

Debunking Metzinger's Account of the Self: Beyond Dialectical Illusion

By

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Abstract

For the neurophenomenologist, Thomas Metzinger, the self does not exist – there are no selves, only the naively realistic misunderstanding that a phenomenal self appears in consciousness. This essay argues that the main problem with Metzinger’s approach is that he is working with an anachronistic, though celebrated, definition of the self, a thinking thing, which he then, naturally, finds unsatisfactory. Three issues with this position are explored, and what is valid in Metzinger’s otherwise rhetorically excessive contribution is recovered. Several positive accounts of the self are indicated.

In a rhetorically brilliant but arguably excessive theoretical speculation, Thomas Metzinger asserts that the brain hallucinates the world as a process of global simulation and then uses its self-model to test reality, computationally eliminating the wrong hypothesis – (e.g.) the pattern in the bushes are the stripes of a tiger, not just tall grass swaying in the shadows cast by the sun - and quickly discarding the inaccurate hypotheses (e.g., Metzinger 2003: 52). This is a computation performed subpersonally and unavailable to attentional awareness due to “autoepistemic closure” (Metzinger 2003: 57). “Autoepistemic closure” means the computation or other perceptual process is beneath the threshold of conscious awareness and closed to awareness on the part of one phenomenal self (auto). It is dark, not visible. It is unavailable to attentional and introspective awareness such as might have been employed by an arm chair philosopher like David Hume. However, this constraint is sometimes violated when consciously performing “as if” type simulations. It is also violated when we are aware that the scene we are observing is a mirage, or when the transparent trust of another in which we are living is suddenly changed to awareness that the other has deceived one. The one becomes aware of its false belief as a nontransparent (“opaque”) mistake. The trust (now opaque and thus visible) was a misrepresentation of the social reality. This gives rise to the distinction between appearance and reality or a developing concept of

misrepresentation (2003: 389). Once the concept of misrepresentation is allowed, that of representation is also available, which, in turn, opens out into an account of intentional relations between subjects and objects, and subjects and subjects.

As Hume famously pointed out, when he examined the contents of his introspective awareness, he did not find a subject among objects. He did not find a self or an ego or a subject.

When we talk of self or substance, we must have an idea annex'd to these terms, otherwise they are altogether unintelligible. Every idea is deriv'd from preceding impressions; and we have no impression of self or substance, as something simple and individual. We have, therefore, no idea of them in that sense" (Hume 1739: 633).

This problem of the self is rooted in Hume's overall philosophical enterprise, and he has to fall back to a customary conjunction of standalone perceptions that form a bundle based on the model of a community or commonwealth (e.g., Haugeland 1977: 63-71).¹ Thomas Metzinger takes up Hume's cause of the non existing self. Metzinger leaves behind Hume's overly simplified theory that perceptions are substantially distinct entities. Metzinger is also inspired by Kant's debunking of the self as a non existent "thinking substance" in Kant's account of dialectical illusion (Kant 1781/87: A348). This

¹ John Haugeland. (1977). "Hume on personal identity" in *Having Thought: Essays on the Metaphysics of Mind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998. Note that Haugeland does not engage Hume on the solution of a "society of mind," a commonwealth, but just leaves it at Hume's impasse between perception of distinct existences and the absence of relationship between distinct existences (Hume 1739: 636).

does not stop Kant – or Metzinger – from a positive account of the self as an appearance (Metzinger’s “phenomenal self model” (PSM)) that has the form of an inner temporal flux anchored in an external spatial permanent in perception. However, Kant’s account of self-affection in the transcendental unity of (self) apperception goes too far for Metzinger (Kant 1781/87: A123; A143/B183). Instead, Metzinger employs a complex information processing mechanism and the wide-ranging cases of neurophenomenology, stating:

The central ontological claim: No such things as selves exist in the world. All that exists are certain information-processing systems meeting the constraints for phenomenality while operating under a transparent self-model [. . .]. However, if an organism operates under a phenomenally transparent self-model, then it possesses a phenomenal self [. . .] being an appearance only [. . .] For all scientific and philosophic purposes, the notion of a self [. . .] can be safely eliminated.”²

