Failures of Imagination: Stuck and Out of Luck in the Suburbs
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As we go about our business in the world, striving to attain our various goals, we often get stuck. We can get stuck in traffic or on a stalled commuter train, or stuck with owning a car or riding the train even if we would rather not. Young people in the United States can find themselves stuck in cul-de-sac subdivisions with no transportation and not much to do, while the elderly are stuck with the choice of giving up their long-time homes and neighbors for isolated apartments or nursing homes. In between, Americans may find themselves stuck in various ruts, driving here and there to go to work, to go to the store, to transport the young and the old – all of which means they are stuck paying the ever-higher price of gas. We may be stuck with our houses, even if they do not meet our needs; stuck in our neighborhoods, even if they are changing around us and we are changing within them; stuck with elected officials, even if we did not vote for them; stuck with the infrastructure and the institutions that make up our built environment. The worst of it is that we may be stuck just when we need most to get unstuck, like the hero of an old cliffhanger film tied to a conveyor belt moving inexorably toward a spinning saw blade.

Whatever their advantages may be, current patterns and processes of metropolitan growth in the United States raise very serious problems for the well-being of residents, the vitality of community and civic life, the prospects for justice, and even the sustainability of civilization itself. Consider just one aspect of the problem: living in a suburban nation currently *requires* activities that undermine the prospects of continuing to live in a suburban nation, in part because those activities depend on the consumption of fossil fuels and the release of long-sequestered carbon into the atmosphere. To the extent that we are stuck with these patterns and processes,

we may be in serious trouble. Even those of us who consider ourselves most acutely aware of our situation and its perils are stuck with the necessity of driving to the store and flying to remote conferences in order to live the kinds of lives we value.

Whether and to what extent we can be blamed for our complicity in metropolitan growth is an open question. I would point out, though, that being stuck is very much akin to bad moral luck: because we are situated agents who always choose and act within particular contexts, our choices and our actions are shaped and constrained in morally relevant ways by factors that are beyond our control. Our involvement with our surroundings can frustrate our efforts to act on our ideals; it can put us at odds with ourselves, pitting our own interests, commitments, and ideals against one another; and it can even constrain and contort our ideals, our understanding of our own interests, and our understanding of what is possible.

The upshot of this is that environmental ethics – perhaps especially the ethics of metropolitan growth – should be attentive to the limits of ethics and to the role of moral luck in shaping human conduct, including the way we build. I would distinguish three kinds of limits.[1] First, there are what I would call *limits of efficacy*, whereby an agent is unable to produce results based on even the most sound moral reasoning: the effort is either stopped outright or deflected in some unexpected direction. Second, there are *limits of integrity* that are experienced as overt and intractable conflicts among the agent's various judgments, commitments, and inclinations. Third, there are *limits of autonomy*, which are far more elusive since they can affect the agent's very perception of the situation within which a decision is to be made. For various reasons, a moral agent may not be able to see some of the options that are available, with the effect that the agent is choosing from an array of options that have been narrowed in advance by some factor

beyond the agent's control. Autonomy is limited to the extent that part of the choice has already

been made before the agent even begins to deliberate.

There are various sources for each of these three kinds of stuckness, all of them a

function of the situatedness of moral agents within their environment. Stuckness can be

physical, biological, social, cultural, political, economic, and technological in character. I would

add to this that one especially important form of stuckness has a cognitive source: the failure of

moral imagination.

I.

The notion of moral imagination, particularly as developed by Mark Johnson and Patricia

Werhane, is rooted in contemporary cognitive science. There is an emerging view of human

cognition according to which human understanding is structured by conceptual schemata and

mental models. Following a basically Kantian insight, this implies that our experience and our

understanding of the situations in which we choose and act are never simply given, but are

constituted by the human mind as it filters and organizes sensation. Put simply, to make sense of

the world and our lives within it, we have to *make* sense by the use of conceptual schemata.[2]

This view of human cognition diverges sharply from its Kantian heritage in that

conceptual schemata and mental models are no longer understood to be shared universally

among all rational beings. Rather, schemata may diverge radically from one another; they are

always selective, always partial, and often metaphorical in their structure.[3] According to Mark

Johnson, the diversity and partialness of schemata implies that there is never a unique, correct,

literal description of a situation that calls for a moral response. Instead, "there are multiple

possible framings of any given situation, and hence different moral consequences depending on

which way we frame the situation."[4] Werhane refers to this as "the *Rashomon* effect," after

Akira Kurosawa's film in which four characters offer radically divergent accounts of the same events.[5]

This emerging understanding of human cognition has important implications for moral deliberation. The conventional view, which Johnson calls "the moral law folk theory," holds that moral reasoning is a matter of using judgment to apply universal moral laws to particular situations – on the condition that there can be a complete and objective description of the situation.[6] If there can be no such objective description and if, as Johnson goes on to argue, moral laws themselves are metaphorical in character,[7] then the conventional view of moral reasoning falls apart.

