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Imagination Is the Door to Amazement and Moral Imagination Holds the Key to Unlock It

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Abstract

The present article presents the concept of moral imagination in the general context of imagination as a journey of discovery and a reawakening of the values created through our feelings, emotions and other relevant life experiences that challenge us to appreciate the power of mind to transcend reality. In this vein, special attention should be paid to our moral principles that guide us through life, where we find moral imagination and its overwhelming capacity to engender new ideas, build new skills, and ultimately develop our critical thinking. Morality and imagination have many things in common, although morals refer to the realm of duties and obligations, whereas imagination concerns the faculty of the mind that deals with ideas from afar. To support this seemingly debatable concept, researchers, linguists, educators, and philosophers are brought into the discussion and they provide meaningful substance with theoretical and practical examples. That education should be the cultivation of goodness and good character is just one of the ensuing conclusions, compounded by the idea that practical knowledge also leads to moral imagination and its ancillary assets.

Keywords: Imagination, Morality, Knowledge, Mental Processes, Understanding

1. Introduction

There are times when we need to pay a great deal of attention to our impressions, experiences, and information that otherwise would be dismissed or replaced by well-known facts or belief. That is exactly when imagination kicks in and we find ourselves in a different world, which might take us into another realm of knowledge and meaningfulness.

Our ways of knowing - imagination, stories, morality and the values of goodness, the nature of doing certain things - they are some of the building blocks of knowledge in its purest form. Such simple things, like perception, belief, and reasoning, are at the root of our mental processes. For better words, this is a general idea that comes from reading about the values created through our feelings, emotions, and related human experience and they all teach us life lessons if we pay attention to the power of our mind to transcend reality. At the center of this argument lies imagination and its unquestionable assets:

> Imagination is the door to amazement, which British-American theologian Alan Jones describes as the primordial way of looking at the world. (Somerville, 2009, p. 9)

In other words, we consider imagination essential when the power of the mind comes into view. Furthermore, the author adds that imagination has a unique ability "to help us see, understand, imagine, speak about, and relate to reality." (ibid.) Along the same lines, we might venture to say that we look at many things through our senses, and imagination can go beyond realities

that cannot be perceived in our daily routine. And, if we continue along the path of physical senses, we find what is called *moral imagination* and its overwhelming prowess. According to Matthew Brown (2020), "Our capacities for empathy and compassion depend on our understanding of the perspectives, feelings, and values of others, and are thus acts of imagination." In the author's view, "science and moral imagination directly challenges the idea that science and values cannot and should not influence each other." In this context, therefore, we might be able to discover the outstanding role of imagination and creative thinking in ethics and value judgment. (https://books.google.com/books)

2. Discussion

2.1. Moral Principles and Moral Imagination

Whenever we find ourselves in doubt or morally confused, many of us try to find where moral laws come from, and how they are governed by human reason, religious beliefs, or simply human feelings. Whether we agree or disagree, we eventually realize that "living morally is principally a matter of *moral insight* into the ultimate moral rules, combined with *strength of will* to 'do the right thing' that is required by these rules." (Johnson, 2014, p. ix) In this view, possible moral confusions might be clarified and even explained through rational application of our daily routine.

However, we should not forget that moral principles are closely intertwined with *moral imagination*. As Johnson argues, moral imagination without principles is detrimental, and consequently "moral principles without moral imagination becomes trivial, impossible to apply, and even a hindrance to morally constructive action." Hence, its significance in understanding feelings and building skills to help us win debates about morality and its underlying principles.

Other educators, like John Paul Lederach (2005), "describe the moral imagination as the capacity to recognize turning points and possibilities in order to venture down unknown paths and create what does not yet exist." (Maiese, https://www.beyondintractability.org/bksum/lederach-imagination) The creation of new concepts and ideas will definitely make us who we are and what we are. We possess abilities that make us human.

