

The Mythic Reality of the Autonomous Individual

with John A. Teske, "Editorial Overview"; Edwin C. Laurenson, "Agency, Freedom, and the Blessings of Opacity"; Phillip Cary, "Philosophical and Religious Origins of the Private Inner Self"; Anindita N. Balslev, "The Enigma of I-Consciousness"; Lene Arnett Jensen, "The Cultural Development of Three Fundamental Moral Ethics"; Amy Banks, "Developing the Capacity to Connect"; John A. Teske, "Externalism, Relational Selves, and Redemptive Relationships"; Kenneth J. Gergen, "From Moral Autonomy to Relational Responsibility"; Steven L. Winter, "Reimagining Democratic Theory for Social Individuals"

AGENCY, FREEDOM, AND THE BLESSINGS OF OPACITY

by Edwin C. Laurenson

Abstract: How can the decisions of "autonomous" individuals provide a rationale for freedom and self-governance if a mechanical and causal sense of the self leads us to question the foundational nature of the individual? If most of our decisions originate in brain function below the level of consciousness, we live in a virtual world produced by mechanisms outside our control, arising from transparent self-models of which we are not aware. "Opacity," the gift of *not* perceiving directly, of *not* automatically believing what we are experiencing, is precisely what makes it possible for us to question our first-person perspectives. While we do not have direct access to the mechanisms that give rise to our sense of ourselves, our investigation can make it possible for us to analyze and understand those very mechanisms consciously. The deployment of that knowledge in the act of decision making and the infinite regress of interacting conscious individuals underlies our existential freedom.

Keywords: agency; causality; consciousness; freedom; individuality; mechanism; Thomas Metzinger; narrative self; phenomenology; postmodernism; self; self-governance; self-model

Discussions of the rationale (or lack thereof) for democratic self-government have frequently dealt with questions relating to the rationality of individuals and their ability to employ reason and act autonomously in exercising a governmental function—which is what every individual

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does within a democratic society. I will begin, therefore, with a broad and simplified account of issues that have historically arisen in some strains of political theory relating to the place of individual rationality within a democratic framework.

The Platonic image of the chariot ostensibly piloted by a driver but careening wildly because he cannot control one of the chariot's two horses illustrates the fear of irrationality that has traditionally powered a fear of democracy (Plato 1995, 43–48), countered however by others' assertion that every form of governance is just as irrationally powered—it's just a question of whose irrationality is going to prevail. Thus, the famous quotation from Winston Churchill: asked what he thought of democracy as a form of government, he replied, "The worst . . . except all the others" (The Official Report 1947, 206–07).

Such assertions of the problems of democratic governance have been countered institutionally by the establishment of mechanisms to impose limits on the democratic process—for example, representative government rather than direct democracy, constitutional limitations on governmental powers, bicameral legislatures, and judicial review—ceaselessly countered by calls for more direct democracy and participation and distrust of power and hierarchy of all kinds. But in the midst of these millennia-long debates, there has at least persisted the notion that there is such a thing as the self, even as modernism and postmodernism and certain kinds of scientific research (and related theorizing) have undermined the very notion of the self and led us to question the coherence of the concept of individual agency.

This is only natural since the investigation of mechanisms—how the world, and we, ourselves, as part of the world, work—has no natural stopping point, including as that investigation interiorly affects who we are because it affects our self-understanding of who we are.¹

This undermining of our ideas about the nature of the self has had several stages. As noted by Leo Strauss, the United States was founded based upon the Enlightenment's understanding of the self, which was subsequently undermined by ongoing advances in modernistic thought and the investigation of ourselves as mechanisms (Strauss 1958, 13; a good summary of Strauss's thought can be found in McAllister 1995). The fundamental feature of political thought in the United States is a straightforward unquestioned sense of the foundational nature of the individual. That, however, is exactly what one is led to question if one views the self—including one's own self—as a mechanism. But in this country, we hold these truths to be self-evident.

Subsequent developments in Western political thought and sociological analysis led many to question whether those truths really were self-evident. And as modern thought moves through Nietzsche into postmodernism,

we see the independent individual stripped apart into components with no center left.

