

the intermediate observations, also presents a problem (Luhmann 1995). According to Luhmann, “the statement ‘God is dead’” implies that it is impossible to identify the end observer” (Luhmann 2000: 87).

«56» Yet then the testimony of the global observer would turn out to be deprived of its desired effect. An appeal to the global observer as a guarantor of truth would then possibly not yield the expected representation about the actual state of affairs.

«57» Meanwhile, the paradox from which it is so extremely complicated to escape would most likely be that we find it difficult to imagine truth without a global observer, yet we also find it difficult to imagine a global observer. In a certain sense, imagining truth in the way to which we are accustomed will not work if we do not introduce the experience of belief into the existence of a global observer.

«58» Yet another, perhaps more practical conclusion from the above – and a way

out of “a dead-end street” – could be contained in the following statement. To go around paradoxes it would make sense to discuss only local observations, which are limited to mutual observation or introspections (Foerster 1981b; Luhmann 1990), and to not assume the existence of some absolute truth, reality, or the state of affairs beyond the local observations.

RECEIVED: 19 FEBRUARY 2014

ACCEPTED: 5 JANUARY 2015

# Open Peer Commentaries

## on Diana Gasparyan’s “What Can the Global Observer Know?”

### How We Can Get an Observer Back

Igor Gasparov

Voronezh Medical State Academy,  
Russia • gasparov/at/mail.ru

**> Upshot** • I introduce some distinctions that I hold to be useful for understanding the global observer problem and then sketch a hypothetical scenario that suggests the existence of an observer that is as good as a global one.

«1» In her paper Diana Gasparyan claims that events are observer-dependent entities (§28). It seems, however, that we are able to distinguish two senses in which we could sensibly say that an event requires an observer. The first might be called “epistemic” and is rather a trivial one. An epistemic access to an event requires an epistemic agent, an observer who should be able to witness that event. The other sense might be called “ontological” and is extremely non-trivial. It amounts to the as-

sertion that mind-independent events are impossible.

«2» Take the epistemic sense first. I think that we can explain how we could sensibly speak about events to which neither we nor anybody else actually have epistemic access. Imagine, for instance, that no one knows, knew or will know who killed Abraham Lincoln, including Lincoln himself and his killer. Although this knowledge is not actually available to anyone, the following counterfactual proposition seems to be true:

- (1) If an appropriate epistemic agent A were present at the place where and the time when Abraham Lincoln was killed, A would know who the killer is.

I think that this counterfactual possibility is enough that we could sensibly speak of events happening in the absence of any actual observer and start to investigate the truth values of propositions that stated them. It seems that there is no need here for a global observer that is something more than a metaphor for the counterfactual conditional I stated above.

«3» Things are not so easy if the mind-independent events are ontologically impossible. Firstly, let us introduce a distinction between an observer that herself is taking part in the event she observes and an observer that is not. I will refer to the former as an internal observer and to the latter as an external observer. Think, for example, of an event such as parking a car. When I observe another person parking her car, I am an external observer. When I myself am parking a car, I am an internal observer. Consider now the following hypothetical case. Suppose there is a history of a material universe that amounts to an ordered sequence of events causally connected in space-time. Then suppose that the first events in this history were just simple physical events such that they exclude any mental properties in the common sense of the term such as perception or understanding. This hypothetical scenario is very close to that which modern physicists assume to be “actually true.”<sup>1</sup> I do not claim, however, that my scenario is the real story of our uni-

1 | I.e., true in the actual world as opposed to true in a possible world.

verse. But it seems that such a scenario must be possible in every plausible conception of the event. Now conceive the following propositions:

- (2) There are no events without an observer.
- (3) There is a set of events that do not contain any ordinary observer as a part.

(2) seems to be the consequence of the ontological interpretation of the event conception proposed by Gasparyan. (3) follows from the scenario I described above. It appears that there is a considerable tension between (2) and (3). Could it be solved in a satisfactory way?

« 4 » As far as I can see, three main options are available here. The first is to assume the existence of an external observer outside of the universe in question. If such an observer was possible she would count as a global observer. Because she seems to be outside of the space-time continuum, she has access to every space-time point of the universe. We have, however, to admit that such an observer is a supernatural rather than natural one.

