Self-Sufficiency & the Good Life

by

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Nature and Art: material and workmanship. There is no beauty unadorned and no excellence that would not become barbaric if it were not supported by artifice: this remedies the evil and improves the good. Nature scarcely ever gives us the very best; for that we must have recourse to art. Without this the best of natural dispositions is uncultured, and half is lacking to any excellence if training is absent. Everyone has something unpolished without artificial training, and every kind of excellence needs some polish.

— Baltasar Gracián, *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* (1655)
In 2011 at Google’s Zeitgeist Conference, Stephen Hawking, the internationally renowned physicist, declared, “Philosophy is dead.” Is he right? Specifically, he went on to assert that science has become humanity’s chief vehicle for the discovery of answers to fundamental ontological questions such as, “Why are we here?” or “Where do we come from?” I would not disagree with Professor Hawking here, nor do I lament that science plays such a role. Yet, is the understanding of being, reality, and other theoretical topics truly what the study of philosophy, at its core, is about? While knowledge of this sort, however obtained, most certainly does affect the practice of philosophy – as it always has – philosophy proper describes a more expansive field. Perhaps analysis of the natural world via naked speculation is dead. Regardless, that procedure was but a single one of philosophy’s numerous aspects, and should not be held identical to philosophy itself.

What is philosophy, then? In the Apology, Plato’s account of the trial in which Socrates was sentenced to death, Socrates tells the people of Athens, “to let no day pass without discussing goodness… is really the very best thing that a man can do, and that life without this sort of examination is not worth living.”¹ Put more succinctly, from the Crito this time, “The really important thing is not to live, but to live well.”² Philosophy, on my account, begins with this contemplation of what the ‘Good Life’ might be and with inquiries into how it can be realized in the everyday lives of individuals. Any notion that reflection of this sort is either no longer

¹ Another Platonic dialogue, which depicts a conversation between Socrates and his student, Crito, during the former’s imprisonment after his trial.
necessary today, or now answerable purely by scientific means, is untenable. The inquiry posed by philosophy can never end, I, along with many others, would argue, because there are no definitive answers, only interpretations that continually change as human culture evolves and spawns different epistemic tools with which individuals can answer the question afresh, to the chagrin of an immediate past that believed it had resolved the matter.

The close relationship between the practice of philosophy and everyday life was more apparent centuries ago than it is in modernity. The philosophers of Classical Antiquity devoted themselves to imparting “not…ready-made knowledge, but…that training and education that would allow their disciples to ‘orient themselves in thought, in the life of the city or in the world,’”3 as Pierre Hadot extensively describes in his Philosophy as a Way of Life. Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Skepticism represent but a few illustrious schools in this tradition. Epictetus, a Stoic philosopher from the first century BCE, explicitly portrays philosophy as a practical discipline: “But when I do find someone who explains [philosophical texts], what remains is to carry out what has been conveyed to me. This alone is grand. But if I am impressed by the explaining itself, what have I done but ended up a grammarian instead of a philosopher….”4 Alongside Epictetus and the Stoics, the other ancient schools each endeavored to continue the work of Socrates by fashioning conceptions of the universe and then positing what living well in their respective universes would entail. Such discourse gave birth to literary characters – “sages” – that personified the complete internalization of the individual schools’ worldviews and values.
The works of a handful of more contemporary philosophers, such as Michel de Montaigne, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Michel Foucault, produce sages of their own, as Alexander Nehamas examines in his book, *The Art of Living*. According to Nehamas, the exercise of philosophy as a mode of living is fundamentally about such artistic creation. In his view, all philosophical pursuit after the Good Life involves the self-application of stylistically linked philosophical principles to oneself until (theoretically) no element of one’s life, in either one’s personality or one’s actions, remains accidental. One thus becomes identical to those unforgettable persona found in the best novels, though able to stand apart from them, whose entire narrative existences can be anticipated by attentive readers due to the eccentric yet coherent psychological compositions of those persona. To undertake such a process, Nehamas states, is to become a true individual because while it uses materials extracted from the outside world, it allows one to determine for oneself how one’s life will play out going forward, regardless of the particular external circumstances.

My own attempt to go beyond reflection and to live philosophically saw inspiration during the beginning of my third year at Wesleyan, when I concurrently took a philosophy seminar on Spinoza’s *Ethics* and an intellectual history course surveying texts from Classical Greece to the Italian Renaissance. Up to that point in my life, I had found myself feeling increasingly exhausted and directionless. I had come to feel an emptiness of sorts, and petty disdain for my surroundings, lingering within me almost constantly. This feeling would be most distinct on Sunday mornings. I lived for the weekends – too brief reprieves from the monotonous and tiring routine of my weekdays. Yet, no matter whatever happened while going out
with friends or relaxing by myself, weekend exploits repeatedly proved to be disappointedly unfulfilling. Looking ahead, I would envision my future morosely. All I would see was another week of putting myself under stress to do well in school, maintaining myself physically and managing other responsibilities that brought me difficulty, however much I might have held them in high regard, all for nothing save an illusory break – and a bland one at that. When we are younger, we live our lives anxiously anticipating various milestones.

What I felt others have also experienced in various contexts. Our first lengthy school assignments, athletic competitions, music recitals, bar/bat mitzvahs or first communions, first kisses, losses of virginity, and numerous other cultural rites of passage bring with them anticipatory stress but often ultimate letdown. They all initially seem of heavy significance and we assume that once we pass them our lives will somehow be easier. However, we soon realize that it is not so; an infinite number of struggles await us afterwards, and no good that we have experienced in the past will ever guarantee triumph over those struggles for us. In the words of Arnold Schopenhauer, the arch-pessimist,

All willing springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering. Fulfillment brings this to an end; yet for one wish that is fulfilled there remain at least ten that are denied…. No attained object of willing can give a satisfaction that lasts and no longer declines; but it is always like the alms thrown to a beggar, which reprieves him today so that his misery may be prolonged till tomorrow.6

As the harsh reality of this perspective became increasingly apparent to me, I wondered what it would mean for the remainder of my life.

In addition, with graduation ever approaching, the incongruity between being a sociable and productive member of adult society and the seemingly self-indulgent nature of my choice areas of academic study (philosophy and intellectual history) and
leisure (immersing myself in escapist fiction of all sorts) weighed heavily upon me. Since I was a very young boy, my parents’ instruction to do well in school had guided how I lived, but it now started to appear that general academic talent would not translate into an ability to thrive outside of school. What do you do when your sole gauge of personal aptitude reveals itself to be inaccurate? I felt torn by jealousy towards individuals pursuing degrees in economics or the hard sciences, and even more so towards those who seemed genuinely interested in contemporary events. It seemed evident that the adult world would be a place in which I would have to jettison all that I held comforting or immediately engaging wherever the world dictated I go. I appreciated that resigning myself to such fate as a given would be the mature course of action, but that did not make it appear any less raw as my possible future. Friedrich Schiller perfectly described this perspective when he wrote,

[Man] can no longer be the sort of entity that wills, if there is even a single case where he absolutely must do what he does not want to do. This singular, terrifying case of simply being necessitated to do what he does not want to do, will haunt him like a ghost and hand him over to the blind terrors of the imagination, something that is actually the case for the majority of people.  

I wondered how one could remain motivated when it appeared that one’s future would largely involve the performance actions always at least partially contrary to one’s will that in any case would never grow easier in the long term.

But my outlook changed as I read Spinoza’s *Ethics* and Epictetus’ *Enchiridion*, and later other texts in light of how I interpreted these two masterworks of how to live one’s life. These books both, in differing words, assert that though we exist in a universe of external causes infinitely greater than us, individuals’ powers of judgment and action are their own. In light of that ownership, individuals become responsible for how they face whatever happens to affect them. Thus, to my mind,
whoever experiences despondency that is not to their liking is left duty bound to cultivate some method of living that will lift them above such feelings by their own efforts, however taxing.

Both philosophers urge that we are able to do so by working to gain an unbiased understanding of the forces that appear to dominate our lives. Specifically, from Epictetus I learned that when we desire something it is not up to us to then affirm or deny only some facets of what we subsequently must do to realize that desire – it is irrational to desire a thing and yet only will to do part of what is required to attain it. From Spinoza I learned that particular difficulties are never reason to abjure a desire for a thing that we deem admirable – we will always find ourselves affected by subjectively antagonistic causes as we strive to pursue our desires, but only personal weakness and lack of knowledge can prevent us from responding actively to every case of apparent hostility. Of course, the mere vocalization of such thoughts cannot effect their internalization.

In his essay, “The Myth of Sisyphus,” Albert Camus writes, “One does not discover the absurd without being tempted to write a manual of happiness.” After beginning finally to understand the power philosophy has to shape our individual lives, I wanted to try my hand at creating my own manual in the art of living, one that would both help direct me as I enter adult life after graduation, and, perhaps, provide comfort and guidance to any finding themselves in circumstances similar to my own, as particular philosophical texts have comforted and guided me. What you are about to read is just that, or the beginnings of such, in the form of an original essay in moral psychology with flavor similar to writings by scholars like Marcus Aurelius, Michel
de Montaigne, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and others. My goal here is to paint a comprehensive picture of an ideal virtue born out of a syncretism of choice elements from my favorite readings done here at Wesleyan University; this ideal I call “self-sufficiency.”

On a general level, this concept is meant to describe the ability to recoup energy, vigor, and enthusiasm from one’s pursuit of the externals* that one reflectively desires, rather than let those exertions drain one and provoke passivity of any kind. It is the ability to deeply engage with the world on one’s own terms while at the same time stand apart from it so that nothing occurring therein can affect the optimistic drive that fuels one’s actions. I outline and illustrate this concept for myself, and do not aim to posit it as the correct or best one for humankind. Nor will I here describe the specific, particular actions that individuals would need to take in order to actually become self-sufficient. As in the writings of all others working within the realm of philosophy as a way of life, what I present here, to use the words of Nehamas, is the rudiments of, “a sort of blueprint that others with a similar purpose can follow, ignore, or deny as they form their own selves.”

To that end, I will argue that self-sufficiency results from the union of three lesser virtues: self-reflection, self-control, and egoism (or self-love). The first of these describes the healthy skepticism present at the heart of any who would call him or herself a philosopher – the open-mindedness to the possibility that the world is not, or might not have to be, as one perceives it or desires it to be at a particular moment.

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* By externals I mean the stoic conception of the world: anything one cannot obtain through sheer mental effort, such as material wealth, social status, bodily fitness, interpersonal relationships, or generally any type of change in the world outside one’s most basic self or faculty of judgment.
which clears the way to active self-modification. The second two are instances of such spiritually active lifestyles and, notably, two that appear diametrically opposed in their respective worldviews. The former involves the disposition to order behavior so that one can attain desires even as doing so is not subjectively pleasant. The latter involves the disposition to self-interested behavior so that one can always act with the full motivation that results when obligation and aversion are entirely absent from one’s actions.

As I have encountered different modes of philosophical living, they almost always fall along one of those two paths. The first, with self-control its core virtue, is that of the ascetic. From this perspective, the willfulness for reality to be as we desire is responsible for all suffering. The universe is beyond human control, and our futile efforts to assert ourselves as individuals needlessly stress us. Consequently, this path asserts that the Good Life consists in the peace of mind which results from learning how to bring oneself into harmony with nature through forgoing one’s ego and personal desires. The notion that all our troubles might be entirely our own doing, and thus entirely within our control, holds a mysterious appeal. That we might be able to face whatever happens to trouble us and calmly say, “No, I will accept you” is an idea so simple, yet tremendously powerful. However, inspiring as the realization of such an ideal may be to those who feel themselves burdened by life’s weight, it

* Intellectual history is rife with examples of this manner of living, including particular schools of antiquity that I previously mentioned, such as Stoicism and Skepticism, as well as Daoism and Buddhism in the East. Western religious ascetics, such as Christianity’s desert fathers might also be considered to fall into this category.
† The Stoics’ called this state apatheia, and advised progress towards it via the excision of all subjective value additions from one’s judgments about experiences. To the Skeptics it was ataraxia, a state in which all belief regarding non self-evident knowledge claims is suspended.
cannot be denied that the ascetic’s victory is a trained letting go, a retreat to safe territory—not a personal overcoming.

The second path, driven by egoism and espoused much less frequently than the first, takes the directly opposite view, as expressed in the words of the 19th century German philosopher, Max Stirner:

“The fetters of reality cut the sharpest welts in my flesh every moment. But *my own* I remain. Given up as serf to a master, I think only of myself and my advantage; his blows strike me indeed, I am not *free* from them; but I endure them only for *my benefit*…. But, as I keep my eye on myself and my selfishness, I take by the forelock the first good opportunity to trample the slaveholder into the dust.”

This is the way of the hero.* This path is based on the exaltation of the individual self and hostility towards the fate that would attempt to control one’s life. Here, the Good Life consists in vigorously asserting one’s will to achieve one’s desires; here, opposition, not acceptance, is the answer to the experience of difficulty. The hero recognizes that antagonistic forces exist in the world, but contends that catering to them is the incorrect action when self-reliant, strong, and decisive individuals are capable of conquering whatever might endeavor to thwart the attainment of their wants. With such an outlook the way of the hero is selfish and powerful in equal measure. By ignoring others’ wishes heroes go where the less self-centered cannot, and are able to accomplish tasks too great for more passive individuals. However, in the end, limitations cannot be ignored. Over time all heroes fall into the tragic

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* Clear examples are rare, but include Stirner’s *The Ego and his Own*, the work wherein the preceding quote is found, and Plato’s characters Callicles and Thrasymachus from *Gorgias* and *Republic*, respectively. Instances of such behavior have a greater presence in the literature and mythology of numerous cultures. Jacob Grimm notes this phenomenon in the first chapter of his *Teutonic Mythology* when he wrote, “It is remarkable that Old Norse legend occasionally mentions certain men who, turning away in utter disgust and doubt from the heathen faith, placed their reliance on their own strength and virtue. Thus in the Sôlar lioð 17 we read of Vêboji and Râdey á sjálf sig þau trúðu, ‘in themselves they trusted.’”
variety. Storytellers can give heroes invulnerable self-motivation, but real individuals are affected by the obstacles they run into as they pursue their desires. As the ascetic understood, willfulness alone cannot bring us total victory over the harsh realities of existence.

A third path does in fact exist – but it is walked only by three with whom I am familiar, and even then obscurely so. Plato, Benedict de Spinoza, and Nietzsche each propose methods of living wherein individuals are simultaneously both slaves and masters – particularly in the first’s Republic, the second’s Ethics, and the third’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra. I certainly view self-sufficiency as falling along this path. Indeed, to an extent I believe that these three philosophers each describe something close to the self-sufficient life in their works. The goal of this project, however, is not to prove the existence of such a connection but to articulate my own account of what self-sufficiency consists and how it can serve me as an ideal as I confront the next phase of my life.

My thesis is divided into 5 chapters. The first of these examines the lives of three characters: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s Werther (from The Sorrows of Young Werther), the Stoic sage, and the Platonic tyrant. In Werther, I identify what it means to not be self-sufficient. Then I analyze the next two, what are clearly philosophical figures and respectively emblematic of the two underlying aspects of artful living – the ascetic and the hero – as potential answers to that which is lacking in Werther. Yet, in so doing I find both to be wanting in the domain of truly self-sufficient existence. With my hands thus empty, I go forth to assemble my own interpretation of self-sufficiency. I do so over the next three chapters by employing
the three virtues of self-reflection, self-control, and egoism as my construction materials. I hope to show in Chapter 2 that the first of these virtues (self-reflection) is a crucial trait for any who would desire their lives to change. In Chapter 3 I explore the second (self-control), a trait that describes the ability to implement and sustain such change, as it happens to place individuals under strain. Then, in Chapter 4 I examine the third (egoism), a contrasting trait that involves the acceleration of such change in the cases where it does not strain individuals whatsoever. In each of these chapters, I both explicate what it would mean to live a life solely instructed by each quality and detail the attendant strengths and weaknesses of such lives.

