

What happens when God describes Utopia?: Neale Donald Walsch's utopian vision

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The first part of this article will discuss the writings of Neale Donald Walsch, and in particular one of his best-selling books, *Conversations with God Book 2*, in which what purports to be a dialogue with God, Walsch outlines a utopian vision of society. In the second part, I offer some reflections on an area of thought which has interested me recently, namely current theories on Emergence and Complex systems. Hopefully some connections between the first and the second parts of this essay will eventually emerge.

For those of you unfamiliar with Neale Donald Walsch's *Conversations with God* series of three books, they began to appear in the mid 1990s and are a record of what Walsch claims to have been a series of conversations with God, in the form of dialogue. Book One can be read as a thorough deconstruction of most people's traditional notions of God and a reappraisal of what a relationship with the divine might mean for an individual in the contemporary world, while Book Two considers how this new understanding could be applied on a broad, social level, and offers a blueprint for a contemporary utopia. Book Three goes on to deal with more obscure themes such as life on other planets, reincarnation, etc. Walsch's conversations have continued up to last year's publication, *Tomorrow's God*, although this book ends with God announcing that it is now Walsch's turn to speak on his own, integrating his voice with the divine.

About half of Book Two is dedicated to God's outlining his/her/its – Walsch purposely varies gender often mid-sentence to challenge traditional Western characterisations of the divine as male – current vision of a better world. Briefly, the conversation covers an education system whose core

syllabus would be values-based rather than fact-based, along the line of the Rudolf Steiner and the Waldorf schools. There would be a redistribution of current massive military spending into social and welfare programmes for the poor throughout the world. But to achieve such global aims, individuals must first be clear about their own aims. God says, “World peace is a personal thing” and “Anger is fear announced” (Walsch 1997b: 152, 151). So, for war to be eliminated from Walsch’s utopian world, individuals would have to, first, achieve a peace within which would allow them to see their apparent needs as mere preferences, and to develop a fearless sense of self, which would no longer be dependent on an outer material expression to affirm itself.

It must be said that Walsch’s God never espouses a particular social idea as right or wrong. Rather she/it/he simply affirms that a certain idea/attitude when put into action will tend to produce a certain result, and it is the duty of individuals and collectives to decide what their grandest vision of themselves is, and then ask themselves whether a particular practice serves to bring that vision into the realm of experience or not. Hence, perhaps surprisingly, God’s utopian vision here is not new, and, as it is acknowledged, cannot be new, but it is rather a composite of the very best ideas of past and present utopian thinkers for experiencing what mankind generally holds as its highest values – justice for all, declaring the truth, loving one’s neighbour, etc.

In God’s view, the purpose of life is to “create anew and Know, Who You Are *in your experience*” [original italics] (*idem*, 158) and certain design features make it possible for us to experience our true nature in this life. Three key characteristics of this life are, firstly, its relativity, whereby you can exist only as an entity in relationship to someone else; secondly, forgetfulness, a “process by which you willingly submit to total amnesia, so that you can *not know* that relativity is merely a trick, and that you are All of It” (*idem*, 158); and thirdly,

Consciousness, a state of Being in which you grow until you reach full awareness, then becoming a True and Living God, creating and experiencing your own reality, expanding and exploring that reality, change and *re-creating* that reality as you stretch your consciousness to new limits – or shall we say, to *no limit*. [original italics] (*ibidem*)

The point of all this forgetting and then remembering is that we can thus create “Who we are and who we want to be,” so that, as God says, “through you [mankind] I experience being Who and What I Am. Without you, I could know it

but not experience it”, and God goes on to say, “I’ll choose experience every time” (*idem*, 159). Walsch’s radical message is that there is no essential separation between the human and the divine, as they are both aspects of the same absolute consciousness. In moving from one stage of consciousness to another, through cycles of amnesia and remembrance, growing human awareness of its true divine, creative nature simultaneously allows the absolute all-encompassing consciousness to experience itself.

The social structure of the utopia outlined in Walsch’s book emerges from a collective ever higher awareness, in which people follow “Laws of Love” which make legislation unnecessary. Like the Ten Commandments, asks Walsch? No, comes the answer; the Ten Commandments do not represent God’s requirements of mankind: as God is everything how can he require anything of anyone? The Ten Commandments are, rather, merely the description of ten types of behaviour which a person living according to the highest values would naturally manifest. “Thou shalt not...” would be better rephrased as “You, – when you realise your divine nature, and live according to it, simply WILL NOT... do such and such a thing”. Of course while we labour under the illusion of separateness, governments will have to legislate.

