

## **On mediocrity**

*“The general tendency of things throughout the world is to render mediocrity the ascendant power among mankind.” [John Stuart Mill]*

### **Introduction**

There is a disease coursing through our veins and it is mediocrity. Fuelled by apathy, legitimised by nationalism and fostered by indifference, it is a unifying threat which lurks below the surface of every institution and, increasingly, manifests in the thinking that constitutes the public mind.

Mediocrity is a disease because it infects society in the same fashion as sickness ails a person, and because its effects are debilitating and damaging. If it is identified and countered, its symptoms can be reduced or suppressed but, like a virus, it can never be eliminated. If ignored, its spread can be extensive and the result acute; worse still, if denied, its influence can be all-encompassing. And mediocrity's power resides primarily in two such consequences: it self-replicates, generating and reinforcing the very environment in which it thrives; and, the more it comes to dominate public thought, the harder mediocrity becomes to recognise.

This contradiction is now at its peak: today, mediocrity's presence is palpable and it manifests everywhere, and yet it is never properly identified nor its effects properly articulated. It is a sickness that evades diagnosis.

Indeed, so well-entrenched is the problem that, for many people, it is no longer possible to imagine a world outside mediocrity's illusionary borders. It constitutes a very real threat to the form and structure of society, and the principles and values that underpin any democratic state. And, if we are to counter it, it needs to be recognised for what it is and then we need to act to end its influence.

The purpose of this essay is to understand mediocrity, its nature and its consequences. But that purpose too holds within it something of a contradiction; for mediocrity is not a coherent principle, in the sense that it may be advocated by an individual or practically applied to a situation. Certainly it cannot be aspired to. Rather, it is the result of inaction or incompetence. Thus, its influence is insidious and, once established, it has the ability to cover one's perception like a veil, giving the adequate the appearance of the outstanding or reducing the exceptional to a dull distraction. And, in doing so, it reinforces its own effect: a vicious circle of lowering expectations and the denigration of the distinguished.

So, while mediocrity's consequences are plain to see, its influence is subtle yet infectious, and this has implications for any account of it: when mediocrity is full blown, its effects are readily identifiable and its symptoms can be described in detail, but its genetic make-up is more complex to map. And, as it is by nature both invasive and pervasive, it is a contagion that remains particularly difficult to define.

It is for this reason that this essay is written generically and not anchored in current affairs. It is designed to elevate the implied above the obvious, as a full and proper understanding of the problem requires, first and foremost, an appreciation of its form. Only by understanding how mediocrity warps our perception can we understand its true nature and only from there is any practical application worthwhile.

### **Mediocrity's character**

At first glance mediocrity is calm. But that calm exterior belies panic. And it is panicking because it knows it is being dishonest when it suggests that it is calm. And it is ostensibly calm because it does

not want anyone to know it is panicking - a vicious circle borne of a deeper understanding that it is out of its depth.

It is ironic that below the surface mediocrity should feel something so intense as panic - any emotion that raises one's heartbeat is normally too much for mediocrity's fragile metabolism. One will never see mediocrity appear to be under stress, apprehensive, anxious or exhausted. To the casual observer mediocrity is mono-emotional, and there is nothing more disconcerting than its smile - feigning to assure, but assuring only doubt.

That said, it would be amiss not to describe mediocrity's true disposition. Its defining traits are as follows: apathy; indifference; doubt; pervasiveness; insecurity; superficiality; vagueness; fear; timidity; denial; compromise; laziness; inertia; arbitrariness; obstinacy; moral indignation; pettiness; jealousy; stubbornness and neediness.

### **How mediocrity is not an ideal**

Any ideal is ultimately unattainable. It is a goal towards which one constantly strives; the driving force behind progress. Excellence is such an ideal, because it is always possible to improve on even the truly brilliant. But mediocrity stands in stark contrast to this: it is a practical consequence, a finite point on an infinite spectrum. This has implications for its nature, as it occupies the ambiguous world between two extremes and so, in turn, is ambiguous itself - neither an outright failure nor a triumphant success, but often alluded to by both as an acceptable outcome.

And mediocrity is not ignorant of its own worth. It is self aware. It constantly suggests to those that would judge it that it occupies a position on that spectrum far closer to excellence than any objective consideration would grant it.

