There's No Leaving the Bubble of Consciousness: Herbert Müller's 0-D Epistemology

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By viewing certain structures as derived from, or referring to, a mind-independent reality, traditional ontology has painted itself into a corner. As was stressed by philosopher Karl Jaspers, consciousness/experience is *encompassing.* The question as to how something in the objective world can give rise to subjective experience is therefore ill-conceived; it rests on the mistaken premise that mind and body are ontically separated, and that this separation has somehow to be overcome. Herbert Müller has developed these insights into an epistemology that does not refer to an outside world and that, *a fortiori*, does not seek to derive knowledge from an external source. This article presents Müller's work on "structuring with zero-derivation" (0-D), mainly in his own words, extracted from three articles that appeared in the highly commendable open-access e-journal *Constructivist Foundations* ↗.

1 Introduction

By viewing certain structures as derived from, or referring to, a mind-independent reality (MIR), traditional metaphysics/ontology has painted itself into a corner. Because it assumes that our knowledge of the world is an internal (perceptual and/or conceptual) image or representation of an external world, it has to ask whether (or to what extent) this image or representation is accurate. But this question it cannot answer. We cannot compare the inner image with the outside world. All there is for us is our knowledge and our experience. George Berkeley expressed this in the clearest fashion when he said that we can only compare ideas with ideas.

As was stressed by the German psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers (1947), the mind — consciousness, experience, awareness — is *encompassing.* The question as to how something in the outside world (e.g., physical or electro-chemical processes in a brain, conceived as part of the outside world) can give rise to subjective experience, is therefore ill-conceived. It rests on the mistaken premise that mind and body are ontically separated, and that this separation has somehow to be overcome.[1]

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1 In fairness to Jaspers it ought to be said that Müller interprets the encompassing feature of consciousness more narrowly than Jaspers did. For Jaspers, encompassing becomes an ontic

Based on these insights, Herbert F. J. Müller — Associate Professor of Psychiatry at McGill University in Montreal and now retired from clinical work at Montreal's Douglas Hospital — has developed an epistemology that does not refer to an *ontic* outside world and that, *a fortiori*, does not seek to derive knowledge from an pre-structured source external to and independent of mind. The mind-world split only has a *pragmatic* or *operational* reality: it is reliable to the extent that it has been tested by feedback.[2]

To further his inquiry into epistemological questions and the use of concepts, Müller started editing the Karl Jaspers Forum (KJF) (http://www.kjf.ca/ ⤴) in 1997. In 1999 he became aware of radical constructivism[3] (chiefly the work of Ernst von Glasersfeld), which has many features in common with his own work on what he calls "structuring with zero-reference" or "zero-derivation" (0-D).

In this article I present, chiefly in Müller's own words, what appear to me to be his main arguments and conclusions.

2   The Achilles heel of science and philosophy

Many people believe that pre-structured option [MIR] provides an outside source of certainty. But this "implies transcending one's experience to an imagined mind-independent source. This is a form of wishful thinking: before it can provide certainty, one must first postulate the MIR-source, and then certify it as real or true by a leap of faith" (Müller, 2007a). In the words of Heinz von Foerster subsequently quoted by Müller: "Objectivity is a subject's delusion that observing can be done without him. Involving objectivity is abrogating responsibility — hence its popularity."

> [W]hat is commonly called consciousness, and specifically its center, ongoing experience, is our only entrance to ourselves and the world. This is a basic consideration for constructivism. For the present discussion, I will define "mind" or "consciousness" as identical with "presently ongoing subject-inclusive mind-nature-and-all experience" (SE), which is to varying degrees a collective experience as well. A characteristic of SE is that we are always caught in its bubble, except during unconsciousness; it is not possible to "transcend" it. All mind-nature qualities and structures, including the "self", originate (are created) and remain within SE, which is not structured except for the results of subject-inclusive operations; the resulting structures are not derived from any pre-existing inside or outside entities. (Müller, 2007b)

> This encompassing (Jaspers, 1947) or central quality of SE is a crucial point of my argument. If it is correct, it follows that objective knowledge happens within subject-inclu-

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transcendence — an existence and a consciousness in general (spirit) encompassing both subjects and objects. See Jaspers (1941).

