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## **DON'T PANIC!**

A Study of the Absurd as an Expression of Anxiety and Existentialism  
in Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

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**Title:** *Don't Panic! A Study of the Absurd as an Expression of Anxiety and Existentialism in Douglas Adams' The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

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**Abstract:** This essay studies the absurd as expressions of anxiety and existentialism in Douglas Adams' novel *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*; my thesis is that the absurd is the key to understanding the novel. With the help of ideas from mainly Gary Cox and Marilette van der Colff, this essay concludes that Adams emphasizes the nature of anxiety and existentialism by simplifying, exaggerating and pointing at the irrational. Adams discusses how the psyche copes with absurdity combined with free choices and sometimes covers everything in a layer of absurdity to let the reader relate to the issues without getting lost.

**Keywords:** Douglas Adams, Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, absurd, anxiety, existentialism.

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## Introduction

*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, although loved by many science fiction enthusiasts, is often disregarded by others as pointless and full of jibber-jabber resulting in nothing at all. My hypothesis is that the absurd is also used by Adams as an expression of deeper human emotions and views of life such as anxiety and existentialism (which will be discussed in chapter one and two respectively), simply hidden in a cheerful book about irrational events that make people laugh at impossible situations.

The novel *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* was created by the English author Douglas Adams (1952-2001). It was originally broadcast as a science fiction comedy on BBC Radio in 1978; the story of the ordinary Englishman called Arthur who loses his planet, is thrown into space without his towel and tries to adapt to Adams' crazy universe, quickly became a success. Adams transformed his science fiction comedy into a novel that was first published in 1979 and has later been adapted to several other media, including a movie. "Hitchhiker's Guide" and the four sequels to the first novel have been called "a trilogy in five parts". The novels have sold over 15 million copies in his lifetime and are still loved by many science fiction fans all over the world. (<http://www.douglasadams.com/dna/bio.html>).

Considering the popularity of Adams' novel, and attempts by several authors to analyze its content, surprisingly little has been written about it in the context of absurdity. In articles on the internet and such, many just state that it is absurd, along with quoting situations in the book they find humorous, without any further investigation into why it is so (<http://www.bookrags.com/studyguide-hitchhikergalaxy/themes.html>, [http://mrquale.com/2008/06/11/the-hitchhiker% E2% 80% 99s-guide-to-the-galaxy-by-douglas-adams-2/](http://mrquale.com/2008/06/11/the-hitchhiker%E2%80%99s-guide-to-the-galaxy-by-douglas-adams-2/)).

Although much attention in the 21<sup>st</sup> century regarding science fiction has been paid to its possible portrayal of different theories such as Marxism, feminism, postmodernism and post colonialism,<sup>1</sup> all such consideration has been excluded from this essay in order to maintain the focus on absurdity. Furthermore, much of the absurdity in Adams' novel is concerned with the choice of language. However, this falls outside the limits of this study, which will focus mainly on the absurdity of the situations.

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<sup>1</sup> For further reading see Edward James in the bibliography

The term absurdity is somewhat difficult to define. It is often mentioned in combination with irony or satire, and some might associate it with a humoristic angle when it comes to literature. Neil Cornwell, in his book *Don't Panic: Douglas Adams & The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, studied the concept of absurdity in literature thoroughly, and boiled it down to the following:

Satire, humour and incongruity are always potential ingredients of the absurd. The abasement of reason, particularly within a disparate setting of humility, 'glory' and 'otherness', also goes some way in the direction of the absurd. The clinching element, however, may be seen to lie in the controversy aroused by the assertion of a condition being 'nothing'... (Cornwell, IX).

In other words, the absurd is often associated with occurring events appear to be based on 'nothing'. Although Cornwell's definition is both well-argued and grounded in facts, the aspect of 'nothing' is difficult to operate with, and in my opinion, there is need for a more applicable term. The absurd will thus be explained in this essay as events and situations occurring based on nothing *rational*.

Two different types of anxiety will be dealt with in this essay. Firstly, the popular term, and secondly, with regard to existentialism. Anxiety is in everyday-language explained by Encyclopedia Britannica Online as follows;

... a feeling of dread, fear, or apprehension, often with no clear justification. ... Anxiety... arises in response to apparently innocuous situations or is the product of subjective, internal emotional conflicts the causes of which may not be apparent to the person himself. ... Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud viewed anxiety as the symptomatic expression of the inner emotional conflict caused when a person suppresses (from conscious awareness) experiences, feelings, or impulses that are too threatening or disturbing to live with. (Search: Anxiety).

