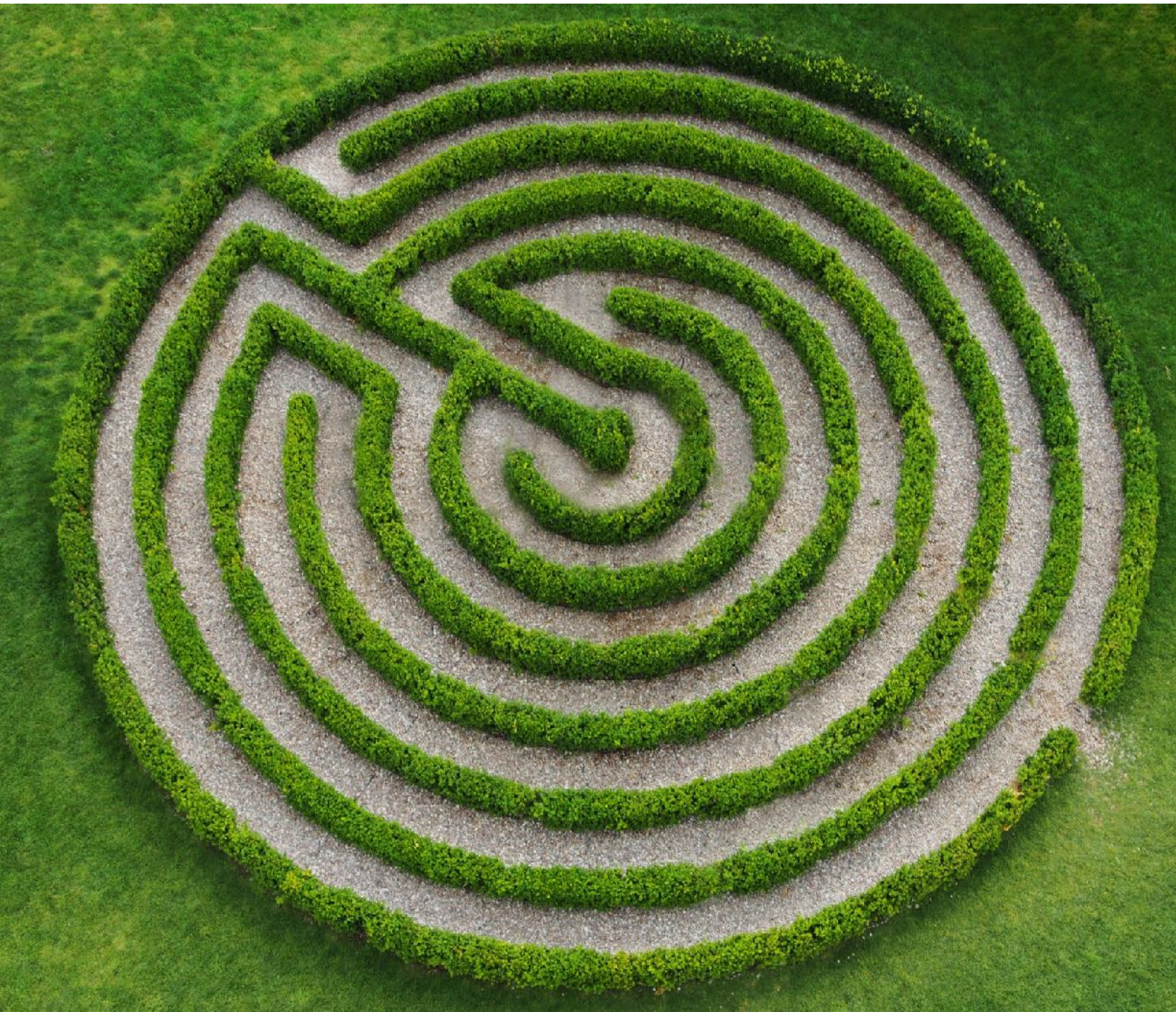
September 2026

VOLUME XVII, ISSUE IX

PEGASUS

A NEWSLETTER FOR THE CAUX ROUND TABLE FOR MORAL CAPITALISM NETWORK LOOKING AT BUSINESS ABOVE THE CLUTTER AND CONFETTI



Pegasus

Introduction by Dave Kansas — Page 2

Trump Lacks the Cognitive and Emotional Fitness to "Faithfully Execute the Office" of President of the United States by Stephen B. Young — Page 4

Superficiality vs. Significance: The Soul's Struggle for Meaning by Michael Hartoonian — Page 17

Introduction

September *Pegasus* brings us two trenchant essays focused on both President Donald J. Trump and an analysis of superficiality vs. significance and how that is important for our culture.

In his essay, "Trump Lacks the Cognitive and Emotional Fitness to "Faithfully Execute the Office" of President of the United States," Steve Young argues that the president is failing to fulfill his main duty.

The article explores a lot of mental health issues and outlines recent statements and actions. "What these pictures have in common is a disassociation from reality. They are fictions, dreamworld narratives. One commentator quipped that Trump's mind is "marinating in a fantasy world."

Given questions about President Joseph R. Biden's mental acuity, raising similar questions about our current president give some cause for concern. It is related to questions about the gerontocracy of our political leadership class writ large, many of which are being amplified as we head into the midterm elections.

Steve cites, among other things, President Trump's actions at the recent September midterm Republican convention in Dallas. "President Trump associated voting for Republicans with money: "If the Republicans win the House of Representatives and the United States Senate, both of them," Trump said, "I will issue a dividend to every adult citizen in the United States of America for $5,000." Trump continued: "We don't want you going to Canada to spend the money. We don't want you going to China, to Germany. You got to spend the money in the United States of America."

