

# Scoping

*or Generating the Right Response*

October 1, 2014

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# Scoping

## *or Generating the Right Response*

*Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.*

Viktor E. Frankl

When I was younger, I periodically had anger problems—I wouldn't characterize them as particularly extreme, but problems nonetheless. Even in early adulthood, I would sometimes overreact. For example, I might become overly angry when my puppy chewed up some item in the house, or, when a driver nearly ran me out of a lane on a freeway, I had a bout of road rage with my wife in the car. Over time (and probably more time than was warranted), I realized that these behaviors were unhelpful and inappropriate. I began to consider how my ideal self might react in any given situation and how I might go about improving my responses. This thinking eventually led me to the following framework:

**The magnitude of any response should be proportional to the future, positive impact of that response.**

I've thought of this framework as reaction "scoping", since the magnitude of each response is set according to the magnitude of its positive impact; e.g., if the response may have a strong, positive effect on your future, then it should be pursued vigorously, whereas if the response may have a negligible or negative impact on your future, then it should be minimized. Initially, I supposed that the response should be proportional to the action itself, but there are situations where the action has a large impact but the responses to that action do not, or conversely, when the response has a large impact, but the action itself has very little. Some examples are in order.

### Small Action->Small Response

These are the most straightforward situations for applying the framework. Let's use one of the examples I've already mentioned: My wife and I had a puppy in her teething stage that we loved very much, and, as you might expect, she would periodically destroy things. In one particular instance, she used a book that we had borrowed from a friend as a chew toy. At this point, there were two basic potential responses: 1) responding with anger, or 2) responding with understanding. It is probably no surprise that I ended up with option 1), which I believe was unwarranted and resulted in an unhappy puppy and master. Certainly, the destroyed book was frustrating since we had to replace it, but on the other hand, it was only a book—its loss would have no substantial impact on my life. Moreover, would being angry have any positive impact on our puppy's or my life at all? I cannot think of one, other than it serving as an example of undesired behavior. Accordingly, following the framework, the response should have been minimal—it would not have a positive impact, so why bother? If, instead of getting angry, I had dispassionately corrected her and given her a more appropriate chew toy, we both could have had a much better day. There are many other everyday situations that fall under this category, e.g., getting cut off in traffic, an unkind word from a stranger (or even a friend for that matter), spilt milk (after all, there's no use crying over it), etc.

## Large Action->Large Response

On the other end of the spectrum, there are also times when a response should be strong. If someone is attacking you and your life is in danger, then a heavy response is warranted. After all, if no response results in your death or injury, then responding would have an immense positive impact for you. Of course, the response does not necessarily have to be violent, but it should be pursued with vigor nonetheless.

Or, consider a more positive event, such as a marriage proposal. In this instance, the proposal is significant, and the answer will have a dramatic (and hopefully positive!) impact on your future.

## Large Action->Small Response

Since I've already mentioned the incident on the road, it can serve as the example here. I was driving with my wife on the freeway, on the way back from a trip to visit our family. I don't recall the exact details of what happened next, but as I remember it, a driver in the right-hand lane merged into my lane such that he would have hit our car on my wife's side. I had to swerve into the left-hand lane to avoid the collision. My response at the time was less than ideal—I elected to tailgate him and blare my horn almost continuously for several minutes, enough so that he pulled off of the road to start a fight. Fortunately, I was not so foolish as to entertain that idea, but on the other hand, I was also not smart enough to listen to my wife, who was lovingly trying to calm me down at the time. While no immediate harm resulted from the incident, I'm sure most would agree my response was not ideal and had the potential to incur deep, negative consequences.

So, instead of that response, what alternatives were there? Although the other driver could have harmed both my wife and me initially (hence the "Large Action"), I had already successfully dodged his merge and was safe. At this point, no more response was warranted, i.e., no response would have had a positive impact on my life (hence the "Small Response").

## Small Action->Large Response

Although I basically conceived of this framework for the "Small Action->Small Response" cases, over time, the "Small Action->Large Response" category has become my favorite. In these situations, the action itself may be small, but the response can have huge, positive impacts. For example, perhaps a potential mate smiles at you from across the room—in the long run, the smile alone is a fairly insignificant event, and so without considering the impacts of the response, a minimal response might be warranted. However, a larger response might have a big, positive impact on your life, e.g., perhaps the ensuing conversation might eventually lead to a wonderful marriage.

One of my favorite examples of this behavior comes from Guy Spier, who is a well-known value investor that I admire, not only because he is a successful investor, but also because he appears to be a wonderful person. In his thirties, Guy began writing thank-you letters to people for even the most mundane actions; for example, he might write one for a maid cleaning his hotel room, thus generating a larger response than expected from such a small action. At his peak, he was writing these letters multiple times every day and some of them had meaningful impacts on his life. Here is how he described his letters in his book, *The Education of a Value Investor*:

*That meal with Mohnish altered the trajectory of my life—even more, perhaps, than my subsequent lunch with Warren Buffett. If I hadn't bothered to thank Mohnish, many great things that have happened since our first dinner might never have occurred. I didn't understand this at the time, but I now see that every letter I wrote was an invitation for serendipity to strike. To many people, it might seem like a waste of time. But I couldn't win the lottery without a ticket, and these tickets were almost free. In a sense, this is a value investing approach to life: pick up something cheap that may one day prove to be precious.*

Six months ago, I started writing my own thank-you notes to friends and family and have recently expanded to strangers. Not only have these “lottery tickets” had a positive impact on the people I’ve given them to, in addition to the potential to generate life-altering outcomes, but they have also made me a more grateful person, which is reward enough in itself.