Returning to Plato’s myth of the cave, in a rhetorical flourish both provocative and insightful, Metzinger asserts that the cave is empty (2003: 549-51). The book in your hand is a dancing shadow in the central nervous system (like the shadows on the wall in the myth of the cave). The fire is neural dynamics (like the fire in the cave). However, no one is home. No one in the sense of a homunculus who can stop the infinite regress, answering the puzzle of who is monitoring the monitor. The substantial self does not exist – it is an illusion, a hypostatization, a reification. The “thinking thing” that was

² Thomas Metzinger, (2003), *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003: 563

mistaken for a soul or self by traditional philosophy does not exist or subsist, but it continues to persist at the level of an illusion. According to Metzinger, it is an evolutionarily adaptive, naïve realistic self-misunderstanding. The thinking thing is useful and required to stop an infinite regress of homunculi, but it is an adaptive artifact, a necessary illusion into which thinkers fall when trying to apprehend what is doing the thinking. The substantiality of the “thinking thing” stops the infinite regress of trying to monitor the monitor. Stops it because it runs into a thing - klunk! - which puts an abrupt end to the infinite loop in which the neurological computer would otherwise spin, instead of doing useful work such as avoiding predators or finding the next meal. Thus, our illusion of the substantiality of the self has survival value. However, it is no less an illusion – as is all the philosophy and religion that gets spun around its illusory substantiality.

In particular, what Metzinger calls this “naïve realistic misunderstanding” - that the self is a persisting thing - stops the brain’s computational processing engine from going into a loop and paralyzing the organism (2003: 279). For example, when the organism is in danger, threatened by an enemy, beast of prey, or natural hazard, “analysis paralysis” is extremely hazardous and is greatly to be avoided (2003: 35, fn#19). Those of our ancestors where such a computational processing loop actually occurred were strangely frozen in a kind of analysis paralysis and – we infer with 20/20 hindsight - were eaten by the tiger, ending the experiment in natural selection. Those that “suffered” from the mistaken belief that the self appearing to their introspective attention was a persisting substance stopped analyzing their situation, acted, and escaped (in this case) the tiger.

The appearance of the self as a thinking thing is generated as an information-computational strategy for optimizing computing resources, reducing ambiguity, and controlling behavior (Metzinger 2003: 316). The phenomenological self model is precisely the accretion, sedimentation, of experiences related to the act of intentional spontaneity bumping up against the world.

Although Metzinger does not comment on the Hume quote, he would likely assert that Hume did not find an impression (perception) corresponding to his idea of a self because he was apprehending the world through a transparent, phenomenal self-model (PSM). “Transparent” means “invisible” to the user – in this case Hume. One looks right through it (the PSM) like a transparent pane of glass. Just as the person sees the bird flying but not the glass window through which the person is looking, the person sees things, etc. in the environment, not the self through which the person engages the world. The content of our transparent self-model is what an introspecting subject apprehends in various ways, little realizing that the neurological, computational process occurring are “under the hood,” beneath the threshold of conscious awareness; but still responsible for that awareness. Of course, there are many examples of opaque mental representations such as good, old fashioned propositional attitudes (2003: 174) as well as the reified experiential contents of a continuous phenomenal self-representation, making it into an object by attending to it (2003: 272).

