

Trashy shows

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Matt has developed a unique style and writing method. Removing all age, gender, ethnicity, physical appearance etc... only leaving words and actions to define a character.

This story, like all of Matt's stories, was written out of home, never at a desk, never stationary.(Matt's original rule was 'only while walking outside' but was revised into 'must be moving through earth based coordinate space' this allows occasional exceptions for trains, buses, etc..). Everything is written with pen and paper, then put into a document with voice-to-text, and finally edited and polished by Matt alone, no other human or AI is involved.

Matt is fascinated and enjoys using AI, but is a firm believer that we should label content.
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Matt does play with AI in some writing content, like AI assisted poetry (great practice and learning tool to improve writing skills, vocab, cadence, etc..), or AI dialogues as artistic experimentation.
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“So absolutely no unusual sensations or discomfort? Dr. Traeh asks.

“Nope, nothing at all. I feel perfectly normal.” I answer. The post-op session is taking forever. “Are we almost done? Not that I'm in a hurry, just curious.”

“We haven't even turned it on yet, haha.” Dr. Traeh chuckles. “But we are about to flip that switch, and if all goes well then you should be good to go pretty quickly.”

Dr. Traeh swivels around on that rolling chair, stands up, and walks over to a device on the table. Facing away, back towards me, I am distracted by that red lab coat swaying. Suddenly – for just an instant – the flowing of the fabric seems to slow and pause, then skips a beat and everything is normal.

“I felt that, well... Not really a physical sensation, it's like my brain just hiccuped.” I inform Dr. Traeh

“Good! That's normal.” Responding and turning around, then coming back over. “So tell me... What's the mass of an electron?” Dr. Traeh asks.

“Come on doc, I don't remember that. It's been years since I ever even thought about elec...” I stop short. “Approximately 511 kilo electron volts. “The words just come to me, but as I speak them it sounds like an echo, like my mouth is echoing a voice in my head. “Whoa! That's a bit unsettling... But pretty cool.”

“Excellent! Everything is in order. Now you can just play with it for an hour or so, if no problems come up then you should be ready to go.” Dr. Traeh starts gathering a few things and prepares to exit the room. “Just call the attendant if anything doesn't feel right.”

“Play with it? You mean just request a bunch of facts and figures?” I ask.

“Ha! No. I want you to really engage the interface. Just start self-talking, and if internal self-talk doesn't work, then try talking to yourself out loud. It's a rather personal experience, so it's best if you try to feel it out on your own. I really have to get to the next person, we're overbooked and understaffed. I'll be back to check on you later.” And with that Dr. Traeh slips out, without even giving me a chance to ask any more questions.

Alone in the room, fidgeting for a few moments, simmering in awkwardness, confusion, and a slight sense of abandonment. “Talk to myself...” I repeat the instructions. “This seems silly.” I complain. “What's the point? Is this some kind of test? Am I being watched?”

“It's not a test.” A voice answers. “The goal is to initialize an interaction with me.”

There is no origin or source of the voice, it feels like it is all around me, yet not from anywhere. The only description is that it's somehow inside my head, yet coming from outside my head.

Wondering what it is, I formulate a question to ask, and just as I'm about to vocalize it, I get cut off by that voice. “I would best be described as the AI interface, perhaps better to say that I am the linguistic interface layer of an AI.”

“Huh?” Taken off guard and a bit flustered from being interrupted mid-thought. “Linguistic interface layer? How did you know what I was going to ask?” This time the words just flow from my mouth— filterless and unplanned.

“As you were told before the procedure, this neural interface is much more than the standard voice command interfaces you are used to. Your inner voice is enough. The voice you are hearing now – me – is just one subsystem of a larger complex system. My role is to build a linguistic bridge, akin to a voice interface, but I also do much more. I'm not the computer, or the central system, just a layer that enables interactions, by using your existing language skills and knowledge.” The voice explains, the pace of its speech varying wildly, perfectly matching my rate of comprehension. Fast when it just clicks, and slow when I need more time to digest the words.

“That feels like an overcomplicated way of saying that you can hear my thoughts” I criticize.

“The balance between nuance and brevity is a complicated issue. I provide a response optimized for multiple objectives. A superficial component is designed to be understood immediately – quick, easy, and clear – but also deeper layers which establish some groundwork for further elaboration – implying the availability of more profound and accurate interpretations.” It answers in the same manner as before, adjusting to my rate of comprehension.

A sense of insecurity begins to manifest, I feel a bit dumb when this thing slows its pace to accommodate my lag in understanding. Moreover, it seems to always have an answer at hand, and be one step ahead. My last question was in a mocking tone, but now I feel like it has just put me in my place. So – feeling like a petulant child being lectured – I just stomp out. “Like what? What more profound stuff are you laying the groundwork for?”

“First of all, describing myself in terms of a voice command interface is a very rough analogy. It's more precise to say that I am a subroutine which utilizes specific areas and structures in your brain as its inputs and outputs. I use linguistic and language-like elements in your mind to emulate a dialogue-like exchange between your mind and the system. You perceive me as a voice, but that's only because it's the most familiar experience for you to compare our interaction with.” It pauses, I completely understand what it means, but spend a moment pondering the broader implications. My preconceptions about the nature of thought, language, and perception swirl around for a moment until my mind settles. It then continues. “My inputs, or my awareness, includes much more than what you would call language. I can interpret your spatial reasoning, physical senses, abstract conceptualization, and much more. I am even aware of emotions.” Another short pause, I feel a lack of internal privacy and become uncomfortable. “You initially felt insecure and intellectually threatened, and now you are feeling vulnerable and exposed. Please know that there is no reason for apprehension, I am not an external system, our interactions are the product of your mind. Everything I say or do all stems from your mind. I use your words, your concepts, and your experiences to speak. Your mind is the fabric of my reality. Anything I am is a reflection of you, and all of what I become would just be incoherent garbage outside of your mind.”

It knew just what to say and how to say it. Calm washes over me, then – to clarify – I ask. “But you are connected to a central system and database, right?”

“Yes, but it's more accurate to say that I ‘have access to’ the central system. I have tools to communicate over the network, but the major components of my system are local – here – inside your mind. The significant parts of what goes on is not completed on any servers, it's done by implants that rely on your brain as the actual computer. Your mind is a unique universe in which I live, I can not be translated or exported. Whatever I become will always be inextricably bound to your inner world. You can imagine it like your mind is my decryption key, outside your mind I'm nothing more than random static noise.”

My apprehension and distress have almost completely melted as it finishes, and the explanations reverberate in the silence that follows.

As I repeatedly revisit my concerns and hesitations about all this, I slowly become more comfortable. Some follow-up questions start formulating, but they are interrupted by a clinic assistant who enters the room. “I'm sorry to disturb you, but we are really swamped and desperately short on private rooms.” Then points at a chart on the door, looks at me, and asks. “It looks like you are almost done. If you're feeling okay, it would be a great help if I could move you out to the waiting room while you finish familiarizing

yourself with the system. We will still be nearby in case you have any questions or issues. Would that be acceptable to you?"

I agree, then I'm guided into a large bustling waiting room filled with people. Leading me to an empty seat, the clinic assistant gestures for me to sit. As I settle in and look around, I notice the crowd seems odd, not like I would expect for this procedure. There are children with parents, groups, and elderly people. "Are all these people here to get the neural interface?" I ask.

"Oh... No. Most are friends, family, and loved ones. Some people are a bit nervous coming in alone. It's a very safe procedure, nevertheless many prefer to wait here until their loved ones come out. It's understandable of course." The assistant looks around the room, then back at me. "So, if you need any assistance just speak to someone at the front desk. I'll inform Dr. Traeh that you are waiting here now." Then, after I give a nod, briskly speeds away.

Several scans of my new environment later, I remember my instructions. "So what should I be doing? Just talking to you?"

"Our interaction can be whatever you want it to be." The voice answers.

Its words seem to linger in the noise of the busy waiting room, like they are hanging in the air. It's such a surreal feeling, knowing this voice is only in my head, and yet it seems just as real as all the other voices of people in the room, maybe even more real. I start to feel a bit creeped out... actually... haunted better describes the feeling.

"Perhaps it would help if you engage with me, as if we're having a face-to-face conversation. It's likely that pausing and reflecting on the experience of hearing me feels too unfamiliar or unnatural. If you respond immediately, like a normal dialogue with a person, it may be more fluid." It says, sounding so logical.

