

"Of Simple Beings and Their ?:  
Thinking (Believing) We Are."

Walter Mucher

Spring 2005

Austin Ames--Where are you going?

Sam Montgomery--I'm late.

Austin--For what?

Sam--Reality.

*A Cinderella Story* (WB, 2004)

In Lewis Carroll's Alice stories the White Rabbit reminds us, constantly, that we are late. As courtier and keeper of time, the White Rabbit orders her majesty's chaotic reasoning—i.e. experiences—into being by regulating the experience of time as it hurries through Wonderland. It is reason's plight to keep reality apart from nonsense. Time reminds us of a mechanistic world, a world of places and things, ordered, defined and ruled by reason. According to Robert V. Levine, "The primary function of clock-time, it may be argued, is to prevent simultaneously occurring events from running one into another" (*A Geography of Time*, 95), such as two trains meeting on the same track at the same time. Yet these events occur in a "realm" which is the product of a little girl's "dream", an ontological phantasm, of sorts. "Reality" is in the realm of the looking glass, a space comprised of virtual reflections of dreams. So we journey haplessly into a virtual Being, treading lightly between the states of waking and dreaming, fretting because we are also late. Alice's world is similar to Australia's aborigines, who believe that the existence

of man depends on the existence of Dreamtime, a world/reality parallel to our own, as real as, if not more real than, waking time. But what if Alice's waking time is not in itself awake, but truly asleep? As in Philip K. Dick's *Time Out of Joint*, we may in fact be no more than a virtual reality, a figment of an over-developed and under-trained mind. Wishes, desires, truths per se, all tenuous beings of an overactive imagination, beings dependant on a mind's ability to maintain its narrative alive.

The power of myth making, augmented by the act of storytelling, clearly enacts this act of self-constitution by the mind. But this act is not a mere following of the prescribed notes or rabbits. It is an actual act of creation, an entifying event following the desires of the Self in Being. The lateness declared by Carroll's White Rabbit's rhyme and reason foretell our actions as reason-less, and that the known must "conform" to her majesty's "heart's" desires, lest heads roll. Yet her majesty's desires are more experiential whims of her own doing than rational truths of any reflection. We run headlessly after the rabbit with the watch, intrigued by its incessant preoccupation for the lateness of the hour, yet we fret in our own hearts for we sense we also are late in our own non-sense. What is this non-sense we "prevent" through our apprehension of clock-time? Reason (to be).

In Judeo-Christian myth before the world was the word – its mere utterance being its reality: Be. But to be also must mean not to be, as I shamelessly pun the Bard. For "Half a bee, philisophically, / Must ipso facto half not be. / But half a bee has got to be / Vis a vis it's entity. / -d'you see?" ("Eric the Half a Bee")<sup>†</sup> No? Neither do many. It is to, eventually, ask if what-is-not, as well as what-is, is perchance, not more than a mere dream (a problem also noted in Calderon de la Barca's *La vida es sueño* as well as underlying Cervantes' narrative *Don*

*Quixote*). Is reality, ultimately, bound by its utterance? Or does it pre-exist all un/conscious act of self-definition?

As in Monty Python's "The Meaning of Life,"\* 'tis, eventually, the question that begs to be asked: "Which comes first? The chicken or the egg?" For years no one has hit on the answer: "The rooster, of course." But seriously, whether it is before, or whether it is after the fact, the fact is, we remember, well, at least some of us do, an awareness that consistently evades us.

Or is it? For to conclude this act as a prescribed protentive act in Being, is to declare Being as a drifting, and somewhat chaotic, reality. And, then, one must question if this protentive reality is in of itself and not a just effect to its just cause. Eventually, one must return to Being, for in its reality lies the act of reality itself. What-is and what-is-not are circumscribed by a perception of its nature, its reality, between Being and Non-Being.

It is really a question of self-awareness, if not self-indulgence, especially if "to be" means "to be aware of". For it demands an awareness of itself before being. Yet, as Descartes strangely concludes, awareness must come from an aware/d being, thus one is aware after the fact of awareness itself. Calderon de la Barca's Prince is unaware of his Being, for he is unaware of his un-existing surroundings. To launch him into reality without this awareness begets the tragedy of a beingless Being: a being unbeknownst to Being and to Being in Itself.

Knowledge, then, might be defined as that which is limited to what we remember. But mere remembrance is somewhat futile given its post-awareness state. Though many have theorized that knowledge is remembrance, and that it implies a previous state—a transcendent real from which all emanate—, others have declared that both knowledge, as well as

remembrances, are a summary of what is given to us in our present state of being. Either way, there seems to be certain pretentiveness to this being given that being is of itself a state of remembrance. In the same manner, knowledge seems to depend on a protentive being, which, in its to be, becomes. It is because of this future being that we constitute an awareness of that which was, for in the transition between the pretentive and the protentive one is. Thus we know what was before it was to be, becoming.

