

ism is avoided because there are shared bases for metaphors within a culture, and even across cultures. Extreme relativism is avoided because some metaphors appear to be grounded in universal bodily experiences.

NARRATIVE

Richard Rorty has observed that people who care about their moral self-development turn, not to philosophical texts on moral theory, but rather to novels, short stories, and plays.⁷ This might seem too obvious to mention, were it not for the fact that many philosophers convince themselves and their students that books on moral theory will tell us how we ought to behave. Why is it that we turn to literary texts for our moral education? Why do we learn more from narratives than from academic moral philosophy about what it is to be human, about the contingencies of life, about the kinds of lives we most want to lead, and about what is involved in trying to lead such lives?

The key to the answer is that our lives ultimately have a narrative structure. It is in sustained narratives, therefore, that we come closest to observing and participating in the reality of life as it is actually experienced and lived. We learn from, and are changed by, such narratives to the extent that we become imaginatively engaged in making fine discriminations of character and in determining what is morally salient in particular situations. We actually enter into the lives of the characters, and we perform acts of perception, decision, and criticism. We find ourselves judging of a character that she shouldn't have done X, or wishing that he had seen a particular situation differently than he did. We want to stop the characters and tell them, "Oh, no, don't do *that*!" or "No, that's not what she meant." Just as in life, we find ourselves surprised by what happens, or disappointed in ourselves for not having seen something earlier. We explore, we learn, and we are changed by our participation in the fiction that creatively imitates life.

In two major books Martha Nussbaum has mounted an extended and quite eloquent argument for the central role of literature in our moral development.⁸ Arguing for the importance of extended narratives as a basis for moral philosophy, Nussbaum makes the case that

a whole tragic drama, unlike a schematic philosophical example making use of a similar story, is capable of tracing the history of a complex pattern of deliberation, showing its roots in a way of life and looking forward to its consequences in that life. As it does all of this, it lays open to view the complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer difficulty of actual human deliberation. . . . A tragedy does not display the dilemmas of

its characters as pre-articulated; it shows them searching for the morally salient; and it forces us, as interpreters, to be similarly active.⁹

Narrative makes it possible for us not only to explore the consequences of decisions and commitments over an extended period of time, but also to reflect on the concrete particularities that make up the fine texture of our actual moral experience. It invites us to develop our perception of character, of what is important in a given situation, and of the subtly interwoven threads of our moral entanglements: "For stories cultivate our ability to see and care for particulars, not as representatives of a law, but as what they themselves are: to respond vigorously with senses and emotions before the new; to care deeply about chance happenings in the world, rather than to fortify ourselves against them; to wait for the outcome and to be bewildered—to wait and to float and be actively passive."¹⁰

Tracing out over an extended time period the consequences of various moral deliberations is therefore crucial to our moral knowledge, and it is essential for moral education. It is through sustained life narrative—through the narratives we live out and construct, and through the fictional narratives we imaginatively inhabit—that we can perform these essential reflections and moral inquiries.

John Gardner has argued that fiction is a laboratory in which we can explore in imagination the probable implications of people's character and choices. He describes what he calls "moral fiction" as a "philosophical method" in which art "controls the argument and gives it its rigor, forces the writer to intense yet dispassionate and unprejudiced watchfulness, drives him—in ways abstract logic cannot match—to unexpected discoveries and, frequently, a change of mind."¹¹ His point is that in a fictional setting we can explore the way a person with a certain character, placed within certain circumstances, might live his life. We can see how his self-knowledge, or lack of it, determines what he does and how that affects others. We can see how his care, or lack of it, determines the quality of his relationships and the morality of his actions.

