

demon

The economist Herbert Weisskopf first became aware of the demon when he was crossing the park on his way home from buying AA batteries for the irritatingly hungry wireless mouse that came with his laptop. He later remembered wondering why we call it a mouse when it has no tail, just before he became aware of a kind of a tail protruding from the back of his head, and something touching that tail, staying out of his field of vision while worming its way into the middle of his head, somehow bypassing his skull. "Demon" he thought at once, to his surprise since this wasn't the kind of thought that was at all natural to him. Later when he was more familiar with it he felt that the traditional demon appearance did not fit well. No horns, no wings. It was more octopus-shaped, except that it had just one eye and its tentacles were long and thin, smoke-wispy rather than suckered and muscular.

Herbert wondered for a moment about his strange apprehension, shrugged his shoulders and continued homewards. He walked cheerfully to the edge of the park, stopped, turned around, and retraced his steps to the pharmacy to get the batteries. The circular rack holding the plasticized cardboard packs of batteries looked so familiar that he put his hand in his jacket pocket, discovered the batteries he had bought twenty minutes earlier, cursed, and crossed the park again. No demon. When he got home he put a battery in the mouse and resumed work. He was writing the second draft of a book on decision theory, polishing a section in which he argued that preferences defined over more complex domains than real numbers can be matched with procedures that eventuate in simple binary decisions. The math was hard. It had to show the

gravitation of a tentative intention towards a definite resolve, under the attractions of incomparable desiderata. But this had to be combined with appealing narrative examples, to make his hypothetical agents resemble real people. Got to remember that, need examples with almost-real people.

Coffee might have something to do with it, he thought when he was next aware of the demon. Smelt it, this time, a kind of sour acrid odour that seemed to waft from the back of the coffee shop where he met with his astrophysicist friend Rosemarie. She refused to meet in Starbucks -- there's precious few bucks in the stars, she would say -- and insisted that they take an old-fashioned vinyl-covered booth in O'Shaughnessey's, where she further insisted on trivial personal gossip and brain-warping chunks of general relativity. The acrid smell was probably old and dirty beans being roasted to the point of combustion, but it seemed somehow personal, directed at him in particular. Rosemarie told him about how her ex had spoken as if obvious incidents in their breakup had never happened, and compared this to the closed temporal loop solutions to the field equations, in which one can keep going round and round between one space-time point and an earlier one. "It's as if he is stuck in a loop of his own invention" she said "and no one can shift him out of it."

Her words made Herbert somehow impatient to get back to work, though he was not sure why. Something about the math. He told Rosemarie a few gossipy stories about an imaginary ex -- or had it really happened? he felt disconcertingly vague -- in order not to seem to rebuff her, finished a second coffee, and walked back to his apartment.

He sat down to work right away. Loops, gravitation, feed-back. The math was surprisingly amenable, though he wrested with the LaTeX to get the symbols tidy. There was something he had to remember. What was it: ah yes, almost-real entities that prefer moving in time, warping influences of massive objects, yes that is what it was all about, and he'd been working on it so long. Third draft, problems of making it realistic. Oh this physics, he'd been struggling with it for ages.

Tiring, he got up, poured himself a glass of wine, and decided on an afternoon nap. He took off his clothes, saw his cycling gear over a chair, tight leggings and bright yellow lycra top, put them on, and fell into bed. A whisper, into his mind while bypassing his ears: his thoughts or another's, dream or awake? A long oval track, legs going round and round, crossing a bridge that is so long that the cables seem on a repeating loop. Smooth oval curves. Curly integrals and partial derivatives, got to get them written down right, but you're wearing LyCrA so it will all go smoothly for me. Something acrid touching the back of your head, now I'm in for ever. Relax now, you're ok here, no hard choices to gravitate to. Round and round, I've been doing this track for so very long.