A Peaceful Coexistence of Epistemologies
(Philosophy from the constructivist's point of view)

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ABSTRACT

The paper first follows von Foerster's account of the participatory position as an epistemological stance and it tries to explain why this is called a "position" and not "knowledge" or "theory", for example. The principal question considered is: What would philosophy look like, if we took into consideration the participatory epistemological position? While trying to answer this question, it keeps bumping into the unsurpassable boundaries dividing different systems of thought. Thus, one cannot expect the answers to be universally valid and the paper takes that into consideration. Nevertheless, von Foerster's turn from objectivity to responsibility and from analytical clarity to trust can perhaps reach beyond the epistemological barriers and speak also to those on "the other side of the epistemological abyss".

KEYWORDS

cognition, epistemology, undecidability, participatory position, constructivism

INTRODUCTION

I hate reality. But it's still the only place where I can get a decent steak.

Woody Allen

Heinz von Foerster’s legacy is not some revolutionary scientific discovery, nor a new and wholesome scientific theory. Heinz's real gift was in showing us the outlines of a new science in the making – the science of the non-trivial. He showed us that the future (of science) is not in the discovery of a "world equation" which would explain everything – to everyone. On the contrary, it will be marked by the redirection of attention from searching for objective truths to becoming aware of the individual's (observer's) interaction with the observed and the individual's attitude towards the world emerging from this awareness. Involvement of the observer would no longer be a thing shunned by scientists, rather, it will itself become the main subject of research.

We, Heinz's heirs, are left with the task to explore the innovations that this position (i.e. the participatory position) introduced into different domains of scientific and everyday life (e.g. Kordes, 2002). Of course, this is neither a simple nor a short-term project. Nevertheless, one has to start somewhere and I cannot think of a more appropriate starting point to embark on this enterprise than philosophy; philosophy being the point at which theory and man – the creator of theory ("wisdom-lover") – are most obviously interlaced and interdependent. At least it would appear to be so to me (I apologize to the more philosophically sophisticated reader for this naive standpoint).

In the paper I first follow up on von Foerster's account of the participatory position as an epistemological stance and I try to explain why this is called a "position" and not "insight" or "theory", for example. I will call the system of thought derived from this position constructivism (again according to von Foerster). The principal question considered is: What would philosophy look like, if we took in consideration the participatory epistemological position. While trying to answer this question, I keep bumping into the unsurpassable boundaries dividing different systems of thought. Thus, one cannot expect the answers to be universally valid and I try to keep this in mind at all
times. Nevertheless, I believe that von Foerster's step from *objectivity* to *responsibility* and from *analytical clarity* to *trust* (perhaps) reaches beyond the epistemological barriers and speaks also to those on "the other side of the epistemological abyss".

**THE MÜNCHHAUSEN TRILEMMA OR WHAT'S BUGGING THE PHILOSOPHERS?**

Since von Foerster is considered to be one of the forefathers of cybernetics and since, according to him, "an epistemology is, for all practical purposes, a cybernetics" (von Foerster 1974 pp. 3), it might be expected that this is the area in which Heinz's work has the greatest value for philosophy.

Ever since the antiquity, epistemologists have been desperately trying to find a piece of firm ground on which they could, once and for all, ground cognition and thus silence the sceptics. Other disciplines (scientific as well as philosophical) can afford not to think about *how* they come to know their research area. Each discipline can pass responsibility to some other, more fundamental one, and peacefully assume that somewhere "down there" everything is well sorted out and sound. Epistemologists are the only ones unable to do that, for there is nothing "down there" what they could appeal to as solid ground. The problem is that the only point in which knowledge can be grounded is knowledge itself. If a given knowledge is grounded in some other knowledge and this other knowledge is again grounded in some further knowledge and so forth, we get *regressus ad infinitum*; but if we stop at some point in this chain and designate a given cognition as the initial one, we only get "invalid, circular inference" (Ule 2001 pp. 25). Agrippa the skeptic, and, many years later, Hans Albert and Leonard Nelson, showed that any theory of cognition necessarily comes down to either *contradiction* or *circularity*, or it has to resort to dogmatic *a priori* arguments.