Sometimes Walsch seems to ventriloquize a voice representing right-wing Christian America, to put across attitudes he imagines some of his readers might harbour towards points arising the dialogue. So, for example, this projected voice at one point asks in horror whether God is a Communist. When the discussion comes onto the *Communist Manifesto*’s “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need”, God recognises its/her/his inspiration behind the idea, but also recognises that before this fundamental tenet could manifest, basic human nature would need to shift from a selfish individual to a loving collective consciousness. Walsch’s conservative voice wonders whether such a group consciousness would not cause the individual’s to be disempowered. The answer that comes is that, from a collective consciousness’s point of view, the idea of one person being well-off while others are dying is unthinkable, as a collective sensibility would experience “well-offness” and destitution simultaneously. The individual who fears their disempowerment as a result of a more equitable distribution of wealth is merely ignorant of the ultimate reality, not “evil” *per se*, and so will not be “condemned”

in any sense. There is no punishment in this utopia, but simply varieties of experience resulting from particular world-views. And besides, as God says, “no-one does evil given his model of the world” (Walsch 1997b: 171). If this is indeed the case, then while it does not relieve the perpetrators of evil or their victims of their suffering, it does relieve us of the right to assume that anyone is in any sense condemned in any metaphysical sense. Julian Barnes seems to be making the same point in the final section of *The History of the World in Ten-and-a-half Chapters*, which was set in heaven. It may be recalled that the protagonist was at first horrified and then fascinated to discover that one of the famous people he could choose to meet there was Adolf Hitler.

Other characteristics of God’s utopia are the elimination of money, in order to overcome the problems caused by its invisibility, or the fact that it can be hidden so successfully, and the setting up of a World Wide Compensation System (WCS) of credit and debit, in which knowledge of all earnings and savings, individual and corporate, would be public and freely available to all. Price tags would display both price to consumer and production cost to encourage fair trade.¹ The WCS would deduct 10% on all earnings for those volunteering it. Of course, complete financial visibility would ensure a tendency of even reluctant earners to volunteer their tithe; by reluctant earners I mean those still labouring under the illusion of their individual consciousness, which allows them to think that they can be rich while others go without. These voluntary deductions would support government programmes and services as voted on by the people, and would replace income tax as such.

Such visibility would not mean that all thoughts were visible; the only requirement would be for honesty at the moment of communication. Similarly, that traditionally great moment of total visibility, the moment of one’s death, when we stand before God and have all our sins relived before us and are judged accordingly, is revealed here by God for the illusion it has always been. There is no final judgement. As God does not consider actions in terms of right or wrong, and so has no grounds for condemning, death is nothing to fear, therefore. It is, rather, a wonderful moment when the illusion of our separateness from each other will be finally dispelled, even for the most hardened individualist.

God recognises that at lower levels of consciousness violence may break out, wars will persist while people are under the illusion they can be won. The solution is a World Court and a peace-keeping force, with all 160 nations as guarantors. For global decision-making, Walsch's book proposes a congress of two representatives per nation, and an assembly with proportional representation. A simultaneous federal system would ensure most governmental decision-making will be taken at more local levels. One might suspect that God is behind the European idea of subsidiarity, even if not responsible for thinking up the term itself.

What about the redistribution of wealth? What about those who work harder and earn more than others? These are concerns expressed by Walsch's hypothetical right-winder. In response, God defends equality of opportunity not equality of fact, as clearly some people will prefer to experience monetary wealth, while others will seek to enrich themselves through different types of experience. The divine solution is for there to be a mutually agreed limit to any individual's maximum earnings, up in the millions, so enough for most of us to feel more than comfortably provided for. Beyond that limit, all further earnings would be put into a charitable trust: 60% being spent in the community along lines specifically chosen by the original earner, while 40% would be administered by government. There would be no limit to earnings, simply a limit on their being retained in their totality, beyond a certain amount.

