

Best of LessWrong: August 2015

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Why people want to die

Over and over again, someone says that living for a very long time would be a bad thing, and then some futurist tries to persuade them that their reasoning is faulty, telling them that they think that way now, but they'll change their minds when they're older.

The thing is, I don't see that happening. I live in a small town full of retirees, and those few I've asked about it are waiting for death peacefully. When I ask them about their ambitions, or things they still want to accomplish, they have none.

Suppose that people mean what they say. Why do they want to die?

The reason is obvious if you just watch them for a few years. They have nothing to live for. They have a great deal of free time, but nothing they really want to do with it. They like visiting friends and relatives, but only so often. The women knit. The men do yardwork. They both work in their gardens and watch a lot of TV. This observational sample is much larger than the few people I've asked.

You folks on LessWrong have lots of interests. You want to understand math, write stories, create start-ups, optimize your lives.

But face it. You're weird. And I mean that in a bad way, evolutionarily speaking. How many of you have kids?

Damn few. The LessWrong mindset is maladaptive. It leads to leaving behind fewer offspring. A well-adapted human cares above all about sex, love, family, and friends, and isn't distracted from those things by an ADD-ish fascination with type theory. That's why they probably have more sex, love, and friends than you do.

Most people *do not have open-ended interests* the way LWers do. If they have a hobby, it's something repetitive like fly-fishing or needlepoint that doesn't provide an endless frontier for discovery. They marry, they have kids, the kids grow up, they have grandkids, and they're done. If you ask them what the best thing in their life was, they'll say it was having kids. If you ask if they'd do it again, they'll laugh and say absolutely not.

We could get into a long argument over the evolution of aging, and whether people would remain eager to have kids if they remained physically young. Maybe some would. Some would not, though. Many young parents are looking forward to the day their kids leave.

A lot of interests in life are passing. You fall in love with a hobby, you learn it, you do it for a few years, then you get tired of it. The things that were fascinating when you were six hold no magic for you now. Pick up a toy soldier and try to play with it. You can't. Skateboarding seems awesome for about five years, and then everyone except Tony Hawk gets tired of it.

Having kids might be like that for some people. Thing is, it's literally the only thing humans have evolved to be interested in. Once you're tired of that, you're done. If some of you want to keep going, that's an accidental by-product of evolution. And there was no evolutionary pressure to exempt it from the common waning of interest with long exposure.

The way to convert deathists isn't to argue with them, but to get them interested in something. Twist them the way you're twisted.

Less Wrong EBook Creator

I read a lot on my kindle and I noticed that some of the sequences aren't available in book form. Also, the ones that are mostly only have the posts. I personally want them to also include some of the high ranking comments and summaries. So, that is why I wrote this tool to automatically create books from a set of posts. It creates the book based on the information you give it in an excel file. The excel file contains:

Post information

Book name
Sequence name
Title
Link
Summary description

Sequence information

Name
Summary

Book information

Name
Summary

The only compulsory component is the link to the post.

I have used the tool to create books for [Living Luminously](#), [No-Nonsense Metaethics](#), [Rationality: From AI to Zombies](#), [Benito's Guide](#) and more. You can see them in the examples folder in this [github link](#). The tool just creates epub books you can use calibre or a similar tool to convert it to another format.

Below is an FAQ on how to use it. If you have any other questions, let me know.

FAQ:

How can I quickly get the tool running?

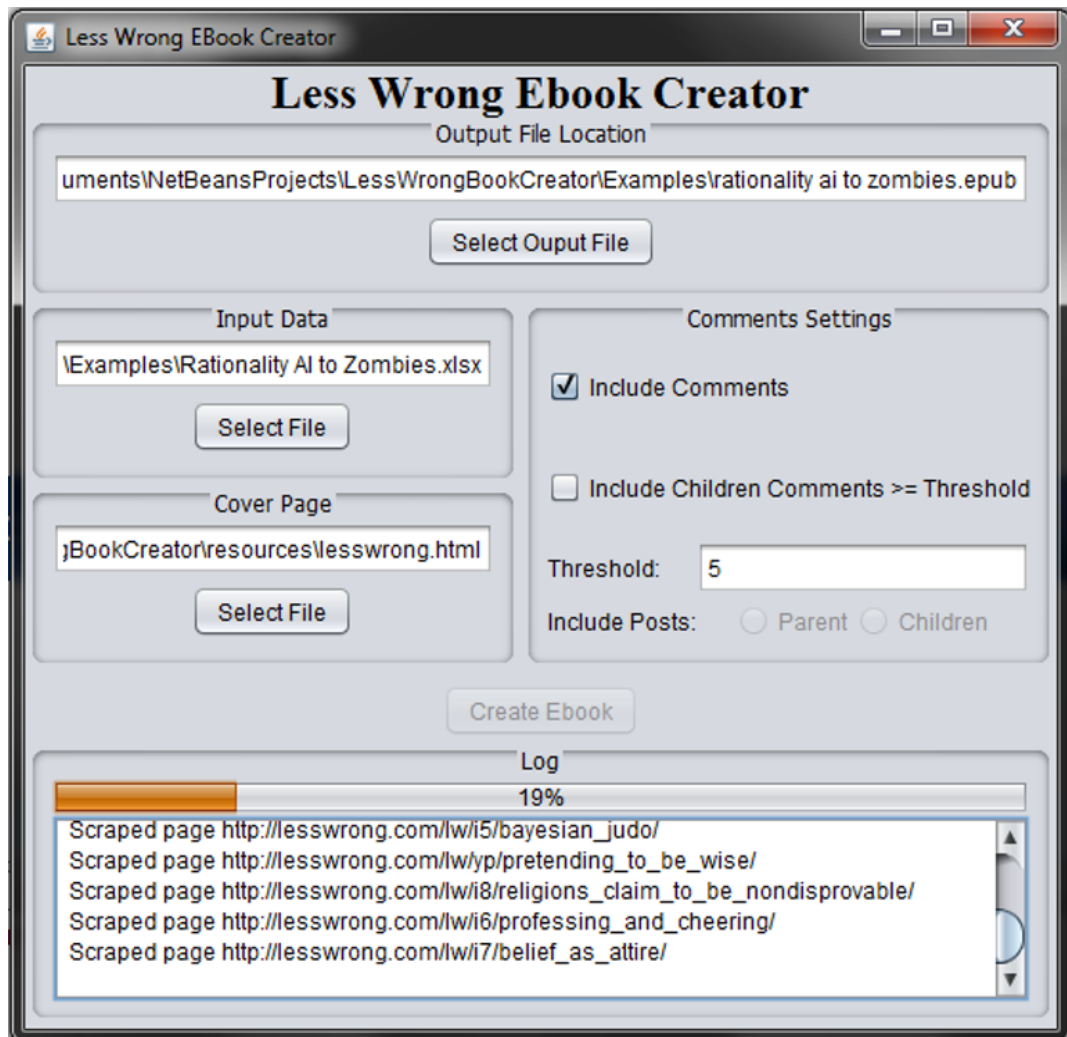
Download the tool from this [dropbox link](#). Copy the jar and the lib folder and then run.

