

Nature of the Mind: Perspective from Meditation & Eastern Philosophy

...

**Goal For Today: Get a (slightly) better sense of
notion of “no - self” and “non-duality”**

Personal Anecdotal Experiences of Psychedelics

Matthew

I had a very profound experience taking LSD many years ago. At the time I was looking for answers to the “meaning of life”; a common occupation for people at this stage of life. I did not have a religious upbringing. In fact, my parents, my father in particular, were agnostic. I too questioned the usefulness of religion. I knew nothing about mystical experiences. I had, by some chance and by virtue of the counter-cultural milieu, been reading about Buddhism, in particular the works of D.T. Suzuki and Thomas Merton. Suzuki’s writing was somewhat academic and remote from actual practice. Merton’s was more direct.

This was my first acid trip. It was just after the end of the school year. St Pepper had just been released. I was in a tenement apartment on the Lower East Side in New York belonging to a friend of a friend whom I was there with. Other than my friend, I was with people I didn’t know. They seemed OK to me.

I was a bit apprehensive because of stories about bad trips. I had no idea what to expect. I took the dose and waited... and waited.

Matthew (cont.)

The hallucinatory effects came on slowly, sneaking up on me. I remember being in a darkened room. I looked about and saw a fine red pattern, a filigree overlaying all space around me. I remember feeling that the hallucinations, which I clearly knew were hallucinations, were permeating all space. Sgt. Pepper was playing somewhere in the apartment- 4000 holes in Blackburn Lancashire. I felt like I was floating but clearly, I was floating seeing the patterns, listening to Sgt Pepper. Then suddenly, I realized that none of what I was sensing was important. None of what I was thinking was important. None of what I was feeling was important. I realized that all form, all perception, all things were empty, void. This was the nature of existence. There is no this or that. I started smiling at I Get by With a Little Help from my Friends.

I am sure that my experience was framed by my readings concerning Sunyata in Buddhist thought, in particular Zen, - “Sunyata, in Buddhist philosophy, the voidness that constitutes ultimate reality; sunyata is seen not as a negation of existence but rather as the undifferentiation out of which all apparent entities, distinctions, and dualities arise.” This, to my utter surprise, is what I realized. I received a gift for absolutely no reason.

Matthew (cont.)

The paradox is – who is realizing or experiencing this Thusness? My personal feeling is that the discussion about the dissolution of self in psychedelic literature misses the mark. It is beside the point. If there is no I, then who or what takes the dose of the psychedelic and disappears... Again, a paradox. The paradox, in my opinion, only arises when we think, or perceive some thing- there must be a discrimination between this and that; my inner self (mind?) and outer things (other objects or other minds).

There is no way to falsify this experience, as Sam Harris says. I have no rational way to fully grasp the experience. Yet, the memory persists. I exist. You exist. All that is around us exists and is important. I am sure my memory persists as some electro-chemical transaction in my brain. It is important to know that... for science to study it. Yet, I was and am convinced that there is Thusnessthe non-dualistic base to what is. We are fortunate to have words to describe it. But, in the normal sense of knowing it is unknowable.

Psychedelics & Meditation

Types of Meditation Practice

1. Focused Awareness:
 - a. Center attention on a single object (breathing, candle-flame). Note when mind is distracted and bring back
2. Loving-Kindness
 - a. Repeat words of compassion, empathy, and wish for well-being towards others
3. Open-Monitoring:
 - a. Cultivate a more open-awareness that observes many aspects of the present moment without getting caught up in them

Mindfulness Meditation usually refers to some combination or either one of Focused Awareness and Open-Monitoring

What Do Psychedelics & Meditation Have In Common?

