

Edit 8.3.24: added another point to the list, now there are 5.

Edit 18.6.24 The mammoth metaphor

<https://waitbutwhy.com/2014/06/taming-mammoth-let-peoples-opinions-run-life.html> is very similar to what i am talking about. Though i don't fully support it, because the author's conclusions are too solipsistic and amoral.

Control over worldview and emotions ("my Enlightenment")

[Has one mention of suicide at the very beginning.]

When I was 14, my life was terrible and I desperately wanted to kill myself every day. Then I had an important realization, and stopped.

For many months after that I felt an indescribably beautiful serenity, just living my life without hating myself or wanting to die.

I called this moment "my enlightenment", though I don't mean anything mystical by that, nor want to imply it was a unique achievement. But it was what many people mean when they say "enlightenment" – it helped me overcome suffering.

If I was a different person, less committed to rationality, with less knowledge about how the world works, I would probably, as many other people do, think that this process of "enlightenment" is the most important thing about my life, and the world generally, that I must dedicate all my life to teaching other people to achieve it, and that all the problems people have in the world are a result of not knowing how to achieve it.

This isn't what I think. There are many different problems about the world that need to be solved. In fact, "people who think that the one thing that really helped them in life is the single thing everyone else needs and will solve all problems in the world" is one of those many problems.

But the thing I realized is still important, even if not uniquely so, and probably less important than meta-politics. Which is why I am writing only one post about it instead of many.

The principle is a widely known one, having similarities with Stoicism, Buddhism, Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, and “The Work”. Which is another reason I write only one post about it – most of the things that can be said were already said. I am mostly writing a short introduction and my personal experience with it.

The most important realization that I made was that emotions (negative ones, specifically) don’t just happen. They are a result of the way I see the world. I feel scared when a scary thing happens, but there is nothing that is objectively scary. There are only things I consider scary, perceive as scary, believe are scary. I believe, even if subconsciously, not just that those things are scary, but that those things *deserve* being scared of, that I *should* be scared of them.

I am not scared of things that I don’t believe are scary, but this is ultimately a quality of me, not of those things. So if I can change how I see those things, I can change my emotional response.

The same thing about being angry at people who are doing annoying things. And being sad about sad things happening in the world.

(One thing that helped reach that conclusion is that many of my responses were already different from most people’s because of different beliefs. I never thought death is bad, so I never feared it, and wasn’t sad about other people dying. I never felt proud or insulted, because I never considered anything a reason for pride, or perceived anything people said as an insult. Even if I knew they meant it as an insult. I just didn’t care.

“People can be hurt by stupid things because they pointlessly care about them” was a very obvious fact throughout my life. See also

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cosDzsAK6bISS-xpqjCh5g1-RrF7PUqb>)

There is no point in being scared of things if it doesn’t help me avoid them. There is no point in being angry or sad if it doesn’t help you solve the problem that makes you angry or sad (in my case, it did the exact opposite 99% of the time). Pain is an indicator of your body being damaged, but it doesn’t help you if you already know your body is being damaged (especially if it is damaged on purpose, like for medical tests), and often hinders you in trying to avoid further damage to your body.

So I tried to convince my mind that people don’t deserve me being angry at them. That actually there are no scary things. That there is no point in being sad about terrible things that happen, and my main response to them should instead be “I must go and do something to fix it this instant!”. Instead of wasting energy on hating myself for not being a good enough person, I should go spend this energy on doing something that will actually be good and make me a good person, because the self-hatred wouldn’t help with that, if anything it will make improvement harder.

And it worked!

When I visited a psychologist several years later, he started explaining about a behavioral model describing a person's behavior as "event->interpretation->emotion->reaction", and while we can't always control events, can never control emotions, and our responses are heavily influenced by emotions, we can consciously control and change our interpretations of events, which changes our emotions. And I responded "oh yeah, I know, and discovered and then applied it at 14".

