

66 What is the value of voluntary effort? – 2/21/26

Is there value in exercising ourselves? There is a tendency among people to focus their effort on only the places they have comparative advantage. Often times, this makes sense and helps us be more productive. It is, after all, the reason why trade works and why corporations have multiple people. It is adaptive in an evolutionary sense, and allowed us to build a civilization.

Only focusing on comparative advantage becomes restrictive when we prevent ourselves from certain activities because there are people, or things, that are both available and better than us. Our lack of comparative advantage does not mean that there is no value in doing the activity.

Take for example, an art critic who does not make art because he sees artists far more talented than him, and thinks to himself, "Why would I make art when I see far more talented people than me?" Of course, there is intrinsic value in learning how to move your hand, to have the eye for perspective, to be able to create beauty. There may not even be any external appreciation for the art, but there is internal value to the process of cultivating expertise and intuition. More than anything else, we as humans ultimately live life to learn and exercise our minds.

Obviously, this is a caricature; we do not live such unidimensional lives. Then, in academics, why do we have a tendency to degrade our own capabilities if there is something better than us? Academic, or for that matter, any intellectual – which includes virtually all human activity – endeavor is not about productivity. If it was, then we would all be in fields that allow for the greatest productivity. The biggest driver of our pursuit of the contemplative life is probably understanding. Of course, there is also ego and obsession.

If understanding is really the purest motivation for our intellectual pursuits, then it is irrational to restrict ourselves from practice of these pursuits because there are things that are better than us. Exercise of our creativity, intuition and problem-solving really are the best ways of expanding our understanding. We can, of course, attempt to satisfy ourselves merely with the outputs of those we have delegated these duties to, since they hold a comparative (or even absolute) advantage over us and can thus inundate us with a large host of pleasant results.

Mere appreciation, however, does not give us full understanding. There is an intuition that can only be obtained by practice of our creativity and by struggling with difficult concepts. We will not obtain this by observation alone, and if understanding is the motivation for contemplation, then we should never even suggest that creativity, careful thought or problem solving will somehow be made obsolete. These are things that nothing, not a person, not a technology, can replace.