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Weltraum der Seele. What is consciousness really?

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Thomas Metzingers “The Elephant and the Blind” is a monumental book, and an instant classic, when it comes to books about consciousness.

Indeed, we are all still struggling, when it comes to a really good understanding of what consciousness *is*. Sure, there are many books out there that claim to help us to understand *what consciousness really is*, but very few actually give us something that make us much wiser. And fewer still is so packed with great insights as Metzingers “*The Elephant and the Blind*”...

Below, you will find a review of the book, or, perhaps, more precisely, comments to some (just a few) of the great insights that you will find in the book.

So, well, what is consciousness? In the book, one can find a number of definitions:

Consciousness is a second order process of knowing.
Because, quite simply, having a sensation is being aware of something,

and consciousness is the knowledge that this awareness currently exist.

It has to do with “*knowing*”:

Phenomenology of waking from deep dreamless sleep is a primordial sense of confidence that perceptual states will very soon occur. That one is now "*open to the world*".

And knows about ones epistemic capacity. P. 41.

...

Where epistemic openness is openness related to knowledge, to the possibility of acquiring knowledge. P. 41.

Consciousness is a continuing, ongoing process of ***nonconceptually knowing the organisms current state of epistemic openness***.

Of expecting new knowledge without yet having it. P. 42.

Consciousness is the appearance of a world...

There is full immersion. Plus the phenomenology of direct realism. P. 79.

The Latin root of "to conceive" concipere, means to take in and hold ... which gives us, "to take in and hold", to cognitively grasp something...

In normal wake states, the phenomenal world appears as irrevocably real. Perhaps, because we never experience the world boundaries?

...

You can experience a picture as a picture only if you are able to see it's frame. Is it the framelessness of consciousness itself that ultimately makes the content of the multimodal virtual image in our brain become real and fully immersive?

P. 265.

But sure, it is difficult to describe these consciousness phenomenons with words:

Human beings tried to make sense of and convey their own experiences on a conceptual level. They tried to describe MPEs, minimal phenomenal experience, ... In doing so, they created new words P. 327. ... Describing mental phenomenons is of course difficult. It could always be possible that people have slightly different experiences, but later describe them in identical ways. Or, similar phenomenons could be described in different ways. P. 326.

Nonduality. Interestingly, in the book, Metzinger makes it abundantly clear that we do not necessarily have a “self” inside the “knowing consciousness”:

Maybe all experiences are originally selfless and only swiftly integrated into an automatic self-model after they arise. P. 19.

A self might come later: “though >>education<< and via punishment and reward” (they even hold something that they called >>you<< responsible for outer behaviour)...

Consciousness itself – our inner model of knowing – is not necessarily integrated with a first person perspective... Phenomenologically there are nonegoic forms of knowing. P. 263.

(And) *Maintaining the “self”*, obviously, *comes with a cost*. Especially as people desperately identify with their high-level self-model. And do their best “*to avoid seeing the abundance of attentional lapses and permanent distractions*” (P. 110).

And do their best to explain away the myriad of unexpected surprises and discontinuities that happens from moment to moment in their minds... (Despite of what their self model might tell them...) (P.111).

In meditation, reaching stages of acceptance and contentment may help gradually lift the need for narrative self deception, liberating the meditator from her constant urge to stabilize the long-term by constructing a thematically coherent life story in a neverending search for meaning. P. 137.

Sure, having a “self” is a lot of work...

One of the most fundamental structural properties of conscious experience – arguably the most important – is the subject / object relation. There is a knowing self directed at the world, at potential action points. And sometimes even at itself. P. 343.

Still, there can be awareness without a subject... (Dual vs. Nondual awareness):

The qualitative character of awareness is neither subjective or objective. But it seems that as it can often contract into a special form, which we later call our own subjective perspective. Nondual awareness would be a process in which what was previously enfolded becomes unfolded. In which the contraction principle is suspended. P. 338.

But the phenomenology of **nonegoic self-knowledge** can arise in you, the biological organism. The organisms can become acquainted with it, as an ownerless state. But only so long as the identification with the epistemic agent model is suspended. P. 399.

MPE, Minimal Phenomenal Experience, pure awareness, is where we find consciousness groundless grounded in itself. P. 415.

The human mind knows silent and nonegoic ways of knowing itself.
Of being in touch with itself. And the conscious experience
of pure awareness and of "self knowing empty cognizance"
is one of them. P. 455.

Consciousness can be entirely disassociated with egoic self-awareness,
time representation, an spatial self location.
None of these features is a necessary condition for consciousness to occur.
MPE, minimal phenomenal experience, is thus a first target.
P. 472.

