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**The author's dog, Maggie, attacks the weave poles. Working Australian Shepherd Club of Upstate New York (WASCUNY) Trial at High Goal Farm, April 2021 (photograph by David K. Cerilli).**

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# Preface

This book is a philosophical inquiry about the meaning of excellence in agility. Why does the agility community need such a book? Because no matter how accomplished we are as trainers, students, or competitors, we are all either striving for excellence, realizing excellence, or falling short of it, sometimes by a lot. I venture that we don't always know exactly what we are aiming for when we are striving, realizing, or falling short. And even if some of us do believe that we know what excellence is, it still remains for this preferred definition to be justified and defended. So my contribution to practitioners of the sport is a rather specialized one, and that is to formulate and to argue for what I believe is a credible concept of excellence; I call this the *ethical concept of excellence*.

Excellence has ethical connotations in ancient philosophy, especially, and the concept is ubiquitous in the literature of the philosophy of sport as an idea worth clarifying and analyzing. My ambition is to use these philosophical resources to elucidate the real-world activity of agility. The risk of this kind of project is that the theory will float uselessly above the practical, finding no points of intersection. I've tried hard not to let that happen. But to keep my feet firmly planted in the agility field rather than philosophical abstraction, I've interviewed practitioners themselves about what excellence in agility means. You will hear from members of my weekly agility class, trainers, instructors, fellow competitors, and judges, each of whom possesses a vast amount of expertise and experience. But just to be clear, I am not trying to instruct anyone about *how* to be excellent in agility. Look elsewhere if you are merely interested in enhancing agility performance outcomes. There are plenty of other books, podcasts, online training courses, and videos to choose from. My inspiration

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for this topic did not begin with success, as you will learn. It was born out of moments of failure and frustration. From this vantage point it made sense to ask, “What am I trying to do?” This kind of question usually marks the start line for philosophical inquiry.

Consider that a good friend of mine has recently lost her agility dog, a darling Corgi named Thisby. There are few words to comfort this kind of loss. My own dog, Maggie, suffered a tendon injury. The uncertainty about her sport-fitness left me wondering if she would ever return to agility. Another friend and agility competitor is suffering from physical pain when she runs her dogs. Nothing seems to help, and she is struggling to imagine how she can remain physically active and to continue to participate in this sport. These events make me wonder why it is that we continue to throw our hearts away. We direct so much passion and love into our dogs and dog sports. But we only make ourselves vulnerable when, inevitably, these animals and things that matter most to us are suddenly taken from our lives. Perhaps this plight is what makes us human. We ardently pursue what makes our lives full and rich, what some philosophers call “a good life.” But these conditions that satisfy are only contingently available to us. We do not entirely control the presence or absence of those conditions that make a flourishing life. This is what Martha Nussbaum (1986, 20) calls “the fragility of goodness.” Imagine that an excellent human life is like a plant that requires the right external conditions in order to flourish and to grow, such as soil, water, and sun. But the plant will wilt or die if these conditions are absent or severely diminished. In this sense flourishing (or human excellence) is fragile, depending as it does on conditions beyond the control of human agency. So when we are robbed of a beloved animal or an activity about which we are passionate, it is natural to acknowledge that any life that is worth living is a vulnerable one, sustained not by necessity or pure strength of will, but by an accidental and temporary grace. What to do when faced with the absence of something so beloved? As Hearne (1994, 98–99) recommends, “Another dog, same breed, right away.... A decade went by between the death of Gunner and the purchase of the new Airedale pup. That was as soon as I could get to it, what with one thing and another.”

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*This, then, is a sketch of the good; for, presumably, we must draw the outline first, and fill it in later. If the sketch is good, anyone it seems can advance and articulate it, and in such cases time discovers more, or is a good partner in discovery. That is also how the crafts have improved, since anyone can add what is lacking [in the outline] (Aristotle 1985, 1098a20–25).*

Some of my friends and acquaintances who have watched me run Maggie in competitive agility events would be *very* surprised that I am writing about excellence in agility. According to most of these people our performance has fallen quite a bit short of excellent for some time now. So what could I possibly have to say about this exalted quality, a quality that my dog and I rarely, if ever, exhibit? Contrary to popular opinion, being eliminated from class after class has given me a unique perspective about what excellence is. And being a philosopher, I am now motivated and keenly interested in exploring the *concept* of excellence in agility from the many possible candidate definitions to the various ways in which dogs and handlers might exemplify this concept. Success in a particular sport does not necessarily guarantee insight about the nature of success. But failing to achieve success can indeed trigger some deep reflection about how and why these failures occur. Or maybe the nature of success and the “excellence” of this sport is more complex and less obvious than everyone seems to think.

