



# *Authenticity or Success?*

## *Dealing With Corrupting Forces in the Performance Society*

an essay by Stephan Schleim (final version, January 4 2021)

photograph “Dancers of the Wind” by courtesy of [Maayke Klaver](#)

“And those who were seen dancing  
were thought to be insane  
by those who could not hear the music.”

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## Expect the Unexpected: The Coronavirus Pandemics 2020/2021

I started writing this essay around the turn of the years 2017 and 2018. After addressing some problems of the academic system and society at large in my philosophy course annually taught in the Winter, students kept asking me for my own opinion on how to deal with these problems. As I try to present topics as neutral as possible in my lectures, I chose for an optional text that everybody who was interested could read, completely voluntarily. The first version of February 2018 was then called: “A Letter to My Students: Success, Money, and Happiness in the Performance Society.”

In the meantime, several students and some friends provided feedback, sometimes quite extensively. A few (former) students even discussed the essay with their parents or grandparents and shared their experiences with me. This essay thus already developed a life of its own, quite unexpected by the author, and inspired at least a few people to reflect more consciously on what they find important in their lives. I am very grateful for that.

As you will see shortly, the text starts out with an invitation to stand still and perceive what is going on in society from an outside perspective. I used the idea of aliens (or a “higher intelligence”) visiting planet earth and studying what we humans are doing. I could never have imagined that roughly two years later many processes in society would actually have to stand still to control the spread of the coronavirus.

This has been (and still is) a challenging time for many of us. The kind of reflection provoked by this essay might not be welcome where people are primarily struggling to get through the immediate effects of the crisis. Practical solutions, even if they are only quick fixes, might be more necessary now than philosophy.

While this is certainly true in many cases, standing still is also an opportunity to continue in a different way or direction as soon as the restrictions and obstacles are removed. Some are already using this period to study more intensively or with different teachers, possibilities that would have been unavailable without the pandemics. This might actually be a way of coping with the short-term problems while at the same time having benefits for one’s future.

The ideal time for this essay may be shortly before the restrictions are removed. We as human people will then jointly decide whether the new normal will be the same as before – or a new and different world where we can move on more authentically *and* successfully for a better life.

“I am still unable, as the Delphic inscription orders, to know myself; and it really seems to me ridiculous to look into other things before I have understood that.” (Sokrates in the *Phaedo*)

## **Preface: Authenticity, Success, and the Meaning of Life (November 2019)**

You are about to read an essay discussing a contradiction I have been perceiving for quite a while in our society: the contradiction to be as successful as possible, ideally as fast as possible, while yet living an authentic life, a life that is roughly compatible with your personal values. I remember a summer school where one of my students put it like this: He felt that he had a duty to create the best possible version of himself. And many of his fellows agreed on that point.

At the end of the essay, I react to a couple of comments of my first readers. However, there was one particular comment which motivated me to add this preface. It was made by a friend who is a family judge, who deals with broken relationships when all other attempts have failed and often enough decides issues with a huge impact on people's lives, such as who should have custody of children after a divorce or whether a child is even sent to foster parents.

She shared her thoughts about this essay in a voice memo. The continuous clicking sound of her high heels on the pavement and eventually the busy chatter of people at rush hour at a train station as well as the station announcements provide the background noise for her words. This is quite literally the situation of many people everyday on their way to work as I describe it in the first section below. She found my observation that much of what people are doing is somehow related to money (second section) and that there seem to be strong incentives to cheat (third section), the "corrupting forces" mentioned in the subtitle, rather depressing.

She then emphasized that many people, particularly those with a higher education, have more freedom to choose their jobs. And she stated that a stable structure, such as going to work regularly even if it's not a very sophisticated activity, can help some to cope with their lives. She said that she saw it in the courtroom many times how people benefited from a more structured way of life.

I agree with all of these points. And I have no doubt that the kind of "cognitive juro-therapy", to borrow a term from the US law and psychology professor Stephen Morse, that she and many other judges are doing can and does help a vast number of people. But this text is not about the application of quick fixes or new coping mechanisms to allow people to function better in society, necessary as that may be for some people when they are losing the ground under their feet.

This essay is intentionally written to go a lot deeper, to question in more detail the goings-on in our present world with its many contradictions between the *traditional* values, as one might call them, such as authenticity and honesty, and the *lived* values as we see them expressed in the lives of successful managers, politicians, athletes, or scientists, to name but a few examples (third section).

Just after finishing this essay, just after getting this comment from this friend, and just after reading a bit more myself I noticed a missing link to much of my former research, namely the topic of self- or neuroenhancement about which I have been writing now for some fifteen years. In this society we are witnessing a strong, in some cases even exponential increase in the consumption of "uppers" or "downers", so-called recreational or medical drugs of various kinds: stimulants, antidepressants, painkillers, tranquilizers, and sleeping pills, to name five of the most common ones.

This is often the consequence of diagnosing some mental disorder like depressive, anxiety, or attention-deficit disorder. At the same time, I perceive an increasing interest in new spirituality expressed in the popularity of more philosophical kinds of yoga and hallucinogenic drugs. With respect to such substances like ayahuasca or mescaline there is even some overlap between the two groups (i.e. people taking substances to cope with their lives and people interested in spirituality). This raises interesting similarities with the counterculture of the 1960s.

I do not attempt to tell you the meaning of life is in this essay, but suggest a way to deal with society's contradiction, a way to allow more happiness in a world full of "corrupting forces."

## Authenticity or Success?

### *Dealing With Corrupting Forces in the Performance Society*

This is an invitation for my students – and anybody else who is interested – to **(1) stand still** for a moment and think about, on an abstract level, what is happening on our planet on an ordinary day. My explanation for **(2) why are we doing what we are doing** will refer to the social construct of money as the major driving force. This in itself may not be so surprising, but from the news and contemporary history, perhaps even from personal experience, we have learned that earning money and being successful nowadays seems to involve **(3) breaking the order** in several respects, that is, breaking society's rules; one could also say that this section provides my empirical evidence.

The transgressions described raise the question **(4) what we should do** about it, whether we should do anything, and what that could be. I will argue that life may challenge us to trade part of our *authenticity*, what we truly want to do or who we truly want to be, for success; and it is up to anyone of us to decide how far we will go in that trade. I will then argue that success may promise **(5) happiness**, but probably rather just temporarily soothe the craving that was in the first place created by the pressure to be successful. In the **(6) epilogue** I will also argue that we cannot simply choose to be happy, as some people claim nowadays, but only to *allow ourselves* to be happy. There is also a **postscript** in which I respond to some questions and critique.

### 1. Standing Still

Imagine a day on the planet earth: People are standing up, some at 8, some at 6, some others even at 5 o'clock or earlier in the morning. Everybody is performing some kind of morning ritual; actions like getting up, some means of hygiene, maybe breakfast or just a cup of hot water, tea, or coffee, learning what is happening in the world, getting dressed, going to work and – if (young) children are present – similar actions involving them and bringing them to kindergarten or school.

