

DOUGLAS ADAMS

(1952 - 2001)

On the Planet of Oracles and Seers

*In this “fifth book in the increasingly inaccurately named Hitch Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy trilogy”, Arthur Dent, one of the main human protagonists, is still on some kind of odyssey through space and time. Convinced that the planet Earth was
5 destroyed (in order to build an intergalactic bypass), Arthur finally finds out that if one is at a loss as to one’s personal future and how to shape it, one can always consult a prophet...*

He headed to the outer Eastern Rim of the Galaxy where, it was said, wisdom and truth were to be found, most particularly on
10 the planet Hawalius, which was a planet of oracles and seers and soothsayers and also take-away pizza shops, because most mystics were completely incapable of cooking for themselves.

However it appeared that some sort of calamity had befallen this planet. As Arthur wandered the streets of the village where
15 the major prophets lived, it had something of a crestfallen air.

*After a while, Arthur learns it is because of the omnipresence of radio and TV reports from across the universe that fewer and fewer people turn to the wise men of Hawalius for advice. — Just before he leaves, Arthur visits a village that consists
20 entirely of extremely high poles; one can go up the poles by climbing on the short wooden pegs that were hammered into them in slowly ascending spirals. Somewhat out of breath from climbing a couple of those poles, he finally sees a man who seems to be the kind of person he is looking for.*

25 Oddly, the man’s face was now only a couple of feet away. He seemed in one way to be a perfectly normal shape, but his body was sitting cross-legged on a pole forty feet away while his face was only two feet from Arthur’s. Without moving his head, and without seeming to do anything odd at all, he stood up and
30 stepped on to the top of another pole. Either it was just the heat, thought Arthur, or space was a different shape for him.

‘[...] We all like to congregate,’ he [said], ‘at boundary conditions.’

‘Really?’ said Arthur.

35 ‘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.’

Arthur got terribly excited. This was exactly the sort of thing he’d been promised in the brochure. Here was a man who
40 seemed to be moving through some kind of Escher space saying really profound things about all sorts of stuff.

It was unnerving though. The man was now stepping from pole to ground, from ground to pole, from pole to pole, from pole to horizon and back: he was making complete nonsense of Arthur's spatial universe. 'Please stop!' Arthur said, suddenly.

'Can't take it, huh?' said the man. Without the slightest movement he was now back, sitting cross-legged, on top of the pole forty feet in front of Arthur. 'You come to me for advice, but you can't cope with anything you don't recognise. Hmmm. So we'll have to tell you something you already know but make it sound like news, eh? Well, business as usual I suppose.' He sighed and squinted mournfully into the distance. 'Where you from, boy?' he then asked.

Arthur decided to be clever. He was fed up with being mistaken for a complete idiot by everyone he ever met. 'Tell you what,' he said. 'You're a seer. Why don't you tell me?'

The old man sighed again. 'I was just,' he said, passing his hand round behind his head, 'making conversation.' When he brought his hand round to the front again, he had a globe of the Earth spinning on his up-pointed forefinger. It was unmistakable. He put it away again. Arthur was stunned.

'How did you—'

'I can't tell you.'

'Why not? I've come all this way.'

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

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

'Everything you see or hear or experience in any way at all is specific to you. You create a universe by perceiving it, so everything in the universe you perceive is specific to you.'

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

'Check it out,' said the old man.

'It says in the brochure, ' said Arthur, pulling it out of his pocket and looking at it again, 'that I can have a special prayer, individually tailored to me and my special needs.'

'Oh, all right,' said the old man. 'Here's a prayer for you. Got a pencil?'

'Yes,' said Arthur.

'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.'
- 95 'Hmmm,' said Arthur. 'Well, thank you—'
- 'There's another prayer that goes with it that's very important,' continued the old man, 'so you'd better jot this down, too.'
- 100 'OK.'
- 'It goes, "Lord, lord, lord ..." It's best to put that bit in, just in case. You can never be too sure. "Lord, lord, lord. Protect me from the consequences of the above prayer. Amen." And that's it. Most of the trouble people get into in life comes from missing out that last part.' [...]
- 105 'Well, thank you for your help,' said Arthur.
- 'Don't mention it,' said the man on the pole, and vanished.

Douglas Adams, *Mostly Harmless* (London: Heinemann, 1992; Pan, 1993), pp. 71-84.

Annotations

8 **rim** edge; 11 **soothsayer** (*arch.*) fortune-teller, prophet; 13 **calamity** disaster; 15 **crestfallen air** sad atmosphere; 40 **Escher** reference to M. C. Escher (1898-1970), a Dutch artist known for works which trick the eye (see below: "The Waterfall", 1961); 45 **spatial** relating to size, area, position (> 'space'); 52f. **Where you from?** (colloquial omission of 'are'); 55f. **Tell you what** (colloquial omission of 'I'; 'what' instead of 'something'); 85 **individually tailored to me** 'maßgeschneidert'; 98 **to jot down** write down in the form of a short, informal note; 101f. **just in case** as a precaution; 107 **Don't mention it** 'nicht der Rede wert'.

Tasks

- 1 Find an example of anti-climax in this text and explain how it works.
- 2 Look at the beginning of the conversation between the prophet and Arthur (ll. 32-41) and elucidate what Arthur's central problem in this meeting is.
- 3 Translate lines 65 to 79 into idiomatic German. Think of how you would stress individual words.
- 4 Explain what the prophet means here (ll. 101f.):
' "Lord, lord, lord ..." It's best to put that bit in, just in case. You can never be too sure.'
- 5 Do you think it is wise to consult a prophet? Give reasons.

M. C. Escher, "The Waterfall" (1961)

The picture can be viewed at the following URI:

http://132.235.90.143/Twon_extras/Twon_Escher_2/escher2-060_twon.jpg

(427 KB! / June 2001)