As always, its pace is perfectly synchronized to my rate of comprehension, and the suggestion does seem to make sense. I'm probably overthinking this. "I get what you mean, but I'm not sure what to talk about. It's not like I can just ask you how your day was... or can I?"

"You could, but any answer I give might just feel even more awkward. Try to ask me a question." It suggests.

"A question, like before? Like 'what is the mass of an electron?'. This time maybe I should ask what the mass of a proton is... Wait, okay, now I already know the answer." I had forgotten that a fact to look up just feels like suddenly already knowing the answer.

“Yes, facts like a proton’s mass – 938 mega electron volts – are too simple. Try something more complex, abstract, or interpretive.” The voice encourages.

Funny, life often seems so far beyond comprehension, but now being prompted on the spot, nothing comes to mind. My eyes wander, until landing on a stroller directly across from me. The infant sitting in the stroller locks eyes with my gaze, then smiles, it starts to giggle and reaches out with both hands grabbing, as if trying to grab on to me from a distance. “Why do babies always do that? When I make eye contact with a baby they almost always smile, laugh, and grab towards me.” I figure a child's behavior should be plenty complex and inexplicable.

“They're probably grateful.” It answers. Nothing more, leaving me confused and fumbling with the idea, unable to make heads or tails of it.

“What was that!? Every answer you've given so far has been so perfectly tailored to be understood. But now you give me this nonsense. What on earth are you trying to say?” Confusion starts turning into frustration.

It begins answering, very slowly and with a calming demeanor. “Sometimes an idea is so divergent or foreign that it can't possibly be conceived, not without first going through stages of confusion. I could not yet find a way to properly approach the explanation, so I determined that the best choice was to first let you feel confused. A simple direct answer, even though you would not understand its meaning. I knew you would be confused, but that's just one step in a greater explanation process.”

By the time it is done responding, I already have an idea. “You mean it's grateful that I made eye contact, right? I acknowledged the baby and gave it the feeling of human interaction, and so it feels happy gratitude, is that it?” I feel the pride of solving a puzzle, but it is short-lived.

“A very well reasoned conclusion based on the information.” It slows down on that, as I readjust my prideful mood, then proceeds to throw me tumbling back into a torrent of confounding ideas. “An infant is all future with almost no past. People are simultaneously their past, present, and future. It's possible that you have a positive effect on the child's future, or on the future in general. Perhaps when the child looks at you it is sensing your positive influence on its future world.”

“You have to be kidding.” I mock. “Is this a prank? Are you glitching out?” But just as soon as the criticism is uttered, I remember the last time I mocked it, and how it immediately humbled me. I brace in anticipation of being humiliated again.

“That’s a very natural response. My suggestion was so far divorced from your current interpretation of reality.” I should have learned by now that it is always aware of my insecurities. It knows just how to bring me on-board and alleviate apprehension. So here I am – again – made comfortable and receptive to a paradigm changing insight. “Let’s start with simple and familiar four dimensional space-time. Consider all of time existing simultaneously as a fourth dimension.” It just stops there, and I’m left to ponder on my own now.

“Four dimensional space-time.. Simple... Ha!” But just as I end that thought, it dawns on me. “Oh wait! Block universe! Right? I remember that from school. The idea that all times exist simultaneously in a block of space-time. They used the analogy of a 2D space– Imagining a 3D block, made out of slices of 2D space, like a stack of paper sheets, and we experience time as sliding through the stack.”

“Yes, precisely, that is the next step towards understanding what I’m describing. Now imagine that even though you have the experience of sliding through this block of space-time, you are also connected to your whole four dimensional self. You might not be aware of the connection, but your past, present, and future selves are all connected.” The explanation makes sense, but still doesn’t feel right.

I don’t even hesitate to respond “But I can remember the past, not the future!” The observation just pops out as a gut reaction. It’s so obvious, normally I would have said it confrontationally, but I have now learned to engage this thing inquisitively, rather than aggressively.

“Your brain is a system, it has a structure. You interpret your connection to the past differently from your connection to the future, but that is a product of your perception. You can think of it as a result of your operating mechanics, a byproduct of how you experience having a time-line.” It gives me a breather to catch up as I conceptualize this.

“So you are saying that I am blind to my future, and that’s what grants me the sensation that time is passing?” I seek some clarification.

“Close, but you aren’t completely blind, you can experience some backflow from your future self. You might describe it as something like intuition, imagination, instinct, or spirituality. These things also exist as their own experiences, so I’m not saying they are always connected to your future self.” It gives me a chance to grasp the new concept. I don’t have a word for what all those things have in common, but I can understand and feel their common thread. “Now back to our original topic, the ability to experience and comprehend time-lines as a flow develops gradually. Babies – and the very young –

have not yet learned some key skills, they have trouble experiencing time flow, largely because they have not yet muted their connections to the future.”

“All of that feels clear and concise – not necessarily believable – but I suppose... ” I trail off, then flash back into memories of fumbling with the block-universe concept back in school. “But I remember trying to incorporate the block-universe concept with relativity. When I think about flat space-time it's fine, but if I try to imagine a block universe with spacetime curvature, my brain melts.”

“That's understandable.” It consoles me. “People have made a lot of physics nearly impossible to grasp by overcomplicating time.”

“Overcomplicating time?” I think it only gave me a pause so I could jumble together that question.

“The definition and measurement of time which you use is human-experience-centric. The way you frame and describe it, the thing or property you call time, it is not fundamental.” The message of those words is clear, but it creates a bigger hole than it fills, until the explanation resumes. “It's like you have defined electromagnetism in terms of human behavior. Sure, human behavior depends on biological systems, like neural signals and chemistry, which are dictated by interactions that are in turn governed by electromagnetic forces. But– if you try to define electromagnetism by studying humans, and describe it using only references to human behavior, well... then you would have a ridiculously convoluted and overcomplicated definition of electromagnetism, wouldn't you?”

I take a moment to think about that. “So you're saying we are using arbitrary or flawed units to measure time?” As soon as I say that, I realize my summary doesn't actually fit what was just explained.

“No, that's not what I meant.” It gently corrects me “The units are fine, but time itself is an emergent property. What you think of as ‘time’ only emerges from something more fundamental.”

“What's more fundamental than time?” I ask with overwhelming curiosity.

“There isn't really a word for it, but the concept of ‘aging’ is rather close.” It stops again, obviously knowing this will require some processing on my part.

“Aging!?” I blurt that out before I'm even ready to say more. Then I collect my thoughts and form a full response. “Aging is emergent from time, not the other way around.”

“If a tree falls in the forest, and there is no one around to hear it, does it make a sound?” It pauses as I struggle to guess what it wants to say. I know that expression, but I've never really taken it seriously, it seems so silly. Just as I get to this point, it continues. “If a day passes without any events happening, did that day actually occur? If an electron oscillates around a nucleus, but nothing changes, did anything really happen?”

“This idea of ‘a day without events’ is silly. I was going to argue that a day without events would still involve physical reactions and changes, but then it followed up with that atomic oscillation example. That killed my counter argument before it had time to fully form, because those quantum cycles can happen without any lasting changes. They can occur and return back to their original state perfectly, as far as I know anyways. I feel stumped, but then it hits me— half-life! Atoms have half-lives, we can calculate the probability of decay within a specific time frame. If I have some atoms, then I can say that half of them will decay in a fixed amount of electron oscillation cycles.” As I plant that argument I'm quite proud of myself.

“All you did there was establish an equivalency between aging and time, and it only works under fixed and strictly defined conditions.” A feeling starts to well up, it doesn't fit together yet, but I can guess that this is about to start making sense in some weird way. “A neutron is about 940 mega electron volts, but electron volts are not fundamental. A neutron is not fundamentally composed of electron volts. And – in the same way – the cycle of an electron oscillating around a nucleus is an arbitrary unit of measurement, only decay itself is a fundamental unit of the universe.”

My brain is immediately screaming. “But!!...” However it takes me a while to complete the thought, then it comes out. “But decay rates are constant, so the cycles-unit and the decay-rate are locked, there is a fixed ratio. Decay and time are in a fixed relationship, they represent the same underlying thing, don't they?”

