

Commonplace book

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

We all want to be better people, shout at the kids less often, get some perspective at work and call our friends and family more. We have a picture of a better version of ourselves but we're still fallible, lazy, tired and busy. Best intentions fall away and we forget our better selves. To make our jobs a little easier we can listen to Marcus Aurelius who tells us that without a goal we can't live consistently (cf. 3.21). Thinking about the sort of qualities we want to show is a great first step but we need a little more help. Thinking about the sort of person we want to be and looking closely at the qualities they embody we can come up with a consistent goal, a set of high or even unattainable targets. Even with our goal, we'll still fail.

Badly. But to get us through the tough spots we're going to get help from philosophers, deities, sportsmen, fictional characters, artists and other people far smarter than us.

The hope here is that we can turn to this "manual" for help at times when we're losing our way, forgetting what's important to us and the promises we've made about the sort of person we want to become.

The set of qualities we're looking to develop here are inspired in part by the Modern Virtues page from the School of Life ¹, the majority of content is helpful quotes and aphorisms. Anything useful you find in these pages will be directly attributable to them.

Good luck, and live well.

¹<http://thephilosophersmail.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Ten-Virtues.pdf>

CHAPTER 2

Action

Without action of some kind our plans for improvement simply won't get very far. We need to look at the mammoth task in front of us and take that scary first step (and then the next). Taking action isn't always easy and choosing the right move (cf. 2.13) at the right time (cf. 5.2) can be stupefyingly hard. The hope is though that we won't be paralysed and we will make an impact on the things important to us.

We won't be successful all the time (in particular I'm not even be successful much of the time) but by persevering (cf. 2.8 and 7.36) we can chip away at the

habits (and even relationships (cf. 3.3)) that are slowing us down or even undoing good progress we've already made.

We need to remember what's important to us. Remember how much time we have and how we choose to spend it. Marcus often looks at how little life he's been allotted (and how much he thinks he has left) and it's a good reminder for people like us to just get on with it.

We also need to remember that people will see where we spend our time and the choices made. No matter what we say they will believe what they see (and don't see).

Action may not always bring happiness, but
without action there is none

Benjamin Disraeli

Each of us lives only now in this brief instant.
The rest has been lived already or is impossible
to see

Marcus Aurelius

Do what nature demands. Get a move on if
you have it in you and don't worry whether
anyone will give you any credit for it. And
don't go expecting Plato's "Republic" either,
just be satisfied with even the smallest progress

Marcus Aurelius

Action expresses priority

Mahatma Gandhi

Fac aut tace

Do or be silent

Code wins

Demonstrate don't explicate

Robert Greene

Quality is not an act. It is a habit.

Aristotle

How you do anything is how you
do everything

Ryan Holiday

If I cannot do great things I can do
small things in a great way

Martin Luther King Jr.

Stick to what's in front of you;
Idea, action, utterance

Marcus Aurelius

It's amazing what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit

Harry S Truman

To think is easy
To act is hard
But the hardest thing of all is to
act in accordance with your think-
ing

John Von Goethe

When you come to a fork in the
road, take it

Yogi Bera

CHAPTER 3

Focus

As hard as it can be to take action, it can be even harder to maintain the level of focus we need to on the right things. We're too polite putting ourselves and our priorities to one side to avoid offending people (cf. 3.2 and 7.22), we make great gains on Twitter and Facebook while we let our Amazing Book Idea gather dust (cf. 3.11) and spend hours mindlessly scrolling around crappy journalism when we could be reading an immersive novel (cf. 6.1) or working on our supposedly beloved hobby (cf. 4.1). Epictetus reminds us that we need to gut things from our lives which take us away from the serious and important business of improvement. We can be sure that nothing truly terrible will happen if we stop

using social media and watching 24 hour rolling news with repeats every 25 minutes or so. We can be supremely confident that life will carry on if we leave the "mind numbing spirit crushing game shows¹" to someone else. There are so many ways to spend the time we have, we need to be careful not to waste it and that can require significant effort. Consistently asking ourselves whether what we're doing right now is truly important to us (cf. 3.13) will be exhausting but ultimately incredibly valuable. Maybe we should call someone who's important to us and focus solely on that for starters. Let's take 15 minutes. The advice and guidance on the next few pages will still be here when we get back.

