Using literature to improve the moral imagination

Stephen Kekoa Miller
Oakwood Friends School, NY; Marist College
smiller@oakwoodfriends.org; stephen.miller@marist.edu

Abstract

The primary aim of this essay will be to look at a few arguments for how to improve Moral Imagination. Next, it will discuss how 'stories' and 'pretending' can alter how we think and act. Additionally, one underdeveloped aspect of traditional normative ethics involves how Moral Imagination is employed but usually not overtly discussed. Finally, the essay will offer an argument for how to use narrative fiction in a philosophy classroom to deepen these abilities.

Keywords

moral imagination; moral theory; philosophy and literature; pre-college philosophy

How can something unimaginable be possible?

Werner Herzog (2023, p. 257)

1. Introduction

Thinking back to the early spring of 2020, it is instructive to remember the failure of imagination experienced by most of us in the world. The press coverage gave us a story of a deadly virus which exploded first in Wuhan, China, moved to Italy and then to the United Kingdom. For those of us in the United States, we had weeks to get ready, yet seemed unable to stir ourselves to make any real preparation until the crisis was already here. Making sense of this is difficult; we are left wondering how we were unable to take the images of suffering in country after country and picture with clarity what it would look like in our own neighborhoods and act to avoid the worst consequences. Ultimately, this points to a failure of Moral Imagination.

Since at least the time when ancient Athens made attending the annual tragedy festival mandatory for citizens, literary works have been seen as a possible aid to this problem. By expanding or improving Moral Imagination, the argument goes, we

become better able to imagine possible actions we could take in the future and what outcomes are likely tied to them.

This essay will explore a few theories of Moral Imagination (Dewey 2015; Johnson 2014; Morrison 2019; Nussbaum 1991, 1995). It will also discuss empirical research on how 'stories' and 'pretending' can alter how we think and act. Additionally, one underdeveloped aspect of traditional normative ethics involves how Moral Imagination is employed but not fleshed out (for instance, utilitarianism relies on it by asking us to imagine the consequences of possible actions and the Rawlsian Veil of Ignorance asks us to imagine ourselves stripped of most aspects of our social identity). Finally, the essay will offer an argument for how best to use fiction to deepen these abilities while avoiding some of the ways that literature can actually worsen some biases or lead to daydreams that diminish our lives.

I have often wondered about how so many rational, educated people I know, including me, fail to adjust their behavior to account for the horrors of global climate change, the terrifying early days of the covid vaccine, or to be able to rethink such social relations as race and gender. A number of years ago, a chance encounter with Walt Whitman's (1871) *Democratic Vistas* helped me to rethink this.

2. Moral Imagination

In this text, Whitman tasks poets, artists and teachers with providing a clearly articulated vision of what a better world would look like. In particular, he asks for a precision of vision, something that could be used to build real change. Whitman (1871) recognised the commercial and technological power of the country in his time, but worried about what final aims these were turned towards:

> In the region of imaginative, spinal and essential attributes, something equivalent to creation is, for our age and lands, imperatively demanded. For not only is it not enough that the new blood, new frame of democracy shall be vivified and held together merely by political means, superficial suffrage, legislation, &c., but it is clear to me that, unless it goes deeper, gets at least as firm and as warm a hold in men's hearts, emotions and belief, as, … no less, but even greater would it be to possess the aggregation of a cluster of mighty poets, artists, teachers, fit for us, national expressers, comprehending and effusing for the men and women of the States, what is universal, native, common to all, inland and seaboard, northern and southern. (p. 306)

This suggests a real moral value to the 'cluster of mighty poets, artists, [and] teachers' envisioning what is universally a counter-narrative to narratives of division. Nussbaum (1995) explains the importance this way: '… it is Whitman's point, I think, that the ability to imagine vividly, and then to assess judicially, another person's pain, to participate in it and then to ask about its significance, is a powerful way of learning what the human facts are and of acquiring a motivation to alter them' (p. 91). Whitman extols the poet's democratising mission: it is a mission of imagination, inclusion, sympathy and voice. Whitman's claim has inspired me ever since, although he got one thing wrong: it is a job for us all, especially students and not just the poets, artists and teachers. So then, how does imagination work and why is it important?

