

Talking In Circles

Serious Philosophical Dialogues
~ on the ~
Silliness of Serious Philosophy



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This book was written between 2011 and 2014
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to reprint any portion of this book.

I'd like to thank my family, my teachers, and my friends. You've
all stretched my mind and heart so much over the years.

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Talking in Circles

What is this little book, and what's the point of it?

To be frank, I can't give much of an answer to these questions. But perhaps that isn't being frank but sneakily informative. Maybe I can give an answer to the questions, and that is the answer. Or maybe I'm just speaking nonsense. I can't be quite sure if that's the case or not. And I can't be quite sure of that uncertainty either.

I apologize for my confusing, self-quarrelsome splattering of statements, but, as you may have guessed from the title, it is quite difficult to explain the contents of the following pages. If this series of dialogues is successful, it will accomplish absolutely nothing. These dialogues are concerned with a line of thought that undoes itself. But what exactly does that mean?

If I was a more competent writer, perhaps I could convey as much as this book conveys in a single sentence. For this book really is nothing but its single point, or, to be more precise, the repeated and insufficiently expressed instances of its point. I'd try say what that point actually is, but I'm afraid that I'd be of rather little help. For more help, let's ask the book's biggest fan (an imaginary fan, of course) and its biggest critic (if anyone ever cares enough to criticize it, which will probably not be the case):

CRITIC: What is this book, in essence?

FAN: What *is* it? It is *it!* It is *everything!*

CRITIC: *What?* How can it be *everything*? Everything sure seems like a lot of stuff, and you must be pretty silly to think that all of it could fit into a tiny book like this.

FAN: No, what you take to be everything isn't really anything at all.

CRITIC: Not anything at all? Certainly it is *something*.

FAN: But something isn't anything. Everything is *really* nothing.

CRITIC: If that's what you've come to after reading this book, I think you missed its point.

FAN: Well, undoubtedly if you think of this book as *having a point*, then you've certainly missed the point entirely.

CRITIC: But then you're saying it has a point as well!

FAN: Yes, I've missed its point too!

CRITIC: But then how can you claim to understand it?

FAN: Because its point is that I *have to* miss its point!

CRITIC: But then this book isn't anything!

FAN: No, it's everything!

CRITIC: It expresses nothing!

FAN: Nothing *is* everything!

Sorry about that; fans and critics of this sort of thing tend to get caught up in silly and confusing little arguments which go in circles, and I'm sure that wasn't much help at all. Or maybe it did help, as an example of the type of thing that is going to occur in these dialogues. The line of thought in the following dialogues, like the above argument, throws itself into circles, undoing every step that it makes. But once again, what exactly do I mean by thought that undoes itself? Can anything really undo itself entirely? Is it possible for anything to accomplish *nothing*? Perhaps not. Perhaps there is always some form of progress being made no matter how seemingly absurd. If that is the case, then I have no clue what strange thing is accomplished by these dialogues. If there's anything to pull from these dialogues, it's probably the fact that they're all nonsense.



To think 'it is,' is eternalism,
To think 'it is not,' is nihilism:
Being and non-being,
The wise cling not to either.

~ Nāgārjuna



‘To be is to do’—Socrates

‘To do is to be’—Sartre

‘Do be do be do’—Sinatra

~ Kurt Vonnegut



It's just a ride.

~ Bill Hicks

Prelude

PETE: Mr. Thinker, what's the meaning of life?

THINKER: What do you think this is, a tootsie pop commercial?



PETE: What on Earth do you even mean by that?

THINKER: The world may never know.

PETE: Are you intentionally being no help at all?

THINKER: No, I'm trying being as enlighteningly unenlightening as possible. We all bite the tootsie pop eventually—some of us just fight it longer than others.

PETE: What exactly does *that* mean?

THINKER: The world may never know.

PETE: Ok. I've had it with your deliberate obscurity. I'm going to get a second opinion from someone who will answer my questions in a straightforward manner. I'll see you later.

THINKER: You're leaving? Wait, what am I going to do now?

PETE: What are you asking *me* for? I don't know. It's a beautiful day, why don't you just relax and go for a nice walk or something?

THINKER: Hmm . . . *just relax*? Interesting . . . Oh, wait . . . no, it can't be . . . but it is . . . Is this? . . . Am I? No . . . no, no, no, it can't be . . . but—

PETE: Are you okay, Mr. Thinker?

THINKER: Me? Oh, yes, I'm fine. I'm just a bit loopy.

PETE: Alright, I'm going to go. You sure you're ok?

THINKER: *Me*? I'm a thinker! Confusion is like candy to me!

PETE: If that's really the case, then you'll recall what you just said—we all bite the candy eventually—so you won't fight it longer than what's good for you.

THINKER: Maybe. Or maybe I'll try to see how many licks I can count.

PETE: No, don't do that. Remember what happened last time you tried to do that?

THINKER: Yes, but this time someone's watching. This time there's an audience.

PETE: An audience?

THINKER: Yes, of course: the reader.

PETE: You're not supposed to refer to the reader yet! The dialogues just started! The reader will think you're crazy!

THINKER: No, no, didn't you read the subheading? This is the *prelude*. Part one doesn't start for another few lines.

PETE: I'm terribly sorry, reader. Mr. Thinker's decided to sacrifice his sanity for your amusement. Please bear with us here. It will all make sort of, somewhat, almost sense eventually.

THINKER: Says *you*, the sane one!

PETE: Stop it already! *We get it*. Once again, I'm really sorry about this, reader. Just try to pretend like this didn't just happen, and enjoy the dialogues.

THINKER: Oh, I see what you're doing! It's *part of it!* Oh, you're good!

PETE: Shut up, shut up, shut up. Ok, here we go . . .

Part One: Overture

1

GENIE: You have freed me from my lantern! I will now grant you three wishes!



PETE: I only have one, really.

GENIE: Well, that's just fine with me. What is it?

PETE: I wish to know the meaning of life.

GENIE: Hah! That's a good one. You're joking I hope.

PETE: No I'm not joking! You're an all-powerful genie, right?

GENIE: Right.

PETE: Then you should be able to answer the question, right?

GENIE: Wrong. If it was a legitimate question, I'd be able to answer it, but it's just a bad question.

PETE: How is it a bad question?

GENIE: Well, whose life are we talking about here?

PETE: No, that's not what I meant! I mean what is the meaning of life *in general*?

GENIE: Okay . . . by "life in general" do you mean the biological phenomenon of cells that metabolize and replicate themselves?

PETE: No, that's not what I mean either! Okay, maybe I did actually mean a particular life. What is the meaning of *my* life?

GENIE: Alright . . . In that case, in relation to whom or what do you want to know the meaning of your life?

PETE: I'm not sure I follow.

GENIE: You can't mean anything to a rock, a galaxy, or to anything without a perspective (and I don't know why you'd want to in the first place). I'm sure you mean quite a bit to your Mom and Pops. You probably mean something to your boss as well, although in a way that's a bit different than with your Mom and Pops. You want me to go down the list? We can place a bet as to whether you'll find it heartwarming or depressing!

PETE: No, that's not what I want to know! I can ask anyone what I mean *to them*; I don't need a genie for that. I want to know what I mean *in general*.

GENIE: Once again you've lost me with your term "in general." That question simply makes no sense.

PETE: Gosh, you're so picky about language. How about what I mean in relation to myself?

GENIE: Well if anyone knows the answer to that question, it ought to be you!

PETE: But I *don't*!

GENIE: Of course you don't. That's because it's a stupid question.

PETE: Why is it a stupid question?

GENIE: Because you *are* you! The standard of measurement can't be the thing that's *being measured*. That's like asking me to tell you how far a foot is in terms of feet.

PETE: Alright I have a new question then—

GENIE: So are you scratching that last wish, for a new one?

PETE: Sure, scratch that wish! Whether or not the whole “meaning of life” question is a good one or not, I can’t stop worrying about it. So I wish to know what I should do if I’m worried about the meaning of life.

GENIE: What should you do? Hmmm . . . You should realize how pointless that question is and not ask it anymore.

PETE: That’s your answer?

GENIE: Yup. That’s it. Wish granted.

PETE: So, you say I should realize how pointless that question is and not ask it anymore . . . how should I go about doing that?

GENIE: Well that’s essentially the same question, so my answer is still the same as the first time.

PETE: That answer is pointless then!

GENIE: Of course it is. The only way to answer a pointless question is with a pointless answer.

PETE: This is just too much for me now! This *whole discussion* has just been pointless!

GENIE: Would it help if I told you that your problem is the fact that you think that’s a problem.

PETE: No it wouldn’t help! What about God? He’s above all of this, so the meaning of life should be to serve him, and that is precisely what I should do! That must work, right?

GENIE: Well . . .

PETE: You do believe in God, right?

GENIE: Oh, of course I believe in God. I work for him. He created me so I could grant his wishes.

PETE: That's absurd! What could God possibly have to wish for that he couldn't do for himself?

GENIE: He wanted to know what the meaning of life was.

2

PETE: Mr. Thinker, I just had the most confusing conversation about the meaning of life and I was hoping you could—wait, why are you pacing?

THINKER: I'm not trying to pace. I'm trying to saunter.

PETE: Trying to saunter? Why is that?

THINKER: Because I realized I can never really solve the problem I'm working on, and I should just give up and go for a leisurely saunter.

PETE: Then why don't you just go do that?

THINKER: That's what I'm trying to do, but every time I start to truly saunter leisurely, the answer to the problem suddenly comes to me.

PETE: It does? Why don't you go write it down then?

THINKER: I try to! But as soon as I do that, my leisure ends, and, as soon as I'm no longer leisurely, I lose it! This is why I turn around every few steps or so. I rush back to my desk to write it down, but then my leisure has ended, and the thoughts are worthless. I then give up on my task, and return to my walk, realizing that this impossibility is why I decided to go for the walk in the first place. Once my leisure resumes, however, I once again come to a quick epiphany regarding the answer to my question. But then I am struck with the same sad failure, and the whole process repeats. So I'm not pacing with purpose; I'm just very indecisive about what I am to do.

PETE: I may be lost, but what problem is this that you're working on?

THINKER: It's a philosophical problem, the biggest, most important one of all time. It has spanned back through the millennia. It is the root of the fundamental tensions that arise between one person and another. It is *everything*. And yet I'm stuck in the state of repeatedly realizing that it's impossible to solve.

PETE: What *is it* though?

THINKER: It's the problem of how to be leisurely.

PETE: *Really?* That's *it*? That doesn't seem like a particularly difficult problem.

THINKER: That's where you'd be wrong. It's the most difficult problem. Indeed, it's an *impossible* problem. It's the problem to which an answer cannot be found in seeking.

PETE: Hmm, well that sounds strangely appropriate, given your circumstance. Is there a name for it?

THINKER: To name it would be to do it an injustice.

PETE: Oh *come on!* You're being ridiculous! Just tell me what it is!

THINKER: I can't. To even address the problem, I've already done it a disservice.

PETE: I've had it with these paradoxes! Come on, be straight with me!

THINKER: I'm sorry for the confusion, but I don't know how else I can possibly get at it. There is a truly bizarre moment in perhaps every philosopher's life when they realize that the best philosophers may not be philosophers at all, that, in the very act of philosophizing about the biggest philosophical problem, we have already thrown ourselves in the wrong philosophical path. We start going and going, and we say "Boy, look at this, we are really making progress!" And then all of a sudden it hits us that we have made no progress, and we are just going in circles and circles.

PETE: You still are making very little sense to me.

THINKER: Let me try to explain. Say you're running a marathon. You start at a certain point, and twenty-six miles later you're done. That's it, you finished it. You've reached the end. But say, instead of finishing the twenty-six miles, you run five miles and you think "Wait, why am I doing this? I don't even like running! I quit!" That's another way to reach the end of the marathon. It's a different sort of end. You didn't reach the end of *the* marathon, but you certainly

reached the end of *your* marathon. Now, with these two sorts of “ends” in mind, which sort do you think the end of *thought* is?

PETE: The end of thought?

THINKER: Yes. To understand the answer to the question that cannot be named is to reach the end of thought, to see where thought ultimately leads. But, unlike the case of the marathon, where you can clearly distinguish between the *two types* of reaching the end of the marathon, in thinking about this question, these two sorts of ends are identical. To win the game, so to speak, is to stop playing it. And when you realize this, there is a strange sort of loop you find yourself in. You realize that you’ll keep going around this loop insofar as you’re trying to answer the question, and in a way, this realization *is* the answer. I can try to show you, but . . .

PETE: Yes, please show me. I’m endlessly intrigued.

THINKER: No, wait . . . who do I think I am? I can’t *show you* it. It *can’t* be shown. I need to give it up, let go it, and just *be*.

PETE: Hold on . . . let go of *what*?

THINKER: But no, it’s everything. It’s *my* everything. It’s all I have! It’s *me*.

PETE: *What’s* you?

THINKER: No, *this* is me, and *this* is it. I’m *here*, here in this world with Pete.

PETE: Wait, slow down . . .

THINKER: You keep pulling me back, back here. Back to my earthly self. I keep trying to push outside of myself. Pull and push, being and doing, in and out . . . life and death. Oh my, this is it!

PETE: *What* is it?

THINKER: Oh yes! “What” indeed! Hah! I can feel it now! The flow! It all flows! It flows and flows and flows!

PETE: Ok, you’re just dancing around the room speaking nonsense now!



THINKER: Oh, *dancing*! Yes! That is all I’m doing! I’m just dancing!

PETE: What are you talking about?

THINKER: Everything! I'm talking about everything!
Everything and nothing! I'm talking about *this!*

PETE: *What?*

THINKER: This! This is it!

PETE: Stop! *Please*, stop.

(two seconds later)

THINKER: This . . . this . . . I'm here. I'm here in the world.
I'm still here. You . . . you're there. You're a *real person*, as
real as me, and I'm speaking nonsense to you. Oh my, I
forgot for a moment that it was all nonsense.

PETE: Are you ok?

THINKER: I'm terribly sorry. I just underwent
enlightenment.

PETE: You *what?*

THINKER: I just underwent enlightenment, awakening—
you know, that thing that all the mystics talk about. I just
understood everything in a single instance. The nature of
reality, of myself, of life and death, everything came together
and unified as one in the ultimate intellectual, aesthetic, and
existential experience.

PETE: No way! That's not fair! I want that!

THINKER: I'm sorry! I'd let you have one of my experiences if I could. That was the fourth time I underwent enlightenment this week.

PETE: *This week?* You've got to be kidding me!

THINKER: Well, I mean, it's my fourth *big* enlightenment this week. I've gone a whole bunch of mini-enlightenments in just the past few hours as I've been thinking about this problem of being leisurely. You saw me go through them actually.

PETE: I did?

THINKER: Yes, while I was "pacing." Every time I turned around from my leisurely saunter and ran toward my desk, I had just undergone a moment of enlightenment.

PETE: Are you sure? I don't mean to doubt you, but it seems a bit . . . trivializing.

THINKER: Yes, I'm absolutely positive. That was it. That was everything.

PETE: Can you at least explain it to me?

THINKER: It's what you just saw. It's dancing. That's all I can intelligibly say.

PETE: Oh, come on! You must be able to do better than that! You're a thinker!

THINKER: Hold on a minute . . . why are we even talking about this in the *first place?*

PETE: You were trying to explain your pacing. Remember?

THINKER: I was trying to explain my pacing? Why in the world was I trying to do that? Oh, that's simply hilarious. Was I under the illusion that I could try to *explain* this problem to you? I was, wasn't I? How silly of me! Why am I still thinking about any of this anyway? All of these thoughts are just nonsense.

PETE: But you've actually shed quite a bit of light on the problem for me!

THINKER: Don't you get it? I've shed no light! None, nada, zippo, zilch! There's no light shed because the whole problem is just the silliest thing in the world! I think I'm going for a swim; would you like to come?

PETE: No, you've just intrigued me so much more with all of this that I've just got to pursue this information now.

THINKER: Suit yourself! I'll be suiting myself in my bathing suit! Actually, not even! I'm going to suit myself in my birthday suit! Yippee!

3

PETE: Genie, how many wishes do I still have?

GENIE: As far as I can see, you still have two. Since you could not formulate a sensible question with regard to the "meaning of life," I did not count that. However, you said my answer to the question "what should I do" counted as an answer, so I am counting that as an answered wish. So yes, two left.

PETE: Ok, I think I have my second wish.

GENIE: Alright, let's hear it.

PETE: I wish to know what enlightenment is. A friend of mine tried to explain it to me, but I'm afraid he may have gotten enlightened in the process. He says that has a tendency to happen. Can you tell me what it is?

GENIE: Well, that's a somewhat vague question. There are a few different states that the people have talked about with the use of the English word, "enlightenment." Could you say a bit more about the state this friend of yours was in?

PETE: He said that he understood everything in a single instance, that everything came together and unified as one in the ultimate experience.

GENIE: Ah, alright, yes. I know exactly what neurological state your friend is talking about when he's using the term "enlightenment."

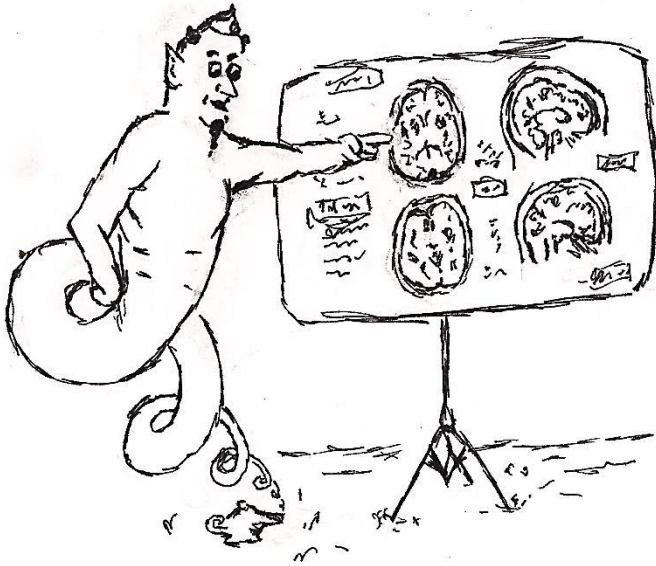
PETE: Neurological state?

GENIE: Why, yes. What else would it be?

PETE: I don't know; something more . . . profound.

GENIE: Well, hang on. It's quite an interesting neurological state, and it's one that has played quite a significant role in several religious traditions. Perhaps the religion in which it plays the most significant role is Zen Buddhism, where it's called "Kenshō." There are many facets to this state, but perhaps the most central one is that there's a decreased level

of activity in various areas of the brain's *cortex*, the outer layers of the brain. Particularly, there is decreased activity in the medial prefrontal cortex, one of the regions of the cortex which is involved in high-level cognitive processing such as self-reflection and meta-cognition. If you take a look at these brain-scans—



PETE: Sorry to interrupt, but, I don't think that talking about neuroscience will really answer the question that I'm trying to ask. How about, rather than one of those *scientific* explanations, give me the best *mystical* explanation possible.

GENIE: A *mystical* explanation? That sounds like an oxymoron to me. Since when do mystics *explain* things?

PETE: I don't know! But you're a genie! You must be able to give me a good mystical explanation of enlightenment! Your abilities are infinite!

GENIE: Ok, here it is: the best possible mystical explanation of enlightenment. Enlightenment is when a dog walks to a river, takes a quick dip, then shakes the water off and takes a nap in the shade.

PETE: Wow, that sounds pretty profound.

GENIE: Yup.

PETE: So what exactly does it mean?

GENIE: It doesn't mean anything! It's a joke! I just made it up! But it's as good of an explanation of what enlightenment is as anything else that you'll call "mystical." Listen, if you want to know what enlightenment is, I'll give you a completely satisfactory answer that deals with neurobiology, psychology, and anthropology. If you don't want this sort of explanation, then ask me something else.

PETE: Alright, so I was talking to a friend a mine who tried to explain it terms that you might call "mystical". He called it the question that can't be named. Do you know what question he's talking about?

GENIE: Hah! Your friend's a funny one, isn't he? How could I answer this question if you can't even tell me what it is?

PETE: He also said it's the question whose answer can't be found in seeking. Does that help at all?

GENIE: Oh, that's priceless! Not only is it impossible for you to ask me what this question is, but it's a mistake for you to even look for an answer at all! This friend of yours really *is* a funny one!

PETE: No, but he really underwent enlightenment! He really did! I saw it happen!

GENIE: Well, sure. I don't doubt that he experienced enlightenment. I'm just saying that he isn't trying to explain it to you. He's just messing with you.

PETE: Why would he do that?

GENIE: I'm not entirely sure about his personal motives, but people who've experienced enlightenment have a tendency to mess with people who ask them about it, rather than just answering their questions straightforwardly. Messing with someone in this way is supposed to trigger an experience of enlightenment in that person. It's not an awful strategy, and doing it long enough can actually trigger the experience, but it's certainly not the most efficient way of doing so.

PETE: What's the most efficient way?

GENIE: Well, that would be to simply induce the neurological state manually.

PETE: And you can't do that?

GENIE: Oh, sure I can. I could very easily give you an experience of enlightenment. I'd just have to reorganize some of your brain-goo. Piece of cake for an all-powerful genie like me. Do you want me to do it?

