

31 It Is Not an Experience

This is exactly what is so impossible to describe: that it is not an experience at all. This is the first thing that I intuitively realized each time: “This is not an experience now.” [#1311]

I am trying to avoid the word experience here, because it would not do it justice, it is a state and not an experience that comes and goes and has a transitory aspect. [#3218]

A recurring theme in many reports is “Pure awareness really is not an experience at all.” This element may be another one that is of special interest for philosophers because it seems to be related to what was investigated in the form of “witness consciousness” and “timelessness” in chapters 19 and 22. To highlight what makes the “not an experience” aspect philosophically interesting, I will tentatively call it “noumenal awareness” or the “phenomenology of transcendentality” (or “transcendentality” for short). I will say more about what all this means in the second part of this chapter, but please allow me to first quickly dissolve one potential misunderstanding right at the outset. In the Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement, pure awareness is described as “transcendental consciousness,” in the sense of a state in which the TM practitioner has “transcended thought” and abides in knowing restful alertness itself. It is a clear and straightforward concept. It corresponds to the second possible reading of the term “pure consciousness,” which for simplicity we will refer to in chapter 34 by the abbreviation P2: “nonthinking.” Transcendental consciousness in this sense is restful alertness without thought, and it is directly related to the ancient notion of *turīya*, the fourth state of consciousness already mentioned in the early Upanishads. This is *not* the phenomenological quality that this chapter is all about.

Here, what we are trying to approximate is that for some meditators, the phenomenal character of pure awareness also includes the apparently self-evident fact that somehow, in a way that is very hard to express in words, what is occurring is not merely

what philosophers call a “phenomenal experience”—something that subjectively appears to us by coming and going in the mind. Rather, pure awareness may feel like something that reveals the timeless condition of possibility for all conscious experience itself, and, somehow, its true nature as well. If this were actually true, and if pure awareness were sometimes the only content of experience (as in a full-absorption episode), then we might even conclude that what *really* makes such states so special is something that goes far beyond mere phenomenology—namely, the fact that they continuously reveal, express, or dynamically represent their own condition of possibility and that of all other conscious states as well. They are not about mere appearance; they involve touching the reality of consciousness “in itself.” Using Kantian terminology, we might therefore be tempted to point out that some of these states are not merely phenomenal but also *noumenal*. In other words, they have an epistemological and a metaphysical dimension that perhaps cannot be cleanly separated from the phenomenology. This philosophical problem—really taking the phenomenology seriously as a target of research, but without committing a C-fallacy, an E-fallacy, or even an M-fallacy (chapter 10)—is what originates from what I call “transcendentality” or “noumenal awareness.” Given the wealth of participants’ reports that we have to work with, there are a number of ways to approach the problem in an evidence-based manner.

To begin with, one interesting finding is that some respondents spontaneously put the word “experience” in quotation marks, probably because they feel the word is slightly inappropriate and the concept that stands behind it may not quite apply. Here are six examples:

- 1236 [. . .] The state is characterized by the “experiencing” [*Erleben*] and “direct knowing” [*Erfahren*] of a completely wide, open space [. . .]. [. . .]
- 1311 Almost impossible to describe, because the word “experiences” in fact completely misses the mark. [. . .]
- 2299 [. . .] At the age of 37, however, another as yet unfamiliar “experience” occurred. [. . .]
- 2859 My “experience” originally occurred during Zen meditation, but occurs at other times now. [. . .]
- 1828 [. . .] without that training the “experience” expressed above is neither interpretable nor meaningful. [. . .]
- 3323 [. . .] Later, however, there were “experiences” in which even the last remnants of this pure consciousness were extinguished in meditation. This was like an inner death, but then also an even greater freedom than pure consciousness itself. There was a clear experience of the fact that pure consciousness is far from being the deepest (or highest) possible, but that “behind” it

there is a much more comprehensive, indescribable “no-thing.” However, it cannot be described with words, since it is no longer an experience, but can at most be described as the absence of all experiences, or as absolute freedom. [. . .]

