



# The development of our sense of self as a defense against invading thoughts: From Buddhist psychology to psychoanalysis

Andreas Mayer

Department of General Psychiatry, Phenomenological Psychopathology and Psychotherapy, University of Heidelberg, Voss-Strasse 4, 69115, Heidelberg, Germany

## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

sense of self  
Buddhist psychology  
Psychoanalysis  
Intrusive thoughts  
Defense mechanism  
Identification with the aggressor

## ABSTRACT

In interdisciplinary debates on the nature of the self, no-self accounts often refer to Buddhist psychology, arguing that the self is an illusion arising from our identification with mental content. What is often missing, however, is a developmentally, motivationally and emotionally plausible reason why this identification happens in the first place. It is argued that directing attention to our ongoing thought activities and their effect on our mind reveals their often invasive character. This is supported by psychoanalytic accounts on the ontogenetic and phylogenetic origins of thinking. On an experiential level, invading thoughts have similarities to attacks and provoke defensive reactions. The defense mechanism described as identification with the aggressor is used as a model in order to better grasp how we deal with invading thoughts, namely, by identifying with them and thus generating a sense of self as an agent of thoughts which provides an illusion of control.

## 1. Introduction

In various fields of study, the phenomenological and ontological status of the self are controversially debated. No-self accounts have a long philosophical tradition and are nowadays often linked to Buddhist psychology (Albahari, 2006; Chadha, 2017; Krueger, 2011; Sideritis, Thompson, & Zahavi, 2011). The dialogue between Buddhism and psychoanalysis has a long tradition and gained some popularity with the publication of *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* by Fromm, Suzuki and De Martino (1960). However, the concept which presumably distinguishes both approaches most – the notion of no-self (Sanskrit: *anātman*) – is often not the main focus of this dialogue. This is surprising, since the no-self doctrine is supposedly the “most well-known and controversial aspect of Buddhist thought” (Krueger, 2011, p. 30). From a Buddhist perspective, the self is considered to be an illusion or fiction, arising from our identification with mental content (Albahari, 2006; Fasching, 2008; see also; Krueger, 2011). However, Gallagher and Zahavi (2008) correctly state that even if the self only had a fictional status, it must still be explained why this fiction arises, or, in other words, why we identify with mental content in the first place. According to Engler (2003), Buddhist psychology does not address this question: “While it describes in great detail the process of identification by which the experience of being a separate self can arise, Buddhist thinking doesn’t explain *why* we construct our experience in this way” (p. 53). He continues:

*Why would we represent ourselves to ourselves in just this way if it only produces suffering, as Buddhism maintains? This doesn’t make sense. We have to assume that every mental structure, every pattern of behavior, emerges only because it is an attempt at adaptation, either to meet a specific developmental task or to deal with some internal or external need (Engler, 2003, p. 53).*

Engler goes on to argue that anxiety gives rise to the development of our sense of self. In his view, the self is “a psychological structure that emerges to confront a “danger situation” by binding anxiety and warding off unwanted and unwelcome knowledge and the aversive feelings that knowledge evokes” (2003, p. 78).

Then, however, his argumentation becomes circular. The basic anxiety, according to Engler, is the fear to be no-self (2003). This fear gives rise to the illusion of a separate self “which only produces suffering” (Engler, 2003, p. 53) and must then be given up through meditative practice in order to feel the blessings of having insight into the nature of no-self. So, in Engler’s account, the journey ends where it once started. If we finally gain insight into the nature of no-self, then why don’t we react again with the same anxiety that gave rise to the development of our sense of self in the first place? The only way out of this dilemma would be to argue that the awareness of no-self before the development of a sense of self is qualitatively different from the awareness of no-self after that development.

In contrast to Engler, it is the aim of the present paper to address the

E-mail address: [andreas.mayer@posteo.de](mailto:andreas.mayer@posteo.de).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2019.100775>

Received 17 July 2019; Received in revised form 25 November 2019; Accepted 26 November 2019

Available online 9 December 2019

0732-118X/© 2019 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

question why we might identify with mental content in the first place and thus construct a sense of self as an agent of thoughts from an interdisciplinary perspective including psychoanalytic approaches to thinking and trauma. Importantly, this sense of self as an agent of thoughts is based on a more fundamental sense of self that already allows for some distinction between self and other. Without the assumption of such a basic sense of self, there would be nobody who could experience thoughts and their developmental precursors as invasive. The sense of self as an agent of thoughts is therefore based on a more fundamental and basic form of differentiation between self and other. In phenomenological accounts, such a minimal self (Gallagher, 2000; Zahavi, 2005) is constituted by the very fact that all our conscious experiences are characterized by first-personal givenness and mineness, i. e., a minimal form of subjectivity (Zahavi, 2005). The idea of a minimal self is in line with neuroscientific accounts of a core self that provides organismic coherence by integrating experiences from various sources (Northoff & Panksepp, 2008). Such a synthetic function is also an important aspect of the psychoanalytic conception of the ego (Epstein, 1988). There is evidence that the aforementioned different senses of self are associated with different patterns of activity in the brain (Dahl, Lutz, & Davidson, 2015; Farb et al., 2007).

The main goal of the present paper is to suggest why and how we construct a sense of self as an agent of thoughts. As a consequence, the paper will not deal with an investigation of the relationship between no-self accounts and more basic forms of the self like the minimal self of phenomenology.

