Chapter 8 from *The Happiness Hypothesis* by Jonathan Haidt
The Felicity of Virtue

It is impossible to live the pleasant life without also living sensibly, nobly and justly, and it is impossible to live sensibly, nobly and justly without living pleasantly. —EPICURUS

Set your heart on doing good. Do it over and over again, and you will be filled with joy. A fool is happy until his mischief turns against him. And a good man may suffer until his goodness flowers. —BUDDHA

WHEN SAGES AND ELDERS urge virtue on the young, they sometimes sound like snake-oil salesmen. The wisdom literature of many cultures essentially says, "Gather round, I have a tonic that will make you happy, healthy, wealthy, and wise! It will get you into heaven, and bring you joy on earth along the way! Just be virtuous!" Young people are extremely good, though, at rolling their eyes and shutting their ears. Their interests and desires are often at odds with those of adults; they quickly find ways to pursue their goals and get themselves into trouble, which often becomes character-building adventure. Huck Finn runs away from his foster mother to raft down the Mississippi with an escaped slave; the young Buddha leaves his father's palace to begin his spiritual quest in the forest; Luke Skywalker leaves his home planet to join the galactic rebellion. All three set off on epic journeys that make each into an adult, complete with a set of new virtues. These hard-won virtues are especially admirable to us as readers because they reveal a depth and authenticity of character that we don't see in the obedient kid who simply accepts the virtues he was raised with.

In this light, Ben Franklin is supremely admirable. Born in Boston in 1706, he was apprenticed at the age of twelve to his older brother James, who owned a printing shop. After many disputes with (and beatings from) his brother, he yearned for freedom, but James would not release him from the legal contract of his apprenticeship. So at the age of seventeen, Ben broke the law and skipped town. He got on a boat to New York and, failing to find work there, kept on going to Philadelphia. There he found work as an apprentice printer and, through skill and diligence, eventually opened his own print shop and published his own newspaper. He went on to spectacular success in business (Poor Richard's Almanack—a compendium of sayings and maxims—was a hit in its day); in science (he proved that lightning is electricity, then tamed it by inventing the lightning rod); in politics (he held too many offices to name); and in diplomacy (he persuaded France to join the American colonies' war against Britain, though France had little to gain from the enterprise). He lived to eighty-four and enjoyed the ride. He took pride in his scientific discoveries and civic creations; he basked in the love and esteem of France as well as of America; and even as an old man he relished the attentions of women.

What was his secret? Virtue. Not the sort of uptight, pleasure-hating Puritanism that some people now associate with that word, but a broader kind of virtue that goes back to ancient Greece. The Greek word aretē meant excellence, virtue, or goodness, especially of a functional sort. The aretē of a knife is to cut well; the aretē of an eye is to see well; the aretē of a person is . . . well, that's one of the oldest questions of philosophy: What is the true nature, function, or goal of a person, relative to which we can say that he or she is living well or badly? Thus in saying that well being or happiness (eudaimonia) is "an activity of soul in conformity with excellence or virtue,"3 Aristotle wasn't saying that happiness comes from giving to the poor and suppressing your sexuality. He was saying that a good life is one where you develop your strengths, realize your potential, and become what it is in your nature to become. (Aristotle believed that all things in the universe had a telos, or purpose toward which they aimed, even though he did not believe that the gods had designed all things.)

One of Franklin's many gifts was his extraordinary ability to see potential and then realize it. He saw the potential of paved and lighted streets, volunteer fire departments, and public libraries, and he pushed to make them all appear in Philadelphia. He saw the potential of the young American republic and played many roles in creating it. He also saw the potential in himself for improving his ways, and he set out to do so. In his late twenties, as a young printer and entrepreneur, he embarked on what he called a "bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection."4 He picked a few virtues he wanted to cultivate, and he tried to live accordingly. He discovered immediately the limitations of the rider:

While my care was employed in guarding against one fault, I was often surprised by another; habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason. I concluded, at length, that the mere speculative conviction that it was our interest to be completely virtuous was not sufficient to prevent our slipping, and that the contrary habits must be broken, and good ones acquired and established, before we can have any dependence on a steady, uniform rectitude of conduct.5

Franklin was a brilliant intuitive psychologist. He realized that the rider can be successful only to the extent that it trains the elephant (though he did not use those terms), so he devised a training regimen. He wrote out a list of thirteen virtues, each linked to specific behaviors that he should or should not do. (For example: "Temperance: Eat not to dullness"; "Frugality: Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself"; "Chastity: Rarely use venery but for health or offspring"). He then printed a table made up of seven columns (one for each day of the week) and thirteen rows (one for each virtue), and he put a black spot in the appropriate square each time he failed to live a whole day in accordance with a particular virtue. He concentrated on only one virtue a week, hoping to keep its row clear of spots while paying no special attention to the other virtues, though he filled in their rows whenever violations occurred. Over thirteen weeks, he worked through the whole table. Then he repeated the process, finding that with repetition the table got less and less spotty. Franklin wrote in his autobiography that, though he fell far short of perfection: "I was, by the endeavor, a better and a happier man than I otherwise should have been if I had not attempted it." He went on: "My posterity should be informed that to this little artifice, with the blessing of God, their ancestor ow'd the constant felicity of his life, down to his 79th year, in which this is written."6

We can't know whether, without his virtue table, Franklin would have been any less happy or successful, but we can search for other evidence to test his main psychological claim. This claim, which I will call the "virtue hypothesis," is the same claim made by Epicurus and the Buddha in the epigraphs that open this chapter: Cultivating virtue will make you happy. There are plenty of reasons to doubt the virtue hypothesis. Franklin himself admitted that he failed utterly to develop the virtue of humility, yet he reaped great social gains by learning to fake it. Perhaps the virtue hypothesis will turn out to be true only in a cynical, Machiavellian way: Cultivating the appearance of virtue will make you successful, and therefore happy, regardless of your true character.

