Investigating the Depths of Consciousness Through Meditation

Terje Sparby
Bender Institute of Neuroimaging
Justus Liebig University, Giessen, Germany

Abstract

This article explores the theory and practice of a contemplative phenomenology. In general, contemplative phenomenology investigates and describes the activity and effects of meditation. Drawing on William James, I suggest that meditation can be understood as involving “lowering the threshold” of consciousness. This includes, among other things, opening up access to unconscious processes. I exemplify an interdisciplinary approach to this idea by combining a recent remote associates test with first-person accounts. Based on further such accounts (historical and contemporary), I develop an outline of the forms of contemplative depth-experience. Taking a cue from Hegel, I argue that understanding deep contemplative experience may require a specific form of conceptuality characterized by synthetic universals. In contemplation this conceptuality can also manifest itself directly in the perceptual system, giving rise to an experience of transcending time and space. The results of this investigation provide an overview of the depths of contemplative experience primarily based on first-person accounts.

1. Introduction

One of the main distinctions in phenomenology is between the descriptive and genetic kind.\footnote{This parallels Brentano’s distinction of descriptive and genetic psychology (Brentano 1924) and Husserl’s distinction of static and genetic phenomenology (Husserl 1966, 1973).} Descriptive phenomenology can be said to consist of investigating and describing the basic features of conscious experience from a first-person perspective, while genetic phenomenology ventures to uncover how conscious experience arises in the first place. In the contemplative traditions ordinary consciousness is understood to resulting from a deeper activity that constructs the experience of world and self.\footnote{Later, in Sec. 7, I will refer to this as “micro-construction of reality”} Through meditative practice it seems possible to gain access to and investigate this activity; hence, in this sense, descriptive and genetic phenomenology go hand in hand. As the process of investigation deepens, it...
is sometimes said that the fundamental source of the activity that constructs the self and the world becomes revealed (Shear 2014), which gives a special meaning to Husserl’s idea of phenomenology as “the science of the essence of consciousness” (Woodruff Smith 2007, p. 233). Contemplative phenomenology gives an account of such an investigation.

Accordingly, contemplative phenomenology can be divided into three subdisciplines: A descriptive phenomenology, a genetic phenomenology, and a phenomenology of the source. Together they cover the whole range of meditative activity, including the meditative techniques and their results. Initially, contemplative phenomenology is a descriptive practice that gives an account of what is done and experienced in meditation. This includes changes that arise, in the meditation itself, in day-to-day life, and also within the sleep state. As contemplative phenomenology proceeds, it can uncover deep structural changes in consciousness and potentially the source of these changes.

The term “contemplation” has a long history, going back to the Greek word *theoria* (Wallace 2007, p. 1). However, here I am less interested in history than in contemplation as a mental activity, and the results of this activity. Furthermore, although there exists a lot of material on the theoretical framework of meditation and its effects, my focus here is on anchoring theoretical considerations of meditative experience. To give a definition of meditation, and its at times indistinguishable cousin “mindfulness”, is challenging. There are many different forms of meditation, and they are often made sense of within different conceptual frameworks. And though each form can possibly be distinguished according to shared functional, qualitative and contextual features (Lutz et al. 2015), much work remains to be done in order to give an exhaustive definition of meditation and all its forms. Maybe this is in itself an empty ideal. For the purposes of this article it is sufficient to follow the typical distinction between *focused attention and open monitoring*.

Focused attention (FA) consists of directing consciousness narrowly towards an object and staying there. Open monitoring (OM) can be considered as the opposite gesture, namely as expanding awareness to include everything that arises without focusing on any specific object. It is possible that these practices give rise to different kinds of changes within consciousness. However, it has been argued that the two forms of medi-

---

3See Latham (2015) for a recent discussion of how to define these forms of meditation in philosophically precise terms. Focused attention is sometimes described as following a definite trajectory of development (see, e.g., Wallace 2006). But the same is true for open monitoring: Different *vipassana jhanas* are said to result from continually being aware of how phenomena arise and pass away (see Sayadaw 1992, p. 179, and Ingram 2008, pp. 246-258). Furthermore, open monitoring, in the sense of insight meditation, is said to lead the meditator through four stages of enlightenment, as described in the Buddhagosa in the classical text *Visuddhimagga* (which also gives an account of how focused attention proceeds through the *jhanas*).
Investigating the Depths of Consciousness Through Meditation

Investigation can also be seen as mutually dependent on each other (in FA, OM necessarily stands in the background as support, and vice versa) and that, as meditation proceeds, they will merge. This is very much in accordance with the notion of depth that I develop here (as depth increases, FA and OM merge). Hence, following Piron (2001, 2003) and Shear (2014), who speak of meditative depth in abstraction from technique, I will not look into potential ways in which the techniques give rise to different forms of depth. However, it can be hypothesized that it is exactly the merger of the mental gestures of FA and OM that accounts for the radical changes of consciousness that occur at the deepest level of meditative experience; a strong focus is combined with an expansive awareness to produce an experience that is both wide and intense at the same time.

The relationship between the contemplative traditions and contemplative phenomenology is equally complex, and I can only provide a limited treatment of it. In general, contemplative phenomenology looks to the traditions for both a source of meditation techniques and frameworks of interpretation of their results. However, its focus is the description of the activity of doing meditation and its effects from the first-person perspective. With regard to interpretative frameworks it is autonomous.

In the following I present an outline and exemplification of a way of doing contemplative phenomenology. I begin by introducing the notion that consciousness has a depth dimension and that this depth can be investigated (Sec. 2). For this I use William James’ idea of “lowering the threshold” of consciousness. Because I provide empirical support for the idea that depths in consciousness can be investigated with the help of meditation (Sec. 3), what I am doing is a form of interdisciplinary contemplative phenomenology. However, I mainly draw on first-person reports of meditative contemplative experience, both historical and my own, in developing an experientially based account of the levels of the depth of consciousness that are accessed through meditation (Secs. 4–7).

Some space will be dedicated to arguing that meditative depth experience is not in principle ineffable, but requires its own kind of reasoning. Here I will draw on Hegel’s understanding of synthetic universals (concepts). The main characteristic of synthetic universals is that they contain the particulars in them. Thinking “plant” both synthetically and universally would mean thinking all possible plants, as in Goethe’s idea of the primal plant, the Urpflanze (Förster 2011). In deep meditative experience,

See Goleman (1988, p. 38), and Yates (2015, p. 36). In relation to concentration practice, there is form of meta-awareness involved that checks to see if the mind is concentrated or not. This meta-awareness is the same that is used in OM (see Lutz et al. 2007, p. 522). Conversely, in order to expand awareness there needs to be, at least initially, focused attention on doing just that, compare Wagemann (2011). The unity of FA and OM, or shamatha and vipashyana, is also discussed in the Buddhist tradition, for instance in Kamalasila’s classical text Stages of Meditation (Rinpoche III 2014, pp. 269f) or the commentary on this text by the Dalai Lama (2001, pp. 140–158).
2. Overview of Current Meditation Research

Contemplative phenomenology relies on data gathered from meditative practice. Currently, however, meditation is not usually considered to be an activity that can itself be a form of scientific inquiry. In the following I will give a short overview of meditation research and try to show how meditation can be used as a tool for investigating consciousness.

