

OWEN BARFIELD & THE EVOLUTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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ABSTRACT: That there exists a history of *thoughts* represents less a question to be decided by research than an operative hypothesis or condition to undertake the majority of philosophical, theological, and scientific research in the first place. Put another way, the history of *thoughts* is a theory by which facts and findings of research in various disciplines may be coherently and meaningfully interpreted. Beyond the postulate that it is possible to cogently articulate a history of *thoughts*, however, this article intends to set forth the theory that there exists a history of *thought* itself, and to show that this theory can shed new light on our experience and conception of the world today. The topic of the present article, therefore, will be the evolution of consciousness, especially as articulated by Owen Barfield.

KEYWORDS: Epistemology; Evolution of Consciousness; Anthropology

Robin G. Collingwood is well-remembered among scholarly readers for his bold assertion that “All history is the history of thought.”¹ Rather than enter the fray of exegesis and dispute Collingwood’s provocative claim at the outset of the present article, suffice it merely propose the converse of his claim as a working hypothesis: what if thought itself has a history? That the latter may be born out by evidence, I hope to show in the study to follow by drawing on the insights and researches of Owen Barfield. Few thinkers have contemplated this question with greater perspicacity than Barfield, “the first and last Inkling.” Whether the fact

¹ Robin G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1946), 315.

that Barfield has received less recognition than his peers J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis is because he deserves less is a question that the reader may begin to answer for herself over the course of this brief study. I hope to show that neither lack of ingenuity nor insight can account for Barfield's relative anonymity, but rather that his time has not yet come. Indeed, it is the present writer's belief that on the day that Barfield's work is understood, a claim like Collingwood's will appear comparatively trivial.

That there exists a history of *thoughts* represents less a question to be decided by research than an operative hypothesis or condition to undertake the majority of philosophical, theological, and scientific research in the first place. Put another way, the history of *thoughts* is a theory by which facts and findings of research in various disciplines may be coherently and meaningfully interpreted. Theory is a reading of what facts mean. Without such a theory, it is unlikely that any meaning will be found because one will not have been looking for it. Beyond the postulate that it is possible to cogently articulate a history of *thoughts*, however, I hope to set forth in this article the theory that there exists a history of *thought* itself, and to show that this theory can shed new light on our experience and conception of the world today. The topic of the present article, therefore, will be the evolution of consciousness.

I. INTRODUCTION AND PARTICIPATION

To begin with, it will be crucial to apply certain strict distinctions in order to obviate the possibility of setting off to pursue a red-herring of a query and end up having chased one idea or another and not having inquired after the evolution of ideation at all. One such necessary preliminary is a careful delineation of the difference between *thoughts* and *thought* itself. To distinguish between an *evolution of ideas* and an *evolution of consciousness* reiterates the same distinction. Very pithily stated, the division above means to highlight the distinction between (a) *what* is perceived, experienced, and thought, and (b) *how*, or *the manner in which*, it is perceived and thought. Put another way, one concerns *the objects of the ideas* and the other, *the ideas as object*. A statement by Plotinus may become something of a keynote for the present investigation: "Our general instinct to seek and learn will, in all reason set us inquiring into the nature of the instrument with which we

search.”² In the present study, I intend to approach the history of ideas as *facts* and set forth a history of consciousness as a *theory* by which to understand the meaning of the former. If one should take, as an example of a historical datum, the constellation of ideas that makes up the Copernican picture of the solar system, then one may attempt to discern the backdrop against which this constellation of ideas is set. This may also be called the “world-conception” or “paradigm.”

I will continue to trace the lineaments of the thesis above, but first a brief explication of the term “paradigm” is in order. By this term is meant something like “the basic and underlying conceptualization that grounds the relevant concepts of inquiry.” In the natural sciences, for instance, concepts like “virtue” or “justice” simply have no place, and a concept like “warmth of heart” will either be entirely meaningless or demand a transliteration into thermometric terms so as to render the phrase almost entirely unintelligible to anyone who employs it in an everyday context. Also in the natural sciences, concepts like “epistemology,” “historical context,” and “situatedness” are mostly foreign. This is precisely what Thomas Kuhn meant to emphasize with the notion of “the incommensurability of paradigms” that he set forth in his 1962 work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.³ Kuhn observed that old paradigms are not falsified, but rather discarded. For this reason, he argued, it is naïve to imagine that the Copernican theory disproved the Ptolemaic one. Both systems were means of interpreting astronomical observations, and thus the geocentric model was not, nor could it have been, disproven by the heliocentric one. Instead it was merely replaced. In Kuhn’s words:

One of the things a scientific community acquires with a paradigm is a criterion for choosing problems that, while the paradigm is taken for granted, can be assumed to have solutions. To a great extent these are the only problems that the community will admit as scientific or encourage its members to undertake. Other problems, including many that had previously been standard, are rejected as metaphysical, as the concern of another discipline or sometimes as just too problematic to be worth the time.⁴

Kuhn lent concise articulation to the principle that “evidence” is always correlative to a given theory that it is evidence for. The notion, therefore, that

² Plotinus, *Enneads* 4.3.1, trans., Stephen MacKenna (London, UK: Penguin Books, 1992), 448.

³ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1962), 148.

⁴ Kuhn, *Scientific Revolutions*, 37.

one paradigm could disprove another is mistaken, and entertaining it depends on overlooking the inherent connection between theory and evidence that Kuhn brought to light.

