

The Shadow of a Puppet Dance: Metzinger, Ligotti and the Illusion of Selfhood

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There are no people, nothing at all like that.

Thomas Ligotti

No such things as selves exist in the world:

Nobody ever was or had a self.

Thomas Metzinger

I. BEING NO-ONE

In his *Being No-One*,¹ Thomas Metzinger sets out a radical challenge to any philosophical defence of the status of subjective self-consciousness against the incursions of reductive neuroscience. Deploying all the resources of a nascent science of consciousness, Metzinger proposes at a stroke to eliminate selves from the ontological horizon and to destroy our most cherished ‘originary’ intuitions about ‘ourselves’ and our place in the world. Such intuitions

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furnish the precondition for the phenomenological description of the world that distinguishes between natural, manifest appearances and the supervening artifices of theoretical knowledge. By staking out a supposedly ‘unobjectifiable’ domain of subjectivity, philosophy has sought to maintain its distance from the coruscating potency of neuroscience. Husserl’s so-called ‘principle of all principles’ provides perhaps the most radical expression of this kind of philosophical presupposition: ‘that every originary, presentive intuition is a legitimising source of cognition, that everything originally offered to us in “intuition” is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented’.² But it is precisely the legitimacy of such ‘pre-theoretical’ intuitions that Metzinger problematises, on the grounds that even appearances themselves are never immediately ‘manifest’ to the conscious subject who experiences them. Working across several levels of explanation, Metzinger is not only able to draw out a tractable science of consciousness, but to expose consciousness’ ‘naive realism’ about its own states.

Despite formidable technical complexity, the upshot of Metzinger’s analyses could not be more clear: ‘no such things as selves exist in the world: Nobody ever *was* or *had* a self’.³ Consequently, ‘consciousness is *only* appearance’.⁴

1. T. Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (London: MIT Press, 2004).

2. E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. F. Kersten. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), 44. This is concurrent with Husserl’s call to get ‘back to the things themselves, questioning them in their self-givenness, and laying aside all prejudices alien to them.’ (Husserl, *Ideas* I section 19)

3. Metzinger, *Being No One*, 1.

4. T. Metzinger, ‘Appearance is Not Knowledge: The Incoherent Strawman, Content-

According to Metzinger, organisms are not selves; rather, they possess ‘self-models’ which cannot be recognised by the system that employs them. All that exist are specific information processing systems engaged in self-modelling, but whose models cannot be correlated with any ostensibly ‘real’ items in the world. Metzinger thereby eliminates substantive subjectivity in favour not of reduction as such, but of tractable explanation. Rather than reducing the self, he uses the scientific resources at his command to produce a functional model of what ‘selves’ must be: ‘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.’⁵

Expanding upon Wilfred Sellar’s attack on the ‘Myth of the Given’ – ‘the idea that some of our beliefs or claims have a privileged epistemic status because the facts that make them true are “given” to us by experience’⁶ – Metzinger claims that our folk-philosophical intuitions are a direct result of the bounds of our cognition, as expressed in the limitations of our phenomenal state-space. He illustrates this with a naturalist substantiation of Plato’s allegory of the cave, predicated on the argument that ‘our phenomenal model of reality is an internal model of reality that could, at any time, in principle, turn out to be quite far removed from a much more high-dimensional physical reality

Content Confusions and Mindless Conscious Subjects’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 11:1 (2004), 67-71.

5. T. Metzinger, ‘Response to “A Self Worth Having”: A Talk With Nicholas Humphrey’, at <http://www.edge.org/discourse/self.html#metzinger> (2003).

6. S. Stich, *Deconstructing the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 118.

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than we have ever thought of'.⁷ The 'cave' is the physical organism; the shadows, a 'low-dimensional projection of a higher dimensional object'; the fire is neural dynamics, i.e. the 'self-regulating flow of neural information processing'; the wall is the space of phenomenology, though the wall and fire are not separate entities. In sum, '[t]he cave in which we live our conscious life is formed by our global, phenomenal model of reality.'⁸ In line with some of the bolder suggestions proposed by contemporary physicists,⁹ then, Metzinger's analogy proposes that phenomenological perception may well be imprisoned within a virtual model, in which an experienced object is merely a 'low-dimensional shadow of the actual physical object in your hands, a dancing shadow in your central nervous system'.¹⁰ The crucial and far-reaching difference from Plato's cave, however, is that this illusion is, quite literally, *no-one's* illusion: 'there is no-one *in* the cave [...] The cave shadow is there. The cave itself is empty.'¹¹

In the following, we will use speculative theses implied by Thomas Ligotti's suffocating, hallucinogenic horror¹² to

7. Metzinger, *Being No One*, 548.

8. *Ibid.*, 546.

