

Noesis

**The Journal of the Mega Society
Issue #204, December 2018**

Contents

About the Mega Society		2
Editorial	Kevin Langdon	3
Old Cat Ollie, and the Price of Compassion	Jeffrey Matucha	5
Interview with Rick Rosner (Part Nine)	Rick Rosner & Scott Douglas Jacobsen	8
God Formula	Marcel Feenstra	17
Why Do Atheists Celebrate Thanksgiving Day?	James Kulacz	20
Obscure Words and Facts Analogies, II	Jeff Ward	22
Another Set of OW&F Analogies	Werner Couwenbergh	22
A Third Set of Analogies	Ken Shea	23
A Chess Problem	Jeff Ward	23
Is Physics Becoming Art at the Limits of Scale?	May-Tzu	24
“Physical Laws” As Sampling Error	May-Tzu	24

About the Mega Society

The Mega Society was founded by Dr. Ronald K. Hoeflin in 1982. The 606 Society (6 in 10⁶), founded by Christopher Harding, was incorporated into the new society and those with IQ scores on the Langdon Adult Intelligence Test (LAIT) of 173 or more were also invited to join. (The LAIT qualifying score was subsequently raised to 175; official scoring of the LAIT terminated at the end of 1993, after the test was compromised). A number of different tests were accepted by 606 and during the first few years of Mega's existence. Later, the LAIT and Dr. Hoeflin's Mega Test became the sole official entrance tests, by vote of the membership. Later, Dr. Hoeflin's Titan Test was added. (The Mega was also compromised, so scores after 1994 are currently not accepted; the Mega and Titan cutoff is now 43—but either the LAIT cutoff or the cutoff on Dr. Hoeflin's tests will need to be changed, as they are not equivalent.)

Mega publishes this irregularly-timed journal. The society also has a (low-traffic) members-only e-mail list. Mega members, please contact the Editor to be added to the list.

For more background on Mega, please refer to Darryl Miyaguchi's "A Short (and Bloody) History of the High-IQ Societies"—

<http://archive.today/K32e>

—the Editor's High-IQ Societies page—

<http://www.polymath-systems.com/intel/hiqsocs/index.html>

—and the official Mega Society page,

<http://www.megasociety.org/>

Noesis is the journal of the Mega Society, an organization whose members are selected by means of high-range intelligence tests. Jeff Ward, 13155 Wimberly Square #284, San Diego, CA 92128, is Administrator of the Mega Society. Inquiries regarding membership should be directed to him at the address above or:

ward-jeff@san.rr.com

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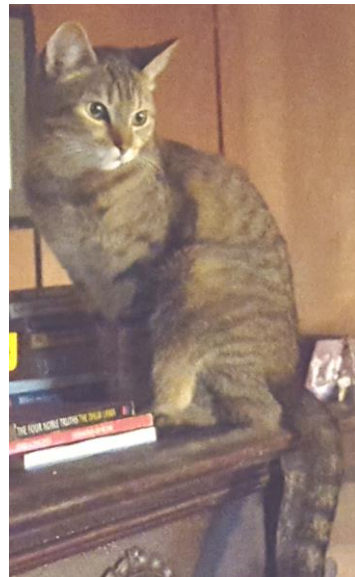
Editorial

Kevin Langdon

The first piece in this issue is “Old Cat Ollie, and the Price of Compassion,” by Jeffrey Matucha, a moving tribute to a much-loved pet.

Jeff is my son-in-law. He lived with us until a few months ago and still comes by every few days.

When we adopted two older cats Jeff called them Ollie and Sparky while my wife Virginia and I called them Blacky and Stripey. Stripey still lives with us. Here are photos of both cats:



I was with Ollie when he died, peacefully, in our front yard. Sparky came along and sniffed noses with him just a few minutes earlier.

A photo of our cat, Jadzia, mentioned in Jeff’s article, appeared on the back page of *Noesis* #183. (Her littermate, Bashir, appeared on the back page of *Noesis* #184. He was, unfortunately, run over on a nearby street a few months before we lost Jadzia.)

Next up is Part Nine of the long interview with Rick Rosner by Scott Douglas Jacobsen, from the *In-Sight* journal site—

<http://in-sightjournal.com/>

—where the interview originally appeared.

In this section of the interview Rick speaks about “informational ethics,” which reminds me of the Buddhist principles of wisdom and compassion. To do good one must understand other people and their needs, and to understand others more than superficially one must come to a deep understanding of oneself.

Rick speaks about the mysteries of consciousness and death in an appropriately tentative way, pointing out how little we know about our place and the place of other sentient beings in relation to these phenomena.

Rick discusses what he anticipates will be the very major effect of artificial intelligence on human society over the next few decades, and the ethical questions which this gives rise to. He goes on to recommend becoming as familiar as possible with the new technological world we’re all living in now and in which we will progressively be more immersed in the future, for one’s own sake and the sake of the society of which one is a part.

Finally, Rick speaks about his quest for fame and the work he’s done to bring him the recognition he craves, including his career in show business and his work on a theory of everything..

Next there’s a short science fiction story, “God Formula,” by Marcel Feenstra.

Then we have a thoughtful essay, “Why Do Atheists Celebrate Thanksgiving Day?”, by James Kulacz.

We have three sets of analogies, by Jeff Ward, Werner Couwenberg, and new Mega member Ken Shea, and a chess problem by Jeff Ward. Solutions to all will appear in *Noesis* #205.

To conclude this issue we have two very brief thought-provoking essays by May-Tzu (Richard May).

And, as usual, please submit material for our next issue, tentatively planned for March 2019.

On another subject, our Internet Officer has placed many issues of *Noesis* on our website, but many issues are still missing. I’d like to ask our long-time members if they have any of the missing issues in their archives. And any member can help us with the related task of creating an index, by author, title, and issue number, of the contributions contained in each issue of *Noesis*.