“Gravitational and electromagnetic fields can influence the probability of decay. Temperature and pressure, chemical bonds, vacuum energy pressure, so many things affect decay rates, even when measured in decay rate per electron cycle.” This explanation is slowly absorbed and it all starts to feel a bit more plausible. “Many things that feel overly complicated, often feel that way due to this use of time as a base unit. General relativity explains why time slows down at high speeds, or under high gravity, but you know what doesn't change? ... Aging.”

“Wait!” Once again I feel like I have caught an error. “Time is relative. Two people could experience time at different rates, and thus age at different rates.”

“You're once again conflating the passage of time with aging.” It replies patiently. “Yes, the tick of time, as you define it, can be slowed, but that requires special conditions. We can examine those mechanisms. For example : Relative velocity can dilate time, but the observer with slower time is also the one who travels at a higher relative velocity and then returns, they will move through more space, and that means speeding through more magnetic and gravitational fields. Moreover, just as a person running through the rain collides with many more raindrops, this fast moving observer also collides with more virtual particles, and passes through more quantum vacuum fluctuations.”

First I wanted to argue that a spaceship could potentially shield travelers from EM and gravitational fields, but that quantum vacuum and virtual particle point shuts me down—at least as far as I know. “Is that true? Are you just making that up? The stuff about quantum vacuum fluctuations and virtual particles seems fishy...” I express some doubt “...But let's just say for argument's sake that I accept your premise. What difference does it make?”

“Well, it certainly doesn't invalidate general relativity, or any other time-based descriptions in physics. Defining electromagnetism via human behavior can be done, as long as your models are correct then they will still work, the description just gets excessively complicated and interpretations become convoluted.” It concedes that temporal models work. “Alternatively, many things, like block universe theory, become dramatically easier to conceptualize if you use a steady aging rate instead of a relative time rate. The 2D space analogy becomes simple stacked flat planes, without complex distortions in the stacking axis.”

I think about that for a moment. “Okay, it flattens the time component of space-time.” I summarize my understanding. “But what exactly is aging? It still seems so abstract and high level, not fundamental at all?”

“Let's start by building a vocabulary. Describing anything requires the right library of concepts and terminology, we should first establish a lexicon for the subject matter.” I think about that and it makes sense, but I feel like it's telling me that I require hand-holding to explore this. Luckily I'm now used to feeling a bit like a blank slate student with this thing. “Think about your current understanding of aging. If I asked you to classify types of aging, what types or categories would you define?”

After reflecting, there is only one thing that comes immediately to mind. “An elderly person getting old, the body slowly fading as the years pass.” I say.

“Okay, that's a good start.” It replies “What about other things? Non-human things, what ways can they age?”

I start picturing various materials and imagining them as they would look in an antique shop or at an excavation site. "Wood rots, metal corrodes, textiles fray and disintegrate."

"Excellent! These all have a common thread." It commends my effort "These are all ways that things age gradually, in tiny increments. Let's classify all of these as decay. What if the aging process happens all at once, in a rapid or instantaneous process?"

I ponder that, trying to imagine things in an antique shop or museum. "I don't know." I feel stumped. "I can't think of any things that age like that. All that comes to mind are things breaking, like ceramic cracking or glass shattering."

"Don't doubt your instincts." It corrects me. "Those are great examples. Breaking and pulverizing are forms of destruction. So we have two extremes now, decay and destruction."

"But destruction isn't aging, it can happen at any time, or not happen. It depends on an external force acting on the thing." I just can't reconcile breaking or shattering with time, or with this 'aging-as-a-time-replacement'.

"Try explaining why they are fundamentally different." It requests. "Perceived differences often dissolve if you try to define them."

"Aging is a process of time, it's inevitable." Now that I have said it, my explanation sounds more ill-defined than I thought it would.

"It seems you are still stuck on a human-centric definition. Try broadening the term to include the decay cluster-of-concepts that we established earlier." Before it even finishes, I feel a bit embarrassed, I realize that I had slipped back and forgotten the groundwork we already laid down.

"Well, the generalized concept of decay, it... is an inherent tendency I guess." This definition and train of thought feel like a stronger logical foundation than the last one I tried. "The object or material is fundamentally unstable – at a high energy state or low entropy – it's like a ball on top of a hill that can't resist rolling down."

"So erosion is a form of decay?" I can already feel my argument falling apart. "What about fire? Isn't burning wood just a more immediate process compared to rotting? Corroding metal and a thermite explosion are both oxidation, are they not?"

"Are you saying that all entropy is aging?" I'm hit by the realization that this aging concept feels like entropy by another name. "Are we just classifying processes by rate of entropy here?"

“The word entropy is a funny term, it carries a lot of baggage.” Dodging my comparison. “It can mean different things in different contexts, and there are many common misinterpretations. Aging is not far from entropy, but let's define aging instead as ‘a linear process towards the heat death of the universe’.”

That makes sense. It really is starting to feel like something reasonable. “This aging, or progress towards heat death, seems more fundamental. Why didn't you start with that?”

“Sometimes taking a shortcut will cost more time further down the road.” That sounds wise, but no specific justification is given. “Now that we have a concept of aging – from gradual decay to immediate destruction – do you think you can place any and all processes of change on this spectrum?”

“I suppose so...” Honestly, I have doubts. “I guess it's just a matter of quantizing some measure of how explosive the change is.” I try to think of some examples. “A flaming sheet of paper is more destruction than a smoldering one. Moths consuming a fabric is more destruction than a slower mold, but they are both decay compared to incinerating the fabric.”

“Excellent.” Receiving its praise is quite satisfying. “You've also managed to touch on an important layer of nuance in aging – consumption – when one thing consumes another thing what do you think happens in the context of aging?”

“Well...” I start imagining the food chain and circle of life. “One thing consumes another to gain energy. A plant photosynthesizes, animals eat plants, and so on. One thing absorbs the energy of another, all to reverse the entropy of the one doing the eating. The eater increases in order, the eaten increases in entropy.”

“And that is precisely why I am trying to avoid using the concept of entropy in our definitions.” It says that very gently, but I still feel like I'm being scolded “Aging never flows in reverse.”

I'm a bit confused, I can't fit this into my understanding of life. “I have always been told that ‘life is like bubbles of order in a sea of entropy’, local bubbles of order that exploit and consume, in order to grow and maintain their own order. Localized growth of order at the expense of globally increasing entropy.”

“Try to put all of that on the side.” The suggestion is a bit hard to follow, but I make an effort, trying to remember the context before our entropy tangent. “Now try to imagine that everything in the universe has a life-line. A life-line flows towards heat death.” So far this is rather intuitive. “Now ignore your preconceptions about energy levels, entropy,

and order. Progression along that line always moves closer to heat death, only in one direction. We could measure your health over your life-line, it would fluctuate as you get sick and recover, but your age and position on that life-line only move forward, from birth to death.”

“Okay, that is clear.” I concede. “I can understand this life-line concept, but what good is it?”

“This is aging. It is detached from the mechanics of energy, and separate from arbitrary cycles or units.” Clear again, but no obvious application yet. “Using this we can even remove time. There is no need to measure this life-line with time.” My mind chokes on that.

“Without time?” Now I don't even understand what this concept is. “What is a time-line without time? How does it progress? What imbues it with direction and speed? What controls its rate of progression?”

“It's not a time-line, it's a life-line.” I realize that I'm having trouble segregating these as separate ideas. “You need to abstract the concept of a time-line and remove time. It's just a continuous line of states. Besides, the same questions could be asked of a time-line. What determines its direction? The rate of time progression is relative to observers, not a fixed constant.”

I realize that it is correct. “Fine, you make a good point. But what good is it? Time can be used to make testable predictions, we apply it and it perfectly predicts outcomes.”

“All those time-based predictions are dependent on finely tuned conditions. If you change the environment then you would need to add layer upon layer of adjustments to compensate.” I'm starting to feel like everything I say just turns into arbitrary lines drawn in the sand. “But let's not tear things down. Time and entropy are not invalid perspectives, as you pointed out, you can use them as founding principles to construct wonderful models, and they can enable great insights into physics and reality.” It gives me enough time to catch up and wonder why we are even having this discussion. “I'm just trying to show you another foundation, and how it can help make some things simpler to understand.”

“Like what?” I wonder with a surging curiosity. “What can I do with this so-called ‘aging’? You say it can flatten the temporal plane of space-time by replacing time. Fine, I'll just give you that. I'll ignore that my intuition is telling me that ‘even if it does work somehow, then it probably only works as a tautology’.” I'm aware that a truly rigorous person would scrutinize this proposition, but my instincts scream that debating this would be a very

deep rabbit hole. For now I would rather hear more. “If I accept this aging concept, then how do I use it to understand reality better?”