2   At the beginning Müller's interest was centered on the mind-brain relation, but soon enough this led him to investigate the epistemological angle, whence his work branched into other fields. Even so the mind-brain relation remains for him a touchstone for the validity of epistemological views.

3   See the article "Radical Constructivism — Childhood's End" in this issue.

sive experience, and not vice versa. (Müller, 2005)

The use of ontology (the leap to MIR–belief) continues to be the conceptual Achilles heel of science and philosophy. Realists, and "hard" scientists in particular, often deny that they use metaphysics, and may be offended when it is pointed out that they do (some even become unfriendly). In recent years though they commonly use the word "ontology" as if that were the most self-evident term to employ, perhaps unaware that it is a branch of metaphysics. Conventional metaphysics thus has a comeback in unexpected places. The problem here is that an ontologist is someone who is able to find a non-existent black cat (or even two of them) in a room without light. (*ibid.*)

Müller gives the example of philosopher John Searle (2004), with whom he agrees that the traditional analysis of perception is "a disaster in the history of philosophy" (*ibid.*), but who then uses the term "ontology" without questioning it, as an aspect of "reality."

That means that he believes in MIR (in fact, he calls it "observer-independent phenomena" (p.7), a somewhat puzzling term, since in the philosophical meaning, phenomena are descriptions of the "observer's" experience, and thus cannot be "observer-independent"). Thus he practices dualism despite his statement that it is wrong... [H]e defends naïve realism, not by proving it, but by pointing to the "unintelligibility of its denial." (Müller, 2005)

Searle finishes his book by saying (p. 304) that "we do not live in... two worlds, a mental world and a physical world... Rather, there is just one world; it is the world we all live in, and we need to account for how we exist as a part of it." Müller agrees, with one qualification:

the world we live in is not discovered by us in a pre-fabricated state, but we structure it. Our possibilities of structuring are limited by the viability of the structures as determined when trying them out, that is, by feedback-in-experience, and in some areas the choices are very limited (like for persons, or gravity, or counting). Structuring mostly does not imply "make up" or "build physically," but it does always mean that all mind-and-world structures are the result of individual and collective structuring and trust, within ("given") unstructured and undivided experience. (*ibid.*)

3   The brain in the mind

The subject or self, and his/her activity, as well as the subject-object split and other dichotomies, are... structured within experience as needed, alongside other tool-structures including machines. The self may be neglected or even denied, but it is in principle always an aspect of experience and reality. It has become possible to understand much of the physiological activity that is needed for experience and mental structures to occur. But these explanations happen inside experience; they are not identical with experience, and they cannot replace it. For objectivists, this may be difficult to see: but because consciousness is encompassing, no one can leave its bubble, in order to look at it objectively, from outside. Brain function is, like other structures, formed (and to be understood) inside consciousness, not vice versa. (Müller, 2005)

The only access to (= knowledge of) brain function is through the encompassing conscious experience, inside which structures are created, from no given referents (0-D).

The experience-matrix has to be the start point for "theories of consciousness" like for everything else. That would imply circular reasoning only if consciousness were seen as an MIR–object. . . but not consciousness as encompassing, experience-as-a-whole, inside of which objective events take place. (*ibid.*)

All self-declared "scientific studies of consciousness" that I am aware of, including the detailed conceptual studies of Metzinger (2003), imply the naïve ontological S–O split, and are therefore, in my opinion, not able to deal with the mind-brain question. Chalmers (1995) had labeled it "the hard problem of consciousness" — "how physical processes in the brain give rise to conscious experience." But it is not just a hard problem; it is the wrong question and cannot be solved in principle. (*ibid.*)

Explanations can only be structures inside experience; attempts to explain experience itself imply reduction of experience to something inside experience, which is self-contradictory. (*ibid.*)

The mind does not emerge from the brain, because it encompasses (knowledge of) the brain. Everything we know of the brain originates and remains in undivided subjective individual and collective mind-and-nature-and-all experience. And so does everything else we know: feelings, self, nature, others, religion. (Müller, 2007b)