- Experience of “no-self”
- Grand Spaciousness
- Emptiness
- Non-Duality
- Strong confidence in belief of having seen a deeper level of reality

Meditation & The Brain

- Almost across the board, all sorts of meditation de-activate the DMN
- Also significant deactivations in the *insula*
- Insula is responsible for a whole range of things:
 - The insula “lights up” in brain scans when people crave drugs, feel pain, anticipate pain, empathize with others, listen to jokes, see disgust on someone’s face, are shunned in a social settings, listen to music, decide not to buy an item, see someone cheat and decide to punish them, and determine degrees of preference while eating chocolate
 - It is linked with “self-awareness” because it is where the mind and body collide. I.e. physical perceptions are translated to subjective experiences, and subjective expectation is translated to physical experience

Defining Self & the Feeling of “not-self”

Narrative

- Self-reflective, story construction about who we are. Our personality traits, our life trajectory, our relationship with others. The stories we tell ourselves about who we are (I am a software engineer who is kind, curious...)
- The stitching together of our autobiographical memory (from last week, when this ability is shut off, our experience of self drastically reduces)
- “Self-referential mental episodes constitute what may be called narrative self-consciousness, namely the complex sequences of self-centered thoughts, memories and imaginings that weave the narrative of our daily lives and shape our core self-related beliefs” (Damasio, 1999; Gallagher, 2000; Schechtman, 2011).
- Gilbert (2010) study: smartphone app checking in on our mind-wandering. Much more often than we would like to think

My Body



- Notions of self are strongly tied to a feeling of *ownership*
- A number of physiological measurements appear to indicate that the real limb is temporarily 'disowned' by the body during the illusion, such as a drop in temperature and an increase in histamine reactivity in the participant's real hand (Moseley et al., 2008; Barnsley et al., 2011;)
- Subjects diagnosed with the monothematic delusion known as somatoparaphrenia routinely deny ownership of a limb, despite the fact that nociception and touch may be preserved in the rejected body part (Melzack, 1990; Bottini et al., 2002).
- The existence of phenomenon of owning body parts that are *not* ours, as well as not owning parts that *are* ours suggests self consciousness involves body ownership

Body Awareness

- It has been argued that interoceptive awareness grounds a core sense of self in normal experience, anchoring oneself in one's body (Damasio, 1999; Craig, 2002; Seth, 2013; Tsakiris, 2017)
- Note that this also involves a *spatio-temporal* awareness of our body in “normal waking consciousness”

**All Three Notions are Disrupted in Deep
Meditative Experiences**

Narrative

- Most meditative practices seeks to “quiet” or recognize the existence of the plethora of self-referential thoughts, and re-focus on only the present moment
- Deactivation of the DMN
- As drastic as on psychedelics?
 - “forgetting that I was a male, a human, a being on Earth—all gone, just infinite sensations and visions,” while another stated “I no longer felt human. I didn't remember what a human was”
 - -Quote from participant on psychedelics
 - Nothing this drastic as a complete loss of autobiographical information is reported from meditation, but it is greatly reduced

Body Ownership

Ataria et al. studied a single highly experienced Tibetan Monk, “S” (with around 20,000 h of practice)

S reported that in the altered state of consciousness he achieved through meditation “there really isn't any [sense of ownership]. It's a feeling of dissolving. [It is] hard to distinguish between senses in the body and senses outside [sic].. There is no sense of mine [and] there is no sense of me”

In a more robust study of 12 long-term mindfulness meditators:

Participants [could] voluntarily induce a “selfless” mode of awareness characterized as “momentary phenomenal experience free of the sense of agency and ownership” (Dor-Ziderman et al., 2013, p. 3).

Bodily Awareness

Paradox in meditation, since some practice emphasize body awareness *itself* as the object of attention

Yet, despite this, meditators report:

“it's like falling into empty space... and a sense of dissolving... and there really isn't a center... I don't have any kind of sense of location... I have no idea where I am in stage three, it's all background, I'm not there basically, just world, so there's no real location at all in stage three. It's very minimal, almost nothing... When there's no boundary, there's no personal point of view, it's the world point of view, it's like the world looking, not [me] looking, the world is looking.” (Ataria et al., 2015, Supplementary Material).