Ultimately, an important ingredient both of self-sufficiency and in what it would mean to lead a good life is absent in each, taken individually. Finding them all thus lacking, in Chapter 5 I unite the three into a comprehensive whole, and detail how such a union retains each of their unique advantages while removing their unique flaws. This amalgamation is what creates self-sufficiency proper. I end by illustrating how that self-sufficiency causes one to view the world and to live in a way that addresses the moral malaise which prompted me to write the thesis in the first place.
CHAPTER I: CHARACTERS

YOUNG WERTHER

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* presents a comprehensive picture of an individual who lives as a slave. Briefly, the plot of Goethe’s novel consists of Werther falling for an engaged woman named Charlotte, and then taking his own life when she fails to reciprocate that love. The portrayal of this series of events is more than a simple tragic romance. Goethe’s work depicts its love story from a distinctly introspective angle. Over the course of *Werther* we witness in first-person the protagonist brought to the heights of emotional exhilaration and the lowest abysses of depression due to his obsession for “Lotte.” Werther informs readers, “You have never known anything so wildly fluctuating as this heart of mine…. I coddle my heart like a sick child and give in to its every whim.” The life of this man, with its chaotic inner turmoil, is defined by passivity and disorder. It is the un-philosophical life of a child. A child is needy and dependent on an adult for survival; if that adult disappears, the child will flounder for a time, yelling confusedly for someone to fulfill its wants until finally, after expending its limited reserves of energy, it curls up on the ground and wastes away. Self-sufficiency is clearly absent from such behavior. Given this absence, Werther’s tale is a good place to begin my study of the concept. Let us more fully examine Werther’s actions, his story serving as a cautionary tale.

Werther’s romantic journey begins impulsively. He first meets Lotte on the way to a ball. From the moment he sees her, Werther is left entranced for reasons that
he can neither fully understand nor translate into words. As his “whole being [is] absorbed with the sight of her, the sound of her voice, her behavior,” he is momentarily left unable even to think. Subsequently, Werther finds himself completely swept away by his passion for her. Unfortunately, while dancing with Lotte he learns that she has a fiancé, Albert. But though this news causes him to confusedly join with the wrong partner, he soon pushes the knowledge aside and makes a decision that foreshadows the remainder of Goethe’s story:

I could not take my eyes off her dark eyes as she chattered; I could not look away from her animated mouth, her bonny cheeks; I was lost utterly in the infectious good spirits of everything she had to say, sometimes without even hearing the words with which she expressed it! … I swore to myself then and there that the girl whom I loved and to whom I therefore had certain rights should never waltz with anyone but me, even if it should prove to be my downfall!

Asserting thus, Werther binds himself to an external object, effectively tying his wellbeing to the woman who infatuates him. The problem here is not that Werther regards a desire for some external as important, but rather that Werther both bases his integrity upon a successful acquisition of the external he desires – namely, Lotte – and defines that acquisition primarily by action on the external’s part, not his own. This young man is a person who refuses to control himself while seeking to control others.

As time progresses Werther’s fixation on Lotte intensifies. As his love for her increases, every other aspect of him stagnates. Werther is an artist, but he loses his ability to create and focus as thoughts of Lotte occupy his mind during every waking or sleeping moment. Despite this dependency, Werther never truly takes action to capture Lotte’s affections. He refuses to try to seduce her or to engage in any other behavior that might be judged adulterous all the while hoping that she might be the
one to initiate an affair. The novel shortly becomes a ride on the rollercoaster that is Werther’s psyche, repeatedly crossing the chasm between the ecstasy and the misery depicted in the following quotes:

I shall see her today! When I awaken in the morning and look blithely into the sunlight, I cry out, “I shall see her today!” And I don’t have another wish for the next twenty-four hours. Everything — everything, I tell you — is lost in this one anticipation!¹⁴

I stretch out my arms for her in vain when, troubled by my dreams, I awaken in the morning; at night I vainly seek her in my bed when a happy, innocent dream has deceived me into imagining I am sitting beside her in a field and holding her hand and kissing her. Oh, when I feel for her, still half dazed with sleep, and wake myself with it — a flood of tears flows from my oppressed heart and I weep inconsolably into a dark dreary future.¹⁵

Lotte is the determinant of Werther’s wellbeing. He lives not as an individual agent, but as a separated fragment of Lotte seeking return to the whole. He requires her presence in some form about his person at all times or else feels deeply agitated. Werther might as well be a hermit who peers at Lotte through a telescope to determine what his psychological state will be each day, just as he sticks his head outside to check the weather.

As Werther prostrates himself before Lotte, declaring to himself that his flourishing in life is entirely dependent on her, he somehow believes that she has an equivalent duty to him — that because he has made her responsible for his wellbeing, she is obligated to conform with and fulfill his desire for her. He tells readers, “Sometimes I simply cannot understand how she can love another, how she dare — since I love her alone, so deeply, so fully, and recognize nothing, know nothing, have nothing but her!”¹⁶ Again Werther demands something beyond his control and wails when it does not obey his commands. He is like a man who sets his wishes on flying by flapping his arms, and then enters into a great depression when doing so lacks the
desired effect. Further, Werther is the sort who would make no effort to augment his arms so that he might increase the probability of his flight.

It is easy to look down on this passive figure. Yet, it is imperative that we do not fail to ask ourselves a particular question, lest we become victims of the greatest irony: how much does Werther’s life resemble our own? He is not merely a moody teenager that we can scoff at, and then ignore. Stirner, in *The Ego & His Own*, remarks, “Archimedes, to move the earth, asked for a standpoint outside it. Men sought continually for this standpoint, and every one seized upon it as well as he was able.” Though Stirner is here specifically referring to the notions of “heaven” and the “world of mind,” his insight is crucial. Often externals pull us along, with our happiness dependent upon them and whether we acquire them. Another’s love is not the only external that can have such an effect; wealth, job promotions, athletic or academic excellence, and religion or politics are all capable of taking control of us as we pursue them. Consequently, we find ourselves exhausted by our lives even when we are doing what we believe we want because the externals we value appear to loom over us as masters issuing orders that we must obey. That many of those orders happen to be distasteful to us, such as the need to forgo sleep or leisure to meet some deadline, makes our lives even more difficult to endure. Worst of all, it would seem that if we do not comply, by choice or by fate, and no longer follow the demands of our chosen externals, our lives would fall apart.

Werther, an extreme case, decides to take his own life after Lotte tells him she no longer feels comfortable seeing him due to his emotional instability. Werther asserts that his situation, and that of all sufferers of lovesickness is analogous to being
wracked by a fatal disease. The symptoms, and indeed the contraction itself, he
claims, are not of his doing. He cannot fight them; left to his own devices the
lovesickness will inevitably lead to his death unless, of course, the object of his
affection is forever there, feeding him the medicine she herself is for him. But is
Werther correct in thus characterizing himself? Do illnesses strike us at random or is
it our responsibility to take preventative measures against them? Is there nothing we
can do but be passive observers as a disease runs its course?

Werther certainly can be read as a tragedy, in which a poor young man is
damned the moment he helplessly succumbs to the charms of a maiden whose being
indescribably attracts his own. However, empathetic validation here is dangerously
misleading. Werther stands as a message that we cannot control our desires, and
therefore have no individual accountability for the role they play in our lives. As
much as one might like to believe him, and free ourselves from such individual
responsibility, we cannot if we have any desire for our lives to be full ones. It is
terribly easy to disintegrate in front of failure and other obstacles, and resign
fatalistically in the belief that success is ultimately due to chance. While a sentiment
of this kind is not wholly untrue – the circumstances we are born into certainly can
confer either great advantage or disadvantage upon us, and events wholly outside our
control can benefit or disrupt our wishes despite any attempt at orchestration – it
neglects the fact that regardless of the outcome, the capacity to actively shape and
pursue our desires, and thereby our wellbeing, exists.

For every desire a person might form, there are always steps, perhaps difficult
or unrealistic, that he or she can take to move closer to its realization. This mere
possibility imposes a philosophical duty to determine how such an effort might best be made at an individual level upon those claiming to genuinely want such realizations to occur. From a universal standpoint all human motion may very well be insignificant, as lyrically portrayed in Shelley’s *Ozymandias*, but that does not discount the fact that individuals can construct mighty empires in their lifetimes if they show fortitude and undertake the hard work required to do so.

**THE STOIC SAGE**

So, how might we take responsibility for our living, and with what results? The Stoic school of philosophy pondered these very questions, and asserted that it held the answer as to how one may deal with externals in a healthy manner. The life of the Stoic sage, as outlined in the deceptively thin *Enchiridion* – a condensed manual of Epictetus’ teachings compiled by his pupil, Arrian, in c. 125 BCE – is one that directly contrasts with that of Goethe’s literary creation. It is a life of total control. “Some things are up to us and some are not up to us,” the opening line of Epictetus’ text, stands the foundational maxim that guides Stoic assessment and reaction to the events in which practitioners find themselves involved. According to Stoicism, we humans lack the final word over all things beyond our powers of judgment, such as our reputations and our possessions, including even our own bodies, as well as innumerable other things. At any moment our plans, great and small, can be shattered regardless of how much we simply want them to come to fruition or how strenuously we have pursued them. Fighting against such necessity by attempting to cling to externals is the fundamental source of human unhappiness, the
Enchiridion argues. However, whereas Werther resigned himself to his sorrows, the Stoic does not.

The second distinguishing premise of the Stoic worldview is, “What upsets people is not things themselves but their judgments about the things.” Epictetus states that we humans are instances of free will amidst an infinitely vast deterministic universe. That will allows us some measure of individual power. In particular, we can control our opinions, impulses, desires, and aversions—or, more accurately, we can control our reactions to these things. As a result, though being buffeted around by externals may be inescapable, individuals can take responsibility for their emotional wellbeing. Before one undertakes any action, Epictetus says, one should remind oneself about all of its potential consequences. To use his example, slightly modified, whenever you go to a pool you cannot overlook that it is a place where you might get splashed. Consequently, if you go and do get splashed, you will not become annoyed but rather accept the incident as part of your initial desire to take a swim. An individual who develops the ability to so align all of his or her choices in accord with nature achieves both an external toughness and an inner calm.

The notion that emotional responses are choices we make, prompted – not caused – by external events, is uncomplicated, yet liberating. We might imagine Werther waking up from a full night’s sleep after crying the entire day, exclaiming, “Good God! Why have I been letting this woman affect me so much? Her love really isn’t that important in the grand scheme of things – enjoyable, yes, but not necessary for me to live a good life.” If Werther is subsequently able to fix this resolution within his memory, it is difficult to argue that the problem of Lotte is not thus solved.
A kind of self-sufficiency lies within Stoic invulnerability. Stoics never desire any object beyond their power, whether it is to avoid misfortune, to achieve some social status, or to please another person. By simply desiring to remain internally unmoved by whatever the universe happens to throw at them, Stoic sages never fail to get what they desire. However, the self-sufficiency that results from such an outlook is achievable only through an extreme adaptability and, when necessary, forms of excision that together border on complete self-sacrifice. Indeed, within stoicism lies a radical asceticism. Epictetus tells us,

Different people are naturally suited for different things. Do you think that if you do those things you can eat as you now do, drink as you now do, have the same likes and dislikes? … You must work on your ruling principle, or work on externals, practice the art either of what is inside or of what is outside, that is, play the role either of a philosopher or of a non-philosopher.20

Why? Because resignation is required to completely harmonize with the surrounding universe, with its ever changing configurations and the scarcity of its offerings relative to our desires. Otherwise, wellbeing cannot be deemed fully secure. If one holds desires for anything besides control over one’s mind and one’s judgment, one’s doors remain open to sorrow as it is always possible that situations might arise capable of frustrating those desires. A man who goes to sleep with his will set on golfing the next day jeopardizes his personal contentment given the fact that it might rain in the morning. Regardless of how much utility he could derive by golfing, Stoicism cannot abide the threat of frustrated expectations that wanting it in particular presents to him. The mature Stoic has no desire beyond that for inner peace. Total

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* “Do not seek to have events happen as you want them to, but instead want them to happen as they do happen, and your life will go well,” Epictetus advises (Epictetus and White, 13).
control forces Stoics to relinquish all want for which satisfaction is not solely dependent on themselves.

Given this asceticism, it follows that Stoicism thus does not provide answers as to how one might healthily pursue externals with energy and commitment. Rather, it asserts that wellbeing can only be achieved by giving up such pursuits altogether, or by treating them as something one should be willing to abandon if it seems they cannot be achieved. This has the effect of turning its practitioners into self-enclosed units able to subsist self-sufficiently only because they possess a minimum involvement in the world.

How does a life entirely void of committed desires compare to Werther’s obsessive desire for a singular external? Certainly it is less chaotic, but only because it is virtually empty. Tranquility may be the result, but tranquility differs greatly from joyfulness. Complete “freedom” from the illusory pushes and pulls of externals is a deeply apathetic state, as Stoicism did appreciate. I would agree with Epictetus that, “It is better to die of hunger with distress and fear gone than to live upset in the midst of plenty,” but I heartily disagree that the former state constitutes a worthy final ideal for human life. Merely seeing distress and fear gone alone is not enough. I would seek positive motivation, inspiration, courage – not absence of fear – and, above all, the power to actively and joyfully chase individually desired externals so as to secure them.

Human life is the pursuit of externals. Without the motion generated from posing demands on the outside world our existence is no different than that of a rock. Facing external happenings, stoicism rejects having negative reactions and replaces
that with the imperviousness derived from having no reactions. While endurance and adaptability are admirable traits, and certainly difficult to achieve, they fall short of the ability even more demanding to cultivate: the ability to pursue the externals that one desires and strive for them in a thoroughly positive manner. The Stoics, in short, make a worthy, yet incomplete effort towards securing individual self-sufficiency. An isolated life of internal stability is not the highest ideal for which one could strive. We must look towards the omnipresent existence of the monist God, wanting, and attaining, everything.

Both Werther and the Stoic sage are extreme figures that fail to provide me with an acceptable basis for worthwhile life, the former imagining our lives simply in terms of passionate enslavement to what we desire, and the latter eschewing desires for externals at the first sign of trouble for a tasteless inner peace. A middle ground must be found between the two extremes. To live the fullest lives, neither can we be utterly controlled by our desires nor can we merely take up a scalpel and cut away all our desires. Both the Wertherian and Stoic lifestyles display an inherent idleness. The former decidedly wants externals, yet refuses to assume responsibility for having them, while the latter denies all wants for externals and chooses to disown those wants instead of seeking a way to retain them. But perhaps there is a third way: why not a life in which we just take what we want, however prickly the external world may be? Perhaps aggression, not restraint, is the key to seizing the reigns of personal striving after the externals one desires.
THE PLATONIC TYRANT

In the Platonic dialogues there is a creature that embodies what might be called self-sufficiency via domination, founded on its having the grit and ruthlessness required to take everything that it wishes. This figure is the tyrant. An account of the tyrannical life appears in the Gorgias, Plato’s dialogue concerning the practice of rhetoric and the relative values of justice and injustice. Callicles, one of Socrates’ interlocutors in the dialogue, asserts that being just, or constraining action according to a set of predefined moral rules, can only be considered good in an arbitrary sense. Self-constraint’s appeal, he continues, is entirely a byproduct of the difficulty intrinsic to wholeheartedly devoting life to the fulfillment of one’s appetites. Long-term unrestraint requires an inner and outer discipline absent in most people. Such behavior calls for both a non-conformist refusal to allow outside forces to dictate one’s values as well as the physical and characterological capability to uncompromisingly pursue whatever desires one has. To quote Callicles directly,

The man who will live correctly must let his own desires be as great as possible and not chasten them, and he must be sufficient to serve them, when they are as great as possible, through courage and intelligence, and to fill them up with the things for which desire arises on each occasion. But this, I think, is not possible for the many; wherefore they blame such men because of shame, hiding their own incapacity, and they say that intemperance is surely a shameful thing (as I was saying earlier), enslaving the human beings who are superior in their nature; unable themselves to supply satisfaction for their pleasures, they praise moderation and justice because of their own unmanliness.22

Werther could not bring himself to move against Lotte’s partner despite wanting to do so because, on a Calliclean view, he was a weak and fearful milquetoast afraid of both his own shadow and of offending those who might harm him in some way. If he had been able to shed his moral qualms and gain the bodily might or mental cunning required to subjugate his rival, Goethe’s novel would likely have a different ending.
Instead of repeatedly complaining about Lotte’s relationship with Albert, the tyrant would push him aside by any means and seize Lotte, willing or otherwise. An individual able to behave likewise in every situation is self-sufficient in the sense that no objects of his or her desire go physically unattained.

