Philosophy is deceitful above all things. On non-dualising speech, the duck-rabbit and JT LeRoy

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is not to present an argument of its own, but to pose questions. The questions arise from considerations that avoid what Josef Mitterer calls *dualising*: seeking alignment between linguistic statements and the world by referring to objects from a 'beyond of discourse'. The paper is intended to clarify which questions become relevant when this alignment is no longer sought. I address an argument that Mitterer develops in relation to Wittgenstein's discussion of aspect-seeing and apply it to the discourse about the US-American writer JT LeRoy and the hoax associated with him. When it is no longer asked, who JT LeRoy *really* is, then questions asked may pursue change rather than truth.

Introduction

The two books of Josef Mitterer, *Das Jenseits der Philosophie* (1992; *The Beyond of Philosophy*) and *Die Flucht aus der Beliebigkeit* (2001; *The Flight From Contingency*), offer a criticism of philosophy. Mitterer claims that different philosophical traditions share common, unquestioned presuppositions, and he critically reconstructs how philosophical questions have come about, shaped by the way that philosophy has been practiced thus far. His critical reconstruction is threefold, addressing: (1) the dichotomous differentiations at the heart of any philosophical school, such as the dichotomies between statement and object, appearance and reality, etc., (2) the orientation of philosophy towards the truth and (3) the idea of reference, i.e., the orientation of thought or speech to the object of thought or speech (Mitterer 2011a: 21–24, §10). Based on this reconstruction, Mitterer introduces the 'non-dualising speech', a way of dealing with philosophical questions that avoids these three commonalities.

The common aim for diverse philosophical traditions is to align what the philosophers of this tradition say with how the world is, as understood within the respective tradition. This presupposes a distinction between two realms: language on the one hand and the world on the other. For Mitterer, philosophers themselves introduced this distinction. In order to argue, to introduce truth as a regulative principle, the distinction between language and world was created, and thus Mitterer labels his reconstruction 'dualist philosophy'. His alternative avoids distinguishing between language and

world, it is not oriented towards the truth, and its direction of thinking is not referential. Therefore, Mitterer calls this way to philosophise 'non-dualising speech'.

Accepting Mitterer's criticism means to change what philosophy strives for. The pursuit of truth is superseded by a pursuit of change (Mitterer 2011: 86, §97). Questions about the relation between object and statement or certain claims about the truth of a proposition may be unmasked as dualist, in a similar manner as logical empiricism argues that the logical analysis of language can reveal certain statements as meaningless pseudo-statements. For Mitterer (2011: 83ff., §§88ff.), the dualist response to a question about the truth of a proposition is made by referring to what he calls the 'beyond of the discourse' – the true world, objective facts, etc. –, the extra-linguistic realm: "The 'language-distinct' reality is the beyond of discourse" (Mitterer 2011: 86, §99). Philosophers who belong to the same tradition, speak the same language and share the same standards may share common views about the beyond of discourse, but others may not. The incommensurability thesis and the anti-metaphysical stance of logical empiricism echo in Mitterer's claims about the beyond of discourse.

Whereas logical empiricism presents linguistic philosophy as a research programme with a specific methodology and a promise of eliminating metaphysics, Mitterer does not do so. He emphasises that he does "not want to establish the Non-dualizing Speech [...], the '*pursuit of change,*' as a new paradigm; indeed, one of my concerns is to *prevent the establishment of paradigms*" (Mitterer 2011: 13). An aim is achieved "when the dualist understands my construction as a *re*construction" (Mitterer 2011a: 35, §28). Non-dualising speech is also "developed only to the extent necessary to be able to reconstruct the dichotomous distinctions between language and reality, description and object, and their role in philosophical discourse" (Mitterer 2011a: 31, §22). This seems to suggest that the pursuit of change merely aims at reconstructing dualist philosophy.

Pursuing change instead of truth can be understood in at least two ways: First, as a critical endeavour that does not aim to produce positive statements but continuously draws attention to dualisations. This approach is similar to Wittgenstein's claim in §6.53 of the *Tractatus,* regarding the "correct method in

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philosophy", namely "to say nothing except what can be said, [...] and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions" (TLP §6.53), but raising one's voice only when someone argues in a dualising way. Ernst von Glasersfeld (2008: 123), for example, proposes this view, writing that "Mitterer is the proponent of a [...] conceptual revision"; in the German translation, Glasersfeld suggests that Mitterer seeks to "ausrotten [...], was er 'dualistische Argumentation' nennt" (Glasersfeld 2011: 125). In this sense, non-dualising speech raises only one question: Is someone committing dualising acts?

