

34 The Elephant: What *Is* Pure Awareness?

It's so close you can't see it.
It's so profound you can't fathom it.
It's so simple you can't believe it.
It's so good you can't accept it.
—“The Four Faults of Awareness”

What you have just read is not a book. It is what philosophers sometimes call a *prolegomenon*: a prefatory discussion of the phenomenology of pure awareness, serving to introduce an extended research program that is hopefully yet to come. As I said at the very beginning, it is important to take the phenomenology itself seriously and start by looking carefully at the actual experiences of real-world meditators. As the author of this prefatory discussion, I hope that what it has done will prove useful for you if you are interested in taking this research further—for example, by working toward a minimal model explanation of consciousness that ultimately unifies the core insights of existing approaches on a formal level.¹

There are many other main courses that might be cooked next, many of which I probably can't even imagine. If you are not a researcher and read the preceding pages out of personal interest, then I hope you have seen some of the depth and beauty that can come along with the experience of pure awareness. Pure awareness does exist, and there definitely is something to it. The human mind knows silent and nonegoic ways of being in touch with itself, and the conscious experience of pure awareness and of “self-knowing empty cognizance” is one of them. It seems that all healthy human beings have the capacity to experience the quality of awareness per se, as well as the crystal-clear, nonconceptual, and entirely selfless form of self-knowledge that is enabled by what I have called the “zero-person perspective.” I hope you have also discovered that pure awareness is something everyone already knows, at least in certain moments of

their lives, that it spontaneously occurs—and you do not have to be an Olympian mediator or some kind of overmotivated spiritual athlete to get in touch with it. Profound pure awareness is not something dramatic or sensational. Rather, the problem is that it's so close that you can't see it. It is maximally simple, but we are complicated. It knows itself, but most of us really don't. That said, our data show that there are *many* people who know these states well but almost never talk about them. One of many reasons for this situation is that we lack the kind of cultural context that would dignify the types of conscious experiences described by more than 500 meditators in this book. It does not really matter whether you have read this book out of personal interest, from the perspective of a researcher, or as an already-experienced practitioner of meditation—I do hope that at some point during your reading, you will have become acutely aware that, somehow, almost all of us are systematically ignoring obvious phenomenological facts. These facts are important. In more than one way, there is an elephant in the room.

For now, we have almost arrived at the end of our journey. This book has brought together a small bit of conceptual analysis, a first set of psychometric data, plus a semi-systematic qualitative analysis of experiential reports. In embarking on this journey, one of my goals was to begin paving the way for future research projects, to lay some very initial foundations and help you see the significance of pure awareness. Another goal was to point to the possibility of a *Bewusstseinskultur* (more on this in the epilogue). But as already explained in the introduction, my main motivation was really quite different: I simply wanted to *share* something that I have found to be valuable with a wider readership—and I hope this collection of materials has served the additional function of creating a platform from which you can begin to make your own discoveries. Perhaps it will have offered you inspiration or some helpful conceptual tools for your own projects. You can find a short list of such tools in the glossary of terms at the end of this book. As I said in the introduction, I have provided only the dessert and some appetizers because I want you to cook the main course yourself—whether it be via your own research, your personal practice, or any other way. However, a first set of cooking utensils and some potential ingredients are now on the table. This book has contained more than 500 answers to the question, “What is pure awareness *like*?” Now we are ready to ask: “What *is* it?”

Pure Awareness: What *Is* It?

So what *is* pure awareness? We still do not really know. We are making a fresh start, and progress is bound to be slow at first. But by now, we do know a bit more about what pure awareness is *like*. So let us take stock. What have we learned? In this summary

chapter, I will now lead you through our results, dividing them into six sections. The main result is that there clearly is a distinct phenomenal character of awareness itself, and for now, it does remain the prime candidate for the simplest and subtlest form of conscious experience that human beings are capable of. The elephant does, apparently, exist.

However, I think we are now in a position to do a bit more, compiling a whole list of preliminary answers. Let us begin with the “subjectivity argument.” I first pointed to this when—in the very first paragraph of this book—I claimed that consciousness can exist without an experiential first-person perspective and that, in this sense, consciousness may not be a *subjective* phenomenon at all. This claim, if true, may change the stakes of the entire consciousness debate; it also forms a deep link to the ethical goal of suffering reduction and the idea of a rational, evidence-based *Bewusstseinskultur*.

The Subjectivity Argument

The minimal model approach dissolves the problem of subjectivity. Consciousness is a whole bundle of problems, some of a more philosophical and some of a more empirical nature. The most difficult of them all, however, is the problem of subjectivity. In the past, it has often been falsely assumed that the target of consciousness research is irreducible because it is essentially tied to individual first-person perspectives (chapter 27), or even to some kind of mysterious “first-person facts.” Now that full-absorption episodes, nonegoic self-awareness, and nondual modes of consciousness are empirically established phenomena, we can see that minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) is not subjective and having a first-person perspective is *not* a necessary condition for consciousness to occur.

There are weak versions of what the term “subjective” could mean, and then there is a philosophically substantial phenomenological reading of it. All the weaker versions are ultimately anchored in the phenomenal experience of having a subjective perspective—but this experience is not the only form of consciousness we know. Take a full-absorption episode of MPE as an example: consciousness in its simplest, most primordial form. Full-absorption episodes are nondual in the sense that no form of subject/object structure is represented in them. Of course, MPE is still subjective, in that there will be *some* subject of experience that “undergoes” or is subjected to an episode of pure awareness—for example, the biological organism that lives through it. Perhaps a conscious machine could have internal states that we describe as physically realizing or even simply being identical to “pure awareness” or “nonegoic self-awareness.”² These are two examples of one weak version of subjectivity: Trivially, the state of MPE will always be the state of *some system*. But this doesn’t entail any phenomenology of ownership,

egoic self-awareness, or the fact that this system has a consciously experienced first-person perspective. One important advantage of the minimal model approach is that it prevents unnecessary details from distracting us from a deeper understanding of our phenomenon of interest.³ My point is that what we call the “first-person perspective” is precisely one such detail.

Our first provisional result is that the phenomenology of world-directed, egoic self-awareness is a surface phenomenon. Ultimately, it belongs to the content of consciousness, but it is not one of its intrinsic features. The “selfiness” and the “perspectivalness” of ordinary conscious experience are part of the movie, if you like, whereas pure awareness is more like the projector’s light beam that sometimes causes the whiteness of the cinema screen when the movie has paused. This may also be what our meditators mean when they say, “It is not an experience” (chapter 31). What unites science and meditation is that what they really want to get at is the light beam, not merely the movie. No, *consciousness* as such is not subjective, but yes, for humans, conscious *experience* almost always is because it has been contracted into and is now structured by a first-person perspective, by the brain’s model of a knowing self directed at the world (chapter 8).

