

LOGOMORPHISM: PROJECTING MODERN CONSCIOUSNESS ONTO ANCIENT MINDS

Landon Loftin

ABSTRACT: Owen Barfield believed that human consciousness has undergone significant changes over the course of history, and that those who fail to recognize these changes, or fail to correctly discern the nature and trajectory of these changes, are prone to the fallacy of projecting their own consciousness onto other, usually older states of consciousness. This fallacy, which especially threatens interpreters of ancient texts, is what Barfield called "logomorphism." In this essay, I examine every passage in which Barfield uses the term "logomorphism" in order to justify and expand upon the general description offered above, and to show how the concept of logomorphism is integral to Barfield's thought.

KEYWORDS: Owen Barfield; Oxford Inklings; Consciousness; Evolution of Consciousness; Logomorphism

Owen Barfield spent the majority of his long career as a writer attempting to delineate a process by which human consciousness has changed over the course of history. He referred to this process as "the history of thinking" (as opposed to "the history of thought), or, more commonly, "the evolution of consciousness."¹

¹ More specifically, the evolution of consciousness can be described as "a process of fundamental change in relation between the human mind and the material world, affecting not only how people have perceived and understood the world, but also the fundamental character of that which is perceived (i.e. the world itself). This change involves, among other things, a movement from the conscious participation in the life of nature characteristic of pre-modern consciousness to the self-conscious observation of nature which

He also coined a term— “logomorphism”— to describe a subtle and pervasive kind of anachronism that results from *reading one’s own state of consciousness into other, usually older, states of consciousness*.² As I hope to show, careful attention to Barfield’s description and examples of logomorphism reveals that this is a fallacy that he believed to be routinely committed by people who either

(1) fail to understand what “consciousness” is and the role that it plays in creating what Barfield calls the “familiar” or “phenomenal” world (i.e. the world as it is known through direct experience),

(2a) fail to recognize that human consciousness has changed or evolved over time.

(2b) fail to understand the exact nature and trajectory of the changes that human consciousness has undergone over the course of its evolution.

(2c) fail to apply their understanding of these changes when seeking to interpret the languages and literatures of pre-modern cultures.

(3a) fail to draw a firm distinction between the evolution of consciousness and “the history of ideas.”

(3b) fail to apply their understanding of this distinction when seeking to interpret the languages and literatures of pre-modern cultures.

Though they are not often explicitly labelled as such, warnings against logomorphic thinking about the history of ideas constantly recur in Barfield’s writings. Whenever we think about the history of ideas, or when we try to translate and interpret ancient texts, we are tempted “to think back ... in our own terms, to project into the minds of our ancestors a kind of thinking which was only made possible by the subsequent events of that very history.” What needs to be realized is that “it wasn’t just people in the past who think like us but have different ideas, but who didn’t think like us altogether at all. They had a different kind of thinking.”³

Barfield uses the term “logomorphism” two times in the main text of *Poetic*

characterizes modern consciousness” Landon Loftin and Max Leyf, *What Barfield Thought: An Introduction to the Work of Owen Barfield* (Cascade Books, 2023) 3.

² For reasons that will become clear in the course of this essay, I have offered a slightly more elaborate description of logomorphism than prior authors who have attempted the same, usually in passing. For instance, Michael V. Di Fuccia described logomorphism as “projecting one’s consciousness backwards.” *Owen Barfield: Philosophy, Poetry, and Theology* (Wipf and Stock, 2016) 240.

³ G.B. Tennyson. *A Barfield Reader: Selections from the Writings of Owen Barfield*. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), xxxi.

Diction, then clarifies and elaborates his meaning in the appendices. In this essay, I examine each of these passages in order to justify and expand upon the general description of logomorphism offered above, and to show how the concept of logomorphism is integral to Barfield's thought.

The first passage to be examined is from chapter 4 of *Poetic Diction* ("Meaning and Myth"), where Barfield coins the term. Here Barfield is concerned primarily with the bearing that his theory of meaning (developed in earlier parts of the book) has on our understanding of what were then the most widely held theories about the origin, nature, and function of ancient myths. When Barfield wrote *Poetic Diction*, the three conceptions of myth that were competing for prominence in the English-speaking world could be broadly categorized as the "metaphorical" or "allegorical" theories, the "psychological" theories, and—most prominent of all—the "naturalistic" theories.⁴ This later group of theories posit that ancient myths came about as a result of misguided attempts to explain natural phenomena. On this view, the great mythologies that arose in ancient societies are thought to be nothing more than conglomerations of primitive scientific hypotheses. Many have followed Auguste Comte, for instance, in arguing that myths are naive explanatory hypotheses. On this view, ancient people "personified causes" in the form of spirits and gods to explain the workings of the natural world.⁵ Thus, Comte assumed that myths are nothing but fanciful, primitive "scientific" musings. For example, the "cause" of thunder was supposed to be similar to the familiar cause of similar sounds in the human realm: e.g., the blacksmith pounding his hammer. Thus, Comte thought, the myths about the Norse god known as Thor were invented to explain a natural phenomenon of thunder.⁶ Another influential proponent of this view was the behavioral psychologist B.F. Skinner. In *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, wrote:

⁴ These are not water-tight categories. Most actual attempts to explain the nature of myth incorporated elements of each of these theories. For instance, many 19th and 20th century anthropologists combined elements of the psychological and the naturalistic approach to myth in their articulations of "animism."

