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Personal Construct Theory and Philosophy
Trevor Butt[1] and Bill Warren

Introduction

Over a decade and a half ago Warren (1998) discussed the general philosophical dimensions of personal construct psychology (PCP) under a heading *Links and Latencies*. This was a descriptive chapter acknowledging the specific references Kelly (1955, 1991a, 1991b) had made to different thinkers and philosophical ideas, as well as discussing ideas that may have been congenial to the theory had Kelly known more about them or better understood them. The present review is aimed at enlarging the theme of the philosophical dimensions of PCP by way of refocusing the *links* and the *latencies* in terms of reviewing thinking on the philosophical dimensions of PCP since the late 1990s. This is something of a daunting task given developments in relation to both philosophy and personal construct psychology. Other contributions to the present volume give different takes on the theory, such that this present chapter is intended to introduce both the theory behind PCP and the philosophical grounding of it to a potentially new audience. This is the preferred alternative to attempting to do justice to cataloguing outcomes of work done or in progress concerning its specific placement in relation to particular matters, for example, postmodernism (see Botella, 1995), and poststructuralism (Eustace & Bruni, 2006).

We will look at the development of constructivism in some detail, however, as it is claimed that PCP is a primary exemplar of it. Constructivism has been referred to as a "fuzzy set," and there is some confusion about exactly what constitutes it. We will argue that it represents an interesting synthesis of pragmatism, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. As such,

it brings together and makes explicit the philosophical links and latencies related to the psychology of personal constructs.

Links

Pragmatism

The most prominent philosophical link in PCP is certainly with pragmatism. As Warren (1998) observed, Kelly was sparing in referencing his sources. He did, however, write that "the philosophy and psychology of John Dewey can be read between the lines of the psychology of personal constructs" (Kelly, 1955, p. 154). In this section, we will see some of the ways in which this is indeed the case. Dewey was a key figure in the development of pragmatism (see Menand, 2002; Thayer, 1982). Along with his friend and fellow-pragmatist George Mead, Dewey had worked at Chicago University. Both saw themselves principally as psychologists, and Dewey served as president of the American Psychological Association in 1899. After the rise of John Watson (a student at Chicago) and behaviorism, however, they found themselves sidelined by the new orthodox psychology. Dewey was henceforth seen as a philosopher and Mead as a sociologist. Pragmatism had thus been eclipsed by behaviorism when Kelly was active between the 1930s and 1960s.

Pragmatism, which Thayer (1982) describes as a movement rather than a philosophical doctrine, flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in North America, and permeated its cultural life. At its heart is a skepticism toward one merely accepting received wisdom and theory-driven beliefs and practices. Dewey's focus was on how individuals think and solve problems, and he prized "an experimental type of mind" (we can see here Kelly's *person as scientist*), one which forms and tests hunches, guesses, and hypotheses to search for a solution to a problem.

Cromwell (2011, p. 331) quotes the physicist Niels Bohr as saying that the job of science is not to represent reality, whatever that is. It is instead to develop productive ways of talking about the world. So there is an implicit primacy of construction here that very clearly chimes with the tenets of PCP. Talking about the world in productive ways emphasizes that ideas and truths are not somehow "out there" awaiting discovery. Instead they are constructions of the world that compete for viability, both within the individual and between individuals. Menand (2002, p. xi) notes that for the pragmatist, ideas are tools just "like knives and forks and microchips."

Their job is to help us get a grip on the world so that we can navigate our way in it. There is not necessarily one solution to any problem. We use the tools we have to make our way in the world as effectively as possible. As in constructive alternativism, events bear more than one construction, and are judged not in terms of their "truth," but their usefulness. For pragmatists, the meaning of a proposition is in its consequences. For William James (see Thayer, 1982), acknowledged as the founder of pragmatism, a truth is a belief that proves useful to the believer.

Constructive alternativism is thus a doctrine that Kelly refined primarily from the works of Dewey. In his *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Dewey (1948) tells us approvingly of an address by "a distinguished English man of science" (p. xvi) in which the author emphasizes that important advances in science rarely comprise "new knowledge which can be added to the great body of old knowledge" (what Kelly calls "accumulative fragmentalism"). Instead, a new perspective arises that disintegrates the old. What is needed is "a Ministry of Disturbance, a regulated source of annoyance; a destroyer of routine; an underminer of complacency" (p. xvii). Here we see pragmatism's skepticism of received wisdom *par excellence*.

