

Art and Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Moral Education

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When the fine philosopher Iris Murdoch says that “teaching art is teaching morals,”¹ she is at once in agreement with the poets Shelley and Yeats as well as with John Dewey. She is also radically, even dangerously, susceptible to misunderstanding. She does not mean that the arts, or a study of them, will police a change in behavior, or even contribute to a discussion between Kantian and utilitarian points of view. She does not mean that virtue may be inculcated in the unsuspecting by books of virtues, stories selected to tell you what virtue is, and why you have to do it that way. Rather, she means something much deeper, something close to the heart of morality and of education. She says that art is good for the soul.

A working demonstration of such a concept is difficult. Kant tried it in the third critique, but his arguments are consistent with the ideal of universal reason that informs his work. And since universal reason is problematic, as MacIntyre and others have recently suggested,² this leaves the question of what art actually does open for further study.

Murdoch relates perception of art and of ethics as both essentially imaginative enterprises. Knowledge of that imaginative structure can help us define and explain both. I would like to look at exceptionally strong support for this view from a study made in cognitive science about the imagination as a fundamental component of thought. I’d like to see whether moral reasoning can be seen less as a deductively confined enterprise, and more as an open-ended, constructive, part of thinking that powerfully pervades everyday life. Critically, cognitive science shows how this does not imply any sort of relativism.

In his recent work *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*, Mark Johnson argues that imagination is fundamental to moral reasoning.³ The subject matter here is clearly philosophy, what he teaches, but the conclusion is a novel one in the traditional field. It is, though, an idea with a heritage. Percy Shelley says in his *Essay on the Defence of Poetry*: “A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensively and comprehensively.... Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb.”⁴ And Dewey says in *Art as Experience* that:

The imagination is the great instrument of moral good...the ideal factors in every moral outlook and human loyalty are imaginative.... Were art an acknowledged power in human association and not treated as the pleasuring of an idle moment or as a means of ostentatious display, and were morals understood to be identical with every aspect of value that is shared in experience, the ‘problem’ of the relation of art and morals would not exist.⁵

both speaking of imagination followed in short order by poetry or art, but they are ahead of us here. Let’s see what cognitive science has to say about the imagination and about the way we really reason morally.

In deriving a basis for an imaginative approach, Johnson takes issue with what he calls a folk theory of ethics but which owes its origins to the deontology of Western religion and which reached its apotheosis with Kant. This is the dualistic argument that we are creatures both of passion and of reason, entirely different things, that moral thinking is a matter solely of reason, and that moral action requires the victory of reason over the passions — the autonomous will over heteronomous feelings. That will, acting only with reason, can determine universal laws of ethics and match general precepts to specific cases, abstracting and prioritizing as necessary to effect the match, and so determine right action, without doubt or obscurity in choice or motivation. Cognitive science takes issue with several points here. Johnson says that although:

there is much in [classical moral law] theory that captures important aspects of our moral experience...there is also much in the theory that is incompatible with what the cognitive sciences are revealing about the nature of concepts, reason and understanding. Consequently, most of us who accept and try to live by the Moral Law theory...are likely to experience a certain inescapable tension and cognitive dissonance in our attempts to decide how to act. The problem...is that we are trying to live according to a view that is inconsistent with how human beings actually make sense of things.⁶

How we make sense of things is cognitive science. It holds that we structure our world not deductively, but through means such as prototype recognition, metaphor, and narrative. The substantial value of narrative has been extensively discussed in ethics⁷ and moral education. Metaphor is now receiving wider attention in philosophy and linguistics,⁸ so I will consider its role here after a look at why the less well-known theory of prototype may be more fundamental, compared to a theory of category, to cognition.

Prototype theory holds that we recognize objects around us by comparing them to mental constructions derived from experience. Recognition has to do with resemblance. We recognize a fish because it approaches our model of one, even though the object we presently see does not share all the characteristics of our prototype. Contrast this with the “classical theory...still held by most people [where] every concept or category [of objectively existing objects] is supposedly defined by a set of necessary and sufficient features a thing must possess if it is to fall under that concept.”⁹ How long have humans known the necessary and sufficient conditions for the category of “fish?” Not that long, given the complexity of taxonomy, but humans have been able to recognize fishes for much longer. Classical theory would not allow us to see that a lungfish is a fish; prototype recognition would.