Such conduct may seem repugnant to many, but that revulsion alone does not constitute sufficient grounds for rejecting tyranny as a way of life. Werther’s passive life led me to ponder how we can pursue wants without becoming enslaved to those wants in the process. I would examine the figure in that light.

Speaking in the *Republic*, Socrates in fact deems the tyrant just that—a slave:

> A real tyrant is really a slave, compelled to engage in the worst kind of fawning, slavery, and pandering to the worst kind of people. He’s so far from satisfying his desires in any way that it is clear— if one happens to know that one must study his whole soul— that he’s in the greatest need of most things and truly poor.23

The genuinely ruinous flaw at the tyrannical life’s core stems from tyrants’ inability to achieve wants that cannot be fulfilled through intensity of want alone, but which are nevertheless crucial to any recognizably thriving human life. Friendly human relationships are the clearest examples of such complex items. Socrates names this flaw, “madness,” a term which he defines specifically: “A man who is mad and deranged attempts to rule not just human beings, but gods as well, and expects that he will be able to succeed.”24 No matter how strongly they believe otherwise, tyrants cannot get anything and everything entirely without compromise. Tyrants stand as the personification of Freud’s “Id”: pure, unrestrained, and unthinking wanting. They are individuals who seek to stroll from point A to point B, plowing through everything in the way. Though this madness may see many desires satisfied, it is entirely ineffective when a desire’s accomplishment is not so one-sided.
Consider Werther now newly minted as a genuine tyrant. This Werther could forcibly abduct Lotte and carry her away to his castle, but doing so would not guarantee her love. The statement, “I love you Werther” made at knifepoint, does not make it so. If Werther were a tyrant, we would observe him making every attempt possible to win Lotte over, save releasing her from captivity and courting her as a free woman, for that would require him to relinquish command. He might torture her or shower her with gifts, but in the end, Werther will be unable to force his way into truly receiving Lotte’s affection. He can never make Lotte’s decision for her: she must give her love freely, or not at all. For all his assertiveness, the method by which the tyrannical Werther seeks to acquire Lotte leaves all his actions just short of truly satisfying his desire for her, while that desire itself keeps him eternally trying. He is no longer her psychological slave with his emotional wellbeing completely dependent on her actions toward him. However, Werther the Tyrant’s total refusal to acknowledge that a loving relationship will require bending on his part only furnishes him with shackles of a different sort. As such, Werther might not commit suicide, but we would find his life characterized by a permanent dissatisfaction, so shallow is the nature of the self-sufficiency by which he actively “possesses” Lotte.

The pursuit of so many desires operates in a similar fashion. Cheating on a test can yield high grades, but cannot make one knowledgeable about the test’s subject. Having the wealth to host lavish parties cannot alone make one pleasant company. The Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein wrote a romance novel titled, Zabibah and the King. It was an Iraqi best seller, but that does not make him a good writer. Many desires – notably those not for tangible, consumable objects – involve
relationships that place restrictions on our conduct if they are to function successfully. Unfortunately for the would-be tyrant, the pursuit of those desires seriously contributes to the power and activeness of human lives.

The nature of tyrants’ power places them atop a gigantic mound of goods without the ability to make use of them for higher purposes. Lower-order desires, defined as those for externals one can physically grasp or consume, are no more than food and tools. Food benefits us only to the point of temporal sustenance. Tools are entirely useless when unaccompanied by the appropriate internal skills or purposes. Tyrants, with their power to coerce the physical world, attain but an illusion of total dominance over the pursuit after desired externals. They do achieve a kind of self-sufficiency that comes from material success. Tyrannical behavior will turn one into the alpha wolf and, through bullying, bribery and manipulation, let one achieve perennial monetary wealth, worldly fame (or infamy) and possibly even historical importance. Yet, the rapaciousness of tyrants’ desires enslaves them—their integrities rest upon their ability to fulfill desires, and that ability is faulty. It is evident that in the endeavor to strike a balance between the stoic and the Wertherian, I went too far, arriving at yet another extreme.

The issue thus stands: For life to be full, one must vigorously chase the externals that one wants, not reject them. However, in doing this, one cannot disregard the necessary conditions for fostering relationships with those externals. Accordingly, one must willingly subscribe to the demands they place upon one. Yet, though externals dictate the process of their incorporation within oneself, one must not become their slave. To accomplish such full life, one would have to take what is
good from the cases of Werther, the Stoic, and the tyrant while avoiding what is bad in them. I now construct a self-sufficiency that serves as means to such achievement.
CHAPTER II: SELF REFLECTION

True self-sufficiency begins with self-reflection, by which I mean the basic ability question all aspects of oneself—especially those that gives one cause for complaint. Without clear knowledge of personal identity and individual wants it is impossible for one to pursue desires either thoroughly or unrelentingly. When we lack self-reflection, we inflate our place in our relationships with the externals we desire while simultaneously ignoring the imperative factor that hands-dirtying industriousness plays in the realization of those desires.

Specifically, the fog of personal bias can corrupt one’s pursuit of externals in three ways. First, it can provoke cynicism and lethargy by leading one to mistake the pursuit of those externals for their mere identification and possession. Unreflective individuals feel no responsibility for their desires. To them, wanting is an urge; whether or not they are willing to act on that urge is of no significance. Second, lack of reflection can enfeeble one by making one believe that one’s ability to act depends on the externals that one has managed to obtain (or hopes to obtain). Unreflective individuals become paralyzed by loss and failure; determinists, they believe externals to have power over their most basic functioning. Third, self-reflection’s absence leaves one’s wellbeing vulnerable by allowing one to cling to desires impressed upon oneself by the outside world. Unreflective individuals, told by the outside to desire specific externals, wonder why the fulfillment of such desires, which they never truly affirmed as their own, fail to satisfy them, yet feel no need to personally alter themselves in response.
Overall, when self-reflection is absent we fail to understand what it means to desire in general as well as why it is that we desire the externals that we do. A fundamental component of self-sufficiency is taking responsibility for who we are and what we want. Self-reflection, a simple yet demanding task, pushes us to reconsider and know those aspects of ourselves in order to create a foundational personal identity that can subsequently be streamlined.

**WANTING, INCOMPLETELY**

Without self-reflection, humanity’s subjective and emotional nature can quickly cloud how one understands the role one plays in one’s pursuit of externals. The accomplishment of a single desire requires one to make numerous steps that one, as an emotional creature, often experiences in differently. During the inevitable periods of hardship between the identification and satisfaction of one’s wants, one is easily brought to despair by one’s feelings and can believe there to be no alternative to one’s suffering.

As Spinoza details in his *Ethics*, we humans exist simultaneously on physical and mental planes. As a result, we face emotional affection – what he terms as “passions” – alongside all of our corporeal encounters. To quote the Dutch-Jewish philosopher directly,

> It is impossible that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause…. From this it follows that man is necessarily always subject to passions, that he follows and obeys the common order of Nature, and accommodates himself to it as much as the nature of things requires.25

We are beings of body *and* mind. Just as one cannot escape the physical consequences of the events that befall oneself, like the broken bones that accompany a fall from great height, so too is one unable to entirely shed the passions raised
within oneself in response to those same events. Though establishing one’s wants is, at bottom, a rational process – one envisions a state as beneficial to oneself, for reasons that can be primarily emotional just as they can be primarily concrete, and either does or does not set out after it in light of the respective cons – that process necessarily generates emotional attachment.

Seeing one’s wants fulfilled as one envisioned brings one joy while their denial brings one pain whether they are long term, such as the desire to be a parent, or immediate, such as the sudden urge to have grilled swordfish for dinner. If, alternatively, one finds oneself ultimately indifferent towards some particular future outcome, it would be asinine to claim that one desires it in any capacity. Emotionality plays an even more distinct role on the microscopic level of one’s individual workings to satisfy one’s desires.

The experiences of the particular events that link a desire’s identification and its satisfaction or frustration can affect one both positively and negatively in a similar fashion to how such final results affect one. For instance, after deciding to travel to a location for whatever reason, one feels animated, or at least unhurt, when stoplights go one’s way, and frustrated when traffic hinders one, with intensity dependent on the initial reason for travel. One’s emotionality goads one in this way to anticipate the future attainment or denial of one’s wants. Green light – one considers arrival to be more likely; red light, and one feels one’s arrival to be less likely.

Humanity’s passionate nature is not essentially problematic. When situations go one’s way, passion can propel one forward. However, when self-reflection is absent from one’s strivings for externals, emotionality can prompt one to value the
final attainment a desire but not the comprehensive pursuit of that desire necessary for such attainment because the intermediary steps are much less attached to any sensuous reward (and on occasion actually unpleasant). Also, that emotions arise in tandem with external events can cause one to mistakenly consider those feelings accompanying one’s motion towards a desire’s satisfaction, either positive or negative, as given by externals when they are instead internally generated. Together, these confusions make it difficult for individuals to maintain control of their liability for instigating, sustaining, and adapting their motion in pursuit of externals.

A confused perspective can lead one to paint one’s life as a sorrowful picture: one sees oneself, wanting so many different things, antagonized by an external world that is out to prevent one from realizing them at every turn, harming one both physically and mentally. One may therefore grow bitter, rejecting many of one’s desires as too difficult while loathing the few that one retains. Certainly, self-sufficiency is unthinkable if one hates one’s very activity.

Let us consider an example. Sam, during his teenage years, sets his heart upon becoming a virtuoso instrumentalist and composer. He envisions himself before a packed concert hall, receiving thunderous applause and rave critical reviews. With this endpoint in mind, he embarks after this career, feeling enthused about his potential fame. Yet, he soon faces the opportunity costs inherent in his desire. Daily practice and study of music theory comes at the price of his leisure. Strenuous effort, he finds, is required to repeatedly develop innovative sonorous ideas. He needs to work during the nights because his beginning compositions and performances do not bring in enough income to underwrite his standard of living. Worst of all, his musical
tastes are not in vogue, and he must choose between following his particular musical vision and that of the public’s. As a result, Sam starts to bemoan his circumstances and envy other musicians who have achieved more success. His enthusiasm waning, he drifts along in his life and his original desire becomes less compelling since he no longer genuinely progresses towards it. Should we feel sympathetic for Sam? Yes, by all means. Sympathy though is not the same as condoning the attitude into which he falls. We can certainly empathize with the difficulty of his life as well as the opening of his eyes to the difference between the reality of being a musician and his ideal. Crying without attempting to address what has provoked one’s tears, however, should inspire less sentiment.

One often comes to realize that one’s particular desires are not quite as admirable as one initially thought. For all the clarity that self-reflection brings it will not transform an individual into a Pythia. Yet, foresight is not self-reflection’s fundamental purpose. Rather, its purpose is to force one to acknowledge that an active path is always open to oneself, that self-pity and blame never constitute worthy responses to hardship, and that such hardship is as intrinsic a component of one’s desires as are the pleasures attending to their final achievement.

A self-reflective individual is one who, facing unpleasantness, is able to ask, “Do I have to be in this sorry situation that I find myself in? What might be my other options?” instead of bowing one’s head while issuing complaint, hoping that fate might eventually absolve one of one’s troubles. Passivity and despair are the only true causes capable of denying one an object that one wants. Self-reflection operates as ignition to action in response to such negative sentiments. It is a window through
which one can view potential change. Having a desire is difficult work, requiring something of one if one is to hold it since nothing actually compels one to do so. Sam, lacking self-reflection, is his own torturer. He lives a miserable, fragmented life, but chooses to fatalistically resign himself to his woes, without even trying to rectify his situation.

**EXTERNAL DEPENDENCY**

In addition to preventing one from actively responding to misfortune, a lack of self-reflection can make one dependent on the externals that one pursues for one’s very ability to act. The reverse of believing oneself unable to personally alter one’s troubles is the belief that one’s thriving rests only on the externals that one holds. Romantic relationships, professions, physical appearance, and social image, for instance, individually drive many peoples’ lives. As they hold or cultivate those externals such people feel content and can cheerfully go after other, lesser externals. Despite their ability to flourish during easy times, such individuals are extremely vulnerable; loss of or damage to their fetishized external can completely undo them.

One must remember that the ultimate object of the pursuit of externals is not the externals but oneself.

I knew a person who underwent a particularly nasty breakup with his girlfriend. She ended things by informing him about a number of problems about himself. He was devastated, and moped around for a lengthy period of time. Her statements made him face parts of himself that he did not like, which he was previously able to ignore while he felt himself validated by their relationship. What did he care if he was out of shape or unkempt as long as his girlfriend adored him?
Her love served as a substitute for self-love. When that evaporated his self-worth followed. If only he had never forgotten himself, maybe he could have avoided injury.

As finite creatures we are ever incomplete. Incompleteness, however, is not bad. The constant need for satisfaction prevents our lives from stagnation. The pursuit of externals should not be regarded as a quest with a definite conclusion or, for that matter, piecemeal, as a string of individual attainments that each yield precious moments of stable contentment before one wants again. Rather, it should be regarded as an unending practice where obtaining one external does not halt an individual’s motion but enhances it going forward. With self-reflection, individuals take ownership of their wanting and find themselves invigorated by always acknowledging just how more satisfied they could be as impetus to constant self-improvement. Such individuals will act in any case, but success motivates them by reminding how much more they can achieve. Having some outsider tell oneself that one is perfect as they currently are would thus be existentially akin to consuming fast food or narcotics—a producer of an effective yet illusory and transient wellbeing.

**EXTERNAL IMPOSITION OF DESIRES**

The absence of self-reflection from individual life can have a third deleterious effect. Like the emotions they stir, our desires themselves cannot be taken for granted. They must be actively affirmed for self-sufficient life to be possible. One can unconsciously allow outsiders to dictate one’s goals and then wonder why one feels

* Perfectionists are similarly motivated by always feeling their actions to be lacking, but where that perception results in self-doubt, this manner of self-reflection results in self-confidence— a subtle difference between “I can do better” versus “This is not good enough.”
disoriented in their pursuit. If one, for whatever reason, realizes that the desires for which one strives are not one’s own, one’s life can unfold. Andre Agassi, in his autobiography *Open*, recalls winning Wimbledon in 1992, his first Major title victory, and, strangely, not feeling terribly euphoric afterwards:

I’m supposed to be a different person now that I’ve won a slam. Everyone says so…. They declare that I’m a winner, a player of substance, the real deal…. But I don’t feel that Wimbledon has changed me. I feel, in fact, as if I’ve been let in on a dirty little secret: winning changes nothing. Now that I’ve won a slam, I know something that very few people on earth are permitted to know. A win doesn’t feel as good as a loss feels bad, and the good feeling doesn’t last as long as the bad. Not even close.

Later in the book, Agassi comes to voice what he had inwardly known for a long time: that his becoming a tennis legend was wholly due to his father’s desires. Eventually, through self-reflection aided by friends he is able to identify desires that are his own, and to rebuild himself on this basis. For example, he discovers a powerful desire to support others who are like him in certain ways but who need help. Thus he decides to build the Andre Agassi College Preparatory Academy. Agassi then returns to tennis with verve, as the means to fund that decision. For the first time he embraces a healthy diet and an intensive conditioning routine despite still “hating” tennis itself, and begins the most successful period of his career.

We are responsible for owning our desires because though the outside world will to a large extent dictate what such desiring entails, it cannot force us to hold those desires. By performing an action we, choosing it over alternatives, essentially say that we want it. Now despite this we often find ourselves doing things without fully understanding them or their consequences. When that misunderstanding primarily stems from lack of knowledge regarding our identities and our personal values or wants subtle troubles occur. Agassi’s life provides a valuable example, as
does the cliché person who grows up cultivating a singular lust for material wealth, and then, after obtaining his or her goal, realizes that wealth alone does not equal happiness. Society, culture, and other individuals often prod us to unthinkingly behave according to their rules, thus delineating how we would act and indoctrinating us towards some desires and away from others that we might reject if put to self-reflection. To the extent that one buys into this inception, one is exposed to a dual hazard: not only will one remain open to emotional injury by the experience of desire’s denial but also the achievement of “one’s” desires will be devoid of real meaning and leave one empty instead of inspired. Without the ability to genuinely exclaim, “I want [x],” the pursuit of externals collapses. There will be no progress, no continual evolution towards a goal or ideal.