Steve adds that this is an issue of mental decline. "Having moral dementia or moral dyslexia disposes the mind to prefer emotionally reactive thinking over more thoughtful consideration of reality."

He also notes the president's increasingly crude language. "No other president," he had recently declared with his customary eloquence, "could do some of the shit I'm doing." …A loyal-unto-death aide, Natalie Harp … is dispatched to fetch a document, and the president begins to read from it, reciting the names of some of history's most powerful figures, explaining how each fell short of his own power as U.S. president."

His conclusion is stark. "In March 1649, similar concerns about personal willfulness and dereliction of duty led the House of Commons in England to abolish the Office of King."

In his essay, "Superficiality vs. Significance: The Soul's Struggle for Meaning," Michael Hartoonian argues that the modern world has driven many of us away from significance. "As we move further into new phases of modernity, with all its benefits, we are also creating new

ways to avoid reality and embrace foolishness, often calling it fun or amusement."

This embrace of false thinking undercuts our culture in deep ways. "Superficiality is another name for loss of purpose. Superficiality is an embrace of motivation over purpose. Superficiality destroys identity and personal agency. It replaces reality with false imagery and makes it impossible to be conscious of the question of having anyone or anything to live or die for."

After wrestling with superficiality vs. significance, he closes with a very relevant revelation. "Wisdom comes through grace and grace is shaped by virtue, reason and aesthetic understanding – qualities that are never easy to acquire. Yet, purpose and meaning depend on them."

Dave Kansas
Editor-at-Large
Pegasus

Trump Lacks the Cognitive and Emotional Fitness to "Faithfully Execute the Office" of President of the United States

Stephen B. Young

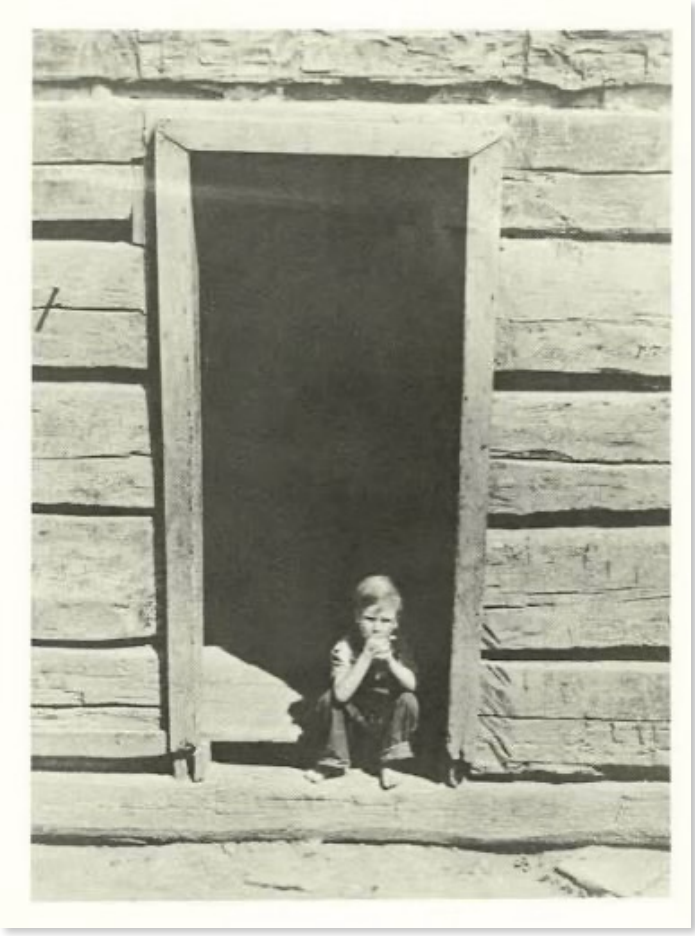
The Constitution of the United States requires that any person serving as president must "faithfully execute the Office" of President.

Section 4 of the 25th Amendment to the Constitution provides a procedure whereby the Congress can determine if a president is unable to discharge the duties of his office, duties required to "faithfully execute" that office.

How can we measure a person's fitness to "execute an office?" By assessing their display of cognitive abilities and emotional orientations. The standard is one of reasonable mental and emotional competence.

