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## Introduction

I used to aspire to greatness. When I was young, greatness meant wealth, and I wanted to find a way to be very rich. My first thought was to become a stockbroker, even though I didn't really know what that meant. Later, when I became obsessed with sports, I decided that my path to wealth should be as a famous athlete. I dreamed about playing basketball professionally, then tennis and baseball, but I never had enough talent for any of these.

Toward the end of high school and into my college years, I started to think of greatness as fame more than wealth. At first, I wanted to be a world-renowned fiction writer who was showered with prizes. Realizing how hard that would be to achieve, and (incorrectly) thinking that an academic life would be stabler, I went to graduate school, where I hoped to become one of those famous professors who was flown around the world to give prestigious lectures. I have come closer to achieving this goal than any of my previous professional plans, but it hasn't made me any more satisfied or happier. I think that's because while all of these different life goals have different values attached to them, they share the same basic aspiration: to become a member of the elite, sitting atop a social pyramid.

Over the last few years, I've come to think that this desire to be at the top is poisonous for ourselves, our relationships, our societies, and our planet—even for the individuals who do make it. And so, as much as I can, I've begun to work against

these aspirations. I'm not saying I don't still find them appealing. Of course I do. I don't know if I'll ever set foot on an airplane without wishing I were sitting in the luxury of first class, or go to an event and not wish I were one of the luminaries on the stage. And of course I am still exercising and writing to the best of my abilities. What I have come to doubt is not the desire to do something well for its own sake, nor even the appeal of winning. Instead, I question the social order that takes our talents and turns them into a desire to win our spot at the top of competitive hierarchies. In fact, as I argue in this book, I have come to think that personal quests for greatness, and, perhaps even more important, the unequal social systems that fuel these quests, are at the heart of much that is wrong in our world.

I'll go into more detail about what precisely is wrong in the course of this book, but to get a rough sense of what I mean, consider a fundamental paradox of our present condition: there is too much, and yet there is not enough. We live amid unprecedented abundance and productive capacity, yet billions go unfed, unclothed, and uncared for. Thus, in a world that has a combined \$399.2 trillion in wealth, more than 3.4 billion people still live on less than \$5.50 a day, while 34.5 million people a year die from a lack of adequate healthcare, and around 9 million more pass away due to hunger.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, machines do more of the necessary work for sustaining life than ever, and yet we have so little leisure time. There are more people alive now than ever, and yet so many of us are alone. We benefit from centuries of wisdom and scientific advances for promoting happiness, and yet we are burdened by anxiety and depression. Indeed, not only is the number of people with depression rising, but so is the average number of years that people report feeling depressed. Anxiety and burnout are also on the rise.<sup>2</sup> We have the capacity to go all over the earth, to the depths of the oceans, and

even into space, and yet those very means of exploration are depleting the sustainability of our home planet. Every year we are taking nearly double what the earth is able to regenerate on a yearly basis.<sup>3</sup>

These trends are all related. When we live in a world where some have too much and many have too little, there is tremendous pressure to either rise to the top or sink to the bottom. And in such a world, we will feel anxious at our prospects, depressed at our situation, alienated from our fellow competitors, and unconcerned with how we damage the environment if doing so feels like the only way to stay alive.

To get beyond the paradoxes caused by the pursuit of greatness, we have to understand where that pursuit itself comes from. I will consider various theories throughout this book—for example, the often-exaggerated claim that we are all hierarchical and competitive by nature—but my basic argument is that “greatness thinking” in fact begins as a meaningful response to the fact that life is imperfect. Accidents, tragedies, and failures befall us all. Greatness responds by saying, “Don’t worry, we can overcome this: though the world as it is may be flawed, humans have the capacity to eventually remove the blemishes of our condition.” To do so, we simply have to encourage the most talented among us—the great ones—to innovate and create and explore. They will push past the limits of our ecosystem and create a flourishing world for the rest of us. To incentivize them to do so, they should be given tremendous wealth and power. And in order to find out who these great ones are, we should have a fiercely competitive society where everyone is trying to prove why they are the greatest. To become great is to feel justified in being spared from suffering some real portion of life’s calamities: because you are improving life for everyone (whether by creating wealth, entertainment, or inventions), all

of your rewards are justified. Seeking that sense of satisfaction and security beyond the flux of life is how I now interpret the origins of my youthful desires for being great that I share with so many other people. Desiring greatness thus makes a lot of sense, but it also creates the anxieties and paradoxes of the world we live in.

