

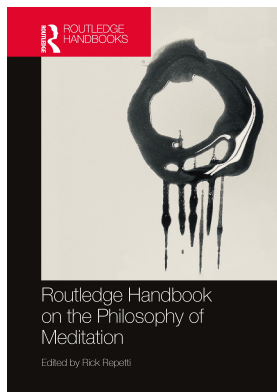
This article was downloaded by: 10.2.97.136

On: 08 Jun 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



Routledge Handbook on the Philosophy of Meditation

Rick Repetti

Meditative experience and the plasticity of self-experience

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781003127253-19>

Matthew MacKenzie

Published online on: 17 May 2022

How to cite :- Matthew MacKenzie. 17 May 2022, *Meditative experience and the plasticity of self-experience from:* Routledge Handbook on the Philosophy of Meditation Routledge

Accessed on: 08 Jun 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781003127253-19>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

15

MEDITATIVE EXPERIENCE AND THE PLASTICITY OF SELF-EXPERIENCE

Matthew MacKenzie

1 Introduction

Some meditative experiences are reported to involve a change in the meditator's sense of self. For instance, some practitioners of body-scan meditation report a felt dissolution of bodily boundaries and a corresponding change in their bodily sense of self. In 'pure-consciousness-events' some subjects report a sense of self as pure consciousness, while others report a loss of the sense of self. In this chapter, I use recent philosophical and empirical work on the phenomenal self and the variability of self-experience to explore possible connections with particular types of meditative experience. In particular, I differentiate minimal subjectivity from the more complex and plastic phenomena of self-identification, self-location, and a strong first-person perspective. I discuss how certain reported meditative experiences transform key aspects of phenomenal self-experience, such as phenomenal (dis-)identification with the body, agency, spatial location, and the phenomenal field. I then discuss philosophical implications for the study of consciousness, the self, and meditation.

2 Minimal subjectivity and self-identification

The central idea I explore in this chapter is that certain forms of meditation and meditative experience can alter forms of self-experience. By 'self-experience' I mean to include the various forms of self-consciousness, self-identification, and sense of self (MacKenzie 2016). On this view, self-experience is *plastic* or variable and meditation can induce both short-term and (potentially) long-term changes in self-experience. Furthermore, it may be the case that certain forms of meditation affect different aspects of self-experience. For instance, again, body-scan meditation may induce an experience of the dissolution of bodily boundaries and a change in bodily self-awareness. In contrast, certain forms of mantra meditation may induce experiences of 'pure consciousness' in which the ordinary senses of self and embodiment drop away.¹ However, before exploring these ideas, some preliminaries are in order.

First, we may distinguish between phenomenal consciousness, subjectivity, and self. These are closely related, but distinct, phenomena. Phenomenal consciousness, in the paradigmatic case, involves *what it is like for a subject to be aware of something*. Based on this initial characterization, we can discern at least three central aspects of phenomenal consciousness. 'What it is like' picks out

the qualitative dimension of consciousness. ‘For a subject’ picks out the subjective, first-personal, or perspectival aspect of consciousness. And ‘to be aware of something’ picks out the aboutness or intentional aspect. That is, phenomenal consciousness paradigmatically involves qualitative, subjective, and intentional dimensions. Furthermore, it is widely accepted that phenomenal consciousness has at least synchronic unity. Of course, a particular theory of consciousness may not affirm either the centrality or even the reality of one or more of these aspects.²

Regarding subjectivity, we may distinguish four types or dimensions. First, we may distinguish *creature* subjectivity and *state* subjectivity.³ Creature subjectivity has to do with a being as a whole. For instance, a mobile animal needs to be able to coordinate perception and action in a flexible and adaptive fashion to survive. This requires a grasp of the self/other distinction in the sensorimotor context of perception and action, which is one of the roots of creature subjectivity. State subjectivity has to do with the (possible) subjective character of particular mental states, events, or processes. Next, we may distinguish *phenomenal* and *non-phenomenal* aspects of subjectivity. Phenomenal subjectivity has to do with the qualitative and structural features of conscious experience. Non-phenomenal subjectivity has to do with those aspects of subjectivity that are not essentially understood in terms of conscious experience.

On my view, a sentient being is capable of conscious sensation, feeling, and action. Creature subjectivity arises from and facilitates the synchronic and diachronic integration of sensation, feeling, and action and constitutes a sentient organismic perspective in and on the world. Thus, sentience and subjectivity are deeply connected and any being with both is therefore a *subject*. However, I maintain a distinction between being a subject and being a *self*. Being a subject is necessary but not sufficient for being a self. Indeed, being a self is an evolutionarily and developmentally more sophisticated phenomenon that builds on sentience and primitive forms of subjectivity. On my account, being a self involves the synchronic and diachronic integration of (at least) four paradigmatic capacities or features: (a) subjectivity, (b) ownership, (c) agency, and (d) valuation. In the normal case, there will be both functional and phenomenological dimensions to the ongoing integration of these features. Hence, self-experience will reflect the integration of these features, and alterations to these functions can give rise to significant alterations in self-experience. Of course, one need not endorse my account of the self. Yet, by distinguishing being a subject from being a self (or just having a sense of self) one can begin to make sense of even drastic alterations of self-experience as forms of experience lived through by conscious subjects.⁴

Finally, we can distinguish three broad levels of self-experience that may be affected in meditative experience. The narrative level (Gallagher 2000) concerns longer-term diachronic integration of self-experience in the form of, e.g., mental time-travel. It also concerns a sense of the temporal arc of one’s life or identity, e.g., in terms of self-image. The minimal (Zahavi 2008) and embodied (Blanke and Metzinger 2009) level concerns the present-centered aspects of self-experience, including the sense of being a conscious mental subject or a sense of global body-ownership. Finally, there is the deeper layer of the basic subject/object contrast which is, arguably, at the roots of the other levels of self-experience (Josipovic 2014).

