

AIMING FOR MORAL MEDIOCRITY

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Abstract: Most people aim to be about as morally good as their peers—not especially better, not especially worse. We do not aim to be good, or non-bad, or to act permissibly rather than impermissibly, by fixed moral standards. Rather, we notice the typical behavior of our peers, then calibrate toward so-so. This is a somewhat bad way to be, but it's not a terribly bad way to be. We are somewhat morally criticizable for having low moral ambitions. Typical arguments defending the moral acceptability of low moral ambitions—the So-What-If-I'm-Not-a-Saint Excuse, the Fairness Objection, the Happy Coincidence Defense, and the claim that you're already in The-Most-You-Can-Do Sweet Spot—do not survive critical scrutiny.

1. Introduction

I have an empirical thesis and a normative thesis. The empirical thesis is: Most people aim to be *morally mediocre*. They aim to be about as morally good as their peers—not especially better, not especially worse. This mediocrity has two aspects. It is peer-relative rather than absolute, and it is middling rather than extreme. We do not aim to be good, or non-bad, or to act permissibly rather than impermissibly, by fixed moral standards. Rather, we notice the typical behavior of people we regard as our peers, and we aim to behave broadly within that range. We aim to be neither among the best nor among the worst. We—most of us—look around, notice how others are acting, then calibrate toward so-so.

The normative thesis is that this is a somewhat bad way to be, but it's not a terribly bad way to be. Also, it is a somewhat good way to be, but it's not a wonderfully good way to be. It's morally mediocre to aim for moral mediocrity. This might sound like a tautology, but it's not. Someone with stringent normative views might regard it as inexcusably rotten to aim merely for mediocrity in our rotten world. Someone with much less stringent views might think that it's perfectly fine to aim for mediocrity, as long as you avoid being among the worst. I will argue that aiming for mediocrity is neither perfectly fine nor inexcusably rotten. We're morally

blameworthy not to aspire for better, but we also deserve tepid praise for avoiding the swampy bottom.

Part One defends the view that most of us aim for about the moral middle. Part Two argues that, at least in our culture, having such an aim is not perfectly morally fine, and thus that the somewhat pejorative term *mediocre* is warranted, capturing in a single word both the empirical peer-relative middlingness and the moderate moral badness.

Part One: The Empirical Thesis

2. Following the Moral Crowd

Robert B. Cialdini and collaborators went to Arizona's Petrified Forest National Park (2006). The park had been losing about a ton of petrified wood per month, mostly stolen in small amounts by casual visitors. Cialdini and collaborators posted four different signs intended to discourage theft, rotating their placement at the heads of different paths. Two signs were explicit injunctions: (A) "Please don't remove petrified wood from the park" (with a picture of a visitor stealing wood, crossed by a red circle and bar) and (B) "Please leave petrified wood in the park" (with a picture of a visitor admiring and photographing a piece of wood). Two signs were descriptive: (C) "Many past visitors have removed the petrified wood from the park, changing the state of the Petrified Forest" (with pictures of three visitors taking wood) and (D) "The vast majority of past visitors have left the petrified wood in the park, preserving the natural state of the Petrified Forest" (with pictures of three visitors admiring and photographing the petrified wood). Cialdini and collaborators then noted how much wood the visitors took from the paths headed by the different signs. Rates of theft were lowest (1.7%) when visitors were explicitly enjoined not to take wood (Condition A). Rates of theft were highest (8.0%) when visitors were told that many past visitors have removed wood (Condition C). Being told that many visitors have removed wood might even have increased the rates of theft, which were estimated normally to be 1% to 4% of visitors (Roggenbuck et al. 1997).

Cialdini and collaborators also found that hotel guests were substantially more likely to reuse towels when a message to "help save the environment" was supplemented with the information that "75% of the guests who stayed in this room (#xxx) participated in our new resource savings program by using their towels more than once" than when the message to help save the environment was supplemented with other types of information or a longer injunction (Goldstein et al. 2008). Similarly, evidence suggests that people are more likely to heed injunctions to reduce household energy usage when shown statistics indicating that they are using more energy than their neighbors—and they may even increase usage when shown statistics that they are using less (Schultz et al. 2007; Allcott 2011; Ayres et al.

2013; Karlin et al. 2015). Littering, lying, tax compliance, and suicide appear to be contagious (Cialdini et al. 1990; Gould 2001; Keizer et al. 2011; Haw et al. 2013; Innes and Mitra 2013; Abrutyn and Mueller 2014; Hays and Carver 2014; Kroher and Wolbring 2015; Maple et al. 2017; Hallsworth et al. 2017; Reyes-Portillo et al. 2018). In “dictator games” (i.e., in laboratory situations in which randomly chosen participants are given money and told they can either keep it all for themselves or share some with less lucky participants), participants tend to be less generous when they learn that previous participants kept most of the money (Bicchieri and Xiao 2009; Dimant 2015; Mcauliffe et al. 2017). According to the large literature on the “bystander effect,” people are less likely to offer aid to strangers if others nearby remain passive (Fischer et al. 2011).

