

Losing Your Self

Being No-One: the Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity

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Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003

ISBN: 0-262-13417-9 (Hardback) 711 pp., \$47.80

Being No-One (henceforth BNO) takes up a challenge Lynn Rudder-Baker laid down to philosophical naturalists to either ‘show how the first-person perspective can be understood naturalistically, or show that it is dispensable’. (Rudder-Baker 1998, p.327) Metzinger opts for the latter strategy. He makes this much clear in his opening line promising that he will argue for the eliminativist conclusion that ‘no such things as selves exist in the world’. The conclusion isn’t a new one—Hume famously thought he was driven to accept something similar. What is refreshingly new about the position Metzinger attempts to articulate is the way in which he argues: BNO is an exemplary work of Neurophilosophy. Metzinger demonstrates an impressive knowledge of up to date neuroscience which he continuously draws on to support and illustrate his account of subjectivity. Interspersed between chapters introducing his theory are case studies covering a range of phenomena from familiar favourites such as varieties of neglect, agnosia and blindsight to less often discussed phenomena such as out-of body experiences, phantom limbs, schizophrenia and a number of other fascinating but less known identity disorders. Metzinger adds a good deal of force to his arguments by showing how his theory of subjectivity can be used to account for each of these phenomena and others.

BNO is exceptionally ambitious in its scope, a fact which is reflected in the length of its eight chapters, most of which exceed 100 pages. While there is much to applaud and celebrate in this work, I found Metzinger’s arguments to be unconvincing in a

number of places. I will concentrate on two of the book's key claims, the first being the book's central claim that 'Nobody ever was or had a self' (p.3). I will argue that Metzinger's account of subjectivity falls short of establishing the metaphysical thesis which the title of his book advertises. Second I will attempt to make sense of Metzinger's claim that 'phenomenal experience during the waking state is an online hallucination.' (p.51)

What is it that Metzinger is denying when he says that no one is, or ever had a self? Metzinger aims to demonstrate that the *experience* each of us has of being someone is an illusion. A subject has the experience of being someone when she experiences the world from a point of view which is her own. I have an experience of being someone when, for instance, I feel happy. I am aware of this feeling as one that belongs to me now, and am thereby aware of undergoing an experience from a point of view that is my own. I also have an experience of being someone when I remember the birthday party I had aged five. The experience I remember is one that is centred on my point of view at an earlier time.

Metzinger's bold hypothesis (see for instance p.563-67) is that the experience each person has of being someone is realised by a representational state of a certain type which he calls a "Phenomenal Self Model" (henceforth a "PSM"). He calls his theory the 'Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity'. It is the PSM which is supposed to explain what it is for a creature to possess a point of view or first person perspective. A creature is aware of its own point of view or perspective on the world when it possesses an active PSM, but what is a PSM?

Metzinger introduces us to the concept of the PSM in chapters 5 and 6. We can get an initial grip on the concept by considering the phenomenon of self-representation. A representation R can be said to be a *self-representation* when R represents a current state of the system that produced R (see §5.2). However a PSM isn't simply a self-

representation; it is a *self-model*. To explain when a representation R counts as a self-model Metzinger introduces the concept of “emulation”. Emulation is a form of simulation in which one information processing system simulates the information processing taking place in another system. A self-model is a special case of emulation in which the emulating system and the target system which is emulated are one and the same.

A representation counts as a *phenomenal* self-model when M satisfies a number of constraints Metzinger has set out in chapter 3 as conditions which a representational state must satisfy if it is to possess a phenomenal content. He identifies only one of these conditions as necessary: that the representational state be globally available for ‘deliberately guided attention, cognitive reference, and control of action’ (p.118). However Metzinger recognises that global availability cannot be a sufficient condition¹ for the possession of phenomenal content, hence his identifying a number of further constraints. The constraint which Metzinger takes to be responsible for transforming a self-model into a phenomenal self-model, is one he labels the ‘transparency constraint’ (see §6.2.6).

Metzinger offers two glosses on what he means by “transparency”. According to his first, a representation is *transparent* if the earlier processing stages which led to the production of the representation are ‘attentionally unavailable’, by which he means that these earlier processing stages are not available to introspection (p.165). According to the second gloss a representation is transparent when it ‘cannot be recognised as a representation by the system itself’ (p.131). Metzinger claims that it is because we do not recognise our conscious experience for the representations that they are, that we experience them as transparent. He calls this phenomenon *autoepistemic closure*. It extends to the experience we have of being someone (p.337). When we have an experience of being someone we seem to be directly and

immediately acquainted with ourselves but Metzinger says this is an illusion. We think otherwise because of the transparency of experience, which prevents us from recognising that the experience we have of being someone is in fact due to the PSM which our brains are constantly in the process of updating.