In conclusion to his book Walsch writes of the society it envisages:

It is not an organisation or an element of society so much as it is a process by which all of society shifts from one way of being to another. It is the hundredth monkey theory in action. It is about critical mass. I have presented this material here, exactly as it was given to me, in order to assist in facilitating that movement, to help in achieving critical mass, and producing that shift. (*idem*, 255)

There are a few things that strike me as being of particular interest in this utopia. The first is that by being conceived globally, like Al-Farabi's paradise, and unlike Thomas More's island, which is linked by a causeway to a non-utopian mainland, Walsch's utopia eliminates the problems of setting and maintaining boundaries which other utopian visions always struggle to overcome. I would like to offer two examples to illustrate this point: in the film *The Village*, directed by M Night Shyamalam, the utopian community maintains

its outmoded values by cutting itself off from the modern world with a border wall which is regularly patrolled by a private security company, and the community's continuity is threatened when one of its members, Ivy, gains special insight into the group's taboos and breaches the wall, later to return; or, to offer a historical instance, in William Lane's *New Australia* project in Paraguay in the late 19th century, disintegration of the community was attributed by the founder to his fellow utopians' (sexual) relations with the non-utopian natives in the forest beyond the palisade. Walls and boundaries are always fundamental problems for utopian communities to resolve.² The second point of particular interest is that by suggesting a two-level system of government simultaneously on a local federal level and on a global international level, it provides in the first instance a legislative and political entity which corresponds to the individual consciousness of separateness, which is an inevitable aspect of our embodied experience of our own lives, while in the second instance it offers a legislative and political entity which corresponds to the group consciousness of the ultimate unity of all things. It is as if the dual form of government is a macrocosmic analogy of the awareness of the individual, at a microcosmic level, of their existence as apparently separate and yet ultimately unified.

And now to come on to Emergence Theory.

Emergence Theory is best explained with the frequently used example of the ant community. The highly organised structure of the ant community into areas such as a food store, a nursery, a rubbish tip and a cemetery³ is a form of ordered behaviour which emerges through the interaction of all the members of that community. However, from our knowledge of the rather limited behavioural patterns of individual ants, we can suppose that the order which is evident when we consider the entire community is beyond the intellectual grasp of individual members of that community, and certainly not the product of any individual's will. According to Paul Cilliers, emergent behaviour is produced in a self-organising complex system. What does he mean by "self-organising"? Cilliers states that "the capacity for self-organisation is a property of complex systems which enables them to develop or change internal structure spontaneously and adaptively in order to cope with, or manipulate, their environment" (Cilliers 1998: 90).

What are the main attributes of a self-organising complex system?
Cilliers enumerates eight.

1) The structure of such systems is not the result of an *a priori* design, and not determined directly by external conditions. Structure results from the interaction between the system and its environment.

2) Such a system can therefore adapt dynamically to changes in the environment.

3) In such a complex system, adaptation is not simply a process of feedback/regulation which can be described linearly. It involves higher-order non-linear processes which cannot be modelled by sets of linear differential equations. A thermostat, for example, which switches on or off according to changes in its environment would not be considered a self-organising complex system.

4) Self-organisation is an emergent property of a system as a whole. The system's individual components only operate on local information and general principles. Macroscopic behaviour emerges from microscopic interactions.

5) Self-organising systems increase in complexity. Since they "learn" from experience, they "remember" previous situations and compare them to new ones, to determine best behaviour. So an increase in complexity also at least partly explains why self-organising systems tend to age, becoming saturated at some stage.

6) Self-organisation is impossible without some form of memory. Without memory, systems would only mirror the environment. So with a self-organising entity there is always a history. The diachronic component cannot therefore be ignored in descriptions of the system, since previous conditions influence present behaviour. Forgetfulness also plays its role – as information which is no longer used fades away. This process not only creates space in memory; more importantly, it provides a measure of the significance of the stored pattern. The more a pattern is used, the stronger its representation in memory. Use it or lose it. Self-organisation is only possible because the system can remember *and* forget.

7) Similarly, the self-organising process is not guided or determined by specific, pre-set goals, so it is hard to talk about the function of such a

system. Trying to introduce the notion of function runs the risk of anthropomorphising (*i.e.* the myth of the Queen Bee), or introducing an external reason for the structure of the system, such as a creative agent, for example “God”. One can, however, talk in terms of sub-functions, as component actions which contribute to the emergence of the overall pattern. The notion of function is closely related to our descriptions of complex systems, but the process of self-organisation cannot be driven by the attempt to perform a function. It is rather the result of an evolutive process whereby the system will simply not survive if it cannot adapt to more complex circumstances.

