Non-dualism: A New Understanding of Language

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Introduction

Non-dualism, as developed by philosopher Josef Mitterer, is an attempt to use and understand language in a novel way. In 2008, Mitterer's central ideas were for the first time internationally and interdisciplinarily discussed in the special issue of Constructivist Foundations entitled "The Non-dualizing Philosophy of Josef Mitterer" (Riegler & Weber 2008). With this second special issue on non-dualist thinking, we give a further voice to scientists experimenting with Mitterer's ideas in areas ranging from historiography to PR theory, from feminism to economics.

For Mitterer, dualism – our traditional way of thinking – is just an argumentation technique based on the use of dichotomic distinctions such as language and (extralinguistic) reality or descriptions and objects (categorically different from their descriptions). These dichotomies are introduced into our discourse whenever conflicts arise; they lead to the perennial problems of philosophy such as the problems of truth, reference, and reality.

Mitterer's non-dualism tries to operate without these distinctions. He criticizes the dualistic "paradigma" of philosophy from within a non-dualistic argumentation that neither presupposes nor creates a beyond for regulating and directing discourse (see Mitterer 1992).

At the core of Mitterer's philosophy, we find his proposal: An object relates to a description of the object like a description so far to a description from now on. Every description changes the object into a new object for further descriptions.

In traditional thinking, the description of an object is, for example, the indication of at least one property the object has. If philosophers reflect on the table (what else!), the proposition "The table is wooden" is a description of the object. Dualist traditional thinking usually does not reflect on the question of whether "table" itself has already been a description, and, if so, a description of what? Does an infinite regress arise here (see Weber's paper in this issue), in analogy to the infinite regress of definitions? Or is it rather a circle, and if so, maybe a vicious circle?

We cannot get out of language when indicating the "other side" of language (or descriptions) – for example, the real thing or the not-yet described object. This is where Mitterer's philosophy starts. And it introduces a new notation, leaving the categorical distinction of object language and metalanguage behind. In non-dualism, any object is nothing other than the already executed description. This description is marked with execution marks (…/…, Mitterer's invention) instead of classical quotation marks ("..."). The next-to-last sentence, for example, is in Mitterer's sense a continuation, a description from now on, of the already given or executed description /any object/. Some of our authors experiment with this notation proposal and show some difficulties in utilizing it and in maintaining it in a consistent way.

Can such seemingly counterintuitive ideas expose the culprit behind philosophy's hard problems? Is Mitterer's view – meticulously formulated in two books so far (Mitterer 1992, 2001) – the culmination of a development that saw assertions such as Nelson Goodman's "We are confined to ways of describing whatever is described. Our universe, so to speak, consists of these ways rather than of a world or of worlds" (Goodman 1978: 3) and Humberto Maturana's "Objects do not pre-exist language" (Maturana 1988: 8.ii.b)?

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Ernst von Glasersfeld referred to Mitterer’s non-dualism as “a third conceptual revision” in philosophy (after ousting ontology and metaphysics) that, “if carried out, would thoroughly change the method and the goals of philosophical investigation.” (Glasersfeld 2008: 123)

An example: The ongoing philosophical puzzle between world and language

Let us consider the statement “The universe is about 14 billion years old.” As long as we continue just describing the universe and not the language we use for describing it, no major problems of philosophy of language arise. But what happens if we claim: “The universe already existed before X already existed was ever said,” or “The universe is much older than the word ‘universe’”? In these sentences, object language and metalanguage seem to mix, but in the strict (dualist!) sense they must be part of metalanguage. But then it follows that we can claim “The universe is much older than the word ‘universe’.” In these sentences, object language and metalanguage seem to mix, but in the strict (dualist!) sense they must be part of metalanguage. But then it follows that we can claim “The universe is much older than the word ‘universe’.” In these sentences, object language and metalanguage seem to mix, but in the strict (dualist!) sense they must be part of metalanguage. But then it follows that we can claim “The universe is much older than the word ‘universe’.”

Consider the following positions of philosophy of language: “Language is a phenomenon categorically distinct from the material world,” or “Language is an intrinsic part of our empirical reality.” For non-dualism, these descriptions are nothing other than possible continuations of the already executed description /language/. And this is also valid for any proposition on the priority of the world compared to (the emergence of human) language: “The world is much older than human language” is a continuation of the description /world/.

A word of caution: non-dualism is an attempt at a new way of using and understanding language rather than any “proven” philosophical position. Non-dualism tries to avoid speaking “about” extralinguistic objects of reference or meaning in the usual semantic sense; this is another important point for us.

Purpose of this issue

Given the innovative character of Mitterer’s theory, this special issue aims at exploring the potential of this possible “third conceptual revision” in von Glasersfeld’s sense. It asks how Mitterer’s way of thinking is related to current debates in philosophy in particular and the humanities in general.

