Libertarian Alliance

THE PHILOSOPHICAL GENIE:
An Intellectual Fable

(Any resemblance to real genies, living or dead, is entirely unintentional.)

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CHARACTERS: A YOUTH (Y) AND A GENIE (G).

SCENE: A GARDEN SHED FULL OF TOOLS AND ASSORTED BRIC-A-BRAC INCLUDING TWO OLD ARMCHAIRS. A LAMP, BIKE AND BOOK ARE THERE BUT WELL HIDDEN AMONG IT ALL.

[A YOUTH ENTERS AND WANDERS UP AND DOWN DISTRACTEDLY.]

Y: I have a problem. What is it all about—everything? That's my problem. I really don't know what's going on in the world. I muddle along without really understanding anything at all. And the more questions I ask, the more deeply I realise my fundamental confusion. None of the people I ask have any adequate answers, and they even fail to understand or care that they don't understand. Perhaps I am at least less confused than they are by realising and caring where some of the problems are.

So why, I ask myself, am I talking to myself in the garden shed—again? And I answer myself thus: 1) Because I have no one else to talk to properly about such matters. 2) Because talking to myself seems to help a little. 3) Because I don't want to appear a lunatic by talking to myself somewhere that I might be overheard. Especially, 4) because of the way I sometimes number the points I make to myself. Oh, and, 5) so that I can have a *cerebral smoke*.

[TAKES OUT A CIGAR AND PUTS IT IN HIS MOUTH THEN PATS HIS CLOTHES AND LOOKS AROUND FOR MATCHES. SPIES SOMETHING.]

Y: Funny, I hadn't noticed that before.

[HE GOES OVER TO THE CORNER OF THE SHED AND PICKS UP AN OLD LAMP. HE INSPECTS IT.]

Y: An old lamp with some writing inscribed on it: "1) Whatever you wish for, or 2) an unforgettable argument. For a limited time only. Rub here and stand well back."

[HE GIVES IT A POLISH WITH HIS CUFF. AN EXTREMELY DISHEVELLED AND UNSHAVEN GENIE, WITH THE APPEARANCE OF A TRAMP, APPEARS IN A PUFF OF SMOKE.]

Y: (Slightly alarmed.) Oh! Who are you?

G: Perhaps I am the "cerebral smoke" of which you spoke, to be metaphorical. Or the genie of the lamp, to be literal.

Y: To be literal, you seem more like an old tramp.

G: It's not easy sustaining sartorial and salutiferous standards inside a lamp, you know.

Y: Evidently not.

G: Look, you summoned me at a moment's notice. So I don't intend to apologise for my condition.

Y: I assure you that no apology is necessary. (Pauses. Sniffs twice and pulls a face.) Or sufficient!

G: Are you making a logical joke?

Y: I'm not sure. Because I'm not sure about anything. I've heard of logic, but what is it exactly?

G: The study of valid inferences or arguments. Necessary and sufficient conditions are terms that occur in that study.

Y: That's all news to me, I fear. They don't teach that at my school.

G: Anyway, because you have summoned me from the lamp, I am bound to give you, "1) whatever you wish for, or 2) an unforgettable argument."

Y: Can I have *anything* I wish for?

G: Yes, "1) whatever you wish for"—*within reason*.

"Or, 2) an unforgettable argument."

Y: What does, "1) ... within reason" mean?

G: Well, for one thing, you couldn't have a square circle, could you? A wheel is circular although it might conceivably be square. But it would be impossible, because illogical, for it to be square and circular at the same time and in the same way.

Y: I suppose so. So is it "within reason" for me to have a new bicycle—with two *circular* wheels?

G: Of course. Just get a Saturday job and you should be able to afford one in a few weeks.

Y: Can't you produce a bike by magic?

G: Yes—in principle. But I'm not really that sort of genie, by preference. Also, large items like bicycles are a great effort. And I've had a bit of a cold recently.

Y: But you said you could give me whatever I wish for.

G: "Or, 2) an unforgettable argument."

Y: But I prefer, "1) whatever [I] wish for."

G: You might well prefer that but the wording does not entail that I guarantee you a choice—let alone that you can have both!

Y: You can't *really* do any magic, can you?

G: Of course I can.

[GENIE PRODUCES A COIN FROM THE YOUTH'S EAR WITH A FLOURISH.]

G: Voila! A coin from your ear.

Y: That's it, is it? That's as magical as you get? Even my uncle does that—and I wish he wouldn't—although I am grateful for the pocket money, of course.

[TO THE GENIE'S EVIDENT DISMAY, HE QUICKLY TAKES THE COIN AND PUTS IT DEEP INTO HIS POCKET TO ASSURE HIS PROPERTY CLAIM TO IT.]

Y: I have to say, that as genies go—from what I have heard, at least—you're hopeless.

G: On the contrary, "as genies *go*" I am the best genie *going*—but not necessarily the best genie *coming*. All other genies merely grant material wishes that leave the wishers no wiser and it usually ends in tears anyway.

Y: So what about, "2) an unforgettable argument"?

G: That was the argument that to promise X or Y is not to promise a *choice* of X or Y or even that each is possible.

Y: Then I might as well promise that every morning I will either eat my breakfast or jump over the moon.

G: Precisely. You have grasped the general logical point very well.

Y: It is very misleading as *naturally* understood, though.

G: (Defensively.) Maybe. But you won't forget that argument, will you?

Y: I suppose not.

G: There you are, then. Job done. Exactly as it says on the tin.

Y: Does this mean that you will never, ever, give me, "1) whatever [I] wish for"?

G: Oh no, of course not! For instance, you might wish for an unforgettable argument.

Y: (Groans.)

G: Or you might wish for me to leave you alone.

Y: I certainly might wish for that.

G: There's no need to be impolite. In any case, I just might surprise you with some seriously strenuous magic later on.

Y: In what way?

G: You do know what a *surprise* is, don't you?

Y: Oh, I see what you mean. But I don't really like surprises.

G: Then I will warn you just before I surprise you.

Y: Then I won't be surprised.

G: You will be surprised anyway. And that will, in itself, also be surprising.

Y: But that's two surprises, then, and I don't really like surprises!

G: Look, I can ameliorate the shock of the surprise but I can hardly eliminate it. Magic does tend to be surprising. And life is full of surprises anyway, so you had better get used to making the best of them.

Y: Well, you are certainly a surprise and so I suppose I had better make the best of you.

