THE JUBILEE CENTRE FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

Cultivating Character and the Promise of Online Technologies

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1. Charting a New Age of Character Cultivation

Over the last decade, techniques of self-directed character change have undergone a revolution, one that promises to fundamentally rewrite the way we understand the cultivation of character. This revolution has been supercharged by rapid advances in digital technology, as well as increasing public attention regarding the benefits of tracking, monitoring, documenting, and shaping the self. Part of the difficulty in following the march of this zeitgeist is that it is so ubiquitous and diffuse. It infuses our perceptions and values of healthcare, education, business, leisure, in addition to fuelling our seemingly insatiable appetite for the 'self-care' industry. The idea that our characters can – indeed *should* – be actively cultivated is now so integral to the 21st century experience that it would be hard to understand a host of contemporary human practices without this assumption. Contemporary culture obsesses over the idea that we must constantly strive to develop ourselves through practices of self-cultivation, as well as valuing character traits involved in doing this. We are urged to take up entrepreneurial activities in our work lives, to engage in self-development in our leisure time, while some of us even try to connect these aspects of ourselves into one overarching 'brand'. Fortunes and careers have been built on this foundation, and the hope that we can change or improve who we are through a strict regimen of self-cultivation is deeply entwined with the contemporary sense of self.

Perhaps contemporary interest in this topic is best understood by situating it in terms of its historical precursors, especially by comparing it to the cultivation of our ethical character, the focus of traditional philosophical interest in this topic. While the concept of character does some work in Plato, it is given central status by Aristotle, and it is his notion of the pliability and malleability of character that overwhelmingly inspires the philosophers of the Hellenistic schools. With the exception of the Cynics, each of the Hellenistic schools promoted specific practices of self-cultivation, complex exercises that innovatively borrowed from the available technologies of the period. Despite the well-known differences, each School was united in the belief that we can actively cultivate our character, both by instilling moral virtues *and* by aligning our characters with the non-moral demands of the good life. Furthermore, departing from Plato's and Aristotle's emphasis on the importance of inculcating virtue in infants and adolescents, the Stoics, Epicureans, and Skeptics promoted exercises that were aimed at adults (often requiring sophisticated mental abilities). Understanding these historical precursors is not only useful in clarifying how today's concept of self-directed character change differs from its ancient forebears. It also helps us evaluatively compare traditional ethical self-cultivation with contemporary self-care, both in terms of their techniques and their very different conceptions of the good life.

Perhaps what is most salient is that neither a *broader ethical agenda* or a more *narrowly focused moral one* is at the forefront of the contemporary fascination with self-directed character change. Typing the term 'self-care' into a search engine, primarily yields products or experiences that one can buy (wellness holidays, CBD vaporisers, vintage trainers, dietary supplements, etc.), as the term is now synonymous with a new kind of conspicuous consumption. Self-care aficionados pride themselves on their innovative fitness regimes, non-invasive cosmetic procedures, and consuming blends of superfoods to improve their health, while carefully documenting (and curating) their pursuit of these activities on social media. There appears to be little here in terms of ethical relevance. This is not a problem in itself, of course, as there is no reason why self-care apps should be compelled to pursue a moral

agenda. Few today would argue for Socrates' or the Stoics' claim that a fully flourishing human life is one solely comprised of virtue. Nevertheless, we may say that digital self-care developers might be neglecting something important. Indeed, we can put the point even more strongly. In the first instance, many philosophers have persuasively argued that moral virtue in some form is a *necessary* part of human flourishing (although they have strongly disagreed whether it is *sufficient*). If this is true, as for example Aristotle believed, then it may be that digital self-care developers could benefit from philosophical insight in this area. Following this, if digital self-care products do turn out to be effective tools to sculpt character in pro-social ways, then those interested in human welfare – whether from a theoretical or practical point of view – should join the conversation currently held between Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, programmers, and positive psychologists to explore how we can develop this technology in ways that reflects moral and ethical insights. I return to this point in the final section.

