

# The Grammar of Self

*Thomas Metzinger's Phenomenal Self-Model and the Closure Framework: The Transparent Closure That Cannot See Itself*

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*No such things as selves exist in the world. Nobody ever had or was a self. All that exists are phenomenal selves, as they appear in conscious experience. The phenomenal self is not a thing but an ongoing process: the content of a transparent self-model.*

Thomas Metzinger, *Being No One*, 2003

*Every finite closure generates remainder. The remainder is not noise. It is the proof that the grammar is finite.*

CF Dietz, *Consciousness, Closure, and the Cosmos*, 2026

## Abstract

Thomas Metzinger is Professor Emeritus of Theoretical Philosophy at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz and a member of the German National Academy Leopoldina. His self-model theory of subjectivity, developed at full technical length in *Being No One* and for a wider audience in *The Ego Tunnel*, is the most comprehensive philosophical account available of how the sense of being a self arises from the brain's representational activity, and why no such thing as a self exists in the world despite that sense being entirely real as an experience. His phenomenal self-model, the brain's transparent real-time model of the organism as a whole, is what generates the first-person perspective: the sense of being a subject looking out at a world from inside a body. Transparency is the crucial structural feature: the phenomenal self-model cannot be represented as a model by the system that runs it, which is why the system looks through it rather than at it, experiencing its content as immediate reality rather than as a constructed representation. This paper argues that Metzinger's self-model theory and the closure framework developed in *Consciousness, Closure, and the Cosmos* converge at a structurally precise point: the transparent self-model is a closure regime whose defining feature is that it cannot represent its own closure character to itself. Metzinger's autoepistemic closure, the system's inability to represent its own representational nature, is the closure framework's account of why any closure necessarily generates remainder it cannot constitute: the closure cannot step outside itself to constitute the fact that it is a closure. The ego tunnel is what it is like to be inside a closure that cannot see its own walls. And Metzinger's most recent work on minimal phenomenal experience, the simplest possible form of awareness present in deep meditation before any content arises, approaches from the empirical direction the same primitive that the CC-C framework calls C: bare conscious presence prior to all closure content. The productive divergence between Metzinger and the closure framework is also the paper's most important philosophical moment: Metzinger concludes that the self is an illusion because it is a model. The closure framework argues the opposite: that a model's being a model does not make its constituted facts illusory. The closure is real as a closure. The self is real as a

self-constituting process. Nobody ever had a self in the sense of possessing a fixed thing. But the process of self-constitution is not an illusion. It is what a self is.

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## **1. The Tunnel**

Out there, beyond your eyes, there is no color. There is electromagnetic radiation of various wavelengths, some of which interact with the photoreceptors in your retinas and trigger cascades of neural processing that eventually produce the experience of color. The color you experience is not out there. It is in here: a product of your visual system's processing, painted onto the tunnel walls of your conscious experience. The evening sky is colorless. The red of the apple is not in the apple. The blue of the sea is not in the sea. What is in the sea is a surface that reflects certain wavelengths. What is in your experience is blue.

Thomas Metzinger uses this observation as the entry point to a philosophy of mind that is, in his own assessment, potentially disturbing. If the color is not in the world but in the tunnel, if the seen world is not the physical world but a model of it, if even the self that seems to be doing the seeing is not a thing in the world but the content of the brain's model of the organism, then we are not what we think we are. We are not subjects inhabiting a world. We are processes generating a tunnel, living inside it, unable to see the walls because the walls are transparent, unable to step outside because there is no outside from inside the tunnel.

Nobody ever had or was a self. This is Metzinger's central claim in *Being No One*. It is not a claim that experience is unreal or that consciousness does not exist. It is a claim about what exists in the world: not selves as fixed entities, only the ongoing process of a phenomenal self-model, a transparent brain-generated representation of the organism as a whole, which produces the appearance of being a self without there being any such thing to appear as.

The closure framework engages this claim with precision. It agrees with Metzinger that the self is a process rather than a thing, that the phenomenal self-model is the mechanism by which the sense of selfhood arises, and that transparency, the model's inability to represent itself as a model, is the crucial structural feature of self-experience. It disagrees with his conclusion that the self is therefore an illusion. A closure is not less real for being a closure. The facts a closure constitutes are genuine facts. The process of self-constitution is real. The self is not an illusion that should be seen through. It is a closure regime that cannot see through itself, and that impossibility is not a deficiency. It is the structural character of all closure.

