

The Parable Of The Talents

Posted on January 31, 2015 by Scott Alexander



Content note: *scrupulosity and self-esteem triggers, IQ, brief discussion of weight and dieting. Not good for growth mindset.*

I

I sometimes blog about research into IQ and human intelligence. I think most readers of this blog already know [IQ is 50% to 80% heritable](#) , and that it's so important for intellectual pursuits that [eminent scientists in some fields have average IQs around 150 to 160](#) . Since IQ this high only appears in 1/10,000 people or so, it beggars coincidence to believe this represents anything but a very strong filter for IQ (or something correlated with it) in reaching that level. If you saw a group of dozens of people who were 7'0 tall on average, you'd assume it was a basketball team or some other group selected for height, not a bunch of botanists who were all very tall by coincidence.

A lot of people find this pretty depressing. Some worry that taking it seriously might damage the "growth mindset" people need to fully actualize their potential. This is important and I want to discuss it eventually, but not now. What I want to discuss now is people

who feel *personally* depressed. For example, a comment from last week:

I'm sorry to leave self a self absorbed comment, but reading this really upset me and I just need to get this off my chest... How is a person supposed to stay sane in a culture that prizes intelligence above everything else – especially if, as Scott suggests, Human Intelligence Really Is the Key to the Future – when they themselves are not particularly intelligent and, apparently, have no potential to ever become intelligent? Right now I basically feel like pond scum.

I hear these kinds of responses every so often, so I should probably learn to expect them. I never do. They seem to me precisely backwards. There's a moral gulf here, and I want to throw stories and intuitions at it until enough of them pile up at the bottom to make a passable bridge. But first, a comparison:

Some people think body weight is biologically/genetically determined. Other people think it's based purely on willpower – how strictly you diet, how much you can bring yourself to exercise. These people get into some pretty acrimonious debates.

Overweight people, and especially people who feel unfairly stigmatized for being overweight, tend to cluster on the biologically determined side. And although not all believers in complete voluntary control of weight are mean to fat people, the people who are mean

to fat people pretty much all insist that weight is voluntary and easily changeable.

Although there's a lot of debate over the science here, there seems to be broad agreement on both sides that the more compassionate, sympathetic, progressive position, the position promoted by the kind of people who are really worried about stigma and self-esteem, is that weight is biologically determined.

And the same is true of mental illness. Sometimes I see depressed patients whose families *really* don't get it. They say "Sure, my daughter feels down, but she needs to realize that's no excuse for shirking her responsibilities. She needs to just pick herself up and get on with her life." On the other hand, most depressed people say that their depression is more fundamental than that, not a thing that can be overcome by willpower, certainly not a thing you can just 'shake off'.

Once again, the compassionate/sympathetic/progressive side of the debate is that depression is something like biological, and cannot easily be overcome with willpower and hard work.

One more example of this pattern. There are frequent political debates in which conservatives (or straw conservatives) argue that financial success is the result of hard work, so poor people are just too lazy to get out of poverty. Then a liberal (or straw liberal) protests that hard work has nothing to do with it, success is determined by accidents of birth like who your parents are and what

your skin color is et cetera, so the poor are blameless in their own predicament.

I'm oversimplifying things, but again the compassionate/sympathetic/progressive side of the debate – and the side endorsed by many of the poor themselves – is supposed to be that success is due to accidents of birth, and the less compassionate side is that success depends on hard work and perseverance and grit and willpower.

The obvious pattern is that attributing outcomes to things like genes, biology, and accidents of birth is kind and sympathetic. Attributing them to who works harder and who's "really trying" can stigmatize people who end up with bad outcomes and is generally viewed as Not A Nice Thing To Do.

And the weird thing, the thing I've never understood, is that intellectual achievement is the one domain that breaks this pattern.

Here it's would-be hard-headed conservatives arguing that intellectual greatness comes from genetics and the accidents of birth and demanding we "accept" this "unpleasant truth".

And it's would-be compassionate progressives who are insisting that no, it depends on who works harder, claiming anybody can be brilliant if they really try, warning us not to "stigmatize" the less intelligent as "genetically inferior".

I can come up with a few explanations for the sudden switch, but none of them are very principled and none of them, to me, seem to break the fundamental symmetry of the situation. I choose to maintain consistency by preserving the belief that overweight people, depressed people, and poor people aren't fully to blame for their situation – and neither are unintelligent people. It's accidents of birth all the way down. Intelligence is mostly genetic and determined at birth – and we've already determined in every other sphere that “mostly genetic and determined at birth” means you don't have to feel bad if you got the short end of the stick.

