

Fostering Virtue by Kentaro Toyama

As much as I liked Narasimha, my favorite mode of travel within India was the auto-rickshaw. The word "rickshaw" comes from "jin riki sha" (人車), which means "human-powered vehicle" in Japanese. The word probably went to China and got picked up by the British, who then applied it to Indian rickshaws. Auto-rickshaws are thus the etymological equivalent of automobiles.

Physically, though, they're a different beast. Auto-rickshaws are three-wheeled, covered, scooter-taxis that zip around in cities throughout India. Elsewhere, they're called "tuk-tuks," "trishaws," or "mototaxis." They're small, light, nimble, and convenient, but it wouldn't be inaccurate to call them mini-deathtraps.

Every so often, I got an outgoing driver who'd engage me in conversation, one who spoke a little English, and who'd also talk about this and that. I remember one particular conversation because of how it ended. The driver told me that he had a family living outside of town that he saw once a week. He had two daughters, aged three and six, and the older one was just starting school. He was proud that he could send her to a private school, where school fees were a couple of dollars per month. Based on what I had heard from other drivers, he probably earned around \$2 per day. He said he would sleep in his rickshaw after my fare (it was past midnight) and then get up at 5 a.m. to catch the early commuters. Right before arriving at my destination -- which at the time happened to be a high-end hotel -- he asked me, "What is the secret of your success? Please tell me, sir, I want to know."

Of course, what he was really asking was, "What can I do, that presumably you are doing, that would allow me to live the better life you appear to have?" The honest reply would have been, "Have been born in a wealthy country to good parents who will see that you get a good education," but of course, that would have been of little help. A more practical answer is something that I continue to struggle with.

The answer was certainly not more virtue, at least for him. It wouldn't have changed his life much, and definitely not without other kinds of support. But for his children or those of us who might support them, more virtue still has value. So, for what it's worth, here are a few speculative ideas for how to foster virtue.

Education

Everyone believes in education, but we could pay it still more attention and think beyond academic K-12 programs. Though the obvious value of an effective education is in the skills and knowledge gained, there are subtler, but possibly more meaningful, impacts on individual and societal virtues.

I'll highlight just one area that is often overlooked: early childhood development. Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman has taken up an ambitious program to model how age-dependent investments in parenting and education relate to adult economic productivity. He and his colleagues incorporate recent findings in psychology and neuroscience, in addition to economics. Heckman notes the importance of both cognitive traits, such as intelligence, and non-cognitive traits, which read like a list of virtues: "perseverance, motivation, self-esteem, self-control, conscientiousness, and forward-looking behavior." Both sets of traits are malleable and generally easier to

influence when a person is younger. In addition, the value of the traits snowball over time; a little extra self-control in first grade can mean greater vocabulary in the second grade, which might mean a lot more books read in the third grade, and so on. Thus, earlier interventions have greater benefits than later ones.

Heckman concludes that interventions in early childhood, such as enriched preschool centers and home visitation programs, are the most cost-effective way to address societal inequalities while increasing overall economic output.

There are non-economic outcomes that matter, too, of course, and I speculate that Heckman's interventions help with those, as well.

Measurement

It's often said that you can't manage what you can't measure, and virtues are difficult to measure. Luckily, psychology researchers see it as an essential part of their job to devise metrics for the hard-to-measure. And they are creative.

For example, psychologist Roy Baumeister, who has linked self-control to a range of positive outcomes, wrote me that self-control can be measured by self-report questionnaires, response-time tasks, neurological measures, blood glucose levels, and... observation of how long a subject can keep a hand under ice water. He cautioned, "No method is perfect, so we need all the measures we can get. Convergence across multiple methods is the best."

The ice water test might be inconvenient for measuring virtue at a national scale, but we could be more creative with economic measures. For example, could some function of personal savings be used as a measure of self-control? Does it mean anything that while Americans were saving less than 0% of their income just before the recession, Chinese people were saving around 50%? Or, what about charitable giving as a measure of compassion? What does it mean that conservatives want to slash the U.S. foreign aid budget, but are more generous than liberals with individual donations? Of course, saving and giving are complex behaviors, but these correlations seem promising. (If you think this is an idea worth following up, please get in touch!)

Coaching and Mentoring

Fostering virtues is tricky. They take time to grow. They depend on context and history. They require internal motivation as well as external encouragement. And there's the perennial problem of who determines what virtues are important.

Because of the complexity, I think the optimal models for encouraging them in others are through peer-coaching (between peers) or mentoring (where there is a status differential). Mentorship in its ideal form has a number of properties that distinguish it from other models of support such as provision, incentivization, manipulation, or coercion:

Mentorship's goal is the eventual independence of the mentee.

Mentorship is primarily about personal growth, and not about exchange or direct benefit to either party.

Mentorship is guided by the aspirations of the mentee, not the desires of the mentor.

Mentorship as a relationship requires voluntary consent of both parties.

Mentorship increases knowledge, skills, social networks, and virtues, as opposed to stuff, e.g., money, food, equipment, infrastructure, technology.

In America, an organization called Year Up, as described by Daniel Bornstein, seems to epitomize good mentoring. In India, I'm familiar with a non-profit called Pradan that uses mentorship as a model both for the rural communities it works with, as well as for the development of its own staff.

Mentorship is a little paternalistic, but done well, it's minimally so. It's paternalism to make paternalism unnecessary.

Community

It's easy enough to think about increasing virtue for others, but how about for oneself? I often think, if only I had more virtue, I'd have more virtue.

Baumeister posits that self-control is like a muscle. In the short term, if you use it, you deplete it. In the longer term, exercising it is what causes it to grow.

His analogy also suggests that, as with exercise, growing virtues is easier when other people are there to do it with you. Peer pressure, friendly rivalry, and mutual encouragement all motivate us to stretch beyond what we might do on our own.

So, as clichéd as it is, forming or joining a community of people who share the same aspirations is probably a good idea. As for my own experience with one community, stay tuned.