

# You're allowed to fight for something

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The first sort of guilt I want to address is the listless guilt, that vague feeling one gets after playing video games for twelve hours straight, a guilty feeling that you should be doing something else. Many people in my local friend group don't suffer from the listless guilt, because many people in my sphere are effective altruists who feel a *very acute and specific* sense of guilt when they think they've spent their time poorly. Specific guilt tends to be as bad or worse than the listless guilt, but before I address specific guilt, I need to confront the listless guilt.

It seems to me that the listless guilt usually stems from not doing anything in particular. I'm not sure how to remove that feeling of guilt in people who aren't doing anything in particular. But if they shift the guilt to being guilty about not doing *one thing in particular*, then I have some tools that might help.

Warning: in this post, I'm going to encourage people with listless guilt to find something to care about, and to shift their guilt away from a vague sense of not doing anything towards a specific sense of not doing one thing in particular. If you already have strong specific guilts, consider skipping this post.

The message of the allegory of the stamp collector is this: *you can care about things in the world*. There is no difference in kind between steering reality towards futures where there are more happy-chemicals in your head, and steering reality towards futures where there are lots of happy humans outside your head. Your decision process is implemented by the lump of meat between your ears, but it builds a map of the entire universe, and you can act (according to the map) towards whatever end you please.

You only ever see the map, but you walk the territory.

Many people will say that humans only ever do what they want. They wheel out phrases such as "revealed preference" and say that no matter what people do, they do it because they wanted to. But here's the thing:

If you use the word "want" to mean "whatever humans actually do," then I need new words to differentiate activities-I-do-for-personal-enjoyment (stargazing, studying physics, tinkering, cavorting) from activities-I-do-for-the-sake-of-others-I-care-about (attempting to reduce existential risk, donating to charities, community service). These are very different clusters of behavior that feel very different, and I need words to distinguish between them.

If a word describes everything, then it distinguishes nothing, and is useless. If you use the word "want" to mean

"whatever people do," then it can't be used for talking about actions. In order for "wants" to be *about* goals humans are trying to achieve for various purposes, it must apply to some goals and not others.

I'm happy to *split* the word "want," because it's a pretty loaded word. Sometimes I use it to distinguish between the stargazing/cavorting cluster and the charity/altruism cluster, and other times I use it to distinguish between tasks-I-reflectively-approve-of-doing (such as studying an interesting topic) and tasks-I-reflectively-disapprove-of-doing (such as procrastinating by reading boring web pages), which is a different way of cutting up things-I-do that I also find useful.

Distinguishing between clusters of things is what words are *for*. If anything, we need to make the word "want" *more* specific, not less specific.

Nihilists may tell you that nothing matters, that there is no altruism, that people only do what they want to, and these are all traps that lead to the listless guilt. They help people half-convince themselves that nothing matters, and then the other half of them, which fails to be fooled, goes on yearning for something more.

So if you're experiencing nihilism along with a vague sense of discomfort or guilt, consider taking a moment to remind yourself that it is possible for you to care about things beyond yourself, for non-selfish reasons.

I've been surprised, in the past, by how many people vehemently resist the idea that they might not actually be selfish, deep down. I've seen some people do some incredible contortions in attempts to convince themselves that their ability to care about others is actually completely selfish. (Because iterated game theory says that if you're in a repeated game it pays to be nice, you see!) These people seem to resist the idea that they could have selfless values on general principles, and consistently struggle to come up with selfish explanations for their altruistic behavior.

Don't get me wrong, selfishness is fine. Yet, true selfishness doesn't lead to the listless guilt. If you think you *must* be selfish, and you also feel vaguely guilty about life, then perhaps you care about what goes on beyond your head.

