Moral Density:

Why Teaching Art Is Teaching Ethics

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Abstract. Is there a relation between the aesthetic and the ethical? Philosophers have long been intrigued by a sense of connection between them. John Dewey and Iris Murdoch agree that teaching art is teaching morals. If that's true, it's powerful. If the correspondence between aesthetic and ethical is metaphorical, remember that metaphor is real – and may have a basis in neurology. I discuss aesthetics, cognitive science, neuroscience, and theory of mind, and find that art and morality share a *density*, as in Nelson Goodman's symptoms of the aesthetic, offering a key to better understanding essential qualities of humanity.

> Beauty is truth, truth beauty.
>
> – John Keats[1]

If this epigraph only rarely escapes English class, something like it has fascinated philosophers for a long time. Iris Murdoch remembers that "Kant said that beauty was an analogon of good, Plato said it was the nearest clue."[2] I want to go further and posit that our means of perception of the aesthetic and the ethical share an organic connection, an understanding of which will help elucidate moral perception, a critical component of moral education.

Or moral education as it should be. But what currently counts as such is, directly or almost directly, simple instruction. I ask why this does not work. I ask why Jane Austen said, "We all love to instruct, though we can teach only what is not worth knowing."[3] She did not mean that training in a skill is not worth knowing; rather, that life's larger questions are not amenable to direct instruction. I ask whether in this sense the traditional idea of moral instruction is fatally flawed. Traditional education in ethics is limited in that it uses the general to stand for the specific: the myriad particulars of unique situations are distilled into rules and systems of conduct, where observing such rules is seen as sufficient for ethical choice and action. This can be a topic of instruction, but cannot provide what I call *moral illumination*.

I

Such an elucidation and the imagination it requires are of necessity related to the particular incident, personality, and situation rather than toward the summarization and generalization that characterize most moral thinking. Much recent work in philosophy[4] finds that the specifics of a situation with an ethical dimension are prior to moral generalism, which by its process of deduction leaves out something critical. The novelist George Eliot agrees: "There is no general doctrine which is not capable of eating out our morality if unchecked by the deep-seated habit of direct fellow feeling with individual fellow-men"[5]: generalism cannot provide complete justification for moral choice. It misses *something*. I ask whether what is missed is crucial to moral perception. If so, how can we understand the way deduction and generalization leave it out?

The idea of a limit to the value of the general in moral deliberation has its roots in Aristotle, who explains, "Up to what point and to what extent a man must deviate before he becomes blameworthy it is not easy to determine by reasoning . . . . Such things depend on particular facts, and the decision rests with perception . . . . All law is universal but about some things it is not possible to make a universal statement which shall be correct."[6] Nancy Sherman concurs that "we are reminded regularly . . . of the limitations of rules and procedures, and of the shortfalls of misplaced rigor . . . . Practical wisdom is not scientific understanding" (*MN*, p. 239).

This particularism so characteristic of Aristotle – an important aspect of his moral theory, as argued by Martha Nussbaum[7] and others – stands in remarkable contrast to moral thinking as practiced by government, social sciences, education, and much of society in general. Algorithms for action implied by moral principles may fall short of sufficient guidance: Sherman writes that "virtue [or practical wisdom] is an embodied matter. Its subject matter is concrete particulars . . . . In Kantian ethics, by contrast, the emphasis is on the universalizability of reason and on the availability of a formal principle for guiding moral judgment" (*MN*, p. 240). While Aristotle holds that a universal statement by definition cannot always be correct, neither he nor my other sources mean to imply that the universal and the principled are not of great importance and value to decision and action; we do maintain, however, that there must be something prior, perception of which depends on attention to the particular.

Frantic discussion after the attacks on New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon in northern Virginia on September 11, 2001, included questions of what the U. S. government knew prior to the attacks and how that information was treated. The phrase "connect the dots" was heard often to describe how disparate pieces of information might have been gathered and interpreted into a meaningful picture. Why could American intelligence not have connected the dots sufficiently well to thwart the tragedy? This is an excellent illustration for my argument: in a situation with a moral component there is initially an infinite number of dots with, at first, no perceptible ordering or necessary priority among them. In retrospect it is easy to say that this dot was important and that one was not. But the original construction of connecting lines is not a product of deductive reason from general principle but instead one of imaginative contemplation of particulars: a construction or connection, where none existed before, that literally creates a picture. From a potentially infinite number of initial perceptions, most must be discarded; some

will be of marginal value; and some will be essential to the construction of an intelligible picture of a situation and its important aspects.