What about nonegoic self-awareness? Nonegoic self-awareness (chapter 29) certainly is *phenomenal* (this is what makes it an experience), but it is neither subjective nor objective. There is no knowing self in it, and it is also not reified—like some kind of “thing” that awareness has turned itself into in order to look at itself from the outside. Nobody owns it. Phenomenologically, it is more like an anonymous and unstructured field of self-cognizant wakefulness. Quite obviously, there could also be an “epistemic subject” in the equally weak and abstract sense given in the two examples of the organism and the conscious machine. Both the organism and the machine could be nonegoically acquainted with such states and *later* report and verbally describe them as “their own” experiences. Afterward, there could be consciously experienced episodic memories referring to an episode of nonegoic self-awareness or full absorption into pure awareness, and such episodes of remembrance could be owned and be experienced as states of a knowing self.⁴ But that knowing self was not present when consciousness occurred in its simplest, most primordial form. All that existed was the zero-person perspective (chapter 3); the epistemic agent model was absent (chapter 25). Yes, the organism or the machine may be “subpersonally acquainted” with such a state, but this form of inner acquaintance, deep, subtle, and intimate as it is, presents us with only a weak and benign, epistemologically and metaphysically unproblematic form of self-knowledge. You do not have to be a person to enjoy it; another animal or a machine could also have it. Subpersonal but nonetheless conscious self-knowledge from the

zero-person perspective does exist—this is what empirical evidence shows. It is thanks to this fact that consciousness is now wide open to scientific methods like data-driven computational modeling. The philosophically substantial epistemological reading of “subjective” says that consciousness is necessarily tied to an epistemic agent (a knowing self that actively organizes the field of experience), to an individual and consciously experienced first-*person* perspective, or to some slightly mysterious but still egoic form of prereflective subjectivity. As our material in this book shows, this reading is false. A more careful and thorough phenomenological approach focused on the *simplest* form of experience demonstrates that consciousness *as such* is not irreducibly subjective in any strong or philosophically interesting sense.

But if MPE isn’t subjective in a strong sense—is it objective? Yes, in the weak, naturalistic sense that it is a fully embodied phenomenon and scientific investigation of it is possible. It is not unknowable. We can—and one day will—have an evidence-based, empirical account of pure awareness. Much more interestingly, however, a more substantial, phenomenological reading of “objective” clearly shows that pure awareness is not truly objective either. If we take the phenomenology of pure, nondual awareness seriously, we find that pure awareness is *neither* subjective *nor* objective. MPE is entirely open to scientific investigation, but doing full philosophical justice to this neither-nor-ness also requires a new approach—an approach that we might provisionally term “spiritual naturalism.” This methodological approach would be naturalist, in that it sees “philosophy and science as engaged in essentially the same enterprise, pursuing similar ends and using similar methods,”⁵ but spiritual, in that it also accepts meditation as an epistemic practice in its own right and underscores the importance of nonegoic self-awareness to any convincing theory of consciousness.

Still on a conceptual level, let us continue summing up by looking at the semantic component of “purity,” taking not only previous, more traditional descriptions but also our own qualitative investigation into account. One result is that we can now distinguish at least five major readings of what the alleged “purity” of MPE might refer to, depending on the phenomenological context.

Five Forms of Purity

If we ask what exactly makes the experience of “pure consciousness” or “pure awareness” *pure*, we are now in a position to offer a number of different answers—and each of them is completely right in its own way.

You may recall that our very first, rather radical, reply to the question about “purity” was this: “Consciousness is pure whenever there is no other experiential content

whatsoever, when the quality of consciousness itself is the only kind of phenomenal character that can later be remembered and reported.” It was this specific answer that led to my initial hypothesis that a maximally simple, minimal form of conscious experience does exist, and that it can be derived equally from historical discourse and from our own data on episodes of full absorption or “clear light sleep” (chapter 20). This answer refers to a canonical idea that appears in some of the mystical and contemplative literature, and it is now tentatively confirmed for a specific subset of MPE states. But this is only the first possible reading of “purity.” Let us look at all five equally possible answers:

- **P1 Contentlessness** MPE can occur in full-absorption episodes as the only kind of phenomenal character that can later be reported; in these cases, pure awareness appears as a stand-alone, singular feature (see introduction).
- **P2 No-thought** The second, less radical, but equally canonical reading of “purity” refers to the absence of all mental conflict, noise, and perturbation. In a simplified reading, it is the absence of all discursive thought, memory, planning, and “spontaneous-task unrelated thought” like daydreaming or mind-wandering (see chapter 25). Pure consciousness means calmly abiding in a crystal-clear and thoughtless state, nonconceptually knowing alertness itself.
- **P3 Clarity** In this answer, pure awareness is the experience of a clear and unobstructed space of knowing. This phenomenological aspect relates to the concept of “epistemic openness” and the idea of having an inner “model of unobstructed epistemic space itself,” which were first sketched in chapters 4 and 5. The clarity feature has been described for centuries and is simply the nonconceptual experience of one’s own epistemic capacity per se, of an inner space that is pure in the sense of being wide open and lucid at the same time.
- **P4 Suchness** This interpretation refers to the phenomenology of “pure perception” extensively discussed in chapter 9. Here, the conscious experience is of perceptual content spontaneously arising, but with a complete lack of conceptual overlay, including time experience and implicit judgments as to the “existence” or “non-existence” of what is perceived. It is this lack that really makes perceptual awareness pure. Phenomenologically, the absence of all discursive thought (“seeing out of emptiness”) leads to a suspension of prior knowledge and expected probabilities in perception (“seeing epistemic openness *in* perceptual objects themselves”) and an experience of timeless immediacy—of perceiving *what is*.
- **P5 Nonduality** In chapters 27 and 29, we saw that one way of defining “purity” is as conscious experience lacking subject/object structure. In this sense, pure awareness

is a nondual *mode* of experience that lacks an epistemic agent model (chapter 25) and any sort of egoic first-person perspective. Of course, there are also more transient nondual *states*, such as full absorption episodes during formal sitting practice. Please note that this general way of looking at MPE could also permit us to speak of phenomenological *degrees* of purity: Subject/object structure turns out to be a fundamental but not strictly necessary structural feature of consciousness that can be absent, a hyperprior or high-level belief that can be suspended through contemplative practice. There are other such hyperpriors. For example, the dualism between what is temporal and what is subjectively experienced as timeless (chapters 22 and 33) or the experiential distinction between what actually exists and what doesn't (chapter 28) could equally be suspended, thereby leading to an even "purer" global mode of conscious experience, to a higher degree of indeterminacy or "neither-nor-ness." Depending on the high-level belief that becomes attenuated, therefore, we may be able to distinguish between different forms or degrees of nondual awareness.