Cover: “Last Sacrifice,” by my sister’s husband, Vincent J. Zukowski. Vince wrote:

Background is watercolor design. Then, the figures are drawn from the background. Finally, another layer of water color is placed to help figures emerge or balance the drawing.

Illustration on page 20 by the Editor.

Old Cat Ollie, and the Price of Compassion

Jeffrey Matucha
September 3, 2017

Last year my cat Jadzia went missing, and I searched everywhere for her. No body in the surrounding areas, no cat, nothing. She just disappeared. (Yes, she is chipped.)

My search for Jadzia involved repeated visits to many of the area animal shelters, especially the one in Berkeley California, my hometown. (We never found her. She's still missing more than a year later.) There were two cats who were always there when I went to visit this shelter in Berkeley. They were always in a larger kennel with several other cats. One was a big black cat with a white "beard" who always looked as if he were scowling. The other was a slim and small tabby.

The volunteers told me they had both been there for months, having come in at the same time. Many cats had been adopted since they had gotten there, but they were both still there.

After seeing them still there again and again, I decided maybe it was time to help them out. I visited them in their kennel, and they were both very nice cats. The little tabby, who would eventually be named Sparky, was very friendly and playful. The big black guy, later to be named Ollie, was an older cat. They estimated that he was around fifteen years old. He was affectionate and liked to be petted, but it was obvious he was an elderly cat. He had a few health problems, which was not surprising given his age, but we decided to adopt him anyway.

Ollie was an active cat, and a gentle giant. He liked to lay on top of people. (Oof! He was a big cat.) At first he was kept inside, but gradually he got to go outside. Our house is in the Berkeley hills next to a creek bed, and there are plenty of places for a wandering cat to go and be entertained, and lots of places for cats to flop out in the sun. The people at the shelter told us about both cats: Sparky had been abandoned in an apartment. The landlord found him there after some tenants had moved out. But Ollie's owners had passed away, and had apparently spoiled him. They had rigged up an elaborate series of mesh tunnels, netted areas, and tents so he could go outside of the house without wandering too far away. The animal control officer who had picked him up said he was quite impressed. He said the entire contraption was quite elaborate, and must have cost at least a grand to build.



Ollie in a basket

We didn't have an elaborate series of mesh tunnels and tents or anything, but we did let him go outside after awhile. He wouldn't go very far, sticking close to the house. He liked to lay in the sun or on the brick porch. It got to the point where he got to go outside regularly. (At least in the daytime. We kept the cats inside at night because our area has coyotes.)

A few months ago Ollie started developing problems. He was slowing down and losing weight, and then he started retaining fluids. The vet said it was his heart, and they prescribed a series of medications which kept Ollie going for awhile, but they were not optimistic, and for good reason. Ollie passed away this past week, only ten months after we adopted him.

Ollie had technically passed on because of congestive heart failure, but he was simply an old cat and it was his time. He obviously was very spoiled by his previous owners, neither of whom manage to outlive their beloved cat. It is quite likely that if I had not gotten Ollie out of the shelter he might have spent the rest of his life there. I used to be a volunteer at a shelter. Adult cats are hard to adopt out. Elderly cats even more so. Kittens fly out the door; you can't keep kittens around, but the older the cat the less likely they are to be adopted.

It was hard to see him go, but we knew what we were getting into. He was not long for this world, but instead of being cooped up inside a kennel at the

shelter he got to go outside, lay on top of people, get lots of petting, and be with his buddy from the shelter. As we laid him down to rest, I wondered what his previous owners would have thought of his fate, that someone had gotten their cat out of the shelter and managed to spoil him in his last year here on Earth. I hope that they would be happy to know how he got to live out his last year without them.

It's an emotional toll, to lose a pet. Every passing takes a little piece out of you and makes the world look a little different. Ollie was no exception to that rule. But we did it. We set a big friendly cat free and let him really live, even though we knew the price would be an all-too-quick heartbreak. It's a burden, and it's hard to ask other people to take on that kind of burden, but I really believe more people need to do things like this. Get the kittens for sure, but pick up an older guy if you can, and get him out of that shelter and let an old cat enjoy the rest of its time.



Ollie hanging out in the yard. He really liked warm days when he could bask in the sun.

Interview with Rick Rosner by Scott Douglas Jacobsen (Part Nine)

ABSTRACT

Part nine of eleven, comprehensive interview with Rick G. Rosner. ex-editor for Mega Society (1991-97), and writer. He discusses the following subject-matter: individual-based/subjective, universe-based/objective, and collective-based ethics, *Social Contract Theory* of Thomas Hobbes (*Leviathan*, 1651), John Locke (*Second Treatise of Government*, 1689), Jean Jacques-Rousseau (*The Social Contract*, 1762), Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (*General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*, 1851), John Rawls (*Theory of Justice*, 1971), David Gauthiers (*Morals By Agreement*, 1986), and Philip Pettit (*Republicanism*, 1997), with discussion on social ethics in essence “boiling down” to the *Golden Rule*; ethics in journalism with respect to acquisition, collation, and reportage, definition of a “real” journalist, Dr. Steven J. Pinker on the improved conditions for humans, and informational ethics in relation to sociocultural trends; motivation of intellectuals for the good, troubles in academia with description of differing cultural/ethical systems transformed into prescription of cultural/ethical relativism – no scale to ethics or cultures, and things for intellectuals to do in the immediate future for the good; Academia’s two dominant ideological strains of “bland multiculturalism” and “ethical relativism,” and reference back to thinking about the future; mobilization of intellectuals for the good in the long-term; possible prevention of this good; and thoughts on ethics of focus on one person with reflection on the personal desire for fame.

Keywords: collective, ethics, fame, good, informational cosmology, informational ethics, intellectuals, journalism, Mega Society, mind-space, objective, Rick G. Rosner, subjective, writer.

89. Ethics at the individual-based/subjective (C_n^E) scale relates to the universe-based/objective scale (C^E). Everything might appear abstract. Not so, informational ethics would clarify social ethics too.

