

Moral imagination as the foundation of ethics

Floris van den Berg

What argument could possibly convince someone of bringing a person within the scope of another person's moral concern? Many traditional ethics and value systems are exclusive systems: some people are in and some are out. Those who are set apart in a different moral category are submitted to a different, lesser, moral concern. In traditional ethics women have such a position. The best position to be in, in most traditional value systems, is of that of the group of males who hold power, like the native male citizen's of Athens 500 BC, when women, slaves and foreigner had much lesser freedom. Traditional ethics can no longer be rationally justified. Without god or any other transcendental skyhook for moral justice (more often, injustice), ethics can no longer be grounded in supernatural causes. Ethics should look for common ground which binds all human beings and perhaps even all sentient beings. Therefore ethics will be in conflict with many traditional value systems which do not look for a common ground of all humanity, but only for their own well described group.

It is not possible to find enough common ground for morality in evolutionary theory. The evolutionary approach to ethics can *explain* why people discriminate against others, because people want *their* culture, *their* group, and, subconsciously, *their* genes to spread and flourish. Evolutionary ethics is descriptive but not of very much value in solving normative problems. To behave ethically is a choice. Fundamentally it is an individual choice embedded in a social context. People can choose to behave ethically or not. There is a difference between acting in accordance with the law and acting morally. Not all laws are morally sound. It is fortunate to live in a society in which the law is to a considerable degree morally justifiable. In Nazi Germany there was a strong difference between acting according to the law and acting morally.

Why should people be moral? There is no categorical imperative that people should be moral. To be moral is a choice. The choice to be moral or not is of fundamental importance for one's character. Sartre has argued for the importance of individual choice of morality in his famous essay *Existentialism and Humanism* (1946). Sometimes being moral has a positive influence on the actor's life, sometimes not. I do not think there is any basis or foundation of deontological values, such as the notion of duty or dignity. People can choose

to attach value to the notion of duty. People can act *as if* human life has dignity – though it is unclear what the word means. To be moral is an individual choice which is not directly related to that person's wellbeing or happiness.

Game theory has a solution for the problem why people should act morally. Richard Dawkins wrote a chapter 'Nice guys finish first' on this in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976). He concludes that it pays off to be nice. If everybody, or at least most people, are nice (i.e. behave morally), then all would be better off. Game theory gives a utilitarian basis for moral behaviour. This leads to the essence of the problem of evil: the free rider problem; those who take advantage of the benevolence of the system, for example those in The Netherlands who take advantage of the welfare state. When many people take 'a free ride' there is the risk that the system might collapse. Many people egoistically care for their own short term well being and in order to gain an advantage for themselves, they harm other people. However, if they would have chosen to act in accordance to the best overall outcome they would have behaved morally.

Can a sane person rationally want to be in an underdog position? What if it was you who were in the position of the underdog? To be in a position of being hungry, enslaved, maltreated, discriminated against? Try to imagine being in the worst off position in a society: what if you were a homosexual who was denied the right to marry or even denied the right to have a sexual relationship? It will be hard to imagine for some who have strong opinions against homosexuality. But if you really were to imagine yourself to be in the position of a homosexual denied access to life fulfilling goals, you would not want that yourself. If everybody in principle imagined being in a worst off position, these positions could be improved.

Of course it is not possible to do the imaginative switch all the time. It can be used as a moral and political tool in order to structure the institutions of a society. Policy makers and politicians should use this tool in order to create a just and well-ordered society. The outcome of the procedure of the Moral Imagination Switch will be some kind of liberal democratic welfare state in which individual freedom should be as large as possible. So, in such a society same sex marriages are legal, as are abortion, euthanasia, medically assisted suicide, sexual freedom and freedom of thought and opinion. The Moral Imagination Switch has great bearing on the multicultural society. To me, it does not seem rational that any person can rationally want to be educated within a cultural religious system which denies them the truth, and other rival opinions. Therefore, the Moral Imagination Switch cannot

justify education and indoctrination of children and adolescents with cultural heritage which is untrue and furthermore propagates ethics which cannot be universally (i.e. by the imaginative switch) justified. For example, mainstream religious traditions of many kinds (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) do not approve of homosexuality and abortion.

Why should people care to look at the world through the eyes of those worst off? If you are in a privileged position why would you care to look at the world through such a miserable perspective? Indeed, there is no compelling reason (apart from utilitarian optimization theory) why one should give up his or her privileges. Once people will use the imagination switch tool, the tool will do its work to show how a wide range of social injustices can be solved. However, the problem is how people can be persuaded to adopt the Moral Imagination Switch. By stimulation, invitation and persuasion people can adopt the moral perspective. Education in moral imagination is crucial. The process of social acculturation usually and unfortunately closes many options for moral imagination.

If liberalism is interpreted by means of the Moral Imagination Switch, then this form of liberalism cannot paradoxically tolerate cultures and practices which do not tolerate individual autonomy (that is the freedom of an individual to do as (s)he chooses as long as (s)he does not harm others). So, liberalism cannot tolerate intolerance against individual autonomy.