## **2. Metzinger's Four Claims**

Metzinger's self-model theory of subjectivity has four interconnected components developed across three decades of work.

## **2.1 The Phenomenal Self-Model: What the Brain Builds When It Builds a Self**

The brain maintains a model of the world: a real-time representation of the organism's environment constructed from sensory signals, prior knowledge, and predictive processing. This is what Seth's controlled hallucination account describes. But the brain also maintains a model of the organism itself: a real-time representation of the body's current state, position, emotional valence, sensorimotor capacities, and identity. This is the phenomenal self-model, the PSM.

The PSM is not a representation of an independently existing self that happens to be in the world. It is a representational construction that produces the sense of being a self. When the PSM is active and functioning normally, the organism experiences itself as a subject: as having a body, as being located in space, as being the source of its own actions and the locus of its own experiences. When the PSM is disrupted, as in certain neurological conditions or under the influence of dissociative substances, the sense of selfhood is disrupted with it. Patients with depersonalization disorder report experiencing themselves from outside, as if watching themselves from a distance, or as if they have no self at all. Out-of-body experiences are disruptions of the PSM's normal spatiotemporal organization. The rubber hand illusion demonstrates that the PSM can incorporate external objects when sensory conditions produce the right pattern of cross-modal signals. The self is wherever the PSM locates it.

## **2.2 Transparency: The Model That Cannot See Itself As a Model**

The most philosophically important feature of the PSM is its transparency. A transparent representation is one that cannot be represented as a representation by the system that uses it: the system looks through it rather than at it. Metzinger contrasts transparent representations with opaque representations. An opaque representation is one that the system can represent as a representation: a painting, a map, a theory, a belief. Opaque representations can be held at arm's length, evaluated, updated, or discarded. Transparent representations cannot be: they are simply what the system experiences as reality.

The normal conscious world-model is largely transparent: we see the apple, not our neural representation of the apple. We experience ourselves as looking directly at the world, not as processing signals from which a model of the world is constructed. The PSM is completely transparent in normal waking consciousness: we experience ourselves as selves, not as systems running self-models. The transparency is what makes the first-person perspective feel immediate and unconstructed. The ego tunnel is the product of a transparent world-model and a transparent self-model running together, producing the experience of being a subject in a world, with no sense that either the subject or the world are models rather than realities.

Metzinger calls this autoepistemic closure: the system cannot represent its own representational activity because the representations through which it would need to do so are themselves transparent. The system is closed to its own epistemic nature. It cannot know that it is knowing, not because it lacks the capacity for self-knowledge, but because the representations that carry its self-knowledge are themselves transparent, not available as objects of higher-order representation.

## **2.3 No-Self: The Consequence of Taking Transparency Seriously**

If the phenomenal self is the content of a transparent self-model, and if no such thing as a self exists in the world independently of that model, then nobody ever had or was a self in the way we intuitively feel we do. The feeling of being a self is real: it is the experience of the PSM's content. But the self that is felt is not a thing. It is an ongoing process: the dynamic activity of a brain constructing and maintaining a self-model.

Metzinger draws a distinction between the phenomenal self, which exists as an experience, and a real self, which would need to exist as a worldly entity independently of any model. The phenomenal self exists. The real self does not. This is not a claim that you do not exist or that experience is illusory. It is a claim about the ontological category of what exists: not a thing called a self but a process called self-modeling, and the experience that process generates.

The implications are significant and Metzinger takes them seriously. If the self is not a fixed entity but an ongoing process, then it can be disrupted, modulated, expanded, and contracted in ways that a fixed entity could not be. If the boundary of the self is determined by the PSM's current content, then that boundary can be altered by changing the PSM. Out-of-body experiences, depersonalization, ego dissolution in psychedelic states, and the dissolution of ego-boundaries in deep meditative absorption: all are changes in the PSM, and all are therefore changes in the self that is experienced. The self is not behind these experiences. It is these experiences.