The main problem with Metzinger's approach is that he is working with an anachronistic, though celebrated, definition of the self, a thinking thing, which he then, naturally, finds unsatisfactory. Metzinger innovatively recreates Kant's strategy of dialectical illusion about the substantial self at three levels without, however, ever acknowledging Kant's dialectic. First, Metzinger argues that the self model is a phenomenal process, generated by the biological nervous system as an appearance in consciousness, a position for which significant interpretation of neurological data and psychiatric cases is useful. Second, he rejects the notion of a hypostasized "thinking thing," which, of course, is the main point made by Kant in the famous fallacy of the paralogisms of the thinking thing (e.g., Kant 1781/87: A348). Yet this is a fallacy built into reason itself, so that, even after it is explained as an illusion, the fallacy still returns again and again. This is similar to an optical illusion, which, even though dispelled, still fools the eye. Instead, Kant provides three kinds of synthetic unity (figurative, reproductive, and productive), and a schematization in the flux of temporal inner sense of the categories of the understanding by which the subject contributes to the unification of its own experience (Kant 1781/87: A98/B150; A137/B176). Metzinger's description of the constraints on phenomenal consciousness do not map directly to Kant's understanding of inner sense, but come close while providing significant amplification in the realm of appearances. Third, in both cases – Kant and Metzinger - the illusion is necessary. For Kant, it is a function of the way in which human reason works, striving to complete the series of conditions in the unconditioned. For Metzinger, it is a resonant result of our biological heritage, spontaneously pulsating forth across the boundary between the conscious organism and environment. According to Metzinger, the human brain operates at a subsymbolic and

nonlinguistic level and commits an “intensional fallacy,” inferring the existence of entities (“unicorns,” “thinking things,” “selves”) used in the intensional context as if they were extended things in space (2003: 387).

For Metzinger, the self is a similar compelling but false appearance in phenomenal experience and a consequence of a commitment to adapt and survive. The appearance is analogous to an illusion or even a pathological state of the brain. Metzinger refers to diverse pathological disease states in which the individual denies having the condition, e.g., denying being blind, while actually blindly stumbling around the room, confabulating that someone moved the chair. “Anosognosia” is a loss of insight into an existing physiological or cognitive deficit (2003: 429).

Like anosognostic patients we might have persistent false beliefs *de se* while never being able to experience consciously this very fact, because they are rooted in the deep structure of our noncognitive model of reality (2003: 437; “de se” is Latin for “regarding the self”).

[. . .] [P]henomenal selfhood originates in a lack of attentional, subsymbolic self-knowledge, Phenomenal transparency is a special kind of darkness. For a biological point of view this kind of darkness has been enormously successful, because it creates what I have called the ‘naïve-realistic self-misunderstanding’ (2003: 632; see also 387, 592, 597, 627 about bad arguments, false beliefs, being convinced of the self-model theory).

We humans are so constituted that we are unable to believe that the self-model theory of subjectivity is actually true, since that would require a “cognitively lucid, nonpathological way of dissolving your sense of self” (2003: 627). Human beings have a strong sense and conviction of being a self; but if one is persuaded by Metzinger’s evidence and arguments that the self is an appearance in an unfolding window of presence of a first-person perspective, then one ought to abandon one’s conviction. Of course, this is not a claim that could be falsified in any obvious way.

Though Metzinger does not use Kant’s language of dialectical illusion, the “naïve realistic self-misunderstanding” points in its direction. This is Metzinger’s attempt to have his cake and eat it too. Metzinger debunks the idea of the self as not being a hypothesized thinking thing, while concurrently arguing, quite convincingly, that each individual is consciously convinced that she or he is someone, a persisting self. There is no contradiction in taking these two positions which capture the tension around the conflicting views of the phenomenal self. Meanwhile, Metzinger succeeds in telling us quite a lot about the phenomenal self-model, the self as it appears in the first person stream of consciousness.

Not everything that is in consciousness is reduced to the hypostasized thinking thing. There is also active phenomenal content, so we do catch ourselves in the act of thinking (2003: 399). For example, the self-model is partitioned into transparent and opaque components. The opaque components are exemplified by propositional content and

attitudes (the propositions presumably implying the operation of an intentionality), and most intellectual operations (calculating, planning, designing) that are undertaken consciously and with intent. The transparent part is the internal endochrinological-chemical milieu in so far as it remains beneath the threshold of conscious awareness; the performance of mirror neurons in inner imitation in so far as we are unaware of them; and all the neurological performances in the premotor, emotional, and intellectual neurological modules in so far as they are necessarily unavailable for introspective attention. The opaque part is the inchoate, emerging proprioceptive and background awareness of the individual's navigational path through the environment at the very threshold of the preconceptual-linguistic boundary (Bermúdez 1998);³ the felt sense of balancing back-and-forth while watching the high-wire acrobat in so far as it can be made available to attentional awareness; and the evidence of vicarious experience, gut reactions, and emotional contagion⁴ (in so far as they are owned in disclosing aspect of the environment as “mine”).

