PHILOSOPHY OF KNOWLEDGE & REALITY

WEEK 11 DAY 1: INTRODUCING EASTERN PHILOSOPHY TO THE WEST
AGENDA

1. Axial Age
2. Western vs. Eastern Philosophy
3. Alan Watts and Hindu Philosophy
• Philosophy not just product of Greek and other European thought.

• Philosophy occurs all over the world, including great traditions in India and China.
THE AXIAL AGE

- 800 to 200 B.C
- Explosion of mental and cultural consciousness unseen previously.
- Plato, Socrates, etc., in the west
- Lao Tse, the Upanishads, and the Buddha in the East.
TWO APPROACHES TO WISDOM: WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

• Learn through **objective reasoning** and **observation**
  • Search for objective knowledge from third person POV.
  • Attempts to avoid subjective bias.

• Digging for truth.
  • Statements are either true or false
  • Knowledge gained by throwing out false statements to see what’s left.

• Knowledge conveyed through argument.

Wisdom: True knowledge is about **objective reality** – **how things really are**. Think hard sciences.
TWO APPROACHES TO WISDOM: WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

As a result, what has western philosophy said about…

• The nature of reality?

• The nature of personal identity?

• The nature of knowledge? Truth?

• The nature of free will?
TWO APPROACHES TO WISDOM: EASTERN PHILOSOPHY

• Learn through **subjective** reasoning and observation –
  • Admits that a search for knowledge is inherently subjective.
  • All views are first person, and are inherently biased.

• Experience truth (not by digging, but by living).
  • Statements not just true or false. They are metaphorical.
  • Knowledge gained by appreciating inherent ambiguity of reality.

• Knowledge conveyed through symbolic story, poetry, parable.

Wisdom: True knowledge is about **subjective reality** – who we really are. Think psychology and religion.
THIS WEEK

A new look at metaphysics, epistemology, personal identity, determinism, and ethics.

• Hinduism
• Buddhism
• Taoism
PHILOSOPHY?

• Emphasis in modern western philosophy seems to be the love of wisdom for wisdom’s sake.

• Eastern traditions have an emphasis on wisdom for the sake of better living.

During 20th century the west became more interested in eastern ideas.
GROOVY PHILOSOPHY
Alan Watts (1915-1973)
British Born, Bay Area Philosopher

• Born in London, moved to New York in 1938.

• Episcopal priest for 6yrs in Chicago before leaving church.

• Never again affiliated himself with any religion, but became a student of Eastern philosophy and religion.

• Popularized eastern thought in the west in the late 50s -70s by...
  • teaching at the Academy of Asian Studies in SF (CIIS)
  • Regular radio talks in Berkeley
  • Television and lecture appearances
  • Books
ALAN WATTS ON NOTHINGNESS
Fictions are useful so long as they are taken as fictions. They are then simply ways of “figuring” the world which we agree to follow so that we can act in cooperation, as we agree about inches and hours, numbers and words, mathematical systems and languages.

If we have no agreement about measures of time and space, I would have no way of making a date with you at the corner of Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue at 3 pm on Sunday, April 4.

But the troubles begin when the fictions are taken as facts.

Does this sound familiar? What is he saying?
In the reading, Watt’s will be making two arguments.

1. That our understanding of the nature of reality is based on a “fiction” that we’ve taken to be fact.
   - Fiction: Causal Determinism
   - Fiction: World Comprised of Individual things

2. And as a result, we have developed an unhealthy “fiction” of our own personal identity.
GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTION

Within pages 1-4, what is the nature of reality that Watts is describing?

How is it different than traditional western approaches to reality?
Critiquing Aristotle’s and Newton’s Causal Determinism:

Examples:
• The brain causes ideas and decisions.
• The heart causes blood to flow.
• Gravity causes objects to fall.
• The right mixture of conditions caused life on our planet.

To say that certain events are causally connected is only a clumsy way of saying that they are features of the same event, like the head and tail of the cat.
CAUSATION AND CAT WALKING
CAUSATION AND CAT WALKING
CAT WALKING
It is essential to understand this point thoroughly: that the thing-in-itself (Kant's *Ding an sich*), whether animal, vegetable, or mineral, is not only unknowable — it does not exist.