Hans Albert, Carl Popper's student, called this choice of possibilities the Münchhausen Trilemma, after the lying baron Münchhausen who once told the story about pulling himself (and his horse) out of a bog by his own hair. None of the described approaches is logically acceptable, but there appears to be no alternative to them. Despite this fact (or, perhaps, just because of it), the basic epistemological question about the possibility, source, and validity of knowledge is still a major issue in philosophy, no less than in the times of Plato. The approaches to answering it have since then become more diverse and the proposed answers accordingly more complex, of course, but the basic question, with virtually no exception, "remained untouched" (Glasersfeld,1984 pp. 3).

If we are to preserve the stability and continuity of our world, we are forced to find some kind of answer to the question about the nature and ground of cognition. This answer is our epistemological position. It can come either in the form of an argument about final grounds, as a skeptical doubt in the existence of anything, as a realistic appeal to "common sense", or in any other form. The answers usually come grounded with strong arguments, but they all have one thing in common: all of them are exclusive – if one is valid, another one cannot be. For more than two and a half millennia epistemologists have been persuading one another about the validity of their arguments.
VON FOERSTER'S ANSWER

Von Foerster (e.g. 1990, 1995) introduced a whole new twist into these ancient epistemological debates. He believes that the question concerning the epistemological position belongs to the set of questions, the answer to which we are free to choose. Argumentation and referring to objective facts is out of the question.

The choice of epistemological position is by no means a simple rational decision between different philosophical conceptions. It is a decision of existential importance, one which all of us have already made at some point in the past – and one which we confirm again and again, at any moment. The chosen position substantially determines the individual's cognitive habits and thus (from the constructivist point of view) also his or her world. The choice cannot be objectively tested, since the selected answer establishes the epistemological framework and this represents the foundations of the network of concepts, on the basis of which we make our decisions and argue for our choice of the answer.

This line of thought leads us into contradictory situations (as expected), pointing out the fact that we are incapable of reaching beyond our epistemological beliefs (i.e. our epistemological choice): If we chose the participatory position (constructivism), the described reasoning (about how we chose our epistemological position among several possible ones and everything that follows is derived from that) makes sense. But if we ground our thinking on the existence of an objective world, which our theories allegedly refer to and asymptotically approach (realism), then the described reasoning is invalid – as it means slipping into relativism, paradox and forbidden circularity. Epistemology cannot help us in grounding epistemological assumptions. In fact, there is absolutely nothing that could help us in grounding epistemological assumptions.

The novelty of von Foerster's hypothesis about the possible selection of the epistemological position lies in the idea of a peaceful coexistence of epistemologies. Some people "use" constructivist epistemology (von Foerster calls this kind of persons inventors), while others prefer the realistic one (the so-called discoverers). But both manage to survive, which implies that both epistemological positions are viable. To a constructivist, this fact confirms the hypothesis of epistemology being a matter of choice. But I am sure that this very same information has a completely different meaning for the realist. Thus, it would appear we are back at the start. But that must not hinder us. Von Foerster himself anticipated this problem:

"I was once asked the question, of how the inhabitants of such different worlds as I sketched them before, the inhabitants of the world they discover, and the inhabitants of a world they invent, how can they ever live together? There is no problem to answer that. The discoverers will most likely become astronomers, physicists and engineers; the inventors family therapists, poets and biologists. And for all of them living together will be no problem either, as long as the discoverers discover inventors, and the inventors invent discoverers." (von Foerster, 1995 pp.7)
PARTICIPATORY POSITION

Both, constructivism and realism are coherent systems of thought. Due to that, the question "who is right?" is in principle undecidable. There is absolutely nothing that could "force" us into accepting one or the other.

