

Ethics of Infinite Improbability and the Logic of Jokes

A look at the philosophical inquiry in Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker-series*

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Part 1

Towards considering *Hitchhiker* as a novel of philosophical inquiry

Introduction: *Hitchhiker* as a philosophical novel

There is no single, authoritative definition of philosophical fiction, but for the most part it is understood to be fiction that deals with philosophical themes. The ‘philosophical novel’ is not a canonical genre of literature in the way that for example the ‘psychological novel’ is.¹ Nevertheless, it seems that many people have a conception of what is and what is not a philosophical novel. A Google search for philosophical novels reveals that some books are considered as more canonical than others. Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*, for example, is almost invariably acknowledged. Its frequency of mention is second only to the books of Dostoyevsky on popular lists.² Douglas Adams’ *Hitchhiker*-books, however, do not appear on a single list. This distinction has aroused my attention because I think the *Hitchhiker*-books and *Atlas Shrugged* share many features. At first, the distinction between them may seem obvious. *Atlas* is structured and guided by references to philosophy. The book is filled with argumentation. It is clearly an attempt to establish philosophical ideas in literary form.³ The *Hitchhiker* series, on the other hand, is often regarded as little more than light entertainment. Its quick changes between scenes allows for a rapid-fire progression from joke to joke, while *Atlas* moves slowly from scene to scene in an expanding world of interconnected characters. But despite their stylistic differences, *Atlas* and the *Hitchhiker* series share motif-driven narrative structures and similar thematic contents. Both portray journeys of inquiry into the nature of the world and man’s place in that world. In this endeavor, they are both reflective of philosophical outlooks.

¹ There are entries for ‘psychological novel’ in dictionaries of literature (e.g. Beckson and Ganz 1990, Cuddon 2013), but none for “philosophical novel”. There is an entry for ‘philosophical fiction’ on Wikipedia, but it’s definition does not reference any authoritative source.

² Although no published articles appear on the first pages of the search, *Atlas Shrugged* is a prominent mention on popular lists on Google, Goodreads.com and Wikipedia.

³ And admittedly, by the author. Rand, 1992:6.

Indeed, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy (A Trilogy in Five Parts)* contains every necessary component that appears to qualify *Atlas Shrugged* and others as philosophical novels. Therefore, it is my goal here to investigate *Hitchhiker's* participation in literature as a work of philosophical inquiry, and to examine its philosophical content in philosophical terms, in order that it may be recognized as a work of philosophical fiction.

While this thesis will deal with Adams' series primarily in its print form, it is worthy of mention that *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* was a multi-mode media event. It started as a radio show, turned into a couple of novels, then a television series, all sustained and contributing to the creative process simultaneously, as well as increasing its audience. Subsequently it expanded into even more novels, three major stage productions, a videogame, a Hollywood feature-length film, and finally yet another addendum to the series, by a different novelist, ten years after Adams' death.⁴ I will be focusing on the five novels penned by Douglas Adams: *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, (1980), *Life, the Universe and Everything* (1982), *So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish*, (1984), and *Mostly Harmless* (1992), all of which are compiled in the 1997 edition *The Ultimate Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy - A Trilogy in Five Parts* (henceforth *Hitchhiker*). The massive and lasting appeal of the series can be attributed in part to its multifaceted formation, although this development itself followed the initial popularity of the radio show and the original novel. Adams didn't set out to be a novelist. In fact, this development in his career gave him mixed emotions.⁵ The first two books (*Hitchhiker's* and *Restaurant*) were written while Adams worked in BBC Radio, and in line with the radio play as a genre, the first

⁴ Simpson, 2005.

⁵ BBC Audio, 2004, Disc 2, Chapter P.

novels are driven chiefly by dialogue. As the series progresses, chapters in subsequent books become longer and more characterized by prose narration and reflection. From his solitary home office in Islington, Adams' work becomes more introspective, and a degree of pessimism in the plot seems to follow this development.⁶ The next two books (*Life* and *So Long*) are heavily existential and the plot is mostly driven by the narrator. The final book (*Mostly Harmless*) returns to the dramatic structure of the first two books, but dealing with the most complex philosophical ideas, it is also the lengthiest in the series. Although I will treat the "trilogy of five" as a single novel, its composition is important to have in mind when regarding it on an analytical basis.

In this thesis, I will attempt to qualify *Hitchhiker* as a work of philosophical fiction. As an introduction to that category, *Atlas Shrugged* will serve as a template. Since such a genre is still under construction, a template is needed, and *Atlas* is chosen on the grounds of its popular recognition as work of philosophical fiction, as well as its narrative and philosophical (dis)similarities to the *Hitchhiker* series. Although *Atlas* and *Hitchhiker* are equally representative of definite philosophical ideas, the two works are not philosophical on the same terms. When the character John Galt in *Atlas* speaks, the author Rand does philosophy: she lays down an argument along with her conclusion. Adams, in his books, never presents a philosophy so assertively. Instead, his work is characterized by playful inquiry into philosophical themes. *Atlas* is the codification in fiction of an entire system of philosophy. *Hitchhiker* does *not* outline a complete system of philosophy. But just like Rand, Adams is participating in an exploration and exchange of philosophical ideas, within the philosophical paradigm of his time. This thesis will explicate *Hitchhiker's* narrative to make clear exactly how

⁶ Ibid.

the series merits philosophical distinction. To properly establish this, I will rely heavily on some terminology from philosophy. The reader will have to bear with me while I present the necessary groundwork for a philosophical reading of *Hitchhiker*. After all, there are entire centers for Ayn Rand studies, and thousands of articles on the philosophy of *Atlas Shrugged*. Meanwhile, there is relatively little scholarly work on the philosophy of Douglas Adams.

A lot has been written about *Hitchhiker*, generally speaking. A few notable examples include books by M.J. Simpson (2005), which details the various media modes in which the series has participated, and Erkenbrecher (2011), which deals with motifs of science fiction and social criticism in the novel, and an article by A.L. Cohen-Rose and S.B. Christiansen (2002), which is about the scientific predictions made by the novel, considering for instance the internet as a real-world parallel to the Hitchhiker's Guide.⁷ *Hitchhiker* is also an honorable mention in several introductory books on science fiction (James and Mendlesohn (ed.) (2003), Booker and Thomas (2009)).⁸ According to these, the novel is a satire, parodying the space opera subgenre of science fiction. Some books also discuss *Hitchhiker* as a work philosophical fiction. The 2012 book *Philosophy and the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, edited by Nicholas Joll is a series of philosophical essays based on concepts and scenes from the *Hitchhiker* series.⁹ The point of the book is not to do literary analysis, but rather to do philosophy with ideas from the *Hitchhiker* universe as the points of departure. It is not a book about the philosophy of *Hitchhiker*, but rather a philosophical work inspired by *Hitchhiker*. In contrast, my analysis will focus on philosophical exploration that exists in the book itself, but Joll's book

⁷ Simpson 2005, Erkenbrecher, 2011, Cohen-Rose and Christiansen, 2002.

⁸ James and Mendlesohn (ed.) 2003, Booker and Thomas, 2009.

⁹ Joll, 2012.

provides valuable support to my hypothesis, and it shows that *Hitchhiker* has a lot to add to philosophical discussion on a number of topics.

I have only been able to find a single book, and a single article, on the philosophy of *Hitchhiker*, both written by Marilette van der Colff, who, in my opinion, reduces the *Hitchhiker* story to yet another ripple on the ocean of existentialism, instead of recognizing its wide range of ideas thereby highlighting its philosophical distinction. Van der Colff's 2008 article 'Aliens and existential elevators: absurdity and its shadows in Douglas Adams's *Hitch hiker* series' is a brief analysis of four characters in the novel.¹⁰ The characters are divided into types according to how much or little they exhibit heroic or antiheroic existentialist positions. Those characters who discover happiness in spite of existential absurdity, i.e. those who "hang the sense of it and entertain themselves" as the character Slartibartfast would say, are dubbed "Sisyphus heroes", after Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Those whose spirit is defeated by absurdity, who wallow in endless depression are called "nihilist nemeses". Van der Colff's book *One is Never Alone with a Rubber Duck* (2010) is more extensive, consisting of three chapters, each covering one aspect of the genre of the novel.¹¹ This analysis of genre serves to prove that *Hitchhiker* is appropriately equipped to deal with existentialist themes, particularly the ones outlined in the 2008 article. I will similarly show how the novel participates in various genres and subgenres, but to a different conclusion regarding its philosophical content.

In order to establish the philosophical merit of *Hitchhiker*, I must first establish what is philosophical. In its most complete sense, philosophy is the systematic arrangement of

¹⁰ Van der Colff, 2008.

¹¹ Van der Colff, 2010.

knowledge, from the customary realm of humanity to the fundamentals of existence, into a comprehensive and coherent whole of thought. However, the method of arrangement and content of philosophy is historically diverse. Since classical times, philosophy has sought to answer five questions, and it is usual to categorize philosophy by these questions.¹² Three categories of philosophy are concerned with the foundations of knowledge and existence. Logic asks, 'what is rational?', epistemology asks, 'how can we have knowledge?', and metaphysics and ontology ask, 'what is real?' The other two categories are concerned with values. They seek *the good*. Aesthetics asks, 'what is beautiful?', and ethics and politics ask, 'how ought we to act?' A philosophy will often provide the answers to these five questions, although priorities have changed throughout history. Aristotle did not operate with a category for epistemology, for instance, but rather a category of natural philosophy, which has since been re-categorized as natural science.¹³ Post-Kantian and Post-Hegelian philosophers have departed from the classical categories each in their own way. Existentialists, operating in the subjectivist tradition of phenomenology, are mostly unconcerned with metaphysics, departing instead from an assertion of existential absurdity.¹⁴ Philosophy of mind is a new category which deals with the nature of consciousness and intelligence. It is a different approach to answering epistemological questions that has become distinguished in recent years with the rise of robotics and artificial intelligence research. Although Joll and van der

¹² There is considerable variability in the number of categories, depending on the purpose and focus of the philosopher writing. However, it is uncontroversial that these five questions are recurrent among several, no matter whether logic was a separate category or a branch of epistemology in classical times, or whether epistemology itself only gained distinction from ontology in the modern era. Kenny, 2010:7-8.

¹³ Copleston, 2003 (1946), 273-275.

¹⁴ There are of significant works on ontology by existentialists like Sartre and Heidegger, but they are concerned not with the fundamentals of the universe, but rather with the primary attributes of man situated in an absurd universe. See Daigle, 2010:30-31.

Colff base their arguments in part on the categories of existentialism and philosophy of mind, this thesis will examine *Hitchhiker* in terms of the five *classical* categories of philosophy. I find that *Atlas Shrugged* is a recognizable example of philosophy in literature precisely because it retains a reference to the classical categories, and Leonard Peikoff makes it clear in the epilogue to *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* that Rand is trying to revive the Aristotelian categories, although she has replaced natural philosophy with the more modern epistemology.¹⁵ On the basis of the template therefore, I argue that if the ideas apparent in *Hitchhiker* ultimately sort into these categories, then it is viable to consider the novel as a work of philosophical fiction.

The comparative approach and the stylistics of philosophical fiction

Atlas is well suited to serve as a template with which to compare *Hitchhiker* as a work of philosophical fiction. Firstly, because it provides a starting point in sorting out what is and what is not philosophical fiction, and secondly, because it provides a helpful basis on which to examine what Adams includes and omits in his philosophical inquiry. Due to differences in their philosophies, and the different receptions of these philosophies in their respective historical climates, *Atlas* and *Hitchhiker* feel very different. This, however, does not reflect differences in terms of literary genre, and does not in itself warrant them to be classified differently. Their respective styles amount to different narrative tones. Rand's tone is assertive, while Adams' is playful and inquisitive. These different tones emerge from the relationships of the philosophical contents to the dominant philosophical paradigm in society. Rand's novel of philosophical assertion is a reaction and challenge to the dominant philosophical paradigm of her time. Adams' novel of philosophical inquiry is a participation in the development of the paradigm of his time. It is possible that knowing that the ideas to be presented are in line with or

¹⁵ Peikoff, 1993:459.

at odds with the ruling paradigm significantly influences the stylistic choices of authors. *Atlas* advocates a hardline political philosophy which the author expects to be challenging to her opponents. Adams shares neither the hard tone nor the political motivation of Rand. He affords his characters little urgency. This is apparent in the dialogues of the novel, where Arthur Dent's distress is continually juxtaposed to the relatively calm demeanor of Ford Prefect. The relative lack of urgency is also apparent from the structure of the series when it is considered as a single unit. Unlike *Atlas*, *Hitchhiker* does not follow an argumentative structure.

While the story of *Atlas* is guided by a rigid outline, each part named after an Aristotelian rule of logic, the *Hitchhiker's* story unfolds impulsively, each book in the series connected to the previous by both plot and theme, but never seeking to reach a conclusion. On issues the characters encounter throughout the galaxy, the "Guide" is only sporadically consulted. It frequently fails to bring the plot to fruition, and in the end it proved to be primarily a device of manipulation rather than the helpful companion to understanding of the universe it seemed at first (772-4). Adams thought of himself that he could be better at sticking to an outlined structure when writing, but his focus was always on achieving the best possible comedy.¹⁶ While working in radio, he could get a feel of the landscape while developing his story. Instead of following a set plan he could test jokes on his colleagues to see which to include and which to omit. I find it helpful to think, in George R. R. Martin's binary schema of writer types, that Ayn Rand is like an architect, who has drawn a plan and followed it meticulously, while Douglas Adams is like a gardener, who has planted seeds by creating characters and endowing them with certain personalities, watered them by putting them into situations, and watched ideas sprout from this basis, writing them down whenever he found the results to be funny.¹⁷

¹⁶ BBC Audio, 2004, Disc 1, Chapter D.

¹⁷ I like this comparison because Architects have a central position in Rand's narratives, while gardeners have a fond relationship to the natural world, much like Adams also has. See Flood, 2011.

Despite their tonal differences, *Atlas* and *Hitchhiker* are united in the genre of satire. There are several similarities between the two in terms of genre, but this one is particularly significant to their explorations of philosophical themes. In fact, it may be beneficial to consider, as Dustin Griffin suggests, that satire shares a border with philosophical writing.¹⁸ This goes especially for Menippean satires, which highlight playful inquiry in addition to the rhetoric of provocation which is characteristic of all satires. Some have gone as far as to argue that *only* the genre of satire is playful enough to enable a merging of philosophy and literature. In 1978 Oxford philosopher Iris Murdoch argued that philosophy and literature are contrary pursuits; one activates the analytical faculty while the other activates the imaginative faculty.¹⁹ According to this distinction, philosophy and fiction become separate genres utilizing distinctly different discourses. A counterpoint is offered by Benjamin Moser of the New York Times, who, with satire in mind, links philosophy in fiction to circumstances of oppression. He suggests that only when the objective of writing is subversive but at the same time camouflaged can the two forms be merged.²⁰ In other words, philosophy in fiction may be linked to the subtle irony that is formally the discourse of satire. I will not speculate as to the universal truth of Moser's hypothesis, but *Atlas* and *Hitchhiker*, at least, both fit the bill. The two novels certainly share subversive traits and an ethic of (more or less playful) inquiry.

According to M. H. Abrams' definition, a satire seeks "to diminish or derogate a subject by evoking towards it attitudes of ridicule, contempt, scorn, or indignation."²¹ Both *Atlas* and *Hitchhiker* display this goal in that they contain didactic passages: They both contain passages

¹⁸ Griffin, 1994:71

¹⁹ Ryerson, 2011.

²⁰ Moser, 2015.

²¹ Abrams, 2015:352.

which highlight their concerns while maintaining a clear moral position.²² The Menippean type of satire is remarkably close to philosophy in that it targets attitudes rather than specific persons. The Menippean as described by Mikhail Bakhtin is indeed a parallel to my understanding of what philosophical fiction is, based on the philosophical explorations in *Atlas* and *Hitchhiker*. Its purpose, in Bakhtin's terms, is to engage in a play of wit in order to test or explore the targeted attitudes.²³ As we shall see, the play of wit is manifest throughout *Hitchhiker*. In fact, the presence of what Bakhtin calls the spirit of carnival, an atmosphere of humor and chaos, eccentric behavior, free expression, and a suspension of power relations, is even more evident in *Hitchhiker* than in *Atlas*, making it in this sense a more clearly satirical text.²⁴ On the other hand, as shown by Dustin Griffin, a satire can be either precise in its object of attack, or a play of wit, making both novels equally satires.²⁵ (Of course, to Bakhtin, the Menippean satire is the central forerunner to the genre of novel entirely, so this connection alone does not prove that a novel has any particular philosophical disposition, although his template for the novel was Dostoyevsky, who was *decidedly* a writer with a philosophical disposition.²⁶)

The fact that both *Atlas* and *Hitchhiker* display the traits of satire underscores my claim that the difference between the two novels is better understood in light of the history of philosophy than in terms of literary genre. The two novels belong to different philosophical

²² In *Atlas* there are no ambiguous characters, and the narrator will explicitly state the morality and immorality of certain behaviors (Gladstein, 1984:23). In *Hitchhiker*, the narrator will occasionally evaluate certain behaviors, as in the passage of the "rich idiots" who extinguish Antarean parakeets to harvest their glands (86-87).

²³ Bakhtin in Griffin 1994:87.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Griffin 1994:30, 84, 87.

²⁶ McHale, 2015:11.

epochs, and they have different attitudes towards their respective epochs representing very different cultural currents.²⁷ Acknowledging these novels as satires helps us see that each novel is conceived within a social and political reality. It is important to consider the context of each writer in a comparison, because the terms they rely on in their philosophical assertions and inquiries, even terms such as logic, philosophy, good and evil, are contextually conditional. Having thus established that both novels fit the genre of satire, we may now *compare* the satire of *Hitchhiker* to that of *Atlas*, this in order that the philosophical outline in the next section be more digestible.

Benjamin Moser writes, 'A novel with ideas is one thing: Any novel has plenty. A novel of ideas is something else.'²⁸ Further in his article he writes that ideas are close to ideology, and that characters in what he calls novels of ideas often become caricatures. The fact that a novel of ideas frequently becomes a novel of ideology is a danger which Adams navigates more carefully than Rand. While *Atlas* has a clear object of attack, the target of ridicule in *Hitchhiker* is varied and dispersed. The antagonists in *Atlas* are vehement in the proliferation of their ideology, while the protagonists are restricted by political constraints at an alarming rate. *Atlas* is itself an alarm, a warning to the people of the United States against what Rand sees as the decadent philosophies of Europe.²⁹ Her heroes must succeed, because their success means the success of her ideology. The urgency with which *Atlas* must implore change, brought on by the political nature of the thematic concern, explains why in *Atlas* the

²⁷ If I were to choose a reference point to distinguish them, I would argue most crucially that the circumstances in which their respective philosophies are developed exist on opposite sides of postmodernism, but as we shall see they are also distinguished by the fact that Rand has an "urgent" political agenda. Unfortunately, I cannot go into detail about this distinction without dedicating significant space to a presentation and analysis of *Atlas Shrugged*, so for the sake of space an elaboration on this has therefore been omitted.

²⁸ Moser, 2015.

²⁹ In particular Roosevelt's "New Deal" triggered Rand to write her opus. Gladstein, 1984:3.

playful and humorous tone of some satires takes a backseat to the moral normative. *Hitchhiker*, on the other hand, encourages an atmosphere of carnival. Adams himself is not without political convictions. In fact, politics have at times seeped into the *Hitchhiker* universe. One particularly blatant allusion to real world politics appeared in the short story *Young Zaphod Plays It Safe*. A reference to a “Reagan”, alluding to the US President, which appeared on the final page in the 1986 original of the story, was removed before its inclusion in the 1997 *Ultimate Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* edition. (Thankfully, the unedited original is still to be found in *The Salmon of Doubt*, a posthumous collection of Adams’ unedited or unpublished texts.³⁰) But although neither author is without convictions, Rand invites a politicized reception. Adams does not. This gives their novels respectively different tones.

Rand is a polemical writer.³¹ *Atlas Shrugged* has served for generations as a manifesto of the political right-wing. The novel is motivated by the political concerns of the author, who believed that the ruling philosophy in society is at odds with important ideals of truth and justice. Revolution is a guiding motif, paving the narrative road through a model of a society beyond salvation. The detective story frames the philosophical ruminations of the author in a world that is parallel to how Rand saw the contemporary social and political world. Literary critics at the time of its publication called the book “excruciatingly awful”, “remarkably silly”³², and “grotesquely eccentric”.³³ Modern sentiments regarding the novel and its author are no less dismissive. It is admittedly a political novel, a revolutionary one at that, and appropriately, supporters of its political message have been more inclined to highlight the book as a

³⁰ Adams, 2005:197.

³¹ Gladstein, 1984:87.

³² Chambers, 1957.