First, it will be argued that thoughts are regularly experienced as invasive. Examples from psychopathology and meditative experiences will underline the basic claim that many if not most of our thoughts arise without conscious control. On an experiential level, these invading thoughts provoke defensive reactions. Second, the claim that many of our thought activities are experienced as invasive is backed up by two psychoanalytically inspired theories on the origins of thinking. Christopher Türcke's (2013) account of the phylogenetic origins of mental space provides a speculative model according to which traumatic events triggered the human capacity for imagination, memory and mental representation. From an ontogenetic perspective, Wilfred Bion's theory of thinking allows for a perspective where early frustrations and absences trigger the capacity to think – absences, that are experienced as attacks (Faimberg, 2005). Third, it will be argued that psychoanalytic approaches to trauma can provide an answer to the question how we deal with invading thoughts. Therefore, the defense mechanism described as identification with the aggressor is used as a model in order to better understand how we deal with invading thoughts, namely, by identifying with them. We thus generate a very specific aspect of our sense of self, namely, our sense of self as a thinker of thoughts. This involves a sense of agency characterized by feelings of authorship and mastery towards thoughts.

## 2. Invading thoughts

The German word *Einfall* is used for both suddenly occurring ideas and acts of invasion (for an English equivalent, consider the term *an idea strikes me* and the verb *to strike*). It alludes to the invasive character of those thought activities that are not under our conscious control. It is common to talk about intrusive thoughts or intrusions. However, this terminology is associated with obsessive-compulsive disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder. Therefore, I shall talk about intrusive thoughts exclusively in cases in which reference to psychopathology is made, reserving the term 'invasive thoughts' to refer to what I take to be a specific quality of thoughts in general. Although *Einfall* in the sense of suddenly occurring ideas has a positive connotation, many suddenly occurring thoughts are experienced as disturbing and therefore as invasions of a former more peaceful state of mind. In this view, the mind is not solely constituted by thoughts or, more generally, mental content. Although our capacity for thinking thoughts develops in close

interaction with the pressure of developmentally early forms of thought (Bion, 1962/2013; see chapter 3.2), it is suggested that it is principally possible at later developmental stages to observe mental content without over-identifying with it (Bishop et al., 2004). This is supported by research on different meditative practices (Dahl et al., 2015) as well as research on mind wandering and meta-awareness (Smallwood & Schooler, 2015). The correlation between mind wandering and unhappiness (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010) also lends some indirect support to the idea that thoughts have an invasive quality.

Obvious examples are compulsive thoughts in obsessive-compulsive disorders or thought insertion in schizophrenia. In an examination of the application of the term thought insertion, Mullins and Spence (2003) discuss a range of related phenomena like influenced thinking or passivity thinking. Gallagher (2000) defines sense of ownership as "the sense that I am the one who is undergoing an experience" (p. 15). In contrast, the sense of agency is the experience that "I cause or generate an action" (Gallagher, 2000). Influenced thinking is characterized by the subject having a sense of ownership, but no sense of agency. Jaspers described this form of thinking as follows: "The patient does not know why he has this thought nor did he intend to have it. He does not feel master of his own thoughts and in addition he feels in the power of some incomprehensible external force" (Jaspers, 1963, pp. 122–123).

Although key features of certain mental illnesses like depression or anxiety disorders, nonclinical samples experience unwanted intrusive thoughts that resemble clinically relevant obsessions. In the sample of Rachman and de Silva (1978), 80% of their nonclinical sample reported having intrusive thoughts similar both in form and content to those of the clinical sample. A particularly distressing example of intrusive thoughts are thoughts of intentionally harming one's infant (Lawrence, Craske, Kempton, Stewart, & Stein, 2017). These thoughts and corresponding images have been reported to occur in almost half of the parents of infants in the general population (Fairbrother & Woody, 2008). This suggests that the experience of losing control over our thoughts or rather, not having them in the first place, is a human universal. Meditation can offer a direct possibility for experiencing this. Meditation techniques can, for example, lead to a state of mindfulness, i. e., a nonjudgmental and nonelaborative awareness in the present moment in which thoughts, feelings and sensations are acknowledged and accepted as they are (Kabat-Zinn, 1998; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002; Teasdale, 1999). In a state of mindfulness, thoughts and feelings inevitably arise and intrude into our mind, yet they are observed as events in the mind, without over-identifying with them. What mindfulness approaches do is therefore to "encourage patients to step out of the war with their thoughts and feelings" (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 237). Interestingly, Bishop uses the word "war". One can only be at war with thoughts if their intrusion into the mind is experienced as an attack. When considering the double meaning of *Einfall*, it is thus not surprising that specific meditative states are experienced as *peaceful* (see for example Engler, 2003, p. 60). For short moments, the invasion of unintended thoughts comes to an end or at least decreases, relief and clarity being the immediate results. Mindfulness, however, is only one aspect of meditative practices. The latter can be categorized according to their primary cognitive mechanisms and might focus on mindfulness, meta-awareness, perspective taking, cognitive reappraisal or self-inquiry (Dahl et al., 2015). In spite of this diversity, meta-awareness, the individual's explicit awareness of the current contents of thought, plays an important role across a broad spectrum of meditation practices (Dahl et al., 2015; Smallwood & Schooler, 2015). It is suggested that this possibility of stepping back and becoming aware of one's ongoing thought activities is what makes their invasive quality recognizable and apparent.