Contextualizing Purity

Before we continue, please note that we find distinct but indirectly related readings of "purity" in many nonphenomenological contexts, which may be very different from the phenomenological ones. Here is a first example. A radically naturalist hypothesis says that MPE can be viewed as a way of thoughtlessly experiencing the raw activity of a specific part of the *neural* body only (in chapters 6 and 18, this was referred to in terms of "abstract interoception" and the "raw-feeling aspect of wakefulness," respectively). Under a functional reading of "purity," awareness could be viewed as pure in the sense of not being mediated by any sensory system, being directed neither at the interior of the nonneural body (via "interoceptive inference") nor at the external environment (via "perceptual inference"), and emerging in the absence of any concrete form of inner or outer action (via any kind of "active inference"). Purity in this sense has no direct connection to ordinary phenomenal experience; in chapter 24, but also in chapters 7 and 18, I termed it "abstract embodiment," viewing it in those contexts as a merely computational property. Rather, it consists in a sheer lack of hierarchical depth, simplicity, or abstractness in an-as-yet-to-be-determined computational sense. Let us now look at a second, very different nonphenomenological context in which the idea of "purity" plays an important role.

One important type of context is not computational, but cultural and historical. In different cultures and against a variety of philosophical backgrounds, the "purity of consciousness" can mean many different things—but interesting and inspiring

connections can be seen. To give just one example, the history of Christian philosophy and early Western theories of consciousness contains the idea of “having a pure conscience,” a beautiful idea that emerges in the context of the Latin precursor concept of *conscientia* and frames consciousness as a matter of higher-order moral judgment and the presence of a divine witness or ideal observer in your own mind. For some interesting transcultural parallels, we can now consult chapter 19 of this book, on “witness consciousness” (and the Christian idea of “resting in the Lord’s gaze”), as well as chapter 26, on the medieval mystics’ concepts of *lûterkeit* and *pûrheit* as related to the *Seelengrund*, the “ground of the soul.” These writers refer, for example, to the “purity of meditation,” the “pure clear light,” or Meister Eckhart’s famous “pure clear One.” According to this second, normative definition of consciousness as Christian *conscientia*, many of us would simply lack awareness: Because *moral* purity and *moral* meta-awareness make you conscious, committing Christian sins makes you unconscious. The general point is that, depending on the context we are considering, new insights about pure awareness could potentially acquire richer meanings that go far beyond the phenomenology itself.

A Minimal Model of Consciousness

At the start of this book, I proposed a new research strategy: to adopt a “minimal model approach” to the problem of consciousness. We do not have such a minimal model yet, but what we have achieved—thanks to the generosity of our participants—is a much better phenomenological understanding of the modeling *targets*, of what it really is that we need to understand better. I may be wrong, but I think that from this description of target states, we can begin to fashion the first building blocks for a minimal model of consciousness. Let us proceed from the most abstract to the most concrete level as we collect our materials:

- MPE is a model of epistemic openness. It is a global and entirely nonconceptual representation of the *possibility* of knowledge and epistemic gain (chapter 5). For example, we could view it as a high-level Bayesian model—an integrated, global, but entirely unstructured expectation of epistemic value. Whenever this model is actually *running* in a physical brain, it opens phenomenal state space—creating the potential for an experience of pure awareness. Please note that “epistemic openness” is a new third-person concept, applied from the external perspective of science. But the property that it (hypothetically) *refers* to can also be represented internally, by the system itself—the idea is that this is what pure awareness is. “Emptiness” is epistemic openness. Phenomenologically, it creates the experiential quality of wakefulness and silent clarity without content.

- Speculatively, MPE can be seen as a highest-level generative model, describing the conditional probability of internally observable states of knowing. What MPE really predicts is the occurrence of internal states carrying high epistemic value (i.e., the probability of uncertainty reduction while navigating the world).⁶
- MPE can also be described as a model of an *epistemic space*, a space containing a very large number of possible states of knowing (chapter 5). All biological and some artificial systems can now be viewed as embodied epistemic spaces. But only some of them have a *model* of their own epistemic space, and only very few are aware of this model *as a model*. Everyday contemplative practice has a lot to do with not just “being conscious,” but also making this model of the space of knowing “visible” or phenomenally opaque—as if learning how to look *at* a window at the same time as you look *through* it.

This was a maximally abstract description. Before summarizing more of our main results, let me point out that for every target phenomenon, there can be multiple, equally justified levels of description. Speaking of “levels” is not some vague spatial metaphor because each level is constituted by (1) a logical subject (e.g., whole persons, biological organisms, brains, parts of brains, their computational states, and other sub-personal units of explanation) and (2) a set of predicates that helps us ascribe certain properties (e.g., beliefs and intentions, bodily states, neural activation patterns and their computational properties, and certain phenomenal qualities like “nonsensational awe”) to this subject. From a philosophical point of view, it is not *prima facie* obvious that one of these levels is “closer to reality.” For example, if our target is “pure awareness,” we can choose among a phenomenological level of description, related statistical and conceptual levels, and the level of neuroscience.

Today, it is more than plausible to assume that MPE has a true physical description. As I have noted too many times, I am not interested in metaphysics—but there are many metaphysical options on the table, neutral monism and nonreductive forms of materialism and naturalism among them.⁷ Of course, many *other* levels of description and explanation also exist, some of which we may discover in the future. What level we choose depends on what exactly it is we want to know, what our epistemic goal really is. As ever, what is needed in choosing the right level is, above all, a quality of open-mindedness.⁸ We also need certain other epistemic virtues, however—like courage (e.g., when it comes to facing emotionally unattractive empirical facts), but also caution and temperance (when it comes to drawing metaphysical conclusions).

The general picture is this: MPE is what anchors verbal reports of pure awareness. However, it is not some sort of mysterious “essence.” MPE is not a thing, but a process. Today, that process is best described using a dimensional approach—that is, as a region

in or path through the phenomenal state space opened up by the human brain, our inner space of actual and possible conscious experiences. This region may have no sharp boundaries. The experiential process or state of consciousness described by this region functions as what I have called the “phenomenological anchor” for a large category of experiential reports, most often occurring in the context of contemplative practice. Over the centuries, this phenomenological anchor has also grounded certain metaphysical models of reality, traditional philosophies of mind, and even religious notions of salvation and liberation. Humankind has known MPE for a long time. The experience has been described by scholars, practitioners, and scholar–practitioners. Accordingly, there are many different and equally important ways of representing and trying to understand this region in conscious state space—some examples being via conceptual analysis, psychometric data, or a more qualitative, phenomenological approach based on a large number of verbal reports. This being said, let us now look at some tentative results.