Some religious and conservative people say they feel offended by behaviour of others and say they are deeply grieved. Well, this is unfortunate for those who have these feelings, but it is not possible for a state to protect feelings of individuals in this way without becoming a police state which in turn will frustrate and harm many individuals. All ethical and political theories are suboptimal, second best (or worse) solutions to clashes of needs.

There are different levels where the tool or method of the Moral Imagination Switch can be used. One is, as mentioned above, as a device to make policy, laws and to create institutions. A different level is in moral education. I think the essence of moral education is the ability to perform a Moral Imagination Switch with as many different positions as possible and to think these positions through and feel the other person from within. In order to be able to perform this psychological thought experiment one has to stand back from one's own position embedded in social and cultural surroundings with its prejudices.

The arts and foremost literature can help to stimulate moral imagination. By reading novels for example one sees and experience the world from a different perspective. It is not necessary that the author puts explicitly moral lessons in the work. The moral value of

reading literature is in the mind of the beholder. The reader should ask his or herself moral questions while reading. The attitude of adopting a moral way of reading and appreciating art can be learned and practiced through education. The questions ‘Why read literature?’ can be answered with: In order to become more morally skilled. Art can and should be an education of the senses. Of course there are more reasons for appreciating the arts, but the moral value is important and justifies attention for education in the arts. Peter Singer and his wife Renate compiled the book *The Moral of the Story. An Anthology of Ethics through Literature* (2005) with fragments from novels which are stimulating the Moral Imagination Switch. Martha Nussbaum also stresses the importance of literature for moral education. In her lengthy book *Love’s Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1990) she analyzes several books as an example of how these books can stimulate the moral imagination. Richard Rorty even argued that Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) did more to abandon slavery, than any philosophical manifest did. Literature can help to promote a moral Gestalt switch.

The study and teaching of history should be along the lines of moral imagination. Instead of studying the ‘great evil man of the past’ it is important to study which groups and individuals were excluded by which (political, cultural, religious) system. The study of culture (anthropology) can also show what groups are discriminated against in different cultures. The main tool for this line of study and teaching is the Moral Imagination Switch: always try to imagine yourself to be in the worst off position and try to find out what can be done about that.

Children tend to be morally imaginative when stimulated by explicit examples of moral evil or pity: children (and many adults too) cry when watching *E.T.*. They cry because they feel pity. That is a strange phenomenon: children feel pity for a creature which is alien. Children still have the basic competence for moral understanding: the ability to imagine to be in a position different from its own position, even if it is a creature alien from itself. The process of growing up and becoming socialized usually is a process of putting up moral blinkers in order *not* to feel pity and responsible for some kind of pain, agony or misery. Children can have acute moral concern e.g. for a baby bird which has fallen from the nest. Grown ups usually do not care. Most children like farm animals. But most parents do not like to show their children how production animals are cruelly treated in factory farms. Probably because people are ashamed. The cruelty of factory farming is a public secret: everyone knows but as long as it is out of sight hardly anyone cares. Can the Moral Imagination

Switch help? Can you imagine yourself to be a cow which is held in a factory farm? Even without knowledge of animal psychology every child knows that these animals are not happy; not as happy as they would be in a green lush meadow. It is not hard to recognize suffering in animals. If I were a cow, I would not want to be maltreated in a factory farm.

It is important to keep in mind the evolutionary structure of organic nature. There is a scale of ability to suffer, depending on the development of the neural system and the brain. Mussels have a less developed neural system than apes; therefore the ability to suffer is less in mussels than in apes. To swat a fly (instantly killing an animal with a rudimentary neural system) therefore is different from torturing farm animals in factory farms (inflicting unnecessary continuous suffering to creatures that *can* suffer).

Moral imagination should be used in a coherent way. Here is an example of deficit moral imagination. Filmmaker Michael Moore writes in *Stupid White Man* (2001) that in one of his documentaries a rabbit is clubbed to death. This scene caused a lot of stir and an incredible load of reaction. Somewhat later in the same documentary a black man is shot. This did not cause reaction. Several conclusions can be drawn from this anecdote. First, people *do* have moral imagination. They feel pity for the rabbit. Or, but this is a cynical interpretation, they do not care for the rabbit but they just do not want to see it. Second, the moral imagination works for a direct confrontation with animal cruelty, but not for humans. A crucial part of moral imagination has gone numb. This might be a result of the daily amount of cruelty, suffering and misery on television, both real and fictitious. Third, I do not suppose that all the people who were opposed to the rabbit scene were ethical vegetarians. Therefore, their moral imagination is weak. They *do* react outraged when confronted directly with cruelty against animals, but they do not care about the cruelty against animals in farm factoring.

The Moral Imagination Switch is a tool for moral reform. Using the tool can create solutions for many ethical problems, but not all problems can be solved with it. The Moral Imagination Switch can be used in a larger political and ethical theory of Universal Subjectivism. Universal Subjectivism is a form of social constructivism which uses a hypothetical social contract as thought experiment in order to look for a planetary ethics which has common ground with all humanity, and more.

Imagination is crucial for moral understanding and being morally good.