

## Article

# Beyond Literal Idolatry: Imagining Faith through Creatively Changing Identities

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**Abstract:** This is Part I of a triptych. It addresses the latent potential of the imagination in constructing a sense of identity. Included is the role of faith in overcoming the obstacles presented by a social imaginary dominated by literal idolatry that leads to unnecessary suffering. The initial foundation examines the process of growth and the role that the imagination plays in the construction of narrative identity—an important part of human development. Literal idolatry interrupts this original process through the creation of a social imaginary that corrupts natural measures for self-correction. At the same time, a creative faith contains the capacity to dislodge the rigid boundaries of literal idolatry. A creative faith narrative identities in ways that open beyond simple coherence and completeness. It can also revitalize social institutions and public spaces. The argument concludes by arguing fictional narratives augment the work of theology in grounding and inspiring creative faith.

**Keywords:** Judith Butler; faith; idolatry; narrative identity; narrative theology; Paul Ricoeur; secular theology; Gregory Bateson; Grace Jantzen; Jerome Miller; Octavia Butler



**Citation:** Boscaljon, Daniel. 2022. Beyond Literal Idolatry: Imagining Faith through Creatively Changing Identities. *Religions* 13: 810. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13090810>

Academic Editors: Verna Marina Ehret and Bill Schmidt

Received: 1 July 2022

Accepted: 27 August 2022

Published: 31 August 2022

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## 1. Introduction

This article is Part One in a triptych of essays that explore the resources of narrative theology relative to the context of modern religious change and the issues created by what I call literal idolatry. Literal idolatry occurs when “God” is misunderstood as a term indicating a particular being rather than as a symbol for a numinous quality within a relational field. The conceptual entity birthed from this misunderstanding is an idol. It is something created, rather than something found. To worship this creation adds complications to this initial confusion. “God”, as an idol, obscures the potential of the divine. It also distorts reality. Many contemporary problems we experience daily, in our intrapersonal as well as our social lives, result from this fundamental understanding.

This essay focuses on the role that language plays in complicating the initial misunderstanding that produces literal idolatry. Language generates the idolatrous situation that Jean-Luc Marion (1991) describes primarily in terms of visual experiences. He claims that idols limit what we see to a field of the same subject so that “one sees nothing but it” (p. 26). Marion correctly understands the basic importance of perception. Language affects what is available for us to experience, see, and know. Words can limit or augment our awareness of reality. Literal idolatry names the process through which our encounters with reality are problematically reduced to a peculiar field of similarities. Imagining faith is a process that creatively changes how we think about identity. Such a faith repairs the damage caused by literal idolatry.

It is not common to think of idols in relation to language. We commonly think of an idol in more concrete terms. The term refers to a human product treated as though it were divine. Anselm’s ontological proof famously defines God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived”. On one level, literal idolatry occurs when an idea or phrase becomes all defining, leaving no space for a living process that could change. Common examples of this occur when nation, party, religion, or economic theory are defined rigidly. Loyalty to such definitions becomes problematically all-consuming. This

path consistently leads to human sacrifice in the name of these static idols. When a reality cannot be conceived beyond what these conceptual creations identify as true, death or despair results.

Thus, on a more subtle level, literal idolatry exists at the level of basic beliefs or assumptions about reality. As assumptions, these beliefs become increasingly rigid and thus more consistent at limiting what is seen or experienced. This result corresponds to Marion's definition of idolatry. Such basic beliefs invariably undermine attempts to engage in critical scrutiny. They offer an indubitable foundation from which thinking emerges. If these beliefs remain unconscious presuppositions, they become a limitation on thinking. Nothing greater than this belief can be conceived because this conception is literally identical to that which is "greatest". In this way, literal idolatry exists in our unquestioned preconceptions of reality and adherence to creeds that explicate a worldview.

This triptych defines how narrative theology equips people to confront literal idolatry in different, complementary ways. As a triptych, each part shares formal similarities and is both separable from but related to an argument that the entirety brings forth. Although each essay can stand alone, seeing them as a whole allows readers to make deeper connections among them. Part Two examines the role of hope relative to the unexplored potential of narrative theology as a particular mode of thinking. Part Three focuses on language as word, the difficulty of naming god, and the importance of embodying a loving witness.

This article, Part One, contrasts the faith that requires imaginative creativity with the kinds of rote belief that constitute literal idolatry. The first section begins by examining the role of the imagination at the individual level of narrative identity. Narrative identity is a developmental process. In it, the imagination performs the vital role of integrating sensory experience and language. Literal idolatry interrupts this imaginative process: rigid beliefs use language to limit, rather than enhance, possible experiences. The second section focuses on how literal idolatry changed the structure of the modern Western social imaginary and why this hinders development on both the social and individual level. The final section discusses how creativity offers an important, meaningful disruption of the idol's grip on the social imagination and why creative expression both requires and expresses faith in ways that liberate those around. This essay is dedicated to Laura Inglis and David Klemm, who each initiated a significant chapter in my journey into the world of creative theology.

## 2. Identity and the Imaginative Resources of Character

The question of identity originates as a question humans ask about themselves. Character serves as a temporary way of asking the question and evaluating answers. The imagination invites an open-ended process that explores systematically shifting senses of reality. Identification becomes a creative process; thus, exploring imagined potentials requires the active work of faith.

### 2.1. *The Relation Connecting Identity and Despair*

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler (2008) observed that not all forms of self-identity are created equal. She wrote, "Suspending the demand for self-identity or, more particularly, for complete coherence, seems to me to counter a certain ethical violence that demands that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times and require that others do the same" (p. 27). The fact that this demand can be suspended indicates that it is optional. The demand also seems undesirable, given that it is consistent with an "ethical violence". This demand for a self-identity characterized by complete coherence seems largely restricted to human relationships, the relationships we have with ourselves and with others. Butler continues, suggesting that the importance of suspending this demand emerged from her concern with "a suspect coherence that sometimes attaches to narrative and, specifically, with the way in which narrative coherence may foreclose upon an ethical resource, namely, an acceptance of the limits of knowability in oneself and others" (p. 34).

What is striking about Butler's insight is that the matter-of-fact statement about the demand for complete coherence expresses something that most people would accept as

normal. Also normal, however, is feeling an *absence* of coherence. This lack of coherence emerges in common experiences involving internal rifts: being unable to decide on a single course of action, forcing oneself to complete a task, being both drawn toward and repulsed by something, or any variety of negative self-judgment. The illusion of coherence is experienced through a reduction of the self that follows from submitting to authority. Submission often involves integrating an external sense of rigid order. The self becomes an unthinking, unfeeling, or uncreative entity that embodies an external will.

Humans are naturally complex in the ways that they relate and develop. This complexity is at odds with the value of total identity and coherence. The demand for self-identity and complete coherence as ideal modes becomes a source of guilt and shame—tools of ethical violence. A sense of guilt emerges after inadequately corresponding to an external will despite knowing that such standards remain impossible to embody. Feelings of shame correspond with sacrificing an inner sense of self, deeming it as bad or evil, in order to please an external will.

Butler's statement about narratives is also illuminating. It seems true that a demand for narrative coherence exists, and that such a demand deals with accepting the limits of knowledge. It makes sense that a suspect, artificially imposed coherence would also leave behind potential resources, even ethical resources. It seems true that we somehow accept as a commonplace the neatness of a coherent form of knowledge at the expense of the unknown. Accepting the desirability of this abstracted form of knowledge because it is easily communicated may lead to the sacrifice of more internally coherent forms of embodied and experiential knowing. The totalizing demand for coherence would spring from a merely literal sense of self-identity constructed at an abstract and disembodied level. Harkening to this would encourage people to replace dynamic relationships with the self and others with more static forms of interaction that would reify this limited form of self-identity. Following Butler's insight, the narrative incoherence and a lack of self-identity become problems only after accepting the abstract value of literal knowledge. It would seem difficult to embrace this kind of knowledge in a completely coherent or self-identical way. The only form of coherence or identity that could follow from an external demand occurs in or as death.

It is important to note that total self-identity, complete coherence, and narrative coherence share a peculiar relationship to truth. The kind of truth these imply would allow for an unlimited or total knowledge of something gained solely through external observation. It is an uncomplicated, literal form of truth that lacks the ability to appreciate nuance or change. When humans are compelled through social expectation to value this limiting form of truth as desirable, it suggests that only what is given (how one is defined by others) should be chosen. It suggests that the truest use of language would mean only one thing to any potential audience. This is the worldview of literal idolatry, which eliminates the potential to see other truths than this. It results in limiting the potential for creative inner and social flourishing.

The basic belief in literal idolatry is that reality is composed of independent, self-consistent objects governed by relationships of external force. "God" is the initial forceful cause. This belief is at odds with natural experiences of the world that emerge through interrelations. The implicit demand for coherence that Butler describes becomes necessary to fill the gap between an imposed vision for how reality "should" be and the innate experience of how things are. This tension begins at the level of the self. Far from self-identical or simple, most humans experience the self as incoherent and confusing. One of the clearest articulations of the incoherence of the self comes from Kierkegaard et al. (1983), at the beginning of the *Sickness Unto Death*. The passage's opening opacity, despite depicting something true (and conveyed more gently in the rest of the book), communicates something true about why a demand for complete coherence seems unwise. Kierkegaard wrote, "The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself" (p. 13). The first half of the book concerns the despair over what it means to be a self. Despair emerges

from many possible ways of misrelating to the self. This mode of self-understanding is consistent with Butler's insight that the self is the outcome of its relationships rather than existing as something isolated or separated. Part I of *Sickness Unto Death* describes the series of inner relations that the self attempts to resolve. The self moves between the finite and infinite, the temporal and the eternal, and between necessity and possibility. Each of these poles offers the self a chance to move from one extreme to the other. No one of these six alternatives provides an ultimately satisfying form of escape.

Because humans are finite, our knowledge—however potentially infinite in theory—is also finite. The demand for complete coherence that stays within the borders of the knowable would seem to ask the self, in Kierkegaard's words, "[to lay] hold of finiteness to support itself" (p. xi). This exacerbates, instead of resolving, the internal misrelation because a self necessarily exceeds the finite. It instinctively explores beyond what is known. A self is not one thing, or capable of defining itself, but systematically eludes this kind of definition. Here and throughout his pseudonymous works, Kierkegaard consistently advocated the importance of moving beyond the rational or knowable. This movement requires faith. In his section on sin, Kierkegaard defined faith as occurring when "the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God" (pp. 14, 82). Kierkegaard's formula for faith depicts the unity of the *given* (being itself) and the *chosen* (willing to be itself) as a foundation for a self-aware (transparent) courageous surrender (resting). If despair shows the capacity of the self to struggle through complex relations, faith models the capability of the self to harmonize a complex internal and an equally complex external environment. Notably, this formula for faith bears a strong affinity to the equally effective resolution of despair advocated by Taoists and Buddhists: the presence of willed stillness, the absence of striving, the acceptance of limitation, and the suspension of demand.

The demand for narrative coherence that Butler mentions shares a problem similar to the construction of the self. Even without having heard coherence be commanded, the experience may feel familiar. It is a widespread basic belief or assumption rather than an explicitly articulated request. The belief is invested in the grammar of English and other languages, which emphasize and thus naturalize a perspective of the world consistent with literal idolatry (Bohm 2008). The self-identical person and the completely coherent narrative are merely human creations, such as "God". They are fictitious figures, entities that can be conceived of abstractly as logically valid, but not things that we either could or would want to find in our everyday lives. If such entities were to exist, they would be unable to grow or to change, to develop or to transform. In reality, anything that would achieve this standard of complete coherence or total self-identity would be totally isolated and thus impossible for us to locate in our finite, relational ways of being. Butler's comment opens the context for the problem that will be addressed by this article, namely, the origin of the demand (and the implicit ethical violence that accompanies the demand) that seems to accompany our intrapersonal and interpersonal modes of relating.

## 2.2. The Relation Connecting Identity and Development

The term "coherence" suggests relationship, not simple identity. Etymologically, coherence means "sticking together". This already implies at least two substantial entities that are in some way fused without thereby becoming identical. Using the terminology introduced via Kierkegaard, the process of self-identity thus involves thinking about how the *given* and the *chosen* stick together from a particular vantage point (the inner perspective of the self), respecting that both the given and the chosen include complex sets of interrelating elements. In healthy and flourishing environments, attaining "complete coherence" (or a cementing of the given and chosen) could occur for a single instant, but the chosen would need to change in order to adapt to the environment that is given in the next moment. Given our experience of temporality, "coincidence" or shared occurrence would need to join "coherence" as an ideal form of guidance for self-identity. Thus, following a useful distinction offered by Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter* (Bennett 2010), the question of coherence is "complex", requiring effort "to maintain the specific relation of movement

and rest between its parts”, rather than a simple body that maintains an “inertial tendency to persist” (p. 22).

It will be useful to gain a preliminary understanding of how identity relates to coherence before examining the more specific topic of self-identity. In *Mind and Nature*, Gregory Bateson (2002) provided a robust description of how mind and nature cohere on different levels. His analysis draws on a wide range of knowledge, moving from his work in genetics and ecology to his experiences in information sciences and anthropology. He uses the lens of relative stability, rather than total self-identity, to question how we experience coherence over time. The extent to which a coherent identity can be considered relatively stable is measurable with “reference to the ongoing truth of some descriptive proposition” (Bateson 2002, p. 58). This measurement resists assumptions of narrative coherence as well as total self-identity by implying degrees of accuracy, the potential for multiple descriptive propositions, and the need to maintain an awareness of the particulars described.

