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Section: PERSPECTIVE

Resolving not to make resolutions : THE MORALIST

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Lots of us do it. As the holiday season comes to a close and the year is ending, we start thinking it's time for a change.

We resolve to be or to do better, starting in January. It's a ritual, a performance of a promise to oneself.

Typical promises: Lose weight. Stop smoking. Spend more time with the family. Volunteer at the food bank. Get some exercise.

My impression is that most people's New Year's resolutions don't stick. By February or March, that chocolate-loving smoker's desk drawer is once again stuffed with Snickers and Newports. Time selfishly alone surfing on the Internet once again replaces reading "The Hungry Caterpillar" to the kids or checking in on the grandparents in assisted living.

Does it matter that we break promises to ourselves?

It matters more than you might think.

I favor ending the annual round of resolution-making.

Breaking promises to other people is considered one of the most unethical things anyone can do. "Keep your promises!" is right up there with "Don't lie!" and "Don't cheat!" as core moral rules. It's clearly wrong to deliberately misrepresent your intentions to other people. When you express your intentions as a promise, people think they can rely on what you say. They count on you. They make plans. They invest time and money. Break your promises, and people feel used. Do it a lot and you get a reputation as a thoughtless user.

But breaking a promise to yourself is not like that. You cannot use yourself. The concept is almost jibberish. (Sorry, Kant!) Suppose you resolve to drop 20 pounds before June. You promise yourself you will diet and exercise each day. But you don't. After a week,

you are back to old vices. So what?

Well, it could be that resources are wasted because of promises you made to yourself. For example, \$500 for a gym membership, plus \$100 for diet books and a freezer full of Lean Cuisine, is serious money that could be better spent. It's better to pay off those student loans or that credit card debt than to futilely subsidize L.A. Fitness.

Another problem could be the sense of shame we feel when we make false promises to ourselves. Doing it once in awhile isn't so bad. But if it becomes a yearly ritual, and concerns something important like our health, work or emotional life, we can start to feel like failures. The lack of follow-through can feel like a character flaw. You start to wonder about yourself. It's unkind to make yourself miserable that way.

A final problem with making unfulfilled promises to yourself is that you may disappoint other people: Grandpa starts looking forward to a closer relationship with you. You've resolved to visit more him often and for a month or two you do. Then the backsliding commences. Your lonely grandfather is heartbroken.

Spare yourself and others the grief. Don't make resolutions. Or only make resolutions that are modestly aspirational.

A few years ago America went Atkins Diet-crazy. After two noxious months of diligently eating bacon and protein powder with every meal, disgusting and alienating our families in the process, we all took off 20 pounds. But a year later we were 30 pounds heavier.

Last year I resolved to take off my own post-Atkins poundage by eating sensibly and being more active. My goal was to lose just one measly pound a month. I managed to meet that goal, plus some. I was proud. I'd felt like an idiot after my Atkins fiasco, embarrassed about the people I'd recruited into the fad.

Although you can't use yourself in just the same sense in which you can wrongly use others, you can abuse yourself. It's self-destructive to make promises to yourself you have reason to think you won't keep.

But the more trivial the subject of the promise, the less worrisome the resolution-making and -breaking. Suppose you have a guilty pleasure, say watching reality TV. You resolve to indulge a bit less next year and spend more time learning a foreign language or practicing your cello, but you don't. No big deal.

By contrast, for a person at risk of diabetes or heart disease, sugary snacks, smoking and no exercise are serious matters. For such a person, it's good to commit to a healthier lifestyle in the New Year, but only if the commitment is serious.

I say, though, forget the ritual of resolution. Just do what you can. Making resolutions isn't in and of itself a sign of good character.

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