The Difficulty in "Becoming What You Are"

A key message in Alan Watts' *Become What You Are* is rooted in the Taoist idea of allowing life to unfold naturally, without force or resistance. Watts argues that we are always living **our** lives, yet we often deny this by trying to control or direct our paths in ways that don't align with who we truly are. This effort to force life in unnatural directions causes dissatisfaction, as we neglect to explore our genuine desires and self. It is similar to the Jungian idea of the Shadow Self - the more we neglect and repress unwanted aspects of ourselves into our subconscious, these repressed traits gain strength. They ultimately end up overpowering us, influencing our behavior and choices in destructive ways. To put it concisely, Watts states that the struggle to control life is what leads to our discontent. A lovely analogy Watts uses for this idea is imagining that you are balancing on a rolling ball. The ball represents the continuous and uncontrollable flow of life. If we try to hold on to a moment, this is analogous to stopping on the ball, resulting in you falling off —life never stands still. Likewise, if you try to rush life (the ball), you will inevitably lose balance and fall. The only solution is to keep in rhythm with life, living in the present moment, accepting life's changes, and letting go of the urge to control or resist what happens next.

The issue facing all of us is that becoming what you are is becoming increasingly more difficult. Yuval Noah Harari outlines this dilemma in his 2023 WIRED interview :

> "Our society is built on the ideas that the voter knows best, that the customer is always right, that ultimate authority is with the feelings of human beings and this assumes that human feelings and human choices are a sacred arena which cannot be hacked, which cannot be manipulated. Ultimately, my choices, my desires reflect my free will and nobody can access that or touch that. **And this was never true.** But we didn't pay a very high cost for believing in this myth in the 19th and 20th century because nobody had a technology to actually do it. Now, people—some people—corporations, governments are gaining the technology to hack human beings. Maybe **the most important fact about living in the 21st century is that we are now hackable animals**."

As mentioned by Harari, since Watts' time, technology has become exceptional at influencing us; supernormal stimuli are so addictive that the average 16 to 24 year old is projected to spend almost 3

of the next 10 years of their life on a screen (See References for Calculation). The food industry and private health care profit off obesity and I'm sure there are many other agents influencing us that neither you nor I are aware of. *Can Watts' advice of allowing life to unfold naturally work in today's society?* Without some amount of forcing and resistance within one's life, too much will influence them without their knowledge. It is becoming a full time job to stay aware of all these influences and it's truly an heroic task trying to control what comes your way. You can not even consume any media without being exposed to ads, occasionally and accidently endeavouring on a rabbit hole or being trapped doom scrolling even though all you wanted to do was check your work email. If we are to concede and say it is impossible to prevent this, can we also say that we are becoming what we are, or are we becoming what a corporation or a government has influenced us to become —in order for them to benefit off us. There are too many questions one has to ask themselves. Even this fear that you are being controlled or influenced is a gold mine for corporations selling services that help you use your phone less; and in a more conscious manner. To some extent, Watts does talk about unseen and unquestioned influences in relation to what his students' true aspirations were. In a lecture entitled "Learning the Human Game" he observes that whenever he asked his students what they would do with their life if money were no object, they always replied that they'd be doing something vastly different to their current doings in life. He was suggesting that, since we were born we have continually been instilled with certain ideas about how life is supposed to unfold; we go to primary school, then secondary school, and if we were good enough at that, then more school at college. Then you get a job until you are about 60 and then retire and proceed to do what you actually wanted to do the whole time. This is an implicit idea that we all have and never really question. It is a **cultural belief**, at least in westernised communities. It isn't a very damaging belief but we interact with much more damaging ideas than this on a daily basis; with more frequency and in very palatable forms.

