



SUCCESS THROUGH REASON, PURPOSE, AND PRIDE: A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS APPLYING AYN RAND'S IDEAS TO PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

In 1995, my world forever changed when I finished reading *Atlas Shrugged*. In it, I learned that philosophy is a guide for living here and now, in a world that was...is understandable, benevolent, and full of richness. I learned that philosophy, properly conceived, provides the framework for a happy, successful life. Objectivism, as defined by Ayn Rand, does just that.

In the following years, I strove to integrate the principles of Objectivism throughout my life with much success. After years of working in IT, I returned to school to earn my PhD in Management Information Systems. During that time, I studied Objectivism much deeper - discovering how proper ethical principles apply to my research in business ethics and technology enhanced decision making. Objectivism, however, was not just for academic articles. As I found myself strapped for time with two new wonderful children (we now have three), I frantically completed my PhD, published articles, and found an academic job while my awesome wife worked nights and weekends to pay the bills. By necessity, I had to find a way to take these incredibly power principles and apply them to my life to maintain my sanity while achieving my goals. I made several discoveries along the way, many of which are found in this e-book. With the foundation of *Reason for Success*, I have started building a platform for sharing these ideas about personal development, goal setting, and Objectivism. These ideas are so powerful in shaping and directing my life and others that I wanted to share them with you in hopes you can find similar growth in your life.

In a nutshell, this is what I found.

Success and happiness in life are not based on luck, but on reason. In order to live, we must have values – reason being the most important and essential value among them. The fact that our lives are conditional upon our actions and that our actions are best served with reason leads to the necessity of purpose in seeking values. Purpose requires a continual focus on creating those values – on productiveness. Productiveness requires focused thought, positive habits, and efficient systems. The result is pride, the internal measure of success. These core tenets establish the foundation of *Reason for Success* – to help others achieve success through reason, purpose, and pride.

The following series of essays appeared on *Reason for Success*. I have organized and edited them for this publication. I start at the most fundamental question about who and what you are and how that defines what you should do – your central purpose. From there, I break down how to take your central purpose and create goals for actualizing your dreams. Lastly, I touch on some habits and techniques that can help you get there.

This book is not the last word on applying Objectivism to success. I am not an expert in Objectivism and may very well make some mistakes in understanding it or how it applies. If I have made mistakes, by all means send me a message at johndrake@reasonforsuccess.com so that I can correct them, improve myself, and share my findings with my readers. I also have lots to learn about productiveness, decision making, success, habits, psychology, and basically everything else.

I would like to hear from you, not just the bad, but the good too. If you have found that Objectivism has transformed your life in some way, please share your story with us. Send them to stories@reasonforsuccess.com.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LIVE WITH A CENTRAL PURPOSE IN LIFE

“A central purpose serves to integrate all the other concerns of a man’s life. It establishes the hierarchy, the relative importance, of his values, it saves him from pointless inner conflicts, it permits him to enjoy life on a wide scale and to carry that enjoyment into any area open to his mind; whereas a man without a purpose is lost in chaos.” ~ Ayn Rand

It was from Ayn Rand that I learned about how purpose is intimately tied to both morality and productivity. By identifying and guiding a life with a **CENTRAL PURPOSE**, an integrating theme pulls activities together for a fuller, more meaningful life. I have written about my search for [an integrating purpose to my life](#) and the [enjoyment I have received from the resulting career](#). It has helped me to resolve inner conflicts and define my [hierarchy of values](#). For me, defining a central purpose is not a moral issue, but a useful tool for actualizing my full potential. I can and do have many interests. I could potentially pursue a wide variety of projects and enjoy them all. But when I focus on an integrating idea, when I search for a [value-dense purpose](#), I find greater enjoyment in life in general.

Is a central purpose obvious? For some it is, for many it is not. I took me until I was 27 until I discovered my central purpose implicitly and until 33 before I could explicitly write it down. It involved identifying and integrating all of the things that had happened in my life and all the jobs I had loved and hated, until I finally saw how they all related. And it was hard work! But I know of other people who knew from an early age what they wanted to do. For them it was obvious.

Can multiple major purposes exist? Absolutely. I know of people who have multiple interests and live happy lives. Is it the best way to live? I liken it to a business that has multiple lines of business. The greater the similarity between those lines of business, the greater the synergies that will emerge, which can lead to greater success. The business owners may indulge in multiple lines of business that have no relationship to one another and enjoy each thoroughly. Each could even create a positive cash-flow. But how easy would it be to run such a business? If a hierarchy of values is not established, which line of business would get what resources? Which would get the most attention, money, time, or effort? With a hierarchy of values, something must be at the top. That top value is your central purpose. The more projects and activities that support that highest value, the less conflict and confusion you’ll have. That’s not to say you can’t enjoy hobbies, your family, your friends, or your own body. But what is central? What is most important? There is a bunch I can say about how other values fit in with the central purpose, but I’ll save that for another post.

Could you be happy without defining a central purpose? Yes. But the better you can find an integrating purpose, the less inner conflicts you will experience and the better equipped you

will be for directing your life. Again, it's about degrees of enjoyment and does not preclude other values that you can enjoy as well.

Can a central purpose change? Yes, but if it changes often or deeply then it probably was not well-defined. I remember when I was much younger, interviewing for a job in web development. The interviewer asked how my previous employment in tutoring and teaching related to web development. She wanted to be sure that web development wasn't some passing whim - that I had some integrating purpose to my life. I immediately saw the connection, in both cases I wanted to facilitate the transfer of knowledge - in one case, through face-to-face classroom instruction and in the other case, through electronic medium. The connection between the two jobs was not vast to me, because I was already starting to identify and integrate my passions. The interviewer was very impressed with my answer and eventually offered me the job.

Are you immoral without a central purpose? No, but you're missing out. I see a well-defined central purpose as a tool for achieving a satisfying and enriching career. It is a tool that helps identify our hierarchy of values. You shouldn't beat yourself up if you don't have one, but spending some time reflecting on your passions and your purpose can help you to achieve more.

Your central purpose is your highest value and the most important concern. If this value is not carefully defined, it is easy to slip into careers you either don't enjoy or feel indifferent about. And that, to me is a travesty.

3 KEYS TO PICKING A CAREER

All things being equal most of us want more money. All things being equal most of us want a career that brings immense personal satisfaction. What if those two things do not align? What if the career that you would love to pursue makes it extremely difficult to make money? Some common examples come to mind – teachers, artists, philosophers, and musicians. They all can be fulfilling careers, if only they would pay more. That’s not to say that some of those jobs don’t pay a lot in some instances, but for the majority of people who attempt them, the pay is minuscule. What can be done about that? What if you’re one of the 50% of Americans that [hate their jobs](#)?

Part of the problem may be how [people are \(wrongly\) advised to pick their careers](#) - aptitude tests, following trendy job markets, following your parents, or simplistic introspection of your joys and pains. Just because you are good at math does not mean you should be an accountant, engineer, or scientist. Just because you hate trash in your house does not mean you should be a garbage collector. While it is possible those careers might work for you, far deeper introspection and knowledge about the careers are necessary.