G: By all means. Perhaps we could tackle some of your "fundamental confusion" about the world. For that is what I specialise in.

Y: What, *my* confusion?

G: No, fundamental confusion.

Y: How can one be a specialist in fundamental confusion?

G: The sorts of fundamental things that people don't really understand but sometimes think they do.

Y: What sort of 'specialism' is that?

G: It's one understanding of 'philosophy'. And it includes logic, which we have already mentioned.

Y: I have heard of philosophy: deep thoughts that are completely useless.

G: On the contrary, deep thoughts that are, 1) an end in themselves, and 2) a guide for the life of a person and the future of societies. The word 'philosophy' comes from the Greek "philo-sophia", meaning 'love of wisdom'.

Y: Wisdom itself is not guaranteed, then?

G: No, but unforgettable arguments are more or less guaranteed.

Y: So you are a sort of philosophical genie.

G: Yes, in both senses of 'philosophical'.

Y: What is the other sense?

G: The one more precisely called 'stoical': calm in the face of good and bad fortune; from the Stoic philosophers.

Y: I suppose it helps to be philosophical in both senses while stuck inside a lamp.

G: Exactly. Or I should have gone mad with boredom and loneliness. Luckily, I had access to books, which are sufficiently small for *moderate* magical manifestation—unlike bicycles.

Y: Have you been in the lamp for a long time?

G: Over two thousand years.

Y: "Over two thousand years" without seeing anyone?

G: I was summoned from time to time to give various people 1) whatever they wished for or 2) an unforgettable argument. But these are more like prison visits. For I have to stay close to the lamp and they never last very long.

Y: But "over two thousand years"?! It must have been terrible!

G: The first two thousand years were the worst. But philosophy was a consolation. Then along came radio and then television—a *modest* 14-inch set. Although they were more of a mixed blessing.

Y: I know about radio and television already, of course. What I don't know is how philosophy is an end in itself.

G: Philosophy is an end in itself because trying to understand the world at a deeper level is both fascinating and edifying. The alternative is to be a puppet of common sense and unexamined assumptions.

Y: And how is philosophy a guide to life?

G: Philosophy is a guide to life because in every area of philosophy you can make discoveries that have practical applications, broadly understood. And those discoveries can change your life and the future of the human world. And anyway, philosophy gave birth to all the subjects of

enquiry. Yet it's not really a subject itself.

Y: What is it, then?

G: It's an intellectual activity: the process of scrupulously examining those assumptions or presuppositions that others take for granted, or don't even consider, or on which there are no settled answers. Once a fairly settled way of dealing with such related questions arises, then a new science is born.

Y: If enough new sciences are born from philosophy, then maybe there won't be any more need or room for philosophy.

G: That couldn't happen. It's always possible to probe any subject or issue in a philosophical way by examining the presuppositions that always must exist.

Y: How is that done?

G: There are a few tools of the trade: logic itself, of course, and a handful of much-debated conceptual distinctions. But mainly it involves racking one's brain and focusing on fundamental assumptions.

Y: I must say that it does all sound exactly like the sort of thing I need. Your arrival was highly opportune.

G: But not entirely fortuitous.

Y: In what way?

G: We might find out later. But in the meantime, I offer you, 1) whatever you wish for, or 2) an unforgettable argument.

Y: But wisdom is not guaranteed? Let alone a bicycle?

G: I don't even promise that my arguments are sound—validly reasoned from true premises—or merely valid, or with true premises—only unforgettable.

Y: Very well then. Let's start somewhere.

G: Let's start at the beginning.

Y: What's the beginning? Is there a beginning?

G: Oh yes, or so it seems to me. And a rational order of explanation. Do you *know* where we should start?

Y: I don't know.

G: Exactly.

Y: Exactly what?

G: You don't know. And you need to know.

Y: Need to know what?

G: You need to know how to know, of course. Or how can we proceed to knowing other things as well? We need a theory of knowledge: an epistemological theory. Mind you, some might say that logic is the beginning. For how can we argue about anything before we have decided what a proper argument is? But we will come back to logic later.

Y: I think I know how to know, though.

G: Oh good. An expert already. Then why don't you tell me your view so that we can both laugh about it and see what's wrong with it.

Y: Knowledge is justified, true, belief.

G: Ha! Common sense.

Y: Is there something wrong with that?

G: Just because it's common sense it's not necessarily false. But it's necessarily not philosophy and so we should be sceptical.

Y: How could knowledge not be justified, true, belief?

G: For one thing, and really the main thing, knowledge cannot be justified—or assured or authenticated or certified or confirmed or demonstrated or established or founded or grounded or proven or sanctioned or substantiated or supported or validated or verified or warranted or any such similar term. All of which terms I use to mean the same thing here.

Y: Couldn't it be reasonably or adequately justified?

G: No. It can't even *begin* to be justified.

Y: Is it not reasonable to assume that if I seem to see something, then I am justified in thinking that it is there?

G: In one sense it is 'reasonable' to make any assumption. For the law of assumption is a logical rule. But how does that justify or support the idea that the thing you seem to see is really there?

Y: I see it. Seeing is believing. It's objective.

G: That's your argument, is it?

Y: Is it too boringly unphilosophical?

G: It's so bad it's almost to bore mechanically. It might be easier if we start from the other end.

Y: What other end?

G: Theories that are clearly universal.

Y: Like scientific theories?

G: Exactly. But only in principle. We won't be doing any actual science, only the philosophy of science. We will be arguing *armchairiori*, as we philosophers sometimes say.

Y: "Armchairiori"?

G: Taking some basic things for granted and then seeing how much further reason can take us—while sitting in armchairs.

Y: I see. Then shall we sit?

G: Of course. For we ought to argue very 'chairfully'.

[THEY PULL UP THE CHAIRS AND SIT.]

Y: So scientific theories are not justified or supported, you say.

G: Correct. Let us take a classic example: 'All swans are white'.

Y: But they aren't all white.

G: True but irrelevant. It was once thought that they were all white. Only white swans were ever seen. And so the theory that 'all swans are white' was thought to be very well supported—until they discovered black swans in Australia.

Y: You mean to say, what is the use of support if a refutation always remains possible?

G: No. I mean to say, how is it any kind of support at all? Even assuming that all the evidence is unproblematic, the evidence is merely compatible with the theory that all swans are white. *Finite* compatible evidence cannot begin to support an *infinite* theory.

