

NEW PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE PROBLEM OF THE SELF

Jorge Gonçalves
jorgalvesenator@gmail.com
Instituto de Filosofia da Linguagem
Universidade Nova de Lisboa

ABSTRACT

In this article I will argue against the solution of the self problem, proposed by the new phenomenologists. Recently Metzinger, in the wake of David Hume, argues that the self is an illusion, relying on data from neurophysiology. The concept of «pre-reflective self-consciousness», presented by the phenomenologists, apparently solves the problem by removing the substantial nature of the self. However developmental psychology leads me to think that in the early stages of life there is no sense of self, even of core self. Thus the problem of self remains, because we do not know why the feeling of self arises from conscious states.

KEY WORDS: self illusion, pre-reflective self-consciousness, core self, early stages of the self.

RESUMEN

«La nueva fenomenología y el problema del sí mismo». Aquí se plantea un argumento en contra de la solución propuesta por los nuevos fenomenólogos acerca del problema del sí mismo (*self*). Recientemente Metzinger, basándose en los datos de la neurofisiología, en la línea de David Hume, sostiene que el sí mismo es una ilusión. El concepto de «auto-conciencia pre-reflexiva» (*pre-reflective self-consciousness*) presentado por los fenomenólogos, aparentemente resuelve el problema mediante la eliminación de la naturaleza sustancial del sí mismo, sin embargo la psicología del desarrollo me lleva a pensar que en las primeras etapas de la vida no hay sentido de sí mismo, ni siquiera de sí mismo nuclear. De esta manera el problema del sí mismo sigue existiendo, ya que desconocemos la razón por la que el sentimiento del yo surge de los estados conscientes.

PALABRAS CLAVE: ilusión del sí mismo, auto-conciencia pre-reflexiva, sí mismo nuclear, primeras etapas del sí mismo.

In this article, I will defend that the concept of pre-reflective self-consciousness, presented by the phenomenologists, is not a solution for the ontological problem of the self, the problem of knowing whether it exists and its nature. The argument I will explore is that in our first initial stages of life, our feeling of self is absent



aside from our having experiences, such as the feelings of pleasure and pain. Consequently, we cannot reduce the problem of the self to one of consciousness. I will begin by describing the problem of the illusion of self recently formulated by Metzinger. Next, I will show attempts made by Zahavi and Phenomenology to present a solution. Following this, I will criticize this solution and explain why I think the problem of self has not been resolved.

If we say that the self does not exist, we are always placing ourselves in a given conception of self. Therefore, the self cannot exist following a determined notion of self, but this does not prevent that it exists under a different notion. However, I think that there is a prevailing notion of self present in the psychology and language of common sense that philosophy develops. For this reason, I think there is a kind of agreement in relation to what constitutes the self. This feeling of self can be captured in a phenomenological way. When I think about that which I am, I seem as an entity to myself, a thing, whose properties are a unity and continuity through time. My self appears as an I among other I's in the middle of inanimate things. I know that my self is connected to the brain, but I can imagine my self as disconnected from the body, maintaining my basic psychological characteristics. The self is thus conceivable as an entity that can survive on its own. Even if there is a physical impossibility to separate it from the brain, phenomenology indicates to us that the situation is at least imaginable without contradiction.

This concept of the self seems to me to be common among various philosophers and raises the problem of determining what is this entity that I am. What is its substance? What I find is a passing flow of successive states of consciousness. It is here that the question arises: what is this entity that appears fixed and unchangeable when in reality there is continuous change in consciousness?

Metzinger¹ recently elaborated a theory of the self where he defends that we are an illusion, an illusion for no one, in fact, the «we» of the previous phrase does not exist. There is no entity with these described characteristics. «We» are no one. Despite these statements seeming counter-intuitive, Metzinger defends them in a convincing way combined with philosophical perspectives and scientific data. He does not defend that the feeling of the self does not exist. He considers it as a phenomenological datum. What he defends is that phenomenology itself is an illusion, just like the other illusions he explains with his model of the mind. It is the case of the *rubber-hand illusion*². The subject is put in a position such that his hand is hidden and he looks at an artificial hand as though it were his real one. His real hand is touched at the same time as the artificial one. In a few seconds, it produces the illusion for the subject that his real hand is the artificial one. Phenomenologically the subject feels that his hand is the artificial one, but this is an illusion because he

¹ Fellow by the Foundation for Science and Technology.