Our lives are expressions of our will. If they happen to not be to our liking we have an obligation to modify ourselves in response. Self-reflection is the operating table for such alteration and, accordingly, must be a constant in the life of one seeking self-sufficiency. It is such an aspirant’s alternative to passive sorrow in every case of desire’s frustration. In short, self-reflection is really no more than a philosophical attitude. Considering the great potential for the pursuit of desires to be both confused and wholly outside individual ownership, those who would attain self-sufficiency must cultivating the ability to momentarily step outside the emotional subjectivity of their lives and think critically about themselves from a variety of angles impossible to view from a biased standpoint.

Under the glare of objective perception, each facet, every particular want of the self-reflective, as they happen to relate to their lives’ forward motion, is imbued
with contingency. “What about myself can I alter?” these introspective watchers ask. Everything is questioned and judged. “What, if possible, do I want to alter? How do I envision the ideal version of myself?” Alone, these questions cannot effect change, but their sincere, continued appearance in place of pessimism is the fundamental initial step away from enslavement and towards empowered autonomy. Self-reflection is no easy task. Above all, it is a statement that, “I am responsible for how I play the hand that I have been dealt. It is up to me to expand my wellbeing and pursue the desires I set for myself. If the world is not as I would have it, I must take action or be satisfied with it being otherwise.” Speaking thus, individuals break down their lives into the constituent materials at the moment of utterance. It is now up to them to use those materials to fashion an artwork of which they will be proud.
CHAPTER III:
SELF-CONTROL

Even a total grasp of who one is and what one wants will not make one self-sufficient. Individuals must be able to act in light of such knowledge for it to be effective. For the self-sufficient individual, that disposition to action comes from self-control. Like self-reflection, self-control is a skill that must be cultivated over time and involves learning to perceive the pursuit of externals in a specific way. Whereas self-reflection involves opening one’s mind to the possibility of change, self-control is about acknowledging that change, and self-construction in general, requires discipline that will often be uncomfortable.

Specifically, self-control should be understood as a disposition to act in an ordered manner. Genuinely acting on the basis of one’s self-reflection cannot entirely occur as one pleases. When one works to attain an external one must comply with the external’s particular demands, to which one might be averse if those demands are observed individually even as one desires the ultimate acquisition of the external. The self-controlled stop themselves from making such fragmented judgments about their wants, and endeavor to will beforehand all such demands placed upon them. As a result, the self-controlled pursuit of externals is both more rigorous and more flexible than that of the average person, even as it ever stubbornly anticipates a definite end.

WANTING, COMPLETELY

To cultivate self-control, one must first deepen one’s appreciation of what the act of desiring externals, itself, entails. Whenever we happen to identify a particular want we quickly become aware of all the individual tasks that we must do perform we
can hold that want in our hands. My wish to produce a quality thesis for example places me under great limitations relative to the student not writing a thesis. As I am no savant able to produce original philosophy at the drop of a hat, I must go to the library, focus for many hours each week, forgo excessive social interaction, and generally organize most of my other time around the thesis’ construction. In addition, this wish, simply by virtue of my having it, alters me psychologically. I am now open to the stress of the wish not being fulfilled, of my failing to complete the thesis; events beyond my control, such as power failures or data loss now represent dangers to my pursuit of externals that I cannot regard aloofly. However I may not want to recognize it, by asserting that I desire to hold a finished thesis in my hand, I am effectively saying that I also want all of these attached difficulties that necessarily attend to it. Conversely, if I do not engage in those actions necessary to fulfill my desire, or even not want those actions as much as I do the original desire, I am in effect disowning that desire, or relegating it to something far less important to me than I might have originally claimed. The steps that we must take to secure our wants are not merely causally related to those final states—they are constituent pieces.

The fundamental difference between one who is self-controlled and one who is not is that whereas the latter mistakenly believes that people can want an external in a vacuum, divorced from everything leading up to its satisfaction, the former regards externals in their entireties. In this respect, the self-controlled internally acknowledge that genuine wanting is equivalent to action. As Theodore Roosevelt once stated, “In this life we get nothing save by effort. Freedom from effort in the present merely means that there has been stored up effort in the past.”

By
maintaining such a perspective, self-control makes its adherents long-winded. Never do they say, “I want an apple,” but only, “I want to move from where I am to the nearest location with apples and do whatever may be necessary to get an apple once I am there.” At the same time, they are laconic. The self-controlled speak in motions rather than in words.

**The Dictatorship of Externals**

A self-controlled attitude is founded on two qualities. The first is self-restraint. By choosing to pursue any external, one signs a social contract of sorts with the external, making oneself its subject, because the attainment of the chosen external rests on a process of transfiguring oneself along the lines of an ideal with predetermined form.† Freedom lies in an openness of potential. In order to realize our desires we necessarily have to limit ourselves to some extent. In every case it is like learning a martial art. On the training mat, the teacher dictates your actions, sometimes on a very minute level, such as when learning how to stand or strike correctly according to the art’s principles. If you act any differently, you will never truly know the art by and because of its definitions. Despite the willingness with which you submit, you cannot be called fully autonomous as long as you continue to obey the teacher’s directions because of your inability to do otherwise in order to achieve your goal. Even when practicing the art outside of the school you still must

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* Indeed, we could conceive of a person asserting that he or she wants an apple to appear in front of him or her so that he or she might satisfy a craving sans effort, but that would be an instance of neither self-control, due to its wistfulness, nor self-sufficiency, due to its hope that some “other” will see the desire fulfilled.

† I am unsure whether to deem this contract is more Lockean or more Hobbesian in nature. One is able to emancipate oneself at any moment by forgoing the external’s pursuit, but in so doing entirely gives up the benefits that the external always conferred. An external can never be said to mistreat one who pursues it. Pursuers simply may not be up to their chosen pursuit.
conform even insofar as you act creatively, applying the techniques you learned in new ways according to different situations. Improvisation is always founded on core principles; its best cases occur when such basic rules are so internalized that one understands how to bend them – a creative act that is assuredly not painting by the numbers, but not a wholly original one either.

The strictness of particular externals’ requirements often differs. Our situatedness affects how we each experience such requirements. Choosing to be a vegan will restrict all eating-related decisions that one encounters during one’s life. Wanting to go out to lunch, in contrast, only restricts one for a handful of hours. Being born with a food allergy adds allergic reaction to all of one’s potential desires to consume specific foods. If one lacks hands, one can still desire to be a chef, but it will entail scientific achievement to be part of that desire whereas it would not be so for one with hands. In the pursuit of externals, the choice to pursue, or not pursue, is the only element over which individuals have total control.

That said, choosing to pursue a single long-term external does not necessitate that all one’s decisions will henceforth be unfree. Though wants have requirements, there is still a reasonable amount of breathing room in regards to how one obeys those demands. Many of the vegan’s decisions will have nothing to do with food, and even those that do remain relatively open to interpretation within the confines of “no animal products.” The disabled individual can decide to pursue either biotech or prosthetic fields of research. The difficulties inherent to self-control increase in magnitude – and realism – however, as an individual’s desires happen to be more specific or more numerous.
As one attempts to simultaneously embrace many externals, one’s idealized form – one’s identity – becomes increasingly robust, yet more definite. The interrelationships between the requirements of each additional external shrink the breadth of potential decisions that one, hoping to maintain a coherent identity, can make in any situation to such an extent that one striving for many externals will live almost mechanistically. The life of a person who desires to have a successful career, cultivate healthy filial and social relationships, maintain a few hobbies and experience a modicum of personal leisure time will have to be highly scheduled so as to make each of those desires consist. We will never truly observe this person considering an individual activity in light of personal inclination – or really considering at all, for that matter – in his or her daily motions. Everything he or she does takes place because he or she must do it, while the absence of everything he or she does not do is because he or she must not do it, all according to whatever the externals he or she wants to pursue insist. Such actions may display no immediate tangible yield, causing the person to appear a masochist to outsiders, and possibly even to him or herself.

**VOLUNTARY SERVITUDE**

Whereas many might deride such constriction, the self-controlled individual does not. Tolerance is the second characteristic aspect of self-control. Because the self-controlled can only consider desires in their entireties, they refrain from making piecemeal value judgments about them. To them, breaking a wanted external into

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*This kind of abstinence is by no means something that can be taken up by a person with a snap of their fingers. We have a tendency to restrict our vision to the present; self-control would have us extend that field. A significant aspect of training in self-control involves*
fragments and deeming a few to be negative is an act of subjective incoherency. For this reason, true self-control vastly differs from masochistic self-denial because the self-controlled never give up anything that they want, save in order to take something that they want more. Unfortunately, many do not appreciate this; self-control is not actually intrinsic to a life pursuing multiple externals.

Most, if not all of us, attempt to grasp a multiplicity of externals. The problem I observe is that when people do so they either actively resist or only passively submit to that dictatorship of externals which I have described. For a simple example of the former, we need look no farther than the popular diets some go on in hopes of rapid, easy weight-loss as an alternative to forgoing the excessive intake of unhealthy foods for the remainder of their lives. For the latter we might think of one who does observe such lifelong dietary restrictions, but retains an inner craving for baked goods and, as a result, comes to despise those less disciplined in their behavior. These two approaches to seeking “healthiness” can only technically be called active. The “action” occurring in each turns the pursuit of externals into an irrational practice of self-denial, which in turn makes that action inefficient towards the achievement of good health.

Self-control involves active submission to the requirements that externals place upon one when one desires them; a sacrifice of one’s immediate freedom of choice so that one may realize more complex, long-term desires and thereby fashion a powerful identity for oneself, capable of more fully engaging and affecting the reaffirming an external during its unpleasant instances, vocally perhaps; an act of simultaneous recollection and foresight, in which a want-er remembers what is necessitated by his or her wanting and anticipates its fulfillment.
external world in unexpected future situations than it would be if one had not so constrained oneself in the present. Self-controlled individuals understand the unfreedom intrinsic to pursuing externals, though not always in foreseeable specifics, and willingly gird themselves with it. Importantly, they do not regard their chains disapprovingly, even if they cause pain.

When a desired external is considered in its entirety, there can be no unattractive attachments to its accomplishment—just that accomplishment viewed from different angles. If they are self-controlled, those who desire to become master chefs like those documented in David Geld’s 2011 film, *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, will neither rage nor cry when they have to work long hours doing menial tasks. Nor will they give up if their superiors toss their preparations out for not being of high enough quality. In such peoples’ minds, they already are master chefs and those duties are merely parts of that identity. By refusing to antagonistically oppose what their desires throw at them, the achievement of their desires, at some future point, is guaranteed.

Do not think though that this self-assuredness about a desire’s eventual fulfillment will express itself as an aloof persistence. Self-controlled apprentices will not mindlessly try again and again—they are ever assessing themselves and then responding to criticism or experimenting when past actions did not yield the desired results. Furthermore, by continuing to return to their toil, the apprentices are not repeatedly denying themselves other more pleasurable desires, as it might appear to outside viewers, but rather constantly affirming the externals that they have deemed most important. The self-controlled are temporal translators, and very capable of
modulating the perception of present hardship into that of future attainment. Consequently, the self-controlled are ever active, and always pushing forward.

The willful submissiveness of the self-controlled allows for great flexibility in addition to such determination. Planning is not a primary factor in their ability to defer so readily to the requirements of the externals that they desire since the particulars of such requirements can never be wholly known in advance of their appearance. Let us hypothetically say that one of our apprentice chefs is assigned the honor of opening the restaurant in the morning, and given the only key available to do so. As he lives somewhat far away from the restaurant, he arranges his alarm clock to wake him early, and finds a means of transportation to get him to his destination. If, unexpectedly, a weather event renders his transport unavailable or his alarm fails to ring, he spends no time worrying about the miscalculation and instead quickly accepts the turn of events as a new requirement to his desire to be a chef and changes his routine to accommodate it. Like Diderot’s Jacques the Fatalist he exclaims, “It was written up above!” Any effort on the chef’s part to assert his authority over the situation by continuing with his original plan, or to do anything contrary to the nature of the immediate circumstances, would amount to an attempt to run through a wall. In the pursuit of externals, so going against the grain is rigidity.

Weariness

Self-control, as I am describing it, inarguably has a Stoic flavor. Again, one of Stoicism’s foundational insights is that, “What upsets people is not things themselves but their judgments about things.” Self-control involves the cultivation of a similar perspective regarding how one relates to externals, namely one of unperturbed
individual deference to the externals one desires. Yet, the Stoic worldview would lead its practitioners to disinterestedness—not to self-control. Failure to obtain some external will hurt one with self-control. By failure I specifically refer to one’s being compelled to reject a desire because it proves incompatible with the other desires that one pursues.

Exemplary self-controlled individuals, by virtue of their outlook, can never truly be denied an external they want because they are ever in motion and will always respond actively to the events that befall them, in a Job-like manner. For them, no external obstacles exist to the attainment of their desires; only less pleasant constitutive elements of those desires that they will affirm without hesitation regardless. Still, at times the self-controlled will have to face their own mortality and accept the impossibility of concurrently pursuing each and every external that they desire. It is for instance simply beyond human capability to altogether publish works of philosophical inquiry, regularly go deep sea diving, campaign for political office and have tightly knit relationships with one’s family. In such situations, a self-controlled individual will voluntarily expel (or modify) the desire or desires that are unable to coexist with the others. This ability to let go, in contrast to obstinately clinging to too much, is an essential part of self-control. By foolishly over-extending one’s activity beyond one’s ability, a person’s pursuit of externals falls out of accord with nature. If one strives for more objects than one can physically manage at present, one will hold none of them wholeheartedly, and in the pursuit of externals a half-hearted holding is none at all.
For the self-controlled, the act of ejecting an excessive desire, voluntary as it may be. Though such rejection does fall under the category of those necessary requirements to fulfilling their remaining wants, it has a bitter taste because it stems from personal lack of power rather than from the external world. Human limitation is the one barrier that self-control cannot hope to traverse. The acknowledgment of individual constraints results in painful cases where the self-controlled view objects that they desire and must say, “I cannot have it. It is beyond me.” This statement is more disheartening than saying that some other prevents a desire’s fulfillment, and certainly different than self-denial’s “I will not have it.”

It should be noted that self-controlled individuals bear such injury in a distinct fashion. They neither fall into passivity nor even openly weep. Rather, they become harder, and perhaps somewhat weary, but not inactively so. Alongside these tribulations, the self-controlled would also find a greater appreciation for the externals that they continue to pursue, effectively intensifying their self-control. This virtue is principally about perseverance through adversity.

For all its benefits, self-control is not incorruptible. The trait’s acquiescent nature leaves the self-controlled prone to various threats. Pure self-control is by definition unquestioning and non self-interested. The self-controlled are consequently in danger of becoming trapped in pursuit of externals that confer no subjective value. Their readiness to obey orders can lead them into following orders for those orders’ sakes. A self-controlled person must be submissive, but not too submissive; he or she must be careful not to blindly accept every demand that appears necessary to satisfy his or her desires. Friendship does not call for one to do everything one’s friend tells
or asks one to do. Excessively catering to the requests of one’s friend does not make one more that person’s friend; it actually makes it more difficult for true friendship to exist. Other types of external-relationships are not supposed to be as mutual, but can be taken by the self-controlled to unnecessary extremes that strain their abilities to pursue other externals without bestowing extra benefit. Also, if resignation comes to dominate one’s being as one bends according to the interrelations of all one’s desires, then one’s self will grow indistinct, making one’s pursuit of externals aimless. One must not forget that self-control initially is a disposition as assertive as it is ordered, and that the obedience for which self-control calls does not entail meekness or actual submission in every case.

Further, though the tenacity for which self-control allows is of high value in the pursuit of externals, activity *eo ipso* is not as clearly a boon. If self-controlled individuals ask themselves why they ultimately labor, self-control will have no response save, “Because its what must be done to obtain externals.” The externals they chase will neither provide sufficient answer. Falling into routine, as often happens under a life of self-control, makes it easy to ignore this question and merely concern oneself with the daily minutiae of fulfilling externals’ requirements. Such unconscious acting is not unworthy living in itself, but it is vulnerable to crisis. If existential questions surface, they can totally unravel the progressive evolution of those with self-control.

