

Construing and Nirvana

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Paper Presented to

The Fifth International Congress on Personal Construct Psychology

Pine Manor College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, USA

July 8-12, 1983

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Two interrelated questions which have perennially intrigued humankind are:

(1) What is the fundamental nature of the universe?, and (2) What is the relationship between that universe and our knowledge? In presenting Personal Construct Psychology (PCP), Kelly (1955) suggested one approach to these questions. He proposed that we consider the universe to be integral and whole; it is a universe in which all of the "parts" are interrelated. Further, he supposed that this universe is always changing with respect to itself and thus it can best be understood along a dimension of time. Human knowledge was seen as a process of coming to know this universe by developing interpretations which are successively closer approximations to the ultimate reality.

The PCP model of human processes elaborates the structure and organization of our personal interpretations of our experience. It proposes that it might be useful to see human understanding as evolving through invented systems of dualistic constructs--patterns in the ever-changing swirl of events. These constructs are not identical to the ultimate nature of the events they represent, but may be useful for anticipating future events. We should assume, according to Kelly, that our systems are open to change and replacement, but perhaps we can hope that at some infinite point in the future reality and our model of it will converge.

The present essay continues an elaboration on these themes and questions, following some implications of Kelly's propositions as they bear on a range of Western and Eastern approaches to these enduring questions.

Nature of the Universe: Unity

The notion of the universe as an integral whole has received extensive elaboration within the context of the new physics--quantum mechanics and relativity theory. Several recent volumes have presented the essentials of modern physics and most have drawn parallels between the new physics and traditions in Western and Eastern philosophy (Bentov, 1977; Bohm, 1980; Capra, 1975; Talbot, 1980; Wolf, 1980; Zukav, 1979). Fransella (1981) discussed the relationship between modern physics and PCP, concentrating primarily on Bohm's work, so only a brief summary will be necessary here.

The essence of the modern view of physics, to take the risk of oversimplifying a complex array of understanding, is that "... at a deep and fundamental level, the 'separate parts' of the universe are connected in an intimate and immediate way (Zukav, 1979, p. 298)." When physicists explore the make-up of reality, extending their search to ever smaller particles, they reach the subatomic level to arrive at the conclusion that there are actually no separate particles at all. Instead, they have suggested that what exists is energy which manifests a particular form to human perception. It is not actually composed of some separate entity or "stuff"; all form is merely a temporary manifestation of the same fundamental process or energy.

Mass is a phenomenon of connecting light rays which go back and forth, sort of freezing them into a pattern. So matter, as it were, is condensed or frozen light. . . moving back and forth at average speeds which are less than the speed of light (Bohm & Weber, 1983, p. 36).

Thus, from this perspective, we could say that everything is a manifestation of the same fundamental activity, which appears to us in a particular form depending on its vibrational pattern and location. Bell's theorem (Fransella, 1981; Zukav, 1979) more specifically proposes, through several effective

demonstrations, that not only is everything a manifestation of the same essential process, but that all aspects of this process are intimately and immediately connected in such a way that two particles at very great distances can "know" instantaneously what happens to each other.

New physics also addresses the concept of time, which is relevant to Kelly's major assumptions. Kelly suggested that time provides the bond between all events, demonstrating their connectedness. Our usual notion of time is of a past, present, and future, marching along in order. The new physics presents a different version of time. Time is seen as not a fixed aspect of the universe but another dimension of space. Physicists use the designation "space/time" to indicate that ultimately the two are inseparable. The relation between these two phenomenal dimensions is actually immediate.

As an object approaches the speed of light, according to relativity, its internal space and time change, so that the clocks slow down relative to other speeds, and the distance is shortened. You would find that the two ends of the light ray would have no time between them and no distance, so they would represent immediate contact (Bohm & Weber, 1983, p. 36).

Again, we see that all events are intimately interrelated and that our experience of time, like our experience of separate "parts" or "objects," is an artifact of the reduced speed of the background energy of the universe. Bentov (1977) has suggested that if we could move at infinite speed, "We could see everything there is to see and be everywhere in practically no time at all. In other words, we would have become omnipresent" (p. 49). Fundamentally, then, time would not (and thus does not) exist as a real entity.

It seems clear that Kelly's original assumption of an integral, changing universe has profound implications beyond our usual understanding of these concepts. We are left with the proposition that the universe consists of an all-pervading unity, and that what we see as separate parts or times are not

really separate at all, but manifestations of the same unnameable and unspecifiable being. This view, evolving from the leading edge of modern physics, our most advanced and exact science, has been seen as indistinguishable from traditional Buddhist cosmology, which teaches that the forms in which "things" are manifest are essentially empty of real substance yet, in a seemingly paradoxical way, that emptiness or void is identical with form (Capra, 1975; Talbot, 1980; Zukav, 1979). Likewise, time and being are considered identical, such that all time, including past, present, and future, exists right now (Yokoi, 1976). We shall return to a consideration of parallels between Kellian and Buddhist concepts following a discussion of the nature of human knowledge from the PCP perspective.