Although there is a deep logic in our psyches and societies for the greatness worldview, we are not condemned to it. There is another way of seeing things that is full of potential today and that can bring us out of these frightening paradoxes. I call it “the good-enough life.” I will also refer to it as “a good-enough life for all” and “the good-enough world.” Good enough here does not just mean doing the bare minimum to get by—although I do argue for more leisure and relaxation. But more than this, I use the words to register an entire worldview dedicated to ensuring that all humans have both goodness (including decency, meaning, and dignity) *and* enoughness (including high-quality food, clothing, shelter, and medical care).<sup>4</sup> Further, because humans also have environmental, emotional, and social needs, goodness and enoughness are always linked. Our lives cannot be good if we do not have enough to survive, and we cannot have enough if our lives are not also suffused with the goodness of our relations.

Like greatness, the good-enough worldview begins with a recognition that life is imperfect. Unlike greatness, however, it denies the claim that only a worthy elite can help us improve our conditions. By supporting only the pursuit of greatness, we are not in fact advancing as much as we could because we are suppressing the vital energies and capacities of the bulk of humanity and wasting our time and passion competitively trying to prove that we are among the great few. There are almost always many more talented and qualified people for a job than

the number of available positions. We can stop letting this circumstance lead to depression and unemployment, and shift our focus to working cooperatively, harnessing the abilities of 7.7 billion good-enough human beings. If we all try to be good enough, rather than great, we can individually do less while gaining as much, if not more.<sup>5</sup> Not only will the material quality of life for most humans improve, but so will their happiness and social cohesion.

To create this world for ourselves and future generations, we cannot take more from the earth than it is capable of producing. We don't need to live in perfect harmony with nature, but we also don't need to dominate it. Earth is not endlessly large, nor endlessly regenerating. It has its own limits, its own sense of well-being, its own material needs. What makes it miraculous is not its perfection, but the mere fact that it is good enough to sustain human life. We have to build our good-enough life within these good-enough conditions. The good-enough life is "for all," including, as much as possible, the many species and vegetal lives with which we share this planet, because when we recognize that none of us is so great as to be able to overcome the terrors of this life on our own, when we understand that the kinks in our condition can best be borne through connections to our infinite kindred, then we appreciate that the most meaningful life available is one that recognizes and fosters our essential interdependence.

The final difference between a good-enough worldview and the greatness worldview is that good-enoughness does not claim we will ever fully overcome the limits of our conditions. Life is only ever good enough: even in a wonderfully harmonious society, we would still have mistakes, tragedies, disagreements, betrayals, natural disasters. But in a good-enough world, there would be no great few who are spared the worst because



of their status. We would all work to mitigate the suffering together. In the end, this is universally beneficial, because rather than existing in the anxious fear of either rising to the top or sinking to the bottom, everyone would have more time and leisure to appreciate the ordinary, good-enough pleasures of existence. Life at its best can never be more than good enough, but the way we live now, suffused with anxiety, inequality, and ecological destruction, is not yet good enough for all.

Rather than aspiring to versions of greatness, I now aspire to help create this good-enough life for all. Or, at the very least, I do my best to aspire. Like many people, I still feel the pull of desiring some slice of greatness for myself. As I'll discuss throughout the book, good-enoughness requires both a personal and political transformation. In a greatness-oriented world, trying to be good enough can ironically feel like you are *not* good enough, at least in the competitive terms presented to you. It is hard for any given individual to break out of this system. While I do believe that our personal aspirations matter—systems don't change without accompanying changes in our ideas about how the world should be—I do not think that this is just about finding singular good-enough heroes. It is about all of us working together to imagine, develop, and participate in a world in which we all have decency and sufficiency.

