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## IS MEDITATION THE ROYAL ROAD THAT LEADS TO PURE CONSCIOUSNESS?<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT**

Over the past 30 years, there has been an increasing scientific and philosophical attention to what contemplative and spiritual traditions for millennia have known as pure consciousness, free from concrete empirical content and egoic self-awareness. The article addresses whether meditation is the best candidate for the research of pure consciousness, as Thomas Metzinger claims in his book *The Elephant and the Blind*. The article calls this the Royal Road Thesis (RRT). The article first critically analyzes the concept of meditation, then uses descriptions of non-meditation to further deconstruct the concept of meditation. A section is devoted to an analysis of Metzinger's claim that minimal phenomenal experience (and pure consciousness) is not mystical in itself, and finally, this is all interpreted in the context of consciousness culture and spirituality. The article concludes that RRT is very problematic and should be replaced by a more nuanced approach.

**KEYWORDS**

pure consciousness,  
pure awareness,  
phenomenology,  
Metzinger, mystical  
experience, mysticism,  
meditation,  
consciousness,  
spirituality

„Man had become distinct, unique, and separate. Now, man operates with the consciousness of separateness. So while meditating he is aware that he is meditating”. (Rav Pinson: *Meditation and Judaism*)

What is pure consciousness? The metaphor of „purity”, which has a rich history in Western philosophy, from Plato to Nietzsche, in the case of this concept, suggests that this kind of consciousness has no particular content, but

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rather bears the characteristics of awareness as such. In principle, it can be experienced within what is called ordinary wakeful consciousness, but there is also a version when it truly manifests in its phenomenal purity. In such cases, it lacks not only sensory perception, but also a spatial or temporal frame of reference, as well as bodily self-consciousness. Moreover, in such pure consciousness, the difference between the ego and the world ceases, and egoic self-awareness as such also disappears, transforming into a fully decentered, zero-person perspective, without empirical content. In short, both subjectivity and objectivity are erased, and thus the difference between them. Those who experience this state feel like they are in contact with primary reality itself, their true nature, their ever-present background which now ceases to be a mere background. Although it is suggested that this luminosity of pure consciousness underlies all of our experiences, it is rarely revealed in its full purity. However, contemplative and spiritual traditions around the world, often independently of one another, have reported on this mode of consciousness for thousands of years. What is new is that contemporary science and philosophy have also begun to systematically take an interest in pure consciousness and related modes of givenness (e.g. Woodhouse 1990, Travis and Pearson 2000, Dainton 2002, Dunne 2011, Baars 2013, Bachmann 2014, Costines, Borghardt, and Wittmann 2021, Schlosser 2021, Meling 2022, Ramm 2023, Jones 2024). Today, the dialogue between and about traditions is intensifying, the empirical material is enriching, neuroscientific insights are gaining increasing importance, and concepts are becoming more precise. An exceptionally important and invaluable moment in this trend is the publication of Thomas Metzinger's 600 pages long *The Elephant and the Blind: The Experience of Pure Consciousness: Philosophy, Science, and 500+ Experiential Reports* (2024). This research involved 3,500 respondents to a questionnaire on the experience of pure consciousness, and 1,403 of them provided usable data. However, it is worth adding that *The Elephant and the Blind* is much more than a mere elaboration of the results of empirical research: on the one hand, it takes into account many traditions, and on the other hand, while keeping neuroscientific insights in mind, it also proposes, organically fitting into Metzinger's oeuvre, a fine-grained phenomenological analysis. Although he calls the book a prolegomenon, it actually offers the most systematic philosophical and scientific approach to the problem of pure consciousness so far. The book deserves to be taken very seriously.

Meditation is often given great importance. For example, it has been suggested, departing from the traditions – both paraphrasing and changing Freud's original saying – that meditation is a „royal road to the Unconscious” (Washburn 1995: 153). Ken Wilber, the developer of integral theory, stated that meditation is the „royal road to Spirit” (2014, cf. 2015). A similar premise is the starting point of Metzinger's research. This is an extremely strong thesis: „the experience of pure awareness in meditation is the best and most natural candidate that we currently have for MPE [minimal phenomenal experience]” (Metzinger 2024:

290, cf. XIX).<sup>2</sup> This significantly influenced the research. For example, in the questionnaire, question 58 reads as follows: “were you aware of meditating?”. There is also a question that goes like this: “did your experience occur during a formal meditation session or spontaneously, outside of formal practice?”. That is, although there may be good reasons to believe that the experience of pure consciousness can be reached through multiple paths, the questionnaire assumes that respondents entered this state specifically through meditation. Although Metzinger mentions other ways of experiencing pure consciousness throughout the book (such as moments after awakening or epileptic seizures), it is nevertheless clear that for him meditation is the “royal road”. The research started from the premise that meditation is the right way, so accordingly, the overwhelming majority of reports were based on meditation (what is more, more than 77.3 percent reported regular meditation). Demographically, the research also contains a highly suspect “contextual” bias: the overwhelming majority of participants are Western, and in fact, 63.4 percent of the useful reports were filled out in German, Metzinger’s native language. Worse still, it turns out that “in phase I a personal invitation ... was emailed by T[homas] M[etzipinger] to a number of regular and committed practitioners of meditation” (Gamma and Metzinger 2021: 4). The research was in a certain sense designed and realized to confirm its own unwarranted assumption – an assumption that is presupposed but never argued for.

The basic message of this article is that this starting point of Metzinger’s research is unfounded. These are not only methodological difficulties, but also serious substantive problems. The Royal Road Thesis (RRT) will be challenged and deconstructed in three steps. First, it will be pointed out that meditation is a very problematic concept, and that a multitude of contingent cultural, historical, and other circumstances shade its vague meaning as we tend to use it today. We will then further deconstruct the significance of meditation using descriptions of non-meditation. As a further step, we will question another of Metzinger’s claims, according to which „MPE itself is not a mystical experience”. Finally, the implications of these insights for the culture of consciousness (*Bewusstseinskultur*) will be discussed, which is also very important for Metzinger.

## The Fragility of the Concept of Meditation

The original meaning of “meditation” is to think over, to consider, to investigate, to think carefully. The Latin *meditatio* and the Greek *meletē* both implied the meaning of “serious and sustained reflection, to ponder.” *Meditatio* (as a close relative of *ruminatio*) very often meant the interiorization and memorization of scriptural texts (one of the sisters of the muse Meletē in Greek mythology is Mnēmē, “memory”). When we describe the writings of Marcus Aurelius as

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2 In his book Metzinger defines minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) as the “maximally simple form of consciousness” (Metzinger 2024a, p. XXVIII) and considers it to be synonymous with pure consciousness (e.g., Metzinger 2024a, pp. 4, 47).

