

Moving towards the goal

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This post contains some advice. I dare not call it obvious, as the illusion of transparency is ever-present. I will call it simple, but people occasionally remind me that they really appreciate the simple advice. So here we go:

1

(As usual, this advice is not for everyone; today I am primarily speaking to those who have something to protect.)

I have been spending quite a bit of time, recently, working with people who are explicitly trying to hop on a higher growth curve and have a larger impact on the world. (Most of them effective altruists.) They wonder how the big problems can be solved, or how one single person can themselves move the needle in a meaningful way. They ask questions like "what needs to be done?", or "what sort of high impact things can I do right now?"

I think this is the wrong way of looking at things.

When I have a big problem that I want solved, I have found that there is one simple process which tends to work. It goes like this:

1. Move towards the goal.

(It's simple, not easy.)

If you follow this process, you either win or you die. (Or you run out of time. Speed is encouraged. So are shortcuts, so is cheating.)

The difficult part is hidden within step 1: it's often hard to keep moving towards the goal. It's difficult to stay motivated. It's difficult to stay focused, especially when pursuing an ambitious goal such as "end ageing," which requires overcoming some fairly significant obstacles.

But we are human beings. We are the single most powerful optimization process in the known universe, with the only exception being *groups* of human beings. If we set ourselves to something and don't stop, we either succeed or we die. There's a whole slew of advice which helps make the former outcome more likely than the latter (via efficiency, etc.), but first it is necessary to begin.

Moving towards the goal doesn't mean you have to work directly on whatever problem you're solving. If you're trying to end aging, then putting on a lab coat and combining random chemicals likely won't do you much good.

Rather, moving towards the goal is about *always acting to solve the problem*, with each motion. Identify the path to the goal that seems shortest, and then walk it. Maybe you need

to acquire financial stability first, and more knowledge second. Maybe you need to expand your social network, or fulfill your social attachment needs. Maybe you need to acquire a new skill. Maybe you have *no idea* how to start, in which case you need to gain more information, do some thinking, and gain a higher vantage point from which to search for a path to the goal.

But no matter what, there is always *some* way to keep moving towards the goal. Get stronger. Get smarter. Return with allies at your back.

2

Here's the pattern that this advice is designed to work against: consider the effective altruist, asking "what needs to be done?", or "what sort of high impact things can I do right now?"

I expect people to go much farther by first identifying an actual goal, and then moving towards it. Which breaks my one-step advice above into a more practical two-step process:

Step 1: identify the goal. Figure out what you're actually trying to accomplish. Probe your motivations, and trace them back to something that compels.

I'm not suggesting tracing your motivations all the way up to "final" goals; it's a bit presumptuous to claim knowledge

of "final goals" given modern introspective capabilities. Rather, look for important problems that you're trying to solve in the world today.

For example, you might be trying to fix education, end hunger, eliminate a disease, prevent aging, become immortal, end suffering, prevent human extinction, or whatever. None of these are *ends unto themselves*, but they're all problems that need solving.

Identifying a goal that compels—that really needs to be solved, and that won't be solved (or won't be solved fast enough) by default—is not always an easy task. Many people are locked into a mindset where they couldn't possibly actually solve any big problems, because big problems are big and people are small. Breaking out of that mindset is a topic for another day; for now I'll assume you have picked your poison and identified some goal to achieve, even if only a minor one.

Step 2: move towards it. So, you've found a goal. Nice work.

Now solve it tomorrow.

Can you? Seriously ask yourself whether or not you can solve the problem tomorrow. I don't care how ambitious it is. Can you solve it tomorrow? If yes, then do it. If not, why not? Say the obstacles aloud.

The usual answers are something like "I lack the power, time, money, network, and so on." Which is great! Now we're getting somewhere.

These are what you need to work on tomorrow, if you want to solve the problem.

Don't ask "what would be good to do," ask "what is standing between me and solving the problem immediately." Identify the obstacles. Your task is now to either remove them or cheat your way around them.

Of course, most of the obstacles themselves are still too big and vague. So ask yourself why you can't solve those problems tomorrow. Say you don't know the people you'd need to know to have a shot at fixing education. Can you contact them all tomorrow? That *probably* wouldn't go well, but why not? What are the obstacles between you and acquiring the resources you're going to need?

Rinse, repeat. Identify the obstacles to overcoming the obstacles, and so on. Eventually, this process will ground out in things that you can actually start doing tomorrow, with a path that you can trace all the way back up to your goal.

Once you have that, throw reservations to the wind, and start *today*.

Moving towards the goal doesn't solve the whole problem. If you want to solve a goal effectively, in the time allotted, it is important to approach the obstacles in the right order, to identify the ones you can safely cheat past, to correctly distinguish between short paths to the goal and long ones. But many people aren't there yet: they're still asking "what would be good for me to do," and not "what stands between me and solving the whole problem tomorrow."

My advice, if you want to be effective, is *always be solving the problem*. With each motion, be overcoming an obstacle that stands between you and the goal. If the obstacles are too large, then your next task is to get stronger, get smarter, or find a way around. That is what it means, to find a path to the goal.

To achieve a goal, simply keep moving along that path.