The Non-Dualist Narrative and the Present

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> Abstract · The commentary sketches the linguistic and rhetorical premises of non-dualism and then draws a line to a sociological concept of temporality and timeliness. Since Weber's analysis of Mitterer's inconsistencies is rather content-orientated, the following thoughts foster a complementary perspective on the non-dualist narrative as a self-elucidating, prevailing theory of knowledge.

Handling Editor · Alexander Riegler

Introduction

« 1 » Stefan Weber's target article deals with the (alleged) inconsistencies of Josef Mitterer's non-dualistic concept. Weber thus picks up a discussion he began in his book on non-dualistic media theory and which was, among others, continued by Siegfried J. Schmidt. Some of the questions formulated in this debate were: How does Mitterer's concept of a description "so far" and "from now on" relate to the notion of social or individual acting? Is there a concrete definition for important notions like "describing" and "discourse"? How can one dissolve the paradox that an object is not different from linguistic descriptions but, at the same time, occurs in union with its description and is changed into a "new" object of further descriptions? (Weber 2005: 295–311; Schmidt 2010: 139f)

« 2 » By contrast, in my commentary I modestly concentrate on the temporal dimension of Mitterer's concept, since Weber's critique more or less explicitly problematizes aspects of validity and timeliness. The central distinction between a description "so far" and "from now on" that Mitterer proposes, already implies a notion of the "present" (or the "contemporary"). Uncovering these implications might help to clear up at least some of the misunderstandings and misleading statements Weber's target article tries to identify. Understanding non-dualism as a narrative, i.e.,

via its structural constitution rather than via single arguments, I roughly sketch a few considerations on the linguistic and rhetorical premises of non-dualism and on the latent connections to the social theory of timeliness, temporality and the present.

Linguistic and rhetorical premises

« 3 » While Mitterer is eager to reveal "the intrinsic rhetorical mechanism" not only in realism or dualism, but also "applied by leading constructivists" (Schmidt 2008: 163), Weber analyzes the "rhetorical move as practised by Mitterer" and his "trick with the present tense" (§17). Mitterer's critique on dualism is based on the distinction between undescribed, non-linguistic objects and their rudimentary, linguistic description (Mitterer 1992: 89). According to Weber, this distinction is inconsistent because Mitterer insinuated a temporal priority of the undescribed object. Weber's counter-argument appeals to descriptions of or statements about the "distant future" that are not "prior to these statements" and that "necessarily" do not "exist" (§21).

« 4 » However, Mitterer's philosophy does not investigate an external reality or the ontological status of future events. It rather discusses the preconditions of dualistic thinking and its temporal order. Hence, the "process of our discourses" gains more relevance than their non-linguistic or metaphysical "beyond" (Mitterer 1988: 29). Statements about future events become part of this discourse, too. With regard to content, these statements describe a present to-be. With regard to form, they also emerge from a long tradition of utopian, predictive, hypothetical or even literary narratives. To address Mitterer's non-dualistic "problematisation as historisation," as Achim Landwehr (2013: 239) has pointed out, might also cast a light on the provenance of its linguistic and rhetorical form. Furthermore, Marzenna Cyzman's comparison of Mitterer's non-dualizing explications and the techniques of traditional rhetoric provided some remarkable similarities, i.e., arguments from authorities, "[d]epersonalization of the proponent's standpoint and personalization of the opponent's standpoint," "[d]iscreditation of the proponent's […] conception" and "acting as if I take myself to be mistaken" as

well as the "use of simple, uncomplicated examples" such as the table or the apple (Cyzman 2017: 21–23). Here, techniques of rhetorical evidence (*evidentia*) apparently come into effect.

« 5 » In addition, Mitterer's non-dualism itself evolves from a long history of sociological and philosophical, neo-Kantian discourses, and subjects them to a logic of critical renunciation (Meierhofer 2008). The rhetoric of non-dualism aims at self-evidence and, regarding Mitterer's textual strategy, permanently produces arguments against ontological, dualist and realist perspectives. A certain variety of dichotomies is the result of this strategy: dualism vs. non-dualism, extra-linguistic vs. linguistic references, object vs. description, descriptions so far vs. descriptions from now on. As a consequence, Mitterer's attributions to "dualizing language" (§14) mark a blind spot in his philosophy. His non-dualist narrative produces semantic and structural oppositions (in the sense of Jakobson 1960) with the intention of convincing its readership. However, occasionally this plan is counter-productive when Weber receives the non-dualist arguments as a "dogma" (§31). It is striking that Mitterer himself mentions the dogma, namely in the context of "infinite regresses." He defines it as an instrument to establish or abort "epistemic reasoning" ("Erkenntnisbegründung," Mitterer 1992: 90). Applying this notion of dogma to Mitterer's own philosophy, the basic distinction between dualism and non-dualism is unavoidable because it initiates his non-dualist narrative.

