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Three Kinds of Failure

Failure has not been, as far as I know, philosophically analyzed in detail.¹ I analyze three distinct kinds or ways of failure, and the relationship among them. I focus on prudential failure in what one has done or not done, in major aspects of one's life, such as romantic love and work. This exploration seems to shed new light on the notion of failure and on its complexity. The explication of failure in a sense needs to be part of the larger aim of understanding what success is, for example, the notion of achievement (see, e.g., Bradford 2015; Hirji 2019). But my aim here is more modest and, based on common-sense notions of success, aims at distinguishing what I claim to be three distinct kinds or ways of failure. The discussion has clear practical application, once we are clear about the three distinct kinds, in helping us to weigh our different interests in not failing, as well as our failure-related fears, against each other.

In the most general way, the concept of failure can be thought to be "Not adequately meeting the purposes one sets (or ought to set) to oneself." The three very different kinds of failure I explicate are instances of this concept.

I have never failed as a professional horse trainer, ballet dancer, software developer, car salesman, Assyriologist, or pastry chef. The reason why I have not failed in these pursuits, as in innumerable others, is that I have never tried to do them. In fact, I have never even wanted to try to do them. It would be ludicrous to say that, just because I have never tried, I have failed in these pursuits. On the contrary, I have *not* failed; I did not try.

This is so irrespective of what we think about the question of how well I would have done had I tried, a question that does not concern us now. Indeed, even if we are sure that, had I tried to do those things, I would have

¹ An interesting exception in the context of art is Mag Uidhir (2013). Williams in "Moral Luck" makes some suggestive thoughts when reflecting on the case of Gauguin (Williams 1981; see also Dan-Cohen 2008).

failed, I have not failed in doing them because I have not tried. Of course, I have not succeeded in doing them either, but the ontology is not binary, i.e., that anything I have not succeeded in doing is therefore something that I have failed in. As I have not even attempted to do them, it seems perfectly reasonable to say that I have not failed in doing them. Not trying *prima facie* suffices for not failing. There are innumerable things of which it can be rightly said that I have not failed doing, simply *because I have not tried* to do (again, irrespective of the question of whether I would have succeeded had I tried). This is surely also so for other people.

This may tempt us with the following argument:

- a. People who try to do things often fail in them.
- b. People who do not try to do things do not fail in them.
- c. It is better not to fail, than to fail.
- d. Therefore, people are better off not trying to do anything.

This is of course a fallacy, but a helpful one. For if it was indeed true that you cannot fail if you do not try, then this argument would need to be taken seriously.

I hasten to exclude those cases where one has a moral obligation to try to do things (support one's children, keep one's promises, not take undue risks with one's patients if one is a medical doctor, and the like). These cases are of course important, but they are not our concern here. We are concerned with those situations in which one is not morally obligated to try doing things, but where the question arises whether nevertheless one could be said to have (prudentially) failed to do them, even if one had not tried to do so. Matters are not always clear cut here since, for example, failure in one's work is likely to affect the way one will help one's children, to whom one has moral obligations. If there are moral obligations to oneself, then the issue becomes even more entangled. Nevertheless our focus here is on prudential failure as such, and not on moral failure. The analysis of the three kinds of prudential failure suggested may be useful in explicating moral failure, but I will not pursue this here.

Now, normally a person indeed cannot plausibly be said to have failed to do most things, if he has never tried to do them. And, because there are so many things that can be done, and even so many things that it might be worthwhile to do, it is a very good idea not to try to do too many of them. So the last thing that we should conclude would be that we should go out and try to do as many things as possible at random or thoughtlessly. Just because

there are so many potentially rewarding things to do, and life being so short, it is important to think before we leap. The lesson of the story is different: it might be a failure for you not to have done something, and it will not be an excuse to say, "I have not failed doing X because I have not even tried to do it." In the case of *some X's*, you fail because you have *not* tried, not because you tried and came up short.

