

The Importance of Being Ernst

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I shall write about my first meeting with Ernst von Glasersfeld, and how his comments then on my doctoral study continue to help me clarify what it is I am trying to talk about; how he challenged me to pursue what has turned out to be my life's work so far; and about how these seem to me now to fit in with that constellation of ideas. For, as Samuel Beckett says:

"There are many ways of saying in vain the thing that I am trying in vain to say."

I met Ernst von Glasersfeld through the agency of Jack Lochhead. It was, as far as we can both work out, the spring of 1978. At that time I had newly graduated with my PhD in cybernetics from Brunel University. My supervisor had been Gordon Pask and my external examiner Heinz von Foerster.

Jack told me of the importance and value of Ernst's work, and invited me to present the work in my PhD at a small seminar that included both Jack and Ernst.

Before I go any further I should say something about my PhD. It consists of a strange work which is contained in a strange document, including, for instance, a summary of the whole thesis in 16 Limericks. It was rejected under its original title ("The Object of Objects, the Point of Points – or, something about Things") because, the university said, it had no library classification for "Things." It was resubmitted, otherwise unchanged, under the title "A Cybernetic Development of Theories of Epistemology and Observation, with reference to Space and Time, as seen in Architecture," a title that was accepted and which better reflected the vocabulary of my research proposal, though not the content of what actually appeared, or my sentiment! It was examined in early 1975.

The thesis concerns what I call "Objects" (with a capital initial O). Writing from the standpoint and understanding I have in 2006, Objects are structures which we might assume (design) to support the proposition (or position) that each of us sees the world differently,¹ yet, in spite of these differences, we behave as if (believe) the worlds we see are the same. Put

this way, it is clear that if we see the world differently, it is neigh impossible for us to prove the worlds we see to be the same, and this goes for all elements of these worlds. We may, and do, act on the basis that the worlds we see are the same, but to act on that basis is not to know it is so. All the elements (including these worlds and the worlds of these worlds) are my so-called Objects. In the thesis, I argued the structure and then explored it, showing how Objects supported (among other things) not only different observations (while believing the Objects observed by different observers were the same), but also important matters such as how they might support logical relationships (so green and hill could be put together to make green hill), and how such relationships might admit communication.

I remarked in the previous paragraph that I was writing from my standpoint and understanding in 2006. This is an important rider. At the time (1974), I knew why I had invented these Objects, and how to argue for them, but I was not quite sure what their purpose was or what they did. I did, of course, realise they supported difference in observations by different observers (and at different times) since that was my intention for them; but I did not understand the nature of the structures, or what they implied. To be honest, thirty years later there are still aspects of Objects that I do not understand.

One question, which I only partially understood at the time, was this: were Objects somehow real, existing in their own right in what I would now call some Mind Independent Reality – although I had no vocabulary for this at the time? I did not know. Or, to be more precise, I thought they were not, yet I spoke of them rather as if they were: I was caught in the physicality and physical realism of the science I had learnt, and the technological optimism of my childhood. And the choice of the word Object, made for good reason, unfortunately also created problems: for it seems that in general use we think, primarily, of an object as a hard, physical entity, existing in an objective frame; whereas I had used the term (and, implicitly, its various grammatical forms) pre-

cisely for all the various meanings it has in English, including some that flatly contradict others. Thus, an object is both that thing that exists independently of me, having a so-called objective existence, and an intention in doing something. If I do not like this contradiction, I can object to it, too. This, as it turned out, was exactly the question Ernst would ask me.

But at the time I wrote my PhD I did not know of Ernst's work, and, indeed, it was early days for his Radical Constructivism. Nor did I really understand the position that would lead to Heinz von Foerster's essential aphorism in which he catches the difficulty that Glasersfeld's Radical Constructivism somehow sets out to resolve, by reconstructing it. Foerster's formulation is

"Only we can decide the undecidable"

by which he means that, where a question is in principle undecidable through logical argument or such like, we are free to chose between the alternative answers, according to our personal taste, as we chose, and without there being any way of determining "objectively" which choice is correct. Indeed, the notion of correct became replaced, in von Glasersfeld's account, by the word viable.

The key question particularly concerns how we judge the status of reality – since we are needed to observe whatever may exist, in order to know it exists, and to talk about it: in Humberto Maturana's aphorism

"Everything said is said by an observer,"

to which von Foerster riposted

"Everything said is said to an observer,"

– it is impossible for us to decide whether what we observe exists apart from our observing. To claim that there is an objective universe that exists apart from our observation is not to assert a fact, but to chose one possible answer, one position, and use it as a basis for acting. Similarly, to claim that there is no objective universe is equally a choice we use as a basis for action. These choices are not conclusions of arguments in logic, and can never be resolved by exclusive choices in an either/or manner.²

(The question has been deconstructed throughout history, but almost always reassembled, normally taking an axiomatic and unarguable position rather than one logically developed – precisely because the question it poses is undecidable. The great exception may be represented by the sceptic, Phyrro, who argued that what was important was to keep doubting.)

