

Reading one of the excerpts for expos just now, I came across the words “self-discipline, self-motivation, and self-direction.” Well, do I have any of those things? No, not really. Is doing a Putnam Problem of the Day out of curiosity “self-motivation,” or is it just procrastination? Heck, what is it that’s preventing me from getting my assignments done? A self-motivation to learn other things and ignore what the classes are forcing on me, or a lack of self-motivation to complete what I set out to do? Clearly, I’m lacking self-motivation. I chose to come here, yet I’m still whining about the work like some disenfranchised high-schooler. I haven’t gotten it through my head yet that no one is forcing me to go here. If I don’t get my work done, then whatever. I don’t get credit for the assignment. The professor doesn’t care.

But here’s the thing. The professor does care. When I refuse to complete assignments, there’s an extensive network of support I get sent to that tries to get me back on track. This is the patronizing sort of thing you would expect to see in high school, not in college. But what does it mean when we say that high school is “mandatory” and college is not? Honestly, given the way things work nowadays, college is just as mandatory as high school, assuming you want to make a decent income (Advocates of blue collar jobs would suggest otherwise, but I couldn’t show my face doing something like that, even though I might enjoy it). Assuming this is true, I’m not railing against college so much as I am railing against the current system. Am I complaining about capitalism? Perhaps. Am I complaining about my current situation? Absolutely.

Maybe, in order to start completing my assignments, I should whip out an old trick that worked for me throughout high school. Given an impulse to rebel against a teacher, one can act out in two ways. The first way – not completing the assignment – is the approach most commonly associated with student rebellion, and is what I’m doing right now. The second, more successful approach is to complete assignments so unbelievably well as to astound the teacher. Completing assignments in this manner allows the student, not the teacher, to set the goal. The autonomy that is threatened by the demand to meet expectations is preserved by the decision to exceed expectations. And the desire for autonomy, after all, is the only thing motivating the rebellion in the first place.

Given that I took the second approach throughout most of high school, and that I’ve been doing it a decent amount in college, I tend to be extremely self-motivated and self-directed. I am less well off, however, in the self-discipline department. My lack of self-discipline might be a consequence of self-respect. Instead of staying up all night to complete assignments, I choose to go to bed, because I respect my basic health and well-being. Simple comfort should never be squandered in the name of the future. In a perfect world, everyone would live by that creed. We live in a world, however, that demands we work endlessly in order to survive, all the while creating things that we don’t need. The excess is infuriating, but perhaps an inevitable consequence of meeting the survival needs in the first place.

It is strange, though. We live in a world that is, at first glance, a land of plenty. Simply walking down the street will show you that. But it is a world that nevertheless demands suffering. It demands, in fact, more hours of work than is needed to survive in a hunter-gatherer tribe. It’s absurd. The difference between what we see and what we are allowed to have has a name: money. Money, however, is an abstraction. It is far less visceral than what we can take in with our senses. I see food, cars, and giant buildings as I walk down the street, and I find my current, painful situation utterly incomprehensible. I take one look at the bed in my dorm, and I see no reason why I cannot sleep.