

Amen: Can Big Brother make you virtuous?

John Wooden, the endlessly quotable NCAA basketball coach who died in 2010, once famously observed that character is what you do when no one is watching.

Officials in Shanghai seem to be turning that maxim on its head with a new smartphone app released late last year that tries to encourage honesty and ethics by giving “public credit” scores to citizens.

Dubbed “Honest Shanghai,” the app collects personal information about users with the help of facial recognition software and national ID numbers.

According to a recent report by National Public Radio, the app sifts through 3,000 pieces of information from nearly 100 government entities to establish three possible “public credit” scores: “very good,” “good” or “bad.”

“A good score allows users to collect rewards like discounted airline tickets,” NPR reported, “and a bad score could one day lead to problems getting loans and getting seats on planes and trains.”

The Shanghai app, according to NPR, is but one piece in a larger master plan to erect a nationwide social credit system by 2020 in China. Traffic violations, failure to pay child support and speaking out against the government could all theoretically conspire to undermine a person’s score under the scheme. A poor score could severely affect everything from employment to housing.

Even if one assumes that the totalitarian Communist government of China is truly concerned with the welfare of its citizens and not with exercising Orwellian controls (a huge assumption, I know), there is a fundamental flaw with its approach: it won’t produce moral excellence.

When my wife and I brought our youngest daughter home from the hospital nine months ago, our little one started crying. Her big sister, then only 18 months old, immediately ran over to offer the wailing baby her most cherished possession, her

stuffed pink “Bear-Bear.”

Our daughter didn’t present the gift to a sibling she just met because we asked her. She didn’t do it because she knew it would curry favor with Mommy and Daddy and result in some treat down the road. She didn’t do it in fear that we would punish her if she failed to soothe her little sister.

She did it because she knew it was the right thing to do. Whenever she needed to be cheered up, “Bear-Bear” was there for her. The virtuous course of action, plain even to a toddler, was to give that source of comfort to one who needed it.

The late Dr. Paul Bagley, one of my favorite professors at Loyola University Maryland, taught in a philosophy class more than two decades ago that moral virtue – as defined by Aristotle – is a disposition to act in the right way. It’s acquired, according to Aristotle’s reasoning, not through study or lectures, but through habits and actions.

A government can’t make its citizens virtuous by bribing them or threatening them with punishment. We become virtuous by acting virtuous for the sake of virtue.

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