

## THE BIG IDEAS

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Unhealthy belief in your importance.

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With a broom called *areté*.

*"The first principle is that you must not fool yourself—and you are the easiest to fool."*

~ Richard Feynman

# Ego Is the Enemy

BY RYAN HOLIDAY · PORTFOLIO © 2016 · 256 PAGES

"While the history books are filled with tales of obsessive, visionary geniuses who remade the world in their image with sheer, almost irrational force, I've found that if you go looking you'll find that history is also made by individuals who fought their egos at every turn, who eschewed the spotlight, and who put their highest goals above their desire for recognition. Engaging with and retelling these stories has been my method of learning and absorbing them. ...

It's always nice to be made to feel special or empowered or inspired. But that's not the main aim of this book. Instead, I have tried to arrange these pages so that you might end in the same place I did when I finished writing it: that is, you will think less of yourself. I hope you will be less invested in the story you tell about your own specialness, and as a result, you will be liberated to *accomplish* the world-changing work you've set out to achieve."

~ Ryan Holiday from *The Ego Is the Enemy*

Meet the enemy: Your ego.

Our guide, Ryan Holiday, wrote one of my favorite books of 2015: [The Obstacle Is the Way](#).

*Ego Is the Enemy* is now one of my favorite books of 2016. It's fantastic.

As with *The Obstacle*, Ryan writes in an incredibly compelling, simple, smart style—integrating ancient wisdom with modern stories to bring the wisdom home. It's captivating. I read it in essentially one sitting—with my AM trip to the park with Emerson as an intermission. :)

The whole conversation around ego can be a complicated one. We'll explore it more in the first Big Idea. But, if you have any ambition at all, you've likely noticed that you have a bit of an ego that goes with it. (Hah. :)

Ryan shows us how our ego rears its head during the three (repeating) critical phases of our lives: Aspire + Success + Failure. And, of course, he shows us how to mitigate its effects by employing the proper virtues at the proper time. (Get the book [here](#).)

My copy of the book is (literally) nearly all marked up. It's packed with Big Ideas and I'm excited to share some of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

## LET'S DEFINE EGO

"Not that this is a book about ego in the Freudian sense. Freud was fond of explaining the ego by way of analogy—our ego was the rider on a horse, with our unconscious drives representing the animal while the ego tried to direct them. Modern psychologists, on the other hand, use the word 'egotist' to refer to someone dangerously focused on themselves and with disregard for anyone else. All these definitions are true enough but of little value outside a clinical setting.

*"Every man I meet is my master in some point, and in that I learn of him."*

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

The ego we see most commonly goes by a more colloquial definition: an unhealthy belief in your own importance. That's the definition the book will use. It's that petulant child inside every person, the one that chooses getting his or her way over anything else. The need to be *better than, more than, recognized for*, far past any reasonable utility—that's ego. It's the sense of superiority and certainty that exceeds the bounds of confidence and talent."

Alright. We'll start with the definition of ego Ryan uses throughout the book: "*an unhealthy belief in your own importance.*"

In other Notes I push back on a lot of the Eastern ideas that we need to annihilate the ego to reach some state of enlightenment—which presupposes that we can somehow transcend ourselves before fully and healthfully mastering ourselves. (We can't.)

For example, in Joseph Campbell's *Pathways to Bliss*, I highlight this wisdom: "*We hear so much talk now, particularly from the Orient, about egolessness. You are trying to smash this thing which is the only thing that keeps you in play. There's got to be somebody up there; otherwise you're not oriented to anything. The self, that's the great circle, the ship, the ego is the little captain on the bridge.*"

Plus: "*Of course, to reach the transpersonal, you have to go through the personal: you have to have both qualities there.*"

And, in Nathaniel Branden's *The Art of Living Consciously*, we focus on this: "*We can talk about transcending a limited self-concept. We cannot talk—rationally—about transcending the self. We can talk about transcending an overrestricted concept of ego. We cannot talk—rationally—about transcending ego (not if we understand what ego really is and don't associate it with vanity or defensiveness).*"

We'll leave the long chat about the various definitions of ego aside for the moment and focus on Ryan's definition that, again, our ego is *an unhealthy belief in our own importance*.