All this work has been required to set up the phenomenal model of the intentionality relation (PMIR) and the emergence of empathy on top of the neurophenomenological infrastructure and computations. In spite of making extensive use of the phenomenal model of the intentionality relation (PMIR), Metzinger issues all the necessary disclaimers – namely, that “...Intentionality as such is not an epistemic target within the scope of this book” (2003: 424). Nevertheless, as with the (phenomenal) self, a detailed inquiry is engaged. This is where an account of empathy is integrated into the

³ José Luis Bermúdez. (1998). *The Paradox of Self-Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000.

⁴ Elaine Hatfield, John T. Cacioppo, Richard L. Rapson. (1994). *Emotional Contagion*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

phenomenal self-model (PSM). Global neural dynamics for this will eventually be discovered empirically, and both the PSM and PMIR are, according to Metzinger, *not* mere theoretic constructs but scientific hypotheses subject to falsification (2003: 411). The PMIR brings the other individual into the horizon. Phenomenally, persons have an awareness of “getting” – understanding in a broad sense – the feelings, beliefs, intentions of other individuals:

Once a system is capable of representing transient subject-object relations in a globally available manner [by means of a PMIR], it becomes possible for the object component in the underlying representational structure to be formed by the *intentions of other beings*. A phenomenal first-person perspective allows for the mental representation of a phenomenal second-person perspective. The PMIR is what builds the bridge to the social dimension. Once a full-blown subjective perspective has been established, *intersubjectivity* can follow. [. . .] [A] completely new and highly interesting forms of information becomes globally available for the system: the information of actually *standing in certain relations to the goals of other conspecifics*. I would claim that it is precisely the conscious availability of this type of information which turned human beings from acting, attending, and thinking *selves* into social subjects (2003: 420-1).

Notwithstanding Metzinger’s disclaimers, a new type of information becomes available through the conspecific’s relationship with others as the goals of these others come into view and are accessed globally via the PMIR. The task of making sense out of

intentionality and the application of intentionality to other beings must be engaged even if it is left incomplete by Metzinger (2003: 420). We have here the emergence of shared goals, society, and, from the perspective of intentionality, a new kind of information that is transformational with regard to possibilities for human beings.

Note also how easy it is for Metzinger to discuss turning “selves” into social subjects after having asserted the self does not exist. Strictly speaking, this is not a contradiction; but it is a clue that Metzinger’s commitment to the existence of the phenomenal being of the self is not as ontologically relative as he makes out. Obviously, he is referring to the phenomenal self and self model, not the thinking thing. It is the latter that falls out of the inquiry, not the self; and less is lost than his rhetorically more extreme statements would imply.

There are at least three issues with this position as outlined in the quote, which will assist us in getting a grip on the key dynamics of the self underlying Metzinger’s position.

First, the order in which phenomena are supposed to unfold is an issue: the order “subjective then intersubjective” is not an opportunity, it is a problem. Contra Metzinger, there is no “full-blown subjective perspective” prior to the *intersubjective*. While there are many parts of consciousness that would survive the loss of intentionality – resulting in a dreamlike awareness, a temporal flux, the nested relationship of the contents, even the phenomenal sense of being someone (the naïve realistic self-misunderstanding) as long as one remained motionless and apathetic in a Buddhist-like meditative state - much