³³ Schneider and Horton, 2012.

masterpiece. (As a testament to its political status, Speaker of the United States House of Representatives Paul Ryan long revered Rand as a defender of laissez-faire capitalism and made the book compulsory reading for his staff, until he decided to distance himself from her philosophy on the count of her atheism.)³⁴ There is certainly no lack of discussion regarding the book's controversial content.

While Rand writes (as she claims) only for herself and those who are inclined to agree with her, Adams' code of pragmatism (see p. 20-21) may be the result of his trying to navigate a politically diverse audience.³⁵ Adams wrote for radio and television, for the public, and for entertainment. Even though the enduring popularity of the series points to the presence of universal concerns in its theme, *Hitchhiker* is largely a product of the zeitgeist. Many of the quirks of protagonist Arthur Dent and satirical jabs from other characters could only have been conceived within the peculiar cultural landscape of late 20th Century metropolitan England.³⁶ The cultural landscape of modern England is saturated with ambiguity. Its diverse make up features simultaneous fusion and rejection of high culture and low culture, romanticism and realism, skepticism and empiricism, pomp and circumstance. Appropriately, Adams' satirical criticism is not directed at a specific establishment or elite, but at the generalized man in power. Actually, not even the man... In specific scenes it is often clear who or what structure is the object of parody, but the thematic consistency throughout the series does not point to a single antagonist. Instead its criticisms are directed at general systemic incompetencies that define the terms of life.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Rand, 1993:vii.

³⁶ Pawlak and Joll, 2012:243.

Adams not only navigates a political audience, but also a philosophical one. Reviewers have criticized the *Hitchhiker* series for lack of consistency. But the point of *Hitchhiker* was never to build a world for the sake of consistency. *Hitchhiker* is not simply science fiction. Nor is it merely a space fantasy. It is a fictional experience that is reflexive of life as the Everyman knows it. One of Adams' goals as a fiction writer was to provide a perspective that could highlight the extraordinary in the ordinary. Comedian Stephen Fry said that the charm of the series lies in its "absolutely human scale".³⁷ Even though it is layered with irony, it is accessible to readers, and sympathetic to their intellectual needs. The novel displays the struggle to navigate a world view drawn between science and existential questions. And one can hardly argue that Douglas Adams is the only one who has ever faced a struggle like that. His readers recognize this philosophical presence, not as philosophy, but as something immediate to their lives. *Hitchhiker* takes this struggle of the Everyman seriously. Adams does not prophesize an alternative solution to the malfunctions of the universe. Instead he presents the universe in all its apparent absurdity and plays with it. His characters face the journey through the galaxy in the manner of conducting a childlike inquiry. The absurdities encountered are the manifestations of philosophical questions. The questions are posed out of concern for something tangible in an uncertain existence. These are concerns that resonate with people of many social classes, in different countries, and over time. This is part of the reason why the novel has garnered a cultic fan following in every corner of the world (and as of February 6, 2018 also in space).³⁸

³⁷ O'Dair, 2009.

³⁸ Frisk, 2018.

Comparative plot synopsis and main philosophical themes

Before we get into a rundown of how *Hitchhiker* explores each of the five philosophical categories, it will be beneficial to sort out some of the key concepts in the novel in relation to our template for philosophical fiction, in order to clarify once again how every work of philosophical fiction is unique in terms of philosophical content, with thematic content relating to the interests of the respective author, while at the same time it is possible to consider these different texts to be participating equally in a wider framework of philosophical literature. It will also here become evident why I have chosen *Atlas* specifically as the novel with which to contrast *Hitchhiker* as a work of philosophical fiction. It is my understanding that the philosophical themes explored in the two novels are diametrically opposed, even though, as we have seen, they belong to the same literary genre.

The key word when discussing the philosophy of *Atlas* is objectivity. Rand's philosophy is called Objectivism because it aims to establish an objective ground for knowledge and ethics. The insistence on objectivity lays the foundation for an ethics based on principles. This is what makes the world of *Atlas*, as reviewers have pointed out, so "black and white".³⁹ Characters are either good – acting consistently in line with the principles of Objectivism, or evil – undermining the principles of Objectivism. Another key word that comes up in *Atlas Shrugged* is society. While its forerunner *The Fountainhead* speaks about the importance of Objectivist principles to individuals, *Atlas Shrugged* is about the importance of Objectivist principles in society.⁴⁰ True good belongs to the individuals, while true evil is a function of a misguided society. Society is filled with "fools" and "looters". Their philosophies are

³⁹ Chambers 1957.

⁴⁰ Rand 1992:3.

characterized by subjectivity, mysticism, and altruism rather than objective, rational, egoist principles. Rand's heroes, whom she calls the "Prime movers" of the world need to be left alone, unrestricted by the rules of society in order to realize themselves as human beings. In turn, though this is only an accident of morality and not the premise of moral action, the products of their activity will benefit the world.

The key words when discussing the philosophy of *Hitchhiker* are absurdity and pragmatism. These concepts are tied closely to the assumption that philosophy is restricted by the epistemic limitations of man. In contrast to objectivist philosophy, there is an assumption of subjectivity as the point from which the universe is explored, and to which the universe may or may not respond as expected. In similarity to objectivist philosophy, ethics follow from the foundational assumptions. The discrepancy between subjective expectations and objective reality is the basis of absurdity. This theme is mirrored in the novel's form. Adams' style of jokes is not random. His comedy feeds the theme of absurdity. Absurdity thus saturates the novel, and it contributes as a premise to the exploration of all the categories of philosophy. As a consequence of this foundation follows an ethics of pragmatism and humble temperance.

Hitchhiker teaches two practical imperatives: to roll with the punches, and "don't panic". Although principles are useful at times, the subject who imposes principles of logic on an arbitrary and mind-boggling universe will be defeated by absurdity, both the logical-epistemological i.e. cosmic, and the existentialist senses of the word. The two imperatives are the effective ways in which characters in the novel attempt to avoid coming to this point of absurdity. The intergalactic journey of the novel presents the characters with ontological instability. It is proven that the reality they know is not to be trusted. On an unreliable and infinitely improbable ontological foundation, the characters find it best not to be too sure

about things. As Adams might have said: 'if life throws lemons at you it is usually best to just go along with it.' Some characters in the series have comfort objects to help them stay ontologically grounded throughout the narrative. These are objects that bring them comfort and a sense of constancy through the transitions and transformations of reality experienced on interstellar space travels. Most notably, Ford Prefect has his towel, and the Hitchhiker's Guide recommends every traveler to bring his towel for both its practical applicability and its psychological value (21). The object which brought Arthur a sense of comfort and constancy on earth was tea, something he cannot easily acquire after the earth is demolished. His story is therefore the one we follow as readers. It is the one from which we can see a gradual realization of the importance of the two practical imperatives.

When the world as Arthur Dent knows it is literally blown to pieces, he must continually come to grips with new realities. It surely would be nice to have some stable and objective principle on which to hold on to through the chaotic journey. Unfortunately, every time he seems to settle on some notion about what is going on, the foundations of his reality are ripped out from under him once again as the Heart of Gold spaceship spins away to a new world. The dramatic turn of events in his life leads Arthur at first to panic. After a short period of incomprehension as to whether it was his house or the whole planet that was destroyed, the panic is full-blown when he and Ford are discovered on the Vogon ship on which they have hitched a ride, and are about to be ejected into space (48). After being rescued from death by vacuum by the spaceship Heart of Gold, Arthur calms his demeanor, but still exhibits resistance to his new situation. One of Arthur's futile attempts at resistance comes when the Nutri-Matic Drinks Synthesizer presents him with a cup filled with a liquid which was 'almost, but not quite, entirely unlike tea.' He has the computer run all its processing circuits simultaneously to create real tea, leaving the Heart of Gold defenseless against an imminent

Vogon attack (154-158). Realizing the futility, and indeed danger, of his attempt to hold on to a reality that is no longer there, Arthur finally rejects both strategies of panic and resistance, and accepts the practical imperatives instead. The moment when he (finally) manages to embrace the ontological instability of space travel comes when he learns to fly. In almost half of *So Long*, Arthur decides to fly around with his girlfriend instead of even touching the ground at all, metaphorically avoiding the rigid base of objective philosophy completely.

Subjectivity, to Adams, is not a challenge to be championed, but a fact that we have to deal with. His philosophy is inspired by existential philosophers (like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Camus), who all highlight the choices of individuals. Although he does not hold that the universe is in essence subjective or relative, he does uphold the fact that man is tied to a subjective point of view. His pragmatism follows from this premise. Pragmatism is the best strategy to those who cannot find any objective truth, which is the case for his individual characters (unlike Rand's characters who claim to know the objective truth about the world). It is tempting to argue that Adams is a writer of existentialist fiction, but reducing him as such would be to ignore some crucial aspects of his world view. Prominently, Adams displays a reverent attitude towards nature and science, which cannot be ignored. He does not endorse the existentialist conception of absurdity as axiomatic, but rather he navigates the uncertain space between absurd possibilities and scientific knowledge. When he invents a mechanism to challenge the reality experienced by his characters, he takes pride in aligning this mechanism with the laws of possibility. In the uncharted territories of life and the cosmos the philosophy of *Hitchhiker* grows distinct.

Philosophical outline: the five categories in *Hitchhiker*

Philosophy is valuable not only for the answers it offers, but for the questions it asks. In *Hitchhiker*, the computer Deep Thought is built and programmed to calculate the answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything. After a processing time of seven and a half million years, the answer is announced, and everyone is baffled when it turns out to be forty-two (120). Unable to make any sense of it, this revelation leads to a new quest; one for the ultimate question to fit the ultimate answer. This quest is not the only plotline in the novel, but it is arguably the most popular one, for example being the one chosen around which to structure the 2005 Garth Jennings film. Throughout the novel, the search for the ultimate question pops up every now and again, and whenever it does it directs our attention towards the philosophical disposition of the novel. The theme of the search for the ultimate question and answer is an existential one, but it is hardly the only philosophical theme in the novel. Other recurring motifs connect to form themes of technology, ecology, normality, and improbability, all of which feed a general philosophical inquiry into the nature of the universe and man's place in it. But with reference to Moser's distinction between novels *with* ideas and novels *of* ideas, I need to establish more than the presence of some philosophical themes in the novel. In order to show that the philosophical inquiry of *Hitchhiker* has significant merit we must dive (deep) into the philosophy itself.

This section will outline the five philosophical categories and how *Hitchhiker* explores different aspects and themes within each of them. The contents of this introduction will be slightly different to the contents in each of the later chapters. What I want to do here is to give an impression of the range with which *Hitchhiker* engages in philosophical inquiry. *Hitchhiker* is not an assertion of philosophy, but an exploration of the possible answers to philosophical questions. In the later chapters of this thesis, I will account in depth for how the

novel explores a few particularly interesting philosophical possibilities. By inviting the reader to participate in philosophical speculation on the topics here mentioned, this section will hopefully give the reader the proper prerequisites to understand the later in-depth analyses. Between what is covered in this introduction and the chapters there will be an interaction which I hope will give rise to new insight into the philosophical merit of the novel.

There is one more reservation that should be considered before we examine the philosophy of *Hitchhiker* in terms of the five classical categories. Especially considering the dissimilarities of novelistic and philosophical discourses, it is important to keep in mind that the separation of themes into rigid categories is somewhat artificial. It is difficult to separate the three categories which have to do with what *is*. The categories of logic, metaphysics, and epistemology are interlinked and interlocked in such a way that separating them sometimes seems counterintuitive. There is a lot of insight to be gained from doing so, but doing so also exposes the fact that the definition of each category is completely dependent on the definitions of the other two. At this point, it is beneficial to make a contrastive reference to our template of philosophical fiction. There is a point to be made about the *order* of the three categories, and *Atlas* and *Hitchhiker* seem to have differing views on that subject. Both novels follow distinct visions of logic, and their narratives are structured accordingly, but the two visions are on different sides of conventional philosophy. In *Atlas*, which follows the unconventional Objectivist school, it is impossible to separate logic from metaphysics. In *Hitchhiker*, which for the most part stands in the conventional Kantian tradition, it is impossible to separate logic from epistemology. Both philosophies clearly distinguish epistemology from metaphysics, and logic can be defined negatively within the contrastive perspective as that which the Objectivist school leaves out of epistemology, and the Kantian school leaves out of metaphysics.

Logic is the first philosophical category that I will examine in order to establish *Hitchhiker* as a novel of philosophical inquiry. Logic is the formal method of reason. It is how we attempt to establish the truth about various matters.⁴¹ It is the basis of coherence, both in philosophical arguments and in lived experience. *Hitchhiker* presupposes a conventional, linguistic view of logic. The Kantian tradition has been identical to the conventional view at least since the works of Gottlob Frege and Ludwig Wittgenstein established logic as a property of language. Since language is the structure of human cognition, this linguistic view of logic ties it to epistemology. In this view, it is only statements of fact, and not facts themselves, that are validated or invalidated through logic. With *Atlas*, Rand took up the battle axe against this understanding of logic. Adams, on the other hand, keeps it as both a desirable and necessary point of reference. In an interview, Adams mentions how he takes great pride in maintaining an absolutely logical structure to the various alien technologies in the *Hitchhiker's* universe.⁴² If the science behind the technology is sometimes unclear, or simply beyond the fathom of our current philosophical capabilities, at least it is logically valid in a linguistic sense.

So how does this view of logic serve the overall philosophical themes of the novel? Logic in this sense is tied to epistemology, and thus it is fallible. Every central character in the *Hitchhiker* series is epistemically limited. As they cannot make systematic sense of the absurdities in the Universe, they must abandon reason as the main method of survival. At times, some choose instead to descend into madness. Ford and Arthur both, though independently of one another, 'decide to go mad' while stuck on prehistoric Earth (320). Other

⁴¹ Alternatively, the truth value of various proposals.

⁴² BBC Audio, 2004, disc 3, chapter 5.

times they turn to the Guide, which provides an authoritative model for a systematizing of the absurdities in the Galaxy. This is an appropriate strategy for a long time:

'The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy is an indispensable companion to all those who are keen to make sense of life in an infinitely complex and confusing Universe, for though it cannot hope to be useful or informative on all matters, it does at least make the reassuring claim, that where it is inaccurate it is at least *definitely* inaccurate. In cases of major discrepancy it's always reality that's got it wrong' (173).

But neither madness nor the appeal to the authority of the Guide are completely successful strategies. Madness turns out to be a lonely endeavor, bringing about no new plot development. It is when Ford and Arthur find each other again and call off the madness that they are finally able to find their way off prehistoric Earth. And the Guide is itself severely limited in philosophical questions, and, if anything, becomes a model for madness (773-4). Zaphod pursues a unique strategy when he physically alters his brain to better fit absurd reality. Actually being very smart, i.e. rational, he finds that he must trick himself to get to where he wants to be: "No sooner had I got there than my former self, the one that operated on my brain, popped into my head and said 'Go see Zarniwoop.' I have never heard of the cat. That is all I know" (98, 175). These strategies are responses, not to epistemic constraints in general, which include the limitations of senses and perspectives, and which I will come back to later, but specifically to the limitation of the faculty of reason. In a seemingly absurd universe, the characters are limited by logic.

The investigation of logic in *Hitchhiker* does not end there. What we have seen so far is the question of individuals and their relation to logic. New questions arise when one applies

the ultimate consequences of this view of logic to a cosmic scale. If logic has a limiting function when applied to people, what results when it is applied to the Universe itself? Is the Universe itself limited by the laws of logic, or does logic remain insufficient as a defining principle of the Universe? The Universe certainly doesn't always appear logical, but that may be only due to epistemic limitations of people. Is it not possible that the universe does not follow the laws of logic as stipulated by man's limited rationality, but some other, grander logic? The perceived absurdity could in fact be quite reasonable, just beyond people's efforts to realize it. Arthur touches upon this when he stipulates that there may be some being outside the universe who has greater knowledge in the questions of the universe. Slartibartfast dismisses his rambling with "'Maybe. Who cares?'" (127). Later in the narrative it is stipulated that there is a man who rules the universe. When we meet him, a tall, shambling man with shabby clothes, living in a shack on a small obscure world in the middle of nowhere, he seems unaware of the existence of anything beyond his shack (279). The questions of 'ultimate logic' and existence outside the universe are metaphysical questions. The characters are unable to provide us the answers, but the questions remain thematically central to the novel. To answer them definitively, one would need to enter a philosophical discussion about which of the fundamental categories is primary. Are metaphysical realities determined by the principles of logic, or is logic an abstraction of the metaphysical given? Adams doesn't participate in this debate by stating any answer, but he explores both possibilities in the novel.

Although logic is most closely tied to epistemology in conventional philosophy, Adams also participates in a literary paradigm which is highly ontologically oriented.⁴³ The link between logic and the metaphysical/ontological in *Hitchhiker* are the various technologies

⁴³ McHale, 2015:15.

that allow the characters to traverse the galaxy, both materially and spiritually. In *Hitchhiker*, technology works on the premise that logic is applied to the Universe itself, and this creates some fascinating possibilities. As the immensity of the universe confirms every possibility as an infinite probability, everything that is logical is also a fact. And anything can be logical, since logic is only a linguistic feature, therefore, anything can be real. The best example of the epistemologically oriented notion of logic as limited applied to the metaphysical comes in *Life*, when Slartibartfast appears in a ship powered by 'bistromathics'. "'On a waiter's check pad," said Slartibartfast, "reality and unreality collide on such a fundamental level that each becomes the other and anything is possible"' (348). The fact that 'on a waiter's check pad numbers dance' could be an allusion to deconstructive theory which states that relations between signifiers and signified are not fixed, and this, at least in a linguistic sense, repeals the most primary logical axiom, the axiom of identity, A is A. And if this axiom does not hold, then all other axioms fall. There can be no such thing as contradiction if logic itself is contradictory. In formal logic, anything follows from a contradiction. Therefore, a ship powered by a contradiction of the laws of logic, can logically do anything.⁴⁴ The narrative thus never breaches any "logic of nature", because every unfathomable event is made possible, and in fact necessary, within the whole sort of general mish-mash of infinite size and probability.

Epistemology is the study of man's recognition and acknowledgement of the world of facts. It asks what is knowledge, and how does one obtain it? Epistemological philosophy is tied to the faculty of reason and therefore to logic. It would also be an empty category if there were not any objects of which to have knowledge, and it is therefore also inextricably tied to

⁴⁴ This is called the 'principle of explosion' or Ex Falso Quodlibet, Cook, 2009:110.

metaphysics as well. *Hitchhiker*, as I have already mentioned, stands for the most part in the Kantian tradition of philosophy. I should also add that this tradition is heavily indebted to Descartes, who established the ego as the starting point of all philosophy. In this tradition, epistemology is the starting point of all philosophical speculation and inquiry. The novel does not invite to philosophical debate regarding the primacy of one category to any other. It explores the philosophical landscape in a playful manner, participating equally in the modernist project of epistemological inquiry and the postmodern project of ontological inquiry.⁴⁵ It does not argue that a subjective perspective is necessarily a valid one. It does however present a reality in which every aspiration towards objectivity is defeated, and only subjectivism remains, but with a dash of existential despair.

Subjectivity as a point of departure for epistemological inquiry is problematic because it quickly leads to a relativization of knowledge. The advantage of style comes to into full fruition here. Adams avoids relativism by not concerning himself with truth in an absolute sense by asserting a philosophical stance. Instead, he relates the notion of knowledge directly to the mental faculties of persons, and places comments on epistemological limitations into dialogues and specific situations. *Mostly Harmless* is speckled with jabs to the epistemic limitations of men in a didactic sense. 'You've got to learn to think multidimensionally' says Harl (675). 'We are used to seeing things the way we are used to seeing them' the narrator mentions when accounting Arthur's confusion with an upside-down map (679). An old man goes even further in explaining epistemic subjectivity to Arthur:

⁴⁵ McHale, 2015:14-15.

'You cannot see what I see because you see what you see. You cannot know what I know because you know what you know. [...] Everything you see or hear or experience in any way at all is specific to you. You create a universe by perceiving it, so everything in the universe you perceive is specific to you' (703).

A subject's epistemic capacity consists of the perception apparatus plus the rational apparatus, i.e. the sense of logic. There are limitations to both these apparatuses. The first couple of books in the *Hitchhiker* series mention the workings of the minds of several species. Comments about Arthur's ape-descendance (11) or Zaphod's split mind (98) establish their limited perspectives on reality. In addition to these, and the dimensional limitations on perception mentioned above, the epistemic limitation extends into man's capacity for logic.

'Now logic is a wonderful thing but it has, as the processes of evolution discovered, certain drawbacks. Anything that thinks logically can be fooled by something else that thinks at least as logically as it does. The easiest way to fool a completely logical robot is to feed it the same stimulus sequence over and over again so it gets locked in a loop' (669).

People are easily fooled by logic, because logic is only a processing of whatever information is at hand. When characters have difficulty coming to terms with reality it is not because they have a corrupt apparatus of rationality, but rather that the universe itself is revealed in a way that defies their usual sensibilities. The universe resists systemization.