² Metzinger, T., *The Ego Tunnel-The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self*, Basic Books, New York, 2009.

² *Op. cit.*



has a real hand of his own flesh and blood. In the same way, the experience that a self exists, an independent entity capable of existing on its own, having an essence, or rather a set of invariable intrinsic properties, and is provided with individuality, is an illusion.

The difference is that in the case of the partial illusions we are conscious, while in the case of the self we are, ourselves, the illusion, and in this sense we do not have the possibility of perceiving that we are illusions. Metzinger explains this situation by stating that the self has a transparent property, in the phenomenal sense. The self understands itself as a reality because it does not know the processes from which it originates, it does not know the reality where it is an illusion itself. In order to understand this better, we can think about another case of transparency: visual perception. When I look at a pen, I think I am looking directly at an object just as it is in the objective exterior world. I do not comprehend this object as a result of representational and neuronal mechanisms. If I do not give in to a reflective process, I am in the position of naïve realism or the belief that reality is just as it appears to me.

According to Metzinger, organisms are equipped with representational mechanisms that result from the course of biological evolution due to the diverse advantages that they bring. Some of these representational mechanisms represent the organism to itself. Metzinger develops an entire complex theory, from which I will preserve here only the conclusions. What interests me here refers to what the phenomenological self, what we feel, is the momentary content of an auto-representational mechanism of the human body. This auto-representation has evolutionary advantages and is not, because of this, an epiphenomenon. To be conscious of our own self, we are completely unaware of the representational mechanisms from which we originate. We are transparent in this sense: we comprehend ourselves directly without paying attention to the mediatory mechanisms. Metzinger draws out the following results from this biological situation: we are no one, we think that we exist as a reality but in truth we do not exist because we are like shadows in Plato's cave. Moreover, Metzinger himself uses this thousand-year-old image³. Neurology is reality, the self is a shadow of this reality that we take to be reality. The ontological status of the self is that of the illusion. From the scientific point of view, the self is a concept to be eliminated because it does not notice the reality it is trying to describe. The experience that I have of the self is not the real thing, and thus I live in a state of auto-illusion.

Metzinger's ontological conclusion that the self does not exist has been criticized in the field of the philosophy of mind by various authors⁴ who assert the

³ Metzinger, T., *Being No One. The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2003, p. 547.

⁴ Zahavi, D., *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the first-person perspective*, Cambridge, MA: Bradford Books, The MIT Press, 2005; Zahavi, D. «Being Someone», *Psyche* 11/5, pp. 1-20, 2005; Zahavi, D., Grünbaum, T., Parnas, J. *The structure and development of self-consciousness*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004; Gallagher, S., *How the Body Shapes the Mind* Oxford Univer-



Phenomenology tradition of Husserl and other philosophers, his followers such as Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Michel Henry. This new Phenomenology has a naturalist character, different from that of the afore mentioned authors whose problems were existential more than anything else. The basic critical idea is that Metzinger, stating that the self does not exist, has a specific conception of self. Despite Metzinger reporting the most recent scientific discoveries in neuroscience, he continues to hold a traditional conception of the self, which is conceived as an image of material things, as being something equipped with spatiality and permanence. Another conception is defended by these authors that being calling the self something more basic and not differentiating it from the flow in phenomenal consciousness. In this conception, the self is reduced to its minimal degree. According to Gallagher's definition, «phenomenologically, that is, in terms of how one experiences it, a consciousness of oneself as an immediate subject of experience, unextended in time.»⁵ The concept of self as we just defined it is broadened in time. However, these authors support that if we take away all of the non-essential characteristics of the self, we will still remain with a nuclear self, a minimal self. This pure consciousness of the self exists only in the so-called «specious present», where there are controversies regarding its real duration. It deals with a minimum point in time when we are conscious. The core self is connected to the flow of consciousness as it is an integral part of it. Whatever experience, pain, for example, the perception of a color, a sudden rage, a brilliant idea, is always felt by a subject as something happening to him and not to another. The experience is always given in a certain way and felt as a happening «to me», as if I were its possessor. The phenomenality of the experience and its first person character are not separable. You cannot speak of an experience in an impersonal way. The experience always happens, by definition, to somebody.