Similar paradigmatic supersessions to the Copernican Revolution were to transpire over the centuries to follow. First the sun was displaced from the center of the universe but the universe was still imagined to have a center. Then, in the early part of the twentieth century, the universe itself was theorized to be expanding, and absolute location was discarded in favor of relativistic space-time as a result of the work of Albert Einstein and Edward Hubble. Even these transformations, however, are comparatively trivial relative to the revolutionary shift from the Medieval paradigm into the Modern one because the transformations above are essentially rearrangements of physical bodies. The Medieval world-conception, by contrast, did not conceptualize the stars and planets as merely material things at all, but as symbols of angelic intelligences. An inquiry into the enchanted world-conception that framed pre-Modern humanity's experience would take the present inquiry too far outside of the orbit of its concentration. Suffice it, therefore, to have indicated the profundity of the transition between these epochs and to hear it as a sort of blast on a slug-horn of history that calls out a challenge of comprehension.

Returning to the attempt to clarify the essential distinction set forth at the outset of this section: the transition from the Ptolemaic to the Copernican solar system presents an example drawn from the history of ideas. The heliocentric model is a theory that is sensible and harmonious relative to the paradigm of Early Modern thinkers. On the contrary, when Aristarchus of Samos set forth in the third century B.C. essentially the same theory that Copernicus⁵ would publish some seventeen odd centuries later with his epochal *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, it was soundly rejected because of its dissonance with the Classical world-conception. This is clear because Copernicus could freshly propose it some seventeen centuries later. In summary, the dominant paradigm of Aristarchus' day was not the same as that of Copernicus' and a given paradigm will be conducive to certain ideas and not to others. If one should then attempt to conceive of an order behind the very procession and transformation

⁵ Henri Bortoft, *Taking Appearances Seriously* (London, UK: Floris Books, 2012), 48.

of these paradigmata themselves with the march of time, then one will have grasped the notion of the evolution of consciousness. The evolution of consciousness allows one to see, in the procession of the paradigms, more than historical happenstance. It is to be hoped that by the end of this study, this subject may stand forth in clear relief. Before I proceed, however, one brief note on terminology may help to consolidate the argument hitherto. Kuhn refers to the heliocentric and geocentric theories as “paradigms.” I have opted to call them “theories,” however, and to reserve “paradigm” to refer to the raft of tacit theories that situates a people’s perception of the world. To preserve this distinction will make it easier to get at the changes in consciousness that are like the river on which these rafts float. As I indicated above, Barfield’s knowledge of this territory is rare, and it is to his guidance, therefore, that I will now turn.

Perhaps the most essential concept to Barfield’s theory of the evolution of consciousness is that of *participation*. The manner by which *participation* transforms through history is the same as that by which *consciousness* evolves. Put another way, a condition of consciousness may be evaluated and classified according to its mode of participation. In order to understand the implications of the proposition that participation undergoes a *diachronic* transformation, it will be necessary first to apprehend the notion *synchronically*. Participation was a technical term for the Schoolmen of the Middle Ages. They, in turn, inherited it with the rich philosophical lineage that flowed like a river of wisdom through Plato, Aristotle, and the *New Testament* and Neo-Platonist writers like Proclus, Boethius, and Dionysius the Areopagite. These philosophers wrote in Greek of course, so they expressed the notion of participation by terms like “*metalepsis*” (μετάληψις), “*methexis*” (μέθεξις), or sometimes “*koinonia*” (κοινωνία). To understand the notion of participation, one may turn to Aquinas, who defines the term in the preface to his commentary on Boethius’ *De hebdomadibus*.⁶ Aquinas identifies three genera of participation:

(i) A *particular* takes part of an *universal*. He offers the following examples of this genus of participation: man participates animal, and Socrates participates man.

(ii) Similarly, a *subject* participates its *accident*. Also, *matter* participates *form*. Aquinas does not feel it necessary to offer any examples of this second genus, but

⁶ Barfield, *Saving the Appearances* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1965), 90.

we could borrow an idiosyncratic example from Aristotle and say that Socrates participates “snub-nosedness” because he, as a *subject*, possessed a snub-nose, as an *accident*.⁷ Similarly, blood and bones participate Socrates because Socrates is the *form* of blood and bones and the *matter* of the respective form. These are examples of subject-accident and matter-form relations, respectively.

(iii) Also, an *effect* participates its *cause*. Barfield specifically cites the example that Aquinas offers in this case: “Suppose we say that air participates the light of the sun, because it does not receive it in that clarity in which it is in the sun.” The sun being the cause of the light, the air participates that cause.⁸

Every particular participates its universal, every effect participates its cause, all matter participates its form, and so on. Similarly, in the most fundamental manner, all beings participate Being (*plura entia, sed non plus entis*), and all things that were made participate the *Lógos* (Λόγος), which is to say, the intelligibility of Being, or the word-like nature of the world. This connection provides the rainbow-bridge to Barfield’s notion of “Final Participation,” which Barfield sets forth as a condition of future attainment as the fruition of “Original Participation” of Ancient peoples and sublation of non-participation or “Onlooker Consciousness” of Modern and contemporary human beings. I will briefly examine each of these conditions as well as the passage between them, before returning to the notion of Final Participation in the last section of this study.

Barfield presents the development of these stages in his 1957 book *Saving the Appearances*. Drawing on philological, anthropological, and anthroposophical evidence, Barfield argues that the manner in which a Primitive human being perceived the world is not the same as that by which a Modern one perceives it today. Barfield suggests the manner in which the philologist may discern the way that the *transformation of language* mirrors the *transformation of the minds that use that language*: “the full meanings of words are flashing, iridescent shapes like flames—ever-flickering vestiges of the slowly evolving consciousness beneath them.”⁹ Signs must be read in the fire. In fact, words are one form of language, but not its only form—as Gadamer most incisively observed, “Being that can be understood is

⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1037a, trans. Hugh Tredennick. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1989), 329.