As he says: "*It's when the notion of ourselves and the world grows so inflated that it begins to distort the reality that surrounds us. When, as the football coach Bill Walsh explained, 'self-confidence becomes arrogance, assertiveness becomes obstinacy, and self-assurance becomes reckless abandon.'* This is the ego, as the writer Cyril Connolly warned, that 'sucks us down like the law of gravity.'

In this way, ego is the enemy of what you want and of what you have: Of mastering your craft. Of real creative insight. Of working well with others. Of building loyalty and support. Of longevity. Of repeating and retaining your success. It repulses advantages and opportunities. It's a magnet for enemies and errors."

(In short, one could say that, paradoxically, it takes a very strong, healthy ego to deal with the very strong, unhealthy aspects of ego. :)

## WANT TO BE MORE THAN A FLASH IN THE PAN?

"If you want to be more than a flash in the pan, you must be prepared to focus on the long term. We will learn that though we *think* big, we must act and live small in order to accomplish what we seek. Because we will be *action* and *education* focused, and forgo validation and status in their pursuit, our ambition will not be grandiose but iterative—one foot in front of the other, learning and growing and putting in the time.

With their aggression, brashness, intensity, selfishness, self-absorption, endless self-promotion, and impulsiveness, our competitors don't realize how they jeopardize their own efforts (to say nothing of their sanity). We will challenge the myth of the self-assured genius for whom doubt and introspection is foreign, as well as challenge the myth of the pained, tortured artist who must sacrifice his health for his work."

*"A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you."*

~ C. S. Lewis

*"The height of cultivation runs to simplicity."*

~ Bruce Lee

That's from the prelude to the first section: *Aspire*.

Want to be more than a flash in the pan? Think big. Live and act small.

Remember that *"our ambition will not be grandiose but iterative—one foot in front of the other, learning and growing and putting in the time."*

<— That's genius.

And, that's impossible to do if we have *"an unhealthy belief in your own importance."*

Why? Because we're already so darn great that we don't need to remain open to learning. We've lost any sense of humility and perspective. And that's not a recipe for true, sustainable awesome.

Let's play the long game and take that precious energy \*out of\* self-promotion and \*into\* mastering ourselves and our craft one step at a time.

P.S. Reminds me of Idan Ravin, who works with the world's elite basketball stars ([see Notes on The Hoops Whisperer](#)). He tells us: *"Talent and fireworks on a few random nights in December aren't enough; succeeding in the NBA requires consistency over an extended period of time—eighty-two regular season games, six months, a daily grind."*

## IS IT 10,000 HOURS OR 20,000 HOURS TO MASTERY?

*"Is it ten thousand hours or twenty thousand hours to mastery? The answer is that it doesn't matter. There is no end zone. To think of a number is to live in a conditional future. We're simply talking about a lot of hours—that to get where we want to go isn't about brilliance, but continual effort. While that's not a terribly sexy idea, it should be an encouraging one. Because it means it's all within reach—for all of us, provided we have the constitution and humbleness to be patient and the fortitude to put in the work."*

So, how many hours does it take to attain mastery? Is it 10,000? 20,000? Or ... ?

How about infinite? (HAH.)

There is no end zone. Welcome to the never-ending game of continual effort.

The ego doesn't like that game. We, committed to sustainable success and flow and joy, must.

Reminds me of Robert Greene's genius passage from his classic book *Mastery* ([see Notes + Interview](#)) and recall that Ryan dropped out of college at 19 to apprentice with Robert!): *"In our culture, we tend to denigrate practice. We want to imagine that great feats occur naturally—that they are the sign of someone's genius or superior talent. Getting to a high level of achievement through practice seems so banal, so uninspiring. Besides, we don't want to have to think of the 10,000 to 20,000 hours that go into such mastery. These values of ours are oddly counterproductive—they cloak from us the fact that almost everyone can reach such heights through tenacious effort, something that should encourage us all. It is time to reverse this prejudice against conscious effort and to see the powers we gain through practice and discipline as eminently inspiring and even miraculous."*

Here's to TENACIOUS EFFORT.