I’ve studied the course map and I’ve walked the course, looking at angles, turns, and approaches. I’ve thought about how fast Maggie will be coming out of the tunnel and where I want to be in order to

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tell her in advance that we will be curling left to an obstacle. I want her on my right side as she comes barreling out. I'm trying to organize a million reminders about my hands (don't wave them around), my shoulders and feet (where they point), and my verbal cue "out" at just the right moment so Maggie knows to move away from me on a bending line. And I tell myself, "Just keep your eyes on her." Staying connected is the most important thing that I will try to remember. Maggie sometimes misses an obstacle to follow me if I'm not looking at her, even though I cue it and it is right in front of her! This is not obstinacy or disobedience. She just wants and needs to be connected with me as we run.

But in a moment none of this planning and rehearsing matters. By the time I line her up at the start line, tell her to "stay," and run out to the first jump, she has already broken her start. In her excitement, she herself has decided that it is time to go. I wasn't ready, and she piles into me, creating a jumble of legs and jump bars. I take her back to the start line, and with much barking and scooting around, I eventually line her up again. But we have already been eliminated for this class. And the clock is ticking. We have only 25 seconds to do a few jumps before we are whistled out of the ring.

Fast forward to another trial and another class. As before I learn the course and walk it to form a plan for handling the twists and turns of this Jumper course. Again, we don't even start. This time I sit Maggie down in front of the first jump and take off her leash to throw behind me. She barks, sidles out of reach, and then grabs her leash on the ground and carries it around, bouncing and careening near me, but not too close. She looks absolutely joyous. But in that moment I regard her as a *delinquent*. My repeated commands to "come" don't make a bit of difference. Eventually I get her under control and peek at the judge. "I guess that's our time," I say regretfully. All I hear is "Thank you" as we slink out of the ring.

I could go on and on about trials where we didn't even start to run a course, and those many, many eliminations we amassed during the spring, summer, and fall of 2021. But I think you get the idea. The main reason for revisiting these painful episodes is to ask a question that is not so easy for me to answer: Why am I doing this? As I write this I have withdrawn from an A.K.C. trial for which I signed up and

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paid. I decided to pause the competitive trialing until I could provide an honest answer to this basic question. One thing I know is that right now, trialing is not fun for me. And I'm not sure about Maggie.

For me the qualifying run is a seduction. Not very long ago it came to stand for disappointment, despair, shame, and the real possibility that I would quit doing competitive agility altogether. I didn't start trialing with a plan to accumulate points, titles, and Facebook cheers. I started by just being happy that Maggie did not jump all over the judge and ring crew. Over time she got focused and serious about the ring, and we sailed through the rather easy courses, accumulating ribbons and titles. Then everything changed. We have been eliminated from so many classes that I can't even keep track of them. It's just a blur of whistles, bells, and "Thank you's" (please leave the ring now). So I have felt pretty low and unaccomplished for a long time now. I've been seeking exceptional performance, and not even getting close.

For those of us who are earnest but merely competent practitioners of the sport, exceptional performance is not a rational quest but it persists as an aspirational ideal. That is the tragic part of the dilemma I face and, perhaps, others do as well. We want to be elite handlers with elite performance dogs because this rarefied standard of excellence is one we have internalized and quietly or implicitly endorsed. But for many of us there are too many obstacles that impede our successful accomplishment of this goal. We are older or less agile handlers. We have less time or money to train. We may not have our own agility fields in which to practice. Maybe we have a dog who is over-aroused and difficult to run. Or maybe we have an older or slow dog who must be constantly urged to run at all. The standard ways of responding to our often frustrated practice of the sport of agility is to be happy when your friends succeed, be happy with a good start-line stay or a good sequence of jumps, be happy with the relationship you have with your dog, be satisfied training your dog at a trial or at home, enjoy the community of agility enthusiasts, or be mindful that this is a hard sport. These are all comforting attitudes to adopt. But they are (psychologically) poor substitutes for the triumph one feels from accomplishing fast, clean qualifying runs. It's like throwing crumbs to someone who hungers for a different kind

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of success. I believe the main problem is that by implicitly endorsing a standard of excellence that we can rarely meet, we negatively shape what it is like to participate in the sport of agility. If I *usually* fall short of an expected standard, then I will *usually* feel frustrated, unsatisfied, or discouraged. And we might expect that in one way or another this attitude will translate into a disheartened attitude toward my dog, who is trying so hard to please me.

