



Aliens and existential elevators: absurdity and its shadows in Douglas Adams's *Hitch hiker* series

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Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being – like a worm.
(Jean-Paul Sartre, 1956.)

Abstract

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According to twentieth-century existentialist philosophy, the universe as we know it is steeped in senselessness, and the only possible means of survival is the construction of subjective meaning. Douglas Adams's fictional universe portrayed in his "Hitch hiker" series reflects the arbitrary nature of existence, and the characters dwelling in this narrative space are faced with two existential choices: the one is defiance in the face of senselessness, the other is bleak despair. This article explores the existential choices made by prominent characters in the "Hitch hiker" series. The article distinguishes between and analyses the Sisyphus characters and their polar opposites (or nihilist shadows) in Douglas Adams's "Hitch hiker" series. Adams's characters, be they human, alien or sentient machine, all face the same existential choice: actuate individual meaning, or resort to despondency. Characters who choose the first option are regarded as Sisyphus figures, whereas characters who choose the latter are referred to as shadows or nihilist nemeses.

Opsomming

Ruimtewesens en eksistensiële hystoestelle: absurditeit en die skadu's daarvan in Douglas Adams se *Hitch hiker*-reeks

Volgens twintigste-eeuse eksistensialistiese filosofie is die heelal soos ons dit ken, deurtrek met sinneloosheid, en die enigste moontlike manier om te oorleef, is om subjektiewe betekenis te konstrueer. Douglas Adams se fiktiewe heelal, soos uitgebeeld in sy "Hitch hiker"-reeks, weerspieël die arbitrêre aard van ons bestaan. Die karakters in sy narratiewe ruimte word met twee eksistensiële vrae gekonfronteer. Die een is trotsering ten spyte van sinneloosheid, die ander is naakte wanhoop. Hierdie artikel ondersoek die eksistensiële keuses wat prominente karakters in die "Hitch hiker"-reeks maak. Hierdie artikel onderskei tussen en analiseer die Sisyphus-karakters en hulle teenoorgesteldes (of nihilistiese skadu's) in Douglas Adams se "Hitch hiker"-reeks. Adams se karakters, of hulle nou ruimtewesens, mense of intelligente masjiene is, word almal met dieselfde eksistensiële keuse gekonfronteer: aktiveer individuele betekenis, of verval in wanhoop. Karakters wat die eerste opsie kies, word gesien as Sisyphus-figure, terwyl karakters wat die tweede opsie kies, beskou word as skadu's of nemeses.

1. Introduction to Douglas Adams

As an original and resonant satiric voice, Adams is most renowned for his very first novel, *The Hitch hiker's guide to the galaxy* (1979), which was developed from a radio series and sparked the composition of several sequential narratives such as *The restaurant at the end of the universe* (1980), *Life, the universe and everything* (1982), *So long, and thanks for all the fish* (1984) and *Mostly harmless* (1992). Although Adams's works are widely regarded as light-hearted entertainment, the *Hitch hiker* series is underpinned by intricate philosophical dimensions, and reflects Adams's astute satirical insight into the human condition. He arrives at this by pitting humankind against a meaningless universe steeped in hilarity, if not overt lunacy. In answer to Søren Kierkegaard's existential question: "if at the bottom of everything there were only a wild ferment, a power that twisting in dark passions produced everything great or inconsequential; if an unfathomable, insatiable emptiness lay hid beneath everything, what would life be but despair?" (Kierkegaard, 2005 [1843]:14), Adams portrays humans, aliens and sentient machines in his *Hitch hiker* series who either defy the absurdity of existence, or resort to bleak despair in the face of senselessness.

This article will provide a profile of Adams as existentialist fantasist; draw a brief comparison between Adams's and Samuel Beckett's absurd fictional universes; and explore the existential choices made by Adams's human, alien and electronic characters. For the purpose of the argument, characters who are conscious of their own absurd struggle and who face the superfluity of existence with defiance are referred to as absurd heroes. Conversely, characters who resort to existential despondency when confronted with their own absurd struggle are referred to as *nihilist nemeses*, the shadows or dark opposites of absurd heroism.