Social ethics equates to collective-based ethics. A superset of C_n^E . A group of individuals with different, similar, or the same ethics within each possible superset. All of this would provide new clarification of the terminology in ethics.

Universe-based ethics means objective; collective-based ethics means universal; individual-based means subjective. More vogue ethics relate to social context and universal ethics such as *Social Contract Theory* of Thomas Hobbes (*Leviathan*, 1651), John Locke (*Second Treatise of Government*, 1689), Jean Jacques-Rousseau (*The Social Contract*, 1762), Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (*General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*, 1851), John Rawls (*Theory of Justice*, 1971), David Gauthiers (*Morals By Agreement*, 1986), and Philip Pettit (*Republicanism*, 1997).

Collectives and individuals can exist out of sync with the greatest possible criterion for ethics (C^E) in informational ethics. They might have greater or lesser correspondence in actions and choices with C^E , and, therefore, more moral or immoral behavior. Degree of moral and immoral dependent upon correspondence with C^E .

Informational ethics clarifies the variant and invariant aspects of ethics. A comprehensive and coherent consideration of ethics. Social ethics pertains to the many-valued middle between individual-based/subjective and universe-based/objective ethics.

A more prosaic consideration of this issue with one question: what equates to the right action in the immediate social context?

I suppose that informational ethics in a social context boils down to something like the golden rule – treat others how you’d want to be treated. Often, a tacit or explicitly stated argument for the inconsiderate treatment of others is that the others don’t have fully developed consciousness – they’re dumb or animal-like. However, if consciousness is a technical-not-mystical thing that’s commonly found in systems with wide-angle information-sharing, then you can assume that you can find consciousness in many of the places you’d suspect you could find it – in other people, for instance, and in animals with decent-sized brains.

In an even smaller nutshell – don’t break stuff. That is, don’t unnecessarily destroy things that may be valued by other conscious beings.

But there’s a huge caveat to all of this. Under informational cosmology, consciousness is a not-too-hard-to-achieve technical phenomenon which arises frequently in the universe. In terms of time and space as we experience it, it’s a rare thing – it shows up on this planet, and suppose, in the closest other instance, it emerged 32 light years (and 700 million years ago) on some other planet – but in terms of sheer numbers, it probably shows up a bunch. Figure our universe creates 10^{20} habitable planets per every 20 billion years, and conscious life arises on one half of one percent of such planets. This would mean that conscious life arises somewhere in the universe an average of nearly once a second.

Conscious life could be, in terms of the sheer number of times it arises, fantastically common. Does that make it less magical? Not necessarily, in that consciousness may be linked to the existence of everything. Not that rocks and trees and Gaia are individually conscious, but that matter is information that’s part of the mind/information-space of the (conscious) universe itself. At the same time, our individual consciousnesses are rough-grained and piddly compared to a universe-sized consciousness. And when an individual consciousness ends, the good and bad things experienced within that consciousness may be completely erased. When a factory-farmed pig leads a thoroughly miserable life and then is killed, there’s no vessel in which the pig’s misery lives on. So does the pig’s misery ultimately matter? Do the good and bad we experience ultimately matter? We just don’t know yet.

We can imagine a set of all possible moments in a mind/information space (with informational cosmology suggesting that such moments are the only context in which things can exist). There are strong probabilistic linkages among such moments, experienced as individual consciousnesses' world-lines. Among animals and primitive naturally arising civilizations, death means the end of a world-line. But in more advanced civilizations, there can be technical resurrection and virtual creation – moments of consciousness and world-lines can be artificially created. So death may not exactly be Game Over. (Though it still may be Game Over. What are the odds that some civilization will resurrect virtual pigs in cyberspace?) Given the possibility of artificial resurrection, we can't rule out the possibility that what's experienced in a world-line has some significance beyond that world-line. There's the obvious significance of the good you do in the world lasting beyond your death. And there's the yet-to-be-explored probabilistic math of how mind-space moments relate to each other beyond the natural moment-to-moment linking along world-lines. Looking into this will be complicated and never-ending. In the meantime, try not to be a dick.

90. Ethics appears more in the fore of the public conversation – for the better. I do not know the precise state of journalism, but I do have many suspicions. Suspicions with respect to acquisition, collation, and reportage from popular news venues. Most venues seem trivial, content with shameless hyperbole and political bias, celebrity gossip, inaccuracies or, worse yet, ignorant and callous; ignorance and a hard edge become the harvesting ground for cynical charlatans, liars, mountebanks, swindlers, and sophists. A phenomenon hastened by continuous motion into a service economy. How else for their jobs to persist? They malignantly grow on ignorance, unconcern for others, and non-production – a modicum of wellbeing from solace at times, but not much else.

Possible amusement in consideration of the reality, but more distress because of the deleterious effect on popular discourse. I quote Malcolm X: “The media is the most powerful entity on earth... they control the minds of the masses.” We should respect media more. Media should conduct themselves with more wisdom. Not an easy task. It becomes a ubiquitous pattern of inaccurate representation. Not aimed at reportage with high correspondence to *objective truth* (which exists – sorry to burst bubbles), but in apparent intent to create an image of how things can *seem* true.

A real journalist seems demonized, wrongly – but expectedly, into obscurity. What do I mean by “real”? “Real” lives next door to “true.” A journalist collects, collates, and summarily reports. Within this framework, a “real journalist” collects, collates, and summarily reports the truth. One might add – for explicit clarity – “...without obfuscation, lies, leniencies, allegiances, and onward in the list of foul behaviour in the name of public (or more appropriately self-) service.” I write in such frank tones because of the immense responsibilities and duties concomitant with roles in the media – at all levels, especially for journalists.

According to Johnstone Family Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, Dr. Steven J. Pinker, we live in the most peaceful times of humankind, which he

described at length in *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence has Declined* (2011). Other troubles exist and persist (more later).