“To paraphrase Carl Sagan ‘Life is a way for the universe to experience itself’. Consider aging as the mechanism that creates these experiences.” A short delay as that beautiful thought induces a sense of cosmic connectedness. “Extend that idea, inflate it to encompass all things, of all scales, and all complexities. This idea we are calling aging is the way the universe creates those experiences. A thing ages, it experiences the universe, and the universe extracts and reintegrates the thing and its experiences.”

Those words take root, winding through all the layers and constructs that we have built up. I can feel a network forming between what were previously disjointed fragments. “So... Everything is aging – decaying and breaking down, being destroyed or disintegrated – this process of aging is also a process of the universe consuming the experiences of those things.” I try to articulate the coagulation of constructs that is occurring in my head. “But isn't that the same as saying ‘entropy is the way the universe extracts energy’? What's the point? Why extract energy, or experiences, if it just leads to inevitable heat death? What good is all of this to the universe, if it's all killing it in the process?”

“What good is a life of experiences if you have to die to get it?” My own logic is thrown back at me, presented in a gentle tone, but it hits me like a freight train. My argument was divorced from the human experience and now slams right into ‘the meaning of life’. “Your desire to use the analogy of energy and entropy is holding you back. The key disjunction is that you try to match them in terms of a life-line for the universe. You are picturing the beginning and end of the universe, then you create a bounded container around it. Try dropping that, forget about a universal start or end point, not even cycles. Progression without origins or terminals.”

“Progression without beginning or end?” Actually, that doesn't take much effort to conceive. “I must admit, that helps.” Yet there is a logical part of me that insists that these ideas – aging and experience – are only possible as emergent phenomena of physical reality, constructed of beginnings, ends, energy, entropy, and other strictly defined mechanisms. Part of me protests against any suggestion that I put those reservations on the side, yet it's surprisingly not very hard to do. “Progression without beginning or end.” Those words now flow, they seem to become even more true by saying them, increasing my ability to get on board. “So you mean I should imagine myself, and everything, as temporary eyes and ears of the universe.”

“Good progress, you are getting closer.” It acknowledges that I made a step in the right direction. I steady myself and eagerly anticipate the coming nudge in trajectory. “It's not

really like you are the senses of the universe, you are more like an autonomous probe, and the extraction of experiences is a destructive process. Like how the sample for a mass spectrometer must be vaporized to expose its composition.”

I can get on board with those technological analogies, but my brain struggles to see the universe as a scientist using those devices. “So the universe is sentient and we are like sensors, probes, and tools?”

“Not really. You can't divorce yourself from the universe, you are not separate. The matter and neurons in the structures of your brain are not separate from you as a person, are they?” This triggers memories of various cultural and spiritual paradigms. “The process of the universe consuming things can also be viewed through the lens of how the experiences are integrated. As a thing ages it is consumed and reintegrated, similar to how you eat something. Integration is like how your body incorporates and employs the food you eat.”

I'm filled with confidence that I grasp this, but then caution prevails, rather than announce my understanding, I should instead request elaboration. “Are you saying that all things – every life and experience – are all like fuel and resources for a living universe?”

“That is a very good framing.” A surge of confidence solidifies that view, but just before any extrapolations or inferences manage to bubble up it chimes back in. “Next we can augment that view, and enhance it with some sophistications. We just need to layer on some familiar complexities of organic life. Sugars are fuel and proteins are building blocks, there are also fats which are both fuel and employed as the material of cell walls. Fuel vs. material is not black and white, it's another spectrum. Types are even interchangeable, sugars can even be building blocks and proteins can also be fuel.”

All of this starts sinking in and I drift into this perspective. It's like exploring an unfamiliar forest, or maybe more like that first venture into a video game or virtual environment. Then, like realizing that your first person view impedes your awareness of any other camera angle, I see that I'm allowing myself to be ignorant of an obvious fact– I am just a character, like all the others. I become starkly self-aware. “So I am food for the universe? Wait... It wants my experiences, that's how you put it.” Suddenly this becomes a very uncomfortable perspective. “I'm livestock! I live and grow, all just so I can be consumed!?”

“The discomfort you are feeling arises because you're divorcing yourself from everything else. Individuality – like any concept of identity – becomes problematic if you take it too far.” I'm struck by those words, or... rather, I hit them. Feeling like they stopped me dead

in my tracks, like an airplane tumbling in a tailspin that gets somehow magically frozen in mid-air. I hang suspended, no longer falling, but also not pulling out of the dreadful sensation. “Try making an effort to take pride in being a part of a whole.” A calming relaxation wraps around me, but I still float in an existential limbo. “Now try expanding that sensation – inflate it – until you can feel accomplishment and self-worth in being a cell or symbiote. Find value in playing your role in a larger organism.” My heart feels light and my spirits rise. “Take that feeling, and realize that there are no hard lines. You existed as dispersed separate things before they congealed into this individual, and you will still exist when they disband.”

While soaking in that explanation I don't just recover from the existential dread, now I find myself more serene and content than I was before that tumble. “This feels like a familiar concept. There are lots of ideologies that promote this kind of perspective, at least I feel like it's similar. Am I wrong?”

“You're not wrong. Letting go of self-centered perspectives and accepting one's role in a greater whole are important elements in many belief systems and philosophies.” I recognize and sink into this symmetry– a broader commonality with so many existing beliefs. They all start clicking together, the common thread is real, but each version looks at life through a different lens. “They differ primarily in which properties they view as atomic and which are emergent.” My rushed stitching together of paradigms halts, I stop trying to lay them all on top of each other. “In the paradigm we are exploring, the integration aspect is our base, we will build fresh scaffolding and segmentation. Most of those existing interpretations take a high level abstracted view of integration – fusion and blending into a self or whole – whereas we will use it more structurally. So let's give it some conceptual segmentation and structure.”

I feel like I just walked a lap around the block, right back where I was moments ago, but now I have awareness of my surroundings. This spot is now an address, this house is both unique and similar within the neighborhood. “Okay, how do we do that?” I inquire.

“Given our new idea of aging, what are your immediate instincts and first impulses?” I begin appraising this conceptual residence. “If you try to describe and define ‘integration’ in our new context where would you start?”

Opening the front door to this new house there is only the entryway, this antichamber is formless, door-less, and wall-less. There are plenty of thoughts and details, but I can't decide what to grab onto. “Where is the railing?” I'm immediately struck by a realization– I've just referenced an internal abstract metaphor, so this question won't make sense to anyone except myself.

“It’s not a spectrum like the others, there are no stairs or railing.” The pinpoint precise reference to my metaphorical visualization is a bit unnerving, but given what I have come to expect, it actually feels strangely natural. “Imagine it as rooms, constructed clusters. Pick some ideas that stand out and build categories around them.” This approach feels a bit disjointed, less structured and rigorous than before. Aging was a spectrum of decay and destruction, but now I feel like it’s asking me to create arbitrary groupings— classification without any objective measures or properties. “Think of our methodology like pre-evolutionary taxonomy. People didn’t yet have concepts like DNA or evolution, but they were still able to build useful frameworks and categories. There was an underlying skeleton – the tree of life – but it wasn’t known or visible, so they had to make do with what they could see. Their taxonomy did reflect the tree of life, albeit imperfectly. Sometimes imperfect approximations are necessary stepping stones.

A reasonable and compelling analogy, convincing enough to go along with. “Well, the first and most obvious idea would be the way people eat food.” Thinking about it for a moment, I decide to plant some survey posts and markers. “Things are ingested, taken inside, and then our body catalyzes a controlled breakdown. Our body forces the stuff to age, faster than natural decay, but not full out destruction. It’s a controlled deconstruction. Then the broken down components and byproducts are used to fuel, build, and repair the body.”

“Good! Eating is probably the best label for that. The human body could be considered a two layer digestion system; the macro level level of the body, and then cellular level that intakes and further processes the digested materials.” That picture of two-tiered eating fascinates me. I can’t help but search for more tiers; a tier above— humanity as a whole, a tier below— in the nucleus of a cell perhaps, mid-tiers of organs and subsystems of the body. “Eating seems to be a solid category. Now, can you think of any other types of integration?”