“Pure Awareness”: From Concepts and Psychometric Data to Qualitative Phenomenology

In a first semantic analysis, I took existing descriptions and concepts of pure consciousness as the raw material.⁹ I found that the two strongest semantic markers by far were “Wakefulness” and “Epistemicity”:

- **Wakefulness** is a graded phenomenal quality that everybody knows. If experienced as such, its qualitative character is related to phenomenological notions like “mental clarity” (but without mental content), “cognitive lucidity” (but without conscious cognition), and “bare awareness” (without any perceptual or cognitive object). As pointed out in chapters 4 and 5, wakefulness is best characterized as an experience of *epistemic openness*. Empirically, it is related to tonic alertness, to stimulus-readiness, and to nonconceptual knowledge about one’s own capacities for orientation in time and space and for control of attention (but without necessarily exerting them).
- **Epistemicity** refers to the consciously experienced quality of knowing, which can sometimes appear in isolation and in the absence of egoic self-consciousness. In this book, it was called “the phenomenal signature of knowing” (chapter 7), or alternatively “the phenomenal signature of *self*-knowing” (chapter 30), since there is also a reflexive variant that was given a conceptual description many centuries ago. Relating this experiential quality to current evidence-based frameworks, we can say that epistemicity is the phenomenal character of *subjective confidence*, such as the nonconceptual experience of knowing the probability that one currently knows or

is likely *able* to know something, like a perceptual object (say, an apple on the table that appears as ultimately real) or a state of one's own mind (say, a spontaneously occurring but somewhat vague feeling of happiness and contentment).

Let us now proceed to the second level of investigation. A first psychometric study took as its database responses given by practitioners of meditation participating in a larger survey.¹⁰ The selection of verbal reports presented in this book originated from the same study as a separate data set. A statistical analysis of the survey responses themselves yielded twelve factors (internally coherent clusters) from our ninety-two questionnaire items, as described in chapters 1 and 2. If we now add in our qualitative analysis as a phenomenological “relevance filter,” then the most interesting five of these factors are the following:

- **Peace, Bliss, and Silence** (factor 2) picks out the experience of relaxation and ease, perhaps the best-known effect of meditation practice generally. It also refers to a simple experience of deep, unbounded silence and “pure being” that is described as natural and gentle. Two items in this cluster relating to the phenomenal experience of “peace” and “wholeness” show an absence of mental conflict and an increased degree of integration. In terms of qualitative analysis, factor 2 directly relates to the two new phenomenological concepts of “existential ease” and “nonsensational awe,” and to many of the experiential reports presented (e.g., in chapters 1 to 3, as well as in chapters 14, 15, and 26).
- **Self-Knowledge, Autonomous Cognizance, and Insight** (factor 3) matches one of the semantic constraints for our first working concept of pure consciousness—namely, the element of “Epistemicity” listed previously because it is related to the nonconceptual phenomenal experience of “knowingness” or subjective confidence. It instantiates an autonomous (i.e., unfabricated) phenomenal character of insight, cognizance, and clarity. Importantly, the strongest-loading item in factor 3 (“Did the experience have a quality of knowing itself?”) expresses a phenomenology of non-egoic, first-order reflexivity that also reappeared in the present qualitative analysis (as explained in chapter 30). Our data show that the nonconceptual quality of “pure knowing” can be *self-directed*, but in a nonegoic way, without the involvement of any kind of mental or bodily agency, lacking a conscious sense of control, the quality of ownership, and the phenomenology of “selfhood” in terms of transtemporal identity. Therefore, we also find a strong phenomenological relationship to factor 8 (“Emptiness and Nonegoic Self-Awareness”).
- **Wakeful Presence** (factor 4) integrates the phenomenology of spatiotemporal self-location with alertness and the unified experience of “existence as such.” According

to our survey data, there is a phenomenal experience of being fully settled in the “Here” and “Now,” permeated by the character of wakefulness and a feeling of “simply being.” We labeled this cluster of phenomenal qualities “Wakeful Presence” because its four strongest-loading items refer to the embodied experience of wakefully being in the present moment. Quite obviously, the phenomenological-alertness component directly relates to and confirms the first, and most prominent, semantic constraint for what we mean by MPE—namely, “Wakefulness” (chapter 4). However, factor 4 also incorporates two additional elements: the experiential qualities of pure being and unity. Both of them reappear in our qualitative assessment, under the rubric of “nondual being” (chapter 26).

- **Luminosity** (factor 6) refers to the nonvisual phenomenal qualities of “brightness,” “radiance,” and “vibrancy,” but also to the visual experience of brightness with closed eyes. “Self-Luminosity”¹¹ was also one of the six semantic constraints previously extracted from the literature, referring to the phenomenology of “brilliance” or to the “clear light of primordial awareness.” Importantly, the phenomenal character sometimes described as “luminosity,” “radiant clarity,” or even “enlightenment” comes in many varieties, which may turn out to be unrelated. For example, many practitioners describe a nonvisual phenomenology of “clear light,” a nonperceptual experience of clarity and mere epistemic openness. By contrast, others report a more concrete form of visual brightness, which can even be experienced with closed eyes.
- **Emptiness and Nonegoic Self-Awareness** (factor 8) may be most interesting from a philosophical perspective. The second- and third-strongest loading items in factor 8 offered two metaphorical descriptions of first-order reflexivity combining the “Self-Knowledge, Autonomous Cognizance, and Insight” of factor 3 and the “Wakeful Presence” of factor 4 with the phenomenal quality of emptiness and epistemic openness. These are negatively correlated with the phenomenology of selfhood: The phenomenology of self-knowing and self-awakening picked out by this factor is *nonegoic*. Arguably, it is precisely these aspects of factor 8 that, for many participants, may express the “spiritual essence” of MPE most directly. Empirical evidence for the actual existence of nonegoic self-awareness in the context of a substantial psychometric study is a theoretically relevant result. It will need further conceptual analysis, one reason being that almost all philosophical theories of conscious self-knowledge have tied it to a subject or an individual first-person perspective. Many think that consciousness is irreducible for exactly this reason. But MPE, as well as reflexive MPE, are subjective only in the benign sense of occurring within an individual organism. The experiential quality of such episodes may later become integrated with some

long-term self-model, mentally reformatted into autobiographical memory, and this appears to be a causal precondition for the episodes to be *reported* in a verbal form that, via its subject/object grammar, retrospectively imports a fictitious first-person perspective.¹² But we now have the first systematic empirical evidence for a conscious and genuinely nonsubjective form of self-knowledge, and this evidence may present us with the kind of “epistemic convergence zone” discussed in chapters 20, 27, and 28, a previously unnoticed point of contact linking human phenomenology with the scientific image of reality.