However, when it comes to relating it to existentialism, there is a more clear distinction between fear and anxiety. Gary Cox discusses this in his book *Existentialist's Guide to Death, the Universe and Nothingness* and gives an example of choosing to, or not to, jump off a cliff which was originally used by Kierkegaard and later, in another fashion, by Sartre. The definition of anxiety is this:

Anxiety ... is a person's concern about what, so to speak, threatens her from inside. She is concerned about what she might choose to do given her unlimited freedom to do it. An anxious person is troubled by her own freedom and spontaneity, by her awareness that there is nothing whatsoever preventing her from choosing to perform a foolish, destructive or disreputable act other than her choice, her freedom, not to perform it. (Cox 49).

The definition of the term Existentialism differs widely depending on which field one is studying. In addition, one often speaks of several existentialist philosophical directions. Even when it comes to existentialism in literature, the definitions do not always cohere with each other. Webster's dictionary defines existentialism as "a chiefly 20th century philosophical movement embracing diverse doctrines but centering on analysis of individual existence in an

unfathomable universe and the plight of the individual who must assume ultimate responsibility for acts of free will without any certain knowledge of what is right or wrong or good or bad.” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/existentialism>). This, in combination with Cox’ description below, will define the use of the term for this essay.

Authenticity is the holy grail of existentialism . . . authenticity involves continually living according to the realisation that you are not a fixed entity like a rock or a table , defined entirely by circumstances, but a free being, responsible for your choices. To live as though you are a fixed entity is what existentialist philosophers call *bad faith*. Bad faith is using freedom against itself by choosing not to choose, relinquishing responsibility and blaming other people and circumstances for the way you are and what you do (Cox 5).

### *Previous Research*

Neil Gaiman was one of Adams’ close friends, and in his book (see page 1) he seeks to reveal the “real” Douglas Adams. He describes the author in his childhood years as “considered a little strange, possibly even retarded” and Adams seeing himself as “. . . the only kid who anybody I knew has ever seen actually walk into a lamppost with his eyes wide open”. (Gaiman 3). Gaiman also gives the impression of Adams living in a different universe, and argues that it might be of great importance to the success of his novels. This insight into Adams’ personality can be helpful when trying to understand his novel. If Adams’ “different universe” was brought into his book, then maybe there is also meaning in the novels’ absurdity, if one is willing to accept the absurd situations as a starting point for interpretation.

Science fiction<sup>2</sup> as a genre, has been discussed endlessly, and is on occasion seen in the context of absurdity. M. Keith Booker observes the following in this context: “Darko Suvin has famously declared the political potential that inheres in science fiction’s ability to produce “cognitive estrangement,” causing readers to see their worlds from fresh perspectives that alienate them from the status quo.” (Booker, 251-252). I believe that Suvin’s statement can also be applied to other aspects than only the political one. Through creating an apparently normal state which is not rational, and then suddenly adding familiar feelings such as anxiety over money, Adams manages to enhance those feelings.

Christian Erkenbrecher has discussed how Adams created humour and criticism in his science fiction elements of the novel. Contrary to the critics’ recurring claims that Adams mainly writes certain things to “poke fun at people”, Erkenbrecher often detects some deeper meaning in Adams’ novel as a result of his reasoning. I interpret Erkenbrecher as advocating the same point previously made by Gaiman; to understand and find meaning in the absurd, we

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<sup>2</sup> The Encyclopedia Britannica online describes science fiction as a “form of fiction that deals principally with the impact of actual or imagined science upon society or individuals.”

have to accept it as a fact. Amongst other things, he uses Pringle's templates of SF (see Erkenbrecher), and the last of them "involves distorting the world we know – either by projecting it into the future or displacing it to an alien location – in order to expose its absurdities." (Pringle 36 quoted in Erkenbrecher 31). He concludes that he has "shown in what way Douglas Adams altered the conventions of SF in order to evoke certain processes of thinking in the reader". In other words, the acceptance of Adams' worldview, in this case extreme absurd, is a necessity to understand what he is trying to express.

Gary Westfahl observes that "the story of Hitchhiker's Guide does not parody specific works of science fiction but instead lampoons general science fiction tropes [...] It is an epic, comic space opera that uses the freedom of science fiction to highlight by exaggeration the absurdity of human existence (Westfahl 2005, 1081 quoted in Erkenbrecher 81). In the following chapters, I will argue that this exaggeration of absurdity is perhaps the best tool Adams has to draw out feelings of anxiety and existentialism from his characters.