## What Is This Book About?

The main question I explore, “What is excellence in agility?” should be of interest to all practitioners of the sport. This includes amateurs like myself who occasionally enter competitive trials, those people who go to an agility class once or twice a week but never compete, and trainers who teach agility classes and seminars as well as elite handlers and their highly trained performance dogs who chase points and titles and who aspire to become eligible for national or international competitions. Additionally, there are many people who just play with their dogs using agility equipment set up in their backyards. It seems to me that all practitioners of agility are trying to achieve excellence, whatever that turns out to be. But one can’t help noticing that excellence in the practice ring may look very different from excellence in the competitive trial setting. Excellence for a new handler and her novice dog may manifest in a completely different way from what more experienced agility teams realize. And what about the backyard enthusiast? Doesn’t she aspire to excellence in the activity too? The main idea I advance here is perhaps more controversial. I argue that there is a univocal concept of excellence that ranges over all of these different contexts of agility. I call this the *ethical concept of excellence*.

For agility practitioners I believe there is a crucial need to formulate a single concept of excellence since without one there is a lack of clarity about what we are trying to achieve when we undertake this sport with our dogs. It might turn out that almost anything will count as excellent or nothing will count, only because we have not clarified the aspirational ideal. But worse and,



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**The author's dog, Maggie, is poised at the peak of the A-frame. Southern Adirondack Agility Club (SAAC) Trial at High Goal Farm, April 2020 (photograph by David K. Cerilli).**

tragically, we may unreflectingly import a concept of excellence into our practice of the sport that we cannot reasonably satisfy. In this case we are denied the pleasure and satisfaction of doing the activity well. As a result, achieving excellence may become so rarified that we are typically disappointed in ourselves and our dogs. The philosophical and real-world examination of the concept of excellence that I undertake here addresses this crucial omission in how we understand and practice the sport of agility.

As practitioners of the sport we think about what we are doing and why. We evaluate successes and failures in the practice field and at competitions, and we deliberate about the quality of life for ourselves as handlers as well as for our dogs. In other words, we reason and reflect about the practice of agility and our participation in it. This makes agility, as well as other sports, ripe for philosophical analysis. Philosophical inquiry finds its natural home in settings where there are open-ended concepts at work and when it is

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clear that these concepts apply to the world with consequences. The meaning of “excellence” is not exhausted by a dictionary definition. The concept invites us to explore what it means and how it applies in particular contexts. One concern I have is that practitioners of agility will invariably measure their own success by a kind of default definition of excellence: a display of perfect skills or perfect runs. Instead we should reevaluate the idea that excellence is essentially connected to performance, not because it allows the poor performers among us to feel better, but because the ethical concept that I recommend brings us closer to the heart and soul of our sport. Let me explain further.

I play the flute, but I am not a professional. I am an intermediate player who, at one time, practiced about four to five times a week. Sometimes the tone sounds good to me in the lower octaves, although the high notes are not always so clear. I try to play with expression but my lack of lung power interferes with phrasing. Sometimes I attempt rather fast passages but invariably get my fingers tangled up. So I repeat the same several measures to get it right, or just better. It is reasonable to describe my flute playing practice as striving for excellence. After all, I am not trying to be a poor player or even an average player. But what standard of excellence applies in this context? By some professional musical standard I fall far short of excellence. For example, it would be laughable to audition for a seat in an orchestra or audition to be admitted to Julliard! But why is *professional* musicianship the standard of excellence that applies in this context? I am not just randomly hitting notes and blowing through the mouthpiece. I am trying to do something that approximates what the professional musician does. We have something in common. But it seems uncharitable to say that I will fail to achieve excellence in my playing because I will never play as expertly as world-class flute players. In other words, a standard of excellence should function in a way that is aspirational. It should guide and inspire me to do better, whether it is playing the flute or practicing agility. But it should not operate as an ideal that is rarely, if ever, realized. The solution is the same for both of these problems, flute-playing and practicing agility. It is to analyze the concept of excellence

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itself. In the case of agility I argue for a “best practices” definition that profiles the internal goods specific to the sport and the relational values that connect handlers with their dogs.

