

PERSONAL VALUES

A faint, yellow-tinted profile of a man's head and shoulders is visible in the background, facing right. The image has a textured, painterly quality.

HOW TO KNOW WHO YOU ARE
AND WHAT YOU STAND FOR

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PART 1: PERSONAL VALUES

WHAT'S THE POINT OF VALUES ANYWAY?

For the last few years, I've had an idea for a satirical self-help article called, "The Productivity Secrets of Adolf Hitler." The article would feature all the popular self-help tropes—goals, visualizations, morning routines—except expressed through the exploits of Hitler.

"Hitler starts his day at 5 AM each morning with a quick round of yoga and five minutes of journaling, he's able to focus his mind on his highly ambitious goals."

"Hitler discovered his [life purpose](#) in a beer hall in his 20s and has since followed it relentlessly, thus infusing his life with [passion](#) and inspiring millions of others like himself."

"Adolf is a strict vegetarian, and makes sure to find time in his busy schedule of genocide and world domination to explore his [creative side](#): he sets aside a few hours each week to listen to opera and paint his favorite landscapes."

I know that I would find the article hilarious. But that's because I'm a sick, twisted fuck. But in the end, I've never quite worked up the courage to write the thing, for obvious reasons.

I've been doing this long enough to know that a) a bunch of [people would get offended](#) and devote themselves entirely to ruining my week with annoying emails and social media screeds, b) the satire would go over a bunch of people's heads and they'd think that I was actually a Nazi, and c) some awful publication somewhere would run the headline, "Bestselling author outs himself as alt-right neo-Nazi" or some shit and my career would summarily be over.

So, I've never written the article. Call me a coward. But it is what it is.

But it bugs me a little bit because I think satirizing Hitler's incredible productivity and influence perfectly embodies a point [I've long made about the self-help world](#): achieving success in life is not nearly as important as our definition of success. If our definition of success is horrific—like, say, world domination and slaughtering millions—then [working harder](#), [setting and achieving goals](#), and [disciplining our minds](#) all become a bad thing.

If you remove the moral horrors from Hitler, on paper, he's one of the most successful self-made people in world history. He went from being a broke, failed artist, to commandeering an entire country and the most powerful military in the world in a matter of two decades. He mobilized and inspired millions. He was tireless and shrewd and intensely focused on his goals. He arguably influenced world history as much as anyone who has ever lived.

But all of that work went toward demented, destructive aims. And tens of millions of people died due to his misguided values.

Therefore, you cannot talk about [self-improvement](#) without also talking about values. It's not enough to simply “grow” and become a “better person.” You must define what a better person is. You must decide in which direction you wish to grow. Because if you don't, well, we might all be screwed.

A lot of people don't realize this. A lot of people [obsessively focus on being happy and feeling good all the time](#)—not realizing that if their values suck, feeling good will hurt them more than help them. If your biggest value in the world is snorting Vicodin through a swirly straw, well, then feeling better is just going to make your life worse.

When I wrote my book, [The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck](#), pretty much the entire book was really just a sneaky way to get people to

think about their values more clearly. There are a million self-help books out there that teach you how to better achieve your goals, but few actually question what goals you should have in the first place. My aim was to write a book that did just that.

In the book, I intentionally avoided getting too deep into what good/bad values are—what they look like, and why they work or don't work—partly because I didn't want to push my own values onto the reader. After all, the whole point of your values is that you adopt them yourself, not because some dude with an obnoxious orange book cover told you to. But if I'm being honest, I also didn't get too deep into defining values because it's an incredibly difficult topic to write about well.

So, this article is my attempt to finally do that. To talk about values. And not just what they are but why they are. Why we find certain things important, what the consequences of that importance are, and how we can go about changing what we find important. It's not a simple subject. And the article is quite long. So enough of me blabbing, let's get on with it.

WHAT ARE YOUR PERSONAL VALUES?

Every moment of every day, whether you realize it or not, you are making a decision of how to spend your time, of what to pay attention to, of where to direct your energy.

Right now, you are choosing to read this ebook. There are an infinite number of things you could be doing, but right now, you are choosing to be here. Maybe in a minute, you decide you need to pee. Or maybe someone texts you and you stop reading. When those things happen, you are making a simple, value-laden decision: [your phone](#) (or your

toilet) is more valuable to you than this article. And your behavior follows that valuation accordingly.

Our values are constantly reflected in the way we choose to behave.

This is critically important—because we all have a few things that we think and say we value, but we never back them up with our actions. I can tell people (and myself) until I’m blue in the face that I care about climate change or the [dangers of social media](#), but if I spend my days driving around in a gas-guzzling SUV and constantly refreshing my news feeds, then my behaviors tell a different story.



Actions don’t lie. We believe we want to get that job, but when push comes to shove, we’re always kind of relieved that no one called us back so we can retreat to our video games again. We tell our girlfriend we really want to see her, but the minute our guy friends call, our schedule magically seems to open up like fucking Moses parting the Red Sea.

Many of us state values we wish we had as a way to cover up the values we actually have. In this way, aspiration can often become another

form of avoidance. Instead of facing who we really are, we lose ourselves in who we wish to become.

Put another way: we lie to ourselves because we don't like some of our own values, and we therefore [don't like a part of ourselves](#). We don't want to admit we have certain values and that we wish we had other values, and it's this discrepancy between self-perception and reality that usually gets us into all sorts of trouble.

That's because our values are extensions of ourselves. They are what define us. When something good happens to something or someone you value, you feel good. When your mom gets a new car or your husband gets a raise or your favorite sports team wins a championship, you feel good—as though these things happened to you yourself.

The opposite is true as well. If you don't value something, you will feel good when something bad happens to it. People took to the streets cheering when Osama Bin Laden was killed. People threw a party outside the prison where the serial killer Ted Bundy was executed. The destruction of someone perceived as evil felt like some great moral victory in the hearts of millions.

So, when we are disconnected from our own values—we value playing video games all day yet believe we value ambition and hard work—our beliefs and ideas get disconnected from our actions and emotions. And to bridge that disconnect, we must become delusional about ourselves and about the world.

OPTIONAL GRAY BOX OF DOOM: WHY PEOPLE WHO HATE THEMSELVES HURT THEMSELVES

Just as we either value or devalue anything in our lives, we can value or devalue ourselves. And much like people celebrating when Ted Bundy got fried, if we [hate ourselves](#) as much as people hated Ted Bundy, then we will celebrate our own destruction.

This is what people who don't loathe themselves don't understand about people who do: that self-destruction feels good in some deep, dark way. The person who loathes themselves feels that they are morally inferior, that they deserve some awful thing to compensate for their own wretchedness. And whether it's through drugs or alcohol or self-harm or even harming others, there's an ugly part of themselves that seeks out this destruction to justify all of the pain and misery they have felt.

Much of the work of the self-esteem movement in the 70s and 80s was to take people from self-loathing to self-loving. People who love themselves don't get any satisfaction from harming themselves. Rather, they get satisfaction from taking care of themselves and improving themselves.

This love for self is crucially important. But it is [also not sufficient](#) in and of itself. Because if we only love ourselves,

then we become self-absorbed twats and indifferent to the suffering or issues of others.

