

Character and . . .

Discomfort

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ANNALEE R. WARD

Introduction: Character and Discomfort

Articles

BETH LINDQUIST MCCAW

The Oxymoron of “My Comfort Zone”

ADAM BENJAMIN SMITH

Discomfort, Attention, and Character

SEAN BENSON

The Persecution of Jaelene Hinkle

Response

ROGER P. EBERTZ

Learning to Live Comfortably in an Uncomfortable World: A Response to McCaw, Smith, and Benson



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Discomfort, Attention, and Character

Adam Benjamin Smith

Abstract

Does your capacity to “pay attention” have anything to do with your moral character? What does studying for exams have to do with becoming a good person? In this essay, I argue that these things are connected: paying attention is about getting comfortable with uncomfortable things, and this “comfort with discomfort” is a mark of good character.

0. A Very Brief Introduction, Which Does Not Try to Grab Your Attention

I’m going to talk about three things. These are (1) attention, (2) discomfort, and (3) moral character. My goal is to catch a glimpse of what these things are, and how they might be connected. Along the way I will talk about some not-so-serious things, like studying for exams, and some very-serious-things, like snuff films.

1. Many Uncomfortable Things

Many things make us uncomfortable. We might have a rock in our shoe, or a mosquito bite, or a crick in our neck. If we stretch the meaning of physical discomfort, from the slight to the serious, we can talk about the discomfort of terrible pain: the suffering of the cancer patient or the torture victim. We can also talk about the wide range of emotional discomfort, from the slight embarrassment of an awkward interaction to the deep wound of a profound humiliation.

It may seem strange or wrong to call the more serious experiences “uncomfortable.” And it’s true that we don’t want to diminish them or pretend them away. At the same time, we don’t want to tell the sufferer that she has no power to diminish the pain by understanding it differently. Because this is clearly something that human beings can do. Our imaginations can make things more serious than they are. The same imaginative power, properly controlled, can take some sting out of serious things. Seneca, the Stoic philosopher, believed that “[p]ain is slight if opinion has added nothing to it . . . in thinking it is slight, you will make it slight. Everything depends on opinion. It is according to opinion that we suffer” (78, 13).

No doubt there is a breaking point where our abilities fail, and the pain overtakes our perspective. Even the Stoics knew this. Marcus Aurelius thought that even in the midst of chronic pain “the mind

maintains its own tranquility by retiring into itself,” but also that “the pain which is intolerable carries us off” (7.33). Perhaps the extreme pain of cancer or torture cannot finally be “managed.” Perhaps there are emotional wounds that you can’t just “get over.” And none of this means that since it’s partly within people’s power to experience them as more or less “bad,” then there’s nothing wrong with torturing or humiliating or otherwise inflicting discomfort on them. The point is that discomfort is not just sitting there, waiting to be suffered. If something makes us *feel* uncomfortable, it might be partly (or even entirely) because we have *made* it uncomfortable. “It is not events that disturb people, it is their judgments concerning them” (Epictetus, book 5). This means that, within limits, we might learn to feel differently. We might learn to make ourselves more comfortable.¹



Within limits, we might learn to feel differently. We might learn to make ourselves more comfortable.

But this isn’t about “creating your own reality.” It’s not about pretending that what’s painful is pleasant. It’s about getting more comfortable with what makes us uncomfortable. And that’s how we should think about one of the hottest topics of the day: our capacity to “pay attention.” Paying attention is about *getting comfortable with discomfort*.

What does that mean? I'm going to start with an easy example, which is the simple act of studying—the familiar experience of preparing for an exam, reading for class, or writing an essay. It's easy to understand that when we're "studying" we're supposed to be "paying attention" to

Paying attention is about getting comfortable with discomfort.

something. It's also easy to understand that studying is often uncomfortable. If we can think carefully about studying, then maybe we can better understand how attention is related to discomfort. The philosopher Simone Weil will help us here.

But remember: I said that I also wanted to show how attention is related to moral character. Since we don't usually think of studying as a serious "moral" issue, that example might seem a bit odd. So, after I talk about studying, I'm going to lead us through Weil's bracing claim that "[t]here is something in our soul that loathes true attention much more violently than flesh loathes fatigue. That something is much closer to evil than flesh is" (111). To try and explain what she means, I'll introduce a second example of "paying attention" where the moral issue seems very serious indeed: the viewing of snuff films on the Internet.