Y: What's the use of evidence then?

G: To refute a theory.

Y: You are saying that we cannot support our theories we can only refute them?

G: Yes. Logically, universal theories cannot be supported by finite evidence. But one counterexample can refute a universal theory.

Y: Doesn't the counterexample have to be supported, at least. Or you wouldn't have a refutation.

G: No. The point is that you could not observe a universal theory's truth. You could not observe all swans being white, everywhere and everywhen. But you could be looking at a particular black swan. So if we assume that we are doing so, then we have our refutation.

Y: But how do we know it's a black swan?

G: It's only an assumption—or conjecture or guess or hunch or hypothesis or intuition or postulate or premise or presumption or speculation or supposal or supposition or surmisal or suspicion or theory or thesis or any such similar term. All of which terms I use to mean the same thing here.

Y: Then why can't we still guess that all swans are white?

G: You could do so unproblematically before, but now you seem to have a counterexample.

Y: But if *both* the universal theory and the counterexample are conjectures, then why should we opt for the counterexample?

G: Only for methodological reasons. Because we could in principle be observing a black swan and

so we can use that potentially accurate observation to refute the universal theory. But we could not in principle be observing the truth of the universal theory. Apparent refuting observations are all we have to go on.

Y: Anyway, why is the observation of a black swan only a conjecture?

G: Because that observation implicitly entails universal theories that similarly cannot be supported by finite evidence. Contra common sense, we necessarily *leap to conclusions* and we necessarily *generalise* at all times. All we can do is test that theory-laden observation as well.

Y: If we can't really go beyond a guess, then does that mean that there is no such thing as probability?

G: No. It means that all probability calculations rest on assumptions that are ultimately guesses. If the guesses happen to be true then the probabilities will be accurate.

Y: But it all rests on conjectures or assumptions?

G: Yes.

Y: It doesn't sound very reassuring.

G: Given that it is what we *have* to do, and that we do seem to be able to deal with the world by using it, I can see no reason to be overly concerned. There seems to be enough stability and universality about for us to exist and make progress.

Y: Yet even that must be an unsupported conjecture too.

G: You are quite right. But consider an alternative and antithetical conjecture—that the world is an utterly chaotic mess. That does not appear to survive the test of casual observation and, methodologically, it leaves us with nothing to do if it were true.

Y: I'm still trying to get to grips with this. *Everything* is a guess?

G: I guess so.

Y: But we usually distinguish between mere guesses and what we know.

G: That's because some guesses appear to pass all the conventional tests and to be uncontroversial.

Y: But we could still be wrong even about them.

G: Yes, but it's not merely that we could still be wrong. It's that they all remain guesses or assumptions that are *completely* unjustified or unsupported.

Y: Is there no sense in which they are 'justified'?

G: Well, it's only a word. If all you mean by the word 'justified' is that a theory has been *squared* with all the known evidence and criticisms so far, then a theory can be justified in that sense. But that sense offers no *epistemological* justification or support. And that support is what people almost always mean by the word when referring to knowledge.

Y: What about acting in 'justified' self-defence? Or taking any 'justified' action?

G: That means acting in accordance with justice. That's a different word that is merely a homonym. You could also 'support' a building or a football team. Again, those senses are nothing to do with epistemology.

Y: I see. But is it a mere guess that I exist or that 2 + 2 = 4?

G: One thing at a time, please. If we grant the assumption that you exist, then it follows that *something* that is you must exist. But what your nature is still remains fully conjectural. You might be nothing like the kind of thing that you assume that you are when you assert your existence.

Y: In what way?

G: The possible examples are infinite, but I can give you a few interesting ones.

Y: Please do.

G: 1) You might have popped into existence only twenty minutes ago with bogus memories of a life that never happened. Or 2) you might be a succession of different consciousnesses and matter that are in reality quite distinct from each other, like the frames of a film. Or 3) you might be a self-conscious part of a virtual world running on the computer of a hyperdimensional

being. Or 4) ... you might be a mere character in a play.

Y: Now you're being ridiculous. But you do begin to alarm me. If everything is ultimately a guess, then how do I know I am not any of these things?

G: I think you can dismiss most such possibilities with various criticisms that themselves withstand criticism. Remember that logical possibility is not the same as real possibility. But you need to think through the criticisms for yourself.

Y: And '2 + 2 = 4'? Is that not as certain as certain can be?

G: Two senses of "certain" can be distinguished. You can feel psychological certainty. But that is not the same as having epistemological certainty. You cannot have that.

Y: Are you certain?

G: Yes—but only psychologically and only for the moment. Epistemologically, even mathematics and logic rest on assumptions. And some things that were once thought to be proofs have later been discovered to be errors.

Y: That's very interesting. But it doesn't really seem to shake the epistemological certainty of the statement that '2 + 2 = 4'.

G: You never know what possibilities you might have overlooked.

Y: On the contrary, I can see that I haven't overlooked anything and that I couldn't overlook anything in a matter that simple.

G: In that case, please count the digits on your right hand.

Y: 1, 2, 3, 5, 6. What?! 1, 2, 3, 5 er 6. What on Earth is going on? I know there must be five but I'm counting six.

G: I made you forget the number four and not realise that you had done so or that there was anything missing. It's not *strenuous* magic. Even hypnotists can do it. I've seen them on TV.

Y: But that means I could always be deluded even by what appear to me to be clear and distinct ideas.

G: Exactly!

Y: Now that does shake me.

G: Again, it ought not to do so unduly. For the abstract possibility of such error is not the real likelihood of such error.

Y: But why did we bother with all the stuff about the white swans? We could have gone straight to these more fundamental arguments about the possibility of being deluded by what I might call a 'malicious genie'. No offence meant.

G: No offence taken. And good question. Earlier we were looking at the philosophy of science. It involves different arguments, as we saw. And from a rhetorical viewpoint, while almost everyone takes science seriously, not many people take genies seriously. Though there is great irony here, for the popular view that science can justify theories is not merely magical but positively illogical.

Y: However, it might have been a more rational order to start with such things as my existence and mathematical truths. And you said you would be taking things in a rational order.

G: I like to progress from 1) assuming that particular observations are accurate in order to show that science *still* has no support, onto 2) showing that particular observations cannot be supported *anyway*, and then 3) that nor can mathematics or *even* logic itself. It makes the progression *a fortiori*.