THE VIRTUES OF THE ANCIENTS

Ideas have pedigrees, ideas have baggage. When we Westerners think about morality, we use concepts that are thousands of years old, but that took a turn in their development in the last two hundred years. We don't realize that our approach to morality is odd from the perspective of other cultures, or that it is based on a particular set of psychological assumptions—a set that now appears to be wrong.

Every culture is concerned about the moral development of its children, and in every culture that left us more than a few pages of writing, we find texts that reveal its approach to morality. Specific rules and prohibitions vary, but the broad outlines of these approaches have a lot in common. Most cultures wrote about virtues that should be cultivated, and many of those virtues were and still are valued across most cultures7 (for example, honesty, justice, courage, benevolence, self-restraint, and respect for authority). Most approaches then specified actions that were good and bad with respect to those virtues. Most approaches were practical, striving to inculcate virtues that would benefit the person who cultivates them.

One of the oldest works of direct moral instruction is the Teaching of Amenemope, an Egyptian text thought to have been written around 1300 BCE. It begins by describing itself as "instruction about life" and as a "guide for well-being," promising that whoever commits its lessons to heart will "discover . . . a treasure house of life, and [his] body will flourish upon earth." Amenemope then offers thirty chapters of advice about how to treat other people, develop self-restraint, and find success and contentment in the process. For example, after repeatedly urging honesty, particularly in respecting the boundary markers of other farmers, the text says:

Plow your fields, and you'll find what you need,
You'll receive bread from your threshing floor.
Better is a bushel given you by God
Than five thousand through wrongdoing. . . .
Better is bread with a happy heart
Than wealth with vexation.8

If this last line sounds familiar to you, it is because the biblical book of Proverbs borrowed a lot from Amenemope. For example: "Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it" (PROVERBS 15:16).

An additional common feature is that these ancient texts rely heavily on maxims and role models rather than proofs and logic. Maxims are carefully phrased to produce a flash of insight and approval. Role models are presented to elicit admiration and awe. When moral instruction triggers emotions, it speaks to the elephant as well as the rider. The wisdom of Confucius and Buddha, for example, comes down to us as lists of aphorisms so timeless and evocative that people still read them today for pleasure and guidance, refer to them as "worldwide laws of life,"9 and write books about their scientific validity.

A third feature of many ancient texts is that they emphasize practice and habit rather than factual knowledge. Confucius compared moral development to learning how to play music;10 both require the study of texts, observance of role models, and many years of practice to develop "virtuosity." Aristotle used a similar metaphor:

Men become builders by building houses, and harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, we grow just by the practice of just actions, self-controlled by exercising our self-control, and courageous by performing acts of courage.11

Buddha offered his followers the "Eightfold Noble Path," a set of activities that will, with practice, create an ethical person (by right speech, right action, right livelihood), and a mentally disciplined person (by right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration).

In all these ways, the ancients reveal a sophisticated understanding of moral psychology, similar to Franklin's. They all knew that virtue resides in a well-trained elephant. They all knew that training takes daily practice and a great deal of repetition. The rider must take part in the training, but if moral instruction imparts only explicit knowledge (facts that the rider can state), it will have no effect on the elephant, and therefore little effect on behavior. Moral education must also impart tacit knowledge—skills of social perception and social emotion so finely tuned that one automatically feels the right thing in each situation, knows the right thing to do, and then wants to do it. Morality, for the ancients, was a kind of practical wisdom.

HOW THE WEST WAS LOST

The Western approach to morality got off to a great start; as in other ancient cultures, it focused on virtues. The Old Testament, the New Testament, Homer, and Aesop all show that our founding cultures relied heavily on proverbs, maxims, fables, and role models to illustrate and teach the virtues. Plato's Republic and Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics, two of the greatest works of Greek philosophy, are essentially treatises on the virtues and their cultivation. Even the Epicureans, who thought pleasure was the goal of life, believed that people needed virtues to cultivate pleasures.

Yet contained in these early triumphs of Greek philosophy are the seeds of later failure. First, the Greek mind that gave us moral inquiry also gave us the beginnings of scientific inquiry, the aim of which is to search for the smallest set of laws that can explain the enormous variety of events in the world. Science values parsimony, but virtue theories, with their long lists of virtues, were never parsimonious. How much more satisfying it would be to the scientific mind to have one virtue, principle, or rule from which all others could be derived? Second, the widespread philosophical worship of reason made many philosophers uncomfortable with locating virtue in habits and feelings. Although Plato located most of virtue in the rationality of his charioteer, even he had to concede that virtue required the right passions; he therefore came up with that complicated metaphor in which one of two horses contains some virtue, but the other has none. For Plato and many later thinkers, rationality was a gift from the gods, a tool to control our animal lusts. Rationality had to be in charge.