*Meditations*, or when Descartes titled his work *Meditations on First Philosophy*, the operation of this semantic dimension is also clear. Guigo I, a Carthusian monk from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, characteristically defined the meaning of meditation as follows: “the busy application of the mind, with the help of one’s reason” (PL 153: 699–700, quoted by McGinn 1994: 358, cf. 385–7, 391). Furthermore, when Hugh of Saint Victor described meditation as a distinct phase of spiritual practice, he also stated that meditation, in addition to being reflective reading (*lectio*), was also a quiet intellectual activity, a deliberate *cogitatio* (*meditare* and *cogitare* are connected to each other, for example in Cicero too, see Ernout and Meillet 1951: 699). It was a mental process that was supposed to lead to conclusions, and, at the same time, its moral dimension was very strong. It is also symptomatic that Guigo I, in the above-mentioned same passage, on the other hand, defined contemplation as: “the mind is in some sorts lifted up to God above itself, so that it tastes the joys of everlasting sweetness”. In fact, what this ecstatic description, and the Christian tradition in general, defines as contemplation, is much closer to the modern meaning of “meditation”, in that it also includes the meaning that it might “imply a reduction on reflective thought or even in mental activity” (Farias, Brazier, and Lalljee 2021: 31). Meditation was sometimes seen as a preparation for contemplation which meant something else (e.g. Baier 2009a), and this terminology has been valid for centuries. For example, even in Adela Curtis’ *New Mysticism*, published in 1906, meditation was still partly a phase of contemplation (see Baier 2009b: 513). An indescribably important transformation of meaning happened though: due to radical semantic changes, “meditation in our times has become almost synonymous with the idea of non-analytical or non-rational contemplation” (Farias, Brazier, and Lalljee 2021: 40). In contemporary folk – and scientific – discourse, meditation increasingly means less and less “I will meditate on that question further”, in the sense of pondering, and more and more refers to the calming of mental activity, the pacification of the mind.

This is also relevant to the concept of pure consciousness. Pure consciousness as such is by definition unstructured, that is, its experience is not defined by concepts or categories as commitments of identifying or cataloguing. Accordingly, Metzinger writes that “our target in this book is therefore the entirely nonconceptual awareness of awareness itself” (2024: XVII). The fact that Metzinger, in line with RRT, describes meditation as the eminent path to entirely nonconceptual awareness seems, from the perspective of conceptual history, to be highly contingent, the result of a complex historical process, a semantic transformation within the Western sociocultural context, the results of which could in principle be different. He uses a contemporary modern – dominantly Western – concept of meditation, in an uncritical and imprecise way, which obscures very important elements of the conceptual history. Based on a different strategy, it would also be legitimate to say that „the most rigorous concept of *meditatio* emphasizes a focus on the mind and reason (*logos*), a reflexive capacity that is typical of the Axial Age” (Silva 2021: 515).

In principle, it would be possible for Metzinger to ignore these difficulties and still propose a concept of meditation that is somehow functional. However, while Metzinger analyzes many expressions with extreme nuance and caution (such as simplicity, perspective, virtuality or “being at home”), the concept of meditation remains unreflected throughout. It appears as a natural given, as a self-evident neutral, quite homogenous and ahistorical-transcultural-universal primal datum, which is immune to criticism. It would be a mistake to accuse Metzinger of some kind of meditative essentialism, because he does not even propose an essentialist definition (see 2024: XX). He once mentions that experience, which is neither filled with agency nor completely agencyless, is “a liberating form of indeterminacy, a phenomenology of neither-nor-ness” (ibid. 83), and that suchness “resists any form of conceptual approximation” (ibid. 85). However, the uncritical use of the concept of meditation is not liberating at all, and throughout the book we do not sense any kind of approximation taking place. An attempt at conceptual accuracy would have been much needed, as there is no consensus in contemporary meditation research on the meaning of meditation. It is still true what Richard E. King wrote that “meditation remains an under-theorized concept” (2021: 51). Some authors “handle” the multiform and diverse nature of meditation in a way that maximizes the extension of the concept, sometimes to the point that all *differentia specifica* disappears. This means, for example, that they consider meditation to include the deciphering of Zen koans, the dissolving of the Sufi mystic’s heart in Allah, and Daoist qigong (an example of such loose language is Shear 2006) (an interesting example is the case of Louis Komjathy, who states that there is no direct equivalent to “meditation”, explains which words are used in the Chinese/Daoist context [“sitting”, “guarding the One”, etc.], and then still uses the “comparative” term “meditation” for Daoist contemplation techniques, Komjathy 2021: 186). Experiential plurality often dissolves into a homogeneous meaning (this sometimes corresponds to the quasi-universalist statement that meditation is “a worldwide practice found in every major religion and in most cultures”, Walsh and Shapiro 2006: 229). In fact, a kind of “customization and detraditionalization for the spiritual consumer in capitalist societies” (King 2021: 52) is taking place, in the framework of which the meaning of meditation becomes free-floating and trivialized, and can then be “discovered” again in so many cultures, sometimes dating back up even to 5000 years. However, it is typically not usually “discovered” in the West or in Abrahamic traditions, in one’s own culture (this sometimes goes hand in hand with the degradation of prayer). The original Western meaning is thus distorted, the new meaning is projected onto others, and then in a next step, an attempt is frequently made to apply it within the framework of the “Easternization of the West”, but mostly with a modernizing agenda – a very strange path. There is a “politics of translation” full of tension. Metzinger’s terminology is not culture-free, but a product of this complex process (it would also be worth critically examining the use of the words “Eastern” and “Asian” in *The Elephant and the Blind*). He notes that the participants are otherwise mostly adherents of a specific “meditation

technique” (Vipassanā, Metta, etc.), but his analysis mostly ignores the details. Metzinger openly rejects perennialism, however, the abstract construction of meditation appears as a generic activity that can be freed from the burden of tradition-specific meanings and native frameworks – the strategies of recontextualization are followed by even stronger effects of decontextualization. This is a further appropriation of traditions that have already been appropriated, filtered by Western reception, for Metzinger’s own purposes. Metzinger acknowledges that “this kind of analysis is vulnerable to many forms of bias and has serious methodological limitations” (2024: XX), but it must be shown precisely what serious difficulties are involved. Terminology does contaminate the research – but this also applies to “meditation” itself.

It is worth briefly mentioning Buddhism, as Metzinger gives it a certain privileged importance, and a very high percentage of participants claim that they practice Buddhist techniques (Vipassanā, Metta, Shamata, or Mahāmudrā, Chan or Zen). “Buddhism” itself is a construct, created through the 19th-century comparative study of “world religions” (“Buddhists” themselves speak much more of Dharma, for example, certainly not of an -ism) (Masuzawa 2005: 121–147). Western reception has projected many things onto “Buddhism,” sometimes accusing it of sheer nihilism, sometimes celebrating it as a rational, empirically based spirituality, and so on. The latter is important here, as it has also influenced the interpretation of “Buddhist meditation”. At the time when modernizing agendas were generally beginning in Asia (Meiji in Japan, the Republic of China, the Bengali Renaissance), a reformist current also began in Theravāda “Buddhism,” in Burma and other countries. One of the main goals was to show that “Buddhism” was not inferior to Christianity, or that it is even more valuable than it (which statement, in a certain sense, also appears in Metzinger 2024: 208). What might appear to be the revival of ancient traditions of introspective meditation was much more a series of inventions and fictitious constructions. One important figure was Anagārika Dharmapāla, a member of the Theosophical Society founded in New York in 1875, who, influenced by Western ideas, became a proponent of Buddhist modernism that emphasized laicity, harmony with modern science, individual creativity, anti-institutional character – and meditation as opposed to external rituals. Thus, gradually something was constructed that is also commonly called rationalized Protestant Buddhism, in which meditation acquired a status that it did not previously have: the emphasis was increasingly on the private and extraordinary experiences (and well-being) of the atomized individual at the expense of devotional-sacramental, pedagogical, propedeutical, pietistic, communal, soteriological, etc. functions.

