

Doubts, Mistakes, and Faulty Judgments

A free-wheeling inquiry in three parts

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I.

What if You Could Manage Mistakes Before You Made Them?

Famed organizational psychologist Adam Grant published a [listicle](#) on CNBC's website last year outlining the "life changes" practiced by successful people.

One item in particular caught my eye. Grant suggests that we "set a mistake budget." The point of that, he writes, is to "encourage trial and error, set a goal for the minimum number of mistakes you want to make per day or per week. When you expect to stumble, you ruminate about it less — and improve more."

I'm intrigued by the notion that we can exert such control over our lives: *Next week, I'm allowed to make four mistakes. The week after, only two. And at the end of the month, I crack down: zero mistakes will be tolerated.* That might be a tough week.

But I also take Grant's point. A mistake budget is an open acknowledgment that you *will* make mistakes. This can be freeing, for instead of stressing out over how to avoid a misstep, you presuppose that missteps are inevitable.

That approach gives you permission to take some risks (perhaps in proportion to the mistake budget you've set), knowing that things may not go entirely smoothly, or go your way at all. And you've already decided to let that be okay, to the extent you're able.

The psychological calculation inherent in setting a mistake budget may help to de-fang the fear and horror that go along with making mistakes.

Grant's conceit is not too far off from the old-school "calorie budget" that dieters set for themselves (back when there was far less stigma associated with wanting to lose weight). If you gave yourself permission in advance to cheat on your diet—to eat a couple of brownies on Saturday night—then you could escape the guilt that might otherwise inevitably hound you for days.

The budgeting paradigm is a neat trick that lets you let yourself down gently—to admit that you are not perfect, that you occasionally stray from self-imposed standards, and that you accept yourself, warts and all.

Isn't self-acceptance lovely? Yes, of course. And not easy to come by for those of us who cannot shake the idea that deep down, we are *supposed* to be perfect—or to come as close as possible, as often as possible.

For aspiring perfectionists, mistakes are a deviation from our internalized norm, and therefore, we're wounded when we make them; our equilibrium is knocked off course. Which, in reality, means we're knocked off course a lot, since mistakes are part of life.

All the more reason, perhaps, to embrace the inevitable and allow ourselves a couple of mistakes on any given day, week, or month. How about: a mistake budget for life? Wouldn't that be freeing? Like a get-out-of-jail-free card?

And can setting a mistake budget help us cut down on prolonged bouts of overthinking? Grant seems to think so. He posits that overt anticipation (mistakes will be made...) cuts down on wearying rumination. In other words, by projecting what may go wrong—perhaps visualizing mistakes you are likely to make based on circumstances—you may be able to short-circuit the overthinking that often accompanies the dread you feel when you're about to incur a risk, whether that's speaking to a group of skeptical investors or telling your step-father he's not invited to Thanksgiving.

Indeed, experts who study overthinking refer to the hamster wheel of repetitive thoughts that define this emotional state as [revving](#) or [rumination](#). Left unchecked, overthinking can lead to crippling anxiety and depression and all that goes with it, such as insomnia and analysis-paralysis, leaving you barely able to function.

Perhaps we should keep an open mind about a tool like mistake-budgeting that has the potential to mitigate bouts of overthinking and crippling self-criticism.

Which brings me around, finally, to doubt.

The moment I learned about the mistake budget, I wondered if there might be something to the notion of setting a doubt budget.

II.

A Reality Check for Your Doubt-Free Existence

Is a 'doubt budget' the prelude to a worry-free life?

Having explored the ramifications of setting a mistake budget (courtesy of [Adam Grant](#)), I must ask: Is such a thing liberating or a sop to self-delusion?

Obvious next question: How about setting a doubt budget? How do we make it real? And will doing so make us feel better about, well, anything?

(Spoiler Alert: I'm leaning toward "no" in answer to these questions. But please read on!)

I believe that self-doubt is a condition to be managed, never defeated. Implementing a doubt budget—a psychological mechanism that lets us ration when, how often, and under what circumstances self-doubt takes hold—strikes me as a form of paradise on earth.

Imagine spending days or weeks free from doubt's shadow. And off you go, skipping about in your art studio, pounding out the pages on your laptop, drawing up plans for your next building.

In this Shangri-La, you're focused on the art, not the worries around *making* the art, because you're not scheduled to doubt your talent, or your ability to finish and deliver, until, say, next month, when your doubt budget is due for reconciliation. (The books must be balanced—but not yet!)

