

EPILOGUE TO *AFTERWORDS*

by Heinz Von Foerster

Afterwords to John Brockman's *Afterwords* should best be written by John Brockman. In fact, he wrote it. It is *Afterwords*. They are put into 292 propositions to be found on pages paginated correspondingly. He who holds paginated blank pages against my counting them as propositions still travels in the semantic universe of forewords. Forewords are propositions which are designed to do some other words: those which follow. Afterwords undo themselves, including their precursors. Post-Wittgensteinian epistemologists first wrestled with, and are now slowly beginning to understand, the last proposition (No. 7) of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*: "Of which we cannot speak we have to remain silent". Brockman understands. Afterwords silence themselves. His last proposition (No. 292) is: "Nobody knows', and you can't find out".

OK. If this is so, why bother? Because *Afterwords* takes the mystery of language and puts it right back into its own mystery; that is, *Afterwords* ex-plains the mystery of language by taking language *out* ("ex-") of the plane of its mystery, so as to become visible to all before it slips back in to its plane. This in itself is a remarkable achievement that has been denied to almost all linguists, for they stick to the description of the plane without seeing that it is the plane that holds their descriptions.

Consider the proposition "There is food at 200 yards due east." This is a declarative sentence with a qualifying clause in English which when translated, for instance, into Bee will be easily understood by bees. Consider now the proposition "This is a declarative sentence with a qualifying clause." This is a proposition upon a proposition in a language that speaks about language. Call this a "second-order language", or "meta-language" or short. Propositions in meta-language cannot be translated into Bee.

The topology of a nervous system that understands and speaks meta-language must close on itself in a particular way. The bees don't have it. It is doubtful whether metalinguistic propositions can be made in any other animal language but Homo. Be this as it may, the blessed curse of a meta-language is that it wears the cloth of a first-order language, an "object language". Thus any proposition carries with it the tantalizing ambiguity: Was it made in meta- or in object-language? Nobody knows, and you can't find out. All attempts to speak *about* a meta-language, that is, to speak *in* meta-metalanguage, are doomed to fail, as Wittgenstein observed: "Remain silent!"

Brockman undooms the doom by an existential undoing of what was left undone. "Existential," for any Beginning is *not* to follow; that is, to begin is first to undo; then one has to undo the beginning in order to begin, and so on.



Intrigued, one follows the construction of Brockman's formidable machinery for doing the undoing, whose cogwheels, levers, pegs, interlocks, springs, etc., are anatomy, anthropology, architecture, astrophysics, biology, cybernetics, epistemology, heuristics, iconography, linguistics, logic, magic, metaphysics, neurophysiology, neuropsychiatry, philosophy, physics, physiology, poetry, proxemics, psychology, quantum mechanics, relativity, zoology, etc. to name a few.

All who are concerned about the violence committed in the name of language will appreciate the useful uselessness of Brockman's un-book.

— Heinz Von Foerster, Chairman (Emeritus) of the Board of Directors of the American Society for Cybernetics and Editor of *The Cybernetics of Cybernetics*.