



TO THE CROSSROADS

CONSTRUCTIVE CONSCIOUS CONTROL
IN A WORLD OF PEOPLE AND 'A
WORLD ON FIRE'

F. MATTHIAS ALEXANDER
ANNUAL MEMORIAL LECTURE,
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Image courtesy of Richard Casebow

RICHARD CASEBOW  

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Abstract

This is a transcript of talk that was presented to the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (STAT) in July 2022

Author's Note: In preparing this lecture for publication, I have left the text in the layout used for its delivery, thereby maintaining its lyrical-poetical style. The style was a deliberate choice to show something of what I was looking to say and to engage the listener online. I hope that by leaving it thus, the reader will find resonances that illuminate their own thinking.

There are two minor changes to the text. The pattern 'that connects' becomes the pattern 'which connects', thereby directly quoting Bateson. Secondly, I have used 'elaborates' rather than 'chooses' for Raimond Gaita in connection with 'preciousness beyond reason'.

The metaphors of 'community of selves' and being a 'personal scientist' are adaptations of Miller Mair's and George Kelly's respective metaphors of 'the community of selves' and 'man-the scientist'. The former adaptation was for ease of communication of an idea, while the latter adaptation is both for its gendered inappropriateness and the philosophical insistence on recognising the personhood of each individual.

By way of introduction and
Starting in my dreamtime
The backing band have been playing
Sympathy for the Devil.

So please allow me to introduce myself
Before I invite you to the crossroads
To hear what I have to say
About Alexander's technique for
Constructive conscious control

In a world of people
In a world on fire.

I will elaborate the former first
By using the work of child psychiatrist, Stanley Greenspan
To explore how our interpersonal development
Provides the context for the evolution of the habits
Which constellate to form a person's
Subconscious guidance and control.

Inhibition, will be highlighted as the primary skill
The foundational skill
Of an embodied mind
Which involves a
Coming into a relationship
With ourselves, where as I put it
We can be breathed, dreamt, spoken
In the knowing of what we need
Which Alexander talks about in *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*.¹

There will then follow three propositions
For helping pupils develop
Constructive conscious control within their relationships
And for role relationships
Which are based on dialogue and mutual understanding.
Fulfilling, perhaps the promise of what Dewey
Might have meant about Alexander's work
Being a 'completed psychoanalysis'.²

I will then open a space for
A brief exploration of the ecological
Dimensions of our work
And it is here that I will conclude
With what, we collectively
Might offer a world on fire.

My thinking about the potential of Alexander's work
In the above, has been enriched by my background
In George Kelly's Personal Construct Theory' and my work
As a constructivist psychotherapist
Working with individuals and couples.

In these ways of working
Constructs and habits are similar in their function.

Defining what we take to be real, what is meaningful
And organising how we control ourselves in our anticipation
Of that reality.

The ability to understand these habits
That we depend on
To define our reality, and our ways of control
Is important, if we are to evolve as people and
Open up and explore new possibilities and realities.

Alexander's work has much to offer people here
If it is placed firmly within the act of living
And knowing what you need
While understanding others.

Before proceeding further with this
I would like to thank Council for this honour
As well as thank them for all the work they do
Both in public and behind the scenes.

Thanking is due to many others both within
And outwith our community
There are too many to thank individually
But I would like to pick out current and past members
Of the STAT Special Interest Group on
Alexander Technique and the Interpersonal.

Who have provided a diverse and supportive environment
For the exploration of some
Of what is presented here today.

I would also like to thank my friend Catherine Cooper
To whom I owe much as a teacher.

While within the constructivist community, with whom I have shared my ideas
Harry Procter, Peter Cummins, Mary Frances
And many others have been of great
Help and support.

Finally, my thanks goes to the most important people, we as teachers know
Our pupils, we are in service to them.

What follows emerges from a polyphony of my own voices
From within my 'community of selves'¹
Which is as useful a metaphor as I know for approaching ourselves.
Within this I am many as well as one
And as such solely responsible for what follows.

From within this community
My fool steps forward to speak
What if?
What if the Alexander Technique was better known?
Could it help, would it help?

With finding a 'pattern which connects'² me, you, them
If we allow ourselves to stop and loosen the bonds of language
Inscribed by habit on our movement.

