Think of a Number, Any Number

Irony as miscommunication in *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*
The Hitch Hiker'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. This was the gist of the notice. It said "The Guide is definitive. Reality is frequently inaccurate". (173)

Introduction
Irony, like most other words, may not mean the same to everyone at a given moment or in a particular situation. According to D.C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, the etymological derivation of the word irony is random (7). Anyone who has read Douglas Adams’ novel cycle *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* will probably agree that it is saturated with irony, but few people would manage to define how or why. Sometimes the ironist sender or receiver is not aware that irony is present. Sometimes one ironist is lost in another ironist’s irony. There may even be events which a receiver would agree are definitely ironic; still, they would ask themselves why. Moreover, an ironic sender may very well be unaware that the receiver experiences irony. It would be impossible to explain or even describe irony at all without first locating it in a literary work, then defining what type of irony is displayed because there are many types of it, and, lastly, focusing on what function it serves in the text as well as what it hides and/or reveals.

The different types of irony are not taxonomically outlined by a committee in agreement but are rather defined in personal but conventional terms by independent scholars who count on their readers to apply these terms only when a historical and etymological understanding has been fully acquired. Muecke, who presents a very thorough explanation of both the word irony and the concept of irony in his book, puts it in the following terms: “In the matter of definition then, I shall not insist ... that everyone set his watch by mine. My attempts at definition ... will be prefaced by a sketch of the history of the concept of irony so that the reader can check his own watch” (8). Muecke points out that:
Irony is both something we see, respond to and practise and a distinction has to be made between the word irony and the concept of irony. The phenomenon was responded to before it was named ... and the word existed before it was applied to the phenomenon. If Homer had a word for the suitor’s mockery, in the Odyssey it was neither ‘sarkasmos’ nor ‘eironeia’. (15)

Muecke explains how irony has meant different things to different people, throughout history.

For Plato eironeia, meant a ‘low down way of taking people in’, for Demosthenes an eiron was one who evaded his responsibilities by pretending unfitness, and for Theophrastus an eiron was evasive and non-committal, concealing his enmities, pretending friendship, misrepresenting his acts and never giving a straight answer. (15)

The complexity of the concept of irony makes it very difficult to grasp. However, if carefully applied to a literary analysis, such an approach could be unexpectedly enlightening. To me, The Hitchhiker’s Guide cycle presents itself as an eiron in the sense that it promises the possibility of truth, and thereby miscommunicates its equivocal message that there is no truth to be found. It is notable that even Adams’ narration discusses irony as it describes the fictional worlds in the Guide cycle. The ship called “The Heart of Gold,” onboard which Arthur Dent and his fellow hitchhikers spend most of their journey is run by the so called improbability drive, which makes travelling quite volatile. The shipboard computer Eddie greets Arthur and Ford by trying to calm them down when they first end up inside the ship. Eddie says:

Please do not be alarmed … by anything you see or hear around you. You are bound to feel some initial ill effects as you have been rescued from certain death at an improbability level of two to the power of two hundred and seventy-six thousand to one against - possibly much higher. We are now cruising at a level of two to the power of twenty-five thousand to one against and falling, and we will be restoring normality just as soon as we are sure what is normal anyway. Thank you. Two to the power of twenty thousand to one against and falling. (58)
In Adams’ novel cycle, we are told how improbable and unpredictable the fabric of time and space is and at the same time we are presented with a narrative technique which uses that very undecidability and manipulation within the mode of irony. The story starts with the end of the world and then replaces that world with various, improbable alternative worlds. We are presented with fragments, not a complete picture of any reality. Discussing hidden meaning and our way of describing the world, Stephen Pricket, in *Narrative, Religion, and Science: Fundamentalism Versus Irony*, argues as follows:

...from Gödel’s incompleteness theorem to Kuhn’s model of paradigms: however full and detailed our seeing or describing the world may be, it is never complete, never exhaustive, and above all, never entirely predictable. There will always be something to be added, more to be said, a different way of interpreting it by those who come after. Moreover, such endless possibility was as rich a source of irony as any hidden meaning. Indeed, it meant that meaning itself had become an infinite term. (122)

Adams’ cycle consists of many layers of irony. The title is ironic in that it presents itself as a guide but does anything but guide. Also, the story itself presents fragmentary aphorisms which are helpful neither for the reader nor for the characters in the story whose dialogue is saturated with irony as well. Arthur’s search for the truth is answered with either universal aphorisms or silence, which leads him astray instead of helping him understand the meaning of his life, let alone everything, which is the implied objective of the quest.

Furthermore, Marvin the paranoid android and Ford Prefect both appear to be omniscient but are not given enough room to voice their knowledge since they are always interrupted, usually by something of a catastrophic and acute nature. When truth is in the vicinity, its presence is vague and elusive. Just as Zaphod Beeblebrox is about to enter the Total Perspective Vortex, a machine in which “you are given just one momentary glimpse of the entire unimaginable infinity of creation, and somewhere in it a tiny little marker, a microscopic dot on a microscopic dot, which says ‘You are here,’” (194) he is instructed by Gargravarr, the custodian of the machine who is disembodied.
Zaphod looked wildly about. The voice was deep and quiet. In other circumstances it would even be described as soothing. There is, however, nothing soothing about being addressed by a disembodied voice out of nowhere … “Why can’t I see ...” “You will find your progress down the building greatly facilitated,” the voice lifted, “if you move about two yards to your left. Why don't you try it?” Zaphod looked and saw a series of short horizontal grooves leading all the way down the side of the building. Gratefully he shifted himself across to them. “Why don’t I see you again at the bottom?” said the voice in his ear, and as it spoke it faded. (192)

In the above quotation, Gargravarr’s voice and elusive appearance fades with the possibility of truth.

Ironically, Arthur’s last name, Dent, is synonymous with having the effect of reducing, as opposed to improving, knowledge. The word Dent derives from the word Dint, which denotes means, which is polysemous with meaning. Thus, meaning is part of Arthur’s last name. His first name is a powerful symbol of a man on an impossible quest. The Holy Grail, and the Ultimate Truth sought by Arthur Dent, are equally empty signifiers. The Ultimate Truth implies that there is one truth, useful to all people, but in reality we can only hope for a personal truth. When Arthur considers the wisdom of oracles, for example, he has high hopes at first, but they never deliver what he needs. The comic effect of this stratum of irony in the novel is that the reader can sympathize with Arthur since the same thing has probably happened to him/her. Stephen Pricket states that “Whereas the traditional aphorism aimed to impart rules of behaviour or practical wisdom, the Romantic aphorism typically consisted of a brief, witty, ironic and often puzzling statement, designed to provoke thought rather than complete it” (123). Adams uses traditional aphorisms to emphasize how useless Universal Truth is to the individual.