These two seeds—the quest for parsimony and the worship of reason—lay dormant in the centuries after the fall of Rome, but they sprouted and bloomed in the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. As advances in technology and commerce began to create a new world, some people began to seek rationally justified social and political arrangements. The French philosopher René Descartes, writing in the seventeenth century, was quite happy to rest his ethical system on the benevolence of God, but Enlightenment thinkers sought a foundation for ethics that did not depend on divine revelation or on God's enforcement. It was as though somebody had offered a prize, like the prizes that lured early aviators to undertake daring journeys: Ten thousand pounds sterling to the first philosopher who can come up with a single moral rule, to be applied through the power of reason, that can cleanly separate good from bad.

Had there been such a prize, it would have gone to the German philosopher Immanuel Kant.12 Like Plato, Kant believed that human beings have a dual nature: part animal and part rational. The animal part of us follows the laws of nature, just as does a falling rock or a lion killing its prey. There is no morality in nature; there is only causality. But the rational part of us, Kant said, can follow a different kind of law: It can respect rules of conduct, and so people (but not lions) can be judged morally for the degree to which they respect the right rules. What might those rules be? Here Kant devised the cleverest trick in all moral philosophy. He reasoned that for moral rules to be laws, they

had to be universally applicable. If gravity worked differently for men and women, or for Italians and Egyptians, we could not speak of it as a law. But rather than searching for rules to which all people would in fact agree (a difficult task, likely to produce only a few bland generalities), Kant turned the problem around and said that people should think about whether the rules guiding their own actions could reasonably be proposed as universal laws. If you are planning to break a promise that has become inconvenient, can you really propose a universal rule that states people ought to break promises that have become inconvenient? Endorsing such a rule would render all promises meaningless. Nor could you consistently will that people cheat, lie, steal, or in any other way deprive other people of their rights or their property, for such evils would surely come back to visit you. This simple test, which Kant called the "categorical imperative," was extraordinarily powerful. It offered to make ethics a branch of applied logic, thereby giving it the sort of certainty that secular ethics, without recourse to a sacred book, had always found elusive.

Over the following decades, the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham challenged Kant for the (hypothetical) prize. When Bentham became a lawyer in 1767, he was appalled by the complexities and inefficiencies of English law. He set out, with typical enlightenment boldness, to re-conceive the entire legal and legislative system by stating clear goals and proposing the most rational means of achieving those goals. The ultimate goal of all legislation, he concluded, was the good of the people; and the more good, the better. Bentham was the father of utilitarianism, the doctrine that in all decisionmaking (legal and personal), our goal should be the maximum total benefit (utility), but who gets the benefit is of little concern.13

The argument between Kant and Bentham has continued ever since. Descendants of Kant (known as "deontologists" from the Greek deon, obligation) try to elaborate the duties and obligations that ethical people must respect, even when their actions lead to bad outcomes (for example, you must never kill an innocent person, even if doing so will save a hundred lives). Descendants of Bentham (known as "consequentialists" because they evaluate actions only by their consequences) try to work out the rules and policies that will bring about the greatest good, even when doing so will sometimes violate other ethical principles (go ahead and kill the one to save the hundred, they say, unless it will set a bad example that leads to later problems).

Despite their many differences, however, the two camps agree in important ways. They both believe in parsimony: Decisions should be based ultimately on one principle only, be it the categorical imperative or the maximization of utility. They both insist that only the rider can make such decisions because moral decision making requires logical reasoning and sometimes even mathematical calculation. They both distrust intuitions and gut feelings, which they see as obstacles to good reasoning. And they both shun the particular in favor of the abstract: You don't need a rich, thick description of the people involved, or of their beliefs and cultural traditions. You just need a few facts and a ranked list of their likes and dislikes (if you are a utilitarian). It doesn't matter what country or historical era you are in; it doesn't matter whether the people involved are your friends, your enemies, or complete strangers. The moral law, like a law of physics, works the same for all people at all times.

These two philosophical approaches have made enormous contributions to legal and political theory and practice; indeed, they helped create societies that respect individual rights (Kant) while still working efficiently for the good of the people (Bentham). But these ideas have also permeated Western culture more generally, where they have had some unintended consequences. The philosopher Edmund Pincoffs14 has argued that consequentialists and deontologists worked

together to convince Westerners in the twentieth century that morality is the study of moral quandaries and dilemmas. Where the Greeks focused on the character of a person and asked what kind of person we should each aim to become, modern ethics focuses on actions, asking when a particular action is right or wrong. Philosophers wrestle with life-and-death dilemmas: Kill one to save five? Allow aborted fetuses to be used as a source of stem cells? Remove the feeding tube from a woman who has been unconscious for fifteen years? Nonphilosophers wrestle with smaller quandaries: Pay my taxes when others are cheating? Turn in a wallet full of money that appears to belong to a drug dealer? Tell my spouse about a sexual indiscretion?

