



The Theory of CNVs & CPFs

GRASPING THE DIVINE:

AN ACCOUNT OF CNVs & CPFs

Of all the truths we've come to learn about human nature, one thing can be certain: People are inclined to seek a narrative that will resonate with them. The search is based on a chronic hunger to imbue our lives with meaning—while lending it a sense of purpose and direction. The resonance is based on the universal human need for hope (something to look forward to) and for security (ways to evade fear). A gripping narrative that addresses such things will tend to find favor with large audiences. Making sense out of the occurrences that comprise one's life can't be done by merely accumulating a collection of disconnected facts; we need to insert our lives into a story-line to provide context for all truths.

In this respect, the fictional nature of the story to which people subscribe is a moot point. People don't gravitate toward a narrative so much because it is historically accurate, but rather because it helps them make sense of things. One of the things we're inclined to posit is some conception of the divine. When the story involves a spiritual dimension, it helps people orient themselves toward the divine.

We homo sapiens are eminently pragmatic creatures, so we will partake in a program—whatever it may be—that seems to WORK for these purposes. While groping around in the dark for something solid to hold onto, many of us will cling to the first thing that appears to offer what we're looking for. We want to cope with life's trials while accessing the promise of better days ahead. We want a sense of wonder, and we want a *raison d'être*. Certain things seem to provide such premium features. Once we've found something that fits the bill, we will vest a tremendous amount of emotion into it.

Such tasks are most readily accomplished by making use of a compelling narrative vehicle. Beyond providing the things we desire, a CNV acts as a memetic dissemination and instantiation mechanism. It is not merely a narrative, but a VEHICLE—a device for “delivering” certain things. It provides the audience with something other than idle amusement. When told well, a tale satiates our thirst for something wonderful to “believe in”...while offering an appealing explanation of the

world in which we find ourselves. Meanwhile, it must be a good STORY. A well-crafted CNV is thus tailored to captivate people—to “stick” in their minds, to enthrall and enchant them.

Such appeal often doesn’t correlate with credence. But so long as the CNV is doing its job, we tend not to fuss over such things. This m.o. is predicated on the simple maxim: “If it ‘works’, then don’t fix it.” It is FAITH, not the result of meticulous, objective, scientific method, that drives a CNV. Rather than seeing in order to believe (as with empirical corroboration), one must believe the CNV in order to see. This is the beauty and the lure of Faith—as well as the source of its gravest dysfunctions.

Because the audience is also a character in the story, the CNV boasts a profound importance. For by explaining where the characters IN the story came from and where they are going (as well as HOW and WHY), it notifies the audience OF the story where they came from and where they are going (as well as HOW and WHY). Imagine being told a story and wanting to know “what happens next”; then imagine how gripping it would become if YOU were the character being inquired about. A story takes on a new level of relevance when it is about YOU—what’s going to happen, and based on what. It’s a “choose your own adventure” mapped to real life.

The story will always exhibit basic characteristics in order to have adequate appeal: that there are better days ahead, a day of reckoning, a final redemption, a settling of all scores. “Take heart,” the CNV must say, “As trying as times may be now, there is something to look forward to—a reason to forge on—a point to all that you endure—an incentive to persist in living in the prescribed manner.”

We all love myths. The “catch” is that the anointed CNV, though just another myth, is not always seen as a myth; it is often seen as an account of Reality. Just as a “cult” is always someone else’s cult activity, and “superstition” is always someone else’s unfounded beliefs, a myth is not what my CNV is. Dogmatism doesn’t like a mirror. Once sanctified, a CNV is rendered sacrosanct...lest the entire mechanism for making sense of the world and of one’s life is pulled from beneath one’s feet.

Because we’re afraid of our morality, CNVs typically offer some kind of continuation of one’s self-consciousness after “death”.

Because we covet norms and predictability, CNVs often provide normative guidelines for how to conduct one’s life.



Because we have an affinity for certainty, CNVs often masquerade as decisive accounts of all the things they purport to explain.

Because the divine is often part of people's worldview, CNVs typically incorporate a deity or deities of some kind. For the purposes of the present essay, we will focus on the monotheistic conception of the divine—epitomized by the Abrahamic paradigm.

