CrossMark

IS RUNNING A MARATHON A VIRTUE?

Eldar Sarajlic

Should we congratulate runners who participate and finish a marathon without winning it? Although it might seem that all who muster the will to do so deserve praise, this article questions whether self-regarding virtues, such as running a marathon, deserve it.

The famous New York City Marathon started small in 1970 with only 127 registered runners and a mere 55 finishers. In 2015 close to 50,000 individuals crossed the finish line, and a similar figure is expected for this year. Running a marathon has never been more popular than today.

Running continuously for twenty-six miles is not for the weak. It takes enormous physical and psychological strength that only few among us could muster. Success is not guaranteed, and those who are not professional sportspersons and who manage to complete the race are often praised for their achievement.

But is praise due to those of us who take on this undoubtedly admirable feat? Should we congratulate our friends and coworkers whose 'happy-but-exhausted' photos at the finish line decorate their Instagram feeds?

In a certain sense, the answer is an unequivocal yes. Norms of decency and solidarity suggest that we rejoice at our friends' successes and share their happiness.

But this question is not as simple as it sounds. If we follow Aristotle's claim that virtues are the object of praise and presume that running a marathon is a virtue, we must inquire into what kind of virtue it is. What exactly are we congratulating marathon runners for?

doi:10.1017/S1477175617000367 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2018
Think 48, Vol. 17 (Spring 2018)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175617000367 Published online by Cambridge University Press

On a very basic level marathon is a physical activity. We are certainly not praising runners for taking part in it; otherwise any other physical activity would demand the same. Nobody thinks my afternoon walk around the block deserves praise.

On a more advanced level, marathon is a competitive sport, where individuals get together to see who can run faster for an extended period of time and space. As in any other sport, we congratulate winners, and pat the losers on the back, encouraging them to try again, while praising their effort. But the praise for losers' effort is not the same as the praise for winners' achievement. The former is a courteous gesture of sympathy, while only the latter is genuine admiration.

So, it follows that unless you came first through the marathon finish line you do not deserve genuine, but rather courteous, praise.

However, this is not the only possible interpretation of the praise for marathon runners. One could admire and praise the sheer scale of the effort, since even making it through the finish line after twenty-six miles of continuous running is an admirable achievement. As anybody who has ever run continuously for at least five miles knows, it takes a lot of physical strength and, more importantly, willpower to do so. Most human bodies are fit for running, and no particular physical disposition prevents us from doing so. But not all of us could muster the will to push our bodies to achieve that.

So, it is plausible to say that when we congratulate a friend for completing a marathon we are praising the power of their will. But, is willpower a virtue that deserves praise?

The answer depends on how virtue is conceptualized. Following Plato, some philosophers think that virtues are intrinsic traits of character that cannot be learned.[1] According to this definition, you either have willpower as a virtue, or you don't. (Maybe this can explain why not everybody is fit for a marathon.) But, if one accepts this definition then it doesn't follow that marathon runners deserve

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175617000367 Published online by Cambridge University Press

genuine praise, since character traits are beyond individual volition. Praising someone for running a marathon is therefore the same as praising someone for having blond hair.

So, in order for willpower to be a virtue, it must be akin to a skill that can be learned and exercised.

However, if willpower is a skill-like virtue, it still doesn't mean that it necessarily deserves praise. As we learn from other philosophers, virtues can be divided into self-regarding and other-regarding.[2] Unlike bravery, generosity, or honesty, which are other-regarding because they shape a person's interaction with others, willpower is a self-regarding virtue. One can have willpower and act only in personal interest.

If this definition is accepted, then it could be argued that exercising willpower does not necessarily deserve praise.