⁸ Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, 90.

⁹ Barfield, *Poetic Diction* (London: Faber and Faber, 1928/1952), 75.

language.”¹⁰ Speech and written language is a concentration of the same principle that accounts for the intelligibility of the world itself, or *Lógos*. Barfield undoubtedly meant to express a similar insight when he remarked that “Strictly speaking, only idolators can raise the question of the ‘origin of language.’ For anyone else to do so is like asking for ‘the origin of origin.’”¹¹ Words are symbols of meanings, and so are objects. To imagine it were possible to step outside of meaning and inquire into its beginnings is perhaps as contradictory as the notion of an omnipotent being creating a stone too heavy for that same being to lift. Similarly, only by drastically impoverishing our notion of language is it possible to inquire into its origin. *Saving the Appearances* begins, indeed, not with the question of verbal language, but with an inquiry into the intelligibility of the world. Just as the *legibility* of a text is integral to the text itself, so the *intelligibility* of the world through perception is not something added on after the fact. Quite on the contrary, the (*objective*) world is correlative to (*subjective*) consciousness. Put another way, an unrepresented, unperceived, or “unfigured” phenomenon is not a phenomenon.

“Look at a rainbow,” Barfield enjoins the reader in the first sentence of *Saving the Appearances*.¹² The rainbow, Barfield observes, is a phenomenon of which necessary conditions are light, raindrops, a seeing eye, and as a specific relationship between the three. “Is [the rainbow] really there?” he invites us to wonder. The basic way in which the rainbow is there is obvious as the condition that allows us to pose such a question in the first place. In other words, we must have some phenomenon whose existence we can dispute. In very specific terms: the rainbow must *appear to us*. It must (i) *appear* because otherwise we would not inquire about it. It must appear to (ii) *us* because otherwise we might call it not “a rainbow” but “the private hallucination of a rainbow.” In Barfield’s terms, the rainbow is a representation that is at least potentially shared, or a “collective representation” in contrast to a personal one. The rainbow must appear (iii) *to us* because, to reiterate the proposition from above, it is senseless to speak of an

¹⁰ Original German: “*Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache.*” Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1975), 470. German text accessed through a Google Books preview of *Wahrheit und Methode*. Available at: https://www.google.com/books/edition/Wahrheit_und_Methode
Accessed on 2019-11-11.

¹¹ Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, 123.

¹² Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, 15.

unperceived phenomenon and the rainbow is a phenomenon. Indeed, the rainbow is in many ways the quintessential phenomenon, which likely accounts for its appearance in the first sentence of Barfield's *magnum opus* as well as its countless appearances in mythology from around the world, from the *Old Testament* in which it continually reappears as a signature of God's covenant with Noah and his descendants—"I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth,"¹³—to *Bifröst*, "the Rainbow Bridge" between *Asgard* and *Middle-Earth* of which *Heimdallr* is the march-warden, to Iris, of whom Socrates said that "this feeling of wonder shows that you are a philosopher, since wonder is the only beginning of philosophy, and he who said that Iris was the child of Thaumias made a good genealogy,"¹⁴ and Homer says "And now Iris, fleet as the wind, was sent by Jove to tell the bad news among the Trojans"¹⁵ and so on in myriad other iconic examples. The rainbow, as the quintessential phenomenon, is Nature's symbol of the sacred communion between Heaven and Earth, the Above and the Below, self and world, etc.... The consummation of philosophy is to experience the transcendence of these apparent disjunctions. This is to reveal the disjunctive elements a polarity and thereby not two, but three-in-one, since the communion of two poles is not a *tertium quid* of the same order of the antipodes, but a mediary factor that both subtends and supersedes them. In this manner, I have delineated the ways in which the rainbow is "really there." I will revisit these stations presently. The manner in which it is *not* there, however, remains to be considered.

One way in which the rainbow is *not* there is that its appearance is contingent on specific *objective* conditions including rain, light, and angle of incidence of the latter amongst countless others. To seriously assert that anything that is contingent on objective conditions, however, is *not really there* is likely quite a bit more than the majority of people will be likely to venture. Certainly the opposite of that assumption constitutes an axiomatic postulate of science as we know it and tacitly underlies most of our ordinary interaction with the material world. Barfield points out that a tree is no different than the rainbow in this respect, since despite conceding that one could anatomize the tree into its elemental

¹³ *Genesis* 9:13.

¹⁴ Plato, *Theaetetus* 155d, trans. Harold N. Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921), 55.

¹⁵ Homer, *The Iliad* 2.786, trans. Samuel Butler (Tucson, AZ: AMS Press, 1968), 36.

constituents like carbon and phosphorus, still we call it by what it is and not what it is made of. Moreover, the elements are no longer a tree following the analysis. To invoke Aristotle's terminology, we call a thing by its *form* and not its *matter*, since the first is what the thing is: wood by itself is not a bed.¹⁶ Similarly, we do not refer to our present subject as "obliquely transluminated water-droplets," but as "a rainbow." Another manner in which the rainbow might *not* be there is that it might be dreamed or hallucinated. The same method by which we ratify any other perception, however, like that of a walnut tree, for instance, is sufficient to decide the strength of this objection. If our hypothetical rainbow is perceptible to any hypothetical being endowed with the requisite faculties to function as a percipient of it, then the concern is moot. If the representation of the rainbow is (at least potentially) collective, then it is "really there."