The aphoristic irony in Adams’ cycle consists of many layers. Arthur searches through time and space for something that could just as well reside within himself. He asks others about the purpose of his life but truth and meaning do not mean the same to one person as they do to another. He is lost on Earth, to begin with, but then gets lost in space and time as well. When he returns to Earth several times, in different times and dimensions, he becomes more and more delusional. He meets different versions of Trillian but remains one version of himself be it the original or not. He is allowed to see
a great many fragments of the Universe but not all of them at once. If someone experiences the Total Perspective Vortex, it is said in The Guide, they can not bear it. We could not endure the entireness of everything. We can, however, miraculously make do with fragments.
Types of irony
As has been established above, irony is neither a new phenomenon, nor a new word. Early concepts of irony, situational and verbal for example, can be found in many old texts, the Odyssey, Beowulf and Exodus. Luigi Anolli in Say Not to Say: New Perspectives on Miscommunication, concludes that irony is “not a fixed and narrow phenomenon, but a family of communicative processes” (137). There is, for example “sarcastic irony” and “kind irony,” two kinds which differ in intention by the interlocutor.

On one side, there is sarcastic irony, through which the speaker blames his/her interlocutor by means of literally praising words (blame by praise). In this way, he/she does not usually intend to soften a heavy expression of criticism, but to condemn the interlocutor without emoting him-/herself, by humiliating him/her through sarcasm and coldness. On the other side, there is kind irony, which consists in praising the other one by means of literally critical and offensive utterance (praise by blame). In such a way the speaker may mitigate the excess and euphoria of direct and explicit praise that may sometimes produce embarrassment in the interlocutor. (Anolli 137)

Anolli continues by pointing out that, although there are many different types of irony, they all have the same basic effect; they hide and reveal information at the same time.

Among these forms there exists a certain “air of family”, as Wittgenstein should say: in fact, they are based in a similar way on common communicative ground. As Muecke has pointed out trenchantly, irony is the art of being clear without being evident. The clearness of the ironic utterance does not in any way involve communicative transparency. In this case “clearness” means that an ironic comment can be linguistically decoded by resorting to standard linguistic operations such as phonological, lexical, and syntactic operations. However, its communicative meaning remains opaque because of its semantic indeterminacy and obliqueness. In this sense irony is neither “evident” nor transparent. (154)
Anolli continues by saying that sarchastic irony is the most frequently used type in Western culture. Kind irony, as an affiliation strategy, should not have the same relevance as sarchastic irony (154). More types of irony presented by Anolli are:

The so-called “Socratic irony”, as an elegant, ingenious, polite, urban way of communication, is convenient for discussing, and debating fashions and dogmas without unbalancing nor compromising. “Bantering irony”, instead, is like wit and serves to reduce the drama of a potentially tense or conflicting situation. (154)

Bantering irony fits the narration in the Guide, since it certainly reduces the drama of the serious matters it deals with and is not intended to attack. The possibility to simultaneously reveal and mask meaning through ironic narration is a highly useful tool in the telling of the story. One of its advantages is that it enables the author to distance himself from the narration. The author’s possible intentions become diluted. I suggest that Adams miscommunicates with his audience for the purpose of demonstrating miscommunication and the faultiness of language. Anolli establishes that being ironic, however, is not synonymous with lying.

Ironic miscommunication consists in a mask that ... in some regards, reveals what it hides, and, in other regards, hides what it reveals. ... Therefore, an ironic speaker is not a deceitful one. Unlike the lie ... irony is found underneath a disguise of pretence ... pretence communication instead clearly cohabits with reality, and exhibits its “not being true”, by winking at what is hidden behind the mask of untruth. (154)

But then again, not lying is not the same as telling the truth, there are grey zones, and it is within these hazy communication zones that Adams’ narration takes place. Irony is miscommunicative, and it makes it difficult for the reader to judge the author by his text. The author hides behind the ironic narrative mode.

Irony is substantially a paradigmatic kind of miscommunication as a complex communicative act ... In some way, the ironist is impervious in his/her position. Irony as miscommunication ... assumes the shape of a complex and kaleidoscopic
communicative resource. According to the occasion, it can be employed in order to stress or to weaken derived meanings. Within social relationships, the ironist, director of his/her own image, can adjust communicative patterns for (un)masking him/herself to others, as well as trying to reduce the risk of being “wrapped around the other’s finger”. (Anolli 154)

Adams’ text does indeed exhibit its not being true. In fact, all the interlocutors in the story are ironic. When being deliberately ironic in narration, one makes sure no one takes one seriously. The ironic mode becomes part of the story.

**Genre**

*The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* is usually labeled as Science-Fiction and/or Fantasy, but in my opinion much has been missed when Douglas Adams’ cycle is placed within these two genres. When a textual universe is created, it may become as unlikely, fantastic or improbable as we can imagine. Science-Fiction and Fantasy are two genres that present a fantastic reality to the reader. However, when SF novels deal with moral issues, existential matters and the human condition, they characteristically do so in a serious tone. Also, unlike other genres, such as historical fiction or mystery novels for example, the temporal and spatial setting in SF is more or less vague. It is specific for the SF genre that the human experience is problematized in a milieu of technological and scientific progress, and it is this characteristic that lends the SF story its credibility. The temporal setting for SF is usually a fixed, distant future. Alternatively, if time-travel is included it moves between a number of fixed, predetermined points in time. The temporal setting of The Guide, however, is absolutely indeterminable, ranging from before the beginning of known human history to its unknown end and beyond.

Furthermore, in Adams’ novel cycle, every event is connected with every other event, which invokes a sense of unpleasant timelessness, a difficulty to sort the events chronologically. Time, as an ongoing phenomenon, is not an important subject in the story, but the short seconds that precede a catastrophe are. Spatially, SF may contain two, or perhaps a few parallel Universes which are always presented with at least a seed of probability and are carefully explained in scientifically up-to-date, technical terms.
Furthermore, in SF these technological explanations are usually presented in an argumentative and convincing tone. In The Guide there is an infinite number of parallel Universes, and only a seemingly random selection is dealt with. We are presented with fragments of the whole, while at the same time being told that the Universe is too big for us to grasp. The main character Arthur Dent, his female fellow human survivor Trillian, and his alien friends erratically leap in and out of these parallel Universes, travel through pan-dimensional time in criss-cross, led by a propulsion system called “the improbability drive.” In Adams’ novel cycle, the reader is not expected to accept any of its claims about its fictional reality.

In Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory Marie Laure-Ryan establishes that “In science fiction proper, the focus is on ... technological advances” (36). Laure-Ryan has categorized a system of reality, in which there is a set of distinct worlds. The actual world (AW) is in the center, and the satellites are alternative, possible worlds. The textual universe is the image of a system of reality projected by a text. “The textual universe is a modal system if,” Laure-Ryan says, “one of its worlds is designated as actual and opposed to the other worlds of the system” (viii). In addition to (AW) presented above, the worlds within this system of reality are: (APW) an alternative possible world in a modal system of reality, (TRW) textual reference world, for which the text claims facts, (TAW) textual actual world, and the image of TRW proposed by the text. The authority that determines the facts of TAW is the actual sender (author), (TAPW) textual alternative possible world, in a modal system, presented as mental constructs by the inhabitants of TAW, and finally (NAW) narratorial actual world, which is what the narrator presents as fact of TRW (Laure-Ryan viii).