would be lost. Without intentionality, consciousness is an awareness of an enduring, passive temporal now, but not much else. Without intentionality, the self-model of subjectivity would be a much less interesting phenomenon – there would be much less phenomenal self in it - without presupposing the operation of intentionality as its basis. For example, Metzinger cites propositional contents as being an instance of contents distinguishing between the transparent and opaque partition of the self-model. Propositional contents are accessible to advanced forms introspection such as verbal thinking and individuals report on them in detail. They are in that sense, opaque. The transparent-opaque distinction is one that requires intentionality (and so the PMIR). Even if one discards this particular example, all of those examples where opacity shows up as false belief, as social cognitions that turn out to be misrepresentations, and, of course, as a first-person perspective, require “consciousness of.” This is so even if the PMIR through its normal operation contributes misleading results by hypostatizing the stream of awareness and by reifying the latter as an object (“fixing the flux”). Indeed the very distinction between transparent and opaque partitions turns on doing this intermittently and transiently.

Perhaps without appreciating the degree to which he has already done so, Metzinger has imported the subject-object relationship into the subject (the phenomenal self-model). He has to do this precisely because the phenomenal self without intentionality would be an impoverished one dimensional, waking dream, and not a very interesting one at that. Metzinger has imported the relationship between subject and object into consciousness, because the phenomenal self-model distinguished transparent and opaque partitions.

As a consequence of importing this distinction, the subject regards some of its nested components (itself) as an object; and this creates the opacity. This occurs as the stream of consciousness drops down into the past as the subject objectifies its immediate experiences as what have just occurred. In introspection, an individual “I” grasps only a hypostasized and objectified subject. A systematic investigation of one’s lived experiences becomes an inquiry into the past - like sitting in a train, watching the scenery go by the window, rolling by – into the spatially remote – and into the past. That is not a bad thing but it is not an investigation into a pulsating “I,” spontaneously streaming forth into the future and into the surrounding milieu. It is the “me” as I appear to myself on a read out of a cerebroscope, not an “I.” By definition, if the subject experiences an object, including itself as object, it does not experience itself as subject.⁵

Second, it is precisely one of the opaque partitions in which the other is disclosed and given by means of a vicarious experience. Light dawns gradually over the whole. Contra Metzinger, as strong a case can be made that “I” is differentiated from “you” (“thou”) as the reverse. The intention of other individual is what gives the one his humanness in the first place. Human beings were acting, attending, thinking, social selves even while they were already in the process of becoming more and more aware of themselves as isolated, alienated, separated subjects. Many higher mammals are notoriously expressive - gregarious and “talkative” in a social context without, however, having a language capable of misrepresenting current situations (though there are one or two uncanny

⁵ This idea is mined by Dan Zahavi from Paul Natrop, one of the so-called neo-Kantians, *Allgemeine Psychologie* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr Verlag, 1912) cited in Dan Zahavi. (2005). *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective*. Cambridge, UK: Bradford Book/MIT Press, 2005: 74.

exceptions) or of referring to a past or future beyond the horizon of short term memory (including imprinting during a past critical period). Yet it is quite possible that chimpanzees are capable of cooperative behavior without mentally representing the goals of other chimpanzees. The human system to interpret behavioral patterns as strictly nonobservable properties in other agents by intentionality detection and meta emulation points in the direction of empathy without actually calling it out (2003: 374).

Finally, all the emerging neurophenomenological accounts of diseases of empathy – autism spectrum disorders, sociopathy, dissociative personality disorder – belong here (Baron-Cohen 1995; Hobson 2002; Farrow and Woodruff, eds. 2007).⁶ Without empathy – whether it is interpreted as a module or a source of simulation (or not) – significant aspects of the affective life of the individual and the new information implicated in the affective life of the other quite simply disappears. The neurophenomenology researcher is skilled at finding a neural correlate of consciousness for virtually every conscious phenomena, and empathy should be no different. The distinction of self and other, even if it is only as appearances, coincides with the emergence of a new type of information constituted in and accessible through empathy. One significant method of access to the other individual self is through the other's expressions of life. Although Metzinger has discussed the emotions insightfully, especially in the context of Cole's identification of the human face as an embodied communication area, the use of expressions to provide