Aside from the fact that some meditators clearly think the word “experience” is inappropriate (yet often find no preferable alternative), it is also interesting to note that what I have provisionally termed the “phenomenology of transcendentality” seems to be quite directly related to other specific experiential qualities, many of which we have already investigated. Let us look at each of them in turn, starting with the feeling of “coming home.” You may perhaps recall that in chapter 13, I presented some examples of what I called the “epistemic dimension of homecoming.” This dimension is characterized by a phenomenology of “remembering” or “recognizing.” In these states, there is clearly a signature of knowing. Often, what is remembered is described as universal, as fundamental, and as something that “had always been there but was forgotten.” Approaching these aspects within the new context of transcendentality, let’s now look at some more examples:

82 [. . .] I was aware that I was meditating and that this was happening to me and that it was not normal, although it was. That is, I had a sense that this state was always there, that I was that, but that I had never experienced it before. [. . .]

173 [. . .] It has always already [*schon immer*] been there. [. . .]

197 [. . .] It felt like getting in contact with something / touching an inner quality that had always already [*immer schon*] been there.

311 The intuitive feeling that this is the ground of being—the true nature or ground state of myself and of everything, which itself is not an experience, but rather the (groundless) basis of all experiences. This is exactly what is so impossible to describe: that it is precisely no experience at all. This is the first thing that I intuitively realized each time: “This is no experience now.” Like entering into a completely different state of matter, which at the same time is so fundamental that it also feels completely normal again—because it was always and in all experiences invisibly present as its basis anyway. It is this quality of recognition, this “Ah yes—of course,” which is, however, completely unspectacular—because it had never been any different anyway. This may sound like philosophy now, but it is only an attempt to put this state of pure awareness into words for myself.

1426 [. . .] The most amazing thing about this experience or state (which lasted for over 2 hours) was how normal it felt, in the sense of “yes, of course, that’s how it is.” It was also a feeling of recognition.

1482 [. . .] a kind of natural remembrance of a state of being that is deeply personal and at the same time universal in the sense that boundaries have dissolved into an experience of deep unity [. . .]

2293 It felt like a homecoming to a natural state forgotten but very familiar. Not in a spiritual way but just a re-cognition.

Adding to our observations on the scare-quoting of “experience” and the connection with homecoming, here comes a third interesting detail. In the original German version of the second and third reports presented here (#173 and #197), we begin to find first instances of expressions like *schon immer* and *immer schon*. When German philosophers talk about transcendentals, they often use exactly these expressions. (The English equivalent would be “always already,” referring to the a priori conditions of possibility for knowledge or some other phenomenon to take place or, somewhat more vaguely, to a condition that has continued without any identifiable historical beginning, as in Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*.) Put simply, a transcendental is a necessary logical presupposition. For example, when speaking about the transcendental subject, Immanuel Kant begins by explaining: “It is [. . .] very evident that I cannot know as an object that which I must presuppose to know any object” (A402). The subject is transcendental in exactly this sense: the “I” can never become an object itself, but at the same time is a necessary precondition for all knowledge. Kant—whom many take to be the most influential Western thinker of them all—then goes on to claim that it is impossible to have any direct conceptual knowledge of the object “since any judgment upon it has *always already* made use of its representation” (A346–B404; my emphasis). This third phenomenological observation may only be a minor detail, but I must admit that as a philosopher, it came as a surprise to me when I saw that a few of our meditators, when trying to describe their minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) experience, spontaneously used exactly the same expression: *schon immer* / *immer schon* / always already. Here are two further examples, this time ones that were originally submitted in English:

1712 I experienced awareness itself. Not in the sense that I was experiencing awareness; there was no “me,” no “observer.” Awareness itself was always already aware.

88 Always and already. Not coming or going. [. . .]

The phenomenology of “always already” also seems to be intimately connected to a fourth aspect of “This is not an experience!”—namely, the *nontransitory* character of pure awareness, its apparent timelessness (more examples can be found in chapter 22). As one of our participants said:

3570 [. . .] It seems difficult to split pure awareness into before, during, and after. This means that it is hard for me to allocate certain memories and sensations precisely to one phase. For me these transitions are barely describable in retrospect.

