

Militant Counteratrophy

As a pretentious person, I have my own word for what everyone else calls "rotting" (a category that includes "doomscrolling"): atrophy. I used to think it was awfully clever because it contained the word "rot" in it, in the same way that most nicknames are contained within their normal forms (e.g., "rob" from "robert"), until I spelled it out and realised that's close but not true. I held that misconception for at least two years. This is the consequence of keeping your ideas private.

I have my own word for it because it's one of the axes upon which my whole life spins. A substantial chunk of my brainpower every day is spent thinking about it. For, you see, I am at war; a purely internal war with myself that has been raging for as long as I can remember. I have good reason to suspect that a similar war is raging in the lives of almost every single other person with access to the internet in the world. Everyone is independently trying to battle what is (subjectively) one of the biggest problems of our generation, and this lack of communication is causing fellow soldiers to keep stepping on the same landmines over and over again. I have not won the war, but I think my advice & experience will be valuable for others in their own battle.

First, we must define the sides of the conflict. How can one be at war with one's self? To understand this, we can follow in the footsteps of Freud (read: misrepresent his work out of disrespect) by dividing the self into three minds: the id, ego, and superego. The id is the animal mind, desiring only instant gratification. In our hunter-gatherer prehistory, the id had a vital role in keeping us alive, but in the modern day, when matters are no longer of life and death, it's become a vestigial limb of the mind, which (when acting beyond the base functions of demanding food and sleep) actively sabotages the self. Much the same as how our instinctual desire for energy (and therefore for sweet foods) became a weakness upon the discovery of sucrose (which is sweet but doesn't grant energy), the id's desires have become catastrophic when people discovered they could make enormous profits off it.

The ego is the closest thing to what we call "the self." It is your inner monologue and the thing that gazes back when you look in the mirror. With pressure from the superego, the ego typically wants the best for you. It wants you to read books,¹ do your chores, and be productive. It is the thing that makes you feel terrible after rotting.

¹ There is debate over if reading does or doesn't count as atrophy. It certainly shares many features with rotting. But the fact that books are often hard to read, demanding a certain amount of effort from the reader, and (hopefully) being thought-provoking instead of thought-terminating, shows that, at least in my view, we can promote the act of reading long-form content to the status of a "higher form" of pleasure. If we wanted to be extra pretentious, we could say that some books are more sophisticated and therefore "higher" than others, but in my view, society is already so hostile to literacy that any long-form reading is a step in the right direction.

Short-form content and the infinite-scroll feature have proven to be ideal snares for the id's attention, which it'll gladly sell out for that blissful state of mindless self-annihilation (or, more accurately, ego-annihilation) which it desires above all else. If the id had its way, it'd trap the body inside Nozick's Experience Machine (also called the "pleasure cube"), allowing the flesh to wither away, placating itself with sounds and lights specially engineered to silence thoughts and provide vapid, thought-terminating entertainment. Alas, it can only get as close to this ideal as humanly possible, which means wasting away hour after hour, clogging the synapses with reels or posts or videos, each eliciting nary more than a smirk, each forgotten as soon as one scrolls to the next. This absorptive process of attention devouring² radically contracts time so that hours disappear with nothing to show for it. Eventually, as much as the id wants to hold onto you, it has to concede control back to the ego, which is forced to reckon with the consequences.

Such is the nature of life when no counteratrophy action is taken: a perpetual concession to the id, with the ego only remarking on the sorry state of things. In my imagination, accepting this lifestyle leads to a long and bleak life where one's dreams and goals are forgotten, and one eventually lies half-awake on their deathbed thinking "what was it all for?" So you can understand the existential nature of this conflict. So what is a sufficiently anxious ego to do?

The difficulty lies in the fact that the id and the ego occupy the same mind. If your ego locks an app behind a password, the id will know the password. The ego can resolve to never rot again, but it doesn't mean anything when the id rears its ugly head once again. You could approach a third party to intervene, but frankly I'd rather kill myself than tell someone my addiction to Instagram reels is so debilitating I need somebody to intervene. But don't despair: there are plenty of strategies that the ego can conduct individually to gain an upper hand in the battle.

To understand which strategies do and don't work, one must understand the characteristics of the two sides in the battle. The ego can think. It can plan, strategise, and make long-term plans. The id is an animal. Everything it does is a subconscious instinct, an unthinking reflex. The ego wants the id dead; the id cannot chain together enough thoughts to even comprehend the ego. Therefore, to quell the id, one must merely withhold instant gratification for long enough that the ego can return and wrest back control. Short-form content platforms — the ego's greatest enemy, and the id's greatest friend — know this, which is why they do their utmost to remove as much friction as possible from the user experience. The goal of the ego is to reintroduce that friction manually, to discourage and eventually vanquish the id. The way we do this is

² We could call this "prosochivorous," from the Greek *prosochē*, meaning 'attention,' if we're interested in speculative etymology. But I've been told using made up words limits reading comprehension.

different for each battlefield. I will share what has worked for me. You can take the basic principles or the specific techniques for use in your own battle.

