

How to Grow the Fuck Up: A Guide to Humans

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When I was like four years old, despite my mother warning me not to, I put my finger on a hot stove. The stove was red and bright and shiny and I knew yummy food came from it, so the allure was irresistible.

That day I learned an important lesson: really hot things suck. They burn you. And you want to avoid touching them again.

Around the same time, I made another important discovery. The ice cream that my parents would treat me on occasion was stored in the freezer, on a shelf that could be easily accessed if I stood on my tippy toes.

One day, while my mother was in the other room (poor mom), I grabbed the ice cream, sat on the floor, and proceeded to engorge myself with my bare hands.

It was the closest I would come to an orgasm for another ten years. If there was a heaven in my little four-year-old mind, I had just found it. Fucking perfection. My own little bucket of Elysium filled with congealed divinity.

As the ice cream began to melt, I smeared an extra helping across my face, letting it dribble all over my shirt, practically bathing in that sweet, sweet goodness. *Oh yes, glorious sugary-milk, share with me your secrets, for today I will know greatness.*

...then my mom walked in. And all hell broke loose — including but not limited to a much-needed bath. I learned a lesson that day too. Stealing ice cream and then dumping it all over yourself and the kitchen floor makes your mother extremely angry. And angry mothers suck. They are not pleasant to be around. They scold you and punish you. And that day, much like the day with the stove, I learned *what not to do*.

But there was a third, meta-lesson going on here as well. It was a simple lesson — a lesson so obvious that we don't even notice when it happens. But this lesson was actually far more important than the other lessons: **eating ice cream is better than being burned.**

That might not strike you as profound. But it is. That's because it's a value judgment. *Ice cream is better than hot stoves. I prefer sugary sweetness in my mouth than a bit of fire on my hand.* It's a discovery of preference and, therefore, prioritization. It's the knowledge that one thing in the world is preferable to the other and, therefore, all future behaviors will consider that fact.

And this is the job of drooly little four-year-olds. To explore ceaselessly. To discover the world around them — to determine what *feels good* and what *feels bad* — and then create value hierarchies out of this knowledge. Ice cream is better than being burned. Playing with the dog is more fun than playing with a rock. Sunny days are better than rainy days.

Coloring is more fun to me than singing. These feelings of pleasure and pain become the bedrock of all our preferences and knowledge going forward in life and actually lay the foundation for what will become our identity later.

What It's Like to Grow Up

A friend of mine once described parenthood as, “Basically just following around a kid for a couple decades and making sure he doesn’t accidentally kill himself, and you’d be amazed how many ways a kid can find to accidentally kill himself.”

One could say young children are always looking for new ways to accidentally kill themselves because the driving force behind them is an innocent curiosity. Early in life, we are driven to explore the world around us because our brains are collecting information on what pleases and harms us, what feels good and bad, what is worth pursuing further and what is worth avoiding.

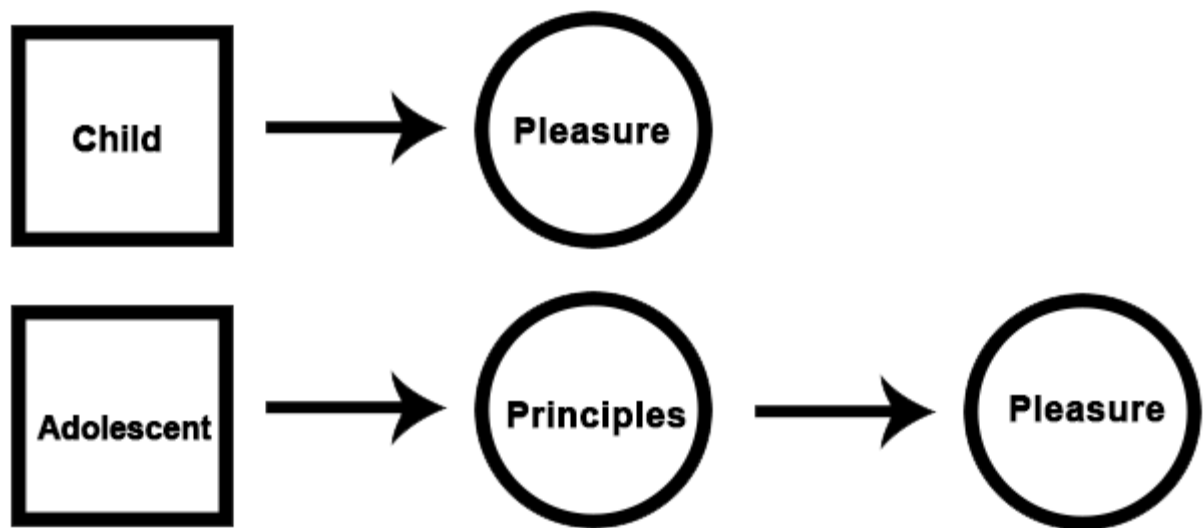
But eventually, the exploratory phase exhausts itself. And not because we run out of world to explore. Quite the opposite, actually. The exploratory phase wraps up because, as we become older, we begin to recognize that there’s *too much* world to explore. It’s too much to take in. You can’t touch and taste everything. You can’t meet all the people. You can’t see all the things. There’s *too much* potential experience and the sheer magnitude of our existence overwhelms us.