A few years ago, I made my first attempt to express this worldview in a public forum. I wrote a short article that focused on the philosophical and literary origins of the idea of a good-enough life.<sup>6</sup> Readers seemed to appreciate what I had to say, especially those who were tired of the inequalities that funnel so many resources to the few and so little to the many. But they also had a lot of questions. How could the ethical values of seeking a good-enough life translate into a social program? What counts as enough, anyway? If we succeeded in making a

good-enough world, wouldn't that be a "great" accomplishment? Don't we need some people to seek out something more than the good enough in order for the rest of us to benefit? Can't life be great for some and good enough for everyone else? What will happen to motivation and incentives? Was I disputing the fact that some people are just more talented than others? Why the words *great* and *good enough*, anyway? Perhaps the most personal comment came from a fellow writer who asked why I seemed to be working so hard on my writing, even as I told others to slow down and embrace the good-enough life—wasn't I being hypocritical?<sup>7</sup> I realized that though the idea behind the good-enough life was based on a relatively simple set of values, explaining and defending its logic would take more than a short essay. That is why this book sets out to explain just what it means to move past a social order based on greatness and create instead a good-enough life for all.

It is because my concern is so universal that although my perspective in this book is largely formed by the experiences I've had as a (mostly) middle-class, able-bodied, White, cisgender male scholar in the United States, I have done my best to listen to and learn from those with other life stories, and I hope that the claims I make here are useful for people from many different backgrounds. I will often use the pronouns "we" and "you" in my writing in order to engage you, the reader, in what follows. Sometimes I will presume that you agree with me and are part of the "we" trying to make a good-enough world. At other points, I will use "we" in a more general sense for what I believe are broadly held beliefs. And sometimes I will address you as someone who probably doesn't agree with me at all and try to convince you that you should. You might at times, of course, think in response: "Stop saying we/you! I don't think that at all!" Given our diversity as humans, such miscues are

inevitable, but I think it's worth the benefits of a more engaged manner of writing.

The four chapter titles (“For Our Selves,” “For Our Relationships,” “For Our World,” and “For Our Planet”) similarly embody this sense of inclusion. With the title of first chapter (“Why Greatness Is Not Good Enough”), they link together to form an exposition of a key theme of the book: “Why greatness is not good enough for ourselves, for our relationships, for our world, for our planet.” The “for” in each of the chapter titles is also meant in the sense of being a benefit to something. The book is *for* our selves, our relationships, our planet, and our world because it is about creating a richer and more complex way of living than the focus on greatness enables. Through different lenses, each chapter argues that the ideology of greatness—that is, again, of thinking that each of us only has value so long as we are competing to be at the top of some hierarchy—is destructive for all the spheres of our life. *The Good-Enough Life* is an argument for revaluing all that is good, sufficient, and imperfect in us, in each other, in our societies, and in our natural world.

If you share the values of the good-enough life already, perhaps this book will help you articulate them better, see their coherence with each other, and understand their limited compatibility with the greatness worldview. If you share some of the values but still believe that supporting the greatness of the few is the best path to creating good-enoughness for the many, perhaps the book will convince you otherwise, or at least give you a logic against which you can explain your position. And if you don't share any of these values now, perhaps I can convince you by the end of this book that they are worth considering. Perhaps you will even take the time to think with me about what the good-enough life is and how we can achieve it. I want

this book to be part of a larger, continuing conversation (one that started long before my writing this) because a good-enough life for all is a complex, dynamic, and evolving ideal that is most meaningful when we all work toward it together.

The events that surrounded the writing of this book have only made this point about interdependence more fundamental to my analysis. I began writing during one of the most epochal events of our era—the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic—and continued working during a second—the uprising against racism and state violence spurred by the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in May 2020. As many commentators have noted, these events have been like an X-ray of the contemporary world, revealing the truth of our condition for anyone who had not previously seen just how unequal and unjust our societies are.<sup>8</sup> The world built around greatness has left billions of people without adequate income, food, or healthcare, while the fortunes of the world's wealthiest have grown by billions of dollars. This is not an accidental flaw; it is the direct result of a world built to reward the few at the expense of the many.