This point is critical when one is dealing with values and principles - the cornerstones of democratic philosophy. Each principle or value is underpinned by an ideal and as one moves from the theoretical to the practical so one should constantly aim to hold any outcome up against the ideal which underpins its undertaking. One should relentlessly ask the question: what more can be done to move this particular outcome closer to the ideal that underlies it. Mediocrity circumvents this process by replacing the relevant ideal with the concept of the 'acceptable'. That is, it constantly tries to reshape excellence in its own image. As such, mediocrity acts to change ones' values, distorting any ability to evaluate excellence - for one is no longer striving to move towards the unattainable but in search of the real and the practical. And so the fear that defines the pursuit of the possible is replaced by the warm embrace of compromise and continuity.

This emotional appeal is one of mediocrity's greatest strengths: while the pursuit of an ideal involves risk and, in turn, the possibility of loss, mediocrity offers assurance and the comfort of knowing. In this way it seduces those with bold aspirations to let go of their dreams; indeed, not to dream at all.

### **How mediocrity complements nationalism**

Stripped of its rhetoric nationalism has its core the pursuit of sameness. It is founded on the notion of what one might call 'negative equality': "*We must all be alike,*" writes the author Ray Bradbury, "*Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal*". This sentiment captures brilliantly the emotional drive that belies those whose purpose it is to promote mediocrity over excellence or, at the very least, those who see independence, difference and competition - the essence of excellence - as a threat, to be stifled or stamped out. "*Then all are happy,*" Bradbury continues, "*for there are no mountains to make them cower, to judge themselves against*". And so it is that the similarity between these two ideas - nationalism and mediocrity - is revealed.

As Bradbury suggests, the desire to enforce continuity is borne of a misunderstanding: for those who resent difference, equality is not an ideal towards which a society should constantly strive, but a practical condition defined by the lowest common denominator, to which everyone should be made to adhere. This misconception is the very motivation behind both nationalist thought and the mediocre impulse.

And so it is that nationalism and mediocrity have found common ground in a single purpose: the creation of an environment in which difference is outlawed as the enemy and uniformity celebrated as the desired outcome. That great essayist William Hazlitt once put it like this: “*The way to get on in the world is to be neither more nor less wise, neither better nor worse than your neighbours.*” The consequences of that, however, are profound because difference is a catalyst for excellence. If it is suppressed, the possibility of change or progress is reduced and public thought stagnates.

Nationalism revels in this. For the nationalist the *status quo* is has no reference in time, it is the past, the present and the future. And therein lies the fuel, and rationale, for any culture which embraces sameness over difference and mediocrity over excellence.

### **How mediocrity promotes the average**

Consider this: the word mediocre is the chief beneficiary of its own influence. A great many dictionaries cite mediocrity as an antonym for excellence. Yet there is a common understanding, one which is gaining strength, that to be mediocre is to fall between two worlds - excellence and failure - and that this is no bad thing. In other words, to be mediocre is an indictment but there is room to decline further still, and its relative position to excellence means, to the mediocre, that position is always justifiable.

I believe there is a stronger case to be made: that while the difference between mediocrity and failure is relative it is not substantive, as both fall short of expectation; but the difference between mediocrity and excellence *is* substantive and thus the same cannot be said in the other direction.

One might well ask: how has it come to pass that the word mediocre has risen through the ranks, closing the gap between itself and excellence in the order of things? The answer is that it has reaped its own reward. Simply put, it has become acceptable to be mediocre.

“*Mediocrity is excellent to the eyes of mediocre people*” wrote the French essayist Joseph Joubert. Perhaps it has some way to go before it usurps excellence itself but certainly it is fair to say that, in the public mind, mediocrity enjoys equal billing with the adequate, the average and the acceptable, as opposed to their opposites. And that is a direct result of its influence. Through mediocrity’s eyes, the glass is always half-full.

