

Serious Conversations

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About five years ago I decided to strike up “serious conversation” with one of my friends via e-mail. This came about because I was going through a low spot in my life, and I wanted something to take my mind off of things. These are my responses (Edited, of course, to offend as few people as possible; although offense is inevitable with me.) from those conversations. We cover topics ranging from the meaning of life, consciousness, physics, religion, self determination and many others. Enjoy.

Part 1:

My friend had just had a conversation about consciousness with a group of neuroscientists and chemists. Everyone, except my friend, agreed that even if one could describe to the last atom the entire human body, one still wouldn't have a description of the person. In essence, a human consciousness is more than the sum of its parts. Consciousness transcends the physical even though it is common knowledge that imbalances in brain chemistry can dramatically affect one's personality (consciousness), and thought is simply electricity jumping across neurons in the brain. My friend was astonished that even without religion being mentioned there seemed to be some implication of it, and my friend asked for my insight. (And some lovely insight I have.)

Here is my response:

Christianity, and probably most other religions, forgets that there are other religions, other philosophies, other points of view, and so the faith doesn't realize what would be common sense to someone with a similar religious background is crazy to someone with another way of viewing the world. Just because religion wasn't mentioned in the conversation doesn't mean that's what everyone implied. This being America, and America being rather self centered, they might have assumed you realized it was in some sense a religious conversation.

It comes down to this. Assume religion is right, assume a soul exists. If they were referring to the soul of a person and not just their consciousness in your conversation, then they are right. I think we would agree that despite all those crazy people on tv, there is no way to quantitatively describe the spiritual realm, assuming it exists at all. Now assume religion is wrong, and they were talking about a soul. You were right. This argument is purely religious and not what we are talking about.

Now assume they were talking about human consciousness. This is certainly philosophy and has nothing to do with religious faith. I am thinking right now; I have consciousness; I exist. No religion there. I would, the next time you speak with them, ask them this: does human consciousness, not the soul, transcend the physical? Does human thought amount to more than some endorphins and electricity? Is the whole greater than the sum of its parts? That makes sure you are both talking about the same thing, nothing religious about it. (Keep in mind Christianity takes the human consciousness and soul to be two completely different things. You can screw up one and save the other for instance. This is why there is ambiguity in your conversation.) I assume you want me to answer those questions I just asked. Well, I can answer them in one word, maybe. It's something that would have to be tested. You would have to describe every smallest unit of the human brain (molecule, atom, quark, whatever the fundamental particles end up being), run a model, and see if the human brain you just modeled did the exact same thing as the model a percentage of the time that could be attributed to quantum fluctuations. (I would assume that by the time we come up with that much computing power we will be able to also predict what percentage quantum mechanics would skew results by.)

Do I believe it could be possible to completely map out a brain's neural pathways and reproduce my consciousness exactly without any more input? Yes, I see no reason it wouldn't be possible. Might it be impossible? Yes to that as well. In actuality, I've come to accept that there is no way to know until it's tested. It isn't common sense to me either way. Might personality differences arise out of quantum mechanics? Certainly. (That might be a really interesting thing to do research on actually.) Do I believe the soul transcends physical description? Yes, but I am a religious person, and I don't think that's what you are talking about.

[So, we concluded that consciousness doesn't necessarily transcend the physical, but it might. I would need a bit more proof one way or another to persuade me, but it would be cool to talk to a computerized

version of myself.]

Part 2: The second entry is about the use of profanity.

A discussion of cussing can become very complicated because it has to do with religion, emotion, etymology, culture and an assortment of other disciplines I can't come up with off the top of my head. I think I've been able to get away with never cussing because I'm not a very angry person. There have only been a couple of times in my life where I've been really angry. I have just never had the need to cuss. I find it worrisome, though, that society finds it more and more necessary to use cussing as filler words. It's really odd though; even I'll admit that a joke becomes funnier if a couple of cuss words are thrown in the right places. I have no idea why that is. (Does anyone out there have a reason for this phenomena?)

I really can't find anything that makes cussing improper other than religion, and that can be tied to culture again. I know the Catholic church believes cussing to be any phrase that demeans a person, so if I call you stupid, that's cussing. It's an extreme that I'm sure everyone finds difficult.

I still can't figure out why it is I don't cuss. (in the societal sense, not the Catholic church sense; I call people stupid all the time) There are many times where the word will pop into my head to use as filler for a joke, and I know the joke will be funnier if I put it in. I simply can't make myself say the word. It isn't family influences; my mom and dad cuss just as much as any other adults. I have even caught my little brother cussing from time to time. All of my close friends cuss. Most of the teachers I'm friends with cuss. And I can't think of a single person whom I look up to in a religious sense that doesn't have the occasional (not sometimes not occasional) profanity slip, including many a priest. If it isn't religion and it isn't culture or family, what is it? The best reason I can come up with is two fold. Most of the adults in my life when I was very little did a very good job instilling the "badness" of cussing. Being an impressionable child I took it as truth. The reason everyone else eventually figured out there is nothing wrong with cussing and I didn't is because I had, or have as the case may be, a twisted, almost grotesque, need to be different and better than everyone else. Since from childhood I "knew" cussing was bad, my inner desire to be better than everyone else filled in the gap where I would have given up on keeping a cussless vocabulary. And now it has become force of habit.

Before I end I'd like to comment on the meaning behind the word. It is not the meaning of a cuss word more than it's feeling represented by the word that is to some degree reprehensible. It's the feeling inside the person that gives the word meaning. This is the reason that as society progress and regresses "improper" words change. For instance, not so long ago children's ears would be covered if someone said dang, shoot, heck, or darn or any of a number of other words that people, including myself, use to replace their "stronger" (by today's standards at least) counterparts. Language continues to evolve and grow as the society driving it grows as well. It wouldn't surprise me if before I die I end up saying words that are currently bleeped on tv simply because no one considers them cuss words anymore. As for now, there is no point in trying to do something that I don't really want to do, so cuss words still are still left out of my reach.