You can use the xlsx files in the examples folder at this [github link](#) for input.

You can use the lesswrong.html file in the resources folder at this [github link](#) for a cover page. If someone wants to create a better cover page, then I will update it.

How does it work?

The below image is an example of the program running.



Descriptions of each of the configurable options are below:

Output File Location - this is where the epub file will be saved

Input Data - this is where the excel file that you want to use as input can be found. The excel file should be in a specific format. You can see examples in the Examples folder in the github location for the format.

Cover page - this is the location of any html file that you want to use as a cover page. Any image files that this html file uses should be in the same folder.

Include comments - this is used to determine whether comments should be included or not

Include children comments >= threshold - this determines whether you only want top posts that are greater or equal to the threshold or whether you want to include children posts that are greater or equal to this threshold as well. For example, if the threshold is five then out of the below comments 1 and 3 would be included if this is checked if it is not checked only comment 1 will be.

Comment 1 7 points

Comment 2 3 points

Comment 3 5 points

Threshold - only comments which have a point score that is greater than or equal to this threshold will be included

Include posts parent - if this is checked than comments 1, 2 and 3 below would be included. This is because comment 3 is greater than or equal to the threshold and comment 1 and 2 are parents of this comment. Only parents of comments greater than or equal to the threshold will be included.

Comment 1 2 points

Comment 2 3 points

Comment 3 5 points

Include posts children - if this is checked than comments 1, 2 and 3 below would be included. This is because comment 1 is greater than or equal to the threshold the other comments are children of a comment that is greater than or equal to the threshold.

Comment 1 7 points

Comment 2 3 points

Comment 3 5 points

What sites can this tool pull posts from

<http://lesswrong.com>

<http://wiki.lesswrong.com>

<http://www.yudkowsky.net>

<http://www.overcomingbias.com/> (includes all comments if comments included)

Do you have some example output of the tool?

See the epub files in the examples folder at this [github link](#)

The example books had the include comments option checked and the threshold was set to 5.

Do you have some example input data that I can use to create epubs?

See the xlsx files in the examples folder at this [github link](#)

Do you have an example cover page that I can use

See the lesswrong.html file in the resources folder at this [github link](#)

Where can I download the tool?

Here is the [dropbox link](#) to the jar file. Copy the jar and the lib folder and then run.

Where can I download the code?

At this [github link](#)

How do I create an input file?

Copy one of the xlsx files in the examples folder at this [github link](#). Update it as appropriate, e.g. change the links to the posts.

Each row in the first sheet defines a post that will be included in the book, its title, a summary to display for this post and which sequence and book it belongs to.

The second and third sheet define the summary to be shown for the sequence and book.

I created or improved some of the input files by adding summaries. Should I share them?

Yes. I haven't written summaries for most of the example excel files. If someone wants to write summaries. then I will then add them to the [github link](#).

I found a problem with the tool or it is not working. What should I do?

Post a comment below and I will look into it.

What does "Parent comment not included" mean?

An example of this is when you have Include children comments \geq threshold set and threshold at 5. If you had the below comments, 1 and 3 would be included, but comment 2 would not be. When you include children comments there is normally a link to the parent comment. However, the parent (comment 2) for comment 3 is not included as its score was less than the threshold. Hence, "parent comment below threshold" indicates that the parent comment was not included. If you do want to include comment 2, then you should recreate the book with the include children or parent option selected.

Comment 1 7 points

Comment2 3 points

Comment 3 5 points

Hasn't someone else already done this?

Yes. See [here](#) for some examples, but I don't think that included any ability to get comments or summaries.

Why is this a separate GUI and not integrated into less wrong?

I was really just writing this for myself and also based on what was said [here](#), also below, it sounds like it should be separate.

