

Non-dualizing from Now On?

Editorial to the Special Issue on the Non-dualizing Philosophy of Josef Mitterer

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"With the first edition of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (1781) the seeds for the ouster of metaphysics were sown, an ouster that was vigorously pushed along by logical positivism in the last century. Josef Mitterer is the proponent of a third conceptual revision that, if carried out, would thoroughly change the method and the goals of philosophical investigation."
Ernst von Glasersfeld, this issue, p. 123

The philosopher

When the Austrian philosopher Josef Mitterer handed out his dissertation *Sprache und Wirklichkeit. Eine erkenntnistheoretische Abhandlung* [Language and Reality: An Epistemological Treatise] to some colleagues for feedback in the late 1970s, the reactions varied between incomprehension, friendly rejection and a straight "he must be joking." Disappointed by some rather hostile receptions (some even called it a "danger to academic philosophy") he turned his back on academia. Mitterer followed the suggestion of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who wrote in *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, "The greeting among philosophers should be 'Take your time,'" and did not publish the book version of his dissertation until 1992, under the title *Das Jenseits der Philosophie. Wider das dualistische Erkenntnisprinzip* [The Beyond of Philosophy: Against the dualistic Principle of Cognition]. In 100 theses he developed a non-dualizing epistemology, which forgoes the categorical distinction between language and reality beyond language. This book was to become the first in a series of three. The second volume, *Die Flucht aus der Belieblichkeit* [The Escape from Arbitrariness], published in 2001, is a critical assessment of the traditional goal of philosophy, i.e.,

truth. The last volume, *Die Richtung des Denkens* [The Direction of Thinking] is in preparation and will deal with a critique of the object-orientation of epistemological thought.

Josef Mitterer was born in 1948 in the small Tyrolean village of Westendorf, Austria, which is better known for skiing and tourism. He studied psychology, sociology and philosophy in Innsbruck, Linz, and Graz, and spent some time at the London School of Economics, Heidelberg University and the Inter-university Centre Dubrovnik. In 1976 he went to study with Paul Feyerabend at the University of California at Berkeley where he continued to develop his philosophical ideas. In 1978 he obtained a doctoral degree from the University of Graz with a dissertation he wrote with Rudolf Haller, entitled *Sprache und Wirklichkeit* [Language and Reality]. After his studies – and due to the reasons mentioned above – Mitterer turned to an entirely different domain, namely tourism, and worked as a professional tour guide in Europe and Asia and later as a management consultant for tour operators in the United States and Canada. He condensed his experiences in the travel world into the essay *Der König von Frankreich lebt oder die Wirklichkeit auf Reisen* [The King of France is Alive or the Reality of Travel], which was republished as *The Reality of Travel* (cf. the contribution of Matthias Kross in this issue). Since 1990, Mitterer has been teaching philosophy at the University of Klagenfurt in southern Austria.

In 1988 Mitterer published the article *Abschied von der Wahrheit* [Farewell to Truth] in the German philosophical journal DELFIN, which was mainly a platform for constructivist thinking at that time. This publication brought Mitterer into contact with Ernst von Glasersfeld and slowly introduced non-dualistic philosophy to constructivists. Mitterer's main thesis in the paper was the idea that de-

scriptions in debate do not fail when confronted with objects, but rather fail against new descriptions. Constructivists felt addressed. But Mitterer irritated them when he included in his 1992 book a sharp criticism of the neurobiological foundations of constructivism, especially of Humberto Maturana, Francisco Varela and Gerhard Roth. Since then, the scientific community has seemed to be uncertain as to whether Mitterer should be labelled a constructivist or a critic of constructivism. In this special issue we would like to clarify this point, among others.

According to Mitterer's own philosophy, we, the editors, did not exert any pressure on the authors to streamline their contributions and terminology to a single "true" translation. Therefore the reader should not be surprised to find a variety of terms referring to Mitterer's philosophy. Should "nicht-dualisierende Rede" be translated as "non-dualizing mode of speaking," "non-dualistic way of talking," or simply as "non-dualism"? We left it to the authors to find the terminology that fits their intentions best, the intention being to honor but also critically evaluate Mitterer's philosophy across the disciplines.

The contributions

Is Josef Mitterer's non-dualizing philosophy yet another philosophical flavor, of which there are so many in the academic world? Yet another philosophical trinket that arouses the short-lived attention of some people and disappears quickly thereafter? Yet another dalliance without implications either for philosophy or for science? We are convinced of the contrary. For many years Mitterer has steadily built up a reputation as an innovative but at the same time also very careful thinker. His

claims have been discussed in various circles, but, unfortunately, this has so far happened in German- and Polish-speaking countries only. Meanwhile “take your time” has taken time and Mitterer celebrated his 60th birthday in July 2008, an opportunity we used to gather connoisseurs of his work to discuss, for the first time in the English language, his achievements and impact. The result is in no relation to the limited spread of his ideas *so far*. We have collected some 22 contributions covering a large variety of intellectual terrain and pointing out the potential impact of his philosophy *from now on*.

