

## A Dilettante at SLAC

It's my first day visiting SLAC—I'm researching a movie script wherein the main character is a physicist—and I'm riding the Stanford shuttle bus to meet some physicists. There's one other passenger, a studious-looking fellow with a briefcase. Being a nosy sort, I ask what he's up to in his work.

The fellow says he's developing a computer program into which he will plug the classics of literature in order to generate solutions to the major problems of modern man: economic, environmental and social ills.

I don't know, I'm thinking, let me think about that.

us. But let's not dwell on a depressing subject. Let's look at how you, as physicists, would approach these claims.

Try it this way: What do you think about my fellow passenger's idea of using the classics of literature to somehow solve the major problems of modern man? Think it has merit?

Probably not, is my (dilettante's) answer.

I emphasize "probably" because as scientists you would hold off final judgment until you know more. You'd want the fellow to produce evidence that his program, his theory, works. And the evidence would have to be just so: it would have to be provided via the scientific method. The problem is that the scientific method is tough to transfer to solving the major problems of modern man—or to everyday life.

The problem of transferring how you do physics to problems of everyday life lies in defining the questions to be answered. Use of mathematics—the language of physics—helps solve this by providing real answers, but more importantly, real questions as well.

In talking to one of you, and in bringing up the question of the search for ultimate causes (or, as I like to think of it, "What It All Means"), I got this response: "42". Putting aside author Douglas Adams's claims about this answer in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, what makes it significant for me is its subtext. Suppose you've found the good old Higgs particle, or—if that's not the last little bugger—suppose you've found whatever does come last, and you've gotten as close to the ultimate cause as you can. Then if the cause is mathematical (maybe even 42), it won't be, at least to us humans, a sensible answer to What It All Means.

Going out on a (dilettante's) limb: you'll never really find that ultimate cause because an ultimate cause won't, or can't, be mathematical. Which in turn means that in your life's work, in the end you'll pretty much...screw up. And I think you all know it.

But you're giving it a shot anyway. And that's what I love about you.

Oh. Do me a favor. If I'm wrong and you guys don't screw up—if you find out What It All Means, and if that little :) email smile is involved, keep it to yourselves. I don't want to know.

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Photo: Allan Weisbecker

I tell the fellow that if there's one thread that runs through classical literature, it's that human beings are incapable of solving problems. Hence the carnage, the suffering, the tragedy with which classical literature is rife. The general incapacity for problem solving might even be the best definition of what a human being is. In other words: An organism that is a complete and utter screw up.

The fellow nods uncertainly; he doesn't say anything.

So—I'm on a real roll now—plugging classical literature into a program meant to solve the major problems of modern man might in fact be the cause of the final apocalypse.

Okay, I didn't say the last bit about the fellow's work causing the final apocalypse—he seemed nice enough. I'm just thinking of this now. And getting cranky. The final apocalypse could very well affect me personally.

My hypothesis is this: You, as physicists, are the exception to my human-beings-being-complete-screw ups assertion.

I emphasize "as physicists" because I suspect that when you're not doing physics you manage to screw up as catastrophically as the rest of