The "present" of non-dualism

« 6 » For theoreticians of "infinite regress" arguments, vicious infinite regresses always contain an "infinite retrogression *into the past*" (§6) or an infinite parceling in space. Weber argues that both is not the case with Mitterer's regress allegations (§31). Weber plausibly observes non-dualism's linguistic mechanism and the temporal recursion: The "objects of descriptions are those descriptions that have already been carried out" (§8). At this point, one can productively relate the distinction between descriptions so far and from now on to sociological conceptions of the "present." According to Weber, non-dualists "fail to

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explain" how descriptions "should be temporalized" (§63).

« 7 » "Present," Niklas Luhmann (1990: 113) writes, "is the excluded third in the dimension of time" ("Gegenwart ist das ausgeschlossene Dritte der Zeitdimension").[1] Yet Luhmann's conception of the "present" refers to the double distinction of "timeliness"/"untimeliness" ("Aktualität"/"Inaktualität") and, in the field of "untimeliness," of future/past ("Zukunft"/"Vergangenheit"). The simple succession of past, present and future is replaced by a triad of "past present," "present present" and "future present." The "present" does not cover a certain period of time but marks the distinction between past and future. To draw this distinction is possible in every section of the temporal dimension, i.e., past, present and future.

« 8 » Luhmann admittedly requires an observer who draws these distinctions, whereas Mitterer apparently omits or neglects this position in favor of what he calls discourse, descriptions or "correlations of reference" ("Referenzbeziehungen," Mitterer 1992: 42). These correlations of reference need no initiator, or at least, Mitterer focuses on changing discourses rather than on acting or observing individuals.[2] Moreover, non-dualism's preference for the "here and now" ("Diesseits," Mitterer 2001: 94) of the discourse points to the ambivalence of "present" and its temporal and physical implications, namely in the sense of "contemporary" and "presence." With his examples of tables and apples in mind, it seems that Mitterer prefers to think of discourse as face-to-face communication, i.e., an "interaction among attendees" ("Interaktion unter Anwesenden," Luhmann 1990: 121) in the tradition of philosophical dialogues.

« 9 » From a viewpoint of the history of knowledge and science, Mitterer's critique of dualism legitimizes itself as an alternative for what might be called present-day epis-

temology. The "rhetorical move" generates a temporal connection between a traditional dualist discourse "so far" and an innovative non-dualist discourse "from now on." The non-dualist narrative, as a result, transfers the distinction of so far/from now on from the level of argumentative content to the level of its structural coherence. By using rhetorical techniques of self-evidence, Mitterer's narrative unfolds – or at least claims – the potential, the theoretical impact and, eventually, the sense of non-dualism. Luhmann (1990: 108) writes: "The distinction currently/potentially is the form in which sense becomes possible" ("Die Differenz aktuell/potentiell ist die Form, in der Sinn möglich wird"). Similarly, Mitterer as an author becomes a critical observer of the untimely, outdated dualism and, at the same time, the creative inventor of an up-to-date alternative. Some preachy assessments such as "vicious," "malign" or "benign" (§31) that Weber applies to determine the infinite regress, or the accusation of "extreme relativism" and "solipsism" (§94) – a charge that Mitterer would certainly deny – semantically correspond to this narrative and its temporal structure.

« 10 » Weber's conclusion that Mitterer's theory "only expresses the distance between the judgement *hic et nunc* and the past object" and therefore signals "nothing solid" about the past (§96) reactivates and operates the dichotomy of dualism and non-dualism. However, even though Mitterer does not define his notions of discourse and description very precisely, he does not abandon the necessity of moral standards, legal norms or social conventions. Saying that "basic consensuses" ("Basiskonsense") can be "questioned anytime" ("jederzeit in Frage gestellt") initially means to underline the "latest state of affairs" ("letzte[r] Stand der Dinge," Mitterer 2001: 105). Mitterer's conception does not lead to a denial either of the past in general or of "climate change" in particular (§96). Contrariwise, non-dualism could explain such phenomena if they were to turn up in the discourse.

