LIFELONG LEARNING AND THE DUTY OF SELF-IMPROVEMENT

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What is ‘life-long learning’ and why should we suppose it a good thing?

In his classic The Right and the Good (1930), British philosopher W. D. Ross proposed an influential list of our main moral duties. Most of the duties Ross mentions are boilerplate and would make almost any contemporary ethicist’s list of ‘Top Ten Moral Duties’. These include what Ross calls duties of justice, fidelity (honesty and promise-keeping), reparation (making up for injuries we have done to others), gratitude, beneficence (doing good), and non-maleficence (avoiding harm). The one slightly surprising and offbeat item on the list is ‘duties of self-improvement’. These are duties, Ross says, that arise from ‘the fact that we can improve ourselves in respect of virtue or of intelligence.’ To contemporary ears this smacks of Victorian moral earnestness; for this reason, perhaps, there has been very little systematic discussion in contemporary moral theory of whether there is a duty of self-improvement, what its theoretical basis might be, how important it might be in relation to potentially conflicting duties, and what concrete actions it might require.

On these issues, philosophers will plainly take different views. Aristotle, for example, with his strong intellectualist bent, would prioritize intellectual growth and improvement. A Christian philosopher, such as Augustine, might attach more importance to moral and spiritual improvement. But all post-modernist qualms aside, the notion that there is a general duty of self-improvement finds strong support in many influential philosophies and ethical theories.

Consider the three leading moral theories: consequentialism, duty theory (a.k.a. deontological ethics), and virtue ethics. Consequentialists – ethicists who claim that acts are right or wrong depending on the consequences they have – could point to the public benefits that would result if people took
seriously a duty to become more ‘intelligent’ and ‘virtuous’ citizens, parents, students, teachers, workers, and public servants. Duty theorists – ethicists such as Kant and Ross himself, who believe that some acts, like promise-breaking and torture, are wrong even if they do maximize good consequences – could appeal to the intrinsic value of developing one’s moral and intellectual potential (Ross) or note that a rational being could not possibly will that a maxim such as ‘Let your talents rust and go undeveloped’ should become a universal law of human conduct (Kant). Virtue ethicists – theorists such as Aristotle, Aquinas, and Alasdair MacIntyre, who claim that ethics is centrally concerned with developing good character and fulfilling human potential – could note that inculcating a strong sense of personal responsibility for developing one’s talents and capacities is crucial for human fulfillment.

In short, there appears to be a strong overlapping consensus for recognizing a general duty of self-improvement. Where disagreements will arise is over specifics. Which should be given priority: intellectual, moral, physical, emotional, spiritual, or vocational improvement? Is there some single ideal pattern of human development that all humans should strive for, or does this properly vary from individual to individual and from culture to culture? Is it permissible for an individual to concentrate more or less exclusively on one area of improvement (say, physical improvement in an Olympic hopeful or wealth-building in a young dot.commer), or is there some minimum level of intellectual, moral, or spiritual development that all persons should be expected to achieve? These are questions on which philosophers of different stripes will clearly disagree.

There are, however, certain aspects or implications of a general duty of self-improvement on which substantial philosophical agreement could be found. One of these, I suggest, is the duty to be a lifelong learner.

Both in the U.S. and in the U.K., ‘lifelong learning’ has unfortunately become associated with various institutionalized and often remedial programs of ‘adult’ (or ‘continuing’) education and vocational training and retraining. I’m using the term in a broader sense, as implying a truly lifelong quest to become an educated, informed person of maturing understanding, insight, and hopefully some modicum of wisdom.

Why think that all (or nearly all) persons who can be lifelong learners have a duty to do so? One of the few contemporary philosophers to discuss this issue in-depth is the late Mortimer J. Adler, best known as a proponent of the ‘Great Books’ and the American educational reform movement, the Paideia Proposal. In his Reforming Education: The Opening of the American Mind (New York: Macmillan, 1988) Adler offers five major reasons for seeing lifelong learning as an ethical imperative.

First, he notes that youth itself – immaturity of mind, character, and experience – is an insuperable obstacle to many important kinds of learning. Aristotle famously suggested that no one under age thirty should study political science, because people younger than that rarely possess either the experience or the practical wisdom needed to grasp fundamental political truths. Aristotle’s view may be a bit extreme (it would put university political science departments out of business), but I’m sure that most readers of this journal (or at least most older readers) would agree with Adler that ‘most of the things that make us adults or mature occur after we leave school.’

