

9 Blinkered

On a good day, Tim Ferriss's morning includes making the bed, meditating, hanging by his feet (which helps with back pain), drinking tea, and journaling: "If I can hit at least three of these items, then I've won the morning. And, as the saying goes, 'If you win the morning, you win the day.'"¹ This is good advice. It's too easy to fritter away the morning, which then taints the whole of the day.

At the start of this book, I claimed that life hacking reveals something about life in the twenty-first century. Mark Rittman's eleven hours spent on an automated Wi-Fi kettle is evidence that even mundane features of life are increasingly taken as systems to be hacked. We can infer something similar from Ferriss's morning regime. His morning ritual, arrived at by way of experimentation, is a system for bootstrapping a successful day. Yet just as an automated kettle's promise of usefulness can turn to frustration, the idea that the morning requires a checklist can turn to irritation.

Shem Magnezi is a software engineer at WeWork, a company that provides shared workspaces for freelancers, entrepreneurs, and other members of the creative class. Although he loves to code and works at a company that caters to start-ups, Magnezi wrote a post entitled "Fuck You Startup World." In the piece, he criticizes the self-improving attitudes espoused by life hacking gurus. Magnezi rails against entrepreneur wannabes and workaholics ("You're not Elon Musk"), extreme eaters (junk-food bingers and Soylent-drinking optimizers), and intellectual pretenders (those who go on about their favorite book of the week). Most importantly, "Fuck you productivity freaks": "You try to make me feel bad because I woke up 'only' at 6AM. Shit, you woke up at 4:30, meditated for 30 minutes, reviewed your quarterly and yearly 'goals' for another 30 minutes, and slurped on a delicious

Soylent shake while checking daily retention trends.”² Magnezi then goes on to flip off other fads. He scorns the pretense of cool and flexible workplaces, irrelevant job interview challenges, ridiculous jargon, engineering hype, and even the shallow adulation of *Mr. Robot* and *Silicon Valley*: “But more than all, start-up world, fuck you for making me one of you.”

If the start-up world made Magnezi into a life-optimizing freak, he is complicit. WeWork is a unicorn—the rare start-up valued at more than a billion dollars—and is aggressively expanding into other domains of life such as housing, fitness, and child care. Such is the reciprocal relationship between the hacker and his or her world, which is increasingly everyone else’s. Even if you disagree that life is “systems of systems, all the way down,” as former Googler Paul Buchheit suggests, the ascent of the hacker means it is increasingly becoming so.

Beyond the increased scope and pressure of life’s systematization is the absurdity of its excesses. In a parody in *McSweeney’s*, Holly Theisen-Jones writes of a morning routine that would certainly win the day.

I rise blissfully at 4:30 am, thanks to my Tibetan singing bowl alarm clock. After 20 minutes of alternate nostril breathing, I start my day with a three-minute cold shower. This I follow with twenty minutes of stream-of-consciousness journaling, then another twenty minutes of gratitude journaling.

For breakfast, I always enjoy a half liter of organic, fair-trade, bulletproof coffee (I use a ghee, coconut oil, and yak butter blend instead of MCT oil), which keeps me in ketosis until I break my intermittent fast. By the way, if you haven’t tried it, nothing does the trick like intermittent fasting for maintaining less than 17% body fat. (For my full fasting protocol, see my e-book.)³

Theisen-Jones’s fictitious morning is followed by additional screwball concoctions for lunch and dinner, references to high-end gadgets including a Vitamix blender and Dyson vacuum cleaner, efficient emailing, software development of a language learning app, Eastern spirituality, exercise with kettle bell swings, decluttering, regimented social interactions, and unsubtle self-promotion of e-books and personal coaching. The thirteen-hundred-word parody is aptly entitled “My Fully Optimized Life Allows Me Ample Time to Optimize Yours.” The piece reveals the many ways in which life is treated as a system to be optimized. It also, importantly, reveals who this self-help is intended for.

Beyond self-help that targets men or women, the genre rarely limits its audience intentionally. The promise of self-help is that if you cannot yet

afford a Vitamix blender, you will soon be able to, if you follow its advice. Yet many people, like the product pickers in Amazon warehouses, can only look upon the emblems of such a lifestyle as they pass by. Additionally, they must suffice with being a part of a system, something that is to be optimized rather than someone who is optimizing. Amazon's proposed wrist device, which buzzes workers when they reach for the wrong item, is evidence of this—until the workers are replaced by automation altogether.

Life hacking is self-help for the creative class. Those fortunate enough to escape the regimentation of others must adopt a regime of their own, perhaps donning the Pavlok wrist device, which will zap them when they get distracted. For those with some autonomy, there's much to be said in favor of the hacker ethos. Self-reliance, a rational and systematizing mind-set, and a willingness to take risks and experiment befit a world of high-tech distractions and opportunities. The ethos is optimistic and optimizing—both words share the same Latin root. Life hacking geeks embrace this because it fits their personality and circumstance, and it can yield positive results. Gurus can even make a career of selling it as a path toward success.