¹Renton, *Trainspotting*

Call your mom

Don't spend time with people you
don't like

Prue Leith

You are whatever the company you
keep is

Lord Chesterfield

Let your mind dwell on examples
of honor

Cicero

Steer clear of lifers, the toxic and charlatans.
You become who you know

Ryan Holiday

Never wrestle with pigs, you both get dirty
and the pig likes it

cf.
3.16

George Bernard Shaw

You can do anything.
but you can't do everything.

cf.
3.11

David Allen

Reaching your true potential involves choice.
How exactly you choose to excel is up to you

Brian Colbert

No random actions, none not based on under-
lying principles

Marcus Aurelius

If you're not doing what you love, you're wasting your time

Billy Joel

You're better off not giving the
small things more time than they
deserve

Marcus Aurelius

Slow down and remember this;
Most things make no difference.
Being busy is a form of laziness.
Lazy thinking and indiscriminate
action.

cf. 3.13

Tim Ferriss

See: efficacy hacks² and a not to do list³.

²<http://bit.ly/1EDPjUQ>

³<http://bit.ly/1EDPu2H>

If you seek tranquillity, do less
or (more accurately) do what's essential
because most of what we
say and do is not essential
Ask yourself at every moment "is
this necessary?"

Marcus Aurelius

If you wish to improve, be content
to appear clueless or stupid in ex-
traneous matters

Epictetus

Hard work is simply the refuge of
people how have nothing better to
do

Oscar Wilde

Never try to teach a pig to sing.
It wastes time and annoys the pig.

cf. 3.6

Robert Heinlein

Parkinson's Law:

A task will swell in (perceived) importance and complexity in relation to the time allocated for its completion.

And so I'll treat them as the law that binds us requires.

With kindness and with justice.

And the inconsequential things?

I'll do my best to treat them as they deserve.

The cucumber is bitter?
The throw it out.
There are brambles in the path?
Then go around them

cf. 3.2

Marcus Aurelius

Four habits to watch for.

Ask yourself:

- is this thought necessary?
 - is it destructive to those around me?
 - is it really what you think?
 - is it just self indulgent?
-

If you don't have a consistent goal
in life, how can you live it in a con-
sistent way?

Marcus Aurelius

They should try to subordinate
things to themselves not them-
selves to things

cf. 4.17

Horace

The things you used to own. Now
they own you

Jack, Fight Club

CHAPTER 4

Leadership

When you are not practicing remember that someone else is and when you meet him he will win.

Bill Bradley

Races are won here not there. Where it is hardest to speed up not easiest

Ryan Holiday

Wise men make more opportunities than they find

Francis Bacon

Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap but by the seeds you sow.

Robert Louis Stephenson

As I grow older I pay less attention
to what people say, I just watch
what they do.

Andrew Carnegie

People do not change, they are
merely revealed

Anne Enright

Kindness gives birth to kindness

Seneca

Pay less attention to the words
people use and greater attention
to the tone of their voice, the look
in their eyes and their body lan-
guage

cf. 4.24

Robert Green

There is no use talking about the
problem unless you talk about the
solution

Betty Williams

Under promise;
over deliver

Tom Peters

You can't build a reputation on
what you're going to do

Henry Ford

Be careful not to baost of any suc-
cess

cf. 8.17

Robert Greene

Be quiet, work hard, stay healthy

use strict;
good servant,
bad master.

Simon Cozens

Be the chief but never the lord

Lao Tzu

One man practicing sportsmanship
is better than 100 teaching it

cf. 4.11

Knute Roche

Life is defined by how much you do, how often you took the difficult path and were rewarded for it

Ryan Holiday

(not by how much you own)

Super-human effort is not worth a damn unless it produces results

Shackleton

Recognise effort
Reward results

BAML

Close captures no crowns

Ryan Holiday

Learning to listen is the most valuable thing you can do

cf. 4.5

Robert Love

The ability to measure people and know who you're dealing with is the most important skill of all

cf. 4.6

Robert Greene

Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire

Confucious

Practice really hearing what people say.

