Historical Memory and Imagined Ideals

Constructing ‘Self-Governance’ from Gendered Experience: Mary Wollstonecraft

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Human agency is at the core of history, or at least at the core of the hermeneutic tradition in the philosophy of history.  This tradition approaches the philosophy of history from the perspective of meaning and language. It argues that historical knowledge depends upon interpretation of meaningful human actions and practices …“history as remembrance.” At the level of one’s own personal history, one’s life is structured and carried out through meaningful action and symbolic expressions. But when one’s life is gendered by the institutions and interpreters within society, how is it possible to articulate or even imagine what it means to critique or defy these socializers and these institutions? One way to ask this question is epistemic: if the intellectual tools of hermeneutics—the interpretation of meaningful texts—are suited to the interpretation of human action and history, then it should be possible to mount a critique that is not ultimately arbitrary or merely ideological. Another way to ask the about the possibility of critique is to invite the thinker/agent to engage in an active construction of the meanings and intentions of the socializers from their point of view. [Foucault, Discipline and Punish]What makes history as remembrance possible are certain tacit regularities in our informal knowledge that survive historical change. Since, on the hermeneutic assumption, historical change is discontinuous, non-deliberate and non-necesitated, the hermeneutic tradition is problematic on the question of critique. As the past exposes contradictions which continue to haunt the present, new possibilities arise. Perhaps a critical perspective is useful in reconstructing the past (History) from an anticipatory standpoint and could construct a schematic from which a critique could be launched.

What are we to do when confronted with deep regularities in our current situation to which we are opposed? Do we resign ourselves to these? Do we hope for some apocalyptic change? For after all, if no one else is free to bring about deep change, how can we be?

I will take the case of Mary Wollstonecraft, whose life was interpreted for nearly a century to belie her argument that women should have the same moral responsibility as men, and explore her construction of self-governance.  The ideal of moral agency that is expressed as *rights* is controversial in the 18th Century –the ideal is in the air in Kant’s *Grounding* (1781), in Rousseau’s *Discourse* and in the American Revolution– yet it still seemed a strange and fanciful notion even when applied to males. It is a particularly difficult notion when applied to women.  How does *history as remembrance* help interpret Wollstonecraft’s claim that women are persons when her biography seems to illustrate the opposite?  How are conceptions of gender formed by history? And how can a particular life critique and inform this remembrance?

Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792 while the French were fighting against tyranny and for liberty, equality, and brotherhood.  She was in England, and the British Jacobins, who were mostly working class blokes, were still riding the ‘audacity of hope.’  It was sixteen years after the death of David Hume.  But in the introduction to the book, Wollstonecraft sounds anything but hopeful.  She herself had written *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters,* but, she says,

I have sighed when obliged to confess that either nature has made a great difference between man and man, or that the civilization that has taken place in the world has been very partial.  I have turned over various books [on education] …but what has been the result? A profound conviction that the neglected education of my fellow-creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore; and that women, in particular, are rendered weak and wretched by a variety of concurring causes, originating from one hasty conclusion. [*Vindication]*

 My colleagues on this panel take very interesting approaches to the process of social construction. On the one hand, Gable explores Hume’s account of the origins of national identity; on the other hand, Binford appears to argue that some fundamental critique of “radicalism” can be articulated by distinguishing between sense and sensibility. My approach is a little different. I am interested in the phenomenon of the particular individual who, though socialized, even imperfectly, into a culture or society, can nevertheless judge that society and take a critical stance.

**I. How does *history as remembrance* help interpret Wollstonecraft’s claim that women are persons when her biography seems to illustrate the opposite?**

 I am going to ask that we together examine a life lived in the cross hairs of a singular idea and a set of passionate choices that are made within the context of that idea.  The idea is simplicity itself: women are persons just as men are persons. Yet the objects of her passionate choices are men.  The idea of equality is of course a complicated idea with which the later half of the 18th century struggled. Sameness at the level of this idea is deconstructed as rights. What is remembered is the (constructed) framework in which the social relations of a people have been set in order to render them intelligible. We as individuals have no whole lives, since there is no one thing to which all things attributed to us refers. The dynamic of interpretation of meaning is set as a narrative that shifts continually between the narrator (the socializers or interpreters of a society) and the self (as it constitutes the main character of the narrative). The problematic of this narrative is a reconstituting of deep traditions and a questioning of their very reason for existence. The tropes in use are, Foucault tells us, four great anti-realist tropes: Dispersal, Reversal, Critical Exposure, and Singular 'Enlightenment'. [The Archeology of Knowledge] I take tropes to be no more that storytelling devices and conventions, one of which is the use of figurative language.