Cialdini concludes that “injunctive norms” (i.e., social or moral admonitions) most effectively promote norm-compliant behavior when they align with “descriptive norms” (i.e., facts about how people actually behave). People are more likely to abide by moral rules if they see that others are also doing so. Conversely, if people see others getting away with morally bad behavior, they are more likely to behave badly themselves. Bicchieri (2017) endorses a similar view. She argues that people will normally comply with social norms only if they have the “empirical expectation” that others are also complying. People tend to follow the (im-)moral crowd. (See also Gino and Galinsky 2012; Dimant 2015; Tankard and Paluck 2016; Farrow et al. 2017). In Section 4, I will add some caveats to these claims.

3. Moral Self-Licensing

All half-hearted dieters know about self-licensing. You’ve been good all day: the salad with only a forkful of dressing, the orange, the cup of plain yogurt, the turkey sandwich no mayo. So tonight you can afford a brownie! *Moral self-licensing* is a similar idea applied to moral cases. You’ve been morally good for a while, or maybe you’ve just done something especially admirable. So now you can indulge in a little sin or selfishness. Conversely, in *moral cleansing* you might react to having done something particularly bad by being especially good for a little while, to kind of even things out.

In a well-known series of experiments, Mazar and Zhong (2010) showed participants an online store either with mostly “green” environmentally friendly products or with few green products. Participants then made hypothetical purchases up to \$25, with a chance that they would actually receive those products to take home. Mazar and Zhong hypothesized that participants who had been randomly assigned to select products from the green store would experience a boost of their “moral self” and be subsequently less motivated to avoid moral transgression. As predicted, participants who had selected from the green store offered less money in dictator games and were more willing to lie to an experimenter for money. Other researchers have found that merely expressing moral intentions or

imagining positive moral traits or actions can also produce less generous choices in dictator games (Sachdeva et al. 2009; Cornelissen et al. 2013; Susewind and Hoelzl 2014; Clot et al. 2018) and more lying or cheating in laboratory conditions (Brown et al. 2011; Jordan et al. 2011; Cornelissen et al. 2013; and conversely, recalling negative moral behavior may reduce rates of laboratory cheating: Ward and King 2018).

In another influential series of studies, Benoît Monin and Dale T. Miller (2001) presented Princeton undergraduates with an opportunity to display their anti-racist or anti-sexist credentials, either by affirming egalitarian opinions on a questionnaire or by selecting an obviously best-qualified black or woman candidate over four white men in a hypothetical hiring decision. Other participants completed a different questionnaire or selected only among white men. When later presented with a hypothetical hiring decision for a stereotypically male job or for hiring a black versus a white officer into a racially charged police force, participants who had earlier displayed their anti-sexist or anti-racist credentials expressed more preference for the white man. Monin and Miller interpret these results as showing that after displaying egalitarianism, participants feel freer to express honest responses that might be partly driven by sexism or racism. (See also Bradley-Geist et al. 2010; Effron et al. 2009; Effron et al. 2012; Merritt et al. 2012; Cascio and Plant 2015; Ebersole et al. 2016).

Similarly, according to *moral identity theory*, people work to ensure that others' perceptions of their moral traits match their own perceptions of their moral traits, calibrating their behavior for better or worse as occasion demands (Mazar et al. 2008; Stets and Carter 2011; 2012; Moore and Gino 2013; Savage et al. 2018). Despite some degree of moral self-flattery (Section 6), most of us don't regard ourselves as extraordinarily fair or generous. If moral identity theory is correct, we will tend to avoid doing morally excellent things that conflict with our self-image.

4. The Gap Between the Evidence Above and the Thesis That Most People Aim for Moral Mediocrity

My thesis is not the almost-tautological thesis that most people are about morally average. Nor is it the somewhat less tautological thesis, defended at convincing length by Christian Miller, that most of us waver unsteadily between good, middling, and bad behavior depending on details of the situation (Miller 2013; 2014; 2018). It is the more specific thesis that our moral middlingness is guided by our observations and expectations of our peers. Most of us actively adjust our moral behavior up or down so as to approximately match the morality of others in the groups with which we identify.

This empirical thesis is, I think, broadly suggested by the literature on moral self-licensing and following the (im-)moral crowd. Following the crowd suggests that we guide ourselves by peer-relative rather than absolute

standards. Moral self-licensing suggests that we calibrate toward some middling state. However, the studies I've cited are also consistent with the falsity of this thesis. Here's why.

