

Pulled Up Short with Stanton Wortham

Is expertise dangerous?

Featuring Marina McCoy with Stanton Wortham (host) and Alexandra Michel (commentator)

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Stanton Wortham 0:05

Welcome to another episode of Pulled Up Short. Thanks very much for being with us. We're very pleased today to have a conversation on expertise and its limitations with Marina McCoy from Boston College and with Alexandra Michel, who is affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania and is an independent researcher. Thanks to both of you for being with us today. We greatly appreciate it. As usual, we'll start off with Marina, the focal guest, giving an account of the point she has to pull us up short. I'll engage in a few questions with her and then Alexandra will come in toward the end and ask some questions of her own.

So Marina, I understand that you'd like us to be a bit skeptical of the concept of expertise. We all think we want expert doctors and expert lawyers and expert pilots. You think that there are some limitations to that way of thinking. So welcome, and please tell us what you're imagining.

Marina McCoy 0:59

Yes, thank you so much for having me here. So we all assume that expertise is a good thing, and indeed, if I'm having brain surgery, I do want my brain surgeon not only to be good, I want him to be the best there is - the person that everybody at the hospital says is a real expert. I don't want the first year of medical school student who's never done the operation to do it, right, let alone a philosophy student (I'm a philosopher, so I can say that). When I get on an airplane, I want the pilot to be really good at flying jets, preferably one who when she encounters turbulence thinks, "I know what to do in this situation," as I am perhaps gripping the side of my chair. The very idea of education, as an educator, is about specializing in a field often at the graduate level. We train people who are doctors, nurses, state lawyers, perhaps pilots to become experts in their fields. So I'm not really against the idea of specialists, but I do worry a lot about the notion of expertise.

We need it for epidemiologists, pilots, brain surgeons, and even in ordinary experiences. I think that a person who was living in Nicaragua may have a lot more knowledge than I do about what women there need. I also think that we have to think about the notion of knowledge in ways that are non-binary, where we don't think either you're an expert or you're not, but rather that all people, including specialists, have to grow and learn in part through dialogue and through a kind of self criticism. I hope we get a chance to talk about Socrates because my approach to this is really informed

by thinking about him and a notion of criticism and self knowledge. So my main claim is to argue that the notion that experts are people who simply know comprehensively and unproblematically actually can undermine knowledge and sometimes harm the common good.

When I was thinking about this, I thought of the example of the pandemic - back in March and April when the pandemic began in 2020, the initial recommendations by the CDC were that you wouldn't use a mask because there wasn't too much evidence for needing one. There was a lot of talk about how you should disinfect surfaces, so I tried to find all the Lysol I could, get some good paper towels in where I couldn't find Lysol, and disinfect the services. The COVID virus was supposedly not aerosolized, but over time, we've discovered that it is. Now there's been a lot more discussion about other preventative matters and not so much about disinfecting surfaces. So over our time, our understanding of the virus changed because we gained new information. Therefore we had to modify the way we thought about it. Now, how does this play into the idea of expertise? Well, for some people, the idea that an expert is 'all knowledgeable' actually ended up undermining their sense of trust in scientists, not because the scientists did anything wrong, but because some people assumed that either expertise is knowing everything, or you don't know anything and you're not an expert. So either experts know unproblematically what's true, or they don't know anything and we shouldn't trust them at all. This is not just a problem with science or epidemiology, which are not my main areas of expertise, but rather a problem with the way that we value experts more generally in our society that's at issue here. So what if expertise can be a dangerous concept, at least as we often understand it?

Stanton Wortham 4:31

So this is certainly a provocative idea. Thanks for bringing this forward. It's also a little bit unsettling, because, as you say, we rely on experts in so many areas of our lives, and we feel as if we have to entrust them because things are complicated, and I can't do everything myself. It sounds like you're saying that not just expertise is sometimes overrated. We're all familiar with the notion that there are people who claim to be experts who really aren't. But you seem to be saying that expertise can be dangerous. So please tell me a little more about what you mean by that.