9. See, for example, the postulation of extra dimensions of space-time in superstring theory, about which physicist Brian Greene writes that: 'the discovery of extra dimensions would show that the entirety of human experience had left us completely unaware of a basic and essential aspect of the universe. It would forcefully argue that even those features of the cosmos that we have thought to be readily accessible to human senses need not be' (B. Greene, *The Elegant Universe: Space, Time and the Texture of Reality* (London: Penguin Science, 2005), 19.

10. Metzinger, *Being No One*, 548-9.

11. *Ibid.*, 549-50.

12. Very briefly, Ligotti's horror is characterised by a claustrophobic discrepancy between realism and oneirism, in which the world is illusional, and the real inconsistent

draw out some of the ramifications of Metzinger's theses. Our fundamental contention is that, just as the expropriation of subjectivity which is the fundamental theme of Ligotti's fiction finds an unexpected realist basis in Metzinger's philosophical naturalism, so, conversely, Ligotti's own metaphysical 'irrealism' affords resources through which the 'unimaginable' consequences of Metzinger's naturalistic 'nemocentrism' can be brought into speculative focus.¹³

II. PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE FICTION OF EXPERIENCE

Metzinger argues that neuroscience circumvents the supposedly irreducible ambit of self-consciousness and dissolves self-intimacy through the objectivation of the mechanisms of subjectivity. It is the non-intuitability of these mechanisms themselves that gives rise to qualitative experience – an experience which is thus constituted by its very inability to access the impersonal mechanisms which make the phenomenal simulation of self possible. This phenomenal simulation is *transparent* to experience: 'we do

and autonomous. Hence, Ligotti inverts the very possibility of redemption: The close-ness of world is disclosed in grotesque fabulation to be utterly autonomous in exactly the same moment as it is revealed that the mind is equally autonomous from the normative phenomenal experience of man. See, for example, T. Ligotti, *Crampton* (Poplar Bluff, MO: Mythos Books, 2002); T. Ligotti, 'I Have a Special Plan For This World' in *Teatro Grottesco* (London: Random House, 2008); T. Ligotti, 'Mad Night of Atonement' in *Noctuary* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1994); T. Ligotti, 'The Tsahal' in *Noctuary* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1994); and T. Ligotti, 'The Sect of the Idiot' in *Songs of a Dead Dreamer* (London: Robinson Publishing, 1989).

13. 'A nemocentric reality model is one that satisfies a sufficiently rich set of constraints for conscious experience [...] while at the same time not exemplifying phenomenal selfhood. It may be functionally egocentric, but it is phenomenologically selfless. It would, while still being a functionally centred representational structure, not be accompanied by the phenomenal experience of being *someone*.' (Metzinger, *Being No One*, 336). Nemocentrism, for Metzinger, is a phenomenologically unimaginable possibility; however, it is a possibility that is perfectly conceivable and neurobiologically possible (see Metzinger, *Being No One*, op.cit.).

not experience phenomenal states *as* phenomenal states [...] [we] *look through them*.¹⁴ Metzinger regularly alludes to fully immersive virtual reality to illustrate his thesis: ‘We do not experience our conscious field as a cyberspace generated by our brain, but simply as reality itself, with which we are in contact in a natural and unproblematic way.’¹⁵ Folk psychology’s agenda is driven by a first person logic, occupying a perspectival and geometric structure that is temporally and spatially individuated.¹⁶ This first-person perspective, however, is simply the phenomenal self-model, which Metzinger considers amenable to a neurobiological description, most likely involving parallel distributed processing (PDP), and a functional description: ‘the phenomenal self-model is a plastic, multimodal structure’.¹⁷

First-person phenomenal experience is thus formulated as an empirical ideality, an empty fiction that is plastic, and therefore highly dependent upon the idiosyncrasies of the species. Effectively, the first-person perspective is a generation of worldhood, ‘a *phenomenal cosmology*’.¹⁸ The layers of simulation that coalesce into phenomenal experience encapsulate the intuition of phenomenal

14. T. Metzinger, ‘The Problem of Consciousness’ in *Conscious Experience*, ed. T. Metzinger (Thorverton, UK: Imprint Academic, 1995) 11.

15. *Ibid.*, 11.