8) In the same way, it is not possible to give crudely reductionistic descriptions of self-organising systems. For example, when sand is poured slowly from above onto a disc, it will form a cone of sand. There will come a point where apparently the next grain of sand will cause an avalanche or dribble and the perfect cone will be temporarily impaired. To argue that the fall of one particular grain of sand “caused” the landslide would be erroneous. Pointing to one event as the cause of the next in a complex system is reductionist and therefore inappropriate. Only the system as a whole in its interaction with its environment can be understood to produce what appear to be subsequent events (see *idem*, 91-93).

To conclude, I would like to consider the view of society and how it works as set forth in Walsch’s book, in relation to Cilliers’s work. What happens if we consider society in terms of self-organising complex systems as outlined by Cilliers? As Walsch’s God observes, levels of unconscious behaviour produce emergent patterns of order. The more unconscious the behaviour of the individual, the less aware they are of how they contribute to the overall pattern of their society. Thus, supremely egocentric behaviour whether on a personal or national level might perceive doing violence to another or going to war as beneficial, while the ability to observe the entire complex system would also see such behaviour’s detrimental effects, which in turn would annul any illusions of benefit. Similarly, the importance of memory and the ability to forget in Cilliers’s description of self-organising complex systems finds echoes in the process of creation described by Walsch’s God. Here, the process of forgetting our divine collective nature occurs when we, individually and collectively, willingly enter

into the illusion of relativity and separateness from each other at birth, or perhaps more accurately at the moment of our birth into language, as Lacan would argue. The process of remembering and gradually reawakening to the divine nature of our being in this life comes with the realisation that our experience of the universe is a result of the creative power of our thoughts, both individually and collectively, and that we are ultimately all one. For Walsch, minds which labour throughout their lives under the delusion of human beings' separateness from each other, will remember the truth of that delusion, when they suddenly awake to the reality of their divine and unified nature at the moment of their death. Remembering has therefore a sense not of merely recalling but also of finally unifying the hitherto dismembered – separate – elements. What is the point of all this? Can we talk in terms of this system, human society, as having a function? According to Cilliers, we cannot, as the system exists merely to perpetuate itself, as long as possible. The metafunction of this forgetting and remembering is, according to Walsch's God, is to enable the divine to experience itself, or, in terms more akin to Cilliers' argument, for the system to experience itself. This metafunction is only perceptible to us to the extent that we are able to align our thinking with the divine, and perceive the emergent order of the system, from outside, or above, or whichever positional metaphor you prefer, at the same time we form a miniscule part of it.

Cilliers claims that self-organising systems cannot be thought of as having an *a priori* plan, or single creative agent. Does Walsch's God act as a separate creative agent, according to his/her/its master plan? If there is no *a priori*, there can apparently be no teleological function to creation as traditional Christian thinking has held.

In Walsch's books, God does not judge in terms of destiny, does not judge actions in terms of good or bad, but rather limits observation to how certain sub-patterns of behaviour appear to produce certain temporary effects on the emergent order. However, there is no final goal, along the lines of building the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, as traditional teleology has formulated. Cilliers says that emergent order has no function; Walsch's God seems to say that what emerges is awareness, and that the function of growing awareness is merely to continue to grow and to manifest itself through changing patterns of behaviour, but there is no final goal at the end of it all.

As for Cilliers' observation that agency and *a priori* plans have no place in self-organising complex systems, this goes completely against traditional understandings of the role of the divine creator. However, Walsch's God eschews these traditional roles, too, and indeed comes close to self-destructing, or rather self-deconstructing, as it/she/he identifies that which is divine so closely with us – God experiences its/his/her creativity through us experiencing ours. According to Walsch, God is us, we are divine, God has no separate existence from the universe's. Just as the separation between us and our neighbours is illusory, so is the separation between God and us.