Both Erkenbrecher's views and Suvin's opinions are related to the statements of Marillette van der Colff in "One is Never Alone with a Rubber Duck: Douglas Adams's Absurd Fictional Universe". She seeks to explain some of the existentialist, absurd, and simply strange aspects of the Hitchhiker's Guide, and show how it has affected interpretations of it.

Douglas Adams's fantasy may be regarded as a means of making meaning, of reinventing our familiar world and creating alternative dreamscapes to reflect on the fabric of "reality" and to try and understand it at some basic level . . . Adams's fantasy also explores the labyrinthine human psyche and its most prominent desire, the desire to make meaning from madness. His fantasy therefore also serves a **psychological function**. (Colff 14)

Furthermore, Colff argues that "I think that his fantasy serves yet another function: the **function of alienating the reader from "this world"** in order to really see society, stark and exposed, and from a distance. So, Douglas Adams comments on "reality" as we know it, be it intolerable or bearable." (Ibid 14). Although Erkenbrecher and Colff express their views in different ways, they both discuss distorting the world and alienating the reader from a normal world as a tool for expressing something else. In my essay, I will put these arguments into my thesis by showing that Adams' universe is based on absurdity.

In Gary Cox' book, he narrows down the views of existential thinkers on certain topics. "Contrary to popular belief however, existentialists do not recommend that real life people should live this way [dwell obsessively on contingency and live always under the aspect of eternity in a meaningless, absurd universe]. That way lies madness." (Cox 149). Nonetheless,

according to existentialists, a realization of choosing not to dwell on it is necessary to avoid living a lie (Ibid 149).

This essay will be divided into two parts. The first chapter is mainly concerned with anxiety and how Adams uses different tools to portray it to his readers. It also shows how he switches between purely pointing to anxiety in the characters, and subtly provoking anxiety in the reader. The second chapter will focus primarily on existentialism and how bad faith and freedom of choice is a recurrent theme in Adams' novel. So as not to lose sight of the aim of the essay, both chapters will contain some elements of both anxiety and existentialism combined.



## Chapter 1 - Anxiety

Adams often uses absurdity to express anxiety in his characters or to induce the same sentiment in the reader. However, he also sometimes manages to do the exact opposite; soothing the reader. Creating such a rollercoaster of stress and relief make us more aware of what we experience, which is perhaps exactly what Adams hoped to achieve.

Absurdity is possibly the first thing we encounter in the novel when, during the first lines of it, we are met with the statement that a large part of the human population were unhappy and were trying to solve that problem by circulating “[...] small green pieces of paper, which is odd because on the whole it wasn’t the small green pieces of paper that were unhappy.” (Adams 5). Thus we are confronted with the suggestion that money having such a significant impact on our lives is odd seeing as one can reduce it to just paper. Forced to look into our own lives, we understand how much grief and anxiety money *as such* costs us for no apparent reason. In contrast to many of the other events in this novel, this one only touches on the fact that the characters feel uneasy, and rather focuses on making the reader feel troubled about what ultimately runs our lives.

Of course, many of us have no need to worry about money, as the chances of it attacking us in the street are quite slim, which indicates the feelings are based in anxiety. If we take Cox’ angle on anxiety into account, we can argue that this feeling of anxiety about money is also founded in the existentialist view of anxiety. Humans can, at any moment, give all their money to charity and live a quiet life in a small hut somewhere, growing their own food (the concept of "a simple life"). The anxiety thus lies in our ability or more commonly, inability to make such an important choice, and by not making it, choosing the opposite alternative. One can thus claim that the mere existence of the possibility of throwing away our money and choosing a simpler and penniless life creates existential anxiety.

The character of councilman Mr. Prosser seems quite disturbed by the events in his life. With the mighty Khan expressing his anger in Prosser’s head, he accepts the fact that he might be going insane. The warlike visions he has seriously worries Mr. Prosser, but the reader is given an explanation based on his biology:

[...] he was also a direct male-line descendant of Genghis Khan, though intervening generations and racial mixing had so juggled his genes that he had no discernible Mongoloid characteristics, and the only vestiges left in Mr L Prosser of his mighty ancestry were a pronounced stoutness about the tum and a predilection for little fur hats (Ibid 9).