Reconstructing Philosophical Dualisms

In the first section three authors try to identify traces of non-dualistic thinking in the history of philosophy.

The conceptual analysis of **Ernst von Glasersfeld** scrutinizes the notion of dichotomy, which is Mitterer’s main task as well. The author discusses Ogden’s work on dichotomy and concludes with the claim that non-dualizing philosophy is an excellent example of how to counter the tradition of realism.

Christian Meierhofer aims to reproduce the development of non-dualism by drawing similarities and associations between Mitterer’s work, and cultural theories and philosophies prior to Mitterer. In particular he points out that there are some interesting analogies between Mitterer and the work of James, Rickert, Weber, Neurath, Mannheim, and Ceccato.

Peter Weibel puts Mitterer’s philosophy into the historical context of the Austrian philosophy of language around 1900 – especially that of the work of Stöhr, Wahle, Mauthner, and Wittgenstein. He gives reasons for his thesis that “Josef Mitterer took the Viennese tradition of language critique as an epistemological principle to its intellectual conclusion” and describes how the “tertium non datur” could be invalidated by non-dualism.

The Description and the Object in Non-dualizing Philosophy

In this section three authors are concerned with the key arguments of non-dualizing philosophy and its possible flaws.

Stefan Weber discusses the core arguments of non-dualism developed step by step in *The Beyond of Philosophy*: the object of description

is the description of the object *so far*. The claim of a priority of an object compared to the indication of the object is only possible *after* the indication of the object. This means that we cannot claim that there are objects beyond claims. Otherwise we get trapped in an infinite regress.

Franz Ofner starts with the observation that Mitterer has not developed a non-dualistic concept of action. He suggests that George Herbert Mead’s theory, in his opinion containing a non-dualistic nucleus, may be a way to implement this missing link.

Volker Gadenne intends to reconcile realism and constructivism and proposes a cautious or “fallibilistic” version of realism by taking constructivist criticism seriously and treating knowledge as a constructive process. He argues that non-dualism is wrong when it says that a thesis does not fail by means of the object, but by means of a new thesis. Gadenne reminds us that there is experience between a thesis and its failure.

Non-dualizing Philosophy and (Radical) Constructivism

Mitterer’s philosophy has always been said to have close ties with (radical) constructivism despite Mitterer’s attempts to keep equidistance to both realism and constructivism (cf. the brief remark in his text in this special issue). Four authors in this section explore this alleged relationship.

The section starts with one of **Josef Mitterer**’s texts, translated into English for the first time. Mitterer argues that there are more similarities than differences between realism and constructivism and that constructivism should fully abandon the notion of “reality” to become more consistent.

Siegfried J. Schmidt explores Mitterer’s criticism of dualistic elements in various forms of radical constructivism. Schmidt argues for a non-dualistic form of constructivism by drawing on Mitterer’s arguments, but developing his own terminology inspired by Hegel.

What are the implications of non-dualizing philosophy for empirical research from a constructivist perspective? **Armin Scholl** develops a striking argumentation for reconciling radical constructivism and non-dualism. He considers both to be similar with regard to the relationship between theory and empirical research.

With the help of cognitive maps **Karl H. Müller** charts various flavors of the (radical) constructivist approach and how they relate to each other, and shows the importance of Mitterer’s philosophy for radical constructivist (RC) research. He considers Mitterer’s work as a radical critique of the semantic turn. The relevance of non-dualism varies according to the use of the term “radical constructivism.” Its relevance is significant if RC is viewed as a new epistemology but left marginal if RC is a label for a group of empirical research programs.

Non-dualizing Philosophy and Actor-Network Theory

In Poland, a group of young philosophers has worked out the links between Mitterer’s philosophy and the actor-network theory (ANT) of Bruno Latour et al. Two of them present the details of their work in this section.

Krzysztof Abriszewski compares Mitterer’s non-dualizing way of speaking (NDS) with Latour’s ANT. Despite their different respective backgrounds – ANT is a continuation of social studies of science situated in the field of sociology of knowledge while NDS belongs to the domain of philosophy of language and epistemology – the author shows that there is a certain degree of convergence between them.

The paper by **Ewa Binczyk** embraces Mitterer’s criticism of dualistic ways of thinking and speaking. Starting with Rorty’s neopragmatism and the so-called strong program of sociology of knowledge – both of which are shown to entail dualistic inconsistencies – the author makes a strong case for an NDS-inspired anti-essentialism. As in Abriszewski’s paper, Latour’s constructivism is presented as a kin theory to NDS that can be fruitfully applied to empirical research programs.

