

Chapter 3

Experiencing *Nothing*



Aurora Borealis

That evening, the sky became full of color. The sun had long since set below the horizon, but the colors seen were no less brilliant than those of a Caribbean sunset. Only this evening was taking place in a completely different part of the world. The warm beaches and the rhythm of day and night of the equatorial regions were here replaced by darkness. The sun hadn't been seen in weeks, the moon had disappeared below the horizon a few days ago, and would not be seen for almost a week. The stars shone brightly in the clear frigid night. But the colors, the colors were a clear expression that although unseen, the sun was still present. The conversation between the earth and the sun expressed itself even in that cold northern darkness - and the colors were magnificent! Not of the earth, nor of the sun, but an expression of their relationship – a between.

As described in the previous chapters, we generally treat most experiences in life as if they are all experiences of objects. We move our physical body through the physical world, navigating from “in-here,” and interact with the various objects “out there.” Our interactions with these objects can be separated into three distinct categories: pleasurable, unpleasurable, or unnoticed. For example, you the reader are holding a physical book in your hand or reading this text on the screen of a computer. Each of these objects is the means by which you are reading these words, either as dark patterns of ink on a piece of paper or as dark spots on a computer screen surrounded by a lighter colored background. Additionally, your body is likely supported by a chair, or perhaps a couch or a bed, and these objects are sitting on a floor. The list of object interactions goes on. Walk through a familiar landscape and if you pay attention to your mind, most of the internal conversations will consist of a series of *identifications* or *naming of objects* that you recognize (note this word, *recognize*, for later) as things you have seen before. Eventually, you stop naming them and in many cases no longer even notice them. The above description is that of a world that most of us, most of the time, accept as simply given. How can *it* be any other way?

Even less obvious are some of the subtle experiences we have and often overlook. These include such ephemeral phenomena as rainbows or holograms. A very subtle example of such an experience is the feeling we have when we are walking along a road and sense that we are being watched. We turn and sure enough we find someone is watching us (hopefully a friend who is trying to “catch our eye”). Most often, we inwardly note something like this as “odd,” but then move on to our usual everyday life. These are the experiences we have where we aren’t experiencing *anything*, although we conceptualize *it* as if we are experiencing *something*; but if we really look closely, we are actually experiencing *nothing*. Note that the previous sentence contains four words (italicized) we habitually use in our everyday language that underscore the central role that the concept of objects plays in our description of the world. If an experience is not caused by a *thing*, then either *it* is an illusion or *it* isn’t real. Notice once again the use of the italics to underscore the difficulty we have in speaking about experience without giving *it* an object-like causality.

To begin to conceive of experience as other than caused directly by objects, the following series of exercises is often helpful.

Exercise #3

Perhaps you have already had the following experience. You were invited to a friend’s party a few weeks ago. You look at the calendar and all of the sudden you realize, “The party is today!” You rush out and purchase the gift you had in mind since you received the invitation a few weeks ago. You quickly go home, and take out the wrapping paper. All you need is a few pieces of tape and,

suddenly, you find that you have a mess on your hands! First the tape sticks to your hands. Now it's stuck to the wrapping paper, only in all the wrong spots. You try to peel the tape back off the paper but now it's stuck to another piece of paper. Why did this have to happen now! You curse yourself for your clumsiness and wonder why you are so inattentive at that moment that you can't wrap a package.

Perhaps a more careful look at the situation is in order. To conduct the following experiments I encourage you to assemble the small group of materials and do this carefully. Of all of the exercises in this book, this one is the most temperamental and subject to the greatest variation. It is definitely worth the effort but if the results you get are not so clear, it is worth reading through the end of this chapter and then retrying the exercise.

Part 1

This exercise is as much an experiment as it is an observation exercise. It is best done on a dry day, in a work area that is not very humid. You will need some assistance, ideally three other people. If others are not available, it is best to move on to the next exercise below (Part 2).

In a large grocery or shopping store, purchase a roll of contact paper (such as the kind used to line shelves in cabinets) and a package of sterile cotton first aid pads. First, cut the contact or shelving paper into a piece about two feet long and the width of the roll wide. Next, at each of the corners of the contact paper, peel loose the corner of the backing paper so that all four corners are just beginning to be exposed. Once this is done, place the paper, backing side down, on a table. Now, open the cotton pads and, taking one or two pads, slowly tear or shred the cotton into thin wispy pieces. With absolutely minimal handling, drop them on to the sheet of contact paper. Sometimes it is necessary to shake one's wrist to release the cotton pieces from the fingers that shredded them. If the cotton pieces stay connected when tearing them, refrain from using your other hand to pull them away. Simply shake your wrist quickly and the piece of cotton should fall slowly to the contact paper below. Place the cotton pieces evenly around the contact paper until about fifteen pieces are distributed.

