

The Part-of-the-World Position of Heinz von Foerster

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Abstract

Among many other fields such as that of learning and teaching, the that of management, etc., Heinz von Foerster has been of enormous influence on the development of systemic family therapy. Paul Watzlawick, for example, was very much influenced by Heinz von Foerster's thinking and has in his own work, in his writings and his lectures about family therapy and philosophy, often referred to Heinz's ideas, particularly those concerning constructivism, cognition, communication and second-order cybernetics. Today, many family therapists around the world refer to Heinz von Foerster's insights. This paper sheds light on the position of Heinz von Foerster in the field of psychotherapy

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Hello, I am Monika Bröcker from Germany. I will give a presentation about Heinz von Foerster.

I assume that most of you knew or have heard of Heinz von Foerster. And I assume that you will agree with me that it is very hard to describe who Heinz von Foerster was.

He described himself as being “without discipline”. By this ambiguous statement, he meant on the one hand that he didn’t belong to just one academic discipline. Instead, he was a trans-disciplinarian. On the other hand, he meant that he didn’t care much about traditional, conventional, or orthodox concepts and preconceived notions. Instead, he liked to turn things around, inside-out and upside-down.

Heinz von Foerster was born in Vienna, Austria in 1911. Originally a physicist and mathematician, he became a leading thinker in the fields of cybernetics, self-organization, and systemics.

He considered himself as a systemicist rather than as a scientist, and thus drew a distinction between systemics and science.

The word “science” comes from the Latin word “scientia”, which is derived from the Indo-European root “skei”, and refers to activities such as “separating”, “distinguishing”, “taking apart”.

Among the words that are derived from “skei” are for example “schism” or “schizophrenia”, and, as Heinz liked to point out, also “shit”, for it is something one wants to separate oneself from. And, as I already mentioned, the word “science” is derived from this root too, because in science one draws distinctions between things.

Traditionally, in sciences one focuses on details and then studies the details of the details. This is called reductionism. One reduces a complicated problem by taking it apart, and then taking apart the parts of the parts. The nice thing about reductionism is that it always has a solution. One can continue to take things apart until one finally understands the whole thing. Unfortunately, however, one actually doesn’t understand the whole thing. In reductionism, the connection, the interrelations between the parts are separated again and again and thus they get lost.

Now, how does “systemics” come in? As complementary terms to “separating”, “distinguishing”, “taking apart”, Heinz von Foerster proposed to look at terms such as “putting together”, “unifying”, “identifying”. For these terms of “togetherness” comes from the Greek root “hen”, which means “one” the word “syn” or “sym”, which we use when we talk about sympathy, symphony, synthesis, etc. From “syn” also comes the word “system”. A system is something, which we put together. So, as a structure of thinking, which is complementary to scientific thinking, Heinz proposed “systemics”, which through putting together, through synchronizing, through creating a symphony from different insights leads to a viewpoint, which couldn’t be reached by reductionism, the systemic perspective.

Among many other fields such as the field of learning and teaching, the field of management, etc., Heinz von Foerster tremendously influenced the development of systemic family therapy. Paul Watzlawick, for example, was very much influenced by Heinz von Foerster’s thinking and has in his own work, in his writings and his lectures about family therapy and philosophy often referred to Heinz’s ideas, particularly those concerning constructivism, cognition, communication and second-order cybernetics. Today, many family therapists around the world like to refer to Heinz von Foerster’s insights.

Heinz von Foerster died in October of 2002 at age 90 but his legacy will live on and it's up to us to continue to develop the systemic viewpoint further – in therapy and other fields.

I first met Heinz in 1997 in Berlin, Germany where he was on a lecture tour. At the end of his last lecture in a lecture series, he showed a movie about his work and life, and his home in Pescadero, California where he had moved in 1975 after his retirement from the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. And he said: "Should fate bring one of you into the neighborhood of San Francisco, come visit me and my wife Mai for a cup of tea and a piece of apricot pie".

Well, I thought that this was a very nice invitation. And since I was not only interested in finding an excuse to live in California but also fascinated with Brief Therapy, I decided to go there to visit the Mental Research Institute, the MRI in Palo Alto and Heinz.

From 1998 till 2002, I participated in MRI's Brief Therapy Center. During that time, I also worked closely with Heinz.

In 2002, Heinz and I completed a four-year-long book project. The book is about Heinz's ethical and his overall position and about his autobiography. It's called "Part of the World".

In the remaining 20 minutes, which I have for my presentation today, I will highlight a few key points from this book, which I consider as essential for Heinz's ethical viewpoint and which in my opinion could be relevant for therapy.

