

Half-assing it with everything you've got

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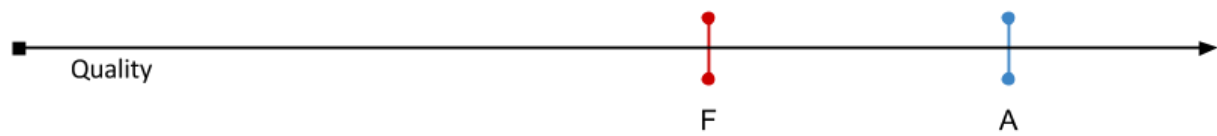
I hang out around a lot of effective altruists. Many of them are motivated primarily by something like guilt (for having great resource and opportunity while others suffer) or shame (for not helping enough). Hell, many of my non-EA friends are primarily motivated by guilt or shame.

I'm not going to criticize guilt/shame motivation: I have this policy where, when somebody puts large amounts of effort or money towards making the world a better place, I try really hard not to condemn their motives. Guilt and shame may be fine tools for jarring people out of complacency. However, I worry that guilt and shame are unhealthy long-term motivators. In many of my friends, guilt and shame tend to induce akrasia, reduce productivity, and drain motivation. So over the next few weeks, I'll be writing a series of posts about removing guilt/shame motivation and replacing it with something stronger.

1

Say you're a college student, and you have a paper due. The quality of the paper will depend upon the amount of effort you put in. We'll say that you know the project pretty well: you can get an A with only moderate effort, and with signifi-

cant effort you could produce something much better than the usual A-grade paper.



The education environment implicitly attempts to convince students that their preferences point ever rightward along this line. Parents and teachers say things like "you should put in your best effort," and they heap shame upon people who don't strive to push ever rightward along the quality line.

People generally react to this coercion in one of two ways. The first group (the "slackers") rejects the implication that quality=preferences. These are the people who don't care about the class, who complain constantly about the useless pointless work they have to do, who half-ass the assignment and turn in something that either barely passes or fails entirely. Slackers tend to resent the authority forcing them to write the paper.

The second group (the "tryers") are the ones who accept the premise that quality=preferences, and strive ever rightwards on the quality line. Tryers include people of all ability levels: some struggle as hard as they can just to get a C, others flaunt their ability to produce masterpieces. Some try to curry favor with the teacher, others are perfectionists who simply can't allow themselves to turn in anything less than

their best effort. Some of them are scrupulous people, who feel guilty even after getting an A, because they know they could have done better, and think they should have. Some are humble, some are show-offs, but all of them are pushing rightward.

Society has spent a *lot* of time conditioning us to think of the tryers as better than the slackers. Being a tryer is a virtue. Slackers are missing the point of education; why are they even there? The tryers are going to go places, the slackers will never amount to anything.

But in fact, both groups are doing it wrong.

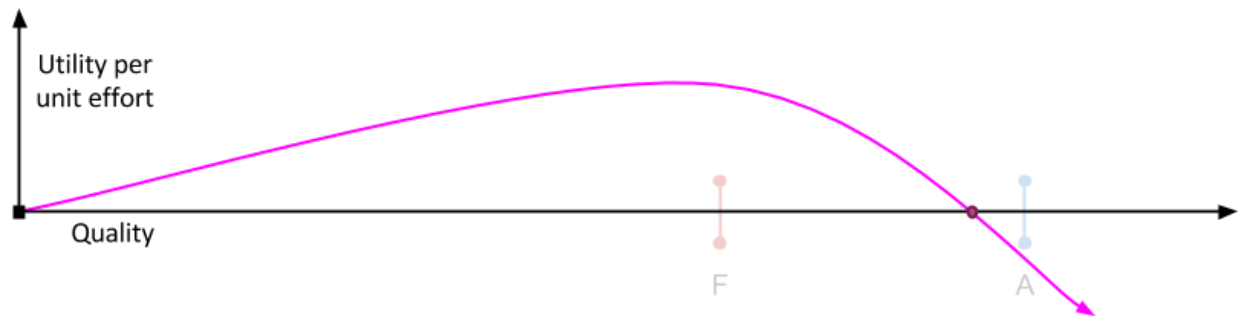
If you want to be highly effective, *remember what you're fighting for.*

And, spoiler alert, you aren't fighting for "write a high-quality paper." That would be a pretty silly thing to fight for.

What is your goal in taking this class? Perhaps you're doing it thanks to a combination of social pressure (your parents said to), social inertia (everybody else goes to college), and a vague belief that this is the path towards a good job and a comfortable life. Or perhaps you're there because you want good grades so you can acquire lots of money and power which you will use to fight dragons. Or perhaps you're there out of a genuine thirst for knowledge. But no matter why you're there, your reason for being there will pick out a sin-

gle target point on the quality line. Your goal, then, is to hit that quality target — no higher, no lower.

Your preferences are not "move rightward on the quality line." Your preferences are to *hit the quality target with minimum effort*.



If you're trying to pass the class, then pass it with minimum effort. Anything else is wasted motion.

