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## SECTION 1: THERAPY

# The challenge of “And” – tolerating the undecidable

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**Purpose** – This paper has the purpose of discussing the phenomenon of two competing positions, which appear in philosophy and psychology in a similar way, and the emerging possibilities when both are seen as complementary.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The approach is to first point out the difficulty, which arises when both positions perceive each other as mutually exclusive and yet claim to fully describe reality. Then Ludwig Wittgenstein's attempt to end the conflict by drawing a line between what can be expressed in language and what is inexpressible is introduced. Finally it is shown how Heinz von Foerster tried to dissolve the argument between both positions by introducing the concept of “in principle undecidable questions”. From here the position of “and” is developed. The implications of this position as a possible way of ending (i.e. “and”-ing) the argument are explored and then related to psychotherapy.

**Findings** – The findings show how the position of “and” increases possibilities in psychotherapy and poses new challenges at the same time.

**Originality/value** – The position of “and” with its consequences is a new perspective in psychotherapy which can be useful to practitioners and researchers as well.

**Keywords** Cybernetics, Psychology, Sciences, Philosophical concepts

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

**Introduction: cybernetics of inspiration**

I was invited to write an article on how Heinz von Foerster influenced my thinking and work as a psychologist. At first it seemed difficult to answer that question, because I was looking for the beginning of this influence, a linear connection. I then realized that I experience my inspiration through Heinz von Foerster and his work more as some kind of “cybernetic process”. I was inspired, because something in his way of thinking felt familiar to me and at the same time influenced me, because his perspective shed new light on what was familiar. When I told Heinz how inspiring our conversations about my *Chronic Pain Project* at the Mental Research Institute (MRI, Palo Alto, California) were to me, he replied, in his kind Viennese manner, that inspiration is only possible if it is mutual.

Since the focus of this article is on Heinz von Foerster's influence on my thinking and work, this article does not have the intention of highlighting the relevant scientific discourse around the issues discussed here.

**Two complementary positions – first encounter**

The familiar aspect in Heinz von Foerster's thinking was the idea of two different positions of looking at the world; it was not only familiar, but also central to my own work. I had encountered these two positions in 1984, while studying philosophy.



My observation was that throughout the history of Western philosophy, there always had been an antagonism between two major ways of describing “reality”. At that time, I was still struggling with finding words to characterize those positions. I spoke of philosophical theories with an empiric criterion for meaning versus those with a non-empiric criterion. Heinz called these two positions “science” and “systemics” or “peep-hole position” and “part-of-the-world position” (von Foerster and Bröcker, 2002).

Even more familiar to me was Heinz von Foerster’s notion, that it is meaningless to argue, which of these two positions is “right”. Many years ago I had written a philosophical thesis (Hoffmann, 1985) on exactly that subject, focusing on Wittgenstein’s (1960) solution to this problem. I was intrigued by the question of how it was possible, that this fight had not made much progress over centuries, if any at all. The problem seemed to me, that both lines of philosophers have been claiming to describe and fully explain reality, but have been basing their theories on different criteria for what is meaningful and what is not. Even though both positions can be seen as complementary, they seem to perceive each other as mutually exclusive. Each philosophy had built up a system based on certain axioms and deduced certain propositions within this system as valid and invalid. If each party insists on being “right”, a conflict is unavoidable and a solution impossible, because the arguments are based on different positions, which are perceived as incompatible.

In this sense, a fight between two competing positions is not only unsolvable, but also meaningless. If I chose to believe in natural science as the only “right” way to gain knowledge about the world, and measure truth and false by empirical means, I can easily “prove” non-empiric statements as meaningless, but only within my own system. If – on the other hand – I believe the crucial knowledge about the world lies beyond empirically describable manifestations, a positivist perspective will seem to me reductionist and have missed the point.

### **Two complementary positions – Ludwig Wittgenstein’s perspective**

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1960) described exactly this problem of philosophy in his book “Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus” and tried to solve the fruitless argument of both positions. I will briefly describe Wittgenstein’s perspective in his Tractatus, since it was my link to Heinz von Foerster’s position. I am aware of the fact, that Wittgenstein later discarded his first language theory, but in my eyes his intention of clarifying what can be said “clearly” remained the same in his later work.

