

Rolf Dobelli: 'People will say about you what they want. Treat it as white noise.'



Rolf Dobelli will speak at LSE on 1 November about his new book [The Art of the Good Life: Clear Thinking for Business and a Better Life](#). The event will be hosted by LSE Business Review. Tickets are free and open to the public.

*More than a principle or a rule, we need a whole mental toolkit to help us understand the world and live a better life. That's a key idea behind Rolf Dobelli's new book, in which he shares 52 practical insights, one chapter at a time. Rolf is a writer, novelist and entrepreneur. He has an MBA and a PhD in economic philosophy from the University of St. Gallen, and wrote six fiction books before his non-fiction *The Art of Thinking Clearly* made him an internationally famous non-fiction writer, one who has a special talent for writing about modern social psychology in a clear and engaging prose. Rolf answered a few questions sent to him via email by LSE Business Review's managing editor Helena Vieira.*

If I read your book correctly, I can imagine you would define yourself as a writer. Period. (Focus, circle of competence, not being a generalist, etc) But you're not only a writer, are you?

I also run WORLD.MINDS, an invitation-only community of the leaders in science, business and the arts. At WORLD.MINDS scientists present their most ground-breaking research. The common thread between my writing and my work at WORLD.MINDS is the quest to express scientific concepts in a clear and concise way. Before I started to write, I co-founded getAbstract, the leading provider of business book summaries. Same story: Trying to express concepts in a clear and concise way. Through my work at getAbstract I've read thousands of non-fiction books, which helped me craft my own non-fiction books. The Circle of Competence is not defined by a "job title", but by a bundle of very specific skills.

Do you consider 'The Art of the Good Life' a self-help book?

I consider it more than just a self-help book. It has a strong philosophical bent. Of course the book contains some step-1-2-3-type suggestions, but the majority of the ideas are interpretations of how the world works and how we as individuals work. I use the term 'mental tools', derived from Charlie Munger's term 'mental models'. You may also call it a 'mental Swiss army knife'.

There are two parts in the book that, to me, seem to contradict each other. In chapter 8, when you say we can't learn about ourselves from introspection, you write 'your best bet is to ask a friend or a partner what's going on inside your head.' In Chapter 17, which advises us to care less about our reputations, you write "the opinions of others are far less significant than you think." How can you reconcile those two?

Introspection is faulty, untrustworthy, and a misleading way of finding out what we want. Introspection is volatile. It fluctuates depending on the day and the mood. It's much better to ask someone who knows us well – our spouse or a good friend. Their opinions count. Their opinions have value. However, opinions of people outside our inner circle must not count. The world will write, tweet, blog about you whatever "it" wants. This is outside of our control, so we should not worry about it and we should not draw any inferences from it as to what we should do with our life. We should treat public opinion about us as white noise.

In chapter 9, when you discuss the authenticity trap, you advocate we curate our personas, keeping our doubts, frustrations and disappointments for our diary, our partner or our pillow. I can understand that to a certain degree. But can't this lead us to a dystopian situation? Isn't this already happening in people's uber-curated self-narratives on Facebook? Are these narratives even believable?

Social media can lead to both, uber-curated self-narratives or uncivilised hyper-authenticity. Neither make for a good life or a good society. I argue for a reduced silhouette towards the public. You show up only where it's necessary, only when you have something relevant to say, while keeping your private life to yourself. It's the separation between your public life and your private life – akin to the separation of church and state. It's not good if you mix the two.

You distinguish inner success from outer success, and discuss ataraxia, the tranquillity of the soul. Is this a state we can reach once and for all or something we strive to achieve and sometimes do, sometimes don't?

We never reach ataraxia once and for all. Ataraxia is an ideal we have to strive for daily. But with each day we get better at it.

In Chapter 46, you discuss how people are always competing against others (the arms race) and losing themselves in the process. That has some implications for the idea of continuing education. Why does getting an MBA, or an extension course, not always mean more?

Because collectively we compete our advantages away. Evolution has shown us how to get out of an arms race: Instead of developing ever bigger and stronger species, some species have evolved in a completely novel way, opening up niches that have been untapped before. Apply this to education: it pays to invest in niches instead of mainstream (MBA).

You mention the dogma trap and advise against having an ideology. Can we remain neutral in a world in which populism and the alt right are gaining ground? Isn't political involvement the best way to bring about change?

You are better off being active in a non-dogmatic way. Dogmas might be attractive to a crowd of voters, but they are untrue. Why would you want to advertise untrue statements just to get elected? I don't get that.

You wrote a chapter, "In Praise of Modesty," that goes against the grain of self-affirmation. Why do so few people seem to understand this logic?

Because self-affirmation (ego) is hardwired into our brains for evolutionary reasons. But modesty makes for a better individual life, because you'll experience fewer disappointments. And a society of modest people makes for a more robust society.

Can "The Art of the Good Life" help organisations?

Several tools on this 'mental Swiss army knife' apply to organisations. Most importantly the role of modesty. Just as society of modest citizens makes for a more robust society, a company of modest employees and managers makes for a more stable and organisation. Why? Because modesty reduces the amount of bullshit in any organisation.



Notes:

- *This interview is based on Rolf Dobelli's book [The Art of the Good Life: Clear Thinking for Business and a Better Life](#), to be published 2 November by Sceptre. Also available in audio and ebook.*
- *The post gives the views of the interviewee, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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