An important feature of Dewey's pragmatism was its rejection of what he saw as the dualisms that had become received wisdom in philosophy and psychology. The separation of the person from the world, self from others, and mind from body had become the uncontested starting points for scientific investigation. Dewey was a century ahead of his time in criticizing the "spectator theory of knowledge," in which there is a sharp distinction between "inside" and "outside," and the job of the senses is simply to represent the world "as it is in reality," whatever that may look like. For Dewey, the boundary between the organism and its environment was a permeable one. Emotions occur when disturbance at this boundary occurs. In an article in 1896, he had argued strongly against psychology taking the reflex arc as its model of action. It artificially fragments a complex sensori-motor action and posits a passive organism that is kicked into action by a stimulus. If the cycle can be said to begin anywhere, it does so in the case of a person with an inquiry, not a prod or a poke; unless the prod or poke has meaning to the individual by reason of it generating a puzzle or question. In Kelly's words, "man is a form of motion" (1955, p. 48), and each person his or her own scientist conducting inquiries.

The separation of self from others was a dualism that was critically elaborated by G. H. Mead (see Thayer, 1982). It was Mead who first established what Kelly refers to as sociality, the construction of others' constructions of

the world and of oneself. For both, the self is a social construction, and not some spiritual gyroscope at the person's center. Here is Kelly:

> Some writers have considered it advisable to try to distinguish between "external" events and "internal" events. In our system there is no particular need for making this kind of distinction. Nor do we have to distinguish sharply between stimulus and response, between the organism and his environment, or between the self and the not-self. (Kelly, 1955, p. 55)

Perhaps the most damaging dualism for psychology is the Cartesian mind/body split. Dewey saw this as deeply embedded in Western culture since the advent of Pauline Christianity. It has resulted in misleading questions such as: do cognitions cause behavior, or are they merely epiphenomena? Let us remind ourselves here of Kelly's Fundamental Postulate: "A person's processes are psychologically channelized by the way in which he anticipates events" (Kelly, 1955, p. 46).

It is essential to note that he refuses to reduce "a person's processes" to how we think, feel, and behave. To separate these into separate faculties is to further propagate the myth of Cartesian dualism. "The person's processes" emphasizes the practical impossibility of separating out these components of action.

Latencies

Here we will consider latencies, that is aspects of personal construct psychology that "lie beneath" Kelly's theory, under three headings: phenomenology, existential phenomenology, and hermeneutics.

Phenomenology

What in the Anglophone world is called continental philosophy mainly comprises the phenomenological family. Spiegelberg (1960, pp. xxvii–xxviii) alerts us to the problems with terms like "movement" or "school" in relation to phenomenology and the difficulty of writing a history of something where the "variety is more characteristic than its connecting unity" (p. xxviii). Kelly (1969a) stated clearly that the psychology of personal constructs was not a variety of phenomenology. He imagined that phenomenology was concerned with the private study of consciousness, and therefore had no focus on the social world that was basic to the pragmatism of both Dewey and Mead.

He thought it perpetuated the Cartesian dualism to which he was strongly opposed, focusing on a private self within the body:

> phenomenological man cannot share his subjective plight, for even his most beloved companion is a manikin fabricated out of his own moods. A blind poet, imprisoned alone in a cell whose walls he cannot touch, the only sound man hears is the ringing in his ears. (Kelly, 1969a, p. 24)

With this rejection, it is difficult to imagine that phenomenology was or is latent within personal construct psychology. However, it is clear from the above quote and elsewhere in Kelly's work that Kelly misunderstood what phenomenology was. In his day, many of the latencies with phenomenology will not have been apparent because so much of it was not yet translated into English. Perhaps all he had to go on was the very selective interpretation of phenomenology that Rogers had endorsed. Phenomenology focuses on the study of experience and resembles pragmatism in that it comprises a family of approaches (Moran, 2002) and has its own developmental history. So diverse is this family that Husserl (1859–1932)—if not exactly its founder, certainly the key thinker in its development—commented in a letter that he was a leader without followers (Moran, 2002, p. 89). Again, like pragmatism, there is no central dogma. Rather, it is characterized as a method or practice—a way of philosophizing. Merleau-Ponty (2004, p. 39) stated its aim as allowing us "to rediscover the world in which we live, yet which we are always prone to forget." This "forgetting" is due to the preconceptions with which we approach it; culturally common constructions that obscure the events themselves. Of course, we can never encounter events in the raw—they are always construed. But phenomenology's aim is to help us realize these constructions as such.