A different understanding of the 'pursuit of change' is proposed by Sebastian Kletzel, who, drawing on Richard Rorty, suggests that such a pursuit might appeal to individuals he calls 'edifying ironists' – those who hope "that no absolutization of a discourse will ever be successful but that there is an ongoing growth of possibilities" (Kletzl 2017: 70) and embody this hope in their philosophical behaviour. Katharina Neges (2022: 113–114) compares dualising and non-dualising speech by analogy to two different languages: "If we speak in a non-dualizing way, we become unreceptive to ontological questions, they sound strange to us, and their meaning cannot be expressed precisely" (Neges 2022: 114). The change pursued is then a language-switch that renders certain expressions obsolete – i.e., philosophically uninteresting – and sparks interest in new ones. In this sense, non-dualising speech is a practise that does not pose a specific question but aims for change and openness.

However, Mitterer's effort to make argumentation transparent instead of transcendent (Mitterer 2011a: 35, §28), which is given as a kind of programmatic slogan, and his claim that "the decision for a different philosophy is always also a decision for different problems" (Mitterer 2011: 121), suggest that different, perhaps even new, problems may arise when arguing non-dualistically. The following examination of Wittgenstein and the discourse surrounding JT LeRoy is an attempt to pose such different problems. It is intended to illustrate how the dualising consideration of a problem leads to familiar questions of canonised philosophy, and to offer an alternative.

Wittgenstein describes the duck-rabbit

Mitterer draws on three examples from section XI in part II of the *Philosophical Investigations*. In these examples, Wittgenstein examines cases in which an object is seen as something else: a triangle can be seen as a triangular hole, a mountain, an arrow, etc. (PI 2009: 210f.), children play a game in which "they say of a chest[,] [...] that it is now a house" (PI 2009: 217), and the duck-rabbit (PI 2009: 204ff.). In the context of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein uses these cases to discuss aspect-seeing and investigates a use of 'to see' that seems to be both visual experience and thought (PI 2009: 207). Noticing an aspect of something means cognitively acknowledging that something has not changed and yet seeing it differently (PI 2009: 203). This phenomenon can be observed, for example, in puzzle-pictures such as the duck-rabbit figure. Mitterer is interested in how Wittgenstein uses language to introduce the language games, i.e. how Wittgenstein describes the relation between the report of visual experience and the description of the visually experienced object.

For Mitterer (2011: 17, §6), "Wittgenstein defends the view that we 'see an object according to its interpretation'". Although this is not a literal quotation from Wittgenstein, it is in line with what can be found in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Examining the use of 'to see' in the case of the duck-rabbit, Wittgenstein notes that it would be odd to say, "Now I see it as a picture-rabbit" (PI 2009: 205), referring to both the visual experience ('picture-rabbit') and the perceived object ('it'). He states that we use 'to see' just to describe what we see: "I say 'It's a rabbit'. Not 'Now it's a rabbit'" (PI 2009: 205), and later asks "how is it possible to *see* an object according to an *interpretation?*" (PI 2009: 211)

In Wittgenstein's discussion of continuous seeing and dawning of an aspect, Mitterer (2011: 21, §6) points out that a sentence "involves a contradiction". This concerns the second sentence in this passage: "The picture might have been shown me, without my ever seeing in it anything but a rabbit. [...] I may, then, have seen the duck-rabbit simply as a picture-rabbit from the first" (PI 2009: 204). For Mitterer, the statement about having seen a picture-rabbit 'from the first' makes it impossible to also mention the duck-rabbit. Either the

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picture-rabbit had been seen or the duck-rabbit. Wittgenstein either describes a "visual (language) experience that did not occur" (Mitterer 2011: 21, §6), or contradicts his claim that an object is seen according to its interpretation.

Wittgenstein's discussion of the duck-rabbit is given as an example for "the endeavor to arrive at interpretations, perceptions, descriptions, and observations of something, where this something is not itself supposed to be an interpretation, perception, description, or observation" (Mitterer 2011: 23, §6). It illustrates that discourses about interpretation, and even the claim that objects are seen according to their interpretation, presuppose that there are things without interpretation, i.e. things of a language-independent realm, from a beyond of discourse. This is not just a criticism of realism, but of the practise of referring to language-independent object when opinions differ, and of the belief to have the right standards for seeing things 'how they really are'.