Marina McCoy 5:04

Right. One of my concerns is that if we start to rely upon the idea that experts simply know, we might start to absolve ourselves of the responsibility to learn. I think it's really important, particularly in a democratic society, for us to take responsibility for knowledge for ourselves - to earn some degree of understanding about a topic through hard work, through learning, through self criticism. Otherwise, we might not be able to identify the people who are experts or who know more than other people at least. So for example, if I don't know anything about statistics, I might go on Twitter and start to rely upon people who use really bad statistical reasoning, don't know how to make a pie chart, and not be able to have any insight into how effective a vaccine is. Or someone might choose to listen to a person who they think is expert and be wrong about that, because they just like their views or it fits with their prior vision of the world. So part of my concern about expertise being dangerous is that if I decide other people are the experts, and I'm not, I might decide that I'm not responsible to come to learn and

to know and to educate myself about issues. Particularly in a democracy, that's important because we choose the people who are our leaders, and we often also the people who are deciding who really counts as an expert.

I think there's also a danger on the side of the experts. If an expert thinks that he or she already knows everything that she needs to know, it can leave a person closed to new models or paradigms, especially paradigms that are contrary to their own way of thinking. For example, I teach a course on mass incarceration at Boston College, and I think we have a real lack of imagination and thinking about how to respond to crime. It's kind of strange when you think about it - that we always think that no matter what the crime is, the right response is incarceration, incarceration, incarceration. We have a real lack of imagination. When experts say, "Well, the solution to a crime is to imprison and the only decision is how long." But why not question this expert view, and say, maybe we shouldn't use the same punishment to respond to such a wide variety of social ills? What is the best way to respond? Maybe it's something different. Maybe someone needs a mentor. Maybe drug treatment is more important. Maybe it's a problem with people who are addicts not having access to child care while they seek drug treatment. Perhaps we should look at what actually helps with recidivism rates being low rather than high. So, it's often not the experts - the people who are doing things the same way they've always been done - who have expertise in this scenario, but other people. Perhaps the ultimate non expert could be the person who's been in and out of the prison system who doesn't have any social or moral authority, but who might have a lot of really interesting, rich experiences, and who might have insights into what their community most needs. So in that case, it's the experts who have to be willing to listen, to change their own models, and to adapt to new information. So I worry when expertise really becomes about someone thinking that I have knowledge and others don't.

Stanton Wortham 8:15

So this is a bit unsettling. I've heard at least three reasons why I should be worried about experts despite the fact that we rely on them - surgeons, pilots, economists and others. There's the ordinary notion that I think isn't too counterintuitive that experts are sometimes overrated. Sometimes people claim to be experts and they're not, or sometimes we give them more authority than we should. But you've raised at least two additional concerns. One is that relying on experts makes the non expert too lazy, too willing to accept something and not do the education they need in order to be informed. And two, that experts themselves sometimes think too highly of what their expertise is and therefore make poor judgments. So that's three reasons why we shouldn't perhaps rely on experts as much as we should. I'm particularly interested in the claim you made that our vision of expertise is too binary - that we treat people as if there are experts... you have your expertise or you don't, you're an expert or you're not. So talk to me a little bit more about how you think we're too binary in our construal of expertise.

Marina McCoy 9:27

I'm really informed by Socrates and by Plato as authors. Those are the areas of specialization (I won't say expertise) in the area in which I work, which is Greek philosophy. Probably a lot of people out there have read Plato and had a taste of Socrates in college. Socrates can be kind of controversial with people

because he often works from a non-binary vision of what constitutes knowledge. He's famous for, among other things, criticizing the leading politicians and poets of his day, who, in his day, were the educators for their lack of knowledge and their mistaken sense of expertise. And then he would say that he was wise because he knew nothing. Now this is super exasperating to people who read Plato for the first time (and even the second and third time) because when Socrates says this, they often don't believe him. They often think that this man Socrates is saying, "I don't know anything," or really "Just my only wisdom to know that I don't know," when very clearly he had strong views about how to live; he had a certain understanding of virtue, including things like courage and justice, and not condemning innocent people to death. Yet here he is claiming not to know that people will think he's ironic, rude, or contentious. But I think actually something else is going on, which is he's understanding the human person to be in a middle state. The divine would be the ultimate expert, right? It would be the god who knows everything, or on the other hand, the human being, who doesn't know anything, which perhaps be reducible to something like an animal. He wants to say no, to be human is neither to be the dumb animal nor to be the divine God, but rather to be in this in-between state.

