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THE OPAQUE WINDOW: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF DEPERSONALIZATION AND DEREALIZATION

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Abstract

Depersonalization–Derealization Disorder (DDD) is a dissociative syndrome characterized by a sense of disconnectedness from one’s own self and the world around. People suffering from the condition report feeling like external observers, cut off from their own bodies, emotions and thoughts; their surroundings are perceived as unreal. The present thesis analyses DDD by sustaining the view that its phenomenology can be understood through Metzinger’s notion of phenomenal transparency. This idea is not entirely new: recent contributions (Ciaunica et al., 2020; Ciaunica et al., 2021; Seth et al., 2012) have framed the dramatic experiences of depersonalization and derealization as instances of highly opaque mental states. However, more detailed discussions of phenomenal transparency are sparse. My contribution wishes to partially fill in this gap. To elucidate the concept of transparency, I will first highlight the distinction between the classical representationalist notion of transparency and the metzingerian, phenomenal account of it. I will then argue that phenomenal transparency adequately describes the associated depersonalized phenomenology. Finally, I will attempt to present and dissipate ambiguities contained in the concept and address potential criticism regarding the redundancy of transparency as an explanatory tool for dissociative phenomena.

Keywords: phenomenal transparency, depersonalization, derealization, DDD, subjective presence, representationalism

Sammanfattning

Depersonalisations- och Derealisationssyndrom (DDD) är ett dissociativt syndrom som kännetecknas av en känsla av att vara frånkopplad från ens eget jag och omvärlden. Människor som lider av tillståndet rapporterar att de känner sig som externa observatörer, avskurna från sina egna kroppar, känslor och tankar; deras omgivning upplevs som överklig. Denna avhandling analyserar DDD genom att stödja uppfattningen att dess fenomenologi kan förstås genom Metzingers föreställning om fenomenal transparens. Denna idé är inte helt ny: senaste bidrag (Ciaunica et al., 2020; Ciaunica et al., 2021; Seth et al., 2012) har ramat in de dramatiska upplevelserna av depersonalisering och derealisering som förekommer av mycket ogenomskinliga mentala tillstånd. Mer detaljerade diskussioner om fenomenal transparens är dock sparsamma. Mitt bidrag vill delvis fylla denna lucka. För att belysa begreppet transparens kommer jag först att lyfta fram distinktionen mellan den klassiska representationalistiska föreställningen om transparens och den metzingerska, fenomenala redogörelsen för den. Jag kommer då att hävda att fenomenal transparens på ett adekvat sätt beskriver den associerade depersonaliserade fenomenologin. Slutligen kommer jag att försöka presentera och skingra oklarheter som finns i konceptet och ta upp potentiell kritik angående transparensens redundans som ett förklarande verktyg för dissociativa fenomen.

Nyckelord: fenomenal transparens, depersonalisering, derealisering, DDD, subjektiv närvaro, representationalism

1. Introduction

Depersonalization and derealization are the two main symptomatologic clusters involved in what The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM–5) labels Depersonalization–Derealization Disorder (DDD). The distinguishing features of the condition are a feeling of detachment and unreality regarding one’s own sense of self (depersonalization) and towards one’s own surroundings (derealization). Some estimates place DDD’s prevalence at around 1–2% of the general population (Hunter et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2012), but episodic instances of depersonalized and derealized experiences appear to be far more common, usually in response to traumatic or distressing events.

This thesis wishes to analyse the phenomenology of DDD through the lenses of phenomenal transparency. Originally elaborated by Thomas Metzinger, phenomenal transparency is proposed as fundamental property of phenomenal states, and it is defined as the degree of introspective attention available towards early processing stages of a mental state. In phenomenological terms, degrees of transparency correspond to perceived degrees of vividness and immediacy, with more direct states being more transparent. The intuition to contextualise dissociative experiences as instances of opaque (non-transparent) states is first hinted at by Metzinger himself, and then fully embraced by more recent interpreters (Ciaunica et al., 2020; Ciaunica et al., 2022a; Seth et al., 2012; Ciaunica et al., 2021).

Given the theoretical background above outlined, my thesis’ major aims are: (i) to show in which way opacity is a proper conceptualisation for understanding the phenomenology of DDD; (ii) to thoroughly examine the difference between the classical representationalist notion of transparency and the phenomenal metzingerian version of it; (iii) to explain how transparency, or the lack of it, can give rise to the phenomenology that is purportedly associated with DDD; (iv) to dispel ambiguities about what the notion of phenomenal transparency can reasonably entail; (v) to spell out in which way the notion is not trivial.

To do so, I will first outline, under section 2, a psychological overview of DDD. Section 3 will serve as a brief introduction to the classical concept of transparency. The same concept will then be compared with the phenomenal notion of transparency in section 4, where I will eventually distinguish two kinds of transparency (epistemic and phenomenal transparency). Section 5 will apply the phenomenology of transparency to illustrate DDD, by presenting some self-reports from individuals suffering with the condition. Under the same section, I will address latent ambiguities relatively to the notion itself; finally, I will evaluate the value of the notion of transparency, and argue for its nontriviality.

2. Depersonalization and derealization: an overview

Depersonalization–Derealization Disorder (DDD) is a type of dissociative disorder. As per the fifth edition of The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM–5), “depersonalization/derealization disorder is characterized by clinically significant persistent or recurrent depersonalization (i.e., experiences of unreality or detachment from one’s mind, self, or body) and/or derealization (i.e., experiences of unreality or detachment from one’s surroundings)” (American Psychiatric Association, DSM–5, 2013). This brief description captures without fail the essential features of the condition, but language appears of no major help when both the subject at the centre of a depersonalized experience as well as the attentive listener struggle to illustrate plainly and simply what that feeling is about.

Metaphorical language is often used when talking about DDD. Individuals report, for example, feeling “as if he or she were in a fog, dream, or bubble, or as if there were a veil or

a glass wall between the individual and world around” (American Psychiatric Association, DSM–5, 2013). However, this particular use of language is best understood as a necessity rather than a stylistic choice. On one hand, the use of metaphors and “as if” –s, seems a robust enough proof of the non-psychotic nature of the derealized experience — reality testing, the function which allows us to represent the state of the world for what it really is (i.e., the ability to hold non-delusional beliefs), is intact. Typically, even if the subject feels detached from one’s own self or from one’s own milieu, she does not espouse her own sensations by completely identifying with their contents — this usually results in the subject recognising the exceptionality or her present situation. On the other hand, such inevitable linguistic choices suggest the presence of a core ineffability, which brings attention to the fundamentally phenomenal, pre-reflective, and pre-theoretical nature of the condition. In line with the phenomenological tradition, many authors have investigated the constitutive aspects of our sense of “realness”, most often highlighting its primary, perhaps even pre-personal and pre-predicative dimension (Trigg, 2015; Blankenburg, 1971, 2 cited in Varga, 2012). What phenomenology exactly do subjects describe when they report that they themselves or their surroundings do not feel real? And what accounts for this phenomenology? If the conceptualisation of reality itself, as already observed, is not affected in this particular dissociative condition, the inner sense of realness certainly is. The next subsection’s main purpose is to provide a psychological characterization of DDD.

2.1 The symptomatology of DDD

The main symptoms of the disorder, based on the analysis of its DSM–5 section, can be grouped as follows:

- Depersonalization, or a feeling of extraneousness with respect to the self. Specifically, alienation can manifest itself in one or more of the following modalities. The individuals will feel separated from or numb towards:
 - a. Their global sense of self. Individuals often report feeling like a robot, or feeling like “no one”;
 - b. Their feelings and affect. Emotional content, when present, can be externally perceived, but not fully attainable and “lived”;
 - c. Their thoughts and cognitive processes. The formation of thoughts, as well as speech, feels automated and out of one’s own control;
 - d. Their sensory and bodily experiences and functions. Rarely, in severe cases, out of body experiences can occur. The subjective experience of time can feel distorted, with consequences for episodic recall.
- Derealization, or a feeling of extraneousness with respect to one’s own surroundings (including other people or animate beings). The phenomenal aspects of DR can be further distinguished into:
 - a. A sense of detachment from the world. The subject can complain about feeling surrounded by e.g., fog, a transparent wall, a bubble;
 - b. A sense of diminished richness and vibrancy. The world can look artificial and bleak;
 - c. Alterations of sensory perceptions can also be present. For example, objects can look bigger or smaller, flattened or exaggeratedly three-dimensional, the vision field expanded or restricted, and the vision blurry. Auditory stimuli can also be perceived as subdued or louder than normal.