First, in most of these studies, only a minority of participants change their behavior as a result of the experimental interventions. For example, although posting a sign saying that many visitors have stolen wood from the Petrified Forest may have doubled or tripled the rates of theft, the observed rate of theft with the sign was still only 8%. It is therefore consistent with Cialdini and collaborators' (2006) results that 92% of visitors abided by an absolute rather than a peer-relative norm of not stealing petrified wood. [Bicchieri and Xiao \(2009\)](#) found a variation from about 50% to about 70% selfish choices in dictator games depending on what participants had been told about previous participants' choices—a substantial change but again one that is consistent with the majority adhering to absolute rather than peer-relative norms of selfishness or generosity. Although most participants *might* follow the crowd given the right conditions—for example, if they actually saw almost everyone taking wood or if they directly witnessed person after person keeping the money in dictator games, existing experiments do not yet show this to be so. Thus, even taking the experiments I've cited at face value, it doesn't follow that most people aim for moral mediocrity.

Second, people might interpret the normative situation differently in light of evidence about peers' behavior or in light of their own past behavior. For example, if people come to believe that lots of others take wood from the park, they might conclude that it's only fair for them to do the same. Alternatively and not incompatibly, they might view high rates of theft as evidence that the community does not accept, or at least is not fully agreed on, the badness of taking wood, and they might moderate their moral opinions in partial deference to community disagreement. If “everyone does it,” maybe it's not so bad after all. Switching examples, participants might decide that if most of the lucky participants keep all of the money in dictator games, then that's just the community norm for how that type of game should be played. Similarly, in bystander situations others' passivity might be viewed as evidence that the situation doesn't require response. Furthermore, as [Mullen and Monin \(2016\)](#) emphasize, some of the licensing experiments might be better understood as credentialing rather than compensating. Credentialing and compensating are not quite the same concept. Credentialing is more epistemic, while compensating is more about accumulating moral credits and debits. Positive behavioral “credentials” might lead one to interpret an ambiguous action as not bad (e.g., not really racist after all), which is different from a calibration or compensation process that accepts that an action is bad but chooses it anyway.

Third, the literature on moral licensing and following the moral crowd is relatively new. Many of the results come from the same few research groups.

Although two recent meta-analyses of the licensing literature find an overall effect (Blanken et al. 2015; Simbrunner and Schlegelmilch 2017), caution is warranted given that the lower bounds of the 95% confidence intervals for nearly every study are close to zero (see Blanken et al. 2015, Figure 1) and there appears to be a positive correlation between standard error and reported effect size (Kuper and Bott Forthcoming). These are patterns that suggest the possibility of underpowered research and a publication bias favoring positive results. One systematic replication attempt of Monin and Miller (2001) confirms a positive result (participants more likely to choose a man for a hypothetical hire after having previously expressed egalitarian opinions), but the effect size was small: 0.1 points on a 7-point scale (Ebersole et al. 2016). Other studies suggest that remembering past good deeds or priming participants' positive moral self-concepts might lead to *more* good behavior by reinforcing one's moral self-concept—the opposite of a licensing effect (Burger and Caldwell 2003; Aquino et al. 2009; Young et al. 2012; Tasimi and Young 2016). Doubts have also been raised about the methodology, replicability, and effect size of studies of the influence of peer behavior on littering, lying, towel reuse, and dictator game performance (Bohner and Schlüter 2014; Wicherts and Bakker 2014; Kroher and Wolbring 2015; Gächter et al. 2017). Although the bystander effect has been widely replicated in low-stakes situations, it might disappear or even be reversed in physically dangerous emergencies or cases in which a “villain” perpetrator is present (Fischer et al. 2011). The empirical evidence, including mediators, effect sizes, and replicability, thus remains uncertain.

I offer the moral mediocrity hypothesis only as an empirical conjecture, one that has some support, but not decisive support, from the current scientific evidence, and one that also, I hope, seems plausible on commonsense grounds. People calibrate toward approximately the moral middle. People do not typically choose to follow a moral rule if they see many others gathering the benefits of vice. But also, typically, people don't want to be worse violators than their peers. If we sense that others are honorable and true, we tend to admire that and follow along. In exceptional cases, we might take a lone stand for morality; but afterwards, it's hard to resist the thought that the world owes us something. Conversely, we might sin exceptionally, but then we often feel that we must compensate somehow.

5. The Moral Behavior of Ethics Professors and the Limited Effects of Moral Discovery

Professional ethicists appear to behave no differently, on average, than do professors who do not specialize in ethics. They behave no differently despite—at least on some issues, like charity and vegetarianism—tending to endorse more stringent moral views. The moral mediocrity hypothesis is one way to make sense of these findings.

