

“LIVE FREE OR DIE”: ROBERT FROST AND THE CHOICE COROLLARY

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The framing of Kelly's Choice Corollary has been subjected to the criticism that it fails the crucial scientific test of falsifiability. It is hard to imagine any choice that a person might make that could not retrospectively be explained by some element of its premise. However personal construct theory, unlike many other therapeutic models in psychology, does at least attempt to understand how we make choices which strikes me as a fundamental human concern that should not be overlooked. Kelly proposed that one of the two criteria that people apply to their choices is whether a particular course of action will lead to an extension of their construct system by exploring new areas that are only partially understood. This paper obliquely examines the attraction of this decision-making principle by conducting a close reading of Robert Frost's most celebrated poem "The Road Not Taken" which ends with the much-quoted lines "Two roads diverged in a wood and I – I – took the one less travelled by. And that has made all the difference." This powerful conclusion appears to celebrate just the qualities of individualism and adventure enshrined in the choice corollary. However a close reading of the whole poem indicates that Frost had a much more nuanced sense of how people make decisions and this subtler analysis is both consistent with a number of contemporary views of the psychology of choice, and less supportive of Kelly's position than you might have expected.

Keywords: *Choice corollary; personal construct theory; Robert Frost*

Kelly framed the Choice Corollary in stark contrast to the motivational and stimulus-response explanations of human decision-taking that dominated American psychology in the 1950s. Adopting his now familiar psychotherapeutic stance that however senseless a person's behaviour might look from the outside it would seem entirely sensible if only we could see things from the actor's perspective, Kelly developed the notion of the *elaborative* choice.

THE CHOICE COROLLARY

"Persons choose for themselves that alternative in a dichotomized construct through which they anticipate the greater possibility for the elaboration of their construct system" (Kelly, 1955, p. 64).

Kelly proposed two competing criteria that the deciding individual might adopt. He, and it is almost always he in Kelly's writing, can opt for

security or adventure. In technical terms this means that elaboration is guided by the principles of definition or extension. Definition allows the person to confirm in ever greater detail aspects of their experience which have already been fairly actively construed whereas extension offers the prospect of reaching out to increase the range of the construct system by exploring new areas that are only very partially understood (Bannister and Fransella 1986). In their influential book "Inquiring Man" Bannister and Fransella (op cit) commented admiringly on the elegant phrasing of the choice corollary in which "Kelly tucks the tail of his theoretical snake into its mouth" but they also acknowledged that he had created "either a tautology or a complete and integrated theory". Other psychologists from within the ranks of PCP have voiced their reservations about the choice corollary more explicitly.

CRITICISMS OF THE CHOICE COROLLARY

The primary charge against the choice corollary is that it is a basically untestable assertion (Butt 1988). As there is no indication of when or why an individual might be drawn towards further definition or extension of their construct system it is not easy to see how any refutable hypothesis could be experimentally examined. This principle of *falsifiability* is central to the scientific method (Popper 1959). While you could argue that in practice very few successful scientists spend their careers trying to prove themselves wrong (Kuhn 1996) you might think that Popper’s ideas ought to have some purchase in a theory that is built around the central metaphor of “Man the Scientist”.

A second concern regards the precise meaning of *anticipate* in the specific context of the choice corollary. It is one of Kelly’s favourite words and captures the forward-looking orientation of personal construct theory. However he is less clear about the exact level of self-awareness at which we operate when making our choices. Are we usually conscious of the options open to us and do we hence make considered decisions based on predictions about the likely psychological consequences of the available alternatives? The circumspection phase of the C-P-C cycle suggests we can make decisions in this measured fashion. Or do we tend to act more intuitively and back our “gut feelings” because one course of action just appeals more than another? Preverbal construing is a powerful example of the *unconscious* way in which we habitually make sense of our worlds. Boxer writing about his experiences in organizational consultancy discovered that most of the decisions made by the managers with whom he worked were determined by the immediacy of “gut feelings” rather than following a period of rational reflection (Boxer 1982). He nonetheless contended that at some level the individual was always backing a hunch that one route forward offered the manager the “best chance of extending and defining his construct system.” A sceptic might wonder how he would ever know if that was, or was not, the case.

A third criticism of the choice corollary is that it appears to pay no heed to the social context in which decisions are taken. Kelly empha-

sizes that the person chooses *for himself* (Kelly 1955) and this emphasis on the individual ignores how much of our construction of events is informed by our relationships with other people (Procter, in press). This is a familiar charge that has been levelled against personal construct theory in general but is particularly pertinent when we consider the social influences on the way our choices are framed and the interpersonal consequences of even the most personal of our decisions.

Nonetheless I think Kelly is to be applauded for his attempts to conceptualise choice in personal construct terms. Furthermore I suspect his identification of the contrasting appeals of predictability and adventure on our decision-taking was perceptive and persuasive. Furthermore there is a credible line of argument that would forgive the inherent untestability of the choice corollary if it proved to be pragmatically useful for clinicians and their clients (Menand2002). Sadly that has not been my experience as I have rarely drawn on the choice corollary to inform my therapeutic work and, to be frank, it is not an aspect of personal construct theory to which I have paid much attention. Until...