Already, however, the reader may sense the direction of Barfield's reasoning, which I will presently attempt to flesh out. First, however, I will consider a third way in which the rainbow might *not* really be there: it is contingent on a *subject* to perceive it. This will likely strike many readers as the weightiest objection, since some genus of naïve realism appears to be the implicit paradigm of the age, the indications of contemporary physics and post-Kantian philosophy notwithstanding. In opposition to this trend, however, Barfield attempts to demonstrate that subjectivity is an *element* and not an *epiphenomenon* of the world. That the rainbow is contingent on my mind does not make it subjective in the solipsistic meaning of that word. After all, the physical world appears objective because I did not create it and instead am confronted by it. But I also did not create my mind. Rather my mind and the rainbow, and every other phenomenon, share a common origin in the metaphysical heart of the world. It is a mistake in both fact and logic to suppose that ideas are subjective merely because they depend on a mind for their appearance. If anything is subjective, it is the sensory stimuli that provide for the recognition of an idea such as "rainbow" or "geranium." The idea itself, however, is by nature transpersonal and universal. Indeed, there is no limit to the number of minds that may participate a single concept any more than there is (in principle) any restriction on how many people may read the present study. Again, therefore, to object that the contingency of

¹⁶ Cf. Aristotle, *Physics* 193a, trans. William Charlton (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1970), 18.

the rainbow's existence on a subject to perceive it should nullify that very existence simply proves too much. If there were truth to the objection, it could not be made since we would have no way to know that the concepts out of which the objection were crafted were at all similar to what we had understood them to be. Instead, we must assume the ability to participate shared concepts as a condition for communication as such—even the communication of spurious objections. Once it is conceded that the collective representation of the rainbow is no less real because it depends on an eye to perceive it and a mind to conceive it, Barfield underscores the obvious fact that the same acknowledgement must be extended to include all phenomena.

2. THE EVOLUTION OF PARTICIPATION

Having established that the world consists in collective representations, Barfield goes on to demonstrate the manner in which the mode of collective representation has undergone a metamorphosis through history. He establishes three general epochs in the evolution of consciousness:

- (i) the “Original Participation” of Ancient and Primordial peoples
- (ii) the “Onlooker Consciousness” of Modern post-scientific cultures, and
- (iii) the “Final Participation” of the age to come.

I will briefly survey the nature of each of these epochs with special emphasis on the last. Let me begin, however, by attempting to understand the most ancient form of consciousness, which Barfield intends to designate by the term “Original Participation.” I will do this by considering several examples in which this mode of consciousness is made manifest with especial clarity. Barfield himself arrived at his fundamental thesis on the evolution of consciousness through his work in philology, which culminated with the publication of *Poetic Diction* in 1928. After winning through to this insight through his own independent research, Barfield was later to discover the same thesis corroborated and elaborated to an immense degree, though not contradicted in any essential points, by none other than Rudolf Steiner, whom Barfield, together with the present writer, regard as the foremost prophet and exemplar of Final Participation in our age. This being a study of Barfield and not Steiner, however, the reader must be left, being so obliged, to make her own acquaintance with the Steiner's work.

Returning to the question of the history of participation, Barfield observed in his early studies that figurative language, or “poetic diction” was capable of producing “a felt change in consciousness”¹⁷ in the reader and he began to inquire into the nature of this shift. He soon discovered strange phylogenetic anomalies in relation to the effect of figurative language. Specifically, it appeared that every word with an immaterial denotation once had a material one. “Wrong,” for instance, once meant “crooked,” while “right” meant “straight.” Barfield notes that this change is conventionally explained by ascribing it to the deliberate use of metaphor by human beings as they became more sophisticated. Coleridge’s use of “perspective,” for instance, a term from optics, to refer to “point of view” in the psychological sense, is an example of such a deliberate evocation of “the before unapprehended relations of things.”¹⁸ Obviously, one has been compelled to explain one metaphor with another, since “point of view” is also a term borrowed from the context of visual perception and therefore, a metaphor for what we frequently mean by it. Thus, the conventional explanation only sweeps the question under the rug. In fact, there is no such thing as material or literal language in the naïve sense in which it is often imagined, because the language is always a sign or symbol of meaning. If this were not the case, we would not be able to read or communicate, since we would see only glyphs, without knowing that that is what they were, and hear only sound “signifying nothing.”¹⁹ Language is essentially and inextricably figurative. Any successful communication must depend on the reader’s intuitive ability to apprehend the meaning what the vehicle of expression is enlisted to convey. The word “metaphor” itself captures this fact in a particularly expressive manner, since it means something like “over-bearer” (*meta-* “above,” “over,” “after,” or “about” + *phorein* “to bear” or “to fare”). All communication is accomplished through the inner apprehension of an outer sign, the latter which ferries the former between minds.

After a thorough investigation into the subject, Barfield concludes that the hypothesis that Ancient people employed the same use of metaphor to denote immaterial objects with words whose referent was a material one simply fails from

¹⁷ Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, 48.

¹⁸ Percy Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry,” *Poetry and Prose of the Romantic Period*, Ed. Russell Noyes (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1956), 1098.

