

6-2020

Contrasting Two Ideas of the Human Person, Social Constructionism and Realism, by Their Similarities in Idolatry and Iconography

Mary Daher

The University of Notre Dame Australia

Follow this and additional works at: <https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/aristos>

Recommended Citation

Daher, M. (2020). "Contrasting Two Ideas of the Human Person, Social Constructionism and Realism, by Their Similarities in Idolatry and Iconography," *Aristos* 5(1), 1-9. Retrieved from <https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/aristos/vol5/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you by ResearchOnline@ND. It has been accepted for inclusion in Aristos by an authorized administrator of ResearchOnline@ND. For more information, please contact researchonline@nd.edu.au.



Contrasting Two Ideas of the Human Person, Social Constructionism and Realism, by Their Similarities in Idolatry and Iconography

Cover Page Footnote

Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, 2nd ed., trans. Thomas A Carlson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

**CONTRASTING TWO IDEAS OF THE HUMAN PERSON,
SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND REALISM,
BY THEIR SIMILARITIES IN IDOLATRY AND ICONOGRAPHY**

Mary Daher

1. Introduction

This essay will seek to contrast the two seminal ideas of human person, social constructionism and realism, through assessing their similarities found in the aesthetic notions of idolatry and iconography, respectively. In order to achieve this, the essay will be divided into two parts; Part II will explore Michel Foucault's social constructionism and Aristotle's realism, in particular, how their ontological conclusion stems from their epistemological framework. While Part III will define what is meant by iconography and idolatry; relying on Jean-Luc Marion's *God Without Being*¹ to show how idolatry mirrors social constructionism and how iconography mirrors realism, evincing the contrast between them.

2. Social Constructionism and Realism

This part will aim at understanding the features of social constructionism, as understood by Foucault and Aristotelian realism, by showing how the epistemological framework of the philosophies result in their ontological conclusions about the human person. As an aside, ontology here involves "claims [made] about the mode of being ... [and] about what constitutes existence for"² human persons.

The notion of social construction essentially provides that reality and things which pertain to it, including "objects, entities, properties[,] ... categories"³ and the human person are "merely conventional or the product of a society's beliefs."⁴ Thus, the human person is

¹ Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, 2nd ed, trans. Thomas A Carlson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

² Molly Brigid Flynn, "Social Constructionism," *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement 2012-13: Ethics and Philosophy* 4, (2013): 1425.

³ Maria Baghramian and J. Adam Carter, "Relativism," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Stanford University, Winter 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/relativism/>.

⁴ Flynn, "Social Constructionism," 1425.

whatever society deems it to be; “examples might include various classifications of persons that are commonly recognised in a given society, such as being black ... in America or being ... an Untouchable in India.”⁵ The epistemological underpinnings of social constructionism are evidenced by Foucault, the philosopher influenced by this philosophy. For Foucault is working “within a post-Hegelian view that human knowledge is constituted in part by contingent concepts and categories rather than ... universal[s]”.⁶ While any appeal to universal notions would not actually point to reality⁷ but only “concepts that are mentally constructed”.⁸ In his work, *God Without Being*, Foucault espouses the notion of “problematization”,⁹ to describe “the ways in which projects of inquiry and empirical questions are rooted within very specific social contexts;”¹⁰ This means that any grounds of knowledge “can neither be identified nor judged outside of the contingent conventions of social and scientific practice.”¹¹ The implications of this epistemology is twofold; firstly, “that we cannot know reality”¹² and secondly, that “knowledge resides in each individual.”¹³ With this understanding of knowledge in mind, it was argued by Foucault that the idea of “man” was losing “its intelligibility”,¹⁴ believing the person to be “the product or outcome of social structures”¹⁵ and “highly variant across cultures”.¹⁶ Conclusively, social constructionism’s epistemological framework, as demonstrated by Foucault’s problematization, has the effect of relegating any understanding of the human person to the opinions of a given society or individual.

Unlike the above, realism provides that an “object is what it is regardless of what people may think or feel about it.”¹⁷ A significant philosopher of realism was Aristotle, who proposed the theory of hylomorphism which provided that every substance,¹⁸ including human persons,

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Linda Martín Alcoff, “Foucault’s Normative Epistemology,” in *A Companion to Foucault*, ed. by Christopher Falzon, Timothy O’Leary, and Jana Sawicki (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2013), 210.