Starting in 2007, Joshua Rust and I began looking for empirical evidence that professional ethicists behave differently than do other people of similar social background. Across several published studies employing nineteen different main measures of arguably moral behavior, our evidence suggests that ethics professors behave similarly to others of similar social background (reviewed in [Schwitzgebel and Rust 2015](#); see also [Schönegger and Wagner Forthcoming](#)). Among our measures are peer-rated overall moral behavior, theft of library books, voting participation in public elections, membership in the Nazi party in 1930s Germany, littering, failing to pay required conference registration fees, staying in regular contact with one's mother, charitable giving, vegetarianism, replying to emails from students, paying membership dues to support one's main disciplinary academic society, being an organ donor, being a blood donor, responding dishonestly to survey questions, and letting the door slam when entering or leaving during a talk. These measures vary from the trivial (door slamming, littering) to substantial life decisions that some people view as extremely morally important (joining the Nazi party, donating large sums of money to charity), from behavior toward strangers (being a blood or organ donor) to behavior toward family members (calling mom). The measures also vary from controversial issues on which moral opinion is divided (vegetarianism, payment of dues to support one's disciplinary society) to issues of broad consensus (littering, being an organ donor). Some of our measures relied on self-report (calling mom, being a blood donor) while for others we could assess behavior without self-report (voter participation, littering, paying conference registration fees, joining the Nazi party). In one case, we found evidence that ethicists behaved on average worse (obscure ethics books were more likely to be missing from academic libraries than were other books of similar age and checkout rate), but mostly we found no statistically detectable differences in behavior. (We emphasize that data were always de-identified and analyzed at the group level so that we could never determine the behavior of any living person.)

In some cases, we also had measures of expressed moral opinion about the issues in question, which we could compare with both self-reported behavior and directly observed behavior ([Schwitzgebel and Rust 2014](#)). We found several issues on which professional ethicists endorsed more stringent norms (charitable donation, vegetarianism, organ and blood donation), but we did not detect any corresponding differences in overall moral behavior by our main planned measures. (On some subsidiary measures, we did find differences, but not in any consistent direction.) Nor did we find, overall, that ethicists' behavior was either more consistent or less consistent with their explicitly endorsed normative opinions.

Our results permit several possible interpretations. One simple explanation is that philosophical moral reflection is behaviorally inert. Another is that philosophical ethics would not be inert if applied to cases that arise in ethicists' daily lives, but instead ethicists focus mainly on the abstract,

the obscure, or general public policy. Still another is that people drawn to professional ethics are disproportionately those who need to reason their way to behaving morally, while non-ethicists require less intellectual justification for moral behavior—and so philosophical ethics effectively helps hyper-intellectual people improve to moral average. It's an open empirical question ([Rust and Schwitzgebel 2014](#)).

If the moral mediocrity hypothesis is correct, that would also explain this pattern of results. Consider some of our most striking data—the data on vegetarianism. In 2009, Joshua Rust and I sent a questionnaire to professional philosophical ethicists, non-ethicist philosophers, and a comparison group of professors in other departments in the same universities in five U.S. states ([Schwitzgebel and Rust 2014](#)). In the first part of the questionnaire, we asked respondents their attitudes about several different moral issues. Among those questions, we asked respondents to rate “regularly eating the meat of mammals, such as beef or pork” on a 1–9 scale from “very morally bad” to “very morally good,” with “morally neutral” in the middle. Sixty percent of ethicist respondents rated it somewhere on the “bad” side, compared to 45% of the non-ethicist philosophers and only 19% of the non-philosophers. But when we asked later in the survey, “Think back on your last evening meal, not including snacks. Did you eat the meat of a mammal during that meal?”, we found no statistically detectable difference among the groups. Overall 38% of respondents answered yes, including 37% of ethicists. We found a similar pattern by age and gender: big differences in expressed moral opinion, with women and younger respondents more likely to condemn meat-eating, but little if any difference in self-reported behavior. (However, see [Schönegger and Wagner Forthcoming](#) for evidence that German-speaking philosophers might eat less meat than non-philosophers.)

So here's a thought experiment.

Cheeseburger ethicist. Max¹ is an ethics professor teaching an applied moral issues class. He introduces his students to the philosophical arguments for and against vegetarianism. He admits to his students that he personally is convinced that the arguments for vegetarianism are sound and that eating meat is morally bad. He considers various objections, including objections raised in class discussion, and he rebuts each one. After class, he goes to the school cafeteria and eats a cheeseburger.

If the moral mediocrity hypothesis is true, we can explain Max's behavior. Max believes that, through philosophical reasoning, he has made a moral discovery: It's morally bad to eat meat. Now, having discovered this, what is Max to do? According to the moral mediocrity hypothesis, he does not

¹ Name selected randomly from lists of former lower-division students in my courses. See [Schwitzgebel 2015](#).

aim to be morally good by absolute standards. Instead, he aims to be about as morally good as the people he regards as his peers. And what are most of his peers doing? Other professors, his family and friends, the people around him in the cafeteria—they're mostly eating meat. If Max is aiming for mediocrity, he will eat meat too. Instead of leading to a change in behavior, Max's moral discovery has led him only to have a lower opinion of (almost) everyone's moral behavior, his own included, while he keeps on doing what he has always done.

Now it does seem likely that some people are convinced by philosophical arguments not only to endorse the goodness of vegetarianism but also to practice vegetarianism. This pattern can be made consistent with the moral mediocrity hypothesis if the result is licensing of worse behavior in other areas. For example, if you put in the work and self-deprivation to become a vegetarian, then maybe you have an excuse to ignore student emails more than you previously did, or to pollute more, or to be ruder to your neighbors, or to shirk departmental duties, or to give less to charity.