Eventually, when people are leaving their homes, some kind of transportation will be involved to get them from A to B or from C to D: walking, bicycles, cars, busses, trains, planes or you name it to bring bodies from one destination to another. In terms of physics, this means that millions of tons of metal and other material will move about. And this only works by consuming energy, be it glucose in your body, gasoline, electricity produced by a power plant far away, kerosene, or some other source. These processes of consumption will be *irreversible*, which means that energy spent for getting from A to B will be transformed into movement and warmth and not be available to get from C to D.

Have you ever thought about the goings-on of our planet like this? And what I just wrote down, what I summarized in a few sentences, all these processes involving an immense amount of matter and energy, they will look like *just another ordinary day* to those people involved in them, whether they are office employees, entrepreneurs, workers, bus drivers, children, or students.

### *Observed by a Higher Intelligence*

Now imagine that some higher intelligence visits our solar system in a spaceship and observes such an ordinary day on our planet. Imagine it could use all conceivable kinds of instruments to measure these goings-on, up to the smallest particles, forces, and energies that exist. Imagine it could feed all these data into the most powerful supercomputer in the universe; and that computer could recognize

patterns: regularities reflecting roads, railway tracks, cities and their suburbs, connections between air- and seaports, also changes of day and night. The computer could identify all such relations as some kind of regularity – and perhaps the higher intelligence has no concept of “roads” or “cities” or “night” and just sees them as mere patterns.

However sophisticated the pattern recognition may be, it strikes me as obvious that neither this intelligence nor the supercomputer could understand the *meaning* of these processes, could understand *why* or *what for* these processes are happening, other than that they are consuming and transforming energy. Imagine that, puzzled, this higher intelligence sends its equivalent of sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, biologists, physicists, and what other discipline might be helpful, down on our planet to answer that question. What do you think could the answer be?

## 2. Why Are We Doing What We Are Doing?

Books can be and perhaps have already been written to explain what is going on on our planet, to make sense of it all. For the present purpose, let us assume that some major part of the processes described above ultimately has to do with earning *money*; or spending it. And those processes which are not directly related to money might be indirectly so: like education that shall provide the necessary skills to get a good job or just any job or to start an enterprise or to make investments.

And how often have I heard that students rather had wanted to study something else, something like literature or philosophy, but that they eventually chose a program because of the job opportunities? Whose lives were they living? I do not want to arrive at a moral judgment, though, at least not at the present moment. We could say that the higher intelligence did not send ethicists along; it just wants to understand its observations from a neutral distance.

### *Their Observations*

Now imagine that after some research the specialists mentioned earlier return to their spaceship and say (or their equivalent of communication in their mode of being) something like:

“We saw living beings and dead matter. The living beings can be separated into numerous species. Of these, we particularly noticed one consisting of 7.5 billion individuals, spread around almost the whole planet. They are both the most intelligent and the most energy-consuming species. When we tried to make sense of their behavior, to understand the movement patterns our supercomputer had registered from a distance, we noticed that most of them are somehow related to a virtual thing (the higher intelligence does not use the notion of ‘social constructs’) called ‘money.’

“That thing seems to exist and to be exchanged in various forms like printed pieces of paper, metal coins, gold bars, or just symbols in some computer’s memory. The majority of the billions of individuals find ‘money’ so important that they align their movement patterns to it. That seems to explain the huge amount of energy consumed and transformed every day.

“Unfortunately though, we could not understand why ‘money’ is so important to these life forms, other than that the movements of other living beings and some dead matter are aligned to it. We presently have no method to arrive at a better conclusion than that. Let’s travel to another part of the universe to look for more interesting problems.”

### *Growing Up*

And thus they left as mysteriously as they had arrived, completely unnoticed by us humans...

As I wrote, I am not trying to get a moral message across here; not yet. The paragraphs thus far were just intended to arrive at an observation and explanation as neutrally as possible of what is going on on our planet on an ordinary day. Instead of the higher intelligence, we could have used a member of some native tribe that never had contact with the “civilized world” before; or a person who lost all memories. Note that when we were children, we were like that person, like the member of the tribe, or like the higher intelligence in that respect. We *grew into* this culture. We call this “growing up” or becoming “adults.”

As a result of that, we tend to no longer take note of the ordinary, regardless of the amount of energy involved. We no longer wonder why so many people and things move or are moved every day. We no longer wonder why we are doing what we are doing. And we take for granted that money is involved almost everywhere, whether we get food in the grocery, go to the pub with our friends, see our psychotherapist, make plans for vacation, or get a present for someone.

Our world is like an orchestra where every musician is playing her or his part to create a symphony, with the major difference that it is not so clear who the conductor is.

### 3. Breaking the Order<sup>1</sup>

We have learned thus far what an ordinary day on our planet looks like, perceived from a distance, and what keeps things and people moving. I would now like to get closer to the *psychology* of these processes, that is, what motivates individual people to do what they are doing.

Have you ever used public transport in some major city in the rush hour and studied people’s faces and postures? And asked yourself how many of these people might be *happy*? The preliminary conclusion of my investigations, and I have been doing this for half of my life, is that just a small minority looks happy.

Instead, I saw many people with their expensive and standardized coffee-to-go – some spend more than €1,000 per year that way without noticing! – in one of their hands, maybe also a cigarette, and of course a smartphone in the other hand. Their tired eyes are fixed on the screen of that device, craving for more news and messages.

Note that three stimulating or relaxing drugs were mentioned in the previous sentences; and the digital drug: information. I cannot read people’s minds and I might be wrong. But from all that I can tell the majority did not look happy.

#### *Strange Processes*

Something that the higher intelligence could not understand, but what we have learned from the news, our contemporary history, and perhaps also personal experience, is that every ordinary day on our planet also involves some *strange processes*. They now seem to be occurring so regularly that I hesitate to call them “extra-ordinary”, although I personally would like to believe that they are rather the exception than the rule.

I am particularly thinking of all kinds of rule-breaking behaviors: abuses of power and cheating. Remember that major international car companies were not only lying about the emissions of their products, but actually implementing software into their cars that would detect an official

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1 A musical suggestion for this section is Max Cooper’s *Order from Chaos*. Note that Cooper, or perhaps I should write Dr Cooper, was a geneticist until he experienced the competition for research funding. He quit. Now hundreds of thousands of people are listening to his songs, many of which relate to scientific ideas.

testing procedure and then fake emissions subsequently. The products could thus be advertised and sold as environmentally friendly, as “clean” cars.<sup>2</sup>

This was not just about entering wrong values into some documents, but actually embedding intelligent cheating mechanisms into a car that would recognize autonomously *when* it had to cheat. Artificial cheating intelligence! Or maybe we could just call it “smart cheating.”

Imagine how many people had to know about this. At least the executives who took the decision and the programmers and engineers who designed and implemented the cheating algorithms such that they worked reliably and remained undetected for years. All these people knew that their behavior could damage their company and that thousands of their colleagues would contribute to producing, advertising, and selling products under false assumptions.

At some point, marketers and car dealers would believe the intentionally false information about the cars’ emissions, would praise the products as environmentally friendly, and sell them over and over again. Now we know that these cars are actually polluting the environment much more and potentially harming the health of people and other living beings.

### *Why Did Nobody Speak Up Earlier?*

Other examples are legion. You probably have heard that producers or agents in the entertainment industry used their power to solicit sexual behaviors or even to cover sexual transgressions involving people dependent on their decisions. The list of names seems to get longer and longer, up to the point that you might ask yourself who is *not* abusing power.

