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0521811368 - Narrative, Religion and Science: Fundamentalism versus Irony, 1700-1999

Stephen Prickett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

*Arthur Dent, Screwtape and the mysteries  
of story-telling*

In Douglas Adams' novel, *Mostly Harmless*, which appears as volume five of his increasingly inaccurately named trilogy, *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, we find the following gnomic conversation between our nearest equivalent to a hero, Arthur Dent, and a mysterious old man who appears to be pole-squatting in another dimension on the planet Hawalius, on the outer Eastern Rim of the Galaxy. It is a planet inhabited almost entirely by oracles, seers and soothsayers – together with an inordinate number of take-away pizza shops, because most of these mystics were quite incapable of cooking for themselves. Here Arthur encounters a village composed entirely of extremely high poles surmounted by platforms. The majority turn out to be unoccupied, except for a liberal sprinkling of bird-droppings, but from one of them Arthur sees an old man on a neighbouring pole who, after a little persuasion, offers this explanation of nearly everything:

'You cannot see what I see because you see what you see. You cannot know what I know because you know what you know. What I see and what I know cannot be added to what you see and what you know because they are not of the same kind. Neither can it replace what you see and what you know, because that would be to replace yourself.'

'Hang on, can I write this down?' said Arthur, excitedly fumbling in his pocket for a pencil.

'You can pick up a copy at the spaceport,' said the old man. 'They've got racks of the stuff.'

'Oh,' said Arthur, disappointed. 'Well, isn't there anything that's perhaps a bit more specific to me?'

'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.'

Arthur looked at him doubtfully. 'Can I get that at the spaceport, too?' he said.

'Check it out,' said the old man.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Douglas Adams, *Mostly Harmless*, Heinemann, 1992, p. 83.

Cambridge University Press

0521811368 - Narrative, Religion and Science: Fundamentalism versus Irony, 1700-1999

Stephen Prickett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Though this may be standard stuff to the inhabitants of the mystic planet, it appears to be news to our everyman hero, Arthur Dent, who is clearly not well up in German Idealist philosophy.

We live in a society inundated by self-confessed story-tellers. Whereas 100, or even 50 years ago those who told the grand narratives about the world – scientists, historians and theologians – were anxious to impress us with the accuracy and authority of their knowledge, today they seem to be clamouring to be recognized as something nearer to that of village elders, the story-tellers of the tribe. Physics, declared Niels Bohr, father of the ‘Copenhagen’ interpretation of quantum theory in the 1920s and 1930s, tells us not about what is, but what we can *say* to each other concerning the world. There is no ‘scientific method’ writes Jean-François Lyotard, a scientist is before anything else a person ‘who tells stories’.<sup>2</sup> This description of the scientist is echoed by John Gribbin, the physics writer, who recently commented at the end of a lengthy discussion of quantum theory, ‘I do not claim that it is anything more than just a fiction; all scientific models are simply Kiplingesque “just-so” stories that give us a feeling that we understand what is going on.’<sup>3</sup> Startling as this might seem to the non-scientist, within their profession such views from Bohr or Gribbin are no longer controversial. Gribbin seems in fact, consciously or unconsciously, to be echoing the American biologist Stephen Jay Gould, who had used precisely the same phrase, ‘just-so stories’ – but without mentioning Kipling – in an essay in 1991.<sup>4</sup> Science, Gould claimed, was best thought of as a series of interpretative or ‘adaptive stories’ to explain certain phenomena.