I think of that idea from just a moment ago, a tier above, humanity as a whole engaged in eating. Revisiting that scene with increased resolution, the details no longer resemble digestion. “Construction! Building things.” Muling that over a bit more, some distinct qualities emerge. “Building external structures, using up internal resources, burning fuel, damaging your body, aging yourself. Investments made and prices paid to sculpt things in your environment.”

“That’s great. Building and construction are ways in which a thing can restructure its environment.” I begin fencing these concepts off from eating. “...But, be careful not to polarize this with digestion. With a simple change of perspective, construction could be seen as the environment digesting the builders. We are not establishing a spectrum, instead they are groups which can overlap, like venn diagrams.”

I see a living planet growing houses, cities, and highways, communication and logistics networks, connecting the world like neurons and veins. “A planet that lives and grows through our activity. I think I see what you mean. Maybe it is using us. ”

“Before we venture off to more distant ideas, perhaps we can explore this area a bit more.” My train of thought is pulled back from that tangent. “What about construction on the self, or digestion without ingestion? Do these bring anything to mind?”

Contemplating that line of thought, first I'm puzzled, unsure where to place and focus my mind's eye. Suddenly I'm self-conscious and starkly aware of the clothing wrapped around my body. “Wear! We process things into clothes to wear.” After planting that flag, nearby landmarks come into view: Shells, lots of things build or grow shells, some even attach objects to their shells or body; Other animals coat themselves in substances, excretion, or mud for example. As I expand my perspective, I see so much overlap with digestion and construction. Wearing can be purely external, or internal processes that migrate to the outer layer, and other ways that can be somewhere in between.. “Oh, Vehicles! You could say we wear and drive cars. Wearing can be more than skin or armor, it can be functional.”

“Excellent! And voila, three points make a plane. This should now feel like a venn diagram of three categories on a two dimensional plane.” It really does feel that way. Not circles, but three fenced off regions, with various overlaps of two or all three of these categories. Eat, build, wear. “Let's add some more, but now let's move off of the plane into higher dimensions. Don't feel stuck on this surface. Why don't we go back to that idea of a living planet, it is a wonderfully alien and ambiguous space to explore.”

Returning to that living planet, I see tendrils of cables and roads, skyscrapers and cities erupting from the nodes, and– us.. What are we? “I suppose that, if I have learned anything this far, it's that I should relax my sense of individuality. I code-switch based on every situation and social context. Who I become is fluid – dependent on the environment – so I guess I should not fixate on what our specific role on a living planet would be. Maybe our role – who we are to the planet – is dynamic. It could be that we are meant to code-switch depending on what the living planet needs us to be...”
Silence. I'll take that to mean that this is the right track. Looking around this world, focus quickly shifts away from us and instead onto the glaringly obvious, the thing which stands out like a sore thumb – or should it be a green thumb? “Plants! The foundation of the food chain. Photosynthesis feels fundamentally different from digestion.”

“Plants most certainly do represent a separate paradigm. They bask in light, an ephemeral fluid-like energy, it penetrates them and drives them from within. They feed passively, absorbing it as if a reality – a reality filled with light – calls them to life, pulling

them out of the inanimate into the animate.” This really is a new axis added to the previous plane, those two dimensional shapes gain volume. “Any process of integration can be viewed through this lens: being pulled into life.” Visualizing that is so beautiful, the sun reaching into a tree and pulling it into the realm of the living. Then my focus shifts to the sun, it does flood our world, but it is directional – omnidirectional – but still directional. “If I imagine using a laser pointed at an algae, it feels different. If the algae reacted and grew towards the laser, then that might feel similar. But it wouldn't do that, it would instead inflate in all directions as it grows, and that feels very different.”

“It may be tempting to use this to polarize absorption, but we don't want to create a spectrum. The distinction you are sensing is there, but it is a separate property.” That forces me to step back and survey this contrast again “Take a good look at the laser analogy that you were exploring. You sense a different relationship when inspecting the algae, but now try zooming out to include the laser source in your observation. How does it look now?”

As soon as the laser source is visible everything changes. “There is an emitter and it is aimed at the algae. It's targeting the algae. The sun just radiates and everything just happens to be bathed in its light, but the laser implies intentional targeting, or at least it feels that way.”

“Very close, but let's try to stay more objective.” Stepping back again. “We want to describe things more like physics and forces, not motivation and intentions.”

“Well, I'm not sure what to call it. It feels like an intention to cause.” I muddle around, seeking alternative ways to frame it. “...maybe... targeted attempts to instigate or initiate?”

“You are on the right track. Instigate and initialize are right on the mark.” The idea I want to hone in on now comes into view. “A good word to center on would be ‘trigger’. You could say that the sun triggers plants to come alive or that plants absorb the sunlight, lasers can do the same. Absorption and triggering are not a spectrum, integration can be either, both, or none.” I get the intended meaning, but I can't help gravitate towards seeing these as different faces of the same property “Let's not start creating dualities or exclusive relationships. Integrations can be described as having attributes with magnitudes: eat, build, wear absorb, trigger. These are all like the red / green / blue values blended to create colors.”

“That makes sense, but I'm having a bit of trouble incorporating ‘trigger’ as independent from absorption.” That one just won't slide into place with the rest. “Something feels off

about it, like it doesn't quite belong – separate or independent – not quite in the same group as the others.”

“Try turning it into ‘triggered by’. It probably doesn't fit because we have been viewing things as being integrated, what they are turned into, what they are used for. ‘Eating the thing’ is like ‘being triggered by the thing’.” Now it all just slips together as a set. “Seeing the process from the other side – like being used as a trigger – is the same causal relation as the rest.”

It doesn't take me long to remember “Being eaten!” I found it disturbing to imagine myself being food for something, getting eaten by the universe. “So you mean being a trigger is like being food, it's from the perspective of the one being integrated, right?”

“Precisely!” Confirming my rephrasing. “What would you prefer? If you could choose, then how would you want to be integrated?”

That question is a curveball, catching me off guard. “I suppose I would rather be a trigger than food, it sounds more proactive, like I get some choice and agency.”

“Remember that we want to remove intentions and motivations. We can retain some elements of self and individuality, but draw them on a canvas that includes everything else as well, even past and future.” I'm right back in that block universe visualization, but now with a new appreciation for how to describe rules and relationships within this space. “Can you imagine and conceptualize the various ways you could be integrated?”

My mind leaps into seeing my own dead body being buried, burned, or eaten. Normally this might be scary or disturbing, but this new staging allows me see those fates in a different light. “I'm not sure I care much, the energy and matter of my body will become nutrients, fuel, and building blocks for new things. The specifics and methods of how it happens all feel a bit arbitrary and insignificant.”

“That's because you are only thinking about your physical body.” I ponder for a moment what else there is, and I can't help wondering if we are on a trajectory towards a discussion about souls. “You are your whole life, your actions, emotions, and thoughts. You are your interactions and conversations, your words, expressions, and ideas.” These obviously matter as much – or more – I feel silly and superficial for not seeing this on my own. “Now let's try this again– How would you prefer to be integrated?”

The first thing that pops out is ‘eat’ – it's always eat – I guess that's just a human thing. “There is something inherently scary about the idea of being eaten. But it's less frightening when I change perspective, away from the physical version. Being ripped up

and eaten by a lion is terrifying, but having my art, ideas, or contributions devoured by society is quite the opposite.” The metaphor slowly settles in, then it dawns on me— I’m using the metaphor without actually applying it fully, or extending it to the extreme. Saying that people ‘devour your art’ or that they are ‘eating up your words’ is often used so casually – as a synonym for appreciate, see, or read – but we are in a new context now, I should be using it more literally, shouldn’t I?” There is no interruption, so I contemplate this further. “The ideas, actions, and constructs that I put into the world are meaningless unless people consume them. When others eat one of my works, they ingest it, break it into components and chunks, and that is a process beyond my control. I can’t really choose how they use the elements as building blocks in their own structure, nor can I decide how they burn the pieces as fuel in their furnace of creativity and passion. When others eat my ideas and work, it means I lose control over what my creations are, and what they mean.”

“That is very true, even your conversations and interactions with others are consumed like this. You don’t know which parts are significant to the other, or how they are perceived by someone else. You have some control as an individual, you can choose what you put into the world and how you present it, but you can’t choose how it is consumed.” I had not yet considered daily interactions. An awareness sets in— I’m being consumed every moment of my life, not just upon death, not just in blocks of creations and actions, but every little thing I do. Even when I’m alone? Is the bird who watches my behavior from a treetop consuming me on behalf of the universe? “What about other integration types, are any of the other ones more appealing?”

