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Do We Really Exist? Eastern Inspirations in Thomas Metzinger's Self-model Theory of Subjectivity

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of Thomas Metzinger's self-model theory of subjectivity (SMT). Metzinger claims that beyond the biological organism and its properties, there is no individual and distinct entity that can be regarded as "self". What really exists is the phenomenal sense of being self, which creates the illusion of the existence of something permanent. Taking the concepts of David Hume and certain early Buddhists thinkers as his starting point, Metzinger claims that during introspection, which is a type of phenomenal experience, we find nothing stable, but only impermanent impressions. As he argues, this hypothesis is supported by empirical neuroscience research, which should be considered when studying human subjectivity. Drawing extensively from the results of science and philosophy of mind, he proposes a concept of a phenomenal self-model (PSM). The PSM integrates information about the whole biological organism and makes it available from the first-person perspective.

The first part of the paper presents the key issues of the SMT and the four aspects of Metzinger's critique of the concept of the substantial self. The paper also offers a critical analysis of some of Metzinger's ideas. The second section discusses the common features as well as differences between the SMT and the Buddhist concept of non-self (s. *anātman*, p. *anattā*). It also aims to analyse certain problematic issues of the notion of *anattā* and demonstrate some of the challenges connected with the use of a comparative method.

Keywords: *philosophy of mind, cognitive science, early Buddhism, non-self, anattā*

Słowa kluczowe: *filozofia umysłu, kognitywistyka, wczesny buddyzm, brak jaźni, anattā*

Introduction

A theory denying the existence of any distinct, stable Self or an Ego can be expected to be highly counterintuitive as it is at odds with the popular, common-sense views on this subject. Nevertheless, these kinds of theories have become increasingly prevalent in contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive science, as evidenced by the ideas of scholars such as Susan Blackmore, Todd Feinberg and Thomas Metzinger. The notion of the absence of the self did not seem to be present in most of pre-modern Western philosophy. However, some doctrines of ancient Indian Philosophy, such as the Buddhist non-self theory are also based on criticism of the idea of a monadic permanent self. Interestingly, some of the contemporary Western philosophers of mind openly admit their interest in Eastern philosophy (e.g., Blackmore 2011, Gamma and Metzinger 2021). Is therefore interesting to examine, to what extent ancient Indian and modern Western criticisms of the notion of Self are in agreeance or whether their similarity is merely superficial. A cross-cultural perspective can help to bring out certain features and shed light on aspects that might be overlooked in a single-faceted analysis of the above concepts. Through comparative philosophy, we are able to enrich our knowledge and form our expectations, which will significantly affect the reception of a philosophical problem. Using intercultural research, we might also be able to acknowledge how cultural, political, and religious contexts influence the development of philosophical thought (Jakubczak 2013, 42–3). This allows us to recognise limitations that burden our thinking, which, as will be presented in this paper, can result in alternative perspectives in the study of philosophical problems.

A general overview of Metzinger's self-model theory of subjectivity

Thomas Metzinger is renowned for his self-model theory of subjectivity (SMT). This theory is characterised by a holistic approach to the issue of consciousness and combines the approaches of philosophy of mind, neuroscience and

cognitive science. Through this theory, Metzinger deals with the following issues:

> Why is there always someone having the experience? Who is the feeler of your feelings and the dreamer of your dreams? Who is the agent doing the doing, and what is the entity thinking your thoughts? Why is your conscious reality your conscious reality? (Metzinger 2009, 1–2)

Metzinger holds the anti-realist view of the self, i.e., the assumption that there is no such thing as, an eternal, individual or ontologically independent self. His view involves the denial of the existence of the self understood in the Cartesian sense, i.e., as a non-physical substantial subject capable of existing outside the brain and the body. In connection with that, he also challenges the dualistic idea that sees the mind as elevated beyond nature (see Poczobut 2013, 347; 2009, 517). He argues that a pre-reflective assumption of the certain existence of a separate entity such as the self is present in academic discourse. However, he labels such beliefs as "folk-metaphysical" because he believes that there is no convincing empirical evidence to support this view.

