

Self-Improvement: Advice or Experience?

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With growing financial insecurity, diminishing job prospects, increasing demands of skills from one person, self-improvement seems to be the newest fad. Considering our conditions, it was almost inevitable that this would become one of the driving philosophies people live by.

What self-improvement promises is not inherently a bad thing, it is normal and expected that people would want satisfaction, happiness, and comfort out of their lives. However, the irony here is that self-improvement itself directly contradicts these concepts. To improve yourself, you would have to be unhappy and unsatisfied with where you are currently, and you would have to step out of your comfort zone to hone your skills or learn new perspectives. Not that these are things you should never do, because you are almost required to do them to not crash and burn in your life, but mainstream self-improvement philosophy is essentially the illusion of an end, and that is why it sells. There is this idea that if you work hard enough, and gain enough skills, learn enough languages, you will eventually get to a point where you do not have to do those ever again. This is not explicitly stated, of course, but that is the underlying positive effect that gets people hooked.

That is why, while self-improvement itself is something to be supported, the *sector* and *culture* are usually questionable. To start with, people have different positions in life, the point at which we start to improve ourselves and what we perceive our destination to be, differs widely from person to person. On top of that, the tools at our disposal, the opportunities we are able to access, and how much time we have to make use of these, are also different. This variation is the main problem in offering generic advice to the masses on a topic as personal as self-improvement. Furthermore, talking about self-improvement often has the same effect as making a to-do list, it tricks you into feeling like you have done something when you have not, so you get the satisfaction of an accomplishment without changing anything in your life.

Another glaring issue with self-improvement guides is the survivorship bias. The survivorship bias occurs because successes are often more visible whereas we tend to not see, or ignore failures. It is the assumption that we could copy whatever the successful person did, and we would achieve the same things that they have. This is understandably a comforting way to see the world because it gives us control, but unfortunately, it is not the reality. Success is dependent on a world of factors, starting from upbringing, financial means, small and big decisions, and more often than people realize, luck. Reading or listening to behavior guides or habits from people who share the position you want to be in, does not guarantee that you will hold their place if you do what they do. For every person that did these things and succeeded, there are likely hundreds, if not thousands, who have not.

The advices themselves can also just be low quality. Admittedly, there are some good ones that provide interesting insights, but as the sector and your consumption grow, the suggestions almost become

meaningless. Items like sleeping or working a certain number of hours are starting to become things many people rightfully scoff at, but there are still a lot of people that believe them. Even the good ones may not fit your situation or may contradict other advice that equally makes sense. Some can even be tone-deaf or may not fit your idea of improvement, such as suggesting a work-life balance to the workers while ignoring the long-term consequences that decision may have on their lives.

So then, do we not try to improve ourselves if it is so hopeless? Well, of course not. You decide to aim for improvement or not, but it is not hopeless. It is only the case that you cannot simply have a step-by-step to-do list for what you want out of life, and unfortunately, you might just have to figure it out yourself. You can be open to advice and guidance, but at the end of the day, you must take responsibility and action for yourself. You will learn more about your flaws, your deficits, and the areas to improve upon with direct experience than you will ever have through the anecdotes of other people. To see what you cannot do, you must first do it, and to learn how to do it, you must first see how *not* to do it. A good sense of self-awareness is required for efficient self-improvement, and that is achieved by failure, even though that is what we are trying to avoid with self-improvement. It is certainly a funny cycle, and a scary road to take. However, self-improvement culture is essentially people offering you their map for a place that only they have been in, without seeing where you are and where you need to get to. Unfortunately, there is not a map yet for your road, and you have to make it yourself. As a result, you will have to bump into things and take the wrong path now and then, but doing so will always be more effective than using the map of Texas to get to New York from Chicago.