The term “meditation research” is ambiguous. It refers to either (i) research on meditation, using methodologies from established scientific disciplines, or (ii) research that considers meditation itself as a methodology of scientific inquiry. The former, which typically focuses on the health benefits of meditation or sets out to map correlations between brain states and meditative activity, is by far the most prolific, and the number of published articles is growing exponentially (Ott 2010, p. 152).

In contrast, research articles that consider meditation as a methodology of scientific (systematic/philosophical/phenomenological/introspective) investigation are scarce. In the book *The View from Within*, which helped to put introspection back on the map of consciousness studies, Jonathan Shear and Ron Jevning outline the meaning of pure consciousness, and Alan Wallace presents the tradition of shamatha as a methodology for the investigation of consciousness. The topic of pure consciousness was, for a while, a controversial and much debated topic (Forman 1997). Certain promising suggestions were made, for instance with regard to the potential of meditation as a source of knowledge (Shear 1996), but this work never really gathered momentum. As Shear (2014, p. 58) recently stated,

```
not much progress appears to have been made in the use of meditation as a methodology to explore consciousness. The promise of meditation as exploratory methodology thus still appears to remain largely just that – mere promise.
```

While the (lack of) literature generally supports this claim, there are indications that things might be changing. Recently, Galen Strawson points to the application of meditation when arguing that the subject can “in the present moment of awareness take itself as it is in the present moment of awareness as the object of this awareness” (Strawson 2011, p. 274).” Similarly, Wolfgang Fasching emphasizes meditative insights as a basis for understanding the nature of consciousness (Fasching 2008).

Traditionally, meditation is not primarily connected with scientific inquiry. At the center of the contemplative endeavor was the idea of *enlightenment* (cessation of self-centered consciousness) and/or *moksha* (final liberation from the cycle of rebirth) as opposed to knowledge (Lutz et al. 2007, p. 57). A widespread approach is to disregard insights and phenomena that are revealed through meditation practice, as they tend to draw attention away for the deepening of the practice. Consider the notion *makyō* in Zen Buddhism, which refers to illusory phenomena that appear in meditation. It is seen as an obstacle to practice if one clings to these phenomena or understand them as representing a deepening of knowledge.

If one considers the given world as fundamentally illusory (*maya/samsara*), there is not much reason for devoting time and effort to its investigation. The contemplative traditions demonstrate this view in the absence of any empirical science of the brain. One can also find this view expressed in a recent study on perceptual changes in experienced meditation practitioners, done by Full et al. (2013). The interviewees are primarily monastic monks, and one of the traditional rules of the monasteries is that one is not allowed to speak of one’s own meditation experiences. This highlights the different intentions behind modern scientific and traditional contemplative practice. Though it is certainly the case that the contemplative traditions are concerned with knowledge of reality, such as for instance in insight practice that looks for the basic qualities (no-self, impermanence, suffering) inherent in everything, there is little place for a fully autonomous investigation of reality, basing claims on documented experiential reports.

Not talking about one’s meditation experiences is also a common practice outside of the traditional monastic setting. The justifications for this include that talking about one’s experiences leads to comparison, which again leads to desire and envy (Siff 2014), and this is detrimental to the ultimate aim of realizing no-self. Here the priority is clear: Dissolving the ego is more important than reporting on experience. However, the meeting between the critical and distanced mindset of science with the contemplative traditions might help enable reporting on experience without detrimental effects, either for the subject doing the reporting or others.

---

5Michael Pagis (2008, chap. 5) has given an analysis of this phenomenon, highlighting the value placed on silence within the Theravada tradition.
Under ideal circumstances at least, critique and distance holds the ego in check and neutralizes it.

The focus on the immediate, existential condition of the human being is both the strength and weakness of the contemplative traditions. They speak to the existential core of the human being, but lack the distance and ideal of objectivity and systematicity of the secular, scientific mindset. I will not go into the historical aspects of the development of this mindset that has been prevalent in the West—indeed, there may be good reasons to believe that secularism and the differentiation of the value spheres (religion, science, art) is actually a better realization of spiritual ideals than anything else we have seen in history (Taylor 2007).

Instead, what I will focus on here is the prospects of the re-integration of the scientific and the contemplative or spiritual perspective. In other words, I will focus on the potential for a deepening of consciousness studies through meditation. It could be argued that meditation offers a special tool for the introspective investigation of consciousness, in that it excels at attentional regulation, so as to make it stable and reliable (Wallace 1999). One could ask whether this is not indeed a necessary prerequisite for an introspective science based on deepening attention. While this is an important point, it could also be asked if a proper description of human experience is actually that of unstable attention; how do we know that stabilized attention reveals what an object more truly is? I will give examples of cases in meditation where the perceiver and the object perceived cannot be easily distinguished. I propose that contemplative phenomenology should bracket the question of what is real and what is not (see Sec. 8).

3. Meditation and Consciousness Studies: Lowering the Threshold

In order to understand the nature of an object one has to investigate the full range of its states. If we want to come to understand the nature of water, we must know how it behaves as a solid, fluid, gas, and so on. Similarly, in order to come to know the nature of consciousness, we have

---

6 The example I have in mind is that of hallucinations that appear externally. This comes as a result of attention becoming stable, among other things. It could, naturally, be claimed that hallucinations are subjective. But experientially there is no immediate way of distinguishing between veridical perception and hallucination. The distinction between real and unreal in this case happens, I would claim, through coordinating one experience with a community of other experiencers. Maybe certain structures can be uncovered in relation to hallucination that can be independently confirmed by other meditations. At least this seems believable in the sense of uncovering the reasons for why certain hallucinations happen as they do (such as cognitive penetration based on memories). In this way, attentional stability gives insight into the construction of reality rather than the human life world as it is.
to investigate all of its states. This is simply a matter of uncovering the full range of manifestations of the object in question. It is well known that meditation gives access to states of consciousness that are not usually accessible when we are awake, such as dreaming and deep sleep (Thompson 2015).