Due to the fact that the divine plays a role in the story, it must be cast as a character. (After all, stories are about characters—agents interacting with one another.) Personifying the divine is not a difficult leap due to our tendency to anthropomorphize things. Taking what Dennett calls, “the intentional stance” seems to be primally hardwired into homo sapiens. We are, moreover, meaning-makers: seeing a symbol, a pattern, and even a “hidden meaning” in many things. We therefore have a natural penchant to ascribe significance to things where there is none—interpreting a sheer coincidence as a “sign” or divine intervention or an omen of some kind...or a chance occurrence as a profound symbol of something important. We “read into” things, and project our own hopes and fears onto an indifferent world, so as to imbue it with a grand design.

So the widespread proclivity to conceive of the divine in terms of a cosmic parental figure is unsurprising. It only stands to reason that this character—replete with interests, sentiments, motivations, and agendas—has played a crucial role in most CNVs. (That the conception is logistically untenable poses little problem, as it works perfectly well for the assigned purpose: to tell a compelling story.) Casting all things in terms of divine ordinance allows us to write off the inexplicable and bewildering—to account for all things.

It is important to recognize the allure of a deity who says: “I’m on your side. I will always be with you. I will watch over you and protect you. You will never be alone. You can depend on me.” We often crave some kind of reassurance from a seemingly credible, “higher” “power”—whatever that may mean—that, “all will be well in the end.” That is to say, we crave a cosmic parental figure that notifies us that, ultimately, “everything will be okay”.

The CPF is enticing because it offers guidance in times of confusion, aid when we’re in need, comfort in times of tribulation, and solace in times of woe. Moreover, it is that to which we may offer gratitude when good fortune comes our way. That such an entity exists is an appealing proposition. So we not only often believe in a CPF, we believe in believing in a CPF.

We humans are superstitious creatures...and we're suckers for a good story. So we will naturally gravitate toward any narrative that provides a CPF. A variety of CNVs have accomplished this task. Consequently, communion with the divine has been effected in various ways throughout human history. Be it in the form of a Messiah (Jesus of Nazareth), in the form of a conduit (Siddhartha), or in the form of a messenger (Mohammed of Mecca), the CPF fulfills a pivotal role within the CNV. Such proxies serve as a mouthpiece for the divine: a tangible manifestation. We humans love concretes, and find it difficult to work with abstractions.

Take, for instance, the folklore surrounding Jesus of Nazareth. Recorded for the first time generations after its subject's death, the tale is embellished and largely fictional—all for the sake of conveying a powerful message in a provocative and memorable way. It offers many of the features we look for in a CNV, including a full-fledged embodiment to which we can relate. The tale's historical fidelity is therefore a moot point. So long as it addresses the things that we want to be addressed, it will be adopted.

(For an insightful work about Christian folklore as CNV, see Elain Pagels' *Gnostic Gospels* and Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*. Hands down, the best book to read about the origins and subsequent metamorphosis of Christian folklore is *Lost Christianities* by Bart Ehrman.)

Being "in touch with" the divine is a state to which many people aspire. Each man does this in a way that resonates with him—based on his cares and concerns, his knowledge / ignorance, and his immediate circumstances. CNVs enable us to forge some kind of connected-ness with the divine-as-CPF. Be it via a savior or a prophet, a symbol of the divine or a representative of the divine, a "chosen person" or a magical talisman, an idol or an incantation, cultivating (and procuring) a connection with the divine is the ideal state to which many aspire.

Being the social creatures that we are, we're often inclined to forge this connection with fellow travelers (i.e. via a shared experience). We thus use CNVs as a means by which we can realize this ideal state with a community. (For STORIES are easy to SHARE, and story-TELLING is a group activity.) Human interaction is fostered and human bonds are forged, creating a fraternity of like-minded people who partake in the same narrative together.

Regardless of whether we refer to the divine as “the mystical” (Wittgenstein), “the noumenal” (Kant), “the Will” (Schopenhauer), “the World Spirit” (Hegel), the Tao (Lao Tzu), Brahma (Hindus), Allah (Muslims), Yahweh (Jews), the Christ (Christians), the Buddha (Buddhists), or the Almighty Zucchini From The Sky (Fred, from Toledo, Ohio), we conceive the divine in a way that makes sense to us. It is tempting to render the divine a CPF, simply because we have an innate penchant to do so.

