Ethics and Imagination[*]

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It is difficult to understate the disarrayed state of scholarship at the intersection of ethics and imagination. A vast range of methodologies and motivations across philosophical subdisciplines present quite the organizational challenge to providing a comprehensive overview of the field. Our goal in this chapter is to trawl through these issues at the intersection of ethics and imagination to identify and organize the predominant debates. In the following sections, we present the following taxonomy of issues: §1 focuses on questions that ask whether our imagination can be constrained by ethical considerations; §2 asks whether imagination can contribute to the cultivation of ethical lives through engagements with narrative artworks; §3 applies similar questions to a 'real world' context; and §4 centers around the issue of whether imagination contributes to constructing new ethical or political frameworks.

Before delving into these issues, some terminological notes are in order: We work with deliberately broad construals of both ethics and imagination to better account for the diversity of issues at stake in their intersection. Articulating a precise account of either ethics or imagination is beyond the scope of this chapter. The following conceptions of ethics and imagination encompass the breadth of ideas we work with: First, we take *ethics* as the set of norms governing human lives that are concerned with how to live and what to do: they constitute the standards of good and bad, right and wrong, permissible and impermissible, and so on. While we acknowledge that some moral philosophers, following Bernard Williams (1985/2006), use 'ethics' to refer broadly to the subject matter of moral philosophy and 'morality' to refer narrowly to a specific development of the ethical that came from the Western tradition, we will use these terms interchangeably. Second, we take *imagination* to be the capacity for representing possibilities other than the actual, times other than the present, and perspectives other than one's own (Liao & Gendler 2019). The use of imagination is pervasive to human lives, including in: engaging with artworks, understanding the perspectives of others, practical decision-making, and thinking about theoretical possibilities.

1. Ethical Constraints on Imagination

Initially, one might think that ethics and imagination operate in separate realms: ethics seems to be grounded in the real world, but imagination is often thought to roam free in fantasy lands; we typically make moral assessments on publicly available behavior, but imagination happens inside one's head. However, important questions arise at the intersection, complicating any simplistic dichotomies. This section provides an overview of some of these challenges, including the moral evaluation of imagination, the potential for morality's constraining our imaginative abilities, and the possibility of moral norms' governing our imaginings.

When it comes to the moral evaluation of imagination, philosophers primarily focus on positive reactions to imagining morally reprehensible objects (Cooke 2014; Gaut 1998, 2007; Smuts 2013, 2016). Specifically, the question of moral evaluation arises when we assess certain responses to imagining egregious scenarios: is it *wrong* to take pleasure in imagining the undeserved suffering of others, given that the suffering is purely imagined? If such imaginings have no real-world effects (for example, if they fail to change one's attitudes towards the real world or motivate immoral actions), it might seem strange to subject them to moral evaluation. Yet, if one takes pleasure in imagining torturing children but never harms any in real life, it might intuitively strike us as wrong. Why might this be?

A common approach locates an intrinsic wrong in enjoying evil, even in imaginary contexts. In other words, it is wrong to take pleasure in imagining things that are bad in themselves (Smuts 2013, 2016). Attitudes directed towards imagined states of affairs can likewise be subject to moral evaluation if they reveal negative aspects of one's character (Gaut 1998). Additionally, some argue that the attitudes directed towards imagined scenarios and characters are likely to manifest in attitudes towards real entities of the relevant type as well (Gaut 1998, 2007; Gendler 2006a, 2008a, 2008b). For example, even if a rape fantasist only imagines raping fictional women, it is integral to his fantasy that he is raping *women*, beings of a kind that exist in the real world.