16. Folk psychology attributes a unique and direct causal link from a selection process for volition as the cause of behaviour. Metzinger takes this causal link to be untenable, so that; ‘it is not only that folk psychology is false - it is the content of the conscious self-model that attributes a causal relation between two events represented within it’ (Metzinger, *Being No One*, 360). Folk psychology is therefore both false and hallucinatory from a scientific, third person account.

17. T. Metzinger and B. Walde, ‘Commentary on Jakob’s “Ineffability of Qualia”’, *Consciousness and Cognition* 9 (2000), 352-62.

18. Metzinger, ‘The Problem of Consciousness’, 6.

cosmology which, from the third person perspective, is understood to be a representational and functional property which can be analysed *in its entirety* on this basis.¹⁹ ‘Selves’ in the full-blooded ontological sense, then, fall victim to Ockham’s razor:

Under a general principle of ontological parsimony, it is not necessary (or rational) to assume the existence of selves, because as theoretical entities they fulfil no indispensable explanatory function [...] All that can be explained by the phenomenological notion of a ‘self’ can also be explained using the representationalist notion of a transparent self-*model*.²⁰

Even the most elementary components of phenomenality are unavailable to the self. For example, Metzinger argues that, in order to draw logical concepts from phenomenal content, and therefore to have epistemic and justified belief with regard to simple forms of phenomenal content, transtemporal identity criteria would have to be assumed, drawn directly from material identity criteria.²¹ In that case, the abstraction of logic or ontology from experience would necessitate the indubitability of the self-manifestation of appearances: ‘letting apparition show *itself* in its appearance according to its appearance.’²² Thus, phenomenological appearance is rooted in an originary field of self-identity which, removing the imposition of

19. See Metzinger, *Being No One*, 577. However, Metzinger suggests that this might not be a rational choice in all contexts, drawing a clear distinction between his work and the Churchlands’.

20. *Ibid.*

21. For a phenomenological account in which this is indeed assumed to be the case, see J.-L. Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. J. Kosky (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002) 7ff.

22. *Ibid.*, 8.

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the conceptual a priori, claims to return ‘things’ to lived experience, and to the fleshly actuality of consciousness. According to Metzinger, we only assume the reliability of this primitive self-identity on the assumption that ‘in our subjective experience of sensory sameness we carry out a phenomenal representation of this transtemporal identity on the object level in an automatic manner, which already carries its epistemic justification in itself.’ – and ‘[i]t is precisely this background assumption which is false.’²³ The transtemporal criteria necessary for the subjective individuation and consequent logical identity are simply unavailable to subjective introspection, so that phenomenal concepts are a priori incapable of being introspectively formed. Phenomenological primitives, supposedly straightforwardly given to the conscious subject, are incapable of providing even the most basic conceptual traction on the data of consciousness. Hence, as Metzinger argues:

The phenomenological approach in philosophy of mind, at least with regard to those simple forms of phenomenal content, is due to failure; a descriptive psychology cannot come into existence with regard to almost all of the most simple forms of phenomenal content [...] The neural and functional correlates of the corresponding phenomenal states can, in principle, provide us with transtemporal identity criteria as well as with those logical identity criteria for which we have been looking. Neurophenomenology is possible; phenomenology is impossible.²⁴

Only through the objective scientific circumvention of self-conscious experience is it possible to gain traction on

23. Metzinger, *Being No One*, 82.

24. Metzinger, ‘Commentary on Jakab’s “Ineffability of Qualia”’.

the specific reality of both the manifest and non-manifest elements of phenomenal consciousness.

III. TRANSPARENCY: A SPECIAL FORM OF DARKNESS

The phenomenal self comes about through a ‘special form of epistemic darkness’ – essentially, the inability of the subject to represent the conditions of its own intuitions. Folk psychology posits that the world is given immediately to subjective consciousness; it assumes that the experience of phenomenal content is transparent to the self. Metzinger argues, on the contrary, that immediacy is an illusory experience of the ‘outside’ world:

From an epistemological perspective, we see that our phenomenal states at no point in time establish a direct and immediate contact with the world for us [...] However, on the level of phenomenal representation [...] this fact is systematically suppressed.²⁵

In a direct inversion of the traditional notion of the transparency of inner sense, Metzinger argues that transparency, as an essential characteristic of phenomenal experience, illuminates the phenomenological fallacy of *pure* experience and the ‘subjective impression of immediacy’. Naive realism is not, therefore, a philosophical theory as such; it is the global character of intuition, once the latter is understood in terms of phenomenal content locally supervening on neurobiological properties. Opacity, as opposed to transparency, occurs when appearances are cognised *as* appearances. Hence, our primitive pre-reflective feeling of conscious selfhood is *never* truthful, in that it does not correspond to any single entity *inside* or *outside* of the self-representing