2. "Study Hard"

If you want to do well in school, people might tell you to "study hard." The Internet offers you "40 powerful quotes to help you study hard for your upcoming test or exam" (Wong), and there's a guidebook for students titled *Study is Hard Work* (Armstrong).² Now: if it's so important to "study hard," you'll need a clear picture of what it is. You need to be able to see what it actually *looks like* to study hard. Otherwise, how will you know if you're doing it right?

So: what picture does the phrase "study hard" put into our minds? What does a person look like when they're studying hard?

Simone Weil says it probably looks like this: they're hunched over a book; they're straining their eyes; their forehead is creased; they look "determined," and "serious," maybe even "grim." They don't look

Character and . . . Discomfort

relaxed or at ease. They don't look *comfortable* (109–10). They look a little scared, a little nervous, worried that their concentration might break and they'll lose focus and forget everything and start thinking about that bug on the window or that thing that happened yesterday or that alert on their phone what happened is my friend texting me is she still mad at me maybe I should look (no! I'm studying) maybe I should just look for a second oh look at that funny picture of a cat I should find some more funny pictures of cats because they're so relaxing I need to relax (I need to study!) I'm pretty stressed look at this cat man I'm bad at focusing (need to focus!) this is frustrating look at those cats man cats are boring maybe more cats will be less boring nope yep nope yep swipe left swipe right scroll down down down down down down down might be something interesting at the bottom . . . ³

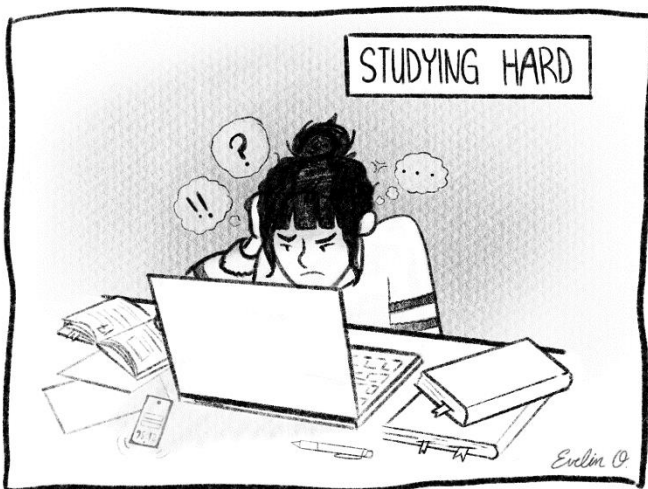


Illustration by Evelin Ortiz

Question: is this person

- a. failing to study hard because she's gotten too comfortable to pay attention?

or

- b. failing because she's studying so hard she can't get comfortable with paying attention?

The correct answer is “b.” Let me show you why.

3. Don't Think About An Elephant

If I come up to you and say, “don't think about an elephant,” what will you immediately start thinking about?

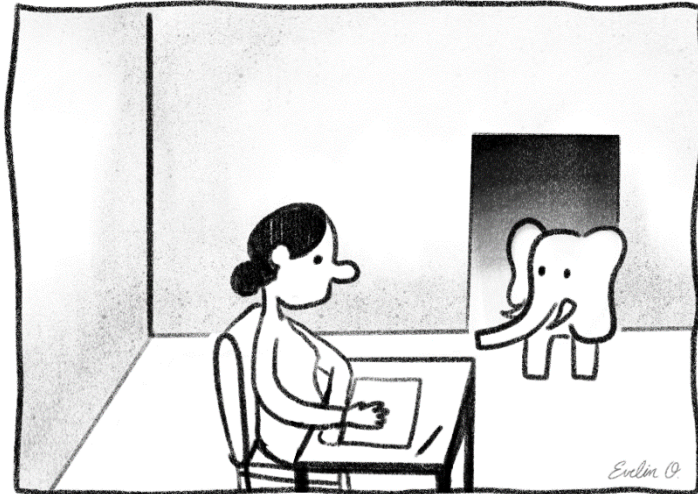


Illustration by Evelin Ortiz

4. Pay Attention!

Suppose I'm your teacher and you get distracted in my class and I say, “Pay attention!” What do I want you to do, exactly? Do I mean:

a. “don't think about what you're thinking about”

or

b. “do think about what you're not thinking about”

The correct answer is “b.” “Don't think about what you're thinking about” is like saying “don't think about an elephant.” So that's not what I mean.

5. Try Not to Think About The Elephant

Suppose you can't stop thinking about the elephant. You're thinking about the elephant all day, everyday, and it's interfering with your life. You can't sleep, you can't work, you can't enjoy anything, because the elephant is always on your mind. So you come to me and ask what you should do, and I say, "try not to think about the elephant." Will that help?