Consider the following analogy. Imagine that I am naturally disgusted by kale. I cannot stand its taste, its smell makes me nauseous, and if I were to eat even a little bit I would have cramps and would probably vomit. But kale happens to be very healthy. It is rich in fibre and vitamins and is overall very beneficial for our health. Now, imagine also that every year the borough of Brooklyn organizes an annual kale festival, where hundreds of New Yorkers gather to consume kale together. The festival also includes a kale-eating competition, and the winner is the person who eats most kale chips in five minutes. If I decided to participate in this festival, and with rigorous preparation managed to eat a bag of kale chips (not enough to win the competition, but sufficient to show my willpower), posting about this achievement on my Twitter feed, would you congratulate me for doing so? Would my kale-eating be virtuous?

Unless you're offering me a courteous praise, it is hard to say that I deserve a substantial congratulation. This is because what I have done concerns only myself and nobody else. To borrow a phrase from Kant, eating kale is here only hypothetically, and not categorically, valuable. Its value depends upon my prior end – healthy living – and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175617000367 Published online by Cambridge University Press

has no independent worth. I should eat kale only if I want to be healthy; there is no categorical demand to eat kale.

This argument hinges on prior acceptance of the claim that no self-regarding virtues are praiseworthy, which many will reject. One could ask: If someone decides to eat healthy, why should not that be praiseworthy? But look at the term 'praise' more closely. The dictionary definition says it means 'to express approval or admiration'. Basically, when we praise we express approval of other people's actions.

I find it problematic to 'approve' somebody's exercise of willpower because I consider it paternalistic. Approval implies that we know better than the other person, and by approving we somehow build an asymmetric epistemic relation between a veteran knower and a rookie who just now figured out how to use his willpower. While it is justifiable to act in this way towards children, it is not justifiable in the case of adults. For example, it seems appropriate if I praise my daughter's willpower to wait for dinner before eating the cookie, but it hardly seems appropriate if I do that to my wife. If she does defer eating cookie to after dinner, it may be good for her, but that's not something that I can know better than her, and it's definitely not something I should approve or disapprove.

Therefore, I believe running a marathon belongs to the same group of self-regarding virtues. While undoubtedly good, its value is limited only to the persons doing it.

Of course, this does not mean that when a marathon is organized in support of a certain cause its value is merely hypothetical. Self-regarding virtues such as willpower can also be put to other-regarding use. In cases in which races take place to raise awareness about, say, breast cancer, their value extends beyond those who participate. The benefits of a marathon geared to raise money for finding a cure for cancer are objective and categorical. I suspect that this may be the reason why many marathons are cloaked in social causes (unlike for example football games). Without a cause, or a strong competitive interpretation, marathon seems to be normatively empty: there is nothing objectively valuable about it.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175617000367 Published online by Cambridge University Press

One could also argue that the ubiquity of marathon selfies and hashtags that invite praise for participating in a twenty-six-mile run is a sign of narcissistic times. We are invited to congratulate people for doing things that are good for themselves only, and which have little or no objective social value. For example, the energy invested in preparing for and participating in a marathon is enormous. It is not hard to imagine how much social benefit could be harnessed by so many calories spent in other ways than running. How many days serving in soup kitchens throughout American inner cities? How many days spent helping refugees in Greek islands?

Marathon runners are, of course, not blameworthy for choosing to run instead of joining a humanitarian mission to the Middle East. Those are their bodies, that's their time, and they are perfectly justified in using those bodies and spending that time in whichever way they choose to do. So, let me be clear: there is nothing wrong with running a marathon. But, if they are not blameworthy for doing so, they are also not praiseworthy. So, next time you hear a co-worker bragging about running a marathon, the only proper response to that should be: good for you, my friend.

Eldar Sarajlic is Assistant Professor at City University of New York – Borough of Manhattan Community College.

Notes

[1] See Hugh Mercer Curtler, 'Can Virtue Be Taught?', *Humanitas* 7.4 (1994): 43–50.

[2] See Gabriele Taylor and Sybil Wolfram, 'The Self-Regarding and Other-Regarding Virtues', *Philosophical Quarterly* 18.72 (1968): 238–48.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175617000367 Published online by Cambridge University Press