John Dewey (2015) sees imaginative work as at the heart of thinking in general:

> Deliberation is a dramatic rehearsal (in imagination) of various competing possible lines of action. It starts from the blocking of efficient overt action, due to that conflict of prior habit and newly released impulse to which reference has been made. Then each habit, each impulse, involved in the temporary suspense of overt action takes its turn in being tried out. Deliberation is an experiment in finding out what the various lines of possible action are really like. It is an experiment in making various combinations of selected elements of habits and impulses, to see what the resultant action would be like if it were entered upon. But the trial is in imagination, not in overt fact. The experiment is carried on by tentative rehearsals in thought which do not affect physical facts outside the body. Thought runs ahead and foresees outcomes, and thereby avoids having to await the instruction of actual failure and disaster. An act overtly tried out is irrevocable, its consequences cannot be blotted out. An act tried out in imagination is not final or fatal. It is retrievable. (p. 190)

For Dewey then, what he calls Moral Imagination involves a chance to go over possible ways of acting before committing to any of them. There are many ways we can engage in this process; we can daydream, fantasise, picture possible courses of action, read accounts of the behaviors of others or read novels. Mark Johnson (2014) calls this 'dramatic imaginative rehearsal' (p. 93). Johnson (2015) suggests the purpose of this process to be that 'We need to imagine how various actions open to us might alter our self-identity, modify our commitments, change our relationships, and affect the lives of others' (p. 187). What he terms 'responsible imagination' concerns realistic

alternatives that also go towards solving the real issues of real communities. This capability is essential to living a good life, but it is not something that we naturally do well. As a result, it is something that a good education would address.

John Kekes (2018) delves into the details of what this would look like by suggesting that we understand this responsible Moral Imagination as a virtue (p. 46). This would entail a challenging negotiation between vice-ridden forms of imagination that would be either suggesting that there were fewer realistic options available than is actually possible and seeing the realm of options as being limitless, a form of fantasy. Flaubert's (2011) Emma Bovary is a classic example of the latter. Kekes (2018) calls Emma Bovary's form of imagination 'Promethean Romanticism' (p. 51), suggesting that it involves a form of fantasy which is disconnected from reality. Emma dreams of wealth, balls, romance and living as if in a novel. Her 'romantic' approach to life ends up causing her to devalue her unromantic but good husband, to despise the daily life around her, and to pine for a future that we suspect would not make her happy even if it somehow came about.

Kekes (2018) further divides Moral Imagination into modes related to time: Corrective Moral Imagination would lead us to fix past mistakes in what we used to imagine possible; Exploratory Moral Imagination, which aims to 'form a realistic view of what it would be like to live according to one's recognized possibilities'; and Disciplined Moral Imagination, a 'present deliberation of one's possibilities.' When used in conjunction mindfully, they can lead to an 'enlargement of life' (p. 51).

Dewey did worry about forms of imagination such as fantasy or daydreaming, but perhaps even more pernicious is the tendency we have to see our range of possibilities as far more compressed than they really are. When we are exercising our imaginations properly, it allows us to 'concretely perceive what is before us in light of what could be ... Imaginative experience ventures beyond restatements of convention to grasp undisclosed opportunities and to generate new ideals and ends' (Fesmire 2003, p. 65-66).

Although not much directly talked about in the history of philosophy, once we start to look, it becomes obvious that many disparate perspectives need us to employ Moral Imagination. Philosophy has a tradition of proposing alternative social arrangements, from Plato's *Republic* to Rawls' *Theory of Justice*. Even moral theories we might not initially consider to be concerned with imagination usually end up relying on imaginative work. To be a utilitarian involves needing to empathetically imagine what consequences given actions might have. Kantian Respect for Persons style thinking

also demands that we imagine the ends of other people that we must respect. The challenge here is specificity.

In this case, what is needed is that leap of imagination Whitman tasked the poets, artists and teachers with. We may not yet be able to fully articulate how to maintain hope in grim times, but employing what Jonathan Lear (2009) calls 'radical hope' (p. 103) would mean describing new arrangements and goods in the face of what seems to be a rising sense of hopelessness. As an example of concrete activities to address this, here are some questions that could be raised to a class: in the coming world when robots and apps take most of our jobs, what can a meaningful life look like, even with a guaranteed minimum income? As we rethink how gender is lived, what could a society with genuine fluidity of gender look like? How can social structures be formed which both celebrate our differences while still making us feel connected enough to enable civil love?

