The Philosophical Genie

A Dialogue Introduction to Philosophy

Any resemblance to any real genie, living or dead, is entirely unintentional.

Preface

Seeing and reading Tom Stoppard's early philosophical plays helped to convince me that, much as I was interested in plays, I was even more interested in philosophy. However, the traditional philosophical dialogue does go some way to marrying the two; and so this is one of my own attempts at that (see also its complementary partner *A Damned Politician: a Dialogue Introduction to Libertarianism*). It was first written for one of Christian Michel's intellectual soirées in the late noughties. It has been significantly revised. It is intended to be an enjoyable and stimulating introduction to philosophy itself, but it is far from comprehensive and systematic: partly because of the limitations of length and form; and partly because it is biased in favour of philosophical theories for which I have a critical preference. I have avoided adding references to books and articles relating to the sundry controversial assertions that are made. This is for several reasons. 1) It would distract significantly from the main text and turn it into something other than the dialogue it is intended to be. 2) Such references would not, in any case, support those assertions: for we can never escape the realm of conjecture. 3) It is a small matter these days to do an internet search for relevant material (pro and con) concerning any assertions. And 4) my more-scholarly books and articles already contain many of the relevant references and in a more-detailed argumentative context.

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 youth enters and wanders up and down distractedly.]

Y: I have a problem. What is it all about—everything? I really don't understand the world. I mean the fundamental nature of important general things such as morals, politics, science, art, and how one ought to live. I muddle along superficially 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 about, what 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 often number the points I make to myself. Oh, and, 5) so that I can have a *cerebral smoke*.

[He takes out a small cigar from a square tin and puts it in his mouth then pats his clothes and looks around for matches. He 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. Guaranteed 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 the tramp of the lamp.

G: It's not easy sustaining sartorial and salubrious 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. 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: Then it can hardly be a good school. 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. For a limited time only."

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, "within reason" mean?

G: Well, for one thing, you couldn't have a square circle, could you? A wheel is usually circular although it might—even usefully—be square. But it would be impossible 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 bicycle by magic?

G: Yes, of course—in principle. But I'm not really that sort of genie—by preference. Also, large items, such as 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 you are guaranteed a choice—or even that both are possible.

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

G: Of course I can.

[The 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 can do that—and I wish he wouldn't; although I'm grateful for the pocket money.

[To the genie's evident dismay, he quickly takes the coin and puts it deep into his pocket to ensure 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 none the wiser—and it usually ends in tears, anyway.

Y: Hmm. So what about, “2) an unforgettable argument”?

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

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

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

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

G: Maybe. But you won’t forget that argument, will you?

Y: I suppose not.

G: There you are, then. Job done. [Pointing to the lamp.] 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: Urh!

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 shall 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: 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: That's half right. For it is about "deep thoughts", but they are, 1) an end in themselves as real insights into the world, and 2) a guide for the life of a person and the future of humankind. The word 'philosophy' comes from the Greek "philo", meaning 'loving', and "sophia", meaning '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's the other sense?

G: The one that is more precisely called 'stoical': calm in the face of both 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: Oh, 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 of thought is both fascinating and edifying. The alternative is to be blinkered by 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. All ideologies, good or bad, were created by people doing philosophy. 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 critically examining those assumptions that most people take for granted, or don't even notice, or on which there are no settled answers. Once a fairly systematic 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 fundamental assumptions that always must exist.

Y: How is that examination done?

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

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 guarantee that my arguments are logically sound (that is, validly reasoned from true premises), or, for that matter, valid (that is, with truth-preserving inferences), or even with true premises (that is, assumptions that accurately describe the world)—only unforgettable.

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

G: Let's start at the beginning.

Y: Is there a beginning?

G: Oh yes, or so it seems to me. And a rational, or reasonable, 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 an epistemological theory; that is, a theory of knowledge. Mind you, some people might say that logic is the beginning. For how can we clearly argue about anything before we have decided what a proper argument is? But we have touched on logic a few times already, and we can return to it when relevant as we proceed.

