

OUT

OF

Tricksters, Interdependence,

YOUR

and the Cosmic Game of

MIND

Hide-and-Seek

Alan Watts

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## Preface by Mark Watts

Back in the midfifties, my father gained a large following for his public radio talks on station KPFA in Berkeley, California, and these talks were soon followed by the bestselling *Way of Zen* and his groundbreaking *Psychotherapy East and West*. His approach resonated well with open-minded Bay Area audiences as he examined the wisdoms of Asia through the fresh lenses of Western psychology and the emerging scientific revelations of the postatomic age. In his talks, he often suggested that Buddhism should be thought of as a form of psychotherapy, and was not to be compared with Western religions. Instead, he felt that in essence ecological awareness and mystical experience were expressions of the same form of awakened experience. By the early sixties, his radio talks and landmark books had nudged him out onto the college speaking circuit, and for the next twelve years, he delivered large-hall public lectures and more intimate seminars to groups across the country. Many of these sessions were recorded and collected.

Nearly ten years ago, after reviewing dozens of the seminars my father recorded in the late sixties and early seventies, I selected recordings—that flowed together beautifully—from six historic events to become the *Out of Your Mind* audio collection. They are all exceptional sessions, including “The Nature of Consciousness,” “Web of Life,” “Inevitable Ecstasy,” “The World as Just So,” “The World as Self,” and “The World as Emptiness.”

Upon its release, *Out of Your Mind* was an immediate success, and over the years it became one of the most listened-to Alan Watts series of all time, attracting audiences from all over the world.

The series of talks began with all-encompassing themes, including core issues of shared perception, comparative cosmology, and humankind's place in the natural world. In these talks, my father demonstrated convincingly that most of the common sense of the Western world is rooted in outdated science and the dominant cultural constructs of the nineteenth century. Always ready to challenge the status quo, he tackled assumptions that many took for granted, demonstrating how out of touch with the contemporary state of knowledge the "everyday reality" of the Western world had become.

As this body of work developed, he also offered solutions, both psychological and cosmological, and in drawing increasingly from the Buddhist worldview that he explored in these seminars, he offered a fresh and convincing alternative perspective, one of a universe in which we are both inseparable and welcome participants, and at the same time expressions of the "entire works." In this ultimately reciprocal worldview, we find not only our place in and of nature, but also the tools with which to share this mind-shifting perspective of life with others.

Even though I understood the power of these talks, I was unprepared for what began to happen as they made their way out and into the world. In addition to being popular with many of Sounds True's listeners, the collection began to attract a new, younger audience, and several years after its release, quotes and videos began to pop up regularly on social media. Creative video posts based on clips were getting millions of views as well (twenty million at last count), and it is by far the most rewarding aspect of continuing my father's works to see how these ideas are received in the lives of many, and to watch as they take on new forms and continue to grow.



**PART ONE**

THE NATURE  
OF  
CONSCIOUSNESS

# Cosmological Models of the World

I want to start by looking at some of the basic ideas that underlie our common sense in the West—our fundamental notions about what life is all about. There are historical origins for these ideas, and their influence is a lot stronger than most people realize. I'm referring to our essential beliefs about the world—beliefs that are built into our systems of logic and the very nature of the language we use.

I'll use the word *myth* to refer to these ideas. Not to denote something untrue, but to call to mind something quite powerful. A myth in this sense is an image we use to make sense of the world, and at present, we live under the influence of two extremely powerful images, both of which are entirely inadequate in the present state of scientific knowledge. One of our most important challenges today is to replace these myths with an adequate, satisfying, and sensible image of the world that accords with our actual experience of it.

So, the two fundamental images of the world that we've been operating under for more than two thousand years are essentially models of the universe: the *ceramic model* and the *fully automatic model*. Let's look at the first of these, the ceramic model.

