

Make For Yourself No Idol

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Abstract

From a constructivist perspective, knowledge is indeterminate. Human beliefs bear no necessary direct relationship to reality, yet we tend to objectify them and treat them as though they are real. This tendency may be metaphorically likened to idolatry, in which a created image is worshipped as though it is the ultimate. Idolatry commits the arrogance of believing that it is possible to know final truth. The implications of this metaphor for constructivist thought is discussed in terms of Barfield's argument that originally hypotheses served only to "save the appearances" but with the success of modern science came to be treated as though they were true. Transcendence of idolatry requires active recognition that constructs that are human inventions, and that human participation is central to our understanding of reality.

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How do we understand the relationship between what we might think of as "reality" and our ideas and beliefs about it? Kelly (1955) assumed that there is not necessarily a direct correspondence between our ideas, which we have constructed, and the universe, to which we suppose our ideas refer. It is useful to take the position that knowledge remains indeterminate. However, because of our desire for certainty we have a powerful tendency to accept our constructs as objective representations of what is actually there (Kelly, 1977). We endow our beliefs with the power of reality itself, and forget that they are our inventions. In doing so, we "forget" that what we know is rooted in our own assumptions. This is particularly the case with our most familiar beliefs, whether idiosyncratic or culturally shared, which we tend to accept as "givens."

The Psychology of Personal Constructs rests upon the assumption that all ideas about the universe are human inventions and are subject to revision and replacement. Although he presumed that the universe is real and that we are coming to know it, to encourage appropriate humility Kelly (1977) proposed that the correspondence between our constructs and reality is best thought of as occurring at some infinitely distant time in the future. He also warned that current "truths" are likely to look much different in the light of new reconstructions. Thus, the development of knowledge and the quest for deeper understanding requires awareness of the ad interim nature of constructs and acknowledgement that final understanding always lies beyond the horizon. It is useful to recognize that our knowledge is necessarily incomplete, and may

even be mistaken. In order to avoid the tendency to accept prematurely a particular belief, seekers of knowledge must find a way to embrace this awareness and work comfortably with it.

Concern about the relation between beliefs and reality has been raised by a variety of philosophers and historians of science who have also contended that scientific knowing does not yield ultimate truths. Popper's (1963) criteria of falsifiability, Bartley's (1962) comprehensively critical rationalism, and Feyerabend's (1978) epistemological anarchy are some notable examples of epistemological theories emphasizing our inability to prove knowledge as true. Mahoney (1976) summarized the non justificatory nature of scientific rationality in his call for psychologists to study scientists and the process of science. Kuhn (1962) described the emergence and revision of scientific paradigms, and the wholesale revolutions in world view that accompany them, documenting how our construction of reality changes with these revolutions.

A major contribution to this philosophical discussion is Michael Polanyi's (1958; 1965; 1969) theory of Personal Knowledge. There is great compatibility between the theories of Polanyi and Kelly (McWilliams, 1991). Both describe knowledge as derived from the awareness of coherence (themes, patterns) among particular elements that were previously seen as independent or uncomprehended. Discovery originates from an awareness that something that was hidden may be potentially available to understanding. It is an active process relying on the knower's experience and skill, and involving a commitment, based on faith, to the pursuit and articulation of the hidden entity. Elements that originally held focal awareness come to be subsumed within more comprehensive constructs (McWilliams, 1988b) and are then experienced subsidiarily within the focal awareness of the new entity. Belief that the entity is universally valid, rather than a figment of personal phenomenal experience, drives the commitment toward elaborating and articulating it in a way that can be compelling to others. These beliefs are often tacitly held in the context of unarticulated assumptions and faith.

Polanyi viewed the personal commitment to knowledge as inherently hazardous. Since a comprehensive entity is presumed to be real it is likely to reveal itself to us in a number of unpredictable ways. Like Kelly, he suggested that we might define reality as that which we actively expect to reveal itself in indeterminate ways as our knowledge evolves (Polanyi, 1964). We are likely to find that as we elaborate our understanding events prove to be radically different than what we originally anticipated. This outcome should be expected if we recognize that the original construction may be based on a small a set of elements. Further investigation may reveal a wide variety of additional elements and lead to constructs whose implications range far beyond the initial anticipation.

Thus, constructs, and their superordinate and subordinate systems, whether tacitly understood or well elaborated and articulated, are not the "truth." Knowledge of reality must, inevitably, remain indeterminate. Although these arguments clearly suggest that we should be humble about our beliefs we continue to have the tendency to behave, in ordinary as well as "professional" life, as though the universe truly is what we think it is. I would like to elaborate on this theme by proposing that the concept of idolatry, borrowed, in a propositional mood (Kelly, 1964), from religion, provides a useful metaphor for addressing the tendency to reify constructs, and the danger of believing that a particular understanding directly represents reality.