Metaphysics is the philosophical category which is concerned with the structure of reality and existence. It asks what are the most fundamental and general features and

relations of the universe? It's most important subset is ontology, which deals with what is real. While science deals with the nature of specific kinds of entities (physical, chemical, biological, etc.), ontology deals with the existence of entities in general.⁴⁶ I use the terms almost interchangeably, preferring one to the other only based on conventions in terminology. I will regard Metaphysics to be the name of the category/field of philosophy, and ontology as the subset in which an author of fiction makes inquiries and commitments. The universe presented in *Hitchhiker* is for the most part consistent with contemporary science. Metaphysical speculation, and inquiry which can be categorized as such, is what occurs when Adams' story goes beyond the established facts of science. Even beyond what science can hope to tell us, there is still something metaphysically given; a foundation of everything that is.

Chapters 8 and 9 in *Hitchhiker's* establish that the fictional universe is in fact identical to the true universe of real life (56). The most important consequence of this is the fact that science in the real world enters the fictional universe without any further ado. Most of the extraordinary events in the plot can be explained by one simple fact: that the universe is an inconceivably large thing (53). The *Hitchhiker* universe suggests an adherence to the multiverse theory, and is open-ended in its answers to questions that lie outside the dimensions of space-time. However, in addition to theories that are ongoing in science today, Adams' fictional universe also stipulates the existence of additional dimensions. The narrative we follow does not transcend the dimensions, but there are pandimensional beings in the story who can transcend space-time without having the fiction break with terms established by science. With these characters, the story glides from the mode of realism (which would be

⁴⁶ Ney, 2014:xiii, 30.

characteristic of an ordinary science fiction novel) into the realm of philosophy. When it is revealed that the universe as we know and understand it is not in fact even the entire thing, Adams introduces the term: 'WSOGMM - the whole sort of general mish-mash' (655). The engine that enables the most outlandish coincidences and journeys in the saga, the infinite improbability drive, works on principles supplied by the additional dimensions in the whole sort of general mish-mash. The axis of improbability does not create contradiction in a definite manner which dissolves the metaphysically given. It is rather that the facticity of infinity entails both infinite probability and infinite improbability. This cosmic ambiguity is a philosophical innovation in the metaphysical exploration of *Hitchhiker*.

To what might seem the contrary of the endless possibilities afforded by an infinite universe, the *Hitchhiker* universe is also a fatalistic one. The end comes as a necessity, in all possible worlds, and, as one should expect, at the end. This fatalism is explored in terms of absurdity. The absurd is the premonition of fatalism in the moment, reflecting always the futility of man's struggle for meaning and purpose. Although the narrative is highly oriented by logic, the novel does present an absurd universe. Apart from a general feeling of absurdity, we know that *Hitchhiker* presents an absurd universe from cues from the narrator to the tune that 'reason has been suspended' (55). There are, however, two possible meanings of absurdity. Cosmic absurdity is the lack of an organizing principle. Existential absurdity is the lack of ultimate meaning. The narrator does not tell us what kind of absurdity we are dealing with. The cues seem mainly to be referring to the psychological states of the characters, and not the fabric of the universe. The metaphysical question here is whether the psychologically experienced absurdity reflects a fundamental feature of the universe, or whether it is simply the result of unfulfilled existential expectations. If the absurdity is a feature of the universe itself, it means that the universe is devoid of an organizing principle. That cosmos is actually

chaos. If, however, it merely refers to the psychological states of characters, it only means that their expectations of order and meaning have been broken.

The fatalism we observe in the narrative could be the product of a universe which either *imposes* direction or is *devoid* of direction. The first would create a breach of expectations based on logic. The second would be a breach of expectations from existential philosophy. In both cases, an absurd universe is one that is indifferent to the expectations of people, and this is what we see when answers to philosophical conundrums prove increasingly elusive. A statement of the elusiveness of knowledge is found in the passage which introduces *Restaurant*: 'There is a theory which states that if ever anyone discovers exactly what the Universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable. There is another which states that this has already happened' (148). A less farcical statement of the elusiveness of knowledge happens in the plotline about the ultimate answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything. Once the answer proves to be 42, the quest for the ultimate question to fit the answer begins. But this question, it turns out, cannot be known in the same universe where one knows the answer (465).

If characters demand that the universe appeals to their sense of logic, they will be left without ontological grounding. The *Hitchhiker* universe is not necessarily absurd in the sense that it is devoid of natural laws, although it certainly challenges our current knowledge and our faculties of reason in principle. Rather, it is absurd in the sense that it resists systemization. It is the absence of ultimate answers to fundamental existential conundrums which creates absurdity. There is no ultimate authority on metaphysics. The novel is ambiguous when it comes to the existence of God. There is a god (who has left a message to his creation in the mountains of Quentullus Quazgar), and there is a man who rules the universe from his shack

in the middle of nowhere, and there is an indication that there are several other gods in the universe, but they all came into existence a split second *after* the universe itself, and therefore they are all limited by the universe itself being their own metaphysical given (610, 655). With this premise, Adams rules out that any god could serve as prime organizer of everything, and thus he maintains that the question of ultimate purpose and direction lies outside the dimensions about which we can have knowledge. The only metaphysical conclusion that we can draw is that the universe *may* not adhere to any ultimate purpose or guiding force. If characters fail to realize this, they are struck with existential despair. The solution then becomes an ethical question.

Just like the three fundamental categories, the two categories of philosophy that deal with values, ethics and aesthetics, are difficult to separate entirely. Sometimes it is not even desirable to do so. To Douglas Adams, that which is aesthetically beautiful is also the ethically good. This is available information in some of his other works, for example in *Last Chance to See* (1990). We learn here that what Adams considers good is the natural world, and that he is highly concerned with ecological conservation. In *Hitchhiker* this information is available indirectly, through satire. *Hitchhiker* directs satirical critique at the moral incompetents who lead to the destruction of nature. Early on in the narrative, the Vogons are the representatives of these moral incompetents. They destroy everything that is beautiful out of sheer stubborn thoughtlessness.

‘The natural forces on the planet Vogsphere had been working overtime to make up for their earlier blunder. They brought forth scintillating jeweled scuttling crabs, which the Vogons ate, smashing their shells with iron mallets; tall aspiring trees of

brehtaking slenderness and color which the Vogons cut down and burned the crabmeat with; elegant gazellelike creatures with silken coats and dewy eyes which the Vogons would catch and sit on. They were no use as transport because their backs would snap instantly, but the Vogons sat on them anyway' (33).

Later in the narrative, humans exhibit the same tendency to overlook their destructive behavior:

"Dying out!" repeated Ford. "Do you know what that means?", "Er... we shouldn't sell them any life insurance?" called out the wag again. Ford ignored him, and appealed to the whole crowd. "Can you try and understand," he said, "that it's just since we've arrived here that they've started dying out!" (298).

In terms of theme, we see here that aesthetic considerations are linked to ethical considerations. But there is more to be reviewed regarding *Hitchhiker's* aesthetic project, and it shows up not as aesthetics *in* the novel, but as the aesthetics *of* the novel.

Aesthetics is the philosophy of what is applied in art. *Hitchhiker's* aesthetic project is less apparent as content than it is manifest in style. The mixture of aesthetics and ethics in the thematic content of the novel is a result of its satiric spin on life. The novel's participation in an investigation of aesthetics is demonstrated in a formal way. Satire is ethical art. But *Hitchhiker* participates in more projects than this. In terms of genre, Marilette van der Colff recognizes the novel's participation in three: fantasy, science fiction, and satire.⁴⁷ Of course,

⁴⁷ Van der Colff, 2010:66.

science fiction and satire often go hand in hand, sci-fi providing the alien lens through which to document and criticize the present world from a fictional distance. Adams also utilizes techniques from fantasy to reinvent the world and explore the theme of meaning.⁴⁸ Van der Colff suggests that absurdity in content is an effect of the blend of literary techniques from these three genres. However, *Hitchhiker* also participates in philosophical and cultural movements that have not been codified in terms of literary genre. Its pursuit of both epistemological and metaphysical questions places it in relation to the modernist and postmodernist literary periods respectively.⁴⁹ Several motifs, like the motif of flying, or the motif of the end of the world (the Earth being destroyed is both the start and finale of the novel) link the novel to other postmodern fictions, and the timing is appropriate, as *Hitchhiker* was penned at the height of postmodernism. At the same time, the novel's exploration of the categories of logic and ethics sets it apart as distinctly philosophical in a broad sense. The broad angle here, which involves both reverent attention to logic and stark ethical criticisms, establishes a distance to the relativism that is a key characteristic of postmodernism.⁵⁰ The playfulness that characterizes *Hitchhiker* as a novel of philosophical inquiry, does not entail an assertion of relativism, but an exploration of possibilities.

Comedy is Adams' preferred format. *Hitchhiker* is structured around jokes, and there is a peculiarity to the style of Adams' jokes. Jokes in *Hitchhiker* are structured such that they reflect the play with the fundamental philosophical categories. Adams was largely inspired by Monty Python. His early idol was John Cleese, and later in his career he worked closely with

⁴⁸ Van der Colff, 2010:14.

⁴⁹ McHale 2015:14-15.

⁵⁰ Duigan, 2018.

Graham Chapman.⁵¹ Adams thought that Chapman's comedic style was based around the disruption of expectations. 'He was always setting himself up in one way in order to surprise you by going another way.'⁵² Adams calls this the subversive authority paradox, and it brilliantly complimented the neurotic and logical style of Cleese. Adams' style is a synthesis of the relationship between the two Pythoners. Comedy in *Hitchhiker* occurs when expectations are set up in order to be disrupted. This inspiration creates a basis for both jokes and anti-jokes. The following sentence is a prime example of a Douglas Adams joke: 'The ships hung in the sky in much the same way as bricks don't' (25). We are led to expect a simile, but instead of a normal simile we are handed the negation of something that does not correspond in similarity. (In logical terms we expect $[a \approx b]$, but instead we get $[a \approx -c]$.) The following extract is a representative *Hitchhiker* anti-joke:

"Is that Zaphod Beeblebrox?" asked one iguana of another iguana. "I think so", replied the second iguana. "Well, doesn't that just take the biscuit," said the first iguana. "Funny old thing, life," said the second iguana. "It's what you make it," said the first and they lapsed back into silence' (217).

The joke is set up in a familiar pattern, as an exchange between two members of a group. Such a joke usually plays on the connotations people have to the group in question, but iguanas are not known for any particular stereotype. We are drawn into an expectation of an on-point bit about iguanas, but are instead led through a short, stoic meditation on life. This anti-joke

⁵¹ BBC Audio, 2004, disc 1, chapter G.

⁵² Ibid.

achieves comedy without a punchline. And this style is perfectly suited to stylistically frame a modern philosophical investigation.

Ethics is probably the easiest of the philosophical categories to spot. As a satire, *Hitchhiker* points out behaviors and phenomena that are worthy of ridicule. Unlike *Atlas*, *Hitchhiker* does not have a philosophical target. Its target is rather unphilosophical, and the comedic effect largely arises through parody.⁵³ The narrative is full of unambiguous allusions to real world practices, and the moral evaluation of those practices is clear. The lampoon is especially clear when it comes to environmentally destructive practices. Many of the characters and species in the galaxy are deliberately wicked towards nature. The Vogons torture and kill the crabs, trees, and gazelle-like creatures on their home planet just out of stubbornness (34), and Ford takes up being cruel to animals as a form of entertainment while he is stranded on prehistoric Earth (322). And there are several satirical jabs at species throughout the galaxy whose general political incompetence is to the detriment of other species. However, the ethics we are dealing with here is not simple utilitarianism. The inquiry posed by the *Hitchhiker* series is an existential one.

There is existential ambiguity in the novel. Marilette van der Colff writes: 'In the *Hitchhiker* books, the distinction between subjective reality and objective morality is rather fuzzy: readers are clearly encouraged to spin subjective cocoons of meaning, and yet they are reminded of a more general moral blueprint.'⁵⁴ On one page the novel explores the possibilities of a subjectivist epistemology, but on another its exploration of ethics is colored

⁵³ Parody here is understood as the irony between what is expected and what is presented. I draw on Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody as something which is referential and intertextual, but which mainly looks a lot like satire. Hutcheon, 2000.

⁵⁴ Van der Colff, 2010:64.

by an identifiable moral imperative. The philosophical implication here is not contradiction, but pragmatism. The moral code of *Hitchhiker* is pragmatic. This means that ethics are determined on a situation by situation basis, and need to be so, because situations in the *Hitchhiker* narrative pose varied and at times inconsistent challenges to morality. Principles are defeated by an absurd universe. The navigation between definitive realities in a story where facts are disillusioned is what sets *Hitchhiker* apart from other satires. Pragmatism is not a rejection of reality. There is virtue in a middle ground, and Adams' vision of the middle ground can be summed up in an imperative sentence: Be nice, generally speaking. It would be senseless to be anything else.

The limitations of the central characters and species (those that are established in the discussion of the three fundamental categories) are linked to ethical considerations. The examples of cruelty provided above all feed the same general theme: that it is senselessness which is wicked. Vogons themselves are not evil, they are just terribly bureaucratic. Their wickedness is banal. Individually, they are removed from responsibility, because their wickedness is legitimized at the systemic level. They are not immoral by choice, they are moral incompetents. The narrator does not shy away from imposing judgments of value regarding the practices of moral incompetents. In the following paragraph he evaluates a certain practice as "revolting", and the practitioners of such behavior as "idiots": 'An Antarean parakeet gland stuck on a small stick is a revolting but much-sought-after cocktail delicacy and very large sums of money are often paid for them by very rich idiots who want to impress other very rich idiots' (86-87). The word "idiot" implies the senselessness and intellectual incompetence that accompanies the unethical practice in question.

Ford is not morally incompetent. But on prehistoric earth, having seen the future of the planet, he becomes lost to the meaninglessness of existence. He knows that nothing he

does will have an impact on the grand scale of things, and in a fit of senselessness he decides to go mad and throws morality out the window. His momentary wickedness is caused by existential despair. We see here the senseless in two forms, both are products of man's insistence on meaning placed in a seemingly absurd existence. The Vogons find their meanings in carrying out their orders. But Ford desperately tries anything to find meaning without success. At best he manages to distract himself and forget about his desire for meaning sometimes. Slartibartfast's prescription is to 'hang the sense of it' (127), to let go of the insistence on sense in an indifferent universe. This seems to work for Arthur. He is at his most happy twice throughout the narrative. First, when he makes sandwiches on prehistoric earth. Second, when he is flying. In both situations he is confined to the fatalistic indifference of the universe, but in both he decides to just go with whatever happens and be happy no matter what. Arthur is thus one of van der Colff's Sisyphus-heroes.⁵⁵ According to van der Colff, he becomes one who smiles at futility; who finds happiness despite absurdity. But there is a complication to this interpretation. At the end of his solitude, Arthur decides to go mad. And after he has flown with the girl, Fenchurch, and loses her, he becomes lonely, and this stunts his ability to be happy. The conclusion I draw regarding ethics in the novel therefore, i.e., the prescription of *Hitchhiker* is not, as van der Colff says, to be *happy* in spite of all the absurdity in the universe, but to be *nice*.

Hitchhiker's characters advocate pragmatic behavior mainly for the sake of their own sanity but also for the sake of each other. The two reasons are linked together, of course. The plot only moves forward when characters run into each other, not, say, when they are stuck on solitary planets making sandwiches for years on end. The social aspect is necessary to have

⁵⁵ Van der Colff, 2008.

sanity and purpose. Characters who are isolated go mad. Characters who are together do not. The environmental concern could be considered as an extension of this. The extension being that we must take care of all living beings in order to maintain our sanity. To borrow a quote from Mark Carwardine at the end of *Last Chance to See*: 'the world would be a poorer, darker, lonelier place without them.'⁵⁶ This prescription seems ultimately to be defeated by the plot development. It all comes to an inevitable annihilation in the end. But that fatalism is crucial to the imperative. It is the ultimate futility that defeats the utilitarian concern, which must then be replaced by an immediate, practical ethic, an everyday ethic for the everyman. Life is here, it may be futile, but at least it is real, so be nice! There is no redemption in life, save what may be found along the way. The universe doesn't care about you, so you need to care about others, otherwise there is no care at all, and there wouldn't be any nice things.

Now that the reader has patiently read this introduction, it is hoped that he or she is better equipped to deal with the depth of the philosophical inquiry that colors the world of *Hitchhiker*. The following five chapters will examine some of the most interesting philosophical insight of the novel in a detailed manner.

Chapter 1 deals with the question of what is rational. It will give an introduction to formal logic, in order to show how *Hitchhiker* engages with logic to explore its limitations. This chapter will show how absurdity is explored in the logical sense of the word, and how the notion of absurdity relates to our main characters, and the universe.

⁵⁶ Adams and Carwardine, 1990:206.

Chapter 2 deals with the question of how we can have knowledge. It accounts what knowledge is, and how *Hitchhiker* explores the possibility of overcoming the epistemic limitations that we usually take for granted.

Chapter 3 deals with the question of what is real. It shows how *Hitchhiker* defines reality, and how it further plays with the possibilities of reality, within the parameter of uncertainty. This chapter also deals with the relationships between probability and randomness, which are central concepts to our understanding of the universe.

Chapter 4 will first deal with how *Hitchhiker* approaches the question of beauty, or aesthetic value, and aesthetic experience. This chapter will also examine the aesthetic expression of *Hitchhiker* itself. It will show how *Hitchhiker's* particular brand of jokes combines with the genre tropes of science fiction and satire, as well as drawing on some influence from postmodernism.

Chapter 5 deals with *Hitchhiker's* exploration of ethics. This chapter shows how the novel advocates a pragmatic approach to ethics, but that it also explores more specifically what behavior should be considered valuable. The exploration of ethics is largely focused on existentialism, a philosophical system that was very influential to Adams, and which shares with *Hitchhiker* the view that the fundamental categories of philosophy (i.e. questions of epistemology and ontology) are decisive in determining ethical values.

The first three chapters will all deal with similar themes, as these three questions are explored together in the novel. The two final chapters are also closely related, dealing with questions of values that are particularly hard to separate in the satire of *Hitchhiker*. Sometimes a thought that might be about a category previously mentioned will come back in a later chapter. In the novel, the exploration into the categories of value importantly build on the previous exploration of the fundamental categories, and I reflect this in my extrapolation.

This is because some ideas are complex, and knowledge of more than one topic is needed before we can award them proper attention. In this way the chapters will build on each other to develop our knowledge, and in sum they will show that *Hitchhiker* is a thoroughly thoughtful novel, exploring philosophical questions in a comprehensive manner. The purpose of the chapters will not be to continue a philosophical inquiry into each philosophical category. It will be to shed light on the philosophical inquiry conducted in the novel and to iron out the consequences of some of the ideas it explores.

Part 2

The philosophy of *Hitchhiker*

Chapter 1: What is rational? Logic in *Hitchhiker*

Philosophy can be a complete system of ideas, or it can be an inquiry into the ideas that would go into such a system. In both cases, ideas are usually organized according to the principle of *coherence*, which means that they are systematized according to the rules of logic. *Hitchhiker* does not assert a complete philosophical system, but it explores the possibilities of such a system. On a cosmic and existential scale, it questions both the possible contents of philosophy, as well as the possibilities (and limitations) of a system based on logical principles. The coherence principle ties the structure of philosophy intimately to the question of what is rational. Answering this question lays a foundation on which to answer all other philosophical questions. It is usual in philosophy to equate rationality with logic. It was, after all, the principle of logic which gave rise to philosophy in ancient Greece.⁵⁷ Although there may or may not be a one-to-one relationship between logic and rationality, logic is where we will begin our investigation.

Logic is a way of structuring ideas, whether those ideas are a complete philosophy or just any odd contents of the mind. Formally, logic follows a pattern of deduction from two basic axioms: 1. The axiom of identity, which states that a thing is always identical to itself, or ($a = a$), and 2. The axiom of non-contradiction, which states that a thing cannot both be and not be at the same time, or $(-(a \wedge \neg a))$.⁵⁸ These are axioms because they are the most irreducible components of formal rationality, i.e. of thought as coded in language. The axioms are

⁵⁷ Kenny, 2010:44, 188.

⁵⁸ The laws are first stated in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Sometimes a third law is included. "The law of excluded middle" states that everything must either be or not be, or $(A \vee \neg A)$, but this axiom controversial, because it has metaphysical implications which are called into question by quantum theory. Horn, 2014.

undeniable because we cannot imagine a coherent system of ideas without them.⁵⁹ In everyday speech we talk about having a “sense of logic”. This sense is the desire for coherence, which can either be satisfied or frustrated. Adams uses this phrase specifically, in a scene in *So Long*, where Arthur Dent inexplicably finds his house intact. Having relaxed in his bed and calmed his mind down after the recent spin through the universe, Arthur lights his lamp, which to his astonishment actually does light up. ‘This appealed to Arthur’s sense of logic. Since the Electricity Board had cut him off without fail every time he paid his bill, it seemed only reasonable that they should leave him connected when he hadn’t. Sending them money obviously only drew attention to himself’ (503). The bedside light responds in a way which corresponds to Arthur’s expectations. Its pattern of doing the opposite of what it is supposed to is coherent with the pattern that he is used to.