This turn from character ethics to quandary ethics has turned moral education away from virtues and toward moral reasoning. If morality is about dilemmas, then moral education is training in problem solving. Children must be taught how to think about moral problems, especially how to overcome their natural egoism and take into their calculations the needs of others. As the United States became more ethnically diverse in the 1970s and 1980s, and also more averse to authoritarian methods of education, the idea of teaching specific moral facts and values went out of fashion. Instead, the rationalist legacy of quandary ethics gave us teachers and many parents who would enthusiastically endorse this line, from a recent child-rearing handbook: "My approach does not teach children what and what not to do and why, but rather, it teaches them how to think so they can decide for themselves what and what not to do, and why."15

I believe that this turn from character to quandary was a profound mistake, for two reasons. First, it weakens morality and limits its scope. Where the ancients saw virtue and character at work in everything a person does, our modern conception confines morality to a set of situations that arise for each person only a few times in any given week: tradeoffs between self-interest and the interests of others. In our thin and restricted modern conception, a moral person is one who gives to charity, helps others, plays by the rules, and in general does not put her own self-interest too far ahead of others'. Most of the activities and decisions of life are therefore insulated from moral concern. When morality is reduced to the opposite of self-interest, however, the virtue hypothesis becomes paradoxical: In modern terms, the virtue hypothesis says that acting against your self-interest is in your self-interest. It's hard to convince people that this is true, and it can't possibly be true in all situations. In his time, Ben Franklin had a much easier task when he extolled the virtue hypothesis. Like the ancients, he had a thicker, richer notion of virtues as a garden of excellences that a person cultivates to become more effective and appealing to others. Seen in this way, virtue is, obviously, its own reward. Franklin's example implicitly posed this question for his contemporaries and his descendants: Are you willing to work now for your own later well-being, or are you so lazy and short-sighted that you won't make the effort?

The second problem with the turn to moral reasoning is that it relies on bad psychology. Many moral education efforts since the 1970s take the rider off of the elephant and train him to solve problems on his own. After being exposed to hours of case studies, classroom discussions about moral dilemmas, and videos about people who faced dilemmas and made the right choices, the child learns how (not what) to think. Then class ends, the rider gets back on the elephant, and nothing changes at recess. Trying to make children behave ethically by teaching them to reason well is like trying to make a dog happy by wagging its tail. It gets causality backwards.

During my first year of graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania, I discovered the weakness of moral reasoning in myself. I read a wonderful book—Practical Ethics—by the Princeton philosopher Peter Singer.16 Singer, a humane consequentialist, shows how we can apply a consistent

concern for the welfare of others to resolve many ethical problems of daily life. Singer's approach to the ethics of killing animals changed forever my thinking about my food choices. Singer proposes and justifies a few guiding principles: First, it is wrong to cause pain and suffering to any sentient creature, therefore current factory farming methods are unethical. Second, it is wrong to take the life of a sentient being that has some sense of identity and attachments, therefore killing animals with large brains and highly developed social lives (such as other primates and most other mammals) is wrong, even if they could be raised in an environment they enjoyed and were then killed painlessly. Singer's clear and compelling arguments convinced me on the spot, and since that day I have been morally opposed to all forms of factory farming. Morally opposed, but not behaviorally opposed. I love the taste of meat, and the only thing that changed in the first six months after reading Singer is that I thought about my hypocrisy each time I ordered a hamburger.

But then, during my second year of graduate school, I began to study the emotion of disgust, and I worked with Paul Rozin, one of the foremost authorities on the psychology of eating. Rozin and I were trying to find video clips to elicit disgust in the experiments we were planning, and we met one morning with a research assistant who showed us some videos he had found. One of them was Faces of Death, a compilation of real and fake video footage of people being killed. (These scenes were so disturbing that we could not ethically use them.) Along with the videotaped suicides and executions, there was a long sequence shot inside a slaughterhouse. I watched in horror as cows, moving down a dripping disassembly line, were bludgeoned, hooked, and sliced up. Afterwards, Rozin and I went to lunch to talk about the project. We both ordered vegetarian meals. For days afterwards, the sight of red meat made me queasy. My visceral feelings now matched the beliefs Singer had given me. The elephant now agreed with the rider, and I became a vegetarian. For about three weeks. Gradually, as the disgust faded, fish and chicken reentered my diet. Then red meat did, too, although even now, eighteen years later, I still eat less red meat and choose non-factory-farmed meats when they are available.

That experience taught me an important lesson. I think of myself as a fairly rational person. I found Singer's arguments persuasive. But, to paraphrase Medea's lament (from chapter 1): I saw the right way and approved it, but followed the wrong, until an emotion came along to provide some force.

THE VIRTUES OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

The cry that we've lost our way is heard from some quarter in every country and era, but it has been particularly loud in the United States since the social turmoil of the 1960s and the economic malaise and rising crime of the 1970s. Political conservatives, particularly those who have strong religious beliefs, bridled at the "value-free" approach to moral education and the "empowering" of children to think for themselves instead of teaching them facts and values to think about. In the 1980s, these conservatives challenged the education establishment by pushing for character education programs in schools, and by home-schooling their own children.