Ultimately, we all need to value ourselves but also something above ourselves. Whether it's God or Allah or some moral code or cause, we need to value something above ourselves to make our lives feel as though they have meaning.

Because if you make yourself the highest value in your life, then you will never feel the desire to sacrifice for anything, and life will feel purposeless and just [chasing one high after another](#). In other words, you just become a narcissistic assface.

And no one wants that...

YOU ARE WHAT YOU VALUE

We all know that story of the middle-class, educated person with a decent job who has a mini “freak out” and decides to take a week or ten days (or ten months) and cut all contact with the outside world, run to some remote and obscure part of the globe, and proceed to “find themselves.”

Hell, maybe this has been you at some point. I know it's been me in the past.

Here's what people mean when they say they need to "find themselves": they're finding new values. Our identity—that is, the thing that we perceive and understand as the "self"—is the aggregation of everything we value. So when you run away to be alone somewhere, what you're really doing is running away somewhere to re-evaluate your values.

Here's how it usually plays out:

- You are experiencing a large amount of pressure and/or stress in your day-to-day life.
- Due to said pressure and/or stress, you feel as though you are losing control of the direction of your own life. You don't know what you're doing or why you're doing it. You begin to feel as though your own desires or decisions no longer matter. Maybe you want to drink mojitos and play banjo—but the overwhelming demands of your school/job/family/partner make it so that you feel as though you're not able to live out those desires.
- This is the "self" you feel you have "lost"—a sense that you are no longer the one navigating the ship of your own existence. Rather, you are blown back and forth across the sea of life by the winds of your responsibilities—or some other deep-sounding metaphor.
- By removing yourself from these pressures and/or stressors, you are able to recover a sense of control over yourself. You are, once again, in charge of your own day-to-day existence without the interference of a million external pressures.
- Not only that, but by gaining separation from the turbulent forces of your day-to-day life, you are able to look at those forces from afar and gain perspective on whether you actually want the

life that you have. Is this who you are? Is this what you care about? You question your decisions and priorities.

- You decide that there are a few things you want to change. There are things you believe you care about too much and you want to stop caring about them. There are other things that you feel you should care about more and promise to prioritize them. You are now constructing the “new you.”
- You then vow to return to the “real world” and live out your new priorities, to be your “new self”—especially because you now have a bitching tan.

This whole process—whether done on a secluded island, a cruise ship, out in the woods somewhere, or at a raucous self-help seminar—is essentially just an escapade in adjusting one’s values.

You leave, get perspective on what in your life matters to you, [what should matter more](#), what should matter less, and then (ideally) return and get on with it. By returning and changing your priorities, you change your values, and you come back “a new person.”

Values are the fundamental component of our psychological make-up and [our identity](#). We are defined by what we choose to find important in our lives. We are defined by our prioritizations.

If money matters more than anything, then that will come to define who we are. If getting laid and smoking J’s is the most important thing in our lives, that will come to define who we are. And if we feel like shit about ourselves and believe we don’t deserve love, success, or intimacy, then that will also come to define who we are—through our actions, our words, and our decisions.

Any change in self is a change in the configuration of our values. When [something tragic happens](#), it devastates us because not only do we feel sadness, but also because we lose something we value. And when we lose enough of what we value, we begin to question the value of life itself.

We valued our partner [and now they're gone](#). And that crushes us. It calls into question who we are, our value as a human, and what we know about the world. It throws us into an existential crisis, an identity crisis, because we don't know what to believe, feel, or do anymore. So, instead, we sit at home with our new girlfriend, a.k.a., a bag of Oreos.

This change in identity composition is true for positive events as well. When something incredible happens, we don't just experience the joy of winning or achieving some goal, we also go through a change in valuation for ourselves—we come to see ourselves as more valuable, as more deserving. [Meaning](#) is added to the world. Our life vibrates with increased intensity. And that is what is so powerful.

WHY SOME PERSONAL VALUES ARE BETTER THAN OTHERS

Before we get into exactly how to change our personal values, let's talk about which values are healthy and which values are harmful. In my book, [The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck](#), I defined good and bad values in the following way:

Good values are:

1. Evidence-based
2. Constructive

3. Controllable

Bad values are:

1. Emotion-based
2. Destructive
3. Uncontrollable

EVIDENCE-BASED VS EMOTION-BASED VALUES

If you've paid any attention to my work over the past five years, you've seen a constant theme: overly relying on our emotions is [unreliable at best](#) and [damaging at worst](#). Unfortunately, most of us rely too much on our [emotions without even realizing it](#).

Psychological research shows that most of us, most of the time, [make decisions](#) and are [inspired to action via our feelings](#), rather than based on knowledge or information. Psychological research also shows us that our feelings are generally self-centered, willing to give up long-term benefits for short-term gains, and are often warped and/or delusional.

People who lead their lives based on how they feel will find themselves [perpetually on a treadmill](#), constantly needing more, more, more. And the only way to step off that treadmill is to decide that something matters more than your own feelings—that some cause, [some goal](#), [some person](#), is worth occasionally getting hurt for.

That “cause” is often what we refer to as [our “purpose”](#) and finding it is one of the most important endeavors we can take to enhance our health and well-being. But our purpose should be sought [not merely through what feels good](#). It must be considered and reasoned. We

must accumulate evidence supporting it. Otherwise, we'll spend our lives chasing a mirage.

CONSTRUCTIVE VS DESTRUCTIVE VALUES

This one sounds simple, but will start to scramble your brain if you think about it enough.

We don't want to value things that harm ourselves or others. We do want to value things that enhance ourselves and others.

Duh.

Now, determining what is actually spurring growth and what is actually harming us can get complicated.

Busting your ass at the gym technically damages your body—but it also [causes you to grow](#).

Taking MDMA can actually enhance your [emotional growth](#) in some circumstances, but if you take it every weekend to numb yourself, then you're probably causing more emotional harm than good.

Having [casual sex](#) can be a means to enhance personal confidence but also a means to avoid intimacy or emotional maturity.

There's a blurry line between growth and harm. And they often appear as two sides of the same coin. This is why what you value is often not as important as why you value it. If you value martial arts because you enjoy hurting people, then that's a bad value. But if you value it because you are in the military and want to learn to protect yourself and others—that's a good value.

Ultimately, it's the intention that matters most.

CONTROLLABLE VS UNCONTROLLABLE VALUES

When you value things that are outside your control, you essentially give up your life to that thing.

The most classic example of this is money. Yes, you have some control over [how much money you make](#), but not total control. Economies collapse, companies go under, [entire professions get automated away](#) by technology.

If everything you do is for the sake of money, and then tragedy strikes and all of that money is eaten up by hospital bills, you will lose much more than a loved one—you will lose your perceived purpose for living as well.

Money for the sake of money is a bad value because you can't always control it. Creativity or industriousness or a strong work ethic are good values because you CAN control them—and doing them well will ultimately generate money as a side effect.

We need values we can control, otherwise our values control us. And that's no bueno.

Some examples of good, healthy values: honesty, building something new, [vulnerability](#), standing up for oneself, standing up for others, self-respect, curiosity, charity, humility, creativity.