"Make for Yourself No Idol"

Language itself may be seen as fundamentally metaphorical, and the etymology of a word often provides insight into ways that it might be understood beyond its immediate connotations. The word "idol" derives from the Greek eidolon meaning image, apparition, or phantom. "Idolatry" comes from joining eidolon with latreia, to serve or worship. In a strict etymological sense, idolatry exists when an image (apparition, phantom) is treated as if it were real and worshipped as the ultimate. From a religious perspective idolatry is "sinful" not simply because it treats an image as real, but because it arrogantly presumes to know the ultimate truth. Idolatry is dangerous because it substitutes what should be an ad interim construct for reality itself thus attempting to shortcut what must be an unending quest for knowledge.

The warning not to accept any image as being ultimate is represented in both Western and Eastern spiritual perspectives. The Hebrew Bible commands "You shall make for yourself no idol in the likeness of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them" (Verkuyl, 1969, p. 74). The Tao-te-Ching, states that "existence is beyond the power of words to define: terms may be used but are none of them absolute" (Bynner, 1980). In a similar vein, a classic Chinese Zen Buddhist text, the hsin-hsin-ming (Blyth, 1976) warns of the danger of attachment to particular ideas, beliefs, or values when the goal is authentic understanding. It counsels against seeking for ultimate truth or attachment to any particular opinion. These religious teachings emphasize that truth is ineffable and it is crucial to avoid the arrogance of believing that our current beliefs represent an ultimate reality.

Bakan (1965; 1966) was the first to introduce me to the application of the concept of idolatry beyond its religious context. He proposed that religion and science express a singular human impulse to appreciate the nature of existence and the possibility of transcending any specific expression that nature. This impulse presupposes that the manifest is only an intimation of a more fundamental reality that remains unmanifest. The purpose of the basic human impulse is to reach out beyond what is manifest toward the unmanifest, to transcend the obvious, in Kelly's (1977) terms. The unmanifest contains the more important, eternal, and universal reality. Bakan emphasized that the essence of this impulse is the movement toward the unmanifest rather than any final objective. However, in our desire for fulfillment we have the tendency to accept a particular expression of the impulse as the ultimate. When we do this we are committing the sin of idolatry. Idolatry is the worship of the process of seeking fulfillment, or one of its products, as if it were the fulfillment itself. When this happens we lose the sense that the unmanifest continues to exist, and we forget that the search for it will never end. "Idolatry is to yield to the bribe of the manifest" (Bakan, 1966, p. 6). Fulfillment must remain an ideal, and there should always be "the sense of that which is not yet realized" (p. 7).

Saving the Appearances

Barfield (1988) applied the concept of idolatry to our current way of looking at knowledge, particularly scientific knowledge, through an extensive treatise on the evolution of human consciousness. He described human perceptions as "representations," and suggested that "reality" itself, as we know and accept it, is a system of collectively shared representations. The universe, the "unrepresented," exists independently of human construction, a notion similar

to Bakan's (1967) "unmanifest," and Kelly's (1977) "unknown." Representations are often simply experienced but can also become similar to constructs in the Kellian sense when they are constructed by humans into the perception of "things." As we think about and apply these representations there is the tendency to "objectify" them and perceive them as being "out there," having little to do with ourselves. More reflexively, we can take the further step of thinking about the basic nature of our representations and their relation to our knowledge, in which case we have the possibility of realizing our intimate personal involvement with our constructions.

Barfield suggested that "primitive" humans experienced their representations through a direct and intimate participation in their knowledge. This was not something on which they reflected, but they consciously felt connected, directly and immediately, with their phenomenal world. This direct connection was rooted in the sense that they and the universe were of the same nature so there was no separation or boundary between their immediate experience and "the universe." Barfield called this experience "original participation." The history of Western thought involves an evolution from this kind of participatory knowing through the objectification of knowledge and toward an eventual newer kind of participation.

