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Working Virtues, Session 2

Empathy, Compassion, Humility

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

Virtue Clusters & Pathways

- Some virtues imply or enable others; some are natural pathways to others.
- There are varying pathways into the world of virtues, for example, generosity.
- A unity of the virtues? Maybe, but let our experiences be the guide rather than a theory of virtue. Ask: “Where does working with this virtue, e.g., empathy, take us?”

How Virtues become Vices

- Was Aristotle Right? Virtues are always an intermediate between two extremes.

Rashness ----- Courage ----- Cowardice

- Or perhaps, any single virtue needs to be balanced by other virtues, e.g., generosity by self-respect and prudence, etc.

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 age, a kind of world-weariness, 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 is 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 compassion act or practice?
- Where did you learn this?
- How has it functioned in your life?



Exercise for the Virtue Profile: Name 2 Virtues

1. Name a *virtue from your prehistory* that you continue to see as valuable.

Describe an occasion on which the value of this virtue became apparent.

2. Name a *virtue about which you can say, "I acquired that from out of my own experience"*. . . something different, or in addition to, my inheritance from my family of origin

Describe an occasion on which the value of this virtue became apparent.

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)*

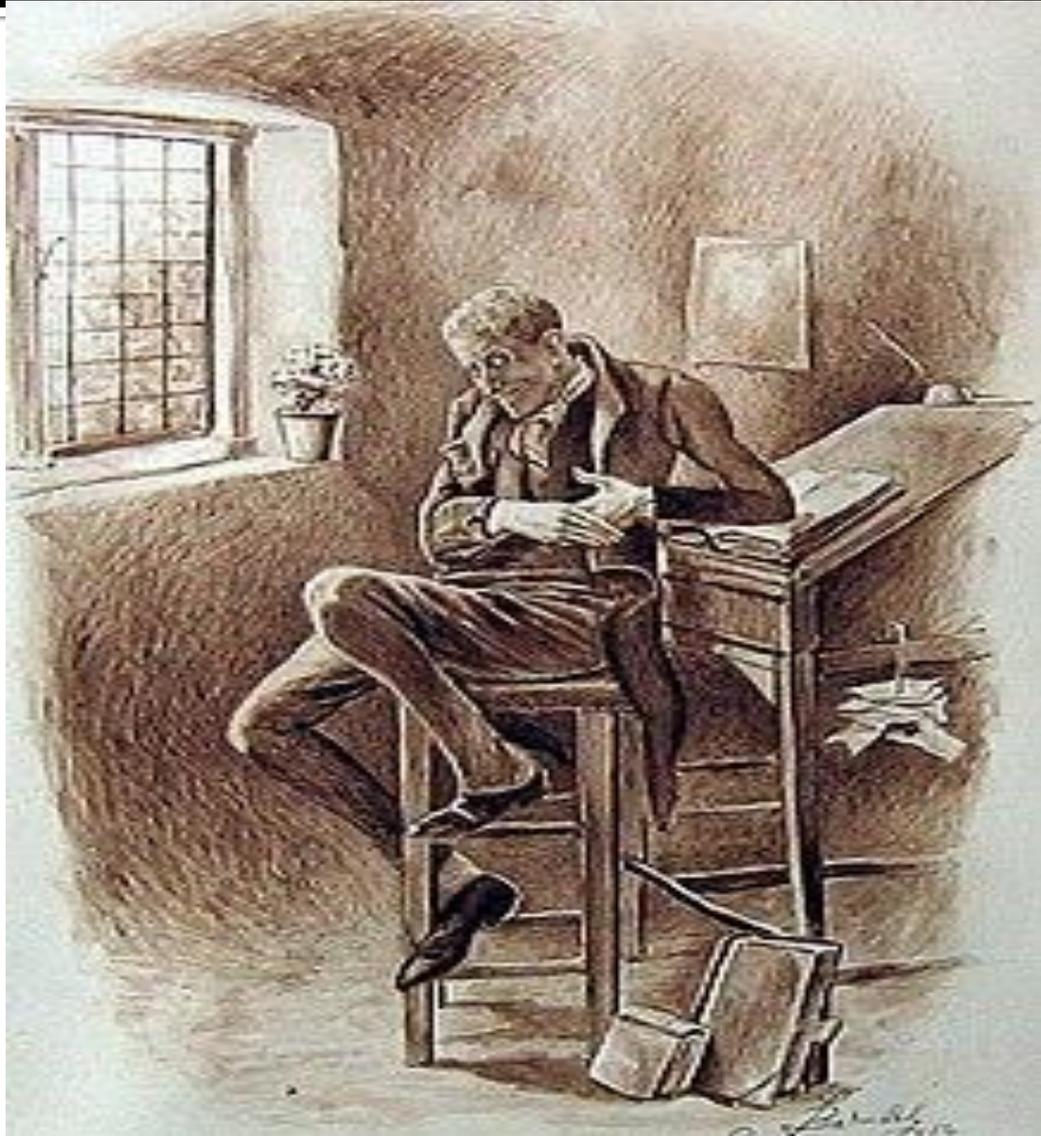
Humility: Seeing How Little Separates Us

“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. . .

False Humility -- Uriah Heep Vice disguised as a Virtue



Humility's Opposites

- Prideful Arrogance
- Moral Certainty
- Perfectionism
- Narcissism

Narcissism is a Dead End