⁷ Robert G Miller, Edward A Synan and Brock Scheller, “Universals,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement 2012-2013: Ethics and Philosophy* 4, (2013): 1588.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Alcoff, “Foucault’s Normative Epistemology,” 211.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Clifton Chadwick, “Why I Am Not a Constructivist,” *Educational Technology* 44, no. 5 (2004): 47, <http://www.jstor.org/ipacez.nd.edu.au/stable/44428936>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Alcoff, “Foucault’s Normative Epistemology,” 211.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Flynn, “Social Constructionism,” 1425.

¹⁸ Thomas Ainsworth, “Form vs. Matter,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Stanford University, Spring 2016), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/form-matter/>; William Augustine Wallace and Austriaco Nicanor, “Hylomorphism,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement 2012-13: Ethics and Philosophy* 2, (2013): 727; Frederick D Wilhelmsen and James G Murphy, “Realism,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement 2012-13: Ethics and Philosophy* 4, (2013): 1307.

comprises of matter and form.¹⁹ Notably, for the purposes of this paper there will be a larger emphasis on form than matter. Matter in hylomorphism can be thought of generally as “the physical dimensions of a substance that can be measured for extension, mass, and inertia”.²⁰ Conversely, form is synonymous with “*essence or nature*”²¹ and when united with matter it individuates substances,²² serving “to differentiate one type of corporeal being from another”.²³ To elaborate, Martin Tweedale’s article, *Aristotle’s Realism*,²⁴ provides two key theses summarising form as Aristotle prescribed it. The first thesis is that “[f]orms are universals”,²⁵ in support of this Tweedale quotes Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, “when we have the whole, such a form in this flesh and these bones, we must have Socrates and Callias. They are different in virtues of matter for the matter is different; but they are the same in form for the form is indivisible.”²⁶ As Tweedale claims, form here is common to both Socrates and Callias making it a universal.²⁷ Universal here relates to concepts, thus “a concept, idea, or term is said to be universal when it signifies something common to a certain plurality of instances.”²⁸ The second thesis is that “[i]ntellegible objects ... are forms”,²⁹ this thesis essentially provides for Aristotle’s epistemology. For Aristotle, knowledge is “basically abstractive, and that abstraction depends upon a series of experiences with reality through the medium of the sense”,³⁰ hence to be intelligible a thing must be real³¹ and experienced. Forms are therefore intelligible as one “can come to know [them] ... through experience and understanding.”³² Moreover, they must be based in reality in order for the “sensual perceptions of individual things [to] compound into memories, memories into experience, and experience ... [yielding] causal insight into the universal”.³³ Subsequently, “the essence or form of a human being ... [would] not exist except as embodied ... in actual human beings, and so would not exist if there

¹⁹ Ainsworth, “Form vs. Matter.”; Wallace and Nicanor, “Hylomorphism,” 727.

²⁰ Wallace and Nicanor, “Hylomorphism,” 727.

²¹ Francis Joseph Collingwood, William Augustine Wallace and Mark D. Gossiaux, “Form,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement 2012-2013: Ethics and Philosophy 2*, (2013): 579.

²² Ibid 580.

²³ Wallace and Nicanor, “Hylomorphism,” 727.

²⁴ Martin Tweedale, “Aristotle’s Realism,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 18, no. 3 (1988): 501-526, <http://www.jstor.org/ipacez.nd.edu.au/stable/40231596>.

²⁵ Ibid 504.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1034a5-8; Ibid 505.

²⁷ Tweedale, “Aristotle’s Realism,” 505.

²⁸ Miller, Synan and Scheller, “Universals,” 1588.

²⁹ Tweedale, “Aristotle’s Realism,” 507.

³⁰ Wilhelmsen and Murphy, “Realism,” 1308.

³¹ Ibid 1307.

³² Chad Engelland, “Epistemology, History of,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement 2012-2013: Ethics and Philosophy 2*, (2013): 484.