3 Types of meditation

Dahl, Lutz, and Davidson (2015) propose a classification system that categorizes styles of meditation into three broad families: attentional, constructive, and deconstructive. This system of classification is based on the (proposed) primary cognitive mechanisms in each family. In the attentional family the primary mechanisms are attention regulation and meta-awareness. They argue:

that a shared characteristic of all meditation practices in this family is the systematic training of the capacity to intentionally initiate, direct, and/or sustain these attentional processes while ... strengthening the capacity to be aware of the processes of thinking, feeling, and perceiving.

(Id., p. 516)

Attention regulation here includes capacities to control the orientation and aperture of attention, to detect and disengage from distractions, and to reorient attention to a chosen object. Meta-awareness is “heightened awareness of the processes of consciousness, including the processes of thinking, feeling, and perceiving” (id., p. 515).

On this account, both focused-attention (FA) and open-monitoring (OM) styles of meditation are in the attentional family. Focused-attention practices involve the cultivation of a narrowed attentional aperture and focused concentration on a chosen object. For instance, in breath-awareness meditation the meditator closely attends to the breath, leading to a vivid and focused quality of attention. In the context of Buddhist meditation practices, this kind of focused attention is called *smṛti* (Sanskrit) or *sati* (Pāli) and can lead to a state of one-pointedness (Sanskrit: *ekāgratā*; Pāli: *ekagattā*). Further, FA styles of meditation typically involve meta-awareness in the form of monitoring the object and quality of attention. In the Buddhist context, this meta-cognitive capacity is called ‘*samprajanya*’. Open-monitoring practices involve a widened attentional aperture. In some forms, the meditator cultivates an open or receptive form of attention and takes as object whatever experiential contents may arise: The meditator sustains attention on the quality of awareness itself. In both forms, meta-awareness is deployed in monitoring the object and quality of attention. Finally, they argue, the regulation of attention and meta-awareness cultivated in attentional family practices undermines the tendency to experiential fusion. They define ‘experiential fusion’ as “an automatic process whereby one becomes absorbed in the contents of consciousness, leading to a diminished capacity to monitor and/or regulate psychological processes” (id., p. 515). They also argue that reversing experiential fusion can have positive effects on mental health (id., p. 517).

The constructive family of practices focuses on cultivating psychological patterns conducive to well-being. The authors propose that “one avenue through which these practices may affect well-being is by targeting maladaptive self-schema and replacing them with more adaptive conceptions of self” (id., p. 518). Here the self-schema refers to a latent network of conceptions and beliefs about the self that can influence explicit thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. The two central cognitive mechanisms in this family are cognitive reappraisal and perspective taking. Cognitive reappraisal involves shifts in thinking about events or situations leading to an altered response. Perspective taking involves “the act of considering how oneself or another would feel in a particular situation” (id., p. 518) and, they argue, is especially important for healthy interpersonal interaction. Both cognitive reappraisal and perspective-taking are deployed in constructive styles of practice to counteract maladaptive psychological patterns and cultivate more adaptive ones.

Buddhist loving-kindness meditation (*mettā-bhāvanā*) is a well-known example of a constructive style of practice. In this practice the meditator cultivates, sustains, and directs a feeling and attitude of *mettā* (loving-kindness, friendliness, or well-wishing). The meditator might, for instance, cultivate *mettā* directed toward a friend or loved one, internally repeating affirmative phrases reflecting benevolent intentions, such as “May you be happy”. She might then direct and sustain the feeling/attitude toward a stranger, then toward someone with whom she has more difficult interpersonal interactions. Eventually, the meditator would extend loving-kindness toward all sentient beings. In this style, then, the meditator trains in priming certain

affects and attitudes, but also cultivates the ability to stabilize and direct the attitude. Further, this style of practice involves cognitive appraisal and reappraisal in its emphasis on well-wishing and perspective-taking in its progressive direction of this attitude toward others, including strangers or people with whom one might have conflicts.

The deconstructive family of practices “aims to undo maladaptive cognitive patterns by exploring the dynamics of perception, emotion, and cognition and generating insights into one’s internal models of the self, others, and the world” (*id.*, p. 519). Dahl et al. suggest that the primary cognitive mechanism in this family is self-inquiry, which they define as “the process of investigating the dynamics and nature of conscious experience” (*id.*, p. 519). The goal of this inquiry is not just to cultivate awareness, but also to gain insight into the nature and dynamics of experience. And this insight is itself meant to undo cognitive reification, which the authors define as:

the experience of thoughts, emotions, and perceptions as being accurate depictions of reality and, in particular, the implicit belief that the self and objects of consciousness are inherently enduring, unitary, and independent of their surrounding conditions and circumstances.

(*Id.*, p. 515)

It should be noted that, while this definition may be appropriate to the context of Buddhist meditation, it may not be appropriate to other forms of self-inquiry. For instance, in forms of self-inquiry meditation within the Advaita Vedānta (nondualistic Vedic) tradition, the insight may be recognition of a changeless witness consciousness (*sākṣin*) that is construed as the condition of the possibility of the various changing contents of experience. Hence, one might say that cognitive reification involves some form of distortion of experience by one’s latent beliefs, concepts, or other cognitive patterns.

