

Commentary 01 on
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HOW DO PHYSICISTS BUILD REALITY?

By Herbert F J Muller

I DO EXIST. DO YOU?

by Paul Jones

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Abstract

The inconsistency of idealism is demonstrated in both ontology and epistemology. To become applicable in scientific methodology, the article has to be re-interpreted in a materialistic way, accounting for the social nature of consciousness.

The article tries to appeal to science (physics, biology and psychology) for support of an intentionally idealistic position denying the existence of any reality beyond “ongoing experience” and “ad-hoc constructions”. However, it is only the quotes from idealistic philosophers of science (including scientists acting as amateur philosophers) that tend to agree with the principles proclaimed. The quotes describing the physical models of special and general relativity or quantum theory do not contain anything idealistic about them, representing the usual stand of most physicists commonly known as natural-science materialism, and, despite all the variety of idealistic philosophies, “scientific materialism is the dominant contemporary paradigm” [R. Leonard, Comm. 8 on KJF TA 7, {7}]. Dr. Muller may complain that materialism is “very prevalent” {6}[†], but the very fact of its prevalence speaks for its scientific value. Paradigms do not change in response to somebody’s desire – any change has to be economically and socially determined, which implies materialist approach to consciousness as well.

The very title of H. Muller’s paper contains a conceptual displacement from scientific objectivity to solipsism. Physicists do not “build” reality, at least no more than any other person who acts and produces material traces in the world. One could speak about reconstruction rather than construction of reality in science, reconstruction in specific material forms serving to objectify the natural correspondence between reality and the patterns of human activity. The forms of this reflection necessarily reproduce the features of material things or processes they reflect, and there is no idea that would not refer to a material prototype.

This latter statement needs explanation. The intuitive materialism of most scientists cannot account for existence of abstract ideas as naturally as existence of physical, chemical, biological or other systems. The numerous attempts to reduce abstract thought to mere physiology have largely discredited the materialist approach to consciousness in general, commonly being identified with vulgar (reductionist, metaphysical) materialism. Still, abstractions in human thinking must correspond to material phenomena, and there is no need to invent any self-existing consciousness to explain them. The only solution possible would be to attribute consciousness to a social rather than biological body, so that abstract ideas would reflect social rather than physical or other formations. Nevertheless, since the society is a part of Nature, albeit specific, social processes are as material as physical, and they can be studied in a consistently objective way.

Part I of the article may produce a strange impression of void talking to emptiness. H. Muller’s desire to persuade the reader in that there is no need to admit any reality independent of one’s ideas about it is intrinsically fallible, since, following the author’s reasons, there is no need to admit the existence of

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

anybody to persuade, or even the existence of the author himself and all his texts. I doubt that many participants of the Forum would agree to consider themselves as Dr. Muller's fantasies – otherwise, what might be the sense in sending them anything for comment?

When H. Muller speaks about “ongoing mind-nature experiences”, one gets immediately perplexed: what can be meant by that if there is no nature outside the mind, and nothing can happen outside “subjective experience”? Moreover, where does that experience come from? If there is something beyond the mind, it has to be different from it in at least one respect, being not identical to the mind, and hence be independent from the mind in that respect; what is then the use in denying the existence of mind-independent reality? If we admit anything (let us call it nature) existing along with the mind, why should we admit the mind's existence outside nature? Why not merely a part of nature reflecting nature and itself? If Kant and Plato said that things as they are can never be perceived, this does not mean that things cannot be perceived at all, and that we cannot study them using indirect methods quite common in any science.

If one assumes that H. Muller does not deny the existence of the world in ontology, only denying the existence of any structures in the world outside the mind, the problem of the consistency of thinking comes forth. If there had been no material correlates of human thoughts, there would have been no joint activity of many people and communication between them. However, we can quite often see hundreds of individuals working for a common goal, and many people can communicate efficiently enough, despite of all the misinterpretations that have to be gradually eliminated. This can only be explained if we admit that people's mental processes reflect regularities existing outside their minds, some of these regularities being natural and some being the products of human activity. Once again we come to reflection as an attribute of any natural motion, with its social form including self-reflection in the form of consciousness.

Certainly, the reflections of things are not identical to the things themselves; however, this distinction cannot be consistently drawn within idealism. We could recall the medieval struggle of “nominalism” and “realism”: “nominalists” said that the categories (usually those listed by Aristotle) were mere names for something in the outer world, while “realists” admitted independent existence of categories as specific entities. One cannot identify, say, “nominalism” with materialism, and “realism” with idealism – both contained materialistic and idealistic elements. However, the assumption of the existence of ideas outside an individual mind often lead to admitting the existence of ideas prior to any mind at all, which is the corner-stone of idealism. H. Muller might be called a “nominalist”, if one interpreted his words in the sense that human ideas fully belong to consciousness, and not to reality they reflect. One could also agree that ideas are produced by people only, and not by non-conscious nature. The difference between materialism and idealism depends on what is meant under “consciousness”. If consciousness is said to be entirely different from nature, existing somewhere “outside” it, we deal with idealism; if, on the contrary, consciousness is understood as a natural (namely, social) phenomenon, there is nothing strange in admitting the existence of ideas outside individual mind as long as they belong to a collective motion in the human society. Individual consciousness (mind) is only a projection of the collective consciousness of humanity onto certain material formations including both biological bodies and their cultural environment.

It should be stressed that the question about objective existence of human ideas does not coincide with that of objective existence of structures in nature. There is no reason to deny structured world before any perception – in particular, the existence of different things in the world. It would be much more logical to admit that mental structures reflect something in the world, thus being a little different from mere delirium. Certainly, there is no need in pre-existence of ideas before any activity, and structures in cognition do not appear before cognition—but this does not deny the objectivity of the structures they reflect. If the world had not been structured beyond any mind, the participants of the Forum, would not have differed from each other save in Dr. Muller's imagination, and the existence of the Forum itself would have been under question.

One could note an obvious inconsistency in H. Muller's discourse, in his speaking about the “adequacy” of cognitive structures and “proving” or “testing” it {6}. If there is no correspondence of mental structures to anything else beyond the mind, why would anybody have to bother about

adequacy and proof? anything imagined would do equally well. There would be no need in “reporting” one’s imaginary structures to anybody, including oneself, and hence no need to construct or experience anything at all.

One could analyze every sentence of H. Muller’s article demonstrating the same inconsistency within an idealistic stand. To summarize, the cognition side of human activity is overestimated in the text, up to identifying any activity at all with cognition. As a result, consciousness gets reduced to “subjective experience” {14}, becoming disconnected from the rest of nature. The well-known direction of any cognition from syncretism to analyticity, and further to synthesis and practice, gets distorted in exaggerating the role of the syncretic stage. Yes, science can only feed on syncretic ideas produced on the lower levels of cognition, and there is no direct assimilation of objective distinctions. However, one could note that people’s experience (which is a material process precedes any cognition, including syncretic one) is already a reflection of natural (and cultural) processes, and it may be quite non-trivial and hierarchically organized. H. Muller admits structure formation “on a biological basis” {4}; he has to make just one more step to admit social structures, and proceed to the structuredness of the physical world.

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