II

Reason cannot, initially, connect dots. Connections and resulting recognition are made with what cognitive science calls prototype theory, in opposition to the more traditional and readily accepted category theory.[8] While the latter operates deductively, prototype recognition is fundamentally imaginative. While category specifies that recognition of an object occurs because the parts of the object meet necessary and sufficient conditions for identification of it, prototype posits that we recognize something because it resembles objects in our experience. There are no preexisting conditions for the second dot. There need not be a minimum number of dots to form a picture or a limit in numbers of what may be significant. Prior to recognition of the picture, we are not able to say which dots are meaningful and which are superfluous, as we would be able to say if each dot were subjected to the tests of necessity and sufficiency prescribed by category.

Prototype theory holds that we recognize objects around us by comparing them to mental constructions derived from experience. Recognition has to do with resemblance. We recognize a fish because it approaches our model of one, even though the object we may presently see may not share all the characteristics of our prototype. Contrast this with Mark Johnson's description of category: the "classical theory . . . still held by most people [in which] every concept or category [of objectively existing objects] is supposedly defined by a set of necessary and sufficient features a thing must possess if it is to fall under that concept" (*MI*, p. 8). How long have humans known the necessary and sufficient conditions for the category of "fish"? Not that long, given the complexity of taxonomy, but humans have been able to recognize fishes for much longer. Category theory does not allow us to see that a lungfish is a fish; prototype recognition does.

With prototype theory, looking at a page full of dots, we may at random choose one as a starting point, and then look for a second. We do not examine each potential second dot for necessary and sufficient conditions; we allow a second dot to present itself, as it were, in its spatial relationship to the first dot, forming an image looking "something like" what we have seen before. To construct the picture beginning with two dots is a fundamentally imaginative act.

Once two dots are in place, deduction can specify a third, induction can predict a fourth, and what Peirce calls abduction[9] or Harman calls the inference to the best explanation[10] can infer that they and others like them constitute a shape. However, initial questions of what dots count toward intelligibility are not answered in this way: we can never compose the scene solely through rational means. Imagination is necessary to complete perception of elements we may then treat with reason, and imagination is always of the particular, as is prototype. The sense of moral illumination I will explore is also, necessarily, of the particular.

Thus there is an indefinite number of points of reference in the picture, no subset of which will allow us to begin to construct its meaning. The entire set must initially be available, and priorities of points of reference are not given. A particular painting, for example, does not contain only five or ten preestablished referents that allow us to generate meaning. Instead, *all* the figures and all the colors in the painting contribute to an organic whole in the meaning that,

as John Dewey[11] argues, is constructed by the viewer (the educator Joseph Novak also finds that a person engaged in learning makes, rather than discovers, meaning[12]). This imaginative construction, I contend, works in moral as well as aesthetic perception.

Dewey writes in *Art as Experience* that moral education occurs through a certain kind of appreciation of art. Murdoch confirms, "Teaching art is teaching morals" (*MG*, p. 322). Nussbaum agrees that to see the aesthetic in a certain way can facilitate an understanding of the nature of decency and how we are obliged to treat other people. But this is a controversial point: Kant thinks that empathy can obstruct the moral.[13] Consider Kant's idea in contrast to an exceptional example of sympathy as the essence of the moral: the crisis of conscience experienced by Mark Twain's character Huckleberry Finn, a most ingenuous fellow, yet one of distinct feelings. Lionel Trilling,[14] Jonathan Bennett,[15] Carol Freedman,[16] and Paul Harkin[17] use the novel to show how emotions such as empathy can not only advocate moral judgment, as Kant recognizes, but be constitutive of it.

Huck's quandary is between either reporting the whereabouts of the runaway slave Jim or treating another human being as such – a predicament between what he has been taught is right and what he feels is right. Twain's book challenges the Kantian belief that any decision determined by compassion or love could not be a moral judgment. Huck has, on the one hand, any number of received general principles of duty to tell him what to do. On the other hand, he has strong compassion for a particular person in a particular place that, at first, he heavily discounts. Freedman asks, "Is it necessarily the case that just because Huck acts from compassion that he does not conceive of what he's doing as right – that he does not engage in a moral judgment? I think it's most plausible to say that when Huck finally decides not to turn Jim in, he comes to a more heart-felt conception of what's right, not that he does what he believes is wrong" ("MH," p. 103).

