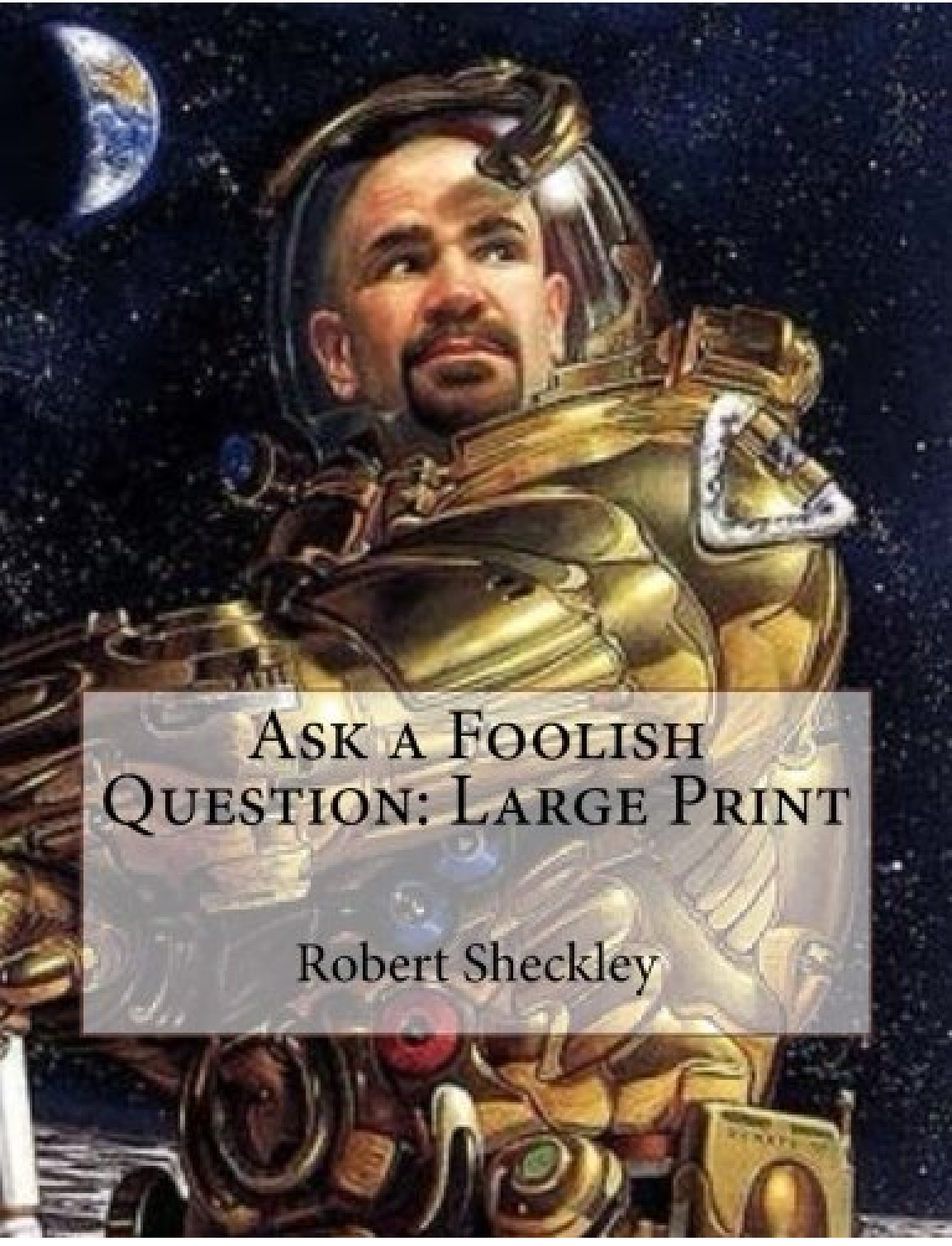


Ask a Foolish Question: Large Print

Robert Sheckley

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ASK A FOOLISH QUESTION ***

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It's well established now that the way you put a question often determines not only the answer you'll get, but the type of answer possible. So ... a mechanical answerer, geared to produce the ultimate revelations in reference to anything you want to know, might have unsuspected limitations.

Ask A Foolish Question

by ROBERT SHECKLEY



Answerer was built to last as long as was necessary—which was quite long, as some races judge time, and not long at all, according to others. But to Answerer, it was just long enough.

As to size, Answerer was large to some and small to others. He could be viewed as complex, although some believed that he was really very simple.