I am not endorsing the notion that it is these aspects of modern philosophy, informing among other things fascism and communism, that primarily led to the horrors of the twentieth century. It has been argued within political philosophy that stripping the individual of a foundational character and replacing that character with a pure, value-neutral mechanistic account underlay the ability of ruthless rulers to treat people as disposable cogs and the social organism as the important and fundamental entity (McAllister 1995, 132–75, describing the thought of Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin). Humanity's history is replete with barbarism and violence, and I do not believe that fallout from advanced political theory explains that kind of monstrosity. But still, if we question the foundational character of the individual, we are left with deep questions concerning the basis for our values and personal commitments.

The existence of a human “narrative self” does not appear to be questioned. That is, we at least have a self-construct deriving from recollections of the experiences, decisions, and activities we attribute to ourselves. The narrative self, however, is stripped of causal efficacy. Even conceding the many aspects of our personal circumstances we know we don't control—our genetic endowment (at least yet), our parentage, our early education, our initial material circumstances, influences from peers as we grow up, just to list a few—one might take the view that it at least matters whether we consciously think about how we feel, what we want, and how we can get it. Yet, that's not true of the narrative self. According to those who think our consciousness produces only a narrative self, all we do is tell ourselves a story that has little or nothing to do with how we actually behave. The decisions we make come from our subconscious, and only from the subconscious, which is not controllable even in principle by an organ that has as narrow a bandwidth as our consciousness.

Of course, that view is clearly correct if anything approaching full conscious control is posited. Benjamin Libet's studies showed decades ago that the decision to move one's finger is evidenced by potentials detected by electrodes inserted in the brain about a second before the finger moves and between a half second and a quarter second before subjects can consciously report the decision. (Libet's experiments are described in Daniel Wegner 2002, 52–56.) In other words, the potential is activated before the subject “decides” to initiate the movement. Many other experiments have yielded similar results.

If, assuming that our consciousness is produced by our brains, we consider how it must work, we realize that we must live in a virtual world—

that is, the world we experience is the world that our brain processes and gives us the ability to perceive consciously.

We may have the impression that we are directly encountering what is “out there.” But we don’t, either externally or internally. Both our external and proprioceptive perceptions are virtually represented to our consciousness. We have embodied brains, and an exceedingly powerful information processing network in those brains, combined with reactions in the rest of our bodies, that presents to us the world as we experience it. But an understanding of the way that processing occurs is not available to us by introspection, and even in principle we can control very little of it consciously.

One interpretation of what this means can be found in a passage at the end of Daniel Wegner’s *The Illusion of Conscious Will*:

Sometimes how things seem is more important than what they are. This is true in theater, in art, in used car sales, in economics, and—it now turns out—in the scientific analysis of conscious will. The fact is, it seems to each of us that we have conscious will. It seems we have selves. It seems we have minds. It seems we are agents. It seems we cause what we do. Although it is sobering and ultimately accurate to call all this an illusion, it is a mistake to conclude that the illusory is trivial. On the contrary, the illusions piled atop apparent mental causation are the building blocks of human psychology and social life. It is only with the feeling of conscious will that we can begin to solve the problems of knowing who we are as individuals, of discerning what we can and cannot do, and of judging ourselves morally right or wrong for what we have done. (341-42)

I think the view Wegner propounds is imbued with deep philosophical confusion. However, it is not silly just because it is wrong. In essence, my disagreement with him has to do with the kind of functional role that consciousness plays.

A more nuanced and penetrating perspective is, in my view, found in Thomas Metzinger’s *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (2004), in which he considers many of the same issues that Wegner treats but presents a very different analysis of the naturalization of the self. In a passage at the beginning of the book he tells us:

[The] main thesis [of this book] is that no such things as selves exist in the world: Nobody ever *was* or *had* a self. All that ever existed were conscious self-models that could not be recognized as models. The phenomenal self is not a thing, but a process—and the subjective experience of *being someone* emerges if a conscious information processing system operates under a transparent self-model. You are such a system now, as you read these sentences. Because you cannot recognize your self-model, it is transparent: you look right through it. You don’t see it. But you see *with* it. In other, more metaphorical, words, the central claim of this book is that as you read these lines you constantly confuse yourself with the content of the self-model currently activated by your brain.

