We do not know which poison killed Cleopatra or whether she died from poison at all. But certainly something caused her death.

There is a simple way to reconcile this intuition with the criticism of the God’s Eye point of view. We do not need a global observer for all actual and possible events of all times; we may as well settle for the idea that any single event can or could or could have been observed by someone, either directly by sense experience or indirectly through some other empirical evidence. (The latter obviously needs some elaboration that cannot be made here.) In brief, instead of the global observer we may envisage a possible observer for each event.

This must not be read as a definition of truth or reality, however. If it were, we would be left with a strong form of constructivism that in the past has variously been called idealism, verificationism or even critical rationalism (Royce 1900: 266). But the assertion that Cleopatra died in 30 BC is not true because this event was, or could have been, observed; nor does the existence of the poison that allegedly caused her death depend on actual or possible knowledge of the event.

The main reason why truth cannot be defined as actual or possible observation is that counterfactual conditions of epistemic justification cannot be defined in terms of justification. For example, we may say that a suitably positioned observer could have observed that Cleopatra was bitten by a snake. The meaning of “suitable position” is something like “close enough to see the event clearly,” which denotes a real spatial relation. A person standing in this relation to an event is able to make a reliable observation. Thus, talking about observation presupposes talking about reality.

But why then talk about observation anyway? Why not go back to the realist standpoint and abandon observation or, for that matter, epistemic justification altogether? The sentence “Cleopatra was bitten by a snake” is true if the snake bite happened in 30 BC. If it is true, it is true because this particular event existed. Why emphasize that it could have been observed by someone? Why demand possible observation?

The answer pertains to understanding, a notion that Gasparyan rightly ties to local observation in §§46–49. We understand what it means to say that Cleopatra was bitten by a snake if we have an idea of “Cleopatra,” “snake” and “bite,” and of what it means to observe their correlation in a single event. Technically speaking, we must have a grasp of justification conditions.

In philosophical semantics, there are those who think that the meaning of an assertion is given by its truth conditions, and others who think that justification conditions play that role. Both views are unnecessarily one-sided; there is no reason why we should not accept both kinds of conditions as ingredients of meaning.

In order to understand the sentence “Cleopatra was bitten by a snake” you need to know its truth conditions. This sentence is true if Cleopatra was bitten by a snake; if the snake’s teeth did cut Cleopatra’s skin; if this was the cause of her death; and so on. But you also need to know under what conditions the belief that Cleopatra was bitten by a snake is or would be justified, conditions that include different sorts of observations.

This two-sidedness of meaning, I think, is the ultimate reason why we cannot do without the notion of observation or, generally speaking, epistemic justification. Even though global observation is to be abandoned, as Gasparyan has convincingly shown, there is still room for possible local observations made by someone.
Constructivism

Transcending Illusions and Illusions of Transcendence

Vincent Kenny

so on – and does not appeal to notions such as "confirmation" since no such luxury is available to a radical constructivist.

2 In my commentary I emphasize a few core ideas from the RC of Ernst von Glasersfeld, restate some of their implications, and show how these implications would rule out any possibility of the "global observer" or "omniscient interpreter" discussed in Diana Gasparyan's target article.

3 Concisely put, RC states that there are strict limits regarding what one can claim to "know" about what we call the "outside world."

- We cannot claim to know anything about some "external world" ("reality") since all we can have access to is our own embodied experience, and hence the "outside world" is for us a "black box."
- Moreover, even our own experience remains a "black box" to "ourself-as-observer" because we must always construct some sense out of our experiencing in order to make any kind of statement about it.

The parallactic gaps

4 RC describes a range of critical uncertainties between the individual system and the world, and, also, between a variety of intrapersonal experiential processes. The incommensurability of these various phenomena constitutes unbridgeable "gaps" that in turn generate the condition of "groundlessness" on the outside and "selflessness" on the inside.

5 The argument here arises largely from Immanuel Kant's observations about the illusions we create of there being "connectivity" between different phenomena that exist at entirely different levels. We generate what Kant called a "transcendental illusion" (Kant 1905: 247), where we have the tendency to confound our "subjective necessity" to perceive a connection between elements with some "objective necessity" of the objects we are describing (ibid: 248).