So is classical moral law theory problematic in showing that the moral choice in a given situation or context is a specific application of a general principle, since there are few real-life situations that neatly fit general laws. H.L.A. Hart’s example of wheeled vehicles in a park is excellent, showing that even legal thinking at its most astute questions primacy of classical principle.

A general ethical concept as a practical matter cannot contain a set of necessary and sufficient conditions by which a specific situation could be fit to it. Johnson says

Since our basic moral concepts do not have this essentialist structure, we cannot...simply determine the features of a situation, find the relevant concepts under which it falls, and apply the moral law to get one definite imperative for our action.¹⁰

This is strongly reminiscent of Carol Gilligan's eloquent summation of her moral theory:

Hypothetical dilemmas, in the abstraction of their presentation, divest moral actors from the history and psychology of their individual lives and separate the moral problem from the social contingencies of its possible occurrence. In doing so, these dilemmas are useful for the distillation and refinement of objective principles of justice and for measuring the formal logic of equality and reciprocity. However, the reconstruction of the dilemma in its contextual particularity allows the understanding of cause and consequence¹¹

which her argument requires for ethical action and which, with prototype theory, we can understand in terms of cognitive perception.

In the same way, the cognitive study of metaphor not only agrees with, but complements, the importance philosophy and linguistics attach to it. Johnson and George Lakoff wrote in *Metaphors We Live By* that our thought process is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. If so, much of the moral situation cannot be, as it were, put into words — or should we say, put into thought — any other way.

Contrary to traditional views of meaning...our conceptual system is, for the most part, structured by systematic metaphorical mappings [so] we understand more abstract and less structured domains (such as our concepts of reason, knowledge, belief) via mappings from more concrete and highly structured domains of experience (such as our bodily experience of vision, movement, eating, or manipulating objects). Language, and the conceptual system that underlies it, does not give us a literal core of terms capable of mapping directly onto experience.¹²

Instead, we map the world, including moral obligation, through imagination. Johnson identifies as his central claim that “human moral understanding is fundamentally imaginative [and that] metaphor is one of the principal mechanisms of imaginative cognition.”¹³ Murdoch concurs, calling metaphors “fundamental modes of understanding.”¹⁴ — views greatly at odds with the traditional disparagement of metaphor as fanciful, and obscure or indeterminant.

Some, making that criticism, would mean “fanciful” but say “imaginative,” ignoring Coleridge's distinction, which Murdoch almost agrees with. While his distinction was between

fancy...a shifting-about of given pieces [and] imagination, creative fusion...the contrast more positively in terms of two active faculties, one somewhat mechanically generating narrowly banal false pictures (the ego as all-powerful), and the other [the imagination] freely and creatively exploring the world, moving toward the expression and elucidation (and in art celebration) of what is true and deep.¹⁵

In support of the value of an imaginative connection with the world, Martha Nussbaum shows that the imagination that can see particularity is essential to Aristotelian practical reasoning. Aristotle's attack on purely “scientific” conceptions of rationality included “a defense of the emotions and the imagination as essential to rational choice.”¹⁶ She argues that while Kantian theory finds imagination something like frivolous flights of fancy that can conflict with duty, Aristotle's view of it placed emphasis upon:

its selective and discriminatory character rather than upon its capability for free fantasy. Its job is more to focus on reality than to create unreality...the person of practical wisdom will not neglect the concrete deliverances of the imagination when thinking about virtue and goodness. Instead of ascending from particular to general, deliberative imagination links particulars without dispensing with their particularity.¹⁷

To address the second objection to metaphor, obscurity: it is vital to see that what imagination connects with and explores the world, using the tool of metaphor. Imagination is grounded in experience and is no more indeterminate. It seems to be, very simply, how we make sense of experience, including moral experience. Murdoch says:

Imagination, if the concept is in question at all, can scarcely be thought of as morally neutral. When we settle down to be “thoroughly rational” about a situation, we have already, reflectively or unreflectively, imagined it in a certain way. Our deepest imaginings which structure the world in which “moral judgments” occur are already evaluations. Perception itself is a mode of evaluation.¹⁸

A statement that is reminiscent of philosophers of science, Kuhn and others, who show that observation is theory-laden. If observation of phenomena requires an act of the imagination to achieve final coherence, why should moral observation be any different?