⁵ Auguste Comte. *Cours de Philosophie Positive* (Urbana, Illinois: Project Gutenberg, 2018) Retrieved July 8, 2018 from gutenberg.org/files/31881/31881-h/31881-h.htm.

⁶ This example is attributed to Comte by C. Stephen Evans. C. Stephen Evans, *Preserving the Person: A Look at the Human Sciences* (Regent College Publishing, 2002), 17.

Man's first experience with causes probably came from his own behaviour: things moved because he moved them. If other things moved, it was because someone else was moving them, and if the mover could not be seen, it was because he was invisible. The Greek gods served in this way as the causes of physical phenomena. They were usually outside the things they moved, but they might enter into and 'possess' them.⁷

In *Poetic Diction*, Barfield offers his own example of this widely-accepted interpretation of myth, and introduces the term "logomorphism":

The remoter ancestors of Homer, we are given to understand, observing that it was darker in winter than in summer, immediately decided that there must be some 'cause' for this 'phenomenon,' and had no difficulty in tossing off the 'theory' of, say, Demeter and Persephone, to account for it. A good name for this kind of banality- the fruit, as it is, of *projecting post-logical thoughts back into a pre-logical age*- would perhaps be '*Logomorphism*'. Whatever we call it, there is no denying that it is at present extraordinarily widespread, being indeed taken for granted in all the most reputable circles.⁸

This kind of naturalistic interpretation of myth as "primitive science" was widely accepted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and still holds sway in the popular imagination. Barfield, after surveying the historical development of meaning by means of both language and poetry, points out that naturalistic theories of myth, like the other kinds of theories mentioned above, fail to account for differences in consciousness between ancient and modern people. They assume that, while ancient people had different (and, it is generally assumed, *inferior*) thoughts about the world, their consciousness of the world itself was essentially the same as that of the modern person. However, in Barfield's view, the great mythologies of the ancient world are better understood (or, more accurately, *experienced*- since abstract conceptions are products of the evolution of consciousness) as profound expressions of a qualitatively different form of consciousness— one that neither encourages nor supports the kind of abstract

⁷ B.F. Skinner. *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1973), 13.

⁸ Barfield continues: "Imagination, history, bare common sense- these, it seems, are as nothing beside the paramount necessity that the great Mumbo Jumbo, the patent, double-million magnifying Inductive Method, should be allowed to continue contemplating its own ideal reflection- a golden age in which every man was his own Newton, in a world dropping with apples. Only when poesy, who is herself alive, looks backward, does she see at a glance how much younger is the Tree of Knowledge than the Tree of Life." (Barfield's emphasis) *Poetic Diction*, 90.

hypothesizing that characterizes modern science. This means that the perceptions, conceptions, and aims of people in the societies from which the myths emerged were such that their meaning can only be comprehended by way of a concentrated effort of the imagination. To appropriate one of Barfield's phrases in a different context, in order to understand the ancient myths, one must "shed Western civilization like an old garment and behold [them] in a new and strange light."⁹

From the passage quoted above, it may appear that Barfield is *defining* logomorphism specifically as the mistake of "projecting post-logical thoughts back into a pre-logical age," but a careful reading of this and subsequent passages shows that this is not so. In Barfield's view, "projecting post-logical thoughts back into a pre-logical age" leads to logomorphism, but it is not the only road to that undesirable destination. At this point, what bears mention is that all logomorphisms result from a kind of "projection"—specifically, a projection of ways of thinking that are characteristic of the present age onto ways of thinking that are characteristic of prior ages. But as before, the phrase "ways of thinking" must be qualified for the sake of precision. While the naturalistic theorists of myth acknowledge that ancient people had different *thoughts*, they generally fail to acknowledge that the very process and aim of their *thinking* was alien to that which is now taken for granted. Where not only thoughts, but also *thinking* differs, as noted above, even processes as basic as perception are affected.¹⁰

Without more context, and without reference to Barfield's own reservations, phrases like "pre-logical" and "post-logical" may be confusing, or even misleading. Indeed, if Barfield is suggesting that ancient people were incapable of logical thought, his readers may justifiably accuse him of the "chronological snobbery" that he is otherwise so careful to avoid.¹¹ But this interpretation, though excusable, turns out to be a mischaracterization. Evidence of this is found in other works that make use of the term "pre-logical." For example, in *Saving the*

⁹ *Poetic Diction*, 49.

¹⁰ Barfield even seems to think that differences in perception are the primary indicator that a particular change is an "evolution-of-consciousness-change" rather than a mere "history-of-ideas-change." *History, Guilt, and Habit*, 49.

¹¹ C.S. Lewis coined the phrase "chronological snobbery" to describe the kind of error that his conversations with Barfield taught him to avoid. *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1956) 207.

