SG Academy episodes, September 2015 through June 2016

Episode #31: Why become an engineer?

Why, when you know that more technology leads to increasing consumerism, financial instability, inequality, unemployment, environmental degradation and pollution, mass extinction, climate change, and many other crises that mankind faces today?

Episode #32: What sort of ruler would you be?

Videos: A short article and fragment from *The Prince* by Machiavelli; and second, an article which links Machiavelli to the German concept of *Realpolitik*.

Episode #33: What is endlessness?

Videos: about spacetime on sciencealert.com, plus a bonus video by Tim and Eric on the vastness of our universe. The metaphysics of it, not the astrophysics. For example, how do you conceptualize infinity in space and eternity in time? Can you experience these directly? What is Earth 'floating' on, or are we perpetually falling through an endless nothingness? Where is "here," and when is "now"?

Episode #34: Are you free to do what makes you happy?

A pair of short videos, one with the English philosopher Alan Watts entitled "What if Money Was No Object?" and another with comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell on following your bliss. Modern culture prides itself on presenting individuals with opportunities for choice. Like choosing your job, your beliefs, your gender, your partner. But are you happy with your choices? Do you know what makes you happy, where your passion lies? And are you capable of freely choosing for yourself? If not, what other mechanisms might be directing your life?

Episode #35: Are universities corporate training centers?

An article on NewRepublic.com about the corporatization of higher education, and a short video by the London School of Life entitled, *What are universities for?*

Episode #36: What is the future of work?

An article about the Swedish experiment for a six hour work day, a recent article about a researcher who says that working before 10am is tantamount to torture, and some bonus material on technological employment (robots and computers taking our jobs) and the basic or guaranteed income movement which claims that all adult members of society should be given an minimal amount of money to survive whether they work or not. Are these issues an indication of the future of work? Will we work less days, work shorter hours, or hardly work at all? What does this mean for our personal development, for the local and global economy, for migration, for our productivity, happiness, and purpose in life? Not to mention consumerism, sustainability, and the environment? Or is it all just a lot of hot air, and are we doomed to keep working till we're 70?

Episode #37: What would life be like without sex?

Two technologies-in-the-making, genetic engineering of humans and the artificial uterus. If we can make babies and develop them entirely outside of our own bodies, then why even have sex organs anymore? What would life be like if we no longer needed sex, arguably one

of the driving forces in our existence? What would it mean for women, for men, for the differences between us? And what would it mean for the babies?

Episode #38: How do you construct a moral compass?

How do you decide what is right and what is wrong? And do you have a fixed core made up of laws, commandments, or virtues, or are you guided by intuition or empathy? Do you serve others or yourself? We explore different religious ideas like Thelema, Hedonism, Stoicism, Jewish ethics, Jainism, Satanism. Starting point is the amorality of the Assassin's Creed: *"Nothing is true, everything is permitted."*

Episode #39: How do you know what a word really means?

Using websites like etymonline.com and dictionary.com to explore word origins or etymology. It's a treasure hunt for meaning. Try a few: Weird, But, True , Folks

Episode #40: What happens when you treat everything like a game?

An article by anthropologist David Graeber on fun, and the opening pages of *Homo ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* by sociologist Johan Huizinga. There are game elements everywhere, from hierarchies, to taboos, to bureaucracy, to sports. But why is fun fun? Which elements of your life do you see as a game, and which ones not? Is the universe your playground?

Episode #41: Is a matriarchy possible?

Some anthropologists believe that most ancient societies were ruled by women, until the beginning of patriarchal societies ruled by men around the Iron Age. But there are also still-existing, archaic societies which give examples of matrilineal communities, where things like property, commerce, and family lineage are ruled over and passed down from mothers to daughters. I came across a Yahoo Answers page that asked the exact same question. What are the fundamental roles that men and women play in our society, how are those roles shifting, what does that means for our culture, technology, the environment, political processes, and so on?

Episode #42: Why are humans obsessed with the apocalypse?

Articles on listverse and vox. Doomsday-thinking is a widespread cultural phenomenon, from Republican senators in the USA to many of your favorite books, games, and movies. Why the obsession with the apocalypse? To what extent does it drive all of us, not just the suicide bombers? And what does it mean for our evolution to be culturally obsessed with our collective death?

Episode #43: Why is our world covered in logos?