The collapse of the moral law folk theory is all to the good, Johnson maintains, because it allows us to acknowledge the richness and subtlety of human moral experience. As Martha Nussbaum states the matter, following Henry James, "moral knowledge . . . is not simply intellectual grasp of propositions; it is not even simply intellectual grasp of particular facts; it is perception. It is seeing a complex, concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking in what is there, with imagination and feeling."[8]

Shifting away from the conventional view, Johnson argues, also allows us to recast our understanding of the process of critical moral deliberation in terms of moral imagination. Writes Johnson:

> The crux of this view of moral criticism as fundamentally imaginative is that
> moral objectivity consists, not in having an absolute "God's-eye point of view,"
> but rather in a specific kind of reflective, exploratory, and critical process of
> evaluation carried out through communal discourse and practice.[9]

The process he proposes here is experimental and experiential. It is a matter of "trying out different imaginative framings of a situation," "examining hitherto unnoticed implications of a shared metaphorical concept," "empathetically exploring the experience and feelings of other people", and "envisioning how various continuations of our individual and cultural narratives are possible, and what they would entail for oneself and others." In short, it is "a dialogue of different perspectives . . . worked out through the experience of a people over long periods of time."[10]

Werhane develops the idea of moral imagination further, arguing that what distinguishes moral imagination from other forms of free and creative imagination is that it always begins with the particulars of a situation, it makes it possible to disengage from the details of the situation in order to gain a critical perspective on it, and it deals with possibilities that "if not practical, are at least theoretical viable and actualizable", rather than the more fantastic possibilities open to free reflection.[11] Accordingly, for Werhane, moral imagination fills three distinct functions: it enables us to grasp the moral dimensions of our experience of a given situation, it enables us to reframe situations and so engage in a critique of the various mental models we might bring to bear, and it opens up new possibilities for interpretation and choice.[12]

One important implication of the notion of moral imagination is that narrative comes to play a central role in human moral reasoning. One way we make sense of our lives in the world is to tell ourselves stories about ourselves. Michael J. Pardales argues that thinking of our lives as narratives opens up an important possibility for critical reflection: "we notice patterns and question what caused or causes us to act a certain way in particular situations."[13] In telling our own stories, though, we necessarily highlight some details and leave out many others, thus framing in very particular ways the trajectories of our lives through time, our choices, and our

actions. Johnson notes that the role of narrative in human understanding means, among other things, that moral deliberation is always historically situated; "any theory of morality that purports to detemporalize human action (which is to say, to offer an eternal standpoint) cannot be an adequate theory of *human* morality. Humans are temporal, and ultimately narrative, creatures."[14]

If Johnson and Werhane are correct, then character development and moral education are not only – or even primarily – a matter of training in moral theory and logical thinking. Rather, moral education is best understood as a process of enriching the moral imagination of each individual by a variety of means. Martha Nussbaum has argued forcefully that reading and discussion of literature is an effective way of enriching moral imagination. At one point, she declares that "the novel can be a paradigm of moral activity," granting insight into moral situations and complex decisions that cannot be captured in propositional judgments.[15] Literature also adds to the range of our moral experience. As Pardales notes, "Through literature we can have experiences that we may not be able to have otherwise. We get a glimpse into the lives of characters that may be very different from our own, or to which we would not otherwise have access."[16]

The desired end result of moral education is an imagination that is well stocked with diverse conceptual schemata and narrative possibilities.[17] The richer the moral imagination, the more it is possible to recognize ethical aspects of experience, reframe situations and decisions to gain critical perspective on them, and experiment with various possibilities for action, imagining their ramifications before committing to action.

