

WORKING VIRTUES

OLLI Vanderbilt, Spring, 2024

Session 1

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What are Virtues?

- Virtues speak not to actions but to *being*, not to what we do, but to *who we are*. . .
- Virtues focus on the agent behind the moral choices, the interior aspects of the external actions, the person behind the judgments and decisions.
- Virtues, together, define character. . .qualities of heart & mind that *predispose* to certain actions/choices
- Virtues address who we are *in the routines*, when no big problems are at hand.

By Contrast: Other Aspects of Ethics

- Rules ---tell us exactly what to do, they are directive, or imperative, e.g., “Don’t lie.”
- Principles --- tell us what values to look for and uphold, e.g., “When we lie we disrespect others.”
- Theories --- tell us how to justify rules, principles and choices, e.g., utilitarianism

Virtue-Oriented Ethics:

- Moral standards are largely learned through having skilled mentors.
- Making good choices is more a matter of good character, developing the right habits, than a matter of using the right rules or principles.
- *Being* good leads to *thinking* appropriately, and then, to *choosing* rightly.

It takes a good person to appreciate moral reasoning.

--Aristotle

Working Virtues

- Virtues are things *only understood through practice*; we can't think our way into an understanding. Similar to skills. . . head work follows successful practice
- We will examine:
 1. How virtues work, or function; differentiating them from their near relations, correcting misunderstandings.
 2. What the work of virtues accomplishes; where it leads. The *telos*, or purpose. . .

Virtues Disclose the Core Values



What are the Important Virtues?

CATHOLICISM'S CARDINAL VIRTUES

- Temperance
- Prudence
- Courage
- Justice

- Faith
- Hope
- Love

7 VIRTUES AND (7 VICES)

- | | |
|--------------|------------|
| ■ Humility | (pride) |
| ■ Kindness | (envy) |
| ■ Temperance | (gluttony) |
| ■ Chastity | (lust) |
| ■ Patience | (wrath) |
| ■ Charity | (greed) |
| ■ Diligence | (sloth) |

Buddhist Virtues (Brahmaviharas)

4 Sublime Attitudes or Divine Abodes

1. Loving-kindness --- active good will
2. Compassion --- identifying with suffering of others
3. Empathic joy --- joy in the happiness of others
4. Equanimity --- impartiality toward everything and everyone

How Virtues become Vices



- Aristotle's view: Virtues are always an intermediate between two extremes.

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

- And any virtue needs to be balanced in a larger constellation of virtues, which together make for a "good" or "happy" life?

Virtue/Vice = Beauty/Deformity

“The end of all moral speculations is to [display] the **deformity of vice and beauty of virtue**, beget correspondent habits, and engage us to avoid the one, and embrace the other.”



David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 1751

What do Winston Churchill and Maya Angelou agree on re: virtues?



The Primacy of Courage

- Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities. . . because it is the quality that guarantees all the others.

--Winston Churchill

- Courage is the most important of the virtues, because without courage you can't practice any other virtue consistently.

--Maya Angelou

Hector, defender of Troy

- . . . for our country, 'tis a bliss to die./ The gallant man, though slain in fight he be,/ Yet leaves his nation safe, his children free;/ Entails a debt on all the grateful state;/ His own brave friends shall glory in his fate;/ His wife live honour'd, all his race succeed, And late posterity enjoy the deed!
- Homer, *The Iliad*



Adam Smith

- “Self-command is not only itself a great virtue, but from it all the other virtues seem to derive their principal luster.”

*The Theory of Moral
Sentiments, 1759*



Nietzsche (1844-1900)