As I said, the book is about ethics. It's about Heinz von Foerster's position, which is his position of considering himself as part of the world.

Metaphysics is an important part of Heinz' position. According to Heinz, the metaphysical activity is the activity with which we decide in principle undecidable questions. "Only the undecidable questions, *we* can decide." For all decidable questions have already been decided. For example, the question, "Is 2 x 2 four or five?" can be decided because the rules of mathematics have been accepted.

There is freedom of choice when one answers an in principle undecidable question. With the freedom of choice arises the need to take responsibility for one's actions.

Heinz favorite example for undecidable questions is the following: "Am I *apart from* the universe or am I *a part of* the universe?"

Option number one: I am *apart from* the universe. Heinz called this position the peephole position. We can imagine the peephole-position like this: On the one hand, there is the world. On the other hand, there is an observer who is apart from the world and kind of looks through a peephole onto the world and reports what he sees there. He could say: "I stand outside the world and observe the world and the happenings in the world totally uninfluenced by my positions, my preferences, my likes and dislikes".

This position also underlies the idea of objectivity, which says that the characteristics of the observer shall not enter the description of the observation. This idea of objectivity is predominant in the scientific worldview and thus in academia.

Ernst von Glasersfeld likes to quote Heinz von Foerster with the following statement: "Objectivity is the delusion that observations could be made without an observer".

Option number two: "I am *a part of* the universe: This observer could say: "Whatever I do, I do onto the world, and whatever the world does it does onto me." This is the position, which Heinz adopted for himself: "I am part of the world. When I change, the universe changes with me because I am a part of the universe".

Now, a main question I had when I first started working with Heinz was that of how he had arrived to this position of considering himself as part of the world. I wanted to know where this position had come from; how Heinz had derived it from his cybernetic and systems theories. So I asked him: "Where does your position come from?"

A main idea of mine was to give this ethical principle a foundation, a scientific basis, a fundament and thus enrich it with content. I wanted to support this position with a theoretical basis – perhaps in order to justify or defend it.

At first, Heinz seemed to avoid answering my question. Then, since I didn't give up and kept insisting, he finally came up with an explanation. His answer to my question came as a big surprise to me.

First, he said that the position could not be derived from any theory. That it was a fundamental position, which he had adopted for himself. And that as such, it would stand in the beginning.

This was diametrically opposed to what I had assumed. I had thought that the position had its basis in the viewpoint that everything in the universe is connected, that there is an interdependency, a systemic nature, a oneness of individual and all other processes of change in the universe. That was how I had understood Gregory Bateson's idea of "the pattern, which connects."

But Heinz said: "I believe, if I still had the opportunity to talk with Gregory Bateson about these thoughts and said: 'Look, Gregory, don't we both have this position?' he would perhaps say: 'Yes, Heinz, this is a consequence.' And I would say: 'Gregory, for me it is the beginning. Your idea of *pattern, which connects*, et cetera – this all flows out of your central position; that you do not want to separate yourself from all of us and from the cosmos; but that you want to consider yourself as part of the world."

Even though I accepted Heinz's answer that his position could not be derived from anything else, I kept wondering how he had arrived to his position. And Heinz said: "If I were to derive the central principle from anything, I can only derive it from my personal life, from my personal biography, from the experiences of my life."

So, in our book project, we pursued the development of the position from the experiences in Heinz's personal autobiography. Of course, in my short presentation today I can't tell you all the experiences in Heinz's life, which had led him to adopt this position. However, I would like to give you two examples, which I personally find especially interesting with regard to Heinz's position.

The first example is an experience in Heinz's youth. When he was a little boy he had a book, which contained a fable by Krylof. It's the fable of a hermit – an old man living by himself in a cave in the forest – and a bear. The story goes like this: A hermit meets a bear that had been stung by a bee. The hermit helps the bear and relieves him from pain. Sensible of his obligation, the bear asks the hermit to become his guardian. The hermit willingly accepts the offer, and invites the bear into his cave where he treats him with hospitality. And they pass their time with pipes and grog in a most amicable manner. The day being very hot, the hermit falls asleep and the bear employs himself in driving away the flies from the hermit's face. But, in spite of all his care, one of the flies perpetually returns to attack, and settles on the hermit's nose. "Now, I shall have you, most certainly", says the bear and gives the hermit a violent blow on the face, which effectually demolishes the fly, but at the same time terribly bruises the hermit. The hermit angrily jumps up and kicks the bear out of the cave's entrance, jumping with both legs against the bear. And by himself he lives happily ever after.

