

How Does Self-Improvement Work?

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Kings enjoy easy luxuries isn't because they're wise; Noble Men suffer from senseless poverty isn't because they're stupid – it's due to the difference in fortune. However, pursuing noble goals, living honestly, deliberating prudently, and learning from history – those aren't dependent on fortune. Therefore, Noble Men deal with what they can control seriously, and never long for what they can't control; Little Men constantly overlook what they can control, but forever crave what they can't control. Noble Men, instead of envying what they don't deserve yet, work on what they can do earnestly, so they improve themselves everyday; Little Men always dream of what's beyond their merits, but give up what they could do easily, so they worsen themselves everyday. As a result, Noble Men improve everyday and Little Men worsen everyday – for the same reason. That's why they differ so much eventually.

—Xunzi, *Discourse on Fortune* (my translation)¹

When reading biographies, you see success would often come after success; the opposite is also true: failure would often come after failure.² The process usually goes like this: two people with similar natural abilities, one starts with a positive initial momentum; the other with a negative one. The momentum, in either direction, compounds over time, and is further strengthened by external forces. First gradually and then exponentially, the good becomes better and the bad becomes worse, ultimately leading to a striking difference in the final outlook between the two.

How to worsen oneself is easy to understand. Nobody would want to worsen themselves *knowingly*; improvement simply never comes to their minds. So while improvers advance, they stand still. And when they meet adverse circumstances, they become worse.³

The hard question is: How do you improve yourself?

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When does self-improvement begin? Because you can only improve yourself by performing a sequence of activities, including mental ac-

¹ Original text: “楚王后车千乘，非知也；君子啜菽饮水，非愚也。是节然也。若夫心意修，德行厚，知虑明，生于今而志乎古，则是其在我者也。故君子敬其在己者，而不慕其在天者。小人错其在己者，而慕其在天者。君子敬其在己者而不慕其在天者，是以日进也。小人错其在己者而慕其在天者，是以日退也。故君子之所以日进，与小人之所以日退，一也。君子小人之所以相悬者在此耳。” —《荀子·天论》

² But failures are much less visible; we rarely talk about them because failed stories are unpleasant and wouldn't sell. It's unfortunate because we can learn far more from failures than from successes.

³ Often without realizing it themselves.

tivities, the time when self-improvers take the first action to improve seems to be the starting point. But it's earlier: you must already be *determined* in your mind when you've started to act. Therefore, the key moment is when self-improvers cultivate mental determination.⁴

How to get that determination? Unfortunately, it seems determination is largely a trait from inborn temperaments;⁵ we don't know the "scientific" way to produce it. It appears to happen spontaneously: the idea of self-improvement suddenly hits self-improvers at a certain point in life, and since then they know it's what they want by their nature. Although sadly we don't know how this most important part works,⁶ any discussion on self-improvement can't make sense without assuming determination.

If you're determined enough to act to self-improve, how to keep the activities *sustainable*? What stops and maintains human activities? Pain and pleasure.

Pain and Pleasure

If we oversimplify what drives human activities, it would be: (1) humans avoid pain⁷ and (2) humans seek pleasure^{8,9}.

To maintain self-improvement, we need to consider which type of pain and pleasure is good or bad for it.¹⁰

Both intense pain and pleasure, either physical or mental, are bad. Intense pain, either physical or mental, damages your body and mind, and therefore is never good for self-improvement in the long run. Intense pleasure, either physical or mental, is bad because it's addictive and therefore distracts you from self-improvement.

How about mild pain and pleasure? Mild physical pleasure, if harmless and taken moderately, is neither good nor bad. But given human's pleasure-seeking nature, it's always at risk of becoming excessive and addictive, so the right attitude is indifference with caution.

Mild pain, either physical or mental, is good – *if* they're the *inevitable* part of self-improvement.¹¹ As a matter of fact, you can't improve without pain.¹² For example, mild physical pain from exercise is necessary to improve the body and mild mental pain from learning and self-criticizing is unavoidable to improve the mind. This inevitable mild pain during self-improvement is the *friction* that you need to overcome.

⁴ If we go even earlier, we would get into the never-ending debate between free will and determinism, so we need to stop here.

⁵ Determination is also a suitcase word that is hard to unpack its meaning.

⁶ It isn't a crime though. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, after an entire book of discussions on virtues, Aristotle ended it by saying we can only teach them to people who already have the right temperament.