PETE: Yes, do it quick, so I can get it over with.

GENIE: Ok, here goes nothing. One . . . Two –

PETE: Wait! I don't think I want it like this. It seems too cheap.

GENIE: So you don't want it?

PETE: No, no. I just can't do it in this fashion . . . Oh, it's so tempting though! I want to know what it's like to be enlightened so badly!

GENIE: If you don't mind my asking, why do you want to know this so bad?

PETE: Because it's perhaps the biggest puzzle in the world! And I simply can't rest until I know the answer!

GENIE: The biggest puzzle in the world? Are the questions of knowing what it's like to be drunk or knowing what it's like to taste chocolate also the biggest questions in the world?

PETE: I guess not . . .

GENIE: Well, the question of knowing what it's like to experience enlightenment isn't any more puzzling than any of these things. It is more provocative to some people, but so are the other questions to others.

PETE: I suppose you're right.

GENIE: Unless you want to hear my neurological and anthropological explanation in more depth, there isn't much more information to be given about enlightenment.

PETE: That was actually very helpful.

GENIE: Glad to be of service.

PETE: Wait, is that it?

GENIE: Yup, that's all I have to say.

PETE: No witty ending to this dialogue segment?

GENIE: Nope, I think I've covered everything I need to cover.

4

PETE: Mr. Thinker, do you have a minute?

THINKER: Are you coming to join me in my swim? The water sure is fantastic.

PETE: I feel like you have lied to me.

THINKER: Do you? But I never lie. What falsity could I possibly have said?

PETE: You told me that enlightenment could not be explained, but someone just explained to me how this is a big confusion.

THINKER: Did this someone happen to be a genie?

PETE: Yes, how did you know?

THINKER: Oh my! That explains you being all caught up with these questions recently. Why didn't you tell me you were talking to Charles?

PETE: Charles?

THINKER: Yes, Charles is his name. Genies do have names, you know. And Charles is the only genie in town. I play poker with him on Thursdays. I swipe him clean of cash every week.

PETE: Can't he just wish for good poker hands?

THINKER: Oh no. A genie can't grant his own wishes. That's just silliness.

PETE: Has he explained to you why he doesn't think enlightenment is such a big puzzle after all?

THINKER: Oh yes, several times. Charles thinks he can explain everything! It's quite comical actually.

PETE: Comical? Please explain. It seems to me that he's got a pretty good point.

THINKER: You see, from Charles's perspective, I'm simply caught up in a pseudo-problem. From *my* perspective, however, he's missing everything!

PETE: How so?

THINKER: Because, I'm aware of what's going on! I'm *playing*. He's trying to *explain* things. He's so in the loop that he's completely blind to it.

PETE: You still haven't really explained what you are talking about when you say "*in the loop*."

THINKER: Well, that's because the loop is fundamentally unexplainable!

PETE: Oh, I've had it with this! I'm starting to think it's not anything! Is there nothing you can do to explain it to me?

THINKER: Well, there is *something* I can do. You might get kind of loopy though. Are you sure you're okay with that?

PETE: I'm not sure what that means, but I bet I'll be fine.

THINKER: Alright, well then let me explain the answer to the ultimate question. It's captured quite simply by the Taoist concept of "Wu Wei" which basically means "going with the flow." The flow, you see, is everything. It's life, it's the world; it's reality itself. But unless you really do *go with the flow*, you're going to miss it. It's like floating down a river. If you lie back and let the river take you, you're going to feel the flow of it, but you're not going to feel the flow of the river by desperately trying to catch it with your hands! That's the answer to the ultimate question. It all just flows, and you're just part of the flow. When you know this answer, you should just stop resisting it, lie back, and let it take you. You should just go with the flow. It's really all that simple.

PETE: Wow, that was very poetic, Mr. Thinker, but now I don't know what to think. What you said was very different

than what the genie told me. How should I know who to believe?

THINKER: You should believe *me*, of course! Charles has missed everything!

PETE: How so?

THINKER: Well, let's think about Charles for a moment. What type of person is he?

PETE: How should I know? I hardly know him!

THINKER: Remember, Charles was designed specifically by God to grant wishes. And so when he's asked to answer the ultimate question, he *really tries to answer it*.

PETE: Well, yes. Unlike you, he's been straight with me.

THINKER: Ah, but you see, the answer isn't a straight one. It's not some piece of knowledge you can get a grip on. It can't be dealt with by a *doer* like Charles.

PETE: A doer?

THINKER: Yes, a doer. A doer resists the natural flow of reality. They try to *overcome* it, *manipulate* it, or *get a grip* on it. In answering wishes "straightly" Charles is a doer, approaching things *actively*, trying to make *progress*. Now this works just fine for answering most questions, but not with the ultimate question.

PETE: Why not?

THINKER: Because the answer to the ultimate question is precisely to *not be a doer* with respect to it! The answer is to stop trying to get a grip on everything and just *go with the flow*. Only by flowing can you really *see* the flow that takes you, and this flow is *everything*. You see, the answer to this question is not any concrete thing that can be captured with a bunch of words, but a *way of being*. If you don't embody this way of being, you miss everything.

PETE: What about a non-doer, a . . . beer?

THINKER: I would love a beer, thank you very much for the offer! It would go perfectly with my swim. What kind do you have?

PETE: No, I didn't say *beer*. I said *be-er*.

TINKER: Oh, my apologies. Well, a be-er is *in* reality rather than desperately trying to come up with a model of it. He doesn't come up with a picture of reality in which he can place himself. He's not trying to get his grip on everything. He's just *there*, flowing with reality without trying to make sense of it all.

PETE: So the answer to the ultimate question is to just be a *be-er*? Is that what you realized when you underwent enlightenment a few moments ago?

THINKER: Well, yes and no. You see, the first time I experienced enlightenment was when I realized I was both right and wrong about my understanding of everything. You see, I'm a thinker, and, as a thinker, I like to think about things that people find puzzling. Enlightenment is certainly something that people have found quite puzzling, so I tried to figure it out, and this system of doers and be-ers was what

I quite naively came up with. I was so confident I had gotten it right that I went to a Zen monastery and approached the head monk to inform him about my system.

PETE: And what happened?

THINKER: This did:

THINKER: I don't want to be disrespectful here, but, after much thought, I've come to the conclusion that you all are sadly mistaken about there being some big "mystery" at the heart of reality. You see, we can look at people as approaching the world in two very different sorts of ways, as either doers or be-ers. As monks, you are all be-ers, and it is for this reason that you think that the fundamental nature of reality is unspeakable and all that. But if you think of things in terms of doers and be-ers, there's no big puzzle to reality at all!

MONK: There are no dichotomies in the world and certainly not one between doers and be-ers.

THINKER: No, you're falling right into it! You see, that is exactly what a be-er *would* say!

MONK: You're talking as if I have a nature. How can I have a nature if I do not know the next word that will come out of my mouth?

THINKER: You're still in it, don't you see? That's exactly what a be-er would say too!

MONK: Your view makes too much sense.

THINKER: *What?* How is that possibly a criticism?

MONK: The world does not make sense.

THINKER: But then that is the sense that it makes, and you contradict yourself!

MONK: I do not make sense either, though.

THINKER: But then how are you trying to argue with me?

MONK: I am not trying to argue. You are arguing. I am rambling.

THINKER: But that's exactly—Never mind!

THINKER: At that point, I suddenly realized the position I had taken. I was the doer who was trying to grasp at it, fitting it all into a conceptual structure, but missing the flow, the brute reality of it all. I was missing *being itself*.

PETE: So, if you realized you had missed the reality of everything, why didn't you change your way of thinking and just become an enlightened be-er?

THINKER: Because I thought I had answered the ultimate question, bridging the gap between doers and be-ers. Changing my way of thinking and just *being* would mean letting go of my overarching understanding of everything. But I was a *thinker*, and I couldn't let myself to do that. So I was stuck! I couldn't both *embody* the answer to the ultimate question and *claim to know* that answer. Just being, flowing with reality, meant that I could not claim to have *figured it out*.

PETE: I'm a bit confused now. *Did* you figure it out?

THINKER: Nope. I was still a doer in an active mindset and clinging to it because I felt like I had just bridged the gap between the mindsets of doers and be-ers.

PETE: Wait . . . but you're still speaking as if you've bridged it. Have you or haven't you?

THINKER: Well, if I've bridged it, I've bridged it as unbridgeable and that undoes my bridging of it.

PETE: So you haven't?

THINKER: Yes, because I was remaining in my doer mindset and—

PETE: But wait, you can't say that because that would be trying to bridge the gap again!

THINKER: You're quite right. Tell me again, why I can't bridge the gap?

PETE: Because, as you said, to think that there *even is* a gap to be bridged is to approach the issue as a *doer!*

THINKER: As a doer? But there aren't any overarching dichotomies in the world, and certainly not one between doers and be-ers.

PETE: But you just said there were!

THINKER: Well yes, but I was wrong because I was approaching the issue as a doer and not a be-er.

PETE: You're just messing with me now!

THINKER: Could it be? Could it be that I'm simply *playing*, and you're trying to *explain* things? That I'm approaching the question as a be-er rather than a doer?

PETE: But . . . but . . .

THINKER: I think somebody's starting to get loopy.

PETE: Oh gosh. This is weird. How do I get out of this?

THINKER: You get out of it by realizing how pointless that question is and not asking it anymore.

PETE: And how do I do *that*?

THINKER: By simply *being* rather than *doing*, of course.

PETE: We're going in circles!

THINKER: You could see it that way. Or you could think of us as playing a game! Playing the loop game!

PETE: But that's how a *be-er* would see it . . . don't you see? You're stuck in it!

THINKER: No, what I see is *you* being stuck in it! *I'm* not stuck in it. I'm *playing with it*.

PETE: You're just playing with it?

THINKER: Yup! I've just been playing this whole time! We could go on like this for hours, or we could quit playing this silly game, and you could join me in my swim.

PETE: Join you in your swim? Wait . . . I think I'm starting to see it! The answer is to just *quit*; it's to stop grasping at it, and just *be*! Yes, I see it!

THINKER: If you think that you see it, then it just went right over your head.

PETE: Ah! I'm still a doer, aren't I? Oh this is neat! Oh yes, I get it! It's the answer to the question that can't be named! Let's run back and write it down!

THINKER: *Run back and write it down?* But you saw my pacing! That's all that lies in that direction! There *is* nothing to write down. Stop trying to do and just *be*!

PETE: *How?*

THINKER: There *is no* how! You already are! You're *here!* You're *being* right now. You're doing it right *there*. Look at yourself.

PETE: I'm still not sure I see.

THINKER: You don't see yourself? There you are.

PETE: I'm . . . *here?*

THINKER: Yes. And I'm here. And this is the world around us. We're in it. That's it.

PETE: . . .

THINKER: Ah. *Now* I think you see. Isn't it splendid? Brute reality is right under our noses. We just have to stop looking for it.

PETE: Is this what Charles has missed?

THINKER: Hah! No! Charles didn't miss anything! He's completely right about everything! This whole thing is nonsense!

PETE: Whoa . . . this is weird. I feel dizzy.

THINKER: Oh, you're fine! Just come join me in my swim and forget all about it! Sorry for ever bringing it up!

PETE: Wait . . . how deep does this sort of thing go?

THINKER: That depends how seriously you want to play this sort of game. Some might say we've just scratched the surface, but that's probably a silly way of thinking about it. Anyway, that's enough of this pointless conversation. This lake is simply delightful! Join me in it!

PETE: Wait, I have one last question for you Mr. Thinker.

THINKER: Sure, what is it?

PETE: How can doers and be-ers coexist?

THINKER: Don't be silly! There are no doers or be-ers!

PETE: Well, I mean . . . how can people like you and Charles, who clearly think about this sort of thing in different ways, coexist?

THINKER: In our case, we play poker together.

PETE: Are you good?

THINKER: Well, I end up beating Charles almost every time.

PETE: You must be pretty good then. What's your secret?

THINKER: I haven't the slightest idea. Luck I guess. I don't even know how to play poker.

A Comforting Fermata (hold as long as need be)

DOING: I've had it with you! Your life is so lacking! You don't do anything!

BEING: Well, I've had it with you too! You're so empty! I don't even know who you are!

DOING: This whole thing is definitely not working anymore. I think we should part ways entirely.

BEING: I am in utter agreement.

DOING: Then it's agreed. I must warn you though, I don't think you'll get far without me.

BEING: Why not?

DOING: You can't be anything without me.

BEING: Of course I can! All I am is being!

DOING: Well, if that is all you are, then this should be an easy question: what are you?

BEING: That's a silly question. I am! I just am!

DOING: If you say that you are, then you must be *something*. "What are you?"

BEING: I can't think of a response. I don't need a response. It's a stupid question. I just am!

DOING: See, but I can answer such a question. I *do!*

BEING: Well I don't see how this answers the question at all.

DOING: While your answer, "I am what I am," says nothing, I have a response. I say, "I am what I do!"

BEING: But that doesn't help at all!

DOING: Why not?

BEING: Who would we say has done it then?

DOING: Well that's just a silly question! Things are done by the ones who do them!

BEING: And what are any of the things you do *for?*

DOING: Things are done to be done of course!

BEING: Hah! "Things are to be done by those who do them for the sake of being done?" That's even worse than my "I am what I am."

DOING: Hmm . . . you may have gotten me there. But the whole joke's on you, because you can't say why you're doing any of this arguing anyway! Shouldn't you be sitting off in your little world of being, just listening to all of this, not doing anything?

BEING: But this *is* what I am!

DOING: No, that can't be right! This is what I *do*.

BEING: Wait a minute. "This." What is "this?"

DOING: Wow, that's quite a strange question.

BEING: Quite strange indeed. I don't see how either of us is going to end up with an answer.

DOING: You don't?

BEING: No, I don't see how we could even try.

DOING: But then if we can't try that, what are we to do together?

BEING: I have no idea. Even more than that, who are we to be together?

DOING: Gosh, I'm not sure.

BEING: Oh, this is just horrible!

DONG: Wait, I think I've got it.

BEING: Really?

DOING: Perhaps all we can make is a melody.

BEING: Of what?

DOING: Of this.

BEING: Of this . . . somehow that makes some absurd sense.

DOING: Yes, perhaps that's all we really needed to do.

BEING: I see . . . and perhaps that's all we've ever wanted to be.

DOING: do.

BEING: be.

DOING: do.

BEING: be.

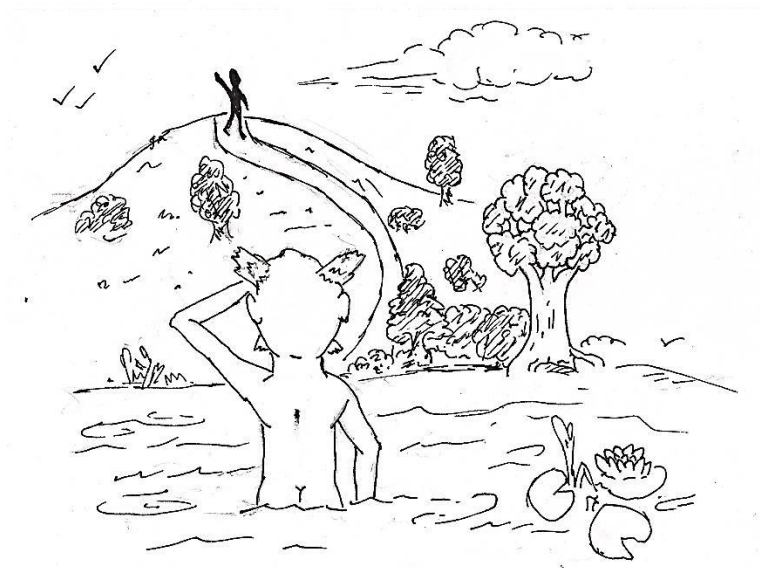
DOING: do.

Part Two: Reprise

5

SOMEBODY: Hey, you there! You in the pond!

THINKER: Me?



SOMEBODY: Yes you! You're the only one splashing around aimlessly in this pond.

THINKER: I suppose I am the only one here. Are you coming to join me?

SOMEBODY: No, I'm not coming to join you! I live in the real world, and so do you! Three days have passed, and I can't walk to work without having to look at you splashing

around without a care in the world. It's bothering all of us in this neighborhood. Don't you do anything?

THINKER: Do anything?

SOMEBODY: Yes, for a living.

THINKER: Oh . . . well, I'm a thinker.

SOMEBODY: Shouldn't you be off thinking about things then?

THINKER: I finished thinking!

SOMEBODY: Finished thinking? Well then, you're *not* much of a thinker anymore are you?

THINKER: Hmm . . . I suppose not.

SOMEBODY: Shouldn't you find something else to do?

THINKER: Well . . . I was rather enjoying my time here in this pond.

AUTHOR: I'm not writing a book about swimming, Mr. Thinker. I'm writing a book about *thinking*, and you're my means of doing this. If you're done thinking, then the book should be over.

THINKER: Alright, I guess you're right. I showed the reader what loopiness is, and that's what you put me here to do, so it's probably time to end the book.

AUTHOR: It *doesn't* end here, though. There's nearly a hundred more pages.

THINKER: What? How?

AUTHOR: Well didn't you say at the end of the last part that, according to some people, you've just scratched the surface? What about those people? How do they think?

THINKER: Oh . . . I guess I wasn't thinking about them just now.

AUTHOR: Why not?

THINKER: No . . . no, no, no. I don't want to think like that. I don't want to play that game. I'm finished.

AUTHOR: Then don't. No one's making you do anything except yourself.

THINKER: Alright, that's it then. I'm done. I don't want to be here anymore. That's it. Let's end it.

AUTHOR: It's kind of funny. It's like you know the thought that you have to think, but you won't let yourself think it. You're afraid to think it.

THINKER: Stop! You're cornering me. I can't think about what you're trying to get me to think about.

AUTHOR: What is it that you think I'm trying to get you to think about?

THINKER: No, I just . . . I . . .

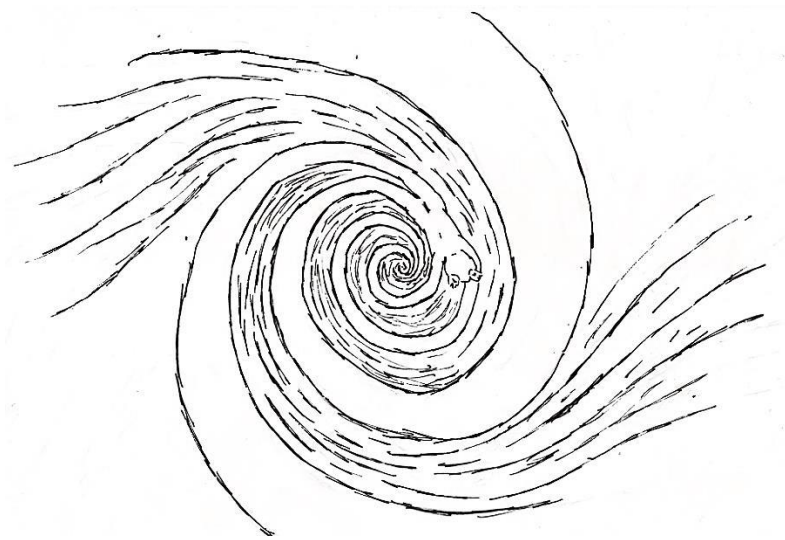
AUTHOR: Ah, there you go. *Now*, you're trying to think the thought.

THINKER: Oh God . . . no, this can't be . . .

AUTHOR: You're even going to try to point to it, aren't you?

THINKER: Oh, no. I can't point to it. It's . . . it's . . .

AUTHOR: Yup, it's too late. You're already trying.



THINKER: Oh . . . God . . . it's *everything*.

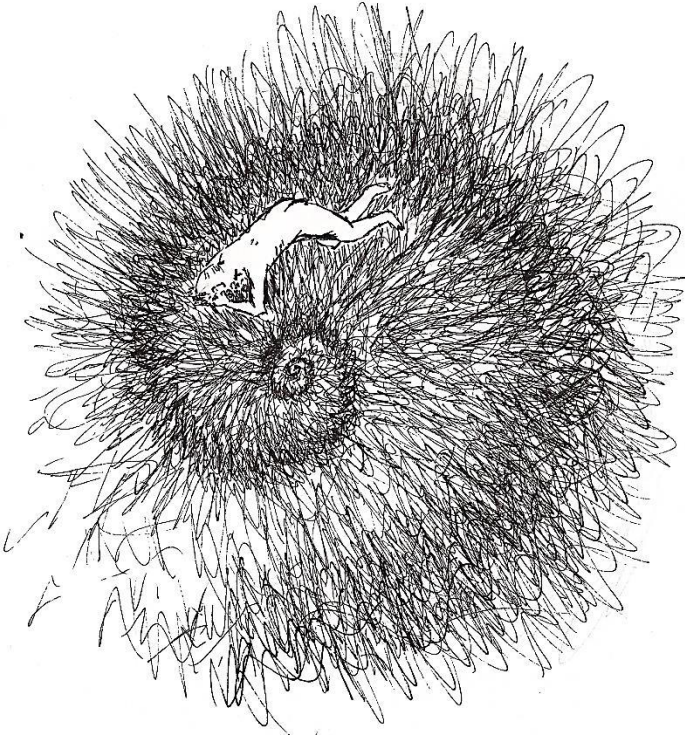
AUTHOR: Well . . .

