



“Zen without bells and whistles.”

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Being No One – The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity

by Thomas Metzinger

Thoughts Without a Thinker

When the 17th-century philosopher Rene Descartes made his famous statement "I think, therefore I am," he was certain that this intuition could not possibly be doubted. If there are thoughts, there must be someone who thinks. Descartes identified the thinker with "himself," and himself with the immortal soul. Unsatisfied with the Cartesian framework, scientists try to explain human self-consciousness as a natural phenomenon. This "naturalization project" is guided by the complex question: How may conscious selfhood (subjective experience and autonomous agency) emerge from causal chains of events in a physical world? In *Being No One*, the German philosopher Thomas Metzinger addresses this challenge and proposes a framework of how self-consciousness might be naturalized. In a bold, thorough, and thought-provoking synthesis, he combines a huge body of neuroscientific and psychological research data with philosophi-

cal considerations and fine-grained phenomenological reflections on real-life experiences.

Metzinger, a professor at Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany, maintains that there are actually no autonomous selves in the material world. The perception that one is the source of thoughts and actions is an illusion, emerging from physical processes in neuronal networks where no self can be identified. To put it provocatively, there are experiences, but no one who experiences; there are thoughts, but no thinker; actions, but no actor. Based on this premise, naturalization of self-consciousness means explaining the detailed representational, functional, and computational structure of the selfhood illusion. One must consider its evolutionary advantage, how it emerges from neuronal processes, and how it is related to the puzzling philosophical riddles in connection with consciousness, such as the mind-body problem.

According to Metzinger's "self-model theory of subjectivity," there are two central constituents of human self-consciousness, the phenomenal self-model (PSM) and the phenomenal model of the intentionality relation (PMIR). The first emerges if a representation of the organism itself is embedded into its conscious "mental world model" (the whole of its experience).



Every conscious mental content is available for flexible, non-automatic cognition and the control of action, and so is the PSM. The core of the self-model is formed by our awareness of our own body and its motions. Mental contents are experienced as mine-my leg, my thought, my memory of the past-if they are bound to this sensory core according to the binding and attribution rules known from cognitive psychology. For example, Daniel Wegner proposed that the conviction that an ongoing event is my action is based on the well known principles of causal attribution.

The self-model thus presents the organism as a subjective-objective thing, as part of the world. However, in order for the PSM to be useful, the relations between subject and object in philosophical terms a new the "arrow of intentionality"—must also be represented. This representation is what Metzinger calls the PMIR. The combination of the two components, PSM and PMIR, leads to full-blown subjectivity, i.e., to the experience of being in the world under a first-person perspective, of being someone who acts, perceives, and thinks autonomously and flexibly. This someone is what philosophers usually call a self. The author proposes that many human abilities, such as highly developed abstract cognition and understanding the mind of others, are rooted in the basic characteristics of the subject-world rela-

tionship as instantiated by the PSM and PMIR.

Metzinger maintains that this theoretical skeleton contains, in a nutshell, everything necessary for a naturalization of self-consciousness and its function. Using this perspective, he then thoroughly and subtly analyzes a wide variety of data, clinical case studies, and daily experiences, including the phenomenology, psychology, and neurobiology of the human sense of identity and its often dramatic disturbances. These fascinating explanations constitute one of the main rewards of reading the book. For example, he carefully considers Cotard's syndrome, in which patients experience themselves as being nonexistent, obviously contradicting Descartes's claim that the mere presence of thoughts leads to the conviction of existence. Metzinger presents the following analysis: The Cotard patients do not recognize any feelings, and as a result they do not construct an emotional self-model. Nevertheless, they still have a cognitive self-model that enables them to grasp thoughts about themselves. However, they experience themselves only as an object, not as a subject; a "conscious self-model is in place, but it is not a subject-model any- more, only an object-model." Interestingly, considerations of this kind might also serve to explain certain characteristics of spiritual and mystical experiences.



The theory of subjectivity Metzinger presents in *Being No One* seems very promising in that it offers a conceptual framework for explaining many empirical phenomena related to human self-consciousness. His basic strategy is to show that everything of interest regarding self-consciousness can be reduced to phenomenal representations. Under the presupposition that phenomenal representations emerge from neuronal processes, this means that naturalization of self-consciousness is indeed possible. Metzinger's interdisciplinary approach opens a new path toward a scientific theory of consciousness and self-consciousness.

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