Part 3: The third entry consists of some of my thoughts on organized religion.

Prepare to be offended. Sorry. Religion has the tendency to make people deny the scientific truth. (Before everyone gets up in arms let me provide an example: it took the deaths and imprisonment of many scientists [e.g. Galileo, although he specifically wasn't killed by the Church] before the Catholic Church would admit the earth went around the sun. Same too with evolution. [I can't think of anyone killed because of it though.]) Whether this critical skepticism (I'm not saying skepticism of science is a bad thing; I'm saying the reason for the skepticism could be misguided.) is an unconscious, learned response or something someone chooses to do depends on the person. I am not saying most people blindly accept religion but possibly.

Religion also does a good job of making sure people don't question its validity. Religion says it's good for people to question their faith, but most religious people I know don't act that way. (In my quest for an understanding of faith, I am about to read a book by an atheist about why religion is nonsense. I think I've read enough books about why there should be a God, I think it's time to view the other side. I'll let you know if it's any good.) I believe this stems from the fact that those with religious power do not want to give up that power because in the not so distant past religious power meant you had political power. And the way to keep political power is to keep the masses stupid or at least unquestioning.

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People have a tendency to mix religion with everything (By that I mean use religion to influence decisions that have nothing to do with religion.) under the assumption that religion is always right simply because it was ordained by God. (Before you get up in arms with that statement let me say that just because God ordained specific people to “manage” his followers doesn’t mean they can’t still screw the religion up. [Anyone heard of the Avignon Antipapacy?])

Most people worry about religion being injected into science where it really does not belong. I’m not concerned with that. Science can do a very good job of defending itself against purely religious ideals. The thing that worries me most is people confusing religion and politics. Politics has no defense against religion, and one need only look at the president to see some of the consequences of religion dominating political decisions. It seems every day we get closer and closer to a theocracy. That does worry me. (And just because it’s a theocracy of my own religion doesn’t make me worry less. Just because the Taliban was an Islamic government didn’t mean those with that faith liked it there.)

Humanity's need to believe in something greater than itself is very strong, and I have no idea where it comes from. Religion would say that is God trying to "bring us home." I don't blindly subscribe to that; I hope. I think it has to do with there not really seeming to be an obvious purpose to existence. One has to find it. And religion is the easy way out, because let's face it, most people are too lazy to figure out a purpose, and religion is a convenient, easy way to have a purpose to life. I think that's why so many people accept a religion without understanding it. (As an aside, I think that's where the majority of problems concerning religion come from, people not really understanding what they believe.)

The only thing I can say about organized religion demanding that other organized religions are wrong is that I hope I've picked the correct religion. I know that must be unsettling to you. It is to me as well. The truth is, there is no way to know which is actually right (if any) until you die, so there is no use in worrying about it.

The interesting thing about organized religion is that if you don’t already subscribe to one, and you don’t see one you like, you can start your own. There are so many Christian denominations alone, who would notice another. And besides, I would argue that you don't need to belong to an organized religion to be religious. Organized religion is a forum and a place for people to celebrate what they believe as a community. And community is what humanity is all about. That’s purpose enough right there.

Part 4: The fourth entry is about the purpose of all of existence.

My friend had just commented on the lack of a purpose for noncomplex life. The example was an amoeba. My friend had also commented on why we need a purpose to life. No other creature needs a purpose; why should we need one? Lastly, my friend pointed out we need to differentiate between the purpose for all of existence, the purpose of life, and an individual’s purpose. I responded:

Perhaps an amoeba is just a by product of the evolution of life; perhaps an amoeba has already served its purpose, as simply an early step of life. And now the amoeba simply exists just because it knows no better. It could be also that one of the purposes of an amoeba is to support the ecosystem(s) in which humanity can thrive.

Sentience could be the goal of the universe, or at least life, to figure itself out, and the purpose of everything around us is to support us in trying to figure the universe out. (It’s also true we could be just a stepping stone to something even more important than us. Actually, I hope we are; if we aren’t, we still have some serious evolving to do if you ask me.)

I wonder why we need a purpose in life. Why can’t we just live like everything else? I don’t think anything else needs a purpose to life. I doubt any animals can think about things of this nature, so why are humans so insistent on having a purpose to life. I don’t have a good answer to that. (Here is the best answer my friend could come up with: Humanity is a very goal oriented species. We make “to do” lists, we set career goals, the government supposedly has a set of goals for Iraq. We’re all about doing things for reasons. Perhaps humanity’s need for a purpose of existence is just an extension of our human nature.)

My friend pointed out that a person’s purpose in life might be to find their purpose in life. (Even though that’s circular reasoning.) I think that could be a valid thing to say, but if there really isn’t a purpose to life, then that person has wasted their life. This is why I need something more to my purpose in life than just finding my purpose. There has to be more to the purpose than the purpose. Was there a purpose to the universe at all before humanity came around to start looking for a purpose?

I’m a believer in the anthropic principle. (The anthropic principle is born out of physics. It comes in

several forms, but the gist of it is this: The universe is very fine tuned for our existence. So fine tuned that any infinitesimal change in any of a number of constants [e.g. the fine-structure constant, the masses of any of the fundamental particles, the strength of any of the fundamental forces, the speed of light, etc. etc.] would throw the universe so out of whack that the most complex form of matter would be random protons and neutrons flying around [and perhaps not every that]. No atoms, no stars, no galaxies, and no life. Our existence is a big coincidence. How does science explain this? By the anthropic principle, which states: we wouldn't be here to measure the fundamental physical constants if the constants were of a strength precluding our existence. In other words, we are here now because if things were different we couldn't be here. That may seem like circular reasoning, and actually it kind of is except for the theory of the multiverse. It states that there are an infinite amount of universes each existing simultaneously with different properties. The reason we are in this universe and not in any other is because of the anthropic principle. The multiverse is a very vague, improvable concept in physics, but it has an elegance that appeals to me.) And to me the anthropic principle is enough to answer the "how we are here?" of existence for me. Assuming God doesn't exist, I really can't think of a reason for the universe or life or anything really, except for that principle. (I find it necessary to have a reason beyond God for there to be a universe. Some people are blessed-or cursed depending on your view-to have a faith where faith is all you need. I am not one of those people.) But being here now, I'm glad the fundamental forces are in balance and that light travels the speed it does and that the proton isn't a bit heavier.