In the preface of the Tractatus, Wittgenstein sums up the meaning of his book: “What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent” (Wittgenstein, 1960, p. 27). Wittgenstein wants to lay down once and for all, what is expressible through language and what is not, because to him the philosophical problems are a consequence of imprecisions in our language. The use of meaningless sentences results in unclarities and problems, which actually are no problems.

Wittgenstein separates the expressible from the inexpressible, but at the same time does not attach much importance to the expressible itself. In claiming the worthlessness of knowing “how the world is” (Wittgenstein, 1960, p. 187), Wittgenstein turns against positivism, his own philosophy, as much as against metaphysics, which is concerned with the true character of the world behind its manifestations (Bachmann, 1953). To him positivism is only a method to determine

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what can be said, but it is not a worldview, as it is for his colleagues of the Vienna Circle (Bachmann, 1953). He does not try to interpret the world in one way or the other. Reality remains untouched. To Wittgenstein positivism can offer a valid description of our world, but at the same time positivism cannot explain the world. As an ideology, positivism is just as meaningless as metaphysics.

The fascinating aspect about Wittgenstein is that he incorporates the two extreme tendencies of the intellectual currents of the West: on the one hand his theory of language with its analytical method and empiristic-rational characteristics – reflecting the strict scientific ideal of the 20th century – on the other hand the mystical components of his thinking, which reach beyond scientific thinking. “There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical” (Wittgenstein, 1960, p. 187). Wittgenstein shows that science cannot contribute to the solution of the problems of life. Concerning all the existential questions like, e.g. the meaning of life, ethics, or God, we are referred to ourselves. We can say how the world is and how we experience the world, but we cannot draw any conclusions from that.

By determining what can be known and said and what cannot be known and therefore is inexpressible, he wants to end the fight between positivism and metaphysics once and for all. He does not get into the dualism of empiricism and metaphysics. The Tractatus does not want to determine the “speakable” with the intention of deducing the non-existence of the “unspeakable”. The definition of what can be said is to prevent inexpressible contents from being turned into something speakable.

Wittgenstein puts each philosophy in its place, so that a controversy cannot arise. Empiricism may represent the world accurately, but cannot make any statements about metaphysics, because the content of the latter is beyond our language and our thinking. Empiricism cannot draw any conclusions from its – neutral – representation of the world (even if it is complete) in terms of the existence or non-existence of metaphysical contents, because it cannot exclude any possibility (Wittgenstein, 1960, p. 39). Metaphysics, on the other hand, is condemned to silence, because “whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (Wittgenstein, 1960, p. 189). To Wittgenstein, there can be no such thing as theoretical metaphysics, because metaphysics cannot argue and try to express its content through language, but nevertheless its content stays untouched. Art does not argue. Art shows the inexpressible. Wittgenstein sees metaphysics as more related to art, than to science and draws the line.

### **Two complementary positions – Heinz von Foerster’s perspective**

As shown above, Wittgenstein tried to end the fight between those two different positions in philosophy, by making very clear what can be said and what is inexpressible. He tried to heal the conflict by giving science one place and metaphysical contents another. Whether this solution is useful or not, is beyond the scope of this article. Relevant to me in this context is the fact that Wittgenstein tried to make room for both positions. He acknowledged both sides and tried to find a place where both can be useful – in his eyes – and stop being destructive to each other in fights which are meaningless, because the arguments are based on undecidable propositions.

Heinz von Foerster does the same. He speaks about two different kinds of positions, which are “complementary” to each other (von Foerster and Bröcker, 2002): the “part-of-the-world” position (systemics) and the peep-hole position (science). Heinz describes the

peep-hole position as being “*apart from* the universe”, meaning “whenever I *look*, I’m looking as if through a peephole upon an unfolding universe” (von Foerster, 1990, p. 11). This is the classical position of an objective observer. The observer is able to look at the world uninfluenced by his own position. His characteristics do not influence the description of his observations and he is not influenced by the context (von Foerster and Bröcker, 2002). The complementary position is to feel as a “*part of* the universe”, meaning “whenever I *act*, I’m changing myself and the universe as well” (von Foerster, 1990, p. 11). Here one cannot separate oneself from the world. Objectivity is neither a goal nor seen as possible. These two positions are equivalent to those described by Wittgenstein: the position of empiricism or natural science and the position of metaphysics. In the one we are observers of a reality outside of ourselves (empiricism), in the other we are a part of the world, not apart of it (metaphysics). These two positions have very different implications and consequences.