Importantly, descriptive propositions relate to *both* the given (what is described) *and* the chosen (the terms used to describe it). This definition works because truth is a relational term. An identification is stable for as long as the descriptive proposition accurately relates an understanding of the given and the desirability of the chosen. A well-developed “descriptive proposition” is flexible and accommodating enough to allow for a range of options without requiring constant revision but can shift emphasis depending on what is useful in a given circumstance. As an example: a stable definition of a cat may emerge as a descriptive proposition that includes a range of relational behaviors that could be judged (more or less aloof, affectionate, charming, and irritating) and that excludes other kinds of behaviors (the ability to fly). If a particular cat’s behaviors depart from this range, it signals that something is changing (one’s tolerance for behaviors, the cat’s needs, the environment in which such judgments are made, etc.). This would require revising the truth of the ongoing description.

One advantage a stable system has over a rigid system is its capacity to flexibly accommodate a range of more or less tolerable options. Change is important. It allows relational systems to adapt to shifting conditions, while a sense of identity provides the stabilizing component of continuity. Evaluating the ongoing truth of descriptive propositions relates new experiences to something familiar to sense what still fits. Bateson (2002) resolved this twofold set of needs by postulating that living things maintained a foundational sense of stability by changing only after a new condition had passed a double requirement: “It must fit the organism’s internal demands for coherence, and it must fit the external requirements of the environment” (p. 134). Ideal forms of descriptive propositions could consider the organism as given and the environment as chosen, or vice versa.

All organisms seem capable of learning from and adapting to changing conditions in their environments, an ongoing balance of the given and the chosen. Bateson (2002) used the term “stochastic processes” to indicate how living systems find conditions that are capable of meeting both sides of this double requirement. Bateson argues that a sequence is said to be stochastic when “a sequence of events combines a random component with a selective process so that only certain outcomes of the random are allowed to endure” (p. 214). At a mundane level, choosing what sounds good for dinner (a selective component) based on what restaurants are open nearby (a random component) is a stochastic process. Stochastic processes are similar to dialectical systems in that they reward certain results over others but are importantly different in that these processes pre-exist any kind of aim or intentionality. Such a system is valuable because it provides a flexible sense of self-consistency (internal identity) and a sense of continuity (over time) without becoming overly rigid. The term is quite useful inasmuch as it describes a wide range of living systems and organisms. Bateson’s examples include genetic change (DNA mutations) and what we call learning (including, but not limited to, an organism’s adaptations). The term provides a way of understanding how things evolve within the whole context of an implicate order (Bohm 2008).



In part, stochastic processes describe a model of what [Bennett \(2010\)](#) calls distributed agency. She describes efficacy, trajectory, and causality as concepts that involve non-human actors as capable of changing or modifying environments. The more-than-human world (involving all the given entities that influence environments beyond humans) contains an abundance of material and animal entities endowed with varying degrees of efficacy (the capacity to cause change), trajectory (movement without a clear destination), and emergent causality (which, similar to a process, involves a shifting number of contributing factors that seem to encourage or limit the quality or direction of change). Following Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism, Bennett adds: "A cause is a singular, stable, and masterful initiator of events, while an origin is a complex, mobile, and heteronomous enjoiner of forces" (pp. 28–33). It is easier to name a single cause than to attain a holistic awareness of origin, emergent causality, possible trajectories, and relative efficacies. The extra effort results in a greater appreciation for what is stable in a given environment. Ultimately, the ongoing relative stability of things means that a single individual human can do little to serve as either a cause or origin that would create a change in external circumstances. Bateson, Bennett, and Bohm provide a thoughtful alternative to the worldview of literal idolatry, showing the rich and expansive differences that coincide and converge to give rise to a moment of reality. Rather than static forms, these authors depict external reality as a complex and ever evolving series of relationships that dance more or less harmoniously.

### 2.3. *The Relation of Character and the Imagination*

Humans are uniquely capable of altering how they evaluate stability. We can frame the relationship between the given (what is described) and the chosen (how it is described) in a way that provides useful information toward flourishing. Put simply, this is the activity of interpretation. In *Fallible Man*, Paul [Ricoeur \(1986\)](#) argued that human thinking and judgments have the capacity to do exactly this. He showed that humans are capable of undergoing sensory experiences from a particular point of view (p. 24), which gives a limited amount of information; in addition, humans then make a descriptive proposition about the experience using language. He identifies the imagination as the synthetic faculty that processes, for example, the changing quality of sunlight as an experience of relative "coolness", "brightness", or both. This potentially adds a level of complexity to how humans engage in stochastic processes. In nature, a stochastic process provides limits to which plants flourish in a particular environment. Language and imagination provide humans with options beyond momentary sense experience and expand human processes to incorporate thriving beyond mere survival.

The imagination is where the outer world (sense experience) and inner world (language) coincide. A more nuanced vocabulary alters our ability to refine and appreciate sensory experiences (expanding the chosen), and sensory experience gives rise to new opportunities for expressing and evaluating descriptive propositions (expanding the given). A given sense experience (the relative intensity of sound, color, or tactile vibrational frequencies) alters given spatial arrangements, and verbal expressions describing this sensory input (loud or blue or soft) affect the experience of the given.

The quality of character, which [Ricoeur \(1986\)](#) calls the finite openness of humans, also participates in the ongoing balance of the given and the chosen. At the level of character, certain kinds of sensory experiences are deemed more or less pleasurable or desirable. Acquaintance with different terms and experiences make one more or less aware of these predispositions. Ultimately, each of these four terms (sense experience, imagination, linguistic expression, and character) offer points of potential coherence where inner and outer worlds relate. That means each one falls within the range of being relatively given and relatively chosen. To use Bennett's terms, the relative openness and availability of one of these components influences the emergent causality of something similar to self-identity without one of these elements serving as a singular cause.

#### 2.4. The Relation of Character and Narrative Identity

The role of character returns in a more complex form in *Oneself as Another*, where Ricoeur and Blamey (Ricoeur and Blamey 1991) explored the questions of narrative identity and how selves develop. His work defined narrative identity as an ongoing process that involves the work of an *idem* identity (the relatively stable component that functions as the given) and an *ipse* identity (the process component that functions as chosen). The *idem* identity includes the given element of one's body and preferences, and the chosen element of one's habits that have become second nature. The *idem* identity includes persistent preferences. The *ipse* identity becomes exceptionally important in terms of the volitional projection into future situations. It evaluates the desirability of potentially valuable character traits, obtained through new experiences. Identity becomes a conversation moving between relative constancy (*idem* as a stable element) and relative continuity (*ipse* as investigating some change over time). This dynamic process and unfolding of identity show why presuppositions involving total self-identity or complete coherence are psychologically inadequate.

The terms "given" and "chosen", initially used to discuss Kierkegaard and here used to describe *idem* and *ipse*, remain useful as a way to consider the relationship between these complementary features of similarity. It is useful to keep Bateson's discussion of stochastic processes in mind when considering the evolution of the self as a dynamic process. Within this framework, "character" becomes a descriptive proposition of a developing (non-total) self-identity. For example, it seems common to unthinkingly use this process to determine the extent to which an experience is "my kind of thing".

Within Ricoeur's framework, character provides a way to externally reflect one's identity without feeling a need to subject oneself (or others) to the ethically violent demand for a totality of self-identity or complete coherence. It also provides a person, internally, with a sense of self that can rest transparently as an act of surrender to the ongoing task that affirms the complex gathering of what is given and chosen. Character combines the properties of stability and flexibility. It is persistent enough to be addressed but open enough to continually adapt through a stochastic process of development (p. 118). One can create a descriptive proposition of character and assess whether this expression of its ongoing truth remains apt. Expressions can take the form of language (stories we tell ourselves about who we are) or actions (how we choose to behave to a given circumstance). Characters develop over time, changing in ways that support internal needs for continuity that cohere with the external requirements of the environment. *Idem* offers character the gift of certainty, and *ipse* bestows upon character the benefits of attestation (p. 22).

Ricoeur (Ricoeur and Blamey 1991) demonstrated how habits and identifications help a developing character relate to its internal needs and the external environment. A habit, for example, starts out as something "already acquired" (given) and "being formed" (chosen). A habit's process of evolution from "disposition" to "trait" discloses the subtle work of transforming the chosen to the given. Habits, dispositions, and traits thus provide an evolving basis from which someone's character addresses the outer environment. Identifications depend on a felt similarity with pre-existing "values, norms, ideals, models, and heroes" that appear as more or less desirable in the linguistic or conceptual world (pp. 119–21). Characters use language to alter experiences of the given and the chosen after the fact, allowing later facts to contextualize, challenge, and change earlier judgments.

The relationship between *idem* and *ipse* as they coincide in character provides two ways to measure the coherence of the self. Ricoeur (Ricoeur and Blamey 1991) identifies the lower level as a point where *ipse* recognizes itself in *idem*, affirming the truth of the descriptive proposition of character expressed as continuity in time. Importantly, at an upper limit, the *ipse* "poses the question of its identity without the aid and support of *idem*" (p. 124), evaluating the desirability of the character as an ongoing proposition given a current set of opportunities at the level of identifications, habits, and sense experiences. This act of questioning opens the opportunity for change. *Ipse* can question whether certain possible near future actions would be appropriate (asking "is this something I can do/that

I would enjoy”), and whether past habits or identifications still fit (asking “does this past component still fit my present sense of self” or “is this past component still appropriate for who I am?”). To *ipse* belongs the anticipatory reception of one’s identified becoming, the ability to navigate toward situations and outcomes that would enhance the potential for enjoying life. *Idem* regulates the standard for inward and outward facing coherence from the internal perspective, while *ipse* evaluates *idem* as a whole relative to the environment. These provide resources for a stable, dynamic inner psychology that necessarily resists total self-identity as a goal.

If *ipse* evaluates that a character’s limitations are too rigid, preventing the opportunity for harmonious flourishing, it can alter the character’s sense of what is needed for desirable internal coherence. This could be experienced as a sense of restlessness with one’s current routines and a desire to start exercising each day. If one’s actions have been resulting in illness, stress, or exhaustion, *idem* can supply a sense that more constancy is needed. This could be a balancing, compensatory impulse to spend more time resting at home. A developmental sense of character, to this extent, allows *ipse* to evaluate a “self” that is importantly non-identical to its past sense of givenness, and the *idem* to communicate a felt awareness of how things are going. Both *ipse* and *idem*, as well as the surrounding environment, participate in the emergent causality of a self. The whole system serves as an ongoing reference of “origin” for how *ipse* and *idem* evaluate the ongoing truth of its descriptive propositions, becoming more or less stable and flexible in accordance with what seems desirable within a moment. It is possible, after all, to both rest and exercise more often as part of a healthy lifestyle. Both *idem* and *ipse* contribute important information with reference to the ongoing process of the descriptive proposition of how things are. The *idem* identity, with its limited perspective and preferences (given) that have been enhanced over time (chosen), provides information attuned to the felt experience of the surrounding world. The *ipse* identity is able to use its awareness of patterns within an environment (given) and assess what possibilities related to the desired goals and values (chosen) are available.

It is equally as mistaken to despair over the self as incoherent as it is to demand that the self be completely coherent. Each of these misinterpretations differently fixes the self as an object, rather than looking at the self as a continually transforming, mediating process of relationships (analogous to the larger ecosystems and environments that surround us). The paradox inherent in a narrative identity is that both *ipse* and *idem* are complex understandings of self, which relate to a character (another identification of self). These generally stick together, although not ever in a complete or determinable way. And yet, following Butler (2008), “The point here is not to celebrate a certain notion of incoherence, but only to consider that our incoherence is ineradicable but nontotalizing, and that it establishes the way in which we are implicated, beholden, derived, constituted by what is beyond us and before us” (p. 35). The self is a work of faith insofar as its inner finite potential exceeds any perspective or judgment about it. Almost no element of the self can be completely placed within the limits of knowability, as evidenced by the complexity of our dynamic interrelationship as well as our ability to surprise ourselves.

Only conceptual things can be totally known as particular entities. With some things, gaps in knowledge occur as ignorance that can be amended by further research. This kind of unknowability is simply circumstantial. The precious unknowability of a self, its capacity to develop and to surprise, to grow and to change, leaves its future something imaginable rather than knowable. But the self is not completely unknowable: it retains a rich, sometimes contradictory experiential knowledge that is embodied as habit and thought of as memory. This particular combination of the knowable and unknowable that humans are given make self-relations an ongoing work of faith. The ways that we choose to embrace the task of self-relation make this a more or less creative work of faith. Approaching self-relation as a creative work of faith undermines the influence of a literal idolatry that would affix a particular label or description as comprising a totality of the self.



### 2.5. The Relation of Truth and Narrative Identity

One of the ways that a literal idolatry perpetuates itself within and among humans is through emphasizing a particular kind of truth. It views truth as something unchanging and abstract. It does not offer a feeling of revelation but is experienced and expressed only as and through language. One of the gifts opened by thinking through narrative identity is an enriched sense of truth that capably folds qualities of relative stability and change into a dynamic, participatory experience. Providing a robust alternative to literal idolatry also requires providing a way of determining truth as something importantly flexible. This allows the resources of reason and language to coincide with imaginative and embodied experiences.

This alternative sense of truth can be thought of dialectically, which functions relative to ideas and language in ways similar to how Bateson described stochastic processes. Dialectical thinking is usefully limited to language, which allows paradoxes that emerge between writing and reality to inform the foundation of narrative identity. Dialectical thinking adds important resources for understanding the ongoing truth of descriptive propositions, especially with the additional resources allotted by phenomenology.