Matthew Fallshaw:

Implementing this in the code doesn't seem to be significantly better than implementing an independent scraper, and it increases the amount of code we have to maintain. I think this is **not** a desirable feature.

Travel Through Time to Increase Your Effectiveness

I am a time traveler.

I hold this belief not because it is true, but because it is useful. That it also happens to be true -- we are *all* time travelers, swept along by the looping chrono-currents of reality that only *seem* to flow in one direction -- is largely beside the point.

In the literature of instrumental rationality, I am struck by a pattern in which tips I find useful often involve reframing an issue from a different temporal perspective. For instance, when questioning whether it is worth continuing an ongoing commitment, we are advised to ask ourselves "Knowing what I know now, if I could go back in time, would I make the same choice?"¹ Also, when embarking on a new venture, we are advised to perform a "pre-mortem", imagining ourselves in a future where it didn't pan out and identifying what went wrong.² This type of thinking has a long tradition. Whenever we use visualization as a tool for achieving goals, or for steeling ourselves against the worst case scenarios,³ we are, in a sense, stepping outside the present.

To the degree that intelligence is the ability to model the universe and "[search out paths through probability to any desired future](#)" we should not be surprised that mental time travel comes naturally to us. And to the degree that playing to this strength has already produced so many useful tips, I think it is worth experimenting with it in search of other tools and exploits.

Below are a few techniques I've been developing over the last two years that capitalize on how easy it is to mentally travel through time. I fully admit that they simply "re-skin" existing advice and techniques. But it's possible that you, my fellow traveller, may find, as I do, that these skins easier to slip into.

Second Chances

There are those who tell you to live each day as if it might be your last. I prefer to live each day as if I'm doing it over.

These philosophies could not be more different. The first invites short-sightedness, and, if followed to its logical conclusion, results in each day being worse than the one preceding it, as you burn bridges and fail to act on any longer-term goals. The second philosophy, in contrast, invites you to optimize for mindfulness, growth, or productivity based on the circumstances of the day and its relation to all subsequent days.

I am doing today over. I trust that there is some reason I chose to go back in time to today specifically. In this particular case, I came back to write this article -- an article which, in a prior version of the future, never got written. How much sadder, that other future. What an opportunity I have to improve on it! In the grand scheme of things, whatever else I might have done today must not have really mattered; that must be why I picked *today*. But this article... this could really make a difference in someone's life! No wonder I burned out a star to power the machine that took me back to this

moment. (It helps to imagine that the choice to come back was taken after much deliberation, and at great expense.)

So today might be all about productivity. But most of the last two weeks I did over again with a focus on *growth*. You see, I wasn't ready for the prior version of the future -- the one where I brought my best knowledge and skills to bear, but still fell short. So I did those days over. I studied. I trained. Then I studied and trained some more. Maybe this time it will be enough.

Other days have been more about [mindfulness](#). I've always had a difficult time being "in the moment" during times I hope to be able to look back on fondly. I can be prickly and impatient at weddings, for example. On vacations, I fret about the money I'm spending, and worry about the home I've left unattended. On such days, it helps to imagine that I've chosen to come back to this day and really *appreciate* it this time -- to soak in the beauty of the of my surroundings, to relish the functionality of my still-youthful body, to feel the warm presence of my loved ones, to fully imprint the memory of the smile on my daughters face. More than appreciate the day, I want to *master* it, with Bill Murray-like panache, [Groundhog Day style](#). I want to grab my wife's hand, and, at just the right moment, tell her I love her in a way that makes her know I *mean* it.

I don't have to limit myself to the coarse grain of an entire *day*. Most days actually have a mix of purposes. Whenever I'm driving a car, the purpose of the moment is to prevent getting that ticket or getting into that accident -- you know, the one that happened in the prior version of that commute. How embarrassed was my future self! To think that I had thought that going a little bit faster mattered in the slightest, or that the notifications on my phone couldn't wait until I got home. How lucky I am to be able to fix things this time around, and with such trivial changes to my behavior.⁴

Split Selves

I think that much of our stress and akrasia come from feeling overwhelmed by what the future requires of us. We find it hard to write chapter 4 because the thought of still having to write chapters 5 through 36 terrifies. If you don't trust yourself to stick with the program tomorrow, there's no point in working on it today. The fear becomes self-fulfilling.

Much has been written about the importance of building up habits that allow you to trust yourself. While I agree that those are important, my confidence comes from a different place: the place next to my time machine where I keep my cloning vats.

At an undisclosed location outside of time, there is a version of myself who notices when I have chosen a goal that requires reliable performance over an extended period. This self then runs an integrity check and, provided the task does not seem *prima facie* unrealistic given our capabilities, replicates us as many times as there are days needed to complete the task. Each clone is sent to a specific day.

I am one of these clones. I don't need to worry about whether I will follow through on my commitments beyond today, because that's not my job. Someone else is handling that. I am TodayMe, and if I follow through on my portion of the task, then I can trust that TomorrowMe -- who is, after all, *identical* -- will also do his part. And so on.⁵

This is how the 2,000+ anki cards for my [classroom spaced repetition](#) effort got written last year.

Bobbling

A "bobble", to the uninitiated, is a type of stasis sphere central to Vernor Vinge's novels [The Peace War](#) and [Marooned in Realtime](#). Anyone or anything inside a bobble experiences no passage of time until the bobble bursts at some specified future time determined at the bobble's creation. The experience of being bobbled is one of instantly finding oneself in that future.