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### **Heinz von Foerster – dissolving the fight through “in principle undecidable”**

Heinz has the same intention as Wittgenstein, but takes a more elegant route to solve the problem. He ends the fight between these two positions by stating, that the question which of them is “right” or “wrong” is an in principle undecidable question. In principle undecidable questions are questions, which can only be answered by us subjectively. “There is no external necessity that forces us to answer such questions one way or another. We are free! The complement to necessity is not chance, it is choice! *We can choose who we wish to become when we have decided on an in principle undecidable question*” (von Foerster, 1990, p. 10). When one decides one way or the other in answering such a question, one makes a decision. The confusion arises, when people are not aware of their freedom of choice in answering such a question. People answer these questions without noticing that they are making a – subjective – decision and then claim to “possess the real truth”. Heinz says: “Without noticing it, we constantly decide questions that are in principle undecidable. That is why people always get into each other’s hair, for everyone claims ‘I am right’” (Bröcker, 2003, p. 53). The conflict is based on the lack of awareness about that freedom of choice. Heinz wants to make people aware of the fact that they are making a decision, because then they could – if they wanted to – maybe also make a different decision. Heinz calls this human activity, where undecidable questions are decided a “metaphysical activity” (von Foerster and Bröcker, 2002).

Only the undecidable questions can be decided by us, because the decidable questions have already been decided. Decidable questions have been asked in an area, where the rules of the game have been determined. Philosophically speaking, decidable propositions can be deduced from the axioms of a certain logical system as valid or invalid. We can say: “this is false” or “this is true”. The axioms are the rules of the game, they are semantically independent statements, and they are the base of the system. (von Foerster and Bröcker, 2002). But, where does this base, the axioms, itself come from? Since axioms are propositions that cannot be deduced from the system, they must be invented. The inventor made a decision, a personal decision which propositions he wants to base his theory on. Heinz would say that those propositions in a system, which cannot be deduced from this system, are “undecidable propositions” (von Foerster and Bröcker, 2002). Heinz agrees with the Vienna Circle in saying that

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“axioms are rules of a game that one invents (...)” (Bröcker, 2003, p. 55). In Heinz’s sense, a metaphysicist is “one who decides for himself questions that are in principle undecidable” (Bröcker, 2003, p. 57).

Heinz also agrees with Wittgenstein in terms of the inexpressible. There are some things which cannot be expressed through language itself, “but rather, through my speaking, these things occur” (Bröcker, 2003, p. 53). In his book with Monika (von Foerster and Bröcker, 2002), he wants to express ethics “implicitly” in what he says. Heinz recognized, that “the problem of articulating ethics had to do with the limits of language or with the structure of language” (Bröcker, 2003, p. 52). In terms of the inexpressible, Heinz suggests, similar to Wittgenstein, to use metaphors to show those contents, which cannot be substantiated through deduction and causality.

### **The phenomenon of in principle undecidable questions – the position of “and”**

The situation described so far is the following: There seems to be a tendency towards two central positions when looking at the world or so-called “reality”. These two positions are complementary but perceive each other as mutually exclusive. Therefore supporters of each position have been – and still are – again and again in conflict with each other. The attempted solution to solve this conflict has been a more or less heated exchange of logical arguments. The atmosphere of this fight shows up already in titles such as “The defeat of metaphysics through logical analysis of language” by Carnap a member of the Vienna Circle (Carnap, 1975). These arguments are, as shown above, meaningless, since they are based on undecidable propositions. Who is “right” or “wrong” is an in principle undecidable question. So, why argue? Heinz says, that “very few people see that there exists a freedom when one gives an answer to in principle unanswerable, undecidable questions; that you make a decision when you decide either so, so, so or so” (Bröcker, 2003, p. 53). Therefore he wants to make people aware of the freedom they have and – unknowingly – also make use of. Does this mean there would be no more arguments between those two positions, if everyone involved would be aware of the personal decision they made in terms of their position? My experience is that people have great trouble with accepting the idea, that their position is based on a personal decision and not on the “truth”. Whether this concerns personal matters or academic matters does not make much difference.