In other words, we already see that there are here two very different kinds or manifestations of failure:

- A. Performance Failure (PF): not doing well in something that one tries to do
- B. Omission Failure (OF): not trying to do something that one in some weak (prudential) sense "should" have done or attempted doing

In PF, we focus on the way in which one engages with the goals that one is trying to achieve, with "failure" implying that one is not going about it adequately: one is not doing what one should be doing or doing what one should not be doing, within the activity or endeavor. One is not performing satisfactorily, let alone optimally. There is, however, some conceptual leeway here, such as when one succeeds by a lucky fluke. One may have not been engaging with the goals at all adequately, but nevertheless also cannot be said to have failed, if one has succeeded. But we can set this aside. One failed to perform well, but was merely lucky.

The last caveat in B is crucial since, as we have seen, not trying to do things cannot always (or even typically) be construed as failure. There has to be some sense of "should," however weak, in order for the X to emerge, among the numerous things that one also could have done, did not do, and it would make no sense to say that one has failed simply for not trying to do. This may amount to something like that it would have been a very good idea, or perhaps even best, prudentially, for someone to have tried doing X. There might often be more than one thing of this sort, and then one "should" have done (should have attempted to do) one among them. This can remain general, and we obviously do not give an account of the content of what would constitute a failure of this sort for each person. Likewise, we can mostly bracket the complex epistemic issues, such as how we would *know* what a person "should" have done.

Much of what one might say here is, of course, individual and contextual. For example, that given one's particular talents it might have been better for

one to try to go for this sort of career, something which, for a person who lacks the relevant talent, would have been a mistake. The things concerning which we might speak of a person's OF, because he did not try to do, would vary from person to person. People have special talents or aptitudes for things, are interested or desire certain things, would realize themselves if they were to do certain things, and would be happy doing them. What those things are depends upon who one is, and upon the circumstances.

It matters, of course, whether we want to speak about failure objectively or subjectively. Subjective failure would be failure by one's own standards, or having a feeling or sense of failure, while objective failure would involve external standards that would allow a judgment that could over-rule the agent's own views or feelings about his or her failure or success. For our purposes we can leave this open and focus on the question of the kinds of failure. The present evaluation can apply both in subjective self-evaluations and in external estimates of, say, what more an agent could have done and whether she optimized her potential in a given sphere. Often, of course, there will be significant consistency between the subjective sense of failure and the judgment that a more objective evaluation will yield, such as in typical cases where a person cannot find decent work in his profession for many years (while others with similar qualifications do), or his unhappy marriage ended in a bitter divorce.

Sometimes more general statements might be plausible, such as that every (or nearly every) person ought to have tried to find romantic love, within his or her capacities; or that everyone (or nearly everyone) ought to have tried to discover what would make for self-realization, within his or her life's conditions. And of course there are deep and fascinating philosophical questions here, such as how much human nature affects what people (everyone, or most people) "should" try to do; whether there are general requirements that every person ought to try to meet, in order that he or she are to be said to have lived life "to the fullest"; or what is required by the idea of living "a meaningful life." But we cannot enter these complexities and need not do so in order to explicate the three kinds or forms of "failure."

We can see that OF here does not depend on a conscious decision to not try. It is usually not easy to be justifiably assured in the judgment that a certain person "ought" to have done X, but once we are, the fact that this person never thought about doing X or not doing X, need not necessarily matter. He failed, prudentially, to do X, even if he did not decide not to

do it. This further shows that we have here a very different kind of failure from the previous one (of failing to do what one tries to do, failure *within* a pursuit), for the first concept conceptually requires some sense of “trying” or engagement for there to be failure, while the second does not.²