Can we find a way to unknow, what needs to be unknown
A way to Keat's 'negative capability'³
And BE
'Capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts
Without any irritable reaching after fact or reason'
Would that help, could that help?
The backing band plays the Monkey's 'I'm a believer'
And yes I am a believer.

But I am also a fool wanting to tell you something
Hoping you'll hear something
See something, maybe
Smell something
That allows you to be breathed
A bit more into the dreaming of you
Me, them, in a 'pattern which connects' them
Me and you,incarnating
A mutual appreciation of understanding.

Appreciation, habit, familiar words
I want to take with us, in a dreaming, of what if?

In a dreaming such as this, let us call on the great snake
The Ouroboros, that eats his own tail.
We need such energy in a world consuming itself.

Alexander's teleology contaminated as it is by eugenism
Racism, colonialism and other practices of
Instrumental subordination

In its quest for 'freedom in thought and action ', can
It help, would it help?

Or is it too much infected by the dis-eases of civilisation
And part of the great wrecking and ravaging.

'I'm a believer' remember, wishing us to
Step together, into unknowing, a
Fool's step, yes
But
I'm also a mad crazy person, being
As sane as I can be

Dancing at the cross roads
With the spirit of Robert Johnson's guitar
Telling me what road not to take.

It's not the freedom road of an individualism, that
Fails to connect, fails to listen, fails to hear
Fails to see, fails to love
Fails to care, for who is there in relation, here-now-always.

Here-now-always
We are relating, creating
Being towards, moving away from
Knowing, unknowing, tumbling, falling
Waves of energy channelized by habits into action.

We are future forward, anticipating replications of the past
Moving sometimes smoothly
Carrying past terrors often hidden
Concealed beneath the facade of civilisation's socialisation.

'De-concealment', brings a truth
That allows for a sought welcome
A deserved welcome
A needed welcome
For the terrified and raging to come home to themselves.

Every mammal has a rage system, every human a 'face of decision'
A 'what the fuck face'
Or in Alexander speak, a 'manner of reaction'.¹⁰

If we let it 'manner of reaction' points beyond itself
Beyond what it conceals, to what is to be welcomed
To what is 'precious beyond reason'¹¹ in each of us here today.

We are entering a territory here, construed
By psychotherapists, psychologists, philosophers

Alexander technique teachers and of course many others
Who rely on different habits
That always reaches beyond to a beholding of the other.
Where
The development of habit is a matter of commitment
Aesthetic appeal and personal fit.

Amongst psychotherapists
Carl Rogers recommends 'unconditional positive regard',¹² Irvin
Yalom a 'posture of acceptance'¹³
And George Kelly a 'credulous attitude'.¹⁴

While philosopher Raimond Gaita
Elaborates, the already mentioned the
'Preciousness beyond reason'

For practical and aesthetic reasons
The later two are my habits of choice.
Before going on to show you why
Let me say that I am not arguing that you
Or anyone else should necessarily adopt them.

Although if you find yourselves trying them on for size
Standing in my shoes, for awhile
I will be delighted, you will be following what I want to say
Understanding me.

Understanding me does not mean agreeing with me
Aligning with me
You may well think I am wrong
Or that I am that mad crazy person
Mentioned earlier.

You can walk away
Look to enter an argument with me
Though my invitation to you
Is that we look for a dialogue.

A dialogue, requires sensory appreciation,
With each person having the capacity to stand in each other's shoes
Understanding the other in their habits
Before looking together at the question of how to proceed?

In coming to the crossroads with me, this question
Is the central question, the only question, we can ask.

In a 'world on fire' it is the only question worth asking.

Within the work of FM Alexander, especially the written work of Alexander

I believe we might find the threads of an answer
By allowing the great weaving looms of the past with their clickety-clack
To fall silent
And then unstitching
The threads, that I want to use here
In a weaving of something
Of what keeps me involved in this work
Of what I have taken
What I have made of the selected threads.

It's an answer, albeit to my own questions
Of how I might be useful
And how we as a community
Might help with the changes that are coming.

How we can adapt and contribute to
A human flourishing that might be different from what has gone before.

