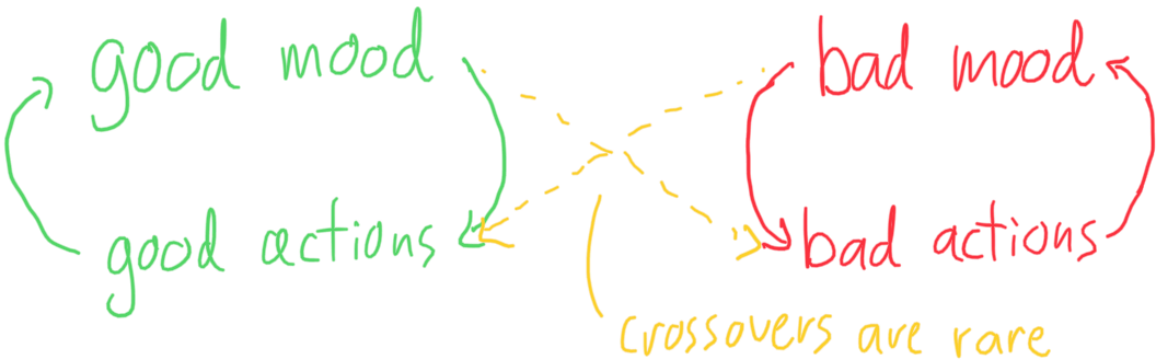
The logic of waking up early

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> *Early to bed, early to rise*
> *Makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise!*[1]

I wake up at 4 AM whenever I can. I initially laughed at the idea after hypothesizing that it might help my productivity, started doing it out of stubbornness when a friend told me I wouldn't be able to,[2] and have stuck with it—off and on, as much as my schedule allows—ever since.

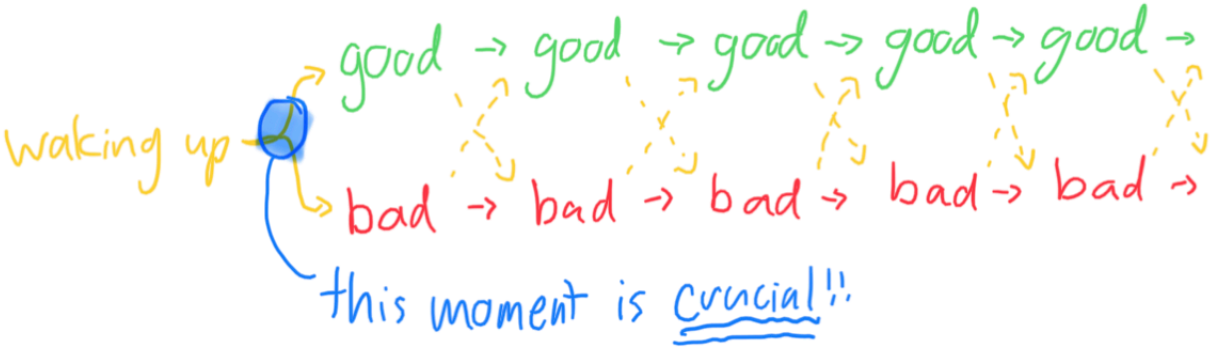
Why? Because it makes my days way better. *Why?* My reasoning goes like this:



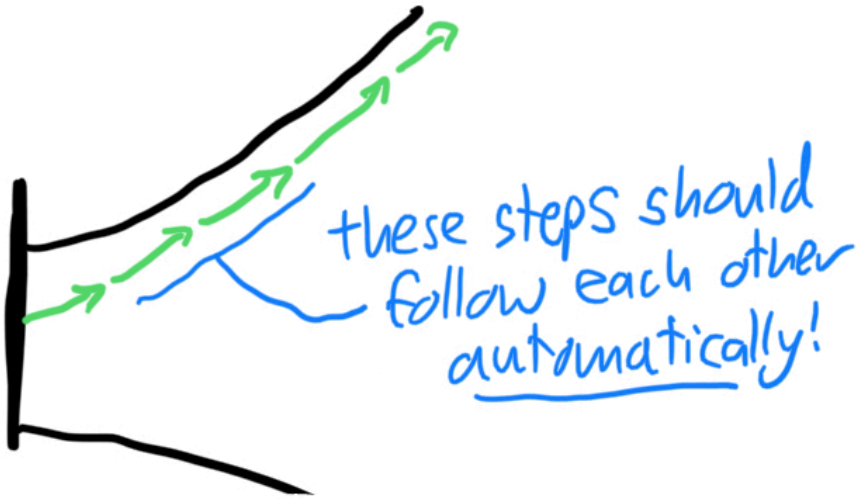
1. Mood and action are intertwined. I spend my time better (by exercising, working, cleaning, etc) when I'm in a good mood, because I have more confidence and willpower. Conversely, well-spent time gives me a sense of pride and accomplishment, which puts me in a good mood. The inverses are true, too: bad moods lead to wasted time, and wasting time makes me miserable.