6. Try to Pay Attention!

Suppose I'm your teacher and you're still distracted in my class and I say, "try to pay attention!" If you try to pay attention, what will you be thinking about? Will it be:

- a. the thing you want to pay attention to

or

- b. yourself, trying to pay attention to the thing you want to pay attention to

The correct answer is "b." If you are "trying" to pay attention to a thing, you are not paying attention to the thing. Instead, you are paying attention to what it feels like to try to pay attention to the thing. So you are still distracted, and you are still not paying attention.⁴ This is why Yoda told Luke: *There is no try. There is only do. Or do not.*

Everything I know, I learned from *Star Wars*.⁵

7. Pay Attention.

This time you are distracted and I say "pay attention," but there is no exclamation point. I'm not angry or frustrated with you. And I don't mean that you should *stop* thinking about the elephant, or that you should *try* to stop thinking about the elephant. I mean that you should *start* thinking about the mouse, or the mountain, or whatever it is. Attention is positive, not negative. Attention is not about saying "no" to that. It's about saying "yes" to this.

If you're distracted, the solution is not to fight the thing that distracts you. That just makes you think more about it. Nor is the solution to "try" to pay attention to the other thing. That just makes you think about the trying—how hard it is, how frustrating, how *uncomfortable*, how you might fail, what will happen if you fail, how you can't wait till the trying is over. It makes you think about how nice it would be to be perfectly comfortable, instead of making you comfortable with thinking about the thing. And so "[w]e are never fully content and the image of contentedness, which serves as our guide, always seems to keep true pleasure at bay" (Pezeu-Massabuau 8).

Instead, the solution is to let the other thing attract you. Then you're actually thinking about the other thing. You're thinking about the mouse, or the mountain, and you've forgotten about the elephant. Because you can't think about two things at once (No: there's no such thing as "multitasking" (Rosen).). So if you need to stop thinking about one thing, the solution is to start thinking about another thing.

But how do you do it? How do you really "pay attention"? Just wait: we're getting there.

8. Let's Step Outside.



Illustration by Evelin Ortiz

Suppose you could step outside your mind, like you're stepping outside your front door, and then look back in through the windows so you can watch what's happening inside. What do you see? Fragments of feeling, words and phrases and sentences, images, flashbacks and flash-forwards, things you can name and things you can't, floating and darting back and forth. You watch yourself shopping at the

mall with your friends and you see what you're thinking and feeling as you're walking and talking. You see pictures of fashion models leaving window displays and settling inside your brain, making you want the clothes that they're wearing, or the bodies they're flaunting. Standing now outside your mind, you're paying attention to what you're paying attention to. You watch for a while and eventually you notice patterns: what you tend to think about in certain situations, around certain people, during certain activities. You notice *what you're thinking about* when you're in those situations. What do you see?

That's what paying attention is like: stepping outside yourself, looking back into yourself, and noticing whatever there is to notice. No judgment; no reaction. Just *notice*.

Let's talk some more about Simone Weil, and about the difference between "studying hard" and "studying well." Weil can help us understand better just how serious this question about attention really is. For Weil, attention isn't just a skill that helps you do better on tests. It's a skill that that you need if you are going to become a good person. Attention is an ethical matter. It's about your character.

9. Weil says: "There is something in our soul that loathes true attention much more violently than flesh loathes fatigue. That something is much closer to evil than flesh is. That is why, every time we truly give our attention we destroy some evil in ourselves" (11)

If we say we're "uncomfortable," we're usually talking about physical discomfort ("this chair is uncomfortable"). Almost as often we use the word to describe emotional discomfort ("that conversation was uncomfortable"). But the philosopher is talking here about something that goes deeper than both the physical and the emotional levels of experience. It's much harder to describe this level with words, and it's easy to get confused.

Weil knows that for some reason we usually conflate attention with a physical or emotional experience. "Most often attention is confused with a kind of muscular effort. If one says to one's pupils: 'Now you

must pay attention,’ one sees them contracting their brows, holding their breath, stiffening their muscles. If after two minutes they are asked what they have been paying attention to, they cannot reply. They have been concentrating on nothing. They have been contracting their muscles.”

It’s like when we’re learning to do pull-ups. Your trainer will tell you to use your *lattisumus dorsi*—the large muscles in your back. But if you’ve never done a pull-up you might not know how to feel it in your back, and you’ll rely completely on your arms. You’ll think “doing a pull-up” feels like “pulling your body up with your arms.” But if you’re doing that, you’re not really doing a pull-up. It’s the same with “paying attention.” If you’re straining your body to do it, then you’re not really doing it. If you feel stressed, then you know you’re doing it wrong.