... [The human conscious self-model] ... is a wonderfully efficient two-way window that allows an organism to conceive of itself as a whole and thereby to causally interact with its inner and outer environment in an entirely new, integrated, and intelligent manner. Consciousness, the phenomenal self, and the first-person perspective are fascinating *representational* phenomena that have a long evolutionary history, a history which eventually led to the formation of complex societies and a cultural embedding of conscious experience itself. (1)

In Metzinger's view, the phenomenal self is a fundamental component of our intentional cognitive capabilities and our ability to initiate planned action—and therefore causally efficacious, even though part of a naturalistic mechanism.

Phenomenology deals with how we experience the world—what the mechanisms of our brains and bodies give rise to as far as our conscious experience is concerned. But in Metzinger's view—and mine—our phenomenology is functional. In *Being No One*, Metzinger analyzes what he believes to be the prerequisites of conscious experience from a representational and functional as well as phenomenological perspective. The prerequisites he identifies for phenomenological consciousness—what he calls “constraints”—are as follows (107–211):

1. Global availability—the ability to pay attention to a wide variety of different perceptions deriving from both proprioceptive and external activation.
2. Within a window of the presence—the perception that the external world and our internal states are present as natural transparent phenomena.
- 3 and 4. Integration into a coherent global state and “convolved holism”—the sense of living in a single, integrated world and experience integration of our internal and external perceptions.
5. Dynamaticity—perception of a present, a future, and a past, and an ability to conceive of oneself as a being moving through time.
6. Perspectivalness—identification of oneself with a first-person perspective, noting that it is possible for people with certain mental disabilities to not have the ability to view themselves as other than a third party or object.
7. Transparency—our perceptions, internal and external, and to some extent our emotions (feelings), present themselves to us as direct encounters with that which is perceived, and we have no internal access to the mechanisms that produce them. We have no access to the neural processes that give us the ability to see, to hear, to feel the scratch of an itch. Our naïve

- experience is that what we are perceiving is what is just *there*, but what we perceive is what our brains have processed before we experience it as conscious perception.
8. Offline activation—our ability to activate a worldview without being in the presence of the objects or proprioceptive experiences that inform it, which gives us the ability to have a separate “reality,” which can be activated separately, as in dreams (both day and night), but gives way to transparent perception of what is “there” in the presence of external and internal stimuli.
 9. Representation of intensities—our ability to experience perception with that vary in strength.
 10. “Ultrasmoothness”—our perception that the world we experience is continuous even though we can’t pay conscious attention to anything approaching the flood of data that reaches our brains through our external and internal sensing capabilities.
 11. Finally, what is the master that has shaped our capacities and understandings this way? Adaptivity. Our consciousness has been shaped this way by evolutionary advantage.

The result, according to Metzinger, is that we conceive of ourselves as functioning conscious agents for compelling reasons:

... [W]e can now formulate what ... the advantage of possessing a phenomenal first person perspective actually consists of. Phenomenal mental models are instruments used to make a certain subset of information currently active in the system available for the control of action, for focal attention, and for cognitive processing. (420)

An agent is a system that has a certain degree of selective and flexible motor control, and that has ... representationally and functionally appropriated the underlying *selection processes* by integrating them into its self-model. Consciously experienced agency appears only if these selection processes are part of the [agent’s phenomenal self model]... [A]n essential part of this process is the activation of a ... representation of “the self in the act of deliberating,” ... (608)

The next logical step to take consists in asking if ... in any type of real-world neurophenomenological configuration, *first-person* agency ever does coexist with a lack of [non-conceptual] ownership.² ... Can you have a transparent self model of yourself as actively generating a certain thought without then *owning* this thought? Can you experience yourself as actively and focally attending to the perceived weight of this book that you are now holding in your hands without automatically *owning* the ongoing act of attending? Is it possible to deliberately initiate a bodily movement without ... experiencing the actual movement as that of your *own* body? It is very tempting to say that here ... we are actually confronted with phenomenal necessity, with something lawlike, with an *essential* connection between two elements holding across all possible cases. Agency ... is a prime

candidate for the conceptual essence of phenomenal ownership, for phenomenal selfhood, and for the deepest origin of subjectivity. . . . Is the constitution of . . . consciously experienced ownership *causally tied* to the mechanism by which systems like ourselves functionally appropriate the subpersonal processes selecting target objects for attention, cognition, and action?

