Commentary 01 on
Karl Jaspers Forum, Target Article 1, 27 June 1997

IS THE MIND REAL?
by H. F .J. Muller

ZERO SCIENCE *vs.* HIERARCHICAL SCIENCE

by Paul Jones

4 July 1997

Abstract

The zero-reference method suggested by H. F. G. Muller as a solution for the psychophysical problem in contrast to the intrinsically inconsistent position of abstract objectivism may be considered as a fundamental level of description, related to the first syncretic stages of any research. However, such syncretism is not enough in scientific study, and an analytic investigation must necessarily follow. To restore the integrity, hierarchical approach is suggested, synthesizing both syncretic and analytic views as the levels of the object's hierarchy reflecting its development.

The paper by H. F .J. Muller presents a new turn of the old *psychophysical problem*: why human perceptions are not perceived as such but rather refer to the objects in the physical world? This common fact of human psychology might be worded as a paradox: the physical objects apparently belong to the external world and do not depend on the observer's personality, but there is no way for the observer to find out what are the things on themselves, since all what the observer may experience gets filtered through the person's subjectivity.

Many attempts to resolve this paradox have been known in the history of psychology and philosophy. In their majority, they form two distinct clusters, depending on whether the things are considered as existing independently of the mind or the things are mere artifacts of the mind's activity. The philosophies representing the first trend are often called materialism, objectivism, empiricism etc. The second branch encompasses all the varieties of subjective idealism.

In the modern philosophy of science and consciousness studies, there is a strong objectivist line trying to reduce conscious phenomena to the physiology or physics of the functioning of neural ensembles, as modeled in artificial intelligence studies. An extreme expression of it is advocated by universal computationalism describing all the conscious processes (and virtually all the processes at all) as mere computation. Consciousness is said to be "localized" in the brain, and it is claimed to be completely describable in terms of neurology and computer architecture.

However, such an approach raises many objections. As H. F .J. Muller indicates in his paper, radical objectivism, first, has not succeeded in deriving psychological phenomena from neurology and, second, it could not give any description of the specificity of conscious experience, in most cases simply denying it.

Unfortunately, the fallacies of objectivism are not explicated, merely hinted to. The statement that {1}[†] "belief in mind-independent reality is self-contradictory and by definition excludes subjective experience (awareness, 'consciousness') from reality" is not convincing, since

1. this is not a matter of belief, but rather the fact of human activity and the practice of scientific research;
2. there is no contradiction in admitting the objective existence of subjectivity as a specific part of reality.

[†] *Notation*: { } paragraphs of the source text.

The assertion that the mind cannot be an object to study because it is in the permanent movement and development {6} is not completely exact, since there are many developing objects other than the mind, and science well dares to study them. Of course the description of development is the weakest part of the science of today – but the actual difficulties encountered here are never mentioned in the paper reviewed. H. F .J. Muller says that "if reality were mind-independent, the mind would have to be mind-independent in order to be real" {7}. But there is no contradiction in that, since the mind as an objective phenomenon studied by science may, in the same time, be a subjective experience – and the study of the mind is to explain this effect.

The origin of the inadequacy of objectivism in the realm of psychological (and especially conscious) phenomena can be found in the illegal identification of the mechanism of an objective phenomenon with the phenomenon itself, the manifestation of the general rule with that rule proper. Distinct levels of reality are thus merged together, mixing qualitatively different elements in the same model on an equal footing, which means the loss of specificity and apparent contradictions. Thus, computationalists try to deduce consciousness as a consequence of the connections in the neural "wetware", and the focus of their research is on artificial reproducing the construction manifesting conscious behavior. This approach is intrinsically contradictory, since the very possibility of implementing consciousness in different media (like the "wetware" of the brain and the hardware of the computers) implies that the material of which a conscious thing is made is not essential for the presence of consciousness, which can appear in quite different things most differently organized. One could illustrate it by a computer example: the same output can be produced by many quite different programs, working on operationally incompatible computers – so, this output cannot be characterized by the computer architecture and software used, but rather requires a higher-level description accounting for the external processes possibly involving the computers.

H. F .J. Muller's objections only refer to one variety of objectivism, primitive and inconsistent, ignoring the objectivity of the object's hierarchy and the necessity of its description on different levels.

H. F .J. Muller tries to suggest an idea overcoming the difficulties of "vulgar" objectivism, which he calls the "zero-reference method". The method is based on two basic principles:

1. "the functional aspect is much more important than any static term which might be employed" {8};
2. "all mental structures crystallize (and are constructed) within an unstructured and therefore undefinable matrix, which can be used as a kind of zero-reference point" {10}.

In other words, instead of considering the objectively existing structures (which somehow get identified with mental structures in the text of the paper), one is to consider an unstructured process, which is arbitrarily identified with subjectivity {6}.