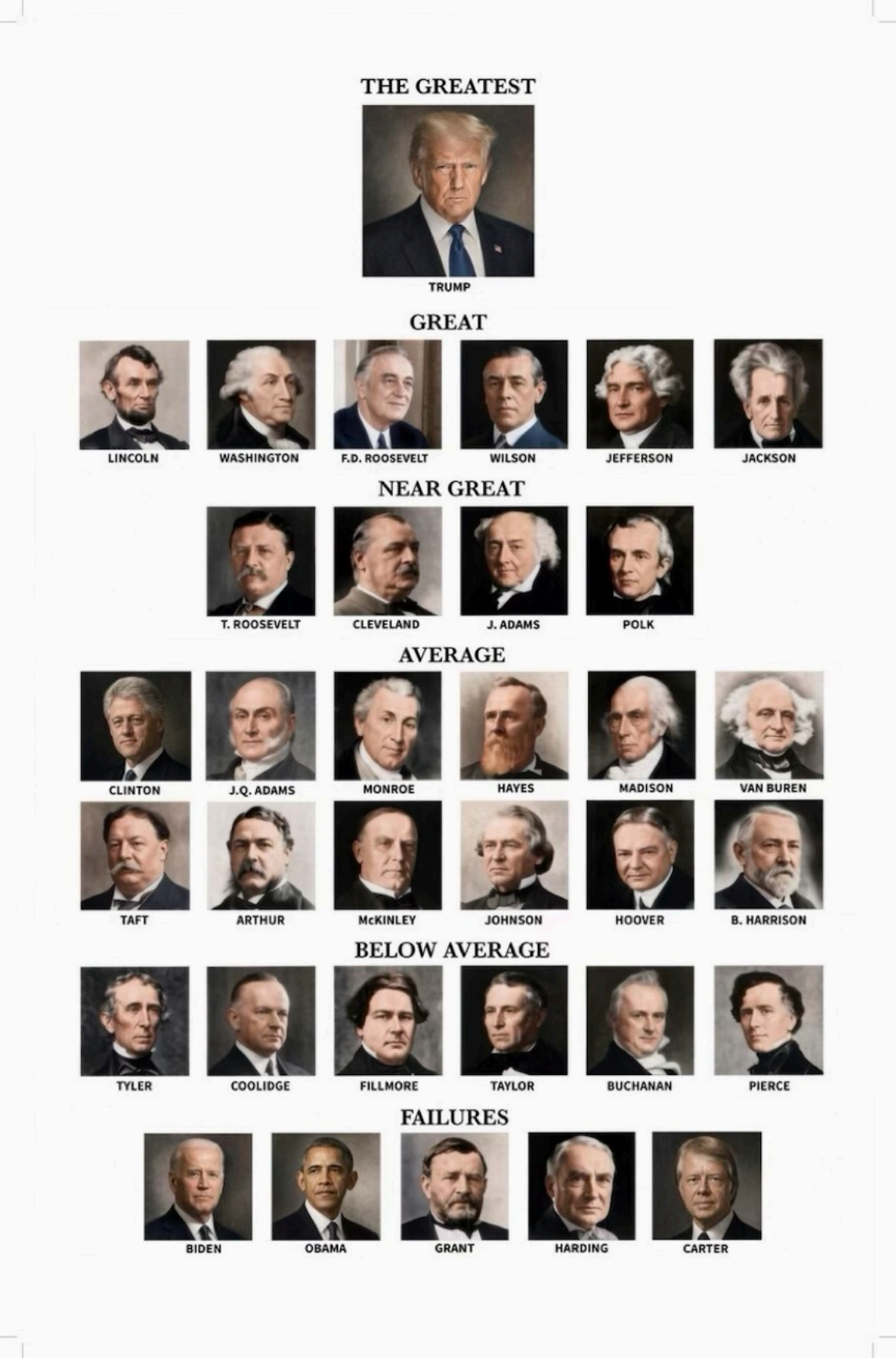
Executing an office is a fiduciary function. The presidency is an office. Thus, a president is an agent held to duties of loyalty and due care. Too much self-seeking and self-referentialism in an officeholder is a failure of loyalty. Too much sloppy or misguided thinking is a failure in taking due care.

Wall Street Journal commentator Gerard Baker admits he has passed through three stages of reaction to Donald Trump's character and rhetoric. He first experienced a Trump disappointment syndrome. Then a Trump disillusionment syndrome to now having an advanced case of Trump dismay syndrome. Baker is reacting to his perceptions of Trump as he is as a person and as he wants to be said person. But how can one person ever well judge another?



One accepted way of getting to know a person's inner orientations is to listen to their words, to study what stories they tell. In the thematic apperception test (TAT), the individual in question is asked to tell a story about what is going on in the picture. Here is a picture often used in TAT interviews:

Donald Trump has a story of himself wherein he is the “greatest” president in American history. He recently posted this chart on his Truth Social site:



Of note is that he left out Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush. What, do you suppose, are his internalized personal stories as to why he ignored these predecessors?

What, do you suppose, are his internalized, personal stories that explains these pictures, which he posted on his site?

What these pictures have in common is a disassociation from reality. They are fictions, dreamworld narratives. One commentator quipped that Trump's mind is "marinating in a fantasy world."

Trump most likely is aware of the limitations inherent in his internalized personal stories. In an interview with New York Magazine, Trump agreed with the assertion put forth by a Democratic senator, who said the president is building monuments to himself as no one else will. "That's true," Trump said. "Nobody will do it once I'm gone. When I leave here, nobody will."
One whose self-story bears no relation to reality lacks a respectable and reliable moral compass. Such "moral dementia" refers to disruptions in moral reasoning, empathy and social behavior which can be caused by specific neurodegenerative disorders, most notably a loss of capacity in the frontotemporal part of the brain, called frontotemporal dementia (FTD).

Frontotemporal dementia is marked by profound changes in social conduct, loss of inhibition, apathy and altered judgments regarding moral emotions. It changes personality, judgment and social behavior. The person affected may experience increasing difficulty in planning or organizing activities. They may behave inappropriately in social or work settings and have trouble communicating with others or relating to loved ones.

To minimize FTD, do not passively accept unsatisfactory circumstances, but form a picture in your mind of circumstances as they should be. Hold that picture, develop it firmly in all details, believe in it, pray about it, work at it and you can actualize it according to that mental image emphasized in your positive thinking. It damages the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, anterior insula and amygdala, leading to loss of empathy, where patients experience emotional blunting and a reduced capacity for emotional resonance during moral decisions. This degeneration of the frontotemporal lobe often shifts decision-making toward cold, calculated or strictly utilitarian choices rather than socially nuanced or emotionally guided ones.