Suppose this is right. The main practical effect of moral discovery on our personal day-to-day behavior is that it helps us more accurately calibrate our mediocrity, with a clearer understanding of how morally good or bad we all in fact are.

6. Aiming for B+

A few years ago, I was away from my family at a luxurious ethics conference, enjoying an expensive restaurant meal, surrounded by philosophers and moral psychologists. I raised some of these issues.

"B+," said one of the others there at the dinner with me. He was a world-renowned ethicist. "That's what I'm aiming for. B+."

I remember thinking, but I did not say, *B+ sounds good. Maybe that's what I'm aiming for too. B+ on the great moral curve of white middle-class North Americans. Let other people get the As.*

B+ probably isn't low enough to be mediocre, exactly. B+ is good. It's just not excellent. Maybe, really, instead of aiming for mediocrity, most people aim for something like B+—a bit above mediocre, but shy of excellent?

Some support for this idea comes from the literature on *moral self-enhancement*. In general, people tend to have overly positive self-conceptions (Taylor and Brown 1988; Alicke and Sedikides 2011). They over-attribute positive traits to themselves, and they under-attribute negative traits. This appears to be especially the case with moral traits like honesty and fairness—even more so than with other positive traits like competence and creativity (Alicke et al. 2001; Brown 2012; Gebauer et al. 2013; Tappin and McKay 2017). Arguably, if people tend to think that they are already morally above average, their intention might be approximately to stay the course, or maybe improve just a little, thereby steering themselves somewhere north of mediocrity.

This is an attractive view. Maybe it's even true. It seems to me plausible that this is how many people think of themselves. This might be how it feels, from the inside, to be a typical person, or a typical person in our culture—before we take into account excuse-making, failure, and invisible or semi-visible sources of error and rationalization.

However, I suspect that most people who think they are aiming for B+ are in fact aiming lower. Consider the undergraduate student who tells you that they are aiming for a B+ in your class. If they're really aiming for a B+, they should be willing to calibrate their effort accordingly. If the student would dial back their effort after getting an A and if they would increase their effort after getting a C+, then yes, it's probably right to say that they're aiming for a B+. If the C+ leaves them disappointed but they are unprepared to work on improving (and there are no extenuating circumstances), then it's probably more accurate to say that they were kind of hoping that a B+ would fall into their lap, rather than really aiming for a B+. Conversely, if they don't reduce their effort after getting the A, they might not really be aiming for B+ as much as aiming higher but willing to settle if necessary. To see where people are aiming, look not at what they say but instead at how they actually calibrate. This behavior-oriented, dispositionalist view of aiming fits with the general picture of attitudes that I have defended at length elsewhere (Schwitzgebel 2002; 2013; Unpublished manuscript).

It is also important here to use objective moral standards rather than people's own moral standards, since—I hope this is not too cynical—people will tend to choose moral standards that flatter their vices. The tax cheat might come to think it's not bad to cheat on taxes; the negligent professor might decide that it's no big deal to blow off meetings with students; the racist sees nothing wrong in their racism. If we use people's own self-flatteringly chosen moral standards, it shouldn't be surprising if most of them think they're above average. Let's not do that. When I say that people aim for mediocrity, I mean not that they aim for mediocrity-by-their-own-rationalized-self-flattering-standards. I mean that they are calibrating toward what is actually morally middling by normatively appropriate peer-relative standards. I interpret both the "aiming" and the moral standards in a "de re" rather than a "de dicto" sense (Smith 1994; Arpaly 2003).

(Complications arise when moral ignorance is excusable. Related complications arise if self-licensing is governed by erroneous moral assessments, excusable or otherwise. Let's set aside these issues aside for now.)

From the inside, it might seem like you are aiming for B+. The average person might sincerely judge that that's their moral target. However, rather than interpreting such self-assessments at face value, we should look at how people actually steer. If my conjecture is right, then most people, most of the time, don't just happen to hit mediocrity. They actively wiggle and veer toward it.

About a year ago, I emailed the famous ethicist about his B+ remark. It had stuck in my mind, and I wanted his permission to quote him by name.

He didn't remember having made that remark, and he denied that that was his view. He is not, he said, aiming merely for a moral B+. It must have been the chardonnay speaking.

Part Two: The Normative Thesis

7. The Moral Mediocrity of Being Morally Mediocre

My normative thesis is that, at least in our culture, it's morally mediocre to aim to be morally mediocre. Or to phrase it in a less tautologous-sounding way: It's somewhat bad but also somewhat good to try to calibrate yourself so that you behave in ways that are overall morally similar to your peers.