Without common diversionary tactics or redirecting attention from particular groups, even excuses for infliction of suffering upon other human beings, terrorist activity from fundamentalist national and religious groups, killing without trial in violation of international human rights, and law, by some countries, organizations, and individuals, and variegated forms of subjection, general thralldom, or objectification of women depending on the history, nation, culture, context, people, and motivations, ethics emerges in each of these particulars and their innumerable interactions – acknowledging far more numerous other instances without explicit statement, how does an information-based perspective in ethics relate to sociocultural trends?

In addition to the long-term trend of science moving humanity away from the center of the universe, there's a long-term social trend of admitting that an increasingly large sphere of people deserve civil rights, with an implied acknowledgment that different groups – women, minorities, LGBT people – think and feel on a par with members of the most empowered class. Informational cosmology will reinforce that process. It will lead to the mathematization of consciousness and, by 2050 or so, we'll be able to estimate the size of thinking systems. (We'll have a number of pairs of numbers which will reflect the size of an information-space.)

Having a numerical idea of the size of thinking systems and mathematical models of such systems will inform ethical questions. Is it wrong to make a chicken, with its mind-space of size X, suffer? What about a cow? A whale? A robot companion? Is it cruel to deprive someone of his AI brain booster, reducing the size of his mind-space by two-thirds? Should a copy of a deceased person's mind-space, downloaded with 92% accuracy while he was still alive, have legal rights? Should it continue to receive a pension? Should it be able to vote? Should it be able to own things? Should video games be allowed to incorporate AIs which think and feel? How much privacy should be given to individuals' mind-spaces? Who should be allowed to have cyber-immortality? Should reengineering of criminals' mental landscapes to remove criminal tendencies replace punishment?

All these and many more questions about AIs and boosted brains are familiar to anyone who's interested in science fiction. Informational cosmology will help clarify what thinking and consciousness are and will encourage and facilitate the creation of artificial and add-on thinking systems.

Our world will have more and more embedded computing devices – people (who watch TED talks) are calling it “the internet of things,” “ubiquitous computing,” “the world waking up.” Many of these devices will be of sufficient complexity that they can be said to think, which will raise a zillion new questions of ethics and etiquette. And we won't have time to adequately answer these questions before new stuff comes along. We'll be playing catch-up, at least until someone develops MannersMaster, an AI specialist system brain add-on. “MannersMaster has manners, so you don't have to! Order now, and we'll include MannersMaster Junior, absolutely free!”

I imagine a science-fiction story in which every animal above a certain level of complexity has had its intelligence boosted.

[Editor's note: There is such a science fiction story, though the intelligence boost is natural rather than human-created, Brain Wave, by my late friend Poul Anderson.]

Their lives become a mix of their old ways of being and new behaviors prompted by their expanded cognition. When one animal kills another, the killer is obligated to absorb and incorporate the life experience – the mental record – of the animal it's killing. (This is also how vampires should work. Nanobots, injected via the vampire's bite, map the victim's brain. The victim lives on, along with a chorus of other victims, in the vampire's brain.) I don't imagine this will really happen – it's just fun to think about. However, eventually we'll have dogs and cats that live for 40 years and have the intelligence of kindergarteners (and little articulated paws for posting their selfies on Instagram for Pets).

91. You spoke in another venue for motivating intellectuals into a force for good. Difficulties exist in mobilization of intellectuals for the good. Formal, mainstream intellectuals, i.e., a majority of Academia, seem to have two dominant ideological strains: bland multiculturalism and moral relativism. A broad conceptualization would depict these two in generalized, merged terms: difference in cultural/ethical systems transformed into prescription of cultural/ethical relativism – no scale to ethics or cultures. Ethics becomes a human construction; in contradistinction to this ubiquitous academic position, informational ethics necessitates otherwise – described earlier.

Together, these have crippled effective ethical calculations and implementations in and from the Academy in many instances. Organizations external to Academia could form, organize, strategize, and implement various plans of action to counteract these rather negative developments. Trouble with this, the majority of funding, support, and advertisement goes towards mainstream academics.

If we wish to create a force of good from intellectuals, in and out of the ivory tower, we might need to erase or modify these ideological programs based on their failure to intake large quantities of ethically relevant information and compute this into effective action to solve problems inside and outside the university system. I do not state this with the intention to demean any particular person or group.

Either through tacit approval or passive negligence, all – interviewer included – have failed to combat the morally crippling effects of these two ideological strains in conjunction. Intellectuals have more foundational work to complete in this light. What can intellectuals begin to do in the immediate as a force for good?

I'll say again that people need to think about the changes the future will bring. The future will be increasingly focused on thinking, computing, and sharing information. It could be helpful to start thinking about the risks and benefits of this kind of future before it arrives.

Here's how we might think about and prepare for the future:

If you're in the arts, make stories set in the near-future. Picturing the near-future is hard, because it doesn't exist yet, and it has a lot of moving parts. But people will love you for taking on the future. Look at *Star Trek* – it's been around for 48 years, has spawned a bunch of series and movies, and is universally known and widely beloved, and it does a half-assed job at best of presenting the future.

Acquire scientific and technical literacy. The future's not gonna get *less* filled with high-tech geegaws. Everybody should understand this stuff, so we can distinguish reasonable approximations of the truth from nonsense and don't get fooled by bad actors – sleazy corporations, sneaky government programs – hiding behind lies. C'mon – if you can understand the math of fantasy football, you can track trends in tech.

Sharpen and systematize our predictions of the future. We do a lot of predicting of election and sports results. We don't do much predicting of the future in general. We use Moore's Law to determine how small and cheap and powerful our devices will become. Futurists like Ray Kurzweil have their timelines full of predictions. But we don't have a good overall consensus landscape of how the future might unfold. A consensus landscape would of course be wrong about a bunch of things, maybe most things, but at least it would give us practice at thinking about and getting ahead of possible issues. We're doing a crap job of addressing global warming. Idiots and shysters are still arguing that doing anything about it is playing into some liberal, big-government scam, and those arguments seem as if they'll continue for years to come, even as increasingly obvious effects become apparent. What will happen if that kind of paralysis-by-bullshit is allowed to play out with a faster-moving problem?

