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Alan Watts' 'dramatic model' and the pursuit of peace

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This article explores the contribution of Alan Watts' 'dramatic model of the universe' to the pursuit of peace. It locates Watts' critique of dominant Western worldviews alongside process philosophers, ecologists and peace theorists who have made similar claims. It focuses on Watts' proposition that understanding the 'self' to be a 'skin-encapsulated ego' is a root cause of many of humanity's biggest problems, not least the destruction of the environment. According to Watts, a more satisfying worldview understands the self to be a process, inseparable from the cosmological, evolutionary and ecological processes out of which it has emerged. Watts refers to this as a 'dramatic' model of the universe. He contrasts this with the 'ceramic' and 'fully-automatic' models, which he posits underlie most Western worldviews. The impact of these models is discussed in terms of social, ecological and inner peace.

Keywords: Alan Watts; dramatic model; worldviews; panentheism; positive peace; inner peace; social justice; ecological harmony

Introduction

This article explores the theoretical and practical contributions of Alan Watts' 'dramatic model of the universe' to the pursuit of peace. It begins by introducing two myths or images of the world that Watts sees as underpinning Western worldviews and institutions. He calls these the 'ceramic' and the 'fully-automatic' models of the universe (Watts, 1960/2004, Disc 1). Watts examines the ways in which these two models have facilitated an individualistic understanding of the self as *separate* from the 'other' – other people, other life forms and the cosmos. He describes this illusory-yet-persuasive idea of the self as a 'skin-encapsulated ego', which he considers to be a root cause of a number of indirect or structural forms of violence such as vast inequality and the destruction of the planet. Watts proposes a third worldview, a 'dramatic model of the universe', that he believes to reflect a more accurate understanding of the world and to foster a more satisfying experience of life. This article explores Watts' three models, drawing also from the similar proposals of Charles Birch and Thomas Berry. Its purpose is to explore ways in which the dramatic model can contribute to the pursuit of peace.

In theological terms, Watts' ceramic model reflects the theology of *classic monotheism*, the belief in one (mono) supernatural 'God'. This theology is largely found within Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism). Watts' fully-automatic model

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describes the theological category of *atheism*, the belief that there is no 'God'; a worldview based on reductionistic, materialistic and mechanistic forms of science. Watts' dramatic model reflects the theology of *panentheism*, a belief that everything is *inside* 'God'. This is a worldview found in Eastern philosophy-religions, Indigenous worldviews, within some liberal and mystic forms of the Abrahamic religions, and in more holistic approaches to science (see Clayton & Peacocke, 2004; Cooper, 2006). Each of these theological categories contains a diversity of views within and between them, and Watts' three models of the universe do not necessarily capture every worldview. He uses these generalized models and associated stories to explore deep cultural narratives and associated assumptions embedded in these three dominant ways in which humans see the world today. I start by introducing the stories and ontologies of these three worldviews.

The ceramic model

'The ceramic model of the universe is based on the book of Genesis', says Watts (1960/2004), 'from which Judaism, Islam, and Christianity derive their basic picture of the world'. The ceramic model is based on a story in which a supernatural 'God' creates life *ex nihilo*, like a potter moulds clay or an architect designs buildings. 'God' is imagined to create 'stuff' from nothing and form it into a planet, animals and people, animated by 'His' breath of life (Watts, 1969). In this view, 'God' is 'a technician, potter, carpenter, architect, who has in mind a plan, and who fashions the universe in accordance with that plan' (Watts, 1960/2004). 'God' is thought to be a sort-of king, a human-like supernatural being (generally a man) who rules over living things. 'God' is outside and separate from humanity, as well as outside and separate from animals and Earth. In this view, each human being (and their individual soul) is considered to be separate from other humans, (and superior to) other animals and nature, seeking to rule and conquer over others under 'God's' command.