Eugene Gendlin, whose work in process philosophy and phenomenology led to impressive breakthroughs in psychology, thought about truth as a dynamic process. One particularly useful essay in this regard ([Gendlin et al. 2018](#)) moved through the tension between truth, writing, and reality as it emerged in Plato's *Symposium*. He began with Plato's awareness of the limitations of the literal: "...the real thing could not be written" due to the "very nature of writing, real thinking, and reality" (p. 177). The gap between the literal and the real remained impassible. At the same time, the dialogic form is "more real, than if [Plato] had written only assertions and only ones that were all consistent with each other" (p. 177). The dialogic form allows for inconsistencies that emerge at the juncture of language and reality. To put these in writing leads to a "very highly informative" kind of not knowing because experiencing where the literal and actual diverge enables readers to engage in works of creativity and faith. Contradictions provide important information (p. 178) that would be missed in a flat system of total self-identity or narrative coherence.

Gendlin's analysis about the truth of Plato's writings provides a way to understand the centrality of faith relative to the truth of a narrative identity, also revealing how literal idolatry distorts this truth. Gendlin wrote that the value of Plato's dialectic comes in depicting literal statements as an inadequate starting place intended to provoke readers to evaluate the extent to which it was true. The incomplete abstractedness of the literal urges a return to the reality of a felt experience in the moment—to test its ongoing truth. If the literal truth is at odds with the felt experience of reality it initiates the process of truth finding. Gendlin found that this occurs as we abandon a formerly important literal statement in favor of a new, equally incomplete, descriptive proposition. This means that the new truth itself "will later be overthrown, but the specific information which led to it will never be abandoned" (p. 179). The process of truth has limits: concepts that are literally articulated arise from experience but are not bound to them. The truth, Gendlin found, "controls concept-formation and keeps it from being arbitrary, corrects it and forces us to remake concepts when we find where they are faulty" (p. 179).

Even more pointedly, [Gendlin et al. \(2018, p. 179\)](#) described why prioritizing a merely literal sense of truth, even if others around agree that this literal truth is valid, produces errors and wrongful results. He wrote:

The key here is that something controls what we can and cannot continue to maintain when examples from life make what we said seem false to us. This recognition consists of something other than our statements, concepts, definitions, and logic. With only these we could never sense the wrongness of anything that follows logically.

More than simply an explanation for why it is important to test literal descriptions of external reality, this is also an important key for truth relative to the narrative identity of a self. Any label applied to the self as an *ipse* identification is a literal claim that produces

tension with a situational reality as part of an ongoing narrative of character formation. The virtue of such literal understandings is to test and adapt them, not to embrace them as descriptive of a total self-identity or to value complete narrative cohesion. Faith emerges through the capacity to allow for incoherence, to follow questions that form and lead to deeper wisdom and enhanced understandings. The truth is experienced as that which goes beyond the literal toward a faith which remains outside the ability for words to say completely.

Gendlin et al. (2018), too, appreciated the crucial role that paradox plays when speaking of truth. Paradox allows contradictions to be productive, rather than “taken as adding up to nothing” (p. 180), which relativistic claims (truth on both sides) and nihilistic claims (there is no truth) have in common. He wrote, “A paradox expresses an insight while still using the words one had before that insight”, allowing that an experienced but as yet ineffable insight may require “the same words used in two ways” (p. 180). Literal idolatry disavows the potential for words to generate multiple meaningful experiences. It embraces at most “any one product from the method”, in terms of literally true statements, rather than understanding truth as a process of generation that allows “the eternally same forms” to be “regenerated in a moving activity by us” (p. 181).

The ongoing emergence of character through the difference of *ipse* and *idem* appeals to a similar sense of truth disinclined toward literal totalizations. The truth of a human character can only emerge through the ongoing work of narrative identity, shifting and changing in time. Character is the self-sensing that experiences what is true but incomplete about literal suggestions offered by the habits of *idem* or the identifications of *ipse*.

## 2.6. The Relation of Faith and the Imagination

A sense of narrative identity usefully offers an ongoing process resulting in self-knowledge. Ricoeur’s account carefully details how the work of *idem* and *ipse* provide the context in which one’s developing character can be assessed by one’s self and by others. Assessing the ongoing truth of the self as a descriptive proposition through a dialogical movement between language and experience proves useful in three ways: to understand the past, to act spontaneously and appropriately in the present, and to orient oneself toward circumstances that seem conducive to the future. The character is an excellent resource for self-assessment as it developmentally integrates the given and the chosen through the formation of habit and identification (especially as both habits and identifications invite character to oscillate between given and chosen). This process toward self-knowledge provides the kind of narrative coherence that allows the self to rest transparently in the open unity of the given and the chosen—the descriptive proposition of character.

At the same time, this seems to only partly address the suspicion Butler (2008) raised regarding narrative coherence and the tendency for knowledge to forestall other resources. Remaining aware of the limits of knowledge invites the awareness of resources that remain outside of knowledge. Because conventional thinking follows Descartes in strongly equating knowledge and existence as well as thinking and being (which is why Butler’s suspicions are well placed), it becomes convenient to associate the unknown or the unknowable as nonexistent. In reality, the realm of the knowable remains rather small—especially compared to the realm of the imaginable. The imaginable becomes realized through faith that is not satisfied with a knowledge defined by words alone.

In *Fallible Man*, Ricoeur (1986) details the limits of knowability. Knowing, which describes our awareness of external objects with a combination of subjective conviction and objective certainty, is one of three different ways that the inner and outer worlds can converge. Two thirds of our experiences of the world—including acting (our relations with other people) and feeling (which provides access to our inner landscape and sense of heart)—remain beyond the limits of knowability. Knowledge requires a distance from the objects that are known. It is mediated through the imagination in a way that remains uncertain, and thus fallible. Moments of connection with others or the self can be experienced but not known. At best, our feelings become voiced in a way that testifies to a deep intuition of

coherence: “Feeling expresses my belonging to this landscape that, in turn, is the sign and cipher of my inwardness” (p. 89). Belonging and participation are modes of connection that can be experienced, but not known. Words struggle to communicate the truth of these moments.

These resources—our loving connections with others and our felt connection with ourselves—are potential experiences in the domain of the given. To the extent that they resist knowledge, such experiences thus remain unchosen and beyond our ability to predict or control. Such experiences of unchosen connections (such as falling in love) are powerful, difficult to ignore, and often impossible to explain or justify. These important moments interrupt the chosen narrative cohesion of our lives. They defy conventional stories that tend to follow knowable or predictable linear trajectories toward that which is greater and better. Such moments invite us toward the fragile riches located beyond the reach of knowledge.

The traditions of depth psychology and archetypal studies have achieved a great deal with respect to recognizing the value of the imagination as a rich source of information. Choosing to explore this imaginal realm (Cheetham 2020) involves exploring the reality of thinking as an experience without aiming toward literal knowledge as an outcome. Approaches to the psychological work of active imagination (Johnson 1989; von Franz 1997) have provided enhanced knowledge of the self as a site for transformative experiences beyond knowledge. Enhanced, powerful forms of connection to nature also provide this (Plotkin 2003, 2021). Such methods treat the imagination as a space in itself rather than a means to the end of knowing. Doing so, following Ricoeur, is the best way to experience connection. Feelings of wholeness relieve the sensations of disconnection, alienation, and despair that come from relying too heavily on knowledge and the method of distanced observation. These vital experiences of reality remain desperately needed. Depth psychologies prioritize using the imagination (the chosen) as a resourceful lens from which to explore reality (the given). What these approaches have in common is looking to the imagination as something potentially useful beyond the knowable.

Although knowing is limited in isolation, its insights help ground us in reality. Approaches that ignore feedback from the knowable can lead to simple forms of fantasy problematically divorced from reality (Winnicott 2017). Excluding what is given as knowable indicates a lack of attunement. Fantasy occurs when we exclusively orient to the chosen. It can occur by choosing *only* the experiential or *only* the literal rather than putting these in dialogue. Each choice results in subjective experiences of reality informed by an exclusively self-informing descriptive proposition that avoids measuring its ongoing truth in conversation. These approaches break from reality instead of opening a different way to experience reality. A stable exploration of reality requires an orientation to truth as the coinciding of the literal (known through language) and experiential (connected to feelings) alongside a desire for confirmation. This important principle for stable explorations of reality remains crucial even when the quality of confirmation steps beyond the narrow limits of what can be rendered in language as literally known.

Faith explores beyond what is literally knowable without the risk of fantasy. Faith maintains its stance as a descriptive proposition (chosen language) that evaluates the extent to which it is confirmed in reality (given experience). It is unlike knowledge because it orients toward a reality that is objectively uncertain and unknowable. This reality requires the imagination. Such an orientation to reality is at odds with conventional understanding because it is paradoxical. Unsurprisingly, Kierkegaard, Gendlin, and Zen traditions (Sekida 2005) indicate that the paradox is an important boundary that demarcates a different realm of the given.

The imagination constitutes the domain in which we experience the limits of what is literally knowable. This includes concepts as objects of knowledge that are exclusively expressible in language. Respecting this limitation suggests a value in exercising epistemological humility. Language almost always requires a moment of humility: its precision is contrary to its felt importance. Faith is the proper comportment relative to determinable

unknowns that refuse to be reduced to an object, even in the imagination. The self is an example of such a determinable unknown, as are the selves of other persons. For the sake of convenience, each determinable unknown can be named and understood as something discrete, but such names or labels cannot convey the entire truth of what it is. As Kierkegaard consistently pointed out, because experiences of faith orient to experiences of reality that move beyond the conventional boundaries of the knowable, expressions of faith do not rely on reductionist naming strategies. Instead, they emerge as indirect communication, including parables, paradoxes, and silence. Such ways of communicating use the abstract capacity of language to imperfectly preserve the truth of the experienced reality.

Orienting to the imagination instead of literal knowledge invites a different experience of character. Recall that Ricoeur (Ricoeur and Blamey 1991) in *Oneself as Another* defined character as the convergence of the chosen and the given of *ipse* and *idem* in the formation of a narrative identity. The book *Oneself as Another* was based on Ricoeur's Gifford Lectures. When published, it did not include the final lecture, "The Summoned Subject in the School of the Narratives of the Prophetic Vision" (Ricoeur 1995, pp. 262–78). While *Oneself as Another* provides a model of narrative identity within the realm of knowledge, this culminating essay discusses the role of narrative identity that looks to the resources excluded by what can be known: those of faith.

Ricoeur (1995) provided a series of archetypal figures and characteristic responses that arise out of an inner confrontation of self and self: the prophetic call, the Christ image, and the inner teacher. This coincidence of self and self is something wholly unique, even if similarities in types can be identified at an external, literal level. Ricoeur wrote that such figures provide "the most internalized expression of the responding self, which is internalized to the point of constituting itself as an autonomous instance in the ethical tradition". Ricoeur refers to this moment as the call of conscience. Although this is wholly idiosyncratic and may mark a departure from conventional morality, this self-attunement builds on the practice of sensing truth at the heart of character formation. The process results in a new set of nonconventional given possibilities for the *ipse* to pursue. These new possibilities provide a stark alternative to social dictates. They emerge from the depths of the self.

Ricoeur (1995) described the process as a "graft [where] two living organs are changed into each other: on the one side, the call of the self to itself is intensified and transformed by the figure that serves as its model and archetype; on the other, the transcendent figure is internalized by the moment of appropriation that transmutes it into an inner voice" (p. 271). This process of grafting remains within the structure of faith rather than knowledge. It opens faith to a dynamic process of growth toward the unknowable rather than empty repetitions of abstract literal beliefs. By introducing the role of an imagined inner teacher, Ricoeur amplified the individualized potential for religious faith.

This analysis indicates the potential for an exploration of character as it emerges through affirming non-knowable realities. Here, the character (chosen) relates to the individualized, personal voice of conscience (given) that combines with (chosen) figures drawn from (given) religious traditions. This process, unlike fantasy, maintains the potential for assessing the ongoing truth of a descriptive proposition because it still seeks for robust forms of felt confirmation or disconfirmation in conversation with literal traditions and external reality. It also provides an initial indication of the experience of one's total self-expression through the complete revelation of character. Such a complete revelation requires the imaginable in addition to the knowable. This experience of character emerges through accessing the full range of awareness, including the sense experiences and intuitions that are larger than language or certainty. Such experiences importantly inspire a total, passionate response from the core of one's being. One does not experience the whole self as an object of the imagination, such as we might experience the character of another. Instead, the experience occurs in its total and full expression of truth in ways that exceed knowledge, rationality, or proof. The "truth" of this expression, in fact, is necessarily limited to the full voicing and manifestation of one's character in a particular situation.

### 2.7. The Relation of Faith and Belief

As can be seen through the separate publication of the “Summoned Subject” essay, discussions of faith that exceed social standards of what is literally knowable are not generally acknowledged. The emphasis in conventional religious traditions in the West, especially Protestant Christianity (including its emphasis on apologetics), is to approach unknowable realities and imaginative resources through the lens of certainty and knowledge. It translates these through a direct use of language that shifts this content into the limited function of the imagination as a medium connecting sense experiences and language. Although this translation is perhaps necessary as a way of gradually introducing unknowable realities, many religions undertake a second step. This additional step brings the potentiality of religion into the limits of the knowable and excludes the actual connection to the imagination or faith. As an example, contemporary conventional Christianity renders the imaginative place of Heaven as an actuality in time and space that serves as a home for the dearly departed. Evangelical Christians thus discuss “knowing” loved ones are saved from damnation. Rather than the felt sense of confirmation available through the connection to the call of conscience and an affirmation of subjective conviction, this step uses the process of accepting a literal belief as a way to overcome the lack of a felt response. Often in such traditions, doubt is seen as the enemy of faith instead of important to its existence.