By contrast, an impoverished moral imagination is possessed of relatively few schemata and a relatively narrow range of narrative possibilities – and so more prone to failure than one

that is rich. A particularly pernicious form of dogmatism lies at the farthest extreme of impoverishment, where an individual may be fixated on a small handful of conceptual schemata or narrative threads, unable to see or acknowledge their partialness and, as a consequence, regarding them as absolute truths. From the point of view of the dogmatist, any alternative conceptual schemata on which other people act seem either incomprehensible or simply evil.

Given the various functions of imagination in moral perception and deliberation, imagination can fail in any of a number of different ways. An individual moral agent may be . . .

… unable to recognize moral dimensions and demands of concrete situations and unable to see which situations call for a moral response (*failure of ethical sensitivity*); or

… unable to attend to the particularities of a situation because of fixation on abstractions (*failure of attention*); or

… unable to inquire critically into the causes of actions, the complex motives that may be at work within that agent (*failure of self-understanding*); or

… unable to reframe a situation to gain critical perspective on both the situation and the agent's own habitual ways of framing it (*failure of critical perspective*); or

… unable to empathize with others or to see a given situation from others' points of view, especially when those others tend to frame situations very differently (*failure of empathy*); or

… unable to generate new and unforeseen possibilities for thought and action (*failure of creativity*); or

… unable to spin out plausible narratives about the likely practical implications of particular ways of thinking and acting (*failure of foresight*); or

… beset by some combination of the above failures, which intertwine with and reinforce one another in response to a given situation.

All of these may be counted as failures insofar as they result in a kind of blindness to the complexity and peril of human life in the world, and insofar as they prevent moral agents from learning and developing more sophisticted responses to morally complex situations. Because human understanding is always partial, and because we are vulnerable to the consequences of our actions, we can ill afford to be too confident of our understanding as we pursue our various projects. Not only can overconfidence lead us to wander into blind alleys or off of cliffs, but overconfidence can also act as a poison in the body politic of a democratic republic. As Edward Tivnan has argued, "nothing could be more destructive of the dream of a decent society than the illusion of omniscience. Moral progress requires disagreement."[18] For this reason, cultivating moral imagination – at minimum, a willingness to imagine what it is like to stand on the other side of the various barricades that criss-cross the cultural landscape – may be a basic responsibility of citizenship.

II.

To see how the various failures of imagination might play themselves out in the ethics of the built environment, I will focus on the barricade that divides those who live in the city and those who live in suburbs and exurbs. In many American metropolitan areas, a highway bypass that forms a ring around the city serves as an informal barrier between the city and the suburbs, between "inside" and "outside". In the Atlanta region, for example, people make snap judgments about one another on the basis of whether they live inside or outside the Perimeter (I-285).

Stating the matter in these terms verges on oversimplification, of course. The landscape of American metropolitan areas is more diverse and complex than this simple dichotomy suggests, as features of the built environment formerly identified as strictly urban or strictly suburban have tended to blend together, in "edge cities" and infill development, in suburban arts centers and urban strip malls, in patches and rings of development from different eras shaped by different visions and different technologies, and in the pervasiveness of dependence on the automobile. What has emerged is not the old bull's-eye pattern of city and suburb, but a much more complex "polynucleated metropolis."[19]

Nevertheless, attention to the rhetoric of development and land use does suggest that the city/suburb dichotomy is alive and well in the minds of many, as a competition between two very different conceptual schemata. For many Americans, it seems that to choose between the city and the suburb is not just to choose between two different geographic locations – "inside" or "outside" – but between two different visions of a good human life. Each vision is informed by a set of mental models that offer distinctive ways of framing not only basic perceptions of and responses to the built environment, but also conceptions of health, security, family, community, and even nature.

Suburban communities today define themselves much as did their nineteenth-century counterparts, as distinct and distant from the city and its problems, holding out the promise of a bucolic retreat in which to raise children and pursue happiness.[20] Signs of the persistence of this self-definition are plain to be seen today, in the publicity for burgeoning new subdivisions, in local policies designed to protect against urban influences and the influx of too many urban residents, and in letters to the editor denouncing the blight and ugliness of the city, the corruption of its politicians, and arrogance of its elites, and the ignorance and criminality of its poor.

For their part, many of the more affluent residents of the urban center follow the lead of their twentieth-century counterparts in looking down on suburbs and suburbanites with a mixture of bafflement and contempt, citing the bland conformity of homes and homeowners alike.[21] By contrast, they opt for the economic and political access and the intellectual and cultural ferment that have traditionally been found only in cities.

