Chianna Calabrese
Happiness
April 12th 2016

The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are by Alan Watts is in and of itself extremely uplifting. According to The Book, a thing 'in and of itself' is not possible as practically the entire book argues in favor of dispelling the illusion of individuality. Watts is the dominant Western philosopher who both translates the philosophical ideals of the East, and combines them with ideas from the West. The Book is probably the most widely read of Watts' writings and after reading it, it is clear to see why.

Watts is coherent and concise, even though The Book is only 143 pages there is a density to it which makes it enjoyable and thought provoking. On starting to read the book it seemed like the point was going to be redundant, and in a sense it is. The redundancy does not diminish the nature of the book, however, as the variety of examples Watts uses illustrate a range of aspects about the philosophical theory of this inseparableness. For Watts everything 'Goeswith' (a word he coined) everything else.

Seeing as I was reading it through the scope of how it relates to happiness it seemed like Watts displayed the opposite, in other words, why we are unhappy and how experiencing the world around us through a different paradigm will alter how we feel.

The Book's chapters are; Inside Information, The Game of Black and White, How to be a Genuine Fake, The World is Your Body, So What?, and IT. The first of these chapters deals with the notion that the people who come before us are supposed to give us insight into the world around us, and that there is indeed no real answer or 'inside info' that we are not being given which other people around us are not. It serves to prime us for the following sections of the book. Many of the

ideologies that Watts describes are quite commonsensical, and while it is interesting a lot of it is intuitive.

The second chapter questions the commonly accepted notion of the Judeo-Christian God where God is seen as a supreme monarch, a king who we must all fear as coming out of the systems of government and society that had been in place. The second chapter also deals with the idea that Black and White are in constant battle with each other, and that White (analogous to 'good' in European mythos) must win out over Black. Instead Watts describes how they are two parts of the same whole and that neither could possibly 'win' over the other because then the winner would cease to exist without it's opposite. Following this logic the same is true of solid and space.

In the third chapter it can be argued that the book reaches its climax, and central argument. How To Be a Genuine Fake predominantly discusses the concept of egoism, and how it's a complete lie. This chapter describes how throughout our whole lives society feeds us the idea that we're an individual and separate entity. We are graded, judged, valued, scolded, praised, and processed by all the other individuals and institutions that surround us. This chapter attempts to describe the inseparability of one thing in the world from everything else. A useful metaphor he provides is one of a tree, where each individual is a branch or a twig extended from the whole, but having a unique perspective on it. When you take this metaphor further you might as well be saying the world is like the world, which only goes further to prove his point that everything in our experience is inseparable and to be understood in the sense of oneness.

The chapter of this book titled The World is Your Body might have been more aptly named The Universe is Your Body, because to just say 'world' excludes the position and context of the globe as something also in a present situation of being. Early on in The Book Watts describes a cat

as seen through a narrow slit in a fence, to the onlooker it seems the head of the cat has caused the neck of the cat, the neck the shoulders and so on to the tail. Watts throws out the problem of cause and effect by saying that the question is framed wrong. Later he returns to his description of the cat and says something slightly different. Our dominant perception is that each cat is only one cat it's whole life, the way of understanding it stated in The Book is that language has distorted our view and in fact the cat is simply a culmination of a series of events. In this sense the universe happens to be 'catting'. The cat is a situation, the cat we see is made of everything ever in the cat's life, as well as what we would think of as not cat, or the negative space around the cat. If there were nothing but cat, the cat simply wouldn't be cat. The same goes for Humans and anything else you care to think of.

Something to appreciate about this book is that Watts neither demonizes nor praises the entirety of Western or Eastern culture and philosophy, he doesn't posit that East is better than West or vice versa. Watts states that "the Chinese-despite all their sophistication-made little progress in science because it never occurred to them to think of nature as a mechanism, as 'composed' of separable parts, and 'obeying' logical laws." (58) Over the entirety of the book Watts uses philosophical and scientific sources from all over the globe to illustrate the basic idea of oneness.

The So What? And IT chapters of the book are meant to take the reader down a step from the kind of thinking that is very different from how any Westerner reading the book was likely raised. Watts talks about consumerism, materialism, the goal of careers, and how trying to gauge the future in such a long sighted way is ideal for no one. We could be happier if we understood we should not be in it for our own individual 'pursuit of happiness', but we should live more simply, and

more in the present. He also talks about paradoxes and so called 'double-binds' we put ourselves into, like 'Try to Relax', and that these cause degrees of dissatisfaction within us.

When describing the leaders of massive corporations, he says that they have the wrong values, and that we should not demonize them but feel pity for them. "The point becomes clear with compassion and sorrow, that many of our most powerful and wealthy men are miserable dupes and captives in a treadmill, who-with the rarest exceptions-have not the ghost of a notion how to spend and enjoy money." (100). Yet within the system they were raised in those same men reach for the things they are told will make them happy.

Watts concludes this book by saying that we should not try to shed our egoism, because that will be self defeating, much like trying to relax could be. The suggestion is that we should just accept the sensation of individuality as another part of our world, but allow ourselves to see the oneness of everything as not contradictory from the separateness we're raised to believe we have. Overall The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are (we can now see the potential joke of the title) is succinct, interesting, and it offers a framework of thought that we can view the world through. It is a framework that Westerners are not often offered, and it gives readers a refreshing perspective. Although I would warn against taking the word of The Book as gospel… I intend to read it again, and I recommend it to anyone who has a long afternoon and an open mind.

Work Cited

Watts, Alan. *The Book: On The Taboo of Knowing Who You Are*. New York: Vintage, 1972. Print.