## Implementation

While the underlying idea of the framework is quite simple, implementing it is not. The primary difficulty is that initial reactions can be almost immediate and reflexive. For example, it may be very difficult to avoid the initial feelings of frustration or anger when stuck in a traffic jam when you have an appointment; however, even where these feelings have already arrived, there is still a choice as to whether to amplify them or not. Thus, there is a distinction between **reactions**, i.e., the feelings or impulses that we do not have a great deal of control over, and **responses**, i.e., the actions that we actually take. For example, recognizing that the initial reaction of being frustrated or unhappy won’t fix the traffic situation can allow you to respond by letting go of those feelings. Or, as another example, after an argument, we often replay the event over and over, thinking of “perfect” comebacks; such a response is a choice to maintain or even feed the initial reaction of anger, rather than letting it dwindle on its own. Thus, even if an initial reaction has already occurred, there is still choice on how to respond.

While it would be ideal to avoid these negative reactions entirely, I do not believe that they can be fully excised—even the Dalai Lama still has feelings of anger, which he has characterized as fundamental to humans. On this topic, he provides the following advice:

*Feelings of anger and hatred arise from a mind that is troubled by dissatisfaction and discontent. So you can prepare ahead of time by constantly working toward building inner contentment and cultivating kindness and compassion. This brings about a certain calmness of mind that can help prevent anger from arising in the first place. And then when a situation does arise that makes you angry, you should directly confront your anger and analyze it. Investigate what factors have given rise to that particular instance of anger or hatred. Then, analyze further, seeing whether it is an appropriate response and especially whether it is constructive or destructive. And you make an effort to exert a certain inner discipline and restraint, actively combating it by applying the antidotes: counteracting these negative emotions with thoughts of patience and tolerance.*

## A More Difficult Situation

I described this idea to a friend of mine and her immediate response was—“What about divorce?” At the time, she was not aware that I had split up with my wife six months prior. Not feeling like revealing this fact at that particular moment, I cleverly answered, “Well, that is much more difficult.”

I’ll use my own situation as an example, since a split up can take many different forms. In my case, I had believed that our marriage was better than virtually any other I was aware of and remarked on it in passing to my wife. That comment began a three-day discussion that ultimately ended with our deciding to split up, though the decision was mostly hers. By way of explanation to such a surprising turn of events, the reason was essentially this: she was depressed and unhappy, and had been for quite a long time; both of us were aware of this fact, but I had assumed we would work through it together. She, however, decided that her best option was to face it alone.

Using the framework, clearly the action falls under “Large”, as my life was now dramatically different. The response side, however, is a bit trickier. On the one hand, I did not have much of a choice in the matter, so one might argue that the response would ideally be small, i.e., the split up was not going to be undone, and so my life would go on in a new manner regardless of whatever response I might have. On the other hand, responses to a split-up can take on many different forms, some healthy and some quite unhealthy. In that sense, one could argue that the response should be large, since a good one would have a very strong positive impact on my future life. For example, in my case, I decided to start traveling and meditating, which has resulted in me being the happiest I have ever been. I’m ambivalent with regard to whether “Small Response” or “Large Response” is used as the category in this case, as in reality, I think both are true; so take your pick if you have a strong preference. Ultimately, I believe the answer is to continue on as positively as possible, in the present, and understanding that ruminations on the past are generally not helpful.

Of course, the intellectual best response and my actual response were not the same because, as discussed earlier, implementation is difficult. Overall though, I am happy with the results, and I believe having the framework helped me put things into perspective. That is not to say it was an easy process—in the beginning months, I cried fairly often, but the intervals between melancholies gradually lengthened until I was largely fine about six months later. As a side note, there is quite a bit of interesting research indicating that love interacts with the brain in a manner very similar to addiction. Even further, research indicates that after a breakup, individuals essentially experience withdrawal symptoms. That being the case, it would be unreasonable to expect that anyone could “think” themselves out of these feelings; they can however, treat each new period of sadness or grief as the stimulus and attempt to respond appropriately.

## Extending the Framework

While I came up with this framework specifically for responses, I do not see any reason it could not be extended to any action. Thus, instead of being restricted to the subset of responses to stimulus, any action can be judged based on its potential future impact. Under this revised framework, for any action, you could then ask, “Does this action have a potential positive impact on my life?” If so, the action might be warranted. It could further be extended to take into account the probability of such a positive impact, e.g., if the action is very likely to produce a positive impact, it should be pursued vigorously, whereas one that is less likely to produce a positive impact might still be pursued, but with less effort invested. In that case, the framework might be rephrased as:

**The magnitude of any action should be proportional to the probability of the future, positive impact of that action.**

**October 1, 2014**