Even more explicit is the philosopher and evolutionary sociobiologist, Daniel Dennett, one of Gould’s fiercest critics:

I have to tell you a story. You don’t want to be swayed by a story? Well, I *know* you won’t be swayed by a formal argument; you won’t even *listen* to a formal argument for my conclusion, so I start where I have to start.<sup>5</sup>

Nor are scientists the only ones now aspiring to a status only a few years ago abandoned to the poets, novelists and the other composers of fictions whom Plato saw as the first people who ought to be expelled from his ideal Republic. Historians, who have in truth as much right as modern-day poets to see themselves as the direct descendants of ancient bards, have

<sup>2</sup> *The Ghost in the Atom* eds. P.C.W. Davies and J.R. Brown, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> John Gribbin, *Schrödinger’s Kittens, and the Search for Reality*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995, p. 222.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, ‘Not Necessarily a Wing’ in *Bully for Brontosaurus: Reflections in Natural History*, Hutchinson Radius, 1991, p. 144.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996, p. 21.

Cambridge University Press

0521811368 - Narrative, Religion and Science: Fundamentalism versus Irony, 1700-1999

Stephen Prickett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

long been aware that they are really only telling stories about the past – hence, no doubt, their embarrassment at the wilder fantasies of their craft, such as *Braveheart*. Philosophers such as Jacques Derrida (yes – he is a professional philosopher!) have echoed the German Romantic Friedrich Schlegel in calling for philosophy to aspire to the status of literature.<sup>6</sup> More surprising is the way in which those one-time purveyors of divine truth, theologians and biblical scholars, now scramble to get aboard the story-tellers' bandwagon. A recent, and very interesting, study of the New Testament was beguilingly entitled *The New Testament as True Fiction*.<sup>7</sup> Writing in 1996, Nicholas Lash, then Norris Hulse Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, similarly takes it for granted that the primary function of both science and philosophy is to tell stories.

I am not arguing that human beings are incapable of metaphysics, or that they 'only' tell stories . . . It would be more accurate to say that the narrative comes first, and that the formal systems we construct – whether in philosophy or science – are coloured, shaped, determined, by the story-telling soil from which they spring.<sup>8</sup>

Teachers of literature like myself, accustomed to being sharply reminded, ever since Plato, that we are in the only discipline to deal with fictions as a matter of course, can be forgiven for feeling overwhelmed by the sudden popularity of our field. But it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that this new enthusiasm of other disciplines to be part of the story stems less from an innate love of literature than from a widespread belief that it might solve problems of their own – in particular the twin twentieth-century problems of subjectivity and pluralism.

At every level, our modern world is riven with conflicting descriptions and contradictory explanations. Historians differ fiercely from one another in their interpretations of the past, and, quite apart from the fact that we cannot check every fact they assert, we know that there is in the end no authoritative and final version against which they can be measured. Scientists investigating the material and biological structure of matter are swayed by historical paradigms of which they may be only partially conscious,<sup>9</sup> but they rarely address the questions of the Kantian

<sup>6</sup> Which, of course, is not the same as *equating* the two. See Derrida's 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism', in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe, Routledge, 1996, pp. 79–80.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas Templeton, *The New Testament as True Fiction*, Sheffield Academic Press, 1999. For those who wish to know more about this book, see my review of it in *The Times Literary Supplement*, March 3, 2000, p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and End of Religion*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> The term comes, of course, from Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, 1962.

Cambridge University Press

0521811368 - Narrative, Religion and Science: Fundamentalism versus Irony, 1700-1999

Stephen Prickett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

philosopher as to how far we can ever know things-in-themselves in the first place. The world described by cosmologists or quantum physicists is in any case so bizarre as scarcely to relate to the world we experience at all. Sociologists are as likely to interpret any scientific theory in terms of the social structure of the society that produced it, as they are to acknowledge its accuracy in describing the material world.<sup>10</sup> The dialectical materialist believes that material conditions and the means of production shape society; the Freudian believes, on the contrary, that we unconsciously shape our external conditions to suit internal needs. Environmentalists take a very different view of our world from any of these.