If you're trying to ace the class, then ace it with minimum effort. Anything else is wasted motion.

If you're trying to learn the material to the fullest, then mine the assignment for all its knowledge, and don't fret about your grade. Anything else is wasted motion.

If you're trying to do achieve some combination of good grades (for signalling purposes), respect (for social reasons), and knowledge (for various effects), then pinpoint the minimum quality target that gets a good grade, impresses the teacher, and allows you to learn the material, and hit that as efficiently as you can. Anything more is wasted motion.

Your quality target may be significantly left of F — if, say, you've already passed the class, and this assignment doesn't matter. Your quality target may be significantly to the right of A — if, say, you're there to learn the material, and grade inflation means that it's much easier to produce an A-grade paper than it is to complete the assignment in the maximally informative way. But no matter what, your goals will induce a quality target.

Both the slackers *and* the tryers are pursuing lost purposes. The slackers scoff at the tryers, who treat an artificial quality line like it's their actual preferences and waste effort over-achieving. The tryers scoff at the slackers, who are taking classes but refusing to learn. And both sides are right! Because both sides are wasting motion.

The slackers fail to deploy their full strength because they realize that the quality line is not their preference curve. The tryers deploy their full strength at the wrong target, in attempts to go as far right as possible, wasting energy on a fight that is not theirs. So take the third path: *remember what you're fighting for*. Always deploy your full strength, in order to hit your quality target as fast as possible.

Half-ass everything, with everything you've got.

(My teachers used to say that I could do great things if only I applied myself. I used to tell them that if they wanted me to apply more effort, they would need to invent higher letter grades.)

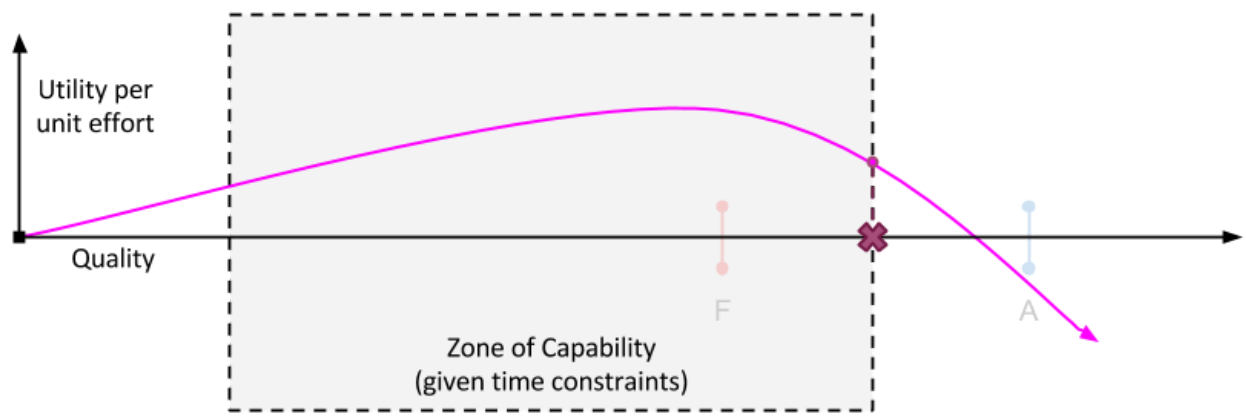
2

A common objection arises here:

Some things are too important to "half-ass." Some things are simply worth fighting for with your full strength. It's one thing to half-ass a homework assignment, and another thing entirely to half-ass saving a life. Sometimes you want to push as far right as you can on the quality curve.

This is both true and false, because it is mixed up. Given any project, *always* aim no higher than the quality target, and always strive for minimum expenditure of effort. It doesn't matter whether you're writing a term paper, pulling a person out of a burning house, or creating a galaxy-spanning human civilization — the goal is always to achieve some quality target with minimum effort. Negentropy is scarce.

That said, the quality target can be *really really high*. In fact, the quality target is sometimes unattainably high. Often, we simply aren't capable of hitting our quality targets, and in those cases, we *do* want to push as far right along the preference curve as we can.



This can occur naturally whenever you work on something difficult relative to your skill level, or in competitive situations, or if you're signalling your ability to work hard. But don't get confused. Even if you write for the love of writing, you eventually have to stop editing and call it finished. Even if you're getting somebody out of a burning building, you eventually stop putting effort towards ensuring that they survive in favor of putting that effort towards saving other dying people instead. Even if you're building an intergalactic civilization, you need to trade off energy spent building the civilization against energy spent living in it.

There are goals for which you cannot achieve your quality targets, and in those cases, you will push ever rightwards. But too many people automatically assume that, when an authority figure describes a quality line, they're "supposed to" push as far right as possible. They think they "should" care about quality. This is silly: real world problems are not about producing the highest-quality products. In all walks of life, the goal is to hit a quality target with minimum effort.

This is of course only a fuzzy and inaccurate description of reality. The relative costs of time, effort, energy, attention, and quality are generally in flux, and change with both information and circumstance. The essential point is to be able to differentiate between the implicit quality line highlighted circumstance, and your actual preference curve.