2. Digital Self-Care Techniques

Digital self-care apps have been on the exponential rise since around 2015. These apps are designed to be installed onto out smartphones or tablets, notifying us with a buzz or a beep when we act in ways that harm our life-goals, offering tips on how to lift our emotional state, or advising us on how to fine-tune our exercise regimes. The developers of such self-care apps claim they can radically improve the practice of self-care, and that their products offer unique ways to cultivate ourselves. According to the Pew Research Center, apps constitute a year-on-year rise of the $10 billion annually spent on self-care in the US alone. The soaring popularity of these products suggests that they will continue to occupy an important role in 21st century life. Calm™ has now clocked up a staggering 50 million downloads, and it won the prestigious iTunes App of the Year in 2017, whereas BetterMe™ won the iTunes Best New App award in 2018 (6 million active users). At a time that many of us are starting to worry about the time we spend online, it was timely that iTunes declared 'self-care' the App Trend of the Year (2019).

As one might imagine, examples of the flashy marketing messages of digital self-care products abound, but what is of philosophical interest are the *techniques* that are employed to guide character change. These techniques either use online technology to reinvent and extend traditional practices of self-cultivation, or they try to do something entirely new. They can be divided into six overlapping categories: i) Passive documentation, ii) Instilling habits, iii) Mindfulness techniques, iv) Self-reflective notetaking, v) Community building, iv), and Gamification.

i) *Passive documentation*. Apps such as iMoodJournal™ and MoodNotes™ prompt users to record their mood when they are electronically notified via their smartphone throughout the day. Researchers on mood have found that self-reporting one's mood to a medical professional is often highly inaccurate. This is because mood recollection is largely determined by the mood one is in when one is recollecting. Using data that tracks a patient's mood throughout the day makes diagnosis and treatment much more accurate. Passive documentation gives healthcare professionals tools to gather data on patients in a way that would be impossible without this technology.

ii) *Instilling habits*. Many self-care apps seek character change by instilling habits. From Aristotle onwards, instilling habits has been regarded as an effective means to cultivate one's character, both insofar as good habits are responsible for virtuous character change, and insofar as eliminating negative habits can remove the conditions for vices to grow. This has been consistently backed by the empirical evidence that both contemporary virtue ethicists and positive psychologists draw upon. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that self-care app manufacturers have sought to incorporate habit formation into their products. Based on empirical research in positive psychology, digital self-care companies have started to incorporate gratitude 'tasks' into their products to precipitate the concomitant feelings of life-satisfaction that expressing gratitude gives to the one who expresses it (not to mention to the one who is thanked). For example, developers from the Parisian company, Fabulous™, prompt users to manifest gratitude to their friends and loved ones and to do a daily 'good deed' via a smartphone notification. While the self-interested motivation for expressing gratitude in this case would not meet Aristotle's criteria for the necessary disinterested nature of this character trait (see footnote 1 below), it does give us a clue to how a practice pertaining to our moral development could be coded into an app.

iii) *Mindfulness techniques*. While there are many dedicated meditation apps (Headspace™, Buddhify™), many of the largest self-care app companies, including Calm™, contain a mindfulness function. Perhaps it is no accident that tech users have sought to solve paradigmatic problems of digital wellbeing with techniques that explicitly aim to tackle anxiety, procrastination, and distraction. Not only have mindfulness practices been fashionable in Silicon Valley since the late 1990s, there has been a widespread mainstream uptake of this kind of self-care technique, including in therapy, sport psychology, education, and the military. Much of this has been fuelled by the swelling empirical evidence that mindfulness has a statistically measurable effect on the lives of meditators (Grossman *et al* 2004). Apps offer the possibility of moving beyond traditional mindfulness techniques in two important ways. First, these exercises can be inserted between required daily activities – while travelling on public transport, say, or waiting to pick up kids from school. Instead of devoting dedicated time to visit a mindfulness teacher, apps offer the possibility for time-pressed people to increase their well-being though practicing mindfulness, without the expense of travelling to a dedicated space to do so. Second, incorporated algorithms allow guided meditations to be targeted at individual users in a way that would be impossible in a group setting. For instance, according to the needs of users, Buddhify's algorithms allow it to point users towards guided meditations on 'friendship', 'anger', 'fear', 'sleeplessness', etc.