Second, Adler argues, few people can claim to be truly ‘educated’ as a result of formal schooling. Partly this is due to failing schools and misguided, voguish educational policies. Many students today graduate from secondary schools and even from universities lacking basic cultural literacy and intellectual skills – skills of critical reading, disciplined reasoning, effective speaking and writing, and attentive listening. But even if all students received high-quality schooling, Adler claims, a commitment to lifelong learning would still be necessary. Even the best schooling won’t introduce students to more than a fraction of the great works of art, literature, philosophy and so forth that all educated persons should be acquainted with. And given the rapid pace of scientific, technological, and societal change, no individual – or society – can hope to thrive without a willingness constructively to confront change and master new technologies, knowledge, and skills.

Third, Adler argues that lifelong learning is essential for civic
Literacy and the responsibilities of democratic citizenship. Being a good democratic citizen requires a basic understanding of democratic institutions, processes, and values. In democratic societies this basic civic literacy should be a given for every citizen—though all too often, as studies repeatedly and depressingly show, it is not. But as Adler notes, effective democratic citizenship requires more than a basic familiarity with democratic values and institutions. An effective citizen is a knowledgeable and informed citizen. Effective citizens must stay abreast of local, national, and international developments and intelligently appraise political office-seekers' qualifications and views on the issues. This implies not only a willingness to acquire the intellectual skills and dispositions necessary for sound political judgment (not an easy task!), but also a willingness to stay informed on political issues and events. This, in turn, implies a commitment to lifelong learning.

Fourth, Adler argues, 'use it or lose it' is a rule that applies to mental muscles as well as physical ones. Studies confirm that aging adults who remain intellectually active and engaged tend to remain mentally sharper, longer, than those who don't. In fact, animal studies and a growing body of human evidence suggests that people who live mentally challenging lives are at significantly less risk of developing Alzheimer’s or dementia.

Finally, Adler argues that a commitment to lifelong learning is necessary for people's personal fulfillment as human beings. Adler grounds this claim in a broadly Aristotelian vision of human flourishing. On that view, human fulfillment consists not in pleasure, power, or fame, but fundamentally in making the most of our potential—striving for excellence in all that we do, but particularly in those capacities of heart, mind, and spirit that make us distinctively human. Drawing on this tradition, Adler contends that the 'best education of a rational animal is the discipline of his rational powers and the cultivation of his intellect,' and that this process must continue well beyond the period of formal schooling. This is a plausible but debatable view of the central aim of education. But the claim that lifelong learning is crucial to human fulfillment need not be grounded on any controversial theory of human nature, Aristotelian or otherwise. Philosophers and educators of many different ideological camps would agree that it would be not merely unfortunate, but morally deficient and blameworthy, for individuals to permit their minds to go to seed following their years of formal schooling. To refuse to live an 'examined life', to close one’s mind to new ideas and new information, to surrender to close-mindedness and intellectual stagnation, would be a grave disservice to oneself and frequently to one’s family, coworkers, and community as well. Whatever true human fulfillment may consist in, it is not compatible with a life of intellectual lotus eating.

All of this, as I say, would be widely agreed to by philosophers and educational theorists of many different viewpoints. And this makes it all the more puzzling why there has been so little serious scholarly discussion of a duty of self-improvement or, more particularly, a duty of lifelong learning.

To illustrate: As I write, I have on my office desk three fat, recent philosophy of education anthologies. In all these thousands of pages, there is not a single sustained discussion of lifelong learning.

I find this amazing. Not only, as Adler shows, is it highly plausible to think that there is a general duty of lifelong learning, but it's clear that this is an important duty that demands our most serious attention and reflection. Few of us are ever likely to confront the runaway trolley and other far-fetched 'ethical dilemmas' that are the staple of contemporary moral theory. But today, and every day for the indefinite future, each of us must wrestle with the question of how we can best utilize our time and talents for personal enrichment, continued learning, and growth. This is a knotty and complex question that each individual must answer for himself. (Answers will be highly personalized.) But it is also a question on which philosophers and educational theorists could contribute a good deal. It is high time they got cracking.

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