An alternative solution distinguishes 'imagination' from 'fictive imagination' (that is, imaginings about fictional states of affairs) as a way to assess relevant moral differences between, for instance, taking pleasure in imagining murdering a fictional character and imagining murdering a real person.[1] Those who take this distinction seriously suggest that any moral assessments we make about one type of imagining cannot transfer to the other: "even if we grant that it might sometimes be wrong to imagine *x* or to take pleasure in imagining *x*, nothing follows about the ethical status of fictively imagining *x*, with or without pleasure" (Cooke 2014: 317). So, while it

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[1] For a related distinction regarding fantasies (that is, conscious, pleasurable imaginings), see Cherry (1985, 1988), who differentiates 'surrogate fantasies' from 'autonomous fantasies', where the former typically involves situations that the fantasist would like to take place in reality and the latter involves scenarios that the fantasist does not want actualized (for example, someone might enjoy rape fantasies but not want rape to occur in reality). Autonomous fantasies on his view are far less morally problematic, maybe even morally innocuous, because of this lack of desire for actualization. Alternatively, see Sher (2019) who argues that morality does not govern private thought in general, because prohibitions against thoughts lack discrete boundaries and an individual's subjective world is impermeable to others.

might be wrong to find pleasure in imagining murdering a real person, it might not be wrong to take pleasure in a similar imaginative act if it is directed towards a fictional one.

Another issue at the intersection of ethics and imagination is 'the problem of imaginative resistance', which suggests that morality seems to impose constraints on imagination. *Imaginative resistance* occurs when an otherwise competent imaginer experiences a psychological tension when prompted to engage in an imaginative activity (Gendler & Liao 2016; Miyazono & Liao 2016; Tuna 2020). While we can easily imagine various things that do not exist in the real world, like *flying castles*, *golden mountains*, and *grumpy ogres who befriend talking donkeys*, it might be difficult, perhaps even impossible, for us to imagine *forks that are indistinguishable from televisions*, *five-fingered ovals*, and *female infanticide being a paragon of ethical conduct*, even in the context of fiction.[2] This contrast between easy and challenging cases gives rise to the following problem: why is it that certain imaginative acts are met with resistance while others are not?

Although imaginative resistance seems to occur with a diverse range of imagined objects and scenarios (Kim et al. 2019; Walton 1994, 2006; Weatherson 2004; Yablo 2002), the initial cases that attracted philosophers' attention (and the cases we focus on here) tend to involve engagement with fictions that run counter to one's moral sensibilities (Gendler 2000, 2006b; Moran 1994; Walton 1990, 1994). Most people, for instance, experience difficulties trying to imagine the following:

"In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl" (Walton 1994: 37).

This prompt has been subject to myriad analyses in the literature. It requires one to imagine that 'Giselda did the right thing' in killing her baby on grounds of its gender; to accept the prompt, one must imagine having a positive moral evaluation of female infanticide. One possible explanation for why most people experience difficulty in imagining this prompt is because they do not endorse the moral evaluation in reality. However, as we have seen, we are typically able to imagine many things we do not believe exist in the real world, especially in the context of fiction. What makes the 'Giselda prompt' any different, and why does this resistance arise? Various solutions have been proposed. For the purposes of this chapter, we expound the two main types of diagnoses on the nature of imaginative resistance.[3]

First, *cantian* theories of imaginative resistance locate the 'resistance' in an *inability* to imagine — no matter how hard one tries to imagine certain things, one *can't* (Meskin & Weinberg 2003; Stear 2015; Walton 1990, 1994; Weatherson 2004;

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[2] Note that the imaginative resistance literature typically involves engagement with *fiction* in particular, but it is possible that the phenomenon can apply more broadly (see, for examples, Gendler 2006b).

[3] The two positions we outline are generally considered part of 'first-wave' analyses of imaginative resistance, which take the mechanisms and psychological components of the phenomenon as the topics of disagreement. Some other approaches are worth noting: *eliminativists* stand in opposition to the majority theorists working in this tradition (who affirm the existence of imaginative resistance) by raising doubts about imaginative resistance's status as a *sui generis* phenomenon (Mothersill 2003; Sauchelli 2016, 2019; Tanner 1994; Todd 2009); and 'second wave' analyses attempted to shed insight on the phenomenon through examining both contextual differences (Black et al. 2018; Liao et al. 2014; Liao 2016; Nanay 2010; Weinberg 2008) and individual differences (Barnes & Black 2016; Clavel-Vazquez 2018; Peterson 2019).