⁷ It's because otherwise, our ancestors wouldn't survive.

⁸ It's mostly because of boredom (which is a type of mental pain).

⁹ In soft science, Occam's razor usually hurts more than it helps. Simple laws, driven by physics envy, don't work; they don't generalize well. But since pain and pleasure are so fundamental in human behaviors, it wouldn't be ridiculous to say humans are pain-avoiding and pleasure-seeking machines.

¹⁰ Good or bad aren't in the moral sense. Moral opinions are mostly feelings determined by inborn temperaments and influence from family and society. They can be arbitrary, and there's no ground for arguing them. Instead, what's meant by good or bad is, judged objectively, whether it helps or hurts self-improvement.

¹¹ Otherwise, taking pain intentionally for no good reason is irrational.

¹² It's probably a limit that nature puts on us. If we can improve without pain, then everyone could improve easily, and the system, as a whole, wouldn't be stable, e.g. the bell curve wouldn't hold.

If self-improvement gives only pain and friction, it would be hard to do it consistently. Luckily, it also gives mild mental pleasure. Among all types of mild mental pleasure, the most helpful one is the mental pleasure from self-improvement, e.g. pride in jobs well done, joy of the progress, and fulfillment of overcoming old vices, etc. The pleasure reinforces the self-improving activities that cause it, making you more likely to repeat them in the future.

Most importantly, mild mental pleasure from self-improvement counterbalances the inevitable pain;¹³ it's the key to making self-improvement sustainable. In other words, we can overcome the pain of self-improvement because its pleasant part is greater.¹⁴

It leads to an important fact: self-improvement is a *struggling* process, always mixed with (mild) pain and (mild mental) pleasure.

To summarize, intense pain and pleasure, both mental and physical, are always bad, and should be avoided first.¹⁵ Mild physical pleasure is cautiously indifferent. Mild pain, both physical and mental, is good – *if* they're the inevitable part of self-improvement. The mild mental pleasure from self-improvement is the most helpful; only if you can enjoy self-improving, you can do it consistently.

Determination weaponed by mental pleasure from self-improvement isn't enough because you need to perform, not just one, but a sequence of self-improving activities. Therefore, the frequency of those activities matters. What concerns with activity frequency? Habit.

Habit

What's a habit? It's what you *do*¹⁶ repeatedly, i.e. it's what you *actually* do, not what you say you'll do or what you feel you should do. Since you're what you do, habit is your second nature.

Breaking a habit is painful, both physically and mentally, no matter if it's a good or a bad habit. We, therefore, rarely change habits.^{17,18} We're all creatures of habits.

Because it's almost impossible to break habits, the logical consequence is the *magic of compounding* works in both directions. It's massively beneficial if you develop good habits since the benefits will compound *effortlessly*;¹⁹ it's massively destructive if you develop bad habits since the damage will compound *unnoticeably*.²⁰ Over the long run, that's why people differ so much.

¹³ Pain and pleasure can easily co-exist in the same mind. Our brain is like computers that have many processes running at the same time, and it's perfectly normal for them to conflict with each other.

¹⁴ Or in Spinoza's noble words "...because we enjoy [blessedness], we are able to restrain our passions." (The last proposition in *Ethics*)

¹⁵ It might seem intense mental pleasure should be good, e.g. intense mental pleasure about self-improvement. However, the problem is it isn't sustainable. Self-improvement is always a long-term game; what matters ultimately is the total progress in your lifetime. Intense mental pleasure of any type can lead to swinging to the opposite extreme. If your mind and productivity look like bipolar disorder, it isn't optimal in the long run.

¹⁶ Including what you do in your mind, i.e. mental habit.

¹⁷ Corollary 1: It's almost impossible to change people.

¹⁸ Corollary 2: When picking people, the most important thing to look at is their habits, i.e. what they *do* repeatedly (not what they say) because their habits determine their characters and the force of habits is too strong to fight against.

¹⁹ "We're what we repeatedly do. Excellence then...[is] a habit." – Will Durant paraphrasing Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in *The Story of Philosophy*.

²⁰ "The chains of habit are too light to be felt until they are too heavy to be broken." Warren Buffett quoting someone (maybe Bertrand Russell or Samuel Johnson).