Ricoeur ([Ricoeur and Blamey 1991](#)) posited this relationship of imagination and belief relative to narrative identity: “To imagination is attributed the faculty of moving easily from one experience to another if their difference is slight and gradual, and thus of transforming diversity into identity”. He added that “Belief serves here as a relay, filling in the deficiencies of the impression” (p. 127). As an example, it is important to adhere to the belief that the person who wakes up is the same person as the person who went to sleep. It is equally important to believe that, in the absence of reliving a past encounter, the way a memory is retrieved and verbally recounted is more or less consistent with the initial sense impressions. Such beliefs, developed through one’s verbal abilities, greatly contribute to enabling the continuity of relationships with others over space and time. The relationship between imagination and belief can also work forward in time, anticipating what one is likely to do, allowing for attestations about one’s capability. This also smooths uncertainty about what is manageable.

The joy of attestation, using words to describe the senses, was core to the imagination’s role as [Ricoeur \(1986\)](#) conveyed it. Owen [Barfield \(1988\)](#) was deeply sympathetic to this perspective; he wrote that language originated as the echo of nature in the human, or “the echo of what once sounded and fashioned in both of them at the same time” (p. 123). As Flaubert understood in emphasizing the importance of *le mot juste*, or the right word, something powerful happens when precise language offers an echo, when it articulates an apt descriptive proposition of a sensory experience. This is especially true when it offers a descriptive proposition in language that articulates—and thus conveys—an activating encounter with unknowable reality. As those who keep a journal know, literary expressions are important and enliven the imaginative encounters with archetypal teachers that Ricoeur describes.

Hearing another’s joyful communication, conveyed as a belief, can enter into the imagination and summon a sensory experience of powerful affirmation providing a full sense of self-recognition. Such moments can provide an empowering experience of character confirmation. For example, recent language that communicates how gender is a spectrum rather than a binary has liberated people to a greater amount of self-understanding. It has resulted in expanded options for self-expression and the communication of needs and desires than what had been available in earlier generations. The power of expressing one’s identity in language, to give voice to a feeling in a word, is an essential part of human development.

This example also shows the ways in which the cultural contribution of language is not neutral: society inevitably informs the values and ideas of its speakers. In addition to vocabulary, syntax, and grammar, language also contributes what Barfield called “collective representations”. If the imagination initially connects how a sensory experience feels to



language, collective representations communicate a concept as if it were something known at that sensory level. Collective representations are similar to language in this way: they do not originate in any one individual but do not exist without individuals. “Like the words of a language, [collective representations] are common to the members of a given social group, and are transmitted from one generation to another, developing and changing only gradually in the process” (Barfield 1988, p. 33). They are linguistic expressions that are shared as though they were true or natural, images that are donated rather than formed by one’s own imaginative work. Rather than *le mot juste*, which expresses a personal experience in a public way, these kinds of collective representations import public expressions as though they were personally experienced. For example, stereotypes of marginalized groups support racist beliefs about the innate worth of individuals despite the prevalence of factual evidence to the contrary. These collective representations take the form of conventional beliefs, things that are stated as though they were certain facts despite often being antithetical to one’s own experience.

The introduction to this article provided Marion’s definition of idolatry, arguing that idols homogenize and thus reduce what can be seen. Ricoeur (1986) argued that idolatry occurs at the heart of feeling, through a forgetfulness that causes someone to mistake happiness with a schematized object of human desire (p. 131). Barfield’s discussion of idolatry provides a middle ground: he argued that the homogenization occurs through language, in part through the prioritization of “collective representations” whose optional or created status becomes forgotten. Idolatry occurs when we begin to take collective representations as the measure of truth for our own ongoing experience, relying on these abstract generalities instead of our own generative, creative faculties. The result is that we no longer responsibly represent reality through verbal concepts that have different kinds of advantages. Instead, we mistake as something “given” various concepts and limitations that in reality are optional. We experience these concepts as idols when we take them as identical to reality.

This opens a nuanced definition of literal idolatry. Idolatry occurs when we relate to the world as “subjects” who manipulate or discuss “objects” using words as though they were a given reality rather than remembering that language continually shapes reality. Barfield (1988) argued this point most clearly in his chapter “Religion”, stating that, for those who see the world as filled with objects, “most nouns are the names of idols” (p. 157). This is exceptionally true about nominalizations, words such as “decision” or “argument”, that turn a process into an object. He concluded, “... the besetting sin to-day is the sin of literalness, or idolatry” (p. 162). In the same way that our imaginative powers can translate a process into a literal object, so can they also reduce the vitality of a living being into mere syllables.

One of the ways that accepting collective representations induces idolatry is through making us neglectful of our imaginative capacities. In this process, we become increasingly disconnected from our sensory experiences and thus more reliant upon the presence of collective representations. This upsets the balance of language and experience that Gendlin and Bateson recommended, leading to the kind of fantasy Winnicott warns against. Bereft of our felt connection to reality and neglectful of the creative power of the imagination, we tend to rely exclusively on language as the origin of reality. Literal idolatry occurs when language and its descriptive capabilities are seen as something that can be “true” or “real” apart from a connection to the imagination or sensory experience. The privileging of whiteness and masculinity, along with quasi-scientific “explanations” such as survival of the fittest, become nominalized collective representations that are given as “certainties” that “exist” as distinct from human interpretations or designations. Again, following Marion, idolatry occurs when “we see nothing but” the idol, or the literal reductions that follow an unthinking reliance on collective representations.

In our contemporary world, and following in the tradition of Black feminists and other advocates of complex identity formations, it is problematic to use nouns such as “Black” or “queer” as literal definitions of a human. It is problematic because it leads to a mistaken

totalizing self-identity or as a measure of complete coherence. Although a term might unlock an initial joyful self-proclamation of identity in language, such terms deployed as totalizing identity markers end up becoming idols that obscure or war against other potential identity markers. As totalizing terms, such labels reduce options rather than expanding them. People thus feel that it is necessary to choose between loyalty to potential identity groups (race vs. gender vs. class). When such terms demand total identification, they no longer serve to unlock a complex, shifting set of potential identifications in the moment. When used as if literally true, these terms provide an erroneous descriptive proposition and remain deaf to input suggesting that they no longer speak to a felt sense of ongoing truth.

When a belief takes the form of literal idolatry, it removes the imagination's capacity for faith that respects the limits of knowability. Such beliefs instead provide unverifiable definitions of reality. At this point, belief is akin to the disconnected exploration of self-referential non-realities (Winnicott 2017). This tendency toward literalness, the eschewing of the human responsibility for co-creating the world, is self-erasing. Barfield found that gesturing to the symbolic basis of thought (reminding people that we creatively or imaginatively experience *X as if Y*, rather than seeing *X is* or *as Y*) upsets a person's preference "to remain 'literal'". Barfield followed this by stating such a person can hardly admit to this preference "since self-knowledge is the very thing" that idolatry avoids. This preference relates to Butler's discussion of the demand for total self-identity or complete coherence, projected by a verbal statement that acts as though the belief named the entire network of self-relations. A gesture to self-knowledge would require a movement through the imagination back to a felt sense of reality, which is one of the earliest casualties of literal idolatry. The virtue of language is to persist abstractly in time without regard to any particular present circumstance. Thus, a problematic statement of belief persists without any relation to the imagination or the felt ground of the sense experience beneath. It becomes a descriptive proposition emptied of its content, upheld as an ideal that distracts from its violation of the limits of knowability.

### 3. Idolatry and the Problem of Modern Religious Change

The introjection of literal idolatry is a defining trait of the modern social imaginary, especially given the unnatural demand for hierarchy and its use of religion and violence to curtail imaginative explorations of faith that nonetheless persist in humans.

#### 3.1. *The Modern Development of the Social Imaginary*

In an ideal world, collective representations provide linguistic portals that empower people to responsibly and creatively speak forth descriptive propositions that articulate their felt awareness of emergent realities. Collective representations would serve as part of the informing echo that shaped mind and nature simultaneously. Such an idealized understanding would follow Bateson's argument that culture and nature relate through a stochastic process that requires a two-pronged standard to allow change. Bateson (2002) found that most cultural institutions rely on this process of flexible, adaptive stability. Recalling his work as an anthropologist, Bateson described an Australian tribe whose social organization and ideas about nature are *abductively* related. This means that their ideas about nature support, and are supported by, their ideas about society. Thus, individuals in the tribe live, "as all human beings must, in an enormously complex network of mutually supporting presuppositions" (p. 134). One example of how this works in our contemporary society occurs when someone attempts to justify economic or political inequality by claiming that "survival of the fittest" is "only natural". So doing appeals to a mistaken conventional interpretation of nature that supports a harmful social order without examining how nature exists as a collaborative balance.

This complex network of presuppositions at the social level corresponds to the unthought character level of "habit" in Ricoeur's narrative identity at the individual level. A culture has a characteristic set of capacities that it has developed as valuable or desirable.

Portions of experience that are less frequently explored become dormant and eventually associated with unknown realities. At a cultural level, Bateson (2002) finds that those presuppositions that support conventional values create the conditions of epistemology. These unthought presuppositions determine which sensory experiences are perceptible in consciousness and subsequently imagined as true. Collective representations provide these presuppositions in the account of literal idolatry offered above. They weaken our immediate and intuitive felt sense of reality. When epistemology becomes a cultural language-based substitute for felt experience, it supplants the more accurate dialectic of expression and experience that Gendlin described. It leads to thinking we can know the truth of something through exclusively verbal formulations.

The resulting situation is difficult to change, because altering a cultural epistemology requires “shifting our whole system of abductions”, with the understanding that an abduction is a “double or multiple description of some object or event or sequence” (Bateson 2002, p. 134). Instead of a thoughtful correction to an abductive system of presuppositions, a society dominated by literal idolatry tends to argue about what things are called. These arguments provide the illusion of change but preserve the system of abductions and presuppositions. Collective representations remain invisible influences, the unknowable foundation of what we call knowledge.

In the West, the most recent epistemological change occurred in the shift to the modern from the medieval system of abductions. Based on his understanding of language and culture, Barfield (1988) argued that this transition coincided with an idolatrous mindset. He depicted the transition from the medieval to the modern in terms of a cultural shift from a *participatory* into a *perspectival* mode of experience. People shifted from *living in* to *looking at* the world. He wrote, “Before the scientific revolution the world was more like a garment [people] wore about them than a stage on which they moved. In such a world the convention of perspective was unnecessary” (p. 94) because “they felt themselves and the objects around them and the words that expressed those objects, immersed together in something like a clear lake of . . . meaning” (p. 95). Barfield’s “garment” and immersion in a “clear lake of meaning” invite us to think of a world in which more forms of coherence were always already given, rather than needing to be attained. Using Ricoeur’s terms, the imagination connected language and the senses, while collective representations (such as archetypes) opened a wider range of known realities.

The demand for self-identity and complete coherence becomes comprehensible only after a shift from a *participatory* (where these would have been presupposed) to a *perspectival* mode of experience. Barfield is not alone in identifying this shift and its consequences with reference to religion. More recently, Charles Taylor (2007) described this as a transition from a society “in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others” (p. 3). Taylor used the term “disembedding” to describe how the modern world was attained at the expense of the kind of coherence that naturally occurs when immersed in experiences. Instead of cohering, the individual, social, and cosmic worlds began to pull apart (pp. 146–58).

One result of this was gaining a “buffered self” that lets people develop greater “confidence in [their] own moral ordering at the expense of a self that was porous and vulnerable to a world of spirits and powers” (p. 27). In addition to an increased level of psychological or spiritual armoring, buffering led to the disconnection of the self from the world of sensory experience and the creative imagination. A buffered self, shielded from the felt experience of participation, is then primed to inhabit the *perspectival* mode of experience that Barfield described. The consequence of the armoring not only led to a sense of heightened individual responsibility for moral ordering (including coherence and self-identity), but also to a world in which “subjects” interacted with “objects”. Such a shift also parallels what Bennett would identify as an increasing emphasis on causality instead of a co-emergent world of distributed agency and expansive origins.

Understood as a shift in how narrative identities are constructed, the process of disembedding becomes the way that the ongoing truth of descriptive propositions are exclusively

measured by one form of verbal reasoning. Following Gendlin, an over reliance on verbal reasoning leads people to neglect imagined and felt connections to others and the self. Consequently, truth is reduced to the level of flat, unchanging assertions. Following Taylor, this shift in abductive presuppositions was experienced as increasing disconnection. It resulted in a contextual reality that no longer provided an adequate foundation for identity. Bridging this gap was the growing sense of individual causal efficacy, exhibiting an abstract moral determination anchored in the isolating and merely literal world. This generated a provisional, perhaps incoherent, sense of character. More options at a conceptual level without reference to felt experience meant that less was *given* at what Ricoeur considered the “lower level” where *idem* and *ipse* become indistinguishable. Instead, as the options for what was *chosen* multiplied, individuals needed to exert far more effort to retain a stable sense of narrative identity. As a result, “often we treat ourselves as objects. Working and social life require this objectification; our very freedom depends on these social regularities which give us a routine existence. And so we create ourselves and in ourselves the conditions of validity of the concepts of modern psychology. These concepts are adapted to the man who adapts himself” (Ricoeur 1986, p. 101). The objectification of the self is a symptom of the perspectival psychology of the modern social imaginary.