While all Buddhist traditions are undoubtedly important, to reconstruct this aspect of the meaning of meditation, one must first understand the reception of Theravada. This is because it was often given priority in historical scholarship, with a heavy emphasis on the Pali canon, leading to the frequent suggestion that Theravada represents the most original form of Buddhism. In this context, it is particularly important to emphasize the role of Ledi Sayādaw,

Mingun Jetavana Sayādaw, and Mahāsī Sayādaw who played a central role in the construction of Buddhist modernism, which was also an essential prerequisite for the contemporary hype around “mindfulness mania” (Thompson 2020: 87–102). Meditation techniques were adapted to laypeople, increasingly freeing the basic message from “Buddhist” teachings. For example, mindfulness (originally just one of many qualities, a specific part of the Eightfold Path that included “self-restraint and concern for the welfare of others”, Thompson 2020: 87) has been decontextualized, concentration and absorption were deemed to be devaluated (and *sati* or mindfulness was presented as continuous lucidity), the importance of the renunciatory lifestyle has faded, meditation was increasingly emerging as a psychological cure, ethical codes (set of values, evaluative judgments etc.) were pushed into the background or even entirely neglected, they began to emphasize that success can be achieved in the short term, etc. Siegmund Feniger, born to a Jewish family in Germany and later a Buddhist monk under the name Nyanaponika Thera, introduced the term “bare attention” in 1954, referring to the non-judgmental attitude we adopt towards phenomena during meditation. However, this was a distorted translation. During the complex debates surrounding bare attention, it was pointed out, among other things, that originally “there is little that is ‘bare’ about the faculty of *sati*, since it entails, among other things, the proper discrimination of the moral valence of phenomena as they arise” (Sharf 2014: 943). Moreover, the Sanskrit equivalent of Pali *sati*, *smṛti*, means to remember, for example the Vedas; and it means something similar in the “Buddhist” traditions (this is also important because it resonates with what was claimed about memorization of scriptural texts in the Christian traditions – for example, in Teresa of Ávila, meditation is essentially recollection). So what John Kabat-Zinn and others describe as non-judgmental, bare attention in mindfulness today is also very much the result of a complex historical process, a construction (which is not to say that non-judgmentality is completely absent from traditions such as Mahāyāna, see for example Husgafvel 2018). The modernizing-reformist transformations essentially fulfilled exactly this function: to create an oversimplified technique and protocol that can be easily commodified and exported. These changes, such as Mahāsī’s inventions, were sharply criticized in their homeland – but from the West, this hugely problematic export package is seen first and foremost. As Robert Sharf writes:

*Vipassanā* was traditionally understood as a kind of analytic discernment cultivated through memorizing, internalizing, and ‘bearing in mind’ (*sati*) key abhidharmic categories. (...) Reformers like Mahāsī could jettison this by approaching *sati* as ‘mindfulness’ and treating vipassanā as the meditative experience of ‘bare awareness’. Path and goal become one, and advanced stages of insight are available to anyone willing to follow a simple technique (2014: 952–3).

To put it simply, “Theravāda was refashioned in the image of post-Enlightenment Christianity” (Sharf 1995: 252).

What we have said can be applied to other Theravāda traditions as well, and to other “Buddhist” traditions. Fortunately, Western Buddhism and Buddhist modernism have a very rich critical literature (e.g., Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, Faure 1993: 15–89, Lopez 1995, Lopez 1998, McMahan 2008, Braun 2013, Wilson 2014, Purser and Milillo 2014, Huntington 2015). These debates and controversies also touch on meditation and “McMindfulness”, from de-ethicised therapeutic techniques to the issue of militarisation – it is unnecessary to go into these details here. As we have seen, Western reception has distorted not only “Buddhism” in general, but also meditation itself, in many ways – it has begun to consider this specific practice of elite virtuosi as the core of “Buddhism” (which was much less significant than we think today), and at the same time has taken it out of its original lifeworld, increasingly considering it as a mental discipline that can and should be a stand-alone activity. This “Buddhism” and “meditation”, passed through multiple ideological filters, appear in Metzinger’s book, *The Elephant and the Mind*, without reflection. When we read that, for example, 43.9 percent of the participants are Vipassanā practitioners, we must keep in mind that this is actually a modernist construction, further distorted by Western and secular Buddhism. Metzinger considers it important to emphasize that pure consciousness played a major role in “Eastern philosophical traditions” and that “contemplative practice has mostly taken place against the background of religious belief systems like Buddhism or Hinduism” (2024: XVII). We can now ignore the extent to which this use of the term “East” is a problematic orientalism and what an extraordinary role contemplation has played in the West for centuries, but it is important to note that what appears throughout the book as “Eastern practice” is in many respects the result of modernist-reformist tendencies under Western influence, in which missionaries, scholarship etc. also played a part. It was a very ambivalent process: the West served at once – in a self-deprecating way – as an example to follow and as a partner in debate.

It is worth highlighting that Western and secular Buddhism is not only an Anglo-American product, but also a significant part of it is German. The German pre-modern history of meditation is also exciting (e.g. Luther), but also the modern German history, for example Carl Happisch, who outlined “meditative psychotherapy”, Philipp Dessauer, who introduced the concept of “natural meditation”, Karl Graf Dürkheim, the esotericist with a significant Nazi career, the “vicar of Hiroshima”, Hugo Enomiya-Lassale, who tried to associate Catholicism with Zen, etc. This process resulted in Ingrid Riedel being able to state that meditation had become the central practice of the *Neue Religiosität* (1975), or Karl Baier being able to write that meditation had become a cult word and the magic expression of the time (Baier 2009: 910–911). There are also other interesting connections in the history of ideas, for example, regarding the influence of German Romanticism on the modern Western reception and interpretation of Buddhism and meditation (Bhikkhu 2012). Metzinger’s research, in which 64.4 percent of the useful reports were filled out in German, and 55.4 percent of the participants were from Germany, is at the end

of this complex process, full of contingencies, arbitrariness and misunderstandings. It is not only that Metzinger – who, as he himself admits, has been meditating for decades – uses the concept of meditation naively, uncritically, without nuances and unreflectively, and that this raises serious substantive and methodological questions, but this is also related to the concept of pure consciousness whose semantics may also raise important questions. To give just one example: while Metzinger’s book fundamentally presents pure consciousness as the goal to be achieved by „Eastern philosophies and practices” (or at least by some secular interpretation of them), the question can be raised as to whether the transformation, reduction and then withdrawal of attention in these practices itself „does not yield ‚nonconceptual awareness’ so much as the cessation of consciousness itself” (Sharf 2014: 944). Certain traditions suggest exactly this, but are ignored.