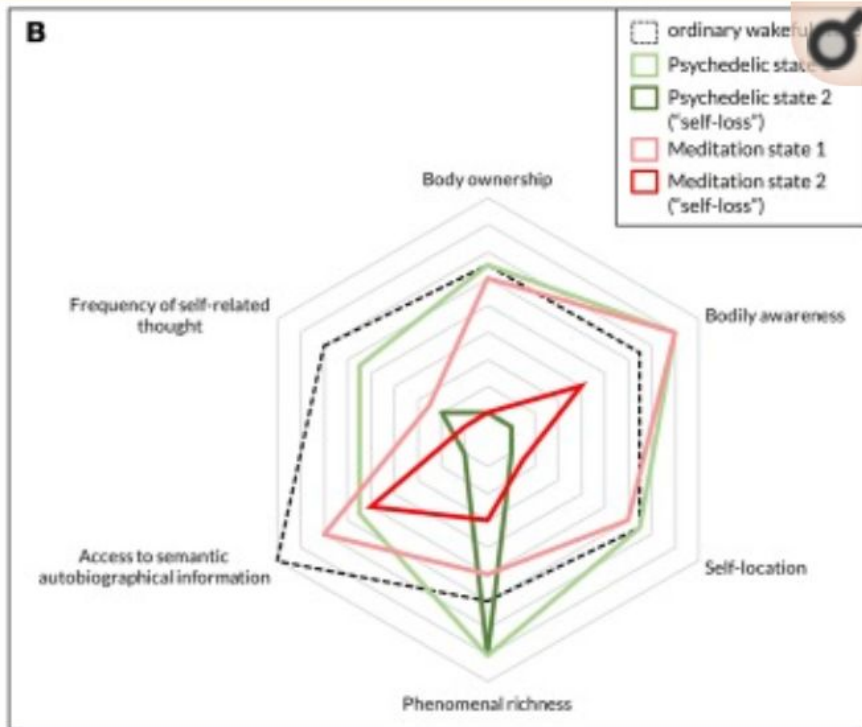
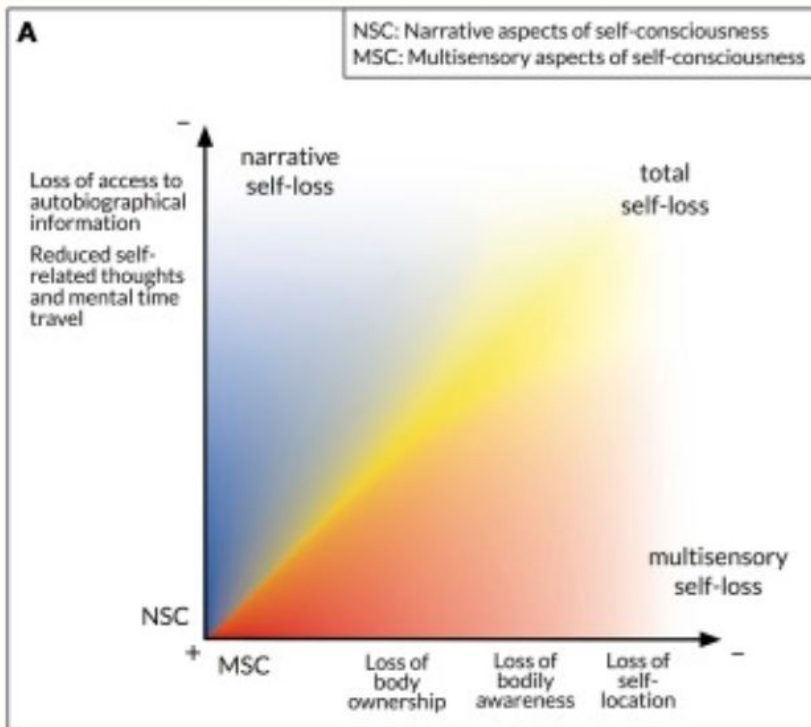
“Thus, it seems that certain meditation practices may inhibit awareness of bodily

Loss of body awareness in psychedelics

“The feeling was very cosmic, of oneness with everything” (5-MeO-DMT, report #78485 from Erowid.org), “an immediate complete dissolution of any identity and a merging into the Oneness, timeless, pure awareness and light energy of the Universe... Similar in some ways with a previous Samadhi meditation experience”

“Thus, it seems that certain meditation practices may inhibit awareness of bodily sensations, reduced in some cases to a mere background interoceptive awareness, while psychedelic substances (DMT and 5-MeO-DMT in particular) may completely suppress awareness of the body.”