3. Literature and Moral Imagination

Ultimately, we need the new equivalent of the seismic shift in thinking about the world humans experience from Alexander Humboldt's first description of the Earth's atmosphere as a holistic unity, or the Earth Day use of the first photos of Earth taken from outer space. We need this in order to keep our hope for a better future alive, and to be justified in doing so. Many have suggested that literature is one of the best ways to accomplish this.

If this is so, we will need to develop what Wayne Booth (1988) titled 'an ethics of fiction' (p. 8). He defines this as 'a program for improving us in any way or a judgment that some works of art may debase us' and suggests that ethical criticism would aim to 'improve both selves and society' (p. 12). We will address the fiction aspect soon, but when it comes to educating the moral imagination of students in the classroom, we must select the right kind of text. We must look at stories through an ethical prism. This may be akin to Socrates' position on censorship in *The Republic*, which some may question, but it is an expectation in high school that I will address more fully below when I focus on good character.

Rather, with the right approach, spending time with characters like this can allow us the dramatic rehearsal that Dewey was talking about. One of the most insightful contemporary thinkers about Moral Imagination, Mark Johnson, offers us a good starting point. He writes that 'Moral understanding is in large measure imaginatively structured … [M]orality is not the search for moral laws to guide our lives, but rather

the ongoing imaginative exploration of possibilities for dealing with our problems, enhancing the quality of our communal relations, and forming significant personal attachments that grow' (2014, p. 209). So, the aim of this paper will be to explore which kinds of literature could help us with this work, and perhaps also to read these works with a special eye to using them in building Moral Imagination.

What is it about narrative that can allow us such a strong experience if it is the case that 'the imagined object lacks the vitality and vivacity of the perceived one' (Scarry 2001, p. 4). Scarry continues on to claim that 'it is a remarkable fact that this ordinary enfeeblement of images has a striking exception in the verbal arts, where images somehow do acquire the vivacity of perceptual objects' (2001, p. 6). Something happens when we encounter imaginative images in literary form that seems to bring them to life. This process of what Scarry calls 'dreaming-by-the-book' (2001, p. 43) allows narrative fiction to seem vividly alive in ways that daydreams, fantasies, actual dreams and other weak forms of imaginative work simply do not. The neurological reasons for this remain unclear, but narrative fiction must be experienced over time in a different way, in taking longer, it gives us a much more sustained peek at an alternative picture.

One of the most influential writers about the potential for literature to make us better has long been Martha Nussbaum. In *Poetic Justice*, Nussbaum (1995) offers an extended discussion of how literature might work in the context of politics and legal reasoning. Here she asks two main questions: 'Why novels and which novels?' (p. 4). She suggests that novels are concrete but also involve a complex interplay between that concreteness and abstract values (p. 8). Following this, Nussbaum (1995) argues that 'In imagining things that do not really exist, the novel … is not being "idle": for it is helping its readers to acknowledge their own world and to choose more reflectively in it' (p. 31). In what must be her most striking claim in this book, Nussbaum further claims that the very structure of novels lead them to be 'a defender of the Enlightenment ideal of the equality and dignity of all human life, not of uncritical traditionalism' (p. 46) because the novel, 'in its basic structure … constructs compassion in readers, positioning them as people who care intensely about the sufferings and bad luck of others, and who identify with them in ways that show possibilities for themselves' (p. 66). The rest of the book shows examples of legal decisions that Nussbaum thinks benefited from using narrative fiction and those that suffered from remaining abstract in such a way that they violated individual rights.

We need to think about what kinds of fiction would be best suited to perform this magic. This fiction would be indeed, she suggests, a 'school for moral sentiments' (2013, p. 359). Here is a specific example. Nussbaum's (2013) book *Political Emotions* makes an important argument about the challenge of a modern welfare state: the need to inculcate civic love, the love between citizens, in order for citizens to be willing to contribute to the welfare of strangers who share citizenship with them. Nussbaum offers a nuanced and inspiring close reading of songs and dances of Rabindranath Tagore and Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. According to Nussbaum (2013), the expanded perspective that literature conveys may be the best way to bring about that civic love. The point she's making here is that the works of Tagore and Mozart themselves can enrich our Moral Imagination by helping us to recognise the value of those who we would previously have seen as alien.