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rational_emotive_behavior_therapy

There are many stories about people who had their brain damaged in a way that changed their emotions. One of them (I remember those facts very clearly, but can't find the specific place where I read this) was a man who lost his ability to be scared. One of his experiences he told about was that previously, he had a recurring nightmare about escaping from huge terrible black dogs that want to eat him. After the change to his emotions, he still often had the same dream. The dogs were just as big and as black. They were still running after him. But it wasn't scary. It was just a situation. They are running, he is running, they are black, so what? What is there to be afraid of? This is very similar to my situation. Including having less nightmares. Though I do still have them sometimes.

It didn't magically work to completely eliminate all my negative emotions.

I do still feel anger, and pretty often. But it is always very short. No more than around 3 seconds. It appears in me and then disappears again. My anger is like sparks that want to light a fire, but can't, because there isn't any fuel for them, as I don't encourage and strengthen my anger, not thinking that anger is a correct or reasonable response. Not winding myself up (as I always did before, and as, I think, most people do without noticing). I acknowledge that my mind felt anger, and then just continue onward.

There are many negative emotions I didn't manage to convince myself are useless and should go, like stress and guilt. I don't just suppress them because they feel bad (though I currently read "Replacing Guilt" www.mindingourway.com/guilt which might change my mind on it).

It didn't visibly help with pain. My pain threshold is much higher now than it was before, but that may be just being an adult instead of a kid. A mental technique didn't help much with a problem that was more physical than emotional. Pretty predictable.

Important things to note:

1) I didn't try to suppress my emotions, didn't ignore them. I am very aware of my emotions, and do feel them. (There are situations that are extremely unusual and do cause me to cry for literal hours, though they are rare)

Suppressing and ignoring your emotions is a bad idea, and you should be careful to avoid it.

I don't have any personal experience with problems it causes, but here's the story of someone who does:

<https://www.lesswrong.com/posts/qmXqHKpgRfg83Nif9/how-to-ignore-your-emotions-w-hile-also-thinking-you-re>

(Note to the people who don't want to read the linked post because they are opposed to LessWrong on principle: this is a post by a guy who explains how trying to be so rational he doesn't have emotions was bad and you shouldn't do it, which is opposed to the stereotypical ethos you probably associate with LessWrong.)

2) I only decided to do this whole thing because I concluded that not being able to be scared didn't make me worse at avoiding dangerous things, and not feeling sorrow or anger doesn't make me worse at fixing problems and making the world better. (Maybe they made me worse in an absolute sense, but if I kept feeling them all the time I would be far less able to do anything at all than in my present state.) If you think anger is an important part of your motivation for fixing things that anger you (or pain is an important part of your self-preservation), trying to convince yourself out of emotions may be a bad idea.

3) I didn't just stop feeling those emotions. It wasn't the only goal and a singular action. It was the end of a long process, of understanding myself, what things I need in life, what I value. Why I value what I value, and what things I just thought are important because of mental inertia, and stopped believing.

4) There might be a difference between "wanting X" and "expecting X", where expectation causes suffering and not just desire. Maybe. You can recognize that a thing is bad and work to change it, without suffering about it, because you don't believe you should suffer. But that's a deep topic about specific flavors of emotions, that I am not good at describing, and is probably very different for different people.

5) This might not work. I am pretty certain not literally everyone can control their emotions the way I did. Maybe some people can do it but not to the same extent of feeling enlightened and amazingly serene. And maybe you can convince yourself out of some emotions but not others. I wouldn't be surprised if there are people who can convince themselves out of caring about pain, which I failed at, but would have very hard time doing it with most emotions.

The important thing is, it's an option. If you have emotions you want to stop feeling, you can always try. And it's fine if you fail.

Since formulating all those principles, I encountered in two places ideas that are similar but worse, and I will explain how to further articulate my approach to emotional control.

Eliezer Yudkowsky, also on LessWrong, wrote a post called Feeling Rational

<https://www.lesswrong.com/posts/SqF8cHjJv43mvJJzx/feeling-rational>

Which says that you should only feel emotions when they are a result of correctly understanding reality (which I fully agree with, understanding reality is important), “only be scared of things if they really are scary”, which I don’t agree with. There is no such thing as “things that are truly scary”. You just believe them to be or not be scary. There are things that are dangerous, but there is nothing that says you must be scared of dangerous things. Where is the theorem of probability that proves “The Way must oppose my calm” if I want to be calm in that situation?