ROBERT FROST

On a family holiday to New England in autumn 2017, I visited The Frost Place which is a farmhouse near Franconia in New Hampshire where the renowned American poet Robert Frost lived with his family from 1915-1917. As well as housing a significant collection of biographical material, The Frost Place also offers visitors the chance to appreciate several of his better known poems sited at various points along a short woodland walk. The conservators have chosen works that resonate strongly with the sylvan setting including the only one of Frost’s poems that I knew, or thought I knew, – “The Road not Taken”. All I actually remembered were the final three lines.

The Road Not Taken

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could*

To where it bent in the undergrowth;

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim
Because it was grassy and wanted wear,
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

This epic finale struck me as resonating strongly with Kelly's proposition that choices can be determined by the possibility of extending one's construct system. On first reading, the memorable ending leaves the reader with the impression that Frost has written a hymn to individualism and non-conformity and a ringing invitation to being adventurous and going your own way. No doubt that is why it has been regularly adopted by advertisers to sell a range of products including Ford cars, travel insurance and, less obviously, Nicorette chewing gum. However, a close reading of *The Road not Taken* in its entirety reveals that Frost held a much more nuanced and subtle view of the psychology of choice. Indeed a literary commentator in the USA described it "as the best example in all of American poetry of a wolf in sheep's clothing". and a recently published academic analysis is sub-titled "Finding America in the Poem Everyone Loves and Almost Everyone Gets Wrong" (Orr, 2015).

SOME HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Frost wrote *The Road not Taken* shortly after returning from England where he and his family lived from 1912-15 and where his exceptional talents were first widely recognized by, among others, the British poet and literary critic Edward Thomas. Thomas and Frost became close friends and enjoyed long walks together in the Gloucester

woodland. Thomas was apparently very keen to introduce his American visitor to the full range of the local flora but would often reproach himself for not having chosen the best route through the forest to show off the trees to their greatest advantage. Frost claimed that he was moved to write *The Road not Taken* as a jokey commentary on his friend's indecisiveness and was subsequently somewhat taken aback when readers took his verse so seriously! Thomas, like so many young men of his generation, was killed in the First World War at the Battle of Arras in 1917.

Despite his success in Europe Frost continued to struggle financially. He was not successful enough to generate enough income from farming to support his family and took on various lecturing positions to boost his funds. Interestingly, the subject he taught to local students was not English Literature but Psychology. In a newspaper interview preserved at The Frost Place, the poet explained to the journalists who interviewed him that the psychology he drew upon was "not the sort you read about in books." This is not entirely surprising because Frost was not much of an academic and twice dropped out of university courses (at both Dartmouth and Harvard) for which he had enrolled. However, his writings resonate with a poet's sensitivity to human experience which, it is reasonable to assume, he developed through his education in the proverbial University of Life.

A CLOSER READING

The first clue that there is more to the poem than the sentiments expressed in its rousing conclusion lies in its title which is not *The Road Less Travelled* (as most Google searchers assume) but *The Road not Taken*. It is therefore a reflection on what might have been rather than a simple celebration of what actually took place.

The first two stanzas suggest that the author of the poem could not differentiate much between the two routes open to him as "the passing there had worn them just the same". It sounds as though he could very easily have taken either option and indeed thought the untaken alternative way worth saving "for another day" but he doubted he would actually return and could never recreate these identical circumstances anyway.

But he had to choose one of the two diverging roads and so he just did.

The contrast between the almost accidental way the writer describes how he took his decision at the time and how he expects to be relating this incident “ages and ages hence” is stark. Now note the drama and the impressive decisiveness as the poet recalls how *I* (repeated for emphasis) chose “the road less travelled by” and (just as *I* had anticipated) “that has made all the difference.” Frost sounds to understand very well that the explanations we like to give for the choices we have made may bear little resemblance to the actual way those decisions were taken at the time.

Is it possible that Frost is simply poking fun at our tendency to overstate the control we have over our own destinies – the sense of self-importance that makes Frank Sinatra’s version of “My Way” such a popular soundtrack at funerals? Richard Bell sent me an audiofile of Frost reciting *The Road not Taken* and I could detect no irony whatsoever in the sonorous tones in which he delivered the poem’s momentous conclusion. I am therefore inclined to think that Frost recognized how much having the liberty to choose for yourself matters to people. Indeed the slogan “Live Free or Die” is the State motto of his beloved New Hampshire. We may overstate our capacity to determine the direction our lives follow but the feeling that we are masters of our own ships stiffens our psychological resolve.