Within the trope of *dispersal*, what we retrospectively call Reason and Nature are empty abstractions; there is no one reality which is sufficiently independent of us to discover as a criterion or standard by which we might evaluate our traditions. The narrative of the individual ends arbitrarily at her death and the meaning of her life is now immediately in the hands of others to articulate. The space that her life has taken up enters, then, into history. But, on this trope, there is no History – there is no one thing all our histories are about, there is only a plurality. Since we think, as we remember, that anything might have a history, there necessarily is, we think, no one History of everything. Or so it seems.

Wollstonecraft's life encompassed several unconventional personal relationships including two ill-fated affairs, with Henry Fuseli and Gilbert Imlay (by whom she had a daughter, Fanny Imlay). Wollstonecraft, after a suicide attempt, married the philosopher William Godwin, one of the forefathers of the anarchist movement. Wollstonecraft died at the age of thirty-eight, ten days after giving birth to her second daughter, Mary Godwin, leaving behind several unfinished manuscripts as well as her infant daughter. This is Wollstonecraft life; and she is also the author of *Vindication*. She is the *natural* in Nature unfolding and *Reason* proposing an ideal.

One of Wollstonecraft's most direct critiques in the *Vindication* is of false and excessive sensibility, particularly in women. She argues that women who succumb to sensibility are "blown about by every momentary gust of feeling" and because they are "the prey of their senses," these women cannot or at least do not, think rationally. In fact, she claims, they do harm not only to themselves but to the entire civilization: these are not women who can help refine a civilization as Christine de Pisan argued even in the early 15th century—and still a popular eighteenth-century idea—but rather women who will destroy it. This critique of a false sensibility, juxtaposed with the narrative of her life, fairly begs us to interpret her view of self-governance as an ideal she could not herself attain. We might accept that; or we might excuse her by indicating that she wrote *Vindication* before her experience as a mother and a lover. Her husband (wonderfully) tells us that she was immersed in sensibility and that she “needed” his reason to balance her life. Her experiences are, Godwin tells us, in apposition to her radical and rationalist agenda. [Interestingly, no one seems to have accused the men, including Godwin, of being immersed in sensibility when they engage in sexual relations with her.]

But, given the trope of dispersal, the paradox vanishes. The oppositional definitions of self-governance and sensibility are rendered politically dangerous because they neutralize the specific struggle Wollstonecraft articulates. The definition of self-governance as the opposition of sensibility is revealed as constituted and the dispersed analysis dispels the paradox of the opposition. That is, the trope of dispersal reveals the falsity of the constituted definition of sensibility that tradition puts forward.

**II. How are conceptions of gender formed by history? The trope of Reversal**

But what is it that Wollstonecraft herself means by the terms *self-governance* and *sensibility*?

The eighteenth century embodies the struggle between the romanticism of the self expressing itself and the supposed rationalist ideal of self governance as reason governing sensibility. This is played out in the general dissent from the governance of monarchies, in the American Revolution, the French Revolution, Rousseau’s common will, and even in the epistemologies of Hume and Kant. Wollstonecraft presents an ideal of self-governance that challenges an already radical take on the subject.

