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# Moral Imagination

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 **MORAL IMAGINATION**

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Moral imagination provides leaders with insight into others and the world and helps them make moral decisions and form visions. Leaders need imagination to determine the values they embrace and the feelings that these values engender in themselves and others. Leaders use imagination to animate values, apply moral principles to particular situations, and understand the moral aspects of situations. Imagination and moral values are the fundamental components of a vision.

**BACKGROUND OF THE IDEA**

One can find discussions about moral imagination in twentieth-century philosophy, anthropology, and literature, but eighteenth-century philosophers also realized its importance. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) thought that imagination had to play a role in ethics because pure (a priori) moral principles such as “do not lie” cannot be sensibly applied in the variety of situations that confront people in everyday life. Morality is not simply a set of rules or values. It requires a means of knowing when certain moral principles are relevant and how to apply them. David Hume (1711–1776) thought morality was a mixture of emotion—or passion—and reason. He said that reason had insight but no agency, while passion had agency but no insight. Hume concluded, “reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions” (Hume 1988, 415). Hume believed that imagination transforms our moral feelings, knowledge, and experiences into moral obligation to others through sympathy or empathy; without moral imagination, one would not have empathy. For example, without moral imagination one would not have empathy. Without empathy it would be impossible to apply a moral principle like the golden rule—do unto others as you would have others do unto you.

In the twentieth century, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz defined moral imagination as the ability of people to share emotions across cultures. After reading a Western anthropologist’s description of a Balinese ritual in which the concubines of a raja throw themselves into the raja’s funeral pyre, Geertz

asked, “How it is that people’s creations can be so utterly their own and so deeply a part of us?” (Geertz 1983, 54). While the ceremony itself is barbaric to the Western mind, the art and drama of it also moves people from the West. According to Geertz, moral imagination is a conglomeration of morality, emotion, and art: “Life is translation and we are all lost in it” (Geertz 1983, 55).

Morality also depends on a person’s willingness to open up his or her world to include a variety of others. Imagination is not just about creating something new, but about having a broad perspective. As the philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch noted, “moral people are not necessarily more creative, but rather they possess a larger picture of life, which allows them to see right and wrong clearly and with less doubt” (Murdoch 1993, 325). A broad perspective can come either from the cultivation of imagination or from an expansive use of experience in life. Another philosopher, Sabina Lovibond, noted, “The use of moral concepts by individual speakers over time is grounded in an increasingly diversified capacity for participation in a variety of social practices” (Lovibond 1983, 32).

Philosophers such as Murdoch and Mary Warnock recognized the role that emotions played in morality and intelligence before research on emotional intelligence had even begun. As Mary Warnock observed, “Children cannot be taught to feel deeply, but they can be taught to look and listen in such a way that the imaginative emotion follows. Imagination helps us to see the familiar at a different level, and sporadically, we may also use it to render our experience unfamiliar and mysterious” (Warnock 1976, 206–207). In an essay on teaching the novelist Jane Austen, the literary critic Lionel Trilling argued that books written by authors who possess moral imagination stimulate moral feelings in the reader. He says that when we read these books, “We undertake an activity which humanism holds to be precious, in that it redeems the individual from moral torpor” (Trilling 1979, 212).

## MORAL IMAGINATION AND COGNITIVE SCIENCE

The philosopher Mark Johnson’s book *Moral Imagination* offers the most comprehensive treatment of

the subject. Drawing from anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, and psychology, Johnson gives a detailed account of moral imagination based on insights from the cognitive sciences. First, he discusses the role of prototypes in ethics. (Prototypes are models that convey the essential characteristics of a type. For example, a role model, a proverb, or a story may help one understand what constitutes kindness and classify behavior as kind and unkind.) People do not understand categories by making lists of things, but rather through prototypes of them. Johnson says that the fact that people understand moral principles by prototypes explains why people learn moral principles from their experiences and from things like art, literature, and case studies.

Johnson then uses the literature on frame semantics to talk about the larger contexts in which people see the world. In ethics, any situation can be framed in a variety of ways with a variety of consequences, but there are limits to the number of ways that people can frame things. Metaphor is also part of moral reasoning, according to Johnson. Linguists and psychologists have shown that our conceptual system is largely formed by systemic metaphorical mappings. People understand abstract and unstructured domains of ideas via more concrete, highly structured mappings that come from experience. Johnson says that without metaphorical understanding, we could not make moral judgments. Metaphor allows people to conceptualize situations in different ways, provides different ways of understanding morality, and allows for analogizing and moving beyond prototypes to new cases. Base-level experiences such as pain, pleasure, harm, and well-being also help people apply moral principles such as human rights to a variety of different individuals in different cultures. Baseline experiences help people empathize with others and apply moral principles using analogical reasoning.

Lastly, Johnson emphasizes the importance of narrative as the fundamental way that people understand the world. Johnson says, “Narrative is not just an explanatory device, but it is actually constitutive of the way we experience things. No moral theory can be adequate if it does not take into account the narrative character of our experience” (Johnson 1993, 11). Using insights gained from the cognitive

scientist Howard Gardner's book *Leading Minds*, Johnson defines moral imagination as "an ability to imaginatively discern various possibilities for acting within a given situation and to envision the potential help and harm that that are likely to result from a given action" (Johnson 1993, 202).

## APPLICATION TO LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The philosopher and leadership scholar Joanne B. Ciulla wrote about the implications of moral imagination for teaching business ethics in 1991 and for leadership development in 1996. According to Ciulla, an ethics course should use subjects such as art and literature to stimulate the imagination, touch students' moral sentiments, give students the opportunity to practice problem solving, and broaden their perspective on the world. She argues that there are creative and prescriptive elements to moral imagination. The creative function of moral imagination concerns *imagining how*, that is, how people think about putting their values and moral principles into action. This encompasses fulfilling moral duties and obligations and upholding principles and values through creative solutions and creative ways of solving problems and working with others. The prescriptive element of moral imagination is *imagining that*, which encompasses empathy and the ability to disengage from a particular mind-set to identify and foresee moral problems or obligations. It often takes imagination to see that something is a real or potential ethical problem. Ciulla says, "Empathy, like moral imagination, is about getting the moral and factual parts of the story right (*seeing that*), otherwise we are putting ourselves in the wrong person's shoes" (Ciulla 1998, 101).

Part of a leader's job is to help others imagine morally better ways of living and doing things. Ciulla says the element that connects *imagining how* with *imagining that* is the drive to seek truth and a passion to do what is morally right. She argues that developing critical thinking skills for assessing truth, cultivating moral feelings, and stimulating moral imagination are the most important aspects of leadership development. Ciulla believes that without

critical skills and moral imagination leaders cannot create visions, understand their moral obligations to others, or implement their beliefs and values in the ways that they lead and in the initiatives that they take for change or transformation.

## CONTRIBUTION TO LEADERSHIP RESEARCH

Work on moral imagination has the potential to contribute two things to leadership studies. First, it offers insight into how to teach ethics in leadership development programs. Second, the concept offers a multilevel and interdisciplinary way to analyze how leaders lead, make ethical decisions, and form visions. The philosophic literature on moral imagination is still new to leadership studies, but it is slowly working its way into the literature. It has the potential for enriching our understanding of the moral and intellectual dimensions of vision, motivation, followership, and change.

—Joanne B. Ciulla

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