

# On Mediocrity

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For almost a year now, I've been doing something I've never done before – keeping a diary. Looking at the diary, I realized that my writings are more about social life than personal life. I noticed that in various parts of the diary, I complain about mediocrity. Almost everyone around me produces mediocre work. They earn money from the work they do, make ends meet, but none of them produce excellent work. Mediocrity bothers me because it is boring. How much can a person watch Zira, Karabakh, Neftchi? I want to watch Real Madrid, Manchester City, Chelsea. Also, I myself am afraid of being producing mediocre work.

Mediocrity, in my understanding, means two different but related things. First, there's what I'd call *settling for less*. This is when someone doesn't put in their best effort and just does enough to get by. Their work is okay or good enough, but not because they can't do better – it's because they're not trying to improve or reach their full potential. This isn't about being average; anyone can excel if they really try. Then there's the second meaning, which is simply being average in your field. When people use mediocrity this way, they're saying someone isn't among the world's best at what they do. Of course, statistically speaking, most people can't be at the top – some will be the best, most will be average, and others will fall below average. That's just how numbers work. For what I'm talking about here, I'm using the first sense – choosing not to excel when you could. Most people around me are mediocre in the first sense because they settle for less and don't develop their abilities to their full potential. (Not surprisingly, they're also mediocre in the second sense, since they neither develop their abilities nor even aspire to be among the best in their field.)

By *work* I mean any kind of work. For example, I would want at

least one of my web developer friends to be excellent in the IT field. To be recognized by web developers. Or have a photographer acquaintance who is an excellent photographer. Those who understand this work would look at a photo and say, "This is the work of so-and-so, look how they captured this." I have many lawyer friends, and I would want them to excel in the legal field. Yes, they win cases at the ECHR, which is good. But if I had studied law, I would have won a case against Azerbaijan too; it's not difficult. Winning a case at the ECHR doesn't make you excellent.

I'm not exactly sure what excellence means in the fields I mentioned. The experts themselves should explain it to me. They should say, "you don't understand art. Look, my paintings have such-and-such quality. I apply the brush like this" etc. Maybe I still won't be interested in art, but meeting such a person would make me happy and, most importantly, inspire me. There's nothing that gives me more pleasure than talking to people who are doing an excellent job. And if they are among the best in their field, that's even better.

For example, I roughly know what excellence means in the academic field. If you have articles and books published in top journals and publishing houses in your field, then you're an excellent academic, and you might also be among the best in your field. I don't have any Azerbaijani acquaintances like this. However, I know several such foreign philosophers. Their articles are in top journals, and their books are published by Oxford and Cambridge University Press. Every time I talk to them, I learn something. Most importantly, talking to them about any topic, even trivial things, is inspiring. You see that the person in front of you is not the *mad genius* depicted in movies. They are ordinary people. They have ordinary interests like everyone else. You think that one day you too can be an excellent philosopher and perhaps become among the best in your field.

Here, my purpose is not to fetishize academia. I just gave

this example because I know the meaning of excellent in philosophy. But the work in question can be any work. For example, a relative of ours is a parquet layer, and people would always praise him. They would say there's no one who can lay parquet with the precision of a jeweller. I don't know which parquet layers are the most prestigious in Azerbaijan; perhaps people exaggerated his skills because he was my relative. But when I was a child, I believed he was one of the best parquet layers. His house was large, and he had laid the parquet himself. I would crawl on the floor and look at every detail. The wood was so beautifully arranged that it seemed the entire floor was not made of hundreds of separate pieces, but as if a room-sized parquet had been manufactured at the factory, lowered with a crane from the roof, and glued to the house. No hair or paper had stuck to the parquet's varnish; it was perfectly smooth. I enjoyed getting to know the person who prepared that parquet and talking to him more than the beauty of the parquet itself.

I love listening to Sevan Nişanyan, a Turkish intellectual, even if he is sometimes an unreasonable person. Someone asked him what makes a place a city. Sevan answered that what makes a place a city is its ability to attract the best people in their fields from all over the world. He gave a radical example. He said, for instance, when he was in New York, he observed this himself. Looking for a chef? At least three of the world's best chefs are in New York. Looking for an artist? The same thing. A mathematician? The same thing. You go to an event, and they say, "This is so-and-so, one of the best chefs." It's a great feeling. I'm not a chef, and I'm not even interested in what a *good chef* means. But I would like to meet the best chef. Most importantly, as Sevan said, it doesn't end with just those three people. Those three chefs inspire hundreds of people to be excellent in their fields, each gathering their own apprentices, creating a community of chefs and competition among them. Even if a person never becomes one of the best themselves, they would most probably produce

excellent results and enjoy being in such an environment.

Above, I complained about most people around me producing mediocre work, and I confessed my own fear of mediocrity. My purpose was not to insult or blame people, but to describe my surroundings. The mediocrity of people around me bothers me. I wanted to express this complaint. For example, I notice changes in my sitting posture when I don't go out for a while. My back hunches, I wear wrinkled clothes, and even when garbage bins (paper and plastic) are full, I'm too lazy to take them to the nearby dumpster. In such moments, my productivity decrease. I read and write less. I think that if evening came, I would just go to sleep. Unfortunately, among my friends in Azerbaijan, I feel the same way because they are mediocre.