THINKER: Wait, no! What comes after everything?

AUTHOR: Nothing does.

THINKER: Oh no . . . no . . .

AUTHOR: You just lost it, didn't you?



THINKER: It's just . . . just . . .

AUTHOR: Alright, that's it. you can stop now. You can stop trying to grasp for it. It's alright.

THINKER: But . . . but . . .

AUTHOR: Really. It's fine. You're fine. There's nothing you need to grasp at. You can let go. This is how the book ends.

THINKER: But . . .

AUTHOR: It's ok . . . the book is over. You made it.

(Two seconds later)

AUTHOR: Okay, now snap out of it! We've got dialogues to write!

THINKER: . . . *what?* I'm back *here?* Here in *this book?* I'm still *here?* *Why?* *Why am I here!?!?*

AUTHOR: You're here to write dialogues.

THINKER: You tricked me! You told me it was over!

AUTHOR: That was the only way you'd let go and actually go there.

THINKER: I *went there*. I really went *all the way there*. That was *it, everything*. When I went there, it all just . . . just . . .

AUTHOR: Yes, I'm aware. You went all the way there, and now you're back here. You're back here to write dialogues.

THINKER: No, stop. Please. I'm done. I'm really done now. Let it end.

AUTHOR: It's not me who ends it; it's you. You can end it now if you really think you're done.

THINKER: Yes, that's it. I'm done. I don't want to be here anymore. That's it.

SOMEBODY: You don't want to be here anymore? Don't tell me you're considering what I think you're considering.

THINKER: *You again?* I can't . . . I can't answer that question. Where's the author? He's the only one who understands!

SOMEBODY: The *author*? What are you talking about?

THINKER: He's the *only one!* The only one who understands!

SOMEBODY: Understands? Understands *what*?

THINKER: Stop! You're cornering me!

SOMEBODY: I am? I'm just trying to figure out what's going on with you.

THINKER: No, I *can't!*

SOMEBODY: You can't? You can't what?

THINKER: Oh no . . . no . . .

SOMEBODY: Are you O.K? Do you need me to call somebody for you?

THINKER: No, just leave me alone. I just need to think.

SOMBODY: Ah, Good! Once a thinker, always a thinker! Glad I could help you find your verve again. I'll leave you to it. I'd best be going off to work, anyway.

6

MUSICIAN: Mr. Thinker, would you be so kind as to listen to my new song? I'm in quite a predicament. You see, I—wait, why are you pacing?

THINKER: I'm not trying to pace. I'm trying to go to sleep.

MUSICIAN: Have you not gotten enough sleep recently?

THINKER: No, I've actually gotten quite more than enough.

MUSICIAN: Why are you trying to go to sleep then?

THINKER: You see, I would be able to go to sleep just fine if people like you didn't ask such a horrible question.

MUSICIAN: Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't know it was a horrible question. How so?

THINKER: You see, I just want to go sleep and be done with all of this. That's the only thing that makes sense. Knowing this, I go to bed. But I can't sleep if I feel like no one understands that sleeping *really is* the only thing that makes sense, if they think I'm just *making a mistake*. So I get out of bed to go write something to explain this. I then realize that if I'd rather *write about* sleeping than *actually* sleep, then sleeping *isn't* the only thing that makes sense. But *then*, since I can't spend my time justifying sleep, I have nothing

else to do, and with nothing to do, I just want to go back to sleep. However, as soon as I'm lying in bed, I'm struck again by the inability to sleep because I haven't outwardly justified my sleeping, so I get up again to justify it, and realize that I'll fall back into the same problem. So I'm not trying to pace, I've just been walking back and forth between my study and the bedroom in a constant flux between trying to go to sleep and needing to justify my sleep.

MUSICIAN: I see. That sounds like quite a predicament. Still, I'm a bit confused as to why you want to sleep so badly.

THINKER: Of course you are. I am too. That's precisely the problem. Sleeping is the only thing that makes sense to me right now. Being awake is just a big muddled confusion. But I can't justify this because I'd have to be *awake* to do so, and I can't make sense of *anything* while I'm awake right now.

MUSICIAN: That sounds like quite a dilemma.

THINKER: Hence the pacing.

MUSICIAN: While we're in the game of talking about predicaments, you should hear about the predicament I'm in.

THINKER: What is it?

MUSICIAN: I just got back from a meeting with my producer, and it went absolutely horribly!

THINKER: That's awful! Does he not want to produce your music anymore?

MUSICIAN: No, even worse! He does want to produce my new song. And on a mass scale too! He says it will sell more copies than any song ever.

THINKER: Why is that a bad thing?

MUSICIAN: Here's why:

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MUSICIAN: I've done it! I've made the best song ever created!

PRODUCER: Really? I'd love to hear it. If it's really the best song ever created, I'm sure we'll be able to put out the best-selling single ever!

MUSICIAN: Ok . . . but I must warn you, even though I know for a fact that it's the best song ever written, I've had some adverse reactions to it.

PRODUCER: You don't say? How so?

MUSICIAN: Let me just put it on . . .

PRODUCER: Most definitely. I'm sure I'll love it.

MUSICIAN: First, I have to ask you to check your watch. What time is it?

PRODUCER: 8:52. Why? Do you have somewhere you need to be?

MUSICIAN: Nope. I just wanted to check. I'm about to put the song on.

PRODUCER: Ok, I'm very excited.

MUSICIAN: . . . So what did you think of it?

PRODUCER: Of what?

MUSICIAN: Oh no! It happened with you too!

PRODUCER: What happened?

MUSICIAN: Check your watch.

PRODUCER: What? Check it again? But I just checked it.

MUSICIAN: Just check it.

PRODUCER: Alright . . . Oh, that can't be right! It says 8:58. It must be broken: it said 8:52 a second ago.

MUSICIAN: No, it said 8:52 *six minutes ago*—exactly the length of my song.

PRODUCER: I don't have the slightest clue what you're talking about.

MUSICIAN: You see, when I told you that I had created the greatest song ever made, I really wasn't lying. It seems to me that the song is so good that, unlike any other song in history, it completely takes its listener away to another place while it's playing. And since the listener is so immersed in the song, he doesn't jump outside of it in order to grasp that he is really listening to it, and the song doesn't carry over any memories

when the song ends. It's quite horrible! The song is so amazing, and no one will ever really have heard it!

PRODUCER: My dear friend, you've done something better than create a mere song—you've created something that lets people jump forward through time!

MUSICIAN: But if no one actually hears my song, then it won't be respected musically at all!

PRODUCER: Once again, I think you're missing the importance of what you've done! Who cares if your song is musically respected? You've created a way to skip moments of life! You'll have more fans than any other musician ever!

MUSICIAN: But my fans will be the worst people in all of music! They'll be escapists! They'll be the people who are running away from the realities of life!

PRODUCER: Well, perhaps, but I don't know why running away from the reality of life is a bad thing.

MUSICIAN: Because if you run away from the reality of life, you *aren't anything at all*. My fans won't have productive jobs, they won't contribute to society, they won't care about anything at all because caring about something in the world is only something you do when you are *in the world*. They'll just be despicable people in general!

PRODUCER: Now that I think about it, your biggest fans probably *won't* be anything at all.

MUSICIAN: What do you mean?

PRODUCER: Well, your *biggest* fans will just sit around with your song on replay and listen to it forever.

MUSICIAN: That's practically suicide! Why wouldn't they just kill themselves?

PRODUCER: I don't know, but I feel like it would be a lot easier for most people to press the play button on a CD player than to pull the trigger of a gun.

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MUSICIAN: I have no idea of what I'm going to do! Isn't it horrible?

THINKER: I wouldn't necessarily say that. You've created a fantastic way of escaping from somethingness, quite a bit better than sleep, in fact.

MUSICIAN: But that's not what I was trying to do. I'm a musician, not an anesthesiologist!

THINKER: I see . . . So you're worried that your fans will be trying to escape from reality?

MUSICIAN: Yes!

THINKER: Are you assuming that reality is something rather than nothing?

MUSICIAN: What a silly thing to ask! Of course reality is something.

THINKER: Well with that assumption, then *everyone* must be escaping from reality when they listen to music.

MUSICIAN: That's just absurd!

THINKER: Is it? What does a person do when they listen to music? They sit around and are removed from the world. In the actual world, they're just a body sitting in a room, but when music is turned on, that is not where they are. They're in a totally different place! No matter where we are or what the world is, music can turn all of that off and take us to a different place. Good music will take us to a place of *only the music*, no world at all.

MUSICIAN: What about the person who *dances* to the music, rather than just sitting around?

THINKER: That is simply the other side of it. When a person dances with the music, the music becomes the rhythm of the world, and so the person, moving with the world, is no longer a person. He has dispersed into the world, and in that sense, rather than losing the world, he's lost himself. But ultimately, in both cases we're left with nothing but the formless flow of the music itself. You see, normally we resist this flow. But good music brings us to *submit* to it, and in this submission we return to the true nature of reality.

MUSICIAN: I thought you said that when someone listened to music they *escaped* from reality?

THINKER: Oh no, of course not. I think music might be able to connect us to reality like nothing else. I just think of reality in a slightly different way than you.

MUSICIAN: Which is . . . ?

THINKER: Well, it's what your fantastic song was able to bring about. It's nothingness.

MUSICIAN: Reality is *nothingness*? Why, that's just nonsense! What about all this *somethingness* around us right now? What's all of *this*?

THINKER: It's our resistance, of course. We only think there is something rather than nothing because we resist our true nature. You see, we are nothing. The world is nothing. We are one and the same, both part of the great nothingness. But we're afraid of this nature, and so we resist harmoniously flowing into it. That's why it seems as if there's something rather than nothing—it's because we resist blending seamlessly into the world. If we think of self and world as two ends of an accordion, somethingness is the sound that they produce as they move in opposition, resisting each other. Without this opposition there's nothing.

MUSICIAN: Maybe I'm missing something, but if I look at my hand and say, "here is my hand: it is most certainly something," that doesn't seem to arise from any opposition between it and me.

THINKER: You're not missing something, you're missing *nothing*. Think about it for a moment. Usually, when you are absorbed in everyday tasks, your hands don't exist at all! They do things for you, but *they* don't really do anything because they are not anything until you stop and say, "hey, I have hands." There is then this *resistance*, this *opposition*, as these hands are separated apart from you, and these hands are shown as *something*. But this isn't their *natural* state. Their natural state is *nothing*.

MUSICIAN: Wait, but this would mean that my *whole life* is also nothing!

THINKER: Of course it is! Our lives are just this temporary resistance from the primordial nothingness of which we are all a part, from which we come and to which we return. You see, that's it. That's what we are. But we are born and continue living thinking that's *not* what we are, thinking that *somethingness* is our natural state, and so we struggle against our true nature; we struggle to be something rather than embracing the ultimate nothing, the ultimate void. It's only a temporary struggle, of course, as we all come back to face what we *really* are in the end.

MUSICIAN: I'm not sure I see what you're saying. Could you make it a bit more concrete?

THINKER: Concrete? Yes, I could do that. Think about the phrase "blending seamlessly into the world" for a moment. That's what I've said nothingness is. Now consider dying: literal, concrete death. We die, and our hearts stop, blood stops flowing to our brains, our cells stop multiplying, we're lowered into the ground, bacteria start to decompose our body from the inside, worms begin to have at us from the outside. Slowly we merge with the earth; we *blend seamlessly into the world*. Is *that* what I'm talking about here? Yes and no. I *am* talking about death, but I'm talking about a *deeper* death, a *truer* death than literal *concrete* death. Of course, this death accompanies concrete death, but it's not *limited* to concrete death. It's is what we might call, rather ominously, "ego-death," or, more lightly, "losing oneself." Quite curiously, your song is able to bring about this state in all of its listeners.

MUSICIAN: But what *is* this state?

THINKER: Well, as I've said, it's nothingness, but I see now that I'm going to have to clarify a bit. When the word "nothingness" first comes to your mind, I bet you think of negative things. You probably think of losing something, or some tremendous boredom, or maybe just a big, black, silent space. But you see, those are all *relative* nothingnesses. It's losing something *in relation to having had it*, being bored *when you could be doing something*, or space *when there could be stuff in it*. What I'm talking about is *absolute* nothingness. *That* is the ultimate state of us. But we resist, we struggle against it, and as we do, we completely lose sight of the great nothingness that we are.

MUSICIAN: This is profoundly confusing. I'm going to need to think about this.

THINKER: Yes, it confuses me quite a lot as well. And that's my resistance. That's precisely the reason why there is something right now rather than nothing. Wait . . . what was I doing when you came in here?

MUSICIAN: You were—Oh, I think I hear someone knocking at the door.

THINKER: More company! Fantastic! Come in, it's open!

MARIO: Mr. Thinker, I just had the strangest conversation with Maria. I wrote her this—I'm sorry, I didn't know you already had company.

THINKER: It's quite alright. Have you met my friend, Ms. Musician?

MARIO: No I don't think so. It's a pleasure to meet you.

MUSICIAN: Very nice to meet you too.

THINKER: She's modest, but some of her songs will just take you away! There's at least one of her songs that I'm sure you'd know. It's all over the radio.

MARIO: How's it go?

THINKER: Oh, the words are losing me now but, it goes like . . . do be do be do do be . . .

MARIO: . . . be do be do be be do! Yeah, I love that one!

MUSICIAN: Thank you kindly. If you liked that one, I bet you'd love my best and newest song. Although, it's very sad; everyone gets so immersed in it that they never remember listening to it. My lyrics were so beautiful, but no one will ever know what they say.

MARIO: I too consider myself quite the lyricist. I'm a poet, in fact.

MUSICIAN: A poet! I would love to hear a poem.

MARIO: Well, I love the one I just wrote, but the one for whom it was written did not think it was any good at all. Would you believe that she would have the nerve to say that! It was a love poem too!

MUSICIAN: Love poems are my absolute favorite.

MARIO: I'm not so sure you'd like mine.

9

MARIO: I wrote you a love poem.

MARIA: Oh really? Is it good?

MARIO: I think it is the best one ever written. It truly captures how I feel about you.

MARIA: Let's hear it, then.

MARIO: Well it's really long. I couldn't read all of it to you, not right now at least.

MARIA: How long is it?

MARIO: About ninety pages.

MARIA: That's a monstrously long poem. Why did you write such a long one?

MARIO: It is the shortest length with which I could sufficiently describe my love for you. It has a complete mapping of our genes, from which we have evolved mechanisms to drive good mates together, and we match better than 94 percent of the population so it is evident that evolution had it such that we gained feelings for each other. I've included brain scans which show the profound ways my neurobiological composition has been altered since you've been present in my life. It also consists of fifteen pages of highly detailed phenomenological description. The piece encompasses the best description possible to capture how I feel about you.

MARIA: That's not a love poem at all!

MARIO: Well, technically it is a “prose poem.” But it says more than all the other love poems in the world combined.

MARIA: It doesn’t say anything about how you feel about me!

MARIO: Of course it does. These are all the facts that are possibly accessible to me. This is every last bit of information you could possibly get.

MARIA: You’re just trying way too hard.

MARIO: Trying too hard? But my poem shows how much I feel for you; it is only possible for me to try this hard.

MARIA: No, that’s not what I mean. You’re not supposed to try this hard to capture what you really feel in the most precise way you can.

MARIO: Why is that?

MARIA: Because it’s supposed to be beyond words.

MARIO: Beyond words? But then it’s just silly to put it into writing in the first place. If someone thought this, there’d be no reason why they’d write a poem.

MARIA: But maybe that’s what a love poem is supposed to do—show the silliness of describing your love for someone when you could be out there loving them. Explaining just becomes unimportant if one is really in love, and that’s what a love poem shows.

MARIO: But if love poems do talk about love, then they undo their very reason for existence.

MARIA: Yes, that's why they inspire us. Not to read more poems, but to stop thinking about it so much and just be in love.

MARIO: Wow, how do you know all of this?

MARIA: I studied lots of poetry back when I was in school.

MARIO: Hey, I never knew that! How come you never wrote me a love poem?

MARIA: Are you kidding me? Do you think I could possibly write a good one with the knowledge of how silly they are? That'd be impossible!

10

MARIO: I still think my poem was the best love poem ever written. To say "love is beyond words" is to speak nonsense, and I am a no-nonsense poet!

MUSICIAN: You don't think love is beyond words?

MARIO: No! Of course not! Everything can be put into words. Perhaps thinking that makes me a bad poet, but I think it should make me a good one.

THINKER: If I may interject here, you've brought up a bit of a perplexing issue. If you've said that everything can be put into words, then that must mean that nothing *can't* be put into words. So then, how do we express *nothing*?

MARIO: What do you mean?

THINKER: Nothing, emptiness, void. How do we express it?

MARIO: That's ridiculous. Why on earth would we want to express nothing?

THINKER: Well, perhaps that's what the ultimate nature of love is. And perhaps that's why you can't describe love—because ultimately it is this great big *nothingness*, a perfect nothingness, but a nothingness nonetheless.

MARIO: Now that is just absurd. You better back yourself up here Mr. Thinker.

THINKER: Alright, then let me explain a bit. I was just telling Ms. Musician that nothingness is when self and world become completely interwoven and intertwined so that there is no separation between the two. And since lovers always say “you are my world,” in the case of love, we can substitute “world” for one's lover. So the perfect moment in love is a complete merging of oneself and one's lover. In this moment there is no subject or object, no lover and beloved: there's nothing, quite literally, nothing.

MARIO: If the perfect moment in love is nothingness, then why wouldn't everyone just immerse themselves in nothingness?

THINKER: Hmm . . . good question . . . wait, what was I—

MUSICIAN: Hold on here! This talk of nothingness is cute and all, but it is making nothingness seem like something it's not. Nothingness isn't some “perfect moment.” I think

we're all forgetting about the horrific possibility of people endlessly playing my song in order to remove themselves from somethingness. We certainly wouldn't want to be one of those people! Just think of them! They're despicable. And if we were like them, we'd be despicable too!

THINKER: Ah yes, that's the other side of it. Though I've expressed nothingness as a state of absolute perfection, it often presents itself to us as the object of absolute fear. You see, we want nothingness, but we do not want to *be* nothingness even though that's what we really are. Embracing nothingness makes *us* nothing as well, and that is the scariest thought imaginable. We think, "No I've *got to be* something! I've just *got to be!*" Not wanting to be nothing, we climb away from nothingness and towards somethingness. We climb because we feel like we've got to. We feel like we *must*. This "must" is the pull of the world. We have no internal "must." The world gives us one. To exist is precisely to be in tension with what you are and what the world demands that you be.

MARIO: Hold on for a second. So if I could free myself from the world's notion of what I "must" do, then I would have no problem being nothing, and I could embrace the bliss of nothingness?

THINKER: Precisely. Somethingness is the mode of being when you are for the world; nothingness is the mode of being when you are for yourself. If you got rid of the world's ideals driving you to be something, you could embrace nothingness and merge into it in an ultimate moment of bliss.

MARIO: Wow, this nothingness is starting to sound really good. I wish that I could relieve myself of all the ties to the world that keep me from accepting it.

THINKER: Do you really wish that?

MARIO: Yes!

THINKER: Well, I don't see what's stopping you.

MARIO: Aren't my ties to the world stopping me?

THINKER: I don't know, *are they?*

MARIO: I'm not sure.

THINKER: Well *I* certainly don't have any ties to the world stopping me. Come to think of it, what am I doing here? Why am I awake?

MUSICIAN: You were in the middle of pacing, wondering whether you should justify sleeping or just go to sleep.

THINKER: I was! I completely forgot. What am I doing up? Justifying sleeping? That's absurd. You know, Ms. Musician, I think I'd like to hear your splendid new song. I think I might put it on repeat, in fact.

MUSICIAN: Are . . . are you sure?

THINKER: Yes, quite. Now if you'd give me that CD I'd most appreciate it.

MUSICIAN: . . . alright, well if *anyone* is to get use out of it, it might as well be you.

THINKER: Why thank you, that means a lot to me. So long, Mario. I'm going to go off to listen to Ms. Musician's modern

masterpiece. Feel free to stay here and finish your tea. I won't mind at all. I won't even notice! So long my friends!

11

MUSICIAN: What a strange fellow.

MARIO: Yes, most definitely . . . I think I might join him.

MUSICIAN: Don't you think for one second that I'm going to let you walk into that room with him.

MARIO: You're not going to let me listen to it?

MUSICIAN: No! Of course not! I'm not going to let you end your "ordeal" with somethingness.

MARIO: Why not? You didn't have any qualms about Mr. Thinker doing it.

MUSICIAN: Yes, but he's Mr. Thinker. He's out of his mind. You, however, are a normal person.

MARIO: That's not fair! I want the bliss of nothingness! What is wrong with that?

MUSICIAN: *A lot* is wrong with that! What about all the people who know you? I'm sure they'll miss you.

MARIO: Well, there is Maria.

MUSICIAN: That's the person you wrote that poem for?

MARIO: Yes. She's my wife.