The power of fictional narrative to develop our moral sensitivity, our ability to make subtle discriminations, and our empathy for others, is thus the result of the narrative structure of our lives. Even where moral laws do exist, we learn what they mean and how they apply only by seeing people, ourselves and others, try to live by them over extended periods.¹² To understand what certain virtues involve and how a person's character manifests itself, we need to see them realized in the narrative fabric of human lives. To see what the acceptance of certain values entails, we must trace out their implications over large periods of time, and in dif-

ferent contexts. *Narrative explorations of this sort are, in fact, what moral reasoning is all about.*

In short, we must recognize the narrative dimensions of our lives, both the narratives we inherit from our culture and the particular instantiations of those narratives that we are constructing in our own lives. Any adequate moral philosophy must give a central role to the narrative structure of experience and to the nature of the particular narratives that make up different moral traditions. Fictional narratives provide us rich, humanly realistic experimental settings in which we can make our own moral explorations. We make those explorations, not just in novels and plays, but also in the narrative construction of our lives. This, I take it, is what Richard Eldridge means when he says that “these texts, these readings, and the understanding of our moral personhood in the world that they develop will be true or successful not because a known method or criterion tells us so, but only insofar as we take them up, live them, make sense and assessments of our lives in their terms.”¹³

What Difference Does Moral Imagination Make?

Let me summarize what I have been arguing concerning the difference that moral imagination ought to make in how we live our lives. A theory of morality should be a theory of moral understanding. Moral understanding is in large measure imaginatively structured. The primary forms of moral imagination are concepts with prototype structure, semantic frames, conceptual metaphors, and narratives. To be morally insightful and sensitive thus requires of us two things: (1) We must have knowledge of the imaginative nature of human conceptual systems and reasoning. This means that we must know what those imaginative structures are, how they work, and what they entail about the nature of our moral understanding. (2) We must cultivate moral imagination by sharpening our powers of discrimination, exercising our capacity for envisioning new possibilities, and imaginatively tracing out the implications of our metaphors, prototypes, and narratives.

The first requirement above, gaining knowledge of our moral understanding, entails that we will give up the illusions both of absolute moral values and of radical moral subjectivism. It requires us to give up the idea that moral reasoning is finding prearticulated rules and fitting them to situations. It demands that we study in detail the metaphoric structure of our morality, asking what it highlights and what it hides. Finally, it gives us a way to determine what might be changeable in our understanding and what such changes would entail for who we are and how we affect others.

The second requirement, that of developing our moral imagination, changes our conception of moral development. It sees our primary task as less a matter of learning how to apply moral laws and more a task of refining our perception of character and situations and of developing empathetic imagination to take up the part of others.

These, then, are some of the senses in which an experientialist view of moral theory can still give us some of the kinds of guidance we desire from a moral theory. It can't tell us what to do in given situations, but then neither could traditional Moral Law theories. Rather, it gives the kind of general guidance that comes from enhanced moral understanding and self-knowledge.

Empathetic Imagination

Traditional moral theories have almost entirely ignored one of our most important moral capacities—the capacity for empathy. Hume's treatment of what he called "sympathy" or "fellow-feeling"¹⁴ touches on this issue, but it does not go to the heart of imaginative empathetic projection into the experience of other people.¹⁵ As a limiting case, it requires the ability to imagine *ourselves* in different situations and conditions at past and future times. Unless we can put ourselves in the place of another, unless we can enlarge our own perspective through an imaginative encounter with the experience of others, unless we can let our own values and ideals be called into question from various points of view, we cannot be morally sensitive.

Hume was therefore at least partially correct in recognizing a general sympathy as the basis for morality: "Utility is only a tendency to a certain end; and were the end totally indifferent to us, we should feel the same indifference towards the means. It is requisite a *sentiment* should here display itself, in order to give a preference to the useful above the pernicious tendencies. This sentiment can be no other than a feeling for the happiness of mankind, and a resentment of their misery."¹⁶

What Hume misses is that, beyond a feeling for the well-being of others, we need also to imaginatively take up their experience. According to the traditional interpretation of Hume's moral theory, he misses this aspect because of his rigid separation of reason and feeling, which forces him to deny reason a central role in morality. But Annette Baier has argued that Hume is actually criticizing this strict separation of reason and feeling. She suggests that Hume's entire project gradually builds up a rich and subtle account of rational sentiment as underlying our ability to imaginatively take up the part of another person.¹⁷ In any case, the most

charitable way to construe Hume's sentiment for the welfare of others is as a blending of feeling, imagination, and reason.