--Again, seems to be more extreme and of a slightly different nature when these experiences are found in psychedelics vs meditation



Discussion

Other aspects or parts of self that are not included here?

Is this scientific evidence satisfactory to claims that the “self does not exist”?

Are these experiences seemingly paradoxical only because of the language we use(subject “I”)? Or is there something more deeply paradoxical about the concept of no self that remains to be investigated?

How can there be pain without a subject of pain? I.e. if I feel pain I also immediately know the subject of said pain. It must be me.

Virtual Reality Embodiment: how does this support the claims reported here?

Pure Consciousness/ Non Dual Awareness

Non Dual Awareness (NDA)

(a) ordinary **experience** is “dual” or dichotomous, insofar as **it is structured around a subject-pole and an object-pole**; (b) this subject-object dichotomy is illusory, because conscious awareness as such is not fundamentally dual; (c) it is possible, through the practice of NDA meditation, to dispel this illusion and directly experience conscious awareness as non-dual.

Making Sense of the first facet

1. Ordinary consciousness is structured by a subject/object dichotomy insofar as we are normally aware of ourselves via thought, perception and bodily sensations in addition to being aware of external objects.
2. “Being presented with something necessarily involves being pre-reflectively and pre-conceptually aware of being the subject to whom something is presented” (Nida-Rümelin, 2017, p. 66; see also Strawson, 1999; Kriegel, 2009; Zahavi, 2014; Guillot, 2017)

We can take NDA to mean that the normal perception of a “background” self is gone and also that the nature of *representation* of the world in our minds has changed

NDA supposedly goes further

Not only has the *representation* changed, but this version of seeing the world is actually, in some sense “truer”. The subject-object dichotomy is, in Indian Buddhist philosophy, completely *illusory*

Perhaps a better term for this would be “Awareness of Non-Duality”

Pure Consciousness

A purely conscious state is characterized by “an ‘emptying out’ by a subject of all experiential content and phenomenological qualities, including concepts, thoughts, sense perception, and sensuous images” (Gellman, 2017). States which have been qualified as purely conscious include experiences reached through certain forms of meditation (Nash and Newberg, 2013) and mystical experiences (Stace, 1960; Shear, 1994).

Phenomenology: The subjective first person experience

Representational vs Phenomenological Content

It is possible that some conscious states lack representational content on the ground that states such as moods, pain or orgasm which do not seem to represent anything (Rey, 1998; Kind, 2007; Aydede, 2009)

Pure consciousness seems to be referring to a complete lack of ALL phenomenological content

Representational vs Phenomenological Content

However, this definition cannot be taken literally if we are talking about phenomenal consciousness: by definition, a phenomenally conscious mental state is a mental state such that there is something it like for a creature to be in it (Nagel, 1974), and if there is something it is like to be in a mental state then the mental state has phenomenal character. Therefore, the notion of a (phenomenally) conscious mental state literally lacking phenomenal character is absurd (Gennaro, 2008; Strawson, 2013): **the experience of absence is not equivalent to the absence of experience.**

Discussion

Is pure consciousness possible?

What can we make of these definitions?

Metzinger : Minimal Phenomenal Experience

What is MPE?

- The experience of conscious experience that lies underneath all other conscious experience
- The bare minimum for what we would call a “conscious being”
- Metzinger is trying to deepen our understanding of “pure consciousness”

Categorization of MPE

MPE lacks, (i) MPS or other forms of self-consciousness, (ii) time representation, and (iii) a spatial frame of reference. More generally, here it is not the global phenomenology of identifying with the body as a whole that constitutes the empirical starting point, but all reports in which subjects claim that they have actually had an experience of *consciousness as such* - Metzinger

He is trying to understand the claim that people have experienced “raw” consciousness; the claim that once we remove the movie, all that is left is the “movie projector”