Along the same lines we may add that "moral imagination is a mental capacity to create or use ideas, images, and metaphors not derived from moral principles or immediate observation." (Moral imagination | Ethics, Philosophy & Human Nature | Britannica) Furthermore, and to add to the same point, "Moral imagination also involves envisioning the full range of possibilities in a particular situation in order to solve an ethical challenge." Not an easy task, but if we combine the mental capacity to generate ideas, images, and metaphors with moral imagination and its approach to ethics, we definitely realize the power of the *moral insights* and the *strength of will*. Moral imagination at its best. Moral Imagination - Ethics Unwrapped (utexas.edu)

According to Adam Smith and his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), using an imaginative act, "one represents to oneself the situation, interests, and values of another person, generating thereby a feeling or passion. If that passion is the same as that of the other person (a phenomenon Smith refers to as 'sympathy'), then a pleasing sentiment results, leading to moral approval. As individuals across society engage their imaginations, an imaginative point of view emerges that is uniform, general, and normative." (Eugene Heath, Moral imagination | Ethics, Philosophy & Human Nature | Britannica)

We find such concepts through immediate observation when we find ourselves in need of moral truth and therefore develop our own moral responses. The best examples will come from our personal experience and from our history and the general culture that surrounds us.

2.2. Morality and Imagination

To begin with, morality and imagination have many things in common, although morals refers to the realm of duties and obligations, whereas imagination has been touted over the centuries to concern the faculty of the mind that deals with ideas and images from afar.

The phrase *moral imagination* was used for the first time by Edmund Burke in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. In Burke's own words,

> I exhibit a moral obligation when I act rightly by my selection from a pre-existing array of approved habits. […] I cannot but act in a way that is familiar and precedented. It is a conscious choice, which the heart owns and the understanding ratifies. (Bromwich, *Moral Imagination*, 2014, p.7)

In this view, moral obligation is a choice found in our heart and, by selecting it from a set of existing habits, we make sure we do our best to comprehend its relevance.

Similar approaches to the same subject can be found in the work of researchers like Edward Tivnan (1996), who postulated that complex issues like moral disputes are not likely to be solved easily, mainly because they might prove to be fundamental and therefore irreconcilable. As such, he argues that we find ourselves in a moral dilemma, but

> The only way we can create a decent society out of so many versions of what Americans think is 'decent' is to understand why we disagree so strongly and learn to live with our disagreements, all the while fighting for our convictions (but never forgetting that we might actually be wrong. This requires what I call 'moral imagination.' (Tivnan, 1996, p.7)

This is the definition Tivnan proposed after delving into the most controversial moral questions of our lives, from abortion to euthanasia, from suicide to capital punishment, and from racial justice to affirmative action. Mediating between opposite ideals, the author avers, is the only way possible when we endeavor to solve emotional issues of everyday life. In this context, he comes to the conclusion that

> Moral progress is impossible without disagreement. But the most productive kind of disagreement demands moral reflection – trying to understand why others believe what they do. And that requires, I believe, moral imagination. (p.10)

Moral imagination becomes intrinsically tied to our innate ability to find common grounds when controversy meets moral issues and we have to decide what the best solution would be.

Such relevant discussion topics were originally debated by moral philosophers, theologians and constitutional scholars, but today the same problems are routinely argued and counter-argued in mass media, social media, and even street demonstrations. These arguments may be as old as Plato and Aristotle, but the widespread use of science and advanced technology can definitely make them available for the people in the street, where people are free to express an opinion.

2.3. Education and the Cultivation of Goodness and Good Character

The reality of our experience is our moral sense, "our inescapable feeling, in the face of temptation, that this is or that is wrong." (Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*, 2012, p. 300) Furthermore, the search for answers regarding reasonable questions will lead to an imperative in us to "act as if the maxim of our action were to become by our will a universal law of nature." (*Practical Reasons*, p. 139) And then not by reasoning, but by using our immediate feeling, we come to the obvious conclusion that there is and should be something in us that will tell us not to lie.

Next, we need to find out where this feeling comes from. It can be argued that there is a sense in all of us that will tell us what to do, but that will come only from the depth of our souls.