Consider for a moment Srinivasa Ramanujan, one of the greatest mathematicians of all time. He grew up in poverty in a one-room house in small-town India. He taught himself mathematics by borrowing books from local college students and working through the problems on his own until he reached the end of the solveable ones and had nowhere else to go but inventing ways to solve the unsolveable ones.

There are a lot of poor people in the United States today whose life circumstances prevented their parents from reading books to them as a child, prevented them from getting into the best schools, prevented them from attending college, et cetera. And pretty much all of those people *still* got more educational opportunities than Ramanujan did.

And from there we can go in one of two directions. First, we can say that a lot of intelligence is innate, that Ramanujan was a ge-

nious, and that we mortals cannot be expected to replicate his accomplishments.

Or second, we can say those poor people are *just not trying hard enough*.

Take “innate ability” out of the picture, and if you meet a poor person on the street begging for food, saying he never had a chance, your reply must be “Well, if you’d just borrowed a couple of math textbooks from the local library at age 12, you would have been a Fields Medalist by now. I hear that pays pretty well.”

The best reason *not* to say that is that we view Ramanujan as intellectually gifted. But the very phrase tells us where we should classify that belief. Ramanujan’s genius is a “gift” in much the same way your parents giving you a trust fund on your eighteenth birthday is a “gift”, and it should be weighted accordingly in the moral calculus.



I shouldn’t pretend I’m worried about this for the sake of the poor. I’m worried for *me*.

My last IQ-ish test was my SATs in high school. I got a perfect score in Verbal, and a good-but-not-great score in Math.

And in high school English, I got A++s in all my classes, Principal's Gold Medals, 100%s on tests, first prize in various state-wide essay contests, etc. In Math, I just barely by the skin of my teeth scraped together a pass in Calculus with a C-.

Every time I won some kind of prize in English my parents would praise me and say I was good and should feel good. My teachers would hold me up as an example and say other kids should try to be more like me. Meanwhile, when I would bring home a report card with a C- in math, my parents would have concerned faces and tell me they were disappointed and I wasn't living up to my potential and I needed to work harder et cetera.

And I don't know which part bothered me more.

Every time I was held up as an example in English class, I wanted to crawl under a rock and die. I didn't do it! I didn't study at all, half the time I did the homework in the car on the way to school, those essays for the statewide competition were thrown together on a lark without a trace of real effort. To praise me for any of it seemed and still seems utterly unjust.

On the other hand, to this day I believe I deserve a fucking *statue* for getting a C- in Calculus I. It should be in the center of the schoolyard, and have a plaque saying something like "Scott Alexander, who by making a herculean effort managed to pass Calculus I, even though they kept throwing random things after the little curly S sign and pretending it made sense."

And without some notion of innate ability, I don't know what to do with this experience. I don't want to have to accept the blame for being a lazy person who just didn't try hard enough in Math. But I *really* don't want to have to accept the credit for being a virtuous and studious English student who worked harder than his peers. I *know* there were people who worked harder than I did in English, who poured their heart and soul into that course – and who still got Cs and Ds. To deny innate ability is to devalue their efforts and sacrifice, while simultaneously giving me credit I don't deserve.

Meanwhile, there were some students who did better than I did in Math with seemingly zero effort. I didn't begrudge those students. But if they'd started trying to say they had exactly the same level of innate ability as I did, and the only difference was *they* were trying while *I* was slacking off, then I sure as hell would have begrudged them. Especially if I knew they were lazing around on the beach while I was poring over a textbook.

I tend to think of social norms as contracts bargained between different groups. In the case of attitudes towards intelligence, those two groups are smart people and dumb people. Since I was both at once, I got to make the bargain with myself, which simplified the bargaining process immensely. The deal I came up with was that I wasn't going to beat myself up over the areas I was bad at, but I also didn't get to become too cocky about the areas I was good at. It was all genetic luck of the draw either way. In the meantime, I would try to press as hard as I could to exploit my strengths and cover up my deficiencies. So far I've found this to be a really

healthy way of treating myself, and it's the way I try to treat others as well.