¹⁹ Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 5.5.

lack of evidence. On the contrary, Barfield convincingly argues that the consciousness of Ancient humanity simply did not provide for the polarization of the world into a material and an immaterial aspect and therefore this division does not appear in language either. He offers the exquisitely illustrative example of the word “heart” as an entry-point for Modern people into the Ancient experience of the world, since the polarization of the word “heart” into an *anatomical* and a *spiritual* designation is not complete. When a courtier exclaims “O! how my heart is rent in twain by knife of your unkindness” this is not exactly a medical diagnosis, though the surgeon might perform a similar operation on a physical organ that is also an heart without the affect that the phrase connotes. These meanings, though separate, are not entirely so. For Barfield, the word “heart”—or more precisely, the meaning of the word “heart”—is simply in the process of undergoing a polarization in human experience that the majority of phenomena have long since completed.

Let the present writer here take the opportunity to stave off the objection that Barfield has extrapolated a thesis about the use of language to an over-arching claim about the world. Admittedly, such an objection is unlikely from one who has grasped the thread of argument to this point, since Barfield’s insight is precisely that “the world” is inseparable from our experience of, and manner of perceiving it. He further assumes, as a postulate, that the latter will leave its stamp on the use of language, and he discovered in his research that the latter had indeed undergone a transformation through history. If the postulate that the use of language should reflect the manner in which people perceive and conceptualize the world seems unwarranted, let the reader consider the all but absurd notion that it should not—that language bore no resemblance to the world as we experience it. It is an impossible contention because it depends, to be formulated and grasped, on the same isomorphism that it putatively seeks to reject. Any claim about the world must presuppose that the language in which the same is formulated is capable of sustaining some relation to it. Word and world, therefore, are heteronymous but not ultimately heterogeneous; they are two breaths in the wind of meaning.

The implication of Barfield’s thesis is that changes in language testify to changes in the consciousness which uses that language. The consciousness that stamps its changes in language is the same consciousness by which the world is

experienced. Philological evidence suggests that Ancient humanity perceived a world in which the separation characterized two paragraphs earlier—between material and immaterial imports—had not taken place. If one assume this possibility as an hypothesis, a line from the *John Gospel* shines forth like a nova in one’s apprehension; a nova whose light will easily illuminate the entire book from which the line was drawn. *The King James Version* of the Bible translates the Greek text of *John 3:8* τὸ πνεῦμα ὅπου θέλει πνεῖ καὶ τὴν φωνὴν αὐτοῦ ἀκούεις, ἀλλ’ οὐκ οἶδας πόθεν ἔρχεται καὶ ποῦ ὑπάγει· οὕτως ἐστὶν πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος in the following manner:

The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.

The pleasing poetic quality of the *King James Version* notwithstanding, an English translation of that line is impossible. The reason for this is that, as the careful reader may have noted, the words “wind,” “breath,” and “Spirit,” are all the same word in the Greek original: *pneuma*, πνεῦμα. The line might, therefore, have read “The spirit breathes (or respire, or inspires) where it will, its sound you hear, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; such is everyone born of the wind.” It could have rendered in countless other forms as well. The profit in this quandary lies in whether it can help us to conceive of a world in which “wind,” “breath” and “Spirit” meant the same thing. Put another way, the selfsame perception could be called by any one of these words. Imagination often provides the most comprehensive insight: we may imagine a solution of meaning out of which these three words gradually crystallize.

Psychologist Julian Jaynes offers another view into the world of Original Participation in his seminal 1967 work *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. Jaynes, like Barfield, interprets ancient texts not as *stories* but as *histories*. In other words, the gods and goddesses of the Homeric epics are not poetic inventions, but rather factual, historical descriptions of the manner in which Ancient Greeks conceived the world. Jaynes writes of *the Iliad* that:

It is one god who makes Achilles promise not to go into battle, another who urges him to go, and another who then clothes him in a golden fire reaching up to heaven and screams through his throat across the bloodied trench at the Trojans, rousing in them ungovernable panic. In fact, the gods take the place of [personal]

consciousness.²⁰

One need not evaluate all of Jaynes' arguments to appreciate his conviction that the Ancient Greeks perceived a different world, in a different manner, from the ordinary man of today. Jaynes asserts that this difference is an expression of the lack of inner subjectivity and deliberation on the part of the characters. What we today experience inwardly as thought, emotion, and volition, Achilles experienced objectively as the deeds of gods. Again, to imagine the condensation of discrete aspects out of a common solution confers the nature of this evolution in a comprehensive and intuitive way.

Barfield emphasizes that there was nothing capricious or arbitrary in the manner that ancient people developed their mythologies. The arbitrariness lies, on the contrary, with Modern anthropologists who misinterpret the origins and significance of this mythology as a result of having extrapolated the the mode of consciousness actual to our time onto other eras:

For the nineteenth-century fantasy of early man first gazing, with his mind *tabula rasa*, at natural phenomena like ours, then seeking to explain them with thoughts like ours, and then by a process of inference 'peopling' them with the 'aery phantoms' of mythology, there just is not any single shred of evidence whatever.²¹

This is to say that the theory of artful use of metaphor and "peopling" of nature with the figures of mythology, despite being a plausible theory, fails from dearth of evidence. Barfield argues against the conventional belief that Ancient peoples did not first perceive more-or-less the same phenomenal world that we see today and then proceed to invent all manner of fantasies and figments to explain its proceedings. Quite on the contrary, the phenomenal world itself was not the same in ancient times as in modern ones. Put another way, the Onlooker Consciousness of the ordinary human being of today not only perceives and interprets the world differently than the Original Participating consciousness of the past, but the very world itself is different. It is to be hoped that by this point in the present study, the inseparability of the *perception* of the world with the *conception* of the world has been thoroughly established and that a proposition like the above strikes the reader as perfectly natural. Allow me, however, to explore

²⁰ Jaynes, *The Origins of Consciousness*, (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 72.

