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First published 2012 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978–0–230–29112–6

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Philosophy and The hitchhiker's guide to the galaxy / edited by
Nicholas Joll.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 978–0–230–29112–6 (pbk.)

1. Adams, Douglas, 1952–2001. Hitchhiker's guide to the galaxy. 2. Philosophy in literature. I. Joll, Nicholas.

PR6051.D3352Z84 2012

823'.914—dc23

2012008997

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

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Introduction

Nicholas Joll

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy is either:

- A hugely useful, informative and entertaining book, the standard reference work for all those struggling to make it from one part of the universe to another part of the universe on as little as 30 Altairian dollars a day. [. . .]
- A book/TV series/set of records/play/computer game/towel which began life as a BBC radio series written by Douglas Adams.

(H2G2 entry for 'The Hitchhiker's
Guide to the Galaxy')

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy is a wholly remarkable book.

(*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, chapter 8)

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy – the guide within the *Guide*, I mean – *is* remarkable. It's remarkable because it was technologically prescient (i.e. ahead of its time). The Guide is a 'largish electronic calculator' that is connected to

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a 'Sub-Etha Net' and which can display 'any one of a million "pages" [...] at a moment's notice'. It can tell you 'everything you need to know about anything'.¹ Adams thought up the guide in the 1970s. Today, it is not so far from reality. For today we have portable devices that connect to the Internet; and the Internet is, for many people, an increasingly important source of information.² It *might* even be that, one day, our world will contain something like the 'Guide Mark II', that guide being a trans-dimensional, time-manipulating bird that declares itself to be all-knowing, all-powerful and extremely vain.

The Hitchhiker's Guide in the *other* sense – the collection of radio series, books, television programmes and more – is remarkable too, and not just because it contains the intergalactic Guide. Nor is it just that, in the *Hitchhiker* phenomenon, Adams created something remarkably funny and remarkably imaginative. *Hitchhiker's* is those things; and those are reasons why it has been, in at least many of its forms, such a remarkable commercial success. But, additionally: *Hitchhiker's* is remarkably *philosophical* and, indeed, a marvellous vehicle for popular philosophy.

The proof of this will be in the pudding. That is, the chapters that follow should amount to an extended justification for the view that *Hitchhiker's* is both philosophical and great for popular philosophy. Nonetheless, I explore those things here in this Introduction, as well. There are reasons why I do that – reasons why, so to speak, I anticipate the pudding. (There should be a saying along those lines. I fear there isn't, though. 'Counting your chickens' is as near as we get.) Here's a first reason. Exploring that stuff in advance – here in the Introduction – should serve to ease readers into the book. Secondly, that exploration will allow me to say a few things that don't get said in the chapters. I should note,

too, something else that this Introduction does: it gives an overview of the rest of the book.

Here's what all this amounts to. The rest of this Introduction consists of these sections:

1. *Hitchhiker's* and philosophy
2. What is philosophy?
3. More on *Hitchhiker's* and philosophy
4. The project and point of this book
5. Overview of the rest of the book

Which of these sections are important? Which skippable? It depends.

If you find it *obvious* that *Hitchhiker's* is philosophical, then you might skip the first section. If you have a reasonable idea of what philosophy is, you could skip the second section. Section three goes further into how *Hitchhiker's* is philosophical. So if you think you know just *how Hitchhiker's* is philosophical, or if you are not really interested in the details of that, then by all means pass on by. If you are keen to launch straight into the book proper, then you could dispense with, well, the whole of the rest of this Introduction. That said, section 5 does contain some practical information about the book's glossary and suchlike. For my part, I find nearly all of the Introduction quite interesting. But then I would.