Vigen Guroian is famous for his solid and elegant piece of work entitled *Tending the Heart of Virtue*, with its subtitle *How Classic Stories Awaken a Child's Moral Imagination,* in which he touted that children should learn what is good, goodness, what is to be upright. In other words, education should be the cultivation of goodness and good character. Is he talking about instruction of morality in general, or maybe he is going a little deeper? Himself a parent with lots of questions regarding morality and its value, not only in the family, but also in the large frame of our society, Guroian argues in favor of imagination as essential in the process of education:

> Mere instruction in morality is not sufficient to nurture the virtues. It might even backfire, especially when presentation is heavily exhortative and the pupil's will is coerced. (Guroian, 1998, p. 156)

What does he mean by "mere instruction?" Is this acceptable? Or is it not enough? Do we force our students to be what we deem appropriate?

> Instead, a compelling vision of the goodness of goodness itself needs to be presented in a way that is attractive and stirs the imagination. A good moral education addresses both the cognitive and affective dimensions of human nature. (ibid, p. 156)

We should notice that the author points to something that "is attractive and stirs the imagination." Young readers should find the attraction themselves to something that nurtures their imagination:

> The great fairy tales and fantasy stories capture the meaning of morality through vivid depictions of the struggle between good and evil, where characters must make difficult decisions between right and wrong or heroes and villains contest the very fate of imaginary worlds. The great stories avoid didacticism and supply the imagination with important symbolic information about the shape of our world and appropriate responses to its inhabitants. (ibid, pp. 17-18)

Imaginative literature, then, might be considered not only relevant, but also necessary because the work of imaginative fiction is a powerful conveyor of reality.

William Kilpatrick, Gregory and Suzanne M. Wolfe in *Books That Build Character, A Guide to Teaching Your Child Moral Values through Stories* (1994) continue the same idea when they make the connection between imagination and virtue:

> Imagination is one of the keys to virtue. It's not enough to know what is right. It's also necessary to desire to do right. Desire, in turn, is directed to a large extent to imagination. In theory, reason should guide our moral choices, but in practice, it is imagination much more than reason that calls the shots. Too often our reason obediently submits to what our imagination has already decided. (p. 23)

For better words, imagination and virtue play a major role when we involve desire and reason in the process of choosing what to do and how to do it right. Such sophisticated ideas might be quite challenging, but we need to understand how children understand the value of virtue. If we go back in time, we may find an answer in Plato:

> Children should be brought up in such a way that they will love virtue and hate vice. How does a child fall in love with virtue? By being exposed to the right kind of stories, music, and art, said Plato. Such an education helps a child to develop the right sort of likes and dislikes, and without those dispositions it won't matter how much formal training in ethics a youngster later receives. (ibid, p. 23)

The authors of *Books That Build Character, A Guide to Teaching Your Child Moral Values through Stories* plead for the choice of good books that fall into this category:

> That is why books are so important for moral education. They inspire a love of goodness. Stories, then, because of their hold on the imagination, can help to create an emotional attachment to goodness. If other things are in place, that emotional attraction can then grow into a real commitment to goodness. (ibid, p. 24)

Stories, as such, are found to provide the best examples mostly because they deal with imagination and its multi-faceted capacity to sift through likes and dislikes, one of which relates it to our emotions and the general concept of goodness.

For all of us in the education realm, the emotional attachment to the idea of good as the embodiment of moral imagination can practically be found in books, as long as we know that to choose and how to deliver the message to our audience.

2.4. From Moral Education to Moral Imagination

In 2016, Jon M Fennell, Professor at Hillsdale College, asserted that for many years he was puzzled by certain phrases containing 'moral imagination.' After careful research, he contradicted some of his predecessors who claimed that moral imagination is something that can be lost and that it exists in some persons but not in others. His personal view was that "all of us possess moral imagination":

> …moral imagination is the name of a store of images— images pertaining to ideals, principles, meanings, and possibilities—in terms of which one grasps the world and, thereby, in light of which one acts. But the way one acts is a synonym for character. Thus, the building of moral imagination is the formation of character, and to the degree that parents and teachers systematically involve themselves in this activity they are engaged in character education. moral imagination is the name of a store of images—images pertaining to ideals, principles, meanings, and possibilities—in terms of which one grasps the world and, thereby, in light of which one acts. But the way one acts is a synonym for character. Thus, the building of moral imagination is the formation of character, and to the degree that parents and teachers systematically involve themselves in this activity they are engaged in character education. (https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2016/04/what-is-the-moral-imagination.html)

Education, in Fennel's opinion, proves to be absolutely essential in the formation of character, whereby moral imagination helps us clarify its value in building our store of images in the shape of "ideals, principles, meanings, and possibilities."