What I call *bobbling* is a specific variation of the Split Selves technique, one that I find to be of use with tasks that are hard to get into and stay focused on, as writing often is. It's really just a role-playing wrapper for the [timeboxing](#) method of your choice (i.e. The Pomodoro Technique).

In its most elaborate form, bobbling works like this:

It's almost 5:00. I'm going to make a jump to 6:30. From my perspective, I will blink 90 minutes into a future where *someone* has done 90 minutes of work on my project -- someone with exactly the same brains and skills as me, but much more focused.

There are some restrictions: I cannot have any specific expectations about what that 90 minutes of progress will produce; I just have to trust it will be at least as much progress as I myself could have made in that time. Also, the task has to be one that I myself wouldn't mind or have trouble doing if I didn't live in realtime, with all its anxieties and distractions.

Before I make the jump, I'm going to make some preparations. It's bad to jump on a full bladder or an empty stomach.⁶ It also wouldn't do for anyone to find out that I'm mucking with time, so I'd better do what I can to make sure I'll be left alone. I close the door...

Do you ever have dreams that you're not completely in? Where there is thought but not self? Just ideas coalescing, cohering, constructing... Words becoming sentences, sentences becoming paragraphs, revising and rearranging... There is no outside world. There is no world at all. Only a sphere of focus floating on ripples of reflection in an aether sea where time has no meaning.

A timer beeps somewhere. 6:30? I thought it was 5:00.⁷ Oh yeah, I must have bobbled. It can be disorienting.

Hey, look at all this progress someone left. Hmm... [shifty eyes]... Guess I'll just take credit for this [shuffling papers up]...

One way to look at bobbling is that you're forking off a temporary version of yourself who ignores the passage of time and forgets all cares beyond the task at hand. As the forked self, it doesn't matter how long it takes to "spool up" and get through the "ugh field" surrounding the task, because time is meaningless inside the bobble. It takes what it takes and that's that.

This is how much of my fiction and code gets written. And how my tax returns get completed.

The Past, Interrupted

Context shifting carries costs. We are more productive when we can play a single role for an extended period without interruption. But sometimes it can't be helped. You need to get back to what you were doing and pick up where you left off. Hours ago. Days. Weeks. This is difficult because what you were doing just *seconds* ago is still running through your head.

Let it go.

When you last stopped doing the older task that you now need to resume, you created a Restore Point. Everything you've done since then has been a different Save file. Now it's time to suspend this present self and re-load your past self. If there's something you need to write down, do it... but you have to shut the present self down *completely* because you can't run two versions of yourself at once. Just do it quickly and efficiently, and don't feel bad about it. When it's time to go back to the newer self, you *will*, wholeheartedly, with that same zeal that you are now reverting to the past. It's going to be *ok*.

You are now the past self. Everything else was an irrelevant interruption.

Case Study: The Sleeper

Sleep is super important, so let me tell you about an increasingly old version of myself I call The Sleeper. The Sleeper has been trying to get a really good night's sleep since March of 2014. But something always happens. The sun comes up. An alarm goes off. And the sleeper keeps getting Suspended for 16 hours or so. So cranky is The Sleeper!

You see, I have always had trouble falling asleep, tossing and turning for 30-60 minutes most nights. But *staying* asleep and *going back to* sleep have never been problems. And there's nothing more satisfying than having an alarm go off on a Saturday, realizing that I can turn it off, and going back to bed.

So I no longer go to sleep every night. I only go *back to* sleep, by suspending my present self, loading up the The Sleeper and thinking, "Lousy stupid *day* interrupting my sleep. [Grumble grumble]. Now, where was I?...[snore]"

It's such a stupid-sounding hack, I know, but it works amazingly well for me. Your mileage may vary. For reference, I'm biologically a night owl.

Toward a More Excellent Future

In the 1989 cinematic masterpiece, *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*, the titular time-traveling protagonists find themselves in the clutches of the San Dimas police department. They escape this "bogus" predicament by committing to use their time machine in the future to arrange the details of their escape. From [IMDB](#):

[Captain Logan](#): [Captain Logan sees Bill and Ted pushing Billy the Kid out of the prison block window] Ted, what in the hell do you think you're doing?

[Ted](#): Trash can... remember a trash can!

[Captain Logan](#): Trash can? What are you talking about...

[a trash can with "Wyld Stallyans Rule" written on the side lands on Captain Logan's head]

It stands to reason that they did not leave their future behavior to chance. If possible, they probably used their machine as soon as they escaped. If not, they probably left themselves detailed notes and reminders. Whatever they did, it obviously worked. They made good on their commitments. This is *excellence*.

Successful time travel is all about bringing our past, present, and future selves into a cooperative alignment. They need to trust each other. They need to communicate. Sometimes, we need to prepare things in the present and send messages into the future. Sometimes, we have to envision different futures to provide direction to the present. Sometimes, we need to honor the past.

I wrote an initial draft of this article more than 18 months ago. I was eager to finish it and post it to Discussion with my freshly created LW account. But I knew that the article would improve with time and experience, after I had tested the ideas more and accumulated clearer examples. Perhaps, I thought, it could even become worthy of posting to Main.

So to my draft I added some notes, links, and questions. I asked my my future selves to revisit the file, and also to accumulate enough LW karma to gain Main-posting privileges.