If Metzinger is to show that there are no selves, he must show that there is no object that persists through time which is me or you. There are two possible ways of understanding what it is for a thing to persist through time.² On the first understanding a thing is extended through time in the same way as it is extended through space. Just as each point in space can only contain a part of an object, so each point in time can only contain a part of an object, a “time-slice” of that thing. A thing that persists through time in this way I shall say ‘perdures’. On the second understanding things are extended in time in a different way from how they are extended in space. A single thing can be wholly present at a particular time. A thing that persists through time in this way I shall say ‘endures’.

Metzinger’s Self-Model Theory isn’t incompatible with a metaphysical thesis that says there are *perduring* selves. Such a thesis doesn’t claim that at each time there is a self that is wholly present which we experience when we have an experience of being someone. It says that a self is a collection of time-slices, and all we can experience from moment to moment is a single time-slice. The view of the self which Metzinger seems keen to deny says that the self is a ‘substance, an unchangeable essence, or a thing’. This denial is perfectly consistent with a view of the self as a collection of time-slices which perdures but does not endure.

That being said it is not obvious how Metzinger’s Self-Model Theory is inconsistent with a materialist theory of the self such as animalism which says that there are enduring selves.³ According to animalists at each moment in time there is an animal that exists at the place that you exist and you are identical with that animal.

Metzinger's theory does entail that we are a special kind of animal whose brain can produce and update PSM's. This doesn't seem incompatible with the claim that at any given moment in time each of us is wholly present as the animal with which s/he is identical. Indeed Metzinger even concedes that 'if an organism operates under a phenomenally transparent self-model, then it possess a phenomenal self' (p.563). I conclude then that on both understandings of the thesis that each of us is a thing that persists through time, Metzinger has not succeeded in showing that the experience we have of being someone is an illusion.

I will finish up by briefly considering Metzinger's account of perceptual content. The first half of *Being No-One* gives an account of representation (chapter 2), and sets out a number of constraints which a representational state must satisfy if it is to have what Metzinger calls "phenomenal content" (chapter 3). Metzinger takes a conscious mental representation to be a special case of a more general phenomenon he calls 'mental simulation' (p.50). What is simulated, he tells us, is a temporal moment of an ongoing representational process. When I am reading a book, say, the experience I have of looking at one and the same book is the result of an 'ongoing process' which constructs for me an experience with a stable and coherent content (p.23). The book as I experience it isn't a true reflection of the continuous information processing activity taking place in my brain. This leads Metzinger to call the subjective experience I have of the book as something substantial 'an illusion' which my brain constructs for me.

What Metzinger has in mind becomes a little clearer as chapter 2 progresses. He seems to want to say that the impression I have of holding the book in my hands *now* is an illusion. It is the sense I have of my experiences taking place in the present that my brain constructs for me. 'The consciously experienced present' is 'the remembered present' (p.25), he says echoing Edelman, 1989. Metzinger doesn't stop

there, pointing out what he takes to be an implication of this fact. If we have no experience of things in the present, it must be that all of our experiences are representation of possibilities. Metzinger cites work by Revonsuo, 1995 & 2000 in support of this claim (p.25). What my experiences represent are possible realities. My conscious experiences are mental simulations in the sense that they simulate for me possible but non-actual situations. The situations I seem to experience are non-actual because I can never have a conscious experience of how things actually are in the present. Indeed Metzinger even goes as far to call conscious experiences ‘online hallucinations’. Our sensory systems depict ‘a possible reality as an actual reality’ (p.51).

Metzinger concludes that ‘we are never in any direct epistemic contact with the world around us’ (p.50). We think we have direct and unmediated access to reality in the here and now but Metzinger maintains this is an illusion: the reality we experience from moment to a moment is a simulation. This claim is challenged by a number of alternative views of conscious experience, both in philosophy and in psychology, none of which receive any discussion by Metzinger. Perhaps most contentious is his claim that our brains are constantly in the process of generating an overarching, singular and coherent representation of reality as a whole. Metzinger calls this the *Globality Constraint* (§3.2.3). Metzinger’s Globality Constraint is called into question by a good deal of recent research on vision, not least of all the change-blindness experiments (Simon and Levin, 1997). These experiments suggest that our brains do not bother to produce internal representations which reproduce all of the detail in a visual scene. We have a broad idea of what is out there at each moment which we use to guide our action. The details are available in the world to be used as when they are needed—there is no need for our brains to reproduce all this information in the form of rich internal models or simulations.

There is room then to challenge another of Metzinger's claims to have uncovered an illusion at the heart of our conscious subjective experiences. Metzinger doesn't succeed in showing that the self is an illusion, and nor does he conclusively establish that the reality we ordinarily experience is one that our brain is continuously hallucinating. Even though BNO doesn't succeed in conclusively establishing its key claim it nevertheless takes us on a fascinating and rewarding journey.

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¹ This has been argued by Block, 1995.

² I am following Lewis, 1976 here.

³ Olson, 1997 defends a version of animalism. The view can arguably be traced back to Aristotle.