Appearances, Barfield appeals to the work of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, a famed anthropologist, who also describes primitive people as “pre-logical.”¹² Aware that Lévy-Bruhl was himself heavily criticized for this, Barfield notes that Lévy-Bruhl’s critics appear to be guilty of misrepresenting his view in the same way that Barfield himself may be misrepresented: “I doubt,” Barfield writes, “if it was his case that all primitives *invariably* think in a pre-logical way. It is certainly not mine.”¹³ Here Barfield makes it clear that his view differs from the caricature that the term “pre-logical” might suggest, but only says that primitive people were not *invariably* pre-logical. Elsewhere, however, more hints are provided. In an essay called “Thinking and Thought” Barfield indirectly nuances the meaning of “pre-logical” by expanding on his description of modern thought as an edifice that is “built ... on the secure but rigid framework of *logic*.”¹⁴ He elaborates in the footnote that is appended to this quotation: “This is true of the average modern European, whether or no he is really capable of thinking with logical accuracy. There is all the difference in the world between the illogical and the pre-logical. The point is that he thinks in the logical mode.”¹⁵ We may, without undue speculation, rearrange this statement on the relation between modern consciousness and logic in order to better understand what Barfield intends by describing early humans as “pre-logical.” Thus, we may say that “the average early human can be accurately described as ‘pre-logical’ whether or no he was really capable of thinking with logical accuracy. There is all the difference in the world between the illogical and the pre-logical. The point is that he thought in a pre-logical mode.”

This pre-logical mode of thought turns out to be, on further inspection, what Barfield and others (including Lévy-Bruhl) have called “participation”— an essential Barfieldian concept explored at length in *Saving the Appearances*. For now, in order to introduce the character of the pre-logical mind, only one aspect of participation requires explanation: that is, the aspect that Barfield explores in “Thinking and Thought”— the essay from which the above-quoted passage

¹² See, for instance, Lévy Bruhl’s *How Natives Think*, trans. Lilian Ada Clare (George Allen and Unwin, 1926) 78.

¹³ *Saving the Appearances*, 33.

¹⁴ “Thinking and Thought,” *Romanticism Comes of Age*, 65.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

comes. In this essay, Barfield draws on Samuel Taylor Coleridge's distinction between "thinking" and "thought" as a basis for the already-discussed distinction that Barfield himself draws between "the history of thinking" and "the history of thought" (a.k.a. "the history of ideas" and "the evolution of consciousness")¹⁶ The stated purpose of this particular essay, then, is to be "a kind of digest of notes for a possible history of thinking— not of thought, but thinking— as it has developed in the Western world from the beginning of Greek civilisation down to our own day."¹⁷

Though there are innumerable threads that could be traced through the complex and expansive fabric of changes in human thinking, Barfield chooses to trace these changes in relation to the concept denoted in English by the word "law," which has become a cornerstone of modern consciousness, especially since the Scientific Revolution.¹⁸ Just a little reflection, however, will show that the meaning of "law" in modern Western thought is a semantic descendant of older, markedly different conceptions of "law" that have been integral to ancient Hebrew, Greek, and Roman thought. Barfield notes, though, that his interest is not just in the fact that different meanings have been attached to the words like "law" and its historical cognates; that much falls within the purview of the history of thought. According to Barfield, "a history of thinking differs from a history of thought in that, not content with observing *that* men began to think thus and thus at a certain time, it goes on to ask *how* they became able to think so."¹⁹ The history of thought, therefore, is concerned with results of changes in what people have, in fact, believed, but a history of thinking is concerned with changes in the underlying process— that is, the consciousness that enabled and encouraged the thoughts in question. But this sort of inquiry can only be successfully conducted by a historian who is aware of the difficulties involved in transcending the consciousness of his or her own age. Thus: "once having perceived that such a concept as 'law' in its application to nature only entered into human

¹⁶ See Barfield's extensive commentary on the relevant section of Coleridge's Notebooks in chapter 1 of *What Coleridge Thought*, 16-27.

¹⁷ "Thinking and Thought," *Romanticism Comes of Age*, 60.

¹⁸ "The whole of what we respect as 'science' ... is nothing but the investigation and revelation of 'laws,' whether they be laws of nature in the stricter physical sense or 'laws' which are assumed ... to govern such regions as human behavior, economic intercourse, etc." *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

consciousness at a certain period, we must try for all previous periods, as it were, to *unthink* that concept together with all its intellectual and psychological implications and consequences.”²⁰ “This,” Barfield notes, “requires a very real effort of the imagination, besides a fairly intimate acquaintance with the customary processes of our own intellects.”²¹ The willingness and ability to do what Barfield here describes as “unthink” are thus *sine qua non* for the historian who wishes to avoid logomorphism. And this is because “we tend to think back ... *in our own terms*, to project into the minds of our ancestors the kind of thinking which was only made possible by the subsequent events of that very history.”²²

So how does Barfield go about “unthinking” the familiar concept of law? First, he looks into the history of ideas to find the point at which the modern conception of law came into being. This, he maintains, can be pin-pointed with rare exactitude. In his influential *Novum Organon*, Francis Bacon wrote the following words, giving an early and tentative expression to a worldview that has since largely defined modernity: “It may be,” he wrote,

that nothing really exists except individual bodies, which produce real motion according to law; in science it is just that law, and the enquiry, discovery, and explanation of it, which are the fundamental requisites both for the knowledge and control of Nature. And it is that law ... which I mean when I use (chiefly because of its current prevalence and familiarity) the word ‘forms’.

Despite his evident reservations, Bacon felt forced to use the word “forms” to express his meaning because *his* concept of “law” (i.e., immutable, impersonal, mind-independent principles that govern the behavior of Nature) was yet foreign to all but a few European intellectuals. At that time, the average educated person was still steeped in the intellectual environment of ancient Greek philosophy. And it was a world in which the consciousness of the average person was formed by, and sympathetic to, the worldview of Plato, whose theory of the forms remained the basis for what Barfield sometimes calls “the reality-principle” of late medieval Europe.

In order to move from a study of the history of ideas, and into a study of the evolution of consciousness, Barfield endeavors to investigate the semantic change

²⁰ Ibid., 63.

