

What to Do

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What should one do? That may seem a strange question, but it's not meaningless or unanswerable. It's the sort of question kids ask before they learn not to ask big questions. I only came across it myself in the process of investigating something else. But once I did, I thought I should at least try to answer it.

So what should one do? One should help people, and take care of the world. Those two are obvious. But is there anything else? When I ask that, the answer that pops up is Make good new things.

I can't prove that one should do this, any more than I can prove that one should help people or take care of the world. We're talking about first principles here. But I can explain why this principle makes sense. The most impressive thing humans can do is to think. It may be the most impressive thing that can be done. And the best kind of thinking, or more precisely the best proof that one has thought well, is to make good new things.

I mean new things in a very general sense. Newton's physics was a good new thing. Indeed, the first version of this principle was to have good new ideas. But that didn't seem general enough: it didn't include making art or music, for example, except insofar as they embody new ideas. And while they may embody new ideas, that's not all they embody, unless you stretch the word "idea" so uselessly thin that it includes everything that goes through your nervous system.

Even for ideas that one has consciously, though, I prefer the phrasing "make good new things." There are other ways to describe

the best kind of thinking. To make discoveries, for example, or to understand something more deeply than others have. But how well do you understand something if you can't make a model of it, or write about it? Indeed, trying to express what you understand is not just a way to prove that you understand it, but a way to understand it better.

Another reason I like this phrasing is that it biases us toward creation. It causes us to prefer the kind of ideas that are naturally seen as making things rather than, say, making critical observations about things other people have made. Those are ideas too, and sometimes valuable ones, but it's easy to trick oneself into believing they're more valuable than they are. Criticism seems sophisticated, and making new things often seems awkward, especially at first; and yet it's precisely those first steps that are most rare and valuable.

Is newness essential? I think so. Obviously it's essential in science. If you copied a paper of someone else's and published it as your own, it would seem not merely unimpressive but dishonest. And it's similar in the arts. A copy of a good painting can be a pleasing thing, but it's not impressive in the way the original was. Which in turn implies it's not impressive to make the same thing over and over, however well; you're just copying yourself.

Note though that we're talking about a different kind of should with this principle. Taking care of people and the world are shoulds in the sense that they're one's duty, but making good new things is a should in the sense that this is how to live to one's full potential. Historically most rules about how to live have been a mix of both kinds of should, though usually with more of the former than the latter.

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For most of history the question "What should one do?" got much the same answer everywhere, whether you asked Cicero or Confucius. You should be wise, brave, honest, temperate, and just, uphold tradition, and serve the public interest. There was a long stretch where in some parts of the world the answer became "Serve God," but in practice it was still considered good to be wise, brave, honest, temperate, and just, uphold tradition, and serve the public interest.

And indeed this recipe would have seemed right to most Victorians. But there's nothing in it about taking care of the world or making new things, and that's a bit worrying, because it seems like this question should be a timeless one. The answer shouldn't change much.

I'm not too worried that the traditional answers don't mention taking care of the world. Obviously people only started to care about that once it became clear we could ruin it. But how can making good new things be important if the traditional answers don't mention it?

The traditional answers were answers to a slightly different question. They were answers to the question of how to be, rather than what to do. The audience didn't have a lot of choice about what to do. The audience up till recent centuries was the landowning class, which was also the political class. They weren't choosing between doing physics and writing novels. Their work was foreordained: manage their estates, participate in politics, fight when necessary. It was ok to do certain other kinds of work in one's spare time, but ideally one didn't have any. Cicero's *De Officiis* is one of the great classical answers to the question of how to live, and in it he explicitly says that he wouldn't even be writing it if he hadn't been excluded from public life by recent political upheavals.

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There were of course people doing what we would now call "original work," and they were often admired for it, but they weren't seen as models. Archimedes knew that he was the first to prove that a sphere has $\frac{2}{3}$ the volume of the smallest enclosing cylinder and was very pleased about it. But you don't find ancient writers urging their readers to emulate him. They regarded him more as a prodigy than a model.

Now many more of us can follow Archimedes's example and devote most of our attention to one kind of work. He turned out to be a model after all, along with a collection of other people that his contemporaries would have found it strange to treat as a distinct group, because the vein of people making new things ran at right angles to the social hierarchy.

What kinds of new things count? I'd rather leave that question to the makers of them. It would be a risky business to try to define any kind of threshold, because new kinds of work are often despised at first. Raymond Chandler was writing literal pulp fiction, and he's now recognized as one of the best writers of the twentieth century. Indeed this pattern is so common that you can use it as a recipe: if you're excited about some kind of work that's not considered prestigious and you can explain what everyone else is overlooking about it, then this is not merely a kind of work that's ok to do, but one to seek out.

The other reason I wouldn't want to define any thresholds is that we don't need them. The kind of people who make good new things don't need rules to keep them honest.

So there's my guess at a set of principles to live by: take care of people and the world, and make good new things. Different people will do these to varying degrees. There will presumably be lots who focus entirely on taking care of people. There will be a few who focus mostly on making new things. But even if you're one of those, you should at least make sure that the new things you make don't net harm people or the world. And if you go a step further and try to make things that help them, you may find you're ahead on the trade. You'll be more constrained in what you can make, but you'll make it with more energy.

On the other hand, if you make something amazing, you'll often be helping people or the world even if you didn't mean to. Newton was driven by curiosity and ambition, not by any practical effect his work might have, and yet the practical effect of his work has been enormous. And this seems the rule rather than the exception. So if you think you can make something amazing, you should probably just go ahead and do it.

Notes

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We could treat all three as the same kind of should by saying that it's one's duty to live well — for example by saying, as some Christians have, that it's one's duty to make the most of one's God-given gifts. But this seems one of those casuistries people invented to evade the stern requirements of religion: it was permissible to spend time studying math instead of praying or performing acts of charity because otherwise you were rejecting a gift God had given you. A useful casuistry no doubt, but we don't need it.

We could also combine the first two principles, since people are part of the world. Why should our species get special treatment? I won't try to justify this choice, but I'm skeptical that anyone who claims to think differently actually lives according to their principles.

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Confucius was also excluded from public life after ending up on the losing end of a power struggle, and presumably he too would not be so famous now if it hadn't been for this long stretch of enforced leisure.

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