

Title: Working on Yourself

Abstract:

This is a thesis-antithesis-synthesis kind of talk. We begin with a question: How should one react to one's own moral achievements and moral failures, and to the moral achievements and moral failures of other people? One answer that may seem initially compelling is that we should be *harsher* on ourselves than we are on others: that is to say, we should be modest about our own moral achievements while celebrating others' moral achievements, and we should be lenient in response to others' moral failures without being similarly lenient in response to our own moral failures. As compelling as this answer might seem, a smorgasbord of recent trends in popular moral thought push back against it in various ways, and it paints an odd picture of how good people are supposed to talk to each other. That's the thesis and its antitheses. The synthesis is the central idea of this talk: the idea of *working on yourself*. I'll say what working on yourself is, and I'll also introduce the idea of a *deliberate self-improvement*, which is my name for what you bring about when you try to work on yourself and you succeed. With these two notions in hand, I'll argue that the initially-compelling answer and its intuitive counterphenomena can all be readily accommodated by an account that emphasizes the importance of working on yourself while recognizing the enormous diversity of impediments to their doing so that particular individuals might encounter. We'll see that some apparent self/other asymmetries have solid metaphysical or moral underpinnings, while others dissolve. I'll then discuss some cool upshots and one remaining deeper puzzle.