25. Metzinger, *Being No-One*, 59.

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system.²⁶ The culmination of this inversion of the concept of transparency is indicated by the fact that transparency is a form of darkness: ‘With regard to the phenomenology of visual experience transparency means that we are not able to see something, because it is transparent. We don’t see the window but only the bird flying by. *Phenomenal* transparency in general, however, means that something particular is not accessible to subjective experience, namely, the representational character of the contents of conscious experience.’²⁷ The immediately given contents of the Phenomenal Self-Model (PSM) correspond neither to the sub-personal mechanisms underlying those contents, nor to any kind of external reality; the entire life-world is illusory, an ‘online hallucination.’²⁸ Metzinger calls this feature of the self-model theory (SMT) ‘autoepistemic closure’ – that is, the closure and boundedness of processing in regard to internal dynamics. Autoepistemic closure allows for the availability of phenomenal content but not of the vehicle of content.²⁹

26. See *ibid.*, 565.

27. *Ibid.*, 169. Metzinger elucidates this point: ‘We do not have the feeling of living in a three-dimensional film or in an inner representational space: in standard situations our conscious life always takes place *in the world*. We do not experience our conscious field as a cyberspace generated by our brain, but simply as reality itself, with which we are in contact in a natural and unproblematic way. In standard situations the contents of pure experience are subjectively given in a direct and seemingly immediate manner. It is precisely in this sense that we can say: they are infinitely close to us.’ (Metzinger, ‘The Problem of Consciousness’, 11-2).

28. See Metzinger, *Being No-One*, 51. As Metzinger puts it: ‘The instruments of representation themselves cannot be represented as such anymore, and hence the experiencing system, by necessity, is entangled in a naive realism.’ (*Ibid.*, 169).

29. The dualism of vehicle and content is not available for Metzinger; they cannot be understood as two distinct entities (see Metzinger, *Being No-One*, 166). More specifically then, transparency results from the: ‘attentional unavailability of earlier processing stages in the brain for introspection. Transparency results from a structural / architectonic property of the neural information-processing going on in our brains’ (T. Metzinger, ‘Phenomenal Transparency and Cognitive Self-Reference’,

However, as Metzinger is unwilling to split vehicle from content – which he believes would reify abstract content – transparency is further complexified by the assumption that there is a processual and physically realised *embodied* content.³⁰ Metzinger therefore effectively lays waste to functionalism's attempt to abstract the cognitive from actual physiological processes, an attempt which arguably already concedes the irreducible status of human sapience *vis-à-vis* its empirical substrate.

This, of course, is a characteristically modern philosophical distinction – the same one that allows Kant to maintain the autonomy of the transcendental subject from any empirical intervention or knowledge whatsoever. Through the *Critique of Pure Reason's* so-called 'paradox of inner sense', Kant is able to maintain the transcendental status of the 'I think' without lapsing into pure idealism, which would necessarily conflate inner sense with consciousness.³¹ Inner and outer sense are given in empirical perception as an intuitive whole, which is ultimately determined by the understanding through the transcendental synthesis of pure apperception.³² Therefore, the intuitive unity of subjective consciousness remains distinct from the transcendental

Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences 2 (2003), 353–93.

30. Hence, phenomenal transparency is distinguished from a Cartesian epistemic transparency; 'The Cartesian claim about the epistemic transparency of self-consciousness can itself not be epistemically justified.' (Metzinger, *Being No-One*, 167), though it is phenomenologically adequate (see Metzinger, *Being No-One*, 340).

31. This is key to Kant's critique of idealism and of the Cartesian subject; that they conflate inner sense with the conscious self.

32. Kant argues that: 'What determines inner sense is the understanding and its originary power of combining the manifold of intuition, that is, of bringing it under an apperception.' I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Meiklejohn, ed. V. Politis (London: Everyman, 1993), 111 (B153).

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unity of apperception, the ‘I think’, that unifies the manifold of presentations into an object of experience.

