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Being No One: The Self-Model Theory Of Subjectivity (MIT Press)



Synopsis

According to Thomas Metzinger, no such things as selves exist in the world: nobody ever had or was a self. All that exists are phenomenal selves, as they appear in conscious experience. The phenomenal self, however, is not a thing but an ongoing process; it is the content of a "transparent self-model." In *Being No One*, Metzinger, a German philosopher, draws strongly on neuroscientific research to present a representationalist and functional analysis of what a consciously experienced first-person perspective actually is. Building a bridge between the humanities and the empirical sciences of the mind, he develops new conceptual toolkits and metaphors; uses case studies of unusual states of mind such as agnosia, neglect, blindsight, and hallucinations; and offers new sets of multilevel constraints for the concept of consciousness. Metzinger's central question is: How exactly does strong, consciously experienced subjectivity emerge out of objective events in the natural world? His epistemic goal is to determine whether conscious experience, in particular the experience of being someone that results from the emergence of a phenomenal self, can be analyzed on subpersonal levels of description. He also asks if and how our Cartesian intuitions that subjective experiences as such can never be reductively explained are themselves ultimately rooted in the deeper representational structure of our conscious minds.

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Customer Reviews

This book is very hard to review. There are many reasons for this. One is that I may be biased: I

think this may be the most important book written about consciousness in the last couple of decades. Then there is the fact that the book is enormous in scope, (and not far in size either- it is 650 pages long), brilliantly written and argued, and succeeds in doing something few other related books do. Reading this book makes you feel that consciousness has been explained. It makes you feel that the monster has been tamed, that progress can be made, that those who believe there can be no sensible explanation for consciousness are just wrong. Now in reality, it is not obvious that consciousness HAS been explained. But one feels like it has. And this is why I think this book is superior to Daniel Dennett's "Consciousness explained", arguably the book regarded as the most significant and influential philosophical contribution in the field. After reading Dennett, few believed consciousness had been explained. Even few felt like it had. This book is unique, and I believe it is a matter of time until its impact is made apparent. Metzinger wanted to show that the self can be explained in subpersonal terms, using representational analysis. He quickly noticed that since Selves are usually conscious entities, that he would first have to do this for consciousness. Imagine that. Having to explain consciousness to try to explain the self. And so, the book could be seen as divided in two. First, a theory of consciousness, and second, a theory of the self. I am by far more impressed with the former, although undoubtedly the latter is extremely interesting as well.

This is a truly brilliant book, with some weaknesses. Anyone with a background in philosophy who reads any book about neurological disorders immediately sees the possibility of building a theory of consciousness and self based on those disorders. Metzinger has done just that. Personally, I find Metzinger's arguments persuasive, and I think he has developed something truly original and valid. (Metzinger himself would admit, however, that not all aspects of his theory will turn out to be correct.) The primary weakness of the book is its highly abstract nature. Multiple pages can pass by, all of a purely theoretical nature and without a single concrete example along the way. Moreover, for some of his subsidiary theories, Metzinger even creates acronyms which he uses afterwards throughout the book--which can be annoying. I often found myself trying to remember exactly what PMIR stands for. But given the depth and breadth of this work, I suppose acronyms are justified. This is just not a book intended for the general public. One small criticism on vocabulary: Metzinger uses the terms "transparent" and "opaque" with their opposite connotative meanings. Metzinger's "transparent" is meant as invisible, like a transparent model not being visible as a model. But, unfortunately, for most English speakers, transparent usually connotes something being visible: a "transparent form of government" is one in which the citizens can peer into and see what's really going on. Something in the reverse direction happens with Metzinger's use of the word "opaque."

English speakers sometimes use "opaque" as meaning obscure or difficult to understand--which is not what Metzinger intends at all.

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