

ERNST VON GLASERSFELD'S LIMERICK

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In the 1980s I went through a phase of writing limericks during idle moments when I lacked something to read. The result was a set of 27 limericks about cybernetics. (Umpleby, 1992) I occasionally use the limericks in class to restate a theoretical point. Limericks bring a smile and demonstrate that cybernetics can be approached in a variety of ways. Below are three limericks from this collection. The last was written by Ernst von Glasersfeld. It seems Ernst believed that I was overly concerned with "reality" as opposed to perception, or at least that I had not captured the point that he was trying to make.

A seminal paper in cybernetics was the article, "What the Frog's Eye Tells the Frog's Brain," by Jerome Lettvin, Humberto Maturana, Warren McCulloch, and Walter Pitts (McCulloch, 1959). It demonstrated that the eye does not receive information and then pass it to the brain for interpretation. Rather, each neuron is a computational element, and only certain types of signals are perceived at all.

If you were an eyeball in pain,
And you spied a cool pool down the lane,
 But the rest of the bod
 Could just barely jog,
What would you then tell to the brain?

At a conference in Acapulco in 1980 Ernst Von Glasersfeld (1974) referred to the work on the visual system of the frog. Apparently frogs will die of starvation if surrounded by immobile but quite edible flies, but if one rolls a bee-bee across a frog's field of vision, it will strike out with its tongue and swallow it with relish. Hence the frog is constructed to eat, not flies, but moving black specks of a certain size. I thought this was a delightful story and so wrote a limerick about it.

A rather dim-witted, large frog
Ate bee-bees I rolled down his log.
 For me they were slugs,
 But for him they were bugs.
Will he sink when he jumps in the bog?

When Ernst read this limerick, he felt that the frog had been maligned. His purpose in telling the story had been to illustrate how the nervous system constructs a "reality." In defense of the frog, Ernst wrote the following limerick.

The beebees in Frog made a lump,

Too heavy for him to jump!
So he stood on his head
And dropping the lead
He pensively said,
"There must be more than one bee in Umpl."

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