

A MYSTICAL EPISTEMOLOGY

the universe... appears to be organized in ways that enable it to observe and know itself.

So writes Joanna Macy in *World as Lover, World as Self* (1991:75). The argument, from Buddhist and systems approaches to perception and epistemology, is that it is an error in thinking to place “reality” either in the outside world, as do classical empiricists, or in the mind alone, as do subjective idealists. For the Buddha, she explains, reality *co-arises* in the process of perception:

We create our worlds, but we do not do so unilaterally, for consciousness is colored by that on which it feeds; subject and object are interdependent. The Buddha denied neither the “thereness” of the sense objects nor the projective tendencies of the mind, he simply saw the process as a two-way street. The conditioning is mutual (Macy, 1991:68)

Joanna Macy draws on systems thinking to make a similar point: open systems maintain and organize themselves through feedback loops, circuits of information which both maintain stability (negative feedback loops) and allow for creativity and change (positive feedback loops). As Gregory Bateson (Bateson, 1972) pointed out, “mind” does not reside only in the individual but in the information circuits which flow through the whole ecological system. From a systems point of view, organisms learn when new pathways, new loops and circuits of information are formed. Reality arises through mutual causation in the very process of the ecosystem’s self-organizing and self-maintaining.

The point that Joanna Macy is making is really identical to that which John Heron and I make in our paper on a participatory worldview. We argued that there is a given cosmos, a primordial reality, in which the mind actively participates and that mind and the given cosmos are engaged in a co-creative dance. What then emerges as “reality” is the fruit of an interaction of the given cosmos and the way mind engages with it.

Worlds and people are what we meet, but the meeting is shaped by our own terms of reference. (Heron, 1996: 11)

And as Bateson puts it, we are in

... a region where you are partly blown by the winds of reality and partly an artist creating a composite out of inner and outer events. (in Brockman, 1977:245)

Knowing then is a process: there is no ultimate truth to be known. But that doesn’t throw us into a nihilistic relativism, for there are processes of knowing are more or less valuable because they are more or less transparent. Joanna Macy

points to the Buddhist practice of *vipassana*, insight meditation, as one in which the illusion of a separate self doing the knowing of an external reality can make way to an awareness of the process of perception itself. And the process of cooperative inquiry, cycles of action and reflection within a community of inquiry, is in itself a discipline through which knowing-in-action reveals itself.

So knowing doesn't reside in the knower, nor does truth in what is known, but in-between. And from there we go to this marvellous proposal that the universe is organized in such a way as to be able to observe and know itself. She is not trying to suggest that the universe knows itself in the reflexive self-conscious way that humans do—although of course it is easy to miss the point that we humans are part of the universe, as so in that limited sense humans *are* the universe observing and knowing itself.

Is it then possible to discover experiential evidence for this epistemological argument. Can I *experience*—see, hear, feel, intuit—the universe observing and knowing itself? I shall go outside and see what I can find out.

Outside

I can start with the process of finding a place to sit outside. I had to find my long john's, and then my hat, both of which involved going upstairs to my shared bedroom and trying not to disturb George, who was already writing. This involved loops of knowing that reached away from me into different parts of the house, and moment-to-moment feedback as I walked up the stairs, one step after another, my body knowing where it was in relation to the steps, or more accurately, a body-climbing-stairway whole. Does the stairway know I am climbing it? Well, the question is already dualistic, but yes, we can imagine the feedback loops in the relation between the treads and the structure of the stairs, so that the one supports the other.

When I got outside I went, using a mental image, to the garden bench that I sat on yesterday. Now, I could say I immediately thought, "This is too cold"; I could say, "My body immediately told me I was too cold"; or that the wind drove me away. Today it feels as if I (who is this I anyway?) can say that the bodywind was too cold.

Just as in the story writing, just as Barbara says, there seems to always be a narrator. But the narrator is not the ego. Huh! The narrator is a device, a relatively permanent point from which a perspective can be offered. This is so both in writing *and* in epistemology! The narrator doesn't have to be the primary character of the story, even when one is writing in the first person, for there is another, slightly shadowy figure there, who we can call the narrator. If this is so of the narrator is it also true of the knower? So that the "knower" is a relatively permanent point from which the universe observes itself, knows itself and wonders about itself (herself? himself? themself? Gaiaself?)