On a neurological level of analysis, it has been suggested (Seth et al., 2012) that the insular cortex is crucial to the process of subjective presence. In particular, irregular patterns of activity in the anterior insular cortex (AIC), and the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) have been observed in DDD patients (Phillips et al., 2001; Medford et al., 2016). In addition, some neuroimaging studies have found an increased activation of the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex — whose functions involve attentional regulation, cognitive control, and executive function — associated with emotional processing in subjects suffering from DDD (Ciaunica et al., 2020), pointing to a preference for cognitive processing and overthinking patterns when confronted with emotional stimuli.

Depersonalization (DP) and derealization (DR), when chronic and/or of significant impact on the life of the subject are categorised, as already observed, as a disorder (DDD). DDD is estimated to afflict 1–2% of the population (Hunter et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2012). However, it is more common for depersonalization (and derealization) to be present as a dissociative symptom — co-occurring, e.g., with major depression, panic disorder, or schizophrenia (Baker et al., 2003; Hunter et al., 2004) — or as a transient experience. In fact, while DPD constitutes a chronic, dysfunctional condition, it is not infrequent for the general population to episodically experience estrangement (as in cases of *jamais vu*. Gerrans, 2018) or full-blown dissociative episodes, usually in response to fatigue (Tibubos et al., 2018), sleep deprivation, hypnosis (Röder et al., 2007) and highly stressful events such as accidents (Daniels et al., 2012), abuse or drug use (Hunter et al., 2013). Some studies have reported a lifetime prevalence of DP episodes of 50% amongst college students (Dixon, 1963).

2.2 Depersonalization and derealization: a single construct?

My analysis, henceforth, will not focus on either one or the other situations above described. Since the scope of my work is not restricted to the attainment of a better understanding of DDD for its clinical significance, but it also aims at shedding light on relevant properties of conscious experience, I will consider the qualities of depersonalized and derealized states — whether as an indication of a disorder *tout court* or as a particular phenomenal experience — to be the central theme of this thesis. Given this choice, a question naturally follows: is the diagnosable disorder phenomenally different from acute, episodic instances of DP/DR? If different, is this divergence so significant that would motivate the treatment of the two as separate phenomena? Conversely, what common elements can be drawn from those two states to inform my disquisition?

There is evidence that milder depersonalization is more likely to be accompanied by anxiety, while chronic and severe DDD is almost paradoxically not marked by such a relationship (Ciaunica & Charlton, 2018; Sierra et al., 2011). Subjective reports of DP/DR show that the type and intensity of dissociative experiences are variable, with some elements of the symptomatology being more salient depending on the individual in question. However, even for the same person, a distinctive transformation of the depersonalized phenomenology can occur over time. A chronic depersonalized subject comments that “[t]he experience changes the more chronic it becomes. Early on, the sensation was peculiarly physical. Right after eating the yoghurt, I had a clear memory of how I had felt a short while earlier and could identify the distinct, physical changes that were impeding me from feeling well. My vision was not tracking objects properly around the room; I felt dizzy; my reactions were delayed. These days, I experience depersonalization as mostly a lack of narrative. Moments seem to melt away as soon as they have passed, and life goes by as a series of unrelated frames.” (Ciaunica & Charlton, 2018). It is interesting to observe that the two categorical features mentioned in the passage (the perceptual, physical changes involved in the sense of disconnectedness; the lack

of “mine-ss” relatively to the narrative of the self and the flattening of affect) are recognised as equally notable markers of DDD even when one prevails, over time, over the other. It is possible to suppose that a type of habituation to the altered version of one’s own sensorial and affective experience over time could explain the disappearance of those early stronger reactions. Perhaps the shock value of a sudden change in the perception of the self and a diminished sense of realness of the world would provoke, at least initially, higher levels of negative arousal. As the experience of DP drags on, and the sense of detachment from one’s own emotions and perceptions becomes an integral part of one’s own personal history, it would be reasonable to think that the pervasive alienation so specific to DP would be reflected in a more stable but pervasive symptomatology. A symptomatology that would now target higher-order representations, as the temporal scale of the condition expands and englobes a wider portion of the subjective experience, namely memory and meta-awareness.

But the aetiology behind these symptomatologic shifts is not what I aim to discuss here. It suffices to note that, notwithstanding the evidence pointing to possible phenomenological differences between acute and chronic states of depersonalization, a number of common denominators seems to be at play in any case. It is exactly this qualitative difference relatively to the normal way of being and “feeling” oneself and the surrounding world that unifies the diverse accounts of DP and DR. At any rate, the qualitative value of the internal experience appears to be significantly altered during depersonalization, whether the experience is transient or not. Whether, say, the affective component or the sensorial component carries a heavier weight, whether that loss of mine-ss is accompanied by fluctuating degrees of emotional distress, the basic phenomenology of DP/DR remains similar. It is probably this similarity that allows DP and DR to be considered stand-alone symptoms as well as an actual disorder, depending on the intensity and the level of impairment generated. For this reason, when referring to DP/DR, it is my intention to capture the nuclear experience of estrangement equally shared by chronic and acute manifestations of DP/DR. In what sense exactly to experiences feel unreal to the relevant subjects? And how can we philosophically analyse these experiences?

3. Representationalism and the transparency argument

Many philosophers have argued that transparency is a basic property of certain mental states. Before diving into this property and clarifying how it is relevant to the phenomenon of depersonalization, however, it will be appropriate to clarify the theoretical background associated with it. This is no easy task. Transparency itself, unaccompanied by any other specification, is a broad term: it is relevant to semantical, phenomenal, and epistemological considerations alike. For this reason, it is essential to distinguish between different meanings and articulations of transparency, before highlighting its purported relevance for DDD.

I do not intend to provide an exhaustive summary of the concept or of its heterogeneous descriptions across domains. I shall instead focus on those accounts that have more successfully introduced and utilised the concept to inform more overarching theories of perception and consciousness. The discussion of transparency, in particular, has been brought to sustain the soundness of representational theories of consciousness. One of the most notable arguments in favour of representationalism is, indeed, the argument from transparency. If the founder of the concept of transparency himself, (G.E. Moore) was not a proponent of representationalism, its original input has later been welcomed by a number of representationalist thinkers.

Representationalist theories of consciousness, over the past three decades, have gained popularity amongst philosophers of the mind. A crucial notion, playing a unifying role across different representationalist views, is the notion of intentionality. When a mental state is intentional, it has a certain *aboutness*, it is directed towards something, and it represents things as being a certain way — be it real or hallucinated. Intentional states are also reflective of certain beliefs (i.e., my belief that there is a red apple on the table is indicative of a certain representation of how I understand the world — the apple being green, the apple laying on the table, etc. — to be). If intentionality is almost uncontroversially representational, what about those mental states that seem to evade, *prima facie*, the same boundaries tying intentional, propositional states to representations? It is not completely obvious how phenomenal states, for instance, would be representational. Is the qualitative aspect of seeing a green apple — the what-is-likeness of my phenomenal experience— representing, by itself, something about that current state of affairs?

In short, the representationalist claim is that the phenomenal character of conscious experiences is strictly associated with its intentional content. On this view, both weak and strong representationalist accounts have emerged. Weak theses maintain that all phenomenal states necessitate a corresponding representational content. It is theoretically admissible, as per weak representationalism, for phenomenal states to also involve non-intentional, “new” properties of some sort (Block, 1996; Chalmers, 1996). Strong theses, on the contrary, are more inflexible in that they state intentional or representational content alone is enough for phenomenal content to be present, and that the phenomenal can always be reduced to the corresponding representations. Usually, the representational component hinges on functionalist or physicalist explicantia.