Y: I think I know how to know, though. For I have thought about this shedloads of times—garden shedloads, in fact.

G: Oh good, an expert already! Then why don't you state your view so that we can examine it.

Y: Alright. Knowledge is justified true belief.

G: Ha! Common sense.

Y: Is there something wrong with common sense?

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 can't be justified in the sense of being *supported*—or confirmed, or established, or verified, or any such similar term.

Y: Can't knowledge be reasonably or adequately justified by support?

G: It can't even *begin* to be 'justified' in the sense of supported, because all arguments, and explanations, and observations, and even logical inferences themselves, rest on assumptions. Hence, all is within a realm of assumptions, or conjectures, or guesses—even tests and criticisms are.

Y: Is it not reasonable to assume that if I seem to see a tree, then I am justified in thinking that I do see a tree?

G: In one sense it is 'reasonable' to make any assumption. For the 'rule of assumption' (that you may assume anything) is an unrefuted 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.

Y: "To bore mechan…"?

G: [Interrupting.] Exactly! But it might be easier if we start from the other end.

Y: What other end?

G: Theories that are clearly universal.

Y: Such as scientific theories?

G: Yes. 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: Using reason, or thought, alone to deduce the way the world has to be—while sitting in armchairs.

Y: I see. Then shall we sit?

G: Of course. For we need to argue 'chairfully'.

[They pull up the armchairs and sit.]

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

G: Correct. Let us take a classic universal 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's the use of support if a refutation always remains possible?

G: No. I mean to say, how is there any kind of support at all? Even assuming that all the theory-laden 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 logical 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 any such similar term.

Y: Then why can't we still assume 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 assumptions, then why should we opt for the counterexample?

G: Good question. 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 an assumption?

G: Because that apparently simple observation implicitly entails universal theories that similarly cannot be supported by finite theory-laden 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, however well tested they are. If the guesses happen to be true, then the probabilities will be accurate.

Y: But it all rests on guesses 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 doing 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, of course. 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 survive all the conventional criticisms 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, in the sense of 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* support, and matters might change in a moment with the discovery of a refuting criticism or observation. Epistemological *support* is what people almost always mean by 'justification' when referring to knowledge. And there is a danger of equivocating between, or conflating, the two senses. Indeed, that is common even among philosophers.

Y: What about so-called "evidence-*based*" practices of various kinds? Doesn't that mean they are supported by evidence?

G: No, they are really *theory-laden*-evidence-*tested* practices. And testing cannot support, it can only fail to refute.

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

G: Perhaps those make sense insofar as they are only intended to be conjectures about acting in accordance with *justice*, or *morality*, or *prudence* under certain assumed circumstances. As such, they are not about epistemological support. But the danger of conflation remains.

Y: Speaking of justice, aren't alleged law-breakers presumed innocent until *proven* guilty beyond reasonable doubt?

G: What that really involves is that the 'innocent' thesis has not withstood criticism and the 'guilty' thesis has withstood criticism. Both theses have been 'proven' in the sense of 'rigorously tested' rather than in the sense of 'demonstrated to be true or false'. And only the 'guilty' thesis has survived—in the opinion of the jury, at least.

Y: But the main point still sounds crazy. If all theories are only assumptions, then why should I walk down the stairs rather than try to fly from the window like Peter Pan?

G: Because the theory that 'walking down the stairs is fairly safe' has survived testing. And the theory that 'everyone can simply fly like Peter Pan' has been refuted.

Y: Isn't that just another way of saying that some theories are supported?

G: No, because—as we have seen—they cannot be supported. However, we can have a critical preference. For practical purposes, we often prefer theories that appear to have survived criticism or testing.

Y: So not all assumptions are equal, then?

G: There are at least three general categories: some assumptions appear to be falsified; some have passed every test we have come up with so far; and some have not even been tested.

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

G: One thing at a time, please! Even if we grant the assumption that you exist, then it only follows that *something* that is you must exist. But what your nature is still remains to be conjectured. 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 false 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 dialogue.