What surprises me more than the existence of such abuses is how many people must have known about them for many years or even decades but kept silent. Why did nobody speak up earlier? Was it just fear or people’s own career interests and dependencies?

As bad as such transgressions are in themselves, such power games imply that those who actually *resisted* the pressure and did not grant sexual or other favors would have had a *competitive disadvantage*. That is, while many stars whom you admire for their roles might have adapted pragmatically to do what was good for their careers, to “go the extra mile,” as it is called sometimes, those actors who actually declined to play according to these weird rules had lower chances for success. Thus, from a particular point of view, not those who were abused but those who actually resisted the abuse are the real (competitive) losers.

### *Sports and Competition*

That situation is very similar to doping in sports. Who has the highest interest in enforcing anti-doping rules? Those athletes who are *not* doping, of course. And that is because the cheating of others, if it remains undiscovered, puts them at a competitive disadvantage. Already the *mere possibility* that others might be doping exerts some pressure on an athlete to break the rules. In game theory, such situations have been called a “Prisoner’s Dilemma.”

Honesty in a highly competitive environment where much is at stake will only work if the rules are not just written down somewhere but are actually working in an individual’s psychology. That is, almost everybody must follow them and cheaters must be caught such that the transgressions are indeed rather the exception than the rule.

But again, as in the examples before, it is usually not just an individual’s transgression: As recent investigations of doping scandals have shown over and over again, coaches, doctors, and in

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<sup>2</sup> Those who have not heard much about the scandal before can read some basic facts on this [Wikipedia page](#).



some cases even officials of athletic institutions collaborated to break the rules. That is, whether or not such cheating is organized by the state, as has been demonstrated for countries of the former Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact and is presently speculated about Russia and China, it is often *organized systematically*.

And I do not see whether cheating, when it is carried out in the name of some state's ideology, should be any worse than when it is carried out for individual success and profit. Doping is thus also a problem of Western countries, where ministries support sports organizations with taxpayers' money and expect a certain revenue in return, such as a particular number of medals.

It is psychologically extremely interesting to read recent accounts on how athletes, who first resist the pressure to take illegal substances, sometimes were manipulated to consent: Cases are reported where coaches modified training schedules such that an athlete would break down. In such a mentally as well as physically weak moment, always pointing out the high requirements of the sport and the high performance of the competitors, some people eventually agreed to cheat.<sup>3</sup>

After that choice has been made once, after that immoral and even forbidden threshold has been passed once, that decision will be easier for the second time. And the third. And so on. Besides that, the athlete will be rewarded by an increased performance, by faster successes, perhaps even more medals and new records, until he or she might be found guilty and lose all of that. But already the ancients knew that popularity and fame can be volatile, they can pass quicker than they came.

### *And Academia?*

The final examples I would like to discuss here are taken from academia itself, the system that filled the major portion of my past 20 years.

You may have heard about researchers who fabricated data. There were some remarkable cases in psychology indeed. But disciplines like chemistry or physics had their own scandals as well. If we include plagiarism, probably every discipline will have its bad cases.

Note that for many transgressions, particularly the examples of Diederik Stapel (Universities of Groningen and Tilburg) and Marc Hauser (Harvard University), investigations were started only because *students* or *young researchers* persistently reported strange observations. The established professors and officials often turned down the possibility that one of their colleagues with such a high reputation might actually be committing scientific fraud.

This suggests that those who have less adapted to the rules of the system (i.e. the younger ones) also have a different mindset. And trust me: These scandals have had an impact on our psychology program in Groningen and the kinds of questions the students are asking, particularly on the Master's level. We might even distinguish a pre- and a post-Stapel era. In that sense, the fraud actually had some positive consequences for our, for your education.

When I was still a PhD student I once got to know a professor a bit better who was very successful in my area of research and who was like a role model for me. When he had a new publication in *Nature* I was surprised about the interpretation of his data. Now I was in a position to just ask him directly, why had he chosen that odd interpretation? And he just replied: "Because the peer reviewers wanted it like that."

I was startled that even someone whom I had perceived as one of the leaders of the field could not write his articles the way he wished, at least not when he wanted (or needed?) to publish in high-impact journals like *Nature*.

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<sup>3</sup> I have particularly read about doping in Germany, my home country, summarized on this [Wikipedia page](#) (in German). You can probably find similarly interesting reports about the situation in many other countries.



### *Who Controls the Controllers?*

Of course there are good arguments in favor of an independent control of one's research before publication. The predicate *scientific* should, after all, promise high reliability and validity. But the way our peer review is organized makes it subject to a number of conflicts of interest.

To make this discussion not too long, let me just state that many editors, that is those who take the decisions on which papers to allow into peer review, who the peer reviewers will be, and finally which paper will be accepted for publication and which not, are actually employees of *profit-oriented companies* on a competitive market and neither fully independent nor objective. Unlike in the legal system, there usually is no chance to appeal against a decision such that an independent party would control the editor's choices.

The peer reviewers are usually also not accountable for their decisions. First of all, they are anonymous to the scientific community, only known to the editor who has to protect their identity. Secondly, they are either experts in the field and thus potential competitors of those whose work they have to review neutrally, or they may have insufficient expertise. That is, a conflict of interest or a lack of competence is built structurally into the peer-reviewing process.

Of course, scientists can *in principle* review the research of their peers the way it is supposed to be. All that I am saying is that the present system does not guarantee this to be the case. But add to that the fear of losing funding, which might ultimately also mean the loss of somebody's research position and thus the economic existence, increasing time pressure, and a situation that renowned researchers have characterized as "[hypercompetition](#)." Do you still trust that peer review primarily guarantees scientific quality and that people will never abuse their power?

These facts have been known for a very long time and most people simply adapt. I have experienced it several times in my career that senior scientists cared less about the scientific soundness of their data and more on whether a paper is publishable, particularly publishable in a high-impact journal. Another group of renowned researchers called this focus on high impact a "[corrupting force](#)." Young researchers who are still looking for permanent, so called tenured positions will be subject most to such corrupting pressures, but also the senior scientists who have to keep a certain level of success or may have become addicted to it are affected.

### *Biological Psychiatry*

I would also like to share with you two experiences I have had in the context of Biological Psychiatry, which has becoming an ever more important topic in my teaching and research.

The first experience is about a leading expert in psychiatric epidemiology, that is, those researchers who are investigating how common mental disorders are. In an influential paper, he and his collaborators had described mental disorders like general anxiety or major depressive disorder as "brain disorders," put into one category with neurological disorders like Parkinson's disease, epilepsy, or dementia.

I did not know that professor, but I gave it a try and asked him in an email why he had used that notion of brain disorders in that way. The answer was surprisingly clear: "Brain disorder: A very stupid concept which has only a political and financially-strategic meaning. Mental disorders are mental disorders and not brain disorders." To my surprise, that professor even cc'ed his answer to two of his employees.

But then, why did they write in their publications – and I just saw that they have hundreds and hundreds of citations on the *ISI Web of Science* – that depression and other mental disorders are

*brain disorders*? I mean, the professor had given an answer: For political and financial reasons. A lot of money was put into brain research since the “Decade of the Brain”, the 1990s, and thus experts had a stake in describing mental problems as brain problems.

