

Capitalism and Virtue

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The Virtue of Prosperity: Finding Values in an Age of Techno-Affluence
Dinesh D'Souza
New York: Free Press, 2000
xx + 284 pp., index

This is an age of accelerating change. The way we communicate, the way we sustain ourselves financially—the way we *live*—has been forever altered. We are richer now, the world has shrunk, and we are mastering nature. But are we *really* better off? Are our gains—in wealth, technology, and health—gains in fact, or does the final accounting show a loss for humankind? Does technology primarily empower or alienate? Is wealth at odds with virtue? Do we make ourselves unwitting slaves in our quest to master nature? These are the questions that concern Dinesh D'Souza in *The Virtue of Prosperity: Finding Values in an Age of Techno-Affluence*.

D'Souza frames his inquiry by defining two camps with opposed attitudes toward the new economy and its fruits. The first camp, the “Party of Yeah,” celebrates the market, plumps vigorously and optimistically for each “new new thing” and derides any attempt to impede progress or slow innovation. The second camp, the “Party of Nay,” laments growing inequality, the fragmentation of community, the spiritual smallness of acquisitiveness, and our lost connection to the earth.

The Virtue of Prosperity consists largely in a charming guided tour through the arguments of these two camps. D'Souza himself tends to come down on the side of the free-market, pro-technology angels. However, he is not without “Nay” tendencies. He defends capitalism with vigor and conviction, yet is careful to do so within a moral framework largely shared with the Party of Nay. He is aware of alternative moral approaches to the defense of capitalism, and

mentions Ayn Rand's in particular, but dismisses her philosophy out of hand.

D'Souza is not a knee-jerk technophobe, but he's no skill for science, either. He worries that the scientific enterprise promotes a materialist outlook at odds with the ideal of political liberty, arguing, bizarrely, that if materialism is true, then the American experiment is a failure. In the end, D'Souza's true colors shine bright as he attacks human genetic manipulation on the grounds that it is "tyrannical" and "repugnant."

The Virtue of Prosperity begins as an energetic, journalistic account of the trends and personalities of the new economy. As the story wears on, and D'Souza increasingly parts company with Yeah orthodoxy, he becomes increasingly philosophical, tacitly recognizing a burden to justify his Strauss-flavored conservatism against the libertarian technophiles. Clearly a talented teacher (you could do worse for a quick and dirty overview of classical political thought) and a very capable debater, D'Souza is not, however, an original thinker, and his forays into philosophy fail to meet professional standards of rigor and cogency.

Because I am in agreement with the general thrust of D'Souza's arguments in favor of free markets and technology, and because his deeper philosophical claims have received little attention, I will put my focus there, and pay some attention to his arguments about the moral case for capitalism, the implications of the scientific image, and the immorality of genetic manipulation.

The Moral Defense of Capitalism

D'Souza lays out in spirited detail how capitalism has triumphed over socialism, how it is conquering scarcity, providing unimaginable wealth, and creating amazing life-enhancing technologies. There are clear virtues to prosperity, yet D'Souza worries that prosperity itself may militate against virtue. He writes that "Capitalism has won the economic war, but it has not yet won the moral war," and he's right (D'Souza 2000, 231).

However, he hardly does his part in the war effort, merely repeating traditional and remarkably unpersuasive arguments of pro-

market conservatives—which won't do. The reason they won't do is that capitalism, especially in its advanced, technological form, is a wildly new form of social organization, and that fact demands a reconsideration of the kind of virtues that are worth having and endorsing. Only a moral code consistent with the mainsprings of capitalism can fully vindicate capitalism. D'Souza acknowledges the existence of alternatives to the quasi-mystical altruist tradition, but fails to take them seriously, and so, despite his best intentions, fails to win ground for capitalism on the moral front.