Existence as a whole may not have a purpose, but individuals can give themselves a purpose. Next a discussion of that.

A Change of Persuasion

After a lot of thought and deliberation, reading a lot of books, I have decided to amend my philosophic persuasion. Don't freak out on me; it isn't as drastic as you might be thinking. I will continue to be a Roman Catholic. While I am Catholic mostly because my grandparents were Catholic, I have come to independently believe in Catholicism as well, but as I get older I no longer have to live exactly by the tradition of the Battalio family. (Interestingly, I have an uncle who used to be a Dominican [I think] brother but left because he thought that the changes made by Vatican II were too extreme. He's still Catholic, just not a brother.) I have a more developed sense of self. And I think that I have become a more thoughtful person. As a consequence, I must include an extra identifier to my system of beliefs besides Catholic. But, do I still have faith? Yes. (Most of the time.) Am I still Catholic? Most certainly yes. However, I also must face what reason suggests.

For a theory to be scientific, it must have repeatable, testable outcomes (hence why string theory is very controversial). Scientifically, there is no way to prove God. God is not a scientific theory. (Although some may argue otherwise.) In this way I must also now face that I am an agnostic as well as a Catholic. I have faith that He exists, but I believe there is no way to scientifically verify this. Thus the term "agnostic Catholic" encapsulates both my religious affiliation and my scientific affiliation. I feel that any person of science or reason should, if they claim religious affiliation, also claim a scientific persuasion. Obviously you cannot claim a religious affiliation and also be an atheist, but you can differentiate yourself between Agnosticism, arguing that God cannot be proven, arguing that there is a way to prove God or believing that science and religion are two separate entities that have no business even considering one another.

Given my definition of Agnosticism, many of you are probably agnostic. In fact, I bet many of you consider all of this a statement of the obvious. Obvious or not, one needs to have a firm stance on where they are philosophically, even if it is just an expression of ignorance, as my philosophy usually is.

I have ideas for about seven or eight more blog posts, so I will hopefully get out at least that many before the semester begins.

Part 5: The fifth entry is about my individual purpose to life.

Some time ago I started to read (and still haven't finished, you know me) The Nicomachean Ethics by Aristotle. He set out his purpose of life as being for Eudaimonia. (Eudaimonia is usually translated as happiness, but a better translation is that of human flourishing.) Aristotle says Eudaimonia is the pursuit of virtue through rational activity. (Aristotle then goes on to explain the virtues he refers to: rationality, relationships, scientific knowledge, character, etc.) I am using this philosophy as the opposing crutch to my purpose relating to there being a God. Eudaimonia makes up for what I find purpose-lacking religiously. It's an interesting concept. All humans strive knowledge (most of us at least) and happiness. (I am realizing already that I'm not going to do as good a job as Aristotle at explaining this.) Those things aren't good enough; that's why most people feel unfulfilled. You need all the other virtues to get anything out of life. It's the combination of character, intellect and knowledge that makes life worth-while.

It's curious that we are the only creatures that have to have a purpose to life. We are a very goal oriented species, and we are very good at inventing reasons for life. I think a lot of this as to do with the fact we are one of a few species that has free time. We can provide more than our needs, so we have to find things to occupy our time. Animals don't care they might not have a purpose if there are too busy fending off the latest predator to think about it. If we can't find things to fill that time we wonder why we are here if we can't do things we want instead of need.

If you can have a purpose to life without religion, then that is very commendable and independent of you. I can't. I wouldn't say I envy you though because I do like and genuinely believe in my religious convictions, but I will say I don't see how people can subscribe to an existence where the only reason they wake up is to be one day closer to death and therefore heaven. I need more than just religion as a reason to wake up in the morning. If I were you, I wouldn't be embarrassed of it though. There's no reason to be, in almost the same way I'm not embarrassed because I'm Roman Catholic and not Greek Orthodox or Baptist or Muslim or Hindu. Subscribing to a faith is all concept is just as commendable as being able to live with no religion at all.

For me the fact remains that I need both faith and reason to survive. I find that at some point along the way my convictions fail with just one and without the other.

Part 6: Entry six is about the origin of God and Science.

My friend and I have taken up several other topics, but we are currently revisiting religion. I will post our conversations on family, art, and a comment on what we want to do with our lives further on in the series. I began the conversation:

The older I get, and the more stuff I learn about, the harder and harder it is to believe in a religion. Being a child and believing in a religion is easy because children can be convinced of everything. Which, from an atheist's perspective, is why religions force parents to teach their children about faith at an early age (It could also be why in the Catholic Church you must agree to raise your children Catholic if you want to be married in the Catholic Church.) because they are so impressionable, and it's easy to convince them to believe. The older I get the more I realize that if I hadn't been raised in a religion, I probably wouldn't be religious. This is a scary thought. Religion could be the second Christmas myth, and unlike Santa Claus, when we get old enough no one tells us that Jesus is just a made up story for the sake of the holiday, which is quite possible. The question becomes, where did religion come from? If it's just something that we conscript children into, who conscripted the first generation? Could Jesus be a real person? What about Moses, Mohammad, Buddha? How unlikely is a God who created all of us? What about a Son who died for us? (Notice I still capitalize the names. I still haven't given up on religion completely.) If God didn't create the universe, where did it come from? Perhaps the answer is in front of us; perhaps we will never know.

