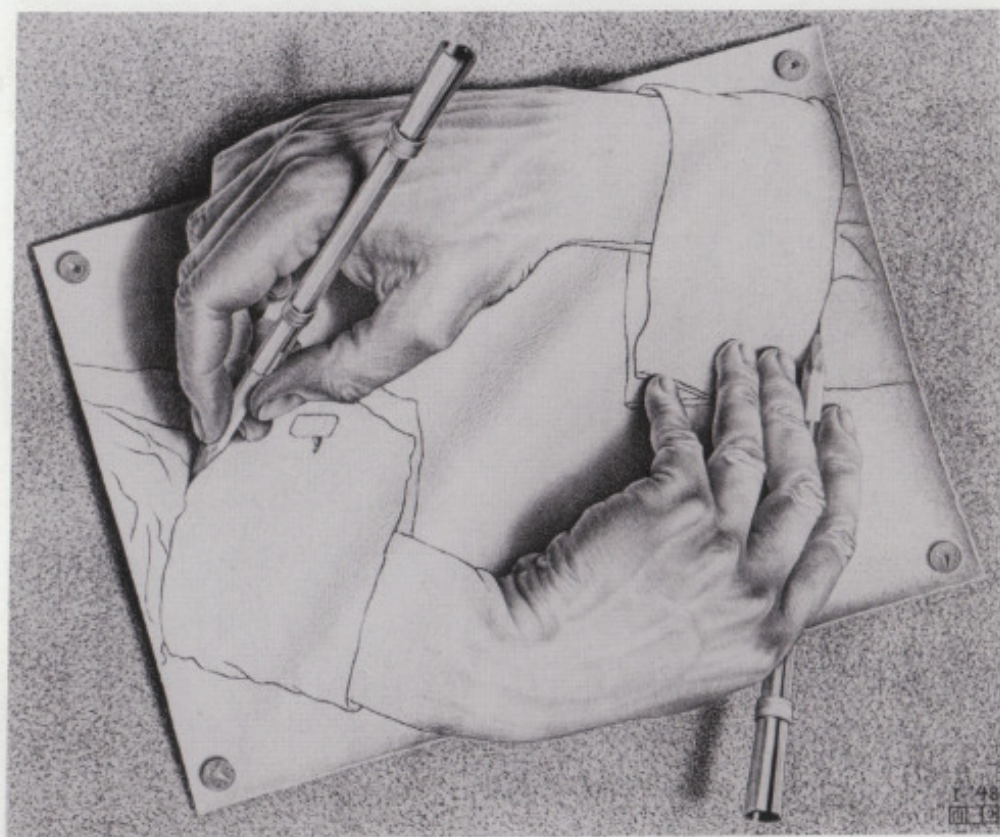


Being or Nothingness



Joe K



Warning!

Please study the letter to Professor
Hofstadter before you read the book.
Good Luck!

March 17, 2007

Basic Books
At: Chief Editor
387 Park Avenue South
New York, NY 10016

Dear Sir,

Enclosed you will find a Swedish translation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's long lost manuscript, "Being or Nothingness," commonly referred to as "The Giant Rat of Sumatra." Unfortunately the English original vanished shortly after its appearance and we have, as of yet, not managed to retrieve it.

I send the book to you since it is oddly intertwined with Professor Douglas Hofstadter and his book "I am a strange loop," which will soon be released by your Publishing House.

"Being or Nothingness" contains a letter in English, directed to Professor Hofstadter, which might make you curious about the rest of the book. Should that be the case, you will need to have the book translated to English, twenty-one rather short pages.

I realize this is an unusual way of promoting a book project. If you are not interested, just throw the book away, but please send a short email to notify me of your disapproval.

With kind regards,
"The Translator"



NOW IN ENGLISH

Prof. Douglas Hofstadter
CRCC, Indiana University
510 North Fess Avenue
Bloomington, In 47408-3822



November 9, 2006

Dear Professor Hofstadter,

Your last e-mail had an encouraging tone that made me happy. I didn't reply since I was afraid of making some statement that might jeopardize our good relationship. Instead I went ahead and sent the letters. For the same reason I didn't acknowledge receiving your articles. I have browsed through them and realize that I have interesting studies ahead of me. Thank you for your generosity.