In other words, our reason is characterized by the unique error of ignoring the "subjective origins" of our construals and by taking these construals as if they were "objective" features.

6 There are levels that are different levels simply because they can never "meet" one another. They are "mutually untranslatable" or are "not collapsable" or reducible one to the other. The illusion that we have levels that make a connection with one another arises because we ignore the subjective activity of the observer whose operations of distinctions create the illusion of a "connection." Slavoj Žižek (2005) describes this activity of the observer as a "parallax view," where by continually shifting perspective between two points, one generates the Kantian transcendental illusion or fallacy of being able to employ the same language for mutually incompatible events.

7 Constructivists will be more familiar than familiar with the observation that the "word" is not the "object" (that the word is describing) and, more generally, that the "map" is not the "territory." Furthermore, George Kelly took pains to repeat that the "word label" being used was not the "construct discrimination" that one makes (Kelly 1969: 87). Similarly, many authors such as Roger Penrose (1990) have emphasized the gap between "words" and what may be going on "in our thoughts," the gap between "thinking" and "talking about such thinking."

Unknowability as groundlessness

8 Constructivism induces states of doubt because of how it describes our relationship to what is called "reality." Strict limits to knowing make it necessary to treat one's knowledge as propositional or hypothetical, and to be constantly aware that each part of our "knowing" has a "sell-by date" stamped on it. Sooner or later, whatever we believe we know will be redundant, irrelevant, or no longer useful for anything and will have to be thrown away.

9 Here we have the dilemma of "groundlessness" of the observer, that is, the observer has no "solid ground" to stand on, and no direct access to independently existing objects that may tell him or her when his observations are in line with the "real."

10 Constructivism emphasizes that just because we do "work," it does not mean that we have grasped some essential fact or objective truth about some independent reality.

11 The radical constructivism of von Glasersfeld tells us that we do have to doubt our "senses" when instead they seem to tell us what is "staring us in the face," or what is "obvious," or what is "right under our noses," or "as plain as day." These and many other commonly used phrases make a reference to the realist notion of "direct perception," that we see things directly "as they are in themselves," as "independently existing objects or events." The certainty that is removed here is that given by the illusion of directly knowing "reality" and of having a "handle" on reality.

We can neither "know" the other nor share "meaning"

12 We often try to reassure people by telling them that their "fears are groundless," but what constructivism tells us is that it is not only our "fears" that are "groundless" but that everything in our experiential world remains "groundless" because we have no direct access to what we call the "outside world." We cannot "know" it.

13 As part of the incommensurability of different levels within this unknowable external world, it is also the case, by implication, that (i) we cannot "know" the others in this world, (ii) we cannot "share" experience, and (iii) we cannot "understand" the other or be understood by them.

"We have no more access to an ontological reality than to the thoughts of another person. All we have to go on is our experience. In both cases we interpret what we see, hear, and feel, and we construct models that should enable us to make predictions." (Glaserfeld 1996: 496)

14 RC replaces the standard notion of "shared meaning" with the idea of a constructed consensual domain of workable joint anticipations. Von Glasersfeld's idea of creating an "adaptive fit" with others does not imply that we have created a "shared meaning" with them. It means rather that we have evolved a working compatibility between our own idiosyncratic meaning constructions and those of the other person:

"There can no longer be the claim that the meanings of words must be shared by the users of a language because these meanings are derived from fixed, external entities. Instead, here once more, there is at best a relation of fit. That is to say, we tend to conclude that what we have said is understood by the listener if the way he or she reacts to our utterance seems compatible with our theoretical framework."

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expectations. However, as we discover only too often, what seemed understanding at first, disintegrates when a seemingly unproblematic utterance leads to quite unexpected reactions in a new situation.\(^{(29)}\) (Glasersfeld 1988: 89).

\(^{15}\) Since we cannot “know” the ideas of another person, we cannot “share” experience with another, and consequently we cannot “understand” another person nor can we be “understood” by them. We may begin to ask what is it that happens in our networks of conversations if the best we can manage with others is to stabilize a certain degree of compatibility of expectations and coordinations of actions.