Attention is an ethical matter. It’s about your character.

This seems odd, though. None of us *wants* strain and stress, do we? Weil makes it sound like “doing it wrong” is hard, while “doing it right” is easy. She says “tiredness has nothing to do with work.” She says “will power . . . has practically no place in study . . . there must be pleasure and joy in work.” So: if true attention is relaxing and fun—if true attention is more *comfortable!*—then why is there “something in our soul” that loathes it? What is this “something”? And why does she say that this something is almost “evil”—as if our ability to pay attention has something to do with our moral character?

10. Something Wicked This Way Comes.

Remember, paying attention is like performing a physical movement. It’s hard to learn how to correctly do a pull-up; but it’s easier to do a pull-up when you know how to do it correctly. There’s discomfort at first; but then there’s comfort. Of course, you experience “discomfort” even when you’re doing pull-ups correctly, because pull-ups are hard and your muscles get sore. But it’s not the same *kind* of discomfort you experience when you’re first learning how to do pull-ups. When you’re learning, you’re uncomfortable with the discomfort of sore muscles. You might even mistake the sore muscles for something you ought to


avoid. And what you feel most of all is probably “frustration.” You can’t do it yet, and that makes you feel bad about yourself, which you resent. If you’re at the gym, learning in front of others, it might make you feel embarrassed, which you resent even more. But, once you’ve learned what it’s like to do the pull-ups correctly, you get more and more comfortable with being sore, with being tired. You don’t feel resentful. You get *comfortable with discomfort*.

So “true attention” isn’t necessarily “relaxing” and “fun” in the sense that binging on Netflix or playing videogames is relaxing and fun. It’s not that kind of comfortable. It’s a more complicated kind of comfort. And “something in our soul” doesn’t *want* to be comfortable in this more complicated way. We resist it. We resent it. And that, Weil says, brings us close to “evil.” It’s a mark of bad character. Or it’s an obstacle to developing good character.

Weil says that “attention consists of suspending our thought . . . our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything . . .” (111). It is “a special way of waiting upon truth, setting our hearts upon it, yet not allowing ourselves to go out in search of it” (113). She says this is how we should study for tests,

how we should do our work, how we should do *everything* that we have to do. We can’t force an unused muscle into action. We have to relax and wait patiently for it to click, or

the connection to snap into place. We have to get comfortable with the process. “Attention is an effort, the greatest of all efforts, but it is a negative effort” (111). And—here’s the key point—this attitude of true attention is indispensable not only to studying well but to loving our neighbor. “The capacity to give one’s attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing. . . . Nearly all those who think they have this capacity do not possess it. Warmth of heart, impulsiveness, pity are not enough” (114). Instead, we have to “know how to look at [another person] in a certain way. This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth” (115).



This attitude of true attention is indispensable not only to studying well but to loving our neighbor.

Simone Weil is a Christian. If you want a similar thought from another tradition, here is the Tao Te Ching, as translated by Ursula Le Guin:

*So the unwanted soul
sees what's hidden,
and the ever-wanting soul
sees only what it wants (Lao Tzu 2)*

The “something in the soul” that loathes true attention is what we sometimes call *selfishness*, although this word is too simple to really capture the evil that Weil has in mind. Maybe “self-centeredness” is better. But whatever word we use, it’s clear that we’ve started talking about ethical questions, questions about right and wrong ways to live our lives. In other words, we’ve started talking about “character.”

Which is good, since this is supposed to be a journal about character!

11. So: What does attention have to do with character, if attention is about getting comfortable with discomfort?

Let’s start by noticing what probably comes to mind if we imagine a person with “good character.” Do we imagine a person who gets very upset about minor inconveniences, but never gets angry about genuine injustice? Do we think of someone who often laugh at others’ expense but never laughs at herself? Who laughs about serious matters but takes laughing matters too seriously?⁶ Do we have in mind a person who refuses to apologize when she’s done wrong to others, or fails to stand up for herself when others have wronged her? Someone who easily lets go of her friends whenever the relationship gets difficult, but never lets go of a grudge?

Of course the answer is “no.” A person like this has *bad* character. And what makes her character so bad? Well, her reactions are all wrong. Sometimes she overreacts, sometimes she underreacts. In all these examples, she feels the wrong thing. Her emotions don’t seem appropriate.


