



Being Someone

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PSYCHE 11 (5), June 2005

KEYWORDS: Self, Phenomenology, Self-experience, Metzinger

COMMENTARY ON: Metzinger, T. (2003) *Being No One. The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press xii + 699pp. ISBN: 0-262-13417-9.

ABSTRACT: My discussion will focus on what is arguably the main claim of *Being No One*: That no such things as selves exist in the world and that nobody ever was or had a self. In discussing to what extent Metzinger can be said to argue convincingly for this claim, I will also comment on his methodological use of pathology and briefly make some remarks vis-à-vis his understanding and criticism of phenomenology.

Being No One is a book that engages with some truly interesting questions. It is also a very long book, and it will be impossible to deal with all its suggestions and to discuss all the problems it raises in a short commentary. What I intend to do in the following is to focus on three areas. My emphasis will be on Metzinger's main claim: no such things as selves exist in the world and nobody ever was or had a self. In discussing to what extent Metzinger can be said to argue convincingly for this claim in *Being No One*, I will also comment on his methodological use of pathology and briefly make some remarks vis-à-vis his understanding and criticism of phenomenology.

1.

The legitimacy of the notion of self has been questioned throughout the history of philosophy. To mention two classical figures, both Hume and Nietzsche have insisted that the positing of a conscious self or subject is descriptively unwarranted. If we describe the content of our consciousness accurately, if we actually pay attention to that which is given, we will not find any self. As Hume famously wrote in *A Treatise of Human Nature*:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception (Hume 1888: 252).

As for Nietzsche, one finds the following statement in one of his manuscripts from the 1880ies:

The “subject” is not something given, it is something added and invented and projected behind what there is (Nietzsche 1960: 903 [1968: 267]).

Thus, rather than having experiential reality, the self must be classified as a linguistic construct or as a product of reflection. Similar views have been defended by Husserl in *Logische Untersuchungen* and by Sartre in *La transcendance de l’ego*.

Recently, however, a rather different kind of what we might call self-skepticism has gained popularity among some philosophers and neuroscientists. According to this approach, what is crucial is not whether or not the self is a given. Whether something is real is not a question of its appearance, is not a question of whether it is experienced as real, rather it is a question of whether it fits into our scientific worldview. According to this criterion, the self has been weighed and has been found wanting.

One prominent exponent of this view is Thomas Metzinger, who in *Being No One* offers us a representationalist and functionalist analysis of what a consciously experienced first-person perspective is. The conclusion he reaches is quite unequivocal: “no such things as selves exist in the world: Nobody ever *was* or *had* a self” (p. 1).¹ Thus, for all scientific and philosophical purposes, the notion of a self can safely be eliminated. It is neither necessary nor rational to assume the existence of a self, since it is a theoretical entity that fulfills no indispensable explanatory function. In reality, the self is not an actually existing object, it is not an unchangeable substance, rather it is what Metzinger calls a representational construct. All that previously has been explained by reference to a phenomenological notion of “self” can in his view be better explained with the help of the notion of a phenomenally transparent self-model, i.e., a self-model whose

representational (or *misrepresentational*) nature cannot be recognized by the system using it (pp. 337, 563, 626).

The way we are given to ourselves on the level of conscious experience must consequently count as a deficit. Biological organisms exist, but an organism is not a self. Some organisms possess self-models, but such self-models are not selves, but merely complex brain states (p. 563). All that really exist are certain types of information-processing systems that are engaged in operations of self-modeling, and we should not commit the mistake of confusing a model with reality (pp. 370, 385, 390). Or to be more precise (since there is no I, you, or we), due to an autoepistemic closure, due to lack of information, due to a special form of epistemic darkness, the self-representing system is caught up in a naïve-realistic self-misunderstanding (pp. 332, 436-437, 564). Properly speaking, there is no one who confuses herself with anything, since there is no one who could be taken in by the illusion of a conscious self (p. 634). The self is a *mere* appearance, and on several occasions Metzinger compares the recognition of the illusory or fictitious character of one's own self, with the kind of insight that is one of the main goals of Buddhist enlightenment (pp. 550, 566).

What kind of argumentation does Metzinger employ in order to reach this eliminativist conclusion? For one thing, he criticizes what he calls analytical scholasticism with its tendency toward arrogant armchair theorizing (p. 3) and instead attributes a decisive role to neuroscientific investigations and to the study of pathological phenomena, i.e., to non-standard empirical challenges to our philosophical platitudes.

Before considering some of the cases discussed by Metzinger, let me briefly comment on this choice of methodology.

2.

One of the customary ways to test the validity of philosophical analyses has been to look for invalidating counter-examples. If none could be found, so much the better for the proposed thesis. This search has often been carried out by means of imagination. We don't necessarily have to come across (f)actual counter-examples. It is sufficient if we can imagine them. Thus, *imaginability* has often been taken as a mark of *possibility*: If something is imaginable, then it is, if not practically, or physically possible, at least possible in principle, that is, conceptually or metaphysically possible. And if that is the case, then the exceptions are relevant, and should be taken into account when assessing the validity of the philosophical claims.