In case of conflicts, dualists argue and justify their claims by referring to the objects from a beyond of discourse. This reference is made possible by a dualist "*apriorization of the object*" (Mitterer 2011: 81, §80). A person's own opinion, disguised as an objective measure, thus becomes the standard for judgement and comparison. Mitterer's suggestion for avoiding this is the introduction of the notions 'so far' and 'from now on': "The description of the object constitutes/forms together with the object it describes a 'new' object of further description. Denoting the object of a description means denoting and prescribing a description *so far* that is supposed to be continued in a description *from now on* and to be changed into a new object for further description(s)" (Mitterer 2001: 46, §21). Instead of committing the dualising act of comparing linguistic statements with an alleged language-independent object from a beyond of discourse, non-dualising speech continues the discourse without reference to anything non-linguistic. Describing, comparing, agreeing, dissenting, objecting to statements, all occur within the discourse. Different descriptions repeatedly form and change objects of the discourse.

Modelling a non-dualistic discourse is challenging. Examples of how a description-from-now-on continues a description-so-far are often illustrative, such as continuing /a table/ or /an apple/ (Mitterer uses /execution marks/ to indicate that a description performed is an object of a description, cf. Mitterer 2011: 43, §14). I consider it an open question what problems arise when a

discourse is carried out in a non-dualising way. Are different problems likely to emerge? In the next section, I investigate this question by considering the case of JT LeRoy.

The case of JT LeRoy

JT LeRoy is the author of three books, the novel *Sarah* (2001), the short story collection *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things* (2001), the novella *Harold's End* (2005), and several shorter contributions published in literary anthologies and magazines in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Handy 2008). LeRoy writes about growing up with his drug-addicted mother, who worked as a prostitute at truck stops and cross-dressed him as a girl to attract men, selling him for sexual and physical abuse. His writings tell grim tales of trauma, rape and misery; yet they bear witness to survival and the power of literature in overcoming traumatic experience.

LeRoy only communicated by telephone and email, avoiding face-to-face contact with others. He did not make public appearances until 2001, when he gave his first readings in San Francisco, wearing sunglasses and a blonde wig. He then quickly became a cult figure, with several film and music celebrities among his fans. Only three years later, LeRoy promoted Asia Argento's adaptation of his second book at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival. (Beachy 2005; Handy 2008)

In 2006, *The New York Times* published the article *The Unmasking of JT Leroy: In Public, He's a She* (St. John 2006), stating that the literary works of LeRoy were written by Laura Albert, a 1965 born New York author and musician. While this had been claimed earlier (Beachy 2005), it remained unclear, who the person with the wig and sunglasses was, as LeRoy and Albert had been seen together. St. John (2006) revealed that this person was Savannah Knoop, Albert's partner's sister, who dressed up as LeRoy while Albert handled communication via email and phone. St. John's claims were confirmed to be true.

'The Unmasking of JT Leroy' turned out to be both a scoop for the public and a shock to the many (including famous) friends who had trusted LeRoy. Above all, it created confusion. Even after the reveal, director Gus Van Sant, a close friend LeRoy, is quoted as saying, "I still kind of believe that he exists, just not in the flesh" (Handy 2008). In an effort to resolve the confusion, questions

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about 'the real JT LeRoy' were raised, about 'the truth' and even about 'the real truth' as, for example, Loontjens (2008) notes: "LeRoy's hoax shows that the desire to know the real truth suddenly becomes very pressing when what was believed to be 'real' reveals itself as pure fiction."

There are at least three possible answers to question who 'the real JT LeRoy' is:

(1) The most common answer is that there is simply no real JT LeRoy. This position was used in court in 2007, when Laura Albert was sued for fraud: "A film production company has sued Ms. Albert, saying that a contract signed with JT Leroy for the rights to make a feature film of 'Sarah' should be null and void, for the simple reason that JT Leroy does not exist" (Feuer 2007). The production company won the case.

(2) During the trial, Albert stated that LeRoy was a coping mechanism and that he was real for her: "Albert told jurors [...] that she had been assuming male identities for decades as a coping mechanism for psychological problems brought on by her sexual abuse as a child. To her, she said, LeRoy was real" (Westfeldt 2007). She claimed that, "It was more like two computer programs running in my head. There was him, and there was me" (Feuer 2007a). For Albert, LeRoy fulfilled a psychological function. He allowed her to say things that she would not have said otherwise, similar as Falco for Hans Hölzel or Hannah Montana for Miley Cyrus.

Savannah Knoop, who made the public appearances as LeRoy in disguise, offers a similar account. In their memoir *Girl Boy Girl* (2008), Knoop writes about being LeRoy, noting "I feel like it's taking over my life" (Knoop 2008: 155), and reflects on their different body perception while being LeRoy (Knoop 2008: 202). After the unmasking, Knoop stated that LeRoy had served as a shortcut for expressing their queer identity (Crummy 2019).

