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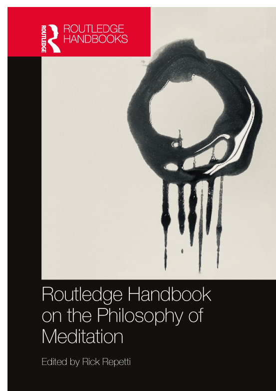

Routledge Handbook on the Philosophy of Meditation

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The philosophy of meditation

Publication details
https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781003127253-4
Rick Repetti
Published online on: 17 May 2022

How to cite :- Rick Repetti. 17 May 2022, *The philosophy of meditation from:* Routledge Handbook on the Philosophy of Meditation Routledge
Accessed on: 08 Jun 2023
https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781003127253-4

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2
THE PHILOSOPHY OF MEDITATION
The spoken *Tao*

Rick Repetti

1 Introduction: Speaking the *Tao*

In the opening stanza of the *Tao Te Ching* (*Treatise on the Way and Its Power*), the Taoist sage Lao Tzu (aka Laozi) claims, paradoxically, that "the spoken *Tao* is not the real *Tao*" (1999, v.1). In Taoism, '*Tao*' is an ambiguous word referring to ultimate reality, the Way (of nature, how things are), and to the teachings about, and meditative practices leading to, mystical (but possibly natural) harmony with, that ultimate reality – the way to the Way. Similarly, in Buddhism, the 'Dharma' – what Buddhists referred to before the term 'Buddhism' came to replace it – is an ambiguous word referring both to ultimate reality and to the teachings about, and meditative practices leading to harmony with, that ultimate reality. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna presents the meditative path as the royal road to liberation. Before the term "Christian" was coined to refer (in a derogatory sense) to followers of the teachings of Jesus Christ, the earliest Christians referred to their spiritual path as 'the Way', in line with Jesus's claim, "I am the truth, the way, and the life" (John 14:6).

Contemplatives in many – if not all – mystical traditions aspire to an enlightened state considered ineffable, beyond ordinary language and conceptualization. A metaphor used to resolve the Taoist paradox – of *saying* that *speaking* about the *Tao* is not really *about* it, in some sense – is that such teachings are like a finger pointing at the moon: the finger is to get one to look at the moon, not at the finger. Philosophy, in this metaphor, is all about the finger pointing – what pointing means, how pointing relates to the metaphorical moon, what the nature is of the metaphorical moon, and of the pointing/moon relationship, and so on – but not necessarily about how to come into direct, unmediated contact with the 'real' *Tao*, which latter is further paradoxically conceived as beyond all conceptualization. However, meditation, in this metaphor, is precisely thought to be one of the best ways to transform and transport consciousness to the metaphorical moon, to the real *Tao* – which leads to enlightenment. Within these contemplative philosophies, then, meditation is what enables the metaphorical eyes to behold the moon, so to speak, whereas philosophy is at best what points the mind to the importance of the metaphorical moon and of seeking its vision. Metaphors are not arguments, however, but they are aids to intuition, understanding, or, as John Vervaeke notes (this *Handbook*, Chapter 12), *intellection*, a mode of philosophical insight and understanding prized by ancient philosophers over propositional knowledge, or *knowledge-that*.

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Philosophical understanding – if not all understanding – is usually conceptually structured and, to the extent that it is, it is at least theoretically linguistically expressible. However, the meditative mystical experience, which Lao Tzu describes as returning to the roots, to the ground of being, is claimed across many traditions – not just Asian ones – to be trans-linguistic, trans-conceptual. In the New Testament, the mystical experience is described as *the peace that surpasses all understanding* (Philippians 4:6). As Thomas Aquinas put a similar point, all of his rich philosophical treatises – his metaphorical moon-pointings – were like *straw* compared to his one brief mystical experience (Serra-Lima 2014). Sarvapelli Radhakrishnan has argued that this nondualistic state is at the heart of all mystical experience (although that use of 'all' may reasonably be construed as an over-generalization), and that the seeming differences in the different traditions describing it are more functions of the dualistic linguistic/conceptual frameworks used to describe it than they are reflective of any difference in the trans-conceptual experience itself (Patyiayang 2008). John Hick (1982), likewise, argued that the holy in all faiths, having experienced this transcendent, noumenal (ineffable) 'Real', all exhibit the same drastic transformation of character, from a prior ego-focused concern with oneself to predominantly altruistic concern for others, which trans-cultural uniformity he took to be evidence of the validity of their encounters with that noumenal, ineffable Reality.[1] However plausible or implausible, these are rich metaphilosophical claims about the philosophical validity of meditation, shared by many diverse Asian and Western soteriologically oriented contemplative traditions.

Before going further, I should emphasize that the term 'meditation' is multiply ambiguous. I explore its many meanings at length elsewhere (Repetti 2020), and Legum (Chapter 1) disambiguates its relevant meanings well enough to isolate the one I have in mind for present, introductory purposes, so I will not go further here except to sketch that sense. Later on in this chapter I take up the issue of definitions of 'meditation' and 'philosophy' and will assert one definition of 'meditation' that overlaps with one important sense of the term 'philosophy', so I will postpone the issue of more precise definitions until then. For now, however, suffice it to say that the sense of 'meditation' I am referring to in general in this chapter is the one that situates serious meditation practice in the center of the sort of philosophical-wisdom-oriented or sapiential contemplative paths I have been discussing, and tentatively ignores many other popular senses noted by Legum and others, such as the sorts associated with simple yoga or breathing exercises, and so on, that are generally practiced for non-philosophical reasons, such as for stress or anxiety reduction, for general health and well-being, for martial arts, and the like. This is not to deny that there are overlapping or penumbral cases between the two categories, nor that they do not pose classificatory issues. Rather, for the present purpose of assessing the philosophical merits of meditation, it makes sense to restrict my attention to serious long-term sapiential meditation practices situated within philosophically framed contemplative paths, which in our time includes Stoic meditation practices most – but not all[2] – of which are cogitational or discursive, unlike the cogitation-attenuating practices typically associated with many Asian contemplative philosophies.

To continue, then, the monastic record within sapiential contemplative traditions – properly analyzed as a loose approximation, at best, of consensus among countless testimonial accounts – carries some weight, as we shall see shortly, but only so much. For, regardless of how much weight it might carry, a Humean skeptic about, by analogy, say, miracles, can easily dismiss the fact that miracle stories abound in all religious and mystical traditions by simple appeal to Ockham's Razor plus any naturalistic error theory, e.g., any combination of wishful thinking, indoctrination, gullibility, confirmation bias, faulty evidentialism, the telephone game, fraud, etc., without even making Hume's *a priori* argument about how the very concept of a miracle is self-refuting: To count as a literal miracle, an event must be physically impossible, but any claim to

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the effect that an event putatively satisfies that criterion must be rejected on that very ground – because it is, by definition, impossible. It amounts, or rather reduces, to something equivalent to claiming that one saw a round square, and thus it ought to be rejected on those *a priori* grounds, in which case the antecedent weight of the testimony is moot.

Nevertheless, most serious, long-term practitioners of meditation consider meditation a central activity defining their contemplative philosophy, their way of life, their aspiration toward something loosely equivalent to the *Tao*. We are addressing the *philosophical validity* of this contemplative path, 'the spoken *Tao*', an assessment that requires philosophical analysis, but which might benefit from – if not require – long experience with the practice of meditation, the thing to be assessed. By analogy, to fully assess the claim that "yoga exercises relax the mind and generally support overall wellbeing", while empirical evidence technically counts more than anecdotal evidence in an objective sense and in an objective forum (e.g., health science), any given individual's assessment of the claim, in terms of its plausibility *to them*, might benefit from their simply experimenting with the practice of yoga personally, if not with long experience practicing yoga.

Thus, the collection, analysis, integration, and theorization of anecdotal evidence from the experiences of generations of long-term practitioners within a shared tradition and thus a shared discourse community facilitates an additive testimonial and hence additive evidentiary value to the claims of individual practitioners, such that their aggregation creates an evidentiary whole that at a certain point becomes greater than the sum of its individual parts viewed in isolation, if at some point the claims at issue appear significantly more plausible the more likely they are to be affirmed by increasing numbers of practitioners. Thus, the monastic record, not coincidentally, loosely construed to include Asian meditation masters and their communities of practitioners,[3] as well as Western religious and secular contemplatives, makes clear that substantial cognitive, affective, dispositional, and behavioral transformations are thought to attend sustained, disciplined contemplative practices.

