

Method to Awesome:

An Essay on Self-Control, Motivation, and Rational Morality

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Before mankind gained the ability to look at the earth from outer space, authors of speculative fiction tended to describe it as a giant green ball floating in a black void. Today, it is common knowledge that the earth is actually bright blue. Their mistake, however, is quite understandable. Using common sense, an earthbound human can point to the abundance of green trees, green grass, the green oceans along inhabited shorelines, all as evidence supporting the hypothesis, the prediction, that the earth will appear green from outer space. And therein lies the problem with relying on common sense: Despite offering very compelling predictions and explanations, it is sometimes spectacularly inaccurate. And, even when it is not completely wrong, common sense can be misleading in its simplicity.

In some cases, an erroneous, common sense conclusion does little harm. Will the color of the earth from space have a big impact on an individual's life? Probably not. At other times, though, being wrong can mean the difference between living a miserable, ineffective life and being awesome.

Take, for example, the common sense view of self-control. All humans with healthy brains possess this important mental faculty. Throughout the typical day, a person will be confronted with urges to behave in ways that are unhealthy, unproductive, illegal, anti-social, or just plain immoral. Self-control is used for something as simple as resisting the urge to eat that last brownie in the box, and it is also how opportunities to commit crimes pass by untaken.

The generally held, common sense view is that there are two options when confronted with a desire or urge: Give in to it, or struggle against it until the desire is defeated. If this theory of self-control holds true, then when a person fails to defeat an impulse or urge it is because he does not have as much self-control, as much willpower, as other people who are able to resist the same. In one respect, this common sense view is correct.

Self-control, also called self-regulation, is very much like a muscle that a person can use to overpower whatever urges might arise. However, scientific research has shown that, like a muscle, the faculty of self-control grows fatigued with continuous or repetitive use, and each use draws on a common reservoir, a limited inner resource that can be temporarily depleted and that requires time to refill (Brehm, p. 77-78). After being confronted with a series of small stressors and urges, a person might not have enough left in the reservoir to resist the next, perhaps more serious urge. Also, when the mental struggle against caving in to a desire goes on long enough, the reservoir runs dry and the battle is lost. Common sense would say that some people need a bigger reservoir. This is just not true.

It is not the size of the reservoir that matters. What matters is how wisely the reserves are used. The common sense view of self-control is misleading in its simplicity because it does not address the fact that there is a third option: to declare mentally that the desired action — whatever it may be — is simply not an option. So long as giving in remains an option, the struggle continues to drain the self-control reservoir. By invoking the third option — the “not an option” option — the struggle ends before it can begin.

This does not mean that the key to defeating an unwanted desire is to put it out of mind. Scientific research has further shown that attempts to ‘not think’ about something are very often

doomed to failure. This is due to the ironic process (Brehm, p. 76-78). Whenever I attempt to inhibit a thought, the process of cognitive restraint includes an automatic 'ironic' process wherein I also begin to search my own mind for the unwanted thought. When I am distracted or tired, or when the reservoir is drained from the struggle, the ironic process prevails, and the thought and desire resurface. The distinction here is that the 'third option' involves redefining the desire, while attempting to put it out of mind is a temporary avoidance of the issue.

When I invoke the 'third option,' it can seem like the negative feeling that results will last forever; however, the truth is that the negative feeling, the brain's childish tantrum, goes away in mere seconds. No further inner dialog about the subject is necessary. My decision has been made. If the urge resurfaces in a minute or two, I repeat the process, training my brain to a new way of being. The key is my refusal to engage in an internal struggle, because struggling just keeps alive the option while a finite resource is drained. And time is on the desire's side.

Another awesomeness-preventer, I have found, is the common sense take on motivation. I once thought that the motivation to do something must come before the actual doing. Keeping with this theory, any attempt to do something that I did not feel like doing seemed to promise misery. Believing this to be the case, projects (e.g. working out, reading a book, cleaning my cell) would not get done until I felt like doing them. Once again, common sense failed to produce optimal behavior.

I eventually learned that when I have weak motivation to 'get it done,' a feeling of indifference or ambiguity, or a powerful desire to procrastinate, then strong motivation to act could be generated by beginning to act. In other words, common sense dictates that motivation must come before action, but the truth is that a strong feeling of motivation will also follow said action.

Why is this so? The commonly accepted definition of a behavior is that it is an action. A more precise definition of a behavior is that it is four interdependent sub-behaviors — like the four corners of a square. These four corners are acting, thinking, feeling, and physiological responses (e.g. heartbeat, sweating palms). I know that, when I choose to, I have direct control over my thoughts and actions. Through this direct control I can indirectly control my feelings and physiology. So, if I want to change my feeling from 'I'll do it later' to 'Let's do this,' all that I need to do is think: "It needs to be done. And I know enough about myself to know that the motivation will follow." Then I get to work, and I soon feel like working until everything that needs doing is done.

I think of self-control as the ability to put on the brakes when I need to, and motivation as the ability to push down on the gas when I slow down. Both are extremely valuable, but I had to go beyond common sense, to get methodical in my quest to be awesome, before I could gain true access to these abilities.

The first step in this methodical quest was to call into question everything that the people around me call "normal" — because normal is a fallacy. For example, what people call normal behaviors — all four inseparable corners of the square — are actually just the most familiar of a wide range of possibilities. Sometimes normal is used to indicate that the behavior does not deviate much from the average, that it is statistically frequent. I do not want to be average. I want to excel.