By explaining the circumstances to the reader, Adams shows us that some anxiety we experience in everyday life has a perfectly reasonable explanation. Unfortunately for us, as

well as Mr. Prosser, it is often one that we might never want to take part of. If he could just accept that he will never discover his mental secrets, Mr. Prosser would perhaps be a much happier, or at least more content, man. Again, making a choice becomes an issue. Mr. Prosser is in fact free to embrace his pending madness, check himself into a mental hospital or see a psychiatrist, but then of course people might think less of him. Nevertheless, the possibility is there, and it is perhaps a frightening thought for him to realise it is. In this incident, Adams tries to show us how we can build up anxiety over situations we do not understand and cannot change. Some coincidences are simply absurd and obsessing about them will not help.

Perhaps the most obvious use of absurdity reoccurs all through the novel; the idea that insight into something of great importance is so close to being discovered, but is accidentally lost in a blunder by the bureaucracy. In this case it is the question of "life, the universe and everything" being on the verge of revelation, only to have the machine working on it (the earth) demolished right before it was finished with the calculations.

‘Deep Thought designed the Earth, we built it and you lived on it.’ ‘And the Vogons came and destroyed it five minutes before the program was completed,’ added Arthur, not unbitingly. [...] ‘Well, that’s bureaucracy for you,’ he added. (Ibid 164).

When the protagonist discovers this, he is relieved because he has always felt part of something bigger only quickly to be told “that’s just perfectly normal paranoia.” (Ibid 164). Human anxiety about the meaning of our own existence is brought to life again. Arthur’s desire to “make meaning from madness”, in the words of Colff quoted above, makes him grasp for straws and creates only further anxiety in him, as he is not successful in his search.

In my opinion, this situation with the bureaucracy portrayed as the de-personified villain is also similar to the points previously made by Suvin and Erkenbrecher. Adams creates an insanely absurd situation with satirical caricatures of people working for the government (the vogons), with whom there can be no reasoning whatsoever. As a result of there being no way to bend the rules, and the people upholding them refusing to listen to any cry for help or justice (be it human or alien), the most important parts of our creation will ultimately be destroyed. By paralleling the bureaucratic madness of space, with that going on in Arthurs’ life, the hopelessness of such a mess becomes even more apparent.

However, Erkenbrecher’s theory discusses distorting the world we know, and although Adams is doing that to a certain extent, he also puts our “normal” bureaucracy problems right next to it. This time, Adams fulfils Erkenbrecher’s expectations by a somewhat different method, and proves that estrangement to underline similarities can be done in other ways. The

parallels make us see more clearly what is wrong with our own system, through distortion to a certain extent, but also through familiarity.

In chapter nine, “The Infinite Improbability Drive” brings out the absurd in relation to the ridiculous. In short, the Drive makes something extremely improbable happen every time its big red button is pushed. The last example is on page 77 when “there’s an infinite number of monkeys outside who want to talk to us about this script for *Hamlet* they’ve worked out.” This is of course a reference to the theory that such a thing would be possible. The whole chapter contains such strange and irrational happenings, but one does sense the underlying tension that the characters feel:

‘Hell, I’m relieved to hear you say that,’ said Ford. ‘Why?’ ‘Because I thought I must be going mad.’ ‘Perhaps you are. Perhaps you only thought I said it.’ Ford thought about this. ‘Well, did you say it or didn’t you?’ he asked. ‘I think so,’ said Arthur. ‘Well, perhaps, we’re both going mad.’ (Ibid 74).

Besides finding it all very entertaining, they start seriously doubting their own sanity, expressing fear of the unknown that is occurring as well as what is to come. If we draw on some of Cornwell’s compiled definitions of the theoretical absurd, we find that ‘absurdism’ can be considered as “[man’s] search for order brings him into conflict with his universe” (Cornwell 3). The characters’ attempt to rationalize about their situation is therefore not doing them any good – on the contrary – it only emphasizes the trouble they are facing.

Both Arthur and Ford, his alien friend, appear to be a little bit scared of the changes occurring due to the “Infinite Improbability Drive”, even right from the beginning: “‘What sort of ship are we in?’ asked Arthur as the pit of eternity yawned beneath them. ‘I don’t know,’ said Ford, I haven’t opened my eyes yet.’ ‘No, nor have I,’ said Arthur.” (Ibid 73). As they are not in any way threatened by it, the fear lies in the unknown. Even though the “Infinite Improbability Drive” has just saved them from a certain death, (and one can assume not much would be worse than that), they are immediately sceptical towards things they do not understand.

