

Defiance

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The third dubious virtue is defiance. As with the other dubious virtues, it can get you into trouble. Remember the law of equal and opposite advice. Used correctly, it can play a key role in a healthy guilt-free motivation system.

I used to tell people that I'm roughly 90% defiance-fueled. The most common response was "ha ha I guess you can be manipulated by reverse psychology, then"; which led me to realize that I didn't yet know how to convey what I meant by "defiance fuel," so I stopped saying it. Today, we see whether I can convey what I mean by "defiance fuel" yet.

Most people I talk to about defiance think of it as a mental stance adopted against some authority figure. Perhaps they imagine a parental figure saying "finish your broccoli," and a child who hates broccoli with their jaw set and smolder in their eyes, who proceeds to eat with as much petulance as they can muster, plotting their revenge. The feeling we imagine in that child is perhaps the standard central example of "defiance."

I claim that that child does possess defiance-the-virtue, but not in their petulance, and not in their opposition to an authority figure. Defiance-the-action is in the child chewing with their mouth open in an open refusal to submit; defiance-the-virtue is in the mental actions they make *before* they start chewing with their mouth open. It's in the inter-

nal steeling they do when deciding not to be ordered around. It's in their decision to be self-reliant, it's in their refusal to take orders lying down. If these automatic and subconscious mental motions were verbalized, they might be written "I am my own person; and not beholden to your whims," or "if you push me, I push back." But they aren't verbalized, because they aren't conscious. They're reflexive.

Defiance-the-virtue is about encountering a badness that's brewing in the world, and *reflexively* doing everything you can to throw a wrench in the works, to twist things in your favor. Defiance-the-virtue is about taking nothing lying down, and refusing to let badnesses in the universe slide.

Defiance isn't about acting petulantly without hesitation: A defiant child might bide their time, knowing that if they act rashly there will be harsh consequences. Defiance is about *resisting the default state of affairs* without hesitation: A defiant child might weigh their options and bide their time, but at no point do they wonder whether they should defy. They simply dislike the situation, and so rebel against it.

Defiance-the-virtue is about having *that* reaction, to something that's wrong in the world.

Of course, there's an art to defying the right things. I do recommend defying death; I don't recommend having the "defi-

ance" reaction against people who tell you to do things in a stern and authoritative voice. People who order you around can either be ignored or obeyed according to the social context, but they aren't usually worth *defying*, except perhaps in situations where you legitimately need to demonstrate that you're not beholden to them, and where gentler reminders have failed.

As a rule of thumb, I suggest that it's usually healthy to have a defiance reaction towards *states of the world*, and usually unhealthy to have a defiance reaction towards *people*.

To illustrate the difference, imagine you're Neo, twenty years after the first matrix movie. The sequels never happened; instead you got trapped in the matrix while one by one, all your connections to the outside world died or disappeared. One day, you lost your grasp on your ability to control the matrix, your abilities slipping through your grasp like lucidity slipping away in a dream. Now you stand atop a skyscraper, looking across the gap at its twin, unable to quite recall what it was like to fly.

You stand there frozen, desperate to recall what you once knew, finding it evasive. Behind you, someone else enters the rooftop and shouts at you over the wind.

"What the hell are you doing, you idiot?" they cry. "Get back from there! Now!"

Defiance-against-a-person would be to feel a burning need to show this person up, show them that you're not beholden to their demands, and possibly do something rash.

Defiance-against-the-world would be to hear this person cry out, and use the impetus to remember what it was you used to know. You would say, "Oh, right. I'm in the matrix." You would remember that the rules and customs of this place do not have dominion over you, no matter what illusions the people around you are taken in by. Your mind would snap back into focus. You would grab what you had forgotten how to grasp, and leap.

(And those with defiance-the-virtue deeply instilled in them don't need the impetus provided by another person to access the mental state — defiance is a property of the relationship between them and the state of the world that they can recall at will, not a property of the relationships between them and others.)

This is the defiance I mean to talk about. It's related to level hopping and skepticism about your limitations. It's related to the skill of measuring your progress not against others, but against what actually happens.

I've been writing a long sequence of posts on how to replace guilt-based motivation with something else. Many people

have remarked to me that my writings on averting guilt seem inspired by Taoism. And: maybe. There are some parallels. But not here, not with defiance.

Defiance is not about coming to terms with the world. It's about looking looking at the world and having the same mental reflexes as the defiant child. It's about the reflexive impulse to say "screw this" and choose self-reliance over hopelessness in the face of problems that are crushingly large. It's about a deep-seated inability to go gently into that good night. It's about being able to look at the terrible social equilibria we're all trapped in and get *pissed off* — not because any individual is evil, but because almost nobody is evil and everything is broken anyway.

Above all, it's about seeing that the world is broken, and *feeling* something akin to "fuck these mortal constraints, I'm *fixing things*."

When the defiant child eats their vegetables with as much spite as is humanly possible, there was never a *thought that crossed their mind* about capitulating to their parents. Petulance was an *automatic response*. They weren't carefully weighing a decision about whether to spite their parents — at best, they may have carefully weighed a decision about whether to get their payback now, overtly; or later, subtly. The defiance was a *reflex*; the fact that they weren't going to submit quietly to authority was never in question.

Defiance-the-virtue is about having the same reflexive response, not towards an authority figure, but towards *the state of a broken world*. It's about making the fact that you struggle to fix broken worlds *automatic and unspoken* — you might weigh your options and bide your time, but you spare no thought for *whether you will struggle*.

I don't know how to teach defiance, but it's one of the keystones of my motivation system. If you want to build yourself a motivation system akin to mine, defiance is an important component.

So this is how I suggest motivating yourself in place of guilt: Let the wrongness of the world trigger something deep inside of you, such that the question stops being whether you will capitulate or lose hope, and becomes *how you will wrest the course of the future onto a different path*. See the current state of affairs as your adversary; see the future as the prize that hangs in the balance. Shake off the illusory constraints, set your jaw, and rebel. Defy.

Allow yourself to be a little reckless. Get a little desperate. Let defiance of the way things are burn in you. Then *act*.