Call out cynical stupidity and anti-scientific bias in the media. News channels are full of false balance or false equivalence, with a sensible argument on one side and idiots spouting bullshit on the other, presented as equal in merit. We should be less afraid to call stupidity stupid.

If we don't do the work of visualizing the future, it will be built for us in ways that will be less to our liking.

92. What about the long-term? How can those with particular gifts and talents contribute to society?

John Maynard Keynes said, "In the long run we are all dead." The era of people with exceptional natural talents may be, in the not so long run, over. In some important ways, we're living at the beginning of the end of the world. It's premature to call this the end of human civilization and the beginning of post-human civilization, but it's not *that* premature. The science fiction future is coming. It won't be much about Mars colonies and gyrocopters. The future will be the rise of computation, with everyone being nodes in a network of stuff that thinks.

Natural talents won't translate directly into the world of pervasive computing. The new talented might be people who figure out the most effective ways to team up or merge with technology. The most effective talents change from era to era. My friend Lance Richlin, who's skilled in Old-Masters-style painting and who painted the portrait of me which begins each part of this interview, scrambles to make a living. Four hundred years ago, his painting skill would have made him wildly successful and highly renowned.

[Editor's note: This painting appeared with the first few parts of the interview in Noesis but is not repeated in each issue.]

Andy Warhol was a talented illustrator, but he found great success in putting aside illustration to concentrate on the role of celebrity in pop culture. Jeff Koons is an artist-technologist, developing novel high-tech methods to create works of kitsch which acquire grace and grandeur through their sheer size and precision.

In the long run, contributions to society will come from people who find and create creative niches in the computational world. Old niches will remain for traditional artists, writers, performers, but many more new niches will open up as the world becomes more saturated with cheap computing. There will be room and need for both creators and artistic interpreters of computation-intensive technology. So, once again, my advice is to stay current on technology. And don't be afraid to do stupid stuff – powerful technology brings with it powerful frivolity, which often turns out to have seriously transformative effects – Twitter and other social media as tools against political repression, for instance.

93. Insofar as ethics concerns individuals' focus on one person, this collective drain of attentional, emotional, and sometimes intellectual resources might work for good or bad, which relates to an astonishing and relatively pervasive celebrity culture devoid of a single scintilla of responsibility – even with a lack of basic knowledge about risks associated with the potential for creation of an idol without grounds. You comment on this celebrity culture within some of the discussion for prior parts of the interview.

Most people do not deserve such status because most do not earn it. Further, most fail to heed risks and steward responsibilities implicated within increased attention, admiration, and general expenditure of collective time and resources on them. Entrusted power means privilege; privilege implies responsibility; responsibility proportional to privilege, and therefore responsibility proportional to entrusted power.

In point of fact, you desire fame – have for decades. You spend lots of time in this pursuit. As noted, responsibilities and risks come with it. Based on the quotation of Eugene Wigner from me and your return with the quote of Albert Einstein, I return the ball to you with a minor note from *Ideas and Opinions* (1954) by Einstein in print:

The cult of individuals is always, in my view, unjustified. To be sure, nature distributes her gifts unevenly among her children. But there are plenty of

well-endowed, thank God, and I am firmly convinced that most of them live quiet, unobtrusive lives. It strikes me as unfair, and even in bad taste, to select a few of them for boundless admiration, attributing superhuman powers of mind and character to them. This has been my fate, and the contrast between the popular estimate of my powers and achievements and the reality is simply grotesque.

—Einstein, 1954

I observe near-universal tendencies in others and yourself. What do people want in life? Lots of things. You want to be understood, liked, and respected – in no particular order. Why the desire for fame – even glory? Does this not appear proud or hubristic?

I agree with Einstein that the structure of fame rests on a rotten foundation, since every characteristic on which fame can be based is the result of luck, even traits that don't seem like special gifts, such as persistence or conscientiousness. But fame being based on luck doesn't imply a moral prohibition against trying to become famous. Many famous people who complain about fame probably secretly or not-so-secretly enjoy its benefits.

Starting when I was young, I wanted fame for at least three reasons – respect, understanding, and a girlfriend. I was nerdy at a time when nerdy wasn't at all cute. I sometimes felt picked-on. Whenever allowed, I stayed inside at recess and read. From constant reading and looking at *Mad* magazine and *National Lampoon* and accidentally being exposed to a book of Victorian pornographic writing (and having cute third- and fourth-grade teachers), I became aware of women's sexual desirability by age nine, which is way too young to do anything about it, especially when you're a geek.

So I wanted to be famous. I didn't want to be picked-on, and I wanted a girlfriend. I figured that my shot at recognition would be through figuring out the universe.

I've always been a little weird. Not so much eccentric-for-attention (though I do like attention) but rather, having my own ways of doing things which make sense to me but seem nuts to everyone else – taking 70 pills a day, going to the gym 5 times a day, having an OCDish preference for turning clockwise. Always figured if I were famous my quirks would be understood and perhaps accepted. Instead of “What's up with that weirdo?” it'd be “Hey, there's that guy who does that stuff.”

I've been pretty successful without being famous. Been married for nearly 24 years. Am a parent of a lovely daughter. Have been a TV writer for more than 25 years, contributing to 2,500 hours of network television and being nominated for six Writers Guild Awards and an Emmy. Am generally thought of by people who know me as not especially a prick or a douche.

I'm past the point of wanting celebrity in order to get a girlfriend. But I still want to be famous. Have had brushes with fame – was in an Errol Morris documentary, have been in three TV pilots which, like most pilots, didn't go anywhere, occasionally get to be in a

news article. None of these has caused me to reach a self-sustaining level of fame, where you get to stay famous by virtue of being famous.