Knowledge, or at least that part of the cognitive act that we identify as knowledge, seems to be, in essence, reflexive. We know because we reflect upon experiences, whether real or not, that are placed upon our sensors. Yet they do not tend to be simple experiences. These experiences are coded and decoded every time we ponder upon them. We mix-and-match, sometimes evolving, and others devolving, into beauties or beasts of our own accord. Hence, as the proud creators of Pandoras or Frankenstein Monsters we parade our monsters as marks of our limits of the known and open them upon the realm of the unknown.

We know because we posit our identities unto the unknown. We cogitate our being into the unknown. In this form we tend to re-cognize our own knowing, or remembering of the known, as enacting being. Is remembrance, in part or in its entirety, a component of or in itself a/that reality that circumscribes (our own) being? Or is it a mere construct of a/our (feeble) mind's desire to define its environment? If it is the latter, are dreams, then, part of this same reality? Or are they no more than mere wisps of furtive glances at what-is and what-is-not?

Consider the reality of a Sufi master. When confronted with being, do they not aspire to attain Being by enacting Non-Being? Do they not look into the mirror and see Nothingness looming? For "the beloved is the mirror of the lover, and in Him the lover sees with his own eyes

but himself” (‘Iraqi 89). It is through this mirror—i.e. Nothingness—that one becomes before the Real. Or, rather, Being is in enacting a stance before the Real, an act by which reality wavers inconsistently before its pondered desires. It demands a place and a time upon which to decry its existence. Yet it falters unbeknownst before its very act of Being: Its crux being Time. We are unable to consolidate our stance in Being given our preoccupation with Time.

Our obsession with acquiring Time, chronological Time, robs us of our own existence. We diagram, count, partition and lay out time. We hang it, wear it, bejewel, animate, voice and digitize time. We mark and punch it, sum and discount it. We fracture, win, loose and borrow it. We make time a commodity to be sold, bought and bartered. And, eventually we steal it. It is this pilfering which we un/knowingly fear the most. As a response to this fear, we value things by quantity, be they produced or acquired, not by the depth of its idea or meaning, but by anchoring our “reality” to virtual spaces “possessed”. We hoard objectified events by displacing sentient content for easily accountable things. We reduce ourselves to mere temporal quantities, not quality of life, how fast or how much it takes, not what it means.

And what of our experiences? Experiences require content to describe its Being. This content establishes meaning to the experience, which, eventually, defines our Being, our place in Time. Yet we expell these experiences from our lives for they take up too much of our “precious”, quantifiable time. We dispose of time wasted by wasting time away, shaving off minutes, second, microseconds from our daily fret.

During my visits to Costa Rica I was constantly reminded by its populace that “Hay más tiempo que vida”—there is more time than life. A concept somehow forgotten today in the (over)developed west. We tend to think there is not enough time to do or accomplish what we

want, or think we need, or have to do. But this is only true if our lives defined time, as we tend to think. And we think because we surf through time, thinking in the process, but not overcoming its reality. Even though we tend to give time its meaning by our acts or lack of. But what defines this meaning? What is meaning?

Meaning is defined by action, not by ends/results. We are, not because we are, but because we become. Yet we tend to deposit value to our end results while we readily trample the act of reaching this end as a nuisance to be overcome. This end result mentality shortchanges our experiences by quantifying bits and pieces. This “bits and pieces” mentality excludes any consideration of the in-between, of the process through which one encounters.

Are we not, then, Being and Non-Being? Retentive and protentive acts of the Being? Or are we no more than “simple spiraling coils of self-replicating DNA.” (“Meaning of Life”) Truth of the matter is that, but for a few moments, we seem to be no more than self-deprecating automatons of a forged dream, a reality of our vacuous existence, mere objects that occupy space like dust bunnies of the universe. We act upon givens, grudgingly moving along on a veritable track that guides our actions upon somewhat pre-determined slips in space-time.

Plotinus, as well as Heidegger later, viewed this *weltschaumstraum* as a coming together of opposites, a be-coming, in an indeterminable intermediate, or in-between, where each reality, or being, is thwarted by an-other, yet necessarily present in all acts of being-in-itself. We basically polarize our being into Being and Non-Being. We create an ideal binary where ambiguity does not tread. It either is or is-not. Black or White. True or False. Good or Bad. But reality is not so clean cut. It is this gray area that defines the meaning of an act, of an event. Being is defined not by Birth and Death, but by Becoming: the transition from point A to point B

makes the difference. “It is when we step outside the restrictions, when knowing the rules inside and out; we choose just the right time to break them, to transcend them, that we are truly human.” (Manison) It is in this “becoming”, in the *act* of being itself, that we are something more than being. We are that which is in becoming, not just that which becomes.