This 'taking up the place of another' is an act of imaginative experience and dramatic rehearsal of the sort described by Nussbaum and Eldridge in their accounts of narrative moral explorations. It is perhaps the most important imaginative exploration we can perform. It is not sufficient merely to manipulate a cool, detached 'objective' reason toward the situation of others. We must, instead, go out toward people to inhabit their worlds, not just by rational calculations, but also in imagination, feeling, and expression.

Reflecting in this way involves an *imaginative rationality* through which we can participate empathetically in another's experience: their suffering, pain, humiliation, and frustrations, as well as their joy, fulfillment, plans, and hopes. Morally sensitive people are capable of living out, in and through such an experiential imagination, the reality of others with whom they are interacting, or whom their actions might affect.

I would describe this imaginative rationality as *passionate*, if that word were not so laden with subjectivist connotations. Roberto Unger describes as passionate "the whole range of interpersonal encounters in which people do not treat one another as means to one another's ends."¹⁸ Passion is the basis of our noninstrumental relations to others, and it takes us beyond fixed character, social roles, and institutional arrangements.

Extending my earlier argument that Kant's categorical imperative requires imaginative (metaphoric) interpretation, we can now see that the Kantian imperative always to treat others (and oneself) as ends-in-themselves has no practical meaning independent of our imaginatively taking up the place of the other. Contrary to Kant's explicit claims, we cannot know what it means to treat someone as an end-in-himself, in any concrete way, unless we can imagine his experience, feelings, plans, goals, and hopes. We cannot know what respect for others demands of us, unless we participate imaginatively in their experience of the world.

We need this same reflective attitude toward, and imaginative knowledge of, ourselves, if we hope ever to rise above the level of creatures driven by immediate needs, desires, and whims. For we must be able to imagine how we might feel and think and act in various hypothetical situations.

It is extremely important to understand that the kind of empathetic imaginative understanding involved here is not merely personal or subjective. Such a romantic view of empathy, as a kind of flowing-into-the-other by giving oneself up to

strong fellow-feeling, is an artifact of an erroneous traditional separation of reason, imagination, and feeling. However, even the romantic poets understood the shared, communal character of imagination and feeling. The poetry of both Wordsworth and Coleridge, for example, often involves meditations directed toward revivifying strong human feelings that bind us together in community. Both the *Lyrical Ballads* and the *Biographia Literaria* explore the communal and transformative character of an imagination that makes it possible for us to understand each other, to share a world, and to reach out to others in a caring way.

Now that we have seen the social, public, and constitutive dimensions of imagination (in conceptual structure, metaphor, image schemas, and narrative), we can dismiss subjectivist readings of imagination, as being cognitively and experientially false. We need not worry that empathetic imagination is a private, personal, or utterly subjective activity. Rather, it is the chief activity by which we are able to inhabit a more or less common world—a world of shared gestures, actions, perceptions, experiences, meanings, symbols, and narratives.

Moral imagination is public and shared.¹⁹ It has the same public character as do our social relations, practices, and institutions, for all of these are defined by metaphors and other imaginative structures. Imagination, as I have described it, is the primary means by which social relations are constituted. Consider, for example, the imaginative dimensions of all sexual relations that have a truly social dimension. A sexual act can be meaningful only if it is more than a sequence of passive reactions to stimulation. Each person must imaginatively grasp the other's acts as responses to one's own intentions and acts. I must experience your touching of me as both expressing your desire and as directed toward me and my desire. I must take up and carry forward your desire in my active response to you. In happy cases the result is a reciprocal play between partners, a kind of erotic dialectic in which we share in each other's experience. Joseph Kupfer explains the nature of this reciprocity as

sharing in each other's ends, each taking risks in respect to the same things and with regard to one another at the same time. . . . Sexual reciprocity is also responding to another's physical response: moving to the other's movement, stroking the caressing hand, embracing the embracer. It includes acting on the needs and desires which we perceive the other to have. At the same time, our partner is responding in like fashion to us. Furthermore, reciprocity includes responding both for our own sake and for the sake of the other, independent of our personal stake.²⁰

Meaningful sexual relations are, in this way, social and deeply imaginative. As such, they are representative of human relations generally, which rest on the ability to take up the part of the other and to let one's ongoing interactions and relations be guided by one's imaginative grasp of the experience and intentions of other people. It is this kind of empathetic understanding that underlies the possibility of any morality that is more than mere rule-following.