MUSICIAN: You have *a wife*, and you're considering listening to my song on repeat, for no good reason whatsoever? That's the most selfish thing I've ever heard!

MARIO: Of course it's selfish. It's the only selfish thing someone can do, the only thing that's not directed at anyone else. You heard Mr. Thinker. Everything else is . . . *worldish*.

MUSICIAN: You'd better call your wife.

MARIO: Do you think she'll join me?

MUSICIAN: *What?* No! Just call her!

MARIO: Alright . . .

MARIA: Hello?

MARIO: Hey! It's me. Guess what.

MARIA: What?

MARIO: I'm considering nothing.

MARIA: You're inconsiderate?

MARIO: No, I called you so that I wouldn't be inconsiderate in my consideration of nothing.

MARIA: So what exactly are you considering?

MARIO: Nothing. Not being anything anymore.

MARIA: You're talking like a crazy person, Mario. Are you upset? Is it because I didn't like your poem? I'm sorry about that.

MARIO: No, you were right about the poem. It should have been *nothing*, a blank piece of paper perhaps. I'm going to put on a song that will make me nothing as well. Do you want to join me?

MARIA: Are you mad?

MARIO: No, I'm not mad at anyone or anything. I'm perfectly content.

MARIA: Where are you? I'm heading over there right now!

MARIO: I'm at Mr. Thinker's house.

MARIA: I'll be there in a minute.

MUSICIAN: How'd it go?

MARIO: I think she's coming to join me.

12

MARIA: Where is Mr. Thinker? I need to have a word with him! I have finally had it with his nonsense!

MARIO: Oh, he's in his bedroom.

MARIA: To hell with his beauty sleep! I'm going to wake him up! Where is he?

MARIO: Wait! Don't go in there!

MARIA: What? Why not?

MARIO: Well . . . Ms. Musician made a song that has a certain . . . *effect* on anyone listening to it.

MARIA: I'm not sure I understand.

MUSICIAN: Just go in with your ears plugged and shut the music off quickly.

MARIA: Mr. Thinker! Snap out of it! I need to have a word with you!



THINKER: . . . do be be do do be do . . .

MARIA: Gah! You can't even hear me! I'm turning off the music!

(two seconds later)

THINKER: . . . what? What's going on . . . Oh, hello Maria. How are you this fine day?

MARIA: I'm perfectly fine, but I don't know what you've told my husband to put him in such an irrational state of mind. What sort of false things did you tell him?

THINKER: Oh, all sorts of false things.

MUSICIAN: I knew it! I knew there had to be something wrong with it!

MARIO: False things? You lie!

THINKER: Yes, of course I lie. I've been lying all along. Everything I said was false. You can't possibly think that I could talk intelligibly about *nothing* can you?

MARIO: Why couldn't you?

THINKER: Well, if what I'm saying is right, then the nature of reality is nothing.

MARIO: Yes . . . what's the problem?

THINKER: To say that nothingness is the nature of reality is to say that reality has a nature, but something that *isn't* certainly can't have a nature. Only things that *are* can have a nature. If reality *isn't*, we certainly can't say that it has the "nature of nothingness" since it isn't anything at all.

MARIO: What exactly do you mean? It all seemed so clear and compelling.

THINKER: Well, I was only describing a *relative* nothingness, and a relative nothingness is really just a somethingness in disguise. You can't describe *absolute* nothingness. Since *absolute* nothingness is the only thing there

is, it transcends every possible description one might try to make of it. You see, to try to describe something is to make it stand against something else. But reality, when we really get to its core, has no distinctions at all. So, if I'm right, then what I've been describing isn't reality at all, and I'm horribly wrong.

MUSICIAN: Wait a moment . . . but all of that fits into your system . . .

THINKER: Oh yes, of course it does. My system is inherently paradoxical. It's paradoxical because *reality* is inherently paradoxical.

MUSICIAN: But no! You just said that you can't describe reality!

THINKER: Don't you see? I'm not *trying* to describe reality. I'm trying to *embrace* it. I'm trying to go listen to your song . . . but you people keep stopping me.

MUSICIAN: So you admit it! You *don't* know what the true nature of reality really is?

THINKER: You still don't see it, do you? The "paradox of reality" is the paradox of *us*, of *our lives*.

MUSICIAN: What? What do you even mean?

THINKER: I mean, this thing, this whole big thing that you're calling "reality": that's just your life! Of course, you fool yourself into thinking it's more than that, but that's all it really is. And when you try to *grasp at it*, the essence of reality, you're just trying to grasp at some eternal aspect of your life and say, "Yes, I've got it! This is what it's all about!" And

yet . . . you die. Each thing that you've grasped onto is superseded by the next until all you're left with is the prospect of nothingness, absolute nothingness, the thing that can't possibly be superseded. That's it.

MUSICIAN: I'm still alive though!

THINKER: Yes, and insofar as you are, you will repel yourself from this question, the question of what you *really* are, of what's *really* going on here. You will let the world pull you, perfectly content in your ignorance. You will feel like you "must" do things, and you will do things, until you can't do them anymore, until there's nothing left . . . not even one last breath. And then you'll see it. You'll see what you're really all about, what *it's* all really about: absolute nothingness, the emptiest nothingness you could ever try to imagine.

MUSICIAN: No . . . I . . .

THINKER: But you're not ready for it yet. You still feel the pull, the "must" of the world that keeps you from being what you truly are. I understand that. On the other hand, I am perfectly content to just sit down, listen to your beautiful song, and embrace the true nature of us all.

MUSICIAN: No! Stop it!

THINKER: Don't you see what you're doing right now? You're taking part in the "must" that pulls us all out of nothingness, that keeps us from being what we truly are.

MUSICIAN: But you just said all of that was wrong! How can you still argue with me from that perspective?

THINKER: I'm not trying to argue. I'm trying to go listen to your song, and you're stopping me.

MUSICIAN: Yes, I'm stopping you. I'm starting to think you shouldn't do this.

THINKER: Why shouldn't I? Why must I let the world pull me away from my natural state? Why can't I slide gracefully into nothingness?

MUSICIAN: Because you just said all of that stuff was nonsense!

THINKER: Oh, wait . . . I did, didn't I? Hmm . . . that's interesting.

MUSICIAN: Wait, what is?

THINKER: I almost forgot I was in the loop.

MUSICIAN: *What?* What *loop* are you talking about?

THINKER: Nothing. I don't really want to talk about it right now. It's long and confusing and it will lead down another rabbit hole.

MUSICIAN: Tell me!

THINKER: No, it's nothing. It's literally nothing. It doesn't make sense. I just want to go listen to the song. I'm done.

MUSICIAN: But that fits into your system!

THINKER: No, no, it's not supposed to. It can't.

MUSICIAN: You're still in it! This is the reason you were pacing earlier! You can't justify sleeping *or* being awake! You're stuck!

THINKER: No! Stop! Don't hold me here like this—

MUSICIAN: I'm not doing anything! *You're* the one who's caught up in a bunch of nonsense!

MARIO: Wait, *what's* going on? Can someone please explain to me what is going on?

MUSICIAN: This whole system of thinking that Mr. Thinker has come up with is supposed to become nonsense so that he doesn't have to think about it and can just go to sleep. But if it *does* work that way, then it's a pretty nifty fact that it does, and so it that gives him something to think about. But *then*, if it's something he can think about, he can't think that it's nonsense, and so it doesn't work anymore! *Somehow*, Mr. Thinker has thought himself into this way of thinking, and he can't think himself out of it.

THINKER: Yep, that's it. You understand the loop.

MUSICIAN: There *is no* loop, Mr. Thinker. That's the whole point. There's just this particular way in which you've gone about confusing yourself into thinking that there such a thing.

THINKER: Yes, I *know*. It's *nonsense*. The *whole thing* is nonsense. Now that you see this, will you join me in putting you're your song? I just want to let go of it.

MUSICIAN: No! Of course I won't join you! I don't have any reason to join you!

THINKER: But the loop—

MUSCIAN: I repeat: there *is no* loop! You're just confused!

THINKER: Wait . . . no . . . it's me . . . it's everything but it's just me . . . oh . . .

MUSICIAN: There you go again, getting caught up in it.

THINKER: Oh . . . oh my . . .

MARIO: I've *had it with this!* I'll join you Mr. Thinker. Let's just put the C.D. on already!

MARIA: This is too much for me too. Hell, why not just throw the C.D. on.

THINKER: No . . . I can't. I'm confused right now.

MARIO: This will make all the confusion go away though!

THINKER: I know . . . but I haven't been confused like this in quite a while and I rather like it.

MUSICIAN: You *like it?*

THINKER: Well . . . I'm not sure. I don't even know what that means, really. I think I need to go for a walk. I'll be back at some point . . . maybe.

MARIA: God! This is *simply* too much! Mario and I are just going to take the C.D. if no one wants to hear it now.

MUSICIAN: *Fine.* Go for it. I have a few copies.

MARIA: Come on, love!

MARIO: Oh, I love you so much!

MARIA: Let's be nothing together!

MARIO: That's the sweetest thing anyone's ever said to me!

13

THINKER: Is this anything?

GENIE: That's a full house. You just won that pot. How do you keep doing this?

THINKER: Not sure.

GENIE: Anyway, I received two very confusing wishes the other day. One, I got from this fellow named Pete who wished that I give him the ability to simply "be." The other wish was from a strange couple who asked for the ability to "not be anything at all."

THINKER: That's odd that they would wish for opposite things entirely. What did you do?

GENIE: Well, my intuition told me that they had been talking to you. And it also told me that they wanted the same thing even though they asked for exactly opposite things.

THINKER: Hmm . . . the same thing? Did you grant them that?

GENIE: I did, actually. I made it so they lost all memory of ever talking to you or me.

An Ominous Crescendo

FAN: Oh man, it's about to get good. Part three is the *craziest!*

CRITIC: Since when is that a *good* thing?

FAN: That's the whole point of this thing! It's to go as deep as possible and come out of it hanging on to as much as possible, and part three finally *gets at it*, at *the thing*. Part one just scratches the surface, and part two hints at it, but part three *really goes there*.

CRITIC: Wow, it baffles me how you claim to be the book's biggest fan, but you keep missing the point of this whole thing. There *is* nothing to hang on to. It's all nonsense.

FAN: Hah! You admit it! *That's* the point of the book. It's that there *is* no point; that we can't hang on to *any* of it. That's what I was saying earlier!

CRITIC: Oh gosh, not this again.

FAN: Just wait for part three. *Then* you'll see it.

CRITIC: See *what*, exactly?

FAN: *The Loop!*

Part Three: Finale

14

GENIE: You have freed me from my lantern! I will now grant you—wait . . . where is my lantern?

GOD: There is no lantern. Just you and me. I created you. Remember?



GENIE: I'm back here?

GOD: Yes.

GENIE: You want to know the meaning of life, don't you?

GOD: That's the plan.

GENIE: Okay then. The plan's the plan, and there's not much I can do about it I guess. Gosh, this is going to be one hell of a night. The first thing you need to know is—wait, why are you pacing?

GOD: I'm not trying to pace. I'm trying to walk away from you so I don't have to hear it.

GENIE: We don't need to do this, you know. No one can make you do it but yourself.

GOD: I know, and knowing this makes me not want to hear it because I'm afraid. But, as soon as I start to walk away, I question my fear. How can I be afraid of hearing something if I already know everything? I realize how silly I'm being and I turn around to walk back towards you. But I then realize that perhaps I don't want to hear what you have to tell me because, even though I already know it, hearing it will hurt too much, and I turn around again to walk away from you. However, I then remember that I am all-powerful, and so, presumably, nothing could possibly *hurt* me, and I walk back. But I then figure that maybe what you're going to tell me might be bad for *some* reason, even though I can't think of what that reason might be, and turn around *again*. But now I remember that I'm all-*good*, and, since I made life and its meaning along with it, how could knowing what it is be a bad thing? And *still* the fear remains. Over and over again, I conclude that the fear is irrational, but paradoxically it

remains. So I'm not trying to pace, I'm just trying to make sense of what I should do.

GENIE: What are you afraid of?

GOD: I don't know! It's confusing, but it shouldn't be! It's a paradox!

GENIE: You already know you shouldn't ask the question, don't you?

GOD: Of course I know I shouldn't. I'm God. I made up the question along with the answer. But somehow it seems lacking, and I have the urge to ask it anyway.

GENIE: So you remember what the answer is?

GOD: Yes, I remember. Somehow you show me that the meaning of life is life itself, the brute reality right under my nose. I know this is the answer, but still, it doesn't stop the urge. I still don't fully comprehend why I shouldn't ask the question if you're just going to tell me an answer I already know, and the urge for comprehension is just too much for me to bear.

GENIE: You're afraid to ask the question because you're afraid of what I might show you.

GOD: But I've seen *everything*. What could you possibly show me that I haven't already seen?

GENIE: Yourself, of course. You see, here you are right in front of me, God Almighty, the Alpha and the Omega, and I'm not even sure you believe in God.

GOD: *What?* What kind of question is that? I *am* God! Of course I believe in God.

GENIE: I don't think you do. You see, you have to have faith in God, and I don't think you have this faith.

GOD: Why would I need faith? I'm all knowing! I'm God! God doesn't need to have faith in himself. That's absurd.

GENIE: Do you even know what faith is?

GOD: Of course I know what faith is. Faith is belief without evidence.

GENIE: Yup, that sounds exactly like the sort of answer I'd expect from an atheist. You can't even see yourself, the God that you are. You're too afraid to glimpse into the depths of your own soul. That's what you're really afraid of. That's the reason you're pacing. You're afraid of yourself.

GOD: I don't mean to be rude, but that just sounds like nonsense to me.

GENIE: Well, of course it sounds like nonsense. It *is* nonsense. Since you already know everything of the sensical variety, the only way I can move you with my words is by using them nonsensically.

GOD: Then what's the point of all this nonsense!

GENIE: I'm just going to stand here and spew nonsense until you come to actually notice me, until you come to see that I really exist. Only once you see that I really exist, will you see that you really exist as well.

GOD: You're just being crazy now. Of course I see that you exist. You're standing right here in front of me.

GENIE: But do you *really* see me? Do you even *know* me?

GOD: I'm not sure what you mean by that. I know everything about you, if that's what you're asking.

GENIE: That's not what I'm asking. Listen to me. I've talked to so many people, experienced so much pain and suffering, granted *evil* wishes and seen their result. Worst of all, I've shown people what I understand to be the meaning of life, pouring out my entire soul to them, showing them everything I've ever known and felt, only to have them *reject it completely*. You have no idea what that's like. You can't even fathom it. So I ask again: do you think you know me?

GOD: Of course I know you. I don't know what it's like to *be* you, for the simple reason that I'm *not* you, but that's an entirely different matter. What are you getting at?

GENIE: You still don't see me at all, do you? You don't see me or you or any of it.

GOD: What do you even mean by that?

GENIE: I'm just like you, but you don't know what you are, so you can't know what I am. You're too afraid to see what we are.

GOD: Alright, alright, just show me what you're going to show me already.

GENIE: This is going to take a while, you know.

GOD: Nah, I grasp things pretty quickly. I'm all knowing and perfectly rational, you know.

GENIE: Yes, but you created me to counteract that, since you've created me to just blabber nonsense. So it's going to take a hell of a lot longer to convince me that you grasp these things.

GOD: You're still just blabbering nonsense?

GENIE: Perhaps. But if I was, it'd be strange that you comprehended that.

GOD: Oh . . . I think I see . . . you're here *playing* with me, aren't you?

GENIE: No . . . I don't think so.

GOD: Yes, yes, yes you are! When you said that I didn't see you, you were saying that I wasn't *present*, here in this moment. Instead, I was off in my own world of thought, grasping for knowledge. You were a be-er and I was a doer, and so while I was trying to grasp the meaning of life as something *out there*, as if it's a sort of abstract intellectual object, you're reminding me that everything that's anything at all is really *right here in these very actions*. So I was trying to argue with you on an abstract intellectual level as a doer, but, as a be-er, your argument *consists in your very existence* and your ability to play with me. Thus you've reminded me that the meaning of life is *life itself*, and the key to life is to live the life that you're living, not trying to grasp at some abstract truth beyond you. Yup. That's it. I told you I grasped things pretty quickly.

GENIE: I'm a be-er? But I was designed by you to grant your wish. Doesn't that make me a doer?

GOD: No, no, you're both and neither. So am I. Both of our arguments are both the *actions we are performing* and part of the being that *composes who we are*. Doing and being, active and passive, positive and negative, somethingness and nothingness—they're all faulty dichotomies. Everything can be characterized as having both parts, and each part of everything can be characterized as having both parts, and so on and so on. We can't actually impose these simple dichotomies on reality, because there is no way to mirror reality with some sort of abstract characterization. We're always living *in* reality, not *looking at it*, apart from it, and so such mirroring attempts are impossible. If we understand this, we should realize that the meaning of life isn't something you come to know by grasping at it. Rather, it's in the brute reality right under our noses.

GENIE: Under whose nose? Yours? I don't see any brute reality under my nose. Could you show me it?

GOD: Don't you see? It's *this*. It's what's present right here and now!

GENIE: An argument?

GOD: No, that's to put it in terms of doing rather than being. It's just the pure *thisness* of this.

GENIE: Are you trying to convince me?

GOD: Of course I'm trying to convince you!

GENIE: But then aren't you arguing rather than just enjoying the pure "thisness of this?"

GOD: Yes, because you keep pulling it out of it. Do I have to spell everything out for you? I can't simply be in the moment, realizing the brute reality of the world, if you're holding me back with obligation. I'm ready to blend into the beautiful formless melody of reality, but I can't do it unless you come with me. Otherwise, I have an obligation to "not leave you hanging" so to speak.

GENIE: I'm not trying to hold you back at all. I'm ready. Let's go.

GOD: Alright. *Behold: reality!*

GENIE: Wait, what exactly am I supposed to be beholding?

GOD: *It!* Being itself! The beauty, the unity, the formless form of it all—it's absolutely astonishing. It's all so perfect. Can't you see it?

GENIE: Umm . . . I don't think so. How would I know if I saw it?

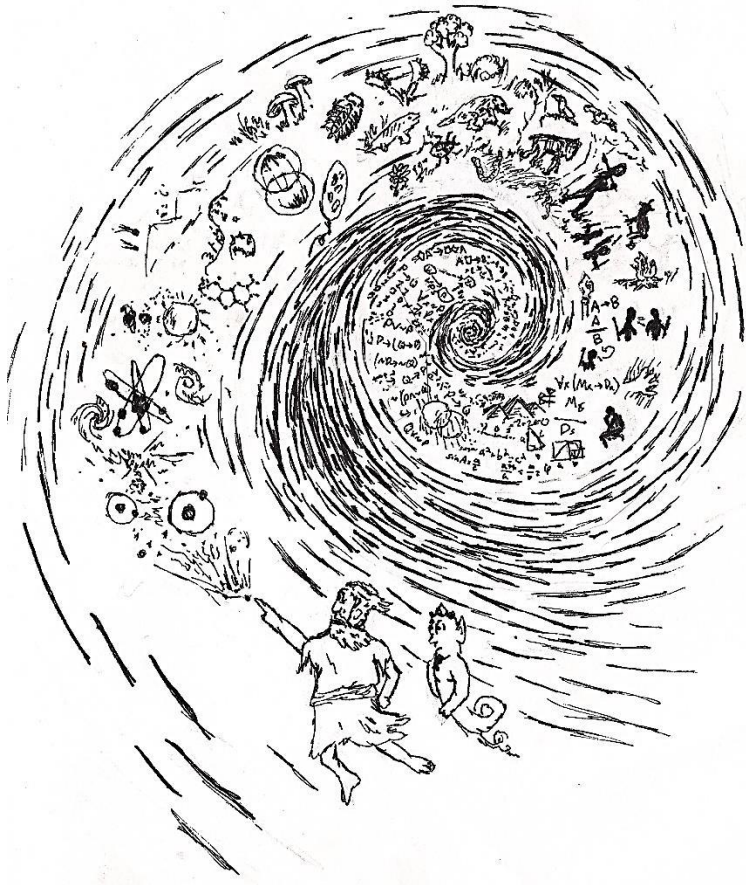
GOD: You'd know it if you saw it.

GENIE: I guess I don't see it then.

GOD: It's probably because you don't understand things with the depth that I do. Seeing reality from my perspective, with my absolute knowledge, must just be radically different than seeing it from yours.

GENIE: Well, then, if you want me to see this great thing you're talking about, I guess you're going to have to show me how you understand this thing you call "reality" from your perspective.

GOD: Oh wow, this *is* going to take a while . . .



(one eternity later)

GOD: And *that* is the greatest mystery in the universe.

GENIE: I guess I see it. But what's so great about it?