It is reasonable that, with our second kind, there is an assumption that if one had tried to do X, there is a significant chance that one would have succeeded, at least to some degree. The clichéd adage that it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all seems to imply that a life lived with a *failed* attempt at love is still somehow better than a life with no attempt at all at love. But even here, if one were nearly certain that the continuous efforts would amount to nothing but heartache, this would matter, prudentially. As a rule, it would not make sense to speak of failing to try to do something that one had very little chance of succeeding to do had one tried. This seems related to the famous “Ought implies Can” principle. We can imagine extreme cases where this would not be so: if one has been stranded in the desert and has no realistic chance of getting out, we might want to say that nevertheless one fails in the OF sense if one does not even try to do so; if one just gives up. But normally we can be understood to be speaking about trying to do things that one has some significant chance of succeeding to do, if one seriously tries. The qualifier “seriously” matters here because when we speak of trying we refer to making a serious effort, not a mere gesture. How serious must “serious” be is contextual and can be set aside here.

Finally, it will often be the case that a judgment of OF will be “type-related” rather than “token-related.” For a talented person confronting various opportunities, there will not usually be a specific thing that it would be a failure to not try to do; rather, not trying to do *anything* among various things would constitute the OF. One ought to try to have friends and find love, and not having any can be construed as OF, but not being friends with this or that specific person (or even not trying to be friends with him or her), or not establishing a loving relationship with this or that specific person (or even not trying to establish such a relationship with him or her) typically is not an OF. Of course there might be a person with whom one has a greater chance of establishing the optimal friendship or

² The salience of OF in addition to PF can be seen also from looking at what people regret; see, for example, Gilovich & Medvec 1995; Roesch & Summerville 2005.

loving relationship: one's potentially best friend or true love. The question of the weight that we ought to give this thought is a topic for a separate discussion. And there are cases when you really would have liked to have met a particular person, such as one's hero. But generally, the pertinent notion here resembles imperfect duties: the OF is not to seek friends, or true love, *ever*, or for a very long time, or the like (rather than in a specific instance). Similarly, not actualizing *any* of one's talents and capabilities may well be an OF, but actualizing one set instead of another will usually not be. Again, there are many valuable things to do, so (except in a rare situation) the OF can hardly be to not do any one of them, but rather the OF to do anything or nearly anything.

To the two kinds of failure already explicated we now need to add a third, which can emerge from a response to the second:

- C. Selection Failure (SF): trying to do something that one in some sense "should" not have done or attempted to do

SF clearly differs from OF, being active rather than passive, and following what one "should" *not* have done rather than not following what one "should" have done. The psychological climate of a life marred by the fear to engage, in OF, can lie at the exact opposite from that of a life spoiled by rushing into the wrong things, in SF. But SF is also unlike PF, in that in SF the failure lies in *what* one set out to attempt rather than (as in PF) in one's lack of success in engaging *properly* when doing something one set out to attempt, i.e., in *how* one goes about it, in not *performing* well. SF (together with OF) is, as it were, strategic, while PF is tactical. Clearly many instances of PF are not within a path that it is a failure, in itself, to be on. Given that people have not failed in terms of SF, i.e., they are on an adequate path, they will typically sometimes succeed and sometimes fail in terms of PF.

But why is SF at all a form of failure? The reason is that this sense of failure tries to capture the idea that one fails, already, by trying to do X. Here setting oneself on the path to X is, *in itself*, the failure. This may be, for example, because one is bound to fail (in the sense of PF), and there is hence no reason to go in the given direction (which, of course, does not imply that one ought to aim only for things that one cannot fail doing; these things involve a balance, and are contextual). Or, perhaps, pursuing X prevents one from doing other things that it would be better to do, i.e., it has heavy opportunity costs.