The notion of the imagination as a rich sort of observation, in fact a necessary component of any observation, suggests the heart of what cognitive study can offer to the argument for the primacy of imagination. Seeing the mind as part of the body, and imagination as in essence a physical mechanism, provides a grounding that the classical theory cannot. For example, we are constrained in visual observation by the acuity of our vision, by how far, in general terms, a person can be expected to see. Some people see farther than others; some see better at night, yet the constraints of the species prevail. Also, we communicate in the essentially public and necessarily cooperative developments called languages. Even our thought, as Dewey said, is a social construction.

As well, we all share human needs, and concepts of flourishing at least greatly overlap. Johnson agrees that metaphor as cognition is biologically constrained, and Philip Kitcher, discussing a resurgence of naturalism in philosophy, says “Discussions of anthropological relativism make plain how easy it is to impute variable ends by failing to allow for the possibility that common goals are articulated differently in different circumstances.”¹⁹ The specter of relativism is in fact far less a problem for biologically and historically grounded creatures such as we, than it would be if principles of universal reason were what we must look for. The failure of what MacIntyre called the Enlightenment Project to find an entirely rational basis for morality is one sign of the problem. With the more recent realization that the analytic/synthetic distinction is a tenuous construction, we would want to ask, what would a truly analytic and purely rational theory be like, if there could be one?

Rather, if the imagination is fundamental to moral reasoning, are we one step closer to understanding Murdoch’s claim that teaching art is teaching morals? Even Kant felt that:

Beauty symbolizes morality because the free imagination in its co-operation with the orderly rule-giving understanding, when in contemplation it creates and sustains beautiful objects, is like the free activity of the moral will in obedience to laws of reason, when we “construct” a moral problem and its solution.²⁰

suggesting a mirroring of some structure of thinking, if no more. Murdoch goes further, saying:

“Truth” is something we recognize in good art when we are led to a juster, clearer, more detailed, more refined understanding. Good art “explains” truth itself, by manifesting deep conceptual connections. Truth is clarification, justice, compassion...the mysterious imaginative power of the artist...is not remote from moral imagination.²¹

but, if so, how? Might something, who knows what, in a painting or a novel “feel” true, in a confusion of terms or emotions? That’s not much support for anything. There’s a need to show some similarity in the structure of perception, something more than Kant’s symbolizing, to be able to argue that the imagination at work in moral perception are similar to what happens when we experience art as Dewey saw we can experience it.

There might be a clue in Murdoch’s word to relate ethical and aesthetic experience. She says:, “Our moral experience shares in the peculiar density of art,”²² and “in everyday moral discussion... we deploy a complex densely textured network of values round an intuited centre of ‘good’.”²³ “Looked at in this way, life can be seen as full of aesthetic imaginative activity which is also, scarcely distinguishably, moral activity.”²⁴ What could she mean by “density?” She could not mean obscure, since her whole discussion of imagination and of truth manifested in art implies a final clarity. She may mean “complex” in more than the sense of simply having many parts or connections. With the aesthetic, for example, expression and perception seems complex in a special way, one outlined by Nelson Goodman in *Languages of Art*.²⁵ He describes these qualities or “symptoms” of the aesthetic:

- 1) syntactic density: a work of art contains an undefined number of referents, so constructed that between any two points, there is room for a third. There is thus no limit or priority, or necessary distinction, among the referents.
- 2) syntactic repleteness: the greater part of these referents need to be employed by the viewer to generate meaning. We cannot say that only ten, or a thousand, referents are significant in an artwork, and the rest are superfluous.
- 3) semantic density: the number, variety and density of referents is sufficient that paraphrase of the artwork is impossible. To do so would require that, from the density and profusion of referents, a finite number be extracted. To do that requires prioritizing.

so that something more than deductive reasoning is required to make sense of the referents in the artwork. What the painting or novel does cannot be outlined, paraphrased, or generalized.