George Ainslie (2001), examining the monastic record as part of his research into the philosophical puzzle of *akrasia* (Greek: literally, 'non-control', but informally, 'weakness of will'), argues that we may take the bulk of it for granted as first-personal testimony from contemplatives admitting their decades-long struggles with vices. While Ainslie was concerned to theorize the will, the same argument applies here: We may take for granted the bulk of their first-personal testimony about their contemplative experiences. As we shall see below, according to one orthodox (Vedic) Indian epistemological school, Mīmāṃsā, any claims that attain the status of social consensus possess *prima facie* evidentiary validity unless and until overturned by stronger evidence. If that view is plausible, then it justifies Ainslie's claims about the validity of the monastic record as well as mine about the more inclusive contemplative record.[4]

Asian meditation masters are aptly considered the contemplative equivalents of Olympic athletes of mind-control (as contrasted with athletic body-control), and recent neuroscientific studies of these meditation virtuosos support this general claim (Goleman and Davidson 2017), long believed in the world's contemplative traditions. For this reason, I encourage any reader who has not yet experienced a significant meditative state to pick up the practice, at least while reading this book, to have an experiential reference for many of its claims – to look at the moon, not just the finger pointing to it. If not, perhaps by the end of this book, those without a meditation practice will have reasons to begin one.[5]

Speaking of the finger in the pointing/moon metaphor, while it makes sense for an advocate of meditation as a form of philosophy to prescribe looking directly at the moon, so to speak, by taking up the practice of meditation, it should be emphasized that attention to the metaphorical finger – the spoken *Tao*, the philosophy of meditation (its critics or skeptics included) – spans

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at least three millennia in Asian philosophy, and within that philosophy, contemplative practices are not only considered forms of philosophical practice, but typically as premiere philosophical practices thought to lead to enlightenment, the highest philosophical wisdom. As Vervaeke (this *Handbook*, Chapter 12) will emphasize, the original meaning of 'philosophy' denotes the *love* of *wisdom*, both of which matter – love and wisdom. Love involves deep, conscientious attention to, and caring for, the thing loved, in this case wisdom. And wisdom is not merely the sort of proposition-manipulating skills cultivated in analytic philosophy, a *knowledge-that*, as I argued in our Introduction, but more a sort of *knowledge-how*, or skill, as Gowans (this *Handbook*, Chapter 10) argues.

I mentioned one school of Indian philosophy above, Mīmāṃsā. A very brief tour of the six *āstika* (orthodox: i.e., Vedic) *darśanas* ('visions': philosophical schools, or philosophies) in Indian philosophy (of which Mīmāṃsā is one) and just two *nāstika* (unorthodox or heterodox) Indian *darśanas* will show that the philosophy of meditation – in which meditation is considered a premiere form of philosophical practice – has been around for millennia in most forms of both orthodox and heterodox Indian philosophy. In Samkhya, one of the six *āstika darśanas*, reality is composed of two substances, *puruṣa* (pure consciousness) and *prakṛti* (primordial matter, which is unmanifest and unconscious, until in contact with *puruṣa*, and then becomes the manifest, manifold world of unminded and minded matter), both substances of which co-exist eternally. Yoga (union), another *āstika darśana*, accepts and develops Samkhya metaphysics into a very specific set of soteriological psychotechnologies revolving around moral precepts and contemplative practices leading to *mokṣa*, liberation or enlightenment, construed as disentanglement of *puruṣa* (pure awareness) from *prakṛti* (primordial and/or manifest matter).

Mīmāṃsā (reflection), focusing on epistemology (and dutiful ritual actions believed to maintain *ṛta*, cosmic order), as mentioned earlier, holds that any claim widely accepted as true has *prima facie* validity or basic epistemic grounding unless and until disproved on superior epistemic grounds; because the Vedas and Upaniṣads have that status and discuss contemplative practices, their contemplative claims have the sort of 'basic' status that Mīmāṃsā epistemologists regard as grounded, established, a status that Richard Legum disputed in the previous chapter here. Vedānta (the 'end of the Veda', focusing on the later Upaniṣads), another *āstika darśana*, still popular in Indian philosophy today along with another *āstika darśana*, Yoga, centrally revolves around the knowledge and contemplative practices leading the *ātman* (the individual soul) to liberation in Brahman (the cosmic Soul, God), and admits of both *dvaita* (dualist) and *advaita* (nondualist) *darśanas*. The two remaining *āstika darśanas*, Nyāya (logic) and Vaiśeṣika (metaphysical categorization of particulars, based on Nyāya), while not focused on liberation, both accommodate and incorporate such ideas. Buddhism and Jainism are the two most popular Indian *nāstika darśanas* (heterodox philosophies), both of which revolve around ethical and contemplative practices thought to lead to nirvana (enlightenment) or *mokṣa* (liberation), respectively.

Each of these philosophical systems was significantly developed in dialectical exchanges with some or all of the others over the course of the millennia since their inception. At its peak, Nalanda University and monastery, in modern-day Bihar, India, was home to many of these dialectical developments. Described as the Oxford of India (Friquegnon, this *Handbook*, Chapter 4), Nalanda operated from the 5th to almost the 13th century CE, with many revered scholars who taught the major Buddhist philosophies, the Vedas, the six Vedic philosophies, grammar, logic, mathematics, and medicine, and was a major source of over a thousand Indian texts brought to China in the 7th century, influencing East Asian Buddhism. Many such texts of Indian philosophy are still being and yet to be translated into English, bringing vast hitherto-untapped resources in the philosophy of meditation to the West.

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2 Some philosophical objections to meditation

By analogy, the counterfactual discovery of Atlantis, as well as a wealth of Atlantean texts in, say, the philosophy of religion, and a university developing them for close to a millennium, would support the claim that there was an Atlantean philosophy of religion. However, that alone would not establish that there is or was an actually existing Atlantean deity. So, too, while the relatively recent Western 'discovery' of this long-living Asian philosophical contemplative tradition does establish Asian philosophy as in possession of a philosophy of meditation, that alone does not establish the claim that meditation works or is a form of philosophy in our sense of the term. For, as our Introduction and Legum (Chapter 1) make clear, there are objections to the "meditation *is* philosophy" hypothesis.

Here, I only consider a few representative objections to meditation, some I already touched on in our Introduction, some of which Legum develops. I also only argue against them here at a relatively low-resolution level, since Legum argued for them – from the vantage of analytic philosophy and analytic epistemology, rather admirably – at a more fine-grained level of analysis, so I will leave it to the reader to weigh the pros and cons between the two approaches. In subsequent chapters, many variations on these issues will resurface in more nuanced forms.

Gilbert Ryle (1949, pp. 145 ff.) argued that introspection was an incoherent concept, because, among other reasons Legum examines and critiques, to observe a mental state, e.g., rage, is to interfere with and thus diminish it, which raises the question: Can there be objective introspective activities – by which Ryle presupposes 'objective' means 'lacking observer-interference' – and, if not, can meditative practices have cognitive value? Robert Nozick (1981, pp. 158–9 ff.) argued that meditative states may just be cases of diminished mental activity, akin to a soundless stereo system that is on but not playing music, and thus absent any supramundane metaphysical framework they may be cognitively meaningless, which raises the question: If meditative states just involve a damping down of the cognitive apparatus, can they nonetheless be meaningful? Nozick admits, however, that the altruistic impact these experiences have on practitioners is not as easily dismissed (*id.*). (I said more about this important fact in the Introduction, so I will not repeat those points here.)

Some Buddhist and Hindu meditation practices aspire to the attainment of nondualistic mental states, absent all thought, construed as the pinnacle of philosophical enlightenment, whereas the bulk of Western philosophical aspirations and efforts occur within the dualistic space of conceptual analysis, mostly of propositions, their inter-relationships, and their truth conditions, which we may describe as the full-throttled functioning of the cognitive apparatus, by contrast with Nozick's depiction of meditation as the fully attenuated, down-shifted, or damped down, cognitive apparatus. In what sense, if any, might meditative practices and the mental states they foster count as philosophical practices or activities, from the Western philosophical perspective, according to which philosophy is largely a complex cognitive activity? Is meditation a philosophical activity, or an anti-philosophical activity? I will attempt to answer these questions in outline shortly; subsequent chapters here attempt to answer them in greater detail.

On another line of criticism, some have argued that the recent embrace of meditation in Western society supports the status quo – what Purser and Loy have described as 'McMindfulness' (2013), the consumerist commodification of mindfulness akin to the fast-food giant's approach to nutrition. Is meditation the new opiate for the now-secular consumerist capitalist masses? Does McMindfulness anaesthetize the masses, yielding better 'milk-producing cows' (effective workers), more docile in the face of societal inequities and injustices, trained to internalize and personalize 'stress' and interpret it as something to be stoically resolved individually? Does meditation enact a divide-and-conquer neoliberal strategy that isolates individuals from collective

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societal consciousness and responsibility, reinforcing a false consciousness? Is meditation practice in this sense antisocial, retrogressive, unethical?

I have addressed these McMindfulness-based objections and offered pro-meditation responses to them elsewhere (Repetti 2016), so I will not elaborate on them in detail here, except to sketch one general response. Insofar as the most popular forms of meditation embraced in the West may be loosely characterized as involving forms of attention-training exercises, and the repetitive training in any activity is the primary means for cultivating the skills those activities are designed to cultivate, it follows from this simplest of analyses that meditation functions to cultivate attentional skills as its primary result – attentional stability, focus, clarity, detachment, mental quiescence, self-regulative ability, and emotional control, among many other positive traits both standardly predicted and standardly experienced as a result of sustained meditative practice.[6] These positive character traits ought to be beneficial in *any* life, including the life of the dedicated social justice activist, who I would suggest could benefit from them, as many activists (as well as many in the helping professions) often struggle with burnout, precisely because they fail to attend sufficiently to the way they handle and respond to 'stress'. To the extent these meditation-developed traits or skills turn out contrary results, it is intuitive that such contrary results depend on the *uses* to which these skills are devoted, as opposed to anything intrinsic to the skills themselves. Of course, better focus, steadiness, self-control, and the like will equally improve the effectiveness of activists, artists, martial artists, and assassins alike.