Here, I have to confess to a certain way of reading Alexander's books
Which I struggle with when I read them in an ordinary way.

I have read them as detective stories
And looked to stand in Alexander's shoes
In order to understand the habits he was depending on
To do the work he did.

This is a practice of acceptance
In wishing to dialogue with him
I take him 'credulously'.

For a dialogue to happen
There has to be a mutuality of acceptance
A recognition of 'constructive alternativism'¹⁵
Where there is no one way, no one answer
No 'universal constant in living'
Other than if we choose to 'act as if'.¹⁶

In dialoguing with Alexander
I find myself thanking him
For his work and acknowledging its usefulness in the freeing of my life
From the constrictions of a childhood that was
Despite me being born in 1963, Victorian in character
Nested as it was within the 'spheres' of family, church, nation and empire.

Each sustained practices of dominion, practices of subordination
Which continue within a world atomising itself
In an ultimately doomed ecological order
Which denies inter-dependence, inter-connectedness and patterns that connect.

These can only be formed with an open eyed care and concern
Based on an understanding of ourselves and others
Within our own and their living fabric of connections.

My personal transition here
Involved a transition from subconscious guidance and control
To constructive conscious guidance and control
In terms of the use of myself.

Which is an essentially meaningless sentence
To anyone not familiar with our jargon.

To escape this jargon, a pause
Into lengthening and widening
Seeking the cross roads
Into standing now with negative capability
Not reaching, but looking
To meet.....
What was
Familiar to the Greeks as their 'daimon'¹⁸
The Romans as their 'genius'¹⁹
The Sufi as their 'angel'²⁰
And to us, in common language
Our soul.

Which we meet when
We allow ourselves to be breathed
Dreamt, spoken in finding a language
That is always looking to escape the bindings of its past.
BEING²¹ requires nothing less.

In this unstitching and weaving, can we find that elegance
Of a spine that lengthens and a back that widens
Balancing precariously within our own weather systems
To know what we need
And speak?

I hope so, I trust so
This is more than and less than reasoning
It is on a daily basis, embodied way finding.
A knowing of ourselves in intentional living
Involving acts of thinking, acts of mind.

Down at the crossroads
Not reaching after fact or reason
To say mind is not to commit myself
Or you to any kind of mind body dualism.

If you think that and drift that way

Then you'll miss what I want to say
And the new backing band, Count Basie with his orchestra
Have Sinatra singing The Best is Yet To Come.

I'll say more and I hope so
By turning to Stanley Greenspan's
Six-stage model of development of mind²²
Which I sometimes use to help me understand, where my pupils
Might be in their development as people.

Mind here involves the development
Of a set of habits whose sixth and final stage concludes when:
'Thinking' is logical, abstract'
And flexible across the full range
Of age-appropriate emotions and interactions'.

These habits support an individual
In moving, as we are always doing
'Into the next chapter' of our lives.

Of these what Alexander called inhibition
Is the foundational skill of all subsequent stages
In being the primary habit
Of the first stage.

Which completes, when we are able to:
'Stay calm, organised most of the time even when under stress'
This for Greenspan, underpins all subsequent stages of thinking
The how of this, is the most intimate concern
Of the Alexander technique teacher with their pupils.

Who live, as we do, within a 'rhythm of withdrawal and return'²³
Moving between, to use Alexander's language
'Mental' and 'physical' acts in a world of people.

Here understanding others, anticipating their actions
Construing their intentions is a matter of life and death
A matter of 'personal science';²⁴ of 'personal knowledge'²⁵
Held in habits
That are 'inter-personal, ecological, social, narrative and private'.²⁶

The habits that people rely on inter-personally and socially
For their 'subconscious guidance and control'
Reach back to babies attempts to engage others in their care
The preparation for which starts in the womb
Where a baby will orientate to the sound of their mother's voice.²⁷

Once born, babies can quickly discriminate between
A face that is turning fully towards them, from one that is averted.²⁸

In this world
When overwhelmed, anxious threatened
They learn to avert their own gaze
To the side, partially or fully
Or by looking down and in.²⁹

These initial experiments in control
Inscribe in movement, the habits
By which both withdrawals
And subsequent returns
To engagement
Are made.