²¹ Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, 42.

the meaning of such a difference in slightly more depth before turning towards “Final Participation.”

3. FIGURATION, ALPHA-THINKING, & BETA-THINKING

What might it mean to say Onlooker Consciousness perceives the world differently and also perceives a different world? Barfield offers several terms that will prove exceedingly useful in exploring this question. The former delineates three types of cognition, which inform perception in diverse ways.

(i) “Figuration” Barfield describes as the ordinarily pre-conscious representational activity of rendering sensory input into intelligible perceptions. For example, I perceive that a flower-pot has a reverse face and an interior with volume and dimension, as well as weight, despite that none of these things is a direct object of sense. “Substantiality” is itself a tacit theory of figuration and not an immediate object of sense, as is “materiality,” and “externality.” Indeed, literally every organizing idea by which we structure our perception of the world is a fruit of figuration and not a datum of sense. The senses perceive only sensations and not objects or concepts. My perception of any object, therefore, is always the result of the process of cognition that Barfield means to indicate with the term “figuration.” On other occasions, he employs the term “representation” to indicate roughly the same cognitive process.

(ii) On the coattails of figuration, it is possible to elaborate further conceptual relations, and critique implicit ones between the primitive products of perception that figuration provided. Barfield refers to this activity by the perhaps deliberately unfelicitous phrase “alpha-thinking.” As an example of alpha-thinking: I may note that the geranium planted in the flower-pot has blossoms made of plastic. At once, this observation will set my alpha-thinking into motion in attempt to reconcile the conceptual incongruity of a living thing made of lifeless material. The final issue of the flurry of thinking will be the precipitation of a new figuration: “fake plant” and not “geranium.” Clearly the boundary between figuration and alpha-thinking is one which is continually traversed. As another example of the “double-take” of figuration and alpha-thinking, Barfield invites us to consider the case of a thrush singing: what do we hear, we might ask? A noise, a birdsong, the birdsong of a thrush, or the mating call of an American Robin (*turdus migratorius*)? What is heard today may be heard differently and therefore likely different tomorrow. In Barfield’s words, “I say I ‘hear a thrush singing outside my window’. But do I? He

is invisible, and it might perhaps be a blackbird; I have begun the business of thinking...already!"²²

Our conceptual knowledge is continually informing our perceptions. In fact, perception just is the fixation of a bouquet of transcendental ideas in a particular vessel of sensory stimuli.

(iii) Together with figuration and alpha-thinking, Barfield also distinguishes a third type of cognition, differentiated from the preceding one more by its object than by its nature. "Beta-thinking" is the term that Barfield employs to denote the very process which we are presently undertaking: "thinking about thinking." Thus, while the object of alpha-thinking is figuration, the object of beta-thinking is alpha-thinking. In the same manner by which alpha-thinking may elaborate or critique figuration, so may beta-thinking critically evaluate posits and propositions set forth by alpha-thinking. Indeed, this entire article is largely just this sort of undertaking.

4. FINAL PARTICIPATION

The Onlooker Consciousness that characterizes the Modern human being has its center of gravity, so to speak, in the activity of alpha-thinking. Figuration, for Onlooker Consciousness is largely an unconscious process: we do not ordinarily experience the manner by which our cognition weaves the tapestry of collective representation out of the senses' threads. Instead, we wake up to a world of objects and then begin to think about them, often with the purpose of manipulating them towards our own preferences of utility. Put another way, Onlooker Consciousness is defined by the basic subject-object structure of perception that Descartes so notoriously characterized. Barfield describes Onlooker Consciousness as "idolatrous" for the reason that it treats an image as something independent of imagination. Put another way, an object becomes an idol when the subject discounts her own activity of representation or figuration that is inherent to perception as the condition it. Onlooker Consciousness is characterized as precisely the neglect of this activity. Onlooker Consciousness, Barfield writes:

had clothed [the representations] with the independence and extrinsicality of the unrepresented itself. 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

²² Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, 34.

unrepresented.²³

To recapitulate, it is only in virtue of our conceptualization and representation of things as “external objects” that they are perceptible to us as such. It is senseless to think about an unrepresented world because by thinking of it, we are representing it. By the same token, if it is unrepresented, then it is not a world. Put another way, it is the posit of “externality” or “extrinsicity” that discloses a world of external objects to consciousness in the first place. If the intentionality of the former were done away with, the latter would follow as a consequence and the same scenario would be experienced as a hallucination. This means that we sustain the integrity of the objective world through every act of cognition. No less could a chorus of thrushes persist with the silence of its members than the world could run on outside of consciousness.

Final participation implies the consciousness of our own participation of the creative principle of reality—of the *Lógos*. *To participate* this creative and organizing principle—that “by which all things were made”—however, is simultaneously to *be participated by* all things that were made. “The way up is the way down,” in Heraclitus’ terse formulation.²⁴ Barfield alludes to the implications of this realization:

To renounce the heterogeneity of observed from observer involves, if it is taken seriously, abandoning the whole “onlooker” stance, upon which both the pursuit of science and modern language-use in general are based; it means advancing to awareness of another relation altogether between mind and matter. If we had actually made the advance, we should have become naturally, unforcedly, and unremittingly aware that the mind cannot refer to a natural object without at the same time referring to its own activity...scientific discovery is always a discovery about language, but also that it is always a discovery about the self which uses language.²⁵

Obviously, to acknowledge a correlation of mind and world of such a degree would entirely overturn the paradigm of convention today. Only a gadfly will criticize a thing without patent fault, but only an ostrich will bury its head in the

²³ Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, 62.