Metzinger concurs with Kant on the futile nature of rational psychology, and similarly on his transcendental (rather than ontological) distinction between phenomenal content and reality. However, this transcendental *opacity*, for Kant, lies in the fact that there can be no transparent knowledge of the self – concomitant with which is the dissolution of the substantive self through the positing of a formal a priori ground of subjectivity. Hence, whilst Kant’s concept of ‘transcendental illusion’ certainly corresponds with what Metzinger terms ‘phenomenological illusion’ – that is, the drawing of epistemic conclusions from phenomenal experience – ultimately, Kant’s positing of a noumenal subjectivity commits the same fallacy that he had sworn to abjure. For, if Metzinger is correct, then the PSM undermines any attempt to transcendentalise subjectivity or consciousness, and the putatively noumenal substratum of inner sense can be cashed out in its entirety from within the ambit of scientific objectivity. Kant presupposed the unification of sense to be given through the unity of apperception that acts as the transcendental guarantor for the nomological consistency of appearances, and thus specifies ideal laws of appearance that have subsequently been shown to be rooted in empirical intuition. Metzinger disavows the role of syntactical invariance through his insistence on the sub-symbolic and immanent objectivity of the non-manifest element of consciousness.³³ The self-model is a

33. As Metzinger explicates: ‘the presence and striking holism of phenomenal reality [...] would no longer have to be explained in accordance with classical philosophical models *from above* (e.g. by a transcendental subject), if we had a good bottom-up alternative [...] called “feature binding” in the terminology of brain research: The fusion of different properties perceived by the system into a *holistic* internal structure.’

plastic structure which can be neurobiologically described as a complex neural activation pattern. But furthermore, '[o]n a more abstract level the same pattern of physiological activity can also be described as a complex functional state'.³⁴ Since appearances are not discursively structured for Metzinger, he eradicates the autonomy of nomological consistency by rooting the manifestation of appearances in physical structures that are in no way dependent upon ideal (transcendental) laws.

Metzinger thus inverts Kantian 'opacity', arguing that it is not the transcendental opacity of the self that is primary, but the transparency of the self-model, which, through its objectivation, can become opaque, allowing for the cognising of appearances *as* appearances. It is our functional design that forces us into a naive realism, so that the explanation for semantic transparency is given by an evolutionary, rather than a transcendental, account: 'for biological systems like ourselves – who always had to minimise the computational load [...] naive realism was a functionally adequate "background assumption" to achieve reproductive success [...] [there was] no evolutionary pressure on our representational architecture to overcome the naive realism inherent in semantic transparency'.³⁵

Such a binding of properties is, for instance, necessary in enabling us to see objects *as* objects' (Metzinger, 'Faster than Thought: Holism, Homogeneity and Temporal Coding', in *Conscious Experience*, ed. T. Metzinger (Thorverton, UK: Imprint Academic, 1995), 435.

34. T. Metzinger, 'The Subjectivity of Subjective Experience: A Representationalist Analysis of the First-Person Perspective' in *Neural Correlates of Consciousness: Empirical and Conceptual Questions*, ed. T. Metzinger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 289.

35. Metzinger, *The Subjectivity of Subjective Experience*, 299.

IV. THE IMMANENT OBJECTIVATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Kant safeguards the autonomy of philosophy via recourse to a notion of an a priori transcendental subjectivity which would circumscribe possible experience, rendering empirical science inherently incapable of investigating the objectivity of the object and the formal conditions of empirical actuality. And, whether overtly or not, much ‘continental philosophy’ remains wedded to the presupposition that science is supervenient on a set of concepts that are ideally embedded in the subject. This disjunction of the empirical sciences and philosophy arguably attains its most extreme formulation in Husserl’s conception of pure phenomenology as a transcendental-eidetic science whose bracketing of the world ensures that the natural sciences are confined to *res extensa*, thereby preserving an immanent plane of pure experience governed by an irreducible transcendental consciousness: ‘the existence of Nature cannot be the condition for the existence of consciousness, since Nature itself turns out to be a correlate of consciousness: Nature is only as being constituted in regular concatenations of consciousness’.³⁶ However, according to Metzinger, it is the very domain of pre-theoretical access which, despite all claims to the contrary, is ultimately tethered to the myopia of contingently – evolutionarily – circumscribed conditions of intuition. Phenomenology, rather than reaching into ‘the

36. E. Husserl, *Ideas*, Book 1, 116. See also Husserl’s account of phenomenology as an eidetic science: ‘phenomenological or pure psychology as an intrinsically primary and completely self-contained psychological discipline, which is also sharply separated from natural science, is, for very fundamental reasons, not to be established as an empirical science but rather as a purely rational (“apriori,” “eidetic”) science. As such it is the necessary foundation for any rigorous empirical science dealing with the laws of the psychic, quite the same way that the purely rational disciplines of nature pure geometry, kinematics, chronology, mechanics are the foundation for every possible “exact” empirical science of nature’ (Husserl, ‘Phenomenology: Entry for the Encyclopedia Britannica’, *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 2, 1971: 77-90).

things themselves’, succeeds only in transcendentalising folk psychology. In the wake of Metzinger, consciousness must be conceived of as produced by immanent objective mechanisms, which are themselves sub-symbolic, non-linguistic, and unconscious, so that ‘pure self-reflection’ is exposed as caught within the obscurantism of an empirico-transcendental circularity.