Since technology must respect mathematical and natural laws, relations E/natural laws, F/taxonomic, G/logical, H/analytical and I/linguistic will be maintained, but all others may be severed. The trademark for the genre is its respect for the wide version of F by its trangression of the narrow F’. (Laure-Ryan 36)

By the wide version of F/taxonomic, Laure-Ryan means that TAW is accessible from AW if both worlds contain the same species. By the ‘narrow F,’ she means that both worlds also must contain the same manufactured objects, which are of the type known to the reader. Adams’ story does not respect any of these categories of Laure-Ryan’s,
and can therefore not easily be regarded Science-Fiction. In Adams’ novel cycle, all references to mathematical and technological laws are disrespectful of the natural laws on Earth, yet the Earth functions as AW in The Guide. Additionally, irony is central in the narration, which is antithetic to the serious and argumentative tone of pure science fiction. There is an unfathomable abstruseness accomplished with the ironic tone in Adams’ narration, which perfidiously parodies its association with the genre. The abundance of irony, sarcasm and juxtapositions in The Guide makes it very difficult to clearly see what type of text it is. While it can be considered a monument of universal aphorisms, The Guide can also be regarded as a deliberately meaningless story, telling us that language lacks the ability to transmit true meaning, or in fact, any meaning. I do not claim that it is merely a study of communicative problems although there is an element of linguistic theorization in the text, not least present within the mode of irony. It is also a study of philosophical problems, telling us that we can not possibly grasp the entirety of the Universe in which we live and die.

In Transrealist Fiction: Writing in the Slipstream of Science Damien Broderick presents a type of fiction, alternative to SF and Fantasy, in which artificial emotions and emotive artificialness can be found. Broderick calls such a genre “transrealism.” By lending humanness to machines, Adams effectively masks the fact that he is dealing with the human condition. Marvin, the depressed robot, for example, is more genuinely depressed than any actual human could ever be. Transrealism is characteristic in that it:

...denotes sf with heart, portraying against its fantastic and disruptive invented settings naturalistic characters (some of them robots or aliens) with complex inner lives and personal histories somewhat resembling the density of recognizable or real people.” (Broderick 21)

In my opinion, The Guide can be placed within transrealist fiction because it deals also with the machine’s perception of reality in connection with language, which enables the machines in the story to appear even more humanlike than they would if they had a restricted vocabulary, or a limited and non humanlike mind. The machines are thereby able to express their emotions, in their own voice, ironically even. Broderick states that “the substrates of the impermeable level of reality will perhaps forever evade us” unless indeed a genuine Theory of Everything is found, but our search for knowledge and truth will have to serve us until then (21). Not until we can create truly human artificial life
forms, can we understand ourselves. We must not, however, forget that we can, naturally create actual humans already. In transrealist fiction, realities and worlds that are inhabited by truly emotional machines can be created and that is a useful device to describe the human condition ironically. Marvin, the paranoid android, has a rich inner life, but Trillian, the only surviving female human, on the other hand, who is a biological life-form, appears to have a poor inner life, as far as we are told. Trillian dwells in the background and her voice is hardly heard at all. The reason for this, I suggest, could be to enhance the notion of humanness in Marvin since she is the one who is closest attached to the android. A fictional world in which a robot can show more emotions than a human being is transrealist fiction. Such a story is undeniably ironic, too.

**Societal critique**

There is an undertone of harsh societal critique particularly regarding profit hunting and environmental pollution in Adams’ novel cycle. Human actions are frequently described as idiotic in the book, from the crucifixion of Jesus Christ to the bureaucracy surrounding the demolition of Dent’s house. There are, however, no clear statements for or against any human behavior, simply manifestations of it. The critique is interwoven with issues that are of importance to aliens, and space- and time-travelling humans but not immediately to the human reader. Even when Adams deals with the destruction of Earth, the tone is hilarious and irresistible. The ironic veiling of the societal critique could have been more powerful if it had been of a more direct and sarcastic kind, but the twists of direction and the links to alien, non-human fictional worlds, dilutes it to such an extent that in the end it seems more like a critique on societal critique.

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)

When reading the above quotation, one can not help wondering to whom this explanation of human behavior is addressed. Who is the implied reader? An alien reading it, would remember the description of Earth in The Guide which says: “Mostly harmless.” The Earth is naturally harmless to an alien because it no longer exists, and even when it did, the pollution of Earth would not affect the alien. Seen from another point of view, if humans are capable of polluting their own environment to the point of their own extinction, the alien might be terrified of the potential threat they could be to other life forms in the Universe. It is also ironic that the human race almost but never quite accomplished its own extinction before they were disintegrated by the Vogons. A human reading it would, first of all, already know how oil was misused on Earth and secondly, would essentially have to be Arthur or Trillian because they are the only two humans who fled the destruction of Earth. Furthermore, the destruction of Earth was carried out to make a “hyperspace bypass,” which suggests that a road was going to be paved exactly where Earth, a moving planet, was positioned in an infinite Universe. This does not make any sense on any level. In the story there are much more sophisticated ways for aliens described to get from point A to point B than by car on paved roads. Finally, if this alien-made bypass was being paved, the aliens would also know about oil related pollution. Adams thus explains the obvious but conceals obscure phenomena. New concepts are left hanging in the air while the familiar Earthly phenomena are meticulously explained. Irony and the play of language, more than its contents, lend this unlikely story its credibility.

The excerpt above dealing with travelling methods belongs in a context of transportation problems and the question which transportation system might be the fastest.

And what about matter transference beams? Any form of transport which involved tearing you apart atom by atom, flinging those atoms through the sub-ether, and then jamming them back together again just when they were getting their first taste of freedom for years had to be bad news. (257)
In the last book, *Mostly Harmless*, “bad news” is presented as the fastest propulsion system. This play of words signifies the ambiguity of irony as well as the semantic undecidability of language permeating the narration. In the introduction to *Mostly Harmless*, the issue of transportation problems is brought up again, and the “bad news” method is exemplified as useless. It is notable that alien entities are called people, that “bad news” is presented as a universal phenomenon known to the inhabitants of remote worlds, and that spaceships are seen as a common means of transportation choice even though matter transference beams and other non-vehicle means of transportation have been described. The text problematizes itself by presenting uniquely human knowledge in alien situations. Humans are portrayed as quite insignificant in the Universe whereas the human condition, human knowledge and the technological progress on Earth are as fixed phenomena as the stars in the sky. The reader is faced with a problem when realising that a highly developed alien race of beings is not only paving roads that will not be needed since their crafts are flying but are actually building ships that fly, being powered by an abstract phenomenon known by humans on Earth only. Furthermore, one cannot help wondering why these highly evolved aliens bother with anything but matter transference beams since this seems to be a very effective manner in which to get from point A to point B.

