

The Ultimate Question

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When I was growing up (said Argyle) I was always curious about things. I pestered all three of my parents with endless questions, and finally, in exasperation, they bought me a computer, which I promptly christened TAM (for The Answer Machine).

In the beginning, it was capable of answering almost all of my simplistic queries. Of course, it couldn't tell me why all the elevators arrive at once, or why no adult can open a child-proof bottle, but it was pretty good on some of the more common questions.

For example, like any kid, I'd ask why the sky was green.

And TAM would spew out an answer in a nanosecond or two, to the effect that my world's sky was green because all the continents were blanketed by green grass and the oceans were covered by an exceptionally fast-growing and disgusting form of algae, but that skies actually came in all colors, including blue, purple, violet, indigo, yellow, red, orange, mauve, puce, magenta, and licorice black.

Or I might ask "How high is up?", always a favorite among obnoxious youngsters.

And TAM would explain that everything was relative, that Up wasn't quite as high if you were standing atop a mountain as if you were in a valley, which made me clarify my thinking and express myself more precisely.

Whenever I had a few extra credits to spend, I bought TAM more memory and brainpower, and began asking it increasingly difficult questions.

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"For instance?" asked Max, who just couldn't stop himself from interrupting almost every story at least once.

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For instance (answered Argyle), I'm not even a mammal, and my race has three sexes -- so why am I attracted to big-breasted women?

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"Damned good question," said Max. "What did TAM answer?"

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That it was a universal constant (said Argyle) and I shouldn't lose any sleep over it.

As I became more sophisticated I'd ask if a tree made a noise when it fell in an empty forest, and TAM would kind of sigh and explain that a forest couldn't very well be empty of trees, and that I had to learn to think more clearly.

Or I'd pose the question: if God made me, who made God? And he'd reply that it was an invalid supposition until I could prove God had made me, and that personally he doubted it like all hell. (You'll notice that by now I was referring to TAM as him rather than it; I found it helped personalize him -- and he was also able to answer some embarrassingly naive and insecure questions about the nature of sex, which is something that none of my parents seemed able to do.)

Anyway, I kept buying TAM more brainpower, and kept pushing him to the limits of his abilities.

For example, since I worship 37 gods and Men worship only one, I decided to prove they were wrong. So I did some studying, and I found out that Men put a lot of stock in the First Cause Argument. You know the one: for every effect there is a cause, and when you finally backtrack to a first cause beyond which you can't go, you call that God. So I asked TAM if he could disprove the First Cause Argument.

"Certainly," he replied instantly. "To disprove it, one need merely show that not everything has a first cause."

"Okay, you can disprove it," I said, realizing that I had expressed myself improperly. "Now will you?"

"If you wish. Consider the set of all negative integers. The last cause, the highest number, is minus one. The next-to-last cause is minus two. And the first cause, minus infinity, cannot exist."

"Excellent!" I exclaimed. But suddenly I was filled with doubt. "Could it be that that's just a fluke?" I asked. "A single disproof to a theory that's lasted thousands of years?"

"You want more, I got more," replied TAM. "Consider next the set of all proper fractions. The last cause, the highest number, is one over one. The second highest is one over two, or one-half. Then one-third, and so on. And the first cause, one over infinity, cannot exist."

"Thank you, TAM," I said.

"That was almost too easy," said TAM. "Ask me a tough one."

"Well, the other proof of God that still seems to have widespread acceptance is Bishop Barkley's -- that of the unseen observer. Can you disprove it?"

This time it took TAM three nanoseconds to answer.

"No, but I can show you how trivial it is."

"Trivial? In what way?"

"Wait until I access my rhyming dictionary," said TAM. "Ah, here it is. All right: I can condense everything Bishop Barkley said, every argument he made, every word of his entire life's work, into a single four-line stanza, to wit:

With eyes wide open and mouth shut tight, _

I watch by day and I watch by night. _

And though I'm sure you must find it odd, _

I'm always here -- you may call me God._

I submit to you that anything that can be reduced to such a childish doggerel cannot possibly have any universal import or validity. Furthermore," he added, "it kind of makes God into a Peeping Tom. Who wants to worship a Supreme Voyeur?"

"If you say so."

"I just did," answered TAM.

Well, the years passed by, and I thirsted for more knowledge, and finally I reached the point where I sought the Ultimate Answer to Existence.

The problem was, TAM didn't have enough brainpower to handle the question. Oh, he could compute the diameter of an electron in half a nanosecond, and he was able to pinpoint the date of the Big Bang to within 17 minutes ... but what I wanted to know was simply beyond him.

I knew the only way to get my answers was to increase TAM's capacity by a multiple of thousands, maybe tens of thousands. And that would require money -- more than I could earn in several lifetimes.

Still, I knew that if I could make TAM bright enough to answer my questions, the entire galaxy would benefit. So one day I robbed the biggest bank on our planet. The plan was foolproof, of course: TAM, who was as eager to increase his intellect as I was, had come up with it. I must confess that even as I was filling my bags with loot, I was silently appealing for understanding to Morixomete, the God of Heinous Deeds Committed for Noble Purposes. I'm sure He heard and forgave me, and I was really sorry about the sixteen innocent bystanders.