Therefore, our brain begins to focus less on trying everything for ourselves and more on developing some rules to help us navigate the endless complexity of the world before us. We adopt most of these rules from our parents and teachers. But many of them we figure out for ourselves. For instance, after fucking around near enough open flames, you develop a little mental rule that *all flames are dangerous*, not just that one on the stove. And after seeing your mom get pissed enough times, you begin to figure out that *stealing is always bad*, not just when it’s ice cream.

As a result, some general principles begin to emerge in our minds. Practice care around dangerous things so you won’t get hurt. Be honest with your parents and they’ll treat you well. Share with your siblings and they’ll share with you.

These new values are more sophisticated because they’re abstract. The little kid thinks, “Ice cream is awesome, therefore I want ice cream.” The adolescent thinks, “Ice cream is awesome, but stealing stuff pisses my parents off and I will get punished; therefore, I’m not going to take the ice cream from the freezer.” The adolescent applies rules and principles to her decision making in a way that a young child cannot.

As a result, an adolescent learns that strictly pursuing your own pleasure and avoiding pain can cause problems. Actions have consequences. You must negotiate your own desires with the desires of those around you. You must play by the rules of society and authority, and then you will, more often than not, be rewarded.



This, quite literally, is maturity in action: developing *higher-level* and *more abstract* principles to enhance decision making in a wider range of contexts. This is how you adjust to the world, how you learn to handle the seemingly infinite permutations of experience. It is a major cognitive leap for children and fundamental to growing up in a healthy, happy way.¹

When we're toddlers, we are learning to see the world in terms of cause and effect. Of pleasure vs pain. Touching the hot stove *causes* pain in my hand. Therefore, it is bad. Stealing ice cream from the freezer *causes* my body to feel pleasure, therefore it is good. Good is better than bad.

This is why young kids are like little sociopaths. They cannot conceive of anything in life beyond what is immediately pleasurable or painful for them at any given moment. They cannot feel empathy. They cannot imagine what life is like in your shoes. They just want some fucking ice cream. *NOW!*

What happens when we get older is we begin to understand that there are multiple consequences to any single action and many of them affect us either indirectly or at some point in the future. General rules and trade-offs are understood as the way these consequences function. Mom and Dad get angry if I steal something; therefore, I will not steal, *even if it feels good*. My teacher will punish me if I talk in class; therefore, I will not talk, *even if I want to*.

The knowledge of pleasure and pain is still there in these older children. It's just that pleasure and pain *no longer direct most decision making*. They are no longer the basis of our values. Older children weigh their personal feelings against their understanding of rules, trade-offs, and the social order around them to plan and make decisions.

This is an improvement, but there's still a weakness in this adolescent approach to life. Everything is seen as a trade-off. Older children and adolescents (and a shocking number of adults) approach life as an endless series of bargains. *I will do what my boss says so I can get money. I will call my mother so I don't get yelled at. I will do my homework so I don't fuck up my future. I will lie and pretend to be nice so I don't have to deal with conflict.*

Nothing is done for its own sake. Everything is a calculated trade-off, usually made out of fear of the negative repercussions.

You can't live your entire life this way, otherwise, you're never actually living *your* life.

You're merely living out an aggregation of the desires of the people around you. To become an optimized and emotionally healthy individual, you must break out of this bargaining and come to understand even higher and more abstract guiding principles.

How to Be an Adult

When you google "how to be an adult" most of the results that come back talk about preparing for job interviews, managing your finances, cleaning up after yourself, and not being a disrespectful asshole.

These things are all great, and indeed, they are all things that adults are expected to do. But I would argue that they, by themselves, do not make you an adult. They simply prevent you from being a child, which is not the same thing as being an adult.

That's because most people who do these things do them because they are rule- and transaction-based. You prepare well for a job interview *because* you want to get a good job. You learn how to clean your house *because* it has direct consequences on your health and what people think of you. You manage your finances *because* if you don't, you will be royally fucked one day down the road.