Since meditation holds the potential of access to states that are not directly accessible under normal conditions, it can make the experience of such states part of a scientific discourse on par with all other disciplines based on introspection (such as logic and mathematics). Because meditation reports are normally based on experiences whilst awake, they are less susceptible to the form of skepticism that one can have toward dream reports. Some doubt that the narrative of dream reports correspond to an actual dream experiences, and rather think that they are constructed on awakening (see the discussion by Windt 2013).

In meditation dream consciousness is usually avoided. An exception is so-called dream yoga, where the dream-state is included in the practice (Thompson 2015). However, dream yoga seeks an awake access to the dream state (similar, if not identical, to the state of lucid dreaming). Hence it is clear that in meditation one aims at staying as awake as possible while access to other states of consciousness is opened. This means that meditation has a special significance for consciousness studies; it enables first-person, scientific investigation of non-ordinary states of consciousness, states that may themselves become sources of knowledge.

William James explores a similar idea in the last article he published in his lifetime, titled “A Suggestion About Mysticism”. James (1910, p. 85) suggests

that states of mystical intuition may be only very sudden and great extensions of the ordinary “field of consciousness” [...] The extension itself would, if my view be correct, consist in an immense spreading of the margin of the field, so that knowledge ordinarily transmarginal would become included, and the ordinary margin would grow more central.

James goes on to compare the field of consciousness to a wave, where the contents of normal consciousness lie above a horizontal threshold that divides it. Beneath the threshold the wave expands in all directions. Then he continues (James 1910, p. 87):

My hypothesis is that movement of the threshold downwards will [...] bring a mass of subconscious memories, conceptions, emotional feelings, and perceptions of relation, etc., into view all at once; and that if this enlargement of the nimbus that surrounds the sensational present is vast enough, while no one of the items it contains attracts our attention singly, we shall have the conditions fulfilled for a kind of consciousness in all essential respects like that termed
mystical. It will be transient, if the change of threshold is transient. It will be of reality, enlargement, and illumination, possibly rapturously so. It will be of unification, for the present coalesces in it with ranges of the remote quite out of its reach under ordinary circumstances; and the sense of relation will be greatly enhanced. Its form will be intuitive or perceptual, not conceptual, for the remembered or conceived objects in the enlarged field are supposed not to attract the attention singly, but only to give the sense of tremendous muchness suddenly revealed. If they attracted attention separately, we should have the ordinary steep-waved consciousness, and the mystical character would depart.

Based on this we can now formulate both the promise and the problem of meditation in relation to the study of consciousness.

The promise is: Meditation is a way to lower the threshold. It is well known that meditation can bring up long-forgotten memories, and often with such memories, say of childhood, very specific emotions show up (Engler 1986, p. 27). So it should be clear that meditation can open up an access to layers of consciousness that normally remain hidden. Also, as James states, through lowering the threshold one can have intuitions of relations and a sense of connection. This, firstly, has an epistemological significance: Science and knowledge are essentially about discovering how everything “hangs together” (Nagel 2012, p. 15). Secondly, it can have an ethical significance. Ethics is usually primarily viewed as the study of the normative relations of human beings to each other, secondary to nature and, in some instances, to the transcendent.

Furthermore, I think it is plausible that the lowering of the threshold and the resulting “intuitions of relations and a sense of connection” implies that there is a deep bond between knowledge and ethics, which under normal circumstances is hidden. As the threshold lowers and consciousness is expanded, the interrelatedness of everything is uncovered; the separation between what is and what has moral significance starts to dissolve. This, in itself, has a deep philosophical impact, as the usual distinction between ontology (what is) and normativity (what should be) no longer holds. To summarize: Meditation can expand consciousness in a way that reveals aspects of consciousness that under normal circumstances are hidden and brings about a greater sense of relation that at once has deep epistemological and ethical significance.

It could be asked whether James’ metaphor of lowering the threshold really is applicable to the deepest meditative states. Does, for instance, the subject remain intact as the threshold is expanded, or does the whole subject-object relationship collapse at one point or another? First of all, it is a question of debate whether the deepest meditative states actually imply such a dissolution. Albahari (2011, p. 82), for instance, claims that even an enlightened mind that has realized the dissolution of self will
Investigating the Depths of Consciousness Through Meditation

remain “a unified, perspectival, ‘witness consciousness’ ”. Secondly, James indeed indicates that lowering the threshold implies consciousness taking on a “mystical character”. “Mystical experiences” according to James (1911, p. 295) have four characteristics: 1. ineffability, 2. noetic quality, 3. transiency, and 4. passivity. By “noetic quality” James means a kind of knowledge or “insight into depths of truth” [emphasis added] unplumbed by the discursive intellect” (James 1911, p. 295).

Expanding James’ list of characteristics of mystical states, Stace claims that (introvertive) mystical experiences also exhibit a transcendence of space and time; they are nonspatial and nontemporal (Stace 1960, p. 131). The characteristic of “transcending space and time” implies that a deep shift in the subject-object relationship is experienced. Normal consciousness (both the subject and the objects of experience) is inherently situated in time and space; transcending space and time involves expanding the reaches of the subject, dissolving the boundaries between inside and outside, between past and future (Ott 2013). This is how I understand James, when he writes that lowering the threshold will lead to a form of consciousness “in all essential respects like that termed mystical” where “the present coalesces in it with ranges of the remote quite out of its reach under ordinary circumstances”.

James also gestures toward the problem that lowering the threshold involves moving into a realm of non-conceptuality. How could it then be of any use for an investigation of reality? First of all, this problem does not seem to arise in relation to the memories, emotions, etc. that show up when the threshold is lowered (memories and feelings are neither non-conceptual nor ineffable). Hence lowering the threshold does not exclusively reveal things that are non-conceptual or ineffable. Secondly, it is usually the case that normal perceptual experience reveals a muchness that is beyond conceptualization in any practical sense. But this does not render it useless as part of an investigation of reality. Thirdly, it may be the case that the intuitions of relations in the mystical state need to be grasped with a different form of conceptuality than the one we are used to.

James actually indicates this himself elsewhere, and I will return to this in Sec. 5. For now it suffices to say there is no reason to doubt that the lowering of the threshold can lead to intuitions that are fleeting, vague, hard to articulate – often even hard to remember in the first place – but I do not think there is reason to believe that they are in principle vague or non-conceptual. Rather, lowering the threshold can provide insights that are deeper than the ones we have access to in ordinary experience, and we could well end up needing new or different concepts in order to grasp and articulate these insights. Meditation would then not only change the ordinary structure of consciousness in a way that reveals the connections that under normal circumstances are hidden, but also make them acces-
sible to a process of cognition rooted in ordinary experience. Again, this is the promise of meditation.