Some examples of bad, unhealthy values: dominating others through manipulation or violence, fucking more men/women, [feeling good all the time](#), always being the center of attention, not being alone, being liked by everybody, being rich for the sake of being rich, sacrificing small animals to the pagan gods.

HOW TO REINVENT YOURSELF

Below is perhaps one of the most inspiring TED Talks I've ever come across. It's not filled with mind-blowing ideas. You're not going to get huge takeaways that you can immediately run off and implement in your own life. The guy isn't even that great of a speaker.

But what he describes is absolutely profound:



[Watch the full video.](#)

Daryl Davis is a black musician who has traveled and played blues shows all over the US south. In his career, he's inevitably run into a number of white supremacists. And rather than fight them or argue with them, he chose to do something unexpected: he befriended them.

This might sound insane. And maybe it is. But here's what's more insane: he's convinced over 200 KKK members to give up their robes.

Here's what most people don't get about value change: *you can't argue someone out of their values*. You can't shame them into valuing something different (shaming them actually often has the opposite effect—they double down).

Nope, changing one's values is far more subtle than that. And perhaps without even realizing it, Daryl Davis appears to be a master at it.

STEP 1: THE VALUE MUST FAIL

Davis intuitively understood something that almost all of us do not: values are based on experience. You cannot argue someone out of their values. You cannot threaten them to let go of their most deeply-held beliefs. That just makes them defensive and even more resistant to [changing themselves](#). Instead, you must approach them with empathy.

The only way to change someone's values is by presenting them with a contrary experience to their value. The KKK members held deeply racist values and instead of attacking them and approaching them as an adversary—in a way that would reflect their values back to them—Davis chose to approach them in the completely opposite way: as a friend. And that friendliness and respect caused the KKK members to call everything they knew into question.

To let go of a value, it must be contradicted through experience. Sometimes this contradiction happens by taking the value to its logical conclusion. Too much partying ultimately makes life feel empty and meaningless. Pursuing too much money ultimately brings greater stress and alienation. Too much sex gives you chafed thighs and rug burns on your knees.

Other times, a value is contradicted by the real world. Many KKK members that met Davis had never known a black person, much less

one they respected. So, he simply met them and then earned their respect.

STEP 2: WE MUST HAVE THE SELF-AWARENESS TO RECOGNIZE THAT OUR VALUES HAVE FAILED

When our values fail, it's terrifying. There's a grief process that takes place. Since our values constitute our identity and our understanding of who we are, losing a value feels as though we're losing a part of ourselves.

Therefore, we resist that failure. We explain it away and deny it. We come up with rationalizations. Davis said that for months, his KKK friends would struggle to justify their friendship with him. They would say things like, "Well, you're different, Daryl," or create elaborate justifications for why they respected him.

When our values fail, we have two knee-jerk justifications: 1) the world sucks, or 2) we suck.

Let's say you spend your entire life chasing money. And then, in your 40s, you accumulate a good amount. But instead of diving and swimming in gold coins like Scrooge McDuck, this money doesn't bring you [happiness](#), it brings you more stress. You have to figure out how to invest it. You have to pay taxes on seemingly everything. Friends and family members continuously approach you looking for help or handouts.



But instead of considering that the value sucks, that maybe you should care about something more than money, most people instead blame the world around them. It's the government's fault because they punish wealth and success. The world is full of moochers and lazy people who just want a handout. The stock market is a racket and impossible to win.

Others blame themselves. They think, "I should be able to handle this, therefore I just need to make even more money and everything will be alright." They get caught on a treadmill of constantly pursuing their value more and more until they become a sort of extremist.

Few people stop to consider that the value itself is at fault. That valuing money got you into this situation, therefore there's no way it can get you out.

STEP 3: QUESTION THE VALUE AND BRAINSTORM WHAT VALUES COULD DO A BETTER JOB

I'll dive deeper into this in the next section, but part of growing up and becoming a well-adjusted adult is replacing low-level, material values, with higher-level, abstract values. So instead of chasing money all the time, you could chase freedom. Instead of trying to be liked by everyone, you could value developing intimacy with a few. Instead of trying to win everything, you could focus on merely giving your best effort.

These higher-level, abstract values are better because they produce better problems. If your primary value in life is how much money you have, then you will always need more money. But if your primary value is personal freedom, then you will need more money for a while, but there might be some situations where you need less money. Or, where money is completely irrelevant or even counterproductive to your freedom.

Ultimately, abstract values are values you can control. You can always control whether you're being honest or not. You cannot control if people like you. You can always control whether you're giving your best effort. You can't always control if you win or not. You can always control if you're doing something [you find meaningful](#), you can't always control how much you'll get paid.

STEP 4: LIVE THE NEW VALUE

So, here's the catch: sitting around thinking about better values to have is nice. But nothing will solidify until you go out and embody that new value. Values are won and lost through life experience. Not through logic or feelings or even beliefs. They have to be lived and experienced to stick.

This often takes courage. To go out and live a value contrary to your old values is fucking scary. I imagine the KKK guys were terrified to spend time with a black man. It probably freaked them out when they realized they liked him and respected him. They probably avoided him and put up walls between themselves and him.

We do the same thing in our own lives all the time. It's easy to want [authentic relationships](#). But it's hard to live them. It's scary. We avoid it. We come up with excuses for why we have to wait, or [we'll do it next time](#). But the "next time" inevitably ends up being another failure and another pain.

STEP 5: REAP THE BENEFITS OF THE NEW VALUE

When you do summon the courage to live out your new values, something crazy happens: it feels good. You experience the benefits. And once you experience those benefits, not only does it become easier to continue living the new value, but it sounds insane that you didn't do this sooner.

It's like the high you get after a good run. Or the relief you feel after telling someone the truth. Or the liberation you feel when you stop being a racist fuck and hand over your Klan robe to a nice old black man.

Like jumping into a cold pool, the terror and shock passes and you're left with a wonderful sense of relief, and a newer, deeper understanding of who you really are.

PART 2: CHOOSING BETTER VALUES

When I was four years old, despite my mother warning me not to, I put my finger on a hot stove. The stove was red and bright and shiny and I knew yummy food came from it, so the allure was irresistible.

That day I learned an important lesson: really hot things suck. They burn you. And you want to avoid touching them again.

Around the same time, I made another important discovery. The ice cream that my parents would treat me on occasion was stored in the freezer, on a shelf that could be easily accessed if I stood on my tippy toes.

One day, while my mother was in the other room (poor mom), I grabbed the ice cream, sat on the floor, and proceeded to engorge myself with my bare hands.

It was the closest I would come to an orgasm for another ten years. If there was a heaven in my little four-year-old mind, I had just found it. Fucking perfection. My own little bucket of Elysium filled with congealed divinity.

As the ice cream began to melt, I smeared an extra helping across my face, letting it dribble all over my shirt, practically bathing in that sweet, sweet goodness. Oh yes, glorious sugary-milk, share with me your secrets, for today I will know greatness.

...then my mom walked in. And all hell broke loose—including but not limited to a much-needed bath. I learned a lesson that day too. Stealing ice cream and then dumping it all over yourself and the kitchen floor makes your mother extremely angry. And angry mothers suck. They are not pleasant to be around. They scold you and punish you. And that day, much like the day with the stove, I learned what not to do.