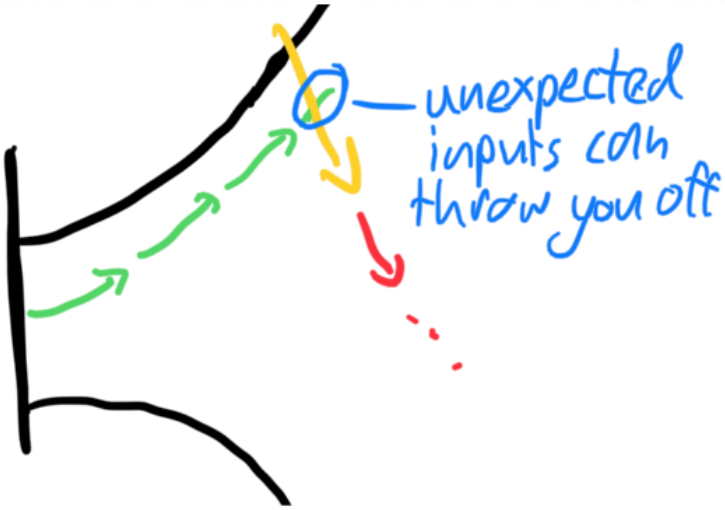
2. Mood and action have momentum. We humans most frequently stick with the easiest path; so, whether we're in a good action/mood loop or a bad one, we tend to keep on going. It's possible to climb out of or fall into a bad rut; but either switch takes energy, so continuing is the default.



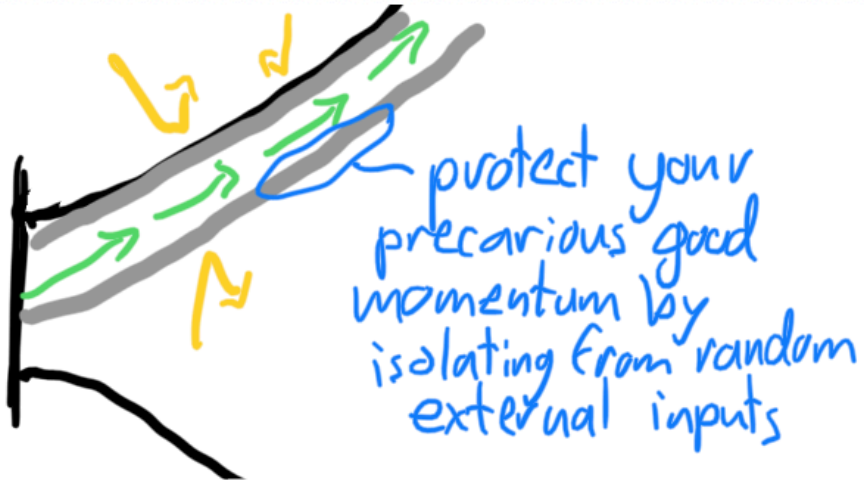
3. The first moment of each day is the most important one. Your chain of good or bad momentum resets each night;[3] rolling out of bed in the morning, your day is a blank slate. Whether your first actions are good or bad, they often determine the rest. When you "wake up on the wrong side of the bed" (an idiom that points to this truth) your entire day can be ruined.