The ceramic model is consistent with a worldview that biologist and process thinker Charles Birch (1993, pp. 57, 67) calls *supernatural dualism*. It separates the world into two distinct realms: the physical and the supernatural. Worldviews based on this model consider 'God' to be something that one must 'believe in' or 'reject', generally alongside a set of theological doctrines. Cultural historian and ordained Catholic priest Thomas Berry (1988) discusses this worldview in terms of the 'Old Story' of Western society. He defines the 'Old Story' as based on the traditional Christian narratives of 'God' creating the world, and Jesus Christ redeeming humanity. Berry (1988, p. 124) observes that while this traditional story is still believed by people across the world, it is now 'dysfunctional in its larger social dimensions'. Berry gauges that human beings are destroying their planet because 'we have not learned the new story' (p. 123).

Informed by a degree in theology and a five-year stint as an Episcopalian priest, Watts (1969, p. 65) clarifies that he is

> not, of course, speaking of 'God' as conceived by the most subtle Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theologians, but of the popular image. For it is the vivid image rather than the tenuous concept which has the greater influence on common sense.

This leads to an important point, namely that the ceramic model is not the *only* worldview found within Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The more 'subtle' conceptions of

'God' that Watts is referring to might be images of God as sexless, a cosmic force, or as Paul Tillich called it, 'The ground of all being' (Watts, 1969, p. 21; quoting Tillich). These subtle images might fit closer to or within the dramatic model of the universe. I will return to this shortly.

Watts (1975, p. 13) goes on to criticize a deep cultural assumption found in Western societies which has arisen from the ceramic model: that is, the feeling of being a 'skin-encapsulated ego', which Watts considers to be 'one of the most important Christian conventions'. He draws out these connections in the Christian idea of a

> separate soul and its fleshly vehicle together constituting a personality which is unique and ultimately valuable in the sight of God. This view is undoubtedly the historical basis of the Western style of individuality, giving us the sensation of ourselves as isolated islands of consciousness confronted with objective experiences which are quite 'other'. (p. 13)

This central point, which Watts repeats throughout hundreds of his lectures and writings, is arguably at the crux of structural forms of violence caused by both the ceramic and fully-automatic models.

The fully-automatic model

Watts describes the transition from the ceramic model to the fully-automatic model as dethroning one tyrant and replacing it with a worse one. The 'game of God got embarrassing', says Watts (1960/2004) and the 'all-too-intelligent God' was replaced by a 'Cosmic Idiot'. While the new model rejected the supernatural 'God' of the ceramic model, it retained some of its 'ceramic' building blocks – 'the laws of nature were still there, but no lawmaker' (Watts, 1969, p. 50). The assumption that humans were separate from nature was retained. Earth was still treated as an artefact, but now it was thought of as an automatic machine. The result is the idea of a 'clockwork universe', a Cartesian/Newtonian worldview that tells humans they are an accident, a fluke. This model depicts a view of the world without 'God', in which humanity sees itself as the ruler over Earth and other living beings. In the shift from the ceramic model, power over people, animals and nature moves from 'God' to humanity.

Birch (1993, p. 57) describes this perspective as an 'atheistic, materialistic' worldview. It is atheistic in its rejection of 'God' and is materialistic in its conception of the world as comprised of matter or atoms that intersect like balls on a billiard table. This view is also reductionist in its tendency to try to understand a whole system by reducing it to its parts; and it is 'mechanistic' in the way that it imagines that the 'universe is a gigantic machine made up of countless smaller machines' (Birch, 1990, p. 57). Birch explains that while this worldview existed in ancient Greece, it has developed alongside science and technology, and has come to dominate the worldview of many people, especially in the Western world, over the last 500 years.

Berry (1988, p. 125) links the origins of this worldview to the Black Death (1347–1665) that killed 'perhaps one third of the population' of Europe. Berry observes that as epidemic plagues spread across Europe, people started to doubt the religious explanation of an all-powerful and all-good 'God' who would allow such a catastrophe to occur. One reaction was 'an intensification of faith experience, an effort to activate supernatural forces with special powers of intervention in the phenomenal world

now viewed as threatening to the human community' (p. 126). This reaction reflects a continuation of the ceramic model. The other response to the crisis of faith was an attempt to gain 'control of the physical world to escape its pain and to increase its utility to human society' (p. 125). This is reflective of the fully-automatic model. Berry explains that 'from these two tendencies the two dominant cultural communities of recent centuries were formed: the believing religious community and the secular community' (p. 125). Another way of putting it is that these two reactions have led to the development of the ceramic and fully-automatic models of the universe.