The “essence” of consciousness : it is a “minimal” model. We are not trying to capture all the complexities of consciousness, rather we want the least complicated understanding

The Problem & Metzinger's Solution

Traditional philosophical claims (non-Western philosophy) about an “empty” or “contentless” form of experience raise a problem for the currently leading kind of theories about consciousness, namely Representationalism: If this conscious state is not about anything, then there is an experience that is not defined by its content; therefore, Representationalism would be false. Here, first steps towards an investigation of minimal phenomenal experience are provided together with a defence of Representationalism-- Metzinger

No doubtedly these experiences also seem to exist. We should at least try to make sense of them. “Pure” consciousness really is a representational state, but, interestingly, one that instantiates a unique type of phenomenal character which is typically described as “empty” or non-representational.

Further Problems

If we look at directly at experienced meditators, such as Tibetan monks, and give them questionnaires about MPE, their prior belief systems, and cultural values will shape exactly how they feel about certain questions related to MPE.

Further, even what is happening in their brain is determined from the top down based on their belief systems and such. The teachings emphasize and tell you that this sort of thing is going to happen, and in some sort of self-fulfilling loop you may experience it

What Metzinger Wants to Explain

There would be no mental content whatever but rather a complete emptiness, vacuum, void. One would suppose a priori that consciousness would then entirely lapse and one would fall asleep or become unconscious. But the introvertive mystics—thousands of them all over the world—unanimously assert that they have attained to this complete vacuum of particular mental contents, but that what then happens is quite different from a lapse into unconsciousness. On the contrary, what emerges is a state of pure consciousness—"pure" in the sense that it is not the consciousness of any empirical content. It has no content except itself. [...] It is the bare unity of the manifold of consciousness from which the manifold itself has been obliterated. This seems analogous to saying that if from a whole or unity of many parts we could subtract all the parts, the empty whole or unity would be left.

What Metzinger Wants to Explain

One neither thinks nor perceives any mental or sensory content. Yet, despite this suspension of content, one emerges from such events confident that one had remained awake inside, fully conscious. This experience, which has been called the pure consciousness event, or PCE, has been identified in virtually every tradition. [...] The pure consciousness event may be defined as a wakeful but contentless (non-intentional) consciousness. (Forman, 1998)

Claim 1 : MPE is non-binary

MPE is something that is not necessarily unique or deterministic, but rather: phenomenal consciousness does not have definitional, but probabilistic structure. “Probabilistic structure” means that that a certain conscious experience falls under MPE if it satisfies a sufficient number of constraints encoded by MPE's semantic constituents

[MPE] refers to states, regions, and trajectories in a multidimensional space constituted by functional and content-related dimensions – it is a graded and heterogeneous construct, membership comes in degrees (Bayne, Hohwy, & Owen, 2016)

Two more constraints

Wakefulness : a phenomenological feeling of great alertness

Low complexity : absence of sensory feeling, or higher level symbolic content, conceptual thought, or propositional thought as well

Metzinger is trying to defend representationalism:

“The absence of all empirical content could itself be an appearance, and what subjects (falsely) describe as a “contentless” phenomenal state actually carries an abstract form of intentional content. If there is a content that can account for the experience of contentlessness, then Representationalism remains tenable.”

Note that “wakefulness” is the *subjective* feeling not the *functional*. I.e. I could be asleep at react with extreme alertness without knowing it

Negative Descriptions of MPE

- **Non-sensory:** MPE itself instantiates no perceptual qualities (which also includes “nothingness”, i.e., the absence of the phenomenal property of “objecthood”, meaning that there is no subjective experience of distinct *multimodal* objects as integrated from different sensory features and as segmented from a background or perceptual scene);
- **non-motor:** absolute stillness, no motion in space;
- **atemporal:** an absence of temporal experience, no motion in time;
- **non-cognitive:** non-symbolic and non-conceptual, no mind wandering;
- **non-egoic:** no self-location in time, no self-location in space, no quality of agency, no localized unit of identification (i.e., MPE itself is not even characterized by MPS, the minimal phenomenal sense of selfhood);
- **aperspectival:** no epistemic agent model (EAM²), no sense of bodily agency, no passive personal-level self-as-subject. Hence the relevant phenomenal character seems not to be a *first-person* character – during its actual occurrence it is not tied to an individual first-person perspective (this feature is often called “non-duality” in Buddhist or Neo-Advaitan literature).