One’s motion is not secure if one cannot discern reason for why one moves—nor is it as enthusiastic as possible. Even if existential unraveling never transpires, self-control alone will still be unable to reach self-sufficiency. Self-control is
incapable of sustaining a life’s acceleration. It trains one to carry the weight of multiple externals on one’s back, but that heaviness will never evaporate. The ability to tolerate all of an external’s constituent pieces together does not necessarily entail love for each of them. One can bear a thing while seeking more pleasing or efficient variations of the thing—an attitude fundamentally different from totally accepting that thing as is. Action does not have to be exuberant to occur or be effective.

The life of pure self-control is without rejoicing and laughter just as it is without passive sorrow. Self-control by itself turns one into a machine; a thing of mindless discipline with great productive capacity, yet unable to surpass itself. Though self-controlled movement may never halt, that very hardiness can tire its practitioners as they age within the confines of their chosen lifestyles. And, weariness is the enemy of the animated and insatiable drive for more that identifies self-sufficient behavior. The strenuousness of the self-controlled life may also result in a contented pursuit of a very few externals or a Stoic detachment from specific externals in total.

In short, through self-control individuals learn how to act. The mere knowledge of our identities and our wants, which self-reflection can uncover, is not enough to get us to actually realize those wants and transform ourselves. When we identify desires, we often only point to end-states that seem appealing to us. Yet, rarely do we fully affirm all the necessary steps leading up to those end-points because many of those steps require strain or courage to take, and thus present subjective difficulties to us. Sadly, such a disjointed perspective causes individuals to tear apart their wellbeing by simultaneously desiring and not desiring single externals.
I defined self-control as a disposition to act in an ordered manner, conditioned by that understanding. One who is truly self-controlled appreciates that in the act of genuine wanting – as opposed to fragmented wanting – one has control over nothing save the initial decision to want or to not want. Going forward, the self-controlled perceive it their duty to direct their actions in accord with whatever the externals they chose command of them, and to bear the imposition of such order without qualm. Consequently, where others would allow their egos to hold them back from attaining their desires the self-controlled do not, for they, through strength of will, have raised their desires in value above that of experiencing immediate subjective pleasure.

Therein lies a problem, however. Though the action of the self-controlled will be machine-like and inexorable, it should not be observed as fully self-sufficient. In their willingness to bend, the self-controlled lose that animalistic dynamism which allows us to surpass what we previously believed ourselves to be capable of when we engage in those extraordinary actions that we love with every facet of our beings. The purely self-controlled submit to the strenuous life not because they would have it no other way, but because they observe no alternative having chosen a life of externals. Self-sufficient life requires the former. Thus, we must turn to examine a second disposition to action that is specifically not grounded on the acquiescence to externals’ rule.
François de La Rochefoucauld, the 17th century French nobleman-author wrote in his *Maximes*, “We cannot love anything except in relation to ourselves….”

I agree with him – though I would replace “love” with “want.” Max Stirner said the same, albeit in a more direct, abrasive fashion: “man is *mercenary* and does nothing ‘gratis.’”

We take no action, including positive inaction, in which we perceive no positive benefit to ourselves. Anyone who can recall *doing* a thing that they did not personally want to do in light of the possible alternatives lies to themselves. Just as we eat to satisfy our hunger so too do we maintain relationships, give aid to strangers, and kneel to authority in order to satiate our personal desires. Self-interestedness, though, is an amoral, not immoral, quality. It can only be judged “bad” in another’s actions, and only because it disrespects the reality of some alternative that we would want instead—in other words, our own self-interestedness.

One can respond to one’s innate self-interestedness in three ways: first, by not acknowledging it—“altruism” I call this; second, by egotistically acknowledging it; or third, by egoistically acknowledging it.* Each has different effects, but only egoism is part of self-sufficiency. That said, it must be noted that while egoism is component to self-sufficiency it, like self-control, is not self-sufficiency entire. Indeed, while it contributes to self-sufficiency – and to our understanding of this difficult concept – it

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* The latter two might seem almost the same, but this is an illusion born of their being spelled almost identically. **Egotistic** describes those who solely act in accordance with their will, and through such self-love come to perceive themselves superior to the external world. **Egoistic** describes those who, while like egotists in the former respect, appreciate that coherent self-direction entails standing apart from – not above – the external world.
lacks important elements of self-sufficiency and thus is an inadequate way of being. Consequently, though egoism is morally superior to either altruism or egotism, and though it is one of the three gates through which we must pass to gain an understanding of true self-sufficiency, it has weaknesses as a mode of life which that greater concept will have to address. Let us examine these opposing expressions of self-interestedness so that we might further discover what self-sufficiency is.

**ALTRUISM**

Many people never consciously affirm their self-interestedness, even as it guides them in everything they do. Instead, they believe in altruism – that they do, or should, direct their action according to concern for some other. I identify two causes for such belief. The first cause operates when timidity is responsible for peoples’ failure to affirm their personal self-interestedness, when individuals mistakenly believe that they can (and should) regard the desires of others as more worthy of fulfillment than their own. The second cause operates when idleness is responsible for peoples’ failure to affirm their personal self-interestedness, when individuals choose to receive their morals from the hands of established orders – which ultimately value their success over that of their followers – instead of working to develop personal ethical systems. Both causes characteristically result in lives lived for and, most importantly, dependent on something greater than the individuals living it.

Consider the case of the first cause, that springing from lack of self-confidence. That lack can goad individuals to convince themselves that they, and their wants, are worthless relative to others—be they other individuals, groups or gods, and their particular desires. In an effort to prove otherwise to themselves these meek ones
search for validation by attempting to further the interests of others. Insecure, these figures spend their lives pursuing not externals, but what I shall call *internals*—in the outside world. Pride, or the notion that one can exclaim “I am valuable” is beyond them. The insecure rely on externals to make that statement for them.

In consequence of such self-destitution, the insecure are prone to taking orders, and enthusiastically so. Having cheapened their self-worth, they come to derive satisfaction from assisting others in realizing these others’ desires since merely fulfilling their own desires feels to them a small or undeserving enterprise. Yet, the insecure follow self-benefit to the same extent as everyone else. Through their “selfless” behavior they are rewarded with both purpose and self-esteem, and would not act as they do if it was otherwise. The insecure delude themselves into thinking themselves altruistic, and so not only fail to recognize what they are about but also, as a result of this failure, sustain themselves in a half-assed manner. If anything happens to the others that the insecure serve, they will be left groundless. Consider the wellbeing of one who lives for contributing to some charity only to find after a number of years that the charity ruthlessly extorted those who it supposedly had aided. Also, as important as those others are to the insecure, and as much as the insecure help them, those others are by no means under obligation to the insecure. Think of that same individual’s wellbeing if one’s contribution happens to be received by the charity without gratitude one year.

Externally enabled life such as this can continue for a long time, and not wholly unhealthily. Even the saddest insecurity – that of self-doubt so crippling it produces an utter inability to recognize achievement – can be responsible for
tremendous activity. While it may be impossible to accurately diagnose such affliction in individuals based on look alone, making specific examples difficult to identify, we can speculate as Karl Sanders, one of my favorite musicians, did when writing his song “User-Maat Re.” The title refers to Ramesses II, perhaps the most famous Egyptian Pharaoh (and the inspiration for Shelley’s poem “Ozymandias”). Sanders tells us,

I have often wondered what drove Ramesses to go to such megalomaniacal length to accomplish so much in his lifetime - to be Pharaoh par excellence on the grandest possible scale. I like to think that it has something to do with a son's desire to live up to his father's [Seti I] and predecessors' legacy. Of course, with Ramesses, this was carried to lengths never equaled before or since. When I wrote the lyrics to this song, I envisioned a man hearing voices in his head. For each accomplishment he would hear his father's voice telling him, "you have done nothing". which in turn drives the man's obsession to live up to his father's seemingly impossible expectations. 32

If we add that Ramesses might have believed himself to be acting for the glory and power of Egypt, than we have a useful portrait of the insecurity I am trying to describe." He despises his internal, weak self who he futilely strives to alter via a host of external accomplishments. Ramesses pursues externals as a parasite. To stop, or to fail, is to reveal personal worthlessness. Neither are Ramesses’s successes free from parasitism, motivated by pessimism as they are. The inescapable knowledge of his accomplishments ultimate flimsiness is what drives him, leaving him forlorn even as he acts. Ramesses could not therefore be called self-sufficient; the truly self-sufficient are ignorant to the concept of failure, and will not utilize it as a source of motivation.

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* Even if Ramesses were acting in a more self-directed fashion, the insecure characterization painted by Sanders lyrics would keep him a symbol of altruistic conduct. Self-berating perfectionists, in a strange way, are subordinate to whatever ideals they feel themselves compelled to attain.
The second cause of altruism is indolence papered over by the notion of obligation. It is truly a difficult task for individuals to personally determine the scope of what they should and should not want for they must fashion their own ethical systems to do so, and that is lengthy, mentally-taxing work requiring an individualist courage. Rather than so exert themselves, many turn to established norms for the guidance they need. Thus, such people enter into vassalage to religion, state, etiquette, sexual mores, family etc., receiving an uncomplicated view of the world and directives regarding their pursuit of externals in return for propagating the values that those systems prescribe.

Altruists of this type depend on such norms to uphold their pursuits of externals. Without those norms’ instruction, they find themselves existentially lost, as happens to Derek Vinyard, the protagonist of the 1998 film American History X. In the film, Vinyard sees his neo-Nazi worldview go undermined while in prison. While serving time for the murder of a black car-jacker, he is raped by members of the Aryan Brotherhood after questioning their criminal dealings and then protected from further violence by a black gang due to the persuasion of a particular black inmate with whom he becomes friends. After his release, no longer racist Derek finds himself entirely unable to return to his old life populated by racist friends and family.

Altruism, overall, does not necessarily entail a bad or insufficient life, but it cannot play a role in a truly self-sufficient one. The life that altruists experience rests on tenuous foundations. For them, personal integrity is interwoven with the externals they chase—and no externals exist that cannot be taken away. During hard existential times, altruists crumble. Externals of all types are indeed valuable, but they should
not be confused for, or relied on as, the foundational source of motivation responsible for self-sufficient living. If injured, one does not heal oneself by taking anesthetics. Insecurity and lethargy must be overcome, not ignored through the use of others as crutches to help carry one’s existential weight. There are superior forms of relationships.

EGOTISM

Egotism is the second manner in which individuals can respond to their innate self-interestedness. Unlike altruists, egotists acknowledge their self-interestedness. By egotism I define an attitude towards life that holds fulfilling one’s own desires as most important attached to the ignorant belief that the surrounding world is one’s servant to command, and has to cater to one’s will. Thus, egotistic appreciation of the primacy of oneself in one’s life is distinctively accompanied by a corresponding loss of respect for the externals that one pursues. Egotists consider all externals merely as apples to be eaten and then discarded in accordance with their appetite. Egotists feel entitled. In egotism the act of anointing oneself as the ruler of one’s own life sprouts an arrogant outlook in which one is superior relative to all other things. Not only do egotists attach the highest importance to their desires, but also they think that the entire world should as well.

The condescending glance and indignant sneer are two of signature marks of the egotist. Egotists do not question themselves or doubt their correctness, and

* Think of spoiled children who, being picky eaters, get their parents to prepare meals specifically according to their wishes that are different from what the rest of the family eats. Their whims never denied, when these children are old enough to go to restaurants (or eat at others’ houses) they unthinkingly expect to be able to order off the menu if none of the offerings appear to their liking, and will vocalize that expectation without hesitation.
therefore are less than pleased when they hear their wants questioned. They quickly put down proposed alternatives to their will. As such, egotists are very resolute individuals. They will charge towards what they think will satisfy their desires without consideration for others’ judgments, forcing their way through whatever might happen to bar their path. Such an attitude will often allow one to succeed in one’s endeavors simply due to the weak-wills of so many individuals.

No ulterior motives exist to the egotistic pursuit of externals, as they did to that of the altruistic. Egotists are openly and unabashedly selfish. Accordingly, the denial of will is existentially offensive to egotism. If egotists’ endeavors prove unsuccessful they seethe at the gall of who or whatever can be held responsible. The same occurs in situations where one, for any reason, would attempt to subordinate egotists’ wills. To use myself as example, I remember at times feeling completely unwarranted hostility due to the “imposition” of being asked to help clean the house with my housemates, even as I appreciated the reasonableness of the request. This kind of irrational self-centeredness, which would attempt to override external obligations, is at the core of an egotistic attitude—though it does not always display itself in appearance.

Egotism is thus because it involves only an incomplete internalization of self-centeredness. Egotists, unlike altruists, know how to make demands. The problem is that they attempt to make those demands on externals rather than on themselves. By sheer force of will do egotists hope to see their desires satisfied. Their imperiousness is so great that the thought of obtaining wanted objects completely overshadows the numerous particular actions that they must perform in order to realize that state of
fulfillment. Egotists expect to satisfy their desires by simply crying out “I want! I want!” until externals capitulate to that barrage.

This headstrong method certainly can yield fruits when egotists face externals less obstinate than themselves, but it closes them off from any externals that require self-sacrifice in any measure to gain. To egotism’s rigid perspective such sacrifice conflicts with the promotion of their self-interest. Changing how one behaves at the behest of a loved one or going out of one’s way to assist a friend are two activities, for instance, in which egotists will never engage. This total aversion to externals that will not provide immediate and unobstructed benefit, combined with their show of disdain towards others’ wants, prevents egotists from forming relationships, save inadvertently.

The malevolent nature of egotism’s drive leaves its adherents very vulnerable to envy—a desire for the possession of another attached to a feeling that one is more deserving of it than the possessor. Egotists feel themselves to be in unending competition with the outside world. They consider others’ benefit their loss. Every sign of adversity prompts self-justifying thoughts of how they are in the right and whatever opposes them is in the wrong that go forgotten if the experience is underwent from the other side. Ultimately, like altruists, egotists are dependent on the externals they pursue for their wellbeing even though the motivation by which they pursue is not. That is why egotism too has no place in self-sufficiency. The idea of foregoing wants causes egotists pain and brings them to tantrum. Additionally, they have trouble gauging how successful their pursuit of externals is; vain creatures, egotists enjoy flattery and require a kind of reassurance to survive. For example, an
intellectual egotist, when meeting you, will say in a few words, “These are all the books I have read. I am quite smart, am I not?” Agreement will not affect this individual, as he or she already believes as much. Disagreement or a refusal to acknowledge will provoke not doubt but anger and perhaps a “You idiot. What do you know?”

This is not insecurity, to be sure—the egotist’s inflated self-image remains unmarred. Still, the suffering of negative passions can be as individually damaging as low self-esteem. Both subtly restrict how one acts, and self-sufficiency tolerates no such personal limitations. What egotists fail to realize is that to be truly self-interested requires a measure of disconnect from the external world. Trading externally induced happiness for hostility does not release one from the sway of whatever is so able to affect one. Only when one is able to disregard opposition itself through fixating on self-love can one be deemed truly self-interested.

**EGOISM**

The third way in which individuals can respond to their self-interestedness, which does serve as constituent to self-sufficiency, is egoism. Like egotism, egoism is founded on the active personal recognition of self-interestedness. As consequence, egoism’s appearance may look similar to that of egotism in some respects. On an internal level, however, the two approaches differ quite drastically, for only egoism truly embraces self-interestedness. Egoism, simply put, is the attitude towards life that results when one is able to fully and coherently internalize the assertion, “I ultimately am the sole owner of my life. Nothing I do exists beyond my will and there is nothing
to which I am obliged, in feeling or in act, save through my own choosing. And, *the same holds for others.*”

In making such a statement, egoists resolve to consider nothing save themselves (or in relation to their benefit). This means that they will never compare themselves to others, care about how others judge them as they follow their desires, or in general allow externals to disturb them from happily doing what they deem currently important. An egoistic attitude involves the ability to fully ignore whatever one is not wholly inclined to call a subjective good and, alternatively, to joyously engage with the externals that one does judge to be pleasant and attractive.