Heinz was very moved by this story and said to himself that this wasn't nice of the hermit because the bear had had good intentions, he had meant well. And for the rest of his life, Heinz had adopted the position that the consequences should not overshadow the well-meant intentions. Well meant is what is essential. Heinz realized later that this is especially so as the consequences can't be foreseen as we live in non-trivial systems, which are in principle unanalyzable and unpredictable.

The second example that I would like to tell you refers to the influence of the philosophers of the Vienna circle for the development of Heinz's position.

The philosophers of the Vienna circle reformulated the traditional definition of an axiom. The traditional definition of an axiom was: An axiom neither requires nor is capable of a proof.

The philosophers of the Vienna circle rather defined axioms as rules of a game, rules which one sets in the beginning and which one then follows.

This definition goes along well with the origin of the word "axiom". As you may know, the word "axiom" is derived from the Latin word "axioma" and means "something, which is regarded as important".

"Axiom" goes back to the Greek word "axiόein", which means "to appreciate" from the Greek root "axios", which means "worthy". An axiom can be defined as an opinion, which is highly appreciated or highly regarded, well respected. It is trustworthy because it is highly appreciated. In this sense, Heinz appreciated his part-of-the-world position but he couldn't prove it.

This reminds me of a distinction Heinz liked to make. The German word "Wahrheit" or the Italian word "veritá" is derived from the Latin word "veritas". It means that a statement can be verified, that it can be proved, that one can compare a statement with what "really" is the case.

On the other hand, the English word for "veritas" is "truth", which is more related to the word "trust". "Truth" and "trust" come from the same root. This means that one doesn't need to verify if that what another said is true or false. Instead, one can say: "I decide: That, what the other said is the case. It is as he said it. This is trust."

Now back to the axioms and the Vienna circle. Through negation of an axiom one generates a new world.

There is a proposition by Wittgenstein, which goes like this: "We draw up a picture of the world." Heinz von Foerster opposes this proposition and says: "We draw up a world from a picture." This twist creates a new world.

The world, which comes about through the negation of Wittgenstein's proposition is the world of constructivism, that is the epistemological position of that we ourselves construct our world. The constructivist viewpoint is diametrically opposed to the viewpoint of that the world is given, i. e. of the ontological position.

A central concern of mine was to get Heinz to derive consequences from his central position. Consequences for therapy, consequences for management, consequences for teaching and learning, etc. Heinz's answer to my question for the consequences of his part-of-the-world-position was very interesting to me.

He said that deriving consequences would reflect the old world view, the old thinking, linear thinking where you get from A to B, from B to C and from C to D. He said that he couldn't derive consequences because it was all one. It is all a big oneness, a unity. The so-called consequences are part of his position. They are implications.

This is the implicitness of the position. Thoughts in system theories, cybernetics, therapy, management, etc. are all illustrations but not consequences.

And Heinz said: "You, the past, the presence and the future are a single oneness out of which you cannot, should not nor want to depart."

Okay, so what are some of the implications of the part-of-the world-position? What meaning does this position hold?

What had struck Heinz the most was the great proximity of his thoughts to those in Taoist philosophy.

Like in Heinz part-of-the-world position, in Taoist philosophy the idea of oneness is essential. It's the idea that the one emerges from the other, and the other emerges from the one.

Another similarity lies in that both the Tao and ethics cannot be articulated, they are both implicit.

Someone who asks for the Tao, will never understand it, and someone who answers this question has never understood it. The famous quote by Tschuang-Tzu, the great Tao master is: „Who answers the question for the Tao does not know Tao. Someone might hear from the Tao but actually he doesn't hear anything from the Tao. About Tao, there is no asking, about Tao there is no questioning.”

With regards to ethics, Heinz liked to refer to the famous Wittgenstein quote:

„It is clear that ethics cannot be articulated.“

I would like to use this opportunity to quickly refer to Heinz's distinction between ethics and morality.

According to Heinz, it is important that ethics and morality be clearly separated.

Morality, as Heinz pointed out, is characterized by two points: Point number one: Every statement, every rule, every law of morality is directed to *the other*.

In morality one tells the other how he or she is to behave. It is the position of „you should“. Point number two: The authorities who postulate these laws are themselves not subject to the laws. The independence of the lawmakers from their laws originates from the attempt to enforce obedience for the laws through threats of punishment. Morality is immediately tied to a punishment and reward system. And with it, every action becomes a business transaction.

Laws of morality limit people's freedom of action.

