

The Joys of Mediocrity

Intro

In reading into this topic, it seems to me that perhaps another title for this discussion could as well be the Fruits of Mediocrity for fruit can be a joy. Mediocrity is not a subject in the forefront of discourse and is a sadly neglected topic.

This paper is made up of musings rather than careful thought. Unfortunately, there has been insufficient time to invest in a more thorough approach. Perhaps some of the musings could lead to detailed discussion.

Clearing the ground

So what is mediocrity? Being mediocre? And what is being mediocre? Being average. Being ordinary. Being the norm! Why is mediocre disparaging whereas average does not carry this opprobrium. Why is being the norm either bland or appreciative in tone?

Moving to an idea of the average – the idea is that of the average IQ being 100 (i.e. the mediocre see above). This may be interpreted as meaning that half must have an IQ of less than 100. This seems rather sad, so many below 100. But maybe a correct analysis is that many float around the 100 level with outliers both above and below that cancel each other out.

Both the linguistic and the mathematical analysis should dispel the dismal aura of the word “mediocre.” and its nounification “mediocrity”

The Voyage of Discovery

Mediocrity or the average is not lauded as a concept per se in the humanities (sad seeing that mediocrity is so human). But in science that there is, in fact, a Mediocrity principle. Briefly it is that if an item is drawn at random from one of several sets or categories, it's more likely to come from the most numerous categories than from any one of the less numerous categories. It has been applied even if implicitly since the 17th century.

But on reviewing philosophy and other writings, and indeed life, one finds it has a substantial if unacknowledged presence. Some examples are our primary legislature the House of Commons (a designation not referring to areas of land that can be used by members of the public); a prime motivating pamphlet for the American War of Independence, namely “Common Sense” and the Common Law.

Before indulging in a consideration of the impact of the mediocre on individual life, it is worth considering the social dimension.

Democracy

The foundation of democracy is said to be the will of the people which as a whole should hold ultimate sway, no particular group should. By definition, the generality of the people will be the average i.e. the mediocre. Hence the mediocrity is king.

It should be mentioned that to many, if not most, democracy is now considered a good thing.

The Reasonable Man

Turning to the law, a venerable fiction/concept in English law is the “reasonable man” also called the “man on the Clapham omnibus”. What is he - but the ordinary person. His notional standard of behaviour is generally the standard by which a litigant’s behaviour is judged. In defamation the standard is whether a statement harms the claimant’s reputation in eyes of right-thinking members of the public.

Taking this idea further, consider the jury. 12 randomly selected members of the adult public representing notionally the peers (or equals) of the defendant. It is a distilled general consensus of society that has the task of assessing whether the defendant has complied with the standards that the general public has previously set forth in legislation or by interpretation by judges of its rules.

Common Sense

What is it but knowledge of generally appropriate behaviour, usually based on everyday knowledge of the everyday person i.e. the average or mediocre person.

An interesting question is to what extent common sense varies between different societies, countries and groupings. The difference between, say, the French, German and British turn of mind.

Freedom

Whilst maybe rather old hat, the difference between the two concepts of liberty (a la Berlin) is perhaps characterised by the mediocre, Contrast the idea that freedom is the absence of constraint on one’s actions by the will of another with the that it is the ability to achieve one’s inmost nature free from constraint. The latter is psychologically aspirational in seeking to perfect oneself and the other based on being left alone.

Morality - Utilitarianism – the Greater Good

Morality is essentially the behaviour of people towards each other. How is one to assess how to behave towards others particularly those one does not know well. One needs to behave in the way that appropriate to the community. It will be the behaviour expected by most, if not all, members of that community – i.e. the average. Thus, perhaps, mediocre behaviour.

If moral analysis is based upon the greater good of society, that good is surely assessed on what is best for the ordinary person (i.e. the mediocre) and not the exceptional. Behaviour and action is to be accommodated to mediocrity.

Indeed, an interesting thought is whether a society or community can exist if it does not regress to the mediocre.

Language

To be of any use (and according to Wittgenstein repeatable) language needs to be understood by more than one person. The larger the number the more one can say that the form/content of the language is the fruit of mediocrity.

Personal Perfection?

A number of thoughts are set out:

To accept mediocrity is to be free of a drive to perfection, to be free of the onerous idea that if you want something enough or try hard enough you can achieve it. Is it not a relief to be able to enjoy minor successes and be free of the disappointment arising from lack of achievement.

The endless drive was known as monomania and is essentially self-serving and perhaps inevitably selfish. How many have been sacrificed to the failure of the monomaniac. To those the more harmonious desires of the mediocre would have been a joy.

How do the brilliant cope with the muddy thought processes of the average person. Is it a sense of superiority or one of repeated frustration?

The Beast in the Machine

The mediocrity of human beings has been a consistent view over the centuries and was not denigratory. It was based upon the consideration that humans are halfway between gods and animals – having supreme ideas yet also base lusts.

A theological view was that man was born sinful by reason of man's Original Sin but was given free will by God in order that man might control his sinfulness and follow God's laws. (To St Augustine a major route was the need to pray repeatedly and frequently though one could only aspire to sinlessness) This has been called the moral principle of mediocrity.

This can be contrasted with the Lockean view that thoughts and passions, body and mind were manifestations of the material that makes the human body. An early form of physicalism. I have not had the chance to consider this in any detail. But some of my initial thoughts are as follows.

One's thoughts are aspects of one's bodily make-up. Humans have similar bodily make-up. Their thoughts and needs will therefore be basically similar. We have arrived at the mediocre.

This seems to lead a free-from view of liberty i.e. freedom is available to anyone. There is no striving of a trapped spirit. This view of liberty is to be found in Hume and Mill etc.

This is to be contrasted with the Romantic notion of the individuality of each person (the spirit which should be allowed to bloom into full flower.

Humility

To many societies humility is a virtue. What is humility other than the conceit that one is no better than others i.e. the average, the mediocrity.

Conclusion

Like Wall, I can now say that I have now discharged my duty.

I trust that I have touched upon sufficient fruits, flowers and joys of mediocrity.

Brian Stewart – Jan 2023