So how can we tie our passions together with making lots of money?

1. Identify your values

First, you need to introspect, deeply and meaningfully. You need to think about all the activities that you love or despise. Attempt to identify what aspects of the activities you enjoy or hate. Avoid the quick answers, like “I like playing computer games”. Why do you like playing computer games? What about the games do you enjoy? Is it the strategy? Is it the interaction with friends? Is it the competition? Maybe you like gardening. Is it because you like the challenge of designing a beautiful landscape? Or maybe you just like nurturing living things? As a kid, did you enjoy spending time with your mom working in the garden? Look for common denominators. Discover your most important values. Then put them [into a hierarchy](#), listing the most important at the top.

2. Identify your strengths

Have you identified your values? Great. Now, look at your skills. Do you have any strengths? Are you a whiz at math? Can you argue your parents into submission? Perhaps you have great dexterity, a musical ear, or excellent enunciation. These strengths do not need to be better than everyone else’s strengths, just good for you. Why not identify your weakness? Because you’re probably already doing it and you need to stop. You can’t make money on your weaknesses, but you can get better at them. Are there any skills that you could

and want to learn or improve upon (most can be)? Don't try to be a jack of all trades. Specialization is the name of the game for success.

What you love and what you can do should help define a direction for your career. Ideally, these first two steps help you to discover your [central purpose in life](#) (CPL). Even if you haven't picked a CPL, you should have a direction that better captures your passions and capabilities.

3. Identify opportunities

Lastly, you have to look at the world around you. After you look inward, look outward and try to identify how your CPL can be useful. Yep, that's right, happiness is not guaranteed, but the pursuit of happiness is (or at least would be in the U.S. with a little less government meddling). Here, again, people often underestimate the opportunities available. They look superficial at "jobs," hold their noses, and pick one. Whether this is due to a lack of knowledge or an aversion to risk, selecting jobs this way greatly limits your career and leads inevitably to dissatisfaction. Think broadly. Do some research. Talk to friends and family about what type of stuff they do in their jobs. Become more entrepreneurial.

Maybe you love organizing clutter. And by love I mean you are obsessed with finding the right place for everything (OCD anyone). Not to mention, you are pretty darn good at it. However, the prospect of becoming a filing clerk sounds dreadful. You could become an interior designer specializing in organizational systems. You could start a blog writing and reviewing organizing strategies. You could write software that organizes digital photos more effectively. You could start a business organizing office spaces. You could design products that better handle organizational needs. You could sell products you love but designed by others. Perhaps you could do several of these. Or change from one job to another.

The important thing is that you identify, identify, identify and then integrate, integrate, integrate. In other words, use [reason](#)! Turn your passions, strengths, and opportunities into a [value dense career](#) that integrates as much about who you are and where you live into a career that can best bring you happiness and money.

WHY YOUR CAREER SHOULD COME BEFORE YOUR FAMILY

If you were to take any time to watch me throughout my day, you would probably think that I am a typical family man. I average 40 hour work weeks. On the weekends, I spend a large amount of time with my family. We go to sport practices and play in the backyard. We go on bike rides together. I read them books every night before bed. I play Sorry, Battleship, Candyland, Stratego, and UNO with them. I take them sledding in the winter and camping in the summer. We make dinner a family meal EVERY evening. I cherish the time I spend with my wife and kids. So it may come as a surprise that I consider my career as more important than my family.

Let me explain why.

To me, a career is not just a job. A job is simply the current employment opportunity for which someone is paying me. Many jobs might create a career. Then again, many jobs can just be many jobs, leading to no career. A career, on the other hand, is a long-term productive occupation that culminates in [a central purpose in life](#). It is one's life work. It is the ultimate source of value creation in a profession of one's choosing. And because you choose it, it represents the profession you are most passionate about pursuing. It is something that motivates us to get up in the morning and challenges throughout the day.

Family, on the other hand, is where you celebrate our achievements and commiserate in our failures. It's the place where we can share successes, support each other when floundering, and cling to in times of deep sadness. Family can provide the emotional fuel to keep going when the going gets tough. But there must be something going on outside of the family, some career, for there to be a need for this support (okay, I know some families that create more stress then help alleviate, but let's leave that aside). While family is not essential for success and happiness, it certainly makes success special by providing us a place to share our achievements.

In 2003, I decided after many months of introspection and research, that I wanted a career as an academic. I made this decision before I knew my wife or had children. Shortly after I met my soon to be wife, I informed her that my career path was going to take me far away from our hometown of St. Louis. The probability of finding a grad program, and later, an academic position in the St. Louis area were slim. However much I loved her and wanted to marry her, I did not and could not give up my dream. I was fully willing to manage a long distance relationship, if that was our path, but I was certainly moving away. A month before I left for

grad school, we were married and I was fortunate enough that she came with me. My career came first.

You might say “that is fine for you, but not for me.” So why do I say that your career **SHOULD** come first?

The primary reason is because [happiness comes from value creation](#). You can hardly be happy, even if snuggled with the ones you love, if you’re in a mud hut, sick and starving, with no hope of improvement. It is likewise difficult to build enthusiasm for a job at McDonald’s as a fry cook. While earning money can in a meaningful sense [buy happiness](#), as evidenced by [studies](#) showing a correlation between happiness and income up to \$75,000, is it just the money? Perhaps, but think about the types of people who earn more than \$75,000 per year. Most of them are in their mid to late careers. These people have discovered a profession they love, worked hard at that profession, and established a career in that field. In the same study mentioned above, higher earning incomes did correlate with a deeper sense of achievement with life. Careers allow individuals to focus intensely on one specialty to develop ever greater values, achieving things that they could scarcely imagine in their 20s. It isn’t the money that’s creating the happiness, but the known value creation as evidenced by other people valuing your output by offering larger sums of money.

Family, as wonderful as they are, cannot give you that deep sense of achievement. The reason – people have free will. So no matter how much time and effort you put into creating strong, healthy relationships, they are ultimately responsible for their own lives and their own achievements. They can choose to love you or reject you. They can choose to make the most out of their lives or choose not to. Even if you do everything right, it is their lives to live. Your sense of achievement in cultivating that relationship will always be mediated by that fact. No matter how awesome your kids, spouse, parents, or loved ones become because of your help, you can never claim their achievements for yourself.

Certainly, raising children can provide a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment. Mine do. And many stay-at-home moms and dads can attest to the pleasures (and pains) in raising kids. We can share many joys and values within our loving relationships. And I am very proud to see my kids exhibiting the principles I’ve worked so hard to instill in them. But much of that pleasure comes from our shared creation of values, of small scale achievements, with people we love.

If you truly do make your family your highest value, you end up living your life for their sake, succumbing to the trappings of altruism. Why is altruism so dangerous? Consider a problem so prevalent, that it even has its own name – “Empty nest syndrome.” Wikipedia [suggests](#) that people “whose identity was based on being a parent” are susceptible to *empty nest syndrome* –

resulting in depressions, loss of purpose, and feelings of rejection when children leave home to start out on their own. These people truly have made their family their highest value. When their kids grow up and move out, parents can find themselves without that highest value, without a career, and without a clear sense of self. It doesn't have to be that way. It shouldn't be that way, as Ayn Rand so eloquently showed in [Atlas Shrugged](#) and [The Virtue of Selfishness](#).