Also in the 1980s, several philosophers helped to revive virtue theories. Most notably, Alasdair MacIntyre argued in After Virtue17 that the "enlightenment project" of creating a universal, context-free morality was doomed from the beginning. Cultures that have shared values and rich traditions invariably generate a framework in which people can value and evaluate each other. One can easily talk about the virtues of a priest, a soldier, a mother, or a merchant in the context of fourth-century BCE Athens. Strip away all identity and context, however, and there is little to grab on to. How much can you say about the virtues of a generalized Homo sapiens, floating in space with no particular sex, age, occupation, or culture? The modern requirement that ethics ignore

particularity is what gave us our weaker morality—applicable everywhere, but encompassing nowhere. MacIntyre says that the loss of a language of virtue, grounded in a particular tradition, makes it difficult for us to find meaning, coherence, and purpose in life.18

In recent years, even psychology has become involved. In 1998, Martin Seligman founded positive psychology when he asserted that psychology had lost its way. Psychology had become obsessed with pathology and the dark side of human nature, blind to all that was good and noble in people. Seligman noted that psychologists had created an enormous manual, known as the "DSM" (the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*), to diagnose every possible mental illness and behavioral annoyance, but psychology didn't even have a language with which to talk about the upper reaches of human health, talent, and possibility. When Seligman launched positive psychology, one of his first goals was to create a diagnostic manual for the strengths and virtues. He and another psychologist, Chris Peterson of the University of Michigan, set out to construct a list of the strengths and virtues, one that might be valid for any human culture. I argued with them that the list did not have to be valid for all cultures to be useful; they should focus just on large-scale industrial societies. Several anthropologists told them that a universal list could never be created. Fortunately, however, they persevered.

As a first step, Peterson and Seligman surveyed every list of virtues they could find, from the holy books of major religions down to the Boy Scout Oath ("trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly . . . "). They made large tables of virtues and tried to see which ones were common across lists. Although no specific virtue made every list, six broad virtues, or families of related virtues, appeared on nearly all lists: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (the ability to forge connections to something larger than the self). These virtues are widely endorsed because they are abstract: There are many ways to be wise, or courageous, or humane, and it is impossible to find a human culture that rejects all forms of any of these virtues. (Can we even imagine a culture in which parents hope that their children will grow up to be foolish, cowardly, and cruel?) But the real value of the list of six is that it serves as an organizing framework for more specific strengths of character. Peterson and Seligman define character strengths as specific ways of displaying, practicing, and cultivating the virtues. Several paths lead to each virtue. People, as well as cultures, vary in the degree to which they value each path. This is the real power of the classification: It points to specific means of growth toward widely valued ends without insisting that any one way is mandatory for all people at all times. The classification is a tool for diagnosing people's diverse strengths and for helping them find ways to cultivate excellence.

Peterson and Seligman suggest that there are twenty-four principle character strengths, each leading to one of the six higher-level virtues.19 You can diagnose yourself by looking at the list below or by taking the strengths test (at www.authentichappiness.org).

> Wisdom: • Curiosity • Love of learning • Judgment • Ingenuity • Emotional intelligence • Perspective 2. Courage: • Valor • Perseverance • Integrity 3. Humanity: • Kindness • Loving 4. Justice: • Citizenship • Fairness • Leadership 5. Temperance: • Self-control • Prudence • Humility 6. Transcendence: • Appreciation of beauty and excellence • Gratitude • Hope • Spirituality • Forgiveness • Humor • Zest

Odds are that you don't have much trouble with the list of six virtue families, but you do have objections to the longer list of strengths. Why is humor a means to transcendence? Why is leadership on the list, but not the virtues of followers and subordinates—duty, respect, and obedience? Please, go ahead and argue. The genius of Peterson and Seligman's classification is to get

the conversation going, to propose a specific list of strengths and virtues, and then let the scientific and therapeutic communities work out the details. Just as the DSM is thoroughly revised every ten or fifteen years, the classification of strengths and virtues (known among positive psychologists as the "un-DSM") is sure to be revised and improved in a few years. In daring to be specific, in daring to be wrong, Peterson and Seligman have demonstrated ingenuity, leadership, and hope.

This classification is already generating exciting research and liberating ideas. Here's my favorite idea: Work on your strengths, not your weaknesses. How many of your New Year's resolutions have been about fixing a flaw? And how many of those resolutions have you made several years in a row? It's difficult to change any aspect of your personality by sheer force of will, and if it is a weakness you choose to work on, you probably won't enjoy the process. If you don't find pleasure or reinforcement along the way, then—unless you have the willpower of Ben Franklin—you'll soon give up. But you don't really have to be good at everything. Life offers so many chances to use one tool instead of another, and often you can use a strength to get around a weakness.

In the positive psychology class I teach at the University of Virginia, the final project is to make yourself a better person, using all the tools of psychology, and then prove that you have done so. About half the students each year succeed, and the most successful ones usually either use cognitive behavioral therapy on themselves (it really does work!) or employ a strength, or both. For example, one student lamented her inability to forgive. Her mental life was dominated by ruminations about how those to whom she was closest had hurt her. For her project, she drew on her strength of loving: Each time she found herself spiraling down into thoughts about victimhood, she brought to mind a positive memory about the person in question, which triggered a flash of affection. Each flash cut off her anger and freed her, temporarily, from rumination. In time, this effortful mental process became habitual and she became more forgiving (as she demonstrated using the reports she had filled out each day to chart her progress). The rider had trained the elephant with rewards at each step.

Another outstanding project was done by a woman who had just undergone surgery for brain cancer. At the age of twenty-one, Julia faced no better than even odds of surviving. To deal with her fears, she cultivated one of her strengths—zest. She made lists of the activities going on at the university and of the beautiful hikes and parks in the nearby Blue Ridge Mountains. She shared these lists with the rest of the class, she took time away from her studies to go on these hikes, and she invited friends and classmates to join her. People often say that adversity makes them want to live each day to the fullest, and when Julia made a conscious effort to cultivate her natural strength of zest, she really did it. (She is still full of zest today.)