One of the problems has to do with the speed of light and the difficulties involved in trying to exceed it. You can’t. Nothing travels faster than the speed of light with the possible exception of bad news, which obeys its own special laws. The Hingefrel people of Arkintoofole Minor did try to build spaceships that were powered by bad news but they didn’t work particularly well and were so extremely unwelcome whenever they arrived anywhere that there wasn’t really any point in being there. (635)

Both the previous quotation and the one above end by the implicit statement that there is no point in being anywhere else than where you are right now. This is a recurring notion, which follows Arthur’s search for himself and for his purpose in life. Also, the yearning for “here and now,” is constantly disturbed by the leaps in time and space. The story itself would have been completely different if the author had tried to make it credible. If the novel cycle had been written in a somber and argumentative tone, I doubt that it would have been tolerable. In my opinion, the author’s choice of narrative
mode is superior to the actual component parts of the story; the plot is not at the core of the story but language itself is.

The plot, the characters’ personalities, and the worlds described can be interpreted differently by each reader, but the ironic narration is too obvious to be denied. A multi-layered miscommunication is achieved by telling a bizarre and unfathomable story in an ironic tone, addressed to an undecided implied reader. The story itself is fantastically improbable and needs to be processed carefully by the reader, in order to be assimilated. Moreover, the ironic tone, by its grandeur alone, effectively drowns the story and veils the abundance of connotative links to the third layer of communication, a societal critique which, in turn, undermines itself by its irony. In the midst of this intricacy, the reader is reassured by such encouraging remarks as “don’t panic” or “The Guide is definitive.” This device creates a deceitful illusion of simplicity. However, the extent of irony perceived depends on how much of an ironist the reader is. “While we may legitimately question whether something has been said or done with ironical intent, we cannot question anyone’s right to see something as ironic,” says Muecke (44). He draws attention to the importance of interpretive potential in a text arguing that “…the role of the ironic observer is more active and creative than the word ‘observer’ suggests” (43). On the blurb of Muecke’s book it is claimed that “Irony is a phenomenon of considerable cultural and literary importance,” but he also states that “One need not accept the view … that all art, or all literature is essentially ironic … one need only list the major writers in whose work irony is significantly present … Homer…Plato…Shakespeare…Kafka” (4).

In addition, Muecke argues that a similar list of non-ironic writers is not to be made. He also states that “literature, with language as its medium, is inescapably ideational,” (5) as opposed to the non-verbal arts, which at first seem to appeal to the senses, not the intellect. Thus, non-ironic communication, through the medium of language, can only be achieved if the receiver fails to find irony in its content. Muecke also says that when literature is most “musical,” as in lyric poetry, it is least ironical. Conversely, he continues, it is when a painting is “intellectual” or “literary,” whether in making a statement or conveying a message, that it can be ironic (5). As I see it, The Guide does not make any clear statements through its story, but through its narration.
The Play of Binaries

As Adams clearly demonstrates, language can be used to eradicate meaning. We need language, but its evasiveness confuses us. Communicative problems are foregrounded, particularly as regards Arthur Dent and the Babel Fish. The following is said about the Babel Fish in The Guide:

It feeds on brainwave energy not from its carrier but from those around it. It absorbs all unconscious mental frequencies from this brainwave energy to nourish itself with. It then excretes into the mind of its carrier a telepathic matrix formed by combining the conscious thought frequencies with nerve signals picked up from the speech centres of the brain which has supplied them. (42)

Arthur is introduced to the Babel Fish very early in the story. According to The Guide, “… if you stick a Babel fish in your ear you can instantly understand anything said to you in any form of language” (42). Unlike science fiction proper, with its technological but quite plausible descriptions, there is a quasi-technological explanation to how it operates. Dent puts the fish in his ear and easily communicates with every entity he encounters. He also miraculously reads all written signs in any language he encounters in the Universe. Furthermore, he communicates verbally with machines of various kinds, but it is never stated in what language this communication takes place. For example, when Arthur explains to the Nutri-Matic vending machine, onboard “The Heart of Gold,” how to make a decent cup of tea, he does so by telling about India and all the details concerning the beverage. Their communication is anything but easy, but that is not because they have difficulties understanding each other’s languages but because Arthur is human and the Nutri-Matic is a machine.

‘Listen, you machine,’ he said, ‘you claim you can synthesize any drink in existence, so why do you keep giving me the same undrinkable stuff?’
‘Nutrition and pleasurable sense data,’ burbled the machine. ‘Share and Enjoy.’
‘It tastes filthy!’
‘If you have enjoyed the experience of this drink,’ continued the machine, ‘why not share it with your friends?’
‘Because,’ said Arthur tartly, ‘I want to keep them. Will you try to comprehend what I’m telling you? That drink …’
'That drink,' said the machine sweetly, ‘was individually tailored to meet your personal requirements for nutrition and pleasure.’

‘Ah,’ said Arthur, ‘so I’m a masochist on diet am I?’

‘Share and Enjoy.’

‘Oh shut up.’

‘Will that be all?’

Arthur decided to give up.

‘Yes,’ he said. Then he decided he’d be damned if he’d give up. ‘No,’ he said, ‘look, it’s very, very simple ... all I want ... is a cup of tea. You are going to make one for me. Keep quiet and listen.’ (155)

The Guide says any form of language, which in one sense includes written words, but it also says anything said to you, which simultaneously excludes text. Neither written signs nor machines, such as robots, coffee machines, androids or elevators emit brainwaves. Yet, Arthur understands them all, as if they communicated in English. One salient question is, what language, and what sign system the actual Guide is written/spoken in. It is not English, so it too must be translated by the fish in Arthur’s ear. Arthur’s speech is not translated, so he must rely on everyone else having a Babel Fish in their ear. The Guide implies that everyone in the Universe has a Babel Fish, but of course it omits humans on Earth, all of whom, like Arthur, are oblivious to this useful creature. Adams’ philosophical point on the Babel Fish ends up in an ironic anti-argument.

Now it is such a bizarrely improbable coincidence that anything so mindbogglingly useful could have evolved purely by chance that some thinkers have chosen to see it as the final and clinching proof of the non-existence of God. The argument goes something like this: ‘I refuse to prove that I exist,’ says God, ‘for proof denies faith, and without faith I am nothing.’ (42)

The circular argumentation in the quotation above would not be possible without irony. In the above extract from The Guide, God refuses to prove his/her existence to humans since they are denied access to the translating fish on Earth. However, according to The Guide, humans are those who question God’s logic. This places humans both outside
and inside the center of The Guide, which thereby contradicts itself. It does not make sense because it was never intended to make sense.

‘But,’ says Man, ‘The Babel fish is a dead giveaway, isn’t it? It could not have evolved by chance. It proves you exist, and so therefore, by your own arguments, you don’t. QED.’ ‘Oh dear,’ says God, ‘I hadn’t thought of that,’ and promptly vanished in a puff of logic. ‘Oh, that was easy,’ says Man, and for an encore goes on to prove that black is white and gets himself killed on the next zebra crossing.

(42, emphasis added)

The simultaneous revelation and veiling in the above quotation clearly shows to what extent ironic narration can be used to abate meaning.