Bargaining with rules and the social order allows us to be functioning human beings in the world. But ideally, after some time, we will begin to realize that the whole world cannot always be bargained with, nor should we subject every aspect of our life to a series of transactions. You don't want to bargain with your father for love, or your friends for companionship, or your boss for respect. Why? Because feeling like you have to manipulate people into loving or respecting you feels shitty. It undermines the whole project. If you have to convince someone to love you, then they don't love you. If you have to cajole someone into respecting you, then they don't respect you. **The most precious and important things in life cannot be bargained with. To try to do so destroys them.**

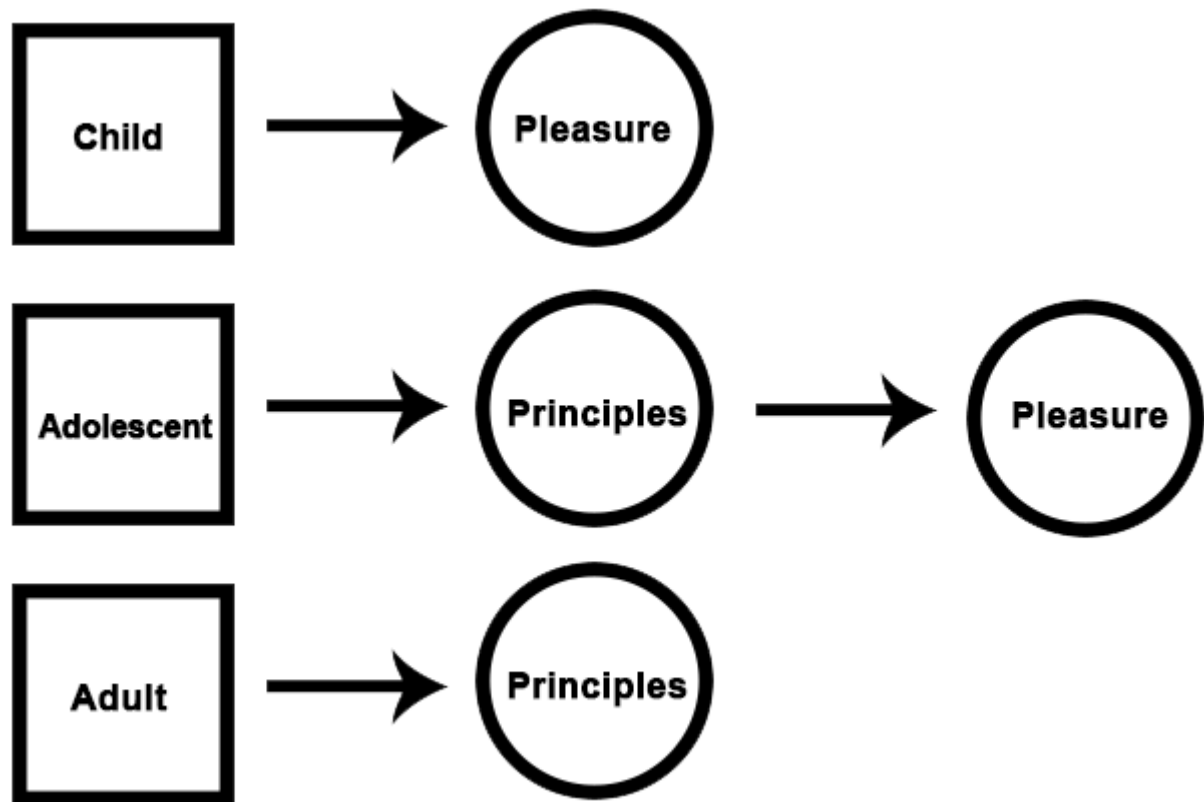
You cannot conspire for happiness. It is impossible. But often this is what people try to do, especially when they seek out self-help and other personal development advice — they are essentially saying, "Show me the rules of the game I have to play; and I'll play it." Not realizing that *it's the fact that they think there are rules to happiness that's actually preventing them from being happy.*

While people who navigate the world through bargaining and rules can get far in the material world, they remain crippled and alone in their emotional world. This is because transactional values create toxic relationships — relationships that are built on manipulation.

When you achieve adulthood, you realize that viewing some relationships and pursuits as transactions guts them of all joy and meaning. That living in a world where everything is bargained for enslaves you to *other people's* thoughts and desires rather than freeing you

to pursue your own. To stand on your own two feet, you must be willing to sometimes stand alone.

Adulthood is the realization that sometimes an abstract principle is right and good for its own sake. The same way that the adolescent realizes there's more to the world than the child's pleasure or pain, the adult realizes that there's more to the world than the adolescent's constant bargaining for validation, approval, and satisfaction. The adult does what is right for the simple reason that it is right. End of discussion.



An adolescent will say that she values honesty — because she has learned that saying so produces good results — but when confronted with the difficult conversations, she will tell white lies, exaggerate the truth, and fail to stand up for her own self-worth.