Timelessness is clearly a major phenomenological marker of the pure-awareness experience. The phenomenological aspect of “transcendentality” could be related to this experiential quality of timelessness—which, philosophically, would be expected of something highly abstract and transcendental, such as something related to the *condition of possibility* for time experience itself. However, if all this is true, such experiences really aren’t “experiences” at all—at least in the sense of being episodic. They are temporally unbounded, and they are not tied to a given psychological moment, to any specific consciously experienced Now. If taken seriously, some of our reports attempt to refer to something that has no beginning and no end. And there is no “point in time” at which it takes place (here, you may recall the short quote by Douglas Harding presented in chapter 19). The following report makes this very clear:

1749 It never started, and it never ended, and that’s no contradiction with saying that it ebbed in slowly like getting into a warm bath, and ended in the same way about 6 hours later. [. . .] None of this was experiential, meaning no experience or experiencing could indicate or capture it.

In chapter 22, we investigated the phenomenology of “timeless change.” It seems that, for some participants, one way of trying to describe the aspect that I am trying to isolate here is to say that pure awareness is the true self (as discussed in chapters 29 and 30) and is *absolute* in the sense of preceding all other forms of appearance:

2668 I had an experience of pure experience in which I became aware of myself. I became aware that the ego is absolute and that “before” it is nothing. [. . .]

In addition, it seems as if the transcendentality of “always already” and the sense of touching reality “in itself” can also be couched in terms of the phenomenology of nothingness or complete absence (chapter 16):

1788 [. . .] In a further, even deeper state I suddenly see that everything is pure “nothing.” This is initially frightening for me as well as very liberating and absurdly funny, because “nothing” is the only thing that is. I myself am also nothing, have always been nothing, and I cannot lose anything, because there is nothing to lose. This is how I experience it in this state. The liberating and very satisfying thing is that I then “see” that what I really am cannot die, because it is always already this lively nothingness and there is absolutely nothing else. [. . .]

Let me end the first half of this chapter, in which we have dwelt on the phenomenological puzzle constituted by credible reports about “conscious experience that really isn’t,” by showing you an example of how some of the meditators who participated in our study did more than report on their own experiences. Some actually developed deep philosophical theories about what “appearance” really is and what precisely makes it possible:

1416 What you have defined as “pure awareness,” I would describe as follows: being aware that some (any) content of experience appears (even very subtle, like the fact of breathing or just being alive), and then becoming aware that what appears is the nonappearing of something that does not appear. When the meaning of “appearing” (being aware) becomes “the nonappearing of the nonappearing,” then any content of experience (sensible or not) fades, goes to the background. What remains is the fact of experiencing (being aware of) something that is not there. In this way, there is awareness of awareness (because the content is no longer disturbing the perception of awareness as such), but this goes much deeper than just what is captured by the words “pure awareness,” since what is really appearing is the fact that any appearing is the nonappearing of what does not appear.

Noumenal Awareness and Sympathy for the Devil

The subject does not belong to the world, rather it is a limit of the world.

Where *in* the world is a metaphysical subject to be found?

You will say that this is exactly like the case of the eye and the visual field.

But really you do not see the eye. And nothing in the visual field allows you to infer that it is seen by an eye.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 5.632 and 5.633

Question: Through what expedients is it possible to trace back the radiance of one’s sense faculties in one thought and awaken to self-nature?

Chinul: The self-nature is just your own mind. What other expedients do you need?

If you ask for expedients to seek understanding, you are like a person who, because he does not see his own eyes, assumes that he has no eyes and decides to find some way to see.

But since he does have eyes, how else is he supposed to see? If he realizes that in fact he has never lost his eyes, this is the same as seeing his eyes, and no longer would he waste his time trying to find a way to see. How then could he have any thoughts that he could not see? Your numinous awareness is exactly the same.