### **How mediocrity prefers the general to the specific**

To be specific, that is, to describe accurately something in detail, is an onerous task. It requires one to be prepared not only for disappointment (because the details of most things reveal them to be less than perfect - inconsistent and, often, random) but dedicated to understanding the subject at hand fully and rigorous in applying that understanding. Being vague or general allows one to gloss over inconsistency and to give randomness and ambiguity the appearance of order, structure and uniformity. Naturally then, the former lends itself to commitment and expertise - two defining characteristics of excellence - while the latter lends itself to mediocrity, which enjoys nothing more than ignoring the particular in favour of the general.

It is easy, then, to understand why mediocrity is a moraliser: because there is no subject more prone to shades of grey than human nature. That fact is too much for mediocrity. Humankind’s diversity, its

inconsistency, the wonderful richness of its difference is something mediocrity is unable to understand, let alone appreciate. If anything, it is repulsed by it.

And so mediocrity is a shallow soul. It finds refuge in insincere moral platitudes - such things as 'appropriateness' and 'respectfulness', 'politeness' and 'civility' - and it is by nature deferential and obsequious, and places much emphasis on status. These are the things that help it to cope; to bypass proper interrogation and to avoid the possibility of a deeper understanding or greater appreciation of the world around it. And it advocates them vociferously. One begins to see how mediocrity lends itself to nationalism, which has a proclivity for moralising.

### **How mediocrity resents excellence**

Mediocrity is a confused society, even its own members refute their status; but it is also a cruel society which, because its reach is now so far and wide, often tempts those forged in excellence to seek its approval. That is a mistake, because mediocrity will never endorse excellence, just as compromise will never understand principle. If anything, it resents excellence and seeks it out with the purpose of diluting or ending its influence entirely. The greatest judge of excellence is excellence itself. The ability properly to distinguish the one from the other will tell you to which society you belong and, if you are wise as well as excellent, where you should look for approval.

Why does mediocrity resent excellence with such intensity? In many respects these two protagonists are mutually exclusive, so perhaps its animosity is understandable; but that is also to detract from mediocrity's cunning. Mediocrity lurks within excellence, waiting for an opportunity to manifest. Yet the opposite does not hold true. And here excellence is its own worst enemy, for such is its appetite for progress that what is excellent today will undoubtedly be mediocre tomorrow. Mediocrity, on the other hand, is trapped in time. What is mediocre today will not past muster tomorrow. And so it seeks to extend the bubble in which it thrives, so as to engulf as much possible, slowing down time and making society forget the world that lives outside its reach, as it moves to banish excellence from its sight.

There is another source for that resentment. And it is deeply ironic. Mediocrity's curse is that it is self aware. Inherent in the idea of resentment is the requirement that one understands what it is that one dislikes. Mediocrity understands full well what excellence is and the chasm that separates the two. And mediocrity resents it. It resents it because it knows that its own nature is apathetic, that the abyss between it and excellence will never be crossed and that even to contemplate doing so would require mediocrity to leave its comfort zone and venture out into the unknown. And with a glance in excellence's direction mediocrity articulates all these constraints in an instant, and then it acts to remove the threat from its view.

### **How mediocrity is insidious and pervasive**

The Sorites paradox poses the following question: if one has a single grain of sand and to it one adds another and another, and so on and so forth, at what point do you have a heap of sand? Basic logic dictates that if you have a single grain of sand, you do not have a heap. By the same logic, if you have two grains of sand, you do not have a heap; nor do three grains constitute a heap; nor four. Yet, at some point, if you keep adding a single grain of sand at a time, you will indeed have a heap. And the question then becomes, at what point does your initial premise - that a single grain of sand does not constitute a heap - become false?

The paradox is also known as the 'little-by-little argument' and it describes very well the nature of mediocrity and how it subtly strengthens its grip around society's throat. It does so little-by-little.

A mediocre outcome does not comprise a threat. It can be easily excused or explained away; certainly that is mediocrity's own intent. Rather it is that attitude - one fostered and encouraged by mediocrity itself - that manufactures an environment in which mediocrity multiplies. Put another way: it is not the mediocre outcome which is problematic - failure is an inherent risk in any endeavour - but the attitude that accompanies it. It is that attitude which determines whether or not that outcome will proliferate or be isolated. And as an attitude, mediocrity has many guises: apathy, indifference, idleness, denial - each of which insidiously infects public thought and serves as the source for mediocrity's strength and growth.