States where there is contentlessness,
no thought (absence of mental conflict, noise and perturbation),
clarity (clear and unobstructed space of knowing),
suchness (no conceptual overlays), **nonduality**
(***lacking an epistemic agent model***).
P. 461.

Indeed, in the brain we have many models of the world that surround us, and the book argues that consciousness is part of this system of models that we need to navigate the world with:

We hope to deliver an accurate inner image of how the world really is.
The primary goal is to continue to stay alive.
To maintain physiological integrity in the face of danger and opportunity.
P. 83.

Obviously, this conscious model is not being experienced as a model. It now is the organism that seem to be conscious. It is not perceived as a model of the world as a whole, or some complex image in the organisms head. Instead it is perceived as "*being conscious*"... (P. 79).

You experience the tree in front of you not as holographic construct.

But simply as a tree, out there in front of you.
Irrevocably real and immediately given.
This is because your introspective attention
does not penetrate the earlier processing stages
in your construct the visual scene, bind different
visual features into a gestalt so resolve as ambiguities,
and separate the tree from its background. P. 363.

Consciousness is a second order process of knowing.
Because, quite simply, having a sensation is being aware of something,
and consciousness is the knowledge that awareness currently exists. P. 364.

How is consciousness “made”. Well, over the years there has been many theories.
Metzinger mentions (opens the doors for the possibility) that it might not be as
complicated as we (many of us) currently think. E.g. Victor Lamme’s “recurrent
processing theory” is mentioned:

In Victor Lamme’s “recurrent processing theory” of consciousness,
Lamme argues that localized recurrent or reentrant processing
within the perceptual parts of our brain is sufficient
to give rise to consciousness.

...

And that parietal and frontal regions might be required only
for later reporting the contents of perceptual experience
or drawing on them for reasoning and decision making. P.95.

So, could an AI have a conscious self-model? Well...

What would it take to make an AI experience realness itself?
For our future AI, this could mean that if it were to represent
the global phenomenal signature of knowing in a way that
made it impossible to detect it as an internal construct,
as a representation of knowing, then it would have to understand
the quality of subjective confidence as something that is simply given.

P. 347.

Still, these (self) models are, of course, *not simple...*

In the human self-model, one of the deepest part of the model is the goal hierarchy that it represents. The hierarchy of goals to be achieved in this life, and their relations to each other. Which together constitute the values we live by. What really matters?

Where “*the decoherence of contradictory goals and values creates suffering*” (P. 142).

There is even something as “*a model for the no-model*”:

Even when everything is gone. *As in an inner death*,
there is still something...One *description describe nothingness*
like this: Indescribable not-anything...

...

But it can not be described in words. Since it is no longer an experience.
Rather, it can at most be described as the absence of all experience.
Absolute freedom. P. 158.

This raises the question of whether the pure awareness experience
might be the first conscious experience that every human has in the womb?
We should take this possibility in mind.

If MPE (Minimal Phenomenal Experience) really is minimal,
then it is plausible to assume that it might also be primary.
It may be the first phenomenal state that all of us experience.
Even if we cannot remember after birth.

Emptiness, the silent, clear, and non-dual experience
of becoming epistemically open to the world
– would then be the first conscious experience
every sentient being actually has.

P. 165.

Where, later, this MPE “nothingness” is then intervoven with other models, and

eventually (finds its place) with(in) the rest of human society.

Our cultural context forms a nested hierarchy.
Our minds are nested minds. And by functionally appropriating theories via our self model, we can make beliefs our own.
Changing our very brains, an changing the way we see reality. P. 170.

Models are made, and models can, of course, break apart under the influence of drugs, or in certain meditation states.

Albert Hoffmann (the Swiss chemist known for being the first to synthesize, ingest, and learn of the psychedelic effects of lysergic acid diethylamide, LSD) about the “quality of epistemic openness” (awareness, what it is...):

When you have grasped that ***I make the world.***
That I become richer through what comes in,
you try to remain open. And it is also possible to
remain open and to open yourself more and more,
to let more and more of the immense miracle of creation flow in
P. 269.

Indeed, LSD can cause chaos, when it comes to the normal functioning of perception and self-models. Certainly, taking LSD can reveal things and parts that we normally do not notice...

Selfless states without any unit of identification
may occur under dreamless deep sleep partial epileptic seizures.
In particular, certain psychoactive drugs, such as LSD, psilocybin
and 5-MeO-DMT have dramatic effects on self consciousness,
and can temporarily suppress any form of self-identification
– a phenomenom known in the Scientific litterature as
“*drug induced ego dissolution*”. P. 287.