Thus, choosing the good, habits will make you enjoy it, and you'll feel fulfilled ultimately;²¹ choosing the bad, habits will make you addicted to it, and you'll feel miserable eventually.

Since habits, once formed, rarely change, it's the most rewarding to form good habits early in life, which has the highest benefit-to-cost ratio.²² It's such an obviously right idea that is merely common sense, and all major civilizations have similar teaching, as Warren Buffett and Charlie Munger would say, "If it's trite, it's right."

Forming habits isn't enough; you also need to maintain them. For how long? A lifetime.²³ What makes you *stick* to good habits? We've said determination and mental pleasure, but there's also discipline.

Discipline

While determination is mostly about doing the right things, discipline is mostly about *not* doing the wrong things. Discipline might be even more important than determination because you can benefit *far, far* more by avoiding big mistakes than trying to do something "smart," and by avoiding huge and obvious setbacks than seeking small and hard-to-find "improvements." Reading a little history, you would find humans keep making the same mistakes again and again; we only have a few typical ways to self-destroy life.²⁴ So avoiding them is a low-hanging fruit; it lets you get ahead of most people already.

Reading history, it's obvious that the most common human mistake is getting corrupted by pleasure and becoming unwilling to do what's unpleasant but necessary. Or in Mencius's words, "We flourish from struggling and worry; we perish from comfort and ease."²⁵ It's how countless people, including civilizations, ruin themselves. We're *very, very* easy to fall into the trap of indulgence because of our pain-avoiding and pleasure-seeking human nature. In other words, we tend to avoid good pain and take bad pleasure.

The cure is to go the opposite: taking good pain and avoiding bad pleasure. How can you go against human nature? We've said self-improvement is a struggling state between pain and pleasure, so the hope is the mental pleasure from self-improvement overcomes the friction of taking good pain and the temptation from taking bad pleasure.²⁶ And once you've formed the proper habits, let them run on autopilot, i.e. relying on your animal nature of habits.

We're also naturally shortsighted because otherwise, our ancestors wouldn't

²¹ Or in Ben Franklin's more eloquent words, "Hit upon that direction of life which is most excellent, and *custom* will make it the most delightful."

²² Aristotle: "So it is a matter of no little importance what sort of habits we form from the earliest age – it makes a vast difference, or rather all the difference in the world." (*Nicomachean Ethics*)

²³ Aristotle: "One swallow does not make a summer; neither does one day. Similarly neither can one day, or a brief space of time, make a man blessed and happy." (*Nicomachean Ethics*). All civilizations have similar sayings, another trite-and-right common sense.

²⁴ What repeatedly happens in history: recreational chemicals, i.e. drug, smoking, alcohol, etc., gambling, lust, and overeating, etc. We don't need creativity in this business. Why invent new ways of destroying life if the old ways work so well?

²⁵ My translation. Original text: "生于忧患而死于安乐也。" — 《孟子·告子下》

²⁶ It's of course hard; that's why it's such a common human mistake.

survive if they didn't, by default, constantly stare at how to stay alive in the immediate future. We, therefore, tend to avoid short-term pain and take short-term pleasure. But it's a huge advantage if you can train yourself to see the long run, and *talk to yourself*²⁷ to take short-term good pain and avoid short-term bad pleasure because it's what'll be good for you eventually.

²⁷ Which isn't different from how you persuade others.

Simply put by Ben Franklin, the great self-improver, "Would you live with ease, do what you ought, and not what you please."²⁸ Paradoxically, taking the necessary pain and avoiding bad pleasure in the short run will make life easier and more pleasant in the long run.

²⁸ Another trite-and-right common sense in almost all civilizations.

Discipline also means sticking to what you know to be right. It's hard to always stick to doing what's right – even if you know it works – because you'll get bored by doing the same thing again and again. You're tempted to try new things by what Keynes called *animal spirits*, i.e. human's craving for actions. Discipline means overcoming animal spirits: if you know what you're doing is working, and the benefit is compounding, *don't* break the magic of compounding.²⁹ It's better to stick to what's obviously right than to look for what's bizarrely wrong.

²⁹ Corollary: Doing good things moderately but everyday is more beneficial than doing them intensely but only once in a while.

The best self-improving state is the golden mean between (mild good) pain and (mild mental) pleasure. The right amount of good pain makes you alert and active: too little makes you indulgent; too much becomes counterproductive. But since pleasure has destroyed far more people than pain, it's safer to err on the side of taking too much good pain than not taking enough.