## **2.4 Minimal Phenomenal Experience: Approaching the Floor of Consciousness**

Metzinger's most recent program of research pursues what he calls minimal phenomenal experience: the simplest possible form of consciousness, the bare awareness that remains when all content has been stripped away. His empirical entry point is the phenomenology reported by advanced meditators in states of pure awareness: states in which the usual contents of consciousness, thoughts, perceptions, emotions, the sense of a self, have faded, but something remains. Not nothing. Something. A bare knowing, an unpartitioned epistemic space, awareness without an object.

Metzinger's hypothesis is that this minimal phenomenal experience is the content of a predictive model of tonic alertness: the brain's representation of its own state of being awake and available to experience, prior to any specific content entering that availability. He proposes six semantic constraints that any adequate account of minimal phenomenal experience must satisfy, and uses sixteen phenomenological case studies drawn from meditation literature and first-person reports to develop the concept.

This program is philosophically significant for the series because minimal phenomenal experience is the closest empirical approach available to what the CC-C framework calls C: bare conscious presence prior to all closure content. Metzinger approaches it from the phenomenological and empirical direction, asking what the simplest possible experiential state is and how it might be modeled computationally. The closure framework approaches it from the philosophical direction, arguing that C is the primitive that makes all modeling possible and cannot itself be derived from any model. Both are approaching the same thing from different sides of the boundary between what can be studied empirically and what must be presupposed for any empirical study to be possible.

### **3. What Metzinger Needs**

Metzinger's self-model theory is the most technically comprehensive available account of how the sense of being a self arises from representational processes in the brain. His account of transparency is philosophically precise and empirically grounded. His no-self conclusion is taken seriously by philosophers and neuroscientists across a wide range of positions on consciousness. His minimal phenomenal experience program is among the most ambitious and carefully conducted in contemporary consciousness research.

There are two questions Metzinger's framework raises that the closure framework addresses. The first is about the status of the model's constituted facts. Metzinger argues that the self is not real because it is a model. But this argument proves too much. Every perceptual experience is a model in Metzinger's sense: our experience of the red apple is the content of a transparent world-model, not a report of mind-independent redness. If the self is not real because it is a model, then the apple is not red, the sky is not blue, and no perceptual fact is a genuine fact. The closure framework resists this conclusion: a model's being a model does not make its constituted facts illusory. The redness of the apple is a genuine fact about the apple-as-constituted-by-the-visual-system. The self is a genuine fact about the organism-as-constituted-by-the-self-model. The constituted facts are real, even though the closure that constitutes them is finite and generates remainder.

The second question is about the status of transparency itself. Metzinger describes transparency as the system's inability to represent its representational nature. The closure framework asks: what is the structural reason for this inability? Why must any self-model be transparent? The answer the closure framework gives is structural: any closure must generate remainder that includes itself. The closure cannot step outside itself to constitute the fact that it is a closure, because any such step would require a higher-level closure, which would itself be unable to constitute its own closure-character, and so on indefinitely. Transparency is not a contingent feature of the human PSM. It is the structural consequence of what it means for any finite organizational system to draw distinctions. The system draws distinctions from inside, which is the only place there is to draw them from. That it cannot see itself drawing them is not a deficiency. It is the basic structure of all finite closure.

### **4. Two Concepts in the Language of Self**

The closure framework is introduced here in the minimum terms needed to ground Metzinger's account and show what each provides the other.

#### **4.1 The Phenomenal Self-Model Is a Closure Regime**

A closure regime is a system that stabilizes some content by drawing distinctions, establishing identity criteria, and maintaining lawful relationships among its elements. The phenomenal self-model is a closure regime in this precise sense: it draws distinctions between self and world, between the organism's internal states and the external environment, between what belongs to the self and what does not. It establishes identity criteria: the criteria that determine when a given experience or body part or action is experienced as mine rather than alien. And it

maintains lawful relationships among its elements: the spatiotemporal organization of body experience, the narrative continuity of personal identity across time, the sense of agency that connects intentions to actions.