Thus, opposition to the cultivation of these positive character traits is thus not only naïve and misplaced, but counter-intuitive and counter-productive, that is, if anyone were to be influenced by them to prefer mindlessness over mindfulness. These objections are similar to the misconceptions typically associated with Stoicism, to the effect that Stoicism encourages a 'stoic' (fatalistic) acceptance of injustice and other forms of suffering, a misconception that Massimo Pigliucci, one of our contributors here, forcefully undermines in his excellent introduction to the Stoic life (2017).[7]

The fact that meditation has these trait effects undermines Ryle's objection, for the fact that practice successfully intervenes on undesirable mental states and cultivates such positive traits is a feature, not a bug, of the practice. Nozick's objection, about the attenuated and thus cognitively meaningless mental states of meditation, is not as easily dismissed, but even Legum, who tries to defend it, acknowledges that it is insufficiently persuasive, and a number of other contributors to this *Handbook* address the Nozickian objection in much more nuanced ways than which may be easily summarized here. For example, Sonam Kachru, John Spackman, Wolfgang Fasching, and Christian Coseru directly address it, with or without depicting it as *Nozick's* objection, and others indirectly touch on it, so I will leave the better part of a response to their collective efforts. For my part, however, all I will say for now is that I do believe successful attainment of deep meditative states does give rise to states of *gnosis* that are philosophically and spiritually transformative, their relative ineffability notwithstanding.[8]

3 Some tentative definitions

Similar to the concept of a game, which covers so many diverse things that any one putatively definitive characteristic is likely not to apply to all and only games, the concept of *meditation* also covers many diverse things, and there may not even be any one element in common in all the many different types, but only, as Wittgenstein famously noted, a 'family resemblance' between their features (1953). Some involve nondualistic (objectless) conscious states; others are dualistic. Similarly, it is doubtful philosophy is one thing, as opposed to many which may also lack a common element. Thus, it would help to at least try to define these terms in ways that cover most

common forms of the things being referred to by them. Here, sketches of the core elements of these concepts, together with what is problematic about them, should suffice. More complete answers to such questions are implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, attempted throughout this volume – not that the authors agree.

Mindfulness, the most increasingly popular form of meditation in the West of late, was once informally defined by one of my meditation teachers, Dhamma Dena (a disciple of the Burmese Theravāda meditation master S.N. Goenka),[9] as "extra-ordinary attention to ordinary experience" (Dena n.d.). Ordinary experience entails awareness, but often it is divided, disbursed, or diminished, if not mindless, as when we forget the route we just took.

There is also a difference between meditative training, practice drills, or exercises, and attained states of meditation. The latter often arise spontaneously, although the more one practices the former, the more likely are the latter. Thus, I doubt a neat definition of 'meditation' can be given that includes all and only mental states and practices that count as meditation.[10] Different contributors here focus on different senses of the term, so it would be misleading to endorse just one that might include them all. Moreover, Davis (this *Handbook*, Chapter 18) expresses reasonable doubts about the prospects for a 'philosophy of meditation' precisely because there are so many different conceptions of meditation – to say nothing, I should emphasize, of the homologous issue regarding the equally many different forms and conceptions of philosophy.

Even Dena's definition is problematic, however, because there are forms of meditative practice that clearly depart from ordinary experience. *Satori*, a sudden flash of enlightenment in Zen, is not an ordinary experience, in one sense, though arguably it counts as extraordinary attention to ordinary experience, in another sense. While it is out of the ordinary because of its rarity and intensity, it is conceptualized as encountering the ordinary as it truly is – what it is like to truly and completely just *be, here, now*. (That characterization is admittedly a gross simplification, but it suffices to make the intended point.) One Zen adage that might convey this sort of contrast without a contrast, or 'non-contrast', for short, is the following:

> Before enlightenment, chop wood and carry water.
> After enlightenment, chop wood and carry water.

One admittedly simplistic interpretation of this adage is that all that changes upon attaining enlightenment is perspective: It is not necessarily the case that the enlightened has some sort of cosmic vision, perception of a supernatural kind, and/or any other supramundane cognition. The Buddha's description of his enlightening meditative experience, however, included visitations from demons and deities, visions of previous incarnations, and laser-like cognitive penetration into the nature of mind, among other extraordinary phenomena, some of which appear to be psychic.

Some Buddhists argue that these are all elements of ordinary experience, in the sense that everyone has an 'inherent Buddha nature' that is *uncovered* or revealed via Buddhist practices, as opposed to *attained* by them. 'Buddha' means 'awakened one', and Buddhism revolves around the belief that the enlightened state is the natural state, but is eclipsed by mental defilements resulting from ignorance of our true nature: Remove these somnambulistic defilements, and ordinary experience is enlightening, like waking up to reality. Before and after enlightenment, again, nothing changes but perspective, from ignorance to wisdom, akin to the difference between dreaming and lucid dreaming: Lucid dreaming is realizing you are dreaming while dreaming, and that realization makes all the difference. Similar themes abound in most of the other Indian philosophies, important differences in their details and construal notwithstanding.

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Thus, in addition to the intentionally vague working sense of the term I've been working with, then, let us consider moving forward tentatively with Dena's perhaps imperfect definition of meditation, for practical purposes, as it at least adds some content to my earlier contrastive sense of the term, which only contrasted what passes for meditation in the world's contemplative traditions with such things as breathing exercises for pain management or anxiety-reduction. Despite such limitations of Dena's definition of 'meditation', it also provides some initial content to a definition of 'philosophy' with which we may start. Philosophy may be described as "extra-ordinary *examination* of ordinary experience", which substitutes 'examination' for 'attention' in Dena's definition, but I would also add "and the concepts, language, and claims arising therefrom" for a more thorough initial definition of 'philosophy'. After all, ordinary experience involves metaphysical (Aristotelian, later Kantian) categories, such as space, time, substance, attribute, etc., as well as consciousness, and paying extraordinary attention to these features of ordinary experience does constitute philosophy.

This set of definitions entails that meditation is a form of philosophy, however, so it risks the fallacy of persuasive definition: defining a term in a dispute in such a way that it resolves the dispute by stipulative fiat. I would not *argue* that, *by definition*, meditation is a form of philosophical activity: It may not be for some types of meditation, nor for some forms of philosophy. Thus, we must proceed here with caution.

Meditation is typically not the production, entertainment, or assessment of an argument (although in special cases it could be, e.g., if one immersed oneself in, say, Anslem's ontological argument, using the method of *lectio divina*,[11] deeply contemplating each premise, and so on). Thus, if engaging in arguments constitutes one's conception of philosophy, then most forms of meditation are not (this kind of) philosophy. Stress-reducing breathing exercises are considered forms of meditation, but may be no different from breathing into a brown paper bag to reduce anxiety or engaging in the Lamaze method of breathing to handle the pains of childbirth. I doubt either constitutes extraordinary attention to, or examination of, ordinary experience, or of the arguments that seek to articulate and understand experience. As Legum (Chapter 1) suggests, a variety of mundane meditation practices do not rise to the level of posing a challenge to the "meditation is philosophy" hypothesis, but that is because nobody seriously thinks they count as forms of philosophy, e.g., the sort martial artists employ, etc., so they may be set aside. Other meditation exercises are explicitly philosophical, such as contemplating infinite space, infinite time, or the nature of ultimate reality, or introspecting consciousness to attempt to discern whether it is self-illuminating, necessarily object-oriented, or a selfless process, among other philosophical possibilities.

Following Legum, if one wanted to press the claim that meditation is, by definition, philosophy, they could differentiate activities (perhaps nonliterally) *considered* forms of meditation (e.g., deep breathing for relaxation) from those that (perhaps literally) *are* forms of meditation (e.g., *zazen*, Zen-style sitting meditation), and insist that only those activities that satisfy the (literal) definition count, but I do not wish to press that line of reasoning – not that I think a non-circular approach that relies on such definitions is implausible. Instead of relying on stipulative definitions, however, which come perilously close to the fallacy of persuasive definition, I prefer to argue for the substantive claim that meditation is a philosophical activity, on other grounds, simply to avoid the appearance of question begging by way of stipulative fiat. That would be bad philosophy.

Another reason to avoid the potential circularity of the stipulative approach is that it is unclear whether these two Dena-based definitions are mutually entailing. The differences revolve around the terms 'attention' and 'examination'. One can pay *attention* to (concentrate on) something without *examining* (discriminatively differentiating between) its features, by simply fixating

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on it, say, by simply gazing at the center of a candle flame ('*tratak*'), an actual, and quite effective, yogic meditative practice that the ancient Indian yogi-sage Patanjali recommends in his classic treatise on the *āstika darśana* Yoga (and yogic meditation), the *Yoga Sutras* (Bryant 2015), and which I have found to be an excellent way to develop the ability of one-pointedness of attention. Or one may *examine* something without necessarily *attending* to it in the way one attends to the candle flame, perceptually, say, by engaging in hypothetical, speculative, or counterfactual reasoning about it, for example, exploring the inclusion and exclusion relations between squares and rectangles, between fear and shame, or between *sophia* and *theoria*, without attending to them in some representational manner, but purely conceptually, as per Plato's anagogic ascent toward the Forms, or as per his other famous student (alongside Aristotle), Euclid. One can also both attend to and examine something, such as visually focusing on a Rorschach inkblot or other ambiguous figure while examining their competing perceptual and/or interpretive forms.