But still I could not understand how these researchers could write something *as scientists* of which they themselves knew that it was wrong. The pressure to be successful in the competition for scarce research funds and publications, the “corrupting forces” mentioned above, indeed seem to be strong, even for leaders of their fields. Or maybe particularly for them, because that is the way they have become leaders?

The second experience can be summarized shorter: When I sent my second book, the one on the “Neuro Society” (2011), to a couple of psychiatry professors, one replied that he agreed with most of what I had written, but that he would not give my book to his employees for the fear that they might give up their work. A few years later, that same professor would share a sophisticated and critical view of his field in a small group after a couple of beers at a conference – but then give a conference presentation on the very next day as if Biological Psychiatry were the only truth!

It seemed as if there were two personalities in that professor: one which was fully aware of the many problems and contradictions of what he and his employees were doing and on the basis of which they were probably treating their patients; and another one that had cast away any possible doubt and just fulfilled a certain function to create the illusion of certainty in public.

I do in no way want to suggest that I am any better, morally or scientifically, than that professor or the other people mentioned before. But I just feel that I could not live like that, permanently knowing that what I was doing was actually wrong. I could simply not do it, at least not without drugs that would somehow silence my doubts and feelings.

Because of that, I chose to give up my career in social neuroscience and moved to Groningen in 2009 to become a Theoretical Psychologist. And I am very grateful for this possibility to stay in academia, since 2015 even with a well-paid permanent position, without having to work against my conviction; and I am writing this not to show off, but just to demonstrate that it is *possible*.

You do not have to believe me. Stronger actually: You *should not* believe me. If you are interested, then please have your own experiences in the academic system or with academics. If you come to a different conclusion, then please share your evidence and arguments with me and I shall reconsider my position.

The only thing I ask you is not to simply take for granted what people will tell you in “presentation mode.” Try to get to know them better, earn their trust, perhaps have a couple of beers or other beverages with them, socialize, talk to them when nobody else is around – and take note whether they are still giving the same answers or whether their views have become different.

### *Strange Feelings*

I hope that the examples I have shared with you on the previous pages do not make you feel desperate. Thinking and writing about them gives rise to sadness in me. But more disconcerting than that there is so much dishonesty, cheating, and corruption in such different fields as the economy, the entertainment industry, sports, and even academia is to me the thought that so many people are doing things of which they know, I assume, somewhere in themselves, that they are wrong. This seems like living *pseudo-lives*. I don’t want to be judgmental – I’m just concerned that every moment in life is unique and irreversible and that the inauthentic life is lost forever.

Why are people nevertheless living it? Presumably because they are rewarded for that behavior, rewarded with a fast route to money, success, fame, career opportunities, or sexual

pleasure. And such days may be just ordinary days in their lives. Imagining that I would have to work under such circumstances gives me a feeling of my stomach turned upside down.

Discussing these examples obviously raises the question what we should do about it, a question that some of you keep asking me once in a while.

#### 4. What Should We Do?

First of all, it is important to understand that there is no need to worry. Ancient Eastern and Western wisdom have shown that either something can be changed or cannot be changed. If it *cannot* be changed, then we should accept that, instead of worrying, for nothing can be done about it. If it *can* be changed, worrying is also unnecessary, because something can be done about it.

Yet, it is often tricky to distinguish the two, things that can or cannot be changed, or whether a change is worth the effort it requires. This requires *wisdom*. And that something can be changed obviously does not mean that it will be easy. Remember the students and young researchers who had to insist until official investigations into the fraud cases were initiated, while members of the establishment turned down and perhaps even ridiculed their suspicions.<sup>4</sup>

Our previous analysis suggests that some people are cheating, are breaking the rules because such behavior can be rewarded – and being honest actually can be punished. What an odd world, you might wonder, and rightly so. But it actually boils down to good old *behaviorism*, which Burrhus Skinner applied to society.<sup>5</sup> He called the incentive structure of an environment its *contingencies* of reward and punishment.

And indeed are such structures contingent (random) in the sense that they could have been different. But they are kept alive by people's behavior, or one could also say "performances," the term Judith Butler used to explain the construction and maintenance of gender roles. They are as they are *now* – and they can change in the *future*.

Most people in an official function would probably deny that these contingencies are such that cheating can be rewarded and honesty can be punished – but then ask them why cheating is so easy and why, by contrast, the publication of a methodologically sound scientific study that did not yield a statistically significant result (i.e. null findings) is so difficult, although these data are obviously the "answer" that the world gave to the research question?

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4 More recent examples are the students' protests in Amsterdam in 2015, which were also supported by many employees and citizens, which finally forced the university's president to step down. Or that the University Council of Groningen eventually [stopped the plans to expand to China](#), in spite of political support and years of lobbying. They show that top-down-processes *can* be influenced by those at the bottom or in the middle of society. Jerry Farber, whose texts were copied and shared intensively by students in the 1960s and 70s, explained possibilities of grassroots activities such as direct action, provocation, or student government, in his essay *The Four-Fold Path to Student Liberation*, pp. 47-68 in his book *The Student as Nigger* (Pocket Books, 5th ed., 1972).

5 His essays on freedom (*Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, Bantam, 1972) belong to the intellectual texts that influenced me most in my life, particularly the one on *The Design of a Culture*. In that sense, my current academic path and this essay began in a hotel room in Utrecht in the summer of 2012, just before I had to present a research project to a selection committee of the *Dutch Research Foundation* (NWO). Instead of preparing that interview over and over again, I read Skinner's texts. My project proposal was turned down. But an independent academic committee, an [independent administrative judge](#) and eventually the [highest administrative court](#) of the Netherlands later found that both, the selection committee and NWO officials, had broken the rules over and over again. Currently I am paying 60% of my salary with the €250,000 that were granted by the judges out of NWO's budget and NWO was later also [sued](#) to pay €25,000 in damages.

## *A Question of Authenticity*

The title of this section is: What should we do? But *is* there something we should do about the situation anyway? Is it our responsibility to change the rules in the economy, the entertainment industry, sports, or academia, even if we could?

Note that the examples discussed above were no matters of life or death. If the respective people had behaved differently, they might have had less fast success and, in the worst case, might have had to change their life in some way. Perhaps they would have become happier or even more successful in that other life, other than the people commuting in the rush hour as described above, but as a matter of fact they have traded some of their *authenticity* for success, for the rewards that we mentioned.

This world is not just black and white, it knows many shades of gray in between. That is, presumably nobody is *maximally* authentic. One could argue whether it is maximally authentic to answer “yes” when your grandmother asks you whether you like her meal, when in fact you do not like it, but you also know how much time she spent preparing it and how much disharmony it would create saying “no.”

Must we be maximally authentic, maximally true to ourselves and others? I think that this is a very personal question that is ultimately related to the meaning that we want to give to our lives.

## *Doomed to be Free*

In the past, and actually still today in many other regions of the world, people believed in a personal god and might have asked: “God, what do you want me to do in this life?” That is not an option for many of us anymore. We must decide for ourselves – and even not deciding is a decision, a dilemma that existential philosophers were so aware of. Remember that Jean-Paul Sartre said that we are “doomed to be free.”

