# Presentable violence and it’s mirror

# Links

* [Nietsche vs Kierkegaard](https://www.reddit.com/r/Existentialism/comments/fd3dzp/nietzsche_vs_kierkegaard_discussion/?utm_medium=android_app&utm_source=share)
* [Tim Ferris and Brene Brown](https://tim.blog/2020/02/06/brene-brown-striving-self-acceptance-saving-marriages/)
* [Tyler Cowen and David Perella](https://perell.com/podcast/tyler-cowen-production-function/)
* [Anna Gatd](https://twitter.com/TheAnnaGat/status/1270329740465975296?s=19)
* Ted Gioia’s Music: A Subversive History
* Agnes Callard on the Ezra Klein Show
* Rule of thirds tweet
* Jenny Holzer truism: ambition is just as dangerous as complacency

## Motivating questions

* How do we know when to push and when to rest, both at the micro level (e.g. in daily/weekly subproject level) and at the macro level (what projects to take on, when to quit a project, etc.)?
* What is the relationship between striving and acceptance?
* How do I personally make sense of these two opposing forces?
* What is the point of striving? Does it actually make us better?
* What do we strive for? How do I as an individual with my specific set of skills, personality traits, experiences, relationships decide what to strive for?
* Why do I feel this conflict and how do I reconcile the fact that I both want to make amazing things and chill the fuck out?

When I was much younger, after dropping out of high school in a THC-drenched haze, I spent a lot of time meditating and reading about meditation and buddhist flavored self improvement. I loved it and took it seriously, had a regular practice, attended a regular group meditation, went on retreat and diligently studied the modern western buddhist canon.

But I also really didn’t like it sometimes. The advice and the dharma talks made me feel bad about myself as often as they lifted me up. It often felt like I wasn’t doing it right or I wasn’t improving enough. I felt guilty when I bought some beer or skipped my morning asanas (which happened around 3:30 every morning thanks to my previous career as a baker).

This tension between wanting to be good (great!) and wanting to feel good (great!) is still with me. These days, I feel it mostly when listening to, or reading, or otherwise seeing the work of people that inspires me which inevitably also makes me feel a little bit inferior. The following is a great incapsulation of something that raises both desire and disgust, from a [David Perella interview with Tyler Cowen](https://perell.com/podcast/tyler-cowen-production-function/):

Why don’t knowledge workers as a class take improving their skills as seriously as we’re implying here and as you and I have discussed; like why they don’t have the same rigour as, say a LeBron James?

Cowen goes on to offer an explanation involving the lack of reward for doing so, grounded in the fact that we’ve not had a great way to demanding and evaluate a person’s skills in these areas. They speculate that this may be changing with the internet and the way that ambitious, motivated individuals have more opportunities to display their abilities and motivations than they once had. The Internet is a blank canvas for showing our brilliance.

Maybe that’s true, but maybe this simply isn’t the best way to live for most of us. This is a hypothesis that I can personally relate to, as someone who vacilates back and forth on the value of ambition and pursuing lofty goals.

There is an implicit value judgement here: more knowledge, more doing, more training, more better. It feels very adjacent to the optimize everything, hyper achievement oriented mindset that drives us to work more, work harder, do better. If I just push myself a little more, get a little better, *then* I will be the person I want to be.

I feel very ambivalent about this idea. On the one hand, yes I want to be better and move intentionally toward the things I want. On the other hand, when optimization and performance improvement are your North Stars, something very fundamental about being human is lost. Anna Gat expresses this view very clearly, calling it the Utility Tyranny, in a [recent tweet](https://twitter.com/TheAnnaGat/status/1270329740465975296?s=19). I completely and at the same time the economist in me wants to tell her she just needs to put beauty and pleasure in her utility function[[1]](#footnote-25). about this, calling it the *Utility Tyranny*, a phrase that quite delights the rebellious economist in me.

Another beautiful example of what may be lost in the *optimize everything* paradigm comes from Ted Gioia’s book, [*Music: A Subversive History*](http://tedgioia.com/music.html) when speaking about the origins of music in the natural world:

Krause describes a memorable encounter with an elder of the Nez Perce tribe named Angus Wilson, who chided him one day: “You white people know nothing about music. But I’ll teach you something about it if you want.” The next morning, Krause found himself led to the bank of a stream in northeastern Oregon, where he was motioned to sit quietly on the ground. After a chilly wait, a breeze picked up, and suddenly his surroundings were filled with the sound of a pipe organ chord—a remarkable occurrence, since no instrument was in sight. Wilson brought him over to the water’s edge and pointed to a group of reeds, broken at different lengths by wind and ice. “He took out his knife,” Krause later recalled, “and cut one at the base, whittled some holes, brought the instrument to his lips and began to play a melody. When he stopped, he said, ‘This is how we learned our music.’”

The point that these two examples is to illustrate that certain life pleasures, insights and experiences happen precisely when we step away from the drive to perfect every aspect of our lives.Neauty will always find a way to push up in the cracks but if we don’t take a moment to allow ourselves to see it, then was ever there in the first place?