So I think we need to reconceptualize how we think about ourselves as knowers, and realize that we're always at this in-between state. We never get to leave it fully. We're always encountering the world and trying to develop models and paradigms that help us to account for it better. But we're going to need to revise those things, and not to settle easily into this knowing or not knowing paradigm. Especially when we think about moral and political issues, this is key, right? Because Socrates thought it would be important to recognize there's often an unknown or an incomplete element to whatever topic we're exploring. So we cease to learn and grow if we think that we know all of that. For example, when he talks about courage, he explores a very interesting paradox about courage in a dialogue called the Laches, where he notes that if you don't know anything, and you send your troops into battle, you're probably not courageous. You're foolish. But on the other hand, if you know everything about how to defeat the enemy and it's a sure win, that's not courage, either. He doesn't resolve that dilemma or paradox in this dialogue where he discusses it. He simply says, "This is a really hard problem. It seems like courage involves a degree of knowing and a degree of not knowing. Therefore, we need to consider further that our understanding of courage itself might be incomplete." This is the kind of thing that I think is really interesting about being human - that we're always growing and being able to articulate, conceptualize, and make sense of concepts in the world.

Stanton Wortham 12:48

I can see how it's dangerous for people to think they no longer need to learn because they're already experts, or they can rely on experts. I also see what you're saying about how it's dangerous for experts to assume that they know things in circumstances that may have changed. So their expertise is not adequate to understand what it is that's happening in the new environment. They overlook complexities or novelties, and then they make mistakes, but we're prone to trust them anyway. I can see those dangers to expertise. Once we accept that you're right, that expertise is dangerous and isn't just something that we should uncritically rely on, how do you recommend that we adjust our understanding of expertise and our behavior toward experts?

Marina McCoy 13:34

I've recently written a book on Plato's Republic, where I talked about the notion of human beings thinking in terms of models or paradigms. So the idea is that paradigms partially, but don't completely, capture the way that the world is. We have different models of the world, and some of these models are better than others. Some models of ethics or politics really do correspond to reality in a better way, and we should give credit to people who are able to develop and defend these paradigms. Certainly there are people who know more things than other people. But it's important always to remember that even if we want to say someone is a specialist or has gained more knowledge of a topic than another person, that that person and we ourselves are always working with models. For example, the models that we've had in the past that framed racism as just prejudice have now changed, and we understand that systematic racism or privilege also play a part. So we have another model there, right? Maybe more than one model. Maybe in another ten years, we will have learned more about racism, and we'll have to shift our models again.

As a teacher, I say this in the classroom. I teach about a variety of philosophical and theological theories and topics, including ones on social justice. It's a dangerous assumption for professors like me to assume that I, as a teacher, have knowledge and the students are the ones without knowledge. I learn all the time for my students. On the topic of racism, one of my students last year introduced to the class the idea of racial trauma: the experiences that people of color can have from constantly encountering examples of violence or prejudice against black people in the media or even in the classroom. There's an emotional wear, my students said, in having to listen to it and absorb it all. That made me really start to rethink, "Well, how should I teach what I want to do with this topic?" For example, do I want to make sure that I include topics about racism and examples of hope and successful change? Do I want to talk about resilience? Do I want to conceptualize not only the sinful or serious nature of racism, but also the ways that that courage and resilience plays out in communities. If I had assumed that I was the expert on race or how to teach philosophy of racism or what's important for me to include in my syllabus because of the reading and studying and teaching that I have done, I probably wouldn't have learned from this student. But hopefully, by listening, we can gain something about how we want to adapt our paradigms, rethink, and constantly learn and grow.