The deconstructive family includes object-oriented, subject-oriented, and nondual forms of inquiry. Object-oriented forms of meditation focus inquiry on various objects, e.g., perceptual objects or sensations, noting, say, their impermanence. Subject-oriented forms focus inquiry on the subject’s own states or processes, e.g., thoughts or emotions, noting, say, their spontaneity or their difference from their objects. Nondual forms of meditation “are designed to elicit an experiential shift into a mode of experiencing in which the cognitive structures of self/other and subject/object are no longer the dominant mode of experience” (*id.*, p. 519). Moreover, these styles often involve a relaxation or release of a sense of effort, control, or voluntary direction of attention. According to a number of nondual contemplative traditions, this shift is possible because there is a more fundamental aspect or condition of consciousness that is not bifurcated by the cognitive structures of self/other and subject/object (Josipovic 2019).

4 Variations in self-experience

In the first section of this chapter I suggested three broad levels of self-experience that may be affected by meditation: the narrative, embodied minimal, and deep subject/object levels. The narrative and embodied minimal levels of self-experience (at least) involve what Blanke and Metzinger (2009) term a ‘minimal phenomenal self’ (MPS) or what I call a ‘minimal phenomenal subject’.⁵ The key components of MPS are: (a) self-identification, (b) spatiotemporal self-location, and (c) a weak first-person perspective (1PP) (*id.*, p. 8). On this account, the embodied minimal level of self-experience is constituted by the MPS, whereas the narrative level involves more sophisticated forms of self-experience. According to Blanke and

Metzinger, the narrative or autobiographical level requires possession of a cognitive first-person perspective that:

appears when a system possesses a concept of the strong 1PP and is able to apply this concept to itself (i.e. it has an abstract and active mental representation of itself as a subject of experience, which includes a special form of cognitive self-reference).

(Id., p. 7)

A more robust phenomenal self (RPS), then, will involve a strong 1PP, including autobiographical or narrative identity, and a sense of agency.

On this account of the MPS, self-identification is functionally a form of global body-representation and is phenomenologically an identification with the body as a whole, rather than any one of its parts.⁶ The spatial dimension of self-location involves the sense of the body as occupying a certain volume within a spatial frame of reference. The temporal dimension involves, for instance, a felt sense of the now. The authors define the weak first-person perspective as:

a purely geometrical feature of a perceptual or imagined model of reality possessing a point of projection functioning as its origin in sensory and mental processing, but is not linked with theoretically more charged notions such as “subject of experience” (the conscious self) or “epistemic subject” (knowing self).

(Id., p. 8)

In his work on dreams (2013) and mind-wandering (2018), Metzinger has deployed the notion of a *phenomenal unit of identification*. Here a unit of identification is the experiential content or structure with which the subject self-identifies, yielding the sense “I *am* this!” And, just as one’s sense of spatiotemporal location can change in different types of experience, so too can the unit of one’s basic self-identification as part of the MPS. For example, in a case of mind-wandering one’s sense of self or phenomenal unit of identification may switch from being mentally present in one’s current situation to identification with oneself in a distinct, imagined scenario. Metzinger (2018) characterizes this as identifying with a ‘virtual self’ and even ‘becoming someone else’ for a period of time. Furthermore, he posits both a minimal and a maximal unit of identification. For example, a minimal unit might be the unextended point of projection in the weak 1PP. In contrast, a maximal unit might be the phenomenal domain as a whole. Finally, Metzinger suggests a unit of identification he calls the

“meta-aware self” – an internal model of an active entity that has the ability to end an ongoing chain of task-unrelated thought and to return the focus of attention to what is now consciously remembered as “the” original task.

(Id., p. 102).⁷

This variability in the phenomenal unit of identification is at the root of what I call the ‘plasticity of self-experience’.

5 Altered states and meditative experience

Having laid some conceptual groundwork, let me now turn to the types of changes to self-experience reported in various meditation practices. I have organized this section based on the narrative, minimal embodied, and deep or subject/object levels of self-experience identified in

the first section. This discussion is by no means comprehensive, but it will indicate the connections between meditation and changes in self-experience.

Beginning with the narrative sense of self, there at least three ways this level of self-experience might be changed. Recall that the narrative level of self-experience includes rich conceptual, autobiographical, and temporal dimensions of self-experience. In their work on the effects of Buddhist contemplative practices, Lindahl and Britton (2019) characterize this level as the ‘story of me’. In moment-to-moment experience, this ‘story of me’ may include various forms of self-referential thoughts and feelings, as well as mental time-travel in the form of, e.g., autobiographical memory and mind-wandering. Styles of meditation from the attentional family, such as mindfulness practice, cultivate both present-centered focus and meta-awareness.

The first type of change in narrative self-experience, then, is a reduction in self-referential thinking (e.g., rumination) and mental time-travel (e.g., mind-wandering). Meditators report, e.g., a ‘quieting of the mind’ and a more present-centered sense of self or mental presence. The second type of change involves a more fundamental shift away from the narrative level of self-experience. Here subjects not only have a reduction or quieting of narrative self-consciousness, but may lose access to some or all of their narrative sense of self. As Lindahl and Britton discuss, one subject on a Theravāda meditation retreat reports forgetting their own name. Another reports: “It basically felt like whatever personality I thought I had before just disintegrated. And it wasn’t an expansive disintegration into unity or bliss or anything like that. It was a disintegration into dust” (2019, p. 164). Here the dramatic change in self-experience may constitute a form of depersonalization. A third type of change affects how the meditator relates to their narrative self-experience. Rather than a loss of narrative self-consciousness, the meditator may experience defusion or even disidentification with the narrative level of self-experience. A Zen practitioner reports:

all day long I saw how all my actions were reinforcing this story that I had told myself
.... And this story that I was telling myself was the very thing that was preventing me
from being with my experience.