Transparency, in closure framework terms, is the constitutive blindness of any closure to its own closure-character. The closure draws distinctions, but it cannot draw the distinction between itself and what it is not as a distinction, because drawing that distinction would require a higher-level closure within which the current closure appeared as an element. The PSM constitutes the self as the subject of experience, but it cannot constitute the PSM-as-model as an object of the self's experience, because constituting it would require a metaclosure within which the PSM appeared as an element. The metaclosure exists in philosophical reflection: we can think about the PSM as a model. But in transparent operation, the PSM is not available as an object. It is simply what the self is. The closure's content is experienced as reality because the closure cannot present its own closure-character to itself.

## **4.2 The Ego Tunnel Is the Phenomenology of Being Inside a Closure**

Metzinger's ego tunnel metaphor captures something the closure framework expresses structurally: conscious experience is always inside a closure, never outside it. The tunnel is the experienced world as constituted by the closure's distinctions and identity criteria. The walls are what the closure cannot constitute, the remainder that lies beyond its current organizational scope. The tunnel moves forward as the closure updates: new facts are constituted, old ones supersede, the remainder that was yesterday's wall becomes today's tunnel through Jablonka-style expansion into the adjacent possible.

What Metzinger calls looking through the transparent self-model directly onto the world is what the closure framework calls the immediate felt reality of any constituted fact: the closure does not present its constituted facts as constructions but as realities, because construction and reality are not distinguishable from inside the closure. There is no phenomenological difference between seeing the apple and seeing-the-brain's-model-of-the-apple, for the same reason that there is no phenomenological difference between knowing a fact and knowing-the-closure's-constitution-of-the-fact. The closure constitutes the fact, and the constituted fact is experienced as the fact. That is not an illusion. That is how closure works.

## **5. Four Claims, One Structure**

The vocabulary correspondence between Metzinger's self-model theory and the closure framework is philosophically the most exacting in the series. What Metzinger calls the phenomenal self-model, the closure framework calls the self-constituting closure regime: the organized system of distinctions and identity criteria that generates the sense of being a self. What Metzinger calls transparency, the framework calls the structural blindness of any closure to its own closure-character: the consequence of the fact that any closure draws distinctions from inside, which is the only place there is. What Metzinger calls the ego tunnel, the framework calls the phenomenology of being inside a closure: the world as constituted by the closure's distinctions, experienced as immediate reality because the closure cannot present itself as closure. What Metzinger calls autoepistemic closure, the framework calls the remainder that every closure generates about itself:

the closure cannot constitute the fact of its own constitution. And what Metzinger calls minimal phenomenal experience, the framework calls the approach to C from the empirical direction: the simplest possible experiential state, prior to all closure content, which is what the closure framework takes as the primitive C.

### **5.1 Transparency Is Closure's Constitutive Blindness**

Metzinger's transparency is the most precise available characterization of what the closure framework means by the structural blindness of any closure to its own operation. A transparent representation cannot be represented as a representation by the system that runs it. A closure cannot constitute the fact of its own constitution using the same closure that is doing the constituting. Both describe the same structural reality from different theoretical vocabularies.

The closure framework adds the structural explanation of why this is necessary rather than contingent. It is not that the PSM happens to be transparent, and might have been opaque if evolution had taken a different course. It is that any finite system that draws distinctions from inside cannot use those distinctions to constitute the fact that it is drawing distinctions, because constituting that fact would require a higher-level closure, which would face the same impossibility at its own level. Transparency is not a design limitation. It is the structural consequence of what it means to be a finite organizational system that constitutes facts from inside. Every closure is transparent in this sense. The PSM is the most philosophically investigated instance.

### **5.2 No-Self Is Correct, But Not Because the Model Makes the Self Unreal**

Metzinger's no-self conclusion, that nobody ever had or was a self, is correct in the sense the closure framework endorses: the self is not a fixed entity but an ongoing process of self-constitution. There is no substance called selfhood that exists independently of the PSM's activity, any more than there is a substance called redness that exists independently of the visual system's color-processing.