To begin: the phone is your greatest enemy. The unprecedented modern ability to beam frictionless short-form content directly into your brain at every waking moment, anywhere in the world, is the greatest capitulation to the id in human history.³ Lying in bed, holding your phone to your face, with short-form content autoscrolling in front of you, is the closest approximation to the pleasure cube that we've accomplished so far. It is the id's paradise and the ego's hell. In a perfect world — and I have fantasised about this many a time — you would throw your smartphone into the sea and buy a 20-year-old brick for cheap, only capable of making and receiving calls. Alas, society makes no room for downgrading oneself like this. You need to be able to use Google Maps while in the city. If you're like me, you need to write down every second thought that pops in your head, and a pen and paper simply don't cut it. If you can make the Nokia lifestyle work, I envy you, but for the rest of us, we must be more sophisticated in our stratagems.

The first and easiest step is to uninstall every short-form app on your phone. Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube.⁴ All of these are accessible through the web version, but the experience has much more friction. This is why these platforms desperately want you to use the app. Remember that they are your enemy. Only lies pass through the serpent's tongue. Of course, if the id were smart, it'd simply reinstall the apps, log back in, and return to happy, mindless atrophy. But it's not. It'd rather avoid the minor boredom of the reinstallation process if it can just use the web versions.

Desktop is the ego's domain; there, it has full power over your user experience. Chrome's mobile version, however, doesn't allow for extensions or any JavaScript tricks that can customise your experience. This is because Chrome wants you dead.⁵ You can try to learn how to jailbreak your phone, or you can use some useful apps that can aid the ego's countermeasures easily. Apps like "Stay Free" and "Stay Focused" on Android allow you to completely block certain websites on your phone. More sophisticated features are available for paying customers, but their free features are a good start. While this sounds attractive to the ego, we know from other addictions that sudden and total abstinence is not advisable. If you've been using the same short-form content app

³ If you wanted to be marxist about it, you could instead reframe the "capitulation" as an attack on our attention by major tech companies.

⁴ My inclusion of YouTube in this list has been controversial among my contemporaries. Objections include that it can be informative and allows for long-form content. I would in turn object that it can be thought-terminating and allows for short-form content. When the ego is in power, of course the best can be found in all platforms. But when the id takes the wheel, if a pleasure cube exists, with an open, inviting door, it will be entered.

⁵ In truth, Chrome's incentives simply happen to align with the id's; companies are incapable of "wanting" anything. In more truth, there are real reasons relating to security and performance that make this decision more reasonable. But charity to your enemies isn't fun, so we say that Chrome wants you dead.

for years, the id will overcome its usual sloth and go the extra effort to simply disable the blocks the ego has set up, rendering the defence useless. A strategy that has proven effective for my contemporaries and me has been setting daily limits: satiate the id with ten minutes of atrophy before the block automatically kicks in, snapping you back to reality, (hopefully) letting the ego return to put the phone down. Decrease the limit as time goes on, in the same way we slowly wean addicts off their substances. Like a frog in boiling water, the id won't even realise that you're attacking it, slowly getting used to shorter and shorter periods of atrophy. Thus, ideally, we can keep the wonderful boons of the smartphone while eventually killing the pleasure cube that hides within it. If this fails, buy a Nokia, a notebook, and a paper map of your city. In the absence of Google, approach strangers on the street with your questions.

Once your war against the id begins, you'll realise the full extent to which it has encroached on every aspect of your life. Desktop is not safe: the temptation of atrophy is around every corner. The id is an animal, but even dogs can learn and adapt. After killing your mobile Instagram addiction, you might find yourself ensnared in hours-long atrophy sessions on the desktop web version. Fear not; the desktop is the ego's domain. You can find similar website-blocking apps as on mobile, but I prefer more sophisticated strategies. Consider deleting your accounts for short-form websites. If you need them for other reasons, you can use extensions to reshape websites to give them friction. I recommend "IGPlus" for Instagram and "UnTrap for YouTube" for YouTube.⁶ Obviously. These and similar extensions transform your experience using these websites to make them id-hostile. They can remove infinite scrolling, short-form content, or even (in the case of UnTrap) go to extreme lengths to make atrophy as unpleasant as possible, like making all YouTube videos grayscale. Such extreme measures shouldn't be necessary. The highest priorities are to remove sidebar video recommendations on YouTube and to automatically redirect you from your standard Instagram feed to the chronological Following feed, which is far less entertaining. Extensions and strategies that allow you to keep scrolling but find it boring are perfect, for they will kill the habit in you, driving the id further and further into the darkness. Some may find this extreme, but I advise turning off your YouTube watch history, which removes all recommendations from the home page, and either deleting your channel or unsubscribing from all channels. This way, you can still find videos, but make it impossible for the id to be caught in an atrophy spiral.

[here goes the conclusion, where i answer the obvious question "this seems like a lot of beating around the bush and attacking symptoms of root causes. how do you actually solve this. problem is idk the answer]

⁶ Alternatively, you can reproduce their effects using Tampermonkey. Most LLMs are proficient at creating Tampermonkey scripts to your specifications. UnTrap can make YouTube Music incredibly slow. Why would you ever use YouTube Music? Because, unlike Spotify, adblock actually works on it. But only on Firefox (maybe; the boundaries of adblock are constantly shifting as its developers fight a constant guerilla war against Chrome). Consider downloading Firefox purely for an adblocked YouTube Music.