The way Adams deals with the possibility of having any comprehensive system based on logic at all is a parallel to the method that is applied in the field of formal logic. In formal logic a proposal is validated or invalidated by formulating it as an argument, then negating its conclusion, and finally testing the negation of the conclusion.⁶⁰ If the negation of the conclusion can be deductively reduced to absurdity, then the conclusion as it stands must be logically valid. I will provide two generic examples below just to illustrate how this works.

Example 1 – a valid argument:

Text: “All humans are from Earth. Arthur is a human. Therefore, Arthur is from Earth.”

⁵⁹ Imagining a coherent *world* without them may be possible nonetheless...

⁶⁰ Gensler, 2010:153-6.

If “H” means being human and “E” means being from Earth, then in formal propositional logic this argument would look like this:

P1: $H \rightarrow E$ [If Arthur is human, then he must be from Earth]

P2: H [Arthur is human]

C: E [Therefore, Arthur is from Earth]

In order to prove this, we assume the negation to the conclusion as a premise.

P0: $\neg E$ [Arthur is not from Earth]

P1: $H \rightarrow E$ [If Arthur is human, then he must be from Earth]

P2: H [Arthur is human]

C1 (follows from P0 and P1): $\neg H$ [Arthur is not human]

RAA (follows from P2 and C1): $H \wedge \neg H$ [Arthur is both human and not human.]

Now a contradiction has occurred. The conclusion that Arthur is both human and not human contradicts one of the basic axioms of logic, the axiom of non-contradiction, which states that a thing cannot both be and not be at the same time. We call this contradiction a reduction to absurdity, or RAA (*reductio ad absurdum*). The negation of the original conclusion is proved to be absurd, therefore the argument must be logically valid.

Example 2 – an invalid argument:

Text: “Arthur is an Englishman. Some Englishmen hate tea. Therefore, Arthur hates tea.”

If “a” is Arthur, “E” is Englishman, and “H” is hating tea, then transcribed to quantificational logic the argument will look like this:

P1: Ea [Arthur is an Englishman]

P2: $\exists x(Ex \wedge Hx)$ [Some people are Englishmen who hate tea]

C: Ha [Arthur hates tea]

To disprove this, we assume that Arthur does not hate tea.

P0: $\neg Ha$ [Arthur does not hate tea]

P1: Ea [Arthur is an Englishman]

P2: $\exists x(Ex \wedge Hx)$ [Some people are Englishmen who hate tea]

C1 (follows from P0 and P1): $Ea \wedge \neg Ha$ [Arthur is an Englishman and does not hate tea]

C2 (follows from C1): $\exists x(Ex \wedge \neg Hx)$ [There are some Englishmen who do not hate tea]

There is no contradiction here, even though we assumed the opposite of the conclusion. Given only these premises, we cannot tell how Arthur feels about tea. In other words, the negation of the conclusion is not absurd. Ergo the original conclusion is not logically valid.

What we see here is that in formal logic, logic is directly contraposed to absurdity. As an exploration into absurdity, *Hitchhiker* applies a suggestion of the negation of logic to the universe. The universe seems absurd, and this begs the question: is that possible? Is the universe truly absurd, or is there some grand logic which holds it together? Following from the example above, if the universe which is assumed to be absurd turns out to be totally reducible to absurdity, then the grand logic of the universe must be intact. If, however, the apparent absurdity actually seems to make a lot of sense, then a grand logic of the universe

remains in question. What we do see in the novel is that the acceptance of absurdity does seem to make a lot of sense. The assumption of absurdity appears not to lead to contradiction, and therefore, the universe may in fact be absurd.

Adams explores absurdity on several levels. *Hitchhiker* is not simply a theatre of the absurd. The works of Beckett and Pinter etc. call on the theme of absurdity, but only in a strictly existential sense of the word. Their works deal with existential absurdity, i.e. the absence of ultimate purpose in the universe. Adams does indeed deal with this kind of absurdity as well, as van der Colff demonstrates. Marvin the paranoid android, the existential elevators, Arthur and Ford all display struggles and responses to existential absurdity.⁶¹ But *Hitchhiker* crucially also deals with absurdity in the logical sense of the word, i.e. the apparent absence of an ultimate logical order in the universe. In contrast to the view of logic as rational, absurdity is meaninglessness in thought.⁶² And we will see both here and in later chapters that meaninglessness in thought is the focus target of much of Adams' satire.

At the most fundamental level, absurdity is explored as a possible feature of metaphysical reality itself. If there is a contradiction in the premises of an argument, then one can deduce anything from them. Because of this, anything follows logically from absurdity. Thus, in an absurd universe, anything is possible. In the novel, the most obvious example of this is the Bistromathic drive on Slartibartfast's ship. Through a denial of the axioms of identity and non-contradiction, the ship is able to propel itself through the galaxy. 'Bistromathics [is] one of those most bizarre of mathematical concepts, a recipriversexcluson, a number whose existence can only be defined as being anything other than itself' (345). The way the drive

⁶¹ Van der Colff, 2008.

⁶² Russel in Wittgenstein, 2016:8.

works is comically illustrated as a restaurant scene, where the sum on the check is ever-changing and unreliable.

“Listen,” he said, “on a waiter’s check pad numbers dance. You must have encountered the phenomenon” (347).

[...]

“On a waiter’s check pad,” said Slartibartfast, “reality and unreality collide on such a fundamental level that each becomes the other and anything is possible, within certain parameters” (348).

Arthur questions the possibility that absurdity has the function to allow anything. His line of reasoning is quickly stopped as he cannot find any contradictions between his previous experience and the situation in which he now finds himself.

“I know what it looks like,” said Slartibartfast, and went into it. As he did so, Arthur had a sudden vague flash of what it might mean, but he refused to believe it. The Universe could not possibly work like that, he thought, cannot possibly. That, he thought to himself, would be as absurd as, as absurd as... he terminated that line of thinking. Most of the absurd things he could think of had already happened” (343-4).

It works, because as Slartibartfast said, ‘in space travel all the numbers are awful’ (347).

Admittedly, there are certain conditions which allow the contradiction to work. “What parameters?” “It’s impossible to say,” said Slartibartfast. “That’s one of them. Strange but true. At least, I think it’s strange,” he added, “and I am assured that it’s true” (348). The

parameters which limit the bistro-mathic drive may point to the presence of some grander order of things, a logic that structures even the absurd. On the other hand, it may just be a way for the logic of the narrative to avoid collapsing in on itself. It would be easy to dismiss this as one of several places in the novel where Adams leaves a question open and moves on to avoid having to deal with it. However, I will give Adams the benefit of the doubt and treat this and other statements of avoidance in the novel not as *deus ex machina* devices, but as intentional circumventions of bold philosophical assertions to the advantage of a durable philosophical inquiry. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis (p. 25), Adams has stated that he takes pride in the logic of his narrative. But at the same time, he is conscious of the fact that man's capacity for rationality is limited.

'Now logic is a wonderful thing but it has, as the process of evolution discovered, certain drawbacks. Anything that thinks logically can be fooled by something else that thinks at least as logically as it does. The easiest way to fool a completely logical robot is to feed it the same stimulus sequence over and over again so it gets locked in a loop. This was best demonstrated by the famous Herring Sandwich experiments conducted millennia ago at MISPWOSO (the MaxiMegalon Institute of Slowly and Painfully Working Out the Surprisingly Obvious)' (669).

In the experiments, the Herring Sandwich which was fed into the logic loop proved logically to be the driving force behind all change and development in life (670).⁶³ Of course, the

⁶³ The herring sandwich experiment does not end at the MISPWOSO. It propagates in the entire novel. To the analytic reader, the herring sandwich may become a red herring, because if common conceptions about the novel's existentialist motifs are to be believed, then herring sandwiches *are* the driving force behind everything in life. At least sandwiches more generally and symbolically speaking

experiment only illustrates how logic makes one susceptible to attribute cause and effect to the relevant input, whether or not there is any truth about reality to be found in such a deduction.

Hitchhiker balances on the fence between absolute absurdity and apparent absurdity, which is perceived only due to the limitations of our rational capabilities. The input on which we base our rational judgments is limited to the experience of only four dimensions of the universe. One of them, time, is particularly limiting, as several passages in the novel illustrate. The logic of time, or 'chrono-logic' (779) ties us to expectations not just of order, but of a specific order. The opening of the fifth book (*Mostly Harmless*) reads as follows:

'Anything that happens, happens. Anything that, in happening, causes something else to happen, causes something else to happen. Anything that, in happening, causes itself to happen again, happens again. It doesn't necessarily do it in chronological order, though' (631-634).

With these words *Hitchhiker* challenges the logic of chronological causality, which in turn allows for some interesting theories about causation. For instance, the story of how life began in the universe relies on what is commonly referred to as the "bootstrap paradox":

are. If the ultimate meaning of life is to find happiness in absurdity, as van der Colff (2010:39) claims is the position of the novel, sandwiches is exactly the project which makes Arthur most happy. Sandwiches are his Sisyphus rocks. But actually, there is nothing in the text which points to that. (I was just stuck in a deductive loop of my own, after being fed a lot of sandwiches.)

'A hole had just appeared in the Galaxy. It was exactly a nothingth of a second long, a nothingth of an inch wide, and quite a lot of millions of light-years from end to end. [...] The nothingth of a second for which the hole existed reverberated backward and forward through time in a most improbable fashion. Somewhere in the deeply remote past it seriously traumatized a small random group of atoms drifting through the empty sterility of space and made them cling together in the most extraordinarily unlikely patterns. These patterns quickly learned to copy themselves (this was part of what was so extraordinary about the pattern) and went on to cause massive trouble on every planet they drifted on to. This was how life began in the Universe' (55).

We soon learn that this event was caused by the infinite improbability drive, a drive which is both product of, and operated by, life-forms. The creation of life by the life-forms that arose from the creation of life amounts to a bootstrap paradox, where the plot comes about by figuratively "pulling itself up by its own bootstraps".⁶⁴ This little story is framed by "the storms of unreason" and a statement about reason being out to lunch, accentuating that it contradicts our logical intuitions, and not by accident.

Adams does not assert neither existence nor thought without logic, but he has created a narrative through which the logical faculties of characters are continuously challenged. *Hitchhiker* is an odyssey of unreason, where logic, whether it be the capabilities of human beings or hyper-intelligent shades of the color blue, comes up short in the integration of cosmic absurdities. Sometimes what is absurd are social behaviors, like destroying other species or habitats for no reason at all, or the practice of putting instructions on a box of

⁶⁴ Faye, 2018.

toothpicks (578, 585). When people act irrationally, logic does not lead to a better understanding of them. Other times, what is absurd is science. Bistromathics, for instance, defies the basic axioms of formal logic. In another section of the novel, Ford finds an item called an *Ident-I-Eeze*. It is a chip which is also an absolute proof of a person's identity, conveniently easy to pick up off the ground for anyone who wants to commit identity fraud, and therefore described as 'technology's greatest triumph to date over both itself and plain common sense' (677).

In the galaxy, reason seems to be a very hard thing to hold on to. In *Life*, we are told the story of the reason why a small group of Forest-dwellers were being innocently slaughtered.

'And [...] it was a very good one. It was very clear, very rational and tough. The Messenger would hang his head and feel sad and foolish that he had not realized what a tough and complex place the real world was, and what difficulties and paradoxes had to be embraced if one was to live in it' (465).

Unfortunately, the reason itself is lost before the Messenger can return to his people.

'The Messenger did understand the reason, and he returned to his people in the Forest. But as he approached them, as he walked through the Forest and among the trees, he found that all he could remember of the reason was how terribly clear the argument had seemed. What it actually was, he couldn't remember at all' (467).

Luckily, the fact that the reason had been so well argued was a great comfort when the next slaughter of Forest-dwellers occurred. This is one of several examples in the novel that points to a mechanism which sustains life in spite of prevailing unreason. This mechanism is a certain kind of madness.

Van der Colff writes that ‘Adams’s creatures have in common (besides wanting answers to their existential questions) [...] that they are all born mad, “and some remain so.”’⁶⁵ She is right to point out that madness is a response to the absurdity in the *Hitchhiker* universe. Madness is tied to absurdity, but not in the purely existential sense of the word. It is a mechanism for dealing with the futility of life, but also for dealing with the consequences of logical absurdity. I think it is important to stress the difference here, because absurdity in logic does not necessarily entail the futility of life. There is an important consequence from rejecting the exclusively existentialist interpretation of the novel. It means that what Adams is exploring is not only the human psyche, but the world itself, as it appears before that psyche. In *Hitchhiker*, Madness comes to expression not as despair, but, in spite of what van der Colff seems to conclude, it can also be seen as whimsical. This makes characters adaptable to a world where not only technology and other material circumstances of life, but also philosophical ideas through which one comprehends and orders that life, are continually in flux. Just like it is an exploration of absurdity which guarantees the validity of logic, it is madness that allows the characters in *Hitchhiker* to retain their sanity.

⁶⁵ Van der Colff, 2010:83.

Chapter 2: How can we have knowledge? Epistemology in *Hitchhiker*

What can we know, and on what grounds? *Hitchhiker* is grounded in the subjectivist epistemology of Immanuel Kant. But as with every other philosophical category, the novel does not exhibit any obligation to remain on ground level. The journey through the galaxy takes us into uncharted territory to explore the boundaries of epistemology and challenge the consequences of several positions. According to Kant, knowledge is in principle limited to the subjective perspective. And although the Kantian tradition remains strong in contemporary philosophy, what we can know and on what grounds we can base that knowledge is still an open question. Many hold the belief that eventually all knowledge will be accessible through science. Even though we are currently limited to a subjective perspective, this may change with the advent of new technologies in the approachable future. This position is called scientism, and Nicholas Joll argues that Adams may adhere to this position.⁶⁶ Without speculation about the position of the author, however, it is at least clear that *Hitchhiker* explores the liminal border between epistemology in the Kantian tradition and scientism. Scientism's claim that we may someday overcome our limitations through science is at this point only a possibility for consideration. Perspectival limitation is definitive in the current philosophical paradigm, and it is also a recurring motif in the novel. Arthur, Ford, the Guide, and even the man who is said to rule the universe, are all limited in their perspectives on reality. But there are also several characters in the novel, and some technologies, that are not limited in the same way that Kantian philosophy holds up as the foundation of knowledge. There are those who can experience and interact with the universe in many dimensions, notably the mice and the Guide Mark Two. There are also technologies that seem to reveal an

⁶⁶ Joll, 2012:10.

absolute truth, a totality of perspectives, or ultimate answer: foremost Deep Thought and the Total Perspective Vortex. There are, however, practical and philosophical challenges to overcome in order for the truths offered by these technologies to be obtained and integrated into the form of human knowledge.

According to the understanding of our current philosophical paradigm, human knowledge is information integrated into a system based on two epistemic faculties: the senses and the mind. The senses are the points of contact between individuals and the world. Every bit of information about the world is based on what is obtained through the senses.⁶⁷ Philosophers disagree on how directly one may experience the world through the senses, but no matter what distance there is between the inner and outer worlds that make up reality, the senses are the providers of the raw material for knowledge. The mind is the faculty which structures that raw sensory information into a system.⁶⁸ One way the mind does this is by using logic. Logic is a formal ideal of the thought process which stresses the importance of coherence and which requires little creativity on the part of the mind. Logic is usually thought to form the basis of rational thought. Another, more creative, way to structure sensory input is by way of conception. Concepts are inventions of the mind which serve to turn complex experiences into manageable bits of thought so that they can be incorporated into the system

⁶⁷ Platonists would disagree with this, believing the mind to work as a point of access to eternal truths, and sensory input to only be a distraction from these. Kant, however, has an Aristotelian position because knowledge seems abstracted from the world. There are interesting insights from Christianity on how to combine the two positions, but *Hitchhiker* seems really only to follow the position that I outline here.

⁶⁸ According to Kant, the mind processes sensory information automatically, because it is 'programmed' to certain patterns of understanding. Although I have emphasized that *Hitchhiker* participates in the Kantian tradition, its perspective is based on philosophy which has developed far beyond Kant's groundwork. Here I am talking about how information is structured in thought, and my understanding of this is tied to linguistic patterns that I will discuss presently.

in a comprehensible manner.⁶⁹ Both logic and conception are ways of integrating new information with a preexisting perspective on reality. A fully integrated perspective on reality is called a world view, and the point of a world view is to make sense of the world. There may be other ways of structuring information into knowledge, but the operating premise in *Hitchhiker* is the fact that all knowledge is based on the two faculties, both of which are attributes of the individual subject.⁷⁰

That all knowledge is based on subjective experience means that all knowledge is limited to a subjective perspective. In other words, knowledge is relative to individuals. This is explored with particular clarity in *Mostly Harmless*. At a moment of mental distress, when the Guide fails to provide Arthur advice and consolation, he travels to Hawalius, a planet inhabited by 'oracles, seers, soothsayers and also take-out pizza parlors' (693). There, an old sage tells Arthur 'You cannot see what I see because you see what you see. You cannot know what I know because you know what you know. [...] Everything you see or hear or experience in any way at all is specific to you. You create a universe by perceiving it, so everything in the universe you perceive is specific to you' (703). Shortly after his visit to Hawalius, Arthur suddenly discovers he has a teenage daughter. As is often the case with teenagers and their parents, the two have a hard time seeing things from one another's perspective. A parenting guide

⁶⁹ Ayn Rand argues a case for concept formation as the core of the rational mind. Her philosophy is focused on highlighting the creative potential of man, and she distinguishes man from animals by claiming a defining difference between them to be the difference between choices based on concepts (free and rational choice) and choices based on percepts (animal instincts) (Peikoff, 1993:73). Philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari on the other hand, do not identify basic rationality with concept formation. To them, concept formation is rather the way that a certain kind of knowledge is developed, namely philosophical knowledge (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994).

⁷⁰ Other theories include for example the dialogical approaches that are highlighted in the social learning theories of Lev Vygostsky or Mikhail Bakhtin.

called *'Practical Parenting in a Fractally Demented Universe'* concretizes the sage's explanation to Arthur's situation:

'We live in strange times. We also live in strange places: each in a universe of our own. The people with whom we populate our universes are the shadows of whole other universes intersecting with our own. Being able to glance out into this bewildering complexity of infinite recursion and say things like, "Oh, hi, Ed! Nice tan. How's Carol?" involves a great deal of filtering skill for which all conscious entities have eventually to develop a capacity in order to protect themselves from the contemplation of the chaos through which they seethe and tumble. So give your kid a break, okay?' (737).

These passages underscore the fact that we are strictly tied to experiencing the universe subjectively. They go as far as to suggest that the universe as experienced by one person is not identical to the universe as experienced by another person. In an epistemological sense, then, there is not just one universe, but many. (This is not to say that the universe is multiple in a metaphysical sense. That will be a topic for the next chapter in this thesis. It means only that knowledge is inextricably tied to subjective perspectives, based on individual life experiences.)

Every person has 'a different set of the most basic assumptions about life' (785). This premise has two important consequences in the novel. The first is that characters are differently equipped to comprehend and relate to unexpected things in the universe. Those who view the world as predictable are confounded when the unexpected happens. The old sage says to Arthur: 'You come to me for advice, but you can't cope with anything you don't recognize' (703). Those who view the world as unpredictable, in contrast, are mentally

prepared for the fact that challenges will come. The second consequence is that attempts to overcome the limitations of subjective perspectives are both ubiquitous and futile. An early example of this comes in *Hitchhiker's*, when Arthur and Ford are captured by a Vogon guard. Ford desperately tries to change the Vogon's perspective on their situation, in order to have him change his mind about ejecting them into space. A short conversation ensues, where Ford's arguments appears to convince the Vogon to assume a different perspective, but in the end the Vogon guard's mantra is reinforced: 'Resistance is useless!' and they are thrown into space (48-50). The Vogon guard's mantra gives a premonition of future events where perspectives will clash, and persuasions fail.

Everyone in *Hitchhiker* has been dealt a different hand when it comes to their abilities to comprehend the passage of events. According to how monotonous their life experiences have been, characters are to different degrees cemented in their world views. Characters can be placed along a spectrum, at one end of which are the robots, who because they are machines have very monotonous "lives". To compensate for their monotonous work many of them are programmed with GPP features, or 'genuine people personalities' (64). Marvin the paranoid android, who is a GPP-prototype is programmed with depression, and although he has an extraordinarily high capacity for comprehension, he can never see the world from anything but a pessimistic perspective:

"Look, robot, the stars are coming out!" says Arthur. "I know," replies Marvin. "Wretched isn't it?", "But that sunset! I've never seen anything like it in my wildest dreams... the two suns! It was like mountains of fire boiling into space" attempts Arthur again. "I've seen it," said Marvin. "It's rubbish" (100).