The answer may be yes, but we must not forget how it will only hold for healthy human beings.³ (609)

. . . The brain, the dynamical, self-organizing system as a whole, *activates* the [conscious] pilot if and only if it needs the pilot as a representational instrument to order to integrate, monitor, predict, and remember its own activities. . . . As soon as the system does not need a globally available self-model, it simply turns itself off. . . . Sleep is the little brother of death. (558)

According to Metzinger, therefore, our conception of ourselves as conscious agents is fundamentally tied to functional capabilities. In other words, *contra* Wegner, our experience of ourselves as conscious agents, and our consciousness itself, plays a fundamental functional role; it does not just produce the tag-along narrative self. This account strikes me as a convincing description of how and why our consciousness arises.

My title speaks of the blessings of opacity. What is opacity? Recall that, according to Metzinger, our external and internal sense perceptions present themselves to us, colored and shaped by our feelings, as direct encounters with that which we perceive. Our consciousness, however, confers the gifts of remembrance and comparison, the ability to perceive the world from differing perspectives, the ability to go “offline” and conceive of an entirely different world, the ability to understand that what we perceive and feel is not simply “there,” the gift of having to work through and labor, utilizing the slow capability of explicit, stated, and spelled out conscious analysis. We could not begin to consciously process our perceptions of the world and our bodies or to monitor and control that processes that maintain us as organisms. We rely upon the functional capacities that give rise to the perception of transparency. But it is the gift of opacity combined with the gift of transparency that lets us have a first-person perspective—an automatically arising perception of ourselves as agents acting in the world—and then to question it, to observe and analyze the apparent transparency, and to say, “I can’t see or feel the operation of the neurons that give me the ability to see or to hear or to sense myself interiorly, that produce the feelings that sustain me and motivate my actions, that allow me to deploy my abilities to think and analyze, but after thousands of years of investigation, I and my fellows can come to analyze and understand those mechanisms consciously.”

Before returning to Metzinger, I will integrate these thoughts about the nature of consciousness and agency with a consideration of freedom, which I think is existential, as it interacts with the exercise of power and choice.

I believe the key to an accurate understanding of choice and freedom is that a decision is never just “being made.” That is, the act of decision always requires someone to actively choose. Discussions of free will generally concentrate on two questions: Does free will (1) refer exclusively to an absence of external constraint, sometimes identified in political theory as associated with the philosopher Thomas Hobbes ([1651] 1957, 136–38), or (2) rather, to a human ability to decide in an acausal manner that would frustrate, even in principle, the possibility of predicting accurately what a person will do, what thoughts she will think, in a particular situation before she actually performs that action or thinks those thoughts. That is, does the assertion of free will in the second sense commit one to a rejection of the understanding that our actions and thoughts result from the functioning of our bodies and brains, active in a very complex way according to deterministic laws of interaction of matter and energy? Correlatively, if we reject the existence of free will in the second sense, how do we recover the concept of responsibility?

I believe this set of apparent conundrums rests upon a failure to distinguish between the perspectives of being internal and external to the deciding system. When I make a decision, I have no choice but to view myself as free in the process of doing so. Until I decide, I do not know what I am going to do. That does not mean that I am not constrained by external factors, many relating to abilities that I do not possess even in principle. I cannot, for instance, choose to flap my arms and fly; and I cannot accurately predict the consequences of my actions, including what others will do in response. It also does not mean that, standing at this instant of decision, I believe I have “freely chosen” to be who I am, that I do not see that I have been shaped by influences external to me or that I do not take as a given (even though I may question) desires that present themselves as part of who I am as a person.

I can look back on every decision I have ever made and analyze it, if I wish, as having been the inevitable result of the interaction of factors that are external to me, internal factors that present themselves to me as givens and my own thought processes, which are both part of me as I experience myself and present themselves to me without my choosing them, all of which this mysterious “I” composing this article, somehow participated in but did not “control.”