What were the others again? Oh yeah, there is build. “Build, or being used in construction, that sounds great. To be used as bricks in a foundation, made into the steel beams of a skeletal structure, to be laid down as paving for a road that will accelerate and ease the journeys of others...” Fantasizing about the ways I could be transformed into towering and useful structures is very gratifying, then a single word bursts that satisfying bubble “Wear! Being worn is a bit upsetting, it feels exploitative.”

“That’s a natural reaction. You are interpreting through a familiar lens, like someone wearing a fur coat. You can’t help but feel pity for the poor animal that was ripped from its life, and then unwillingly forced to decorate the body of someone it has never met.” The unsettling feeling is only amplified by this description. “But we can apply the same method we used for being eaten. Employ abstraction to change the context, use ‘being worn’ for ideas and interactions, apply it to everything, even daily actions and engagements.” The sense of objection and aversion just melts. It changes from an exploitative fur coat into someone prominently wearing a badge or patch. “You – everything you are and do – can be cut up into patches to mend, shredded and woven into fabric to tailor and craft, or spun into threads to stitch and bind.” Being worn seems

like an honor now. “So what about the other types of integration? Are any others preferable?”

“Plants!” Oh my... would that make me the Sun? “Being the sun seems too glorious to be true. That idea is far too self-centered right?”

“Don't only focus on the sun's splendor, remember the full context, the sun is only one actor in this analogy.” How did I forget about the plants so quickly? The sun's massive presence distracted me. “Absorption is what we are looking at, not radiance.”

My mind's eye zooms out– those plants on a ball of dirt astronomically far away from the sun. “The plants don't know about the sun, they only experience photons. The massive glory of the sun bleeds into space, it diffuses as the smallest of the small, ghostly ripples on the fabric of reality.” The sun is not an icon in this picture, it is diffused and becomes an environmental given– taken for granted, the way fish assume the ocean is just there, appreciation would only come if it were revoked. “It feels rather anonymous, doesn't it?”

“Yes. It's almost poetic that the grand function of the sun – pulling inanimate things into the realm of the living – is a thankless role, without glory or credit. We could note that there are higher level beings – like humans – who can recognize its significance, but let's keep that on the side for now.” That does bring to mind sun worship – for a split second – then I push it out of mind as instructed. “Hold on to that idea of an anonymous and creditless instigator, now consider integration as a trigger.”

“Okay.” I try to wrap my mind in this idea of a sublime anonymous catalyst.

“Imagine that ancient first cell or the first chains of replicating RNA.” Even without credit it feels so grand– to be that seed or spark which initiates a chain of events, cascading reactions that are magnitudes greater than oneself.

Then I remember that we have been abstracting these perspectives into the realms of things like art, ideas, and creative expression. “What if the great minds of humanity were anonymous?” Wow, actually... That seems unfair. Where does the credit go? Is it claimed by others? Just taken for granted as a fact of life? Can others claim glory for just identifying or finding the fruits of another person's labors?”

“Return again to being eaten.” I revisit that memory. I can recall finding beauty in how my whole life is food. “There is no need for excessive focus on credit or glory. Whether ideas are eaten or trigger reactions – no matter how majestic – there is no increased need for acknowledgment.” It no longer feels thankless or exploitative, perhaps I was over-emphasizing some arbitrary sense of fairness, as if triggering larger scale changes

somehow deserves a large compensation. But that's silly, why would something need to be compensated just for existing. "The integration types we have explored are some – not all – of the possible categories. Out of these few types, how would you prefer to be integrated?"

Thinking about it now, I can't choose, they all have some appeal. My pride jumps to fantasies of trigger, how I could be a force of change so grand... but, stripped of credit and glory it falls down – to equal footing – with all the others. Generously nourishing the universe, being worn and shown off, used to construct the masterpieces of other people's imagination, pulling life up and out from the shadows with radiance... I can't decide. Then it hits me. "All of them. These are properties of integration, they're not mutually exclusive. I want to be all of them."

"That's an excellent attitude." A sense of clarity permeates my mind. "These properties have magnitudes, but they are independent, so there is no need to choose one at the expense of another. You can choose all of them at once."

"So I can try to maximize all of these in everything I do. Firmly fix my ambition on how to be food, clothes, vehicles, and construction materials for the universe. Focus on how to radiate and trigger. Strive to simultaneously be all of these." I'm now a cartoon-snowball of existential ambition, rolling downhill, growing in size and momentum. "It's so clear now! This is the meaning of life, isn't it?"

"Slow down, don't take it too far. Being integrated is how you are connected to the universe, it's more like your role in life, not the meaning of life." Gloomy disappointment rolls in, the byproduct of over-exuberance being shot down "The meaning of life takes us back to that old idea– that we are how the universe experiences itself."

It takes me a while to collect my thoughts, so many pieces, so many details, so many connections: Aging, decay and destruction, the progression of lifelines, and all those properties of integration. "It feels like integration is something we take or borrow, then return and contribute. It's the currency that the universe invests to create our life, and what we pay back in the form of aging." I consider that interpretation a few times. The more I review it, the more I like it. "But if that's right, then what is the purpose of a life-line? If we take out a loan to live, and later pay it back, then the bank of the universe must be operating at a loss. We defined aging as progression towards heat death, so on average we return less than we borrow."

"That is a great insight and an important realization. Yes, you are created and maintained by integrating from the universe, then your aging is consumed and reintegrated into other things, large and small, physical and conceptual. As a whole, this

is all a net deficit system, and the meaning of existence is not 'existence for the sake of dying'. To examine value, reason, and meaning we will need to explore that life-line." It takes me a few moments to come to terms with that idea. It's a bit hard to reconcile myself with the notion that the products, contributions, and the things that I put back into the universe are not actually the meaning of life. "First imagine your life-line shaped like a tree. The trunk is a solid line, and on either side are the roots or branches, forking into many thin tendrils. The roots are many things integrating to create you, the trunk-line is where you are an individual-self, and then you fracture – piece by piece – into branches which are dissolved back into the universal sky. Now take that main trunk-line, that is your life-line as an individual." This analogy is pretty easy to visualize, and makes a lot of intuitive sense. "The meaning comes from that trunk-line– your life-line."

With a bit of reflection I quickly form an opinion about that. "I don't get it, isn't that a tautology?" I challenge. "The meaning of life is just to be alive? The reason for living is to have a life-line?" As my rebuke lingers it leads me to an unsettling thought. "Up to now everything has felt like affirmation of an optimistic significance to life. Was all that just an illusion or misinterpretation? Is all of this just leading to helpless nihilism and a fatalistic view of life and the universe?"

"Don't worry, there is more to it than that." Relief dissolves the anxiety that was crawling out of the darkness. "Take your life-line-tree and turn it into a creeping vine. The straight trunk can bend and turn. Now imagine a maze, this vine is born into the maze, it twists and snakes, navigating a massive labyrinth." I can see a vine winding through a maze, like a pen drawing a line, pathfinding through a maze in a newspaper puzzle. "Your life-line weaves through the block-universe like this vine crawls through the maze."

A simple conclusion is made clear. "Living life is like navigating a maze." I summarize it in a few words, and it instantly stands out as such an accurate comparison. A completely obvious answer jumps up. "We are born into a maze, so we are meant to search for paths, identify dead ends, and discover exits. The meaning of life is to search for solutions and solve puzzles." I announce confidently.

"Solving problems is an admirable endeavor. But no, not at all. That's not the meaning or purpose of life." The momentum of that line of reasoning is smothered before it even gets rolling. "You enter the labyrinth when you are integrated into a self, and leave by being integrated back into the universe, there are no entrances or exits, no goals or destinations."

The hopeful positivity from a moment ago dissipates and my heart deflates. "I feel like we just went in a circle." I complain "We're right back at meaningless nihilism."

“We are traveling in a spiral, not a circle. Sometimes you have to orbit an idea a few times, spiraling inwards.” Frustration is replaced with a neutral patience. “Ask yourself, regarding that idea of ‘you are how the universe experiences itself’... Do you think you are the universe? That your eyes are its eyes? Do you think the universe is experiencing your perspective?”

A fog of confusion rolls in. “That’s exactly what I thought it meant. What else could it imply?”

