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Psychotherapy East and West: a retrospective review, part I – 1961–1970

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This article is the first of a two-part retrospective reflection on Alan Watts' 1961 book *Psychotherapy East and West*. Part I concerns 1961–1970, especially initial book reviews in academic journals. Watts' text garnered early interest from psychologists and psychotherapists rather than from religionists, and Watts was praised for his writing style and challenging outlook. The book was concurrently scrutinizing and indicative of problematic predicaments in 1960s psychotherapy and American society by its lining up with values and aspirations of countercultural and human potential movements. Critical and affirmative commentaries tended to focus on Watts' approach to ego transcendence. The 1960s ended with divided opinion about Watts and his work viewed from optimistic literary and skeptical Freudian vantage points.

Keywords: psychotherapy; crisis; 'philosophical unconscious'; ego; transcendence; criticism

When Alan Watts' *Psychotherapy East and West* appeared in 1961, serious colloquies on connections between psychology, psychotherapy, and masteries of Buddhism, Daoism, Vedanta, and Yoga were extant for over 30 years. Jung's landmark commentary on Wilhelm's German translation of *The Secret of the Golden Flower* opened conversation in 1929 (Jung 1929). Early interlocutors on East–West psycho-spiritual interchange, including Watts (1937, 1939/1994, 1940), emphasized psychology and psychotherapy understood in Freudian, Jungian, and, eventually, neo-Freudian terms. In *Psychotherapy East and West*, Watts (1961/1969) guided conversation in a new direction by undergirding his text with: (1) organismic and transactional perspectives informed by Alfred North Whitehead, Joseph Needham, Lancelot Law Whyte, Arthur F. Bentley, and the Gestalt psychologists; (2) 'meta-Freudian' perspectives of Norman O. Brown and Herbert Marcuse; and (3) double-bind communication research of Gregory Bateson and Jay Haley.

Psychotherapy East and West culminated a 10-year inquiry, beginning with Watts' 1951 American Academy of Asian Studies (AAAS) faculty appointment, where he offered seminars on 'The Application of Asian Psychology to Modern Psychiatry'. Watts subsequently consulted for Gregory Bateson's research team whilst publishing papers (Watts, 1953, 1955, 1956), book reviews (Watts, 1959b, 1959c, 1960) and lectures (Watts, 1959a) propaedeutic to *Psychotherapy East and West*. Finally, the planning and writing of the book were informed by ongoing conversations with

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psychotherapy providers and consumers as Watts conducted seminars and guest lectures at numerous medical schools and psychiatric clinics.

The present article considers 1961–1970 academic assessments of *Psychotherapy East and West* toward lending perspective on its role and impact in psychology and broader cultural grounds of 1960s America. Two preliminary notes. First, the 1970 cut-off date is not arbitrary, given that a 1971 re-issue of the book initiated conversations in Britain, continental Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, which are considered in Part II of this review article. Also, I am writing as a research psychologist interested in psychology's history, and intrigued by Watts' life and work. My goal is description rather than interpretation (though they seem hardly separable), and clinical psychologists perhaps would take differing routes through the subject matter.

Early reviews

Intending *Psychotherapy East and West* as an exploratory thesis, Watts aimed at stimulating professional conversations *between* religionists and psychotherapists. Though aside from Salzman's (1963) review, the text garnered scant attention from religion and philosophy journals. Instead, distribution of appraisals among *The Psychoanalytic Review* (Curry, 1962), the *Archives of General Psychiatry* (Ruesch, 1962), the *Journal of Analytical Psychology* (Henderson, 1963), *Psychiatry* (Rioch, 1963), and the *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* (Levy, 1967) indicates an impact felt primarily *within* psychology and psychiatry. Still, assessments appeared also in *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* (Moffett, 1962), *MANAS* (Review, 1963), and *Teachers College Record* (Eichler, 1963).

Review content likewise suggests Watts' (1961) relevance to psychologically minded rather than religiously minded thinkers (e.g. Curry, 1962, p. 128; Henderson, 1963, p. 187; Ruesch, 1962, p. 254). While Eichler (1963) expressed a diverging opinion, suggesting the book to be 'fundamentally a philosophical essay, concerned only secondarily with psychotherapy *per se*' (p. 89), Rioch (1963) offered an expansive endorsement, saying that Watts (1961) merits attention from not only psychotherapists, 'but all who are concerned with the predicament of modern man' (p. 107; see also Salzman, 1963, p. 173).