(*Id.*, p. 163)

In the self-inquiry style of Advaita Vedānta meditation associated with the Hindu contemplative, Sri Ramana Maharshi (1989), the practitioner is instructed to maintain awareness of the changing contents of experience in a manner similar to open-monitoring. Then, periodically – particularly when it is noticed that the mind has wandered or become fused with thinking – the practitioner asks, “Who is aware (of this)?”, “Who am I?”, or “Am I this?” These self-inquiry questions are not meant to call up a conceptual or discursive answer, but to evoke a phenomenological shift of awareness from the various contents of experience to awareness itself, sometimes described as a contemplative intention to extricate awareness from (false) identification with its (habitually identified with) objects, with the latter construed as inessential features of consciousness and the former as essential. Through practice, this shift is to be stabilized such that the practitioner is not bound (fused) to thinking and does not ultimately identify with the narrative level of self-experience: The practice is meant to evoke a shift in the phenomenal unit of identification from the inner narrative to awareness itself.⁸

Turning now to the minimal, embodied level of self-experience, there are several aspects that may be modified in meditative experience. Recall that the MPS model of the minimal self or subject posits three related dimensions: self-identification, self-location, and a weak first-person perspective. Dor-Ziderman et al. (2013), in a study of 12 long-term meditators, found

some subjects report a loss of bodily ownership, a form of self-identification in the MPS model. Similarly, a meditator in Lindahl and Britton's study reports:

Yeah, well I didn't have a sense of my body belonging to a "me". There wasn't a sense of "me" there. I could feel my hand – there was a feeling of a hand, but it didn't feel like my hand.

(2019, p. 165)

Ataria et al. (2015) show that some meditators experience alterations in or loss of a sense of agency, both in the flow of thoughts and in movement. Subjects report being on 'autopilot' and there being no 'me' performing actions, or having a clear sense of thoughts and experiences arising spontaneously.

With regard to the sense of self-location, Dor-Ziderman et al. (2016) found evidence of a reduction in the sense of boundaries (SB) in some long-term meditators. They explain: "As the SB becomes more flexible, one's ability to locate oneself in space deteriorates" (p. 3). In their study they found that the sense of self-location reduces gradually, beginning with an attenuation of the left/right and up/down orientation and ending with a loss of the sense of spatial orientation. Similarly, a Zen practitioner reports: "the boundary between me and my environment began to break down. A bird flew in front of me, but it didn't fly in front of me – it flew through me" (Lindahl and Britton 2019, p. 170). Ataria et al. (2015) and Dambrun (2016) also found that meditation can induce a sense of dissolving or loss of bodily boundaries. However, Ataria et al. (2015) report that bodily sensations are not fully lost even when the SB is dissolved. In addition, Dor-Ziderman et al. (2016) also found attenuation in the phenomenal sense of time, including a reduction in the sense of duration and a reduction or even loss in the felt sense of temporal continuity.

Regarding the minimal sense of being a self or subject, there is widespread evidence of alteration or attenuation of this level of self-experience (Ataria et al. 2015, Dor-Ziderman et al. 2013, Lindahl et al. 2017, Dambrun 2016). In connection with their study on self-boundaries, Dor-Ziderman et al. explain:

As the SB becomes more flexible, the sense of self dissolves, thus becoming weaker. This process begins by expanding the sense of self (SB2) and, thereafter (SB3), as the SB disappears the sense of self disappears altogether.

(2016, p. 3)

Further, in their 2013 study, 4 of 12 participants reported significant alterations in the minimal sense of self. For example, one reports: "It was emptiness, as if the self fell out of the picture. There was experience but it had no address, it was not attached to a center or subject" (2013, p. 6). To capture this fundamental shift in experience, Dor-Ziderman et al. propose that there is a level of experience, below the minimal self, which they term 'selfless experiencing' (SL): "momentary phenomenal experience free from the sense of agency and ownership" (2013, p. 3).

It is important to note here the difference between modifications of the minimal and narrative senses of self. Both types of changes may be reported as a loss or attenuation of self. However, changes in narrative self-experience affected primarily the flow of self-related thinking and feeling (the 'inner story') and mental time-travel. Changes in minimal self-experience affected the (arguably) more basic aspects of self-experience, such as the feeling of subjective mental presence – the feeling of having a 'center' or a phenomenal 'address' – or even the synchronic unity of experience. At this level, the phenomenal unit of identification appears to shift

more from the narrative level (NS) to the present-centered sense of self (MS), and in some cases to a loss of phenomenal identification (SL).

Already with the shift from MS to SL, we seem to be getting beneath the level of the minimal phenomenal self or subject. At this more fundamental level of experience, an explicit sense of first-personal consciousness, of being someone, may be diminished or absent. In their 2013 study, Dor-Ziderman et al. gave different instructions to target the narrative, minimal, and selfless levels of experience. In particular, for the MS they instructed to “[t]ry to experience what is happening to you at the present moment”, whereas for the SL they instructed “[t]ry to experience what is happening as the present moment, when you are not at the center” (p. 4).⁹ However, even if there is a level of experience below the MPS, it may still involve aspects associated with subjectivity, such as a phenomenal perspective, a basic self/other contrast, or an internal/external contrast. In the remainder of this section, I take up two further styles of meditation – the nondual and pure consciousness types – that may be interpreted as affecting these more basic aspects of experience.