A speech by Scottish comic book artist Grant Morrison at DisinfoCon (starting in the 10th minute). Morrison relates his theory (taken from occultism) that corporate logos and other symbols are in fact sigils, magical emblems used to influence the world. But what power do symbols really have over us? What is the psychological source and impact of the most popular symbolic themes, like wings, stars, and circles? What are the symbols of power in our culture? What are your favorite symbols? And how do you feel about being bombarded with them every day of your life?

Episode #44: What is the greatest story ever told?

First, the opening chapter of Genesis, the opening book of the Judeo-Christian Bible. Second, NASA's short summary of the Big Bang theory. And Alan Watt's summation of Hindu philosophy as it imagines the beginning of reality in god's dream. Religion, science, and mysticism. Are they at odds with each other? Is one of them better than the rest? Are any of them satisfying? Can they be reconciled? And most interestingly, what belief do you yourself ascribe to? What is the greatest story to you?

Episode #45: Is it your destiny to discuss free will today?

A threesome of short interviews by Big Think with physicist Michio Kaku, philosopher Daniel Dennett, and psychologist Steven Pinker on the question of free will. Related concepts to check out: Determinism, Laplace's Demon, Causality, Chaos Theory, Randomness, Indeterminism, Uncertainty Principle, Libertarianism, Compatibilism, Luck, Karma

Episode #46: Why does beauty exist?

an article on Wired.com with the same title question. It's a simple question, and a simple problem; why do some things stand out to us, and others don't? Is it biological, instinctive, and/or culturally learned? Why are some people excellent at creating beauty, in image, song, or text? What role does beauty have in (your) life? What role does it have in society, in the way we live together as a species?

Episode #47: What is the future of nature on Earth??

A ted talk by Koert van Mensvoort, a philosopher, artist, and scientist in Eindhoven who discusses the changing relationship between nature, culture, technology, and humanity. He calls it Next Nature. Cool stuff. Use it as a departure point to discuss everything from golf carts to manmade islands and medical nanobots. Because really, will we still have biodiversity, natural disasters, and bottle nosed dolphins as the Anthropocene develops?

Episode #48: How much do you want to know about your health?

A short video from New Scientist sponsored by Philips, so it's likely part of a marketing scheme. Nevertheless, it brings up interesting questions about health and technology. The amount of data we can get about our health, through smart phones and wearables, is growing, and that growth is accelerating. You'd think that knowing more about our health, real-time, should help us make better decisions. But will it? How important is health to us? Can tech bring us more in touch with our bodies? And what happens to all the data if there's a leak? Or if governments and health care systems demand to have access? How will society change when it's more prevention-oriented than healing-oriented? Can I still eat pizza and burgers and fries and vindaloo and quesadillas and milk shakes and ice cream on my Saturdays, while sitting on my ass behind my computer screen playing games for ten hours without a toilet break, while my heart monitor, stomach acid monitor, lipids monitor, sugar level monitor, and general laziness monitor are constantly warning me with beeps and flashing led's to go for a walk?

Episode #49: Should we substitute democratic lottery for democratic elections?

A short introductory animation by TED, and second, an article from Israeli newspaper Haaretz on the drive for lottery in the Belgian Senate. In a lottery-based democracy, how would the dynamic of politics, authority, rational decision making, corruption, revolving-door autocrats, lobbying, etc change? Would politics be more fair, and if so, would it be better? And how would it change our individual lives if we were suddenly eligible for office?

Episode #50: What is the evolutionary advantage of stupidity?

A bit from the Daily Show by correspondent Jordan Klepper. Specifically around the 2 minute mark. Enjoy. Dig deep into your own stupidity, what it is, and try to divine any evolutionary purpose that it may serve.

Episode #51: What is the best way to punish someone?

An article from the Washington Post, The District of Columbia has apparently had the idea of reducing recidivism amongst its prisoners by paying ex-cons money once they're released. So, commit a crime, do some time, and then get paid not to do it again. What do you think works? What do you think is right? Could we do without punishment? Should we pamper the trespassers of our laws and norms, instead of punishing them?

Episode #52: Why do we still have libraries and museums?