The literary acumen displayed in *Psychotherapy East and West* was lauded for Watts' hermeneutical understanding (Moffett, 1962; Rioch, 1963; Ruesch, 1962) and capacity for expounding on various wisdom traditions of Asia (Eichler, 1963; Salzman, 1963). The text also had a 'shock effect' (Rioch, 1963) on readers' psychological and philosophical sensibilities due to: (1) Watts' exasperating-to-the-Western-mind coverage of Buddhism, Taoism, Vedanta, and Yoga per se (Eichler, 1963); (2) his innovative (problematic) *interpretations* of 'Eastern' subject matter (Henderson, 1963, p. 186); and (3) his 'illuminating and provocative' discussion of 'Western' therapeutic processes (Rioch, 1963, pp. 108–109; see also Curry, 1962; Levy, 1967; Moffett, 1962).

Watts' challenging outlook spoke to the 1960s 'crisis' in psychotherapy. As Weisskopf-Joelson (1968) observed:

> At the present time it is difficult to find many psychotherapists who agree on the interpretation of any case. Moreover, many therapists have, orally or in written documents, expressed doubts concerning the basic assumptions upon which their work rests, and have admitted they don't quite know 'what goes on' in therapy. (p. 107)

Weisskopf-Joelson could have paraphrased Watts (1961/1969):

> I know of few reputable psychiatrists who will not admit, at least in private, that their profession is still far from being a science. To begin with, there is no generally accepted theory or even terminology of the science, but rather a multiplicity of conflicting theories and divergent techniques … To make things worse there is still no clear evidence that psychotherapy is anything more than a hit-or-miss placebo, and save in the case of psychotic symptoms that can be controlled by certain drugs, there is no sure way of distinguishing its 'cures' from spontaneous remission. (pp. 22–23)

Psychotherapy East and West seemed *inspective* and *symptomatic* of the crisis in psychotherapy. The book was *inspective* by critiquing 'theoretical confusion' enduring in the psychotherapeutic approaches of the day. It was *symptomatic* by raising issues indicative of the crisis itself. Regarding the former, Watts (1961/1969) referred to psychotherapists' 'philosophical unconscious' – that is to say, their unwitting ignorance of 'the contemporary philosophy of science' and 'hidden metaphysical premises' underlying psychological theory, including 'discredited anthropological ideas of the nineteenth century' (p. 26), and 'the social and ecological contexts of patient and therapist' which 'tend to be ignored in a situation where two people are closeted together in private' (p. 27). Even Jung's (1958) claim that his psychology is 'a science of mere phenomena without any metaphysical implications' (p. 476) is itself, according to Watts (1961/1969), a 'whopping metaphysical assumption' (p. 27). As Watts wrote, 'unconscious metaphysics tend to be bad metaphysics' (p. 26).

Watts (1961/1969) engaged transcultural comparisons toward uncovering the philosophical unconscious: 'Cultural patterns come to light and hidden metaphysical assumptions become clear only to the degree that we can step outside the cultural or metaphysical systems in which we are involved by comparing them with others' (p. 28) – in this case Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism. Recognizing potential paradigmatic tumult engendered by *Psychotherapy East and West* through exposition of unconscious material, Curry (1962) noted: 'Watts, in writing this book (which is certainly a sticking-his-neck-out), has extended an invitation to all clinicians to examine thoughtfully what they are doing in relation to what their theories say they are doing' (p. 128; see also Salzman, 1963, p. 173). Watts' transcultural comparisons now appear as early signals of his hermeneutical turn in the 1960s (see Columbus, 2012). Whereas his previous writings were often predicated on perennial philosophy, Watts (1961/1969) employed cultural/historical variations of philosophical-religious differences as points of exploration, resemblance, and contrast.