The ceramic model of the universe originates from the book of Genesis, from which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all derive their basic picture of the world. And the image of the world that comes from the book of Genesis is that the world is an artifact made by the



Creator—just as a potter forms pots out of clay, or a carpenter fashions tables and chairs from wood. Don't forget that Jesus, the Son of God, is also the son of a carpenter. So, in this way, the image of God we have is one of a potter, carpenter, technician, or architect who creates the universe in accordance with his plan.

Essential to this first model of the universe is the notion that the world consists of *stuff*—primordial matter or substance. And just as the potter takes clay and imposes his will upon it, so does the Creator craft the universe out of this fundamental stuff. He takes it and makes it into whatever he wants. And so in the book of Genesis, the Lord God makes Adam out of dust—he fashions a clay figurine, breathes into it, and it becomes *alive*. The clay becomes *informed*. See, by itself, the clay is formless and comes with no intelligence, so it requires an external intelligence—an external energy—to bring it to life and put some sense in it.

This is how we've inherited the concept of ourselves as artifacts, as things that were *made*. In our culture, children ask their parents, "How was I made?" or "Who made me?" But these aren't questions asked by Chinese or Indian (specifically, Hindu) children. Now, a Chinese child might ask her mother, "How did I grow?" But *growing* and *making* are entirely different procedures. You see, when you *make* something, you put it together—you arrange its parts, you work from the *outside* to the *in*. Again, that's how a potter works on clay, or a sculptor works on stone. However, when you watch something *grow*, it happens in the opposite direction—that is, from the *inside* to the *out*. *Growth* means that something expands, burgeons, blossoms, and happens all over itself at once. The original, simple form of a living cell in the womb will progressively complicate itself.

That's what the *growing* process looks like, as opposed to the *making* process. Note that in this model, there's a fundamental difference between the *maker* and the *made* thing, between the Creator and his creature.

Where did this idea originate? Basically, the ceramic model of the universe came out of cultures with monarchical forms of government. And so, for them, the maker of the universe was also conceived as the

king of the universe—“King of kings, Lord of lords, only Ruler of princes . . .”—I’m quoting from the Book of Common Prayer here. People who orient themselves to the universe in this way relate to basic reality as a subject relates to a king, and so they’re on very humble terms with whatever it is that runs the whole show. I find it odd that here in the United States, citizens of a democracy still hold to such a monarchical theory of the universe.

So the idea that we must kneel, bow, and prostrate before the Lord of the universe out of humility and respect is a holdover from ancient Near Eastern cultures. But why? Basically, no one is more frightened than a tyrant. That’s why he sits with his back to the wall while you must approach him from below with your face to the ground. See, you can’t use your weapons that way. When you approach the ruler, you don’t stand up and face him, because you might attack him. And very well you might, because he rules your life, and the man who rules your life is the biggest crook in the bunch. In other words, the ruler is the one who’s allowed to commit crimes against you; *criminals* are just people we lock up in jail.

So, when you design a church, what does it look like? Although this has changed in some cases, for the longest time the Catholic Church placed the altar with its back to the wall at the east end of the building. The altar is the throne, and the priest is the chief—the vizier of the court—and he makes obeisance to the throne in front. And all the people face the throne and kneel down before it. A great Catholic cathedral is called a basilica, from the Greek *basileus*, which means “king.” So a basilica is the house of the king, and the ritual of the Catholic Church is based on the court rituals of Byzantium. A Protestant church looks a little different—it resembles a judicial courthouse—but its appearance betrays a belief in the same model of the universe. The judge in an American court wears a black robe, as did Protestant ministers, and everyone sits in some kind of box—pulpits and pews that resemble where the judge and members of the jury sit.

These forms of Christianity share an autocratic view of the nature of the universe, so the architecture of their churches reflects that view.

The Catholic version builds everything around the *king*, whereas the Protestant church is designed around the *judge*. But when you try to apply these images to the universe itself—to the very nature of life—you find them very limiting.