To sum up my friend's reply: Humans, being curious and having a desire to understand all that they see, came up with way to explain all the phenomena around them. God was attributed as the doer of the unexplainable. If there was not an obvious explanation it must be God. And humans wishing to control whatever they can to better their condition created religion via ceremonies, rites, sacrifices, worship, to influence of that entity with controlled the unexplainable.

She continued: Just like religion, science was conceived to explain what was confusing. Science was just another method to make order of the chaos. And like religion, science has changed over the ages. The

science we know today is not like the science of the ancient Greeks. What we consider science today is based on the, well, scientific method: developing a hypothesis and testing to see if that hypothesis is correct. Before the scientific revolution, science was not this. Scientists used Aristotelian logic to try to derive truths about the world without much experiment, most of which turned out wrong.

Science and religion did not really become separate things until around the 1800s or so, and they didn't come into direct conflict until much later, when people began questioning one from the other's point of view. My point is that religion and science are sort of different ways of addressing the same questions (explaining the things we don't understand). But you can't really judge one of them by the other one's rules and standards.

Well, where does this leave me? At best I can believe with the part of me that still has faith. (Faith being believing in something which by definition you have no proof of.) And calling myself agnostic with the scientific part of me. I'm not saying that science and religion contradict each other. As my friend said, they were created as different methods of explaining the same world. And today, many religions embrace science. I'm saying that science doesn't need religion, and that religion can adapt itself to whatever science proves. There will never be a way to prove religion wrong. Religion will always redefine itself. But the question is, do I still have faith?

Part 7: Entry seven is about control.

Previously my friend hit upon an important point, that religion and science are different methods for explaining the same thing. Also, she noted that religious ceremonies were created so we could control God. Here is my perspective: I find it difficult to let go completely of religion because I like the hope of control. Assuming what I pray for gets answered, I can in some respects control whatever I want. But with the things I cannot control (for example, a safe drive, an extra scholarship offer, acceptance to whatever grad school, that it will rain today), without prayer, I really have no control. They are left to luck and chance. So, letting go of religion means letting go of a level of control. I think that's part of the reason that religion is so hard to disavow. Who would want less control over their lives? Christianity is particularly good about saying that if God hasn't answered your prayers yet, you aren't praying enough or in the correct way. Prayer and religion give people a way to swing the odds in their favor, and people are greedy. They will take whatever method they can to get what they want, even if it is trying to use God to hurt others chances, say for winning a football game or getting a job. (Let me just say as a matter of personal belief, even before I started questioning my faith, God does not care if you win a football game. Your prayers for your team were no stronger or better than the prayers for the opposing team. God doesn't care. Stop thanking Him. He didn't do anything to help your team.)

Control might also be considered the root of religion and part of the reason why religion is still around. Faith gives you a level of control where logically or scientifically you should hold none. But to tone that statement down, and to not give faith undue credit. "Miracles" do happen in the sense not that God has necessarily done something for you, but in the sense that, for example, life is very resilient and can heal itself without an explanation from medicine (or insert some other "miracle" in place of a medical miracle). I would expect that the occurrence of that will continue to decrease as we become more and more knowledgeable about ourselves and the universe. It's just easier to attribute "miracles" to an omnipotent God than it is to attribute them to our own ignorance. The part of me that still clings to belief wants to believe in the miracles though, but as we understand more and more of the world, I feel it will become more and more difficult.

I'm also inclined to believe that culture had a major influence on the survival of some religions over others. It would make sense that dominant cultures, that for whatever reason became dominant, would have a greater chance of spreading their religions. And that fits the facts. The dominate cultures of the Far East have religions that dominate the Far East, and the dominate cultures of the West have Judeo-Christian religions that have come to dominate the West.

And again, I believe it is the very nature of religions that ensure their survival. Judeo-Christian religions are very big about spreading the faith. Followers are even told they will be rewarded for more and more converts. I've never heard of the Ancient Roman or Greek religions being about that.

Part 8: The eighth entry concerns the purpose of science in my life and how religion fills in the gaps.

Here is how I view the end of science. Just because I can't understand the soul and heaven and God (if they exist) doesn't mean I can't understand everything else. If we understood the universe except for religion, then I would have to think about the end of science again, fortunately we'll probably never fully understand the universe. Until then why stop pursuing science just because we one day might understand everything except religion? Just because we can't describe the soul or God now doesn't mean we won't some day get there. I think religion and science can describe the same thing, just in different ways. What I can call creation, you can call evolution and the big bang. One being right doesn't mean the other is wrong. If science, then not religion or if religion, then not science is fallacious, a dichotomy in the most horrid sense. Both can exist simultaneously and not only exist but help on another.

Part 9: The ninth entry concerns family:

With this entry I must start with my friend's side. She has a rather large extended family that she doesn't have much in common with and often questions her obligations to her family and what she gets from her family.

She begins by saying that family is the group of people who are supposed to be there regardless of the circumstances and who should delight in your happiness and be pained in your sadness. The love of a family is more than enjoyment of one another's company. In a biological sense, we are attached to those with whom we share genes. Socially and culturally, there is pressure to protect and care for our family members.

Friendship, on the other hand, is optional. Our friendships change as our interests change; we are looking for something specific - pleasure, company, common interests - in our friends. Family, though is forever; we are tied to our family by our genes and by mutual family members. And it seems we are supposed to get something different from our familial relationships besides enjoyment of company or common interests.

But what is it, where is it, and at what point do you decide, with a particular relative, that you just don't have it? Or is the question, "would I feel that something significant was missing if I didn't see them anymore? Would they?" What makes me care deeply for some family members and not others.

I, unfortunately for my friend, have very little context to help here. I have a very limited family, not more than half a dozen that I ever see, and probably less than 20 total. So I have very little to draw from. In these couple of paragraphs is the best response I could muster:

So, firstly, family love is different, yes, but why? I think it's mostly cultural. Something along the lines of a long time ago, when humanity was much more lawless, and trust was in short supply, you could trust your family, and that's all you could trust. And trust is the first step to building a friendship which can then lead to love. I also think it might have something to do with a desire to return what love and companionship is given us. This would explain why you would care for those who care for you. The family members one cares for have established a lasting connection to you. It's selfish, but that's what humanity is.

