

Józef Bremer. *Osoba — fikcja czy rzeczywistość? Tożsamość i jedność ja w świetle badań neurologicznych* [Persons: Fiction or Reality? The Identity and Unity of the “Self” in the Light of Neurological Research]. 2nd ed. Cracow: Aureus, 2014.

Józef Bremer’s recently republished book *Osoba — fikcja czy rzeczywistość?* offers both a survey and an analysis of contemporary discussions of the notions of “self” and “self-consciousness.” The author declares that he will “present the controversies over the criteria for the identity and unity of persons that have emerged in contemporary Anglo-American analytical philosophy, against a broadly sketched philosophical and psychological background.”¹ Bremer emphasizes that philosophy explains concepts and creates models, while the cognitive sciences² are concerned with discovering facts and interpreting mechanisms and structures. This leads to disagreements, as cognitivists tend to draw extensively on the results of the empirical sciences, leading in turn to a naturalization of the very concept of personhood analyzed by philosophers. Therefore, tackling the question of whether it is possible to preserve the concept of personhood adopted in philosophical anthropology will be crucial to any philosophical engagement with the cognitive sciences.³

Józef Bremer’s book contains ten chapters and a short foreword. The first chapter has an introductory character. In it the author offers a historical survey, both of specifically philosophical conceptions of what personhood could amount to, and of other related attempts to capture it, while at the same time setting forth his own definition. The second chapter dis-

1. Bremer, *Osoba — fikcja czy rzeczywistość*, 13. Editor’s translation, here and in subsequent quotations from Bremer’s book.

2. Let me note here that, in this review, in spite of its having been adopted by Bremer and being already in widespread use in Polish scholarship, I will not be employing the term “cognitivism” (*kognitywistyka*), which seems to suggest that there is a unity in respect of both object (or, more precisely, an objective aspect) and method in what in English are called the “cognitive sciences.” The latter term is more appropriate, as it reveals *expressis verbis* the fact that cognitive sciences are, in actuality, a conglomerate of multiple disciplines jointly engaged in studying a single object.

3. The problems arising at the level of the foundations of the cognitive sciences are pointed to by, among others, Eric Margolis, Richard Samuels, and Stephen P. Stich, in the Introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Cognitive Science*, edited by them (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). These are, for instance, the problems connected with the metatheoretical presuppositions associated *inter alia* with selecting a model of mind or of thinking, the problem of the multiplicity of disciplines included within the cognitive sciences and of their relationships, and problems pertaining to the meanings attributed to fundamental terms.

cusses the stance of Peter Strawson, according to which there is a necessary connection between mental and bodily states. The final part of the chapter is of pivotal importance for Bremer's subsequent analyses, as he spells out there the fundamental presuppositions of the philosophical concepts of "self" and "person" he himself espouses. The main presupposition consists in accepting that "speaking adequately about a self-conscious individual, endowed with unity and identity, and referred to as a 'person,' requires taking into account the necessary correlation of those properties with their bodily-neuronal substrate" (76). This presupposition is meant to enable a combining together of explanations of personhood couched in scientific and in common-sense terms. Bremer supplements this with some epistemological presuppositions, the most important of which consists in the embracing of the assumption that persons are self-conscious, both in respect of their selves as such, and of their own actions, and that they are endowed with a capacity for perceiving their environments and their own bodies. It should be remarked here that, strictly speaking, these are ontological presuppositions about the natural cognitive capacities of persons, and not epistemological presuppositions internal to the cognitivist theory itself. Besides, Bremer discusses some "ontological presuppositions," including the one that persons and selves are of necessity linked with their bodies.

Together, these presuppositions make it possible for a broadly classical conception of "person" and "self" to be proposed. Chapters 3 and 4 then set out on a path aimed at crystallizing such a conception through historical enquiry. They discuss, respectively, two fundamental philosophical conceptions of the self: namely, the sort of "ego-theories" (to employ the term appearing in the author's own English summary) that appear in Aristotle, in Descartes, and in the form of some contemporary variants, as well as the anti-subjectivistic conception, according to which a "bundle of perceptions" is held to be itself constitutive of our consciousness, as was proposed by Hume and is advocated by Derek Parfit. Bremer then places Kant's conception between these, devoting Chapter 5 of his book, "Konstruowana jedność Ja – I. Kant" ["Kant: The Constructed Unity of the Ego"] to the latter. According to Bremer, the theoretical pictures put forward by Kant on the one hand, and by scientific realism on the other, are close to one another, as they furnish clear criteria for what can be known, and establish the impossibility of going beyond those foundations, even if they differ in that the material aspect of the person, apprehended through a scientific approach, is what counts as important for scientific realists, while what count as fundamental for Kant are "the *a priori* categories of what can be thought that establish the framework for every kind of scientific theory" (251).

Chapter 6 explores the linguistic usage of the pronoun “I,” with the aim of bringing us to a consideration of the conceptions of personhood that emerged in the wake of the so-called “linguistic turn” in analytical philosophy. The discussion here is very much influenced by the opinions of Wittgenstein. At this juncture Bremer offers readers an analysis of the pronoun “I,” conducting this at a strictly linguistic level and attending to its occasion-specific and deictic functions, with the focus on its colloquial *usus*. Then he undertakes an analysis of the semantic correlate of the vocable “I,” where this includes analyzing arguments against the existence of the self qua substance such as were proposed by G. E. M. Anscombe, who pointed out that if “I” were a name referring to an object, it would have to denote a kind of Cartesian non-bodily and non-spatial subject, whereas the contents of consciousness need not in fact refer to any enduring object. In line with Anscombe’s argument, one might say that it is not the sheer fact of referring that should be doubted, but the very reality to which “I” purportedly refers.

