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Tired: A Reflection On Asceticism and the Value of Quantitative Assessment

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Synopsis

I have spent a lot of time thinking this past year and a half about the relationship between asceticism and success. As a mathematics student and a collegiate athlete, I have far too often gotten caught up in the pursuit of objective standards. This chase has left me burnt out and broken. Existential philosophy has been my greatest asset in discerning the true purpose of asceticism. I reflect on this journey and the nature of assessment in this short reflection.

I have spent a lot of time thinking this past year and a half about the relationship between asceticism and success, which I feel is relevant to the question of the value of quantitative assessment. For some context, in high school and most of college, I have embodied the ideals of asceticism almost exclusively. Three days a week in high school, I'd wake up before 5:00am to swim for an hour and a half, go to school, where I was taking the maximum number of AP classes and never getting a B, then stay after school for another two plus hour swim workout before finally returning home to do my homework and going to bed. The two weekdays I had off from morning workout usually entailed an additional hour of calisthenics in the evening. I didn't have much time for (or interest in) fun and developed a rigid attachment to black and white thinking. I believed asceticism and its increasing pursuit was the only path to success, and while this was ultimately miserable, the thought of failing was *so much* worse, that from asceticism I derived pleasure.

In many ways, I have taken the same approach to mathematics as I took to competitive swimming. I work on problem sets in isolation through completion, and when I get stuck, I rarely reach out for help, instead just work-

ing harder, sinking deeper into the problem, and figuring it out on my own. I gain an incredible amount of pride from my secluded methods, which speaks to their ascetic nature. Still, mathematics was one of the first places I realized that asceticism alone does not precipitate success. For some reason, it has always been obvious to me that there are parts of learning and creative insight over which I have no control. I remember one night in middle school trying to memorize a poem. I practiced it before bed and had committed less than half of it to memory. In the morning, with no additional active effort on my part, I had the whole poem memorized. This memory has directed much of my academics, and I regularly find that I am more creative and productive after taking a break from an assignment. I have never pulled an all-nighter; in fact, I rarely work past 10:00pm.

Still, math, like swimming, became for me, a largely individualistic pursuit. Life was about my intelligence, my learning, and my control of my success. Becoming caught up in my own success left me abandoned and empty when things got harder, I got burnt out, and I started to fail. Much of college for me has been the realization that my isolated, disciplined life style is not only, not the only way to exist, but also not the only way to be successful, even objectively so. Philosophy, in particular existentialist theories, has been my greatest support in discerning the true purpose of ascetic ideals and by consequence, a better and more fruitful way to live.

Thanks to my philosophical mains, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, I've begun to categorize discipline, objective standards, and rationality as all a part of an "Apollonian" realm of existence. This realm contrasts Nietzsche's second sphere, the Dionysian, or that which contains music, revelry, aesthetics, pleasures, friendship, and love. The Dionysian is somewhat more innate. Born requisitely able to indulge, we could, if we so chose, always live in this animal sphere, at the obvious price of a somewhat unfulfilled experience. By ascribing to an ethical standard, studying phenomena objectively, and entering the Apollonian realm we get achievement, all scientific knowledge, and order. The Apollonian is the realm of universal truth, standardization, and objectivity. Kierkegaard calls this the ethical sphere in reference to its requirement of ethics or asceticism. It is meant to contrast his more Dionysian *aesthetic* sphere. The problem with the Apollonian becomes that this realm is infinite. There is no end to the degree of comparative objectivity, and objective success can never be satisfied. Science is never ending, and achievement always demands more. Both the Dionysian and Apollo-

nian, or the aesthetic and ethical spheres, when pursued alone, are empty. The key is to enter the Apollonian realm in order to enhance the Dionysian realm. This is the idea behind Kierkegaard's religious life. Ascetics are meant to be in the pursuit of passion; the ethical realm was never intended to be pursued as an end. It takes a *leap of faith* to escape from the anxiety of the Apollonian and rejoin the Dionysian anew.

The Apollonian-Dionysian distinction gives me a framework in which to navigate the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity. It has taught me that there is an important role to working hard, to putting in the hours exercising or studying and that achievement *is* a result of these things. But, it has more importantly taught me that ascetic hard work and achievement are not ends but means. Always one to over-categorize and connect seemingly disjoint notions, I have come to think of the question of quantitative vs. qualitative assessment, being somewhat a debate between individualism and standardization, as not only related but also illustrative of this distinction. I greatly value quantitative evaluation and objective standards. In my more ascetic days, I have even found them addicting. But, objective standards are, in my view, critical only in establishing a baseline of abilities required for collaboration, ethos, and advancement of passion. "Scores" should not be viewed as the end goal. They are, as a part of the Apollonian realm, a means. There's usually that spark, as a youth; swimming was fun and math was easy, a Dionysian entrance to a field or a pursuit, but true passion, a second entrance to the Dionysian realm, comes after commitment. That commitment is largely, though certainly not exclusively, defined objectively and subject to quantitative standards, but passion can never be quantified that way. Passion and subjectivity are important facets of education that our systems often overlook. If curriculum incorporated more qualitative feedback and individualized projects, could students develop a healthier approach to achievement and in doing so potentially even achieve more?