Weinberg & Meskin 2006; Yablo 2002). When it comes to prompts like the Giselda proposition, it seems like we simply lack the ability to imagine that female infancide is morally right. To support this claim, cantians often appeal to a 'Reality Principle', which posits constitutive relations between base-level and higher-order propositions that are fixed across worlds, including fictional worlds. Some variation of this principle is often invoked to impose limitations on authorial authority in determining what can be made fictional — authors lack authority to create fictional worlds that deviate significantly from some base-level facts (Walton 1990, 1994; Weatherson 2004; Yablo 2002). Just like how authors cannot make conceptual impossibilities such as square circles exist in their fictions, they cannot make moral impossibilities exist. Our inability to imagine results from an author's failed attempts to breach such laws.

Second, *wontian* theories maintain that we are not unable, but merely *unwilling* to engage with certain imaginative prompts — we simply *won't* imaginatively engage with a fiction that runs counter to our morals (Gendler 2000, 2006b; Currie 2002; Stokes 2006). Contrary to the cantian claim, wontians deny that conceptual impossibilities are what evoke imaginative resistance: Conceptual impossibilities are not necessary because some stories seem able to make contradictory propositions hold true in the fictional context they build, and they are not sufficient because imaginative resistance can be evoked for stories that do not rest on conceptual impossibilities (Gendler 2000). On the wontian account, imagining turns out to be an act that exercises and engineers the imaginer's conceptual repertoire and appraisal habits. So morality imposes a constraint on our imagination, but not in the way cantians suggest. According to wontians, we can in principle imagine the fictional truth of the Giselda proposition, but we are unwilling to do so on moral grounds.

Further insight into the relationship between ethics and imagination can be drawn from adjacent literature that examines questions of ethical considerations bearing on other mental states. Surprisingly, attempts to bridge these literatures are currently rare, if not non-existent. Here, we identify some parallels that have been overlooked thus far. For one, we could forge a connection between imaginative resistance and the burgeoning literature in moral encroachment of belief (Basu 2021; Bolinger 2020; Moss 2018). Moral encroachment tracks the idea that moral considerations can factor into epistemic phenomena, such as the justification of beliefs.[4] If this is right, it could potentially bolster the idea that moral factors bear on the imaginative realm as well, that is, features of imagination such as the ability to imagine or the authority to create scenarios to prompt imagination could be governed by moral norms. Indeed, we can plausibly construe the cantian theory as mapping onto a similar concept — the *moral encroachment* of imagination. As a tentative example, there might be parallel considerations between how authorial

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[4] We note that although research in moral encroachment varies widely in methodology and motivations, this characterization of moral encroachment follows the general consensus of the concept in its most basic form. Going into the specificities of this debate is beyond the scope of this current chapter, but see Bolinger (2020) for an illuminating review of the varieties of studies that tend to fall under the label 'moral encroachment'.

authority breaks down with significant deviations from moral constraints and how epistemic justification can be impacted by moral factors.

Next, in addition to the moral evaluation of the imaginings themselves (which we covered earlier in this section), we might draw further inspiration from the literature on *doxastic wronging* to investigate whether imaginings can *wrong others*. Proponents of doxastic wronging claim that beliefs in themselves can wrong others, even if they never get expressed or put into action (Basu 2021; Basu & Schroeder 2019). Specifically, beliefs can wrong in virtue of their content, for example, forming beliefs about someone based on stereotyped representations of their race can wrong them insofar as the believer fails to respect that person's individual agency. Turning to the imaginative realm, Robin Zheng and Nils-Hennes Stear (manuscript) argue that imaginings can wrong in virtue of their content when they realize a controlling image or normalizing oppressive behavior, in congruence with oppression, in a specific sociohistorical context. Thinking about the imaginative analogue of doxasting wronging could bolster the wontian theory by providing an explanation for why people resist imagining morally deviant propositions: perhaps we refuse to imagine certain prompts because we wish to evade moral culpability. Along these lines, we suggest that mining insights from adjacent literatures on ethics' bearing on other mental states can give us greater understanding of the interaction between morality and imagination.