Decidable and undecidable questions
An example of a decidable question given by Heinz is: "Is the number 76534 divisible by two?" We could think of a more difficult one. Let us just recall Fermat's "Last Theorem", stating that the equation $x^n + y^n = z^n$ has no non-zero integer solutions for $x$, $y$ and $z$ when $n > 2$. It took mathematicians almost four hundred years to develop the sequence of mathematical procedures that confirm Fermat's assumption. The searching for such sequences sets the problem in the framework of logico-mathematical relations, which guarantees that we can climb from any node of this network to any other one. It might happen that we will never actually find the answer to some of the decidable questions, but we can still rest assured that the answer is somewhere in the firmly set network.

Examples of such integral networks of thought are Euclid’s *The Elements* and Russel & Whitehead’s *Principia Mathematica*. The aim of the *Principia* was to introduce a conceptual apparatus that would allow for exact deduction without ambiguities, contradictions and undecidables. But, as von Foerster reminds us, in 1931 Kurt Gödel published a paper entitled *On formally undecidable propositions in the Principia Mathematica and related systems*, demonstrating that even such carefully elaborated logical systems, as presented by Russel & Whitehead, are not undecidability-proof.

According to von Foerster, in principle undecidable questions can be found anywhere, not just in formal systems. Heinz liked to give the example of the question about the origin of the universe. He thought that this undecidability is "apparent by the many different answers that are given to this question. Some claim that the origin of the universe was a singular act of creation; others say that there was never a beginning: the universe is a perpetually self-regenerating system in an eternal dynamic equilibrium; still others insist that what appears to us now as our universe are the remnants of a "Big Bang" that occurred perhaps 10 or 20 billion years ago, whose faint echo one is supposed to "hear" over large radio antennas" (von Foerster, 1990).

Von Foerster's metaphysical postulate
According to von Foerster, there is a substantial difference between the decidable and in principle undecidable questions. He sums up this difference in his metaphysical postulate (von Foerster, 1995 pp. 6):

"Only those questions that are in principle undecidable, we can decide."

Decidable questions have already been decided by the choice of the conceptual network in which we pose them and the selection of rules, according to which we relate that which we call "question" with that which we consider to be the "answer" to it. Sometimes this works immediately, sometimes it takes a very long time, but in the end, after a sequence of necessary logical steps, we always reach an indisputable answer: a final yes or no. Therefore, we are not free to decide about decidable questions or their answers, since they have already been decided upon – we might also say answered – by
our choosing the context in which we ask them and the rules according to which we wish to receive the answers.

Von Foerster claims that it is only when deciding about in principle undecidable questions that we are really free of any bonds, even logical ones. There is no external force that could make us answer such questions one way or another. We are free – the complement of necessity is not coincidence, but choice. In von Foerster's words, "we can choose who we wish to become when we have decided on in principle undecidable questions." (von Foerster, 1995 pp. 6)

Freedom also brings responsibility for our choices, a responsibility we cannot ascribe to anybody else but ourselves. Von Foerster (1995, 6) says:

"With much ingenuity and imagination, mechanisms were contrived by which one could bypass this awesome burden. With hierarchies, entire institutions have been built where it is impossible to localize responsibility. Everyone in such a system can say: "I was told to do X.""

In his opinion, this expression substitutes: "Among the many choices I had, I decided on X."

Objectivity is the favorite means of avoiding responsibility (let us just recall the term "objective circumstances"). The necessary condition of objectivity, i.e. the claim that the properties of the observer do not affect the description of his or her observations, removes the very essence of observation, namely cognition. This way "the observer is reduced to a copying machine, and the notion of responsibility has been successfully juggled away." (von Foerster, 1995 pp. 7; italics by me)

**Am I a part of the universe?**

Hierarchy, objectivity and similar instruments are mere derivations of a decision we have made (or consented to) about a pair of in principle undecidable questions. The decisive pair is the following one (see e.g. von Foerster, 1990 pp. 3):

"Am I apart from the universe?
(That is, whenever I look, I'm looking as through a peephole upon an unfolding universe.)
Or
Am I a part of the universe?
(That is, whenever I act, I'm changing myself and the universe.)"