If 'philosophy' and 'meditation' are both vaguely bounded or otherwise fuzzy concepts, as they seem to be based on the above considerations alone, then how can we determine what would count as the philosophical validity of meditation? An alternative, pragmatic way to try to demonstrate the philosophical validity of meditation could be by way of ostension: to simply sketch – point to – some sample philosophical questions about the ways in which meditation may be philosophically valid. While this method alone is insufficient for formulating the sort of definition that would undermine the Wittgensteinian idea that philosophically nuanced concepts (like 'game') do not admit of necessary and sufficient conditions, but rather that they at best admit of family resemblances, it ought to suffice for present purposes.

4 Some ways meditation might be philosophically valid

Neuroscience research identifies correlations between meditation and altered structures and functions in the attention and empathy centers of the brain, increases in neural stem cell production and self-regulative abilities, and decreases in stress hormones, among other philosophically interesting findings (Goleman and Davidson 2017), possibly challenging the epiphenomenalist theory to the effect that mental causation is entirely reducible to brain-level (neural) causation.[12] Additionally, based on their meta-study of the 50 most-cited research papers on meditation studies, Goleman and Davidson (*id.*) have argued that advanced meditation practitioners exhibit highly synchronized baseline gamma brainwave patterns that are otherwise rare and momentary in non-practitioners (which advanced practitioners associate with a global awareness or open-monitoring type of consciousness),[13] properties of much 'younger' brains, and a variety of related exceptional characteristics suggesting very productive relationships between meditation, phenomenology (given the apparently correct self-reports of the practitioners about their mental states, contra Ryle), and neuroplasticity. Further, analysis of meditating versus non-meditating brains correlates with a difference between active and inactive states of the 'default network', also associated with the difference between self-referencing ideation and its absence. As Thompson has suggested (2014), highly skilled meditation practitioners' phenomenological expertise about their own experiences (such as the association between gamma brainwaves and practitioners' claims of global awareness) can help neuroscientists analyzing practitioners' brain states to identify many more mind-brain correlations (neural correlates of consciousness, NCCs).

All of these neuroscientific findings raise neurophilosophical questions: To what extent can such experimental philosophy (x-phi) work inform our understanding of the mind-brain, the self, and the nature of consciousness? What, if anything, can neuroscientific studies on the meditating mind's altering of the structures and functions of the brain tell us about the metaphysics of mind, consciousness, mental causation, or agency? What can we conclude from such stud-

ies about human nature, human potential, and human flourishing? Attempts to answer some of these questions are made in some of the other chapters here, e.g., especially by Vago and Vervaeke, and to a lesser extent many of the others.

Most of these philosophical questions gain traction from what some have described as contemplative neuroscience (Zajonc 2008). Additionally, contemplative neurophilosophy may be brought to bear on seminal neurophilosophical x-phi studies initiated by Benjamin Libet (1999), which attempt to shed light on the puzzle of free will by helping to identify pre-conscious neural indicators of decision. These studies share the following strategy: measure brainwave activity of test subjects asked to identify the moment they become conscious of a decision (say, to press a meaningless button), and uncover brain activity reliably indicating that the decision is neurologically predictable before the subject becomes conscious of the decision, allegedly evidencing the claim that conscious awareness of decisions is an after-the-fact epiphenomenon, and thus that free will is an illusion (since belief in free will generally presupposes that agents' conscious decisions are the locus of control over their actions, not earlier, unconscious neural factors). Setting aside objections to this approach, and there are many solid objections to it (Repetti 2019), how might neurophilosophical work on meditation experts' phenomenologically skilled minds help to contribute to our understanding of agency and the question of free will?

Here is one testable hypothesis: If meditation experts are as expert at phenomenological sensitivity as they are at meditation, as Thompson suggests (2014), then they have greater cognitive access to subtle features of their own mental states, so they might be able to reduce the time lag at the center of Libet type studies. That is but one possible contemplative neuroscientific experiment that promises to have x-phi value. Similar experiments upon phenomenologically skilled meditation experts may be devised to test hypotheses about the various different aspects of the self, such as the narrative self, the autobiographical self, the semantic self, the first-personal perspectival aspect of the self, the reflexivity thesis (the claim that consciousness is inherently self-illuminating, not just other-illuminating), and so on. Some such studies have already begun. In the next chapter, by Ben Abelson, and in later chapters, by David Vago, John Vervaeke, Matt MacKenzie, Bryce Huebner and Genevieve Hayman, and others (this *Handbook*), the philosophical implications of some of these studies are addressed and put to very good philosophical use.

These ideas involve testable empirical hypotheses and are neurophilosophically valid thereby, regardless of the results of such studies. But not all forms of philosophical validity need to be neurophilosophical or empirical, not only when it comes to meditation, but also to just about anything else that might be philosophical. For example, the key Socratic question – "How should one live?" – is essentially *not* an empirical question, although empirical knowledge can inform important elements of a complete answer to that question, e.g., regarding what lifestyles promote species-typical human flourishing. The question – "Why is there something rather than nothing?" – is not an empirical question, despite what some philosophically naïve cosmologists, e.g., Krauss (2013), contend about something's being nothing, as if some sort of inchoate, unmanifest quantum field, a *something*, counts as a *nothing*. In response to this conflation of 'something' empirical with 'nothing', I would simply insist on the Parmenidean axioms: (a) there is no such *thing* as nothing (which is not the same thing as the absence of a physical object in otherwise 'empty' space that contains quantum fields, which latter entail a 'something'), and, *a fortiori*, (b) *ex nihil, nihil fit*.

An alternative way to argue that meditation might be philosophically valid is to directly challenge or counter the arguments that claim it is not, as we have been doing, e.g., with the arguments of Ryle (1949) and Nozick (1981), who argue that meditation is essentially incoherent or meaningless, respectively. When philosopher-sages like Aquinas, Al Ghazali, and others claim that their meditative experiences render their philosophical treatises analogous to mere straw,

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however, it is difficult not to take such claims seriously, much less to dismiss such meditative claims on Rylean or Nozickian grounds, despite the fact that such dismissals may be favored, first blush, by Ockham's razor, or on the sort of epistemic grounds proposed by Legum, inspired by Chisholm, who places the justificatory burden on those who take meditative claims to be foundationally 'basic' in Plantinga's sense.

In the contrastive case, between Plantinga style and Chisholm style approaches to the nature of 'basic' epistemic status, however, whether the dialectical scales tilt one way or the other is not obvious, nor obviously independent of their contrasting, complex epistemologies, each of which arguably functions, ironically, as a kind of holist framework, their foundationalist components notwithstanding, in the sense that each such epistemology is constituted by a vast network of not only foundational axioms but a complex inferential structure extending from them throughout many layers of non-basic propositions and evidence. Deciding between such complex systems seems to require taking them in, not at the level of whether or not either system appears more coherent in light of how it handles one specific type of proposition, in this case meditative claims, but at the global, systemic level, at which each functions like a paradigm informing research.[14]

One possibly dialectical-scale-tilting consideration may be found in the paradigm constituting the Indian philosophical system discussed earlier, Mīmāṃsā (reflection), according to which widely accepted conventional claims have presumptive validity unless and until refuted by stronger evidence. The sort of clash of divergent framework-based intuitions afoot between Chisholm and Plantinga does not seem to constitute refutation by way of stronger evidence. On Mīmāṃsā epistemology, the fact that most meditative traditions embrace the idea that meditative training alters the mind, and is engaged precisely for that reason, therefore, affords that meditative claim some *prima facie* validity. What is a bug for Ryle – the non-neutral, interfering character of introspection – is therefore a *prima facie* valid feature for the meditation practitioner.

Here is another, related set of reasons why Ryle's bug is a meditator's feature. Consider the following analogy. Intuitively, fasting enables the ascetic to render hunger sensations opaque, in the sense of not seeing desired edibles *through* the hunger sensations, but rather enabling them to see the hunger sensations *themselves*, also analogous to being able to see colored eyeglass lenses instead of seeing the visible world through them. Both examples involve translucence, which enables seeing through the intermediary but also enables seeing the intermediary, though the latter example is literally visual translucence, whereas the former example is more generally cognitive. This is a frame-shifting move. By contrast, hunger sensations typically function non-opaquely or transparently for the non-fasting non-ascetic, who 'sees' edibles *through* the hunger sensations, but does not 'see' the hunger sensations *themselves*, despite being powerfully moved by them. The non-fasting person is stuck in that perspectival frame, so to speak.