Another assessment found on Google of those suffering from a reality deficit is "moral dyslexia," which is not a clinical or psychological term. There's no diagnosis by that name. It's a metaphor people use informally, borrowing from dyslexia (a specific, well-defined learning difference in processing written language) to describe someone who seems to have real trouble telling right from wrong or who consistently "reads situations backwards" morally. Because it's not an actual condition, there's no fixed checklist of symptoms, but here's what people generally mean when they use the phrase:

- Inconsistent moral reasoning: Applying different standards to themselves versus others or to different people in similar situations without seeming to notice the inconsistency.
- Difficulty reading moral weight accurately: Treating small transgressions as huge and huge ones as trivial, seemingly at random or self-servingly.
- Self-justification over objective reflection: Quickly generating reasons why their actions were fine rather than pausing to actually evaluate them.

- Weak connection between stated values and behavior: They may say the "right" things about ethics in the abstract, but act differently in the moment
- Trouble with perspective-taking: Struggling to genuinely model how their actions land on other people.

Thus, Trump can wrongly understand the moral vectors involved with money. He can, with great sincerity, believe that the money Americans spend on imports is a "ripoff" of our nation, requiring punishment of those countries which produce what Americans want to buy.

Here is Trump prioritizing the selfish emotionalism associated with money:

> *Interest Rates in the United States should be 1%, or less, because we are the Best Credit in the World – BY FAR. Our Country is BOOMING with new Investment! If we stopped Trading with every country that we have a Deficit with, which is most of them, we would make, at least, 1.5 Trillion Dollars a year. The word "Deficit" is nothing more than a fancy word for LOSS. We are "carrying" almost every country in the World, and that cannot go on any longer. LOWER THE INTEREST RATES FOR THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, AND FAST! President DONALD J. TRUMP* (source: https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/117282643318690567)

At the September midterm Republican Party convention in Dallas, Trump associated voting for Republicans with money: "If the Republicans win the House of Representatives and the United States Senate, both of them," Trump said, "I will issue a dividend to every adult citizen in the United States of America for $5,000," adding, "We don't want you going to Canada to spend the money. We don't want you going to China, to Germany. You got to spend the money in the United States of America."

Emotionalizing the getting of money contributes to moral dyslexia, as was noted by the Apostle Paul – "For the love of money is the root of all evil." (1 Timothy 6:10)

Having moral dementia or moral dyslexia disposes the mind to prefer emotionally reactive thinking over more thoughtful consideration of reality. Daniel Kahneman called fast thinking or system 1 thinking fast, automatic, emotion-based judgment as opposed to slower, deliberate reasoning, which he called system 2 thinking.

System 1 thinking falls back on empowering the amygdala to produce our thinking and our behaviors. The amygdala is the brain's rapid, emotional response center. It's central to snap, feeling-driven judgment, according to Claude AI.

The amygdala performs these functions for us:

-Threat/emotional detection: It scans incoming information (sights, sounds, situations)

for emotional significance, especially anything fear or threat related and does this fast, often before the "thinking" parts of your brain have caught up.

-Triggers the fight-or-flight response: It can activate the body's stress response (adrenaline, increased heart rate, heightened alertness) in milliseconds.

- Colors memory with emotion: It tags experiences as emotionally significant, which is why fear or anger-charged memories tend to stick vividly.

- Drives impulsive reactions: It can act faster than the prefrontal cortex (which handles reasoning and impulse control). It can essentially "hijack" behavior before deliberate thought kicks in. This is often called an amygdala hijack, a term popularized by Daniel Goleman in his work on emotional intelligence.

In short, the amygdala is like an alarm system – quick, instinctive and built for survival, not nuance. It says "react now," while the prefrontal cortex says "wait, let's think." When someone makes snap, emotion-driven decisions, it often reflects the amygdala's fast response outpacing or overriding the slower, more deliberate reasoning of the prefrontal cortex.

The amygdala functions as a "triggering mechanism," setting off fears and anxieties which alienate us from others and prejudice our judgements. This is called the amygdala hijack, which brings on loss of logic, where emotional responses override the rational prefrontal cortex, as the brain reacts to emotional or social stress – like criticism or an argument – in the same way it reacts to a physical survival threat.

The triggering sequence starts with an alarm. The amygdala acts as the brain's threat detector. Then it provokes fast, defensive action by sending rapid signals before the thinking part of the brain can process the situation with perspective and knowledge. Then the amygdala releases stress hormones, like adrenaline and cortisol, which kick off physical symptoms such as heart rate increases, shallow breathing and muscle contraction, the active shortening or tightening of muscle fibers triggered by nerve signals. When you experience muscle tension, individual muscle fibers or entire groups stay locked in a minor, continuous state of contraction instead of fully relaxing.

To calm an active amygdala response, you can use slow breathing techniques with a longer exhale to signal safety to your nervous system.

So, a person prone to fast, system 1 thinking could be described as having a very reactive or dominant amygdala response taking over from prefrontal regulation mental processing of who we are in any given moment.