Moreover, it is just over 200 years since Kant changed the whole course of Western philosophy by arguing that time and space are internal constructs of the mind. For him, not merely were things in themselves ultimately unknowable but, in effect, our knowledge of the world is shaped – and limited – by our own mental capacities. Whatever modifications have since been proposed to his arguments, no one has decisively refuted him. Yet over that same period modern science has made spectacular developments by assuming, at least at an ‘instrumental’ level, that reality is both objective and knowable. The current (‘big bang’) cosmological theory of the origins of the universe predicates that space and time are indivisibly woven into the fabric of things. According to this view, there *was no time* before that moment – that ‘singularity’ – some fifteen billion years ago.

As we shall see, there have been a number of very interesting attempts to reconcile these apparently totally contradictory views of the world, but there is as yet certainly no consensus about their success. To a degree that few of us (even professional philosophers and scientists) comprehend, our philosophy and our science remain at odds. How then can we approach any common reality beneath such seething diversity? To many, I suspect, the idea that we are simply telling stories about the world appeals because it appears to solve what would otherwise be an enormous epistemological problem.

This may well be so, but as Lash comments, narrative is not itself a neutral medium. In C. S. Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters*, which I first read as a child, I remember a passage where Screwtape, a senior devil, writes to his nephew, a junior devil called Wormwood, about the mental condition of modern human beings. ‘Your man has been accustomed, ever since he

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Joseph Carroll’s review of three recent biographies of Darwin, by Adrian Desmond and James Moore, by Janet Browne, and by John Bowlby, in *Times Literary Supplement*, February 20, 1998, pp. 7–8.

Cambridge University Press

0521811368 - Narrative, Religion and Science: Fundamentalism versus Irony, 1700-1999

Stephen Prickett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

was a boy, to have a dozen incompatible philosophies dancing about together inside his head. He doesn't think of doctrines as primarily "true" or "false", but as "academic" or "practical", "outworn" or "contemporary", "conventional" or "ruthless". Jargon, not argument, is your best ally . . .'<sup>11</sup>

As an adult, not to mention a professor of literature concerned with modern intellectual history, I have long been uncomfortably aware that *Screwtape* was guilty of gravely understating his case. He was by no means the first, and was certainly not the last to notice that we live in a culture dominated by stereotypes, illusions, copies, imitations, sound-bites and fantasies. Not merely do our clichéd labels invoke ready-made emotions, but also most contemporary humans have *many more* than half a dozen such incompatible ideas floating around inside their heads. Moreover, as we have seen, their incompatibility is not simply a matter of different beliefs or even just of jargon.

As Arthur Dent discovered, our perspectives on the world will depend, not least, on how we see ourselves – of the kinds of story we tell ourselves about who we are. The pattern shifts with every change in viewpoint, whether personal or historical. Our perspectives will also depend on where we come from and our historical circumstances at the time. In 1954 Lewis described himself in a famous lecture as a 'dinosaur'.<sup>12</sup> He was referring, only partly with self-deprecating irony, to his lack of sympathy with certain aspects of modern culture, but (even without the prompting of Freud) we might well suspect that the wry humour of declaring oneself an extinct monster might mask very real fears that it could be true.

Let's look again at *Screwtape's* advice to Wormwood. If we are to understand it at all, we need first of all to remember the context in which it was written – a context which is, in some ways, easier for us to reconstruct with hindsight, than it would have been for many of those actually living through the terrifying and dramatic events engulfing Britain in 1942. It would be easy, for example, to forget the huge shifts in popular awareness between the early 1940s, when Lewis was writing *Screwtape*, and the 1950s when Lewis was attempting to sum up his own intellectual development. In 1942, in a world at war, with ideologies seemingly polarized between Hitler's Fascism and Stalinist Communism, the possibilities for unconscious rhetorical pluralism of the kind *Screwtape* is hopefully wishing on Wormwood's 'patient', though they were certainly widespread, were

<sup>11</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Geoffrey Bles, 1942, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> 'De Descriptione Temporum', *They Asked for a Paper*, Geoffrey Bles, 1962.