My wife and kids bring me an immense amount of joy and I love them with all my heart. I would not give them up and would fight with all of my might to protect and care for them. My wife and to some extent my kids understand how I feel about them. They also understand how important my career is to me and do not ask me to give it up for their sake. I would certainly not ask them to do so for me. While there may be changes, delays, postponements, temporary set-backs, and even emergencies, pursuing our passions must come first. Our happiness depends on it.

WRITING 5 YEAR GOALS

Look around you. Identify the most successful people you know. Now, ask them if they have a long-term plan or goal for themselves, for their career, or for their business. I did this a number of years ago and found that each and every successful person I talked to could identify, usually quite explicitly, where they wanted to be in 5 years.

The relationship between having and pursuing long-term goals and success in a career, in a business, or in life is not accidental. It stems from the intimate relationship between purpose and productivity. No one has better articulated that relationship than Ayn Rand. In “The Objectivist Ethics,” [The Virtue of Selfishness](#), she states:

“The virtue of Productiveness is the recognition of the fact that productive work is the process by which man’s mind sustains his life, the process that sets man free of the necessity to adjust himself to his background, as all animals do, and gives him the power to adjust his background to himself. “

She goes on to say:

“‘Productive work’ does not mean the unfocused performance of the motions of some job. It means the consciously chosen pursuit of a productive career, in any line of rational endeavor, great or modest, on any level of ability. It is not the degree of a man’s ability nor the scale of his work that is ethically relevant here, but the fullest and most purposeful use of his mind.”

The great inventor, Thomas Edison, also identified this relationship between success, productivity, and thought.

“The first requisite for success is to develop the ability to focus and apply your mental and physical energies to the problem at hand – without growing weary. Because such thinking is often difficult, there seems to be no limit to which some people will go to avoid the effort and labor that is associated with it...”

To be successful, one must achieve high levels of productivity. To be productive, one must think continuously and to their fullest ability.

So what does all of this mean in terms of writing 5 year goals? It begins by the identification of one’s central purpose in life.

“Productive work is the central purpose of a rational man’s life, the central value that integrates and determines the hierarchy of all his other values. Reason is the source, the precondition of his productive work—pride is the result.” – Ayn Rand

This identification does not necessitate many months of thinking. It does, however, require applying your full capacity to think. Approached correctly, it can be accomplished in as little as an hour, as I have explained and accomplished before. With a clear purpose, one can start to identify gaps between where we are now and where we want to be. These gaps mark the outline to one's 5 year goals. Author Burgess Laughlin [analyzes](#) the nature of a central purpose in life and criteria for writing a successful central purpose for your life.

As a personal example, I was unsatisfied with my career five years ago as a web developer. It would have done me little good 5 years ago to say, "Well I'm here right now, now what?" There were literally an infinite number of ways I could have proceeded. I could have continued as a web developer. I could have focused on database administration. I could have specialized in project management. I could have pursued my MBA. I could have... well, I could go on and on and on, but I think you get the point. In fact, I had been contemplating all of those various career choices I listed above. The sad thing is, I probably would have been dissatisfied with the results in any of those choices because I hadn't identified my central purpose.

I realized that these various professions did not address my passions. I loved teaching, loved technology, loved business, and loved researching and learning new things. Above all, my passion was with helping individuals make the best decisions possible, either through use of information technology or through education of proper thinking skills. The only career path that allowed me to combine all of my passions was a professor of information systems. I could teach thinking skills to students, teach proper development of information technologies to facilitate successful business operations, and research how people make the decisions they do and see how technology can supplement an individual's decision-making process.

After identifying a central purpose in life, the next step is a fact-finding mission to discover all of the potential means of achieving that end. When I first decided to pursue a career as a professor, I had to go research more about teaching at the university level. Although I originally thought that the only way to get into academia was with a PhD, I learned that individuals can teach at the university level with just a master's degree. But, in order to teach students in a master's or PhD program, I would need to have a PhD. Because I wanted that additional potential interaction with master's and PhD students, my original notion of obtaining a PhD was warranted. I also had to research various university requirements for admission and potential programs of study that best fit my needs and background.

The fact-finding mission should reveal various paths to the end that you want. Anyone of these paths will get you where you want to be. The path that best aligns with your values, your personality, and your lifestyle should become your 5-year goal. This process often takes a great

deal of introspection and integration of all the details, before a goal emerges that sings to your passions.

On a more practical note, 5 year goals should be written such that they are a stretch, but doable. Consider everything that can be accomplished in 1 year if you apply all your effort. If you can imagine completing your 5 year goal in 1 year, the 5 year goal is not big enough. We often underestimate what we can do if we apply a continuous effort and fully apply our mental capacities. By considering what can be done if we “stretch”, we begin to feel an urgency to act that we may not if there is no urgency. That urgency to act is exactly what is needed.

What is the most important part of 5-year goals? ACTION! It is action, driven by rational thought, leading to productive work in one’s central purpose, which leads to success. Writing solid 5 year goals sets the ground work – engaging in sustained and continuous effort turns the goals into success. To turn 5-year goals into such sustained effort requires identification of shorter-range goals and plans of [action](#) (on the scale of 1 year, 1 month, and 1 week respectively).

WRITING 5 YEAR GOALS – A PERSONAL EXAMPLE

In the previous [chapter](#), I identified an outline for identifying 5 year goals, which begins with identifying your central purpose in life (CPL). In this post, I detail how I arrived at my current 5 year goals. I start with my current CPL - **TO TEACH OTHERS HOW TO MAKE BETTER DECISIONS, SPECIFICALLY IN DESIGNING, BUILDING, MAINTAINING, AND USING WEB SITES.**

How did I write my 5 year goals? First was to confirm my ideal is something of value to me. By writing a CPL before writing 5 year plan, I have specified the work I want to do. The CPL identifies the **WHAT**. But the goals identify the **WHERE** - where I want to be. It's an end point. The **WHAT** and **WHERE** should be consistent and guide each other.

When writing my 5 year goals, I looked at my current interests, values, and strengths. The idea is to look for major themes within the CPL. From there, I assessed the difference between where I am now in each of the themes and where I would ideally wanted to be. In my case, I have three major personal initiatives that are consuming my time. These three are:

1. Researching and publishing the relationship between individual ethical perspectives and decision-making using information technology
2. Improving IS class curriculum to encourage proper thinking using sound pedagogical techniques and correct philosophic ideas.
3. Discovering ways to improve personal, classroom, and research productivity to free my time for other endeavors as they arise.