But there was a third, meta-lesson going on here as well. It was a simple lesson—a lesson so obvious that we don’t even notice when it happens. But this lesson was actually far more important than the other lessons: eating ice cream is better than being burned.

That might not strike you as profound. But it is. That’s because it’s a value judgment. Ice cream is better than hot stoves. I prefer sugary sweetness in my mouth than a bit of fire on my hand. *It’s a discovery of preference and, therefore, prioritization.* It’s the knowledge that one thing in the world is preferable to the other and, therefore, all future behaviors will consider that fact.

And this is the job of drooly little four-year-olds. To explore ceaselessly. To discover the world around them—to determine what feels good and what feels bad—and then create value hierarchies out of this knowledge.

Ice cream is better than being burned. Playing with the dog is more fun than playing with a rock. Sunny days are better than rainy days. Coloring is more fun to me than singing. These feelings of pleasure and pain become the bedrock of all our preferences and knowledge going forward in life and actually lay the foundation for what will become our identity later on.

WHAT IT’S LIKE TO GROW UP

A friend of mine once described parenthood as, “Basically just following a kid around for a couple decades and making sure he doesn’t accidentally kill himself—and you’d be amazed how many ways a kid can find to accidentally kill himself.”

One could say young children are always looking for new ways to accidentally kill themselves because the driving force behind them is

an innocent curiosity. Early in life, we are driven to explore the world around us because our brains are collecting information on what pleases and harms us, what feels good and bad, what is worth pursuing further and what is worth avoiding.

But eventually, the exploratory phase exhausts itself. And not because we run out of world to explore. Quite the opposite, actually. The exploratory phase wraps up because, as we become older, we begin to recognize that there's too much world to explore. It's too much to take in. You can't touch and taste everything. You can't meet all the people. [You can't see all the things](#). There's too much potential experience and the sheer magnitude of our existence overwhelms us.

Therefore, our brain begins to focus less on trying everything for ourselves and more on developing some rules to help us navigate the endless complexity of the world before us.

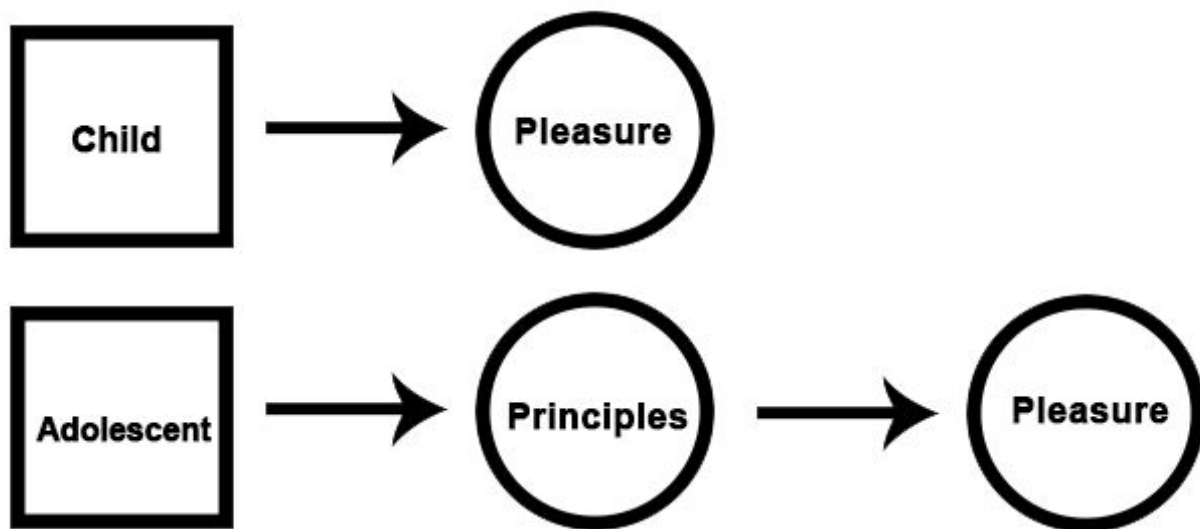
We adopt most of these rules from our [parents](#) and [teachers](#). But we also figure out many on our own. For instance, after fucking around near enough open flames, you develop a little mental rule that all flames are dangerous, not just that one on the stove. And after seeing your mom get pissed enough times, you begin to figure out that stealing is always bad, not just when it's ice cream.

As a result, some general principles begin to emerge in our minds. Practice care around dangerous things so you won't get hurt. Be honest with your parents and they'll treat you well. Share with your siblings and they'll share with you.

These new values are more sophisticated because they're abstract. The little kid thinks, "Ice cream is awesome, therefore I want ice cream." The adolescent thinks, "Ice cream is awesome, but stealing stuff pisses my parents off and I will get punished; therefore, I'm not going to take

the ice cream from the freezer.” The adolescent applies rules and principles to her decision making in a way that a young child cannot.

As a result, an adolescent learns that strictly pursuing your own pleasure and avoiding pain **can cause problems**. Actions have consequences. You must negotiate your own desires with the desires of those around you. You must play by the rules of society and authority, and then you will, more often than not, be rewarded.



This, quite literally, is maturity in action: developing higher-level and more abstract principles to enhance decision making in a wider range of contexts. This is how you adjust to the world, how you learn to handle the seemingly infinite permutations of experience. It is a major cognitive leap for children and fundamental to growing up in a healthy, happy way.¹

When we're toddlers, we are learning to see the world in terms of cause and effect. Of pleasure vs pain. Touching the hot stove causes

¹ Pretty much all of this article is my own spin on the research and pioneering ideas of the developmental psychologists [Jean Piaget](#), [Lawrence Kohlberg](#), and [Robert Kegan](#). My version is simplified, of course. If I had to recommend one book to dive into the subject, I would recommend Kegan's [The Evolving Self](#).

pain in my hand. Therefore, it is bad. Stealing ice cream from the freezer causes my body to feel pleasure, therefore it is good. Good is better than bad.

This is why young kids are like little sociopaths. They cannot conceive of anything in life beyond what is immediately pleasurable or painful for them at any given moment. They cannot feel empathy. They cannot imagine what life is like in your shoes. They just want some fucking ice cream. NOW!

What happens when we get older is we begin to understand that there are multiple consequences to any single action and many of them affect us either indirectly or at some point in the future. General rules and trade-offs are understood as the way these consequences function. Mom and Dad get angry if I steal something; therefore, I will not steal, even if it feels good. My teacher will punish me if I talk in class; therefore, I will not talk, even if I want to.

The knowledge of pleasure and pain is still there in these older children. It's just that pleasure and pain no longer direct most decision making. They are no longer the [basis of our values](#). Older children weigh their personal feelings against their understanding of rules, trade-offs, and the social order around them to plan and make decisions.

This is an improvement, but there's still a weakness in this adolescent approach to life. Everything is seen as a trade-off. Older children and adolescents (and a shocking number of adults) approach life as an endless series of bargains. I will do what my boss says so I can get money. I will call my mother so I don't get yelled at. I will do my homework so I don't fuck up my future. I will lie and pretend to be nice so I don't have to deal with conflict.