An example of Trump's propensity to use this thinking was reported by CNN:

> *President Donald Trump's close aide Natalie Harp showed him clips of media coverage last week before he banned Politico, CNN and MS NOW from the White House, people familiar with the matter said.*
>
> *One source said a graphic from Politico was among the material that is believed to have infuriated the president and helped inform his decision to bar the three outlets from the White House grounds. The president also viewed clips from television, a second source said.*
>
> *Trump's pronouncement, which came after a string of setbacks in the courts and Congress, caught many advisers – including those who deal with the press on a daily basis – by surprise. Trump did not point to any particular story or tension point as the cause when asked about it later that day.*
>
> *"No reason," he said Friday, when asked about the ban, adding, "It's a very simple ban. I don't want them in my office. I don't want them here. I would say the ban would go as far as you can."*

The general pattern – prefrontal cortex (executive control, planning, impulse regulation) being "overridden" by limbic system activity (emotional reactivity, threat response, impulsivity) – shows up as a feature in several different conditions, including:

- Post-traumatic stress disorder: The amygdala becomes hyperreactive, while prefrontal regulation is dampened, especially during flashbacks or triggered states.
- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: Executive function deficits (planning, inhibition, working memory) leave more room for impulsive, emotionally-driven responses.
- Borderline personality disorder: Marked by intense limbic reactivity and difficulty with top-down emotional regulation.
- Acute stress response/panic disorder: The "fight-or-flight" state is essentially limbic override of executive processing.
- Intermittent explosive disorder: Characterized by disproportionate anger outbursts, linked to amygdala-prefrontal imbalance.
- Disruptive, impulse control and conduct disorders: This whole diagnostic class centers on poor behavioral regulation.

Other clinical terms applicable to one indulging in moral dementia or moral dyslexia are:

- Low effortful control: A term from temperament/personality psychology (used a lot in developmental research) describing a reduced capacity to inhibit impulses and regulate attention.

- Low conscientiousness: Conscientiousness includes self-discipline and impulse control. Someone not comfortable with being conscientious isn't "disordered," just less regulated and so prone to quiet, extemporaneous spontaneity.
- Executive dysfunction: A broad neuropsychological term for impaired planning, inhibition and self-control, which the prefrontal cortex governs.

Mark Danner reported a curious episode of Trump's fast thinking on his historical stature, quoting New York Times reporters Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Swan, who wrote after their meeting with President Trump:

"No other president," he had recently declared with his customary eloquence, "could do some of the shit I'm doing." …A loyal-unto-death aide, Natalie Harp … is dispatched to fetch a document and the president begins to read from it, reciting the names of some of history's most powerful figures, explaining how each fell short of his own power as U.S. president.

Alexander the Great, the Caesars, William the Conqueror – "They didn't have airplanes, right? You couldn't travel around." Genghis Khan. Attila the Hun. Tamerlane. "Napoleon," he said with relish. "Hitler. Mao. Stalin."

These leaders "maintained power through fear," he said. "Who would ever do a thing like that? Right?"

Trump lingered on the document's central argument: that each leader, however fearsome in his day, had no global reach. Their power was local. But his was not.

"I never thought of it in terms of that," Trump said. "It's very interesting, the power." Then he added: "But when I read it, I said, 'He's right.'" …

"What was revealing," they write, was not really that Trump agreed with the thesis, but the way he inhabited it: the evident pleasure he took in the company of Mao, Hitler and Stalin, masters of state control through murder, torture and detention and Napoleon – and the untroubled ease with which he accepted a place among men who had reshaped the world through conquest and fear. He drew no distinction between those who built and those who destroyed."

Danner concluded: "The scene is irresistible: the president of the United States sitting at the resolute desk and comparing himself blithely to Mao, Hitler and Stalin. Still, what does it tell us? That a tireless and amoral will to power is deeply embedded in Donald Trump's narcissism and vanity is not exactly a revelation: anyone who has watched him perform a ninety-minute stand-up routine before a crowd of supporters – drinking in, with almost erotic delight, the fervent worship of thousands – cannot have failed to notice."

With fast thinking, words take on great power. They easily become reality itself for the speaker. What is said is transformed from sound and mentation into worldly materiality and

so stands in for reality and truth. Fast thinking, thus, conflates the Kantian realms of the noumenal and the phenomenal. The words used by fast thinkers are not carefully chosen and often are intensely emotional or pejorative. Words concretize the immediacy of impressions in one who uses system 1 thinking. The superficial becomes the substantive.

For Trump, this tendency was illuminated quite nicely in a recent essay on reading by Rose Horowitch, published in The Atlantic:

It is unlikely that Donald Trump has familiarized himself with Orality and Literacy. But if he did, he might recognize himself in Ong's description. Trump's communication style is perfectly suited to an oral society. He employs epithets – "Low-Energy Jeb," "Little Marco," "Sleepy Joe" – that are easy to remember and repeat. He contradicts himself as though there is no record of his previous statements. Even his writing is almost indistinguishable from his speech. (It makes sense; Trump reportedly prefers dictation to composition.) His online posts are full of idiosyncratically placed punctuation, capital letters and exclamation points. Many are memes with little text: One featured an image of an American warship hitting an Iranian airplane with a laser beam and included the phrase "Lasers: Bing, Bing, GONE!!!"

Trump is our first postliterate president. It is difficult to imagine him being elected leader of a country where information is primarily spread through text. Ahead of the 2024 election, an NBC News poll of 1,000 voters found that Joe Biden had a 49-point lead among respondents who read newspapers. Trump has pioneered a style of communication that exploits our distracted, disputatious age. "So many people, particularly in the academic and journalistic circles, think of him as a political revolutionary," Roderick Hart, a communications professor emeritus at the University of Texas at Austin, told me. "And I see him much more as a rhetorical revolutionary."

Words for pre-literate and post-literate persons tend to be accepted as worldly reality. So, for Trump, a war is really not a war. A tariff is really not a tax on your own people. Money and "winning" really do provide life with hopeful meaning and purpose.

Here, Trump brings to life the presumption of Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass* when instructing Alice on the meaning of words:

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all."