Another example would be when I visited Managua, Nicaragua on a faculty staff trip. We met with a leading feminist scholar there. I knew from my study of feminism, that second wave feminism in the 70s was thought to have focused too much on the experiences and problems of upper-middle-class white women in the northern hemisphere; that in the 80s and 90s, there had been a sea change in realizing that feminists in other countries could have different concerns. Or there might be different class concerns. So in Nicaragua, for example, that might mean thinking about how to combat a politically corrupt system, and not you know, do you stay home with your kids or not? But when I asked the scholar what their center's relationship was like with feminists in North American universities, her reply was, "They're just not interested in us."

My suspicion is that there is this kind of human, almost prideful, tendency, where we want to consider ourselves experts, and we often grant expertise to other people who are like us - people from our nation or people who look like us. We can sometimes dismiss individuals as somehow not expert - for example, not taking seriously enough a doctor or a lawyer who is a person of color because of racist presuppositions of what expertise should look like, perhaps someone who is white. Conversely, we could also absolve ourselves of the ability to learn something new and say, "I'm going to leave that to the experts." We have a responsibility to learn something about topics like racism, how vaccines work, what statistics are, like, moral and political questions, even if I don't end up being a specialist in that field, rather than leaving it in the hands of so called experts, and then becoming disappointed and cynical when it turns out they don't know everything.

Stanton Wortham 17:58

Thank you for elaborating your points about why we should be skeptical of expertise, at least in some respects. Those examples helped me to understand the points that you're trying to make. To close out the segment, could you tell me a little bit about implications? So if our listeners came in to this particular episode with the expectation that expertise was crucial, and they wanted an expert whenever they needed to make a decision or a procedure. Now they're a little bit concerned about expertise. How should they behave differently in the world? How should we restructure the way that we orient to or produce experts?

Marina McCoy 18:37

First of all, I think it's about understanding that both individuals and societies - whole communities of people - are living in this perpetual in-between that I was talking about, meaning, we're never going to be the perfect possessors of complete knowledge. There's always more to know. So, of course, we ought to seek out people who know more than we do about various topics. That might sometimes be the people who are known to have a certain type of knowledge. I probably do want to talk to epidemiologists if I want to understand more about COVID and how it spreads in communities. However, I also have to understand that my own knowledge about many topics and other people's knowledge about many topics is something that we are always going to keep growing into. We have to be able to be open to different voices, and maybe not only academic ones, but the voices of students or someone from a different political perspective or a different community. If I understand that, maybe I can remember that others are in the same human place, right? So the politicians or scientists trying to figure out how to negotiate the pandemic aren't either completely awful people who don't get it or completely right and should never be doubted, but they are human and figuring this out on the best evidence and the best methodologies that they have available to them.

We also need to really look at who our society allows to be seen as experts. If a Latina epidemiologist receives less credibility when she speaks out about disease transmission because we as a society, perceive medical experts as white men or white women, then we have to reframe the social constructs that we have built around expertise. That often means making sure that diverse voices have a place in the political sphere. I also think we can cultivate certain virtues, not only as individuals but as a

community: virtues of humility, curiosity, flexible thinking. So what do I mean about each of those virtues? So humility is knowing that I don't know everything and neither does anybody else. We're human. We're imperfect, and that's okay. Curiosity means understanding that we're born to inquire, to learn more, that we have an attitude of openness towards intellectual and personal growth. That kind of goes with the humility, right? If I don't know everything, then maybe I can actually be curious about the things I don't yet know. Most importantly, probably flexibility. We have to be able to change our paradigms when the evidence warrants or when other people share stories with us that challenge our perceptions. That flexibility even has to include a degree of self criticism and probably a sense of humor.