Mental discipline is the most important form of discipline, i.e. not letting your emotions disrupt you. It's hard but hugely rewarding; emotional stability is *far, far* more important than having a few more IQs.

Unfortunately, similar to determination, true discipline also seems to mostly come from inborn temperaments.³⁰ You can impose discipline, but it won't be optimal. *Internally* imposed discipline that is *genuine* works a lot better than *externally* imposed discipline that is *fake*.

³⁰ Discipline is a suitcase word too, like discipline.

The progress of self-improvement is never smooth, full of unexpected ups and downs. Your own state fluctuates constantly, making the progress look like a sequence of virtuous and vicious cycles, which you need to adapt to.

Virtuous and Vicious Cycle

It's important to *constantly* monitor if you're in a virtuous or a vicious cycle of self-improvement without *self-deception*. The first principle is always not to fool yourself.³¹ Because we all have different pursuits, it's impossible to precisely define what's good for you, and therefore what's meant by improvement for you and hence whether you're improving or worsening. You have to make your own judgments. However, it only works if you *genuinely* want to improve; otherwise, you would fool yourself into believing what feels good.³² Where does this earnestness come from? The determination. Only if you're determined to self-improve, you'll care more about actually improving than making yourself feel good with self-deception.

³¹ As in anything else.

³² e.g. you're improving when you aren't and you aren't worsening when you're.

Assume you aren't fooling yourself, how can you tell if you're in a virtuous or a vicious cycle? If you're in a deep cycle, you would know it easily: things are going either obviously well or obviously badly.

If you're in a deep virtuous circle, you can simply continue the momentum. But be cautious about small negative momentum that grows unnoticeably and suddenly becomes irreversible, i.e. the killing-the-frog-with-warm-water case.³³

³³ It can be more dangerous than a right-in-your-face crisis because it doesn't trigger your alarm.

If you're in a deep vicious circle, it's, of course, the worst. You need to break it. You might have to "burn the boats," which takes strong determination, or more commonly, is forced by external circumstances. In milder cases, you need to start to get out of the bottom by doing small things that are painful but right. The friction is huge though; if it were easy, self-destruction wouldn't be such a common problem. Hence, it's much easier to *avoid* it in the first place.

You should adapt like physical exercise training. If you're in a virtuous circle, and you're getting used to doing unpleasant but right things, then it's a good time to try harder things to push the limit. If you're in a vicious cycle, and you're getting used to avoiding pain, then you shouldn't push yourself to do the most unpleasant (but right) things that you never tried before. Instead, you should start by doing small and less painful things to gradually accumulate momentum.

When you're in a shallow cycle, and the net momentum is a mixture of both directions, it's harder to know which cycle you're in. There's a heuristic: Are you actively producing or passively consuming? Actively producing things is a sign of virtuous cycle; it leads to active mind, material reward, and fulfilled feeling. Passively consuming things is a sign of vicious cycle; it leads to passive mind, material punishment, and worthless feeling.³⁴ In other words, productivity, i.e. how many

³⁴ Passive pleasure doesn't fit human instincts because we aren't programmed to enjoy pleasure without effort.

things³⁵ you do and actively create, is a reasonable measure of your current state.

When you're in a shallow virtuous circle, a small negative momentum can destroy it and push you to the vicious circle, so you need to be alerted when it happens and stop it early. When you're in a shallow vicious circle, and you see the small positive momentum, you need to "babysit" it since it's fragile.

You have to adapt to not only the fluctuations in your own progress, but also the external circumstances that you can't control.

External Force

We give lots of names to things that we can't control: external circumstance, big force, trend, tide, headwind/tailwind, chance, luck, fortune, fate, destiny, providence, God – or in our time – randomness.³⁶

It sometimes seems all external forces are going well, and the whole world is helping you. The opposite can also happen: it sometimes seems all external forces are going worse, and the whole world is hurting you. In both extreme cases, it's wise to know they won't last. When you're at the peak of fortune, remind yourself that it'll pass before you get arrogant and corrupted, and don't lament when it's gone because it'll be for sure. When you're at the bottom of fortune, don't feel depressed; remember that the misfortune will pass soon, and things will get better.³⁷ In short, fortune will regress to the mean eventually.