It is one thing that the critical approach can reveal the complex conceptual history of meditation, and it is another that contemporary meditation research, which has mostly forgotten its original meaning, cannot even reach a consensus on its current semantics. This is understandable, of course, since it is the result of a complex interplay of today’s significant factors, the processes of popularization, scientification, and psychologization. The current history of the Western concept of meditation includes, for example, the pet detective Ace Ventura who, chanting „alrighty then”, teleports himself from Africa to Tibetan monks (and actor Jim Carrey, who often speaks about the power of meditation), contemporary medical-cognitive-behavioral discourses that talk about „neurodharma”, „cortical thickness” or „plastic brain changes”, or also the masses of Westerners who, for example, want to be Buddhists while at the same time „real nonattachment ... is something ... [they] either cannot or will not concede” (Cox 1977: 84), so meditation is very often just a trendy wellness activity. When we examine contemporary meditation research, we see that it is emphasized that „currently, there is no agreed upon definition of meditation in the scientific literature” (Bond et al. 2009: 135). A similar ambiguity often surrounds the term mindfulness, which is sometimes treated as synonymous with meditation (and at other times distinguished from it). For example, it is said that in the future “the various possible meanings of ‚mindfulness’ have to be clarified” (Dam et al. 2008: 16), that there are “limitations of the notion of mindfulness” (Millière et al. 2018). A recent article suggests that “a general consensus for defining and differentiating between meditation techniques currently does not exist” (Sparby and Sacchet 2022). Finally, a review about meditation research states once again that “criticism regarding the lack of clarity concerning theory, definitions, and taxonomy, as well as deficient or poorly reported methodology, has arisen”, and emphasizes that it is desirable to “provide clear and unambiguous definitions of constructs and practices” (Engström, Willander and Simon 2021: 541). It seems like the task is being postponed forever. Such examples could be cited in an infinite number.

If demarcation criteria and cross-cultural classifications are proposed despite the challenges, a thousand and a thousand difficulties arise. For example,

is it really necessary to define meditation as logical relaxation (letting go of goal-striving, suspending analytical judgment, releasing conceptual processing...)? What about those practices in which analytical-conceptual-discursive insights play a central role? And then it is not right to define it as “mental silence” in general, is it? Is meditation necessarily a defined technique? In response to those who claim meditation is a specific practice, we can raise a counter-question, drawing on Jiddu Krishnamurti’s teachings: what if that meditation is not something separate, but an unformalizable, continuous awareness that permeates all of life? And what about the paradoxical „non-practices” of non-meditation? Is meditation necessarily self-induced? Doesn’t guided meditation contain an external instance? Does a potentially selfless state really need to be described using the term “self”? Is meditation an altered state of consciousness? Don’t we risk projecting an overly problematic concept (Fortier 2017) onto meditation? Would it help to define meditation in other very general and complex terms, such as when it is said that “it is embedded in a religious/spiritual/philosophical context”? And when they define meditation as a “cognitive training technique to regulate and monitor attention, perception etc.”, aren’t they proposing a modernist de-ethicised perspective, taken out of the context of the traditional lifeworlds of meditation? And is such a description sufficient to define the *differentia specifica* of meditation? “Cognitive” itself also implies a very complex semantics, carrying with it a variety of connotations: intellectual, internal, abstract... And, for example, it can be argued that meditation is not internal at all... (e.g., Fasching 2008). And why is it that some people who consider meditation to be attention regulation also consider Sufi dancing and sweat lodge as meditation? Some people deny that meditation is an activity, describing it as a way of being; non-meditation is also described as being without an activity. And so on.

It is unnecessary to continue with further deconstruction, because the difficulties of definitional attempts are encoded in the conceptual history of meditation. No matter how much a new attempt tries to be multidimensional, to take into account the diversity of practices, to emphasize that this practice is not a discreet stage but a process, or to skillfully balance between too narrow and too broad definitions, “meditation” carries within itself the essential distortion that has occurred in the Western conceptual history, and this has been made even more serious by further serious complications over the past 150 years. No concept intended to be operational, however cautiously proposed by and no matter what „concerted efforts to define” are invested in it, for example, a family resemblance approach, can overcome this difficulty. Metzinger’s research, the premise of which is RRT, was carried out with a concept burdened with serious tensions. A *conceptus absconditus* is one of the most important pillars, which seems to withdraw itself the more we try to grasp it. To put it simply, it is not clear at all that meditation is the royal road to pure consciousness if we can’t really say what it is, without referring to the incommensurable meanings revealed by historical-critical analysis.

## The Challenge of Non-Meditation

If we temporarily set aside the difficulties associated with the concept of „meditation”, we can state that non-meditation is mostly defined as an experience that fulfills the goals of meditation, but by suspending or neglecting the characteristics of formal meditation techniques. Non-meditation is, in principle, purely spontaneous and effortless, lacking the ultimately alienating and dualistic aspiration of “I am doing meditation”. It can also occur unplanned in the midst of everyday activities, for example as a kind of micromeditation. Spacious awareness could then naturally arise with the purity of full luminosity. It is suggested that while meditation is a deliberative practice that has an agent and a goal, non-meditation is said to be more about recognizing – rediscovering – the always already existing awakened nature of consciousness and the unwavering existence that does not need to be practiced. It is often described as the immediate and causeless self-arising of our primordial state. Thus, the silent and resting clarity of non-meditation is ultimately not a practice or an action, but rather a simple way of being, a letting go and letting happen, a joyful “okayness”. In a certain sense, those experiencing non-meditation are always already where they need to be, with separate egoic-self awareness dissolving in the background, or even completely free from it. It is suggested that disciplined methods, mental agitation, forced effort, etc., would only remove us from this zone. Similarly, it can be said that pure consciousness is also pure in that it cannot be constructed. In contrast, meditation as a second quality added to being – the attempt to meditate and to improve something – ultimately distances us from it and can ruin it completely. The propensity of generating meditation, the fixations of voluntary control, the endeavor of trying more or less hard, the distracting fabrications, the filters of interpretation and interferences, the heavy baggage of “I meditate”, the planned structuring of unstructuredness ... – all might make it impossible to experience pure consciousness. There is “a vortex of thinking about the practice, framing the practice, resisting the practice, and comparing and judging our practice against a perceived ideal” (Baker 2021). That is why it is suggested sometimes that consciousness should not be held hostage to labels such as “meditation”. One might say that not a single enlightened being meditates. However, there is no point in telling someone: “do nothing”, “be passive”, “keep doing nothing”, “don’t act”, “don’t meditate” (...) Non-meditation itself can only be realized through non-means. Accordingly, there is no need to cultivate, there is nothing to cultivate.