Now for the tricky part. Have two assistants hold a forefinger or a thumb on each of two corners of the backing paper so that the backing paper remains tightly on the table. At the same time, you and the third assistant pull on the contact paper from the four lifted corners so that the contact paper is slowly pulled off of the backing paper. Try to pull evenly, and try to keep the paper as horizontal as possible. Note that you will need to take great care

just as the contact paper finally releases from the backing paper to prevent a snapping action from disturbing the wispy cotton pieces on the paper. Once the paper is removed, separate the contact paper from the backing piece and observe what happens to the cotton pieces. It often helps to move the two papers closer and further apart a few times in order to clearly see what is taking place. If everything described above has been carefully followed, you will observe many of the wispy cotton pieces lifting or falling as the papers are separated or brought into close proximity. In some cases the pieces may be seen to jump off of the contact paper even if there is very little observable movement of the two papers away from each other.

When the conditions are right, most people will find the above demonstration to be fun and often laughter will accompany the movement of the cotton pieces, especially if they jump off the paper. We take great joy in seeing movement that appears to occur on its own. We expect movement to occur when one object comes into contact with another, such as when one pool ball hits another. The jumping of the cotton pieces, or even simply their standing upright and lying down, seems to have another quality. This quality was fascinating when it was first discovered and the phrase, “action at a distance” was often used to describe it when it was intently studied during the 18th century. In fact, this “action at a distance” was considered to be a very mysterious action at the time of its first discovery. It was believed to be similar to, or even the essence of, that which gives animate life its motive power. Was the mystery of this “action at a distance” similar to that which gives all animal and human beings life? What is this activity? It causes motion where usually motion is seen only as a result of object causality or a living being’s intention. It is interesting to note that Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein was written just at the time when European scientists were becoming greatly interested in electrical phenomena. Many of the initial discoveries from Benjamin Franklin through Michael Faraday were made in this period of the late 18th and early 19th century. Since the time when electrical stimulation was first noted by the Italian scientist Luigi Galvani in 1791, many scientists, writers and aristocrats became fascinated with the possibility that electrical phenomena was the basis of all life. The science appeared to be on the threshold of this understanding when Shelley wrote her fictional story of Frankenstein.

Part 2

Whether you were successful or unsuccessful in creating the effect above, you are encouraged to see other instances where these types of effects might occur.

Unroll two pieces of scotch tape from a tape dispenser, each approximately two inches long . Be careful to only touch the tape at the end where you tear the piece on the serrated edge of the

dispenser. Notice what happens when the two pieces of tape are brought near each other. If the two pieces are placed perfectly parallel to each other and at the same height, you may observe the two pieces of tape moving away from each other. If you place them parallel with one piece higher than the other, you may see them moving toward each other. How is it possible that the same materials sometimes attract and sometimes repel? You may also note that in time (or with lots of handling) the tape pieces lose the movement quality all together and we are back to “two objects,” i.e. pieces of tape. You might recall the story of wrapping a gift quickly. Were you simply clumsy or was some other activity also in play? Try combing your hair and notice what happens when the comb is then brought back in close proximity with your hair but not touching (hopefully your hair is dry and doesn't have any hair products in it that would make it oily or too “full-bodied”).

In each of the cases above we observe objects moving without them being in contact with each other. In short, we observe some means for creating motion between objects without the need for an intermediate object. Even if we work hard to remove everything in between (remove all of the air) we can still get the same effect. Now we have entered into a new possibility: objects can be observed to have a relationship between them without being in contact. Note, we can only observe the interaction with the presence of two or more objects. We can never observe any of these types of phenomena happening in isolation. All of these phenomena appear as “betweens,” as relational rather than as a fixed appearance such as when we say, “I look at a table.” (We will have more to say about the apparent fixed appearance of the table in a future chapter.)

Commentary on Exercise #3

We can quickly dispel any sense of novelty or mystery by simply calling the above phenomena “static electricity” or “triboelectric phenomena.” Once we give it this name, we can simply leave it at that. A given name gives us certainty, like a landscape we commute through everyday. We tend to ignore the details, and simply occupy our time with more important thoughts than those we identified in our surroundings initially and now ignore. Alternatively, we can try to understand what *it* really is that we are experiencing. At this point that nagging word *it* is going to have to go. No longer will the language of objects suffice, we now need a language of relationship.

Let's recall the two pieces of tape. When the two pieces of tape are brought near each other so that the 'same' ends are in close proximity, you will usually observe that the pieces of tape have a tendency to move away from each other. If you bring the tip of one piece near the base of the other, you will likely observe that the free end of the first piece of tape moves toward the second one where it

attaches to your finger. We observe motion between the pieces of tape, either as one of *moving toward* or of *moving away*, depending on the conditions. Specifically, which part of the objects we bring into close proximity affects the outcome.

The attraction of hair to a comb after repeated combing on a cold dry winter day can give us a few more insights. If we don't first comb the hair with the comb no interaction occurs. The common requirement for each of these experiments to work is that two dissimilar materials that are dry (and often formerly alive) must be brought into intimate contact and separated. Upon separation, a new condition has been created in the space surrounding the visible object, which results in attraction or repulsion when brought into close proximity to another object that has been prepared in a similar manner.