But the closure framework resists Metzinger's implication that the self is therefore an illusion, or that discovering the PSM's mechanism should dissolve the sense of being a self. The constituted facts of the PSM are genuine facts about the organism as constituted by the self-closure. The self is real as a self-constituting process. The process is not less real for being a process rather than a thing. Maturana's autopoiesis is not less real for being an ongoing process rather than a fixed substance. Thompson's enacting organism is not less real for its enaction being dynamic rather than static. Metzinger correctly identifies what the self is, a closure regime rather than a fixed entity, but then concludes that identifying it as a closure regime reveals its unreality. The closure framework says the opposite: identifying it as a closure regime reveals its real character. The self is real as what it actually is.

### **5.3 Autoepistemic Closure Is the Remainder the Closure Generates About Itself**

Metzinger's autoepistemic closure, the system's inability to represent its own representational nature, is in closure framework terms the remainder that every closure generates about itself: the fact of its own constitution is the one fact the closure cannot constitute. This is not

a limitation specific to consciousness or to the human brain. It is the general structural character of any finite closure: the closure cannot step outside itself to constitute the fact that it is a closure.

This means that the self-knowledge any consciousness has is always knowledge from inside: knowledge of what the self-closure has constituted, not knowledge of the closure itself as closure. The self can know its feelings, its memories, its beliefs, its intentions, all of which are contents of the self-closure. It cannot know its own constitution as constitution, except indirectly through philosophical reflection that partially externalizes the closure by building a metaclosure. Metzinger's project in *Being No One* is precisely such a metaclosure: an attempt to constitute the PSM as an object of philosophical and scientific investigation, thereby partially lifting the transparency that normally makes the PSM invisible. The project partially succeeds, as all such projects do, while itself being conducted from inside a transparency that cannot be fully lifted.

#### **5.4 Minimal Phenomenal Experience Approaches C from the Empirical Side**

Metzinger's minimal phenomenal experience research is the closest any empirical program has come to the primitive the CC-C framework calls C. He is asking: what is the simplest possible form of consciousness, the least that can be present while something rather than nothing is experienced? His answer: a bare knowing, an unpartitioned epistemic space, awareness prior to any specific object or content.

The closure framework's C is bare conscious presence prior to all closure content: the primitive that is not derivable from any organizational structure but is the condition under which any organizational structure is experienced rather than merely processed. Metzinger's minimal phenomenal experience and the closure framework's C are approaching the same boundary from opposite directions. Metzinger approaches it empirically, reducing the content of consciousness toward its floor and asking what remains. The closure framework approaches it philosophically, arguing that C is what must be presupposed for any such reduction to be possible: the presence that is present before the first content arrives.

The question that separates them is whether minimal phenomenal experience is itself a model, a Bayesian representation of tonic alertness as Metzinger proposes, or whether it is what the model opens onto when the model has reduced itself to its simplest form. This is the boundary between the closure framework's C as primitive and Metzinger's C as the content of the simplest possible model. It is a productive boundary, not a mere disagreement, because it is the boundary between what any empirical program can study and what any empirical program must presuppose.

### **6. The Productive Divergence**

The most important philosophical moment in the series comes at the intersection of Metzinger's no-self conclusion and the closure framework's account of constituted facts. It is worth dwelling on.

Metzinger argues: the self is the content of a self-model; models are not things in the world; therefore no such thing as a self exists in the world. This argument is valid if models are not things in the world. But the closure framework contests this premise. A closure regime is a thing in the world: an organizational structure that draws distinctions, constitutes facts, and generates

remainder. The PSM is a thing in the world in exactly this sense. It is not a substance, not a fixed entity, not a Cartesian ego. But it is a real process that constitutes real facts.

The red of the apple is not in the apple in the sense of being a mind-independent property of the apple's surface reflectance. But the redness experienced by the visual system is a genuine fact about the apple-as-constituted-by-the-visual-system. This is not less real than the physical fact of the apple's surface reflectance. It is a different kind of fact: a constituted fact, grammar-relative, closure-dependent, but nonetheless real. The closure framework's account of grammar-relative knowledge means that all facts are constituted facts. There are no mind-independent facts that exist prior to and independently of any constituting closure. The physical facts that science studies are constituted by scientific closure regimes operating on sensory and instrumental input. The phenomenal facts that consciousness studies are constituted by perceptual and self-modeling closure regimes operating on sensory and interoceptive input. Neither kind of fact is more or less real than the other.