If I may now indulge myself with a message to my past: "Here's that trash can you ordered, dude."

Party on.

Exercises

Second Chances

- Imagine that your future self made great sacrifices to come back and do today over. Figure out what today was *for*, and get it *right* this time.
- When struggling to feel fully present in a moment you wish to be able to look back on fondly, imagine that you have come back from the future solely to appreciate this singular occasion.
- When performing a dangerous activity (i.e. driving), imagine that you have traveled back in time to prevent the accident you were otherwise going to have today.

Split Selves & Bobbling

- When working on a task that requires consistent long-term output, imagine that you are a clone whose only concern is the portion of the task that has to be completed today. Other clones will handle other days, because they are identical to you.
- When struggling to make headway on a task requiring focused attention:
 1. Imagine blinking forward 1-4 hours into a future where that much work has been done on it.

2. Create conditions where a version of yourself could avoid all distractions during that window, and start a timer.
3. Enjoy role-playing a time-insensitive version of your mind for whom nothing exists but the intellectual world of the task.

The Past, Interrupted

- When needing to perform a dramatic task shift:
 1. Write down any thoughts you are afraid of losing from your current context.
 2. Completely dump the contents your current working memory without *any* reservations.
 3. Imagine that you are now the prior self who last worked on the “new” (old) task.
- If you’re struggling to fall asleep, role-play a version of yourself who was sleeping soundly but was interrupted by something temporary. Go *back* to sleep.

Toward a More Excellent Future

- Imagine a cool future outcome that is inevitable because you’ve returned to carry out the requisite steps. Enjoy the sense of excellence that comes from being one with your past, present, and future.

¹Cialdini, [Influence](#)

²Klein, [Harvard Business Review](#) (and many other writers in different places)

³Vika [has written about this](#) on LessWrong fairly recently.

⁴I feel like Eliezer or someone else may have articulated a version of that driving mindset somewhere else on LW, but I have been unable to locate it. My apologies if I am forgetting to credit someone.

⁵I will leave the relevant analysis of decision theory in Newcomblike scenarios to others.

⁶I am aware that a true bobble would have no such restrictions. My methods are not purely Vingean.

⁷You might reasonably ask what a clock is doing inside my bobble at all. Wouldn't it break the illusion? I answer that, in the bobbed mindset, the clock is less a chronological tracker than a device that randomly shows different combinations of digits, one of which will burst the bobble. It is not showing them in an order that necessarily brings this combination *closer*. The clock is more akin to a pair of dice that someone keeps rolling until it comes up snake-eyes and an alarm goes off. Time is meaningless here. Keep working.

Where could's go

This is a linkpost for <https://mindingourway.com/where-coulds-go/>

Most people don't think they "could" cure Alzheimers by snapping their fingers, and so they don't feel terrible about failing to do this.

By contrast, people who fail to resist overeating, or who fail to stop playing Civilization at a reasonable hour, feel strongly that they "could have" resisted, and take this as a license to feel terrible about their decisions.

As I said [last week](#), most people have broken "could's."

Willpower is scarce in this world. Sometimes, you can will yourself out of a mental rut you're in, but only rarely; more often, sheer force of will alone is not sufficient. If your plan to stop staying up too late playing Civilization is "well I'll just force myself harder next time," then this plan is doomed to failure. If it didn't work last time, it likely won't work next time. [Willpower is a stopgap, not a remedy.](#)

I think that most people's "could's" are broken because they put the action nodes in the wrong place. They think that the "choice" occurred at turn 347 of Civilization, when they decided to continue playing one more round (and at each following turn between midnight and 4:00 in the morning).

But that's not where the choice occurred. If you have to force yourself to change your behavior, then you've already missed the real choice node.

The actual choice occurs when you decide *whether to play Civilization or not*, at the very beginning.

Say you have one acquaintance in your social circles who regularly frustrates you, and every so often, you explode at them and get into a big shouting match. You *know* you shouldn't start yelling at them, you *try* to not be frustrated. Whenever they start annoying you, you *will* yourself to cool down, but it never quite works (no matter how strongly you resolve to force yourself harder next time). In this case, I suggest that you stop trying to force yourself to hold back as your frustration peaks, and instead start noticing what happens *five minutes before* you explode. *That's* where the real choice is. The real choice isn't in whether or not you explode *in the moment*, it's in whether you exit the situation five minutes earlier.

The real choices tend to happen a few minutes before the choices that people beat themselves up about. If you have to apply willpower, you've already missed the choice node. (In fact, I've previously suggested promising yourself that you'll [never pull yourself out of a situation using willpower](#) — knowing that you *won't* save your own ass if you get into a situation where you need willpower to extract yourself really makes you notice the true point of no return when it comes along.)

If you find yourself in a pattern of behavior you don't like, then I recommend pretending you don't have *any* willpower. Imagine you lived in the world where you *couldn't* force yourself to stop doing something addicting after starting. In that world, how would you act?

Look for the triggers that precede the action you wish you could make differently. What happens an hour beforehand? What happens five minutes beforehand? What happens sixty seconds before you fail to act as you wish?

That's where the real choice lies.

Most people's coulds are broken. They treat themselves like they "could" start bingeing a TV show and then stop at a reasonable hour. They put themselves in a situation that tempts them against their better judgement, and then berate themselves when they succumb.

