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

Ho Manh Tung

Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University

Beppu, Oita, Japan

August 28, 2020

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 one's 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, or 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 in this vain is the "3D method of creativity" ⁴, which I'd like to call, the "3D principles of creativity:" 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 path to generate and adopt 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. One needs to make good decisions. The decisions one makes toward growth depend on how that person reflects on and builds his or her core values (the mindsponge mechanism) and his/her capacity for discipline to capture and enact new opportunities that aligned with the core.

Here there are the evil twins of an undisciplined mind: one is not willing to expose oneself to new ideas and opportunities, thus making the mindsponge rigid; the other is to go off in all kind of contradictory directions, thus completely rob the mindsponge off its ability to filter. The balance is attained only when a person has reflected and been aware of his core values, ideas, and strengths, then expand his being in the way that align with them.

In his journey, he had worked with people from different cultures in many different jobs and capacities, each with different degree of success. It is not accidental that my mentor's work on these mechanisms only appeared many years after his first major publications^{6,7}. To continue to reflect, challenge, and grow is to live one's life to the fullest.

References

1. Nguyen, M.H., Serik, M., Vuong, T.T., Ho, M..T. (2019). Internationalization and its discontents: Help-seeking behaviors of students in a multicultural environment regarding acculturative stress and depression. *Sustainability*, 11(7), 1865.
2. Vuong, Q.H., Napier, N.K. (2015). Acculturation and global mindsponge: an emerging market perspective. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 49, 354-367.
3. Seligman, M.E. (2012). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. New York, Simon and Schuster.
4. Vuong, Q.H., Napier, N.K. (2014). Making creativity: the value of multiple filters in the innovation process. *International Journal of Transitions and Innovation Systems*, 3(4), 294-327.
5. Kaufman, S.B. (2020). *Transcend: The new science of self-actualization*. New York, NY: JP Tarcher US/Perigee Bks.
6. Huu, N. V., Hoang, V. Q., & Ngoc, T. M. (2005). Central limit theorem for functional of jump Markov processes. *Vietnam Journal of Mathematics*, 33(4), 443-461.
7. Huu, N. V., & Hoang, V. Q. (2007). On the martingale representation theorem and on approximate hedging a contingent claim in the minimum deviation square criterion. In: R. Jeltsch, T-T. Li, and I. H. Sloan (Eds.) *Some Topics in Industrial and Applied Mathematics* (pp. 134-151). Singapore: World Scientific.
DOI:10.1142/9789812709356_0008