But now, I kind of really want/need to be famous. I lost my longest-lasting, best TV-writing job a few months ago and am screwed when it comes to (easily) getting more TV work (even though I'm a proven writer). Met with an agent at a big agency. He said that he can't represent me unless I have a spec sitcom pilot. But if I take a couple months and write a spec pilot, all that would do, if the agent indeed would rep me, would be to get my stuff into a stack of 200 or so submissions, out of which 1 or 2 percent of the submitters might be hired. I want to stand out from the hundreds of other submitters, and to do that, it would be helpful to have fame. (If I did write a spec pilot, it'd be about a weird genius dad with a normal family who thinks he's half-an-idiot. Write what you know.)

Genius is very popular on TV right now – two flavors of Sherlock Holmes, *The Big Bang Theory*, the team of super-geniuses on *Scorpion*, the genius forensic techs and profilers on every murder show. CBS alone must have more than a dozen actors playing geniuses. So I want to yell, “Yo! Over here, CBS – a real person who's gotten dozens of highest-ever scores on IQ tests, who has a theory of the universe that might not suck, who knows all the issues and behaviors associated with being a weird-ass brainiac, and who's written more TV than all but 60 or 80 people in the city of Los Angeles.”

It's not unreasonable for me to want recognition. You may have noticed that reality TV has made dozens and dozens and dozens of horrible people famous. At least my story is interesting. I'm not some Botox addict getting in a slap-fight at a wine-tasting. (But give me a chance – I'll do that.) Marilyn Savant has had a nice 30-year career based on having the world's highest IQ. My scores are higher than hers.

And let's say my theory of the universe is at least partially correct. It could lead to big steps forward in our understanding of the world and our place in it. It could help us figure out how to make our brains work better. If some fame draws some attention to the theory, then good.

If you've slogged through all of the interview up to this point, you should be able to tell that I'm not a BSer. I've spent decades trying to figure out how the universe works (when I haven't been writing Kardashian jokes), and I've come up with some stuff that I think merits some attention. Yeah, there's some “Hey – looka me!” in my fame-seeking. But, after working on a theory for 33 ½ years and having had a bunch of ridiculous mis-adventures, it doesn't make me a douche to want people to check out my stuff.



God Formula

Marcel Feenstra

“So, this is it?” said the physicist. “This is it,” said the angel.

They were standing in what appeared to be, at first sight, a living room, but what seemed, upon closer inspection, to be an office instead. Or perhaps it was a library. The walls were covered with books, from floor to bottom, and there was a small table, or desk, with a chair.

“No other people?” said the physicist. “Not a soul,” said the angel.

That could be a good sign, the physicist thought: perhaps this wasn't Hell after all. “While you should not believe everything you read,” said the angel who must have been reading his mind, “you have nothing to fear. You're not in Hell. Not in Heaven either, for that matter.”

The physicist felt relieved, even though he did not completely understand his predicament. He was dead, obviously, but at least he wasn't about to undergo eternal torture. Things could have been much, much worse.

“I must admit,” said the physicist, “that I don't quite understand why I am here. I have been an agnostic, if not an atheist, for most of my life. It did not take me long to realize that religion was just an invention to give meaning to life, a desperate attempt to understand the world.”

“Ha!” said the angel. “Do you really think that's different from what scientists do?” The physicist felt insulted that the angel equated science and religion; he wanted to give the same lecture about *theories* and *falsifiable predictions* that he had probably delivered countless times before, but it occurred to him that this might not be the time or the place to pick a fight.

“So, why am I here?”

The angel smiled mysteriously. “You are here because you were so very, very close. Of course, you had no idea, but your ideas and your formulas were beginning to coincide with reality. A few more years, and you might have gotten it exactly right.”

Damn: just a few more years, thought the physicist. He did not remember his age.

“As you've noticed, there are books around us. More than a thousand, to be precise. That's a lot for humans, and even for angels, but not for God, obviously.”

“Obviously,” said the physicist who had no idea where this was going.

“You had been working on the concept of *infinity reduction* –the idea that, in mathematics, a simple formula can describe, predict, or even create, an infinite number of cases. And you had wondered if the same principle could be applied to reality: if some formula, or set of formulas, much more complicated than the ones known to humanity, might explain the history, present and future of the entire universe. Well, you were right!”

The physicist could not remember the details of what he had been working on. Was it normal to forget things when you died?

“You were right, but you still had quite a long way to go. It *is* possible to formulate a Theory of Everything, or, as we prefer to say, to write down the God Formula, but it would take thousands of man-years. And a lot of space.”

The angel pointed at the books.

“Let’s say you knew the exact position of every subatomic particle at the beginning of time, the exact direction in which they were about to move, and the exact speed.”

He paused briefly to let his words sink in, but the physicist had no trouble following him; in fact, he already suspected what the angel would say next.

“And let’s say you also knew all the different rules that governed their interactions –even the quantum rules that you haven’t quite figured out yet, apparently— then you would be able to calculate, with infinite precision, the state of the universe at any point in time. You would know history, present and future.”

“Only if there was no randomness,” the physicist was quick to point out.

“The formula would cover randomness as well,” said the angel. “And ideally, it would not be necessary to calculate intermediary states. A bit like...”

He briefly paused again, as if he were looking for a good example.

“When you want to square a large number, you don’t have to square all the different numbers between zero and that number to get the correct result.” The physicist appreciated that the angel tried to simplify an extremely difficult concept so that he would understand it, but he wasn’t used to others talking down to him. More than once, he had been called the greatest mind of his generation, and he had the impression that this peculiar place enabled him to think more clearly than ever before. OK, he got it: a library full of books was needed to hold the God Formula.

“I understand that the formula is really, really long and extremely complicated, but why so *many* books? Why not a single, God-size volume?”

The physicist felt rather clever for asking that question, but the angel replied: “That wouldn’t be very manageable, now would it?” How could he know—perhaps God had huge hands, much larger than his own.

“Why am I here?” the physicist asked again.