Now I want to talk about the causes of mediocrity. Because some of my friends have said that others – more precisely, the political system – were more to blame for their mediocrity. I partially agree with them. The political system affects everything, including people's love for their work. The Azerbaijan SSR anthem says that "heroism, and prowess are the desires of a free person." We can say something similar about a person's attitude towards their work. When a person is not free, is humiliated daily by the state or others, lives in fear, and has no hope for the future, it is understandable that they would not care about being excellent in their work. One of the things that motivate people, perhaps the primary motivation, is *moving forward* – that is, earning more money or achieving a higher social status. In Azerbaijan, for many people, the paths to move forward are politically blocked, or what is required to move forward is not excellence in one's work, but political loyalty and connections. The political system cuts off one of the factors that would encourage people to strive for excellence. Thus, the political system encourages mediocrity.

However, one of the causes of mediocrity is mediocre people

themselves. *Moving forward* is one of the things that encourages people to strive for excellence. Yes, the political system opens the way for mediocre people and encourages mediocrity. But one of the reasons people do not strive for excellence is that they do not see non-instrumental value in their work – i.e., they view work only as a tool for earning money.

What is instrumental value? Saying that x has instrumental value means that x is causally necessary for another valuable phenomenon y. That is, x is instrumentally valuable when x is one of the causes of y. For example, money has instrumental value because it allows us to acquire other things valuable to us (a house, food, clothing, travel, insurance, etc.).

If work is also instrumentally valuable, then the value of work is, for example, earning money or status. If we won't earn more money or status by doing our job better, then it's irrational to go through the trouble of working better. (An act is irrational when it does not serve our goals.) I think people who try to justify their mediocrity by citing the political situation only see instrumental value in their work. Therefore, they are content with mediocrity because the work environment in Azerbaijan does not require excellence from them. They receive the same salary whether they work better or just adequately. So why should they bother?

But there are also non-instrumental values in life. For example, one of these values is constitutive value. Saying that x has constitutive value means that x is conceptually necessary for another valuable phenomenon y. In other words, x is part of the definition of y. For example, imagine that *citizenship* is a valuable status. For a person to be considered a citizen rather than a subject or serf, they must have civil and economic freedoms. If they do not have freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, the right to vote and be elected, freedom of religious belief, freedom to do business, etc., they are not a citizen, but a subject of some lord. Note

that civil and economic freedoms do not cause citizenship – the relationship between these freedoms and citizenship is not causal. These freedoms are part of citizenship. Just as a woman cannot be a mother without having a child, a person cannot be a citizen, by definition, without these freedoms.

If work is also constitutively valuable, then its value will not be entirely dependent on money and status. For example, we have many characteristics that make up our identity. Some we do not choose (e.g., being someone's son, being from Aghdam), and some we do choose (e.g., being a graduate of a certain university, being a member of a certain party). Even if those around us consider them worthless, we may consider these characteristics important, and if one of them is taken away, we might feel that our identity has been damaged, that we are incomplete.

A person's profession can also be one of the characteristics that make up their identity. A teacher who is fired and sees their work as valuable might be disappointed not just because they lost a source of income or were treated unfairly, but because a part of their identity was taken away. A painter who cannot paint due to paralysis might feel sad not just because they lost a source of income or health, but because they lost a part of their identity. If work is part of a person's identity, then striving to do their work perfectly can be understood as strengthening their identity. If being someone's son is part of my identity, I will strive to be a good son. If being a teacher is part of my identity, then I will strive to be a good teacher. Alternatively, works might be constitutively valuable for *happiness* understood as life satisfaction. I am satisfied with my life when, among other things, I do my job excellently – if, for example, I am an excellent teacher.

There is another non-instrumental value: something being intrinsically valuable or valuable in itself. Saying that x is valuable in itself means that the value of x is not dependent

on any other phenomenon. For example, friendship, love, loyalty, being an honest person are valuable in themselves. Being an honest person is not valuable because we will gain respect by being honest or because honesty is part of our identity. It may be that a person gains respect by being honest and that honesty is part of their identity. Even in this case, we can say that honesty is valuable in itself. That is, even if a person does not gain respect for being honest and honesty is not part of their identity, honesty is still not a worthless property.

Being excellent in one's profession can also be valuable in itself. For example, imagine you are a car mechanic in Alat. The mechanics in the surrounding towns are mediocre, and you work at the same quality level. If you improve your quality while keeping prices the same, your customers won't increase because either no one will understand that the quality has improved, or even if they understand, your reputation won't spread beyond the village, so outsiders won't bring their cars to you. Additionally, imagine that improving your quality won't increase your reputation in Alat. People will say you're foolish because you're giving yourself unnecessary trouble. In such a situation, if you see your work as valuable in itself, you might be interested in improving the quality of your work as a car mechanic.

From what I've observed, the people I define as mediocre see no non-instrumental value in their work. Therefore, since they won't earn extra money or status, they don't strive for excellence in their work. Or they see non-instrumental value in their work, but their economic/psychological situation is so poor, and the non-instrumental value they assign to work is so small that this value does not motivate them to strive for excellence in their work. They remain mediocre and keep their heads down. Why don't they see the non-instrumental value in their work? I don't have a clear answer to this question