Much contemporary philosophy, particularly analytical philosophy of mind, abounds with thought experiments meant to test and challenge our habitual assumptions about the nature of consciousness, the mind-body relation, personal identity etc. Thus, one often comes across references to zombies, brain-transplantations, twin-earths and teletransporters, etc. This way of doing philosophy has, however, not been met with universal approval.² One understandable reaction has been to ask whether it is legitimate to draw substantial philosophical conclusions from the fact that certain scenarios are

imaginable. Is our imagination always trustworthy, does it always attest to metaphysical possibility, or might it occasionally reflect nothing but our own ignorance?

If we ask somebody whether he can imagine a candle burning in a vacuum or a gold bar floating on water, and if the answer is yes, should we then conclude that there must be some possible world where gold bars have a different molecular weight, while remaining gold bars, and where candles can burn despite a lack of oxygen, or should we rather conclude that the person has only succeeded in imagining something that superficially resembles gold bars and burning candles? It does seem necessary to distinguish between imagining something in the sense of having a loose set of fantasies and imagining it in the sense of thinking it through carefully, and surely only the latter is of any value if we wish to establish whether a certain scenario is possible or not. The lesson to learn is undoubtedly, that the more ignorant we are, the easier it will seem to imagine something, since “the obstructive facts are not there to obtrude” (Wilkes 1988: 31). What seemed to be an imaginable possibility might on closer examination turn out to be an impossibility in disguise; but if we wish to derive any interesting conclusions from our thought experiments we need to assure ourselves that we are not faced with such impossibilities. In short, it might be wise to avoid mistaking an excessive imagination for an insight into possibility, just as we should avoid equating a failure of imagination with an insight into necessity. As Dennett puts it, “When philosophical fantasies become too outlandish—involving time machines, say, or duplicate universes or infinitely powerful deceiving demons—we may wisely decline to conclude *anything* from them. Our conviction that we understand the issues involved may be unreliable, an illusion produced by the vividness of the fantasy” (Dennett 1981: 230).

This criticism should not be misunderstood. Thinking about exceptional cases is, to quote Tamar Gendler “indispensable if we wish to avoid mistaking accidental regularities for regularities which reflect a deeper truth about the world” (Gendler 1999: 463). But since so many details have to be taken care of, if a thought experiment is really to be conclusive, it might occasionally be better to abandon fiction altogether and instead pay more attention to the startling facts that can be found in the actual world. Real life deviations can serve the same function as thought experiments. They can also probe and test our concepts and intuitions, and they can do so in a far more reliable way, since the background conditions are known to us. Being real phenomena, they do not harbor any concealed impossibilities. If we wish to test our assumptions about the unity of mind, the privacy of mental states, the nature of agency, or the role of emotions, far more can be learned from a close examination of pathological phenomena such as depersonalization, thought insertion, multiple personality disorder, cases of apraxia, or states of anhedonia than from thought experiments involving zipped brains or teletransporters.

Having said this, however, a word of caution is appropriate. Pathological phenomena and other empirical findings are of course open to interpretation. Their interpretation will usually depend upon the framework within which one is operating. Thus, the theoretical impact of an empirical case is not necessarily something that can be easily determined. One might agree with Metzinger that it is important not to underestimate the richness, complexity, and variety of conscious phenomena and that

non-standard cases of conscious (self-)experience can test the validity of a theory of self. But he might be overstating his point when he writes that “many classical theories of mind, from Descartes to Kant, will have to count as having been refuted, even after consideration of the very first example” of such pathological cases (p. 429). In fact, this quick and off-hand dismissal of 200 years of philosophy strikes me as being simply odd. What purpose does it serve? It is fine, if Metzinger himself does not want to engage with canonical philosophical figures, but if he wants to criticize them, he should do so on the basis of solid scholarship. (The same point applies to Metzinger’s treatment of phenomenology, but I will return to that in a moment). Contrary to what Metzinger suggests, it is rather doubtful that one will find many classical philosophers who have subscribed to the thesis that unnoticed errors about the content of one’s own mind are logically impossible (pp. 429, 431). Even if they had, it is by no means clear what kind of conclusions one should draw from pathological cases. Are pathological cases mere anomalies? Are they the exceptions that prove the rule? Or should they rather force us to abandon our habitual classification of behavior and experience with the realization that the normality that has been our point of departure has no priority, but is merely one variation among many? Does pathology reveal something fundamental that simply remains hidden in normal experience, or does it rather reflect or manifest an abnormal mode or some compensatory attempt to deal with a dysfunction (cf. Marcel 2003: 56)? Whatever the precise answer to these questions turns out to be, it does seem problematic, however, simply to draw unqualified conclusions about normal cases on the basis on pathology.

Although Metzinger spends considerable time discussing pathological cases, and although he repeatedly emphasizes how important it is to listen closely to the patients and to take their *phenomenology* seriously (pp. 446, 455), I also think he underestimates the difficulty of doing the latter. Frequently he simply, and mistakenly, equates it with taking the patients’ first-person assertions at face value. The danger of doing that comes to the fore in his analysis of both schizophrenic thought insertion and Cotard’s syndrome.

One of the prominent features of schizophrenia is that it typically involves forms of alienated self-consciousness. In what is known as thought insertion, for example, the patient might have introspective access to his or her own mental states, but still experience these states not only as being controlled or influenced by others, but as alien, as belonging to another. As one patient complained:

Thoughts are put into my mind like "Kill God." It is just like my mind working, but it isn't. They come from this chap, Chris. They are his thoughts (Quoted in Frith 1992: 66).