What makes the phenomenon of “in principle undecidable questions” so hard to accept? Why does it seem so difficult to accept the idea, that both positions are possible and maybe even useful? Wanting to be “right”, the position of “either-or”, seems almost ingrained into human nature and incompatible with a position of leaving room for both positions, the position of “and”. We just have to look at personal conflicts and observe ourselves. Holding the own position and that of the other simultaneously as possible ways of seeing the situation without trying to dominate the other through logical arguments is difficult. What happens to us, when we say: “This is only the way I see it, nothing more, nothing less”? What happens, on the other hand, when we say: “This is the only way to see it, I am right and you are wrong”? It seems so rare, that people try to understand the position of the other in order to broaden the own scope of vision. This might still seem fairly trivial in personal conflicts, but what happens to us, when we take the position of “and” a step further, into our professional lives? What does it feel like to accept a position, which is different or even incompatible with mine as

another possible description of “reality”, especially in academia? How do I react? What happens, when we take it even another step further, into politics? Imagine a politician in her election campaign taking a position of “and”. How would potential voters feel about this politician?

Now, after having looked at the possible implications which come along with the position of “and”, I would like to raise some questions about the implications of such a position on psychology and psychotherapy. Raising questions around this subject seems more fruitful to me than providing answers, since questions might stimulate new ideas.

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### **The position of “and” in psychology and psychotherapy**

With increasing popularity of systems theory, cybernetics and constructivism in the field of psychology and psychotherapy, a tendency arose to discount so-called “linear thinking” as “old fashioned” and “no longer appropriate”. Now there was a conflict between the medical model and the modern systemic model. Linear thinking was described as “reductionist” whereas the systemic perspective held a new promise: The possibility of seeing the “whole”.

What motivates many psychologists to the position of “either-or” when it comes to the medical and the systemic model? And not only between those models but also within the systemic model are different approaches discussed in an “either-or” fashion. In the best case the position of “either-or” would be useful in terms of effective treatment. Is this really so? Can we really say this approach is better than another? I would say it is an in principle undecidable question. One could argue now, that the effectiveness of the treatment would decide which approach is better. But, how do we measure effectiveness? There are many different ways of measuring effectiveness. Each way is based on a certain position. If I like to look at the world through a “peephole”, as Heinz says, I will design a different experiment than when I consider myself as part of the world.

“To decide who is right is total nonsense. One could, of course, play a game: Design experiments that shall decide, whether the peephole man or the fellow man, i.e., the one who plays along, who takes part, is right. I, however, maintain that the answer to this question is already contained in the experiment. Therefore I maintain that experiments that are supposed to decide independently of this decision do not exist . . .” (Heinz von Foerster in Bröcker, 2003, p. 56).

Where does this leave us, as psychologists and practitioners? If the position of “either-or” is not really useful, could the position of “and” be of better use? This would encompass that the medical model and the systemic model are both possible ways of looking at human problems. Maybe each model is useful in a different area? If I, for example, want to reduce complexity, reductionism is useful. When I am more interested in understanding the “whole”, a systemic perspective might get me further. The position of “and” would open the possibility to use the medical and the systemic model in a flexible way, hence increasing the number of choices, but also challenging me to decide which model is more useful at which point. Taking a position of “and” involves flexibility, having choices and making decisions. When external guidelines for these decisions are lacking, the position of “either-or” frees us from having to take responsibility for our choices.

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I, for example, wonder if acute problems could be distinguished from chronic problems. Maybe a linear perspective might be helpful for acute problems, because their degree of complexity could be considered as compatible with such an approach. A systemic perspective, on the other hand, might be more compatible with the degree of complexity of chronic problems. The question now would be: when are certain approaches useful and where are their limits? Different psychotherapeutic models could be helpful in different areas, with different problems and different clients. What makes it hard for a systemic therapist to accept the idea, that, for example, psychoanalysis can be useful? How do I feel, as a psychotherapist, when my approach is one of many other possibilities?

### **Implications of the position of “and” for psychotherapeutic practice**

What consequences arise from the position of “and” for my psychotherapeutic practice? I would like to add here, that my work as a psychotherapist has also been strongly influenced by the position of the MRI Brief Therapy Model, and that I use the term “attempted solution” in the sense of this model (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1974).

