

Introduction: The Elephant and the Blind

The “Pure Awareness” Experience: What Is It *Like*?

As pure as white fresh fallen snow [#1186]

As if the pause between thoughts grows very long, but without waiting. [#521]

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]

This is a book about the phenomenology of “pure awareness.” Part of an ongoing research project, it is about all states in which we seem to experience either no contents of consciousness at all or, alternatively, the contents along with the deeper nature of consciousness itself, the character of awareness as such. The book presents a selection of experiential reports from the Minimal Phenomenal Experience Project, an interdisciplinary research initiative aiming at a “minimal model explanation” for conscious experience. A minimal model explanation is one that leaves out everything superfluous, isolating the core causal factors giving rise to the target phenomenon that we want to understand.¹

Here, the target phenomenon is consciousness itself. This is why the experience of consciousness per se, the experience of “pure awareness” or “pure consciousness,” as it occurs in meditation practice, is of special interest. Part of the working hypothesis is that consciousness can exist not only in the absence of thought and sensory perception, but even without time experience, without self-location in a spatial frame of reference, and without any egoic form of bodily self-consciousness. As a matter of fact, we now have accumulating empirical evidence from a range of sources that consciousness can be entirely dissociated from egoic self-awareness; I claim that it can even exist without an experiential first-person perspective. In this sense, consciousness may not be a *subjective* phenomenon at all.

As a philosopher of mind who has been interested in the problem of consciousness for a long time, I founded the Minimal Phenomenal Experience network in 2019 because I wanted to look at the problem of consciousness from a new angle by asking, “What is the simplest kind of conscious experience we know?” One of the original ideas was that, for a variety of reasons, it is time to make a fresh start and finally take the phenomenology of pure consciousness or pure awareness in meditation seriously—for example, by using it as an empirical entry point for rigorous scientific research on consciousness. This book is intended to prepare such an entry point—getting the door ready to walk through.

Consciousness science has made great progress during the last three decades. We have a lot of data and a much better understanding of the physical correlates of conscious experience. Yet we still see many competing approaches and are not even close to having a single, self-consistent theory of consciousness. Like the Standard Model in particle physics, for example, a convincing Standard Model in consciousness science would have to provide major successes in generating experimental predictions while already naming and classifying a large majority of the truly fundamental factors. But in the consciousness science community, we have a long way to go until anything remotely resembling the Standard Model of particle physics could be written down. Three decades after the Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness was founded in 1994, we still do not even know (or cannot agree on) what precisely it is that needs to be explained.

If at some point in the future we want to formulate a first Standard Model of consciousness, then, as its foundation, we will first need a *minimal* model of what conscious experience is. This is the new strategic route that I am proposing. As noted, a minimal model will consist of a formal description that includes only the core causal factors giving rise to our target phenomenon—it will extract the essence and leave out everything that is not strictly necessary. This would be one way to arrive at an idealized model of the universal and repeatable features of all conscious experience, isolating what is really relevant to a deeper scientific and philosophical understanding. Therefore, as a philosopher of mind, my first question is this: What is the *simplest* kind of conscious experience that we know?

The main motive behind this book, however, is rather different. I simply want to share something with the wider public—something that I think may be helpful and inspiring not only for philosophers and scientists but for a whole range of very different people, and quite possibly for reasons that I am unable to imagine. I think that the phenomenological material presented here could be of interest to other practitioners of meditation; to artists, writers, and poets; to educators, therapists, and policymakers;

perhaps to theologians and scholars of religion; but certainly also to neuroscientists, mathematicians, and researchers working on computational models of conscious experience. I am only a slightly narrow-minded philosopher of mind and cognitive science, who is working in an interdisciplinary fashion, pursuing a generally naturalistic approach. Other people might be inspired in different ways or come to more important insights. To give a concrete example, I imagine that there might well be other philosophers working with very different background assumptions and pursuing very different goals from mine—for example, phenomenologists, epistemologists, and philosophers of science, but also researchers interested in comparative and cross-cultural philosophy—who will find this material as valuable as I do. As this list implies, there is a much wider context behind all of this.