\(^{16}\) For the psychotherapist, the unease of this view often arrives with the realization that they are not describing their patients’ problematic experiences, nor are they describing the differential diagnosis of the presenting problems, nor other features of the clinical dilemmas presented in their office. Instead, from the RC point of view, the most that any therapist can do is to construe artificiately their own experiences of the patients’ interactions with them.

**Unknownability as selflessness: Experiential eviction**

\(^{17}\) Following the constructivist outlook, we can find no certainties – neither on the outside nor in the inside worlds. While groundlessness threatens us on the “outside” because we cannot “know it,” selflessness threatens us on the inside because neither there can we come to “know” even the self.

\(^{18}\) Experiential eviction arises due to at least three impossibilities: (i) we do not have direct access to self-experience; (ii) we do not have the possibility of “self” observation; (iii) we cannot find a “self” at home when we go looking.

We do not have direct access to self-experience

\(^{19}\) As we have seen above, we lose certainty by realizing that the senses do not give a direct account of “reality.” So the senses themselves become “circumscribed” in what they “recount” in “looking out at the world.” Equally problematic is our notion of “experience,” which we cannot take as a “given” either since RC shows that we cannot “know” even our own experience directly. We do not have any privileged access to our own inner world. We must always “make something out of it” via our constructing system. This is because we must always construct our experience of events in order to produce what von Glasersfeld calls “experiential reality.” From my point of view, this selective “experiential reality” necessarily leaves out all the rest of “experience” that may have occurred during the event.

\(^{20}\) Selflessness impacts in several potentially disturbing ways on the person in the form of (a) “self-doubt” as a result of putting the self “in parenthesis.” (b) RC also leads to the view that there is no “self” in the way that people usually think, and that (c) it is impossible to observe the self.

**We do not have the possibility of “self” observation**

\(^{21}\) Von Glasersfeld and Francisco Varela (1987) elaborate the problem of self-referentiality, showing that it is an impossible task. They problematize the notion of “knowing ourselves” by raising doubts about the dominant models of “consciousness,” memory,” and “intelligence” and therefore of our own relationship to ourselves – whatever that self may be. In their article they point out the impossibility of self-observation elaborating Humberto Maturana’s principle that “anything said is said by an observer” into the affirmation that “anything known is known by an expericer.” Among the implications of this affirmation are:

\(^{22}\) (1) that we can know ourselves only to the extent to which we experience ourselves, and (2) that the self we do experience and incorporate into our cognitive structures, by that very act of construction, ceases to be the self that does the experiencing.\(^{(30)}\) (Glasersfeld & Varela 1987: 40)

\(^{23}\) So, far from being able to implicate a handy “external global observer,” we cannot even establish a satisfactory grip on some putative local “internal self-observer.”

We cannot find a “self” at home when we go looking

\(^{24}\) Moreover, when as neuropsychologists we go looking for our “self-as-observer” (in order to “observe it and how it operates”), we can find no-one at home. So selflessness means that we cannot locate anything like a centralized controlling “observer” who can make observations and constructions of its own experiencing.

\(^{25}\) Both groundlessness and selflessness show the need from an RC point of view to reconstruct our handy but misleading notions about what is “inside” and what is “outside,” and what might be the “boundary” between some “inside” and some “outside” domains.

**Conclusion**

\(^{26}\) While talking creates the impression that the speaker (i) is revealing their thinking, (ii) has reflected and analyzed and understood the phenomena in question, (iii) is “speaking the same language” as the listener, (iv) is able to “share” their own experiences with the listener, and (v) “knows” or has understood something, RC reveals that all of these assumptions are mere illusions. Rather, talking is merely a way of attempting to “fill the impossible gap” that yawns between the experience of selflessness and groundlessness.

\(^{27}\) RC not only puts “objectivity in parenthesis” (Maturana 1988), that is, puts in doubt the “it” that we are construing, but it also puts in doubt the “knowing” that is going on about this “it” and, further, puts in doubt the “who” it is that is doing this knowing. In other words, constructivism also puts “subjectivity in parenthesis.” The struggle to position a “global observer” is dissolved by radicalising radical constructivism to emphasise that from the point of view of organisational closure (Maturana 1988), there is no “outside.” All that happens within the operations of the recursive relations of constitution in the network is the production of those same processes that constitute the autonomous system. There is nothing that refers to an “outside world” or to a “medium.” As Maturana often repeats, at the moment of perceiving it is not possible to distinguish a hallucination from a perception. More than thirty years ago Varela had already characterised the immune system as a network of cellular interactions whose events are inward-focused rather than outward. This leads to a very different understanding of the relationship of “inside” to “outside.”