The theme continues to be “Scott Relives His Childhood Inadequacies”. So:

When I was 6 and my brother was 4, our mom decided that as an Overachieving Jewish Mother she was contractually obligated to make both of us learn to play piano. She enrolled me in a Yamaha introductory piano class, and my younger brother in a Yamaha ‘cute little kids bang on the keyboard’ class.

A little while later, I noticed that my brother was now with me in my Introductory Piano class.

A little while later, I noticed that my brother was now by far the best student in my Introductory Piano Class, even though he had just started and was two or three years younger than anyone else there.

A little while later, Yamaha USA flew him to Japan to show him off before the Yamaha corporate honchos there.

Well, one thing led to another, and my brother won several international piano competitions, got a professorship in music at

age 25, and now routinely gets news articles written about him calling him “among the top musicians of his generation”.

Meanwhile, I was always a mediocre student at Yamaha. When the time came to try an instrument in elementary school, I went with the violin to see if maybe I’d find it more to my tastes than the piano. I was quickly sorted into the remedial class because I couldn’t figure out how to make my instrument stop sounding like a wounded cat. After a year or so of this, I decided to switch to fulfilling my music requirement through a choir, and everyone who’d had to listen to me breathed a sigh of relief.

Every so often I wonder if somewhere deep inside me there is the potential to be “among the top musicians of my generation.” I try to recollect whether my brother practiced harder than I did. My memories are hazy, but I don’t think he practiced *much* harder until well after his career as a child prodigy had taken off. The cycle seemed to be that every time he practiced, things came fluidly to him and he would produce beautiful music and everyone would be amazed. And this must have felt great, and incentivized him to practice more, and that made him even better, so that the beautiful music came even more fluidly, and the praise became more effusive, until eventually he chose a full-time career in music and became amazing. Meanwhile, when I started practicing it always sounded like wounded cats, and I would get very cautious praise like “Good job, Scott, it sounded like that cat was hurt a little less badly than usual,” and it made me frustrated, and want to practice less, which made me even worse, until eventually I quit in disgust.

On the other hand, I know people who want to get good at writing, and make a mighty resolution to write two hundred words a day every day, and then after the first week they find it's too annoying and give up. These people think I'm amazing, and why shouldn't they? I've written a few hundred to a few thousand words pretty much every day for the past ten years.

But as I've said before, this has taken exactly zero willpower. It's more that I [can't stop even if I want to](#). Part of that is probably that when I write, I feel really good about having expressed exactly what it was I meant to say. Lots of people read it, they comment, they praise me, I feel good, I'm encouraged to keep writing, and it's exactly the same virtuous cycle as my brother got from his piano practice.

And so I think it would be *too easy* to say something like "There's no innate component at all. Your brother practiced piano really hard but almost never writes. You write all the time, but wimped out of practicing piano. So what do you expect? You both got what you deserved."

I tried to practice piano as hard as he did. I really tried. But every moment was a struggle. I could keep it up for a while, and then we'd go on vacation, and there'd be no piano easily available, and I would be breathing a sigh of relief at having a ready-made excuse, and he'd be heading off to look for a piano somewhere to practice on. Meanwhile, I am writing this post in short breaks between running around hospital corridors responding to psychiatric emergencies, and there's probably someone very impressed with that,

someone saying “But you had such a great excuse to get out of your writing practice!”

I dunno. But I don't think of myself as working hard at any of the things I am good at, in the sense of “exerting vast willpower to force myself kicking and screaming to do them”. It's possible I *do* work hard, and that an outside observer would accuse me of eliding how hard I work, but it's not a conscious elision and I don't feel that way from the inside.

Ramanujan worked very hard at math. But I don't think he thought of it as work. He obtained a scholarship to the local college, but dropped out almost immediately because he couldn't make himself study any subject other than math. Then he got accepted to another college, and dropped out *again* because they made him study non-mathematical subjects and he failed a physiology class. Then he nearly starved to death because he had no money and no scholarship. To me, this doesn't sound like a person who just happens to be very hard-working; if he had the ability to study other subjects he would have, for no reason other than that it would have allowed him to stay in college so he could keep studying math. It seems to me that in some sense Ramanujan was *incapable* of putting hard work into non-math subjects.

I really wanted to learn math and failed, but I did graduate with honors from medical school. Ramanujan really wanted to learn physiology and failed, but he did become one of history's great mathematicians. So which one of us was the hard worker?