It becomes apparent, then, how mediocrity is pervasive, because it is rare for any attitudinal change to be marked or dramatic; more likely it is subtle and takes shape over time. Mediocrity is nothing more than a nudge in a certain direction. As such it can be easily resisted but, if ignored, sooner or later you will find yourself standing within its domain, unable to account for how you got there.

### **How mediocrity elevates process and compromise over outcomes**

An outcome requires effort to achieve. So it is by nature mediocrity's enemy. And mediocrity will act to prevent its achievement or reduce its impact. It does this by shifting emphasis away from the outcome and towards the process designed to achieve it. This trend is bolstered by mediocrity's great love of bureaucracy. Indeed, when mediocrity is firmly established in an organisation, the nature of any given process is elevated even to the point where the outcome is no longer relevant at all. The form of that process, its structure, its composition, its timelines, its parameters, its procedural correctness become all-important and every effort is poured into ensuring that these requirements are all indulged and fully interrogated.

Here mediocrity is the enemy of legitimate decisions. Under the pretence that it speaks on behalf of the majority, mediocrity allows one voice of dissent to be used as a pseudo-moral veto, negating any democratic outcome by elevating discontent above consensus.

In this way mediocrity reverses best practice: instead of the outcome determining the process needed to achieve it, the outcome is warped to comply with the process. Mediocrity takes all that is noble about compromise and turns it on itself, bringing its ability to dilute excellence to the fore and emphasising form over substance. In doing so it drains resources and redirects effort to those things that detract from progress and stifle development.

There are key phrases and words which mediocrity relies on to shore up its cause - all distorted for the purpose of interrogating process and redirecting one's focus away from outcomes: 'inclusive' (as in, was the process inclusive?), 'fair' (was it fair?), 'consultation' (was everyone consulted?) and 'thorough' (was it thorough enough?) among many others. Any outcome is held hostage to such questions. To those who would strive for excellence, these are watchwords, to be approached with caution; to those caught in mediocrity's embrace, they are weasel words, used to mask one's true intent. Significantly, each one of them is subjective and, as such, opens the door to debate and a discussion with no readily identifiable end. Everything is negotiable. All of this works in mediocrity's favour - it is enervating, ensuring that time and effort are consumed on those things which detract from the hard decisions which necessitate any outcome.

### **How mediocrity hollows language**

Mediocrity's relationship with language swings violently between antagonism and celebration. There is no greater source of satisfaction for the mediocre than being able to manipulate language to reduce expectation and numb the anxiety that accompanies the prospect of application or exertion. When it is antagonistic, it will fight or deny the meaning of words; when it is celebratory, it relishes in its own contrived interpretation of key words and phrases. Always its purpose it to reduce expectation, lower

the bar and ease the workload. And once again, if mediocrity is firmly entrenched in a society, the latter of these two emotional states has some serious consequences for the nature of public discourse and the language that defines it. Mediocrity eats away at the meaning of words, leaving behind a hollow shell. The more pronounced the problem, the more acute the effect.

The first to fall are those words related to principles and values - ideas like 'accountability' and 'transparency', 'good governance' and 'tolerance'. Special attention is given to 'excellence'. Each of these words is steadily denuded of its connotations and denotation, until it is nothing more than an empty reference to an idea which no one can define, but everyone is willing to debate. A mediocre society will spend much time pondering the nature of accountability and what constitutes good governance, but precious little time actually holding people to account or practising good governance.

There are some words that are immune to mediocrity's influence, but only because they are themselves ambiguous by nature: 'adequate', 'average', 'sufficient', 'satisfactory', 'appropriate', and 'acceptable'. It is no surprise, then, that because of their ambiguity mediocrity has claimed these words as its own, and uses them under the pretence that all is well and real progress, just around the next corner.

Because mediocrity has such an affinity for vagueness and generalisation, it is also a good friend of the cliché. Most clichés do not hold up to close examination, but they do serve another purpose: to the uneducated they are an allusion to wisdom, and so mediocrity uses them to impress those who can only be impressed and bolster its own sense of self worth.

