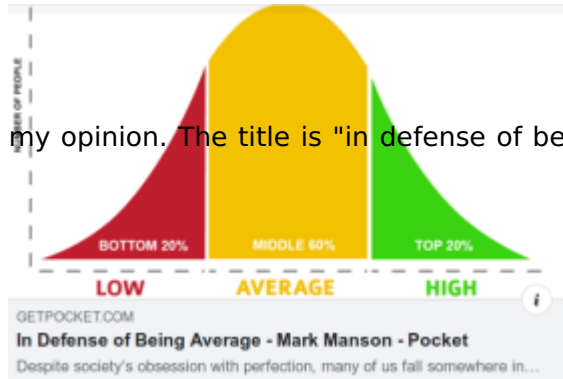


# Evaluating "In Defense of Being Average"

Post by "Cassius" of June 14, 2019 at 8:57 AM



my opinion. The title is "in defense of being average."

I had a friend forward me this article today and ask  
There are parts I agree with and parts I don't, and throughout the article I smell a strong odor of Stoicism. But the article does try to strike a balance by saying "**mediocrity, as a goal, sucks. But mediocrity, as a result, is OK.**"

Probably an article like this helps us drill down if we consider "What would Epicurus say about

"mediocrity?"

<https://getpocket.com/explore/item/i...e=pocket-newtab>

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Post by "Cassius" of June 14, 2019 at 8:58 AM

E:

Mark Manson identifies as a Stoic, so it makes sense that his articles reflect that... but what an interesting question you ask, what Epicurus would say about mediocrity...

Seems like it would depend on the situation. If a pleasure couldn't be increased by time spent developing a skill level, then I wouldn't likely care about doing it.

There are some things I enjoy being really good at, but my skill doesn't depend on others not being good. It's funny that Manson assumes excellence has to be competitive, when it could just mean accurate. We could all have excellent grammar, for instance, and this wouldn't be a competition. All doctors could in theory make accurate diagnoses.

This afternoon, I did a zoom interview for a training program I want to enter, to learn to do a particular procedure in medicine. The interviewer asked me "how do you think you might stand out from other applicants?" And I laughed and said "I don't know, because I haven't seen their

files... but actually I hope I don't stand out-- I hope there are a lot of applicants who are very qualified to learn this, in case someone in my family needs to have it done!" ? She liked that answer.

So when I learn this procedure, I will have the goal of doing it as well as possible, for the pleasure of working without stress, for the income from it, and of course, for not being sued due to incompetence...

Ok, I guess what I am getting at here is that there's a natural limit to skill, for most things. And in some cases I will want to reach that limit, if pleasure increases. In others, such as precise laundry folding, I don't care. I'm not going to iron my underwear, lol. That wouldn't give me pleasure.

Cassius:

I should have realized that his tone marked him as a stoic and now when I look at his home page it jumps out further.

I agree with you that being very good at something doesn't necessarily entail competitiveness, and probably that is a stoic artifact that he associates the two as being necessarily connected. We don't allow doctors in Appalachia to perform medicine at a standard of care lesser than New York City - the standard of care is national, as I understand it, but I don't think most of us would expect to receive the same standard of care in some isolated subsaharan desert.

Realizing that everyone can't be "the best" on a scale is simply a fact that we shouldn't be afraid of, and the competitiveness angle is a trap too, but it seems to me that there's something about the "tone" or the way he views the subject that goes beyond accepting reality and creeps into a very stoic-like suppression of the emotion of being good at something that most anyone can experience in at least some areas of life. More "throwing the baby out with the bathwater" stoic over-rationalizing.

Pretty much what you would expect from someone who would write "The Subtle Art of Not Giving A F\*ck"

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**Post by "Hiram" of June 14, 2019 at 10:53 AM**

Epicurus on mediocrity?

At least one saying speaks against "the crowd" and its opinions, and how we should be independent from them.

I think this has historical roots in Epicurus experiencing the tyranny of the Platonists at the gym in Mytilene when they exiled him under threat.

I also think of Socrates being executed after a democratic vote, which was a specter hovering over everyone in the recent history of Epicurus' time.

The crowds were perceived to be tyrannical, at least in potential. And stupid, and wrong. The study of nature was seen as the main antidote for this problem, but not everyone was expected to take it up.

And so at least for a philosopher of his day, mediocrity's dangers were mainly tied to consensus, lack of critical thinking, and lack of studying nature.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of June 14, 2019 at 10:58 AM**

I completely agree Hiram -- very good points. Elayne pointed out that this writer's background is confirmed Stoicism, and I think we see very important parallels between Stoic foundations and his conclusions, as you say.

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### **Post by "Joshua" of June 14, 2019 at 11:04 AM**

I think this relates to the larger issue of whether it's good for people to be specialists or generalists. I read a "Romantic vs Classical" distinction into the argument. Take the view of the Generalist, here expressed by Robert Heinlein;

#### Quote

A human being should be able to change a diaper, plan an invasion, butcher a hog, conn a ship, design a building, write a sonnet, balance accounts, build a wall, set a bone, comfort the dying, take orders, give orders, cooperate, act alone, solve equations, analyse a new problem, pitch manure, program a computer, cook a tasty meal, fight efficiently, die gallantly. Specialization is for insects.