Conclusion

« 11 » Non-dualism, as Mitterer conceives it, activates a narrative of the "present" on at least two levels. On the level of

philosophical and epistemological content, non-dualism replaces dualistic and realistic concepts of reality. Here, "reality is nothing more […] than those views that are advanced at the present moment" ("Die Wirklichkeit ist nichts weiter […] als jene Auffassungen, die zum gegenwärtigen Zeitpunkt vertreten werden," Mitterer 2001: 105). Weber's attempt to identify certain inconsistencies necessarily remains on this level and has to negotiate the dichotomies Mitterer provides. On the level of narrative structures, however, the latent non-dualistic concept of the "present" reoccurs. Non-dualism presents itself as a new, topical alternative to the philosophical and epistemological tradition that now appears as a discourse "so far."

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1| All translations from the German are mine.

2| By the way, one might see here similarities to Jacques Derrida's poststructuralist notion of *différance* or, even more prominent, to Friedrich Nietzsche's anti-metaphysical dictum about the "moveable army of metaphors" ("bewegliches Heer von Metaphern").

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Author's Response
Philosophy without Ontology?

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> **Abstract** · Even though all my commentators defended non-dualism, they could not convince me that I had misunderstood Mitterer's position. My response focuses on six topics: The question of changing one's philosophical position; the problem of the infinite regress; the concepts of descriptions and objects in classical philosophy and in non-dualism; the non-dualistic distinction of descriptions *so far* and descriptions *from now on*; the problem of time and the time arrow; and the question of ethical consequences. I argue for a more moderate version of epistemology, avoiding the inconsistencies and contradictions of non-dualism.

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On changing one's view

« 1 » My critics did not mince their words: **Michael Schorner** (§1) labelled my target article a "misrepresentation" – a very dualist term, by the way, neither "representation" nor "misrepresentation" appear as terms in non-dualism –, and **Katharina Neges** called it a "misinterpretation" (§19) leading to a "considerable confusion." **Schorner**, as well as **Armin Scholl**, is concerned about the validity of my former writings, for example, my post-doctoral thesis (Weber 2005), in which I built a media theory based on Josef Mitterer's non-dualism. **Schorner** (§14) asks whether I built my "work on nonsense."

« 2 » I see no problem in changing my philosophical position. It was no sudden re-thinking, it had started already in 2010. In many discussions with Peter Strasser, Claude Gratton, Volker Gadenne, and Franz Ofner, I have developed the view that non-dualism, especially the terminology of description *so far* and description *from now on* replacing the traditional dualism of *object disparate from descriptions* and *description*, is not viable due to inherent logical inconsistencies and paradoxical consequences.

« 3 » While there are philosophers who have been loyal to their body of work for their entire lives, such as Niklas Luhmann, Ernst von Glasersfeld, Silvio Ceccato, and also Mitterer himself, many philosophers have partially or completely revised their earlier works, including the later Ludwig Wittgenstein, Paul Feyerabend, and Siegfried J. Schmidt, just to mention a few. So, why should anybody be criticized for changing their position? Even Mitterer admits:

❝ Changing our views at large time intervals can also be seen as a sign of creativity. What is important is that there are no contradictory positions in the same article or in the same book. ❞ (FFC: §150, editor's translation)[1]

I feel that I am in good company, as a sceptic of what I previously thought to be consistent. In this sense, I agree with Mitterer: "The admission of error is always related to the past […]"[2] (FFC: §125).

« 4 » One of the main points of my critics – especially **Neges** (§§4–10) and **Christof Schalhorn** (§§2–4) – is the allegation that I (mis-)understood non-dualism as a (rare) kind of *ontological idealism*, namely "*linguistic idealism*" (**Neges** §4, my emphasis) or "*idealistic-linguistic monism*" (**Schalhorn** §2, my emphasis): *Ontological idealism* (Guyer & Horstmann 2015, also quoted by **Neges** §4) claims that all there is, is neither reality nor matter (that exists independently of the human observer). Instead, all there is are "mental instances" such as human thoughts, the mind, or subjective worlds. *Radical linguistic idealism* as a special variant of ontological idealism[3] is the claim that all there is,

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1 | "Wenn wir unsere Auffassungen in größeren zeitlichen Abständen ändern, kann dies auch als Zeichen von Kreativität gelten. Wichtig ist nur, dass nicht in einem Artikel, im gleichen Buch widersprüchliche Standpunkte eingenommen werden."

2 | "Das Eingeständnis des Irrtums ist immer auf die Vergangenheit bezogen […]"

3 | **Neges** (§4) proposed this definition of linguistic idealism: "If understood as a variant of ontological idealism, linguistic idealism denies in its most extreme form the existence of a language-different reality." A more moderate definition is the view that "the world is essentially a precipitate of language, or (in a different metaphor) the internal accusative of language" (Gaskin 2019: 1325). However, Gaskin's definition does not fit