In Sherman's words, moral "ends become qualified not only through deliberation, but also through perception and emotional sensitivity" (*FC*, p. 89) because "our judgment of particular cases and our knowledge of how to compose the scene is itself part of the moral response" (p. 3). Add to this Murdoch's view that "how we see our situation is itself, already, a moral activity" (*MG*, p. 315) – an idea close to Dewey's thinking.[18] Both refer to cognition informed by the emotions. The first conclusion I draw is that good moral education begins with an *education in feeling*.

Empirical evidence supports the efficacy of such cultivation. Recent experiments in psychology by Kidd and Castano[19] in 2013 and 2016 have found that reading literary fiction, as opposed to reading popular fiction or not reading, may nourish an individual's grasp of theory of mind (ToM), which holds that other people have thoughts and feelings which may differ from her own. ToM is essential to empathy, which I believe is vital to anything approaching informed moral choice. As they describe their research focus: "Our ability to infer and understand others' thoughts and feelings . . . has important consequences across the life span, supporting empathy, pro-social behavior, and coordination in groups. Socialization practices and interpersonal interactions help develop this capacity, and so does engaging with fiction" ("DS," p. 474). Further, "Understanding others' mental states is a crucial skill that enables the complex social

relationships that characterize human societies" ("RL," p. 377). Beyond understanding others, Nathaniel Rich asks the question, "How do people come to know themselves? One way is by reading fiction. The profound act of empathy demanded by a novel, forcing the reader to suspend disbelief and embody a stranger's skin, prompts reflection and self-questioning."[20] If reading good fiction, or, as Kidd and Castano also suggest, broader "engagement with works of art" (p. 377) can nourish empathy, it is a powerful reason that young people be introduced to literary fiction and art by faculty who are aware of its influence on ToM.

Notwithstanding issues of correlation versus causation and that empathic people may be more likely to read good fiction in the first place, these psychologists' finding – that exposure to good literature can nurture what certainly counts as more than a skill – raises a most interesting question of why this should occur. Some good fiction explores mental states of (fictional) others; some does not. Hemingway, for example, often allows mental states to be inferred. But all fiction addresses the particular.

III

Theorists of particularism emphasize its requirement for keenness of perception. Sherman argues that perception is a necessary component of Aristotelian practical wisdom, or virtue. For Aristotle, "our judgment of particular cases and our knowledge of how to 'compose the scene' . . . discerning the morally salient features of a situation is part of . . . the morally appropriate response" (*FC*, p. 3), and Aristotelian "practical reason [is] a kind of perception, as a way of judging or construing the case prior to deciding how to act" (p. 13). Murdoch agrees: "Perception itself is a mode of evaluation" (*MG*, p. 314).

Critics respond that a requirement of perception for moral deliberation is not unique to particularism. Even Kant must perceive an act to be a theft or a lie, and utilitarianism needs to know when people are happy. In either case, perception is required and must be evaluated and recognized as fitting a given category of human action, need, or emotion. But particularists reply that the depth of perception required is much different. In her work most critical of utilitarianism, *Poetic Justice*, Nussbaum details how:

> in its determination to see only what can enter into utilitarian calculations, the economic mind is blind: blind to the qualitative richness of the perceptible world; to the separateness of its people, to their inner depths, their hopes and loves and fears; blind to what it is like to live a human life and to try to endow it with a human meaning. Blind, above all, to the fact that human life is something mysterious and extremely complicated, something that demands to be approached with faculties of mind and resources of language that are suited to the expression of that complexity. In the name of science, the wonder that illuminates and prompts the deepest science has been jettisoned. In the name of taking each person's pain seriously – the noblest motivation in the birth of utilitarianism – we have a view that cannot adequately fathom any person's pain. (*PJ*, pp. 26–27)

Beyond the depth needed, particularism necessitates perception at an earlier point in the moral response. Although some aspects of decision-making can be rule-governed, the initial realization that an action is required cannot be. What system of rules, no matter how elaborate,

could guide me, walking down the street, as to whether this or that activity requires my intervention as a moral agent? Sherman says, "On Aristotle's view, an ethical theory that begins with the justification of a decision begins too far down the road. Preliminary to deciding how to act, one must acknowledge that a situation calls for action. This decision must arise from a reading of the circumstances" (*FC*, p. 29). Something must be ready to initiate moral thinking: whatever makes us look to principles for guidance cannot itself be a principle. In any given circumstance, the "reading, or reaction, is informed by ethical considerations expressive of the agent's virtue. Perception is thus informed by the virtues . . . . Much of the work of virtue will rest in knowing how to construe the case" (p. 29). Thus perception is prior to consideration of any principle and cannot result from ratiocination.

