

Preface

This compilation has not been made with the intention of making either party look foolish, smart, right, or wrong. Rather, it has only been made because it shows how I define myself, what kind of person I am —or at least want to be— , what my ideals and goals are.

Enjoy!

The initial conversation

17:21:12 **Jeremy**: So, to your knowledge, would it be illegal for me to put an email somebody sent me on my website?
17:21:39 **Jeremy**: Forgetting about whether my school has policies about that.
17:22:40 **Yale**: You mean, without their permission?
17:22:43 **Jeremy**: Yep.
17:23:07 **Yale**: I can't see how it would be illegal.
17:23:12 **Yale**: It would just be an asshole thing to do.
17:23:19 **Jeremy**: How about if they specifically don't give their permission.
17:23:30 **Jeremy**: Well, I'm not really concerned with how things shape up in your view of the world :)
17:23:41 **Yale**: I don't think that'd matter.
17:23:44 **Yale**: Of course you're not.
17:24:05 **Jeremy**: Well, I'm going to look at it more, of course.
17:24:25 **Jeremy**: To make sure.
17:24:57 **Jeremy**: The guy said that the author of correspondence has the rights.
17:25:01 **Jeremy**: To their writings.
17:25:40 **Yale**: I can't honestly say for sure.
17:26:04 **Jeremy**: Yeah. Well, I've taken it down for now.
17:43:17 **Yale**: Can I ask you a serious question?
17:43:37 **Jeremy**: You can ask.
17:43:42 **Jeremy**: You can always ask.
17:43:45 **Yale**: You're not very happy, are you?
17:44:59 **Jeremy**: Is there a point to me answering this question?
17:45:15 **Yale**: Not really, I guess.
17:45:26 **Jeremy**: I mean, are you interested in my answer?
17:45:48 **Yale**: I don't like to see a friend being so unhappy as you seem to me to be.
17:46:35 **Yale**: I mean, I can't directly do anything about it.
17:46:59 **Yale**: But it just seems to me that you've come across as increasingly unhappy lately.
17:47:47 **Jeremy**: That sort of says something about you, doesn't it?
17:48:11 **Yale**: It's OK if you don't want to talk about it.
17:48:14 **Yale**: You don't have to get defensive.
17:48:30 **Jeremy**: That's not the sense I meant it in.
17:48:36 **Jeremy**: I'm being serious.
17:48:41 **Yale**: Well, what do you mean

17:48:42 Yale: ?

17:50:09 Jeremy: The way I see things, our emotional reactions to our perception of the world is shaped more by the way we have been conditioned to react to stimuli, than by the stimuli itself.

17:50:11 Jeremy: For example:

17:50:42 Jeremy: A question like "That sort of says something about you, doesn't it?" can be interpreted in a lot of different ways.

17:50:58 Jeremy: But the way you interpret it coming from me depends more on what you think about me, than what I mean.

17:51:00 Jeremy: think about me.

17:51:13 Yale: I'm serious. If you don't want to talk about it, we won't talk about it. But you don't have to deflect me off on a tangent.

17:51:25 Yale: Just say you don't want to discuss it.

17:51:37 Jeremy: I am discussing it.

17:51:56 Jeremy: Perhaps you just don't think that what I'm discussing is relevant, or interesting.

17:52:14 Yale: I just asked you a question.

17:52:24 Jeremy: There were a few issues you raised, though.

17:52:29 Jeremy: I'll return to the first question, though.

17:53:37 Jeremy: Am I happy? Not only am I happy, but I'm happier than I've ever been at any point in my life. (Which shouldn't be something exceptional... it would be a shame to not be constantly reaching new peaks of happiness and contentment with one's life.)

17:53:56 Jeremy: That's my answer to the question, but I hesitated to answer because you have no reason to take my word for it.

17:54:06 Jeremy: And I'm not about to try to convince you to take my word for it.

17:54:21 Jeremy: But to return to my other point.

17:55:22 Jeremy: Your perception of me becoming increasingly unhappy clearly cannot have anything to do with me if I am quite happy and content, and only getting happier. However, I do think it reflects what you think of me.

17:55:33 Jeremy: And of course that's not meant to blame or shame you for anything.

17:55:40 Jeremy: But to invite you to reflect.

17:56:07 Jeremy: You misinterpreted my question above as trying to deflect the conversation away from myself, rather than a serious attempt to discuss something that was interesting to me.

17:56:08 Yale: Look, I'll level with you.

17:56:22 Yale: You've always been sort of an obnoxious person. For as long as I've known you.

17:56:26 Yale: That's part of your charm.

17:56:33 Yale: You're free-spirited.

17:56:46 Yale: But lately, it seems to have intensified.

17:56:50 Yale: Become outright nastiness.