Now, these days we like to tell ourselves that our feelings are “valid,” no matter what the feelings are. And in a sense that’s true. The sense in

which it's true is that you have to begin with what you've got. You have to start where you are, emotionally. You've got a feeling, which is a way of responding internally to some situation, and you can't just magically change it. So it's "valid" in the sense that it's yours, and you've got to accept that this is where you're coming from.

But acceptance is not the same as approval. You accept where you are so you can move forward if need be. Your feelings are what they are in the moment. But this doesn't mean you couldn't feel differently. And in some cases you *should* learn to feel differently.⁷

Now I can introduce my second and more serious example of "paying attention": the snuff film. We all know that in dark corners of the Internet there are these videos of people suffering terribly. People being tortured and killed. I'm not talking about actors acting; I'm talking real life. And there are people who watch these videos and are entertained by them. They laugh; they get excited and aroused. They are paying attention in a way that somehow makes the snuff film a source of comfort. Are their feelings "valid"?⁸

If "valid" doesn't just mean that you have to accept the feelings you (or others) have, but that the feelings you (or others) have are morally *acceptable* no matter what they are, then of course the answer is "no." Those feelings are not valid. The valid emotional response to a snuff film is extreme *discomfort*.⁹



In some cases you should learn to feel differently.

This is why the concept of character is important. We like to think of morality in terms of rules, and we like to think that the only rules that matter are the ones that keep people from actually hurting one another. But those people sitting

alone in their basements watching snuff films on the Internet are not hurting anyone else. They are hurting themselves. Maybe we can anticipate that by turning themselves into the types of people who laugh at cruelty when no one's watching, they're making it more likely that if they get the chance to act cruelly toward others, or to not stop cruelty when they see it in real life, then they'll take that chance. And then they will have violated the moral rules.

But the idea of character is the idea that even if they never hurt anyone else in the real world, there's still something terribly wrong with them. The idea of character is that *how you feel in response to things really matters*, in a moral sense. If you want to be a good person and live a meaningful life, it's not enough that you don't hurt people with your actions. To be a good person, to live a really meaningful life, you need to not *want* to hurt people.¹⁰

That's why we talk about "virtue" when we're talking about character. For Aristotle (and lots of other people), virtue means this: feeling the right feeling, at the right time, in the right amount, toward the right person or thing, for the right reasons (ch.6). Virtue is about striking the target with your feelings, like hitting the bull's eye with your arrow. And virtue is about *practice*. You can get better at feeling, just like you can get better at archery.¹¹

Now: what does "paying attention" have to do with "virtue"? What does attention have to do with character, if attention is about getting comfortable with discomfort, and character is about hitting the mark with your feelings?

It's like this: attention is how we practice virtue. We need some way to understand what it's like to "get better at feeling the right feelings," and I'm saying that the concept of "paying attention" is the way to understand what it's like—as long as we also understand "attention" in the right way! So let's make the connection.¹²

The exaggeration, laughing at what's serious and not laughing at what's funny, etc.—this is us reacting automatically, without really knowing what we're doing. We're being driven by what we find uncomfortable. We flee the discomfort of a serious thing by laughing. We don't want to pay attention to the terribleness, because it makes us feel sad, and we're not comfortable feeling sad. So we're bad at paying attention to it, because paying attention to it makes us feel bad. So we pay attention to something else, some other part of the situation, something that might make us feel good.

Now, like I said, we don't really know what we're doing when we simply react in our habitual way. But we're reacting badly, because this tragedy

deserves our attention—the right way to feel about it is *sad*. How do we get to know ourselves better? We step outside our front door and look back in, observe ourselves. But look: if what’s going on inside is bad, this might *also* make us feel bad. We might not want to watch ourselves like this. We might not want to watch ourselves watching a snuff film and laughing. So paying attention to what we’re paying attention to can also be a source of discomfort, which we might want to run away from. We might want to run back inside the house, where things are comfortable and entertaining. Instead of paying attention to what we’re paying attention to, we go back to our old habits of feeling.

So here’s how it *is* helpful to think of our feelings as “valid.” If we want to change what’s going on inside our house, we can’t run away from observing what’s going on inside our house. We have to be able to stay outside, calm and patient, and simply note what’s happening. But we’re doing this so we can adjust those feelings, until we are paying attention to the right things, knowing that what we pay attention to has the power to shape us.¹³

Still, what we want to know is this: *how* do we adjust those feelings? Here’s the kicker:


12. Paying Attention to How We’re Feeling Actually Changes How We’re Feeling.

Changes *how* we’re feeling—not *what* we’re feeling, not necessarily. When you “observe” without judgment, you loosen the hold of the feeling. You think you’re just observing the feeling; but by observing it, you’re stepping outside the feeling for a moment, and that *changes* the feeling from one that has a grip on you, to one that you have a grip on. The feeling is still what it is; but now you have a relationship to it. Instead of fleeing an uncomfortable feeling for a “comfort,” you are getting “comfortable with discomfort.”