Do your best to get inside their minds

cf. 4.21

Marcus Aurelius

Learn to ask of all actions, "why
are they doing that?"
Starting with your own.

cf. 7.4

Marcus Aurelius

If it's in your control why do it? If
it's in someone else's then who are
you blaming?
Blame no one
Set people straight if you can. If
not just repair the damage

cf. 11.7

Marcus Aurelius

If they've done something wrong,
correct them gently and show
them how to improve.

If you can't do that the blame lies
with you or no one

cf. 2.12

Marcus Aurelius

To undertake nothing:

- without purpose or at random
- for any other reason than the
common good

cf. 3.12

Marcus Aurelius

Quiet minds cannot be perplexed
or frightened but go on like a clock
...in a thunderstorm

Robert Louis Stephenson

In the end, if people mistrust you and resist
your authority you have only yourself to blame

Robert Greene

CHAPTER 5

Patience

Ask yourself this question:
Am I in charge of this situation or is this situation in charge of me?

Anthony De Mello

Do not make war unless victory
may be gained;
If there is a prospect of victory
move;
If there is no prospect of victory do
not move.

Sun Tzu

Impatience: perhaps the single
greatest pitfall

Robert Greene

How much more damage grief
and anger do than the things that
caused them

Marcus Aurelius

There are always more of them be-
fore they are counted

cf. 7.18

Ulysses S Grant

The senses don't deceive judge-
ment deceives

Goethe

It is more important to know
where you're going than to get
there quickly

cf. 3.21

Isocrates

Patience Wounded too often becomes rage

Publius Syrus

If you are unsure of a course of action do not attempt it. Your doubts and hesitation will infect your execution

cf. 5.2

Robert Greene

CHAPTER 6

Learning

If I read a book and get one good idea from that \$20, then I've gotten one of the greatest deals of all time

Tom Peters

To forgive and forget means to have thrown away a dearly bought experience

Arthur Schopenhaur

The greatest danger you face is your mind growing soft and your eyes growing dull

Robert Greene

You think you are doing fine you
are not compelled to adapt until it
is too late

Robert Greene

The art lies in concealing the art

Horace

If people knew how hard I worked,
it would not seem so masterful-
Michelangelo

never expose the sweat and labor
behind your poise

Robert Greene

Never nitpick a heuristic

Nassim Taleb

You must see your attempt at attaining mastery as something necessary and positive

Robert Greene

More listening, more learning
Fewer interruptions, fewer conclusions.

cf. 8.11

Ryan Holiday

I would never die for my beliefs because I might
be wrong

Bertand Russell

An investment in knowledge al-
ways pays the best interest.

Benjamin Franklin

Does learning mean nothing to you
unless you know that someone else
knows that you know it?

cf. 8.17

Michel de Montaigne

CHAPTER 7

Resilience

When we are tired we are attacked by ideas
we conquered long ago.

Friedrich Nietzsche

All the meat and all that it wants.

Case, Neuromancer

It's just fat and muscle

Hanlon's Razor:
Never attribute to malice that
which can be adequately explained
by incompetence

cf. 11.7

Robert J. Hanlon

or weakness or fear or hunger or . . .

Promise yourself to be so strong that nothing
can disturb your peace of mind

Christian D'Larson

You control the effort not the results

Ryan Holiday

We control our own actions and
are responsible for them.

If we act wrongly we have done
serious harm to ourselves

Marcus Aurelius

Does what happened stop you
from acting with justice, generos-
ity, self control, sanity, prudence,
honesty and stright forwardness?

Marcus Aurelius

The world loves to blacken the radiant and
drag the sublime through the dust

Schiller

Haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate

cf.
11.3

Taylor Swift

You don't need their approval

Danielle La Porte

Tranquility comes when you stop
caring what they say

Marcus Aurelius

Ta eph'hemin
Ta ouk eph'hemin

Stoic phrase

what is up to us, what is not up to us.