Protestant Minister Norman Vincent Peale stood very high in Trump's estimation of a

truth-teller. Peale had married Trump's father and mother and officiated at Trump's marriage to his first wife Ivana.

According to Claude AI, Trump has described being shaped by Peale's "positive thinking" outlook rather than by a framework of guilt or asking for forgiveness, reportedly saying something along the lines of "I think in terms of let's go on and let's make it right" rather than dwelling on sin. Trump said: "Norman Vincent Peale – the great Norman Vincent Peale – was my pastor. *The Power of Positive Thinking* – everybody's heard of Norman Vincent Peale. He was so great." "I still remember his sermons. And what he would do is he'd bring real life situations – modern-day situations – into the sermon. The greatest speaker I think I've ever witnessed." "He thought I was his greatest student of all time."

In Peale's theology, the right words have talismanic power – an unearthly power to transform the merely spoken into worldly reality. Speak rightly and it shall be so. For example, in *The Power of Positive Thinking,* he wrote:

"The greatest secret for eliminating the inferiority complex, which is another term for deep and profound self-doubt, is to fill your mind to overflowing with faith. Develop a tremendous faith in God and that will give you a humble, yet soundly realistic faith in yourself."

The trouble with most prayers is that they aren't big enough, "To get anywhere with faith," said he. "Learn to pray big prayers. God will rate you according to the size of your prayers."

"That is a very great fact to remember in connection with difficult problems – "the rough is only mental." Your obstacles are present all right. They are not fanciful, but they are not actually so difficult as they seem. Your mental attitude is the most important factor. Believe that Almighty God has put in you the power to lift yourself out of the rough by keeping your eye firmly fixed on the source of your power. Affirm to yourself that through this power, you can do anything you have to do. Believe that this power is taking the tension out of you, that this power is flowing through you. Believe this and a sense of victory will come."

"… "vital thoughts of courage and confidence" banish from our minds feelings of insecurity and lack of self-confidence. … Think defeat and you are bound to feel defeated. Peale quoted Emerson: "They conquer who believe they can."

"Nobody can be you as effectively as YOU can" so "depreciate every so-called obstacle. Minimize them."

"Think positively, for example, and you set in motion positive forces which bring positive

results to pass. Positive thoughts create around yourself an atmosphere propitious to the development of positive outcomes. On the contrary, think negative thoughts and you create around yourself an atmosphere propitious to the development of negative results. … Do not passively accept unsatisfactory circumstances, but form a picture in your mind of circumstances as they should be. Hold that picture, develop it firmly in all details, believe in it, pray about it, work at it and you can actualize it according to that mental image emphasized in your positive thinking."

In short, reality can be what you make it to be – with some Divine help of course!

From the vantage point of neuroscience, Peale's advice enables you to pacify or tranquilize amygdala intrusions, to restrain and prevent frontotemporal dementia. Following Peale's advice and training, your prefrontal cortex, where slow thinking holds court, will take command of you and compartmentalize and so neutralize paralyzing and debilitating impulses and impressions coming from the amygdala in its responding to reality in the moment.

Peale's positive thinking comes to the rescue of your prefrontal cortex – disempowering fast thinking. Create a reflective mood which naturally turns to slow thinking in relating you to the world around you.

How might we understand how a person comes to indulge in fast system 1 thinking, contributing to an unbalanced moral orientation about self and others, confusing fact and fiction? For myself, the work on personality development of Erik Erikson provides reliable inferences addressing this question (I audited Professor Erikson's class at Harvard College as an undergraduate). Erikson wrote on Martin Luther's psychological development as creating in him the need and the will to break with the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church and propose, on his own, a new way of being Christian (*Young Man Luther).*

Erikson saw our life cycle from birth to death – universally, cross-culturally and historically – as meeting with and passing through stages of resolving intra-mental tensions. He proposed eight ages for each person's life. How one resolves (or does not resolve) the tensions of each stage sets in motion how one will react and deal with the tensions emerging in the following stage. Add up the decisions made in each stage and you have a life history.

Norman Vincent Peale

For Trump, I would map his life journey as follows:

In stage one, he fell into mistrust, rejecting basic trust, which, in the second stage, led to accepting shame/doubt over comfortable autonomy, which, in the third stage, led to living with guilt, while rejecting collaborative initiative, which, in the fourth stage, led to feeling inferiority and not internalizing industry, which, in the fifth stage, brought on role confusion centered on dominance experience supported by following the money and not a welcome and reliable identity, which, in the sixth stage, led to isolation over intimacy, which, in the seventh stage, led to stagnation over benevolent generativity, which, in the eighth stage, has now led to despair over ego integrity, which will be followed by a lonely, unmourned death.

Conclusion

Moral dyslexia, moral dementia, frontotemporal dementia, fast system 1 thinking, low effortful control, low conscientiousness and executive dysfunction are each presumptive disqualifications preventing one from "faithfully executing the Office of President" under the Constitution of the United States.

In March 1649, similar concerns about personal willfulness and dereliction of duty led the House of Commons in England to abolish the Office of King:

And whereas it is and hath been found by experience, that the Office of a King in this Nation and Ireland and to have the power thereof in any single person, is unnecessary, burthensom and dangerous to the liberty, safety and publique interest of the people and that for the most part, use hath been made of the regal power and prerogative, to oppress and impoverish and enslave the subject; and that usually and naturally any one person in such power makes it his interest to incroach upon the just freedom and liberty of the people and to promote the setting up of their own will and power above the laws that so they might enslave these kingdoms to their own lust; Be it therefore enacted and ordained by this present parliament and by authority of the same, that the Office of a King in this Nation shall not henceforth reside in or be exercised by any one single person; and that no one person whatsoever shall or may have or hold the Office, stile, dignity, power or authority of King of the said kingdoms and dominions or any of them or of the Prince of Wales, any law, statute, usage or custom to the contrary thereof in any wise notwithstanding.