Egotism goes beyond this. Immoderate, it is as I said the self-indulgent attitude towards life that results when one not only resolves to unremittingly follow self-interest but also believes that doing so raises one to a plane superior to that of all externals. The distinction between egoism and egotism can be illustrated by an example likely close to many college students’ lives: that of securing a job. As individuals seek gainful employment, they overhear the searches of others come to completion while theirs continues. Egotists react spitefully. “Be silent, I am the one who should have a job, not you,” they think. Perhaps they attempt to trivialize the job won or criticize the person’s boastful show of pleasure. In contrast, an egoist would remain unmoved and unfeeling, while inwardly responding thus: “Good for that person, but their success in this case has no bearing on my own finding a job. That is up to myself and my action.”* Neither would an egoist here proffer extensive

* You might wonder if these figures’ reactions would change if the job offer that the overheard received had been one for which they too had applied. For the egotist, there would be no difference save possibly an increase in the flare of his or her rage. The egoist, on the other hand, would now say to him or herself, “What other jobs might I want?” before quickly
congratulations. Egoists, not overly gracious, will not be compelled to validate others’ achievements just as they expect none to validate their own.

**SELF-RELIANCE**

To describe egoism further, as coherent self-concern it is characterized by a confident aloofness. A fundamental element of an egoistic worldview is the recognition that in affirming selfish action one should expect no other to gratify that selfishness for one. This appreciation leaves one so alone in the universe that it can be terrifying, until one discovers oneself to be in possession of an *internal* of tremendous power that can be forgotten but never taken away: self-love. At that moment one becomes an egoist, seeing that though one is solely responsible for one’s wellbeing, one will always be there for oneself and able to strive for that wellbeing if one is hearty enough to do so. Stirner, naturally, provides us with the egoist mantra: “The divine is God’s concern; the human, man’s. My concern is neither the divine nor the human, not the true, good, just, free etc., but solely what is *mine*, and it is not a general one, but is—unique, as I am unique. Nothing is more to me than myself!”

The affirmation of one’s utmost value to oneself – the establishment of personal integrity – sets egoists apart from others by simultaneously closing them off to specific affects, such as hopelessness, petty hate, and annoyance while providing them with an unshakeable sense of self-satisfaction. Both altruists and egotists, we saw, are ruled in differing ways by their desires. Egoists are autonomous. Cloaked in their solitude, worn not out of fear, anxiety, shyness or any similar desire for withdrawal, egoists purely pursue externals for the *external* benefits they identify taking up the search afresh. That disposition to action may remind us of the self-controlled, but it is differently motivated.
therein, for they already are internally complete. Egoism is the rejoicing in, and wholesale ownership of, one’s power of will. Egotists absolve themselves of any need for self-justification. The statement, “I do what I do because I want to” distinguishes their perspective on life. No one can impose values, happiness, or sadness on egoists.

Further, egoists are averse to competition in the usual sense of the word. While they above all are self-competitive – always seeking to outdo their past efforts and fulfill more wants – egoists lack the spirit of rivalry that pushes individuals to outshine other people and harshly criticize their own work; a need for outside approval nonexistent in egotists. Others cannot tell egoists that they are doing well or poorly even as egoists acknowledge the outside world. Egoists do what they choose—that is enough for both their sustenance and their motivation.

Egoistic self-acceptance translates into an impersonal yet benevolent dignity, which egotists exhibit in all their endeavors. Self-absorbed, they do not critique that which is different from them. Egoists are agreeable and notably free of disdain because the word “should” is not found in their conversations. On the egoist perspective, choices have inherent value to their makers and require no explanation to outsiders besides their being actively displayed. If there is any right that egoism recognizes, it is the pursuit of happiness.

By the same token, however, egoists will not deign to obey external orders of any kind. Just as they understand that the world does not have to cater to them, egoists do not cater or defer to externals, only acting when they can exclaim an all encompassing “Yes” at the same time. If egoists stand distinct from you, they will participate in neither your joys nor your sorrows. They will listen, but only rarely
reassure or praise. Egoists will never actively seek to offend another, but neither will they actively seek to consider others’ feelings besides those of individuals with whom they, for their own satisfaction, cooperate. The only connection egoists will have with strangers is that of the knowing smile shown towards those whom the egoists observe becoming like them. Some would call all this uncaring, but who are they to impose “should’s?”

**ADEQUATE CAUSATION**

Egoism significantly affects how individuals pursue externals. Most fundamentally, egoists never desire in order to quell inner turmoil or satiate needs. To egoists, the goal of the pursuit of externals is the enhancement of individual power and, correspondingly, the expansion of individual identity. Stirner again well explains the undirected, erratic, and perhaps inefficient inner dynamo that fuels egoists’ activity:

> The *own* man is *originally* free, because he recognizes nothing but himself; he does not need to free himself first, because at the start he rejects everything outside himself, because he prizes nothing more than himself, rates nothing higher, because, in short, he starts from himself and “comes to himself.”

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Thus, egoists, unlike many, pursue externals already in possession of a basic understanding of who they are and what they want, providing them with firm ground upon which they may go about constructing themselves into the ideal individuals who they desire to be. Resolving to merely yet vigorously follow one’s own good as one conceives it greatly simplifies life. By refusing to act out of obligation or think “I

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* Even sleeping or eating, the egoist acts affirmatively, only *doing* because he or she wants to do. Indeed, such behavior is largely about perspective. Egotists are as affected by external forces as all things, so they certainly do feel tired and hungry at times, but whenever they move they take total ownership for their doing so. Whereas others would say, “I’m going to eat because I’m hungry,” egoists say, “I’m going to eat because I want to eat.”
want to do this, but another would rather I do that. I don’t really want to do that, but maybe I should…” egoists avoid the half-assery so often a part of peoples’ lives.

In the *Gorgias*, Plato has Socrates analogize the moderate, just person to a man who carries a set of intact, full jars as he navigates his life, in contrast to the intemperate person, who resembles a man who spends his life ever attempting to fill the set of leaky jars that he bears. Egoists, accepting their own selfishness and the distance between them and all pursuits of externals not their own, resemble the former whereas non-egoists resemble the latter. An active life spent constantly filling such a jar is assuredly not unworthy, but is one dictated by the jar, and becomes all the more juvenile if the pourers become frustrated by their pouring without also wanting to either stop pouring or trade in their jars for new ones.

Egoists, with their jars, are the “adequate causes” of their behavior – to use Spinozan vocabulary – and therefore truly active agents. In the third part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza asserts, “I call that cause adequate whose effect can be clearly and distinctly perceived through it. But I call it partial, or inadequate, if its effect cannot be understood through it alone;” Moreover, “we are active when something takes place, either in us or externally to us, of which we are the adequate cause.” In short, to be an adequate cause is to never say that one reacts to external events, but rather to only say that one determines one’s actions for oneself based on what will be most personally advantageous given the circumstances one encounters. Egoists may assuredly be defined as such.

When one “achieves” egoism, the phrase “I do not want” is removed from one’s action-vocabulary. Egoists recognize that action can never be entirely
unaccompanied by willing, and so strive to take no actions save those they can consciously fill with an affirmative spirit given the situations in which they find themselves—a capacity entirely lacking in those who are conflicted about themselves. Accordingly, hesitancy and reluctance are absent from the egoists’ experiences because they never do anything that even a part of them rebels against.

**LOVING EXTERNALS**

Egoists love their wants unconditionally and without compromise. Whereas altruists reluctantly accept the bad in their wants when it is outweighed by good, egoists know of no bad in their wants. “How could something I want be a burden to me?” the egoist asks, eagerly avowing that want whole. This viewpoint is not exactly analogous to the self-control that I previously examined, in which one grows flexible through cultivating the ability to defer and by being “averse only to what is against nature among the things that are up to you.” Egoists never defer, and their tolerance of difficulty will only display itself in the initial identification of a particular want.

In the same vein, egoists never allow others to normatively curtail their desires. They observe no intrinsic ethical issues behind theft, assault or general conflict if such action happens to be necessary for the securing of their wants—though egoists’ engagement in such conduct is never scornful. Egoists do not look down upon their potential victims’ initial holding of desired objects or those peoples’ inability to continue doing so. Egoists do not say, “How dare you keep what we want

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* As do egotists, though they see bad, and thereby reject wants, more quickly than egoists. In other words, egoists have greater capacity of will than do egotists. When egoists form desires the power of their wanting easily overcomes foreseeable downsides, while egotists turn away from externals at the first sign of any potential unpleasantness. Egoists are able to initially desire unpleasantness if it will benefit them.
from us,” but only, “We want one of your possessions and will seize it if we are able.” If they are successful, egoists injure the previous owners no further; instead, they look them in the eye and state, “Assert yourselves, we will not prevent you from taking it back—if you can.” Such behavior is indeed as impersonal as it sounds, and many will find it distasteful. However, no one has a right to others’ respect. The respect of another will have little value in any case if one is incapable of respecting oneself.

**ALTRUISTIC VS. EGOISTIC COOPERATION**

This attitude most certainly does not prevent egoists from cultivating relationships. Egoistic relationships, though, are of a different nature than altruistic relationships. Altruism gives rise to cooperation based on dependency. Such cooperation views relationships as trades of goods between individually needy actors, with more apparent trades valued more highly than less apparent ones, and where goods that more deeply gratify one’s ego are regarded as more attractive than those less so gratifying. *

Altruistic cooperation’s focus on trading and the notion of inner deficiency colors the products generated by that cooperation. Not only do the participants seek the benefits of their collaborations, but they also require displays of gratitude for their efforts or else feel offended. From the altruistic perspective, a meaningful relationship cannot exist unless the involved parties depend on each other—it is an insult to show oneself capable of acting individually. If one does not exhibit pain, such as grief, after

* I mean, for instance, that one who makes us a meal is usually valued more highly than those responsible for getting the particular ingredients to us, and one who makes us feel good about ourselves is usually valued more highly by us than the one who only makes us that meal. Basically, the altruistic understanding of cooperation is one rife with inequality.
any kind of loss the depth of one’s caring about what was lost is questioned. If altruists do not receive some form of the words, “You are valuable, I need you,” their ability to cooperate suffers. Concurrently, base material exchange is respected but considered much less sacred. The relative value of whatever one can provide in an exchange (as opposed to the participation itself) determines much about that one’s place in an altruistic relationship.

None of these features typify egoistic cooperation. Bartering is not a feature of an egoistic relationship; there is no transaction of needed goods taking place. Rather, in egoistic cooperation we observe two or more individuals who, either finding or having brought their wants into alignment, embark on a creative process in which each mutually contributes. Together, they perform a special kind of action that satisfies their shared want more dynamically than would have been possible separately. For example, consider any scientific research collaboration, such as the Apollo missions (though perhaps those were too nationalistic a series of endeavors to qualify completely*). A kibbutz or commune might provide better illustration. Collaboration of this type is no less than an enhanced version of the individual egoistic pursuit of externals.

As such, egoists rapidly, easily, and forcibly throw themselves behind and encourage such relationships, feeling an exuberant fellowship with the other

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*I observe nationalistic cooperation in an anarchist’s sense; as an offshoot of what I would call the zealot’s cooperation. Zealous cooperation is similar to egoistic cooperation in its basis on creative union, but differs in that it permits, and even encourages the sacrifice of its participants. In cooperation born of zealotry not only are the products of the union considered greater than its parts, but its constructed identity is as well—like a state, religion or firm. For this reason, the individuals who compose the zealous cooperation are little more than interchangeable cogs in a machine, able to be used and replaced without the enterprise collapsing. For example, think of a nation engaging in war (a squad of individual soldiers might, in contrast, be a useful example of an egoistic cooperation).
participants all the while. When another industrious contributor in cooperation struggles to accomplish his or her task, egoists will be among the first to provide support because in so doing they help themselves. However, egoists have no sympathy for free riders or isolationists; egoists can watch such figures perish without disturbance. Also, and very importantly, a cooperating egoist is never incapable of moving towards, or better said, attempting to move towards, completion alone. While egoists may hold cooperation in high regard, they can and will leave others behind if cooperation becomes strained. Even if doing so turns them into a Sisyphus, as one working to reach the moon by oneself would be, egoists will at least try to accomplish their wants as long as they continue to desire them.

**ISOLATION**

Living in harmony with personal will makes egoists dedicated, yet fickle. When egoists desire a thing, they strive after it with the entirety of their beings. Pure egoists are enthusiastic, excitedly seizing upon whatever happens to genuinely capture their interest. Yet, if unforeseen difficulties present themselves, egotists can eject their wants as easily as they originally affirmed them. For example, if egoists, working successfully in their dream careers, are one day presented with a host of unanticipated responsibilities, perhaps by new management, that are antithetical to their conception of what they initially desired from their job, egoists will pack their belongings in short order. They will not say, “Performing Y is now a part of X, and I wanted X,” as would the self-controlled. From their perspectives, “Y + X” is an entirely new want that may or may not receive the stamp of their will. Thus, egoists are changeable fellows; just as egoists will not allow outsiders to dictate their wants,
they also will not adapt to externals if they unexpectedly give egoists cause for displeasure. And, they will not look the worse for it—other pursuits still exist to be had. If egoists fail to gain benefits from their exertions, what reason do they have not to release their grasp? They do not exert themselves in order for their wants to coexist; externals have to hold egoists’ ever forward-moving attentions.

In this way, the egoistic refusal to be obliged can cause egoists to exclude themselves from much of what life might offer them. For that very reason egoism is itself incapable of making individuals properly self-sufficient. Taken to the extreme, the egoistic mindset can become like that of the protagonist in Patrick Süskind’s novel *Perfume*, Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, an 18th century Frenchman born with a superhuman sense of smell. Near the novel’s midpoint, Grenouille travels across the French countryside to reach the city of Grasse so that he can learn advanced perfuming techniques. On his journey, he begins to avoid the scent of humanity and eventually ventures from his path into a cave where he dwells for seven years, losing himself in playing with and remembering all the scents he had encountered since his birth. Of this experience the narrator relays,

> We are familiar with people who seek out solitude: penitents, failures, saints, or prophets. They retreat to deserts, preferable where they live on locusts and honey…. They do this to be nearer to God. Their solitude is a self-mortification by which they do penance. They act in the belief that they are living a life pleasing to God…. Grenouille’s case was nothing of the sort. There was not the least notion of God in his head. He was not doing penance nor waiting for some supernatural inspiration. He had withdrawn solely for his personal pleasure, only to be near to himself. No longer distracted by anything external, he basked in his own existence and found it splendid. He lay in his stony crypt like his own corpse, hardly breathing, his heart hardly beating—and yet lived as intensively and dissolutely as ever a rake had lived in the wide world outside.38

An all-encompassing egoism is similar. It leaves individuals susceptible to a self-satisfaction so great that it causes them to reject externals altogether. Directing effort
towards specific actions over alternatives may appear pointless if one is happy with oneself from the start. Such an outlook will not always pull individuals away from society and into caves, but it can easily halt the personal growth that self-sufficiency is supposed to promote and sustain. That is the chief danger of egoism: distorted self-contentment, the belief that the benefits of a relationship with the world are not worth the requisite effort.

Whereas self-control allows for individual endurance, egoism allows for individual joy, exchanging the ability to maintain a strong grip even as desired externals discomfort one for the verve that comes from solely pursuing the few externals that (subjectively) confer one benefit without disadvantage. Such behavior results from egoists’ consistent acknowledgment of the self-interest that is ultimately responsible for individuals’ pursuits of externals in the first place. In doing so, egoists, unlike those different from them, can be said to wholly direct their actions (and therefore, their lives) on both long-term and daily levels. A self-sufficient life would certainly be so spirited and self-instigated, and yet egoism is not fully self-sufficient.

Egoists’ Epicurean attitude places them in a hermitage of sorts. Many admirable externals will be attached to difficulties that we can never foresee or simply change in nature without affecting their worthiness. Unwillingness to participate in relations with externals that are at times chafing is a temperament as feeble as it is limiting. Life is abrasive, and self-sufficient individuals will not recoil from that truth, just as they will not resign themselves to the weariness inherent to a
self-controlled existence. The matter is thus: to attain true self-sufficiency, one must combine egoism with self-control – both unlocked by self-reflection.
CHAPTER V: SELF-SUFFICIENCY

I set out in this thesis to give an account of self-sufficiency, first to discover of what it consists, and second to appreciate its merits as a way of being. To this end I explored three related virtues: self-reflection, self-control, and egoism. As it turned out, each proves an important element to the concept of self-sufficiency and shines light on the positive aspects of it as a way of life, but is deeply flawed as a sole guide to that concept. In this final section, I will first review these three qualities and then detail their unification in which the unique strengths of each remain while the weaknesses fall away, resulting in what I call self-sufficiency. Finally, I will consider how this quality operates as a reinterpretation of an ancient Greek virtue known as sophrosune.