Cambridge University Press

0521811368 - Narrative, Religion and Science: Fundamentalism versus Irony, 1700-1999

Stephen Prickett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

simply fewer than in the 1950s. Certainly they were many fewer than in the 1990s, a decade after the French sociologist Lyotard's proclamation of the 'end of grand narratives' had ushered in postmodernism,<sup>13</sup> and following the American historian Fukuyama's famous – or notorious – vision that we had reached 'the end of history'.<sup>14</sup> If the former announced a joyful incoherence of all things, the latter's much-misunderstood claim referred in Hegelian terms to the apparent cessation of ideological conflict in the Western world after the fall of communism. But whether true or not (and Fukuyama's own title had a carefully placed question mark after it) what it would be safer to call the present 'ideological lull' has simply made room for a succession of 'minor' conflicts, usually in the name of incompatible nationalisms, in which religion is often a significant factor. At the same time even the most stable and homogeneous societies have discovered that they already incorporate a degree of ontological pluralism that would have been difficult for Lewis (or even Screwtape) to foresee.

'Pluralism' is a relatively new word for a relatively new condition. It was first used in a strictly material sense in the early nineteenth century to describe the practice of well-placed clergy drawing salaries from several churches at the same time – often without residing at any of them. It was only just over 100 years ago, in 1887, that it was first applied, presumably as a metaphor from the corruptions of Anglicanism, to the holding of fundamentally different and incompatible ideas – perhaps originally with the implication that, like the *rentier* clergy, any such mental 'pluralist' would in the end 'reside' in none of them. In practice, however, it quickly came to refer less to individual people than to the kind of society whose inhabitants held widely differing views about themselves and about how that society should operate. The first such society had been seventeenth-century England, which, unlike any other countries in Europe, had experienced within the span of a single century officially condoned clergy from across the whole spectrum of Christianity, from the Catholic priesthood through to Puritan ministers.<sup>15</sup> Even a disastrous Civil War had failed to produce a viable or enforceable consensus, and over the next 100 years or so, the English had slowly had to come to terms with the fact that there was no going back to any traditional world of common beliefs and aspirations.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trs Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, foreword by Fredric Jameson, Manchester University Press, 1984.

<sup>14</sup> Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, Summer, 1989, pp. 3–18.

<sup>15</sup> See Peter Harrison, 'If the time of the appearance of this new interpretative framework was the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, then the place was England.' *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 3; 84.

Cambridge University Press

0521811368 - Narrative, Religion and Science: Fundamentalism versus Irony, 1700-1999

Stephen Prickett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

As a result, one of the commonest modern meanings of ‘pluralism’ refers to the agreed stand-off between once rival Christian Churches. In modern democratic countries, theories of the state, of justice, and of what constitutes the ‘good life’ in general are essentially pluralistic in outlook – not just in religion, but in every form of social, political and economic life.<sup>16</sup> Thus we take it for granted that conservatives and socialists may differ profoundly about the means to their political goals, but they do so within a democratic framework. John Stuart Mill’s now classic idea of liberty – the freedom to act in so far as it does not impinge upon the freedom of others – has elevated pluralism from being a necessary evil of the seventeenth century into a common good of the twentieth.

But there is a fundamental difference between those who merely hold differing views within an accepted framework, and those whose personal stories allow no such framework in common. Such ‘ontological pluralism’ adds a whole new dimension and presents a whole new dilemma. As the name suggests, ontological conflicts concern the very nature of *being* itself. In theory – and all too often in practice – they permit no other way of seeing things. Though a theist is likely to regard the world in a quite different way from an atheist, it is fortunate that, at least since the seventeenth century, many forms of theism (including nowadays most – but not all – forms of Christianity) make peaceful co-existence with non-believers an explicit part of their faith. But a minority of Muslims believe that, as a complete ideology and way of life, Islam cannot socially co-exist with any other kind of society, and can only properly be practised within an Islamic state governed by the Sharia. Similarly, some Orthodox Jews see an ontological difference between themselves and non-Jews (or even liberal and secularized Jews) so great that they would prefer to see Israel as a religious state all of whose citizens were governed solely by Hebrew Law. Like these religious orthodoxies, some forms of nationalism permit no compromise with opposing beliefs – let alone opposing nationalisms. Massacres in Northern Ireland, Bosnia and Ruanda bear witness to such conflicting ontologies. Others, although not (at the moment) violent, represent differences of being so great as to make the