A great part of the modern person’s anxiety centres on the fear of making mistakes, in particular big mistakes. Chapter 31 of the novel is concerned with such a mistake. The careless talk of Arthur Dent, along with a tremendous miscalculation of size by warrior aliens, leads to an entire fleet of battle ships being swallowed by a dog on the planet Earth. Here, the anxiety is put in a different setting. Although humorous at first, the story of so many people being killed as a result of a misunderstanding really is tragic. And when they finally find the person responsible for all their suffering, and they decide to avenge their dead comrades, they are themselves eliminated because of yet another sort of “miscalculation”. By once more

exaggerating the absurdity of the circumstances in a particular situation, Adams feeds his readers the feeling of fear, helplessness and lack of understanding.

The character Zaphod Beeblebrox experiences anxiety on the verge of paranoia when he thinks someone has tampered with his brain only to later discover it was himself.

‘Some bastard had cauterized all the synapses and electronically traumatized those two lumps of cerebellum. . . ‘Why? I can only guess. But I do know who the bastard was. . . ‘Because they left their initials burnt into the cauterized synapses. ‘They left them there for me to see. . . ‘Z. B., he said quietly. (Adams 126-128).

As Zaphod turns out to be right about his fear, one might argue that anxiety in its regular term, does not apply to this incident. However, the fact that the tampering turns out to be of his own making, maybe analogous to the self-destructive tendencies associated with some mental disorders, makes it existential in its relation to anxiety. Zaphod has quite obviously chosen to change his brain, and also chosen to forget about it. Furthermore, he wrote his initials so the possibility of finding out what he removed is present. Thus, he experiences trouble interpreting his own previous actions and what he wants to do about it. He is able to choose freely which way to proceed, which terrifies him. In addition, he cannot be quite certain that the decision was made to damage him in some way, which would mean he had just harmed himself rather severely, and might do it again.

Zaphod displays a typical science fiction-aspect when the group are faced with the possibility of replacing Arthurs’ brains with a simple, electronic one. “‘Yeah,’ said Zaphod with a sudden evil grin, ‘you’d just have to program it to say *What? And I don’t understand and Where’s the tea?* – who’d know the difference?’” (Ibid 173). In science fiction, there is often included a fear that the aliens in our universe are smarter than us, and could invade our planet if they want to. This anxiety (we have no proof it is so) is included in Adams’ book, and in this episode, not only are we inferior to other beings in the universe, we are even considered ‘simple’. Of course, this could be a devastating blow to anyone’s psyche, but Arthur is already so caught up in all the other things going on (facing maybe losing his brain, amongst other things), that the anxiety of this particular comment is probably not as present as it becomes to the reader.

The android Marvin is the only character in the novel who embraces his anxiety and also has a very depressed view of his own existence (although no one can accuse Arthur of being a ray of sunshine either). Ironically, Marvin is a robot. There has been much discussion about whether robots in the future will be able to develop feelings, and if they will want to destroy the human race. It is therefore interesting that Adams brings up the possibility of them having more tendencies to question their own existence and feelings about it, than humans.

Marvin experiences anxiety and depression about everything, and manages to spread this around him to the extent that even other machines become affected: '[...] I talked to the computer at great length and explained my view of the universe to it,' said Marvin. 'And what happened?' pressed Ford. 'It committed suicide,' said Marvin [...] (Ibid 183). Erkenbrecher observes that "Adams' inclusion of a highly-skilled robot whose capabilities are never fully used by his fellows reflects a deeper angst prevailing in early 1980s students' minds". (60). I would say this was more of a coincidence than a plan of Adams, seeing as this issue can be applied to many aspects of life and that the book was published, along with some of the radio shows, *before* the 1980s.

Marvin's anxiety also differs from the other characters in the way that the reader is not informed whether or not he is free to choose for himself. One assumes in terms of humans that they are free beings unless other information is revealed, but when it comes to robots, it is not so obvious. We are told Marvin is there to serve the humans, and although he obviously has the ability to think quite freely, he seems very loyal to the group he serves. On several occasions, he has the opportunity of running away, and taking into account his huge intellect, he probably could outsmart the humans and "take over" had he wished to. '[...] Here I am, brain the size of a planet and they ask me to take you down to the bridge. Call that *job satisfaction*? 'Cos I don't'. (Adams 86). Nevertheless, he somewhat reluctantly helps the humans around him, making the element of anxiety so much more exciting. According to Cox's view on anxiety, if Marvin is free to choose, the only thing stopping him from leaving is choosing to stay. Although it makes him miserable, he does dedicate his life to helping Arthur and the others.