Y: "*A fortiori*"?

G: That means 'arguing with added strength' at each stage. And so that is one sort of rational order. And, what is more, it has the pleasing paradox of adding strength of argument while at the same time increasingly undermining the very idea that arguments are as strong as they might seem to be. But other people will prefer to start with a malicious genie. It doesn't really matter as long as you cover it all.

Y: Anyway, you have given me a great deal to consider already. But the most pressing issue is, surely, how should we best deal with these ubiquitous and ineluctable conjectures?

G: We can and ought to be as bold in our conjectures as possible. For they are based on nothing at all anyway, and we stand to capture

more truth in our theoretical nets by being bold.

Y: As bold as possible?

G: New theories must always be compatible with *some* background theories; for we cannot test everything at once. And they must always have testable consequences if we are to have an empirical theory. Then we must be as rigorous in our tests and criticisms as possible.

Y: Might the perceived lack of justification cause people to ignore rival theories?

G: No, because lacking the bogus view of justification also ought to make us less dogmatic. We must be less certain of our own theories and more ready to listen to other theories.

Y: Even if all you have told me has undermined the 'justified' part of knowledge, what about knowledge being 'true' or 'believed'?

G: A lot of the things we call 'knowledge' in science and common sense will not be true. And many of the implications of those theories will not have been considered let alone believed, even if the basic theories themselves are broadly understood and believed—which they often aren't. In other words, a lot that passes for knowledge is *unjustified, untrue, unbelief.*

Y: If that is true, then is there really any knowledge at all? Maybe we know nothing.

G: One reasonable understanding of 'knowledge' is being in possession of a true theory. In that sense we surely know all sorts of things. Otherwise it is hard to see how we are able to deal with the world on a daily basis. But we know by guessing or assumption.

Y: That makes a sort of sense, I suppose. But doesn't this theory of knowledge presuppose that all sorts of things exist?

G: It has to do so if you are doing science or observational work. But the general idea that knowledge progresses by guesses and criticisms is silent about metaphysics.

Y: What is "metaphysics"?

G: The study and theories of what general sorts of things exist.

Y: "General sorts of things"?

G: Important categories of existence rather than all the things within those categories.

Y: So what general sorts of things do exist?

G: I would divide things into four worlds or realms or domains. 1) Matter: that is physical stuff, 2) mind: that is consciousness, 3) memes: that is abstractions recorded in matter; and 4) the manifold: that is all possible abstractions.

Y: What about God?

G: None of the gods exist—as I never tire of explaining to them.

Y: You have seen the non-existent gods?

G: Yes, and seeing is disbelieving. They are all too absurd to exist.

Y: Then how and where do you see them?

G: I intellectually apprehend them in the manifold—we will come to that later. And they are absurdly inconsistent with far more plausible and testable theories about the world. And sometimes they are even inconsistent with themselves.

Y: Like square circles?

G: Yes. But it's not always so obvious and can take a bit of argument to make clear.

Y: But genies do exist?

G: Duh! Manifestly!

Y: How do I know that you are not my hallucination?

G: For one thing, it's not psychologically plausible for you to hallucinate someone who is so readily able to scintillate you with so many strange and sophisticated arguments.

Y: That's a good argument.

G: And unforgettable.

Y: How many arguments is that already?

G: I don't recall but it hardly matters.

Y: Your arguments don't seem very formal in their structure.

G: Most arguments are enthymemes.

Y: What are "enthymemes"?

G: Arguments where some assumptions or deductions or conclusions are implicit rather than stated. It saves time and tedium and is not a problem unless there is an implicit error as well.

Y: Very well. Back to metaphysics.

G: Yes.

Y: Isn't everything ultimately matter? I have often wondered about that.

G: Even *apparent* matter is not ultimately *matter*. Virtually all so-called 'matter' is empty space but with some absolutely tiny particles, possibly only theoretical points, whizzing about in it. And almost all of space has next to no matter in it at all. In that sense, it would be more reasonable to speak of the 'empty world' than the 'material world'.

Y: Yes, that is my understanding from my physics lessons. But even all that space is part of the material world in a general sense of 'material', for it only exists because of the matter—or so I am told. So we can usefully call space part of the material world.

G: Agreed.

Y: And so we can then go on to say that everything is ultimately matter in some general sense.

G: Even if that were true, it might still be useful to make metaphysical distinctions between the radically different forms that the matter takes. But how could it all be matter?

Y: Well, for one thing, human beings are made of matter. And minds are ultimately material brains being conscious and thinking.

G: I am inclined to agree to a large extent. And that is a case of one thing emerging from another in a way that it is ultimately a part of it but so qualitatively different that it merits a different category.

Y: Do you have any other example of that?

G: Yes. We might also say that science is ultimately metaphysics, or a subset of metaphysics, because it rests on metaphysical presuppositions. And yet the distinction is clear and useful between science, as empirically falsifiable, and metaphysics, as only rationally criticisable.

Y: Yes, that seems to make sense.

G: And what is called "theoretical physics" is really metaphysical physics that we don't yet know how to turn into scientific physics.

Y: Yes, that also makes sense. But all this still leaves minds as ultimately physical, doesn't it?

G: To some extent but maybe not entirely.

Y: How could it not be entirely?

G: This is where memes come in. Consider when the conscious brain perceives an argument—which is one type of meme, or embodied abstraction, of course.

Y: What about it?

G: The question is this: does the physical brain operate like a glorified system of bouncing billiard balls in order to grasp the argument? Or does the conscious mind grasp the abstraction and thereby pull the physical brain along with it? In other words, is there what philosophers sometimes call "downward causation"—the mind causally affecting the material brain?

Y: But if the mind is the brain, then we could not escape physical causality.

G: Maybe we don't need to. The conscious apprehension of a meme might determine the position of the relevant subatomic particles *within* the brain in just the way that quantum mechanics says it is possible for observation to do *outside* the brain. And thus consciousness could have a causal effect on matter but consistent with physical laws.

Y: My mind is now officially boggling. Do we need "downward causation"?

G: Without downward causation we have a

problem. A billiard-ball brain could, in principle, do everything unconsciously just like a computer. Any consciousness would be a mere epiphenomenon: something that is caused but can't act upon what caused it. Just like the sun and rain can cause a rainbow, but the rainbow has no effect back on the sun and the rain. In the case of rainbows, that doesn't appear to suggest a problem. But if the mind doesn't have some effect on the brain, then how could something as amazing as consciousness have evolved when it does nothing useful for the organism?