2. The Function of Narrative Arts in Ethical Life: A Guidebook for Imagination?

Our next topic centers around the following question: to what extent can imaginative engagements with *narrative arts* (for example, literature, film, television, comics, etc.) influence people's morals?[5] Numerous theorists have offered accounts for ways in which imaginative engagement with narrative arts can morally educate or corrupt (Booth 1988; Depaul 1988; Jacobson 1997; Johnson 1994; Landy 2008; Mullin 2004; Robinson 2005).[6] In this section, we focus specifically on the role of imagination in *moral persuasion*, where narrative arts are thought to guide our imaginings in at least two ways: they facilitate the exploration and identification of morally significant patterns; and they can also prompt perspective-taking or the simulation of others' mental states. These imaginative mechanisms are thought to alter people's appraisal repertoire (that is, emotional, moral, and other responses)

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[5] This debate has sometimes been referred to as the 'moral persuasion' debate. Moral persuasion partially overlaps with, but is conceptually distinct from, the 'value interaction' debate, which concerns the connection between aesthetic and moral values (see Liao & Meskin (2018): 659–662 for an overview; see also Giovanelli (2007) and McGregor (2014) for alternative taxonomies). The overlap occurs when, for instance, someone criticizes an artwork for morally corrupting its audience (moral persuasion) and that this ethical defect constitutes an aesthetic defect (value interaction). However, since one might endorse one claim but not the other (for example, one could affirm that an artwork morally corrupts its audience but deny that this constitutes an aesthetic defect) the two debates are conceptually distinct. This section sets aside the value interaction debate to focus on the role of imagination in the moral persuasion debate.

[6] However, others have argued that narrative arts cannot offer any new, non-trivial moral knowledge (Lamarque & Olsen 1994; Posner 1997, 1998). In addition to the philosophical debate amongst these theorists, there is also a parallel empirical debate that occurs in fields such as psychology, communications, and media studies on the effect of narrative arts on cognitive attitudes (see Liao & Gendler 2011: 86–87 for an overview).

that can be deployed in real-life situations as well as merely fictional ones, providing another connection between the imaginative and ethical realms.

Narrative artworks can serve as 'props' for testing, deepening, and refining our moral understanding in diverse scenarios without real consequences. Notably, Martha Nussbaum (1990, 1995) argues that imaginative engagement with literature helps people develop their ability to discern morally salient features of their situation; imagined scenarios enable emotional involvement without the taint of distorting self-interest. Given that narrative artworks are relatively self-contained in this manner, some have gone so far as to argue that they offer a *cognitively preferable* means to acquire epistemic benefits because of their simplicity (Elgin 2014).[7] This is because situations and people in real life are bound to be affected by endless connections to other features that could potentially merit consideration, while the nuanced depictions presented in fictional narratives are more tractable in typically being limited to descriptions of the story world.

Not all narratives guide imagination in the same way. Unfortunately, most philosophical discussions of narrative arts only examine examples in the *realist genre*, that is, the kind of fiction that is morally and psychologically realistic. James Harold (2007) critiques this narrow range of examples and uses the case of *Catch-22* to demonstrate how satire can guide imagination to cultivate our ethical lives in a distinctive way. Harold argues that while realistic narratives tend to invite readers to engage with the characters, *Catch-22* invites readers to maintain an ironic distance from the characters until the very end — this transition from disengagement to engagement encourages readers to reflect on the appropriate moral response to an absurd, unjust world. Generalizing Harold's observation, Shen-yi Liao (2013) analyses the genre of horror comedies such as *Evil Dead 2* to demonstrate that different narrative genres can guide imagination and cultivate our ethical lives in different ways. In addition, Paisley Livingston (2009) argues that the diversity of narrative artworks cautions against generic claims about narratives' capacity to educate and corrupt.