## Chapter 2 - Existentialism

One might argue that drinking tea is an ingrained characteristic typical of the English. Therefore it is quite fitting that Adams has made the character Arthur obsessed with it. In any other context, he may not have been so anxious to find a cup of tea, but the situation in which he finds himself makes him desperate to find something simple to hold on to in a place where he does not understand anything. Tea is something so elementary to him, that the mere absence of it is in itself somewhat upsetting to him. Not to say that had he simply had some in his hand, he would be calmer, but in searching for something familiar he has somehow set his eyes on tea. One can argue that Arthur's focus on tea is prohibiting him from understanding or doing anything useful about the dangerous and strange situations. It is also important to note that it is only Arthur who can change the course of his thoughts, but he is not able to. The only thing holding him back is himself, which according to existentialism, will only lead him down a bad path, as it is a typical example of 'bad faith'. This search for tea is somewhat mocked by Adams, in the sense that it makes Arthur appear particularly pathetic (as if him wearing his pyjamas was not enough). In belittling Arthur by implying he cannot handle his new reality, Adams tends to agree with 'bad faith' being a bad thing. Arthur only complains about how difficult everything is, but he does not do anything about it. Does that mean Arthur is weak or is he trapped in his own head with his choices? Which situations can one "snap out of" and which can be accredited to something else than simply our own choices? Nevertheless, trying to find simple tasks or surroundings to hold on to in a crisis is a common reaction, and may even have a beneficial effect on the stress level.

Arthur is not the only one struggling with his own insignificance in comparison to the big universe. Yet Adams manages to enhance that feeling probably most people in the world have, when Arthur discovers that the only words describing earth to a reader of "The Guide" (see below), thus probably also to the rest of the galaxy is "Mostly harmless" (Adams, 58). The existence of all that we humans hold dear and which make up our entire lives could be reduced to two words. Overwhelmed by this information, Arthur is shocked.

When two missiles are turned into a giant sperm whale and a bowl of petunias, both plummeting towards earth, the sperm whale brings up some existential questions. It ponders over its own existence in quite an optimistic way, somewhat soothing the reader by the simplicity of its thoughts: "Er, excuse me, who am I? Hello? Why am I here? What's my purpose in life? What do I mean by who am I? Calm down, get a grip now" (Adams 117).

However, all such relief is soon smashed along with the whale. The humour in this particular event is quite interesting. Cornwell observes that “Satire, humour and incongruity are always potential ingredients of the absurd. The abasement of reason [...] also goes some way in the direction of the absurd.” (IV). Perhaps we ridicule the existentialist thoughts of the whale not only because we interpret it as being absurd that it would have any, but also because we know it is a quickly passing moment in the novel. By this chapter, the reader is accustomed to Adams short passages of humorous events, causing a tendency to pay less attention to the issues brought up by briefly passing characters. One might underestimate the importance of the whale’s feeling, seeing as one knows he will die soon anyway.

Furthermore, the fate of the bowl of petunias is also noted: “Curiously enough, the only thing that went through the mind of the bowl of petunias as it fell was, Oh no, not again. Many people have speculated that if we knew exactly why the bowl of petunias had thought that we would know a lot more about the nature of the universe than we do now.” (Adams 118). Again the grasping for meaning becomes obvious and Adams mocks the idea of ‘finding sense in simple things’ and being able to see ‘the bigger picture’, and thus, as mentioned above, expresses trademarks of anxiety. The absurdity of petunias thinking at all is mixed with the endless possibilities of what their only thought could mean. Are they focusing on the wrong thing, and if so, do we? Can we change anything we want by changing paths or are we locked? These are all difficult questions which unfortunately, due to lack of space, cannot be fully dealt with here.

‘Resistance is futile’, meaning that we are predestined to certain things in life (for example dying), might be a recognizable feeling for many. However, they are the words of a young Vogon guard, whom Arthur and Ford try to persuade to let them go. By talking about all that is beautiful and all the things one could do with one’s life, they confuse the guard who only sees a future of throwing people out and shouting. Seeing that he does not even know why he does it, Ford points out that he is the one really in trouble (even though he and Arthur are about to die of asphyxiation any minute). (Ibid 65-67). Erkenbrecher compares several vagon features in personality with humans. “. . . not only appearance-wise do these creatures resemble humans; they suffer under typically human flaws such as having a distorted self-picture and overestimating one’s own capabilities.” (40). By trying to give the young vagon some perspective, Ford and Arthur make him doubt everything he knows, and even himself.