Metzinger sees the reason for this widespread belief in the existence of the self in the non-intuitive nature of the opposite view, namely the non-self concept. He claims that one of the main problems of this theory is its counterintuitive character (Metzinger 2011, 293). Due the fact that the first-person perspective connected with the sense of selfhood was gained through evolution, humans are simply unable to conceive of experiencing reality from a self-less perspective. A point of view is inherently intentional, that is, it is always a point of view possessed by someone. We are simply unable to consciously conceive the first-person perspective of the state of not being conscious (cf. Blackmore 2002, 19). As long as there is no phenomenal ego which experiences it, there is also no point (of view) from which something can be communicated. Therefore, if there are truly self-less moments in our experience, they are inconceivable from the perspective of the ordinary self. According to Metzinger, this is due to the functional structure of the brain (Metzinger 2011, 289–90). Consequently, he argues, there is a sense of the phenomenal reality of the self and of the metaphysical necessity of its existence. However, it is not a sufficient reason to assume the real, objective existence of the self.

It is noteworthy that Metzinger does not deny the existence of the psychological sense of being or having a self. His claim that the self does not exist means precisely that the knowledge we have at present does not allow us to assume its existence and even implies that there is no metaphysical

ground for having a sense of being a self (Metzinger 2009, 1; 2011, 283–4). Metzinger denies the existence of an individual, stable centre of identity in our brains or any element in metaphysical reality that ensures the continuity of human existence and is responsible for the first-person perspective characterizing our phenomenal experience (Metzinger 2009, 209). It is neither possible to be a "self" nor to have one. "Self" is simply a theoretical concept and a representational psychological construct.

The phenomenal self-model

Metzinger's self-model theory of subjectivity relates to the concept of the phenomenal self-model (PSM) (Metzinger 2009, 30, 106; 2005, 3). The PSM is created by the brain processes occurring within a biological organism, which produce a very vivid and spatial-temporally organised model of reality. It cannot be considered a substance, but rather an integrated process that consists of stimulus-derived unified information and can be seen as the way in which the biological organism experiences the world. This means that the PSM integrates information about the sensations of the entire system, both internal (temperature, body position, emotions) and external (social relations), and then represents them in a relatively unified form as a self-model (Metzinger 2003, 301–2). As he describes it, it is "the conscious model of the organism as a whole that is activated by the brain" (Metzinger 2009, 4).

Its content is precisely the phenomenal ego, or the self, which is the way in which the organism can grasp the inner image of a person and of the external environment (Metzinger 2003, 299). It is responsible for the first-person perspective and the experience of being a self and is also a necessary condition of our intentionality. It is through the PSM, that it is possible for anything to appear to a particular subject at all (Metzinger 2009, 4–5). The Ego, as the content of the PSM, consists of bodily sensations, emotional states, perceptions, memories, acts of will and thoughts. Nonetheless, it is all "...a transparent mental image: You—the physical person as a whole—look right through it. You do not see it. But you see with it" (Metzinger 2009, 7–8).

This transparency, coupled with the phenomenal model of the intentionality relation (PMIR: a model that allows the self to be experienced as an agent), enables the emergence of the first-person perspective (Metzinger 2003, 411). In his analysis of the notion of the self, Metzinger concludes that a dynamic PSM, which is based on the continuous processes of the biological organism, should replace the unclear and unjustified notion of substantive self in scientific discourse.

Why is the existence of the self problematic?

Metzinger maintains an anti-realist position about the self. In his critique, he distinguishes four grounds from which one can argue for the absence of the self: ontological, epistemic, methodological and semantic (Metzinger 2011, 280–6). It is noteworthy that ontological anti-realism about "the self" (ARS_O) is the most developed, and one can consider it to be the core of Metzinger's non-self theory.

> ARS_O states that the self is not a substance, with Metzinger defining the latter as: an entity that can 'stand in existence' all by itself, even if all other existing entities were to disappear. It is 'ontologically self-subsistent,' because it can sustain its own existence. It endures over time and is an ontologically fundamental entity, because it belongs to the basic building blocks of reality (Metzinger 2011, 280).

In ARS_O, Metzinger distinguishes between two approaches. The first one involves the negation of all substance and takes into account Buddhist positions of ontological anti-substantialism and structural realism, which postulate that all that exist are relations (Metzinger 2011, 280–1). The conclusion from this is that there are no specific identity criteria for mental, psychological, or phenomenological entities.

