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Outwitting Our Minds' Resistance to Being Reverse-Engineered

I used to work with hundreds of mice in the laboratory. I noticed that sometimes, they acted strangely when they are stressed out. Instead of being aggressive and attacking us, they default into what one might think of as “recreational” activities for mice--they might start grooming themselves, or hop onto a running wheel if they have access to one.

I used to judge the mice--if only you knew that you might have a chance at escaping if you attack us! Or maybe hop onto our limbs and scamper off in a grand escape, like Pinky and the Brain!



Pinky:

Gee, Brain. What are we going to do tonight?

The Brain:

The same thing we do every night, Pinky. Try to take over the world!

Now I see that I think the same critical thoughts towards myself. I am, much like you and everyone else, living with a higher background stress level since 2020.

But my version of licking my fur is fiddling with my information capture system. *Should I use Notion or go back to Evernote?* Maybe if I use Apple Notes too, then I can jot down my thoughts faster for the initial capture...yes yes, I must write an article about this...

As you can see, **“distraction through productivity” and self-criticism are some of the clever ways the mind uses to prevent reverse-engineering.** (The reasons *why* the mind doesn’t want itself to be understood or examined are a mystery, and one I’d like to write about at another time.) But what I’d like to point out is the ubiquitous presence of this “productive” pattern, where we occupy ourselves with activities to self-soothe and provide a sense of control over the chaotic world we live in. And at the same time, denigrate ourselves for doing so.

One obvious “solution” to both of these challenges are to practice mindfulness or to meditate. And I see that more and more people are incorporating these practices into their lives, with positive outcomes. This is great!

But as our strategies to develop self-awareness evolve, so will the mind’s ability to deceive and distract us from our goals.

A Self-Guided Tour for the Mind

One of the insidious tricks of the mind is to co-opt “solutions” to prevent us from really looking inside. For example, if we use meditation or mindfulness only as a self-soothing/calming mechanism and neglect to use the settled mind state to examine the causes of our suffering, then we are unable to progress further along in our spiritual maturity.

But evaluating our own spiritual practice is tricky. Unlike say, a sport, or playing a musical instrument, there are no sensory cues with which a teacher can evaluate your progress. It’s all in our heads, right? And it’s challenging to articulate feelings and emotions beyond surface ones that we share with others on a daily basis. *(Although it’s sometimes frustrating to hear that aspects of spirituality are ineffable, I believe this is what the scriptures are pointing to--human languages have not evolved to necessitate the communication of inner workings of the mind, so we literally don’t have the words for them!)*

Instead, I can only point you to good teachers who can, through deepened practice, provide guiding questions for self-evaluation. Here’s an excellent article from Gil on the topic. It’s quite dense (a lot of questions!) so it’s not meant to be understood in one reading, but instead referred to like a map, to see if we are heading approximately in the right direction.

[Skillful Ways to Evaluate Your Practice](#) - Gil Fronsdal

Key snippet: *“An important part of practice is appreciating the insights that come with it. It’s not just a matter of becoming calm, but also understanding how your mind works, how your heart*

works, and what the causes and conditions of suffering and liberation are. As you look more deeply, can you see how you create a sense of self?"

Self-Acceptance as Baseline

The other “trick” my mind likes to play on me is injecting my day with self-criticizing thoughts, similar to those I admonished the mice with. The insidious side of this is that the mind can take something beneficial such as spiritual practice, and twist it on its head. For example, the constant feeling of “not good enough” can sometimes morph into ““this meditation session was not good enough...!”

But what I’ve learned is that **true self-examination can’t really take place while that “not good enough” tune is ringing, and it’s also part of the mind’s system to prevent being reverse-engineered.** Much like in military warfare, lowering a troop’s morale can be a highly effective tactic. I would like to expand on self-acceptance and the challenges thereof in a future essay, but here are some resources to tide us all over for now:

[What If You Did Everything Right Yesterday?](#) - Jon Bell

This thought experiment by my friend Jon is one that I have not heard anywhere else, but I find highly effective as a form of radical self-acceptance. It’s what got me through writing this essay! Key Snippet: *“What if everything you did yesterday was right? What if some omniscient power could have a chat with you about how you did and say “actually, you did everything perfectly yesterday.”*

[Two Bad Bricks](#) - Ajahn Brahm

This is a sample of Ajahn Brahm’s brilliant teachings—he tells relatable stories despite being a monastic, and this one in particular illustrates his own fallibility and perfectionism. Here’s a longer talk by Ajahn Brahm called [“You’re Good Enough”](#) on his YouTube channel if you’d like to hear more talks by one of the most light-hearted monks today.

As our strategies to develop self-awareness evolve, so will the mind’s ability to deceive. So instead of criticizing mice for their strange self-soothing behaviors, I now understand that there is a paradox at play here—we have to simultaneously see when we are distracted, and also allow kindness towards ourselves when distractions happen. Therefore, **the balance of self-examination and self-acceptance is what we can reliably use to navigate the path of spiritual maturity and begin the reverse-engineering process.**

Colophon

Questions from Draft 1:

1. It's rough around the edges with raw emotions, and I'm trying to say something that's...kind of direct, and designed to "shake up" the reader's worldview. Did I succeed here or do you think I missed the mark?
2. The intro ended up really long before I got to my point...but in a way I feel I really wanted to give a very precise context to the list that is quite different from the usual expected context for this kind of content. (I personally think this context might be more important than the curated list itself...or maybe I just wanted to twist the prompt to fit what I want to write today, haha!) What are your thoughts on how to structure this better?

Kind Reviewers:

- Sam Millunchick
- Stephen Samuel
- Chris Wong
- Tobi Emonts-Holley
- Raymond Song
- Nick Miller
- Lyssa Menard
- Paolo Belcastro

Revision Log:

- Draft 3 To-Do List
 - Refine language, run through Pro-Writing Aid
 - Refine self-acceptance portion to include more detailed arguments
 - Add more resources/links
- Draft 2:
 - Tabled for a future essay:
 - Tobi suggested "agree with this fully, might be good to explore why we don't practice mindfulness in those times though. Keeping busy feels safer as we do not want to 'waste time' doing nothing."
 - Lyssa suggested writing about mindfulness/awareness vs meditation as a practice
 - Incorporated reviewers' comments--there were so many good ones! I rearranged the structure of the essay to separate the self-examination vs self-acceptance parts, and added explanations for "reverse engineering." I also state that I don't discuss "why" the mind doesn't want to be reverse-engineered b/c that is a chunky separate topic!