“Only be scared of real things” is a good first step, but the obvious next step you should try immediately after is “try to not be scared at all”.

Yudkowsky doesn’t believe in being so rational you don’t feel emotions, and this in my opinion is the reason he is WRONG (in this specific context).

(He is fully correct about the fact people shouldn’t be embarrassed to feel strong emotions or care about things deeply. That is just obvious.)

Later a friend recommended me the book “Loving What Is” by Byron Katie.

Just like with the psychologist, my main response was “yeah, I know this”. But I also disagree with the book deeply.

It’s written in a very flowery and somewhat mystical style, with a lot of vague and positive sounding phrasings. Which I dislike, but that by itself doesn’t make it wrong. No, the problem [1] is that those vague wordings cause the book to have a terrible conclusion (I don’t know if that was intentional on the author’s part or not, but it’s not that important – the book is written the way it’s written, people will learn what the book says rather than what the authors want it to).

The book is phrased in such a way to imply that “the reversal”, changing your thoughts to be something different than they were, is an inherently good thing. That it “connects you with your inner truth”, or something like that (I don’t remember the exact words because they all blur together). That it is always better to reverse your thoughts. And that is fully, 100% false.

All of the principles behind controlling your beliefs and “the reversal” only make sense on the assumption that morality is subjective, that things are arbitrary. There are no good or bad things (things can be meta-good and meta-bad, see my essay on meta-morality [<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1HqdF1eXfdZy31JDrC-KqpiXprfzRY>]

[DC1](#)], but it's not the same thing), only things you decide are bad or good. This is why you can change your beliefs about what should trouble you and what shouldn't, because they are ultimately arbitrary. And so it must be your choice.

If you are angry about people leaving socks on the floor, you can convince yourself socks on the floor are fine. But there is nothing "true" about that. The version of you that believes there is no problem isn't a truer version of you than the one that believes the socks are a problem. A happier version, yes. But that is not the same thing. You can choose to make the change that makes you happier. But you can choose not to.

I could, in addition to not feeling anger, sorrow and fear, stop caring about other people, feeling responsibility, worrying about problems other people have. I would have been even happier then. I chose not to. Because it is very important to me to help other people as much as I can. The happiness of others is more important than my happiness. This is my choice. And there is nothing but those choices that makes moral beliefs right.

And that brought me to realizing a thing that may be note 6) In the previous list, and possibly the most important one.

When the world doesn't fit your expectations, you can change either your expectations, or the world. You can't change everything about the world, so if you want your expectations to be met fully, you must change them too. "Change what I can and accept what I can't" as the saying goes.

But also the wisdom to distinguish the two. Even if you can change all of your expectations (which you often can't), nothing says that you should only change them instead of the world too, even if it is technically a solution to the problem.

Some problems can only be solved by realizing they were never problems in the first place. But some actually do need solving.

And that is something Byron Katie seems to not understand. And maybe Stoicism and Buddhism? And maybe REBT. My psychologist brought up REBT in the first place, when responding to my complaint "I don't have energy to function, which means I can't write my super important essays about meta-morality and meta-politics and controlling your beliefs that will help the world" with "well, maybe you don't need to write those essays. Maybe you don't need to help the world, or function at all. Have you thought about that?"

Seriously?!

I know I can stop caring about the problem. I don't want to. I want to solve it and I need help.

My goal is not to feel fine about not improving the world, my goal is to improve the world. Because that is the goal I chose.

You can always choose to care about anything. You can always choose not to.

Always remember it.

[1] Another problem could be the social way the community is organized, the fact The Work is made before an audience which can judge you, preventing you from actually doing the things that are better for you. And generally people should make the standard “is my community by any chance a cult” check, though I don’t have any specific evidence that their social organization is bad, just general suspicion.

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Other published Google drive pages (with long and short essays on various weird topics):

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Wnk9CP7qrFzV0nzNbKapc7b4u_QJeqZN

(maybe I will post them to a blog at some point)

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