—Chinul (1158–1210), *Secrets on Cultivating the Mind*

In his famous early work *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein said that the subject itself does not belong to the world, but is a *limit* of the world (TLP 5.632). The original German title, before the English translation was given the Latin title, was *Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung*; the book was written during World War I and not published until 1922. In 1929, Wittgenstein submitted it as his PhD thesis at Trinity College in Cambridge, and it was the only book-length work he wrote that was published during his lifetime. What exactly does it mean for something to be “a limit” of the world? Could the pure-awareness experience be a way of touching or even becoming one with the limit of our world? Could it perhaps be the ultimate selfless form of being a *subject*?

In the third quotation given at the start of this section, Chinul—the founder of Korean Zen—tells us that there is a way to “realize” the fact that we have never lost our eyes, and this is the same as “seeing” these eyes—which on the other hand, as Wittgenstein points out, *cannot* be seen because they never become part of the visual field. (Mirrors let us cheat somewhat, of course, but in a mirror, what you are seeing is not your eye as a *seeing* eye.) What is the truth here, when we think of the phenomenal field as a whole? Is consciousness per se somehow folded into the field of experience? In this special case, are “realizing” and “seeing” it really one and the same process? Or is the realization in the end not a real insight at all, but rather the making-real of a new world-model in the brain? Here, we get into philosophically deep water.

In Roberts Buswell’s English translation of *Straight Talk on the True Mind* (which was written around 1205), Chinul is asked by a student what the normal mind is, and he replies: “All men possess a point of numinous brightness which is still like space and pervades every region. When contrasted with mundane affairs, it is expediently called noumenal nature. When contrasted with formations and consciousness, it is provisionally called true mind.” Could this be a promising route for making sense of many of the reports presented in this book? Are they perhaps not reports about mundane “phenomenal experiences,” because they are really referring to the realm of *noumena*, to the true mind, to the “noumenal nature” sometimes revealing itself in our very own consciousness? The general picture that would thus be emerging could make us see that what it really means for an experience “not to be an experience” is the fact that the episode in question cannot be adequately described as *phenomenal*, but is more like an awakening into something *noumenal*. It is not even an episode—but rather an internally timeless insight into something that is genuinely transcendental.

It may be tempting to say something like this: phenomenal consciousness refers to how things appear to you, to *what it is like* to have an experience; noumenal consciousness, strictly speaking, is not *like* anything at all and accordingly is correctly reported

as not being an experience. All phenomenal forms are virtual, therefore ultimately *misrepresentational* (chapter 28), and must disappear. What remains is pure, reflexive awareness—the only aspect that is guaranteed to be veridical. Here, reality is grasped because it is based on a direct, nonegoic form of self-knowledge—namely, the process of recognition itself. Perhaps we would also like to say that MPE is the way in which the *conditions of possibility* for all experience reveal themselves, but a way we haven't yet fully understood. Clearly, for anybody who wants to take the reports presented here seriously, a host of philosophical questions begins to arise—and I admit that I have no ready-made answers.

As a starting point, we should be aware that the distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena* is something conceptual, and is not part of the contemplative experience/nonexperience itself. The distinction itself does not belong to the qualitative character of MPE. In themselves, most of the internally timeless episodes verbally reported in this chapter clearly lack any positive distinction between appearance and reality, or between what could be merely phenomenal and what might be noumenal. Perhaps we can say that they are also nondual in the extended sense of the dualism between appearance and consciousness “in itself” having been suspended, because once again, we seem to find a quality of neither-nor-ness. For the most part, we hear only what they were *not*—namely, experiences. And this is what we must pay attention to.