2. Adams as existentialist fantasist

At the root of Existentialism lies the belief that existence is random and essentially meaningless. This randomness impressed upon our being causes many people to dwell in the dank caves of anxiety and despair rather than face their accidental existence with defiance. Adams's *Hitch hiker* series reflects an intense awareness of existential anxiety as a result of what Heidegger calls *geworfenheit*, or *thrownness* (Butler, 1984:9). Existentialists argue that human beings are cast into the cauldron of being; into certain conditions that are beyond our power to control. These conditions comprise our so-called *facticity*. Lance St. John Butler describes *facticity* as follows, "Facticity is *the way things are* ... It is all that cribs, cabins and confines us but, like all such limitations, it is also the condition of the possible" (Butler, 1984:14). Seeing that *facticity* does not merely imply limitation, but also possibility, human beings are condemned to be free, our existential anxiety arises from the human compulsion to define our own existence, to reinvent ourselves.

In Adams's novels the shock of nothingness, superfluity and absurdity is reflected, which is vividly revealed to us in moments of intense existential anxiety and contemplations on *facticity*. Adams's fictional universe is carefully constructed on Sartre's claim that "Existence itself is contingent, gratuitous, unjustifiable." (Sartre, 1956:xvi.) Sartre (2008:76) negates the notion that being emerges from a preordained purpose, but argues that "human beings exist first and then their essence is defined". Except for Adams's robotic characters, who will be introduced in much detail further on in the argument, his fictional creatures exist in a world devoid of any inherent meaning. If these characters choose to actuate their own being, they survive the contingent absurdity. Adams's fantastical world indeed reflects Barrett's contention that "Man's existence is absurd in the midst of a cosmos that knows him not; the only

meaning he can give himself is through the free project that he launches out of his own nothingness" (Barrett, 1962:247). In this we see that humankind is compelled to create itself, and to create its world.

Adam's absurd heroes are characters who, as Camus (1975:64) suggests, "[live] out [their] adventure[s] within the span of [their] lifetime[s]". In Adams's absurd universe we recognise elements of Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus (1975:108-109) comments on Sisyphus's plight:

... Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He *is*, as much through his passions as through his torture ... Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition ... The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.

Sisyphus, doomed by the gods to rolling a boulder up and down a hill to perpetuity, will never see his labour come to fruition. Like Sisyphus, Adams's absurd heroes demonstrate a capacity to face their own absurdity with courage and defiance. Like Sisyphus, they realise that happiness can never be disentangled from absurdity, that there is no ultimate, meaningful destination, no final victory or reward. In actuating their own being, Adams's absurd heroes show that they are conscious of their own absurd struggle: "This action in awareness constitutes the only form of heroism we can contemplate for modern humanity. Our heroism lies in the lucidity of the absurd struggle." (Du Plock, 2005:18.)

3. Adams's and Beckett's absurd fictional universes

Adams's absurd fictional universe is very similar to the Beckettian universe in that both elucidate the superfluity of the human condition and the compulsion to actuate one's own being. According to Baldick, Beckett's classic absurdist play, *Waiting for Godot* (*En attendant Godot*, 1952), "revives some of the conventions of clowning and farce to represent the impossibility of purposeful action and the paralysis of human aspiration" (Baldick, 1990:1). Likewise, Adams's *Hitch hiker* series portrays a ludicrous universe in which a number of rather farcical characters employ whatever improbable resources are at their disposal to reinvent their own essence.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett's two clownlike characters, Vladimir and Estragon, occupy a waste world devoid of meaning, and spend their days waiting for an enigmatic figure called Godot. They wait,

and while waiting, they entertain themselves; “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful” (Beckett, 1990:41). Vladimir and Estragon’s attempts at entertaining themselves take on various forms: anything from trying to hang themselves, to exercising, acting and make-believe, trying on boots and discussing turnips. The following words spoken by Vladimir resonate with the absurdity of the human condition and the necessity of moulding meaning from the nothingness which lies at the core of the universe: “We wait. We are bored ... We are bored to death, there’s no denying it. Good. A diversion comes along and what do we do? We let it go to waste ... In an instant all will vanish and we’ll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness!” (Beckett, 1990:75.) The next section explores Adams’s fictional creatures, as well as the existential choices they make, in a universe akin to Beckett’s absurd void.