Turning to the transparency of phenomenal states, it can be stated that a phenomenal state is thought of as transparent when only the content of the experience is introspectable. One of the first classical formulations is famously attributed to G.E. Moore (1903) who wrote about our perceptual experiences being “diaphanous” in his work “The Refutation of Idealism”. In his words, “the moment we try to fix our attention upon consciousness and to see what, distinctly, it is, it seems to vanish: it seems as if we had before us a mere emptiness. When we try to introspect the sensation of blue, all we can see is the blue: the other element is as if it were diaphanous.” (Moore, 1903, p. 25). The what-is-likeness of seeing blue is all there is; it does not seem like we can have access, via introspection, to the intrinsic features of our own sensory experience.

G. Harman (1990) provided another influential description of transparency applied to visual perception. When Eloise sees a tree (whether it is a veridical or a hallucinated tree, but this distinction is not relevant at the moment), she is aware of the content of her perceptual experience. However, the intrinsic features, the features that make it possible for her to attend to the colour of the leaves, the shape of the trunk, the scenery that surrounds the tree, etc., are normally inaccessible. Briefly, we are not aware of the underlying internal processes, but our introspective capability stops right at the intentional objects of the experience¹. Or, as Amy Kind puts it, using another example: “right now, as I look out into the family room, among

¹ Harman grants that one could think of instances where intrinsic mechanisms are accessible. Let us imagine that David is undergoing brain surgery and that he is conscious of what is happening. Not only is he conscious, but he can also look, through a mirror, how his neurons are firing while generating that experience. But what matters is that David is aware of those processes in a way that is psychologically similar to the way he would look at a tree or at someone else’s ongoing neural activity. An external observer would, likewise, also have an experience (the visual experience of looking at David’s brain processes), which is functionally similar to the one David is having during his observation. It is not clear if, for Harman, this kind of scenario poses an issue for transparency, but it surely does not undermine the validity of functionalism.

the many toys scattered on the floor is my older son's yellow Bumblebee Transformer. But what happens when I try to attend to the yellowness of my visual experience of Bumblebee? Proponents of transparency say that my attention will slip right through to the yellow toy itself, that there is no way for me to attend to the yellowness of my experience itself without attending to what it represents" (Kind, 2010, p. 904).

The impossibility of being aware of the intrinsic properties of the experience per se — stripped out of any intentional content — makes the representational stance quite cogent. In fact, a strong representationalist stance would affirm that, since no relevant intrinsic features are available for introspection, it seems to follow that: (a) our perceptual experience represents external stuff and not internal states; (b) if present, internal features should be at least introspectable. But, since the only features we can successfully attend to are representational and we normally see "right through" the content of whatever external object we are attending to, (c) the phenomenal content of our own experiences is reduced to their intentional content. This is, in a nutshell, the argument from transparency in favour of a strong representationalist view of consciousness.

4. Phenomenal transparency: looking through the window

Other accounts of transparency, as already anticipated, articulate the concept differently. In particular, I will be interested in how transparency is invoked by Thomas Metzinger, moving from classical formulations, to describe a fundamental feature of the phenomenal self-model (PSM)². I believe this specific way of framing transparency can provide some clarity in reconciling abnormal phenomenal experiences with a theoretically accurate picture of the self. Leaving aside, for a short moment, the distinctions expressly discussed by the author himself, I argue that the operational notion of transparency with respect to the PSM can be used more flexibly according to two coordinates:

(i) Firstly, transparency is defined by Metzinger as one of eleven constraints that are supposed to help pin down the core of phenomenal representations. This renders transparency a fundamental element of phenomenal experience at large. But one of the ways in which transparency can be interpreted in a broader direction is the admission of transparent states not being a necessary accompanying feature of every occurring conscious representation. As it will become more evident later through the analysis of certain phenomenal states, transparency is not a sufficient nor a necessary condition for phenomenal experience to take place. Instead, this property seems to exist on a continuum, with degrees of intensity and distinct referential routes.

(ii) Secondly, transparency is not only a direct feature of perceptual experience. It is a property that can also be applied to one or more parts of the model of the self. Not only the mental state associated with looking at an apple, for instance, is suitable to be labelled as

² The notion of PSM is developed by Metzinger and it is crucial to his analysis of a first-person perspective phenomenology. In short, the PSM is composed by the current, consciously available contents relative to the self (e.g., sensations, emotions, thoughts, etc). Within the PSM, both bottom-up and top-down processes are constantly generated. However, one of the most interesting features of the PSM, it is the way all these processes are "kept together" under one same property, the self-representational property of "mineness", which refers to the phenomenological intuition of the contents of the PSM referring to oneself (Metzinger, 2003a, p. 302) Another higher-order representational property would be the property of selfhood, which represent the system as a whole, numerically identical entity over time.

transparent, but other representational entities can be labelled by the same property, including a global sense of selfhood. In other words, it seems appropriate to talk of a transparent model of the self instead of limiting the scope of the notion to this or that sort of experience, to sensory or bodily representational content.

I shall now elucidate these points by diving deeper into the specifics of how Metzinger's definition deviates from the one I have introduced in the previous section. Transparent representations must be understood in the context of a model of a self. This means that transparency is only one of the properties expressed within the limits of phenomenal consciousness. Other constraints³ are already tracing the contours of what makes a conscious phenomenal state such a state. There is another, crucial concept underlying the notion of transparency, expressed in the formal definition. This thesis will be crucial for what follows:

Metzinger's transparency thesis. "For any phenomenal state, the degree of phenomenal transparency is inversely proportional to the introspective degree of attentional availability of earlier processing stages." (Metzinger, 2003a, p. 166).

Here, the impossibility of introspecting the internal mechanisms that give rise to representational contents is substituted with (i) internal attentional availability which (ii) comes in degrees. A crucial difference is that the classical notion refers to intrinsic properties of the state in question, while Metzinger explicitly targets the state's causal history (the earlier processing stages).

Finally, another essential clarification is especially useful in providing a working framework to make sense of dissociative phenomena like DP and DR. Introspective attentional availability to early processing stages should not be thought of as cognitive or epistemological access to the features or to the mere existence of those processes. It is interesting, in this context, to reconsider a hypothetical case discussed by Harman (see note 2, section 3). Let us suppose that a patient undergoing brain surgery can observe the way their neurons are firing and is thus aware (at least in a sense) of the intrinsic features of their own experience. While, as noted, it is not clear if Harman would consider this a case of failed transparency, he does not concede that this kind of occurrence would be different from ordinary visual experiences in any functionally significant way. I agree with this last point. But I will attempt to go even further and agree with Metzinger that transparency, as a relevant property of the phenomenal self, is nonconceptual and evades epistemological comprehension. Back at the neurosurgical patient's case, the implicit question posed, following Harman's proposal, would be:

1 a. Is the patient's experience functionally (or psychologically) different in any relevant way compared to the experience they would have if they were to observe someone else's internal brain processes?

A variation of the same question, meant to revolve around the phenomenally transparent aspect of the matter, would be:

³ E.g., the phenomenal state will first and foremost be already active within a window of presence — that is, it will be necessarily experienced as happening in the immediacy, in the present moment. While time flows — and while an individual orientation through the temporal currents is what shapes our presence with respect to past, present, and future — the qualitative condition of being conscious is expressed within the Now (Metzinger, 2003a, p. 126).

1b. Is the patient's experience phenomenally different in any relevant way compared to the experience they would have if they were to observe someone else's internal brain processes?