Thus, as Metzinger puts it, schizophrenia confronts us with situations where patients experience introspectively alienated conscious thoughts for which they have no sense of agency or ownership, and he takes this to demonstrate that selfhood or what he calls the

phenomenal quality of mineness is not required for conscious experience (pp. 334, 382, 445-446).

However, as Metzinger himself observes “phenomenal mineness is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon” (p. 443). It comes in degrees and perhaps the situation is slightly less clear-cut than Metzinger seems to think. Shaun Gallagher has recently argued for a distinction between a *sense of ownership* and a *sense of agency*. Whereas the sense of agency refers to the sense of being the initiator or source of an action or thought, the sense of ownership refers to the sense that it is *my* body that is moving, that the experiences I am living through are given as mine. In normal voluntary action, the sense of agency and ownership coincide. When I reach for a cup, the movement is felt as mine, and I have a sense of initiating or generating the movement. In cases of involuntary action, the two can come apart. If I am pushed or if I am undergoing spasms, I will experience ownership of the movement—I, rather than somebody else, am the one moving—but I will lack a sense of agency; I will lack an experience of being the agent or initiator of the movement (Gallagher 2000: 204).

It might not be difficult to find first-person statements about thought insertions, which (if taken in isolation and at face value) seem to offer ample evidence in support of the claim that some experiential states completely lack the quality of *mineness*. However, one should not overlook that the subjects of thought insertions clearly recognize that they are the subjects in whom the alien episodes occur. The patients are not confused about where the alien thoughts occur. They occur in the patients’ own minds. The sense of ownership is still intact. That is why they complain about it and suffer from it (cf. Stephens & Graham 2000: 8, 126, Gallagher 2000: 230). To put it differently, there is obviously nothing wrong in thinking that foreign thoughts occur in other minds. It is only the belief that alien thoughts occur in one’s *own* mind that is pathological and dreadful. Even if the inserted thoughts are felt as intrusive and strange, they cannot lack the quality of mineness completely, since the afflicted subject is quite aware that it is he himself rather than somebody else who is experiencing these alien thoughts. When schizophrenics assert that their thoughts are not their own, they do not mean that they themselves are not having the thoughts, but rather that someone else has inserted them and that they themselves are not responsible for generating them. Thus, rather than involving a lack of a sense of ownership, passivity phenomena like thought insertions involve a lack of a sense of authorship (or self-agency) and a misattribution of agency to someone or something else.

According to Metzinger, the phenomenology of schizophrenia is so well known that it is superfluous to offer any explicit case study of it (p. 445). Given the length of the book, I am not sure this was the best place to save space. If one looks at the recent work by for instance Josef Parnas and Louis Sass, one will find a careful examination of the phenomenology of schizophrenia that differs markedly from the account offered by Metzinger (Sass 2000, Parnas & Sass 2001, Parnas, Bovet & Zahavi 2002, Parnas 2003, Sass & Parnas 2003).

Cotard’s syndrome is an extreme kind of nihilistic delusion named after the French neurologist and psychiatrist Jules Cotard. It comprises any one of a series of

delusions ranging from the fixed and unshakable belief that one has lost money, organs, blood, or body parts to believing that one has died and is a walking corpse. In its most profound form, the delusion takes the form of a professed belief that one does not exist. Thus, patients suffering from Cotard's syndrome might deny their own existence, might explicitly state not only that they are dead, but also that they do not exist.

According to Metzinger, patients suffering from Cotard's syndrome are *truthfully* denying their own existence (p. 455). This choice of term seems slightly surprising, since one should have thought that the appropriate term would have been "sincerely", but given Metzinger's own adherence to a no-self doctrine, perhaps he thinks such patients are closer to the truth than non-pathological subjects? In any case, according to Metzinger, such delusional statements must be understood literally, and he therefore argues that they can function as knockdown arguments against any form of Cartesianism. But does the nihilistic delusion really testify to the complete absence of pre-reflective self-intimacy (p. 459)? The patients may cease using the first-person pronoun, but does that imply that they lack a first-personal access to their own experiences? In his own description of the syndrome, Metzinger provides a further piece of information that should make us hesitate before accepting any literal interpretation. This is the fact that Cotard patients frequently express a coexisting belief in their own *immortality* (p. 456)! Moreover, these patients will typically engage in activities, such as eating, conversing, etc., that are quite incongruent with the professed belief. To put it differently, they frequently demonstrate what is known in the psychiatric literature as "double bookkeeping". This feature is rather typical of schizophrenia, where patients with paranoid delusions or delusions of grandeur may express the belief that the nursing staff is poisoning their food or that they are the German emperor while unhesitatingly eating their lunch or cleaning the floors, respectively. The fact that the patients frequently fail to act on their delusions in the appropriate way puts any straightforward literal interpretation of the delusions in question. It also suggests that it may be wrong to interpret delusions as if they were simply strongly held ordinary beliefs that merely happen to be false.