17:56:54 Yale: For no apparent reason.

17:56:59 Yale: Vindictiveness, almost.

17:57:01 Yale: I don't know.

17:57:12 Jeremy: Let me know when you're done.

17:57:19 Yale: Looking back on my own life, and people who I've known, we've all gone

through a period like that.

17:57:24 Yale: I remember being like that.

17:57:35 Yale: I also remember the times around then being the least happy time of my life.

17:57:43 Yale: Although I never would have known it at the time.

17:58:14 Yale: So, I'm just saying that, from where I stand, you've become less and less pleasant to deal with.

17:58:26 Yale: Even other people seem to think so, and you seem to take pride in that.

17:58:41 Yale: And that just seems like the behavior of a fundamentally unhappy person.

17:58:52 Yale: I'm not a psychologist or anything.

17:59:06 Yale: I'm just drawing off my own experience.

17:59:14 Yale: But I need to go to class now.

17:59:17 Yale: I'm late.

17:59:27 Jeremy: Well, I'll send you a hopefully very short reply.

17:59:35 Yale: Okay, if you like.

17:59:49 Yale: Later.

from me

Dear Yale,

I have read your comments, and I appreciate your care and concern, especially considering that we are rather emotionally distant from each other at present.

Here are my responses, not by way of defense, but rather "for your information" . Please do not respond to this email unless you're actually interested in seriously discussing the ideas put forth in here. Perhaps you find them incredibly stupid and ridiculous, and you want to tell me that. Well, I can't stop you from doing so, but know that my life is consciously organized to the point where the only comments that can be of any improvement to the quality of my life are constructive ones.

Happy reading!

* * *

I have spent many years reflecting on my life and experiences, deciding how I want to structure my life and my relationships with other people. Apparently you have too, and apparently we have come to different conclusions; I'm fine with that, because I don't believe in a universal "right" or "wrong" . (See <http://mathmeth.port5.com/JAW/jaw20.pdf> for a little more on that.)

I'll mention some ways in which we differ.

17:56:22 Yale: You've always been sort of an obnoxious person. For as long as I've

known you.

The way I look at the world gives me the following interpretation of your comment: "You've always been sort of an obnoxious person." to me means "I've always perceived you as an obnoxious person." . Indeed, some people do not find me obnoxious; some people have almost never found me obnoxious. What matters to me, in terms of shaping my life, is not what you or anyone else considers obnoxious, but what I consider obnoxious, because at the end of the day, when I evaluate my life, I only have myself to answer to.

I present myself on a take-it-or-leave-it basis, and I'm not offended or hurt if someone finds me offensive, obnoxious, etc. I prefer to associate with like-minded others, and I have no anger towards people who disagree with me; I simply don't tend to associate with them.

17:57:35 Yale: I also remember the times around then being the least happy time of my life.

17:57:43 Yale: Although I never would have known it at the time.

I don't think I'm wrong in saying that the reason you suspect I'm unhappy is by analogy with your own life.

I see what you're saying. For the record, though, I tend to be very hesitant when reasoning by analogy, because I think the brain is rather overproductive when drawing connections, and rather talented at overlooking possibly fundamental differences.

All I can say is that I am very happy with my life, for about three years now. You in fact played a pivotal role in that by helping me to question certain aspects of my own behavior and of the behavior I enjoyed most in others. But as I've said, we seem to have come to different conclusions.

17:58:14 Yale: So, I'm just saying that, from where I stand, you've become less and less pleasant to deal with.

I'm really surprised to read this! About three years ago or so, we had some unpleasantness between us. I tried --in an admittedly inappropriate fashion at first-- to resolve that unpleasantness, but it didn't work, and I thought that was clear! And in fact when it became clear it wasn't working, I said something like: "If you're not willing to take me seriously when we talk, then we're not going to get anywhere, and our relationship won't be anything more than a casual acquaintanceship." . Things continued, and I realized that I needed to simply let myself fall away from you, because there was no point in being a part of a relationship I gained no pleasure from. For years now I've grown more and more distant from you --although I've kept in casual contact with you about this or that-- , and for a long time now you have been neither pleasant nor unpleasant to deal with, because our interaction has been pretty much nonexistent, and because I have no emotional ties to you anymore --neither negative nor positive ones!-- .

In fact, I no longer have truly unpleasant interactions with *anyone* anymore, because I simply don't interact with people who I deem uninterested in having a productive relationship with me: I leave them be; I'm not out to convert them to my opinions, and in fact completely accept that some people may even have unbridled rage towards me. It doesn't even bother me when people misunderstand my opinions and intentions, as I feel you do.

So when I gather that you have been so affected by me, that seems a shame: No one forces me to have unpleasant interactions with anyone, and I consider it my responsibility to put myself in comfortable situations, and to extract myself from unpleasant ones.