Another way narrative artworks can guide our imagination towards ethical ends is by prompting simulation (Currie 1995; Kieran 2003) or the adoption of a perspective (Camp 2009, 2017; Stueber 2008, 2016; von Wright 2002). Simulating a character's mental states involves cultivating a first-personal understanding of the character's mental states to imagine their experiences, rather than identifying or sympathizing with the character (Currie 1995). Narratives serve to orient readers in a manner appropriate for recreating another perspective by providing requisite information (Stueber 2008). Readers take the information that narratives provide to structure their understanding of characters and their way of experiencing the world.

Many theorists are optimistic about narrative artworks' capacity to foster empathy or compassion for others (Carroll 2000, 2002; Kieran 1996; Murdoch 1970).

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[7] In this respect, narrative arts function similarly to thought experiments: both involve uses of imaginary scenarios for coming to new understandings of the real world (Gendler 2010). In fact, Jonathan Weinberg (2008) argues that philosophical thought experiments constitute a genre of narratives. One important difference is that while thought experiments primarily aim to generate new propositional knowledge, narrative arts (at least in the moral domain) also aim to generate other types of understanding, including a reconfigured appraisal repertoire.

Martha Nussbaum (1990, 1995, 1997) is again a prominent advocate for the morally formative value of literature, advancing the view that literature can develop and exercise one's moral capacities via enhancing one's capacity for sympathetic understanding. This connection is well supported by empirical evidence (Djikic et al. 2013; Kidd & Castano 2013; Mar et al. 2006, 2009), particularly in developmental psychology (Gebhard et al. 2003; Melchiori & Mallett 2015; Vezzali et al. 2015).[8] The thought here is that children often acquire their moral capacities alongside exposure to stories by rehearsing empathetic responses to characters (Currie & Ravenscroft 2002; Ravenscroft 2012) — in rehearsing their empathetic responses, children recreate the emotional states of fictional characters and gain the ability to differentiate their own emotions from others', a skill they can also use to navigate real life situations.

However, this imaginative capacity also has the potential to *harm* moral developments (Hurley 2004; Harold 2005). Matthew Kieran (2003) argues that narrative artworks espousing morally defective perspectives can be morally corruptive insofar as they invite one to imaginatively adopt dubious values and commitments. Using Martin Scorsese's crime film *GoodFellas* as a case study, he illustrates how the film entices audience members to absorb the values and commitments of the Mafia by rendering the deeply defective moral perspective intelligible. These values likely present a sharp divergence from the values the audience members hold in reality, creating a tension between the beliefs that they hold about the real world (for example, outgroup members are worthy of moral concern) and the ones they imagine holding about the fictional world (for example, outgroup members are morally insignificant).

A narrative artwork's power to edify can backfire when the work fails to meet epistemic standards, such as accuracy. When works present distorted depictions of marginalized groups, this can become particularly worrisome. For instance, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or *The Confessions of Nat Turner* can promote ignorance or arrogance on part of the reader in encouraging them to empathize with characters who have outlooks presented as representative of their social groups but actually deviate significantly from the group's actual outlook (Harold 2003; Shim forthcoming). This can in turn obscure the oppressive realities that the marginalized group faces, hampering progress in rectifying injustices. Thus, fiction plausibly serves as a guidebook for the imagination, but it can lead us to either morally enlightening or morally corrupt destinations. Although facilitating empathetic understanding is generally desirable, we ought to approach this ability with epistemic humility and caution for assessing the perspectives that a fiction prompts us to take.

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[8] It is questionable that this moral formative value is unique to literature, and not common to all narrative arts: more recent experimental results show no measurable difference in empathizing abilities between groups that read literary fiction versus other reading materials (Panero et al. 2016). There also exists skepticism regarding the claim that children can transfer moral lessons from fictions to reality (Narvaez et al. 1998; Strouse et al. 2018).

