

Larry R. Churchill

larry.churchill@vumc.org

Working Virtues, Session 2

Empathy, Compassion, Humility

Leftovers from Session 1

Practicing Virtues as a means to something else. . .

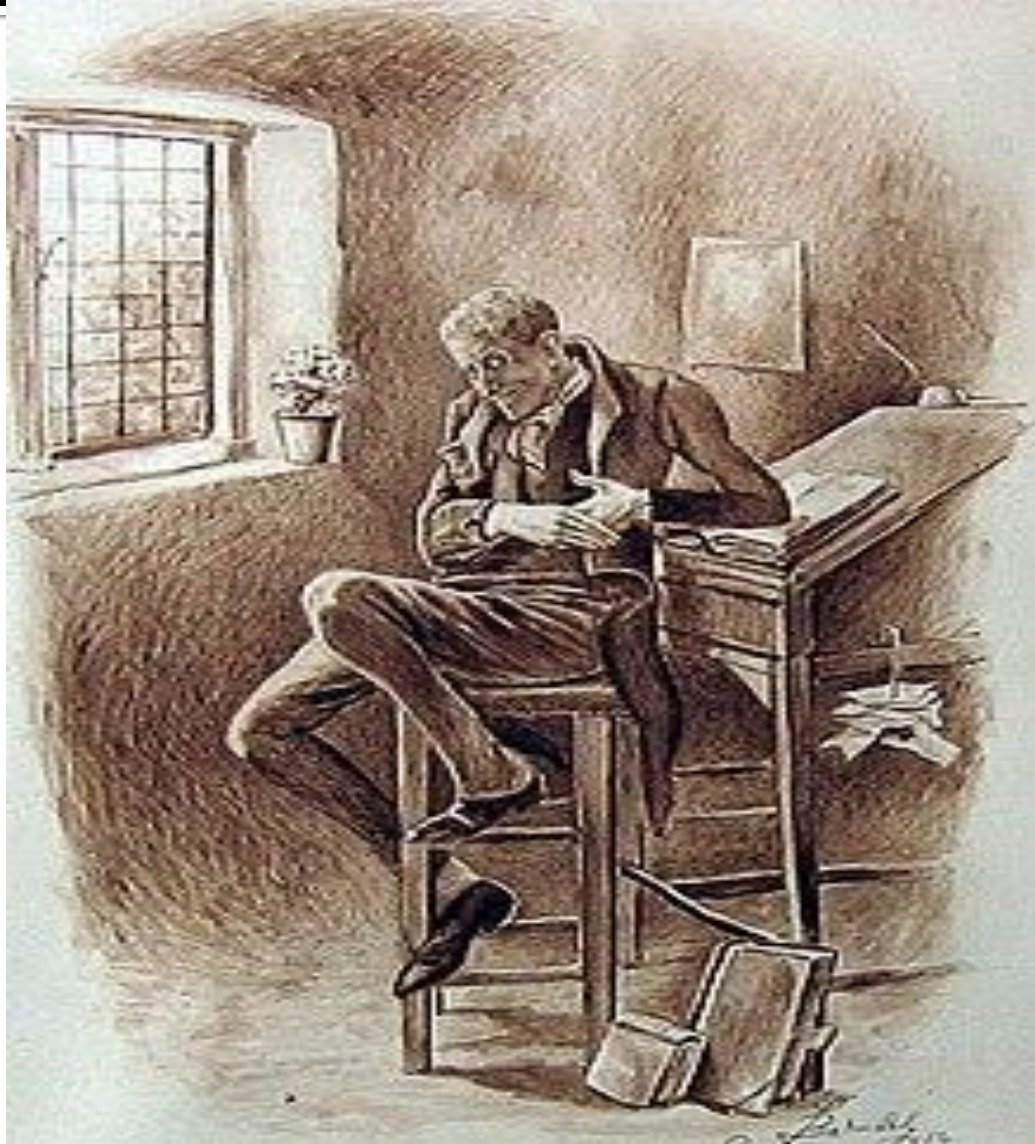
Fast Thinking/ Slow Thinking

The Place of Virtues in Ethics

Practicing Virtues: Means/End

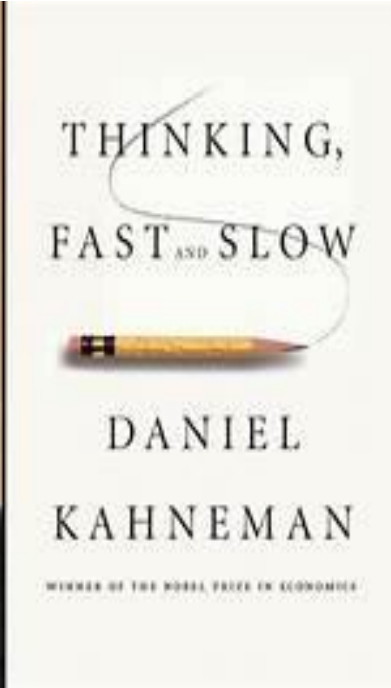
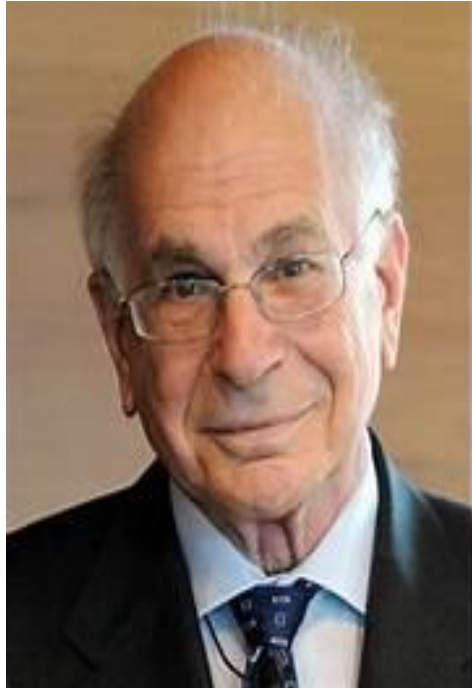
- *Virtues are, then, a means to an end; but cannot be practiced as a means to an end, e.g., happiness. (from last week)*
- Revised: virtues cannot be practiced **solely** as a means to an end. . .since it is the intrinsic value of practicing the virtue that leads to moral knowledge, and finally, to the right end...

Uriah Heep -- Humility practiced only as a means to power



Kahneman (and Tversky)

Nobel Prize in economics, 2002



Importance of Slow Thinking in Ethics

Thinking Fast and Slow, Daniel Kahneman

- Fast thinking is what the mind prefers, the default position. Quick, metaphorical, reactive...
- Slow thinking takes effort, is gestational, analytical, reflective. . . .
- “a puzzling limitation of our mind: excessive confidence in what we know, our apparent inability to acknowledge the full extent of our ignorance...and the underestimate of the role of chance in events.” p. 14

Virtues and Ethics

- Rules and principles are still needed, not everything folds into virtues. . .
- Ethics involves many human capacities, not just one, such as sound reasoning. Other capacities engaged are curiosity, emotions and feelings, intuition, imagination, memory, cognitive agility, reflection, aesthetic appreciation, skepticism, etc.

Virtues are Open – Living & Organic

- Not precisely defined, unlike math; open to the fluctuations of our experiences; this enables us to grow morally (but also to atrophy)

Pi = 3.14159265359. . .

- No final or definitive understanding of virtues, we are constantly interpreting and re-interpreting in light of our experience. . . Which is what we do when we open our virtue backpack. . .and also what we do as we tell stories of the moral life at different life stages. . .

A Systematic Unity of the Virtues?

- I am dubious, but perhaps...
- Let our experiences be the guide rather than a theory of virtue.
- Ask: “Where does working with this virtue lead, e.g., empathy, take us?”

Do Some Virtues Lead to Others?

