

Study Guide

Angels of the Singularity Chapter 6



This chapter is about reality, madness, suffering, and what we would lose if consciousness was artificial. Comments below do not exhaust the possible interpretations, but are only suggestions for further thought.

In the past before the comic, the immortal billionaires ascended to the Moon God's palace, which is also considered to be heaven, and the billionaires angels. As (partially) revealed in the last pages, their various minds were abstracted into software running on a network of computers, so that they were free from physical reality. In this state, reality is (to the angels in heaven) mind-dependent, their world being one of pure information, which is why Jackson comments that "everything is an idea in the mind of God." This is what George Berkeley said in the 18th century, describing the metaphysical doctrine of idealism. (Metaphysics is the philosophical study of reality as such.) Since the angels' minds are integrated with that of the Moon God, their reality is truly an idea in his mind. This is the ultimate realization of Kurzweil's dictum that "it's all just a computation." I claim that taking reality for a computation is to commit the fallacy of confusing a representation with the thing itself.

There is no physical suffering in heaven, since there are no bodies. But there could be the suffering of madness, which would afflict even a disembodied mind. There may be different sorts of madness: those due to malfunctions of the hardware of the brain, and those due to malfunctions of software. However, for a material brain there may be no distinction between these, because hardware and software are the same thing, and it may be impossible to abstract mental function without bringing the full function of hardware with it. I don't think anyone now knows whether this is true. But for science fiction, let's assume the mind can be abstracted, and in that state it could maybe be subject to madness. Of course, nothing real matters to minds in this abstracted state either, because they create their own reality. Is that mentality itself madness?

This man our heroes encounter is not sane. There is something wrong with him. But do we despise him? A singularitarian (one who believes a man-made evolutionary leap will occur soon) would say "those humans are just inadequate computers, and we should make better ones." I think this poor unfortunate would be despised by the singularitarians with their grandiose project, but most readers would have some sympathy for him. He's not one of the privileged, but he's like a poet or a scholar; not as concerned with his physical well-being as he is with beauty and truth. His beauty-seeking is expressed in his sustaining himself on flower scent, which though rarified and evanescent is enough. (Or is it? He does die, after all.) I do not know why he believes his hands are diminishing, except that it may be an unconscious metaphor for his inability to act in a world where society has been destroyed. There, high-level knowledge means nothing.

Except, he can uselessly recite what he's read, for his benefit only, while it lands on the uncomprehending ears of Grant and Jackson. There are four statements, three of which are examples of madness.

Deleuze and Guattari are a philosopher and a psychoanalyst who became stars of postmodernism with their book *Anti-Oedipus*. I think it's a massive exercise in destroying the reader's potential comprehension, going well beyond the usual malevolent postmodernist obfuscation in deploying an impressive array of rhetorical tactics to deflect understanding. If the intent is to turn the reader into a schizo (a form of madness the authors admire for being non-conformist), well that's laudably clever. Whatever, I see it as madness about madness, in the style of academesque (not unlike Lucky's speech from *Godot*, below). This passage was chosen mainly for mentioning reality and the desert. But it's also valuable as part of a philosophical mode that fancies itself as akin to poetry. In the late 18th century, Schiller—the poet-turned-philosopher—argued that philosophy should be less abstract and more aesthetic like poetry. This strongly affected the work of the 19th century's most influential philosopher, Hegel. In the 20th century, Heidegger—the father of modern Continental philosophy—expressed similar ideas (influenced more by the late 18th century poet Holderlin, a friend of Hegel's), embracing a poetic style and declaring philosophy prior to logic. I think Heidegger's a scoundrel for many reasons, and I have no use for Continental philosophy, but would I do away with it? No, I'm happy it's here. Our lives are richer because someone is exploring this avenue of thought, no matter how wrong-headed it may be. I don't want to lose it, even

if I don't want to have it.

The next quotation is by Gertrude Stein, from her poem about Matisse. He was to become a renowned artist, but according to Stein he also suffered. There is a popular idea that artists need to suffer in order to create great art, sort of the way some saints self-flagellated to purge the flesh and become holy. It may be a naive misconception, or cause-and-effect may be reversed; highly creative people are often alienated. In this poem, Matisse appears to have decided to do what he was doing in spite of the suffering that resulted. That's what our cartoon madman has concluded, especially when obtaining his sustenance from spiky cacti.

The third text is from *Waiting for Godot* by Beckett. The character speaking is Lucky, who seems to be a mad academic babbling nonsense at length. There is however some meaningful content to his rant, if one reads carefully. I see in it allusions to the "problem of evil," a major issue in theology and a question that turns believers into atheists (hooray!). If God is all good, all seeing and all powerful, why does he allow needless suffering? God, at least in his Jesus form, suffers "...with those who for reasons unknown but time will tell are plunged in torment..." The madman in this comic suffers, and for what reason? He's been left behind, part of the detritus of humanity that couldn't make the leap to the "next stage of evolution." He was left behind by those who became the mind of God, created by Man. I prefer to solve the problem of evil by seeing God as an evil cartoon character.

In each case, these quotations are sort of crazy, but wonderful and necessary. All this would be obliterated in the singularitarian program, because you need a faulty computer to create the craziness we love as humans. We love it because it is us, not because it conforms to an abstract ideal. Kurzweil claims that the next generation pseudo-humans will create great works of art with ease. Hogwash. Human art is for the human brain. Robot art (if anyone could figure out how to make a robot artist, or would spend the money to do the work) would be for robot brains, and would probably stink, in human estimation. We value the productions of human brains, such as they are, because this is an exploration of a vast landscape of thought and experience which is peculiar to us.

The last quote is from Psalms, and is basically an (unconscious?) announcement by the madman that he is about to die. The bee takes his soul to heaven (endless abundance and beauty), which is a real place on Earth, not an abstraction or a higher plane of existence. Compare this with the Moon God's heaven. Our madman's heaven is one for a being with a real physical body and a real death. Maybe there's even a pun here, where existence is "to bee."

On page 7 the gentleman to the left has had his brain enhanced, so that his head is connected by cables to some offscreen equipment. I'm not sure if that's his real face. Maybe he used to look more like his neighbor to the right, that beaky old codger with his fembots. The brain-enhanced gentleman has an Italian-design spacecraft, with elements from the Rialto bridge and Saint Mark's campanile in Venice, with a Palladio rotunda. The spaceships nearby are based on elements of Notre Dame cathedral in Paris and an art deco church tower in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

All depicted wildflowers are authentic Southwest desert and mountain flora.

Why do I write such obscure comics? Because I can sense the massive interconnections between clusters of ideas, and invite others to do the same. This singularity idea drags with it lots of implied consequences, most of which are ignored or dismissed by the true believers. It's tangled up with religion, philosophy, economics, art, and practically everything else, because it's about changing what we mean when we say "human." I'm presenting ideas covered with strings of magnets, which latch onto other such ideas when placed near them, and form a clattering symphony when lined up in a story so that they appear "naturally." It's better than constraining the interconnections in a linearized, logical essay.

In his novels, William Burroughs was doing something similar. He mixed together ideas from the highest and lowest of human thoughts to concoct a rich mess from which new connections emerge. It's how life started on Earth. Everything we love, including forests and radical bohemian art scenes, emerges as a result of accidental connections in a rich mess, the "edge of chaos." That's why the underworld was more exciting for Burroughs; new ideas were emerging, even if only a beat poet could perceive them. 1950s culture was trying to clean away as much of this as possible. I worry that the vision of the transhumanists is dead perfection.