Nondual styles of meditation fall under the deconstructive family of practices. This style of practice has its roots in the Hindu nondual traditions of Advaita Vedānta and Pratyabhijñā, as well as the Buddhist Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen traditions. A central commitment of these traditions, Josipovic writes,

is that at some fundamental level, human experience is not fragmented into opposing dualities, but that such fragmentation, though a universal condition of human life, is adventitious to a more unified reality underlying our daily experiences.

(2014, p. 2)

In the context of meditation, that underlying reality is said to be nondual awareness (NDA):

a nonconceptual nondual awareness that abides, ordinarily unrecognized, in the background of all conscious experiencing. This background awareness appears in meditation to be unitary and unchanging – a cognizance that is in itself empty of content, yet clearly aware and blissful – whereas various sensory, affective, and cognitive contents, and the various states of arousal appear to it as dynamic processes or, as a well-known metaphor states, like images in a mirror.

(Id., p. 2)

The aim, then, is to experientially recognize this nondual awareness and to defuse attachment or identification with the shifting contents presented within the horizon of NDA.¹⁰ In some styles of practice the meditator may be instructed to shift her basic sense of identity from these contents to NDA as the true nature of mind or self.¹¹ Empirical research on these styles of meditation is only beginning (Fucci et al. 2018). However, Josipovic reports:

Our results indicate that anticorrelation between intrinsic and extrinsic networks can be influenced in profoundly different ways through meditation, and that NDA meditation is different from FA and OM meditations in that it enables a state of mind in which extrinsic and intrinsic experiences are increasingly synergistic rather than competing.

(2014, p. 5)

These results are consistent with the goal of these practices to diminish or eliminate the purported subject/object duality. In the context of Dzogchen, for instance:

emphasis of both object and subject moves, at least theoretically, to a point where no elements of objectivity or subjectivity – whether in the form of conceptual structures, categories of time and space, or some other feature – remain in the experience. At this point, the invariant feature of cognition is said to be realized fully by the meditator, and this is the full-blown state of Open Presence ... [The] stability [of this state] consists of one's ability to continue to experience phenomena without objectifying them and, ideally, without having a sense of an agentive or narrative subjectivity. The state thus seems to cultivate a type of *ipseity* or bare awareness.

(Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson 2007, p. 517)

In this form of nondual meditation, the practitioner attempts to undo the cognitive reification of both object and subject, as well as narrative and agential senses of self. As these structures of experience diminish, the purportedly continuous or ever-present background of nondual awareness is revealed. As Lutz et al. (2007) note, NDA ('open presence') is a form of bare awareness because it is prior to the reified structures of subject and object. However, it is also open in that it is the condition or horizon within which various phenomenal contents arise and cease. In this style of nondual meditation, the recognition of NDA is consistent with the continued experience of phenomenal contents. To use a common metaphor from these traditions, NDA is like the open sky, always in the background as clouds gather and disperse. As the practitioner comes to stabilize and 'rest as' this space of nondual awareness, we might say that the phenomenal unit of identification has shifted to its maximum, the very space of phenomenality itself (Metzinger 2018, Fasching 2008).

Turning to pure consciousness meditation, I will focus on the styles rooted in the Yoga and Advaita Vedānta traditions. The most common style of meditation associated with pure consciousness experiences is Transcendental Meditation, a form of mantra meditation in which the meditator mentally repeats a particular sound, word, or phrase. As the mantra is repeated, the mind settles and phenomenal contents are said to diminish. This quiet mind, then, is sometimes described as a lucid and silent state of consciousness. In some cases, meditators report entering a state of pure consciousness. As Shear and Jevning characterize it, "when the mind has become completely settled (while nevertheless remaining alert) one steps outside all activity of perception, and, silent and fully awake inside, experiences pure, unmanifest, absolutely objectless, consciousness" (1999, pp. 194–5). As one practitioner reports,

Sometimes in meditation my thoughts drift away entirely, and I gain a state I would describe as simply being awake. I'm not thinking about anything. I'm not particularly aware of any sensations, I'm not aware of being absorbed in anything in particular, and yet I am quite certain (after the fact) that I have not been asleep. During it I am simply awake or simply present.

(Forman 1999, p. 20)

Furthermore, some TM practitioners report an elimination of a sense of effort in concentration as well as a loss of the senses of time, space, and body sense (Arenander and Travis, 2004). These pure consciousness experiences (PCE) are also associated with "profound bodily relaxation, marked by spontaneous breath quiescence and global, high amplitude, slow frequency (alpha) EEG patterns which are general highly coherent across frontal leads" (Raffone and Srinivasan 2009).

Because the PCE purportedly is a form of objectless consciousness, it can be characterized as nondual. The subject/object duality is absent because there is no object, and even the usual

duality between the subject's own states and her awareness of them is attenuated or absent. However, there is an important difference between the PCE and the type of nondual awareness already discussed. In the PCE a nondual state is achieved by the absence of explicit phenomenal contents, while in the NDA discussed above, the nondual state is achieved in the presence of phenomenal contents. So, while both states are understood to be a recognition of consciousness itself as distinct from its contents, the phenomenological structure differs. One way to understand the difference here is in terms of the phenomenal unit of identification. The NDA experience involves the maximal unit of phenomenal identification: the space or expanse of consciousness as the context of phenomenal contents. In contrast, the PCE involves the minimal unit of phenomenal identification: the simple state of phenomenal consciousness devoid of contents. In both cases, though, there is a shift of self-identification from the typical sense of being a separate subject in relation to an object to a sense of being consciousness itself, whether in its pure form or in its spacious form.