Because consciousness research is happening in a fast-changing sociocultural context, this is also a book about why we need a new culture of consciousness and how to get it. A culture of consciousness (or *Bewusstseinskultur*) is a culture that values and cultivates the mental states of its members in an ethical and evidence-based way. We do not have such a culture, and we need one, because without it, we have no hope of solving any of the crises wracking today's world, from environmental or political collapse to our sleepwalk into the era of artificial intelligence (AI) and postbiotic consciousness. The new culture of consciousness will come of age only if guided by a science of consciousness that can answer ancient questions in new ways. At the end of this book, I will briefly make the case that the experience of pure awareness could be the kernel around which this growth happens—if it happens. Pure awareness may turn out to be the “convergence zone” where a more radical and intellectually honest form of spiritual practice, cognitive neuroscience, and modern philosophy of mind will finally come together. If the philosophy (and science) of consciousness wants to make genuine progress, it will need to finally take seriously precisely those forms of consciousness that it has long been most skeptical about—namely, selfless pure-awareness experiences as they occur in meditation. Consciousness itself can be experienced from what this book terms the “zero-person perspective,” the perspective created by the most genuine forms of spiritual practice. As it will turn out, on the deepest level, consciousness is not a *subjective* phenomenon in any philosophically interesting sense, but it apparently knows itself, nonegoically. Paradoxical as it sounds, selfless forms of self-awareness do exist, and they are the key to understanding all the other kinds. But beyond consciousness science, they are also relevant for applied ethics, for culture and society. In case you are interested, I will say a little more about the multiple motivations behind the book in an epilogue at the end of our journey. Meanwhile, the book itself will give hints of its wider context as we proceed.

But let us now try to get straight to the material itself, as fast as possible. The experiential reports of meditators that you already have seen and that you will find on the following pages result from a very first attempt to lay the psychometric foundations for phenomenological analysis that is finer-grained than the folk-psychological descriptions we already have.² Each number—like #1186, #521, or #1311—refers to an individual description of pure awareness. They were collected in an online study that my research colleagues and I conducted in early 2020. Over 3,500 respondents from fifty-seven countries participated, and 1,403 of them provided usable data. The latter group was equally split between men and women, with an average age of fifty-two, and with more than 77 percent reporting regular meditation. In addition to answering the ninety-two questionnaire items, respondents could submit free-form reports describing past episodes of pure awareness. During the three months of data collection, 1,171 such reports were submitted, and 841 of them were usable. For this book, I selected more than 500 of them. They are published here with their authors' explicit agreement and are fully anonymized. Every participant had two opportunities to exclude their experiential reports from publication: either by stating their preference at the end of the survey or by responding to an individual email sent after the end of the data collection, formally asking for their consent and giving them a second opportunity to opt out.

Our goal was not to do more meditation research,³ but to directly home in on the subjective experience of consciousness *per se*, which has been reported for many centuries and from countless sociocultural contexts. The instruction given to our participants was this:

This questionnaire investigates all experiences in which there is an “awareness of awareness *itself*” or “consciousness of consciousness *itself*.” Our target is the subjective experience of “consciousness *as such*.” Sometimes such states are also referred to as “pure awareness” or “pure consciousness.” We are not primarily interested in mystical experiences or dramatic spiritual peak experiences of any sort, but rather in all states characterized by a quality of “pure awareness” or of “consciousness *itself*.” This means that—independently of the current existence or nonexistence of other consciously experienced contents—an “awareness of awareness” has emerged. In other words, we are interested in states in which we clearly and distinctly experience the quality of “consciousness” itself. (Emphases in the original.)

Let me quickly defuse a first potential misunderstanding. If we are looking for the experiential quality of consciousness “as such,” we must not look for its conceptual essence or for consciousness as it might appear from the perspective of some specific theory (one that tells us what the essence or intrinsic nature of consciousness really is).

We are not looking for consciousness “under a conceptual representation,” as a modern philosopher of cognitive science might say. When someone talks about experiencing “consciousness as such” or “awareness per se,” they are never referring to some sort of mental act in which they grasp its conceptual essence, thereby forming a thought about consciousness *as* consciousness. Exactly the opposite is the case, and our target in this book is therefore the entirely nonconceptual awareness of awareness itself. As the very first metaphorical description at the start of this chapter, which was given by one of our participants, appositely expresses, consciousness as such is something absolutely pristine. It is a wakeful, entirely silent, and uncontracted quality of clarity; it is the effortless experiential character of nonconceptually knowing *itself*—and it is also, as another of our participants said, “that which never speaks” (see chapter 30). Right at the very beginning, I want to explicitly thank our participants for providing so many reports and for trying so sincerely to communicate the ineffable. They did not have to do this. In our initial survey, creating a written report was entirely optional; it was extra work that our meditators chose to do. I see the results as a kind of donation to consciousness research made by our participants, and this is another of the reasons why I want to pass them on and share them with a wider audience. The survey respondents have made a great contribution to us all by sincerely trying to convey something that has, for millennia, been referred to as a paradigm of what is beyond all words.

