



The Impossible Problem

By Steve Couch

Characters:

Hugh Jego: a television presenter

Molly Kewell: a research scientist

Wanda Vaguely: a philosopher

[The three actors are sitting on chairs, with Hugh slightly to one side and the others angled towards him.]

If possible, start the sketch with some suitable theme music for the programme. Play a few seconds then fade out. Not having the music won't make much difference to the beginning of the sketch, but playing the music again will make the ad lib to fade out at the end easier to accomplish.]

Hugh: Hello, and welcome to another edition of The Impossible Problem, the television show where we consider questions that have confused and confounded great thinkers for generations, and try to find convincing answers... in five minutes. I'm your host, Hugh Jego. With me today are Professor of molecular physics at New College University, Molly Kewell.

Molly: Hello.

Hugh: and Thinker-in-residence at the Ivory Towers philosophical institute, Wanda Vaguely.

Wanda: Good morning.

Hugh: Today we are turning our attention to that perennial query, what happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable object. Molly, would you like to start us off on this one.

Molly: Well Hugh, clearly the question itself is a logical impossibility. No object can be said to be unmovable.

Hugh: You haven't met my agent.

Molly: There is no such thing as an immovable object; the best we can say is that an object has yet to encounter sufficient force to make it move.

Wanda: That's exactly the kind of narrow-minded approach that we've come to expect from the scientific community. Of course there can be such a thing as an immovable object, AND an irresistible force. We only have to think of the platonic ideal of force – not just a strong force, but the essence of force, if you will. Conversely, the essence of irresistibility. If we can conceive them, then in a sense – a very real sense although not, of course, a sense that corresponds directly to real life – they can be said to exist.

Hugh: I'm not sure that I follow you, Wanda.

Wanda: We can imagine the concept of force – we've all seen it. For example, if I punch you, my fist pushes your fat, wobbly face away and sends you sprawling to the floor, writhing in the dirt and begging for mercy.

Hugh: Ah, you have met my agent!

Wanda: We know what force is, so we can imagine its fullest expression. Take the absolute essence, the essential forciness of force and extrapolate out to the maximum potential of the concept. That force exists – philosophically, if not physically – and we can then create thought experiments to validate our theories of its ability to move the unmovable.

Molly: But that's ridiculous. I thought this was going to be a reasoned scientific debate, not some spurious talking shop for half-baked woolly theorising with no relevance to anything that anyone would recognise as the real world.

Hugh: Have you ever seen this show before?

Molly: If a so-called irresistible force encountered a so-called immovable object, one of them – at least – would be exposed as a fraud. If the object moved, it wouldn't be immovable. If it didn't, then the force has been resisted. And even then, it's entirely possible that a greater force will come along one day to defeat the winner. The best you can say is that something has been unmovable or irresistible up to now. There is no platonic ideal of forciness. That's just the kind of ludicrous waffle that some people – yeah, I'm looking at you Wanda – have invented to justify their large academic salaries and to sell misleading books full of slack-minded gobbledegook to further addle the brains of the unthinking masses, pandering to their desperate desire to think of themselves as something other than the half-witted dullards they must be to lap up the words of a charlatan like Wanda. No offence.

Hugh: Strong words. Wanda, would you like to come back to that.

Wanda: *[shakes head pityingly]* Oh Hugh, it's just not worth it. Some people can't see past the shadows of the so-called real world. They are blind to philosophy and the mysteries of life. If it can't be pinned down and labelled, they can't conceive of it. I pity you, Molly. I really do.

Hugh: So there we have it: The immovable force versus the irresistible object – I'm calling this one a score draw. Join us again next week when our guests will be Dr Rory Motion and Professor Edna Bucket, who will be trying to unravel which came first, the chicken or the egg.

Molly: Clearly, it's the egg.

Wanda: No, the chicken.

Molly: But you can't get a chicken without it hatching from an egg.

Wanda: But who lays the egg that the chicken hatches out of? You need another chicken.

Molly: But that chicken must have come from an egg!

Wanda: Which has to be laid by a chicken!

[actors ad lib to fade – either play up some closing music for the show, or dim the lights, or just have them walk off stage still arguing].