In this way, when we speak of the self it is unnecessary to conceive it as a separated entity. The experience itself has a personal character. The self is not an essential center that groups experiences around itself. It is implicitly present in any experience. This idea that the self is implicitly present is very important for the phenomenologists' argument. In order for the self to exist, a conscious auto-reflection is unnecessary. It is unnecessary that I am thinking about myself in order for the feeling of *mine-ness* to arise. One of the ways of verifying that this pre-reflective consciousness of self is always present consists in, for example, asking a person who is absorbed in reading what he's doing. Without hesitation he will respond, «I'm reading». In the moment that he is absorbed in reading, the subject is not conscious of himself explicitly. He is completely absorbed in that which he is reading. Nevertheless, why he responds without hesitation to an interrogation shows (according to the phenomenologists) that his consciousness of himself was always tacitly present.

sity Press, USA, 2006; Gallagher, S., «Philosophical Conceptions of the Self.», *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 4 (1): pp. 14-21, 2000.

⁵ Gallagher, S., «Philosophical Conceptions of the Self.» *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 4 (1): pp. 14-21, 2000, p. 15.



This consciousness of self is not purely empty; there is a specific depth that constitutes the core self. In this way, the self is always implicitly present in all of the stream of consciousness and is not only in a few privileged moments of reflection.

What implications does this have for the ontological thesis that the self is an illusion? The self will only be an illusion when we see it in analogy with physical objects, with the objects of the world. If we allow ourselves to think of the self in this way and we see it as an auto-referential process, the problem of knowing whether the self exists or not becomes different. In this case, questioning the existence of a core self will be like questioning the existence of consciousness and even of the world itself, as the consciousness in Phenomenology is not opposed to the objective world. Consciousness is where the world is given. The concept of the core self does not stop the phenomenologists from having abandoned the concept of the broader or narrative self. Merely that the core self is assumed in these most diverse *selves* and that once it is admitted that the core self is part of the stream of consciousness, it does not make more sense to say that «we are nobody» as Metzinger and others claim, unless they wish to deny the existence of consciousness itself.

The phenomenologists thus claim to reduce the problem of the existence of the self to the problem of the existence of consciousness. If there exists a mind-body problem, it includes the problem of the self because once consciousness is explained there is no longer an additional problem of the self. Of course empirically the formation of the broader self from the core self remains to be explained, but this would not be a *hard problem*. The so-called «hard problem» is a problem of understanding how the connection between matter and consciousness is possible. It is a problem that many consider to be insoluble. The problem of the relation of the nuclear self with the narrative self is not a hard problem; it is an easy problem because there isn't a difference in nature, there is no *explanatory gap*.

Pre-reflective self-consciousness is not a consciousness of a pre-existing self, but a consciousness that contains a minimal sense of self, a core self, as an integral part within itself. If there is experience, there is a core self. This assumes that any being to which we can attribute phenomenal and sensorial states will always have a minimum sense of self. Now, an objection to this train of thought is that the self does not exist since the beginning of life, even though there are experiences, such as for example, sensations of pleasure and pain. If babies have experiences but no feeling of self, the thesis of the self as an integral part of consciousness is questioned. There can be consciousness without a feeling of self, therefore they are two different things although intimately related. This question is difficult to investigate because, remember, what interests us here is the phenomenology of the child and not only his observable behavior. We can infer the former from the latter, however this generates different interpretations and it is difficult to produce evidence for the theory to be proven. The most traditional researchers (Henri Wallon⁶, Merleau-

⁶ Wallon, H. *Les origines du caractère chez l'enfant. Les préludes du sentiment de personnalité*, Boivin, Paris, 1934, [PUF, Paris, 1973].