The answer to 1a, according to Harman, would be a resonant no. But a similar response can be articulated with regards to transparency, intended as an important constraint for conscious experiences. In fact, it is not clear what phenomenological nonconceptual content would be added as a result of witnessing one's own brain processes. Strictly speaking, the phenomenology of looking at someone else's brain activation patterns would be different from observing one's own. However, it seems that the distinction would be quite superficial: it would not be more different than looking at a rose instead of a sunflower. What changes is the object (or the content) of the experience, what does not seem to change are the relevant properties. One of these unchanged properties, which appears unchanged under both conditions, is phenomenal transparency. If the person believing he's observing his own brain were to be tricked into thinking that he is, while they are actually showing him someone else's brain, there would be no relevant difference – the person, in fact, would not be under any phenomenological intuition that that's the "wrong" brain; not in the same way that seems unmistakably real when we realise we are, for instance, reflecting upon ourselves in a meta-cognitive fashion.

I take the thought experiment of a patient witnessing their own brain to show that whatever proponents of transparency (both Metzinger and classical representationalists) mean by 'awareness' cannot be mere epistemic access. For the notion to be relevant for explaining the phenomenal character of certain experiences the relevant sense of awareness must be somehow phenomenally significant.

4.1 The phenomenology of transparency

But what does transparency, as understood by Metzinger, feel like? What does the impossibility of attentioning those early mechanisms correspond to in terms of lived experience? It has already been said that an entirely transparent state can be characterised as a state in which we lack attentional access to the processes leading to the acquisition of the perceptual data. If we were to imagine a situation of total transparency, we would not perceive the composite, representational quality of our own states at all. From an epistemological perspective, we can certainly grapple with the idea of our final perceptions happening through a *medium* and, at the same time, and we can also attempt to find the neural correlates corresponding to this or that set of simple or complex conscious snapshots. However, the reality of our everyday life consists of the impression of a direct, immediate contact with the objects we sense.

A metaphor often used in the literature (Metzinger 2003, p. 169; Ciaunica et al, 2020; Legrand, 2005) to illustrate transparency compares the latter with the action of looking through a window. We should imagine a fully transparent window, which would generate the perfect illusion of invisibility. While looking at a tree right through the fully transparent window, the image of the tree would feel unmediated and reachable; it would possess, just like any other standard percept, the characteristic of givenness. This is what happens when we operate according to a fully transparent mode: we fail to notice the existence of the window, or, abandoning our window analogy, we fail to notice the existence of those preparatory processing stages and, instead, we attend to what is present in a naively realistic fashion. The incoming input would present the functional advantage of being treated by the perceiver as factual, that is, as an actual, real state of affairs. There is a natural connection between an experience being fully transparent in this sense and it seeming real. If you are

entirely unaware of the earlier processing stages of an experience, then it seems natural to think that the experience is directly given to you ‘from the world’, and so seemingly real. By contrast, if you are aware of the earlier processing stages, it seems plausible that the experience would appear to you as internally manufactured rather than as given to you by the world. While it is difficult to make this more precise, the general idea seems promising.

There are some reasons to think that this kind of transparency comes with evolutionary advantages: it is not optimal for a system to possess knowledge about the neural activity underlying the resulting phenomenal landscape (Metzinger, 2003a, p. 175). In the economy of cognition, it is not always the most successful path, for a system, to dispense resources towards acquiring that kind of processual information. Just like a user interacts with a computer through a user interface without having direct access to the internal layers of the computational machine, so does a biological system. If this comparison is not completely appropriate with reference to the distinction between epistemic and phenomenal access to the vehicle properties, it highlights an important fact: that for the user it would be unnecessary and even detrimental to not operate a computer through a simplified user interface. Missing information about the workings of the system as a whole is thus advantageous, as far as it allows the instantiation of a smooth operativity through the interaction with a virtual or natural environment.

4.2 Epistemological and phenomenal transparency

It is interesting to note, together with Legrand (2005), that the window metaphor can be employed to facilitate our understanding of classical transparency as well as metzingerian neurophenomenological transparency. In particular, Legrand compares Tye’s and Metzinger’s positions. Notwithstanding the common claim that transparency can be understood in the context of a representationalist model of consciousness, their positions seem to conduct towards two opposing and apparently irreconcilable conclusions about what transparency unveils. I will illustrate how:

According to Tye, looking through the window means becoming aware of the undeniable intentional character of the phenomenal experience. Since when introspecting we cannot become aware of anything else other than the object out there, and since the intrinsic features of the phenomenal experience are amiss, then intrinsic features do not exist. All we are left with is the representational content. Transparency, following this line of reasoning, means looking through a window, and, in the process (at least if we grant Tye’s argument), the presence of the window is revealed to the introspecting self.

For Metzinger, phenomenal transparency highlights an antipodal process: it is the immediate, seemingly unmediated recognition of what is present behind the window. The observer does not become aware of the representational character of every phenomenal experience, but she is in contact with the contents of the experiences in a way that can be characterized, phenomenally speaking, as unmediated, direct, and felt as unmistakably real. The presence of a window, following this line of observation, is entirely missed in its pure transparency. Moreover, Metzinger admits that transparent experiences can shift (even in response to quite mundane activities) to reveal degrees of opacity as a consequence of different functional needs or mental conditions.

I want to argue that, in order to understand the phenomenology of dissociation, the notion used by Metzinger is more appropriate. Also, I will argue that even though Metzinger pointedly rejects the classical definition of transparency as too rigid and unsatisfactory, the two senses in which transparency is understood are not necessarily as incompatible as portrayed, as they draw attention to two different consequences, starting from a similar

observation. A first way to see how the two descriptions are less irreconcilable than expected is to interrogate the type of claim defended by each of the two. Interestingly, both classical representationalism and the not so orthodox metzingerian version of representationalism support the conclusion that phenomenal experience is ultimately a form of representation. If for classical representationalism the two coincide, Metzinger includes a caveat: phenomenal content is a special subdivision of intentional content and is delimited by several constraints. Ultimately, at a higher epistemological level of description, intentional content is all there is, but this relevant fact does not exclude the importance of analysing phenomenal content. In fact, phenomenal content would be separable from intentional content. This passage elucidates Metzinger's distinction between intentional and phenomenal content. Starting from the situation in which the reader is attending to the book she's reading, he observes:

"What you are looking onto is its representational content, the existence of a book, here and now, as given through your sensory organs. This content, therefore, is an abstract property of the concrete representational state in your brain. However, as we have already seen, there are at least two kinds of content. The intentional content of the relevant states in your head depends on the fact of this book actually existing, and of the relevant state being a reliable instrument for gaining knowledge in general. If this representational carrier is a good and reliably functioning instrument for generating knowledge about the external world, then, by its very transparency, it permits you to directly, as it were, look "through it" right onto the book. It makes the information carried by it globally available (constraint 1), without your having to care about how this little miracle is achieved. The phenomenal content of your currently active book representation is what stays the same, no matter if the book exists or not. It is solely determined by internal properties of the nervous system. If your current perception, unnoticed by you, actually is a hallucination, then, as it were, you, as a system as a whole, are no longer looking "through" the state in your head onto the world, but only at the representational vehicle itself—without this fact itself being globally available to you." (Metzinger, 2003a, p. 173).

Here, Metzinger appears to suggest the existence of a divide between intentional and phenomenal content, respectively corresponding to their status of externality and internality. The intentional content needs to refer to an object out there in the world, and it is *about* something; the movement of intentional states would resemble an arrow that moves from an observer to the object. More classic representationalists like Harman would hold that this relationship is preserved in any case. Even if the Fountain of Youth Ponce de Leon is searching for does not exist, Ponce de Leon is still looking for something out there he believed he would be able to reach. In this sense, the content of its mental state can be classified as intentional, regardless of the Fountain of Youth's actual inexistence (Harman, 1990). Metzinger, however, mentions at different points that hallucinations and dreams can hardly be regarded as states holding intentional content. What they possess is a more elementary form of mental content, namely the phenomenal content.