There is no brain-in-itself. When we talk of "*the brain*" we mean our *knowledge of brain structure and function* (which originates and stays inside encompassing subject-inclusive mind-and-nature experience). Thus *the brain is in the mind, the mind (individual and collective subjective experience) cannot be explained or understood in terms of brain function. . . To ask how the mind (SE) can be found in a fictitious postulated primary ontological (i.e., mind-free) reality is a non-starter. . .* The problem of the objective origin of consciousness cannot be solved, but it can be dissolved. (*ibid.*, original emphases)

4   Ontology: a working-tool of the knowledge trade

Searle (2004, p.202) makes the important point that science is defined as a method or procedure rather than by ontology, with which I agree entirely. Now if he could eliminate MIR-ontology (traditional metaphysics) altogether — it is superfluous and causes problems. Thinking involves procedures, use of mental tools, including temporary pragmatic stabilizers as needed. That is to say, ontology–metaphysics should be seen as working- (or as-if-) ontology–metaphysics. He has also shown (as others have) that machines do not (have to) understand symbols they deal with (his Chinese room argument, pp. 89ff), and again I quite agree. We, not machines, are the ones that understand symbols, including the metaphysical ones. Jaspers called them "ciphers"; we create and use them as tools: guideposts and stabilizers. (Müller, 2005)

For structuring and stability, thinking needs overall encompassing structures. However, these are not provided by ordinary experience, including perception, but rather by extrapolation from scientific theories, by intuition, or by religious revelations. (*ibid.*)

Most of us are born into one or another tradition of the many practiced religious or semi-religious creeds; thus for most people the question of choosing between them does not come up. Still, because they are arbitrary in the sense that there are so many competing offers for help with the need for structure, they need and receive social enforcement for persistence and effectiveness. In theistic religion the emphasis is on establishing the belief with help of an ontological leap to MIR–reality, and thereafter its

reinforcement by indoctrination, preaching, rituals, and punishment for disagreement. In any of these views, strong beliefs tend to cause conflict with experiences that cannot be understood within them. (*ibid.*)

Since one can be certain only to a limited degree about the reliability of structures in experience, word-concepts (or their postulated fictitious referents) may be wished to be more reliable (real or true). One may want mental structures to be guaranteed by a mind-external agency like God or Nature, although both of these are actually unifying extrapolations from structures created in experience. You feel more comfortable dealing with a pre-fabricated outside world than with only the word-concepts you trust — but the outside world is itself a word-concept, made "real" via trust... Sufficient stability is needed for successful function, but it does not require MIR–ontology. The ontological leap provides stability (particularly when the ontology is viewed as absolutely valid), but also causes problems, such as rigidity or fanaticism. One can instead use working- (or as-if-) ontology, where ontological (= metaphysical) entities are not assumed to be absolutes, but posited as working-tools. (*ibid.*)

We may have come to a point where we need to accept this conflict [the conflict between wanting certainty and the insight that none is available: that doubt is present, and actually desirable, at all times] as a fundamental condition of thinking, rather than comforting ourselves with absolute beliefs of one or another kind. (*ibid.*)

There is a difference between "structuring" and "inventing or creating or causing." This is decisive for questions such as: do we only structure the world, or do we also create it? The conflation of the two is not compatible with the 0-D-structuring view.

(i) We do not create the acoustic nerve or the planet Jupiter; there is no place for invention, since there are reliable earlier spontaneous (non-deliberate and non-verbal) subject-inclusive structures, such as visual–gestalt forms. Deliberate verbal structures are, or can be, added to them in order to include them in deliberate world-and-self-and-all structures.

(ii) But we have to invent structures where working-structures are needed or desired, but no earlier spontaneous structures are available: to create a song, to structure our identity or self (to a degree), a political constitution, or a religion, etc.