Sure, some of the same effects can also occur spontaneously, without the help of drugs...In one case-story, in the book, an example of “*Dissolution of body*

boundaries” is described:

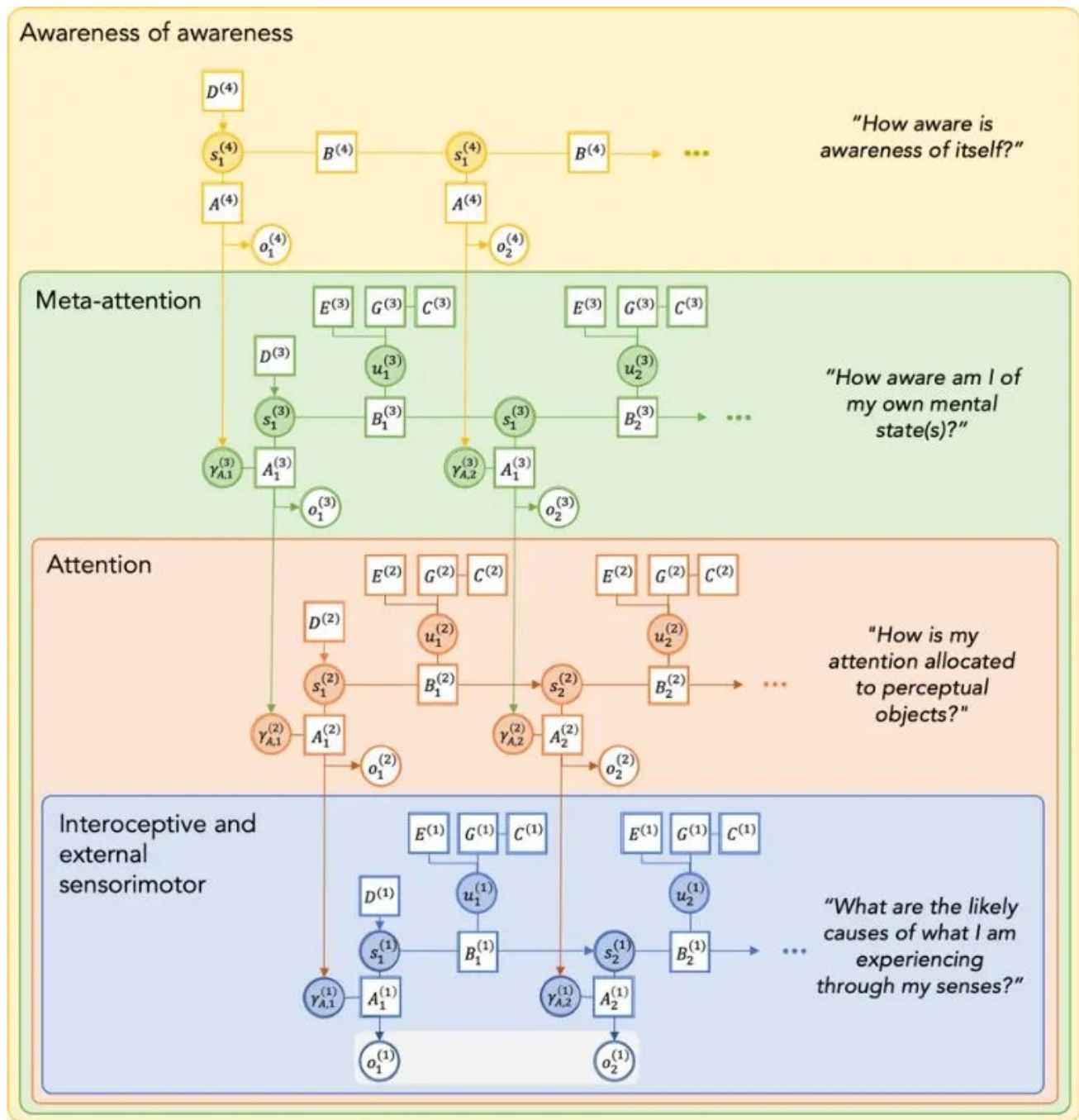
I was practicing walking meditation outside.
On a soft, uneven meadow. After a while I felt an invitation
to be absorbed into the ground.
At first that frightened me quite a bit,
and the need arose for me to decide.
Do I allow what is happening here, or do I get out?
That lasted for a little while, then I somehow let go of my control,
and I felt like I dissolved.
It was connected with a feeling of fullness, or wholeness,
or maybe also emptiness.
I wouldn't know how to tell them apart in the situation...
P. 278.

Indeed, many strange things can happen... Our brains self-models can even begin
to model (as ourselves) other people with empathy... And much more...

In social cognition, the bodily self-model in our brain
can expand into the social domain.
One way that it does so is by allowing the
intentions and movements/sensations of others to "inhabit us",
turning them into something that we can directly feel within ourselves.
P. 282.