To begin with, let's look at the supposed split between matter and spirit—an idea essential to the ceramic model. What is *matter*? It's a question that physicists once attempted to explore, because they sought to understand the fundamental substance of the world, but that question—"What is matter?"—is one they stopped asking long ago. See, in exploring the nature of matter, physicists realized they could only describe it in terms of behavior—in terms of form and pattern. In finding smaller and smaller particles—atoms, electrons, protons, all sorts of nuclear particles—you never arrive at any fundamental stuff, so you can only describe how it appears to act.

What happens is this: We use the word *stuff* because that's how the world looks when our eyes are out of focus. We think of stuff as if it were some kind of undifferentiated goo, but that's merely because our vision is fuzzy. When we focus, we're able to see forms and patterns, and all we can really talk about is patterns. The picture of the world offered by the most sophisticated efforts of physics today is not one of formed stuff or potted clay, but patterns—self-moving, self-designing, dancing patterns. But our common sense hasn't yet caught up with this new picture.

And that brings us to our second operating image of the world—the fully automatic model. As Western thought evolved, the ceramic model ran into trouble. For the longest time, Western science was influenced by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to assume that particular laws of nature existed and that these laws were established in the beginning by the Creator, the maker of the universe. So we have tended to think of all natural phenomena as obeying certain laws according to plan, like a well-behaved machine—a timely streetcar, train, or tram. Well, in the eighteenth century, Western intellectuals began to question this idea, specifically whether or not a prime mover—a universal architect—actually exists. They reasoned that there might be universal laws, but that doesn't necessitate a creator of those laws.

See, the hypothesis of God did little in the way of helping to make predictions, and that's the business of science: *What's going to happen?* By studying the behavior of the past and describing it carefully, we can make predictions about what's going to happen in the future—that's really the whole of science. And to do this and to make successful predictions, it turns out that you don't need God as a hypothesis, because it makes no difference to anything. So they dropped the God hypothesis and kept the hypothesis of law, because you can make predictions from behavioral regularities in the universe. They got rid of the law-maker and kept the law.

And this is how we arrived at the current conception of the universe as a machine, as something that functions according to clocklike, mechanical principles. Newton's image of the world is based on billiards—atoms are like billiard balls that bang each other around at predictable angles. And the behavior of every individual, therefore, is viewed as a complex arrangement of billiard balls being banged around by everything else. This is the fully automatic model of the universe. The notion of reality as blind energy. We see this in the nineteenth-century thought of Ernst Haeckel and T. H. Huxley, who described the world as nothing but unintelligent force, as well as in the philosophy of Freud, who identified our basic psychological energy as libido—blind lust.

So, according to this view, we're all flukes. Out of the exuberance of blind energy and the result of pure chance, here we are with all our values, languages, cultures, and love. It's like the idea that one thousand monkeys banging away at one thousand typewriters for millions of years will eventually write the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and then immediately relapse into typing nonsense. But if we subscribe to this idea and like being alive and human, we end up needing to fight nature at every turn, because nature will turn us back into nonsense the moment we let it. And so we impose our will upon the world as if it were something completely alien to us—something that exists on the outside. That's why we have a culture based on the idea of war between people and nature.

Additionally, in the United States, we define manliness in terms of aggression. I think it must be because we're frightened. We put on this show of being tough guys, but it's completely unnecessary, you know. If you have what it takes, you don't need to put on an act, and you certainly don't need to beat nature into submission. Why be hostile to nature?

You are not something separate from nature. You are an aspect or a symptom of nature. You, as a human being, grow out of this physical universe in exactly the same way that an apple grows out of an apple tree. A tree that grows apples is a tree with apples, just as a universe in which human beings appear is a universe of human beings. The existence of people is symptomatic of the kind of universe we live in, but under the influence of our two great myths—the ceramic and fully automatic models of the universe—we feel that we do not belong in the world. In popular speech, we say, “I came into the world,” but we didn't—we came *out* of the world.