⁶ Simon Baron-Cohen. (1995). *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997. Also relevant, J. Fodor. (1983). *The Modularity of Mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987: 47. P. Hobson. (2002). *The Cradle of Thought: Exploring the Origins of Thinking*, New York: Macmillan Pan, 2002. T. Farrow and P. Woodruff, eds. (2007). *Empathy in Mental Illness*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

“social glue” between individuals is overlooked.⁷ The information that turned humans beings into social beings is available as expressed emotions, actions, statements, etc. This expression of emotions (understood broadly to include affects, sensations, moods, feelings) is a phenomenon virtually indistinguishable from the social context in which it is enacted and implemented. Perhaps this is what he means by issuing the disclaimer that the PMIR is “not an epistemic target within the scope of this book” (2003: 424).

Thus, while Metzinger’s contribution is substantial – indeed monumental – the research program points in the direction of discovering the empirical structures and processes of neurology that undergrid the PSM and PMIR, not the humanization of the self in its phenomenal or related forms. This is not a criticism; it’s just what’s so. What is a criticism is that the position – there is no self – turn out to be misleading, albeit as an entertaining rhetorical flourish. The “thinking thing” was debunked by Kant as dialectical illusion (1781/1787), further exorcized by Gilbert Ryle as a ghost in the machine (1949), and periodically purged by analytic thinkers from Wittgenstein (1945) to John Wisdom (1946). The suspicion is growing that perhaps Kant was right – no matter how often we dispel the illusion of the self as a substantial, thinking thing, the illusion keeps coming back. Obviously this is not the only approach to the self.

Thus, a word of caution in conclusion. The approach to the self of neurophenomenology (Metzinger) is simply not that of classic phenomenology (Husserl 1929/31), that of classic phenomenology is not that of fundamental ontology (Heidegger 1927), that of ontology is not that of psychoanalysis (Kohut 1984), and that of psychoanalysis is not

⁷ Jonathan Cole, (1998), *About Face*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998. Cited in Metzinger, 2003: 168.

that of neurophenomenology, phenomenology, ontology, empiricism, social psychology, or, for that matter, analytic philosophy. Any effort to shoehorn them all into one unified category is misguided. No attempt has been made to do that here or to be exhaustive within the scope of a single essay. Approaches to the self extend along a spectrum. At the one end, the position is that the self is non-existent. There are no selves. That is the explicit interpretation by Metzinger of himself, though as suggested here, the matter is rather more complex than he pretends. Along the way, Metzinger integrates a vast amount of empirical material into a powerful and thought-provoking research program of neurophenomenology. There is no substance-self, no immortal source, but there is a phenomenal self model that encompasses the rich, dynamic, effective structures and functions attributed to the self under various interpretations that are as numerous as the thinkers being integrated in spite of the claims that they are misguided.

The alternative to Metzinger, at the other end of the spectrum, the self is the bearer of the individual's humanity, ambitions and ideals (values), fundamental wholeness, completeness, integrity, individuality. In between are positions about character traits, agency, spontaneity, that are functional, phenomenological, ontological (hermeneutical (narrative)), psychoanalytical, and even biological.

For Augustine, the self is an *initium*, the capability of beginning something new. For the Kantian, the self is the source of spontaneity, which, in turn, is responsible for synthesizing experience into a coherent manifold. For Edmund Husserl (1929/31) the self is the monad, the psychophysical organism that contains the entire universe of meaning,

especially the other, within its sphere of ownness, the realm of what is “mine” as a source of intentionality. For Martin Heidegger (1927) the self is the articulation of the thrown-projection of care of the human being that takes a stand on its being, making a resolute commitment. For the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut (1984) the self is the dynamic tension arc of accomplishment between narcissistic grandiosity and idealizing objectifications of otherness that enable the individual to engage a productive life of satisfying personal relatedness. For Hannah Arendt, (1926/65) the self is the bearer of natality, the ability (literally) to give birth to the new. Given wide agreement that the self is *not* a thinking thing, there is still much room for controversy as to what is actually showing up and appearing as the self.

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