Y: I see what you mean.

G: And we can go further. If it exists, this quantum process is also the way that free will arises as part of downward causation. Now, I know what you are going to say.

Y: What?

G: That brain scans show that people actually make a decision to move their fingers a moment or so before they are aware of making the decision. And some people say that this shows that free will is an illusion.

Y: I don't think I *was* going to say that, actually. But what do you say in reply to it?

G: I say, hah!

Y: That clears that up, then.

G: I hadn't finished. I say hah! That is merely due to the conflation of consciousness with self-consciousness—a common mistake. It is the self-consciousness of the conscious decision that is delayed. And I conjecture that it is delayed because sometimes we need to act quicker than full self-consciousness would allow. But we still make a free conscious choice.

Y: Could this theory of downward causation be scientifically testable?

G: I don't know enough about brain science and physics to answer that. But if it could, then it would be another example of something leaving the realm of philosophy and becoming empirical science. And that is fine, of course. There will always be new philosophical problems that arise.

Y: Is downward causation needed to give mind a separate category of existence from unconscious matter?

G: I should not have thought so. Consciousness is sufficiently distinctive and amazing to merit a separate category even if it is only an emergent and epiphenomenal quality of matter.

Y: What about "the manifold" you mentioned? How exactly does that come into this? And what exactly is it?

G: Is mathematics part of matter?

Y: Maybe it's an abstraction from matter.

G: I think you are grasping at straws. '2 + 2 = 4' was true before the material universe existed and will be true afterwards. Matter is not necessary.

Y: I suppose you are right. But abstractions don't really exist.

G: They don't exist in the same way that matter does but they do have objective existence.

Y: How can they be "objective"?

G: Anyone can check on them by thinking about them. Their qualities are not a matter of subjective perception or choice.

Y: But they were invented by our minds.

G: Theories *about* them were invented by our minds. But *they* were already there to be discovered. We could not have *decided* to make 2 + 2 equal to 5.

Y: I suppose not. Then what is 'meme' and what is 'manifold' here?

G: When an abstraction becomes part of a culture and is physically recorded in some way, if only in people's brains, then it is a meme. But memes are an *infinitely* small subset of all the possible abstractions that comprise the manifold.

Y: And do all theories and facts that are not yet invented or discovered have a virtual existence in the manifold?

G: Yes. For instance, ever higher prime numbers exist in the manifold, whether or not they will ever be discovered.

Y: So memes are part of the manifold but are given

a separate metaphysical status because of the importance of becoming part of a consciousness or culture.

G: Yes.

Y: Just as with mind being part of matter but worthy of a separate category and science being part of metaphysics but worthy of a separate category.

G: Exactly. Well noticed.

Y: What about artistic things like paintings and poems?

G: All are in the manifold, whether discovered or not. They are all abstractions.

Y: And every possible abstraction is in the manifold.

G: Yes.

Y: I admit that the manifold is not material but I'm not convinced that it really exists. It's just a way of *talking* about abstractions.

G: The truths of mathematics do not depend on our talking about them, do they?

Y: I suppose not. So they must exist in some sense apart from the physical world.

G: And if all the true theories in mathematics are there to be discovered, then all the false theories, as the complements of the true theories, must be there to be discovered as well.

Y: I can't see how to keep them out.

G: And once mathematical theories, true and false, are agreed to exist in some realm without the physical world then I can't see how to keep out all of the other abstractions either.

Y: I'm going to need to think all this over.

G: Yes, and over and over. Philosophy requires us to re-examine our ideas all the time. As soon as we stop doing that we give up philosophy.

Y: In that case, something about paintings and poems now occurs to me.

G: What?

Y: For one thing, I don't see how paintings and poems can really be said to be discovered in the way that a truth in mathematics or science is discovered.

G: The artist discovers how the light, or paint, or words, or ideas appear to fit or fail to fit his purposes. He doesn't choose those things, does he?

Y: Maybe not, but he does choose what to try and he chooses the final overall composition. That looks more like an invention than a discovery.

G: Perhaps it is always *both*. We invent theories and then discover whether they appear to fit or not fit the problem that we are trying to solve. But I admit that there must be a sense in which a truth in science or mathematics is more naturally said to be there to be discovered, and in many cases almost inevitably will be if not by one person then by another. While a poem that Shakespeare wrote would never have been written by another poet eventually. Still, the world of all abstractions seems to have objective existence and to be very useful.

Y: In what way is it useful as opposed to never distinguishing it as a world but simply carrying on theorising?

G: Realising that it is there as an objective world encourages us to conjecture more boldly and look harder for facts about such theories and criticisms of them. It encourages us to transcend our current theories.

Y: I have another thought about paintings and poems, though.

G: Go ahead.

Y: I can see that a poem will exist as a meme. A particular idea that can be given any number of physical expressions. The poem is not what is on the page but the thing that the page merely records and represents. But surely a painting is a one-off physical object and thereby quite different.

G: That is only common sense, of course—but I disagree.

Y: The Mona Lisa is a particular work of art, is it not?

G: Indeed it is, but it is not the physical painting itself.

Y: What is it, then?

G: It is the image of the Mona Lisa as seen by Leonardo da Vinci at the moment that the painting was finished to his satisfaction. That image is an abstraction and it is the real work of art.

Y: That would imply that a Mona-Lisa *copy* that is as close as the original painting to that abstract image would be just as artistically valuable.

G: Yes, and if it is closer than the original—perhaps because the original has decayed since an image was made—then it is more artistically valuable. Suppose I possess the original painting as it is now and a perfect copy of the original that has not decayed. Which would you rather *see*?

Y: The perfect copy. I could not turn down seeing something so artistically valuable. For hundreds of years, no one has seen the image of the Mona Lisa exactly as it was supposed to look.

G: And which would you rather *own*?

Y: The original. I could not turn down owning something so financially valuable.

G: Good. You appreciate the difference between real art and prudent investment.

Y: But your theory is not how this is seen by the buyers and sellers of paintings, including the painters themselves.

G: That is partly because they are confused. It is a mere contingent fact that a string quartet is written by the composer and needs to be made physical repeatedly by others while a painting is made physical by the painter himself only once. But technology might change that, and partly has already.

Y: I suspect the artist's original painting will maintain a superior price whatever happens.