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 reasonably dismiss most such possibilities with various criticisms that themselves seem, on balance, to withstand criticism. Remember that logical possibility is not the same as real possibility. 'Logical possibility' merely means that something is not a contradiction in terms. But you need to think through the criticisms for yourself.

Y: Then I shall do so. But what about, '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's not the same as having epistemological certainty. You can't have that—or even anything going in that direction.

Y: Are you certain?

G: Yes—but only psychologically and only at 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 logical possibility of such error is not the real likelihood of such error.

Y: But then 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. In fact, we did start there briefly. But then I thought it better to take a detour and "start from the other end" with science, remember?

Y: Oh yes. Why?

G: The philosophy of science involves different arguments, as we have seen. And from a rhetorical viewpoint, while almost everyone takes science seriously, almost no one takes genies seriously. Although there is a great irony here, for the popular view that science can support 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 it easier for people to follow and accept. And so that is one sort of rational order.

Y: I see that it is.

G: Also, 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 may prefer to start with a "malicious genie", as you put it.

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. Otherwise, the more general and the more falsifiable the better. Then we must be as rigorous in our tests and criticisms as possible.

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

G: No, it ought to make us less dogmatic: less confident of our current theories and more ready to listen to other theories.

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

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

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

G: Another reasonable understanding of 'knowledge' is simply being in possession of a true theory. In that sense, we appear to know all sorts of things. Otherwise, it's 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, or imply, that certain kinds of things exist?

G: The general idea that knowledge progresses by guesses and criticisms is relatively open about metaphysics.

Y: What is "metaphysics"?

G: Broadly and briefly, the study and theories of what general sorts of things exist (or that is the central branch of ontology, if restricted to broad categories rather than including any further questions about them).

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 existing things into four worlds, or realms, or domains. 0) Modes: all that is abstract (numbers, patterns, theories, poems, etc.). 1) Matter: all that is physical (subatomic particles, energy, light, gravity, space, so-called 'anti-matter', etc.). 2) Mind: all that is conscious (whether self-conscious or not, including the sensations of non-persons). 3) Memes: all abstractions (or modes) that are recorded in matter (in books, computers, the internet, etc., but also in people's brains).

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 their abstractions, or modes. And they are ridiculously 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. This is an example of philosophical theology, incidentally.

Y: But many people believe in one omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniamorous God, who will ultimately ensure justice: punishment for sin, and reward for virtue.

G: Nobody has ever believed in such a god.

Y: How can you possibly know that?

G: Because the people who say they believe all admit to ‘sinning’, and it would be psychologically impossible to ‘sin’ in the presence of such a god. It wouldn’t even be tempting. It would be like a burglar breaking into a house for something of relatively little value when he could see that a van-load of policemen were watching him—only many times less likely. This is an example of philosophical psychology, incidentally.

Y: But people say that they believe, and they seem to be honest.

G: They are honest. They believe that they believe in God. But it doesn’t follow that they do believe in God—especially when they behave as though they don’t. Someone might also honestly claim to know where he left his car. But it doesn’t follow that he does know where he left his car—especially when he cannot later find it. There is also the compounding confusion caused by equivocating between, or conflating both, ‘belief’ being used in a factual sense (believing that X exists) and a value sense (believing that X is a good thing).

Y: While genies are not believed to exist but they do exist?

G: Duh! Manifestly!

Y: How do I know that you aren’t my hallucination?

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

Y: That’s a good argument.

G: And unforgettable.

Y: Your arguments don’t seem very formal in their structure, though.

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 usually a problem unless there is an implicit error as well.

Y: I see. Then, back to metaphysics.

G: By all means.

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

G: Even *apparent* physical matter is hardly solid matter. Virtually all so-called ‘physical matter’ is mostly empty space, but with some absolutely minuscule particles whizzing about in it. And almost all of space has next to no physical matter in it at all. In that sense, at least, it may be more reasonable to speak of the ‘empty world’ than the ‘material world’.

Y: Yes, that’s 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 physical 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 emergent 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 such that it is still ultimately a part of it but so qualitatively different that it merits a different category.