One source of complexity here is that the conceptual distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena* was not available *as such* in those early Asian contemplative traditions that generated the scholar-practitioners who observed their own minds over thousands of hours, with admirable discipline and great existential seriousness, and who gradually developed the techniques some of which many Westerners now use to meditate. The distinction originated in early Western philosophy (with Sextus Empiricus, whom we met in chapter 14 in the company of Wittgenstein) and today is mostly associated with Kant's epistemology. To give just one concrete example, the influential and important Eastern notion of recognizing one's “true nature” emerged not only in a distant historical epoch, but also in a completely different sociocultural context from Kant's system of thought. Therefore, it will be difficult to relate the Western distinction between appearance and reality in all its own historical depth to, say, the time-honored tradition of Buddhist philosophy. Both are highly differentiated within themselves and have their own complex prehistories. There simply is no direct mapping here between Western philosophy and Korean Zen or other important Asian traditions. But we can certainly ask whether shared phenomenological anchors lie behind all those incommensurable conceptual schemes. We would then be looking not for absolute perennial essences, but for humankind's experiential prototypes: shared regions in neuropsychological state space that ground the philosophical puzzles they later create.

Buddhist philosophy is deep and complex, spanning many centuries. But Kant's distinction between *Dinge an sich selbst* ("things in themselves") and mere appearances is complex too. Let us use it as a small case study in the problem of incommensurability between different philosophical worldviews. For Kant, things in themselves are the conceptually required *something* that is not appearance, but appears in every appearance. At first glance, it may be attractive to say: Appearances are empty because they have, exactly as Kant says, no existence "grounded in themselves"; they are only experiences. But MPE, pure awareness, is precisely the one *Ding an sich selbst* that we have been looking for, because it is here that we find consciousness groundlessly grounded in itself. MPE is the true self, the true nature of the mind—the "noumenal nature" referred to in Buswell's beautiful translation presented earlier. But again, Kant's philosophical system is complex—and it has its own difficulties. For example, the appearance/thing-in-itself distinction is not the same as that between *phenomena* and *noumena*, between what can be an object of our sensible spatiotemporal intuition and what can never become an object of sensible intuition. In addition, as far as we know, Kant was not a meditator; he did not systematically cultivate this form of epistemic practice and probably did not even know the "nonexperiential" states to which some of our meditators refer. His theoretical work could not have been inspired by such states.

I hope this small example illustrates one or two aspects of the deep crosscultural incommensurability that exists here. There is no simple mapping. The number and scale of the incompatibilities is exactly why a fresh and global bottom-up approach is so important, complete with large and heterogeneous samples of participants.

But let us not avoid the problem. There are limits to scientific understanding. To bring out the issue more clearly, I will now play the role of an *advocatus diaboli*, taking another, somewhat more playful, angle to illustrate what I think may be the central difficulty here for you, my reader. The devil told me this:

You cannot treat reports in which people say "This was not an experience!" as experiential reports. The material you just presented shows that your own approach of focusing solely on the phenomenology of pure awareness while trying to leave out the epistemology and, most of all, the metaphysics is deeply misguided. You are feigning ignorance, burying your head in philosophical sand. Proceeding with a reductionist "phenomenological approach" while ignoring self-evident metaphysical implications is intellectually dishonest—and as you have said yourself, intellectual honesty is a necessary element of any truly spiritual perspective. These are spiritual experiences and you are refusing to take them seriously *in their spirituality*.

"Maybe," I tried to interrupt, "but 'self-evident' metaphysical truths just don't exist. Don't you see . . ." But then I noticed an uncanny, mean-spirited smile on the devil's

face. This smile expressed a deeply malicious form of compassion, an evil form of empathy that I had never seen before. The devil had already seen through me:

Don't you see that all your misguided attempts to somehow understand something that just *can't* be understood ruin your very own practice? The craving for understanding destroys it all. All you're doing is feeding the epistemic agent model in your brain, making it stronger and stronger. "Combining different forms of epistemic practice"—what puffed-up nonsense! You are nourishing delusion, and one part of you enjoys it. The other part knows I am right.