- Are there more-or-less natural pathways, or easy connections, so that practicing one virtue will lead, sooner or later, to others?
- So, even if the satisfaction of a systematic unity is beyond us, we can reflect and observe. . .

Ann Patchett, "My Year of No Shopping," *NYT* 12/15/2017

Once I got the hang of giving shopping up, it wasn't much of a trick. The trickier part was living with the startling abundance that had become glaringly obvious when I stopped trying to get more. Once I could see what I already had, and what actually mattered, I was left with a feeling that was somewhere between sickened and humbled. When did I amass so many things, and did someone else need them?



If you stop thinking about what you might want, it's a whole lot easier to see what other people don't have. There's a reason that just about every religion regards material belongings as an impediment to peace. This is why Siddhartha had to leave his palace to become the Buddha. This is why Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor." It's why my friend Sister Nena, an 85-year-old Catholic nun, took a vow of poverty when she entered the convent at 18.



The things we buy and buy and buy are like a thick coat of Vaseline smeared on glass: We can see some shapes out there, light and dark, but in our constant craving for what we may still want, we miss life's details.



Empathy: Evolutionary Roots

"Our brains have been designed to blur the line between self and others. It is an ancient neural circuitry that marks every mammal, from mouse to elephant."



"Being both more systematically brutal than chimps and more empathic than bonobos, we are by far the most bipolar ape."

— *Frans de Waal*

Misunderstandings of Empathy

- Empathy is not sympathy, or emotional merging, or echoing; not simply feeling what others feel. (Yawning, giggling, sadness, fear)
- Empathy is not primarily emotional.
- Empathy is not a mysterious gift from on high; not something tied to a personality type, such that some have it and some don't,
 "...and if you don't have it , you can't learn it."

Empathy defined

- Empathy is *the ability to imaginatively place oneself into another person's situation* (always partial); this often requires an intention to pay attention to experiences I have not had. . . .
--- Richard Sobel
- The essential aspects are a *willingness to reach out for, and accredit,* another person's experiences and perspective.

"Empathy Needs a Face"

---Frans de Waal



Do Rats Have Empathy?

Science, Dec. 9, 2011

- Report of Bartal, Decety and Mason, University of Chicago; free rats opened cage of trapped rats and shared chocolate



Absence of Empathy

- “It wasn’t only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy. It was confusion and misunderstanding; above all, it was failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you.”

--- Ian McEwan, *Atonement*

Absence of Empathy

The protagonist explaining how we came to senselessly murder a young woman. . .

“This is the worst, the essential sin. . . I never imagined her vividly enough; I did not make her live. Yes, that failure of imagination is my real crime, the one that makes the others possible. What I told the policeman is true—I killed her because for me she was not alive.”

--John Banville, *The Book of Evidence*

Questions to be curious about

- *Is there a “down-regulation” or diminishment of empathic skills as we grow out of the idealism of our youth, a kind of world-weary callousness, a sense of having “seen it all before”?*
- *What opportunities are available for practicing and honing empathic abilities?*

Empathy Profile

- *Who do I seem to have empathy for easily or naturally?*
- *Who do I find it hard to empathize with?*

Compassion begins in empathy

- Sympathy

The echoing of emotions and reactions; the contagion of affective states...

- Empathy

The *imaginative* effort to put oneself in another's place, "walking in their shoes"...

Recognizing Suffering is Central to Compassion



“We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer,
Letters and Papers from Prison

Compassion as a Necessity

“Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them, humanity cannot survive.”

Dalai Lama XIV,
The Art of Happiness



Compassion and Kindness to Ourselves

“Compassion for others begins with kindness to ourselves.”

Pema Chandra



Compassion begins in empathy and ends in responses of care

Empathy  Caring Responses

Compassion is *suffering recognized and responded to...*

Gestures of compassion for the sick:

- “You’re a brave person to put up with all this pain”
- “I admire the way you are taking responsibility for your care”

Inhibitors to Empathy & Compassion

1. Snap judgments, generalizing about others with first impressions. . . Labeling;
Empathy and Compassion require suspension of judgments.
2. Preoccupation with appearances, with how a person is dressed, their demeanor, accent. . .
3. Prejudice: the (usually tacit) sense that some others are not quite worth the time or effort, because of race, age, status...