The Imaginative Envisionment of Possibilities for Acting

Beyond knowledge of our own and others' cognitive and moral capacities and perspectives, beyond an abiding fellow-feeling, beyond the ability to inhabit imaginatively the world of another, something more is yet required. That 'something more' is an ability to imaginatively discern various possibilities for acting within a given situation and to envision the potential help and harm that are likely to result from a given action.

Care, concern, and good intentions are not enough. We are social creatures who live in communities, whose material and emotional well-being require social relationships and interactions, and whose individual and joint projects require actions directed toward goals, such as satisfying our material, interpersonal, and cultural needs. We need, not just to will purely, but rather to act in ways that promote the well-being of ourselves and others.

Kant is famous for denying that purposive activity is or ever could be definitive of the morality of our willing. He sought to remind us that a good will stands forth as morally praiseworthy in its own right, without regard to any ends it might or might not achieve: "Even if it should happen that, by a particularly unfortunate fate or by the niggardly provision of a step-motherly nature, this will should be wholly lacking in power to accomplish its purpose, and if even the greatest effort should not avail it to achieve anything of its end, and if there remained only the good will (not as a mere wish but as the summoning of all the means in our power), it would sparkle like a jewel in its own right, as something that had its full worth in itself" (*F*, 394).

Kant was right in observing that uncontrollable contingencies ought not to detract from the merit of good willing. However, moral action requires us to realize ends, both immediate (e.g., to assist an accident victim) and long-range (e.g., to educate the young), both narrow (e.g., to help someone find shelter) and comprehensive (e.g., to realize an overarching pattern of social relations). Good willing doesn't exist in itself, locked up in inner mental space and isolated from our actions. Will is not an entity separated from its directedness toward the realiza-

tion of various ends, purposes, and plans, most of which require joint actions and projects. Our will is thus spread out in the activity of our ongoing lives, though it is not reducible to that activity.

The envisioning of possibilities for fruitful, meaningful, and constructive action requires moral imagination. Our ability to criticize a moral view depends on our capacity for imagining alternative viewpoints on, and solutions to, a particular moral problem. In order to adapt and grow, we must be able to see beyond our present vantage point and to grow beyond our present selves. We must be able to imagine new dimensions for our character, new directions for our relationships with others, and even new forms of social organization. Roberto Unger has articulated both the need and the conditions of possibility for imaginative transformation of this sort.

So you know . . . that, though it is your fate to live within conditional worlds, you also have the power to break outside them. When you do that, however, you do not reach the unconditional: the thought beyond limiting method and language, the society beyond limiting practical and imaginative structure, the personality beyond limiting character. You can, nevertheless, work toward a situation that keeps alive the power to break the limits: to think thoughts that shatter the available canon of reason and discourse, to experiment with forms of collective life that the established practical and imaginative order of society locks out or puts down, to reach out toward the person beyond the character.²¹

It is precisely by recognizing the always partial nature of our metaphors, schemas, and narratives that we can keep ourselves alerted to the constant necessity of stretching ourselves beyond our present identity and context. No person can be moral in a suitably reflective way who cannot imagine alternative viewpoints as a means of understanding and transforming the limits of his own convictions and commitments. This is an activity of moral imagination.

Imaginative Moral Reasoning

The metaphors and other imaginative structures that make us aware of our conditioned state and the need to seek out alternative viewpoints turn out to give us the means we need to do this. The very character of metaphorical understanding that undermines absolutist pretensions—its relative indeterminacy and multiplicity of meanings—also supplies us with a range of possible meanings and directions that we might previously have overlooked. On the one hand, our imaginative un-

derstanding creates certain problems for us, since it introduces a multivalence and open-endedness into our understanding and reasoning. On the other hand, it does not leave us without resources for dealing with indeterminacies in our experience. It opens up a range of constrained alternatives that might help us solve our problem or accomplish our general goal.