Psychotherapists deal with human problems. We work with people who struggle with in principle undecidable questions. Crucial to me is that I cannot see myself as an expert for my client’s in principle undecidable problems. There is no “right” and “wrong”, there are only the personal decisions and perspectives of my clients. If I do not see myself as an expert for my client’s unanswerable questions, my focus shifts from wanting to teach my client to see his “problem” through my eyes, as some approaches do, to providing some kind of framework where the client can become aware of his own position. When he realizes that he has a choice in terms of the perspective he is taking, he can make a different choice if he feels inclined to do so.

Therapy then becomes a place, where people, who have got stuck on some kind of problem, find assistance in answering the undecidable in a way, which they experience as beneficial. Problems only exist if they are perceived as such. The same is true for solutions. From this perspective, methods appear as useful, which help people decide the undecidable while keeping the therapist’s influence at a minimum. Clients often think about solutions to their problems on a “common-sense” level, in a more or less logical-analytical way and get stuck. When the client is encouraged to shift to a “systemic” perspective, new solutions can arise. In my own work as a therapist, this is achieved for example through working with the clients visual presentations of attempted solutions. Crucial is, that the clients images are neither influenced nor interpreted by the therapist. The only purpose is to encourage a shift in perspective, so that the client’s choices for new solutions are increased. Through this shift in perspective, the client can “look” at his own solution in a new way and change it. The therapist is an expert for the process, the client is an expert for the content. When solutions are developed out of the client’s position by the client himself, the better they “fit” into his own position and the sooner the client’s autonomy is “restored”. If “therapy” is still a good name for this kind of process, is another question.

Whatever the cause of the clients problem is becomes irrelevant because this too is an in principle unanswerable question. The consequence is that the client’s perspective becomes central to the process of therapeutic conversation. It is not important what is “true”, it is important what the client accepts as his reality. The client sets the goal for

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therapy and determines the success and the end of the process. Without a norm for “truth” or “right”, the client keeps the responsibility for his problem.

A position of “either-or” would have different implications. The therapist might give more advice, provide some guidelines and take more responsibility for the client’s problem and its solution. This too can be a useful approach. In my experience, some clients also prefer this approach. A therapist with the position of “and” might be flexible enough to provide such a complementary position. Denying the clients request would convey the message “what you want is not appropriate”. In addition to decreasing the therapist’s “number of possibilities” in terms of his interventions, it would also give the client the feeling of inadequateness.

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### **The “and” – a conclusion**

Heinz said: “Act always so as to increase the number of choices” (von Foerster, 1990, p. 13). In this sense the position of “and” would be of advantage and appears as a fertile position. The challenge is that such a position requires flexibility. Flexibility again requires freedom. And freedom requires responsibility, because decisions have to be made. In order to make decisions, I need to tolerate insecurity and uneasiness. Personal decisions about in principle undecidable questions can evoke insecurity since there are no external guidelines which tell us what is “right” or “wrong”. We create our own world. We are thrown back onto ourselves. Whatever we decide, we are responsible, because we are free. This freedom of choice can be experienced as liberating by some people and as a burden by others when the resulting responsibility feels uncomfortable.

The advantage of an “either-or” position would be that flexibility vanishes and at some point stagnation sets in, with the bonus of increased security and predictability. Freedom gets lost, but so does responsibility. When there is a “law”, which tells us what is “right”, we have some sort of guideline for our behaviour and thinking. Heinz speaks of objectivity “as a popular device for avoiding responsibility” (von Foerster, 1990, p. 11). A position of “either-or” makes it easier to find an identity. From an “and” position it is difficult to identify yourself with only one of the poles. To find and maintain an identity with an awareness of the undecidable is a challenge.

Maybe the position that the own position is a subjective choice, a personal answer to an in principle undecidable question, can soften the “fronts” between different perspectives. Keeping in mind that this too is only a possible position among others, maybe instead of polemic monologues and logically armed arguments fertile dialogues and tolerance of the “other” would then have room to emerge. Whether the freedom of choice and the resulting responsibility make the lack of security worthwhile is, again, an in principle undecidable question.

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