Book Review

(Received: July 7, 2003; Final: July 15, 2003)

Review of Thomas Metzinger’s Being No One. The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity

Thinking about them—and theirselves has always been a favorite pastime of philosophers. Is the self an essence that survives all physical changes of the body, something indestructible and different in kind from the material? Or is it just a name we give to a bundle of mental perceptions? We might suspect that wishful thinking has impeded progress on this topic. For some, the self may be the modern descendant of the soul, harboring all the ideals about themselves they hold most dear—free will, autonomy, continuity, and morality.

Thomas Metzinger, one of the few ‘global players’ of German philosophy of mind, does away with any kind of warm and fuzzy intuitions about our selves and proposes a radical solution: no such things as selves exist in the world. What philosophers have taken as the essence of the human subject is nothing more (or less) than the content of a phenomenal model the human brain constructs of itself and its body. In his new book, Metzinger offers as representationalist analysis of consciousness, the phenomenal self and the first-person perspective. His approach is grounded in conceptual analysis that is guided, first and foremost, by an unreserved willingness to take the phenomenal nature of our mental lives seriously and to respect the results of empirical research. Metzinger presents his ideas in a healthy spirit of openness to revision and with a strong commitment to avoiding ideological views that disregard empirical data. Apart from being refreshingly undogmatic, Metzinger’s project is also highly ambitious. Its aim is to create a whole new universe of conceptual instruments that will improve our ability to grasp and dissect the phenomena of self-consciousness and subjectivity. Throughout the book, Metzinger largely stays within this universe. This gives him the opportunity to build up his theory without too much distraction. On the other hand—and this might be seen as a flaw—you won’t find much critical discussion of his theory with respect to those of other thinkers, let alone anything in the way of historical or conceptual overview of the topic. Overall, however, I think the fruitfulness of his theory excuses this somewhat ‘autistic’ strategy.

Metzinger’s universe consists of 12 conceptual tools, 10 constraints that mental content needs to satisfy in order to count as conscious content, and two new theoretical entities that form the decisive elements in understanding the phenomenal self and the first-person perspective.
The dozen conceptual tools allow us to refine our description of the representational roles played by mental content. These roles are presentation, representation, and simulation, each with a mental and phenomenal reading, and each applicable to either self- or non-self-related content. The term ‘mental’ is used for content that is, but has not yet become conscious, phenomenal content. Presentational content is strictly stimulus-correlated and nonconceptual and serves to flag the presence of a stimulus. The major class of phenomenal presentational content are sensory ‘qualia’ or sense impressions. An example for self-related phenomenal presentational content is proprioceptive input. An important characteristic of presentational content is that, in most cases, it cannot be re-presented and is not available for cognition and concept formation. This is different from representational content which serves to represent physical reality, both that which is external and internal to the individual. Simulational content, finally, is the representation of counterfactual content. It depicts possible states of the world or of the individual, and is the prerequisite for higher cognitive abilities such as thinking, planning, and goal-directed behavior. It allows for behavior which is no longer strictly stimulus-correlated. Metzinger emphasizes that while epistemologically, a representation is always a simulation (since we are never in direct, unmediated contact with reality), phenomenologically, a simulation can be experienced as either a representation or a simulation, depending on whether it is experienced as necessarily tied to the present moment or not.

Next, Metzinger proposes 10 constraints on phenomenal consciousness that specify features mental content has to possess in order to become conscious. Metzinger does not see these constraints as written in stone but as open to criticism and revision. True to his commitment to taking phenomenology seriously, Metzinger starts working out each constraint on the phenomenological level, but then proceeds to flesh them out on further levels of description (representational, functional, computational, and neurophysical), thereby maximizing their semantic content and specificity. He also makes it clear that he regards consciousness as a continuum rather than an all-or-nothing phenomenon. In fact, he argues that degrees of ‘phenomenality’ actually correspond to degrees of constraint satisfaction: mental content that satisfies more of the constraints he introduces will possess a higher degree of phenomenal ‘realness.’

Not all constraints are equally important. There is a basic set of three necessary constraints that have to be satisfied in order for a minimal degree of consciousness to emerge: globality, presentationality, and transparency. Globality means that phenomenal events always take place in a global context, they are embedded in a global representation of the world. No atoms of phenomenal experience exist in isolation. On the functional level, this constraint corresponds to the well known ‘global availability’ criterion proposed for example, by Baars (1988), Chalmers (1997), and Block (1995), stating that conscious content is characterized by being globally available for the control of thought, speech, and other behaviors. Metzinger adds global availability for attention as a further level of differentiation to the globality constraint. The function of globality is to enhance an organism’s behavioral flexibility and selectivity by allowing context-sensitive reactions to its environment. The second constraint, presentationality, means that phenomenal goings-on are always experienced as happening now, within, a ‘window of presence.’ The third constraint, transparency,