17:58:26 Yale: Even other people seem to think so, and you seem to take pride in that.

I only take pride in following the paths I've carved out for myself, in learning more about myself and the world, in improving the quality of my life, and in having a hell of a lot of fun. I couldn't even begin to understand how to take pride in other people's opinions of me, whether positive or negative. (When people have negative opinions about me, if I suspect they may have observed something about me I missed, I am interested to know why. If not, I may simply be amused; perhaps you mistook my amusement for pride? When people have positive opinions about me, if I suspect they have good reason to have those opinions, I am excited to get to know such people, because they are likely to be compatible with me. If not, they're probably a little overeager, and I approach hesitantly.)

Please don't think that I would ever say you were the only one who disagrees with me! There are many of you out there! But if it makes you feel any better, you'll be happy to know that there are those who do agree with me on a lot of important issues. I don't think that makes me any more or less "right" about the way I structure my life, but it's always nice to have companions. :)

17:58:41 Yale: And that just seems like the behavior of a fundamentally unhappy person.

On this point I must strongly disagree. As far as I can tell, you are saying that if I accept that others find me unpleasant, I am fundamentally unhappy. For me, such acceptance is the hallmark of a fundamentally happy person. I am not a salesman out to please as many people as possible; I am out to pursue the paths, and interact with those people I find most appealing. Again, it seems like we just disagree on this point.

17:59:06 Yale: I'm just drawing off my own experience.

Me too.

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17:50:42 Jeremy: A question like "That sort of says something about you, doesn't it?"

can be interpreted in a lot of different ways.

In regards to the discussion linked on my away message --which I assume you read?-- , one of my friends remarked today that he found the girl's attitude very amusing, but thought that some of my comments were a bit obnoxious. For some reason I can't quite put my finger on yet, straightforward, controlled, impartial comments are often read as obnoxious. Let's look at an example.

19:26:50 eskimosoccerstar: i don't know u at all

19:26:58 eskimosoccerstar: fuck u

19:27:13 Jeremy: Well, if that's the way you feel, fine. I never said anything against you with harmful intentions.

Plain text can't do it justice, but it is clear that there's a very sarcastic, whiny, immature reading of my response, and that is the reading my friend probably got. However, there is also a very calm, collected reading of my response, one that says no more than: "I accept that you feel the way you do, and I had no intention to bring you to this state." . Etc. But as we all know, much subtlety is lost over AIM or email.

People have sometimes asked me whether it would be more appropriate to be more sensitive and empathetic in my responses. I have found from experience that this is more harmful than helpful; that it is better to just be completely honest as to my meanings and intentions, and then present myself on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. In my reasoned opinion, masking my thoughts and opinions in niceties only compounds the problem, and prolongs discovery of fundamental incompatibilities; being emotional in order to be sympathetic can often spin an upset person out of control. In cases where misunderstanding is the order of the day, I find it crucial to be honest and straightforward. That may seem cold, but that depends on how you define warmth: I find the intimacy of emotional honesty to be much more warming than sugar coating.

There is also a larger problem, I think: To be dishonest in the above way doesn't live up to what I expect from myself in the way I treat others. For the most part, I want to treat others with respect, and for me, honesty and openness are the key hallmarks of respect. And it is important to me that the people I am close to feel the same way; thus being honest in emotionally charged situations and watching others' reactions tells me a lot of crucial information about someone I may not know very well.

* * *

Perhaps you'd be interested to read a little manifesto I wrote awhile back. I found that I got very similar comments and questions over and over again, so I wrote some general responses.

Not included, unfortunately, are my writings on monogamy and human relationships I've been working on for about three years now. These writings outline my opinions on how to structure my life and interact with others. However, at present they are just a

collection of musings I've had throughout the years; although I've often discussed the big picture from start to finish in person, I haven't yet committed that picture to paper. Because I'd rather not waste your time, I haven't included these musings; however, I'd be happy to discuss any of my opinions on life with you, if you're interested in them.

+j

from Yale

I was thinking about you the other night. I was reading your exchange with Geoff Pullum and a few things occurred to me. First, just because people think your ideas on "right and wrong" and "facts" are ridiculous does not make you a misunderstood philosophical genius. It is completely transparent that you are more interested in playing word games with people than seriously discussing philosophy. Second, you do an awful lot of "Oh sure, you could interpret that statement this way, but I didn't mean it like that and it never crossed my mind that anyone would take offense at it." You're too smart for me to believe you don't pick your words very carefully and think about how they'll affect people. Again, word games. Third, you can't seriously believe that people appreciate any of the things you say you thought they'd appreciate. You knew you were just saying things to tweak that girl you had the conversation with. No reasonable person is going to see your "calm, collected reading" of any of your responses, and to suggest that they will is self-centered and completely dismissive of other people's feelings.