In case you're skeptical, here's a little thought experiment:

*Imagine you live alone in the woods, having forsaken civilization when the Unethical Psychologist Authoritarians came to power a few years back.*

*Your only companion is your dog, twelve years old, who you raised from a puppy. (If you have a pet or have ever had a pet, use them instead.)*

*You're aware of the fact that humans have figured out how to do some pretty impressive perception modification (which is part of what allowed the Unethical Psychologist Authoritarians to come to power).*

*One day, a psychologist comes to you and offers you a deal. They'd like to take your dog out back and shoot it. If you let them do so, they'll clean things up, erase your the memories of this conversation, and then alter your perceptions such that you perceive exactly what you would have if they hadn't shot your dog. (Don't worry, they'll also have people track you and alter the perceptions of anyone else who would see the dog, so that they also see the dog, so that you won't seem crazy. And they'll remove that fact from your mind, so you don't worry about being tracked.)*

*In return, they'll give you a dollar.*

Under the assumption that you will in fact believe and perceive the same things you would have if they hadn't shot the dog, *and* have an extra dollar for your trouble, would you take the offer?

Most people reject it. You're allowed to reject it! You're allowed to reject *arbitrarily good* amounts of faked pleasure-experience in order to avoid bad real-world outcomes.

You're allowed to care about whether your beliefs are actually hooked up to reality. You're allowed to care about things outside of you!

One friend of mine, after probing around in thought experiments such as this one, said "Huh. Well, so I definitely care about myself experiencing pleasure, and also I seem to care about other people actually existing and experiencing pleasure, though I don't know why."

She seemed surprised and confused to notice that she cared about others, as though this fact demanded explanation.

*You don't need an excuse.* You can just care about things outside yourself.

If you have the listless guilt, if something seems like it's missing in life, if it seems like there's something else you should be doing with your time, then probe the feeling. Figure out what's missing.

Maybe start by saying, aloud, "I can care about how the world is," and "I want the world to be different than it currently is," if that helps unstick something. And then *listen* to that listless feeling saying there must be something more, and look at the world with fresh eyes, and ask yourself what is wrong. Ask yourself what you would like to see changed.

Is the world totally perfect? No? What would you change, if granted omnipotence? Do you want to acquire power, fame, or riches? Do you want to reduce inequality? Do you want to make it easier for humans to connect? Do you want to reduce loneliness and despair? Do you want to put an end to disease and suffering? Do you want to slay Moloch, the avatar of a runaway civilization that chews humans to pieces, twisted them into bitter shells of their former selves by forcing them to take degrading jobs in order to survive?

Don't just look for ideas that sound nice. Look for changes in the world that *compel* you, ideas such that thinking them

makes something move in your chest. Look for places where the world is broken and in need of fixing. Look for things in the world that are *unacceptable*. Reject the natural order.

It doesn't have to be a grand and ambitious desire. Maybe you'll just want more personal gain. Maybe you'll find that there's one person in particular who you want to save, one person trapped in a hellhole that you want to shield them from. Or maybe you'll decide that you want to save the entire damn world. I don't know. But if you want to remove the listless guilt, then step one is finding something to fight for.

Step zero is *believing that you can*.

Lots of people seem to have these blinders on: the world is big and they are small, and they're just trying to scrape together a living or get by with skills that don't seem particularly relevant to their ambitions, and they don't have the time or ability or energy to make things better. And so they try not to think about it, and then they forget that they're allowed to have a way they want the future to be, that they're allowed to have a specific vision for what they want to achieve.

They forget that they're allowed to desperately want the future to be different from the present.

Finding something to fight for won't *eliminate* the listless guilt. In fact, it may do the opposite: it may refine the listless



guilt into a more pointed thing, a guilt about not making the world better *right now*. It may make you feel guilty about there being so much wrongness and badness that you're not confronting, that you *can't* confront. That's OK: the goal of this exercise is not to eliminate the listless guilt, but to *shift* it. The pointed guilt is more painful, but easier to replace with intrinsic motivation.

The listless guilt is a guilt about not doing anything. To remove it, we must first turn it into a guilt about not doing *something in particular*.

If, instead of feeling vaguely guilty for bingeing netflix due to the feeling that there must be more to life, you feel *specifically* guilty because you could have been pursuing some concrete end, then we've made progress. The latter guilt, though often much more painful, is easier to address.