It might be doubted whether selecting a wrong path to pursue, in SF, is not just a variant of the failure of omission (OF), or a mere mistake rather than a failure. One could admittedly limit the typology in such a way and make do with two types of failure, and still be able to capture many of the insights that follow from distinguishing PF from the other forms of failure. But it seems to me that, at least in many cases, we would thereby be missing something important. Failure in performance *within the pursuit one aims for*, as in PF, is indeed typically a complex combination of activity and passivity, being too aggressive or not aggressive enough at different points, failing tactically, in various and changing ways, in the proper pursuit of one's given goals. On the strategic level, however, there are often two *distinct* ways in which people fail, modes of failing in choosing *what one's general aim* should be, which need to be distinguished. These are, importantly, not only modes of actual failure, but often psychologically distinct types of failure-generating dispositions. OF is often a fearful, too-conservative, life-shy avoidance of challenge and the risk of failure, detachment from one's dreams and ambitions (and indeed an anxiety to form and articulate them), disengagement with one's strengths and with the real opportunities for love or professional self-realization, "playing it safe" to a fault. SF, by contrast, is often the failure to take due care, rushing into a place where one is unlikely to succeed, not just a mistake in judging which of the alternatives it would be best to go for, but a failure, in one's general disposition, to connect to the difficulties of reality and to one's limitations.

Typically the two types of failure will be manifested by different people; or, occasionally, by an individual at different phases of his or her life – perhaps as an over-reaction to an earlier failure in the other direction. OF and SF are, then, frequently not just accidental mistakes but failures that derive from contrasting systematic vices. In OF one is typically paralyzed by the fear of failure, in SF one is typically mesmerized by the lure of success. OF is frequently a failure *in non-engagement*, an expression of a fear of life, of a lack of confidence, of an undue pessimism as to one's chances of success (or perhaps of the consequences of failure). SF, by contrast, is frequently a failure *of engagement* that is due to an unreasonable over-optimism, in setting one's life in a direction which is beyond one's talents and abilities, or not giving due weight to the possible difficulties and consequences.

SF can appear at various levels of generality. Such a failure might be, for a given person, to try at all to engage in some very general matter (while in

fact “One is not cut out for marriage”). Even more generally, there might be such claims that pertain to every person. For example, certain Stoic or Far Eastern belief systems, which see success as the overcoming of desire and striving, may consider any attempt at setting oneself personal or professional goals as a surrender to the ego and hence already an (SF) failure.³ More typically the claims pertaining to SF will be more specific, such as, person P ought not to marry person Q; the failure would be even to try to be together, while “clearly they were not meant to be.” There is every reason to think that P & Q will fail (in the sense of PF) in their marriage if they marry, and hence setting out to do so would be an SF. Or, that a woman should not set out in life to become a professional singer, or a businesswoman. She may simply not be cut out for the life implied by these goals.

OF is constituted by the person’s *not trying* to do the relevant thing (e.g., seek love, develop her talents, get a job). The failure, as we noted, is a failure *to engage*. In SF, by contrast, the person is active, and the failure is constituted by the things he does try to do – the failure is *in aiming at, trying to do, and engaging in* the wrong things (e.g., pursuing the manifestly wrong career, for one). In PF, we recall, the failure was internal to the pursuit one was engaging in, one failed in not going about adequately, in doing whatever one set out to do.

The analogy of a game can help us to see the three kinds of failure: in PF, a person does not play the game *well*, and loses; in OF, she *does not play*, that in itself being the failure; while in SF, she *plays the wrong game* (for her). If we consider the example of romantic love, the failures may be, respectively, in failing to adequately work on the relationship one is in, in not entering any relationship, and in entering the wrong relationship. If we consider the example of a professional career, the failures may be, respectively, in failing in developing one’s career, in not choosing any career, and in choosing the wrong career.

In all three forms of failure we can typically speak about degrees of failure, although sometimes success and failure will be a matter of passing a certain threshold, and then if one has not, one will be said just to have failed. In PF, one may fail miserably, or just not do very well, in whatever it is one is

³ Perhaps such positions are better understood as a radical revaluations of what success would be, so that (say) not trying to get rid of one’s ambitions itself becomes a failure. But we need not enter these complexities here.

trying to do. In OF, one may do nothing of the given thing that one “should” have done, or make a few serious attempts but nevertheless be said to have largely failed (in the OF sense) doing/trying to do. And in SF, one might fail miserably, utterly miss the mark, in what one sets as a target for oneself and attempts to do, or merely fail (SF sense) in really getting it right but still roughly be in the general territory.