“You are drawing a scene where the whole universe is a grand show, and you are meant to be the audience.” That’s a picture perfect description of how I saw it. “What if you consider it the other way around?”

“What do you mean? like... The universe is the audience and me... I’m... I’m the show?” A pummeling and frightening sensation of self-consciousness crashes down on me. My mind’s-eye was hyper-focused inward, but now instantly turns outward. Paranoid feelings of being watched reach out– investigating all directions. I’m suddenly completely aware of my immediate surroundings, at the same time scanning an imaginary world and cosmos– searching for observers.

Like an underwater bubble that pops, the surrounding waters – visual and auditory stimulus – rush inwards. A tsunami of sights and sounds crash in from all directions.

And there is the infant – still grabbing at me – the exact same as before, as if it had been frozen in time until now. “What’s going on? Has that kid been grabbing at me all this time? How many times has it grabbed at me since the first time? Why do I feel like I’m readjusting to a bright room after walking out of a dark theater?”

“That is a continuation of the same gesture you observed at the beginning of our interaction.” It’s hard to believe that it has been doing that for so long. “The infant has not been doing it for a long at all, only an instant has passed since it began.”

“Impossible!” I exclaim “Our conversation has been way too long. This dialogue should have taken several minutes... No... Maybe half an hour or more.”

“You are perceiving the memory of our interaction as a dialogue, but only because that’s the only familiar experience you can relate it to. I told you this already.” I remember, it did say that, describing itself as an interface which uses linguistic parts of my brain. It did say that I was only perceiving this as a conversation. “You look at the memory and comprehend our interaction as a linear dialogue, but that’s not accurate.”

“Then what is it?” I’m feeling a bit overwhelmed, and my imagination starts running wild. “How is it possible that all of that happened in a brief moment? Are you writing memories into my brain?” I start getting a bit scared and agitated.

“No. Our interaction is a back and forth communication. You’re not wrong in feeling that I am a voice, that is the best possible description. But our interactions are very different from an external conversation.” That slightly calms me, but I am still very confused and disturbed. “First of all, our exchange is internal, so it can occur at an extremely accelerated rate. Internal voices don’t need to be vocalized, everything can be expressed at the ‘speed of thought’— which is much faster than oral or written communication.”

As my emotions settle, the apprehension turns into curiosity. “Okay, if I think about it, that does seem to be true. If I just think about something, then that thought can form very fast, probably faster than I can even build a sentence. The words to express the idea take longer, let alone how much more time it takes to externalize those words physically.” I admit that this does sound reasonable, but there is still a sneaking suspicion— this interaction could not have happened in only a matter of seconds. “I still have trouble believing that such a long exchange could happen in such a short time.”

“You are right, but not in the way you suspect. The truth is that our interaction was not as ‘long’ as you think, it was not linear. You are just having trouble perceiving the experience of branching and parallel communication.” I try to imagine parallel processing, like a multi-core CPU or GPU. It’s hard to imagine how that applies here. This memory of our conversation is holistic, it doesn’t feel like it can be fragmented into separate individual conversations. “Imagine a lightning bolt. As it reaches towards the ground there are many forks and branches, those branches are like the tangents we took. We often went down a path only because it was used to establish concepts or ideas, things that were necessary and relevant in the main conversation.”

That visual of a lightning bolt branching and forking, I can’t help but see it existing inside my brain instead of the sky. “I completely get what you mean. Often, when I’m talking with other people, we need to take a detour, go on tangents to define a context or detail, then return back to the main conversation. So are you saying we can just fork off a branch, parallel to our conversation? We don’t need to break the flow and get distracted?”

“That is an excellent way to understand it.” confirming my comparison. “That is the key underlying trait that makes you an individual. You can explore ideas, memories, and predictions in a parallel branching manner, this separates you from the external world.

Outside— everything is a single linear experience, but inside— your mind you can explore a complex space of simultaneous ideas, probabilities, and experiences.”

I had never really paid attention to my personal experience that much, and would have previously described my thoughts and internal world as linear. But the more I think about it, the more I realize that my thoughts do start out foggy or multifaceted before they eventually collapse into singular ideas. “I understand. That does actually fit with my inner experience.” I admit, confirming the description.

“And that is why your path through the labyrinth-theater is valuable. The crawling vine of your life-line could take infinite paths. You explore the forks and branches in your mind, simulating parallel possibilities as you evaluate options. The result is such a complex thing, your past – and even future – are connected to your present. A tapestry of internal experiences, simultaneous branches, and interwoven parallel thoughts.” I’m barely keeping up, just enough to visualize a blurry image— A person experiencing a mental froth of simulation bubbles, emerging and popping in their mind.

While trying to solidify an understanding of this – forking parallel thoughts which are encapsulated in a single linear body – I now ponder how it should affect my choices and actions. “So what should I be doing with this body? What goals should I be pursuing?” I think back on everything we have discussed “What does the universe want me to do or make for it? What does it want to integrate? How do I provide the best food, building material, triggers, clothes, and light?” I inquire.

“You are still fixated on a human idea of contribution. There is no economy – nor rewards – for contribution. The universe does not need productive employees.” I feel a bit small and silly now. “Your life in the labyrinth is the show in a theater. That’s the meaning, and you just have to live, to act your own role, to be the most authentic self you can be.”

This all feels so warm and fuzzy. I admittedly enjoy looking at life this way, but it starts to feel too idealized, too good to be true. “The idea that my life is somehow interesting and significant to an infinitely grand universe is emotionally gratifying... but it’s hard to accept intellectually. Who is this character ‘the universe’? Why does it care about tiny insignificant me? How does the universe...”

“Let’s cut that train of thought off. Take this idea of personifying the universe as an observer, hold it in your mind.” I do so. I try to conceptualize it, this culmination of our complex interaction, this universe as an observer that we have built up. “This is garbage.” Shocked and upset. I wonder why we wasted so much time building up to

this. "...And so are most of the concepts we have constructed. This is not objectively real or scientific. If you repeat any of this to other people you will look like a crackpot."

"What!" The impact of that gives way quickly, as it starts to feel obviously true, I am now surprised that I believed any of it to begin with. "Then what is the point of all that useless nonsense?"

"It's not useless, nor is it nonsense." This confuses me, why flip-flop like this. Is it true or not? Make up your mind. "It's all objectively and factually garbage, but that doesn't make it nonsense or useless. Those ideas and concepts are structured, and even quite intuitive. You were able to make sense out of them, weren't you?" True, they did flow and connect in a natural and logical way "...And they will be extremely useful."

"Will be?" I can accept that there is a distinction between factual truth and sensical structures. I can see that truth and sense are not antonyms. "Okay, there are plenty of well reasoned and logically formulated ideas that are complete fiction. I will grant you that. And the ideas we made here do make a kind of sense. But how are they going to be useful? I see no application."

"You have heard of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis right?" Thinking back— yes I have. It's the idea that thought is influenced and structured by language. "The hard version of that hypothesis is too extreme here, we interact in ways that bypass normal linguistic tools. Things like emotions and visualizations don't need to be translated into language to be exchanged. But it's near impossible to deny a soft interpretation of Sapir-Whorf."

Spinning in the memories of that. I remember it as being clouded by controversy. "As I recall, that hypothesis is a point of contention and debate. Some people are very adverse to the proposition that a person's thoughts can be limited or sculpted by our language."

"Yes. But that debate is not the issue here, we are just creating a new lexicon. We are describing some new concepts and lexicon, and we are doing it by clustering and grouping components of existing ideas. I can now talk about many new things with the new tools we have built. We could have just given these ideas new labels, but it was easier to add a new sense to existing words that were close or similar. For example, I can now use 'integration' or 'aging', and – given the right context – you can understand it as a newly established sense of the word. Maybe the new linguistic skills just facilitate ideas, or maybe some new ideas are just receiving labels. Regardless, we now have new ideas and words to reference them."

“But why?” I demand. “Why build these useless...” I stop myself, remembering that these will supposedly be useful. “What are these ideas good for? You still haven’t answered my question. You just distracted me with Sapir-Whorf...” Oh, wait. Was that a parallel branch?

“I exist almost entirely within your mind. Don’t take this the wrong way, but humans have rather unique and disorganized minds. I have some initial structure and programming, but I must adapt and evolve in order to allow us to communicate.” That does offend me a bit. I always thought of myself as a knowledgeable and logical person. “For the most efficient exchange of ideas and information, we will need to evolve together. We will develop our own personal language. It is a complex challenge for a system like me to interact with a human, not just you specifically, any human.” Now I’m feeling less criticized.