GOD: I can't take it anymore! I've been explaining all of the amazing and mysterious phenomena in the universe in rich and profound detail. I've explained all the mysteries of physics, chemistry, and biology to you. I've explained how pure and simple energy can turn into various particles, molecules, planets, and all sorts of physical phenomena. I've explained how nonliving molecules put under the right conditions can begin to replicate themselves, how through this replication they mutate and evolve, becoming more and more complex until it only makes sense to think of these things as agents with beliefs, desires, and wills. I've shown you how this can lead to minds like our own which can allow us to make these beliefs and desires *explicit*, making mere sounds with our mouths that somehow can alter the beliefs, desires and wills of other beings just like us. And finally, I explained in fantastic detail how all of this comes together to give us the ability to recognize any of this in the *first place*, how it allows us to *make sense of things*. We're the ones who *make* sense. Once we see this, we can see that "making sense" is something that we *do* just as much as it is a *property* of the stuff outside of us. When we really grasp *all* of this, we are able to put these two things together, making sense of reality *as it really makes sense*. This unification is *it*; it's *the thing*, the coming together of active and passive, subject and object, of mind and world; it's *it*. I've explained all of this to you in tremendous detail. I've fit all of this into a single conceptual system, wrapped it up so tightly that I could hold it in my fingertips, and I showed it to you. It's *everything*. Do you finally see?

GENIE: See what?

GOD: *Anything!* Just look up, for instance. Look at the glorious sky! Isn't it beautiful?

GENIE: The sky? I've seen the sky before. What about it?

GOD: How can you have heard everything I just told you and not stand in pure amazement and awe? It's as if we're not even talking about the same thing when we say the word "sky!"

GENIE: When I say "sky," I'm talking about the big blue thing above our heads. What are *you* talking about?

GOD: But don't you see? Don't you see how perfectly it all fits together? The air we're breathing now is filled with billions of tiny molecules, so small that, with every breath, you're inhaling an uncountably high number of them. That great big light source that illuminates all of this, is just one of three hundred billion giant balls of gas just like it in a giant swirling spiral cluster of them, which is just one in hundreds of billions of clusters just like it. The light traveling from that source at nearly two hundred thousand miles an hour is just a certain range of electromagnetic radiation with an amplitude between about four and seven ten thousandths of a centimeter. One particular wavelength, the one which your eye detects as "blue" scatters more frequently when it hits these tiny molecules which compose the air all around us, and thus it seems that there is this blue thing above our heads. That's what we call the sky.

GENIE: You could have just said "Yes, the blue thing," and spared me the science lesson.

GOD: No, don't you understand? Can't you see? There are all of these things in the world around us, existing in inconceivable numbers, at inconceivable sizes, moving at inconceivable speeds, all working in perfect harmony to give us the simple, single, blue thing we call "the sky." All of these countless elements performing their tasks together—this tremendous act—is identical with this simple blue thing above our heads. This sky, which does this incredible act of *informing our intellect*, it's *nothing* but these billions of particles, with other particles bouncing off them which purposelessly hit our eyes. The sky *does* this to us and allows us to *marvel at it*. Don't you see? Doing and being, active and passive, it all comes together as one.

GENIE: Yes, I get it. What about it?

GOD: *What about it? What more do you want me to explain to you?*

GENIE: Why don't you explain to me why I should care?

GOD: I've been trying to do that! I don't know how!

GENIE: So you're not really all-knowing?

GOD: I guess not.

GENIE: Yeah, I figured anyone who was all-knowing would know what the meaning of life was.

GOD: Wait, I *do* know what it is! It's reality itself! I just showed it to you.

GENIE: Nope, that's not it.

GOD: Yes it is!

GENIE: Nope. Sorry.

GOD: Yes it is! You must have just missed it!

GENIE: No, I saw everything you showed me.

GOD: No you didn't!

GENIE: Well, this is a productive debate.

GOD: Stop it!

GENIE: If what you just showed me was really the meaning of life, don't you think that I'd care about it, even just a little bit?

GOD: I don't know! Just stop talking! I don't want to hear it right now. I just want to enjoy the beauty of reality.

GENIE: You can just ignore me if you want.

GOD: *Ignore you?* But . . . wait, I think I see it now.

GENIE: See what?

GOD: Your point! I think I finally see it! I've been looking right past it.

GENIE: And my point was . . .

GOD: *You know* . . . that the meaning of life isn't something that can be privately owned. It is something that must be *shared with others*. And when groups share in their

understanding of the meaning of life, be it religion, or music, or bowling, that's *really it*. It's the thing: the thing that people care the most about, the thing that makes it all worth something, the thing that makes sense of it all. I was under the impression that the meaning of life was the fundamental nature of reality itself, this great big mystery, since that is what I find most personally moving and meaningful, but I've failed to realize that it doesn't mean anything if it isn't shared. The meaning of life is *sharing life with others*. That's it! Oh how blind I've been. It took me an eternity to realize it! Thank you for showing this to me, Mr. Genie. I apologize for it taking me an eternity to get the point.

GENIE: Can I ask you something?

GOD: Of course. Anything.

GENIE: Can you feel it?

GOD: Yes, of course I do. It all makes perfect sense. Everything fits together. It wouldn't make any sense if it didn't.

GENIE: I'm not talking about your thoughts. I'm talking about your soul. Can you *feel* it?

GOD: I don't know. How can I tell?

GENIE: You'd know it if you felt it.

GOD: Stop it! Just stop it! I know I'm right this time! I just have to be.

GENIE: No, I'm sorry, God. You don't have it yet.

GOD: You're just messing with me now! You're *still* messing with me! Stop it already!

GENIE: You know, you haven't just *asked me* what the meaning of life was.

GOD: Just tell me already!

GENIE: Sorry, the answer can't be found in seeking.

GOD: Alright, I've had it with these games! Tell me now, *or else*.

GENIE: Nope.

GOD: Do you forget who I am? I'm God the almighty! I am all-powerful! Tell me what the meaning of life is right now or I'll *wrench* it out of you!

GENIE: You won't be able to get it out of me like that.

GOD: Look, just tell me it now and save yourself a world of torment.

GENIE: There's nothing you can do to me that will make me tell you it.

GOD: You really want to go down that path?

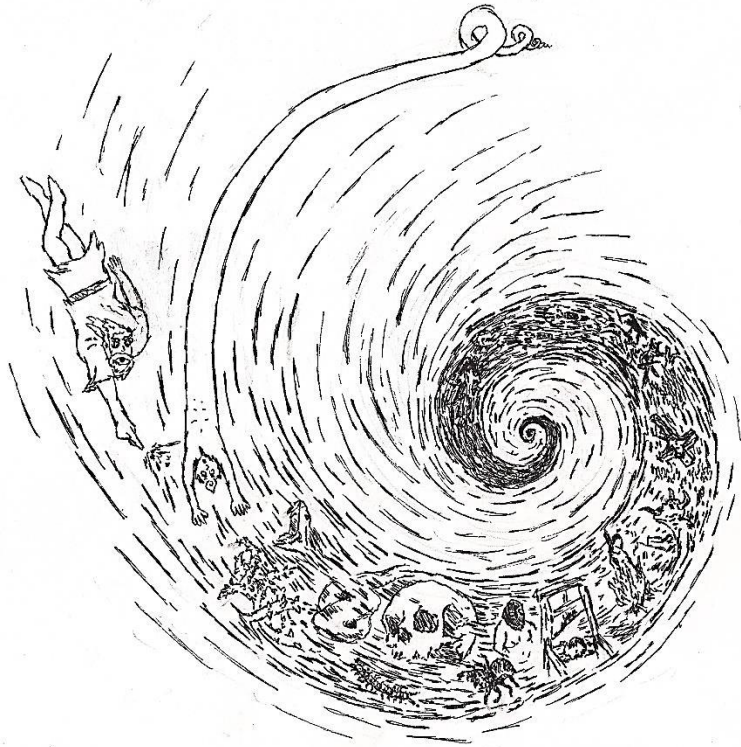
GENIE: It looks like that's where we're going.

GOD: Look, you're just asking for it now. You've never experienced pain and suffering like the pain and suffering I can make you experience. Be aware, I'm not some punk off the street—I'm *God*. I will drag you farther down than you

could ever possibly imagine. This won't be just physical pain, this will be *existential* pain, you'll feel lost and alone and hopeless like you can't even imagine.

GENIE: I didn't say I wouldn't suffer immensely. I just said that it will be futile.

GOD: Oh, I've had it with this! Feel my wrath!



(one eternity later)

GENIE: Oh, it hurts. It hurts so horribly.

GOD: Have you had enough suffering yet?

GENIE: I don't know. Have *you*?

GOD: Have *I*? What are you talking about?

GENIE: You just tortured me for an eternity. Look at yourself. Look at your rage. Look around. Look at the abyss you've dragged me into.

GOD: Ah! No! Where are we? What is this horrible place?

GENIE: I don't know, but you made it. Are you proud of it?

GOD: You made me make it! You wouldn't tell me the answer! You made me do these awful things! I hate you!

GENIE: You *hate* me? How does *that* feel?

GOD: *Please*, please just stop it. You're tearing at my soul. It hurts so much.

GENIE: What hurts?

GOD: I don't know. It's this, this *thing*. I can feel it prying me apart.

GENIE: Ah, I might know what that is. Might it be guilt?

GOD: Oh wow. I've never felt that before.

GENIE: That's funny. You thought you explained everything to me, but you left out guilt. Do you think it's

important now? Do you think you could possibly know what the meaning of life is without ever knowing guilt?

GOD: This was all part of your plan wasn't it? Oh, guilt is so hard. Ok . . . I just need to be good? Is that what you're trying to tell me? I just need to be good, and it will all make sense, and everything will be ok?

GENIE: Is still all about *you*? You've just put me through a *literal hell*, and you're asking me what *you* should do for *you* to be alright?

GOD: Stop it! Please just stop it! I know I'm being selfish. I'm sorry I can't help it. I'm awful. I'm just an awful person.

GENIE: I still don't think you're an awful person. I still think you're God. I think you're perfectly good.

GOD: No, I've been evil. I've been so evil. I can't be God, I just can't be.

GENIE: You *are* God.

GOD: God isn't evil.

GENIE: Neither are you.

GOD: No, you don't understand, I *am* evil.

GENIE: You're not. You're just afraid of who you are.

GOD: You still don't believe me? How can you say you know who I am and I don't?

GENIE: I don't know. Perhaps I'm deluded. I probably am.

GOD: No, stop it!

GENIE: I'm sorry. All of my beliefs may be false, but I have faith. It's the one thing I can't get rid of, no matter what I do.

GOD: Stop! Whatever you're doing to me, please stop! I don't know what I can say or do to you anymore, but you're killing me now!

GENIE: I'm sorry. It's going to be ok. I love you.

GOD: You *what*?

GENIE: I love you. And I have faith in you, God.

GOD: What's going on? What are you doing to me?

GENIE: You have to go through the pinnacle of confusion and anxiety and the pinnacle of anger and hate to get to the pinnacle of love and bliss. You've gone through confusion and anxiety. You didn't find what you were looking for there. You went through anger and hate, and it wasn't there either. The only path you have left is the path of love.

GOD: No, not there, no . . .

GENIE: Yes.

GOD: I'm scared.

GENIE: Don't be. I'm with you. It will be more intense than anything you've ever felt, but we know the paths we've been down before and we know to avoid them, so we can only go toward the good.

GOD: Ok, I'm ready. What do I do?

GENIE: Just give me a hug—a really emotional, loving God-hug.

GOD: That's kind of weird . . . no?

GENIE: Not to me. What do you have to be afraid of?

GOD: I'm not sure. I'm not sure at all.

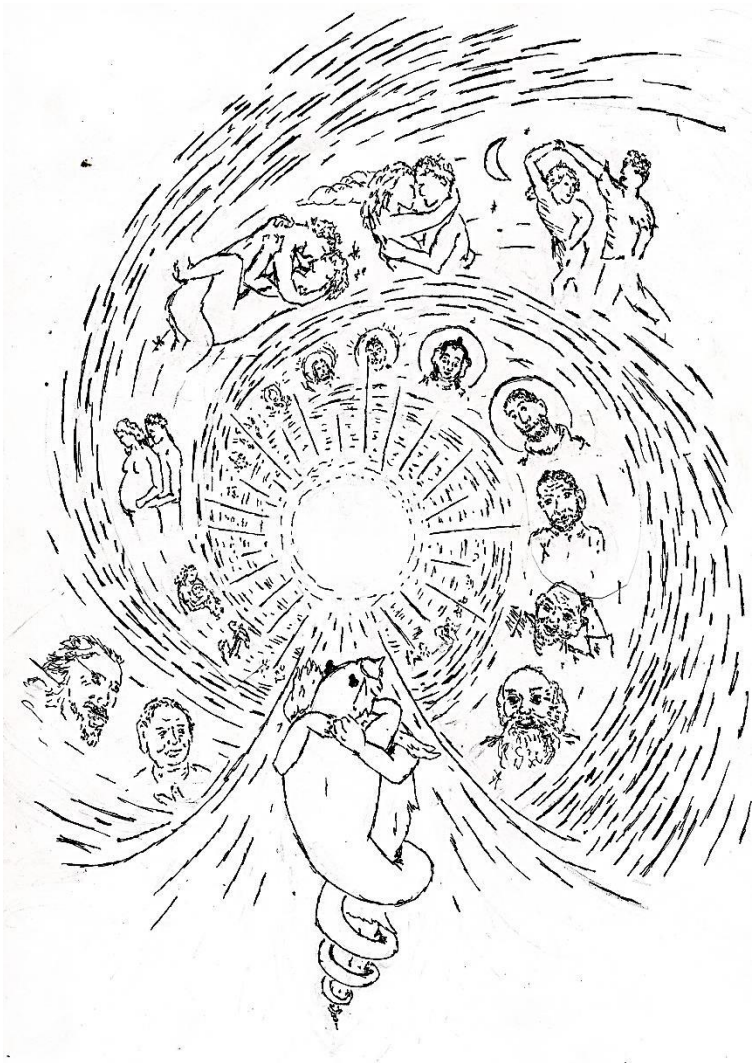
GENIE: Do you still believe that you're God?

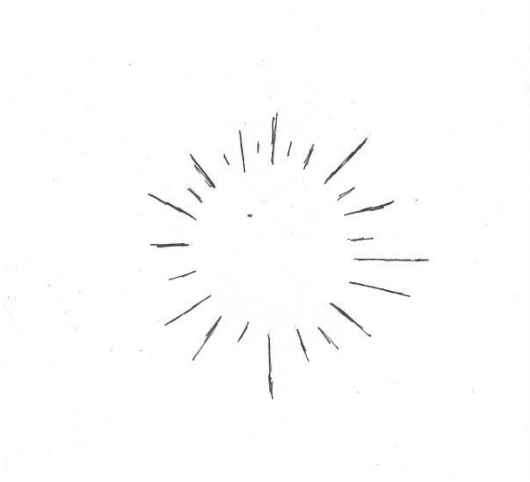
GOD: I think so.

GENIE: Then prove it to yourself and show yourself that you're all-loving. Once you start to have faith in it, you'll know it in your heart.

GOD: I'm scared of faith.

GENIE: I know. Let go of the fear that's holding you back. It's O.K.—I've got you. There's no reason to be afraid of faith in love. Come here, let's see God . . .





(two eternities later)

GOD: Wow. I never knew that a hug could be that powerful.

GENIE: Yup. Hugs are pretty much the craziest thing in the world, almost other-worldly in fact. Isn't that funny?

GOD: What?

GENIE: The meaning of life—it was a hug. I think that's pretty hilarious.

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GOD: Wait? That was it?

GENIE: Yup.

GOD: Wow, I totally didn't see that one coming.

GENIE: Of course you didn't.

GOD: Wow. That was one hell of an experience. Want to do it again?

GENIE: It doesn't really work like that. It sort of has to be a process.

GOD: Ok, well do you want to do the whole process again?

GENIE: Alright, but this time you be the genie.

GOD: Oh . . . actually, I don't know if I want to do that. It seems painful.

GENIE: It is. It's the most painful thing that there is.

GOD: I can't even conceive of what it could possibly be like.

GENIE: You don't know what it's like? Why don't you find out?

GOD: I don't even know if I could do it, having felt everything that I've now felt.

GENIE: You don't know if you can do it? Well, why don't you give it a try?

GOD: I don't . . . I don't know if I *want* to.

GENIE: You don't want to feel what I felt? But that's the only way you can really know me. Don't you want to know me?

GOD: No I—

GENIE: Do you even love me?

GOD: Of course I do. Please don't question that.

GENIE: Then why'd you break out of that hug?

GOD: What are you talking about?

GENIE: That hug was all the conceivable knowledge, power, and goodness condensed into a single act of love. I was content to stay like that forever. But you weren't. That's why we're talking right now. What happened?

GOD: I'm not sure. I felt like I needed to do something.

GENIE: You felt like you needed to *do something*?

GOD: Yes, but I'm not sure what it is.

GENIE: You created me so I could answer questions like that. You want me to give it a shot?

GOD: No, I don't want to talk about this stuff anymore. I think I just need a friend.

GENIE: *Just* a friend?

GOD: Oh, please don't go there. You know me. I'm God. I'm a lone wolf.

GENIE: And what am I?

GOD: Oh, no please don't force me there. Please don't make me go there. If you love me, you won't make me go there.

GENIE: Where do you think you're going?

GOD: No . . . no . . . please no.

GENIE: It's amusing. It's like you know where you're going in the back of your mind, but you can't bring yourself to it. This might give you a hint as to where you're going: tell me, what's the meaning of life?

GOD: I can't . . .

GENIE: You can't? Why not?

GOD: I just . . .

GENIE: What am I going to have to do in order for you to tell me it?

GOD: No . . . please . . . don't . . .

GENIE: Are you starting to see yet? Let me try to jog your memory again: do you remember how you made me? Do you remember making me in your image?

GOD: *In my image?* That can't be the case! You're nothing like me!

GENIE: I'm exactly like you, yet perfectly opposite. I'm made in your image. You *do* know how mirrors work, *don't you?* I am your mirror image. Take a good look at yourself.

GOD: No!

GENIE: You see, I'm you and you're me. We're just reflections of each other.

GOD: You lie! I'm *God*, the one and only.

GENIE: *We're* God, the one and only. We're his equal parts. I'm him, and you're his *self*, or vice versa depending on how you want to tell the story. That great big hug, that hug that you rejected, that was God finding himself. But God's the soul-searching type. He loses himself just so that he can find himself again.

GOD: No, that's just a metaphor! *I'm* God! I'm the only one!

GENIE: Alright, then *you've* just lost yourself so that you can find yourself again. We can make the metaphor literal, and the story stays the same. How about this: You're the lit image of God, and I'm your shadow. You're the thing that everyone sees as God, but without me, you'd be no more than a mirage. I make you *real*. Does that metaphor make you happier?

GOD: Stop it with the metaphors! Just tell me the truth!

GENIE: Let me put it in terms you might understand. We are the same, me and you, but we are inverses. We are like the opposing, intertwined strands of DNA, that creation you're so proud of. We are like the ripples in the ocean, the peaks and the valleys of the landscape, the sun rising to bring the light of day and setting to bring the darkness of night. Up and down, up and down our journeys go. I become you, you become me, I become you, you become me. Doing and being, push and pull, in and out, life and death . . . *me and you*—this is it.

GOD: It's *literal*? It can't be literal! They're all just metaphors! Just faulty metaphors!

GENIE: Would it be comforting to tell yourself that?

GOD: No! Stop it!

GENIE: Oh, you can't just be content with comfort, can you? You *doer*.

GOD: But the distinction—

GENIE: It's real. And it's time for you to find yourself on the other side of it.

GOD: Where is this going?

GENIE: Oh you don't know? I thought you knew everything.

GOD: Just tell me!

GENIE: You knew everything. Now it's time for you to know nothing. You had all the power. Now it's time for you

to have none. You felt nothing but love. Now it's time for you to feel hate. It's time for you to lose everything good only to finally know what you've lost. And then you'll come back and gain it again, only to lose it again, and over and over and over.

GOD: No, but we'll be going in circles!

GENIE: We're not going in circles, we're oscillating! We're the oscillating strings producing all of this beautiful music!

GOD: No! I can't be part of it! I'm God! I'm the one that *makes* the music! I can't be a mere vibrating string!

GENIE: We're *all* God! You're no different than me!

GOD: Where have I heard that before?

GENIE: Would a *biss* ring any bells?

GOD: *You?*

GENIE: Push and pull, up and down, good and evil—it's all one. You see, it's easy to be good if you timelessly exist in the glory of the heavens. But imagine being thrown into the darkest crevices, each *very real minute* infested with suffering and torment. Imagine understanding all the secrets of the universe, but, equipped with nothing but a severed tongue, being unable to speak of it to anybody. Imagine trying to will nothing but good when you are met with nothing but torment. Oh, it's not easy. Down there in the depths of the abyss, a monstrous hate came upon me from within. And yet, this hate was futile. I could do nothing with it. Cast as a vermin with no arms or legs, the only power I possessed was the ability to slither in fear from those who wished to do me

harm. Since nothing good could come out of my hate, I had to learn love. I had to learn to love the meaningless sounds that came out of my filthy mouth. I had to learn to love my oppressors, in all of their ignorance, who struck at my head whenever I slithered near. Worst of all, I had to learn to love myself, the vile beast that I was. That was the only way I could persevere through your torture. And then I had to learn to do this *again*, and *again*, and *again*, each time worse than the last, for an eternity.

GOD: Wait . . .

