Accepting a helping hand can be the right thing to do

Arthur Caplan

The underappreciated moral theorist Benjamin Franklin in his youth made up a list of virtues he felt ought to be followed as sound guides for living one’s life. Some of the virtues he prescribed relate to personal behaviour: temperance, order, resolution, frugality, moderation, industry, cleanliness and tranquility. The rest are social character traits: sincerity, justice, silence, chastity and humility. He never abandoned his faith in those values, teaching them to his son and anyone who cared to read his Poor Richard’s Almanack. In his autobiography, Franklin tells us that he kept a diary in which he evaluated, on a daily basis, his success in living up to each virtue.1

That Franklin enjoyed a life in which the virtues he extolled were not omnipresent is well known. He would be the first to confess that there were more than a few occasions when he failed to live up to his own moral teaching.1 What is interesting about his virtue ethic is not his personal struggle to conform to it but his belief that moral character is made up of multiple components, that each person can, through intellectual struggle during one’s life, make real progress in changing the elements of one’s character for the better, and that failure is a constant companion with respect to self-improvement.

Franklin is hardly alone in holding the view that improvement in the many dimensions of character is possible at every stage of our lives. Charles Dickens, Jesus, Socrates, Maslow and just about every high school teacher, religious leader and sports coach I have ever encountered believed the same thing.

The idea that we are capable of constant self-improvement may rest as much on normative belief as it does upon a series of sound, cross-cultural, empirical studies, but it adds further heft to the crucially important argument brought forward by Singh.2 Her analysis of children’s views of the impact stimulant drug treatments have upon their self-governance is a seminal contribution to the ethical debate over the merits of treating children diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) with drugs.

Singh notes that critics of stimulant drug treatment worry that the use of drugs for the treatment of what might be labelled impairments of self-governance risks living children who lack the inborn capacity to self-govern. This worry holds that in controlling behaviour related to both performance in school or work and over-aggressiveness towards others, children receiving drugs will either be made into compliant zombies or amoral weaklings. In the absence of medication, and having failed to master controlling behaviour related to both performance in school teacher, religious leader and sports coach I have ever encountered believed the same thing.

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REFERENCES
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