Nature of Human Knowledge: Construing

For Kelly (1955), human knowledge is usefully understood as the process of construing. To construe is to place an interpretation on an event by assigning it to a place within an organized system of bipolar or dualistic dimensions (constructs). Each individual erects a personal system of constructs based on ways of perceiving repetitive patterns or themes among a series of events which are experienced as taking place along a dimension of time. Each construct represents ways in which some events are alike and thus different from other, equally relevant, events.

The purpose of construing is its convenience for the person in anticipating events in the future. Kelly saw the person as standing in the present, seeing it through the template of the construct system evolved from experience with past events, and peering off into the future in anticipation of what may be to come. The construing process is thus a practical one; it is a real world of real events for which the anticipations are made and the system exists for this very specific, anticipatory purpose. But Kelly also

proposed the hope that to the extent that the person was open to admitting new events to the system's range of convenience and to evolving the system in response to its validation and invalidation, the collective human construct system might grow ever closer to a correspondence with ultimate reality. To ward off the arrogance which would result from thinking we have "arrived" at that end point, Kelly suggested that such a final system would be developed at some infinite time in the future, and that we should consider our current constructions to be ad interim propositions which are subject to revision or replacement.

The cornerstone of Kelly's notion of a construct is its dichotomous nature. The universe itself is not seen as being dichotomous--it is whole, integral, and undivided. It is human construction, however, which, in its attempts to make the world predictable, divides it into dimensions like "for vs. against," "good vs. evil," and "up vs. down." In doing so, the person is relating not to the concrete aspects of an event but to some property which remains abstract and ultimately hypothetical. It is not the final "truth" of the dimension that makes it valid, but its ability to lead to predictions which turn out to be palpably true at least part of the time gives it utility.

Kelly described many hazards inherent in the construing process. Once a person has evolved a system which seems to have some utility for anticipating future events there is a tendency to become attached to it and resist altering it in the face of invalidating evidence. Kelly defined a psychological disorder as "any personal construction which is used repeatedly in spite of consistent invalidation" (1955, p. 831), and disorders may take many forms. It is possible to cling to constructions which are obsolete or jump to new interpretations which are so loose that they cannot lead to specific predictions. Attention can be constricted to a narrow range of events and

thus miss much of great relevance and importance. Events can be construed as being relevant to only one particular interpretation, ruling out the possibility of alternative construal, change, and evolution. A more serious type of disorder is hostility, which is the effort to force the universe to fit itself into our prior predictions (Kelly, 1979b).

Suppose, however, that a person steers a path which avoids most of these pitfalls. Constructs may be put forth in a propositional mood, with acceptance of personal responsibility for their invention and allowance for the possibility of alternative views of the same events. Constructs can be flexibly altered and the system can evolve, alternatively loosening and tightening its "grip" on events, and dilating and constricting the range of events considered, to develop an optimal organization. The system can be altered to bring it more in line with the construed outcomes of previous anticipations. It may be possible to have a well-functioning construct system which would be useful for the specific purpose of anticipating day-to-day events with which the person interacts throughout life.

We may now return to our second major question. What is the relationship between this construct system and the ultimate nature of the universe, as described above? Does this ideal system represent a good, or direct, fit with the fundamental reality? Are there any inherent shortcomings to this mode of functioning? We may also introduce an additional question. Is this method of "knowing" the universe the only approach available to us?

Construing and Unity

Dōgen was . . . the first to teach that life is all one, all of a piece; that when we split it up into bits, some of which are fascinating, others boring, yet others important or not important to us personally, etc., we are in fact losing the flow of life altogether. By attempting to dominate events we strand ourselves on false islands of permanence, seeing ourselves as stationary while 'life' rushes past (Bancroft, 1979, p. 21).

We have already described the modern, Western conception of the universe, derived from the new physics, and how it has been seen as essentially identical to the views of the traditions of Buddhist philosophy. An examination of Buddhist views on psychology also reveals major parallels with the Kellian notion of construing. Buddhist psychology, like PCP, emphasizes that normal human understanding of the world involves the use of dualistic dimensions which, while inherently transparent, provide the basis for usual thinking, feeling, and behaving. Both approaches agree that the universe is itself not dualistic, and that it holds no allegiance to our dualistic dimensions. They also agree that this conventional way of relating to the world is useful for dealing with particular purposes.