A SOUND PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Frost may well not have been a scholarly psychologist himself but his insights into the nature of choice are supported by several strands of academic research into human decision-taking. His sense that most of our preferences are far from clear-cut finds support from within the ranks of personal construct theoreticians (Tschudi 1977). Tschudi explored the puzzling position in which individuals express a wish to change and yet seem loathe to abandon what outsiders view as their clearly problematic behavior. Using his A-B-C interviewing technique, he was able to tease out the surprising benefits of retaining “symptoms” and the often unrecognized risks of adopting new ways of being. While some of his examples can be neatly classi-

fied as illustrating the competing appeals of definition or extension of the person’s construct system, most serve to underline how frequently the choices with which we are faced throw up “implicative dilemmas”. Careful questioning may sometimes allow individuals to explain some of the advantages and disadvantages between which they feel obliged to choose but oftentimes I suspect they are unaware of the likely consequences of their decisions and/or paralysed by the complexity of their personal balance sheet when reflecting on the pros and cons of any particular course of action.

If this analysis is correct it is unsurprising that many choices are made on an impulsive and intuitive rather than a rational and considered basis (Kahneman 2011). Kahneman won a Nobel Prize along with his long-time colleague Tversky for their research into economic decision-taking in which they discovered that while people are capable of systematically analyzing an array of options they mostly use ill-understood shortcuts to help them draw conclusions speedily. In his book “Thinking Fast and Slow”, Kahneman described these two ways of making choices as System One and System Two thinking which he defined as follows: “System One operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control. System Two allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations. The operations of System Two are often associated with the subjective experience of agency, choice and concentration.”

While Kahneman provided many examples of the folly of applying System One thinking when taking important financial decisions, he also acknowledged that our dominant use of this swift intuitive approach to problem solving has probably had evolutionary benefits. So when Frost confesses he did not spend much time weighing up his options when faced with a fork in the path that seems an entirely sensible way of responding to that situation. Why bother trying to work out which way offers greater promise – just go with what feels right.

When Frost contrasts the whimsical way in which he actually made his decision in the woods and the manner in which he would subsequently describe the reasons for his choice he describes a phenomenon that has been subjected to some intriguing empirical investigation. Four

Scandinavian social psychologists (Johansson et al, 2005) conducted an experiment in which 120 participants were shown pairs of photos of female faces and asked to say which they found the more attractive. On completion of the first round of judgements participants were presented with a subset of 15 pairs of photos and invited to explain their preferences. However the experimenters distorted the feedback on three of these trials and reversed the result by telling participants that that the “wrong” face had been their chosen image. The results of this manipulation were surprising. First of all only 13% of the “wrong” representations were recognized as incorrect. Furthermore, when asked to reflect on their decision-making there was no discernible difference between the way participants explained the rationale behind the choices they had *not* made and the choices they had actually made!

The researchers described this phenomenon as the tendency to “tell more than we know”. It is therefore tempting to parody one of Kelly’s most celebrated aphorisms and advise: “Don’t bother asking a person why they made a particular choice. They probably don’t have a clue. However they are very likely to make up some entirely fallacious *post hoc* explanation to justify their decision anyway.”

Despite these insights into the way in which choices are made and explained, Frost chose to end the Road not Taken with an emotional appeal to our sense of personal agency. Within mainstream psychology the idea that a person’s “locus of control” might be closely related to their psychological well-being has received much attention (Rotter 1966). Rotter, who was a colleague of Kelly’s at Ohio State University in the early 1950s, proposed that a tendency to believe you can influence the directions your life takes is positively associated with good mental health. In contrast people who are inclined to feel things “just happen” to them are more vulnerable to emotional difficulties. Although this prediction does not hold so evidently in collectivist cultures or countries where harmony with the environment rather than mastery over it is valued (Smith et al, 1995) it is fair to suggest that Americans in general and New Englanders in particular, admire individuals with an internal locus of control. So Frost probably knew he was pushing against an open door.

CONCLUSIONS

Has this literary diversion altered my views of the Choice Corollary? I continue to consider that the psychology of choice is frankly much more messy than Kelly’s formulation allows. While the poetic metaphor of the fork in the road is a familiar way of framing our options, real world challenges cannot often be reduced to a simple either/or decision. Both Kelly and Frost under-emphasize the importance of social influences on our choices. Kelly stresses that the person chooses *for himself* while the momentous conclusion of *The Road not Taken* glorifies the role of the self-directing individual. The notion of being able to anticipate which of the options available to us is more likely to lead to the optimal elaboration of our construct systems strikes me as at odds with my own experience of how I make decisions. If most of our choices are governed by what Kahneman describes as System One thinking it is hard to defend the assumption that people habitually operate at this heightened level of self-awareness. Finally I think people have a strong tendency overstate their understanding of how and why they have made decisions. It is important not to mistake reasons for causes.

So ultimately I have come to the harsh judgement that I find the Choice Corollary neither scientifically convincing nor pragmatically helpful. Fortunately I can still investigate the possibilities of the ten other corollaries ...

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David Green has been a clinical psychologist in the UK for a long time now. It is about time he retired properly but he still kindles an enthusiasm for PCP. He was co-author with Richard Butler of “The Child Within: Taking the Young Person’s Perspective by Applying Personal Construct Psychology” (2007) and likes to think he may still have the occasional bright idea.

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