Psychotherapy East and West was *symptomatic* of 1960s crises in psychotherapy via two conflicts regarding the psychotherapeutic approach. Moreover, these conflicts resonated loudly in broader American cultural contexts. First, per Weisskopf-Joelson (1968), was 'the conforming versus the socially critical approach' (p. 112) as Watts (1961/1969) contended that therapists genuinely concerned with helping individuals must judiciously examine dysfunctional social systems:

> Disturbed individuals are points in the social field where contradictions in the field break out. It will not do at all to confirm the contradictions from which they are suffering, for a psychiatrist to be the official representative of a sick system of institutions. (p. 58)

Watts fully challenged the sensibilities of many psychotherapists who – Rioch's (1963) words – 'see their task as increasing adjustment rather than liberation from social

roles' (p. 110). Yet critical examinations of problematic social-cultural institutions had wide appeal beyond psychotherapeutic milieux by pronounced opposition to technocratic social structures as described by Roszak (1969). Watts (along with Herbert Marcuse, Norman O. Brown, Allen Ginsburg, and Paul Goodman) was identified as a key influence on countercultural thinking of 1960s American youth – with the attendant hippie 'dropout' population, psychedelic ethos, progressive sexual mores, alternative lifestyles, and anti-war sentiments – due to 'such very solid intellectual achievements as *Psychotherapy East and West*' (pp. 132–133).

The second conflict of psychotherapeutic process identified by Weisskopf-Joelson (1968) reflected in *Psychotherapy East and West* is 'the pathological versus the ontological approach' (p. 113) as Watts expanded psychotherapy beyond remediation of mental health disturbances localized to comparatively few people. He contended that psychotherapy is useful toward transforming psychological and spiritual states common in general populations. Elsewhere, Watts (1953) called it 'a psychotherapy of the "normal" person' (p. 26). The 'ontological approach' to psychotherapy ties into the 1960s human potential movement aligned with academic Humanistic Psychology's emphasis on personal and interpersonal growth, and self-actualization. As Elkins (2009) describes it:

> The human potential movement … took humanistic ideals into the streets of America in the form of thousands of workshops, encounter groups, sensitivity training labs, personal growth groups, and various kinds of individual therapeutic experiences … . America became a 'therapeutic culture' with literally millions of individuals participating in some form of therapeutic activities … The vast majority of those who took part in these activities did not view themselves as 'participating in treatments for mental illness' … The focus of the human potential movement and the 'therapeutic culture' was not on curing mental illness, but on personal growth, improved relationships, and more effective interpersonal skills. (p. 42)

More is said in Part II of this review article concerning *Psychotherapy East and West* vis-à-vis the human potential movement, but it suffices here to say, via Eugene Taylor, that within 1960s therapeutic culture-at-large, Watts' books generally became 'bibles of the consciousness movement' (Taylor, 2000, p. 275), with *Psychotherapy East and West* being 'possibly one of the most influential texts of the American psychotherapeutic counterculture' (Taylor, 2003, p. 185).

Criticism and commentary

The most notable and elaborate criticisms of *Psychotherapy East and West* were offered by Jungian psychologist and founder of the Jung Institute of San Francisco, Joseph L. Henderson (1963). His criticisms are especially noteworthy, as Watts (1961/1969) commented that Freudian and Jungian depth psychologies were 'becoming more and more of a backwater in the development of Western psychiatry' and 'increasingly out of touch with all that has been going on in the science of human behavior during the last thirty years' (p. xii).

Henderson's (1963) criticisms were threefold. First, Watts automatically accepted a motivational consonance (transcendence of the ego) and methodological commensurability between psychotherapy, Daoism, and Buddhism. Henderson wrote:

> [Watts] does not appear to know how much time we psychotherapists spend in unearthing the mixed motives of behavior and in re-educating our patients to fit them for their first real adaptation to family or community. This is not our choice, but represents the basic need for the undeveloped ego to find its place in society in a meaningful, not over-adapted way. True enough, for patients who are already over-adapted, we may seek to bring results similar to those of Taoism or Zen Buddhism. But similarity is not identity, and the way of liberation in the West cannot aim at dissolving the ego as unnecessary to an experience of the Self. (p. 186)

Remarkably similar criticisms were offered 20 years earlier in Beatrice M. Hinkle's (1940) review of *The Meaning of Happiness* (Watts, 1940). Hinkle, a distinguished Jungian analyst and translator of Jung, noted that Watts 'fails to recognize that the theories [of analytical psychology] are not intellectual concepts into which the individual is fitted, but are formulations based on the psychological material brought forth by the analytical experience itself' (p. 48).