An important part of making good on this promise is to provide first-person experiential support for the claim that experienced meditators really are practicing an activity that lowers the threshold. Then we can begin to sketch a theoretical framework for the ontological and epistemology significance of meditative states. In other words, we could come to appreciate their “noetic value” – to use a term James (1910, p. 87) states in his conclusion:

Is consciousness already there waiting to be uncovered? And is it a veridical revelation of reality? These are questions on which I do not touch. In the subjects of the experience the “emotion of conviction” is always strong, and sometimes absolute. The ordinary psychologist disposes of the phenomenon under the conveniently “scientific” head of petit mal, if not “bosh” or “rubbish”. But we know so little of the noetic value of abnormal mental states of any kind that in my own opinion we had better keep an open mind and collect facts sympathetically for a long time to come. We shall not understand these alterations of consciousness either in this generation or the next.

More than two generations have passed since James’ last article was published, and not much material has been added to advance this approach. I suggest, however, that gathering data should go hand-in-hand with developing theory. It is my sense that philosophy is in a good position to develop theoretical structures to help understand the experiential results of meditation. This is part of what I aim to do in the following. First I will consider some experimental data that support the notion that meditation accesses the unconscious.

4. Empirical Support for the Claim that Meditation “Lowers the Threshold”

Most of us have had the experience of not being able to remember a name – for instance of a famous movie star – and then suddenly having it dawn on them. What is going on in such cases? Interestingly, on some level we already have to know the name, otherwise we would not be able to recognize it when it comes to mind. Hence there is some level of knowing that we do not have access to, and there has to be some form of unconscious processing going on that we seem to have minimal influence over. It is not possible to force oneself to remember, though prolonged attention does seem to have an effect. Sometimes hours, or even days, can go by before suddenly the very recognizable dawning-event takes place and we simply know the answer.
Using the threshold analogy, one could say that, in such moments, there is an expansion of the threshold downward so that the relevant connections are intuited. It seems wrong to say that something from below the threshold “bubbles up” to the surface, however. Having a name suddenly dropping into consciousness would not be very helpful. We also need to “dip into” the relevant context attached to the name. In any case, it seems quite clear that an unconscious “mind” exists, a mind that we in ordinary circumstances only have limited access to, and that certain unconscious processes take place so as to bring relevant information from the unconscious into conscious awareness.

Can meditation help us dive into the deep water of consciousness? If we take creativity as involving access to the unconscious, there have indeed been several studies that support this (see the reviews by Horan 2009 and Lippelt 2014). Here I will focus on a recent experiment, presented in the article “Zen Meditation and Access to Information in the Unconscious” (Strick et al. 2012), which specifically suggests that there is a connection between meditation, creativity, and accessing the unconscious. The authors point out that there is already evidence that meditation increases “the ability to concentrate” (meditators “become better at ignoring distracting stimuli in the environment”), that it “leads to a greater concordance between unconscious and conscious reports of self-related attributes”, and that it increases the “congruence between implicit and explicit self-esteem” (Strick et al. 2012, p. 1477).

It is unclear, however, if the reason for this is that meditation gives better access to the unconscious. There can be other explanations of the correlations found, such as that meditators may be striving to be as honest as possible. Furthermore, there is also some physiological evidence that meditators have better access to the unconscious, since meditation has been shown to lead to “changes in local theta and lower alpha power as well as theta coherence changes [...] associated with [internalized attention]”.

Unsatisfied with this, however, Strick et al. found a more direct way of testing whether or not meditation gives better access to the unconscious using the so-called Remote Associates Test (RAT), originally devised to measure creativity (Mednick 1962, 1967). The subject in the test is given three words, and then tries to find a fourth that is related to and unites all three. For example: You are given the three words pure, blue, and fall. Does any word come to mind that is related to all of them? Sometimes the answer comes quickly, sometimes it takes more time, and in difficult cases we might not find any word at all. In this example, a proper choice would be water. Water is often associated with being pure and blue, and the “main ingredient” in a waterfall is, of course, water. In a RAT, the subjects are presented with a multitude of such cases, and the success rate and response time are used as indicators of access to the unconscious.

To test if meditation has an impact in the context of a RAT, Strick et
al. gathered a group of people who did a meditation sitting of 20 minutes led by a Zen master before conducting the test. The result was that this group had a higher “number of correct solutions to the RAT items” (Strick et al. 2012, p. 1478) compared to the control group, who just relaxed for 20 minutes before doing the test.

Some care needs to be taken in interpreting the results. As the authors point out, the RAT test may be seen as consisting of two stages: First a solution is found, and secondly the solution has to be “transferred to consciousness” (Strick et al. 2012, p. 1478). It is possible that meditation makes one better at coming up with a solution, while the capacity for accessing it remains the same (if so, we could not say that meditation opens up an access to the unconscious).

Strick et al. designed a second experiment that addresses this using subliminal priming. Just now I presented the example of finding a word that unites pure, blue, and fall, and the solution was water. Did the solution come easy? What if it were possible to “implant” the word “water” within consciousness before the task? Then we could check whether meditation improved access instead of capacity for associative processing. If you look at the first sentence two paragraphs above, you will find something that could function as subliminal priming, making the task of coming up with the word “water” easier (I refer to the “deep water of consciousness”).

In the context of a RAT one can systematically test subliminal priming. This is done by showing a possible solution to a task very quickly (less than 20 milliseconds) between a pre-mask and post-mask, which consists of a string of symbols such as &&&&&&&&. Since the priming word is shown for such a short amount of time, it is not possible to register it consciously. In one case, the word “spring” was shown, priming a solution to the task of naming one of the four seasons. By doing a series of such trials, it is possible to determine if priming has an effect. Again, the experiment indicated that meditation opens up access to the unconscious. Note that this also seems to mean that meditation makes one more susceptible to subliminal influences, but that is an issue I will leave aside here.

5. Examples from Practice

While on a retreat in 2012, I experienced a phenomenon that supports the idea that meditation provides access to the unconscious. At the time I had been doing a form of open monitoring meditation where I gazed indeterminately at whatever was in front of me, performing no task other than being fully aware in the present moment, leaving the surface of consciousness free of content as far as possible.

During one particular session I was meditating alone in my room, looking out of the window in front of me. It was daytime, and the sun was
shining. Through the window I could see some spruce trees, the branches of which were swaying slowly in the wind. Further back behind the trees there was an earthy brown field. As I entered deeper into the meditation, I could see some figures starting to take shape in the tree branches. There were some areas in the branches that had a triangle-like form, and “in” these shapes “small Buddhas” sitting in a lotus position appeared. The figures matched the triangle shape and swaying movement of the branches, and they were dressed in green and brown garments. The sensory impression was not as strong and clear as an ordinary impression. There seemed to be an influence from my mind on perception, but the influence was not strong enough to completely break with the outer impressions. It was an in-between state where imagination mixed with the senses. Shifting or blinking would make the figures disappear.