Basically, I started thinking about what a pathetic obnoxious jerk you are. I thought about telling you that.

Then I thought a little more. I don't really think you're a bad person. If you were unintelligent, I would in fact simply write you off as a pathetic obnoxious jerk. What I see, however, is really a very unhappy, scared person.

You've never been what I'd call happy. Without going into details, I have specific recollections of our childhood that now lead me to believe you were in fact quite miserable growing up. Obviously, your life is different now than when you were young, but it still seems to me that your actions are those of someone who is still deeply unhappy. When I ask you a question--just to inquire if you're feeling OK--you can't simply answer it. You have to turn it around on me and suggest that I must be unhappy or insecure in some way for asking the question, and by the way you're the happiest you've ever been, thank you very much. Actions speak louder than words, and those are not the actions of happy man. A happy man wouldn't be bothered by the question as deeply as you seem to be. Happy people don't feel the need to write four page FAQs from people who they've upset. Now, I suppose, you're going to argue with my interpretation of the word "happy".

This brings me to my other point. You're very, very scared of being inferior to anyone in

any way (at least, in the fields that are important to you). By playing word games with people, you demonstrate (to yourself, anyway) that you are a superior person. When people don't accept your position, it is not that your position may just possibly be weak or fundamentally meaningless, but that they either don't understand it or are so religiously fervent in their beliefs that no amount of rational reasoning will ever change their minds about anything. A few weeks ago I was trying to explain to you the concept of promissory estoppel, and before I could even finish explaining the reasoning behind it, you told me you were amused by depths of my zealotry. Frankly, I think you tend to take opinions and express them in ways that you know will goad people into arguing with you because it makes you feel superior when people "don't understand you".

Furthermore, it is not enough to simply prove to yourself your superiority. You feel a compulsion to prove it to everyone else, too. Geoff Pullum specifically asked you not to post your email correspondence online. You couldn't bear to respect his wishes, however, because you needed to show everyone else what a zealot he was and how you trounced him intellectually by doing nothing more than presenting him with the facts. Oh ho! Aren't you the clever one? Is it really necessary to post your conversation with a random girl on AIM? Boy, you wouldn't believe how sensitive stupid people are when confronted by someone of clearly superior intelligence. Does the world need to know how intellectually bankrupt this one girl is for daring to suggest to you that she got an unfair shake dealing with the school about her RA position? Boy, you sure put HER in her place. Not everything everyone says to you is necessarily intended for public consumption. Failure to acknowledge this is immature and destroys trust people might otherwise be willing to place in you. You've even done it to me: your reply to our conversation, complete with key quotations taken out of context, was Cced to three people (two of whom I've never met, or even heard of). I don't know how to convince you that this is a completely inappropriate thing to do. I suspect you know it, but your overriding compulsion to prove your superiority to these people forced you to do it anyway. I am pleased that you at least respect me enough to use the Cc and not the Bcc field--although I wonder if that isn't your way of trying to rub my stupidity in my face.

The way I see things, it's less important to you that people like you than that they respect your intellectual superiority. I feel badly for you, because I know you're not happy. I don't hate you, and I don't think you're an inferior person. I do, however, think you're very troubled. Sadly, I also find you very tiresome to deal with of late, which is frustrating for me because I still like you and would like to be your friend if possible. I suppose, however, that if I can't or won't meet your exacting criteria of someone who is interested in having a productive relationship with you (which seems to include acting as your intellectual punching bag) then you don't see me as worthy of being your friend. If that's the case, then I think you have a very petty definition of friendship. But hey, there's no "correct" definition of "friendship", right?

Perhaps not, but there are people who truly care about you. Fewer than you think.

Yale

from me

Well, you certainly seem to have some strong opinions about me and my opinions, as well as about absolutes and life in general! And you also seem to be convinced of their validity. I think that's great, and I know your confidence will take you far.

It seems to me that, as you often have, you have overinterpreted some of my comments and actions, a symptom of which is your phrase "as if to say" . But now as then, I don't think there's anything I could say that could convince you that your interpretations are indeed overinterpretations. Oh well.

Perhaps you will be interested in delving into these points more deeply sometime in person. But for now I think we've said all that can productively be said.

+j

from me

I am sending to myself responses to almost every sentence in your most recent email to me. I am not sending them to you, but in case you should be interested in speaking in person someday, these responses might be a good place to start.

+j

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from Yale

Well, I'm glad I struck a nerve with you.

Yale

--

from me

I guess I'm not exactly sure what your latest email means.