An adolescent will say he loves you. But his conception of love is that he gets something in return (probably sex), that love is merely an emotional swap meet, where you each bring everything you have to offer and haggle with each other for the best deal.

An adolescent says she is generous. But when she does favors and gives gifts, it's always done conditionally, with the unspoken idea that she will receive something in return at some later date.

An adult will be honest for the simple sake that honesty is more important than pleasure or pain. Honesty is more important than getting what you want or achieving a goal. Honesty is inherently good and valuable, in and of itself. An adult will love freely without expecting anything in return because an adult understands that *that* is the only thing that can make love real. An adult will give without expectation, without seeking anything in return, because to do so defeats the purpose of a gift in the first place.

So the little kid steals the ice cream because it feels good, oblivious to the consequences. The older child stops himself from stealing it because he knows it will create worse consequences in the future. But his decision is ultimately part of a bargain with his future self: "I'll forgo some pleasure now to prevent greater future pain."

But it's only the adult who doesn't steal for the simple principle that stealing is wrong. And to steal — even if they got away with it! — *would make them feel worse about themselves.*

If Only There Were More Adults in the World

Now, I know what you're saying, "Geez Mark, by your definition, most of the people walking around in the world are shit-brained adolescents, or worse, a bunch of over-sized children."

Well... yeah. Have you talked to any humans lately? By and large, they kind of suck²

Here's a sad fact: few ever make it to adulthood. And fewer manage to stay there. Why is that?

1. When we are little kids, the way we learn to transcend the pleasure/pain values ("ice cream is good," "hot stoves are bad") is by pursuing those values and seeing how they fail us. We steal the ice cream, mom gets pissed and punishes us. Suddenly, "ice cream is good," doesn't seem as straightforward as it used to — there are all sorts of other factors to consider. I like ice cream. And I like mom. But taking the ice cream will upset mom. What do I do? Eventually, the child is forced to reckon with the fact that there are unintended consequences from pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain.
2. This is essentially what good early parenting boils down to: implementing the correct consequences for a child's pleasure/pain-driven behavior. Punish them for stealing ice cream. Reward them for sitting quietly in a restaurant. You are, quite literally, helping them to understand that life is far more complicated than simply pursuing one's pleasure and avoiding one's pain.³ Parents who fail to do this fail their children in an incredibly fundamental way because, as children grow up, they will experience the shocking realization that the world does not cater to their whims. This will be incredibly painful for them, far more painful than it would have been had they learned the lesson when they were younger. And as a result, by having to learn this lesson at an older age, they will be socially punished by their peers for not understanding it. Nobody wants to be friends with a selfish brat. Nobody wants to work with someone who doesn't consider others' feelings or appreciate rules. The un-taught child will be shunned and ridiculed for their behavior in the real world, resulting in even more pain and suffering.
3. Parents can also fail their children in another way: they can abuse them. A young child who is abused also does not develop beyond their pain/pleasure-driven values because their punishment follows no logical pattern and doesn't reinforce deeper, more thoughtful values. It's just random and cruel. Stealing ice cream sometimes results in harsh pain. Other times it results in nothing. Therefore, no lesson is learned. No higher values are produced. And the child never learns to control her own behavior. This is why children who are abused and children who are neglected often end up with the same problems as adults: they remain stuck in their childhood

value system.

4. Even worse, if the abuse is extreme enough (or if the child is particularly sensitive) this constant pain can become baked into their psyche going forward. Their normal day-to-day existence will be a state of distrust and fear, and they will compulsively seek pleasure to assuage that underlying pain. This is where addiction and compulsion are born. Alcohol, sex, drugs, gambling, Instagram — as they grow older they will be compulsively sucked into these activities because it allows them to become distracted from themselves, to momentarily forget who they are and what they feel. More significantly, many abused children will subconsciously seek out further abuse in their adult relationships for the simple reason that abuse is the only thing that makes sense to them. It becomes an identity for them. They need it to feel whole.
5. People get stuck on the second adolescent stage of values for similar reasons, although the results are less severe. Some people are incredibly good at playing the bargaining game. They are charming and charismatic. They are naturally able to sense what other people want of them and they are adept at filling that role. Put bluntly: they're too good at manipulating people to get what they want. And because their manipulation rarely fails them in any meaningful way, they come to believe that this is simply how the whole world operates. Everyone is like this. Everyone is manipulative and controlling. Love is bullshit. Trust is a sign of weakness.
6. It requires good parents and teachers to not allow themselves to succumb to the adolescent's bargains. It is their responsibility to point out to the adolescent that this sort of behavior is a never-ending treadmill, that you can only get so much from the world by bargaining with it, that the only things in life of real value and meaning are achieved without conditions, without transactions. The best way to do this is through example. The best way to teach an adolescent to trust is to trust them. The best way to teach an adolescent respect is to respect them. The best way to teach someone to love is by loving them.