Recall that, for Ricoeur, the imagination synthesized and connected the finite and limited dimension of sensory experience with the infinite and abstract tool of language. This allowed people to undergo, but not to know, a range of ineffable experiences. If cultures can be said to have certain character traits or habits, a set of values and presuppositions perpetuated through ways that language frames experience, then, using an abductive model of reasoning, they would also have a social imaginary. The social imaginary would provide a storehouse of language that would make more or less nuanced experiences available. In the wake of modernity, the social imaginary and the collective representations it housed became a functional substitute for Barfield’s clear lake of meaning. This difference is important because the modern social imaginary largely promotes values inconsistent with natural processes of change. These replaced spontaneous experiences of the imagination that connect words to feelings, leading to experimentation and growth.

Taylor (2007) uses the term “social imaginary” in this way, and it is telling that his descriptions of the foundation of the social imaginary are neither natural nor numinous, the primary paths toward feeling connections. He ventured that the web of commonalities that comprise a social imaginary includes how people “imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations” (p. 171). The focus of the imagination no longer relates to sensory experiences, but to presumptions about other people’s literal thoughts and judgments. The social imaginary fosters lateral connections and remains disconnected (disembedded) from direct experiences. As its primarily verbal and conceptual forms of identification became increasingly prominent, it offered a widespread alternative to the kinds of natural growth and narrative identity outlined by Bateson and Ricoeur.

The modern Western social imaginary also developed its own process of narrative identity, which Joseph Campbell (2008) called the “journey of the hero”. This narrative structure interpreted past cultural myths and created present day stories that emphasized and idealized the often violent events of an individual battling against adversarial forces through a profusion of collective representations. This new narrative structure was consistent with the now buffered, disconnected, and isolated “self” that no longer could presuppose meaningful and harmonious connections that would develop through a deepened sense of character. By using words and suggesting narratives that framed the world as adversarial, modern individuals were increasingly driven to focus on the shallow and uncertain guesses about the thoughts of what others think. It became less likely that people would want to question these underlying presuppositions because such questions would risk ostracization and isolation. Struggle, victory, and even loss were all preferable to the prospect of being outside society altogether.

### 3.2. How Arche and Hierarchy Structure the Modern Western Social Imaginary

The disconnection from a felt sense of reality skewed the imagination toward merely verbal or conceptual fantasies anchored in social conformity. Character originally bore the imprint of a person's unique preferences and convictions as they developed capacities through a stochastic process that resulted in an expanded narrative identity. Eventually, these reduced to what the social imaginary found acceptable. The social imaginary in this way began to supplant, rather than supplement, genuine individual identities until only collective representations remained. The unthinkable no longer provided a portal to the imagination: it became synonymous with the impossible. Those who succeeded at embracing and embodying the standard of complete coherence and total self-identity became more similar to objects whose essence and value could be quickly ascertained and extracted, i.e., they became nominalizable. Self-definition conformed to given essentialized collective representations that lacked individuality. Individuality was expressed by choosing among unimaginative options. Character became measured by how well one conformed to external expectations. Performing roles required an exhausting amount of effort. It became difficult to recall the self's innate potential to emerge in imaginative explication.

The structure of the social imagination became increasingly distanced from the nature-based mirror of collaborative flourishing that Bateson depicted. Hierarchy replaced harmony, as dominator models of relating self and world (Eisler 2019) began to structure civilization. It ordered society based on rigid binaries anchored in the use of fear and violence. The body (the feeling-based anchor to the sensory world and qualitative experiences) was often devalued so that the mind (the gateway to the literal world of language and concepts) could be glorified. Feelings were neglected, including the natural feelings of pleasure and joy that came in response to truthful and creative expressions. This limited the ideal functioning of an *ipse* identity, which increasingly was reduced to searching through distorted collective representations in the social imaginary. Rather than curiosity in partnership with the world, societies and people became ruled by the potential of a dominator's way of relating to the internal and external world. Life was experienced as competitive rather than collaborative. The foundational binaries became presuppositions that replaced pre-existing relational possibilities (Eisler 2019). This resulted in the positive valuation of exerting violent power as a forceful way of altering one's self and others' (Eisler 2019; Jantzen 1998).

If life is relational, as Bateson's model would suggest, then becoming disembodied and disconnected from relationships would lead to being preoccupied with death. Grace Jantzen (1998) argued that the social imaginary that grounds Western civilization "has had both a fascination with and dread of death", as is shown in "its continuous involvement with war" (p. 129). This can, perhaps, be understood as a cultural character trait. Ricoeur alluded to the fact that narrative identities were not exclusive to individuals, hinting that the oscillation between *ipse* and *idem* also occurs in groups of humans in ways that span generations. Similar to Campbell's journey of the hero, individual stories that are told (including religious myths, secular histories, and contemporary entertainment) continuously resupply collective representations useful to instill the conventional values and models that an individual's *ipse* finds as points of identification. These reinforce the seeming inevitability of the social order as a "necessary evil". It becomes more difficult to imagine alternatives.

In addition to their fixation on death, Jantzen found that overarching cultural narratives that arc through the imaginary—even when they conflict at an *ipse* level—nonetheless often have shared assumptions at the *idem* level. She identifies some of these narrative assumptions of the Western imaginary: "assumptions of progress, of the worth of rationality understood in terms of objectivity and universality, and of the dignity and value of the individual and of freedom. It is within this framework that thought in the west proceeds" (p. 128). Jantzen's target is not these values, but the ways that progress, rationality, and individuality serve as presuppositions that limit alternatives (such as contentedness, imagination, and community). To demonstrate how ostensible opponents share presuppositions,



Jantzen described how contemporary conflicts between science and religion fail to move forward. Both scientists and fundamentalists largely *agree* that reality involves progress, objective rationality, and individual freedom (rather than alternatives). They only *disagree* about what the terms mean rather than exploring how science or religion could be thought of otherwise.

This “*idem*” level agreement of a social imaginary reduces both the conceptual availability of potential alternatives as well as the ability to assess reality in a way that can encompass multiple perspectives. For example, many social imaginaries have historically rejected the belief that women and children should be treated with respect. Often, those who asserted that all persons have dignity were dismissed as being “irrational” or as “irreligious” depending on the audience. Resolving a problem requires more than simply shifting debates of whether reason or religion is more true. It is not sufficient to value only subjective or only communal standards. The correct path forward requires forming descriptive propositions that avoid valuing only one side of a binary rather than a relationship between complementary poles. The best way places potential truths into conversation.

We are trained to evaluate the ongoing truth of a descriptive proposition with an exclusive focus on verbal formulas. Thus, we sometimes overlook that loud and sometimes violent disagreements actually protect the same core presuppositions. Following the tradition of the Anglo-American philosophy of religion, but largely responsive to the historical thrust of Christian theological development, Jantzen called merely verbal formulas “justified true beliefs”. She argued that “the increased emphasis on beliefs is itself a consequence of modernity and the privatization of religion (p. 20)”. This insight anticipated much of what Taylor described in *The Secular Age*. Such rationally articulated that beliefs provide a verbal gateway into the social imaginary. The status of what makes beliefs “justified” is necessarily put in relation to that particular imaginary rather than a more holistic or personally sensed reality.

Put back into Ricoeur’s terminology, both the “belief” and the “justification” relate wholly to the infinite, abstract, and conceptual pole of language rather than to any grounding, finite feeling of sensory experience. It presupposes and thus uses only one portion of what could be known (language) at the expense of the other (sense). Further, the justifications are aimed toward perpetuating the presuppositions of the social imaginary and its values at the expense of a more holistic sense of reality. Thus, any kind of faith or truth articulated as a justified true belief would be unlikely to have the integrative, transformative effect of faith that Kierkegaard described. The vitality of faith arises from felt experience.

As in other important cultural forms informed by abductive social systems and structures, religions became rooted in the social imaginary and thus grounded in literal idolatry. When this happens in a religious tradition, verbal formulas of “belief” or creedal statements replace the lived, creative vitality of faith. Observable obedience to literal traditions supplants the capacity to transform the world through an inner awakening based on imaginative encounters with unknowable realities (the focus of Section 3 of this essay). Undermining this source of faith diminished the sense of confidence people could have in their intuitive understandings. Embracing collective representations that held hierarchies as natural generated approval. Both the merely mental definition of good and exclusively verbal formulations of truth became disconnected from embodied reality. Internalized systems of morality perpetuated the hierarchical collective representations of the social imaginary. People enacted psychological violence upon themselves and thus reduced the need for actual physical violence to maintain social cohesion (Foucault 1977). Violence is an application of force that compels adherence to an unnatural, externally imposed end or result; one common artificial end is the perpetuation of hierarchical organizations. One example of this is the violent demand for self-identity and complete coherence that Butler described. People desire an externally imposed result (total self-identity) at the expense of the natural evolution of character. A contemporary example of violence that compels complete narrative coherence is the use of RINO (Republican in Name Only) as an

insult targeting those who deviate from the ideologically framed narrative coherence that dominates contemporary American politics.

Often, that which “justified” the “true beliefs” was less a forceful argument than an appeal to an authority within the system of hierarchies violently imposed on the social imaginary. These are unlike beliefs in innate virtue or goodness, which persist as attitudes of faith outside of systems of justification or authority. Justified true beliefs became laden with values that promote a given social order (the order that justifies them as true), whose premises violate the normative potential of harmonious flourishing. Jantzen unsurprisingly notes that such beliefs, even when “justified true beliefs”, have “clear class and gender implications” (p. 20). Attempting to justify one’s beliefs to others requires putting them in terms of the social system. Doing so strengthens the social system without providing any true ground of confidence for what was felt.

Many contemporary authors have exposed important flaws in how the social imaginary excludes valid perspectives. This limits what is presumed possible to know or experience. “Man represents the western configuration of the human as synonymous with the heteromale, white, propertied, and liberal subject that renders all those who do not conform to these characteristics as exploitable nonhumans, literal legal no-bodies” (Weheliye 2014, p. 135). These artificially limited world views that are projected as absolute truth have historically led to a narrowed way of knowing the world, rendering a vast amount of potential experience as extraneous (Neumann 2017). The imaginary Jantzen describes has been imposed throughout the world. It conforms to the power that a left-brained approach to experience (McGilchrist 2021) has retained as foundational and particularly useful for the development of technologies. Often these technologies provide military advantages. Because the imaginary of western culture has been successful at marginalizing other kinds of knowing, it has been addressed by various critiques of “epistemicide” (Santos 2014), the advocacy of queer phenomenology (Ahmed 2006), and the validation of women’s ways of knowing (Belenky 1986; Gilligan 2006).

Believing that conforming to “moral ideals” is beneficial, especially in religious contexts, often generates harmful effects to oneself and others in a horrifying feedback loop. The pursuit of the idealized “coherent” self, organized around justified true beliefs as the source of a total self-identity, projects violence onto the surrounding world. It does not test the truth of its descriptive propositions by drawing internal and external sources into conversation. It results in a narrow, one-sided character unlike the potential Ricoeur and Gendlin described. Alex Zamalin (2019), in his study of *Black No More*, described this narrowness as consistent with self-interested pursuits. Operating in the exclusively verbal and conceptual realm of the imaginary allows things to be called by terms antithetical to what they are. He writes, “concealing lack of virtue requires reversing its meaning” such that “Hard work becomes exploitation. Theft is a natural right . . . white supremacy represses and rationalizes this process. Whiteness becomes an organized religion”. Zamalin then describes how the contemporary social imaginary and the demand for complete coherence work together: “One submits to its fixed identity to wash away their contradictions. But there is a cost: it is morally deadening” (p. 68). Zamalin’s insight also reflects the ways that ostensible opposites at the level of *ipse* fuse at the level of *idem*. The harmful consequences of those pursuing purity with an air of sanctimoniousness creates a “static” identity that must be preserved at all costs. The pursuit of this ideal is the illusion of certainty within the limits of rationality, not real faith.

In religious settings, any sense of “faith” grounded in a social imaginary that generates and is protected by a hierarchy tends to be compensatory. It advises sacrifice for a future reward. Hierarchies tend to proliferate based on what Ricoeur (Ricoeur and Ihde 2007) identifies as the twin themes that comprise the “corrupt forms of religion”: *accusation* and *consolation*. These themes correlate to “taboo and refuge” as the “two main aspects of religion”, and to two poles of religious feeling in its simplest sense: “the fear of punishment and the desire for protection” (p. 441). These two options derive from the death-based dominator model of the contemporary social imaginary. Ricoeur (Ricoeur and Ihde 2007)

explores how Nietzsche and Freud offered “a critique of cultural representations considered as disguised symptoms of desire and fear” by focusing on its forms of “prohibition, accusation, punishment, and condemnation” grounded on a “god who both threatens and consoles” (p. 441). Notably, the shared premise in these themes is the avoidance of perceived harm, not the pursuit of the good.

Often, a religion anchored on the fear of punishment and the corresponding desire for protection takes the collective representations of the divine literally. Such religious approaches create conceptual idols. Worshippers are encouraged to identify with the idol, sacrificing what is uniquely given in character for power and influence. Habits are evaluated relatively to external conformity to the idol’s standard, rather than through an innate desire to grow or develop. The pursuit of a character that conforms to religious ideals that were distorted by collective representations often leads to a diminished, rather than empowered, sense of self. A sense of natural unique goodness is lost, replaced by a sense of guilt or shame for deviating from collective representations of appropriateness. When the powerful potential of a narrative identity is lost, it results in becoming a character in someone else’s story.

Fromm (1994, p. 78) indicated that a “faith” generated out of these conditions of fear and estrangement becomes a fearful, anxious reaction against unbearable conditions. Such conditions compromise the integrated expressions of inner relatedness that comprise an affirmation of life. As an example, Luther’s forceful faith derived “certainty by elimination of the isolated individual self by becoming an instrument in the hands of an overwhelmingly strong power outside of the individual”. This surrender to a greater power can develop into a drive to display loyalty to authority against all personally felt and rational impulses. This form of faith, which springs from a dominator model of the social imaginary, is literally understood as the only possibility of faith and becomes either desired or reviled as though it comprised the true capacity of faith. Because it demands the annihilation of the self and the destruction of one’s given character, Kierkegaard would classify this inner erosion as an act of despair rather than a work of faith.