G: Yes, but that could be for sentimental reasons—like paying a lot for a famous person's old hat. We could even say that buying the original painting for artistic reasons might become 'old hat'.

Y: Talking about one thing in philosophy seems to lead to many other things too.

G: Yes. A fundamental theory in one area is likely to have implications in many other areas. And what we have just been discussing is part of aesthetics; specifically a theory of art. We could talk more about that if you wish. Such as the purposes of art and how much so-called 'modern art' is partly an old joke that was never very funny and partly due to aesthetic confusion. I wouldn't give any of it *lamp* room.

Y: Has anyone ever told you that you are quite opinionated?

G: Not often in the last two thousand years. But before that, yes. Though only by anti-intellectuals who didn't themselves have any opinions worth mentioning.

Y: Anyway, I think I would rather ask some things about the philosophy of morals and politics. For I have to admit that I am mightily confused by both and yet they must be extremely important.

G: Ask away.

Y: Are morals subjective, in that what seems right to one person is not contradicted by the fact that it seems wrong to another?

G: No.

Y: Then are morals objective like mathematics and scientific theories, in that there is always a fact of the matter and anyone can check it?

G: No.

Y: How can morals not be subjective or objective?

G: Because morals are quasi-objective. And so, incidentally, are aesthetics.

Y: What is "quasi-objective"?

G: A moral view about people's behaviour cannot be true or false. For it doesn't attempt to *describe* what people actually do. It attempts to *prescribe* what people ought to do. But we can still more or less treat a moral view as though it were objective.

Y: How?

G: The way we argue, and use analogies and cite evidence, will have the same structure. Our moral theories cannot be true or false but we still think they can be correct or mistaken, or at least better or worse. And our *feeling* that some theory is 'right' will be the same whether the theory is factual, moral or aesthetic. When we change our moral views we do not perceive it as a change of trivial taste but the correction of egregious error.

Y: Aren't moral disagreements less important because they aren't factual?

G: On the contrary, moral disagreements are far more important than most factual ones. For we can disagree about some fact without a practical clash, even if it is some practical fact about what foods are safe to eat. For then you can eat what you like and I eat what I like.

Y: Surely we can do that with morals as well.

G: With morals we cannot be happy to allow that because they involve *universal* prescriptions. We will think that every other person ought to behave in a certain way even if he disagrees with us. We will not assist him in behaviour we sincerely believe to be immoral and we might even feel it just to coerce him to the moral behaviour.

Y: Is that where politics comes in?

G: I hope not.

Y: Why not?

G: Because politics is itself immoral.

Y: How is that possible given that everyone agrees that politics is necessary?

G: Everyone does not agree. And even if they were to do so, then they would *all* be wrong.

Y: What is immoral about politics?

G: Anything that it is immoral for a person to do it is immoral for an organisation of people to do. Do you agree?

Y: I can't think of a counterexample just now.

G: Then that's good enough for now. Is it immoral for someone to use aggressive coercion to take other people's justly acquired property?

Y: Yes.

G: Is it immoral for someone to use aggressive coercion to force other people to do what he says?

Y: Yes.

G: The state is an organisation that does both these immoral things.

Y: But the state has the consent of the people, at least in a democracy.

G: It does not have consent and you don't have democracy.

Y: As I only have common sense to explain my views I guess it's up to you to argue against them.

G: Certainly. Most people think the state is necessary and even desirable to some degree. That's why the state can exist. But a feeling that something is necessary is not equivalent to consenting to whatever it does. Moreover, consent must ultimately be individual.

Y: You mean that the majority cannot consent on the behalf of the minority?

G: Yes. Democracy, or 'people rule', would be majoritarian. Real democracy is only what you would call 'binding referenda' unrestricted by any rules.

Y: What do we have, then?

G: You have elected oligarchy: popular votes that create a small ruling group.

Y: Perhaps there is no consent and no democracy either. I'm not sure yet. But can't all objections be overcome by the fact that politics really is necessary?

G: Is that having a different standard for an organisation than for an individual person?

Y: Maybe not. Maybe it would be alright in principle for an individual to do the necessary things that a state does; it's just that an individual

is not going to be able to do so for all sorts of reasons, including lacking the wealth, power, wisdom and legitimacy.

G: That is a very good answer. Then the matter we have to consider is whether the state does anything necessary.

Y: Surely it does.

G: Could you list some examples?

Y: That's easy. Education, healthcare, welfare, infrastructure, money, law and order, defence.

G: All of those things have been, or still are to some extent, better provided by the market or voluntary associations or charity. A little reading that challenges common sense would soon show this. I will leave that to you for homework.

Y: But that is not what we are taught in schools or, I suppose, universities.

G: It has become commonly believed that an extensive state is necessary, but that was not always so.

Y: Then why do they think any different now? How did the previous view become lost?

G: They think different now partly because all those employed by, or otherwise ostensibly benefiting from, the existing system—maybe around half the population—have vested interests in maintaining the system as it is. But both the vested interests and most other people also think it's 'obvious' that state planning must sometimes be an improvement on anarchy in increasing liberty and welfare. And it was the spread of that state-planning meme that has caused the rise in state intervention.

Y: It also strikes *me* as "obvious" that state planning ought sometimes to be better than anarchy in increasing liberty and welfare.

G: Yes, it is 'obvious' to you because of the ideological environment that you have been raised in. But it doesn't withstand much argumentative scrutiny.

Y: Then please give it a little "argumentative scrutiny".

G: Certainly. The market uses profit and loss as indicators of relative scarcity in order to guide resources into their most productive uses. Politics has no way of calculating improvements on what is done by markets, or individuals and their associations. The state's actions are arbitrary from an economic viewpoint. And so the state destroys productivity, and thereby general welfare, but also liberty in that people are not allowed the free use of their own property and sometimes even their own bodies.

Y: Two things occur to me. 1) A transfer from a rich person to a poor person might lower the welfare of the rich person but it will more than increase the welfare of the poor person, and 2) similarly, this loss of property might restrict the liberty of the rich person but it will more than increase the liberty of the poor person to do the things he values.

G: Let's deal with welfare first. Any short-run welfare gain in such transfers will undermine the long-run productivity of leaving the market and voluntary associations alone. It will, in effect, punish productivity and reward unproductivity. It will also undermine economic calculation to the degree that it is done, and take away the resources that are needed for capital accumulation.