Perhaps the most forceful exponent for capitalism on moral grounds was Ayn Rand, and readers of this journal will be interested in how she fares with D'Souza. Not well, it turns out, because D'Souza has not bothered to understand Rand's moral and political philosophy. Here is what D'Souza says:

The reason for Rand's hostility to altruism is that it frequently militates against man's survival, his pleasure, and his happiness. In Rand's hedonistic philosophy it is rational and moral for us human beings to be concerned with our own interests, and we should be concerned with the welfare of others only to the degree that it gives us pleasure. Even love and friendship, Rand argues, are nothing more than "the spiritual payment given in exchange for the personal, selfish pleasure" that we derive from other people. Consequently Rand finds herself positively enthusiastic about selfishness as the ground of human happiness. "The attack on selfishness," Rand writes, "is an attack on man's self-esteem."

This is a weird and unpleasant doctrine, and indeed, Rand was a weird and unpleasant woman. Her intelligence, however, is not in doubt, and the failure of both Gilder's and Rand's attempts to vindicate capitalism morally show that the free-market system has a real problem in answering the charge of avarice. (116)

Perhaps D'Souza has an argument that justifies his assuredness. If he does, he doesn't share it, providing the reader no reason to believe that Rand's doctrine is a failure, other than that it (and Rand herself) is "weird and unpleasant." In any case, he badly mischaracterizes her

position. Rand does not espouse hedonism, as a closer reading of the key text of Rand's moral philosophy, "The Objectivist Ethics" (Rand 1964) would have revealed to D'Souza. (Or, better yet, as any of her novels would have shown; grim workaholic Randian heroes are hardly exemplars of the hedonistic life of pleasure.)

In "The Objectivist Ethics," Rand takes special care to distinguish the *standard of value* from the *purpose* of action. Rand argues that we ought to seek our own happiness as our proper moral goal. But happiness is conceptually distinct from pleasure, and in any case does not serve as the *standard* for the evaluation of prospective courses of action. The *standard*, as distinct from the *goal*, is to be found in the objective requirements for a successful life as the kind of being we humans are. According to Rand, happiness and pleasure reliably *indicate* value—they signal when we are on the right track in living successful lives as human beings. So it follows that pleasure, happiness, and moral value are often found together. But the indicator is not confused for the indicated. Rand's eudaimonist position is similar, in fact, to Aristotle's non-weird and not unpleasant moral doctrine.

D'Souza's confusion obscures Rand's ideas about our grounds for proper concern for others. And this further obscures an important part of her moral case for capitalism. According to Rand, we should be actively concerned with others' welfare to the degree that they *add value* to our lives, and this need not be anything we register in the form of pleasure (because pleasure isn't the ground of value)—although we certainly hope it does in cases of love and friendship.

Take an example. Suppose a scientist develops a vaccine that I am given as a child, and therefore I never contract a certain life-threatening disease. My well-being has been objectively improved—suffering and death has been forestalled, value has been added. However, the inoculation doesn't induce good feelings (perhaps it induces short-term nausea instead); it simply enables life. And so I have reason to be actively concerned with the welfare of people like the scientist, and for the system that makes such innovations as vaccines possible, whether it makes me *feel* good or not. Indeed, Rand's thematic argument in *Atlas Shrugged* is that innovators provide us with incredible benefits that we may never recognize, but that we *should* recognize them, lest we

ignorantly undermine the conditions (freedom), under which persons of intelligence and industry can and do add vast amounts of objective value to our lives.

Because our happiness is our proper moral purpose, we should each endorse and respect shared principles—such as individual rights to life, liberty and property—that sustain the conditions under which each of us may peacefully pursue our happiness. However, it turns out that adherence to these principles not only keeps us out of each other’s way as we go about building our lives, but also enables enormous mutual benefits through the division of labor, encourages discovery, and stimulates the creative and productive to shower benefits upon the rest of us. It is only when we are embedded in a context of relative scarcity that a gain for me requires a loss for you.

By encouraging the ongoing *creation* of new wealth by every productive person, capitalism makes others objectively valuable to us. Capitalism thus gives us good, non-arbitrary reasons to *really care* about the welfare of others—reasons that get a real grip on our proper motivation to live happy lives. Such reasons are far superior to moralizing exhortations to care for others simply because, well, we’re all part of the human family. As doctrines go, this strikes me as neither weird nor unpleasant. It strikes me as profound, humane, and true.