Metzinger himself does not expressly take an elaborate stance on the type of theoretical connection existing between intentional and phenomenal content. He cautiously suggests, however, that thinking of intentional content as existing on a continuum between conscious and nonconscious intentional content might be a better strategy than establishing a systematic separation of the two forms of content (Metzinger, 2003a p.112). What changes, in this admittedly unusual take on representationalism, is the narrower sense to which the intentional is relegated — at least, as evident in the passage above—reported. That space is occupied by the phenomenal content, which describes the mode of experience from an

internal and subjective standpoint. The intentional content can potentially become phenomenal content when it is apt to be experienced as active within a window of presence, and it is globally available. These are only some of the most important constraints. Crucially, phenomenal experience is defined as sub-personal and, if considered in its quintessential form, ineffable. On the hypothetical continuum between conscious and nonconscious intentional content, the ineffability of such experiences would be placed right at the very end of the gradient. The qualities just mentioned are made clearer in the exposition of certain states not available for cognition and motor control, but still available for attention, which Metzinger calls “Metzinger qualia”:

“A good first example may be presented by very brief episodes of extremely subtle changes in bodily sensation or, in terms of the representation of external reality, shifts in nonunitary colour experience during states of open-eyed, deep meditation. In all their phenomenal subtlety, such experiential transitions would be difficult targets from a methodological perspective.” (Metzinger, 2003a, p. 75).

To attempt to verbally communicate what these transitions look or feel like, or to even retrospectively remember them and report information about them, would add a different mental representation to those purely phenomenological states. In fact, those colours would presumably be measured against an imagined, less vivid, categorical representation of “red” or “purple”, or “blue”. In other words, there is a fundamental sense in which these “extremely phenomenal” experiences are subsymbolic; they do not necessitate a linguistic vehicle to emerge.

I have briefly attempted to untie some conceptual knots around the question of intentionality and phenomenality. With these conceptual instruments in mind, I will now turn back to the original problem of explaining how the two connotations of transparency relate to each other. It seems to me that the resultant opposition derives from a conflation of two different philosophical attitudes and, consequently, two entirely different definitions of transparency can be made explicit. Until now, in my exposition, I have restricted the case of transparency to visual experiences, just for the sake of simplicity. Let us try again, then, to think about what happens under ordinary circumstances when we are confronted with the environment around us. Maybe we grab a cup of coffee. At a first, elementary level of observation, it is apparent that that cup seems absolutely real to us, and we normally do not pause our motor activity or the ongoing generative processes that ground the experience as real in order to question whether we are looking at a representational product of our own neural activity. We look at the red cup, we differentiate it from the blue one on its right, and perhaps we hand it over to the person next to us. Importantly, in none of the actions I have just described there is a subjective sense in which the agent is treating the cup as a representation.

It is arguably a challenging undertaking to provide a satisfying account of conscious experience from a phenomenal perspective: a first-person account of subjective experience is unavoidably communicated through linguistic and symbolic means. But there is more: any *a posteriori* introspective movement would still not capture the phenomenal character of the original experience. This does not mean that any attempt to investigate phenomenal consciousness and the phenomenology of first-person perspectiveness should be abandoned. Admittedly, the exposition of phenomenal transparency (PT) is part of that effort. If we consider the cup of coffee once again and assume an epistemological posture, it would be quite uncontroversial to recognise a type of epistemological transparency (ET) as a relevant property of conscious experience. After having observed the phenomenally unmediated sense

in which transparency characterizes our relationship with a world model, we can turn to an epistemological mode of cognitive reference, which reveals the phenomenal content as being ultimately representational. If we try to introspect the intrinsic content of our phenomenal experience, we will only find its intentional content: the cup is no more than something red, something that resembles a glass, something with a handle, something entrenched within a context of objects which seem to be, in turn, ultimately representational contents. Here are a few ways in which PT and ET differ: PT corresponds to a what has otherwise been named “presence” (Seth et al., 2012) or “phenomenal depth” (Gaebler et al., 2013) and it is nonconceptually realised; EP relies on the ability to grasp and manipulate higher-order concepts. For this reason, PT could be a property of non-human animal consciousness, while EP would be available only to those organisms equipped not only with successful self-referential cognitive models, but also epistemological meta-awareness. Moreover, while the phenomenology of PT is self-explanatorily transparent, the phenomenology associated with the creation of propositional entities such as ET is distinctly opaque (in a phenomenally transparent sense): the existence of representational models is made accessible. Finally, while a lack of introspective availability is common to both PT and EP, it could be argued that different notions of introspection can be identified to further distinguish the two notions.

In particular, with respect to the metarepresentations operating on a model of the world (I will turn to the transparency of the self-model in the next paragraph), Metzinger defined two different notions: the first type of introspection can also be conceptualised as attention directed towards internal metarepresentations working on a subsymbolic level. The content of these representations refers to a portion of the world portrayed as external, and the metarepresentations themselves would be working on a “pre-existing, coherent world-model”. It is equivalent to what, in a folk-psychological sense, we commonly call attention (Metzinger, 2003b, p. 366).

The second type of introspection is a conceptual (a non-attentional) kind of metarepresentation. While the final representational content is the same (a portion of the world portrayed as external), the operation conducted on that same content is different, as it involves internally generated cognitive references. In other words, it refers to the act of perceiving an external object and attributing a concept or mental reference to it. The type of introspection involved in the impossibility of attending to early processing stages which constitutes phenomenal transparency would coincide with the first notion of introspection above-mentioned.

4.3 Transparency of the self-model

The principal claim I will sustain in the fifth section is that associated phenomenology of dissociative states — such as in depersonalization and derealization — is one of failed transparency as pertaining, respectively, to the model of the self and the model of a global environment.

A similar sense of transparency, in the phenomenally transparent and metzingerian connotation of the term, is felt with respect to a generally unitary and coherent first-person perspective maintained as identity through time. That is what it is usually referred to as the self. The central claim put forward for the transparency of the self is that we ordinarily function under the guidance of a model of the self which creates the impression of identity. In reality, what happens is that what we identify ourselves with is just the content of our self-model. I will now attempt to clarify in what way it is possible to uphold transparency as property belonging to a model of the self.

The main idea is that, just as the majority of mental representations are subjected to transparency, the same can be affirmed for the way the system represents the self. Metzinger describes the phenomenal self-model (PSM) as “the content of your conscious self: your current bodily sensations, your present emotional situation, plus all the contents of your phenomenally experienced cognitive processing [...] Intuitively, and in a certain metaphorical sense, one could even say that you are the content of your PSM.” (Metzinger, 2003aa, p. 299). The PSM constitutes a unity, a microcosm integrated within a world experienced as external and objective. A quality of “mineness”, of subjective identification with the PSM as a whole on one hand, and a quality of “otherness” attributed to others and to the environment on the other both seem phenomenologically necessary. It is through this distinction that a boundary between the experience of selfhood and the experience of otherness, perceived through the specifics of a first-person perspective, is drawn.

But what it is important to note about the quality of “mineness”, or about the phenomenology of being a self *tout court*, is that our introspection is blind even with reference to those processes giving rise to that distinct phenomenology. For the majority of our waking life, and for most people, the phenomenal self is not recognised as a representation. Transparency of the phenomenal self means that the ongoing process of self-model activation is not experienced as a process, nor its content is recognised as possessing any representational character. Instead, we are immersed in that content, and the resulting phenomenology which derives from a transparent subjective identification with said content shapes the experience of being conscious as the experience of being someone. In the next section, I will focus on the phenomenological exposition of depersonalization and derealization as highly opaque states.

5. Phenomenal transparency and DDD

After having laid out the concept of transparency and established the proper distinctions between the epistemological and the phenomenal metzingerian operational notion of it, I will now show how DP and DR are best understood as disturbances where the transparency of mental representations is disrupted. Before doing that, however, I will critically evaluate Metzinger’s own account of transparency. At least two main components can be identified as part of his working model of transparency: the first one stated in the definition, which I will call definitional component, treats phenomenal transparency in terms of lack of attentional availability to the processual history of a state. This conceptual component points to a factual explanation to account for the degree of phenomenal transparency a certain state possesses:

“For any phenomenal state, the degree of phenomenal transparency is inversely proportional to the introspective degree of attentional availability of earlier processing stages”. (Metzinger, 2003aa, p. 165)

There is a second component, which I have described at large throughout Section 3 and that I will call phenomenal component, which illustrates the purported phenomenological aspect of the conditions determined by the first component. In other terms, the degree of transparency corresponds to the degree of perceived immediacy with respect to our selfhood and our environment: “the phenomenology of transparency is the phenomenology of apparently direct perception”. (Metzinger, 2003aa, p. 169).