At this point, I will not go into the discussion of other philosophical attempts similar to von Foerster's¹ nor about whether there are other possible epistemological positions. Personally, I think there are other ones. In any case, it is obvious that this kind of decisions bring about a deep gap between the mentioned alternatives, two fundamentally different worlds. I can either see myself as the dweller of an independent

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¹ It should be mentioned that there have been several theoretical approaches which, each in its own way, preceede von Foerster's epistemological ideas. Let me just mention Gianbattista Vico, the Japanise Kyoto school, Martin Heidegger, and Gregory Bateson.
universe, whose regularities, rules and habits I am trying to discover, or as a participant of a conspiracy, whose laws, rules and habits I am inventing as I go along. As mentioned above, von Foerster talks about choosing between becoming a discoverer or an inventor.

"Whenever I speak to those who have made their decision to be either discoverers or inventors, I am impressed again and again by the fact that neither of them realizes that they have ever made that decision. Moreover, when challenged to justify their position, a conceptual framework is constructed that, it turns out, is itself the result of a decision upon an in principle undecidable question." (von Foerster, 1995 pp. 7)

This quotation reflects the recursivity of cognition. It is us and us alone who are manifested in the choice between the described questions (and in answering any undecidable question). Any attempt to justify our choice is condemned to failure, since such justification would call for the articulation of the network inside which the question becomes decidable. With this, another question springs to mind: In relation to what can one justify the network?

PHILOSOPHY FROM THE CONSTRUCTIVIST'S POINT OF VIEW

Von Foerster did not use the adjective "metaphysical" to describe his postulate just for kicks. Most of the principal philosophical questions belong to the category of undecidable questions. Once we accept this claim, our discourse becomes much more modest. The questions about substance, apriorisms, truth; the dilemmas between realism and anti-realism, epistemological questions etc., all these are undecidable questions. We are free to choose the answers to them.

Accepting von Foerster’s metaphysical postulate, philosophical discussions would go somewhere along the lines of "I decided for the following answer to this question. This fundamental decision implies that …"

Once we (be it consciously or unconsciously) have chosen the basic (axiomatic) position, we have set the foundations for our system of thought. From this point on, we are no longer free to choose the answers as we please. A given question can appear to be "fundamental" in one of the systems, while in the other one the answer to it can result from the chosen conceptual network. Just like in building mathematical systems, we proceed from a fistful of selected axioms. The procedures of reaching our epistemological conclusions are, of course, not as clear as mathematical frameworks. Hermeneutics teaches us that we are at any time unable to fully articulate the tradition and the entire context on which our system of thought is based.

"We are always within the situation, and to throw light on it is a task that is never entirely completed. This is true also of the hermeneutic situation, i.e., the situation in which we find ourselves with regard to the tradition that we are trying to understand. The illumination of this situation – effective-historical reflection – can never be completely achieved, but this is not due to a lack in the reflection, but lies in the essence of the historical being which is ours. To exist historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete." (Gadamer, 1975 pp. 269 IN: Winograd & Flores, 1986 pp.29)
But we can at least try to approach as much as possible the articulation and awareness of the decisions about undecidable questions, which we have made in the past and which now form our world.