Positive Description : self luminosity

This brilliant emptiness is the radiant essence of your own awareness. It is beyond substance, beyond characteristics, beyond colour. [...] The instant of your own presence is empty, yet it is not a nihilistic emptiness, but unimpeded radiance, brilliant and vibrant. [...] Your own awareness, a vast luminous expanse, clarity inseparable from emptiness, is also the Buddha of unchanging light, beyond birth and death. Just to perceive this is enough. If you recognize this brilliant essence of your own awareness as Buddha Nature, then gazing into it is to abide in the state of enlightenment. (Lingpa, 2014, pp. 14–15)

a phenomenal property of MPE typically described as “radiance”, “brilliance”, or the “clear light” of primordial awareness.

Pause here; can we make sense of this? The whole thing seems paradoxical

Three more constraints

Introspective Ability: ability to see consciousness as such, the medium of representations

Epistemicity: Phenomenological experience of “knowing” (without necessarily knowing anything *in particular*)

Transparency/Opaque, the degree to which we can see this

Introspective Ability

“Introspectively, we can access its content, but not the content-formation process itself. The carrier is invisible” The actual consciousness of blue is not experienced, we just know that it is blue

In pure consciousness states there is the subjective feeling of *being able* to actually access the nature of consciousness as such. But there is also a functional property in that one can then “activate” that ability which changes their Pure Conscious experience

Thoughts/Opaqueness: the degree to which this would be seen

Thoughts? I am still confused at what “blue” would be if one did activate their ability

The Refrigerator Problem

“I participated in a silent, 9-day, Buddhist-style meditation retreat. During the second morning meditation of the fifth day, I experienced pure awareness.”

“I”

You KNOW the light is off inside when you close it but when you try to validate this and look inside, you turn on the light

introspective knowledge of one’s own conscious states presupposes the activation of an EAM (e.g., a mental model of an epistemic agent actively controlling the focus of introspective attention, see note 7) and a minimal sense of selfhood

Metzinger's Solution

It is the process of episodic memory retrieval itself that creates the “I” “It is plausible to assume that there exist entirely unconscious encoding mechanisms in the brain, subpersonal mechanisms capable of forming unconscious memories even of absolutely prototypical MPE states, a registration of full-absorption episodes characterized not only by low, but by minimal complexity. a retrieval of such unconscious memories referring to past selfless episodes into the level of conscious processing could conceivably lead to the creation of a specific type of false memory, by transforming them into an “autobiographical data-format”, integrating them into a personal-level narrative. Sincere reports about selfless states could be therefore be sincere reports about false autobiographical memories.

Any report of MPE means we are adding more to the story when we tell it

Crude overview of Metzinger's Model of how MPE works

Key Idea: an organism can be alert without knowing that it is alert

Arousal: physical condition indicating information processing power available to an organism

Tonic Alertness: functional property that enables mental capacities such as orientation, executive control, attention, and epistemic agency.

Wakefulness: Phenomenal property, which is the representation of tonic Alertness.

THIS is the primary property of MPE

The phenomenology of wakefulness is the experience of openness: The organism is now sensitive to incoming stimuli, it can perceive the environment and internal states of its own body, it is open to the world and it represents this very fact. In this sense, MPE is a non-egoic, non-conceptual form of self-knowledge. Second, the phenomenology of wakefulness is the experience of possessing a set of epistemic capacities: For example, the organism now has the capacity of orienting itself in time and space, of taking a perspective. It non-conceptually knows about this capacity but does not exert it.