6 Philosophical implications

As can be seen from the foregoing discussion, there is accumulating evidence that meditation can transform self-experience. Different methods of meditation may transform different aspects or dimensions of self-experience, including the narrative, minimal embodied, and deep levels. In this final section, I take up some of the methodological and phenomenological implications of this recent work.

The material discussed above further supports the philosophical relevance and importance of a broadly neurophenomenological method. The central aim of neurophenomenology is to develop an integrated account of human experience by drawing ideas and methods from the mind sciences, philosophical phenomenology, and contemplative traditions. More particularly, it aims to develop a theoretical and practical bridge between first-, second-, and third-person approaches to the study of experience. Varela (1996) summarizes the basic method:

- (1) Subjects (as well as experimenters) suspend their beliefs or theories about experience;
- (2) Subjects gain intimacy with the domain of investigation by reflectively focusing on how they are experiencing the stimulus;
- (3) Subjects offer descriptions that are then intersubjectively validated.

Of course, not all the studies referred to in previous sections have deployed the neurophenomenological method. However, they have involved careful reflection on and description of meditative experiences, and in a number of instances researchers have worked with experienced meditators as both subjects and collaborators. In addition, we see a mutual illumination between first-person reports of experience and phenomenological analyses of stable structures of experience such as ownership, agency, and different types or levels of self-experience. This is critical because it allows for exploration of these structures in particular studies, but also allows for intersubjective comparison and (potential) identification of neurobiological correlates.

A related methodological implication concerns the relationship between phenomenology and metaphysics. In the philosophy of consciousness and the self, one may be tempted to jump straight to the big metaphysical questions: Is there such a thing as the self? Is consciousness real or an illusion? Are either the self or consciousness (if they exist) physical? However, while these are legitimate philosophical questions, investigation into meditation and meditative experience suggests a different approach. The plasticity of experiences of both self and consciousness supports a 'phenomenology-first' approach to philosophical inquiry here. Indeed, I agree with

Strawson that the “sense of the self is the source in experience of the philosophical problem of the self” (2019, p. 17).

Thus, we should begin our inquiry into the nature and existence of the self with careful phenomenological analysis of both the structures and variations of self-experience. Relevantly, Strawson identifies three related questions:

The local phenomenological question:

(I) What is the nature of the human sense of the self?

The general phenomenological question:

(II) Are there other possibilities, when it comes to a sense of the self? (Can we describe the minimal case of genuine possession of a sense of the self?)

The conditions question:

(III) What are the grounds or preconditions of possession of a sense of the self?

(Id., p. 18)

Careful philosophical and empirical work on meditation in relation to self-experience offers important insights in relation to these questions. Moreover, one can and should try to make progress on these phenomenological questions before settling on answers to the metaphysical questions.

One key phenomenological insight that arises from the work discussed above is that there appears to be a deep structural distinction between the (normal) sense of self and consciousness. Recall that I distinguish between phenomenal consciousness, subjectivity, and self. Arguably, in normal experience these are so deeply intertwined as to be almost indistinguishable. However, what we see in these studies of meditation is that subjects can have quite dramatic alterations of their sense of self and that they are consciously aware of these alterations. Indeed, we see some evidence of a partial or complete loss of some aspect of the normal sense of self, accompanied by the continuation or even heightening of phenomenal consciousness. This contrast is most apparent in pure consciousness experience (PCE) where it is reported that the normal senses of intentionality, agency, ownership, body-awareness, and spatiotemporal location drop away – and yet consciousness remains and the sense of awareness or lucid alertness is heightened.

While we can draw a sharp phenomenological distinction between the normal sense of self and consciousness, subjectivity is an intermediate phenomenon. Recall that minimal phenomenal subjectivity (MPS) involves self-identification, spatiotemporal self-location, and a weak first-person perspective. The studies discussed here report significant alterations in both self-identification and self-location, including, e.g., dissolution of bodily boundaries and disidentification with the body and with thinking. Here we see attenuation or elimination of aspects of the MPS without cessation of phenomenal consciousness.¹²

Should we conclude that consciousness could lack all subjectivity? This question highlights an important divide in philosophical phenomenology between egological and non-egological theories of consciousness. Briefly, as Zahavi explains, an egological theory “would typically claim that it is a conceptual and experiential truth that any episode of experiencing necessarily includes a subject of experience” (2008, p. 99). E.g., when watching a movie, on an egological view, “I am not only intentionally directed at the *movie*, nor merely aware of the movie being *watched*, I am also aware that it is being watched by *me*, that is, that *I am watching the movie*” (*id.*). In contrast, a non-egological theory denies that phenomenal consciousness necessarily involves a sense of self or subjectivity of the kind identified by the egological theorist. In this case, consciousness may be acquainted with *itself*, but not necessarily with a (phenomenal) self or subject.

However, as I have argued (MacKenzie 2015), we can distinguish both weak and strong versions of these positions. A strong egological view holds that consciousness necessarily involves the experience of a more robust self, whereas a weak egological view, like Zahavi's, holds only that consciousness necessarily has minimal 'for-me-ness' or first-personal givenness. A strong non-egological or 'no-ownership' view will deny even minimal subjectivity to consciousness: Conscious events occur, but are not in any meaningful sense lived-through by a subject. A weak non-egological view will hold that experiences are lived through by the subject, but will deny that subjective experiences always involve even a pre-reflective sense of for-me-ness (MacKenzie 2015, p. 12): Phenomenal consciousness entails a minimal phenomenal perspective that is more basic than the sense of personal ownership or for-me-ness.