With a doubt budget in place (hypothetically), you trick yourself into sequestering that particular brand of anxiety, potentially freeing yourself to enter that longed-for state of “flow” when intrusive thoughts do not come between you and the act of creation. Your self-affirming mantras are in place, unmolested: *I am a creator, an innovator, an artist, and my art is beautiful to behold.*

What a vision! Talk about living in paradise.

Unfortunately, I don't think it's nearly that simple. Giving oneself permission to make mistakes (as a mistake budget does), seems grounded in externalities. Whether your mistake is made in public or in private, it has an actionable dimension. Self-doubt, in contrast, is a storm that rages in our heads, often at unpredictable intervals (in the middle of the night; in the shower; on the treadmill; during a meeting).

I'll push this a bit further. You can worry endlessly about a mistake you *may* make in the future, but by allowing yourself room to make that mistake in the first place (the planned mistake budget), you get a jump on forgiving yourself and moving on. I call that de-fanging the enemy, and I think it's got potential.

But self-doubt is qualitatively different and far more amorphous. Especially where creative endeavors are concerned, doubt is an integral part of the creative process. Even a concert pianist at the peak of her powers is apt to question her phrasing, her total mastery of a piece, her ability to honor the composer's intentions.

If you've watched even just one episode of the *Great British Baking Show*, it's clear that self-doubt is a co-star of the show. Every baker is plagued by self-doubt during every minute they're making a recipe. You might say that doubt is *baked in* to every confection. (Sorry.)

And so, I'm struggling to see a way to rationally budget self-doubt. To tell yourself: This month, I'm permitted three intervals of self-doubt, each lasting no more than five minutes.

The mind is a messy, messy place and it often refuses to play by the rules that we seek in vain to impose.

I've concluded, therefore, that it's not possible to set a doubt budget the way you might set a mistake budget.

That's not where I started, intellectually. I thought I could make a case for rational doubt budgeting. But I can't. (If you disagree, tell me!)

However, I do think there is a “next best thing” to try, and that is to interrogate—and to see plainly—the ways in which you *manufacture doubt* and implications related to the *illegitimate co-option of doubt*.

The business of manufacturing and co-opting doubt is fascinating and it takes us from Socrates to Pasteur and beyond. The topic offers lessons to help us manage doubt in ways you may not have thought of before.

III.

When Judgment and Self-Doubt Collide

There are rational and irrational bases for doubting yourself, and it's useful—perhaps a relief, if not a revelation—to recognize the difference. That way, the next time self-doubt comes calling, you can pull back and analyze the grounds for your doubt—and decide whether you're being an idiot or not. (I don't *really* think you're an idiot, but you take my point.)

Now into the Black Hole of Philosophy we fall...*helloooooo*...

...beginning with a story...

Epistemic self-doubt: fancy phrase for a neat idea

There once was a doctor who was awake for 36 hours. She was called upon in this state to make a diagnosis that seemed dramatic. A colleague suggested that perhaps her sleep-deprived state had caused her to err. The doctor immediately doubted herself—her capacity to make the right call. But—importantly—she recognized that her doubt had a rational basis. It made sense, in fact, that “a maximally rational person in her situation would have a lower confidence,” says philosopher [Sherrilyn Roush](#).

This provides us, Roush says, “with a way of representing the state of self-doubt coherently.”

What would the opposite of that look like? What if someone is in a state of self-doubt that is fundamentally incoherent (not rational)?

Take the doctor once more. Imagine that she doubts her diagnosis in a particular case not because she's sleep-deprived, but because she was ranked last in her class in medical school. (This is my notion, not Roush's.)

I submit to you that's not a coherent basis for the doctor to doubt her diagnostic competence overall. There's no convincing cause-and-effect here, as there may be with sleep deprivation's impact on judgment.

When your judgment is pitted against your doubts, it's not always clear which side wins. That is the very nature of epistemic self-doubt (*epistemology* being the branch of philosophy having to do with knowledge).

This warring state can surely turn anybody into a real head case—and send them into a doom loop.

Bear with me through another of Roush's examples to make the effect of this really clear:

Suppose you identify murder suspect #3 in a line-up, for a murder you witnessed first-hand. You're sure you've fingered the killer. But then you read a paper claiming that eyewitnesses are overconfident when they're under duress.

So now you doubt your convictions and can't figure out *what* you know or what you *think* you know about which suspect is the real murderer. In other words, your own judgment is suddenly butting heads with your doubts.