I really don't feel pressure to like or be around extended family. If I like a family member, I don't look at those relationships any differently than ordinary friendship. If I stop liking them, I stop interacting with them. I don't really dislike any of my family though. I suppose my problem with all this is I haven't spent enough time around my family to know whether or not I like them. I feel my obligations to family are simply being courteous and civil. And that's about it.

Part 10: The tenth entry in this series is about art:

I think there is a caveat to the typical definition of art. (My friend began the discussion with the sort of definition a critic or textbook would give: art is a timeless expression of some feeling or sentiment.) Art may be a timeless expression of some feeling, but that feeling can be different for different times. Great art will be able to continuously fit into the mold of attractiveness for a time period. The question is who defines truly great art? Who gives art meaning? The short answer is an individual. Just because a critic or the populace decides something is a great piece of art doesn't make it great to you.

My friend has a hard time getting a particular feeling or expression when viewing art. She is far more interested in the historical context within which it originally fit than with what the painting might express. She believes that many probably do not find something meaningful in art. She supposes that it means far more to them to be able to say that they have seen the painting, rather than to actually look at the painting. So, the true

value of the old masterpieces now is that we can say we saw them. A critic might disagree, but in terms of the popular masses, they probably only look at art because other people tell them to. The question is why are some pieces art "great", but others not? And is greatness something intrinsic to the piece of art or a result of critics influencing the public or something else?

Just because you don't feel that a particular piece of art isn't expressing something to you doesn't make it meaningless and consequently not art. Art doesn't necessarily have to impose meaning to everyone for it to be great. Art can be considered simply for its own beauty, its appeal to the senses. That can be technical beauty, as in the level of skill the artist had to demonstrate to create the work. It could be the intrinsic beauty, as in the colors, composition or form of the subject is pleasing to the eye. Or I suppose it could be the contextual beauty, as in the meaning we give to a subject makes it beautiful, the sunset is beautiful, two people in love is beautiful.

I can't say why a great painting doesn't impart meaning to some people. It could depend on the kind of person one is, an analytical person interested in facts as opposed to an emotional person concerned with beauty. When I find myself in a museum, I never try to force any emotion out at the sight of a piece of art. Meaning can be very subtle, and a lot of the time I don't get it either, but sometimes meaning will jump off the canvas and hit you. You just have to be open to it.

It is probably correct to say that most people see art because others say they should go see it. Most people follow instead of lead. People are attracted to what they are told is attractive, find beauty in what they are told is beautiful, see meaning where they are told to see meaning, so I would agree that critics of art steer us to what they conclude just because they are held in authority. Although, it might be because you are seeing something that's one of a kind, unique. A painting can also connect you to the time period it represents. A picture is a thousand words.

However, some pieces and artists are great because they were the avant-garde for a new way of thinking, a new way of artistry or simply because they were one of the first masters of a particular genre or medium. That might have inspired the interest of the masses at first. I would imagine though that the continued influence of the great works has to do with a bit of everything - originality, critics, fashion, political and social relevancy.

Part 11: The eleventh entry is a continuation of part ten about art:

My friend continued:

Most great masterpieces were painted on commission. An artist didn't sit in his studio and paint because he wanted to or had something he needed to express. He painted because a wealthy person wanted him to paint something for him, either as decoration, or to simply display their wealth and power for all to see. But now, those paintings are in museums so the masses can view them just to say they have seen them. So originally, the subject matter of the painting did matter; it was full of political or religious or social symbolism. However, they existed not for the sake of art as we consider it today, but for something else.

My reply was:

I suppose the greatness of those commissioned artists of before has to do with the ability of those who commissioned the works to purvey them to the general populace. In effect, the church and government becomes the art critic. This portrait of me as king or this depiction of the last supper is important because I say so. Marvel at its awesomeness you peasants. Okay, not that dramatically, but I think my point remains. My question being: does greatness only come from commission, only from an imposed purpose so others will find and "know" the purpose as well instead of some abstract, relative thought?

Perhaps considering how artists of our time have become renowned would help us in contemplating how art becomes great. How did Andy Warhol or Norman Rockwell become famous? I think it might be that they had a sense of the every day man. That's cliché but valid. Rockwell painted scenes that a random American would recognize and say, "Hey, that could be me." Or, "I might actually live that." Warhol started with some work with icons of Americana, the Campbell soup labels or Coke bottles. (He stayed famous for eliciting controversy, but became famous for his art.) Their main draw was appealing to the everyman. You have to appeal to the masses to be remembered.

To sum up what I think:

I would be of the line of thought that art will always be created; whether or not an artist can support themselves doesn't matter. People will always be inspired to create, regardless of any financial implications. I

would say the individual needs art that expresses outside the political, economic, and social power of the owner, but that art doesn't need to be financed by an outside power. Again, people will create what comes to them naturally along with what they are paid to create.

I guess to finish. Art is a work that expresses a thought, feeling or idea through various media. An artist is anyone who creates that work. That's a broad definition, but I'm not a philosopher.

Part 12: The twelfth entry is about where I am going in life:

Both my friend and I are having difficulty in narrowing our focus in life. Here's what I have to say about it.

College is becoming more about gaining life experience, which we all would do without college anyway, but a specific kind of life experience. An experience which will enable us to parse out ideas, troubleshoot problems, embrace diversity, and become a better person than a life experience without college. College in general is a good idea, regardless of whether or not you come out of it in a specific field. However, I am not necessarily saying that each further layer of education narrows your choice of career by a level. I'm just saying that after you finish a layer of education you have a smaller world cone of possibilities that you could become, for example with a degree in physics, you probably wouldn't go to grad school for theatre. An undergrad degree has narrowed your scope at least some, though not to a specific field.

