I Am a Strange Loop by Douglas R. Hofstadter

Another Visit To The Metaphors Of Geb

Amazon Best Books of the Month, March 2007: Pulitzer-Prize winner Douglas Hofstadter takes on some weighty and wonderful questions in I Am a Strange Loop--among them, the size of a soul and the vagaries of thought--and proposes persuasive answers that surprised me both with their simplicity and their sense of optimism: a rare combination to be found in a book that tackles the mysteries of the brain. This long-awaited book is a must-have for avid science readers and navel-gazers. --Anne Bartholomew

In the strange loop, Douglas Hofstadter has come up with a pretty fertile metaphor. The problem is that the book doesn't do a whole lot to explain it. If you can dig or grok or intuit that consciousness is a strange loop, then you won't need the long portions of this book that attempt to promote this thesis. If you cannot so grok, then reading those same portions will be confusing and unhelpful.

This is not Hofstadter's fault. Trying to understand consciousness in this way is like the art of seeing one's own eye - it pushes up at the limits of language and reason. Good writing can only get you so far.

There are other portions that are quite enjoyable and these are the ones that are less thesis-driven and more literary. Hofstadter's youthful attempt at his own Socratic dialogue is fun and -although he apologizes at length for its immaturity- actually pretty good. I could have read a book-length chat between his Plato and Socrates (who seem -anachronistically- to be aware of computers and fruit-canning machines).

But even these bits could have done with a bit more editorial direction. The main problem with this book is Hofstadter's isolation within the closed-universe of the academic philosophy of mind. He clearly attaches an undue importance to this vanishingly small world. Hofstadter's snipes at John Searle are embarrassingly frank in their personal bitterness. I have
never thought Searle was worth taking very seriously, but Hofstadter has little sense of humor about him or his work.

The same problem colors Hofstadter’s frequent digressions into ethics, since his ethical positions seem to stem more directly from the cultural values of the academy than from his own ideas. He makes clear that he is pro-animal rights and pro-choice, since animals have consciousness and fetuses do not. He proposes that there exists a hierarchy of consciousness, with small-souled beings (e.g. fetuses, vegetables, retarded human beings) at or near the bottom and large-souled beings (e.g. adult humans) at the top. I happen to agree with him here, but Hofstadter’s ethical discussion would be greatly enlivened by a familiarity with mysticism and religion, especially Buddhism and Aristotle. Instead, his horizons seem limited to journal-page arguments with Dennett, Churchland and Searle (ethical geniuses none).

Specifically, Hofstadter conflates degree of consciousness with relative right to exist. If he fails to recognize that this is a non sequitur, he does at least acknowledge that it commits him to a troublesome implication: that 2-year old humans have less right to exist than adult humans. He deals with this as follows:

Even though I sincerely believe there is much more of a soul in a twenty-year-old than in a two-year-old (a view that will no doubt dismay many readers), I nonetheless have enormous respect for the potential of the two-year-old to develop a much larger soul over the course of a dozen or so years.

It is entirely obvious that fetuses (not to mention spermatazoa) have this same potential, so to the extent that potential is the reason for Hofstadter’s pro-choice views, his argument is unsatisfactory.

He gives another: cuteness. Perhaps, he suggests, the sensation of cuteness reflects a protective instinct in humans. But this is clearly a positive fact and not a normative one - Badtz Maru is cute, but this alone does not give him rights. Indeed, it seems to me that the OPPOSITE is often true. Babies are precious by virtue of their limited awareness, not in spite of it. (Which is a greater tragedy: the death of child or a highly realized being?) Viewed with a cold eye, the strange loop theory of consciousness simply has no necessary ethical implications. Like Dennett, Hofstadter is a terrific thinker but a hamfisted ethicist - an unreflective mouthpiece for the ideology of the academy.

By far, the most useful contribution here is Hofstadter’s specific discussion of video feedback as a metaphor for consciousness. Again, you either grok this or you dont - there is just no explaining something this weird. In the most novel and interesting portion of the book, he uses Marvin Minsky’s term telepresence to explore the notion that consciousness is not singular, discrete or correlated with a spatial location or any single body. He
suggests, I think rightly, that mind exists wherever there is sufficient feedback of information, and that it spills over from one feedback loop into another, without respect for bodies, matter, or location. However, in my view, the same prejudices that prevent Hofstadter from confronting the ethical implications of his views also commit him to a reductive, ateleological worldview (again, he is here in lockstep with Dennett here), and this forces him over and over again to explain mind as some sort of emergent (and therefore anomalous) property of information itself. It also forces him to spill gallons of ink unnecessarily in an (unsuccessful) attempt to salvage free will. Finally, it keeps him from exploring the teleological (and much more parsimonious) alternative: that information exists in order to facilitate the emergence of mind.

At the end of the day, this is a self-indulgent book-length footnote to Hofstadter’s masterpiece, GEB. Rather than pick at these scraps, the reader should take the opportunity to read or re-read that work.

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