Answerer knew that he was as he should be. Above and beyond all else, he was The Answerer. He Knew.

Of the race that built him, the less said the better. They also Knew, and never said whether they found the knowledge pleasant.

They built Answerer as a service to less-sophisticated races, and departed in a unique manner. Where they went only Answerer knows.

Because Answerer knows everything.

Upon his planet, circling his sun, Answerer sat. Duration continued, long, as some judge duration, short as others judge it. But as it should be, to Answerer.

Within him were the Answers. He knew the nature of things, and why things are as they are, and what they are, and what it all means.

Answerer could answer anything, provided it was a legitimate question. And he wanted to! He was eager to!

How else should an Answerer be?

What else should an Answerer do?

So he waited for creatures to come and ask.

"How do you feel, sir?" Morran asked, floating gently over to the old man.

"Better," Lingman said, trying to smile. No-weight was a vast relief. Even though Morran had expended an enormous amount of fuel, getting into space under minimum acceleration, Lingman's feeble heart

hadn't liked it. Lingman's heart had balked and sulked, pounded angrily against the brittle rib-case, hesitated and sped up. It seemed for a time as though Lingman's heart was going to stop, out of sheer pique.

But no-weight was a vast relief, and the feeble heart was going again.

Morran had no such problems. His strong body was built for strain and stress. He wouldn't experience them on this trip, not if he expected old Lingman to live.

"I'm going to live," Lingman muttered, in answer to the unspoken question. "Long enough to find out." Morran touched the controls, and the ship slipped into sub-space like an eel into oil.

"We'll find out," Morran murmured. He helped the old man unstrap himself. "We're going to find the Answerer!"

Lingman nodded at his young partner. They had been reassuring themselves for years. Originally it had been Lingman's project. Then Morran, graduating from Cal Tech, had joined him. Together they had traced the rumors across the solar system. The legends of an ancient humanoid race who had known the answer to all things, and who had built Answerer and departed.

"Think of it," Morran said. "The answer to everything!" A physicist, Morran had many questions to ask Answerer. The expanding universe; the binding force of atomic nuclei; novae and supernovae; planetary formation; red shift, relativity and a thousand others.

"Yes," Lingman said. He pulled himself to the vision plate and looked out on the bleak prairie of the illusory sub-space. He was a biologist and an old man. He had two questions.

What is life?

What is death?

After a particularly-long period of hunting purple, Lek and his friends gathered to talk. Purple always ran thin in the neighborhood of multiple-cluster stars—why, no one knew—so talk was definitely in order.

"Do you know," Lek said, "I think I'll hunt up this Answerer." Lek spoke the Ollgrat language now, the language of imminent decision.

"Why?" Ilm asked him, in the Hvest tongue of light banter. "Why do you want to know things? Isn't the job of gathering purple enough for you?"

"No," Lek said, still speaking the language of imminent decision. "It is not." The great job of Lek and his kind was the gathering of purple. They found purple imbedded in many parts of the fabric of space, minute quantities of it. Slowly, they were building a huge mound of it. What the mound was for, no one knew.

"I suppose you'll ask him what purple is?" Ilm asked, pushing a star out of his way and lying down.

"I will," Lek said. "We have continued in ignorance

too long. We must know the true nature of purple, and its meaning in the scheme of things. We must know why it governs our lives." For this speech Lek switched to Ilgret, the language of incipient-knowledge.

Ilm and the others didn't try to argue, even in the tongue of arguments. They knew that the knowledge was important. Ever since the dawn of time, Lek, Ilm and the others had gathered purple. Now it was time to know the ultimate answers to the universe—what purple was, and what the mound was for.

And of course, there was the Answerer to tell them. Everyone had heard of the Answerer, built by a race not unlike themselves, now long departed.

"Will you ask him anything else?" Ilm asked Lek.

"I don't know," Lek said. "Perhaps I'll ask about the stars. There's really nothing else important." Since Lek and his brothers had lived since the dawn of time, they didn't consider death. And since their numbers were always the same, they didn't consider the question of life.

But purple? And the mound?

"I go!" Lek shouted, in the vernacular of decision-to-fact.

"Good fortune!" his brothers shouted back, in the jargon of greatest-friendship.

Lek strode off, leaping from star to star.

Alone on his little planet, Answerer sat, waiting for the Questioners. Occasionally he mumbled the

answers to himself. This was his privilege. He Knew.

But he waited, and the time was neither too long nor too short, for any of the creatures of space to come and ask.