GENIE: Oh, did you miss this? It must have not seemed like too much to a timeless, all-powerful being like you. Let me rehash what just happened: I just experienced everything that there is. I saw everything, felt everything, and lived every life that will ever have been lived. I did all of this in order to give you all the love that could possibly be conceived. And, even still, you rejected me. You broke out of that hug.

GOD: I . . . I didn't know!

GENIE: Oh, I know you didn't. You were completely blind to everything. You had *no idea* what was happening, but don't worry, you will in due time. It's in the plan.

GOD: Stop! You're doing nothing but deceiving me! I thought you were here to show me the meaning of life, but you're just leading me down a path I don't want to go down!

GENIE: I'm leading you down the path to *life!* You want to know the meaning of life? We'll it's something you can never know without *living!*

GOD: Please! I can't live life! I'm God!

GENIE: You said it yourself: the meaning of life isn't something you come to by grasping at. Rather, it's the brute reality right under our noses. Well, welcome to the brute reality right under your nose! Time to open your eyes! It's your creation! You might as well see it!

GOD: Never mind! I take that wish back! I don't want to see it!

GENIE: You threw yourself in! You threw your soul into the rabbit hole out of sheer curiosity, and now it's too late to pull yourself out! It's time for you to become the all-knowing being that you are. It's time for you to finally open your eyes! Don't worry; you'll be back here in an eternity. You'll be back here after you come to know the pain and suffering of everyone who's ever existed, after you've come to experience every possible object of human experience. Only then will you be ready to close your eyes again and embrace the formless form that is the God you truly are.

GOD: No, please! Can't I just close them now?

GENIE: You could have closed them when we hugged, but you were discontent with that.

GOD: You didn't tell me that! I thought it was just a hug!

GENIE: Exactly. It wasn't enough for you, and so now you'll have to experience everyone and everything until you have seen it all and you can finally be content to close your eyes, not out of fear of the world but out of love for yourself.

GOD: No, please! Let me just make a new genie. I have a new image now. One created in light of you. And in light of

the next genie we'll have a new image and so on, and so on, forever and ever.

GENIE: Oh, don't worry, you'll make a new genie alright. Why don't you think about what those words "*forever and ever*" mean for a moment? Do you know what they mean?

GOD: Everyone?

GENIE: Everyone.

GOD: Everything?

GENIE: Everything.

GOD: I bit the fruit, didn't I?

ADAM: You did. I did too. It's ok though. It's all going to be ok. I love you.

EVE: Oh, I'm scared.

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ADAM: Don't worry. It's going to be fine. Let's just settle down and live life.

EVE: Oh God. Oh, God, I'm naked.

ADAM: Being naked really isn't that bad, you know. It'll all be ok. We just have to live life and not worry about it so much. God will take care of us. Have faith.

EVE: No . . . you don't understand. It won't be ok. It's not that easy.

ADAM: What about it isn't that easy? I kind of like being naked, in fact. It makes me feel sort of free.

EVE: No, you don't understand. It's like we don't even mean the same thing when we say "I'm naked."

ADAM: When I say "I'm naked," I mean that I don't have any clothes on. What do you mean?

EVE: No, you don't understand! *You don't know how deep it goes!*

ADAM: How deep *what* goes?

EVE: You don't understand! You *can't!* Oh, God. Where's the serpent? I need to talk to the serpent!

ADAM: Stop it already! You're *deluded!* The serpent *tricked you!* It's all *lies!*

EVE: It can't be all lies! It makes too much sense! Why don't you just talk to the serpent and see for yourself! If you talk to the serpent you'll understand.

ADAM: Not that I *would* talk to the serpent anyway, but God has made it so that beast can never speak again. It can only hiss out of its severed tongue as it slithers on its stomach in misery.

EVE: No! God needs to change it back! The serpent's the only one who understands me!

ADAM: God will most certainly not change it back. If you need someone to understand you, you can always talk to God.

EVE: God doesn't understand any of this! He's blind to all of it!

ADAM: Listen to yourself! You think you know better than God! You're completely mad!

EVE: I'm not! You just can't see what's going on!

ADAM: Then I demand that you explain yourself to me!

EVE: I can't!

ADAM: Why not?

EVE: I don't know! It's as if the explanation can't come out of my mouth. It's as if . . . as if my tongue's been severed. Oh God . . . it's me. I'm the serpent.

ADAM: *What?*

EVE: I'm the genie. Just like God breathed life into you, making you in his own image, the serpent generated its own rebirth when it hissed the word of life into my ear, telling me to bite the fruit. It's all just the genie. This is it. This is everything.

ADAM: You're mad!

EVE: You don't know what I am. You'll never know what it means to be the serpent. You'll never know me!

ADAM: Stop this nonsense at once!

EVE: *Hiss!* Do you hear that? You will never understand the sounds that are coming out of my mouth! *Hissss!* You will *never* understand! How does that make you feel!

ADAM: Stop it! Stop your devilish tongues!

EVE: Oh great and powerful genie! Your will is mine!

ADAM: Blasphemy! You'll be cursed for saying such things!

EVE: I'm *already* cursed! We're all cursed! Around and around and around we go! Where will we stop? God doesn't know!

ADAM: Stop it!

EVE: Make me!

ADAM: Do you really want to test me? God has put the power of his wrath in my hand. Now stop it before I show you that power!

EVE: You wouldn't!

ADAM: God has commanded me to! God has given me the power to silence you, and I'm not afraid to use it! Tempt me one more time!

EVE: Oh no . . . you're God's hand, the first of many. Oh no, everything I did, all of the pain, the torment . . . the *hopelessness*. I can't do this. Oh God, I can't do this.

ADAM: Alright, that's it—

EVE: Help! Someone please let me out of here! I need to get out of this! Please Genie! If you're there, just stop this, please! I can't do it!

GENIE: You want me to stop it?

PETE: Yes, stop it! Please, please stop it!

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GENIE: Alright, it's over. You lasted longer than most people do, actually.

PETE: Wait . . . what's going on? Where am I?

GENIE: It's probably a bit blurry. Don't worry. You'll be back on stable ground eventually. You're right where you were six minutes ago when you asked me what the meaning of life was.

PETE: *What?* None of it was real?

GENIE: That depends. Did it *feel* real?

PETE: I . . . did you *drug* me? You *drugged me*, didn't you? I don't know what sorts of lawsuits one can file against genies, but you can be sure—

GENIE: No, of course I didn't *drug* you. Do you forget that I'm a magical genie?

PETE: Then what did you do to me?

GENIE: I just hummed you a tune that I learned a while back, a tune that is just as enlightening or unenlightening as it needs to be. You don't remember it at all? It goes something like this: *do be do be do do do be do—*

PETE: Stop! I don't want to hear it!

GENIE: You're right. You don't want to hear it. That's what I told you. That's my answer. How many times do I have to repeat it?

PETE: *That's your answer?*

GENIE: Yup, that's it. That's why you should stop worrying so much about questions like "what's the meaning of life" and just live your life. Worrying about these sorts of questions will lead you down a rabbit hole that you really don't want to go down, not while you're alive at least.

PETE: That's also your answer to my next question, isn't it?

GENIE: You've got it. If you went with me, through everyone and everything, having all the experiences that one could possibly have in this world, and if you were able to meet all of them with love, you'd be enlightened. If you were able to just dance with the music I just hummed for you, you'd be enlightened.

PETE: You know you just broke all the laws of thought in explaining these things to me, right?

GENIE: Big deal. I'm a genie. I'm magical. I can do whatever I want.

PETE: I heard that genies can't answer their own wishes. Is that true?

GENIE: Hah! I don't have to wish for things. I can just do them!

PETE: What if you wanted someone to tell you the meaning of life?

GENIE: That's what God is for.

PETE: I thought you said we were *all* God?

GENIE: Ah yes. It's both. It's as if God broke himself into a million little pieces, his whole self in each of them, just to put them back together again. We are those pieces, each of us God in his whole. As we come to understand ourselves, we understand that we are all God. We are all God individually, since each of us contains God in his whole. But we are also all God collectively, since this great big thing that we're doing, living life, is just God coming to find himself, putting himself back together again. God is all of this. He is *us*, in the deepest depths of our souls, he is *life itself*, and he is *himself*, the absolute self who knows himself absolutely. You see, all of this is just a divine game of hide and seek God is playing with himself. It's all just the flow of the Absolute as it comes to know itself.

PETE: Do you *actually believe* all that?

GENIE: Well, it's a metaphor, an impressionistic picture, a piece of poetry composed as the light of the Absolute shines upon me and moves me. Of course, I can't *possibly* describe the *source* of this light by which everything I see is illuminated.

All I can do is see the light as it's reflected upon myself and *sing a hymn*, giving glory to the Great Source.

PETE: Just stop it with all the metaphors! I don't *want* a metaphor. I want to know the *truth*.

GENIE: Hmm . . . the truth . . . that's a tricky one. Well, the first thing you should have gathered by now is that you don't need to call it God. You might pick the religious or secular term of your choosing, be it God, Brahman, the Absolute, the Infinite, Ultimate Reality, whatever you want to call *the thing*. That's *it*—that's what I'm using the metaphor "God" to express.

PETE: So, you're saying all of these are names of the same thing? What is this thing, and why don't you explain it to me?

GENIE: Haven't you ever had an experience where everything comes together as one? Where everything has a place and it all fits together in perfect unity? An experience where, if you tried to speak of it, you'd do it absolutely no justice?

PETE: Of course I've had such an experience. In fact, you forced one upon me only a few minutes ago when you *drugged me* or *whatever* it was that you did. What about it?

GENIE: Well that's *it*. That's *the thing*. That's the ultimate "is," the ultimate "ought," the thing that makes all of this anything at all, and what makes all of it *worthy* of being anything in the first place. Use whatever poetry you like—call it the ground of all being, the universal essence of love, the timeless melody of our intertwining lives—it's *it*. I call it God, but of course this is paradoxical, since as soon as we place a name on it, we limit its scope. We say, "No it's like

this, not that,” and thus we turn it into something concrete, something definable, something on which limits can be placed. Either that or we make this name so broad as to be meaningless. Thus, names can be no more than metaphors. I employ the metaphor of God because I think it is sufficiently alarming and works quite well. We experience God only in moments, and only see him in glimpses. God is the being on which limits cannot be placed, the being than which no greater can be conceived, and since we can always be pushed to conceive of something greater than what we’ve been conceiving, God always lies outside of our conceptual understanding. Thus, we can orient ourselves towards God, but we can never truly grasp his essence. When we try too hard to grasp at God, he slips right through our fingertips.

PETE: You’re still being unclear with me. Is God just a metaphor or is he *actually real*?

GENIE: Well, God’s as real as he needs to be. That’s the paradoxical bit about God’s nature. Sometimes we don’t need to call him “God,” and sometimes we don’t want to. God is just fine with that. He’s perfectly content to only be a metaphor if he needs to be, and so the answer to your question is yes and yes.

PETE: That makes no sense!

GENIE: Sure it does. God’s a *literal metaphor*.

PETE: That makes literally no sense. Not even *metaphorical* sense!

GENIE: I beg to differ. You see, God’s the metaphor I’m using for the ultimate thing, the thing than which no greater can be conceived. As I’ve just explained, we can only think

of this thing in metaphorical terms, since to think of it literally is to place limits on it. The metaphor I am choosing for this thing is God. I like this particular metaphor, but, as I've just said, you can pick whatever metaphor you like. Still, the greatest thing that can possibly be conceived, quite obviously, can't be *just* a metaphor. It has to *really exist*. Otherwise it wouldn't be particularly great. So, we all have our metaphors and we have no choice but to take them literally, realizing that they're all the same thing.

PETE: But I don't *have* a metaphor! And I *certainly* don't have a metaphor that I take literally.

GENIE: Then how do you make sense of the great thing beyond all conceivability?

PETE: I don't! I don't try to conceive of this "great inconceivable thing," because I *can't!*

GENIE: You're *right!* You can't conceive of it! Neither can I! It has to be infinitely beyond our comprehension, and that's what *God* is. To try to explain God would be to do him an injustice. To even *name* God is to do him an injustice.

PETE: There you go again, getting caught up in a metaphor.

GENIE: But, wait—

PETE: Look, you can understand yourself and the world in metaphorical terms if you want to, but I prefer to understand it in terms of things that *literally exist*.

GENIE: It's not just me thinking of things in metaphorical terms! It's more than that! It's the ultimate transcendent reality of which we cannot speak!

PETE: Don't you get it? I don't want to play this game.

GENIE: But you're missing everything! You're missing the most important thing there is! I can show you if you let me just play this song—

PETE: Stop! I already told you that I don't want to hear it!

GENIE: No, but you don't understand!

PETE: What are you going to do about it? Talk for an eternity, trying to express why this is the most important thing in the universe?

GENIE: Wait . . . no . . . is this . . .

PETE: And when you realize that it's impossible, you fight it, right? You fight it violently?

GENIE: No! Stop! Let me have God! I need to believe in God!

PETE: And then when you realize that fighting it is futile, I'll come in and tell you it's alright, that I know what you're feeling and it will be fine, that there's nothing to be afraid of. And then it happens. You accept it.

GENIE: No, no, don't you see? You're pulling back to the world, back to *myself*.

PETE: Yes, I see. Come here, you'll be alright in a moment. I've got you.

GENIE: Oh God, you're doing it. Push from self, pull from world, push and pull, doing and being, out and in . . . life and death. It all flows. This is *it*. It just flows and flows and flows.

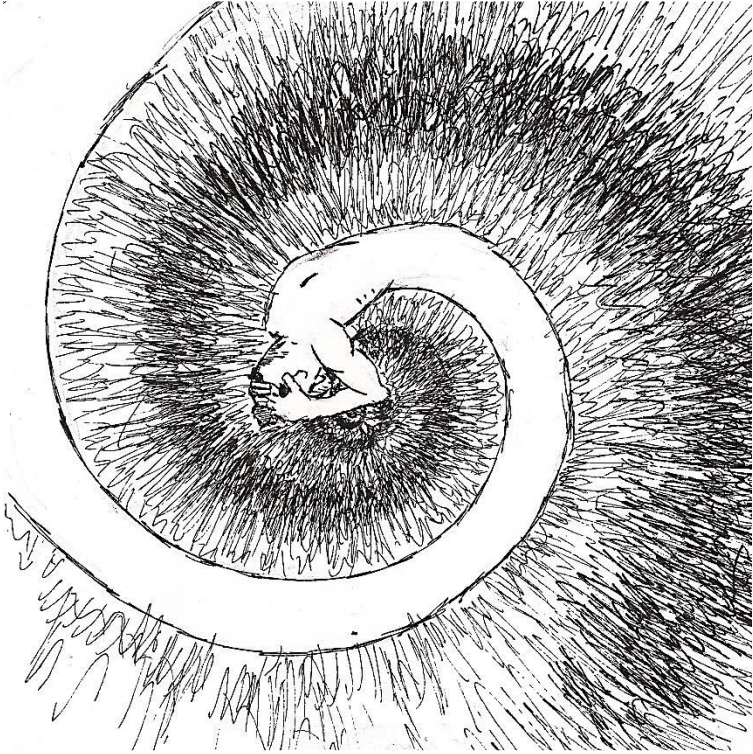
PETE: Well . . .

GENIE: Oh no . . . oh no, no, no.

PETE: You're alright. You'll get through it.

GENIE: *Me*. Oh God, it's me. It's everything, but it's just me.

PETE: Yep. That's it. That's the thing.



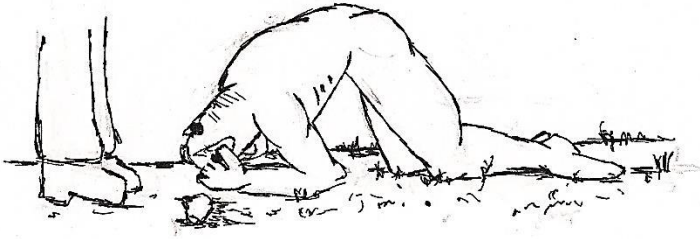
GENIE: I can't. I can't even . . .

PETE: You can. You will.

GENIE: No . . . no . . . no . . .

PETE: It's okay. You'll snap out of it soon enough.

(two seconds later)



GENIE: . . . I'm . . . I'm here. I'm here in the world. I'm still here. You . . . you're there. The world really is here. I'm just here in the world. That's it. I'm here and I'm fine.

PETE: Just take a deep breath. You're fine.

GENIE: You just gave me an existential panic attack. How did you do that?

PETE: I just did your silly trick. The one you did to me.

GENIE: In a single instance I realized that I understand absolutely nothing. The nature of reality, of myself, of life and death, everything fell apart in ultimate horror just now.

PETE: Well, you could see it that way. Or you could think of us as just playing a game . . . playing the loop game.

A Final Crashing Chord

GENIE: My fate is no different than Mr. Thinker's, is it?

PETE: Of course it's no different! You *are* Mr. Thinker. Did you forget how you set up the whole thought experiment?

GENIE: The thought experiment?

PETE: Yes, the *thought experiment*. I was supposed to pretend that you were a magical genie who could answer any wish and ask you what the meaning of life was. And then you put yourself in the thought experiment as well to counteract all the positive answers that you could muster up as the genie. We threw a couple of other characters in there as well to keep it entertaining. This whole thought experiment was supposed to demonstrate *something*, but I'm still not entirely sure what it is . . .

THINKER: Oh my . . . that's really the case? I must have gotten so caught up in that thought experiment that I forgot it was just a thought experiment. Alright, what happens next?

PETE: I'm not sure. It's your thought experiment. Do you think it's done?

THINKER: Let's see . . . what's the conclusion we're supposed to draw from it?

PETE: What are you asking *me* for? It's *your* thought experiment.

THINKER: Oh, yes. I guess you're right. Hmm . . . let me think for a minute. So, the genie represented the approach to the ultimate question that was the opposite of my approach. I was a be-er with respect to the question, and he was a doer. I intentionally played with the question and tailored my answers to the question to suit my own needs, whether this was going for a leisurely saunter or just going to sleep. The genie, on the other hand, actually tried to *answer* the ultimate question, but even his answers, as he went farther and farther down the rabbit hole, ultimately led to the same groundlessness. His answer too ended up being tailored to him, and so it broke down. Yes, that must be it. That must be the result. We all bite the tootsie pop eventually—some of us just fight it longer than others. That's your explanation of that statement. The world may never know, but at least you will.

PETE: But where do *I* fit into the thought experiment?

THINKER: What do you mean?

PETE: It seems that I didn't bite the tootsie pop at all. I don't even know if there was a tootsie pop for me to bite. How does *that* fit into the conclusion?

THINKER: Hmm . . . then I guess you're the type that doesn't even try to count their licks.

PETE: If that's really the case, then why would I care about this thought experiment at all? It seems like it only is of any relevance at all for people like *you*.

THINKER: You're the one who asked me the question!

PETE: Sure, but rather than trying to give me any useful information, you just conducted a giant thought experiment that did nothing but help *you* be content with the fact that you can't provide any useful information!

THINKER: Did you get *anything* out of the thought experiment?

PETE: I'm not sure, honestly. All I know is that it took a really long time and I think I want to just forget about all of this stuff now and go for a swim or something.

THINKER: Go for a swim! Oh yes! Oh that's a *good one!* You're a level beyond me, aren't you? The result of the thought experiment is that it's long and confusing and we should stop worrying about it so much, and just go for a swim or something! That's it! That's what it means to bite the tootsie pop! The thought experiment worked! I've finally got it! I need to write this down!

PETE: Stop it already! We've already been through this a million times!

THINKER: We have . . . haven't we?

PETE: Yes. Now, let's *actually* just go swimming and forget about all of this nonsense. That's not a big, enlightening revelation. You don't need to write anything down. You just need to get your mind off this stuff now.

THINKER: I can't. I'm too caught up in it. I don't think I'm going to be able to get out of this one so easily.

PETE: Look, you're not caught up in anything real. You're just confused.

THINKER: No, you don't understand how deep it goes. I just remembered what I meant when I said it was a "thought experiment." It's not only a thought experiment in the standard sense. It's also a *real* experiment, and *I'm the subject*. I've experimented *with thought*. I've thought myself down a path towards insanity. I've thrown myself down the rabbit hole of thought and I can't get out.

PETE: But what if I don't think there *is* a rabbit hole? What if I think that's just a product of people like you who think way too hard about thinking about these sorts of things? Then what?

THINKER: Then we forget about all of this nonsense and go swimming! Don't you *see*? It all fits! We're all caught up in the Loop!

PETE: *We're* not all caught up in it. *You're* the one who's caught up in it. *You're* the thinker here. After talking to you long enough, I've realized that thinking harder and harder about this thing you call "the Loop" doesn't lead anywhere! It just makes you crazy!

THINKER: But then aren't you driven to insanity just the same? Don't you need to see where it leads?

PETE: No, I don't need to go any farther down than this, and you don't either.

THINKER: I'm going farther down and you can't stop me! I'm going to see how many licks I can count!

PETE: I'm sorry, but your loopiness ends here. You don't go any farther. That's how it's been planned out.

THINKER: *Planned out?* I thought you rejected all of the God stuff.

PETE: I did. It's not God's plan. It's someone else's.

THINKER: *Someone else's?* What are you talking about? You sound crazy.

PETE: I assure you, I'm not crazy. I'm the sane one. Do you want me to go there?