Jerome Miller (1992, p. 14) referred to an unquestioned level of presupposition as an “*arche*”, a foundation that bestows an air of certainty onto knowledge, which happens in our current social imaginary through the use of justified true beliefs. As a form of *idem* at the cultural level, it narrows the range of *ipse* to its terms. Miller states that the loss of an *arche* “uproots our tradition at its source, removes its Archimedean principle, creates an-*arche*”. Defining the *arche* as a support of one’s preferred interpretive framework enables those who stand unquestioningly on its principle to claim a position of superiority over alternatives. Miller explored the paradoxical relationship between *arche* and truth in this way:

And how could one go about making a case for such superiority when the very principle whose superiority one intends to prove would have to be intuited at the beginning because it alone could provide a basis for one’s argument? The more one reflects on that paradox, the more one is led to suspect that the real but repressed purpose of every universe of meaning is to construct a system of defenses around a primal prejudice which is treated as an absolute principle so that its ungrounded character can be disguised. (p. 14).

A truly grounded character is open to correction. It explores vulnerably, without attempts at external justification. In time, and with the permission of incoherence that establishes the ongoing truth of a character based on an evolving range, narrative identities tend to deepen. Even those who never feel summoned to the level of conviction that occurs at the imaginative level of faith nonetheless naturally gravitate to the promptings of conscience as a basic guiding principle. This natural inclination to the good is subverted by the modern social imaginary. Lacking the resources of felt experience and with an epistemology that embraces the literal, conscience became equated with obedience. The modern social imaginary is predicated on an *arche* that values conformity to conventional moral authority, complete coherence in the self, and the promotion of an artificial hierarchy.

A lack of growth combined with cultural inflexibility becomes part of the *idem* of the individual thinkers within a given system. Miller (1992) found that having an *arche* “makes its lack of knowledge the dogmatic starting point of a whole system” (p. 15), a systemic limitation inherited by those born into that narrowed way of knowing. Once the imaginary that bridges language and sensory experience loses curiosity about the ongoing truth of its propositional status, it shifts from understanding *X as if* it were *Y* to positing that *X is Y*. The formula *X is Y* becomes a rigid, unchanging statement of identity. Because living in a punitive, dominator culture makes it desirable to repress a capacity for fallibility, the resulting diminution of *ipse* possibilities leads to a restricted and inopportunistically rigid *idem* structure. This restricts the capacity to think creatively.

Understood at an individual level, this rigid sense of identity becomes the demand for a completely coherent, self-identical person. The sense of self, still shorn of a secure (unquestioned) position in a disembedded social world or religious cosmos, is not eager to dismiss the social imaginary that provides a sense of commonality. Curiosity and openness become associated with fallibility (or fallenness); thus, these traits are punished, especially when it comes to questioning the *arche*. What remains is a violent struggle for domination and superiority based on claiming the right to define the *arche*, and thus the basis of the cultural norms and the social imaginary. Dimly aware that something has been repressed but dreading an encounter with it, anxiety pervades the felt experience of the imaginary no matter where one fits in its organization.

An *arche* initially had a positive function: as a descriptive proposition of the world whose ongoing truth was assessed, it allowed humans to experience the world “as if” it fit a particular set of rules. These rules consisted of harmonious integrations of language and sensory experience. Children’s games of make-believe, in which they create temporary rules around reality to open up new experiences, show the usefulness of a temporary *arche*. This playful embrace of an abundant and vital world is lost once a particular *arche* ceases to be one possibility among many and becomes experienced as something *certain* or *necessary*, even when it has outlived its best functioning. This results in a distinct disadvantage: our ability to interact with the world becomes limited.

This is especially true of the contemporary *arche*, scientific rationality. It perpetuates itself by identifying knowledge as “everything [that can] be measured, known, tested, fully understood”. What it jettisons are the essential qualities for a spontaneous life. These vital qualities emerge from “...a sensitivity to human expressiveness—the different gestures, tones of voice, and textures of speech—that provide cues for responding to and engaging with the person who appears before them” (Zamalin 2019, p. 53). Believing in the *arche* that serves as the foundation for a social structure reduces what could be *chosen*. This then eliminates the ability for the *ipse* identity to engage confidently with the surrounding world.

Barfield related literalness to the embrace of a subject–object world. This provides a helpful way of understanding the change that created the modern religious landscape and social imaginary. Ricoeur described how narrative identity is a dynamic work of self-creation that moves between an *idem* level of foundational sameness and an *ipse* level of identificatory recognition. This ongoing process of recognition and self-discovery is stochastically fallible and relates to how the imagination provides a synthesis connecting sense experience and language reminiscent of Gendlin’s definition of truth. At the level of the collective representations that serve as the *arche* of a social imaginary, modernity tends to limit the capacity of the imagination by making experience certain, indubitable, and literal: a small set of conceptual, verbal imaginings.

At the level of the cultural narratives that govern the directions that societies (and the individuals in them) evaluate as desirable, the *arche* contains the sorts of unquestioned narrative structures that Jantzen described, including the assumption of progress, the value of rationality, and the focus on individuals and freedoms. These fixed imaginative connections are disguised moral evaluations that rank mind over body, men over women, power over pleasure, and word over body. Collective representations become a more dominant and increasingly assumed (unquestionable) origin at the heart of a social imaginary, the

“modern” equivalent to being embedded in a social or cosmic order. The construction of a narrative identity devolves into the work of developing habits that support a connection to a particular idolatrous collective representation, presupposed as desirable.

### 3.3. How Literal Idolatry Limits the Capacity for Creative Change

Bateson’s description of a stochastic process provides a model for how change is natural and intuitive. It provides a flexible sense of self-consistency (internal identity) and a sense of continuity (over time) without becoming overly rigid. Such a system prioritizes development over total coherence or absolute certainty. Stochastic processes value guesses but remain anchored in a harmonious congruence grounded in reality, in conversation with ongoing environmental circumstances. Ricoeur’s description of narrative identity shows how our characters can change and develop over time when anchored in the primacy of sense experience and a spontaneous imagination. It seems fair to state that Ricoeur’s narrative identity emerges on a *stochastic* basis because it employs a random component (*ipse*-based explorations of different external environments that allow for a scattering of unpredictable events) and a selective process (Ricoeur’s sense of *imagination* and *character*) to only allow certain outcomes to endure (*idem* as a stable sense of sameness). When internal or external changes indicate an inadequate or outdated *idem* identity (such as what happens during puberty or when moving to a new vocation or residence), it requires a certain number of *stochastic* experiments where identities are “tried on” or “tried out”. Character integrates what is more authentic into an emergent *idem* identity.

The question of the selective process works at the level of judgment as well as at the level of narrative identity. The *imagination*, which frames sensory experiences in terms that we can recognize, filters out non-threatening extraneous elements and allows us to focus on experiential data that support our preferences. Similarly, *character* limits what beliefs and behaviors we will identify as belonging to us; within psychologically integrated or congruent persons, the beliefs and behavior are generally consistent with a person’s self-awareness. Following Taylor and Jantzen, in our modern world, the *social imaginary* provides a parallel evaluative function as it operates within individuals by arranging experiences and possibilities in terms of preset presuppositions. It guides guardians and authorities within cultural institutions (political, social, and religious) to make decisions that conform to the milieu of its social reality.

Often, such preset schemas become defined as “properties” that are imagined to be necessarily true. This process reflects Barfield’s description of how nouns become idols through the stilling influence of nominalizing processes. This sense of property comes in part from the philosophical notion referring to elements that are essential to the identity of something, the way that whiteness is a property of chalk. Once the imagined “property” is understood literally, in a totally definitive way, problems emerge—both at the level of individuals and the society. The modern social imaginary encourages this pattern of thought. As Jennifer Nash (2019) argued, “As it is currently structured, property deeply organizes sociality, and law operates to protect property from trespass and theft. Thus, law operates to create categories like property holder (owner) and trespasser (thief), and to organize the social world around proximities to ownership” (p. 125). A narrative identity does not need “properties” in this way, as character remains grounded by qualities, traits, and attributes that evolve over time.

Understanding how a stochastic process ideally functions provides a useful way to sense how idolatry is problematic for dynamic systems. Relative to the process of change, idolatry occurs when something interferes with this selective process by precluding the possibility of a partially random scattering. Gendlin might find that this occurs when the conceptual becomes literally understood as truth without recourse to felt experience. Barfield would argue that this occurs when we take created collective representations as literally real. Miller would suggest that this becomes the *arche* that determines what counts as thinking. Nash might argue that this would come from possessing too many “properties”, things that we do not want to imagine ourselves without. Each of these



makes humans more rigid, less flexible, more guarded, and less open. The resulting lack of curiosity prevents people from sensing large portions of otherwise available experiences, defining them as extraneous (Neumann 2017). This would largely include the unknowable realities open to the imagination but closed to conventional beliefs—including Ricoeur's summoned subject. At the level of narrative identity, a fixation on unchanging properties interrupts a natural stochastic process by freezing the *idem* sense of identity.

A second way to interrupt a stochastic system at an individual level is through what Sartre (1996) identified as *bad faith*. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre discusses the “metastable concept of ‘transcendence-facticity’” (p. 149). The latter terms are fairly similar to the sense of chosen and given, or Ricoeur's use of *ipse* and *idem*. For Sartre, the terms are the “double property of the human being” and thus he (similar to Ricoeur) admitted that the “two aspects of human reality are and ought to be capable of a valid co-ordination” (p. 148). Unlike Ricoeur or Gendlin, Sartre did not attend to the ideal functioning of this system, i.e., what it would be to live in *good faith*. Sartre wrote, “But bad faith does not wish either to co-ordinate them or to surmount them in a synthesis. Bad faith seeks to affirm their identity while preserving their differences” (p. 148). Bad faith allows someone to embrace the illusion of freedom without responsibility, treating these two realities as convenient, mutually exclusive, and non-integrated options. Bad faith allows us to affirm our facticity and believe we had no choice, or to affirm our transcendence and claim that we are not bound to past choices. This treats the given and chosen as mutually exclusive rather than as collaborative and generative elements within a person's character.

Perhaps it is unsurprising, but it would seem as if the project of literal idolatry can only be undertaken as a bad faith project. Otherwise, the stochastic process of dynamic evolution would prohibit any form of idolatry. *Arches* and imaginaries would retain their sense of “as if”, leaving individuals with the joyful responsibility of constructing characters by a sorting process that results in increasingly appropriate habits and identifications. Sartre's brilliant discussion of reasoning in bad faith shows that bad faith arguments, constructed to defend a premise, are persuasive precisely and only because “to the extent that I could be so persuaded, I have always been so”. The first choice one makes in bad faith is “the nature of truth”, after which, contrary to Gendlin, “... a peculiar type of evidence appears; *non-persuasive* evidence. Bad faith apprehends evidence but it is resigned in advance to not being fulfilled by this evidence, to not being persuaded and transformed into good faith” (pp. 162–63). The nonchalant pre-determination to sidestep the evaluative mechanism so central for the stochastic process (and, in Ricoeur's work, for character development) ensures a system that shifts without actually moving. When engaging in bad faith, one selects a descriptive proposition as a way of ignoring the presentation of an ongoing truth. This results in feeling stuck, not stable.

One of the important services rendered by a stochastic process is that it invites organisms to respond to their environments, using feedback to determine strategies to meet their needs. Bateson (2002) argued that temporary changes are *adaptations* to present circumstances. Over a prolonged period of time (in which, Ricoeur would say, new habits alter a character and recontextualize “normal”), organisms *acclimate* to that which is initially experienced as extreme or excessive. As an example, Bateson related that the basic structure of an organism slowly changes when it moves into high-altitude (and oxygen-poor) environments. Bateson also allowed for another kind of change, *addiction*, a category of change that is not adaptive and features no survival value (p. 178).

Acclimation uses the creative imagination in positive ways so that organisms can thrive in sites that would seem to be hostile. Nash (2019) demonstrated this capacity in her invitation for Black feminists to imagine the law as a place that would promote human flourishing. She wrote, “freedom and radical black feminist politics can be rooted in myriad sites, including spaces that have been rife with our own subordination” (p. 130). Nash also presents the problematic side of acclimation, which has led Black feminism to adhere to a property-based perspective. This happens when Black feminists identify intersectionality as part of a territory in need of defense. Nash described this problematic process as reflecting

some aspects of Black feminism that align overmuch with the modern social imaginary, and thus “has mirrored a larger US tradition in which to care for something is to assert ownership over it, and thus to protect it from imagined threat of trespass”. But because she also knows that black feminist theory is “anticaptivity... fundamentally invested in radical conceptions of freedom”, she wishes to reanimate black feminism’s radical imagination, its capacity to continue to ask:

What if we imagined relationships with what we cherish beyond the racially saturated conceptions of property and ownership? Can we untether care and love from ownership? Can we express our deepest and most cherished investments otherwise? (p. 137)

The questions are carefully worded to inspire all readers to tell a different story, opening a shift from a historical awareness of legal oppression as being constitutive of identity through facticity to imagining it as a site of care. Even if social structures seem to define hierarchical binaries as facts, perpetuating beliefs such as the necessity to struggle over who dominates, such suggestions remain informed by the totalizing vision of literal idolatry.