I think it's obvious to say that as the average person becomes more and more educated, undergraduate degrees will erode in prestige; you'll have to have more degrees for the same reward in a career. Also, as the body of knowledge of our race grows, an undergrad degree makes up a smaller and smaller percentage of knowledge that can be known. Eventually people will have to have careers that are very specific simply because a human brain isn't capable of understanding the amount of knowledge in a general field. So, comparatively not long ago an equivalent undergrad education would give you enough knowledge to make breakthroughs in a field that cannot be done today. Therefore, we cannot blame ourselves completely for neither being able to specialize enough nor for being as enthusiastic as we should simply because the world around us is changing, not so much the typical undergrad.

My enthusiasm for different things changes all the time, hobbies, different music, books, etc. So, I would think that it would be no different for a field. Perhaps it will just take us time working in different things we find intriguing to find the subject we can become excited about. The beauty about college is that you are exposed to many different fields and can try out many different subjects to find one that suits you.

Part 13: The thirteenth entry is a continuation of the part about where I am going in life:

A long time ago I figured out that I was going to have a hard time in deciding what to do with my life. I enjoy doing too many things. I considered music for a while, but I also enjoyed building things, so for a while I wanted to be an engineer, which is part of the reason I started out majoring as one. My dad started making me go to the library right after I began going to junior high, which is one of the things I am most grateful to my dad for actually. I always had a curiosity about physics, so I began reading about it. That's where my physics kick began. For what ever reason, I also loved watching the weather channel. I still don't know why I like it so much, the material repeats every 30 minutes. So, I got into meteorology and reading about it as well. And meteorology is after all, only applied math and physics

Forgetting changing majors so many times, the biggest problem still remains what to do after all my school, and how much school do I want. I do intend on getting at least a master's. I am fairly certain I can get not only accepted by a decent school but also get a nice assistantship to a middle of the road meteorology school, and I might even do that well at a nice school. (Here's the list of schools I intend on applying to: Penn State, Oklahoma, Colorado State, Georgia Tech, U. of Alabama in Huntsville, Florida State). I suppose I'll decide on whether to get a doctorate once I'm a ways into my masters.

After school, I'd like to get a job. Where becomes the issue. Currently, I'm playing with the idea of staying in higher education and trying to get a tenure track position as professor. From what I've seen of it, I think I'd like research and teaching. I have also toyed with the idea of going into the National Weather Service. It's difficult to get into because they consolidated the offices about a decade ago, so there are significantly fewer positions. But, after a few years, you get paid very well. However, they work in shifts, and seniority does not get you out of working the night or weekend shifts. You get paid a 10% bonus for working then, but

I'm not so keen on the idea of working outside the regular 9-5 workday, much less having to change my schedule every few weeks. Even though I'm in the program at State to go into TV, I've pretty much dismissed the idea. The pay and hours stink for the first ten or so years (avg. salary starting out is less than 30,000 and just about everyone is given a weekend shift, meaning you work just about your entire 40 hour week in two days. No thanks.) I am good at the TV stuff, but I don't really want to deal with the stress and publicity of it. So, I've pretty much resigned myself to leaving that unless I'm offered a job for \$50,000 or more in somewhere interesting, which won't happen.

That's about it. In spite of all that though, if I could make a nice living playing the piano or any other instrument and composing, or especially becoming the director of an orchestra/symphony (my dream job), I would drop everything and do that. I fall more and more in love with music every day. Don't get me wrong, I love meteorology and physics and the rest as well, but music is my passion. I also think it might be interesting to become a philosopher or writer. That would be something very interesting to try.

Part 14: The fourteenth entry has general comments about a career, college and such:

I think once you get far into a profession, most people are devoted to their field. Undergrads are there because they know no better. Grad students are in a field because they think they will like it. Doctoral students because they believe they will enjoy making it their career. Post docs because they can see the light at the end of the tunnel. And professionals because they know enough about their field to be excited.

I am of the belief that as an undergrad you narrow down your career path to one field, and grad school is where you figure out what you want to do in that field. There are numerous exceptions, for example physicists or mathematicians going into meteorology or some sort of engineering as they go into grad school. But in general, that's how I see the end of college, a increasing narrowing of scope.

A lot of finding the perfect job is luck; a large portion of it is diligence though. That's the part I'm determined in making sure is in my favor. You just have to try until you find what it is you can do for 30 or 40 years of your life. You just have to look into something that you might be interested in and finding who it is that hires those people, what degrees they have, what is their job description, what other duties they have, etc. The possibilities are endless really, especially in the age of information we are in today.

I am not aspiring to be a professional musician or conductor, but if it ever happened, I am certain I would be very happy doing it. As far as composing is concerned, that's the problem with contemporary "classical" music; there are so many other genres of music, that not many people really listen to it anymore. There is also something to be said of music not being appreciated in the era it is composed. For example, rioting at the Rite of Spring, but now its considered fantastic, same with a lot of Schoenberg. Bach wasn't even appreciated in his time. I'm certain that fifty years from now we will look back and see the "great composers" were right in front of us. Although it concerns me that "classical" music is not appreciated as much as it should be.

Part 15: The fifteenth entry concerns self determination:

To quote my friend:

The problem is this: in a world where you can do just about anything, how do you decide what to do? When you're smart enough and educated enough to do almost anything there is in the world to do, how can you possibly figure out what you should do, what you want to do?

Ever wondered about why the fiction stories that seem to appeal most to our world now involve people who are fulfilling their "destiny?" Take something like Star Wars, Harry Potter, or Lord of the Rings, and you find a hero who is simply playing out something they were always meant to do because of their bloodline or because of some particularly extraordinary thing that happened to them that doesn't really leave them much choice about what to do with the rest of their lives. That's how they become great. Indeed, it seems like heroes in these types of stories are the ones we like best. We hold some romanticized notions of destiny and fate that really play almost no bearing on everyday life today. Granted, it is undoubtedly much easier to craft an interesting story when you have a definite problem and a character with an unavoidable fate, much easier than writing a story about a character with no specific inclination toward anything or any particular obstacles in his way except the anxiety of self-determination. But that's what real life is like for people like us. It's terrifying

to think that we could literally do /anything/.