The Greek perspective as represented by Plato emphasized three degrees of knowledge: observation, mental activity, and contemplative knowledge of the supreme good. This theme is also seen in St. Bonaventure's "three eyes" of attaining knowledge (Wilber, 1983). Scientific investigation is a combination of the first two levels, applying mental processes to observations to generate hypothetical patterns that account for the observations. Since higher order, supreme, knowledge was seen as pre-existing and divine and thus not derived from observations, it was not necessary that the hypotheses be "true" in any ultimate sense. Similar to Kelly's approach to constructs, the value of hypotheses lies in their convenience and practicality for the prediction of events and their "truth" was seen as irrelevant. As long as they could account for observation--"save the appearances"--they were useful, and the possibility of alternative, and even inferentially incompatible, hypotheses created no difficulty. This perception compares well to Kelly's proposition that it is not necessary to disprove one hypothesis in order to entertain another.

A major shift in the evolution of thinking about science occurred when astronomers such as Copernicus began to take the perspective that the heliocentric view not only was consistent with appearances, and perhaps more useful than the Ptolemaic hypothesis, but that it was ultimately true. According to Barfield, the Church's problem with the Copernican view was not with its alternative conception of the heavens but with its claim to objectivity. Such a position led to a mechanical view that phenomena exist independently of human construction, and created the groundwork for idolatrous thinking.

It was not simply a new theory of the nature of the celestial movements that was feared, but a new theory of the nature of theory; namely, that, if a hypothesis saves all appearances, it is identical with truth. (Barfield, 1988, p. 50-51)

If scientific hypotheses are invented constructs which can be usefully applied toward the anticipation of events, but not necessarily true, this should be described by scientists and understood by the lay public. Even scientists who should fathom these philosophical implications are often guilty of describing science as "pushing the frontiers of knowledge," and

making pronouncements such as "We now know that the earth revolves around the Sun." Such statements imply that prior hypotheses were wrong but current ones are final. A more appropriate statement might be "When astronomers used to look at the sky they saw the Sun revolving around the Earth, but when current astronomers look at the sky they see the Earth revolving around the Sun." As modern scientists move further from their direct experience and use hypotheses from other sciences as if they were proven facts, it has tended, according to Barfield, to lead ordinary people to regard scientific theories as fact, and these theories have become part of the collective representations of the human culture.

The scientific perspective that has dominated the last two hundred years of Western thought has defined phenomena as existing independently of consciousness and human participation. Thus, we have lost the awareness that representations are the constructs of the scientists themselves. With the success of technology, since the nineteenth century, these metaphors with which the world is understood came to be seen as having absolute validity. Representations of the world came to be taken, or mistaken, for ultimate truth.

But a representation, which is collectively mistaken for an ultimate--ought not to be called a representation. It is an idol. Thus the phenomena themselves are idols, when they are imagined as enjoying that independence of human perception which can in fact only pertain to the unrepresented (Barfield, 1988, p. 62).

Similar to Bakan's conception, idolatry in human thinking occurs for Barfield when we forget that "things" are the collective representations of human consciousness, a function of our invented constructs, and thus directly related to human activity. Only the unmanifest, the unrepresented, is independent of human consciousness. Anything that is named, or represented, is an artifact of human experience. "Things" do not exist without human construction of them.

The evolution of human consciousness has involved a decline in the sense of our participation in what is known. But lest it appear that Barfield only suggests that human understanding is deteriorating, let me now introduce his assessment of how we can rise out of this idolatrous hole into which we apparently have dug ourselves. This loss of original participation, according to Barfield, ultimately serves the further evolution of human consciousness toward a higher, and ultimately anti-idolatrous, level. He postulated that the Hebrews, in their injunction against idolatry, specifically set out to destroy original participation because it had become too idolatrous. The major Hebrew argument regarding the taboo against speaking the name of God was rooted in the awareness of the essentially ineffable nature of the ultimate, and the human tendency to change abstract images into concrete objects. This movement, Barfield suggests, presaged a long process of development toward a new and deeper kind of participation, through the active and conscious use of metaphor.

When we use language metaphorically, we bring it about of our own free will that an appearance means something other than itself, and, usually, that a manifest 'means' an unmanifest. We start with an idol, and we ourselves turn the idol into a representation. (p. 126)

It is through this conscious use of metaphorical imagination that we can again take responsibility for our participation in our knowledge. We transcend idolatry through awareness that our representations are not of nature, not something independent of our consciousness, but

are of ourselves. We understand that nature itself is the representation of human consciousness. Thus, the destruction of both original participation and the idolatry of objectivism leads to the liberation of images, or constructs, for our imaginative use in "creating" the universe. Barfield called this conscious awareness that we participate in the phenomena of nature and in the construction of our experience of the universe "final participation".

Final participation is not seen by Barfield as a remote goal but as a direction toward which we humans ought to be moving, and is consistent with the human participation in knowledge that Kelly described in "Ontological Acceleration" (Maher, 1979). For Barfield, the future of nature itself depends on the direction that we humans take. Creative, imaginative, and responsible active participation in the evolution of human knowledge can occur to the extent that we can experience the idolatrous use of our representations and then move to the next step of conscious participation in them.