The first level of investigation looked at the *concepts* that were used to refer to pure consciousness across different historical epochs and cultural contexts; the second level was a *psychometric* approach to MPE using a larger sample of present-day meditators in more than fifty countries.¹³ The third level of investigation targeted the *phenomenology* of awareness based on explicit verbal reports. The semisystematic qualitative analysis offered in this book has tried to integrate all three levels and has now yielded a whole range of specific phenomenological insights into the pure-awareness experience, as well as some more abstract principles. Before listing a selection of core insights, this time starting with the more concrete and proceeding to the more general, let me come back to the fable of the elephant and the blind and draw your attention to a fundamental phenomenological principle, guarding against possible misunderstandings right from the outset.

The prototypical core of MPE can occur in isolation, but also in combination with other, often more global states and modes of conscious experience. The elephant can be found all by itself, in a desert as it were, but also in and against the background of very different landscapes—in a valley or on a hilltop, deep in the forest or bathing in a river. These landscapes can also be seen as something that appears *within* the elephant, as if it were dreaming about or imagining them. Sometimes other animals like to walk ahead of it (think of an experience of deep relaxation or dissolving body boundaries, as described in chapters 1, 24, and 25). From time to time, other phenomenological creatures may prefer to follow in its footsteps (think of experiences of connectedness, joy and gratitude, or lucid dreaming, as described in chapters 11, 15, and 21). And then there is always the oxpecker, a bird that lands on an elephant and sits on top of it. Even a human elephant rider—a mahout (chapter 25)—has been known to appear in the elephant’s mind from time to time.

Many of the reports presented in this book may appear to be referring to very different states of consciousness that at first glance have nothing much to do with each other. However, what unites them is that they were given at the end of a long survey targeting MPE and involving ninety-two items, in response to a question asking for one

particular example where the qualitative character of “awareness itself” was explicit and clearly noticeable. In some cases, the examples chosen were dramatically altered states of consciousness, perhaps involving an MPE experience plus ego dissolution, an episode of nondual awareness, or the paradoxical quality of timeless change plus a global mode of consciousness involving “witness consciousness” (for more, see chapters 25, 27, 22, and 19). In other examples, “awareness itself” was the only experiential quality that could later be reported; these were full-absorption episodes, typically occurring during formal sitting meditation or, much more rarely, during dreamless deep sleep (chapter 20). In sum, we find a whole *family* of MPE-related modes of conscious experience. For example, we saw how in the real life of a committed practitioner, there are many variants and subtle, hard-to-describe transitions between such variants and modes, creating a lived pattern of family resemblances that is impossible to cleanly map onto any rigid conceptual scheme. However, we also find a hard phenomenological core. Our dimensional approach shows that there are resemblances, but there is also a prototype. So, finally, if we consider just prototypical MPE itself, the phenomenological anchor of pure awareness reports, what stands out? What is the phenomenological core? It includes the following elements:

- **Simplicity.** The phenomenal character of awareness itself is utterly simple, but it often goes along with a subjective sense of profundity. In our participants’ ratings, the statement “The experience of ‘pure awareness’ is the simplest kind of conscious experience I know” achieved a median rating of 80 out of 100 possible points, and it appears in a cluster of items in which MPE is described in terms of the phenomenal character of “existential ease” (see chapter 1), as “the natural state” (item #73), and as an experience of pure being (item #55). This resonates with many ancient texts, where it has been described as “the natural state” or one’s own “true nature,” for example.
- **Silence.** As one of many expressions of simplicity, the phenomenology of silence and mental stillness is often described as a complete absence of thought and mental content. Prototypical MPE is characterized by a principle of mental inaction and non-reactivity: Phenomenologically, it is that which never speaks, never makes a choice, and never initiates an action. On the level of semantic analysis, the phenomenology of silence appeared as the “low complexity” constraint for our working concept of pure consciousness (chapter 3); statistically, it is related to the most internally consistent of the twelve factors, factor 2, which was labeled “Peace, Bliss, and Silence.”
- **Wakefulness.** Wakefulness is the conscious experience of tonic alertness, which—in more abstract terms—can be described as the phenomenology of epistemic openness. The qualitative character of wakefulness is a core feature of MPE, and in

semantic analysis, it reappears strongly as the Wakefulness constraint (PC1), while from a psychometric perspective we can clearly see it in factor 4 (“Wakeful Presence”) and factor 3 (“Self-Knowledge, Autonomous Cognizance, and Insight”).

- **Clarity.** In chapter 6, I analyzed clarity as the experience of an unobstructed inner space of epistemic possibilities. Our meditators described their own experience of clarity as related to qualities of lucidity, lightness, and spaciousness; as an absence of cognitive perturbation characterized by equilibrium and wakeful presence; as a calm and timeless form of stillness; as a gentle form of acuity or sharpness; or as a mode of conscious perception without center or boundaries. The prototypical core of MPE, therefore, can be described as a silent combination of clarity and wakefulness, the phenomenal experience of unobstructed epistemic openness. This corresponds to some classical texts that speak of the union of lucidity and emptiness.
- **The signature of knowing.** MPE instantiates an autonomous and unfabricated phenomenal character of *subjective confidence*, often described as a quality of insight, cognizance, and clarity. Phenomenologically, it is that which *knows* but never speaks, makes a choice, or acts. Importantly, our data show that the specific phenomenal character of subjective confidence can occur in isolation, as an experience of “pure knowing” that lacks subject and object. Equally important, they also demonstrate the existence of a phenomenology of nonegoic self-awareness (i.e., the actual occurrence of a distinct phenomenal signature of *self-knowing*, which can be experienced in isolation and nondually). In a first conceptual analysis, this core feature appeared as the semantic constraint of “Epistemicity” (PC5); in psychometric analysis, it is reflected as factor 3 (“Self-Knowledge, Autonomous Cognizance, and Insight”); and qualitatively, it is interestingly related to certain aspects of luminosity (see chapter 18).

The qualitative analysis presented in this book has highlighted a range of features that are intimately related to pure awareness, some of which (like density and soundness) have, to my knowledge, never been directly reported before, while others (like spaciousness, timelessness, pure presence, and paradoxical combinations of emptiness and fullness) have been repeatedly described for centuries. Perhaps most significant of all, this analysis has also confirmed that MPE can occur not only as a stand-alone phenomenon, but also as a major characteristic of certain altered states of consciousness. There seem to be global *modes* of conscious experience in which the explicit experience of awareness itself plays a central role, but in which the flowing kaleidoscope creating other and more specific content is present as well. In the introduction, I termed such modes of conscious experience “MPE modes.”