7. When parents and teachers fail to do this, it's usually because *they themselves* are stuck at an adolescent level of value judgments. They, too, see the world in transactional terms. They, too, bargain love for sex, loyalty for affection, respect for obedience. In fact, they likely bargain with their kids for affection, love, or respect. They think it's normal, so the kid grows up thinking it's normal. And the shitty, shallow, transactional parent/child relationship is then replicated when the kid begins forming romantic relationships.⁴
8. Some adolescents become stuck at the second stage for the same reason others are stuck at the first: abuse and trauma. Victims of bullying are a particularly notable example. A person who has been bullied in their younger years will move through the world with an assumed understanding that no one will ever like or respect them unconditionally, that all affection must be hard-won through a series of practiced conversation and canned actions. You must dress a certain way. You must speak a certain way. You must act a certain way. Or else.
1. As adults, they will move through the world assuming all human relationships are a never-ending tit-for-tat trade agreement. That intimacy is no more than a feigned sense of knowing one another for each person's mutual benefit. Again, this is because, in the transactional world of high schools, this person was mistreated and abused for doing those transactions poorly. They didn't dress the right way. They weren't a "cool" kid. They got bad grades or had a learning disability or were scrawny and awkward. As a result, they are psychologically punished for decades, as they live the rest of their life in constant fear of ever fucking up a transactional relationship ever again. And instead of recognizing that the problem is the *transactional approach to the world itself*, they assume the problem is that it took them so long to do the transactions appropriately.

It's probably an overstatement to say that Marilyn Manson saved my life. But he might have saved my maturity. When I was 13, I was kicked out of my school and lost almost all of my friends. My parents divorced a few months later, and not long after, my brother moved out of the house. To get me away from the bad influences around me, my parents sent me to a Christian school in suburban Texas⁵ where I knew no one. I was an atheist and unathletic geek in a state that worships football and Jesus, in that order.

For a while, it wasn't pretty. I got shoved into some lockers. I got laughed off the football field. It took me almost two years to make any friends. It sucked. I felt the compulsion to try and fit in, to buy into the transactional nature of the high school social life, to "fake it to make it." But, at the same time, it was those very behaviors everyone expected from me that I hated so much.

Marilyn Manson was an inspiration to me around this time because through his music and in his interviews, he vocally pushed a message of self-empowerment, especially to disillusioned teens like me. It was he who first suggested *that I get to decide* what is cool and not cool, that people shame non-conformists because they are afraid of not conforming themselves, and that daring to not conform and empowering yourself to be who you want to be is what gave others permission to do the same.



Today, Marilyn is often remembered for his cheesy makeup and his shock rock outfits on stage. People don't realize how in-touch he was with the disaffected suburban youth of the 90s. There's a reason he shocked people with his intelligent interviews as much as he did for his stage antics. That's because there was always a message beneath his madness: that you don't have to buy into the transactional game if you don't want to. You are always free to choose. And not only are you free to choose, but you are obliged to choose who you

are going to be, whether you realize it or not. The only question is: do you have the courage to do it? Do you have the courage to be an adult? Do you have the courage to decide for yourself what your values are?

What Level Are Your Values On?

The problem with writing about any sort of hierarchy like this is that every reader tends to immediately imagine themselves on the top rung, taking discreet pleasure in judging the masses of poor, unfortunate souls stuck on the rungs below them.

The fact of the matter is that if you are reading this, most of your values are likely in the pleasure/pain stage or the transactional stage. I know this for the simple reason that the majority of the population is still floundering in these stages most of the time (myself included). And let's be real: this is a personal development site — you wouldn't have come here if things weren't a little bit fucked up already.

On top of that, these high-level, adult values are the definition of what we consider to be noble and virtuous. It's the CEO who takes the blame for an employee's fuck up. It's the teacher who sacrifices her vacation days to help tutor a struggling student. It's a friend who risks the friendship by telling you that your partying has gotten out of control.

We all know and revere these stories. And the reason we know and revere them is that they're uncommon. Because we rarely, if ever, are able to do these things ourselves. Most of us, most of the time, are stuck at the level of bargaining, of asking ourselves, "Yeah, but what's in it *for me*?" or worse, at the level of childish pleasure, screaming, "GIMME THAT, I WANT IT!"



The truth is, it's hard to detect what level our values are on. This is because we tell ourselves all sorts of elaborate stories to justify what we want. A gambling addict will

compulsively pursue the thrills of making and losing money, but in his head, he's invented a convincing story about how he's going to win everything back and show everyone he's not a loser (adolescent bargaining) or that he's actually doing this for the good of his family (adult virtue).

