Not because you "should"

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A few months ago, a friend of mine was describing her motivational issues to me. As an example, she explained she was having trouble making herself clean her room, despite her dissatisfaction with the constant messiness.

I asked: "Have you considered just not forcing yourself?"

She blinked, and cocked her head at me, and said "but then my room wouldn't get cleaned."

I called bullshit. Because look: either (a) you stop forcing yourself to clean the room, and you realize you don't actually care about having a clean room, and then your room stays messy *and that's fine because you don't care*; or (b) you stop forcing yourself to clean the room, and then you get a bit worried, because some part of you *actually wants the room cleaned*, so you listen to that part of yourself, and you work with it, and you find a time to clean the room *because you want to.*

Either way, you win. No need to use internal force.

This is a technique I've <u>recommended before</u> for motivational issues, and I recommend it again when dealing with

shoulds. If you struggle with feelings of guilt, obligation, or inadequacy, then I strongly suggest the following remedy:

Just stop doing things because you "should".

As in, never let a "should" feel like a reason to do something. Only do things because they seem like the best thing to do after you've thought about it; never do things just because you "should."

A commenter to my last post said:

> *There's some meaning lost when you go from "I should X" to "If I X, I will achieve Y", which is "And I want to achieve Y enough to X, that's the best of the options."*

I think this is mostly correct. Only mostly, because as far as I can tell most people don't tend to use "I should X" to mean "X is my best option." More frequently, I see people use it to mean "I would conclude that X is my best option *if I knew more facts*," or "I would conclude that X is my best option *if I thought longer*", or "I would conclude that X is my best option *if I really cared about what I say I care about*."

Regardless, all these various interpretations of "I should X" share one property: It's extremely difficult to make these claims about X *while you're still deliberating*.

If you ever happen to figure out which option is best, then don't slap the label "should" on it and go back to thinking about your options! If you know what the best option is, then stop deliberating and *do it.*

After the fact, looking back, you are welcome to say "ah, knowing what I know now, I see that pressing the green button would have been better." But *in the moment,* all you can do is evaluate all of your actions and see which one looks best given the information available. Shoulds are for retrospectives, not for deliberation.

What you *should* do is the option that actually seems best when you're done weighing your options, regardless of whether or not it has a "should" label attached. You can't figure out which action actually seems best by slapping "should" labels on options willy-nilly and then feeling bad when you ignore them.

Imagine you're trying to solve an algebra problem, with the following method:

1. Say to yourself, "The answer is going to be x=17. I know it."
2. Look at the problem. The problem is "2x = 12; solve for x."
3. Conclude the answer is x=6, and then feel really guilty because x wasn't 17.

This is not the best method ever for solving algebra problems. A better method might be to look at the problem *first,* with-

out deciding what the answer is in advance or feeling guilty when it turns out you aren't prescient.

For the same reason, it's a bit silly to slap a "should" label on all your actions before you actually know which action seems best!

I've seen many people use the word "should" to highlight a conflict between what they perceive as desires and what they perceive as moral obligations. For example, they might say "well I *want* to buy this ice cream, but I *should* donate the money to the Against Malaria Foundation instead."

I say, this is a false conflict. Imagine this person precommitting to never doing anything just because they "should." How might they feel?

They might feel relieved, because they *actually didn't* care about helping others, not even a little bit. So they discharge their guilt, buy their ice cream, and go on their merry way.

But more likely (in someone who thought they "should" give to AMF), that would feel a little bad, and a little hollow. This person, when committing to never do things because they "should," might feel a bit of fear. They might worry that if they didn't keep themselves in check then they'd *never* do

anything to help those less fortunate than themselves. That might seem bad, to them.

Which lets them actually see the true problem, for the first time: they *both* want to buy the ice cream *and* help those who are worse off than them. Now they can actually weigh both desires on the scales, or search for clever third options that fulfill both desires, and so on.

This is a big part of where guilt-free effective altruism comes from, I think: instead of forcing yourself to give to charities sporadically when the guilt overcomes you, promise yourself that you *won't* give sporadically due to guilt, and then *listen* to the part of you that says "but then when will I help others!?" Don't force yourself to be an altruist — instead, commit to *never* forcing yourself, and then work with the part of you that protests, and become an altruist *if and only if you want to help.*

Some people, when they stop forcing themselves to do things because they "should," will do a bit less to improve the world. They'll bow a bit less to social pressure, and insofar as the social pressure was pushing them to do what you think is good, you might count that as a loss. Some people *don't* care about things larger than themselves, and that's *perfectly fine*, and making them more resilient to social pressure might lose the world some charity.

But I expect that far *more* charity is lost from people convincing themselves that their altruistic desires are external

obligations and then resenting them. I expect that *most* people who feel obligated to improve the world and only do it because they "should" will become much more effective if they stop forcing themselves.

It might take them a while. There might be some backlash from years of using internal violence to fulfill a moral obligation that felt more like a bitter duty than a deep desire. Maybe when they first cut themselves free of the "shoulds" they'll go on a self-indulgent hedonistic spending spree. But most of them, I expect, will make their way back. Maybe they'll have to struggle through the listless guilt, maybe they'll have to do a lot of soul searching in order to figure out what they're really fighting for, but once they do, they'll be back stronger than ever.

A little while back, I said

> *And most importantly, guilt doesn't seem like a good long-term motivator: if you want to join the ranks of people saving the world, I would rather you join them proudly. There are many trials and tribulations ahead, and we'd do better to face them with our heads held high.*

And this is a big part of it. If you're going to struggle on the side of Earth and all its children, I expect you can pull harder if you're pulling because you want to, not just because you should.

Imagine promising yourself that you're never going to do something just because you "should," ever again. How does that make you feel?

Do you feel relieved? If so, then you were probably putting your "should" labels on the wrong things and forcing yourself to do things that weren't actually best.

Alternatively, do you feel anxious and worried? Is your mind saying "but wait, if I don't force myself to do what I should, then I'll never get anything done, and I'll lose my job, and I'll never help those less fortunate than myself, and that's bad!"? Because in that case, *listen to those concerns* when you're making your choices. Engage with that part of yourself. You may still decide to do a bunch of unpleasant work, but at least now you'll be doing it because it's better than the alternative, rather than because you're forcing yourself.

(There's still this one hitch where you decide A is best and find yourself doing B anyway; we'll get to this a few posts down the line.)

When you're making a decision, never let the force of action come from a "should." The "should" label is what you place on actions *after* you decide they're best. It's the label you place retrospectively on the answer, not something that can compel you towards the answer.

When you're deliberating, your only responsibility is to figure out which action seems best given the available time and information. Leave the "shoulds" to the historians.