Stanton Wortham 21:15

Great. Well, this has been very illuminating to me, I think I need to think a little bit harder about what expertise means and how I should rely on it or not rely on it. At this point, I'd love to invite in Alexandra Michel to engage further and share her perspective on some of these issues.

Alexandra Michel 21:34

Thank you, Marina. This was fantastically interesting. How would you characterize your perspective? Is it a moral or an ethical approach to expertise?

Marina McCoy 21:46

Yes, I would definitely see it as both moral and socio-political, insofar as I'm looking at the importance of understanding an ethical disposition towards expertise. I think it is also epistemological. In other words, that means it's grounded in a certain vision of what I think knowledge can and can't do, or how we acquire knowledge.

Alexandra Michel 22:08

And so the claim you're making is that certain ways are just good and other ways of behaving towards expertise or bad. Is that right?

Marina McCoy 22:17

I would say a little bit in between. I certainly did want to push away the idea that experts are just gods, right?

Alexandra Michel 22:26

But why? Because it's bad to do that it's politically incorrect to do that?

Marina McCoy 22:31

Well, I just think it's not real, and whatever is ethical has to be grounded in what's real. I think the fact is that as people, we're not capable of perfect knowledge. That's never been the case; that never will be the case. But that doesn't mean we can't know anything. I think it's hard for people to live psychologically in that middle space. They either want to think "I know everything," "my political party

is right," "my favorite expert is right." Or they want to give up the whole possibility of knowing anything at all and absolve themselves of that. So for me, it's about first recognizing epistemologically, what are we as knowers? And then having the right ethical disposition towards ourselves in light of that.

Alexandra Michel 23:17

So I study organizations, and organizations claim they worry about ethics because it has a reputational effect if they say something different. But they worry about expertise, too, for different reasons, because what they have found is that people who believe they are experts overlook when the world is changing, and the paradigms no longer hold. So I want to add to your list of dangers this one: that experts overlook a change in context. So it's a different approach. I'm not saying it's good or bad, or that it's moral or immoral when they comport themselves in a certain way, but that businesses suffer when experts overlook a change in context. What that also does is it adds boundary conditions. You seem to make your argument in an abstract world - it's always good; it's always bad. I know I'm characterizing you, but it's more fun that way, right?

From a business perspective, expertise has only become a problem when the context has been changing. When the environment was relatively stable, or let's say you operated a dry cleaner, your expertise will hold for a long period of time. There's just no need - a business person will tell you - to invest in ways to complexify a situation or have people criticize themselves and so on. But if we are entering a global environment, exemplified by the pandemic, where rules that have been holding for decades, all of sudden no longer hold, then understanding the dangers of expertise now becomes a business problem.

For example, Goldman, a while back tried to build up its trading division, and they hired experts and paid them lots of money. That incentivized the individuals to consult their own expertise and trade in the way that they were used to, and thus, being oriented towards their heads overlooked the fact that the context was changing: securities that had been positively correlated for decades, all of a sudden, were negatively correlated or not at all. So the context changed, and the firm lost a lot of money because of that. So what I'm adding here is the boundary condition that's important when you look at it from a business perspective. So expertise becomes more or less dangerous when the environment is more or less turbulent.

What I'm also adding is that the solution you seem to be proposing falls into a cognitive discursive realm. So people can either criticize themselves, some sort of metacognition; cultivate themselves through certain virtues, such as humility; or they can engage in interpersonal discursive behaviors, What I'm adding is a sociomaterial perspective. I believe that there are things that organizations can do by creating a material context that you cannot do by operating on your own mind and that you cannot do only through discursive means. For example, what organizations might do is someone who becomes an expert in let's say, a banker, becomes an expert in mergers and acquisitions. In New York, you put them all of sudden into the Frankfurt office, and then they need to solve problems for which they're ill equipped. And then what do they do? Something very different from what you're proposing. You're

saying that people update their models. What the individual who was transported into the Frankfurt office is doing is draw on other people. So there are two aspects here that are different from what you're saying. One is that the person is transported into a different context, which is a non-cognitive way of making the person aware of his or her limitations. It's like the example: you go up the mountain, and if you have different perspectives, it's the mountain. It's a view. The other thing is that what the beneficial outcome is not an updated model, a growing model, a more humble model of the world. It is you drawing other people; it's a socially distributed, non-cognitive model of expertise.