Old Concepts, New Concepts: The Emptiness of “Emptiness”

The concept of “pure consciousness” or “pure awareness” has a long tradition in the literature on contemplative practices. It is often described as a contentless form of experience, and it has played a great role in Eastern philosophical traditions. Over the centuries, contemplative practice has mostly taken place against the background of religious belief systems like Buddhism or Hinduism, with meditators trying to achieve a goal state like “liberation” or “enlightenment.” Accordingly, the phenomenological taxonomies of such states have often been shaped by traditional metaphysical belief systems and an ancient cultural context. However, during the last fifty years, a historically new situation has emerged: Millions of practitioners in Western societies meditate regularly, on a daily basis, but many of them (45.6 percent of our participant sample) do so in a secular context and describe themselves a “spiritual but not religious (SBNR)” or as “spiritual but not affiliated (SBNA)” (see chapter 17). Will they have systematically different experiences from those who meditate within religious frameworks? Is there a common denominator across different cultural contexts? When it comes to the potential to answer such questions, the current situation is unprecedented. We

have the powerful tools of modern science at our disposal, we have new theoretical approaches to the problem of consciousness, and we now have millions of regular meditators in different countries and cultures, all over the world. This opens the door to a new, unideological, and radically bottom-up approach to the phenomenology of consciousness per se. There is a historical opportunity to start over.

In this book, I will use the terms “pure consciousness” and “pure awareness” interchangeably. In the contemplative history of humankind, many intimately related concepts have already been coined. Some of the influential ones include the following:

- *Dharmakāya*, the “truth body” of the Buddhist Pāli canon
- *Rigpa*, in Tibetan Dzogchen, pure awareness, the “knowledge of the ground,” and the spontaneous presence of primordial wakefulness
- *Sākṣin*, the “witness consciousness” of classical *Advaita Vedānta* philosophy
- *Samādhi*, the “even intellect,” as we find it in the *Bhagavad Gita* or the *Yoga Sūtra of Patañjali*, a thoughtless state of equilibrium in which all distinctions between meditator, potential objects of meditation, and the process itself have disappeared
- *Sat-chit-ananda*, “existence, consciousness, and bliss” in Hindu philosophy
- *Turīya*, from the oldest Upanishads onward, the idea of a fourth state of “pure consciousness” underlying the three common states of waking, dreaming, and dreamless deep sleep
- *Ye shes*, the timeless awareness of original wakefulness, for example in *Vajrayāna* Buddhism

These are only a few examples. What all these traditional concepts point to is a simple and apparently pure form of consciousness in which awareness itself gradually turns into the foreground of experience—or in which the distinction between foreground and background itself becomes meaningless.

I herewith officially promise that in the whole of this book, I will use only a single new abbreviation. My general working hypothesis is that there actually exists a maximally simple form of consciousness: minimal phenomenal experience, hereafter MPE.⁴ This simplest form of conscious experience lacks time representation; self-location in a spatial frame of reference; the experience of ownership, agency, and autobiographical self-awareness; and a phenomenally experienced first-person perspective. Of course, there is much more to be said here, and we will come to understand all of this much better as we travel through the book together—but my working hypothesis is that temporal experience (even the very idea of a “now”), spatially localized body-experience, and the subjective center of experience created by egoic self-awareness are all nonnecessary features of consciousness. If there is an essence, they are not part of it.

I believe that the experience of pure awareness in meditation is the best and most natural candidate that we currently have for MPE; therefore, I will use the new theoretical concept of MPE and the two well-known phenomenological concepts of “pure consciousness” and “pure awareness” interchangeably in this book. Looking at the world from the perspective of MPE is what in chapters 3 and 29 I will call taking the “zero-person perspective,” because this minimal form of consciousness does not involve an egoic form of self-awareness—although, as we will see in chapter 29, it is often described as something that actually knows *itself*. One of the most interesting results yielded by our study is the wealth of evidence that nonegoic self-awareness exists. Our data indicate that there may actually be something like self-knowledge from the zero-person perspective—and if anything has a deep philosophical flavor, this does. However, the general idea is very easy to understand. Searching for MPE just means honestly and seriously asking the following question: What is the *simplest* kind of conscious experience that human beings are capable of?

Philosophers and scientists ask this question from the outside. But you can also look at simplicity from the inside, as a practitioner of meditation. In our online survey, conducted in five languages and targeting regular meditators from all over the world, we asked participants to rate their agreement with the following statement (item #84 in our survey): “The experience of ‘pure awareness’ is the simplest kind of conscious experience I know.” In our questionnaire, this item achieved a median rating of 80 out of 100 possible points, adding support to my intuition that pure awareness is a good proxy for MPE.