## DON'T BE PASSIONATE

*"Is an iterative approach less exciting than manifestos, epiphanies, flying across the country to surprise someone, or sending four-thousand-word stream-of-consciousness e-mails in the middle of the night? Of course. Is it less glamorous and bold than going all in and maxing out your credit cards because you believe in yourself? Absolutely. ... Passion is form over function. Purpose is function, function, function."*

*"Ego doesn't allow for proper incubation either. To become what we ultimately hope to become often takes long periods of obscurity, of sitting and wrestling with some topic or paradox. Humility is what keeps us there, concerned that we don't know enough and that we must continue to study."*

*Ego rushes to the end, rationalizes that patience is for losers (wrongly seeing it as a weakness), and assumes we're good enough to give our talents a go in the world."*

~ Ryan Holiday

*"Passion typically masks a weakness. Its breathlessness and impetuosity and franticness are poor substitutes for discipline, for mastery, for strength and perseverance.*

~ Ryan Holiday

The critical work that you want to do—it can be done by you alone. It will require your deliberation and consideration. Passion doesn't help. We don't need you to be excited or amped. The world has that in spades.

It'd be far better if you were intimidated by what lies ahead—humbled by its magnitude and determined to see it through regardless. Leave passion for the amateurs and the delusional. Make it about what you feel you must do and say, not what you care about and wish to be. Then you will do great things. Then you will stop being your old, good-intentioned, but ineffective self."

That's from a chapter appropriately called "Don't Be Passionate."

Don't be passionate?! (Gasp! :o)

Correct. Don't be passionate.

Go beyond passion to purpose.

Know what you're here to do and why you're committed to doing it. Recognize how hard that is going to be. Remember the fact that you don't start the climb up Everest at a sprint. Be on purpose. Show up daily. Be a master craftsman.

P.S. This is the essence of Cal Newport's brilliant book *So Good They Can't Ignore You* ([see Notes](#)). Cal juxtaposes the *passion mindset* ("What's in it for me?") vs. the *craftsman mindset* ("How can I create something meaningful?"). Our society tells us that passion is enough. It's not.

## MAKE IT SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO FAKE IT

"Back to that popular trope: Fake it 'til you make it. It's no surprise that such an idea has found increasing relevance in our noxiously bullshit, Nerf world. When it is difficult to tell a real producer from an adept self-promoter, of course some people will roll the dice and manage to play the confidence game. Make it so you don't have to fake it—that's the key. Can you imagine a doctor trying to get by with anything less? Or a quarterback, or a bull rider? More to the point, would you want them to? So why would you try otherwise?"

Every time you sit down to work, remind yourself: I am delaying gratification by doing this. I am passing the marshmallow test. I am earning what my ambition burns for. I am making an investment in myself instead of my ego. Give yourself a little credit for this choice, but not so much, because you've got to get back to the task at hand: practicing, working, improving."

That's from a chapter appropriately named "Work, Work, Work."

Yes, the theme of showing up and doing the work dominates the Aspire section. If we want sustainable success, we must show up and Do. The. Work.

Are you?

(On that note: I created a new bookmark yesterday as I was reading this book. A simple index card with (Pressfield-inspired) "TURN PRO" written on it. That was my theme for 2015. It's one of my themes for 2016 as well.

Note to self: TURNING PRO is not a flip-the-switch, done decision. It's a moment-to-moment + daily decision. We'll come back to this in our final Idea as well.)

## EUTHYMIA ← THE SENSE OF OUR OWN PATH → TRANQUILITY

"According to Seneca, the Greek word *euthymia* is one we should think of often: it is the sense of our own path and how to stay on it without getting distracted by all the others that intersect it. In other words, it's not about beating the other guy. It's not about having more than the others. It's about being what you are, and being as good as possible at it, without succumbing to all the

*"Failure sucks. Deal with it. With dignity and self-respect."*

~ Ryan Holiday

"Find out why you're after what you're after. Ignore those who mess with your pace. Let them covet what you have, not the other way around. Because that's independence. That's contentment."

~ Ryan Holiday

things that draw you away from it. It's about going where you set out to go. About accomplishing the most that you're capable of in what you choose. That's it. No more and no less. (By the way, *euthymia* means 'tranquility' in English.) ...