RECAPITULATION OF THE THREE VIRTUES

I began my search by discussing self-reflection, the means of learning how to question the determinacy of one’s situation—the imperative initial step towards readjusting how one lives. When one feels dissatisfied – for when else would one desire change? – one must first discern that one’s dissatisfaction is not compulsory, that potential alternatives to one’s sadness do in fact exist, if one is to even consider taking action instead of succumbing outright. That discrimination is the function of self-reflection. Questioning converts truth into possibilities, allowing questioners to create personal interpretations of the undermined circumstances. A type of freedom results from reflecting on one’s identity and one’s actions. Much less is preordained than one might have previously believed. However, this skeptic’s freedom is only
valuable if one is capable of formulating answers in response to one’s doubts. Deconstruction is useless if reconstruction does not follow. Doubt is worthless when it does not preface deed.

Self-reflection, as any individual activity, can become decadent and corruptive. By itself, self-reflection immobilizes whoever engages in it. Questioning can destabilize any facet of our identities and individual experiences, be it beneficial or harmful to us, and convert the self-reflective to nihilism. If one can appreciate the usefulness of artifice, one can return on one’s own terms to one’s world from that nihilistic standpoint and go forth crafting oneself along the lines of personal ideals. The trouble is, as Nietzsche wrote in *Beyond Good & Evil*, “When you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you.” For some, the self-construction to which self-reflection points can appear so terrifyingly strenuous or absurd that they choose to either forget their inquiries and continue onward in ignorance, permitting their integrity to vacillate with external causes, or forever laze in the meaningless state of nature that they now inhabit.

Only in vain can one seek certain knowledge that one’s life is “right” according to some universal moral standard. This is no reason though to live under a defeatist attitude in which one cedes final moral ownership of one’s life to anything outside oneself, to some realm of reluctant obligation. Whatever one’s circumstances, one can strive for *coherence* instead—the life of the unbending line, ever approaching the attainment of one’s self-identified moral ideal.

Crafting one’s life into an argument somehow capable of standing on its own as it grows along with oneself, accounting for one’s numerous desires for externals, is
vastly more difficult than the analogous task of setting an equally nuanced thesis down on a page (or in one’s mind). The latter requires but a written statement that a writer can restructure with no more than a thought whereas the former requires continual, active living, in which ordering can only result from strength of willpower and exhaustingly repetitive routine. Simply put, self-reflection without some manner of action cannot bring about a self-sufficient life: pure reflectors will either know what their desires and beliefs are without moving on them, or will fail to develop desires altogether. Self-reflection alone is inert, while self-sufficiency is active. To find the source of this activity, I took us to two seemingly opposing lifestyles as potential activators to self-reflection’s questioning: *self-control* and *egoism*.

*Self-control* I defined as the disposition to ordered action. Given this definition, I showed that such a disposition involves willing acquiescence to any demands that the externals one desires present or, in other words, the resolution to personally affirm every necessary aspect of a wanted external equally, including those that not only yield no immediate benefit or pleasure to us, but also those cause us pain. Self-control by itself both widens and strengthens its adherents’ capacity to embrace the externals they desire. Self-control’s mantra, “I will do anything that an external I value asks of me without qualm” generates great flexibility and endurance.

With such an outlook, the self-controlled are highly dutiful order-takers and thus able to act immediately and without hesitation. Consequently, no obstacle can derail their efforts to attain that which they believe will satisfy their desires. The self-controlled realize that nothing save themselves can disrupt their ability to affirm the
circumstances they face, and thereby stop them from directing action towards the achievement of whatever externals they find worthy of their exertion.

The danger of self-control is two-fold. First, the self-controlled can internalize the attitude of a servant to such an extent that they forget the leading role they play in all their actions – personally choosing externals before they ever follow those externals’ directives – and come to obey for obeying’s sake. Servitude can also lead one to forget the exact form of one’s initial wants as well. One is deprived of one’s individuality when one, for any reason, elevates the externals one desires above oneself. Such an individual is a machine, not a human—a tool for outsiders, unthinkingly ready to immediately perform exactly as told without consideration of reward or efficiency.

If my roommates repeatedly did not do their dishes, I might think, “I want to live in a clean house and have a good relationship with my roommates. Them not doing their dishes should not bring me stress. It’s no trouble doing their dishes for them,” and certainly be called self-controlled. However, such bending is passive and cowardly when the option for confrontation exists, and can also be engaged in a self-controlled manner. Self-control makes a person a master burden carrier: determined, strong and hard, yet cold as well, and ultimately slavish. The commands externals give can often be responded to in numerous ways. Too rapid movement to obey leaves us vulnerable to a kind of oversight.

Second, the efforts of the self-controlled will still existentially weary such individuals, as they are in fact human despite their outward appearance. Affirming the difficulties that one faces does not make those difficulties enjoyable. It can be
unsetting for the self-controlled to consider that the necessity with which they have clothed themselves, remains only due to their discipline. A moment of laxity can quickly undo everything they have worked towards. Letting go, passivity ever tempts them. Once one has become skillful at bearing the weight of necessity without disturbance, it may seem appealing to avoid the additional effort required to mold oneself according to some personal vision and Stoically bear the necessary affects unrelated to the satisfaction of desires with which the external world will unavoidably batter one. In these vulnerabilities the self-controlled reveal that they are not truly self-sufficient.

In contrast, egoism, a coherent self-interestedness, involves joyful individualism. I defined egoism as a lifestyle in which one truly makes oneself and one’s benefit one’s sole concern, and gains both self-esteem and self-direction in so doing. Whereas many find the pursuit of externals tiring, egoists love the pursuit of externals as an extension of themselves, due to their refusal to bend to the wills of others. Egoists are not dependent on externals for either their ability to act or their integrity. They never pursue externals they do not fully love, and are not weakened by finding any external to presently be beyond their grasp. To egoists, externals are tools that aid in one’s powers of acting but not the reason for action itself.

Self-love and self-benefit provide egoists with all the meaning they require. Their relationships with the externals they desire are warm and friendly. Egoists never carry externals as weights on their backs; rather, egoists link arms with the externals that appeal to them while benevolently brushing aside those that fail to pique their attentions. “I admire you. You appear to be headed in the direction I want
to travel, let us walk together!” egoists exclaim, or, just as easily, “I am on a different road than you, and I permit none to slow me down. Go your own way and leave me to mine.” Everything egoists do (including chosen inaction) – as well as everything that happens to them, insofar as it helps to provoke such doing – is made part of their selves and is thus subsumed by their self-love. They are consequently beings of gusto, energized by their lives. Egoists have no conception of toil because actions can only be toilsome to one if part of oneself would rebel to that action, a psychological state which egoists do not abide or attempt to override via the application of discipline. Egoists regard no disparity between work and leisure. With every action they express and cultivate themselves in harmony with their will, thereby entailing that such actions are, on a subjective level, totally free from negative connotations.

Yet, as I identified, pure egoists are ever at risk of carefree self-satisfaction that prompts them to ignore the external world altogether. Egoists’ intolerance of antagonism leaves them very ready to drop externals if those externals become misaligned with the individuals who they want to be. As it is in the nature of the pursuit of externals to be faced with demands by desires that will not conform to our wishes, this egoistic inflexibility is certainly problematic with respect to self-sufficiency. If self-love grows excessive, an egoist might ask, “What do I need these particular externals for? I have myself and that has always been enough.” Thus egoists might retreat when self-sufficiency would have them engage, squandering the powerful desiring that self-love should have inspired within them.

Just as the self-reflective are clear to themselves but inert and so not self-sufficient, and just as the self-controlled are enslaved to externals and thus are not
self-sufficient, so the egoists, because they are ultimately indifferent to externals even as they use them for their projects and their survival, fail to reach self-sufficiency. Each form of living has something to contribute to the idea of self-sufficiency, but each is severely limited in itself. Yet if one combines these three virtues into a coherent single lifestyle, the strengths of self-reflection, self-control, and egoism remain while their weaknesses evaporate, and together they produce a comprehensive picture of self-sufficiency and its merits as a mode of being.

**SELF-SUFFICIENCY PROPER**

A self-sufficient person has the clarity of vision but not the immobility of the merely self-reflective, the deep external engagement but not the weary dehumanization of the merely self-controlled, and the joyful self-ownership but not the aloofness towards anything beyond personal interest of the merely egoistic. Self-sufficient individuals want, and love, the whole external world, and their lives are cases of unceasingly accelerating expansion. Nothing can injure them, for everything they do, as well as everything that happens to them, is bent towards the realization of their personal will. As a result, their robust existences exhibit constant, tremendous exertions of energy unaccompanied by weariness. Living rejuvenates them.

As the self-sufficient act, their gaze focuses simultaneously on the future and the present. Three questions are ever at the backs of the self-sufficient mind: “Who am I now? Who do I want to be? What must I do to bridge those two?” Through acting on the basis of their answers to these questions, the self-sufficient find themselves linked to whomever they seek to become. Such knowledge of self is liable to change, of course. Individuals can, suddenly or gradually, find themselves
dissatisfied with the lives they lead, perhaps discovering one morning that they would rather have been mountaineers than the office workers they are presently. Subsequently, two responses are possible: “stay the course” or “evolve.” For many, staying the course is an act of resignation: “I’m too old to learn mountaineering; it’s too late for me;” “The training will be too painful, too difficult;” “I have other responsibilities I cannot forgo—I have a duty to my family, to society…. As a result they turn sad, frustrated, or numb and return to their day jobs where they perform their daily responsibilities while wistfully dreaming of the heights.

The self-sufficient undergo such crises in a wholly different manner. They actively stay the course if they choose that response over their newfound desire to be a climber. With alacrity dependent on how cultivated their self-sufficiency is, they boil all excuses down to a statement: “I currently want other things more than I want to be a mountaineer.” The self-sufficient recognize that if they are unable to whip themselves into new directions then they are in fact already acting in accordance with their will and thus have no reason to not happily engage to the fullest of their abilities in whatever they already are presently doing, even if it involves no more than data-entry. The self-sufficient worldview is inarguably black and white in regards to its stance on individual wants. A fundamental aspect of self-sufficiency is realizing the irrationality of saying “No” – of being angry, resentful, or depressed – towards anything that one does (including inaction).

Self-sufficiency’s optimism is total. I seek to avoid neither the hard cases nor to take the concept to its extremes. A self-sufficient Jewish man captured by the SS would joyfully and assertively – a state dissimilar to the martyr’s serene acceptance – board a train to Auschwitz insofar as he valued life and considered such action to be more aligned with that value than resistance would be.
As they do for “staying the course,” the non self-sufficient and the self-sufficient experience the alternate response – evolution – differently. Those who find that the mountaineer’s life is an external they genuinely desire will eventually face the harsh realities inherent to doing so. Being anything wholeheartedly involves strain of some sort. Regardless of the extent to which our mountaineers considered the requirements of their new lifestyle beforehand, such as having to procure equipment, plan routes, and endure inhospitable weather and terrain, and regardless of the initial rush they feel by beginning to realize their desires, as time progresses they will eventually find that living as a mountaineer is as much work as any other extended practice. Unexpected obstacles will be encountered as well.

Many of our mountaineers will consequently evolve only passively after the freshness of the external they have chosen wears away. They will continue to move onward, but will do so sighing. The menial parts of ascent are endured for the sake of those exuberant moments felt when they reach a summit. With such a mentality they are left deeply injured if they fail to attain those experiences, when they for whatever reason abort a climb. In some cases, the necessity of subjectively unpleasant difficulty, whatever one’s chosen life, will simply push the non self-sufficient to attempt to forget their new desires, and return to the struggles to which they were more accustomed.

Again, the response of the self-sufficient to this revelation of hardship is entirely unlike that of the non self-sufficient. They derive enjoyment from but one source: realizing their wants—not easiness, pleasure, or anything so limiting. For them, no experience in between the base and the zenith, save the cessation of motion,
falls outside that parameter. Self-sufficient mountaineers affirm all facets of the climbing process – preparation, ascension, and reaching the summit – equally. This includes moments of failure as well as moments of triumph. They understand that accomplishment cannot be excised from the menial preparations, the unpredictable adaptations to sudden snowfall or simply being cold, and so they are able to engage each part with sustained intensity, always exclaiming as they act, “I am getting what I want!”

Even when the route connecting base and peak is not wholly clear, the self-sufficient still act. Trying to adapt in the moment if necessary, they learn how to best achieve the identified macroscopic desires that are always at the forefront of their minds. Such unclear, honing action too is part of the realization of their desires. For the self-sufficient, only inaction can stand as failure. Re-prioritizing and momentarily placing a want aside until one understands the means and has the might to successfully pursue it is not the same as abandoning a want, as long as the want is never forgotten.

Indeed, self-sufficiency is impossible without the pursuit of externals itself. The self-sufficient are so unquenchably galvanized into activity because they hold, and can thus strive for, ideal future conceptions of themselves in possession of all the externals they desire. The inner dynamism attained through cohering their self-reflection, self-control, and egoism makes the self-sufficient capable, but only by directing that power towards some engagement with objects outside themselves can they actually be called self-sufficient. By pursuing externals as they do, the self-sufficient live in a state of continuous, non-stagnant self-realization.
To build on Camus’ metaphor,⁴⁰ I see the self-sufficient as a Sisyphus who has come to own his role to such an extent that he would try to keep rolling his boulder even if the gods absolved him of that task—a Sisyphus who, if he suddenly found his stone to stand motionless at the top of his hill, would push it down again rather than join the other aimlessly wandering shades in Hades. Sisyphus has found not only meaning in his “punishment,” but also the source of physical and mental strength, and a mentality that will allow him to accomplish anything given enough time. While appearing repetitive or absurd from the outside, Sisyphus’ task is the opposite from his perspective. With both his “burden” and his voracity to grow, Sisyphus uses his climb to shape and improve himself, discovering new ways to tackle it each time—perhaps now walking backwards, then on his hands—and in so doing he approaches the status of a titan.

**A NEW SOPHROSUNE**

Self-sufficiency thus conceived offers a particular interpretation of the classical Greek value of *sophrosune*, a term with meaning close to moderation, balance, or harmony, as it is discussed extensively in Plato’s *Republic*. Socrates lauds *sophrosune* as the foundational trait of just behavior, the principal virtue sought by Socrates and his interlocutors. Through its cultivation, a person is streamlined, with all facets of his or her self pointed towards, and serving a purpose in, the completion of some personally affirmed undertaking.⁴¹ To use the philosopher’s words,

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⁴¹ Not coincidentally I think, Socrates pronounces in the *Republic* at 369b that self-sufficiency is the final purpose of the just city that he uses to approximate the just individual: “I think a city comes to be because none of us is self-sufficient, but we all need many things. Do you think a city is founded on any other principle?” Note also that the self-sufficiency mentioned here is dissimilar to that which I describe and, regardless, that Socrates is saying that individual self-sufficiency is impossible naturally, or without some construct or method.
One who is just does not allow any part of himself to do the work of another part or allow the various classes within him to meddle with each other. He regulates well what is really his own and rules himself. He puts himself in order, is his own friend, and harmonizes the... parts of himself like... notes in a musical scale. He binds together those parts and any others there may be in between, and from having been many things he becomes entirely one, moderate and harmonious. Only then does he act. And when he does anything, whether acquiring wealth, taking care of his body, engaging in politics, or in private contracts— in all of these he believes that the action is just and fine that preserves this inner harmony and helps achieve it, and calls it so, and regards as wisdom the knowledge that oversees such actions. And he believes that the action that destroys this harmony is unjust, and calls it so, and regards the belief that oversees it as ignorance.  

Only those with sophrosune ever truly act, this passage would assert. The particular action itself does not matter. What does matter is that others who lack sophrosune, when they act, restrain their own momentum by incoherently going in multiple, opposing directions at the same time, such as one who would like to stay at home but attends a social function because one feels “obliged” to do so, and ends up both feeling unhappy and appearing a scrooge to others, to the detriment of one’s future relations. Nothing so hinders individuals who have attained sophrosune. They commit themselves fully to their decisions. When they act, the action is the sole one they want to perform at that particular moment. No voice lingers in their conscience complaining about the action’s occurrence. Sophrosune in this regard is a means to one becoming that “adequate cause” Spinoza details.