Again, my working hypothesis is that the pure-awareness experience—which millions of meditators have reported for centuries and which still occurs countless times around the globe every single day—is our best candidate for MPE. But is it true? Is pure awareness the simplest kind of conscious experience we know? To answer this question, we will need excellent neuroscientific research plus fine-grained mathematical modeling and a new computational phenomenology of meditation. We will also need a lot of good philosophy of mind, for example to provide a conceptual synthesis of new empirical data or to tell us what meaningful criteria for “minimality” or “simplicity” could be. But before we can even get that far, we must look carefully at the phenomenology itself. This is one of the main points that I want to make. The experience itself has to be taken seriously, as best we can. Specifically, this means investigating it in an evidence-based manner, and in a way that is intellectually honest, not driven by a hidden metaphysical agenda or the unacknowledged background assumptions of some religious or other ideological framework. As will become clear in chapter 34, this book and the publications that preceded it can therefore be seen as a preparation for a

rigorous, systematic research program on MPE and for future research that will target the fascinating experience of pure awareness—and perhaps even make the experience more widely and readily available to humankind. All I am doing here is laying some very first conceptual and phenomenological foundations, while sometimes elucidating the wider context. But eventually the problem of pure consciousness will have to be handed over to the hard sciences of the mind, to cognitive neuroscience and computational modeling; and from there, it then will have to return to philosophy of mind and applied ethics. In the end, new empirical results always need conceptual interpretation and an ethical assessment of any new potential for action they may generate (more on this in the epilogue).

As I have pointed out, MPE must play a central role in the formulation of a first standard model of consciousness. But all of this is not merely about science; there is a broader context. If anything was ever a “big-picture issue,” then pure consciousness is. There is a profundity in some of the reported experiences that directly relates to many of the deepest philosophical puzzles. We cannot feign ignorance, trying to disregard the profundity in favor of well-defined research questions. But before anything else, we must try and get as close as possible to the phenomenon itself. I think that laying our first foundations will require three procedures: (1) extraction of semantic constraints from the existing literature,⁵ (2) statistical analysis of a large body of experiential data,⁶ and (3) a more qualitative investigation of phenomenological descriptions of MPE-like states. The last of these is this book’s main task, but as you will see, I draw on progress toward the other two, plus some historical resources as well.

Of course, there are obstacles. The first procedure is difficult because the traditional literature on pure awareness in meditation is vast, spanning many centuries, and any attempt to extract core ideas inevitably turns into a kind of cross-cultural cherry-picking.⁷ There is no semantic essence of the concept of “pure consciousness” that could be readily and easily isolated. For the second type of procedure, a psychometric approach involves statistical analysis of surveys targeting pure-awareness experiences using a predetermined set of questionnaire items. This kind of analysis is vulnerable to many forms of bias and has serious methodological limitations, as I imagine you will appreciate as soon as you read chapters 1 and 2 of this book. The third procedure, a qualitative analysis of phenomenological self-reports, is equally difficult. This book does not yet present a truly systematic kind of qualitative analysis; it simply draws together a large number of phenomenological reports in very loose groupings. As a first move, it is much more modest than what will be needed to create the qualitative part of a truly solid foundation. But perhaps this book will yield a new and flexible heuristic to help us search the space of possible solutions to the problem of consciousness

in a better, more radical way. If we bring all three approaches together, then maybe they will destroy a few counterproductive theoretical intuitions and give us some fresh ideas. One simple set of interconnected points that I hope this book will make is that there is something of great value and relevance here, it is much more common than we think, it has been ignored for too long, and it could be rewarding to give it some real attention—scientifically as well as culturally.

Most important, being an interdisciplinary philosopher of mind myself, I thought that it would be important not to get carried away too soon with grand philosophical theorizing about “consciousness without content,” or to call for specialized neuroscientific research programs based on ill-defined objects of inquiry. Again: We must first get as close to the phenomenal character of the experience as we possibly can. Beyond sharing the material with you; beyond minimal models, the subjectivity argument, and *Bewusstseinskultur*, one of my central motivations has been to take the phenomenology of pure awareness seriously at last, as well as to linger with it for a while. We need to respect and pay attention to the extremely subtle phenomenology of pure consciousness itself because we need to know what it really is that we want to understand and explain. Is MPE, the simplest kind of conscious experience, the state that meditators *actually* experience? If so, how should we make sense of the fact that, as we will see in chapter 31, some claim that MPE is not really an “experience” at all?

Here are two more conceptual clarifications, and then we are good to go. First: The specific phenomenology of pure awareness can occur as a stand-alone feature or in combination with other forms of experiential content. For example, it can emerge in deep and clear states of sitting meditation, thoughtless and with closed eyes, and when all other forms of perceptual experience have temporarily disappeared. In these cases, it is a single, stand-alone feature—the only feature that can later be reported. It cannot be reported while it takes place, a fact that we may refer to as “concurrent ineffability.” I call such episodes, involving nothing other than pure awareness itself, “full-absorption episodes.” But as the reports provided by our meditators show, pure awareness can also appear with open eyes (e.g., during walking meditation) as an all-pervading quality of effortless mindfulness. It also sometimes occurs spontaneously, outside of any formal contemplative practice (more on this toward the end of the book).