The major difference between the two psychologies is their emphasis on the value of this dualistic process. The PCP approach has focused on the utility of dualistic construing and has developed very useful methods of elaborating how the construct system is organized (Bannister & Mair, 1968; Fransella & Bannister, 1977; Shaw, 1981) and how to assist the person to evolve a more effective and useful construct system (Bannister & Fransella, 1982; Landfield & Leitner, 1980). Buddhist psychology, in contrast, has focused on the lack of substantiality of the dualistic system and has developed a repertoire of methods for assisting the person to see through the "illusion" of the conceptual world and to come to a direct experience of the basic unity of all things (Goleman, 1981).

A fundamental concern about dualistic construing, as it relates to our view of reality, is that it creates divisions, separations, and boundaries in what we have seen is a unified, holistic, inter-connected universe. Through the construing process we essentially create and inhabit a delusional world in which things are separate and distinct. Reality itself is devoid of distinct

"things," so all things are essentially identical, as manifestations of the same reality. As Wilber (1977) has pointed out, since the real world has no opposites it can't be grasped in terms of dichotomous thoughts. As a result, all constructions of reality are essentially empty and devoid of substance.

To the extent that we attend to the conventional dichotomous ideas about the universe, we are taken away from the direct, immediate experience of the universe. The relation between direct experience and our constructions of it can be illustrated using Polanyi's (1958) construct of focal vs. subsidiary awareness. We become focally aware of an object or entity by being subsidiarily aware of the raw sensory experience and other elements which "make up" the entity. These sensory experiences, which are our only real, immediate experience, are construed as being relevant to a dualistic dimension which then comes to represent the "object." As awareness focuses on the more superordinate dimensions to which the event becomes related, attention moves further away from the direct experience of reality. Thus, to the extent that awareness is on the world of the construct system it becomes more and more "delusional."

As we evolve our dichotomous construct system, moving away from direct connection with unity, and as we continue to divide the world up into opposites, we also develop the construct of self vs. other. As Wilber (1979) has suggested, we draw a boundary between ourselves and the rest of the universe, setting up a split which is not inherent in reality. As a result, our dualistic construct system becomes inherently self-centered. We identify our "self" with our constructs and, since we use our constructs to maintain our construction of our "self," we have a great investment in their survival, even in the face of evidence which contradicts their predictions. Such evidence is not hard to come by since the world exists independently of our

construction of it and rarely manages to satisfy our particular self-directed anticipations for very long. Thus, rather than directly experiencing the world, we divide it into those events which support our notion of what is "good" for us or "validating" for our system, and those events which are "bad" for us because they "invalidate" our system. We cling to what we have that is "good" and grasp for more, and we avoid and try to resist what is "bad" for us, responding with anger or hostility to the universe's failure to go the way our particular construction says it should go. Throughout both of these processes we remain divided from the universe and ignorant of the essential unity of all things.

Even with our hypothetically ideal construct system, which is flexible and open to change, certain difficulties are inevitable because the system remains rooted in dualism. By accepting the dichotomies as real, there is a tendency to direct much of our awareness to reifying our constructs and perceiving the mental processes which evolve as real and important. Our lives become directed by these thoughts, and their accompanying emotions (Ellis, 1962), rather than using constructs for their "intended" purpose of anticipating specific events. This distinction between useful and non-useful modes of construing can be exemplified by contrasting "technical thinking" with other kinds of mental activities:

There is nothing wrong with thinking in the sense of what I call "technical thinking." We have to think in order to walk from here to the corner or to bake a cake or to solve a physics problem. That use of the mind is fine. It isn't real or unreal; it is just what it is. But opinions, judgments, memories, dreaming about the future--ninety percent of the thoughts spinning around in our heads have no essential reality (Beck, 1983, p. 13).

Many Eastern traditions suggest that it is possible to transcend the delusion of our self-invented dualistic world and, in seeing the transparency of our construct system, experience the unity of reality more directly. The striking

parallels between these traditions and PCP suggests a potentially synergistic confluence between the two approaches which could extend their implications and range.

Construing and Nirvana

To study the Way is to study the self.
 To study the self is to forget the self.
 To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things.
 To be enlightened by all things is to remove the barriers
 between one's self and others.

(Yokoi, 1976, p. 39)

This quote, from the thirteenth century Zen master Dōgen, describes the path to enlightenment, or nirvana, the direct perception of undifferentiated unity, without experiencing through the filter of dualistic construing (Merton, 1968; Zukav, 1979). This undifferentiated reality is not a separate reality from our ordinary world, but is a different way of seeing things. It involves the awareness that words and constructs only represent things but are not the things themselves. It recognizes a distinction between direct experience, which is indescribable, and a construction which is a description of the experience. "A state of being is an experience. A description of a state of being is a symbol. Symbols and experience do not follow the same rules" (Zukav, 1979, p. 271).