Cilliers cites Derrida's insistence on introducing Time into Saussure's model of how language systems work and how they generate meaning, through the Derridean concepts of "deference" and the awareness that the "metaphysics of presence" can only be achieved beyond now. Similarly, introducing Time into God's utopian society, as spelt out in Walsch's books, reminds us that society only exists as a process and processes can only manifest to us in Time, even if it is a process without a specific goal.

Much utopian thinking seems to be focussed on the achievement of future goals, which imply society moving from a present state of collective "lack" in the Lacanian sense, to a future state of abundance, where that "lack" is overcome. These days, from an individual perspective, Self-Help manuals and courses are structured along much the same lines as were the Christian Church's "spiritual exercises" in former times. Such a movement implies a process in time, a movement from the present of lack, to the future of abundance. Walsch's God encourages us to accept that, when we perceive our divine nature (a nature which by definition cannot lack anything), the illusion of our separateness from each other, or to put it another way our underlying oneness with the divine and with each other as reality in the present, then the sense of lack will be replaced by one of abundance, in the present. At the moment we accept this notion, the idea that it is possible to move from a state of lack into a state of abundance will be shown to be an illusion. When that illusion is dispelled, Walsch claims, Time will also be shown to be an illusion, a mere product of our limited selfish perspective on the various processes we live.

The state in which unity with the divine is experienced is not an imaginary one, or rather is no more imaginary than any other state described by

individuals who claim to have experienced them. It is at any rate one which has often been described by people within what might be called mystical literature.⁴ Of course, all such experiences happen to human beings who after their transcendent moment(s) of enlightenment return to live in their separate bodies and under a corresponding separate notion of Self. However, their moment of illumination, the literature suggests, generally teaches them that though they live as separate, they now know for sure and never forget that that apparent separateness is illusory.⁵

From the point of view of Cillier's descriptions of Self-Organising Complex Systems, it is as if, while under the illusion of the separateness of our Self from others, our understanding of the overall system is as limited as an individual ant switching from foraging for food to dragging dead ants to the colony cemetery because the overabundance of pheromones of other foraging ants triggers off in their brains a compulsion to change to another social role. We contribute to the overall creation of order while reacting to only the most local circumstances. On the other hand, when in the moment of illumination we have a momentary god-like glimpse of the overall pattern of society, the world, the cosmos, and see the interconnectedness of all things, it is as if an ant momentarily becomes the observer of the ant colony, who can see the emergent order, and realise how apparent individual decisions can contribute to that overall evolutionary pattern.

Walsch's utopian vision invites us to recognise and live in the knowledge of this higher awareness, when we understand how the apparent separation between us is an effect of our identity as created by language, and therefore ultimately illusory. The choice to look for, find and experience the emergence of this higher consciousness, and the society that such an awareness will produce, is always our choice now – we can act as ants or/and gods. In the words of the final lines of "A Talking Book", a poem by Don Patterson,

There is no wall
 Pick up your bed
 Walk through it –
 Last chance, friend,
 So do it, or don't do it. (Patterson 2004: 31)

Notes

¹ In fact Walsch's CWG web-site shop has put this into practice in cataloguing at least some of the items on sale there in this way.

² It is not really by being global that a utopian project solves the problems of boundaries with the non-utopian. In Walsch's case, his utopia must be global, because it can only exist as a result of an increased higher awareness in which everyone participates, and from which no-one is excluded or remains an outsider. It is global in the sense that it includes all minds on the planet, rather than all territory.

³ See research by Deborah Gordon at Stanford University, Palo Alto, as described in Johnson 2001: "The Myth of the Ant Queen", 29-72.

⁴ Two contemporary examples of this type of mystical writing are: Tolle 1999; and Parsons 1995 and, at greater length, 2002. But there are numerous others, both contemporary and historical, as for example, collected in Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness*, a classic collection of descriptions of mystical experience outside religious tradition.

⁵ It is interesting to note, as Tony Parsons points out, that there exists plenty of Self-Help teachers, gurus and other spiritual teachers, and I suspect utopian academics and other thinkers, who have a vested interest in keeping the goals of their programmes forever in the future, forever deferred, as in that way they attempt to guarantee their status as guardians and mediators of those goals, when in fact, Walsch's God, Parsons, Tolle and many others, argue that all necessary knowledge for the achievement of those goals, whether socially or individually utopian, is available to everyone all the time, without other people's intermediation.

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