This is bullshit, of course. He simply can't help himself.

It's clear, then, that we can't trust our own interpretations of our actions. There's a small mountain of psychological evidence to support this: we feel something first, then we justify it later with some story we tell ourselves. And that story is usually highly biased and vastly overestimates how noble and selfless we were.⁶

Therefore, we must learn to distrust our thoughts. We must become skeptical of the interpretations of our own actions. Instead, we must focus on the actions themselves.

Thoughts can lie. Interpretations can be changed or forgotten. But actions are permanent. Therefore, the only way to get at your values — *totruly* understand what you value and what you do not — is to observe your actions.

If you say you want to go back to school and get your degree, but it's 12 years later and you're on excuse number 57, then no, you don't actually want to go back. What you want *is to feel like you want to go back*. And that is completely different.

If you say you value honesty in your relationship above all else, yet regularly hide your actions and behaviors from your partner, actively question their motivations and where they've been, and snoop into their text messages when they're sleeping, then, no, you don't value honesty. You say you do to justify your lower-level values.

Chances are you're good at adhering to higher-level values in some contexts and not others. There are people who are great friends but shitty parents. There are people who are great parents but shitty professionals. There are people who are just shitty people but holy fuck, are they productive. We all have our areas of maturity and immaturity.

Most recurring emotional problems people experience are simply first- and second-level value systems that are being held onto despite the fact that they are failing. A mother who fights with her children constantly because they don't call her with a certain regularity is holding onto a transactional approach to love — the idea that love can be quantified and measured. A friend who tells you white lies probably does so because he doesn't want to threaten whatever he's getting from you. A co-worker who steals your work and calls it their own is indulging in a compulsive desire for pleasure (or, in this case, success).

The only way to get clear about our own values is by *learning to observe our own actions* and observing them dispassionately as if we were neutral bystanders:

Actions that consistently hurt yourself or others, that you find yourself excusing repeatedly and/or lying to hide, probably indicate you have a low-level compulsive pleasure/pain driven value. Lying is inherently selfish and designed to make way for our most selfish desires. If I lie to my wife about where I was last night, then it signifies, *by definition*, that I am acting selfishly and compulsively. Generally, the more lying, the more compulsive we probably are.⁷

Actions that are premeditated with the desire to get a certain result out of someone or something, are bargaining/transactional values. There's a difference between telling someone you're interested in them because that's what you think they want to hear, and simply telling someone you're interested in them because you're freely expressing yourself. The latter is honesty, the former is manipulation. And the line between the two is blurry for a lot of people.⁸

Actions motivated by deeper ethical principles that you're willing to suffer for because you believe they are right in *all contexts*, regardless of the specific outcome to yourself, are representative of higher-level adult values.

These are things you come to understand about yourself because you question not only your actions but your interpretations of your own actions. You must sit and think critically about yourself and about what you've chosen to care about, not through word, but through deed.

Ultimately, this is what it means to "know thyself" — to know your own values, to have a clear understanding of your actions and what motivates them, to understand what level of maturity you're operating on.

Any time you sit down with a therapist or coach or friend, this is the process that is happening. You are describing your actions and your interpretation of those actions. With the guided assistance of the therapist/coach/friend person, you then sit there and pick apart whether or not your interpretations of your actions actually make sense. Or are you just deluding yourself? Do your actions reflect what you think is important? If not, where is the disconnect?

It's this process of aligning your self-interpretation with your actions that gives you control over your life and your actions. It's this alignment that allows you to feel a sense of meaning and fulfillment in your life. To become happy and healthy. It's this alignment that allows you to grow up.

Our Culture's Maturity Crisis

Modern democracy was basically invented under the assumption that the average human being is a selfish delusional piece of shit. The belief went that the only way to protect us from ourselves is to create systems so interlocking and interdependent that no one person or group can completely hose the rest of the population at any given time.

Put another way, the founders and Enlightenment thinkers understood that the games of politics and statecraft are inevitably played at the level of bargaining and transactional relationships, and therefore systems need to be constructed in such a way that no one person (or organization) can win too much, too often.

Most politicians make their names and their livings by existing in a vast web of transactional relationships. They bargain with their voters and donors. They bargain with each other to build coalitions and alliances. They bargain with other branches of government and political

parties to jockey for prominence and position. Politics is a transactional and selfish game, and democracy is the best system thus far for the sole reason that it's the only system that openly admits that.

There's only one way to threaten a democratic system: by demanding one's own desires and pleasures are more important than anyone else's. That is, by being childish.