To reject a literal interpretation of delusional statements and to argue that such a type of interpretation is unsatisfactory is not intended as an endorsement of the Jaspersian principle of un-understandability. Delusional statements are not meaningless, not simply empty speech acts, nor, for that matter, are they merely extravagant metaphors used to describe otherwise normal situations. Rather, they are attempts to express highly unusual and frequently dreadful experiential situations that inevitably stretch ordinary language to its limit. However, this is not the right place to offer an alternative positive account or interpretation of delusions since they are a highly complex topic in need of careful analysis.³ The only point I wish to make is that pathological phenomena, like any other empirical phenomena, are open to interpretation and that their proper elucidation frequently requires long clinical experience with patients. To identify a phenomenological approach to psychopathology with a literal interpretation of first-person statements, as Metzinger does, is much too facile and belittles the major contributions provided by phenomenological psychiatrists such as Minkowski, Binswanger, Tatossian, Tellenbach, and Blankenburg, etc.

3.

Let me return to Metzinger's basic claim. According to him, there are no such things as selves or subjects of experience in the world. All that exists are phenomenal selves, that is, selves that are nothing but properties of complex representational processes (p. 577). Granted that this is true, however, why does Metzinger adopt a no-self doctrine, why does he take the self to be an illusion? Why does he not rather argue like Churchland, who writes, "The brain makes us think that we have a self. Does that mean that the self I think I am is not real? No, it is as real as any activity of the brain. It does mean, however, that one's self is not an ethereal bit of 'soul stuff'" (Churchland 2002: 124). Part of the reason for this seems to be that Metzinger himself, at least implicitly, remains committed to a rather classical conception of the self. According to this conception, the self is a mysteriously unchanging essence, a process-independent ontological substance that could exist all by itself, i.e., in isolation from the rest of the world (pp. 577, 626). Metzinger denies the existence of such an entity, and then concludes that no such things as selves exist. It should be obvious, however, that this conclusion would only be warranted if Metzinger's definition of the self were the only one available. And I hardly need to point out, that this is by no means the case. On the contrary, it would be an obvious exaggeration to claim that the notion of "self" is unequivocal and that there is a widespread consensus about what exactly it means to be a self. If one looks at the contemporary discussion one will find it to be literally bursting with competing definitions of the self. In a well-known article from 1988, Neisser distinguished five different selves: The ecological, the interpersonal, the extended, the private, and the conceptual self (Neisser 1988: 35). Eleven years later, Strawson summed up a recent discussion on the self that had taken place in *Journal of Consciousness Studies* by enumerating no less than twenty-one concepts of self (Strawson 1999: 484).

Let me briefly present *one* of these alternative conceptions. This is a conception that has been developed in phenomenology. I earlier mentioned that Sartre is known for having dismissed an egological account of consciousness in his early work *La transcendance de l'ego*. But whereas Sartre in that work had characterized non-egological consciousness as *impersonal*, he describes this view as mistaken in both *L'être et le néant* and in the important article "Conscience de soi et connaissance de soi". Although no ego exists on the pre-reflective level, consciousness remains personal because consciousness is at bottom characterized by a fundamental self-givenness or self-referentiality which Sartre terms *ipseity* (selfhood, from the Latin, *ipse*) (Sartre 1943: 142. Cf. 1948: 63). Sartre's crucial move is consequently to distinguish between ego and self. When Sartre speaks of a self, he is referring to something very basic, something characterizing (phenomenal) consciousness as such. It is something that characterizes my very mode of existence, and although I can fail to articulate it, it is not something I can fail to be. As Sartre also writes, "pre-reflective consciousness is self-consciousness. It is this same notion of *self* which must be studied, for it defines the very being of consciousness" (Sartre 1943: 114 [1956: 76]).

In *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Merleau-Ponty occasionally speaks of the subject as realizing its *ipseity* in its embodied being-in-the-world (Merleau-Ponty 1945:

467). However, he also refers to Husserl's investigations of inner time-consciousness and writes that the original temporal flow must count as the archetypical relationship of self to self and that it traces out an interiority or *ipseity* (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 487). One page later, Merleau-Ponty writes that consciousness is always affected by itself and that the word "consciousness" has no meaning independently of this fundamental self-givenness (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 488).

Michel Henry repeatedly characterizes selfhood in terms of an interior self-affection (Henry 1963: 581, 584, 585). Insofar as subjectivity reveals itself to itself, it is an *ipseity* (Henry 2003: 52). Or as he puts it in his early work *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*: "The interiority of the immediate presence to itself constitutes the essence of ipseity" (Henry 1965: 53 [1975: 38]). What we find in Henry is consequently a clear accentuation of the link between selfhood and self-awareness. Because consciousness is as such characterized by a primitive, tacit, self-awareness, it is appropriate to ascribe a fundamental type of *ipseity* to the experiential phenomena. More precisely, Henry links a basic notion of selfhood to the first-personal givenness of experiential life.