The problem with this view is that it appears to the Classical thinker as being overly Romantic; it sounds like it should sound good, but in reality it yields poor results. The Jack-of-all-trades is the master of none.

The Specialist ideal finds its expression in a character like Doyle's Sherlock Holmes;

#### Quote

I consider that a man's brain originally is like a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furniture as you choose. A fool takes in all the lumber of every sort that he comes across, so that the knowledge which might be useful to him gets crowded out, or at best is jumbled up with a lot of other things, so that he has a difficulty in laying his hands upon it. Now the skillful workman is very careful indeed as to what he takes into his brain-attic. He will have nothing but the tools which may help him in doing his work, but of these he has a large assortment, and all in the most perfect order. It is a mistake to think that that little room has elastic walls and can distend to any extent. Depend upon it there comes a time when for every addition of knowledge you forget something that you knew before. It is of the highest importance, therefore, not to have useless facts elbowing out the useful ones.

This strikes the Romantic thinker as something inhuman; the machination of man.

It's clear that the market selects for Specialists. A person with a mediocre ability in 10 different areas will very often be shoehorned into employment using one of those skills at a low level. The Specialist attaining excellence in one area will, if they have chosen a good field, find high-status employment that is satisfying and rewarding. But here's the thing; the Generalist will almost always be better at handling adversity. First of all, because they are accustomed to mediocrity anyway; second, because when confronted by it, they have a wide range of other hobbies and activities to plug into it.

So when it comes to the Epicurean project of maximizing pleasure and happiness over a whole human life, it won't necessarily be the case that striving for excellence yields the best result.

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### **Post by “Joshua” of June 14, 2019 at 11:45 AM**

For myself, I have been a low-wage restaurant cook, a metalcaster at a foundry, a package sorter, a retail clerk, and now a trucker. In spite of a general lack of excellence in my life, I somehow manage to remain tranquil and equanimous throughout the day. And yet in the course of 14 years in customer service one way or another, I was always meeting with

attorneys, physicians, engineers, bankers, and business people who were chronically grumpy and generally unsatisfied.

Who knows. Maybe when they actually make it out to that lakehouse, or boat, or golf course, or posh vacation, they really are happy. But I always thought---if I can be happy riding my bike to work making \$10 an hour, why can't you be happy heading to the firm in your Range Rover, even in spite of the traffic?

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### **Post by “Elayne” of June 14, 2019 at 12:33 PM**

JJ, I would say the pleasure or pain is in the details, and I am hesitant to generalize about specialization, lol.

Which approach works best for pleasure depends on the temperament of the individual, the skill level, and the resources of the social environment. For instance, a one-instrument specialist who achieves remarkable skill, such that he can be sufficiently paid, and who does not get bored with that one instrument and in fact prefers it to something like hog butchering-- that person would be well advised to keep on specializing. He can contract out the generalist work.

But if there are not people around who can cook his food, tile his floor, etc, to the standard he wants done... perhaps he would be happier to put some of those practice hours into a few other skills.

Most people would probably classify me as a generalist, in that I have a wider than typical variety of interests and skills-- I do not have a single-minded passion that I have pursued. However, this has not for me translated to mediocrity of skill level for all of those interests. For some or maybe even most, sure. For instance, I've done competition ballroom but remain very much an amateur-- I did it just for fun, and that attitude was a big part of what made it fun. I had no concern about the outcome, other than not injuring my partner. I don't need to earn money with it. Same with singing-- I can stay on pitch, harmonize, and do solos in my Chorus, but I am not interested in becoming a professional level singer.

For other things, it is relatively easy to become highly skilled without all that much time investment. For instance, I have hand-made quilts with 14 even stitches per inch, exactly cut and pieced-- because you can't get more exact to the unaided eye, after a certain point. And because I have done so much cooking, I have a feel for it, and I can out do most restaurant meals for a small group. I'm not saying I'm top chef-- but neither am I anywhere close to mediocre. Getting good at cooking has paid off big time in terms of pleasure, on a daily basis!

Along the way, because of curiosity, I have learned to do things like roast my own coffee in my garage, using a drum roaster. That's something you can spend a LOT of time learning, but even a moderate time investment pays off with an amazing jump in pleasure of taste, well beyond mediocre.

In my pediatric work, I am a "general pediatrician"-- but in this case, because the amount of available knowledge is not as much as you might think, and because I am constitutionally curious, I have taken time to learn a lot of depth about many of the body systems. The only things I need to refer to specialists are for procedures I don't know how to do-- I didn't train to do surgery, EEGs, etc. However, the depth of knowledge I can access about the various organ systems is substantial, and I have taken advantage of that... plus, unlike the specialist, I am able to put findings in one system into context with the whole body-- which has led to my occasionally making diagnoses that excellent specialists completely missed.