This perception is not just of a greater degree than what the Kantian or utilitarian thinks she needs, but a different kind, which I will illustrate with a contrast between two kinds of representation. In terms of moral illumination, one is much more valuable than the other.

The concept of "represent" has shades of meaning better delineated in German than in English.[21] In that language, *darstellen* means to "re-present" by presenting again, in the way theater represents life. By contrast, *vertreten* means to represent by description and analysis. Here, a scene from life is delineated by discursive discussion that outlines, counts, establishes order in, and prioritizes. Where theater is darstellen in that it recreates an episode with specific people in a specific time and place, a text in sociology or ethnography is vertreten. When the painter Edward Hopper stated, "I would like to say what Renoir said, that the important element in a picture cannot be defined, cannot be explained,"[22] he meant that darstellen and vertreten are incommensurable. In "Against Interpretation," Susan Sontag cautions against imposing too much vertreten on darstellen.[23] In *Culture and Truth*, Renato Rosaldo argues that ethnography in common practice – analytic description – simply cannot do justice to the depth of human interaction. He illustrates this succinctly (and hilariously) by describing people to themselves in ethnographic terms:

> The daily family breakfast started turning in my mind into a ritual described in the distanced normalizing mode of a classic ethnography . . . . While we were eating breakfast, I revealed . . . the "true" ethnography of their family breakfast:
> Every morning the reigning patriarch, as if just in from the hunt, shouts from the kitchen, "How many people would like a poached egg?" Women and children take turns saying yes or no.
> In the meantime, the women talk among themselves and designate one among them the toast maker. As the eggs near readiness, the reigning patriarch calls out to the designated toast maker, "The eggs are about ready. Is there enough toast?"
> "Yes," comes the deferential reply. "The last two pieces are about to pop up." The reigning patriarch then proudly enters bearing a plate of poached eggs before him.
> Throughout the course of the meal, the women and children, including the designated toast maker, perform the ritual praise song, saying "These sure are great eggs, Dad."
> My rendition of a family breakfast in the ethnographic present transformed a relatively spontaneous event into a generic cultural form. It became a caricatured analysis of rituals of dominance and deference organized along lines of gender and generation.[24]

It did more than that. By describing, albeit accurately, a breakfast in an objective, analytic style, it left a great deal out of the picture. It arguably omitted aspects critical to any kind of depth of understanding of that family. So it was no wonder that "the experience of having gales of laughter greet my microethnography made me wonder why a manner of speaking that sounds like the literal 'truth' when describing distant cultures seems terribly funny as a description of 'us' . . . Why does the highly serious classic ethnographic idiom almost inevitably become parodic when used as self-description?" (*CT*, p. 48).

It is because the ethnographic idiom, a vertreten of systematic description, leaves so much out of the picture. When discussing a distant culture of which we have no direct experience, the discrepancy between that description and the whole picture is not evident; in the case of a description of ourselves it is very much manifest. I don't mean, though, that what's omitted could be restored by a greater quantity of description, or a more exact depiction. It is not that, nor is it point of view. It is not the apparent objectivity of the description: consider how a breakfast scene described by Hemingway would differ from the ethnography. Is the difference that something is missing, or simply that it's a different sort of representation, suited for a different purpose?

Clearly vertreten and darstellen are much different, and each may at times be better suited to a different objective. My argument here, however, is that both are used to represent moral situations and to ask moral questions. At this point we can see that there is a substantive difference between them. Their use in discussion of moral perception and judgment may produce substantially different results.

