

Meditative Phenomenology and Philosophy of Mind

This talk considers the potential relevance of meditation practice—and practitioners' altered phenomenology—as a “data point” in the philosophy of mind.

Philosophers of mind routinely appeal to their first-person subjective experience and phenomenological intuitions as motivation and evidential support for their theorising. This natural and indispensable aspect of philosophical practice raises several issues. One concerns the limited “data set”: taking one's own phenomenology, or the overlap in some scholars' shared experiences, as representing a universal norm for humankind, thereby ignoring potential diversity across individuals, cultures, and contexts. Another, less discussed issue concerns the possibility that philosophers' introspection may be relatively coarse-grained, glossing over subtleties that only emerge through phenomenological investigation with properly trained subjects (e.g. neuro- and micro-phenomenological methodologies; see Bitbol & Petitmengin, 2017).

There are various routes to broadening and improving the phenomenological “data set.” Here I argue that philosophy of mind would particularly benefit from close examination of mindfulness meditators' phenomenological lives. This aligns with recent calls in consciousness studies to treat advanced meditators as especially valuable sources of evidence (e.g. Lieberman & Sacchet, 2025).

The talk has three parts.

First, to set the context for the phenomenological discussion, I will outline some key aspects of (advanced) mindfulness meditation and clarify common misunderstandings about both the practice and the “skills” it involves. I will highlight the effortless nature of meditation, the systematic cultivation of intentions and psychological habits, and the theme of “letting go” as philosophically particularly interesting and relevant aspects of practice.

Second, I will review a range of striking meditative experiences, focusing on widely agreed-upon phenomenological descriptions of relevant states of consciousness. I will begin by discussing aspects of meditative absorptions (“jhanas”), which involve effortlessly maintaining highly focused attention on an increasingly abstract or rarefied body–mind state. I will then consider how such states can lead to the ‘pacification’ of lived body and mind, often manifesting as experiences of extraordinary bodily comfort and mental bliss. Here I will emphasise the potential for such exceptional psychophysical states to dominate one's lived experience overall—24/7, and well outside formal meditation practice—underscoring the extent of trainable neurodiversity. Finally, I will discuss non-dual states of consciousness, in

which the normal subject–object distinction seems to dissolve. Overall, the second part of the talk aims to draw philosophers’ attention to these little-discussed, trainable dimensions of neurodiversity, associated with various aspects of subjective experience and multiple sense modalities.

Third, I will reflect on the potential relevance of such phenomenological data for philosophy of mind. I will address some or all of the following topics: the concept of attention and its relation to consciousness; the debate between thin vs. rich properties in perception; the nature and extent of cognitive penetration; and the classic debate between naïve realism and representationalism. Regarding the latter, for example, I will suggest that representationalism is, all things considered, a better fit for meditative phenomenology.