³³ Ibid.

were no longer any human beings.”³⁴ The result of Aristotle’s epistemological framework, with the emphasis on the experience of the real and universal, results in the discovery of form in the human person.

3. Philosophies of Human Person in Idolatry and Iconography

Before emphasising the similarities of social constructionism and realism in the notions of idols and icons, it is important to determine what is meant by icons and idolatry. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,³⁵ “[i]dolatry consists in divinizing what is not God.”³⁶ It involves someone transferring “his indestructible notion of God to anything other than God.”³⁷ An obvious example of idolatry is the golden calf in Exodus,³⁸ with a modern example being that of the bull market in the stock exchange. Whereas, iconography involves an icon, that is, an image or panting used for liturgical and spiritual edification to represent³⁹ or “make present again, the event reproduced or the holy person celebrated”⁴⁰ in the image; a popular icon is the *Theotokos*,⁴¹ the Blessed Virgin Mary. Jean-Luc Marion’s work, *God Without Being*, provides an account of the phenomenological⁴² effects and differences of icons and idols; it is this account which will be used to highlight the presence of social constructionism and realism in idols and icons, respectively.

To begin, according to Marion an idol only exists provided that one has seen it.⁴³ This eludes to a common theme throughout Marion’s assessment on idols, viz, that there is a contingency on the individual for the icon’s existence, for “[t]he gaze alone makes the idol”.⁴⁴ This theme, is a facet of social constructionism which relies on the individual or group of individuals, namely society, for the construction of the human person. Under this theme the idol is not real independent of the construction by one or more people which is akin to the human person as determined by one or more persons influenced by social constructionism. This relativism and dependency can be seen when Marion likens the idol to “a mirror that

³⁴ Wilhelmsen and Murphy, “Realism,” 1307.

³⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1997).

³⁶ *Ibid* 2113.

³⁷ *Ibid* 2114.

³⁸ Exodus 32; Marion, *God Without Being*, 8.

³⁹ L Jones, “Icon,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 7, (2003): 278; Thomas Becquet, “The Significance of the Icon,” *The Furrow* 12, no. 1 (1961): 38, <http://www.jstor.org/ipacez.nd.edu.au/stable/27658001>.

⁴⁰ Becquet, “The Significance of the Icon,” 36.

⁴¹ Jones, “Icon,” 278-279.

⁴² Marion, *God Without Being*, 7.

⁴³ *Ibid* 9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid* 10.

reflects the gaze's image".⁴⁵ Furthermore, this relativistic understanding of idols matches up well with social constructionism, since social constructionism would define the human person as whatever is mirrored by society. Another prevalent theme which Marion propounds is that the individual precedes the idol; evidenced by Marion's statement, "the idol with its visibility fills the intention of the gaze, ... [t]he gaze precedes the idol".⁴⁶ The individual's prefiguring means there is no room for a real understanding or experiential knowledge of the idol and because of this there is no experience of the real, making it unintelligible. While any amount of intelligibility stems from what society constructs onto it. Another result of man proceeding the icon is that man is a necessary condition for reality, reality cannot exist without the gazer. In terms of social constructionism, the notion of human person would therefore not exist without society. An additional theme argued by Marion is "[t]hat which characterises the idol stems from the gaze."⁴⁷ This characterising of reality, which in this instance is the idol, is similar to social constructionism; which provides that any idea thought of, like the human person must embody some part of the individuals or societies construing it. Conclusively, the similarities between social constructionism and idols is; reality's dependency on individual and societal constructs, the encouragement of relativism, the individual being able to characterise reality and the promotion of reality's unintelligibility due to the jettison of the realness and experiential knowledge of a thing.

Unlike the idol, according to Marion the icon "does not result from a vision but provokes one."⁴⁸ The icon is not dependent on the gaze, instead it "summons sight in letting the visible ... [the icon] be saturated little by little with the invisible."⁴⁹ The icon depicts what is real outside of the gaze, as "the icon displaces the limits of our visibility to the measure of its own – its glory",⁵⁰ glory here being the divinity which the icon is making present;⁵¹ subsequently because what the icon depicts is real, it can be experienced. This reality of an icon is similar to form in realism, since the reality of form can only be known through experience and is a reality outside of the individual's or society's construction. In light of this experiential perception another similarity between realism and icons is that the icon is intelligible as explicitly stated by Marion, the icon "teaches the gaze".⁵² This intelligibility

⁴⁵ Ibid 12.