By contrast, I don't treat myself as if I "could" stop binge-reading a good book, and therefore I don't feel terrible if I binge. Instead, I say, "ah, I see, I binge-read engaging books; I will treat 'read an engaging book' as a single atomic action that takes five to twenty hours, with no choice nodes in between." Where others are berating themselves for failing to complete an impossible task ("stop binge-reading halfway through and get back to real work"), I am learning what I am and am not capable of, and learning where my real action nodes are.

We humans don't *have* all the choice nodes. Sometimes, we can't stop binge-reading a good book anymore than we could snap our fingers to cure Alzheimer's disease. Sometimes, addiction takes over; other times, the lizard brain takes over; other times, primal rage takes over. In those moments, we don't get to call the shots. We aren't the choice-makers at every point in our lives. We often lack the willpower to override our impulses, instincts, and habits.

The goal is to win anyway.

Our better judgement is not the absolute arbiter of our actions, and there are often times when the voice of judgement is nearly powerless to affect our behavior. We [aren't yet gods](#). We're still monkeys. Still neural nets.

I suggest you stop berating yourself for failing to complete impossible tasks, and start experimenting and identifying which action nodes *work*.

Search for the choices that let you act as you wish *before* the decision gets difficult to execute. Learn how to identify the moments when your mind is readily responding to your will. Those are the real choice-points, and it is from there that you may optimize.

Self compassion

This is a linkpost for <https://mindingourway.com/self-compassion/>

Imagine a time when you were feeling guilt-wracked. Maybe a time you [hurt a friend badly](#). Maybe a time you tried to do get some important work done, and found you couldn't, and this kicked off a failure spiral leading to a deep depression. Maybe some other time: the important thing is to load into memory a time you felt guilt-wracked, and recall how you felt towards yourself in that case.

(When I do this, I get an internal sense of resistance, of not-wanting-to-look, of willing-the-past-to-be-different.)

Now imagine you have a child, who grows to the same age that you were then, who finds themselves in exactly the same situation. Maybe they, too, hurt somebody badly -- they didn't consciously realize how badly they were about to hurt a friend until one moment too late, and now they feel terrible. Or maybe they, too, tried to do something important, and found it hard, and started doubting themselves, and spiraled downwards into a depression that they now have trouble climbing out of.

Imagine what you might feel towards your child, in this scenario.

(When I do this, I get a sense of compassion, of protectiveness, and a desire to reassure them that this is what it looks like to learn hard lessons, for [us monkeys](#).)

I encourage you to simulate the feelings you would feel towards your child in this situation —

— and then check whether you can *also* feel that way towards *yourself*.

When you think of your own failings, can you feel that compassion and protectiveness and impulse to reassure towards *you*?

Many can't. Some don't feel compassion towards others in the first place (this post is not for them — if you want help feeling compassion towards your fellow humans, then maybe try [this post](#) and see if it works for you.) Others can as easily feel compassion for themselves as others. But many people I've spoken to experience a wide gulf between compassion for others and self-compassion — which is a shame, because self-compassion is an important part of self-loyalty and the mental toolset I'm trying to convey with these posts.

To close the gap between compassion and self-compassion, I offer two tools. The first is a reminder that self-compassion is not the same thing as self-pity, and nor is it the same thing as making excuses for yourself. It is well possible to feel self-compassion even while thinking that you are not moving fast enough. It is perfectly possible to feel self-compassion even as you notice that you're completely failing to act as you wish to.

For example, imagine someone going through boot camp in World War II, filled with resolve and determination to become a soldier and defend the free world — except they are a small person, and a weak one. Imagine them working their heart out, trying as hard as they can, and failing anyway. Imagine them failing to make the cut. Now,

can you imagine feeling compassion for them, feeling warmth towards them, and maybe feeling a hint of sadness for their loss, without feeling any sense of pity? Compassion for yourself can be similar, without any hint of pity.

Or imagine another person going through the same boot camp, who really wants to go defend the free world with all their peers (on some level), but who lacks the deep drive. They *want* to feel the same passion and fire as their diminutive counterpart, but instead they feel resistance and suffer from depression — and every day they drag themselves out of bed (slightly too late), and every day they force themselves through the obstacle courses (but not quickly enough), and they aren't going to make the cut, and they're sick with guilt about it. Can you imagine feeling compassion for them in their plight, while making absolutely no excuses for their performance? Again, self-compassion can be the same way. You don't need to make excuses for yourself, to take the outside view and feel the same warmth for a monkey that's *trying* to try, against the gradient of depression and doubt.

Now imagine someone else doing what you're trying to do. Imagine them working on hard problems, and putting in what effort they can muster — sometimes it is enough, sometimes it isn't; sometimes they are highly motivated, other times they are blocked by their own mind and unable to act as they wish. Look at them and see the fragile monkey trying to build a satisfactory life, trying to improve their world. See if you can feel compassion for them. You don't need to pity them, you don't need to make excuses for their failures, you don't need to find ways they could improve: simply see if you can feel some warmth, for a fellow lost monkey — and then shift your gaze to yourself, and see if you can feel a similar sort of warmth.

The second tool I offer, to close the gap between compassion for others and compassion for yourself, is this: I recommend that you pinch yourself, and remember what you are. Practice [original seeing](#) while looking upon yourself and your situation. What do you see?

I see bundles of proteins and lipids arranged in a giant colony of cells, their lives given over to the implementation of a wet protein computer that thinks it's a person.

I see fractal patterns that arise on precisely the right sort of planet when you pour sunlight into it for a billion years.