### **How mediocrity focuses on the existent at the expense of the possible**

The downside of reducing expectation and celebrating the lowest common denominator is that it is not possible to celebrate that purpose itself. Even mediocrity knows its own limits, and for it to expressly state its intent would be to reveal itself for what it really is. So instead it concerns itself with defining what is already plain to see. This focus on the existent has the effect of diverting attention away from the possible; for, if the parameters of a debate are predefined, it is impossible to analyse any matter within its broader context: its own nature determines its strengths and weaknesses. And if the subject is intrinsically mediocre, within that limited frame of reference, even its best attributes are hard to cherish. Not so for mediocrity. It presents each attribute as a grand achievement by reference to those things below it, simultaneously enforcing an artificial amnesia about the possibilities that might exist above it.

### **How mediocrity undermines accountability**

Mediocrity detests having to explain its own actions and thus accountability is a principle for which it reserves exceptional hostility. In order to properly account for one's actions, it is necessary not only to explain what happened, but why. Mediocrity has no problem with the what. Indeed, it enjoys nothing more than initiating an in-depth discussion about the exact nature of those things right before its eyes; but beyond that it is not willing to look. And that is the very place where a person's intent can be found. This refusal to engage in any discussion about motive is perfectly understandable; after all, mediocrity's motive is self-serving and its intent callous. One can always tell someone drunk on mediocrity, they are unable to talk about abstract concepts and obsess about describing the practical world around them. Asking mediocrity to account for its inability to predict failure or to plan ahead, even for its unwillingness to change the *status quo*, is thus a futile exercise. In its most virulent form, mediocrity's deliberate short-sightedness advances past denial and the excuse becomes reality: intent is outsourced entirely to someone else; there is only action, and who can be held to account for doing nothing more than what they were told?

This last point is important because it has implications for personal responsibility. The last thing mediocrity wants is responsibility, and when it is thrust upon it, it froths and bubbles - a violent allergic reaction, akin to salt being poured on a snail. It will look anywhere but in the mirror, and blame and misdirection are the tools it trades in when it is put under pressure.

### **How mediocrity distorts reason**

Mediocrity is fickle, fluctuating between anger and apathy. When it is angry the cause is resentment - it recognises excellence and understands it will never be able to achieve it, and this is the source of intense distress. But that is a truth mediocrity can never express and so the anger swells within it. It never manifests in rage, rather passive aggression. And one can almost taste the bitterness.

When mediocrity is apathetic the cause is fear. On the horizon it recognises excellence and the thought of the arduous journey necessary to meet up with it in the far distance is simply too much to bear. And so it shuts down and retreats, arguing that the undertaking is simply too difficult or dangerous to merit any serious consideration; and besides, what's wrong with where it is?

And this is to mediocrity's own detriment; for, in being able to recognise excellence, it reveals some small amount of appreciation for it. With regard to lazy writers, the famed literary critic Cyril Connolly puts it like this: "*Sloth in writers is always a symptom of an acute inner conflict, especially that laziness which renders them incapable of doing the thing which they are most looking forward to.*" So mediocrity is able to experience some small regret, and it has only its own fear to blame.

The common consequence of both these moods is the damage inflicted on reason. If it is angry, mediocrity's judgment is warped by malice and, if it is apathetic, its façade of reasonableness is designed to mask the way in which it manipulates logic in justifying its failure to act. And so it is that mediocrity often renders rational thought redundant. Its own emotional state means it is simply unable to appreciate the power that resides in a carefully reasoned argument.

### **How mediocrity is intuitive**

Excellence is counter-intuitive. Not entirely, but substantially. Perhaps Aristotle put it best when he said excellence "*is not an act but a habit*". Nevertheless, it does involve risk, the possibility of failure and a venture into the unknown. All of these things require one's intellect to override an emotional pull in the other direction. For mediocrity, however, there is no such choice. Intuitively it chooses the path of least emotional resistance, bypassing hard decisions by avoiding them in the first place.

Mediocrity is unthinking. Its business is not to stimulate thought but to soothe away anxiety. Mistakenly it thinks the best way to do this is to pretend conflict doesn't exist. So mediocrity never actually calms its inner fears but denies them, as it does the need for introspection or self appraisal. This stands in stark contrast to excellence, which is self-calibrating: it gratefully assimilates any shortcoming as knowledge necessary to reset its own processes and advance forward.

