

damage and Imagination

A post by Adam Morton

On Amy Kind's blog on imagination, [the junkyard](#). ([original URL](#) of the post.)

Our ability to treat one another well, or even decently, depends on our capacities to imagine, simulate, sympathize, empathize, and intuit other people. These are a wide array of different, similar, and overlapping, capacities, essential to human social life. I shall lump them all together as imagining (but [see](#)). We imagine what it is like for one another, and we act accordingly. We tend not to give people presents they will hate, or to spare people experiences they will enjoy.

I used to think that this was the fundamental link between psychology and ethics. Moral behaviour requires specific social skills, and our evolution as social creatures has given us at least crude approximations to them. I still think that there is a [connection](#) between our social capacities and our standard rules of morality. But I have come to think that both are blind to something important, and that focusing on it shows big gaps in interpersonal imagination and in standard morality. The labels for these gaps are damage and empathetic failure.

Rape and sexual abuse are dramatically awful. But a realization of quite how awful they can be, and the grounds for their awfulness, waited for our time:

my lifetime, and I was typical in coming slowly to the realization. Not long ago while decent people would have thought of these as wrong, often very wrong, they would have traced the wrongness to violations of autonomy and infliction of short term pain. The perpetrator is doing something to someone against their will, and it hurts. In other cultures the wrongness is also traced to factors that now seem to us perverse. In Roman culture the rape of a daughter or a slave is taken as an offence against the property of the *paterfamilias*, and in Greek culture the rape of a woman in the temple of a goddess will usually lead to the goddess' anger at the woman for defiling her space, rather than at the rapist. One is reminded of reports of contemporary cultures in which rape victims are charged with adultery. We have come to see a basic thing that is missing from these reactions. The victims are often [damaged](#) , though the psychology is still somewhat obscure. They can be prone to depression, irrational feelings of guilt, a sense of being bad and unworthy, and in some cases suicidal tendencies.

The authorities of the Catholic Church are generally decent and sympathetic people, and they never dreamt of anything but condemnation of abusive priests. But they took the grounds for the condemnation to be forbidden sex rather than terrible wounding. Though this is a conjecture, some support is given by the papal document [Sacramentum Poenitentiae](#) , which takes the crime to be a violation of the commandment against adultery.

There are many ways in which people can be damaged, and many of them were invisible until recently. [Post-traumatic stress](#) , first noticed as "shell shock" after the first world war, is an example. We now see it as occurring also in milder forms. Similarly we thought of torture as the infliction of great pain, which it usually is. But in so doing we ignored the great injury to a person's conception of herself and her ability to function, of which there is now abundant [evidence](#). Torture, like post-traumatic stress, can also take milder forms, and can be subtle and psychological rather than overtly physical. There are many other less dramatic kinds of damage. We have learned that [corporal punishment](#) of children does not make them become well-adjusted and considerate adults. A vitally important topic is that of subtle implicit prejudice. There is now a lot of evidence that having one's attention drawn to one's membership in a group presented as less capable [reduces one's performance](#) on tasks requiring attention and skill. It works like a taunt or a tease, disabling one.

Why were these things ignored? I suspect two related factors. One is the special nature of our capacities for imagining each other. They have developed to mediate standard forms of social life and cooperative activity. So they focus on grasping other people's intentions and actions: the desires that actions aim to satisfy and the beliefs that shape them. But while damage has effects on a person's intentions and desires it does not consist in them, so these capacities tend to ignore it. The other is emphasis on conscious states of mind. But people often are not consciously aware that they are damaged. I suspect that

these two factors are connected, but I can only give hesitant guesses about what their common origins might be. Both point to gaps in our intuitive grasp of human psychology.

There are important things about other people that we are not good at imagining. The kinds of damage I have been mentioning are examples, and the ways that human cultures have misunderstood them is testimony to our blindness on these topics. But there are many others: depression, phobias, anxiety, neurological damage. There are also teasing and bullying, which can take very everyday forms, in which people have no idea of the harm they are causing. (One interesting feature of teasing, and also of some worse action is that the person doing it will be guided by an awareness of the discomfort of the other person they are doing it to. The discomfort but not the damage. Moreover the perpetrator will often delight in imagining the other person's horrified or annoyed awareness — imagination even — of them.) Many items on the list are phenomena that are best explained neurologically rather than psychologically, but to say this is just to relabel what we don't understand.

The gaps in our imagination have more serious consequences than just leaving us puzzled about ourselves and others. They affect our lives quite deeply. One aspect of this is a warping of our moral vocabulary and principles. Right action consists, we might think, in helping people get what they want, respecting their autonomy, giving them pleasure rather than pain, and cooperating with them for mutual benefit. Moral theories in philosophy differ in which of these

they make central and how they account for the importance of the less central ones. (For utilitarianism the central concept is the pleasure/pain balance, for contractarianism cooperation, and for Kantian ethics autonomy.) But the essence of [morality](#) is taken, both in philosophy and I think in most of our everyday thinking, to lie in these areas.

But this leaves out many of the effects we have on one another. You can do someone a lot of damage, without causing them pain or violating their wishes. Someone with diminished self-respect may even think that they are enjoying the denigration or teasing that results in their reduced accomplishments and reduced satisfaction in their life. For that matter, you can do someone good, help them, without bringing them pleasure or assisting with something they want. A simple example is a parent talking articulately in a give-and-take way with a child.

It is surely not controversial that there are gaps in our imagination of one another. And it is surely not controversial that we can [harm](#) one another in deep and hard to discern ways. But my claim is that each of these is more extensive and more varied than we normally think. And that they are related: damage is hard to imagine. For much damage does not consist in pain and is not reflected in a person's conscious life or the social sense of their acquaintances. If this is right there is a very important project of understanding and dealing with these things better than we do. It requires the combined attention of philosophers — both philosophers of mind and moral

philosophers — psychologists — both developmental and clinical psychologists — and social thinkers. It also requires an openness to tinkering with deeply ingrained ideas that regulate our treatment of one another. That is quite demanding; but the stakes are high.

■ ■ ■ ■

Adam Morton has taught at Princeton, Ottawa, Bristol, Oklahoma, Alberta, and UBC. He is now retired from teaching though not from writing. Two recent books are *Bounded Thinking* (OUP) and *Emotion and Imagination* (Polity). He is now working on a book on experimental evidence.