So why do you do what you do? That's the question you need to answer. Stare at it until you can. Only then will you understand what matters and what doesn't. Only then can you say no, can you opt out of stupid races that don't matter, or even exist. Only then is it easy to ignore 'successful' people, because most of the time they aren't—at least relative to you, and often even to themselves. Only then can you develop that quiet confidence Seneca talked about."

*Euthymia.*

My new favorite word.

*Euthymia* = "the sense of our own path and how to stay on it without getting distracted by all the others that intersect it."

What is YOUR path?

—> WHY DO YOU DO WHAT YOU DO?

Let's stare at that question until we can answer it. And then make the conscious decision to cut off other paths, embrace the inherent trade-offs in life, recognize that, as Ryan advises, we can't (!) have it all (ego hates to embrace the constraints of reality), and then quit thinking about what others are up to as we live with *euthymia*.

The result of that clarity and courage and consistency?

TRANQUILITY.

P.S. Remember Sonja Lyubomirsky's scientific wisdom that happy people aren't thinking about other people. They're too busy living their lives to worry about what others are doing. (And, when they DO think of others, it's simply to celebrate their awesomeness not to compare.)

*Euthymia* = Tranquility.

## FALSE HOPE VS. TRUE HOPE

"What we need to see is that *we* are not failures, we're just *experiencing* failure. We need to embody what's come to be known as the Stockdale Paradox, based on the philosopher soldier James Stockdale, who spent seven years in a North Vietnamese prison camp. On the one hand, to survive such an ordeal you must have deep faith in yourself and your ability to persevere. On the other, you must be realistic about your situation and surroundings. False hope is not your friend; like ego, it betrays you in the toughest moments."

That's from the final section on Failure.

We WILL (!), of course (!), experience failure. That's a given. The sooner we embrace that fact the sooner we can embrace the fact that "*we are not failures, we're just experiencing failure.*"

It's the hyper uptight, taking-itself-too-seriously ego within each of us that overidentifies with both success and failure. We need to step back and see the big picture.

Part of that big picture involves having a deep sense of TRUE hope \*not\* a flitting and fleeting sense of *false* hope.

The difference? Shane Lopez, the leading researcher studying the science of hope ([see Notes on Making Hope Happen](#)), tells us that TRUE hope is the sense that your future will be better than your present while recognizing our agency in the process and the need for us to embrace multiple pathways to get there—KNOWING it's not going to be easy.

False hope, on the other hand, thinks it'll be easy. When the inevitable challenges arise, we fold.

"We're afraid to lose and fail because we think it says something about us. It doesn't. Success didn't either. All that failure says is that there is a chance to improve and better understand yourself."

~ Ryan Holiday

"There is something of a civil war going on within all of our lives. There is a recalcitrant South of our soul revolting against the North of our soul. And there is this continual struggle within the very structure of every individual life."

~ Martin Luther King, Jr.

James Stockdale tells us that kind of naive optimism literally kills. (See the Notes on *Courage Under Fire* for more on his incredible story + wisdom.)

We need to have a deep sense of trust in our ability to persevere to create a better future AND a ruthless embrace of our current reality.

How're you doing with that?

## A BROOM NAMED ARETÉ

"My friend the philosopher and martial artist Daniele Bolelli once gave me a helpful metaphor. He explained that training was like sweeping the floor. Just because we've done it once, doesn't mean the floor is clean forever. Every day the dust comes back. Every day we must sweep. ...

Every day for the rest of your life you will find yourself at one of three phases: aspiration, success, failure. You will battle the ego in each of them. You will make mistakes in each of them.

You must sweep the floor every minute of every day. And then sweep again."

Those are the final words of the book.

I LOVE that image of sweeping the floor.

The dust collects quickly. We must sweep the floor of our lives every minute of every day.

And then sweep it again.

The Greeks had a word for that as well: *areté*.

Moment to moment to moment, we have an opportunity to step into and express the best within us. Let's do that as we optimize, actualize and win the battle with our lower selves.

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## About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at [heroic.us](http://heroic.us).

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