iv) *Self-reflective notetaking*. Written reflection on one's daily activities is a practice of self-care that can be traced to ancient times. Closely associated with the Stoic school (especially Seneca, Marcus Aurelius), this practice enjoys much attention in today's self-care communities. Apps such as Reflectly™ prompt users to record their daily thoughts on feelings by way of notifications. These diaries form a continuous record of how one's character develops, which can be re-read to compare one's current

perceptions of an ongoing issue with one's memories of it. More sophisticated apps such as Replika™ have an active AI function that gently probes the user's mental, emotional, and existential state. Incorporating AI technology into such apps holds especial potential because it provides a virtual confidant that stores details of the user's life narrative in its virtual memory, identifies patterns in negative thought patterns, and can even point to connections in these stored confidences. Given the anticipated future development of AI technology over the next decades, we should expect that self-care apps using this kind of tech will become increasingly better at interrogating a user's written text or masquerading as their correspondent.

v) *Community building*. Although the emphasis on the 'self' in *self*-care has been criticised for being individualistic, traditional self-care techniques strongly emphasise the communal dimension of character change. App developers have striven to meet the challenge by replacing an actual community with a virtual one. Headspace™, for example, tells the user how many others are simultaneously mediating with its product in real time. As Headspace™ is the market leader in meditation apps, these numbers frequently run into the hundreds of thousands. As one might expect, the aim of this function is to boost users' sense of community identity, which in turn boosts their own motivation to meditate.

vi) *Gamification*. This technique is contained to many of the categories outlined above, and is a technique that is unique to online platforms. Many self-care apps make use of 'streak' technology, a function that records the user's unbroken daily engagement with the app concerned. Streaks are created when a user engages with the app consistently. Typically, users gain marks each day for using the app, and these collate to form a lengthening streak. This in turn motivates the users to maintain their progress on the app, because the streak comes to be regarded as valuable. Apart from relatively subtle gamification such as streaks, apps such as Happify™ also use more overtly gamified techniques. Originally started by two entrepreneurs from the video-games industry with the self-professed aim to 'gamify happiness', at times this app uses a gaming interface to ask users to identify the emotions they are feeling, to reflect on them, then to sift them into positive and negative categories.

From this we can see that self-care app technology currently uses six interrelated techniques to cultivate the self. On the one hand, some of these techniques aim to *replicate* techniques found in traditional self-care. For example, the community-building element in Headspace™ (discussed above) aims to compensate for what could be regarded as the necessarily individualistic format of the app. By informing the user how many other people are simultaneously using Headspace™, the user's own identity and their identity as a meditator is bolstered. Indeed, such community effects are arguably greater than what they aim to mimic, as instead of mediating with a small group of flesh-and-blood individuals at a certain geographical location, users are offered a global perspective, and are presented with a breakdown of numbers and locations of fellow meditators worldwide. On the other hand, some of these tools *extend* traditional self-care by explicitly using the online platform that apps are built upon as a vehicle to facilitate our uptake of self-care. As well as improving on traditional self-care formats, apps also improve on them in ways that entirely depend on the

technology by which they are powered. Gamification is perhaps the best example of this, as there is no equivalent technique in traditional self-care. By using gamified techniques, self-care app developers can ensure their users engage with their products on a daily basis, can make the practice of self-care more fun and less arduous, and can more effectively monitor how committed users are to their self-care practice.

3. The Promise of Online Self-Care Technology

I have suggested that one of the most pressing problems for digital self-care products is that they promote an ideal of the good life that is primarily guided by a contemporary notion of well-being, rather than more substantive eudaemonic ideal. While there currently seems to be little industry appetite to *expand the remit* of self-care to include moral concerns, the potential of this technology to cultivate our moral character should now be clear. There is no obvious reason why the digital techniques for the cultivation of character should be restricted to the cultivation of our well-being.[1] Rather, it seems that they could be applied much more widely, including to our moral and ethical character. If apps can successfully instil self-care habits and routines – such as exercising regularly or allocating time for mindfulness – then it is possible that the very same techniques could be applied to the cultivation of virtuous conduct. Indeed, in my discussion of 'Instilling Habits' (2, ii), I noted that the self-care app company Fabulous™ already encourages users to incorporate the habit of 'manifesting gratitude' into their daily routines. Although 'gratitude' only appears as a canonical virtue in the Confucian tradition, many would position it in the moral sphere, even just regarding it as a prosocial character trait, or proto-virtue, rather than a fully-fledged virtue itself. This should give us hope that the techniques of digital self-care could be applied to aspects of character that go beyond our well-being.