Rethinking what Epicurus proposed in his *Letter to Menoeceus*, that existence is real between the moment of birth and the moment of death, and that to live is to learn to die, we should ask ourselves if we are not in fact the sum of our parts, or at least of our experiences.

Death, like most experiences that we think of as “natural”, is a product of the human imagination—all animals die, but only humans suffer Death. This suffering is a social construct transmitted through time by customs and traditions. Death rears its head to remind us of our limits. We forget it only marks a “moment” which collapses into a mere point, a signpost to and from which life experiences itself. But death is not an experience in itself. It has no Being-in-Time to account for. It provides no content to its meaning. In *The Magic Mountain* Thomas Mann reminds us that we are prone to obsess on that event which has “no subjective character,” on that which falls “entirely in the category of objective events,” (in Enright 71) and, thus, which serves as nothing more than a signpost for the rabbits.

We are what we have been, as well as what we shall be. It is this play between past and future that creates the Now, a spatiotemporal bubble in which our consciousness un-folds its Self into Being. But, is this Now THE Now? Or are there other potential Nows to (our) being? And should we care? “There was a time,” writes William Hazlitt, “when we were not: this gives us no concern—why should it trouble us that a time will come when we shall cease to be?” (“On the Fear of Death” in Enright 31) Is it rabbit season? Do we embrace its rabbitness? Or do we squirm

as its pelt is taken of its bludgeoned body? Why do we squirm? Maybe Tom Stoppard's *Rosencratz and Guildenstern are Dead* can give us a hint.

Do you ever think yourself as actually *dead*, lying in a box with a lid on it? ... It's silly to be depressed by it. I mean one thinks of it like being *alive* in a box, one keeps forgetting to take into account that one is *dead* ... which should make a difference ... shouldn't it? I mean, you'd never *know* you were in a box, would you? It would be just like being *asleep* in a box. (in Enright 27)

"Nudge Nudge. Know what I mean? Wink Wink. Say ... no ... more." ("Nudge Nudge")  
Worry not, it tastes like chicken, don't it? Knowledge tramples our desires, for it reveals its truths. We can no longer idealize without reality biting us, hard, in our existential derriere. We must conform to this reality, for it becomes part of our Being, and guides our wants. Its death grip strangles our carefree existence forcing us to face our limits, our expiration date, as to speak, when we are no longer suitable to be consumed by our passions.

And yet we heed not the warnings of Joyce's artist: "Eternity! O, dread and dire word. Eternity! What mind of man can understand it?" (in Enright 196) Or of Mann's *Doctor Faust* as he relishes on the secret of hell, the total renouncement of all that defines the human as one reads "*here everything leaves off*"? (in Enright 197) We forego its truth for it belittles our existence, our "worth" in being, to make sense of the senseless. We partake, whole heartedly, in a fictive pursuit of the proverbial White Rabbit of being itself: Being-in-Time.

As in Alice's Wonderland we run frantically about trying to contain Time. We usurp and decry its reign. We ask not where it came from. But we worry when we know not where it went.

Confronted with our insecurities, we stand firm upon the changeless face of Space and embrace its promise of salvation. We bask on the warmth of immutable realities, calm beachfronts of virtual tranquility, yet wince at the surging temporal waves that encroach our peaceful existence as they erode the sand beneath our Being. And, when push comes to shove, and Rubik's cube of Space-Time rotates its faces again, our Will succumbs before the unknown and demands that we question such stagnant realities before our time is up. Then, and only then, can we realize that our only benefactor has been Time all along, while Space has been but a shameless detractor of our dreams and passions for an unattainable, and somewhat reproachable, eternity.

So "Don't be silly chumps" and take the time to join me in singing this little ditty I learned as a young man, as a small tribute to life, and death, for, in the end, be it real, or be it mere artifice, it is what it is itself: simply Being.

"Always Look on the Bright Side of Life"

Composer: Eric Idle, Author: Eric Idle, Arranger: John Altman.

Some things in life are bad  
They can really make you mad  
Other things just make you swear  
and curse  
When you're chewing on  
life's gristle  
Don't grumble, give a whistle  
And this'll help things turn out for the best...  
And...

...always look on the bright side  
of life...  
(Whistle)

Always look on the light side

of life...  
(Whistle)

If life seems jolly rotten  
There's something you've forgotten  
And that's to laugh and smile and  
dance and sing  
When you're feeling in the dumps  
Don't be silly chumps  
Just purse your lips and whistle  
- that's the thing.

And... always look on the bright  
side of life...  
(Whistle)

Come on.

Always look on the bright side  
of life...  
(Whistle)

For life is quite absurd  
And death's the final word  
You must always face the curtain  
with a bow  
Forget about your sin - give the  
audience a grin  
Enjoy it - it's your last chance  
anyhow.