We are living in a society where advertisements and the behavior of our peers are permanently telling us that freedom means consuming and that buying ever more things and services will make us happy. But I think that just like a smoker rather reduces her or his craving by lighting yet another cigarette, buying things rather reduces the craving that was created in us.

Note that the world wide web, originally a project of free global communication, and with it the smartphone that virtually everybody carries in her or his pocket, primarily has become a means of advertising and selling things. That is why companies like Facebook and Google are earning billions and why they are collecting so much data about everyone: to advertise better and more personally such that we consume more.

The incentive structure, the contingencies of our society clearly *could* be changed.<sup>6</sup> They are no natural forces, but structures created and maintained by humans, including ourselves. Even if they *were* natural forces, we could possibly do something about it, just like we are building planes to get off the ground or dykes to protect us from the sea. We humans are indeed specialized in adapting the environment to our needs, which is unfortunately not always for the better of that (living) environment.

Yet I see no possibility short of a totalitarian state to change the incentive structure on a large scale. The autocratic movements that we can currently see rising in Turkey, Poland, and the United

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<sup>6</sup> For a convincing view on what a totally different economy could look like, see David C. Korten’s *Change the Story, Change the Future: A Living Economy for a Living Earth* (Berrett-Koehler, 2015). Korten is a critic of the globalization, former professor of the *Harvard Business School*, member of the *Club of Rome*, and political activist.

States and to a lesser degree in the Netherlands, Germany, and Austria could be a sign that people find it increasingly difficult to cope with the “freedom” of our society, that they realize that consuming is not meaningful and rather reduces craving than that it leads to happiness, and that they understand that performing well is often associated with corruption and subject to inequalities we have not even talked about; inequalities related to education, wealth, gender, race, and more.

### *An Artist's Life*

One of my old friends from my time as a student is an artist who has been living in Berlin for many years. I do not understand much of art, particularly not his art. But what I understand is that there are other artists who are more successful than Michael in terms of selling their work. He has been doing some social work for many years to pay his bills and to make it possible for himself to be an artist in our society.

He gets a scholarship occasionally which allows him more financial independence for his projects. Michael probably could make other art to earn more money, but I believe that he has the feeling that that would not be the kind of art that he himself finds important. That is, he is not trading authenticity for success, as we have seen in the examples above, but success for authenticity.

The other day I talked to him in a cocktail bar about the meaning of success for life. While we cannot reconstruct precisely who contributed what, we finally ended with an illustration similar to the following one, drawn on a napkin. As Michael is the artist, he is probably the one who did the original drawing, not this version here that I drew in my diary:

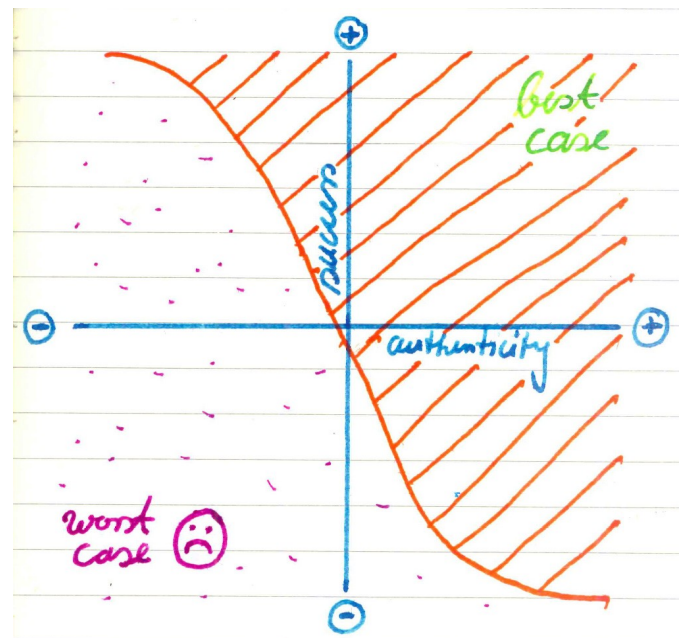
### *A Matrix of Authenticity*

This graph is my personal answer to the question of this section: What should we do? It shows two variables, authenticity and success, and the axes split the space into four sections.

The one on the lower left is where people are neither authentic nor successful. Imagine that you were committing fraud as a scientist, doping as an athlete, abusing people as a director, or creating fake products as a businessman. Your cheating or transgressions might eventually be noticed and you might lose everything that you have built up in your life. That would be neither authentic nor successful.

The space on the upper right is for people who are both authentic and successful and it seems logical to me that most, if not all of us would like to be in that section. As I wrote before, life is not just black and white and there are indefinite possibilities between the maximally authentic, maximally successful and the minimally authentic, minimally successful points in the graph.

In the upper left part there is much success but not much authenticity; and in the lower right there is much authenticity but not much success. I am not telling you what you should do. I am only



suggesting that you find the spot on the graph that is *right for you*. But note that while success may come or may not come, depending on many external factors beyond our control, we have more influence on how authentically we can live.

I sincerely hope that you will end up somewhere in the orange area, but I will not say that you are a bad person if you will not. For who am I to judge others? But note that the way I drew the graph it is clear that I, personally, value authenticity higher than success.

## 5. Happiness

By choosing to study psychology a couple of years ago you already have decided that money is not the single most important thing for you. Presumably you took that decision because you want to understand how the mind works, to understand people, or to help them.

How you can help them best would deserve an essay of its own. But I suspect that in the meantime you have realized that by studying psychology you primarily understand *psychologists*. But never mind, this is already a first step towards understanding people.

You have probably also realized by now that not everything happening at the university is really a good means to understand people and the world, or to solve problems. You may be stressed out at least sometimes because there are so many things that you must do, exams that you must learn for, applications for internships or Master's programs that you must think of. And once you are finished with an exam or an application, there will already be the next one to be taken care of.

### *Exhausted*

It is not surprising me that [ever more students are seeking psychological counseling](#). Many of your [professors are probably stressed out](#), too. The primary reason why this is so has to do with the incentive structure described above, with legal reforms related to the *Bologna Declaration*<sup>7</sup> that started in 1999 and more generally the *New Public Management* enacted by many governments worldwide. Globalization and neoliberalism are more broad terms and entail these processes.

Instead of explaining the details here and making this essay much longer, I will only point out something about the psychology of this kind of politics: Just like advertisements and perhaps also peer pressure tries to convince us that we must consume more to be happy, that new kind of management tries to convince us that we always must *perform* more and better to be successful. And success, in turn, seems to be associated with happiness.