Nothing is done for its own sake. Everything is a calculated trade-off, usually made out of fear of the negative repercussions.

You can't live your entire life this way, otherwise, you're never actually living your life. You're merely living out an aggregation of the desires of the people around you. To become an optimized and emotionally healthy individual, you must break out of this bargaining and come to understand even higher and more abstract guiding principles.

HOW TO BE AN ADULT

When you google “how to be an adult” most of the results that come back talk about preparing for job interviews, managing your finances, cleaning up after yourself, and not being a disrespectful asshole.

These things are all great, and indeed, they are all things that adults are expected to do. But I would argue that they, by themselves, do not make you an adult. They simply prevent you from being a child, which is not the same thing as being an adult.

That's because most people who do these things do them because they are rule- and transaction-based. You prepare well for a job interview because you want to get a good job. You learn how to clean your house because it has direct consequences on your health and what people think of you. You [manage your finances](#) because if you don't, you will be royally fucked one day down the road.

Bargaining with rules and the social order allows us to be functioning human beings in the world. But ideally, after some time, we will begin to realize that the whole world cannot always be bargained with, nor should we subject every aspect of our life to a series of transactions. You don't want to bargain with your father for love, or your friends for companionship, or your boss for respect. Why? Because feeling like

you have to [manipulate people into loving or respecting you](#) feels shitty. It undermines the whole project. If you have to convince someone to love you, then they don't love you. If you have to cajole someone into respecting you, then they don't respect you. The most precious and important things in life cannot be bargained with. To try to do so destroys them.

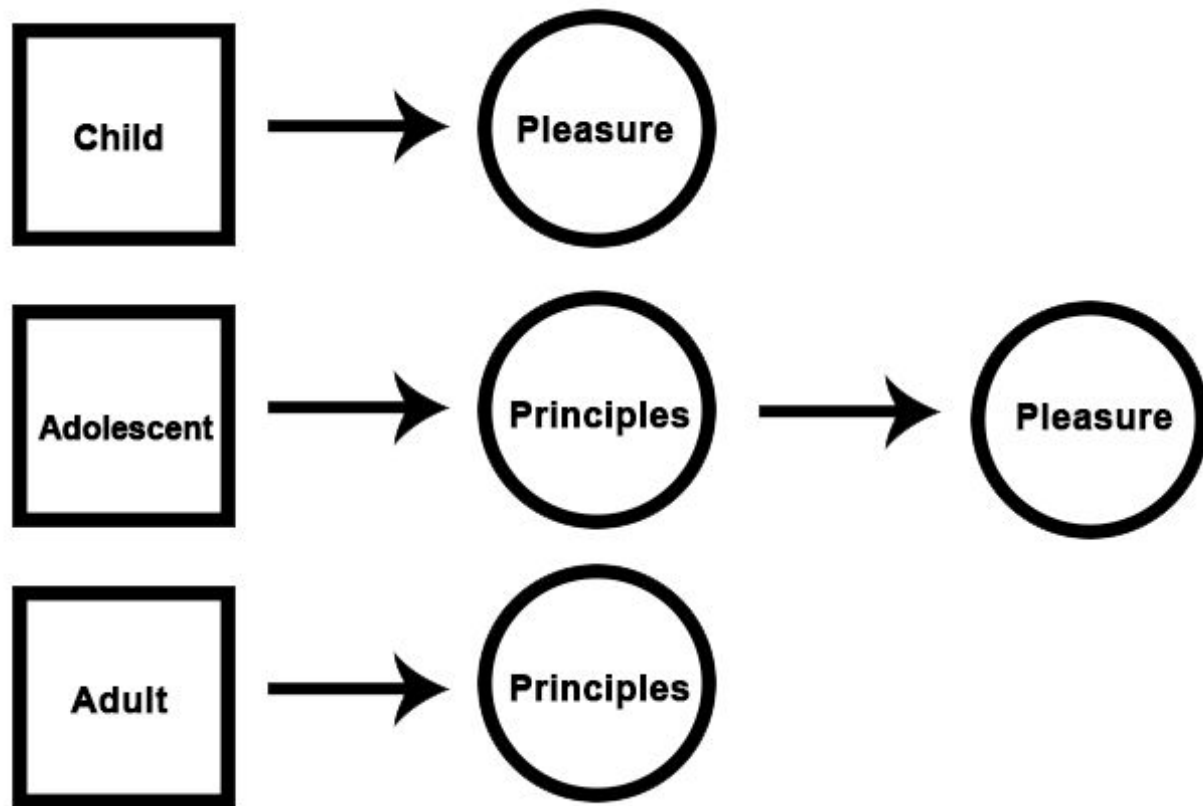
You cannot [conspire for happiness](#). It is impossible. But often this is what people try to do, especially when they seek out [self-help](#) and other [personal development advice](#)—they are essentially saying, “Show me the rules of the game I have to play; and I'll play it.” Not realizing that it's the fact that they think there are rules to happiness that's actually preventing them from [being happy](#).

While people who navigate the world through bargaining and rules can get far in the [material world](#), they remain crippled and alone in their [emotional world](#). This is because transactional values create [toxic relationships](#)—relationships that are built on manipulation.

When you achieve adulthood, you realize that viewing some relationships and pursuits as transactions guts them of all [joy and meaning](#). That living in a world where everything is bargained for enslaves you to other people's thoughts and desires rather than freeing you to pursue your own. To stand on your own two feet, you must be willing to sometimes stand alone.

Adulthood is the realization that sometimes an abstract principle is right and good for its own sake. The same way that the adolescent realizes there's more to the world than the child's pleasure or pain, the adult realizes that there's more to the world than the adolescent's constant bargaining for validation, approval, and satisfaction. The

adult does what is right for the simple reason that it is right. End of discussion.



An adolescent will say that she values honesty—because she has learned that saying so produces good results—but when confronted with the difficult conversations, she will tell white lies, exaggerate the truth, and fail to stand up for her own self-worth.

An adolescent will say he loves you. But his **conception of love** is that he gets something in return (**probably sex**), that love is merely an emotional swap meet, where you each bring everything you have to offer and haggle with each other for the best deal.

An adolescent says she is generous. But when she does favors and gives gifts, **it's always done conditionally**, with the unspoken idea that she will receive something in return at some later date.

An adult will be honest for the simple sake that honesty is more important than pleasure or pain. Honesty is more important than getting what you want or [achieving a goal](#). Honesty is inherently good and valuable, in and of itself. An adult will love freely without expecting anything in return because an adult understands that that is the only thing that can make love real. An adult will give without expectation, without seeking anything in return, because to do so defeats the purpose of a gift in the first place.

So the little kid steals the ice cream because it feels good, oblivious to the consequences. The older child stops himself from stealing it because he knows it will create worse consequences in the future. But his decision is ultimately part of a bargain with his future self: “I’ll forgo some pleasure now to prevent greater future pain.”

But it’s only the adult who doesn’t steal for the simple principle that stealing is wrong. And to steal—even if they got away with it!—would make them feel worse about themselves.

IF ONLY THERE WERE MORE ADULTS IN THE WORLD

Now, I know what you’re saying, “Geez Mark, by your definition, most of the people walking around in the world are shit-brained adolescents, or worse, a bunch of over-sized children.”