3. Social Cognition in Ethical Life: Imagination, Fast and Slow

Observing ethics and imagination in the context of fiction provides a relatively sterilized slate for theorists to distill the important features of their relation. However, ethics and imagination also interact in the absence of fictional prompts. Ethicists working outside of aesthetics have become increasingly interested in imagination as a facilitator for this kind of understanding towards real people and the implications it can have for our interpersonal relationships. In this section, we examine issues at the intersection of ethics and imagination that arise in real life, such as the function of imagination in moral deliberation and imagination's contribution to other mental states that are potentially subject to moral evaluation.

Moral theorists have identified imagination's role as providing us the means to view others as being worthy of serious moral concern (Jacobs 1991; Johnson 2016; Stueber 2016), as well as being a crucial element in moral decision-making (Biss 2014; Coeckelberg & Mesman 2007; Narvaez & Mrkva 2014). We can use imagination to explore different scenarios of moral significance without having to actually experience them. This can be applied in practice to various domains, such as medicine, in which imagination can play a practical role for medical practitioners in integrating an imaginative process into their decision-making processes. Here, imagination can help practitioners synthesize available information on the situation, empathize with the parties involved, and facilitate better outcomes for their patients after mentally exploring various possibilities for action (Coeckelbergh & Mesman 2007; Scott 1997).

In highlighting the practical applications of imagination, some theorists suggest that imagination is a skill that we can cultivate. Amy Kind (2020), for instance, argues that imagination can give us the ability to know what new experiences are like. If this is right, imagination can open radical possibilities for understanding others who have very different life experiences from ourselves, which can potentially foster greater care and empathy towards others. Some doubt the possibility that imagination has the ability to give us genuine understanding of situations that we have not actually experienced (Arpaly 2020; Elliot & Elliot 1991; Mackenzie & Scully 2007; Paul 2014). Moreover, others worry that taking this idea too seriously can promote epistemic arrogance, especially when dominantly situated imaginers claim that they can truly understand the experiences of marginalized people, even when they get it wrong (Frye 1992; Roelofs 2014; Shim forthcoming; Taylor 2014). So while imagination might help us achieve empathetic understanding, we might have reason to be sensitive to its potential limitations.

Another way that imagination can aid our moral development includes playing a role in autonomy, specifically in self-understanding, self-reflection, and practical deliberation about the self. On this point, Catriona Mackenzie (2000) suggests that failures of imagination that appear in stereotyped representations espoused in the dominant cultural repertoire of metaphors, symbols, and images could lead to failures in autonomy as well. Alternatively, we suggest that such failures in autonomy might not be caused by imaginative failures, but rather be *sustained* by imaginative practices: Our discussion so far has centered around

imagination's role in 'slow' moral cognition, that is, conscious, deliberate, and effortful ways of thinking. However, imagination might also play a role in 'fast' moral cognition, that is, unconscious, automatic and effortless ways of thinking. Traditional discussions of ethics have tended to focus on slow moral cognition, but in recent years fast moral cognition has gained traction. In what follows, we map out potential ways imagination can contribute to 'fast' mental states that are potentially subject to moral evaluation, using implicit bias as a case study.[9]

The exact relationship between imagination and implicit bias is under debate. One approach is Ema Sullivan-Bissett's (2018) constitutive claim, in which implicit biases are unconscious imaginings. This account distinguishes two structures of implicit biases: associative implicit biases are constituted by multiple imaginings, and non-associative implicit biases are constituted by single imaginings. Two major advantages of the imagination-based model of implicit bias are that the two different kinds of imaginings can accommodate the heterogeneity of the phenomenon, and since imagination is not constrained by truth, this model need not attribute contradictory beliefs to agents. Another approach follows an indirect causal claim proposed by Anna Welpinghus (2020), in which imagination plays a mediating role in turning implicit biases, whatever they turn out to be, into downstream effects. On this account, imagination is central to decision-making because it is the mental activity with which we integrate a large array of social knowledge and elaborate the possibilities that we are considering.