The second focuses on the notion of the self in "folk-phenomenology" and on what Metzinger considers to be an unjustified metaphysical assumption of the self's substantial existence. Within this approach, Metzinger considers the following issue: "Why should we assume the existence of selves in the first place?" (Metzinger 2011, 281).

As indicated previously, entwined with this fact is the issue of the transparency of the representation of reality. According to Metzinger this question is not usually raised because we are all born as "naive realists" (Metzinger 2009, 40–2; 2005, 11). This is due to the unavailability of the construction process to our introspection, i.e., our failure to recognise phenomenal representations as just representations and not objective reality. The first-person perspective was achieved through evolution. Therefore, mistaken identification with "the self" or, to put it in another terms, with our phenomenal experience occurs due the fact that human organs have evolved to help us to survive, rather than reflect the richness and complexity of reality. The brain produces such a perfect simulation of outside reality that we are unable to recognize it as a mental image. The organism has mistakenly identified itself with the representation it produces and has situated itself within it as a separate agent, or as the "self". The inability to see reality as a projection

is not caused by the speed of integration in the brain *per se*, but rather by the different speeds of distinct types of processing in relation to each other, e.g., attention and visual perception processing. Therefore, higher-order representations become transparent because the process that creates the experienced object integrates the information faster than the second-order process (Metzinger 2009, 42). What follows from this general description is that we do not have access to the actual information-processing. To use an analogy, it is not the case that we can perceive the pixels that construct the image we see, as during watching a film. We only have access to already processed information and therefore also have a false sense of being in direct contact with the world (Metzinger 2009, 41).

According to ARS_0, neither the realist approach to the self nor the assumption of the principle of individuation is ultimately satisfactory. Regarding the former, it would be necessary to situate the selves in space and time and to ascribe to them physical properties, which would be the conditions of their individuality and countability. However, Metzinger claims that only material bodies can possess such properties, while the self lacks the material qualities that would allow it to be considered as a real entity (Metzinger 2011, 281). On the other hand, he considers the concept of *haecceitas*, which was already proposed by John Duns Scotus (Gilson 2018, chap. 2). It is supposed to be something that makes a thing what it is, thus being the basis of its individuality or a principle of individuation. He even writes about something like "primitive thisness" – possible to experience in special states e.g., in meditation. Nevertheless, Metzinger claims that ascribing real existence to this "thisness" "is, of course, a pure hypostatization" (Metzinger 2011, 281–2).

In his thorough study of the ontological status of the self, Metzinger especially focuses on the bundle theory of the mind (Metzinger 2011, 282). According to this view, the self is a collection of a number of properties. In particular, he refers to David Hume, who believed that in the act of introspection we find only variable sensory impressions and feelings (e.g., what we see or hear and love or hate) (Hume 1896, 251–3). However, there is no separate entity that can possess these impressions. Therefore, the self can be considered an aggregate or bundle of impressions but should not be regarded as a distinct substantial entity. Metzinger takes the following hypothesis by Hume as his starting point:

> From the perspective of present-day cognitive neuroscience, this would be a scientifically plausible strategy: Our brains segment scenes and constitute multimodal, consciously perceived perceptual objects (e.g. one's own body as a

> whole) not by attaching properties to some more basic entity, but by a dynamic, bottom-up process of self-organization called "feature-binding" (Metzinger 2011, 282).

Therefore, this assumption entails belief that the subjective sense of the unification of various impressions does not require the existence of an underlying entity, since this sense "gradually emerges out of the self-organizing interaction between a large number of simpler components" (Metzinger 2011, 282).

The epistemic anti-realism about "the self" (ARS_E) is another position which Metzinger considers to relate to the critique of the self. The point of departure of ARS_E is that "the self is part of an unknowable realm of individuals, possessing an unknowable intrinsic nature" (Metzinger 2011, 284).

One can say that this idea is without any ontological components as it is limited to negative statements about the ontological status of the self. The key problem with this explanation is that it abstains from making any claims about human nature, thus making its status completely unclear. This is because the assumption within ARS_E that the self is unknowable implies the impossibility of an adequate introspective self-knowledge (Metzinger 2011, 284).