Existentialism and existential phenomenology

Arguably, the most prevalent or best known form of phenomenology since the mid-twentieth century has been existential phenomenology. Sometimes referred to loosely and generally as existentialism, it combines the phenomenological approach with the philosophy of existence. Whereas Husserl's phenomenology might be seen as "top-down," searching for essences in perception, existential phenomenology is by contrast "bottom-up," starting with the existent—that is, the person in the world. We can see an immediate congruence with PCP here, albeit that congruence must be seen with a little less enthusiasm in the light of Soffer's (1990) insights. Existentialism's

focus was on what this position saw as the immense paradox with which human beings are faced. That paradox was between the two true propositions: (1) on the one hand, the individual's absolute worth, yet (2) his or her ultimate worthlessness (in terms of nature, and other people—who will always be "the other" and never fully knowable). The task for the philosopher was to understand how this paradox might be dealt with so as to make life worth living, and living in an "authentic" way. This was a universal and macro-level problem concerned with the *Being* "writ large" (why/how does anything exist?) but also, more for some (e.g., Heidegger) and less so for others (e.g., Sartre), with *being*. The last, *being*, goes to the real world of people going about their lives and the sense and meanings they make. In simple terms, existential phenomenology applies the method or practice that is phenomenology—in one or other of its guises or formulations—to the domain of questions that concern the *Being* (if such exists) and the *being* of human beings. The psychology of personal constructs can be seen as an existential phenomenological approach in that it has this real-world, individual focus. Similarly, emotions are defined not in objective terms, but in terms of the person's action and experience. When we look at Kelly's (1955) analysis of the self-characterization sketch, his recommendations are those a phenomenologist would use: look closely at the protocol and read it again and again for meanings that might not be immediately apparent. Rephrase it with different emphases to see if yet further meanings emerge, and so on. Kelly's point is that we should never assume others see the world as we do. His method is like Husserl's; trying to get us to stand back from our fore-structure (our own construct system) and view things afresh.

Importantly, too, the existentialist's person is rooted in the social world, far from the "blind poet, imprisoned in his cell" derided by Kelly. The stress on intersubjectivity is the hallmark of existential phenomenology. There is no Cartesian dualism, no spiritual center to the person. "There is no inner man. Man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xi). For contemporary personal construct theorists, existential phenomenology bears a strong resemblance to existentialism (Butt, 2008; Warren, 1998). Holland (1977) went as far as to label Kelly "a reluctant existentialist." Whereas Rogers and Maslow used its vocabulary, their variant is scarcely recognizable when compared to the European original. Equally, while Kelly had shunned it, yet he reinvented it using his own terms and structure.

Like Sartre, Kelly saw the person as self-inventing. Both were concerned with the person's choices, along with the ensuing anxiety and guilt that particular choices may generate. The Garden of Eden myth features in

several of Kelly's later papers (Maher, 1969), but is central in two: "Sin and Psychotherapy" (Kelly, 1969b) and "Psychotherapy and the Nature of Man" (Kelly, 1969c). The former is perhaps a pivotal paper in the Kelly canon (Butt, 2008). In it Kelly emphasizes that constructs are not in some cognitive domain "behind" action, but, rather, are immersed in it: we construe in action. We choose between alternatives that we see as open to us and choose that alternative that makes most sense to us. We then have to hope for the best, because we cannot see where every choice will take us (and this is where we encounter anxiety and guilt). When humankind ate from the Tree of Knowledge, it chose to live by adventure rather than lead a life of passivity and blind obedience. There can be no return to the Garden of Eden and neither should there be. Kelly believed that the ultimate choice between good and evil was unavoidable, and his catalogue of efforts to evade it strongly resembles examples of Sartrian Bad Faith.

Hermeneutics

Phenomenology is said to have taken a "hermeneutic turn," just as hermeneutics has been said to have taken a "philosophical turn." The latter was when an activity concerned with understanding biblical texts with reference to who wrote them, when they were written, and in what context they were written, took on a wider field of questions. The former is generally traced to Husserl's shift of focus in his discussion of language and thinking (e.g., Noe, 1992). Historically, *hermeneutics* (customarily derived from the ancient Greek mythological god, the "messenger" Hermes, god of such activities as language, meaning, interpretation) appears in the ancient Greek world in Plato and Aristotle in discussion around language and interpretation and shared/idiosyncratic interpretation and meaning. Heidegger's and Gadamer's work focused on the importance of uncovering "deeper" or "hidden" meaning, an exposure thereby of something of *Being*, from language employed by human beings; language "writ large."

