

On flourishing and creativity: The importance of reflective self-discipline

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My mentor once argues that to reach one's full potential, one must come to term with one's cultural roots. When I first heard it, it seemed to me to be a self-evident truth, a self-help axiom, perhaps. When I reflect on it with my experiences of studying overseas in a multicultural campus¹, I realize there are a few ways in which it makes sense.

First, to be in close proximity to different cultural values, there must be a mechanism in mind to evaluate, filter, select, and eject these values. My mentor offers a conceptual framework for this process called "mindsponge²." Without being mindful of the strengths and weaknesses of one's own personal and cultural values, this process risks being chaotic and rigid. Being mindful of one's own personal and cultural values, in other words, seeing what forces are pushing our thoughts and actions from behind and to which directions, is undoubtedly helpful in making deliberate decisions about what we want to become.

Second, in the context of maximizing one's own potential, or in the context of flourishing³, the "mindsponge" framework can be applied to ideas: how we evaluate, filter, select, and reject ideas. Thus, to maximize one's own potential, in a broad sense, is to enact the right idea and to reject particular ideas at the right time. And to do so correctly more often than incorrectly.

Third, how do we know when we are correct when we are not? Here I argue that reflective self-discipline is the key to determine the answer to this question. Another useful framework on offer here is the "3D method of creativity" ⁴: a person combines "out-of-

discipline insights" with his/her "expertise within a discipline," through a disciplined working process to produce innovations and breakthroughs.

The "mindsponge" mechanism shows that our mind is continuously choosing to enact certain ideas and values from the world, and some of the ideas and values form the core of our being. They, themselves, participate in the process of filtering and selecting ideas later. The "3D method of creativity" offers a disciplined pathway to generate and capture valuable ideas: one must always be willing to step out of one's discipline, i.e., comfort zone, to expose to a new pattern of thinking; and the only way to incorporate the new ways of thinking to one's core values is through a disciplined working process.

Now I will attempt to connect these ideas to a recent metaphor of human flourishing offered by Scott Barry Kaufman, the sailboat metaphor: life is not like hiking up atop of a mountain; it is more like sailing in an ocean, where there is a vast amount of new opportunities⁵. The lower levels in Maslow's hierarchy form the bases of the boat. If the boat has holes in it, one cannot sail anywhere. In this metaphor, people are asked to conceptualize flourishing or self-actualization as a direction, not a destination. One must continuously sail in a vast ocean of potentialities: to explore, to love, and to find and fulfill one's purposes.

The sailboat metaphor shows us the shortness of one's life: a person cannot explore everything in such a vast ocean of opportunities. The decisions one makes toward growth will depend on how that person reflects and build his core values (the mindsponge mechanism) and his/her capacity for discipline to catch and enact new opportunities. It is not accidental that my mentor's work on this mechanism only appeared many years after his first major publications^{6,7}.

References

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