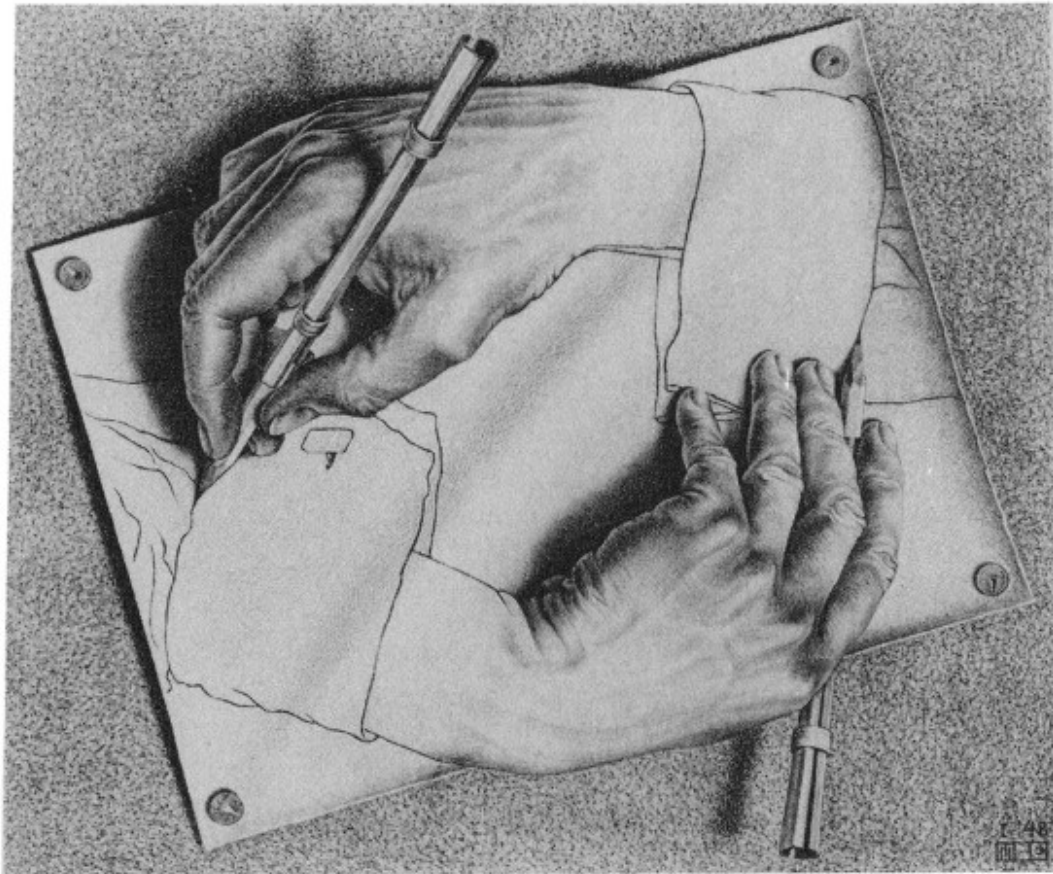
By now the seven letters should have arrived and hopefully you are a little curious. As you get ready to read "The full circle", I want to give you a word of caution. When I encountered the manuscript, many years ago, I was totally unprepared. I had found some old typewritten pages carelessly thrown in the corner of an abandoned railroad station, where I had taken refuge after leaving a party that had gotten out of control. As circumstances would have it I started to read and discovered patterns I had to explore.

The manuscript has a reproduction of Escher's "Drawing Hands" on its cover. Should the text resemble what its cover implies it to be, reading it could be dangerous. Had I sent a copy without comments, it might have caused harm. Our correspondence assures that you have a vision of a writer as you read. Also, by disclosing passages in advance I hope to have intrigued you enough, not to dismiss the manuscript as esoteric nonsense.

Before you proceed, I should mention that the manuscript can be viewed as a religious document. The text can be incorporated into both the Jewish and the Christian tradition, but doing so with too much vigour would be to narrow its scope. Whether it is embraced and cherished or rejected and condemned does not depend on what religious or ideological belief system the reader subscribes to. Deep down it is a matter of faith and choice.

There you are! I have disclosed almost everything I know about the manuscript. It is time for you to address this strange loop. It would please me if you were to give me some sort of feedback. The manuscript has not been made public, partly because, like Conan Doyle, I hesitate whether the world is ready but also since I am not sure that the patterns I perceive are really there. I realize that I might be mistaken and will neither object nor be offended if this turns out to be your opinion.