The German-Jewish writer Walter Benjamin wrote an essay on the philosophy of history as he was fleeing the Nazis in 1940. One line in his essay has always resonated with me: “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule.”<sup>9</sup> The upheavals during which I wrote this book will be followed by others throughout our history until we recognize that an unequal social order creates unbearable tensions between those deemed great and those deemed expendable in the pursuit of greatness. The good-enough life offers a vision of a world beyond this state of emergency. It will still have problems, of course. There will still be pandemics, accidents, betrayals. But we can work toward a world in which,

when problems arise, our society—built on care, trust, and decency for all—is able to come together to face them.

Some will undoubtedly respond that my vision of humanity is sentimental. It sounds nice, sure, but it's not how the world works, and it's not possible because humans are hardwired by evolution to competitively pursue hierarchical positions. Moreover, you might be thinking, this vision is a potential blow to progress: Isn't the remarkable revolution of the modern age that it took a species once ruled by warrior strength and created a civic culture open to anyone with the right talent and effort?

While these arguments make some sense, they are not entirely accurate: we have always been defined as much by cooperation as by hierarchical competition, and meritocratic ideals have existed for thousands of years. Nor do they speak well to how we might progress as a species. There is increasing evidence today, for example, that progress is made not by getting the “best and brightest” in the room, but rather by cooperative reflection among diverse, well-informed viewpoints.<sup>10</sup> There is also good evidence to suggest that “collective intelligence” is more fundamental to human progress than individual genius.<sup>11</sup> And even when a singular genius appears, their work always depends on vast networks and institutions that have supported them. We will see later in the book why this is true for everyone from Albert Einstein to LeBron James and Steve Jobs.

To arrive at this better world for all, we don't just need more minds; we need more good minds. So instead of dumping resources (including respect and attention) *on* the few, we should work continually and cooperatively *as* the many. This won't be easy, and it requires good training and good institutions with clear forms of both solidarity and non-oppressive hierarchy. Mistakes will undoubtedly be made. But creating

this good-enough life for all is worth the effort, because, ultimately, this is about our fundamental values, and this is the kind of world toward which our ideals of equality, liberty, and justice have always guided us.

You may rightly wonder if human societies can ever truly create a good-enough life for all. I will try to show not only why we can, but why it is necessary to do so. Ultimately, what is unrealistic is not the hope that we might live in a world that is good-enough for all, but rather the belief that we can keep surviving in our greatness culture, with all the hatred, inequality, and destruction that tear us apart day by day.<sup>12</sup>

I will not, however, insist that I have all the answers on how to create this other world. My point, after all, is that good-enoughness is not about one person's idea of how the world should be—it's about all of us working together. I suggest a baseline goal, not a specific set of contents. This is a democratic offering for all of us to keep thinking together about how to create a more encompassing social value system. This system aims to make a world that is good, that provides enough goodness for all, and yet still appreciates that life is unavoidably filled with accidents and tragedies, and that we have to work within the limits of our natural resources. (Once again: it's only ever good enough.)

It is only fitting, then, to have begun writing this book in circumstances that threaten to overturn everything we think of as normal: this is precisely the kind of situation that leads us to question our greatness-oriented society and to understand what the good-enough world we should be building would look like. Our ongoing crises push on the frailty of our individual powers, showing us that though none of us can survive very well on our own, all of us together can build and thrive. This vision is well captured in thoughts like these from "Jester D," a

sanitation worker, shared on Twitter one morning in early March 2020, when I began writing during a pandemic:

I can't work from home and my job is an essential city service that must get done. It's a tough job, from getting up pre-dawn to the physical toll it takes on my body to the monotonous nature of the job, at times it's hard to keep on going . . .

Right now though, I am feeling an extra sense of pride and purpose as I do my work. I see the people, my people, of my city, peeking out their windows at me. They're scared, we're scared. Scared but resilient . . .

Us garbagemen are gonna keep collecting the garbage, doctors and nurses are gonna keep doctoring and nurse-ering. It's gonna be ok, we're gonna make it be ok. I love my city. I love my country. I love my planet Earth. Be good to each other and we'll get through this.<sup>13</sup>

Being good to each other and providing enough for each other; not asking too much of each other and not taking too much for ourselves: We do not need more than this for humanity to flourish.

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