Sometimes, I have known things that specialists in a field did not know, even in their field-- for instance, when one of my family members had what looked like a low neutrophil count, which was a known side effect of the medication he was taking, his specialist was alarmed. He was going to stop the medication, which was the only thing so far that had helped my family member. However, because of my wide-ranging reading habits, I remembered a phenomenon with this particular medication where the morning blood count can differ from the afternoon, and if the afternoon count is normal there is no need to worry. Pseudoneutropenia. I brought the specialist the articles, he rechecked my family member's lab test in the afternoon, and it was all fine.

If a person is a generalist in several activities with reasonably accessible depth of skill for moderate time investment, it is possible to be as good or nearly as good as a specialist who chooses only one activity. The difference will show up more if it is a specialty where the time needed to excel would rule out many additional activities.

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## **Post by “Joshua” of June 14, 2019 at 1:07 PM**

There's something that very often *doesn't* get said about customer service work generally, Elayne, and that's that almost all of the people one deals with actually are very pleasant! People of any sort can be and often are happy. I was merely intending to show that they can be happy *or* unhappy in unexpected ways. It isn't *always* easy to draw a straight line between excellence and happiness, or between mediocrity and misery...or vice versa.

Un an unrelated note, there's a strong tradition of quilting in my large German-Catholic extended family. I won't vouch for the stitchwork, but the intergenerational bonding is something very special to see! There are probably over 40 of us descended from my

grandparents, and we *all* have quilts, to the fourth generation.

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### **Post by “Elayne” of June 14, 2019 at 1:26 PM**

Oh, yes, I agree that working with the public is often pleasant-- I enjoy meeting most of the families in my practice! And unlike Tolstoy, I find their stories of happiness to be more fascinating and variable than their stories of sadness, which tend for me to be mostly similar.

I think we are in full agreement that there is no strict correlation between skill level as an abstract quality, minus specifics, and pleasure... but what I meant to say is that for certain specific situations, more skill can bring more pleasure. "It depends" is probably my most accurate answer.

Customer service is a great example of a skill that can make one's life significantly more pleasant! Both for the person in the job and the customer. There is an older woman who works at the driver's license photo desk where I live, who always seems to be in a great mood. She goes through this brief routine with every person-- she says "I want you to have a photo you like!" She has them roll their shoulders and neck, take a big breath, relax and smile. This puts everyone in the line in a good mood, so they are easier for her to work with too. I actually enjoy going to update my license photo, because I look forward to the friendliness of that room. I do the same thing with my patients-- I greet them with a big smile, and if I know them, an offer of a quick hug. That changes everything about the rest of the visit, so it is a skill worth getting very good at, for me. No mediocre smiling, lol!

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of June 14, 2019 at 2:25 PM**

*From the article: "You will have a growing appreciation for life's basic experiences. You will learn to [measure yourself](#) through a new, healthier means: the pleasures of simple friendship, creating something, helping a person in need, reading a good book, laughing with someone you care about."*

On the positive side, embracing being average is embracing your humanity. Could embracing your humanity possibly be considered a natural pleasure in that it is working with what is natural? This subject sounds like Montaigne, from what very little I know of him.

Reminds me of a happy-go-lucky guy I once worked with who always said he was sleeping his way to the middle. But that's not on point!

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## Post by “Cassius” of June 14, 2019 at 2:42 PM

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

It's clear that the market selects for Specialists.

This comment caught my eye. I totally agree with it -- the **market** selects for specialists

The issue then is whether we will find our greatest happiness as being part of that market, and as the world moves on (and I get older) I am increasingly sceptical that "the market" is the answer to everything.

I know in my past I was deeply influenced by libertarian arguments, and I still think that "freedom" is generally going to be desirable and lead to the greatest happiness. But now as a function of realizing that "virtue" and everything similar is a "tool" for happiness, and not intrinsically and always desirable itself, I see the limits of the "libertarian" argument.

Presuming that "the market" will always lead to the most desirable result has been, I think, a huge error in the thinking of many Americans in the last 100 years. In many cases the market can and well be the best way of deciding disputes and conflicts, but it's not always going to be the best way, and elevating "the dollar" to the ultimate decision point is going to lead to just as bad a result as if we elevated "simple living" to an end in itself -- and probably worse.

ALSO (I got carried away on the first point) I think it is important that one point that is decidedly in favor of being a generalist is that you do often have wider choices available to you, and if you become the world's best programmer of some arcane computer language that only the NSA uses and understands, then your options are going to be limited to working for the NSA, and your livelihood becomes so tied to them that you can no longer afford to disagree or do anything "outside the box" of your masters.

All this I guess is why Epicurus did spend significant time talking about the likely better outcome of not overreaching "economically." But at the same time:

[VS63](#). There is also a limit in simple living, and he who fails to understand this falls into an error as great as that of the man who gives way to extravagance.

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## Post by “Joshua” of June 14, 2019 at 7:19 PM

I am certainly **not** one who thinks the market will always yield the best result. The market gave us robber barons, children working in mines, Irish Need Not Apply, and myriad other problems.

That, to me, is on a par with a similar fallacy; that "humans needn't worry because mother nature will always find balance". Mother Nature often finds balance by eradicating whole clades. Lucretius had it right; the universe doesn't exist for us, and it will continue to exist long after we and all our works are gone. (Am I off topic yet? ?)