Metzinger not only knows about non-meditation, but he devotes an entire chapter to it (2024: 421–445). However, the question is whether he draws the right conclusions and whether he does not assimilate the challenge of non-meditation into his own presuppositions. Metzinger applies to non-meditation the theory he developed with Iuliia Pliushch, the dolphin model of cognition, which describes the interplay of conscious and unconscious processes. In fact, he suggests that the non-meditation is also the end result of such interactions. While some participants describe experiencing pure consciousness when they

are not meditating (and from this they come to the conclusion, for example, that “I will never have to meditate again”, 3624 quoted by Metzinger 2024: 425, cf. 430), Metzinger argues that the spontaneous occurrence of pure consciousness is ultimately mediated by two factors: “a continuous stabilization of unconscious preconditions of such experience through formal meditation practice”, and “an improved ability to *recognize* such episodes during everyday life” (ibid. 425). So when it comes to the experience of spontaneity, Metzinger emphasizes non-spontaneous presuppositions, when the occurrence of pure consciousness could take center stage, Metzinger highlights – in a typically modernist way – unconscious processes, and non-meditation as a counter-experience is revealed as the mere result of the formal practices of meditation. Accordingly, meditation is a mental discipline that can achieve phenomenologically contentless pure consciousness, but in reality the underlying mechanisms are unconscious processes in the brain and cannot be targeted (ibid. 439). Here too, Metzinger suggests that the autophenomenology of the experiencer of pure consciousness is somewhat wrong, and that 3rd person “heterophenomenology” (Daniel Dennett) will establish what is actually happening (for a critique of Metzinger’s interpretation of “phenomenology”, see Harman 2011: 15–21). Metzinger suggests that givenness, phenomenological spontaneity, is subject to the danger of the C-fallacy (i.e., some convinced feeling of consciousness is not yet a reliable indicator, but cries out for epistemic justification), and instead it is worth emphasizing “the unconscious causal precursors in the brain” (2024: 109). One might argue, of course, that all experience, even that of pure consciousness, somehow fits, for example, into the hermeneutical contexts of a person’s life. However, a much stronger claim is that, no matter how novel the experience may be and how it disrupts existing patterns, it is due solely to previously existing – unconscious – mental events. A simple question arises here: is it really true that “letting go” can only be achieved through formal-technical, systematic and goal-directed practices? Without disputing the importance of meditation understood in this way in the lives of millions of people: can there not be authentically unexpected experiences of pure consciousness, that is, that are not the result of previous non-spontaneous efforts, if, generally speaking, “there are always already micro-ecstasies going on in the subtle layers of experience” (Losoncz 2023a: 130), or if there is an external instance that brings forth it in an unpredictable way, so it is not the subject that „creates the right causal conditions”? Something that, in a deeper sense, would be an event? This might, of course, mean that the RRT is untenable. There are probably many more spontaneous events, if any, than there are experiences that can be gained through formal practices. Actually, Metzinger himself admits that there is spontaneously occurring minimal phenomenal experience, for example during transitions between sleep and wakefulness, flow states or during psychedelic experiences (2024: 431) (and maybe certain childhood experiences?, ibid.: 100). But then the general methodological and substantive question arises again: after all, why would meditation be “the best and most natural candidate” for the realization pure awareness? Especially since more

spontaneous experiences seem more „natural”. And in general: what are the criteria for “being the best candidate”? If speed and effectivity, then perhaps psychedelics, such as 5-Meo-DMT, are a better candidate (cf. Millière 2018). If the affective dimension, then, for example, ecstatic sex (cf. Losoncz 2024) also arises as a possibility. And so on. And, in general, if by non-meditation we simply mean, for example, the pure joy of letting go, maybe there is no necessary “dialectic” of meditation and non-meditation? To put it simply, is it possible for non-meditation to occur spontaneously, not as a result of formal practice?

It seems, but this should be further researched, that the most significant explicit traditions of non-meditation, the Tibetans, are generally more inclined to consider meditation as a prerequisite for non-meditation (*sgom med*), and to speak of a set of exact conditions and practices for non-meditation itself, to give protecting pointing-out instructions, etc. (see, for example, Brown 2006: 405–440). In line with this, it is customary to emphasize that non-meditation is an advanced state, and that stopping meditation too early is a thorough misunderstanding of the instructions. The general rejection of meditation is mostly considered a “don’t do nothing” type, nihilistic – that is, to be avoided – pseudo-instruction. They emphasize that within the relative conditions of consciousness, the relative effort of meditation is still important – until the gate to the ultimate state opens. However, the question arises whether there are variants in Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen, which leave open another kind of possibility which are bolder than this (like, if I’m not mistaken, when Keith Dowman talks about natural non-meditation in his book on radical Dzogchen non-meditation, 2020). It also arises that sometimes even beginners are capable of non-meditation. It is, of course, worth keeping the insights of these invaluable traditions in mind, while not forgetting their limitations.

Non-meditation is a complex conceptual figure, carrying a tension within it. On the one hand, as a term, it includes meditation, even if in the form of negation, and relies on it – and the effortlessness of non-meditation is often preceded in reality by the relative efforts of meditation. On the other hand, however, as a paradoxical counter-practice it also deconstructs it, and in principle can ultimately mean the neglect or elimination of meditation. In this respect, non-meditation might also point the way towards other processes that lead to pure consciousness, yet are not achieved through meditation. By devoting a chapter to non-meditation, Metzinger himself contributed in a specific way to the criticism of RRT: non-meditation is in a sense a “more natural candidate”, since it is effortless and spontaneous. Metzinger would probably say that meditation is the only doorway to non-meditation. However, with the variations of spontaneously occurring pure awareness, a completely different possibility opens up. The “subtle turn” or the full absorption might happen in other ways.

### **Is Pure Consciousness a Mystical Experience?**

One state of consciousness that could imply an experience of pure consciousness would be the mystical experience. In this respect, Metzinger clearly states

that “MPE is not itself a mystical experience – though some MPE modes may actually fall under one or other technical definition of ‘mystical experience’” (2024: 325, cf. XVII, 328). Once again, just as there is no definition of meditation, so there is no definition of mysticism – it is not clear why the minimal phenomenal experience itself, and with it the pure consciousness, is *not* a mystical experience. However, Metzinger adds several things. First, in the introduction, he emphasizes that the experiences analyzed throughout the book will be those that “humankind’s meditators and mystics have known ... for millennia” (ibid. XII; he seems to call these “the most genuine forms of spiritual practice”, ibid. XV). Metzinger then adds that the book will draw on many classical texts, “such as /those/ from Buddhism or Western mysticism” (ibid. XXIX). Based on this formulation, could RRT be supplemented with the thesis of mysticism as an additional royal road? The terms “mysticism”, “mystics”, “mystical” appear in many contexts, in the company of the names of Mechthild von Magdeburg and Simone Weil, St. John of the Cross and Wittgenstein, Johannes Tauler and Robert Forman. Then, quoting and analyzing Meister Eckhart, Metzinger says that “many phenomenological details found in our own data ... had already been described by the mystics of the Middle Ages” (ibid. 323). Taken altogether, Metzinger clearly implicitly considers mysticism to be a separate category from meditation, and sometimes mentions them side by side, but surprisingly he does not consider mysticism to be the “best candidate” for paths to pure consciousness. Therefore, two serious difficulties follow. First, why does he not explain what he means by mysticism, and why does he claim that MPEs are not mystical experiences in themselves? Second, why does he not address the fact that – perhaps – mysticism involves practices other than meditation, which could lead to a significant change in RRT?