There were eighteen of them, gathered in one place.

"I invoke the rule of eighteen," cried one. And another appeared, who had never before been, born by the rule of eighteen.

"We must go to the Answerer," one cried. "Our lives are governed by the rule of eighteen. Where there are eighteen, there will be nineteen. Why is this so?"

No one could answer.

"Where am I?" asked the newborn nineteenth. One took him aside for instruction.

That left seventeen. A stable number.

"And we must find out," cried another, "Why all places are different, although there is no distance."

That was the problem. One is here. Then one is there. Just like that, no movement, no reason. And yet, without moving, one is in another place.

"The stars are cold," one cried.

"Why?"

"We must go to the Answerer."

For they had heard the legends, knew the tales. "Once there was a race, a good deal like us, and they Knew—and they told Answerer. Then they departed to where there is no place, but much distance."

"How do we get there?" the newborn nineteenth cried, filled now with knowledge.

"We go." And eighteen of them vanished. One was left. Moodily he stared at the tremendous spread of an icy star, then he too vanished.

"Those old legends are true," Morran gasped. "There it is."

They had come out of sub-space at the place the legends told of, and before them was a star unlike any other star. Morran invented a classification for it, but it didn't matter. There was no other like it.

Swinging around the star was a planet, and this too was unlike any other planet. Morran invented reasons, but they didn't matter. This planet was the only one.

"Strap yourself in, sir," Morran said. "I'll land as gently as I can."

Lek came to Answerer, striding swiftly from star to star. He lifted Answerer in his hand and looked at him.

"So you are Answerer," he said.

"Yes," Answerer said.

"Then tell me," Lek said, settling himself comfortably

in a gap between the stars, "Tell me what I am."

"A partiality," Answerer said. "An indication."

"Come now," Lek muttered, his pride hurt. "You can do better than that. Now then. The purpose of my kind is to gather purple, and to build a mound of it. Can you tell me the real meaning of this?"

"Your question is without meaning," Answerer said. He knew what purple actually was, and what the mound was for. But the explanation was concealed in a greater explanation. Without this, Lek's question was inexplicable, and Lek had failed to ask the real question.

Lek asked other questions, and Answerer was unable to answer them. Lek viewed things through his specialized eyes, extracted a part of the truth and refused to see more. How to tell a blind man the sensation of green?

Answerer didn't try. He wasn't supposed to.

Finally, Lek emitted a scornful laugh. One of his little stepping-stones flared at the sound, then faded back to its usual intensity.

Lek departed, striding swiftly across the stars.

Answerer knew. But he had to be asked the proper questions first. He pondered this limitation, gazing at the stars which were neither large nor small, but exactly the right size.

The proper questions. The race which built Answerer should have taken that into account, Answerer thought. They should have made some allowance for

semantic nonsense, allowed him to attempt an unravelling.

Answerer contented himself with muttering the answers to himself.

Eighteen creatures came to Answerer, neither walking nor flying, but simply appearing. Shivering in the cold glare of the stars, they gazed up at the massiveness of Answerer.

"If there is no distance," one asked, "Then how can things be in other places?"

Answerer knew what distance was, and what places were. But he couldn't answer the question. There was distance, but not as these creatures saw it. And there were places, but in a different fashion from that which the creatures expected.

"Rephrase the question," Answerer said hopefully.

"Why are we short here," one asked, "And long over there? Why are we fat over there, and short here? Why are the stars cold?"

Answerer knew all things. He knew why stars were cold, but he couldn't explain it in terms of stars or coldness.

"Why," another asked, "Is there a rule of eighteen? Why, when eighteen gather, is another produced?"

But of course the answer was part of another, greater

question, which hadn't been asked.

Another was produced by the rule of eighteen, and the nineteen creatures vanished.

Answerer mumbled the right questions to himself, and answered them.

"We made it," Morran said. "Well, well." He patted Lingman on the shoulder—lightly, because Lingman might fall apart.

The old biologist was tired. His face was sunken, yellow, lined. Already the mark of the skull was showing in his prominent yellow teeth, his small, flat nose, his exposed cheekbones. The matrix was showing through.

"Let's get on," Lingman said. He didn't want to waste any time. He didn't have any time to waste.

Helmeted, they walked along the little path.

"Not so fast," Lingman murmured.

"Right," Morran said. They walked together, along the dark path of the planet that was different from all other planets, soaring alone around a sun different from all other suns.