"Mediocre" has a negative connotation in ordinary English. Not only does it mean somewhere in the ballpark of average or ordinary, but (in contrast with the less loaded word "average") "mediocre" also implies that the thing in question is somewhat bad. And yet, the mediocre is not horrible, and being mediocre is compatible with having some redeeming features—with being in some respects good. Mediocre coffee is good enough for me, most of the time. Mediocre students mostly pass their classes and get their degrees. Aiming for moral mediocrity is like aiming to be a moral B-minus student or a donut shop moral drip blend.

The simplest opposing views are that it's *perfectly fine* to aim to be about as morally good as your peers and that it is *horrible* to aim to be about as morally good (or rather, as morally bad) as your peers.

I won't criticize the latter view at length. I don't think many of us regard our peers as morally horrible. Some people might think that most of humanity is morally horrible, apart from their valued in-group of friends or coreligionists—but then they probably treat that in-group as the peers toward whose behavior they morally calibrate. Others might think that even their peers, perhaps *especially* their peers, are morally horrible, on the grounds that there's something morally horrible about our shared lifestyle, such as its luxuriousness in the face of global poverty. I will not address such views here. Still others might just be ordinary curmudgeons who see the worst in people. This too, is difficult to address directly. Let me note that people do often lend a helping hand to strangers for no obvious benefit; treat their fellows kindly; share, sacrifice, and maintain deep friendships; and take principled stands against injustice. Following the moral crowd can be good. When others act with kindness and integrity, that inspires us to do the same. Attempting to compensate for having acted badly can also be good; the memory of guilt can motivate improvement. We're not horrible, only mediocre!

Against the view that it's perfectly fine to aim to behave about as morally well as your peers, I offer first, your peers. They fail to reply to your important emails. They shirk their duties and neglect their promises. They are rude and grumpy for no good reason. They have annoying dogs,

loud parties, bad driving habits, and an unjustified sense of entitlement. They make you wait and then concoct some glib excuse. They form obnoxious opinions on too little information and then vote for horrible things. They participate in and support institutions and practices that casually ruin people's lives by denying them reasonable and necessary health care, by cruelly guarding unearned privilege, and by perpetuating exploitative systems. In all of these small and sometimes large ways, our peers behave badly, and we really ought to try to be better than that. I'm assuming that your peers are typical middle- to upper-class adult members of a mainstream Anglophone culture. If your peers are Nazi death camp guards or saints in Heaven, the normative assessment might be different.

Second, we are, all of us, shot through with bigotry and bias—bias based on race, sex, disability, beauty, age, class, political opinion, profession, prestige, nationality, and cultural background. We are not all biased in all respects, but we are all significantly biased in some respects. The range of biases based on disability in particular is difficult to avoid, since disability is so various and often experienced as saliently annoying to witness or deal with (Corrigan 2014). Bias toward the conventionally physically beautiful, in matters on which physical beauty ought to have no bearing, is also pervasive and substantial, across a wide range of social measures (Langlois et al. 2000). We ought to aim to improve. And we can improve! Obvious and empirically confirmed techniques exist, such as exposing oneself to positive exemplars and adopting bias-reducing policies like anonymous grading of exams—but few of us give this more than a half-hearted effort.

Third, even if we aren't morally horrible for living middle-class lifestyles, history might not judge us to be entirely innocent. Our typical lifestyles harm the environment, by which we collectively contribute to the probable death and immiseration of many millions of future people. Arguably, also, most of us ought to give much more to charitable causes, local or global, in time or in money, than we do, given our relative privilege and luxury. And most of us eat meat—which most U.S. and German ethicists think is morally bad. We purchase consumer goods from companies we know or ought to know engage in bad practices. It's contentious how bad all this is, and my overall argument does not depend essentially on any of the ideas in this paragraph, but if this perspective is even close to correct, every normal middle-class person in our society is morally criticizable for a wide range of actions every day. (Singer [1972; 2009 [1975]] is probably the best-known philosophical advocate of this variety of highly morally demanding view.)

It is not, therefore, perfectly fine to aim to be morally mediocre. We are not entirely morally blameless for implicitly steering ourselves toward being mediocre neighbors, people of about-typical levels of prejudice, and mediocre global citizens.

I will now consider four lines of reasoning by which you might hope to wiggle out of this somewhat negative conclusion.

8. The So-What-If-I'm-Not-a-Saint Excuse

People sometimes respond to my moral mediocrity thesis by acknowledging that, yes, they aren't aiming for sainthood—but that's not so bad. Sainthood is such a high standard! Ordinary people can't really be blamed for falling short of *that*. Philosopher advocates of the So-What-If-I'm-Not-a-Saint Excuse sometimes appeal to Susan Wolf's (1982) classic argument that it's reasonable not to want to be morally perfect, with all the sacrifices that moral perfection seems to require.