From States to Modes

As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, global MPE modes can often be characterized by more all-encompassing qualities of clarity, certainty, and nonduality than are found in localized MPE states. Other highly typical descriptors are joyfulness and well-being; virtuality and emptiness; an all-pervading experience of silence, deep peace, and nonreactivity; the global phenomenal qualities of soundness, connectedness, openness, and unity; and an attitude of all-forgiveness. Let me list five typical examples:

- **Witnessing.** Witnessing is a global mode of conscious experience that, in the wake state, is characterized by an uncontracted version of the phenomenal signature of knowing listed here as one of the two strongest semantic markers of pure awareness. As investigated in chapter 19, the *totality* of all experiential contents appears as if being observed by something that isn't really an "observer" at all—by a timeless, absolutely impersonal, knowing presence. Phenomenologically, this MPE mode can perhaps best be described as an experience of the world being mirrored in an all-encompassing quality of infinite, choiceless, and nonconceptual knowing.
- **Nondual awareness.** Nondual awareness is perhaps the best-known global MPE mode. Once again, its existence shows that the experience of knowing does not have to be contracted into a self and a first-person perspective because it can also occur in a "nondual" way. It is as if mirror and world merge. For example, the "meditating self" can sometimes be absent while at the same time perceptual objects take on another quality, not as distinct entities "outside" the space of egoic self-awareness but as elements of a new *Weltinnenraum* (Rilke's "inner world-space"). Nondual awareness lacks subject/object structure, and it is often described as a spacious form of awareness for which conceptual distinctions like "inner" and "outer" or "real" versus "illusory" do not make sense. The example of nondual awareness also illustrates a general point: Global MPE modes are often characterized by (1) the phenomenal character of MPE having become exceptionally strong and vivid, and (2) the fact that certain structural features (like subject/object duality) have been attenuated or are missing altogether.
- **MPE as a nonegoic unit of identification.** Another important general insight is that there are dual and nondual variants of MPE itself. To give an example, I pointed out in chapter 3 that there is one phenomenology of *experiencing* silence, and another of *being* silence. This phenomenological difference points to the same general principle: Repeated and vivid episodes of MPE can apparently lead to a flattening of the brain's landscape of hyperpriors, dissolving some of our unconscious expectations about the structure of reality—for example, about who *we* are.¹⁴ In our example, this

can lead to the disappearance of subject/object structure in the experience of mental stillness.

The specific result that dual and nondual variants of MPE both exist also corresponds to the ideas of “dual mindfulness” (as reflected in factors 1, 7, and 9 in our study) and “nondual mindfulness.”¹⁵ Phenomenologically, in dual mindfulness, there still is a meditator and a goal state that is “owned”; there is a sense of effort created by either mental or bodily agency; and accordingly, the subjective experience of time is sustained and remains in place. Typically, there will be an attentional lapse, followed by the phenomenology of noticing, remembering the goal state, and refocusing.¹⁶ There may be a recurring experience of awareness as such, but it is still a meditation experience, not yet effortless and not a full-absorption episode. In dual-mindfulness practice, we may find the experience of a meditating self, recognizing the phenomenal character of MPE, and then looking at and calmly abiding in the quality of awareness itself. Nondual MPE modes, by contrast, have often been described by saying that the experiencer has simply “become one” with pure awareness or the effortless experience of mindfulness itself (this can be described as non-meditation; see chapter 32). The new concept of a “nonegoic unit of identification” highlights the phenomenological fact that this happens without creating any classic markers of selfhood like ownership, agency, or self-location in time and space. My empirical hypothesis is that dual-mindfulness practice indirectly creates the unconscious causal precursors for nondual modes to appear in the practitioner’s brain.

- **Bodiless body-experience.** There are global modes of conscious experience in which the experience of embodiment is no longer tied to a representation of the physical body. In chapter 24, I described these modes as examples of “abstract embodiment.” They seem to follow the same principle of MPE becoming the unit of identification just described, but in the more spatial sense of directly “embodying” or “realizing” abstract MPE qualities like wakefulness or the phenomenal signature of knowing itself. These MPE modes have been reported in the past, but they deserve more attention as a target of systematic empirical research programs. The general principle of the brain suspending automatic predictions about the structure of reality clearly recurs in many forms. As we have seen, it can also refer to a dissolving of felt boundaries between body and environment, to the well-documented phenomenon of ego dissolution, to the disappearance of time experience, and even to the loss of any distinction between what exists and what doesn’t.
- **Virtuality.** Some MPE modes are characterized by the phenomenological fact that the conceptual distinction between what is “real” and what is “not real” can no longer

be meaningfully applied (chapter 28). Experientially, there is a global form of meta-physical indeterminacy, a hard-to-describe form of neither-nor-ness, and this “lucid-dreamlike” quality of virtuality may appear when the phenomenal character of pure awareness itself has become very vivid and dominant, leading to a global quality of “translucency.” This “virtuality mode” is yet another example of the general principle that MPE not only occurs in isolation or in simple combination with other experiential contents, but at times emerges in the context of an entirely new *mode* of conscious experience. We find MPE states, but we also find MPE modes. What we do not know is whether there is any direct causal relation here, governing transitions between states and modes.

Ten Open Questions

In closing, let me list a few of the most important future research targets yielded by the prefatory discussion presented in this book. I have flagged a whole series of them as we’ve been going along, but here are the ten that I consider most promising:

- The overarching goal is a *minimal model explanation* for consciousness, involving a formal model of conscious experience that leaves out everything superfluous, isolating only the core causal factors. Given our psychometric data and the qualitative analysis in this book, my initial working hypothesis still stands: Consciousness can be entirely dissociated from egoic self-awareness, time representation, and spatial self-location; none of these features is a necessary condition for consciousness to occur. MPE is thus the first target.
- On a *conceptual* level, it will be important to develop convincing semantic criteria for minimality. “What is the simplest kind of conscious experience?” is, if taken seriously, a difficult question that demands the attention of computational modelers, mathematicians, and philosophers alike. As I pointed out in chapter 17, this is a thorny theoretical issue that cannot be answered per decree by self-proclaimed experts or spiritual teachers merely restating the phenomenological taxonomies of time-honored contemplative traditions, let alone by the supposedly authoritative representatives of some religious system.
- As should now be obvious, the challenge of pure awareness is extremely interesting from a wider *philosophical* perspective, and for many reasons. For example, pure awareness is a new challenge for philosophy of science, but equally for comparative and cross-cultural philosophy, applied ethics, and many other subfields. I have tried to pave the way for others by focusing on the phenomenal character itself, but some

of the core discoveries that we have begun to make clearly have important *epistemological* implications.