What Dean Inge wrote in 1899, that “no word in our language – not even Socialism – has been employed more loosely than ‘Mysticism’” (quoted by McGinn 1991: 266), still holds some truth today. The meaning of “mysticism” is also a huge challenge, and it involves serious difficulties. The original meaning of the Latin *mysticus* and the Greek *mustikos* refers back to *muo*, which first of all means “to close” or “to conceal”, but it also meant “silent” or “secret”. The other meanings refer to initiation, introduction, etc. So, basically, “mystical” meant that something is hidden, and in this sense, for example, Pseudo-Dionysius spoke of mystical theology around the 5th century, or in this sense, it was suggested that the mystical reading of the hidden messages of the Bible is also possible. When Origen spoke of the contemplation of divinity as a special mode of knowing *mystika*, the emphasis was on the objectively present contents of knowledge, not on any subjective state or feeling. The word “mystical” has been used in this way for many centuries. As a noun, “mysticism” is a relatively recent creation, as Michel de Certeau shows in *The Mystic Fable* (1995), a product of early 17th-century France. This resulted in an important shift in Western attitudes: mysticism began to refer to one’s own experience or language, and first-person descriptions proliferated. “Mysticism” largely started to mean a special experience, and it was in this sense that they began to

analyze it within academia, especially from the end of the 19th century. American scholars, such as William James, played a major role in this.

It is thought-provoking when a prominent researcher like Bernard McGinn, in his monumental series on Western Christian mysticism, states that “any simple definition of such a complex and controversial phenomenon seems utopian” (1991: XV), yet still continues to use the term “mysticism”, primarily meaning being in the presence of God, throughout his volumes. It is worth looking at a few more aspects of the concept’s history over the past 150 years. From our perspective, it is interesting that many people define the state of pure consciousness as a mystical experience. This trend began with William T. Stace, who viewed pure consciousness as the common core of all mystical experiences, especially those he termed introverted. For Stace, these are defined by a unitary, undifferentiated awareness without any sensory content (see, above all, Stace 1960: 85–86, 160–161, but also, for example, Brainard 1996: 360). Furthermore, in psychedelic research, it is particularly important to make the term “mysticism” as operational as possible. For example, Walter Pahnke’s 1963 ‘Good Friday Experiment’ was trying to show that “drugs” can occasion mystical-type experiences in high rates, and it is suggested that in 2006 Roland Griffiths and others again demonstrated that psilocybin can induce mystical experiences. In contemporary psychedelic research, it is claimed that there is a robust correlation between psychometric measures of mystical-type experience and lasting benefits, that is, “the degree of mystical experience is a strong predictor of clinical improvement” (Letheby 2021: 19–27, who relies heavily on Stace). Therefore, clarifying the concept is crucial. Pahnke (and his colleague William Richards) used Stace’s definition, according to which the properties of mystical experience are internal and external unity, noetic quality, transcendence of time and space, ineffability, paradoxicality, sense of sacredness, and deeply felt positive mood. Several difficulties arise from these. For example, it is doubtful whether mystical experience is truly paradoxical. For example, paradoxes are very often mere rhetorical devices that can be “explained away” (see Jones 2016: 233–261). Or the question arises whether mysticism literally suggests that this experience is ineffable. Mystical accounts are actually often linguistically extremely rich, and many mystics make very clear knowledge-claims and positive characterizations of transcendent realities (see, for example, Jones 2016: 203–233, Knepper 2017, Diperna 2018: 204). Or, for instance, Abrahamic religions approach the issue of union in a much more nuanced way. That the union would always be a total *unio mystica* is a myth (see Idel and McGinn 2016, cf. Pike 1992). As we can see, many questions arise regarding the nature of the mystical experience. In any case, several operational definitions have been used on numerous occasions in the past 75 years of research. For example, Pahnke and Richards’ Mystical Experience Questionnaire was based on the 100 items of the States of Consciousness Questionnaire, highlighting 43 of them (1966). It is also worth mentioning the Hood Mysticism Scale (e.g. Hood 1975), and Spilka and his colleagues’ analysis (2005: 350–365), which led to the development of a 32-item mysticism scale in research led by Griffiths and

others (2006). In all such definitions and questionnaires, the main reference point is Stace's theory of mysticism.

If we look through Metzinger's book, we can see that his analysis of the experience of pure consciousness repeatedly draws attention to all the things that the definitions of mysticism we have mentioned refer to in the context of Stace's theory, such as paradoxicality (2024: 55, 94, et passim.), noetic quality (ibid.: 351), the transcendence of ordinary space and time experience (ibid.: 247–271). Or, for example, Metzinger expresses his gratitude to the participants “for trying so sincerely to communicate the ineffable” (ibid.; XVII). As a proponent of secular spirituality, he avoids the meanings of “sacred”, but still quotes a practitioner of transcendental meditation who speaks of a “sacred model of reality” (ibid.; 211). Finally, although we can observe ambivalence in this regard, Metzinger clearly notes the very positive affective tone of many reports, such as: “it is a feeling of merging with all happiness and all love. It is soooooo soooooo big” (ibid.: 717., ibid.: 273). Overall, there are definitions available for mysticism that might fit well with the way Metzinger characterizes pure consciousness in general. On the one hand, the oldest meaning of the “mystical” may also be relevant, insofar as pure consciousness is a layer or possibility of consciousness that is mostly hidden from ordinary wakeful experience. On the other hand, the modern meaning of “mysticism,” which is probably best viewed as a cluster-concept, has significant overlap with what Metzinger describes as pure consciousness. In other words, while Metzinger claims, without reflection and without argument, that “MPE is not itself a mystical experience,” it is not at all easy to imagine, given what has been said, an MPE or experience of pure consciousness that is not mystical in nature.

Why is all this crucial? Of course, first of all, because of understanding the nature of pure consciousness itself. Moreover, if we could say of mysticism that it is an eminent way to achieve pure consciousness (and, as we have seen, Metzinger himself also claims that pure consciousness is something that “mystics have known ... for millennia”), then the meditative RRT needs to be revised substantially. It can hardly be argued that the mystical state of consciousness is achieved only through meditation, unless we expand the concept of meditation so broadly that it ultimately loses all of its semantic weight. But there are further consequences as well. For Metzinger, one of the key questions is what makes a state of consciousness a good state of consciousness, and whether MPE, or pure consciousness, is a good state of consciousness (ibid. 479, 481, etc.). If, as we have seen in the case of psychedelic research, there might be a robust correlation between mystical experience and benefits, and on the other hand, mystical experience and pure consciousness overlap, then we are much closer to the right answer.