Y: Do you have another 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—at the extreme, at least—metaphysical physics that we don't yet know how to turn into testable scientific physics.

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

G: To a great extent, but maybe not entirely. This is an example of the philosophy of mind, incidentally.

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 philosophy of mind sometimes calls "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 the same sort of 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 current physics.

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 and can't affect what caused it. Just like the sun and rain can cause a rainbow, but the rainbow has no effect 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 postulated quantum process may also be the way that non-deterministic 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 non-deterministic 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 that argument is merely due to the conflation of consciousness with self-consciousness—a common mistake. It's the self-consciousness of the conscious decision that is delayed. And I conjecture that it is delayed because often 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—which is always good, of course. And there will always be new philosophical problems to discover.

Y: What about the abstractions, or modes, you mentioned? How exactly do they come into all this? And what exactly are they?

G: Is mathematics part of matter?

Y: Maybe it's only an abstraction from matter.

G: I think you are grasping at straws. '2 + 2 = 4' was true before the material universe existed, and it 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: In the sense that anyone can check on them by thinking about them. Their qualities are not a matter of subjective perception or of choice.

Y: But they were invented and defined by our minds. So we can choose to invent and define them differently.

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

Y: I suppose not. Please remind me: what is 'meme' and what is 'mode' here?

G: When an abstraction, or mode, 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 abstractions, or modes.

Y: And do all abstractions that are not yet invented or discovered have this virtual existence?

G: Yes. For instance, ever higher prime numbers exist as abstractions (as my friend Euclid proved), whether or not they will ever be discovered.

Y: So every possible abstraction is in the world of modes?

G: Yes. And every impossible abstraction too: such as square circles.

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

G: That is known as 'nominalism'. But the facts (the way things really are) about mathematics do not depend on our talking about them, do they?

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

G: And that, by contrast, is known as 'realism'. Moreover, if all the true propositions or theories (accurate accounts of the facts) about mathematics are also 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 fundamental ideas continually. As soon as we stop doing that we give up philosophy.

Y: In that case, some things about paintings and poems as abstractions occur to me.

G: What?

Y: First, I don't see how paintings and poems can really be said to be discovered in the way that a fact 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 to fit the problem that we are trying to solve. But I admit that there must be a sense in which a fact 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 sonnet that Shakespeare wrote—if he was the person who really wrote it—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 and infinite world encourages us to conjecture more boldly in that world and to look harder for what such abstractions entail and for criticisms of them. It helps 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 abstraction, or mode, that is given some physical expression. And the real poem is not what is on the page, for instance, but the abstraction that the page merely records and represents. But surely a painting is really 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, of course. 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 appear.

G: And which would you rather *own*?

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

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

Y: What about the incredible skill that is sometimes involved in creating the physical object?

G: That is not art but craft. And craftsmanship has a separate value.

Y: But your theory is not how things are usually understood 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 other musicians, while a painting is made physical by the painter himself only once. But technology can 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 other reasons—like paying a lot for a famous person's old hat. We could even say that the idea of 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 the theory of art that we have just been discussing is within the branch of philosophy known as aesthetics. We could talk more about that if you wish. Such as the various purposes of art and how much of 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: Only anti-intellectuals, who didn't themselves have any opinions that weren't common sense.

Y: Anyway, I think I would rather ask some things about the philosophy of morals and of 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 like taste and personal preferences, 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, is 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 explain, and argue, and criticise, 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' or 'mistaken' will be the same feeling 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 about some practical fact, such as what foods are safe to eat. For then you can eat what you choose and I can eat what I choose.

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

G: With morals we can't be content to allow that because they involve universal categorical prescriptions. We will think that every person ought to behave in a certain way even if they disagree. We will not assist them in behaviour we sincerely believe to be immoral, and we might even feel it just to coerce them 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 mistaken.

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 aggressively interfere with other people's justly acquired property?

Y: Yes.

G: Is it immoral for someone to use aggressive coercion to make 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 like ours.

G: It does not have consent and you don't have a 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 thinking that something is necessary and desirable is not equivalent to consenting to whatever it does. Moreover, consent must be individual.