²⁴ “ὁδὸς ἄνω κάτω μία καὶ ὡστὴ,” DK 60. John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1920), 138.

²⁵ Barfield, “Language and Discovery,” *The Rediscovery of Meaning and Other Essays* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1977), 139.

sand when the wealth of evidence has cried out for substantial transformation.

It is likely that few people will directly contest the above, few think all the way through its implications, and fewer still will not set about forgetting them the moment the object of their attention shifts from the beta-thinking which revealed this connection to alpha-thinking which conceals it. Barfield, however, was an exceptional thinker, both for his insight and his integrity. The notion of Final Participation is an inevitable inference from the discovery of this correlation. Given that the mind is already operative in even the most rudimentary perceptual acts, the mind can awaken to this activity, and intensify it. This changes the world. “This changes the world” is not a cliché or a figure of speech, but a literal statement of fact. Awakening to our own creative activity in perception changes the world because the world is phenomenal and cognition is not outside of it. Cognition is a fact—a fact that subtends all other facts. If I fail to include it in my conception of the world, I have set forth a proposition that is not only deficient, but actually nullifies itself in its very issue. We perceive the world according to how we conceive of it—*through* eyesight, perhaps, but *by* insight. And if we assume this mantle of responsibility, once born by the gods of old, then we participate finally the same *Lógos* which our ancestors participated originally. “Is it not written in your law, I have said, Ye are gods?”²⁶ This is quite a vertiginous conclusion so I will attempt to come at it by a different route to demonstrate that I have not attained this height by some trickery or deception, and also to acclimate the mind to this path by means of the repeated ascent.

Let the reader again consider that there is no such thing as an imperceptible phenomenon. Again, phenomenon literally means “what shows itself,” or “what appears” (φαινόμενον). It is perhaps hard to think this way today because we are bewitched by philosophers and scientists like Kant and Einstein into thinking that real reality must be mathematised and imperceptible, hidden behind a veil of transcendental conditions or differential equations. But let us imagine Einstein recapitulating Newton’s notorious experiment with falling fruit. If Einstein, after developing his theory of General Relativity in 1916, were to watch an apple fall, would not have seen, in the mode of Aristotle and the natural philosophers of old, the Earth element striving to rejoin its Mother. Nor would he have seen the

²⁶ *John* 10:34.

operation of universal gravitation, in the manner of Newton. Instead, Einstein would have perceived a demonstration of warped spacetime around a massive body. Obviously he would not see this with his eyes. Still this is hardly an objection, since, as noted above, it is a rule of perception. We don't see with our eyes but through them. Thus, the fact that Einstein perceived the phenomenon with his mind does not imply that he did not perceive it. On the contrary, mental activity is a condition of all perception, as I have attempted to demonstrate through this entire study.

In the interest of elucidating the manner in which we participate in the figuration of the world through our own cognition, one may attempt to retrace the development of the present condition. If one should consider gravity as weight, it will be evident that the idea of gravity is immanent to the object in question, and active in it. As Barfield writes:

The essence of original participation is that there stands behind the phenomena, and on the other side of them from me, a represented which is of the same nature as me. Whether it is called "mana," or by the names of many gods and demons, or God the Father, or the spirit world, it is of the same nature as the perceiving self, inasmuch as it is not mechanical or accidental, but psychic and voluntary.²⁷

On first sight, the example that I selected above might seem to contradict Barfield's more mystical characterization of Original Participation. Closer scrutiny, however, will reveal that Barfield's remark offers insight into a difference in the perception of gravity that would otherwise all too-easily be glossed over: namely, that before the Scientific Revolution, weight was indeed something "psychic and voluntary." Nature, or physis (φύσις) itself was conceptualized and experienced as psychic and voluntary. A massive object fell not because of an abstract, universal field of force, but because of its inherent nature to strive towards the center of the cosmos. Put another way, gravity was perceived as a trait intrinsic to a given body. By the middle of the twentieth century, "body" itself is a problematic term since matter is conceptualized as a collapse occasioned by measurement and described by wave-functions, of fields of probability for such collapses.²⁸ For this reason, to imagine a simple and concrete bearer of predicates

²⁷ Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, 42.

²⁸ Cf. John von Neumann, *Mathematical Foundations of Quantum Mechanics* (London, UK: Princeton University Press, 1955), 213.

such predicates as “gravity” can only be regarded an impertinent and outmoded notion.

The consciousness general to the present moment in history no longer provides for the same participatory experience in the act of figuration of our distant forbears. The latter resulted in a world populated with phenomena or beings, and not mere objects. Put another way, every object had an inside as well as an outside. Nor does the consciousness general to today allow for the optimistic and uncritical trust in alpha-thinking that was the engine of Scholastic philosophy and Modern science. The development of Onlooker Consciousness from the Participatory Consciousness of the Ancients enabled the gradual accretion of conceptual relations by means of alpha-thinking so as to ultimately all but bury from sight, the figuration that is part and parcel the very phenomena that alpha-thinking takes as its object. Increasingly, these fruits of figuration are imagined as heterogeneous to the mind that participated their origin but which now confronts them in the habit of extrinsicality. Objects are no longer experienced as phenomena, but as brute facts. At the same time, this very estrangement of the mind from the phenomenal world creates a womb in which individuality may gestate. Thus, the evolution of consciousness over the last millennia traces the concomitant waning of participation and waxing of self-consciousness.