As an example of the way this kind of imaginative transformation of our moral understanding operates in an open-ended, yet highly constrained, manner, I want to consider Steven Winter's analysis of the imaginative basis of a landmark case of legal reasoning.²² The case examined by Winter is *legal*, but because his analysis focuses on imaginative structures present in conceptualization and reasoning generally, it can stand as an example of what typically goes on in the creative use of *moral* imagination, too.

The case, *NLRB v. Jones and Laughlin Steel Corp.*, concerns the issue of whether the federal government should have the power to regulate labor relations in manufacturing. The outcome established an important precedent for greater government regulation in this and many other areas as well. The steel company wanted to preserve its power to restrict union activities. Relying on well-established nineteenth-century precedent, the steel manufacturers argued that we must distinguish manufacturing from commerce. Manufacturing is *local* and thus subject only to the laws of the state in which the goods are made. Commerce, to the extent that it extends across state boundaries, would be subject to federal regulation. So construed, the federal government would have no jurisdiction over the steel company's handling of labor problems arising at the level of manufacturing.

The drafters of the National Labor Relations Act argued differently, building their argument on the metaphor of a *STREAM OF COMMERCE*. Taking that metaphor as fundamental, they reasoned that a corporation's interfering with labor's collective bargaining has "the necessary effect of burdening and *obstructing* commerce by (a) impairing the efficiency, safety, or operation of the instrumentalities of commerce; (b) *occurring in the current of commerce*; (c) materially affecting, *restricting, or controlling the flow* of raw materials or manufactured or processed goods from or *into the channels of commerce* . . . or (d) causing diminution of employment and wages in such *volume* as substantially to impair or disrupt the market for goods *flowing from or into the channels of commerce*."²³

What Justice Hughes discerned in this argument was not only the *STREAM OF COMMERCE* metaphor, but also the *SOURCE-PATH-GOAL* schema that underlies it. He used this schema as the basis for an alternative metaphorical understanding

that would justify even greater governmental control over business. Arguing that the STREAM OF COMMERCE metaphor covers only a limited range of cases, Hughes then elaborates his alternative metaphoric frame: "The congressional authority to protect interstate commerce from burdens and obstructions is not limited to transactions which can be deemed to be an essential part of a 'flow' of interstate or foreign commerce. *Burdens and obstructions* may be due to *injurious action springing from other sources*. The fundamental principle is that the power to regulate commerce is the power to enact 'all appropriate legislation' for its '*protection and advancement*' . . . and it is primarily for Congress to consider and decide the *fact of the danger* and to *meet it*."²⁴

Hughes is transforming the logic of the argument here from one of avoiding obstructions to the free flow of commerce (STREAM OF COMMERCE metaphor) to one of actively meeting potential dangers that might limit the *advancement* of commerce. A much more aggressive role for the government is being sanctioned. The basis for this expanded role is the emergence of a new metaphoric conception of COMMERCE AS JOURNEY. As Hughes says, what if we regard commerce as "*a great movement of iron ore, coal and limestone along well-defined paths*."²⁵ Commerce, personified as a traveller, must then be supported and protected as it moves along its journey (following a SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema). A much more active role of protector is justified for the federal government, in which anticipated dangers or obstructions must be directly confronted. That would mean that the government could intervene at any point in the commerce journey, even at the 'start' of the journey in the manufacturing plants.

Winter summarizes Hughes's imaginative transformation of the underlying metaphors and their basic image schema:

The older model was premised on a *stream* metaphor that entailed a quite limited congressional role: If commerce is a stream, then Congress's job is to *regulate* its flow and protect it from *obstructions*. Hughes' model, premised on the much richer *journey* metaphor, yields more wide ranging entailments. If commerce is a traveler on a journey, then the potential sources of interference are much more widespread. The focus now becomes not mere obstructions, but harms of many sorts such as *throttling, danger, injurious actions springing from other sources*. The correlative congressional power shifts from *regulation* to *protection and advancement*. Congress is now the interstate police protecting the always vulnerable traveler and expediting her journey.²⁶

Hughes goes on to explore the entailments of his new metaphor, including the key notion that “*stoppage* of those [manufacturing] operations by *industrial strife* would have a most serious effect on interstate commerce,”²⁷ so that the federal government may find it necessary to interfere with labor relations, insofar as they might pose a threat to the ability of commerce to make its journey.