Virtue sounds like hard work, and often is. But when virtues are re-conceived as excellences, each of which can be achieved by the practice of several strengths of character, and when the practice of these strengths is often intrinsically rewarding, suddenly the work sounds more like Csikszentmihalyi's flow and less like toil. It's work that—like Seligman's description of gratifications—engages you fully, draws on your strengths, and allows you to lose self-consciousness and immerse yourself in what you are doing. Franklin would be pleased: The virtue hypothesis is alive and well, firmly ensconced in positive psychology.

HARD QUESTION, EASY ANSWERS

Virtue can be its own reward, but that's obvious only for the virtues that one finds rewarding. If your strengths include curiosity or love of learning, you'll enjoy cultivating wisdom by traveling,

going to museums, and attending public lectures. If your strengths include gratitude and appreciation of beauty, the feelings of transcendence you get from contemplating the Grand Canyon will give you pleasure too. But it would be naive to think that doing the right thing always feels good. The real test of the virtue hypothesis is to see whether it is true even in our restricted modern understanding of morality as altruism. Forget all that stuff about growth and excellence. Is it true that acting against my self-interest, for the good of others, even when I don't want to, is still good for me? Sages and moralists have always answered with an unqualified yes, but the challenge for science is to qualify: When is it true, and why?

Religion and science each begin with an easy and unsatisfying answer, but then move on to more subtle and interesting explanations. For religious sages, the easy way out is to invoke divine reciprocity in the afterlife. Do good, because God will punish the wicked and reward the virtuous. For Christians, there's heaven or hell. Hindus have the impersonal workings of karma: The universe will repay you in the next life with a higher or lower rebirth, which will depend upon your virtue in this life.

I'm in no position to say whether God, heaven, or an afterlife exists, but as a psychologist I am entitled to point out that belief in postmortem justice shows two signs of primitive moral thinking. In the 1920s, the great developmental psychologist Jean Piaget[20] got down on his knees to play marbles and jacks with children and, in the process, mapped out how morality develops. He found that, as children develop an increasingly sophisticated understanding of right and wrong, they go through a phase in which many rules take on a kind of sacredness and unchangeability. During this phase, children believe in "immanent justice"—justice that is inherent in an act itself. In this stage, they think that if they break rules, even accidentally, something bad will happen to them, even if nobody knows about their transgressions. Immanent justice shows up in adults, too, particularly when it comes to explaining illness and grave misfortune. A survey[21] of beliefs about the causes of illness across cultures shows that the three most common explanations are biomedical (referring to physical causes of disease), interpersonal (illness is caused by witchcraft, related to envy and conflict), and moral (illness is caused by one's own past actions, particularly violations of food and sexual taboos). Most Westerners consciously embrace the biomedical explanation and reject the other two, yet when illness strikes and Westerners ask, "Why me?" one of the places they often look for answers is to their own past transgressions. The belief that God or fate will dole out rewards and punishments for good and bad behavior seems on its face to be a cosmic extension of our childhood belief in immanent justice, which is itself a part of our obsession with reciprocity.

The second problem with postmortem justice is that it relies on the myth of pure evil.[22] Each of us can easily divide the world into good and evil, but presumably God would not suffer from the many biases and Machiavellian motivations that make us do so. Moral motivations (justice, honor, loyalty, patriotism) enter into most acts of violence, including terrorism and war. Most people believe their actions are morally justified. A few paragons of evil stand out as candidates for hell, but almost everyone else would end up in limbo. It just won't work to turn God into Santa Claus, a moral accountant keeping track of 6 billion accounts, because most lives can't be placed definitively in the naughty or nice columns.

The scientific approach to the question also begins with an easy and unsatisfying answer: Virtue is good for your genes under some circumstances. When "survival of the fittest" came to mean "survival of the fittest gene," it became easy to see that the fittest genes would motivate kind and cooperative behavior in two scenarios: when it benefited those who bore a copy of those genes (that

is, kin), or when it benefited the bearers of the genes directly by helping them reap the surplus of non-zero-sum games using the tit-for-tat strategy. These two processes—kin altruism and reciprocal altruism—do indeed explain nearly all altruism among nonhuman animals, and much of human altruism, too. This answer is unsatisfying, however, because our genes are, to some extent, puppet masters making us want things that are sometimes good for them but bad for us (such as extramarital affairs, or prestige bought at the expense of happiness). We cannot look to genetic self-interest as a guide either to virtuous or to happy living. Furthermore, anyone who does embrace reciprocal altruism as a justification for altruism (rather than merely a cause of it) would then be free to pick and choose: Be nice to those who can help you, but don't waste time or money on anyone else (for example, never leave a tip in restaurants you will not return to). So to evaluate the idea that altruism pays for the altruist, we need to push the sages and the scientists harder: Does it even pay when there is neither postmortem nor reciprocal payback?

HARD QUESTION, HARD ANSWERS

St. Paul quotes Jesus as having said that "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (ACTS 20:35). One meaning of "bless" is "to confer happiness or prosperity upon."23 Does helping others really confer happiness or prosperity on the helper? I know of no evidence showing that altruists gain money from their altruism, but the evidence suggests that they often gain happiness. People who do volunteer work are happier and healthier than those who don't; but, as always, we have to contend with the problem of reverse correlation: Congenitally happy people are just plain nicer to begin with,24 so their volunteer work may be a consequence of their happiness, not a cause. The happiness-as-cause hypothesis received direct support when the psychologist Alice Isen25 went around Philadelphia leaving dimes in pay phones. The people who used those phones and found the dimes were then more likely to help a person who dropped a stack of papers (carefully timed to coincide with the phone caller's exit), compared with people who used phones that had empty coin-return slots. Isen has done more random acts of kindness than any other psychologist: She has distributed cookies, bags of candy, and packs of stationery; she has manipulated the outcome of video games (to let people win); and she has shown people happy pictures, always with the same finding: Happy people are kinder and more helpful than those in the control group.