### **How mediocrity is unapologetic**

Because excellence realises that any error or poor outcome on its part stands in the way of progress it is able to apologise. It does so because, in the first place, it has the ability to identify an error in judgment (indeed, it cannot ignore it) and, in the second place, because it wants to improve. Mediocrity, however, cannot apologise. It cannot because, on both counts, its nature is intrinsically different to that of excellence: not only does it not possess the ability to identify mistakes, but it has absolutely no desire to apologise for them.

The first of these two points concerns its aptitude - mediocrity lacks the requisite skills, knowledge and expertise to recognise properly any shortcoming; the second concerns its obstinate nature - mediocrity is unwilling to apologise because it understands that it is unable to improve and so any defeat is not a stepping stone, as it is for excellence, but a ceiling. That is, it represents a point beyond which mediocrity cannot pass. And so it refuses to recognise it; for to do so would be to reveal its own limits.

Thus, should a situation arise in which excellence is obliged to apologise to mediocrity, the scene is set for much resentment and animosity. Instead of that apology being received as an appropriate response to the desire to develop or advance, mediocrity will turn it into an indictment - an opportunity to berate excellence, to blame and moralise. Excellence knows this and it is a bitter pill to swallow. It makes sense, then, that when excellence is bolstered by maturity and the perspective inherent to it, even in error it rises above mediocrity and holds the high ground. Mediocrity is ageless, it lurks in perpetual adolescence.

But mediocrity's duplicity does not stop with moral indignation. In an act of complete self indulgence, mediocrity will not hesitate for a moment to bask in excellence's success, or to claim its' victories as its own. Despite every effort to sabotage it, regardless of a stubborn refusal to celebrate it and notwithstanding a deep-seated resentment toward championing it, mediocrity will seamlessly appropriate any excellent outcome as if that achievement was its very intention from the beginning.

#### **How mediocrity creates a false sense of comfort**

Mediocrity denies its own existence. One might ask how this assertion fairly sits next to the contention that mediocrity it is self aware. The answer is obvious: its denial is a consequence of it being self aware.

More often than not mediocrity's fear - and the resentment that accompanies it - is a powerful reaction to a subliminal awareness, a suggestion at the very edge of its consciousness that it is inadequate. But it is there none-the-less and the implications for mediocrity's behaviour, profound. On a day-to-day basis, however, mediocrity drifts through the world seemingly oblivious to its own nature and, were one to confront it, any acknowledgment of its form or character would amount to nothing more than a superficial smile and a nod, only for it to revert to type the very next morning. To meet head-on its own deficiencies would be for mediocrity to relinquish its purpose; like a wildfire realising its authority is determined by the very things it destroys and willingly sacrificing its ambition. So instead it embraces denial, happy to pretend it doesn't exist and easily offended when it sees its own shadow.

Mediocrity constantly strives to extend this false sense of comfort to the world around it. But even that world is no bigger than its imagination. And it has no imagination; for imagination is aspirational and mediocrity cannot dream. For mediocrity, the world is restricted to only those things right before its eyes. As a general rule, the further something is from mediocrity, the less likely it is to give it its attention; and those things out of sight get no attention at all.

#### **How mediocrity is blindly optimistic or pessimistic**

For mediocrity there is no difference between optimism and pessimism: both are useful excuses to explain away failure. And the more optimistic or pessimistic mediocrity is, the bigger the failure it is able to explain. In this sense it uses both as a distraction, not only from its own intent but from its particular role in any endeavour. It employs exaggeration and hyperbole to achieve its ends and is willing even to resort to emotional blackmail, if raw enthusiasm does not serve its purpose.

When it is blindly optimistic, it plays on political correctness and constantly suggests that even a bold undertaking is not bold enough. When it is blindly pessimistic, it plays on fear and uses bureaucracy

as mirror to deflect passion and commitment. Both those attitudes are then consistently applied, whether expressed at an idea's conception or its collapse.

If mediocrity is optimistic in response to failure, it is so because that is all it has to offer; if it is pessimistic, it is so because, by default - as opposed to design - it managed to make the right judgment and is thus presented with a rare opportunity to champion its own ignorance, which it does with glee.