I'm inclined to agree with Wolf that morality is highly demanding and that when the demands of morality conflict with other deeply held values it's often wise, admirable, or reasonable to act immorally (see also [Slote 1983](#); [Williams 1985](#); [Foot 2002](#); [Dorsey 2016](#)). But to use the possibly excessive demands of sainthood as an excuse for being a mediocre member of a blameworthy crowd is to pitch a false dichotomy, as if the only choice were between mediocrity and huge self-sacrifice. Moral improvement needn't require crushing yourself. Most of us could improve quite a bit with no devastating effect on our personalities or life projects. We could be somewhat more generous with our time and less grumpy. We could give more to charity, tweak our lifestyles to better protect the environment, and be somewhat more reliable in executing our responsibilities. We could be better neighbors and sons- or daughters-in-law. We could more vividly speak against injustice. Of course we could. None of these things require sainthood or huge sacrifice; and moral improvement doesn't require that you do all of them. We could aim for an imperfect-but-excellent A or A-minus, even if we give up on A+. Among us walk morally admirable non-saints who achieve peer-relative moral excellence without leading bland or miserable lives. You probably know a few. It is easy to think of ways in which we could act morally better. We simply prefer not to do these things.

Maybe you can self-consciously and reasonably choose moral mediocrity, just like you can self-consciously and reasonably choose to buy mediocre coffee (if the excellent coffee is too expensive) and just like you can self-consciously and reasonably choose to be a mediocre student (“Hey, Cs get degrees, I've got other priorities!”). My suggestion is only this: If this speaks to your condition, acknowledge that fact and accept that you are thereby somewhat morally blameworthy.

I suppose that with all this talk of moral grading—A+, A-minus, B+, C—I ought to explicitly acknowledge the obvious caveats. Morality is multi-dimensional, defying neat linear arrangement. And moral character often also resists empirical assessment, due to deception, self-deception, humility, varying degrees of vice- or virtue-signaling, the influence of situation, and the fact that we see only limited samples of behavior. Grades simplify a complex phenomenon.

9. The Fairness Objection

The Fairness Objection is this: since (by stipulation) most of your peers aren't making the sacrifices necessary for peer-relative moral excellence, it's unfair for you to be blamed for also declining to make those sacrifices. If the average person in your financial condition gives $X\%$ of their income to charity, it would be unfair to blame you for not giving more. If your colleagues down the hall cheat, shirk, lie, and flake X amount of the time, it's only fair that you should get to do the same. Fairness requires that we demand no more than average moral sacrifice from the average person. Thus, there's nothing wrong with aiming to be a middling member of the moral community—approximately as selfish, dishonest, unkind, exploitative, and unreliable as the other people around you. As long as your “Value Over Replacement Moral Agent” (Arpaly 2017) is non-negative, you're fine!

To this objection, I offer two replies. First, sometimes we should apply absolute standards. Some actions are morally bad even if the majority of your peers are doing them. As an extreme example, consider a Nazi death camp doctor in 1941 who is somewhat kinder to the inmates and less enthusiastic about killing than the average death camp doctor, but who still participates in and benefits from the system. (A fascinating real-life case is Ernst B. in Lifton's [1986] *The Nazi Doctors*.) In such cases, “Hey, at least I'm better than average!” is a poor excuse. More moderately, most people, as I've said, exhibit substantial bigotry and bias, and they are criticizable for doing so. That you're typical or average in your degree of prejudice is at best a mitigator of blame, not an excuser. Or suppose that you work as a claims adjuster for an insurance company. If you decide on your company's behalf to deny or slow-walk someone's health coverage on flimsy grounds, betting that they won't sue, you've acted wrongly even if most of your peers would have done the same. Although some putative norms become morally optional if most of your peers fail to comply, other norms don't share that structure. For that subset of norms, aiming for mediocrity is not perfectly fine. It might be unfair to blame you *more* than your peers, but if you violate absolute moral standards you still deserve *some* blame, regardless of what your peers are doing. (Against the justice of using peers' unfair behavior as an excuse, generally, to act similarly, see the literature on partial compliance in non-ideal theories of justice: Miller 2011; Valentini 2012; Kates 2014.)

Second, trading off norm violations is often inexcusable. Maybe you're a warm-hearted fellow, but flakier than average in keeping up with deadlines and responsibilities. Maybe you know you tend to be rude and grumpy, but you're an unusually active volunteer for good causes in your community. If the moral licensing literature is correct, then most of us, in guiding our behavior, implicitly treat these tradeoffs as exculpatory. You forgive yourself for one in light of the other. You let your excellence on one area

justify lowering your aims in another, so that in averaging the two you emerge somewhere near the middle. Such tradeoffs, however, sound strange if made explicit: “It’s fine that I insulted the cashier, because this afternoon I’m volunteering for river clean-up.” “I’m not criticizable for neglecting Cameron’s urgent email because this morning I greeted Monica and Britney kindly, filling the office with good vibes.” Moral self-licensing blushes under scrutiny.

10. The Happy Coincidence Defense

Here are four things I care intensely about: being a good father, being a good philosopher, being a good teacher, and being a morally good person. It would be lovely if there were never any tradeoffs among these four aims.