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

G: Exactly. And real democracy, or 'people-rule', would be majoritarian and unrestricted by any rules.

Y: What do we have instead, then?

G: You have a popularly elected oligarchy: occasional mass votes that create a small ruling group.

Y: Perhaps there is no real consent and no real democracy either. 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 ought 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, and national defence.

G: All of those things have been, or still are to some extent, better provided by the market, or by voluntary associations, or by charity. A little libertarian literature on those issues would soon explain 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 is 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: The state has the motive and the power to grow. This growth increases the numbers of its vested-interest supporters and crowds out alternatives until they are even forgotten. It comes to be common sense that state-control must very often be an improvement on anarchy in increasing welfare and liberty.

Y: That certainly strikes *me* as "common sense".

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

Y: Then please give it some "scrutiny".

G: Certainly. Freely trading individuals and businesses (collectively known as 'the free market') are able to use profit and loss as indicators of relative scarcity in order to guide resources into their most productive uses. To the extent that everything is private property (so that either trade or tort law can deal with unacceptable negative externalities), politics has no way of calculating improvements on what is done by the free market. The state's actions are arbitrary from an economic viewpoint. And so the state reduces productivity, and thereby general welfare, but it also reduces social liberty: 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 compulsory 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. Such compulsory 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 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 goose death, golden-egg production will be going down. Serious poverty only continues to exist because of state interferences with markets.

Y: More conjectural food for critical thought. But what about liberty?

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

Y: It seems to me that if I were to take someone's 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 perverse, 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 social liberty. It has perverse and pernicious implications and so they can be used as criticisms of itself. In that loose sense it is 'paradoxical'.

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

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

Y: So what are the perverse and pernicious implications of zero-sum liberty?

G: I can list three main ones.

Y: Please do.

G: 1) Such liberty cannot be maximised for everyone: it can only be competed over or shared out in some way. Competing over liberty does not sound desirable, but is even equality of such liberty any better? It would require continual political intervention to enforce the equality, and it would undermine economic behaviour. 2) It also implies that any criteria for what types of liberty are allowable—liberty to do this but not liberty to do that—must be something other than liberty. But most people think that a conception of liberty in itself should be some sort of criterion of what is allowable. And 3) this view implies that we have somehow to balance the supposed 'liberty' of a thief, or other aggressor, against that of his victims. The zero-sum conception of social liberty gives us problems rather than solutions. Yet people do sometimes talk of liberty in this way.

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

G: The non-invasive conception of social liberty. It is prudent, productive, and plain.

Y: What is that conception?

G: Non-invasive liberty agrees with the popular view of social liberty as not being invasively constrained, or proactively imposed on, by other people. It has prudent and productive implications, and is also plain.

Y: So what are the prudent and productive implications of non-invasive liberty?

G: I can list three main ones.

Y: Please do.

G: 1) Such liberty can in principle be maximised for everyone: there need be no competition over it when this is the goal. And it is generally thought desirable for everyone, at least to a large degree. 2) Such liberty in itself can be, and generally is, thought of as a criterion of what is allowable. And 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. The non-invasive conception of social liberty gives us solutions rather than problems. This sense of 'liberty' is what libertarians or, more generally, classical liberals usually intend. And it applies insofar as any society is plainly describable as 'liberal'.

Y: Can you elaborate on how is this conception of liberty is explained and applied?

G: Certainly. For the philosophically unsophisticated or confused, a conflation of self-ownership and particular kinds of both private property and deontological rights are asserted to "justify" libertarianism—but without an explicit theory of social liberty. For the philosophically sophisticated and unconfused, everything must be contradistinguished, and clarified, and corrected. This involves five general stages that I can briefly outline.

Y: Please do.