In the novel cycle humans are both included and excluded. Not until Arthur is in outer space and the Earth is disintegrated, does he have access to the Babel Fish. His alien friend Ford Prefect, who is from Betelgeuse, has learned English and communicates with Arthur before he introduces him to the Babel Fish in outer space. It all takes place on Earth before its destruction. Since the Babel Fish works so that Arthur’s speech is also translated to those aliens who possess Babel fish, then why did Ford learn English? It is clear that Ford had a Babel Fish inside his ear long before he ended up on Earth and met Arthur Dent. Ford must have been prohibited to introduce it to Arthur while he was still on Earth. Furthermore, this suggests that Ford Prefect is omniscient. Moreover, Ford is said not to understand sarcasm, an element permeating their conversation. “They don’t have sarcasm on Betelgeuse, and Ford Prefect often failed to notice it unless he was concentrating” (12). Irony, however, seems to be the core of the Betelgeusian language, and sarcasm exists within irony. As has been established earlier, sarcasm is a type of irony whose main feature is that you are neither lying nor telling the truth. It is rather a matter of omitting information, presenting only fragments, the pieces of which, if put together, do not present a complete picture. Ford says, for example, to Arthur “you’d better be prepared for the jump into hyperspace. It’s unpleasantly like being drunk” (42). When Arthur asks Ford what is so unpleasant about being drunk, Ford replies “You ask a glass of water” (42). Irony thus appears to be universal, since it is present both on Earth and on Betelgeuse.

The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy signifies the cruelties of language whose power we are in completely as long as we ascribe meaning to it. Adams seems to
suggest we stop doing so but simultaneously he bombards us with intricately paradoxical irony, demonstrating the impossibility of denying meaning in language. Morton Gurewitch, in *The Ironic Temper and the Comic Imagination*, refers to Jan Swearingen’s list of ironic uses:

The double bind; the confidence game; the ironic narrator; the schizophrenic personality; the deceptive relationship between the conscious and the subconscious mind; the notions that ‘God’, the author or the subject are dead, that ‘the human condition’ is an ironic deceit or tragic joke; literary and religious attempts to go beyond words into silence because words are inevitably ‘inadequate’... linguistic contingency, illusoriness, unreliability. (214-215)

Ironic narration may drain the concentration of the reader who then settles for fragments. If Adams’ novel cycle had not been funny, it would probably have been abandoned half way through by most readers. It is the humor in the ironic narration, and the vague sense that something more tangible is being dealt with that makes it bearable, and even enjoyable. Silence, as an opposition to words, is used to demonstrate both the importance of language and its iniquities. Our love of language, our need for and our submission to it is exemplified when Arthur is stranded on pre-historic Earth, completely isolated from language. A craft lands and a tall creature comes out and says “You’re a jerk, Dent,” whereupon Arthur can only manage “Ru ... ra ... wah ... who?”, before he lapses into a frantic kind of silence, feeling the effects of having not said anything to anybody for as long as he can remember. The tall creature goes on, “Arthur Dent?” and Arthur nods. To make sure he is addressing the right person, the tall creature asks again, “Arthur Philip Dent?” and Arthur manages a weak “yes,” and then receives the full message when the alien repeats and adds, “You’re a jerk, a complete asshole” (316). The first interlocution Dent experiences in a long period of years, during which silence has been total, is an insult delivered to him by an alien whom he has never met and, who subsequently, has never met him, and who is thus not entitled to judge him by Earthly standards. In addition, he would not even have understood the alien unless he had had a Babel Fish in his ear. Arthur is so unused to speaking by then that even though he is usually very good at it, he simply cannot retaliate verbally. Arthur must feel overwhelmed with joy and anticipation when the prospect of having someone,
anyone, anything, to talk to emerges as he watches the craft land before him. As he watches the craft lift again, he jumps and screams back at it but there is no one to hear him or speak to him. He has the use of his voice back again but no one to talk to. Here, both language and silence are presented as equally horrific states of mind.

**Centric ambivalence**

From one perspective, one could claim that by the destruction of the Earth, humans and humanness are sent out into the margin. The story tells us that the original humans put onto the (computer) Earth were the biological software, oblivious to reality and their purpose placed there only to calculate the question to the answer *forty-two*. Ford Prefect spent four years on earth, writing about human cultures, all of which was condensed, by the new editors of *The Guide*, too: *Earth: Mostly Harmless*. Seen from the perspective of a societal critique, the book exemplifies human destructiveness in an absurd degree thus simultaneously keeping the human race firmly in the center of the story. On the surface the novel cycle focuses on everything *not* human, particularly disregarding the insignificant ape-like creatures on the mostly harmless planet Earth. However, it tells us that the earth is *not* a planet, but a giant computer, designed and constructed by another giant computer, which, in turn, was designed and created by a race of hyperintelligent pan-dimensional beings, known to us as mice. On the planet of Magrathea, Arthur is told the whole story by a man called Slartibartfast. Even this detailed lesson is only a fragment of a non-existent *whole* truth. “Earthman, the planet you lived on was commissioned, paid for, and run by mice. It was destroyed five minutes before the completion of the purpose for which it was built, and we’ve got to build another one” (109).

The question whether humans are natural or artificial arises when one takes into account that the earth was artificially constructed in Adams’ fictional world. Thus, humans must also be machines, or at least part of the machine Earth, and consequently artificial to their nature. “And this computer, which was called the Earth, was so large that it was frequently mistaken for a planet - especially by the strange ape-like beings who roamed its surface, totally unaware that they were simply part of a gigantic computer program” (149). We are told that the Earth was programmed with human beings, as its software; they were eradicated by the Golgafrinchans, an alien race who are the forefathers of the human race existent today in Adams’ Textual Universe. Ford explains this to Arthur when they are back on prehistoric Earth. “Like it or leave it, the
Golgafrinchans are the people you are descended from. In two million years they get destroyed by the Vogons. History is never altered you see, it just fits together like a jigsaw. Funny old thing, life, isn’t it?” (303). It is clear that Ford knows sarcastic irony very well.

Humans are both outside and inside the story, both significant and insignificant at the same time. So, what are humans, then, according to the novel cycle? Are they Golgafrinchans, and if so, who were the original software of the computer Earth? If so, when did they stop being Golgafrinchans, and become humans? Arthur is called a human, but it turns out he is a descendant of the Golgafrinchans. One could consider the Golgafrinchans, and Arthur too, to be part of a computer virus. To assign humans the function of a computer virus, as Adams has done in The Guide, is to artificialize humanity. Humans are said to be oblivious to their reality and their purpose on Earth, Yet, they are apparently not humans at all, but Golgafrinchans. Humans are those who are mostly harmless but the ones who question God’s authority. The reader is led in circles through a transrealistic story that leads back to the beginning. What we are, in fact, told in all of this intricacy, is that we are indeed oblivious to our reality and our purpose on Earth. Twice over. If we believe that, then it must be true, but since, as has been established previously, truth does not exist, we should not believe it. If so, then we are not oblivious to our reality and purpose on Earth. But we are. There is, indeed, auto-deconstruction within the text.