In this regard, there is clearly a sense in which this figure/ground frame-shifting diminishes the power of such emotions or intentions to more immediately direct attention and action toward their intentional objects, on the one hand. This enables the practitioner to more directly examine the emotions or intentions in themselves, decoupled from their usual (stimulus/response type) psychological attachment to their intentional objects, thereby affording potentially liberating experiential insights (and self-regulative abilities) not otherwise salient after the emotion or intention has subsided, contra Ryle, on the other hand. Introspective meditation practice does appear to engender this sort of frame-shifting, from the sort of cognitive/conative (stimulus/response type) coupling typical of the hungry or angry person typically seeing through those mental states toward their intentional objects in the world, to an awareness of those mental states themselves, also enabling decoupling, decentering, or detachment, plus greater self-regulative ability.[15]

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A related, perhaps more challenging, Rylean objection to introspection that Legum also addresses in detail, but which I will only sketch, is that the part of the mind doing the observing is part of the same mind being observed, which appears problematic insofar as the observing part of the mind must observe its own observing of the rest of the mind, which includes its observing of its observing of its observing, and so on, in which case we are off to the (infinite regress) races. This suggests a paradox of self-reference in the mind's attempting to be aware of itself, as reflected in adages typically appealed to as part of an argument against the reflexivity thesis to the effect that consciousness is not only other-illuminating, but also self-illuminating: A blade cannot cut itself, an eye cannot directly see itself, and a mirror cannot directly mirror itself. An introspecting mind, on this line of criticism, seems to violate these principles, which entails that reflexivity is impossible.[16]

However, one plausible way to prevent the regress is to note that the practice of observing the contents of one's mental state need not presuppose observing one's observing, but simply some element of awareness directed at the rest of the mental state – a limited cognitive engagement of one aspect of attention with other aspects of awareness, not a logically exhaustive assessment of the mental state that includes its own self-observing function(s). A model of such a system was offered by Siderits (2003, pp. 65–6) for another purpose (to explain how self-reflection might be possible *without a self*), but which may be applied here: a 'shifting coalitions' model, according to which different elements of mind take turns reflecting on each other.[17]

Arguably, then, the meditative investigation of mental states is a coherent, valid, and/or useful form of philosophical inquiry, even granting that meditative attention is incomplete as per Ryle's objection, on the one hand, and interferes with and alters not only mental states, also as per Ryle's objection, but brain structures and functions, on the other hand. Thus, there is a sense in which a form of meditation that slows and aims at stopping thoughts is not necessarily at odds with analytic philosophy, which is essentially a close examination of the contents of, and logical relations between, thoughts or claims. The path toward total mental quiescence, then, according to the lore of a number of different contemplative traditions, putatively involves intentionally slowing thoughts (in the broader Cartesian sense of any and all mental states), being able to frame-shift, break frame, or decouple from their usual modes of cognitively/conatively coupled presentation, cultivating greater liberating insights into their nature, which all feed back iteratively into their attenuation, leading to deeper insights, which in turn lead to increased mental quiescence, the deeper stages of which break greater frame, and eventually expose awareness itself (the same way fasting exposes hunger sensations themselves, redirecting attention from the objects of hunger to hunger itself, in this case redirecting attention from the objects of awareness to awareness itself),[18] which continues with the insight-generating, decoupling, and deepening process, until the final frame-breaking, figure/ground shift considered the goal of practice, but described differently by the different traditions (liberation, enlightenment, the highest wisdom, etc.), is attained. Or so such theories hold.

A rich metaphor from the meditative traditions of India is that the mind in *samādhi*, complete meditative stillness, is akin to the stillness of a lake after all lake movement has subsided: All non-water elements have settled to the bottom or released into the atmosphere, leaving the water crystal clear, the surface like a sheet of glass, perfectly mirroring the moon, which represents ultimate reality; drop a single pebble into it, and the image shatters into thousands of pieces. By analogy, after all mental activity has subsided, all cognitive equipment is clear of distortions, and mind functions like a perfectly clear mirror, reflecting ultimate reality. In that state, contemplative sages claim, there is no duality of subject/object, in which case there is no 'something', but nor is there 'nothing'. Legum's challenge would be to ask: How is this philosophically meaningful?

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As Patanjali put the idea behind this metaphor in the opening line of the *Yoga Sutras* (paraphrasing): Herein lies the essence of yoga: nonduality (yoga: union) is achieved by stilling the fluctuations of mind (Bryant 2015, p. 1). The Legum style question, again, is: Is that quiescent state merely the equivalent of the *hum* of an otherwise soundless stereo that is turned on but producing no music, as Nozick put it, or, as I would put it, merely *ho-hum*? Or is the nonduality experienced better described as the *Om*, the ultimate reality encountered in enlightenment, the *summum bonum* of the contemplative path? Could it be both? If there is no cognitively discernible difference between the *ho-hum* and the *Om*, then they are presumably identical, but their identity would drain the *Om* of its supramundane implications, deflating what seemed to possess the greatest cosmic significance to something of virtually nihilistic meaning.

Expressing a somewhat similarly skeptical attitude about the more popular construal of the introspective approach as a path to enlightenment, Garfield has objected that the strategy of examining meditative mental states, which are altered states, is akin to examining one's hallucinations in order to garner a greater understanding of reality (2012).[19] However, Descartes (1993) examined all his mental states, including dream states and hypothetically globally deluded ones, to determine their relationship with reality, and noted that dreams can be true (mathematical truths remains true whether dreaming or waking), and reality can still be discerned by analyzing all such states, albeit not necessarily via the same sort of 'meditation' methodologies employed by the likes of the Buddha or Patanjali.

In *lojong*, the Tibetan art of mind-training, as reflected in such texts as Atisha's *The Seven Points of Training the Mind* (Wallace 2012) and Kamalashila's *Stages of Meditation* (1998), the practitioner is advised, among other things, to cultivate what I consider *lucid waking* states, the waking state analogue of *lucid dream* states, states in which one maintains awareness that one is dreaming. The goal of lucid-waking practices is to foster meta-awareness of the ways in which the better part of the waking mind – resembling the better part of dream experience – projects, shapes, and interprets otherwise ephemeral, malleable, insubstantial, and thus typically misconstrued and, according to Buddhism, therefore dissatisfactory daily waking experience. There is also an attempt in *lojong* to penetrate the dreamless state with meta-awareness, i.e., to cultivate a contemplative version of lucid dreaming, with the belief that doing so cultivates the same meta-ability ranging over all mental states, including the dreamless state. Similar attempts are also found in Advaita Vedanta (Hindu nondualism), although the philosophical frameworks of these systems differ.[20]

Perfecting the mind-training process is, in Buddhism, attaining the final figure/ground frame-shift: nirvana, enlightenment, the state of perfectly lucid wakefulness, Buddhahood, the highest philosophical wisdom. Prior to perfect awakening, on this view, the better part of waking experience resembles a good part of dream experience, and both are somewhat somnambulistic, insofar as they generally lack lucidity with respect to the ways in which pre-conscious volitions move us, expectations shape what is salient, preconceptions frame how we interpret what is relevant from among what is salient, dispositions influence how we respond to experiences, and so on. If there is any truth to the idea that the highly developed methodology of disciplined meditative mind-training turns on the metacognitive lights of the experiencing subject, and those lights are inherently philosophical insofar as they promise to illuminate the constructed nature of phenomenological experience, among other features of the subject, the object, and the subject/object relationship, then on that ground alone meditation counts as a philosophical exercise, and a sapientially powerful one at that. As Vervaeke (this *Handbook*, Chapter 12) emphasizes, philosophy is the love of wisdom, and love involves care about, tending to, the object of love, in this case wisdom. Anything that cultivates wisdom is worth caring about. Millennia-old traditions across the globe have practiced meditation as a way of loving – caring about, carefully

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attending to, aspiring to, and cultivating – what they construe to be the highest philosophical wisdom. *Theoria*, from this perspective, is instrumental to *sophia*.

There are similar but different ways of *carefully attending to* mental states in the Western philosophical tradition. For example, Hume and Kant employed different analyses both of which arguably resemble some sort of introspection, *carefully attending to* mental states in order to develop insight into their nature, reaching opposite conclusions. Hume (several centuries after the Buddha), simply paying close attention to his occurrent mental states, concluded there is no continuant integrating them into a self. Kant, analyzing the conditions necessary for the possibility of mental states, concluded that the self is the necessary subjective unity of consciousness that makes perceptions and other mental states possible at all. Their introspective methods, however different from each other's or from the Asian contemplatives, may be construed as resembling something like cogitational, conceptual, or propositional forms of *lojong*, more broadly construed.

William James thought that "an education that could train the faculty of attention would be an education *par excellence*" (1890, p. 463), and *lojong* is precisely that type of education. The Stoics placed a significant focus on the cultivation of a kind of mindful attention, *prosochê*. Pigliucci (this *Handbook*, Chapter 24) claims: "Epictetus himself devotes a chapter of his *Discourses* to the concept of *prosochê*, literally translated as 'attention' and often referred to as Stoic mindfulness" (referencing Epictetus (2008)). How might contemplative neurophilosophical research contribute to the debate between Hume and Kant, to James's assertion, or to the Stoics' practices? The potential for positive answers to this question ought to be plausible by now, if not obviously so.

Again, regardless of the outcomes of such research, it seems intuitive that such questions are not only philosophically valid, but substantive. More importantly, these are questions anyone can attempt to answer on their own by engaging in their own meditative explorations, just as they can engage on their own in philosophical inquiry to cultivate a sense of its validity. Indeed, Goleman (1988) argues that the meditation cushion, so to speak, is the individualized 'lab' in which practitioners each may daily test various elements of their own thought, intention, feeling, and other mental states, dispositions, actions, and psychophysiological attributes, in terms of how poorly or well the practitioner is able to bring about and sustain mental quiescence in the often-visceral wake of engaging in such phenomena. As noted earlier, he also asserts that the Abhidharma – the third collection of early Buddhist discourses containing philosophical analyses of the other two collections, the sayings of the Buddha and the monastic code – represents the collective wisdom from conventions of advanced early Buddhist practitioners, many considered enlightened, comparing notes from their meditation cushions, so to speak, on these experiential findings (*id.*).