Nirvana refers to the direct awareness that the basic essence of being is not only indescribable but beyond the judgment of our dualistic systems, although our judgments do also exist as independent and unrelated processes. This experience does not entail a retreat from the world nor a rejection of ordinary life. It does not refer to an ascendance to an invisible reality separate from the ordinary. Instead, it involves ". . . a direct grasp of the unity of the invisible and the visible, the noumenal and the phenomenal, or, if you prefer, an experiential realization that any such division is bound to

be pure imagination" (Merton, 1968, p. 37). In the words of Longchenpa (1975, p. 125), a fourteenth century Tibetan Buddhist master:

Since everything is but an apparition
Perfect in being what it is,
Having nothing to do with good or bad,
acceptance or rejection,
One may well burst out in laughter.

From the PCP perspective, this experience involves a direct awareness of the personally constructed, and hence insubstantial, nature of dichotomous construing. It need not involve abandonment of the construct system, foregoing a way to anticipate events, for constructs can be recognized as useful for technical thinking. It would, however, involve becoming aware of the difference between the constructs and the events themselves, and the personal, self-centered way in which constructs are used. Such awareness could extend the liberating qualities of PCP by elaborating its utility for freeing us from our self-imposed limitations.

There are a number of methods within the PCP armamentarium which are directly relevant to enhancing this process. Construct elicitation, laddering of superordinate constructs, and repertory grid analysis methods (Fransella & Bannister, 1977) can all be directed toward assisting the person to a greater awareness of the way in which the world of experience becomes divided into parts and how personal values and emotions affect what is experienced. Boxer's (1979, 1980) work on reflexive learning represents an example of how repertory grid methods can be used to assist the person in becoming aware of the process of construing.

Traditional approaches to attaining the enlightenment experience have typically involved a range of meditational practices (Goleman, 1977). Insight

meditation involves practices oriented towards the person's awareness of present sensory and mental events, and the relation between them (Goldstein, 1983; Walsh, Goleman, Kornfield, Pensa, & Shapiro, 1978). From the PCP perspective insight meditation might be seen as a focus on the construing process itself, following awareness from moment-to-moment as sensations arise, become construed, lead to discrimination at a pole of a dimension, and ultimately to judgment at superordinate levels, accompanied by conditioned chains of association. As Polanyi (1958) has suggested, to focus on subsidiary elements destroys the meaning of the more comprehensive entity. Thus, to focus on awareness of the sensations and the way the construing process evolves would change the meaning of the construct and demonstrate its illusory and transparent character.

Concentration meditation (Aitken, 1982; Suzuki, 1970) involves practices in which the person maintains open concentration or awareness by focusing on the breath, sensations, or a koan. As attention wanders to thought, the thoughts are allowed to arise and pass without attachment or judgment, and attention is returned to the breath, etc. Through this process, the insubstantial and ever-changing nature of thought is experienced and constructs can be seen as "just constructs" rather than something real and important. By combining concentration meditation practice with the articulation of personal constructs elicited through PCP repertory grid methods, awareness of this process may be facilitated.

Such practices could assist in developing greater awareness of the way in which dichotomous construing divides and separates the seamless universe, removing our experience from our unity with the whole. Dichotomous constructs may still be used for technical thinking, but with the awareness that there is a difference between the divided world they represent and the unified world

which coexists with them. Through such a process we may be able to bring our awareness into greater correspondence with the holistic universe and reduce our sense of separateness from it.

In "Ontological Acceleration", Kelly (1979a) emphasized that human consciousness is in a continuing process of evolution: "It is increasingly clear that human behavior has not settled into orbit. It is, indeed, the one part of nature that now is most in transition--perhaps transforming itself at a pace no other aspect of nature has ever matched" (p. 23). Kelly encouraged psychologists to "participate in the accelerated behavioral innovations that promise to change the shape of human affairs. . ." (p. 45). Major writers on the evolution of consciousness (Jaynes, 1976; Wilber, 1981) have suggested that human consciousness is in a transition stage from a sense of separateness toward an awareness of the unity of all things. The study of consciousness and the active practice of consciousness development have experienced tremendous recent growth (Ornstein, 1973; Valle & von Eckartsburg, 1981; Wilber, 1977). Through applying Personal Construct Psychology to the study of this process, perhaps we can continue "to participate in the quickening human enterprise. . ." (Kelly, 1979a, p. 45) which the evolution of human consciousness represents.

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