An interview from the online version of the German magazine Der Spiegel with the recently deceased Umberto Eco, famous author and semiotician. In it, Eco claims that the list is the origin of culture. The list, as in shopping lists, music playlists, dictionaries, your friend list, catalogues of the stars, museum collections, libraries, and so on. Humans seem obsessed with lists. We meet in a library every week, so let's take a moment to dissect and deconstruct it, the reasons for its continued existence, and the role that lists (or in physical form: collections) play in modern culture and identity. Can we dump libraries and move on to other things? What kind of things do you collect and why? What drives our need to collect, to catalog, to make lists? What do you think of Eco's theory?

Episode #53: Is idealism dead?

First, a hopeful, hopeful video on the ideal country or utopia by *The School of Life*. And second, in a video by Charlie Brooker, a deeply cynical look at the sensational ideals presented to us by tv programs like Cribs and My Sweet Sixteen. The first video claims to help us imagine a better world; the second claims the better world is destroying the fabric of life as we know it. Mwahaha. A lovely juxtaposition.

Episode #54: What does it mean to be on a spiritual path?

When are you on a spiritual path? And when are you not? Why does spiritual talk sound like a bunch of hot air to some people, and like deep wisdom to others? Why is there a demographic trend of people identifying themselves as "spiritual but not religious"?

Episode #55: Should Artificial Intelligence destroy us or help us?

From Gizmodo, a list of debunked myths about AI. Second, a long essay on Wait But Why? on AI. And lastly, a HopesAndFears article on the all-important question whether or not AI will get high. What are the chances that AI already exists, here or somewhere else in the universe? Are you afraid of the possibilities, or do you think the dangers are exaggerated? Bonus: Isaac Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics

Episode #56: How do you create your own religion?

Discordianism, from the 1960s, is believed to be either a religion disguised as a joke or a joke disguised as a religion. You can read its sacred text, the Principia Discordia, which is both hilarious and illuminating, here. The South Park episodes "All About Mormons" and "Trapped in the Closet" accurately parody the origins of Mormonism and Scientology. There's also the occult religion Thelema, founded by occultist Aleister Crowley (known in the early 20th century as "the wickedest man alive" and "the Great Beast"). The founding text is The Book

of the Law. And finally, there's Raëlism, a UFO religion founded in the 1970s by a guy who believes humans were created by aliens.

What are the necessary elements of a religion? Who decides to become a prophet? If you wanted to create your own private religion, how would you go about it? Which divine source would you choose? What, if anything, would you borrow from existing religions?

Episode #57: What is (or are) the best model(s) for a relationship?

A TED talk by author Christopher Ryan on sex and pair bonding. There's some talk about Darwin, bonobos, sexually autonomous societies. And how our naturally evolved sense of relationships clashes with the economic model of our modern society. All of which nicely introduces the question of what the best type or model of relationship is for the 21st century. How do long term relationships hold up? How does the nuclear family model (husband-wife-kids) hold up? Why are dating sites and apps so popular? How do they change our idea of intimate relationships? How does individualization play into this? Are we still able to form pair bonds when we're all so used to having things our own way?

Episode #58: What is an altered state of consciousness and what does it mean?

A do-it-yourself experiment. It should be safe, but read the article before you try it. It involves staring into someone else's eyes for ten minutes, then seeing what the effects are. If you can't find a partner, try this one or this one and stare at your screen for a while. These two videos mimic the hallucinatory effects of certain mind altering substances. The eye-staring experiment is meant to lead to more directly psychedelic effects. Read up on Wikipedia about the myriad other methods, both accidental and deliberate, for altering your state of consciousness. Here's a talk by a psychotherapist who heads a facility at Johns Hopkins where psychedelics research is taking place, on the surrounding culture, stigma, and science of it.

What is an altered state? Why do humans (and other animals) experience altered states of consciousness? What do they mean in terms of our normal state of consciousness? Who pursues them and why? What are the personal effects? And what role do they play in society? Religion? Science? Drinking ayahuasca for example, an Amazonian psychedelic brew, is in vogue everywhere from tourist hotspots in the jungle to Hollywood. Is this the same as Ecstasy in the 80s and 90s, and LSD in the 60s and 70s?

Episode #59: What is music and why do we love it?

An article from a neuroscience mag on the evolution of music. Back it up with a Wikipedia page on evolutionary musicology, a youtube video highlighting some of the musical developments of the last millennia (with a ridiculously high bias towards the 20th century), and your own musical tastes. Do you know how many musicians, bands, choirs, orchestra's, and impromptu performances there are in the world right now? How many genres there are, and how many are now extinct? How new technology impacts the production and appreciation of music, as well as the way it spreads across the globe?

