

Talk with the Author

Mr. Niemz, you are a full professor of biomedical engineering at Heidelberg University, the most famous and oldest university in Germany founded in 1386. You are not only a successful researcher, but also a gifted author and speaker. Is it a calling for you to write books and give lectures?

Niemz: Yes, but it wasn't always like that. I didn't do that well in German at school. I even dropped it in high school because our German teacher made fun of the way I wrote my letter "p". So, I got through my final school years without any German. They let me do this although it's really embarrassing to graduate from school without an exam in your own native language. My advanced courses were in math and ancient Greek. Looking back, I can now see that these subjects have strongly influenced my thinking today. Translating a text by Plato into German has a lot in common with searching for eternity: You sit in front of a big puzzle and think how one piece fits into another. And if one piece fits, I'm as excited today as I was back then—but with the difference that I have since learned to impart knowledge. I am looking forward to every talk because its content fascinates me just as much as my listeners.

You know how to present connectedness of things intuitively—across all of physics, biology, medicine, philosophy, religion, art and music. Is this your code of life? Should we think more in terms of connectivity?

Niemz: Well, when I look at our world today, I honestly think that we pay far too little attention to connectedness. It's often right in front of us and so obvious. We only have to get a feeling of how one thing effects another. Whoever is always trying to get his way, will never have a successful partnership. Whoever shuts himself off will never understand the big picture. Whoever oppresses others will never live in peace. Even the question about whether we can live on after death is really a question about connection: How could we still have the capability to feel and to learn—let alone stay alive—if we no longer have bodies?

So, this is what we've been caught up in: self-delusion—the first chapter in your new book?

Niemz: That's right! I believe that many people today suffer from self-delusion. They see themselves as the measure of all things. They even hope that they will continue living after they die. The own self is more important to them than anything else in the world. I make the claim in my book that self-delusion is the primary cause of all social conflicts on our planet. No matter what conflict we look at today, we see it everywhere: Humanity is suffering from an enormous ego-inflation. Self-delusion retards our ability to see connections. It clouds our view of reality.

Is there such a thing as reality at all?

Niemz: And how! It isn't just made up of material objects, but living experiences. Reality is anchored with a trait that we call "time". Sometimes we would like to move reality back to an earlier point in time. The fact that this is impossible proves that reality is actually real.

You talk about different perspectives to reality in your book. Can you give us a short explanation?

Niemz: I'll be happy to! To us, reality splits into spatial and temporal (space and time). This split leads to experiencing reality in a distorted way: as a side-by-side of separate individuals and as a one-by-one of life into death. But there is another, an undistorted perspective to reality: the perspective of light which I also call "eternity". For light, all spatial and temporal distances turn zero—from light's perspective, there is neither individuality nor death.

So, does that imply that we are all immortal?

Niemz: Yes, we are immortal, but not in the sense that most people would like or expect. An eternity that contains everything does not permit anything to be added or taken away from it. This means that we cannot do anything new in eternity—not to mention have a new experience. But we make ourselves immortal through everything that we feel, learn and do in the here and now. These are the traces that we leave behind—in the light.

Anyone who hears what you say might ask himself how you support your claims. Are there any findings that will back you up? Do you have any examples?

Niemz: Let me cite three brilliant scientists who have made a permanent mark on our perception of reality today: natural scientist Charles Darwin, physicist Albert Einstein and a philosopher and mathematician who is still relatively unknown—Alfred North Whitehead. All of these scientists questioned our conventional way of looking at things—and they rocked the civilized world with their findings: Reality unfolds as one big picture, and we get a wrong idea of it whenever we dissect it into parts. This deception continues with the belief in the individual ego that is predominant in the Western world today.

So, you're saying that in reality we're not individual human beings? Don't we have our own identity?

Niemz: Well, I actually believe that we do have an identity, but only within our human administration of justice. Yet our thoughts, our feelings and even our bodies don't have such an identity at all. Every experience that we have changes us. Even our body cells die and continually renew themselves. The thing that gives "self" a meaning is always the verb that we attach to the self: I read, I feel, I learn. It's the verbs that move us! This finally opened my eyes. I am not a "who" at all, but a "what"—a verb. I see all of us as the experiences of one single cosmic self. This cosmic self feels and learns through us.

But if I am not a person, but a verb, then who is responsible for what I do?

Niemz: Thank you for this important question. Of course, my claim has far-reaching consequences for both justice and human accountability. If we're not individuals, we certainly cannot be responsible for our actions by ourselves. But this doesn't mean that everyone may do whatever they want. It's the other way around: It's not about "taking care of number one" in this world, it's about the big picture—taking care of all. We have a common responsibility. Whoever still talks about "individuals" today, is oversimplifying the world.

Dear Mr. Niemz, now you've outlined the main features of your world view. So many unconventional claims will certainly provoke criticism. How do you handle that?

Niemz: Let me first thank all of those readers who are discovering my thoughts for themselves and who have been sending me positive feedback. Without this encouragement, I would hardly have been able to write seven books in just twelve years. But there's also criticism, and the criticism of some of my colleagues is especially painful. They believe that everything can be explained through physics, but they forget that there are values like love that transcend all physical observation. I occasionally remind these colleagues that we physicists are also devout human beings: One can only believe in a scientific theory, but never prove it. So, there will never be a proven theory of everything for this world, no matter how hard we try.

As a physicist, you stand up to ego-obsession, but in our current world it's a completely different story. In many countries, politicians and parties demand separation among humanity. Are you an idealist? Or do you also have a recipe ready to stop this separation?

Niemz: Everything I write is based on knowledge and compassion. Separation comes from ignorance, greed or envy, and fear. I certainly wouldn't stand up to ego-obsession if individuality were something that nature promotes and fosters. But all scientific knowledge indicates that individuality does not count in the eyes of nature. This is already evident in the evolution of all species: Shutting yourself off is unsexy. It retards the mixing of genotypes and counteracts evolution. Of course, we can't make anyone find happiness. But unfortunately, we're all in the same boat together—and nature is at the controls. This is why I look on with increasing apprehension when more and more countries want to shut off foreigners. This has been the case especially with the USA, Great Britain, Poland, Austria and Hungary in the recent past. But the nationalism in Germany and France is increasing momentum too, and there's no end in sight. I might be an idealist if I say that we must conceive ourselves to be more "we". But I also do have a medicine for us: Deals won't work—what works is education, education and even more education! If we guarantee every human being a good general education free from all political and religious influence, two human achievements will thrive on their own: democracy and ethics. Both of these flourish from nature's desire for understanding and love.

What you're saying all sounds so clear and loving. Your words have the power to open hearts and minds. Are these the words of a revelation?

Niemz: Revelation is a powerful word. Sometimes I am seized by feelings of inspiration while I write, and then I must quickly jot down my thoughts. This somehow moves everything to suddenly fit together so well that I have asked myself: Why has no one else brought it up yet? These moments of pause show me that I am on the right path. Whoever wants to go to the source, must swim upstream.

Is there perhaps one last thing that you might want to share with your readers?

Niemz: Yes, there's still something else. We have talked a lot about connection and things that fit together—about reality and about nature. But one idea hasn't been brought up yet that has been worrying me more and more nowadays: I'm talking about mindfulness. It is madness to see humanity spend 1.8 trillion US dollars per year to protect itself against itself (!) while approximately 800 billion people starve. Many of us scurry around from one deadline to the next and don't take the time to stop and smell the roses—to just take in and feel the moment. If we would be successful in being more mindful—not only in connection with ourselves, but also with others—, then no one would need to draw attention to self-delusion.

Mr. Niemz, I thank you for this talk.