Marina McCoy 27:44

Yeah, so that's interesting. So first of all, I want to try to emulate what I've said is good to do, which is to be flexible about how we think and try to learn from other people. So I really appreciate your points a lot, and I particularly appreciate the points about needing to have a practical, not an abstract element, and the material culture aspect of it. It is an important point to include that there's a social material context for all this. I would still argue it's cognitive, right? But that there would be maybe social material ways that we would encourage that cognitive reframing to take place. So I work in academia, right? So for me, the things that came to mind in terms of organizational pieces would be things like this: when we admit more diverse classes of students - students from different states, from different backgrounds, from different parts of the world, from different racial identities, from different social classes - that is a material condition, you might say, of the organization. It's a deliberate practice, but that is actually part of what leads to the kinds of dialogues that I'm hoping take place at a university. I don't mean by dialogue, simply, "I'm going to talk to somebody else." I mean, something like putting myself in the position of having conversations with people who have very different understanding of things than I do. There might be, indeed as you suggest, these social material contexts that allow that to take place. Study abroad is another good example. For a college student, maybe it's not being moved to the Frankfurt office, but taking a class in Frankfurt. In that case, what's happening is there is a change of paradigm. Someone might think, you know, I've always thought that the way people think about democracy is like this, but when I visit Germany, I understand that the history of Europe really informs a different understanding of how we understand a constitution, or something like that, right? So there's a cognitive change and that students paradigm that's taking place, but it's taking place through an encounter with living people that's affected by the presence of this institutional structure that made it happen.

Alexandra Michel 30:14

So I would really like to believe that too, because that is something that as educators, you can affect. You can engage people in conversations, and you can check one another's understanding and mental model. I encountered a few situations in the business world that made me skeptical about the cognitive approach to conversion. One is, on Wall Street, there's one bank who is known for producing extraordinary results, and if you ask the individuals in the bank, why do you do it? How do you do it? They would say, "It's teamwork." I did a bit of research and found that every bank and every organization values teamwork. Every individual values teamwork. The organizations throw boatloads of money at people to engage in teamwork. But what actually happens is, if you observe people at their

jobs, they don't do it, because they think they are the experts. So there is the value of teamwork; there is a constant flood of education on teamwork; there are incentives about teamwork; and there is the experience that working with teams is pleasant, and so on. Yet people don't do it. The only solution that is one bank found was to put people in situations where their own knowledge is insufficient and where they had to draw on others. So there is a situation being structured that makes your mental models irrelevant. It doesn't matter whether you believe in teamwork or whether you value or not, you have to engage in it. That was the only situation where people actually did. Another situation that's kind of similar is the experiment about of the Samaritan. Remember that the Good Samaritan where they did this experiment?

Marina McCoy 30:18

Yes, I think I know this experiment. It's pretty funny.

Alexandra Michel 32:12

Yeah. So they have individuals who have been cultivated all their lives to believe in altruism, who are taught in the situation, you have to talk about altruism. They anticipate having to display a certain stance which makes it more likely that you engage in this behavior. So you have all of these conditions that would work for people displaying altruism, and then they're in a rush, and oops, they overlook the person lying on the ground. Here again, you have people who have cultivated mental models and really buy into them. But simple things, such as when you're a little bit in a rush, blows your moral values and your cognitive whatever out the window. All I'm saying is that doesn't invalidate anything you're saying. I really believe deeply in your findings, and I'm merely elaborating what their importance is in a different context. What I'm encouraging us to think about are our sociomaterial conditions for somehow mitigating the dangers of expertise, which I think are very real.