\(^{28}\) [T]he organism perceives the penetration of foreign materials not by recognizing them as...
Cognitive Evolution and the Idea of a Global Observer

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> Upshot • I propose a simple way of representing the idea of global observation, broadly understood: a pair composed of an observer and the observer's location (or viewpoint). Given this, the concept of global observation can have at least three different meanings: the idea of a privileged viewpoint (God's eye); the idea of occupying all possible viewpoints at once; the idea of a view from nowhere (no viewpoint). According to the hypothesis proposed in this article, these are all consecutive stages in the evolution of cognition. I elaborate in detail on the final stage, which I call "theory of being."

1. In my opinion, Diana Gasparyan plausibly proves the contradiction inherent in the idea of mind-independent, objective and ready-made reality, conceived of as a kind of distinct kingdom; and of the idea of a perfect description of this kingdom, made by some but not all minds – a description that mysteriously oversteps the limits, perspective-dependency, finiteness and locality of mind as such. However, together with an affirmation of Gasparyan's position, I would like to formulate some critical remarks and a hypothesis closely related to the problem of the global observer – however, elucidating it from a somewhat different angle.

2. Let me start with some relative doubt as to whether the examples of global-observer-involving thinking given by Gasparyan justify the introduction of a single collective term; in other words – whether they make up a more or less unified collection. For Berkeley, the global observer is a really existing, full-blooded being. On the other hand, for Laplace and Donald Davidson, it is a theoretical fiction. Moreover, in Hilary Putnam's argument there is in fact no observer, but rather a viewpoint of reality. If a metaphysical realist claims that a fully adequate description of objective, external reality is possible (provided, as it is mostly believed today, exclusively by science), says Putnam, then there must exist a kind of God's eye viewpoint of reality, free of all the limitations characteristic of, for instance, the folk conceptual schemata used by people. However, the scientific view is not a good candidate in this context, since there might well be more than a single scientific description of the same phenomenon, while the language and tools of science are also perspective-dependent and changeable over time. If so, Putnam concludes, we can forget about occupying the God's eye position: all descriptions of the world are internal to the world; they are all, as Gasparyan would say, local. Admittedly, if the point in question is to be a viewpoint, then it must be conceived of as a place for a possible observer, not for a desk or tree. Note, however, that still, in the case of God's eye, the viewpoint is of a special kind, not an observer. In other words, there is a subtle difference between two ideas – the idea of a special observer, who is capable of somewhat extraordinary cognition, and the idea of a special viewpoint. Hence the question is: What makes global observation global – the capacities of the global observer, who can stand everywhere or who is capable, paradoxically, of standing nowhere, or the special features of the viewpoint, which might be occupied by an ordinary as well as an extraordinary observer; or both these things.

3. In this context I would like to stress the fact that there are at least three possible ways in which the global observer could be defined:

(GO1) A global observer is an observer capable of occupying all possible viewpoints at once.
(GO2) A global observer is an observer occupying some special, i.e., privileged viewpoint that allows him to see reality as it is in itself.
(GO3) A global observer is, paradoxically, an observer capable of occupying no viewpoint at all; this is the idea of someone having a view from nowhere, as Thomas Nagel (1989) brilliantly captured it.

4. Now, it is not entirely clear which characteristics Gasparyan has in mind. If she thinks that they are all equivalent, then it is up to her to prove it. Equivalence is a promising perspective, nevertheless it should be explicitly demonstrated. It seems that Gasparyan's intentions are best expressed by (GO3), but at the same time she refers to Putnam, whose critical ideas of the God-eye's viewpoint are rather close to (GO2). Moreover, she refers to (GO1) without providing any comment on the difference between (GO1) and (GO3). We read that the global observer is "a collective witness because it is expected to possess knowledge of every account of the incident any possible witness, who saw it from a different angle and point of view, can produce" ($26).

5. As for the second of my remarks, Gasparyan affirms the existence of a local observer or even epistemic locality (thus

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