The Buddha encouraged his followers not to take any of his claims on faith, but to test them in their own meditative experiments – a great idea, particularly since he made some fantastic claims about supernatural beings, rebirth, and the like. There is thus a very straightforward sense in which the Socratic imperative – the god Apollo's command, allegedly inscribed over the entrance to his temple at Delphi, "*Know thyself*" – may be pursued on the meditation cushion. One example of an accessible approach off the meditation cushion is to periodically ask oneself: Am I conscious now? That is the meta-awareness-triggering question Susan Blackmore (2017), philosopher and long-term meditation practitioner, asks herself throughout the day as part of what I would describe as her lucid-waking mind-training.

Another consideration worth raising may be seen by asking: What is the best way to analyze, test, and thus understand the relationship between the different types of meditation and the different worldviews or spiritual traditions that embed them, e.g., by comparing neuroscientific data on the differences between meditation practitioners from different traditions? Can science

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identify the differences between more or less effective meditation techniques, identifying which techniques bring about which results (say, in order to find out which is more effective and thus more worth pursuing)? Can the neural correlates of nirvana, the allegedly enlightened meditative state, be identified and thus verified in brain scans of the allegedly enlightened? (That could put some renowned guru types out of business – sparing many from lives possibly wasted following false prophets.) Could we discover that advanced mystics from various traditions are all in the same brain state, experiencing a common reality, as analysis of the claims of Radhakrishnan (Patyiayang 2008) and Hick (1982) might suggest? Is a purely secular, non-supramundane, ideology-free, naturalistic, scientifically grounded form of sapiential meditation possible, contra Ryle? If so, is it desirable, or at all cognitively meaningful, contra Nozick? Could such a practice constitute a rational post-modern form of spiritual practice for the non-believer, contra Purser and Loy?

John Vervaeke, one of our contributors here, argues for an affirmative answer to some of these questions. In his excellent online video lecture series, "Awakening from the Meaning Crisis" (2020a) – which I highly recommend as an enlightening source not only of practical contemplative wisdom, but as supplying a wealth of additional evidence for what (in the Introduction) I termed the *three central hypotheses* (that meditation can aid philosophical understanding, that there is or ought to be a philosophy of meditation, and that meditation is a form of philosophy) – Vervaeke argues that cognitive science already supplies not only positive answers to many of these questions, but also grounds many of the contemplative claims we have entertained here thus far, and will be extremely helpful in developing the science and philosophy of meditation in the near future. It can also, he is most inspired to argue, help us resolve our current meaning crisis, which he describes as our post-religious loss of the sort of mythic meaning that we gained during the Axial Age, but lost during the scientific revolution. What we need is a religion that is not a religion, as he puts it. He suggests that the nearly global popularity of mindfulness meditation reflects our collective need for a scientifically and philosophically plausible substitute for what religious myth and related practices used to supply – something I have sensed for quite some time, both in general and in my own life.[21]

We have reviewed some reasons to think meditation is philosophically valid, and we have raised some philosophical questions about meditation. Many similar questions may be raised, the answers to which would constitute arguments for or against the philosophical validity of various meditative practices and states. The answers to such questions are not obvious, but what does seem obvious is that most of these questions are philosophically legitimate. Thus, this simple overview of the many philosophical questions that can be raised about meditation supports the conclusion that there is a philosophy of meditation and that it should be recognized as such, even if all the answers to these questions were to turn out to be negative. By analogy, some philosophers view the question of free will the same way: Whether we have it or not is not what determines whether there is a genuine philosophical field of inquiry investigating free will, a philosophy of free will.[22] Surely, these questions about meditation count as reasons to think there is a philosophy of meditation defined precisely by such questions and their potential answers, positive or negative.

Similar analogies may be made with the metaphysics of the self, or the existence of God, and so on. For example, it is widely held that most Buddhists adhere to a no-self doctrine, according to which the self is at best a conventional, pragmatic fiction or convenient designator referring to a speaker (or someone spoken to) that lacks any ultimate, ontologically substantive status, any continuant that remains unchanged through the series of changes that constitute anyone's moment-to-moment experience. For this and similar reasons, most Buddhists adopt a similar view of the notion of free will as a convenient, conventional mode of reference to individuals'

ability to make choices and perform actions but that lacks a genuine referent in ultimate reality. The reasoning is simple: If there is no self, there can be no autonomous self.[23]

The *no-self-thus-no-free-will* view is considered the dominant view among Buddhist philosophers, although it is not the only one. Those holding the dominant view typically have rejected the idea that there is or should be a Buddhist theory of free will, but I have argued that just as there is a Buddhist theory of the self, albeit a negative one, i.e., the no-self doctrine, so too there is a Buddhist theory of free will, albeit a negative one, the no-free-will doctrine, and the mere fact that most Buddhists accept this negative theory duo does not mean that either matter is philosophically closed, the way that, say, evolution theory is scientifically closed (pending solid counter-evidence) (Repetti 2019). Some Buddhists reject one or both negative doctrines.[24]

Thus, the matter is philosophically open, and there are many competing Buddhist theories of free will. On mine, because certain meditation practices increase self-regulative and related metacognitive skills, they enable practitioners to cultivate not only freedom of the will, but freedom of thought, emotion, action, and any aspect of human activity that is voluntary, culminating in freedom of the self and most generally freedom of mind or mental freedom, regardless of whether it turns out that determinism is true, false, or some mixture of both. In fact, I have argued that my model can stand fairly well against the most powerful skeptical arguments against free will (Repetti 2019). More on that shortly.

Similarly, that there is a philosophy of religion is independent of whether there is a God, though that is one of its central questions. Religious institutions, beliefs, and practices raise metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and other philosophical questions, so for this reason alone it makes sense for there to be a philosophy of religion. Because meditation raises similarly philosophical questions, it makes sense to develop a philosophy of meditation.

5 Meditation, free will, and philosophical wisdom

In addition, some of the better reasons I think meditation practices count as philosophical activities are related to arguments I have made extensively about how they can be used to *increase* our free will and related self-regulatory abilities falling under the rubric of freedom of the mind (Repetti 2019). Those arguments are worth reviewing here in outline.[25]

First, the term "free will" is highly contentious and thus I cannot delve deeply into all its different meanings here, much less argue for various metaphysical claims about agency and the nature of the self. To avoid these complexities, here I will simplify the otherwise ambitious aims that characterize many of my other writings on this subject by restricting much of what I mean to convey by this term to its practical, conventional, causal/functional, empirical meaning, that is, to those of our simple self-regulative abilities that Aristotle associated with, and identified by, their being *voluntary*. This category includes our ability to pause before acting, to reflect on the likely outcomes of alternatives and deliberate about their values and preferability, to examine and reassess our own intentions and values, to resist our tendency to simply act on our own occurrent desires and emotions, to choose among considered alternatives, to enact intentions, to decide what to pay attention to, how much effort to make, and so on. We clearly possess these abilities, and exercise them in varying degrees. They constitute various aspects of our agency or free will, as commonly understood, for we take their exercise to be *up to us*, the underlying (often opaque) metaphysics and their related philosophical disputes notwithstanding.

Whether it is necessary for us to possess a metaphysically robust *libertarian* type of autonomy, that is, one with an acausal or contracausal ability, to correctly count these otherwise obvious elements of free will noted in the previous paragraph, is a question we can set aside for purposes of showing how meditation practices can increase our causal/functional free will – that is,

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the extent to which we can increasingly develop and instantiate those abilities. That is, we can view 'free will' independently of metaphysical questions about whether the relevant actions of the agent are entirely determined or somewhat random and whether the agent is a genuinely substantive entity or just a closely clustered but ultimately impersonal causal series. I am not suggesting these questions are irrelevant, but only that we can bracket them for current purposes. I address them elsewhere in great detail (Repetti 2019).

Meditation practices can help develop the ability to disassociate awareness from the objects of awareness, by simply exercising the ability to watch mental contents enter and exit awareness without acting on those mental contents, such as desires to scratch an itch, quench a wave of thirst, answer a ringing phone, and so on. As noted above in response to Ryle's objection about the non-neutral interference of introspection, by introspecting we are able to perform a figure/ground frame-shift enabling us to decouple emotions and intentions from their intentional objects and look at them (opaquely) instead of looking through them (transparently). On my analysis, this extends the range of voluntary control over the emotions and intentions, similar to the way fasting affords a greater opportunity to refrain from acting on hunger sensations, but it also applies to all mental states.

The Buddha, perhaps the world's greatest meditation virtuoso, claimed that he perfected this ability, such that he was *able to think or not think whatever thought he wanted to think or not think*, respectively, *to have or not have any resolve he wanted to have or not have*, respectively, and so forth (Repetti 2019, pp. 9, 18, 20). We may fruitfully compare his claim with Harry Frankfurt's (1971) analysis of freedom of the will, despite obvious differences that are irrelevant to the point of the comparison, but which latter is worth emphasizing to preempt irrelevant objections based on such irrelevant differences, which is unfortunately fairly common.