²¹ Ibid., 63-64.

²² Ibid., 63.

that Bacon is here struggling to inaugurate. This is no surprise because, as Barfield consistently maintains, it is by studying language historically that changes in consciousness can best be discerned. Whereas a history of ideas is ordinarily reliant upon the “parallel histories of literature and philosophy,” the historian of consciousness is obliged to rely upon that which makes the expression of thought possible: that is, language itself. Barfield articulated this point memorably in *History in English Words*:

[I]n our own language alone, not to speak of its many companions, the past history of humanity is spread out in an imperishable map, just as the history of the mineral earth lies embedded in the layers of its outer crust. But there is a difference between the record of the rocks and the secrets which are hidden in language: whereas the former can only give us a knowledge of outward, dead things—such as forgotten seas and the bodily shapes of prehistoric animals and primitive men—language has preserved for us the inner, living history of man’s soul. It reveals the evolution of consciousness.²³

Thus, in “Thinking and Thought,” Barfield says that “if we wish to grasp imaginatively the way in which men thought, before they had this transferred concept of ‘law’ ... it may be worthwhile to investigate the old meaning of the term for which, in effect, it was substituted.”²⁴ But to investigate the term “form”—being the term for which “law” was substituted—one must delve not only into Greek philosophy, but also into the language that embodied the consciousness of the ancient Greeks; that is, the soil in which the flower of Greek philosophy grew.

Barfield carries his investigation forward, therefore, by examining the ancient Greek language, and begins by noting one of the many interesting findings reported by people who have patiently and imaginatively traced the meanings of its words to their earliest records. Like all languages, the farther one traces Greek back in time, the more it loses its static, abstract character; thus, ancient Greek has a “living quality” that has been lauded by so many philologists. Barfield admits, though, that knowledge of this living quality cannot easily be conveyed to those without a hard-won, firsthand knowledge of the language. Nevertheless, he attempts to convey it by means of several examples, drawn at random from a

²³ *History in English Words* (Lindisfarne Books, 2003) 14.

²⁴ “Thinking and Thought,” *Romanticism Comes of Age*, 67.

great host of candidates. First of all, Barfield says,

if we try to enter imaginatively into the meaning of many Greek words, comparing them with apparently similar words in our own language, we get all sorts of interesting results. In the case of long hair, for instance, we find that, besides the static, analytic method of statement, which arises from results only—‘to have long hair’, the Greek language in its early stages actually had a single verb to express this physical condition, a verb which is *ex hypothesi* untranslatable in modern English, and to which the nearest approach would perhaps be ‘to become long as to the hair’, ‘to bristle’, etc.²⁵

Similarly, in an earlier passage of the same essay, Barfield says that

the man of today knows quite well, of course, whether his hair is long or short; but if he examines this knowledge more closely, he will find that it is only knowledge of a *result*.... But if we try to imagine that, instead of this way of knowledge, we could actually be conscious *in* the growing of our hair, could feel it as *movement* in something the same way we still feel our breathing as movement, we should be making an approach towards the difference between Greek consciousness and Greek thinking, and our own.²⁶

Finally, on the same note, Barfield says that “[t]he Greek youth of Homer’s day, as he approached manhood, did not ‘have a beard’, he did not even ‘grow a beard’; he did not require a substantive at all to express what was happening— he ‘foamed!’”²⁷

Another example involves language about youth. To say that a person is young, Barfield asserts, “the Greek language did not require, as we do, the static, logical mode of copula and predicate— ‘So and so is young’; it could say ‘So and so *blossoms* or *blooms*’, using the same word as it used for the flowers of the field.” One may be tempted to reply that modern English can do the same (as Barfield himself just demonstrated!), but there is a crucial difference: “It cannot be too often insisted,” according to Barfield, “that this was not a poetical metaphor, but a bedrock element in the Greek language.”²⁸ Indeed, he says, “it is *we*, when we use such expressions today, who are trying to get back, *via* poetic metaphor, into the kind of consciousness which the Greek had and could express quite naturally

²⁵ Ibid., 67-68.

²⁶ Ibid., 66.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

and straightforwardly.”²⁹

From these, and other observations— and more importantly from a first-hand knowledge of several ancient languages) Barfield draws the same conclusion that thinkers like Coleridge, Steiner, Heidegger, and many others have drawn, which is summarized in the passage from which this discussion began:

The pervasive quality of Greek thinking and of Greek consciousness as a whole—the characteristic that distinguishes it most from our own and most delights us—is that it is in a certain sense *alive*. As a thinker or knower, the Greek tended to be at home, as it were, in the coming-into-being, or becoming; whereas our own thought, built as it is on the secure but rigid framework of logic (which the Greeks did not succeed in evolving for us until Aristotle’s day), can only deal with ‘become, the finished product— except, of course, where it is willing to bring in the aid of poesy and metaphor.³⁰

From these insights, emerges a basic understanding of the “pre-logical” mode of consciousness that Barfield attributes to the individuals and societies that are responsible for the great myths of the ancient world. They did not theorize about nature, as a modern scientist theorizes about nature, for their thinking was more concrete than abstract, more dynamic than static. Ancient minds did not, as modern minds do, dwell primarily on *thoughts*, which consist of stable, objective categories that are ripe for abstract, logical manipulation; they were more at home in the process of *thinking*. Similarly, unlike modern people, the ancients did not perceive the world primarily as a collection of discreet, inert objects that serve as raw material for technological manipulation. These are later developments in human consciousness that are dependent upon, and arise contemporaneously with, what Barfield sometimes calls “abstraction,” or, more familiarly, self-consciousness.