How about the way music started, and the parallels to music amongst other creatures? What is the evolutionary function, the social function, the neurochemistry of listening to music and feeling yourself changed because of it? Do dogs love heavy metal or do they prefer Beethoven? Where is the boundary between music and noise? And what is noise in the first place?

Episode #60: What is the future of fascism?

An interview with the eloquent former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis, and an anti-fascist website from the USA. Varoufakis points to the parallels between our time and the late 1920s, when xenophobic nationalists took power in several European and Asian nations

during an economic crisis. The anti-fascist site lists some of the main characteristics of fascism, as well as some (no doubt cherry-picked) quotes.

What do you think is happening in global politics? Why are far right parties so popular? What will this mean for the future of the EU, for human rights, prosperity, and conflict? Is this really a repetition of the 20s and 30s, and are we headed towards another world war because of it? What's different about today's world? What would you do if Trump becomes president, or if Wilders became prime minister? Do you think it might happen?

Bonus: an article on Operation Paperclip, and a Salon piece comparing Donald Trump to Benito Mussolini.

Episode #61: What is a "real" man?

A famous (Thai?) video portraying a "real man" (or just: a good guy). Second, an opinion piece on men's rights on realmendrinkwhiskey.com.

Is a real man a feminist? Does he hunt his own food? Support his family, or be a stay-at-home dad with a baby in a sling on his back? Does a man show emotions, train his muscles, and drink whiskey when nobody's looking? What defines a real man: his chromosomes, his (penis) length, his passport, his own sense of self? Is being a man the same as masculinity? Is the idea of a "man" a historical fiction that needs new defining? And if so, can we reach an understanding that will comfortably fit reality? Is this something men should do themselves, in a backlash against feminism, or in an open, cross-cultural discussion? Are you a real man?

Episode #62: What is the main purpose of life?

This question was proposed by a student. Not because he's a religious fanatic, but because he wanted to explore different points of view. Source material is you: just your own knowledge, beliefs, thoughts, and theories. And a video by Monty Python from *The Meaning of Life*. Okay and the dictionary entry for purpose, including its word origin.

Episode #63: How do you detect your own bullshit?

A site dedicated to the wisdom of Deepak Chopra. Second, a fun article on Esquire about an experiment in "Radical Honesty." Third, a short quote from sci-fi author Philip K Dick on fine tuning your BS meter. Fourth, a YouTube video with professional sceptic Michael Shermer, on how to apply the scientific method to BS detection. And finally, for the intrepid explorers of the linguistic roots of bullshit creation, an interview with philosopher Heron Stone on *The Five Stupidities of the English Language*. Detecting other people's bullshit can be a challenge. Detecting your own is a whole other ballgame. How do you know when you're deceiving yourself? Telling half-truths, white lies, false certainties? Excuses, omissions, procrastinations, and simply pretending something doesn't exist so you don't have to deal with it.

Episode #64: What do video games tell us about ourselves and who we're becoming?

An interview on The Atlantic about EVE Online, one of the oldest MMORPG's that's still played by millions of people around the world. The interviewee has written a historical account of what went down in the first ten years or so of the game's existence. A history book. About a game world. Second, here's an article about an 80's game called Missile Command and its psychological impact on players and especially on its creator.

Why do we play video games? Why do we make and play the games that we do? How do these games, from strategy, to combat, to puzzles, to fantasy, to crime reflect our own image of ourselves, as a society, and as individuals?

Episode #65: Can we feed ourselves (meat or plant based food) and be guilt free?

Philosopher Peter Singer on animal rights. Life feeds on life; we kill other organisms to survive. Is there a fundamental difference between killing animals and killing plants? Where does morality come into play in nature? Is there a guilt-free food? How would you sustain yourself ideally? Sub question: (when) will bacon attain sainthood?

Episode #66: Is there a hierarchy of knowledge?

A comic by XKCD, with a variation by an unknown doodler. (it's a nerd joke so only laugh if it makes you cry)

We try to include as many perspectives as possible in our discussions at the SG Academy. But are some perspectives better than others? Is science a higher truth than others? How do you rank your sources? Where do you put yourself and your field of expertise? How accurate is the comic?

Bonus question: Is there such a thing as objective knowledge or truth? Prove it to everyone without a doubt.