Let me be clear about what I'm *not* saying. If you're taking a college course, I'm *not* telling you that you should be scraping by by only the barest of margins. If you're saving a life, I'm *not* telling you to prefer speed over caution. In general, I'm decidedly **not** saying that you must always identify the worst outcome that you'd grudgingly accept as your target.

What I am saying is, don't conflate the quality line with the preference curve. Don't get confused when the teacher labels one quality-point "pass" and another "fail," for these are just labels, and your deeper goals are likely only tangentially related to those labels. Remember what you're trying to achieve, identify your quality target, and aim for that: no higher, no lower.

(Also, remember that the planning fallacy exists! If you shoot for a D, you might get an F. Humans tend to be overconfident. When you pick your targets, be cautious, and leave yourself comfortable margins.)

3

The common slacker objection goes:

But what if "get the minimum passing grade as quick as possible" is also boring? What if this task, too, is meaningless?

Then get out of college!

I personally find that shooting for the minimum acceptable quality is usually *fun*. Doing the homework assignment is boring, but finding a way to get the homework assignment up to an acceptable level *with as little total effort as possible* is an interesting optimization problem that actually engages my wits, an optimization problem which both my inner perfectionist and my inner rebel can get behind.

But sometimes, after remembering what you're fighting for, the whole project will still seem worthless. Sometimes, the goal of getting the minimum passing grade with minimum effort will still stink of somebody else trying to pass off their arbitrary metric as your true preferences. In that case, consider dropping the class.

More generally, if there's no variation on "achieve such-and-such a goal with minimum effort" that seems worth doing, then you may need to abandon that goal entirely.

By contrast, the common tryer objection runs as follows:

But I'm a perfectionist! I physically can't stop caring about a low-quality product. I'm compelled to do my best.

Great! Harness the perfectionist within you, and point it towards the goal of hitting your target with minimum effort.

Instead of being a perfectionist about the paper, be a perfectionist about *writing* the paper. Be a perfectionist about identifying good strategies, about abandoning sunk costs, about killing your darlings, about noticing when you're done. Be a perfectionist about wasting no attention. Be a perfectionist about learning from your mistakes. Perfectionism can be a powerful tool, but there's no need to point it at overachieving on metrics you don't care about.

4

Attempting to hit a quality target with the least possible effort is, in a sense, a much more difficult task than pushing as far right on the quality-line as possible. One always could push further right on the quality line with more time: when one is trying to write a great paper, they always *could* correct their flaws with more time and energy. But when one is trying to produce a paper with minimal wasted motion, mistakes are irrevocable. Time cannot be un-wasted.

In this sense, switching from being a tryer to a whole-assed-half-asser may lead to more guilt and shame than usual, if

you start feeling guilty about every wasted motion.

However, I see far too many people feeling guilt and shame about not having pushed far enough along the quality line. They feel guilty about not putting effort towards their job (which they hate); they feel guilty about not being a good enough friend (when they are nearly at breakdown themselves); they feel guilty about not fulfilling their parent's expectations (which are ridiculous and uninformed). In order to replace guilt and shame with intrinsic motivation, it is first necessary to break the slacker/tryer dichotomy. If you've got to feel guilty, please feel guilty about missing your own targets, rather than feeling guilty about not adopting some arbitrary quality line as your true preferences. The former type of guilt is the one that I have a shot at addressing.

(Scrupulous people: in the interim, please don't feel guilty about wasting motion! Treat it like an important part of the human action process rather than something to be ashamed of. Future posts will expand on this idea.)

5

Most people seem to have two modes of working on problems: the slacker path-of-least-resistance "coasting" mode, and the tryer make-a-masterpiece "overachiever" mode. When faced with a problem, most people either put in the minimum effort necessary to scrape by without pissing off

the relevant authorities, or else they pour their heart and soul into the task.

Almost everybody spends some time in both modes. Some people overachieve in history class and coast in grammar class. Some people overachieve at work and coast in their relationship. In fact, most heartwarming bad-students-can-be-good-people-too stories are about how students who are slacking in most domains are secretly trying really hard when it comes to dance/sports/music/number theory.

This, of course, is another piece of tryer propaganda: "Don't worry," the movies say, "these slackers aren't bad people, because they're secretly tryers in other domains!" As if you're only a good person if you can adopt *some* arbitrary quality line as your true preferences.

Most people are trapped in the slacker/tryer dichotomy. They either do as little as they can get away with or as much as they can manage. They're either aiming for barely acceptable or they're aiming to be the best. Very few people seem able to pick a target in the middle and then pursue it with *everything they've got*. Very few people seem capable of deploying their *full strength* to hit "mediocre" as efficiently as possible.

Reject the dichotomy. Keep your eye on the preference curve. And remember that the preference curve says this, and only this:

Succeed, with no wasted motion.

The slacker in you rebels against pointless tasks, and the tryer in you wants perfection. So satisfy both: aim for the minimum necessary target, and move there as efficiently as possible.

And if ever you forget what it means to "succeed" in one context or another, take a moment to pause and remember what you're fighting for.