I will demonstrate that the second component, inasmuch as it is a purely descriptive notion, can unproblematically be useful to portray the phenomenology of certain dissociative states and of opaque states at large; however, the first component — and, by extension, Metzinger’s formal definition — appears problematic, or at least ambiguous in its phrasing. In fact, there does not seem to exist a straightforward connection between the degree of attentional availability to early processing stages on one hand and the feeling of being in direct contact with one’s own phenomenal states on the other. Furthermore, if we isolate the first component, it is not clear how varying degrees of attention directed at internal processing stages would feel like to the person attending to them in the first place.

5.1 The phenomenology of DP and DR

I have already provided an overview of DDD (Depersonalization–Derealization Disorder) and its cardinal symptomatology. I will now delve deeper into its phenomenology; specifically, my analysis will be centred around a few selected self-reports from individuals suffering from the condition. First, it is possible to draw a line between the depersonalized and derealized experience, even if the two often co-occur. A common complaint during depersonalized states is that the subject does not feel like a person anymore. The quality of being present to oneself, the effortless and embodied pre-reflectiveness appears to be stripped away from the individual phenomenology. A subject reports: “I feel like a robot, like I am listening to someone else talking, like I am looking at myself from the outside, but it is not another voice or body – it is mine, it is me, it just doesn’t feel like it” (Baker et al. 2003).

In this passage, at least two elements emerge: the person does not feel in control of their own body and of their own actions; and a distinct separateness exists, a *medium* interposed between a self who is observing and a self who is talking and interacting with the world. Importantly, however, the subject does not fully identify with the “observing self”, nor is the sense of self ultimately ruptured. The belief that he *is* that self persists. In other terms, the subject is not delusional, but his feelings of not belonging to himself in any immediate and naively realistic sense anymore are undeniably present. His model of the self has not undergone a radical demolition, but something has changed. Another, more precise way of putting it is by framing it as an alteration of transparency with respect to selfhood. The subject is unable to engage in even the most regular activities (like holding a conversation) while feeling in direct, immediate contact with himself. As already observed in Section 4, this type of direct contact with oneself manifests, in the context of selfhood, as identification with the content of the self as a whole. However, the givenness of a first-person perspective is what is ultimately shattered during depersonalized states. Another self-report from a depersonalized subject emphasises the phenomenal loss of a given first-person viewpoint:

“My perception felt as though it had been drawn back inside my head, almost as though I was looking at the world from the back of my head, and could see the back of my own eye sockets. (...) Essentially, it felt like there was a divorce or fracture between the world and me so that although my body was still in the world, my mind was only an observer. (...) These were all sensations whose existence I didn’t even know one hour before.” (Ciaunica et al., 2020).

The above passage testifies, once again, to the depersonalized perception of feeling one’s selfhood as an object (as opposed to a fully transparent subject) — in its phrasing, it is almost reminiscent of a latent out of body experience, except that the subject herself keeps metaphorizing her own experience. I believe this difficulty could be yet another significant indication of the non-linguistic, subsymbolic dimension involved in the pre-reflective sense of self.

A fragmentation between a higher-order level of representation, which conceptualizes the state of affairs as continuous, and a lower-level phenomenological certainty (or uncertainty) is also echoed in the subject's narrativization of the experience when she points to the fact that "although my body was still in the world, my mind was only an observer". In addition, the "fracture" between the subject and the world is an indication of a derealized state: they do not feel immersed in the normally transparent flow of perceptions and mental states. To recall one more time the window analogy from Section 4, we could say that something now stands between the depersonalized and derealized patients and the givenness of the ordinary perceptual experience: that window, which is simply a metaphor for the composite and representational nature of our own experience, which is normally invisible, becomes opaque during this particular kind of dissociative states. Curiously, another patient employs a similar analogy. To him, living with the disorder feels like "walking around with a goldfish bowl" on his head (Baker et al., 2003). The same subject recounts that everything he looks at feels "like it is the wrong colour, and the depth is all wrong". Visual distortions and an overall altered perceptual context are often part of the disorder. Another patient recounts how his proprioceptive deficit reflects on the appearance of the environment. He says: "when I walk down the street I feel as if I am swaying and the pavement is moving," (Baker et al., 2003). A deeper analysis of the sensorimotor disturbances reveals that, while there is no unique common pattern of alteration, when these kinds of alterations are present in the first place the stimuli received appear almost universally unstable and confusing. A subject report feeling as if his "hands and feet appear to increase and decrease in size" and as if "living in a film — it is all black and white and 2D." (Baker et al., 2003).

So far, two elements have stood out from the narratives presented: an intense feeling of detachment from one's own sense of self and/or the environment, and a feeling of qualitative change in the proprioceptive and external perceptive sphere — with percepts showing as unstable and disorienting. There is a third sense in which the derealized phenomenology lacks stableness, vividness, and groundedness: the emotional and affective functioning undergoes a similar deflation. A subject describes the experience as feeling nothing at all ("I just feel nothing — not pain, not anxiety, not happiness." Baker et al., 2003). Another reflects on her ability to perform agency without feeling present in the world in any meaningful way: "Functioning and existing are not the same as living, I learned. Incredible as it sounds, your brain is capable of dividing the two (...) I'm conscious, even as I write this, that I must have a functioning inner life; one which is capable of articulating this experience. But the capacity to knit it into any kind of meaningful narrative that I occupy and own is missing. And that absence for some reason seems to be critical to my feeling as though I am alive" (Ciaunica et al., 2020). It is evident, from this last passage, that not only is her emotional reactivity dampened, but that something is missing from her ability to construct and retain a solid enough narrative of the self.

5.2 Opacity and DDD

We have observed that a drastic change in transparency, intended in its phenomenal component as the degree of immediacy and vividness attributed to a phenomenal state, can be applied to interpret each salient aspect of the depersonalized phenomenology:

(i) In a global sense, both the sense of selfhood and the sense of being *in* the world as part of the world (while keeping a stable first-person perspective) are subjected to opacification. While not delusional, the nature of these disturbances highlights a general feeling of detachment from the subjectiveness of an embodied self (depersonalization), and from the experience of being an embodied self out and about in the world (derealization).

(ii) Actions, movements, and perceptions also appear affected. Sensory alterations are not uncommon. We can only speculate as to why these alterations (e.g., changeable size of the objects, black-and-white “filtering”, etc.) occur. However, it seems likely that the opacity of the phenomenological states could have a destabilising effect relatively to the mere perceptual alteration in the first place, and not vice versa. These quasi-pseudo-hallucinatory symptoms, while often featuring as a complementary factor, do not seem to constitute nuclear features of the condition. I am suggesting that an intense sense of transparent presence is part of what preserves the stability and dynamicity of ordinary stimuli.

(iii) Emotional processing is impacted too, with numbness and the impression of not being able to access the qualitative dimension of one’s own feelings being common manifestations of an affective disruption. Alexithymia, the reduced ability to recognise or understand emotions, often coexists with DDD. Once again, depersonalized emotions can be recognized as opaque emotions: when their development is not absolutely stunted, they are dampened and not as vivid as they would otherwise feel like. They are perceived by an external, cognitively referential viewpoint; but not properly felt in their immediacy.

However, how does the definitional component relate to the occurring phenomenology of transparent and opacified states? The definition states that degrees of transparency are inversely proportional to the degrees of introspective attentional availability to early processing stages. As a consequence, a fully transparent mental state would be characterised by a complete lack of access to the early processing stages instantiated by the brain before the final representation is presented. Thus, when a mental state becomes more opaque, the system would have at least some degree of access to those early processing stages. But how should this access be intended as? And how would it give rise to higher or lower degrees of immediacy? The definition can appear ambiguous if confronted with these questions.