The crucial idea propounded by all of the phenomenologists is that an understanding of what it means to be a self calls for an examination of the structure of experience, and vice versa. To put it differently, the claim being made is that the investigations of self and experience have to be integrated if both are to be understood. More precisely, the (minimal or core) self is claimed to possess experiential reality, it is taken to be closely linked to the first-person perspective, and is in fact identified with the first-personal *givenness* of the experiential phenomena. At its most primitive, self-consciousness is simply a question of having first-personal access to one's own consciousness; it is a question of the first-personal givenness or manifestation of experiential life. This first-personal givenness of experiential phenomena is not something quite incidental to their being, a mere varnish that the experiences could lack without ceasing to be experiences. On the contrary, this first-personal givenness makes the experiences *subjective*. Although there are different types of experiences (the smelling of hay, the seeing of a sunset, the touching of an ice cube etc.), and although there are different types of experiential givenness (perceptual, imaginative, and recollective, etc.) there are common features as well. One such common feature is the quality of *mineness* (or to use Heidegger's term "*Jemeinigkeit*"). Whether a certain experience is experienced as mine or not does not depend on something apart from the experience, but on the givenness of the experience. If the experience is given to me in a first-personal mode of presentation, it is experienced as my experience, otherwise not. To be conscious of *oneself*, is consequently not to capture a pure self that exists in separation from the stream of consciousness, rather it just entails being conscious of an experience in its first-personal mode of givenness. In short, the self referred to is not something standing beyond or opposed to the stream of experiences, rather it is a feature or function of their givenness. It is the invariant dimension of first-personal givenness in the multitude of changing experiences.⁴

Incidentally, this view makes it clear that self-awareness is not to be understood as an awareness of an isolated, worldless self, nor is the self located and hidden in the head. To be self-aware is not to interrupt the experiential interaction with the world in order to turn one's gaze inwards; on the contrary, self-awareness is always the self-awareness of a world-immersed self. The self is present to itself precisely and indeed only when it is engaged in the world. It would consequently be a decisive mistake to interpret the phenomenological notion of a core, or minimal, self as a Cartesian-style mental residuum, that is, as some kind of self-enclosed and self-sufficient interiority.⁵ The phenomenological notion of self is fully compatible with a strong emphasis on the fundamental intentionality, or being-in-the-world, of consciousness. It is no coincidence that even Heidegger employed such a minimal notion of self (cf. Zahavi 2003b).

If we return to Metzinger, we will find him endorsing a rather similar position, since he also argues for a close link between selfhood, self-experience, and the first-person perspective. As he puts it, during conscious experience, human beings experience themselves as being someone. But the phenomenology of being someone is essentially connected to the phenomenology of perspectivalness, to the experiential perspectivity of one's own consciousness. Our experiential life possesses a focus of experience, a point of view. It is a first-person perspective in the sense of being tied to a self. Thus, it doesn't make sense to speak of a first-person perspective without speaking of a self (pp. 5, 157, 303). But what does this experiential selfhood amount to? How should one articulate the non-conceptual sense of ownership that goes along with the phenomenal experience of being someone? Articulating (or rediscovering) insights found in phenomenology, Metzinger writes that there seems to be a primitive and pre-reflective form of phenomenal self-consciousness which underlies all higher-order and conceptually mediated forms of self-consciousness, and in which these have to be anchored if an infinite regress is to be avoided. What this pre-reflective self-intimacy amounts to, is a very basic and seemingly spontaneous, effortless way of inner acquaintance, of "being in touch with oneself," of being "infinitely close to oneself." It can also be articulated in terms of a pre-reflective and non-conceptual sense of ownership or consciously experienced "mineness" that accompanies bodily sensations, emotional states and cognitive contents. In non-pathological cases, all these mental states are pre-attentively and automatically, and quite independently of any higher-level cognitive operations, experienced subjectively as one's own states, as part of one's own stream of consciousness. This consciously experienced selfhood—which precedes any thinking of the self—differs from all other forms of experiential content by its highly invariant nature. Excepting pathological cases, and contrary to, say, the scent of crushed mint leaves or the taste of buttermilk, it is always there. Frequently it will recede into the background of phenomenal experience. It will be attentionally available, but will often not be attended to at all, but merely be expressed as a subtle background presence (pp. 158, 267, 291, 626).

There is, superficially at least, a rather striking overlap between Metzinger's description and the account favored by numerous phenomenologists. That is also where the agreement ends. The phenomenologists would argue that the self is real if it has experiential reality, and that the validity of our account of the self is to be measured by its

ability to be faithful to experience, by its ability to capture and articulate (invariant) experiential structures. By contrast, Metzinger argues that it would be a fallacy (what he calls the error of phenomenological reification) to conclude from the content and structure of phenomenal self-experience to the literal properties of an internal and non-physical object, which is what Metzinger takes the self to be (p. 271).⁶ In Metzinger's view, a phenomenological account of selfhood has no metaphysical impact. Our self-experience, our primitive pre-reflective feeling of conscious selfhood, is never truthful in that it does not correspond to any single entity inside or outside of the self-representing system (p. 565). But why should the reality of the self depend upon whether it faithfully mirrors either subpersonal mechanisms or external (mind independent) entities? If we were wholeheartedly to endorse such a restrictive metaphysical principle, we would declare the entire life-world, the world we live in, and know and care about, illusory.

Is this in fact Metzinger's own position? After having read *Being No One*, I am still unsure about how deep his eliminativism runs. At one point in the book, Metzinger explicitly characterizes our phenomenal experience during waking state as an online hallucination (p. 51). What are the implications of this claim? Metzinger argues that the central ontological claim of his position is that no such things as selves exist. But considering Metzinger's repeated claim that phenomenal content cannot count as epistemically justified content couldn't one by using the very same arguments show that there is no such "thing" as phenomenal consciousness itself (pp. 401, 404)? And what about the cultural and historical world, is that also fictitious? If there are no I, you, and we, how can there then be "a rich social reality" (p. 590)? Given Metzinger's view, would the truly consistent position not be to argue that there are in fact no such things as chairs, playing cards, operas, marriage ceremonies and civil wars?