Explicitly acknowledging such tradeoffs is unpleasant—sufficiently unpleasant that it’s tempting to try to rationalize them away. It’s distinctly uncomfortable to me, for example, to acknowledge that I would probably be a better father if I traveled less for work. Similarly uncomfortable is the thought that the money I spent on a family trip to Paris last summer could probably have saved a few people from death due to poverty-related causes.

Here’s a tempting way of rationalizing. I think of it as the *Happy Coincidence Defense*. Consider travel for work. I don’t *have* to travel around the world giving talks and meeting people. No one will fire me if I don’t do it, and most of my colleagues do it less than I do. I seem to be prioritizing my research career at the cost of being a somewhat less good father, teacher, and global moral citizen (given the luxurious use of resources and the pollution of air travel).

The Happy Coincidence Defense says no, I am not sacrificing these other goals at all. Although I am away from my children, I am a better father for it. I am a role model of career success for them, and I can tell them stories about my travels. I have enriched my life, and then I can mingle that richness into theirs. I am a more globally aware, wiser father! Similarly, although I might cancel a class or two and de-prioritize lecture preparation, research travel improves my teaching in the long run, since it improves me as a philosopher. And my philosophical work, isn’t that an important contribution to society? Maybe it’s important enough to morally justify the expense, pollution, and waste. I do more good for the world traveling around discussing philosophy than I could do leading a more modest lifestyle at home, donating more to charities, and being more fully engaged in my local community.

After enough reflection of this sort, it can come to seem that I am not making any tradeoffs at all among these four things that I care intensely about. Instead, I am maximizing them all. This trip I am on now, it’s the best thing I can do, all things considered, as a philosopher *and* as a father *and* as a teacher *and* as a citizen of the moral community. Good news!

Now that *might* be true—just like it might be true that the morally best action is usually in one’s “enlightened self-interest” (see discussions in Bloomfield 2008). If so, that would be a happy coincidence. Sometimes there really are such happy coincidences. Let’s work to structure our societies and lives to increase the frequency of such coincidences! But the pattern of thinking is, I think you’ll agree, suspicious. Life is full of tradeoffs among important things. Happy Coincidence reasoning seems likely often to be epistemically dubious post-hoc rationalization. It seems likely that I am illegitimately convincing myself that something I *want* to be true really is true. Through this rationalization, I treat my apparent moral mediocrity as only superficial, holding that closer investigation will reveal my life to be a harmonious convergence of moral and non-moral excellences.

11. The-Most-You-Can-Do Sweet Spot

Another approach is to accept your moral near-averageness while rejecting the idea that you are morally criticizable, by insisting that you are doing the best you can do. It is true that trying too hard at something can backfire. Trying too hard to be funny can sometimes make you less funny. If you try too hard to win the race, you might exhaust yourself at the beginning and then collapse. You need to pace yourself. Maybe morality is like that? Maybe moral idealists sometimes push themselves too hard, and they would find more success pursuing a moderate, sustainable course. Someone moved by the arguments for vegetarianism who immediately attempts the very strictest veganism might be more likely to revert to cheeseburgers in a few months than someone who sets their sights a bit lower. Somewhat differently, someone passionately committed to nosebleedingly high moral standards might become prone to self-deception, or unbearably sanctimonious, or insensitive to nuances and others’ legitimate excuses.

It is therefore possible that you are currently in the sweet spot such that if you tried to be any morally better than you in fact are, you would actually become morally worse. You might already be doing the most you can do. Since you couldn’t be morally better than you currently are, your seeming mediocrity is not criticizable. You were rude to the cashier, biased in viewing the handsome student more favorably, thoughtless of your spouse, and negligent of your months’ overdue comments to the PhD student who cannot yet advance to candidacy because of your delay—but if you tried to be any morally better you would . . . well, something.

This may be the case for some people. If you’re a homeless mother of three who has managed to keep it together through a cold winter and physical abuse, I’m ready to believe that you might really have no resources to do better than you’re already doing. But for most of us, it’s probably good policy to be skeptical of any tendency to think that you are already in The-Most-You-Can-Do Sweet Spot.

12. Conclusion

Most of us do not aim to be morally good by absolute standards. Instead we aim to be about as morally good as our peers. Our peers are somewhat morally criticizable—not morally horrible, but morally mediocre. If we aim to approximately match their mediocrity, we are somewhat morally criticizable for having such low personal moral ambitions. It’s tempting to try to rationalize one’s mediocrity away by admitting merely that one is not a saint, or by appealing to the Fairness Objection or the Happy Coincidence Defense, or by flattering oneself that one is already in The-Most-You-Can-Do Sweet Spot—but these self-serving excuses don’t survive scrutiny.

Consider where you truly aim. Maybe moral goodness isn’t so important to you, as long as you’re not among the worst. If so, own your mediocrity. Accept the moral criticism you deserve for your low moral ambitions, or change them.

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