

Interview with a God

Metaphysics is a dark ocean without shores or lighthouse, strewn with many a philosophic wreck. —Immanuel Kant

This story contains 1257 words (excluding footnotes). Artificial intelligence was not used in making this story.

The interviewer in the studio got his signal from his producer and began, “Good morning, listeners! We are fortunate to have an immortal god as our guest today, an actual member of the pantheon. Welcome, your grace, or what do you prefer to be called?”

The god was sitting in the interviewee’s chair. He leaned forward and said, “My name isn’t commonly known, as I am one of many minor deities, and you probably wouldn’t be able to pronounce it anyway, so ‘your grace’ or ‘highness’ are satisfactory.”

“So, are you really immortal, your grace? You look pretty much like a normal human.”

“Yes, I cannot die, and I have super powers.” The god suddenly grew to superhuman size, stood up, about three meters tall, nearly bumping his head on the ceiling. Then he returned to normal size and sat back down in the interviewee’s chair.

The interviewer said, “That was quite a demonstration. He just expanded in size and returned to normal, right here in the studio. He is wearing a white iridescent tunic, and it grew and shrank with him. I guess you really are a god. That settles that, then. What’s it like being immortal? And how old are you anyway?”

“Being immortal is just like living, but you don’t worry about dying. I’m also invulnerable and have eternal youth, like all the gods. My age is indeterminate. I am not as old as the oldest gods. Some of them existed before the universe was created. I am one of the newer, minor gods.”

The interviewer took a sip from his cup of coffee. “Would you like a cup of coffee? I can have my producer get you one.”

“That is nice of you to offer, but we gods drink nectar, and sometimes wine.”

“And eat ambrosia. Is that right?”

“That is correct, and sometimes meat. I see you are conversant with classical theology.”¹

“With your super powers, you could help many people if you wanted to, could you not?”

¹ In the epic poem, Athena fed ambrosia to Odysseus to invigorate him before he confronted the interlopers.

“Yes, of course, but most of us gods have learned from hard experience not to get involved with mortal affairs. Aphrodite ‘helped’ the Trojans, and that didn’t turn out so well for them, did it?”

“You’re right about that, your grace. Hector, Paris, Priam, and all their women, every Trojan, were either killed or sold into slavery.”

“After that fiasco, most of us have adopted a policy of non-interference.”

“That’s good to hear, but I guess it means you can’t do small favors either.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Perhaps satisfying curiosity, or something like that.”

“Isn’t that what I’m doing right now with this interview?”

“Yes, you are. What about time travel?”

“What about it?”

“Can you travel in time?”

“Our super-computational abilities allow us to infer past events and to make reliable predictions about the future, but actual ‘travel’ in time is impossible, even for gods.”

“I see.” The interviewer sat back and thought for a few seconds of dead air. Then he said, “Perhaps you can help with a difficult current scientific and philosophical problem.”

“Perhaps. What problem did you have in mind?”

“I was thinking of the problem of consciousness. There was a recent article in *Scientific American* magazine about this. It consists of two problems, actually, one called easy and one called hard.”

“Yes, I know to what you are referring. The so-called easy problem asks *what* consciousness is and *how* it is generated. The hard problem is *why*. Because we can imagine beings with behavior but no internal experience,² we ask, ‘why should it be that there is *something that it is like* to be alive.’ This is an important problem because conscious experience is the only way in which we can *know* anything. There would be no philosophy without it.”

The interviewer said, “That is what I had in mind. It seems there are actually three problem, then, two easy ones, what and how, and the hard one, why.”

His grace said, “I can answer the hard one for you, and then the easy ones will become the hard problems.”

² A future sophisticated robot could be an example of a so-called philosophical zombie.

The interviewer said, “That would be wonderful if you did that for our listeners.”

“We all have intimations of *what* consciousness is because we all experience the qualia that comprise it. Here’s a hint: consciousness is a formless substance. Our minds give our thoughts and feelings form. And here’s a hint on the *how* problem: it’s in the synapses. Neuroscientists may be working on the what and how problems for a long time.”

“So, the firings of the waking brain’s synapses somehow comprise consciousness? Perhaps utilizing quantum entanglement?”

“That is all I can say on those problems, for now.”

“What about the hard problem of why?”

“Here’s why animals have consciousness. First, observe that no experience enters into memory without passing through consciousness first. No memories are formed from the unconscious mental processes which form the vast preponderance of the mind.”

“All right.”

“Second, consider the evolution of animals. There was an explosion of animal types back in the Cambrian Period about half a billion years ago.³ That was due to nature’s invention of consciousness that enabled memory. Creatures that could form memories had a behavioral-computational advantage over simpler types. A predator-prey arms race was the result. Body and brain types diversified. Animals that could remember dominated the life game in both offense and defense. Consciousness was necessary for the formation of memories in animal brains.”

“Involving the hippocampus in human brains?”

His grace merely said, “Yes.”

“That seems to make sense, as a Turing Machine requires a tape memory, and human brains are equivalent to Turing Machines. That is, people can compute anything that can be computed.”

“Correct. Animals with memory would be enabled to reason or at least perform attack and defense as needed.”

“Well, listeners, you heard it here first. Our god guest has answered an important philosophical question.”

“I’m glad to be able to help.”

“We are out of time now and must bid farewell to our guest.”

³ Named for a province in Wales where the fossil shales were found, the Cambrian marked a period of explosive diversification of animal life and is the first geological period of the Paleozoic Era of the Phanerozoic Eon.

“Farewell!” said the god. And with that he vanished as if he had never been there.

Later, at lunch at a small bistro down the street from the station, the interviewer and producer were talking about the morning’s show. “So let me get this straight.” said the producer. “An electronic computer does not require consciousness to form memories, but an animal brain does?”

The interviewer said, “That’s what the god implied. It seems obvious to me that a set of relays and switches, whether in mechanical or electronic form ought not to have inner experience. What else could consciousness be for if not for knowing and remembering in animal brains?”

“I guess so,” said the producer, “but that would mean that even low animals like worms have consciousness.”

“Have you ever been fishing with live worms? They struggle mightily to avoid the point of the hook, and when you pierce them, they seem to just give up the struggle. You know they don’t like it and can feel the pain. Without consciousness, there is no pain.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. On the brighter side, consciousness allows us to experience pleasure. Would life be worthwhile if we didn’t have pleasures or know we even existed?”

The two finished their lunch and walked back to the station together.