The statement that meditation is “the best and most natural candidate” for MPE or pure consciousness seems increasingly weak. Rather, it seems that Metzinger formulated this not-so-obvious statement in a modern culture-specific context, as a result of a complicated 150-year semantic transformation, “mindfulness mania,” and so on. On the other hand, it is worth taking into

consideration that Metzinger quotes, for example, Meister Eckhart, who says that God must be loved in a mindless way (ibid.: 318), or the fourteenth century Christian mystic Begine of Hadewijch, who says that the knowledge of our nature is to “experience human and divine love as one being” (quoted by ibid.: 315, cf. 322). Why does not the question arise as to whether the practice of formal meditation led to these experiences? Metzinger often refers to and quotes Hadewijch, whose descriptions correspond phenomenologically very well to pure consciousness: return to the groundless depths, one single taste of one nature... However, the path leading to this state and this state itself includes, among other things, excess of love and annihilation, “living on *minne*” (love), which Hadewijch also describes as madness (*orewoet*) (see McGinn 1998: 199–222). This does not at all seem to be the mental discipline that we usually understand by meditation these days. In fact, if we approach the question in this way, the millennial traditions of mysticism and other, e.g. affective, ways of achieving pure consciousness can open up for the research of pure consciousness. Hadewijch, for example, is an integral result of the 12th-century turn in Western Christian mysticism (affective Dionysianism, etc.). In the case of the practices of so many other affective traditions, it may be suggested that they lead to the experience of pure consciousness, from the *fana* of love-intoxicated Sufism to the mystical experiences of bhakti. Metzinger knows exactly that descriptions of pure consciousness very often report a positive affective tone, and even raises the radical hypothesis that perhaps consciousness is fundamentally affective (2024: 154), but due to the one-sided meditational RRT, all this remains in the background, and the possibilities related to them are not exploited. All this could raise a number of further questions. For example, shouldn’t research on peak experience, flow, ecstasy, etc. (for example, Laski’s classical pioneering insights, 1961: 176–226) also be systematically taken into account? Taking into consideration the complexity of mysticism could also lead to a much more subtle map of the triggers, modes, states and spontaneous occurrences of pure consciousness. Of course, what is really important here is not to qualify “mysticism” interpreted in a forcedly standardized way as a royal road at all costs, but to research further, nuanced and rich paths, critical phenomenological borderlands leading to pure consciousness.

## The Dangers of Consciousness Culture

Andrew Atkinson has proposed a complex taxonomy of spirituality (1997: 97–111, cf. Schlamm 2001), which may be useful here, without going into detail. Atkinson defines Hot as spirituality that is directed, at least phenomenologically, towards a transcendence – numinous, powerful, etc. – which we cannot experience without relying solely on ourselves. Cool, on the other hand, is directed towards what is our essence, that is, access to it is a naturally given right. To this is added a further conceptual pair: Structured means that discipline or effort are needed, while in Unstructured spirituality liberation is already in our own constantly given nature or the connection with the divine simply requires

unconditional submission. For example, in Cool Structured spirituality (e.g. Theravāda) gradual self-realization is quiet, still and methodologically detailed; Hot Unstructured spirituality (e.g. Sufism) might be “lost in love”. From the perspective of this taxonomy of spirituality, Metzinger’s book is one-sided in that it relegates the phenomenology of Hot to the background in comparison to the analysis of Cool (and, moreover, he in fact claims that non-meditation is not possible without prior formal practice of meditation, that is, that Cool Unstructured spirituality cannot exist without Cool Structure). The arche-decision, an *ex ante* resolution that determines the whole framework of the investigation (see Losoncz 2020: 194–5), made at the expense of Hot lies deep within the meditative RRT. Metzinger mentions at one point the tension between divine grace and self-redemption, which he strangely sees as a difference between theology and “Eastern models”, but no important methodological or substantive insights emerge from this (2024: 111–112).

For Metzinger, it is very important that his research contributes to what he calls “consciousness culture” (*Bewusstseinskultur*) (he has also published a book on the subject, 2023). For him, pure consciousness “may turn out to be the ‘convergence zone’ where a more radical and intellectually honest form of spiritual practice, cognitive neuroscience, and modern philosophy of mind will finally come together” (2024: XV). It is clear from Metzinger’s comments that intellectual honesty for him means naturalism<sup>3</sup> without a hidden metaphysical agenda and religious (or other ideological) background assumptions. (e.g., *ibid.*: XIX, 208). Meanwhile, we learn that 45.6 percent of the participants regularly practice meditation in a secular context (2024: XVII, Gamma and Metzinger 2021: 7). Metzinger seems to arrive at this conclusion on the basis that 45.6 percent of people defined themselves as “spiritual but not religious” or as “spiritual but not affiliated”, although there is also a separate secular category, with 13.4 percent of the participants. However, even Metzinger himself admits that “nobody knows what these concepts actually mean” (2024: 27). But what is then the relevance of the remark that 45.6 percent practice meditation in a secular context? And why would it follow that just because some people describe themselves as “not religious” or “not affiliated”, they also consider themselves secular? This may mean that they are not affiliated with religious institutions, but otherwise, supernatural sacredness is very important to them. For Metzinger, it is clearly most important that spirituality becomes independent from what he considers an irrational belief system (*ibid.*: 492), but practitioners of spirituality who describe themselves as autonomous from organized religions do not in themselves necessarily meet Metzinger’s criteria. Is it not possible, for example, that in fact a very large number of them attach great importance to the sacredness manifested in their experiences, which was

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3 Naturalism in Metzinger’s philosophy is primarily a science-informed framework that allows for the analysis of important questions without resorting to supernatural or non-physical entities. In *The Elephant and the Blind*, for example, he calls his own undertaking “a generally naturalistic approach” (2024: XV).

mentioned earlier? A further problem is that Metzinger also unreflectively accepts Weber's diagnosis of the disenchantment of the worlds as a "sociological context" (ibid.: 178), which, however, probably never happened (for the thesis that the thesis on disenchantment is a myth, see Josephson-Storm 2017). Overall, it seems that Metzinger wants to consider the participants in his research who define themselves as spiritual as his allies, and projects the vague category of secularity onto them, but this seems extremely arbitrary.

Another problem is Metzinger's reference to metaphysically neutral descriptions of pure consciousness (2024: 150). This basically means that an account is limited to a phenomenological description of how consciousness is given, without suggesting anything about what noumenal reality is like in itself. It is worth adding that Metzinger also says that he is not interested in metaphysics (ibid: 463). But is his philosophy of pure consciousness really metaphysically neutral? If metaphysics "is that branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of reality in its most fundamental aspects" (Koons and Pickavance 2017: 3), then Metzinger's own "radically naturalistic perspective" (2024: 61, cf. XV) actually seems very metaphysical. What is more, at one symptomatic point, even he admits that naturalism is a kind of metaphysics (ibid. 463). And, as we have seen, he identifies naturalism with intellectual honesty. To sum it up, first of all, Metzinger at the same time reappropriates many traditions *and* decontextualizes the experiences of pure consciousness and meditation. Meanwhile, he seeks to free traditional accounts from their metaphysical background assumptions, while he is promoting his own metaphysical agenda, naturalism. This is all the more problematic since he himself acknowledges that there are other relevant metaphysical options besides naturalism, such as neutral monism or non-reductive forms of materialism (2024: 463). It is worth noting that there are also those in contemporary philosophy who, taking into account the doctrine of pure consciousness as well, represent a non-naturalistic position (e.g. Fasching 2016, Albahari 2019). Metzinger claims not to be interested in metaphysics, even though he himself admits that the naturalism he applies to pure consciousness is also metaphysics. Metzinger considers naturalism to be a sign of intellectual honesty today, even though he himself admits that there are other strong metaphysical positions as well. Contradiction upon contradiction. It goes without saying that the way we view metaphysics is crucial to contemporary spirituality.