With kind regards,
"The Writer"



M.C. Escher's "Drawing Hands" © 2007 The M.C. Escher Company-Holland. All rights reserved. www.mcescher.com

This letter was received recently
from an anonymous sender.
Could this be the first and last
post-post-modern work?

Greetings from R

Being or Nothingness

Joe K

Preface

One day I found a book. It was lying in the open, visible to all, but I was the only one curious enough to pick it up. This I have regretted many times. The manuscript has haunted me ever since. Finally I realised that the only way to break free is to have it published.

I try to lead a decent, responsible life and the last thing I would want is to be reminded that I was the one who found the book you hold in your hand.

Brace yourself and turn the pages gently as you embark on a strange journey through time and space.

Late one Saturday evening I sat at B's place browsing through the Collected Works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. A literary magazine that B subscribed to featured a contest. They had selected twenty-five quotations from Conan Doyle's books, and the task was to identify the characters that had made the different statements. In addition they wanted the first three hundred words of the book that Conan Doyle never published – the story for which he believed society was not yet ready, *The Giant Rat of Sumatra*. An hour passed without us finding any of the lines. We decided to skip the contest, yet still proceed to write the story. We tried several approaches, but none of them seemed particularly original.

Then, suddenly, we heard a soft voice behind us:

"Here I am, the Giant Rat of Sumatra."

We turned round and saw a puny little mouse.

"But you are so small and unassuming, you cannot possibly be a Giant Rat," I said.

"Yet that is precisely what people call me," the mouse replied. "I am what I am, but I have been thoroughly misunderstood and what men cannot understand they insist on discussing and so, little by little, a strange transition takes place. The more they talk about me the more I grow – in their imagination. Eventually I will be large enough to devour them," the mouse laughed.

"But why do they discuss matters they cannot understand," I wondered.

"They do, because they are on a quest for the meaning of life, but tonight I will challenge you by changing your perspective. Tonight, I will ask the question, 'What is the meaning of life?'"

This challenge delighted us, since we knew the answer to that old riddle. "In the eighteenth century David Hume demonstrated that it is not possible to elicit a normative thesis out of descriptive statements. Therefore, it is incorrect even to ask that question. The meaning of life should neither be debated nor discussed. Every step that brings you closer to a solution, robs you of some of the meaning you searched for," I started.

"Life has meaning,' is a statement that confutes the theory of rationality, regardless of whether it is true or false. It is analogous to Gödel's theorem concerning non-contradictive formal systems," B continued.

He got up and went to the bookshelf, the mouse slowly following him. B reached for *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, a book by Hofstadter where these issues are discussed. Unfortunately the book next to it was knocked over and fell straight towards the mouse.

In a flash she threw herself to one side.

"You can keep your damned books," she screamed, and then she was gone. B knelt and picked up the book.

"Strange," he muttered, "I have never seen this book before."

He weighed the book in his hand, turned to the title page and started to read ...

Being or Nothingness

Joe K

Dedication

In commemoration of Joseph Knecht, magister Ludi Josephus III,
who abandoned 'the glass bead game,'
the most beautiful of ideas,

FOR LIFE ...

... UNTO DEATH

Motto

Everything living should be an end in itself.

Nothing living should be merely the means
to the end of either its own
or any other man's idea.

Axiom

The more a man is made into a means of an idea,
the more he will leave his body,
making it and everything else, dead and alive,
into means to the end of that idea.

If we turn 'creating a welfare state' into an idea,
and make 'the reduction of other people's suffering' the end of that idea,
people's suffering will increase instead of decreasing.

Only by not turning it into an idea,
'to create a living and free world,'
will a living and free world be born.

Food for thought

A ship in harbour is safe,
but that is not what ships are built for.

Anonymous

The world is like an onion.
You peel layer upon layer in pursuit of God,
but the centre will show up empty.

Meister Eckehart

If I ask for a glass of water and someone gives me a cup
filled with the most exquisite of wines, I will send him away,
until he realises that happiness does not depend on what you get,
but on getting what you want.

Sören Kierkegaard

If by eternity is understood, not infinite temporal duration
but non-temporality,
then it can be said that a man lives eternally if he lives in the present.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Time is what appears at the horizon of Being.

Martin Heidegger

THE SOUL IS THE PRISON OF THE BODY (Michel Foucault)

THE SOUL IS THE PRISON OF THE BODY (Michel Foucault)

THE SOUL IS THE PRISON OF THE BODY (Michel Foucault) ...