People used to ask me for writing advice. And I, in all earnestness, would say “Just transcribe your thoughts onto paper exactly like they sound in your head.” It turns out that doesn’t work for other people. Maybe it doesn’t work for me either, and it just feels like it does.

But you know what? When asked about one of his discoveries, a method of simplifying a very difficult problem to a continued fraction, Ramanujan described his thought process as: “It is simple. The minute I heard the problem, I knew that the answer was a continued fraction. ‘Which continued fraction?’ I asked myself. Then the answer came to my mind”.

And again, maybe that’s just how it feels to him, and the real answer is “study math so hard that you flunk out of college twice, and eventually you develop so much intuition that you can solve problems without thinking about them.”

(or maybe the real answer is “have dreams where obscure Hindu gods appear to you as drops of blood and reveal mathematical formulae”. [Ramanujan was weird](#))

But I *still* feel like there’s something going on here where the solution to me being bad at math and piano isn’t just “sweat blood and push through your brain’s aversion to these subjects until you make it stick”. When I read biographies of Ramanujan and other famous mathematicians, there’s no sense that they ever had to do that with math. When I talk to my brother, I never get a sense that he had to do that with piano. And if I am good enough at writing to

qualify to have an opinion on being good at things, then I don't feel like I ever went through that process myself.

So this too is part of my deal with myself. I'll try to do my best at things, but if there's something I really hate, something where I have to go uphill every step of the way, then it's okay to admit mediocrity. I won't beat myself up for not forcing myself kicking and screaming to practice piano. And in return I won't become too cocky about practicing writing a lot. It's probably [some kind of luck of the draw](#) either way.

IV

I said before that this wasn't just about poor people, it was about me being selfishly worried for my own sake. I think I might have given the mistaken impression that I merely need to justify to myself why I can't get an A in math or play the piano. But it's much worse than that.

The rationalist community tends to get a lot of high-scrupulosity people, people who tend to beat themselves up for not doing more than they are. It's why [I push giving 10% to charity](#), not as some kind of amazing stretch goal that we need to guilt people into doing, but as a crutch, a sort of "don't worry, you're still okay if you only give ten percent". It's why there's so much emphasis on "heroic responsibility" and how you, yes you, have to solve all the world's problems personally. It's why I see red when anyone accus-

es us of entitlement, since it goes about as well as calling an anorexic person fat.

And we really aren't doing ourselves any favors. For example, Nick Bostrom writes:

Searching for a cure for aging is not just a nice thing that we should perhaps one day get around to. It is an urgent, screaming moral imperative. The sooner we start a focused research program, the sooner we will get results. It matters if we get the cure in 25 years rather than in 24 years: a population greater than that of Canada would die as a result.

If that bothers you, you *definitely* shouldn't read [Astronomical Waste](#).

Yet here I am, not doing anti-aging research. Why not?

Because I tried doing biology research a few times and it was really hard and made me miserable. You know how in every science class, when the teacher says "Okay, pour the white chemical into the grey chemical, and notice how it turns green and begins to bubble," there's always one student who pours the white chemical into the grey chemical, and it just forms a greyish-white mixture and sits there? That was me. I hated it, I didn't have the dexterity or the precision of mind to do it well, and when I finally finished my required experimental science classes I was happy never to think about it again. Even the abstract intellectual part of it – the one

where you go through data about genes and ligands and receptors in supercentenarians and shake it until data comes out – requires exactly the kind of math skills that I don't have.

Insofar as this is a matter of innate aptitude – some people are cut out for biology research and I'm not one of them – all is well, and my decision to get a job I'm good at instead is entirely justified.

But insofar as there's no such thing as innate aptitude, just hard work and grit – then by not being gritty enough, I'm a monster who's complicit in the death of a population greater than that of Canada.

Insofar as there's no such thing as innate aptitude, I have *no excuse* for not being Aubrey de Grey. Or if Aubrey de Grey doesn't impress you much, Norman Borlaug. Or if you don't know who either of those two people are, Elon Musk.

I once heard a friend, upon his first use of modafinil, wonder aloud if the way they felt on that stimulant was the way Elon Musk felt all the time. That tied a lot of things together for me, gave me an intuitive understanding of what it might “feel like from the inside” to be Elon Musk. And it gave me a good tool to discuss biological variation with. Most of us agree that people on stimulants can perform in ways it's difficult for people off stimulants to match. Most of us agree that there's nothing magical about stimulants, just changes to the levels of dopamine, histamine, norepinephrine et cetera in the brain. And most of us agree there's a lot of natural

variation in these chemicals anyway. So “me on stimulants is that guy’s normal” seems like a good way of cutting through some of the philosophical difficulties around this issue.