       As humans, we have always been influenced by what other humans are doing. This is part of cultural dissemination, it is how we learn from and how we relate with each other. The mode of this dissemination and the frequency of cultural exchanges has become astronomically different. By virtue of the internet and social media, the nature of cultural exchange and the advent of world culture have become very different prospects. The question is the following : **Is it possible to reach a state where**

we can question whether something is really what we want when we have all these different cultural influences that constitute the majority of our daily impressions; which shape our immediate sensations and emotions? (Here we are referencing an empiricists' definition of impression, see the references). We are inundated with so many different ideas from so many different peoples it's as if we never have to think for ourselves and we scarcely take adequate time out to think how we feel about things.

　　"And this was never true." This statement that our decision making was never fully free makes this article less dramatic. As such, it might be easier to say that every decision we make is a result of the amalgamation of impressions we have taken in. In a sense, this follows the philosophical concepts of Tabula Rasa and relates to empiricism : we are all blank slates, as we grow up our experiences shape our beliefs, wants, ideas, etc. We all grow up in a culture, so for all our lives we have been (are being) influenced by the culture we live in. This influence is usually not a process that is available to our conscious brain. As a result, decision making has a false air of free will. There is a magic to it; most of the time we couldn't objectively explain why we are doing what we are doing, why we like what we like. Individually, impressions change our brains, form the way we think, influence the way we speak, how we conduct our lives, among many other things. The act of receiving impressions is central to the spread of culture. Before we consciously process or form ideas about what we are observing, we have already been influenced by said culture, often imitating it unconsciously later on. These initial, unexamined impressions form the foundation of cultural transmission. With the advent of technology, this process has become even more pervasive and less perceptible. As Harari stated, technology has infiltrated our biology, shaping our neural pathways through constant exposure to digital stimuli. Our relationship with technology, particularly social media, has shifted toward consuming impressions at an unprecedented rate, often without the opportunity to digest them fully. This inundation of "micro-impressions" —millions every day—overwhelms our ability to process them in a way that integrates them meaningfully or healthily. If it was already difficult to recognize how cultural influences shaped us, this digital deluge leaves us more confused, disoriented, and detached from the origins of our thoughts and behaviors. Can we truly integrate such a relentless flow of impressions into a coherent sense of self?

This transforms the question from one of appraising our modern culture and questioning whether we want to adhere to it, to a question pertaining to the age-old theme of technological development at the expense of our psychology, spirituality and serenity. These are topics I'd like to explore in a more technical manner. For now, I'd like to end with a passage from Dostoevsky's The Idiot

"There must have been an idea more powerful than any disaster, famine, torture,leprosy, and all that hell which mankind could not have borne without that one binding idea which directed men's minds and fertilized the springs of life! Show me anything resembling that power in our age of depravity and railways… I meant to say our age of steamships and railways, but I say : depravity and railways, because I'm drunk but I tell the truth. Show me a force which binds today's humanity together with half the power it possessed in those centuries. And now dare to tell me that the springs of life have not been weakened and tainted under this "star", this net which ensnares the people. And don't try to browbeat me with your prosperity, your riches, the rarity of famine and the speed of communications! The riches are greater but the force is less; there is no more a binding principle; everything has grown soft, everything and everyone grown flabby! We've all grown flabby, all, all of us!..."

This is from page 557 and is the end of Lebedev's monologue which starts off about a russian cannibal— who "never ate babies by the way" — that was never caught and of his own volition, eventually turned himself in. Lebedev argues that even someone who is involved with something as evil as cannibalism still had some innate goodness inside of them — the binding principle. Lebedev's long tirade is all about how "depravity and railways" slowly chip away at this inherently good binding principle. We are all more connected literally, in the past by railways and now by algorithms and networks, but have we become distant from our fellow human beings' experience? Or is this just a silly point made by a drunk man for a laugh? In conclusion, it was never truly possible to become who you really are without some form of influence. We are being influenced at an ever increasing rate and even though it might be in vain, we all could benefit from decreasing the amount of impressions we receive online and spend a bit more time sitting with our own thoughts trying to discern the slight way in which we have changed today.

References:

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2.1 Hume's Theory of Ideas

Impressions are "all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul," and ideas are the "faint images" of impressions present in thinking and reasoning

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