Self-sufficiency’s brand of sophrosune requires further unpacking, however. The sophrosune of self-sufficiency in no sense springs from self-denial. One could conceivably order oneself by naming some desire best and then allowing it to lead one’s actions by dominating one’s other desires, which become gratified only so that they may provide sustenance for their ruler. Plato himself could be misinterpreted as advocating this when he places reason above the sensuous appetites in the moral
hierarchy found within the Republic. Restraint, though occasionally a result of self-sufficiency’s sophrosune, is not its primary function—as I have argued, the satisfaction of personal desiring is. And importantly, self-sufficient individuals’ whole beings drive them to that satisfaction, not some single “ruling part.” (Plato is rightly interpreted as claiming the same thing.)

Self-sufficiency cultivates balance through addition instead of through subtraction, through increased action rather than decreased action. Moderation, self-sufficiency asserts, is achieved not by wanting less but by wanting more in complement. A want diminished is not the same original want. Instead of forgoing something that one wants, self-sufficiency would have one apply oneself elsewhere so that one may find oneself equal to the task of wanting both. For instance, gluttons who, ashamed of their gluttony, diet are no longer gluttons. Gluttony is too much for them. The same holds true even for dieters who genuinely no longer desire their old gluttony and truthfully say, “I cannot go on living unhealthily; that is not what I want,” before attempting to implement new eating habits, however difficult. There is nothing inherently wrong with surrender, especially a surrender that yields beneficial results, as happens in the second case. Yet, self-sufficiency strives would strive otherwise.

Self-sufficiency considers it a sin to abandon or let wants overpower one, if those wants are genuine. Gluttons who decide to take up bodily exercise before considering dietary changes expand their desires rather than contract them. In so doing they distinguish themselves from mere gluttons (who pursue their pleasures without making them their own), or guilty gluttons (who indulge their desires but who
continually regret that they do); they become a third kind of glutton, one who appreciates that gluttony is part of oneself and thus moves to master it so as to prevent gluttony from becoming the architect of one’s identity, even as it stands a feature. The simultaneous pursuit of various externals together can occur harmoniously, with each amplifying one’s attachment to the other. The externals that the self-sufficient pursue are all so interconnected (ideally).*

The third type of gluttony holds no animosity towards the love of consumption, but does appreciate that for its sensuous benefits, gluttony can have unacceptable downsides, such as obesity, that may affect one’s ability to fulfill many potential desires. All the same, its adherents appreciate that gluttony is a part of them, and they refuse to despise or excise their parts. These gluttons therefore set it upon themselves to make that part cohere with their other wants, however the external world permits. Thus, they bind their eating habits to their exercise habits. The amount of time these gluttons spend at the gym dictates what they can eat, and how much. If they desire more food, they increase how much they exercise.

As self-sufficient individuals pursue more and more complementary externals, their lives become increasingly discrete, for they result not from contingent nature but from carefully structured planning. We might think of them as resembling the deist god who imposes natural laws on the universe (the universe here being their bodies or their lives) and then steps away to watch that creation unfold. The self-sufficient yield their freedom of choice regarding individual actions because they are so structured,

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* Spinoza alludes to this harmonizing of individual wants when, in the *Ethics*’ final postulate, he describes “blessedness” (or freedom of mind) stating, “P42: Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself; nor do we enjoy it because we restrain our lusts; on the contrary, because we enjoy it, we are able to restrain them.” (Spinoza, Spinoza, and Curley. 264)
yet when taken as wholes, only their lives can be considered truly free due to the overall thoroughness of those lives’ self-direction. These individuals truly answer Zarathustra’s question, “Can you give yourself your own evil and good and hang your will above yourself like a law? Can you be your own judge and avenger of your law?”\(^{42}\) They are those who Nietzsche’s prophet calls, “the ones who will with a single will…”\(^{43}\)

Spinoza’s definitions of “God” and “freedom” help to further clarify self-sufficiency’s *sophrosune*. In the first part of the *Ethics*, he writes:

D6: By God I understand a being absolutely infinite, that is, a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence….

D7: That thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone. But a thing is called necessary, or rather compelled, which is determined by another to exist and to produce an effect in a certain and determinate manner.\(^{44}\)

The Spinozan God is identical to nature itself. God, “a substance consisting of infinite attributes,” alone is wholly free according to the Dutch-Jewish philosopher. As it is all encompassing, nothing external exists to it that can serve as a source of compulsion. This God’s actions – or, rather, internal motions – transpire in a determined fashion, and this determinacy follows from God’s “personal” structure (as observed by humanity in scientific and mathematical principles). God is thus free in a way similar way to how the self-sufficient are free. As the monistic amalgamation of existence’s innumerable, constantly moving pieces, as well as the being ultimately
responsible for such motion, the Spinozan God represents self-sufficient *sophrosune* and stands as the ideal towards which the self-sufficient strive.

* I use the word “ideal” specifically. We, limited as we are, are not gods, of course, and thus we will never be able to achieve such completeness. That impossibility does not prevent us from seeking to be God, however—just as the impossibility of Sisyphus’ rolling the stone over the hill does not prevent him from trying to do so with the joyful, self-expressive exertion I described above.
So, having written this thesis, I consider where I am now relative to where I was before where I started it, and wonder whether the issues that prompted me to undertake this endeavor have been resolved. In the introduction I described how I wrestled with a melancholy that resulted from beginning to appreciate that life involves unceasing difficulty and largely consists of predefined pathways to which we must adjust. I do not think my vision was faulty, but that is not what I wanted to show myself. These days more than ever I know that the minutiae of my life will not really be up to me, and that the notion of standalone breaks – of life as a series of milestone events through which we must pass and then can stop and celebrate, with anticipations of those celebrations pulling us onward – is a crutch on which individuals rely to make exertion more endurable. I assuredly accept this intimidating worldview even after writing this thesis. But I did not craft my ideas about self-sufficiency simply to bear this existential malaise; I see it is a means to step above it. Since I began contemplating this project I have felt melancholy recede. It has by no means disappeared, nor do I expect it ever will. Now, though, however it may still potently flare at times, something will restrain it.

Am I self-sufficient? No. I have only described an individual whom I would like to be. Part of me still rebels against productivity, and increasingly often do I feel guilty devoting time to self-indulgent leisure (is there any other kind?). You, reader, now have as good an idea as do I, in regards to how one may actualize self-sufficient life. The ternary unity to which I point does not easily keep its composition. I did not argue or show that self-controlled and egoistic attitudes will necessarily and smoothly
cohere despite their apparent incongruity. I asserted rather that those two philosophical modes both have something truly admirable at their cores, but which require balancing to be useful. Further, I contended that their simultaneous cultivation – an unusual notion, I think – is not only possible but results in such balance. Unfortunately for those who would hope securing happiness to be an easy matter, that dual progress will not, and cannot, happen on its own.

Proactive self-reflection must be a constant recalibrating, complacency-preventing presence until the moment when self-sufficient living becomes intuitive, if that is even possible. To singly be either self-controlled or egoistic already requires a strong will. The former would have us compel ourselves to do what we often do not want to do, and the latter would have us not do what we do not want to do but feel compelled to do. Together they would entail that we willingly be restrained and free (or own, as Max Stirner would say) in chorus—paradoxical, no? Tension-inducing, certainly. Through self-reflection it is perceivable that the two can be blended with assertive effort, but the emphasis must always be on the effort.

A comprehensive outline specifically detailing what self-sufficiency’s catalogue of spiritual exercise (to use Hadot’s term) would include is notably absent from this thesis, and thus an obvious area to apply thought in a subsequent work, in addition to the continued refinement and elucidation of the concept of self-sufficiency itself. The schools of Greco-Roman antiquity that I overviewed in the introduction each prescribed various training methods for adepts to practice daily. Stoics, for example, made a habit of keeping diaries of sorts in which they would write accounts of their experiences without the addition of value judgments or other subjective
characterizations. Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* stands as a historically renowned case of such a diary.

Conceivably, self-sufficiency might advocate us to write about ourselves, but such writing would have to achieve an outcome more demanding of us than an unbiased view of our individual inhabitancies of the world. It would have to mold our outlook to see our fully willed individual actions as directly producing knowable and sense-able subjective good regardless of the immediate output. Writing out maps of our wants, so that we may visually track their logical consequences and interrelations (and thereby both more accurately understand which of them are genuine, and also better perceive how we progress towards their fulfillment through our actions), would likely be a vital tool, though initially one difficult to produce. Constantly regulating our language would undoubtedly be of great importance as well, so that we never restrict our actions by deriding those we choose to perform. Writing little odes to the difficulties we experience – each highlighting a particular strenuousness, but not in a negative light – which enumerate how embracing them increases our power might be helpful, if somewhat humorously narcissistic and masochistic. As I continue to think of these matters, I would like to fashion a number of “maxims of the self-sufficient,” in the style of Baltasar Gracián’s *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*.

As I consider possible spiritual exercises I return to reflect upon self-sufficiency itself, and I worry. I worry that what I have crafted is immature, incoherent – stylistically or logically – or, even worse, banal. Might self-reflection in reality be fundamentally passive, and unknown to those who act swiftly and with

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* So Epictetus advises, “If you kiss your child or your wife, say that you are kissing a human being; for when it dies you will not be upset” (Epictetus and White, 12).
confidence? Are the chains of the self-controlled entirely of their own devising? Does the world laugh at how their striving for consistency makes them beholden to the externals they believe are important to acquire? And might the distance that egoists observe between themselves and others also be unnatural, a result of some inability to trust externals that leaves them disadvantaged by their resolution to cultivate self-reliance instead of searching for strangers who they can assist and depend upon in turn? I wonder whether I play a great joke on myself, fashioning self-sufficiency as the leitmotiv of a life I would consider well lived.

But ultimately all such worries are pointless. Those questions will always exist for an individual who contemplates such topics. The only mistake would be to posit no answers in return. The understanding of self-sufficiency that I have presented, corporeal as it is now, is far from finished, and would remain thus even with the addition of a chapter on “best practices” or further refinements of the concept of self-sufficiency itself. My version of Socrates’ quest to learn what it means to live well will expand and hone itself as I too grow older.

At times during the thesis process I would wonder how my life would be different if I instead were expanding the sphere of human knowledge by performing scientific research, or advancing the understanding of some academic subject through entering the discourse of other scholars, as happens in most theses. That would certainly make it easier for me to grasp what has been accomplished in this culmination of my undergraduate studies. Indeed, some might opine that I stand here at the end with nothing of real substance. Yet I feel that I have done something. I overhear many dealing in a variety of fashions with the topics I addressed. Among
my friends and acquaintances alone I have been privy to anxiety over relationships, personal image, workload, the future, and numerous other externals. They, each in their own way, moan about the bad as I have and often continue to do so. Sometimes those hardships provoke philosophical discussions. Usually, though, the troubles they experienced go shortly forgotten once the issue is resolved—until another arises, that is. I gather that this is what happens to most people. Where are the motivated, the truly energetic? I have never encountered one of them. Most philosophize like they exercise: in short, non-cumulative (and thereby non-constructive) bursts.

By beginning this personal aesthetic enterprise now I hope to live otherwise. Whatever I do in the future, I, with self-sufficiency’s aid, resolve to make my own. Carrying a personal ideal of moral worthiness as one lives provides one with a testing stone, a focal point to which one can direct one’s life upward and outward as it moves forward. The biggest moral danger humans face, I think, is not worry, inaction, or passion. It is ignorant self-hypocrisy of regretting the actions to which one, and no other, said “Yes” or “No,” and of loathing oneself without attempting, or even planning, modification. Having an ideal truly of one’s own that one is able to keep sculpting, even as it contains hints to remind one of its earlier form, creates a foundation of meaning for one’s life that can serve as an impetus for all other actions. Just as I described a self-sufficient disposition as useless without externals in order for that disposition to assist in their pursuit, so too do externals lack full flavor if obtaining them does not contribute toward transforming ourselves into individuals to whom we would reflectively aspire.
That said, one worry still remains. I admittedly wonder whether self-sufficiency, for all its appeal as it sits in my mind, might be impractically idealistic. As my thesis nears completion, I do not see any light at the end of the cliché tunnel, only more tunnels. In witnessing this, a large part of myself is unable to smile, and I feel guilty given the subject on which I have pondered. I remember, though, that convalescence, like physical fitness, cannot come to us instantaneously. Living well requires practice, and real practice – that which bears fruit – is neither fun nor easy. In the end my progress is up to me, yet I know that I am capable of it. I am confident that self-sufficiency, unattainable or not, points in a direction that I affirm worthy, and that within such worthiness I can find joy. In the Gorgias, Callicles remarks to Socrates,

The truth, therefore, is thus, and you will know it if you proceed to greater things, once you have let philosophy drop. For philosophy, to be sure, Socrates, is a graceful thing, if someone engages in it in due measure at the proper age; but if he fritters his time away in it further than is needed, it is the corruption of human beings.46

I would contend that Callicles speaks incorrectly. Philosophy allows us as individuals to take small steps in our everyday lives that bring us closer to whatever we may call good. Otherwise, we unconsciously drift with the current. That is the corruption of a human being, as Schiller defines, “the entity that wills.”47 Our lives are not finished until we die. Neither is philosophy since, to my knowledge, none of us is ever able to concretely hold Goodness in our hands and confidently know that we are doing so.
ENDNOTES

2 Ibid., 87.
3 Pierre Hadot and Arnold I. Davidson, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 21: More fully, concerning the Stoics on page 83, “In their view, philosophy did not consist in teaching an abstract theory – much less in the exegesis of texts – but rather in the art of living. It is a concrete attitude and determinate lifestyle, which engages the whole of existence. The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. It is a conversion which turns our entire life upside down, changing the life of the person who goes through it. It raises the individual from an inauthentic condition of life, darkened by unconsciousness and harassed by worry, to an authentic state of life, in which he attains self-consciousness, an exact vision of the world, inner peace, and freedom”.
5 Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*, Sather Classical Lectures (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 3: “[The Socratic self-construction practiced by Montaigne, Nietzsche and Foucault] is a philosophical accomplishment because the content and nature of the self created in the process… depends on holding views on issues that have traditionally been considered philosophical and not on anything that one pleases. It is literary because the connection between those philosophical views is not only a matter of systematic logical interrelations but also, more centrally, a matter of style. It is a question of putting those views together so that, even when the connections between them are not strictly logical, it makes psychological and interpretative sense to attribute them to a single, coherent character”.
9 Nehamas, 3.
12 Ibid., 36.
13 Ibid., 38 - 39.
14 Ibid., 53.
15 Ibid., 65.
Ibid., 87.  
17 Stirner and Byington, 63.  
18 Epictetus and White, 11.  
19 Ibid., 13.  
20 Ibid., 20.  
21 Ibid., 16.  
24 Ibid., 243.  
29 Epictetus and White, 13.  
31 Stirner and Byington, 164.  
33 Stirner and Byington, 5.  
34 Ibid., 164.  
35 Plato, Nichols, and Plato, Gorgias : And, Phaedrus, 86: “Consider whether you are saying something of the following sort about the life of each, the moderate and the intemperate man: if each of two men had many jars, and those of the one were healthy and full (one of wine, one of honey, one of milk, and many others of many other things), and the sources of each of these things were scarce and difficult and to be supplied for oneself with many difficult toils; the one man, then, having filled his jars, conducts no more supplies to them nor gives any heed, but as regards these he is at rest; for the other man, just as for that one, the sources can be supplied but are difficult, the vessels are perforated and decayed, and he is always compelled, night and day, to fill them, or he suffers the utmost pains”.  
36 Spinoza, Spinoza, and Curley, 153.  
37 Epictetus and White, 12.  
40 Camus, 88.
41 Plato, Grube, and Reeve, Republic, 119 - 120.
43 Ibid., 57.
44 Spinoza, Spinoza, and Curley, 85 - 86.
45 Hadot and Davidson, 83: “In the view of all philosophical schools, mankind’s principal cause of suffering, disorder, and unconsciousness were the passions: that is, unregulated desires and exaggerated fears. People are prevented from truly living, it was taught, because they are dominated by worries. Philosophy thus appears, in the first place as a therapeutic of the passions. Each school had its own therapeutic method, but all of them linked their therapeutics to a profound transformation of the individual’s mode of seeing and being. The object of spiritual exercises is precisely to bring about this transformation”.
46 Plato, Nichols, and Plato, Gorgias: And, Phaedrus, 75.
47 Schiller, Hinderer, and Dahlstrom, 71.
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