The text ultimately suggests that we are the aliens, strangers to ourselves, and unable to know ourselves. According to Adams’ TAW, mankind has evolved for two million years and has managed, just barely, to return to the level of knowledge, scientific grandeur and social conduct held by our replacement ancestors, the Golgafrinchans, who accidentally populated the Earth two million years ago, and, as has been explained earlier, replaced the original humans. In between these two equalibratory points, there can only have been either complete ignorance or its opposite, total knowledge, which is out of the question, as has also been established above. This anti-achievement suggests that we cannot transgress a certain point of knowledge, but only return to ignorance and start all over again. The entire novel cycle, with its circular temporality, is a mise en abîme. Adams demonstrates the impossibility of the task of finding the Ultimate Truth; that is the meaning of life, and he does so through a multi-layered, ironic narrative mode. In a creationist TAW he presents evolution as a circular phenomenon with limited range. The reader is informed that finding “the ultimate
answer” requires pronouncing “the ultimate question,” and that according to The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, only either can exist. Thus, evoluution and intelligent design walk hand in hand in Adams’ TAW, a notion that leads back to the statement ‘only either can exist,’ on the question and the answer.

Truth
In addition to the crucial element of language, humanness, fate, free will, philosophy and truth are other important matters. Zaphod Beeblebrox, who may have known his fate in the past but chose to hide sections of his mind from himself in order to become president of the galaxy, is an enhanced symbol of human oblivion. This is partly due to Zaphod not being human, which destabilizes the concept of humanness, and partly because he made a choice within the concept of fate. Throughout the cycle, there is a pervasive element of fate, coexisting with the concept of free will. In a fatalistic Universe every choice made by an individual must, by logical reasoning be part of his/her fate. Provided that fate exists, a predetermined choice only appears to be free but is in fact an illusion. The matter of free will becomes even more abstruse if schizophrenia is added to this line of reasoning. With his two heads and volatile personality, Zaphod personifies the evanescence of truth and meaning. Gurewitch says:

Ambiguity, duplicity, multiplicity, paradox, disjunctiveness, complexity, elusiveness, provisionality, incertitude, indeterminism – these are only a few of irony’s linkages. Irony also suggests an equilibrium of opposed forces or at least a condition of suspension of contrary powers. (15)

When Gurewitch points to Jan Swearingen’s list of ironic uses including verbal technique, an effective strategy and sometimes a situation in which an unnamed fate is the agent of reversal, he is widening the concept of irony significantly (214-215).

Since Zaphod Beeblebrox can be considered schizophrenic, at least artificially, his binate choices, which are made within his fate, are beyond explanation. He does not even understand them himself, and he claims he does not want to know. This is his fate also or he would not have performed the advanced brain surgery. “I don’t know what this great thing I’m meant to be doing is, and it looks to me as if I was supposed not to know. And I resent that, right?” (164). Zaphod explains to his dead grandfather and the
others onboard the ship, “The Heart of Gold,” that he would not have been able to become president of the galaxy, or to steal the ship, which must have been the important thing if he had not shut down parts of his mind (164). The ultra-absurd impossibility of the situation is further explained.

Except this old self of mine tried to leave himself in control, leaving orders for me in the bit of my brain he locked off. Well, I don’t want to know, and I don’t want to hear them. That’s my choice. I'm not going to be anybody’s puppet, particularly not my own. (165)

Zaphod is in a situation in which he can not even communicate with himself, without being ironic.

The rules change as soon as we come close enough to have a glimpse of the truth. Even the Earth, constructed by hyperintelligent, pan-dimensional mice to calculate the ultimate question, is doomed to fail. “... Deep Thought computed and calculated, and in the end announced that the answer was in fact Forty-two - and so another, even bigger, computer had to be built to find out what the actual question was” (149). Deep Thought deducts this by logical reasoning even before it is given its assignment to calculate The Answer.

I speak of none but the computer that is to come after me!...You know nothing of future time...and yet in my teeming circuitry I can navigate the infinite delta streams of future probability and see that there must one day come a computer whose merest operational parameters I am not worthy to calculate, but which it will be my fate eventually to design. (113)

When Fook and Lunkwill, the pan-dimensional operators of Deep Thought have presented its task, two philosophers, Majikthise and Vroomfondel, demand admission to talk to them. Completely non-synchronized in their presentation, the two philosophers finally demand the machine is immediately shut off. When Lunkwill asks what the problem is, Majikthise says that demarcation is the problem. The philosophers are worried they will be out of work once Deep Thought presents the answer. Deep Thought explains to them that he will have to run the program for seven and a half million years, and that:
Everyone’s going to have their own theories about what answer I’m eventually to come up with, and who better to capitalize on that media market than you yourself? So long as you can keep disagreeing with each other violently enough and slagging each other off in the popular press, you can keep yourself on the gravy train for life. How does that sound? (115)

This logical line of reasoning thoroughly impresses the worried philosophers. Here is an example of a machine being more sensible, not only more logical, than biological beings with brains.

The two philosophers gaped at him. ‘Bloody hell,’ said Majikthise, ‘now that is what I call thinking. Here Vroomfondel, why do we never think of things like that?’ ‘Dunno’, said Vroomfondel in an awed whisper, ‘think our brains must be too highly trained Majikthise’. So saying, they turned on their heels and walked out of the door and into a lifestyle beyond their wildest dreams. (115)

So, in Adams’ TAW, even professional philosophers are trained in thinking in a certain way, much as a computer in our AW is programmed to think certain thoughts. Interestingly, this also corresponds with Adams’ AW, in which humans are schooled, just like computers. The difference between the above scenario and real life on Earth today is that everything is taken to its extreme, and narrated with irony consistently. The hint of societal critique permeating the entire novel cycle is apparent here too, especially regarding the focus on capitalistic profit. This meaninglessness of life is very difficult to grasp, and Adams is not alone in trying to present to us the idea that no matter how far we go in our reasoning and contemplation, we will never reach the goal of truth and meaning unless the goal is the journey, the struggle. The search for truth and meaning is doomed to fail. Geoffrey Bennington, in Futures: Of Jacques Derrida says:

Philosophy is a discourse that knows all about the future, or at least about its future. It knows, and has always known, that it has no future. Philosophy knows that the future is death. Philosophy is always going to die. Always has been going to die. Always will have been going to die. From the beginning, its future will have been its end: and from this end, its future will have been always to begin its
ending again. Philosophy happens in this archeo-teleo-necrological solidarity. The end of philosophy is the end of philosophy. (17)

Pondering the meaning of life is a circular and infinite task. However, when Adams presents this idea in a consistently ironic tone, he adds the element of hope by sowing the seeds of doubt in the reader. The lifespan of a human being is definitive, The Guide is definitive, but the search is eternal. The Guide tells us that:

... nothing that ever happened on the Earth could possibly make the slightest bit of sense. Sadly however, just before the critical moment of readout, the Earth was unexpectedly demolished by the Vogons to make way - so they claimed - for a new hyperspace bypass, and so all hope of discovering a meaning for life was lost for ever. Or so it would seem. (149-150)

A philosophy on hopelessness should not contain hope. Still, in The Guide we are lulled into a labyrinthine substratum which simultaneously suggests hope and dissent. This puts the reader in an unstable and uncomfortable situation. The reader is unable to take a position and is left wondering whether there is hope or not and whether The Guide is what it seems, a science-fiction cycle about the adventures of Arthur Dent, or a demonstration of miscommunication. Uncertainty is a fragile state, in which we do not wish to dwell, and therefore some readers may settle for the fun stratum of the ironic tale. Others may start asking hopeless questions, depending on how much of an ironist they are, themselves. If all hope is indeed lost, then why write a funny story about it? The two clauses which may or may not invoke doubt in the reader in the extract above, are “so they claimed,” and “Or so it would seem.” These leakages of imploration to the reader are very important in that they vaguely tell us to doubt the text, which in the foreground stratum tells us that “The Guide is definitive,” and “Don’t panic” and that it is more trustworthy than our own perception of reality. Undecidability and ambiguity are the core of the textual makeup of Adams’ narration. The ironist reader conceives it as equivocal.