I take Murdoch to be saying that imaginative connection is as essential to ethical perception as to aesthetic; that the perception of a moral situation involves something like Goodman’s symptoms of the aesthetic. Do these symptoms work, in moral terms?

In fact they do. Syntactic and semantic density describe our understanding that there’s not a necessary limit, perhaps numbering in the single digits, of “things that count” in a moral question. Usually, the claim: “Look, it’s a simple matter of” is an attempt or a plea to simplify, sometimes a disingenuous one. This density is the reason we canno’t establish the necessary and sufficient conditions the classical theory requires for applying general principles to specific examples, and can’t

necessarily or completely rank order the conditions we can see. As well, paraphrase doesn't work in moral thinking. Empathy, an imaginative construction, has nothing to do with category.

When Murdoch speaks of the density of art she is speaking, I think, in Goodman's sense and saying that the dense and replete particularity — the full context — of a moral situation requires imagination to complete and to see. The poet Yeats concurs, and points to a direction for education:

I have observed dreams and visions very carefully, and am now certain that the imagination has some way of lighting on the truth that the reason has not, and that its commandments, delivered when the body is still and the reason silent, are the most binding we can ever know.... The arts are, I believe, about to take upon their shoulders the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders of priests.²⁶

Although study of imagination and metaphor in philosophy, linguistics, and cognitive science has barely begun, Murdoch and Johnson already have something crucial to say to education. If moral thinking does not work deductively, how could it be taught that way? Attempts to do so would have to fail and, compounding the problem, be seen as hypocritical by the young people we need so badly to reach.

Yet a "teaching" of art as moral instruction would fail as badly. I can envision a curriculum in which the value to be received from art is delineated and prioritized. Multiple-choice tests would be possible. The effect would be devastating.

I saw a series of photographs called "Material World" a year ago. Typical families from most countries of the world took their possessions outdoors — onto the street, onto the roof, depending on architecture, and a picture was taken. The rich colors of cultural artifacts shone in the natural light of so many parts of the world. Household objects, things of value, became almost palpable. You could nearly taste the food they ate, and you saw in their faces how that light and food and culture shaped them as it nourished them.

I shared the museum with a school tour. Bright twelve-year-olds responded eagerly to the photographs, or tried to. Teachers with menace in their voices guided or controlled both movement and discussion. They admonished students to quantify their observations. Their questions had the tone of tests. They looked very tired. But some students sneaked around the corner and looked at other pictures on their own. Their enthusiasm about and comments on the art were wonderful, and their socialization was at a much different level than the main group.

I think about the best kind of school, where the prevailing energy is one of excited exploration — about any subject since, as Dewey thought, the aesthetic experience is in no way limited to what is traditionally called art. A free imagination is a wonderful thing to bring to science and history as well. In this best way, learning itself is a moral activity. Like the aesthetic, moral sensibilities pervade every aspect of everyday life. Reasoning about them is essential and good, as a sign of attention and sincere attempt to choose right and live well, but the larger part lies elsewhere. That's why moral education, at its best, is nourishment for the imagination.

1. Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 322.

2. Alisdair Macintyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).
3. Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 8.
4. Percy Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," in *Prose of the Romantic Period*, ed. Carl Woodring (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), 495.
5. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1934), 344-49.
6. Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, 8.
7. Alisdair Macintyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).
8. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
9. Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, 8.
10. *Ibid.*, 9.
11. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 100.
12. Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, 10.
13. *Ibid.*, 33.
14. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 306.
15. *Ibid.*, 321.
16. Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 55.
17. *Ibid.*, 77-78.
18. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 314.
19. Philip Kitcher, "The Naturalists Return," *Philosophical Review* 101, no. 1 (January 1992).
20. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 321.
21. *Ibid.*, 314, 323.
22. *Ibid.*, 341.
23. *Ibid.*, 325.
24. *Ibid.*, 324.
25. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 251.
26. W.B. Yeats, "Ideas of Good and Evil" in *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Collier, 1961), 65.