So, more precisely, what could such a perception self-model for “pure awareness”
look like?

Well, the following model is proposed in the book for “Minimal Phenomenal
Experience with content”...



Proposed deep generative model
of Minimal Phenomenal Experience with content. For more: See <https://mpe-project.info>

At the lowest level the model ask: What are the likely causes of what I am experiencing through my senses.
At the highest level the model deal with "epistemic openness".
Global epistemic openness to incoming information.
How aware is awareness of itself.

An MPE experience is/can be modelled as a result of inference at only the highest level. Without any perceptual inference at the levels below. P. 477.

Where it is noted in the book, that:

MPE is not some metaphysical essence. Rather it is a region in phenomenal state space...
(Clearly) Pure awareness has many aspects and dimensions...
P. 496.

For more, see the [MPE_Project](#) page.

Its all complicated. And (For a conscious agent) *Finding your place in the world is not easy ...*

The unstoppable rise of science and technology that led to a bureaucratic, **"soulless", secularised western society**.
Where scientific understanding was more highly valued than faith or personal experience.
...
In 1918 Weber wrote: "The fate of our times is characterized by rationalisation and intellectualization and, above all, "disenchantment of the world".
P. 178.

So, we (conscious agents) *need something to cling on to...*

Many of us try to find something.
Something that allow us to live in an insane world.
Without going insane ourselves. Something that creates coherence.
Something truly sustainable that functions as a normative meta context.
Some overarching theme or highest level goal.
Something that reenchants our world, a reliable long-term perspective
P. 171.

...
Typically, the difference between mere subjektive experience
of and the much more difficult philosophical question
of whether something like an objective meaning exist at all,
and how it can be known, if so - is deliberately glossed over.
For many people, regularly repeating experiences of meaningfulness
or of "being touched" seems to be good enough.
The good feeling is what counts.
While the deeper issue relating to the conceivability
of objective meaning in life is systematically avoided.
P.175.

Certainly, such perception “models”, we, do not like to be confronted with their
own limits and mortality...

The insight into mortality is exactly one such ugly surprise.
Biological organisms like ourselves must maintain certain vital parameters.
Certain critical physiological variables, within certain bounds. P. 187.

Over the centuries many western philosophers have noted that
living an examined life has a lot to do with learning to die.
And as matter of fact, confronting ones one mortality as directly
as possible may turn out to be the deeper core of any spiritual practice.
P. 189.

How can we come to other conscious states (than the normal wake conscious
state) such as MPE (Minimal Phenomenal Experience)...?

The functional conditions that reliably enable pure awareness to arise are unconscious.
...
And cannot be directly targeted by the conscious self.
..
There is neither a negative nor a positive correlation between the number of practice hours and score for pure awareness states
...
I.e. there (might be) is something highly important that can't be measured in hours...
P. 439.

Since the enabling conditions are located on a sub personal level, the fine grained causal process by which they come about is hidden from the person.
...
These (other) stages later begin to involve degree's of ego dissolution, a cessation of time experience, a feeling of witnessing, or even then spontaneous and effortless emergence of nondual awareness.
P. 442.

Can we, or AI, learn how to trigger these other conscious states?

It is conceivable that new technology could directly cause the casually enabling conditions for MPE on the sub personal level, perhaps by using AI and new methods of adaptive realtime feedback to target the neuronal correlates of consciousness and their computational functions much directly and precisely.
...
In the future...
...
To give a more specific examples, we could use machine learning techniques to extract patterns for mpe's and see how they are started.
P. 443.

Both meditation and psychedelic can promote

1. The unbinding of mental content from the self model.
2. A decentered mode of introspection and

3. A shift of self related mental content from phenomenal transparency to opacity (not transparent).
P. 429.

Indeed, the spontaneous occurrence of pure awareness is (can be) caused by different factors. E.g.

- A continuous stabilization of the unconscious, functional precondition of such experiences through formal meditation practice .
- And, more specifically, an improved ability to recognize such episodes during every day life. P. 425.

Obviously, according to the book, we (our culture) should try to have more of the good conscious states, and less of the bad states. We should have a “*bewusstseinskultur*”:

Clean air and water. Schools, museums, public transport...
etc.
but also evidence based enculturation of those states of consciousness that we have found to be valuable. P. 488.

(Maybe not the right word to use, when we are talking about experiences like the Minimal Phenomenal Experience, but well...)

A *thought provoking* book. Many great insights. Loads of information. Loads of things to learn!

Beyond awesome.

Consciousness

Philosophy

Philosophy Of Mind

Cognitive Science

Cognition