‘The bigger picture’ is also the central theme of the answer of the question to life, universe and everything. Reducing it all to the number 42 is quite a bold move from Adams.

If he meant it seriously, it certainly would upset existentialist thinkers, and goes hand in hand with the absurdity of the novel. When coming straight from pure chaos, the characters are given perhaps the most important piece of information in the universe, only they do not understand how to interpret it, which creates more chaos. “Arthur Dent’s travels through it [the universe] demonstrate that surface is everything and that nothing has any meaningful substance. All the so-called absolute answers that appear turn out to be shams or irritatingly banal” (Harris-Fain 5 quoted in Erkenbrecher 68). The answer 42 is thus very existentialist assuming it is meant as a joke; taking into account Adams’ previous tendencies on this matter, I believe we can safely presume it is.

The number 42 as the answer to the question of the Universe in particular is thus very conforming with existentialism. “If they [the existentialists] evoke the scientific notion of the universe at all, it is to reinforce their nihilistic claims about how lost and abandoned humanity is in the so-called grand scheme of things (what scheme?) and how ultimately pointless and absurd our futile, ant-swarm existence is on this speck of space debris we call Earth.” (Cox 11).

Another one of Adams’ expression of existentialism is the Babel fish (a small fish that, when put into your ear, translates any language), by simply through its own existence proves there is a God and thus makes him vanish. (Adams 56) Explaining the existentialist view of religion is not an easy task. Although untrue, it is a common belief that atheism is a necessity of existentialism. This belief originates from the fact that “the best known existentialist thinkers of the twentieth century . . . are all declared atheists who insist that mankind is abandoned in a meaningless, godless universe” (Cox 151). According to Adams’ novel, God has left the universe. It is important to note here, however, that there are respected thinkers who believe in both religion and in existentialism. Kierkegaard is one of the Christian existentialists and for him “God’s existence cannot be proven or even shown to be probable, as no amount of finite reasoning can establish anything at all about the infinite” (Ibid 152). Still, this would be an argument for the exact opposite of the point Adams is making, and so the two (Kierkegaard and Adams) would probably strongly disagree.

*The Hitchhiker’s guide to the Galaxy* is, according to *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, a wholly remarkable book, as illustrated by the following quote:

In many of the more relaxed civilizations on the Outer Eastern Rim of the Galaxy, the Hitchhiker’s Guide has already supplanted the great Encyclopaedia Galactica as the standard repository of all knowledge and wisdom, for though it has many omissions and contains much that is apocryphal, or at least widely inaccurate, it scores over the older, more pedestrian work in



two important respects. First, it is slightly cheaper; and secondly it has the words DON'T PANIC inscribed in large friendly letters on its cover. (Adams 6).

The idea of such a book would be appealing. It seems a book fitting the description above would be so much more helpful than an ordinary encyclopaedia. When dealing with life's difficulties one often finds that answers are hard to find, but from the excerpts of the Guide in the novel, it appears the Guide has all the answers. As Adams has made such an effort to make the electronic encyclopaedia feel 'real', it is unrealistic that he meant it simply as a mockery of encyclopaedias.

Gaiman states that the idea of such a book came to Adams spontaneously, and that in combination with its positive tone, makes me therefore interpret that particular piece of the book as very dear to Adams. Thus, I believe this element is not some existentialist point being made, but actually the exact opposite; a very un-existentialist side of Adams where he honestly wishes this book existed. Such a sudden leap into a tub of bad faith has to make one seriously consider how the existentialist side of Adams is expressed in the novel. Nonetheless, the use of satire and irony combined with other simplified "easy truths", for example the previously mentioned sperm whale, indicates that the book might be an isolated occurrence, and not the standard on how we should interpret Adams' novel.

Although a towel might appear to many as an ordinary object of our daily life, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* claims it is so much more;

A towel, it says, is about the most massively useful thing an interstellar hitchhiker can have. Partly it has great practical value – you can wrap it around you for warmth. . . you can lie on it. . . you can sleep under it. . . use it to sail a mini-raft down the slow heavy river Moth; wet it for use in hand-to-hand combat; wrap it round your head to ward off noxious fumes. . . you can wave your towel as a distress signal, and of course dry yourself off with it if it still seems to be clean enough. (Adams 26).