As for poor and minority communities in the city, they have historically been stuck – for a variety of cultural, legal, and economic reasons – with crumbling infrastructure, high concentrations of poverty, high rates of crime, dwindling opportunities for education and employment, and the repercussions of various attempts at urban renewal.[22] Where members of these communities might historically have stood on the cultural divide between city and suburbs is less than clear, though more recently, many minority families have moved to the suburbs as soon as they have been able to do so.

The very fact that the highway bypass can serve as a cultural barricade suggests an ongoing failure of imagination: a failure of empathy. Imagining one kind of life or another is not in itself a bad thing. The failure of empathy occurs if that is the only kind of life one can imagine, that is, if all other ways of living are either unimaginable or are imagined only as unworthy of human beings. This applies to residents of a suburban condominium development, for whom a neighborhood can only be appealing if there is no more than a minimal difference in the appearance of all the buildings and lawns and in the incomes of the neighbors, and who view urban life and urban residents with suspicion. It also applies to the residents of a gentrifying urban neighborhood, who relish the diversity of both their houses and their neighbors, and who shake their heads in bemusement at the thought that someone might actually choose to live in the howling bourgeois wilderness out beyond the bypass.

Such a failure of empathy is one way of being stuck with the status quo. The two sides in a dispute over this or that development proposal on this or that parcel of land come to be entrenched, either battling it out or simply staring at each other across a yawning cultural chasm. The problems of being stuck in this way are perhaps more obvious in the politics of abortion or capital punishment, but even with the city-suburb divide the effect is the same: those who disagree are the enemy, the incomprehensible other, to be defeated by any means necessary; it is not even worth talking to *them*, and there is no way that *we* and *they* find common ground that might make it possible to go on together. Without some measure of empathy – at least enough to acknowledge the bare possibility of reasonable disagreement – democratic deliberation cannot even begin.

The failure of empathy is intertwined with and reinforced by other failures of moral imagination. As already noted, the stark cultural divide between city and suburb does not seem to be represented in the landscape itself. In terms of form and function, city and suburb are increasingly intertwined and interdependent. Continuing to think of the metropolitan landscape in terms of the city/suburb dichotomy may amount to a failure of attention, in which allegiance to an abstraction trumps the perception of concrete detail.

There may also be failures of self-understanding involved, to the extent that advocates for the urban or the suburban model are unaware of the historical dynamics that have shaped their own perceptions of and expectations for the built environment. Those who grew up in postwar suburban subdivisions may take them for granted as right and natural, assuming that urban life is unpleasant and unsafe simply because that is what they have always been led to expect. It takes a considerable expansion and refinement of the imagination to see where these expectations have come from, and all the various ways they have perpetuated themselves in American culture.

For example, anti-urban bias in the United States has fed what Anthony Weston has called a "self-validating reduction."[23] Middle-class white people abandoned the city in the second half of the twentieth century in part because of the stereotypes they held regarding urban otherness, poverty and decay; as a result of their abandonment, the city and its remaining residents came more closely to resemble those very stereotypes. This particular case may also be a failure of foresight, as those who acted as individuals in fleeing the city may not have been able to imagine that their choice could contribute to a larger-scale pattern that would radically undermine the life of the city.

Failures of self-understanding seem to be closely related to failures of critical perspective: when people assume that their own point of view is right and natural, it is difficult for them even to see the point of finding the limitations and failings of that point of view. For example, consider the widespread assumption that the suburbs are the best place to raise children. This assumption is bound together with the cultural prototype of the nuclear family, with a father and a mother raising their children in a detached single-family house surrounded by a lawn. It is simply obvious to most Americans that this is what children really need.

However, even a little study of history would reveal that the prototype of the nuclear family was a nineteenth-century invention, shaped in large measure by the Evangelical movement in England – a movement that also had a profound influence on the suburban vision of houses in a park.[24] Coming to see the nuclear family as an invention rooted in a particular cultural and historical context might make it easier to gain some critical perspective on the meaning of 'family'. For example, the Evangelical vision entailed that the appropriate sphere for a woman was a household far removed from city life, so that her greater moral purity would influence the children without being sullied by the corrupting influences of business and politics.