Yet all this will not ease D’Souza’s worry that entrepreneurs and innovators may nevertheless be motivated by greed, or may turn out to be unsavory characters according to traditional moral paradigms.

Now, I think there are three basic moves one can make in the face of a conflict between capitalism and traditional morality: (1) Reject capitalism altogether on traditional moral grounds; (2) Try to maintain them both in some uneasy balance; (3) Accept capitalism wholeheartedly and revise traditional morality to accommodate it. D’Souza gravitates toward the second choice (which suits the conservative taste for doctrinal messiness).

My own view is that our traditional moral paradigms, and the moral intuitions that reflect those paradigms, are grounded in a conception of human virtue forged in a context of relative scarcity and zero-sum interaction that no longer obtains in the West. So we have

little reason to trust the tradition or our intuitions. Capitalism is so obviously beneficial that it's necessary to revise the moral tradition.

It's interesting that D'Souza does not deny that morality can change over time. He touches more than once upon the possibility of moral evolution, noting that changes in a society's structure—its economy, laws, and cultural milieu—effect changes in the characters of its denizens. D'Souza puts forth the example of Benjamin Franklin, writing: "Franklin, the archetypical American, is a new type of person created by a new type of society" (D'Souza 2000, 165). Yet the new bourgeois virtues involve a partial inversion or revaluation of traditional morality, which is evidenced by the fact that "Dante assigns the qualities that motivate the Benjamin Franklin type—ambition, desire for power, and avarice—to the bottom rungs of Hell" (167). So, apparently, something happened to our conception of morals in the interim between Dante and Franklin, and Dante and Franklin can't both be right. Gladly, D'Souza shows no sympathy for the idea that "the archetypical American" (165) is the apotheosis of evil, and thus seems to concede the possibility of moral progress, or at least benign change.

Nevertheless, D'Souza does nothing to show the moral way forward, or even to explain why Dante was wrong about Franklin, and proceeds to take the measure of capitalism against very traditional moral ideals, invoking Athens and Jerusalem with Straussian reverence. While he does not endorse the strained position of thinkers like George Gilder, who argue that capitalism is good because it motivates us to be altruists (it's just too obvious that businessmen are in it for themselves), in the end D'Souza musters only a very weak defense, concluding that capitalism "makes us better people by limiting the scope of our vices" and "civilizes greed, just as marriage civilizes lust" (126). While this may move us to *tolerate* capitalism, *maybe*, it certainly won't have anyone mounting the barricades in defense of *laissez-faire*.

Throughout *Virtue*, D'Souza seems to hold his own moral preferences as a permanently fixed point, avoiding reflection on the source of his preference for the Greek/Christian moral ethos that drives his judgments of weirdness and repugnance. Although he acknowledges the possibility of salutary moral change in the example

of Franklin, he does not entertain the possibility that his own sensibility is a product of conditioning, of an education in entrenched moral principles unsuited to the post-scarcity era.

The Anti-Materialist Metaphysics of America

In Chapter Eight, D'Souza provides an argument against metaphysical materialism that I believe is at the heart of his discomfort with the scientific image. He sets forth a critique of what he calls the "techno-Nietzscheans." According to D'Souza, the techno-Nietzschean doctrine is that

We are molecules, but molecules that know how to rebel! Our values do not derive from nature or nature's God; rather they arise from the arbitrary force of our wills. And now our wills can make the most momentous choice ever exercised on behalf of our species: the choice to reject human nature. (215)

D'Souza introduces University of Chicago bioethicist Leon Kass as the foil to the techno-Nietzscheans. Kass, who "speaks with the aura of a secular priest," claims that the techno-Nietzscheans "are intoxicated with power, but they show no evidence of responsibility," and, D'Souza tells us, want "people to trust the natural revulsion they have for new technologies such as cloning and genetic enhancement of children; he says that these instincts contain greater wisdom than we may be able to articulate" (219). Kass warns us of the "hubris" of attempting to understand and control nature, and argues that science itself must be constrained by a value-laden conception of humanity, lest our conception of the world, and our place in it, become disenchanting. D'Souza writes in a Kassian vein, with an added concern for maintaining an enchanted conception of politics:

[R]ecall that a few centuries ago modern science and America were both constructed on the foundation of conquering nature so that, by harvesting nature's bounty, man would be free to choose a better life for himself. But the materialist view holds that this freedom is an illusion. Our choices, even our technology, simply reflect the mindless operations of the

genetic code that is built into our bodies and over which we have effectively no control. Far from us prevailing over the laws of evolution, those laws remain in firm control, and we are their helpless subjects. The stunning conclusion is that modern science is a failure and America is a failure. Far from conquering nature, it is nature that continues to reign tyrannically over man. (228)

D'Souza's conclusion is stunning, if only because it comes logically as an utter surprise. D'Souza has managed to confound so many issues in a single paragraph that it is difficult to choose a place to start. But let's start with freedom.

This passage, and D'Souza's entire argument in this portion of the book, rests on an equivocation on the meaning of "freedom." D'Souza asserts that the whole point of science and America is to contribute to our freedom to choose a better life for ourselves. Well, OK. But does materialism really hold that "this freedom is an illusion?" Well, no. It holds that everything is physical, in the sense that everything is in space and time. This doctrine has no straightforward implications for freedom as we intuitively understand it. When the jailer tells the newly sobered town drunk that he is "free to go," he is not making a claim about the metaphysics of causation. He's saying that should the town drunk choose to go, he will not be kept under lock and key. Whether it is open to us to choose better lives for ourselves has nothing to do with deep questions about the determinism or indeterminism of the natural order. These are very different questions about very different things. So, thankfully, the fact that we are continuous with nature, and subject to its laws, does not straightaway entail the failure of the American Experiment and the Scientific Enterprise. It's undeniable that "freedom" in the political sense is spelled the same as "freedom" in the peculiar metaphysical sense. But one can't really derive "stunning" conclusions from spelling alone.

Furthermore, D'Souza doesn't understand the position he criticizes. It's patently false on materialist grounds to say that our choices, or our technology, "reflect the mindless operations of the genetic code." Our choices reflect the mindful operations of our brains. Now, our brains do have a basic structure, and this structure

does reflect the “mindless operations of our genetic code,” but our genes provide only the gross, basic plan of the brain; the neurological details are specified by the particulars of development and experience, many of which are consequences of our own prior choices.

At bottom, it seems that D’Souza is disappointed that humans are subject to the law of identity, that we have a definite nature at all. The underlying assumption is that if we have a determinate constitution, then we are mere slaves of that constitution, since we didn’t choose it. But we should reject this assumption, and instead recognize another, which is evident once grasped: that if we have any capacity or ability at all, then we have it in virtue of the way we are “built.” So, if we have the ability to freely choose, then that capacity must be underwritten by determinate aspects of our nature, just as our capacity to hear is underwritten by the determinate structure of the ear and brain. It follows that our ability to choose, or to have control over anything at all, requires a nature that *enables* choice and control, but which we did not choose (and could not have chosen) for ourselves. Freedom does not require self-creation.

The Rhetoric of Repugnance

D’Souza concludes *The Virtue of Prosperity* with a crescendo of hysteria about the possibility of cloning and genetic manipulation. He argues that cloning must be banned, and he pulls out all the rhetorical stops. For instance, he writes:

The reason is that what the techno-utopians want—namely to remake other human beings and to redesign human nature—represents a fundamental attack on the integrity of humanity, the value of human life, and the principle of the American Revolution. (249)

If you’re confused about what cloning and genetic manipulation have to do with the principles of the American Revolution, so am I. D’Souza’s arguments in this portion of the book are so heavy on histrionics and so short on philosophically competent argumentation that one does credit to the author by concluding that he seeks not to persuade, but to rally fellow conservatives to the cause of ensuring that

science does not too hastily cure disease and provide hope for new possibilities of human life.

A single example will suffice to show the character of D’Souza’s arguments. D’Souza says that the American Revolution was based on the founders’ conception of human nature, according to which we have an inherent dignity, yet our tendencies toward vice must be limited by checks on political power. This conception entails that “each of us has a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and that these rights shall not be abrogated without our consent.” (250), and the revolution was not completed until Lincoln had emancipated the slaves. OK, yes. But then we’re very suddenly treated to the surprising claim that “[t]he attempt to enhance and redesign other human beings represents a flagrant denial of this principle, which is the basis of our dignity and rights. Indeed, it represents a restoration of the principle of slavery . . .” (250).