Down at the crossroads
Between withdrawal and return
Babies learn self-regulation
Developing their subconscious guidance and control
In relation to the world, and their carers.

They are laying down the pre-verbal habits
That they will take with them into adulthood.

As Alexander observed this involves certain uses of the head, neck and torso
And I would add the face, in relationship to others
In a developing skill of engagement
Which is the second stage in Greenspan's model
Which concludes, when successful with a
'Deep, emotionally rich capacity for intimacy, caring, and empathy'.

What follows, the skill in engagement
Is the third stage, where one is
'Able to express a wide range of subtle emotions
Most of the time, in a purposeful and organised way'.

While the fourth stage completes, when it does
With the pre-verbal self able to construe
The intentions and expectations of others
'Flexibly and accurately'
Before developing in the fifth stage
The ability
To imaginatively create, elaborate, express.....
Emotional ideas
Across the full range of emotions.

Such conceiving
Relies on remaining calm, even when under stress
And our manner of conceiving
As Alexander in *CCCF*³⁰ and *UCL*³¹ points out

Depends on our manner of use.

For me this way of thinking
Using Alexander and Greenspan's work
Opens up the inter-personal space, which can otherwise be concealed
In Alexander's work behind manner of reaction
Allowing for spontaneity and creativity
In acts of living
Where the vitality of the emotional life
Is always welcomed
And included in the fullness of living.

It allows too for
The recognition of a psycho-physical mind
An embodied, 'intercorporeal'³² mind
Where we are in relation with ourselves and others
As actors in our own and other's narratives and dramas.

Where 'behaviour is the experiment'³³
And that includes using Alexander's technique
Of inhibition and direction
To perform 'mental and physical' acts,
In a rhythm of withdrawal and return
In conceiving and changing behaviour
Within our inter-personal and social worlds.

Within these worlds we play many parts,
Some out of choice, some are forced on us
And present the inescapable realities of 'the they'³⁴
Within which life must be navigated
Intimacies formed in patterns of inclusion and exclusion.
Politics, not formal politics
But the politics of who's in and who's out
Is always there to be understood and
Anticipated in the emerging and changing hierarchies of life.

The how of this
The means whereby of this
Is central to the 'act of living'³⁵ and
Finding out each day what we need.

For this we need to be able to stop and reason into the unknown
In order come to the cross roads with negative capability.

And in this gathering at the cross roads, with negative capability
We can meet, as we must meet
The master himself Shakespeare.

Shakespeare, the theatre, the performance of roles

The use of the voice is
Where our work began.

Without it as a context for Alexander's discoveries
We would not be here
Without construing his 'use of his voice'
As the cause of his difficulties
He could not, would not have started.
Without the extension of 'use'
Into all his activities
The possibilities of constructive conscious control
Would not be open to all.

In the story of this, that is chapter 1 of *The Use of the Self*
Alexander presents himself as a scientist
Engaged in a form of scientific practice.

In this he is I think an exemplar
Of what George Kelly called a 'personal scientist'³⁶
In the way that he both seeks to solve and
Solves the difficulties that he was experiencing
With the use of his voice
And as he was to come to realise
With the use of his self.

Down at the crossroads,
If you have followed me this far
I want to whisper to you
From my acting as if
Three propositions that seem self-evident to me
And invite you try them on for size.

The first proposition is that we are all personal scientists
Each and everyone one of us, not just Alexander.

This is a way of beholding the other
It is a choice, a way of acting as if
It places everyone within the 'form of history'³⁷
As actors, evolving their own experiments in moving and being with others.

This way, this habit, of acting-thinking
Is permeable to babies in the womb.

When they are born, their personal scientist
Within their inter-personal world is foremost
As already mentioned, a personal political scientist
Concerned with who is in, who is out, who gets what.

The pre-verbal and non-verbal habits of this stage
Are to repeat
The foundations of the subconscious guidance and control
That the Alexander technique teacher
Is seeking to re-educate to consciousness.

They help a person form a 'core role'³⁸
Within an evolved matrix of figures
Towards whom some people
Continually comport themselves
In later life, to their great detriment.

The performance of this 'core role'
And all roles that we have in our repertory
For we have many
Depends on our habits for
Co-ordinating a use of our selves.