Before going into my room to meditate, I had been browsing through a large book with very striking and colorful images of Buddhas sitting in a lotus position. It seems to me that this had left a strong impression on my unconscious, which then expressed itself as I entered into open presence with my eyes in a steady gaze. (I was not at all attempting to lead my sensory attention in one way or another, other than relaxing the whole process of sensing and thinking.)

One could perhaps call this a form of cognitive penetration. Examples of such penetration are well-known, such as the rabbit-duck image, or the Necker cube that switches as it is either seen from above or from below. In instances like this we experience only light cognitive penetration, and the objectivity of the penetration is high (most people see either a duck or a rabbit, not a horse or a Buddha). In the meditation cases that I am describing here, the unconscious of the individual is allowed to “play” or intermingle with the outer senses in a way that in normal (non-meditation) situations would not happen. The penetration is quite strong, but the imagination still does not take full control over the perceptual system.

To show that the case of seeing “Buddhas in the trees” is not exceptional, it might be worthwhile to mention another case. This happened while I was sitting out in the woods and watching the small lake in front of the cabin I was staying in. Again it was slightly windy, and as I was gazing meditatively in a state of open presence, figures started to show in the ripples of the water. There appeared what seemed to be a crowd of people forming a line, watching me. They wore clothing from the middle ages. Once again the image was not fully clear, and I could not study the details. However, there was a sense of depth to the image. Shifting the gaze would make the figures disappear, but they would come back again as my eyes had settled. During this time I had reflected on history and ancestry, and I suppose this is a likely source of the “projection”.

A further example is of figures of what seemed to be gods and titans appearing in the carpet in front of me during a long, challenging, meditation
session. (I had a slight sense that the struggles of the figures represented
the internal struggle that was taking place.)

The images can be so stable that they return to their initial shape after
shifting the gaze, but can also, similar to the shifting three-dimensional
impression of a Necker cube, shift into another form of stability. A better
comparison is, perhaps, the well-known case of seeing figures in clouds.
Such figures disappear as the clouds shift. In the case of seeing figures in
the ripples of the water and the moving trees, however, the impressions
can remain stable as the sensory impression changes. This suggests that
the perceptual shift is stronger in meditation. And, again, they also seem
connected to what is going on internally.

Further study would be required to find out whether such effects come
as a result of simply holding one’s gaze steady for a long time, or if it is
related to the meditative practice itself (one difficulty here is that holding
one’s gaze while remaining attentive to what is going on in the visual field
could be viewed as a form of meditation). A fruitful approach would prob-
ably be to use elicitation interviews (Vermersch 1999, 2009, Petitmegin
1999) in order to investigate the microphenomenology. Furthermore, one
study of so-called “superstitious perception” (such as seeing figures in
clouds) suggests that aspects of the mind (memory templates) can indeed
influence what we perceive, and it could be that meditation strengthens
this effect (Gosselin and Schyns 2013).

As already indicated, it is common that meditation brings up long
forgotten childhood memories and even trauma. Similarly, experiences of
insight into questions of a more theoretical nature can show up during
meditation. Here I can also bring an example from my own practice. As I
was doing preparatory work in connection with the idea that meditation
“lowers the threshold” I struggled somewhat to come up with examples of
this. The question had been in my mind throughout the day and it was
hard to focus during my evening practice. I was doing a meditation where
one goes through the events of the day backwards. As I was approaching
the morning, imagining myself lying in bed, I tried to follow my experience
even further “back”, trying to get into the state before waking up.

Then the following idea appeared: on many occasions I have expe-
rienced that memories of dreams I have had during the night show up
during my morning meditation. It seems that meditation opens up an
access to the area of consciousness where dream memories are stored.
These memories can be just as strong as memories from earlier waking
experiences, so I see no reason to doubt that the memories are actually
dream memories. The experience of memory contains the immediate in-
sight that it is my experience, and that I had it earlier during the night or
when slumbering in the morning. In any case, the idea that dream mem-
ories can arise in meditation seems a clear case of meditation opening up
access to the unconscious. In fact, having this dawn on me itself was an
example of meditation opening up access to the unconscious. I had been looking for an example throughout the day of how meditation accesses the unconscious and then suddenly an answer presented itself in meditation, both giving and being an example of what I was looking for.

6. The Hegelian Connection:
   The Noetic Value of Lowering the Threshold

   The examples I have been exploring up until now are cases where the notion of ineffability does not apply. Neither associations arising in the mind nor memories have the quality of ineffability. Ineffability seems to apply to an even deeper layer of consciousness, connected to the “sense of relation” and “muchness” characteristic of it. As I indicated earlier, it might be the case that experiences in the depths of consciousness need to be approached with a different form of conceptuality, and that they only seem ineffable until we do so. This was, in fact, also suggested by William James in his seminal work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James 1911, pp. 388f):

   Looking back on my own experiences, they all converge towards a kind of insight to which I cannot help ascribing some metaphysical significance. The keynote of it is invariably a reconciliation. It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity. Not only do they, as contrasted species, belong to one and the same genus, but one of the species, the nobler and better one, is itself the genus, and so soaks up and absorbs its opposite into itself. This is a dark saying, I know, when thus expressed in terms of common logic, but I cannot wholly escape from its authority. I feel as if it must mean something, something like what the Hegelian philosophy means, if one could only lay hold of it more clearly. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear; to me the living sense of its reality only comes in the artificial mystic state of mind.

   In a footnote, James (1911, p. 389) continues:

   What reader of Hegel can doubt that that sense of a perfected Being with all its otherness soaked up into itself, which dominates his whole philosophy, must have come from the prominence in his consciousness of mystical moods like this, in most persons kept subliminal? The notion is thoroughly characteristic of the mystical level, and the Aufgabe of making it articulate was surely set to Hegel’s intellect by mystical feeling.

   Thus James indeed has a notion that the “ ineffable” is possible to understand. However, it does seem to require its own mode of conceptuality,
one that is driven by the reconciliation of opposites in a way familiar to the movement of thinking found in Hegel’s logic (James 1911, p. 416). Hegel speaks of the self-particularization of the universal, its creating of a pair of opposites, and the merger of the two into a concrete universal, which is a “true individual”. The true individual is a whole consisting of opposites, and is also a realization of what the first, abstract, universal had in itself to become.

This can be illustrated relatively easily by the first movement of Hegel’s logic: Pure being turns into nothing, because pure being cannot be distinguished from anything – there is nothing in it to either intuit or think. But nothing also is, because it makes a difference if nothing or something is intuited or thought. So being and nothing both turn into each other. Hegel sees this movement as a merging of the two into a speculative unity, a unity of opposites which, in this case, is becoming. Becoming is understood as a unity consisting of the moments of coming-to-be and ceasing-to-be, formed by movement from being to nothing (ceasing-to-be) and nothing to being (coming-to-be).