Glaserfeld's proposal of what he calls Radical Constructivism may be seen as a renewed approach to this undecidable question (just as it may be seen as an approach to the so-called problems of linguistic relativism). It is radical in that original (root) sense that it returns to the root (the Latin root is *radox*), and examines the notion of construction anew. Glaserfeld takes Piaget's radical and revolutionary notion of the child's construction and conservation of the object seriously (he talks of this as a driving insight in the development of his thinking) and he is not swayed by the more conventional, and in my opinion compromised, type of constructivism in which it is often assumed that there is an independent, objective reality which we, though our short-comings and limitations, are unable to grasp clearly. A consequence of Piaget's argument is that it is uncertain that you and I, when we talk of an object, are talking of the same thing, or even that there is any such given thing as the object or the real world – or even you and I – out there in what we talk of and treat as a real world. For what Piaget postulates is that we must work from the experience we live in, differentiating and thus distinguishing, forming patterns out of what become distinct percepts; which, as we forge the patterns, create the concepts we then attach to our postulated objects which we use to house these concepts (deriving from experience), realising them by compressing experience.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ranulph Glanville studied architecture and electronic composition followed by cybernetics (his PhD was examined by Heinz von Foerster; his supervisor was Gordon Pask) and then human learning (PhD examined by Gerard de Zeeuw, supervisor Laurie Thomas). He has published extensively in all these fields. Glanville teaches and facilitates the development of programmes and research in Universities around the world.

A logic by which we can distinguish in the continuum of experience is described in George Spencer Brown's seminal "Laws of Form," a cult book in the late 1960s, and is captured in the name of Herbert Müller's Karl Jaspers Forum as the question of the possibility of a "Mind Independent Reality" fuelling a hot debate on the internet.

It was against such developing concepts and understandings that second order cybernetics came about in the early 1970s. This is a cybernetics that talks of the observer as in the system being observed, rather than an observer of the system. Amongst its proponents were Foerster, Humberto Maturana (and his then colleague Francisco Varela) and Gordon Pask, and it was into this cauldron of currently forming understandings that I plugged my Theory of Objects, perhaps forming the final basic building block of second order cybernetics. The gap my Objects were supposed to fill was precisely the one Piaget points to: that we each experience and thus form our percepts and concepts differently, and yet we believe that we can talk about the same thing. Foerster's examiner's report on the PhD Thesis referred to my work as the first formal system for Piaget's concepts. The question I now realise I was asking was what sort of structure would we need to develop that would allow this: and I came up with my Objects.³ Objects tell us of the sort of universe a universe that is built on difference and construction is.

But, as I wrote above, at the same time Glaserfeld was examining Piaget's concepts, and was doing so in a less instrumental way. Behind his public thinking he was, I believe, asking what Piaget's account, and the accounts of those with similar views, meant for how we understand our being in the world, even that we could believe we were in the world.

It was at this moment that our ideas were brought into the presence of each other.

The question Glaserfeld asked me at the seminar, "Are Objects somehow real, existing in their own right?" stopped me in my tracks. I had indeed talked of Objects as though they existed independently, out there in some existential real world in a version of the language of schoolboy physics (though I would have been hard pressed either to say this, or to indicate what sort of existential real world they inhabited). Yet they were intended essentially as mentalistic devices and manoeuvres that reside in and address the world of observation (and

experience), not as either physical entities or adjuncts to such entities. I realised that I had either to drop these Objects (which Ernst so objected to but which I loved) or meditate on the notion of reality that they proposed and required, to resolve the conflict between the deeper implications of the world they proposed and the habits of language I had grown up with. Over the years this is what I have done.

Heinz von Foerster asked me after he had finished examining my PhD, what I proposed doing with it. I had no idea: innocent that I was, the question had never occurred to me. He suggested I should not publish it as a big book, but should take various parts and ideas and present them, extending them as I saw fit. Ernst von Glaserfeld defined for me where, and in reference to what, I had to do this. If I have succeeded in exploring and explaining anything about the world as second order cybernetics proposes it, then it is because in large part Ernst challenged me to do so.

Thank you, Ernst, for the insight, the challenge – and the outcomes.

Notes

1. In constructivist terms, constructs the world differently. The story I tell here is, in a sense, the story of the shift in my understanding which in 1974 I expressed by "see" and would now express by "construct."
2. Some may argue that there is other evidence, but we chose which it is and how to value it. This includes such assertions as "it's inconceivable that" and "it can't be coincidence," so often used to justify our assumptions, which are assertions of a lack of imagination and an insistence upon the patterns we find reflecting an inaccessible actuality.
3. The key (and radical) concept from which the Theory of Objects grows is that, in a universe of observation, everything must be both observable and observed (this is a condition of entry into the universe). Therefore, for an Object (such as I) to enter the universe it must observe itself. It is the self observation that allows the Object to assert – if only to itself – its existence (in this universe).

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