Yet even within the creative class, life hacking is not an absolute positive. For the individual, optimism is susceptible to credulousness and optimization to excess. And that which first appears as a virtue can instead be a near enemy. Efficiency is not always effective, minimalism can be grasping, and healthism pathological. Romantic conquest is not the same as human connection, and Wisdom 2.0 is not always wise.

Beyond the individual, when the system being hacked involves others, the ethics of life hacking span a spectrum of gray. Though life hacking purports to reveal the gap between commonly understood rules and what is actually possible, its own vision tends to be impaired. In our final life hacker exemplar, we can see excesses of the hacker mind-set, and more importantly, shortsightedness when it comes to others.

“I Choose Me”

James Altucher, tech entrepreneur and writer, had promised his daughter that they could go to a teen fashion show. Yet his friend's offer to put them on the guest list had gone astray. Altucher didn't get upset, but he didn't leave: “I find when you act confused but polite then people want to help. There was a line behind me. I wasn't fighting or angry. So there was no

reason for anyone to get angry at me. They just wanted to end the confusion.”⁴ So the attendant quietly handed them standing-only passes.

Once inside, Altucher approached an organizer and said, “I write for the *Wall Street Journal* and I thought we would get great seats.” She ran off to check but returned to tell him they had already seated someone from there—not surprising, given that Altucher was a blogger for the website rather than a reporter for the paper. Altucher was again, politely, bounced to the back. There, he and his daughter made friends with the folks around them, including the ushers. When the lights dimmed, an usher waved his daughter to an empty seat near the front. Mission accomplished.

After the show, Altucher and his daughter went to play ping-pong, but the venue had been rented out for a corporate event. Nonetheless, they saw an empty table with paddles and a ball and played for an hour. When a staff member finally noticed, they were asked to leave. Altucher offered to pay for the time, but that wasn’t necessary. He had, again, gotten what he wanted.

Altucher is an interesting character. He attended top-notch computer science programs, but he scraped by as an undergraduate and was kicked out of a PhD program. He’s traded hedge funds and founded more than a dozen companies. Most failed, but some investments have been huge wins. He loves games, including chess and Go. For a maniacal period his all-consuming passion was poker, during which he would take a helicopter to Atlantic City for nonstop weekend binges. He is a minimalist, as he wrote in a post on *Boing Boing*: “I have one bag of clothes, one backpack with a computer, iPad, and phone. I have zero other possessions.” This lifestyle was the focus of a *New York Times* profile a few months later.⁵ He is a prolific blogger, author, and podcaster on the topics of investing and broader self-help. He has taken the title of his 2013 book, *Choose Yourself: Be Happy, Make Millions, Live the Dream*, as his self-help slogan. For example, Altucher’s main newsletter promises to teach you how to “choose yourself.” Readers need only enter their email address and click “I CHOOSE ME.” This is a stepping-stone on the path to his other newsletters, which cost hundreds to thousands of dollars.

Altucher’s most recent enthusiasms are digital currencies, like bitcoin, and stand-up comedy. He’s even combined the two: in one performance he notes that the bitcoin he used to pay for lap dances at his bachelor party is now worth \$17 million. That’s kind of funny. He also characterizes his teenage daughters as not very bright and incapable of understanding digital currencies. That just seems mean. In 2018, he became a focus of derision

himself when news sites began reporting on “The Man behind Those ‘Bitcoin Genius’ Ads All Over the Internet.” Altucher was using these tacky ads to promote his “crypto trader” newsletter and drive interest to a service in which he had invested: “I guarantee you’ll see how to make 10 times your money in the next 12 months.”⁶ If you lose all your money following his expensive advice, you’ll get an extra year’s worth for free. Such digital currency ads have since been banned by Google and Facebook.

Altucher might even be the source of Ferriss’s anecdote, from the last chapter, about the merits of being a sore loser. (Ferriss was a guest, guest-host, and advertiser on *Question of the Day*, Altucher and Stephen Dubner’s joint podcast.) Altucher has written about dashing chess pieces to the floor in two blog posts: “How Being a Sore Loser Can Make You Rich (or Crazy)” and “Life Is like a Game. Here’s How You Master Any Game.” His stories about gate crashing are from the post “How to Break All the Rules and Get Everything You Want.”⁷

The idea that life is a zero-sum game, with rules to be bent or broken in order to get what you want, is the most hawkish expression of life hacking. It isn’t essential to the ethos, but it follows naturally as a technique for quick fixes, especially among gurus, given it is an easy sell. Of course, this idea isn’t unique to Altucher. Sethi “hacks the system” by doing the opposite of what everyone else does, such as doing push-ups on exotic animals. Ferriss promises to “make the impossible possible by bending the rules,” as in the case of his dubious kickboxing championship.⁸ The question, then, remains: What happens to others when you “break all the rules to get everything you want”?