Chiari and Nuzzo (2010) discussed personal construct psychology in the context of developments in constructivist thinking more generally. While they intentionally focused on a number of areas that opened up the important matter of transcending traditional dichotomies, their reflections highlighted the significance of hermeneutics in and for constructivist psychology. This was in terms of the location of various members of the constructivist family in relation to one another, but, specifically in relation to personal construct psychology, in terms of the stress on narrative or a *narratologic approach* epitomized in Mair's (1988) psychology of

"storytelling." Arguably, personal construct psychology is a hermeneutic psychology. It is clearly primarily concerned with the interpretation of the meaning of events to the individual, and not the explanation of behavior in terms of lawful relationships.

In the social sciences, reference is made to what is termed the hermeneutic circle. This means that interpretation takes place when we circle between whole and part in order to appreciate the meaning of something. So, like pragmatism, meanings are contextual and are only understood as we place the part (event) within its context (whole). An action can only be understood by seeing how it fits in with how it is construed by a person. Objective assessment based on a stimulus-response pattern may well not reveal this. Kelly's recommendations for interpreting self-characterization sketches are a good example. One strategy he suggests is that we read a passage over and over again, stressing different words in order to see how the meaning of a sentence changes within different contexts. Further, in a recent study drawing on the work of Gadamer, Peck (2012) argues by way of a cogent critique of Kelly's ideas on language that a more formal elaboration of personal construct psychology in terms of Gadamer's work would be fruitful. Such an elaboration, he argues, would provide both a corrective to the problem of language in personal construct psychology and strengthen the point we are making here. In any event, the location of its development out of pragmatism does not present a significant difficulty given the compatibilities between that perspective and both phenomenology and hermeneutics.

Constructivism

In constructivism we see a synthesis of pragmatism, existential phenomenology, and hermeneutics (Chiari & Nuzzo, 2010). Constructivism proposes that we construct as well as discover the world that we inhabit. Central to constructivism is the pragmatists' point that ideas are like tools. There will be many viable constructions of reality, drawing on many different theories. When a strategy works, it does not tell us what reality is like, merely that the strategy worked. Chiari and Nuzzo (2010), drawing on von Foerster, give the example that there will be many ways of opening a lock. We might perhaps use a key, a credit card, or a needle. These do not give us a picture of the lock.

Kelly's personal construct theory is seen as one of the main forerunners of contemporary constructivism. Others, according to Chiari and Nuzzo

(2010), are Piaget's genetic epistemology, narrative psychology, social constructionism, and the autopoiesis of Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. In this section, we will begin by outlining constructivism, pointing out what distinguishes it from its contrast, objectivism. We will note how it draws on pragmatism, phenomenology, and hermeneutics, and then briefly indicate some of the differences and controversies within it.

What is termed objectivism is what is regarded by most laypeople as "common sense." It holds that the world is known to us through our senses; we come to know it through contact with it and thus are able to negotiate our way in it. Orthodox psychology very much supports such a doctrine. Perception relates the features of the world through touch, vision, and hearing. Cognition is about the way in which we come to know the world. Learning focuses on how we adapt to and change our environment. In all this, a separation between person and world is assumed. When Watson's behaviorist manifesto was adopted by the discipline in the early twentieth century, the dualism between person and environment was reinforced by psychologists' determination to model themselves on nineteenth-century physicists. Objectivism and its experimental method became the only legitimate ways to study behavior.

Both pragmatism and phenomenology are against dualisms that separate mind from body, self from other, and person from environment. We have seen that John Dewey had warned in 1896 of the folly of taking the reflex arc as a paradigm in psychology. The separation of person from environment obscures the way of seeing the systemic and inseparable relationship between them. The reflex sees the environment as impinging on a passive organism, leading to an involuntary response from it. However, if the cycle begins anywhere, it does so with the person's curiosity, a question that is manifest in his or her action. Instead of "behavior," driven by "motivation," it is more useful to think of a person's action (or what Kelly termed "construing"), infused as it is with perception and purpose. Dewey had derided the objectivist view of a person disinterestedly registering the "real" world via senses as the "spectator view of knowledge." Each person is in an inseparable symbiosis with his or her environment. The same point had been at the center of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology: "Perception is precisely that kind of act in which there can be no question of setting the act apart from the end to which it is directed" (1962, p. 374).

