

Commentary 21 on
Karl Jaspers Forum, Target Article 15, 19 January 1999

HOW DO PHYSICISTS BUILD REALITY?

By Herbert F J Muller

WE CANNOT ARGUE IF WE DON'T EXIST

by Paul Jones

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Abstract

One cannot argue with a solipsist, since one's arguments can never be treated as something real by a person who doubts the existence of any reality at all. Commenting such views can only be of some use for materialists talking between themselves.

Muller's response to my and Nunn's comments is an illustrative example of how void may be argument addressed to a person of a different ideological stand. In dialectical materialism, this is a natural consequence of the secondary nature of people's thoughts and the primariness of matter: indeed, it is only practice that can influence people's views, and never the arguments. Words can be used to support communication between persons with similar pictures of the world (that is, involved in similar activities), and they can tell nothing to those who do not want to understand. That is why I never intend to convert idealists into materialists, and all I write is mainly to serve as an anchor for other people who acknowledge my existence and do not doubt that there is something in the world to talk about. Since if there is nothing at all there is nothing to discuss.

Here, I am speaking to materialists, and my topic is an idealist's incapability of comprehending any argument save their own – at least until they make a concession to materialism.

1.

Misunderstanding is striking from the very beginning (in the abstract of Muller's R3):

{abstract}[†] “Paul Jones proposes that science, including that dealing with consciousness, has to be based on the principle of the primacy of matter, and that mind is secondary to matter”... “I suggest that this is not possible, because all knowledge, both about matter and about other areas, can only take place within subjective experience (‘mind’, ‘consciousness’) which is the only entrance to reality.”

The latter does not contradict to the former, since consciousness is only one of the aspects of the same reality, being “implemented” in (the social form of) matter. On the other hand, there is again the same inconsistency: one cannot speak about the mind as an “entrance to reality” without reality existing outside (and independently of) the mind.

{4} “I say that all mental structures are built inside originally undivided mind-nature experience.”...”This opinion is supported by the observation that no mental structures arise outside experience.”

For a materialist, this is trivial: human ideas are produced by humans, and not “ready-made”. However, this does not mean that there is nothing but human ideas, and one should overestimate primitive (syncretic) thought.

{abstract} “The mind-brain relation is the mind-matter relation of Descartes because brain is matter”

The primitive ideas of Descartes can hardly account for the complexity of the problem. There is no

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

mind-brain relation, and one can never treat consciousness in that way. It is on the social level of matter only that consciousness can be explained.

{abstract} “Traditional metaphysicists (materialists as well as others) want to discover a pre-constructed reality”

It is vulgar (metaphysical) materialists only that can speak of any “pre-constructed” reality. Matter has not been “constructed” by anybody, and it develops, never remaining the same. A part of this development is associated with conscious activity.

2.

{2} “‘Materialism’ (which implies belief in mind-independent reality, MIR) is Jones’ world view.”

Materialism is not a belief, it is an ideological position. Idealists can be satisfied with beliefs. Materialists have to participate in the practice.

{2} “Vulgar materialism seems to be more or less what others call naive realism”

Not at all. The distinction between the natural-science and metaphysical materialism has already been drawn in paragraph {1} of my comment C4 on TA15.

{2} “In response to an earlier communication from Jones, I have discussed (in TA1 R2) dialectical materialism, which he advocates”

That was a discussion of the common prejudice about dialectical materialism, rather than dialectical materialism itself. In January, I submitted a target article to KJF, concerning the difference between vulgar (metaphysical) and dialectical materialism, as well as their relation to idealism. It is a pity that it has not been distributed on the Forum before Muller’s R3.

I must also stress that, personally, I am not an advocate of dialectical materialism, since my views are much wider, though including dialectical materialism as one of the cornerstones.

3.

The typical trick of an idealist who is too shy to admit being an idealist is term substitution.

{3} “Secondly, both he and Nunn write that I am an ‘idealist’, which baffles me”... “My opinion, in contrast, is that: all ideas”...“are constructed inside experience, and thus secondary to it.”

One can replace the word “idea” with the word “experience”, but this will change nothing in the sense of the text. The point is whether one agrees that there is something beyond human thoughts, which determines them, – this is materialism, – or there is nothing but thoughts (“experiences”) – this is idealism.

More examples:

{6} “Other people or the world in general are not ‘my phantasies’, but they are part of constructed reality”

Constructed by whom?!! Surely, if I am your mental construction, you do not need to take me for serious, Mr. Muller!

{7} “Structuring reality does not mean inventing or imagining or hallucinating it, as Jones appears to assume”

Fine! First, you “build” reality as you please; then you “structure” this ephemeral construction and call that science! Like in the well-known gag: “It’s nineties, baby, and there ain’t no such thing as paranoia – it’s all real now.”

4.

In any argument, one has to omit much of what is implied, just to save space. However, such defaults may be misused:

{5} “The prevalence of materialism does not prove that it works; it fails in the study of mind-brain

relationships ('consciousness'), and needs replacement by a more helpful view."

Who said that materialism failed in studying consciousness? In fact, the only knowledge we have came from quite materialistic research, and never from solipsist mediation. Can idealism be called a "more helpful view" if it denies the very possibility of knowing anything?

Once again, the relationship between the body and the mind has little to do with the problem of consciousness.

5.

An example of the direct rejection of the other's position:

{5} "Physicists build reality like everyone else, by thinking, not by 'leaving material traces'"

One can never build anything by thinking. Let Muller try to do that at least once and show me the product. Let him tell the millions of homeless people that they can have roof over their heads by mere thinking about it! Let him tell the millions of suffering from hunger that they can be satiated by mere thought of bread! Even in science, let me know about at least one scientist who became scientist without being involved in the cultural process called science, by mere thinking of being a scientist...

6.

Both idealists and vulgar materialists get baffled by the existence of abstract ideas, up to the degree of claiming such ideas unrelated to anything at all:

{5} "Jones says that there is no idea that would not refer to matter: how does this apply to numbers?"

Numbers are an example of entirely matter-dependent abstraction. They do not exist outside a certain way of action, namely, counting (or, more generally, measurement). One can distinguish various kinds of numbers according to the operations admissible within the corresponding class; these operations refer to a specific area of human activity, which can only exist under certain economic and social conditions. It is poor understanding of this circumstance that causes many void debates about the "true" theory of numbers, or "incompleteness" of existing theories. Any theory is applicable within its own range of activities, and every theory is incomplete, since it cannot be applied to any activity at all.

7.

My attempts to extract rational grains from any position, however erroneous, should not be interpreted as a concession to idealism.

{9} "Jones wants to translate my formulations into a materialistic view"

In my C08, I only demonstrate that, even within idealism, there may be bright spots reflecting the realities of the world, social realities included. No thought should be neglected, since there can be no thought without material grounds for it.

{9} "He distinguishes 'objective' and 'productive' aspects of subjectivity: 'all one knows has already been 'adapted' to the human ways', and 'for singular things, their objective integrity can only be limited'. This I guess is as close as Jones comes to acknowledging that the mind builds reality."

Mind can never build reality. It is people who do that, and they have to do that in matter, not in their thoughts.

<http://unism.pjwb.org/kjf/index.htm>

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