Summing up, thoughts are not only thought by something or someone who wants to think them: a self, a thinker or a conscious 'I'. If thoughts can enter our mind although we do not want to think them, if they stay in our mind although we do not want them to, if they reappear although or even because we want to suppress them, and if we feel better

and more at peace in meditative states characterized by a decrease in thought activities, then we can justifiably say that they have an invasive quality and therefore at least some similarities to attacks.

Importantly, although thoughts are not literally experienced as attacks, they share an important aspect with them: they occur against the individual's will or, in other words, the individual does not have the possibility not to think them. They impose themselves on the individual and have therefore an overwhelming or invasive quality - like attacks or acts of aggression. In the following line of argument, this quality will be referred to as invasive.

### 3. Developmental perspectives

To say that thoughts have an invasive quality raises the question whether this is just the result of our appraisal in the very moment of their occurrence or if the perception of this quality tells us something deeper about the very nature or even origins of thought.

#### 3.1. Traumatic events as the cradle of thought

In his book *Philosophy of Dreams*, German philosopher Christopher Türcke tries nothing less than to describe the psychological development of our species by applying psychoanalytic ideas to the ways our human forebears coped with traumatic events and frightening environments. According to Türcke, our human ancestors were subject to traumatic experiences by the awesome and potentially shocking forces of nature. In his view, these forces were experienced as traumatic. In order to find relief, our ancestors compulsively repeated these experiences in rituals of human sacrifice. In this process, *homo sapiens* slowly created the mental capacity to imagine and, with respect to traumatic events, to represent them internally. This needs some more explanation. According to Türcke, we can only imagine things we have previously perceived as being enacted. He plays with the German word *Vorstellung*, which means both imagination and performance and which - in its verbal form (*vorstellen*) - can be read as *vor-stellen*, i.e., to put something in front of someone or something (so that it can be observed). According to Türcke, only procedures and actions which had been repeatedly performed could have given rise to their mental representation and hence to the realm of imagination. Repetition, however, was not sufficient in his view. Only procedures and actions which were capable of arousing the nervous system of *homo sapiens* intensely could, via repetition, become internalized and thus give rise to mental representation and imagination. Traumatic events were the most arousing experiences in this respect. Rituals of human sacrifice can be thought of as organized traumatic events which had the same capacity to arouse the nervous system as the traumatic forces of nature. However, rituals of human sacrifice provided the opportunity for role reversal. While the shocking forces of nature were uncontrollable, our human forebears now had control over the course of action and re-enacted the originally experienced trauma by sacrificing a conspecific. By turning victims in offenders, these rituals had a therapeutic function by establishing a sense of control and a possibility for tension reduction. They began to *represent* the original traumatic event. Via repetition, the course of action and its relieving function were successively internalized and hence transformed into a mental function. *Vorstellungen* in the sense of performances thus became *Vorstellungen* in the sense of imagination and mental representation. According to Türcke, traumatic repetition compulsion is at the heart of the phylogenesis of mental space and therefore thinking. What his account does not consider, however, is the role of social interactions for the development of thinking or, more broadly speaking, mental space (for a thorough critique see Mayer, 2015). Nevertheless, his account provides support to the idea that thoughts have an invasive quality by conceptualizing literal attacks through various shocking forces of nature (e.g., predators, lightnings, fire) as the cradle of thought in human development. The latter idea is also supported by Revonsuo's (2000) reinterpretation of dreams. In his view, the evolutionary function of

dreaming was to simulate threatening events in order to be able to better avoid them in the future.

#### 3.2. Absences as attacks that trigger thoughts

While Türcke put a specific type of disturbing emotional experience - traumatic events - at the heart of his theory on the development of mental space in phylogenetic terms, the British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion focused on its development in early infancy. Thinking for Bion always involves feeling, he considers both to be "inseparable aspects of a single psychological event" (Ogden, 2008, p. 13). According to Ogden, Bion thinks that mature thinking "is generated in response to our most archaic fears" (Ogden, 2008, p. 16). However, these most archaic fears differ from those which Türcke considers to be the cradle of human thinking. Thinking, in Bion's view, depends on two mental developments: the development of thoughts and the development of "an apparatus to cope with them" (Bion, 1962/2013, p. 302). He classifies thoughts in preconceptions, conceptions, thoughts, and concepts. To understand his notion of preconception, Bion provides the example of an infant's inborn disposition that makes him expect the breast of the mother. Preconceptions can hence be thought of as psycho-physical states of expectation (Riesenberg-Malcolm, 2001). Bion (1962/2013) goes on: "When the preconception is brought into contact with a realization that approximates to it, the mental outcome is a conception" (p. 302). In other words: If the inborn's expectation of a breast is met by reality, i.e., if the mother provides her breast, a conception develops and is accompanied by "an emotional experience of satisfaction" (Bion, 1962/2013, p. 303). If, however, this expectation is frustrated, a thought in Bion's sense can develop:

The model I propose is that of an infant whose expectation of a breast is mated with a realization of no breast available for satisfaction. This mating is experienced as a no-breast, or 'absent' breast inside (...) If the capacity for toleration of frustration is sufficient the 'no-breast' inside becomes a thought, and an apparatus for 'thinking' it develops. (Bion, 1962/2013, p. 303).