While the fully-automatic model claims to be based on science, developments in contemporary science discredit this basis. Birch (1990, p. x) observes that this worldview is 'challenged by modern physics, modern biology and by frontier thinking in theology and philosophy'. Theories of evolution, non-linear mathematics, ecology and phenomenology – which arose in the last century – reflect a shift away from the traditional mechanistic, materialist and reductionist approaches to science. These more holistic scientific concepts point to the interconnection between subject and object, the inseparability of organism and environment, the unbroken lines between all species, and between relationships of process within systems and their emergent properties. An understanding of the world more consistent with these concepts is found in the worldview that Watts calls the dramatic model of the universe.

The dramatic model

'Consider the world as a drama', declares Watts (1960/2004); 'What's the basis of all drama? The basis of all stories, of all plots, of all happenings – is the game of hide and seek … '. In his dramatic model of the universe Watts draws from the Hindu *Vedanta* to describe a game in which the *Atman* (or 'God', or your Self with a capital 'S') hides from itself by manifesting in different forms (including your 'self', with a little 's', in the particular mind-body you are today). In this view, 'you' are not just what is inside your 'bag of skin', but you are the whole cosmic process. Watts suggests that 'God' manifests in different forms (for example, as you and me) in order to experience life in new ways.

In the dramatic model, 'God' exists simultaneously in different forms and at different layers of existence. 'God' is inside and expressed through humanity and other forms of life, which are nested inside and expressed through 'God' as the Earth, which is nested inside 'God' as the Universe, which is nested inside a wondrous boundless 'ground of all being' that is also 'God'. This model reflects a panentheistic ontology: everything is inside 'God' and 'God' is inside everything. Your 'self' as your temporal mind-body is considered to be an expression of 'God', a manifestation of your bigger 'Self' (or a manifestation of 'God'). While 'God', the world and humans may have their own distinguishable identities, they are simultaneously connected and inseparable from other layers. Due to this inseparability one can take a view that they are all, in a sense, 'You'. As Watts (1969, p. 21) says, 'the Ultimate Ground of Being is *you*' (his italics). He clarifies that with the '*you*', he is not referring to the 'everyday you' (which he sees 'the Ground' pretending to be), but is referring to you as the 'inmost Self which escapes inspection because it is always the inspector'. This is 'the taboo of taboos: you're IT!'

The image of nested connections stands in contrast with the ceramic model and the fully-automatic model, which perceive humanity as separate from Earth and separate

from 'God'. In the dramatic model, humanity is perceived as an emergent event within Earth, inseparable from Earth's processes, both evolutionarily and ecologically. In this view, 'God' is inside and experiencing all of these forms and non-forms. 'God' is being and non-being and, in Watts' understanding, so are 'You'.

This model of the universe resonates with deep ecology, in which Arne Naess (1974, p. 34) identifies two notions of self: the 'ego, the self with a small s, and then this great Self, the Self with a capital S, the atman'. This also resonates with ancient yogic principles, which Sri Aurobindo (1996, p. 414) describes as seeing 'on one side the Infinite, the Formless, the One, the Peace' and 'on the other it sees the finite, the world of forms, the jarring multiplicity, the strife … '. These two identities – our self (inside our body) and our Self (as the cosmic event) – offer a way to make sense of panentheism's dipolar (encompassing two poles) understanding of 'God'. This is to say that 'God' has both a formless nature (beyond the universe, that which the universe is inside) and a nature in form (as the universe and within everything inside it). As the seminal panentheist thinker Alfred North Whitehead (1929, p. 343) put it, 'God is not *before* all creation but *with* all creation' (his italics).