Well... yeah. Have you talked to any humans lately? By and large, they kind of suck.²

² According to Lawrence Kohlberg’s model of moral development, which much of this article is based on, by 36 years old, 89% of the population has achieved the adolescent stage of moral reasoning and only 13% ever achieve the adult stage. See: L. Kohlberg (1987). [The Measurement of Moral Judgment](#). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press.

Here's a sad fact: few ever make it to adulthood. And fewer manage to stay there. Why is that? Well...

1. When we are little kids, the way we learn to transcend the pleasure/pain values (“ice cream is good/hot stoves are bad”) is by pursuing those values and seeing how they fail us. We steal the ice cream, mom gets pissed and punishes us. Suddenly, “ice cream is good,” doesn’t seem as straightforward as it used to—there are all sorts of other factors to consider. I like ice cream. And I like mom. But taking the ice cream will upset mom. What do I do? Eventually, the child is forced to reckon with the fact that there are unintended consequences from pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain.
2. This is essentially what good early parenting boils down to: implementing the correct consequences for a child’s pleasure/pain-driven behavior. Punish them for stealing ice cream. Reward them for sitting quietly in a restaurant. You are, quite literally, helping them to understand that [life is far more complicated](#) than simply pursuing one’s pleasure and avoiding one’s pain.³ Parents who fail to do this fail their children in an incredibly fundamental way because, as children grow up, they will experience the shocking realization that the world does not cater to their whims. This will be incredibly painful for them, far more painful than it would have been had they learned the lesson when they were younger. And as a result, by having to learn this lesson at an older age, they will be socially punished by their peers for not understanding it. Nobody wants to be friends with a

³ Delayed self-gratification is one of the strongest predictors of a child’s future success in the world. See the famous “marshmallow experiments:” Mischel, Walter; Ebbesen, Ebbe B.; Raskoff Zeiss, Antonette (1972). [Cognitive and attentional mechanisms in delay of gratification](#). Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. 21 (2): 204–218.

selfish brat. Nobody wants to work with someone who doesn't consider others' feelings or appreciate rules. The un-taught child will be shunned and ridiculed for their behavior in the real world, resulting in even more pain and suffering.

3. Parents can also fail their children in another way: they can abuse them. A young child who is abused also does not develop beyond their pain/pleasure-driven values because their punishment follows no logical pattern and doesn't reinforce deeper, more thoughtful values. It's just random and cruel. Stealing ice cream sometimes results in harsh pain. Other times it results in nothing. Therefore, no lesson is learned. No higher values are produced. And the child never learns to [control her own behavior](#). This is why children who are abused and children who are neglected often end up with the same problems as adults: they remain stuck in their childhood value system.
4. Even worse, if the abuse is extreme enough (or if the child is particularly sensitive) this constant pain can become baked into their psyche going forward. Their normal day-to-day existence will be a state of distrust and fear, and they will compulsively seek pleasure to [assuage that underlying pain](#). This is where addiction and compulsion are born. Alcohol, sex, drugs, gambling, [Instagram](#)—as they grow older they will be compulsively sucked into these activities because it allows them to become distracted from themselves, to momentarily forget who they are and what they feel. More significantly, many abused children will subconsciously seek out further abuse in their adult relationships for the simple reason that abuse is the only thing that makes sense to them. It becomes an [identity for them](#). They need it to feel whole.

5. People get stuck on the second adolescent stage of values for similar reasons, although the results are less severe. Some people are incredibly good at playing the bargaining game. They are charming and charismatic. They are naturally able to sense what other people want of them and they are adept at filling that role. Put bluntly: they're too good at manipulating people to get what they want. And because their manipulation rarely fails them in any meaningful way, they come to believe that this is simply how the whole world operates. Everyone is like this. Everyone is manipulative and controlling. Love is bullshit. Trust is a sign of weakness.
6. It requires good parents and teachers to not allow themselves to succumb to the adolescent's bargains. It is their responsibility to point out to the adolescent that this sort of behavior is a never-ending treadmill, that you can only get so much from the world by bargaining with it, that the only things in life of real value and meaning are achieved without conditions, without transactions. The best way to do this is through example. The best way to teach an adolescent to trust is to trust them. The best way to teach an adolescent respect is to respect them. The best way to teach someone to love is by loving them.



7. When parents and teachers fail to do this, it's usually because they themselves are stuck at an adolescent level of value judgments. They, too, see the world in transactional terms. They, too, bargain love for sex, loyalty for affection, respect for obedience. In fact, they likely bargain with their kids for affection, love, or respect. They think it's normal, so the kid grows up thinking it's normal. And the shitty, shallow, transactional parent/child relationship is then replicated when the kid begins forming [romantic relationships](#).⁴
8. Some adolescents become stuck at the second stage for the same reason others are stuck at the first: abuse and [trauma](#). Victims of bullying are a particularly notable example. A person who has

⁴ More about how this adolescent values torpedo relationships can be found [here](#). Good books on how the parent/child dysfunction creates romantic dysfunction later in life are [Getting the Love You Want](#) by Harville Hendrix, and [Attached](#) by Amir Levine and Rachel Heller.

been bullied in their younger years will move through the world with an assumed understanding that no one will ever like or respect them unconditionally, that all affection must be hard-won through a series of practiced conversation and canned actions. You must dress a certain way. You must speak a certain way. You must act a certain way. Or else.

As adults, they will move through the world assuming all human relationships are a never-ending tit-for-tat trade agreement. That intimacy is no more than a feigned sense of knowing one another for each person's mutual benefit.

Again, this is because, in the transactional world of high schools, this person was mistreated and abused for doing those transactions poorly. They didn't dress the right way. They weren't a "cool" kid. They got bad grades or had a learning disability or were scrawny and awkward. As a result, they are psychologically punished for decades, as they live the rest of their life in constant fear of ever fucking up a transactional relationship ever again. And instead of recognizing that the problem is the transactional approach to the world itself, they assume the problem is that it took them so long to do the transactions appropriately.

It's probably an overstatement to say that Marilyn Manson saved my life. But he might have saved my maturity. When I was 13, I was kicked out of my school and lost almost all of my friends. My parents divorced a few months later, and not long after, my brother moved out of the house. To get me away from the bad influences around me, my

parents sent me to a Christian school in suburban Texas⁵ where I knew no one. I was an atheist and unathletic geek in a state that worships football and Jesus, in that order.

For a while, it wasn't pretty. I got shoved into some lockers. I got laughed off the football field. It took me almost two years to make any friends. It sucked. I felt the compulsion to try and fit in, to buy into the transactional nature of the high school social life, to "fake it to make it." But, at the same time, it was those very behaviors everyone expected from me that I hated so much.

Marilyn Manson was an inspiration to me around this time because through his music and in his interviews, he vocally pushed a message of self-empowerment, especially to disillusioned teens like me. It was he who first suggested that I get to decide what is cool and not cool, that people shame non-conformists because they are afraid of not conforming themselves, and that daring to not conform and empowering yourself to [be who you want to be](#) is what gave others permission to do the same.