Each of these three is a concretization of my CPL. But they will not do for goals. Goals must be made quantifiable. To get there, I analyzed each of my themes in more detail. For the first theme, I summarize my thoughts:

The ethics track of research is essential for kick starting a long-term re-evaluation of the role of various ethical perspectives on the success of individuals in business. While I don't know how long I will pursue this track, I do want to focus on it in the next 5 years for three reasons – 1. to better understand the relationship between ethical beliefs and the usage of web technologies, 2. to establish a research tradition that is inspired by Objectivism so that future academics can build on my success, and 3. to establish my career in academy as a successful researcher so as to remain marketable and respected. To accomplish this, I need to publish regularly and of good quality to gain recognition. Based on past experience, I can manage 1 article a year. If I try to tackle more than that, I often get bogged down and cannot finish any of them. I also expect, as I build my research experience, I will be able to publish more articles, but I may want to explore and publish in domains other than ethics. If I can publish at least one article a year in this

domain that shares my increased understanding of ethical beliefs and decision making while utilizing an Objectivist perspective, I will have accomplished my goal.

My second theme:

Improving the class curriculum should be well established within 5 years. Over the past year, I have read a number of books and listened to some lectures on the philosophy of education to help me build a foundation for evaluating and implementing pedagogical techniques effectively. Over the next 5 years, I will continue to refine my class curriculum to incorporate an appropriate hierarchy of knowledge. I have started this in my Intro IS class and plan to re-evaluate my other classes, including my Web Application Development course. Based on what I have learned in my current classes, this process involves continuously research, experimentation, and editing. The hard part will be identifying clear measurements of success. Perhaps this could be the beginning of a new research stream.

The last theme:

I have just started addressing this need. Currently, my work week consists of 40 or so hours a week. I do not want to take any more time than that at this point in my career because I have young children at home that take up the remainder of my time. I am still ambitious and refuse to let time be a limiting factor in my success. But my current work requirements do not give me much free time to expand into other realms. So I need to brainstorm how to accomplish the goals listed above with less time, but more efficiency so that I can continue to perform well in those areas AND add new goals. For example, I have long desired to re-start Camp Indecon, or something much like it. In fact, I have numerous business ideas I would love to try out (like the site you are visiting right now), but do not have the time to do so. I also have a book idea that I would love to get started writing. To find that time, I need to be more effective with what I currently do so that I can better create the world I want. I've been rereading David Allen's Getting Things Done, to help with personal productivity. I've also been experimenting in my Systems Analysis and Design class with methods of improving retention, but minimizing my time involvement. Within 5 years, I want to continue the productive activities I am doing today (research, teaching, and committee work), but with 20% more efficiency (freeing up 1 day a week for new projects/goals).

A big part of my thinking process above consisted of analyzing my past accomplishments. This analysis helped me judge my capabilities for continued success. Questions I asked myself: Consider what I have accomplished in the past 5 years. How structured was my pursuit of those goals? Did I have a plan to get where I am now? If I had a specific goals and a plan for achievement, could I have done more? If so, how much more?

As you can see, the first and third themes have [clear quantifiable goals](#). These are important for establishing bench marks for success. I am still working on a clear quantifiable goal for

theme 2. I see this one as a work in progress goal. But I realize I must come up with something if I want to ensure its success, hence my reference to a research project. What I've found is that the process of thinking about a quantifiable measure for success is just as important as the actual measurement itself. By thinking through how you will measure success, you must essentialize and concretize the theme from a nebulous idea into a clear, precise actionable item. By doing so, you force your mind to consider reality and your means of interacting with it ([reason](#)).

The last question I asked myself is "Are these 5 year goals doable, but make me stretch?" My answer is yes, they are all doable. Taken individually, none of the three stretch my capabilities, but trying to accomplish all three within 5 years will continue to push me. Could I push myself to do even more? Maybe, but not without losing my love of the work I'm doing. For example, I enjoy blogging, but it is nowhere listed in my long-term goals. Yet, I talk about many of my goals on here. Sometimes I brainstorm ideas out loud just to see if they make sense once I write them down. Sometimes I just need to vent so that I can get on with other more productive things. If I push myself to be hyper productive without taking into account my personality and hierarchy of values, it would ultimately be self-destructive. Context matters, so your goals should not neglect them.

Hopefully, my thinking out loud about writing 5 year goals helps you to do the same. I would love to hear about your experiences.

SMART GOALS AND PHILOSOPHY

In [Why Businessmen Need Philosophy](#), Dr. Harry Binswanger identifies your philosophy as the ultimate CEO in your life. What does that mean in practice? It means that if your philosophy is consistent with reality, it should provide the foundation for living. Take goal-setting. Based on what I understand about philosophy, I would suspect that an ideal approach to goal-setting would be based on your [values](#) - clearly [identified](#), [objectively](#) defined, and do not [contradict](#) reality. How does Objectivism relate industry best standards for goal-setting – to create [SMART goals](#) (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-bound)? Below, I discuss specific quotes from Rand that relate to these best practices.

Any mistakes in this application belong to me and not to Rand.

Specific:

Goals implicitly assume that something is changing. They are changing from one point to another. Those points can be identified. What has Rand said about change?

“They proclaim that there is no law of identity, that nothing exists but change, and blank out the fact that change presupposes the concepts of what changes, from what and to what, that without the law of identity no such concept as “change” is possible.”

My take: Epistemologically, identity proceeds change. If the point of a goal is to induce change in a certain direction, then we have identify the facts about the topic of change. Otherwise, we will only change randomly in any direction. I want to induce change in some direction, I need to clearly identify and specify the start and end point. The clearer, more specific, I can identify those points, the more focused my actions can be to induce the necessary change.

Measurable:

With goal-setting, you are dealing with reality.

“When it comes to applying his knowledge, man decides what he chooses to do, according to what he has learned, remembering that the basic principle of rational action in all aspects of human existence, is: “Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed.” This means that man does not create reality and can achieve his values only by making his decisions consonant with the facts of reality.”

Goals must relate to the facts of reality. This requires objectivity.

“Objectivity begins with the realization that man (including his every attribute and faculty, including his consciousness) is an entity of a specific nature who must act accordingly; that there is no escape from the law of identity, neither in the universe with which he deals nor in the

working of his own consciousness, and if he is to acquire knowledge of the first, he must discover the proper method of using the second; that there is no room for the arbitrary in any activity of man, least of all in his method of cognition—and just as he has learned to be guided by objective criteria in making his physical tools, so he must be guided by objective criteria in forming his tools of cognition: his concepts.”

How do we determine the specific nature of reality? Measurement.

“Measurement is the identification of a relationship—a quantitative relationship established by means of a standard that serves as a unit. Entities (and their actions) are measured by their attributes (length, weight, velocity, etc.) and the standard of measurement is a concretely specified unit representing the appropriate attribute. Thus, one measures length in inches, feet and miles—weight in pounds—velocity by means of a given distance traversed in a given time, etc.”

My take: From the section on specificity, we see that we must identify the relationship between where we are now and where we want to be. This identification requires objectivity in defining the relationship, with direct reference to reality. This relationship is measurable. While the measurement may be difficult to evaluate, it exists and should be used to verify progress towards a goal. The measurements should not be arbitrary, but correspond to the necessary conditions of the goal. This also means that if a goal is not measurable, chances are it has not been objectively defined. Setting a goal to be a “good reader” is too vague. What does it mean to be a “good reader”? The practical effect of non-measurable goals is an inability to track progress.