There is one final passage that sheds light on the terms “pre-logical” and “post-logical”: that is, Appendix IV of *Poetic Diction*. The contents of this appendix will therefore be examined in the following section.

In Appendix IV (“Subjective and Objective”) Barfield further considers the

²⁹ Ibid., 68-69.

³⁰ Ibid., 65.

naturalistic theory of myth and again asserts that it is a product of logomorphic thinking. But he gives what appears at first to be a different reason for believing this to be the case. In his own words, “at the time when the myths came into being, our distinction between subjective and objective cannot have existed.”³¹ He elaborates this assertion later in Appendix IV: “I believe that a reasonably sensitive, and at the same time unprejudiced, examination of the semantic histories of words, must of itself lead to the conclusion that the distinction of objective from subjective is a relatively late arrival in human consciousness.”³² Indeed, Barfield says, “the distinction in question, though it must of course have been developing before, did not rise to the level of philosophic consciousness until the time of the Stoic sect.”³³ This “subjectivity,” which consists in a consciousness of oneself as a distinct subject in a world of inert objects, is taken for granted by most modern people. Consequently, this feature of modern consciousness is often projected onto the ancient mind, leading to logomorphic interpretations of many pre-modern texts. The irony of this, as Barfield points out, is that all the theories of myth that were *en vogue* at that time shared a common assumption that the myths were in some way a product of “projected subjectivity” on the part of the ancients. That is to say, the ancient mind “*projected* subjective intellectual processes onto the objective world of mechanical causes and effects.”³⁴ On Barfield’s account, however, it is only modern theorists who are projecting their subjectivity or self-consciousness, but in this case, it is not projected onto the material world; rather, modern theorists are projecting their own self-consciousness onto what Barfield once called “that luckless dustbin of pseudo-scientific fantasies— the mind of ancient man.”³⁵ Projection, therefore, “is done by the modern theorist himself, not in space but in time; and the picture projected— strangely enough— is a picture of a man with a magic lantern.”³⁶

Barfield goes on to make clear the connection between his belief that ancient

³¹ *Poetic Diction*, 204.

³² *Ibid.*, 206.

³³ *Ibid.* At this point in Barfield’s life, he had not yet come to identify the turning-point with Jesus of Nazareth, though he later did. See “Philology and the Incarnation,” *The Rediscovery of Meaning and Other Essays* (Oxford: Barfield Press, 2013)

³⁴ *Poetic Diction*, 204.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 204.

people lacked subjectivity and his description of ancient minds as “pre-logical”: In his words, “[subjectivity] is inseparable, as Kant himself demonstrated quite satisfactorily, from rational or discursive thought operating in abstract ideas. Consequently, in pre-logical times it could not have existed at all.”³⁷ In order for abstract, discursive thought to flower (as it began to do with the rise of philosophy in Athens and later in the Scientific Revolution) the human mind had to partially divorce itself from “the appearances of nature” and achieve an abstract and detached conception of the world. This was one of the most important achievements of the post-Socratic Greek philosophers. Plato’s thought made significant strides in this direction, but it was his student Aristotle who first seems to have understood himself to be a largely detached subject in a world of objects. Hence, Plato and his predecessors saw the task of understanding the world and the task of understanding the human soul as one; Aristotle saw these as separate tasks. It is no coincidence, then, that Aristotle was the first great formal logician and natural philosopher, or that those who anticipated and helped bring about the Scientific Revolution have generally identified themselves as “Aristotelians.”³⁸

On Barfield’s account, abstract conceptions, discursive thought, and self-consciousness arise contemporaneously and depend on each other for their continued existence. Even so, it was not until the time of Galileo that we have a record of thoughts that are *consciously*, *intentionally*, and *methodically* divorced from the appearances of nature. This, Barfield points out, is the crux of the change that took place in the Scientific Revolution: Prior to this revolution, the aim of natural philosophy was largely to “save the appearances”; after this revolution, it was to see through or past the appearances of nature, which are often misleading.

Returning to the passage being examined, the naturalistic theories of myth depend on assumptions about ancient forms of consciousness that Barfield rejects. Barfield argues at length that subjectivity and self-consciousness have increased greatly since the time in which the great mythologies emerged. Indeed, it is the lack of subjectivity that made the emergence of these myths possible. Because of

³⁷ Ibid. We will return to Kant’s connection between subjectivity and rational or discursive thought in the discussion of Appendix II.

³⁸ Hence, also why thinkers like Plato so often treated analogies as arguments. They simply assumed that truths about the human soul were implicit in the world, just waiting to be revealed by philosophers who attend to the nature of the things around them.

this, the abstract, logical mode of thought that is habitual to the modern mind cannot be attributed to ancient people, as do those who imagine the ancient myth-makers to be primitive scientists. “This is why,” Barfield asserts, “in order to form a conception of the consciousness of primitive man, we really have to ... *unthink*, not merely our now half-instinctive logical processes, but even the seemingly fundamental distinction between self and world.”³⁹

Barfield continues his discussion of logomorphism in Appendix IV by observing that

the only way of avoiding the somewhat subtle traps which are constantly laid for us by logomorphism is to accustom ourselves thoroughly to the thought that the dualism, *objective: subjective*, is fundamental neither psychologically, historically, nor philosophically.⁴⁰