Today, Marilyn is often remembered for his cheesy makeup and his shock rock outfits on stage. People don't realize how in-touch he was with the disaffected suburban youth of the 90s. There's a reason he shocked people with his intelligent interviews as much as he did for his stage antics. That's because there was always a message beneath his madness: that you don't have to buy into the transactional game if you don't want to. You are always free to choose. And not only are you free to choose, but you are obliged to choose who you are going to be, whether you realize it or not. The only question is: do you have the

⁵ Shout out to St. Andrew's Episcopal School for turning out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me. But it was rough there for the first couple years.

courage to do it? Do you have the courage to be an adult? Do you have the courage to decide for yourself what your values are?



WHAT LEVEL ARE YOUR VALUES ON?

The problem with writing about any sort of hierarchy like this is that every reader tends to immediately imagine themselves on the top rung, taking discreet pleasure in judging the masses of poor, unfortunate souls stuck on the rungs below them.

The fact of the matter is that if you are reading this, most of your values are likely in the pleasure/pain stage or the transactional stage. I know this for the simple reason that the majority of the population is still floundering in these stages most of the time (myself included).

And let's be real: I run a personal development site—you wouldn't have come here if things weren't a little bit fucked up already.

On top of that, these high-level, adult values are the definition of what we consider to be noble and virtuous. It's the CEO who takes the blame for an employee's fuck up. It's the teacher who sacrifices her vacation days to help tutor a struggling student. It's a friend who risks the friendship by telling you that your partying has gotten out of control.



We all know and revere these stories. And the reason we know and revere them is that they're uncommon. Because we rarely, if ever, are able to do these things ourselves. Most of us, most of the time, are stuck at the level of bargaining, of asking ourselves, "Yeah, but

what's in it for me?" or worse, at the level of childish pleasure, screaming, "GIMME THAT, I WANT IT!"

The truth is, it's hard to detect what level our values are on. This is because we tell ourselves all sorts of elaborate stories to justify what we want. A gambling addict will compulsively pursue the thrills of making and losing money, but in his head, he's invented a convincing story about how he's going to win everything back and show everyone he's not a loser (adolescent bargaining) or that he's actually doing this for the good of his family (adult virtue).

This is bullshit, of course. He simply can't help himself.

It's clear, then, that [we can't trust our own interpretations of our actions](#). There's a small mountain of psychological evidence to support this: we feel something first, then we justify it later with some story we tell ourselves. And that story is usually highly biased and vastly overestimates how noble and selfless we were.⁶

Therefore, we must learn to [distrust our thoughts](#). We must become skeptical of the interpretations of our own actions. Instead, we must focus on the actions themselves.

Thoughts can lie. Interpretations can be changed or forgotten. But actions are permanent. Therefore, the only way to get at your values—to truly understand what you value and what you do not—is to observe your actions.

If you say you want to go back to school and get your degree, but it's 12 years later and you're on excuse number 57, then no, you [don't actually want to go back](#). What you want is to feel like you want to go back. And that is completely different.

If you say you value honesty in your relationship above all else, yet regularly hide your actions and behaviors from your partner, actively question their motivations and where they've been, and snoop into their text messages when they're sleeping, then, no, you don't value honesty. You say you do to justify your lower-level values.

Chances are you're good at adhering to higher-level values in some contexts and not others. There are people who are great friends but shitty parents. There are people who are great parents but shitty professionals. There are people who are just shitty people but holy

⁶ For more on this topic, I recommend Daniel Kahneman's brilliant book, [Thinking, Fast and Slow](#).

fuck, are they **productive**. We all have our areas of maturity and immaturity.

Most recurring emotional problems people experience are simply first- and second-level value systems that are being held onto despite the fact that they are failing.

A mother who fights with her children constantly because they don't call her with a certain regularity is holding onto a transactional approach to love—the idea that love can be quantified and measured.

A friend who tells you white lies probably does so because he doesn't want to threaten whatever he's getting from you. A co-worker who steals your work and calls it their own is indulging in a compulsive desire for pleasure (or, in this case, success).

The only way to get clear about our own values is by learning to observe our own actions and observing them dispassionately as if we were neutral bystanders:

- Actions that consistently hurt yourself or others, that you find yourself excusing repeatedly and/or lying to hide, probably indicate you have a low-level compulsive pleasure/pain driven value. Lying is inherently selfish and designed to make way for our most selfish desires. If I lie to my wife about where I was last night, then it signifies, by definition, that I am acting selfishly and compulsively. Generally, the more lying, the more compulsive we probably are.⁷

⁷ One of the first things taught in Alcoholics Anonymous is that addicts are compulsive liars. But it's not because they want to. It's because they are so compulsive with their actions, that they must compulsively lie to continue to justify those actions. They lie so frequently and so easily that they believe themselves. This is probably the clearest definition of a child-like pleasure/pain value I can imagine. All that matters is the pleasurable feeling. Nothing and nobody else.

- Actions that are premeditated with the desire to get a certain result out of someone or something, are bargaining/transactional values. There's a difference between telling someone you're interested in them because that's what you think they want to hear, and simply telling someone you're interested in them because you're freely expressing yourself. The latter is honesty, the former is manipulation. And the line between the two is blurry for a lot of people.⁸
- Actions motivated by deeper ethical principles that you're willing to suffer for because you believe they are right in all contexts, regardless of the specific outcome to yourself, are representative of higher-level adult values.

These are things you come to understand about yourself because you question not only your actions but your interpretations of your own actions. You must sit and think critically about yourself and about [what you've chosen to care about](#), not through words, but through deeds.

Ultimately, this is what it means to “know thyself”—to know your own values, to [have a clear understanding of your actions and what motivates them](#), to understand what level of maturity you're operating on.

Any time you sit down with a [therapist](#) or coach or friend, this is the process that is happening. You are describing your actions and your interpretation of those actions. With the guided assistance of the

⁸ This is what a lot of men don't understand: that telling a woman something honest for the wrong reason is no better than lying in the first place. Women implicitly get this, even though they often can't express it. To them, it makes a guy feel 'creepy' or 'desperate.' But, at the heart of it, is the fact that the man is treating his relationship with her transactionally to get something from her (usually sex) instead of treating her unconditionally as one would in an adult relationship. Much of feminism is simply trying to get men to stop seeing relationships with women in terms of a transaction and instead see them as other adults. The problem is that most men don't even see other men as respectable adults.

therapist/coach/friend person, you then sit there and pick apart whether or not your interpretations of your actions actually make sense. Or are you just deluding yourself? Do your actions reflect what you think is important? If not, where is the disconnect?

It's this process of aligning your self-interpretation with your actions that gives you [control over your life](#) and your actions. It's this alignment that allows you to [feel a sense of meaning](#) and fulfillment in your life. To become happy and healthy. It's this alignment that allows you to grow up.

HOW TO GROW UP

STEP 1 – FAIL

Chances are, if you're reading this, and you're still stuck organizing your life around pleasure/pain values, or transactional/rule-based values, you probably don't need me to explain why they cause problems—your life is already a fucking mess.