Irony is an elusive concept, and its variation and diversity is vast. Irony can be found in all fictional narration, and Gurewitch calls it the key both to tragedy and comedy. He also states that it invokes striking discrepancies, startling juxtapositions and the shock of unexpectedly altered circumstance as well as oddities of fate and mysteries
and iniquities of the cosmos (15). The Guide exhibits all of these phenomena and it seems Adams chose irony as the medium for invoking in the reader mixed emotions of trust and distrust, revelation and mystery with surgical precision. Gurewitch continues by arguing that in comedy, irony may be associated with an analgesic jesting at the world’s distempers, and that it may be viewed as a metaphysics of the absurd (15). The ubiquity of irony in The Guide is, in itself, its strongest absurdity. Furthermore, in Adams’ narration, the absurd is not juxtaposed with reality for effect, but is placed within it to a point where reality becomes absurd. When Arthur is back on Earth in So Long and Thank’s For all the Fish, he meets a man in California whose beach house is inside out. The man’s name is Wonko the Sane and he promises to tell Arthur and Fenchurch (an alternative version of Trillian) why all the dolphins on Earth have disappeared.

It was inside out. Actually inside out, to the extent that they had to park on the carpet. All along what one would normally call the outer wall, which was decorated in a tasteful interior-designed pink, were bookshelves, also a couple of those odd three-legged tables with semi-circular tops which stand in such a way as to suggest that someone just dropped the wall straight through them, and pictures which were clearly designed to soothe … Confusing. The sign above the front door said, “Come Outside”, and so, nervously, they had. Inside, of course, was where the Outside was. Rough brickwork, nicely done painting, guttering in good repair, a garden path, a couple of small trees, some rooms leading off. (584)

Arthur and Fenchurch like this peculiar man because he “had an open, engaging quality and seemed able to mock himself before anyone else did” (585). The reason for Wonko building his beach house inside out, was toothpicks.

‘Ah yes,’ he said, ‘that’s to do with the day I finally realized that the world had gone totally mad and built the Asylum to put it in, poor thing, and hoped it would get better’. … ‘Here,’ said Wonko the Sane, ‘we are outside the Asylum.’ He pointed again at the rough brickwork, the pointing and the guttering. ‘Go through that door,’ he pointed at the first door through which they had originally entered, ‘and you go into the Asylum. I’ve tried to decorate it nicely to keep the inmates happy, but there’s very little one can do. I never go in there now myself. If ever I
am tempted, which these days I rarely am, I simply look at the sign written over the door and shy away.’ (585)

The sign that caused Wonko’s action says “Hold stick near centre of its length. Moisten pointed end in mouth. Insert in tooth space, blunt end next to gum. Use gentle in-out motion” (585).

‘It seemed to me’, said Wonko the Sane, ‘that any civilization that had so far lost its head as to need to include a set of detailed instructions for use in a packet of toothpicks, was no longer a civilization in which I could live and stay sane … And in case it crossed your mind to wonder, as I can see how it possibly might, I am completely sane. Which is why I call myself Wonko the Sane, just to reassure people on this point.’ (586)

The reversal of reality is an ironic strategy, which in Wonko’s case completely reverses conventional truth.

As has been discussed above, there is an undertone of societal critique throughout the novel cycle, and it becomes more and more tangible towards the last two volumes although never explicitly so. The ironic narration is manipulative and raises questions why, if he wanted to criticize our modern society, Adams did not use a serious tone instead. Even when Ford orders room service to charge the entire London zoo, and the release of all its animals into the wild, on his credit card in *Mostly Harmless*, the narration is ironic. After that request has been granted, Ford orders up some foie gras, and a sallad with blue cheese dressing. Arthur then says “Um, I always feel a bit bad about foie gras. Bit cruel to the geese, isn’t it?,” whereupon Ford replies “Fuck ‘em,’ you can’t care about every damn thing” (805). Adams makes absolutely sure his readers cannot take his text seriously. It does not make sense to save the world and exclude geese. Such twists are part of the ironic mode, as both Gurewitch and Swearingen suggest. Is the choice of irony a sign of the modern times Adams is criticizing? Can irony be used as an effective tool to create confusion? Pricket argues that:

Register, rhetoric and imagery all manipulate in their own ways; above all, irony emerges as the natural mode of our modern fragmented culture ... since the
eighteenth century there have been only two possible ways of understanding the world: the fundamentalist, and the ironic. (1)

The fragmentation of our society is apparent, not least in the telethons for various causes; we cannot please them all. We can not save all the animals because we do not even know all the species yet. As I have suggested, Adams wants to show us the impossibility of true meaning, and the non-existence of truth. Irony seems to function well as an overall jargon to demonstrate it.

Giving up on language and replacing it with what is more true and meaningful is clearly something sought in the very last paragraph of the novel cycle when the Grebulon leader, who has been monitoring the Earth, reads in his horoscope (from Earthly sources) that he is going to have a bad month. “The Grebulon leader ended up having a very bad month after all. It was pretty much the same as all the previous months except that there was now nothing on the television anymore. He put on some light music instead” (815). Earthly notions of reality has been taken on by them as the truth since the Grebulons have taken part of all media broadcast from Earth. Here, the first ironic statement is that what is true on earth is, by physical principles, not true on the edge of the solar system. The Grebulon ship’s relation to the stars is not the same, and therefore a horoscope designed for humans on Earth will do them no good. The second ironic twist is that the Grebulons have been monitored by the Vogons, who in turn, are set out to destroy the Earth and when this mission is completed, there will be no Earthly horoscopic truth left for the Grebulons. By replacing language with music, light music at that, the Grebulon leader turns to a universal truth, one that needs no interpretation. It is important to point out that complicated music would need interpretation, or at least some attention, and would not serve as well as a polar opposite to language. As has been exemplified above, neither would silence do since it is an equally horrific state of mind as language. Thus, light music functions as an alternative; it is a habile and frictionless illusion of reality. It would be more complicated if the light music the Grebulon leader puts on, came from Earth because that would make it even less meaningful since the Earth no longer exists.