Since this view of true womanhood is both partial and problematic, the corresponding view of the house and garden should also reveal itself as partial and problematic. Further, raising children in the car-dependent suburbs of the twenty-first century has unintended consequences that put a strain on family life: children may be content to play in the yard until they are seven or eight, but they do not have true mobility until they are at least sixteen; in between, they face years of boredom and alienation, except to the extent that their parents can drive them around.[25]

Failures of creativity would seem to follow from failures of self-understanding and failures of critical perspective. If the status quo is taken as given, whatever its problems may be, then it may not even occur to people to look for alternatives. Even if it does occur to them, the range of alternatives they can consider may be narrower than it might otherwise be. So, a nuclear family with two working parents may be faced with the dual challenge of caring for young children and caring for an elderly grandparent. If they accept the dominant model of the nuclear family living in isolation in its own home, it may never occur to them that they might partly solve both problems by moving the elderly grandparent into their household, so that children and grandparent can help care for one another, or by moving into adjacent apartments in an urban high-rise. These would hardly be radical steps, given the wide range of ways in which human beings have structured family life, but they would very likely violate many Americans' sense of independence and propriety.

More broadly, the city/suburb dichotomy itself can feed into a failure of creativity. Advocates for new urbanism and neo-traditionalism seem often to frame our options as a stark choice between a traditional vision of urban life and a traditional vision of suburban life. This tendency can be seen in the popular use of a tool called a visual preference survey, in which subjects are shown images of different kinds of development, streetscape, and landscape, and

asked to rate their response to each. In its popular use, people may be shown two contrasting images of the same scene, say a typical suburban corridor lined by parking lots and the same corridor as it might look if it were an urban boulevard complete with sidewalk cafés and a tree-lined median. This may serve to shake some people out of their complacency, if they had come to accept suburban landforms as given, but it is also meant to evoke nostalgia for an older vision of urban or even small-town life, as though Main Street were the only alternative to strip malls. In this use, the images are meant to be persuasive: isn't *that* better than *this*? Wouldn't you really rather live *there* than *here*?

Aside from the many ways in which two-dimensional, digitally altered images may be deceptive, the persuasive use of pictures suggests that at least some advocates for new urbanism and neo-traditionalism have fallen into a false dilemma, which amounts to a failure of creativity. There are more than two ways to structure the built environment in order to meet basic human needs, some that are already to be found in practice and others that may never yet have been tried. If we are really stuck with the choice between staying in the suburbs and going back to some prelapsarian urban scene, people might reasonably choose to stay put. Having only two options, however attractive one of them may look projected on a screen, is really not that much better than having only one.

Intertwined with all of the failures considered so far are failures of foresight – which are very hard to avoid, given the limits of human cognitive capacities. Building a certain way has a direct influence on how people live their lives in the world. The physical and institutional infrastructure opens some opportunities while closing off others, and the effects ramify outward through the cultural environment and the natural environment. Some of these effects and their ramifications can come as a surprise. Consider, for example, recent studies that suggest a link

between dependence on the automobile and rising rates of obesity among Americans[26], or the much stronger link between dependence on the automobile and the changing global climate.

Looking further afield, it soon becomes clear that there are plenty of failures to go around, even on the part of those who think of themselves as most open-eyed and clear-headed about the problems of metropolitan growth. Consider environmental philosophers, for example, especially those of us who would measure everything against the standard of Nature. Fixation on the abstraction, 'Nature,' is an outgrowth of a peculiar and historically contingent conception of the world, a schema that is in its way just as partial and selective as any other. While the environmentalist schema could be put forward to expand the moral imagination of others with whom we share this planet, it can also inform the dream of an objective, Nature's-eye view through which we can compel recalcitrant others to toe the line. In this latter guise, the schema can distract environmentalists from paying lucid attention to the particular details of our situation (warts and all), make it difficult for us to empathize with those who "just don't get it" (e.g., those who actually like living in suburbs), narrow the range of creative possibilities for constructive action, and generally blind us to the unavoidable partialness and contingency of our own outlook.

Consider an example. When it comes to planning an environmental ethics conference, what do we imagine as the best place to meet? Many of us would say that a remote mountain retreat is an obvious choice, as opposed to Orlando, or Hoboken, or Sun City, or East St. Louis, or rural Nebraska, or the shattered remains of New Orleans. To the extent that the choice strikes us as obvious, we may be held captive by the nineteenth-century Romantic aesthetic of a man alone in the wilderness testing his strength against a mountain, or the late-twentieth-century neo-Romantic aesthetic of communing with the more-than-human. Or it may be that we frame our work as opposition to modernity in one or another of its forms, and hence as opposition-in-

principle to the overdomesticated urban realm. In that case, it only makes sense for us to meet in full retreat from the city – never mind that many of us will have to fly from one large urban airport to another to get there, an irony of the particular that we might rather overlook.