One central question was: Which philosophers maintain significant positions comparable to Mitterer’s in at least some aspects, and how do they relate to him? We thought of the inferentialistic non-dualistic theory of Brandom, and the already mentioned reflections on descriptions by Goodman or on “languageing” by Maturana. To our delight, authors came up with a series of additional thinkers who seem to have certain ties with Mitterer: Alfred North Whitehead, George Herbert Mead, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Richard Rorty, Judith Butler, and George Spencer-Brown.

Further questions we posed to the authors included:

- Does Mitterer’s non-dualism argue beyond the distinction between object language and metalanguage? Or is the distinction between object language and metalanguage a useful tool for criticizing non-dualism?
- When introducing the distinction between language and objects categorically different from language, does dualism lead to an infinite regress (as Mitterer tried to show) that can be avoided by non-dualism?
- How does Mitterer’s non-dualism relate to conceptions of language or “languageing” in (radical) constructivism (especially Maturana, von Glasersfeld, Schmidt, and von Foerster)? Or is non-dualism rather a “third philosophy” beyond realism and constructivism?
- What is the relation between non-dualism and neo-pragmatism?
- How does Mitterer’s understanding of “interpretation” change the way we conceptualize the understanding of texts?
- What role can Mitterer’s non-dualism play in the humanities and in particular in media philosophy (e.g., Schmidt, Weber)?
- Does Mitterer’s non-dualistic way of thinking change the logic of empirical investigations?
- Not all these complex questions were answered by our authors, and we see many more aspects for future research.

In the next section, we provide an overview of the accepted papers arranged in four groups: “Exploring Mitterer’s theory,” “Comparing Mitterer with other philosophers and theorists,” “New applications of non-dualism,” and “Critical papers.”
Contributors to this issue

So far, Mitterer’s books have not been translated into English and there are only a few of his papers available in the English language. In this issue, we present another translation, “On interpretation,” which is published here for the first time and precedes the submitted contributions in this issue. In it, Joseph Mitterer deals with the question of how interpretations of texts relate to each other and whether it is possible to distinguish between text and interpretation.

Most of the following submitted contributions either deal with certain aspects of non-dualism or link it with other philosophies. However, there are also critical papers that challenge its claims.

Exploring Mitterer’s theory

Stefan Weber explores the infinite regress allegations against dualism as raised by Mitterer in his main book The Beyond of Philosophy. Weber tries to answer the following questions: Does the dualist distinction between the not-yet described object and the description of the object lead to an infinite regress and, if so, is it a benign or a vicious one? Current literature on infinite regress arguments does not, as expected, discuss Mitterer’s alleged regresses at all. One possibility is to show that Mitterer failed to establish an infinite regress argument. Another interpretation is a benign regress because the argument would not lead to a contradiction at any stage. Only if the regress can be seen as vicious, do serious problems for dualism arise – and the need for a non-dualist alternative seems plausible. Otherwise, non-dualism would be nothing more than a “thought experiment.”

Katharina Neges seeks to answer a central question often asked by dualist thinkers: Does non-dualism deny the existence of material objects? It is, by the way, the same question also often heard from realists discussing constructivist positions: Does constructivism deny the existence of a real world, of things-as-such? Neges gives an unusual answer. She argues that the question itself operates with dualist distinctions not presupposed by non-dualists. So non-dualists could leave that question behind “in a relaxed manner,” as she proposes.

The aim of Franz Ofner’s paper is to develop a theory of science that is compatible with Mitterer’s non-dualism. According to the author, the main problem is that the non-dualist deals with descriptions as results of inquiries but has to understand an inquiry itself as not categorically different from descriptions. Is this a causal paradox? Ofner’s solution comes from George Herbert Mead’s theory of action and communication, which allows for connecting describing and inquiring non-dualistically.

Marzenna Cyzman’s contribution focuses on the relation of fiction/non-fiction. She proposes Mitterer’s non-dualism as a new kind of description of literary texts. In particular, Cyzman claims that the “ontologizing” or “textualizing type” of literary discourse is the core of a type of dualistic epistemology, which she calls the “towards-object epistemology,” and that in this framework it is the text that verifies its fictionality or non-fictionality. Cyzman offers an alternative approach and concludes that Mitterer’s philosophy must be considered as the foundation of a radical non-essentialistic way of thinking about literature.

Comparing Mitterer with other philosophers and theorists

In his paper, Martin G. Weiss shows that the anti-essentialist, anti-foundational, constructivist approach of Judith Butler can help to explain and enrich Mitterer’s view. By applying a comparative analysis of the core concepts of Mitterer’s and Butler’s work, the author claims that Mitterer’s critique of the analytic and constructivist (!) philosophies for their blind adoption of a dualistic epistemology based on an ontological difference between the world and the words can be solved by Butler’s concept of culturally inherited linguistic practices.