This is not to say only that things exist in relation to one another, but that what we call "things" are no more than glimpses of a unified process.
ON THE EXISTENCE OF “THINGS” (PG 2)

Example: Crest vs. Trough

- Two words – crest & trough
- But, not two separate things.
- All part of one unified process.
ON THE EXISTENCE OF “THINGS”

• How do we describe a heart?
ON THE EXISTENCE OF "THINGS"

- Must be described in relation to other organs and the rest of the body in a unified process.
ON THE EXISTENCE OF “THINGS” (PG 5)

Once upon a time the mouth, the hands, and the feet said to each other,

"We do all this work gathering food and chewing it up, but that lazy fellow, the stomach, does nothing. It's high time he did some work too, so let's go on strike!"

Whereupon they went many days without working, but soon found themselves feeling weaker and weaker until at last each of them realized that the stomach was their stomach, and that they would have to go back to work to remain alive.
CAUSATION AND THE EXISTENCE OF “THINGS” (PG 6)

As soon as one sees that separate things are fictitious, it becomes obvious that nonexistent things cannot "perform" actions. The difficulty is that most languages are arranged so that actions (verbs) have to be set in motion by things (nouns), and we forget that rules of grammar are not necessarily rules, or patterns, of nature.

This, which is nothing more than a convention of grammar, is also responsible for (or, better, "goeswith") absurd puzzles as to how spirit governs matter, or mind moves body. How can a noun, which is by definition not action, lead to action?
HOW LANGUAGE STRUCTURES OUR REALITY (PG 6)

We say:

“It is raining.”

• But is there an “it” that is raining?

• Isn’t it more precise to say “raining is occurring”?

• “A man is running” assumes that a thing is doing something.

• Isn’t it more precise to say that the organism is sometimes a running process, standing process, sleeping process, etc.

...in each instance the "cause" of the behavior is the situation as a whole, the organism/environment.
The existence of a man implies parents, even though they may be long since dead, and the birth of an organism implies its death. Wouldn't it be as farfetched to call birth the cause of death as to call the cat's head the cause of the tail?

Total situations are, therefore, patterns in time as much as patterns in space.

What does this mean for causation (cause and effect)?
Within pages 1-4, what is the nature of reality that Watts is describing?

How is it different than traditional western approaches to reality?

Reality isn’t comprised of separate things governed by chains of cause and effects. It’s all ONE big process.

Most of our philosophical contradictions are the result of this misperception of reality.
SUMMARY (PG 8)

To sum up:

• **No thing or organism exists on its own**, it does not act on its own.

• Furthermore, **every organism is a process**: thus the organism is not other than its actions.

More precisely, the organism, including its behavior, is a process which is to be understood only in relation to the larger and longer process of its environment.

Parts are fictions of language, of the calculus of looking at the world through a net which seems to chop it up into bits.
SO WHO/WHAT ARE WE?
Surely all forms of life, including man, must be understood as "symptoms" of the earth, the solar system, and the galaxy—in which case we cannot escape the conclusion that the galaxy is intelligent.

Imagine, then, that a billion years ago some beings from another part of the galaxy made a tour through the solar system in their flying saucer and found no life. They would dismiss it as "Just a bunch of old rocks!" But if they returned today, they would have to apologize: "Well—you were peopling rocks after all!"
SYMPTOMS OF THE EARTH

What is the earth? What does it grow?
So, too, everything that you hear, touch, taste, and smell is some kind of vibration interacting with your brain, which translates that vibration into what you know as light, color, sound, hardness, roughness, saltiness, heaviness, or pungence.

Apart from your brain, or some brain, the world is devoid of light, heat, weight, solidity, motion, space, time, or any other imaginable feature. All these phenomena are interactions, or transactions, of vibrations with a certain arrangement of neurons.

**Conclusion:**
One might almost say that the magic of the brain is to evoke these marvels from the universe, as a harpist evokes melody from the silent strings. (pg 11)
PERSONAL IDENTITY: WHO ARE WE?

Watts is slowly, but surely, telling us an Eastern (Hindu) story for who we really are.

If no “things” exist and all is a process, then who/what are we?

Question: When did the Big Bang end?

What is the true identity of a leaf?
Our view of reality is so perverse that we can convince ourselves that we are separate from one another, and separate from the earth.

- Practical Concern:
  
  - We treat nature as something to be conquered.
  
  - We mistreat it thinking we are separate from it like the hand that becomes jealous of the stomach.
  
  - We mistreat ourselves and each other thinking we are all separate (mine vs. his/hers, me vs. him/her)
  
  - Our sense of a separate self leads to stress and anxiety.
HINDU NEED TO WAKE UP: WAKING UP TO WHAT?
Can you see why the hippies loved this?

• Eastern philosophy as practical philosophy.

• Eastern philosophy as experiential and very closely associated to observations of nature.

• Eastern philosophy as more metaphorical and hence more poetic.

• More poetic = more accurate?