To approach this a different way, one limitation of contemporary identity politics is that it suggests seeing people “as” Black or queer, presupposing that such terms provide a total knowledge of another’s identity. This focus on defining people as determined by external observables is limited. It distracts from the invitation to view social conditions as capable of being changed, i.e., from the potential for improving everyone’s lives, including those currently marginalized. Nash opens up the potential for the imagination to provide a work of good faith. Her imagination is not a fantasy of escapist transcendence. It opens a new direction within the self and thus, potentially, society. Exploring the world informed by descriptive propositions based on generosity and care would mean moving from the given (legal fixation on property) to a different chosen (a caring focus on loving relationships). This process of changing identities would create new habits and opportunities. It would free all people for fresh forms of action within emergent situations.

Unfortunately, addiction, the second potential for adaptation, is more available in our society than the imaginative acclimation Nash invites. Bateson argues that addiction occurs when an “innovator is hooked into the business of trying to hold constant some rate of change” (Bateson 2002, p. 174). Constancy is achieved by neglecting the sorts of feedback evaluations that prefer dynamic, responsive growth. Addiction is the desire to maintain a static condition in a way that feels dynamic. Similar to bad faith, addiction preserves the larger system through creating the illusion of change. The error, one suspects, comes when a small element within a wider system exerts a powerful influence over the rest with catastrophic consequences. This definition of addiction works relative to social vices (where the desire to hold constant a specific kind of feeling, through the cycles of diminishing returns, proves to be more powerful than survival). It also works relative to social systems of addiction, such as technology, fuel, convenience, and wealth. Each of these evaluates success by holding constant (or improving/accelerating) the rate of change as measured by a particular vector in a certain direction.

Literal idolatry holds change at a constant level that deters potential rivals. Creative attention is compelled to resolve crises caused by addictive habits rather than considering how to best inhabit the world as part of a larger whole. No matter how much suffering a creative solution temporarily alleviates, ideas that remain within the confines of literal idolatry only perpetuate problems. By preserving *arche* and hierarchy, the character structure remains unchanged and at best only new habits are enabled or acquired, leading to “static” rather than “dynamic” change. A dynamic change requires “new drives or character traits” (Fromm 1994, p. 13).

Interestingly, a model for this kind of dynamic change exists in twelve-step recovery groups. Many people find that attempting to overcome addiction through some sort of control, especially when the addiction has become a “property” of one’s identity, results in only temporary relief. Addiction and control are mirrored psychological forms at an *idem* level. Controlling responses to addiction focus on what Bennett would identify as

causal logic that identifies only one seemingly dominant component. They ignore notions of distributive agency that examine reality more holistically. The true alternative, which opens up the potential for a qualitatively different future, occurs through surrender. The kind of surrender advised in twelve-step groups allows for a unifying move of faith whose first three steps provide a simplified, secularized echo of Kierkegaard's definition of faith: "the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God" (Kierkegaard et al. 1983). This work of surrender unites the chosen and the given rather than allowing them to remain opposed.

#### 4. Imagination and the Importance of a Creative Faith

The potential power of the imagination to form robust personal narrative identities is inhibited by the prominence of literal idolatry in cultural institutions. An imaginative faith creatively changes the process of identity formation. This Fourth section shows the abductive relationship connecting faith and creativity through the individual, social, and literary imagination.

##### 4.1. The Role of Creative Faith and the Imagination within Flourishing Narrative Identities

In Barfield's version of moving past literal idolatry, people accept responsibility as being full co-creators of reality. This differs from the present situation, where people tend to experience a metastable version of reality as a "given" about which we have divergent opinions, or as a reality that passively awaits the exercise of unilateral control. Barfield offered another option. He described his alternative route as "final participation", which echoes Aristotle's language concerning teleology. This alternative to literal idolatry invites readers to think of imaginative acts as more expansive processes than flights of fancy. It points to how intentional acts of imagination are part of the human work in the whole system of nature. It inspires one to consider how the human imagination can synthesize the whole of reality, and not just one's own individual narrative identity.

Barfield (1988) clarified what he means by "final participation", describing it as a "special exertion... of imagination in the genial or creative sense" (p. 137). The term *genial* derives from a Latin term, and its full sense includes both our contemporary understanding of the term as "friendly", as well as a sense of "genius", akin to the Greek *daimon*. The "genial" exertion of the imagination would require some understanding of a shared meaningful purpose that treats the surrounding reality as friendly. It seeks partnership, not domination. The "creative" sense of the imagination could also be unpacked in its most robust sense. Barfield argued that the imagination is potentially *productive*, not only *participatory* (the pre-modern "garment" model) or *perspectival* (the modern "stage" model). Rather than denying reality by deleting what seems unpleasant or burdensome, productive uses of the imagination add new options. This type of imagination spontaneously generates, from within, a sense of seeing the world as if it were a harmonious whole to which one could be attuned. Instead of domination or resignation, such a form of spontaneous relation is the only way to truly be opposed to submission (Fromm 1994, p. 29).

The exercise of final participation, emerging through "an attempt to use imagination systematically" (Barfield 1988, p. 137), provides a solid foundation for the open, free development of individual characters. A participatory imagination invites the particular quality of one's core self (given) to express itself productively in the world (chosen), responsibly externalizing the inner world of the imagination. This is reminiscent of Ricoeur (1995) describing the inner voice summoning us toward a deepened and matured sense of character. This deepened character then tangibly unfolds in conversation with the world.

Such creative expressions introduce a source of subjective conviction apart from objective and conceptual certainty. Thus, they invariably exceed the boundaries of objectively knowable reality, especially given the artificial constrictions and limitations imposed by the social imaginary that prevent others from sharing similar experiences. Erich Neumann (2017) described this kind of experience as the "paradox inherent in... unitary reality" (p. 103), positing that such experiences are overwhelming and cannot be known

or grasped, even when a creative person helps to fashion or develop it with a fully cooperative conscious mind. Experiencing this form of creativity is not “irrational”; it is, rather, suprarational” as it uniquely “brings intellectual, volitional, and emotional functions into play all together” (May 1975, p. 49). Similar to all forms of suprarational experiences, including witnessing a beautiful sunrise or falling in love, these events carry forward a felt significance beyond an ability to verbally “justify” its importance. Neumann (2017) added that a physical dimension of such experiences is also important (pp. 61–62), emphasizing that in this high level of creative expression “meaning is incorporated not anonymously but as individual form” (pp. 61–62). The creative imagination expresses itself by externalizing what was experienced, even if such an expression paradoxically makes use of old forms. It produces fresh, new things.

Such creative expressions are grounded in the body, facilitating whole and congruent experiences of reality. Barbara Newman (2021) described how a blend of physical and mental training was prominent in premodern forms of education—during Barfield’s time of participation. She posited that this participatory pedagogy invited a form of coinherence “rooted in empathy and mutual love directed toward a common good”, taking form as a “process of imitation”, an “imitative pedagogy that we now expect only with physical skills” but that then “pervaded all forms of instruction” (p. 9). This approach leads to tacit knowledge, the embodied resource of skill-based capabilities that are often difficult to put into words (Bohm 2009). This sense of unified imitation that starts from the body corresponds with the modern ideal of creative consciousness (Kühlewind 2011). Such gentle creative expressions are capable of generating a sense of coinherence that recovers the “permeable self” that exists at the foundation of contemporary life (Newman 2021, p. 164). It opens up a mode of spontaneous relationship based on following one’s inclinations rather than obeying the self (Fromm 1994, p. 85). It also productively reshapes the shared social reality around a creative act as it provides those who witness it with a way to access an experience of unknowable reality.

Given this, it is unsurprising that a creative faith integrates embodied pleasure rather than working against the body. It is for this reason that Rollo May (1975) suggested that the courage to create would require “a new kind of physical courage that will neither run rampant in violence nor require our assertion of egocentric power *over* other people”, such as has become common; instead, true creativity uses the body “...for the cultivation of sensitivity” including “the capacity to listen with the body” and “a learning to think with the body...valuing of the body as a means of empathy with others” (p. 15). This invites the body’s capacity to feel sensory input to serve as the foundation of spontaneous, creative connections instead of the mind’s knowledge of social identities. Attention to one’s physical body is an important part of a creative faith: when the mind focuses on the body, it activates the full range of the imagination. Doing so also deepens one’s relationship with the imagination, as the learned capacities and literal knowledge taught by the modern world converge. This results in a deeper appreciation of one’s environment than existed in the premodern world of participation.

In its most full experience and expression, the creative imagination originates from the heart rather than the mind. It retains a passionate vitality rather than the deathly stillness of complete coherence. The mind tends to be associated with language and words, while images and the imaginal realm are associated with the heart (Cheetham 2020). This makes sense, as the bare unfolding of one’s character into a conventional world exposes the heart; it is both vitalizing and also vulnerable. Creativity is thus associated with courage (May 1975, p. 20), a word that also springs from heartfelt origins (*coeur* is the French term for heart). Along with courage, this kind of creativity requires confidence, acting (etymologically) with faith that is always required when exposing and expressing one’s personally imagined unknowable reality. Such creative expression is almost effortless. It simply acknowledges the ongoing truth of descriptive propositions concerning the full sense of one’s experience of reality. Any creative work summoned from the depths of a full-bodied life aptly expresses that truth in a way that echoes the most original capacity of language. Creative productions

provide a coinherence of subjective conviction and objective certainty in an external artifact (verbal, gestural, visual, sonic, silence, and stillness) that preserves the truth of an event as an experiential whole.

The religious dimension of this form of creativity stands against literal idolatry and conventional religious practices. Thus, May (1975) associates “the creative artist and poet and saint” as battling against “an outmoded and inadequate form of God on the basis of their new insights into divinity (p. 30)”. May cites Tillich to argue that “The continuous emergence of the God beyond god is the mark of creative courage in the religious sphere” (p. 35). This invocation of absolute faith, anchored in the genuine conviction of a person’s particular character, paradoxically provides universal access to the experience of a reintegrated cosmos. It revitalizes not just religion but also shows the sacred potentiality of everyday life. It stands opposed to the corrupt elements of religion that bring into awareness “infantile, archaic dreads, unconscious longings, and similar primitive psychic content”. Creative expression “points ahead. It is integrative...”, and it acts as the “*progressive* side of symbol and myth” that brings out “a reality that was literally not present before, a reality that is not merely subjective but has a second pole which is outside of ourselves” (May 1975, p. 91). Such creative works express an inviting, integrating wholeness.

#### 4.2. *The Role of the Imagination and Creative Faith in Modern Social Institutions*

Ricoeur wrote that the imagination connects external sensory experiences to language and verbal expression. Recent theorists also discuss the importance of the *inner* senses for providing important data. In *How God Becomes Real*, anthropologist T. M. Luhrmann (2020) argued that, in addition to foundational religious elements such as scriptural narratives or devotional practices, numinous experiences are also inspired by the capacity for absorption. This process involves “disciplines of the imagination” (p. 58). Looking at a variety of religious practices from Buddhism to Evangelical Christianity to Paganism, Luhrmann found that one consistent element of religious training involves people learning to “deliberately blur the line between what they might once have attributed to an internal cause and what they might now wish to attribute to an external one” (p. 69). From being given an image to hearing God speak, such inner senses provide generative experiences of faith capable of transforming someone from the inside.

This fusion of the inner and outer worlds is the result of a stochastic process that merges the foundation of a religious tradition with the random events of an ordinary world to generate occasional spontaneous internal responses. These involve a kind of hermeneutics similar to those Ricoeur (1995) described as part of the imaginative engagement with the summoned subject. Ricoeur’s suggestion of an “inner voice” requires something similar to the inner senses Luhrmann describes. Luhrmann (2020, pp. 50–51) indicated that once people learn the process of *discerning* how the desired experience (the voice of God) differs from other random mental events, they are able to have such experiences with greater frequency. They have a greater capacity for absorption in general. This kind of process integrates a positive, rather than repressive, awareness of one’s internal states and surroundings. The result is an embodied feeling of pleasure, wholeness, and goodness. Because the truth of these experiences is located in sensory experience—rather than a verbal expression such as a belief—it *feels* true, even if it cannot be objectively proven. This feeling of congruent wholeness and peace offers an initial awareness of how to discern truth, because any truth that cannot be congruently affirmed is at best a partial or metastable truth. Confidence in this experience of faith emerges at the core of one’s own body through an attunement to one’s own felt experience. After becoming attuned to one’s inner senses, non-ordinary experiences can inform (and often enhance) everyday encounters and interactions.

For Luhrmann (2020, p. xiii), the foundation for faith, for making God feel real, involves four elements: (1) detailed stories whose “vividly imagined worlds enable suspended disbelief”, (2) the potential for absorption, (3) the way people think about their



minds (which involves what Luhmann calls paracosms, localized communities with a shared social imaginary), and (4) a “kindled” sense of response. This kindling allows an initial experience to be perceived and primed for repetition; in other words, it is imitative of past experiences. The power of such experiences, at best, provides a way to break with prior habits of thinking about inner experiences and to introduce a more liberating alternative (p. 175). The community of people who provide the context of relationships and stories, which foster a more meaningful sense of interconnected reality, are the heart of faith experiences. Although the overarching social imaginary may remain “disembedded”, in Taylor’s words, such communities provide a paracosmic context of unification and supportive wholeness. Within this context, a belief functions more similar to Miller’s *arche* in its ideal sense: an “ontological commitment” that serves as an entry point for extraordinary experiences of wonder (Luhmann 2020, p. 182).