This is what extremists are: childish. They're a bunch of fucking babies. Because extremists are intractable and impossible to bargain with, extremists are, by definition, childish. They want the world to be a certain way and they refuse to acknowledge any interests or values other than their own. They refuse to bargain. They refuse to appeal to a higher virtue or principle above their own selfish desires. Therefore, they ruin everything around them.

Extremists are dangerous because they know how to dress up their childish values in the language of transaction or universal principle. A right-wing extremist will claim he desires "freedom" above all else and that he's willing to make sacrifices for that freedom. But what he really means is that he wants freedom from any other values. He wants freedom from having to deal with change or the marginalization of other people. He wants the freedom to pursue his own impulses and desires.

Extremists on the left play the same game, the only thing that changes is the language. A leftie extremist will say that she wants "equality" for all. And that she will give up anything for it. But what she really means is that she never wants to feel inferior or harmed. That she never wants to feel threatened or unsafe. Essentially, that she never wants to feel pain. And demanding that everyone be treated equally at all times, in all circumstances, is one way of running away from that pain.

Extremism, on both the right and the left, has undeniably risen in the past few decades. There are likely many complicated and overlapping reasons for this. But I'll throw out one idea: that the maturity of the voting population is deteriorating. American culture is based on the indulgence of pleasure and avoidance of pain. American consumerism has become so good at indulging these childish impulses that much of the population has come to see them as *rights*. Extremists on the right respond to the fact that they believe climate change is a hoax or evolution is fake with the claim that *they have the right to believe anything they want to*. Extremists on the left respond to the fact that people are inherently unequal, and a free, functioning society requires there to be winners and losers by claiming *they have a right to whatever treatment someone else has*.

These are childish views. They deny reality. And when you deny reality, bad things happen.



The problem is that the media (again, both on the right and the left) has discovered that reinforcing the childish wishes of extremists on each side is good for business. That's because extremists, like children, are compulsive. They don't know how to stop. They are addicts for their cause. They throw their lives away for it. And because they will throw their lives away for an imagined cause, they make for the most impassioned audience. And with the internet squeezing the media's business models dry, they've slowly had to resort to pandering to the most reactive and virulent people out there: the childish extremes. The extremes get the most attention. They get the most clicks. And they cause the most controversy. So they dictate the media's discourse.

Welcome to 2018. Let's hope we all survive.

How to Grow Up

Step 1 – Fail

Chances are, if you're reading this, and you're still stuck organizing your life around pleasure/pain values, or transactional/rule-based values, you probably don't need me to explain why they cause problems — your life is already a fucking mess.

But just in case you do, here you go:

Pleasure/pain values fail for the simple reason that pleasure and pain are bad long-term predictors of health, growth, and happiness. OK, yeah, touching a hot stove sucks and you shouldn't do that anymore. But what about lying to a friend? Or waking up early for work? Or, like, *not doing heroin*. Those are just a few of the millions of examples where pursuing pleasure/pain values will lead you astray.⁹

Transactional/rule-based values rob you of the trust, intimacy, and love necessary to

remain an emotionally healthy and happy human being. This is because, when you view all relationships and actions as a means to an end, you will suspect an ulterior motive in everything that happens and everything anyone ever does to you.

Before you can move on and learn from these flawed value systems, *you must experience the pain of them failing*. That means not denying that they are failing. That means not avoiding the pain of that failure. That means facing that failure head on and admitting what is plain to see: that you fucked up, and there's gotta be a better way.

Step 2 – Skin in the game.

People operating on a childish pleasure/pain values derive their self-esteem from how much pleasure or pain they feel. Therefore, when they feel good, they feel good about themselves, and when they feel bad, they feel bad about themselves. So when a person at this level fucks up big-time, their first explanation is likely going to be, "I'm a piece of shit. I'm a horrible person. What was I thinking?"

This is harmful. This likely makes the problem worse. The problem is not you. The problem is what you're choosing to value, how you're choosing to see the world and the way in which it operates. There's nothing wrong with pleasure. There's nothing necessarily wrong with pain either. *It's the reason each occurs that makes them right or wrong*

Recognizing this truth is what gently shoves your value-system into a more mature bargaining/transactional level. You didn't fuck up because you caused pain. You fucked up because you caused pain *for bad reasons*. The reason a drunk driver hitting another car is so unethical is not because people got hurt — it's because the drunk driver is far more culpable than the other person — i.e., the transaction was unfair.

A lot of people try to "fix" those who suffer from compulsive actions and are stuck in the pleasure/pain value system by bringing them straight up to adulthood. They want to teach alcoholics the virtue of honesty. They want to convince violent abusers of the importance of generosity and patience.

But you can't do that. You can't skip stages. That's like skipping algebra and going straight to calculus. You can't go from a child to an adult without being an adolescent in between.