This gives you room to maneuver. It opens up the space in your mind for you to start directing your attention to something else, some other aspect of the situation, so that you can feel the right way about the situation. Instead of fleeing the uncomfortable feeling of sadness for the comforting feeling of “fun,” you step outside your house and you watch

yourself laughing at what should make you feel sad, and when that makes you feel bad about yourself, which makes you feel uncomfortable, you step further out and watch yourself feeling bad about yourself for laughing at the sad thing, and you keep calm, so you can stay honest.

But you don't stop with "I'm gonna be honest"—as if that absolves you of the need to change. Instead, now that you see that you're laughing at the sad thing because you're paying attention to the wrong thing, you can see where you *ought* to be directing your attention, because now you can see what you *ought* to be feeling. Because your feeling is a return on your investment of attention. If you invest your attention elsewhere, then you'll be paid back with a different feeling. And as you get better at putting your attention more precisely where it's supposed to go, you'll get better at feeling: feeling the right feeling, at the right time, toward the right person or thing, in the right amount, for the right reason. You'll get better, in other words, at developing your moral character.



As you get better at putting your attention precisely where it's supposed to go, you'll get better at feeling: feeling the right feeling, at the right time.

And who knows—you might also get better at studying for your exams.

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Thank you to Evelin Ortiz, Wendt Character Scholar, for the illustrations on pp. 30, 31, and 33.

Notes

¹ For an argument in moral philosophy along these lines, see Christine Korsgaard. But it's possible that Korsgaard takes her Stoic argument too far,

and fails to appreciate the limits I want to acknowledge here. For a reply see David Sussman.

² Actually, despite the title, *Study is Hard Work*, this is a very fine book, and the message is quite compatible with my argument. Armstrong wants students to learn how to *enjoy* the “hard work” of studying!

³ See Cohen.

⁴ Suzuki explains that in order to correct this mistake, we must become *aware* that we are not paying attention. This means that we must pay attention to ourselves not-paying-attention. But the point of paying attention to ourselves is actually to *forget* ourselves, so that we can pay attention to what is outside us (79).

⁵ Among other, more respectable sources. See for example Barret.

⁶ Recent interest in the “philosophy of humor” has produced several studies in which a good sense of humor can be understood as a virtue. For example, see John Lippitt.

⁷ Mirander Fricker develops at length an argument in “Reason and Emotion” much in line with the one I suggest here.

⁸ There is a crucial difference between soberly confronting the recorded horrors of war crimes or police shootings, on the one hand, and consuming images of violent death for pleasure, on the other hand. In these two kinds of viewing, we are “paying attention” to different aspects of our viewing experience. John Bailey explores this in “Viewing Death.”

⁹ This is a source of moral confusion in our culture. Jennifer Nedelsky similarly distinguishes “being judgmental” (refusing to “accept” that one has a feeling) from “making a judgment” (discerning that the feeling one has is good or bad). Nedelsky says that we have come to believe that one cannot make a judgment without being judgmental: she argues that in fact we can and that we *must* be able to do this, in order to live well together and to build a good moral character. She also describes “mindfulness” as a practice in which we explicitly aim to become less judgmental *precisely in order to* make better judgments.

¹⁰ See Nussbaum on the significance of this view of emotions.

¹¹ It is useful to think about virtue-as-archery once again in the context of humor. See Brady Wright.,

¹² Jay Garfield draws out the connection in detail in “Mindfulness and Ethics: Attention, Virtue and Perfection.” I am drawing on a background of Eastern (generally Buddhist) and Western (generally Aristotelian) scholarship on virtue ethics. Garfield is one of many scholars who are also interested bridging the

two traditions. See also the previous reference (endnote 5) to Barret, “‘WuWei’ and Flow.”

¹³ What I’m recommending here obviously has a lot in common with popular notions of “mindfulness.” But there’s a difference: it matters not only that we’re paying attention, but what we’re paying attention to. We pay attention to what we’re paying attention to in order to refocus our attention, because the object of our attention *shapes us*. See Jacobs and Wallace for more on this.

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