Metzinger knows about the dangers of spirituality and meditation abuse, for example, that spiritual movements often create alternative realities for themselves, that the status of authority in them is often problematic, that practitioners often develop a spiritual superego, etc. Metzinger also cites Thompson's critical analysis that spirituality tends to become "experience-based forms of privately organized religious delusion" (Metzinger 2024: 493, 153). It is worth noting that the critical analysis of experience is particularly important because it can reveal that the concept of religious (or spiritual) experience is a "relatively late and distinctively Western invention" (Sharf 2012: 98) and that a one-sided emphasis on it can seriously distort the way we think about these things. The

fact that a subjective dimension, personal experience, often treated in isolation, has become the central category of the analysis of religious (or spiritual) life, has serious negative effects on understanding, since, for example, most religious experiences are explicitly and strongly embedded in communal practices. Even more important than Metzinger's ignoring of these difficulties is that he also omits something crucial: that Thompson (2020) also subjected "neural Buddhism" to sharp criticism (incidentally, he also sharply criticized the No Self View which is so important to Metzinger), since, according to him, those who connect neuroscience and meditation usually take "meditation" out of its life-world and existential-ethical context and distort it. "Spiritual naturalism" is an increasingly important topic (see e.g., Jones 2012, Letheby 2021: 196–205), but the way the author of *The Elephant and the Blind* tends to identify with it (Metzinger 2024: 326, 459) raises many serious questions.

Metzinger is often accused of unrestrained scientism, that is, that he considers natural science "the sole arbiter of what there is" (Zahavi 2005: 16). Similarly serious problems were raised with regard to his classification of phenomenology as false and neurophenomenology as desirable, or that he reduced personal levels of description to the subpersonal etc. (Harman 2011: 15–21). In the context of pure consciousness and meditation, the question arises whether Metzinger's identification of "causally enabling conditions" (Metzinger 2024: 437) is not too narrow and one-sided? Is not he overemphasizing the neural dimension of the processes while neglecting other factors, such as sociocultural ones, which may also contribute significantly to the experience of pure consciousness? Does not he take these experiences from their lifeworld and existential-ethical contexts in a distorting decontextualizing way too? And is he justified when he claims that "real spiritual practice ... is the epistemic practice of liberating oneself from background assumptions" (ibid. 172)? This ambitious statement seems to devalue traditions that are faithful to certain teachings, aiming, in a typically *Aufklärer* way, to get rid of assumptions, instead of understanding their hermeneutical significance (Gadamer 2004: 277–285). But even more problematic is that Metzinger, instead of taking a dialogical stance, authoritatively states what "real spiritual practice" is.

As exciting as Metzinger's analyses of certain concepts are sometimes, what is truly symptomatic is when he takes something for granted. Spirituality is a further example, although, while he speaks very positively of "secular spirituality", he could have relied on a large number of contemporary, critical approaches (e.g. Losoncz 2023b). When Metzinger states that "possibly the deepest sense of the word 'spirituality'" is that it is "a form of conscious experience that is completely independent of religious belief systems" (2024: 491), he suggests something peculiar. A critical history of "spirit" reveals, for example, the role of St. Paul (with his division of man into body, soul, and spirit) in the past of this Western concept, but also that "spirituality" has operated within this religious framework for centuries. What Metzinger is doing is part of the process that the title of Jeremy Carrette and Richard King's book suggests: *Selling Spirituality. The Silent Takeover of Religion* (2005) – with the takeover being

explicit in Metzinger, without ever defining spirituality of course (and in the process, he makes proposals that depart significantly from the traditions, regarding mortality denial or the new naturalistic interpretation of *samsāra*).

Finally, a difficulty has to do with a further important sacred cow, consciousness itself, and the “radical culture of consciousness” (2024: 492) advocated by Metzinger in general. Is it self-evident that consciousness should be at the center of spirituality? P. M. S. Hacker argued in his article on the “sad and sorry history of consciousness” that the concept of consciousness, which – in its current sense – entails a number of fundamental conceptual confusions, was unknown to the ancients and is a latecomer upon the stage of Western philosophy (2012). Instead of full immersion, consciousness may suggest that there is something that “needs to step outside of the flow of reality to recognize it.” But is it possible “to be on land and sea at the same time” (Heisig 2001: 48)? It is no coincidence that Martin Heidegger avoided using the word “consciousness”, since there is something alienating about it in relation to our everyday and immersed existence in the lifeworld (on this, e.g., Holland 2018). If we are looking for the “deepest meaning” at all costs: Mahāmudrā, for example, states that, from an absolute perspective, there is no “mind” or consciousness (Brown 2006: 415, cf. about the attainment of the mindless [*acittaka*] state Griffiths 1990: 78–82). Is it possible that the “deepest meaning” of spirituality should be described, for example, more as a pathless path or a way of being, and not as consciousness? However, considering this in detail is beyond the scope of this article.

Metzinger claims that his approach is generally not only scientific but also “spiritual, insofar as it also accepts meditation as an epistemic practice in its own right” (2024: 459). However, as we have seen, in his book, that is invaluable but problematic in many ways. Metzinger nowhere argues for a meditational RRT. Accordingly, the way he presents spirituality is necessarily one-sided and poor – vast continents of spirituality are left out. The other paths that might lead to pure consciousness – or even further – are relegated to the background. Unlike this, we need a more nuanced cartography of self-transcendence that is less unidimensional. Meditation today is a *façon de parler* that scientific and philosophical research should approach it more cautiously, more rigorously. The meditation-naïve perspective, seen in a broader historical context, is an ad hoc framework that is not heuristic in itself, but rather entails a series of problems. If we don’t need a paradigm shift, we definitely need more careful approaches. Metzinger is right: “we even need a new generation of scholar–practitioners not blinded by ideology” (ibid. 327). However, to align with this understanding, there is a great need for a more precise concept of meditation, to be developed through historical-critical analysis. On the other hand, research on pure consciousness must not lose sight of the plurality of paths to this state, avoiding undue priority to any single one. Instead, it must account for as many variants as possible. This process has already begun in connection with psychedelics (Losoncz 2025), but will undoubtedly continue in other areas as well.

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## Mark Lošonc

### Da li je meditacija kraljevski put koji vodi do čiste svesti?

#### Apstrakt

Tokom proteklih 30 godina, sve veća je naučna i filozofska pažnja prema onome što su kontemplativne i duhovne tradicije milenijumima poznavale kao čistu svest, oslobođenu empirijskog sadržaja i egoičke samosvesti. U članku se govori o tome da li je meditacija najbolji kandidat za postizanje iskustva čiste svesti, kao što Tomas Mecerger tvrdi u svojoj knjizi *The Elephant and the Blind*. U članku se to naziva *Royal Road Thesis* (RRT). Članak prvo kritički analizira koncept meditacije, a zatim koristi opise ne-meditacije da bi dalje dekonstruisao koncept meditacije. Deo je posvećen analizi Mecergerove tvrdnje da minimalno fenomenalno iskustvo (i čista svest) nije samo po sebi mistično, i konačno, sve se to tumači u kontekstu kulture svesti i spiritualnosti. U članku se zaključuje da je RRT veoma problematičan i da ga treba zameniti nijansiranim pristupom.

Ključne reči: čista svest, čista svest, fenomenologija, Mecerger, mistično iskustvo, mistika, meditacija, svest, spiritualnost, duhovnost