Metzinger argues that where philosophy has long grappled with reason and representation, it is only now that representation has ‘through its semantic coupling with the concept of information, been transposed to the domain of mathematical precision and subsequently achieved empirical anchorage.’³⁷ Thus, ‘[c]onceptual progress by a combination of philosophy and empirical research programs is possible; conceptual progress by introspection alone is impossible in principle.’³⁸ Metzinger’s work constantly forces philosophy to take account of *objective* intelligence; the sub-personal production of phenomenality as a naturalised Kantianism. The objective structure of knowledge is invested with empirical contingency, as one among many objective procedures; man as a mass of info-theoretic computation packed densely through sedimented layers of transcendental deception.

V. NEMOCENTRISM

Perhaps one of the most intriguing undercurrents of Metzinger’s book, albeit one that he does not expand upon, is the implicit suggestion that the interests of thought can be unbound from lived experience, and in many cases even

37. Metzinger, *Being No One*, 19.

38. *Ibid.*, 83.

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opposed to the interests of life.³⁹ For example, in a general discussion of scientific realism, Metzinger writes that ‘there are aspects of the scientific world-view which may be damaging to our mental well-being’.⁴⁰ The object ‘man’ consists of tightly packed layers of simulation, for which naive realism becomes a necessary prophylactic in order to ward off the terror concomitant with the destruction of our intuitions regarding ourselves and our status in the world: ‘conscious subjectivity is the case in which a single organism has learned to enslave *itself*’.⁴¹ It is at this point that Thomas Ligotti’s work can illuminate Metzinger’s thesis, offering a phenomenological purchase upon that which Metzinger has claimed to be impossible for the imagination – methodological nemo-centrism.

Ligotti invokes the expropriation of subjective experience thus: ‘There are no people, nothing at all like that, the human phenomenon is but the sum of densely coiled layers of illusion, each of which winds itself upon the supreme insanity that there are persons of any kind.’⁴² Ligotti couples this supreme insanity with a metaphysical irrealism regarding the substantive nature of the world. The supposedly foundational order of the phenomenal world is

39. This is consistent with our general critique of phenomenology, following Derrida’s characterisation of Husserl’s work as ‘a philosophy of life [...] because the source of sense in general is always determined as an act of living, as an act of a living being, as *Lebendigkeit*’ (J. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973) 10). On this divorce between the interests of thought and those of life, see Ray Brassier’s *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006).

40. Metzinger, ‘Response to “A Self Worth Having”’.

41. Metzinger, *Being No One*, 558. The self is mere appearance; ‘the conscious self is an illusion which is no-one’s illusion’ (Metzinger, ‘The Subjectivity of Subjective Experience’, 2000).

42. Ligotti, ‘I Have a Special Plan for this World’.

a mere semblance – and not a semblance of a supra-terrestrial realm, or an alien ‘Other’, but a semblance of the real world, which is utterly indifferent to the interests of organic life and thought. Ligotti thus unfolds some of the existential and phenomenological implications of Metzinger’s conceptualisation of the relative autonomy of appearances: His characters experience reality in a way that is utterly incommensurate with the phenomenological register of human perception.

Ligotti’s work is characterised by two movements which he refuses to separate: the subject’s passive dispossession of self-consciousness, and the ‘enlightenment of inanity’. This double movement unmasks the reality within which the characters have always been. The suffocating effect Ligotti achieves through this process is intensified by his staunch repudiation of any recourse to the supernatural; there is no possibility of escape. Hence, the *ascecis* of the personal takes place within a positively insignificant reality, a realisation which dissolves both the intimacy of subjective experience, and the impersonal distance of the mechanics of that experience.

Ligotti’s phenomenological nemocentrism draws out this collapse of any securely demarcated ontological and epistemological foundations in a weird-fictional landscape filled with the ruins and ghosts of puppets. Throughout Ligotti’s work, the puppet figures as the insensate and sub-personal reality hidden beneath the ‘mindless mirrors’ of our naive reality. Puppets function as ‘conduits to the unreal’,⁴³ through whose agency hallucinatory phenomenality bleeds into a simultaneous concretisation of the

43. S.T. Joshi, ‘Thomas Ligotti: Escape From Life’, in *The Thomas Ligotti Reader*, ed. D. Schweitzer (Evanston, MD: Wildside Press, 2003) 135.