Individual creative capacities arise through blurring the boundaries between inner and outer so that it becomes increasingly difficult to divide expression and experience. This is magnified in an expanded community of believers. Creative social relationships transform the feel of a material space, investing it with non-ordinary properties. Traditionally, *communitas*, an event when social relations become more harmonious and egalitarian (Moore and Havlick 2001, p. 94), was seen as resulting from the pre-existing creation of a sacred space (Moore and Havlick 2001, p. 57). Luhmann’s work shows how the reverse is also true: the presence of harmonious social relationships invokes the latent numinous potential of an environment. Even noninitiates can experience liminal moments of a holy nature through encounters activated in the event of this kind of faith community. Such a communal presence allows for a donation of the divine into an otherwise mundane circumstance through a shared, although localized, creative social imaginary.

Important sociopolitical transformations are also generated out of this kind of shared imaginative faith. A creative faith can rewrite oppressive social narratives by imagining beyond binaries such as dominate/submit. As Nash (2019) wrote, Black feminists could demand that “law imagine itself *otherwise*, that it unfold and move in ways that might seem contrary to its fundamental project” (p. 130). This imaginative work could summon law’s innate capacity to promote universal harmony rather than one-sided oppression. A creative faith might encourage a suspension of disbelief that enables caring responses to difficult situations. Doing so could elicit creative ideas for progress to flow forth. It could generate powerful communal experiences. Nash indicates how the imaginative potential of a creative faith clearly remains important as a way to transform social institutions.

#### 4.3. The Role of the Imagination and Creative Faith in Discerning the Truth

The notion of “inner senses” and the potential of blurring the inner and outer, however natural and intuitive, risks recreating the situation of fantasy that Winnicott warned against. Because of this, we need a robust method for determining the ongoing truth of descriptive propositions grounded in absorptive experiences through the inner senses. This becomes psychologically necessary because, as Newman (2021) mentions, not all inner voices are beneficent. This is reinforced by the extensive psychoanalytic literature concerning the ways people internalize critical, shaming, and guilt-inducing voices that recur throughout their lives. To this extent, whether the voices initially manifest as internally or as externally generated, psychological wellness requires the cultivation of the skill of discerning true voices. Because external voices become “internal” when remembered, it becomes necessary to venture beyond the literal level and develop a criterion to distinguish voices that lead toward true reality from those that lead toward fantasy.

One potential origin of the problem is confusion about truth. In reality, the most that can be correctly said of any statement is that it is “of” truth (imaginatively) rather than that it “is” true (literally). Whether a voice is “inner” or “outer” is less important than the content that one “hears”. Measuring content alone is inadequate. True content can be misunderstood, and false content can generate more accurate understandings. An exclusive focus on the origin (inner or outer senses) or the content (subjectively or

objectively demonstrable) risks creating an impasse currently resolved by external authority or violence. Another way forward is needed.

One alternative is to have faith in the potential emergence of a process that provides loving experiences of truth beyond literal roadblocks. The concept of a felt sense of truth outlined by Gendlin et al. (2018, p. 186) once again provides helpful suggestions for navigating responsibly through seeming impasses and contradictions. The same literal words can reflect two sources of inspiration: an intuition made before knowledge, or what is formulated after knowing. The former statements can be read as poetry (or as an inquiry), the latter as prophecy (or as philosophy). As an example, think of a common place utterance such as “I’m not ready to become a parent”. This can be stated truly both before and after one has a child—but the same words have different meanings from each perspective based on the embodied, lived experience of having attempted to parent.

When it comes to discerning voices, Gendlin focused on the love of truth. He found that an innate inspiration “cannot be dispensed with” (p. 187). Truth only emerges through a passionate love of truth that “leads one on past the desire to retain one’s proffered definition”. True knowledge, and knowledge of truth, requires this love. Love and truth run parallel: both are introduced by but are transcended in particular literal or objective forms. More important than any literal instance of something true is the “eternal object... which controls knowledge, and does it only through love”, offering inspiration “that ‘knows’ before we can formulate, so that we may formulate from what we have encountered already” (p. 187). The love of truth kindles a passionate response that eventuates in poetic exclamations or philosophical inquiries. It is a desire to express what is intimated but not fully known. Such expressions then invite embodied experiences.

The kind of literal truths that lack an inspiration in the good and beautiful lead to merely logical formulations that “pretend to a kind of ‘true’ that need not be good and beautiful” (p. 187). Love drives past such flat conceptions toward more vibrant expressions of truth. A two-step validation system is important for truth to become present within a living being. The first step (truth as object or goal) creates statements that express an experience of truth, and the second (truth as a process) checks to see whether that expression holds true in particular situations (p. 188). A merely literal truth confuses the object and process, making something seem as if it “is” true rather than at best being “of” truth. This error stalls further movement toward true expression (p. 192). Discerning object from process avoids the temptation to see truth as a given property of a statement. It empowers people to evaluate how statements relate to specific situations.

Gendlin’s two-fold validation system is also useful for appreciating the space of character within a narrative identity. Character that comes as inspiration (Ricoeur’s summoned subject, or Barfield’s sense of genius) remains part “of” the movement of *ipse* and *idem* and expands as it continues to discern the ongoing truth of descriptive propositions, whatever the content or the source. Inviting an imaginative source that drives a process through various expressions and experiences and allowing the engine of this imaginative source to partake “of” an eternal love provides a robust alternative to literal idolatry. This source can speak both before and after knowledge, appreciated as poetry, philosophy, or prophecy. True statements can be expressed or experienced in multiple ways, grounded in a faith in the unproveable, ineffable source of eternal love.

Finally, learning to discern the truth of one’s character relative to an inner dimension offers a foundation from which we can imagine loving environments in which all can flourish. It creates contexts that reflect the source of eternal love by learning how to move past the impasses caused when one is stuck on a literal articulation. The problem is not always in the source text (inner or outer voices), but the choice in how to relate to it. Recent history suggests that an adherence to literal truth—whether arguments suggesting that God’s word is wholly revealed in the revelation of the King James Version of the Christian scriptures or in Supreme Court arguments manufacturing the original intent of the authors—tends to reinforce rather than repair the damage caused by past misinterpretations.

#### 4.4. Imagining Creative Faith through Narrative Theology

Gendlin's distinction between "is" and "of" truth also becomes useful for understanding how to voice truthful statements and not just evaluate them. Such expressions remain motivated by the love of truth involved in discerning statements. In *The Lost Knowledge of the Imagination*, Gary Lachman (2017) describes how Barfield used language as evidence of how human consciousness has altered significantly over the past 500 years. Our language "started out as 'living' and able to express the inside of the world, and over time lost its vitality and became limited to only the surface of things" (p. 40). Lachman then writes that Barfield found in the roots of language that the living element simply exists in the language itself: "The poet aims at altering our consciousness by using striking metaphors. The old language didn't aim at doing this, but it nevertheless did", especially when using "a material image to express an immaterial idea" (p. 41), fusing the inside and outside. The roots of language retain their vitality without regard to literal social conventions. This enables creative expressions of non-ordinary truth to resist the contemporary constraints of abstract conceptual reasoning. The roots of language always embrace the "as if" quality of expression, steering clear of the "is" and "as" produced by literal idolatry.

If this relationship to the roots of language was a gift of participatory consciousness, then the correlating gift from perspectival consciousness (even if it is poorly used in the modern social imaginary) came in the formation of overarching narrative structures such as novels and movies. This becomes the "process" of language; the chosen that activates the power of the roots of language (the given). Such conceptual structures and processes provide an intellectual scaffolding that allows for an enriched understanding of space and time. It allows for a sense of a future that can be created in advance, rather than one already engineered by the heavens. At best, the powers of words and structure combine to inspire creative works that empower readers to bring a different kind of consciousness into being.

Theologians have long lamented the tendency for conceptions of God to become idolatrous modes of mirroring and amplifying conventional understandings of self and society. Naïve expressions of faith reflect images of God constrained by literal idolatry, commonly articulated in terms of property, punishment, and patriarchy. Such models of God retain a feudalistic notion of sovereignty that perpetuates the authoritarian *arche* that maintains power structures. Recent theological models have offered more process-oriented examples of a god that changes (Taylor 2009; Keller 2018, 2021) in ways that are modeled on contemporary technology, ecology, and politics. Such models are necessary and important: they provide a creative way of systematically re-imagining God by inspiring new ways in which God can be conceived that are conversant with contemporary culture. Intentionally situating models of God in relation to contemporary concerns displaces the idea that God is something self-identical or based in some sort of completely cohesive (and thus hermetically sealed) narrative structure. And yet, while such works are important and necessary, their impact on a world that suffers from literal idolatry is at best indirect.

As Luhrmann noted, the detailed worlds conveyed by narratives have a way of amplifying our capacity to imagine in ways that include the demands of verbal reason, but without the rigidity sometimes found in systems of theology and philosophy. In "Against Dryness", Iris Murdoch and Conradi (1998) also appreciated the imaginative capacity of literature to grapple with reality, even as she remained critical of its tendency to instead reproduce fantasies. She was aware that literature could "animate prose language into an imaginative stuff in its own right" (p. 292). Murdoch hungered for nuance. She understood that philosophical concepts fell short of helping people imagine "in a non-metaphysical, non-totalitarian, and non-religious sense, the transcendence of reality [in ways that invited them] to picture the substance of our being" (p. 293). Murdoch additionally praised the capacity of literature to "arm us against consolation and fantasy" and to rediscover the "the real impenetrable human person" who requires neither a buffered self nor the use of violence, but instead experiences the self as "substantial, impenetrable, individual, indefinable, and valuable" (p. 294). Murdoch follows this descriptive proposition with praise for contingency, which recognizes that "[r]eality is not a given whole" and paves the

way for an imaginative reflection with reality. Contingency invokes the potential of origin rather than cause, bringing attention to a kind of urgent necessity that is lived, not logical.

A narrative theology, understood as literature, could provide readers with a new way of experiencing the self, reality, and God as co-inherent parts of an unknowable reality. One outstanding example of this approach to narrative theology appears in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (Butler 1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (Butler 1998). These books offer a paradigmatic example of literature that both substantially re-imagines the nature of God and offers a morally complex set of characters whose contingent circumstances, written as science-fiction, have become increasingly reflective of our daily reality. These books experienced a resurgence in 2020 as the world she predicts, or depicts (set in 2024), had striking parallels to the American experience of dystopian reality: disease, unemployment, Trump, and climate disasters. Zamalin (2019) noted that "*Parable* implicated American capitalist liberal democracy in creating a future dystopian social disaster", with an imaginative approach that "eschew[ed] traditional questions of political strategy", allowing "the books to exist as a work of political theory" (pp. 124–25). In Butler's novels, the span between 2015 and 2030 was simply called the Apocalypse, caused by "accidentally coinciding climactic, economic, and sociological crises", although the narrator notes that "convenience, profit, and inertia" continue to destroy the environment, resulting in the inevitability of "poverty, hunger, and disease" for many people (Brown 2021, p. 86). *Parable of the Talents* features Andrew Steele Jarret, running to "make America great again". His success can be largely traced to his association with "Christian America", a political organization that embraces religious intolerance and advocates for moving back to a simpler time.

The fact that some of the nightmarish elements of the novels have come true indicates the strength of Butler's overall vision. She understood the power of believing that "God is the same", as well as the lethal consequences that such a belief inevitably spawns. This, it seems, allowed her imagination to make accurate assessments of the future. Her innovation as a science-fiction writer came in positing an important alternative to the constellation of authoritarian religious and political power and the decline of natural and cultural worlds: Earthseed. The core tenet of this religion, constructed by the admirably complex narrator Lauren Olamina, presents a wholly different perspective on the nature of the divine: "The only lasting truth/Is Change/God is Change" (Brown 2021, p. 87). Butler was less interested in positing a simple binary than reflecting a descriptive proposition that experiencing truth requires grappling with themes such as change, similarity, adaptation, and domination. The religious vision of Earthseed culminates in its own paradox: "... changing and prevailing cannot coexist. Adaptation is a conundrum in the *Parable* novels. We must adapt to survive, but species are never stable over time if they successfully adapt. If God is change, then species survival is not possible" (Brown 2021, p. 94). The novels do not provide a tidy resolution of such issues.

Brown's interpretation of Butler's warning is clear: a commitment to change needs to stay open to the results of that change, without remaining fixed on abstract notions of identity (species). Fixation implies the kind of abstract value hierarchy built on something in the past, retained at the expense of the future. A commitment to a *final participation* and to overcoming literal idolatry must also be wary of taking a "human being" or even "God as Change" as something fixed, finished, total, or determined. Such ways of seeing the world, as Marion (1991) noted, are idolatrous. Rather than protecting these anxiously, as an *arche* that we could not wonder away from with a daring act of the imagination, a systematic and productive use of the *genial* imagination can allow us to experience and explore unthought realities—perhaps through kindled inner senses. Relying on the fixed, external support of a "justified true belief" or the metastable process of *bad faith* as a way to attain a completely coherent kind of total self-identity as a transparently knowable object reinforces the problems discussed herein. As an alternative, it remains possible to choose an open and imaginative emergence as the expression of one's inner *genius*, which participates in the ongoing co-creation of reality. As a form of final participation, this

avoids the problems of literal idolatry by retaining a sense of being non-total, incomplete, or temporarily “of” an eternal truth. Such is the work of creative faith.

As a final word from Butler (1993):

Create no images of God.  
Accept the images  
that God has provided.  
They are everywhere,  
in everything.  
God is Change—  
Seed to tree,  
tree to forest;  
Rain to river,  
river to sea;  
Grubs to bees,  
bees to swarm.  
From one, many;  
from many, one;  
Forever uniting, growing, dissolving—  
forever Changing.  
The universe  
is God’s self-portrait. (p. 315).

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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