G: 1) The non-normative, pre-propertarian, *abstract* theory of liberty—as people not proactively constraining, or imposing on, each other—is first explained. 2) This is then *applied* factually to derive ultimate control of both one's own body and any first-used resources (and thereafter voluntary transfer) as normally maximising liberty in contingent practice. 3) Practical protection of such ultimate controls entails institutionalising them as self-*ownership* and private *property*. 4) Objective solutions to sundry relevant problems can then also be derived. But 5) it remains an entirely separate matter to go on to defend the *moral* status of such applied liberty. And, of course, at no stage is anything 'justified' in the sense of 'supported beyond assumptions'.

Y: I can see that there is a lot to discuss further in all this political philosophy.

G: Yes, it really requires a separate dialogue; perhaps with two more-appropriate characters.

Y: What *are* you talking about?

G: I'm not entirely sure. It's as though words are being put into my mouth. But then thinking can sometimes be like that. As someone once said, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say."

Y: Anyway, I now have a general question. Are all these arguments you have given me the ones that 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. And 2) because I consider my arguments to be, a) less well known, b) more interesting, c) possibly sound, and d) if sound, quite important.

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

G: Most philosophers end up with common sense on many subjects. And that is philosophical failure. Intellectually, it is better to be interesting even if mistaken.

Y: Why is there so much "philosophical failure"?

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

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

G: I read many of the books and journals.

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, then, 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 sometimes even suppressed, due to state-monopolisation of the university system, consensus-dominated journals, and the rise of political correctness. One heterodox exception is post-modern philosophy.

Y: What is 'post-modern philosophy'?

G: It is mainly pretentious obscurantism and perverse relativism. But it's tolerated just because it's not taken too seriously.

Y: And what is 'political correctness'?

G: In effect, it is the systematic privileging of all people who are—primarily—*not* white, male, heterosexual, or able-bodied; but always on the pretext of being "fair".

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

G: Not really. Many of the greatest philosophers did other things to make a living. One might always become an academic in one of the state-monopolised and predominantly tax-funded university systems.

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

G: Generally, no. Virtually all academics are helping to crowd out more-efficient liberal alternatives to state intervention. It might be honest and honourable if one were genuinely trying to depoliticise the system from within. But academia is such a quagmire of corruption and consensus that the temptation to go native is often overwhelming.

Y: I am far from sure that philosophy would be the right career for me. But I am sure that I ought to look into philosophy 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 type that I really had in mind.

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: How is that possible?

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 between whatever I wish for and an unforgettable argument.

G: No, I said that the wording meant that you couldn'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 can't forget the unforgettable arguments, so how is such a choice possible?

G: You won't *forget* the arguments. I will turn back time and you will find the bicycle but never hear the arguments.

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—and greedy wishes do tend to end badly. Anyway, 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 you "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: I haven't finished yet.

Y: Oh dear!

G: Don't worry. I only really 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. Although first I have another question.

G: Go ahead.

Y: Earlier, you said that your arrival 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 appreciate 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: Who—or what?—was she?

G: Her name was Sophia. She was a muse. The muse of wisdom.

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 beautiful. 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 limitations. 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 Sophia 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 assumed that would be so. But it seems to be the right thing to do. Or would 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, although I'm not sure about the physics of it, anything that involves backwards time-travel is probably inherently paradoxical:

simply because then some events both did and did not occur. And yet I seem to be able to produce it when requested.

Y: Hang on a minute! What will happen to me as her descendant?

G: Well, unbeknownst to me at the time, she was with child by me before my incarceration. And you are descended that way.

Y: So you were already also my ancestor and there is no problem.

G: There is a possible problem: even the smallest change in an original condition would almost always change almost everything eventually, and not just you, due to the compounding differences known as the "butterfly effect". Nevertheless, on past experience, it seems that I can only choose one of the few versions that somehow does not have that effect. Perhaps that's because only paradox-free time travel is possible.

Y: That's probably alright then. So 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'.

[The youth 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: Er, what was I just saying? Ah yes, "a cerebral smoke".

[He takes out a small cigar from a square tin and puts it in his mouth then pats his clothes and looks around for matches. He spies something.]

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

[He goes over to the corner of the shed and picks up an old book. He inspects it.]

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

[He opens the cover and reads.]

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

[He turns the pages.]

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

[He sits and starts to read.]

[The light goes out.]