

Obvious advice

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This is a common scene at the MIRI offices: I have a decision to make, like what sort of winter fundraiser to run. Before making any choices, I take a few minutes to write down all the obvious things to do before making the decision: spend five minutes brainstorming options before weighting any pros or cons; talk to people who have run different types of fundraisers in similar situations; and so on. I can usually generate a handful of obvious things to do before making my decision. I write those things down, and then I describe my decision to one of my advisors and see if they have any advice. They say "only the obvious," and then rattle off five more obvious things I hadn't thought of, all of them useful.

Sometimes, I wonder how successful a person would be if they just did all the obvious things in pursuit of their goals.

So with that in mind, allow me to offer some quite obvious pieces of advice, which have proven very useful for me:

Before carrying out any plan, *actually do the obvious things*.

When you're about to make a big decision, pause, and ask yourself what obvious things a reasonable person would do before making this sort of decision. Would they spend a full five minutes (by the clock) brainstorming alternative options before settling on a decision? Would they consult with

friends and advisors? Would they do some particular type of research?

Then, *actually do the obvious things*.

A corollary to this advice is to also occasionally consider *not doing things the wrong way*. Imagine someone who's recently failed at an endeavor that was important to them. They're fraught with despair, and you attempt to console them by saying "well, at least you learned something." They snap back, "yeah, I learned never to try hard things ever again!"

This may be just an emotional outburst, yes, but if they act upon this outburst — and withdraw, and become less curious, and become more bitter — then they are in solid need of the above corollary. In fact, the middle of an emotional outburst is one of the *best times* to use the corollary. I have often myself found it useful, mid-hasty-decision, to pause, reflect, and ask myself "wait... is this a *terrible plan*?"

(And then, if the answer is yes, I don't carry out the plan — a crucial step.)

Both pieces of advice above — "do the obvious preparation", and "don't execute bad plans" — each get a lot more useful as you expand your notions of "obvious preparation" and "bad plan". In fact, quite a bit of rationalist-style advice is

about expanding your notion of "obvious thing" and "bad plan." Thus, this advice gets much more helpful if you make sure to do the obvious things.

(Not all the rationalist advice is of this form, of course; many of the most important rationalist skills are cognitive operations that happen in five seconds or less. One example of a five-second-level skill is the skill of encountering a new problem and *reflexively starting to list obvious preparations* or noticing an emotional outburst and *reflexively taking a step back and checking whether your current plan is terrible*. More often than not, one of the goals of these blog posts is to install a five-second cognitive reflex of *deciding to apply a tool* by describing the tool itself. But I digress.)

For example, the cognitive reflex of "enumerate obvious preparations" becomes much more useful once you have concepts like "brainstorm options before weighing pros and cons" and "set a five minute timer and actually think about the problem for the whole five minutes" and "consider the opportunity costs." And the cognitive reflex of "check whether your current plan is terrible" becomes more useful as you add concepts like "rationalizing" and "blindly acting out a social role" and so on.

So this week's advice is obvious advice, but useful nonetheless: find a way to gain a reflex to actually do all the obvious preparation, before undertaking a new task or making a big decision.

It's surprising how often the advice that I give people who come to me asking for advice cashes out to some form of "well, have you considered doing the obvious thing?"

For example, when someone comes to me and says "help, I have a talk I have to give and I'm going to be terribly nervous and I dread it, what do I do?" it's often surprisingly helpful for me to ask, "well, what sort of things would make you less nervous?" Or someone comes to me and says "I find myself just playing video games all day, how do I stop myself?", I first ask, "have you considered what sorts of things you'd rather do besides play video games all day?"

In many cases, the obvious prompts aren't sufficient. But in a surprising number of cases, *they are*. I still often find this advice useful myself: when my attention slips, I am often helped by someone just asking me to consider the obvious — "what would make the task less dreadful?" or "have you thought for five minutes about alternatives?" or "have you considered delegating this?" and so on.

Much of my advice for how to manage guilt was generated by this very process, by me imagining feeling guilty, and then imagining which obvious things I'd try to do to engage with the feeling. I would ask myself questions like "what is the cause of this feeling?" and "how is it being useful to me?" and "is there a better way I can achieve those goals?" and I would spend time listening to myself and brainstorming op-

tions, because those are all the obvious ways to address the problem. Many of my early posts on guilt were a product of articulating that reflexive process. The types of obvious advice that I would generate — such as asking "what is the cause and use of this feeling?" — might be very different from the obvious advice that you would generate, and that's fine. The trick is to apply the obvious advice first.

Or imagine you have the problem of finding it difficult to use the "do the obvious" technique. Maybe you've been struggling to remember to consider the obvious whenever you encounter a hard decision. Instead of asking for advice, consider generating a list like the following, first:

- Spend five minutes generating examples of decisions you made in the past where it would have been helpful to do the obvious things first. Then spend five minutes examining those and looking for patterns.
- Close your eyes and visualize yourself facing a new decision in as much concrete detail as you can, and practice thinking "oh wait, let me list the obvious things before proceeding."
- Train yourself to notice decision-points better by buying a tally counter and tracking decisions and giving yourself positive reinforcement every time you do.

Or imagine that you have tried to do all the obvious things, and you find that you're going into "enumerate the obvious" mode even for the most trivial tasks, and it's making your trivial tasks take way too long and the whole thing seems pretty foolish. Then, before complaining, consider trying the

corollary, and consider whether applying "try the obvious" far too often is in fact a terrible plan.

Your list of obvious things will very likely look very different from my own — my friends and advisors *still* generate obvious-in-retrospect ideas that I myself was incapable of generating, even after spending a few minutes generating the sort of ideas I expected them to generate. Collecting tips and techniques from other people in your environment is a great way to expand your "obvious things" repertoire, and asking for advice from friends will likely continue to generate new obvious things for quite some time. It's OK for your lists to be very different; the trick is to do *some* of the obvious preparation before making a hard decision. It can often make a difference.

The important thing, here, is to find a way to actually start doing the obvious things. This is the skill that's like footwork for a rationalist: remembering to actually do the obvious preparation is easy to learn and difficult to master; it's a skill to drill when you have spare mental energy in hopes that it comes naturally and easily whenever the going gets tough and the stakes get high.

I continue to wonder how powerful a person could become, if they simply managed to do all the obvious things in pursuit of their goals.

