

The Big Picture

I am reasonably sure that all of us have a friend or acquaintance who continuously baffles us. They choose the most profitable investments, victorious horses at the racetrack, the correct times to call the bluffs of poker playing opponents, and more often than most, winning lottery numbers. They are usually closed mouthed about themselves and thus endowed with an aura of mystery. We don't know where they come from, anything about their background or their family, or indeed if they have one.

I have had such an acquaintance from our early teens. His name was a most improbable Apollo Tidey. We met in High School and over the years we maintained a familiarity that was, at best, easy going and at worst, distant. There was never any warmth between us and as I later learnt there never was between Apollo and his other acquaintances. We competed against each other at an assortment of games, coupled with frivolous banter where we each attempted to get the better of the other. I usually lost. On the few occasions when I did get the better of Apollo, I always had the feeling that it was deliberate on his part.

As stated, I never had learnt anything personal about him. This all changed after I had a most astonishing conversation with him a couple of weeks ago. I still do not know what to make of it so that any feedback from you, dear reader, would be most appreciated.

I was sitting on a park bench, admiring the beautiful scenery when this familiar looking gentleman sat down beside me. Since I had not seen Apollo for about seven years, I didn't recognize him immediately. I did a double take when he addressed me.

"Albert, it seems that you have forgotten an old friend."

I recognized Apollo's voice instantly. It had not lost any of its uniqueness. It was a voice replete with deep timbre and a certain resonating quality. His physical appearance had hardly changed. The years had dealt well with him. He had retained his youthful good looks to an astonishing degree. It didn't appear as if he had aged at all from the time he was in his early twenties. I guess I had not immediately recognized him because I would have anticipated him aging somewhat and because he was the last person I expected to run into. I found it most surprising that he was here, in a city that my wife and I had recently come to without informing any of our friends and acquaintances. It was truly a snap decision, or so we thought, to come here.

"What brings you here?" I asked with a certain degree of alacrity.

"I am quite pleased at how happy you are to see me," he replied somewhat sardonically.

"Why should I be? The last time we got together you took me for quite a bundle. It nearly caused my wife to leave me. I had to promise her that I would never get involved in any wagering or game playing with you again. By the way, how did you find us?"

Chuckling, Apollo responded. "In answer to your question, you forget that it was I who planted the idea that you should move to another locale and even suggested a few to you. Since you were always very easy to influence, I assumed that you would choose one of my recommended options and that you would conveniently forget their source. You invariably had a poor opinion of yourself and as such were the perfect pigeon, if I

can use the vernacular. In any case, I was correct. It hardly required any effort to find you. Actually it required no effort. I will explain shortly.

Also I can assure you that you should have no fear about the future of your marriage. I have no intention of enticing you into any sort of game. Your wife will remain your wife unless you and you alone do something to alter that blissful state of affairs often optimistically labeled a "happy marriage". Having never entered that institution you are on your own as to how you should remain in your current marital status or for that matter, change it, maybe for the better. I take that all back. I forgot how vulnerable you are to my suggestions. You might do something you will regret."

"Listen, my so called friend, something you never really were," I retorted. "I neither need nor want anything from you. All our dealings have never been of any benefit to me. On the contrary, they nearly always caused me a great deal of grief and anxiety. Now I guess, you have sought me out for a reason. Kindly tell me what it is and then go on your way. I am willing to listen but not willing to lend you any type of helping hand, if that is what you want or need. Being who and what you are, you would probably bite it off."

For the first time that I could recall, Apollo evinced a note of hesitancy and indecision. He looked at me somewhat quizzically. After, what appeared to be an eternity but was actually a few seconds he slowly and very carefully answered.

"Without realizing it, you have hit the nail right on the head. Before proceeding further, I must confess that I do not understand why I have sought you out and what I am doing here. All I know is that I have an overwhelming urge, one I cannot nullify, to tell you things that I have never told anyone. Indeed, even this somewhat maudlin confession goes against everything I always believed about myself. I am further mortified by the fact that it is to you I am addressing this disclosure, you who I have always felt to be mediocre, someone I could always best rather too easily. This compulsion is completely mystifying. Perhaps it is because you have always had an interest in science, metaphysics and philosophy and seemed to have a better grasp of these questions than all of your contemporaries."

"Thanks a lot for the compliment you just paid me," I retorted. "I guess one takes one's insults from where they come. An insult directed at anyone should often be considered a compliment when one considers the source and in your case all insults are really compliments, and compliments, insults. In any case, let's get this painful confrontation over with. What is it that you want to disclose?"

"Touché," Apollo replied. Again, most surprisingly, he continued hesitantly. "I know that what I am about to relate, you will not believe. How you react is really no concern of mine. I just know that I have to confide in you.

I am very well aware that over the years that we have been acquainted, you have always wondered about me, that is, who I am, where I come from, how do I earn a living, why is it that I nearly always succeeded in anything I attempted, who my kin were, and so on. Well, you are about to have your curiosity satisfied, however please do not interrupt me and I suggest that you suspend disbelief during my exposition. When I am through, I will answer any questions you may have.

I know there were times when you thought that I was a figment of your imagination. The truth is that you are a figment of mine. Not only you but your total universe and the existence of everything you either perceive or imagine or your knowledge thereof does not really exist or it exists as a tableau, a work of art painted by a master painter or perhaps a cartoonist. I do not, nor have I ever existed within the limits of your existence and in particular those of time. I am timeless and eternal. I do not know from whence I come or if I came from anywhere. As far as I can fathom, I have always existed as an entity that has no material, or energy character but rather only as thought. As such I have the power to create in my mind anything and that which I so create exists only in my mind.

