

KELLY, JESUS, AND PAUL - A COMMENTARY ON JONATHAN D. RASKIN: 'DON'T CRY FOR ME GEORGE A. KELLY'

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Jonathan D. Raskin (2006). Don't cry for me George A. Kelly: Human involvement and the construing of personal construct psychology. *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*, 3, 50-61

Two of Garry Will's recent books have been *What Jesus meant* (2006) and *What Paul meant* (2006). Jonathan Raskin (this issue, 2006, p. 50-61) places the question "What did Kelly really mean?" Garry Will's in his powerful writing has succeeded in placing a thorn in the side of contemporary conservative, fundamentalist, and papal religion. George A. Kelly (1955), likewise, placed a thorn in the side of contemporary psychology. Even with this attributed purpose I have good reason to believe that Jesus, Paul, and Kelly are not accessible to tell me personally what they really meant.

In our entire itinerary of experiencing existence we make constructs as we go along. Then, as security blanket, we reify the elements of these constructs and thereby feel more comfortable. So, 'real' and 'meaning' are simply attributes that we have awarded. Whether Kelly, Jesus, or Paul would affirm these awards for us is another matter.

A central intent in Raskin's tract is to challenge the habit among scholars of personal construct theory (PCP) to cite quotations by Kelly to affirm what Kelly really meant. In rebuttal Raskin moves to the thesis that the consummatory goal for assessing Kelly's theory is not so much what was true in some kind of real way "but more so on how convincing an argument I made and whether the implications of my argument were deemed generative by readers (Raskin, op. cit., p. 56)." In this statement Raskin at once has made his paper a powerful one with powerful issues at stake. To this I say bravo, but also I say let's look at the bath water being splashed away.

62

Let me tell a story. A while back I attended a series of lectures about William James and the revival of pragmatism. (By the way, Kelly cites William James in the opening pages of his two volumes.) Sponsored by the humanities area of the university, only philosophy, religion, and history were represented in the audience—except for one psychologist, i.e., me. The method for speaker and audience to arrive at truth statements, I learned, was to diverge—to cite and integrate wider and wider sources from James' central writings, his peripheral writings, and from relevant scholarly sources by others on the issues at hand. As discrepancy or contradiction arose, the collected quotations, arranged logically, were employed to resolve conflict and to trump vagrant viewpoints. In contrast, my own truth statement practice as an experimental clinical psychologist was to search amicably among the discussants to converge upon some crucial testable hypothesis that, if disconfirmed by empirical data, would leave the tenets of James' theoretical formulations in jeopardy. By injecting this line of query it seemed as if I were facing an army of generalists who were so well rounded that there was no point to be found, and I was the David who searched for a bullet to know more and more about less and less until I could empirically verify everything about nothing. Such bipolarity as I may have imagined put aside, my convergent style of thinking was not only foreign to the audience but produced many scornful and jaundiced eye. People wondered where this "black sheep (aka black creep)" came from.

Kelly used the word 'brittle hypothesis.' Popper called it falsifiability of a theory's propositions. I choose to call it disconfirmability (by controlled investigation). However called, a basic tenet of experimental method is that if you cannot state the conditions and observations by which a formulation

can be potentially disconfirmed, then you do not have a scientific theory. Newtonian and Darwinian theory, in turn, have met this criterion and have buckled in specific ways. Creationism and intelligent design have failed the test and have become formulations not of science but of advocacy. Kelly has held the tenet up as an emblem for PCP.

My conclusion re Raskin's thesis is twofold. To remain solely in the realm of citing chapter and verse is nonproductive alike for the individual investigator, for the individual clinician, and for the general evolution of PCP beyond a static dated theory. Who said it, if Kelly were alive today he would not be a Kellian? But the other side of the picture is that these two kinds of epistemology indeed exist. As I learned in my James colloquium, even seasoned scholars are often unfamiliar with the territory of the other. In the end, knowledge advances if these divergent and convergent methods feast upon one another.

A second issue concerns Raskin's choice of the weeping nosology (*ibid.*, this issue) and its alleged incompatibility with general theory in PCP. Raskin makes very clear arguments that the alleged typology is incompatible with the general PCP theory. Assuming that the discrepancy is *not* in the eyes of us beholders but inherently in the theory illogic, he carefully acknowledges that one cannot then discern onto which attribution we should assign 'the real Kelly.' Let me first take pause and ask whether these kinds of weepings indeed represent a formal typology.

As for weeping, Kelly was indeed influenced of his own claim by role theory, his directing college theatre, and Moreno's psychodrama. Although Raskin cited reports of Kelly's crying during clinical supervision sessions, I saw it not. By the time of my passage (1950-1955), he must have been wept dry.

Many alternative interpretations are possible to account for what would appear a discrepancy between the weeping typology and his 'theory general.' The first alternative is that Raskin is right. As Kelly read his chapter manuscripts to his Wednesday night nucleus of students, the students would often catch contradictions like this and figuratively beat Kelly to a pulp. It may be that on the evening this theme of weeping was offered, the students' wits may already have become glazed by the beer. If so, shame on both Kelly and students.

Another alternative is that, as Raskin noted,

Kelly was well known for the colossal spoof. Sometimes he would see how far he could lead a student down 'the garden path' before the student discovered he had been merely made a fool. This was sometimes Kelly's tough terminal pedagogy, but it seems unlikely he would do this with his readers.

Another alternative, which I offer with favor, is that what appears as a formal typology is not indeed the case. Kelly, well versed in psychometrics, was well informed of the need for normative scaling, reliability, predictive validity, profiling of orthogonal factors, use of percentiles to achieve a level playing field for comparison. Such matters he freely explored with rep grid work. He despised them in assessing groups of individuals and called it quantitative sociology. Accordingly, psychometric typology-making is not evident with the weeping. My tentative conclusion, therefore, is that Kelly was offering the beginning clinician a series of alternative saddles. Each might be useful to mount their longitudinal ride into psychotherapy. If this formulation is correct, then the criticisms enumerated by Raskin would be 'off the mark.' Kelly was always concerned (perhaps because of his own excessive need for control) that student clinicians not get lost within either the construct systems or the emotions of their clients. Instead they should subsume each individual client's construct system within her or his own integral personal construct system. (Kelly emphasized his view here as different from Carl Rogers' emphasis upon empathy and positive regard, the Rogerian view being a submerging into rather than securing of superordinate perspective for each client's construct system.) Within this context Kelly may have been offering not a formal typology but a list of alternative constructs from which the therapeutic journey would be launched.

Other issues are raised by Raskin that are of such importance that they deserve address in a separate paper. Among them is the comparison of the different kinds of constructivisms and how they relate to other theoretical perspectives. Of particular interest and to the creative credit of Raskin is the illumination of relativism vs. absolutism in thinking. Not only does Raskin explode this bipolarity as a philosophical dilemma but also he implicitly rejects relativist vs. absolutist thinking as a trait on which individuals differ one from another. Instead, absolutist and relativist thinking are momentary states that occur within the same individual, depending

upon whether she or he is construing alternatives or committing to a particular decision. In this respect Raskin rightfully quotes McWilliams' (1996) plea that we "take conscious responsibility for our personal participation in creating meaning." In that responsibility is the 'committing' as well as the 'relativizing.' These issues, if anything, are even more important than the central topic of Raskin's paper, and they deserve separate and full attention.

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