IV

It would be a mistake, though, to say that simple perception of either kind of representation is all that is needed to support moral judgment. Susanne Langer recalls William James's famous description of raw sense perception as a "blooming, buzzing confusion"; she suggests that "the process of breaking up our sense experience . . . making reality conceivable, memorable, sometimes even predictable, is a process of imagination. [The most] primitive conception is imagination."[25] Murdoch points out that "when we settle down to be 'thoroughly rational' about a situation, we have already, reflectively or unreflectively, imagined it in a certain way" (*MG*, p. 314). She calls imagination "a spontaneous intuitive capacity to put together what is presented to us so as to form a coherent spatio-temporal experience which is intellectually ordered and sensuously based" (*MG*, p. 308). If so, then "what is presented to us," i.e., our raw perceptions, James's confusion, is in need of being put together.

A basis for this argument is found in the philosophy of science, as Thomas Kuhn explains. In his classic examples, chemists prior to Lavoisier did not 'see' oxygenation in combustion, and where Aristotle saw a falling stone constrained in its fall by a string, Galileo saw a pendulum; before that paradigm had been imagined, "there were no pendulums, but only swinging stones, for the scientist to see."[26] The raw sense data was there, but had not yet been completed. This is Kant's idea: he said that even "knowledge of the phenomenal world, empirical knowledge, is made possible by the imagination as a power of spontaneous synthesis operating at the transcendental barrier of consciousness" (*MG*, p. 314). Dewey concurs: "Only a personal

response involving imagination can possibly procure realization even of pure 'facts.'"[27] So knowledge of the physical world itself is possible only with the imagination. Thus Kant's requirement for moral principle alone, as recognition of duty not distracted by imagination or sympathy, forms a startling contrast with his requirement that imagination is necessary to make sense of the world in the first place. Instead, *imagination is fundamental to moral reasoning*.

This is an idea with a heritage: Percy Shelley says in *The Defence of Poetry*: "A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensively and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own."[28] Dewey agrees: "The imagination is the great instrument of moral good . . . the ideal factors in every moral outlook and human loyalty are imaginative . . . . Were art an acknowledged power in human association and not treated as the pleasuring of an idle moment or as a means of ostentatious display, and were morals understood to be identical with every aspect of value that is shared in experience, the 'problem' of the relation of art and morals would not exist" (*AE*, pp. 344–49).

Shelley and Dewey are speaking of a moral imagination, a wonderful idea that only recently has received much in the way of systematic enquiry. In recent work in cognitive science, Johnson lays a groundwork that can help us understand the imagination and the way we actually reason morally. In deriving a basis for an imaginative approach, he takes issue with what he calls a folk theory of ethics, one which owes its origins to the deontology of Western religion and which was best expressed by Kant. This is the dualistic argument that we are creatures both of passion and of reason, which are entirely different things, that moral thinking is a matter solely of reason, and that moral action requires the victory of reason over the passions – the autonomous will over heteronomous feelings. That will, acting only in concert with reason, can determine universal laws of ethics and match general precepts to specific cases, abstracting and prioritizing as necessary to effect the match, and so determine right action, without doubt or obscurity in choice or motivation.

Clearly, while this folk theory is derived from a tradition we can identify largely as Kantian, it does not adequately represent the complexity of Kant's thinking. What is important is not whether the moral law folk theory is a sufficient representation of the Kantian tradition rather than a popularization of it but, instead, what is implied by the reliance of both on a supreme principle of reason as adequate for moral judgment. To affirm such a reliance is not to gainsay the distinction in philosophy between the contexts of discovery and of justification, or to say that moral reasoning in practice is entirely deductive. It is to ask whether comprehension of principle, either God-given or rationally derived, sufficiently supports moral perception.

Cognitive science has a most interesting answer. Johnson says that although "there is much in [classical moral law] theory that captures important aspects of our moral experience . . . there is also much in the theory that is incompatible with what the cognitive sciences are revealing about the nature of concepts, reason and understanding . . . . [The problem] is that we are trying to live according to a view that is inconsistent with how human beings actually make sense of things" (*MI*, p. 8).

How we make sense of things is, exactly, cognitive science. It holds that we structure our worldview not deductively, but through means such as prototype recognition, metaphor, and narrative. The substantial value of narrative has been extensively discussed in ethics and moral education.[29] With the prototype/category distinction discussed above, cognitive science argues that classical moral law theory is also problematic in showing that the moral choice in a given situation or context is a specific application of a general principle. H. L. A. Hart's legal example of wheeled vehicles in a park is excellent, showing that even judicial thinking at its most astute questions primacy of classical principle. Thus we understand his explanation that "if a penumbra of uncertainty must surround all legal rules, then their application to specific cases in the penumbral area cannot be a matter of logical deduction."[30] A general ethical concept as a practical matter cannot contain a set of necessary and sufficient conditions by which a specific situation could be deductively fit to it. Johnson says: "Since our basic moral concepts do not have this essentialist structure, we cannot [just] determine the features of a situation, find the relevant concepts under which it falls, and apply the moral law to get one definite imperative for our action" (*MI*, p. 10) as Kantian and utilitarian theory claim we can.