⁴⁶ Ibid 10-11.

⁴⁷ Ibid 10.

⁴⁸ Ibid 17.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Marion, *God Without Being*, 22.

⁵¹ Jones, "Icon," 278-279; Michael B Ewbank, "Of Idols, Icons, and Aquinas's *Esse*: Reflections on Jean-Luc Marion," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (2002): 163, <https://doi.org/10.5840/ipq20024221>.

⁵² Marion, *God Without Being*, 18.

stems from the reality of what the icon is presenting and the ability to experience it. Another similarity is that the icon like the form acts as a universal, as “every icon manifests and indicates the secret”;⁵³ this ubiquitous secret is the immutable God,⁵⁴ who by His transcendence “must be understood for every icon”.⁵⁵ God’s common presence in icons eludes to the universality of forms, namely that forms denote the general humanity of the individual. This universality of icons is buttressed through the icon’s aim of “eschewing the idiosyncratic by fostering a contemplative disposition in their beholders.”⁵⁶ An additional similarity between realism and icons is their static nature, this is reflected in Marion’s view that the icon “is defined by an origin without original”.⁵⁷ To elaborate, the form of the human person is unchanging and not subject to the individual, likewise the icon points to a reality beyond itself which cannot be changed, viz, God. This sentiment is mirrored in Michael B Ewbank’s reflection on Jean-Luc Marion,⁵⁸ when he provides that “[i]t is generally acknowledged that symbol-images that partake of the status of the ‘iconic’ possess a dominant character of stability and continuity that temper the procession of temporal being.”⁵⁹ To summarise, icons are similar to the realist notion of form due to their promotion of reality independent of the individual, their promotion of intelligibility, their appeal to universals and their static natures.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, this essay sought to show the contrast between social constructionism and realism, with particular emphasis on Michel Foucault’s social constructionism and form in Aristotle’s realism. The first part of this essay, elaborated on Foucault’s social constructionism and Aristotle’s realism through evincing how the epistemological framework of each resulted in their ontological conclusions of the human person. In light of this, the key features found in Foucault’s social constructionism were that the idea of human person can only be understood by what society dictates, it need not be real or experience, it is contingent on individuals and the idea of man lost its intelligibility due to the subjectivity of societies and cultures. While the features found in Aristotle’s realism was that the form of the human person is a universal and that it is intelligible through experiential knowledge as there are real instances of it. Moreover,

⁵³ Ibid 17, 240.

⁵⁴ Ibid; Jones, “Icon,” 278-279.

⁵⁵ Ibid 17.

⁵⁶ Michael B Ewbank, “Of Idols, Icons, and Aquinas’s *Esse*: Reflections on Jean-Luc Marion,” 164.

⁵⁷ Marion, *God Without Being*, 20.

⁵⁸ Michael B Ewbank, “Of Idols, Icons, and Aquinas’s *Esse*: Reflections on Jean-Luc Marion,” 161-175.

⁵⁹ Ibid 163.

the second part of this paper obtained the contrast between the two philosophies of human person through their similarities in the aesthetical notions of icons and idols. It was argued using Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenological assessment of idols and icons that the features of each was similar to Foucault's social constructionism and Aristotle's realism, respectively. The similarities found between Foucault's social constructionism and idols was their contingency on the individual for their existence, their relativistic influence, the idea that the individual precedes their reality making them unintelligible and unable to be experienced, that they are not real and both must embody the person constructing them. Whereas the similarities between Aristotle's realism and icons is that they are not dependent on the individual or society, they are the intelligible since they are able to be real and experienced, they are universals and have a static nature.