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oneiric. Life is played out as an inescapable puppet show, an endless dream in which the puppets are generally unaware that they are trapped within a mesmeric dance of whose mechanisms they know nothing, and over which they have no control. As Dziemianowicz notes in relation to Ligotti's 'Dreams of a Mannikin', the puppet's overriding affect is a suspicion that 'he and his entire world are merely a fictional diversion'.⁴⁴ The puppet is not merely an mocking parody of man, it is the unmasking of the animate face of insensate reality, the unveiling of the inexorable mechanics of the personal; 'There are no means for escaping this world. It penetrates even into your sleep and is its substance. You are caught in your own dreaming where there is no space. And are held forever where there is no time. You can do nothing you are not told to do. There is no hope for escape from this dream that was never yours. The very words you speak are only its very words.'⁴⁵ The irrepressible horror concomitant with Ligotti's concretisation of the oneiric stems from the *experience* of living in a 'three-dimensional film', a 'tunnel through an inconceivably high-dimensional reality'.⁴⁶ This phenomenal experience of nemocentrism ultimately dissolves both the intimacy of the personal and the distance of the impersonal; 'nothing's too small, nothing's too big. You lose your car keys, your wife gets run over by a semi, some nut blows up the capital of Pakistan'.⁴⁷ For this reason, the concretisation of the puppet

44. S. Dziemianowicz, 'Nothing Is What It Seems To Be', in *The Thomas Ligotti Reader*, ed. D. Schweitzer (Evanston, MD: Wildside Press, 2003), 50. See T. Ligotti, 'Dreams of a Mannikin', in *Songs of a Dead Dreamer*.

45. Ligotti, 'I Have a Special Plan for this World'.

46. Metzinger, *Being No One*, 551.

47. Ligotti, *Crampton*, 82.

concomitant with the increasing passivity of the narrator engenders an affect of universal claustrophobia through the implosion of the personal – which was, of course, never personal to begin with.

It is resolutely not the case, however, that the puppet-world is ‘willed’ into existence by an ‘Other’; there is no puppet master pulling the strings.⁴⁸ Ligotti’s systematic assault on empirical realism is not a result of the reinvigoration of the world with a Heraclitean flux, a pure productivity, or a contingent excess of materiality. Ligotti’s real is ‘positively’ senseless, rigorously disabling any attempt to provide reality with substantive or ideal foundations by irreversibly severing its reciprocity with the pretensions of subjective thought. Ligotti can no more assume the existence of an extant and hypostatized nature than he can assume the necessary constancy of presence. The transcendental illusion exposed by Metzinger is expanded into a total disparity between the interests of life and the reality that life finds itself within. The secure foundations of the phenomenal and the real dissolve, not into a universal solipsism, but into a rigorous realism; ‘it is not, in the end, a replacement of the real world by the unreal, but a sort of turning the real world inside out to show that it was unreal all along’.⁴⁹

48. As Ligotti consistently maintains, the dissolution of the self cannot give way to a Schopenhaurian Will, as this reinstates some form of ‘first philosophy’ in the form of an underlying essence. See Ligotti, ‘Tsalal’; ‘You wrote that there is not true growth or evolution in the life of this world but only transformations of appearance, an incessant melting and molding of surfaces without underlying essence. Above all you pronounced that there is no salvation of any being because no beings exist as such, nothing exists to be saved – everything, everyone exists only to be drawn into the slow and endless swirling of mutations that we may see every second of our lives’.

49. Joshi, ‘Thomas Ligotti’, 139. Hence the statement; ‘Nothing is real’ (Ligotti, *Crampton*, 83), is not assumable under the idealising consequences of phenomenal immediacy.

COLLAPSE IV

Where Metzinger definitively resolves to destroy the possibility of the synthesis of man and nature, it is through Ligotti's phenomenological fictionalisation that the affective ramifications of this move are elucidated. Ligotti has developed a method of realising the absolute indifference of the real to the human and the personal through a metaphysical irrealism in which he disentangles appearances from both sufficient reason and originary manifestation by severing the nomological isomorphism of appearances and their substrate; in the end, subjectivity is simply a specific exacerbation of objectivity.⁵⁰ Accordingly, an unforeseen consequence of Ligotti's inhabitation of Metzinger's epistemic nemocentricism is that Metzinger's naturalistic realism ends up providing traction on Ligotti's metaphysical irrealism: 'The horror and nothingness of human existence – the cosy facade behind which was only a spinning abyss.'⁵¹ Phenomenal cosmology is not given by a structural syntax, but is simply an exacerbation of objective processes unconstrained by any form of ideality.