**THE HERMENEUTIC APPROACH**

If we accept the concept of an objective world outside ourselves, we could also consent to the idea of language being a way of indicating external objects, and then we can afford to make definitions, labels. But from the point of view of the constructivist concept of the subject as a co-creator of (his or her own) world, precise definitions can sometimes even be harmful. Many times they deceive us into the illusion that we have "grasped" some notion and thus comprehended it. Clear definitions also imply that everyone *must* be able to understand the subject of discourse. Rigid definitions bring along the tacit presupposition that there is something like an "out there". Many examples can be found (especially in analytical philosophy) where clear, logically consistent sentences filled with precisely defined notions lead to utter nonsense and mostly to never-ending scholastic debates, hinting at the fact that analytical clarity is not so "clear" to everybody. If we insist on the conclusion that the observer always participates in what he or she observes, all statements (being statements made by observers) are *self-referring* and potentially paradoxical. It gets worse: not just statements concerning cognition, but also all other statements have no more firm ground than the objects of the epistemological debate. The only difference being that with other statements this is less obvious.

The hermeneutic approach characteristic of constructivism allows for a spiral approach to reaching agreement in a dialogue or operative knowledge in reading (Kordes, Jericek 2001). This last notion implies the situation when we are perhaps unable to construct a complete definition of a given notion, but we are able to handle it, use it in a meaningful way (i.e. capability of action).

According to Rorty, there is such strong consent concerning a certain part of our world that we can take it as objective and thus can afford to be "epistemological" in that area. But outside of it we must act "hermeneutically". We can afford to act epistemologically in the areas where we understand completely what is going on (i.e. where we already agreed upon a practice of discourse), while we must act hermeneutically where we do not understand what is going on and are sincere enough to admit that to ourselves. (Rorty, 1991)

Rorty says that the difference between the "hermeneutic" and the "epistemological" discourse is that the hermeneutic one does not ascribe the possibility of reaching consent to the existence of a common underlying ground or matrix, but to the discussion itself – until the discussion goes on, there is hope that the participants will somehow reach consent.

Rorty's turn to hermeneutics could also be interpreted as a turn from attempting to reach (ultimate) truth to attempting to gain knowledge. The imperfective aspect agrees to the view of cognition as an *open* process, the goal of which is not to find facts about an objective world, but viable action.
PHILOSOPHY AS TESTIFYING

As already mentioned, most philosophical strains share a common feature: all of them strive to "get to the bottom of things". It appears that all of them are based on an unconscious epistemological model, tacitly suggesting to the philosopher that there exists an objective truth acceptable to all – and that it is his or her destiny to finally expose it. This is superbly described in the introduction to the book *The Linguistic Turn*, edited by Rorty (1992 pp. 1). Let me present a somewhat longer quote to illustrate that:

"The history of philosophy is punctuated by revolts against the practices of previous philosophers and by attempts to transform philosophy into a science – a discipline in which universally recognized decision-procedures are available for testing philosophical theses. In Descartes, in Kant, in Hegel, in Husserl, in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, and again in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, one finds the same disgust at the spectacle of philosophers quarreling endlessly over the same issues. The proposed remedy for this situation typically consists in adopting a new method: for example, the method of "clear and distinct ideas" outlined in Descartes' *Regulae*, Kant's "transcendental method," Husserl's "bracketing," the early Wittgenstein's attempt to exhibit the meaninglessness of traditional philosophical theses by due attention to logical form, and the later Wittgenstein's attempt to exhibit the pointlessness of these theses by diagnosing the causes of their having been propounded. In all of these revolts, the aim of the revolutionary is to replace opinion with knowledge, and to propose as the proper meaning of "philosophy" the accomplishment of some finite task by applying a certain set of methodological directions.

In the past, every such revolution has failed, and always for the same reason. The revolutionaries were found to have presupposed, both in the criticism of their predecessors and in their directives for the future, the truth of certain substantive and controversial philosophical theses. The new method which each proposed was one which, in good conscience, could be adopted only by those who subscribed to those theses. Every philosophical rebel has tried to be "presuppositionless," but none has succeeded. This is not surprising, for it would indeed be hard to know what methods a philosopher ought to follow without knowing something about the nature of the philosopher's subject matter, and about the nature of human knowledge. to know what method to adopt, one must already have arrived at some metaphysical and some epistemological conclusions."