What we need to find, however, is the reverse effect: that altruistic acts directly cause happiness and/or other long-term benefits. With its exhortation to "give blood; all you'll feel is good," is the American Red Cross telling the truth? The psychologist Jane Piliavin has studied blood donors in detail and found that, yes, giving blood does indeed make people feel good, and good about themselves. Piliavin26 has reviewed the broader literature on all kinds of volunteer work and reached the conclusion that helping others does help the self, but in complex ways that depend on one's life stage. Research on "service learning," in which (mostly) high school students do volunteer work and engage in group reflection on what they are doing as part of a course, provides generally encouraging results: reduced delinquency and behavioral problems, increased civic participation, and increased commitment to positive social values. However, these programs do not appear to have much effect on the self-esteem or happiness of the adolescents involved. For adults, the story is a bit different. A longitudinal study27 that tracked volunteering and well-being over many years in thousands of people was able to show a causal effect: When a person increased volunteer work, all measures of happiness and well-being increased (on average) afterwards, for as long as the volunteer work was a part of the person's life. The elderly benefit even more than do other adults, particularly when their volunteer work either involves direct person-to-person helping or is done through a religious organization. The benefits of volunteer work for the elderly are so large that they even show up in improved health and longer life. Stephanie Brown and her colleagues at the University of

Michigan found striking evidence of such effects when they examined data from a large longitudinal study of older married couples.28 Those who reported giving more help and support to spouses, friends, and relatives went on to live longer than those who gave less (even after controlling for factors such as health at the beginning of the study period), whereas the amount of help that people reported receiving showed no relationship to longevity. Brown's finding shows directly that, at least for older people, it really is more blessed to give than to receive.

This pattern of age-related change suggests that two of the big benefits of volunteer work are that it brings people together, and it helps them to construct a McAdams-style life story.29 Adolescents are already immersed in a dense network of social relationships, and they are just barely beginning to construct their life stories, so they don't much need either of these benefits. With age, however, one's story begins to take shape, and altruistic activities add depth and virtue to one's character. In old age, when social networks are thinned by the deaths of friends and family, the social benefits of volunteering are strongest (and indeed, it is the most socially isolated elderly who benefit the most from volunteering).30 Furthermore, in old age, generativity, relationship, and spiritual strivings come to matter more, but achievement strivings seem out of place,31 more appropriate for the middle chapters of a life story; therefore, an activity that lets one "give something back" fits right into the story and helps to craft a satisfying conclusion.

THE FUTURE OF VIRTUE

Scientific research supports the virtue hypothesis, even when it is reduced to the claim that altruism is good for you. When it is evaluated in the way that Ben Franklin meant it, as a claim about virtue more broadly, it becomes so profoundly true that it raises the question of whether cultural conservatives are correct in their critique of modern life and its restricted, permissive morality. Should we in the West try to return to a more virtue-based morality?

I believe that we have indeed lost something important—a richly textured common ethos with widely shared virtues and values. Just watch movies from the 1930s and 1940s and you'll see people moving around in a dense web of moral fibers: Characters are concerned about their honor, their reputation, and the appearance of propriety. Children are frequently disciplined by adults other than their parents. The good guys always win, and crime never pays. It may sound stuffy and constraining to us now, but that's the point: Some constraint is good for us; absolute freedom is not. Durkheim, the sociologist who found that freedom from social ties is correlated with suicide32 also gave us the word "anomie" (normlessness). Anomie is the condition of a society in which there are no clear rules, norms, or standards of value. In an anomic society, people can do as they please; but without any clear standards or respected social institutions to enforce those standards, it is harder for people to find things they want to do. Anomie breeds feelings of rootlessness and anxiety and leads to an increase in amoral and antisocial behavior. Modern sociological research strongly supports Durkheim: One of the best predictors of the health of an American neighborhood is the degree to which adults respond to the misdeeds of other people's children.33 When community standards are enforced, there is constraint and cooperation. When everyone minds his own business and looks the other way, there is freedom and anomie.

My colleague at the University of Virginia, the sociologist James Hunter, carries Durkheim's ideas forward into the current debate about character education. In his provocative book The Death of Character,34 Hunter traces out how America lost its older ideas about virtue and character. Before the Industrial Revolution, Americans honored the virtues of "producers"—hard work, self-restraint, sacrifice for the future, and sacrifice for the common good. But during the twentieth century, as

people became wealthier and the producer society turned gradually into the mass consumption society, an alternative vision of the self arose—a vision centered on the idea of individual preferences and personal fulfillment. The intrinsically moral term "character" fell out of favor and was replaced by the amoral term "personality."