Most of the time, it's neither the extreme, but rather a mixture of both. Handling fortune is easy: just follow the tailwind. It's harder to handle misfortune,³⁸ but it's more important and rewarding because you can't go wrong with controlling damages, but you might go wrong with "maximizing" advantages.

Paradoxically, small misfortunes can be actually good in the long run. Just like the best state of self-improvement is the golden mean between pain and pleasure, the best external circumstance, in the *long* run, is the golden mean between adversity and ease. Too little adversity would make you indulgent; too much would crush you. But you can't control most of the external challenges in your life.³⁹ What *you* can do is to stay *fortitude* in front of misfortunes, as Epictetus said, "It's not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters."⁴⁰

First, you need to avoid the common human mistake, i.e. refusing to

³⁵ Things that matter, of course.

³⁶ The length of this list suggests that we really have lots of things out of our control – something our ancestors knew all too well. Every civilization can draw a long list of words that mean the same thing.

³⁷ Or in an extreme misfortunate, if not, you'll be gone soon so the pain will stop.

³⁸ As we all would say.

³⁹ Although you can actively seek them.

⁴⁰ It might be a misattribution – I can't find where he said it.

accept what isn't up to you emotionally. You *wish* this moment to be different from what it is, but the world *doesn't* care what you wish for. Harmful emotions from not accepting reality, e.g. self-pity, cynicism, regret, anger, depression, etc., never help; they'll rather hurt you in almost every way. You need to learn to discipline your emotions. *Then*, you should redirect your attention to what's up to you because not only you'll act to improve things, but also you'll have something to do⁴¹ to distract you from getting stuck in the harmful emotions. In short, *accept* what you *can't* control; *optimize* what you *can* control.^{42,43}

Never complain; almost nothing is more harmful than complaining. Don't pity yourself; almost nothing hurts yourself (and others) more than self-pity. Bad and stupid behaviors usually have some fun in them;⁴⁴ but complaining and self-pity have none.⁴⁵ Also, stay away from people who habitually complain or pity themselves.

If you always keep staring at the results, you'll be constantly disturbed by counterproductive emotions, which, paradoxically, will hurt your real chance of getting what you want because they distract you from doing what you should. The right way is to imitate great sports players who, when in games, don't look at the scoreboard; instead, they focus on their performance. In short, *don't* look at results; just improve yourself.

Viewing it differently, things, people, families, companies, countries, civilizations, and even the Universe – no matter how great once they were or they are now – will die one day. "This too will pass"⁴⁶ is a truth regardless of how much you don't want to believe. Therefore, the *process* rather than the result is all you have in the end.⁴⁷ So enjoy the process of self-improvement,⁴⁸ lower expectation of external rewards, and appreciate what you already have. In other words, self-improvement is an end in itself.

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The development of an individual isn't different from the rise and fall of a family, a company, an institute, a country, an idea, a big social/economic/cultural force, or a civilization. And none of them is different from the development of nature. We're, after all, a part of nature. We know how nature improves: natural selection. The process is gradual and nature is patient. It keeps doing what works and correcting former mistakes, gives small rewards when on the right track, and avoids jumping too far which might lead to death. We know it works because it has gotten us here. Imitate nature.

⁴¹ i.e. satisfying animal spirits.

⁴² Perhaps the philosophy that stresses it the most is Stoicism, especially Epictetus. But it's another trite-and-right idea in all civilizations that is merely common sense.

⁴³ A common example of what you can't control is the past, and what you can control is the future. So don't get stuck in the past; what had happened already happened, you can do nothing about it. Instead, look forward and think of what you can do for the future.

⁴⁴ That's why they're attractive.

⁴⁵ Inspired by Warren Buffett and Charlie Munger's view on envy.

⁴⁶ "It is said an Eastern monarch once charged his wise men to invent him a sentence, to be ever in view, and which should be true and appropriate in all times and situations. They presented him the words: 'And this, too, shall pass away.' How much it expresses! How chastening in the hour of pride! How consoling in the depths of affliction!" – Abraham Lincoln.

⁴⁷ Some people would ask why self-improve then? No matter how much you improve, it'll be gone eventually. It's like saying because you can't live forever, you should poison yourself now.

⁴⁸ You might not be superficially happy (because of the inevitable pain from self-improvement), but you'll be happier than if you never try. You'll feel more fulfilled and less regretful on your deathbed if you've tried your best to self-improve, following what your nature dictates.