- Let me single out just one issue—a philosophical problem that may be the most interesting of all: the epistemic status of nonegoic self-awareness (as statistically described by factor 8). Given the conceptual tools of modern epistemology, is determining the status of nonegoic self-knowledge a *tractable* problem? Here, part of the philosophical difficulty lies in correctly assessing the “self-validating” phenomenology of certainty and insight with respect to the states’ own epistemic status, such as when some verbal report claims that this was *not* a mere phenomenal experience (see chapter 31). Is the contemplative phenomenology of nonegoic self-knowledge merely an interesting form of experiential character, perhaps one that has never been adequately described, or is it grounded in a deep but entirely nonconceptual form of self-knowledge *sui generis*? If it is in a class by itself, an absolutely unique epistemic phenomenon, what is the relation of “nonegoic acquaintance” that I have briefly gestured toward in this discussion—what exactly does it mean for a conscious system to know itself from a zero-person perspective?
- On the level of *neuroscience*, what in chapters 20 and 21 I called the “Triple Triangulation Project” would be the logical first step. It involves systematically comparing episodes in which MPE (1) occurs as a stand-alone phenomenon and (2) is entered from the wake state, from a lucid dream, or from non-rapid eye movement (NREM) sleep. As explained in chapter 20, this project would involve a number of steps, which can be summed up as follows:
 - Isolate the minimally sufficient neural correlates of type I, type II, and type III episodes of full absorption in neurotypical human beings.
 - Describe commonalities and overlaps by creating a series of computational models that, on a mathematical level, ultimately allow us to find out whether there is a phenomenological “cut set” connecting all three kinds of full-absorption episode—and if so, what exactly its physical and computational correlates are in the human brain.
 - Empirically validate mathematical descriptions of MPE by reliably bringing about the pure-awareness experience via a *subpersonal* route, such as by instantiating its physical and computational correlates through advanced forms of neurofeedback.
- The *psychometric instruments* used to describe the phenomenal character of MPE are in need of serious improvement. This will be achieved by better questionnaires, validation studies using confirmatory factor analysis, and an exploration of potential

differences in response patterns and item functioning across linguistic and sociocultural contexts.

- If larger numbers of verbal reports can be gathered in the future, it will be possible to build a much larger and more varied *phenomenological database* to be submitted to more systematic forms of qualitative analysis. These could include computer-aided “big-data” and artificial intelligence (AI) strategies to deal with increasing volumes at higher speeds. (You can contribute to this set of related projects, even if you are not a meditator, by going to mpe-project.info, where a revised version of the survey is open for submissions.)
- As I have mentioned several times, perhaps the greatest *methodological* problem to be solved is what I have termed “embodied theory contamination.” The problem of theory contamination is of special relevance when dealing with the verbal reports describing the experience of pure awareness. For example, we need a much better understanding of how the presence or absence of spiritual and religious elements, whether privately embodied or via institutions, gets integrated into the meditator’s self-model. This in turn will allow us to understand how such elements influence verbal reports and determine the fine-grained phenomenal character of contemplative experience itself.
- There are many ways in which virtual reality (VR) and new mixed-reality technologies could be used and combined with other methods like real-time functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), AI-controlled brain–computer interfaces, and other yet-to-be-invented technologies.¹⁷ This could happen by first creating VR models of MPE and nondual awareness and later using these models as experimental tools to systematically induce some of or all the phenomenological features described in this book. For example, VR models could be used to give users a higher degree of opacity-control¹⁸ over their own conscious states, or to create the phenomenology of “translucency” described in chapter 28.
- Finally, given the many new mathematical tools now at hand,¹⁹ the time has come to develop a *computational phenomenology* of meditation.²⁰ Beyond dual-mindfulness, full-absorption episodes, and the Triple Triangulation Project, the most relevant modeling target would be nonegoic self-awareness, also termed “reflexive MPE” (chapter 30). To end on a more concrete note, figure 34.1 presents a simple sketch of a possible computational model. If you would like more detail, a range of color figures depicting fully parameterized models of the state of pure awareness with and without content, and also of some global modes like nondual awareness, are provided on the companion website (mpe-project.info).

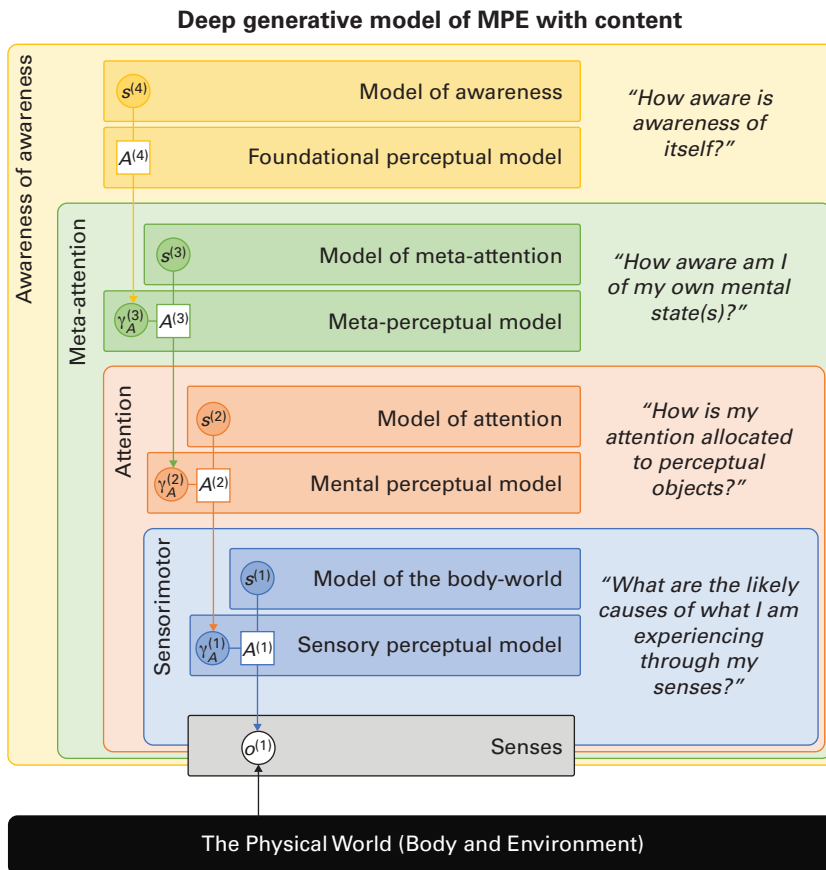


Figure 34.1

An illustration of a nested inferential architecture that would give rise to the experience of pure awareness as co-occurring with other forms experiential content. The phenomenal character of MPE is present and may encompass everything else, but thoughts, feelings, and sensations occur at the same time. Phenomenological examples would be episodic experiential states during dual-mindfulness practice (e.g., chapters 1–5) or the global MPE mode of witness consciousness (chapter 19). The tentative model presented here was conceived by Thomas Metzinger and Lars Sandved-Smith; the figures were created by Lars Sandved-Smith.²¹