The key here is that the relationship between two objects, moving toward or away from each other, has no other visible qualities that can be identified as the cause of movement that we observe. A new quality has entered our experience with no object-like origin. We can say that the moving toward or away occurs in the space around an object, but the objects themselves lacked these qualities prior to being brought into intimate proximity with one another and then separated. The attraction or repulsion is not found in any one object, because we can only observe the activity *between* the objects. We can begin to think of this as a dialogue between two people. The dialogue is not originating out of one person or the other, but instead arises out of the interaction between the two people. And what of the solidity of the concept of each person? Recall the sensory deprivation tank that was described in the first chapter. One of the observations we noticed is that the concept of our own self is arising out of the interaction we have with the world. It begins to beg the question, what, where or how do phenomena originate? Even in our own self, if the designation of our sense of existence is largely dependent on having some type of sensory impression, it would appear that our sense of "self" and "world" are also between. The internal movement of 'inner' gives us a sense of 'outer,' while the movement of the outer helps us to have a sense of our inner being. (Is this starting to sound like the two pieces of tape?) Perhaps all qualities are relational and not independent entities.

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To combat the fixed idea of material causality for electricity, Michael Faraday, one of the key investigators of electrical phenomena in the 19th century, arrived at the concept of an electrical field. Rather than thinking of electrical phenomena as being caused by some tiny, object-like, not quite observable entity such as an electron, electrical phenomena were conceived of as being a certain set of qualities that could be experienced in space. For example, the space between our pieces of tape from the experiment above can be thought of as having

electrical qualities coming to appearance. We see the tape moving toward some areas and moving away from others. A common designation for this state of being would be to say that the object is “charged” with either a positive or negative electric field. However, this type of conceptual system doesn’t go far enough in truly and clearly describing the qualities of electrical phenomena. A polarity of positive or negative designation is only meaningful with respect to some accepted frame of reference. For example, almost all of the electrical systems we use are referenced to the electrical potential of the earth. In fact, the British system often refers to this reference as earth, earthed or earth-ground. In America we usually simply say that the systems is grounded or connected to ground. The fact is that the earth is not lacking in electrical qualities, but instead has quite a lively electromagnetic relationship with the sun. When the sun’s electromagnetic activity increases, the earth’s electromagnetic activity responds. This relationship is one of the key criteria needed for experiencing the Northern Lights or Aurora Borealis phenomena (Aurora Australis in the southern Hemisphere). The glow in the polar regions of the sky is an expression of a relationship between the earth and the sun, and not simply a quality that the sun has suddenly transferred to the earth. Even the earth as a reference point for electrical systems can have local variations. The same can also be detected with sensitive instrumentations every time lightning strikes the earth in relatively close proximity to where a measurement is being taken. So even what we call *ground* in an electrical system is simply a referential common designation on which we agree.

The key in all of these phenomena is not to think of electricity as simply the transfer of a small entity called “an electron” (this view is considered outdated in modern physics). It is to see that what we call electrical phenomena only manifests as “a between;” an expression of a relationship is meaningless and unknown in isolation. In electrical terms, a monopole is meaningless unless the polarity is referenced to some other pole. However, this same relationship has tremendous meaning in understanding a quality. By observing a manifestation or a new interaction *between* similar or complementary polarities, new qualities come to appearance that were not present until the condition of close proximity arose. I understand very little about any organism by looking at it in isolation. Place the organism in the context of its surrounding habitat, and you will know not only more about the organism but also more about the environment it is found within. The organism and larger environment only take on meaning as an expression of relational betweens. This knowing is not only true for animals. The statement is true for plants and people and all experiential happenings! The Tibetans’ have a great phrase for this: “all phenomena arise dependent on conditions.” Therefore, no phenomenal impression, or any other experience, can be seen as a separate entity. An interdependent world is a fact, down to the most infinitesimal bit!

To return to the electrical descriptions under investigation, even the designations positive and negative are simply conventions. The origins of these designations

goes back to the 18th century, and is somewhat related to the deposition and dissolution of two metal plates in a wet cell battery. On one pole of the wet cell battery (the anode), a coating begins to form on the metal plate as an electrical potential is utilized, while on the other pole (cathode), the metal plate appears to slowly dissolve. Note once again how the observation of each of these phenomena is part of a greater whole (deposition and dissolution), rather than each simply being a phenomena isolated to itself.

So, if all phenomena are between, how is it possible to conceive of the world in this new relational manner? The question might be turned back on itself and ask instead, how did we develop the habit of thinking of the world as separate? A well known Zen koan points at the origin of the old separate conceptual habit by asking: "what is the sound of one hand clapping?" Perhaps the seed for an answer is always right there, in our everyday activities, in trying to wrap that gift with scotch tape.