To have the most useful thing in the universe in your bathroom, reassures you that you are least doing something right. Again, by suggesting that a towel could be used in very many situations in life, he reduces the importance of all our other possessions. Erkenbrecher also states that "It is typical for Douglas Adams to raise an everyday item above all technical devices and thus mock SF's expected fascination with technology." (62). The idea that something we humans really need in order to solve many of our everyday problems is not some alien technology, but actually something common to us, is comforting.

On the other hand, it is very existentialist in its nature as it notes things a towel actually does (well, more or less). One can use a towel to sleep under, lie on it etcetera. Instead of revealing some impressive piece of alien technology that comes along and solves our problems, Adams promotes the concept of finding new ways to use the things we already

have. If we stop searching for greater meaning and for something new or other to solve things, maybe we can look at reality and discover new aspects of what we have.

Jenny Turner wrote an article in the Guardian in 2009 (“Does the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy still answer the ultimate question?”) questioning whether Adams’ Hitchhiker’s- books are still relevant. In my opinion, her observation that the story “is just one massive post-colonial metaphor, in which the nice-but-dim English gentleman is dethroned, diminished, lost in space – caught, not exactly with his pants down, but dressed only in his pyjamas; his house, his planet, flattened by aliens; his anthropocentrism about to be exploded, and so on.” is interesting, but perhaps not the most important thing about it. She does make a good point regarding the feeling the novel conveys though.

Above all, Adams's books give voice to a sense of dismay and uprootedness, of being oneself out of date and unfit for purpose and somehow not in on the joke: "All through my life I've had this strange unaccountable feeling that something was going on in the world, something big, even sinister, and no one would tell me what it was," as Arthur complains to Slartibartfast. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/oct/03/hitchhikers-guide-galaxy-douglas-adams>).

## Conclusion

The thesis of this essay is that the absurdity of the novel *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is used deliberately by Adams to portray feelings of anxiety and existentialism and the key to understanding it lies in understanding how he uses absurdity. To argue this, works by several authors have helped me to explain how Adams uses the different elements in his book to reveal the absurdity of our world and also display anxiety and features of existentialism.

Adams' novel includes many situations which express and deal with anxiety. The absurdity that is present in these situations serves different functions at different times. Sometimes the absurdity enhances the nature of the anxiety by mainly simplifying, in other situations the writer creates anxiety in the reader by bringing up problems one tries to ignore if one can help it. In other words, Adams exaggerates absurdity to make our own world seem absurd and sometimes to make our actions and feelings seem irrational.

Furthermore, Adams uses the irrational situations in his novel to provoke feelings of anxiety mainly from his protagonists Arthur, Zaphod and Marvin, thus displaying how the psyche copes with absurdity. Along with Marvin's ability to choose freely, all of their relationships to freedom are questioned and show that it more often than not leads to a lot of anxiety for them.

Many aspects of this novel display typical existential features. For example, as previously mentioned, much of the anxiety in it is often related to the central theme of anxiety in existentialism. However, many of the situations in which it is present are very absurd. By using absurdity as a tool, Adams achieves to keep his readers interested (a pure existential tale might get somewhat depressing after a while). The absurdity is thus often used to express the existentialism by exaggerating it, but also sometimes by slightly covering it up, to make the reader subconsciously relate to it, but not focusing too much on it and then lose interest in the novel. For instance, Adams shows how bad faith is for 'the weak' when Arthur succumbs to it in his search for tea. In addition, the vogon guard's view of life is very existentialist in its nature ('resistance is futile') and reminds us that there is no bigger meaning in life, and searching for it will not lead us anywhere. The issue of whether there is room for a "God" within the existentialist movement is also addressed, as Adams uses the Babel fish, quite contrary to Kierkegaard, to claim that God could be shown to exist and thus cannot exist. In short, absurdity is used as a tool to promote some existential ideas, but it is done very delicately and sometimes even subtly.

Although the above are all features very typical of existentialism, there are some aspects to Adams novel which contradict an absolute devotion to this concept. His apparent fondness for “The Guide” advocates a less absolute view of it. However, Adams’ novel is saturated with quite large stereotypes of existentialist thinking, which cannot be ignored.

The use of absurdity thus serves Adams well, as he manages to express some very complicated emotions and concepts (anxiety and existentialism) while still entertaining his readers and without confusing them too much.

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