The next assumption, namely that of methodological anti-realism about "the self" (ARS_M), carries with it the most radical argument for eliminating the concept of the substantial self from scientific discourse. According to this approach, scientific research does not provide plausible empirical data from which the existence of individual and real selves can be inferred (Metzinger 2011, 285). As discussed above, Metzinger holds that phenomenal subjective experiences are worthy of study but are certainly not sufficient to provide a basis for a realist hypothesis of the self. Nonetheless, apart from such experiences, we have no further evidence to support this assertion. Therefore, Metzinger believes that we should focus on the neuroscientific and evolutionary perspective, which will have the added advantage of being conceptually economical. In his innovative survey, Metzinger attempts to create such a description by developing the PSM concept, which we have already briefly explained above.

Any reflections on the topic of self must necessarily touch upon the aspects connected with the linguistic domain. Consequently, Metzinger also introduces the idea of semantic anti-realism about "the self" (ARS_S). ARS_S deals with the issue of relation between language and reality. Its main assumption is that "the indexical expression 'I' does not refer to any entity that is ontologically fundamental" (Metzinger 2011, 285).

This thesis implies the absence of any permanent entity to which we refer by using the pronoun "I". Again, according to Metzinger, any phenomenal (and

by extension subjective) experience must be empirically justified to serve as a basis for making statements about objective reality (Metzinger 2011, 286). The use of personal pronouns is necessary and Metzinger does not seem to deny this. He questions the possibility of reducing phenomenal experience to purely neurobiological aspects (Metzinger 2009, 52–3). However, the search for objective correlates of these forms of classes makes us fall into the illusion of the individual self. Through language, we refer to the past and the future by placing the "self" there and thus creating the illusion of continuity (cf. Polak 2018, 56–8). Metzinger, therefore, by no means does diminish the role of language, but simply points to its functional aspect (Metzinger 2011, 288, 294; 2009, 43–4). He argues that developing a first-person perspective was driven by evolutionary processes and possesses an adaptive value but does not necessarily reflect the true structure of objective reality. Evolution is not worried about our veridical view of reality but only about our survival.

Since we use personal pronouns on a daily basis, this aspect of Metzinger's theory may appear very counterintuitive. However, it appears to us in this way, because we are constitutionally unable "see through" the phenomenal self-model as it is "transparent" to us, were we to use Metzinger's term (Metzinger 2009, 107; 2013, 17). We cannot go beyond it because we are unable to cognise without the sensory nervous system which represents images through neural pathways. However, to be more specific, we can only speak of an illusion from a first-person perspective. When we consider the issue from a third-person perspective, we find that at this subpersonal level, there is no question of any illusion or escape from it. According to Metzinger, the fact that we cannot distance ourselves from this kind of illusion is not the limitation, because "we" are in fact biological organisms. He argues that there is no one beyond it who can be subject to such constraints, no homunculus that is a subject to this illusion. Therefore, one can say, that we inherently recognise reality through illusion.

The Buddhist view on the non-self

The following part of this paper explores the similarities of Thomas Metzinger's self-model theory of subjectivity with the early Buddhist non-self concept (s. *anātman,* p. *anattā*). Such an interdisciplinary comparative approach is worthwhile because, firstly, more parallels can be explored than just those briefly mentioned by Metzinger. Secondly, it can enrich our present state of knowledge on consciousness and broaden research perspectives.

As in Metzinger's theory, in early Buddhism, we can find a denial of the existence of the self. One can argue that this is the point of departure which is common to both of these approaches. The early Buddhist discourses show the Buddha's teaching as a way of dealing with the problem of suffering (s. *duḥkha*, p. *dukkha*), which is closely related to attachment to the self. The Buddha claimed that all pleasures one experiences are impermanent and that eventually one will have to face suffering. Such a belief is related to the understanding of suffering as inherent in any process of change. According to this notion, everything that we experience in the world is impermanent (s. *anitya*, p. *anicca*), because things are constantly changing. This specific feature of reality makes the world a place of unstable conditions and consequently the individual will never be able to obtain what they want (Gethin 1998, 59–61, cf. Harvey 2013a, 26). Therefore, it follows, that a man will suffer, until he attains the cessation of desire (s. *tṛṣṇā*, p. *taṇhā*). One is also unable to understand the true nature of things as long as one persistently strives to appropriate some part of the universe as one's own and consider it in a following way: "this is mine, I am this, this is my self" (Gethin 1998, 147, 59–60).