A thorough inquiry invites us to explore reasonable answers to the question “What is excellence in agility?” Here are a few possible answers that deserve closer examination. Excellence in agility is

- exceptional performance;
- a qualifying run, a title, or a championship earned at a competitive event;
- a display of skill by a handler and her dog;
- playing with your dog in an agility ring;
- just getting better, inch by inch;
- realizing the internal rewards of the sport as opposed to the external rewards of the sport; and
- realizing the relational values that connect handlers and their dogs.

Each candidate answer to the main question is itself conceptually complex. For example, we will want to know what exceptional performance is, what the relevant agility skills are, and who can achieve these. What does it mean to get better at a sport like agility? What are the internal rewards of agility activity? And what is the contrast or tension between the internal rewards and the external rewards of the sport? Finally, what are relational values? And why are these central to the practice of agility? Each topic has a point of intersection with some related philosophical ideas that are introduced simply and explained. The philosophical literature ranges over the subject areas of ethics and animals, theoretical ethics, and the philosophy of sport. My aim is not merely to survey the landscape of answers to the main question but to argue for a *plausible* answer. So the methodology is to first present some problems about the concept of excellence in Chapter One. Then I critically evaluate possible solutions to these problems in Chapters Two and Three. Finally, I present and explain my own position about the meaning of excellence in Chapters Four, Five, and Six. By my way of thinking it is not just elite agility practitioners who can realize excellence. Nor do I believe that everyone is excellent. This relativistic position cannot be correct if there

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exist any criteria whatsoever for realizing excellence. My own view is somewhere in between. There are indeed some conditions that must be satisfied in order to realize ethical excellence. This position allows that even novice handlers and their novice dogs can be excellent in this sense. It is also possible that a winning competitive agility team may fail to realize ethical excellence, although I prefer not to imagine what that would look like.

## Why Stories?

My inquiry about excellence is populated by stories about agility. The story is like a lens that magnifies the relevant details about what it means to aspire to excellence, to fall short of excellence, or to realize excellence in a sport. I sometimes include vignettes about my own dog, Maggie, to illustrate the main idea of a chapter. But to explore a topic more thoroughly I also include interviews with practitioners of agility. These are short dialogues with trainers and instructors, agility classmates, judges, and friends that I have made at competitions and in the practice field. I also profile memoirs, documentary films, and fiction about the practice of agility to reveal real-world obstacles as well as examples of success in aspiring to excellence. The main purpose of storytelling is to illustrate the concrete details about what it means to undertake a sport like this, together with a dog. A story can reveal what things look like from the inside point of view, the emotional center of the activity itself, accompanied by all of the desires, pleasures, hopes, fears, or disappointments that we experience when we invest so much passion into an activity. Think of these narratives as a way to envision how it feels to struggle and fail, to struggle and succeed, to revise one's goals, and to admit mistakes. In other words, these stories are entries to an "emotional education" about our sport. Nussbaum (1990, 160) describes this kind of illustrative strategy as "getting the tip."

Progress comes not from the teaching of an abstract law but by leading the friend, or child, or loved one—by a word, by a story, by an image—to see some new aspect of the concrete case at hand, to see it as this or that.

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Giving a “tip” is to give a gentle hint about how one might see. The “tip,” here, is given not in words at all but in a sudden show of feeling. It is concrete, and it prompts the recognition of the concrete.

I leave the reader with some practical advice about how to give a “tip.” In Chapter Seven I formulate five recommendations for how to tell a story about ethical excellence. These stories should fill our agility-focused lives. They should be repeated with variations to our friends, to our students, and to fellow competitors. These stories will display the particular concrete details about ethical excellence as reminders about what is good for the sport of agility. My aim is not to teach anyone *how* to be excellent. Maybe, like me, you have been striving for excellence with disappointing results. Or maybe you have actually realized excellence but still wonder what that means in a variety of different settings. If so, then together we are “partners in discovery,” ideally positioned to fill in the “sketch of the good,” as Aristotle puts it.