I did not mean to imply that when reading your email, I --for example-- realized several flaws in my position, was offended or hurt, was provoked to discover new insights about life, etc. Rather, I found that I could easily provide "stock" responses to

almost everything you wrote. If you meant to say something more deep, I confess that I missed it. You're welcome to try again.

I wrote the responses, because in the case that you would like to discuss questions of ideology in the future, your comments and my responses would be a good place to start. (In other words, we could print out the email and go through one by one.)

I also wrote the responses, because other than the "FAQ" , I don't have a collection in one place of many of my "stock" responses to certain critiques of my ideology.

I also wrote the responses so that I could share them with those of my friends who are intensely interested in my developing ideology, and enjoy observing how my ideology leads me to react to certain comments.

Sorry if there was some confusion? And let me know when and if you'd like to discuss this further in person.

+j

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from Yale

Nobody's critiquing your ideology. You're welcome to any ideology you choose. I don't care how you see "facts" or what your philosophy on life is. Your ideas are nothing new--the very same ideas have occurred to me and to countless other people as well. In truth, I find your old hat philosophy boring. What irritates me (and others) is not your ideas, but the way you express them. When you're so fond of semantic games it's hard to take any discussion with you seriously. Every conversation with you revolves around you, because you need to show your superiority.

I'm not really telling you this to criticize you. I really do care about your well being. Honestly, I'm not sure why, since you treat me like dirt. I guess I still have some respect for you as a person. Maybe because I feel sorry for you--I can't really blame you for being so unpleasant to deal with when you obviously have so much unhappiness in your life. Deep down, you know you're not happy. You don't have to admit it to me. I know it's not your style.

Have you ever sought professional help? You wouldn't have to tell anyone about it, and it could be beneficial in ways you don't realize now. I know it's not a pleasant thing to do, admitting you might need help with depression, but I really think you should at least give it a try. If, after all, you're as happy as you say you are, then all you've lost is a little time. UCSC has a free counseling program that you ought to at least consider.

For what it's worth, though, I think you owe me and Geoff Pullum a public apology. I know you're not concerned with my world view on the matter, but it would be the big

thing to do.

Yale

--

from me (never sent)

First, just because people think your ideas on "right and wrong" and "facts" are ridiculous does not make you a misunderstood philosophical genius.

It seems that you think I think I am a misunderstood philosophical genius. I don't. I only think that I have thought quite a bit about ideas that are important to me, and I am ready and willing to discuss them with any interested party.

It is completely transparent that you are more interested in playing word games with people than seriously discussing philosophy.

That is completely transparent to *you* . I'm not interested in playing word games, but I am interested in semantics: Unfortunately, people use words very differently, and it is important to me to nail down how someone is using a word before I discuss an idea involving that word. (Because otherwise we would be talking at cross-purposes.)

Second, you do an awful lot of "Oh sure, you could interpret that statement this way, but I didn't mean it like that and it never crossed my mind that anyone would take offense at it." You're too smart for me to believe you don't pick your words very carefully and think about how they'll affect people. Again, word games.

You don't have to believe it. I pick my words carefully to express what I mean, not in order to affect people in a nonabrasive way. In fact I have no intention of provoking anyone.

Third, you can't seriously believe that people appreciate any of the things you say you thought they'd appreciate. You knew you were just saying things to tweak that girl you had the conversation with.

Well, I have to disagree with you. I *was* only saying the things I said to inform her, and once she became outraged, I *was* only saying the things I said to express clearly what I meant. At no time did it ever cross my mind to "tweak" this person; in fact I didn't even know her, and was seriously interested in playing backgammon with her.

I don't expect everyone to react to me in the way I would like people to react. But people do, and those who do show that they are in agreement with what I consider fundamental tenets of my ideology.

No reasonable person is going to see your "calm, collected reading" of any of your

responses, and to suggest that they will is self-centered and completely dismissive of other people's feelings.

Then I guess I know several people who are, in your opinion, unreasonable. I can live with that, since your notion of reasonableness is not one that is interesting to me.

You've never been what I'd call happy. Without going into details, I have specific recollections of our childhood that now lead me to believe you were in fact quite miserable growing up.

You have only ever had a very slight look into my life, then and now. You seem to be extrapolating from that small slice to talk about the whole pie, while in fact you know practically nothing of the person I was then, or the person I am now. I was a very happy person as a child, and am a very happy person now. My only periods of unhappiness were: My last years at Mirman, and my first at Culver High, when I felt like a social outcast; and for a few months, during a breakup with a girlfriend at the end of my freshman year of college. You can read more into my life if you want... but it's possible I'm just a "pathetic obnoxious jerk" . :)

But I think here you reveal something crucial. You say, "You've never been what I'd call happy." . Doesn't that explain everything? I am **not** what you'd call happy, because I have completely different goals from you. But by the goals I set for myself, I am quite happy. And you can believe that or not.