The doors on the spaceship *Heart of Gold* are, to Marvin's misery, programmed with cheerful and sunny dispositions: *'It is their pleasure to open for you, and their satisfaction to close again with the knowledge of a job well done'* (65). The GPP programming does not serve to alleviate the monotony of their existence. Quite the contrary, it binds them to perpetual experience through a hardwired filter of emotion. The robots' perspectives on the world cannot be changed.

To explore how a different epistemological foundation affects further integration of experience into knowledge, Adams makes interesting use of characterization. Among the human and humanoid characters, we see contrasting positions along the spectrum in character pairs. Arthur is contrasted to Ford. Arthur had lived a relatively monotonous life on Earth and did not expect his situation to change. He was poorly equipped to integrate the experience of intergalactic hitchhiking into his world view. The result is that at first, he does not believe his experience, and later on he decides to go mad. Ford, on the other hand, is used to the wild lifestyle of intergalactic hitchhiking, and although he was somewhat distressed by the imminent destruction of the earth, such a prospect was not unfamiliar to him. Ford is from a small planet somewhere in the vicinity of Betelgeuse, a massive red giant star set to collapse into a supernova at any moment (11).⁷¹ He has learned, from this subjective expectation of sudden doom, that the universe is unpredictable, and thus he is better at integrating unexpected experiences. Trillian, who is an astrophysicist who is looking for adventure is also well equipped to integrate the experience of space travel into her world view. She is contrasted to Zaphod, who we might expect to be great at handling the unexpected, but who has locked away part of his brain from himself, and therefore experiences severe cognitive

⁷¹ Siegel, 2017.

shortcomings (98). Trillian is a voice of stoic reason compared to Zaphod's hysteria. When their ship picks up Arthur and Ford who are floating in space, Zaphod exclaims "That's incredible". "No, Zaphod," replies Trillian, "Just very very improbable" (62). In this situation, Trillian has a higher understanding of the universe than Zaphod and is therefore able to integrate the unexpected experience of abnormality into her knowledge.

The limitations of knowledge extend to almost every character in the novel. Even the man who supposedly rules the universe is limited to experience only the inside of his own "shack". Though he controls everything else, his body of knowledge is very small. The man inhabits the most uninhibited end of the spectrum of perspectival limitations, but in his case, perspective has been opened so far that he is unable to assert any knowledge whatever, as every possible fact is relativized to the infinite myriad of possible world views. "You're very sure of your facts," he said at last. "I couldn't trust the thinking of a man who takes the Universe – if there is one – for granted" (283). The man questions every perspective on the basis that they are relative, including his own. "I've never met all these people you speak of. And neither, I suspect, have you. They only exist in words we hear. It is folly to say you know what is happening to other people. Only they know, if they exist. They have their own Universes of their own eyes and ears' (283). It is possible that the man who rules the universe is a metafictional character representing the author. Just like a writer, the man in the shack rubs the sharp end of a pencil against a paper. 'It made a mark, and he was delighted with the discovery, as he was every day' (280). The similarity is stunning, and the man's unwillingness to assert any fact about the universe is a striking parallel to Adams' own playfully inquisitive style. Adams, who is in control of the universe within the novel, avoids making assertions about his beliefs, allowing instead his characters and readers to inhabit universes of their own,

so that they may explore and discover the philosophical possibilities of which even he does not see the end.

From this we might draw the conclusion that *Hitchhiker* asserts a principled view of epistemic limitation and encourages readers to accept this and “spin subjective cocoons of meaning”.⁷² However, this epistemic limitation is only one side of the exploration, the preexisting philosophical ground level from which the exploration of *Hitchhiker* departs. Some characters seek to transcend the perspectival limitations on knowledge, and although most characters are unable to do so, the transcendence of the subjective perspectives may in fact be possible through science and technology. People of all times have sought an ultimate truth to expand their world views past the limitations of their perspective. Philosophy sought this end, but it failed to arrive at anything definitive, approaching instead the relativism exhibited by the man in the shack. The two philosophers Vroomfondel and Majikthise bickering over facts and demands shows that their discussion had reached deadlock: “All right!” bawled Vroomfondel, banging on a nearby desk. “I am Vroomfondel, and that is *not* a demand, that is a solid *fact!* What we demand is solid *facts!*”, “No, we don’t!” exclaimed Majikthise in irritation. “That is precisely what we don’t demand!” (114). Philosophers as represented in this scene cannot even agree on what it is they cannot agree on. It is thus not from philosophy that we can expect any absolute knowledge. The thing that was finally able to provide an ultimate answer was not human or humanoid, but the computer Deep Thought.

Lucky for the philosophers who were worried about unemployment however, no one could understand the answer that was precisely calculated by Deep Thought. Knowledge is created when observations are integrated into a world view, but nobody was able to

⁷² Van der Colff, 2010:64.

meaningfully integrate the answer forty-two into their world view. Even when the ultimate answer was known, ultimate knowledge remained elusive. The apparently nonsensical ultimate answer proved that there was a missing link before ultimate knowledge could be obtained. Deep Thought explained: “I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you’ve never actually known what the question is” (121). Deep Thought’s revelation sparks a quest for the ultimate question to go with the answer. But the question, too, proves utterly elusive. This twist in the narrative may be inspired by quantum physics.⁷³ In quantum physics, Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle states that knowledge on the level of elementary particles is in principle uncertain, because the instruments used to measure particles also necessarily modify their states in the moment of observation. In the case of photons, for example, we can measure either the position or the momentum of the particle but measuring either one alters the other. Knowledge of one state of the particle therefore excludes knowledge of the other.⁷⁴ In *Life*, we learn that the uncertainty principle also dictates our knowledge of the ultimate question and answer:

‘[T]he Question and the Answer are mutually exclusive. Knowledge of one logically precludes knowledge of the other. It is impossible that both can ever be known about the same Universe.’ [...] “Except,” ... “if it happened, it seems that the Question and the Answer would just cancel each other out, and take the Universe with them, which would then be replaced by something even more bizarrely inexplicable. It is possible

⁷³ Joll, 2012:10.

⁷⁴ Hilgevoord and Uffink, 2016.

that this has already happened,” [...] “but there is a certain amount of uncertainty about it’ (465).

When observations are too absurd to be integrated into the existing world view one must change one’s perspective on reality and adopt a new world view. Changing one’s world view is a psychologically demanding project, which is why people have always sought to avoid it. The quest for the ultimate question and answer is the strategy of finding a ‘master’ perspective; one world view to obviate all others. A different approach is seen with the Total Perspective Vortex. It offers no single master perspective. Instead, the vortex is the total sum of all perspectives in the universe. The vortex was invented by a man wanting to annoy his wife.

‘Trin Tragula - for that was his name – was a dreamer, a thinker, a speculative philosopher or, as his wife would have it, an idiot. And she would nag him incessantly about the utterly inordinate amount of time he spent staring into space, or mulling over the mechanics of safety pins, or doing spectrographic analyses of pieces of fairy cake. “Have some sense of proportion!” she would say, sometimes as often as thirty-eight times in a single day. And so he built the Total Perspective Vortex – just to show her’ (198).

The machine works by simulation. Due to the “principle of extrapolated matter analyses” the machine can extrapolate a complete picture of the entire universe from a piece of fairy cake and project it all at once through the vortex. This means that what the person in the vortex sees is nothing less than the totality of everything: every object, and every perspective on

them; 'the whole of creation – every sun, every planet, their orbits, their composition and their economic and social history.' To Trin Tragula's horror, the shock of the simulation completely annihilated his wife's brain. 'But to his satisfaction he realized that he had proved conclusively that if life is going to exist in a Universe of this size, then the one thing it cannot afford to have is a sense of proportion' (198).

The Total Perspective Vortex shows that the mind can in fact transcend its limited perspective, through simulation. The problem is that no perspective alone will be completely infallible, and the totality of all perspectives is too much for anyone to handle. This realization is made by Arthur, who in his post-hyperspace contemplations discovered that 'the mind is only made to comprehend small things', making it in principle unable to process the 'really big space' that is the universe (43, 53). But is it possible that science might eventually be able to answer everything? There is an entry in the Guide about a place called Han Wavel. It is

'an exotic holiday planet, and one of the wonders of the Galaxy. Han Wavel is a world that consists largely of fabulous ultraluxury hotels and casinos, all of which have been formed by the natural erosion of wind and rain. The chances of this happening are more or less one to infinity against. Little is known of how this came about because none of the geophysicists, probability statisticians, meteoranalysts or bizarrologists who are so keen to research it can afford to stay there' (363).

From this entry it seems the main problem is not that science is unable to provide a more complete knowledge of the universe in principle, but rather that science is not allotted enough resources to be able to do so. Deep Thought was able to calculate the ultimate answer, but not the question that would make sense of it all. The Earth was built to do that, but it was

destroyed in a mistake of bureaucracy five minutes before the completion of its processing time. It seems that economic and political conditions impose as much of a limitation on knowledge as the epistemic limitations of the mind and senses.

There is one technology in the novel whose perception surpasses the others. The Guide Mark Two is able to traverse the dimensions of the multiverse, to experience them all and to engage with them.

‘Your universe is vast to you. Vast in time, vast in space. That’s because of the filters through which you perceive it. But I was built with no filters at all, which means I perceive the Mish Mash which contains all possible universes but which has, itself, no size at all. For me, anything is possible. I am omniscient and omnipotent, extremely vain and, what is more, I come in a handy self-carrying package’ (762).

But what the Guide Mark two actually does may not involve a transcendence of perception. It may be just a catering to the subjective perspective, which is what it was created to do. It says ‘you have to work out how much of the above is true’ (762). We know that the mind is creative, because integration of observations into a world view is in part a creative process. And the fact that the mind is creative means that we have the possibility to deceive ourselves. ‘Just because you see something, it doesn’t mean to say it’s there. And if you don’t see something, it doesn’t mean to say it’s not there. It’s only what your senses bring to your attention’ says the Guide (760). We cannot make any assertions about epistemology without considering that

there is always a possibility that we are being deceived by our mental faculties.⁷⁵ As we learn from this passage in *Hitchhiker's*: 'It is an important and popular fact that things are not always what they seem' (105). Therefore, the novel does not make assertions but an inquiry.

Man has always thought himself to be the most intelligent creature in the universe. However, in the novel we discover that there are creatures whose faculties for knowledge about the universe far surpass those of man. Man is in fact severely restricted from knowledge and understanding about life, the universe and everything. When compared with the hyperintelligent pandimensional beings that are mice, man seems to be merely 'a logic machine that has been fooled by something which thinks at least as logically as he does.' Man may be nothing but a mechanical part of 'the organic life which forms the operational matrix of a giant computer' (122). But even the creatures that are less restricted have trouble understanding the ultimate answer. There is only one character in the novel who knows both the ultimate answer and the question that goes with it: Prak, who survived the Total Perspective Vortex, and he can't tell anyone the question, because of what looks like a quantum mechanical principle. Alternatively, it could be that the question *is* known, but that it is irrational in the context of the answer. At the end of *Restaurant*, Arthur pulls out Scrabble tiles at random, and reveals that the ultimate question may be 'what do you get if you multiply six by nine?' (306). If this is the true question that goes with the answer, then existence itself seems to be based on either a typographical error, or an error in computing. The only logical conclusion we can draw after this exploration into epistemology is something similar to what was written on a computer terminal in the Hitchhiker's Guide offices:

⁷⁵ This is the premise that Rene Descartes calls the problem of the evil genius. In the case of Zaphod, there *is* evidently an evil genius who is deceiving him, and it is himself. There are other characters in the novel which may be considered evil geniuses, notably Hactar (see p. 72) and the Guide Mark Two (see p. 67).

'If you are reading this on planet Earth then [...] Good luck to you. There is an awful lot of stuff you don't know anything about, but you are not alone in this. It's just that in your case the consequences of not knowing any of this stuff are particularly terrible, but then, hey, that's just the way the cookie gets completely stomped on and obliterated' (686).

Chapter 3: What is real? Metaphysics in *Hitchhiker*

In the two previous chapters we saw that *Hitchhiker* explores how people relate to the universe by conceptualizing systems of order. But how does reality as it is conceived by characters in the novel relate to the reality of the universe itself? Is the universe in its objective state an ordered system or is it a chaotic and absurd collection of random coincidences? We have seen that characters sometimes find it difficult to come to terms with the universe, because it does not correspond to their expectations. Every character has a uniquely personal world view, and some of them develop madness in order to integrate their experiences of a seemingly absurd reality. Fiction works the same way in real life as madness works in the novel. Both are strategies that unite thought and reality without contradiction. The novel of philosophical exploration is also an attempt to make sense of a universe that is too vast and complex to be comprehended in simple human terms. But both madness and fiction are problematic ways to explore reality itself, because in both, the subjective perspective and objective reality may intermingle and become indistinguishable from one another. Fantasy may blend with fact, thus extending the *cosmos* beyond the physical universe. (With *cosmos* I mean order, as in 'the order of the universe'. A crucial part of my discussion in chapters 1-3 is whether that order is imposed on the universe by the mind, or whether order is an essential feature of the universe itself, with independent existence, to be merely discovered by the mind.) So what is ultimately real?

In search of ultimate reality, we must go beyond the appearance of the universe, into *metaphysics*. *Hitchhiker* does not ask whether life is real or not, but it does inquire into the nature of reality. What is it that is real? There are two steps to answering this question. Firstly, one must define reality. *Hitchhiker* does so by contrasting reality with unreality and illusion. Secondly, one must attempt to uncover the structure of reality. *Hitchhiker* does this by

exploring the limits of the structures that we have customarily used to make sense of everything. As we saw in chapter 1, logic is one such structure. In chapter 2 we saw that creative conception was a second, and science and technology a third. This chapter will cover the rest of the novel's quest to explore reality. We will see how new dimensions are added to the narrative in order to explore the metaphysical order of the universe. Instead of through logic and conception, this order is explored in terms of cause and effect. A universe organized on these terms becomes questionably absurd with the existence of randomness and coincidence. The final question which *Hitchhiker's* exploration into the nature of reality poses is this: is there any order to the universe at all?

The metaphysical inquiry of *Hitchhiker* is prompted by the fact that the reality of the universe is often incomprehensible through our epistemic faculties (Our senses and rationality, as we saw in chapter 2). So what basis do we have for talking about reality at all? As we saw in the previous chapter, very little can be said about reality itself. We are tied to a subjective perspective on reality, and our subjective capacities for awareness and comprehension are quite limited. The fact that reality is so often incomprehensible is a central theme of the novel. The Guide states that the universe is "mind-boggling" (53), and the Guide itself is unable to keep up with the rapid changes in the Galaxy (556). Nevertheless, the Universe *is* something tangible to the mind. There is something which answers at least to some, if not all expectations, allowing one to develop technology and to have experiences, through whatever faculty the mind is equipped with. This means that there is a substantial basis for talking about reality, as that something tangible which the universe is. Although we may not be able to perceive the reality of the universe directly, we can say a whole lot about its metaphysical nature from how the universe answers to our expectations. To be able to

explore reality, we must only know what to look for. We start by looking for a definition. How then, does *Hitchhiker* define reality?

The main characters in the novel have a pragmatic approach to defining reality. In one scene from *Life*, Arthur and Trillian contemplate the extent to which one can assign the property of 'realness' to a sofa: 'At least, if it wasn't real, it did support them, and as that is what sofas are supposed to do[. T]his, by any test that mattered, was a real sofa' (451). With this thought, Arthur and Trillian make a reasonable distinction between reality and unreality on a pragmatic basis. The sofa must be real, because it works like a sofa. This position implies an extremely subjective definition of reality, and as such, it has both epistemological and ethical limitations. The "man behind the sofa", so to speak is, a character called Hactar. In addition to the sofa, Hactar presents a whole furnished inventory, including a table with tea, milk and sugar, but as he explains, he offers nothing but 'tricks of the light' (451). In other words, the sofa that Arthur and Trillian determine to be real, is actually an illusion. Illusions are unreal in the sense that they are not what they seem, but, as we find from the exchange between Hactar and Arthur and Trillian, they are real in a different sense. "It is possible to be comfortable with tricks of the light, [...] if that is all you have'", says Hactar (451). This implies that illusions are real, but only in the pragmatic sense that they bring comfort.

The sofa scene is juxtaposed with a scene in which Slartibartfast returns 'to his own ship, the *Bistromath*, ha[s] a furious row with the waiter and disappear[s] off into an entirely subjective idea of what space [is]' (454). Together these scenes highlight the relationship between illusions and reality. Illusions are a part of reality, but only if reality is defined in entirely subjective terms. This approach allows people of different dispositions to face reality with varying degrees of success. Characters in the novel are differently equipped to navigate a subjective reality with an ethic of pragmatism. At the very beginning of the story, Arthur is

hesitant to drink three pints of beer at lunchtime, whereupon Ford tells him, "Time is an illusion. Lunchtime doubly so" (18). Arthur is having a hard time distinguishing between comfort and reality, and thus he has a hard time facing the imminent changes to his circumstances. The character who is Arthur's opposite here is Zaphod Beeblebrox, who expertly handles the pragmatic ethic, and whose skills in this respect have earned him the position of president of the Galaxy (28). The presidency is a position which is built around illusions, and we are told that 'Zaphod loved effect: it was what he was best at' (29). The novel makes it a point to show that illusions are part of reality as we know it. Illusions may be 'tricks on the light', but as we later learn, they are still part of the dimensional framework that makes up reality to us.

Philosophically speaking, individuals cannot easily distinguish their subjective reality from a reality that exists independently from their subjective experience. The pragmatic definition of reality is therefore a relativistic definition, and it cannot qualify a universal theory of metaphysics. It cannot answer the question of what is "ultimately real", yet that is a question which permeates the novel. The main philosophical quest in *Hitchhiker* is to discover not the facts regarding perceived realities, but the facts regarding the reality of the universe itself. For that we need an objective epistemological grounding. In chapter 2 we saw that objective grounding is elusive, but not necessarily impossible. If we somehow free ourselves from our subjective perspectives, we might be able to establish a correspondence theory of reality, i.e., we could see how the universe itself corresponds to our observations and expectations. It is our epistemic faculties which limit us to the reality that we find rational. Through technology and science (or fictional thought experiments featuring technology and science), we may be able to temporarily transcend these faculties. By introducing an assumption that anything is possible, we may test the possibilities of the universe in an

ultimate way. *Hitchhiker* does exactly this. The novel introduces technology that opens up reality itself, through which we may bypass the need for an objectively valid definition of reality. As we shall see, this technology works by approaching the borders of the order that our rationality usually imposes on the universe. At these borders probability is infinite, and this accounts for all the observations that are usually so difficult to integrate into our knowledge. Infinite probability gives a new dimension to the experiences we have conceptualized as randomness and coincidence. So, with the perceptual doors between man and objective reality opened up through technology, what exactly does *Hitchhiker* discover about the structure of reality? We need to follow the exploration from its basic premises. We need to understand how the technology of infinite improbability works.

The novel states that the universe is big – really mind-bogglingly big (53). In fact, it is so big that anything that is possible is a nearly guaranteed probability. Any possibility that isn't accounted for with infinite time and space will probably be accounted for with infinite dimensions and the whole sort of general mish-mash of parallel universes (655). Now, just to make it clear, dimensions are not other universes, but rather sides of the universe that we are unable to perceive. 'You've got to learn to think multidimensionally' says Harl, the editor of the Guide Mark Two (675). Space and time are only four of the dimensions along whose axes it is possible to move. Probability is another (761). Just as we can move around in space and manipulate objects in space because we are able to perceive space, so there could possibly be a way, if there was a way to calculate the exact probability that something might occur, that one could know exactly how far along the probability axis to move in order to make that something occur. Of course, those whose perspectives on reality are limited to four dimensions are not able to calculate probability. It may however, in theory, be possible to program a machine to do it. This is the principle behind the Infinite Improbability Drive.

‘The principle for generating small amounts of *finite* improbability by simply hooking the logic circuits of a Bambleweeny 57 Sub-Meson Brain to an atomic vector plotter suspended in a strong Brownian Motion producer (say a nice hot cup of tea) were of course well understood – and such generators were often used to break ice at parties by making all the molecules in the hostess’s undergarments leap simultaneously one foot to the left, in accordance with the Theory of Indeterminacy. [However, constructing] a machine which could generate the *infinite* improbability field needed to flip a spaceship across the mind-paralyzing-distances between the farthest stars [was announced to be] virtually impossible. Then, one day, a student who had been left to sweep up the lab after a particularly unsuccessful party found himself reasoning this way: If, he thought to himself, such a machine is a *virtual* impossibility, then it must logically be a *finite* improbability. So all I have to do in order to make one is to work out exactly how improbable it is, feed that figure into the finite improbability generator, give it a fresh cup of really hot tea... and turn it on!’ (60).

