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The Ego Tunnel: The Science of Mind and the Myth of the Self

Cameron Buckner [a]

[a] Department of Philosophy, Indiana University, Bloomington, 1033 E. Third Street, Sycamore Hall 026, Bloomington, IN 47405, USA

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Book review

The Ego Tunnel: The Science of Mind and the Myth of the Self
Thomas Metzinger
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In *The ego tunnel*, Thomas Metzinger offers us an original and informed overview of the science and philosophy of consciousness. In contrast to his earlier books, Metzinger's discussion is aimed at not professional philosophers or scientists, but rather the wider public. The book's most distinctive contribution is Metzinger's visionary analysis of the future of consciousness research. Updating themes commonly associated with the Churchlands (Churchland, 1984; Churchland, 1994), Metzinger warns that this future research will grant us new capabilities to understand and manipulate our own conscious states, and we had better get ready.

While the book provides a broad overview of heterogeneous issues, it is organized into three main parts. The first part reviews the state of the art of the science and philosophy of consciousness and reprises his well-known positions on its central questions. Metzinger usefully arranges this material around six "problems":

1. The One-World-Problem: why and how are the various aspects of conscious experience organized into a single reality?
2. The Now Problem: how and why is experience organized into James' "specious present"?
3. The Reality Problem: why do we naturally suppose that experience puts us into direct contact when the world, when science seems to tell us that those experiences are rather the product of temporally and spatially extended neural processes?
4. The Ineffability Problem: why does the content of experience seem to outstrip our ability to describe it?
5. The Evolution Problem: how did consciousness evolve, and what is its biological function?
6. The Who Problem: what is the entity that has all these experiences?

This section unfolds like an exposé; Metzinger debunks conscious experience as the greatest trick of a master illusionist, the brain. Our "direct" and "unified" perception of reality is explained as a complex inferential process enabled by synchronized neural firing; the "specious present" is shown to be a misleading by-product of speed constraints inherent in neural mechanisms which operate on their own output; and the "simple self" is shown, through various illusions and agnosias (such as Cotard's delusion, in which otherwise normal subjects experience a loss of bodily self-recognition, often causing them to believe that they are dead or do not exist) to be composed of a diverse variety of subpersonal processes. This line of thought

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culminates in his eliminativist thesis that ''the self'' as we know it is a sham—that ''no such things as selves exist in the world'' (p. 8).

While this eliminativist thesis has some panache, ''quining'' a concept which plays such a central role in folk discourse (as opposed to a term of art like 'qualia'; Dennett, 1987) may underestimate the resilience of that discourse. For the main questions that concern Metzinger, there is little difference between saying ''there is no such thing as the self'' and ''the self is not quite what we supposed it to be.'' Metzinger supports his eliminativism by appeal to empirical studies on phenomena such as the well-known ''rubber-hand'' illusion. In this illusion, a subject's real hand is covered from view, and a rubber hand is placed next to it on a table. The real and rubber hands are then stroked simultaneously with a probe; eventually, subjects come to experience the rubber hand as their own, even feeling the presence of a ''phantom arm'' leading up to the hand. These experiments, however, can be interpreted to imply only that our brains *sometimes* and *in some ways* misrepresent the nature of the self, rather than that our sense of self is *always* and *nothing but* an illusion. Eliminativist theses must be bolstered by strong assumptions about the semantics of our folk concepts, and Metzinger's is no exception. He suggests that it is essential to our concept of the self that it ''stays the same across time'' and that it ''could not in principle be divided into parts'' (p. 208). For concepts of phenomena as significant and multifaceted as selfhood, however, these essentialist proposals are rarely convincing. While our practices may require some revision in the face of future consciousness research, I expect that we shall still find ourselves to be agents with our own distinctive goals and projects, largely in control of our own actions, located at a particular place and time, and endowed with a distinctively first-person perspective on our world and on the workings of our own minds. (For an instructive comparison, see Stich's reversal on eliminativism about intentional states between Ramsey, Stich, & Garon, 1990, and Stich & Laurence, 1994.)

Indeed, naturalist philosophers of mind are increasingly turning away from eliminativism about the self, preferring instead a ''partial error theory'' of self-consciousness, which holds that self-consciousness may mislead in some ways or in contexts but is generally veridical (e.g., Pereboom, 2011). Metzinger does consider more moderate positions in chapter 8, where he suggests that we could ''say that the self is a widely distributed process in the brain. . . [or that] the system as a whole. . . can be called a 'self''' (p. 208). He rejects these positions, however, arguing that they ''don't take the phenomenology really seriously.'' But again, I am disputing semantics, not phenomenology. Perhaps Metzinger supposes his essentialist semantics to be supported by phenomenology, too. I must confess I don't know what it would be like to have the experience *that a certain property is essential* (rather than merely *important*) to a given concept. At any rate, suppose there is such phenomenology; Metzinger himself is already committed to the general fallibility of phenomenology as a guide to *ontology*. Why not suppose phenomenology to be a fallible guide to *semantics* as well?