Watts' dramatic model is inspired by the wisdom of Buddhism, Taoism, Vedanta and Yoga in the East. Watts was also significantly influenced by panentheistic theology and process philosophy in the West, such as the work of Whitehead, Gregory Bateson and Teilhard de Chardin (Watts, 1975, Preface). These traditions and thinkers share the basic assumptions of the dramatic model – that everything is *connected* and everything is constantly in *process*. This view is based on the scientific theories of evolution and ecology that show there to be no clear line of separation between organisms and environments in time or in space. As Whitehead (1933/1964, p. 226) observes, 'we cannot determine with what molecules the brain begins and the rest of the body ends. Further, we cannot tell with what molecules the body ends and the external world begins'. As your heart and lungs are your internal organs, the sun, air, plants and insects are your external organs (Watts, 1971/2007, p. 36). Your bag of skin is not a barrier or boundary but is a bridge between two aspects of your self. We are, therefore, a continuous process with everything and everyone else.

Like actors on a stage, people are temporary players in the universe or multiverse's drama. According to Watts, people get so caught up in their *personas*, the roles they play, that they often forget their identity beyond their masks. Watts reveals a liberating perspective in which behind the temporal mask, you are 'The Universe' or 'God', coming on as 'you' in order to experience Yourself. Whitehead (1933/1964, p. 293) spoke of this as the 'adventure of the universe as one'. Put another way, 'You are an aperture through which the universe [or 'God'] is looking at and exploring itself' (Watts, 2000, p. 90).

At this point I could get lost in many Wattsian metaphors of an Earth that 'peoples' and dots on the outer edges of a bottle of ink thrown at a wall (Watts, 1960/2004). I could consider the history of these philosophical ideas (e.g. see Cooper, 2006) or the location of the worldview in different religions today (e.g. see Biernacki & Clayton, 2014). Or I could delve into the contemporary developments in physics, ecology, evolution, complexity and emergence that provide evidence to support a dramatic view of the universe (e.g. see Clayton & Peacocke, 2004; Griffin, 2014). With limited space I resist all such temptations in order to focus on the implications of the dramatic model for the pursuit of peace.

Implications for peace

> Briefly, the thesis is that the prevalent sensation of oneself as a separate ego enclosed in a bag of skin is a hallucination which … underlies the misuse of technology for the violent subjugation of man's natural environment and, consequently, its eventual destruction. (Watts, 1969, p. 9)

In his preface to *The Book*, quoted above, Watts summarizes the essential contribution of the dramatic model to peace. As discussed above, Watts' dramatic model of the universe encourages a new sense of existence as a process intimately connected to everything in the universe. In doing so, the dramatic model illuminates a way of addressing the violence that humanity is causing to their selves and to their environment. For Watts, the pursuit of peace starts in individuals' experience in this present moment that, as he often emphasizes, is all there is. Watts connects a sense of inner peace to social justice and ecological harmony, as this section of the article will explore. He appeals to listeners' desire for happiness and pleasure, connecting their self-interests with the interests of their greater Self: that is, for the common good of humanity and Earth. The basic premise for this connection is the dramatic model's understanding that the 'self' is also the 'Self', and therefore that global interests are in fact also our Self-interests. Watts convincingly argues that the benefits of each of us acting in the interests of all of humanity and Earth are experienced not only by our infinite Self but also by our selves in our short temporal lives.

Inner and global peace

The dramatic model encourages a feeling of connectedness and empowerment through the realization and feeling that everything is you. 'It is a new feeling of possession of and participation in the world', says Birch (1993, p. 34). Watts (1975, p. 14) describes a 'transformation of consciousness, of the inner feeling of one's own existence', following which one feels a 'release of the individual from forms of conditioning imposed upon him by social institutions'. Both of these shifts are fundamental to the pursuit of peace: the former for the experience of peace within oneself; the latter as a starting point for questioning the social constructions and cultural habits that have (both positive and negative) implications for social and ecological peace. Inner peace can lead to global peace through people coming to know them 'selves' as connected participants in the world, exposing the fallacy of social constructions that foster alienated experiences of the self as separate from the world, and in time empowering individuals collectively to work to change the political, economic and social structures towards a vision of a more peaceful, just and ecologically harmonious way of being.