4.

Given how frequently Metzinger employs the term "phenomenology" in *Being No One*, it is rather unsettling how little time he spends on actually discussing its proper meaning. From the context, it is clear that Metzinger uses the term in a variety of different ways. Occasionally, he seems to identify it simply with the (introspectively accessible) experiential domain, as when he writes that "phenomenology supervenes on internally realized functional properties" (p. 22). Frequently, he seems to consider it as a synonym for folk-psychology, i.e., as a supposedly naïve methodology or a pre-scientific set of beliefs about the working of the mind. This equivocation is for instance expressed when Metzinger talks about folk phenomenology (pp. 268, 488). Finally and rather infrequently, he also refers to phenomenology as a specific philosophical tradition. These uses of the term are however never explicitly distinguished by Metzinger, and the ambiguity blurs his actual claims. At one point, for instance, he writes "Neurophenomenology is possible; phenomenology is impossible" (p. 83). From the context, it is not completely clear what type of phenomenology Metzinger wants to banish. However, one does get the impression that Metzinger takes the different uses of the term to be intimately connected. They are all part of the same package. Philosophical phenomenology is a refined (dressed up) form of folk psychology whose main claim is that introspection can provide us with direct access to and true knowledge about the

experiential domain. If this is a correct reading of Metzinger, and if Metzinger wants to claim that philosophical phenomenology is condemned to failure then one must add that his rejection of this philosophical tradition is as well-grounded and as convincing as his dismissal of the classical philosophy of mind from Descartes to Kant, i.e., not at all. This is not the right place to clarify what classical philosophical phenomenology actually is, and I have done so extensively elsewhere, but let me briefly show why it, most emphatically, is not some kind of introspectionism. Let us start by looking at Edmund Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen*. This book is a recognized milestone in 20th century philosophy, and indisputably a work in phenomenological philosophy. In fact, it constituted what Husserl himself took to be his "breakthrough" to phenomenology. What kind of analyses does one find in the book? One finds Husserl's famous attack on and rejection of psychologism; a defence of the irreducibility of logic and the ideality of meaning; an analysis of pictorial representations; a theory of the part-whole relation; a sophisticated account of intentionality; and an epistemological clarification of the relation between concepts and intuitions, to mention just a few of the many topics treated in the book. Is the method at work introspection, and is this a work in introspective psychology? I think it should be obvious to anybody who has actually bothered to read the book that the answer is no. Should we then conclude that the book is after all not a work in phenomenology or should we rather reconsider our hasty identification of phenomenology and introspective psychology? Again, I think the answer should be obvious.

Although it would be an exaggeration to claim that Husserl's analyses in *Logische Untersuchungen* found universal approval among the subsequent generations of phenomenologists,⁷ I don't know of any instance at all where Husserl's position was rejected on the basis of an appeal to "better" introspective evidence. On the contrary, Husserl's analyses gave rise to an intense discussion among phenomenological philosophers, and many of the analyses were subsequently improved and refined by thinkers like Sartre, Heidegger, Lévinas and Derrida (cf. Zahavi & Stjernfelt 2002). Compare this to Metzinger who claims that the phenomenological method cannot provide a method for generating any growth of knowledge since there is no way one can reach intersubjective consensus on claims like "this is the purest blue anyone can perceive" vs. "no it isn't, it has a slight green hue." (p. 591). But these claims are not the type of claims that are to be found in works by phenomenological philosophers, and to suggest so is to reveal one's lack of familiarity with the tradition in question.

All the major figures in the phenomenological tradition have openly and unequivocally denied that they are engaged in some kind of introspective psychology and that the method they employ is a method of introspection (cf. Gurwitsch 1966: 89-106, Husserl 1984b: 201-216, Heidegger 1993: 11-17, Merleau-Ponty 1945: 70). To provide a fully exhaustive account of their reasons for this denial would necessitate a positive account of what classical phenomenology actually amounts to, and to do so *in extenso* falls, as already mentioned, outside the scope of this paper. However, let me try to briefly list a few of the main reasons.⁸

To start with, it is important to realize that classical phenomenology is not just another name for a kind of psychological self-observation; rather it must be appreciated as a special form of transcendental philosophy that seeks to reflect on the conditions of possibility of experience and cognition.⁹ Thus, it is no coincidence that Husserl categorically rejects the attempt to equate the notion of phenomenological intuition with a type of inner experience or introspection (Husserl 1987: 36), and even argues that the very suggestion that phenomenology is attempting to reconstitute the method of introspection (*innerer Beobachtung*) is preposterous and perverse (Husserl 1952: 38).