4. The existential choices made by Adams’s absurd heroes and their shadows/nihilist nemeses

In his *Hitch hiker* series, Adams portrays a cosmos in which the earth, and specifically humankind, are absurd, random and diminutive, a universe reminiscent of Beckett’s fictional world in *Waiting for Godot*. Adams (1995:15) describes the earth as follows:

Far out in the uncharted backwaters of the unfashionable end of the western spiral arm of the Galaxy lies a small unregarded yellow sun. Orbiting this at a distance of roughly ninety-two million miles is an utterly insignificant little blue-green planet whose ape-descended life-forms are so amazingly primitive that they still think digital watches are a pretty neat idea.

From the outset of the *Hitch hiker* series, Adams casts the absurdity of the human condition in a satiric light. Human beings and their planet are miniscule and inconsequential in relation to an immense universe seemingly governed by improbability. Adams’s is a universe in which “whole planets [start] turning unexpectedly into banana fruitcake” (Adams, 1995:604); a universe in which “hot doughnuts [pop] out of the road ... and horrid fish [storm] out of the sky ...” (Adams, 1995:66).

Adams’s characters find themselves in an alien world devoid of meaning; a world similar to Samuel Beckett’s. Even though Adams’s characters range from human to artificially intelligent and alien, he ultimately satirises humankind’s ludicrous attempts at imposing meaning on an indecipherable universe. In *The restaurant at the end of the universe* (the second book in the *Hitch hiker* series), for exam-

ple, Adams creates a race (called the Jatravartid people of Viltvodle VI) who believe "that the entire universe was in fact sneezed out of the nose of a being called the Great Green Arkleseizure" (Adams, 1995:155). Another instance where the accidental nature of existence is pointed out as contended by Sartre, is where a being called Wowbagger the Infinitely Prolonged, has "his immortality inadvertently thrust upon him by an unfortunate accident with an irrational particle accelerator, a liquid lunch and a pair of rubber bands" (Adams, 1995:313).

Like Sartre and Camus, Adams believes in the random and arbitrary structure of the universe and the absurd nature of existence. Characters selected for discussion face an existential choice. They either choose absurd heroism, or display nihilistic tendencies. In the *Hitch hiker* series, characters who learn to face their *facticity* (or facts regarding their existence in space-time) with defiance are Arthur Dent (a run-of-the-mill Englishman), Ford Prefect (an alien from somewhere in the vicinity of Betelgeuse), a mysterious old man (with the unlikely name of Slartibartfast) who designs planets, a race of creatures inhabiting a relatively small and crowded nut tree, and a madman living with his cat in a shack on the outskirts of nowhere. These characters represent the courage, defiance and absurd heroism as embodied in Camus's Sisyphus.

In contrast, Marvin the perpetually depressed robot and Adams's existential elevators, may be regarded as the dark shadows of absurdity – as Sisyphus' nihilist nemeses. Sartre's postulation that "being precedes essence" has already been mentioned. The reader may argue that the essence of a machine precedes its existence, seeing that machines are invented with a specific purpose in mind. Sartre explains this argument by using a papercutter as example:

[H]ere is an object which has been made by an artisan whose inspiration came from a concept. He referred to the concept of what a paper-cutter is and likewise to a known method of production, which is part of the concept ... Thus, the paper-cutter is at once an object produced in a certain way and, on the other hand, one having a specific use ... Therefore, let us say that, for the paper-cutter, essence ... precedes existence (Kessler quoted in Lawrence, 2004:151).

However, a careful analysis of Adams's sentient machines shows that, although they have been created with a purpose, they still question an existence that seems to blossom from superfluity. For

the purpose of the argument, Adams's sentient machines will henceforth be regarded as the nihilist shadows of absurd heroism.