Ponty⁷, Lacan⁸) have defended the thesis that the first months of human existence are selfless. Nevertheless, the most recent research has claimed to demonstrate that such is not the case. Gallagher and Meltzoff make an account of this research⁹. Both the traditional researchers and the most recent ones agree regarding the proprioceptive system the of body schema as responsible for the feeling of self and of others, during the first months of life. Gallagher and Meltzoff confirm meanwhile that there has been a confusion regarding the body schema and the body image. We can define the body schema as a system that is unconscious of its processes (motor capacities, abilities, habits) that constantly regulate posture and movement. The body image is a system that can be conscious of perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs directed at the body itself. The body schema is connected to doing, moving, while the body image is the perception, analysis or control of these movements. The ambiguous use of these two terms complicates the comprehension of the traditional authors' theory, because they are not conscious of the fact that they are speaking about different things. Everyone accepts, in a pacificatory fashion, that a child has an innate body schema; the same does not apply to the body image. However, the body image is what gives the feeling of self in childhood. When a child acquires a body image, it is able to feel experiences as its own and differentiate them from the experiences of others. According to traditional authors, this does not happen before recognizing one's own image in the mirror. This does not mean that the mirror, as a physical object, is the cause of this mental evolution, but the mirror translates it and measures it. Before this there is a phase designated by Merleau-Ponty as pre-communication and by Wallon as social syncretism where there is no differentiation between the I and others: As Merleau-Ponty says, «There is no one individual over against another but rather an anonymous collectivity, an undifferentiated group life»¹⁰. In early stages of life, there is a «chaos in which I am submerged» (Merleau-Ponty), a «blooming, buzzing confusion» (William James). A child does not have a unified vision of its body. This unified vision of the body depends, in part, on learning. A child's perception starts as being interoceptive, since a newborn does not have the capacity to understand exterior information, as exterior. There is no distinction between self and environment. When a child recognizes the image in the mirror as his own signifies that he can distinguish the other because it looks at him in the same way as another. His body appears to him as unified (in anticipated imagination because in reality it isn't yet, according to Lacan) and like one among many others. This conquest is not yet total and definitive because it is here that begins the sketch of the self, which did not exist before. The evolution of the *no-self*

⁷ Merleau-Ponty M., «As relações com o outro na criança» *Na Sorbonne: Resumo de Cursos*, Papirus, S. Paulo 1990, [Éditions Cynara, 1988].

⁸ Lacan, J., «Le Stade du Miroir comme Formateur de la Fonction du Je», *Écrits* Paris, Seuil, 1966 [1937].

⁹ Gallagher, N. & Meltzoff, A., «The Earliest Sense of Self and Others: Merleau-Ponty and Recent Developmental Studies». *Philosophical Psychology* 9 (2), pp. 211-33, 1, 1996.

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, M., *op. cit.*, p. 83 (my own translation).

phase to the *self* phase is described by Wallon and Merleau-Ponty as an evolution of an interior that exteriorizes itself. Lacan is more radical in indicating that this pertains to an identification process in the psychoanalytical sense. There is, in the identification of the image of another, a process from outside to inside. Without the other, the child cannot construct the self, which is wholly realized in the image of this other.

Whatever the explanation, what is important here is that these authors make a clear distinction between a period in which the self does not exist and one where it begins to exist. This has been criticized by more recent conceptions that attribute more capacities to newborns than those authors considered traditional. According to the new investigators, a newborn already has an innate feeling of self that begins working right away. A newborn already has the feeling of its own experiences, for example, the sensations of pleasure and pain, that are his own and not another's. Of course it would be a minimal feeling, but justifiably if these authors are right, their data will serve as support for the thesis that there is a core self where there is consciousness.

The most important empirical fact that these authors have established is the observation of newborns imitation. Merleau-Ponty wrote in 'The Child's Relations with Others' that «The child executes a gesture to the image that he sees made by another: he smiles because it smiled at him. It is necessary that the perceived image is translated into motor image; since he cannot have an image of himself smiling nor the motor feeling of another. The transfer of the other to him is impossible by analogy.»¹¹ He shows a model here of translation that states perception and motor skills are different by nature considering that it is necessary to transform visual stimulus into motor stimulus. However, a child does not have an image of itself nor the feeling of the other before 6 months of age and because of this it cannot imitate. The integration of perception and motor skills will be progressive through maturity and learning. Gallagher and Meltzoff support against this, founded on various investigations, that there is imitation among children between 0 and 6 years of age, the main empirical fact being in reference to tongue protrusion. In agreement with his interpretation of the facts, a child recognizes the adult's gesture who sticks out his tongue at him and rapidly transforms this perception into a motor perception. To explain this fact, they defend that a supramodal system/device exists where the visual and motor systems speak, since the beginning, in the same language. A child does not have any difficulty in relating the actions he sees in others, that are in fact others to him, with the invisible actions within himself because innately, without requiring any training, he already has a body image that makes this connection. Obviously the training will play an important role in his development, but Gallagher and Meltzoff defend that the child already has the cognitive baggage necessary in order to make elementary imitation. If imitation is possible, then we have evidence that a minimal sense of self and of others exists