Bending the Rules

Altucher’s story of gate crashing highlights that the hacker ethos is tightly coupled with individualism, which is inherent in American self-help and the Californian Ideology. In Stoic terms, the individual is responsible for and can achieve a good life by way of his or her own rational disposition and behavior. This attitude begets the strengths of self-reliance, engagement with the world, and experimentation toward improvement. It is well suited to a world where systems, and the potential for hacking, are everywhere. Altucher’s intelligence and affinity for systems thinking has made him wealthy and famous. His advice is now sought after and appreciated by many thousands of readers and listeners.

For the individual, the flip side of these attributes is excess bordering on obsession and maladaptive behavior. For example, most people want a good (nominal) night's sleep. The optimizing hacker, opting for the Uberman sleep cycle, might achieve great efficiency, but at the expense of mental stability and social compatibility. Similarly, in periods of his life, Altucher has lost millions, been broke, friendless, and despondent. He once binged on poker for a year straight and confesses that on the day his first daughter was born, he escaped the hospital as soon as he could to return to the table. As Altucher puts it, his approach "can make you rich (or crazy)."

When it comes to others, Altucher draws a lesson from his adventure with his daughter: don't steal, murder, or break the laws, "but most other rules can be bent. If you act like the river, you ultimately flow past all the rocks along the way."⁹ Yet some of those rocks, no doubt, are people who are stuck in place.

What separates most bendable rules from nonbendable ones? Altucher does not say, but I can imagine a simple principle and a more complex assessment. Rule bending is okay when no one is harmed. For example, being friendly led to his daughter's getting a seat at the fashion show: no harm. Being friendly is also a universal imperative, in the sense that I discussed in chapter 1. The more friendly people there are, the better. However, I imagine Altucher was a minor irritant to the fashion show staff, those behind him in line, or anyone waiting to play ping-pong. If everyone acted similarly, the world would be a little worse off. This is unlike, for example, the case of disability hackers sharing tips for holding and manipulating household items. These hacks are beneficial and remain so no matter how many people use them.

At worst, life hacking gurus hawking enhancement supplements, as Ferriss did, and crypto-currency get-rich schemes, as Altucher does, are perpetrating scams. They are claiming to have found a gap between conventional thought and the actual rules underlying biological and economic systems. Ferriss's BrainQUICKEN boosted "neural transmission and information processing," and Altucher "cracked 'the crypto code.'"¹⁰ This doesn't mean gurus are necessarily insincere. Ferriss's fondness for supplements, at least, seems more self-servingly credulous than knowingly deceitful. He likely believes in the advice he gives, or at least thinks of it as providing options for others to experiment with. Nor does this mean gurus never offer good

advice; after all, the broken clock is correct twice a day. And even flat-out bogus advice can give people a sense of hope or inspiration. The question is, How much does the advice cost, and are there better alternatives?

At best, life hacking entrepreneurs miss that their advice is rooted in their own experiences, which are not universal. Perhaps Ferriss's morning routine grates on others because he assumes that others have similar circumstances and will have similar results. Those who are awakened by screaming kids might roll their eyes at the fantasy of such a morning. Those who replicate the regime without similar results might feel disappointed. And those who can't manage the necessary discipline might grow resentful.

Similarly, people's varied circumstances mean that not everyone has the same freedom to bend the rules and get away with it. Research suggests entrepreneurship is associated with "smart and illicit" tendencies early in life. This is advantageous for young white men whose rule breaking, such as skipping school and gambling, does not impair their future as it does others'. Additionally, these rule breakers are more likely to have the financial, social, and cultural resources to launch entrepreneurial ventures and recover from them when they fail.¹¹ Mark Zuckerberg's flouting of convention by dropping out of college or wearing a hoodie is read differently than a black kid's doing the same. So for one critic, Altucher's story isn't about being nice and bending rules, it is about life hacking as entitlement and privilege. She suggests Altucher's tips work only if you preface them with "if you are a white male." And even then, "oftentimes, when you take (or ask for!) things that do not belong to you, women are giving you the side-eye and exchanging glances with each other."¹² Altucher broke the rules and got everything he wanted, but he was also oblivious to those around him.