Englishman, Arthur Dent, embodies the absurdity of the human condition, the ambiguity inherent in every life, as well as the solitary struggle to actuate individual being. Arthur Dent's *facticity* is defined by everyday, inconsequential phenomena such as kettles, plugs, refrigerators and, of course, tea. In the course of the *Hitch hiker* series, however, Arthur comes face to face with the rampant meaninglessness of the universe and with his life as an absurd man. Yet, he also learns how to construct meaning, even if the meaning constructed is farcical, absurd and grotesquely comical. He learns that keeping oneself occupied, as the two tramps in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* do, is the sole means of survival: he learns to defy nothingness. In *Life, the universe and everything* (the third novel in the *Hitch hiker* series), for example, Arthur resorts to madness as a form of actuating subjective meaning. After two years of being stranded alone on prehistoric earth, Arthur decides to approach his absurd situation from a creative perspective; he would reinvent his own existence, even if it cost him his sanity:

He had just had a wonderful idea about how to cope with the terrible lonely isolation, the nightmares, the failure of all his attempts at horticulture, and the sheer futurelessness and futility of his life here on prehistoric Earth, which was that he would go mad. (Adams, 1995:316.)

Only moments after Arthur has announced his resolve to go mad, Ford Prefect appears (an event conducive to madness) and suggests that they should travel to present day England on a Chesterfield sofa. Ford's and Arthur's attempts at making meaning while stranded on prehistoric earth are reminiscent of the Theatre of the Absurd in that their movements and actions border on the grotesque; their actions are rooted in the madness that ensues in a world devoid of purpose or direction. In our eyes, these protagonists are transformed into Beckett's clowns. The following dialogue between Ford and Arthur is indicative of the recurrent theme of absurdity and the human compulsion to construct subjective meaning:

‘I thought you must be dead ...’ [Arthur] said simply.

‘So did I for a while,’ said Ford, ‘and then I decided I was a lemon for a couple of weeks. I kept myself amused all that time jumping in and out of a gin and tonic ...’

‘Where,’ [Arthur] said, ‘did you ...?’

'Find a gin and tonic?', said Ford brightly. 'I found a small lake that thought it was a gin and tonic, and jumped in and out of that. At least, I think it thought it was a gin and tonic.'

'I may,' he added with a grin which would have sent sane men scampering into trees, 'have been imagining it' (Adams, 1995: 317).

Ford also tells Arthur that he visited Africa and that he behaved very oddly there. For example, he took to being cruel to animals, "but only ... as a hobby" (Adams, 1995:318), and he tried to learn to fly. Ford's actions and attempts at actuating his own essence do not merely border on the grotesque: they actually radiate madness.

In *So long, and thanks for all the fish* (the fourth novel in the *Hitch hiker* series), Ford Prefect once again testifies to this madness born of the human condition. Upon being asked what life is like, Ford, arguing that "here was something that [he] ... could speak about with authority", answers: "Life ... is like a grapefruit ... It's sort of orangey-yellow and dimpled on the outside, wet and squidgy in the middle. It's got pips inside too. Oh, and some people have half a one for breakfast" (Adams, 1995:544). Ford's definition of life once more reflects the arbitrariness of human existence. Perhaps his knowledge of the absurd tapestry of space-time causes him to abandon all normal conventions of coherent meaning.

Ford and Arthur realise the futility of trying to discover life's ultimate meaning, since this is utterly elusive. When approached by two girls on prehistoric earth, Ford explains the absurdity thus, "My friend and I were just contemplating the meaning of life. Frivolous exercise" (Adams, 1995:306). In the spirit of absurdity Ford also adds, "Nothing's for anything ... Come and join us, I'm Ford, this is Arthur. We were just about to do nothing for a while but it can wait" (Adams, 1995:306). In a dour Beckettian universe, Arthur Dent and Ford Prefect, Englishman and alien, choose to defy the random nature of existence, and to embrace the madness of their recreated essence.

From the above analysis of the characters Arthur Dent and Ford Prefect, it is evident that, in the face of *facticity* and a universe steeped in nothingness, they perpetually entertain themselves with various forms of apparent madness. They realise that the "show must go on", even if the stage on which it is performed is a void space born of "a wild ferment, a power that twisting in dark passions produced everything great or inconsequential" (Kierkegaard, 2005 [1843]:14).