Non-dualizing Philosophy in Feminism and Policy Making

What are the implications of non-dualizing philosophy for society and politics? In this section two authors elaborate on gender and political aspects.

Aleksandra Derra attends to the problem of female subjectivity. By drawing on Mitterer and Latour the author seeks to overcome essentialist ascriptions that block further progress in the feminist movement. According to the author, only in a non-dualistic ap-

proach is emancipation able to focus on the situation of women rather than getting stuck in essentialist definitions.

Mathis Danelzik addresses a so far completely neglected topic: What are the political implications of non-dualistic philosophy? The author discusses to what extent the imperative to tolerance follows from a non-dualistic framework. Finally, he sheds light on the question of power and social dynamics.

The Potential of Non-dualizing Philosophy in the Humanities

This section features the work of six authors ranging from philosophy to media theory, from pedagogics to the science of art.

Sven Grampp compares Mitterer's position with Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* on issues such as knowledge, doubt, and norms. He argues that Wittgenstein's pragmatic investigations of certainty point toward a dualistic worldview "without being a dualist." Grampp therefore remains skeptical as to whether Mitterer's view is compatible with Wittgenstein's.

The paper by **Matthias Kross** reminds us of a not well known but highly original paper by Josef Mitterer, *The Reality of Travel*. Kross' contribution links the philosopher's theories to the philosopher's life. It characterizes the role of the philosopher, and even more, the epistemologist, as a "passenger," deeply embedded in what Arnold van Gennep called "rites de passage."

Martin Staude attempts a formal-logical reconstruction of non-dualizing philosophy combined with the logic of distinction of George Spencer Brown. Furthermore he aims at linking the notion of description, central in Mitterer's work, to the sociological and semiotic notion of meaning. Finally he presents a non-dualistic interpretation of the semiotic triangle.

Theo Hug investigates the notion of truth in education. By focusing on possible translations of a central statement of Mitterer's, Hug explores the relationship between non-dualism and contemporary philosophy of education. He arrives at the conclusion that Mitterer's philosophy sets apart a new field of pedagogical discourse.

Roland Graf's contribution deals with media theory and media philosophy. For him, some media philosophers have already adopted principles of non-dualism without a

consistent framework. Therefore, Mitterer's philosophy seems appropriate to offering new insights into the way that consensus or dissent is manufactured in a world of more and more mediated descriptions.

Starting with the claim that speaking is a process of embodied experience, the objective of **Sibylle Moser** is to explore Mitterer's non-dualizing philosophy via Laurie Anderson's performance art in general, and more particularly with reference to her treatment of language as an "embodied process." Together with Mitterer, Moser challenges the traditional truth-functional views of language and thought exemplified by a work of art.

The Beyond of Non-dualizing Philosophy

In this special concluding section two leading Austrian intellectuals present their ways of talking about non-dualism: the philosopher Peter Strasser has delivered a paper that is metaphysical as well as ironical and the renowned Austrian theologian Adolf Holl talks about the "beyond of the theologians" that we never can talk about.

Peter Strasser takes the reader on a fairly satirical ride seeking similarities and differences comparing the non-dualizing philosophy of Josef Mitterer, the idealistic position of Bishop Berkeley and famous passages in the gospel according to St. John. Finally he criticizes Mitterer's position by introducing the "It" as the blind spot of non-dualism, or, as the author calls it, its "nightmare" (allusions to Sigmund Freud and Stephen King, however, are purely coincidental...).

Adolf Holl, finally, known for being a critical voice in the Catholic world, is concerned about the "beyond of the theologians," which is alluded to by Mitterer in his paper from 1988.

The impact

This special issue of *Constructivist Foundations* features 22 contributions from eight scientific disciplines: philosophy, psychology, cognitive science, sociology, media science, pedagogics, science of art, and theology. It shows that there is an enormous potential to discuss critically the non-dualistic ideas of Josef Mitterer in cultural as well as natural sciences. But it also demonstrates that the criti-

cal reception of the work of Mitterer has only just begun. So of course there are blind spots in this publication – things you can imagine today, but that have not happened so far. Two dialogues especially are desiderata:

- Non-dualizing philosophy and (quantum) physics: There are realist and constructivist interpretations of quantum effects, but so far there is no adaptation of the key arguments of non-dualism in approaching or interpreting quantum physics. What would be the role of the observer of quantum processes in the unity of object and description in non-dualism?
- Non-dualizing philosophy and the history of Austrian epistemology: Does Mitterer mark a categorical break with logical empiricism and Wittgenstein, or are there any points of reference?

So will we all be non-dualizing from now on? We strongly believe that Mitterer's work contains enough "philosophical dynamite" to shake the foundations not only of philosophical disciplines but also of the humanities, of natural sciences, and possibly beyond that: in everyday conversation situations whenever we refer to a reality or to something that is said to be happening "in fact."

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