

Book Review

Review of Douglas R. Hofstadter's Book: *I Am a Strange Loop*

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ABSTRACT

There is little science to be found in Hofstadter's analogical arguments. His book is mostly weak philosophy. He (page xvii) writes: "Although I hope to reach philosophers with this book's ideas, I don't think I write much like a philosopher". Then he writes (page 325): "Philosophers who believe that consciousness comes from something over and above physical law are dualists, etc., etc." Physical laws are found necessary, but Hofstadter's own strange loop implies that laws in isolation are insufficient to explain consciousness. There is only a leap of faith! Moreover, it is caricature mode thinking that is found dualistic. The strange loop can be better advanced by bringing it in line with philosophy, and in particular, the philosophies of C.S. Peirce and Edmund Husserl. It is the Trinitarian logic offered by Hegel that is non-dual, and it is Brouwer's intuitionist mathematics that is non-dual. You can find this book at Amazon http://www.amazon.com/Am-Strange-Loop-Douglas-Hofstadter/dp/0465030785/ref=cm_cr-mr-title.

Key Words: strange loop, consciousness, self-reference.

Caricature-mode thinking is an abstract flow of symbolism that Hofstadter relates to selfness. Hofstadter (page 84) writes on the concepts that find themselves triggered while standing at the grocery store checkout: "grocery cart", "line", "customers", "to wait", "candy rack", "candy bar", "tabloid", "newspaper", "movie stars", "trashy headline", etc. Even dogs can hold such symbolism sets, Hofstadter (page 81) writes: "my paw", "my tail", "my food", "my water", "my dish", "indoors", "outdoors", "dog door", "human door", etc. And the richer the symbolism set the bigger the "soul", with humans having bigger souls than dogs, mosquito selves hardly measure up. Caricature-mode thought involves an abstract symbolism set that is found self triggering, Hofstadter (page 91) writes: "all of this more abstract stuff is rooted in the constant reinforcement, moment by moment, of symbols that are haphazardly triggered out of dormancy by events in the world that we perceive first-hand. These immediate mental events constitute the bedrock underlying our broader sense of reality."

Coming with caricature-mode thinking is the function of analogical reasoning. Hofstadter's book is one such analogical argument followed by another, a check on the word "analogies" found in the index is very revealing. Hofstadter (page xv) writes: "And one of my firmest conclusions is that we always think by seeking and drawing parallels to things we know from our past, and that we therefore communicate best when we exploit examples, analogies, and metaphors galore, when we avoid abstract generalities, when we use very down-to-earth, concrete, and simple language, and when we talk directly about our own experiences." The problem comes that analogies provide only the leap of faith leaving the deeper realization of meaning and truth undeclared. When does the leap of faith become the leap of empathy? Caricature-mode thinking leaves this question unanswered, rather analogical reasoning becomes a proxy for "pulling the wool over our eyes" as this mode of thinking avoids the key issue. Hofstadter's analogies disappoint, leaving selfness undefined.

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The weakness of analogical reasoning has led Hofstadter to insist that the strange loop is defined by the collection of abstract symbols that have found themselves in a circuit. Hofstadter prefers the abstract formalism of mathematical symbolism in isolation, even for example the symbolism found in Whitehead and Russell's "Principia Mathematica" (PM). To his credit Hofstadter notes that the PM formalism is unable to remove itself from loopiness. However, Hofstadter forgets that Gödel is also unable to be removed from the symbolism that turned the formalism into a self referential loop. Gödel as caricature is not Gödel as person (otherwise big mistake), and this revelation defeats Hofstadter's thesis. No doubt, Hofstadter prefers the formalistic mathematics of David Hilbert to the intuitionist mathematic of L. E. J. Brouwer. With intuitionist mathematics the creating subject cannot be turned into caricature presented as language, and this view brings a completely different interpretation to the strange loop. The strange loop as a collection of caricatures is not sufficient to explain consciousness, it is only that the strange loop is found as a necessary condition given that reality is rich enough to contain a creating subject. Hofstadter got it backward, and fooled himself with analogical arguments. The strange loop and its caricatures support a full awareness, it is not that the strange loop defines consciousness from mere caricatures.

Analogical reasoning has led Hofstadter to declare that selfness is an illusion or an epiphenomenon; beyond caricature-mode thinking there is no personhood. If something cannot be proven by the lower level system (inside a strange loop), somehow this is enough for Hofstadter to leap to the conclusion that the upper level self is an illusion. But this does not follow, and Hofstadter admits to downward causality in Chapter 12. Moreover, for something to be an illusion, there must be some self that is fooled, and a foolish self is still real despite Hofstadter's analogical arguments. Hofstadter got it backward! What is the illusion is only the caricature-mode person, but this is only the ego self that is found attached to caricature.

Hofstadter (Chapters 15 and 16) makes a very strong case for person-to-person sharing inside one brain, even if one person has departed and comes to us in dreams. Certainly if selfness is an epiphenomenon then there is little difficulty in conceiving of life after death, as illusion has no limit. And because truth is defined by analogy then there is life after death found in Hofstadter's strange loop. However, a much stronger case can be made for person-to-person sharing by expanding the strange-loop beyond caricature mode thinking; for example, by including Husserl's transcendental and inter-subjective self.

Hofstadter will have you believe that caricatures and analogical arguments form a complete system; and that this abstract system is enough for our feelings to emerge being that feelings are themselves more caricatures. Hofstadter (page 201) writes on how the mind works: "by the compounding of old ideas into new structures that become new ideas that can themselves be used in compounds, and round and round endlessly, growing even more remote from the basic earthbound imagery that is each language's soil." Caricature mode thinking is in fact an example of dualism that Hofstadter struggles with in Chapter 22. In the Epilogue, Hofstadter seeks the non-dual but the only way he can find it is to detach from the egocentric symbolism that depicts the strange loop. It is caricature mode thinking that must be partially abandoned! Otherwise, mere analogy will never find its leap of empathy.

There is little science to be found in Hofstadter's analogical arguments. His book is mostly weak philosophy. He (page xvii) writes: "Although I hope to reach philosophers with this book's ideas, I don't think I write much like a philosopher". Then he writes (page 325): "Philosophers who believe that consciousness comes from something over and above physical law are dualists, etc., etc." Physical laws are found necessary, but Hofstadter's own strange loop implies that laws in isolation are insufficient to explain consciousness. There is only a leap of faith! Moreover, it is caricature mode thinking that is found dualistic. The strange loop can be better advanced by bringing it in line with

philosophy, and in particular, the philosophies of C.S. Peirce and Edmund Husserl. It is the Trinitarian logic offered by Hegel that is non-dual, and it is Brouwer's intuitionist mathematics that is non-dual.

Hofstadter's "I Am a Strange Loop" is very interesting (3 stars worth), but it needs work. Hofstadter can profit from reading Whitehead's "Process and Reality," where we find even Whitehead moving beyond PM, and moving beyond self as caricature.

References

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