Where does one start? From *The Meaning of Happiness* (1968) through to *The Book* (1969), Watts directs his audience to be present, and to find happiness through acceptance. He encourages people to accept themselves, to seek greater understandings of their context, to accept the things they cannot change, and act within what they can. Watts enlightens listeners to a feeling of meaningfulness and life purpose. Like music, life is to be experienced. His philosophy has influenced counter-culture movements, the rejection of capitalistic values, and a realization of the true self that includes the other. Watts' words resonate with positive psychology and the human potential movement. The realization that one is not separate and

alone in the world, that one is deeply connected to everything that is, has significant implications both for one's life and for one's death.

Death may be a more significant fear and driving factor for some people than others, impacting on their psychological peace and on their approach to issues of social and environmental justice in the world. Within the ceramic model, a fear of death is associated with 'the dread Last Judgment, when sinners will be consigned to the temporary horrors of Purgatory or the everlasting agony of Hell' (Watts, 1969, p. 39). For believers, a great comfort is found in the 'popular fantasies of Heaven'. Supernaturalism can have a dangerous side, if in the wrong hands. Watts (1971/2007, p. 75) contends, rather provocatively, that '[o]nly a supernaturalist would deliberately press the button to set off nuclear warfare, in the belief that his spiritual values are more important than material existence'. Within the fully-automatic model, on the other hand, a fear arises with a view to death, taking 'us into everlasting nothingness – as if that could be some sort of experience, like being buried alive forever' (Watts, 1969, p. 38).

In contrast, under the dramatic model, death becomes a 'great event'. Like birth, death is a 'natural and necessary end of human life – as natural as leaves falling in autumn' (Watts, 1969, p. 40). Watts explains that in death, 'the individual is released from his ego-prison … this is the golden opportunity for awakening into the knowledge that one's actual self is the Self which plays the universe – an occasion for great rejoicing' (p. 40). Such an understanding lessens one's fear of death, as one realizes that it is only a temporal aspect of one's self that can die. You, the real you, the Self, lives on forever. According to Watts, you live eternally through all of the infinite adventures of the universe, seen in the life and times of everyone and everything that has ever inhabited our cosmos.

With this vision of connectedness to life beyond one's short life, one may be motivated to use the power they have to contribute to a better world. For example, they may put more effort into recycling, or walk rather than drive, encourage divestment from fossil fuels or campaign for carbon tax, make more socially and ecologically just decisions in organizations within which they work, or even change career – guided by a vision of care for the creative longevity of the whole cosmic process. Under the dramatic model, true self-interest is synonymous with true altruism – when one understands oneself to include the other. As deep ecologist Tim Hayward (1994, p. 71) puts it, 'The bottom line is that I have a duty and interest to protect and preserve nature because I am one with it'. While such a vision may not be achieved in full, any movement in this direction is likely to help shift the current self-destructive trajectory of humanity's collective actions towards a more peaceful future. In considering the relationship between inner peace and global peace, the final stage of this article considers the implications of Watts' dramatic model on social justice and ecological harmony.

Social justice and ecological harmony

In his book *Does It Matter?* Watts (1971/2007, p. 74) observes that '[c]ivilization "works", temporarily, for the privileged individual, but in the not-so-long run it could easily be a speeding up of consumption which dissolves all life on the planet'. Watts is capturing an essential dynamic of 'world systems theory', international relations and theories of structural violence in peace theory (Galtung, 1971;

Wallerstein, 1974). Current international political and economic institutions enable the exploitation of resources (including humans) in the 'third world', in order to provide cheap goods and services for the 'first world' and to offshore their environmental costs (see Jorgenson, 2006). Yet in the not-so-long run, this system of relationships threatens the future for all. This threat is seen in well-known issues of climate change, the depletion of topsoil, deforestation and the rapid extinction of species – none of which are any more desirable for rich than for poor.