In sum, the process of continuing the elaboration of human knowledge requires the realization that the unmanifest, the unrepresented, perpetually exists and that our beliefs are our subjective, creative constructions rather than the ultimate truth. This perspective requires that we be constantly aware that a conceptualized entity is not, and cannot be, ultimately real and that, as Kelly indicated, the universe holds no allegiance to our constructs. The shaping of a construct, whether comprehensive or incidental, must always include awareness that knowledge is indeterminate. Rather than serving our images, we must be willing to be iconoclasts, to break the images and thus be open to revising our understandings and entertaining new interpretations.

Constructivism and Iconoclasm

If we are aware that knowledge is indeterminate it is easier to revise our constructs when events in the universe fail to conform to our anticipations, as they always, ultimately, will. Constructive alternativism, Kelly's proposition that all interpretations of the universe are subject to revision and ultimate replacement, is consistent with an iconoclastic stance. Its contrast, accumulative fragmentalism, represents an idolatrous belief that current human knowledge consists of fragments of ultimate truth. Within Kelly's model, it is expected that interpretations will be revised during the process of articulation and ultimately replaced as better understandings evolve. This "humility" reduces the tendency toward an idolatrous position on any particular construction. Kelly encouraged us to approach all beliefs or interpretations as tentative and ad interim, and he modeled how to apply this perspective when he proposed his own theory.

The theoretical statements propounded are no more than partially accurate constructions of events which, in turn, are no more than partially perceived. Moreover, what we propose, even in its truer aspects, will eventually be overthrown and displaced by something with more truth in it. Indeed, our theory is frankly designed to contribute effectively to its own eventual overthrow and displacement (Maher, 1979, p. 66).

"Suppose We Regard . . ."

Kelly's (1955) propositional vs. preemptive construct dimension is particularly relevant to the issue of idolatry. When a construct is used preemptively, it restricts its elements or particulars to itself exclusively. It is a "nothing-but" usage that encourages the belief that the representation is inherent in the object. Preemptive usage limits other possibilities, prevents consideration of an alternate way of "saving the appearances," and encourages idolatry. Propositional usage of constructs leaves open the possibility that events might be understood in alternative ways.

The conventional indicative mood of our language suggests that qualities are inherent to events, committing an objectification similar to that described by Barfield. Kelly (1964) proposed an alternative, invitational, mood to language in which the speaker takes full responsibility for attributing a quality to an event, and suggests to the listener that a particular interpretation of the event might be considered. Casting a proposition in an invitational mood leaves the listener in a state of expectation which could lead to further questions, and suggests that the subject is open to a range of possibilities. Drawing on the idolatry metaphor in this presentation, for example, it might be interesting to ask, "Suppose we regard scientific investigation as if it were a spiritual undertaking?"

Further elaborating on the suggestion that ideas and reality are not isomorphic, and that there is benefit in considering a wide range of alternative perspectives, Kelly proposed that it is not necessary to disprove one interpretation in order to entertain an alternative. If interpretations are regarded as propositions that are personally invented, there is no reason to assume that the universe is responsible for these constructs. Hence, a range of possibilities may be entertained. The challenge in pursuing knowledge, according to Kelly (1977), is to engage in the full cycle of human experience by combining a personal commitment to knowing with the active exploration and aggressive testing of the knowledge (affirmative anticipation). To complete the cycle, however previous understandings must be reconstrued and the experience must end "in fresh hopes never before envisioned" (Kelly, 1977, p. 9).

Kelly's hypothetical approach was influenced by Vaihinger (1924), whose intriguing "as if" philosophy emphasized the generation of various possibilities (Mahoney, 1988). This is a consciously fictional approach, based on the assumption that representations are tools for adapting to the world and that their importance lies in their practical utility for furthering the pursuit of knowledge rather than their accuracy in representing the universe. Similarly to Barfield and Bakan, Vaihinger assumed that objective reality is not accessible and ideas are useful to the extent that they can expedite our ability to anticipate events. Idolatry may be avoided by building inquiry around a deliberately fictional approach. When ideas are known to be arbitrary they have no claim to ultimate accuracy. They may easily be replaced as new ideas are proposed, and can be used consciously to enhance the process of furthering inquiry rather than as ends in themselves.