Transvaluation of the Virtues

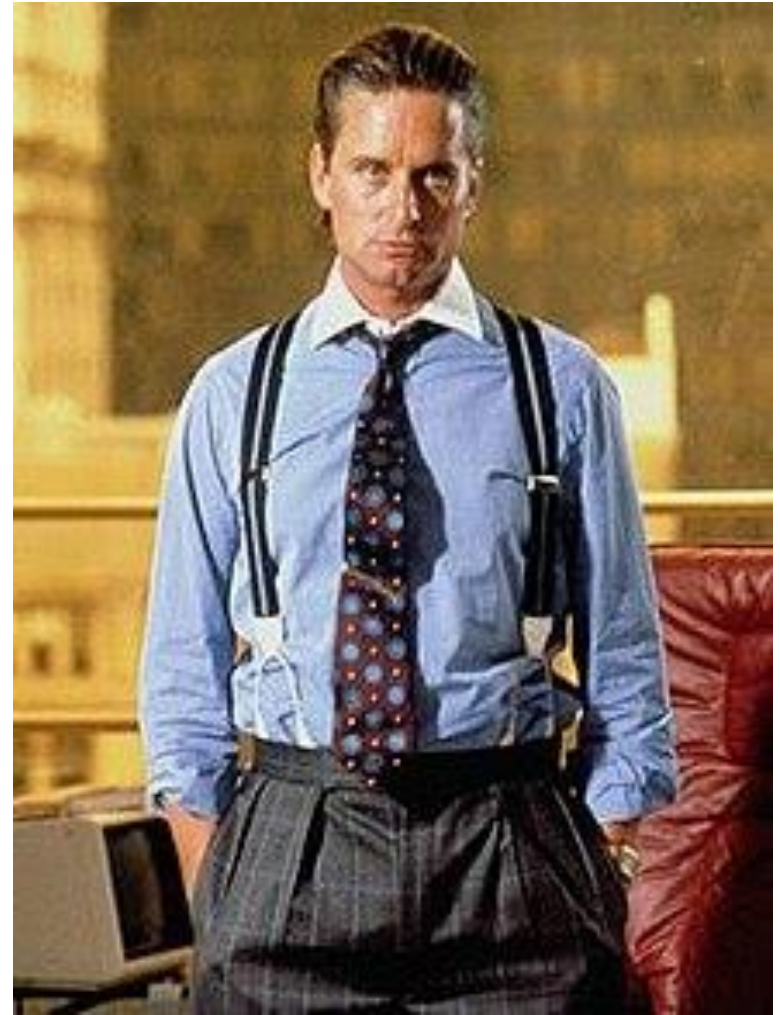
- “The Christian faith from the beginning, is sacrifice, the sacrifice of all freedom, all pride, all self-confidence of spirit, it is at the same time subjection, self-derision, and self-mutilation.”
— Friedrich Nietzsche,
Beyond Good and Evil



Gordon Gekko

Wall Street, 1987; Money Never Sleeps, 2010

- "Greed, for lack of a better word, is good"



“Virtue is its Own Reward”: No... and Yes

- Yes--Being good will not make us rich or famous. . .
- No--The practice of the virtues *does* lead to a superior form of happiness; something better than bigger houses, faster cars or older whisky. . . For example, a deeper understanding of ourselves and joy of relating well to others; satisfaction of personal integrity; more authentic spirituality. . .
- Virtues are, then, a means to an end; but *cannot be practiced as a means to an end*, e.g., happiness.

What are the Important Virtues?

- Virtues as **Life Skills**; What virtues are needed to survive and flourish under the demands of living a life? And especially, are needed for **my** life?
- Are these the same for everyone? Do certain occupations or life situations call for special virtues?
- Are there age-appropriate virtues, e.g., different for the 20 year-old and the 80 year-old? Different for grandparenting than for parenting?

The Case of David McNeely

The Issue: How to take the retirement income. . .

Option 1: take the full amount, with no survivor benefits

Option 2: Take 85% of the full amount, with this amount continuing for his spouse for her lifetime.

Background for McNeely

- McNeely is a classics scholar, hence, not a large retirement benefit
- Sarah McNeely, the spouse, has history of breast cancer. McNeely's first wife died of breast cancer.
- Tragic sensibility and assumption that his current wife will die first: "Just my fate."
- Decision: maximize income for the remainder of their life together. . .(option 1)

McNeely Case, continued

- What are the virtues (and vices) at play in McNeely's choice?
- What are the virtues missing from his choice?

The Case of Mary Pilgrim

DAY 1

- Patient, Mary Pilgrim, presents with recurrence of cancer
- One year ago treated for Ca by amputation of lower left leg
- Surgeon is optimistic about treatment and recovery