Henderson's (1963) second criticism concerned Watts' portrayals of Freud and Jung as problematically assuming 'that intelligence rests precariously on a biological and instinctual basis which is "animal in the worst sense"' (p. 187). Henderson rejoined:

> One wonders if Watts has forgotten some of his Eastern philosophy, which also emphasizes a struggle with the animal nature. The cow-herding pictures of Zen Buddhism provide a striking example beside the superhuman efforts of Tibetan Yogis to overcome the effects of demonic possession. (p. 187)

Here again, Hinkle (1940) similarly assessed Watts' (1940) discussions of 'psychological acceptance' and 'escape' from vicissitudes of living. Hinkle criticized Watts' insufficient notice of autonomic functions as he 'fails to recognize the biological reactions of fight and flight in his discussion, and consequently he writes as though the primary attitudes of individuals were produced by his environment and were a matter of choice and will' (pp. 485–486).

Henderson's (1963) third criticism concerned Watts' approach to ego transcendence. Henderson contended that the liberated ego in Watts' theory is only the outward *persona*. 'But', suggested Henderson,

> the ego is not thus dissolved, it merely turns inward to observe and relate to … inner images. It is this inner aspect of the ego which provides an introverted continuity of consciousness, as the persona provides the outer continuity of behavior. (p. 187)

Henderson added: 'The awareness of this subject–object duality becomes the necessary condition for further individual development' (p. 187).

Ruesch (1962) offered a variation on Henderson's (1963) third criticism. Ruesch, like Henderson, doubted ego liberation as an adaptive solution to problems of living, but he directed attention to socio-technological environs rather than to inner experience. 'Physical-scientific or social-symbolic' creations of human culture, suggested Ruesch, surpass mundane standings of individuals such that people inevitably are aware of differences. Individuals are thus wary of extant technologies and cultural-social institutions, and '*this split awareness may itself be protective*' (italics added). Ruesch continued:

> Were it not for this awareness … [people] would feel as one with all the metallic and plastic trash that Madison Avenue so glowingly praises. No, perhaps it is necessary for modern man to be split and separated from the machines and institutions he produces if he wishes to survive … The stranger surroundings are, the more wary the human being fortunately becomes. The duality of existence is perhaps the best way in which man can counteract his exaggerated need for control. *When he comes to feel sufficiently alienated, he might steer his maladapted evolution in a more creative direction.* (p. 255, italics added)

Note that Watts' later offerings (e.g. 1966, 1971) served implicitly as replies to Ruesch's criticism. Watts elaborated an ontological estrangement that is simultaneously source and symptom of problematic cultural and technological conditions, and discussed healing existential alienation without denying difference. However, I refer here to Gordon's (1970) criticisms, as discussed below.

Moffett (1962), a literary theorist of some renown, offered a third take on Watts' (1961/1969) exposition and remediation of ontological estrangement. Moffett suggested:

> Watts is telling a kind of story. The protagonist is 'I', the antagonist the 'other'. The action is comprised of games and counter-games (double-binds and therapeutic releases). More accurately, he is telling the story about the dissolution of a story, the fiction of the ego. (p. 486)

Psychotherapy East and West is thus likened to an *anti-novel*, the genre of mid-twentieth-century literature gaining its moniker from Sartre's 1948 introduction to Sarraute's *Portrait of a Man Unknown* (Sartre, 1948). Anti-novels, anti-plays, and other anti-literatures undermine and destabilize character, personality, and plot. Moffett noted: 'Watts' discussion of the ego and "its" actions persuades us that they don't exist. Or rather exist only as *a necessity of communication*, not as a necessity of nature' (p. 486, italics added). It seems plausible to suggest that *Psychotherapy East and West* reflects not only the anti-novel genre, but, in 'reaching a crisis of isomorphism between language and life' (Moffett, 1962, p. 490), it foreshadows certain postmodern, constructionist, and deconstructionist approaches to reading, writing, and living. Indeed, *Psychotherapy East and West* predates seminal publications of de Man, Derrida, and Berger and Luckmann by at least five years.

The above reviews reflect bifurcated trajectories of opinion about Watts (1961/1969) continuing to the end of the 1960s. Two assessments exemplify the decade-ending Y-junction and foreshadowing of subsequent discussion in Part II of this review article. Daniel J. Leary's (1969) optimistic contention was that Watts, along with Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (Jesuit paleontologist), George Bernard Shaw (playwright), Buckminster Fuller (architect and systems theorist), David T. Brazelon (economist), Marshall McLuhan (communication theorist), theologians Harvey Cox, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Leslie Dewart, and philosophers Norman O. Brown and Martin Buber, are veritable 'voices of convergence'. According to Leary, these thinkers constitute unanimous expression from numerous intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual perspectives which, when collectively joined, offer tangible support for the aspiration that people may access, through inspired creativity and humane technology, new heights of existential fulfillment.