... and we have placed ourselves outside of it!

Joe K

Sexuality is the projection of Being into space-time.

Sexuality is holy.

Family is holy.

Disconnect sexuality from Being, and Nothingness emerges!

Joe K

Socrates was the ugliest man in Greece,
but he found solace.
He invented the 'World of Ideas.'

Joe K

Psychoanalysis is precisely the disease,
for which it believes itself to be the cure.

Adopted from Karl Krauss

My thinking is muscular.

Albert Einstein

Einstein reinserted time into space
and, behold, the laws of physics changed.
What would happen if one did the same for
the humanistic and social sciences?

You are invited to try,
but think it over before you proceed.
This time it will not be sufficient with an 'Imagined Observer.'
You have to become a part of the project yourself.
Take every precaution and pray ...
...that you will survive the journey!

Joe K

I am a strange loop.

Douglas Hofstadter

Man never gets to know what his calling is.
He senses his destiny while walking through life.

Henrik Ibsen

Life is meant to be a joyous adventure.

Joe K

Hell is truth seen too late.

Thomas Hobbes

The eye is our only digital organ of perception.

The eye is the mirror of the soul.

Your soul is the entire world!

Joe K

What then is the 'Tree of Life,' in the middle of Paradise?

The tree we were not allowed to eat from,

after having tasted the fruit from the 'Tree of Knowledge.'

Enter a sylvan glade an early summer morning.

Close your eyes.

Open them slowly and look around.

Joe K

Why is it that no one in our omniscient era

has managed to produce a coherent ontology?

Maybe because it has already been written!

When will the existentialist philosophers discover St. Paul?

Joe K

He who denies the Trinity will lose his soul

and he who tries to understand the Trinity fully will lose his mind.

Anonymous

I am Joe K – You are Joe K

Joe K

Of what one cannot speak, one must remain silent.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

A dream

When I was a child it annoyed me that I had so few socks and most of them I did not like. One day, after school, I was at a friend's house as he opened his closet door. My face turned green with envy when I saw the stacks of fluffy terry cloth socks.

After leaving my parent's house I did not worry about what clothes to wear, except for my socks, which I chose with care. One Saturday afternoon I went downtown to buy terry cloth socks. The sales people laughed at me.

"They went out of style a long time ago, but you can always try some other store."

I rushed from shop to shop and suddenly I got lucky. In one of the department stores they had a sale on terry cloth socks: six pairs for thirty crowns.

"They are from Taiwan but other than Swedish terry cloth socks these are the best," said the clerk, who wore them herself. I bought six yellow and six blue pairs of socks and left the store radiant with joy.

Late that evening I finished the book you are reading. Exhausted, I threw myself on the bed and immediately fell into a deep sleep. In the dream I was chased. I ran in my socks from house to house but no one would help me find my shoes. Finally I stopped in the middle of a field and looked at my feet which had sunk deep into the wet soil. Slowly, I knelt and took off my socks.

When I lifted my gaze a man stood in front of me, smiling. At that moment, I realised the scope of the thought that I had barely touched upon before falling asleep, "It is with our feet we participate in 'living the world.'"

I understood that it was not necessarily up to me to write the book. I could forget about the writing of the book completely.

THE FIRST DAY AFTER I STOPPED WRITING THE BOOK

Doctor Watson came by.

We chatted about everyday tidings, but after a while we found ourselves discussing the meaning of life. He told me of a book that he had recently read, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. A gigantic computer had been programmed to answer the question of the meaning of life. A priesthood evolved that constantly provided it with more information. Hundreds of generations passed when suddenly the computer announced that it had found the answer. Everyone gathered to receive the sacred words. A long silence followed and then the computer spoke again.

"But I don't think you want to know."

"We do!" everyone shouted and threatened to cut off the power if it did not comply.

"Alright, but you won't be satisfied. The answer to the question of the meaning of life is 42."

Dr Watson broke out in laughter at the absurd answer. I let him be for a while and then kindly interrupted.

"The answer may seem strange, but it is really the only answer that a computer can give. The digit 4 refers to the four space-time-dimensions of existence, that is Being, and the digit 2 stands for the two dimensions of time, [REDACTED], that is Nothingness. Hence, the computer's answer to the question of the meaning of life is 'Being and Nothingness.'"