But just in case you do, here you go:

- Pleasure/pain values fail for the simple reason that pleasure and pain are bad long-term predictors of health, [growth](#), and [happiness](#). OK, yeah, touching a hot stove sucks and you shouldn't do that anymore. But what about lying to a friend? Or waking up early for work? Or, like, not doing heroin. Those are just a few of the millions of examples where pursuing pleasure/pain values will lead you astray.⁹

⁹ This is the major reason why I don't buy into utilitarian ethical philosophies. This idea that you can simply calculate life in terms of pleasure-added and pain-averted strikes me as naive at best and misguided at worst. Some of the best moments of my life were incredibly painful and undesirable. Some of the worst moments of my life felt amazing at the time. The utilitarian framework sounds wonderful in theory but quickly falls apart in practice for any situation of even modest complexity.

- Transactional/rule-based values rob you of the trust, intimacy, and [love](#) necessary to remain an emotionally healthy and happy human being. This is because, when you view all relationships and actions as a means to an end, you will suspect an ulterior motive in everything that happens and everything anyone ever does to you.

Before you can move on and learn from these flawed value systems, you must experience the pain of them failing. That means not denying that they are failing. That means not avoiding the pain of that failure. That means facing that failure head on and admitting what is plain to see: that you fucked up, and there's gotta be a better way.

STEP 2 – SKIN IN THE GAME.

People operating on a childish pleasure/pain values derive their self-esteem from how much pleasure or pain they feel. Therefore, when they feel good, they feel good about themselves, and when they feel bad, they feel bad about themselves. So when a person at this level fucks up big-time, their first explanation is likely going to be, “I’m a piece of shit. I’m a horrible person. What was I thinking?”

This is harmful. This likely makes the problem worse. The problem is not you. The problem is what you’re choosing to value, how you’re choosing to see the world and the way in which it operates. There’s nothing wrong with pleasure. There’s nothing necessarily wrong with pain either. It’s the reason each occurs that makes them right or wrong.

Recognizing this truth is what gently shoves your value-system into a more mature bargaining/transactional level. You didn’t fuck up because you caused pain. You fucked up because you caused pain for bad reasons. The reason a drunk driver hitting another car is so

unethical is not because people got hurt—it's because the drunk driver is far more culpable than the other person—i.e., the transaction was unfair.

A lot of people try to “fix” those who suffer from compulsive actions and are stuck in the pleasure/pain value system by bringing them straight up to adulthood. They want to teach alcoholics the virtue of honesty. They want to convince violent abusers of the importance of generosity and patience.

But you can't do that. You can't skip stages. That's like skipping algebra and going straight to calculus. You can't go from a child to an adult without being an adolescent in between.

People stuck at compulsion need to first learn to think of things in transactional terms. Alcoholism isn't bad because your body is a temple and self-harm is intrinsically wrong—those are adult values.

No, alcoholism is bad because it's a bad trade-off. It hurts people. People who don't deserve it. People you love and want to help. It fucks up other life plans. It destroys families, finances, and fidelity. It's essentially giving up a mountain for a molehill.

Addicts and criminals often overcome this by latching onto some transactional value. For some, it's [religion](#). But for most, it's usually a loved one. I once spoke to a recovered drug addict who said the only thing that got him through was his daughter. He didn't give a shit about himself. But the thought of her losing out on the opportunity to have a father, when she had done nothing to deserve it, brought him to his knees and eventually got him sober.

Addicts often talk about “hitting rock bottom.” Rock bottom is a place that is so destructive, so painful, that they are no longer able to avoid the simple fact that their behaviors are destroying their own lives and

the lives of others. It's only with this intensely painful realization that the addict is confronted with the transactional nature of life. That their choices have consequences, not just for their future self, but for others. And those consequences must be managed.

We move beyond our childish values when we realize that we have skin in the game—that there are repercussions for our actions beyond our immediate self.

This is why research has found that the most effective ways to [break any bad habit](#) is to—you guessed it—bargain for it. Try this: write your best friend a check for \$3,000 and tell him if you ever smoke another cigarette, he can go cash it. It's shocking how effective this is. Create consequences for yourself. Create accountability.

STEP 3 – BE WILLING TO DIE FOR SOMETHING.

Getting a solid footing on transactional/bargaining values will make you a functioning human being. But it won't make you a mature adult. You'll still suffer from [transactional, toxic relationships](#) and crises of meaning in your day-to-day life.

The key difference between an adolescent and an adult is that the adolescent is scared to do anything unless they feel confident that they'll get something in return for it:

- They don't want to risk quitting their job unless they know they'll be happier somewhere else.
- They don't want to tell someone they have feelings for them unless they can guarantee a [satisfying relationship](#) will occur.
- They don't want to risk sharing their ideas unless they know they will win the approval of others.

To an adolescent, the way they feel about themselves is determined by how well they're able to bargain with the world. And if they fail to bargain with the world, then they will blame themselves. For this reason, the adolescent is scared to death of rejection or failure. To them, to fail or be rejected is a sort of death because everything they want from the world—all meaning, all purpose—will be denied to them.

It's this willingness to die that leads to adulthood. Adulthood occurs when one realizes that the only way to conquer suffering is to become unmoved by suffering. Adulthood occurs when one realizes that it's better to suffer for the right reasons than to feel pleasure for the wrong reasons. Adulthood occurs when one realizes that it's better to love and lose than to never love at all.

- An adult looks at that career change and says, "I'd rather be dead than a zombie who sleepwalks through a life not his own." And he quits.
- An adult looks at that person they have fallen for and says, "I'd rather be dead than to hide my heart from the world." And she speaks.
- An adult looks at their ideas and says, "I'd rather be dead than to suppress my own talent and potential." And then she acts.

An adult accepts that there are some ways of living life that are worse than not living at all. And because they recognize this, they are able to act boldly in the face of their own shame or fears.

In my book, *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a Fuck*, I relate a number of painful and traumatic experiences from my adolescence: the

dissolution of my family, painful social rejections, the loss of my first romantic relationship, the death of a friend.

Because I experienced so much hurt in my relationships when I was younger, for much of my early adulthood, I approached relationships in algorithmic terms: I studied books on relating to people and learned how to present myself in ways that minimized rejection, that gave me more influence over people's perceptions of me. I pursued sex relentlessly, in an attempt to make up for the depth of my emotional pain with superficial, hollow relationships. For many years of my life, I saw friendships simply in terms of utility: I do this for someone so I can get something in return. And the moment a relationship began to cause me pain, I would find a way to escape it.

I was very successful at this for many years. I created and then escaped from—literally, I [traveled the world](#) to get away—dozens of relationships with otherwise good people, some of whom really cared about me, but who I was not mature enough to handle.

But this escapism was a solution that was as painful as the problem. The only thing more painful than losing a significant relationship is not having a significant relationship. And it slowly began to dawn on me that [happiness was not the point](#)—pain was. That the same way the struggle and challenge in my professional life made my accomplishments more meaningful, the willingness to face pain and discomfort was actually what made relationships feel meaningful. Not the sexiness or excitement or satisfaction.

And so, at the ripe old age of 30, I finally came to understand what it meant to live my life as an adult. That it's the ability to choose: what pleasure is worthwhile, [what pain is worthwhile](#), to pursue and love unconditionally, without judgment or shame.

So I chose to celebrate. Me and eight of my closest friends went to Las Vegas and drank about \$1,000 of alcohol in one night. And it was wonderful.

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