« 5 » The second option is to assume that every simple physical event has some observational powers. This option is not very plausible unless we are willing to accept a radical version of panpsychism. According to this version, the physical matter would have not merely some protomental properties, but something more that would enable it to observe what is happening in and to it. Sincerely said, such a version of panpsychism strikes me as very outlandish.

« 6 » The last option suggests that by creating hypotheses, physicists caused the history of the universe backwardly. This option is not very plausible either since it entails a very strong version of mental backward causation and the possibility of overlapping mutually excluding histories of a universe that could arise simply by formulating controversial hypothesis about its history. However, maybe each time a new hypothesis is formulated, a new universe comes into existence.

« 7 » As we see, each option has its own costs. But the costs are not the same. If I had the choice, I would choose the first. It seems to entail the existence of an external observer that is as good as a global one. And this is what Gasparyan is likely to reject. I

do not see why such an observer should be impossible even if I have to admit that only a godlike observer could be good enough to play this role.

« 8 » The main reason why Gasparyan rejects the existence of the global observer is that such an observer would have to instantiate contradictory properties of “being global” and “being an observer” (§43). The property of being an observer seems to entail the property of being subjected to certain limitations whereas the property of being global seems to entail the property of not having any limitations. I think, however, that this does not apply to a being that is epistemically godlike. She must be able to adopt an infinitely number of limited points of views, each of which would be a possible combination of appropriate qualitative and quantitative limitations that, according to Gasparyan, we are to impose upon every genuine observer (§34, §§38f).

« 9 » We may wonder what we could epistemically gain from assuming the existence of that godlike global observer, for there is no way to prove her existence anyway. Indeed there is no epistemological gain from such an observer if she does not have some additional qualities such as providing some kind of access to her own knowledge. But the point here is rather that we do not need any such observer for our epistemological purposes. When we, however, take the necessary connection between event and observer that Gasparyan assumes in her paper as ontologically serious, then we get an observer back that is very like the global observer she rejected.

**Igor Gasparov** is an associate professor of philosophy and bioethics at Voronezh Medical State Academy. After finishing his studies in history and German language at Voronezh State University, he received a B.A. in philosophy from Hochschule für Philosophie in Munich. In 2007 he earned a PhD from Voronezh State University. His research fields include personal identity, philosophy of religion, metaphysics and philosophy of mind.

RECEIVED: 23 JANUARY 2015

ACCEPTED: 26 JANUARY 2015

## Who Downed MH-17, or Do Collective Observations Interact Non-Linearly?

Manfred Füllsack

ISIS/University of Graz, Austria

manfred.fuell sack/at/uni-graz.at

**> Upshot.** I consider the possibility of replacing the global observer with a collective observer and ask whether the insights generated by such a collective observer would have to be considered subject to non-linear interactions.

« 1 » Diana Gasparyan directs our attention to an inherent contradiction in the philosophical concept of the global (or universal) observer, which serves as reference in cases that we assume to be observed but where the observer is unknown. To illustrate my commentary, I will draw on the example of the incident of the Malaysian Airliner MH-17, which crashed in summer 2014 after flying over separatist regions of Eastern Ukraine. A global observer in the sense of Gasparyan could have observed who downed MH-17. Was it separatists, as the official government claims, or was it a fighter pilot of the regular army, as the separatists suggest?

« 2 » The global observer as a ubiquitous and thus omni-observant observer would have no limitation in observing this incident. It could observe in a way that is unrestricted and unperturbed by the claim of one or the other side. It could observe without delimitation of temporal or spatial beginnings and endings, and it also would face no financial or material constraints in going into the details of the event. It could simply observe everything, and everything in the same, comprehensive and thorough way. However, in the end – as Gasparyan puts forward – this global observer, in acting this way, would lose any focus. It would have no bias, no preference and no particular field of interest. It would observe *undifferentiatingly*, which means that it would simply make no distinctions. Nothing would protrude from the uniform mash of its observations, and if nothing protruded one might rightfully ask whether such an observer would be observing at all. In this regard, Gasparyan meets with theoreticians such as