While I would not consider measurability an absolute necessity, the process of identifying a measurement focuses the mind on specifying the goal objectively.

Attainable:

The point of goals is that they are something you are working toward. If it is not attainable, then how can you work toward it? While the purpose of this goal setting practice is primarily psychologically focused, it also has philosophic implications.

“The Law of Identity (A is A) is a rational man’s paramount consideration in the process of determining his interests. He knows that the contradictory is the impossible, that a contradiction cannot be achieved in reality and that the attempt to achieve it can lead only to disaster and destruction. Therefore, he does not permit himself to hold contradictory values, to pursue contradictory goals, or to imagine that the pursuit of a contradiction can ever be to his interest.”

My take: Contradictions kill goals in their tracks. As Rand notes, pursuing contradictory goals will end in failure. Goals can also contradict reality, including the reality of who you are and your access to resources. For example, I could set a goal be a billionaire by next

Christmas. While not metaphysically impossible, the facts about my skills and knowledge contradict the necessities for completing the goal (at least at the present time). But note, I can improve my skills and knowledge and so as to bring the attainability of that goal closer in subsequent years.

There is also a fair amount of research that shows that setting goals that slightly stretch your abilities leads to the best results. In other words, pick goals that are attainable with slightly more effort than you think you have.

Relevant:

Goals implicitly identify what's [important](#) to an individual.

“The key concept, in the formation of a sense of life, is the term “important.” It is a concept that belongs to the realm of values, since it implies an answer to the question: Important—to whom? Yet its meaning is different from that of moral values. “Important” does not necessarily mean “good.” It means “a quality, character or standing such as to entitle to attention or consideration” (The American College Dictionary). What, in a fundamental sense, is entitled to one’s attention or consideration? Reality.”

She goes on to say:

“Important”—in its essential meaning, as distinguished from its more limited and superficial uses—is a metaphysical term. It pertains to that aspect of metaphysics which serves as a bridge between metaphysics and ethics: to a fundamental view of man’s nature. That view involves the answers to such questions as whether the universe is knowable or not, whether man has the power of choice or not, whether he can achieve his goals in life or not. The answers to such questions are “metaphysical value-judgments,” since they form the base of ethics.”

Rand makes clear that the base of ethics is not some arbitrary, subjective notion, but based on the facts of reality.

“There is only one fundamental alternative in the universe: existence or nonexistence—and it pertains to a single class of entities: to living organisms. The existence of inanimate matter is unconditional, the existence of life is not: it depends on a specific course of action. Matter is indestructible, it changes its forms, but it cannot cease to exist. It is only a living organism that faces a constant alternative: the issue of life or death. Life is a process of self-sustaining and self-generated action. If an organism fails in that action, it dies; its chemical elements remain, but its life goes out of existence. It is only the concept of ‘Life’ that makes the concept of ‘Value’ possible. It is only to a living entity that things can be good or evil.”

My take: When it comes to goals, Objectivism clearly concludes that goals should not only be relevant in general, but relevant to our own life. For examples, when I identified my [5 year](#)

[goals](#), I made sure they were relevant to my situation and were the most meaningful. This is the only life I have, so I should make the most of it. Goals direct the self-sustaining and self-generated action. If however, your goals contradict the necessities of life, they will harm your ability to survive. A goal to see how much poison I can drink without dying is just stupid on its face. Equally stupid might be a goal to see how much beer I can drink in one night. In a business, a relevant professional goal would be one that corresponds with the corporate strategy (is important). It becomes a win-win solution for both the individual and the organization.

Time-bound:

Change implies something occurring over time. Here Rand has the least to say other than to acknowledge the role of time in achieving values.

“Since a value is that which one acts to gain and/or keep, and the amount of possible action is limited by the duration of one’s lifespan, it is a part of one’s life that one invests in everything one values. The years, months, days or hours of thought, of interest, of action devoted to a value are the currency with which one pays for the enjoyment one receives from it.”

And in the realm of productivity:

“Agriculture is the first step toward civilization, because it requires a significant advance in men’s conceptual development: it requires that they grasp two cardinal concepts which the perceptual, concrete-bound mentality of the hunters could not grasp fully: time and savings. Once you grasp these, you have grasped the three essentials of human survival: time-savings-production. You have grasped the fact that production is not a matter confined to the immediate moment, but a continuous process, and that production is fueled by previous production. The concept of “stock seed” unites the three essentials and applies not merely to agriculture, but much, much more widely: to all forms of productive work.”

My take: It takes time to be productive and work towards one’s goals. And given our limited time alive, we should choose those goals carefully. While time is just another “measure” and should be included with the measurable section above, without it, we would not get the cool acronym SMART.

Conclusion:

While Rand had little to say specifically about goal-setting, I would imagine she would find these industry best practices to be congruent with her philosophy. Indeed, one of her students, [Dr. Edwin Locke](#), established much of the goal-setting research and literature from which SMART goals emerged.

Choose goals with the most relevance to our long-term happiness. Choose goals that we can attain and do not contradict our other goals or reality. Choose goals that are measurable, to ensure objectivity, and choose goals that are specific, to ensure identity. Do these things to create SMART goals and you will be well on your way to a happy, successful life.

TRANSLATING GOALS INTO ACTION

Watching the Olympics, I became amazed at the skills these men and women possess. To achieve such phenomenal skills requires more than just setting big long-term goals – like winning a gold in the Olympics. It requires many, many years of hard work coupled with intelligent training to achieve many sub-goals, building and culminating in world-class abilities. Before they can do a triple loop, they must master a single loop. Before they can master the super G, they must master skiing on the bunny slopes. In previous posts, I wrote about setting 5 year goals [here](#) and [here](#). As important as 5 year goals are, they are useless unless they can be translated into yearly, monthly, and weekly goals and ultimately – action.

How does one go about translating long-term goals into short-term goals? And how do daily practices help to achieve long-term goals? While it seems intuitive to just say, take your long-term goal, split it up into small parts and achieve those small parts in sequence until you achieve the long-term goals, this is a huge over-simplification. If there is one thing I've learned from large goals, it's that it's easy to fall behind on sub-goals. Once you fall behind, it's nearly impossible to catch up.

In software development, there is a well-known book called the [The Mythical Man-Month](#), written by a former IT manager at IBM, Fred Brooks. In this book, he explains why throwing more people at a project that's behind schedule frequently back-fires and causing a project to get further behind schedule. While the reason for this failure is in part due to increasingly difficult communication, the failure occurs at an individual level as well. This is not due to a lack of effort, will-power, or desire. But a simple limitation of human endurance. Beyond a certain point, more work fails to improve skills and may actually promote sloppy habits that hurt continued progress. Besides physical limitations (which varies by person), there are psychological limitations. Missed goals can lead to dejection. Overwhelming projects may lead to procrastination. Simplistic goals fail to gain interest and are neglected. It is a wonder we achieve anything!