I hear the wind in the tree to my left. The wind in the tree beckons my attention away from that last piece of interesting abstraction. The narrator changes. He (or they) are sitting in the sun. And the tree beckoned, as now does a blackbird song

“I” am cosy-toasty now. “This place” is cosy-toasty.¹ Brother wind sweeps more gently round the corner and fans my face.

Grass speaks to the sun. the tulip, man-made artificial red, also reaches to the sun and dances with wind. Man sits and wonders, slipping in and out of ego. birds scold. wind dances in the tree, dancing and making music at the same time, wind-tree music.

I love you. Love? I am you. I am you and you are me.

the lawnmower starts. I (temporary narrator) saw the gardener-man pulling hard on the startercord, the engine bursting into short life and dying, More pulling of the man-startercord-engine. Now they are manriding tractor, or is it tractor-riding man?

Cold wind again, sun clouds cool the day. Legs cold then, Hey! sunclouds make warm again. “I” see that I almost disappeared from the writing and “I” get excited that for a second “I” “got somewhere”. (Me: it is very tiring putting in all those “”)

Computer-man is full of feedback loops which I—whoops— “I” don’t see. Like the one that give us “ then followed by ”—but we would need to be able to place more “ around each “ in order to make the writing clear!

And all through this mystical-epistemological-wondering there is a system which keeps going writing, fingers to keyboard (though black box) to screen to eyes (through glasses, think of the circuits of cultural knowing that these spectacles embody...)

This is a trip. I wonder if this mystical-epistemology (“I” love that phrase) will make any sense to anyone reading it? Is this an “editorial” comment, Barbara—whoops— “Barbara”, or is it just another loop in this loosened out way of seeing and being, in which “I” move in and out of ego and narrator?

“My” attention widens and narrows. It got just really focused when I was putting the “” around Barbara because somehow the machine didn’t want to put them the way round I thought they should go. Wind and trees and sun and chair and cold and spectacles all disappeared. The spectacles disappeared because I was looking through them.

¹ I managed to find an upright chair in the house which I could take to the front porch, and sit in the sun away from most of the breeze. With my long john’s and fleece jacket I was cosy-toasty. Just thought the reader might like to know the “objective” reality.

It is rather tiring doing this kind of writing and attention, I just caught myself —“I just caught “myself”—thinking about going in for a cup of tea. My ethereal kinaesthetic body was almost in through the door before I pulled it back to pay attention here. *Someone* has to be strict with all these feedback loops and different perspectives.

Crows, three crows, fly flap flap across the field, the sun startles off the back of the first one so that her black back is silver-gold-sun. “I” could get like “James Joyce” if “I” go on on like this (“this”?). The man-tractor just drove back into the garden without telling me... I just noticed as it disappeared.

I think what I am doing is a form of deconstruction, deconstructing the “I” which keeps wanting to be central. I am trying to write with different centres of awareness arising and falling, coming forward and moving away. The wind is doing this, teaching a lesson in knowing. She blows and plays with the branches of the tree, and lets them go again. Yesterday she and the trees were an orchestra, today they are a philosophy lesson.

I weep, ever so slightly, at the these insights. That is what “I” wanted to write, but it came out all ego-centred.²

Do you remember Charlie Brown? This little girl pesters him throughout the first three frames of the cartoon, asking “Charlie Brown, do you love me?” until at last he says, “Yes, I love you more than anything in the whole world!”. And in the last frame she says, “Even when he says it he doesn’t say it”

Even when I say it I don’t say it. So I got into fiddling with the keyboard, correcting the punctuation around those all quote marks.

Wittgenstein is reported to have sat on the edge of the lecturers’ platform in front of undergraduate students at Cambridge for half an hour or more, silent except for muttering, “This is damned difficult!” He was right. It always pleases me when I can understand a bit of Wittgenstein. It always pleases “me” when “I” can understand a bit of “Wittgenstein”.

References

- Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. San Francisco: Chandler.
- Brockman, J. (Ed.). (1977). *About Bateson*. New York: E P Dutton.
- Heron, J. (1996). *Co-operative Inquiry: research into the human condition*. London: Sage.

² Either I or “I” am/are getting over-excited here, “getting off” on a mystical-epistemological trip. “Getting off” like this seems to pull “me” strongly back into one-perspective ego, with words like “insight” and, goddess forbid, Enlightenment (with or without a Capital E) creeping in. What I wanted to notice was a sense of delight, I am not sure where it originates, as “we” move in and out of different ways of knowing oneself.

Macy, J. (1991). World as Lover, World as Self. Berkeley, California: Parallax Press.