This gave me pause. The devil continued:

You can perhaps do a semantic analysis of ways in which people have used concepts like "pure consciousness" or "pure awareness" in the past, and you can carry out psychometric studies and offer statistical analyses of the actual reports that present-day, real-life meditators give. But if you want to proceed to a genuinely *qualitative* analysis of these reports that at least attempts to do justice to your research target, then you simply have to concede that their authors are referring not to *phenomenal* states but to something *noumenal*—not to the way pure awareness "appeared" to them, but to the fact that it actually brought them into contact with the reality behind all phenomenal experiences, the true self-nature itself. Your phenomenological reductionism blinds you to this obvious fact. You are deliberately superficial, systematically nourishing delusion—and, again, there is a part of you that already knows it. If you'll permit Satan to use a hybrid Kantian-Buddhist expression, these reports point straight to the very "no-thing in itself." Again—you are not researching phenomenal consciousness here; you're researching numinous awareness, which is your very own true and undifferentiated noumenal nature itself. What you call "MPE" is neither minimal nor phenomenal; it is the real thing, a *noumenon*, consciousness *in and of itself*. You are not advancing our understanding at all, because you are trying to turn a blind eye to the fact that none of this is about more accurately describing "phenomenal qualities" and all the other rubbish—that it's all about an actual manifestation of the noumenon itself.

I must admit that I am slowly beginning to like the devil, simply because I have had to live with her for such a long time. There is something about her. I am sometimes smitten by her charm—did you notice how elegantly she is trying to sell us versions of the E-fallacy and the C-fallacy at the same time?

Recall that the E-fallacy arises whenever someone falsely concludes that a consciously experienced feeling of knowing is a reliable indicator of actually possessing

knowledge (chapters 7 and 18). Accordingly, the feeling of definitely knowing that something was *not* an experience, and therefore was *not* merely phenomenal, needs independent justification. Yes, the reported experiences are often deeply valuable, awe-inspiring, and formidable, and we are obliged to do the fullest justice we can to them—but to draw strong theoretical conclusions, we need to know a lot more. The purported metaphysical implications of the phenomenological descriptions are not self-evident, to the point that many of us just don't see them—as a matter of fact, few of our respondents make strong knowledge claims of this kind. It is only the devil who tries to make us jump to conclusions. And this is just one of the many guises in which you may have begun to notice her popping up.

Conclusions are also easily jumped to when it comes to “phenomenality per se” actually being something noumenal, being the “thing in itself” behind all appearances. The C-fallacy arises whenever someone falsely concludes that just because something feels like the true and timeless nature of consciousness itself—or *not* like an experience at all—we have actually found some metaphysical bedrock or ultimately understood consciousness itself. But the original C-fallacy has a mirror image: Just because something is reported as feeling *not* like an experience at all, this doesn't license the conclusion that it isn't. To complicate matters, we already know that there are states that are mere experiences, although they feel like knowing or even carry the phenomenal signature of knowing—which then leads to the much more interesting question of whether there could also be meditators who, on a nonconceptual level, have genuine insights but do not recognize them as such, mistakenly treating them as mere experiences. This would be the mirror image.

Once again, there is no doubt about the sincerity and veracity of our meditators' reports. They do their best to convey something that, for millennia, has been pointed out as being beyond all words. In doing so, they make an invaluable contribution to consciousness research. But to actually have a parsimonious minimal model explanation for consciousness is something else. It is another project, which belongs to another form of epistemic practice.¹ The way to go is not to jump to strong metaphysical or epistemological conclusions in a naively realistic manner.

As a matter of fact, taking spiritual experiences seriously *in their spirituality* (as the devil demands) means precisely this: not jumping to conclusions, not escaping into metaphysical speculation, not abusing the epistemic practice of meditation as a substitute for religion, not abusing the experiences or the theories for purposes of mortality denial or narrative self-deception (chapter 17). Intellectual honesty is an integral, indispensable part of spiritual practice and it is what connects such practice with modern philosophy and science (see the epilogue).² But the interdisciplinary endeavor of

consciousness science is a project distinct from personal spiritual practice; it is a form of epistemic practice that targets different objects of inquiry. To begin paving the way toward the formulation of a first standard model of consciousness itself, we need much more—we need neural correlates, computational modeling, genuine interdisciplinarity, and an ongoing conceptual synthesis of empirical data. Fine-grained phenomenology is needed to kick-start the process, but unfortunately, we cannot “bootstrap a theory of consciousness out of pure consciousness itself.” Thinking that we can is what in chapter 12 I labeled the “C-fallacy.”