Y: "Capital accumulation"?

G: The accumulation of capital, embodying new technology, is the principal cause of the economic growth that raises the wages and increases productivity for all. At the extreme, coerced wealth transfers will completely kill the goose that lays the golden eggs. But at every stage moving towards goosy death, golden-egg production will be going down.

Y: And what about liberty?

G: Even if I were wrong about welfare, to decrease the liberty of one person is not to increase the liberty of any beneficiary. That is an important confusion.

Y: Then you have discovered a confusion that I didn't know I had. For it seems to me that if I were to steal a bike, then the previous owner of the bike would lose the liberty to use it but I would gain the liberty that he had lost.

G: That conception of liberty is pernicious and paradoxical.

Y: I thought it was human liberty plain and simple. I don't see any problems with it.

G: It is the zero-sum conception of human liberty. It has implications that are intuitively unacceptable and so can be used as criticisms of itself. In that loose sense it is 'paradoxical'.

Y: What is the strong sense of 'paradoxical'?

G: Something that is inherently inconsistent. We can derive a contradiction from it.

Y: So what are the undesirable implications of zero-sum liberty?

G: I can list four main ones.

Y: Please do.

G: 1) Such liberty cannot be maximised for all, it can only be competed over or shared in some way. 2) Competing over liberty does not sound desirable but is even equality of such liberty much better? What exactly does it mean? Why is it desirable? Does it require continual political intervention to enforce the equality? 3) In any case, it follows that the standard for what types of liberty matter—liberty to do this but not liberty to do that—must be something other than liberty. But many people think that a conception of liberty itself should be the standard of what is allowable. And 4) this view means that we have to balance the alleged 'liberty' of a thief, or other aggressor, against that of his victims. Do we really think that this is what we are, and ought to be, doing? The zero-sum conception of liberty gives us problems rather than solutions. Yet people do sometimes talk of liberty in this way and that can cause practical problems especially as applied to politics.

Y: What is the alternative to the zero-sum conception of liberty?

G: The non-invasive conception of liberty.

Y: What is that?

G: Non-invasive liberty agrees with the popular view of liberty as not being interfered with, or not being proactively imposed on, by other people. Not being attacked or robbed is part of liberty; attacking or robbing people is not part of liberty. And this has implications that look more like solutions than problems.

Y: So what are the desirable implications of non-invasive liberty?

G: I can list four main ones.

Y: Please do.

G: 1) In principle, *anyone* in a society can have *complete* liberty. 2) In principle, *everyone* in a society can have complete liberty at the same time. 3) A clear and crucial distinction is now possible between non-invasive liberty and invasive licence. We can say that a thief, or other aggressor, is exercising licence and not liberty. And those who resist an aggressor—or use coercion to recover restitution from an aggressor—are merely protecting their own liberty, not limiting the non-invasive liberty of the aggressor. And 4) such liberty is not only desired by everyone but is generally also thought desirable for everyone, at least to a large degree. So this gives rise to practical solutions especially as applied to politics.

Y: How is it applied practically?

G: External property ownership and even self-ownership itself are consequences of maximising non-invasive liberty. Therefore, expressed in more practical and plain terms, such 'liberty' means being able to do what you like with your own body and your own property—as long as you are not thereby proactively imposing on the body or property of others. This sense of 'liberty' is what libertarians, or classical liberals, mean when they advocate liberty. This is also the dominant conception of liberty within Western history and it applies to any society that is described as generally 'liberal'.

Y: That is also something that I shall need to think about. But now I have a general question. Are all these arguments you have given me the ones that all or most philosophers would accept?

G: Oh no. Most philosophers would not accept them.

Y: Then why are you not telling me what most philosophers think?

G: 1) Because we don't have time to deal with all the theories that most philosophers would tell you. And 2) because I consider the theories I have told you to be, a) less well known, b) very

interesting, c) possibly true, and d) if true, quite important.

Y: But why wouldn't most philosophers agree with you?

G: Most philosophers end up with mere common sense on many subjects. And that is philosophical failure. Intellectually, it is better to be interesting and wrong than fall into common sense even where it is right.

Y: Why is there so much philosophical failure?

G: Because most philosophers are fairly ordinary people. Some philosophers are even worse, of course, intellectual bodgers and prigs. But that need not stop even a bodger-prig from becoming a professor of philosophy.

Y: Why would their students put up with that?

G: It would take a bright student to realise it. And a brave or foolhardy one to challenge them.

Y: How so?

G: Because the bodger-prigs of this world are likely to stoop to corrupt revenge at degree-classification time.

Y: You seem to know a lot about the current world of philosophy.

G: I take some of the magazines as well as the books and periodicals.

Y: Then if you were to sum up the current state of philosophy in one word, what would that word be?

G: Good.

Y: Hmmm. And if you were to sum up the current state of philosophy in two words what would those two words be?

G: Not good.

Y: Can you reconcile those jointly paradoxical replies?

G: Good in some ways and not in others.

Y: Generally, what are the best and what are the worst aspects?

G: The best aspects are that students are broadly taught the great philosophical problems and the great philosophers and encouraged to think rigorously. The worst aspects are that heterodox views are insufficiently encouraged, and even sometimes suppressed due to consensus-reviewed periodicals. One heterodox exception is post-modern philosophy.

Y: What is 'post-modern philosophy'?

G: It is to philosophy what modern art is to art. Post-modern philosophy embraces illogicality and perversity as modern art embraces ugliness and stupidity. But it's tolerated just because it's not taken seriously.

Y: Is it possible to make an honest living as a philosopher?

G: Yes, but some of the greatest philosophers did other things to make a living. One might always become an academic in the state-monopolised and tax-funded university system.

Y: Given what you have said about politics, that would hardly be honest or honourable, would it?

G: Generally, no. One would be a social parasite helping to crowd out a more efficient voluntary alternative to state education. But it could be honest and honourable if one were genuinely trying to liberalise and depoliticise the system from within, and thereby crowding out a statist—as long as you don't go native.

Y: If I had *significant* philosophical ability, might I become such an academic?

G: There is a chance.

Y: And what if I had only *modest* philosophical ability?

G: Then there is a much better chance.

Y: Anyway, I am far from sure that philosophy would be the right life for me. But I am sure that I ought to look into it further.

G: Good. But now I am about to surprise you.

Y: Oh dear!

G: Look under that old tarpaulin over there.

[Y GOES AND LOOKS.]