I spent every credit on more intelligence for TAM, and when he was ready, I hit him with The Question.

"Are you ready?" I said.

"Roger!"

"Okay, here it comes," I said. I paused just a moment for effect and then hit him with it: "Why?"

Usually TAM came up with an answer in less than a second. The really tough questions took him perhaps half a minute. But this time he thought and cogitated and considered, and after eleven minutes he finally gave me his answer:

"Why not?"

That was when I realized there wasn't enough money on my planet to supply him with the intellect he needed to answer the Ultimate Question, so I came out to the Frontier and became a notorious outlaw, though no one knew that I was killing and raping and robbing and plundering for the noblest of causes.

After sixteen years I felt I'd accumulated enough money, and I poured every credit of it into TAM's prodigious brain. By the time I was done, he was probably three times as smart as the Master Computer back on Deluros VIII.

I activated him, and asked the Ultimate Question again:

"Why?"

This time he began whirring and blinking in earnest -- and he kept it up for three days and three nights, considering every possible answer, every alternative, every subtle nuance to the secret of creation. And finally came the moment that we'd both spent our whole lives leading up to -- the Ultimate Answer:

"Because."

"That's it?" I said, surprised.

"That's it," replied TAM.

That's when I realized that the Ultimate Question would remain unanswered for all eternity.

"Thanks," I muttered unhappily.

"Any time," replied TAM.

So I made a total break with my past, left TAM behind, and returned to the Frontier, this time to stay. The only question I ask these days is "Where's the bar?"

I still like big-breasted women, though.

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"So does TAM still exist?" asked O'Grady.

"Yes. Why?"

"Maybe he can't answer the Ultimate Question, but I'll bet he could dope out the odds on next week's games."

"Well, I think it's noble that Argyle spent so long trying to find out the secret of existence," said Sinderella. "Except for all the people he killed and raped, that is."

"It's a chump's game," said Max. "The only thing we were put here for is to make lots of little replicas of ourselves before we totter off to the grave."

"Then it's damned lucky the Beldorians made it so much fun, isn't it?" put in Nicodemus Mayflower.

"Well, I disagree," said Big Red. "I think each of us has his own purpose. If you were to ask Magic Abdul-Jordan whether he wanted to sire a bunch of eighteen-foot-high children, I think he'd tell you that he'd rather shoot himself right now rather than lay a curse like that on his offspring."

"Right," chimed in Little Mike Picasso. "Reproducing the species is all well and good, but to what purpose? I'd rather create one work of lasting art than ten kids who go out and live dull, everyday, unexceptional lives."

"Nobody who comes to the Outpost is unexceptional," said the Bard. "So why should you think their offspring will be?"

"You've heard of shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves in three generations?" replied Three-Gun Max. "Well, how about unexceptional to unexceptional in two generations? I don't recall any of our parents ever traipsing out here to the Frontier and making the kind of reputations we've got. We're a bunch of freaks. Great and heroic freaks to be sure, but freaks nonetheless."

But Nicodemus Mayflower wasn't buying it. "Are you telling me that, say, Einstein and Sinderella couldn't produce a kid with his brains and her looks?"

"I'd say it's a damned sight more likely that they'd produce one with her brains and his looks," answered Max.

"Well, I like that!" snapped Sinderella, glaring at him.

"No insult intended," continued Max. "But let's be reasonable. Was there any reason to predict anyone in this tavern would turn out the way we did? Was your mother the sexiest woman in a whole sector of the galaxy? Do you suppose Catastrophe Baker's father could wipe out entire regiments before going off to bed a sacrosanct high priestess? Did Little Mike have five brothers and sisters who could produce works of art that would pass for the great masters? I say we're all unique, and I can't see what's wrong with

that."

"There's nothing wrong with it," answered the Bard. "But it does tend to cast some serious doubt upon the entire science of genetics."

"Big deal," said Max. "Have you ever seen a gene?"

"I haven't seen a supernova, either," said the Bard. "But I have it on excellent authority that they exist."

"Just keep arguing with me," said Max pugnaciously, "and I won't let you put me in your book."

"Keep saying stupid things and I won't want to."

"Write me out of that book and I'll blow your head off!" bellowed Max, who seemed to have less use for logic than most men.

"Blow my head off and the book will never get finished," shot back the Bard.

"I hadn't considered that," said Max grumpily. "Okay, you can live." He paused. "What were we talking about?"

"The cosmic verities and the meaning of life," said Nicodemus Mayflower. "Stuff like that."

"Only we decided that no one could ever know the answers," added Little Mike Picasso.

"Someone knows," said Catastrophe Baker, who'd been silent for a long time. (Well, for him, anyway.)

Argyle shook his head. "Even TAM didn't know."

Baker shook his head. "TAM was wrong. There's one man who knows the secrets of the universe and the purpose of life."

"And you just happen to know who it is, right?"

"As a matter of fact, I do."