"However, a computer can only handle algorithms," I continued, "therefore it is trapped in the two time-dimensions and can hardly have reasoned along these lines. It is more probable that the computer, through some complicated detour, has stumbled upon the mystique of the natural numbers. Four plus two equals six and six multiplied by seven amounts to 42, but this is common knowledge that you can read about in Pythagoras' books," I ended.

A gloomy atmosphere settled upon us and we sat quietly staring into the fire. Finally Dr Watson broke the silence to tell me of his difficult fall, and later that night we parted as good friends.

THE SECOND DAY AFTER I STOPPED WRITING THE BOOK

I remembered previous times when I had written with inspiration.

I brought the old volumes from the bookshelf and read with amusement. Unfortunately I cannot share the content of these books. If I did, it would generate too much must and local colour.

THE THIRD DAY AFTER I STOPPED WRITING THE BOOK
it rained.

Downtown I met B who told me of a contest that a literary magazine featured. They had selected twenty-five quotations from Conan Doyle's books, and the task was to identify the characters that had made the different statements. In addition they wanted the first three hundred words of the book that Conan Doyle never published – the story for which he believed society was not yet ready, *The Giant Rat of Sumatra*. We parted after having set Saturday evening aside for the contest.

When I returned home I read the letter that had arrived from R. For reasons of integrity I cannot disclose its content.

Late that evening I had completed the book you hold in your hand, except for the heading of the sixth day. As I began to write, all text in my word processor suddenly disappeared. At first I was devastated but then I realised the obvious. A book like this one can only be written on the sixth day, so I decided to await its arrival.

THE FOURTH DAY AFTER I STOPPED WRITING THE BOOK
the Prophets spoke.

Please read pertinent sections of the Old Testament.

THE FIFTH DAY AFTER I STOPPED WRITING THE BOOK
Jesus and John spoke.

Please read pertinent sections of the New Testament.

I sat at B's place and wrote the book.

THE SEVENTH DAY AFTER I STOPPED WRITING THE BOOK

B woke up.

He sat up in bed as the memory of a dream quickly faded. Strange, he muttered to himself while he dressed. He was thinking about the text that he had studied the night before. It was the only book by Conan Doyle he had not previously read and since it was Sunday morning he decided to go downstairs to finish the book.

B walked down the stairs but after a few steps he had to lean against the railing. An inexplicable fear had caused him to lose his balance. He took another couple of steps but the vertigo increased and he was sweating profusely. He tried to rid himself of the unpleasant sensation by shaking his head, but then he realised that there was something terribly wrong about the very way he perceived the reality surrounding him. With every step the swaying got worse and now he could not breathe anymore. His vision turned foggy and the staircase shook, yet he continued down the stairs. He could have sat down, but something unrelenting within forced him onwards.

"There is so much at stake," he heard himself say, before he saw it. On the last step there was a book he had never seen before. Slowly he leaned forward. His hand was trembling and his eyesight was blurred, but gathering all his strength he picked up the book. As through a veil he read the title, *Being or Nothingness* by Joe K.

At that moment B's brain exploded. He saw the inside of his skull in an unbearably bright light and then everything turned black.

B woke up at the bottom of the stairs with a pounding headache. He had fallen on part thirteen of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Collected Works*, which he had left on the staircase the night before. He rose, picked up the book and returned it to the bookshelf.

After breakfast he noticed what he had absent-mindedly scribbled on a piece of paper during the meal. Slowly he read to himself:

Our Father Who Art in Heaven
Hallowed be Thy Name
Thy Kingdom come
Thy Will be done
On earth as it is in Heaven
Give us this day, our Daily Bread
And Forgive us our trespasses
As we Forgive those who trespass against us
And lead us not into Temptation
But deliver us from evil
For Thine is the Kingdom the Power and the
Glory
For Ever and Ever
AMEN

At the bottom of the note there was one more sentence, "*The last day in the life of Ivan Denisovitch*".

B was overwhelmed with joy. Miraculously he had recovered his childhood faith. The crisp, cool spring air hit his face as he rushed out. Approaching the church the clouds parted and the bells started to ring.

He stopped, his eyes brimming with tears, when he saw all the people that had gathered on the church hill. Friends and strangers welcomed him and finally he understood that throughout the ages the church bells had tolled for him.

Afterword

With hindsight it is obvious that our hero was lucky.
The story could have ended infinitely worse.

If, after finishing this text, you find yourself
sitting with a book entitled *Being or Nothingness*, beware.

You wouldn't want to trade the eternal loop of your life
for an infinite loop in the world of ideas, would you?