Let us call a given phenomenal state “A”. Not being aware of A’s causal history means that we cannot know of A as being the product of a series of neural events. However, it is not enough for us to be cognitively aware of those steps for the phenomenology associated with A to suddenly change. Phenomenologically speaking, if we were to be aware of those stages, it would mean that our sense of presence and our phenomenological groundedness would predictably undergo some alterations. If we take the definition as literally as possible, we could imagine two scenarios:

In a “cognitive”, epistemic first scenario, Harman’s brain surgery patient from Section 3 would have only cognitive and epistemological access to the early processing stages of his brain. He could look at his brain processes as they come about. However, as already discussed, and barring unexpected psychological reactions displayed by the patient, no difference in the associated phenomenology of the self would be significantly altered. We do not expect that the experience of looking at a tree feels any different just because, undergoing a surgery, you can simultaneously observe the very neural state that realizes your experience while you are having the experience. If we grant that opacity is a property of phenomenal states present in degrees and in manifested in different ways, we could also grant that the patient is perhaps experiencing a certain degree of opacity, but not one that is significant enough to shake the phenomenological certainty of presence. This is clearly not what happens in manifest cases of opaque phenomenology. While the difference could be conceptualised as difference in magnitude of opacity, I believe that the phenomenological quality is also glaringly different.

Let us imagine another instance, to illustrate in what other, more distinctly phenomenological sense the condition of having access to early processing states could be interpreted. It is difficult to imagine what our experiences would look like if we could have perceptual knowledge of what processes our brain operates in order for us to receive “the final” product, i.e., a perceptual data or experience, like hearing music or observing a

landscape. In contrast with watching from an external perspective the workings of our brain or acquiring the knowledge of which neurons are firing and how they are firing, let us imagine what would entail for our phenomenological experience if those processes, instead of being fast and “invisible” to us, were slowed down to such a degree that we could be able to direct our attention to them and introspect them. If we cannot predict with any precision what would be the impact and the character of such disposition, we can at least admit that our experience would presumably feel correspondingly slowed down and mediated. Importantly, we would perhaps begin to approach reality as a series of representational operations. Without the need for meta-cognition, we would perhaps not be oblivious anymore to the way our interactions with the environment and through our sense of selfhood are constructed.

However, there would be an obvious issue, if we were to follow this literal line of reasoning: no known phenomenology along the transparency/opacity spectrum can be described under those terms. The phenomenology of depersonalization, for instance, can be conceptualized as the realisation of a highly opaque condition, but it does not involve the availability of any “extra” data, in terms of introspectively available contents. The same thing could be affirmed regarding other less blatant cases of opaque phenomenology, such as engagement in imaginary mental activity. What needs to be clarified, therefore, is the fact that the access to the early cognitive processes cannot be understood as access to the *content* of those neural events unfolding in the brain. Rather, that access should be more specifically understood as access to the content of the final, resulting phenomenological experience and to the subjective knowledge of those mediating, instrumental properties possibly existing at all. It is the representational character of the processes per se that is discovered. It is the grantedness of regular phenomenological experiences being questioned. The magnitude of opacity for a given state is thus correlated to the degree to which one or more parts of our mental representations are internally experienced as representations.

But the opacity of a mental state, i.e., the introspective access to the phenomenological state being a result of representational processes, is primarily caused by an altered phenomenology that makes the subject aware of something she was not aware of before the occurrence of a given perceptual shift. In a similar fashion, we are normally unaware of the fact we have a pair of legs, of ears, or a liver, and that a plethora of metabolic and biological processes are being carried on at any moment without us recognising them as such or even being minimally aware of them. But the ordinary, transparent relationship we hold to our bodies is bound to change if, for example, something is not working properly. The pain felt after spraining an ankle brings our attention back to the fact that we have an ankle in the first place; and, secondly, to the transformed phenomenology that accompanies the soreness⁴. Similarly, the recognition of A’s representational nature does not precede the occurring phenomenology; if anything, it seems to either co-occur with it, or be consecutive to it. Let’s follow Metzinger’s example of an opaque, pseudo-hallucinatory state:

⁴ This analogy is useful to further spell out the relationship between the claim that degrees of opacity correspond to degrees of attentional availability to the reality of mediated processes and the resulting phenomenology of diminished immediacy. It is important to mention the terms of the analogy are not perfectly symmetrical. While we can attend to a sensation in our ankle at any time, even if there is no pain or no salient feeling accompanying our directed attentional shift, internal processes of the brain appear more impenetrable. As already highlighted by Feinberg: “it has been known since the time of Aristotle that the brain is insensate. For instance, cutting the cortex itself evokes no pain. Further, the brain has no sensory apparatus directed toward itself. There is no way the subject, from the “inside,” can become aware of his own neurons, from the “inside.” They can be known only objectively from the “outside.” There is no inner eye watching the brain itself, perceiving neurons and glia. The brain is “transparent” from the standpoint of the subject, but not from the standpoint of an outside observer.” (Feinberg 1997, p.87, cited in Metzinger 2003, p. 177)

“If a subject in a laboratory experiment and under the influence of a hallucinogenic drug like LSD or 2- CB observes abstract geometrical patterns on the wall, breathing and slowly evolving into deeper and ever deeper forms of ineffable beauty, the subject will frequently be aware of the representational character of her visual experience in that subregion of his phenomenal space. Typically, the subject will immediately have doubts about the correctness of his experiential state and take back the “existence assumption,” effortlessly going along with visual experience in standard situations. My claim is that what this subject becomes aware of are earlier processing stages in his visual system: the moving patterns simply are these stages.” (Metzinger, 2003a, p. 171).

Once again, I find Metzinger’s phrasing ambiguous. I cannot fully agree with the claim “the moving patterns simply *are* these (*earlier processing*) stages”, but it seems plausible to think, instead, that an instantiating phenomenal element (in that case above in the form of pseudo-hallucinations, in the case of DP/DR experienced more simply as feelings of not being in one’s own body or part of one’s own environment) is required to “feel” reality as a representation as opposed to “thinking” of it as such, in epistemological terms (as for Tye, Harman, etc; see Section 2 and Section 3). Rather, we are aware of our own experience being essentially a representational product, as a result of occurring unusual perceptions in the first place (that we can, *ultima facie*, classify as non-transparent). In the event of a pseudo-hallucination, the hallucinator questions the standard expectation that what she is seeing is real; the depersonalized person questions the standard expectation that what she feels relative to her model of the self is real, and recognises that she still *is* in her body and in control of her own mental and physically realised processes; it just does not feel like it. By questioning this assumption, the subject becomes, in a particular qualitatively subjective sense, aware of the non-grantedness of her immediate experience.

5.3 Is the notion of transparency trivial?

We have now established a more detailed account of what opacity entails. The claim that it requires introspective awareness to the earlier processing stages *tout court* does not clarify the attached phenomenology. To satisfy the latter, opacity can thus be understood as internally directed awareness that a certain experience is a representational product, fabricated by our own cognitive apparatus. More specifically, I have maintained that one primary feature of depersonalization and derealization is their high degree of opacity. One possible objection to my proposal could consist in noticing that, *perhaps*, this operational definition of transparency (or opacity) appears to solely redescribe the experience of derealization and depersonalization. Put differently: Is the characterisation of DDD according to the property of transparency an ultimately sterile, tautological move? Metzinger’s transparency is defined in terms of lack attentional access to the earlier processing stages of a representation. Moreover, lack of transparency in this sense (that is, attentional access to these processing stages) is meant to explain the phenomenology of unreality associated with DDD. But we must be careful to not just define the feeling of unrealness in terms of access to the earlier processing stages, which reveals the “manufactured” nature of the state. The two ideas should be conceptually distinct in order for one to have enough explanatory power to explain the other.