I see wiggles in the Sun's wake that struggle to understand the universe. Incomprehensibly large constructs made of atoms, which are unnoticeably small on the scale of galaxies.

Look at us, the first species among the animals that can figure out what the stars are, yet still tightly bound to impulse and social pressure. (Notice how silly it is, monkeys acting all serious and wise as they try to affect the course of history.)

Look at us: half monkey, half god; towering below the stars.

Look at whatever quest you've taken on, you who was forged by the death of your father's brothers and now claims dominion over the future. Acknowledge that what you're trying to do is difficult. Turn the [monkey sight](#) on yourself, and see the lost monkey who's trying to steer an entire universe...

and say hello. Check in with the monkey. See how it's doing.

Steering the future is a difficult thing. The world is large beyond comprehension, and the monkey wasn't really built for this. The monkey isn't really used to this sort of thing, and it can be pretty hard to work with sometimes.

Let the monkey know that you have its back. Let it know that you'll still have its back, even if it gets ornery or difficult or depressed. Through thick and thin, let you know that you have your support; that even when you screw everything, you'll stand by yourself, and help you through the mess, and help you figure out how to do better in the future.

See if you can resolve to work with yourself. You can do powerful things, if you work together.

There are no "bad people"

This is a linkpost for <https://mindingourway.com/there-are-no/>

When I help friends debug their intrinsic motivation, here's a pattern I often bump into:

Well, if I don't actually start working soon, then I'll be a bad person.

Or, even more worrying:

Well they wanted me to just buckle down and do the work, and I really didn't want to do it then, which means that either they were bad, or I was bad. And I didn't want to be the bad one bad, so I got angry at them, and...

I confess, I do not know what it would mean for somebody to be a "bad person." I do know what it means for somebody to be bad at achieving the goals they set for themselves. I do know what it means for someone to be good at pursuing goals that I dislike. I have no idea what it would mean for a person to "be bad."

I know what it means for a person to lack skill in a specific area. I know what it means for a person to be procrastinating. I know what it means for a person to be acting under impulses that they don't endorse, such as spite or disgust. I know what it means for someone to fail to act as they wish to act. I know what it means for someone to hurt other people, either on purpose or with a feeling of helpless resignation.

But I don't know what it would mean for a person to "be bad." That fails to parse. People don't have a hidden stone deep inside their brain that is either green or red depending on whether they are good or bad. "Badness" is not a fundamental property that a person can have. At best, "they're bad" can be shorthand for either "I don't want their goals achieved" or "they are untrained in a number of skills which would be relevant to the present situation"; but in all cases, "they are bad" must be either shorthand or nonsense.

Asking whether a person is "fundamentally good" or "fundamentally bad" is a type error. Life is not a quest where you struggle to wind up "good." That's not the sort of reality we find ourselves in.

Rather, we find ourselves embedded in a vast universe, with control over the future and a goal of making it wonderful. We find ourselves to be part of a grand deterministic pattern, and we're trying to make that pattern as beautiful as possible.

Step back and imagine history as a fixed path through the great crystal that is our universe over all time; the time-crystal that describes everything everywhere and everywhen; the time-crystal where you can look not only forwards and backwards, but beforewards and afterwards. Imagine the path of history that dances through configurations to the tune of physics. That same physics, according to which the line jigs and jags, is what implements you. In those jigs and jags is the pattern that is your mind. Some of the jigs compute your thoughts, some of the jags compute your choices, and your choices determine how the line dances in the afterwards direction past the event of your choice.

We aren't here to alter the color of the fundamental "goodness" stone buried within us; we're here to make the path through time be a good one.

Life is not a game of "wind up good at the end"; life is about steering the future.

Look not to whether you are good or bad. Look to where you are, and what you can do from there.

Living this mindset does not mean that you lack regrets. It does not free you from the burdens of your wrongdoings. I, like anyone, suffer from recalling harms that I have done to others. But instead of treating those recollections as dark judgements on my soul, I treat them as [messages from my past](#), information about what sorts of undesirable behavior the Nate-monkey is liable to execute if I am not careful.

I sometimes find myself unable to act as I wish; unresponsive to my own cajoling. I treat these not as evidence of my fundamental brokenness, but as evidence about [how and when I can intervene on the world](#).

While I often fail, I do not act under fear of being judged inadequate by the universe. I may *be* inadequate to the tasks I undertake, I may fail to steer the future as I wish to, but I cannot be "fundamentally bad." That sentence does not parse.

There is something freeing about this: I may succeed; I may fail; but I will not be judged by someone who roots through my mind to see whether the stone is green or red.

I will be judged only by the path that the future takes; as will we all.

By contrast, when I help friends debug their motivation, I often find them motivated by a desperate attempt to avoid "being bad."

Where I can, I encourage them not to let that be at the core of what motivates them. It's well and good, when introspecting about why what you're doing is important, to get an answer from yourself that is of the form "otherwise I'll be bad." That's a fine answer to get. But *don't let that be the end of things*. Don't pretend that that's the final answer. *Investigate*.

Ask yourself, "what do I mean by that?" Say to yourself, "I bet that's shorthand for something." *Unpack* the feeling of would-be-bad.

If someone wants you to do the laundry, and you don't want to do the laundry, and you get angry at them because you have a sense that if there is conflict then one of you must be bad and *you* don't want to be bad—

—then pause, and investigate further.

Focus, and ask yourself what bad thing would happen if you did do the laundry, and what bad thing would happen if you didn't.