Most people have the sensation that they are a *something* that exists inside a bag of skin. We feel we are a consciousness looking out at this thing. And then we look at others who resemble us and consider them as people as long as they have similar skin color or religion or what-have-you. Note that when we decide to destroy a particular set of people, we always define them as *unpeople*—not exactly human. So we call them monkeys or monsters or machines, but definitely not people. Whatever hostility we carry toward others and the external world comes from this superstition, [this myth,] an absolutely unfounded theory that we're something that only exists inside our own skin.

I want to propose a different idea. Let's start with the big bang, the theory that billions of years ago, there was a primordial explosion that flung all these galaxies and stars into space. Let's just say for the sake of argument that was the way it happened. It's like someone took a bottle of ink and smashed it against a wall—the ink spread from the big splash in the middle, and out on the edges you have all of these fine droplets in complicated patterns. Just like that, there was a big bang at the beginning of things, and it spread out through space, and you and

I are sitting here as complicated human beings way out on the fringes of that initial explosion.

If you think that you are something that exists inside your own skin, you will define yourself as one complicated, tiny curlicue among others out on the edge of space. Maybe billions of years ago, you were part of that big bang, but now you aren't—you're something separate. But it's only because you've cut yourself off; it all depends on how you define yourself. And here's my alternative idea: If there was a big bang at the beginning of time, you are not something that is the *result* of that explosion at the end of the process. You *are* the process.

You are the big bang. You are the original force of the universe manifesting as whoever you are in the moment. You define yourself as Mr. or Mrs. or Ms. So-and-So, but you're actually the primordial energy of the universe that's still in process. It's just that you learned to define yourself as something separate.

This is one of the basic assumptions that follows from the myths we've been taught to believe. We actually think that separate things and separate events exist. I once asked a group of teenagers how they would define a "thing." At first they said, "A thing is an object," but that's just a synonym—just a different word for "thing." But then one smart girl in the group said, "A thing is a noun," and she was right. But a noun isn't part of nature—it's a part of speech. Nouns don't exist in the physical world, and neither do separate things.

See, the physical world is *wiggly*. Clouds, mountains, trees, people—everything is wiggly. It's only when human beings get working on things that they build buildings in straight lines and try to make the world unwiggly. But here we are—sitting in rooms with all these straight lines—but each one of us is wiggly as all get-out.

When you want control over something that wiggles, it's pretty difficult. A fish is extremely wiggly. When you try to grab a fish, it slips right out of your grasp; so how do you get a hold of it? You use a net. In the same way, we use nets to hold on to the wiggly world. If you want to control a wiggle, you've got to throw some kind of net over it. That's our foundation for measuring the world: nets with so many

holes across and so many holes up and down to help us determine where each wiggle is in terms of the holes in that net. And this is how we break up wiggles into bits. This part of the wiggle is a thing, this other part of the wiggle is an event, and we talk about the bits as if they were separate things unto themselves. But in nature, wiggles don't come "pre-bitted." That's just our way of measuring and controlling patterns and processes. If you want to eat a chicken, you have to cut it up in order to take a bite—it doesn't come already *bitten*. In the same way, the world doesn't come *thinged*. It doesn't arrive already *evented*.

You and I are as continuous with the physical universe as a wave is continuous with the ocean. The ocean *waves*, the universe *peoples*. But we have been hypnotized—literally hypnotized—into feeling and sensing that we exist as separate entities inside our own skin. We don't identify with the original big bang—we think we are just something out on the end of it. So we're all scared stiff. Because our wave is going to disappear, and we're going to die, and that's going to be just awful. As one priest I know is fond of saying, "We're nothing. But something happens between the maternity ward and the crematorium." And that's the mythology we're operating under. Which is why everyone feels unhappy and miserable.

Some people might claim to be Christians. They might go to church, might say they believe in heaven and the afterlife, but they don't. They just think they *ought* to believe in such and such a way. They just believe they *should* believe in the teachings of Christ, but what they really believe in is the fully automatic model. And most of us believe this way—that we're some kind of cosmic fluke, that we're a separate event occurring between the maternity ward and the crematorium, and lights out—that's it.