Marina McCoy 33:18

Yeah, I think that's really helpful. Coming from an ancient Greek philosophy background, the word that kept coming to mind for me was really habit. When we practice the kinds of virtues that we want to practice, that's where those virtues come to life. Similarly, if part of the first virtue that I want to argue for is a virtue of dialogical openness, of flexibility, of being able to change our models, I don't think the model is limited to simply a mental concept. I might be modeling a way of being in the world, but the way that I live out that model is also in my habits, my practices, my culture and community's practices as well. You make a great point. The way I would put it would be: there's a really strong link between our cognitive models or paradigms for how we live and the way we embody that in our social and political practices.

Alexandra Michel 34:21

Yeah. And then also, you didn't define expertise, but it had to do with knowledge, and knowledge can be both embodied and cognitive. But there seems to be an emphasis on cognitive knowledge, right? I'm wondering, what about embodied expertise? You didn't define expertise. Initially it sounded like it's mostly a cognitive thing and about mental models, but now you're bringing in the embodied element.

So does embodied expertise follow the same rules as cognitive expertise, as far as your dangers are concerned?

Marina McCoy 34:58

Yeah, good question. Because one of the things about embodied expertise is that it does include an element of practice. So, you know, think about the difference between the surgeon who knows how to do surgery and the surgeon who knows how to do surgery, right? Because she's actually practice doing it over many years. For sure, there's a way in which practice and habituation can be strengths. Doing something the same way over and over again can actually help you do that practice better, but I think there's still the issue of that flexibility. Learning a new way to do something, learning a new way to perform surgery, or learning a new way to embody a moral virtue in a new context... there's always going to be an element of novelty in the world that is going to require us to be adaptable and flexible. So I think that element at least would carry over from cognitive to embodied expertise.

Alexandra Michel 35:52

What you're saying makes a lot of sense to me. You're saying that embodied expertise may lend itself even to more rigidity, because it can be more practiced and more routinized. I was thinking of the situation in the book, *Ethics Without Principle*, where the one ideal solution to staying sensitive and open to the world is to operate in a different manner, in a non cognitive manner. The example was that when you're walking across the street, and there's a banana peel, you pick it up; not because there's some kind of ethical principle involved, you just do it because you're sensitive. Or when you're talking in a conversation, you steer the conversation away from gossip, not because you're engaging in some sort of ethical principle, you're just responding to the situation in a tacit, noncognitive way. So this sort of thinking says that, it's not merely a sociomaterial route to changing the world in more beneficial ways, as exemplified with the banks. The alternative that you had in mind was refining cognition or to have some kind of discursive engagement. Here is to resort to a different way of functioning, a non-cognitive way of functioning, which in spiritual traditions is also the solution, right?

Marina McCoy 37:23

Yeah. Just to add some new element, as you're speaking, I was thinking about the importance of empathy as well. So I teach in a service learning program named PULSE at Boston College, where my students go serve people in various nonprofits and community partners across the city of Boston. I've served for a number of years at a state prison system. I think that the experiential element of encountering other people in dialogue is not only about cognitive models in the abstract, but about a kind of empathy that allows me to imagine being in someone else's position and to feel with them. In that moment of encounter, we have to recognize the difference between myself and the other, but it is that lived embodied encounter with another person that can be transformative. There's a cognitive element to empathy, right? I have to be able to imagine myself in someone else's position. It's not theoretical, necessarily, but it is cognitive. There is the bodily empathy element; there is the feeling with another because that person is human. I've learned a great deal about what's not right with prisons from people who are imprisoned, not so much from books.

Alexandra Michel 38:36

Yeah, very interesting. Thank you.

Marina McCoy 38:37

Thank you. Thanks for your excellent points.

Stanton Wortham 38:39

This is great. I really appreciate your contribution. So thank you, Alexandra Michel and Marina McCoy. This has been a provocative episode, and next time we get on a plane or talk to a surgeon or something, we're gonna have to think twice. Thank you all for joining us for this episode of Pulled Up Short. We will hope to see you back here next time.