In *The Hitch hiker's guide to the galaxy* (the first novel in the *Hitch hiker* series), the reader is introduced to the designer of planets, Slartibartfast. This character confirms the existential suggestion that one had better entertain oneself in order to survive, since ultimate, inherent meaning is unattainable. "Perhaps I'm old and tired ... but I always think that the chances of finding out what really is going on are so absurdly remote that the only thing to do is to say hang the sense of it and just keep yourself occupied. Look at me: I design coastlines. I got an award for Norway." (Adams, 1995:134.) The above comment by Slartibartfast is perhaps one of the more direct allusions to existential philosophy and the absurd condition of humankind in this particular novel. This argument also reflects the compulsion to actuate individual meaning and to entertain ourselves. In the words of Sternberg (1998:575), "To a large extent, we can create our own lives and determine our own destinies, rather than allowing ourselves to be shaped and buffeted by inexplicable forces outside our conscious grasp."

Another powerful and very comic reflection on the absurdity of existence is evident in *The restaurant at the end of the universe* (the second novel in the *Hitch hiker* series), in which Adams (1995:198) depicts a race of creatures inhabiting a relatively small and crowded nut tree. Adams (1995:198) describes these creatures' futile existence as follows:

... In the corner of the eastern Galactic arm lies the large forest planet Oglaroon, the entire 'intelligent' population of which lives permanently in one fairly small and crowded nut tree. In which they are born, live, fall in love, carve tiny speculative articles in the bark on the meaning of life, the futility of death and the importance of birth control, fight a few extremely minor wars, and eventually die strapped to the underside of some of the less accessible branches.

Consider the nut tree as a microcosm of the world. People are cast into a certain milieu; be that a nut tree in the eastern galactic arm or an insignificant blue and green planet in the "unfashionable end of the western spiral arm of the galaxy" (Adams, 1995:15). Whatever their circumstances or milieu, people speculate on the meaning of life and the futility of death, and carve articles to this effect on the nut trees of the world. The "minor wars" evidently reflect the insignificance of human endeavour, or, in the words of William Barrett, "projects launched out of nothingness" (Barrett, 1962:247). After having spent a lifetime pondering the elusive meaning of life, people die, and return to the earth or the skies or the less accessible

branches of nut trees, so to speak. Even in the face of their random *facticity*, the inhabitants of the nut tree do not resort to suicide or strap themselves to the “less accessible branches”. Instead they fall in love, carve senseless articles in the bark of their nut tree, and “live out ‘their’ adventure[s] within the span of [their] lifetime[s]” (Camus, 1975:64).

The restaurant at the end of the universe (the second novel in the *Hitch hiker* series) also features the supposed ruler of the universe, who is a madman living with his cat in a shack on the outskirts of nowhere. The old man’s as well as his cat’s attempts at making meaning are all born of absurdity, and resound with comic actions reminiscent of the Theatre of the Absurd. The old man’s fascination with a pencil and paper is an excellent example:

[The old man] tried wrapping the paper round the pencil, he tried rubbing the stubby end of the pencil against the paper and then he tried rubbing the sharp end of the pencil against the paper. It made a mark, and he was delighted with the discovery, *as he was every day.* (Adams, 1995:279; italics – MAVdC.)

At the end of the section, the old man once more embarks on a pencil-and-paper meaning-making expedition. He is delighted with this discovery everyday, just as Beckett’s clowns in *Waiting for Godot* anticipate the arrival of the mysterious Godot daily. Human-kind anxiously anticipates the arrival of ultimate meaning, which, of course, is a futile and frustrating endeavour. After having “discovered” the mark on the paper once again, the old man turns to other sources of entertainment, such as talking to his table for a week to see how it will react. Moreover, following his owner’s cue, the cat is constantly entertaining itself with the limited resources at its disposal: “... the cat exhausted the entertainment possibilities of the speck of dust and pounced on to the fish” (Adams, 1995:279). The old man is not even certain of the existence of anything else beyond his solitary shack, least of all the ultimate meaning of life, the universe and everything. Therefore, he resorts to entertaining himself in an absurd attempt at actuating his own essence. Adams may in fact be suggesting that the art of writing is yet another antidote to senselessness; an attempt to actuate subjective meaning.