Bibliography

- Ainsworth, Thomas. "Form vs. Matter." In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University, (Spring 2016). Article published February 8, 2016.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/form-matter/>.
- Alcoff, Linda Martín. "Foucault's Normative Epistemology." In *A Companion to Foucault*, edited by Christopher Falzon, Timothy O'Leary, and Jana Sawicki, 207-225. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2013.
- Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa theologiae*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1920.
- Ashley, Benedict M. "Philosophical Foundations of the Natural Law." In *St. Thomas Aquinas and the Natural Law Tradition: Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Goyette, John, Mark S. Latkovic, and Richard S. Myers, 3-16. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2004. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt285340>.
- Baghramian, Maria and J. Adam Carter. "Relativism." In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University, (Winter 2018). Article published September 11, 2015.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/relativism/>.
- Becquet, Thomas. "The Significance of the Icon." *The Furrow* 12, no. 1 (1961): 32-38.
<http://www.jstor.org.ipacez.nd.edu.au/stable/27658001>.
- Blohm, Michelle. "Releasing the Idol-Icon Dichotomy: An Exposition of Non-Conceptual Experience." *Quaestiones Disputatae* 1, no. 1 (2010): 251-257.
<https://doi.org/10.5840/qd20101116>.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1997.
- Chadwick, Clifton. "Why I Am Not a Constructivist." *Educational Technology* 44, no. 5 (2004): 46-49. <http://www.jstor.org.ipacez.nd.edu.au/stable/44428936>.
- Cohen, S Marc. "Aristotle's Metaphysics." In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University, (Winter 2016). Article published October 8, 2000; last modified June 15, 2016.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/aristotle-metaphysics/>.
- Collingwood, Francis Joseph, William Augustine Wallace and Mark D. Gossiaux. "Form." *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement 2012-2013: Ethics and Philosophy* 2, (2013): 579-585.
- Cuddy, Cajetan. "Idolatry." *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement 2012-13: Ethics and Philosophy* 2, (2013): 738-739.
- Engelland, Chad. "Epistemology, History of." *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement 2012-2013: Ethics and Philosophy* 2, (2013): 482-487.
- Ewbank, Michael B. "Of Idols, Icons, and Aquinas's *Esse*: Reflections on Jean-Luc Marion." *International Philosophical Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (2002): 161-175.
<https://doi.org/10.5840/ipq20024221>.

- Flynn, Molly Brigid. "Social Constructionism." *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement 2012-13: Ethics and Philosophy* 4, (2013): 1425-1427.
- Gutting, Gary and Johann Oksala. "Michel Foucault." In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University, (Spring 2019). Article published April 2, 2003; last modified May 22, 2018. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/foucault/>.
- Hobart, Mark. "Michel Foucault and Anthropology." *RAIN*, no. 65 (1984): 4-5. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3033365>.
- Hubbard, Kyle. "Idolatrous Friendship in Augustine's Confessions." *Philosophy & Theology* 28, no. 1 (2016): 43-57. <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtheol201662244>.
- Jones, L. "Icon." *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 7, (2003): 278-280.
- Marion, Jean-Luc. *God Without Being*. 2nd ed. Translated by Thomas A Carlson. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Masiello, Ralph J and Brendan Sweetman. "Experience." *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement 2012-2013: Ethics and Philosophy* 2, (2013): 537-539.
- McCall, Robert E and John Goyette. "Substance." *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement 2012-2013: Ethics and Philosophy* 4, (2013): 1480-1487.
- Miller, Robert G, Edward A Synan and Brock Scheller. "Universals." *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement 2012-2013: Ethics and Philosophy* 4, (2013): 1588-1594.
- Potter, Brett David. "Creative Intuition After Beauty: Jacques Maritain's Philosophy of Art in the Contemporary Context." *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 21, no. 2 (2018): 81-108.
- Smith, Robin. "Aristotle's Logic." In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University, (Summer 2019). Article published March 18, 2000; last modified February 17, 2017. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/aristotle-logic/>.
- The Holy Bible Revised Standard Version*. 2nd Cath. ed. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006.
- Tweeddale, Martin. "Aristotle's Realism." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 18, no. 3 (1988): 501-526. <http://www.jstor.org/ipacez.nd.edu.au/stable/40231596>.
- Wallace, William Augustine and Austriaco Nicanor. "Hylomorphism." *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement 2012-13: Ethics and Philosophy* 2, (2013): 727-728.
- Wilhelmsen, Frederick D and James G Murphy. "Realism." *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement 2012-13: Ethics and Philosophy* 4, (2013): 1306-1311.