Barfield alludes to this evolution when he describes the manner in which Aristotle’s nous (νοῦς) was “more cosmic” than Aquinas’ intellectus, despite that the latter was intended as a direct translation of the former into Latin.²⁹ The manner by which the same subsequently became Descartes’ res cogitans further articulates this process, as does that by which Aristotle’s notion of hylomorphism—or matter-form composition—became the Cartesian conception of res extensa set against res cogitans. Another sign of this transformation is the process by which the gods which inspired Homer to sing of the wrath of Achilles—which also “grabbed [the hero’s] golden hair,” and “screamed in his throat”—became natural laws on one hand, and the neuroses of the Freudian unconscious or the archetypes of the Jungian one on the other. The Horse of Troy became the horseplay of repressed drives. Barfield again expresses this metamorphosis with exemplary clarity:

²⁹ Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, 100.

Original participation fires the heart from a source outside itself; the images enliven the heart. But in Final Participation—since the death and resurrection—the heart is fired from within by the Christ; and it is for the heart to enliven the images.³⁰

The reader may be confused by the reference to Christ. Given its connection to the *Lógos*, however, it can hardly come as altogether a surprise. Perhaps we ought at least to consider the possibility that our eventual inability to understand the connection of the Christ to the evolution of consciousness might be a result of precisely the veil of Onlooker Consciousness which we are attempting to lift. Barfield leaves no room for equivocation of what he means: “Christ is the cosmic wisdom on its way from Original to Final Participation.”³¹ The present writer is confident that, were one to entertain the above as an hypothesis, it would disclose so many thitherto connections in “nature’s infinite book of secrecy”³² that one would be unlikely to discard it. And this is precisely the manner by which a theory is vetted and ratified— “by its fruits shall ye know the tree,”³³ and by its facts ye shall know the theory. In turn, as propositions are the meaning of syllables, so a theory is what facts mean. Thus, when Barfield writes “I am not flinging [this] out casually. On the contrary I find it so tall that it fills the earth and the sky and is for me the whole meaning of history and, if you like, of time itself,”³⁴ he intends this in a very precise sense. Barfield goes even further, arguing that a theory like the above—that Christ is the bridge between the past and future of Participation—is, in fact, the only way to make sense of the facts on hand.

When we look back on past periods of history, we are often confronted with inconsistencies and blind spots in human thinking, which to us are so palpable that we are almost astonished out of belief. We find it hard to credit the inescapable fact that they remained, for decades or for centuries, completely invisible not only to the generality of men but also to the choicest and wisest spirits of the age. Such are the Athenian emphasis on liberty—with the system of slavery accepted as a matter of course; the notion that the truth could be ascertained and

³⁰ Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, 172.

³¹ Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, 185.

³² Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, 1.2.

³³ *Luke* 6:43.

³⁴ Barfield, “The Nature of Meaning,” *Seven*, 1981, 32-43.

justice done with the help of trial by battle; the Calvinist doctrine of pre-election to eternal damnation; the co-existence of a Christian ethic with an economic doctrine of ruthless *laissez-faire*; and no doubt there are other and better examples.

I believe that the blind-spot which posterity will find most startling in the last hundred years or so of Western civilization, is, that it had, on the one hand, a religion which differed from all others in its acceptance of time, and of a particular point in time, as a cardinal element in its faith; that it had, on the other hand, a picture in its mind of the history of the earth and man as an evolutionary process; and that it neither saw nor supposed any connection whatever between the two.³⁵

In other words, were it possible to approach the issues of science, religion, and human existence in a disinterested and non-sectarian manner—which is, putatively at least, the standard of *bona fide* inquiry—an inherent connection between the sacred and the secular would be immediately manifest.

Let the reader arrive at her own conclusion in the matter, but let her do it having weighed the evidence in the balance of her unprejudiced judgement. To approach the subject of religion in the spirit of science without allowing foregone allegiances to institutionalized forms of either to corrupt one's objectivity is an accomplishment as excellent as it is rare. If one manage it, however, it is the present writer's belief that we will discover the conjunction of science and religion. In a shower of sparks, we will close a circuit that has remained in disjunction for generations since the glow of Original Participation finally faded on the western horizon. The hard problem of consciousness (i.e. how does mind emerge from mindless natural processes?), the disenchantment of the world³⁶ (i.e. the world of phenomena becomes the world of *res extensa*), and the "post-truth" phenomenon³⁷ (i.e metaphysics after Nietzsche) are all creatures native to the interstices between participation Original and Final. In short, with Barfield's insights, we may begin to "expel the demons," or heal the fractures and fragmentation of the present age. Philosophy has diversified into myriad strands and cast itself like a net into the waters of knowledge, into all manner of disciplines and subdisciplines. The harvest of our enterprise has been an all but incomprehensible proliferation of specialized science, but it has perhaps been won at the cost of overfishing our

³⁵ Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, 167.

³⁶ Cf. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 26.

³⁷ Cf. Lee MacIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

understanding, and as a cost it seems to exact the demand of insight into the meaning of this very knowledge. Neither can the reproductive habits of parameciums nor the chemical composition of dust on Jupiter's moons tell a person how to live. But if we share in Barfield's vision—if, with him, we participate and take communion in this common world of meaning—then the disintegration of philosophy will rather appear as a giant out-breath; an expiration of science into the periphery, or a grand systolic throb issued outwards into innumerable capillaries of knowledge. We stand on the yonder side of the inflection point of this great beat of time, and the fragmentation of our era is a sign for our eccentric spirits to repair to the heart of wisdom from which they originally went forth, each bearing back to the center the individuated consciousness that it won through its estrangement in the periphery.

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