In the same way, the cognitive study of metaphor not only agrees with, but complements, the importance philosophy and linguistics attach to it. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson write that our thought process is fundamentally metaphorical in nature, so much of the moral situation can not be put into words – or should we say, put into thought – in any other way:

> Contrary to traditional views of meaning . . . our conceptual system is, for the most part, structured by systematic metaphorical mappings [so] we understand more abstract and less structured domains (such as our concepts of reason, knowledge, belief) via mappings from more concrete and highly structured domains of experience (such as our bodily experience of vision, movement, eating, or manipulating objects). Language, and the conceptual system that underlies it, does not give us a literal core of terms capable of mapping directly onto experience.[31]

Instead, we map the world, including moral obligation, through imagination.

V

Johnson identifies as his central claim that "human moral understanding is fundamentally imaginative" and that metaphor is, necessarily, "one of the principal mechanisms of imaginative cognition" (*MI*, p. 33). Murdoch concurs, calling metaphors "fundamental modes of understanding" (*MG*, p. 306). Steven Pinker finds that "Human intelligence consists of a process of metaphorical abstraction: conceptual structure bleached of its contents, applied to new, abstract domains."[32] Maxine Greene says that imagination "not insignificantly . . . makes metaphor possible."[33] Lakoff argues, "Metaphor is the main mechanism through which we comprehend abstract concepts and perform abstract reasoning. Much subject matter, from the most mundane to the most abstruse scientific theories, can only be comprehended via metaphor . . . . [It] is central to our understanding of experience and to the way we act on that understanding."[34] George Steiner states that "metaphor is a prime instrument of ethical illumin-

ation,"[35] and Cynthia Ozick finds that "metaphor is one of the chief agents of our moral nature, and . . . the more serious we are in life, the less we can do without it."[36]

These refer to cognitive (or conceptual) metaphor, which the Linguistic Society of America defines as "not a mode of language, but a mode of thought. Metaphors project structures from source domains of schematized bodily or enculturated experience into abstract target domains,"[37] and there may actually be a biological basis for metaphor, as considered in the science of neurology. In "Neural reuse: A fundamental organizational principle of the brain,"[38] Michael Anderson says:

> One of the most successful theoretical paradigms in cognitive science has been the conceptual metaphor theories originating with Lakoff and Johnson (1980; 1999) [which] suggest that cognition is dominated by metaphor-based thinking, whereby the structure and logical protocols of one or more domains, combined in various ways, guide or structure thinking in another . . . . A natural question that arises for such theories, however, is how the structured inheritance from one domain to another is actually achieved by the brain. Is it done abstractly . . . or is there a more basic biological grounding, such that the very neural substrates used in supporting cognition in one domain are reused to support cognition in the other? (*NR*, p. 253)

Although neuroscience has yet to reach definitive conclusions, Anderson writes that "a series of early findings bolstered the idea that direct neural substrates supported metaphorical mappings" (p. 254), and Lakoff, in "Mapping the brain's metaphor circuitry: metaphorical thought in everyday reason,"[39] says he and Johnson[40] have shown that "important concepts [like morality] are each defined via multiple conceptual metaphors" ("MB," p. 2), and that "complex concepts are formed by neural binding circuits" (p. 5). "The nodes that regularly fire together strengthen . . . creating neural links . . . Eventually a shortest pathway is reached and a circuit is formed linking the two nodes . . . That circuit *is* the metaphor" (p. 6).