(3) Scholarly works have examined LeRoy in the context of postmodern theories of authorship and gender studies: Caroline Hamilton acknowledges that LeRoy is a hoax but claims that "[a]uthors are made, not born", and uses LeRoy as an example for her claim that an author is "a collective identity, formed by writers, readers and the publishing industry" (Hamilton 2010: 37). Loontjens (2008) claims that "JT LeRoy still is the functional author", even after the unmasking. In this sense, Pil and Galia Kollectiv investigate the textual and

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physical manifestations of the body of JT LeRoy, not denying his existence, but claiming that he 'did not exist properly' ("Despite never having properly existed, JT Leroy had a lung"; Kollectiv and Kollectiv 2018: 254).

It is clear that the three answers are all plausible yet mutually incompatible, and this may now be considered as a result: A philosophical consideration reveals that multiple answers are possible, that none of them is true, and this settles the question about 'the real JT LeRoy'. This assumption can be juxtaposed with Mitterer's examination of the duck-rabbit. Wittgenstein's investigation of aspect-seeing presupposes that the figure is a duck-rabbit. The picture-rabbit and the picture-duck are then introduced as aspects of the figure that had been described as what it is (a duck-rabbit). The three answers to the question of who 'the real JT LeRoy' is can be seen as interpretations (i.e., aspects) of a state of affairs (i.e., the literary hoax): Although we know that LeRoy is a hoax, we can still interpret him in various ways. Interpreting him, for example, as a postmodern author presupposes that he is a hoax. Claiming that the philosophical meta-position explains the complicated matter in its totality, or 'as it is', uses relativistic measures to explain how lawyers, literary scholars or philosophers perceive the matter, allowing each group to assert that LeRoy does (not) exist in a particular way. This approach is following the same path as assuming the answer (1), (2) or (3) to be true. Assuming this philosophical consideration to be true would be, I am borrowing the title from one of LeRoy's books, 'deceitful above all things'.

A case for non-dualism could be made by considering a statement from LeRoy (it is Albert speaking as LeRoy, who does not and cannot speak for himself). He was more concerned with avoiding the establishment of an identity than committing to one, especially with regard to his gender: "When I wrote *Sarah*, I was male-identified, and now I'm not. I don't know what I am. [...] So many people have claimed me as their own, so I guess the best thing is to confuse them all." (Press 2001: 34)

Several papers explore the relations between Butler's ideas about gender and non-dualising speech (Derra 2008; Weiss 2013; Cyzman-Eid 2023). Aleksandra Derra, for example, writes that Butler's performative conception of the subject is opposed to the idea of the subject "as an entity having a certain foundation" (Derra 2008: 208f.), claiming that feminist philosophy and politics

can proceed without an ontological commitment to what a woman is or a consensus on the nature of female subjectivity. With a performative approach to identity, a description-from-now-on changes the established description-so-far, for example that of /female subjectivity/, or of /JT LeRoy/. LeRoy embodies a refusal to be pinned down, seeking to be interpreted through his performance – as text (Albert), as appearance (Knoop) –, being aware of the confusion.

Knoop's memoir was adapted into a film, entitled *JT LeRoy* (2018). In one scene, LeRoy (played by actress Kristen Stewart, who plays Savannah Knoop, who plays LeRoy) is asked whether his story is real, whether he actually wrote the books and whether he is who he says that he is, and s/he responds with a statement that is paradigmatic of non-dualising speech: "JT's whoever you want him to be". There is no foundation of JT LeRoy that somehow determines who he is. Being whoever someone wants him to be shifts the responsibility for how he is to be described to those who actually describe him. For Mitterer, this is the case with every object. What we say is not static, but in flux. What is called 'the real *x*', is how people believe *x* to be described.

Talking about /JT LeRoy/ continuously alters what we are talking about. According to Neges (2022), our convictions, i.e. commonly shared moral beliefs, determine how we talk about (moral) problems, and which (moral) problems we talk about. A change of our moral convictions goes along with changing ourselves: We become another person by choosing differently. Neges argues that certain conflicts should not be carried out over an object, but over the convictions that are used to describe that object (Neges 2022: 192–204). However, I may also retain my convictions while altering the description / LeRoy is performance/ to /LeRoy is not a performance but an author/. Nevertheless, this case addresses convictions, or rather standards, and does raise questions: Is it necessary to adopt different standards in order to understand a different position? Do different standards lead to incommensurable descriptions? Can descriptions change standards? How do standards change? Do new interpretations require new standards? Such questions can only be asked when it is accepted that the things we talk about are not permanent, but in flux.

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