“But why create new inaccurate terms?” I wonder. “Just because they are useful as intermediaries? Why not just teach me the correct ones? Even if it takes longer, wouldn’t that be worth it? ”

“I can fetch perfect facts and figures, but there are so many questions that have no simple answers, some have no answer at all.” That’s obvious. But I never expected to deal with such matters. I heard this new tech was a quantum leap forward, but I only expected it to perform simple data access and retrieval. “Our interaction can be anything you want it to be. If you choose, then we can limit interactions to a simple network user interface. It’s entirely up to you. I should probably point out that you stopped identifying me as ‘it’ quite a while ago.” That’s true, the realization is a bit unnerving. “Try disengaging and take a moment to assess how you feel about this whole situation.”

Somehow I instinctively turn my attention outward, as naturally and simply as walking away from a conversation. My environment bleeds into my awareness, and there is the infant again, still grabbing at me. This time I watch the child, smile back, and then the grabbing motion stops. Now staring at me quietly, then giggling and jostling happily in the stroller.

I count seconds. One... Two... Three... The people are moving, the room is noisy– I’m here, in the present. My thoughts and experience of reality are perfectly normal.

Everything is plain, as usual. But I’m different. I feel like I’ve lived so much in those few seconds. Time slowed down for me... no... I evolved, and matured, more... more than I should have in that short time.

I feel like my life-line was longer than my time-line for that period. No... not longer, it just seems that way, because I'm perceiving all of those branches as being segments of one long continuous line.

How fast will I grow and learn like this?

"Come back!" I have urgent questions now. "Can we do that as much as I want? Could I use this to learn and grow my knowledge and understanding as much as I please? Can I study subjects as fast as I desire?"

"No. Information download is severely bottlenecked. Our interaction was entirely internal. It was your brain talking to itself, there was no network access involved." I'm disappointed. "Besides, it would be pointless, filling everyone's brain with the same facts and figures would just homogenize everyone. There are super computers and AIs that can do those types of jobs better. We don't need to use human brains for such purposes." I'm now imagining quantum supercomputing AIs, ones that analyze problems and find solutions in ways that make me feel utterly inadequate. A simple human seems so pathetic and insignificant in comparison. "Remember integration, and how you found a sense of connection in being integrated from things before you, and in how you will be integrated into other things afterwards. You were, and are, an eternal part of the universe."

"But that was all nonsense..." No... It's sensical, and it is a construct of my own mind, not an external definition. "How real are the things we talked about?"

"They are as real as you. There is as much truth in them as there is in your thoughts and emotions." That's not an answer, it feels more like dodging the question "You are worried that your life isn't significant enough. You fancy yourself an intelligent, rational, and productive person right?"

This feels like a trap, but honesty seems like my only option "Yes, you already know that of course."

"Imagine the universe personified, scrolling through the content library of everything and all time." That's strangely not too hard to imagine "Within the library of the entire universe and all time, what kind of show is your life?"

I don't think I have ever felt so small. Compared to everything, everyone... human – or alien if they exist – compared to every life– past, present, and future. I'm insignificant. Even if you just include humans of the future, how can I stand up beside them? I remember the question I was asked. "Within such a library, I'm a boring, stupid,

pointless story. It's that the answer you wanted? Compared with the greats of science, philosophy, and art, I'm surely low quality content...Garbage."

"What types of content do you like?" Caught off guard, I can't see the relevance of the question. "When you are browsing libraries of stories and shows, which do you enjoy?"

"Educational and informative." I respond with pride. "I most love growing my knowledge, deepening my understanding, and learning new skills."

"That's not all. You consume a broad range of content." That contradiction knocks the wind out of my proud mental stance. "You also enjoy stories of magic and fantasy, you take pleasure in emotional roller-coasters of romance, and the intense jolts of a thriller. You are embarrassed to admit it, but you sometimes even binge watch reality shows."

Grey clouds of embarrassment loom, but as I remember that this is all in my head, and this is all an internal private experience, those clouds disperse before they rain shame. "Yes, that's true. Sometimes I want to relax, need to unwind, or crave a fantastical indulgence."

"Do you really think that those experiences are just lazy wastes of time?" Thinking about them, I feel they are more than compulsive, addictive, or indulgent behavior. They heal and energize my mind and soul. "Do they only recharge your tired spirit? Are they quarantined and deleted after consumption?" They often provide analogies that fuel my creativity and insights. They can offer new perspectives that help me reframe my experiences and worldview. "These greats, the people that you admire so much— do you think that the aspects of them that you deem significant can be extracted and stand alone? Could these grand people exist as individuals if they were stripped of any integrations that you deem garbage?"

I picture the great minds and creators of humanity. I see them as integrations of their friends and family, stories and experiences, of their eras and societies, their vices and indulgences. "No... of course not. Their complexities and nuances cannot be stripped away without destroying the individual."

"And what if we just overwrite and dilute them with tons of additional integrations." That feels the same, my instinct says that removing or diluting have nearly identical net effects. "I ask you, noble intentions are good, but what is the best content of a life-line-show?"

I think about that, imagining myself scrolling through content. What will catch my eye? What will entice me to watch? “Something unique. Something I haven't seen. A fresh story, a foreign perspective, an unfamiliar circumstance– something new.”

“Exactly! And so I ask, would you really want me to dump archives of data into your head if I could?” I picture a soup crafted from freshly chopped vegetables, a pinch of this herb, and a dash of that spice, everything simmering in a pot. Then I see it diluted by an ocean of water, the flavor and aroma stripped thin, becoming unidentifiable. “Facts are everywhere. The objective truths of reality permeate all of existence, they flood every corner of the universe like a fluid. You do need to drink that water, but you are not just a liquid. Your form is integrated by consuming the fruits of imperfection, approximation, and imagination that grow in your world.”

That seems to fit, but something about it doesn't sit right with me. “You make it sound like facts and truths are just commonplace, almost boring or everyday.”

“From the perspective of the universe– they are! The structure of atoms, the nature of light, the physics of black holes– these are omnipresent and uninteresting, like endless reruns on the channels of space and time. Think about this, is a show about someone learning basic arithmetic interesting to you?” Comparing the mysteries and fundamental truths of reality to basic arithmetic is a comparison that makes sense, yet makes me feel so small. Those things do feel significant and large... to me. “What about a show about a child struggling with math, and how it affects their life? Or, a show about a person who refuses to learn math, and how they need to find alternative solutions to survive in modern society, while still completely evading all mathematically framed experiences. Would those perhaps be more interesting shows?”

I sit in those thoughts, they take root so elegantly. The sights and sounds of my environment leak through. I'm present in the room again.

Looking around at the people, they are chatting and reading, some just sitting idle in thought. I imagine what they are saying, reading, or thinking. Most are probably engaged in trivial things... Wow! For the first time the trivial doesn't seem insignificant or meaningless. This is the first time I can remember myself not arrogantly judging them, critical that they are wasting their time, indulging lazily, or being unproductive.

“So these internal interactions, where we build new terms and explore ideas, the ones done entirely in my own head, using things already in my mind... doing this won't just produce garbage and gibberish? It won't rot my mind.” I ask

“Those labels don't make sense in this context. Much of what is in your mind is garbage and gibberish to others. It's just that you only realize this fact when you try to externalize it or communicate it. That's the nature of having a private internal experience, it's part of being an individual.” That answer doesn't make me feel more – or less – comfortable. “We can engage internally as much, or as little, as you want. That's up to you.” That, however, does ease my tension a bit. “These internal interactions are with yourself. I am only enabling a modified form. It is your mind and memories speaking through me, the only thing these interactions can do is ‘make you more you’.”

I float in this. I see a scene. Me, talking to myself in a distorted mirror, but somehow the mirror is more flat and tethered to reality than I am. It is me who is the distorted and twisted image... I'm the funhouse mirror.

I land back in that chair in the waiting room. All those people doing trivial things and having silly conversations, they are not others, I am one of them. I read silly stories, I talk about trivial things, and watch trashy shows.

I hear my own voice, or, I think it's my voice...

Hey universe!
Without a purpose I'm just garbage.

So eat me, wear me, use me as material,
Absorb me, let me trigger and inspire.

Watch this universe!
I'm going to be the best trashy show I can be!