Constructivism, like pragmatism, sees perception as guided by the organism's purpose and action. Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991), building on the phenomenology of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, coined the

term "enaction" to capture the way in which action embodies perception and purpose. Perception is not a matter of information processing, of representing a pre-given real world in the senses. This is objectivism. The only alternative to it is not mentalism—the idea that the world as perceived is a projection of a pre-given mind. As we have already noted, this was the mistake made by Kelly in his critique of what he wrongly thought was phenomenology. Enaction is a better alternative, one that sees the person and the world as intertwined and, as it were, replying to each other in a closed system. Drawing on Varela's experiments on the neuroscience under-pinning color vision, Varela, Thomson, and Rosch (1991) show how colors are not "out there" in a "real world" waiting to be discovered. They are not simply the interpretation of wavelengths of light—this is merely the physi-cist's way of talking about color. It is no more real than what we see. Different animals with different eye-structure pick up entirely different images that we cannot imagine, and this is because their visual systems have evolved pragmatically to assist them in their interactions with the world. This Kelly had endorsed with his claim that there is a real world, but we can only ever know it through our constructions of it. Of course, although we can separate construct from element in our attempt to analyze this interac-tion, in practice the two are inseparable. Constructivism sees both the world and cognition as emerging out of the relationship between them.

Types of constructivism

We turn now to the confusion that can ensue from the difference between constructivism and social constructionism. Social constructionism was launched by Kenneth Gergen in the 1980s. Gergen had worked tirelessly for many years, virtually as a lone voice, arguing against the individualism at the root of Anglo-American social psychology. The social world was quite invisible in it, the assumption being the primacy of individual atoms that came together to make up society. The individual had a concrete reality, while society appeared as some abstract entity "out there." In contrast, social constructionism emphasized the primacy of the social world. Gergen reached "take-off velocity" with an article in the mid-1980s that clearly resonated with many, because quite suddenly social construc-tionism began to proliferate. Some within this camp see constructivism as still asocial and still based on individual cognition. The individual is seen as having too much agency.

As Chiari and Nuzzo (2010) argue, it is easy to cast the psychology of personal constructs as a weak "epistemological" type of constructivism, one

that begins with and privileges the knowledge of the knower. However, we must remember that Kelly's primary focus was in clinical psychology. His concern was with how constructions differ (the Individuality Corollary) rather than how construing is held in common (the Commonality Corollary). All the same, he stressed the tension between the two corollaries (Butt, 2008). We must also remember that there is no Cartesian self in personal construct theory. As we have already seen, self versus not self is a dualism that Kelly had no time for. Instead of self, Kelly talks of "core role structure." This is not a simple translation of the self. It does not denote an inner Cartesian entity, but instead construing based on the constructions of significant others (and as we have seen, Kelly took this formulation from George Mead). So what other psychologists think of as self, Kelly argues emerges from interaction.

In this way, personal construct theory really does transcend the realism/idealism dichotomy and thus qualifies as a strong form of constructivism. Chiari and Nuzzo (2010) argue convincingly that it is this primacy of interaction that is the hallmark of true hermeneutic constructivism. Kelly well understood the socially constructed nature of the person, just as Dewey had. However, once constructed, the person is, to some extent at least, a center for choice and agency. Unlike in some forms of contemporary social constructionism, the individual is not an empty vessel, through which social forces and discourse flow without resistance to produce passive movement.

Conclusions

We hope that this review of the philosophical dimensions of personal construct theory places it in its historic-philosophical context. Historically, the zeitgeist in which it germinated and emerged was one in which the philosophy that was pragmatism held sway in the U.S.A. Philosophically, pragmatism is highly compatible with the phenomenology that Kelly rejected but likely, and through no fault of his own, misunderstood. Thus has subsequent reflection within the community which explores and advances the theory of personal constructs been able to derive a conclusion that it represents a *hermeneutic constructivism*. It is philosophically rich and it brings that richness to therapeutic contexts as well as to theoretical reflection and applied research.

Kelly's contribution to pragmatism was to bring it to bear on the world of clinical psychology. The thread that runs from pragmatism to constructivism is that the world we perceive is both found *and* made. To the naive

observer, it appears that we discover a preexisting world with our senses and scientific experiments. But these "discoveries" are largely constructions that, if they are viable, allow us to get a grip on the world. It is important to remember that other viable constructions are possible. For the psychologist trying to help other people, it is therefore essential to realize that each person does not construe the world in exactly the same way.

Note

1   Sadly, Trevor Butt did not live to see the publication of this chapter, which we hope will be a fitting tribute to his long and very significant contribution to personal construct psychology. (Eds.)

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