People stuck at compulsion need to first learn to think of things in transactional terms. Alcoholism isn't bad because your body is a temple and self-harm is intrinsically wrong — those are adult values.

No, alcoholism is bad because it's a bad trade-off. It hurts people. People who don't deserve it. People you love and want to help. It fucks up other life plans. It destroys families, finances, and fidelity. It's essentially giving up a mountain for a molehill.

Addicts and criminals often overcome this by latching onto some transactional value. For some, it's religion. But for most, it's usually a loved one. I once spoke to a recovered drug addict who said the only thing that got him through was his daughter. He didn't give a shit about himself. But the thought of her losing out on the opportunity to have a father, when she had done nothing to deserve it, brought him to his knees and eventually got him sober.

Addicts often talk about “hitting rock bottom.” Rock bottom is a place that is so destructive, so painful, that they are no longer able to avoid the simple fact that their behaviors are destroying their own lives and the lives of others. It’s only with this intensely painful realization that the addict is confronted with the transactional nature of life. That their choices have consequences, not just for their future self, but for others. And those consequences must be managed.

We move beyond our childish values when we realize that we have skin in the game — that there are repercussions for our actions beyond our immediate self.

This is why research has found that the most effective ways to break any bad habit is to — you guessed it — to bargain for it. Try this: write your best friend a check for \$3,000 and tell him if you ever smoke another cigarette, he can go cash it. It’s shocking how effective this is. Create consequences for yourself. Create accountability.

Step 3 – Be Willing to Die for Something.

Getting a solid footing on transactional/bargaining values will make you a functioning human being. But it won’t make you a mature adult. You’ll still suffer from transactional, toxic relationships and crises of meaning in your day-to-day life.

The key difference between an adolescent and an adult is that the adolescent is scared to do anything unless they feel confident that they’ll get something in return for it:

- They don’t want to risk quitting their job unless they know they’ll be happier somewhere else.
- They don’t want to tell someone they have feelings for them unless they can guarantee a satisfying relationship will occur.
- They don’t want to risk sharing their ideas unless they know they will win the approval of others.

To an adolescent, the way they feel about themselves is determined by how well they’re able to bargain with the world. And if they fail to bargain with the world, then they will blame themselves. For this reason, the adolescent is scared to death of rejection or failure. To them, to fail or be rejected is a sort of death because everything they want from the world — all meaning, all purpose — will be denied them.

It’s this willingness to die that leads to adulthood. Adulthood occurs when one realizes that the only way to conquer suffering is to become unmoved by suffering. Adulthood occurs when one realizes that it’s *better to suffer for the right reasons than to feel pleasure for the wrong reasons*. Adulthood occurs when one realizes that it’s better to love and lose than to never love at all.

- An adult looks at that career change and says, “I’d rather be dead than a zombie who sleepwalks through a life not his own.” And he quits.
- An adult looks at that person they have fallen for and says, “I’d rather be dead than to hide my heart from the world.” And she speaks.
- An adult looks at their ideas and says, “I’d rather be dead than to suppress my own talent and potential.” And then she acts.

An adult accepts that there are some ways of living life that are worse than not living at all. And because they recognize this, they are able to act boldly in the face of their own shame or fears.

In my book, *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a Fuck*, I relate a number of painful and traumatic experiences from my adolescence: the dissolution of my family, painful social rejections, the loss of my first romantic relationship, the death of a friend.

Because I experienced so much hurt in my relationships when I was younger, for much of my early adulthood, I approached relationships in algorithmic terms: I studied books on relating to people and learned how to present myself in ways that minimized rejection, that gave me more influence over people's perceptions of me. I pursued sex relentlessly, in an attempt to make up for the depth of my emotional pain with superficial, hollow relationships. For many years of my life, I saw friendships simply in terms of utility: I do this for someone so I can get something in return. And the moment a relationship began to cause me pain, I would find a way to escape it.

I was very successful at this for many years. I created and then escaped from — literally, I traveled the world to get away — dozens of relationships with otherwise good people, some of whom really cared about me, but who I was not mature enough to handle.

But this escapism was a solution that was as painful as the problem. The only thing more painful than losing a significant relationship is *not having* a significant relationship. And it slowly began to dawn on me that happiness was not the point — pain was. That the same way the struggle and challenge in my professional life made my accomplishments more meaningful, the willingness to face pain and discomfort was actually what made relationships feel meaningful. Not the sexiness or excitement or satisfaction.

And so, at the ripe old age of 30, I finally came to understand what it meant to live my life as an adult. That it's the ability to choose: what pleasure is worthwhile, what pain is worthwhile, to pursue and love unconditionally, without judgment or shame. So I chose to celebrate. Me and eight of my closest friends went to Las Vegas and drank about \$1,000 of alcohol in one night. And it was wonderful.

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