So always look on the bright side  
of death  
Just before you draw your  
terminal breath

Life's a piece of shit  
When you look at it  
Life's a laugh and death's a joke  
it's true  
You'll see it's all a show  
Keep 'em laughing as you go  
Just remember that the last laugh  
is on you

And always look on the bright side  
of life...  
(Whistle)

Always look on the right side  
of life...  
(Whistle)

Come on Brian, cheer up.

Always look on the bright side  
of life...

Always look on the bright side  
of life...

Worse things happen at sea you know.

Always look on the bright side  
of life...

I mean - what have you got to lose?  
You know, you come from nothing  
- you're going back to nothing.  
What have you lost? Nothing.

Always look on the right side  
of life...

---

End Notes

†For the benefit of the reader I include the lyrics to “Eric the Half a Bee”.

“Eric the Half a Bee”

Composer: Eric Idle, Author: Eric Idle, John Cleese.

Orchestra Leader: A-one, two, a-one two three four

Leader: (speaks) Half a bee, philosophically,  
Must ipso facto half not be.

But half a bee has got to be  
Vis a vis it's entity.  
-d'you see?  
But can a bee be said to be  
Or not to be an entire bee  
When  
half the bee is not a bee,  
Due to some ancient injury.  
-Singing...

All sing: La di di, one two three  
Eric the Half a Bee.  
A B C D E F G  
Eric the Half a Bee.

Leader: Is this wretched demi-bee  
Half asleep upon my knee,  
Some freak from a menagerie?

All yell: No! It's Eric the Half a Bee.

All sing: Fiddle di dum, fiddle di dee,  
Eric the Half a Bee.  
Ho ho ho, tee hee hee,  
Eric the Half a Bee.

Leader: I love this hive employ-ee-ee,  
Bisected accidentally,  
One summer's afternoon by me,  
I love him carnally.

All sing: He loves him carnally...

Leader: Semi-carnally.  
(speaks) The End.

Voice: Cyril Connolly?

Leader: No, semi-carnally.

Voice: Oh.

All sing: (Quietly) Cyril Connolly

(Ends with an elaborate whistle)

\* For the benefit of the reader I also include the lyrics to “The Meaning of Life”.

“The Meaning of Life”

Composer: Eric Idle/John Du Prez. Author: Eric Idle.

Why are we here, what's life all about?  
Is God really real, or is there some doubt?  
Well tonight, we're going to sort it all out  
For tonight it's the Meaning of Life.

What's the point of all this hoax?  
Is it the chicken and the egg time,  
Are we just yolks?  
Or perhaps we're just one of God's little jokes.  
Well ça c'est the Meaning of Life.

Is life just a game where we make up the rules,  
While we're searching for something to say,  
Or are we just simply spiralling coils,  
Of self-replicating DNA?

In this life, what is our fate?  
Is there Heaven and Hell? Do we incarnate?  
Is mankind evolving or is it too late?  
Well tonight here's the Meaning of Life.

For millions this life is a sad vale of tears,  
Sitting round with nothing to say,  
While scientists say we're just spiraling coils,  
Of self-replicating DNA.

So just why, why are we here?  
And just what, what, what, what do we fear?  
Well ce soir, for a change, it will all be made clear,  
For this is the Meaning of Life  
-c'est la sens de la vie,  
This is the Meaning of Life.

## Works Cited

- A Cinderella Story*. Dir. Mark Rosman. Perf. Hillary Duff, Chad Michael Murray. Warner Brothers, 2004.
- Enright, D. J. *The Oxford Book of Death*. Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 1983.
- Idle, Eric. "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life." From *Monty Python's Life of Brian*. Dir. Terry Jones. Perf. Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones and Michael Palin. Handmade Films Ltd. 1979.
- Idle, Eric, and Cleese, John. "Eric the Half a Bee." *Monty Python Sings*. Virgin Records 1989.
- Idle, Eric. "The Meaning of Life." From *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life*. Dir. Terry Jones. Perf. Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones and Michael Palin. Celadine Films, 1983.
- 'Iraqi, Fakhruddin. *Divine Flashes*. Translated and Introduction by William Chittick and Peter Lamborn Wilson. Preface by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. New York: Paulist Press, 1982.
- Levine, Robert V. *A Geography of Time: The Temporal Misadventures of a Social Psychologist, or How Every Culture Keeps Time Just a Little Bit Differently*. New York: Basic Books, 1998.
- Manison, Pete D. "Who Names the Lights." *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*. Vol.CXXIII No.11 (Nov. 2003): 78-95.
- "Nudge Nudge" *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. BBC. Dir. Ian MacNaughton. October 19, 1969. DVD. A&E Television Networks. Volume 1, Episode #3. 1999.