The critical move, as we have seen, has already been accomplished—the shift of metaphors carried off by discerning their underlying shared SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema. This is an important part of what I mean by the imaginative exploration of possibilities for action that lies at the heart of moral reasoning. What is crucial in such cases of reasoning is that we can employ metaphoric and other imaginative materials that are already operating in our present understanding of a situation to transform that situation by discovering novel alternatives for evaluation and action.

Justice Hughes’s reasoning in *Jones and Laughlin* is imaginative in that it utilizes metaphoric resources available to all members of our culture, and it carries us, via an underlying image schema, from one systematic metaphor for commerce to a novel one that has very different entailments concerning the extent of government control in business. We have seen that Hughes’s exercise of moral imagination is, although highly constrained by preexisting frames and values, nevertheless not altogether determined by them. He is able to reason creatively from one metaphorical conception to another by his imaginative elaboration of an image schema shared by both metaphorical mappings.

Hughes’s reasoning in this legal case is exemplary of the nature of moral imagination generally. In our moral reasoning we use imaginative structures and contents given to us by our culture and articulated through our personal experience as a basis for imaginatively exploring new possibilities for meaning, relationships, social organizations, and forms of practice.

What is crucial is that our moral reasoning can be *constrained* by the metaphoric and other imaginative structures shared within our culture and moral tradition, yet it can also be *creative* in transforming our moral understanding, our identity, and the course of our lives. Without this kind of imaginative reasoning we would lead dreadfully impoverished lives. We would be reduced to repeating habitual actions, driven by forces and contingencies beyond our control. It is moral imagination that gives us the modest, but absolutely necessary, freedom we have to grow and develop morally and socially.

It is unsettling to some people to realize that there is a certain amount of ineliminable indeterminacy in our experience of situations, and that human moralities

cannot escape this indeterminacy. But the fact that there are always multiple framings possible for any situation ought not to generate either despair or cynicism. Rather, we ought to celebrate the multivalence of situations that makes it possible for us to deal creatively and constructively with them, for this means that we are not locked into the same old fixed patterns of behavior and response. We can transform our experience, we can try out new ideas, and we can grow.

Moral Imagination and the Aesthetic Dimensions of Experience

I began this book with the observation that many people are likely to regard the term ‘moral imagination’ as an oxymoron, a juxtaposition of two contradictory concepts. Their reason for holding this mistaken view is that they accept the Moral Law conception of morality as a system of moral laws derived by pure reason alone, whereas they associate imagination with art, creativity, and our general capacity to *break* rules and transcend our present concepts.

As part of our Enlightenment heritage, we tend to regard imagination as an ‘aesthetic’ capacity whose primary function is creativity in art and science. Let us examine the false assumption that, because imagination is an aesthetic capacity, it can have no place in moral reasoning.

The rigid separation of the aesthetic from the moral is rooted in the following Enlightenment view of cognition that we have inherited: The Enlightenment folk theory of Faculty Psychology was used to support the view that our mental acts can be broken down into separate and distinct forms of judgment. One of the central tasks of epistemology was to explain the role of each of the cognitive faculties or powers in producing the types of judgments characteristic of science, morality, and art. Typically, ‘theoretical’ and ‘scientific’ judgments (judgments giving us determinate objective knowledge of the world) were analyzed as acts that unified sense perceptions under concepts and then conjoined those concepts into propositions that expressed our knowledge of the world. ‘Moral’ judgments, as we have seen, were supposed to involve the judging of particular cases as falling under a particular moral concept, and thereby being governed by a specific moral rule. In other words, moral reasoning (judgment) consisted in the application of moral laws to concrete cases, on the basis of shared moral concepts.

‘Aesthetic’ judgments, by contrast, were thought not to involve any concepts at all, and they were not products of reason. They were, instead, based on *feelings* and *imagination*, expressing our feeling response to certain perceptible forms of natural and artificial objects. It was regarded as crucial not to confuse moral with aesthetic judgments. Neither aesthetic judgments nor acts of artistic