One symptom of this kind of thinking is the Dutch debate on the “zesjescultuur,” which is criticizing that some pupils and students might be learning to be just sufficient, that is, to get the grade six (Dutch: *zes*). This mindset is not tolerated any more in the public discussion. While you might have internalized the values of the performance society so much that you tend to agree immediately – I have had discussions with students saying that they considered it as a duty to

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<sup>7</sup> Let us never forget that the [Bologna Declaration](#), signed by Europe's ministers of science of that time, which introduced the standardized and competitive system that also shaped your Bachelor's and Master's programs, is quite the opposite of what I like to call the *Real Declaration of Bologna*. This is the [Magna Charta Universitatum](#) of 1988 passed on the occasion of the 900th anniversary of Europe's oldest university and signed by 776 universities from 81 countries. It states that “the university is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies differently organized because of geography and historical heritage; it produces, examines, appraises and hands down culture by research and teaching. To meet the needs of the world around it, its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power.” I am afraid that no present university meets that standard. One could draw from that the logical conclusion that universities ceased to exist.



become the best possible version of themselves –, I would like to ask you what else should be sufficient when “sufficient” (the grade) no longer counts as sufficient?

### *The New Sufficiency*

The present performance culture offers us a different category, namely that of *excellence*. Excellence is an interesting thing and I dare say that nobody ever has seen it. Yet it certainly exists, because it can decide careers, can distinguish those getting the a research grant from those who do not, the medal or no medal, the funds or no funds, the role or no role, the publication in a high-impact journal or just a normal journal.

In practice, the excellent ones are successful and those who are successful are so because they are excellent; it is circular reasoning. It reminds me of the Dutch *Golden Age* when Calvinists believed that their success shows that they were chosen by God, which was in turn used as a moral justification for their expansive strategies, also involving slavery and exploitation. For how could they be so successful if they were not the Chosen? It is impossible to refute that reasoning on logical or scientific grounds.

Note that the scarcity in contemporary competitions is often produced artificially. In sports, there is only one gold medal. And the difference in performance between the first and the second or between the third, who still gets bronze, and the fourth, who gets nothing, are often small fractions of a second. From the perspective of an average human being they are all excellent. But that is not the result that the competition will yield.

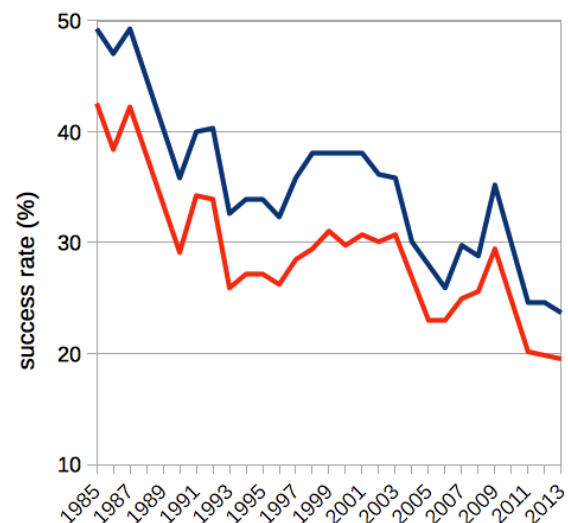
High-impact journals in science have such a high impact because almost everybody wants (or needs) to publish in them, but almost nobody can. The scarcity is created artificially and supposed to reflect quality – or excellence. Many such journals will [publish less than 10%](#) of the submitted papers and already reject the majority without any peer review, that is, without any member of the scientific community having a look at it. Remember that those taking these decisions have various conflicts of interest.

### *Increasing Competition*

Also the chances to get a major research grant are often within the 10-20% range. And times are getting more competitive, as this graph illustrates.

This graph is [originally](#) supposed to show that people from ethnic minorities (orange line) have lower chances than those belonging to the majority (blue line) to get a research grant from the *National Institutes of Health*, an important funding agency in the United States. It indeed questions the assumption of equal opportunities that just 20% of the one group, but 25% of the other are successful. But when you do not read the graph from top to bottom, but from left to right, you can see that the success rates *were cut by more than half*, regardless of the group.

Just like in sports, the difference between the last to get and the first not to get such a grant are often very small. Yet, the winners will be presented as the excellent ones and the losers... will not





be mentioned at all, as if they did not even exist. Just like the decisions to publish a research paper, the decisions to fund a research project are subject to conflicts of interest and not transparent. This does not prove that they are always wrong, but just that mistakes are structurally possible.

To conclude that train of thought let me point out that the primary things that such competitions are producing, be it in the entertainment industry, sports, or academia, are actually *losers*, while virtually all the attention goes to the few winners. Realizing that I was sometimes a winner, sometimes a loser, but always participating in a losers' competition did something to me emotionally. That feeling is also expressed for me in [Fritz Bornstück](#)'s painting "Winners in a Losers' Competition" (2010), which I may reproduce here by courtesy of the artist:



To me, the scene looks as if people prepared for a party, but it just *seems* like a party. Everything looks very artificial, poor, deprived, certainly not authentic, the people are no real people; it is all fake. Even the brightest light source, that one could mistake as the moon, is really just a light bulb. Do I want to look like such a “winner?” Do I want to live a life like that? Do you want to?

*Urge for More*

Whatever your answer is, it is important to realize that the mindset underlying this urge to compete, this urge to be successful is to find out whether one is good enough for a career in entertainment/sports/science. Or in other words: whether one is excellent. At least that is what those who designed the system make us believe. Is it so different from Calvinists who wanted to find out whether they were chosen by God?

In any case, this permanent *urge for more* characterizes our performance society, consumerism, capitalism, and actually also protestantism alike.<sup>8</sup> It is obvious that in such contexts nothing can be sufficient. Sufficiency would mean the end of that system. Therefore, it is in the interest of these systems that we believe, that in us the opinion is created that we, as we are here and now, are not sufficient, actually never so. And remember that after each competition, after each publication, after each exam already the next one is waiting. It is never enough, at least until our retirement.

Imagine how much suffering is likely to be created by the idea that people are not and never sufficient!

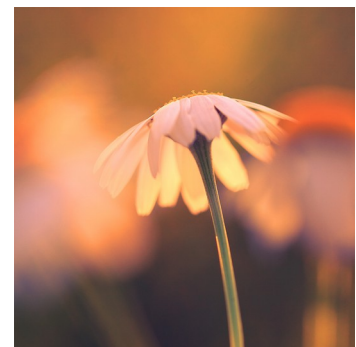
I concluded the previous section by recommending that you find your right spot on the authenticity/success matrix. Now I ask you to consider whether you want to be a winner in a losers' competition yourself. I am not suggesting that you should quit studying, that you should not go for a career in academia, sports, entertainment, business, or wherever you like. All I am saying is that you should ask yourself, at least once in a while, whether what you are doing is truly an expression of what you want to do in this life, of who you want to be in this life. And if there is a mismatch, that you can reclaim your life, your authenticity, your autonomy.

Students keep asking me whether they can be my research assistants. You could of course read literature on some topic, think about it, and eventually write something like my former intern Fabian Hutmacher's essay on [whether Socrates could have meaningfully used the notion of stress](#), or in other words, what kind of thing stress actually is.

But now I am asking you for something different, for an answer to the question: What is it that you truly want to express in this life? And how are you going to do it?