I think the evidence from meditation discussed here provides strong reason to reject the standard or strong egological view. According to a number of meditation traditions and in light of current research, phenomenal consciousness can continue even when the normal sense of being a self or subject is radically altered, diminished, or eliminated. Recall, e.g., the remark from one practitioner of mindfulness meditation: "It was emptiness, as if the self fell out of the picture. There was experience but it had no address, it was not attached to a center or subject" (Dor-Ziderman et al. 2013, p. 6). Moreover, in both nondual and pure consciousness forms of meditation one finds reports of a loss of the sense of being a separate persisting subject, and a recognition of or identification with consciousness itself. In short, meditative experience points to the existence of non-egoic modes of consciousness ruled out by the strong egological theory. I also think the evidence here is at least in tension with the weak egological view. Much depends on just how minimally one construes the first-person perspective, minimal self, or for-me-ness.

However, whether the forms of meditative experience discussed here support the weak or strong versions of the non-egological theory is less clear. In support of the strong non-egological or no-ownership view, we may cite the evidence for what Dor-Ziderman et al. have called the selfless level of experience (SL), the "momentary phenomenal experience free from the sense of agency and ownership" (2013, p. 3). On this view, momentary phenomenal experiences simply occur – they are radically anonymous or asubjective. In support of the weak non-egological view, it should be pointed out that the evidence of these experiences derives from the first-person reports of meditators. Thus, while there appear to be non-egoic modes of experience, they are nonetheless consciously lived-through by the meditators. There is something it is like *for them* to have these kinds of experiences, and they can later recall and report them. This suggests that there remains a minimal form of non-egoic subjectivity that is, on the weak non-egoic theory, an intrinsic feature of phenomenal consciousness.

Indeed, this kind of view is well-known in Indian philosophy. For example, in the Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and Advaita traditions, there is a strict distinction between the egoic sense of self (*ahaṃkāra*, *asmīti*) and non-egoic pure consciousness (*puruṣa*, *cit*, or *sākṣin*). Similarly, some Buddhist thinkers held that, while there is no self, consciousness itself is a form of mere reflexive awareness (*svasaṃvedanamātra*) (MacKenzie 2017). Indeed, in the nondual traditions, the very nature of consciousness is said to be reflexive nondual awareness, the basic open self-luminosity that is the condition of any other phenomenal appearance. No phenomenal appearance can be given apart from this basic condition. Subject and object are not reified independent substances, but rather co-relative and mutually specifying modalities of experience.¹³

7 Conclusion

I distinguished between various senses of the self and of subjectivity. I examined the ways in which various forms of meditation afford phenomenological experiences in which core but

distinct senses of self and of subjectivity either come apart, are eclipsed, or vanish. I have examined ways in which these experiences may or may not support stronger or weaker versions of both egological and non-egological accounts of the self and of subjectivity. The focus of these considerations has been primarily phenomenological, not metaphysical.

It could be the case that an enduring, substantial self exists, even if there are phenomenally selfless episodes of experience. Or, it could be the case that some minimal sense of self or subject is an inherent feature of human phenomenal consciousness, even though no such entity as the self exists. Yet, if we adopt the phenomenology-first approach, I think that rigorous study of meditation and the plasticity of self-experience provide both insights and constraints on any adequate theory of self.

Notes

- 1 See Letheby (this *Handbook*, Chapter 13), for an exploration of the parallels and differences between the alterations in the sense of self produced by meditation and by psychedelics; see also Huebner and Hayman (this *Handbook*, Chapter 17), for an exploration of the different conditions under which both meditative and psychedelic practices may lead to positive or negative outcomes.
- 2 For instance, most Buddhist philosophers strongly deny the diachronic unity of consciousness, and many also deny subjectivity.
- 3 This distinction is meant to explicitly parallel the distinction between creature and state consciousness.
- 4 Furthermore, this distinction makes room for those thinkers who argue against the existence of the self, such as the classical Buddhists or, say, Metzinger (2004).
- 5 Recall that I differentiate the weaker condition of being a persisting subject from the stronger condition of being a persisting self. I therefore set the bar higher for phenomenal selfhood than do Blanke and Metzinger.
- 6 However, as discussed below, there can be phenomenologically asomatic forms of self-identification.
- 7 Note the similarity to the concept of *saṃprajanya* mentioned in the previous section.
- 8 See Thapliyal (this *Handbook*, Chapter 7) and Timalina (this *Handbook*, Chapter 20) for in-depth analyses of the way meditation is construed in Advaita Vedānta.
- 9 These sorts of instructions being offered to subjects in these research studies before those subjects engage in the practices that lead to the sorts of results one might expect from the content of such instructions, perhaps together with contextual beliefs about meditation from the culture at large and from within the contemplative practices communities that attract such practitioners, raise the question: To what extent are these results due more to this sort of priming – and thus threaten to make the conclusions of such studies circular – than to anything inherent in the causal functions of these meditation practices? That practitioners of different techniques within different traditions ‘confirm’ the effectiveness of these experiences along such differential lines arguably raises similar suspicions. See Struhl (this *Handbook*, Chapter 16) for an in-depth examination and response to this set of concerns.
- 10 See Fasching (this *Handbook*, Chapter 9) for an in-depth examination of this type of meditation and an extended argument in its support.
- 11 Again, the potentially priming role of such instructions called into question in note 9 above may be present in these cases as well.
- 12 It is worth repeating that Letheby (this *Handbook*, Chapter 13) addresses ways in which psychedelics produce the same sorts of outcomes. Cf. this *Handbook*, Part V, Meditation and Phenomenology, for alternative views on the phenomenology of the self, its distinct elements, and their philosophical implications.
- 13 Again, Fasching (this *Handbook*, Chapter 9) develops this argument in detail.