Barfield’s arguments in *History in English Words* and *Poetic Diction* serve as substantial support for the proposition that the object/subject dualism that is taken for granted by modern people was not, in fact, a part of the consciousness of the ancients; in this way, he shows that this dualism is not historically fundamental. He also points to evidence from psychologists like J.M. Baldwin who argued that the earliest stages of human psychological development reflect the trajectory seen in consciousness’ evolution as Barfield conceived it;⁴¹ In this way, he supports the proposition that an object/subject dualism is not fundamental psychologically, and lends support to his main thesis by showing a parallel in the phylogenesis and ontogenesis of humanity. But a reader of *Poetic Diction* may fairly object that Barfield’s argument does not establish that the object/subject dualism is fundamental “philosophically” (that is, *ontologically*). At this point, however, Barfield’s belief that, despite that they can be conceptually distinguished, subject and object cannot be, in fact, divided from one another

³⁹ “When we reflect on the history of such notions as humour, influence, melancholy, temper, and the rest, it seems for the moment as though some invisible sorcerer had been conjuring them all inside ourselves—sucking them away from the planets, away from the outside world, away from our own warm flesh and blood, down into the shadowy realm of thoughts and feelings. There they still repose; astrology has changed to astronomy; alchemy to chemistry; today the cold stars glitter unapproachable overhead, and with a naïve detachment mind watches matter moving incomprehensibly in the void. At last, after four centuries, thought has shaken herself free.” Barfield, *History in English Words*, 63.

⁴⁰ *Poetic Diction*, 204.

⁴¹ J.M. Baldwin, *Thought and Things: A Study of the Development and Meaning of Thought*, vol.II (New York: Swan Sonnenschein, 1908)

must be stated without defense.⁴²

The second mention of the term “logomorphism” in the main text of *Poetic Diction* comes in chapter IX, “Verse and Prose.” In this chapter, Barfield distinguishes “poetry” from “verse,” and explores the relation between verse and prose in light of the theory of poetry that he has been developing in preceding chapters. In the immediate context of the passage in question, Barfield is seeking an explanation for the prominence of verse in ancient literature, and of the unexpectedly late arrival of prose in most cultures. Barfield believed that the standard explanation of this phenomenon— “[t]hat before the invention of writing, metrical form was deliberately adopted as an aid to memory”— is far from sufficient. Indeed, he identifies the ease with which the mysteriously late arrival of prosaic literature is often “explained” in this way (or, rather, explained away) as the fruit of logomorphic thinking. Thus, in the relevant passage, Barfield suggests that the close association between verse and poetry— an association that grows stronger the further one looks into the history of literature— is better explained by the fact that ancient consciousness consisted in something like *participation in the life of Nature*, rather than *self-conscious observation of nature*, as mentioned above:

All literatures are, in their infancy, metrical, that is to say, based on a more or less regularly recurring rhythm. Thus, unless we wish to indulge all sorts of fanciful and highly ‘logomorphic’ notions, we are obliged to assume that the earliest verse rhythms were ‘given’ by Nature in the same way as the earliest ‘meaning’.⁴³

Again, Barfield is identifying a tendency that modern thinkers have to assume

⁴² “It may be conceivable objected at this point that the progress of language, etc., only indicates a growing consciousness of the subjective-objective dualism, which was always there in reality, though men did not know it. Such an objection, however, would be meaningless; for the words, subjective and objective, have no reference except to consciousness.” Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, 207.

⁴³ “And this is comprehensible enough. Nature herself is perpetually rhythmic. Just as the myths still live on a ghostly life as fables after they have died as real meaning, so the old rhythmic human consciousness of Nature (it should rather be called a participation than a consciousness) lives on as the tradition of metrical form. We can only understand the origin of metre by going back to the ages when men were conscious, not merely in their heads, but in the beating of their hearts and the pulsing of their blood- when thinking was not only of Nature, but was Nature herself.” *Poetic Diction*, 146.

that ancient people were like modern people in *how* they thought, and differed only in *what* they thought. Though it is hard to imagine, Barfield asks his reader to see how the ancient conception of self was entangled with Nature in a way that made poetry and verse more “natural” than prose.

Every other explicit mention of the term “logomorphism” can be found in Appendix II of *Poetic Diction*. The contents of this long and somewhat obscure appendix will be summarized, interpreted, and analyzed below.

In Appendix II, Barfield’s stated purpose is to clarify the meaning of some key terms in the main argument of *Poetic Diction*. “It may very well be objected,” he wrote, “that certain words, as *abstract, concrete, subjective, etc.*, have been used in this book, either in a question-begging manner, or at least without a sufficiently clear indication of what is meant by them.”⁴⁴ Barfield goes on to state that his use of such terms as “abstract” and “concrete” can be best understood in relation to the meanings assigned to them by some well-known figures in the history of modern philosophy, especially John Locke and Immanuel Kant. In Barfield’s analysis, both of these men have been guilty of logomorphism, and also of disseminating immensely influential philosophies that depend on logomorphic assumptions. In his own words:

I chose Locke, partly because he paid such particular attention to language ... and partly because it seems to me that historically the *Essay* does really mark a very important initial step in the development of those intellectual premises under cover of such words as abstraction (as used in the loose sense) or ‘logomorphism.’ ... Kant, on the other hand, I selected because, with all his contempt of Locke, it seems to me that the *Critique of Pure Reason* was one of the most effective intellectual factors in finally clinching these premises upon the minds of almost the whole Western world.⁴⁵

To shed light on this key passage, Barfield’s comments on each of these philosophers need to be examined in turn.