Why would anyone think this way? There's no reason to—it isn't even scientific. It's just a myth, a story invented by people who wanted to feel a certain way or play a certain game. See, the game of God became embarrassing. We started with the idea of God as a potter or architect or creator of the universe, and that was good. It made us feel that life was important, that we had meaning, that there was a God

who cared. We had a sense of feeling valuable in the eyes of the Father. But after a while, it became embarrassing when we realized that God could see everything we felt and did, right down to our innermost thoughts and feelings. So in order to get rid of that feeling, we became atheists and just started to feel terrible. Because when we got rid of God, we got rid of ourselves. We became nothing but machines.

As Camus put it in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide.” And if you believe in the fully automatic model—that you’re some kind of separate consciousness existing by yourself out in the blind mechanism of space—then the question of suicide makes a lot of sense. So, whether or not you should commit suicide—that’s a good question. Why go on? You should only go on if the game is worth it. The universe has been going on for an incredibly long time, so a satisfactory theory of the universe has to be one worth betting on. That’s just common sense. If you want to go on playing the game, you need an optimal theory for playing it, otherwise you might as well commit suicide, because there’s no point in the game.

The people who came up with the fully automatic model were playing a funny, sideways kind of game. They said, “All you people who believe in religion are old ladies and wishful thinkers. You want your big daddy up there in the sky to comfort you through the hard times, because life is rough and painful. And the only way you can succeed in life is to bite back and get tough. You have to be strong and face facts. Life is just a bunch of junk, and you have to impose your will on the world and make it do what you want.” And this was a convenient theory to come up with when the Europeans were out in the world colonizing natives everywhere. It was a way of justifying their actions and flattering themselves.

Even today, if you’re an academic, intelligent person, you’re expected to believe in the fully automatic model. No other theory of the world is considered respectable. So, to be an intellectually rigorous person, you’re supposed to be prickly.

There are basically two kinds of philosophy: *prickles* and *goo*. Prickly people are precise and logical—they like everything chopped up and clear.



On the other hand, goo people like it vague. In physics, prickly people are those who believe that the ultimate constituency of matter is particles, whereas goo people believe in waves. In philosophy, prickly people are logical positivists, and goo people are idealists. And they're always arguing with each other. But neither could take a position without the other person, because you wouldn't know that you advocated prickles unless there were someone out there advocating goo. You can't know a prickle without the goo. And life is neither prickles nor goo—it's gooey prickles and prickly goo.

I'm a philosopher. If you don't argue with me, I don't know what to think. So if we argue, I have to say "thank you," because owing to the courtesy of your taking a different point of view, I understand what I think and mean. So I can't get rid of you.

But this whole idea that the universe is nothing but unintelligent force playing around out there and not even enjoying it is an incredibly insulting theory of the world. And the people who made that game—the game of putting the world down—thought they were superior because of it. But that just won't do. If you go along with that theory of the world, you become alienated, you feel the world is a mechanism, a trap, and you begin to feel hostile toward it. As if it were a cold arrangement of electronic and neurological mechanisms into which you somehow got caught. And you're stuck in this body that's falling apart, poor thing—you get cancer, the great Siberian Itch, and it's all just terrible. And these mechanic doctors try to help you out, but of course they can't succeed in the end—you're just going to keep falling apart and it's a grim business and it's just too bad. So, in this scenario, if you think that's the way things are, you may as well commit suicide right now.

But maybe you think, after all, that there might be eternal damnation lurking somewhere as a consequence of suicide. Or you think of your children, how they won't have anyone to support them if you kill yourself. So you decide to go on. So you go on in the same frame of mind and teach your children to do the same. And then they go on and support their children without enjoying their lives, and they're afraid to commit suicide too, and so will their children.