

Rule 4 Compare yourself to who you were yesterday, not to who someone else is today

“Stop comparing yourself to others!” – How many times have you received this advice, from parents and teachers alike? I used to hate this statement growing up, especially when our parents would (in typical Asian fashion) constantly compare our achievements to family friends; and when teachers are marking test results by – you guessed it – comparing us to one another. Such hypocrites!

Having said that, we all need an ideal, something to aim at and work towards. But an ideal is at the same time a judge; by definition you always fall short of the ideal. Inevitably, always comparing ourselves to the ideal makes one bitter, jealous and even hopeless. So how can one have benefits of the ideal without having the crushing blow of the judge that regards you as insufficient? That is what Peterson tries to work out in Rule 4.

First, we must first admit that no matter how good you are at something, there is always someone out there who makes you look incompetent. This applies to every facet of life – be it your academics, language ability, guitar playing, football skills, leadership, public speaking – you name it. There is always someone smarter. Taller. More good-looking. More talented. More hardworking. More successful. Inside each and every one of us dwells a critical internal voice that knows just how incompetent we are, compared to all those brilliant, successful people out there.

The brutal truth is that we are not equal in ability or outcome, and never will be. Peterson writes: *“A very small number of people produce much of everything. The winners don’t take all, but they take most, and the bottom is not a good place to be.”* As unfair as this sounds, Peterson explains in interviews about Rule 4 that we should understand this phenomenon as a natural law – something that could be observed in other creative work – called the Pareto distribution. Here is an example – if you own a company, the rule of thumb is that 20% of the employees do 80% of the work. 20% of your customers are responsible for 80% of your sales. In any given domain with an element of creative work, the square root of the number of people operating within that domain do half the productive work. And the discrepancy is magnified exponentially.

Yes, what lays out there is a world rife with inequality. Any creative domain possess these characteristics – once you become more successful in a certain facet of life,

more and more relevant opportunities come to you. Those who have more get more. Those who have less get less. Economists know this to be the Matthew Principle. *“For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.”* – Matthew 25:29. You may have heard this paraphrased as: *“the rich get richer and the poor get poorer”*.

So if this is a natural law, doesn't this mean that we are all doomed for failure? Actually, no – to the contrary. Peterson provides some practical insight in Rule 4 on how to embrace this phenomenon. Each domain of hierarchical value is only one facet of your life. On one level of analysis, Li Ka Shing is wealthier than you in terms of money. But there are other facets of your life – you have your own friends, personal projects, artistic endeavors, athletic pursuits, hopes, and dreams. You have your health, well-being, relationships with those around you, time, potential, and something to look forward to. If you consider judging your success across all facets of life, you will perhaps realise that you are very good at some, average at others, and terrible at the remainder. Just like everyone else. Just because Li Ka Shing is wealthier than you in one facet of life says little about anything.

So who do you know that you could legitimately and fairly compare yourself to? You. Yesterday. Aim high, but use yourself as the control so your goal is to make today some tiny increment so that you are better than yourself yesterday. We can all define what is *“better”* by ourselves. You know where you are weak and insufficient and where you can improve. And the great thing about the Matthew Principle is, it also provides a clear way forward for all of us – once you get the ball rolling, incremental improvement is unstoppable as it starts to compound on an exponential basis!

Comparing yourself with the outside world is necessary, but is only half of the equation. We need to compare ourselves not necessarily with other individuals, but what other individuals have achieved (or continue to achieve) in that aspect of life – as the ideal you wish to achieve. You need to have a hierarchy of improvement, aim for something, and in and of itself that means you are less than people who have already attained along that dimension. Li Ka Shing is rich, but he is only an individual who is successful in achieving financial freedom – that is the ideal we should pinpoint. So who should you defeat in the final analysis? The answer is yourself. You are the final half of the equation. You are the right control for yourself as you have all of your advantages and disadvantages, so if you want to compete fairly with someone, you should be competing with yourself – yesterday.