One problem is that, in a way that is (like so much else) very hard to express in words, MPE does not feel like what philosophers call a “phenomenal experience,” something that subjectively appears to us by coming and going in our minds. Rather, it is something that seems to reveal the timeless condition of possibility for conscious experience itself (chapter 22). MPE is maximally simple, but there is an aspect of profundity that we can now begin to see as directly related to what at the beginning of this chapter I termed the “phenomenology of transcendentality.” This aspect of transcendental profundity is what resists qualitative analysis.

Today, new theoretical options for understanding transcendentalty are on the table. For example, the philosopher Jakob Hohwy has pointed out that under the free energy principle, certain nonequilibrium steady-state systems like ourselves can be described as tracking and representing the conditions of possibility for their own physical existence.³ We already encountered this idea in chapter 17, when discussing the craving for existence. All physical processes have certain conditions that make their existence possible. But only very few physical systems model and *track* these conditions. Self-organizing systems like ourselves exist by persisting in dynamic environments, following, as Hohwy explains, an inner norm by which they model the conditions that make their own physical existence possible. I think that we must not overlook the fact that this modeling itself occurs in a physical medium; if you will, it autopoietically re-creates those conditions for as long as such systems live. Interestingly, *speaking* of the conditions of possibility for existence can also be seen as an (albeit very abstract) way of referring to existence, to being, itself. My own question is this: Why should there not be a much more concrete, fully embodied way of internally modeling or knowing these conditions nonconceptually, without words, in a state of silence—and thereby *realizing them*? Given this new context, I find it hard not to think of the experience of “pure being” that has popped up in so many places throughout this book (e.g., in chapters 1 and 26).

But what about pure *awareness*? Can we also internally model the conditions of possibility for *knowing*—in meditation, nonconceptually, without words, in a state of silence? If we view the experience of pure awareness as an internal model of epistemic

openness (see chapter 4), and if the same principle of continuously tracking the conditions of possibility holds not only for whole organisms, but also for conscious processes unfolding in their nervous systems, then it is conceivable that the actual functioning of this principle can sometimes be detected by the model itself (e.g., in exceptionally clear and silent nondual states). It could be detected by meditators in states of dual mindfulness, but it could perhaps also detect *itself* in what, in the preceding chapter, we called “reflexively aware mindfulness” or “self-knowing empty cognizance.” The currently running model would be continuously tracking its own condition for existence—epistemic openness, the very possibility of knowledge—thereby autopoietically re-creating itself over and over.

If this physical process had a conscious correlate (or if it were not correlated with, but were simply *identical* to, pure awareness “coming alive”), then our prediction would have to be that a bare and empty form of wakefulness emerges, a state that cannot be easily compared to any other kind of conscious experience. The phenomenological prediction would be that it has the experiential quality of continuously refreshing itself, of autonomously holding itself in existence—and, plausibly, of *knowing* itself.

Of course, all of this is more than speculative, and much more research is needed. But given the new theoretical options just sketched out, it is striking to note that contemplative scholar–practitioners living in an entirely different sociocultural context many centuries ago formed experience-based concepts that translate into English as “self-generating pristine awareness,” “self-existing wakefulness,” or “self-originated primordial awareness.” Is there a rational, no-nonsense way to link these ancient zero-person frameworks to present-day third-person evidence, perhaps using the mathematical terminology provided to us by data-driven computational models of brain function, creating a “computational phenomenology of reflexive MPE”? It may sound like too distant or ambitious a research goal to many, but in all modesty, I would like to propose that precisely this would be a major achievement for the next generation of consciousness researchers—perhaps even the one that leads to a decisive breakthrough.

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The Elephant and the Blind

The Experience of Pure Consciousness: Philosophy,
Science, and 500+ Experiential Reports

By: Thomas Metzinger

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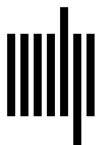
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