Against Excellence As the Norm of Ambition

CEPPA, University of St Andrews, 2 October 2025

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The *norm of excellence*—'aim to excel'—is widely treated as the default norm of ambition. But it carries bad consequences:

   a. Moral failure in domains where excellence is pursued or in other domains
   b. Psychological harms to oneself and to others (disappointment, sense of inadequacy, imposter syndrome, burnout), and some negative economic outcomes
2. The norm of doing one's best—'aim to do your best'—may seem to fare better, but doesn't.
3. If the *norm of sufficiency*—'aim to do well enough'—were widely adopted as default, bad consequences (a-b) would be substantially lessened.
4. The norm of sufficiency still allows for excellence to arise, and if accepted as the default norm would not obviously make our world any worse.
5. Therefore, we have good reason to abandon the norm of excellence as the default norm and replace it with the norm of sufficiency

What would [my life] look like, I wonder, if "good enough" had been good enough?

I don't know. And I don't want to know. A life of smaller dreams that I half-assed, doing some version of what everyone else does? That sounds like a slow death to me. I want no part of it, and neither should you.

Why aim for the middle? Why settle for "good enough" before you've even done the work to see what you are capable of? What do you have to lose? (Schwarzenegger 2023: 70)

"You wanted to be great. You wanted to be excellent. So you got rid of all the bullshit, and you concentrated, and you got focused. And you got great, you got excellent. It worked. You're here. Look at all this." Chef David Fields to Carmy Berzatto, *The Bear*, Season 3, episode 10 ('Forever')

1. Norms of Ambition: General Features and Why They Are Important

- Norms of ambition answer the question: how ambitious should you be in your individual pursuits?

- The importance of ambition:

  - Significantly influences 'turning point' decisions in one's life.
  - Can be powerful determinant of whether one's life is happy/rich/flourishing.
  - Many instances of morally poor behaviour are not malicious, but reflect bad management of effort/time. Such bad management is influenced by ambition.

- Ambition is domain-specific.
  - Domains: parenting, being a friend, chess playing, practicing law etc.

- Some domains are quite broad (e.g. parenting, career-related domains), others are specific (e.g. being a spectator at a particular sport event)
- Each domain is governed by norms that specify better/worse ways of performing in that domain.
- Some of these norms carry moral weight: violating that norm not only makes your performance in that domain worse; it also makes you a worse person *morally*.
- My discussion will focus on educational and professional domains; but my argument applies to other domains, too.

2. The Norm of Excellence

2.1. Defining excellence

- Excellence (in a domain) = belonging to the top n% of those active in that domain (following etymology: 'to rise above').
  - Variably difficult to achieve, depending on domain.
  - Excellence implies potential for influence, esteem, and to be taken as a role model.
  - For my argument, no need for actual, uncontroversial ranking
    - All that's needed is for individuals to have *some* conception of what it takes to be better/worse in the relevant domain.
  - (My argument is compatible with a non-comparative understanding of excellence, too.)

- The Norm of Excellence: Strive for excellence in your domains of activity.

2.2. Evidence that excellence is accepted as setting the default norm of ambition

- Excellence is encouraged, rewarded and valued through many stages of education and career.
  - Incentives: prizes, career opportunities, esteem
  - Student grading, professional evaluations
  - Visible celebrations of high dedication to one's professional/educational aims.
  - Career advice to discover 'what makes you stand out' and pursue it
  - Businesses and institutions routinely bill themselves as excelling in their sector, seek to employ 'outstanding candidates'

2.3. Problems with the excellence norm of ambition

- Moral failure
  - Resource intensiveness: pursuing excellence leads to cutting moral corners.

- Unachievability: Excelling is not normal, so most won't achieve excellence.
  - Bad psychological outcomes:
    - Disappointment/sense of inadequacy

        - Impostor syndrome/burnout
        - Reinforcement of norm of excellence contribution to others people's suffering similar effects
    - Bad economic outcomes: competent people abandon suitable careers.

2.4. When is pursuing excellence appropriate?

- The norm of excellence is appropriate only in circumstances where one has evidence that excellence can be achieved without 'cutting moral corners'.
    - Achieving excellence without moral downsides occurs when the individual is in fact exceptionally talented in the relevant domain, or when circumstances align to make excellent achievement relatively easy to obtain (or both).
    - But these situations are quite rare.
        - Only a very small minority of people are exceptionally talented; and achieving excellence is usually not easy.
        - Moreover, even when these situations arise, it is not always the case that one *has good evidence* that one is in such circumstances.
- So only in quite rare circumstances—not by default—should one be guided by the norm of excellence in one's pursuits.