James alludes to the “dark” nature of such “logic”; he thinks it stems from a certain form of mystical feeling. This “feeling” that infuses the intellect with ideas of reconciliation, or a unity of opposites, seems to be common to the contemplative traditions.  

Franklin Merrell-Wolff (1994, p. 211) gave a particularly rich description of the cognitive phenomenology (Bayne 2011, Chudnoff 2015) of this:

I find a new kind of concept being born in my mind. It is not yet sufficiently tangible to give it a clear delineation, and it is questionable how far present word-forms and even logic may serve for enrobing it. If our more familiar concepts may be thought of as granular and capable of fixed definition, this other kind of concept might be called fluidic or functional and not possessed of fixed definition. As nearly as I can describe it, I would say that this new concept is something like this: An idea enters or is born in the mind, but at once the counter idea achieves recognition. Then the original idea takes on a sort of flowing quality which seems to proceed towards the level that synthesizes both it and the counter idea. There is something in this that suggests the dialectic form of Hegel, but the movement is fluidic rather than in a series of triadic steps. In some respects these concepts seem like vortices in consciousness, as there is a certain quality that suggests a turning inside out that proceeds continuously. So long as I do not try to express this thought, it carries a high order of clarity. It does not

---

7Consider, for instance, the idea of coincidentia oppositorum in the work of Nicholas of Cusa (see McCort 2001, Axtell 1991, Cousins 1968, Emery 1984). The idea of reconciliation as the unity of opposites can be traced back to the origins of Western philosophy (Emlyn-Jones 1976) and can arguably be found in early religious myths (Harris 1991).
involve a defiance of logic, but it seems to require further logical
laws, not yet recognized. When I attempt to give this thought ex-
pression, I have difficulties. It tends to disappear, and I often feel
something like a nascent dizziness. It leaves me with the feeling
that what I write or say is only partly true, try as I will to be as
correct as possible. Thus these sentences both reveal and veil at the
same time. It is not an easy Sea in which to think, when one tries to
retain correlation with the outer consciousness. Whatever success
I do attain in navigating in this compound of the Sea and relative
consciousness, I owe very largely to the years of training in higher
mathematics. Often I feel tempted to fall back upon the relatively
inchoate expression of poetry where the conceptual demands are
less exacting.

As with William James, Merrell-Wolff points out a specific, “fluid”
mode of understanding that moves toward reconciliation. Merrell-Wolff
also draws attention to the difficulty of giving expression to this mode of
understanding, and that it bears a similarity to Hegel’s thinking. It is
worth noting that Hegel would object to calling his thinking triadic and
not fluid. Hegel thinks that a description of his way of thinking as triadic
is superficial; it could just as well be said to contain four steps (Hegel
1970, 6:564). Calling it triadic can obscure the fluidity of the movement.

I will not venture into the question of whether or not this way of un-
derstanding has a significance beyond the dimension of non-ordinary or
mystical experiences. Maybe it is possible to discover patterns of oppo-
sition and reconciliation in nature, maybe not. However, the dynamics
of opposition and reconciliation is not only typical of a form of mystical
intellectual understanding, it is also pervasive in mystical experience of a
more visceral nature. One can see this clearly in the following account
given by Teresa of Avila (1870, p. 238):

I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron’s point there
seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it
at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he
drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me
all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great that
it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this
excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it. The soul is
satisfied now with nothing less than God. The pain is not bodily,
but spiritual; though the body has its share in it, even a large one.
It is a caressing of love so sweet which now takes place between
the soul and God, that I pray God of His goodness to make him
experience it who may think that I am lying.

Avila’s account contains both strong visual imagery, intense emotions
and bodily experience. What is striking, however, is the merging of phe-
nomena that we usually hold apart, or even oppose, such as pain and
pleasure. Maybe it is even correct to say that one of them (pleasure) soaks up its opposite (pain) in becoming “a love so sweet”. The Hegelian understanding of love is indeed that it is a relation where one part gives itself up, only to find itself immediately present in the otherness; it is the feeling of reconciliation, of becoming one with otherness without losing oneself (Hegel 1970, 14:146f).

But what is the significance of such experiences? Do they provide new knowledge? The noetic value of lowering the threshold is indeed to provide a new level of understanding; it radically changes the ideas and perceptions of ordinary consciousness – and prima facia there is no reason to take one level of consciousness as more real. Though ordinary consciousness seems to be the most stable, and therefore perhaps more real, non-ordinary consciousness is sometimes accompanied by a sense of intensification of reality.\(^8\)

In any case, if any rationality revealed by “lowering the threshold” is to be relevant to ordinary discursive practices (such as science, philosophy, theoretical reflection in general) there has to be a way of relating the lower levels to the surface level. This is, again, one of the most important issues in Hegel’s method. In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he set out to start with the most ordinary way of understanding the relationship between concepts and observations (truth arises when our concepts fit observations), and through the internal inconsistencies in this view, which I will not go into here, ends up with a state of absolute knowledge.

Absolute knowledge is the knowledge of what knowledge is; in its concrete form this is the same as the dialectical method that is found in the movement of the pure concepts of being, nothing, becoming, and so on. So there is a form of *katabasis* in Hegel, where discursivity is transformed into a form of intuitive knowing, which becomes the foundation for a form of *anabasis*, where the intuitive knowledge again is connected with discursive, or empirical, knowledge. All of this is very intricate when it is spelled out; here I just want to point to the possibility of clarifying the sense of “darkness” William James mentions and of uniting it with ordinary rationality through a Hegelian framework.

In order to tap into the noetic value of the lower levels of consciousness, there needs to be a form of translation taking place between “holding fast” and “making fluid”, studying of the “coagulation” and “liquefaction” of

---

\(^8\)James (1911, p. 397) gives an example from Trevor’s autobiography: “I have severely questioned the worth of these moments. To no soul have I named them, lest I should be building my life and work on mere phantasies of the brain. But I find that, after every questioning and test, they stand out today as the most real experiences of my life, and experiences which have explained and justified and munified all past experiences and all past growth. Indeed, their reality and their far-reaching significance are ever becoming more clear and evident”. This is what I take James to refer to when he says that mystical states “as a rule [...] carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time” (James 1911, p. 381).
pure thinking, its *metamorphoses* (form-changes). One way of doing this is to use the terminology of one level of understanding to attempt to clarify the terms of another. This approach was pursued by Hegel himself at times. For example, he spoke of a special concept that contains its species *in it* rather than *under it*. On the traditional account, a concept contains its species *under it*, or else one would end up with a contradiction. The reason is that the species are defined according to what differentiates them: Humans and plants are both living beings, but the human being is, unlike a plant, not bound to the earth (plants have roots, humans do not).