In more quotidian terms, Michael Chorost points out that neuroscientists using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scanning see that when a person hears the literal phrase "the player kicked the ball," the motor area of the brain is activated – and when hearing the metaphorical "the addict kicked the habit," the same thing happens: "The understanding of sensory-motor metaphors is not abstracted away from their sensory-motor origins."[41] The neurologist Robert Sapolsky asks: "What are we to make of the brain processing literal and metaphorical versions of a concept in the same brain region? Or that our neural circuitry doesn't cleanly differentiate between the real and the symbolic? . . . This neural confusion about the literal versus the metaphorical gives symbols enormous power."[42]

This may qualify as an understatement. C. S. Peirce, Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and many others have taught us the power of symbol for years, and they knew nothing of neural mapping. Metaphor's projection of meaning from an enculturated source domain into an abstract target domain is clearly much more, much deeper, than a literary device. It forms a relationship fundamental to our thought.

VI

But what about art? Have we lost track of it? Not yet: a strong clue to the relation of the perception of art and morality is in a word Murdoch uses to relate the ethical and the aesthetic. She says "our moral experience shares in the peculiar density of art . . . in everyday moral discussion . . . we deploy a complex densely textured network of values round an intuited centre of 'good' . . . Looked at in this way, life can be seen as full of aesthetic imaginative activity which is also, scarcely distinguishably, moral activity" (*MG*, p. 325).

What could she mean by "density"? She does not mean obscurity. She may mean complex in more than the sense of simply having many parts or connections. With the aesthetic, for example, expression and perception seem complex in a special way, outlined by Nelson Goodman in his *Languages of Art.*[43] He defines three qualities or "symptoms" of the aesthetic:

- *Syntactic density*: A work of art contains an uncounted number of referents, so constructed that between any two points, there is room for a third. There is thus no limit or priority, or necessary distinction, among the referents. For example, in a painting, there is no minimum or maximum allowable number of brushstrokes. More could be added, or many taken away, without necessarily affecting the quality or intent of the painting. The same is true for the words of a poem or novel.
- *Syntactic repleteness*: The greater part of these referents needs to be employed by the viewer to generate meaning. We cannot say that only ten, or a hundred, referents (or dots to be connected) are significant in an artwork, and the rest are superfluous. A critic would make a large statement to call a stanza in a poem, or even one line or one word, dispensable. Each element might add something, and it's hard to say which elements add how much, or which contributions are most important. Critics do make that kind of statement, but it is tenuous at best and not often convincing; they more often concern themselves with the artwork as a whole rather than essentially disagree with the artist by saying that any part of the work is extraneous.
- *Semantic density*: The number, variety, and density of referents is sufficient that paraphrase, i.e. vertreten, of the artwork is impossible. To do so would require that, from the density and profusion of referents, a finite number be extracted. To do that requires prioritizing. Abstraction and extraction by their nature omit something and, when the original has aesthetic dimensions, Goodman would say that there is no guarantee that this something left out is not critical to the meaning of the whole work. The omissions impoverish the experience of the original.

Can these symptoms be mapped onto the moral domain? Note that prototype theory meets Goodman's descriptions. A prototype is never necessarily finished or complete. Its only requirement is that it be something like its reference. Category has to be complete to make sense, while prototype evolves as we develop a better understanding of its reference. While certain aspects of a moral situation are of course more important than others, it may be hard to list aspects in order of relevance, or to find a rule that says this or that facet of the situation is not worthy of consideration. Nor can an observer be certain that paraphrase of the situation captures all its meaning. Thus *the aesthetic and the moral share density,* seminal to perception and conducive to

the connection of metaphor. The painting and the prototype, darstellen and dense, become complete with imagination, a capacity less helpful to discursive prose, category, and vertreten.

Density impels imagination to function, and results are profound. Most of us remember faces better than names: faces have density; names do not. A picture is worth a thousand words: pictures have density; with the significant exception of literature, words do not. Prototype has density; category does not. Darstellen has density; vertreten does not. Critically, example has density; explanation does not. Beauty and truth may become conflated in our perception since they are among the deepest ideas we have and, a related matter, have the most density and require substantive imaginative effort to perceive well. This correspondence – or reminiscence – instantiates a deep conceptual metaphor that lets us see a sense of the one in the other. Perceiving and exploring density in the aesthetic tempers us to perceive it in the fractal geometry of human interaction.

Understanding this nature of a moral density suggests a direction that education might take to become more effective, as it explains why Dewey and Murdoch agree that teaching art is teaching ethics. Yet Dewey cautioned against art and literature that attempts moral education as its didactic purpose, thereby rendering it art of secondary quality (*AE*, p. 346). My argument, instead, favors art that does not intend to teach but rather to illuminate, examples including George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and the novels of Jane Austen.

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