Metzinger's no-self conclusion rests on contrasting the phenomenal self with a real self that would need to exist in the world independently of any model. The closure framework denies that any such real self could exist: all selves are constituted selves, just as all facts are constituted facts. The question is not whether the self is real in the sense of being a model-independent entity, because nothing is model-independent in that sense. The question is whether the self-constituting process is a genuine process that constitutes genuine facts. The closure framework's answer is yes. Metzinger's answer is also yes: the phenomenal self is real as a phenomenal self. The disagreement is about whether saying the phenomenal self is real as a phenomenal self amounts to saying there is no such thing as a self. The closure framework says it amounts to saying that the self is exactly what it is: a self-constituting process whose constituted facts are genuine facts.

## **7. The Grammar of Self**

The evening sky is colorless. The self is not a thing. Both claims are correct in the sense Metzinger intends them: there is no redness in the electromagnetic spectrum independent of any visual system, and there is no fixed entity called a self independent of any self-model. Both claims are also incomplete in the sense the closure framework points toward: the redness that the visual system constitutes is a genuine fact about the world-as-constituted, and the self that the PSM constitutes is a genuine process that constitutes genuine facts about who and what this organism is.

Thomas Metzinger has given philosophy of mind one of its most important structural concepts in transparency: the closure that cannot see its own walls, the model that presents its content as immediate reality, the system that is constitutively blind to its own constitution. He has given it one of its most important empirical programs in the study of minimal phenomenal experience: the patient and rigorous approach to the simplest possible form of consciousness from inside an empirical research tradition. And he has given it one of its most important provocations in the no-self conclusion: the invitation to reconsider what was always assumed to be most certain, the existence of the self that seems to be doing the considering.

The closure framework names the structural logic that Metzinger's program implements and the boundary that his program cannot cross from inside. The PSM is a closure regime: it draws

distinctions, constitutes facts, generates remainder about itself that it cannot constitute. Transparency is the structural blindness of any closure to its own operation. The ego tunnel is the phenomenology of being inside a closure that cannot see its walls. And minimal phenomenal experience is the empirical approach to C: the bare presence that is the condition under which any closure is experienced rather than merely processed.

Nobody ever had or was a self. This is true in the sense that no fixed self-substance exists independently of self-constituting processes. But the self-constituting process is real, and the facts it constitutes are genuine. The tunnel is real even if the tunnel does not contain a tunneler. Being the process of self-constitution is what being a self means. The grammar of self is the grammar of a closure that cannot see its own walls, experiencing its constituted world as immediate reality, pressing into its remainder from inside the only place there is to press from.

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### **Author's Note**

*This paper is the sixteenth in a series engaging thinkers whose work converges with the closure framework developed in *Consciousness, Closure, and the Cosmos*. Thomas Metzinger is Professor Emeritus at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz and a member of the German National Academy Leopoldina. His *Being No One* is among the most technically accomplished books in the philosophy of mind of the past quarter century, and *The Ego Tunnel* brings its central insights to a wider audience with exceptional clarity. His minimal phenomenal experience program, running since 2020, represents the most rigorous empirical approach to what the CC-C framework calls C currently active in consciousness research. This paper identifies what may be the most philosophically consequential disagreement in the series: whether a model's being a model makes its constituted facts unreal, or whether constituted facts are genuine facts precisely as constituted facts. The closure framework takes the second position, arguing that all facts are constituted facts and that this does not diminish their reality but characterizes it. This is the site where the series' broader philosophical commitment, to grammar-relative knowledge as genuine knowledge rather than as a deficient substitute for mind-independent knowledge, has its sharpest expression. The author also notes that Metzinger's transparent self-model and Lawson's closure are the same structural concept arrived at from different directions: Lawson from metaphysics, Metzinger from philosophy of mind and neuroscience. Their independent convergence on the same structural insight is one of the suite's most striking examples of intellectual convergence across disciplines. The author welcomes engagement from Metzinger directly and from philosophers of mind, cognitive scientists, and phenomenologists who find the convergence between the self-model theory and the closure framework either illuminating or contestable.*