That’s right, slavery. How is, say, intervening in a child’s genome to remove the propensity for disease, or to choose its eye color akin to slavery? I don’t know. D’Souza doesn’t seem to know either. He does assert that women do not *own* their fertilized eggs, and that by bending a future person’s genome to our will we are treating potential persons as “chattel.” In any case, there is little argument, and much association and rhetoric. Indeed, mere slavery’s not good enough. D’Souza argues that “[p]arents who try to design their children are *more* tyrannical than slave owners, who merely sought to steal the labor of their slaves,” by converting the fertilized eggs into mere “merchandise” and making them the “images of one’s own will” (252; emphasis added).

There’s little one can do here other than point out that fertilized eggs are not yet persons with full moral standing, unlike slaves. It could be argued that fertilized eggs have *no* moral standing, which would render the analogy to slavery moot. However, suppose zygotes have some standing. Does it follow that altering their genetic sequence constitutes a harm? It’s hard to see how it could. All that has been done is to alter the attributes that a future person might have. When I choose my infant’s diet, I am partly determining what she will become. She has no choice in the matter. I *make* her eat carrots. Am

I flouting the principles of the American Revolution?

When not comparing those who would improve the prospects of their children with slaveholders, D'Souza resorts to the Kassian tactic of arguing that our reactions of repugnance should be regarded as having some kind of rational authority. The possibility that some of us experience no such repugnance, or find arguments from repugnance repugnant, or that our gut reactions may be the product of habituation or useless vestiges of our evolutionary past, does not seem to faze him.

At the base of D'Souza's arguments lies a fundamentally mystical conception of the sources of human value and dignity. D'Souza is not at war so much with biotechnology, but with the growth of scientific knowledge that continues to show us our deeper nature, and punctures our illusions about ourselves. The Founders' principles of liberty and limited government will survive the emerging truths about human nature. Their validity and wisdom does not depend on the belief that a flame of intrinsic value flickers in the interstices of our alleles.

Conclusion

In the end, *The Virtue of Prosperity* is about whether there is some way to accommodate the Athens/Jerusalem picture of human nature and dignity within the demystified world of computation and gene science—of Redmond and Rockville. D'Souza fails to find a way. Because he is too reasonable to entirely reject the advances in human knowledge that bring to our lives wealth and length, he is bound to accept, implicitly at least, the naturalistic conception of the world upon which those advances are founded. Thus, his later anti-naturalistic pleadings come out either shrill or flat; they cannot ring true. He has shown us that he knows too much.

And he has also shown us, in the example of Franklin, that he knows that our moral self-conception can change without ill effect. Therefore, when D'Souza sets out to find “values in an age of techno-affluence,” it is disappointing to see him find only Athens and Jerusalem, as if everything he has told us about the radical, disruptive changes in human technology and social life is irrelevant to the principles and values by which we should abide. D'Souza might insist that human nature, at least, has not changed. But it has changed.

Genes are not all. Our changing environment has changed how we develop physically, intellectually, and socially. Our technology has changed the nature of our institutions, and the modes of human interaction and cooperation. We are *already* different, and this is not due to genetic manipulation. It's time to take what we are now, and what we will become soon, seriously. By seriously, I mean, imaginatively, with a view to how we can best use the fruits of reason to expand the possibilities for human life.

This is my central objection to D'Souza: no imagination. Helpless to imagine a morally satisfactory path into the likely future, D'Souza can only attempt to stall us at the status quo. But the scientific discovery of nature will continue, and will continue to alter what it is to have a *human* life. The Founders were men of remarkable moral imagination. And they were men of Science and Enlightenment. We honor their legacy by using the freedom they have bequeathed us to avail ourselves of the best science has to offer, and to promote the development and distribution of the "useful arts" in the pursuit of new paths to life and happiness. D'Souza's invocation of the Founders in the service of an argument against freedom and the growth of knowledge does them no such honor.

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