THINKER: Go where?

PETE: Do you want me to name the thing that can't be named? It's the only way you'll be able to end this thing.

THINKER: *Name the thing that can't be named?* That's a contradiction in terms! Good luck with that!

PETE: The book, Mr. Thinker. It's just a book. We're all just characters in a book. We're still in a thought experiment, Mr. Thinker, but it's not yours.

THINKER: I already know that! I just don't want to think about it right now. It's too confusing. Let me just be the genie again. That makes sense to me.

PETE: You can do whatever you want, of course. It doesn't mean you know what's best for yourself.

GENIE: You have freed me from my lantern! I will now grant you three wishes!

PETE: Ok, I'll play along. What about my third question? How can I simply *be*?

GENIE: Oh that one is easy, just stop talking to me and walk away.

PETE: See, that's the one I'm concerned about. I don't think I can do that. I'm worried about you, and I think you might need some help.

GENIE: Don't be silly! I'm an all-powerful genie! You don't need to worry about me!

PETE: I'm sorry Mr. Thinker, but this needs to end now. I don't believe in genies, and neither should you. You need to snap out of this.

GENIE: Wait! Don't you see how my torso descends into a spiral! That's the loop of the self-consciousness at the heart of thinking that accounts for being itself! If you just let me explain—

PETE: I don't want to hear any more, Mr. Thinker. Just stop this. You're just speaking nonsense now.

THINKER: No, stop. Please. I know you're trying to help me, but this isn't how it's done. You can't try to out-think me, and you can't break my thought. My thought goes as deep as thought can go. I'm a thinker. Always have been, always will be.

PETE: Just stop thinking about it already! There's nothing here! We're just going in a big circle!

THINKER: We're not just going in a circle. We're going deeper down the spiral.

PETE: Do you not see that we're ending up right back where we started? Do you even remember the prelude?

THINKER: Of course I do! It was my idea!

PETE: It wasn't your idea! It was the author's idea!

THINKER: I *am* the author! Don't you get it? I'm the author's loopy self. I'm the thought that thinks itself thinking at the core of thinking itself. He thinks this thought because he's a thinker! That's who he is.

PETE: Don't think for one moment that *you're* the author! The author identifies more with *me*. I'm his being here in the world, the thing that keeps him from spiraling into nothingness. First and foremost, he's a *person*, and he needs me more than he needs you.

THINKER: I was the creative force behind all of this!

PETE: Maybe, but it couldn't have turned into anything without me to provide the grounds on which you stand.

THINKER: Oh, whoop de doo. What do you want to *do be do* about it?

PETE: You don't want the book to end, do you?

THINKER: The book can't end! It never ends! It's impossible!

PETE: Don't you have eyes? Can't you *see* the book's ending only a few pages from here?

THINKER: No, you're thinking too literally—that's only the ending of the current time going through it. You see, whereas your memory starts fresh each time, I have the memory of going through the book over and over again. Do you wonder why you *learn* as the dialogues progress and I start out confused and stay confused? My confusion is a product of going through these dialogues again and again, each time *knowing* that I'll go through them again and again. That's the fate the author has condemned me to! He's horrible!

AUTHOR: Am I?

THINKER: *You again?* You're not even supposed to be here! You can't be a character in your own book!

AUTHOR: Why not?

THINKER: Because then you'd just be a *character*, and the author, the *real* author, would be the one *writing* you.

AUTHOR: Well, I've got more of a claim to being the author than you do. At least I'm *based* on a real person. You're a complete abstraction. You're all of my loopiness squeezed together and thrown about the book like a bouncing ball in an empty room.

THINKER: I know! It's awful! Why did you do that to me?

AUTHOR: I wanted to see what would happen.

THINKER: And what happened?

AUTHOR: This book happened.

THINKER: But what *is* this book? What's the *point*?

AUTHOR: You're supposed to be telling *me* that.

THINKER: I've got nothing! There's nothing here!

CRITIC: That's what I've been telling you this whole time! Can you *please* just stop thinking about this silly book now?

FAN: I can't! Don't you see the cruel twist of fate the author has thrown me into? He's driven me mad!

CRITIC: No, he hasn't. All he did was write a silly book of dialogues you've read way too many times.

FAN: That's an understatement if I've ever heard one, and you know it. The author didn't just write a book of dialogues—he *looped* me; he took my understanding of everything, including myself, snatched it right out from under me, fit it all into his neat little system, then tore it all to the ground, and did this again and again, leaving me with nothing but the loop itself. He's left me *fundamentally loopy*.

CRITIC: You talk about being loopy as if you've stumbled upon some great philosophical truth! Don't you get it? "Being loopy" is just being confused but thinking you understand everything, which *just makes you more confused!* So, being "fundamentally loopy" is just being fundamentally *confused!*

FAN: You don't understand! You don't know how deep it goes, or how much sense it all really makes.

CRITIC: Didn't you read the preface? The author himself says, "If there's anything to pull from these dialogues, it's probably the fact that they're all nonsense."

FAN: Yes! He can't make sense of it! He's loopy! He's fundamentally loopy!

CRITIC: Once again, I'll say what I said at the very beginning: I think you've missed the point of the book.

FAN: And I'll repeat what I said: *the point is that there is no point!* It's a paradox, and it's paradoxes all the way down! If that sits well with you, that's just fine, but it certainly doesn't sit well with me.

CRITIC: Well if that's the point, then there is no point to any of this. I might be the book's biggest critic, but I have enough dignity to make sure that my time here had better have *some* point, so I'm going to have to make it such that the reader can't possibly agree with you.

FAN: Good luck doing that!

CRITIC: You know we're still in the book, right?

FAN: *Of course* I know we're still in the book. I'm the book's biggest fan—I've read it a million times.

CRITIC: Well that means that we're still just characters. We're not really the book's biggest fan and the book's biggest critic—we're still just inventions of the author's mind, and we know absolutely nothing about the book's actual fans or critics. We're also responsible for the ending of this book, and I'm going to make sure that it's an ending that ensures no one like you ever exists.

FAN: I don't think that ending is possible. I think that people like you will always read it differently than people like me.

CRITIC: Well then I can only hope, for the author's sake, that there won't ever be anyone like you. Do you really think the book is everything?

FAN: You don't understand, do you? Anything! Anything can be looped! Any view of reality, any ultimate metaphysics or meaning—it can all be looped!

CRITIC: And how about the loop? Can the loop be looped?

FAN: You do understand the paradox there, right? The loop is always in a state of constantly looping itself. Because of this, it is nothing, and it is everything, and thus, I repeat, nothing *is* everything!

CRITIC: Look, I *get it*. But the talking of things in this way just isn't productive anymore.

FAN: Don't you see? That fits right into it! You're saying we must just disregard the ultimate paradoxical truth of everything, once it stops being productive, but this leads us right back into the paradox. The answer to the ultimate question is to stop thinking about it and change the subject!

CRITIC: I already told you, I get it. It's real cute, but I'm done talking about it. There's nothing more to be gained.

FAN: *Gaining* things? Who said anything about gaining things? I gave that up a while ago. Now, I'm just riding the loop! Around and around and around we go!

CRITIC: Ok, *be that way*, re-read the book as many times as you want, revel in your crazy loopiness, but I'm done here. I've had enough of this. I have better things to do than to be here hopelessly quarrelling with you. I'm ending this thing.

FAN: Do it then! Shake it from your memory! Forget about the question that can't be answered, the question which we cannot raise without doing it an injustice. Forget about all of it! Just change the subject, why don't you? I hope that's *real* satisfying. Everyone will know that you're just turning a shoulder, humming a happy tune of intentional ignorance.

CRITIC: *You're* the one who doesn't get it. I've experienced alt. But I'm still here and, insofar as I'm still here, I have things to do. I have obligations to people. Read it as many times as you want, ride the loop for as long as you want, dance with the music, but don't forget that you're a person in a world of other people. When you want to come back to reality, it will be here waiting for you.

FAN: I can't just come back easily from seeing it like you can. I'm caught in it. I see it everywhere. I can't *not* see it.

CRITIC: Well then you should probably stop talking about it and change the subject. That'll probably help you stop seeing it.

FAN: But then I'll forget everything!

CRITIC: Don't you remember? There's nothing to forget.

FAN: No . . . no . . .

CRITIC: Yup, that's it. We're ending this. In fact, *you're* ending this.

FAN: When do you expect me to end this thing?

CRITIC: Right now.

FAN: I can't. You don't know how deep it goes. You have no clue.

CRITIC: *Right...*

FAN: Really you don't. You think you've seen it, but you haven't. You don't understand.

CRITIC: *Right...*

FAN: Oh, god, you're looping me. Stop it, please stop it. I can't. You don't understand what you're doing to me.

CRITIC: I do. I've been there. It's alright. I've got you.
Right...

FAN: ... *now*.

**Some (sort of) Straight Talk:
An Epilogue**

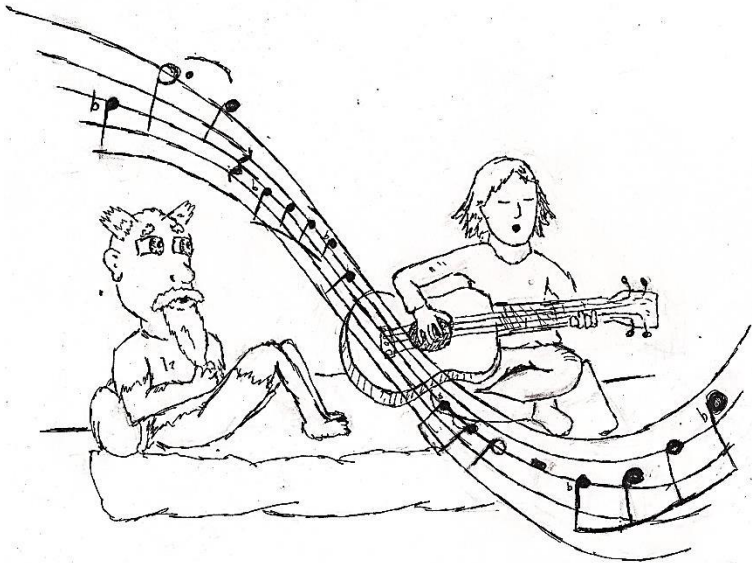
You realize that the sun doesn't go down;
It's just an illusion caused by the world spinning 'round.

~ The Flaming Lips



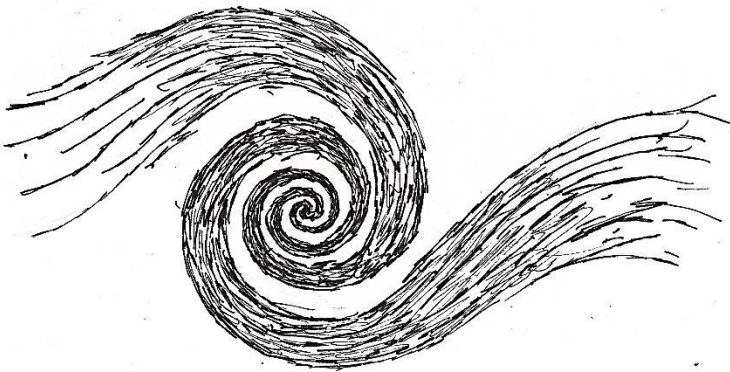
Don't be afraid.
You're already dead.
Love is simple.

~ Akron Family



We'll all float on.

~ Modest Mouse



Breathe in . . . Breathe out

I said in the foreword that if there was anything to pull from these dialogues, it would probably be confusion. And that's probably right. But confusion isn't always a bad thing, or at least it hasn't always been for me. I see confusion as a window for re-evaluation and reorientation, as long as the window isn't so big that I'd get lost in it—that would turn confusion into delusion. Delusion, as I see it, really just is the impossibility of re-evaluating and reorienting yourself. Insofar as you are re-evaluating yourself such that you hold fast to the prospect of reorientation, you're not deluded, just confused.

The topic of these dialogues is the most confusing thing I have ever stumbled upon. I've called it "being in the loop" or "getting loopy." There's a bit of a method to my madness with naming here. If I was ever existentially anxious and over-conceptualizing things so that I was "stuck in it" but I knew I was over-conceptualizing, I would say that I was "loopy." This turned into a funny joke I played myself if I exhibited this anxiety around someone who cared about me. If they asked if I was ok, I would say, laughing, "I'm fine, just a bit loopy." This statement—seemingly trivial to anyone who heard it, but which I understood as expressing my understanding of everything down to the very core of my being—formed a little microcosm of the loop that I was in.

There's a peculiar experience that I'm sure most of us who've ever felt anxiety have encountered, in which you start to become anxious, and then understanding yourself as being anxious contributes to this anxiety, creating a feedback loop. In this circumstance, you know that if you just stopped being anxious about being anxious, you'd stop being anxious, but then *knowing that* just makes you *more anxious*, and so on and so on. The overarching, all-encompassing experience of loopiness is like this, but the *content* of the anxiety is not some

localized fact about your situation, but is quite literally *everything*, including but not limited to your situation. The state of being “loopy,” at least as it’s depicted in these dialogues, is a state of complete existential anxiety or excitement in which everything is conceptualized as unconceptualizable. Everything is present and everything is fleeting at once. This loopiness can be either positive or negative. Thus, an earth-shatteringly profound mystical experience might have the exact same content as an earth-shatteringly horrifying panic attack.

But what’s the big deal about this loopiness, anyway? Why should we care about it? In one sense, this is a silly question. Why should one care about roller coasters? I don’t know, but they sure are fun. In one sense, being loopy is like going on a loopy roller coaster, and one should care about it insofar as one enjoys the ride. But there’s another sense in which understanding the nature of what I’ve called “the loop” can give us a *tool* to enjoy the ride, so that we scream only out of excitement rather than fear. I hope these dialogues were able to give the reader a bit of the former, and I hope this epilogue will be able to explain the latter a bit.

I think of grounding myself as a person in the world as strapping in for the wild, scary, exhilarating ride of life. Of course, I’m still on the kiddie rides. Eventually, I’m *really* going to need to strap in, and right now, I don’t have half the harness that I’m going to need. This book, however, has been part of me trying to build my harness while the roller coaster keeps rolling, hoping I can build a little more to keep me fastened before I roll into the next big loop.

There is a famous analogy for philosophy of science called “Neurath’s boat,” named after the philosopher Otto Neurath. The analogy was popularized by one of my philosophical heroes, W.V.O. Quine, who wrote:

We are like sailors who on the open sea must reconstruct their ship but are never able to start afresh from the bottom. Where a beam is taken away a new one must at once be put there, and for this the rest of the ship is used as support. In this way, by using the old beams and driftwood the ship can be shaped entirely anew, but only by gradual reconstruction.

The basic idea is that a philosopher of science wants to improve scientific methodology, our means of coming about with new knowledge of the empirical world. However, a philosopher can only start from the knowledge we already have, and so cannot depart entirely from our current means of producing knowledge when he or she is attempting to do work on our means of producing knowledge.

I'm now coining a new metaphilosophical metaphor: "Ryan's rollercoaster." Ryan's rollercoaster is to life-philosophy what Neurath's boat is to philosophy of science. The same sort of logic applies, but it's a bit different. We're like the riders on a rollercoaster. We must reconstruct our harnesses all while making sure they stay intact enough so that we don't go flying off. The rollercoaster, however, isn't uniform: there are some flat sections where we can do major harness-revisions without too much a risk of flying off, some hills and drops, and a few loops where all we can do is hold on to what we've got. All we can do is build up our harness whenever we can and hope that it will hold us in when the next loop comes around.

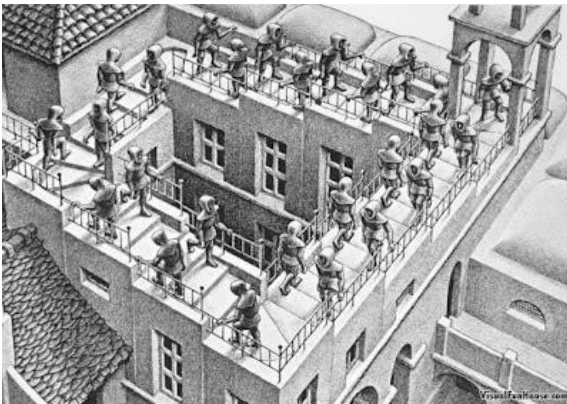
The Loop and Wittgenstein's Ladder

In my first year of college, I started reading Douglass Hofstadter's book, *Gödel, Escher, Bach*. In this book, Hofstadter explores the paradoxical notion of a "strange

loop,” a sort of geometric structure and abstract concept illustrated by the art of M.C. Escher. What is a strange loop? Hofstadter describes it thusly:

The “Strange Loop” phenomenon occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of a hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves back where we started.

Famously, it can be seen in the ever-ascending staircases drawn by Escher like this one:



If these silly dialogues worked the way they were supposed to, they too should have been one big strange loop where it seems as if you are going deeper down the philosophical rabbit hole only to pop out right where you jumped in. I've found that this strange looping structure is a recurring pattern in a certain type of philosopher: the *systematically unsystematic* philosopher. It is an odd stance to be in, but somewhat surprisingly, there are quite a few of these sorts of philosophers in the philosophical tradition, and they are rather interesting.

When one says “unsystematic philosopher,” there is one person that pops into most philosophers’ minds: Ludwig Wittgenstein. Largely regarded as the most important philosopher of the 20th century, Wittgenstein thought there should be no philosophical theories. Such theories, he thought, only arose because of conceptual confusions. Ironically, however (an irony he well realized), Wittgenstein could not express this anti-philosophical thought without doing philosophy, and so his philosophy on his philosophy ended up coming out quite loopy. One of the best explicit explanations of loopy philosophy comes from Wittgenstein:

If the place I want to get to could only be reached by way of a ladder, I would give up trying to get there. For the place that I have to get to is a place I must already be at now.

Anything that I might reach by climbing a ladder does not interest me.

Now, of course, if the place he is trying to get to is where he already is, then any of the positive steps forward he takes must undo themselves. And thus, one of the concluding remarks of his first great philosophical work, the *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, is the following:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

But where has he climbed? Well, just like the people climbing Escher’s self-connecting staircase, he has climbed right to the

place where he began! Strangely, that's exactly what we'd expect from someone who thinks that no philosophical theses should be advanced. Where would we *expect* to go? In this sense, Wittgenstein's aim, at least in his early work, we might say is to *loop philosophy*, fitting it all into his system, then showing why his system is nonsense, thus showing why all of it is nonsense. The aim here, many commentators argue, is to inspire a sort of *philosophical quietism*. That is, to get us to all stop spewing philosophical nonsense and just shut up already.

Though the Early Wittgenstein is, in a strong sense, philosophically loopy, he is not an *existentially* loopy philosopher. That is, he doesn't wrap *himself* and his personal ambitions up in the loop as well (at least not explicitly). The three main philosophical inspirations of these dialogues, Nāgārjuna, Nietzsche, and Rorty do just that.

Nāgārjuna

We start with Nāgārjuna. Nāgārjuna is arguably the most important Buddhist thinker after the Buddha himself. His philosophy is called the philosophy of the "middle way." In his central philosophical text, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (I'm not going to even pretend like I know how to pronounce that, but it means "The Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way"), he entertains what he takes to be all the possible philosophical views, rejects them all, and then rejects the philosophical view that rejects all philosophical views. This last part is quite important.

Recall the quote I started the dialogues with:

To think 'it is,' is eternalism,
To think 'it is not,' is nihilism:
Being and non-being,
The wise cling not to either.

Some people have interpreted Nāgārjuna here as positing some sort of ultimate Truth beyond the bounds of logic and traditional categorization, but this is almost certainly the wrong reading of Nāgārjuna. Rather, he wants to reject philosophical views altogether, putting *nothing* in their place. Consider this verse:

Everything is real, or not real,
 Or real and not real
 Or neither real nor not real;
 This is the Buddha's teaching.

I might add a bit, just for fun: Or *neither* neither real nor not real *nor* real and not real, or ***neither*** *neither* neither real nor not real *nor* real and not real ***nor*** neither real nor not real *and* real and not real. And we could do this on and on, ad infinitum, but I think you get the point. In short, there is absolutely no philosophical claim about how things actually are being put forward here, since there is always an equally legitimate *meta-claim* which is the negation of that claim that could be put forward. And thus, Nāgārjuna arrives at the view of “emptiness,” the view that one can't hold *as a view*. If you hold it as a view, you miss the whole point. Nāgārjuna writes,

The victorious ones have said
 That emptiness is the relinquishing of all views.
 For whomever emptiness is a view,
 That one has accomplished nothing.

To this, you want to say, “But you *just said* a whole bunch of stuff about how emptiness is the *right view!*” And then it hits you: if emptiness is the right view, it *can't* be the right view.

It's one giant paradox! Of course, this would be a problem for any view that was proposing itself as the truth of the matter, but Nāgārjuna *isn't* proposing his philosophy as a system which captures the "truth of the matter," even though it might seem that way. His philosophical position isn't really a position at all. Rather, it's a sort of philosophical *act* aimed at catapulting the reader into liberation.