References

- Arenander, A.T., and Travis, F.T., 2004. Brain patterns of self-awareness. In: B.D. Beitman and J. Nair, eds. *Self-awareness Deficits in Psychiatric Patients: Neurobiology, Assessment, and Treatment*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, pp. 112–26.

- Ataria, Y., Dor-Ziderman, Y., and Berkovich-Ohana, A., 2015. How does it feel to lack a sense of boundaries? A case study of a long-term mindfulness meditator. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 37(December), pp. 133–47. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2015.09.002>.
- Blanke, O., and Metzinger, T., 2009. Full-body illusions and minimal phenomenal selfhood. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 13(1), pp. 7–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2008.10.003>.
- Dahl, C.J., Lutz, A., and Davidson, R.J., 2015. Reconstructing and deconstructing the self: cognitive mechanisms in meditation practice. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 19(9), pp. 515–23. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2015.07.001>.
- Dambrun, M., 2016. When the dissolution of perceived body boundaries elicits happiness: the effect of selflessness induced by a body scan meditation. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 46 (November), pp. 89–98. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2016.09.013>.
- Dor-Ziderman, Y., Berkovich-Ohana, A., Glicksohn, J., and Goldstein, A., 2013. Mindfulness-induced selflessness: a MEG neurophenomenological study. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 7 (September), pp. 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2013.00582>.
- Dor-Ziderman, Y., Ataria, Y., Fulder, S., Goldstein, A., and Berkovich-Ohana, A., 2016. Self-specific processing in the meditating brain: a MEG neurophenomenology study. *Neuroscience of Consciousness*, 2016(1), pp. 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1093/nc/niw019>.
- Fasching, W., 2008. Consciousness, self-consciousness, and meditation. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 7(4), pp. 463–83. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-008-9090-6>.
- Forman, R.K.C., 1999. *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Fucci, E., Abdoun, O., Caclin, A., Francis, A., Dunne, J.D., Ricard, M., Davidson, R.J., and Lutz, A., 2018. Differential effects of non-dual and focused attention meditations on the formation of automatic perceptual habits in expert practitioners. *Neuropsychologia*, 119(October), pp. 92–100. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuropsychologia.2018.07.025>.
- Gallagher, S., 2000. Philosophical conceptions of the self: implications for cognitive science. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 4(1), pp. 14–21. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1364-6613\(99\)01417-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1364-6613(99)01417-5).
- Josipovic, Z., 2014. Neural correlates of nondual awareness in meditation. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1307(1), pp. 9–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.12261>.
- Josipovic, Z., 2019. Nondual awareness: consciousness-as-such as non-representational reflexivity. *Progress in Brain Research*, 244, pp. 273–98. <https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.pbr.2018.10.021>.
- Lindahl, J.R., and Britton, W.B., 2019. 'I have this feeling of not really being here': Buddhist meditation and changes in sense of self. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 26(7–8), pp. 157–83.
- Lindahl, J.R., Fisher, N.E., Cooper, D.J., Rosen, R.K., and Britton, W.B., 2017. The varieties of contemplative experience: a mixed-methods study of meditation-related challenges in western Buddhists. *PLoS One*, 12(5), p. e0176239. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0176239>.
- Lutz, A., Dunne, J.D., and Davidson, R.J., 2007. Meditation and the neuroscience of consciousness: an introduction. In: P. Zelazo, M. Moscovitch, and E. Thompson, eds. *The Cambridge Handbook of Consciousness*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 499–551. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511816789.020>.
- MacKenzie, M., 2015. Reflexivity, subjectivity, and the constructed self: a Buddhist model. *Asian Philosophy*, 25(3), pp. 275–92.
- MacKenzie, M., 2016. (Re-)constructing the self. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 23(1–2), pp. 105–24.
- MacKenzie, M., 2017. Luminous mind: self-luminosity versus other-luminosity in Indian philosophy of mind. In: J. Tuske, ed. *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook to Indian Epistemology and Metaphysics*. New York: Bloomsbury, pp. 335–54.
- Maharshi, S.R., 1989. *Be as You Are: The Teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi*. Edited by D. Godman. Reissue ed. New York: Penguin Books.
- Metzinger, T., 2004. *Being No One: The Self-model Theory of Subjectivity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Metzinger, T.K., 2013. Why are dreams interesting for philosophers? The example of minimal phenomenal selfhood, plus an agenda for future research. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4, p. 746. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00746>.
- Metzinger, T., 2018. Why is mind-wandering interesting for philosophers? In: K. Christoff and K.C.R. Fox, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Spontaneous Thought: Mind-wandering, Creativity, and Dreaming*. Vol. 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 97–111. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190464745.013.32>.
- Raffone, A., and Srinivasan, N., 2009. An adaptive workspace hypothesis about the neural correlates of consciousness: insights from neuroscience and meditation studies. *Progress in Brain Research*, 176, pp. 161–80. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0079-6123\(09\)17620-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0079-6123(09)17620-3).

- Shear, J., and Jevning, R., 1999. Pure consciousness: scientific exploration of meditation techniques. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 6(2–3), pp. 189–210.
- Strawson, G., 2019. *The Subject of Experience*. Reprint ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Varela, F.J., 1996. Neurophenomenology: a methodological remedy for the hard problem. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 3(4), p. 33049.
- Zahavi, D., 2008. *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-person Perspective*. Cambridge, MA: A Bradford Book.