Locke’s famous examination of language in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* can be usefully described as an attempt to portray language as

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 183-184.

nothing more or less than an instrument or tool that exists and functions only for the sake of facilitating discursive thought and communication.⁴⁶ Locke treats words, therefore, as discrete labels for timeless ideas; in his own words, they are “signs of internal conceptions” that “stand as marks for the ideas within [a man’s] mind, whereby they might be made known to others, and the thoughts of other men’s minds be conveyed from one to another.”⁴⁷ This purely functional understanding of language is connected to Locke’s assumption that all words must signify meanings that are, at least in principle, clearly, abstractly, and literally definable. It is no surprise, then, that Barfield takes aim at this section of Locke’s *Essay* since, at the beginning of *Poetic Diction*, Barfield bemoans the lack of interest that Western philosophers have taken in language as such (except insofar as language can be harnessed in service of logic). Indeed, Barfield makes it clear that his purpose is to partially remedy the woeful neglect of serious attention given to the mystery of *meaning*, which cannot, in his view, be reduced to a set of discrete mental abstractions that are attached by convention to arbitrary arrangements of syllables. Barfield explains how interest in serious thought about language has been stifled by the emphasis on formal logic in Western philosophy:

Western philosophy, from Aristotle onwards, is itself a kind of offspring of Logic. To anyone attempting to construct a metaphysic in strict accordance with the canons and categories of formal Logic, the fact that the meanings of words change, not only from age to age, but from context to context, is certainly interesting; but it is interesting solely because it is a nuisance.⁴⁸

That meaning is, in its essence, not susceptible to complete abstract logical analysis follows from Barfield's contention that meaning in language is diminished in proportion to its abstractness.⁴⁹ In this matter, Barfield agrees with Locke in asserting that “the meaning of a word is abstract, just in so far as it is definable.”⁵⁰ We are thinking or speaking abstractly, according to Barfield, when “we are prepared, as Pascal suggested in his *Esprit Geometrique*, to substitute for the word itself its definition, ‘denuding it of all additional meaning.’”⁵¹

⁴⁶ *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, III, passim.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, III, i, 2.

⁴⁸ *Poetic Diction*, 60-61.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 251.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Locke capably describes language as it is understood and employed by modern consciousness, and shows the utility of using words that have been carefully defined, but, on Barfield's view, he goes astray in assuming that words necessarily are (and therefore always have been) merely "signs of internal conceptions." For this reason, after expressing admiration for Locke's handling of language *as it is understood and used in modern consciousness*, Barfield sharply criticizes Locke's assertions about the origin and development of language.

Regarding the origin of language, Locke assumes that it emerged in the way that one would expect it to emerge among people who, prior to having words to express their ideas, had an abstract conception of the world. Thus, Locke assumes that words came about by an intentional process whereby labels were attached by arbitrary convention to "internal conceptions," almost all of which depended on some prior mental act of abstraction. In other words, Locke projects modern consciousness, which is built upon and conditioned by abstractions, onto the earliest humans. In Barfield's view, however, an abstract conception of the world is not only something that early humans did not have (or did not have in a high degree), it is also something that could only have arisen *by means of language*. If it is true that it is only through the long ages of language-use that humans have gained the capacity for abstract perception, thought, and expression, then it is absurd to suppose, as Locke and most of his successors have supposed, that abstract thought is a necessary condition of the emergence and development of language.

Barfield picks out one particular passage from Locke's *Essay* to demonstrate the logomorphic character of his thought on this matter. In this passage, Locke gives a just-so story that is not meant to be an actual description of how words first came into being, but nevertheless conveys a general sense of Locke's understanding of the process. "One of Adam's children," Locke wrote,

roving in the mountains, lights on a glittering substance which pleases his eye. Home he carries it to Adam, who, upon consideration of it, finds it to be hard, to have a bright yellow colour, and an exceeding great weight. There, perhaps, at first, are all the qualities he takes notice of in it; and abstracting this complex idea, consisting of a substance having that peculiar bright yellowness, and a weight very great in proportion to its bulk, he gives the name *zahab* [gold], to denominate and

mark all substances that have these sensible qualities in them.⁵²

Clearly, Locke imagines that ancient people were just like modern people, only less familiar with and knowledgeable of the world around them. On Barfield's account, Locke's just-so story is absurd since it assumes that the perception of early humans was conditioned by abstract conceptions that are, in fact, distinctive aspects of modern consciousness. Thus, Barfield identifies this passage as logomorphic and then says that "[t]his is the kind of thing I mean by 'logomorphism' as an *historical* delusion."⁵³

In addition to its manifestation as a historical delusion, Barfield also describes logomorphism as a *psychological* delusion. To understand what Barfield means when he describes logomorphism as "a psychological delusion," one must turn to his discussion of Kant.⁵⁴ According to Barfield, the cause of logomorphism in Kant's thought is his failure to see that certain deeply-ingrained features of modern psychology are, in fact, historically contingent.⁵⁵ In particular, Kant takes "abstraction" or self-consciousness as a starting-point for all subsequent speculations about the nature of perception and thought. In Barfield's words: "Kant, in his theory of knowledge, implicitly accepts, as a *given*, the subjectivity of the individual. And it is just this fallacy which is at the bottom of what I have called 'Logomorphism.'"⁵⁶ Put differently, Barfield says that Kant "starts his theory of knowledge, not from thinking, but from *Kant thinks*."⁵⁷

Unfortunately, Barfield neglects to clearly elaborate his meaning here. Indeed, it is worth noting that some careful and otherwise admiring students of

⁵² *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, III, vi, 46.