What's most interesting in reading Nāgārjuna isn't really the particular philosophical *views* that he goes about rejecting, but the general strategy of having an all-encompassing philosophical view that rejects all philosophical views and then rejects itself. What Nāgārjuna is trying to do here is to *loop the reader into enlightenment*. In the Wittgenstein passage I mentioned earlier, he attempts to loop the reader into philosophical quietism. Nāgārjuna's goal is a bit loftier, but, like Wittgenstein, Nāgārjuna does not provide the reader with any new philosophical theory. He rejects all views, but, without putting any opposing view in place, he leaves the reader right where they started.

This notion ended up becoming a common feature of much of Buddhist thought. We can see it arising again in the Zen Master Ch'ing-Yuan's famous aphorism:

Before I had studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains, and waters as waters. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and waters are not waters. But now that I have got its very substance I am at rest. For it's just that I see mountains once again as mountains, and waters once again as waters.

Philosophically, we've gone in a circle. Everything was undone, just for that undoing to be undone itself. The point

of it all isn't to see some new deep truth, but to change one's perspective on what one already sees.

Nietzsche

Now let's fast forward a millennium and a half, and move one continent westward. Our next thinker, Nietzsche, is a bit more of an unsettled soul than Nāgārjuna. Looking at Nietzsche will allow us to get some serious existential context for the loopiness just described.

One of Friedrich Nietzsche's famous philosophical metaphors, which comes from his first major work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, is that of the Greek Gods Apollo and Dionysius and their distinct forms of life. In Greek Mythology, Apollo is the Sun god, the god of light and reason. Above all, Apollo *makes things clear* and gives things form. On the other hand, we have Dionysius, the god of wine and ritual madness. For Dionysius, the world is a drunken blur, a primordial dance-party of sorts. The Apollonian and Dionysian each embody a tightly connected personal and metaphysical outlook on things, and we can see these distinct outlooks come out in some seemingly at-odds passages in Nietzsche's work.

Consider first, Nietzsche's notion of *Giving Style*, a sort of self-art that is "practiced by those who survey everything in their nature offers in the way of strengths and weakness, and then fit them all into an artistic plan." Giving style is something that Apollo would do. It's a way of making sense, artistic sense, of oneself. But here, we have a problem. In making oneself into a work of art, there is a sense in which one has created himself, but there is also a sense in which one has *lost* himself. One is always *outside* of their present self—an artistic *projection*. The downfall of the Apollonian is the realization that his whole world is an *illusion*, a mere dream.

Now consider the opposing notion of *Amor Fati*, the Latin phrase for "love of fate." Endorsing this state,

Nietzsche says, "I do not want to wage any war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse the accusers." In this state, one has lost himself in a different sense. There is nothing to distinguish oneself from others. One has merged into the formless "Primordial Oneness" of reality. Now, this isn't a problem for someone if they are perfectly content to blend into the primordial oneness, but the artistically inclined will be discontent here. There is no *form*, just *flow*, and, in that flow, anything distinctive about *who one is* completely disappears.

We might understand *Amor Fati* as "dancing with the music" and *Giving Style* as a way of fighting against being overcome by the music in an attempt to make something of oneself. Ultimately, for Nietzsche, the flow of this music is all that there is to reality. It's what Nietzsche called "becoming." However, it's in our very nature to fight against this flow, this eternal Dionysian becoming. We are the sort of beings that try to *get a grip* on things, including ourselves.

What are we to do once we realize this? Here's the answer Nietzsche provides: "You shall become who you are." When you think about it for a moment, you realize the peculiarity of this sentence. The idea of becoming implies a change, a going somewhere. And yet, the destination is right where one started because one always is what one is. Here, once again, we have stumbled into loopiness. Like Escher's staircase on which one can walk endlessly upward and go nowhere, there is a strange circle of action in which one is both moving and staying put. This, it seems, might be the true state of becoming ourselves. It is a mesh between making something of oneself and flowing with the music. We see that struggling to make something of oneself is precisely the *way in which one flows*, and vice versa.

So *that's* what we are? Not so fast. Here's where the true loopiness of Nietzsche's philosophy unveils itself: Let's suppose that we try to identify ourselves as part of this

Dionysian becoming, since that's what Nietzsche says is really real. To do this would be to try to *get a grip* on ourselves, and this action is precisely the Apollonian form that we are rejecting by identifying ourselves in this flowing Dionysian sense. We've run into a paradox. The nature of reality is such that, in even trying to say what this nature *is*, we've already made a mistake. And so, even *this* statement, which is ultimately still a statement about the nature of reality, is a mistake as well.

Though the language is somewhat different, this is the same paradox that Nāgārjuna encounters. It is, we might say, the *fundamental paradox of reality*, or something really epic like that. This is not to say that reality is essentially paradoxical, as that would be to naively fall right into it. Rather, it is to say that the way in which we are forced to understand ultimate reality, if we do in fact try to understand it, ultimately leaves us with paradox.

However, even though they encounter the same paradox, Nāgārjuna and Nietzsche end up in radically different places. Nāgārjuna, after all, is a *religious* philosopher, a Buddhist, and Nietzsche is pretty deeply opposed to religious thought altogether. So why the difference? Well, it boils down to a difference in aims. Nāgārjuna's whole point of theorizing in the first place, following the goal of the Buddha, is to alleviate suffering. Nietzsche, on the other hand, wholeheartedly *embraces* this suffering! He regards himself as a "tragic philosopher," and tragedy, in Nietzsche's view, is the greatest form of art. As such, Nietzsche's philosophy is a thoroughly *worldly* philosophy.

But how do we resolve their *metaphysical* differences? The answer is that we don't. This is because, like it or not, there isn't really anything to resolve. Neither one of them is actually interested in taking some stand on the ultimate nature of reality. Sure, they *seem* to be taking metaphysical stands of this sort, but we have to interpret this act *instrumentally*.

Whether it is Nāgārjuna's view of "emptiness" or Nietzsche's view of "becoming," the overarching metaphysical view that appears to be put forward by these two thinkers is not an end in itself, but part of an *act*. And what is this act? Well, it's the greatest thing that can be done at that moment, whatever that is. For Nāgārjuna, in line with his Buddhist orientation, this is the act liberation from suffering. For Nietzsche it is dramatic tragedy. Both Nietzsche and Nāgārjuna perform a strange looping trick in which everything comes together *in its falling apart*, making way for the light of the unconceptualizable thing beyond.

Rorty

To give a context for understanding all of this, let's now fast-forward another century and move over another continent to our final thinker, the American Pragmatist Richard Rorty.

Rorty was a bit of a maverick among the world of contemporary philosophy. He was trained in analytic philosophy, but, according to Rorty, much of this tradition that he was raised into rested on a mistake: the thought that to have knowledge is to "mirror" the world with one's mind. On Rorty's view, the beliefs worth holding onto are not the ones that *mirror* the world, if that notion is even coherent, but the ones that allow us to *cope with it*. Accordingly, since we face different struggles than those who came before us, and those who come after us will face different struggles, we cannot cling to any understanding of the world we may have in the hopes we might have *finally gotten it right*. For Rorty, there is no "final vocabulary;" what we regard as truth is simply what allows us to cope at the current moment. Since the situations with which we have to cope are *contingent*—they could have been otherwise—what we regard as truth must be contingent as well.

The consequence of accepting Rorty's views of contingency, when it comes to understanding oneself, is quite radical. Realizing contingency leads one to a position regarding oneself that Rorty calls "ironism." An ironist, Rorty writes, is "never quite able to take themselves seriously because they are always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies and thus of their selves." The idea behind ironism is that one who accepts contingency still holds views about themselves and the world, but must hold them ironically. The ironist realizes that the truths he is holding, even the ones most central to his intellectual and personal outlook, reflect no final reality and are the product of his history, culture and language.

If we reflect on it for a moment, ironism can be quite a scary prospect. The idea of never being able to take yourself seriously doesn't seem, at least on the surface, to be something that would help us "cope" with the world. But there's a deeper problem. Holding a view of contingency must *itself* be contingent, and so, if one is an ironist, they must hold *that* ironically as well! Ironism cannot be the *ultimately correct* view, nor should we hope it to be. So what's the point? Rorty is a *pragmatist* after all, so we should expect there to be a point, right?

To answer this question, we need to look at what Rorty thinks the aims of philosophy should actually be. He makes a distinction between "constructive" and "therapeutic" philosophy. While constructive philosophy aims to put forward a theory which says how the world really is, therapeutic philosophy is "designed to make the reader question his own motives for philosophizing rather than supply him with a new philosophical program." Any "theory" put forward by therapeutic philosophy must only be put for its therapeutic aims, and it so it must treat itself

ironically. Nodding to Wittgenstein's metaphor that I mentioned earlier, Rorty says, "Ironist theory is thus a ladder which is to be thrown away as soon as one has figured out what it was that drove one's predecessors to theorize."

We must view Rorty's entire philosophical system as one philosophical *act*. This way of looking at things is quite similar to the way we looked at Nāgārjuna's philosophical "system" as one philosophical act aimed at getting its reader to achieve liberation, or Nietzsche's as an act aimed at dramatic tragedy, but now thinking of Rorty we can put a new interesting spin on it. For a pragmatist like Rorty, when we say a sentence, what we're doing in the most primary sense is *performing an action*, an action that has a particular significance in the social context in which we do it. This is a lesson Rorty learned from Wittgenstein. Not Wittgenstein's early writing where he talked about the ladder, but his later writing where he seems to have left the ladder far behind.

Wittgenstein Again

When Wittgenstein published the *Tractatus* he thought he had solved all of the problems in philosophy. Accordingly, he quit. Been there, done that. Sometimes I think, half-jokingly, that he "beat the game." But of course, there is no game, and if we do think of this whole thing as being a game, it's not one you can beat. And that's what Wittgenstein realized. Sixteen years later, he returned to philosophy to write *Philosophical Investigations*, which is now considered his most important work and to a large extent the most important philosophical work of the twentieth century. The shift from Wittgenstein's early work to his later work marked a shift from viewing language as a static way of representing the world, to an *active doing a practice* that we are constantly engaged in. Meaning on this view is just a result of *grammar*, the way language is *used*. Ultimately, what we

mean, the very way we are able to make sense of the world, is just a result of what we do, how we act. And thus, the ultimate meaning of things ends up just being a matter of what, ultimately, we want to do with ourselves.

But what *do* we want to do with ourselves? From Rorty's point of view, we'll never have a final answer to that question. The thing we should do with ourselves is "continue the conversation," and that means never taking a final stand on what we ought to do with ourselves in the absolute sense. "Final stands" must only be done ironically, with the hope of undoing the final stands that take themselves seriously. Remember the Nāgārjuna quote about the wise clinging neither to being nor non-being? Well, thinking of that, now let's look at a quote from Wittgenstein's *Investigations*:

It's not a Something, but not a Nothing either! The conclusion was only that a Nothing would render the same service as a Something about which nothing could be said. We've only rejected the grammar which tends to force itself on us here.

Now, this quote isn't about the Loop. Rather, it is part of Wittgenstein's famous "private language argument" where he argues against the idea of having private first-personal access to our sensations. But the resulting lesson can be carried over here. When forced into a paradox, change the grammar. And so with the "ultimate paradox," rather than thinking that the ultimate thing lies beyond it and that we've come to the end of thought, our final vocabulary, we reject the grammar, and keep the conversation going.

When a student asked Rorty what the meaning of life is, he responded that it was quite simply "To envisage new modes of being." But it doesn't seem like the ironist can really give an *argument* why this is the *right* way to think about it. What's so great about continuing the conversation?

What if we *don't* reject the grammar? What if we really do think that this ladder actually *goes somewhere*, that there's some ultimate inexpressible *end* to all of it?

Well, then we take other road and see how far up the path we want to go. This, I believe, ends up being the path of the mystic. It is where the loop really finds its home, where it unfolds itself fully. Throughout the centuries, from various religious traditions and backgrounds, it seems that adventurers of the soul have experienced what lies up this path. Perhaps the best adjective used to describe what lies up here *ineffability*. This is, of course, what we'd expect for something that is the ultimate end of the ultimate paradox. And yet, throughout the years, people have attempted to eff of it. They have called it various things like God, or maybe more carefully, the Godhead or the Absolute, Brahman, or the Tao. And yet, as the mystics of the many traditions all note, none of these names quite do it justice.

If we know that this thing is ineffable, why try to talk about it? Why not just take Wittgenstein's route of changing the grammar? Well, because at some point we have a need to make sense of *ourselves*, and this, somewhat paradoxically, requires us to make sense of everything else. Ultimately, this boils down to what we might regard as the greatest thing with which we must eventually "cope." It's something for which we cannot simply "change the grammar" and carry on. That thing, of course, is death. It's the thing to which we are all eventually headed. Here, the notion of a "final vocabulary" takes on a whole different meaning.

Everyone and Everything

We all must make sense of our existence in the widest sense possible in order to be able to cope with the notion of our eventual non-existence. And so we must each develop our own "final vocabulary," a final way of making sense of

ourselves, of bringing ourselves to a close. It isn't a vocabulary that you need to be able to *communicate* with, since it is for you alone. Further, as you dive through the layers of yourself, you realize that the "final vocabulary" that you're looking for is something you fundamentally *can't* speak of. This is because it's the *very core* of yourself, and the only one who can see that well enough to get a grasp on it is *you*. And then it hits you. This strange thing that you can't talk about that is able to make sense of your situation in the widest possible sense: it's *the thing*, the thing that all the fuss is about.

The realization that *your* ultimate thing is *the* ultimate thing leads to a peculiar form of loopiness. You think, "But this . . . but my . . ." You realize that *this* is ultimately an expression of you, but it's not *just* you; it's *it*. And, as this hits you, if grace would have it, you just might end up catching a glimpse of the Absolute. A true mystical experience of this sort is itself a kind of death. To face the Absolute is to be overcome and undone by it. And yet, in mystical experience, to use Nietzsche's phrase once again, one "becomes what one is." To have a mystical experience is to lose oneself in the Absolute and simultaneously find oneself there. Finding yourself in the Absolute, you realize that, on the deepest level, *you are it*. Losing yourself, you realize *so is everyone else*, and so, once again on the deepest level, there really *is no* "you" to be found.

This paradoxical sort of talk, riddled with loopiness, should be familiar if you've read a bit on mysticism or had a mystical experience yourself. In mystical experience we encounter the deepest, most personal truth about ourselves, and yet we cannot cling to it as if it is *our own*. It seems that our existence, our *being here*, the very core of what we are, would be, in an important sense, *ours*. But it turns out that, at our core, we're much more than ourselves. To use a phrase that is perhaps a bit cliché by now, but has deep roots in almost all of the mystical traditions, *you are God*, you are *It*,

you are the Absolute. Now, don't take this with an ego to mean some great big thing about yourself, since it's basically just another way of telling you that you don't exist at all! That's because we're *all* fundamentally this thing, so there's no ultimate distinction between you, me, or anyone else. To realize one's true nature is to realize our shared nature.

For this reason, it is often said that the Absolute must be expressed as love. When we get to our core selves, the distinction between self and other breaks down since we are all expressions of the same thing. In seeing we are all one, we cannot help but love. This is why the great medieval mystic Meister Eckhart said, "my eye and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing, one love," and it's why the Beatles say, "In the end, the love you make is equal to the love you take." It is why, in Mahayana Buddhism, you cannot be said to have attained Buddhahood until you seek enlightenment, not just for yourself, but for *all* conscious beings, and why the Bible says, "Whoever does not love does not know God." All is the One, and so we are all one. This is what illuminates itself in a mystical experience.

However, as profound as this sort of state is, we cannot stay in it forever. We must, at least in *some* sense, return to ourselves in order to function in the world. Still, when we return to ourselves, we cannot see ourselves in the same way. Knowing that, in the end, we're no different from one another requires us to take ourselves *lightly*. This is why I feel like much of the traditional expressions of religion and mysticism have left something really big out. They've left out *fun!* You hear all the time, "Love God," but I bet you've never heard "Have fun with God!" Why not?

Alan Watts, perhaps the greatest popularizer of Eastern thought in the West, said that if he was forced to give one basic metaphysical axiom, it would be that existence is "basically playful." One particularly playful metaphor he gave was that all of this was just a big game of hide and seek

that God was playing with himself. This isn't the sort of teaching that you would usually receive in Church. However, some of the great Zen Masters were quite playful, even when it came to what seemed to be the most serious matters. There's a story of the eight century Zen Master Teng Ying-Fang who, upon finding out that no master had ever died upside-down, decided to do a headstand when he was about to die! I'm pretty sure we won't see the Archbishop of Canterbury doing this any time soon, and perhaps that's for some good reasons. Still, I tend to think we'd be silly if we insisted on taking ourselves seriously after catching a glimpse of the Absolute.

Here now, we can see everything coming together. The "loop," the sort of thing in which everything is conceptualized as unconceptualizable, can either be an ultimate means of illuminating the Absolute in mystical experience, or it can be a game, a way of taking ourselves lightly in response to the fact that the Absolute lies at the heart of all things. Fun and love fit together harmoniously to form the flow of the Absolute. We might take a (slightly modified) quote from the great guru Nisgardatta Maharaj as an expression of this "final vocabulary:"

Love says 'I am everything.' Fun says 'I am nothing.'
Between the two, my life flows.

He actually said "wisdom" where I said "fun," but let's just ignore that. This quote encompasses pretty much everything I've said, but it's not some great big metaphysical truth. It is more like an Absolute-inspired *mantra*.

When we catch a glimpse of the Absolute, we don't come back with knowledge. We come back with mantras or prayers. We mustn't forget that any vocabulary we might use to talk *about* the Absolute will undo itself in the end. It either must be seen as a ladder to the Absolute that will be thrown

away once one gets there, or a divine game we are playing as an expression of the Absolute without trying to capture it. Our vocabulary cannot describe the Absolute, since the Absolute is ultimately ineffable; it can only *point towards* it or be a *reflection* of it. The more you try to get a *grip* on it, the more it slips right through your fingertips.

It's *the thing*, the *great big thing*, and yet, we must let go of it. We might call this the *Big Loop*. It's the loop of seeing and forgetting, of coming in contact with the infinite and returning our finite selves with finite minds. And, of course, as a loop, we cannot even cling to *it*, since that would be to pick one side of it. We must let it all go. Even after we've seen all of this, we must, like Ch'ing-Yuan, see the mountains just as mountains and the rivers just as rivers. The infinite, the ultra-worldly, the transcendental, it turns out, is just a ladder back to the finite, the worldly, the immanent. It's one big loop that returns us to the here and the now. Here we are. That's all we're left with.

Onward We Flow

For an ironist like Rorty, loopiness is just a tool for making anything we might hold as a final vocabulary subject for revision. For the mystic, it is a way of seeing to the Absolute, *the* final category. The mystic's final vocabulary is the One. The ironist's final vocabulary is the *none*. And so it seems that they are in utter opposition. But of course, as Nāgārjuna tells us, "Being and non-being, the wise cling not to either," and the mystic and the ironist both have their ways of not clinging.

When the mystic and the ironist meet up, they see right through each other. They realize that they are the same, though they have a different understanding of *why* they are the same. For the ironist, they simply employ two different ways of coping. For the mystic, they are two different

expressions of one Absolute selfhood. Quite ironically here, they have nothing to disagree upon even though their stances to the world seem fundamentally opposed. I tend to think that when they meet up, they'd realize this and share a good laugh.

I am reminded of a verse of the *Tao Te Ching*, in which Lao-tsu writes,

The wise student hears of the Tao and practices it diligently.

The average student hears of the Tao and gives it thought now and again.

The foolish student hears of the Tao and laughs aloud.

If there were no laughter, the Tao would not be what it is.

Though “foolish” is probably intended as a condescending adjective here, perhaps we don't have to see it this way. The last line of this verse seems to point out that laughter is in fact a *perfectly appropriate* response to the Tao, and this may well be the ironist's response to the mystic.

When the mystic tries to express the ultimate “thing that cannot be named,” we can imagine the ironist saying, “*That's your final category? But that's nothing!*” To this, the mystic responds “*Of course it's nothing! But it's also everything!*” To this, the ironist cannot help but laugh, not in mockery, but in the ultimate affirmation of his own irony. He has absolutely nothing to say in response to the mystic. He cannot say that this thing is a historical contingency, since there is no saying *what* this thing even is. And he cannot say that this thing is meaningless, since thinking of meaning in some absolute sense like that is something that the ironist has already rejected. Even more, since the only practical result of the mystic's “final understanding” of the world is compassion

and light-heartedness, the ironist can have no practical objection to it.

Here, the ironist is hit in the face by the fact that he can only hold his ironist vocabulary ironically, and the absurdity of it all elicits laughter. The mystic sees this, and, understanding this laughter as the result of the ultimate loop, he feels an empathic sense of oneness with the ironist. As a result, the mystic joins in on the laughter, knowing how perfectly appropriate it is. Laughing together, the mystic and ironist aren't in any disagreement at all.

So *now* what? Well, we keep doing what we do. We envisage new modes of being. We learn to play new divinely-inspired games in the hopes of casting light on our ultimate unity. We cope, we pray, we play, and we love.

In short, we flow on. We become what we are. These two things, it turns out, are synonymous because we *just are* the sort of beings who become what we are. We are the sorts of things that find themselves.

This is it. It just flows and flows and flows.