All three kinds of failure share the common feature of doing/not doing what one should/should not have done. As we saw, in PF, this is a failure of performance within a certain path, in OF, the failure is in not setting upon a (any) relevant path, and in SF, it is setting about the wrong path. In certain cases we might see an example as exemplifying two of the kinds of failure, viewed from a different perspective, but this should not as a rule imply that the kinds of failure are not distinct. Indeed, all three, being examples of failure, can be subsumed under not succeeding in the proper megarational project one has or ought to have. But to dismiss the distinctness of the different kinds of failure is to miss out on the very different and often contrastive insights that reflecting on each way of failure can provide. It is also (as we saw in detail when we contrasted OF with SF) to lose sight of the distinct sort of psychological states that often ground each of the different ways of failure.

The Dangerous Focus on PF

It is very important to recognize the dangers of focusing on PF, and that there is more to failure than PF – not succeeding in doing what one tries to do. This first concept of failure often has a sort of magnetic pull on us, and it is important that one will not be dissuaded from trying to do things by the thought we saw earlier, to the effect that “If I try and fail then I have failed, while if I do not even try I will not fail.” There are, I am pointing out, two more and highly important senses of failure. The first one is OF, in which *you fail precisely because you have not tried*. Many people do not go to study things they are interested in, try out for careers that they think they might like to do, go out on a limb opening a business on their own, or go after other professional or personal challenges, all so that they would not risk PF. If people try out for something, but then the results are not forthcoming, then (they feel) they will be branded as failures. But if they keep the dream to themselves and do not pursue it, then the issue of PF does not come up.

Often, however, this very safety-induced move is itself a failure. Rather than being saved from failure by not trying, the very falling for the temptation “not to fail by not trying” is the OF. One would probably have been fulfilled and content had one done X, one would have been very glad to have done X, but failed to do so; and that is a missed opportunity that, at least sometimes, merits the verdict of being a type of failure.

It is interesting to try to understand this particularly heightened aversion to PF. One factor is that typically there is a greater immediate social cost to PF than OF. Sometimes we cannot even know that a person has made an OF or an SF until quite late, perhaps even when they are quite old, or even dead. Only when looking at their life as a whole might it become completely clear that they really should have tried to do certain types of things (but failed to engage, in the OF way); or should have tried to do things completely different than what they did try (and failed to, in the SF way). Regarding PF, by contrast, we might fairly *quickly* have to face the shame of failing (unless we die trying to do the thing we set out to do). And there are analogues here in the first-person sense, i.e., it is often harder to deny to oneself constant failures of performance, than to be sure in one’s feeling that one failed because one did not opt to engage any pursuit, or made a misguided choice as to what to pursue.

Certain people have a fear of success: for example, they may fear that success will result in changes in their lives that it would be hard for them to cope with; or perhaps they have an unconscious fear of succeeding because that would make them superior to a parent who had failed, and induce overwhelming guilt. The fear of success is typically pathological. The fear of failure that we are discussing may also be so, but often it seems to include a strong component of sheer cognitive error, in the way we noted: being, as it were, *over-impressed by the thought that if one does not try, then one does not fail*.

The dangers of identifying failure only with the first kind of failure, with failing-what-one-has-tried, can be further seen from the public sphere. If our leaders are criticized only for the failures emerging when they try to do things, then it becomes very tempting not to attempt things, or to do only those that it is reasonably assured will not fail – that is, to play it safe. But the price we then pay is that ambitious efforts to go beyond the comfort zone will not be made. The second kind of failure, the failure of not trying, needs to be recognized alongside the failure to succeed in what one has tried. And similarly with the third kind, of trying to do what one should not have

attempted. Here again we find many examples in the public sphere where the problem is not the failure of performance, the failure to succeed in what one has set out, but SF, the failure of opting for the very thing one aimed for and set out to try to do.