The never-ending philosophical striving described by Rorty reminds me of cases mentioned in the work of the family therapists Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch (1974). In the analysis of numerous cases of psychological problems of individuals and whole families, the mentioned therapists discovered that most of their clients approach their problems in ways that are not merely ineffective in reducing their problems, but actually make things worse. The most common form of such approaches is called "more of the same". It is a characteristic of this "strategy" that the involved try to solve their problems by repeating one and the same kind of solution. For example, a couple where the wife is trying to solve the problem of her husband not talking to her by asking him more and more questions, while the husband is trying to solve the problem of his wife "cross-interrogating him all the time" by talking less and less. The continuous endeavor to solve the problem is thus actually what maintains it. Even worse – the more they try to solve it, the more persistent the conflict.
The hopeless, incessant insistence of philosophers on "more of the same" has been the pain in the neck of many naturalist scientists used to pragmatically and expeditiously solving "concrete" (and of course trivial) problems. This presented a problem also to many philosophers, who passed into other disciplines because of that, like Piaget (1972), for example, or tried to modify philosophy into a more practical and functional thing. Constructivists could be said to belong to this last group, at least in part.

It is contestable whether such "renovated" philosophy, capable of handling certain issues in more pragmatic ways, could still be called philosophy at all. I don't think that many philosophers would consent. During the last two thousand years, philosophy became identified with its strategy of "more of the same", namely by trying to get to the bottom of irrational things by rational means. "True" philosophers do not try to change this method at all. This constant reformulating of the same questions, this incessant "internal dialogue" denigrates philosophy, but at the same time keeps it going. We are dealing here with the very same pattern of organization as we can observe in the research of the organization of living beings – constant search is the necessary condition for survival. Ultimate answers would be the end of philosophy itself.

What about constructivists? I will give my answer in the first person singular, even though I believe that most of constructivist thinkers would agree with the following lines: I believe that the pluralism suggested by philosophy has potentials that are lacking in exact sciences. To a constructivist, the plurality of diverse, but coexisting philosophies, suggests a plurality of diverse, but coexisting worlds. The fact that all of these worlds exist simultaneously is good news, showing us that we can coexist, regardless of our "truth".

I think that philosophers ought to give up the (platonic) idea that they are the ones who separate the "grain from the weeds", the truth from the untruth. This position has lately been ascribed mainly to analytical philosophers. Their never-ending, analytically polished debates show that the human brain is capable of constructing and also prove virtually anything (consider, for example, McTaggart's study about the non-existence of time and the innumerable futile attempts to dismiss it that have accumulated in the course of nearly a hundred years). In my opinion, the philosophers' message should be: "Let the grain and the weeds grow and then we will see which is which." Today it is much more necessary to accept such a viewpoint than to keep the rigid distinctions between truth and untruth. Mere thinking is a very bad assistance in deciding about the matters of vital importance. If we do not realize that soon, our very existence might be at stake.

ANY PHILOSOPHY MAKES SENSE, AS LONG AS IT IS EXISTENTIALLY LIABLE FOR ITS AUTHOR

Constructivists do not attempt to step out of the circle of the never-ending search for truth. We try to accept this circle, acknowledge it and take it into consideration, rather than try to overcome it. We are aware of our participation in it. The circle is about the permanent exchange between construction and stability. It consists of a creative part (in which we are free to choose) and a stable part (in which we apply the created constructs as solid foundations to build upon). We believe the concept of truth is only possible on a very limited segment of the circle (the segment that Rorty marked as the
"epistemological" one). If we linearise this part of the circle and ignore the rest, we get realism. Constructivism is therefore not the opposite of realism (which is solipsism) - it belongs to a different epistemological level. The gap dividing constructivism and realism is of the second order.