Hunter points to a second cause of character's death: inclusiveness. The first American colonists created enclaves of ethnic, religious, and moral homogeneity, but the history of America ever since has been one of increasing diversity. In response, educators have struggled to identify the ever-shrinking set of moral ideas everyone could agree upon. This shrinking reached its logical conclusion in the 1960s with the popular "values clarification" movement, which taught no morality at all. Values clarification taught children how to find their own values, and it urged teachers to refrain from imposing values on anyone. Although the goal of inclusiveness was laudable, it had unintended side effects: It cut children off from the soil of tradition, history, and religion that nourished older conceptions of virtue. You can grow vegetables hydroponically, but even then you have to add nutrients to the water. Asking children to grow virtues hydroponically, looking only within themselves for guidance, is like asking each one to invent a personal language—a pointless and isolating task if there is no community with whom to speak. (For a sensitive analysis from a more liberal perspective of the need for "cultural resources" for identity creation, see Anthony Appiah's The Ethics of Identity.)35

I believe Hunter's analysis is correct, but I am not yet convinced that we are worse off, overall, with our restricted modern morality. One thing that often distresses me in old movies and television programs, even up through the 1960s, is how limited were the lives of women and African Americans. We have paid a price for our inclusiveness, but we have bought ourselves a more humane society, with greater opportunity for racial minorities, women, gay people, the handicapped, and others—that is, for most people. And even if some people think the price was too steep, we can't go back, either to a pre-consumer society or to ethnically homogeneous enclaves. All we can do is search for ways that we might reduce our anomie without excluding large classes of people.

Being neither a sociologist nor an expert in education policy, I will not try to design a radical new approach to moral education. Instead, I will present one finding from my own research on diversity. The word "diversity" took on its current role in American discourse only after a 1978 Supreme Court ruling (U.C. Regents v. Bakke) that the use of racial preferences to achieve racial quotas at universities was unconstitutional, but that it was permissible to use racial preferences to increase diversity in the student body. Since then, diversity has been widely celebrated, on bumper stickers, in campus diversity days, and in advertisements. For many liberals, diversity has become an unquestioned good—like justice, freedom, and happiness, the more diversity, the better.

My research on morality, however, spurred me to question it. Given how easy it is to divide people into hostile groups based on trivial differences,36 I wondered whether celebrating diversity might also encourage division, whereas celebrating commonality would help people form cohesive groups and communities. I quickly realized that there are two main kinds of diversity—demographic and moral. Demographic diversity is about socio-demographic categories such as race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, age, and handicapped status. Calling for demographic diversity is in large measure calling for justice, for the inclusion of previously excluded groups. Moral diversity, on the other hand, is essentially what Durkheim described as anomie: a lack of consensus on moral norms and values. Once you make this distinction, you see that nobody can coherently even want moral diversity. If you are pro-choice on the issue of abortion, would you prefer that there be a wide

variety of opinions and no dominant one? Or would you prefer that everyone agree with you and the laws of the land reflect that agreement? If you prefer diversity on an issue, the issue is not a moral issue for you; it is a matter of personal taste.

With my students Holly Hom and Evan Rosenberg, I conducted a study among several groups at the University of Virginia.37 We found that there was strong support among students for increasing diversity for demographic categories (such as race, religion, and social class), even among students who described themselves as politically conservative. Moral diversity (opinions about controversial political questions), however, was much less appealing in most contexts, with the interesting exception of seminar classes. Students wanted to be exposed to moral diversity in class, but not in the people they live with and socialize with. Our conclusion from this study is that diversity is like cholesterol: There's a good kind and a bad kind, and perhaps we should not be trying to maximize both. Liberals are right to work for a society that is open to people of every demographic group, but conservatives might be right in believing that at the same time we should work much harder to create a common, shared identity. Although I am a political liberal, I believe that conservatives have a better understanding of moral development (although not of moral psychology in general—they are too committed to the myth of pure evil). Conservatives want schools to teach lessons that will create a positive and uniquely American identity, including a heavy dose of American history and civics, using English as the only national language. Liberals are justifiably wary of jingoism, nationalism, and the focus on books by "dead white males," but I think everyone who cares about education should remember that the American motto of e pluribus, unum (from many, one) has two parts. The celebration of pluribus should be balanced by policies that strengthen the unum.

Maybe it's too late. Maybe in the hostility of the current culture war, no one can find any value in the ideas of the other side. Or maybe we can turn for instruction to that great moral exemplar, Ben Franklin. Reflecting upon the way history is driven forward by people and parties fighting each other bitterly in pursuit of their self-interest, Franklin proposed creating a "United Party for Virtue." This party, composed of people who had cultivated virtue in themselves, would act only "with a view to the good of mankind." Perhaps that was naive even in Franklin's day, and it seems unlikely that these "good and wise men" would find it as easy to agree on a platform as Franklin supposed. Nonetheless, Franklin may be right that leadership on virtue can never come from the major political actors; it will have to come from a movement of people, such as the people of a town who come together and agree to create moral coherence across the many areas of children's lives. Such movements are happening now. The developmental psychologist William Damon38 calls them "youth charter" movements, for they involve the cooperation of all parties to childrearing—parents, teachers, coaches, religious leaders, and the children themselves—who come to consensus on a "charter" describing the community's shared understandings, obligations, and values and committing all parties to expect and uphold the same high standards of behavior in all settings. Maybe youth charter communities can't rival the moral richness of ancient Athens, but they are doing something to reduce their own anomie while far exceeding Athens in justice.

Haidt, Jonathan. The Happiness Hypothesis (pp. 212-243). Basic Books. Kindle Edition.