In this view, thinking results from frustration. If a preconception "is brought into contact with a realization" (Bion, 1962/2013, p. 302), there is no necessity for thinking (see O'Shaughnessy, 1964). Thoughts are like carriers of frustration, they jump into the gap between preconception and frustration or, in other words, between preconception and absence of realization. Therefore, the individual does not want to think thoughts, since they bring frustration to mind.

The infant therefore uses a process called projective identification in order to get rid of and at the same time communicate its frustration to the mother. In early infancy, children lack the ability to process affects and emotions that result from frustrations. Bion (1959; 1962/2013) suggested that projective identification, a concept first described by Melanie Klein (1946), can explain how children communicate their intolerable subjective experiences to the mother in order to "arouse in the mother feelings of which the infant wishes to be rid" (Ogden, 2008, p. 182). In projective identification, the child projects aspects of himself into another person. This projection exerts pressure on the caregiver by arousing feelings congruent with the projection. For example, the child might communicate despair via crying. As a consequence, the mother might subsequently try to calm the child. In the course of this process, the recipient of the projection (here: the mother) processes it and provides a modified and more tolerable version of it for re-internalization by the child (see Ogden, 1979). Via repetition of this intersubjective cycle, a "capacity for tolerating frustration thus enables the psyche to develop thought as a means by which the frustration that is tolerated is itself made more tolerable" (Bion, 1962/2013, p. 303).

In this theory, thoughts are developmentally prior to thinking. At first glance, this seems illogical, since one cannot explain the development of a capacity to think thoughts as the consequence of thoughts

being there beforehand. This would presuppose what the theory is supposed to explain. It makes sense, however, if we follow Bion and consider thoughts as the raw material that later becomes manipulated by an “apparatus” for thinking. In other words: thoughts can indeed be prior to thinking if we assume that manipulated thoughts are qualitatively different from their precursors. However, it would probably make more sense to label them differently. Bion, unfortunately, does not use the term consistently. For example, he wants to classify thoughts “according to the nature of their developmental history, as pre-conceptions, conceptions or thoughts, and finally concepts” (1962/2013, p. 302). On the same page, however, he says that he wants to “limit the term ‘thought’ to the mating of a preconception with a frustration” (p. 302). Later on in the same paper, however, he also uses the term in a very broad sense, “including all objects I have described as conceptions, thoughts, dream thoughts, alpha-elements and beta-elements” (p. 308). For the purpose of this paper, however, it suffices to assume that thoughts in a more primitive form can be prior to the development of full-fledged thinking. But what might be the phenomenal character of these early protothoughts? How does Bion characterize thoughts *before* the apparatus for thinking them develops? According to Bion, “thinking is a development forced on the psyche by the pressure of thoughts and not the other way round” (1962/2013, p. 302). The expression “pressure of thoughts” points to their invasive quality which forces the organism to cope with them in some way. Thoughts originate in disturbing emotional experience (see Ogden, 2008, p. 23), press on our psyche and we try to get rid of them via projective processes, i.e., we try to get them out of ourselves. In other words, we experience them as invasive. If we take Bion seriously, frustration and absences (of realizations) are essential for our development of thinking. Again, we can ask the question how frustrations and absences might be phenomenally experienced by young infants. The influential frustration-aggression-hypothesis (Dollard, Miller, Doob, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939) which thought of aggression as a consequence of prior frustration might have obscured that frustrations can be experienced as an aggressive attack as well: An attack of someone or something that does not give me what I want or expect. Frustrations go hand in hand with absences: If my wish is frustrated, its fulfilment or the presence of what I desired is absent. The absence of what is needed, however, “requires immediate survival adjustment” and infants subsequently suffer “the psychological pain of absence” (Gurevitch, 2008, p. 562). Experiences of absences are much more than mere cognitive judgments of something not being there. French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1943) famously described how one experiences the absence of someone he was supposed to meet in a café as something which impresses itself on the experiential field of the subject, presenting the world as something that denies a satisfaction or expectation. Gurevitch (2008) gives an impressive description of how absences impact on the individual psyche: “The psychic trauma of absence then transmutes into ‘something’, while the absence itself becomes marked as ‘nothing’, a nothing which in fact operates as though it were ‘something’ with a profound and deeply intrusive impact on the vulnerable self” (p. 563). In the same line, O’Shaughnessy described the experience of the absent breast in early infancy as intrusive (1964, p. 39). However, Gurevitch talks about experienced absences that lead to later psychopathology. These are not necessarily the same absences in terms of quantity and quality that lead to the development of thinking in Bion’s sense. However, they still give us an idea about the phenomenal quality that accompanies the experience of absences. If absences can have an intrusive impact, they have similarities to attacks (see above), or with the words of Faimberg: “An absence is a presence that attacks” (2005, p. 11).