If all of us possess the ability to create images that build our moral imagination, the act itself is synonymous with character formation, and all we have to do is make sure we accumulate and store the images necessary to empower, sustain, and encourage our students to look for the right sort of choices, and in doing so, build their own character.

The building of moral imagination, therefore, becomes the major factor contributing to our understanding of the world and our sense of purpose. Not an easy task, mainly because, according to Allan Bloom in his translation of the *Republic*, "different men see very different things in the world and, although they may partake of a human nature, they develop very different aspects of that nature; they hardly seem to be of the same species, so little do they agree about what is important in life." (p. 351) In other words, we perceive differently various aspects of the human nature and we understand the world in our own way, which makes the process of education a relevant venue whereby students can choose their own images and build their character accordingly.

2.5. Moral Imagination and Practical Knowledge

According to Lockerd (2024), to solve our probing questions we should "experience the truth imaginatively." (https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2024/07/truth-beauty-educating-moral-imagination-benjamin-lockerd)

In his comprehensive analysis of moral imagination, the author starts by saying that Aristotle claimed that beauty is truth: "A good work of art captures universal truths about humanity." He then went on to add other perspectives:

> St Augustine "gave one of the enduring definitions of beauty; namely, that it is a harmonizing of parts in an ordered whole. This definition seems to me to be the best and most comprehensive. Beautiful works have a complexity of parts resolved in an integral wholeness. They exhibit multiplicity in unity." (ibid.)

The idea of beauty in assembling parts in a whole, no matter how different our perceptions are, is another important component of education because it presents "universal truths about humanity."

In his *Paradiso*, Dante Alighieri (2004) claims that "perfect union of spirit and matter makes objective beauty possible and inevitable." Percy Bysshe Shelley (2017) goes even further and says that "imagination allows us to experience life from the perspective of others and is thus essential to love itself." (ibid.)

In all of the above mentioned cases, we find the validity of our categories of value: truth, goodness, and beauty. Furthermore, we are led to take a quick look at other components that solidify the same concepts:

> Symbols are not chosen randomly but point to an abstract meaning naturally because of what they are physically. Water symbolizes cleansing because it cleanses. The rose symbolizes beauty because it is beautiful. (ibid.)

Along the same lines, Kirk Russell uses "moral imagination" to mean "that power of ethical perception which strides beyond the barriers of private experience and events of the moment." As such, "Kirk's theory of imagination has much in common with the one C.S. Lewis proposes in *The Abolition of Man*. In this book, Lewis argues that good imaginative literature trains the heart to respond with ordinate emotions appropriate to the object presented." And a good example will prove to be useful:

> A beautiful garden is not merely a long stretch of grass but a combination of several different plants of various shapes, heights, textures, and colors (and perhaps rocks and sculptures and benches as well) that somehow works, somehow looks all of a piece." (https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2024/07/truth-beauty-educating-moral-imagination-benjamin-lockerd.html)

That being said, Lockerd (2024) concludes that:

> Finally, we maintain that our human imagination is capable of grasping truth and goodness in ways that move us passionately to live in those objective realities." For better words, "The moral imagination is thus our best defense against what C.S. Lewis called 'the abolition of man. (ibid.)

In this vein, moral imagination is therefore viewed as a powerful tool in the hands of those who know how to use it, especially imaginative people in their quest for truth, goodness, and beauty, which make up the basic values of imaginative literature.