Nothing either good nor bad but
thinking makes it so

Shakespeare

Real difficulties can be overcome
It's only the imaginary ones that
are unconquerable

Theodore N Vail

Problems are rarely as bad as we
think they are, or rather, they are
precisely as bad as we think they
are

cf. 7.47

Ryan Holiday

External things are not the problem. It's your assessment of them which you can erase right now

Marcus Aurelius

See things for what they are,
do what we can,
endure what we must

Ryan Holiday

Not to give into adversity.
Not to trust prosperity.

And always take note of Fortune's
habit of behaving exactly as she
pleases

Seneca

You can't stop the waves but you
can learn how to surf

Jon Kabat Zin

All of our unhappiness comes from our inability
to be alone

Jean de la Brugere

A bore is someone who deprives you of solitude
without providing you with company

Gian Vincenzo Gravina

Strive to keep yourself free from unnecessary
entanglements and alliances

Robert Greene

Happiness depends on ourselves

Aristotle

Nothing can bring you peace but
yourself.

Nothing can bring you peace but
the triumph of principles

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Everyone gets one life. Your's is
almost up and instead of treating
yourself with respect you have en-
trusted your happiness to others.

Marcus Aurelius

He who conquers others is strong,
he who conquers himself is
mighty

Lao Tzu

Success depends on previous preparation, and
without such preparation there can be no suc-
cess

Confucius

Proper planning prevents piss poor perfor-
mance

cf.
7.28

Optimism is cowardice

Oswald Spengler

Hope is a poor hedge

Erik R. Sirri

2007, but likely earlier

Preparation not luck

So keep at it until it's fully digested.

A strong stomach digests whatever it eats.

A blazing fire takes whatever you throw on it and makes light and flame.

cf. 9.6

Marcus Aurelius

Courage doesn't always roar.
Sometimes courage is the quiet
voice at the end of the day whis-
pering "I will try again tomorrow"

cf. 7.35

Mary Anne Radmach

Disgraceful for the soul to give up
while the body is still going strong

Marcus Aurelius

Fall seven times, stand eight

cf. 7.35

Japanese Proverb

Choose not to be harmed and you
won't feel harmed
Don't feel harmed and you haven't
been

Marcus Aurelius

It can ruin your life only if it ruins
your character. Otherwise it can-
not harm you. Inside or out

Marcus Aurelius

Trust yourself more and others less

Robert Greene

Love all
Trust a few
Do wrong to none

William Shakespeare

I was once s fortunate man, then fortune deserted me.

But true good fortune is what you make for yourself.

Good fortune:

- good character
- good intentions
- good actions

Ambition: tying your well being to
what other people say and do

Self-indulgence: tying it to the
things that happen to you

Sanity: tying it to your own ac-
tions

cf. 7.13

Marcus Aurelius

Straight not straightened

Marcus Aurelius

What is outside my mind means
nothing to it

Marcus Aurelius

The mind without passions is like a fortress. No place is more secure

Marcus Aurelius

Objective judgment now, at this very moment.

Unselfish action now, at this very moment.

Willing acceptance of all external events now, at this very moment.

That's all you need

Marcus Aurelius

It is we who generate the judgments inscribing them on ourselves

Marcus Aurelius

When you judge another you do not define them, you define yourself.

Wayne Dyer

Care about what other people think and you will always be their prisoner

cf. 7.13

Lao Tzu

It is reason and wisdom which take
away cares
not places afording views over the
sea

cf. 7.24

Horace

Successful people are not gifted;
they just work hard,
then succeed.
On purpose

cf. 6.6

G. K. Nielson

CHAPTER 8

Humility

No chorus of lamentation, No hysterics

Marcus Aurelius

If you're not humble life will visit
humility upon you

Mike Tyson

He who does not emply a guide
cannot gain advantage from the
ground

Sun Tzu

Take the help

Danielle La Porte

Learn as if you were going to live
but live as if you were going to die
tomorrow.

via Ryan Holiday

After the game the king and the
pawn go back into the same box

Italian Proverb

You could leave this life right now.
Let that determine how you act.