As explained when describing Metzinger's theory, the use of personal pronouns contributes to the perception of the self as something unchanging and permanent. These linguistic conditions lead to the assumption of some distinct "self" to which the various experiences relate, which is obviously wrong, both in SMT and early Buddhism. However, it is noteworthy, that the notion of *anattā* does not deny the very existence of a sense of being or having a "self". What is challenged are the assumptions growing out of this nevertheless erroneous sense of the real existence of the enduring substance to which this feeling refers (Harvey 2013b, 62, Gethin 1998, 145–6). This idea is in tune with the assumption found in the ARS_S, that although by using the phrase "I" we are not actually referring to any individual entity, it works well functionally.

As was mentioned in the previous pages, Metzinger denies the existence of a permanent, eternal, and unitary self. The self, whose existence is denied by traditional Buddhism, has similar features. Buddhists thinkers opposed descriptions of the self, such as the one found in the early Brahmanical texts known as the Upanishads, which reads: "a mysterious, ungraspable entity; it is the unseen seer, the unheard hearer, the unthought thinker, the unknown knower; it is the inner controller; it is what is immortal in us" (Gethin 1998, 134).

It is easy to see that this definition is in harmony with Metzinger's comprehension of homunculus. Early Buddhist thinkers believed that there is

nothing permanent, constant, eternal, and unchanging that underlies diverse experiences and is the ultimate essence of person.

The aggregates

According to the Buddha, in addition to the emotional-psychological aspect of the cessation of desire, the intellectual aspect is also particularly important. This refers to the fact that the belief in the existence of a permanent, unchanging self, which constitutes the ultimate identity of a person, arises from ignorance (s. *avidyā*, p. *avijjā*) (Gethin 1998, 133–5). Thus, liberation requires correct recognition of the nature of the mind itself.

This point is expressed allegorically by the story contained in the *Kevaddha Sutta* (DN 11/I 211–23, cf. Gethin 1998, 113–4). It describes a journeying monk, who seeks an answer to the question about the place in which the four elements (earth, water, fire and air) cease. Due to his perfect mastery of concentration (s. *samādhi*), he is able to reach a state in which he travels through the realms of gods in search of a solution to his doubts. Unfortunately, the gods do not answer his questions but redirect him to further, more powerful beings. Finally, the monk breaks his meditative state and reappears close to the Buddha, once again asking the question about the end of the four basic elements. The answer given by Buddha makes the monk realise that his question is incorrect, and that he wandered through many realms, like a land-spotting bird flying through the expanses of the ocean without finding land. The Buddha states that the monk should rather ask:

> "Where do earth, water, fire, and air no footing find?
> Where are long and short, small, and great, fair and foul —
> Where are "name and form" wholly destroyed?"[1]

To which the Buddha responds in a following manner:

> "Where consciousness is signless, boundless, all-luminous,
> That's where earth, water, fire and air find no footing,
> There both long and short, small and great, fair and foul —

[1] DN 11/I 223: "evañca kho eso, bhikkhu, pañho pucchitabbo — 'kattha āpo ca pathavī, tejo vāyo na gādhati. kattha dīghañca rassañca, aṇuṃ thūlaṃ subhāsubhaṃ. kattha nāmañca rūpañca, asesaṃ uparujjhatī'ti". Trans. Walshe 1995, 179.

There "name and form" are wholly destroyed.
With the cessation of consciousness, this is all destroyed."[2]

As we can see, the emphasis is placed on making an analysis of the mind a basis for a correct intellectual grasp of other aspects of reality. The conclusion drawn from this analysis is the very concept of the absence of self as formulated in orthodox Buddhism. According to this concept, each person consists of the five mental and physical aggregates (s. *skandha*, p. *khandha*). The first one, *rūpa*, corresponds to bodily phenomena and the corporeal aspects of the physical world. These encompass the objects of the five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. The next aggregate, sensation (*vedanā*), comprises pleasant or painful experiences. The person is also constituted by perceptions (s. *saṃjñā*, p. *saññā*), responsible for the ordering of sensory stimuli allowing us to recognise a particular object. One can also speak about mental formations (s. *saṃskāra*, p. *saṅkhāras*), which are the processes that construct action bringing about subsequent karmic effects. Consciousness (s. *vijñāna*, p. *viññāṇa*), the last of the aggregates, is responsible for the awareness of oneself as a thinking and knowing individual (Harvey 2013a, 33, Gethin 1998, 135–6).