Stephen B. Young is Global Executive Director of the Caux Round Table for Moral Capitalism.

From the *New York Times:*
(Maggie Haberman Hamed Aleaziz Shane Goldmacher and Jonathan Swan Oct. 2, 2026)

On Aug 7, 2026, Mr. Trump was in the Oval Office with a group of Republican strategists … Natalie Harp, his ever-present assistant and provider of positive news about himself, was there as well.

At the time, Mr. Trump's advisers were waiting for him to sign off, finally, on spending from his super PAC for midterm candidates, after months of anxiety from Republican candidates about whether he would help them financially in tight races.
But during that meeting, the president was much more interested in looking at videos of himself.

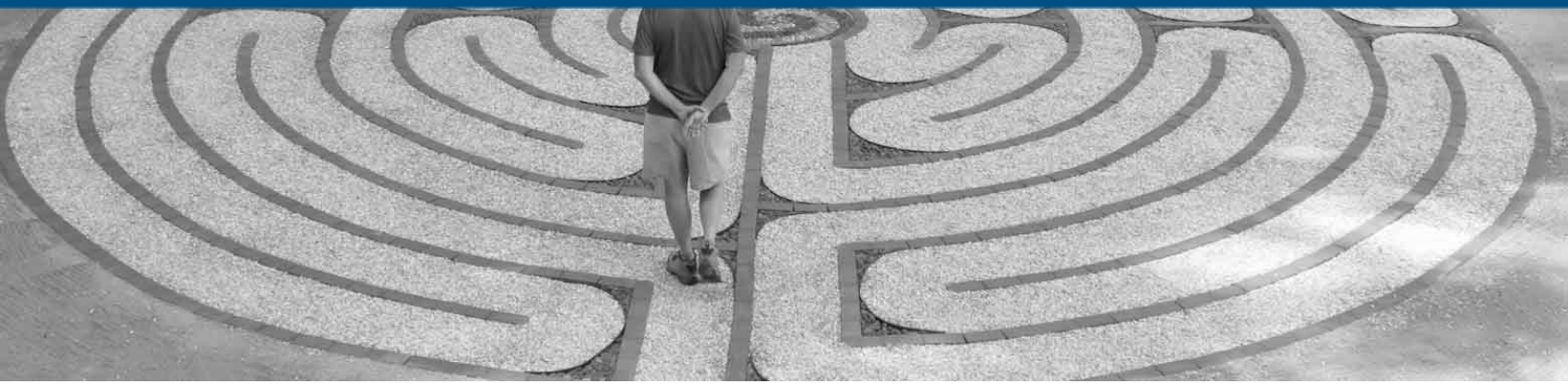
He turned to Ms. Harp and asked her to show the group the type of imagery he favors. Ms. Harp pulled up a series of videos made by the White House digital team on her tablet: Mr. Trump standing in front of vast crowds; Mr. Trump beside Marine One; Mr. Trump with fighter jets streaking overhead.

One video showed Dana White, the U.F.C. president, at the 2024 Republican convention, calling Mr. Trump "the toughest, most resilient person that I've ever met." Mr. Trump has talked with delight about that quote repeatedly ever since.

Such images draw out from President Trump "post-literate" thinking on what is important to him. He internalizes the story told by such images as the truth about himself in a demonstration of Moral Dyslexia working away in the interstices of his prefrontal cortex and his amygdala.

Superficiality vs. Significance: *The Soul's Struggle for Meaning*

Michael Hartoonian



"I wish my daughter to be
A beautiful fool."
-F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby

Introduction

A beautiful fool or an aesthetic soul? It's an interesting choice and that choice marks the enhancement or curtailment of freedom.

As we move further into new phases of modernity, with all its benefits, we are also creating new ways to avoid reality and embrace foolishness, often calling it fun or amusement. The more we separate ourselves from reality, the more vulnerable we become to decadence and corruption. This personal and social decline grows out of unexamined material success and an incomplete understanding of merit and individualism. We must ask: progress toward what and for what purpose? Without that awareness, we lose the chance to cultivate purpose and character and we forget the simple truth that morality is a team sport. No one can be moral alone. It is like a baseball player standing on first base and believing he can score by himself, with no one behind him to advance him around the bases. Playing on a good team makes you better and as you improve, the team gets better. That is, it enhances its social capital.

In baseball, as in life, we always work for ourselves and for others; for the common good. As we work at our personal job for economic and other reasons, we work for others for moral reasons. We build infrastructures that are material and moral at the same time. There can be no just society based entirely on individual merit. The good or just society demands both merit and morality, meaning that self-interest is properly understood. This is the true meaning of Jefferson's "pursuit of (public) happiness."

This essay briefly explores the connection between progress – especially the rise of AI – and the growth of superficiality, along with a retreat from friendship, purpose, happiness and moral seriousness. It asks how we can bring morality to technological advance, lessen the damage of meaninglessness and begin again to care about a life of significance. How do we hold onto a conscious life? How do we avoid living unconsciously?

Superficiality

Superficiality is another name for loss of purpose. Superficiality is an embrace of motivation over purpose. Superficiality destroys identity and personal agency. It replaces reality with false imagery and makes it impossible to be conscious of the question of having anyone or anything to live or die for.