I believe an incomplete overlap exists between depersonalization, derealization and transparency, but that both of those conceptualisations exceed each other and, thus, they are not equivalent entities. In the following, I will analyse two reasons why transparency surpasses the phenomenology of DDD:

One important reason why opacity in Metzinger's sense does not merely redescribe phenomenology of DDD is that, even if we were to admit that transparency is a merely descriptive notion, we are putting under profoundly different terms what the self-reported experience of depersonalized and derealized people is like. Undergoing one or more dissociative episodes does not necessarily provide the subject with any kind of philosophical intuition. Just like the person with DDD does not say she feels like she is accessing the internal configuration and earlier stages her brain is processing, she does not say that reality as they perceive it is the product of certain representational processes either. What they indicate quite emphatically is a feeling of detachment is present, a feeling of being robotic, or not being fully alive, the presence of a bubble or a mist surrounding them: the vividness and the sense of presence disappearing. In turn, they become phenomenally (but not necessarily cognitively) aware that some parts of their mental representative processes are not running as smoothly anymore. Doubts about the givenness of the self-representational contents seeps in. If they can continue existing while feeling like they are not fully existing, while being completely non-delusional but aware of their unusual phenomenal experience, then it means that one or more functional properties which makes them normally feel at home in the world and within their own bodies have to exist. It also means that, under those specific dissociative conditions, that same bundle of functional properties is altered. It means that their ordinary experience of the self and of the world is mediated.

However, for the person suffering from depersonalization, that information is not received as epistemic nor philosophical in any sense. It solely corresponds to an internal phenomenal uncertainty that often leaves the subject confused, rather than enlightened about the workings of their own neurocognitive system. Here is yet one more example of a depersonalized account: "the first time I can remember feeling like I didn't exist, I was 15. I was sitting on a train and all of a sudden I felt like I'd been dropped into someone else's body. My memories, experiences, and feelings—the things that make up my intrinsic sense of "me-ness"—projected across my mind like phantasmagoria, but I felt like they belonged to someone else. Like I was experiencing life in the third person" (Lofthouse, 2014). The subject does state that she feels like the first-person perspective has disappeared, leaving her with an artificial form of third person perspectiveness. However, there is no clear recognition that what she is living is the result of a representational process. However, from an analytical perspective, it is possible to observe that the experience is subjectively confusing, and one of severe opacity, in the sense discussed in the previous subsection.

A second reason this formulation of transparency with respect with DDD is not tautological is that it encompasses a variety of opaque states which are not only defined by the associated capacity of accessing the representational nature of experience. Opacity does not refer to an all-or-nothing dimension, and it cannot be equated to a singular manifestation of it (in our case, the phenomenology of DDD). Since it is a graded property, other examples of more or less opaque mental representations are detectable, and their global character would look discernible and, overall, slightly to starkly different from the phenomenology of depersonalization. A few other examples of opacity are cognitive reference, lucid dreams, pseudo-hallucinations, and out-of-body experiences (OBEs). In each of those situations the person is aware, to varying degrees, that their ongoing experience is not barely present in the world for them to directly interact with it, but that is the result of processes that represent a current state of affairs in the world.

In particular, pseudo-hallucinations highlight this feature of uncertainty: the subject does not accept the phenomenal content of her current representation as veridical; she is aware that some neurocognitive mechanism must be at work to generate the mirage of something that is not properly out there in the world. Pseudo-hallucinations and their opaque

character can be contrasted with full-blown hallucinations: in the latter case, the subject is accepting her own perceptions are unmediated and real — from the hallucinator’s perspective, the experience is phenomenologically transparent and veridical. Importantly, while many instances of opaque states exist, the aetiology of those states cannot be reduced to the degree of opacity displayed by specific phenomenologies. It would not be too controversial to affirm that imagination probably allows for a higher degree of transparency than a severe episode of depersonalization. But I believe that this explanation alone is not sufficient in providing a full picture of the phenomena at issue. Ultimately, my definition of opacity can be regarded as an umbrella term which explains (but is not equal to) the states it comprises.

An additional reason to look at the phenomenon of depersonalization through the lens of transparency is the fruitfulness of the notion as a starting or complementary point for other areas of research. Recent papers in the cognitive psychology and neurocomputational field have advanced hypotheses on the causes of DDD, drawing from predictive processing models of the mind (Seth et al., 2012; Gerrans, 2018; Deane et al., 2020; Ciaunica et al., 2022a). An in-depth exposition of these models is beyond the scope of this text. However, it is worth mentioning in what way the concept of transparency is relevant for predictive processing theories of DDD. According to one of the most recent accounts (Ciaunica et al., 2022a) of DDD, one’s sense of presence is a fundamental, pre-reflective feature of cognitive systems endowed with selfhood. Most self-related information is normally attenuated, i.e., transparent. That is, information about the self is, at least during most somatosensory experiences, left in the background and not introspectively dealt with. A capacity for self-attenuation would be, for instance, what keeps a person running after a ball without being slowed down or impeded in their movements by an unnecessary allocation of attentional resources towards the self.

According to this hypothesis, however, when we feel threatened or when we are subjected to high levels of unpredictability, attention to self-related information might be enhanced as a way of regaining control over the situation. The normal self-attenuated state would then be converted into its opposite: an excessive allocation of cognitive resources towards the internal landscape would ensue, eventually leading to a feeling of alienation towards the pre-reflective, subjective dimension of the self and towards the environment as a whole. As a result, the depersonalized and derealized person “overthinks” herself to the point of detachment. This promising perspective is not only highly coherent with the transparency argument, but it draws upon it to build a possible account of what constitutes the causal basis of derealization and depersonalization.

6. Conclusion

DDD (Depersonalization–Derealization Disorder) is a relatively common disorder, but often overlooked. Importantly, manifestations of depersonalization and derealization are frequently transiently experienced by a larger segment of the population. While disciplines traditionally involved in clinical research like psychology and neuroscience have mostly been at the front line to investigate the nature of the condition, I believe philosophy of mind can offer valuable contributes to the discussion around psychiatric conditions at large, and DDD in particular.

Some researchers and academics have already foreseen great potential in framing the subjective lack of presence and immediacy — a distinguishing feature of depersonalization and derealization — as a failure of phenomenal transparency (Ciaunica et al., 2020; Ciaunica

et al., 2022a; Seth et al., 2012; Ciaunica et al., 2021). In particular, they draw from Metzinger's formulation of it, which employs the notion as a constraint for phenomenal consciousness. Given this framework, my thesis aims at validating the view that transparency is an important feature of our ordinary phenomenological states. In addition, I have attempted to shed some light onto the constitutive differences existing between the classical notion of transparency and the phenomenal definition employed by Metzinger and the researchers engaged in analysing phenomena of altered subjective presence like depersonalization and derealization. Notwithstanding my belief that depersonalized states can first and foremost be understood as highly opaque mental states, I have also identified a few possible lines of criticism towards the notion of transparency itself, and towards the usage of the notion itself and its supposed explanatory relationship to DDD. Specifically, I have shown how the metzingerian definition of PE (phenomenal transparency) is not straightforwardly phrased, and I have offered a clarificatory account of it. Finally, I have tried to present in which ways the involvement of transparency with respect to DDD is not trivial, and how it can enrich the debate around these issues.

There is a quantity of interesting insights that were left behind as they exceeded the purpose of the present discussion. However, new paradigms are questioning the ways of interactions around virtual reality (starting from predictive processing theories) and sense of presence (i.e., transparency). New research around the impact of virtuality on dissociative symptomatology points to a directly proportional relationship between exposure to virtual environment and increase in self-reported measures of depersonalization and derealization (Aardema et al., 2010; Peckmann et al., 2022; Ciaunica et al., 2022b). Exploring how the presentation of self-representational content varies between conditions (e.g., virtual reality immersion, online presence, and even among "natural" versions of simulated mental activity such as immersive daydreaming) might garner useful explanations for our accounts of dissociative conditions and our ordinary phenomenology alike.

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