Summing up, the ontogenetic development of thought in psychoanalytic thinking partly parallels the phylogenetic developmental trajectory outlined above. In both accounts, thinking starts with disturbing emotional experiences which are experienced as invasive and followed by attempts to get rid of them, either via traumatic repetition compulsion among our human forebears (Türcke) or via projective identification in early infancy (Bion). In both cases, an external “container” (Bion,

1962) is necessary for thinking to develop. This container is provided by the ritual space in Türcke’s account and by the mother in Bion’s. According to Bion, it allows for the development “of this apparatus that I shall provisionally call thinking” (1962/2013, p. 302). What develops in the course of time, however, is not only thinking, but also the sense of being “a thinker of thoughts, a feeler of feelings, an initiator of actions, etc.” (Krueger, 2011, p. 28), i.e., a sense of self as an agent of thoughts. Is it possible that this aspect of our sense of self described by Krueger is also a consequence of our attempts to deal with invasive thoughts? What, if this “apparatus” that develops under the pressure of thoughts, is our sense of self or at least makes up an important part of it?

#### 4. Identification with the invader

If thoughts have an invasive quality and if this quality can be traced back to the beginnings of thinking, both in phylogenetic and ontogenetic terms, then how do we deal with this quality? Physical attacks provoke a fight-or-flight reaction, but both reactions are no viable option when it comes to thoughts. What about thought suppression? Social psychologist Daniel Wegner could experimentally demonstrate that thought suppression yields opposite effects, increasing the likelihood of thinking precisely the thought one wants to suppress (Wegner, Schneider, Carter III, & White, 1987). Therefore, suppression is no viable way to deal with invading thoughts either.

Identification with the aggressor is a common defense mechanism following trauma (Ferenczi, 1949; Freud, 1936/1975). A classical and probably more well-known example for identification with the aggressor is the Stockholm Syndrome (see Graham, 1994), a term used to describe the positive bond some kidnap victims develop with their captor. Although this phenomenon was associated with cognitive dissonance theory in the past (Cantor & Price, 2007), identification with the aggressor is primarily driven by anxiety and involves more than cognitive dissonance and a subsequent change in cognition. Ferenczi, in talking about severely abused children, argues that the reactions of children towards sexual violence is often not rejection, hatred or disgust, since children feel too helpless and anxious to protest (1949, p. 228). Instead, they identify with the aggressor: “For our theory this assumption, however, is highly important—namely, that *the weak and undeveloped personality reacts to sudden unpleasure not by defence, but by anxiety-ridden identification and by introjection of the menacing person or aggressor*” (Ferenczi, 1949, p. 228). As a consequence of this process of identification, the aggressor “disappears as part of the external reality, and becomes intra-instead of extra-psyche” (p. 228).

Türcke argues that role reversal was the crucial mechanism that allowed our human forebears to become initiators and finally ritualistic organizers rather than victims of traumatic events. We can also think of this process as an identification with the shocking forces of nature (the aggressor). The aggressor becomes intra-psyche and therefore accessible to transformative psychic work and hence control. The central idea put forward in the present paper is that this mechanism also provides a model for understanding how we try to get a sense of control over invading thoughts. Instead of being thought by them, so to speak, a thinker or “identificatory self-consciousness” (Fasching, 2008) is generated via identification in order to provide some sense of control, or, more precisely, to add a sense of agency to the existing sense of ownership. In the course of this process, invasive thoughts (the aggressor) lose their invasive quality, giving rise to the illusion of a ‘me’ wanting to think them. Frankel (2002) emphasized “that identification with the aggressor, on a smaller scale, operates invisibly but pervasively in the everyday lives of most people” (p. 122). It is, in his view, “a very widespread phenomenon” not restricted to severe prior trauma and “used as a universal tactic by people in a weak or helpless position as a way of coping with others who are seen as stronger and therefore as a threat” (p. 117).

Of course, one might object that, although thoughts sometimes invade our mind as if they came from the outside, they still originate

from sources that lie within an individual organism. However, identifying the source of a thought in the unconscious, the Freudian 'Id' or in implicit processes inside our brain does not change the very fact that we phenomenally experience these thoughts as if we were not their agents. This feeling of not being the agent of our thoughts calls for a control mechanism, or, more precisely, the illusion of a control mechanism: our sense of self as an agent of thoughts. The invasive quality of thoughts puts the individual under stress and makes it look for ways to cope with them. This is in line with Bion who argued "that thinking is a development forced on the psyche by the pressure of thoughts and not the other way round" (1962/2013, p. 302). In the same way, we could say that our sense of self as the agent of thoughts is a development forced on the psyche by the pressure of thoughts. It is important to emphasize that we are talking here about a very specific aspect of our sense of self. Clearly, we are not talking about the minimal self of phenomenology, i.e., the fact that all our conscious experiences are characterized by first-personal givenness and mineness (Zahavi, 2005). Krueger (2011) correctly states that "this firstperson perspective or experiential dimension at the heart of consciousness is not itself a self. It is a feature of the *stream* of experience, and not a self standing *behind* the experience" (p. 33). The self that is standing behind the experience, observing, commenting and appropriating it, is a phenomenologically and ontologically later development and much closer to what has been called the narrative self:

When we consider ourselves as individuals with unique hopes, aspirations, and intentions as singular individuals importantly distinct from others, and with a moral and existential status uniquely our own—we are thinking of ourselves as narrative persons, in an encompassing mode of 'I-maker' awareness (Krueger, 2011, p. 39, p. 39)

It is this kind of narrative self that adds something to the sense of ownership which results from what Zahavi calls minimal self. What it adds is a sense of agency or, in Krueger's terminology, an "I-maker awareness". This awareness has been characterized by Krueger as "a thinker of thoughts, a feeler of feelings, an initiator of actions, etc." (2011, p. 28). It is this kind of self which results, at least partly, from our identification with invasive thoughts. Being able to think them, to be their agent, so to speak, dampens their intrusive quality by giving us the illusion of control and thus relieving anxiety. Thoughts then no longer occur to us, they appear to be thought by us. Daniel Dennett's famous words remind us of Bion's view that thinking results from thoughts rather than the other way round: "Our tales are spun, but for the most part we don't spin them; they spin us. Our human consciousness, and our narrative selfhood, is their product, not their source" (Dennett, 1991, p. 418). Following the argument outlined in this paper, we might slightly modify this into: I don't spin them; they spin an 'I'.