What is behind this categorical dismissal? There are many different reasons. One is that phenomenology is concerned with disclosing what it takes to be a *non-psychological* dimension of consciousness. As Husserl writes in the early lecture course *Einleitung in die Logik und Erkenntnistheorie* from 1906-7: “If consciousness ceases to be a human or some other empirical consciousness, then the word loses all psychological meaning, and ultimately one is *led back to something absolute that is neither physical nor psychical being in a natural scientific sense*. However, in the phenomenological perspective this is the case throughout the field of givenness. It is precisely the apparently so obvious thought, that everything given is either physical or psychical that must be abandoned” (Husserl 1984b: 242). Phenomenology is certainly interested in the phenomena and in their conditions of possibility, but phenomenologists would typically argue that it would be a metaphysical fallacy to locate the phenomenal realm within the mind, and to suggest that the way to access and describe it is by turning the gaze inwards (*introspectio*). As Husserl already pointed out in the *Logische Untersuchungen* the entire facile divide between inside and outside has its origin in a naïve commonsensical metaphysics and is phenomenologically suspect and inappropriate when it comes to understanding the nature of intentionality (Husserl 1984a: 673, 708). But this divide is precisely something that the term “introspection” buys into and accepts. To speak of introspection is to (tacitly) endorse the idea that consciousness is inside the head and the world outside. The same criticism can also be found in Heidegger, who denies that the relation between Dasein and world can be grasped with the help of the concepts “inner” and “outer” (Heidegger 1986: 62), and in Merleau-Ponty, who writes that “Inside and outside are inseparable. The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself” (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 467 [1962: 407]). As Merleau-Ponty also writes, it has for a long time been customary to define the object of psychology by claiming that it is accessible to one person only, namely the bearer of the mental state in question, and that the only way to grasp this object is by means of a special kind of internal perception or introspection. However, this return to the “immediate data of consciousness” quickly turned out to face quite some challenges. Not only did it prove difficult to communicate any insights concerning this private realm to others, but the investigator himself could never be really sure about what exactly this immediate and pure experiential life amounted to, since it by definition eluded every attempt to express, grasp or describe it by means of public language and concepts (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 70). As Merleau-Ponty then proceeds to point out, phenomenology has demonstrated how hopelessly mistaken this view is. According to the findings of phenomenology, the world of experience, the phenomenal field, is not some “inner world”, nor is the phenomenon a “state of consciousness” or a

“mental fact” the experience of which requires a special act of introspection. Rather, we should realize that consciousness is not something that is visible to one person only, and invisible to everybody else. Consciousness is not something exclusively inner, something cut off from the body and the surrounding world, as if the life of the mind could remain precisely the same even if it had no bodily and linguistic expressions (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 70-71).

Merleau-Ponty ends up declaring that phenomenology is distinguished in all its characteristics from introspective psychology and that the difference in question is a difference in principle. Whereas the introspective psychologist considers consciousness as a mere sector of being, and tries to investigate this sector in the same way the physicist tries to investigate his, the phenomenologist realizes that consciousness ultimately calls for a transcendental clarification that goes beyond common sense postulates and brings us face to face with the problem concerning the constitution of the world (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 72).

By adopting the phenomenological attitude we pay attention to the givenness of public objects (trees, planets, paintings, symphonies, numbers, states of affairs, social relations, etc.). But we do not simply focus on the objects precisely as they are given; we also focus on the subjective side of consciousness, thereby becoming aware of our subjective accomplishments and of the intentionality that is at play in order for the objects to appear as they do. When we investigate appearing objects, we also disclose ourselves as datives of manifestation, as those to whom objects appear. The topic of the phenomenological analyses is consequently not a worldless subject, and phenomenology does not ignore the world in favor of consciousness. On the contrary, phenomenology is interested in consciousness because it is world-disclosing. Phenomenology should therefore be understood as a philosophical analysis of the different types of givenness (perceptual, imaginative, recollective etc.), and in connection with this as a reflective investigation of those structures of experience and understanding that permit different types of beings to show themselves as what they are

Phenomenology is not concerned with establishing what a given individual might currently be experiencing. Phenomenology is not interested in qualia in the sense of purely individual data that are incorrigible, ineffable, and incomparable. In fact, strictly speaking phenomenology is not even interested in psychological processes (in contrast to behavioral processes or physical processes). Rather, phenomenology is interested in the very dimension of givenness or appearance and seeks to explore its essential structures and conditions of possibility. Such an investigation is beyond any divide between psychical interiority and physical exteriority, since it is an investigation of the dimension in which any object—be it external or internal—manifests itself (cf. Waldenfels 2000: 217). It is an investigation which aims at disclosing intersubjectively valid structures, and its analyses are open for corrections and control by any (phenomenologically tuned) subject.

Phenomenology has quite different aims and concerns than introspective psychology. Couldn't it be argued, however, that the difference in question, rather than being a difference in whether or not introspection is employed, is merely a difference in

the use that the introspective results are being put to? To put it differently, couldn't it be argued that since introspection is a method used to investigate consciousness from the first-person perspective, and given phenomenology's renowned emphasis on such a first-person approach to consciousness, it is simply ridiculous to deny that phenomenology makes use of introspection? But this argument simply begs the question by defining introspection in such general terms that it covers all investigations of consciousness that takes the first-person perspective seriously.