“Consider, I address you as legislator, whether, when men contend for their freedom

and to be allowed to judge for themselves respecting their own happiness, it be not

inconsistent and unjust to subjugate women, even though you firmly believe that you

are acting in a manner best calculated to promote their happiness. Who made

man the exclusive judge, if women partake with him the gift of reason? In this

style argue tyrants of every denomination...they are all eager to crush reason; yet

always assert that they usurp [it] only to be useful. Do you not act a similar

part when you force all women, by denying them civil and political rights, to

remain immured in their families and groping in the dark?” [VRW, 3]

By challenging the completeness – the finished objectified idea of rights – as insufficiently radical, her life and her work *reverses* the historical standpoint. The trope of reversal stands the constitution of the idea on its head. In constituting the idea of civic and political rights as an object to be examined and elucidated, the 18th century challenges (through many voices) established forms of dominance in society. The “finished” object of this challenge stands as supposedly *self-evident;* yet Wollstonecraft's life and work force the question of how the rights become 'objectified' as an object of knowledge and a standard of practice in the first place. If there were no such thing as the experience of dominance, then it would make no sense to constitute civil and political rights. It is the juxtaposition of her arguments in *Vindication* and her life in relationship to these very men that permits the reversal of the historical standpoint. More often than not, political history assumes the existence of the Individual, of the State, of the People, as self-evident. The paradox of reason and sensibility, as lived by Wollstonecraft, allows the space to ask how these entities have been constituted or objectified. The question itself is a form of criticism. What has been left out of the accounts given is, she says, what gender, itself a construct, means in the assumed realities of the individual, the State, or the People.

The claim that women are persons invokes a capacity for moral agency. So, what does it mean for women to act as autonomous moral agents? Is moral agency itself gendered? Wollstonecraft's argument that women have special duties would seem to support such an interpretation. Like Kant, Wollstonecraft imagines that without rationality, autonomy would be impossible to claim. Neither men nor women can derive their duties as obligatory for themselves without the capacity to reason. And unless there is a political and social organization that supports self-governance, neither men nor women can experience full blooded moral agency. The privileged position of (some) men in society, for example kings or 1% percenters, actually destroys the possibility of autonomy or self-governance, by separating the capacity to reason from the right to experience and give expression to passion (including sexual desire). Self-governance cannot be defined, she argues, as an opposition to sensibility. For example, she says of her attempted suicide that it was deeply rational, writing after her rescue, "I have only to lament, that, when the bitterness of death was past, I was inhumanly brought back to life and misery. But a fixed determination is not to be baffled by disappointment; nor will I allow that to be a frantic attempt, which was one of the calmest acts of reason. In this respect, I am only accountable to myself.”

Her critique is aimed not only at the monarchies and tyrannies that formed the collective memory, the shared memory of those who are ideologically interested in the radical ideas of liberty and equality, but also at liberalism's conceptions of liberty and equality which themselves depend on the subordination of women. [Iris Young 2001, Moira Gatens, 1986]

**III. And how can a particular life critique and inform this remembrance?**

Interpretation involves an indirect or mediated understanding that can only be attained by placing human expressions in their historical context. Thus, understanding is not a process of reconstructing the state of mind of the actor or agent, but one of articulating what is expressed in her life and her work. The hermeneutic tradition approaches the philosophy of history from the perspective of meaning and language. It argues that historical knowledge depends upon interpretation of meaningful human actions and practices …“history as remembrance.”

Typically, however, a *critique* is taken to be historical when its standards are placed in the past or in the future. This marks history as a form of remembrance that is nostalgic, or a form of anticipatory construction that is or attempts to be prophetic. Embedded in this view is the notion that history can explain or predict. Writing about the past can be a critique of the present if we think that the past informs the present in ways, and with consequences, that we don't yet recognize. Mary Wollstonecraft's present, the life she lived and experienced and rendered intelligible to herself, is full of events, proceedings concurrent with her life, that were constituted in ways that she need not realize were rooted in the past.

By taking *critique* as a trope, we might interpret Wollstonecraft as investigating the past, especially in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1786), in *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* and in her novels (*Mary, A Fiction* and *The Wrongs of a Woman: Or Maria*). Her focus on the contradiction between the accounts of education (written by men) and the 'reality' of the practice of education lead her to conclude that the most critical difference between the sexes was the way in which they were each taught. Her investigation does not yield an explanation of the present necessitated by the past, but rather imagined alternatives to the present. The investigation is not about the alternatives themselves. She experiments with alternatives in the school she founded, and although it fails, the experiment moves her to articulate in the polemical elements of Vindication what the consequences are of assuming that the given categories of gender were real.