Also, if the techniques of self-care app technology could be applied to the cultivation of our moral character, then those in the ethical and religious traditions should take this kind of technology seriously. Even if the ideals of well-being that the technology currently promotes can be somewhat nebulous, this should not prevent our critical engagement – instead, it should spur us on. From the tens of thousands of downloads that self-care apps receive each month, as well as the customer reviews that indicate they are first-personally effective (now starting to be backed up by empirical data), it appears that we stand much to gain by enlisting this kind of technology as a vital ally in the demands of contemporary human flourishing. Moreover, there seems to be two special reasons for this, both of which relate to the specific demands of 21st century life. I mentioned them at the end of the last section, but will expand upon them here before closing.

First, digital self-care could *replicate* existing forms of moral self-cultivation in important ways. Take again the technique of community building. As noted above (2, v),

[1] There may be less obvious reasons, but I believe that even these are surmountable. For example, an important part of moral virtue is the *motivation* that elicits the character trait concerned in a given situation. We might worry whether the ease with which digital self-care 'instils habits' would translate into the right kind of deep-seated motivation. To this, one could respond that instilling moral virtue by way of habits has an ancient provenance, including – as mentioned in (2, ii) – from Aristotle. Of course, the ease with which apps instil habits might make it *seem* as if there is something *valuable and gritty* lost in the process. Nevertheless, this is perhaps better regarded as testifying to the effectiveness of digital technology.

traditionally self-cultivation within the religious and spiritual traditions has often emphasised the importance of community. Unsurprisingly, then, those within these traditions (representatives of the Buddhist tradition, for example) have often complained that virtual replacements of their practices overly emphasise the role of the individual. Nevertheless, these critics could perhaps be placated if they are willing to acknowledge that the social structures that historically supported traditional Buddhist practices no longer exist in many parts of the world. While it may be *preferable* for meditative practices to be situated in a real-life community context, there are few that enjoy this possibility. In fact, the demographic for whom app-based meditation is most popular have few chances to engage in their meditative practice communally. The majority of users of apps such as Headspace™ are Generation Ys (born early 1980s to mid 1990s) or Generation Zs (born mid-1990s to early 2000s) who typically live in urban environments, are single or unmarried, and childless. For many of those from this cohort, the practical advantages of apps are irresistible, and the possibilities of seeking a non-digital equivalent would be time-consuming, expensive, and logistically off-putting.

The second reason why self-care apps should be given special consideration as tools to aid human flourishing in the 21st century is they may be well equipped to meet some of the problems that are generated by the ubiquity and intensity of our online lives. As Dean Cocking and Jeroen van den Hoven argue in their recent text, *Evil Online*, there is a species of contemporary moral problems that is inextricably linked to the Internet. They point out that, in addition to the 'online versions of the obvious and straightforward forms of wrongdoing', the internet creates essentially new dilemmas for our moral lives (2018: 3). Most importantly, the authors argue, this includes 'moral fog', a phenomenon in which the online space creates 'conditions where normative competence is especially challenged' (2018: 86). Cocking and van den Hoven's description of 'moral fog' is undoubtably terrifying, but from our overview to digital self-care technology we can say that this cloud – to extend their metrological metaphor – may have a silver lining. While contemporary developments in online technology clearly present many dangers for human flourishing, in the case of digital self-care they also present new opportunities. It may even be the case that the distinctive problems regarding the 21st century cultivation of moral character can only be solved with a more sophisticated approach to online technology itself.[2]

[2] I presented a draft version of this article at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue in July 2019, and would like to thank the members of the Centre for their receptive questions. Special thanks go to Prof. James Arthur, Prof. Kristján Kristjánsson, and Dr Tom Harrison for the lively and challenging discussions we had on the themes of the article during my visit.

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