1 *Hitchhiker's* and philosophy

A biographer has said that Adams 'loved philosophical ideas, and had a natural grasp of them'.³ So it would be unsurprising were *Hitchhiker's* to contain a philosophical idea or two. In fact, *Hitchhiker's* is stuffed full of philosophical

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ideas and of philosophical *questions* in particular. The most conspicuous of those questions is the 'Ultimate Question' of 'Life, the Universe and Everything'. But consider, also, the unfortunate whale that gets brought into existence by the Infinite Improbability Drive (in the first *Hitchhiker* book). The whale asks itself: 'Why am I here? What's my purpose in life? What do I mean by who am I?' (*Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, chapter 18). Those too are philosophical questions. And *Hitchhiker's* contains more of that sort of thing. *Much* more. Let me give a sample of the philosophical questions that come up in *Hitchhiker's* – many of which will be at issue in this book:

- *Can machines think? Can they have emotions?* Consider, for instance, Colin the Happy Robot (in *Mostly Harmless*) and Marvin the very *unhappy* robot.
- *What is personal identity?* That is: under what circumstances are two persons actually one and the same person? Think of the encounter, in *Mostly Harmless*, between Tricia McMillan (who stays on Earth) and Trillian (the space-faring version of Tricia McMillan who changes her name to 'Trillian'). The last of the whale's questions ('What do I mean by who am I?') is relevant here too.
- *Is it alright to eat animals? And, How much does consent matter in ethics?* Consider here the animal that wants to be eaten (in *Restaurant at the End of the Universe*).
- *Is there a God? If there is (or were there) would He be above logic?* In the first *Hitchhiker* book, God 'vanishes in a puff of logic'.
- *Who or what should be given political authority?* Think here of the Galactic Presidency and, especially, of The Man Who Rules the Universe.
- *What sort of work – employment – is valuable?* Here one may cite the Golgafrinchams, the Vogon guard in first

book ('the hours are good [. . .] but now you come to mention it, most of the actual minutes are pretty lousy'), and Arthur as sandwich maker in *Mostly Harmless*. Note also the recurrent light abuse in *Hitchhiker's* of insurance, marketing and advertising.

- *What is the value, and nature, of art and beauty?* Think of the Vogons – of their poetry and of how they treat beautiful things.
- *What can we know, and on what grounds?* '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' (The Man Who Rules the Universe, in *Restaurant*, chapter 29).⁴
- *What is it to be at home?* Arthur stands out here. So does Douglas Adams himself, since he seems persistently to have felt somewhat out of place or out of joint.⁵

It is because these sorts of questions abound in *Hitchhiker's*, and because Adams presents them so engagingly, that, like the program run by Deep Thought, *Hitchhiker's* is so suited for popular philosophy.

Still: what is distinctive about these questions? What makes them philosophical? To use a formulation one might find in a Terry Pratchett book: what, when one really gets right down to it, *is* philosophy?

2 What is philosophy?

This is a difficult question, and one that philosophers, who disagree about just about everything, disagree about. But a short(ish), rough and fairly uncontroversial account goes as follows.

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Philosophy consists in asking and trying to answer questions that have a particular and unusual character. That character consists in their combining two features. On the one hand, the questions at issue seem to admit of better or worse answers. In that way, they seem to be proper questions rather than pseudo-questions, nonsensical questions. So seemingly we can't just dismiss those questions.⁶ On the *other* hand, these questions are ones we do not really know how to tackle. To specify that second characteristic a little: in trying to answer the questions, we have nothing obvious to go on save clear thinking, a desire to get to the bottom of things, and a history of past grapplings with the problem (except in the case of that rare thing, a *new* philosophical problem, in which case things are *really* difficult). We might sum up the whole idea with a line from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein: 'a philosophical problem has the form: "I don't know my way about".'⁷ Or, more simply, we might say: *philosophical issues are peculiarly baffling*. We might even refer here to Vroomfondel's 'areas of doubt and uncertainty'.⁸

