

## Prelude to the Fifth Issue

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*AntiMatters* is dedicated to issues in science and the humanities from non-materialistic perspectives. In the right view of science, there can be no conflict between science and a non-materialistic world view, not least because there is no such thing as a “scientific world view,” and in spite of the fact that “[n]aturalists like to wrap themselves in the mantle of science, as if science in some way supports, endorses, underwrites, implies, or anyway is unusually friendly to naturalism,” as Alvin Plantinga writes in his contribution to this issue.

To effectively deflate the metaphysical claims made by naturalists and materialists — assuming there is a difference between these isms — one should go back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, in which Xenophanes<sup>1</sup> wrote: “Even if a man were to represent to himself the world exactly as it is, he could not discover that this is the case.” It was then that the epistemological problem — how we acquire knowledge and how “true” our knowledge might be — was cast into a form that made it impossible to solve it.

Since then the Western world has manifested an overwhelming tendency to think of knowledge as an organism’s representation of a world that exists side by side with and independently of the representation, of consciousness, of experience. The representation might not yet be quite perfect but, in principle, it was thought to be perfectible. In any event, its goodness was supposed to depend on its degree of correspondence with the outside world. Despite an unbroken chain of skeptics, pointing out that the a priori assumption that knowledge constitutes a *description* of that which is known begs the questions of what it means to know — little has changed. The relation between knowledge and reality is still seen as a more or less picture-like (iconic) correspondence or match. Naturalism and materialism, along with many other isms, depend on this iconic conception of knowledge, and so does the carefully cultivated image of scientists and science teachers as discoverers and dispensers of ontological truth.

In his contributions to this issue, Ernst von Glasersfeld makes it abundantly clear that the relation between a cognitive organism’s representations and its real environment is not that of a *match* but only that of a *fit*. “The metaphysical realist,” he explains, “looks for knowledge that *matches* reality in the same sense as you might look for paint to match the color that is already on the wall.”

If, on the other hand, we say that something *fits*, we have in mind a different relation. A key fits if it opens the lock. The fit describes a capacity of the key, not of the lock. Thanks

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<sup>1</sup> Fragment 34, in H. Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1957.

to professional burglars, we know only too well that there are many keys that are shaped quite differently from ours but nevertheless unlock our doors. The metaphor is crude, but it serves quite well to bring into relief the difference I want to explicate. From the radical constructivist point of view, all of us — scientists, philosophers, laymen, school children, animals, indeed any kind of living organism — face our environment as the burglar faces a lock that he has to unlock in order to get at the loot. (“An Introduction to Radical Constructivism”)

We are in the position of a skipper passing in the dark of a stormy night, without navigational aids, a narrow straits not knowing its contour. If our course is one of the many possible ones that fit the coastline, then we reach the open sea without mishap but we learn nothing about the shape of the coastline. Next time we use the same course, we can expect to once again pass safely. Cognitively we are in the same boat (!): our knowledge *fits* the environment but it cannot claim to be a *match*. If, on the other hand, our course doesn't fit the coastline, then we learn something about the latter but we wreck the ship. This too reflects something of the nature of empirical knowledge: reality manifests itself exclusively where our constructions do *not* fit. Moreover, we can describe and explain the breakdown of a cognitive structure only in the very terms that we have used to build it. Does this remind anyone of Niels Bohr's unique insight into the epistemological implications of quantum mechanics? In *Atomic Theory and the Description of Nature* (p. 18, Cambridge University Press, 1934) he wrote:

Obviously, these facts not only set a limit to the *extent* of the information obtainable by measurements, but they also set a limit to the *meaning* which we may attribute to such information. We meet here in a new light the old truth that in our description of nature the purpose is not to disclose the real essence of the phenomena but only to track down, so far as it is possible, relations between the manifold aspects of our experience.

In “An Introduction to Radical Constructivism,” **Ernst von Glasersfeld** argues that once knowing is no longer understood as the search for an iconic representation of ontological reality but, instead, as a search for fitting ways of behaving and thinking, the traditional problem of epistemology disappears.

In “Facts and the Self from a Constructivist Point of View,” von Glasersfeld argues that empirical facts are constructs based on regularities in a subject's experience. They are “viable” if they maintain their usefulness and serve their purposes in the pursuit of goals. In the course of organizing and systematizing experience, the subject creates not only objects to which independent existence is attributed but also Others to whom the subject imputes such status and capabilities as are conceivable, given the subject's experience. As in the case of concepts, theories, beliefs, and other more abstract structures, the facts a subject has found to be viable gain a higher degree of viability when successful predictions can be made by imputing the use of these facts to Others. This additional viability is the constructivist's counterpart to “objectivity.”

In “Learning as Constructive Activity,” von Glasersfeld argues that knowledge is not a transferable commodity and communication is not a conveyance. Children are not repositories for adult “knowledge,” but organisms which, like all of us, are constantly trying to make sense of, to understand their experience. If we come to see knowledge and competence as products of the individual's conceptual organization of the individual's experience, the teacher's role will no longer be to dispense “truth,” but rather to

help and guide the student in the conceptual organization of certain areas of experience.

From von Glasersfeld's point of view,<sup>2</sup> "anyone who claims to have knowledge that represents the world objectively, that is, as it might be prior to our experiencing it, can justify this claim only on the basis of mystical revelation." Once we strip the sciences of their unwarranted claim to ontological truth, the empirical knowledge that remains fits snugly into many a world view that is based on the experience of mystics.