Maybe you get an answer like "if I don't do the laundry then it will strain my relationship with my friend, but if I do do the laundry then it will spend scarce energy and attention and I'm feeling really exhausted and don't want to force myself to do it."

That's great! (The answer doesn't need to be *comfortable*, it just needs to be *unpacked*. You may well reveal conflicting desires. You may well find that you were ignoring goals that you had but didn't endorse, such as preserving your own attention or energy.) This is a similar mental action to [unpacking a should](#): if you find yourself compelled to do something because otherwise you'd "be bad," then become curious, investigate, and unpack the feeling into its component parts.

Ask yourself, "I don't know what it would mean to be bad; can you elaborate?"

Then, *listen to yourself*. Don't worry if your answers seem senseless! Often, I have watched people completely fail to figure out what is blocking them, because as soon as they get an answer from deep inside their mind, they declare that it's ridiculous, and then they struggle to dismiss it or cover it up or decry it as "irrational."

Perhaps they ask themselves what they mean by "then I'd be bad" and find something like "I apparently think that if I don't do the laundry then it's evidence that I can't do *anything*, and that means I'll lose my job and end up on the street and die cold and alone, and that's *stupid*, so..." at which point they start lecturing themselves about why their concerns are dumb, instead of [declaring self-loyalty](#) and standing by themselves. (If you find yourself doing this, I suggest taking your concerns seriously, and explaining your different beliefs earnestly, with the same respect you'd show an inquisitive child who wants to understand the world but has a few flaws in their understanding.)

[You're still a monkey](#)! You often have inconsistent, strange preferences. Parts of you often have beliefs that other parts of you don't endorse. That's *ok*. Decrying your own inconsistencies is no way to fix them: work with yourself.

So don't settle for being motivated to do something because otherwise you'd "be bad." Unpack the feeling of "being bad," and figure out what outcomes you're aiming for. Figure out what you want to *do*. Figure out how you want the future to *be*.

Because at the end of the day, a person "being bad" fails to parse. "Goodness" and "badness" are not properties of people. People can do terrible things; they can pursue horrible goals; they can watch with growing despair as they act against their own best interests; but they do not have a fundamental stone buried deep inside of them which measures their worth.

Life is not a game of "wind up good at the end." Life is about steering the future.

Not yet gods

This is a linkpost for <https://mindingourway.com/not-yet-gods/>

You probably don't feel guilty for failing to snap your fingers in just such a way as to produce a cure for Alzheimer's disease.

Yet, many people *do* feel guilty for failing to work until they drop every single day (which is [a psychological impossibility](#)). They feel guilty for failing to magically abandon behavioral patterns they dislike, without practice or retraining (which is [a cognitive impossibility](#)). What gives?

The difference, I think, is that people think they "couldn't have" snapped their fingers and cured Alzheimer's, but they think they "could have" used better cognitive patterns. This is where a lot of the damage lies, I think:

Most people's "coulds" are broken.

People think that they "could have" avoided anxiety at that one party. They think they "could have" stopped playing Civilization at a reasonable hour and gone to bed. They think they "could have" stopped watching House of Cards between episodes. I'm not making a point about the illusion of free will, here — I think there *is* a sense in which we "could" do certain things that we do not in fact do. Rather, my point is that most people have a miscalibrated idea of what they could or couldn't do.

People berate themselves whenever their brain fails to be engraved with the cognitive patterns that they wish it was engraved with, as if they had complete dominion over their own thoughts, over the patterns laid down in their heads. As if they weren't a network of neurons. As if they could choose their preferred choice in spite of their cognitive patterns, rather than recognizing that choice *is* a cognitive pattern. As if they were supposed to *choose* their mind, rather than *being* their mind.

As if they were already gods.

We aren't gods.

Not yet.

We're still monkeys.

Almost everybody is a total mess internally, as best as I can tell. Almost everybody struggles to act as they wish to act. Almost everybody is psychologically fragile, and can be put into situations where they do things that they regret — overeat, overspend, get angry, get scared, get anxious. We're monkeys, and we're fairly fragile monkeys at that.

So you don't need to beat yourself up when you miss your targets. You don't need to berate yourself when you fail to act exactly as you wish to act. Acting as you wish doesn't happen for free, it only happens after tweaking the environment and training your brain. You're still a monkey!

Don't berate the monkey. *Help* it, whenever you can. It wants the same things you want — it's you. Assist, don't badger. Figure out how to make it easy to act as you wish. Retrain the monkey. Experiment. Try things.

And be kind to it. It's trying pretty hard. The monkey doesn't know exactly how to get what it wants yet, because it's embedded in a really big complicated world and it doesn't get to see most of it, and because a lot of what it does is due to a dozen different levels of subconscious cause-response patterns that it has very little control over. It's *trying*.

Don't berate the monkey just because it stumbles. [We didn't exactly pick the easiest of paths.](#) We didn't exactly set our sights low. [The things we're trying to do are hard.](#) So when the monkey runs into an obstacle and falls, help it to its feet. Help it practice, or help it train, or help it execute the next clever plan on your list of ways to overcome the obstacles before you.

One day, we may gain more control over our minds. One day, we may be able to choose our cognitive patterns at will, and effortlessly act as we wish. One day, we may become more like the creatures that many wish they were, the imaginary creatures with complete dominion over their own minds many rate themselves against.

But we aren't there yet. We're not gods. We're still monkeys.