What the Infinite Improbability Drive proves is that in the cosmic perspective, more things are possible than what we naturally imagine to be possible. Everything that is possible is also infinitely probable, once the drive is engaged.

This discovery had profound metaphysical consequences. The Drive could realize any possibility, no matter how improbable, and this ability to realize any possibility was the cause of a whole lot of strange and random occurrences in the universe. We read that ‘one of the side effects of work on the Heart of Gold was a whole string of pretty meaningless coincidences [...] such as whole planets unexpectedly turning into banana fruitcake’ (27, 635-

6). Zaphod and Trillian have an exchange where they explain how their starship happened to be at just the right place to pick up Arthur and Ford when they engaged the Infinite Improbability Drive. ‘We pass through every point in the Universe, you know that.’ “Yeah, but that’s one wild coincidence” (69). The consequences of engaging the drive are notoriously unpredictable. The explanation for this is that the Infinite Improbability Drive not only makes possible specific predictable improbabilities. It may realize *any* improbability. Every possibility becomes an infinite probability. This unexpected consequence was disastrously demonstrated by the sinking of the virtually unsinkable starship *Titanic*:

‘The designers and engineers decided, in their innocence, to build a prototype Improbability Field into it, which was meant, supposedly, to ensure that it was Infinitely Improbable that anything would ever go wrong with any part of the ship. They did not realize that because of the quasi-reciprocal and circular nature of all Improbability calculations, anything that was Infinitely Improbable was actually very likely to happen almost immediately’ (374).

This episode shows us the epistemological side of a problem with the theory behind the technology of infinite improbability. Since people are not able to perceive the probability dimension, they have not overcome the possibility that they might make mistakes. Their expectations might still be broken. The drive does allow their knowledge to transcend the subjective perspective. The drive actuates possibilities, and possibilities are rendered in terms which may be a feature of subjective rationality. If possibility is to be understood as rationally possible, then thought and fact become identical. This opens up every imaginable possibility to reality, erasing the line between subjective and objective reality. However, this only opens

up the universe to us in the same fashion that the ultimate answer or the total perspective vortex opened it up. And as we saw in Chapter 2 (p. 66), by attempting to take it in all at once we realize that we are incapable of comprehending reality entirely. Coincidences are events that occur at random, rather than occurring by necessity from a causal chain or otherwise ordered system. Since our rationality insists that reality must be an ordered system, we have a hard time processing randomness. When the distinction between subjective and objective reality is erased, it immediately becomes difficult to say whether coincidences are part of our subjective perspective or the objective reality of the universe, because when we experience something which we cannot account for in our system of cause and effect, we naturally conceptualize it as a random coincidence.

Coincidences and randomness are the necessary consequences of the theory of infinite improbability. The Infinite Improbability Drive works on the premise that probability is not only a calculated prediction of future events given our knowledge about the universe, but a real dimension of the universe itself. From any given cause there are several possible effects existing at different points along the probability axis. Infinite probability makes every point along that axis equally valid, and therefore it obscures the link between cause and effect. If cause and effect are governed only by probability calculations and not determined by necessity, then the universe allows considerable room for random coincidence. The less determined a given outcome is compared to others, the more random it will be, and the Drive makes every possibility an equally determined probability.⁷⁶ This shows that a universe that

⁷⁶ Any number divided by infinity is so approximate that mathematically speaking, they are identical. This is a basic principle of calculus, and The Guide illustrates this in the following passage, which I should admit I have taken out of its context for the sole reason of shedding light on a detail here: 'The Universe – some information to help you live in it. Population: None. It is known that there are an infinite number of worlds, simply because there is an infinite amount of space for them to be in. However, not every one of them is inhabited. Therefore, there must be a finite number of inhabited worlds. Any finite number divided by infinity is as near to nothing as

can be controlled through technology is also fuller of random coincidences. Thus, technologies like the Infinite Improbability Drive enlightens us to the metaphysical unity of order and disorder.

The theory behind the Infinite Improbability Drive shows us that there are dimensions in the universe hitherto unaccounted for. The Drive engaging with one of these dimensions largely accounts for metaphysical randomness. It also to a large extent explains cosmic absurdity, as ‘most things mutate and change along the probability axis’, making logical observance impossible (762).⁷⁷ Unfortunately for the exploration into the nature of reality, the confirmation of metaphysical randomness is disruptive to further inquiry. ‘Thinking multidimensionally’ allows us to expand the system in which we order our observations, but the universe continues to resist systemization even with the added dimension of probability. We can account for coincidences in terms of probability, but we cannot account for them in absolute terms of cause and effect. Randomness is disruptive to causal order. Arthur and Trillian’s daughter Random directs our attention directly to this. Her very existence is a huge coincidence. She is born to Trillian who upon deciding to have somebody’s child at random visited a DNA bank, where she found the only matching species DNA allowing her to have a child belonged to Arthur (736). As a teenager, Random exhibits the disruptive effects of randomness, at first when she unexpectedly enters Arthur’s life, and later when she gets a hold of the Guide Mark Two and starts changing the universe according to her arbitrary whims at the end of *Mostly Harmless*.

makes no odds, so the average population of all the planets in the Universe can be said to be zero. From this it follows that the population of the whole Universe is zero, and that any people you may meet from time to time are merely the products of a deranged imagination’ (243-4).

⁷⁷ The Guide Mark Two explains that this feature of reality is why there are two Tricia McMillans living different lives, but with the same essential identity, in the same universe, at the same time (761). This contradicts the axioms of logic, thereby reducing logic itself to absurdity, and proving the possibility of cosmic absurdity.

The randomness that is realized by the Infinite Improbability Drive and the disruption caused by Random and the Guide Mark Two brings *Hitchhiker's* inquiry into the nature of reality one step closer to the question of whether there is any order to the universe at all. The randomness exhibited by the two is not just disruptive to our knowledge of the universe, but to reality itself. Random disrupts reality in a symbolic way. 'Random's smashing the watch may signify the notion that the universe is not logically structured, according to time or otherwise [...] In a sense, the notion of a "clockwork universe" is discarded.'⁷⁸ The Guide Mark Two disrupts reality in a literal way. It is present in every dimension and every possible universe at once, and by means of this omnidimensional presence, it also has the power to alter reality. The original Guide had an innovative way to bypass problems of inaccuracy in its predictions. It claimed to be the definitive authority on matters of reality, and it won a lawsuit to back its claim. In case of a discrepancy, it was reality which had it wrong (173-4). This was of course a nonsensical claim which only held up judicially. But the Guide Mark Two actually does become the definitive authority on reality, because it *can* change reality to fit its arbitrary predictions. The changes to reality that are caused by the arbitrary whims of whoever uses the Guide Mark Two have similar side-effects as those of the Infinite Improbability Drive. The universe becomes increasingly chaotic after the Guide Mark Two is published. Infinite realization of arbitrariness means infinite randomness and infinite disruption of order. With infinite disruption of order, chaos, rather than order, becomes the fundamental norm of reality. In this way *Hitchhiker*, speaking metaphysically, suggests that disorder may be more fundamental to the universe than order.

⁷⁸ Van der Colff, 2010:61.

There is a scientific basis for this claim in the field of cybernetics, which had momentum in literary circles, particularly in science fiction circles, at the time of *Hitchhiker's* publication. The theory goes that because an ordered system contains more energy than a chaotic system, the expanding universe, spreading its energy ever thinner and thinner, over time will become increasingly less ordered. This is based on the second law of thermodynamics, which states that entropy increases in a closed system.⁷⁹ Norbert Wiener wrote:

'As entropy increases [...] the universe, and all closed systems in the universe, tend naturally to deteriorate and lose their distinctiveness, to move from the least, to the most probable state, from a state of organization and differentiation in which distinctions and forms exist, to a state of chaos and sameness. In Gibbs' universe order is least probable, chaos most probable.'⁸⁰

Entropy here is defined as randomness, or in a different formulation, as negative information. Hence, this theory has an interesting epistemological consequence. Since the universe increases towards disorder, the more order we insist on the universe, the less knowledge we will have about it. In other words, the more rational we are, the less we understand about the reality of the universe. This may be a good reason to go mad. Or you might just hang the sense of reality sometimes and temporarily transcend your perspective by engaging with fiction. At the very least it might be entertaining.

⁷⁹ Hayles, 1998:101.

⁸⁰ Wiener in Hayles, 1998:102.

Hitchhiker does not conclude its inquiry into metaphysics. The story of our main characters ends before the chaos surrounding the plotline of the Guide Mark Two is resolved. But we may draw a conclusion about how the novel's inquiry into this category relates to its inquiry into the other categories. As we see the systems of order that we place on the world to best make our way in it are not necessarily reflective of a fundamental cosmic order. Sometimes, what we consider order may in fact be a chaotic force. Perhaps this is what Zaphod means when he suggests that things are better when they are a bit out of control: "No," said Zaphod, "I do not mean everything's under control. That would not be cool and froody" (215). As I will discuss in connection with Adams' satirical rhetoric, the metaphysical inquiry of *Hitchhiker* is entirely connected to the logic of jokes that is realized in its fiction. Fiction and madness are similar because they both enable otherwise rational man to subvert his expectations and transcend his limited perspective, and thus be enlightened to the world without the restraints of formal logic. Logic is only an abstraction of the metaphysical primary as it is revealed to us as epistemically limited beings. Through comedy and satire *Hitchhiker* continues to explore the questions of philosophy, beyond the answers that we already think we know. Philosophy begins with logic, it does not end there. *Hitchhiker* shows that we may keep finding answers even in absurdity.

Chapter 4: What is beautiful? Aesthetics in *Hitchhiker*

The aesthetic question, which may be posed as any variation of this chapter's title, is a question of values. What value does an object, an action, or a work of art have? By what standard may we evaluate it? Aristotle conceptualized values as the good at which every work of art and every action is thought to aim.⁸¹ We distinguish between what we value in behavior (ethics) and what we value in objects (aesthetics). Aesthetics concerns itself with the practice of creating art (*techné*) and with the evaluation of objects.⁸² An evaluation is the estimation of how something measures up to "the good". Sometimes it can be difficult to separate aesthetics from ethics. Think, for instance, of how the Vogons treat beautiful things. Vogons destroy the natural wonders of their planet, and they butcher the art of poetry. The Guide states that Vogons are not directly evil, but they are portrayed by Adams as unethical nevertheless, because they do not uphold any aesthetic value (38). As we look at more examples we will see that it is not expedient to separate the two categories entirely. The point was made by Kant that aesthetic judgment is to assess the presentations of moral ideas in sensory form.⁸³ Consequently, aesthetic judgment and ethical judgment often go hand in hand. Upholding the aesthetic value of certain things is also a valuable behavior, and vice versa. This chapter will focus on how *Hitchhiker* explores the philosophical category of aesthetics. Now, there are two ways that a novel may undertake an exploration of aesthetics. One of them is of course the typical philosophic investigation into the category of aesthetics, i.e., posing questions about beauty and aesthetic experience and exploring their possible

⁸¹ Aristotle in Hofstadter and Kuhns, 1964:94.

⁸² Aristotle in Hofstadter and Kuhns 1964:94, Wicks, 2013:8, 26.

⁸³ Wicks 2013:33.

answers. *Hitchhiker* does this through some of its main characters, and a few events from galactic history. The other way a novel may explore aesthetics is by itself participating in aesthetic expression. Any work of fiction is per definition an aesthetic object. *Hitchhiker's* commentary on aesthetics as philosophy must therefore be seen in reference to the aesthetic standard of the text itself. The novel's participation in literary genres, e.g. satire and science fiction, and currents, e.g. existentialism and postmodernism, are part of its exploration of aesthetic themes.

Some of the aesthetic themes in *Hitchhiker* are continuations of the themes from the fundamental categories of philosophy. The epistemological theory of limited perspective, for example, is parallel to the aesthetic concept of taste. Taste is the aesthetic judgment informed by subjective conceptions. According to Kant, one should strive for judgment based on universal validity, but the epistemological point of departure entails that any evaluation is affected by subjectivity.⁸⁴ What we consider to be beautiful is dependent on what we know. In an ontologically unstable universe, the beautiful is often what is familiar and safe. Of course, what is considered familiar and safe is also relative to each character, and it changes throughout the narrative of the novel. Arthur, for instance, initially cannot find aesthetic pleasure in space travel, having lost his home and the surroundings that were essential to his comfort. He briefly finds comfort throughout the narrative when he thinks about tea (155), or when he makes sandwiches (725-8). These items have aesthetic value as comfortable items because they are familiar to him. They provide him with momentary stability in an otherwise chaotic existence. But none of Arthur's comfort items are reliably present as he travels on through the galaxy. He does, however, adapt to his situation, and eventually he comes to

⁸⁴ Wicks, 2013:52.

enjoy flying, an activity in which he embraces the knowledge that he has no ontological grounding.

Ford is usually the calm voice of reason juxtaposed to Arthur's desperation. His towel is a reliable comfort item, and he is usually able to remain composed in otherwise distressing situations. Ford is securely confident in his place in the universe. He is able to take the universe at face value and experience beauty in what he sees, without insisting on any additional meaning. This security allows him to provide one of the novel's central commentaries on beauty and the aesthetic experience:

'As Ford gazed at the spectacle of light before them excitement burned inside him, but only the excitement of seeing a strange new planet; it was enough for him to see it as it was. It faintly irritated him that Zaphod had to impose some ludicrous fantasy onto the scene to make it work for him. All this Magrathea nonsense seemed juvenile. Isn't it enough to see that a garden is beautiful without having to believe there are fairies at the bottom of it too?' (80).

Ford can't understand why Zaphod doesn't appreciate the beauty of the planet without experiencing it through the legend of Magrathea. Of course, it turns out that Zaphod correctly assessed the identity of the planet, which indeed was Magrathea. Nonetheless, the point here is that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Both Ford and Zaphod consider the planet to be a beautiful spectacle, but the reasons they find it beautiful are completely different, depending on their beliefs and desires regarding the planet. Ford is skeptical to the existence of the legendary planet, and therefore finds beauty in the observation itself. Zaphod strongly desires

the legend to be true, and when he believes he has found it he is overcome with an experience of sublime beauty of the grandiose spectacle that is, to him, the legendary planet.

What we value as beautiful is based on the knowledge we have of the world. The opposite is also true. We attach little value to the things we don't know. Earthlings, as the narrative makes clear, don't know a lot of things about a lot of things (686). The British are particularly self-centered. That is how they could have become guilty of 'the most grotesquely bad taste', symbolized in the sport of Cricket (372). Cricket, we are told, is a remnant of a faint memory of one of the most horrendous events in galactic history, 'the Krikkit Wars' (355, 379). 'Particularly the bit about the little red ball hitting the wicket, that's very nasty' (372). Bad taste is the aesthetic consequence of poor knowledge. In the case of the sport, bad taste is not particularly damaging to those involved, but it is frowned upon by the galactic society, because the mechanism of aesthetics that allows cricket to be enjoyed by clueless earthlings is the same mechanism which led to the very horror it commemorates. It was the Krikkiters' lack of knowledge about the universe external to their own planet, and subsequent contact with the universe at large, which shook their worldview to the point of them viewing total destruction of everything else as necessary for their continued comfortable existence.

"Overnight," said Slartibartfast, "the whole population of Krikkit was transformed from being charming, delightful, intelligent [...] ordinary people, [...] into charming, delightful, intelligent [...] manic xenophobes. The idea of a Universe didn't fit into their world picture, so to speak. They simply couldn't cope with it. And so, charmingly, delightfully, intelligently, whimsically if you like, they decided to destroy it" (378).

The Krikkit Wars is an example of animosity against the strange, or suspicion of “the other”. The unfamiliar is easily regarded to be without aesthetic value. This is a central point in the satire of *Hitchhiker*. The anecdote about the relationship between cricket and the Krikkit Wars is symbolic of the intertwined nature of ethics and aesthetic. Surely, Cricket can be considered beautiful in human terms, in that there is an art to being good at the sport, and that there is an elegance to the sport from the point of view of a spectator. But the galactic society cannot overlook their knowledge of the sport’s devastating origins, and therefore deem Earthlings to be guilty of incredibly bad taste.

Due to the close relationship between the categories of aesthetics and ethics, one may easily come to think that the unfamiliar is less worthy of ethical treatment. Such a view would entail the complete relativity of values, which would be problematic in a consequentialist sense. This perspective is put forth by Slartibartfast: ‘It’s like, these guys, you know, are entitled to their own view of the Universe. And according to their view, which the Universe forced on them, right, they did right. Sounds crazy, but I think you’ll agree. They believe in [...] peace, justice, morality, sport, family life and the obliteration of all other life forms.’ (381). Even though the Krikkiters are entitled to a subjective worldview like everyone else, they are guilty of a profound form of speciesism, which echoes the human destruction of nature on Earth. The Krikkiters do not consider the perspective of other beings, that life may be valuable to those other beings, even if it is discomfoting to the Krikkiters. Instead, they go on the most destructive rampage in galactic history. Fortunately, the Krikkiters eventually realize that they shouldn’t destroy the universe. In isolation following their temporary defeat, they realize that they would rather participate in intergalactic sporting leagues, than destroy the universe in an attempt to restore the reality of their ancient worldview (439). Through sports, the universe

gains aesthetic value to the Krikketers, and consequently they want to treat it better. Unfortunately, the same epiphany has not come to all species in the universe.

The complete disregard of nature is evident when the Golgafrinchams arrive on prehistoric Earth. The Golgafrinchams immediately begin destroying nature to suit their own economy: ““Since we decided a few weeks ago to adopt the leaf as legal tender, we have, of course, all become immensely rich. [...] So in order to obviate this problem,” he continued, “and effectively revalue the leaf, we are about to embark on a massive defoliation campaign”” (299). To the Golgafrinchams the aesthetic value of nature is reduced to temporary utilitarian value. Nature has no intrinsic value to them. It is only valuable in terms they can understand; money and documentary films.

““Dying out!” repeated Ford. “Do you know what that means?”, “Er... we shouldn’t sell them any life insurance?” called out the wag again. Ford ignored him, and appealed to the whole crowd. “Can you try and understand,” he said,” that it’s just since we’ve arrived here that they’ve started dying out!” “In fact that comes over terribly well in this film,” said the marketing girl, “and just gives it that poignant twist which is the hallmark of the really great documentary. The producer’s very committed”” (298).

Hitchhiker does not enter a discussion about deep ecology.⁸⁵ It does, however, consider the aesthetic value of nature, and how the complete relativization of values to what we can comprehend in the short term is a philosophical danger. The novel shows several examples of

⁸⁵ The debate about whether nature has intrinsic value, or whether it only has value only as a utility of ‘higher’ life forms - a highly relevant debate in contemporary philosophy.

value being judged without reference to any perspectives other than the immediate impression of one species at a time. The novel is ambiguous in its conclusion about what is the proper reason for determining the value of things, but it is clear on the fact that we should approach any value judgment with a great deal of humility.

The Golgafrincham preoccupation with documentary films serves to satirize a cultural feature in which destruction becomes popular entertainment. Nature documentaries create a spectacle of exotic and often endangered natural life. Although documentaries often aim to create awareness of threatened wildlife, this concern easily becomes subservient to the aim of the films as entertainment products. Of course, Adams is not categorically averse to nature documentaries, (he made one himself,) but this theme speaks to a more general cultural aesthetic. We see the ultimate example of this aesthetic at Milliways, the Restaurant at the End of the Universe. Milliways is the only intergalactic cultural event in the novel, and the clientele is gathered to witness nothing less than the end of the Universe itself (214). This scene deconstructs destruction entertainment. When the pursuit of entertainment value leads to the end of everything and the end of everything becomes a value in terms of entertainment, then values are entirely reduced to absurdity. Creating entertainment based on destruction of natural beauty is the pursuit of contradictory aesthetic values. The paradox that arises in the pursuit of contradictory values leads logically to the absurdity of values entirely. There is an ethical implication here, which speaks about the intertwine of ethics and aesthetics. The relativistic pursuit of subjective entertainment with no concern for the destruction that said entertainment may involve leads to a paradox in both categories. It is a paradox that the greatest show in the universe is the destruction of the universe.

From this we turn to consider the aesthetics of the novel itself. The themes covered in the novel are connected to its form. Both contribute to the novel's inquiry into the nature of

beauty and aesthetic experience. Humility is not only the strategy recommended to characters in the plot, but it is also the strategy followed by the novel itself in its philosophical investigation. As a novel which inquires philosophically about the details of the universe rather than asserting a complete philosophic system, it is able to navigate an entire landscape of perspectives. To fully account for how *Hitchhiker* explores the aesthetic question we need to have a look at the literary projects in which the novel participates. We need to look at its particular brand of humor, at how it fits and breaks genre conventions, and how it relates to literary currents that have preceded and surrounded it.