When I ask you a question--just to inquire if you're feeling OK--you can't simply answer it.

Originally, I hesitated to answer the question, because I figured --given our past experience-- you would not accept my opinion at face value. I don't think I was incorrect.

Also, I saw more depth in your question than perhaps you intended. The other day, somebody asked me if I loved a certain girl. Well, I just didn't know how to answer that yes or no, because in my experience, every person under the sun has a different opinion about what "love" means. So I had to clarify what was meant before I could give an answer. And really, in the end, I think that discussing what concepts like "happy" and "love" mean to different people is far more rewarding than answering yes or no questions.

You have to turn it around on me and suggest that I must be unhappy or insecure in some way for asking the question,

I never meant to suggest that you were unhappy or insecure at all, and I don't see how you could think that from the words I used! I only said that your perception of me is shaped more by how you see me, than by my intentions. That doesn't mean that you're unhappy, or that you're insecure; only that you interpret my actions in very particular

ways, and ascribe intentions to me I do not (think I) have.

Now, you can claim that I've been deluding myself my whole life, and that in fact I've "really" been miserable all this time, and that maybe I will delude myself for the rest of my life... but then I don't really care! As far as I can see, I am happy, and only getting happier -- not only that, but I'm more in control of my life now, more in a position to change the course of my life than ever before. And if that's being naive or delusional, then I prefer to stay that way.

[and by the way you're the happiest you've ever been, thank you very much.](#)

Not "thank you very much" . I turned around and answered the question straightforwardly. I think you have colored my response.

[Actions speak louder than words, and those are not the actions of happy man.](#)

But you're interpreting my actions. You have a different rubric than I do for deciding what actions are happy and what are not.

[A happy man wouldn't be bothered by the question as deeply as you seem to be.](#)

What indicated that I was bothered? I was hesitant to enter the discussion, because I didn't want to spend hours of my life telling you what my intentions are for my actions. I think, given where we are now, that I was right to be hesitant, and perhaps wrong to respond. But at no point did I ever say that I was upset or bothered. (Because at no point was I upset or bothered.)

[Happy people don't feel the need to write four page FAQs from people who they've upset.](#)

So says you! I wrote that FAQ with pleasure! I recognize that many people are liable to misinterpret the things I say and do, and I am tickled at the prospect of clarifying human interaction. There's nothing that pleases me more than to discover means of clarifying interaction. I don't know to what extent that FAQ succeeds, but I certainly can't say it's ever hurt.

[Now, I suppose, you're going to argue with my interpretation of the word "happy".](#)

I'm not going to argue with you about anything, and I haven't been arguing with you at any point this whole time. All I've been doing is putting forth my opinions. Can't we disagree without arguing?

However, I do acknowledge --and I guess you're saying you don't?-- that the notion of happiness **is** a relative one. Different people define happiness in different ways. I think it's very likely that we simply have different notions of happiness, and hence we strive for different things in our social interactions. I accept that.

This brings me to my other point. You're very, very scared of being inferior to anyone in any way (at least, in the fields that are important to you).

So says you, but on what basis? I carried on my conversation with Geoff for a time because I thought there was a possibility of serious discussion, not because I thought myself inferior.

For the past year or so, I've been carrying on email conversations with three mathematicians who I am *definitely* inferior to. I'm not scared of that fact; rather, that fact has prodded me to become a better mathematician. In some emails, they are showing me where I went wrong, and I correct myself. In others, I strike out with new ideas that they will critique, from their privileged position. And in yet others, I present my case in opposition to theirs. Sometimes they agree, sometimes they disagree, but the conversations never take on a bitter tone, as they can do with others.

Now, I interact with these superior gentlemen just as I do with everyone else. I'm not afraid of them, nor am I afraid of anyone else. So why are some of my conversations more ridiculous than others?

By playing word games with people, you demonstrate (to yourself, anyway) that you are a superior person.

How do you know this?

When people don't accept your position, it is not that your position may just possibly be weak or fundamentally meaningless, but that they either don't understand it or are so religiously fervent in their beliefs that no amount of rational reasoning will ever change their minds about anything.

Then how do you explain all the times that I do recant my position, that I do change my opinions? Perhaps you only see examples of strong disagreement because (i) we both have well-formed opinions and strongly disagree on most everything, and (ii) you have seen some conversations that were *chosen* for publication because they contain examples of strong disagreement.

The general rule is this: If a person presents to me an argument suggesting that my position is weak or meaningless, and I feel the argument is sound, I will seriously consider it. This has happened and continues to happen. If a person suggests such an argument, but I do not feel the argument is sound, I do not seriously consider it. I've lived this way for some time now and I have no problems with it.