How do you know if what you believe to be true, is actually true? Does someone else know better than you? Are your judging faculties doing you a service...or a disservice?

Let's drag Socrates into this, because why not?

Socrates harbored doubts about the true meaning of piety, virtue, and other nice things. He longed to possess certain knowledge of these exalted states, but doubted that he did, indeed, know enough about them.

What Socrates did *not* doubt, however, was his capacity to attain the knowledge he sought, to learn what piety and virtue were really all about. He was okay with being in touch with his ignorance.

I deduce from this that Socrates' epistemic self-doubt was of the coherent variety: He didn't know everything but he didn't doubt his capacity to learn what he needed and wanted to know. He didn't question his *ability to believe in what he learned to believe in*. So his judgment wasn't in conflict with his doubts.

(Here's how the universe works: Reading Barbra Streisand's memoir, I just came across this passage, which perfectly illustrates Socrates' attitude around doubt: "I realized I didn't have to know all the answers [about developing a script] at this point. I just had to trust that I would find them in the process.")

Now let's sprinkle in a little Descartes

Descartes, on the other hand, was a total mess. He doubted literally everything about what passed for reality around him. He aimed to throw all his beliefs out the window—to the extent that he doubted his belief to *form* a belief. It strikes me that Descartes was made up of pure doubt, since he refused to trust his own judgment in anything except his willingness to doubt everything.

I know this is how philosophy works sometimes, and perhaps it was all fun and games for Monsieur D., but I brand Descartes an incoherent self-doubter. So there. (Philosophers can tell me I'm full of s*hit. That's okay. I'm willing to believe them. Hah.)

Can someone please land this plane?

Yes, but not quite yet.

The good and evil of doubting

For a long time, people believed that decaying meat gave birth to maggots and that a piece of cheese wrapped in a piece of cloth eventually bred mice.

This phenomenon was known as spontaneous generation.

Louis Pasteur, the famed French microbiologist, vociferously doubted the validity of experiments purporting to prove the properties of spontaneous generation. His doubts led him to overturn this bogus theory that totally bollixed correlation and causation.

Pasteur was a good doubter. His doubts proved to be productive—for his reputation and for the world.

The flipside of this is the “[illegitimate cooption of doubt](#),” whereby doubts are exploited in ways that are not beneficial to anyone. This arises all too often in the scientific community, when the validity of researched findings is called in question (i.e., doubted) not because the data or line of inquiry itself is inherently faulty, but because someone seeks to misrepresent the findings and raise doubts to serve their own agenda.

The belief that vaccines cause autism raises doubts about the underlying scientific efficacy of vaccines. The belief that tobacco is not harmful to humans because some people who smoke live a long time also engages in doubt-mongering.

“Doubt can delay or obstruct public health or environmental protections,” writes David Michaels in [The Triumph of Doubt: Dark Money and the Science of Deception](#), “or just convince some jurors that the science isn’t strong enough to label a product as responsible for terrible illnesses.”

That’s the evil side of doubt, right there.

Finally, some closure! And advice!

Wading through all this philosophy leads me to two observations for creative people wrestling with doubt. (Only two, you ask, after all that? Well, wisdom is hard to come by. And I think these are pretty big points.)

FIRST: Not all doubts are created equal, so pay attention.

I encourage you to examine the source of your self-doubt to determine if it is *coherent* or *incoherent*.

Meaning, can you trace your doubts to a specific, temporary cause such as fatigue, a headache, a major distraction...or does it feel amorphous and existential with no clearly identifiable trigger?

Do this on a regular basis—on different days, in different moods, while engaged in different aspects of your craft, whatever it is.

I suspect you’ll often find a coherent reason for your self-doubt. Existential self-doubt is real, but occurs less often, and I’ll have to address that another time.

SECOND: Self-doubt need not overtake self-belief.

Meaning, don’t be like Descartes; don’t lose confidence in your convictions about what matters, especially around your artform. Once you begin to doubt virtually everything, you’ll stop believing in the work you are making or wish to make.

Instead, believe, like Socrates (and Barbra!), in your capacity to pursue the knowledge that helps you achieve your goals, even if there is so much you don't know right now. Don't doubt or second-guess yourself on the basis of ignorance alone.

Finally: Believe in your capacity to believe in your capacity.

At the end of the day, who doesn't love a good tautology?

Also at the end of the day, as you pour that well-deserved libation, think on your doubts. Catalogue them. Pet them.

Then put them aside, and carry on. For that's what you deserve to do.