History as remembrance allows us to lay bare the constitution of these events and their consequences. In this fashion, we can recognize the so-called “realities” of those practices and proceedings concurrent with her life as arbitrary or contingent. It is this dialogue that forms her critique. We can see Wollstonecraft struggle to articulate this:

“History brings forward a fearful catalog of the crimes which [woman’s] cunning has

produced, when the weak slaves have had sufficient address to over-reach their masters

...men have been the luxurious despots, and women their crafty ministers...their hearts

have not been 'debauched by knowledge' or their minds led astray by scientific pursuits [yet]

...the state of warfare which subsists between the sexes makes them employ those wiles

that often frustrate the more open designs of force...When therefor I call women slaves,

I mean in a political and civil sense; for indirectly they obtain too much power and are debased by their exertions to obtain illicit sway. [*Vindication*, 173]

Wollstonecraft’s remarks here can be read as an attempt to understand the situation of women as not 'necessitated' by history. The explanatory force of her observations exposes how arbitrary and peculiar the situation (of women) is. The same may be said of her critique of property and marriage laws, as well as her analysis of maternity. Our reading of these analyses, informed by our reading of her life, connects her work more fully to the choices she made in her life and, I think, clarifies both the contingency of the situation of women as Wollstonecraft lives it, and the currencies that constitute my own present as a woman. So this is a way in which a particular life, its space or its narrative, can become a critique and can inform history as remembrance.

**IV. Singular Enlightenment**

In applying the trope of *singular enlightenment*, I follow the principle that philosophy can enlighten the present, introduced by Kant in the 1784 paper, *What is Enlightenment?*, and I take enlightenment to mean an emancipation from heteronomy, that is, from the acceptance of the principles of others, ready made, without judgment. This the opposite of heteronomy – it is autonomy. Generally however the enlightenment is taken both by the philosophers of the Enlightenment and by so-called historical accounts of it as identified with a unified science and by a set of universal conditions which purportedly reside in the human being. In our analysis, the trope of dispersal scatters these conditions into a plurality. The trope of reversal investigates the assumptions of philosophical anthropology that endow the human being with such enormous importance. And finally the trope of critique allows us to imagine alternatives to the present.

Now, the conditions of our knowledge are to be found in particular and contingent (and anonymous) regularities – these are the tacit regularities in our informal knowledge that survive historical change. In reversing, dispersing, and criticizing what is taken to be universal, we set up the possibility of singular enlightenment. Kant calls this the idea of freedom -our ability to think for ourselves and to recognize that our minds need not be determined by any authority. That is, to think, to interpret for oneself the contingent and to demystify the configurations of power of the present, refusing to take what these configurations of power call our real social nature as constitutive of what is sovereign. The paradox of Wollstonecraft's life as expressed in the meaningful actions and in the practice of her choices juxtaposed with her arguments and her work is then a source of singular enlightenment.

**V. One more interpretive gambit**

I would like to use Kant's notion of exemplary validity as a means of connecting sensibility and self governance through the imagination. Imagination provides examples for judgment.

Kant’s exemplars are constructs that are produced (constructed).  But for Kant these can come to have exemplary validity.  Exemplary validity carries importance in our discussion because it could (at least in theory) propose a constructed criterion that can nevertheless be used to ameliorate the tensions that arise at the edges of social recollections as these recollections construct ideologies or identities.  Without stopping to discuss the epistemic force that Kantian concepts (schemata) play in cognition (in coming to know something), I want to use exemplary validity to propose that we can center our understanding on particulars (on stories, on historical examples) and can judge our collective recollections.