4. Ethics of fiction

Booth (1988) gives us a neologism for what he thinks goes on in reading fiction that helps us to see how this would work: co-duction (p. 72). He defines it as involving 'comparing my experience with other more or less qualified observers … Every such statement implicitly calls for continuing conversation: 'How does my co-duction compare with yours?"' (p. 77). Booth is showing how, despite the very private nature of reading fiction, when it comes to making sense of it, it is a social process. In fact, this is just what ought to happen when literature is used in a classroom setting. The interplay mentioned by Nussbaum of the concrete (the characters and setting of the novel) and the abstract (themes, moral theories and implications) that novels engage in is echoed in a classroom where a class discussion uses the literary elements to get at the larger meaning. Nussbaum (1995) tells us that, 'In the process of co-duction, our intuitions about a literary work will be refined by the criticism of ethical theory and of friendly advice, and this may greatly alter the emotional experience that we are able to have as readers—if, for example, we find ourselves convinced that the novel's invitations to anger and disgust and love are based on a view of the world we can no longer share' (p. 76). The ethics of fiction would aim to use this kind of work to help us to think and imagine more effectively about important social issues.

In her last published work, *Goodness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison (2001) pointed out how we might think about this by giving her readers an interpretive device aimed at helping us to improve our ability to understand moral goodness. Morrison describes the terrible edge evil holds in this way:

> The formula in which evil reigns is bad versus good, but the deck is stacked because goodness in contemporary literature seems to be equated with weakness, as pitiful (a girl running frightened and helpless through the woods while the pursuing villain gets more of our attention than her savior). Evil has a blockbuster audience; Goodness lurks backstage. Evil has vivid speech; Goodness bites its tongue … Evil grabs the intellectual platform and its energy; it demands careful examinations of its consequences, its techniques, its motives, its successes however short-lived or temporary. Grief, melancholy, missed chances for personal happiness often seem to be contemporary literature's concept of evil. It hogs the stage. Goodness sits in the audience and watches, assuming it even has a ticket to the show. (2001, p. 27)

In her typically lyrical manner, Morrison describes how few of our stories help us imagine goodness. The negative effect of this is that we are less able to imagine what goodness looks like with specificity and thus perhaps less often behave as good people. Then, in a surprising move, for one of her final public acts, Morrison evaluates her own work, telling her audience that she 'decided to focus on the role goodness plays in literature using my own line of work—fiction—as a test' (2001, p. 27).

Morrison (2001) is quite unsparing in evaluating some of her earlier works, but does allow that the later ones got better at imagining what goodness could look like. Here she says that '[o]ver time, these last forty years, I have become more and more invested in making sure acts of goodness … produce language. But even when not articulated, like the teaching priest in *A Mercy*, such acts must have a strong impact on the novel's structure and on its meaning. Expressions of goodness are never trivial or incidental in my writing' (p. 18).

If Morrison is right, collectively, we need to start producing more works of art that specify and glorify goodness, but we also need to prioritise engaging with these. Recalling the point above that the more detailed and specific our imaginations are, the more motivating they'll be on our behavior, Morrison's concern is well founded. This addresses the first question Nussbaum asks: which novels? Morrison would have us look for novels with explicit and detailed descriptions of goodness, and her analysis also points to how teachers could guide students towards understanding how the novel is articulating that.

An ethics of fiction devoted to improving our Moral Imaginations then would be on the lookout for precise, specific articulations of goodness in Morrison's presentation

or we could look for literary images of what it would look like to be anti-racist or for a society to practice good environmental management. Morrison never advocates for censorship, however. There is a damaging aggregate effect of having such a large portion of our stories center on evil; our goal should be to give goodness more of a voice.

One recent author who offers us some great models of this is James McBride. He gives us two examples of what a morally good, anti-racist and courageous person could look like. What is interesting is that the two perspectives he offers are in some ways two views of the same person: his mother. In *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* (2012), we get a remarkably detailed, honest and inspiring picture of someone embodying goodness in just the compelling way that Morrison was concerned was not happening.