Our material shows that there are *states* of MPE, but also global *modes* of conscious experience infused with MPE. I take this first conceptual distinction from two of the very best philosophers of consciousness I know, Timothy Bayne and Jakob Hohwy, but they are in no way responsible for my extended use of it. Bayne and Hohwy distinguished between fine-grained states of consciousness and global modes of consciousness. For them, “states” of consciousness are content-specific, with examples including

experiencing pain, looking at a sunset, or feeling depressed. By contrast, a “mode” of consciousness is a global *way* of being conscious; waking, dreaming, epileptic absence seizures, and hypnotic states are examples of such modes.⁸ Here, I will use the two terms to make the following phenomenological distinction: Whereas states of pure consciousness are something local and episodic, something that is still attributed to an experiencing self (whose states they are, for example in reports like “For a few seconds, my mind was crystal clear and entirely silent!”), we also find more generalized modes of consciousness dominated by an all-encompassing experiential quality—namely, the phenomenal character of unbounded pure awareness itself. Two examples of such MPE modes are provided by the phenomenon of “clear light sleep” and by the experience of “nondual awareness,” which we will carefully investigate in chapters 20 and 27, respectively. The full-absorption episodes mentioned here—in which the meditating self has dissolved into pure consciousness and nothing else can later be reported—provide us with an interesting special case; they can be described as a global mode *and* a state at the same time because there is one specific form of content that remains: MPE itself. Being fully absorbed into pure awareness is a mode of conscious experience all its own, creating a global state dominated by one single experiential quality.

To use the terminology of Bayne and Hohwy, all these possibilities are regions of “modal space,”⁹ regions that academic philosophy has almost completely ignored, although humankind’s meditators and mystics have known them for millennia. To sum up, a mode of consciousness is a global way in which reality appears to us. Again, as opposed to a mere state, it is not content-specific because it can timelessly encompass the flow of many kinds of experiential content. There are MPE states and there are MPE modes, and perhaps full-absorption episodes are what connect them. As we will see on our journey, the phenomenology of pure awareness is rich and subtle and it is extremely difficult to do justice to it in words. Therefore, to merely say that MPE can occur “in combination” with other conscious experiences (say, movement sensations in walking meditation) would be a serious phenomenological mistake. Pure awareness is never a simple “add-on,” an element that can be added to or subtracted from ordinary experience. Walking with a silent mind, being choicelessly and effortlessly aware of bodily movement, is not a matter of adding a local phenomenal property that wasn’t there before. Rather, we often find subtle global effects that transform the field of experience altogether, as if it were now enfolded and embedded in something larger—maybe in an unbounded and centerless space of nonconceptual knowing without a knowing self or in an all-encompassing experience of timeless change.

This may be beginning to sound mysterious. But there really is a phenomenological challenge here. Understanding the relation between the phenomenology of pure

awareness and all those other contents of experience we already know—colors, sounds, thoughts, and feelings—will be one of our big challenges in this book. We must begin slowly and carefully, looking at all situations in which awareness of awareness *itself* occurs as a single, stand-alone quality.

Where exactly does the centuries-old notion of “pure” consciousness come from? There are three major types of situation in which it occurs all by itself: in full-absorption states in meditation, during dreamless deep sleep in advanced meditators, and (occasionally) when entered deliberately from a lucid dream. So pure consciousness can be accessed from a waking state; it can spontaneously emerge at night, during a state of low arousal; and in rare cases, it can be deliberately created in the form of a full-absorption episode starting from a lucid dream (see chapter 21). I will present new phenomenological data on pure awareness during dreamless sleep in chapter 20, and one of my predictions will be that the neglected phenomenon that ancient Tibetan Buddhists have sometimes called “clear light sleep” will soon become one of the hottest topics in consciousness research. Here, I simply define a “full-absorption episode” as a state following which the quality of awareness itself is the only phenomenal feature that can later be reported. As noted, pure-consciousness experiences are always ineffable while they unfold because any attempt to report them while they occur would immediately destroy them. The interesting question is what subjects can say about such states *after* they have occurred. In sum, there is an important difference between MPE states and MPE modes, and part of our challenge is to work out exactly how they are related.