In a way, life would be easier if some huge challenge or extraordinary circumstance suddenly landed in my lap because then I would know exactly what to do. Whatever it was might be extremely difficult, but it would be easier than making a choice about what to do in the first place.

Here's what I said:

I have often pondered about self determination as well. Having taken a lot of different classes (by way of changing majors multiple times), I figured out I could pick just about anything I wanted to do and to it just as well as any other person. This is part of why I keep collecting degrees. (If I had unlimited money I would do that for the rest of my life; I really enjoy learning.) I get an inkling about an interest, and I go investigate it. This is the blessing of our youth. If we have an interest, we can go pursue it. So what if you decide that the path you are taking is wrong. At worst you've wasted some of your time (and money). I think this is what most self-determined people end up doing-trying stuff until they like it. I know a lot of people who change careers mid-stream. It is just a matter of being patient enough to wait until you have found a vocation.

Unfortunately, some people are anxious about self-determination, and they just go to the first and easiest place they can go. I think this is partly the reason people working just awful jobs don't leave, because they are scared of what to go do next, not necessarily that they wouldn't be able to find something next, just that would have to find something.

I agree that actually making the choice about what to do is harder than actually doing something. The problem is, I don't really know how to go about making the final determination of what I should do. I just have to hope that my future self will be able to make a better choice than I can presently.

Part 16: The sixteenth entry is another short comment on religion, specifically its prevalence:

My friend made a very good point about why people need religion. To expound: One of the reasons a lot of people hold onto religion into adulthood is because church is more about believing in a religion. It is about socialization with others. Adults in general only socialize around people involved in work or activities involving their children. The largest social outlet for adults outside of those two areas is church and church sponsored activities. Most people need to be around other people to develop and be sane human beings. One of the best parts of humanity is being able to be with others. Church provides that necessity.

Another unrelated reason religion is so prevalent is that religion provides an easy way to complain and ask for wishes. And if someone gives up religion they give away a level of control of their lives. To explain: when you believe in a greater power than yourself, you can pray to that power to fix things you cannot. So when someone gives up on that power they admit there exist circumstances outside of their control. They lose a level of control.

Part 17: The seventeenth entry concerns friendship:

My friend began speaking about friendship from the point of mutual communication, wondering does a friendship exist with no communication, and how she believe she had set up a communication barrier of sorts by not participating in some forms of communication.

“The people I've maintained good contact with emphatically DOES NOT map directly onto those to whom I was the closest while we lived in the same place and interacted in person. It instead maps simply to the people who are best at communicating by the same methods that I prefer to use to communicate.”

I responded:

I can say almost uniformly that everyone has difficulty developing friends and relationships when moving somewhere new. Almost everyone I knew that moved on to grad this year has expressed difficulty in fitting in to the new place and finding new people. It just takes time.

People, as I'm sure you have noticed, like to talk. The advantages you give e-mail are some of the same things others would call disadvantages. People have so little time to sit down and actually write well thought out e-mails. And granted, I like having a serious conversation written for the sake of having a record. (I've many times sat down and read the entire way through our serious conversation.) But typing things out just

takes so much longer to do. However, casual communication - the how are you? or here's something interesting that's just happened in my life - are so much easier to have via phone for most people. (Plus, despite becoming much better at it in the last few years, I have a hard time finding stopping points in conversations so instead of politely excusing myself from a conversation I end up leaving awkward silences, so I don't really talk on the phone all that much anyway.)

I think that communication is a big part of relationships, and that without it relationships are very difficult. I can however think of a few people I still have a friendship with that I don't really talk to anymore. Some relationships can be picked up and continued despite a lack for communication for a very long time. It depends on the relationships, but to give a general statement: most relationships would fail without communication in my opinion.

Getting back to making close friends, I read an article a while ago talking about friendships. It said that on average 70% of a person's friends change every 7 years. It went on to say that people find friends along similar avenues. So if you found friends via theatre activities or band or via your profession, that is how you would continue making friends.

The point is you can't live in a bubble and expect to make friends. That was the problem I had my freshman year at state. I didn't go do anything. Once I did begin branching out, friendships just happened. Once you begin your professional career, assuming you don't just work and go home everyday for your entire life, you will find people your age to interact with.

Part 18: The eighteenth entry wonders what is a worthwhile pursuit:

In trying to figure out what exactly I should be doing with my time, I've come to ask myself many questions, the foremost being, what is a worthwhile pursuit of my time?

It seems to me worthwhile pursuits should fall into a couple of categories (outside of working to fulfill basic needs – food, shelter, etc.). One, personal development, exploration, and awareness - as in learning about something new, contemplating one's existence, meeting new people and learning about them and learning what they know. Two, advancement of the human race - as in helping others, yourself, or your environment. Three, understanding of the universe – as in discovering new truths about the universe or simply learning how it works (the sciences, and philosophy). Four, recreation – as in the pleasures and pastimes that keep our spirits up and allow for a level of unrestricted joy. We need recreation and entertainment just for the sake of it to give our minds time to relax outside of sleep. I think that trivial things are fine as long as that is not all someone does. Also, I think enabling others to perform worthwhile pursuits is a worthwhile pursuit (e.g. parenting).

The question is now why I think those are worthwhile? Perhaps a worthwhile pursuit is an action that helps fulfill our purpose in life. I loosely define my purpose in life to be happy. I am happy when I am doing something in one of those categories. This makes sense to me even though that is circular reasoning.

Part 19: The nineteenth entry deals with deciding upon a purpose in life:

I think that it is useless to plan out your entire life, but I wonder how much you should plan out, what is prudent and what is excessive. Obviously at some point plans will become meaningless because they are so far in the future, and there are entirely too many variables to be considered. Even the most carefully thought out plans are lacking at some point in the future. However, short term plans are very useful. They help steer and guide so that you aren't lost in the tedium of day to day activities. You should take heed of how you feel and what you're thinking about and allow that to be your guide. And if at some point, despite your best efforts, you've found that you've taken a misstep, you can always go take a few steps back and continue. The beauty of life is that you can always change your mind.