Thus, the human race, the planet with all its fauna and flora, all your supposed knowledge and the remainder of the universe including empty space, black holes, and all, are each part of the tableau I created. In other words nothing you perceive or think you know is real. The only thing real is me in the form of thought.

I think I can anticipate two questions. The first is why did I bother. The answer is that it was a sort of thought experiment. I guess that I was bored. I started simply enough with matter, energy, space and most importantly time, and imbued them with certain characteristics that you are familiar with. Then I created living things within the confines of these traits. All the laws of science, including evolutionary theory, all religions, the social sciences and humanities, philosophy, all superstitions, all the arts, so called free will and any and all other perceptions are nothing more than figments of my imagination. While time is not a factor in my existence, the panorama was not created instantaneously. I embellished by implanting new scientific discoveries each being hailed as a major breakthrough and each enabling new and innovative changes to occur. It was all great fun.

The second question, I expect, is why did I materialise as a human being. Again, I considered it a thought experiment. After all, I had planted the idea of "God" in a variety of forms and ways. In one religion, I created quite a theatrical drama about his materialisation as a human being, with all sorts of miraculous powers via a virgin birth and his ultimate demise at the hands of humans. In another his role as creator and the source of 'law' to govern human behaviour as he spelt it out to a representative of his so called 'chosen people'. In that same body of belief was perhaps the most idiotic notion of all which I sardonically obliged the believers to accept and that was the idea that God had created humans in his image, - as if God had an image and a sex. In still another was the notion that 'God' is everything and everywhere. At least that pantheistic idea was the closest to the truth but was recognised by only a small cadre of enlightened personages in a backward part of the world. The contrast between the two worlds, the so called "enlightened versus the "primitive" provided me with much mirth.

Thus for all of these reasons I felt it would be interesting to interact with humans. Since I could not relate mutually with all, I decided to be selective. Despite the fact that it was I who had endowed you with all your attributes I chose you because of your scientific background, your gullibility, your sense of humour, and your general intelligence. You must understand that I did not create every individual separately. Instead I contrived a statistical mock-up of humans of varying qualities. I actually had to seek you and favoured others out. Fortunately it was not difficult.

Here we are. I still cannot understand why I have had this irrepressible urge to confide in you. Now that I have, I feel no better for it.”

For the next ten minutes, I silently mulled over Apollo’s unbelievable diatribe while he remained silent. Equating himself with the almighty was the ultimate in arrogance. I was tempted to simply walk away but my disdain for him prevented this. For once there was an opportunity to get the better of Apollo in a most devastating fashion. I could not resist. I proceeded and as you will see, with mixed results.

“Apollo, I gather you are waiting for a reaction in the form of a commentary. Well, here it is. I do not know what to make of your account but for the moment I am willing to accept it as the gospel (pardon the pun) truth. Let us examine it closely.

First you stated that myself, my universe, all my knowledge and perceptions are part of an imaginary tableau that you painted and include all the contradictions that all unique systems in our universe contain. You neglected to mention that you are also responsible for murder, avarice, genocide, vicious exploitation of the environment and of humanity by humanity and a host of other horrible aspects to existence that underscore these incongruities.”

Apollo then beamingly interjected. “Of course I am. You should realise that in my mind there is no thing such as good and evil. They are instincts that I decided to imbue you with to make life on earth more interesting. I certainly succeeded. It is from them that all the misdeeds you just described originate.”

“Please do not interrupt me again. I didn’t during your confession,” I retorted. I continued.

“I am sure that you are familiar with Godel’s theorem which states that the contradictions within any coherent system cannot be resolved from within it. As long as you were outside the system you could deal with them. By recounting to me your bizarre existence, you are now part of that system you created and are subject to all its foibles and constraints. I am willing to wager that you are now feeling the passage of time in a manner similar to the way all the rest of us do. In other words, you are no longer the master painter you claimed to be. However, If your history is correct, than someone or something else must have replaced you. We, and that includes you, are now the figments of someone else’s imagination and are being manipulated the same way you, so recently, did. That, of course, includes this conversation and that someone may in fact be me. Now if what I just supposed has a grain of truth, that someone will also be manipulated by someone or something else and that someone or something will also be controlled and so on and so on ad infinitum. I know that you must find it disconcerting to realise that, probably, throughout your existence you have been the object of some other power, never realising nor it, nor being able to face an unpalatable truth.

To buttress my argument further, let me remind you that you stated earlier that you thought you could anticipate two questions from me. If you are as omnipotent as you claim you would not have had to anticipate them but you would have known with absolute certainty ahead of time what they would be, since you would have planted them in my mind. Further, is it not obvious that your unwanted impulse to confide in me is further proof that you are now being handled by an unknown force.”

At this point Apollo turned chalk white as he grasped the significance of what he had just heard. His whole raison d'être had just been turned upside down. I pressed on to apply the coup de grace.

"Apollo, do you know where you are right now?", I asked gently.

He looked at me quizzically and replied. "Why we are sitting here on a park bench."

"But where is this park bench exactly located?," I pursued.

"In this park," he indicated with some uncertainty.

"But, where is this park exactly?," I persisted.

"I do not know," was his faltering reply.

Gleefully, I persisted with a straight face.

"This bench and this park are on the grounds of the local insane asylum. I suspect that we are both inmates and are being kept here because we suffer from delusions of grandeur. You are "God" and I am "Albert Einstein".

Apollo's reaction was quite unexpected. He started to laugh. Despite my attempts to stop him and to query him as to the cause of his mirth, he continued chuckling for a few minutes. Then he explained.

"Albert, don't you see. This insane asylum is part of a larger one, that in turn is part of a larger one and so on and so on, ad infinitum. Thus, existence is nothing more than a regressive or progressive infinite series of discrete stages of madness."

They say laughter is contagious. I am still giggling as I am being led away. It seems that once again, Apollo bested me.

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