It is not the aim of constructivists to trigger a new revolution (revolutions are first-order changes!) or to show that we are right, while everybody else is wrong. How could that be, if we keep in mind von Foerster's conception of truth? (Von Foerster, similarly as Nietzsche, considered truth to be mostly a means of power.)

On the other hand, one cannot deny that constructivists are also motivated by the desire to discover the ultimate and universally valid (one could also say – true!) model of the world. That is the force that makes us endure in searching and thinking, just like everybody else. Our only advantage may be that we are aware of the "privacy", and most of all the transitoriness of our truth. Once we find truth, we do not attempt to place it on the altar of eternity.

Any philosophical theory is (or was) important to its maker. (If it is not so, if a theory is just an existentially non-liable wordplay – than it is not worth discussing at all.) To a constructivist, philosophy is something like a testimony (one might even say confession) – a personal account of the search for truth, sense or essence. This is why most of the philosophical disputes appear to me to be a waste of time and energy. From the point of view of a realistic epistemological position, based on the assumption that statements have a speaker-independent meaning, corresponding or not corresponding to objective facts, such disputes, of course, make perfect sense. But being a constructivist, I cannot agree with this position. A testimony of each individual is the best we can expect from him or her, thus it is imperative to see philosophy first as a personal declaration and only then undertake comparisons and criticism. My standpoint is best described by the story von Foerster presented in his paper Ethics and Second-Order Cybernetics (1995 pp. 7):

"I have a dear friend who grew up in Marrakech. The house of his family stood on the street that divides the Jewish and the Arabic quarter. As a boy he played with all the others, listened to what they thought and said, and learned of their fundamentally different views. When I asked him once, "Who was right?" he said, "They are both right."
"But this cannot be," I argued from an Aristotelian platform, "Only one of them can have the truth!"
"The problem is not truth," he answered, "The problem is trust."

As mentioned above, constructivism and realism are divided by the epistemological second-order gap. I demonstrated that this gap cannot be bridged by rational thought, nor can this be done by empirical evidence. Thus constructivism places itself in a paradoxical situation: on the one hand it allows everyone to choose their own viable solution of the epistemological problem, on the other, constructivists do believe that our concept (i.e. the idea that everybody is free to choose the truth) is better than other ones and that we have good arguments in favour of our claim. Von Foerster's story about the chap from Marakesh reminds us that the only solution to this paradoxical situation is to pass onto a higher order; from a rational search for the truth to a search for trust. Only at this level a peaceful coexistence of epistemologies is possible.
Once trust is reached, search for agreement, which is the essential component of the process of communication, as I have emphasized many times before, can begin. In philosophical discussions, it is most important to see whether we can agree on epistemological assumptions. If that is accomplished, we can turn from the "hermeneutic" to the "epistemological" position (according to Rorty). But to accomplish that we need dialogic activity that calls for awareness about there being two (or more) involved in the dialogue. We cannot address "everyone" from "nowhere". We must first make sure that our epistemological assumptions are in line, only then can we start exploring the network of meanings woven around these assumptions. (The major question being, how can we be sure when we have reached this point?)

Thus, we have come full-circle to von Foerster's metaphysical postulate. The "epistemological" assumptions that I am talking about are undecidable questions, the answers to which we are free to choose. As I wrote in the introduction, the construction of the entire system of thought depends on the (conscious or unconscious) choice of the answer to the basic starting point. What is true and what untrue in our world depends on the answer to the undecidable questions (in our case the question is the choice of the epistemological position).

Let me repeat the constructivist's choice of the basic epistemological question:
I am a part of the universe. When I act (including cognizing), I change myself and the universe.

Dear reader, everything I wrote is my testimony that makes sense only from the participatory epistemological position (if it makes any sense at all). A reader from the opposite side of the epistemological gap is advised to exercise trust when thinking about the text above. If nothing else, at least trust that the author is a sincere epistemological seeker and that perhaps some day he might break on through to the one ultimate and objective Truth.

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