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News that Inspires

The Enduring Power of Virtue
by Kentaro Toyama

Virtue, not technocratic solutions, is what I claimed our world needs more of, but I'm not saying anything new. Virtue goes back at least two-and-a-half millennia.

Western accounts of virtue start with Aristotle, but let's go back instead to Confucius. Depending on what you paid attention to in school, you might remember Confucius by the Silver Rule ("Do not do to others..."), his exotic concepts (e.g., filial piety), or a series of grammar-challenged jokes ("Confucius say...").

Confucius did have a lot to say, but if there is one principle that runs through his philosophy, it's that personal virtue is the way to the good life and the good society. He posed the cultivation of virtue as a superior alternative to the manipulation or coercion of behavior through policy. [Right: Chow Yun-Fat as Confucius in a movie that reportedly replaced Avatar in Chinese theaters by government decree.]

I'll highlight three virtues from Confucius's thought that I believe are the basic building blocks for all other virtues: One is benevolence or compassion. Another is self-control, which Confucius believed was enforced and nurtured by adhering to proper forms of behavior. And, the third is wise judgment about how to turn benevolent intention into action of a kind that avoids the proverbial road to hell. Concern for virtue simmers within the public sphere, and it bubbles over on occasion. In fact, the last nine weeks of Fallows bloggers have alluded to virtue several times, though rarely by name: John Tierney asked how college students can be stressed more while studying less, and he was deluged by students lamenting their own and their faculty's lack of self-control. Chuck Spinney, on a post about the Pentagon's failure to keep transparent accounts, cites a lack of benevolent intent: "it [the Pentagon leadership] does not want to fix it."

I sympathized especially with technologist Shelley Hayduk. Despite her advocacy of software to manage information overload, her passionate exhortations were decidedly non-technological: "it might mean downgrading and shutting off noisy alerts, even losing a gadget or two"; "achieving serenity is about taking control [...] rather than [information] controlling you". She closes with a quote from Aldous Huxley which could have been from The Analects of Confucius: "There is only one corner of the universe you can be certain of improving, and that's your own self."

Despite these occasional mentions, public discourse about virtue is muted. To abuse a recent parlour game, below is a graph of the rate of occurrence of the words "virtue" and "technology" in Google's Ngram Viewer, which plots frequency of words occurring in books over time. We see a rapid rise of technology in the last forty years against a two-century slide in virtue. (Is it a coincidence that the crossover happens around 1970, the same year I called out in yesterday's graph? Somewhat similar results are had with "virtue" against "institutions," "policies," and "systems.")

But is virtue still relevant today? For many people, talk of virtue brings to mind chastity belts and shining armor. I prefer definitions, however, that distance themselves from the moralizing (a point I'll return to in the next post). One such definition is provided by Julia Driver, a philosophy professor at Washington University in St. Louis. While many virtue theorists insist that virtues are intrinsically and morally good, Driver defines virtue strictly in terms of outcomes. To her, a virtue is a "character trait that systematically produces good consequences." A trait is a virtue only if it tends to cause good consequences.

I'd go even further. Virtues are paramount because they're the ultimate cause of good consequences, at least among those causes within human control.

For example, following the 9.0 earthquake in Japan, Nicholas Kristof blogged about the Japanese virtue of "gaman," a kind of self-control. He predicted stoicism, self-discipline, and minimal looting behavior on the streets. Japanese culture, after all, was influenced by Confucius.

Sure enough, Japanese people have weathered the continuing crisis with a unique brand of collective self-control. (Positive stereotypes might be as dubious as negative stereotypes, but I invoke the clause where gross generalizations about your own heritage are permitted!)

I happened to be in Tokyo during the quake, and my father told me that at his hospital in the coastal city of Kamogawa where he works, they had evacuated people to the upper floors, even going so far as to sew up some patients mid-surgery. (Luckily, the tsunami there was minor -- hospital and patients were untouched.) The evening of the quake, commuter trains were shut down, and the sidewalks of Tokyo were crowded with people calmly walking home from work. The radio featured one man who had walked three hours already and needed to walk another three more to get home. Just yesterday, the New York Times reported that people are voluntarily conserving enough electricity that some planned power outages have become unnecessary.

Of course, Japanese people have their flaws, too. What the earthquake aftermath shows, however, is the remarkable power of virtue, even in the absence of any explicit legislation or enforcement. Virtue works without TIPS (technologies, institutions, policies, and systems), even though the converse isn't true.

Modern psychology research is confirming the power of virtue, as well, and the work on self-control is representative. Walter Mischel's famous "marshmallow experiment" shows that the ability of 4-year-olds to delay gratification is a good predictor of better adjustment and SAT scores in adolescence. A study by Angela Duckworth and Martin Seligman suggests that self-discipline is more important than IQ in academic performance for middle-school girls. Roy Baumeister and his colleagues find that self-control correlates with greater academic achievement, less addictive behavior, higher self-esteem, and better interpersonal relationships among college students. These studies don't establish the causal link definitively, but the evidence is accumulating.

Baumeister wrote in an e-mail that self-control allows human beings to alter their own behavior according to rules and standards. He summarized elsewhere, "Self-control, then, is one of the crucial mechanisms that had to improve in humans, to enable culture to succeed."

And that takes us back to Confucius, who in referring to ancient role models wrote: "Because their persons were cultivated, their families were in order. Because their families were in order, their states were well-governed. Because their states were

well-governed, the whole kingdom prospered. From the sovereign down to the people, all must consider the cultivation of the person the root of everything besides."*

The root of everything besides! Yet for such a grand idea, virtue is often met with mockery, indifference, or hostility, and in the next post, I speculate as to why.

(*) Adapted from this translation: Legge, James, Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean (New York: Dover Books, 1971; o.p. 1893)