## 5. Discussion

In this paper, it was argued that thoughts have an intrinsically invasive quality. The defense mechanism described as identification with the aggressor was used as model in order to better understand how we deal with this quality. In the present account, however, identification with the aggressor is not just a defense mechanism of the 'Ego' among others. It would definitely go beyond the scope of this paper to compare the Ego of psychoanalysis with the various notions of self (in psychoanalysis and other disciplines). However, there seems to be at least some overlap between the Ego according to Anna Freud and the sense of self as an agent of thoughts that was the focus of this paper, since both have a defensive function. While the title of her famous book *The ego and mechanisms of defense* (1936/1975) implies that the Ego *applies* mechanisms of defense and is thus separate from or even superior and in command of them, it was suggested here that a specific part of our ego-consciousness, namely, our sense of self as an agent of thoughts, partially developed as a defense mechanism.

Moreover, it was suggested that the sense of self as an agent of thoughts arises as the result of a defense against invasive thoughts. The term invasive thoughts or invading thoughts might have given the impression that the author considers thoughts to exist in a realm somewhere separate from the subject before they invade the mind. This was not intended. Maybe it is more accurate to say that thoughts emerge in the process of integrating non-articulated thought impulses originating in emotional experiences and that these impulses force the relevant defense act (identification with the aggressor). Emerging thoughts are constituted by concrete acts of thinking and vice versa. The circularity here is not of a vicious sort, but rather one that expresses the co-constitutive relation between thinking and what is thought. This co-constitutive relation, however, is not inconsistent with the idea that we can still consciously experience thoughts as invasive and that this experience triggers and enhances a specific aspect of our sense of self. The use of the term invasive thoughts or invading thoughts in this paper was by no means meant to say something about the ontological status of thoughts before they become conscious. Rather, they were meant to describe our phenomenal experience of how thoughts enter our mind, irrespective of a subject's involvement in the co-constitutive process sketched out above.

At this point, it is important to avert some further possible misunderstandings. First, the self is of course not only a defense mechanism. In this paper, the focus was on the invasive nature of thoughts and how a specific aspect of our sense of self can be thought of as being the result of a defense mechanism in order to cope with this quality. However, this does neither mean that the self developed only as a result of the invasive quality of thoughts, nor that the self is nothing more than a defense mechanism. Rather, thinking about the invasive quality of thoughts (*Einfälle*) and about an individual's possibilities to cope with them, reveals one important aspect of the self's origin and functions.

Second, the focus on the invasive nature of thoughts might have given the impression that thoughts are a problem. But on the contrary: both in Bion's and Türcke's account, they are solutions to the disturbing emotional experiences that gave rise to them. However, to say that thoughts are rather solutions than problems doesn't automatically mean that they are not phenomenally experienced as invasive. If they were born of necessity, than the individual could not choose whether to think them or not - it had to. They were a means to survive.

Third, one might disagree with the characterization of thoughts provided above by arguing that many of our thoughts like for example daydreams or holiday memories are pleasant and therefore not experienced as invasive and that we sometimes are in control of our thought processes. Of course, thoughts can represent all kinds of things, be they pleasant or unpleasant. The account outlined in this paper did not say anything about the content of thoughts in our everyday lives, but about their developmental origins and the way in which thoughts enter our mind. It was argued that they often uncontrollably enter our mind, irrespective of their content. Some invasive thoughts can certainly be welcome, yet still, they are invasive. This leads us to the second objection, namely, that we sometimes seem to be in control of our thoughts processes, for example, when thinking about the outline of a paper, when doing mathematics, etc.. These activities, however, require a great deal of attention and focussed concentration. This state of mind, in which we experience our thinking as under our conscious control, is not the rule. It is not the default state of our mind which is sometimes disturbed by invasive thoughts. On the contrary: Invasive thoughts (*Einfälle*) are the rule and a great deal of mental effort is needed to ward them off in order to focus on a singular question or task.

Fourth, one might object that the origin of a capacity does not necessarily characterize the capacity itself. For example, if someone has become a good runner because he regularly had to run away from predators in the open savannah, the fear that made him run away is not a part of his well-trained legs. It can neither be found in his legs nor can we say that his legs still have a somehow fleeing quality. This is true, yet the analogy is not valid for the argument developed in this paper.

Importantly, it was not argued that many thoughts in our everyday lives have an invasive quality *because* of their origin in disturbing emotional invasive experiences. Instead, it was argued that our phenomenal experience of thoughts in everyday life reveals their invasive quality and that this quality can also be found in accounts that deal with the phylogenetic and ontogenetic origins of thought.