3. The Norm of Doing One's Best

- The Norm of Doing One's Best: Strive to do your best in your domains of activity.

- Seemingly less demanding and more fitting than the norm of excellence
    - Not tied to objective performance level
    - Relativised to individual's talents and capacities (bystander example)

- Problem: implementation.
    - Even taking natural ability into account, no clear guidance on what to do (Student example)
        - Objection: implicit in the norm of doing one's best is that there is some threshold of achievement beyond which one need not put in more effort.
        - Reply:
            - if that threshold is excellence (or higher), then the same problems afflicting the norm of excellence arise;
            - if it is less than excellence, then the norm should make clear what the threshold is.

4. The Norm of Sufficiency

- The Norm of Sufficiency: Strive to do sufficiently well in your domains of activity.

- ‘Sufficiently well’ varies from domain to domain; but unlike norm of excellence, the norm of sufficiency:
  - does not exhort one to rise above others.
    - so at least in principle, the standard set by the norm of sufficiency is achievable by many, and more likely to be achieved without dereliction of moral duty.
  - carries less risk of disappointment/sense of inadequacy/imposter syndrome/burnout
  - does not set as normal a standard that is in fact achievable only in rare cases
  - requires no special evidence to make its endorsement appropriate:
    - absent evidence of being particularly bad in a domain, or evidence that circumstances are especially badly aligned, we can expect that we can perform in the domain sufficiently well.

- Objection 1: but what if one is active in *too many* domains? Then even abiding by the norm of sufficiency will result in not following through on one’s important moral duties.
  - Reply: True—this scenario is not ruled out by the norm of sufficiency. But neither is it ruled out by the norms of excellence and of doing one’s best.
  - *How many* domains one should be active in is a question on which norms of ambition are silent. Norms of ambition need to be supplemented by ‘diversification guidance’.

- Objection 2: if everyone endorsed the norm of sufficiency by default, we would live in a world of mediocrity.
  - Reply: not clear this would follow:
    - Excellence can be achieved by aiming for mere competent performance (through luck or, if one is especially gifted, through talent)
    - Excellence can be achieved by a collective, each member of which is striving for sufficiently good performance (Examples: space rocket; sports team).
      - Systems/institutions can bear the onus of producing excellence instead of individuals
      - They can absorb the risk of moral failure (investor analogy)
  - It is a genuinely open question whether a world in which the norm of excellence is accepted as default (call this world ‘E’) would contain more excellent achievements than a world in which the norm of sufficiency is accepted as default (call it ‘S’).

        - But clearly E would contain *a lot* more of the moral, psychological and economic harms outlined above than S.
        - These harms would have to be weighed against the alleged greater excellent achievements contained in E.
        - Excellence often makes it hard to see the harms its pursuit implies.
        - It's not implausible that overall S would be a better world than E.
        - We should not accept the norm of excellence as default.

- My argument has focused on educational and career achievements; but it extends to leisure pursuits (e.g. being a golfer) and morally important pursuits (e.g. being a parent).

5. Links to Existing Literature

- Hurka's perfectionism equates the human good with the maximisation of one's talents ('perfections').
    - However, he notes there are 'costs of concentration': focusing on developing a single talent is unlikely to lead to the maximal development of one's talents *overall*, due to diminishing marginal returns.
    - So Hurka advocates pursuing *well-balanced* lives.
    - But there is a key difference between Hurka's view and the norm of sufficiency:
        - Hurka accepts—even mandates—violations of moral norms in one domain if this leads to maximisation of one's overall talents.
        - The norm of sufficiency prohibits violation of moral norms in any domain, and steers clear of advocating maximisation of achievement.

- Satisficing consequentialism: promote the good, but not maximally—only up to a point.
    - Common objection: in situations where an agent (i) has already produced good above the threshold, and (ii) could produce a lot more good at minimal cost, satisficing consequentialism problematically fails to recommend that the agent produce more good (Bradley (2006), Yetter-Chappell (2019), Slater (2020)).
    - Supporting the norm of sufficiency does not face this objection
        - It is a *default* norm that can be overridden where adequate evidence arises (unlike satisficing consequentialism, which is a broad moral theory).
        - If such evidence arises, one should abide by a stronger norm, e.g. the norm of excellence.

- Glasgow (2023): rehabilitates ordinary lives, arguing that a life need not be extraordinary in order to be meaningful.

- Point of similarity: Both Glasgow's and my argument aim to equalise the perceived value of ordinary and extraordinary lives.
- Points of distinction:
    - Glasgow's focus is on meaningfulness, not ambition.
    - the direction of pressure is different: Glasgow argues that it is permissible to lead ordinary lives; I argue that pursuing extraordinary lives is (absent special evidence) impermissible.

References

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