As already mentioned, Metzinger also employs the term "neurophenomenology". This term was originally coined by Francisco Varela, who gave it a precise definition and envisaged it as a novel approach in cognitive science. According to Varela, neurophenomenology is an approach that rejects representationalist and computationalist accounts of consciousness and cognition, and which considers the data from phenomenologically disciplined analyses of lived experience and the experimentally based accounts found in cognitive neuroscience to have equal status and to be linked by mutual constraints. More specifically, Varela argued that the subjective dimension is intrinsically open to intersubjective validation, if only we avail ourselves of a method and procedure for doing so. He thought classical philosophical phenomenology had provided such a method and considered it crucial for the future development of cognitive science that cognitive scientists actually learned to use some of the methodological tools that were developed by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty (Varela 1996, 1997). It is obvious that Metzinger does not have the same agenda in mind as Varela, but although he speaks repeatedly of neurophenomenology, he never provides his own definition of what it actually amounts to.

During the past 10-15 years, there has been a lot of new work dealing with the methodological problem of how to integrate phenomenology, philosophy of mind, and cognitive science. I am thinking of work by, for instance, Varela, Petitot, Thompson and Gallagher (Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1991, Varela 1996, 1997, Varela & Shear 1999, Petitot 1995, Roy, Petitot, Pachoud & Varela 1999, Gallagher 1997).¹⁰ However, *Being No One* contains no discussion of this work. Given Metzinger's frequent reference to phenomenology, and given how crucial the whole issue of methodology is to his own enterprise, this silence is regrettable.

5.

In the beginning of *Being No One*, Metzinger writes that he has tried to steer a middle course between philosophy and empirical science in the book, and that his treatment of philosophical issues will probably strike philosophers as much too brief and superficial (p.4). Despite the length of the book, I agree. There are a number of quite controversial philosophical assumptions at play in *Being No One*; assumptions that are presupposed but never argued for. This includes not only the issue of teleofunctionalism, something that is admitted by Metzinger himself, but also what I would consider Metzinger's endorsement of an unrestrained scientism (natural science is the sole arbiter of what there is) and of what might be called a "neural representationalism": "We" are living in a vivid hallucination generated by the brain, and are never in direct epistemic contact with the

world surrounding us. Thus, it is no coincidence that Metzinger is quite fond of the brain-in-the-vat scenario (pp. 26, 30, 50-51, 404, 547). I hardly need to point out that most interesting books in philosophy do make tacit (or explicit) assumptions so this is not something that is unique to *Being No One*. All I am saying is that the book would have been philosophically more interesting if Metzinger had actually attempted to argue for these claims. His conclusions might be convincing to readers who share his basic assumptions, but to those of us who do not, the book does not offer arguments that would persuade us to change our view.

In my view, the most interesting part of the book is Metzinger's clarification of the different structures of phenomenal experience. His descriptions of the link between selfhood, self-experience, and the first-person perspective have strong affinities—and I am not sure Metzinger himself will take this as praise, though it is certainly intended as such—with positions developed by leading figures in French and German 20th Century philosophy. Incidentally, this overlap may also indicate that Metzinger might have been a bit too rash when he, without offering any arguments, wrote that the by far best contributions to the philosophy of mind in the last century have come from analytical philosophers (p. 3). What remains completely unconvincing to me is the eliminativist consequence drawn by Metzinger. Why not rather argue like Damasio—whose notion of a core self is not that different from Metzinger's own description—and claim that a sense of self is an indispensable part of the conscious mind and that the conscious mind and its constituent properties are real entities, not illusions, and must be investigated as the personal, private, subjective experiences that they are (Damasio 1999: 7, 308)?

In my view, the right conclusion to draw from Metzinger's account is not that there is no self, but that the self is not what some took it to be. The right conclusion to draw is that a substantialist and reifying concept of self should be abandoned—as it rightly has been long time ago by central figures in 19th and 20th Century philosophy.

Notes

¹ All subsequent unmarked page references in the text are to Metzinger's *Being No One*.

² For an extensive criticism, cf. Wilkes 1988.

³ See, however, Parnas & Sass 2001, Parnas 2004.

⁴ For a sustained defence of these notions of self-awareness and self, cf. Zahavi 1999, 2000, 2003a, and in particular 2005b.

⁵ Although Henry might in fact be read as defending a kind of immanentism, I would take exception to this aspect of his position (cf. Zahavi 1999).

⁶ Since the phenomenologists would emphatically deny that the self is an object (be it an internal or an external one) one might ask whether it is Metzinger himself who is engaged in a process of reification.

⁷ I hardly need to point out that the lack of such a universal agreement cannot be taken as proof that Husserl's method was in fact based on introspection. As a case in point, think

of Wittgenstein's private language argument. Although there is little agreement between the commentators about how precisely one should interpret and evaluate it, nobody would want to argue that the argument is introspective in character. For a more direct demonstration of the fact that the discussion of the merits of, say, Husserl's analysis of time-consciousness doesn't come down to a clash of private intuitions, cf. the debate between Dainton and Gallagher in earlier issues of *Psyche* (Dainton 2003, Gallagher 2003a).

⁸ For a more comprehensive account of the basic features of Husserlian phenomenology, cf. Zahavi 2003c. For a focussed discussion on the relation between heterophenomenology and classical phenomenology, cf. Zahavi 2006.

⁹ For a discussion of the unity of the phenomenological tradition, cf. Zahavi 2005a.

¹⁰ For some highly relevant contributions to this discussion that have only appeared after the publication of *Being No One*, cf. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 10/9-10, in particular the papers by Lutz & Thompson (2003) and Gallagher (2003b).

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