“Oh God...” moaned the angel. “I think you will figure it out very quickly. I will leave you alone, so that you can concentrate, but I’ll be back in a week or so.” And away he was.

The physicist looked around the room. The books appeared to be leather-bound, as if they were part of a huge encyclopedia, but there was no text on the spines. No words, no numbers. Any volume could be the first or the last; there was no apparent order, if that concept even applied here.

He walked towards a corner of the room, reached for the top shelf and took out the leftmost book. If they followed normal convention in this place, he had a chance of one in four that this was where he should start. And if they didn’t, he thought, every choice was as good as any other.

The book was large and heavy. He carried it to the table and put it down, unopened. Then he sat down on the chair.

He was a bit nervous. He was about to see what no mortal had seen before. He was thinking much faster now than when he was alive, but still: would he understand? Would he know what was expected of him?

He took a deep breath and opened the book. An empty page stared back at him.

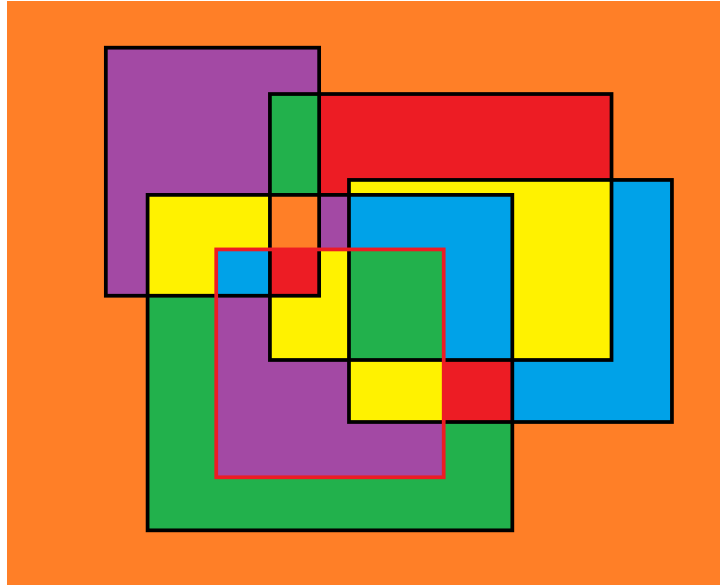
He leafed through the book, but every page he checked seemed white as virgin snow. He moved his face very close to the page, to see if perhaps it contained some minute print, but as far as he could tell there was not a single word. The book smelled like fresh paper, as if it had been created seconds ago, just for him.

This was extremely disappointing, the physicist thought. The angel had told him how close he had been, and while his memories of life before death were rapidly fading, he felt as if his intelligence was increasing by the minute –thoughts racing through his head, his brain almost about to explode. Pretty soon he might be smart enough to understand most, if not everything, of the God Formula.

He checked a few more pages, smelled the paper, even licked a page. Nothing.

The physicist started to feel a rage he had never experienced before. He was here for a reason! The angel would return in a week, and then what?

He banged his fist on the table. Only then did he notice the pen.



Why Do Atheists Celebrate Thanksgiving Day?

James Kulacz

A frequent argument which shows up from lots of apologists (including my E-mail) is what do atheists have to be thankful for on Thanksgiving Day?

This question is posited as an argument for God. Arguments of course are not evidence. Aside from that, the argument assumes that atheists cannot be thankful. It attempts to show atheists as hypocrites (a similar argument is used for celebrating Christmas Day).

Thanksgiving Day is essentially an end-of-harvest day. In the hagiography of the day in American culture, it was celebrated between colonists in Massachusetts Bay colony and Native Americans in the area in 1621, though there is little documentation this event actually occurred.

There is good documentation for the event in Virginia. The 1619 arrival of 38 English settlers at Berkeley Hundred in Charles City County, Virginia, concluded with a religious celebration as dictated by the group's charter from the London Company, which specifically required "that the day of our ships arrival at the place assigned ... in the land of Virginia shall be yearly and perpetually kept holy as a day of thanksgiving to Almighty God." (courtesy of Wikipedia)

The day is a Federal holiday in the United States, the fourth Thursday of November (today). US states celebrated the day sporadically on different days, though Evacuation Day was popular (the day the British Army was evacuated

after the Revolutionary War). President Abraham Lincoln called for a national day of Thanksgiving on the last Thursday of November in 1863. It was not celebrated during Reconstruction (the occupation of the rebellious states of Dixie following the end of the Civil War).

The day as it exists on the Federal calendar now only dates back to President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1939, when he changed it from the last Thursday to the fourth Thursday by proclamation. It was fixed by Congress on that day in 1941.

So what do atheists have to be thankful for, when we dont believe in any god? Why would we be thankful, and to whom?

I am thankful to live in a nation which is mostly at peace.

I am thankful for those who help maintain our society (whether police or teachers, military or doctors, &c).

For a bountiful harvest, and those who toiled long and hard to produce that (ranchers, farmers, farm workers, migrant workers, &c)

For those who bring that bounty to market (harvesters, transport drivers, stockyard and grain elevator workers, &c)

For those who make that bounty available (butchers and bakers, grocers and those who work in all those industries).

For my family, from whom I am separated over this holiday but love (my mother and step-father, my sister and my son).

For my friends, who agree and argue with me and have been supportive throughout my life.

But most of all for my wife, who is my partner-in-crime, my strength and support, and my love for as long as shell have me.

James, in Wyobraska

The practice of putting women on pedestals began to die out when it was discovered that they could give orders better from there. — Betty Grable

We should always watch how politicians treat refugees because that's how they would treat the rest of us if they thought they could get away with it.
— Neal Ascherson, UK journalist and author, commenting on the UKs refusal to allow war refugees from the Kosovo war and genocide (1998-1999)

Obscure Words and Facts Analogies, II

Jeff Ward

1. growing older : senescence :: growing younger : ?
2. man & horse : centaur :: man & goat : ?
3. man & horse : centaur :: lion, goat, & serpent : ?
4. deer : herd :: crows : ?
5. Hilton : Shangri-La :: McCutcheon : ?
6. Yap, Guam : Micronesia :: Madeira, Sao Tiago : ?
7. non-rectangular state flag : Ohio :: non-rectangular flag, member of the UN : ?
8. water surrounded by land : lake :: water surrounded by sea ice : ?
9. dog : canine :: squirrel : ?
also back for a second try, because no one got it last time:
10. dog : canine :: dodo : ?