The idea of the five aggregates is well explained in the Buddhist text *Milindapañha* (Pesala 2001, 32–4). There, we find a story of a meeting between a Buddhist monk Nāgasena and an Indo-Greek king Milinda. When the monk introduces himself to the king, he points out that although he uses a name, there is in fact no individuality that corresponds to the word "Nāgasena". A confused king then begins to ask about the identity of the one who feels happiness, is morally good, practices meditation, lies and sins. He also asks whether perhaps any part of his body, his internal organs, his bodily fluids, and finally any of the five *khandhas* is "Nāgasena", but to each of these questions the monk answers in the negative. In order to clarify his words to Milinda, the monk begins to ask the king similar questions, referring to the chariot in which he had arrived. Nāgasena mentions each of the names of its parts (axle or wheels) and asks if that particular part can be considered synonymous with the chariot. Like the monk before, the king, each time, replies that it is not. Finally, Nāgasena says:

"Then, sir, this chariot is an empty sound. You spoke falsely when you said that you came here in a chariot" (Pesala 2001, 33).

[2] DN 11/I 223: "*viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ,anantaṃ sabbatopabhaṃ.ettha āpo ca pathavī, tejo vāyo na gādhati.ettha dīghañca rassañca aṇuṃ thūlaṃ subhāsubhaṃ. ettha nāmañca rūpañca,asesaṃ uparujjhati.viññāṇassa nirodhena,etthetaṃ uparujjhatī'ti*". Trans. Walshe 1995, 179–80.

Finally, Milinda admits that he uses the word chariot as a convenient term for the relationship of all its parts. In this way, the king has confirmed what Nāgasena had in mind all along, namely that:

"Even so it is because of the thirty-two kinds of organic matter in a human body and the five aggregates of being that I come under the term 'Nāgasena'" (Pesala 2001, 34).

This concept of the five aggregates is in remarkable agreeance with Metzinger's notion of "ego" as a content of phenomenal self-model. The latter's features could be contrasted with the *khandha*s as follows: bodily sensations – *rūpa*, emotional states – *vedanā*, perceptions – *saṃjñā/sañña*, acts of will – *saṃskāra/saṅkhāras*, memories and thoughts - *vijñāna/viññāṇa*. In both cases, none of these features can be considered an unchanging self, as they are impermanent and also susceptible to disease, and a person is not a unity but a conglomerate of various different experiences. Thus, according to Metzinger and early Buddhism, there are changeable experiences, but, in the act of introspection, we will not find among them an unchanging self that "owns" them. They are the foundation of the image of one's individual self, but they are just an image and thus do not constitute a separate being.

Does anyone exist after all?

As discussed above, Metzinger claims that the physical organism mistakes itself for its own self-representation. It is in tune with the early Buddhism concept, that the mind creates an illusion which we mistakenly take to be our self. However, there is an essential difference between these concepts. In his detailed examination, Metzinger distinguished between two levels i.e., basic first-person level and subpersonal level (Metzinger 2009, 209). The only thing that exists at the subpersonal level is the dynamical self-organisation, as there is nobody who is subject of illusion. To use Buddhist terms, there is nobody who is burdened by the *khandha*s. One may accuse Metzinger of getting caught up in the *regressus ad infinitum* or homunculus problem. However, with the above distinction, at least at this stage of investigation, Metzinger seems to have avoided this problem, since, at a fundamental level the biological organism is not a self-conscious agent. This idea coincides with the following words supposedly spoken by the Mahayana Buddhist scholar and monk Vasubandhu (Gethin 1998, 182), to whom Metzinger (2009, 251) refers in his book:

> Buddha has spoken thus: O, Brethren! actions do exist, and also their consequences (merit and demerit), but the person that acts does not. There is no one to cast away this set of elements and no one to assume a new set of them. (There exists no individual), it is only a conventional name given to (a set) of elements[3] (quoted after Stcherbatsky 1919, 845).

One can say that this statement implies the problem of a homunculus or transcendental consciousness. On the one hand, early Buddhist thought is characterised by a reductionist approach, since the *khandha*s fully exhaust the nature of the person and are all that can be found when reflecting on it. To take something impermanent and imperfect as the permanent self is ultimately self-contradictory and leads to suffering. On the other hand, this theory does not fully explain whether there is anyone who mistakenly regards the aggregates as the self. Some texts such as the *Bhāra Sutta* (SN 22.22) claim that the *khandha*s are only a burden which is carried but can also be shed, implying that a person is more than that. Therefore, this concept differs from Metzinger's theory, and is also at odds with orthodox Buddhism claim, that there exists nothing more than the aggregates.