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, M., *op. cit.*, p. 70 (my own translation).



since birth. However, this interpretation of the empirical data was opposed by researchers who made other experiments and offered alternative interpretations. Talia Welsh refers to these results¹² and as a philosopher assumes the freedom to propose a global interpretation of the other results. According to her perspective, the intelligent and communicative behavior does not necessarily imply a self-consciousness. If it did then we would also have to consider that bees have consciousness of self, which does not seem to be the case. Another interpretation of the facts related to sticking out the tongue is possible. The child sticking out his tongue is not imitating an older child. His behavior seems identical, but the phenomenology is different. In older child's imitation, there is, as we have seen, a mental picture, consciousness of himself and the other. Assuming that the same behavior exhibited by the newborn has the same meaning is adapting the facts to the theory. Talia Welsh defends this is valid both in the strong thesis of imitation according to which a newborn does imitate, and in the weaker thesis according to which a newborn's imitation is not properly imitation but is a preform whose development will result imitation. The second possibility seems more plausible, but different experiments seem to deny it. The alternative theories that Talia Welsh refers to basically claim that the initial behavior does not reveal self consciousness. It is merely exploratory reflex and auto-regulation, that being, to avoid discomfort. It is because of adult influence, the parents that this exploratory behavior and auto-regulation transforms into a self consciousness. I think that we could say that if we were left alone to ourselves (believing this were possible), the exploratory behavior and auto-regulation would not make us auto-conscious. In the case of tongue protrusion, it is an exploratory behavior just like any other, which is reinforced by an adult and is repeated as such. Sticking the tongue out does not signify that the child understands the behavior of another as an other and then reproduces it in himself. This implies knowing how to move an invisible part of the body, knowing that it is his tongue that is moving and not the other's. Nevertheless, various experiments, that I cannot enumerate here, go in the direction of showing that tongue protrusion is an exploratory behavior just as any other and does not have a posterior sense of imitation. It cannot even be said that it deals with a proto-imitation in the sense of a very basic mimicry that will be developed. It does not deal with any type of imitation, but with a different behavior, an exploratory reflex like any other.

Admitting that it was proven that the first years of life are selfless, what conclusions can we take from the «illusion of self» question? The phenomenology of a child from the perspective an adult will always be in the domain of great speculation because we are referring to periods of which we have no recollection. The memories of the analyzed patients are never very reliable for our theme, although they are relevant from a therapeutic point of view. If we assume that we enter life

¹² Welsh, T., «Do Neonates Display Innate Self-Awareness? Why Neonatal Imitation Fails to Provide Sufficient Grounds for Innate Self and Other-Awareness». *Philosophical Psychology*, 19 (2), pp. 221-238, 2006.

without self, we can question how it is that it comes to be. How is it that from disconnected and chaotic experiences, a coherent self arises? How is it from the absence of distinction between child's point of view and the other's, a feeling of mineness is born? I am not referring here to causal factors, but pure phenomenology. As causal factors we have the parents' action who treat the child as if he already were a developed self, the learning and the maturity. However, before we give a causal explanation we have to study the phenomenal level. I will only refer here to the aspect of cohesion of the self as an essential characteristic, without which we would not have self. I think there are two possibilities. We can think that the baby's different and chaotic sensations will progressively integrate in such a way to form a relatively cohesive nucleus. The different micro-consciousness will progressively give the baby a completely coherent and consistent sense of being. Another possibility is that the self exists already from the beginning as a nucleus that will come into being by putting together parts and expelling others. The self would already be the reference that, through the chaos, cohesion is built. Whatever the case may be, I repeat that I am referring only to phenomenological processes and not to neuro-cognitive mechanisms. Now we have to face the open question if we can consider phenomenology to be a reality or not. Returning to the initial problem, I think the phenomenologists did not resolve the problem of the self. In the argumentation that I followed, this should be due to the fact that it was not demonstrated whether consciousness necessarily implied a feeling of self, even if minimal. The self raises a different problem than the mere existence of consciousness. The question of knowing whether the self is real or an illusion depends on the ontological place we give to phenomenology. If all of phenomenology is an illusion, as Metzinger claims, then the self also would be an illusion. In my perspective, phenomenology is a reality in itself. It is a reality whose relationships with the material world are difficult to explain, or even unexplainable, but is a reality.

Recibido: octubre 2010. Aceptado: noviembre 2011