Other than this particular semantic issue, I think that Metzinger takes exactly the right attitude towards phenomenology. Indeed, the second part of Metzinger's book focuses on the redemption and revival of phenomenology as a central research area in analytic philosophy of mind. Metzinger's attitude diverges from Husserl's (1900/1973) original vision in recommending a phenomenology which cooperates directly with "third-person" psychology and neuroscience. For Metzinger, phenomenological reports provide an additional—and in the case of consciousness studies, *indispensible*—source of data to be integrated with these third-person investigations. The phenomenologist's task, however, is not to articulate how the world must be constructed if those reports are wholly accurate, but rather to explain why people would be tempted to make those (fallible) reports, given their psychological and neural constitution.

Some of the most fascinating passages in Metzinger's book report his own phenomenology experienced during his adventures in what he calls "philosophical psychonautics," or his attempts to induce the more exotic conscious states like out of body experiences (OBEs) and lucid dreaming. He includes several excerpts he recorded in his dream journal as a young man, which describe his attempts to obtain verifiable observations from several OBEs:

> I attempted to walk to the open window, but instead found myself smoothly gliding there, arriving almost instantaneously. I carefully touched the wooden frame, running my hands over it. Tactile sensations were clear but different—that is, the sensation of relative warmth or cold was absent. I leaped through the window and went upward in a spiral . . . . (p. 88)

The peculiarity and incompleteness of the phenomenology found in this and other OBE experiences, he suggests, is better explained as the halting exploration of a mental model by a malfunctioning brain than by appeal to souls or astral projections. To his more intrepid readers, Metzinger even offers instructions on self-inducing OBEs and lucid dreaming—though the reader is cautioned not to repeat some of his more "pitiless self-experiments" such as deliberately dehydrating himself while focusing on a glass of water in the kitchen before bedtime, or requesting the anesthetic ketamine (which has been associated with OBEs) during surgery (p. 84).

Metzinger recognizes, of course, that the anecdotes obtained through such methods are not serious science, and that any insights gleaned from them must be supported by rigorous, controlled empirical research. One might here, for example, suggest that experimental philosophy has a role to play in the new phenomenology, by investigating phenomenological reports across the lines of education, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and culture, and attempting to determine which aspects of those reports seem to be universal and which are rather culturally-specific, theory-laden, or produced by priming or framing effects. Nevertheless, these accounts are just the right tool to achieve Metzinger's aims, serving both to support particular functional accounts of consciousness and to reignite wonder amongst a new generation of amateur and professional philosophers about the nature of their own conscious states.

Finally, the third part of the book calls for the redoubled development of the field of ''neuroethics.'' Metzinger warns that the new sciences of consciousness will bring with them capacities to induce a variety of familiar and exotic phenomenal states at will, in both artificial and natural agents. Artificial intelligence researchers may soon be able to create ''conscious robots''—an endeavor which Metzinger cautions against, given that such robots would probably endure a great deal of suffering during the trial and error process required to perfect artificial consciousness. He also predicts that the nascent field of ''phenotechnology'' will almost certainly grant us a variety of pharmacological and prosthetic methods to explore the ''unfathomable depth of our phenomenal state-space'' (p. 217). Sensations of the most intense pleasure, complete calm, spiritual epiphany, and even fractured or ''self-less'' phenomenal experiences may soon be available on demand. How can we decide which states of consciousness are ethically good, bad, or neutral—and which should be legally permitted or forbidden? Metzinger discusses a dizzying array of possibilities and questions; while he concedes he is barely able to begin answering those questions, one cannot help but agree with him that they are pressing, and that informed decisions will soon have to be made.

Notably, three chapters conclude with a transcript of an interview conducted by Metzinger with a well-known neurophysiologist. These interviews include a discussion of the relationship between feature binding and the unity of consciousness with Wolf Singer, of the special kinds of consciousness found in dreaming with Allan Hobson, and of the role of mirror neurons in intersubjectivity with Vittorio Gallese. Though these conversations are at times informal from a philosophical perspective, they provide a valuable glimpse into the way that neurophysiologists of consciousness approach their discipline, a contribution that even veterans of the field will appreciate.

On the whole, this is an excellent text, an inspiring discussion aimed at a popular audience written by an excellent philosopher. The book is likely suitable as either a textbook for introductory philosophy of mind or cognitive science courses, or as bedtime reading for all philosophers of consciousness, whether professional or amateur.

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Cameron Buckner
Department of Philosophy
Indiana University, Bloomington
1033 E. Third Street
Sycamore Hall 026
Bloomington, IN 47405, USA
Email: cbuckner@indiana.edu