Y: It's a bicycle. No, wait. It's not just *a* bicycle it is in fact the exact one that I really had in mind. But I never told you what that bike was. How could you have known?

G: Are you surprised despite my warning that I was about to surprise you?

Y: Oh yes! And very pleasantly, thank you.

G: Good. But now I'm going to disappoint you with an unforgettable argument.

Y: Oh dear!

G: I never actually said I could not do big magic—as I call bicycles. But I led you to believe that I could not in order to encourage you to listen to my arguments.

Y: I forgive you.

G: I haven't finished yet. I have not fully explained the nature of the inscription on the lamp.

Y: You said that I couldn't have a choice of which to choose between whatever I wish for and an unforgettable argument.

G: I said that the wording meant that you didn't *necessarily* have a choice. But in fact you do have a choice, after all.

Y: That still sounds good to me.

G: I haven't finished yet. Not only do you have a real choice but you must make a choice.

Y: I don't understand.

G: Both the options are real but you cannot have both of them. In other words, I am using the word 'or' in an exclusive sense.

Y: But I have had the arguments and now I have the bike too.

G: I haven't finished yet. I am now obliging you to choose between the bicycle and the arguments.

Y: But I cannot forget the unforgettable arguments, so how is a choice possible?

G: You won't *forget* the arguments. The arguments will *never* have happened. I will turn back time and you will find the bike but never hear the arguments. I can only change time if you wish it.

Y: Now that is also a surprise, and not a nice one.

G: I didn't say I would limit my surprises. In fact, once I get going with surprises I can find it hard to stop.

Y: I can't help thinking 1) that I am facing a painful choice and, 2) that I was a bit of a fool to wish only for a bike.

G: On the contrary, it does you credit that you were not greedy. Nevertheless, you are faced with the choice you are faced with and not another choice.

Y: But I really wanted a bike.

G: Then you appear to have made your choice.

Y: You mean for the bike.

G: No, for the arguments.

Y: Why do you say that?

G: Because you used the past tense: you said "really *wanted* a bike" and not that you "really *want* a bike."

Y: So I did. I suppose that at that moment I realised that I could not give up those fascinating arguments. I fear I might never come across them all again. But I know that I can get a bike eventually.

G: What is more, as the history of fable shows, selfish magic wishes do tend to end badly.

Y: Yes, there is that too. Then it is goodbye bike, for now at least.

G: I haven't finished yet.

Y: Oh dear!

G: Don't worry. I only wanted you to choose in order to test you and to make you see the value

of the unforgettable arguments. In fact you can have both. And what is more, I will give you one last choice of 1) whatever you wish for, or 2) an unforgettable argument.

Y: You do have trouble stopping surprises when you start them, don't you? But thank you. Though first I have another question.

G: Go ahead.

Y: Earlier you said that your appearance was not entirely fortuitous. What did you mean by that?

G: It was not fortuitous because I was put into the lamp by one of your ancestors. A lady. And I can only be found and summoned by descendants of her family.

Y: But why did she do it?

G: Because I did not show her the love that I ought to have done.

Y: Ought to have done?

G: She was devoted to me but I did not realise that her worth was beyond rubies. And so I neglected her and allowed her to leave me. I remember the precise moment she left. My embrace with loving words could have stopped her.

Y: What was her name?

G: Her name was Sophia. She was a muse.

Y: Putting you inside a lamp for more than two thousand years, Sophia must have been a very cruel muse.

G: She was cruel but fair.

Y: Cruel but *fair*? Cruelty is normally thought to be extremely unfair. Can you resolve that ostensible paradox?

G: Certainly, and in more than one way. 1) Cruel but equally cruel to everyone who crossed her. 2) Cruel but pretty. 3) Cruel but blonde. 4) Cruel but meat and drink to my hungry spirit. 5) Cruel but....

Y: Alright, alright. That's '*fair*' enough.

G: But being inside the lamp was not the real punishment for me.

Y: What was, then?

G: Realising that I loved her and knowing that she was living her life without me and, eventually, dying without me.

Y: So your love of Sophia in one sense made you turn to 'love of sophia' in another.

G: Yes.

Y: But philosophy didn't cure your suffering completely?

G: No. Philosophy has its limits. Or maybe I have my limits. But it made me somewhat stoical and gave me something else to think about.

Y: Then I have decided to wish and what I shall wish for.

G: What is that?

Y: For you to turn back time for yourself so that you don't make the mistake you did in allowing her to leave you. So that you can embrace her with loving words and keep her.

G: [Pause.] But then I would never have come here and you would never have heard the arguments—or have the bicycle.

Y: I guessed that might be so. But it seems to be the right thing to do after all your suffering and your kindness to me. Or will sending you back be a paradox?

G: If you send me back, then I would never have come here and so would not need you to send me back: so perhaps that *account* is not *itself* paradoxical. However, though I'm not sure about the physics, anything that involves backwards time-travel is probably inherently paradoxical simply because then some events both did and did not occur. Yet I seem to be able to produce it when requested.

Y: Then do you agree to my wish?

G: Your unselfish wish is not only my command but also my own heart's dearest desire.

Y: Then I suppose that I ought to say 'goodbye and good luck'.

[Y HOLDS OUT HIS HAND AND THE GENIE SHAKES IT.]

G: Goodbye and good luck. And thank you, my dear young friend.

[THE GENIE DISAPPEARS IN A PUFF OF SMOKE, ALONG WITH THE LAMP AND THE BICYCLE.]

Y: (Dazed.) Er, what was I just saying? Ah yes, a cerebral smoke.

[PUTS A CIGAR INTO HIS MOUTH AND PATS HIS POCKETS FOR MATCHES. NOTICES SOMETHING ON THE GROUND NEAR WHERE THE LAMP HAD PREVIOUSLY BEEN.]

Y: Funny, I hadn't noticed that before.

[PICKS UP A BOOK.]

Y: An old book: "*Escape From Leviathan"*, by "J. C. Lester".

[OPENS THE COVER.]

Y: (Reading slowly.): "G. O'Lamp Esquire". Apparently it was once owned by an Irishman.

[TURNING PAGES.]

Y: And it seems to have his marginal notes throughout. What has he written here? "An unforgettable argument." Perhaps this is the sort of thing I need to help me answer my questions.

[SITS AND STARTS TO READ.]

[LIGHT GOES OUT.]

ENDS