

The Answer to Life, The Universe, and Everything: A Parable

The following parable has been taken from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams, chapters 25 through 28, New York: Pocket Books, 1979.

There are of course many problems connected with life, of which some of the most popular are *Why are people born? Why do they die? Why do they want to spend so much of the intervening time wearing digital watches?* ...

[A] race of hyperintelligent pandimensional beings ... got so fed up with the constant bickering about the meaning of life ... that they decided to sit down and solve their problems once and for all.

And to this end they built themselves a stupendous super computer which was so amazingly intelligent that even before its data banks had been connected up it had started from *I think therefore I am* and got as far as deducing the existence of rice pudding and income tax before anyone managed to turn it off....

On the day of the Great On-Turning two soberly dressed programmers with briefcases arrived.... Their names were Lunkwill and Fook.

For a few moments they sat in respectful silence, then, after exchanging a quiet glance with Fook, Lunkwill leaned forward and touched a small black panel.

The subtlest of hums indicated that the massive computer was now in total active mode. After a pause it spoke to them in a voice rich, resonant and deep.

It said: "What is this great task for which I, Deep Thought,...have been called into existence?..."

"O Deep Thought computer," [Fook] said, "the task we have designed you to perform is this. We want you to tell us..." he paused, "the Answer!"

"The Answer?" said Deep Thought. "The Answer to what?"

"Life!" urged Fook.

"The Universe!" said Lunkwill.

"Everything!" they said in chorus.

Deep Thought paused for a moment's reflection.

"Tricky," he said finally.

"But can you do it?"

Again, a significant pause.

"Yes," said Deep Thought, "I can do it."

"There is an answer?" said Fook with breathless excitement.

"A simple answer?" added Lunkwill.

"Yes" said Deep Thought. "Life, the Universe, and Everything. There is an answer. But," he added, "I'll have to think about it." ...

The hum level in the room suddenly increased as several ancillary bass driver units, mounted in sedately carved and varnished cabinet speakers around the room, cut in to give Deep Thought's voice a little more power.

"All I wanted to say," bellowed the computer, "is that my circuits are now irrevocably committed to calculating the answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything." He paused and satisfied himself that he now had everyone's attention, before continuing more quietly. "But the program will take me a little while to run."

Fook glanced impatiently at his watch.

"How long?" he said.

"Seven and a half million years," said Deep Thought.

Lunkwill and Fook blinked at each other.

"Seven and a half million years!" they cried in chorus....

[Seven and a half million years later]

[There] was a pretty tree-lined city square, and all around it as far as the eye could see were white concrete buildings of airy spacious design but somewhat the worse for wear – many were cracked and stained with rain. Today, however, the sun was shining, a fresh breeze danced lightly through the trees, and the odd sensation that all the buildings were quietly humming was probably caused by the fact that the square and all the streets around it were thronged with cheerful excited people. Somewhere a band was playing, brightly

colored flags were fluttering in the breeze and the spirit of carnival was in the air....

A man standing on a brightly dressed dais before the building which clearly dominated the square was addressing the crowd over a tannoy.

"O people who wait in the shadow of Deep Thought!" he cried out. "...the Time of Waiting is over!"

Wild cheers broke out among the crowd. Flags, streamers and wolf whistles sailed through the air. The narrower streets looked rather like centipedes rolled over on their backs and frantically waving their legs in the air.

"Seven and a half million years our race has waited for this Great and Hopefully Enlightening Day!" cried the cheerleader. "The Day of the Answer!"

Hurrahs burst from the ecstatic crowd.

"Never again," cried the man, "never again will we wake up in the morning and think Who am I? What is my purpose in life? Does it really, cosmically speaking, matter if I don't get up and go to work? For today we will finally learn once and for all the plain and simple answer to all these nagging little problems of Life, the Universe and Everything!"...

Two severely dressed men sat respectfully before the terminal and waited.

"The time is nearly upon us," said one....

"Seventy-five thousand generations ago, our ancestors set this program in motion," the second man said, "and in all that time we will be the first to hear the computer speak."

"An awesome prospect, Phouchg," agreed the first man....

"We are the ones who will hear," said Phouchg, "the answer to the great question of Life...!"

"The Universe...!" said Loonquawl.

"And Everything...!"

"Shhh," said Loonquawl with a slight gesture, "I think Deep Thought is preparing to speak!"

There was a moment's expectant pause while panels slowly came to life on the front of the console. Lights flashed on and off experimentally and settled down into a

businesslike pattern. A soft low hum came from the communication channel.

"Good morning," said Deep Thought at last.

"Er...good morning, O Deep Thought," said Loonquawl nervously, "do you have...er, that is..."

"An answer for you?" interrupted Deep Thought majestically. "Yes, I have."

The two men shivered with expectancy. Their waiting had not been in vain.

"There really is one?" breathed Phouchg.

"There really is one," confirmed Deep Thought.

"To Everything? To the great Question of Life, the Universe and Everything?"

"Yes."

Both of the men had been trained for this moment, their lives had been a preparation for it, they had been selected at birth as those who would witness the answer, but even so they found themselves gasping and squirming like excited children.

"And you're ready to give it to us?" urged Loonquawl.

"I am."

"Now?"

"Now," said Deep Thought....

"Tell us!"

"All right," said Deep Thought. "The Answer to the Great Question..."

"Yes...!"

"Of Life, the Universe and Everything..." said Deep Thought.

"Yes...!"

"Is..." said Deep Thought, and paused.

"Yes...!"

"Is..."

"Yes...!!!...?"

"Forty-two," said Deep Thought, with infinite majesty and calm....

"Forty-two!" yelled Loonquawl. "Is that all you've got to show for seven and a half million years' work?"

"I checked it very thoroughly," said the computer, "and that quite definitely is the answer. I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you've never actually known what the question is."