On my analysis, the Buddha's claim of being able to have or not have the resolve he wants to have or not have, respectively, constitutes freedom of the will on Frankfurt's model: being able to have the will one wants to have. (This is an effective meta-volitional pro-attitude toward one's base-level volitions.) But the Buddha's ability to have similar meta-mental control not only over his intentions or will, but his thoughts, emotions, reactions, and the like, constitutes what I have described as freedom of the mind: being able to have the mind one wants to have. Freedom of the mind includes freedoms not only of the will, but also of emotion, attention, and so on for anything else that falls under the purview of the voluntary.

In his "impossibility argument", however, Galen Strawson (1994) argued that free will is impossible, regardless of whether or not the world is deterministic, because every choice is conditioned by the agent's mental state at the moment of choice, and the only way to circumvent this would be if the agent could bring about their own initially unconditioned mental state – if the agent could create themself from scratch, which is logically impossible, since to author the self-creation, the author must already exist. But Buddhist meditation practices are designed to *decondition* the mind to attain nirvana, standardly characterized as *unconditioned*. If the attainment of an unconditioned mental state is possible, then Strawson's impossibility argument is unsound, and free will is possible, at least for meditation virtuosos. I have argued (2019) that, to the extent anyone approximates nirvana, or cultivates any degree of mental freedom, to that degree they possess an equal share of free will, all considerations of the underlying metaphysics notwithstanding, including being a brain in a vat, a perfectly realistic simulation, or some other bizarre metaphysical scenario.

Meditative training constitutes a central component of the Buddhist Eightfold Path to nirvana, particularly the last two of its components, 'right' mindfulness and concentration, along with 'right' belief, desire, speech, action, livelihood, and effort. I interpret 'right' here in an amoral strategic sense as 'calibrated toward attaining nirvana', mental freedom. Each of these

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eight components may be viewed as a practice or a contemplative object, an aspect of one's life that ought to be brought under the mindful lens of contemplative training, part of a mind-training system designed to overhaul the embodied cognitive/conative apparatus, where each component plays an interdependent role with the others. Thus, for example, one ought to examine and adjust one's intentions (toward mental freedom) with proper effort, mindfulness, and concentration, thereby cultivating and increasing freedom of the will. Likewise, one ought to do the same with one's beliefs, thereby improving one's nirvana-oriented epistemology, as well as one's actions, which, as Aristotle noted, is how one cultivates virtue, and so on for anything else that admits of voluntary control, such as emotions, speech, action, deliberation, etc.

The Buddhist version of the *Tao*, the contemplative path, then, seems well-designed to improve not merely one's mind and will, but many other items to be found in one's philosophical tool kit, so to speak, which are all united in wisdom, the central philosophical virtue. These trainings are not entirely restricted to Buddhism, however. They resemble, among other things found in other philosophies, the three Stoic disciplines, of desire, action, and assent, our ability to grant or withhold our assent being thought to apply not only to belief, which Descartes emphasized in his fourth meditation (1993), but for the Stoics also to perception, interpretation, emotion, and any kind of judgment.[26]

Another way of viewing the philosophical value of meditation is simply to note that meditation may be understood as training the primary philosophical tool, the mind – a primary philosophical endeavor. Training the cognitive equipment deployed in the activity of *doing* philosophy promises to improve philosophical activity, and thus is arguably not relevantly different in this sense from training logico-philosophical skills through dialogical or monological exercises, such as philosophical debates or philosophical argument analysis, respectively. Devoting years of disciplined training to differentiating between awareness and its objects, thoughts and the psychological reactions they trigger, intentions and meta-intentions, perceptions and the concepts used to categorize them, phenomenological states and the metaphysical presuppositions we typically associate with them, and so forth, clearly promises to improve our analytical prowess, and to decrease the extent to which we are vulnerable to cognitive biases and thus to fallacious inferences, motivated reasoning, and self-deluding rationalizations and the like.

Meditation is thus capable of playing a powerful role in training for philosophical wisdom. It therefore clearly counts as a very practical methodology that may be classified as a practical form of virtue epistemology, itself clearly a form of philosophy. If doing modal logic proofs to determine whether Anselm's ontological argument is valid counts as doing philosophy, then doing the above sorts of meditative exercises to determine whether my objection to Strawson's impossibility argument is not just theoretically valid, but also experientially plausible, counts as well.

6 Meditation, philosophical mood, and philosophical impact

As noted in our Introduction, based on my own observations connected with my informal experiments on my philosophy students, meditation appears to help inculcate what I would describe as a philosophically ripe contemplative mode of awareness, to increase the extent to which students engage seriously in philosophical reflection, and the extent to which their philosophical explorations result in shifts in their philosophical perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes.[27] These results seemed clear to me experientially, in terms of palpable, marked differences between students and classroom dynamics in classes exposed to meditation versus those in classes not so exposed, but also in qualitative differences tracked along two different measures, using the multi-variate validated Toronto Mindfulness Scale (TMS) (Lau et al. 2006) and a pre-semester/post-semester philosophical belief survey instrument I devised.

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Let me briefly describe this study,[28] beginning with my own pre/post survey. In the pre/post survey, I asked students for their responses to philosophical statements using a Likert scale including these five options: strongly agree, agree, neutral/not-applicable, disagree, and strongly disagree. The same 25 statements were supplied on the first and last day of class. These included statements such as "I am confident in my understanding of what constitutes knowledge", "I am confident in my understanding of what constitutes reality", "I find thinking interesting for its own sake", and so on.

The TMS similarly uses a Likert scale to elicit reactions to statements related to mindfulness, such as "I find myself watching my thoughts without identifying with them", "I am curious about my reactions to things", and so on. Studies conducted on practitioners of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) show significant changes on the TMS after as little as an 8-week course of daily 20-minute sessions, including increased intrinsic curiosity and increased decentering (detachment from identification with one's thoughts and emotions), which latter result confirms my claims above about how introspection enables figure/ground frame-shifting decoupling, and the former result of which partly confirms my claim above that these frame-shifting experiences afford liberating insights. It should be noted that liberating insights into the nature of mind and behavior which increase self-regulative abilities may be construed as elements, if not incremental stages in the accumulation, of wisdom.

Over the course of a few years, I introduced my students to meditation in roughly half of my philosophy classes. I used the pre/post survey on the first and last day of class in all classes, and I used the TMS immediately after any meditation in those classes exposed to it. The results were statistically significant and impressive. There was a marked increase in the number of changed responses to philosophical statements on the pre/post survey, indicating that the more times students were exposed to meditation (some classes none, some twice, some 5 times, some 12 times, some every day), the greater the frequency and magnitude of changed responses – more changed responses to more philosophical statements, and greater changes in either direction, from strongly agree to strongly disagree, or vice versa, being the largest changes.

Interestingly, whereas the TMS only indicated measurable changes among students exposed to meditation 12 or more times, classes exposed to meditation only 2 to 5 times showed significant changes in the pre/post survey. This suggests that even before students 'realized' that meditation is altering their relationship with their own mind or awareness, as shown on changes in the TMS, it is having an impact on their philosophical attitudes, as shown on the pre/post survey. (I scare-quoted 'realize' to point out that the term has two distinct but related meanings: to come to awareness of, and to actualize or make real.[29] It is not obvious that the impact came to their *conscious* awareness, but the evidence confirms that the impact was *actualized*.)

As someone who believes his own path as a professional philosopher resulted significantly from the tacit philosophical impact of meditation experiences, I am not surprised by these initial findings. If there is empirical reason to think meditation significantly increases philosophical interest and insight, as suggested by the above study, however small in scale and not necessarily rigorously controlled that study may have been, then such relationships are certainly worth exploring in more formal, well-designed x-phi research studies.

7 Conclusion: Meditation is philosophy

Meditative practice in virtually every tradition constitutes a mind-training discipline of engaging with what I consider the contemplative equivalent of what Dennett calls 'intuition

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pumps' (2013). Intuition pumps are philosophical thought experiments that guide intuitions, and alter perspectives, with or without necessarily employing arguments. Two of the more popular thought experiments that function as intuition pumps include the brain-in-a-vat and simulation hypotheses. Imagine you are just a brain in a vat, or a digital mind, wired or programmed, respectively, in some sort of perfect simulation. Can you point to anything in your experience that could count against this? Probably not. But if you cannot prove you are not in one of these scenarios, or so the argument goes, then how can you know that anything else you think is true?[30] The intuition pumped here is one of appearance/reality gap skepticism. I mention these two examples as simply that, examples of usually quite effective intuition pumps – at least initially. Subsequent and careful philosophical analysis is often required to restore pre-intuition pump understanding.

Meditation, in the sense analogous to intuition pumps intended here, therefore, is a practice of performing mental state experiments in order to engender consciousness-altering, figure/ground frame-shifting, radical transformations of the philosophical *gestalt* of one's psyche, what I would call 'consciousness-raising pumps'.[31] I am convinced that meditation is thus the meta-mental and meta-philosophical virtue-epistemic art and practice of consciously sharpening the wisdom-cultivating tools in the philosophical toolkit, particularly for philosophers who consciously practice it as such. For philosophers who practice meditation, meditation can be an opportunity to contemplate the Aristotelian/Kantian categories phenomenologically, which practices have been advocated for millennia in Indian philosophy: contemplating space itself, time itself, subjectivity itself, the self itself, the self/world relationship itself, etc. There is no doubt that there are substantive parallels between such meditation practices and phenomenological bracketing, their differences notwithstanding, both of which involve forms of differentiating between what is simply given in our subjectivity, our phenomenological states, and the metaphysical presuppositions and interpretations we typically associate with them, though, as with any other philosophical issue, philosophers disagree about what to make of this parallel, as shall become clear in some of our later chapters; e.g., Coseru will partly agree but partly disagree with Stone and Zahavi on the relationship between meditation and phenomenology. Regardless of which such view is most plausible, it is obvious from the mere fact of the substantive philosophical disagreement about this that the philosophy of meditation is legitimate, for such philosophers are engaging in it.