III.

Moral imagination concerns the manner in which people understand the situations within which they choose and act. A diverse and lively imagination makes it possible for a moral agent to be, in Nussbaum's terms, "finely aware and richly responsible."[27] If human moral imagination is prone to failure, then moral responsibility becomes more problematic – in two different senses of the term 'responsible'. Failures of imagination themselves make it more difficult to choose and act responsibly and – again following Nussbaum – responsively. At the same time, the rootedness of moral imagination and its failures in the basic cognitive capabilities of human beings makes it difficult to hold individual moral agents fully accountable for their actions.

Take the latter point first. In any number of situations, moral agents may fail to live up even to their own standards of good conduct simply because they did not see their situation in a particular way. So, people who think of themselves as devoted to social justice may not see the extent to which their choices in housing and transportation contribute to economic segregation and exclusion, or people devoted to raising their children in the best possible environment may not see how the environment they have chosen or created might instead hinder the full development of children. Because these failures of choice and action can be traced back to failures of imagination, the question shifts: to what extent can people be held responsible for their own failures of imagination?

To begin to answer this question, it may be helpful to distinguish two different ways in which failures of imagination can get in the way of responsible choice and action. In the first place, they may act as limits of integrity, producing overt conflicts among various values and commitments held by a moral agent. Someone may support inclusionary zoning laws, for example, but oppose a particular zoning variance that would allow for the construction of an apartment building around the corner. Here, a commitment to social justice seems to clash directly with economic self-interest, since the apartment building is perceived as a threat to the value of surrounding properties. There may be a number of failures of imagination involved in this conflict, not least of which are failures of creativity: apparent conflicts may sometimes be reframed so as to open up new possibilities for meeting multiple commitments.

In the second place, failures of imagination may act as limits of autonomy, constraining in advance the range of options open to a moral agent, but in such a way that the agent is not aware of the constraint: this particular range of options seems right and natural and inevitable. Someone raised in the suburbs may come to view cul-de-sac subdivisions as the only appropriate place to live. When it comes time to for the native suburbanite to establish a new household, the choice may be constrained in advance: This cul-de-sac subdivision or that one? Golf course or tennis courts? These restrictive covenants or those restrictive covenants? Other viable options simply are not on the table.

In either case, failures of imagination may well be instances of bad moral luck. According to Thomas Nagel, "where a significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond his control, yet we continue to treat him in that respect as an object of moral judgment, it can be called moral luck. Such luck can be good or bad."[28] There are a number of ways draw distinctions within moral luck. The one that strikes me as most relevant to failures of

imagination is the distinction between constitutive luck (i.e., luck in the formation of one's character) and incident luck (i.e., luck that affects particular actions).

The mere fact that a moral agent is a human being who can only experience the world through various conceptual filters is almost entirely beyond the control of the agent. The fund of conceptual schemata available to a moral agent, the agent's ability to draw on those schemata in responding to complex situations, and some of the agent's basic inclinations may also be largely outside the direct control of the agent, at least insofar as they are a function of the natural and cultural environment in which the agent developed. As a consequence, at least to the extent that we still want to hold ourselves and one another responsible for the kinds of people we become, it seems that failures of imagination may be considered a type of constitutive bad luck.[29]

Concerning the limits of integrity as an instance of bad moral luck, there are some lessons to be learned from feminist scholars who have grappled with just this question. Claudia Card argues that conditions of oppression – the worst sort of moral bad luck – can make the development and maintenance of integrity all but impossible.[30] Women who grow up under such conditions may come to internalize the values of the oppressors, which they experience as a basic inclination toward submissiveness. According to Lisa Tessman, "someone who has these character traits and who meanwhile is committed to liberatory feminist principles through which she can identify these traits as bad (for her) will experience an internal conflict that Card would describe as a lack of integration."[31]

Now, it would be going too far to say that internal conflicts concerning choices in the built environment are the result of moral damage sustained under conditions of oppression. Even so, people may find that they have acquired inclinations toward particular ways of living that are difficult to change, even if they come to judge those ways of living to be bad. Conflicts between

old inclinations and new judgments work against the effort to become an integrated human being. In Tessman's terms, personal transformation is no easy thing: "one cannot simply will one's character to change."[32]