The Blinkered Path

The Californian Ideology has found a new home at South by Southwest (SXSW) in Austin, Texas. Fifteen years ago, this label was affixed to the Bay Area hackers, writers, and entrepreneurs who blended their countercultural sensibilities, technological determinism, and libertarian individualism into a "hybrid orthodoxy" of the digital age.¹³ At SXSW you can find a similar mix of people abiding by that orthodoxy. At the conference there are sessions dedicated to self, bio, and health hacking. You can find Tim Ferriss

talking about the future of psychedelics and James Altucher talking about how to outthink the future. In fact, Ferriss is a regular at SXSW and uses his first book's success at the 2007 event as a case study in optimized self-promotion. Ten years later, he moved to Austin, finding it to be friendlier than San Francisco and less overrun with start-up mania and political correctness.

In 2018, I saw something from SXSW that epitomized the challenges of our moment and the life hacker's response. In fact, the metaphor I had settled upon for this book had become a reality. Panasonic's exhibition, Future Life Factory, included the design concept WEAR SPACE: human blinkers equipped with noise-canceling headphones. Just as horses are fitted with blinkers to block out the periphery and focus their attention, WEAR SPACE does the same for people. The thing looks like a pair of behind-the-head earmuffs reaching for the nose. It's an adjustable cubicle for the head.

In Panasonic's stilted description of the gadget, they note that workers in open offices and digital nomads in cafés are prone to distraction: "today's workers who are required to demonstrate high levels of performance are demanding personalised spaces." WEAR SPACE meets this need and "create[s] visual and psychological boundaries instantly." Additionally, the device comes in handy "in daily life, such as learning a new language, building up focus, or working at home when a spouse is playing with the children."¹⁴ I don't imagine this will ever be a real product, though its designers' sincerity is remarkable. There's no hint of irony or recognition that in donning this contraption, you'll prompt those around you to think you've slipped your "psychological boundaries." Nonetheless, Panasonic's device speaks to challenges of the digital age.

We live in an economy that prizes quick and quantifiable results, a culture that values self-reliance, a period of increasing measurement and uncertainty, and an environment of abundant distraction and choice. Despite transhumanist dreams of silicone-based immortality, we continue to face uncertainty and loss.

In this environment, the creative class, like anyone else, seeks to live a good life. They can work remotely, outsource chores, and track and experiment with every aspect of life. Rather than being a cog in a system, life hackers seek to hack it. And they go about this in a particular way, as rational individuals fond of systems and experimentation. Fortunately for them,

our world is increasingly suited to this approach; at times, it demands it. Hackers' successes in designing digital systems are applied to the broader expanse of life. The same technique for testing whether a blue or a red web banner brings more clicks can be applied to productivity, nutrition, fitness, and dating—with attendant limitations. Life hacking is the collective manifestation of personality, of an ethos, in a reciprocating relationship with a world of systems.

Even if you do not share this ethos, the geeks and gurus I discuss in this book reveal a challenge we all face. The path to a good life—to being “healthy, wealthy, and wise”—is a complicated one. Even straight paths headed toward beacons on the horizon can mislead. Indeed, near enemies sit at the end of the best-paved roads. You wish to be content? Try accumulating all the toys, then getting rid of all but ninety-nine. You wish to be well? Try coconut oil in your coffee. You wish to be wise? Meditate.

Another reason for resentment about morning regimes for winning the day is that the suggestions keep piling up. The profitable paradox at the heart of self-help is that it never suffices. As self-help critic Steve Salerno notes in *Sham: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless*, the best indicator of whether someone will buy a self-help book on a given topic is whether they have bought a similar one in the preceding eighteen months.¹⁵

In the face of the self-help deluge, a potential insight is that *the path is the way*. There is no destination, per se, only how you traverse the path. Of course, this insight is corrupted if you then race about the maze acquiring additional systems and gadgets to add to your regime—many of which will be fads and snake oil. However, unlike Salerno, we ought not dismiss all of self-help (and life hacking) as a sham. There are clever techniques to be discovered and shared, as well as useful frames for making sense of life. More substantively, we need regular reminders. Take the distinction between efficiency and effectiveness; this has been a key lesson of productivity self-help for decades now. Every handful of years we need such lessons bundled up and couched in the vocabulary, enthusiasms, and worries of the current moment.

Life hacking can have utility, with occasional deleterious side effects. And a hack can be useful to a point, after which it has diminishing or negative returns. Clever tricks and lifestyle design work well for some people. They are even enjoyable to those who like to run the maze, yet few life hackers stop to ask about the inequities built into the maze's design.

Life hacking is a tool, like a set of blinkers that restrict vision. In an age of ubiquitous distraction, blocking the periphery is helpful. In an age of economic turbulence, staying focused on a better future is valuable. Even so, the resulting tunnel vision leaves much overlooked, especially among those bent on optimizing. Individual hackers can fail to appreciate that they are in danger of stepping off the edge. For those around them, there is the risk of being bumped aside or trod underfoot. And even those who once embraced blinkers realize that they can chafe, especially when you have to don them first thing in the morning.