In spite of Adams’ consistent irony, fans all over the world have tried to find a deeper meaning, the truth, especially regarding the number Forty-two. Adams himself, however, says in an interview:
The answer to this is very simple. It was a joke. It had to be a number, an ordinary, smallish number, and I chose that one. Binary representations, base thirteen, Tibetan monks are all complete nonsense. I sat at my desk, stared into the garden and thought ‘42 will do.’ I typed it out. End of story. (Wikipedia)

According to Anolli, “irony is an indirect but clear communicative strategy. Irony is neither allusion nor ambiguousness nor even equivocalness” (155). This could easily be misunderstood, because equivocalness and ambiguity can be perceived by the addressee. What could be added to Anolli’s statement is that irony may appear ambiguous and equivocal to the receiver but may not be intentionally so by the sender. In my opinion, there is no hidden message in The Guide, but an explicit one, and as I have stated earlier, it is not to take it seriously. Despite this, I still think Adams took his writing seriously using irony strategically to make sure this message came through clearly. His novel cycle does not end up paradoxical and abstruse by mistake. It was intended miscommunication. It was strategy. Pricket considers any author’s choice of linguistic tools by adding the element of truthfulness.

… Above all, it is useless to ask the obvious question, ‘Is this true?’, since truth, and even rational investigation, have been conveniently dispensed with. We simply have a number of linguistic ‘tools’ at our disposal, and we are free to select whichever one which, for reasons of culture, need, aesthetics or fashion appeal to us most. We recall Screwtape’s ominous words to Wormwood: ‘Jargon, not argument, is your best ally.’ (207)

I think that Douglas Adams’ jargon is crucial to the story’s credibility. The text is not argumentative or persuasive; it just contains words producing an ironic sense of humor. Pricket explains how a text can do without an argument:

...one useful test that can be applied even to theories of irrationality, and that is what is sometimes known as the tu quoque [‘you also’] argument. If, by your argument, there is no such thing as truth, then your argument itself cannot be true. Why, therefore, should we be persuaded by it in the first place? (207)
The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy cycle certainly demonstrates the impossibility of true meaning or of knowing anything for certain.

According to the theories of Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan, our perception of the world, and thus of ourselves, our “reality,” is an illusion. We perceive a construction, a personal interpretation of the “real,” residing outside language, which becomes “reality” to us within the realm of language. Prickett puts it as follows:

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. (13)

Arthur is in an impossible situation trying to find the question to the answer, for the Meaning of Life, the Universe and Everything. The truth keeps teasing him, and slipping through his fingers every time he comes too close. The Guide describes this sisyphean task as follows:

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 theory which states that this has already happened. (148)

When we construct our reality, it is partly taught directly to us, partly filtered, and formulated by our own minds. This is done through language, which is the first reality taught to us. Broderick mentions SF author Philip Kindred Dick’s views on reality:

… Dick built an explanatory system for himself from Kant, Gnosticism, existential psychoanalysis and a melange of acid culture theories of mind and reality … : for each person there are two worlds, the idios kosmos, which is a unique private world, and the koinos kosmos, which literally means shared world. . . .No person can tell which part of his total worldview is [which . . . ] except by the achievement of a strong empathetic rapport with other people. (142)
Reality is undeniably a construction. When Zarniwoop, Zaphod and Trillian are trying to talk to the ruler of the Universe, they are confronted with a veritable Derrida, possibly aided by an Erwin Schrödinger.

…‘How can I tell,’ said the man, ‘that the past isn’t a fiction designed to account for the discrepancy between my immediate physical sensations and my state of mind?’

‘No, listen to me,’ said Zarniwoop, ‘people come to you do they? ... ‘And they ask you,’ said Zarniwoop, ‘to take decisions for them? About people’s lives, about worlds, about economies, about wars, about everything going on out there in the Universe?’

‘Out there?’ said the man, ‘out where?’
‘Out there!’ said Zarniwoop pointing at the door.

‘How can you tell there’s anything out there,’ said the man politely, ‘the door’s closed.’

The rain continued to pound the roof. Inside the shack it was warm.

‘But you know there’s a whole Universe out there!’ cried Zarniwoop. ‘You can’t dodge your responsibilities by saying they don’t exist!’

…

‘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.’ …’I only decide about my Universe,’ continued the man quietly. ‘My Universe is my eyes and my ears. Anything else is hearsay.’ (282-283)

**Conclusion**

We are controlled and influenced by whoever teaches us all the truths available in a certain context, at a certain historical moment, and in a certain culture. We are manipulated from the start, by people who have been manipulated by their predecessors, and so on ad infinitum. Even when we question information, we are using taught
thoughts and words to formulate our dissent. This is a second way in which we are manipulated into believing that what we think is our own original ideas, our “idios kosmos.” Through his consistent ironic narration, Adams shows that he has no intention of arguing for or against anything. He does not try to explain anything but he merely displays human faultiness. He leaves the thorough explanations to The Guide which only delivers wonderful information which, according to itself, is why it is so popular throughout the Galaxy. Reality has to stand back.

Arthur does not become any wiser when he visits the planet Hawalius, which contains a world of oracles and seers and soothsayers, where, it is said, wisdom and truth are to be found. Good advice is available in abundance, but it is not the accumulated general wisdom of others that he needs. Arthur needs to find himself. The first oracle he consults is an old lady, who gives Arthur a printed, indexed and cross-referenced story of her life. She says that she has underlined all the major decisions she ever made. “‘All I can suggest is that if you take decisions that are exactly opposite to the sort of decisions that I’ve taken, then maybe you won’t finish up at the end of your life...’ she paused, and filled her lungs for a good shout, ‘... in a smelly old cave like this!’” (699). Arthur moves on to another oracle, from whom he is given the advice to find himself a beach house. When he asks the oracle if there is any advice for him other than to do with real estate, the oracle explains that a beach house is a state of mind, and does not even have to be on the beach. He continues, “We all like to congregate ... at boundary conditions ... Where land meets water. Where earth meets air. Where body meets mind. Where space meets time. We like to be on one side, and look at the other.” (702). The oracle can not help Arthur to know his own reality better than the old lady. However, he does try to explain the impossibility of knowing another persons reality.

‘... 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 you 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.’ (703)
The oracle also gives Arthur a personal prayer. Disapointed that nothing else was of use, he writes it down.

It goes like this. Let’s see now: “Protect me from knowing what I don’t need to know. Protect me from even knowing that there are things to know that I don’t know. Protect me from knowing that I decided not to know about the things that I decided not to know about. Amen.” That’s it. It’s what you pray silently inside yourself anyway, so you may as well have it out in the open. (704)

The search for meaning and truth is a personal task, which can only be carried out if Arthur starts trusting his own thinking and ability to be emotive. The use of “Amen” at the end of the personal prayer, given by an oracle light years away from the Earth, is a clear demonstration of the manipulative tendency of language. While being just a word to some people, it is sacred to others. Those who read “Amen” in Adams’ text will notice the displacement of it but may not interpret its being there as a sign of the awareness of indoctrination in the author. I think Adams places “Amen” as well as the word “prayer” and uses a Christian jargon in a distant world far from Earthly human civilization to eradicate the meaning of those words. This example shows that the ironic mode can be used both to reveal and conceal at the same time. Adams uses irony as miscommunication in his novel cycle and manages to eliminate meaning by letting the text deconstruct itself. The reader is led to believe that there is truth to be found for Arthur, if all the fragments are summed up, but will find in the end that there is only a collection of fragments. That is ironic.
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