Our core role is akin to James 'self of selves',³⁹
In recognising those 'peculiar motions in the head'⁴⁰
That make up 'acts of attending, assenting, negating, making an effort'⁴¹
Within inter-personal and social contexts.

James 'self of selves'
Takes us beyond our 'role' relationships
Into to our ways of 'BEING' and
Being in the world
Where the most profound generative
Transformations can occur
Such as when we move from relying on
Subconscious guidance and control
To a developing constructive conscious guidance and control.

The second proposition is that when working with people
It is important to take a credulous approach
And understand them in their own terms
If they are to find their own way to what is meaningful for them.

As a practice of acceptance it is foundational
For the 'role' relationship of a teacher
Who can be understanding and compassionate
Who can behold 'the preciousness beyond reason'
Of the person they are working with.

Such psycho-physical attitudes
Foster the conditions for a pupil to experience
The safety and trust to spontaneously lengthen and widen
In preparation for the possibility of handwork.

Which can be quite minimal in exploring
Sub-conscious psycho-physical attitudes and habits of control
That a pupil Is dependent on for the living of their life.

Mirroring, role play, a respectful playfulness
And facility with a guided conversation to turn things around
Are in this way of teaching precursors to
Formally working with the guiding orders
And an unfolding of constructive conscious control
In living.

My third proposition is that for some pupils
Most of their re-education evolves
Within the context of their inter-personal and social relationships.
And a re-education of their comportment
To the present
Allowing them to know
In the present, without the terrors of the past
Their own preciousness beyond reason.

This way, perhaps fulfils the promise of what Dewey
Might have meant about Alexander's work
Being a 'completed psychoanalysis'.

Down at the world crossroads
The interpersonal is 'cleaved'⁴² by the ecological
And the backing band
Have Louis Armstrong singing 'What a wonderful world'.

Within its the ambient worlds of light, sound, touch.....
Within its elements of air, fire, water, earth
At this crossroads
We learn to move with a developing sensory appreciation
Of what is 'afforded'⁴³ to us, for the maintenance of human life
And human living.
Down at the crossroads,
If we let it happen
A 'clearing'⁴⁴
By inhibiting old habits of being.

We allow ourselves
A showing of, a hearing of, a feeling of
A moving with
What is happening within the sphere
That we are never, independent of
And always fully dependent upon
For our acts of living.

And stopping for awhile

At this final crossroads
At this planetary crossroads
In a 'world on fire'.

We may be breathed, dreamt, spoken
And in being spoken
A word for the planet, may emerge
That gives hope, for finding together
A way forward
A step at a time
By embodied wayfaring.

This at least is my hope
For an evolving constructive conscious control
Using Alexander's technique.

And were Alexander alive today
He would I believe place his work
Within this context of our planetary crisis
And its unfolding destruction
Of the very possibility of habitation.

Our work here is not **the** way
In its venturing forth
Into unknowing, with negative capability

Down to the crossroads
Always at the crossroads
We are:
Dreamers dreaming
With the foundlings of our dreams
Often lost, by doing
The familiar, habitual
Fix, that withers hope

Unknowing this
A return to where
We are found in happenings
As dreamers dreaming

Finding again and again
Releases into living
Carried by breath
Beyond the known

Always, breathing, dreaming
Living, hoping, feeling alive
With a clear eyed concern for
Ourselves, others and where we live.

That at least is my hope for Alexander's technique
For evolving a constructive conscious control
That offers something to a world on fire
And our collective need to care for our planets
General functioning, just as we care for our own.