Luckily, these issues can be overcome. As Dr. Edwin Locke has [shown](#), the mere fact of setting specific challenging goals improves performance. Personal productivity writers [David Allen](#) and [Stephen Covey](#) note that projects should and can direct specific day-to-day tasks. They each lay out aspects of improving your personal productivity (although I would love to see an integration of their two approaches). In general long-term goals get turned into short-term goals by laying out a plan to action, detailing specific requirements to achieve at each sub-goal,

and ensuring you push yourself at each step. Time-lines are important, but not the final arbitrator of success. Success is achievement of the goal.

Tips I've learned from translating long-term goals into actionable items:

Over-shoot the short-term goals. If you plan out the next 5 years into a series of short-term goals, do not just settle for staying on track. Set the short-term goal so that you'll be ahead of schedule. There will inevitably be emergencies that crop up and take time away from your goals. The best way to mitigate those emergencies is to be ahead before they hit, so you'll still be on track when the emergency is over.

Review your long-term goals on a regular basis. This helps ensure integration between short-term goals and long-term goals. It's easy to get caught up in the moment with a cool idea or new project. But if that project does not help the long-term goal, it necessarily takes time away from it, thereby hurting your chances at achieving it. Once a week or month, review your current projects in terms of your 5 year goals.

Know your limits, but stretch them. It's easy to over-plan and to under-plan. It's not so easy to plan just the right level of work that pushes you to do your best. In [Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience](#), Csikszentmihalyi describes how professionals at the top of their profession often discover a period of intense focus when all of their awareness melts into just the activity they are doing. This state of "flow" erupts when the professional is fully challenged with a specific task or goal that stretches their abilities. A surgeon, a tennis player, a concert pianist, a computer programmer – they all experience this same phenomena. Finding this sweet spot requires a bit of introspection, but once found, it can greatly enhance your productivity.

Use external milestones to push you. While in school, these external milestones are rather obvious. They are much harder to find in the business world, but if you look carefully there are many projects outside yourself or your business that have completion dates. Aligning your goals with these external projects can help you to stay focused and on track.

Dedicate large blocks of uninterrupted time each week to focus on the big projects. In some jobs this is easier than others. But in order to hit the "flow" state mentioned above, working without interruption is critical. Don't check your email. Let the phone go to voice mail. Stay off of Facebook. Do whatever it takes to get some work done.

Be prepared for change, and its corollary, don't plan too far ahead. While I have very clear 5 year goals, I have little idea what specific work I'll be doing in 4 years. There are simply too many things that can change in the world for me to waste time now planning for what may

become obsolete. Besides the typical innovative changes in your environment, your specific interests may change, you may get laid off from your current job unexpectedly, you may get married and start a family, you may have to start taking care of your parents, or you discover the opportunity of a lifetime. There is always something, so accept it and adjust.

As funny as this may sound, stay healthy! Eating right, getting enough sleep, and working out are prerequisites to long-term health. When you get sick, it's pretty difficult to accomplish your goals. So don't do it.

I have personally followed these tips with great success in completing my PhD and now, in launching my academic career. I know that I have room for improvement in my own productive practices, but with continued focus and determination, I will see results. In fact, improving my productive practices is one of my 5 year goals. I'm looking for roughly a 20% improvement in my productivity within that time. Writing this blog post is part of the process because it forces me to think about and articulate what has worked and not worked for me in the past. It provides me with a foundation to improve. As I discover more, I plan on writing about it. Let me know if you find it useful.

WHY DOING YOUR BEST IS NOT

We've all been there. In spite of our best intentions and diligent work, our performance never seems to meet what we see others accomplishing even though we know we should be able. We try our best, but our best never seems to be enough.

This happened to me recently over the past year. At the beginning of the year, I had plans to train for and race in another [triathlon](#). It has been nearly 8 years since I last raced, but with school, kids, marriage, moving, jobs, and a host of other reasons I had to put my training on hold. This year was going to be different. This year I was determined to race again. As spring rolled around, I signed up for at the local gym with an indoor pool, took my road bike in for a tune up, joined the email list for a local triathlon club, and bought new workout clothes. And while the summer proved a time with increasing endurance and strength, I found with December approaching that I'm no closer to fulfilling my goal. Somewhere along the path, I let my desire slide away. What happened? Why is my goal failing?

While I could sit here and list a host of excuses, the truth of the matter lies with a flaw with how I started. I started with the goal of "Do your best with training."

What's wrong with doing your best? Isn't that what your mom always told you to do? Have to take a test – do your best. Going to try out for football – try your hardest. Performing in the school band – perform the best you can. Trying hard is certainly better than not trying hard, but it suffers from a flaw that ultimately undermines the effort.

Dr. Edwin Locke, the premier researcher in goal-setting, [discovered](#) that individuals tasked with "do your best" assignments consistently under-perform tasks with specific, challenging goals. Today considered one of the most important management theories for improving employee performance, goal-setting is based on the findings by Locke, Latham, and others. Doing your best is not the best when it comes to actual performance.

"Do your best" is not effective because it leaves our minds foggy on just specifically what is supposed to be accomplished. When given the option, our mind would prefer less work not more. Thinking is hard work. So it's only natural that we would want to find excuses not to do it. "Do your best" gives our minds an out, an excuse, to ease up on our effort, in spite of our explicit desires. While we often do not see those excuses when they happen, with a bit of introspection we can.

This is exactly what happened to me in my wish to complete a triathlon. Before training, I would frequently find excuses not to work out, not because I was tired, injured, or sick. But

because I had to get home to help care for the kids, I had to clean the garage, or I had to write another blog post. Sometimes while working out, I would find excuses to end the work out long before I had pushed myself toward real growth. While I told myself that I would do my best, my best was often less than what I would do if I felt compelled to push myself to my limits and beyond. Unfortunately, I let my best be less than my best.

By adopting [specific](#), challenging goals, we can clearly organize our mind, marshal our efforts, plan effective strategies, and motivate ourselves around the task. The goals do not necessarily have to be self-set – externally set goals can be just as powerful. What’s important is that we accept them and make them our own. By making the goals specific, we can better identify what needs to be done to get from here to there. By making the goals challenging, we do not give up on the task before we have fully extended ourselves. If too easy, we easily surpass it and revert back to the “do your best” strategy.

Set goals. Set specific goals. And challenge yourself to constantly improve, grow, and learn. Don’t let “do your best” be your guiding principle or you’ll struggle to truly do your best, as ironic as it seems.

Push yourself to be better.

OVERCOMING THE HARD DECISIONS – WHAT TO DO

The hardest decision I ever had to make came about in the summer of 2007. At the time, I was a PhD student at Auburn University, working as a graduate assistant teaching 2 courses a year. I was just entering the job market and hunting furiously for a position for my eminent graduation that next spring. When out of the blue, Louisiana Tech (one of the locations where I had sent my resume) called me and asked if I could come for a 1 year appointment, starting in 3 weeks. On the upside, I would be making over 4 times my salary as a GA, I would only have to teach one course above and beyond my current teaching load at Auburn with no additional expectations, and I would increase my chances of landing a permanent position at the new institution. On the downside, I would have to move my family on short notice and with no knowledge of the area, I would have no guarantee that I wouldn't have to move them again in 1 year, I would have to finish my PhD long distance, and I would have to inform the department head at Auburn that I was quitting a week before Auburn's classes began. The money was very enticing, but the possible negatives to other values were huge. How could I decide?