For Kant, (as he says in the Third Critique) what schemata do for cognition, examples do for judgment. [*Critique of Judgment,* §59]

Synthesis of a manifold … is what first gives rise to knowledge [it] gathers the

elements for knowledge and unites them into a certain content... This synthesis is

the mere result of the faculty of the imagination [and]...imagination produces the synthesis

by providing an image for a concept. (B176, 180, 124)

This synthesis produces a schema. Analogically, an example has the same role in judgments. Examples play a role whenever we are concerned with, particulars. They are the go-carts (*gangleband*) of judgment. (B173) In Kant's treatment of reflective judgments, that is those judgments where one does not subsume a particular under a concept, the example helps one one construct the concept. The examples lead and guide us, and the judgment acquires “exemplary validity.” The judgment has exemplary validity insofar as it is aptly chosen in some particular political or historical sense in order to claim for the particular what is valid for more than one case. This is an exercise of the imagination. Such a process can invest interpretation with the force of a criterion that can sustain the imagination. We could thus imagine what it means to critique or defy the socializers and the institutions that seek to determine and objectify the configurations of power in which rights figure as if these configurations were actual and inevitable representations of our humanity or of our society. Perhaps Wollstonecraft’s imagination infused her experience and her writings in this way.

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In opposition to the intellectual historiographical approach of the Enlightenment, which examines the various currents or discourses of intellectual thought within the European context during the 17th and 18th centuries, the cultural (or social) approach examines the changes that occurred in European society and culture. Under this approach, the Enlightenment is less a collection of thought than a process of changing sociabilities and cultural practices – both the "content" and the processes by which this content was spread are now important. [Roger Chartier](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roger_Chartier) describes it as follows:

This movement [from the intellectual to the cultural/social] implies casting doubt on two ideas: first, that practices can be deduced from the discourses that authorize or justify them; second, that it is possible to translate into the terms of an explicit ideology the latent meaning of social mechanisms.[[63]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_Enlightenment#cite_note-63)

 The use of *Social Constructs* [1966 The Social Construction of Reality, Berger and Luckmann] are taken to be the result of countless human choices rather than resulting from human judgments. Social recollection is taken to “form the common memories held by a group concerning its shared past.” (Gable) These a.re – like theoretical constructs – anti-realist tropes

Theoretical constructs (like for example quarks) are concepts, models, or schematic ideas. Both allow us to discuss from an anti-realist point of view, the natural and the social sciences.

Wilhelm Dilthey maintained that the human sciences were inherently distinct in that they depend on the understanding of meaningful human actions. Dilthey maintains that the intellectual tools of hermeneutics—the interpretation of meaningful texts—are suited to the interpretation of human action and history. The method of verstehen (understanding) makes a methodology of this approach; it invites the thinker to engage in an active construction of the meanings and intentions of the actors from their point of view. This tradition approaches the philosophy of history from the perspective of meaning and language. It argues that historical knowledge depends upon interpretation of meaningful human actions and practices …“history as remembrance.”

Collingwood focuses on the question of how to specify the content of history. He argues that history is constituted by human actions. Actions are the result of intentional deliberation and choice; so historians are able to explain historical processes “from within” as a reconstruction of the thought processes of the agents who bring them about. Wilhelm Dilthey broadened hermeneutics even more by relating interpretation to historical objectification. Understanding moves from the outer manifestations of human action and productivity to the exploration of their inner meaning. In his last important essay, "The Understanding of Other Persons and Their Manifestations of Life" (1910), Dilthey made clear that this move from outer to inner, from expression to what is expressed, is not based on empathy. Empathy involves a direct identification with the Other. Interpretation involves an indirect or mediated understanding that can only be attained by placing human expressions in their historical context. Thus, understanding is not a process of reconstructing the state of mind of the actor or agent, but one of articulating what is expressed in his work.

Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics is a development of the hermeneutics of his teacher, Heidegger. Gadamer asserted that methodical contemplation is opposite to experience and reflection. We can reach the truth only by understanding or mastering our experience. According to Gadamer, our understanding is not fixed but rather is changing and always indicating new perspectives. The most important thing is to unfold the nature of individual understanding.

Gadamer pointed out that prejudice is an element of our understanding and is not *per se* without value. Being alien to a particular tradition is a condition of understanding. He said that we can never step outside of our tradition — all we can do is try to understand it. This further elaborates the idea of the hermeneutic circle.

**Mary Wollstonecraft** (/ˈwʊlstən.krɑːft/; 27 April 1759 – 10 September 1797) was an eighteenth-century British writer, philosopher, and advocate of women's rights…. Her daughter Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, later Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*, would become an accomplished writer herself.

