

Spring 2010 - TSK Online Program – The Self in Question: part 3

Week 2 - Guide

I love the analysis in this chapter in terms of positioning and conditioning, and I find it very helpful as a way to look at different situations. The idea is that the self makes sure to justify its limited knowledge, and limited capacities for knowledge, by identifying closely with its particular situation, its location in time and space.

It's worth thinking about how this applies to our ordinary experience each day. Suppose I wake up and my back hurts. Soon I find myself worrying about an important meeting I have coming up. This seems to be the most natural set of circumstances in the world. That's what my life consists of: moving from one situation to another. But could it be otherwise? The backache is 'real' enough', but do I have to identify with it as 'my' condition? The meeting, and the concerns that make me anxious when I think of it, are also perfectly 'real'. But do I have to make those concerns into a central element in my experience?

There are two answers to these questions. The first is that we do indeed have to make those moves, because that is what the self does, and we are wholly committed to the self. All you need to do is look at how you live your life from moment to moment to see how convincing this answer seems to be.

The second answer is that making those moves is not in fact required. We could take a broader view, what I believe I have referred to elsewhere as 'the view from everywhere'. You might think about how this possibility relates to the possibility that time and space could 'already' be different.

The analysis of the role played by the bystander, who refuses to "embody or embrace what time presents" (264) offers a valuable insight into the role of knowledge in our universe. Again, we make a lot of assumptions about knowledge in our conventional understanding. The 'bystander' model helps clarify those assumptions, and it suggests how we might do it differently.

In the phone call, I'm going to be asking about the exercise suggested last week: to be aware of the stories that people inhabit.