In all decisions, easy to hard, the same principle applies – you have to apply your hierarchy of values. [Values](#) – all those things that you want to gain or want to keep – are necessary for living and directing your life. We value many things, from good food, restful sleep, and comfortable homes to a loving family, exciting friends, and an engaging career. There are so many things that we value, though, that it's easy to get confused as to how and when to apply them when they seem to conflict. Because the sheer volume of values, it is absolutely necessary to decide which values are most important – to establish a hierarchy. With this hierarchy, we can compare and contrast the expected results from a decision to determine how we are promoting our values best.

Just as ideas are context dependent, so is our hierarchy of values. Values depend on the time, place, timeline, people around us, and the things we are currently doing. For example, if I'm on vacation, the last thing I want to value is work because the whole point of a vacation is to get away from work. Similarly, when I'm at work, I don't want my joy of running to impact my ability to get a job done. Or if I'm having an intimate conversation with my wife, I'm not going to answer my phone.

Once a context for a decision is defined, the first step for establishing a hierarchy starts with the emotional impact of each value to gauge your subconscious importance. If considering what from the menu I want for dinner, I consider how each dish makes me feel now and what I expect to feel after the meal. Feelings can give you a quick and dirty appraisal of your

hierarchy. The only problem with feelings is that they are notorious for leading you to bad decisions. The second step is crucial – you must check your emotional response against reality through the use of reason. If you have used reason consistently throughout your life, your emotional response will likely be the right one. If you haven't, it won't. For example, there is a definite emotional appeal to say that your family comes before your career, but looking at reason you can see why I consider [my career more important than my family](#) – in the context of long-term individual happiness and success. While there are many cases where in short-term contexts my family is more important, long-term the only thing that can make life ideal is a career I passionately pursue.

When applying your hierarchy of values to a specific decision, it is important to explicitly identify all the values at stake. In my decision above, I had 3 major long-term values at stake, my career, my family, and my financial well-being – in that order. The important part was to consider career and family BEFORE the money. For my career, completing my PhD in 4 years was essential. That was my first concern and no short term job could take that value out of my vision. Next, I considered my second highest value, my family. For them, finding a less stressful family environment and more time for family fun was important. If the new job could help with that, then I would definitely consider it. For my financial well-being, more money is always better.

I started my decision by trying to mitigate any negatives to my highest values. So I talked with my dissertation chair to ensure that the move would not impact my working relationship with him nor would it impact my ability to complete my PhD in the time span I had set for myself. Secondly, I considered how to work the channels to inform the department head at Auburn of my decision to soften the blow. I didn't want her to be vindictive and try to hold up my degree for any reason. For my family, I had a deep conversation with my wife to see if this move was something that would be beneficially for both of us. I promised her she could, if she wanted, stay at home with the kids over the next year instead of running herself ragged working. I also contacted the new university to see if they could put me in touch with someone trustworthy for renting a house. There was little I could do to mitigate the quick timeline for the move. It would be painful. I would also lose about a month of research time with packing, moving, and adjusting to the new environment. But given the greater flexibility I would have at home, I could make up that time working in the evenings and weekends. After gathering all of this information, I realized that my career path would not be hurt and may be enhanced with the move, my family would experience a short term upheaval but would have less stress long-term, and my financial picture would be much healthier. For me, that was a green light to go.

Besides mitigating major negatives, another successful strategy for deciding includes redefining the context of the decision. For example, suppose you are unhappy with your current job but face a difficult employment environment. Instead of thinking in just terms of a job, perhaps you could expand the context by considering starting your own business, going back to school for training in a different field, or talking with your boss to see if something can be changed in your current position.

Three things to avoid 1) pursuing “values” that bring you suffering, 2) having poorly defined hierarchy of values, or 3) ignoring your hierarchy when making decisions. If you know what’s important for you and your life, making decisions becomes straight forward.

In short, discover the good, know how good it is, and then go get it. You are worth it.

HOW TO STOP WASTING TIME AND GET THE MOST OUT OF LIFE

Every action we choose requires time and effort – time and effort that could be spent doing another activity. So it's to our best interest to spend each second on activities that create the most value for us - on actions that are value-dense.

“Since a value is that which one acts to gain and/or keep, and the amount of possible action is limited by the duration of one’s lifespan, it is a part of one’s life that one invests in everything one values. The years, months, days or hours of thought, of interest, of action devoted to a value are the currency with which one pays for the enjoyment one receives from it.” ~ Ayn Rand

For example, I've met many wonderful women throughout my life. Yet only one packed such an incredible dense set of values that was consistent with my own, that I decided to marry her. I choose to spend my precious time with my wife because of the immense enjoyment I receive from the relationship. We love hiking, camping, board games, sci-fi, reading, discussing politics/philosophy/economics/technology/education, and on and on. As a couple, we strive to find activities that we both find fulfilling because we know that the more values we share together, the more enjoyable the relationship. The longer I'm in the relationship, the more value-dense the relationship becomes and the more enjoyable it becomes. We find new ways to connect and grow that makes the marriage more satisfying and enriching.

The same applies to friends. I choose friends that bring me the most values packed into one person. There are thousands of individuals I meet through classes, conferences, shopping, social groups, teaching, consulting, and Facebook, many of whom I could spend time interacting with. Although I have the opportunity to spend time with these thousands, I reserve my time and effort for few individuals that bring me the most joy through our shared values. And guess what, those individuals are value-dense. Friends that love playing the same games I do, that like drinking the same beers I do, that enjoy talking about the same things I do, that are interested in trying the same things I want to try, that make me laugh, and that expect me to be the best that I can be but support me when I need a helping hand. I do not want to spend time with people when conversations are stilted and uncomfortable or where we share no common interests. In short, I do not have thousands of friends because I choose not to. I would rather have few friends that are value-dense than lots of friends with few shared interests.

Besides people, careers can be value-dense. After discovering my [central purpose in life](#), I pursued a career as a professor of information systems. I love technology, business, and philosophy. I enjoyed teaching, reading, writing, and helping others make better decisions. As such, my chosen career is value-dense, it combines my interests and skills such that every

minute in this career is pure awesome. I could have picked a career as a philosophy professor or an IT professional or high school teacher - each of which would have added some values. But none are as dense in values as my current choice. That's why I love my job so much.

Food should also be value-dense. One of the things that attracts me to the [paleo-diet](#) (even if I'm not fully following it) is the notion that we should eat food that brings us the most value pound for pound. Why eat things that contain little to no nutritional value? Calories certainly give us some energy, but vitamins and minerals are such an integral part of nutritional health, that we should be eating far more of it than we currently do.