Wollstonecraft considered her suicide attempt deeply rational, writing after her rescue, "I have only to lament, that, when the bitterness of death was past, I was inhumanly brought back to life and misery. But a fixed determination is not to be baffled by disappointment; nor will I allow that to be a frantic attempt, which was one of the calmest acts of reason. In this respect, I am only accountable to myself. Did I care for what is termed reputation, it is by other circumstances that I should be dishonoured."[36]

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Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, the Indian economist and philosopher who first identified the missing women of Asia, draws repeatedly on Wollstonecraft as a political philosopher in *The Idea of Justice*.[73]

Thoughts on the Education of Daughters

what intellectuals wrote about what education should be and not about what education actually was during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

Both books also emphasise the importance of teaching children to reason, revealing Wollstonecraft's intellectual debt to the important seventeenth-century educational philosopher John Locke.[75] However, the prominence she affords religious faith and innate feeling distinguishes her work from his and links it to the discourse of sensibility popular at the end of the eighteenth century.[76] Both texts also advocate the education of women, a controversial topic at the time and one which she would return to throughout her career, most notably in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft argues that well-educated women will be good wives and mothers and ultimately contribute positively to the nation.[77]

More importantly, the contests were open to all, and the enforced anonymity of each submission guaranteed that neither gender nor social rank would determine the judging. Indeed, although the "vast majority" of participants belonged to the wealthier strata of society ("the liberal arts, the clergy, the judiciary, and the medical profession"), there were some cases of the popular classes submitting essays, and even winning.[[85]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_Enlightenment#cite_note-85)

Similarly, a significant number of women participated – and won – the competitions. Of a total of 2 300 prize competitions offered in France, women won 49 – perhaps a small number by modern standards, but very significant in an age in which most women did not have any academic training. Indeed, the majority of the winning entries were for poetry competitions, a genre commonly stressed in women's education.[[86]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_Enlightenment#cite_note-86)

: A Vindication of the Rights of Men attacks aristocracy and advocates republicanism. Hers was the first response in a pamphlet war that subsequently became known as the *Revolution Controversy*, in which Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1792) became the rallying cry for reformers and radicals. Wollstonecraft was unique in her attack on Burke's gendered language. Influenced by Enlightenment thinkers, she believed in progress and derides Burke for relying on tradition and custom. She argues for rationality, pointing out that Burke's system would lead to the continuation of slavery, simply because it had been an ancestral tradition *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is one of the earliest works of feminist philosophy. In it, Wollstonecraft argues that women ought to have an education commensurate with their position in society and then proceeds to redefine that position, claiming that women are essential to the nation because they educate its children and because they could be "companions" to their husbands rather than mere wives.[85] Instead of viewing women as ornaments to society or property to be traded in marriage, Wollstonecraft maintains that they are human beings deserving of the same fundamental rights as men.

can judge our collective recollections.  For Kant (as he says in the Third Critique) what schemata do for cognition, examples do for judgment. [*Critique of Judgment,* §59]

Wollstonecraft does not argue that reason and feeling should act independently of each other; rather, she believes that they should inform each other.

It is often argued by contemporary feminists that while Wollstonecraft does call for equality between the sexes in particular areas of life, such as morality, she does not explicitly state that men and women are equal.[90] What she does claim is that men and women are equal in the eyes of God. However, such claims of equality stand in contrast to her statements respecting the superiority of masculine strength and valour.[91] Wollstonecraft famously and ambiguously writes: "Let it not be concluded that I wish to invert the order of things; I have already granted, that, from the constitution of their bodies, men seem to be designed by Providence to attain a greater degree of virtue. I speak collectively of the whole sex; but I see not the shadow of a reason to conclude that their virtues should differ in respect to their nature. In fact, how can they, if virtue has only one eternal standard? I must therefore, if I reason consequentially, as strenuously maintain that they have the same simple direction, as that there is a God."[92] Her ambiguous statements regarding the equality of the sexes have since made it difficult to classify Wollstonecraft as a modern feminist, particularly since the word and the concept were unavailable to her.[93]

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Is the construct the representation of our idea or the representation of the thing?

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