At other times abnormal is used to indicate that the behavior violates social norms, that it makes those observing the behavior feel anxious. But error-prone common sense produced those social norms, making this a poor standard at best. In both cases, normal is determined by what the greatest number of people in a culture determine is the case — either through their tendency

toward mediocrity or through their desire to put as little effort into thinking as seems necessary. What I came to realize is that if all human actions are goal-oriented, and the ideal goal is a long life filled with health and mental well-being, then a normal behavior, as I have come to define it, is one that is intended to and effective at achieving this goal — in any context. If, in my quest to be happy and healthy, excellent and awesome, the people around me label me as abnormal, so be it.

I know now that the enemy of common sense thinking is the intentional application of reason — both deduction and induction, but also the form of practical reason known as abduction. This unfortunately named process involves inferring to the best explanation why something happened (Sober, p. 9). In other words, it is drawing conclusions concerning something I did not see based on something I did see. This is how theories are formed, even common sense theories. The difference, however, between common sense and practical reason lies in the methodical testing of the theories produced. This is the key to achieving excellence, the key to being awesome.

Theories are most often associated with science, but they are also active in every area of a person's life. For instance, an understanding of self-control and motivation can solve the problem of how to do or not to do something, but it is testable theories in ethics that will inform me of what is right or wrong, what should be done or not be done. And, once again, I have found that common sense and the generally held view of what is normal have produced ethical theories that are spectacularly inaccurate or misleading in their simplicity.

When I decided that my ethics were a problem, I focused all of my mental energy on solving that problem. The first question that I asked was, Why do people do what they do? Common sense dictates that some people are good and act out of concern for others, while other people are evil and selfish. What I discovered, however, is that there are actually four kinds of people in the world. First, there is the Pure Egoist, who will always do what he thinks benefits himself. Second, there is the Pure Altruist, who will always do what he believes will benefit others, without regard for himself. Then there are the two kinds of people who are neither one extreme nor the other. They are concerned with their own self-interest and the interests of others. When these interests conflict, one type will choose their own interests while the other type will side with the interests of others over their own (Sober, p. 335).

Of course, people can make choices that run contrary to their ethical style, depending on the situation. However, over time, people have a tendency toward one style or another. I believe the reason that selfishness, that acting out of self-interest, is considered a bad quality is because three of the types cannot trust the intentions of the fourth type: the Pure Egoist. The common sense view is that the Pure Egoist lacks the ability to experience and act out of empathy. And that is because the commonly accepted definition of empathy is that it is the ability to adopt another's perspective, to see the world through their eyes and feel compassion and tenderness. The motive to act, in this case, becomes to reduce or to avoid causing the other person's distress. However, a little known fact is that a Pure Egoist can also experience empathy — although of an entirely different sort. A Pure Egoist can experience "oneness" with another human being, so that helping others feels like helping an important part of his self. At the moment of decision, the distinction becomes irrelevant.

Pure Egoists have concern for themselves and others who are worthy of that oneness: family, friends, and so on. Semi-Egoists, Semi-Altruists, and Pure Altruists have concern for a larger group of people or all people. But all four kinds of people must live together and get along in some orderly fashion. How can this be achieved when Pure Egoists are vilified for a perfectly natural ethical style? What is called for is a set of moral rules that all rational people can agree

on, regardless of their ethical style. I believe that Professor Bernard Gert has produced just what is needed. These rules are as follows (Gert, p. 125):

1. Don't kill people.
2. Don't cause people pain.
3. Don't disable someone.
4. Don't deprive a person of freedom or opportunity.
5. Don't deprive a person of pleasure.
6. Don't deceive anyone.
7. Keep your promise.
8. Don't cheat.
9. Obey the law.
10. Do your duty.

Of course, these rules are not absolutes. Everyone is always to obey the rule except when he could publicly advocate that everyone violate it in that situation. This means that, if the person receiving the action were someone with whom I am concerned, myself included, and I would nevertheless still shout to the world that everyone should violate the rule in this case, then the violation is acceptable. Anyone who violates the rule when a rational person could not publicly advocate such a violation should be punished. If everyone followed these rules except when no one in their right mind would do so, then the whole world would be awesome.

Notice that this morality does not *require* me to save people, reduce their pain, or provide their pleasure. At best, morality can only *encourage* me to do these things. Also, many parts of a person's ethical code are not addressed in these rules. That is because, since so much can at best be encouraged but not required, much about ethics is personal preference: What I value, what virtues I want to strive toward, and so on. However, these personal preferences are always to be judged by the standard of "Does it lead to a higher quality life for the holder?"

A Pure Egoist will follow these moral rules because they are always in his own best interest. That is, advocating and enforcing these rules protects him and those with whom he is concerned. It just so happens that his following these rules also benefits everyone else. So, even though common sense dictates that selfish people are evil, the truth is that selfishness can be good when the proper moral rules are understood.

These are just three examples of how rejecting "normal" and common sense, and instead adopting the results of a methodical, theory driven exploration of oneself and the universe can produce a higher quality life.

Despite what the thoughts of others may demand, I have reverence for myself. I seek what is useful to me. I desire that which leads me to greater perfection. I see my real interests clearly, and I see the distant results of my actions. Therefore, I strive to follow the moral rules and to live up to my own, personal ethical standards.

I learn by reading and then testing the information in real life situations. I learn from the mistakes of others. I also learn through counterfactual thinking, through considering what did not happen but what just as easily could have. And, above all, I learn by forming theories about why things happen, using those theories to make and test predictions, and then measuring the results. If the prediction turns out to be correct, then I know that I am on to something. If it turns out wrong, then I know that the theory is wrong or incomplete. This is my method to awesome.

At no time, however, do I just blindly accept what the people around me believe. It may be a lonely way to live, but the view is uncommonly nice.

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