And if anybody does not understand what this question or this whole essay has to do with academia, please note that [article 1.3, paragraph 5](#) of the Dutch *Law on Higher Education and Scientific Research* regulates that universities also take care of their students' personal development. The term used in the law is actually not "ontwikkeling" (development), but "ontplooiing" (unfolding), like the petals of a flower are unfolding in the sun.<sup>9</sup>

Let me finish my essay by sharing a recent experience:



8 See sociologist Max Weber's timeless analysis *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (1904/1905), translated into English in 1930 as *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

9 In Dutch: "De instellingen voor hoger onderwijs schenken mede aandacht aan de persoonlijke ontplooiing van hun studenten en de bevordering van hun maatschappelijk verantwoordelijkheidsbesef" (artikel 1.3, lid 5 van de *Wet op het hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek*). The history of this thought dates back as far as 1806 and it has been interpreted differently in the different times, like educating someone to be a good Christian, educating somebody to develop intellect and character such that he or she can choose what is the best for herself or himself, or educating someone to be ready for the job market.

## 6. Epilogue

It was early in the morning, the weekend just after the *Philosophy of Psychology* exam in 2018. I was walking through the streets of a major city in my home country, on the way to a meditation class that would start at 7 am.

Everything was exceptionally silent, besides some workers picking up garbage and a small car sweeping the street. The night before I had been to a concert. On the way back I had seen dozens of people in uniform, already celebrating carnival.

When I had lived in that region myself I had hated that tradition. Now that I sometimes missed my home country I looked with more friendliness at its customs. I would even occasionally watch some soccer matches of the national team for some feeling of connectedness, although I knew that was an illusion. These millionaires running around on the grass are primarily doing what is good for themselves, after all.

### *Why Happiness is Not a Choice*

Walking through the streets, I was pondering the proposition that happiness is a *choice*. That seems to be some people's mantra or meme nowadays. "If you just try hard enough, you can become everything you want." And: "It's just a question of the right mindset. Just believe in it and it becomes true." I was wondering what it would feel like for a very depressed person if somebody told her or him: "You know, you just have to *choose* to be happy."

If it is that easy, why are so many people depressed? Or anxious? Or tired? And why do so many people consume psychoactive drugs, whether they are prescribed medically or taken "recreationally" or to meet the expectations? The problem with the proposition is that it makes another one true as well, namely that sadness is a choice. As we saw before, existential philosophers were aware of the fact that we could not *not* choose, for even that is a choice.

Similarly, if you are sad, then, according to the happiness mantra, that is your choice, because if you wanted to, you could simply choose to be happy. This sounds almost like saying that it is your own fault if you are sad. Or anxious. Or tired. It gives us the full and sole responsibility for how we are feeling.

Often those who are saying such things just are in a fortunate period of their lives. I remembered a discussion with students on a summer school in Berlin in 2014. I had asked them why almost nobody ever puts a photo of herself or himself online where he or she is looking sad. The answer I got was that everybody wants to be happy – and seeing photos of a friend being sad makes them sad, too. Therefore, posting such a photo could be seen as disturbance.

I was surprised, but nobody contradicted. So, first it is people's own fault when they are unhappy and then they may not show it because that would be disturbing? I am aware that I am generalizing here very much but that conclusion seems to reflect at least a tendency in our society.

### *Unfolding*

Walking through the silent streets the seed for this essay was planted. I just had to unfold it. I really wanted to write it and that is what I did – although I "had to do" other things. And I do not think that happiness is a choice. But looking at my life and the lives of others I think that *allowing* happiness is a choice. What do I mean with that?

Maybe we are too busy organizing the consumption and transformation of energy on just another ordinary day on our planet, as I described at the beginning, and maybe we are too busy with getting somewhere all the time that we never notice when we are actually *arriving*. The next project, the next exam, the next evaluation, the next deadline, the next challenge always seems to be looming just around the corner. Remember that the higher intelligence I introduced earlier left our planet without understanding what we are doing. Do we comprehend it ourselves?

What do we really need, from life's perspective? Some air, water, food, and shelter. This means that much of the goings-on on such an "ordinary day" are, strictly speaking, unnecessary. They are creations of the human mind. This gives us a lot of freedom to do things *differently*. And we can also decide on what we deem sufficient, thus allowing more happiness in our lives.

In my own past, it was a big step to let go of perfectionism – the idea that everything has to be excellent – and accept my writing as good enough, as sufficient. I think that I still have high standards, but now I primarily want to be understood and in touch with other people while maintaining authenticity. To my surprise, I not only enjoy writing much more than earlier, but actually also reading my own texts. And what about *you*? When will you start writing? Or what else is your favorite way of expressing yourself?



## Postscript

Some of you commented on an earlier version of this essay and I clarified a few points in the text above. There were a few topics, though, which I would rather address in this postscript, such as a few more thoughts on **authenticity** and the difference between **external and internal critique**.

### *More on Authenticity*

I admit that I have not written much to explain the concept of authenticity. I used “being true to yourself and others” as an alternative once. My idea is that many of us have an intuitive understanding of authenticity and inauthenticity, which is particularly related to doing things of which one knows that they are wrong. The concept is thus about a difference between the *is*, what the world is like, and the *ought*, what it should be like.

Remember the example of scientists committing fraud. They might be making up data. This in itself is just an action like many other actions, too. The problem or the contradiction arises when somebody then publishes these data, writing or at least suggesting that they are real data, data collected by observation and not entered by the researcher her- or himself to support a nice scientific story that can be published in a high-impact journal.

That person thus knows that making up the data with the intention of publishing them is wrong and that writing and submitting the paper to a journal is wrong, too. What makes it wrong? First of all, it is against the explicit and implicit rules of science. Science is aimed at understanding and explaining the world. For this, certain standards of independence and neutrality must be guaranteed. What the world is like and what the researcher wants it to look like for her or his career steps are two different issues.

Publishing the falsified data is also wrong, because it will create wrong opinions in the readers of the publication, namely, that an effect has been measured which was just made up by the scientist. And such wrong opinions can even cause harm!

Think about research in the biomedical sciences, where doctors will prescribe drugs on the basis of reports about their effects and side-effects. If these have been manipulated, patients will receive medications which are largely ineffective and potentially harmful; and the prescriptions will also cause financial damage to the healthcare system. Unfortunately, the situation with the frequently prescribed [antidepressant drugs](#) is very much like that.

In such cases, some people are doing things of which they know that they are wrong; and they are accepting that further damage can be caused by that. That is very inauthentic. Because of pressure, the wish to be successful, a wrong incentive structure, or probably a combination of all of that they are nevertheless doing it. And others trust them and will do the wrong thing, too.

The examples of doping in sports or cheating in business discussed in the essay are structurally very similar. There, too, are athletes, coaches, and trainers or executives, managers, and engineers who know that their actions are wrong and that they can harm other people. Nevertheless they are doing it to be more successful or to earn more profit.

### *What to Tell Your Grandmother*

When introducing the concept of authenticity, I particularly chose an example that is both realistic and thought-provoking. Do you remember the grandmother who asked you how her meal tasted and

you said that you liked it although you did not? I got all kinds of interesting responses which tried to explain why that reaction is *not* inauthentic.

Let me clarify that I am not so much interested in what you actually tell your grandmother or other people in similar situations. I also do not want to tell you what you should do, but just invite you to think about it yourselves. You can say that you like the meal even if you did not like it. This will obviously contribute to a harmonious sphere which arguably has some value in itself. But as a side-effect, your grandmother, to stick to that example, will believe that you really liked that meal: You actually *reinforce* her (wrong) belief.