Sometimes the judgment of SF follows from its having led to PF, i.e., that one failed in what one set as a goal because this was something that one would very likely fail to succeed in achieving. But this need not be so: it might, for example, be that one actually succeeded in the engagement (i.e., did not fail in the PF sense) but nevertheless it was the wrong thing to choose to engage in, say, because the costs were too high, or there were better options available. It was a failure of the SF sort, without leading to PF.

There is no general guide as to how much we need to be guided by the fear of PF, and this will be inevitably contextual. Of course we need to distinguish among situations: no one should risk all of his family's saving in a highly risky business venture and, more generally, the degree of financial risk one takes should be receptive to one's age, circumstances, psychological risk-tolerance, and alternatives. In some roles the reduction or even elimination of failure is crucially important (e.g., quality control). Sometimes it depends on one's success: in gambling, if one has won a huge jackpot then it would normally be a good idea to walk away with one's profits, and not put them at risk of imminent PF. The plan to go and gamble luckily turned out not to be an SF, but staying on indefinitely surely will be.

Likewise, the weight we ought to give to the fear of OF and of SF will also be contextual. When one is young, one can risk OF for a while, the failure of missing opportunities and doing nothing, and still likely have enough time to jump back on the metaphorical horse, and do many of the things that in a weak sense "one should do."⁴ When one has less time, the failure involved in continuing to fail in the sense of OF would be greater. The dangers of SF, i.e., of setting out to do the wrong things, are also in one way more limited when one has time, and can make adjustments. It might even be that, in some broader framework, one will admit that there was an SF, but this fortunately

⁴ Although economically this seems more true for people in the middle class and in advanced societies. People of lower social economic classes, or in poor third-world countries, or when there is widespread unemployment and poverty also in advanced societies, may have only one chance, one opportunity. For them, in such conditions, failure of any kind is more consequential even if it occurs only once. Being in a condition to tolerate major failure is a distinct form of inequality.

led to some good results, by lucky fluke, or because a bitter failure taught one a valuable lesson. Nevertheless, sometimes one's early decisions (e.g., as to one's studies and career) will have long term effects over one's whole life. Better, then, to take care not to fail in terms of SF, at any age. Of course the fear of SF – of setting oneself an aim of doing the wrong thing – can be debilitating, and may lead one to OF, namely, to not try to do much, if anything. Better, as a rule, to risk SF, then to fall into OF.

The fear of PF hinders our lives and our performance in further ways. Anyone aiming for success capably and ambitiously will encounter PF, and in a sense ought to seek it. We must in a sense embrace failure. No one is infinitely capable, and many things worth doing will be difficult. PF is a risk that true (success-oriented) effort-makers must be willing to take, at all stages of their development. And as we improve our ability to perform given tasks with less effort, we put up higher standards and set ourselves new challenges. It follows that PF awaits us at the top, even *after* success: by pushing the limits of success, aiming higher and further, we are bound to reach PF. *Such* PF is, in a sense, *the aim of effort*. Not literally, of course, but in the sense, first, that such PF may have a motivational role – perhaps, for instance, one should be determined not to stop before one fails numerous times. And second, there is also the kind of epistemic consideration here – unless one failed often enough, we may have reason to believe that one was over-conservative in one's attempts. Reaching failure, repeatedly, we know that we have reached the pinnacle of our abilities, at least for the time being. We have learnt what it takes to reach the given level, and what our capacities presently are. And we can then think anew how to do better.⁵

Consider world champion athletes. By definition, they are the best in the world, and if the ultimate test is a world record, then once they have set that, they have, at least for the time being, only themselves to beat. Such a person must surely be ambitious, hard working, and a perfectionist. Yet she must not only be ready for PF, as a natural accompaniment of her daily efforts, but in a sense positively *aim* for it. There are intermediate goals in her competitive life, such as winning competitions, by coming out ahead of the given competitors on the day. Yet her main goal is to beat her own

⁵ Much of the following discussion makes more sense with overwhelming desires to succeed, or even with perfectionism (see, e.g., Hurka 1993; Bradford 2015; Hirji 2019; and for some dangers, Landau 2017). This is, of course, not a condition for our present discussion of the kinds or types of failure.