The characters Arthur Dent, Ford Prefect and Slartibartfast as well as the inhabitants of a random nut tree and a demented old man living in a shack may all be regarded as Sisyphus figures, since they prefer the construction of subjective meaning to bleak existential despair. On the other side of the character spectrum, Marvin (the

paranoid android) and Adams's existential elevators embody the nihilist shadow of absurd heroism.

Marvin the robot has apparently been created for a very technologically advanced purpose, and never hesitates to inform his inferior friends of the fact that his "brain [is] the size of a planet" (Adams, 1995:74). According to the *Encyclopaedia Galactica* (a reference work referred to quite often in the *Hitch hiker* series), a robot is "a mechanical apparatus designed to do the work of a man". The *Encyclopaedia Galactica* also cites the Sirius Cybernetics Corporation's definition of a robot as "Your Plastic Pal Who's Fun To Be With" (Adams, 1995:73). Close analysis of Marvin's character clearly shows that he detests having to "do the work of a man" (in other words, although he has been created with a purpose, he still despises his *facticity* and condescends to all things human). Moreover, Marvin is no fun to be with.

Marvin is no absurd hero, and the reader cannot imagine Marvin happy. If humankind (and artificial intelligence, for that matter) exists in an existential void, then Marvin is certainly not actualising his own essence. Instead, he eats his way further into the rampant nothingness at the world's core. He does exactly the opposite of what Camus proposes humankind should do in order to survive in an absurd universe; instead of celebrating life in its everyday form, Marvin dwells in existential despair. Marvin is also known for soliloquies steeped in self-pity and grave depression, such as, "Sorry, did I say something wrong? ... Pardon me for breathing, which I never do anyway so I don't know why I bother to say it ... I'm so depressed. Life! Don't talk to me about life." (Adams, 1995:75.) Marvin evidently does not rejoice in life, judging, for example, by his response to Arthur's appreciation of the night sky:

'night's falling' [Arthur said]. 'Look, robot, the stars are coming out ...'

The robot obediently looked at them, then looked back.

'I know', he said. 'Wretched isn't it?'

'But that sunset! I've never seen anything like it in my wildest dreams ... the two suns! It was like mountains of fire boiling into space.'

'I've seen it', said Marvin. 'It's rubbish.' (Adams, 1995:109.)

In *Life, the universe and everything*, the scene on Squornshellous Zeta is reminiscent of the Theatre of the Absurd, in that nothingness as theme features prominently:

The mist clung to the surface of the marshes. The swamp trees were grey with it, the tall reeds indistinct. It hung motionless like held breath.

Nothing moved.

There was silence.

The sun struggled feebly with the mist, tried to impart a little warmth here, shed a little light there, but clearly today was going to be just another long haul across the sky.

Nothing moved.

Again, silence.

Nothing moved.

Silence.

Nothing moved.

Very often on Squornshellous Zeta, whole days would go on like this, and this was indeed going to be one of them. (Adams, 1995:344-345.)

Directly juxtaposed with the sun's brave resilience in the face of absurdity, is Marvin. When a mattress called Zem comes across Marvin, morosely trudging through a swamp, the mattress expresses his wish to discuss the weather for a while. The mattress, like Beckett's tramps, sees the discussion of the weather as a desperate attempt at entertainment, and a welcome diversion. It will pass the time until the sun sinks beneath the horizon once more "with a sense of totally wasted effort" (Adams, 1995:345). Marvin is, however, not the ideal person with whom to discuss the weather, and the conversation follows thus:

'My name', said the mattress, 'is Zem. We could discuss the weather a little.'

Marvin paused again in his weary circular plod.

'The dew', he observed, 'has clearly fallen with a particularly sickening thud this morning.' (Adams, 1995:346.)

Marvin the robot clearly embodies the nihilist nemesis of absurd heroism. He evidently does not celebrate life in all its absurd beauty, but prefers to wallow in the marshes of shadow, so to speak. After having witnessed God's final message to his creation on the Quentulus Quazgar mountains, in the land of Sevorbeupstry, Marvin finally shuts down his circuits, and in so doing, lays down his morbid electronic life. It comes as no great surprise that God's final message reads: "We apologise for the inconvenience." (Adams, 1995: 588.)