The problem of moral luck is still more acute when prior constraints on an individual's choices remain hidden in the background, never emerging into the individual's awareness as an overt conflict of motivations. Such limits of autonomy may only be apparent from others' points of view, like that of the audience of an ancient tragedy, gripped by irony, watching the hero walk with blithe self-assurance toward destruction. It may be that we can become aware of the limits of our own autonomy only in hindsight, or perhaps through a process of critical inquiry, with the help of others, that leads to an expansion of moral imagination. Again, this is no easy thing.

This last point about critical inquiry suggests a way of thinking about the other sense of moral responsibility: to live and choose responsibly seems to require an acknowledgement of the limits of human cognitive capacities and the likelihood of failures of imagination. Within those constraints, each of us ought to strive to develop and enrich our own moral imagination as much as possible, ever mindful that we may even so be subject to failures of imagination. We ought, at the very least, to be willing always to envision and explore many different possibilities for what a good life in the world can be – including different possibilities for arranging and living in our built environment.

A crucial point here is that being subject to bad constitutive moral luck does not absolve us of our responsibilities. Rather, as Margaret Urban Walker notes, "we expect ourselves and others to muster certain resources of character to meet the synergy of choice and fortune," resources of character she calls "the virtues of impure agency."[33] Human agency is impure, according to Walker, in the precise sense that there is not in all instances a single, sharp

distinction between the will of the agent and the workings of other causal forces. Because

human agency is always situated in particular causal contexts, it is always impure.

Walker identifies lucidity as one of the virtues of impure agency, understood as "a

reasonable grasp of the nature and seriousness of one's morally unlucky plight."[34] Lucidity is a

perceptual capacity through which we come to understand and respond to the particularities of

each situation within which a choice is to be made. This is a hard-won capacity, as Nussbaum

maintains:

> We live amid bewildering complexities. Obtuseness and refusal of vision are our
>
> besetting vices. Responsible lucidity can be wrested from that darkness only by
>
> painful, vigilant effort, the intense scrutiny of particulars. Our highest and
>
> hardest task is to make ourselves people 'on whom nothing is lost.'[35]

To live responsibly as an impure agent, then, is in part to live responsively.

One of the things to be learned through lucid perception is the various ways and the

various degrees to which we may be stuck. Overcoming failures of imagination may be a

necessary condition for responsible action, but it is not sufficient, in all instances, to make

everything better. Even if we attain a critical perspective on our current ways of building and

living, and even if we can imagine new and better ways, we may still be stuck with the suburbs

for other reasons. For one thing, there is the brute physicality of the infrastructure that has been

set down over a period of decades. For another, there is all that we have invested in the

infrastructure – money, time, energy, even identity – that we are loath to give up, which sets up

the kind of internal conflict that undermines integrity.

Lucid awareness of all of the ways in which we may be stuck leads on to another virtue

of impure agency, which Walker calls "grace." This may be thought of as a kind of modesty, a

recognition that, however much we may learn, we may still be prone to failures of imagination that will only come to light later on. Grace is precisely a rejection of overconfidence in our own capacities as moral beings, a rejection of self-aggrandizement. In Walker's terms, it is "acceptance, nonaggrandized daily 'living with' unsupported by fantasies of overcoming or restitution."[36]

Building on Walker's ideas, Tessman has added compassion to the list of the virtues of impure agency. "Compassion helps one to not assign *too* much responsibility (to oneself or others) when it is not deserved. It helps one to say, 'this is the best I (or she, or he) can do under the circumstances of bad luck.'"[37] Compassion works as a kind of modesty or grace in relationships with others, and feeds into the civic virtues of tolerance and openness to critical discourse. As Tessman puts it, "compassion expresses a recognition that there are many equally acceptable answers to the question 'how ought one to live?' This question will have no *one* right answer a long as it is applied not to some imagined ideal circumstances but to the circumstances one finds oneself in, for when faced with no good choice, different virtuous agents may very well act differently."[38]

If we take seriously these virtues of impure agency, then it seems that our best course will be to dismantle the barricades in our moral imagination that separate city from suburb. If we view people who live different lives in different circumstances with suspicion and contempt, if we think of ourselves as pulling in radically different directions, then we cannot even begin the kind of critical discourse through which we can learn of our own failures and glimpse new possibilities. If instead we are modest in our expectations of ourselves and others, and if we are lucidly aware of the various ways in which we are all constrained in our choices, then we may

begin to think of ourselves as having a common moral and political project of finding better ways to live in the world.