When they don't have freedom, they don't have to make a decision.

When they don't have to make decisions, they don't have responsibility. When one is forced to do something, one can always make an excuse and appeal to the order that was given: "I had no choice. I was forced. I didn't want to do this."

Ethics on the other hand, as we have learned from the metaphysics discussion, implies fundamental freedom.

Ethics does not contain any guidelines.

There is no "you should" in ethics. There can only be "I shall".

In ethics, there is no "right" or "wrong", or "true" or "false", or "good" or "bad".

Heinz liked to say: "The good and the bad are a semantic trap." "Good" or "bad" concern the semantic or linguistic domain that is language. They don't concern anything independent from you out there that *is* good or bad. *You* decide what is good or bad. *You* think it *is* good or bad and then act as if it *were* good or bad.

Good and evil introduce a relativism with which all relationships disappear. From one person's point of view it is *good*, from another person's point of view it is *bad*. That is the problem with truth.

And Heinz liked to say: "Truth is the invention of a liar."

Instead of truth, there could be trust. And, as we have seen before, the problem of truth disappears when one trusts. Trust shows itself when one doesn't need to prove that that what someone said is true or not.

And according to Heinz, trust is the fundamental problem of relationships.

He defined ethics as the behavior with which one makes oneself responsible for one's actions.

And again he liked to refer to Wittgenstein who had said: "Reward and punishment must reside in the action itself."

What follows is that "I must live with the world that I create by living in this or that way. In this world I can sleep or have nightmares."

And as a guideline for himself, Heinz introduced his *Ethical Imperative*: "Act always so as to increase the number of choices."

Now – what are the implications for therapy? Heinz mentioned that his position essentially holds two insights for therapists. One of them he first presented in 1983 at a conference of the Mental Research Institute in San Francisco. The title of the conference was „Maps of the Mind – Maps of the World.“ Heinz began his lecture with the following words: „I have the feeling that the title of this conference was stimulated by a famous statement of Alfred Korzybski, which is: ‚The map is not the territory‘. The underlying idea of this statement has always been used to find out if someone was schizophrenic or not. Schizophrenics apparently mix up the map with the territory by taking the symbol for the object. For example they might eat the menu, because it says ‚soup‘, ‚meat‘ and ‚dessert‘ on it. Ladies and Gentlemen, I am glad that you are all seated, for now comes the Heinz von Foerster theorem: ‚The map *is* the territory‘ because we don't have anything else but maps. We only have depictions or presentations – I wouldn't even say re-presentations – that we can braid together within language with the other. But if one were to say this statement epistemologically correctly one would have to say:

‚The map of the map is not the map of the territory.‘ We only have maps, we don't know anything about a territory. We only know the map of the territory and we know the map of the map and we know that the two are not the same. But the map *is* always the territory because we don't have anything else.”

End of quote.

This idea of the map and the territory reminds me again of Heinz von Foerster's twist of Wittgenstein's proposition: „We make up a world from a picture.“

The second insight that the part-of-the-world position holds for therapy is the following: Many therapists have tried to develop a theory; a theory of therapy or a theory of the mind or something like that.

Heinz always wanted to warn the therapists of developing a theory.

He reminded us that Karl Popper had said that a theory is only acceptable as such if it could be falsified. Popper had found out that it is easy to find support for a theory but that only one counter-proof is necessary to let the theory break down.

If the therapist were to falsify his theory of therapy, he would have to let his patients or clients march through these or those experiments. According to Heinz, this would be unethical, for the clients come to the therapist for help and not to be a tool for the therapist.

Therefore, Heinz thought that a therapist shouldn't come and say: „Now I will try out my theory and see if it is wrong.”

Instead, he should come with an inner position, with an inner conviction, and say: „This or that might help.“ Of course, he can never be sure that it will work. If it doesn't work, he can have an insight „Oh, I did something wrong“, reflect about his own actions and try something different. So he must not only do what he believes he must do, but he must also observe the effects.

There is another notion, which Heinz presented to me and which I consider as relevant for therapy. It's his notion of change. He said the following: „The proposition that I would like to make with regards to change, is that change essentially occurs in the domain of description. One description of a state and a second description of the state are different, and this difference I consider as change. So, change does not occur where one thinks that it occurs but it occurs where one describes it. In my game, change is a problem of description.”

The question is: Did X change or did my description of X change. If one does not accept the position that change occurs in the description, one comes upon contradictions and paradoxes for I can't claim that x is not x. Therefore, Heinz adopted the position that change occurs in the domain of description.

Thank you.

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