Inhibitors to Empathy & Compassion

4. Efficiency, and the Impatience it breeds; being in a hurry, anticipating where you will be next. . .
5. Reason devoid of feeling; relationships that are calculated. . .
6. Psychopathology; deficit of oxytocin; in presence of high levels of testosterone. . .

Compassion Profile

- What is your paradigm, or model of a compassionate act or practice?
- Where did you learn this?
- How has it functioned in your life?



Humility

- Not recognized by the Greeks, who thought pride a virtue and humility a weakness
- Theological history: self-abasement before God
- Modern ethics: accurate self-assessment; involves some de-centering, a fundamental move in ethics. . .

Judith Andre on Humility

“The humble person is more likely to rank herself accurately. Freed from the need to protect herself emotionally, she has no need to flaunt her merits, and can attend to the needs of others.”

Worldly Virtues, 2015

Rewards of Humility

Humility works by opening us to recognition of mistakes, and to forgiveness, which permits survival in the face of mistakes...

*--Charles Bosk, Forgive and Remember
(Chicago, 1979)*

Humility: Seeing How Little Separates Us

“Nothing promotes humility more effectively than the growing realization that little separates us from our patients.”

-- Harvey Chochinov, MD

Humility is a leveling or equalizing force. . .

Humility's Opposites

- Prideful Arrogance
- Moral Certainty
- Perfectionism
- Narcissism

Narcissism is a Dead End



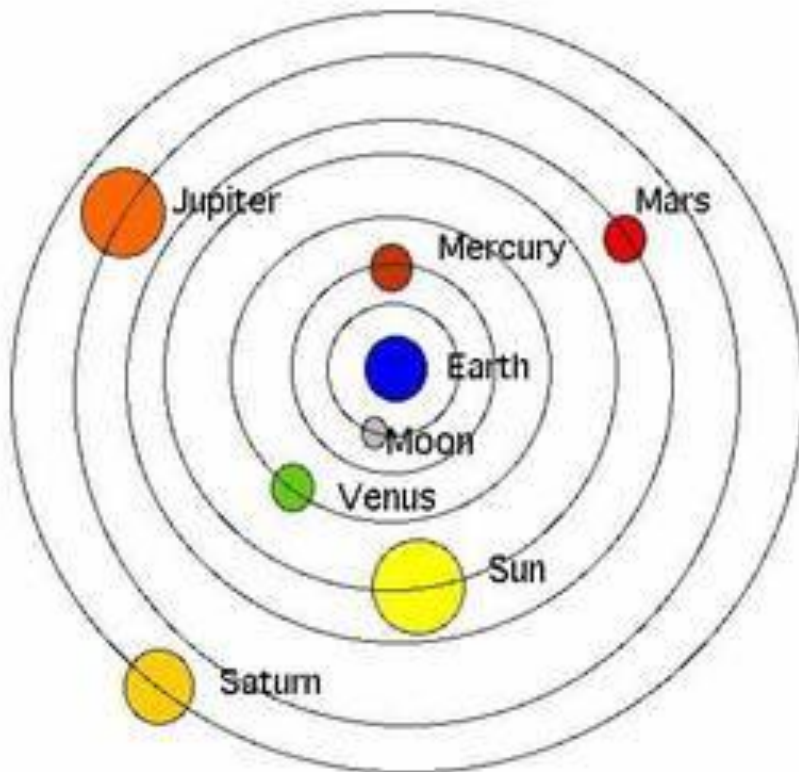
Empathy, Compassion and Humility as De-Centering Movements

De-Centering is the Copernican Move in Ethics

- Taming moral vanity
- Unprivileging myself
- Seeing others as just as real, complex, interesting and valuable as me

Practicing Virtues Shifts the Center

PTOLEMAIC SYSTEM



SOLAR SYSTEM