Notes

[1] I develop this typology in more detail elsewhere, especially Robert Kirkman, "At Home in the Seamless Web: Agency, Obduracy and the Ethics of Metropolitan Growth" (The Georgia Institute of Technology, 2005); Robert Kirkman and Douglas S. Noonan, "On Being Stuck: The Limits of Ethics in the Built Environment" (The Georgia Institute of Technology, 2006).

[2] Patricia Werhane goes so far as to "argue that almost all human activity is sensemaking, in various forms, and that the operative mechanisms in sensemaking are our use of mental models." Patricia Hogue Werhane, *Moral imagination and management decision-making* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.54.

[3] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), p.3.

[4] Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p.9.

[5] Werhane, *Moral imagination and management decision-making*, p.69.

[6] Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, pp.8.

[7] Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, p.63.

[8] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.152.

[9] Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, p.217, emphasis removed.

[10] Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, p.242, emphasis removed.

[11] Werhane, *Moral imagination and management decision-making*, p.101.

[12] Werhane, *Moral imagination and management decision-making*, p.107.

[13] Michael J. Pardales, "'So, How Did You Arrive at that Decision?' Connecting Moral Imagination and Moral Judgement," *Journal of Moral Education* 31 (2002): 430.

[14] Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, p.184.

[15] Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p.152. Edward Tivnan traces the connection of novels to the development of moral imagination back to 1947, in the writings of literary critic Lionel Trilling; "the novel no longer has the kind of moral status Trilling gave to it," Tivnan goes on to assert. Edward Tivnan, *The Moral Imagination: Confronting the Ethical Issues of Our Day* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p.9.

[16] Pardales, "'So, How Did You Arrive at that Decision?'": 432.

[17] On the characterization of "rich" and "poor" moral imagination, see Pardales, "'So, How Did You Arrive at that Decision?'": 431-432.

[18] Tivnan, *The Moral Imagination*, p.245.

[19] On edge cities, see Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), pp.3-8. On the polynucleated metropolis, see W.Z. Hirsch, "The Coming Age of the Polynucleated Metropolis," *Small Cities in Transition: The Dynamics of Growth and Decline*, ed. H.J. Bryce (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1977)..

[20] See, for example Riverside Improvement Company, *Riverside in 1871: With a Description of its Improvements, Together with some Engravings of Views and Buildings* (Chicago: D. & C.H. Blakely, 1871), p.21.

[21] The classic expression of this attitude is to be found in William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956).

[22] Regarding the failures of urban renewal in the United States, see Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), pp.270-313; Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp.219-230.

[23] Anthony Weston, "Self-Validating Reduction: Toward a Theory of Environmental Devaluation," *Environmental Ethics* 18.2 (1996): 115-119.

[24] Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, pp; Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), pp.51-62.

[25] Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point Press, 2000), pp.118-121.

[26] See, for example, Reid Ewing, Tom Schmidt, Richard Killingsworth, Amy Zlot and Stephen Raudenbush, "Relationship Between Urban Sprawl and Physical Activity, Obesity, and Morbidity," *American Journal of Health Promotion* 18.1 (2003): 47-57.

[27] Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p.148.

[28] Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p.26.

[29] Lisa Tessman, "Moral Luck in the Politics of Personal Transformation," *Social Theory & Practice* 26.3 (2000): , p.378.

[30] Claudia Card, *The Unnatural Lottery: Character and Moral Luck* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), p.33.

[31] Tessman, "Moral Luck in the Politics of Personal Transformation," 383.

[32] Tessman, "Moral Luck in the Politics of Personal Transformation," 387.

[33] Margaret Urban Walker, "Moral Luck and the Virtues of Impure Agency," *Moral Luck*, ed. Daniel Statman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p.241.

[34] Walker, "Moral Luck and the Virtues of Impure Agency,", p.243.

[35] Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p.148, citing Henry James.

[36] Walker, "Moral Luck and the Virtues of Impure Agency,", p.242.

[37] Tessman, "Moral Luck in the Politics of Personal Transformation," 394.

[38] Tessman, "Moral Luck in the Politics of Personal Transformation," 394.