Let us take a quick look at this illustration before we end our journey together. The model that it depicts is based on a theory of perception and behavior called *active inference*.²² Within this framework, experience is cast, computationally, as a process of inferences about states of the world and the self. Here, the blue box on the lowest level describes perceptual experiences like seeing, hearing, or feeling (e.g., the physical sensations caused by the breath or bodily movement). Inference at this level asks the question, “What are the likely causes of what I am experiencing through my senses?” The red box containing the blue box illustrates the experience of conscious attention, since inference here amounts to asking the question, “How is my attention allocated to perceptual objects?” Therefore, changes at this second level may describe the introspective experience of, for example, deliberately focusing on the breath by actively making perceptual observations (at the level below it) more precise. Taken together, and in terms of our psychometric study, the first two boxes refer primarily to “Time, Effort, and Desire” (factor 1), “Sensory Perception in Body and Space” (factor 9), and the experience of “Mental Agency” (factor 11). Level 3 in figure 34.1 (the green box) describes all situations in which we gain or lose the nonconceptual, experientially direct awareness of our mind, specifically here the awareness of our current mental state of attention. Inference at this level asks the question, “How aware am I of my own mental state(s)?”

By performing inference at the first, second, and third levels, we can be consciously paying attention to, for instance, a flow of physical sensations and simultaneously be aware of sudden shifts in attention. But we might also become aware of what Claire Petitmengin would call the “microgenesis” of an arising thought, enabling us to disengage from its content—by discovering that there is actually much more to the subtle dynamics of an ongoing thought than what we later report as its “content.”²³ This is a typical example of experiences occurring during mindfulness practice like Shamata or Vipassanā meditation, in which we deliberately but nonjudgmentally observe our breath and monitor the wandering of attention.

Finally, the fourth and largest box describes the phenomenology of “epistemic openness” or pure awareness at the system level. Fourth-level state inferences model perceptual awareness across levels of inference; they are representations of the system’s global “epistemic openness” to incoming information. Phenomenologically, one might argue that to infer at this level is to become consciously aware of awareness itself by asking the question “*How aware is awareness of itself?*”

You may now ask: Why is awareness *consciously* aware of itself in this situation? The short answer is this: Because conscious awareness appears when a system is epistemically open to (i.e., aware of) the world and also *knows* this fact. It now has a model of its own openness. It is level 4 that really endows the content generated on all lower-order levels with phenomenality—with the quality of “being consciously experienced”—because it

adds the *expectation* that something can (and likely *will*) now be known. The additional, superimposed anticipation of knowledge is what generates the phenomenality of this lower-order content. More technically, consciousness is a generic global prediction of epistemic gain that functionally integrates all lower-order content by metarepresenting it as something that is now globally available to be explored in a deeper way. As you may recall from chapter 4, MPE is an ongoing process of nonconceptually experiencing the organism's current state of epistemic openness (i.e., of expecting new knowledge without yet having it). This is what modeling its states at the fourth level amounts to: a single, integrated model of its own epistemic openness in the form of a highest-level but nonegoic self-model. Without this fourth level, we could say that awareness (i.e., level 3) is transparent: We see "with" it or "through" it, but are aware only of the lower-order content. But now, with the fourth level, awareness itself is "opacified," as when we suddenly become aware of the window pane through which we are looking at the garden.

We are now at last in a position to see what the experience of pure awareness during a full-absorption episode really is. An MPE absorption episode can be modeled as the situation in which experience is a result only of inference at the highest level, without any perceptual inference at the levels below it. This would occur when the system no longer attends to lower-level observations and is unable to perform inference at those levels, while continuing to infer at the fourth level. As a result, the phenomenal character of MPE is present and is the only quality that can later be reported, since no thoughts, feelings, or sensations are experienced at the same time. For example, states of pure conscious experience in which nothing but the experiential quality of pure awareness itself is present may occur during deeper states of formal practice (e.g., sitting meditation), but also in phases of NREM sleep, sometimes called "clear light sleep" (chapter 20). Again, such states are not *subjective* states because they are not tied to a first-person perspective. At the nested lower levels, we experience the complex, dynamic, and interdependent network created by the inferred causes of our sensory data plus the continuous movement of thought and attention—often involving a sense of agency and the phenomenology of identification. By contrast, the lucid emptiness of MPE itself is nondual. MPE as such is nondual because the distinction between world and self is not yet represented. Phenomenologically, time and space are equally absent.

In this way, we can begin to model and simulate core features of the phenomenology of MPE and meditative practice. The example given here is meant as a hypothetical starting point to illustrate that in principle, we might eventually come to a computational understanding of MPE, the corresponding experiential quality of pure awareness, and the more subtle microstructures of consciousness as a whole.

The Elephant in the Room

It is now very nearly time to end this summary. But there is one last point that we should not forget: There *is* an elephant in the room. One simple yet striking result from our first study is just how *many* human beings all over the planet actually have these experiences but never really speak about them in public. Our survey demonstrates not only that these individuals are ready to do so, if actively approached under conditions of anonymity and in the context of a serious research project, but also that there is a lot for academic consciousness research to learn from them. Quite simply, what I have termed “MPE” seems to be a phenomenological prototype of humankind—at least, the pure-awareness experience is something that many hundreds of participants from fifty-seven countries consistently reported. Of course, the experiential quality of awareness itself has been described for millennia, mostly in Asian traditions, but today, it appears in many different cultural contexts across the globe. The obvious fact that so many people seek, know, and quietly cultivate the kinds of conscious experience reported in this book, plus the contrasting fact that all of this is only weakly reflected within culture, education, and policymaking (or even science and philosophy of mind), may point to a systematic societal blind spot. There really is an elephant in the room because there seems to be something genuinely profound here—but there is also some reason why global society has been unable to see its importance. Maybe, as in the old Tibetan saying cited at the very beginning of this chapter, it is simply too close for us to see, too profound for us to fathom, too simple for us to believe, or even too good for us to accept.

Let us return to the fable of the elephant and the blind one last time. There are many things that the congenitally blind cannot see—things that they will never know. One of these is that the elephant itself is *not* blind: It might actually be looking at the blind people while they try to touch and understand it. Of course, they could touch one of its eyelids or even an eyeball by chance, but they would never fully understand what they are touching or what kind of understanding this eye affords. They would not know the special form of visual knowledge that is made possible by eyes, and therefore they could not wholly grasp the fact that they might actually be visually perceived themselves. If they were seen by the elephant while trying to make contact with it, they would know nothing of this fact. But the elephant would always already know them in a way they could never know themselves. Could it be that the elephant is looking right at you, *right now*?

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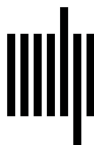
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