This does not seem a good solution, since it leads to more problems than clarity. Here are some difficulties with the "zero-reference" approach:

1. It is not shown why and how the observable structures form from the syncretic something preceding them. It is a well-established fact that any cultural phenomenon develops from syncretic stage (when it is merged with the rest of the culture), to the analytical level revealing all the possible distinctions, and then to the synthesis of all the distinct parts in a higher-level formation. "Zero-reference point" may hence be justified through identification with the primitive syncretism, the first stage of any development. However, one can say little about this stage, and it is the higher levels that are of practical importance.
2. Structural and systemic, static and functional aspects are indistinguishable within the primitive syncretism – so, it is not justified to say that one of these sides may be more important than the other.
3. Consciousness as "a summary expression (or envelope) for the phenomena of experience" is no more comprehensible than as a "theoretical construct". Also, there are many other conceptions of consciousness, and it is not clear why to select the above two.

4. The mind's ability to think of objectively existing things well agrees with the objectivity of the mind as a level of reflection, while the "zero-reference" approach has to admit that all the things are no more than illusion {37}, and so there is nothing in the world but a single mind – the position of extreme subjective idealism, solipsism.
5. The demonstrations of how the "zero-reference" method works {41,42} manifest the scientific weakness of it: the problems are never solved, they are simply denied. Zeno's paradoxes cannot be explained by the claim that "motion is an earlier experience than the space intervals", and the absolutization of "now and here" gives little to the understanding of time.
6. The desire to avoid contradictions {51} can only lead to stagnation, since comprehending contradictions is one of the basic mechanisms of scientific development.

There are other narrow places, beside the above few. Generally, H. F .J. Muller's approach allies with subjective idealism (at least in the description of mental phenomena). Opposing "vulgar" objectivism, H. F .J. Muller could not find better solution than to make subjectivity the origin of all the observable distinctions, and thus refusing to explain any distinctions at all. "Zero-reference" science hence becomes "zero science", denying the meaningfulness of scientific knowledge and eliminating science as such.

The list of references of the paper reflects this limited treatment of the problem: positivist writers (including "cognitive science") are listed together with idealist philosophers, with almost no representatives of philosophic materialism – never speaking of the higher-level dialectical materialism! The solution (much more consistent though yet incomplete) of the mind-body and related problems given by dialectical materialism seems to completely escape the minds of modern researchers in this field.

But there is a very simple and comprehensive solution:

1. The world exists and develops on itself, without any necessity to resort to the mind and consciousness. Every kind of existence is a part of the world's existence in general, and the mind is just one of the forms possible. This is the *material* side of the world.
2. The arrangement of material things is not completely defined by the things themselves, being a link between different levels of existence. Every thing is characterized by its place in the whole of the world – this is its *ideal* aspect.
3. Every *real* thing unites both material and ideal aspects, and the very distinction between the material and the ideal may only refer to a definite level of hierarchy thus being *relative*. So, the world is hierarchically organized, and that the formations of the higher levels can be implemented in different combinations of lower-level elements, which constitute the material base while the way of implementation represents the ideality of the thing.

Exaggerating the first of these principles leads to "vulgar" materialism never distinguishing the properties of the things from the things themselves; most philosophizing refers to it as the only kind of materialism, ignoring the development of the true, dialectical materialism. The overestimation of the second principle is a distinctive feature of idealism, both objective and subjective lines. There were also philosophies based on the isolated third principle (Spinoza's ideas, modern pragmatism and philosophic relativism etc.). It is the account for all the three principles that can become a basis of a consistent scientific methodology.

The reality of any object is the unity of its materiality and ideality; the presence of an ideal aspect is thus indispensable in a consistently objective study, though it does not need to be associated with consciousness, in the general case. The mind, reason, consciousness etc. arise on a certain stage of development, forming a specific level of hierarchy, namely, the social level. The attempts to confine consciousness to an organism are doomed to failure, since the organic properties can only be a premise of consciousness, the way of its implementation, but not its actual contents. The same relation exists between the levels of "physical" existence and life.

From the positions of the hierarchical approach, there is an objective difference between conscious

and unconscious existence, though the forms of this distinction may differ for different unfoldings of the world's hierarchy. In particular, there is a continuum of intermediate levels both between the "physical" existence and life, as well as between conscious and unconscious life. Every two objective formations have something in common, and phenomena akin to consciousness can be found within any other level.

The emphasis on the human activity is one of the most important points in H. F .J. Muller's paper {11}. The fact that any knowledge (and any conscious experience in general) is related to some activity is commonly overlooked in "vulgar" objectivism, seeking for absolute truths for all times. But any science is a culture phenomenon, and it cannot give more than the current level of cultural (and virtually economic) development would permit. Every result of scientific research has some universal contents – but it can only be implicit in the body of relative and culture-dependent knowledge. However, one should not deny any objectivity because of that, since the development of the culture is objective too, and the forms of activity can be scientifically studied, as well as their relation to the forms of thought.

It is rightly indicated that the objectivity of research is in no way a guarantee of truth {15}. It is only practice (purposeful rearrangement of the world) that can tell whether a particular scientific model is valid. Science serves the practice feeding from its reflection in the (social) experience. But the very forms of practice and experience are related to the objectivity of the world, and this is why formal manipulations may lead to valid results in science.

To summarize, the paper by H. F .J. Muller is valuable since it draws attention to the fallacies of "vulgar" objectivism – but it failed to suggest a sound alternative, annihilating science instead of enhancing it.

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