It makes sense to apply that same principle to pursuing all values as densely as possible, including buying things. As a financial principle, we should spend money on things that are value-dense – things that pack the most value into the budget we have. This doesn't mean we should be frugal. Rather, we should identify those things that will bring the most value and then pursue them with a passion. Suppose you love to travel. There are certainly expensive ways and cheap ways to travel. Properly identifying the value you gain from traveling will help you make the optional value choices as to where to spend money when you travel. Do you enjoy the pampering you get at hotels? Then by all means, spend money on a nice hotel. Do you enjoy immersing yourself in the local culture? Then maybe skimping on the hotel is justified and splurging on local events may suit you best.

Combined, all of these examples suggest a value-dense approach to life is ideal and achievable. Leave the career that does not fulfill you. Find friends that match your values and goals. Spend money on things that bring the greatest happiness to your life. And avoid the rest. Don't let unenjoyable things suck your life away. Be sure the values you pursue are rational and life-affirming. But once they are, spend your time and energy on those values prudently. Time and energy is precious. Decisions on how to spend your time and energy should be based on achieving maximal value and should be pursued with full consciousness and awareness of opportunities passed up for the choices made.

WHY AMBITION IS A VIRTUE?

In a world where ambition is sometimes frowned upon, why should you explicitly focus on such a habit and more so, consider it a virtue? Consider this definition of [ambition](#) by Ayn Rand: “THE SYSTEMATIC PURSUIT OF ACHIEVEMENT AND OF CONSTANT IMPROVEMENT IN RESPECT TO ONE’S GOAL.” By this conception, we can envision a positive aspect to ambition. Most of us want to improve our understanding of the world. We want to improve our financial situation. We want to improve our abilities. We want to improve our relationships. We want to improve our enjoyment of life.

It is imperative to have and pursue goals in order to stay alive. When these goals are based in reality, we have the framework for developing goals towards higher and higher achievements that are fulfilling and meaningful. I could not and would not be satisfied with my current income level for the rest of my life – not because my current salary is insufficient to enjoy life, but because a flat income would be a sign that my life has become stagnate. Once I achieve today’s goals, I set my bar higher for tomorrow’s goals. As I continually push myself to be the best that I can be, I increase my enjoyment of life, both in terms of the process of accomplishing the goals and in terms of enjoying the fruits of completed goals. If I am a better professor, I enjoy my day-to-day activities better and enjoy an increased research productivity and teaching effectiveness. If I find ways to increase my income, I am better able to experience today’s wonders and be better prepared for tomorrow’s emergencies. If I am a better husband, I will have a more fulfilling relationship with my wife. If I am a better father, I will have a better relationship with my children, both now and when they become fully independent, virtuous, and happy adults. Ambition is this desire to be better.

Ambition turns for the worse when our goals become irrational (i.e. political power, prestige, etc.). It’s not that ambition is wrong or a vice, but the goals are wrong. The dark side of ambition rears its ugly head when we reject reason and seek second-handed goals. Not success by our own measure but success that can only be granted by others. Doing this puts happiness and success outside of our immediate control. The only means to gain control in these cases is by manipulating others or demanding sacrifice, either of oneself or of others. Neither option works. Think about the person who seeks prestige for prestige sake. How can they accomplish that? Prestige is not something that is granted without a reference to extraordinary skill or ability worth granting recognition too. If someone seeks to master a skill just to gain prestige, what happens when someone better comes along? The prestige seeker is suddenly unsuccessful - suddenly unhappy. Their life would be thrown into turmoil. In a world with 6 billion people, how easy is it for someone better to come along? The prestige seeker will be

constantly on-edge because their prestige could fade away. They would have to focus energy, not on improving their life, but on maintaining their prestige, investing inordinate amounts of time to convince people they are worthy of recognition. If they reject this recognition, the prestige seeker's life would be in shambles.

Instead of second-handedness, ambition requires goals tied to rational selfishness. This allows us to live a happy, purposeful, and successful life.

HOW TO MAKE GOOD HABITS INEVITABLE

Do you want to eat better? Do you struggle with procrastination? Have you ever wanted to be more focused on the big things in life, like my secret passion to become master juggler? Developing good habits and fostering principled virtues are difficult for many of us. They require continued practice and effort. With all that work, the process of developing or changing habits may seem to require exceptional willpower that few of us have. How do you make the development of habits inevitable? The answer: daily accountability calls.

A good friend of mine, a teacher at the prestigious [VanDamme Academy](#), introduced me to the idea of the daily accountability call (who got the idea from his friend, founder of the [Center for Industrial Progress](#)). Every morning during the work week, we spend 10-15 minutes answering simple, yet directed questions about selected habits that we want to improve. These questions take one of two types, things we expect to accomplish before the end of the call and questions reflecting on our previous day's success. The questions are always low commitment, like "Rate on a scale of 1 to 10 how self-aware you were yesterday," "Is your room clean?", "Is your inbox empty?", or "Did you spend 5 minutes yesterday juggling?" By asking the same questions day after day, we begin to internalize the questions, turning the constant attention into inevitable actions. Not inevitable in the sense that we are determined, but inevitable in the sense that our most frequent thoughts get the most attention and hence action. It really can be that simple to overcome a lack of willpower.

Why does this work? It works because we induce our mind to consistently think about your daily actions. Depending on the complexity of the habit, it can take as little as a month and as much as a year to before a habit becomes ingrained. But all of us are prone to get distracted by vacations, holidays, birthdays, special projects, or kids vomiting projectiles for a week straight. These distractions throw us off from habit formation, making it difficult to develop the habit unless we use our force of willpower to get us back on track (or the force of willpower to not to vomit ourselves). By placing the habit formation in the hands of a friend, we become accountable to our friend. You are accountable to your calling partner and he is to you. Since you write the questions you must account for, you control the habits and virtues most meaningful to you. If we get thrown off for a day or even week, your daily calls puts you right back on track. And since you write the questions to ask each other far in advance, no short-term mood swings or emergencies throw us off track.

It is important to keep the questions at a low commitment level so that we do not come to dread the meetings, otherwise the temptation to skip, delay, or cancel the accountability call

becomes too strong. That would defeat the purpose of the call. I enjoy keeping in touch with my friend, who lives on the opposite side of the country. I want to look forward to the conversation, so I like to keep the questions positive and conversation focused on incremental improvement. Each call should not be one admitting constant failure. Nor should it feel like a police interrogation. Occasionally, bad days happen. That is expected. If a series of bad days do not prompt a change in behavior, then perhaps the habit is ill-defined or not as important as originally thought. Reconsider or modify the questions if need be, but don't give up the call. Keep in mind, incremental progress every day leads to huge improvements in the long run.

It is also important not turn the call into a bull session. This can be difficult if you or your call partner is talkative. If this is the case, set a time limit. No more than 20 minutes per call. If there is a story you want to share with him or her, quickly schedule a time to talk later in the day to share the story. Or pick an accountability partner who is more matter of fact or to rushed to spend more than 20 minutes on a call.

This simple technique is a great way to make habits inevitable through daily thought and action. Use it and enjoy the benefits.