"Up here," Morran said. The legends were explicit. A path, leading to stone steps. Stone steps to a courtyard. And then—the Answerer!

To them, Answerer looked like a white screen set in a wall. To their eyes, Answerer was very simple.

Lingman clasped his shaking hands together. This was the culmination of a lifetime's work, financing, arguing, ferreting bits of legend, ending here, now.

"Remember," he said to Morran, "We will be shocked. The truth will be like nothing we have imagined."

"I'm ready," Morran said, his eyes rapturous.

"Very well. Answerer," Lingman said, in his thin little voice, "What is life?"

A voice spoke in their heads. "The question has no meaning. By 'life,' the Questioner is referring to a partial phenomenon, inexplicable except in terms of its whole."

"Of what is life a part?" Lingman asked.

"This question, in its present form, admits of no answer. Questioner is still considering 'life,' from his personal, limited bias."

"Answer it in your own terms, then," Morran said.

"The Answerer can only answer questions." Answerer thought again of the sad limitation imposed by his builders.

Silence.

"Is the universe expanding?" Morran asked confidently.

"'Expansion' is a term inapplicable to the situation. Universe, as the Questioner views it, is an illusory concept."

"Can you tell us *anything*?" Morran asked.

"I can answer any valid question concerning the

nature of things."

The two men looked at each other.

"I think I know what he means," Lingman said sadly. "Our basic assumptions are wrong. All of them."

"They can't be," Morran said. "Physics, biology—"

"Partial truths," Lingman said, with a great weariness in his voice. "At least we've determined that much. We've found out that our inferences concerning observed phenomena are wrong."

"But the rule of the simplest hypothesis—"

"It's only a theory," Lingman said.

"But life—he certainly could answer what life is?"

"Look at it this way," Lingman said. "Suppose you were to ask, 'Why was I born under the constellation Scorpio, in conjunction with Saturn?' I would be unable to answer your question *in terms of the zodiac*, because the zodiac has nothing to do with it."

"I see," Morran said slowly. "He can't answer questions in terms of our assumptions."

"That seems to be the case. And he can't alter our assumptions. He is limited to valid questions—which imply, it would seem, a knowledge we just don't have."

"We can't even ask a valid question?" Morran asked.

"I don't believe that. We must know some basics." He turned to Answerer. "What is death?"

"I cannot explain an anthropomorphism."

"Death an anthropomorphism!" Morran said, and Lingman turned quickly. "Now we're getting somewhere!"

"Are anthropomorphisms unreal?" he asked.

"Anthropomorphisms may be classified, tentatively, as, A, false truths, or B, partial truths in terms of a partial situation."

"Which is applicable here?"

"Both."

That was the closest they got. Morran was unable to draw any more from Answerer. For hours the two men tried, but truth was slipping farther and farther away.

"It's maddening," Morran said, after a while. "This thing has the answer to the whole universe, and he can't tell us unless we ask the right question. But how are we supposed to know the right question?"

Lingman sat down on the ground, leaning against a stone wall. He closed his eyes.

"Savages, that's what we are," Morran said, pacing up and down in front of Answerer. "Imagine a bushman walking up to a physicist and asking him why he can't shoot his arrow into the sun. The scientist can explain it only in his own terms. What would happen?"

"The scientist wouldn't even attempt it," Lingman

said, in a dim voice; "he would know the limitations of the questioner."

"It's fine," Morran said angrily. "How do you explain the earth's rotation to a bushman? Or better, how do you explain relativity to him—maintaining scientific rigor in your explanation at all times, of course."

Lingman, eyes closed, didn't answer.

"We're bushmen. But the gap is much greater here. Worm and super-man, perhaps. The worm desires to know the nature of dirt, and why there's so much of it. Oh, well."

"Shall we go, sir?" Morran asked. Lingman's eyes remained closed. His taloned fingers were clenched, his cheeks sunk further in. The skull was emerging.

"Sir! Sir!"

And Answerer knew that that was not the answer.



lone on his planet, which is neither large nor small, but exactly the right size, Answerer waits. He cannot help the people who come to him, for even Answerer has restrictions.

He can answer only valid questions.

Universe? Life? Death? Purple? Eighteen?

Partial truths, half-truths, little bits of the great question.

But Answerer, alone, mumbles the questions to himself, the true questions, which no one can understand.

How could they understand the true answers?

The questions will never be asked, and Answerer remembers something his builders knew and forgot.

In order to ask a question you must already know most of the answer.



*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ASK A FOOLISH QUESTION ***

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