The existential elevators of Ursa Minor Beta may also be regarded as nihilist nemeses of absurd heroism. Zaphod Breeblebrox has the following conversation with one of these elevators:

'Hello', said the elevator sweetly, 'I am to be your elevator for this trip to the floor of your choice. I have been designed by the Sirius Cybernetics Corporation to take you, the visitor to the *Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, into these their offices ...'

'Yeah', said Zaphod, stepping into it, 'what else do you do besides talk?'

'I go up', said the elevator, 'or down'.

'Good', said Zaphod, 'we're going up'.

'Or down', the elevator reminded him.

'Yeah, OK, up please ...'

'May I ask you', inquired the elevator in its sweetest, most reasonable voice, 'if you've considered all the possibilities that down might offer you? ...'

'Like what other possibilities', he said wearily.

'Well', the voice trickled on like honey on biscuits, 'there's the basement, the microfiles, the heating system ... er ...'

It paused.

'nothing particularly exciting', it admitted, 'but they are alternatives'.

'Holy Zarquon', muttered Zaphod, 'did I ask for an existential elevator?' (Adams, 1995:181-182.)

First of all, the elevator's existence is defined by the repetitive action of going up, or going down. Therefore, Adams's elevators may be

regarded as electronic Sisyphuses, doomed to moving up and down in their concrete shafts for all eternity. This is an action launched out of their own nothingness. They never reach the top or actually achieve something transcendental; neither do they find meaning at the bottom of their existence. Consider for a moment the following description of the mindset of these electronic Sisyphuses:

Not unnaturally, many elevators imbued with intelligence and precognition became terribly frustrated with the mindless business of going up and down, up and down, experimented briefly with the notion of going sideways, as a sort of existential protest, demanded participation in the decision-making process and finally took to squatting in basements sulking. (Adams, 1995:183.)

In the elevators' rebellious experimentation with sideways movement, we recognise the desperate attempt at constructing meaning, characteristic of all humanity. However, the myth of Sisyphus serves to remind us of the fact that although our existence is absurd, we can still rejoice in life, in the transient, and thus become absurd heroes. We should never resort to existential despair or suicidal thoughts. In this sense, Adams's existential elevators cannot be regarded as absurd heroes, since neither their love of life nor their revolt is passionate. Instead they dwell in the basements of despair. Camus (1975:111) remarks about Sisyphus' plight, "The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." However, it is impossible for us to imagine the existential elevators, squatting in their dank basements, happy. There is something about the human condition and absurd heroism which they have simply not been programmed to understand. Suffice it to say that the grave shadow cast by Marvin and his electronic friends is born of the nihilistic belief that:

[t]here is no primordial order; there is nothing but chaos turning upon itself, looking nowhere, desiring nothing, throwing up in its random movements the most beautiful and fragile forms and without thinking twice engulfing them back into its own raging self. Being is in itself profoundly meaningless; to believe in a Providence, watching over the course of nature and bringing good out of evil, transforming disasters in to heavenly or earthly triumphs, is nothing but the sheeplike dream of the timid who can't endure the hard facts. It is all senseless, it is a *perpetually recurring* senselessness. (Earle *et al.*, 1963:80.)

5. Conclusion

Adams's fictional universe is born of a "perpetually recurring senselessness". Characters are cast into an improbable universe, their *facticity* imposed upon them. They ultimately choose to either defy or be engulfed by the ravenous heart of nothingness. They choose either to mould meaning from madness and become absurd heroes, or to wallow in the marshes where the dew falls with "a particularly sickening thud". We are flung into the selfsame senselessness; we face the same choices. In the face of nothingness, Douglas Adams chooses to actuate his own essence by entertaining himself, as it were, with a pencil and a piece of paper. The choice is up to us: Sisyphus or shadow. We cannot be both.

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Key concepts:

absurd heroism
Adams, Douglas: fictional universe
existential choices
subjective meaning

Kernbegrippe:

absurde heldhaftigheid
Adams, Douglas: fiktiewe heelal
eksistensiële keuses
subjektiewe betekenis