In Chapter 7, the author examines a few contemporary theories of the self: the conception of Thomas Nagel, according to which the self is “the foundation of psychological continuity” (305), Daniel Dennett’s conception of the self as narrator, and Thomas Metzinger’s naturalistic conception of the self, as well as the modular conception of brain and self of Jerry Fodor. According to Bremer, Nagel’s conception aims to uncover a connection between an objective (i.e., in this instance, supposedly physicalist) and a subjective (Cartesian, to be precise) point of view, through an enlarged conception of mental reality. According to Bremer, this attempt does not lead to any consistent proposal being formulated. In turn, the approach of Dennett appears to have an eliminativistic character, as it abandons speaking about the self in first-person terms and turns the self into a kind of useful fiction that creates the center of our autobiography. However, according to Bremer, “it is necessary to adopt the first-person perspective in order to speak adequately about persons, whether in ontological or in epistemological terms. Any analogies, along the lines of that typically drawn between persons and machines, that eliminate from their field of comparison the richness of persons’ experiences, their felt sense of freedom and spontaneity in respect of their decision-making, or their apprehension of their own selfhood, turn out to be wide of the mark” (360). Bremer, accordingly, challenges Dennett to explain persons’ consciousness and the common-sense concepts of identity and unity. These are the questions Bremer attempts to answer himself in Chapters 8 and 9, and that are central to his own considerations.

The question of the self is posed by Bremer in the context of so-called “split brain” investigations. Firstly, Bremer describes the syndrome from a neurological point of view. Then he presents the philosophical interpretations: in particular, the approaches of Nagel and Dennett. Neither author offers a convincing answer to the question of how many minds a person with a split brain possesses. As Bremer points out, Nagel suggests that the common-sense image of the mind as countable not be applied to people with split brains. It is impossible to establish a determinate number of centers of consciousness in such people. They have “too much unity for us to say that they have ‘two minds,’ and too much diversity for us to say that they have ‘one mind’” (393). In his conclusion to the chapter, Bremer notes that the experiments discussed there fail to provide any unequivocal answer, either to the question of the number of selves (identified with minds) or to that of where the consciousness in question is located. Neither can an unequivocal answer be found to the question of how it happens that the behavior of people with split brains does not especially differ from the behavior of other persons. As Bremer claims, “the correlate of our perception of being a unity is dispersed over the neuronal networks in the two hemispheres” (414). Investigations into split brains show that the separated hemispheres are nevertheless somehow connected via the body, which functions as some kind of intermediary.

The last chapter (not counting the final remarks) is devoted to explanations of the phenomenon of so-called phantom pains—i.e. pains felt in amputated limbs—as well as to that of phantom limbs as such. Reflection on such “phantom phenomena” plays an important role in Bremer’s approach when it comes to answering the question of how a healthy subject (construing “subject” here in line with its common-sense definition) “locates” its body. In the author’s opinion, if the self is viewed through phantom phenomena, there is no need to treat it as a fiction (as Peter Brugger or Vilayanur Ramachandran, for example, would). It is necessary, however, to accept that such phantom phenomena have the nature of self-stimulations, which “allows one of the fundamental assumptions of psychology, according to which perceptions without stimuli are abnormal, to be denied. . . . Something more occurs in the brain than a mere search for and analysis of inputs. The brain can engender some experiences of a perceptual kind by itself. . . . Neuronal networks built into the brain are responsible for perceptions. Hence the brain’s body-map is innate and independent of external experiences” (455). Consequently, according to Bremer, if we accept that the brain in part gives rise to bodily experiences, then phantom phenomena lose their mystery.

Bremer makes it his goal in this book to explore the problems of selves and persons as they figure both in the cognitive sciences and in philosophy. This is a highly ambitious task and, in practice, one that is impossible to carry out, given the sheer heterogeneity of the scientific and philosophical approaches involved. It is probably for this reason that the work mainly seeks to link up conceptions from the philosophy of mind on the one hand, and from neuroscience on the other. Possibly because of the aforementioned heterogeneity, the author's discussions are usually limited to a comprehensive report on various conceptions, and only rarely try to offer a critical analysis. For instance, the question of split brains is discussed by adducing multiple approaches to the issue of how the self acts when the hemispheres are separated, without presenting either the author's own theorizing of the issue or any more detailed methodological comments such as would bear on the problem of how empirical phenomena are to be explained in the context of the philosophy of mind. On the other hand, one should surely commend the author's firm support for the stance adopted by ontologically and anthropologically oriented philosophy in the debate over the existence and nature of the self, rather than siding with theories that reduce ontological categories to those of science. According to the author, none of the neurological phenomena under scrutiny imply a theory capable of offering a reductionist account of the single self—for instance by postulating two selves, or by reducing the self to some non-personal elements. Such theories turn out, in the light of the scientific investigations scrutinized by Bremer, to be counterintuitive. Neither does it seem possible to furnish any good arguments against those traditional common-sense conceptions of the self that are rooted in our colloquial usage of language.

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