While I don't think you need to have an ultimate goal or accomplishment in mind, I do think everyone needs a purpose in life. If that purpose is to figure out what your purpose is then that is fine, but really living a contemplative life, one of the things I think leads to happiness, means trying to figure out what your purpose is and then acting out that purpose. However, your purpose doesn't have to be some lofty ideal. I believe that loosely my purpose is several fold: One, my first purpose is to be happy, not a just a physical happy, but a psychological happy as well. Two, a purpose of thought, to be self aware and constantly questioning what it is I believe and do, and if this questioning leads me away or towards religion then so be it. Three, to return what I have been given (whether by divinity or chance or fate) to the people around me, that can be through my

talents, actions, personality, and words - to make other people around me better off and happier than they were.

Perhaps your purpose could be achieving set ambitions and goals. Perhaps it doesn't matter as long as you are determined to figure out what that purpose is eventually. I for one know that I always feel very fulfilled when I do critically think about my existence.

Part 20: The twentieth entry concerns happiness:

My friend began by saying that there is more happiness than merely the secretion of chemicals in the brain cause by pleasure. She suggested that because we are a social species an activity that brings an individual pleasure may not cause happiness because that activity is "socially unacceptable, considered useless, or somehow otherwise doesn't fit in with what our higher reasoning values". For something to make you happy it must make you happy on an individual level and be acceptable socially and be valued to you on a higher reasonable level. These activities will depend on the individual and depend on social influences and culture. Some are happy doing trivial things or happy doing socially frowned upon things because they've "eliminated internal conflict, either by changing what they do or by changing what they value".

I answered by describing what some other have thought of happiness:

Aristotle considers happiness the contemplative life, specifically contemplating what truths there are in the universe. "the life according to reason is best and pleasantest, since reason more than anything else is man. This life therefore is also the happiest."

Eudoxus thought that happiness was pleasure. Pleasure being an object of choice, and an object of choice is 'excellent' and good, and because he saw that all things move towards and do what they find pleasurable, pleasure must be the chief end and goal. This is however a fallacious argument, appealing to the masses.

Aristotle also thought that happiness was doing noble and good acts because they are self sufficient (i.e. that they are ends to themselves and "do not lack anything" [whatever that means]). It was also widely agreed upon that you need to have other people around to be happy-to contemplate life with, to do pleasurable things with, to do noble acts with.

Also I would say that if pleasure is the sole avenue towards happiness then it is obvious why no one is happy all the time. Pleasure is the result of an activity. Simply because we are human, we cannot be pursuing activity all the time; we get tired. Thus pleasure cannot be continuous and then happiness is not continuous.

So after all of this, I would say that happiness is a combination of things: pleasure, amusement, contemplation, and the achievement of "good" things. Where a good thing is an end which is noble, virtuous and helps people. I also think that some are content in simple pleasure and amusement because they don't have contemplation and good things. I also think that many are addicted to simple pleasure and thus don't care about the contemplative life. Lastly, I think that to be happy you must have a combination of all those things I mentioned above-one or two won't really cut it.

I know I am sounding like an expert on this, and perhaps I'm just trying to be an expert on my own happiness and generalizing it to everyone else. But I think that I'll find it much easier to achieve happiness if I understand what it is, even if it is just my own personal happiness and not some universal truth, which I don't believe exist anyway.

Part 21: In this, the twenty-first entry, I decide that happiness is a process:

Happiness is a process. You attain a level of achievement, become satisfied that you have done a "good" thing and then move on to a higher level of achievement (for example, like a destitute wanting to eat, then learning a trade, then buying a home, then collecting stamps as a hobby). We are never tired of being happy because there is always another level of achievement to shoot for. And when I say level of achievement, I don't mean some existential spiritual state. I am speaking of a state of being. Because happiness is a process, trying to do things that make other people happy is not what someone should do to makes themselves happy. Everyone is at a different level of achievement, and I would think that no two people are ever at the same level of achievement, therefore happiness is unique to the individual. Also, some people never get beyond a certain level of achievement and once you reach that point you are happy performing the same process over and over again (e.g. a person sticking with the same hobby for their entire life) A lot of the time though the person will

move on to another level and find happiness doing another thing like moving on to collecting coins instead of stamps. (I think I should clarify, I don't necessarily think one level of achievement is better than another because who am I to say so. I am talking about different levels being higher than one another because it is easier for me to visualize moving on from one object of happiness to another) The point is that we are always striving to get to a new level of achievement. And these levels can branch and cause you to try new things and do new things. Happiness is a process.

I think the question is not what makes us happy?, but what are "good things" one does to become happy? I think that doing those good things is what makes a person happy. I believe that those good things are different for every person, and because I'm a different person now than when I was even a couple of seconds ago, those good things change very quickly. Perhaps that's why different "good things" cause different levels of happiness at different times and why we are happy doing different things, or that we feel like performing one hobby or "good" act instead of another. When we are at a different time we are a different person, and that person has a different want, a different "good" act to perform.

So what are those good things? I believe these are set on several levels: biological, philosophical and societal, so there is no set list of things to that a person can strive for to perform those good acts that will make them happy. Although I'm tempted to try to categorize the possible good things, I think that would be a waste of time. So just to give a definition of a good thing: a good thing is an object of one's attention that causes or aids in the continuation of happiness, where happiness is a state of being characterized by contentment and satisfaction of one's life. However, there is something I can't seem to quantify in addition to that. I don't like my definition of happiness. It seems there should be more to it than that. But I need some sort of definition to start.

Part 22: The twenty-second entry is on adulthood:

What makes a person an adult? Is it maturity, whatever that is? Is it education, wisdom, age alone? Is it simply earning the respect of people around you?