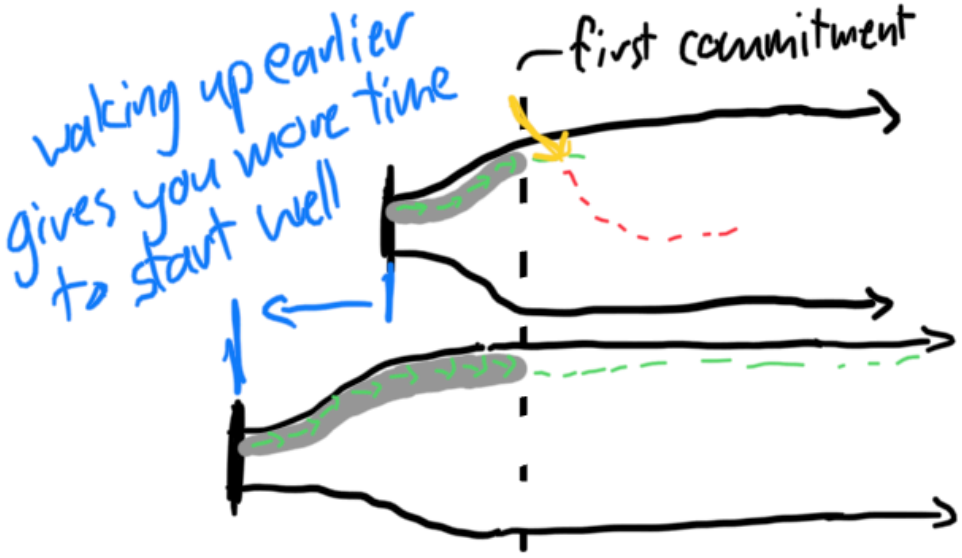
4. Morning actions should be regular and deeply habitual. Consistently good days have consistently good starts, and consistently good starts *are consistent!* If your feet take the same first steps every morning after hitting the ground, over time your morning becomes automatic. A solid routine doesn't let you make bad choices early on; your day becomes good even before your brain turns on.



5. A consistent morning routine depends on an unvarying environment. As every engineer has learned the hard way, the only way to make something reliable is to remove unpredictable variation. Your alarm should always sound the same. Your toothbrush and clothes or tea mug and book should always be in the same place. Having to pause or choose or think is bad!



6. To remove variations, avoid conversations and the Internet as long as possible each morning. I used to roll out of bed right before my 11 AM daily standup meeting and scroll during it, so the first 5 minutes of my day were determined randomly by a conversation with my coworkers and whatever I saw on Twitter. This was horrible; do the opposite! Don't look at news or social media; avoid notifications; don't have conversations that might throw you off; and do this for as long as you can.



7. To avoid early interactions, you must wake up early. Finally, we reach the conclusion: because you, like me, inevitably have varying inputs each day—we live in a society—you should wake up early, to have early time without external input, to have consistently good starts, to have consistently good days. And you should do

so to the largest extent possible.

Caveat 1: If you cannot consistently wake up at 4 AM for long stretches of time, it may not be worth it; the jet-lag-like process of switching your sleep cycle into or out of the routine takes a few days and isn't particularly pleasant.

Caveat 2: This argument does not have to do with the precise hour you wake, but how early you wake relative to when you have to. If you start work at 6 AM, 4 AM won't be magical, because what I'm describing is more precisely the effect of "waking up 6 hours before I start work [i.e. have meaningful necessary exposure to external variation]."

Caveat 3: Nothing in life is free; what you're trading for amazing mornings and productive days in this scheme is your late evenings and nights. I almost always waste these scrolling the Internet or laying around doing nothing, so it's a great trade for me. But if you're not in a relationship, or your entire social life occurs in the 5-6 hours before you go to sleep, a forward-shifted sleep cycle might not be a good choice. I am an introverted autodidact for whom silent hours of uninterrupted reading, writing, and programming are practically euphoric; your mileage may vary.

Caveat 4: The hardest part of this routine is consistently going to bed early. When I fall off this schedule, it's almost always because of staying up past my bedtime. I don't elaborate on that here because it's an important and complicated enough topic for its own exploration.

Caveat 5: When I say "as early as possible," I actually mean "early enough to establish sufficient momentum to reliably have a great day." I personally have found no limit to days getting better as I wake up earlier, so don't mention this above. You should also note, though, that the longer you cruise along with good momentum, the more you get done; so extended isolation has at least this to recommend it, in that you *get stuff done while at* a maximum momentum level. (It's easiest to understand in calculus terms: you're trying to maximize the derivative—your

positive momentum—but as time goes on at a certain momentum you get things done. So continuing at a certain level leaves increasingly more good actions behind you, in the area “under the curve.”)

1. “Poor Richard’s Almanack”, Benjamin Franklin ↩

2. This friend was Saurav Pahadia. In the summer of 2020, he bet me {a notarized letter admitting that he was wrong} that I couldn’t wake up at 4 AM for 10 days in a row. I texted him right right after waking up each day (at 4 AM), and he *still* hasn’t sent it to me almost three years later. It’s okay, though: the gift he inadvertently gave me by revealing a better way to live is far more precious than any embarrassing letter ever would be, and I love him for it. I’ll still extract that letter someday, though! ↩

3. Technically, no— the chain does not fully reset each night, because a bad night might cause you to wake up hungover, or with your room in disarray, or tired to the depths of your soul. But our waking is the point where the momentum is weakest, because our short-term memory is mostly clear, and the environment can be most consistently engineered to get a good start. ↩