It would however be a mistake to think that there is nothing between a full-blown mystic experience and a rational construction based on sensory experience alone. The mystic senses an ineffable Ultimate Reality, a pure Being and/or Consciousness infinite and eternal, an absolute Bliss, and this he or she may perceive as aloof from the world and/or as the ground of its manifestation and/or as the true Self of all beings. The dynamic link between this Ultimate Reality and its manifestation, itself suprarational and supramental, is present everywhere, at the core of all of Nature's operations, as their secret support:

In matter it is an automatic action and effectuation of the hidden idea in things; in life its most seizable form is instinct, an instinctive, subconscious or partly subconscious knowledge and operation; in mind it reveals itself as intuition, a swift, direct and self-effective illumination of intelligence, will, sense and aesthesis.<sup>3</sup>

Cultural historian and evolutionary philosopher **Jean Gebser** may not have been a mystic, but his conception of the emerging of a new consciousness, which he realized in the winter of 1932/33 "in a flashlike intuition" and started describing in 1939, does have a powerful intuition at its core. After he had come to know the work of Sri Aurobindo, he pointed out<sup>4</sup> that his conception "resembles to a large extent the world conception of Sri Aurobindo," which was then unknown to him. He saw an explanation for this phenomenon "in the suggestion that I was included in some manner within the strong field of force as radiated by Sri Aurobindo." "Evolution of Consciousness According to Jean Gebser" introduces and summarizes Gebser's magnum opus, *The Ever-Present Origin*, largely in his own words.

Gebser's central thesis is that human consciousness has undergone a series of mutations, each of which has enriched the world by a new (qualitative rather than quantitative) dimension, and that at present it is mutating from the mental or "perspectival" structure of consciousness to the integral or "aperspectival" one — from mind to supermind, to use Sri Aurobindo's terminology. The consciousness structure preceding the mental apprehended a world of images. The mental structure was the first capable of synthesizing images into a system of self-existent objects. This three-dimensional

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<sup>2</sup> "A Constructivist's View of Learning and Teaching" ♣ in R. Duit, F. Goldberg & H. Niedderer (eds.), *Research in physics learning: Theoretical issues and empirical studies*. Proceedings of an international workshop. Kiel, Germany: IPN, pp. 29–39, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, p. 625. Puducherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Gebser, *Der unsichtbare Ursprung* (Olten: Walter, 1970); "The Invisible Origin," translated by Th. Röttgers and edited by S. Saiter, *The Journal of Conscious Evolution* 1, 2005 (no page numbers).

“coagulation” of two-dimensional images is what we call “matter.” It came into being with the mental structure, and it is bound to be transcended with the consolidation of the integral structure. Matter will “open up” and become the transparent “surface” of a four-dimensional reality, and the human self will escape from its perspectively fixed vantage point and discover its identity with the ever-present Origin.

In “Evolution vs. Naturalism: Why they are like oil and water,” **Alvin Plantinga** argues that evolutionary naturalism — the belief in the combination of naturalism and evolution — “is self-refuting, self-destructive, shoots itself in the foot.” It may be true; but it is irrational to hold it. Evolution, far from supporting naturalism, is incompatible with it; one can’t rationally believe them both.

“Following the Bread Crumbs to the End of Ultimate Meaning” is a very personal piece. Drawing from his rich experience and various other sources, **Avraham Cohen** arrives at a number of questions, rather than answers.

In December 1992, fifteen scientists and philosophers met to explore the question of an appropriate epistemology for consciousness research. Basically, the question was: How does it happen that our powerful methods of scientific enquiry appear so ill-suited to the study of consciousness? If understanding our own consciousness is so central to understanding anything else, will we not have to take this question more seriously than has been the case so far? The outcome of that meeting, presented by **Willis Harman** in “The Scientific Exploration Of Consciousness: Towards An Adequate Epistemology,” is as relevant today as it was then.

In “The Atheist Delusion: Answering Richard Dawkins,” **Greg Taylor** argues that if there is a dangerous delusion in the world, it is not so much moderate religion, as Dawkins would have it, but fundamentalism in all its forms — ideological, scientific and religious — as the imposition of dogma that brooks neither doubt nor respect for disagreement.

Synchronicity, coined by Carl Jung, is the term parapsychologists use for “meaningful coincidence.” In “Synchronicity: The Key of Destiny,” **Frank Joseph** reports that no less than 899 persons who initially booked passage for Titanic’s fateful maiden voyage eventually refused to board her because of warnings they experienced in the forms of various omens, premonitions, dreams and precognitive events. An additional 4,066 would-be passengers either missed the boat or canceled their reservations, usually under apparently normal circumstances, but sometimes through unusual coincidences that prevented them from sailing.

The first book reviewed — *What A Coincidence!: The wow! factor in synchronicity and what it means in everyday life* by Susan M. Watkins — expands on this subject. In addition, the present issue contains reviews of *The Scalpel and the Soul: Encounters with Surgery, the Supernatural, and the Healing Power of Hope* by Alan J. Hamilton, *Reinventing the Sacred: A New View of Science, Reason, and Religion* by Stuart A. Kauffman, and *Living on Purpose: Meaning, Intention, and Value* by Graham Dunstan Martin, as well as excerpts from *21 Days into the Afterlife* by Piero Calvi-Pariseti, *Gateway to the Dao-Field: Essays for the Awakening Educator* by Avraham Cohen, and *The Human Cycle: The Psychology of Social Development* by Sri Aurobindo.