⁵³ *Poetic Diction*, 187.

⁵⁴ "Kant's thought is ... extremely 'logomorphic', though in a slightly different sense from that in which I first used the word. For he is logomorphic, not historically, but psychologically." *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ In this discussion, Barfield uses the terms like "psychological" and "psychology" in their older, philosophical sense rather than the one that has since become conventional. Broadly, Kant's psychology consists in all his assertions about the nature and function of the human mind. In particular, Kant was concerned with identifying and describing the nature and function of the mind's perceptual and rational faculties.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Barfield's work have expressed reservations about this particular passage.⁵⁸ But some modest and charitable speculation about Kant's theory of knowledge can shed at least a little light on the subject at hand. In what follows, I will briefly explore Kant's beliefs about "the synthetical unity of apperception," which, according to Barfield, takes the subjectivity of individual consciousness for granted because it posits abstract thought as a precondition of rationality— then show how it relates to Barfield's belief that Kant's thought is logomorphic.

Roughly, Kant's epistemology includes a theory of perception in which the individual mind receives simple percepts through the senses, and imposes order and intelligibility on them according to its own innate *a priori* concepts and categories. In this, he broke away from his predecessors who, for the most part, believed that the principles of order and unity that make the world intelligible lay in the world itself rather than within the human mind. This activity by which the mind organizes and synthesizes percepts results in our experience of what Kant calls the "phenomenal" world, as opposed to the "noumenal" world which cannot itself be experienced or known. People are not generally conscious of this activity, but apart from this "synthetic unity of apperception" human experience would amount to nothing more than what William James famously described as "a blooming, buzzing confusion."⁵⁹ Thus far, Barfield shares much in common with Kant. Indeed, Barfield lays the foundation for what is generally considered his greatest work (*Saving the Appearances*) by explaining a similar idea at length, and even borrows Kant's examples.⁶⁰

But there are some important points of disagreement as well. The one that is relevant to Barfield's comment on logomorphism in Appendix II has to do with what Kant means by "synthesis." For Kant, the synthesis of percepts is accomplished by means of innate mental categories that are *abstract*, in the sense that Barfield has already defined in his discussion of Locke. Furthermore, Kant

⁵⁸ For instance, Frederick Amrine, in an article that extolls Barfield's merits as a writer and interpreter of Rudolph Steiner, frankly acknowledges his doubts about this particular passage, especially in its handling of Kant: This appendix, according to Amrine, is "the only passage I have encountered in all of Barfield's works in which he simply loses his grip." "Rudolph Steiner as Philosopher," *Research Bulletin of Waldorf Education*, Spring/Summer 2014, vol. XIX, 1. Despite such doubts and difficulties, however, an attempt to make some sense of this appendix is essential for the purpose of this essay.

⁵⁹ *Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1910) 488.

⁶⁰ See chapters I-III of *Saving the Appearances*.

is willing to posit that the possession of these abstract categories is *a necessary condition* of all cognition. On the other hand, one of Barfield's contentions is that abstract categories are themselves products of the evolution of consciousness. Like Locke, then, Kant tries to make sense of the human mind, and though he does not, like Locke, apply his conclusions directly to an interpretation of mental history, he assumes that his account of "thinking" is universal. But Barfield, for reasons that have been suggested, denies that abstract categories had any place in the consciousness that is revealed by ancient language and literature. Assuming for the moment that this is true, it follows from Kant's premises that ancient people had no capacity for what Kant calls "cognition"—a supposition that Barfield roundly rejects. Unlike Kant, Barfield assumes that, whatever might be said about the organization and functioning of the faculties at work in modern mind, nothing is entailed about the nature and function of faculties that were at work in the ancient mind. To assume otherwise is to be guilty of logomorphism.

But Barfield's primary concern in Appendix II is not just to show how influential modern thinkers such as Locke and Kant have propounded logomorphic philosophies; he wishes to show that they are at least partly responsible for what has become a more general tendency to think logomorphically. This is especially true in reference to Kant, which is evident from the final paragraph of this appendix:

"Thus ... logomorphism is always to be suspected in the writing of modern commentators ... upon ancient philosophy or literature.... So ubiquitous is the Konigsberg ghost that it is, in my opinion, wise to assume every modern writer on every subject to be guilty of logomorphism, until he has actually produced some evidence of his innocence."⁶¹

If Barfield is right, then certain wide-ranging consequences seem to follow for anyone who wishes to understand the artifacts of ancient thought and culture by which anything at all is known about the distant past. Any attempt to understand ancient people on their own terms or understand the historical development of the human mind, must be on guard against the logomorphic tendencies that so

⁶¹ *Poetic Diction*, 196.

easily mislead modern people. Though Barfield only mentions the term “logomorphism” a handful of times, often only in passing, the better part of his work can be understood as a prolonged effort to bring these tendencies to his reader’s attention and point him or her toward an escape from the narrow confines of contemporary consciousness.

Gravitas: A Global Extension of the Stony Brook School

london.loftin@sbs.org

316-295-0899

4808 130th Rd. S Bolivar, MO 65613.