A few years later, McBride then published *Heaven & Earth Grocery Store* (2023). This book is fiction, but the protagonist, clearly inspired by his mother, again shows us someone exercising courage and countercultural anti-racism. What is most important about both of these portraits is the fact that these protagonists exist in the messy, problematic 'real' world, but are able to show us that such a person can exist in this 'real' world.

An ethics of fiction aimed at improving our moral imagination would not only promote books like this, but would, in a classroom setting, help children to see how these models of goodness could help them to imagine what these models would look like in their own lives. Perhaps *Breaking Bad* and *Paradise Lost* help us to see that bad people end up with bad lives. However, if Morrison is right, the avalanche of these images desensitises us, merely getting us used to moral badness rather than attuned to avoiding it. So, then, was Socrates right? Should we be censoring stories? Mostly not, but we should attend to what happens when we shortchange goodness in our stories.

We have already seen that the type of 'Promethean Romanticism' of an Emma Bovary can be a problem. However, reading the novel *Madame Bovary*, is not the same as Emma Bovary reading her romance novels. In this case, Flaubert helps us to see the dangers of a Moral Imagination that is more fantasy than robust articulation of possibility. Think also of *Don Quixote* which can be read as a primer on the dangers of fantasy. Quixote's quests are inimical to the kinds of Moral Imagination described by John Dewey as intrinsic to the realistic work of evaluating competing lines of possible action. The point here is not to censor stories with fantastical elements but to use the

Bovarys and Quixotes to help us to see what Promethean Romanticism or daydreaming look like and the terrible toll they exact. Tuan (1989) describes this point this way: 'In this case, it leads to really interesting discussions about how art relates to human happiness and the ways it can illuminate what a good life, or perhaps even more effectively, a bad life, looks like' (p. 39).

While our ethics of fiction would not be looking towards censorship, we now can see how what we read or watch can change how we think in ways we might not desire. Nussbaum, Aristotle and Morrison may well be right that literature can lead us to expand our Moral Imaginations. But we do need to be concerned about what direction they might be expanded in; some stories could cause us to lean away from good and towards evil. Paul Bloom (2016) relays an experiment in his teasingly titled book *Against Empathy*. He describes how subjects were told about a ten-year-old girl named Sheri Summers who had a fatal disease and was waiting in line for treatment that would relieve her pain. When asked what to do, they acknowledged that she should have to wait because other more needy children were ahead of her. But if they were first asked to imagine her feelings, they tended to choose to move her up, putting her ahead of children who were presumably more deserving. Here, empathy was more powerful than fairness, leading to a decision that most of us would see as immoral (p. 7). Bloom (2016) goes on to give an evaluative rundown similar to Morrison's. He states that, 'For every *Uncle Tom's Cabin* there is a *Birth of a Nation*. For every *Bleak House* there is an *Atlas Shrugged*. For every *Color Purple* there is a *Turner Diaries*' (p. 112). Reading *Atlas Shrugged* is not going to make someone selfish. Allowing stories of evil or selfishness to overwhelm those of goodness might though. The key is in balance and proportion.

The very specificity we have talked about Moral Imagination needing in order to be powerful enough to move us to act might also move us to act immorally. Nussbaum (1995) suggests that the two areas where literature can thus be problematic: it can distort the facts and it can 'misrepresent the importance of various types of suffering' (p. 75). We might see this as part of the reason why Dewey always stressed how Moral Imagination ought to be social; it should be talked through with others to figure out where the facts are wrong or how it might be weighing some experiences wrongly. This is the role of co-duction in Booth's book. Without the community engaged along with us, discussions of goodness will not make us better, just as depictions of evil need not make us evil.

This ethics of fiction can be seen from two perspectives: (i) the censorship argument warns us about certain content and suggests a need for certain types of stories to be created; stories which offer us detailed images of people and events which do not yet exist but should, and (ii) the co-duction argument which suggests a mode of reading that calls for us to collectively take these images and also to take cautionary tales like Bovary's and use them to inform our own Moral Imaginations, to improve them and to expand our sense of what is possible and desirable. Certain stories could probably harm us, even if we read them in the supportive, moral community.