Possibility, Plurality, and Play

A combination of propositional, invitational, and "as-if" approaches might lead to a culture of possibility as a vehicle for encouraging creative human inquiry while avoiding idolatry. When

any possibility is open to consideration there is no necessity to be confined to any particular perspective or point of view, or to be consistent with other knowledge. Possibilities may be generated and allowed to survive as long as they prove to be useful in furthering more inquiry. If an hypothesis proves to be useless or is refuted, if it no longer "saves the appearances," it may be easily be discarded. Those that survive are not necessarily justified or true, but might continue to be used because until they are refuted (Bartley, 1987; Mahoney, 1988).

If possibilities are encouraged, and an hypothesis or interpretation does not have to be disproved in order to entertain another, we might embrace a plurality of points of view and approach the pursuit of knowledge from a wide range of perspectives. Elbow (1986) proposed that along with use of the conventional critical approach to knowledge (which he called "methodological doubt"), a contrary approach which he called methodological belief might be entertained. Methodological belief is a conscious process of dwelling within the constructs of others and behaving "as if" they were true. Such active believing can serve as a methodological "game" in which learners artificially stand outside of their personal points of view, and is similar to Fixed Role Therapy (Kelly, 1955), in which clients "pretend" to be someone else for a fixed period of time.

Pretending might be seen as a form of play, which might also generate useful knowledge. Feynman (1983) described the liberation of his research in physics when he chose to do research for fun. One day in the campus dining hall, a student threw a plate in the cafeteria and Feynman noticed that as the plate wobbled the college medallion on the plate seemed to revolve faster than the wobble. He wondered what the relationship was between the two and, playing with the equations on rotation. This "play" led to similar problems regarding the spin of the electron. In short order this led to the work for which he won the Nobel Prize.

Some Implications of Final Participation

Barfield wished his readers to adopt "a sustained acceptance," (1988, p. 11) of the intimate connection between human consciousness and the world of events rather than mere theoretical acknowledgement of the notion. If the foregoing arguments are compelling we may find it necessary to develop the discipline of observing our constructs, articulating our assumptions, and making the constructed nature of our beliefs conscious. Such a process requires more than philosophical assent. It requires us to dwell within our construction processes and accept participatory responsibility for our knowledge. If we take these ideas seriously we must adopt techniques for embracing this understanding on a day-to-day and moment-to-moment basis. As has been described elsewhere (McWilliams, 1984; 1988a), Personal Construct Psychology techniques such as reflexive analysis of repertory grids may be used to facilitate awareness of our intimate participation in construct usage. Eastern meditative practices are powerful and appropriate techniques for developing awareness of how we create our illusory thoughts, including the experience of the existence of separate entities, particularly ourselves (Beck, 1989).

Achieving final participation through this type of "sustained acceptance" will inevitably lead to a transformation in the way that we experience ourselves and the universe. The process requires a radical change in our current way of construing rather than simply correcting an error in our old way of looking at things (Barfield, 1988). When we take the step of observing our

subjective mode of experience and making it an object of our perception our consciousness is transfigured. While our prior framework of knowledge continues to exist it now becomes only a component within a new, higher order framework (Kegan, 1982; Wilber, 1980), a type of change described in a wide variety of constructivist approaches to human development. This transformation requires us to detach from our exclusive identification with our current structure in order to ascend to the more unified organization at the next higher level (Wilber, 1983).

It is useful to be aware of the difficulty we will encounter in our attempts to experience participation in our representations. Transformative change will inevitably be experienced as threatening, because it leads to a new conception of the self. Because of our desire for consistency and predictability, we are likely to resist change by incorporating any new understanding into our existing framework. We have the tendency to maintain our current structure and to make new knowledge into another idol. Although final participation may sound like a desirable goal, our idolatrous tendencies make it easy to translate these concepts into terms consistent with the current structure.

Embracing and incorporating this sustained acceptance will ultimately lead to great liberation. Admitting that our knowledge is not the truth relieves us from the burden of justifying it. It also presents the intriguing possibility living comfortably with insecurity (Watts, 1952) and not knowing (Krishnamurti, 1969). We then become free to participate in the continuing evolution of the universe. As Kelly (1977) expressed it,

If you go ahead and involve yourself, rather than remaining alienated from the human struggle, if you strike out and implement your anticipations, if you dare to commit yourself, if you prepare to assess the outcomes as systematically as you can, and if you master the courage to abandon your favorite psychologisms and intellectualisms and reconstrue life altogether, well, you may not find that you guessed right, but you will stand a chance of transcending more freely those "obvious" facts that now appear to determine your affairs, and you just may get a little closer to the truth that lies somewhere over the horizon. (p. 19)

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