[Agnes Callard presents](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/18/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-nicole-hemmer.html) a way of thinking about these two ideas that doesn’t exactly integrate these ideas, but at least gives us a way to hold them side by side within ourselves:

I think we’re way too quick to identify ourselves with the long term goals, especially when we are not in the moment of being tempted. So we can say, look I *know* how I should really live. I *know* that I should really read those books, and I should not not eat the cookies and I should be less stressed about these things; I should spend more time with my family. These are things I *know*. **And I think the truth is that I really do not know any of them.** I believe them and then I also believe the opposite. And some of my beliefs are more presentable to other people. So I am more presentable to you if I say, yeah I know I should really spend more time with my kids than if I say I have a profound need to escape my kids. But both of those things are true of me. […] And a lot of people have that goal of mastering themselves - which is to say exerting enough violence over themselves to silence, to quiet that other voice because they “know”, they say they know, that other thing. But the truth is that the fact that the other voice is there means you don’t know it and the violence against the self is the kind of trying to quiet it when it is really there.

Callard gives us a much more realistic vision where these two oppositional forces, the one where I want to push myself toward the person I admire and the other where I really just want to be comfortable and happy right where I am, are able to coexist in the same life. She doesn’t provide a way to do this, she just says that this is the reality[[2]](#footnote-28).

How do *I* think about these two desires (or beliefs as Callard calls them)? To be frank, much of the time I don’t want to. I want to do the one thing when I feel like it and do the other when I feel like doing that. Obviously, this is a highly imperfect plan and probably not something that most people would consider an effective way to achieve anything!

In this vein, I tweeted something the other day about how to be successful in life:

Of course this is a joke. I was standing in line to get into my local farmers market (since we are still in a global pandemic, entry is tightly regulated) and was thinking about focus. How do we create an environment in which we can concentrate on achieving those lofty, presentable goals to propel us to infinity, and beyond! I made a quick list of some of the standard things that productivity gurus recommend for maximizing that which they are named for. The list I came up with was sensible, boiler plate stuff that anybody who has scrolled through business Twitter or set up a LinkedIn account is already familiar with:

1. Develop habits (if you get used to doing the same thing every day out will get easier to do the same thing every day)
2. Organize your physical environment to minimize distraction and promote concentration
3. Minimize your ambition set (i.e. Don’t have to many goals)
4. Take care of your mental and physical needs (sleep, exercise, etc)

These things make sense - they are simple and logical and set you up for the perfect bucolic office-scape wherein you are sitting at your desk, steaming mug of tea in hand, white walls reflecting off a dustless desk with nothing but a blank page on the computer screen in front of you (for what it’s worth, in this image I also have a full head of hair, perfect posture and smell like I just walked out of a misty forest).

The problem is that this just doesn’t work for many of us. It especially doesn’t work if, like me, you have a full time job and two kids under three years old (one of whom is sleeping on my chest as I write this). Not only is it not natural for me to work like this, I think I can waste a lot of time trying to set the stage and prepare the right conditions for getting shit done instead of just getting shit done.

The truth is I like a bit of chaos. I like noise. Maybe it’s the years of loud, busy, immediate, tactile bakery work that shaped my brain or maybe it’s how I’m built. Whatever the case, there must be a way for me to commit that sweet sweet violence upon myself from exactly where I am at. There must be a way to take the spirit of all of this self improvement, optimize everything approach and do it the way that makes sense to me. Maybe I’m already doing it. Maybe frantically scanning Hacker News and Marginal Revolution first thing in the morning, scrolling through twitter for five minutes every couple of hours, copy pasting links and tapping ideas into my phone whenever they pop into my head is just the way I am going to make it work. Hell, probably 80% of the time I’ve put into this essay has been sitting on an exercise ball, bouncing my daughter to sleep, writing on my phone. Context switching and implementation intentions be damned,c at least in doing the thing.

I think an appropriate place to end up is here:

I like this rule of thirds:“When you’re chasing a big goal, you’re supposed to feel good 1/3 of the time, OK 1/3 of the time, & crummy 1/3 of the time.”Sometimes we feel down when we get stuck on something, but that’s a crucial part of doing interesting & challenging research https://t.co/dnLD7OikkJ

— Edward Kennedy (@edwardhkennedy) May 12, 2021

I like this because it sets us somewhere between where I sometimes imagine the folks I look up to are (constant flow state, casually producing reams of insight) and where I’m afraid I will always be (toiling in obscurity, screaming into the void). It balances the violence we commit to ourselves trying to be the people we want to be with the reality of who we are now and is nice a heuristic for trying to maintain sanity while trying to steer the ship towards our own Atlantis.

1. Of course this doesn’t actually solve the problem if we are still maximizing the function, it just perverts the idea of doing something for its own sake, optimizing the very thing that is rebelling against the Utility Tyranny in the first place. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
2. There is another great section in this podcast where she is speaking about how the natural devolution of podcasts is into tepid advice giving - idiosyncratic people giving their highly unusual recipe for greatness as if it is something that can be replicated and applied to your life too! She is none too impressed by this phenomenon. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)