

Dialogue, Debate, and Discussion

A Scholar's Quest

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Modern portrayals of human action are overwhelmingly in a calculative and consequentialist tradition. Consequentialist reasoning is the basis for most of modern social and behavioral science and preeminently for economics. Action is seen as choice, and choice is seen as driven by anticipations, incentives, and desires. These ideas trace their roots at least to the Greeks, owe substantial parts of their modern manifestation to the formulations of Jeremy Bentham, and derive much of their contemporary power from the geniuses of L. J. Savage and John von Neumann.

It is no surprise that schools of applied economics (or business) teach such a consequentialist theology as a sacred doctrine and also address their own problems of decision and strategy in the same spirit. They evaluate their alternatives in terms of expected consequences, implement strategies with expected outcomes that appear attractive, and seek to manage the actions of others by assuming they are similarly guided. Such practices honor ideas that are of enormous importance in human development. It is inconceivable that we would abandon them.

Nevertheless, the ideas have their limitations. John Stuart Mill (1838/1962) characterized Bentham, the patron saint of modern consequentialist thought, as having the “completeness of a limited man.” In particular, Mill wrote that

Man is never recognised by [Bentham] as a being capable of...desiring for its own sake, the conformity of his own character to his standard of excellence, without hope of good or evil from other source than his own inward consciousness. (p. 66)

Mill's comments on Bentham might as easily be applied to us. Our comfortable sense of completeness leads us, as it led Bentham, largely to exclude from our visions of human behavior a second grand tradition for understanding, motivating, and justifying action. This tradition sees action as based not on anticipations of consequences but on attempts to fulfill the obligations of personal and social

identities and senses of self, particularly as those obligations and senses are informed by the ethos and practices of great human institutions. It is a tradition that speaks of self-conceptions, identities, and proper behavior rather than expectations, incentives, and desires.

This second vision has become somewhat obscured in contemporary life, and particularly in the halls of business schools, but it has a long and distinguished pedigree. It is captured classically in many major works of literature and philosophy but particularly in that great testament to the human spirit, *Don Quixote*. When challenged to explain his behavior, Quixote does not justify his actions in terms of expectations of their consequences. Rather, he says, “I know who I am” (*Yo sé quien soy*; Cervantes, 1605, I, chap. 5). Quixote seeks consistency with imperatives of the self more than with imperatives of the environment. He exhibits a sanity of identity more than a sanity of reality. He follows a logic of appropriateness more than a logic of consequences. He pursues self-respect more than self-interest.

As Quixote’s misadventures illustrate quite vividly, following a sense of self has its own confusions and limitations, but it celebrates a nonconsequentialist view of humanity. Great enthusiasms, commitments, and actions are tied not to hopes for great outcomes but to a willingness to embrace the arbitrary and unconditional claims of a proper life. Quixote reminds us that if we trust only when trust is warranted, love only when love is returned, learn only when learning is valuable, we abandon an essential feature of our humanness—our willingness to act in the name of a conception of ourselves regardless of its consequences.

The words are obviously a bit peculiar for this setting. But I think they have some mundane implications for those of us who claim to be educators. Our involvements in education undoubtedly have many consequences that we value, but we also pursue and venerate knowledge and learning as a manifestation of faith in what it means to be a human being. When we recognize ourselves as sharing a human identity that is intertwined with traditions of scholarship, we are led to view business schools in ways that are somewhat less consequentialist than are the ways that have become familiar to contemporary discussions.

Recently, our metaphors of business schools have become indistinguishable from metaphors of markets. The problems of business schools are pictured as problems of creating educational programs (or public relations activities) that satisfy the wishes of customers and patrons rich enough to sustain them. It is a conception that yields useful insights and is not to be dismissed thoughtlessly. But it is a conception that fails to capture the fundamental nature of the educational soul.

A university is only incidentally a market. It is more essentially a temple—a temple dedicated to knowledge and a human spirit of inquiry. It is a place where learning and scholarship are revered, not primarily for what they contribute to personal or social well-being but for the vision of humanity that they symbolize, sustain, and pass on. Søren Kierkegaard said that any religion that could be

justified by its consequences was hardly a religion. We can say a similar thing about university education and scholarship. They only become truly worthy of their names when they are embraced as arbitrary matters of faith, not as matters of usefulness. Higher education is a vision, not a calculation. It is a commitment, not a choice. Students are not customers; they are acolytes. Teaching is not a job; it is a sacrament. Research is not an investment; it is a testament.

And when someone says, as they certainly will and do, that all this is romantic madness, that any such foolishness requires a consequential justification, perhaps one that discovers an evolutionary advantage in traditions and faith, the proper answer is Quixote's: "For a knight errant to make himself crazy for a reason merits neither credit nor thanks. The point is to act foolishly without justification" (*Que volverse loco un caballero andante con causa—ni grado ni gracias. El toque está en desatinar sin ocasión*; Cervantes, 1605, I, chap. 25).

The complications of confronting the ordinary realities of day-to-day life often confound such lofty sentiments, and I would not pretend that it is possible or desirable to ignore consequences altogether. But in order to sustain the temple of education, we probably need to rescue it from those deans, donors, faculty, and students who respond to incentives and calculate consequences, and restore it to those who respond to senses of themselves and their callings, who support and pursue knowledge and learning because they represent a proper life, who read books not because they are relevant to their jobs but because they are not, who do research not in order to secure their reputations or improve the world but in order to honor scholarship, and who are committed to sustaining an institution of learning as an object of beauty and an affirmation of humanity.

I do not know whether any such thing is imaginable, much less possible. But if it is, then perhaps we can say that we, like Quixote, know who we are. And that, as my Scandinavian friends are inclined to say, would not be entirely bad.

NOTES

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