<sup>16</sup> See, among others, Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford University Press, 1969; Stuart Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict*, Harvard University Press, 1983, and *Innocence and Experience*, Harvard University Press, 1989; John Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism*, Princeton University Press, 1993; Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, Cambridge University Press, 1986; Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, Methuen, 1962, and *On Human Conduct*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Harvard University Press, 1971; Peter Strawson, ‘Social Morality and Individual Ideal’, in *Freedom and Resentment*, Methuen, 1974; Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, and *Multiculturalism*, Princeton University Press, 1994; and Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Fontana, 1985.

Cambridge University Press

0521811368 - Narrative, Religion and Science: Fundamentalism versus Irony, 1700-1999

Stephen Prickett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

prospect of any reconciliation very difficult to imagine. At a different level of militancy, for instance, some Australian aboriginal peoples have an attitude to their ancestral land which is quite incompatible with modern Western conceptions of 'ownership', which assume the right to change, improve, or exploit property according to circumstances. In such a context, disputes about land are less concerned with legal title than with two incommensurable scales of value.

All this, however, serves not to diminish the force of Screwtape's advice to Wormwood, but, if anything, to strengthen it. If he was mistaken at all, it was in not foreseeing just how fundamentally pluralistic the twentieth century was to become. But, as the ending of the book makes clear, though God may be presumed to have foreknowledge, devils evidently do not. In advising his inexperienced nephew on how to draw his 'patient' into the ever-expectant arms of 'our Father below', Screwtape, it now appears, was prophetic in his insight and wrote better than he knew. But, of course, this is only half the picture. Screwtape is not a real person, he is a character in a story – the fictional creation of C.S. Lewis. Does the fact that it is 'only a story' make any difference to all of the above? Can we say, for instance, that Lewis, in giving those words to Screwtape, also 'wrote better than he knew'?

This poses a much more difficult question. It obviously does not alter the increasing pluralism of the late twentieth-century world, but it does sharply affect our reading of it. Screwtape, after all, is a *devil*. Though it nowhere says so, the whole novella is based on a premise of ironic inversion, in which everything that Screwtape recommends or advises is self-evidently evil, and everything he disapproves of, denigrates or hates is to be seen as valuable, worthwhile and good. The fact that every reader perceives this within a very few lines, and has no difficulty coping with such an inverted narrative, is a tribute both to Lewis' considerable literary skill and to the fact that the historical development of our literary culture has increasingly trained us to cope with narrative irony. Was this growth of twentieth-century pluralism, not to mention the rank undergrowth of jargon that has accompanied it, accurately foreseen by Lewis as being in reality an unmitigated disaster?

Certainly there is some evidence for this. It is clear both from *The Screwtape Letters*, and from his other, more serious and academic writings, that Lewis thought there *had* to be what we would now call a 'meta-narrative', that is, a single over-arching description of things that made sense of the world. The interesting thing is that though for most of his



Cambridge University Press

0521811368 - Narrative, Religion and Science: Fundamentalism versus Irony, 1700-1999

Stephen Prickett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

adult life he was a committed Christian, he seems to have taken it for granted that this was *not* a partisan Christian position. It is true that he would have assumed that it had to be the Christian viewpoint, but not, I think, because it was specifically Christian, but simply because it was obviously right. Any intelligent and logically minded person, whether a classical pagan philosopher, a Church Father, or a modern scientific rationalist, would have had to have agreed on this point, at least. If there were two conflicting accounts of reality, in the end one of them must turn out to be wrong. For him, as a matter of logic rather than belief, there could only be one Truth. We might well be ignorant of it, but, in so far as we did have evidence, and in so far as we could reason about that evidence, we could only arrive in the end, as he himself by his own account had done, at one final master-narrative. For him, only a grand narrative was properly habitable. On the whole, he had greater sympathy with those who inhabited a different grand narrative from himself, than with those who tried to camp out without any at all.<sup>17</sup>