Carsten Ochs’s paper aims at comparing Mitterer’s non-dualistic epistemology with Alfred North Whitehead’s process philosophy. The author claims that Whitehead offers an even better background for getting beyond dualism than Mitterer. Using a so-called “reality check,” the author then constructs a daily situation (two individuals entering a room and observing a table) as a check for both positions, Mitterer’s and Whitehead’s. Ochs goes on to reconstruct Whitehead’s philosophy and to show how it can be understood non-dualistically.

In her paper, Patricia Ene shows some similarities between Mitterer’s notion of descriptions and George Spencer-Brown’s notion of the form of a distinction. Her suggestion is the expansion of Mitterer’s focus using Spencer-Brown’s more general and abstract theory of distinctions in order to apply non-dualism also to fields outside of language, such as empirical investigations. Ene also argues that Mitterer’s alleged infinite regresses are “self-made” because they can only be observed from the viewpoint of non-dualism. Her final claim is that dualistic and non-dualistic approaches are both argumentation techniques.

In his paper, Thomas Himmelfriendpointner compares Mitterer with Ludwig Wittgenstein and Richard Rorty. For Himmelfriendpointner, Wittgenstein, Rorty, and Mitterer developed their respective positions from a similar sense of discomfort with traditional philosophy. The crucial difference is, however, that Mitterer’s non-dualism is no longer occupied with the difficulties of epistemological problems but seeks to overcome the problems arising from the belief in the possibility of an epistemology. In particular, Himmelfriendpointner claims that the difference between seeing and seeing-as (“aspectsual vision”), as introduced by Wittgenstein, is still a dualizing perspective, while Mitterer’s view is more radical.

New applications of non-dualism

Bernhard H. Vollmar claims that the economic sciences would profit from a non-dualistic perspective. Vollmar’s main argument is to use Mitterer’s approach to ask about the role of language and communication in economic theory. As such, the author provides new insights in the process-character of economy.

Olaf Hoffjann examines the epistemological foundations of public relations communication in terms of a comparison of realist, constructivist, and non-dualist epistemologies. He argues in favor of a non-dualist account because both the realist and the constructivist paradigm either fall into epistemological traps or do not even tackle some of the relevant questions such as how and why PR descriptions fail, what PR can do so that its descriptions are believed, and

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how trend-observations can be explained in a plausible manner. As such, for Hoffjann, Mitterer’s non-dualism is a third philosophy beyond realism and constructivism.

In his contribution, Achim Landwehr opens up a discussion between Mitterer’s philosophy and *historiographical theory*, and asks whether non-dualism is able to show a way out of the opposition of fact and fiction. Since non-dualism favors relationism, it shows a way to research the many entanglements and complexities between past realities and their descriptions. Therefore the alternative way of writing history means a history of realities.

Critical papers

Alan G. Gross recognizes a resemblance between his own earlier work, mostly in his book *The Rhetorics of Science*, and Mitterer’s non-dualism as both advocate a method of analysis as distinct from a metaphysical position. However, Gross casts doubt on whether there is only the world of discourse (Mitterer’s claim) or whether there is a sense in which some facts and some theories are beyond arguments. By referring to examples from science, philosophy, and literary criticism, he arrives at the conclusion that it is not possible to argue against certain facts and against progress. The same holds for philosophy and literature. Some claims about science also appear to be inconsistent with Mitterer’s non-dualism, which considers validity claims to be limited to interpretations. Peter Kügler’s paper argues that because of its lack of a clear and convincing semantics, Mitterer’s non-dualism is inconclusive. This can be seen, in particular, when compared to a specific version of pragmatic semantics, which the author distills from Wittgenstein’s “meaning is use” approach. Defending conceptual relativism, Kügler finds Mitterer’s critique of conceptual relativism incorrect and implausible.

Michael Dellwing argues that the activity of anti- or non-dualist philosophers includes some contradictions. Non-dualists attack the practice of dualistic discourse but at the same time they join in with it. They still do not change the practices of philosophy, as they are written by and for philosophers contemplating disembodied situations. So to be genuinely committed, non-dualists should consequently end doing philosophy.

Conclusion

Does non-dualism mark the end of philosophy or rather the beginning of something completely new? The “third conceptual revision” would deprive us of a familiar and immensely comfortable entity: the world (or even worlds?) out there different from human linguistic thinking about it. After the deconstruction of any “spiritual level” (god, gods, ghosts, and so on) and of any metaphysical assumption (such as the thing-in-itself, the untouched, or the unknowable reality “behind” or before all constructions), Mitterer intends to say farewell to the flow of things, to the nature out there in its colors and forms as existing independent and categorically different from our linguistic activities. Is this a philosophical revolution or – if not – an epistemological cul-de-sac (“language solipsism” or “description monism” are just two examples of labels from opponents)? We have no doubt that Mitterer’s philosophy is the “linguistic turn” taken literally. We are confident that the contributions to this special issue will shed light on at least some of these aspects.

References