If imagination is indeed linked to implicit bias in either of these ways, imaginings seem to be subject to moral assessment based on their downstream effects. Recently, moral theorists have shown special interest in the kind of implicit biases that might give rise to group-based discrimination, often based on negative stereotypes, for example, police officers are likely to associate black bodies with criminality, which is plausibly connected to disproportionate levels of police violence against Black people (Correll et al. 2007; Eberhardt et al. 2004; Glaser & Knowles 2008; see Jost et al. 2009 for an overview). Such stereotypes tend to be intertwined with the dissemination of artworks — constantly depicting Black people as criminals in various media exposes audiences to this dangerous stereotype. If we combine this idea with the role of artworks in guiding imagination, we can see how imagination can be weaponized at a systemic level. So while imagination can, as we have shown, be cultivated for the betterment of ethical lives, it seems that it might also be utilizable for sustaining oppression. And this, perhaps, is yet another way in which imagination might be subject to further moral assessment.

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[9] *Implicit bias* roughly encapsulates a cluster of representational mental states that can contribute to evaluative judgments and behavior (Brownstein 2019; Johnson 2020), which are typically assessed by implicit measures like the implicit association test (Greenwald et al. 1998). Given its heterogeneity as a concept, there remain numerous controversies in characterizing implicit bias, including its status as a psychological construct in the first place (Holroyd & Sweetman 2016; Machery forthcoming). Similarly, there remain controversies on agents' moral responsibility for implicit biases (Holroyd et al. 2017). We will set aside these controversies and focus on imagination's possible role in implicit bias.

4. Moral and Political Imagination

So far, we have examined the interaction of ethics and imagination within the context of existing moral frameworks, either by applying them to the contents of imaginative attitudes, or showing how imagination can facilitate the cultivation or transgression of them. In this final section, we examine yet another way in which imagination can bear on ethics: 'moral imagination' or 'political imagination' are thought to formulate or even constitute new moral, social, and political frameworks. This concept is typically invoked in highly heterogeneous ways — if imagination is the "junkyard of the mind" (Harpham 2017), then moral and political imagination constitutes an especially messy area within.

We can begin tidying up this area of the junkyard by identifying an organizing principle behind disparate uses of the term: an emphasis on the creative and transcendental capacities of imaginings. To clarify this capacity, we can turn to a distinction posited by Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft between *recreative* and *creative imagination.* Our focus until now has been on recreative imagination, that is, the capacity to cultivate or transgress existing moral (or political) frameworks. As we have seen, recreative imagination is exercised through engagement with narrative artworks or in ordinary social cognition. Creative imagination, by contrast, is the capacity for imagination to formulate or constitute new moral (and political) frameworks. It aims to combine ideas in unexpected and unconventional ways. Along these lines, some theorists argue that narrative artworks can stimulate an 'imaginative leap' in its audiences to envision a morally better world (Kieran 1996; Stadler 2020).

Traditionally, morality has been conceived as a system of rational principles that seems *prima facie* at odds with the notion of imagination as unbound to reason. Accordingly, the earliest mentions of imagination in discussions of ethical reasoning tended to restrict imagination to the application of moral principles (Hare 1963; Werhane 1999; Williams 1997; see Fesmire 2003 for an overview). In particular, imagination was thought to play a role in moral deliberation by allowing us to imagine how requirements would play out in concrete situations. Such views tended to exhibit a wariness of imagination's potential to lead us to relativism if untempered by reason.