A comment like this one will never give me pause for thought, because I know that I change all the time thanks to my interactions with other people.

A few weeks ago I was trying to explain to you the concept of promissory estoppel, and

before I could even finish explaining the reasoning behind it, you told me you were amused by depths of my zealotry. Frankly, I think you tend to take opinions and express them in ways that you know will goad people into arguing with you because it makes you feel superior when people "don't understand you".

I won't contest your right to think that. However, when I said I was amused by the depths of your zealotry, I meant it. But I wasn't saying that to be spiteful, and if you found it spiteful, then you just shouldn't be around someone like me.

Furthermore, it is not enough to simply prove to yourself your superiority. You feel a compulsion to prove it to everyone else, too.

How do you know this is why I publish certain documents?

Geoff Pullum specifically asked you not to post your email correspondence online. You couldn't bear to respect his wishes, however, because you needed to show everyone else what a zealot he was and how you trounced him intellectually by doing nothing more than presenting him with the facts.

But if I wanted to show my intellectual superiority, why wouldn't I publish email correspondences with instances of professors and researchers recanting, saying that, indeed, they were wrong and I was right? That would certainly show more clearly that I was smarter than people who should, by the size of their paycheck, be smarter than me. The fact is that such emails are boring. Similarly, I don't share with my friends emails where I made a foolish mistake and recanted immediately. But the series of emails with Geoff --like this series with you-- is an interesting exchange between two people in disagreement who have well thought-out views.

The reason I posted --and sincerely wanted to post-- my conversation with Geoff is twofold: (i) I feel that students at UCSC should see the kind of interactions that take place with certain professors. I happen to find his attitude towards me a little stifling, and indeed, many other students at UCSC have been completely shocked --at Geoff-- upon reading our exchange. (ii) I feel that certain interesting issues about the philosophy of science were touched on in that conversation, and have greatly benefitted from the comments others have provided on that conversation. (Perhaps you and Geoff find the conversation meaningless wordplay, but judging from the reactions of many of my friends, you don't speak for everyone.)

Oh ho! Aren't you the clever one?

That seems like contentless sarcasm to me.

Is it really necessary to post your conversation with a random girl on AIM?

I'm always a little surprised when people talk to me about whether certain behavior is "necessary" . I don't like that word with respect to behavior. When I'm not just doing

things subconsciously, or out of habit, I choose to do them because I want to do them, because I feel my life will be enhanced in some way by doing them. I posted my conversation with this girl because I thought it was rather ridiculous, and I thought several of my friends would be entertained to see how she reacted to the things I said. Even though you seem to think that everyone would react the way she did, many of my friends disagree. I consider the posting of the conversation a "success" because of their reactions; not a "failure" because of yours.

Boy, you wouldn't believe how sensitive stupid people are when confronted by someone of clearly superior intelligence.

I never said that, and I don't think that. You think I think that.

Not everything everyone says to you is necessarily intended for public consumption.

Oh, this I know.

Failure to acknowledge this is immature and destroys trust people might otherwise be willing to place in you.

It's immature to you... but to me, I value openness over what you call immaturity. If you say something interesting to me, it will likely be shared with others, regardless of whether I agree or disagree with you. I like to share. If that destroys trust in me, that's great! Why should someone trust me to not share what they tell me, when in all likelihood, I will?

You've even done it to me: your reply to our conversation, complete with key quotations taken out of context, was Cced to three people (two of whom I've never met, or even heard of). I don't know how to convince you that this is a completely inappropriate thing to do.

I wholeheartedly accept that for you this is completely inappropriate. I think it's reasonable to conclude that you should refuse to carry on any more written conversations with me. However, look what you've done! You wrote me this email, chock full of stuff I could send to other people.

I personally don't care whether people quote me, in or out of context, or even if they lie about me! And it is that opinion I use as the basis for my own actions with respect to what others tell me.

I suspect you know it, but your overriding compulsion to prove your superiority to these people forced you to do it anyway.

I won't challenge your right to your suspicion; however, I CC'd the email to these people because I wanted them to see my responses, not your comments. I provided only what was necessary for them to understand my responses.

It had nothing to do with me being "right" or you being "wrong", only to do with observing the reactions of people whose opinions I respect --ie, the people I CC'd the email to-- . In fact, many of my friends disagree with me on certain tenets of my life philosophy, and I often get very interesting criticism from such people.

And if you took my email as me trying to prove you wrong or something, then I'm afraid you may have missed the several times I said: "I'm just presenting my opinions on a take-it-or-leave-it basis, and I accept that others may feel differently." .

I am pleased that you at least respect me enough to use the Cc and not the Bcc field-- although I wonder if that isn't your way of trying to rub my stupidity in my face.