...which is all kind of a big tangent. The point I want to make is that for me, what’s at stake in talking about natural variations in ability isn’t just whether I have to feel like a failure for not getting an A in high school calculus, or not being as good at music as my brother. It’s whether I’m a failure for not being Elon Musk. Specifically, it’s whether I can say “No, I’m really not cut out to be Elon Musk” and go do something else I’m better at without worrying that I’m killing everyone in Canada.

V

The proverb says: “Everyone has somebody better off than they are and somebody worse off than they are, with two exceptions.” When we accept that we’re all in the “not Elon Musk” boat together (with one exception) a lot of the status games around innate ability start to seem less important.

Every so often an overly kind commenter here praises my intelligence and says they feel intellectually inadequate compared to me, that they wish they could be at my level. But at my level, I spend my time feeling intellectually inadequate [Book-Review-And-Highlights-Quantum-Computing-Since-Democritus | compared to Scott Aaronson]]. Scott Aaronson [describes](#) feeling “in awe” of Terence Tao and frequently struggling to understand him. Terence Tao

– well, I don't know if he's religious, but maybe he feels intellectually inadequate compared to God. And God feels intellectually inadequate compared to John von Neumann.

So there's not much point in me feeling inadequate compared to my brother, because even if I was as good at music as my brother, I'd probably just feel inadequate for not being Mozart.

And asking "Well what if you just worked harder?" can elide small distinctions, but not bigger ones. If my only goal is short-term preservation of my self-esteem, I can imagine that if only things had gone a little differently I could have practiced more and ended up as talented as my brother. It's a lot harder for me to imagine the course of events where I do something different and become Mozart. Only one in a billion people reach a Mozart level of achievement; why would it be me?

If I loved music for its own sake and wanted to be a talented musician so I could express the melodies dancing within my heart, then none of this matters. But insofar as I want to be good at music because *I feel bad that other people are better than me at music*, that's a road without an end.

This is also how I feel of when some people on this blog complain they feel dumb for not being as smart as some of the other commenters on this blog.

I happen to have all of your IQ scores in a spreadsheet right here (remember that survey you took?). Not a single person is below

the population average. The first percentile for IQ here – the one such that 1% of respondents are lower and 99% of respondents are higher – is – corresponds to the 85th percentile of the general population. So even if you're in the first percentile here, you're still pretty high up in the broader scheme of things.

At that point we're back on the road without end. I am pretty sure we can raise your IQ as much as you want and you will *still* feel like pond scum. If we raise it twenty points, you'll try reading [Quantum Computing since Democritus](#) and feel like pond scum. If we raise it forty, you'll just go to [Terence Tao's blog](#) and feel like pond scum there. Maybe if you were literally the highest-IQ person in the entire world you would feel good about yourself, but any system where only one person in the world is allowed to feel good about themselves at a time *is a bad system* .

People say we should stop talking about ability differences so that stupid people don't feel bad. I say that there's more than enough room for *everybody* to feel bad, smart and stupid alike, and not talking about it won't help. What will help is fundamentally uncoupling perception of intelligence from perception of self-worth.

I work with psychiatric patients who tend to have cognitive difficulties. Starting out in the Detroit ghetto doesn't do them any favors, and then they get conditions like bipolar disorder and schizophrenia that [actively lower IQ](#) for poorly understood neurological reasons.

The standard psychiatric evaluation includes an assessment of cognitive ability; the one I use is a quick test with three questions. The questions are – “What is 100 minus 7?”, “What do an apple and an orange have in common?”, and “Remember these three words for one minute, then repeat them back to me: house, blue, and tulip”.

There are a lot of people – and I don’t mean floridly psychotic people who don’t know their own name, I mean ordinary reasonable people just like you and me – who can’t answer these questions. And we know why they can’t answer these questions, and it is pretty darned biological.