The universal concept *living being* that humans and plants are species of is indeterminate with regard to the markers “earthbound” and “non-earthbound”, but contains certain markers that are common to all life, such as, e.g., “metabolism”. Universal markers such as “metabolism” apply to all species, and hence do not differentiate them. All markers of a concept can be said of that concept, and so, if the markers of the species are contained in the universal, we would, in this case, have to say *living being* means something that both is and is not earthbound, which is clearly a contradiction. The way this is traditionally handled is to arrange concepts in a hierarchical system, where species are located *under* and not *in* their genus.\(^9\) Hegel thinks he can get around this through his doctrine of contradiction, which I will not go into here. But I want to point out that the way of conceiving concepts can at once explain the “darkness” and the “muchness” of the noetic experiences described by James.

A concept can be said to be “dark” when it is not clearly determined. To clearly determine means to say which predicate applies to a subject in a way that excludes its opposite. If I say of something that it is *red*, I only clearly determine it if I also mean that it is not non-red. If I say that something is either red or non-red, I am obviously not saying very much at all. Most things are either red or non-red.\(^10\) So saying that something is a non-rational animal is clearer than saying that it is an animal. When I am thinking of an animal as an organism with metabolism that can be either rational and non-rational, I am not being very specific, though I do have a notion of what species belong to the concept.

In the case that Merrell-Wolff describes, however, it seems *impossible* to be clear. Being clear means to fixate on one of two opposites, and the process he describes is such that opposites arise more or less simultaneously and then merge. Thus, such a form of conceptuality is inherently

\(^9\)See Sparby (2014, 2015) for further consideration of this point.

\(^{10}\)If we take non-red to mean a specific color other than red, then I am, by saying that something is either red or non-red, implying that it at least is colored. If I mean by non-red any determination at all, then the statement is a truism. One might be able to come up with cases where things are, in some sense, neither red nor non-red, such as a thing that is *becoming red.*
“unclear”, but at the same time it is possible to explicate it by making clear in what sense it is unclear. This puts us in touch with the \textit{processual} nature of dialectical conceptual structures.

The notion of muchness is also related to this. A concrete concept, i.e. one that contains its markers \textit{in} it, is richer than the abstract concepts that only contain the common markers of subordinate species. Such a concrete concept can be compared to sensory intuition. When I see a section of space, the intuition itself contains all the parts that belong to and make up that section. This does not mean that space is contradictory. On the contrary, space is such that different parts of the same are located side by side without interfering with each other. A \textit{conceptual intuition} is similar in that it contains a muchness in it; something that is both differentiated but still constitutive of the same. Again, this can be clarified through a processual or dialectical understanding of concepts which undercuts the problem of contradiction that arises when concepts are understood as containing their elements in them.

The notion of concrete or synthetic concepts can for instance be found in Goethe’s theory of plants. His notion of the primal plant (\textit{Urpflanze}) contains all possible plants in it, and the way he explains the metamorphosis also exemplifies a certain way of understanding the interaction (tension and reconciliation) of opposites. This indicates that Goethe himself had a way of accessing the deeper layers of consciousness, a way of lowering the threshold, without intentionally using a meditative technique. I do not want to go into the merits of Goethe’s way of understanding nature here. I just want to use it as an example where a Hegelian conceptuality has actually been put to work. (It is probably the case that Hegel was inspired by Goethe when developing his logic, but that is another story.)

7. “And It Became Every Church in the World, and Every Synagogue, and Every Mosque, and Every Gurdwara”

It seems that in deep meditative practice the synthetic conceptuality will start to manifest itself beyond the cognitive system of the human being; in meditation even the perceptual system can begin to manifest concrete universals. We can see this in a meditation report given by Shinzen Young.\footnote{The report is based on my own transcript of a video recorded by Stephanie Nash at a retreat in January 2013 in Southern California. Some editing has been done to reduce the conversational style of the report.} Shinzen describes looking at the outer world meditatively, experimenting “with making a very small aperture, just enough of an aperture that pretty vivid patches of color would appear”. In other words, Shinzen did not see objects, but rather the colors that make out
objects, staying “right on the cusp of this urge to look at it like an object”. Shinzen proceeds further, collapsing “the distance between me and those color patches”. Then he notes that

what that created was this huge need to look at what the object was; to not look at it as just a patch of color. And it was a need that I can only describe as being like the need to breathe.

He also notes that this was comparable to a feeling of going to die if the objectification (looking at the objects as they appear in ordinary experience) did not take place.

Shinzen goes on to describe becoming aware of an “undercurrent, this constant, deep, deep, deep, swirling of subtle [internal sensations] that was trying to make sense of things”. This seems to be a clear example of becoming aware of what goes on below the threshold, of what could be called the micro-construction of reality. Now Shinzen offers a description that echoes the one above by Teresa of Avila:

cutting through [the micro-construction] was this constant movement of incandescent terror, to borrow a phrase from T.S. Elliot, that would go away if I only looked at the world the way I usually look at it. And it was deep, and just hot, that’s the only way I can describe it to you. But because of years and years and years of practice it was flowing. So it was also blissful.

Here, again, we see a merging of pain and pleasure. As Shinzen elaborates, the experience was both “absolutely incandescent, paralytic terror” as well as being actually pleasant, because it was flowing. And again such merging seems to be connected with going further down below the threshold of ordinary experience. In Shinzen’s report, this seems to be the precondition for the following deepening of the experience:

We’re in this church, a chapel. And it became every church in the world, and every synagogue, and every mosque and every gurdwara, et cetera, [...] in a really tangible way. [...] There was this sense of transceding time and space. [...] I wasn’t really seeing the chapel as an object, but some part of me was processing it as what it was, but more in the sense of the Platonic ideal.