As an empirical investigation, our psychometric study did not prejudge the question of whether specific contents are present or absent in experience. Rather, it allowed the possibility that the nonconceptual experience of consciousness per se can, but need not, coemerge with other conscious content. This corresponds to the theoretical treatment of MPE as a phenomenological prototype without sharp definitional boundaries. Following this approach means letting go of the project of searching for any ultimate, intrinsic conceptual essence—if you will, it means accepting the emptiness of “emptiness,” as well as of all other phenomenological metaphors. In Buddhist metaphysics, the concept of “emptiness” means that all phenomena lack substantiality or an intrinsic nature of their own (chapter 17). When investigating contemplative experience, the concept can be applied to the notion of “pure awareness” itself. If we do justice to the fact that all of us—practitioners and scholars alike—always find ourselves embedded in a specific historical and linguistic context; if we do justice to the fact that we are embodied and enculturated beings trying to make sense of things from the perspective of our own little cognitive niche, against the backdrop of our very own *Lebenswelt*, then it becomes implausible to expect that any phenomenological concept

(including “emptiness” itself) should always refer to exactly one and the same experiential quality. We have no sharp identity criteria we could apply, either introspectively, in the silence of inner experience, or on the level of thoughts and words; there is no really good argument for the existence of some intrinsic phenomenological essence persisting across all possible contexts. On the other hand, our data indicate that there probably is a common core across different cultural contexts, a region in phenomenal space that anchors all verbal reports. In the end, MPE might turn out to be something like an inborn archetype of conscious experience—something available to all neurotypical human beings, and perhaps also to many nonhuman animals on our planet.

This leads to the second and final conceptual clarification. The book’s guiding idea is that the concept of MPE refers to a specific and almost ineffable kind of conscious experience, which—conveyed via a given set of verbal descriptions—will appear as a *family* of experiential qualities. This also means that the two broadly equivalent phenomenological concepts of “pure consciousness” and “pure awareness” may not form a sharply demarcated category. The enculturated experience of real-world meditation practices may simply be much too fluid and subtle for any rigid conceptual schema. This type of conscious experience has great beauty and depth; it is context-sensitive and very finely nuanced; and most of all, it has a strong quality of ineffability. But maybe it will turn out to be not quite as ineffable as we used to think. Given our new historical situation, *some* progress may be possible. This is precisely what makes pure consciousness so interesting—and there may even be some low-hanging fruit that we haven’t spotted before.

Yet we cannot give what philosophers call a “reductive definition”: The traditional notion of “pure consciousness” cannot be defined by specifying its necessary and sufficient conditions, thereby enabling us to decide whether a given episode of phenomenal experience as described by some practitioner of meditation falls under it. Today, the pure-awareness experience occurs (as far as we know) only in living, embodied beings like ourselves, in biological creatures that are socially situated and have conditioned emotional responses, as well as many cognitive biases unconsciously affecting belief formation, reasoning, and behavior. Many of them also will have their own theories about what pure consciousness really is, coloring their experiential reports. The heterogeneity and the size of our sample can be seen as a strategy to counteract this problem. As noted, our participants came from fifty-seven countries, so their *Lebenswelt* and meditative practices will vary widely. Yet all those experiences, culturally contextualized in such different ways, also resemble each other in striking ways, as we will soon begin to discover.

To design this survey, we drew from the relevant body of Eastern and Western literature and conducted a series of pilot studies involving committed practitioners. From

here, we extracted ninety-two characteristics of pure-consciousness experiences (see figure 1.1 in chapter 1), which were then formed into questionnaire items. The idea was to find clusters within these items that could serve as coherent and meaningful phenomenological dimensions of the experience of pure awareness (see figure 2.1 in chapter 2). Please again note how this dimensional approach also implies that pure awareness is not being treated as something absolute, as something entirely detached from the network of relations connecting all other conscious experiences with each other.¹⁰ This is a new approach, in that it contradicts coarse-grained reifications, such as those that try to turn pure consciousness into a distinct and irreducible metaphysical entity, as some of the ancient religious conceptual schemes for describing meditative experience do.

What connects all these experiences as reported here is a relation of family resemblance. When the experiences are verbally described, we see probabilities that certain descriptions will go together, like patterns in a family in which the mother and father or the two youngest siblings may perhaps be seen together most often. Therefore—if you will forgive me one very last technical point—I will assume throughout that the concept of “pure awareness” has probabilistic, not definitional structure. On the one hand, what holds together the experiential aspects is not one single essence, but rather a lived pattern of probabilities. On the other hand, there really is something to the pure-consciousness experience. Pure awareness definitely seems to have a hard prototypical core—one to which I will return at the end of this book.

The Elephant and the Blind

Do you know the ancient fable of the elephant and the blind people? It originated in ancient South India and has echoed through the centuries.¹¹ The story goes like this: A king tells a group of people who were born blind and who have never come across an elephant before to try to understand what an elephant is like by touching it. Each person feels a different part of the elephant’s body, but only one part each, like the trunk, the tail, a flank, or a tusk. They then describe the elephant. They describe it as being like a thick snake, or like a rope or a brush, or like a wall, or as being something hard, smooth, and pointy. How will they ever agree on whether they are all referring to a single phenomenon in the outside world?