One might wonder what *sort* of questions fall into this category, and, thus, into the domain of philosophy. Well, *ethical* questions do. For how are we to decide what is moral and what is not? Seemingly no survey or experiment or calculation will yield the answer. Indeed: just what does it *mean* to say that something is (morally) right, or wrong?⁹ But there are other types of philosophical questions too. For there are questions that are not ethical (or at least not primarily so) but which are sufficiently baffling to count as philosophical. Examples are the remaining questions mentioned above in section 1 – the questions about whether machines can think, about God and logic, about what is to be at home, and so on. What makes *these* sorts of questions – these philosophical-but-not-ethical questions – so baffling? In the case of at least some of them, the answer, I think, is that they involve this

rather boggling enterprise of trying to *tie things together into a comprehensive whole*. How are we to relate God (if there is one) to logic? How do – how *can* – merely mechanical or bodily things relate to thought and emotions and the self? And how do the various things we know, or think we know, fit together? (One question here is whether knowledge has foundations.) Such ‘tying-together’ questions yield another definition of philosophy. For we might say, with the philosopher Wilfred Sellars, this: philosophy is ‘an attempt to see how things, in the broadest possible sense of the term, hang together, in the broadest possible sense of the term’.¹⁰ (Or we might take that as a characterisation of at least the part of philosophy that is called *metaphysics* . . .¹¹)

Now, because philosophical questions baffle, quite a lot of philosophy is an attempt to *clarify exactly what is being asked about*. For example, when someone asks about the meaning of life, or about the ‘value’ of something they call ‘art’, or about God, what exactly do they mean to get at? Now, sometimes a philosopher, having pursued such clarification, concludes that some would-be philosophical question is not a proper philosophical question after all. The thought here can be that, upon close scrutiny, the question at issue reveals itself to be simply *bogus* – to be nonsensical. Or the thought can be that the question is not really a fundamentally *baffling* one, in that some discipline other than philosophy knows, at least in principle, how to handle it. Some philosophers apply this dismissive approach (in one or the other version) to a *whole bunch* of philosophical questions or to a whole area of philosophy. For instance, some philosophers hold that there is little left for philosophy to say in response to the question, ‘What is knowledge?’ once natural science has been given a good crack at the topic. More: every so often a philosophical movement arises according to which just about *every* philosophical question can be done away with.

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A famous case of this tendency – a tendency one might call *anti-philosophical* – is the movement known as ‘logical positivism’. According to logical positivism, philosophical statements were, literally, nonsense. But the philosophers – the *other* philosophers, ones who could not be called ‘anti-philosophy philosophers’ – tend to get their own back. For they point out the paradox. That is, they respond that the question of whether philosophy is nonsense, or any tool used to distinguish sense from nonsense, is *itself* philosophical.¹²

If you want to blither a bit upon reading that, please feel free.

3 More on *Hitchhiker's* and philosophy

There's more to say, even at a general kind of level, about how *Hitchhiker's* relates to philosophy. For one can ask the following question. Is *Hitchhiker's* philosophical *only* in that it alludes to philosophical ideas, brings up philosophical questions? I mean: does *Hitchhiker's* inhabit a kind of philosophical atmosphere, from which it might be possible to *condense* or *mould* philosophical ideas, but which *itself* has no philosophical substance? In short, does *Hitchhiker's* make any philosophical *claims*? In shorter: it is philosophically man or mouse?

The issue turns out to be involved. So if you want to say, ‘Please, I think I am tired’ (*Restaurant*, chapter 29), then feel free to skip to the next section. That next section stops messing around and imparts, with a reasonable but not excessive amount of detail, just what this book will be up to.

For those of you who are still here: there are some reasons to go for the ‘mouse’ verdict, i.e. to think that there can be little real philosophical substance in *Hitchhiker's*.