A CNV impels us, inspires us, and often has an element of verisimilitude. Hallowed folklore that resonates with large groups enables them to somehow grasp the transcendent, the ineffable, the sublime—regardless of how it is portrayed—as a shared project. The key is to do this by articulating the otherwise inarticulate-able. By doing so communally, we can share in a piece of heritage that imbues our lives with significance. By doing it TOGETHER, it gives each participant a sense of belonging—while providing a sense of security and camaraderie. After all, communities are support networks. Partaking in a legacy is something that promises to give one a grand purpose: something to live for. By such participation, one feels as though one MATTERS.

In the best cases, this process serves to help all people to celebrate universal human solidarity. Regardless of the CNV they use or the CPF they posit, this goal can be accomplished under certain conditions.

Unfortunately, such activity often becomes dysfunctional, as it fosters tribalism rather than agape (species being)—thereby Balkanizing mankind. When collective participation in a CNV becomes fetishized (obsessive and insular), it engenders groupthink, submersion, delusion, and even pathology. Religionism is typically the means by which such factioning takes place.

In the worst cases, the CNV becomes a mechanism for full-fledged cult activity. The casual subscriber becomes a staunch, ideological adherent. A point comes when a person has invested so much psychological energy into a CNV that it is very difficult to extricate himself from the devotion. He becomes inextricably wed to it, emotionally invested in it, and even economically invested in it. You can’t disabuse a cult member of his beliefs, because it’s central to his identity. He bases his reputation and “good name” on the adherence.

People become attached to their CNV with such a force of conviction because that's who they are. Take it away, and their lives are deprived of the very thing that gave them meaning. They need the CNV to be true; they depend on it being true. If it were ever recognized to be not true, their house of cards would collapse: an unacceptable development.

This is sometimes benign; but it is sometimes a train-wreck waiting to happen. Obstinacy and false pride may set in. Cognitive dissonance is sometimes required to sustain one's devotion to the designated CNV. Unfortunately, once someone has gone down the rabbit hole, it is an intractable task to climb out. The collapse of a sacrosanct house of cards is an event that must be avoided at all costs—especially when there is a staunch vested interest in it being maintained. So such edifices remain, generation after generation, regardless of their glaring lack of credence or flagrant dysfunction. Thus we have Salafism, Hassidism, and Pentecostalism...we even have Juche, Scientology, Santeria, and the G.O.P. In each case, we see how CNVs are used to control people—even as they placate the audience's desires.

We're all suckers for a good urban legend. Whether one subscribes to Wahhabism, ultra-orthodox Judaism, the Church of LDS, or the Republican Party, one is sanctifying an urban legend—then structuring one's life and one's identity around one's devotion to it. If one has the audacity to try to debunk the CNV, the devotee will see the effort as endangering his coveted depiction of reality. Consequently, he will dig in his heels, be defiant, and see one as a threat. He will even defend his house of cards to the death...lest he is deprived of the very thing that makes everything make sense. "Keep your hands off my dogma!" he essentially says—though in different terms. "Don't fuck with my narrative," is what any of us might say if we feel that our worldview is being undermined.

When two CNVs encounter one another, it can be a recipe for bad things. The collision is often taken personally—and each side will stick to its guns, invoking its respective CPF for support. Ultimately, we need to preclude such clashes by ensuring that we embrace our shared humanity—something that itself transcends the narratives each group has opted to use. Indeed, we must transcend the mechanism each of us uses for transcendence. Otherwise, we become tools of our own narratives instead of the other way around. The only way to do this is to recognize our designated CNV as a CNV (and the anointed CPF as an idiom).



(Great books to read on this topic are *The Birth & Death of Meaning* by Ernest Becker, *Man's Search For Meaning* by Viktor Frankl, and *The Power of Myth* by Joseph Campbell. Regarding religion, see *In Gods We Trust* by Scott Atran, Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Max Weber's *The Sociology of Religion*, and *Religion Explained* by Pascal Boyer. Also see the chapter on "Religion" in E.O. Wilson's *On Human Nature*, as well as Daniel C. Dennett's amazing book, *Breaking The Spell*.)

We use CNVs to imbue our life with meaning and a sense of purpose. We concoct CPFs because of innate proclivities. This is all well and good...but there's a catch. At the end of the day, such things—whatever form they take—are an accident of history—a byproduct of circumstance—not an objective description of Reality. We must recognize this. It is, indeed, possible to acknowledge that such things are a social / psychological construct without demeaning them. A CNV is a CNV; a CPF is a CPF. To lose sight of this is to betray the noble mission such things may serve—and become mired in neuroses that are deleterious to the weal of society.