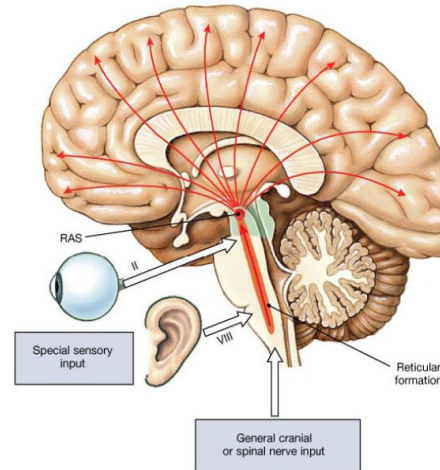
-we just feel *as if* we do, we have *phenomenological experience of ability*

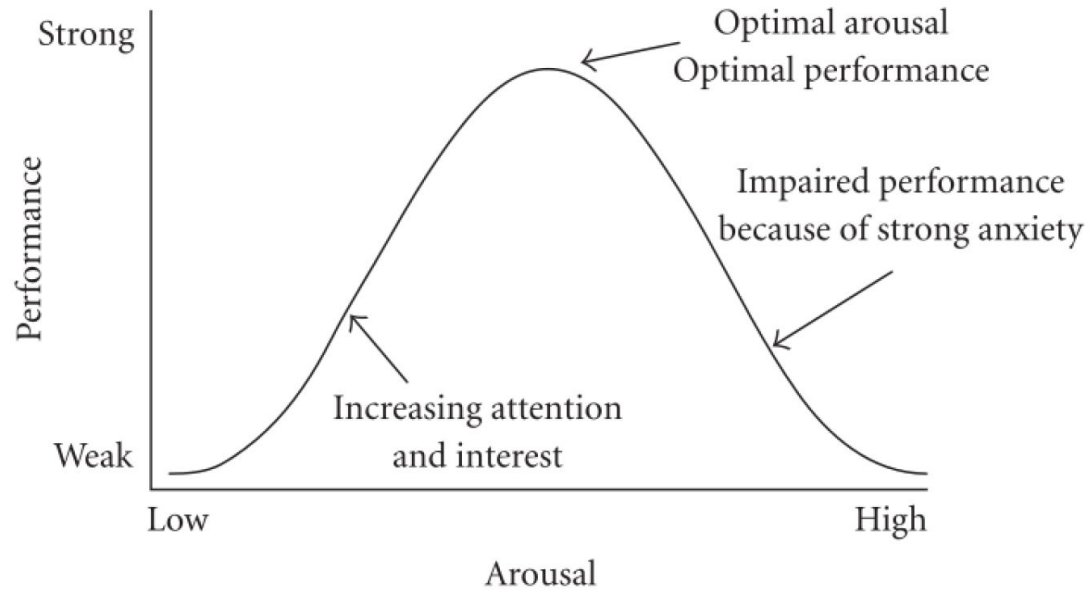
Ascending Reticular Activating System (ARAS)

Reticular Activating System

- Network in brain stem
- Arousal, sleep, pain, & muscle tone
- Ascending fiber sends signals upward
- Arouses and activates cerebral cortex
- Controls overall degree of cortical alertness or level of consciousness:
 - maximum alertness
 - wakefulness
 - sleep
 - coma

Reticular Activating System (RAS) determines the level of alertness





In Sum

Our brain modulates our level of conscious awareness

There is an optimal level of alertness in every situation

Thus, MPE would be our brain trying to understand the most basic form of the signal coming from the ARAS. The signal that is moderating our conscious state. The idea, as I understand it, is that certain types of meditation puts us in a state, a certain type of awareness, that is then able to reflexively see itself.

He argues that MPE must be experienced as “contentless” because it is representing, or modelling, not a thing but a causal force, namely, the signal determining or general state of arousal

Discussion

Even if we describe MPE, have we explained consciousness? Awareness seems to be left out. The medium is still left unsolved.

What of our talk of reality? What metaphysical claims follow from MPE?

If we agree the mind can be “tricked” (virtual embodiment) would Metzinger’s model of MPE be another one of these “tricks”?

Dreams & VR

Are Dreams “experiences”?

Do we experience MPE upon waking up and right before falling asleep? What sort of phenomenological description can we give to those?

What P.O.V is adopted in a dream?

Could these sorts of experiences be created via a virtual reality?