Marcus Aurelius

Foolish is the man who delights in
his good fortune, supposing it will
never leave him.

cf. 7.19

Euripides

To accept it without arrogance,
to let it go with indifference

cf. 8.8

Marcus Aurelius

Your opinion is either dependent
on the facts or it's not;
When they change you should shift
along with them

cf. 7.20

Ryan Holiday

The facts were always there, of course, just unclear or hidden. Think
clearly about what you're looking at. cf 9.10

Remember that to change your
mind and accept correction are
mere acts too

Marcus Aurelius

and so, under our control

It is the folly of many to mistake
the echo of a London coffee shop
for the voice of a kingdom

Jonathan Swift

Everywhere, at each moment, you have the option:

- to accept this event with humility
- to treat each person as he should be treated
- to approach this thought with care, so that nothing irrational creeps in

That you've made enough mistakes yourself. You just like them.

cf. 11.7

Marcus Aurelius

So make your exit with grace
the same grace shown too you

Marcus Aurelius

Be willing to be a beginner every
single morning

cf. 3.14

Meister Eckhart

Boasting is what a boy does, because he has
no real effect on the world.

Matthew Crawford

CHAPTER 9

Confidence

Let go and move with the chaos that presents itself to you. From within it you will find endless oppourtunities that elude other people

Robert Greene

Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage.

cf. 7.20

Anais Nin

So often self confidence is dependent on the basic but elusive premise

"I'm fine as I am"

via the School of Life

on confidence

Don't water your weeds

Harvey Mackay

Any kind of resistance or obstacle that crosses your path should be seen as yet another chance to improve your work

Robert Green

You can adopt the attitude that there's nothing you can do, or you can see the challenge as a call to action

cf. 10.3

Catherine Pulsifer

You've already made it this far, might as well take one more step

Ryan Holiday

But to get back up when you fail, to celebrate behaving like a human (however imperfectly) and fully embrace the pursuit you've embarked on.

Marcus Aurelius

You will fail eventually.
Whatever.

cf. 7.8

Danielle La Parte

A mistake is not something to be determined after the fact but in the light of information up to that point

Nassim Taleb

A failed attempt is just that and nothing more,
its not the end and its not fatal. Keep at it.

Failure cannot cope with persistence.

cf. 7.34

Napoleon Hill

Our doubts are traitors, and make
us lose the good we might oft win
be fearing to attempt.

William Shakespear

CHAPTER 10

Gratitude

Certainly, if a man of understanding still has himself, he has lost nothing.

Michel De Montaigne

If the stars were to appear but one night every thousand years how man would marvel

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Get used to your circumstances, complain about them as little as possible. Grasp whatever advantages they have to offer

cf. 3.19

Seneca

When you kiss your wife or child,
repeat to yourself, "I am kissing a
mortal"

Epictetus

and she may be gone to orrow.

Treat what you don't have as non-
existent

Look at what you have, the things
you value most and think how
much you'd crave them if you
didn't have them

cf. 4.17

Marcus Aurelius

CHAPTER 11

Generosity

Tell yourself this the people I deal with today will be:

- meddling
- ungrateful
- arrogant
- dishonest
- jealous
- surly

cf. 11.7

Marcus Aurelius

People are going to be like that from time to time and so long as you remember that you've been like that too you can see the behaviour for what it is.

Resentment is like taking poison and waiting
for the other person to die

cf.
7.10

Malachi McCourt

Someone hates me? Their prob-
lem.

Mine: to be patient and cheerful
with everyone (including them)

Marcus Aurelius

Because... hate will get you every
time

Every time.

Ryan Holiday

If talking to oneself did not look so mad no day would go by without my growling to myself "you silly shit!"

Yet, I do not intend that to be the definition of me

cf. 9.4

Michel De Montaigne

Always give with remembering and receive without forgetting

cf. 4.7

Brian Tracy

Forgiveness means a long memory of all the times when we wouldn't have gotten through life with someone cutting us some slack. It is recognising that living with others is not possible without excusing errors

via School of Life

See the modern virtues

You've given and they've received it. And yet, like an idiot, you keep holding out for more. To be credited with a good deed? To be repaid in kind? why?

cf.
2.12

Marcus Aurelius

Forgiveness means giving up hope of a better past

cf. 2.2

Lily Tomlin

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