Hitchhiker has value both as a work of philosophical fiction, and as a work of popular entertainment. Even though this thesis argues the case that *Hitchhiker* is a work of philosophical fiction, it does not ignore that it is first and foremost a work of entertainment fiction. The jokes were Adams' goal. The author is on record as saying that his ideas 'come from the logic of jokes, and any relation they bear to anything in the real world is usually completely coincidental'.⁸⁶ He even tried to discourage anyone who would from writing a thesis about the philosophical themes in *Hitchhiker*, on the basis that it wasn't worth it.⁸⁷ But disregarding its philosophical insights would be a disservice to the novel itself, as well as to its readers. Philosophy is part of the entertainment of *Hitchhiker*, and jokes are part of its philosophical discourse. Philosophy and jokes are symbiotic in the novel, whose participation in aesthetic projects highlight and serve the novel's philosophical exploration, and whose philosophical exploration also adds depth to the entertainment value of the book.

⁸⁶ Aberdein, 2012:229

⁸⁷ Joll, 2012:8-9.

Hitchhiker shows us that there is a close link between humor and philosophy. Of course, this is not a new revelation. Many works share *Hitchhiker's* fruitful mix of comedy and philosophy.⁸⁸ Some scholars have suggested that the two are structurally related. Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klein write:

'The construction and payoff of jokes and the construction and payoff of philosophical concepts are made out of the same stuff. They tease the mind in similar ways. That is because philosophy and jokes proceed from the same impulse: to confound our sense of the way things are, to flip our worlds upside down, and to ferret out hidden, often uncomfortable, truths about life. What the philosopher calls an insight, the gagster calls a zinger.'⁸⁹

Cathcart and Klein suggest that jokes are simply an overlooked methodology for philosophical thought. There is support for this amongst philosophers, some of whom have acknowledged the philosophic potential of jokes in different words. Ludwig Wittgenstein, for example, is reported to have averred that 'a serious and philosophical work could be written that would consist entirely of jokes'.⁹⁰ I am not convinced that all jokes are philosophical, but *Hitchhiker's* particular brand of comedy certainly is.

⁸⁸ Unfortunately, there is not enough space to cover those other works, but the interested reader is directed to other books of similar composition, such as Robert Sheckley's *Dimension of Miracles* (1968) or BBC's *Red Dwarf* series (1988-99). These science fiction satires are clearly works of philosophical fiction, utilizing many of the same devices and commenting on many of the same themes as *Hitchhiker*.

⁸⁹ Cathcart & Klein, 2007:2.

⁹⁰ Aberdeen, 2012:230.

Hitchhiker's Pythonesque logic of jokes is the particular brand I am referring to. It is the subversion of expectations that I detailed in part one of this thesis (p. 36-37), combined with the philosophical depth that I have detailed in the chapters that is *Hitchhiker's* remarkable brand of comedy. The first part of this resembles what Simon Critchley calls the incongruity principle. It suggests laughter to be the result of incongruity between knowledge or expectance and actual happenings.⁹¹ This principle covers some of the one-liners in *Hitchhiker*, like the following example where Ford attempts to prepare Arthur for going into hyperspace: "It's unpleasantly like being drunk." "What's so unpleasant about being drunk?" "You ask a glass of water" (41). The joke revolves around the expectation that the simile is referring to an idiomatic use of the phrase 'being drunk', while in fact it is referring to a very literal use of the phrase in the transitive sense that we are simply not used to hearing. The one-liner effectively sets up our expectation and then breaks it. The same effect of subverting our expectations can be reached if we correctly assess the reference of the set-up, but the punchline is exaggerated, as we see in quotes like 'that's just the way the cookie gets completely stomped on and obliterated' (686). Critchley's point, however, is that jokes that follow this principle may have a critical function. Jokes are seen as 'a play upon form, where what is played with are the accepted structures of a given society [. Jokes can] thus have a "critical function"'.⁹² That is why this structure of joke can be effectively used in satire.

Andrew Aberdein introduces a new concept which can explain the second part of *Hitchhiker's* logic of jokes. The Judo Principle, as he calls it, is taking a problem and turning it on its head in order to have it resolve itself. The Infinite Improbability Drive was created on

⁹¹ Critchley, 2002:10.

⁹² Critchley, 2002:10.

this principle. It was infinitely improbable that Arthur and Ford be rescued from the endless vacuum of space, so, in order to save them, Adams takes that infinite improbability and turns it around on itself by creating a drive that works on exactly the principle that makes their rescue unlikely. The drive becomes the basis of a substantial comic bit. It initially follows the incongruity principle of jokes, but it has an added twist with profound philosophical implications.⁹³ The logic of *Hitchhiker* jokes is a play with our expectations as well as with philosophical possibility. It is with this synthesis of structures that *Hitchhiker* can be said to have a particular brand of jokes. By breaking our expectations and turning problems around on themselves, jokes bypass our insistence on a particular structure of reality and allow us to see reality differently. This may lead to apparent absurdity, but it also provides a fertile ground for a philosophical inquiry. Aberdein writes:

‘Quite often there are things that you can only say as jokes, [...] Common sense logic is too unreliable for practical use. It cannot be repaired, so we must learn to avoid its most common malfunctions. Humor plays a special role in learning and communicating about such matters [...] Productive thinking depends on knowing how to use Analogy and Metaphor. But analogies are often false, and metaphors misleading [...] This is why humor is so concerned with the nonsensical.’⁹⁴

⁹³ As were covered in Chapter 3 (p. 75).

⁹⁴ Aberdein, 2012:229-230.

Now that we have seen how *Hitchhiker* jokes are structured we may see what broader aesthetic they serve together. In terms of literary genre, *Hitchhiker* may be classified as a science fiction satire with elements of postmodernism and existentialism.

As a work of comedy, satire is the novel's most prominent feature, but science fiction is central to the novel's satirical type. Comedy is the effect that Adams wants to achieve, and satire is one way that ambition comes to expression in literature. Comedy and satire are married. They are both playful approaches to the world and reality. The point of satire is to reveal flaws and vices through ridicule, and jokes 'make fun of our tendency to unthinkingly identify with the attitudes and values of our social group by showing us exaggerated instances.'⁹⁵ Some of *Hitchhiker's* satire works through a device called the fantastical mirror, and science fiction is the perfect frame for this device. In science fiction we may 'find that many of the eccentric alien races they encounter epitomize some particular human folly such as greed, pretentiousness etc., rather in the manner of Gulliver's Travels.'⁹⁶ The Vogons, Mice, Magratheans, and Golgafrinchams all enlighten us to ethical and political matters, by showing us an exaggerated version of human follies. Science fiction thus serves the function of an 'alien lens through which we can critically assess our own society', by coming face to face with ourselves at a distance.⁹⁷ Adams explains in an interview: 'I like the aspect of [science fiction] which turns the telescope round, by letting you stand so far outside things and see them from a totally different perspective. That's what I try to do in *Hitchhiker*, and that's what I think the best science fiction does. Science fiction that's just about people wandering around

⁹⁵ Cathcart and Klein, 2007:119.

⁹⁶ This quote is taken from the original plot synopsis for *Hitchhiker*, written by Adams himself, and reproduced in Gaiman, *Don't Panic*, 1988:194.

⁹⁷ Parrinder, 1979 in van der Colff, 2010:66.

in space ships shooting each other with ray guns is very dull. I like it when it enables you to do fairly radical reinterpretations of human experience, just to show all the different interpretations that can be put on apparently fairly simple and commonplace events. That I find fun.⁹⁸ Adams explains that he likes science fiction for its satirical function. But science fiction offers more than just the fantastical mirror.

Science fiction provides the ground for perspectival shifts on a massive scale. Without resorting to fantasy, where comments on reality could only ever hope to be hypothetical, science fiction allows the reader to transcend their immediate reality, and thus to understand their size and place in the universe (without the inconvenience of *total* perspective, of course). The prime example of a perspective shift brought on by the science fiction of *Hitchhiker*, is the inverted relationship that we see between mice and man. Because mice are small and man is big, man always assumed that he had superior intelligence. But as it turned out, mice had the ability to transcend dimensions and were cleverly manipulating man to participate in *their* experiment (109-110). The great quantity of such funny and arresting perspective shifts defines both the comedy and the philosophical inquiry of *Hitchhiker*. By calling very deep assumptions into doubt, perspective shifts unite satirical play with philosophy.

Hitchhiker can partly be classified as science fiction, but it is also a parody of the science fiction genre. Staples of the genre like space travel, time travel, galactic empires, arrant technological development, planetary catastrophes, and so on are treated in a comedic fashion rather than with the seriousness that characterize science fiction proper.⁹⁹ Alexander Pawlak and Nicholas Joll put forth four science fiction tropes that are directly parodied in

⁹⁸ Adams with Shircore, 'Douglas Adams: the First and Last Tapes' quoted in Pawlak and Joll 2012:246-7.

⁹⁹ Booker and Thomas, 2009:104.

Hitchhiker: (1) Arthur and Trillian are ‘the last of their kind,’ (2) the journey from planet to planet on a space ship make the novel a ‘space opera’, (3) ‘robots’ are parodied when they are outfitted with ‘genuine people personalities’, and (4) scientific ‘explanations’ are parodied, in for example the explanations of the workings of the Bistromathic and Infinite Improbability drives.¹⁰⁰ However, the parody of *Hitchhiker* is not restricted to science fiction. The novel parodies philosophy, too, as we saw in the debate between Majikthise and Vroomfondel, and religion, e.g. with the creation myth of the Great Green Arkleseizure (149), and the second coming of the prophet Zarquon at the end of the universe (241-2). All these parodies of genres and fields work together to serve a larger pattern of satirical expression, which is essentially an aesthetic of philosophical comedy.

The influence of certain philosophical currents in literature needs also be mentioned to have a full understanding of *Hitchhiker’s* aesthetic. Importantly, *Hitchhiker* draws on many of the staples of postmodernism. Think for example about the book within the book which carried the same title as the novel itself, the Hitchhiker’s Guide. Or the man in the shack who amuses himself by putting marks on his paper with the sharp end of a pencil, and who secretly controls everything in the universe, just like the author of the book. With these motifs the novel exhibits an awareness of its own fictionality, which is a staple characteristic of postmodernism.¹⁰¹ The influence of postmodernism is also apparent from the philosophical exploration that we have seen in the chapters about the fundamental categories. The cessation of logic that we considered in chapter 1 is a theme which fits Jean-Francois Lyotard’s

¹⁰⁰ Pawlak and Joll, 2012:239-40.

¹⁰¹ Butler, 2003:137.

definition of postmodernity, where rationality is no longer a valid basis of social institutions.¹⁰² As we considered in chapter 3, the metaphysical consequences of the cessation of logic allows for events and activities that would otherwise be considered impossible. The novel particularly invests in the recreational activity of flying (363), which according to Brian McHale is a postmodernist leitmotif.¹⁰³

McHale considers that science fiction is a genre which belongs to the postmodernist paradigm: 'SF is openly and avowedly ontological, i.e., like "mainstream" postmodernist writing it is self-consciously "world-building" fiction, laying bare the process of fictional world-making itself.'¹⁰⁴ As it builds a universe and explores its logical and metaphysical possibilities, there are certainly postmodernist tendencies in *Hitchhiker*, but it is not a fully-fledged postmodernist text. It still exhibits the modernist characteristics of a focus on epistemology, and the existentialist awareness of a void at the heart of society.¹⁰⁵ The quest for the ultimate question and ultimate answer could be seen as a quest for a master-narrative. The fact that the ultimate question is elusive is a postmodern trait of the text, but the fact that it may in fact exist, in some quantum-form that is beyond our epistemic capabilities, indicates a denial of postmodernism, and an encouragement to seek the master narrative anyway. *Hitchhiker* thus declares the aesthetic value of the philosophical search. Postmodernism is a period of

¹⁰² Lyotard in Butler 2003:139.

¹⁰³ McHale cites a great number of examples from postmodernist texts where free fall, suspension in mid-air, or aspirations to weightlessness in other forms give an impression that reality is evaporating away to be replaced by something incomprehensible; something '*lighter* than reality'. The theory of weightlessness as a motif of postmodernism goes back to Jameson who in 1991 wrote about what he calls "a kind of anti-gravity of the postmodern", presumably a sense which ultimately derives from consumer culture where solidity of identity is replaced by the 'weightless' simulacra of products. McHale, 2015:139-140, 142.

¹⁰⁴ McHale in Butler, 2003:145-6.

¹⁰⁵ Butler, 2003:140.

philosophical inquiry in fiction and culture, which is mainly concerned with ontology, but *Hitchhiker* is participating in a more general investigation. It considers the postmodernist position but remains inquisitive beyond its insights. Life goes on, after all, and we have yet to reach the point where we may transcend our limitations. Until then, philosophy is valuable, as long as we can have fun with it.

Hitchhiker is not a philosophical dissertation, but a literary unit. It does not explore the five philosophical categories separately or methodically. They are connected and interrelated in the aesthetic expression of the text. Each part of the aesthetic serves the function of tying different categories of thought together in the whole. Adams' particular logic of jokes is the basis of the exploration into the fundamental categories. The inquiries into logic and epistemology start with the ideas that our expectations about what is rational and what we have knowledge about may be subverted, as they can be in jokes. Science fiction allows for a hypothetical approach to philosophical exploration. It is the chosen genre in which the inquiry is manifested as fiction. This grants the text the transcendence of perspectives that we need to explore reality beyond our subjective beliefs and desires. Postmodernism is a literary relative of the metaphysical position that I have called cosmic absurdity. By using postmodernist motifs, the novel thus poses questions about metaphysics. The aesthetic of satire is the connection that ties the categories that deal with values together with the inquiry into the fundamental categories. Satire enables playful inquiry, which makes the novel resistant to bombast. The satire remains humbly inquisitive regarding philosophical matters, despite its many passages of critical outpouring against the follies of mankind. *Hitchhiker* also significantly draws on existentialism, but it is an ethic, more than it is an aesthetic, and will be shown in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: How ought we to behave? Ethics in *Hitchhiker*

What behavior is valuable? This question is far more often answered in terms of personal attributes than in terms of ethics. The answer is also relative, depending on subjective, contextual factors. The following paragraph illustrates a contrast between the values and self-perceptions of men and dolphins:

'[O]n the planet Earth, man had always assumed that he was more intelligent than dolphins because he had achieved so much – the wheel, New York, wars and so on – while all the dolphins had ever done was muck about in the water having a good time. But conversely, the dolphins had always believed that they were far more intelligent than man – for precisely the same reason' (105).

The above quote has the reader question what constitutes intelligent behavior. Man's behavior of long-term planning and executing of those plans (to create inventions, skyscrapers and grand scale infrastructure, strategies of conquest, and technologies of destruction) is contrasted with the behavior of dolphins, who for the most part are content to enjoy what the world offers them in the moment. The quote is clearly satirical. It highlights man's hubris by comparing his self-image to that of the dolphins. By directing this kind of criticism towards man's delusions regarding the greatness of his own behavior, the novel opens an exploration of what kind of behavior we should value. Through its satire, *Hitchhiker* gives many examples of how not to behave. We should not behave like the Vogons, or the Golgafrinchams for example. But how should we behave? Should we try to achieve something, or just muck about in the water and have a good time? What is the best course of action for determining what behavior to pursue? In addition to its satire of man's follies, these questions define

Hitchhiker's inquiry into the category of ethics. An answer to these questions would constitute an ethical system. However, *Hitchhiker* does not conclude with the assertion of any specific ethical system. That does not mean that it treats all courses of action as equally valid. *Hitchhiker's* satire does point to ethical and political right and wrong ways of going about things. But they are only vaguely stated through comedy. In this chapter, we will take a close look at *Hitchhiker's* exploration into the category of ethics. This exploration navigates between what Adams sees as the need for a certain behavior in his contemporary world, and the Universe that is concurrently explored in the novel, which appears to be resistant to principled systems of codification and in which the struggles for ultimate knowledge and ultimate meaning appear to be futile.

The vaguely stated ethic that is advocated by *Hitchhiker* can be understood as a call for unprincipled behavior, with a generalized sympathy towards others and the environment. Unprincipled behavior does not mean completely random behavior, nor is it to say that unprincipled behavior is necessarily good behavior. It means that if we want to achieve the good, we must follow the course of action that we are realistically equipped to handle. What we are realistically equipped to handle is explored with reference to the questions that define the fundamental categories of philosophy. *Hitchhiker* continually maintains the reference to the fundamental categories in questions of ethics. In chapters 1 and 2 we saw that our knowledge is limited and our rationality is practical, and in chapter 3 we saw that the reality we think we know is a theoretical reality which can sometimes be far from how we perceive it through our practical rationality. The alternative position is explored in the novel, but it does not lead anywhere. Since we cannot experience reality objectively, we can never be quite certain that a principle of action is the correct one, in anything but a subjective sense of the word. Our characters are continually let down by appeals to authority: Arthur speculates

about the possibility of a being outside the universe (127), Zaphod meets the man who rules the universe (279), and at the end of *So Long*, God's final message to his creation is revealed (610). If these are divine authorities they do not provide any answer as to what way is the correct way of living. Divine authority may have created the principles that govern the universe, but it has not dictated to lifekind how to go about their business. As far as God or any other metaphysical given is concerned, some principle may be the objectively correct way of going about things, but because we are faced with uncertainty as a primary circumstance it is probable that it is more beneficial to adopt a pragmatic approach to ethics.

The character Tricia McMillan summarizes *Hitchhiker's* exploration of pragmatism in two passages. First, she states a principle that she has learned to live by. "If there's one thing that life's taught me," said Tricia, "it's never go back for your bag" (653). Shortly thereafter, she silently reflects that she only follows the principle sometimes, making her approach to the lesson in practice a pragmatic one: 'As she dabbed each tiny plastic cup into her eyes, she reflected that if there was one thing life had taught her, it was that there are some times when you do not go back for your bag and other times when you do. It had yet to teach her to distinguish between the two types of occasions' (654). This example shows how *Hitchhiker* explores both of the alternative approaches to ethics. It does not definitely conclude that pragmatism is the best approach, but it states that it is at least one character's preferred approach as long as life is governed by uncertainty. It is important to note, however, that pragmatism is only an approach to ethics, and not an ethic in itself. Pragmatism is not a position on the question of values, but an approach to achieving valuable behavior.

Hitchhiker also explores ethical content. Side by side with the premise of pragmatism, the novel encourages a generalized ethic of kindness and environmentalism. This ethic is not stated directly, but it is evident through satire. We have already seen several satirical passages

that deal with the destructive tendencies of man through the lenses of Vogons and Golgafrinchams. Another example illustrates a nuance of the environmentalist concern. It shows that it is not only outright nastiness and purposeful destruction that is the problem, but also that man's way of life has hidden consequences on nature.

'On Earth – when there had been an Earth, before it was demolished to make way for a new hyperspace bypass – the problem had been with cars. The disadvantages involved in pulling lots of black sticky slime from out of the ground where it had been safely hidden out of harm's way, turning it into tar to cover the land with, smoke to fill the air with and pouring the rest into the sea, all seemed to outweigh the advantages of being able to get more quickly from one place to another – particularly when the place you arrived at had probably become, as a result of this, very similar to the place you had left, i.e., covered with tar, full of smoke and short of fish' (257).

Even though the negative consequences seem to completely outweigh the positive here, people continue their behavior. *Hitchhiker* does not tell us directly that the environment has intrinsic value, but it does criticize the irrationality behind its destruction. *Hitchhiker* does not teach what exactly to value, but as we saw in chapter 4, the practices that are most worthy of criticism are those that are not based on values (p. 82). Not intentional evil, but banal immorality. In other words, thoughtless actions which lead to the meaningless detriment of other beings.

The ethical exploration of *Hitchhiker* is thus tied to the concept of meaning. This brings the exploration into the realm of existentialism. Existentialism is a philosophical system whose ethic is hugely influential to the inquiry of the novel. Its ethic is based on the premise of

existential absurdity, a concept which is formed by the collective writings of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. According to Camus, absurdity arises from the clash between the longing for ultimate knowledge and a fundamentally unintelligible universe.¹⁰⁶ In chapter 2, we saw that this clash is present in *Hitchhiker*. The consequence Camus draws from the fact that the universe is unresponsive to the desires of man, is that it is indifferent to the existence of man. In other words, life is meaningless in the cosmic perspective. The existentialist ethic, then, is to defy the meaninglessness of life in the universe and create meaning in subjective terms of happiness instead.¹⁰⁷ While Camus proposes an epistemological argument for the existentialist ethic, Sartre provides an argument from metaphysics. According to Sartre, life is ontologically defined as being surrounded by nothingness.¹⁰⁸ The consequence of this is that man is radically free to adopt any attitude towards life, and it is his own responsibility to choose an attitude that fulfils his desire for meaning. Existential absurdity is life's facticity. It cannot be overcome, but we are free to choose how we react to it. In the face of a futile and absurd universe, the existentialist ethic says that one must choose happiness, or else one will succumb to despair.