Fifth, psychoanalysts might ask about the role of the mother or the primary caregiver in the infant's alleged process of identifying with invading thoughts. In Bion's theory on the development of thinking, the mother has the important role of receiving the infant's projections and transforming them in order to make them more tolerable for the child. Importantly, the theory developed in this paper does not deny the role of the mother or other caregivers. What Bion said about the role of the mother fits nicely with what has been sketched out in this paper: The mother makes the infant's experiences more digestible and acceptable by helping her child to identify with the aggressor, i.e., with invasive thoughts, and thus co-constructs the infant's sense of self as an agent of thoughts. Through these processes of projection and introjection, the basic distinction between self and others as described by Zahavi's minimal self (2005) is further developed.

Although this paper did not in any way vote for self- or no-self accounts, it did provide an emotionally, motivationally and developmentally plausible reason why identification with thoughts might occur in the first place. While the Buddhist no-self doctrine denies the existence of an enduring self (Sanskrit: *anatman*), it does not deny subjectivity (Krueger, 2011). Therefore, the no-self doctrine is not necessarily inconsistent with the idea of a minimal self (Gallagher, 2000; Zahavi, 2005). Rather, it seems to be inconsistent with the reification of another aspect of our sense of self, namely, our sense of self as a thinker and agent of thoughts. In Buddhism, such reification is commonly believed to be the primary cause of suffering (Dahl et al., 2015; Harvey, 2004) and it was argued throughout this paper that it develops in the course of our identification with invasive thoughts. From this perspective, meditative practices allow for the recognition of the invasive quality of thoughts. Instead of identifying with them in order to gain control and thus construct a sense of self as a thinker of thoughts, meditation invites us not to identify with the aggressor, so to speak, i.e., with invasive thoughts. Therefore, a loss of ownership over thoughts during Buddhist meditation can be a positive and freeing experience (Lindahl & Britton, 2019). However, Lindahl and Britton also question the often made claim "that practices of disidentification and experiences of selfless processing should lead to greater happiness and well-being" (2019, p. 179). This is important, since several psychopathologies include alterations and distortions of the self (Parnas & Henriksen, 2014; Sass & Parnas, 2003). This raises the question why disidentification is sometimes experienced as positive and sometimes as utterly disturbing. What could be the link between these extreme outcomes? If thoughts have an invasive quality and if our sense of self as thinkers of thoughts developed as a defense against this quality, disidentification has obvious costs and benefits. While some individuals might feel relief and freedom as a consequence of disidentification with thoughts, others might feel frightened by the experience of losing their sense of self as an agent of thoughts. In other words, whether one focuses on the benefits rather than the costs of disidentification might differ from individual to individual. The account developed in this paper thus offers a new perspective on possible links between these different outcomes and might therefore be of relevance for applied fields of psychology. For example, psychotherapy might want to look closer not only at thought contents, but also at how patients experience their thoughts in qualitative terms and how their degree of identification with their thinking is related to their sense of self. Although this is already done in severe cases of psychopathology with anomalous self-experience or thought insertion (Mullins & Spence, 2003; Parnas & Henriksen, 2014), the perspective developed in this paper suggests that this could be an important perspective in less severe cases as well. Finally, I hope to have demonstrated that psychoanalytic thinking can fruitfully contribute to the ongoing interdisciplinary debate

on the status of the self, its genesis and functions.

## Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Héctor Andrés Sánchez Guerrero at Münster University Hospital and Prof. Dr. Thiemo Breyer from the University of Cologne for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