An important draw of *Psychotherapy East and West* was that 'East and West in their theories of psychology and religion share three converging avenues of

enlightenment' (Leary, 1969, pp. 114–115). The first 'avenue' concerned the issue of embodied spirituality – that is to say, possible transformations of sexuality (Eros) into sacramental experience (Agape). Second was a shift from egocentric thinking to holistic awareness, where 'life is most fully lived when we do not live it, but when it lives us; when the ego is experienced as a cell in an organic whole' (p. 116). Third was renewed emphasis on intuitively lived (phenomenological) time rather than rationalized 'clock time' and the 'necessity of a programmed day' (p. 117). Each of the avenues, in Leary's view, leads to overcoming 'maya' or illusory consciousness.

Counterpoints were offered by Freudian psychoanalyst Lilian Gordon (1970), who voiced skeptical views of countercultural psychotherapy in general and particularly Watts, whose formulation of Zen 'has become an integral part of the style of life and therapy under discussion' (p. 166). Though not discussing *Psychotherapy East and West* specifically, Gordon considered Watts (1966, 1967) among other Esalan Institute workshop leaders and offerings, such as Fritz Perls' Gestalt Therapy, William Schutz's Joy Workshops, and Elizabeth Minz's 'Time-Extended Marathon' group encounters. A 'common denominator', suggested Gordon, 'seems to be the longing for regression to the time when words were not necessary for communication, where all experience was intimate, and all activity play and where delay of impulse discharge was not necessary' (p. 166). Gordon continued: 'The experience of symbiotic merging with its concomitant feeling of sharing in omnipotence and immortality is well stated in Western terms by Watts'. Gordon quoted Watts (1966):

> The hallucination of separateness prevents one from seeing that to cherish the ego is to cherish misery. [Watts here uses the term ego to mean the sense of separate existence.] The death of the individual is not disconnection but simply withdrawal. Eternally and always there is only now, and one and the same now; the present is the only thing that has no end … Once you have seen this you have seen that the universe is at root a magical illusion and a fabulous game, and that there is no separate 'you' to get something out of it, as if life were a bank to be robbed. What we see as death, empty space or nothingness is only the trough between the crests of this endlessly waving ocean. (As cited in Gordon, 1970, p. 167)

Gordon (1970) interpreted Watts (and his cohorts) as expressing regressive symbiotic longings (rather than higher-order transcendence) emerging from 'separation anxiety and fears of annihilation' caused by 1960s breakdowns of religious, political, and scientific/technological institutions and social structures. She wondered 'whether some of the regressive activity may prove serviceable to the ego and may result in new cultural symbols appropriate to the current state of civilization'. But seemingly anticipating the excesses of 1970s American counterculture, Gordon concluded: 'And if these symbols take the form of the magical power of the unrepressed infantile psyche, as Freudians we should not be surprised' (p. 182).

End of the beginning

Part I of this review article has examined 1960s academic book reviews with a view to lending perspective on Watts' (1961/1969) role and impact in the field of psychotherapy and American culture. *Psychotherapy East and West* was relevant primarily to psychologists rather than religionists, and reviewers lauded Watts' literary acumen while noting provocative qualities of the text. *Psychotherapy East and West* was

simultaneously inspective and symptomatic of 1960s crises in psychotherapy and American culture, as Watts aligned with countercultural sensibilities and the human potential movement. Major criticism and commentary centered on Watts' understanding of 'ego' and its transcendence. The 1960s closed with divided estimations of Watts' writings as exemplified by Daniel J. Leary's (1969) optimistic literary assessment and Lilian Gordon's (1970) skeptical Freudian analysis.

Part II of this retrospective review will consider *Psychotherapy East and West* in the light of the subsequent backlash against countercultural and human potential movements, the emergence of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, developments in postmodernism and social constructionism, and twenty-first-century psychological perspectives.

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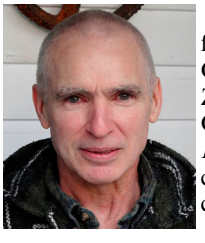
Notes on contributor



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