Hitchhiker and the existentialists explore many of the same questions. The questions stated at the beginning of this chapter have been essential to existentialists, and insight from existentialism has significant presence in the novel. As we see, existentialists are boldly assertive in their ontology, and their ethics follow from those assertions. Existentialists assert the radical freedom of man, and the utter meaninglessness of the universe. From these

¹⁰⁶ Kind, 2012:86.

¹⁰⁷ Kind, 2012, 90.

¹⁰⁸ Van der Colff, 2010:35.

premises, man is in a desperate situation. Sartre (drawing on Martin Heidegger's concept of *geworfenheit*, or 'thrownness') calls it being "thrown into nothingness".¹⁰⁹ One scene in *Hitchhiker's* illustrates the existentialist ontology particularly well. The scene of the sperm whale which is called into existence by the Infinite Improbability Drive shows both how little influence one has over the facticity of one's absurd existence, and the futile struggle to come to terms with the universe. The passage is reproduced in its entirety below.

'Against all probability a sperm whale had suddenly been called into existence several miles above the surface of an alien planet. And since this is not a naturally tenable position for a whale, this poor innocent creature had very little time to come to terms with its identity as a whale before it then had to come to terms with not being a whale any more. This is a complete record of its thought from the moment it began its life till the moment it ended:

"Ah...! What's happening? it thought. Er, excuse me, who am I? Hello? Why am I here? What's my purpose in life? What do I mean by who am I? Calm down, get a grip now... oh! this is an interesting sensation, what is it? It's a sort of... yawning, tingling sensation in my... my... well, I suppose I'd better start finding names for things if I want to make any headway in what for the sake of what I shall call an argument I shall call the world, so let's call it my stomach. Good. Ooooh, it's getting quite strong. And hey, what about this whistling roaring sound going past what I'm suddenly going to call my head? Perhaps I can call that... wind! Is that a good name? It'll do... perhaps I can find a better name for it later when I've found out what it's for. It must be something very important

¹⁰⁹ Van der Colff, 2008.125.

because there certainly seems to be a hell of a lot of it. Hey! What's this thing? This... let's call it a tail – yeah, tail. Hey! I can really thrash it about pretty good, can't I? Wow! Wow! That feels great! Doesn't seem to achieve very much but I'll probably find out what it's for later on. Now, have I built up any coherent picture of things yet? No. Never mind, hey, this is really exciting, so much to find out about, so much to look forward to, I'm quite dizzy with anticipation... Or is it the wind? There really is a lot of that now, isn't there? And wow! Hey! What's this thing suddenly coming towards me very fast? Very, very fast. So big and flat and round, it needs a big wide-sounding name like... ow... ound... round... ground! That's it! That's a good name – ground! I wonder if it will be friends with me?"

And the rest, after a sudden wet thud, was silence' (90-91).

The scene of the whale is a microcosm of the existentialist view of life entirely. Man is called into existence, and "falls" through the universe, making names for things along the way, trying to understand the world, and ultimately vanishing back out of existence.

Luckily, man is free to adopt any attitude towards life. From an absurd situation like this, man can choose to succumb to despair, or to embrace his freedom and create his own happiness. Van der Colff argues that Adams adheres to the existentialist position that life is absurd, and that one must face the absurdity with defiance.¹¹⁰ To show that Adams' universe is completely absurd, she makes an interesting connection between Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and the scene from *Life*, where Marvin meets the mattress Zem on the planet

¹¹⁰ Van der Colff, 2008:128.

Squornshellous Zeta.¹¹¹ ‘Nothing moved. There was silence. [...] Nothing moved. Again, silence. Nothing moved. Silence. Nothing moved. Very often on Squornshellous Zeta, whole days would go on like this, and this was indeed going to be one of them’ (349). This is the scene where “nothingness” most prominently features as a theme in the novel. The mattresses are said to ‘voon’ and ‘floplop’, which of course are the nonsensical inventions of Adams, contributing to the absurdity of the situation. With this link to absurdism, the universe of *Hitchhiker* seems to fit the bill for existential meaninglessness. On this pretext, van der Colff sorts characters from the novel into categories based on which existentialist choice they make; Ford and Arthur are the Sisyphus Heroes who manage to rejoice in life despite recognizing its absurdity, while the existential elevators at the Hitchhiker’s Guide offices (178) and Marvin the Paranoid Android are the nihilist nemeses who fear the future and sulk about their knowledge of the absurdity of life.¹¹² It follows that the novel argues the case of a “heroic” existential ethic. However, it is not a given that all these characters recognize that life is absurd, nor that their choices are decidedly strategies to deal with the absurdity of life.

In the novel, Slartibartfast is the most articulate conveyor of the existentialist ethic:

“‘Perhaps I’m old and tired,” he continued “but I always think that the chances of finding out what really is going on are so absurdly remote that the only thing to do is to say hang the sense of it and just keep yourself occupied. Look at me: I design coastlines. I got an award for Norway. [...] Where’s the sense in that?” he said. “None that I’ve been able to make out’ (127).

¹¹¹ Van der Colff, 2008:134.

¹¹² Van der Colff, 2008.

Slartibartfast advocates the view that the universe is, if not fundamentally absurd, then at least apparently absurd, and that one may choose to distract oneself from this apparent absurdity. There may be no ultimate meaning of life, but you can set out some projects for yourself, and satisfy your own need for meaning that way. Slartibartfast is distinguished for his achievement in creating the fjords. It is a fleeting and meaningless award in the grand scale of the universe, but it is a distinction that at least has some value to Slartibartfast himself. Compare Slartibartfast's position to the question with which I introduced this chapter: what is the difference, really, in achieving an award for building fjords, and mucking about with the water? If as far as we know life is absurd, then achievement and mucking about are equally valuable behaviors. Humans, however, do not value both behaviors equally.

Arthur periodically follows Slartibartfast's advice. When Arthur finds himself in what appears to be his home on Earth, for example, he manages to content himself with his surroundings, and distract himself from all the absurdity he has encountered on his journey through space. 'He had decided how to deal with the mass of contradictions his return journey precipitated, which was that he would simply brazen it out' (510). Arthur displays an indifference to the rest of the world as long as he can enjoy himself. This, however, is not a behavior that Arthur values in other beings. When he encounters the Bartledanians, a species utterly without expectations, hopes, or desires regarding life or the universe, he comments that their indifference to life is unnatural.

'On the one hand he could only recognize and respect what he learned about the Bartledanian view of the Universe, which was that the Universe was what the Universe

was, take it or leave it. On the other hand he could not help but feel that not to desire anything, not ever to wish or to hope, was just not natural' (709).

The Bartledanians are completely indifferent to the world. Their lives do not aspire to meaning, they do not even value the pretense of meaning. Arthur's encounter with the Bartledanians enlightens us to the human need for direction. Their existence, which is truly absurd, does not inspire a behavior that Arthur can live with.

There are additional problems with the existentialist proposal to pursue subjective enjoyment. It seems that enjoyment is not a sufficient criterion for determining the value of behavior. At least, it is difficult to consider as morally good those who act in terms of entirely subjective values. In one scene, Arthur refuses to eat an animal that itself wants to be eaten. Arthur finds the behavior of the animal repulsive (225). The animal explains that it has been bred specifically for the purpose of wanting to be eaten, so that its death will provide it with utmost pleasure, but it cannot convince Arthur to eat it. "I just don't want to eat an animal that's standing there inviting me to," said Arthur. "It's heartless." "Better than eating an animal that doesn't want to be eaten," said Zaphod' (225). The scene presents us with quite an ethical conundrum. The suppliers to Milliways, the restaurant at the end of the universe, have solved an ethical problem by removing the utilitarian downside to eating meat. Zaphod states that it is better to eat an animal that wants to be eaten than one who does not, and we know from other sections of the book that Arthur is not in principle opposed to eating meat, and yet he refuses to eat this specific animal. Arthur does not respect what the animal considers to be its purpose. He cannot bring himself to value the choice of an animal that does not value its own life. An animal who wants to be eaten is "not natural", just like the Bartledanian world view is "not natural".

The problems of an ethic based on entirely subjective values is clearer when the ethic leads to destructive behavior. In a completely different setting, the story visits the ‘longest and most destructive party ever’, a party which has been going on for four generations and from which still no one shows any signs of leaving (410). The party is the epitome of mindless self-indulgence; of enjoyment without any regard for the rest of the world. Over the course of the generations, the party has taken to the sky and armed itself, and transitioned from ‘full time cocktail-party to part time raiding party’. ‘They looted, they raided, they held whole cities to ransom for fresh supplies of cheese, crackers, guacamole, spareribs and wine and spirits that would now get piped aboard from floating tankers’ (411). The airship of drunken partygoers is a “ship of fools”, an organization where everyone steers according to their own discretion, without regard for the authority of others.¹¹³ The party is an organization “steered” by nothing but the subjective discretion of the fools aboard it. Their ethic aims at no other value than to please their own hedonistic desires. Is this, then, the inadvertent consequence of the existentialist ethic?

The ship of fools is a symbol of the vanity of mankind. Participating in the party is to indulge in what philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer called “the vanity of existence”. Man suffers from delusions of grandeur. He thinks his own life is of great concern, despite the fact that he is an inconsequential speck in the grand scale of the universe (194, 196).¹¹⁴ This delusion is the “vanity of existence”.¹¹⁵ Man thinks he is more intelligent than the dolphin, but he only conceives intelligence in terms of his own values. Man thinks he is master of his own

¹¹³ Plato’s *Republic* Book VI.

¹¹⁴ Schopenhauer, 2015:259.

¹¹⁵ Kind, 2012:78-9.

destiny, but he is only a pawn in the experiment of mice (109-110). The insignificance of man's world brackets the novel. The novel both begins and ends with the destruction of the earth, for no other reason than an error of the galactic bureaucracy. Slartibartfast reflects on the futility of the entire planet: "'Ten million years, Earthman, can you conceive of that kind of time span? A galactic civilization could grow from a single worm five times over in that time. Gone.'" He paused. "Well, that's bureaucracy for you," he added' (127). With this framework, ethics itself become absurd. If man is inconsequential, then his behavior doesn't matter, and his morality is meaningless. But this is hardly the case argued by *Hitchhiker*. The novel only explores the ethical implications of the subjective presumptions that man lives by today.

Man seems too far removed from reality, into his own subjectivity, to determine what behavior is valuable to anyone but himself. So, who is really to say that achievements are better than mucking about? Mucking about is perhaps the most valuable behavior as it avoids the pretense that actions have meanings which may transcend the momentary experience of subjects. If on the other hand, we desire a meaning beyond ourselves, we may find better it through achievement. *Hitchhiker* does not give a single, clear answer. It shows us that we are not realistically equipped to discover any ultimate truth, but that we may still approach life with a humble attitude, and that approaching ethics with a great deal of pragmatism may be beneficial. If we adopt humility, rather than vanity, the world might be a more colorful and less lonely place in the future.¹¹⁶ And before we panic over the limitations that make the world appear absurd, we may find comfort in God's Final Message to His Creation, written in fire on the side of a mountain on the planet Quentulus Quazgar: 'We apologize for the inconvenience' (610).

¹¹⁶ Adams and Carwardine, 1990:206.

Conclusion

In the preceding chapters I have examined how *Hitchhiker* explores philosophical questions in terms of the five classical categories of philosophy. In order to qualify *Hitchhiker* as a philosophical novel on the terms popularly acknowledged through the example of *Atlas Shrugged*, I needed to show what components make up a philosophical narrative, and show how Adams addresses each point, even though his voice is different from the clear cut and blatantly didactic style of Ayn Rand. In my discussion of the five categories, there are many scenes and topics from the novel that I could not find room for. I would have liked to mention the epistemological consequences of S.E.P. (Somebody Else's Problem) fields (334), the metaphysical implications of Hotblack Desiato's supernatural response (240) or the political implications of the London lizard elections (597).¹¹⁷ There are also philosophical positions apparent in the novel, for which I could have argued. I could have talked about the development of technologies like genuine people personality robots or the Guide Mark Two's Reverse Temporal Engineering as explorations of the interface between mind and reality, or I could have talked about Adams as a proponent of ethics of virtue. But I did not elaborate on these positions, not because they wouldn't be interesting, but because they are not substantial enough, as far as I can tell, that these discussions would be representative of the

¹¹⁷ The S.E.P. is a field which cloaks the *Bistromath* so that anyone who sees it will be unaware of it. Their brains will dismiss it as "somebody else's problem". The cloak of the *Bistromath* plays on a feature of the mind, and it would be interesting to have seen how this feature works in life generally. Many things, probably, are dismissed as "somebody else's problem", contributing further to the fundamental epistemic limitations of man's capacity for knowledge. Hotblack Desiato is a Rockstar who spends a year dead for tax reasons. Being dead, he, quite naturally, cannot respond when Ford approaches him to catch up on old times. Supernaturally, however, he can. This attests to the existence of a supernatural realm, but we hear nothing more about it in the novel. The London lizard elections is a quite clear satire of party politics. In an alternative version of London, on the second Earth, everyone votes for one lizard to get into political office. They do this even though they don't like any of the lizard candidates, because if they don't vote, the wrong lizard might get elected. Strategic voting thus leads to a game theoretical absurdity; because voting for any lizard goes against the values of the voters. The lesser of two evils argument seems counterproductive when it goes on forever.

novel's philosophical content. *Hitchhiker* is a novel which engages in philosophy in an inquisitive manner. It does not assert a complete system of philosophy. It does not explore all philosophical questions. Yet, as I have shown, it engages with philosophical questions in every category. That makes it worthy of acknowledgement as a philosophical novel.

It might come across that I have tried to read the novel as more than what the novel was intended to be. Overanalyzing is easy. Adams once said: 'When you write something [...] you can place the tiniest piece of information you have so that it sounds like the tip of the iceberg of a vast amount of knowledge. And very often it isn't.'¹¹⁸ Instead of being an attempt to explore philosophical ideas, the ideas that are apparent in the novel could have naturally emerged when Adams' comedy in the satirical style entered the novelistic genre, without any intention of deeper significance. As Benjamin Moser wrote, 'A novel with ideas is one thing: Any novel has plenty. A novel *of* ideas is something else.'¹¹⁹ And if I am wrong in my thesis, am I not breaching a code of ethics myself by pursuing it? In an article entitled 'The Ethics of Ethics and Literature' Mark Kingwell asks the question, 'Is the subjection of novels to a rubric of ideas, however loose and in itself virtuous, a good thing?'¹²⁰ Surely, the fiction itself was Adams' goal. I do not propose that anything but fiction was Adams' end as a fiction writer. He does not attempt to be a philosopher. If he wanted to, I am sure he could have been that as well. I argue only that the novel has a philosophical component, and that it is philosophical in its content. What I have described here is the way in which it is that. Its philosophical exploration is based on the logic of jokes. As a satire it has an element of instruction. Satire is

¹¹⁸ Joll, 2012:8-9.

¹¹⁹ Moser, 2015.

¹²⁰ Kingwell, 2014.

a didactic genre, and this makes the novel assertive at least of an inquiry into blameworthy conceptions that exist in the world. *Hitchhiker's* style of jokes is subversive. In the same manner, *Hitchhiker* is subversive when it comes to the established positions of classical philosophy. It does not directly argue against the positions, but it is generally critical of philosophy, of commonly held assumptions and absurd relativity in all areas of thought. The philosophical aspect does not diminish the novel as an aesthetic work. Nor does the literary aspect diminish the novel as an inquiry into philosophical topics.

Could it be the case that *Hitchhiker* is meant as a satire of philosophy, rather than philosophy itself? Adams' intention to satirize philosophy is quite clear. Consider how the novel satirizes the quest for ultimate truth, and how the philosophers in the narrative become worried for their job security once science may present an ultimate answer once and for all (115). It has been suggested that Adams' position is anti-philosophical; he thinks that science may in fact be able to answer all philosophical conundrums eventually.¹²¹ After all, only an accident of bureaucracy prevented the question to the ultimate answer from already being generated on Earth (127). But none of this makes the novel itself any less philosophical. Even though *Hitchhiker* heavily satirizes philosophy, the satire of *Hitchhiker* goes hand in hand with philosophy. Philosophy is above all else concerned with the love and pursuit of truth. And a function of satire is to point the light of criticism on a misguided reality. From satire of philosophy, then, *Hitchhiker* presents philosophy *as* satire. It is a particular quirk of philosophy that is worthy of criticism and ridicule, namely the absurd relativism which follows when no questions can be ultimately answered, for threat of job security to the philosophers. There are other scenes which also feed this satirical point.

¹²¹ Joll, 2012:10, and in chapter 2 (p. 56).

'Take, first, the "qualified poet" who testified at a trial that "beauty was truth, truth beauty and hoped thereby to prove that the guilty party was Life itself for failing to be either beautiful or true". Consider also what "Man" does once he has used the Babel fish to establish to his satisfaction that there's no God. Excited by this result, Man goes on, "for an encore", "to prove that black is white and gets himself killed on the next zebra crossing". These two passages suggest a philosophical view in its own right. That view is an aversion to philosophies that lose their grasp on reality by being too simplistic or too complacent.'¹²²

The satire of philosophy that we see in *Hitchhiker* is motivated by the same factors which motivate philosophy: a love of truth, and, following this, a desire to seek answers about life, the universe, and everything.

Adams is concerned with philosophy for the same reason that he is concerned with science. He loves truth. Comedy is the shape in which he tells, or questions, the truth. Philosophy is also concerned with truth.¹²³ As literary scholars we are not concerned with truth *prima facie*, but rather with how what the popular imagination regards as truth propagates in cultural products. Philosophical fiction becomes an arena of intersection, where the cultural imagination embarks on an exploration into truth itself. As a literary scholar, I have a philosophical interest in finding out how fiction reflects truth. Adams distinguished between fiction and untruth. As an atheist, reflecting on God, he once stated that God may

¹²² Pawlak and Joll, 2012:245.

¹²³ Kenny, 2010:18.

be a fiction, but not a lie, just like money is invented, but not unreal.¹²⁴ In this he echoes the saying that fiction, though it may not be historically true, is at least psychologically true. This, of course, goes for all fiction, but the novel of philosophical inquiry attempts to go beyond this. It aims not only to discover psychological truths, but to explore what is fundamentally true about life and the universe: What is rational, what is real, what are the limits of our knowledge, how do we package it all up, and how do we base an ethics on this foundation. *Hitchhiker* certainly is an investigation into these questions.

What are the insights to be gained from the philosophical inquiry of *Hitchhiker*? One insight is that our lives persist even though the universe seems absurd, and the only thing that we can do is make the best of that situation. The novel begins in a very humble and human way. 'It begins with a house' (6). The novel also states that Arthur's house is 'not a remarkable house by any means' (7), indicating the ordinariness of the man who lives there. The catalyst of the adventure through the galaxy, which the rest of the novel is set to follow, is an extraordinary event: the demolition of the house, the destruction of the earth, and the disintegration of the reality that man knows. Our journey through the galaxy begins with the man who must come to terms with that event, Arthur Dent, and his predicament is universally representative of man's philosophical predicament. To put it in existentialist terms, Arthur is 'thrown into nothingness' at the onset of the narrative, and he needs to fill that nothingness with meaning. According to existentialism, this is the premise that ontologically defines man: to create his own meaning, i.e.: to make up for himself what the universe does not provide. Rational man demands order, and if the universe is not itself ordered, then man has two options: impress upon it an order created by himself, or to stop demanding order and go mad

¹²⁴ Joll, 2012:12.

instead. The insight is not only explored in existentialist terms, however. It is a common theme in all of philosophy that reality often goes beyond the measures of our limited epistemic faculties. As a result, man declares the world itself to be absurd. It is possible that he is correct in this, but this is a question to which we do not have an answer. An assertion of absurdity is equally arrogant to an assertion of dogmatic answers. This insight therefore has ethical implications. Although humans have great capacity for arrogance, if he wishes to pursue his desire for truth, it is important instead to be humble.

From this review of *Hitchhiker* in light of the classical categories of philosophy, it is clear that the novel warrants some distinction. It both explores the fundamentals of existence, and evaluates the consequences of its findings. As a journey to discover truth and man's place in the universe, it is reflective of real-world concerns. The massive popularity of the novel is also reflective of the universal interest in a broad philosophical search, especially when it is presented with wit, humor and whimsy. Adams navigates a world of disputes among the learned when it comes to great questions. The quarrel between Vroomfondel and Majikthise reflects how difficult it can be to agree on reality (114). In a world of dogmatism, where science and increased knowledge increasingly seem to trivialize man's experience, intuition and solidarity are replaced with bureaucracy and moral ineptitude. We would instead be wise to remember the words of Ford Prefect, that "in an infinite Universe anything can happen" (275). We would be wise to remember that life is infinitely improbable, and we should value it as such. In a world that is saturated with absurdity, it is still important to be nice.

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