

Workout 1 ▪ Thinking for Yourself & Getting Advice

Prompt, Exercise & Practice for Hesiod's *Works & Days*

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"Let him hear the advice of Hesiod. . . . The advice of Hesiod is good." —Aristotle

"Lampon . . . greatly honors the sayings of Hesiod, the one he declares and recommends to his sons."
—Pindar

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The following workout is related to Hesiod's poem, the *Works and Days*, which may be found in the Cave's *The Best of Hesiod's Theogony & Works and Days*. To read some of it, go to "Hesiod" in the Cave Library.

ACCORDING TO THE ancient Greek poet Hesiod, there are two paths we may follow in life. Each path will take us to a different end or destination. One will lead us toward success (*aretē*); the other will direct us toward failure (*kakotēs*).

Here's Hesiod: "It is easy to grab at Failure (*Kakotēs*). It is there in abundance for you. The way is smooth to her, and she dwells very near to you. But the immortal gods have put sweat in front of Success (*Aretē*). The path to her is long and steep. And so it is rough-going at first. Nevertheless, when one comes to the highest point, then the path becomes easy—however hard it is *at first*."*

Hearing Hesiod, we know two things—that the path to success is hard and that the path to failure is easy. But it would be beneficial to know more.

The question is how.

How can we figure out the exact path to follow to reach success? And how can we recognize the path to avoid that ends in failure?

Here's how Hesiod answers the question: "Best of all is the man who thinks about everything for himself, pondering how things will turn out in the end and what will be better. And noble too is the kind of man

Greek & English ▪ The Greek word for "end, goal, purpose" is *telos*.

who is won over by good advice. But good for nothing is the man who does not think for himself or take to heart what he hears from another man."

Two points are implied in the first line of the poet's statement. One, in everything we do, we are moving toward some end (the Greek is *telos*—end, goal, purpose). Two, there is a good or "better" end and a good or "better" way of moving toward that end (the Greek for better is *ameinōn*, the comparative of good or *agathos*).

In figuring out what this end is and how to reach it, there are, according to Hesiod, three options—three things we can do to figure out which way to go to achieve success and avoid failure.

One, we can think for ourselves. "Best of all is the man who *thinks* about everything *for himself*, pondering how things will turn out in the end and what will be better." According to the ancient Greek statesman and historian Xenophon, the philosopher Socrates was like this. "Socrates was so wise," Xenophon reports, "that he never erred in judging between what was better and what was worse. He did not even have to ask others about these, but he relied on himself for his knowledge of them."

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Two, we can get advice from others. “Noble too,” Hesiod declares, “is the kind of man who is won over by good *advice*.” The point echoes the biblical book of Proverbs: “He who listens to counsel is wise.”

Finally, we can do neither. But Hesiod doesn’t recommend this! No, he judges, “Good for nothing is the man who does not think for himself or take to heart what he hears from another man.”

*Though Hesiod’s meaning had to do more with household success or failure in terms of riches (*ploutos*) and the happiness of wealth (*olbios*), later Greeks and Romans understood these lines of Hesiod in terms of excellence or virtue (*aretē*) and mediocrity or vice (*kakotēs*), moral qualities having to do with the health and unhealth or goodness and badness of the soul or body. For instance, Basil the Great said, “What else, if not an exhortation for the young to virtue, are we to assume Hesiod had in mind when he composed the [above] verses that everyone is singing?”

WHAT DO I TYPICALLY DO?

Circle an answer

I typically think for myself get advice do neither

when I am considering what to do, what end to seek, and how best to do it or get there.

If you think for yourself, what is your typical method (if you have one)?

If you get advice, who do you typically go to (whether a live person or a person’s written or recorded advice)?

PROMPT • Thinking about the past • Let’s face it. Things don’t always go well. Recall a time when you failed at something as a result of not thinking for yourself or getting advice from another person or source of wisdom. Describe the failure. Then consider how you could have approached things differently. What else could have you done? Would have thinking about things for yourself changed the outcome? Could have you approached someone for advice? What else?

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EXERCISE ▪ First, **identify two ways** you can regularly **think for yourself** about what to do and how things will turn out for the best going forward. In identifying the two, consider **how** you'll be thinking (e.g., with the help of a journal or out loud in the shower), **when** (e.g., early in the morning or late at night), and **where** (e.g., while walking or sitting in a coffee shop). **Explain** why each way will be beneficial.

Second, **identify two sources of advice** or counsel going forward. Your two can either be a live person or a person's written or recorded advice. **Explain** why each source of advice will be helpful.

Way one I can think for myself about how things will turn out for the best (with explanation)

Way two I can think for myself about how things will turn out for the best (with explanation)

My first source of advice or counsel (with explanation)

My second source of advice or counsel (with explanation)

"A prudent man . . . should make sound reason the guide of his life." —Basil the Great

"My advice for you is that you should accept from the famous thoughts and words of ancient men only what is useful and know what to disregard." —Basil the Great

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PRACTICE ▪ You now have two ways you can think for yourself about what to do and how things will turn out for the best, and two sources of advice. The goal now is to use them the next time you need them. So, the next time you have to engage in an activity that can result in either success or failure, do the following: One, **describe** the **activity** and the **success** you hope for. Two, **think for yourself** about how you can achieve success and avoid failure (using one way you identified above). **Describe** your thinking for yourself. Three, **turn to** one of your two **sources of advice**. **Describe** who or what you turned to and what was said. Four, **act** toward success (describe it). Finally, **evaluate** how things went. Did thinking for yourself help? How? Did turning to someone for advice help? How?

The activity and success I hope for (describe it)

My thinking for myself (describe it)

Who or what I turned to and what was said (describe it)

My activity—what I actually did (describe it)

Evaluation—how things went (whether I was entirely successful or not)

“Best of all is the man who thinks about everything for himself, pondering how things will turn out in the end and what will be better. And noble too is the kind of man who is won over by good advice.”

—Hesiod, *Works and Days*

3 ACTION POINTS

- **Examine** your past—how you have attempted to approach success and avoid failure. Have you thought for yourself? Have you turned to others for advice? Or have you done things blindly, without really thinking about the best way to achieve success?
- **Identify** ways you can regularly rely on your own thinking (deliberation) and the advice of others to achieve success going forward.
- **Practice** thinking for yourself and getting advice whenever you do something that may or may not turn out well depending on how you approach it and what you do.

Extra Space for Answers and Journaling

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

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