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## Current Debates

### "We Must Learn to Use Our Brains Better": An Interview with Thomas Metzinger



No ego, no soul, no self: brain research is coming up with findings that confound our very notion of what it means to be human, giving rise to heated controversy. A discussion with neurophilosopher Thomas Metzinger about suppression, ethical challenges and a new

culture of consciousness.

*Mr Metzinger, like brain researchers, you as a philosopher deny that humans have a self. Why?*

The idea that there is no such thing as the self is by no means new. David Hume and Immanuel Kant both said that there is no self in the sense of a substance that could also exist entirely on its own. This has been a tenet of Buddhist philosophy for 2,500 years. There is virtually no one left in the philosophy of mind who still believes in a soul that exists independently of the body.

What is new about my approach is perhaps the explanation of how the concept of a conscious self evolved. In close cooperation with cognitive scientists and brain researchers, I have developed a theory about this. What we describe as "the" self in our everyday lives is in my opinion the reflection of an inner image: an image conjured up in the brain both when we are awake and when we are dreaming. This process generates a conscious model of the self. However, because we are unable to experience this model as a model, we have the feeling of being a self: a "sense of ego" is created.

#### "Productive dialogue between the disciplines"

*What can philosophy learn from neuroscience?*

For philosophers it is always beneficial to examine empirical research because this often destroys false intuitions. What is more, the findings of brain research greatly restrict the scope of possible solutions to the problem of consciousness, which is very helpful. Sometimes, philosophy can also adopt more precise conceptual tools from the neuro- and cognitive sciences.



*And vice versa?*

Philosophy can in turn lead to advances in the neurosciences. Brain researchers are frequently unsure about what a scientific explanation actually is. Sometimes there are also goals of explanation, such as to decipher consciousness, where the first thing one needs to know exactly is what in fact the goal of explanation is. In such cases, it is important to be accompanied critically by scientific theory – but especially as far as ethical and anthropological consequences are concerned.

#### Culture of suppression



*Advances in brain research could soon make direct intervention into human consciousness possible. What role does philosophy play in this context?*

Our society currently lives in a culture of suppression. Thanks to the neurosciences, we actually already know a great deal about the human mind, yet many people nonetheless attempt to uphold a simple, politically and religiously correct image of humankind.

This will not work in the long term, because advances in knowledge will inevitably also lead to new technologies. New types of medical intervention in the human brain are already possible, for example to treat Parkinson's disease and severe depression. New medication may soon be available to improve mental faculties not only in older people, but also in healthy young people. What is more, technologies such as weapon systems and lie detectors are being developed in the field of artificial intelligence that are also of interest to military and intelligence organizations.

Intellectual honesty and well-applied ethics are becoming increasingly important. Because new legal decisions will have to be taken, there is also a growing need for political advice.

*You talk of a "naturalistic turning point" in today's image of humankind...*

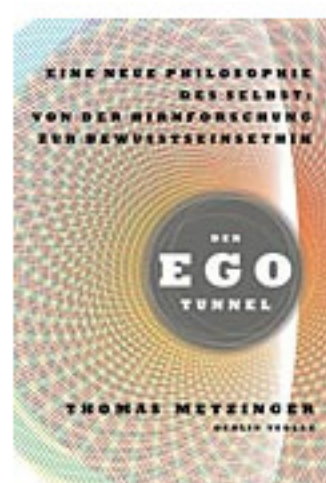
That's right. According to the latest scientific knowledge, evolution also encompasses the development of the human mind. Greed, jealousy and parental love are just as much the product of a gradual evolutionary process as wings, eyes or brains are. In putting forward this idea, it is not the intention of brain researchers to malevolently destroy our image of humankind – they are merely providing us with a better basis for making ethical decisions and with a contribution to the old philosophical ideal of self-knowledge.

Some humanists, Church representatives and politicians attempt to deny scientific facts because they are painful. However, we must face up to the process of self-knowledge – and use our knowledge to increase our autonomy.

#### Is there such a thing as free will?

*Given such self-knowledge, are autonomy and freedom of will even possible?*

There is as yet no completely convincing philosophical theory of freedom of will. There is, however, a conflict between the biological self-model in our brains – which is millions of years old – and new theories in science. It is not really possible to believe that everything is determined for us, as this would ultimately cause serious damage to our mental health. That is in fact the real problem: the conscious self-model that we have as a result of evolution tells us, after all, that we can take new decisions out of the blue.



*You propose a new culture of consciousness. What do you mean by this?*

If we soon gain better and better control over our human consciousness, we need also to think about what in fact a good state of consciousness is and how we wish to live in future. Perhaps the best way to achieve this lies in a flexible basic attitude, in an approach that maximizes as far as possible the autonomy and freedom of the individual.

The newly emerging image of humankind has its own very individual spiritual depth. Our conscious sphere of experience is much bigger than most of us ever imagine. This is what science tells us. We can learn to use our brains in a better and more precise way. What is important is to embed our new knowledge of consciousness and our new scope for action within the culture.

The chances of us achieving this, however, are relatively small. After all, we are being bombarded from all sides by the facts of the climate crisis, yet we do not act. Why should we succeed in developing a culture of consciousness if we are not even capable of securing our own survival?

Thomas Metzinger is currently a fellow at the Berlin Institute for Advanced Study. He teaches theoretical philosophy at the University of Mainz, where he also heads the neuroethics department. From 2005 to 2007, he was president of the "German Society for Cognitive Science" and from autumn 2009 on will be president of the "Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness". In March 2009, his first book aimed at a wider audience has been published, entitled *The Ego-Tunnel*.

*Dominik Reinle conducted the interview. A graduate in sociology, he works as a freelance journalist in Cologne, including for the Internet section of the broadcaster Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR.de).*

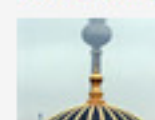
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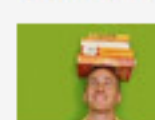
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