DAY 2

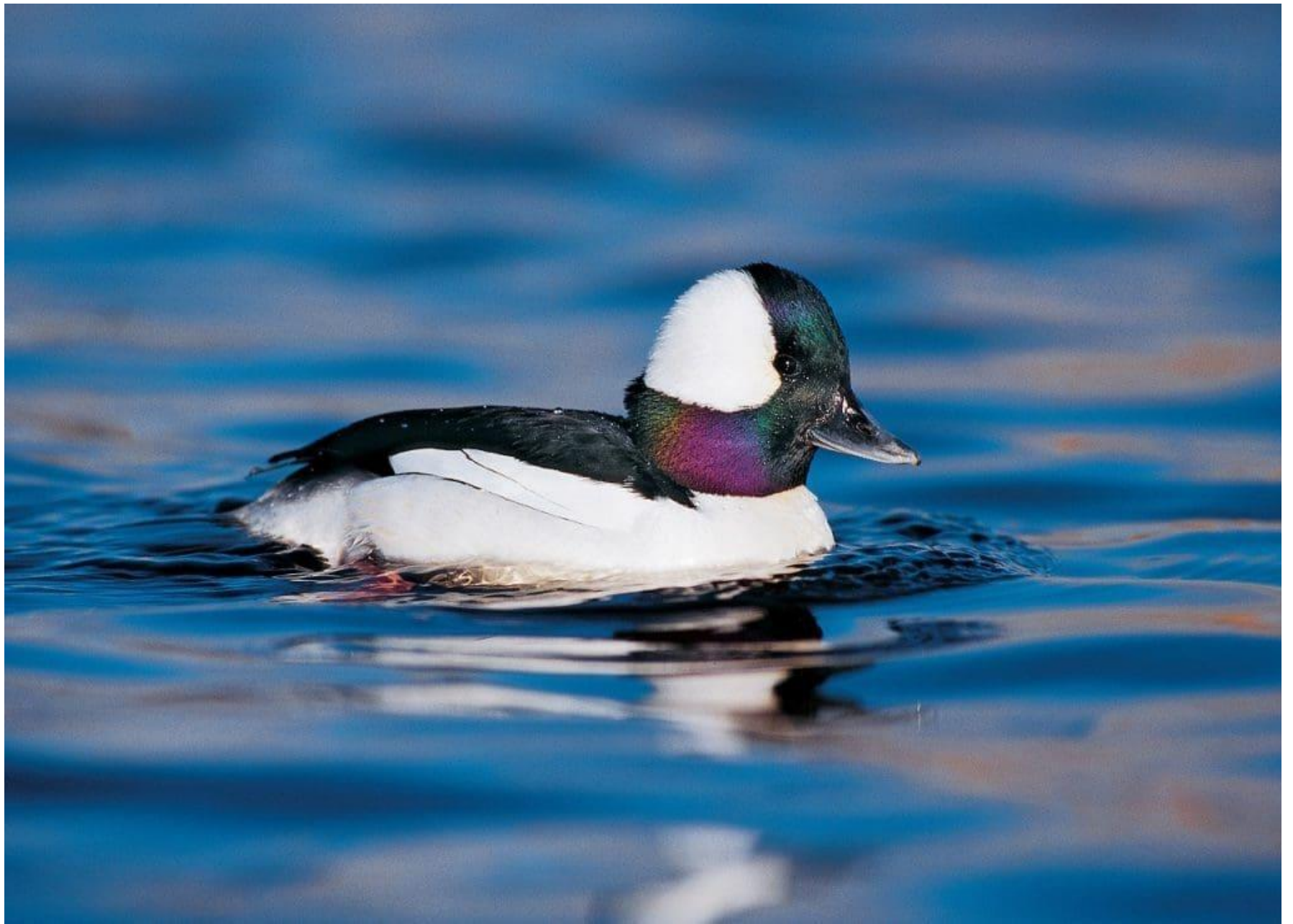
- Patient refuses any further intervention
- Speaks of “being a healing witness,” “doing the Lord’s work” which would be interrupted by any further medical treatment

The Case of Mary Pilgrim

- What virtues are evident in her thinking?
- What virtues do you hope the physician caring for her possesses?

The Territory Ahead: Some Virtues to be Examined

- Love
- Patience
- Truthfulness
- Courage
- Forgiveness
- Humility
- Reverence
- Kindness
- Probing Curiosity
- Loyalty
- Empathy
- Compassion
- Equanimity
- Capacity for Awe/
Wonder
- Relinquishing/
Surrendering
- Resilience
- Hopefulness
- Generosity



No Prodigies in Ethics: Need for a Probing Curiosity

Unlike musical or mathematical geniuses, acquiring the virtues requires life experiences, trial and error, reflection, a mentor and a supportive community. . .

Moral maturity is a developmental process, “growing up” ethically means being curious and reflective as we move through passages and processes; as we change so do the virtues we will need. . .

Probing skill is necessary, a curiosity about the changes in one’s life and values

Moral *Pre*history

- Everyone has a moral *pre*history
- Moral Prehistory is what we learned *unreflectively* in our families of origin, in our early experiences in school, religious organizations--**a moral backpack**



The moral prehistory backpack load

- Moral Prehistory is typically thick with rules, principles, memories, stories, images of good/bad, and short, memorable sayings. . .
- And virtues. . . Reminders to be a certain kind of person
- Every prehistory backpack is a mixed bag—very useful in some ways, inadequate in others

Probing one's moral prehistory

- The first and most basic move in ethics; a skill fundamental to all the others;
- Unzipping the backpack, examining its contents, wondering “Why these virtues and not others?”
- Occasions for probing: realization of difference, or inadequacy, or life changes

Probing is Not a Once-and-Done Thing

- Inevitable changes over the Lifespan
 1. Physical
 2. Social/Interpersonal
 3. Vocational
 4. Geographical
 5. Cultural

Different virtues become important at different points in life's journey

What Virtues are Most Important to Me Now? My virtue profile

- Character traits I need to survive and flourish:

Age_____

Health_____

Personal History_____

Resources/talents_____

Commitments/obligations_____

Larger context of my life_____

Ambitions/Ideals_____

Questions to Consider for Developing a Virtue Profile

- What virtues are most important for me now?
- What are the traits of character, the virtues I most admire in others?
- What virtue deficits do I think are most damaging?
- What are my virtue “growth areas”?

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.

Looking Ahead: for Session 2

- Empathy
- Compassion
- Humility