My aim in this chapter has been to explore some key arguments for and against the claim that meditation is not only a philosophical activity, but to argue for the claim that there is and ought to be a philosophy of meditation not only in Asian philosophy, as there has already been for millennia, but that there is one, and ought to be one recognized, in the contemporary West. I have raised many philosophical questions about the validity of meditation practices, which questions alone – irrespective of the best answers to them – imply that there is and ought to be a philosophy of meditation in the West. I have offered a variety of reasons for thinking that meditative mind-training is a premiere philosophical tool that not only promises to improve any philosopher's philosophical tool kit, but to enable anyone – not just philosophers and philosophy students, but perhaps especially them – to live a contemplative, philosophical life. I have attempted to speak the *Tao*. I have encouraged the reader to look at the metaphorical moon and the pointing finger, but also at whether that finger is legitimately pointing toward a valid and worthwhile conception of philosophical wisdom. My ultimate goal here is to encourage philosophical readers to consider meditation as a potential route to that philosophical wisdom, one that might engender the sorts of figure/ground frame-shifting transformations that actualize and enact an embodied philosophical wisdom, an aspiration I am proud to note that I share with Socrates.

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Notes

1 As I noted in the Introduction, by 'validity' I generally mean the extra-logical sense having to do with plausibility, coherence, cogency, and so on, as opposed to the strictly logical sense according to which deductive arguments are valid if and only if their premises entail their conclusions. The context of my usage of the term throughout this chapter ought to make it clear that I am not using it in the purely logical sense.

2 E.g., the Stoics' 'View from Above' (or 'big picture') meditation involves a kind of visualization exercise, whereby one imagines extending the perspectival vantage of subjective awareness outward to the cosmos across space and time, to take on the perspective *sub specie aeternitatis* – more at a perspectival shift than a cogitational one.

3 Some hold that the Abhidharma, the philosophical component of the early Buddhist canon, was significantly informed by this collective wisdom from advanced early Buddhist practitioners based on their meditative findings, e.g., Goleman (1988).

4 For a summary, exposition, and critique of Ainslie's theory of the will, as well as a series of suggested remedies to its deficiencies, see Repetti (2010a).

5 For an excellent free *course* on meditation, with many insights from Buddhism, psychology, and cognitive science, see Vervaeke (2020b).

6 See Goleman and Davidson (2017), for a meta-analysis of the 50 most-cited studies that evidence the claim that meditation results in these sorts of altered character *traits*, not merely the related altered *states*, repetition of the latter of which appear to cultivate the former.

7 Another criticism associated with McMindfulness asserts that it is stealth Buddhism, on the one hand, while another criticism is that it is not enough – a too-water-down version of – Buddhism, on the other hand. I have argued that these – and the bulk of related – criticisms cancel each other out (Repetti 2016).

8 By 'relative ineffability' I mean to convey that I believe that just because an experience may be *practically* impossible for even a philosophically and verbally gifted individual or community to articulate, that does not preclude the *logical* possibility that a philosophical genius, savant, or research community may someday succeed in rendering it effable. This is consistent with the general theses in the philosophy of mind to the effect that (a) mental states are in principle capable of becoming conscious states, and (b) conscious states are in principle available for various agential roles, including being amenable to verbal description (however inchoately). Some inductive evidence for this possibility may be found in the incredibly syncretic attempts by Vervaeke (2020a) to integrate the many diverse resources of a variety of philosophical traditions, of the various cognitive sciences, and of the contemplative traditions' psychotechnologies in order to reverse engineer enlightenment. His excellent chapter here is a condensed summary of some of that rich and promising work.

9 The Theravāda ('way of the elders') Buddhist tradition is the oldest surviving version of early Buddhism. S.N. Goenka appears to have developed a modified version of the Theravādin meditation practice for the West, emphasizing non-judgmental observation of mental states, intended to lead to *vipassanā* (insight, exemplified by Buddhism's 'three marks of existence': impermanence, dissatisfactoriness, and impersonality). Many leaders in the Western spread of mindfulness attended Goenka's free ten-day mindfulness meditation retreats in India in the 1970s, including Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, Ram Dass, Sharon Salzberg, and others; these ten-day retreats are available the world over today. Goenka's general method has come to be called '*Vipassanā*', interpreted to mean 'mindfulness', and often simply called 'mindfulness', despite substantive intra-Buddhist terminological disagreements about the meaning of such terms. Mindfulness had been adopted and modified by Jon Kabat-Zinn and later developments on his method of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs), and has become the most popular form of meditation spreading across popular culture; see Sharf (2014) for a critical review of this history. Odysseus Stone and Dan Zahavi (this *Handbook*, Chapter 22) also critique that movement, and Massimo Pigliucci (this *Handbook*, Chapter 24) differentiates it from a similar, but distinct, Stoic form of mindfulness, *prosochê*, involving a certain kind of attention.

10 For a fairly comprehensive attempt, see Repetti (2020).

11 '*Lectio divina*' (Latin: literally, "divine word"; informally: scripture) is the term used to describe a (typically, but not necessarily, Judeo-Christian monastic) meditation technique of using a scriptural passage as the focal point, and engaging with it, often in three successive stages: (a) reading it aloud, (b) reading it mentally, and (c) being receptive to what the spirit conjures as its message for the practitioner. Variations on this technique appear across a number of cultural and religious divisions (Zajonc 2008).

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12 See also Baminiwatta and Solangaarachchi (2021), for a comprehensive review of the last 55 years of neuroscientific research on meditation; see also our chapters by Vago and Vervaeke, both more intent on explaining its relevance to philosophy.
13 See Davis's chapter (this *Handbook*, Chapter 18), for an in-depth discussion of the potential normative value of the sort of global attentiveness discussed in the text.
14 See Struhl (this *Handbook*, Chapter 16), for an explication of the way competing paradigms may play a crucial role in the philosophy of meditation.
15 While I have written on most of these ideas elsewhere in different terms (Repetti 2010a, 2017, 2019), a number of the terms in this paragraph, e.g., translucence, 'seeing through', frame-shifting, decoupling, etc., were adopted from Vervaeke (2020a), who uses the example of being aware of the ground when using a cane, but being able to shift awareness to the cane itself, or to the feelings of holding it, which he calls 'transparency-to-opacity shifts'. See Vervaeke (this *Handbook*, Chapter 12), for a more thorough explanation of these ideas and of the cognitive science related to them.
16 See, e.g., Siderits, Thompson, and Zahavi (2011), for an excellent collection of essays most of which directly or else indirectly address this issue.
17 See Ainslie (2001), for an earlier model of our intentional system (our 'will') that admits of a similar shifting-coalitions type analysis of 'pico-economic' (micro-micro-economic) intrapersonal competition between various elements of our motivational psychology; see Repetti (2010a) for a critique.
18 See Fasching (this *Handbook*, Chapter 9), for an elaboration of this argument about meditation as bringing the practitioner to awareness as such.
19 See also Garfield (2015).
20 For an interesting discussion of these philosophies, see Thompson (2015); see also Thapliyal (this *Handbook*, Chapter 7), who specifically compares and contrasts these approaches within certain forms of Buddhism and Vedanta.
21 See also Vervaeke (this *Handbook*, Chapter 12).
22 Some nevertheless express dismissive attitudes toward the very topic of free will within philosophy, comparing it with what a waste of resources it would be if brilliant physicists were to still devote their efforts to trying to solve cold fusion.
23 See, e.g., Goodman (2002); for a critique of Goodman's argument, see Repetti (2012).
24 See, e.g., Carpenter (2015).
25 Ben Abelson (this *Handbook*, Chapter 3) poses an objection to one feature of my meditation-based account of free will.
26 See Pigliucci (2017); see also Pigliucci (this *Handbook*, Chapter 24), which focuses on Stoic and other Western forms of meditation.
27 Dreyfus (this *Handbook*, Chapter 21) also discusses his observations from teaching his students meditation. For more information on the use of meditation in higher education, the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE) has a host of resources, including a peer-reviewed journal, *The Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*, accessible through their website, at https://acmhe.org/resources/joci/.
28 For discussion of this study as well as an argument in favor of a more contemplative approach to teaching philosophy that is informed by the intuition that meditation counts as a form of philosophy, see Repetti (2010b).
29 The two-fold nature of this term was brought to my attention by Vervaeke (2020a).
30 For an in-depth examination of the plausibility and implications of these two thought experiments, see Chalmers (2022).
31 See Friquegnon (this *Handbook*, Chapter 4), for an elaboration of the argument that the Indian yogi and philosopher-sage Santaraksita makes to the effect that analytic, or more broadly discursive, philosophy alone is insufficient for the attainment of the highest philosophical wisdom, which latter requires meditation. On my analysis, that is because meditation functions as an effective consciousness-altering pump.

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