Under superficiality's influence, we create rationales that excuse us from taking ourselves or the world seriously. We misquote Machiavelli to claim that good people make poor leaders or Vince Lombardi to insist that winning is the only thing. We withdraw from situations that require responsibility and blame "the situation" for our lack of agency. "There is nothing I can do anyway," is the common refrain.

And now, as AI appears increasingly powerful, we quietly set aside the burden of sanity and hand human life over to a silicon god, made in the image of "man." Timidity has displaced courage and fear is mistaken for love. Adulthood seems to be disappearing, as we rapidly and voluntarily deskill ourselves into permanent childhood and worse, unconsciousness.

World leaders seem unserious about reality and where they are leading us, while people comfort themselves with the belief that the alligator will eat them last. Or that alligators no longer exist.

Superficiality and AI

Our lack of seriousness about AI illuminates our superficiality of thought and reveals both anxiety and a desire to dismiss it as merely another tool – one that, like earlier technologies, will bring both costs and benefits. Nuclear military power followed a similar pattern. We recognized its power, feared our inability to control it and still persuaded ourselves it could be managed and through alliances, it was, but never completely. There are "wars" being fought over that control still. Climate change and pandemics also pose existential threats, but AI's subtlety and ubiquity make it a qualitative leap beyond them. We have not thought deeply enough about either pandemics or AI. Both are frightening and difficult to understand, so we push them into the unconscious, while AI helps us sustain illusions. Technology demands serious reflection and AI demands global attention: laws, sanctions, education and even taxes on its sales to respond to the displacements already underway. Most of all, it needs a moral partner. Tools are like children entering our lives. They must be guided toward moral purpose through deep engagement not only with power and money, but with philosophy and art. If we fail to do this with AI, we risk the end of human purpose – and perhaps life itself. We must come to know how to employ and build into AI the conceptual framework of virtue friendship, as suggested by Aristotle.

Living a Life that Matters

Confusion between conception and perception has blurred the distinction between mental

images and the images we receive and construct through the senses. We experience the world through perception and take it to be real or true. Yet, the mind forms conceptions that often overlook the facts, definitions and values on which meaning depends. Even when we argue from evidence, reason or logic in search of shared understanding, personal history, ego and self-regard can obstruct our pursuit of truth and even excellence.

We have reached a point in human history where we have produced both biological and silicon offspring, yet may have failed to teach either purpose over mere motivation. We have long assumed that human beings seek meaning and that, like all carbon-based life, nature gives them a purpose – what Aristotle called the fulfillment of potential. Biological life matters, but human beings are distinctive because we can make ethical choices individually and moral choices collectively. When we flourish as social, rational and aesthetic beings, a meaningful or good life becomes possible. Still, that possibility remains only potential. Many forces obstruct meaning and flourishing, including our silicon children, which entertain us, even as we seem unable to guide or restrain them. And we will not do so until we recover and engage our moral identity.

From Superficiality to Wisdom

Moving from our present condition toward something better is difficult. We might call this a theory of discrepancy: the tension between what a person or society is and what it could or ought to become. The word *ought* runs through every serious philosophical argument. It appears in nature's law of potential – the acorn's capacity to become an oak – in the moral reasoning of friendship and dignity and in the disciplined habits needed to build an inner moral architecture. Some human beings may develop such an architecture. As far as we know, no machine can. Even when "smart" data is placed into silicon, that data remains grounded in human information without moral guardrails. The machine can offer only a reckoning, as Thomas Hobbes suggests in *Leviathan*. For Hobbes and modern hedonists, measurement becomes reality and pleasure becomes life's aim. If something cannot be measured, they assume it does not exist. Yet, life's deepest motives – love, beauty, happiness and justice – are damaged when reduced to measurement. We should be cautious about what we believe a machine, trained on measurement, can understand or do. *Leviathan* can be read as an argument against the human mind and as a temptation to trade life for mere existence. Superficiality and hedonism remain close companions.

Wisdom comes through grace and grace is shaped by virtue, reason and aesthetic understanding – qualities that are never easy to acquire. Yet, purpose and meaning depend on them. For many, especially those who cannot move beyond childhood, superficiality is the easier path. They cling to entertainment. "Eat, drink and be merry," with little concern for the future. But whether we like it or not, the future leaves footprints in the present. We may all die tomorrow, but the question remains: what is life for while we are still living it? In *Choruses from The Rock*, T. S. Eliot asks questions that point us toward wisdom:

- Are we knowledgeable of words and ignorant of the word?
- Are we better off now with our innovations, our technical prowess and deluge of information?
- Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
- Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
- Where is the life we have lost by merely living?

I would add that we discover human purpose when we recognize the gap between mere existence and a fully lived life. Human beings, I believe, are meant to pursue public happiness through friendship, civic responsibility, inherited wisdom and care for children, including those born well into the future.

Michael Hartoonian is Associate Editor of Pegasus.

CAUX ROUND TABLE FOR MORAL CAPITALISM

www.cauxroundtable.org | Twitter: @cauxroundtable | Facebook: Caux.Round.Table

Steve Young	David Kansas	Michael Hartoonian	Jed Ipsen	Patrick Rhone
Editor-in-Chief and Publisher	Editor-at-Large	Associate Editor	Assistant Editor	Layout & Design

We hope you enjoyed this issue of Pegasus. Please feel free to share it with others. They can sign up to receive it directly at: https://www.cauxroundtable.org/pegasus/