### **How mediocrity self-replicates and reduces expectation**

By its very existence mediocrity has achieved a large part of its objective. As excellence is a relative concept - in the sense that it can be improved upon - it requires a benchmark against which it can be measured; and mediocrity happily obliges. In doing so it once again acts to reverse best practice. Excellence should never gauge its worth against what is acceptable. Its inherent value sets it apart from the common and the average. Rather it should aspire to what has not yet been achieved. It should constantly aim to raise the bar, to fuel expectation and to drive progress. The moment it stops doing this, the instant excellence relaxes and suggests it has run its course, mediocrity has its foot in the door. From there it systematically draws excellence towards it, until the two are indistinguishable. And it does this over and over again, until society has forgotten what excellence looks like.

Obviously this has implications for expectation. If the average is acceptable - worse still, if the average is supposedly excellent - society's expectations are lowered. And, instead of celebrating any development as an indication of what might follow, it is championed as yet another shining example of what has already been achieved.

### **How mediocrity can never be eliminated**

Mediocrity cannot ever be destroyed. What can be addressed is one's attitude toward it. It is true that, where that attitude is borne of mediocrity itself, this might appear something of a contradiction but in practice the two are easily distinguishable. And the differentiation is important, for the one is a consequence of the other and, if the source can be extinguished, its effects will be quelled in turn.

The case is sometimes made that a mediocre attitude is the consequence of a poor outcome (an excuse which serves the interests of the mediocre themselves, for it suggests they are a victim of something over which they have no control). But this is wrong. A mediocre outcome can easily be the unintended result of an endeavour undertaken in the pursuit of excellence. It happens all the time. An endeavour pursued under the influence of mediocrity's spell, however, will only ever be mediocre itself; if not, worse. It is one's attitude to mediocrity that determines its strength and, if it is to be countered, it is to this cause that one must pay particular attention.

It is worth saying something about the nature of excellence here, because it serves to illuminate not only the difference between it and mediocrity, but the nature of mediocrity itself. Excellence is resilient, it is determined, it feeds on aspiration and hope and its strength lies in a powerful instinct which relentlessly drives it not only to compete with brilliance, but to surpass it. Starved of hope and aspiration though, it will waste away. Excellence needs excellence in order to survive. But this is not true of mediocrity. It can survive anywhere. Feeding off insecurity and fear and able to regenerate at a speed excellence simply cannot match. Even when mediocrity is weak and frail, it needs only the smallest amount of sustenance to regenerate and infect those around it.

In order to suppress mediocrity's influence, then, one has to be permanently vigilant and ruthlessly focused on starving it of those things that would give it life.

## Conclusion

*“Democracy shouldn’t aim to reduce people and their achievements to a common denominator; it should aim to raise them, ambitiously and dramatically, as close as possible to an ideal.” [A.C. Grayling]*

*“The tendency of democracies is, in all things, to mediocrity.” [James Fenimore Cooper]*

I have tried in this essay to set out the nature of mediocrity, in order that it may be more easily identified and its influence countered.

If we are to begin to move away from a culture of mediocrity and towards a society that champions and cherishes excellence, we need to ask some simple questions: Do we aspire to something excellent, or do we aim only to achieve that which is easily within our reach? Can we properly recognise excellence? Have our expectations been lowered to the point where the average is acceptable? And these questions should be asked not only of ourselves but of those who would represent us in government.

To make this move is to overcome a massive inertia. It requires absolute commitment and a relentless drive to lift expectations, to demand excellence from others, to deliver excellence ourselves and to measure our performance against the highest standards. A failure to do so runs the risk of cultivating a society with collective amnesia, no longer able to recognise excellence or to appreciate its worth.

Expelling this enemy that has crept into our house and made itself comfortable requires a monumental effort. But it is by no means a lost cause; to suggest as much would be to grant mediocrity the victory it so dearly desires.

Each of us has a duty in this regard and the potential reward is great. For to be outstanding, to strive for excellence and to celebrate it, is a feeling many of us have forgotten and it is a wondrous thing: a glorious feeling defined by pride, a fulfilment enriched by a sense of accomplishment and the joy of knowing that one has risen above the usual and reserved a special place among the exceptional.

That alone is something worth fighting for.

Gareth van Onselen  
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