Each item in our questionnaire can be viewed as one reaching movement, every answer as the touch of one person born blind. Each blind person’s answer may certainly pick out one important aspect, but still, all the person has is a local sense of touch, never the global gist of the complete visual image. We might even imagine that our group of blind people is actually encountering not one elephant but a small family

of elephants. The family members are not identical, but they are very similar to each other, and every blind person can prod and stroke and tap multiple times to explore an individual segment of one of the multiple elephants. Unexpectedly, in our own case, well over 1,000 blind people came to help. So maybe the king's servants thought it would be more practical to have the great crowd form a circle around a large herd of elephants? Perhaps the king even played a prank on the blind people by smuggling in a single rhinoceros, a donkey, or the occasional hippopotamus! Of course, the blind people's response patterns are only words, and precise statistical evaluations of them are merely numbers, and although both are important and may lead to surprising new discoveries, neither is the real thing. If anything in philosophical phenomenology is *the* prime example of ineffability, then it surely must be the experience of pure consciousness, self-knowing empty cognizance, the inner nature of appearance itself.

But what if we invited 1,403 blind people and asked each of them to touch an elephant ninety-two times? And what if we found 841 blind people whom the king had ordered to visit the elephant family every single day of their life and then simply asked them to describe, in their own words, exactly what they felt on a good day? Perhaps we could get fresh ideas. Maybe we would discover some details that we hadn't thought of before. There might be unexpected relations among the blind people's stories, revealing overlapping patterns of experience. Perhaps we could make some progress, at least compared to what we knew about elephants before.

This is not a scholarly monograph. I have tried to make it as reader-friendly as possible by grouping our meditators' reports into a series of loosely related chapters, each of an easily readable length and reflecting a theme in our respondents' experiences. My main goal was to bring some flexible structure into the wealth of material, in the hope of making it more accessible and opening this phenomenological landscape to readers who may come to it with widely diverging interests, and with either some familiarity with consciousness research or none. Basically, this collection of experiential reports is arranged according to their dominant phenomenological feature and the general context of occurrence, but not according to the rigid conceptual framework of some preexisting theory. It is a soft qualitative analysis that doesn't satisfy academic criteria for systematicity and completeness. If anything, this coarse-grained ordering reflects my personal biases, my own lack of understanding, and probably the fact that I am a long-term practitioner myself. Therefore, to avoid any misunderstandings, I freely admit that many of the following reports could have easily been grouped into at least four or five thematic sections, and, as you will notice very soon, the content of these sections that I have created has large overlaps throughout the whole book. These overlaps are sometimes so extreme that I even chose to use the same report (or a part of

it) twice. The reason for these overlaps is that most verbal reports are so rich that they “cross-load” onto a variety of phenomenological categories, just as different questionnaire items may be related to multiple statistical factors. Consequently, the sequence of chapters is not meant to function as a “ladder,” describing successive stages of something that, after all, has no stages. Rather, it is an attempt to make things easy for you if you haven’t thought much about pure consciousness—an attempt to map out one possible reader-friendly path through varied phenomenological terrain. In an ideal world, this book will perhaps also provide a platform from which you and everybody else can make your own discoveries and start your own projects.

In the interest of anonymizing the reports and letting the experiences speak for themselves, I have left out almost all details referring to the location in which an experience of pure awareness occurred (which country, retreat center, or monastery; whether indoors or out in nature, etc.). I have also left out almost all references to the time (which year, or exactly which formal practice session on which day in a silent retreat), to the specific technique (e.g., *Vipassanā*, *Metta*, *Shamata*, or *Mahamudra*, *Chan* or *Zen*, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction [MBSR] or Transcendental Meditation [TM]), and to teachers, lineages, and organizations teaching meditation. However, I have included one chapter presenting meditators’ descriptions of episodes when the “pure awareness” experience occurred spontaneously outside of formal practice (chapter 32), and here, more of the contextual details are provided. In addition, there are specific chapters devoted to the experience of pure awareness in dreamless deep sleep or during lucid dreaming (chapters 20 and 21) and to examples of episodes that lasted longer than a few minutes (chapter 33). In investigating the phenomenological material, you should always bear in mind that participants in our study came from many different age groups and from fifty-seven countries, and that they practiced (and sometimes combined) different meditation techniques. This breadth is intentional. It is one of the factors that make the material so interesting because it lets us see the commonalities and invariant structures of conscious experience more clearly, as well as the countless variations they underlie.