2.6. Practical Knowledge to Understand Moral Imagination

Our everyday life, our life experience, and in our case, the classroom experience might be the best place to foster such ideas through conversations, debates, and similar practical knowledge: "The richness or the poverty of the moral imagination depends on the richness or the poverty of experience." (Guroian, 2023, p. 24) In other words, the moral imagination can be kept active because it motivates us to find meaning, but it needs nurture and proper exercise. And this brings us back to practice, daily classroom activities where we can resort to good examples of literature. However, according to Kilpatrick, there is always a caveat:

> The danger facing children's literature does not come from ogres and villains that haunt the pages of fairy tales and adventure stories; the danger lies, rather, in the continued proliferation of normless books that cater to anxiety and self-absorption, and have nothing to teach about life, except, perhaps, that whatever happens is okay. The danger is not that such books lead to a life of crime, but to a life of boredom, selfishness, and limited horizons. (Kilpatrick, 1994, p. 6)

Books, in this view, should focus on the meaning of life and its intrinsic values, because humans are fundamentally imaginative and have an innate capability to identify the ultimate moral rules combined with the strength of will "to do the right thing." In all these cases, we also have the power to envision and to discern what is relevant in every situation possible.

If we understand that there are no moral constraints when moral imagination comes to the fore, what we need to do is to identify the basic imaginative structures that make up our moral traditions, and consequently find the right books:

> Fortunately, there is no shortage of stories of another sort: books that challenge, thrill, and excite, and awaken young readers to the potential drama of life, especially to the drama of a life lived in obedience to the highest ideals. Such books have something better than therapeutic reassurance. Like true friends, they encourage us to be our best selves. (p. 6)

With such lofty ideals in our mind, the next task would be to find appropriate examples:

> *The Velveteen Rabbit* and *The Little Mermaid, The Wind in the Willows, The Snow Queen, Beauty and the Beast,* and *the Chronicles of Narnia* … [reveal] an aspect of to be truly human, not in a moralistic way by spelling the rules and regulations of right behavior, but in a way that educates the imagination of the reader to see patterns of linking characters, decisions, and events in the real world. It is a way not just of communicating the rules, but showing how the rules work and perhaps even why they work. However fantastic and unreal the landscapes in which these stories unfold, however untrue to life they may be in a factual sense, they are true in the meaning of the word, in that they reflect the way things are. They open our eyes to look not merely at the surface of things, but at their form. (Stratford Caldecott, 2019) https://theclassicalclassroom.com/2019/11/20/caldecott-on-choosing-fiction/

The overall picture masterfully depicted by Caldecott reminds us of Thomas Aquinas, who argued that the task of education is to prepare the mind "for the presence of our common inheritance, the accumulated and accumulating knowledge of the truth of things." (Quoted by Marion Montgomery in Caldecott's *Beauty for Truth's Sake,* 2017) By reclaiming the classical liberal arts, the author further underlines the values teachers and students find when they realize the literary accomplishments of those who focused on truth and beauty on the indelible background of imagination.

In the classroom, when imagination gets center stage, we find ourselves in the position to help our students develop their own ability to imagine by stimulating them with personal examples, with interesting and fascinating stories, but also by encouraging them to learn from each other.

In the middle of our daily routine of jokes, anecdotes, novels, novellas, movies, plays, songs, text messages, memes, we are never satisfied unless or until we can read, or we can hear a good story. Authors create new stories with their own characters through the activity of storytelling. The text of these stories does not describe any real facts, but the message and the lessons we learn will stay with us if and because they engage the audience's imagination.

A good story is a human-made artifact created to stir the readers' imagination by using a certain linguistic approach that entails characters and words that have the ability to capture images in our mind. We might go even further and call this as an act of mental imagery. Skilled storytellers may be able to translate mental visual images into wonderful narratives.

3. Conclusion

And here comes the conclusion that educators and parents can always resort to stories that captivate the audience and, simultaneously stir the imagination. If imagination is the door to amazement, then moral imagination holds the key to its secrets and wonders. Maybe that is why the word *wonderful* has to idea of 'wonder' embedded in its root.

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