That is, you make it more likely that she will cook the same meal or something similar again in the future. When that situation occurs, the pressure to say that you like the meal is already increased, for then you do not only have to keep up the appearance of enjoying something which you do not really like, but telling the truth this time might raise the even more difficult issue why you did not reply honestly in the past.

Besides that problem, you are also taking a chance away from another person to learn more about your preferences. Obviously he or she wanted to do something for you that you like. Do you remember what I wrote about allowing happiness in our lives? I think much of that has to do with honesty – or authentically – speaking about our desires and wishes. And if you cannot even do that with the trustworthy and loving people in your family, with whom else could you do it?

### *An Alternative Proposal*

So what else could one say then in such a situation? When somebody spent time and effort on doing you a favor, but it happened to be something which you do not really like? You could first of all express your appreciation for what the other person did for you: “Thank you so much for spending your time on cooking this meal for me. I really admire the devotion with which you are caring for others.” With such an expression you could authentically express gratitude.

But then you could continue: “But it turns out that the meal that you cooked today is not really one of my favorites.” This might raise the question of what your favorites would be. And guess what! The likelihood that your grandmother will cook one of your thoe next time will be increased – and would you not enjoy that more? And would you not be happier if you could honestly say that you really liked it next time?

I am aware that not everybody has grandmothers, including myself, or loving and caring family environments. I just wanted to use a realistic example that at least resembles many situations from our real lives. I am deeply convinced that also in relationships there is a lot of misunderstanding, frustration, and even suffering, because people cannot talk openly about their wishes and desires. Also think about the sensible domain of sexuality, where still so many people feel ashamed for expressing their desires and wants – as well as what they don’t want!

And ask yourself whom you are really doing a favor when you are decreasing your own chances of having a truly pleasant experience and at the same time taking a chance of development and learning away from the other person. I know that it is not always easy, but it is worthwhile to try it at least. You and others deserve to allow more happiness in your lives.

A friend added the example of a couple she knows, a man and a woman who have been in a romantic relationship for many years. For their first dinner, he cooked asparagus. She doesn’t like asparagus at all, but was afraid of hurting his feelings. Ever since then he cooks asparagus every year to celebrate their anniversary, and she has to act as if she likes it, for now she would not only have to be true to herself, but also admit that she hasn’t been for so many years! Isn’t that odd?



### *External Versus Internal Critique*

My essay is obviously describing a world that is far from ideal. None of us can individually solve the systemic problems described above. Do you remember the ancient wisdom that we should not worry about things which we cannot change? And that we can do something about the other kind of things? This raises the issue of *how* to change those things.

My recommendation in the essay was to find your right spot on the authenticity-and-success-matrix. For those interested in changing the system I provided more information in the footnotes. However, one of you told me that she discussed the issue with her father who then said something about external versus internal forms of critique. What does that mean?

I do not know where this distinction originally comes from, whether it is political philosophy or logics. But it often makes sense to look at problems in that way. Imagine that somebody wants to prove something in logics or mathematics. That involves axioms and accepted rules. Somebody could simply make a mistake, that is, apply the rules incorrectly. In psychology, you could also imagine somebody who is calculating a statistical test incorrectly.

In such cases the result will probably be wrong. However, when you point that out, you are still arguing from within that system, that is, you might point out that the rule has been applied incorrectly or that the test was calculated wrongly, but you will not question the rules or axioms themselves. The problem can simply be resolved by repeating the individual steps of the logical proof or the statistical calculation without making the mistake.

While you were criticizing what somebody did, you never questioned the axioms or the rules; you did not question the system as such. Therefore, these kinds of critique are called *internal*, which means from within the system. You could also have said that the question that is to be answered is just pointless, or why the axioms and rules are not sufficient to answer it. Then you would have been arguing from without that system, that is, *externally*.

### *Should We Follow the Rules?*

The examples discussed in the essays were not simply about carrying out a logical proof. And they were just indirectly related to calculating statistical tests. Yet, remember that these examples were taken from the real world – business, science, sports – and not just made up.

The question how to deal with such problems thus directly affects our lives, other than proofs in pure logics. Not just the medications others or we get or the vehicles others and we drive affect our lives, but we are also affected as being part of the performance society ourselves. Should we thus follow its rules or should we be against them? And if we are against them, should we argue or perform actions from within our outside of the system?

The advice that the student just mentioned got from her father was to earn money first and then to help people once she has become rich. And do not be concerned: In what follows I shall neither suggest that you should become a revolutionary, nor a millionaire. I just want to invite you to make up your own mind about the question.

## *Helping People*

Imagine someone who wants to help people with psychological problems. The usual way, from within the system, would be to get a degree in psychology, to continue with practical education, and to eventually become a psychotherapist associated with some professional association responsible for quality control and formalization.

This will take many years and you will arguably have to do many things which seem meaningless or unnecessary to reach your aims, like mindlessly collecting credit points by passing multiple choice exams the content of which you will have forgotten few days after the test. Maybe you will be able to help some people in the meantime, what your original aim was, but you will in any case spend a lot of time meeting expectations and functioning as part of the system.

Once you have found a place providing you with material security, such as a permanent position in a mental health institution or your own psychotherapeutic practice, you will likely be in your late 20s, perhaps already in your 30s. I was aged 35 when I got the first permanent contract. You might have additional responsibilities at that time, such as children or loans to pay back.

What I am trying to say here is that every period comes with obligations that might put pressure on your authenticity. Maybe you *do* speak up early in your career, as the students and young researchers mentioned above did to uncover professor Hauser's or Stapel's fraud. But maybe you will not dare to, because you have now become afraid of losing what you have achieved with hard work during the last years. Maybe you do speak up and experience that nobody listens or cares; or that you are jeopardizing collaborations that are important for your future career.

Perhaps you can help more people in the meantime, if that is what you want to do in the first place. And it is certainly an important activity. Yet I doubt that that will solve the general problems in our society. Also those who are in the positions to take important decisions right now once were young and perhaps idealists. Apparently those playing according to the rules for too long are losing their motivation for real change and rather adapt to the expectations.

I thus believe that nothing will really change in society without changing its *incentive structure*, as I explained in more detail above. And I must admit that I do not know what the best way is for this, otherwise I would have done it already.

## *Who Wants to Be Like the Bull Seeing Red?*

Someone who is not following the rules and who is completely against the system will have a very different way of life. He or she will probably meet much resistance, be excluded and ignored, possibly ridiculed. That person will not be able to use the resources – e.g. means of communication – provided by the system. But maybe there are other ways?

From my own experience of suing the *Dutch Research Foundation*, as I described in footnote 5 above, I can only tell that sometimes when you are fighting against something, that opponent can psychologically have a lot of power over you. Are you really free and authentic under such conditions? Is a bull who is becoming furious when he sees a red cape really free and authentic?

Probably nobody really knows whether internal or external critique has higher chances of success; both approaches come with their own opportunities and limitations. In our society, having a stable material basis certainly does have advantages. But depending on how much hardship you are willing to face, you might rather appreciate the probably higher freedom of somebody outside the system. Yet, even her or his body will have to breathe, drink, eat, sleep, and be in need of shelter and social contacts.