

# Questions for Essentialism

## Chapter 3

This is a list of discussion questions to help work through the content of the book

“Essentialism” By Greg McKeown.

Major principles:

Most things we do are not important. They are a part of the “trivial many” vs the “vital few.”

Key examples/illustrations

- Boxer the Horse from Orwell’s Animal Farm
  - The difference in hourly rates for different jobs
  - El Bulli Restaurant
  - The Pareto Principle and the “vital few”
  - Warren Buffet’s investing strategy
1. The chapter opens with a quote from Richard Koch, author of several books on the 80/20 (or Pareto) principle: “Most Of What Exists In The Universe— Our Actions, And All Other Forces, Resources, And Ideas— Has Little Value And Yields Little Result; On The Other Hand, A Few Things Work Fantastically Well And Have Tremendous Impact.” This idea can seem at odds with common sense. Do you agree with Koch? If so why? If you are having trouble accepting this idea, why?
  2. McKeown mentions the story of Animal Farm and the horse “Boxer” who’s answer is to every problem is to work harder. Based on the ideas in this chapter what are the possible outcomes of such a strategy?
  3. Why are there limits to the value of “working harder?”

4. Some types of effort yield more and better results than other kinds of effort. Have you experienced this in your life before?
5. What makes something essential or important for you? Make a very short list of what makes something truly important or vital to your life.
6. Which activities are you spending your time on that are low yield? Which are high yield? Put another way, which activities are minimum wage or less for you? Which produce the greatest results in terms of money, outcomes, happiness, quality, etc.?
  - Low yield
  - High Yield
7. After a certain amount of time, “working more, working harder” results in a plateau of productivity. This can happen because of exhaustion, loss of resources, discouragement, mental fatigue, etc. Are there any areas in your life where you are seeing a plateau of results? Do the hard work of being honest with yourself.
8. Diversification is a common strategy for investors. Yet according to “The Tao of Warren Buffett,” billionaire Warren Buffet makes 90% of his money of just 10 investments. What factors drive the emphasis on diversification rather than focus? Where do you see these factors at work in your life?

9. Take a moment to look up “power law theory.” You can do a brief search, or here is an example of a write up from Forbes. A power law distribution is very different from a normal “bell curve.” This distribution shows some of the science behind the big idea in this chapter. Some people/ideas are far more influential than others. What is your major impression from the power law theory? Take a moment to write this down.
10. Power law theory demonstrates that most “inputs” (people, products, sales accounts, ideas, activities) in the tail fall below median. They do NOT yield average results, they produce below average results. What activities in your life are in the long tail, bringing you lower-than-average results? How can you exchange them? Which one can you quit this week?
11. Talking about high performing employees, Mark Zuckerberg said, “Someone who is exceptional in their role is not just a little better than someone who is pretty good. They are 100 times better.”<sup>1</sup> This is not only true of people, it is true in many areas of life. Which things might you do that are even 10x more effective than the “pretty good” activities that take up most of your time.
12. Most people fail to become essentialists because they don’t know the difference between important vs unimportant. How can you learn the difference in your own life?

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/18/technology/18talent.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/18/technology/18talent.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

13. Does it seem insulting or distasteful to say that most things are “unimportant?” Why?
14. Marketers work hard to convince people that their products/services are important. Part of their success comes from the fact that their audience hasn’t decided ahead of time what is truly important. This can lead to people constantly looking for success through purchasing a new product or software, changing to the newest and hottest business strategy, reading another self help book. Where do you see yourself influenced about what is important by outsiders?
15. McKeown recommends that in light of these principles we spend ample time considering what is truly essential. Take time right now to make an appointment with yourself every week for reflection on your schedule and activities.