50. The dissolution of apodictic realism is continuous with the dissolution of apodictic thought; 'the integrity of material forms is only a prejudice, at most a point of view [...] things are not bolted down, so to speak. And no more is that thing which we call the mind' (T. Ligotti, 'The Cocoons' in *The Shadow at the Bottom of the World* [NY: Cold Spring Press, 2005], 164).

51. T. Ligotti, *Conspiracy Against the Human Race* (Forthcoming – see extract in present volume). This would entail the extraction of metaphysical naturalism from naturalistic realism, which is methodological rather than ontological. Accordingly, it is possible that naturalism may not be the most promising explanatory ground for Metzinger's self-model theory, as evolutionary ethology can be shown to ground a representational efficacy, but in order to extrapolate scientific realism on this basis, Metzinger would have to argue that nature is inherently functional, and therefore promoting a functional univocity. In this case, Metzinger would succumb to the charges that Stephen J. Gould poses to Daniel Dennett: making 'thinly veiled attempts to smuggle purpose back into biology' (S. J. Gould, *The Richness of Life: A Stephen Jay Gould Reader* [London: Vintage, 2007], 442). See D. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (London: Penguin, 1996).

Ligotti's horror, then, can be understood in terms of Metzinger's theory, in such a way as to grasp Ligotti's work as a fictional realisation of Metzinger's nemicentrism. Ligotti's horror is removed from the realm of the fantastic and given naturalistic traction through Metzinger's definition of man as the 'puppet shadow [that] dances on the wall of the neurophenomenological caveman's phenomenal state space'.⁵² Equally, reading Metzinger alongside Ligotti, or as Ligottian theory-horror, accentuates the anomic terror of the arrogation of the self, as the folk psychological ascription of agency that is preserved in the artifice of natural language is extricated from the transcendental pretensions that phenomenology underwrites.

Finally, Ligotti enables us to recognise that the theoretic-practical resolve of Metzinger's theory is to be found not in the reduction of folk psychology, but in a kind of neuro-technology. Phenomenality and knowledge-weighting are malleable: 'the phenomenal self-model is a plastic, multimodal structure'⁵³ whose 'insertion and integration into other domains of information architecture amplify the potential for cognitive pliability'.⁵⁴ What is this but the naturalisation of the final outcome of Ligotti's fantastical puppet-dance: the realisation that underlying our parochial self-conceit is the impersonal reality of the meat-puppet?⁵⁵

52. Metzinger, *Being No One*, 558.

53. Metzinger, 'The Subjectivity of Subjective Experience', 289.

54. See Metzinger; 'change the representational content of the conscious self-model [...] get some unconscious microfunctional output' (Metzinger, 'Response to "A Self Worth Having"').

55. The conjunction of Ligotti and Metzinger induces the definition of man as the shadow of a 'meat-puppet'. For a reading of man as a meat-puppet within contemporary science, see R. Doyle, *On Beyond Living: Rhetorical Transformations of the Life Science* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 36; see also its fictional realisation in the character of Molly in W. Gibson, *Neuromancer* (London: Voyager, 1984).

COLLAPSE IV

Here the objectivation of the world indicates its *real* condition, unveiling the inexorable mechanics of appearances as a prospect of hideous insanity – a hall of mindless mirrors unbound from the densely coiled layers of illusion that characterise the interests of life and the physiology of thought. Meanwhile, cognitive protectionism and organic enslavement ensure the oneiric aphasia of the shadow of the puppet dance:

To know, to understand in the fullest sense, is to plunge into an enlightenment of inanity, a wintry landscape of memory whose substance is all shadows and a profound awareness of the infinite spaces surrounding us on all sides. Within this space we remain suspended only with the aid of strings that quiver with our hopes and our horrors, and which keep us dangling over the gray void. How is it that we can defend such puppetry, condemning any efforts to strip us of these strings? The reason, one must suppose, is that nothing is more enticing, nothing more vitally idiotic, than our desire to have a name – even if it is the name of a stupid little puppet – and to hold on to this name throughout the long ordeal of our lives, as if we could hold on to it forever. If only we could keep those precious strings from growing frayed and tangled, if only we could keep from falling into an empty sky, we might continue to pass ourselves off under our assumed names and perpetuate our puppet's dance throughout all eternity.⁵⁶

56. T. Ligotti, 'A Soft Voice Whispers Nothing' in *In a Foreign Town, In a Foreign Land* (London: Durtro, 1997).