To be honest I didn't really give the decision much thought, and I don't really feel it matters. If these are the sorts of things that really matter to you, then I recommend you exercise more judgement in who you communicate with electronically.

The way I see things, it's less important to you that people like you than that they respect your intellectual superiority.

Whether people like me, whether they respect my "intellectual superiority" --which I don't claim I have to anyone-- , is completely unimportant to me, if by "important" you mean something that could conceivably influence or change the way I act. I act the way I act based on my own reflection of my experiences, and my conversations with close and trusted friends.

I feel badly for you, because I know you're not happy.

Only if you think that your interpretations of my actions are correct.

Sadly, I also find you very tiresome to deal with of late, which is frustrating for me because I still like you and would like to be your friend if possible.

Well that seems ridiculous. I don't know why you would try to be friends with someone who you find tiresome. That would be like saying it's sad that Geoff and I won't be friends; we have radically different and incompatible personalities, and it's not at all a shame that we won't be friends. Moreover, I find it hard to see what you still like about me, and what you wish to get out of a friendship with me. Perhaps it would be helpful if you'd just be explicit about that.

I suppose, however, that if I can't or won't meet your exacting criteria of someone who is interested in having a productive relationship with you (which seems to include acting as your intellectual punching bag) then you don't see me as worthy of being your friend.

That is not the criteria I use to determine friendship. One such criterion is: Does the

person in question ascribe hidden motives to your actions, or refuse to accept your word when you disagree?

You feel like an intellectual punching bag around me? Well, I'm not trying to intellectually punch you, so that means you **perceive** me --in my opinion, incorrectly- - as intellectually punching you. Why do you perceive me in this way? Have you ever asked yourself this question? (Such questions?)

Is it because I disagree with you? Because I sometimes think your ideas are ridiculous? Let me say this: Often I disagree with you, and indeed often I think your ideas are ridiculous. But I always take you at your word, and I always take you seriously. I never doubt that you believe the things you say to me, even though there is always the possibility that you don't. I think I owe that much to anyone I have a conversation with, because what's the point of having a conversation if you don't consider the other person's viewpoint? I have considered your viewpoint, and often rejected it, but I think those are two separate issues.

If that's the case, then I think you have a very petty definition of friendship. But hey, there's no "correct" definition of "friendship", right?

No, I don't think there's a "correct" definition of 'friendship', and you put all the quotes in the right places. I put quotations around 'correct' because if I said "I don't think there's a correct definition of 'friendship' .", that would presuppose that I believed in a notion of correctness. (**) But rather, I question the notion of universal correctness, and opt instead for subjectivity and aesthetics. I use the quotes around 'correct' to indicate that I am talking not about correctness, but about what many people call 'correctness' .

(**) I didn't need the quotes in the sentence before the asterisks, because the presuppositions of the object of "believe" do not rise to the surface. For example, if I say, "John believes that Mary is dead." , that does not commit **me** to believing Mary is dead, whether or not the sentence is true. On the other hand, if I say, "Mary's death really upset me." , that **does** commit me to believing that Mary is dead, whether or not the sentence is true.)

The quotations around 'friendship' are there to aid in distinguishing between use and mention of a word. I am talking about the definition of a word, of a string of letters, and I denote that string by surrounding it with quotation marks --as do most people, I think-- .

Perhaps not, but there are people who truly care about you.

Are you saying that you are one of the people who truly cares about me? If that's so, then we have extremely different definitions of 'care' , because the way you interact with me is not what I call 'care' .

If you are not saying that you are one of these people, then I ask: How do you know?

Fewer than you think.

Again, how do you know? More precisely, how do you know (i) who truly cares about me, and (ii) how many people I think truly care about me?

I actually think very few people truly care about me, and I wouldn't expect the world to be any other way. I think there was a time when I felt more people truly cared about me, but eventually I realized that just wasn't the case: that 'care' was superficial, and not something I really cared about --if I may use the term-- . Now I feel there are far fewer people who care about me, but I see that simply as a reflex of a more realistic outlook on life.

+j

Afterword (8 August 2005)

On a recent walk with my father, I came to the realization that I could have pointed out that, symmetrically, I once acted, thought, and felt as Yale seems to here, and indeed that was not one of the best periods in my life. In short, I had spent several years thinking about the nature of human relationships, and at the end of those years, concluded that I had to be right: I had used logic and reasoning, hadn't I? As a result I was very moralistic towards many of my friends, chastised, accused, shunned, and spoke down to them for not being "right", by my standards.

Now several years later, the fundamental change has been to recognize the utter subjectivity of it all. Different people have different values, and different ways of applying "logic" to a situation, and so different courses of action are right for different people, I think. Under this view, it is impossible to be upset with someone just for being different.