



"I wonder what you mean when you use the word 'I'?" by Alan Watts

I have been very interested in this problem for a long long time; and I have come to the conclusion that what most civilized people mean by that word is a hallucination, that is to say, a false sense of personal identity that is at complete variance with the facts of Nature. And as a result of having a false sense of identity we act in a way that is inappropriate to our natural environment, and when that inappropriate way of action is magnified by a very powerful technology we swiftly begin to see the results of a profound discord between man and Nature.

[...] and we have not realised therefore that our environment is not something other than ourselves. In assuming that it is we have made a great mistake and are now paying the price for it. [...] because we have the strong sensation that our own being inside our skin is extremely different from the world outside our skin. That while there may be intelligence inside human skins and while there may be values and loving feelings, outside the skin is a world of mechanical process which does give a damn about any individual and which is basically unintelligent [...]. But it does not occur, you see, to the ordinary civilised person to regard himself - or herself -- as an expression of the whole universe. [...]

You go with your environment in the same way as your head goes with the rest of your body. [...] But in the ordinary way, we don't feel it; that is to say, we don't have a vivid sensation of belonging to our environment in the same way that we have a sensation of being an ego inside a bag of skin located mostly in the skull, about half way between the ears and a little way behind the eyes. And it issues in these disastrous results of the ego which, according to nineteenth-century common sense, feels that it is a fluke in Nature and that if it does not fight Nature it will not be able to maintain its status as intelligent fluke. [...]

Using symbols and using conscious intelligence - scanning (Nature) - has proved very useful to us. It has given us such technology as we have, but at the same time it has proven too much of a good thing. At the same time we've become so fascinated with it that we confuse the world as it is with the world as it is thought about, talked about and figured about, that is to say, with the world as it is described. And the difference between these two is vast. And when we are not aware of ourselves except in a symbolic way, we are not related to ourselves at all. We are like people eating menus instead of dinners. [...]

So then we get back to the question of 'What do we mean by "I"?' Well first of all, obviously,

we mean our symbol of ourselves. Now, ourselves in this case, is the whole psychophysical organism, conscious and unconscious, plus its environment. That's your real Self. Your real Self, in other words, is the Universe as centred on your organism. That's you. [...] You are not a puppet which your environment pushes around, nor is the environment a puppet which you push around. They go together, they act together.[...] We are only rarely aware of this as when in curious alterations of consciousness which we call mystical experience, cosmic consciousness... An individual gets the feeling that everything that is happening is his own doing, or the opposite of that feeling, that he isn't doing anything; but that all his doings - his decisions and so forth - are happenings of Nature. You can feel it either way. You can describe it in this two completely opposite ways but you are talking about the same experience. You are talking about experiencing your own activity and the activity of Nature as one single process. [...]"

"Through our eyes, the universe is perceiving itself. Through our ears, the universe is listening to its harmonies. We are the witnesses through which the universe becomes conscious of its glory, of its magnificence."

Alan Watts