5. Conclusion

We already have some general social guidelines in place to help us figure out what to read and how to read it. As our communal values change over time, we change which texts we see as morally bad. We change the methods we use to approach stories. We do not necessarily need to censor stories, and usually should not do so, but Morrison's concern is well placed. We want to make sure to balance stories of goodness and evil, and we want to make sure to read the evil ones in communities of co-duction to limit the harm they could do to our Moral Imaginations. There are also some stories we have already agreed we should avoid altogether.

In choosing what to read, we need not be overly worried, for Booth (1988) reminds us that, 'we should make our choices from among formal fiction much as we make them in the rest of life … the analogy can lead us to underestimate the unique value of fiction: its relatively cost-free offer of trial runs' (p. 484). We do not need to only read works that have the cautionary tales of a Quixote in order to not let stories of morally bad characters and oppression overwhelm us. We just need to use rational analysis and communal discussion to help us obtain the benefits of expanded Moral Imaginations offered by narrative fiction.

Nussbaum, Aristotle, Morrison and many others have pointed out the ways that narrative fiction affects our Moral Imaginations. Given how powerful the effects of fiction are, we need to think about which books to spend time with and to think of how best to use them. This is where the connection between philosophy and literature is most important. Reading literature in conjunction with moral theory and especially with vigorous conversations in which a class of students and their teacher work together to process how goodness or evil are presented in the stories allows us to explore a wide range of texts while ameliorating possible harmful effects.

One job should be to submit concepts that are considered socially obvious to further scrutiny, Socrates' original task. This already happens when we ask, 'What kinds of inequality are acceptable?' or 'Are there forms of diversity that aren't desirable?' Although not enough, having students develop precise pictures about a better future state goes some way towards counteracting the terrible, if precise visions of those who look to reinstate or preserve immoral regimes. We thus need to find them the right stories and help them to read them well. In all these ways, we see how well philosophy and literature fit together in a classroom setting, whether it be literature or philosophy courses involved. Having a focus on Moral Imagination, then, helps us to see one area the methods of classroom analysis should aim for.

References

Aristotle, *The Nicomachean ethics*. (JL Ackrill & JO Urmson, eds). Oxford University Press, New York, NY (1998).

Bloom, P (2016) *Against empathy: The case for rational compassion*. Vintage Books, New York, NY.

Booth, WC (1988) *The company we keep: An ethics of fiction*. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

Davies, J (2019) *Imagination*. Pegasus Books, New York, NY.

Dewey, J (2015) *Human nature and conduct — An introduction to social psychology*. Read Books, Reddich, UK.

Fesmire, S (2003) *John Dewey and moral imagination: Pragmatism in ethics*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.

Flaubert, G (2011) *Madame Bovary: Provincial ways*. Kennebec Large Print Perennial, New York, NY.

Herzog, W (2023) *Every man for himself and God against all: A memoir*. Penguin, New York, NY.

Johnson, M (2014) *Moral imagination: Implications of cognitive science for ethics*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Johnson, M (2015) *Morality for humans: Ethical understanding from the perspective of cognitive science*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Kekes, J (2018) *The enlargement of life: Moral imagination at work*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.

Lear, J (2009) *Radical hope: Ethics in the face of cultural devastation*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.

McBride, J (2012) *The color of water: A black man's tribute to his white mother*. Penguin Random House, New York, NY.

McBride, J (2023) *The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store: A novel*. Riverhead Books, New York, NY.

Morrison, T (2019) *Goodness and the literary imagination: Harvard's 95th Ingersoll Lecture with essays on Morrison's moral and religious vision*. University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, VA.

Nussbaum, MC (1991) The literary imagination in public life. *New Literary History*, 22(4), pp. 877–910.

Nussbaum, MC (1995) *Poetic justice: The literary imagination and public life*. Beacon Press, Boston, MA.

Nussbaum, MC (2013) *Political emotions*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Scarry, E (2001) *Dreaming by the book*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

Tuan, Y (1989) *Morality and imagination: Paradoxes of progress*. University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, MI.

Whitman, W (1871) *Democratic vistas*. University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, VA.