

Change Yourself, or Change the World?

It's a perennial philosophical question: What is the best strategy for addressing life's problems? Change yourself, or change the world?

In a [clip](#) from a few years ago that a student recently shared with me, the leftist public intellectual [Slavoj Žižek](#) offered a take that my student apparently found convincing. To judge from Žižek's online popularity, a lot of other people agree with him.

I promised my student I'd watch the clip and give him a response. So, here is that response.

In the clip, Žižek challenges psychologist Jordan Peterson's insistence that one should set one's own house in order before turning to projects of world transformation. Žižek suggests that one's house may not be in order *because* of larger societal problems. As an example, he suggests that it seems absurd to tell people in North Korea to set their houses in order rather than turning to societal reform.

But if we haven't worked through a belief system of morality and ethics by setting our houses in order, how can we evaluate the society we're in? How will we know that our judgment about the morality of our—or any other—society can be reasonably justified if we have not done that internal “setting your house in order” work? A reliable moral compass is necessary to make that evaluation, and without it, we can't have any confidence in our evaluation of our society.

Even the person in North Korea may be able to profit from setting his house in order. This internal work may be the only thing that individual has a modicum of control over. Peterson explains this phenomenon in his book [12 Rules for Life](#):

*Solzhenitsyn poured over the details of his life, with a fine-toothed comb. ... He learned to watch and to listen. He found people he admired; who were honest, despite everything. He took himself apart, piece by piece, let what was unnecessary and harmful die, and resurrected himself. Then he wrote *The Gulag Archipelago*, a history of the Soviet prison camp system. ... Solzhenitsyn's writing utterly and finally demolished the intellectual credibility of communism, as ideology or society. ...*

One man's decision to change his life ... shook the whole pathological system of communist tyranny to its core.

By first focusing on internal change, Solzhenitsyn was able to later produce external change in the world.

Moreover, to produce positive change by spending our energy *exclusively* on transformation of an entire existing order would be extremely difficult—if not impossible. The calculable effect produced by any random individual focusing himself on *world transformation* would be small. Not to mention at least some probability that those actions will produce more harm than good (as much social tinkering and engineering can wind up doing, despite intentions).

And in totalitarian regimes, where any change can be dangerous for the individuals trying to affect change, challenging the regime is likely more dangerous than beginning by focusing on inward change. Even for those of us who do not live under such terrible regimes, dedicating oneself to transforming the world has a high probability of spending lots of the limited hours one has on earth to produce at best tiny changes in the amount of good in the social order.

And, meanwhile, the internal issues are still sitting there, unresolved.

Now, it is certainly true that the internal work can lead to

consequences externally. Internal work will likely result in an outward change that others will have varying reactions to. In some settings, this could get you into trouble with authorities. But it matters that in this case we encounter those difficulties *while doing the work with some possibility of personal efficacy*, rather than while avoiding that work to pursue some ghostly project of world transformation.

In all of these ways, setting our houses in order is always a net positive. It can even potentially become a step toward transforming something beyond ourselves: If others engage in that internal task too, the effects have a chance of extending beyond each of us as individuals.

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