1. 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.¹³

2. Adams tried to deter someone from writing a thesis on the philosophical and scientific themes in *Hitchhiker's*, on the ground that it wasn't worth it.¹⁴
3. Adams seems not to have read much philosophy.¹⁵

None of this is conclusive, though. For, first, Adams was not always a reliable authority on his own life.¹⁶ Second, it is possible that *Hitchhiker's* contains philosophical ideas Adams didn't really know he had, or which, for some reason, he didn't want to acknowledge. Third, one can have philosophical ideas without having read much philosophy. The moral might seem to be this one: the final authority for whether *Hitchhiker's* takes any philosophical line is *Hitchhiker's* itself, not anything biographical, not anything to do with Adams *the man*.¹⁷ But a further complication pushes us back towards Adams himself. Let me explain. If it is the case that *Hitchhiker's* takes a philosophical stance, then probably that stance will be quite *implicit*. After all, *Hitchhiker's* is not a philosophical treatise; and Adams might have thought that 'plonking [philosophical ideas] unadorned into the text would induce instant tedium'.¹⁸ Now, if philosophical claims *are* implicit in *Hitchhiker's*, then it makes sense to use Adams's views – views he expressed outside of his fiction – to help discern the philosophical content that lies within his fiction. So we *do* need to consider whether Adams himself was philosophically man or mouse.

I take as my point of departure one of Adams's many enthusiasms, namely, his enthusiasm for natural science.¹⁹ Adams was interested, especially, in the life sciences. He even liked to note that his initials were DNA ('Douglas Noel Adams'). This love of science is reflected in the fiction. Witness all the jokes in *Hitchhiker's* about evolution. Witness too the Infinite Improbability Drive, eddies in the space-time continuum ("Ah,"

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nodded Arthur, “is he? Is he?”), multiple dimensions, parallel worlds, and the WSOGMM (the ‘Whole Sort of General Mish Mash’ of worlds and dimensions and probabilities). Note also that quantum physics was an inspiration for the idea that it is impossible to know both the Ultimate Question and the Ultimate Answer.²⁰ Still, does this love of science have any particular philosophical significance (beyond the inspiration just mentioned)? After all, many contemporary philosophers are, in one way or another, scientific in their philosophising. One example: many of those working in the so-called ‘philosophy of mind’ make use of results from the brain sciences. There’s ‘the philosophy of science’, too. The philosophy of science deals with philosophical problems thrown up by science as such (if ‘science as such’ exists – that’s one of the problems) and by individual sciences. Also, many philosophers aspire to a quasi-mathematical rigour in their reasoning. There’s something like an overlap, then, between science and philosophy. But there *is* something more to consider here, something more to consider in Adams’s relation to science. That ‘more’ involves the ‘anti-philosophy’ outlook mentioned above (in section 2). Often, science inspires that outlook. When it does, the result is this idea: *many philosophical problems*, or at least many of the philosophical problems that actually make sense, *will turn out to be solvable by science*. This sort of view is sometimes called *scientism*.

There is some reason to attribute scientism to Adams. For one thing, he was *very* keen on science. His friend and biographer Nick Webb said that Adams’s world view was ‘based on science’, in that Adams believed that science was where one should look for ‘serious reflections and questionings about life’.²¹ Further, *Hitchhiker’s* can seem to suggest that philosophers are self-interested buffoons. Here the portrayal of Vroomfondel and his colleague Majikthise stands out. Further yet, Adams greatly admired Richard Dawkins; and

Indexes

There are (don't panic!) four indexes:

- (1) **an index of works by Douglas Adams** (or at least partly by him, and taking 'works' broadly; for details of the works, see the Bibliography);
- (2) **an index of characters, things and places in *Hitchhiker's***;
- (3) **an index of (non-fictional!) philosophers, sages, luminaries and other thinking persons** (i.e. people – so long as they're either thinkers or famous);
- (4) **a general index** (everything else, which turns out mostly to be topics).

In those indexes, unadorned numbers refer to pages, and 'n.' refers to endnotes. 'Passim' means 'throughout'. Page numbers in *italics* refer to pages in the Glossary.

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