In other words, in deep meditation, perceptual experience becomes infused with the concrete universal. One object becomes all objects, single objects are no longer located side-by-side in space, subsisting for a certain span of time.\(^\text{12}\)

\(^\text{12}\)The experience of transcending time is a common feature of deep mystical states. For an overview of the phenomenology of this state and its relation to brain function, see Ott (2013).
8. Conclusion: The Range and Structure of Contemplative Depth-Experience

The investigation undertaken here is a form of contemplative phenomenology. Starting with Williams James’ idea of lowering the threshold, I have indicated some stages and modalities of this lowering by describing certain phenomena appearing as a result of meditative activity. There is good reason to believe that meditation gives access to the unconscious. Under certain conditions, the unconscious can begin to influence sense perception as well. Meditation can help in an ordinary process of knowledge acquisition (giving better access to unconscious processing), but also reveals what seems to be its own kind of contemplative rationality. I have indicated that this is similar to the movement of thinking exemplified by Hegel’s logic. In deep meditative states, this rationality, this logos of concrete universals, of the flowing and merging of opposites, can also manifest itself in perceptual and somatic experiences. The results can be summarized by Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>cognitive system</th>
<th>perceptual system</th>
<th>affective system</th>
<th>contemplative phenomenology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ideas and memories show up</td>
<td>images show up</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>descriptive $S \neq O$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>concepts become fluid</td>
<td>penetrations from the subconscious</td>
<td>pain and pleasure pass into each other</td>
<td>genetic $S \approx O$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>concrete universals appear</td>
<td>infusion by concrete universals</td>
<td>merger of pain and pleasure</td>
<td>source $S = O$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: First, second and third level features experienced in meditation with increasing depth (from top to bottom). Not that first level affective changes have not been treated within the context of this article (n/a).

As meditative depth increases, the distinction between subject and object dissolves (symbolized by $S \neq O$, $S \approx O$, and $S = O$). For instance, in hallucinations based on memories, the self and the world are not as clearly distinct as usual. Furthermore, under normal conditions, pleasure can be connected to a devouring or somehow appropriating external objects to oneself, heightening the subjects experience of itself as self-subsisting and opposed to the external world, while pain is connected to experiencing a conflict between the internal and external world. And hence, when pleasure and pain merge, the boundary between external and
internal is blurred. Similarly, when concrete universals appear in the sensory system, the subject, as the unity of experience, is distributed beyond time and space within the whole of an object, and experiences itself as such, i.e. as the whole; world and self are no longer distinguishable.

Lutz et al. (2007, p. 522) presented a table that bears some resemblance to the one presented here, notably concerning the fact that the most advanced stage is characterized by an absence of both subject and object, with a stronger emphasis on reflexive awareness. It would be a topic of further discussion whether the deepest level described here would be better understood as an absence of subject and object rather than as an identity. Such an identity indeed implies a radical change in the way both subject and object are conceived. But it would also have to be discussed how reflexive awareness is possible when there is an absence of subject and object.

Furthermore, there are parallels with Shear’s account of “the traditional map of levels of mind”: 1. senses, 2. discursive intellect, 3. discriminative intellect, 4. pure individuality or ego, 5. pure bliss, 6. pure consciousness (Shear 2014, p. 59), and also with Piron’s version of the levels of meditative depth: 1. hindrances, 2. relaxation, 3. concentration, 4. essential qualities, 5. non-duality. Pure consciousness could, for instance, be described as a form of non-duality (a collapse of the subject-object distinction). The three levels in Tab. 1 also correspond to a recent case study reporting on the phenomenology of the dissolution of the sense of boundary in meditation, moving from the “default state”, to “dissolving of the sense of boundaries” to “total lack of the sense of boundaries” (Ataria et al. 2015). However, such parallels need to be studied more closely.\textsuperscript{13}

Stace’s distinction between introvertive and extrovertive mystical experiences could probably be fruitful when engaging with deep experiences that include references to external objects (such as the one described in Sec. 5). One particularly contested area concerns whether the deepest levels are more properly described as being experiences of no-self or of some underlying impersonal witness-consciousness or transpersonal self. Perhaps this is to a large extent a matter of terminology (see the dis-

\textsuperscript{13} A related issue is the controversy between realist and constructivist views of religious experience (for a recent account see Taves 2009). A fruitful approach, I believe, should avoid the pitfalls of, on the one hand, a form of realism that understands experience to be so conceptually immaculate that it is impossible to account for how experience can inform reflective processes, and, on the other hand, a form of constructivism that ends up with theories spinning in the void (see McDowell 1994). Such an approach can be provided by a thoroughly relationist view that is sensitive to the ways conceptualization can determine experience and vice versa. In fact, I believe that contemplative phenomenology is necessary to provide full insight into such processes. Methodologically the resulting stance is hermeneutic in that parts and wholes are always seen in light of each other and there is a continual readiness to revise one’s view of both. Furthermore, since I propose an interdisciplinary contemplative phenomenology, what counts as relevant wholes and parts is not limited to first-person reports.
discussion in Sideritis et al. 2011) and of which theoretical framework one prefers. Here contemplative phenomenology can contribute with richer experiential accounts to underpin theoretical considerations.

One aspect of Husserl’s idea of phenomenology is to bracket any ontological claims about the nature of the phenomena that are investigated. This can also be taken to belong to the basic tenets of contemplative phenomenology. However, as I have indicated, this phenomenology tends to reveal its own form of rationality. This rationality suggests that reality itself is flowing, which of itself seems to make strong reification an impossibility. “The world itself” is always between being and nothing, continually coming into being and ceasing to be (much like a biological organism). Still, that contemplative experiences exhibit such a structure of flow does not have to be taken to mean that this structure is fundamental. Indeed, if we take ordinary experience for what it is, things are usually more stable and subsistent than flowing. Hence we can with good reason, at least initially, bracket which mode of experience is “more real”.

However, the phenomenology of contemplative experience also contains examples of experiences that themselves suggest that they are more real than ordinary reality. I did not go into this here but, as I stated earlier, this was already noted by William James in his Varieties of Religious Experience. So contemplative phenomenology does reveal experiences that seem to have a deep ontological significance. This does not make it impossible to take the stance of doing pure phenomenology (bracketing ontological claims) with regard to such experiences from within ordinary experience (perhaps just noting their quality as “more real”), but it does point to a challenge inherent in contemplative phenomenology: Though deep contemplative states are rare, they seem to have deep cognitive value.

It could be that such states are pathological, however, or in some sense pre-rational – and this is indeed Hegel’s interpretation of them – but, in my view, such dismissal is premature. We do not know if William James would have supported further investigation of the depths of consciousness if he were alive today, or what he would have thought about the potential that meditation has in relation to such investigations. I hope, however, to have presented some material that can motivate further and more systematic, meditative study of these depths.

Acknowledgments

This article was written during a research stay at the Mind and Life Institute. Thanks go out to the participants of the visiting scholars seminar

---

14Piron’s deepest level, “non-duality”, is also referred to as “transpersonal self”; see Piron (2001).
who commented on an earlier draft, and also to an anonymous reviewer, who provided valuable feedback.

References


Piron H. (2001): The meditation depth index (MEDI) and the meditation depth questionnaire (MEDEQ). *Journal for Meditation and Meditation Research* 1, 69–92.


Received: 06 July 2015
Revised: 01 December 2015
Accepted: 11 December 2015

Reviewed by Stefan Schmidt and another, anonymous, reviewer.