## References

- Albahari, M. (2006). *Analytical Buddhism: The two-tiered illusion of self*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bion, W. (1959). Attacks on linking. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 40, 308–315.
- Bion, W. R. (1962). *Learning from experience*. London: Heinemann.
- Bion, W. R. (2013). The psychoanalytic study of thinking. *LXXXII Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 2, 301–310 (Original work published 1962).
- Bishop, S. R. (2004). Mindfulness: A proposed operational definition. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 11(3), 230–241, 2004.
- Cantor, C., & Price, J. (2007). Traumatic entrapment, appeasement and complex post-traumatic stress disorder: Evolutionary perspectives of hostage reactions, domestic abuse and the Stockholm syndrome. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 41, 377–384, 2007.
- Chadha, M. (2017). No-self and the phenomenology of agency. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 16, 187–205.
- Dahl, C. J., Lutz, A., & Davidson, R. J. (2015). Reconstructing and deconstructing the self: Cognitive mechanisms in meditation practice. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 19(9), 515–523.
- Dennett, D. (1991). *Consciousness explained*. Boston: Little Brown and Company.
- Dollard, J., Miller, N. E., Doob, L. W., Mowrer, O. H., & Sears, R. R. (1939). *Frustration and aggression*. New Haven, CT, US: Yale University Press.
- Engler, J. (2003). Being somebody and being nobody: A reexamination of the of the understanding of the self in psychoanalysis and Buddhism. In J. D. Safran (Ed.), *Psychoanalysis and Buddhism: An unfolding dialogue* (pp. 35–100). Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 35–100.
- Epstein, M. (1988). The deconstruction of the self: Ego and "egolessness" in Buddhist insight meditation. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 20(1), 61–69.
- Faimberg, H. (2005). Après-coup. Response. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 86, 1–6.
- Fairbrother, N., & Woody, S. R. (2008). New mothers' thoughts of harm related to the newborn. *Archives of Women's Mental Health*, 11, 221–229.
- Farb, N. A., Segal, Z. V., Mayberg, H., Bean, J., McKeon, D., Fatima, Z., et al. (2007). Attending to the present: Mindfulness meditation reveals distinct neural modes of self-reference. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 2(4), 313–322.
- Fasching, W. (2008). Consciousness, self-consciousness, and meditation. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 7, 463–483.
- Ferenczi, S. (1949). Confusion of the tongues between the adults and the child. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 30, 225–230.
- Frankel, J. (2002). Exploring Ferenczi's concept of identification with the aggressor: Its role in trauma, everyday life, and the therapeutic relationship. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 12, 101–139.
- Freud, A. (1975). *Das Ich und die Abwehrmechanismen [The ego and the mechanisms of defense]*. München: Kindler (Original work published 1936).
- Fromm, E., Suzuki, D. T., & De Martino, R. (Eds.). (1960). *Zen buddhism and psychoanalysis*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Gallagher, S. (2000). Philosophical conceptions of the self: Implications for cognitive science. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 4, 14–21.
- Gallagher, S., & Zahavi, D. (2008). *The phenomenological mind: An introduction to philosophy of mind and cognitive science*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Graham, D. L. R., Rawlings, E. I., & Rigsby, R. K. (1994). *Loving to survive: Sexual terror, men's violence and women's lives*. New York: New York University Press.
- Gurevitch, H. (2008). The language of absence. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 89, 561–578.
- Harvey, P. (2004). *The selfless mind: Personality, consciousness and nirvana in early Buddhism*. Routledge.
- Jaspers, K. (1963). *General psychopathology (J. Hoenig & M. W. Hamilton, trans.)*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (1998). Meditation. In J. C. Holland (Ed.), *Psycho-oncology* (pp. 767–779). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Killingsworth, M. A., & Gilbert, D. T. (2010). A wandering mind is an unhappy mind. *Science*, 330, 932.
- Klein, M. (1946). Notes on some schizoid mechanisms. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 27, 99–110.
- Krueger, J. (2011). The who and the how of experience. In D. Zahavi, E. Thompson, & M. Siderits (Eds.), *Self, No self?: Perspectives from analytical, phenomenological, and Indian traditions* (pp. 27–55). Oxford: University Press.

- Lawrence, P. J., Craske, M. G., Kempton, C., Stewart, A., & Stein, A. (2017). Intrusive thoughts and images of intentional harm to infants in the context of maternal postnatal depression, anxiety, and OCD. *British Journal of General Practice*, *67*, 376–377.
- Lindahl, J. R., & Britton, W. B. (2019). 'I have this feeling of not really being here': Buddhist meditation and changes in sense of self. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, *26*.
- Mayer, A. (2015). Human sacrifice and the evolution of thinking: A critical assessment of Christoph Türcke's philosophy of dreams. In T. Breyer (Ed.), *Epistemological dimensions of evolutionary psychology* (pp. 223–238). New York, Heidelberg: Springer.
- Mullins, S., & Spence, S. A. (2003). Re-examining thought insertion. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, *182*, 293–298.
- Northoff, G., & Panksepp, J. (2008). The trans-species concept of self and the subcortical–cortical midline system. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, *12*(7), 259–264.
- Ogden, T. H. (1979). On projective identification. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, *60*, 357–373.
- Ogden, T. H. (2008). Bion's four principles of mental functioning. *Dallas-Fort Worth Business Journal*, *14*, 11–35.
- O'Shaughnessy, E. (1964). The absent object. *Journal of Child Psychotherapy*, *1*, 39–43.
- Parnas, J., & Henriksen, M. G. (2014). Disordered self in the schizophrenia spectrum: A clinical and research perspective. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, *22*(5), 251–265.
- Rachman, S., & de Silva, P. (1978). Abnormal and normal obsessions. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, *16*(4), 233–248.
- Revonsuo, A. (2000). The reinterpretation of dreams: An evolutionary hypothesis of the function of dreaming. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *23*, 877–901.
- Riesenberg-Malcolm, R. (2001). Bion's theory of containment. In C. Bronstein (Ed.), *Catalina Bronstein Kleinian theory - a contemporary perspective* (pp. 165–180). London: Whurr.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1943). *L'être et le néant*, 1943. Paris: Gallimard [Being and nothingness].
- Sass, L. A., & Parnas, J. (2003). Schizophrenia, consciousness, and the self. *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, *29*(3), 427–444.
- Segal, Z. V., Williams, J. M. G., & Teasdale, J. D. (2002). *Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for depression: A new approach for preventing relapse*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Sideritis, M., Thompson, E., & Zahavi, D. (Eds.). (2011). *Self, No self? Perspectives from analytical, phenomenological, and Indian traditions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smallwood, J., & Schooler, J. W. (2015). The science of mind wandering: Empirically navigating the stream of consciousness. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *66*, 487–518.
- Teasdale, J. D. (1999). Metacognition, mindfulness and the modification of mood disorders. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, *6*, 146–155.
- Türcke, C. (2013). *Philosophy of dreams* (Susan H. Gillespie, trans.). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Wegner, D. M., Schneider, D. J., Carter, S. R., III, & White, T. L. (1987). Paradoxical effects of thought suppression. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *53*, 5–13.
- Zahavi, D. (2005). *Subjectivity and selfhood: Investigating the first-person perspective*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.