But nevertheless, weighing my understandings, feelings, desires, thoughts, and perceptions however I do at this moment, all of these factors, including the simultaneously observing the interacting “I,” are part of the interactive decision-making system that I am, whose results I cannot know until I actually make my decisions. The more complex the decision, the

more factors I have to consider in the process of making it, the more I cannot predict what I will do until, in my final weighing, I actually decide.

Others can use their knowledge of the way human beings work, and any knowledge they have of me in particular, to attempt to predict what I will do from a perspective external to me as a deciding system. They may be right or wrong in their prediction; in any case, after I decide they may tell me, “It was inevitable that you would decide and act as you did.” They may even develop a reasonably accurate general theory of how I will behave as a causal system, given enough knowledge of my external and internal circumstances, including the caused process of my thinking about myself. However, there’s an odd caveat to their knowledge: I can learn their theory and the basis for their understanding, and once I know it, it will then become part of the causal processes that underlie what I decide to do.

In my view, this infinite regress underlies human freedom. However, in the political context, a person cannot be free if others don’t interact with her as a person and as an equal, in circumstances in which each can know the other—including their reciprocal thoughts about each other—and each is part of the overall deciding system. That is the core difference of democracy. And the final danger arises when an individual person—a human being—is not thought of or treated as a person—that is, an agent—but as a mechanism that rulers (and others) have the right to control.

As a fitting ending, I will quote from the final two paragraphs of *Being No One*:

Biological evolution is not something to be glorified. . . . In particular, it is a process that exploits and sacrifices individuals. As soon as individual organisms start to consciously represent themselves *as* individuals, this fact will inevitably be reflected in complex facets on the level of phenomenal experience itself. Therefore, defining our own goals involves emancipating ourselves from this evolutionary process, which . . . has shaped the microfunctional landscape of our brains and the representational architecture of our conscious minds. . . . We have to stop glorifying our own neurophenomenological status quo, face the facts, and find the courage to think about positive alternatives in a rational way. In the end, taking responsibility for the future development of our own conscious minds also is an obvious implication of the project of the Enlightenment.

Do you recall how, in the first paragraph of this chapter [and book], I claimed that as you read these lines you constantly confuse yourself with the content of the self-model currently activated in your brain? We now know . . . that this metaphor, if taken too literally, contains a logical mistake: There is no one in *whose* illusion the conscious self could be. . . . As soon as . . . the point that the phenomenal self as such is not an epistemically justified form of mental content and that the phenomenal characteristics of *selfhood* involved results from the transparency of the system model—a new dimension opens. At least in principle, one can wake up from one’s biological history. One can grow up, define one’s goals and become autonomous. And one can start talking back to Mother Nature, elevating her self-conversation to a new level. (Metziner 2004, 633-34)

I take the following lesson: integrating all our capacities, critically including our conscious capabilities to understand the processes that support and allow us to function as the amazingly complex animals we are, we can function as selves that do not exist other than as processes. In Jean-Claude Carriere and Peter Brook's adaptation of the Sufi allegory *The Conference of the Birds*, a group of birds flies to many places and experiences many things and come back to where they started, realizing at the end that what they sought was always within themselves and that, "The way is open, but there is neither traveler nor guide" (1987, 79). In the articles that follow, let us travel together.

NOTES

A version of this article was first presented as the keynote address at the annual conference of The Institute on Religion in an Age of Science (IRAS), on *The Mythic Reality of the Autonomous Individual*, held at the Chautauqua Institution, Chautauqua, NY, USA, June 20–27, 2009.

1. These thoughts are developed further in Edwin C. Laurenson (2000).
2. By non-conceptual ownership Metzinger means the internal, automatic perception that we "own" our actions and our bodies. (562)
3. Metzinger goes on, "First-person agency is certainly a sufficient condition for ownership in nonpathological configurations. However, . . . the initial example of akinetic mutism [described in Metzinger at 418-19] seems to show that it is not a necessary condition: You can phenomenally own your body without being an agent. Our best current control-theoretic models for the delusions of control arising in schizophrenia . . . give us a detailed understanding of how an agent can consciously own his body, and his self-caused bodily motions, *without* being able to phenomenally appropriate the selection and initiation process leading to them. As a result, he owns a body that feels like a remote-controlled puppet."

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