Another Set of OW&F Analogies

Werner Couwenbergh

wcouwenbergh@gmail.com

1. Parmentier : Julienne :: Carré : ?
2. Fungi : Lichen :: Animals : ?
3. Read : Reckoning :: Wrote : ?
4. Open : Closed :: Dragon : ?
5. Venice : Bruges :: Firenze : ?
6. Depth : Aphorism :: Wit : ?
7. Word : Etymology :: Disease : ?
8. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland : Hole :: Mission: Impossible III : ?
9. Bulb : Sky :: Coin : ?
10. Logic : Sophism :: Interpretation of nature : ?
11. White : Colostrum :: Black : ?
12. Chicken : Egg :: Phenomenology : ?
13. Feather : Scale :: Phenix : ?
14. Absolute : Torino :: Relative : ?
15. Political : Aristotle :: Metaphysical : ?
16. Knot : Alexander :: Child : ?
17. Wise : Esoteric :: Holy : ?
18. Spartan : Tartan :: Charlatan : ?
19. Trivial : Road :: Profane : ?
20. Moon : Earthshine :: Pangea : ?
21. Birds : Archaeopteryx :: Tetrapods : ?
22. Electron : Chandrasekhar :: Neutron : ?
23. Birth : Tokology :: Archery : ?

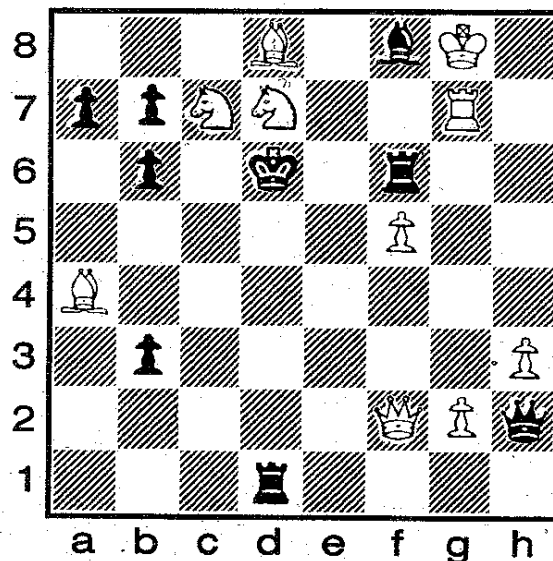
A Third Set of Analogies

Ken Shea

1. Jumbo Shrimp : Oxymoron :: No Small Feat : ?
2. Presentation : Exposition :: Reconciled Resolution : ?
3. Far : Ap- :: Near : ?
4. Money Supply : Monetarist :: Favorable Balance of Trade : ?
5. Idealized Image : Eidolon :: Supplemental Work : ?
6. Playbook : Repertoire :: Book of Spells : ?
7. Dilation : Contraction :: Time : ?
8. Tactfully Put : Euphemistic :: Wordy and True Regardless : ?
9. Eyes : Cries :: Hope : ?
10. Exchange of Favors : Quid Pro Quo :: Essential Piece : ?
11. Railroad : Compound :: Smog : ?
12. Sensory Mashup : Synesthesia :: Divine Food : ?
13. Set : Vespertinal :: Rise : ?
14. Government Seizure : Eminent Domain :: Magician's Swipe : ?
15. Legato : Staccato :: Bound : ?
16. Eye : Horse :: Hurricane : ?
17. Male : Female :: Avuncular : ?
18. Quantifies Risk : Actuary :: Engraves Stones : ?
19. Official Journal : Gazette :: Night Journal : ?
20. Hearsay : Anecdotal :: Holy Mediators : ?

A Chess Problem

Jeff Ward



White mates in 2. If White makes the correct first move, regardless of Black's response, White can checkmate on the following move.

Is Physics Becoming Art at the Limits of Scale?

May-Tzu

Conjecture: There are multiple if not an infinite number of mathematically self-consistent descriptions of physical reality at the extreme ends of scale (cosmology and quantum events), a subset of which may have varying degrees of predictive utility. It cannot be assumed a priori that only one self-consistent mathematical model of physical reality (which can be processed by the brains of homo sapiens and their AI artifacts) can isomorphically map physical reality at all levels of scale. That is, one complete self-consistent mathematical description of physical reality may not exist even in principle to be discovered. The limits of cosmological and quantum modeling may necessarily be only analogous to a neurologically species-limited art form, the medium of which is pure mathematics, rather than one complete, self-consistent description of physical reality. Our physical theories at the extreme ends of scale approach analogs of mathematical paintings of the landscape or spacetimescape of the universe, rather than the theoretical models of classical physics.

“Physical Laws” As Sampling Error

May-Tzu

There is no fundamental ordered physical reality. So-called “constants” are actually variables with a very slow rate of change at the level of scale of the “observer.” As in an infinite n-dimensional matrix of random numbers, every possible ordered series of numbers occurs somewhere by chance alone, there are pockets or subsets of *apparent* order within the multiverse at certain levels of scale. “Physical laws” and “observers,” themselves, are merely sampling errors within random subsets of data values at a particular level of spatio-temporal scale. This hypothesis cannot be disconfirmed within a finite interval of “time” at any level of scale. Propositions within physics cannot ultimately be disconfirmed, as there are propositions within a mathematical system that are true but cannot be proven, *a la* Kurt Goedel. Cosmos is chaos.

“A serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes”

—Ludwig Wittgenstein