This does not imply that the former, (i), are pre-structured (ontic MIR-) objects: they require our structuring — mainly non-deliberate, but also deliberate — and can then be treated as as-if- or working–MIR (the latter, (ii), can too). All of reality is our subject-inclusive structure, within the limits of operational possibilities: the structures do not arise by themselves. But only some of it is our creation in the sense that we make it. The traditional way to distinguish between these two kinds of structure is to assume that the non-invented ones are mind-independently pre-structured. But, as just discussed, there is no need for MIR-ontology-realism; it is replaced by von Glasersfeld's criterion of the "viability" of the structured items, as per feedback during use of the structures.

To repeat: all of reality is our structure and must be able to pass the feedback test, but we invent only some of it. (Müller, 2007b)

Seen from 0-D, traditional metaphysics, such as MIR-objectivity or materialism, is in effect an incomplete (or shortcut) form of working metaphysics. For many purposes this traditional shortcut is sufficient, and more practical than explicit working metaphysics — but there needs to be an awareness that it is a shortcut and make-believe. It implies a

temporary bracketing of the subjects' operations, not mind-independence of reality. (*ibid.*)

Reality, truth, facts, and knowledge are the result of investment of trust in the qualities and structures which one uses... Belief is not enough. The structures need continuous testing by persistent doubt (skepticism) and feedback. Criteria for validity (or viability, as von Glasersfeld terms it) are their performance in ongoing and past experience, and expectations for the future (in science and in all other fields including religion). This validation process is the basis for trust in quality– and structure–aspects of experience (of self-and-world), which then replaces naïve MIR–belief (and "ontology"). (*ibid.*)

5   Inevitable ineffability

Holistic structures include the subjective center of ongoing experience, which cannot become structured; that would require an impossible objectivity and packaging of subjective experience. Positive holistic structures are consequently inevitably paradoxical or mystical, but may be adopted by means of absolute belief, in order to obtain overall meaning and stability via a leap of faith... The paradoxes may, however, prevent some people from accepting theism and other positive holistic beliefs. But constructivism can accommodate holism, and may offer a way to dissolve the paradoxes. For one, constructivism can [step back or back away from] positive holistic structures (which are put on hold). This consideration does not make mysticism rational... but it provides a rational understanding of the presence and irrational function of mysticism. Namely, that the irrationality is a consequence of the unstructured origin within which all rational thinking takes place.

And secondly, holism and the objective method can both be tools in experience with a negative center. Non-theistic (and non-positive) stability practices are used successfully in some cultures, with the help of meditation. They have an unstructured (negative) center-point such as nirvana (which is free of paradoxes). Seen from there, positive theistic structures appear as imperfect preliminary tools, a temporary convenience on the way to the goal of dealing more directly with the unstructured center. (Müller, 2007a)

Although *the encompassing matrix* can be named (as a not-structured item, within which structures are formed), *it cannot itself be encompassed*, that is, it cannot become an entity within itself. But furthermore, since the 0-D view is a negative assertion, denying pre-structured entities, it *cannot be ontologically deconstructed...* However, it can serve as fall-back position for other (i.e., positive) epistemologies, and help avoid MIR-relapses... The change from MIR-ontology to working-ontology might be seen as a sort of mid-course correction for conceptual thinking. The correction implies acknowledgment that the matrix (consciousness) cannot be a part of the ordinary physical world which is a multitude of encompassed entities (as Searle 2004, p.17, also points out). Words like "mind" or "consciousness" refer to the encompassing, and therefore to something "ineffable." (Müller, 2005, original emphases)

The many attempts to structure the whole of consciousness, e.g., "God," or "All," or sometimes "Nature" or "Universe" (i.e., in case they include the subject) are necessarily limited to mystical or paradoxical beliefs, because the encompassing cannot be encompassed by concepts. (*ibid.*)

The subjective aspect of experience (or consciousness) has "to remain empirically inscrutable"; it cannot become objective because "the reflecting self [...] becomes the governor and cannot contemplate itself from the outside" as an object (von Glasersfeld, 2001). There is no subject in exclusively objective studies. The unobservability of the subject is a fundamental fact which is in principle recognized in constructivism, but usually neglected in MIR–views. . . [But t]he aim of the objective method is to eliminate observer-bias, not the observer. (Müller, 2007a)

Acknowledgment

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