The best thing about this book is that you can choose your own route through it. Every chapter has two parts. The first part always begins with one or more novel metaphors or other analogies for pure awareness, taken from the database of responses. One of the many surprises in this initial study was how many new and beautiful metaphorical descriptions of pure awareness our participants seem to have spontaneously created, without ever having been asked to do so. I was deeply impressed by many of them, and I think you may be too. Some of them are still haunting me after many months because somehow they convey something that is hard to put into words, and they open up an entirely new way of looking at things, a possible perspective that I

had never really been aware of. Following the metaphors, there will be a selection of phenomenological reports—sometimes only a few, sometimes many, sometimes in a particular order, sometimes not. In the first part, I have always tried to restrict my own comments to an absolute minimum. You can make sense of the material for yourself.

If you already are a regular practitioner of meditation, then the first part of each chapter may sometimes be a special reading experience, one that may even affect your practice itself—perhaps in unexpected ways. I predict that you will find many of the descriptions of pure awareness pretty obvious and self-evident, perhaps even slightly boring or trivial. Others will make you raise an eyebrow, roll your eyes, or gently shake your head in disbelief. There may be parts of the elephant that you have never touched yourself, and you may naturally suspect that some of these people are actually talking about another kind of animal altogether. Have they bumped into a donkey? Are *they* donkeys?

If you are emotionally attached to a teacher, a lineage, or the conceptual framework of a specific belief system, then you may even get angry. If you adhere to one of the many traditional theories about “stages” of meditation or a given taxonomy of contemplative experience, or, even worse, if you already knew what the “true essence of consciousness” is before you opened this book, then I predict an aversive reaction—which can be a brilliant opportunity to deepen your own mindfulness practice. But I also hope that you may find at least a few experiential reports or novel metaphors that genuinely surprise you because they describe something that you have known for a long time, but in a way you would never have described or considered it yourself. If you are anything like me, the discovery of such unexpected new perspectives on your own inner experience will really be what makes studying these reports rewarding.

Importantly, this last point also applies to you if you have never practiced meditation in your life: Yes, you *do* already know what this pure awareness thing is! Maybe you just never saw why it should be interesting or relevant. You forgot about it. Maybe you saw the simplicity but not the profundity (chapter 12). Nevertheless, a small number of the experiential reports may stay with you for weeks, inspiring you to take a closer, more serious look at your own experience—not in formal meditation, but in everyday life. Such surprises and unexpected recognitions are valuable because they force your brain to update the model that you already have of your conscious experience itself; they literally change your conscious self-model. Perhaps there even is a sense in which the quality of awareness itself never really was “your very own” conscious experience (for more on this, see the “contraction principle” in chapter 8). Whatever your background, I hope that in your own way, you will benefit from the fecundity of surprises—in your everyday life, in your meditation if you practice it, and,

if you do research in this area, in the new interdisciplinary project of homing in on a minimal model explanation for consciousness.

Every chapter is like an incomplete three-course meal, with the dessert coming first. While the first part is inspirational and for enjoyment, and should be easy to read and digest, the second part offers some slightly more substantial food for thought. The second part is not the main course, but a small set of starters. Without going too deep, I will draw your attention to some philosophical or scientific issues that are related to the phenomenological material just presented. Sometimes I will provide new conceptual instruments that may be helpful in thinking more clearly about what the reports presented show—and also about what they do *not* show. At other times, I will look at some of the latest empirical research or simply provide additional information or a bit of context. At other times, we will briefly turn to some classical texts for inspiration, such as from Buddhism or Western mysticism. These are all intended as an assortment of hors d'oeuvres and appetizers. There will also be pointers to other publications that I found relevant, to potential ingredients for future meals—because what I really want is to encourage you to go home and actually begin cooking your very own main course, regardless of whether this means doing new and better research, improving your meditation practices, or anything else that you feel inspired to try. If this book becomes a source of inspiration to a wide range of readers, then it will have done what I hoped for.

All the parts of the book speak to all the others, but after reading this introduction, you may like to jump straight to the concluding chapter for a quick overview, or to the epilogue on *Bewusstseinskultur* for some broader context. You may be most interested in the philosophical commentary offered in the second half of each chapter, or you may like the experiential reports best. If you are a computational modeler, you may treat every chapter as a target description; if you're a neuroscientist, you may well start generating chapter-by-chapter hypotheses about possible physical correlates; and if you are a meditator, I hope that you might find yourself making mental notes of practical pointers and comparing the descriptions against your own experience.

A companion website featuring supplementary material accompanies this book, in case you are looking for extra ingredients or still have room for a cheese course.¹² And, in case you would like to pursue any theme or question more deeply, I offer further references, plus a glossary of terms, at the end of the book. Finally, regardless of whether you are a meditator or not, you can participate in and support our research by completing an updated version of the original survey. But again, the best thing of all is that you don't have to read this book in a straight line. I hope you'll enjoy wherever it takes you.

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The Elephant and the Blind

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Science, and 500+ Experiential Reports

By: Thomas Metzinger

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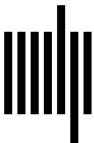
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