Watts' dramatic model aligns with the values promoted by most peace theorists. This includes the promotion of social and ecological justice, non-violent approaches to resolving conflict, and protection of the human rights of all peoples, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, culture or religion. In *The Liberation of Life*, Birch and John Cobb Jr. (1990) consider the practical contributions of the dramatic model (or in their term, 'process thought') to a more socially just and ecologically sustainable world. Birch and Cobb apply process thinking to animal and human rights, to biospheric ethics, and to specific topics such as agriculture, energy, transportation, urban habitats, and the importance of equal rights and opportunities for women. They challenge the dominant economic model and the ideology of unlimited growth, and suggest its replacement with an ecologically liberating model of development, a steady-state economy and a Genuine Progress Indicator to replace the cost-inclusive indicator of Gross Domestic Product (see also Daly & Cobb, 1994).

Watts takes this understanding of our global situation a step further, pointing out that the exploitation of resources by people in Western society includes themselves! Watts (1971/2007, p. 27) observes the irony, in that 'the richest and most powerful civilization on earth is so preoccupied with saving time and making money that it has neither taste for life nor capacity for pleasure'. He relates this to a preoccupation with profit and efficiency. Rather than working to create *wealth*, people in the West work for *money*. The high rates of depression and suicide in Western society may be a symptom of this cultural illness. Almost all aspects of life have been commoditized, from nature to education. Personal well-being, community and the environment are suffering. Why?

Watts posits that at the root of this structural violence is the illusion that our 'self' is a 'skin-encapsulated ego', rather than the real understanding of the self as connected to the entire cosmic process. In feeding their egos, many people in Western culture are perpetuating an ideology of consumption, capital accumulation and free-market growth economics. Arguably these practices are the biggest barriers to addressing global issues of equality and environment such as climate change (Clayton & Heinzekehr, 2014). Increases in global production (in its current ecologically and economically unjust form) exploit people, species and the planet, and entice people to work more hours in order to continue to accumulate an increasing number of things. This feedback loop points to the way that deeply embedded cultural assumptions can indirectly work to maintain unjust and undesirable institutional arrangements.

Pursuing a more socially just and ecologically harmonious global society calls this feedback loop into question. Evolving the laws, policies, institutions and societal values that maintain this loop, towards a culture of peace, requires the political will of citizens and actions of political actors to support the change (e.g. see Held & Hervey, 2009). How? Watts (1971/2007, p. 74) emphasizes that '[w]hat we really need is a technology managed by people who no longer experience "self" as something

foreign to the body and its physical environment'. We need a transformation – a transformation in the nature of our leaders, as well as a transformation in ourselves.

The question remains, how is one to bring about the dramatic model's understanding and experience of the world? Watts points out that we cannot change ourselves or the world 'by force': 'Trying to force a lock bends the key' (Watts, 1971/2007, p. 77). Instead of trying to force change, one should look inside. For Watts, 'intelligence is … the alternative to violence' (p. 77). He writes that 'a new attitude to the physical world' calls for 'first, a profound respect for the intricate interconnections between all creatures … and second, a love for and delight in that world as an extension of your own body' (p. 37).

The process of peace starts with the realization that you are intimately connected to and inseparable from your environment. Exploring ways of bringing about such an ecological awareness, and ways of modifying institutions and life-ways to be based on the principles of process, remain exciting and important areas for future research.

Conclusion

Watts' dramatic model of the universe can be seen as a shift in deep cultural assumptions that underlie ways of understanding the world and living within it. The dramatic model presents an alternative to the outdated ceramic and fully-automatic models that underlie violent, unjust and unsatisfying institutions and practices in the modern world. The dramatic model offers answers to many problems of human psychology and human society. Watts sums this up in three words: *you are IT*. You are an aspect of the whole cosmic process experiencing Yourself. Watts identified many connections between humanity and nature, and observed a fundamental conflict between this intimate connection and the way in which people in Western societies see, and live in, the world. He proposed a compelling panentheistic alternative, which is in greater accord with contemporary science and is a more satisfying and peace-promoting worldview than the more dominant supernatural and atheistic perspectives. Watts believed that such a shift in the way we experience our lives is as rewarding for one's personal experience of life as it is for contributing to peace in the world. Why? Because *you are IT*.

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Notes on contributor

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