It is also worth noting some problems with Metzinger's self-model theory of subjectivity. It seems that Metzinger's understanding of "the self" framework is questionable. Dan Zahavi argues that Metzinger uses the reified notion of the self which is unchanging and ontologically independent (Zahavi 2011, 60). Zahavi points out that such a concept is outdated. According to him, neurosceptics should accept the premise that illusion does not mean absence, but just means that something is wrongly regarded as self (cf. Blackmore 2002, 17).

If it is the case that Metzinger only criticises one of several concepts of the self, then perhaps he should be interested in considering alternative possibilities for the existence of the self. However, if he rejects alternative theories of any existence of a real self, it is worth considering the question, whether his SMT nevertheless presupposes some kind of stable substrate. SMT implies that biological organism is simply responsible for the creation of the illusion of the self. There is no self, but there are processes that produce the illusion. Is it therefore possible to identify the self with these processes?

It seems that Metzinger is against labelling anything as the "self" (cf. Olson 1998, 645–57), just as the Buddhist monk Nāgasena. Nonetheless, it appears that it follows from Metzinger theory that the biological processes at

[3] Quotation comes originally from translation of an excerpt from the Tibetan text *Bstan-hgyur*, which is considered an appendix to Vasubandhu's main work *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*.

the subpersonal level are responsible for the development of the sense of self. Therefore, has not the debate between Metzinger and the supporters of the existence of the real self, although ontologically dependent on neural patterns, become just a disagreement over the naming of the fundamental component present in their concepts?

Concluding remarks

In addressing the concept of the self, both Metzinger's self-model theory and Buddhist notion of *anattā* touch on one of the most fundamental experiences that humans have. However, instead of describing who we actually are, these theories focus on describing who we are not and agree that we are not what we think we are. Such a statement is certainly bound to be shocking and controversial.

It is worth emphasizing here the cultural difference between East and West. The Buddhist thinkers could potentially accuse Western philosophers (and also some non-Buddhist Eastern thinkers) of forcefully seeking a stable ground of the self, which in turn inhibits their spiritual development. However, would Western thinkers be ready to abandon their ideas in favour of attaining the state of liberation that the Buddha taught?

Here, it is worth noting briefly Michel Foucault's analyses of the evolution of human's attitudes to the acquisition of knowledge (Foucault 2005, 16–9). In his important study, Foucault concluded that the concept of care of the self (*epimeleia heautou*), so important in Greece, is presently abandoned. He believed that this understanding was influenced, e.g., by the Cartesian establishment of the cognition of the subject as a foundational element in the pursuit of knowledge. Thus, a pursuit of absolutely certain knowledge replaces occupation with spirituality and self-care.

Such an absolute division has never occurred on the Indian subcontinent. Buddhism paid particular attention to "the step by step discourse" (s. *anupūrvikā kathā*, p. *anupubbi-kathā*), which means that the mind must first be prepared (e.g., by good conduct) so that it is ready for the Buddha's teaching. Therefore, the acquisition of knowledge is closely linked to the spiritual development. Perhaps, the conflict between the negation of the self on the one hand and the search for its stable ground on the other, arises from Metzinger's approach to the question of the self (although, even if this approach is right, it is certainly not the only possible one). Therefore, he may be closer to the Eastern approach to philosophy, which, due to cultural differences, can be difficult to accept in the West.

As a conclusion, let us reconsider to the question posed in the title: do we really exist? The answer to this question will surely depend on the definition of the problematic "we". If we take "we" or "I" as merely conventionally referring to a self-less combination of changeable factors, whether the aggregates in case of Buddhism or physical and biological processes in Metzinger's philosophy, then, in this way, "we" surely exist. Without such an assumption, it would be impossible to explain our functioning in the world. However, if we take "we" as referring to some stable, monadic entity distinct from the body and constituting our identity, then, in such a sense, we must be ready to offer a seemingly paradoxical negative answer to our question.

Abbreviations

DN	Dīgha Nikāya
SN	Saṃyutta Nikāya
p.	Pali
s.	Sanskrit

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