earlier best result. This will necessarily be very difficult, otherwise others would equal or beat her record, or she herself would have broken it earlier. Breaking the world record will obviously be quite rare. But this means that the daily routine, both in practice and competition, will be one of continuous PF. The athlete constantly fails, her performance falls short, but she knows she's on the right track because the criteria keep getting higher. She's not failing constantly to beat the same goals; instead, she fails often, but as she improves she's failing to beat increasingly difficult goals. By contrast, SF, in such a context, may be signaled by constant failure without a rising bar. Perhaps the original choice was not a (SF) failure, but it is time to retire.

One needs to try despite the fear of PF, and to continue trying in the face of repeated PF. Of course PF may also be an indication that a change in one's technique (or the like) is desirable, and the champion needs to try to learn from PF. PF can be a formula for future success. But the likelihood of PF should not stop her from trying.⁶ By contrast, people who psychologically cannot handle PF but nevertheless find themselves in pursuits making it constant, have likely made a major SF, have failed (in the SF sense) in what they are aiming at. So, while the overbearing fear of PF can be debilitating and lead us to OF, one's tolerance for PF and not only the likelihood of failing in the PF way, should guide us in selecting our way in life, and avoiding SF.

Matters do differ from one pursuit to another. As we have already seen, determining the appropriate level of risk requires reflection. A poet can risk producing failed poems most of the time, she will be a success even if but a small number of the things emerging from her pen will be superb, whereas a surgeon cannot afford to lose the vast majority of her patients. The nature and importance of PF in the two pursuits is very different. The success of the poet is really measured *only* by her successful poems, but obviously the surgeon cannot discount the question of the percentages of her success in the surgical operations she conducts. A farmer who would starve if the proposed new crop were to fail ought rationally to be more PF-averse in choosing crops than her neighbor who can have the luxury of experimenting with surplus resources. As a rule, in business one ought to seek a balance between opportunity and the risk of PF, given the alternatives. A change of strategy may very well be necessary if the cost of the PF exceeds any likely reward.

⁶ As Bradford shows, achievement can be manifested also in failure (Bradford 2015, 171–172).

Concern about risk should be an integral part of the setting of standards: a business needs to optimize the failure rate, by setting standards that stretch the effort and enhance performance, but are still appropriately realistic. Yet even then, the idea that one will not fail if one does not try is a very poor guide; and, most likely, will lead to OF. Mapping where things go wrong in a sales campaign, or deciding how many times one should fail before trying something else, are commonsensical, but doing nothing does not get you anywhere, and normally would be in itself a form of OF.

If one is highly motivated, to succeed is also to create an expectation for the repetition of the success, and then for exceeding it. Such expectations are bound to be disappointed. Only if risks are not taken, if standards are set so low that they will be met easily, will PF of this sort not occur. The person who takes care to secure himself, to guarantee success, will hence often be merely fooling himself as to what success means, and – appearances to the contrary – will not be making a true effort. We should often be willing to embrace PF, for the risk of PF is the price of success and, at the limit, PF is (when properly interpreted) the mark that the fullest effort has been made; that the failure of engagement, OF, in no measure exists.

This brings us back to the distinction between the three kinds of failure. Only by settling for mediocrity can we be sure of averting performance failures: those we discover just beyond the limit of our powers, and those that are close to those limits, so that we cannot always produce them dependably. But to settle for an easy and safe-from-PF mediocrity is, often, the greater OF: once again, we will have failed to reach the heights we could, out of the undue fear of failure. Trying and failing (PF) is one form of failure, but often, the greatest failure is not even trying. We should always remember that avoiding PF, and even achieving the utmost in the direction opposite to PF, i.e., successful performance, is tactical. The major failures to avoid in life are OF and SF, such as in the fear of PF leading to not trying to succeed; or pursuing success in the wrong direction (for one), from the beginning.⁷

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