Recent thinkers have eschewed these concerns by demonstrating interest in developing a concept of *moral imagination* to delineate the means through which we explore and forge new values and commitments in the moral realm (Kekes 1991, 2006; Johnson 2016; Narvaez & Mrkva 2014). Moral imagination has been defined as "the expansive dimension of intelligence at work in the ongoing remaking of experience [...] a *process* of experiential transformation and growth" (Johnson 2016: 362) and "the operation of imaginative capacities by agents in pursuit of moral ends" (Biss 2014: 2). On these conceptions, moral imagination is intertwined with freedom by exhibiting the capacity to mentally explore what it is like to realize particular possibilities in the moral realm. John Kekes (1991) argues that the proper function of the moral imagination is not to free us from cultural conditioning, but rather to give us a tool to close the gap between what we consider to be reasonable beliefs about

our possibilities and our actual beliefs. In other words, moral imagination should aim to help us explore or *imagine* different possibilities for action.

Some caution that moral imagination may not be intrinsically virtuous, insofar as it can also help us to contemplate and perform acts of evil (Jacobs 1991). However, as feminist philosophers have emphasized, moral imagination may be integral to circumventing dominant moral understandings that structure our interactions with the world (Babbitt 1996; Biss 2013, 2014; Clarke 2006; Cunliffe 2019; Murdoch 1992). For example, Bridget Clarke (2006) argues that exercising the moral imaginations entails envisaging alternative conceptions of people to the status quo. Following Iris Murdoch, she contrasts this with the notion of *fantasy*, which represents mere escapism — the moral imagination is not escapism, but rather a means by which we can generate new possibilities for our lived realities.

The literature on political imagination exhibits similar thematic commonalities. However, the concept of political imagination might have a distinctive origin, namely, C. Wright Mills's concept of *sociological imagination*, which "enables its possessor to understand the larger historical sense in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. [The sociological imagination] enables [its possessor] to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions" (Mills 1959/2000: 5). If we draw broad inspiration from this conception, we can construe *political imagination* as capturing the relationship between the mental lives of individuals and actual or possible socio-political arrangements. From this, we can identify two dimensions of variations to organize the diverse extensions of the concept.

First, political imagination can be internal or external. On the *internal* conception, political imagination concerns an individual's capacity to construct, critique, and challenge socio-political arrangements. For example, political theorist Hannah Arendt claims that radical social and political change "would be impossible if we could not mentally remove ourselves from where we physically are located and *imagine* that things might as well be different from what they actually are. In other words, the deliberate denial of factual truth- the ability to lie- and the capacity to change facts-the ability to act-are interconnected; they owe their existence to the same source: imagination" (Arendt 1972: 5). By contrast, on the *external* conception, political imagination exists as an emergent property of collective interactions, including ideologies and institutions that constitute social and political facts. For example, political philosopher Charles Taylor characterizes social imaginary as "the kind of common understanding that enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life [...] that is both factual and normative" (Taylor 2004: 24).

Second, political imagination can be *oriented* either conservatively or progressively. As Avshalom Schwartz notes, discussions of political imagination seem to ascribe contradictory capacities: "to both secure order and stability and encourage innovation and change" (Schwartz 2021: 2). Schwartz's diagnosis claims that imagination can have these seemingly contradictory uses because of differences in constraints (compare Kind & Kung 2016). On one hand, Taylor's conception exemplifies the *conservative* orientation, in which imagination is the social glue that

enables institutions to sustain their structure. On the other hand, Arendt's conception exemplifies the *progressive* orientation, in which imagination is a central capacity that enables individuals to remake the world.

5. Conclusion

The terrain at the intersection of ethics and imagination is a particularly fecund area for scholarship. We have provided a sampling of the major issues that have garnered attention in recent years. Existing research provides great insight into the ways in which these realms interact: from morality's capacity to constrain our imaginative abilities, to imagination's role in cultivating moral understanding, to the way imagination can constitute moral frameworks. Though an impressive range of issues have been identified in the literature, this is by no means exhaustive of the field's potential. Several open questions remain: for example, where exactly moral assessment applies (that is, whether moral assessment should apply to the product of imagination, the imaginer, or the creator of the imagined object)? Are the 'fast' and 'slow' forms of imagination subject to the same level of moral assessment? What kinds of moral responsibilities do creators have when creating objects of imagination, and does this responsibility differ with varying levels of dissemination? We can look forward to further excursions in the field.

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