And if our answer to “I feel dumb and worthless because my IQ isn’t high enough” is “don’t worry, you’re not worthless, I’m sure you can be a great scientist if you just try hard enough”, then we are implicitly throwing under the bus all of these people who are *definitely* not going to be great scientists no matter how hard they try. Talking about trying harder can obfuscate the little differences, but once we’re talking about the homeless schizophrenic guy from Detroit who can’t tell me 100 minus 7 to save his life, you can’t just magic the problem away with a wave of your hand and say “I’m sure he can be the next Ramanujan if he keeps a positive attitude!” You either need to condemn him as worthless *or else stop fricking tying worth to innate intellectual ability* .

This is getting pretty close to what I was talking about in my post on [burdens](#) . When I get a suicidal patient who thinks they’re a burden on society, it’s nice to be able to point out ten important

things they've done for society recently and prove them wrong. But sometimes it's not that easy, and the only thing you can say is "f#@k that s#!t". Yes, society has organized itself in a way that excludes and impoverishes a bunch of people who could have been perfectly happy in the state of nature picking berries and hunting aurochs. It's not your fault, and if they're going to give you compensation *you take it* . And we had better make this perfectly clear now, so that when everything becomes automated and run by robots and we're *all* behind the curve, everybody agrees that us continuing to exist is still okay.

Likewise with intellectual ability. When someone feels sad because they can't be a great scientist, it is nice to be able to point out all of their intellectual strengths and tell them "Yes you can, if only you put your mind to it!" But this is often not true. At that point you have to say "f@#k it" and tell them to stop tying their self-worth to being a great scientist. And we had better establish that now, before transhumanists succeed in creating superintelligence and we *all* have to come to terms with our intellectual inferiority.

VI

But I think the situation can also be somewhat rosier than that.

Ozy once told me that the [law of comparative advantage](#) was one of the most inspirational things they had ever read. This was sufficiently strange that I demanded an explanation.

Ozy said that it proves *everyone can contribute* . Even if you are worse than everyone else at everything, you can still participate in global trade and other people will pay you money. It may not be very much money, but it will be some, and it will be a measure of how your actions are making other people better off and they are grateful for your existence.

(in real life this doesn't work for a couple of reasons, but who cares about real life when we have a *theory* ?)

After some thought, I was also inspired by this.

I'm never going to be a great mathematician or Elon Musk. But if I pursue my comparative advantage, which right now is medicine, I can still make money. And if I feel like it, I can donate it to mathematics research. Or anti-aging research. Or [the same people Elon Musk donates his money to](#) . They will use it to hire smart people with important talents that I lack, and I will be at least partially responsible for those people's successes.

If I had an IQ of 70, I think I would still want to pursue my comparative advantage – even if that was ditch-digging, or whatever, and donate that money to important causes. It might not be very much money, but it would be *some* .

Our modern word “talent” comes from the Greek word *talenton* , a certain amount of precious metal sometimes used as a denomination of money. The etymology passes through a parable of Jesus'. A master calls three servants to him and gives the first five tal-

ents, the second two talents, and the third one talent. The first two servants invest the money and double it. The third literally buries it in a hole. The master comes back later and praises the first two servants, but sends the third servant to Hell (metaphor? what metaphor?).

Various people have come up with various interpretations, but the most popular says that God gives all of us different amounts of resources, and He will judge us based on how well we use these resources rather than on how many He gave us. It would be stupid to give your first servant five loads of silver, then your second servant two loads of silver, then immediately start chewing out the second servant for having less silver than the first one. And if both servants invested their silver wisely, it would be silly to chew out the second one for ending up with less profit when he started with less seed capital. The moral seems to be that if you take what God gives you and use it wisely, you're fine.

The modern word "talent" comes from this parable. It implies "a thing God has given you which you can invest and give back".

So if I were a ditch-digger, I think I would dig ditches, donate a portion of the small amount I made, and trust that I had done what I could with the talents I was given. **VII.** The Jews *also* talk about how God judges you for your gifts. Rabbi Zusya once said that when he died, he wasn't worried that God would ask him "Why weren't you Moses?" or "Why weren't you Solomon?" But he did worry that God might ask "Why weren't you Rabbi Zusya?"

And this is part of why it's important for me to believe in innate ability, and especially differences in innate ability. If everything comes down to hard work and positive attitude, then God has every right to ask me "Why weren't you Srinivasa Ramanujan?" or "Why weren't you Elon Musk?"

If everyone is legitimately a different person with a different brain and different talents and abilities, then all God gets to ask me is whether or not I was Scott Alexander.

This seems like a gratifyingly low bar. *[more to come on this subject later]*