Is this perhaps one of the things he meant by calling himself a ‘dinosaur’? Of the four arguments he produces in that lecture to show the gulf between himself and the ‘modern’ world, one of the most telling is his lack of sympathy with the idea that there might be more than one correct (as distinct from simply mistaken) ‘meaning’ to a poem. Moreover, there is no doubt that later in life Lewis came to view himself as the self-appointed guardian of what he saw as an essentially monistic tradition. It included not merely historical Christianity, but the other peoples of ‘the book’, Judaism and Islam, as well as the other great world religions which follow what he called loosely ‘the Way’ – a conception of life and a system of morality, which whether based upon divine inspiration, or simply humanistic ideals, would have included a stream of historical figures as diverse as Socrates and Plato, the Stoics, and Buddha, Jesus and St Paul, not to mention George Eliot, John Stuart Mill and Gandhi. For them it made sense to speak, in the singular, of the ‘Truth’ – and to base their lives upon the search for it. Opposed to this would be the consummation devoutly wished on us by Screwtape and his fellow devils, where jargon and labels fragment reality, and people would unconsciously or consciously apply different and unrelated criteria to different parts of their experience – giving us, in effect, whether we like it or not, our modern world.

<sup>17</sup> A theme of his early satire on opposing intellectual systems, *Pilgrim's Regress*, Geoffrey Bles, 1943.

Cambridge University Press

0521811368 - Narrative, Religion and Science: Fundamentalism versus Irony, 1700-1999

Stephen Prickett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

And this is our problem in a nutshell. Lewis, with the best will in the world, seems not merely wrong in his expectation of the eventual triumph of truth and common sense, but his most feverish nightmares appear to have come to pass. His satiric creation, *Screwtape*, with, literally, the *worst* will in the world, seems from the very first chapter to have been right after all. This is certainly not the first example in history of satire becoming literal truth, but it is the more disconcerting in that it affects not just politics, or fashion, or some other essentially ephemeral human activity, but the very bedrock and stability of our world. Either there is a single, over-riding truth about things (whether we know it or not) or there isn't. This is a problem more immediately obvious in ostensibly theocratic or monistic states, such as Taliban Afghanistan or former communist countries, than in western liberal democracies, simply because in the latter ('the modern world') we are embedded in a tacit procedural agreement that is essentially capitalistic in its pluralism. Experience has shown us that it is preferable to throw a large number of solutions at a given problem in the hope that one or more might succeed, and not to start from *a priori* first principles. We rarely, if ever, discuss questions of absolute truth, and when on the rare occasions that Church leaders do so, they are greeted with embarrassed silence by their allies, and abuse from their opponents.

It is tempting, of course, to put the whole problem down to our ignorance; to argue that things will appear different when we know more. This may be so. The trouble is that history and experience point the other way. Until the beginning of the eighteenth century it was still possible for people to believe that the steady progress of science and learning in general would eventually prove the great truths of the Christian religion. It was possible to believe in the convergence of all knowledge. But what happened was not convergence, but divergence on a hitherto unimaginable scale. We are today living through the greatest explosion of information the world has ever seen. Every area of human knowledge seems to have undergone at least one radical revision in the last half-century. We now know infinitely more about our universe, our history, our pre-history, even our biology than our parents did. And what is the result? Despite Edward O. Wilson's belief in consilience, an increasingly coherent world-picture, we most of us discover a vastly greater and in many ways more mysterious fragmentation of knowledge than ever before.

As so often, Douglas Adams parodies the problem very neatly. In the first volume of *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide* we are told the 'Answer': it is