Endnotes

- 1 F Matthias Alexander (1997). *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*. London: STAT Books.
- 2 Dewey, J. (1996). Introductory word in *Man's Supreme Inheritance*. London: Mouritz, p.xxx
- 3 Kelly, G.A. (1991). *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*. Vol. 1 & Vol 2. London: Routledge.
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- 5 Bateson, G. (2002). *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*. Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, Inc, pp. 11-18.
- 6 Keats, John. *Delphi Complete Works of John Keats* (Illustrated) (Delphi Poets Series) (Kindle Locations 10846-10847). Delphi Classics. Kindle Edition
- 7 Alexander, F.M. (2000). *The Universal Constant in Living*. London: Mouritz, p.188.
- 8 Heidegger, M. and Sadler, T. (2002). *The Essence of Truth: On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus*. New York, ; Continuum, London, pp.53-57.
- 9 Alain Berthoz (2009). *Emotion and Reason: The Cognitive Science of Decision Making*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, pp.26-29.
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- 11 Raimond Gaita (2002). *A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love and Truth and Justice*. London; New York: Routledge.
- 12 Kirschenbaum, H. and Henderson, V.L. eds., (1990). *The Carl Rogers Reader*. London: Constable, pp.225-226.
- 13 The full quote from Yalom is: 'The basic posture of the therapist to a client must be one of concern, acceptance, genuineness, empathy. Nothing, no technical consideration, takes precedence over this attitude.' Yalom, I.D. and Leszcz, M. (2005). *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*. 5th ed. New York: Basic Books, pp117.
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- 17 Sloterdijk, P. (2011). *Bubbles: Spheres Volume 1 - Microspherology*. South Pasadena, Ca: Semiotext (E).
- Sloterdijk, P. (2014). *Globes: Spheres Volume 2 - Macrospherology*. South Pasadena: Semiotext(E).
- 18 Sloterdijk, P. (2011). *Bubbles: Spheres Volume 1 - Microspherology*. South Pasadena, Ca: Semiotext(E).
- 19 ibid
- 20 ibid
- 21 BEING is capitalised to refer to Heidegger both in his early and later work, see: Heidegger, M., Macquarrie, J. and Robinson, E. (2013). *Being and Time*. Malden Blackwell. Heidegger, M., Rojcewicz, R. and Vallega-Neu, D. (2012). *Contributions to Philosophy (of the*

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22 Greenspan, S.I. and Beryl Lief Benderly (1998). *The Growth of the Mind: And the Endangered Origins of Intelligence*. Reading, Mass.: Perseus Books.

23 Macmurray, J. (1999). *Persons in Relation*. Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, pp.86-105

24 In talking of 'personal science' I am thinking very much of George Kelly's characterisation of people as personal scientists. See also note 36. Kelly, G.A. (1991). *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*. Vol. 1 & Vol 2. London: Routledge.

25 Polanyi, M. (1974). *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. University Of Chicago Press.

26 What I have referred to as 'social self-knowledge' concerns the 'conceptual self', while 'narrative self-knowledge' concerns the 'temporally extended self'. Neisser, Ulric. "The Self Perceived." *The Perceived Self: Ecological and Interpersonal Sources of Self-Knowledge*, edited by Ulric Neisser, Cambridge England, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 3–21.

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30 F Matthias Alexander (1997). *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*. London: STAT Books.

31 Alexander, F.M. (2000). *The Universal Constant in Living*. London: Mouritz

32 Di, E.A., Elena Clare Cuffari and Hanne De Jaegher (2018). *Linguistic Bodies: The Continuity Between Life and Language*. Cambridge, Ma: The Mit Press, pp.63.

33 Kelly, G. (1970). 'Behaviour Is An Experiment'. In: D. Bannister, ed., *Perspectives in Personal Construct Theory*. London and New York: Academic Press, pp.255–269.

34 Heidegger, M., Macquarrie, J. and Robinson, E. (2013). *Being and Time*. Malden Blackwell

35 The phrase 'the act of living' is used a number of times in Alexander's work. One such use is here: F Matthias Alexander (1992). *The Use of the Self: its Conscious Direction in Relation to Diagnosis Functioning and the Control of Reaction*. Victor Gollancz Limited, pp.17-20.

36 Kelly's metaphor is actually 'man the scientist', with his theory being cast in terms of a person's psychological processes. See: Kelly, G.A. (1991). *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*. Vol. 1. London: Routledge, pp3-73. It has become customary within the world of personal construct theory to refer to Kelly's metaphor in terms of people as 'personal scientists', see:

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Mildred Shaw cited in: Fransella, F. (1995). George Kelly. London: Sage, p.141., best captures what I mean here 'Each personal scientist uses himself as participative subject matter, and construes the results in a personally meaningful way. To do this effectively a conversational method must be used.'

37 Macmurray, J. (1999). *The Self as Agent*. Amherst, Ny: Humanities Books.

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