

IMAGINATION AS A REFLECTION OF VALUE-COMMITMENT

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ABSTRACT

Hume remarked on how our moral value-commitments set limits for what we are willing to imagine. Moral values also guide imagination when we envision variant scenarios and options for action. How do values reveal themselves through imagining? What does the manner through which values appear tell us about the nature of values? Imagination furnishes a non-perceptual manner of arriving at moral determinations anchored to the irreducibly first-person experience of moral approval and disapproval. The commitment to one's values, surviving through every willingly imagined alteration of perspective, indicates a subjective necessity to values. At the same time, the values leaving their trace in what we imagine, direct imagination to furnish reasons which necessitate belief and action. This subjective necessity generates an ideal of affective moral consistency and a criterion of suitability for proposed action.

Introduction

Hume (1985 [1757], pp. 226-49) remarked on how our moral values set limits for what we are willing to imagine. Moral values¹ also guide imagination in moral thought experiments: values give implicit rules for what counts as noteworthy, as significantly identical, or as significantly different when we envision variant scenarios and options for action. The questions I should like to pursue here are: (1) how do values reveal themselves through imagining? and (2) what does the manner through which values appear tell us about the nature of values? To shed some light on these questions, I will focus on two tasks. The first consists of analyzing a phenomenon Hume brought to our notice, viz., our experience of resistance when we try to identify imaginatively with a repugnant moral perspective. The second involves unfolding some implications of imagining counterfactual situations and alternative perspectives in moral thinking. If values affect the exercise of imagination, they should appear in that exercise. Examining the manner of their appearance in turn might tell us something about the nature of values.

I

The phenomenon with which I shall begin has come to be known as imaginative resistance.² David Hume is usually credited as being the first to draw attention to this phenomenon in his essay "Of the Standard of Taste" (Hume: 1985 [1757], pp. 226-49). Hume observes that when a literary work demands its reader identify with a perspective that the reader finds morally repugnant, the reader's imagination resists such identification and the enjoyment of the work is diminished. I am not concerned with the aesthetic issue here, but only with the phenomenon in which there occurs a resistance against imagining oneself as holding a belief or attitude which one finds morally repugnant. While a work of art,

such as a novel or poem, may occasion this imaginative resistance, the exercise of imagination in envisioning oneself as approving or disapproving some state of affairs can proceed as a thought-experiment independently of literary prompting.

A critic might object that people are perfectly capable of imaginatively identifying with attitudes they find morally repugnant. Let us consider the case of stage acting. An actor should be able to make an audience suspend disbelief. A good actor should be able to play a character whom the actor in actual life finds morally repugnant. What is going on here? The actor imitates the behavior of the character, even drawing upon the actor's *own feelings* to do so convincingly. First of all, the *artistic difficulty* the actor faces in playing a despicable character might indicate *moral resistance*. Secondly, the actor might implicitly work with the Socratic insight that people don't do evil because it's evil, but because they think it to be somehow good. Thirdly, since even the most despicable character has *some* good or neutral traits, the actor might identify with a character on the basis of those non-despicable traits. Even certain despicable traits might form a basis for identification, but in that case the actor refuses to reflectively endorse³ the despicable traits. The question is whether the actor is willing to enter *fully* into the spirit of the character's wicked sentiment. A sharper case would be one where it is obvious that the very point of the play involves praising a character whom the actor cannot help but find morally repugnant.⁴ Hume himself invokes such a case when he points out that the Roman Catholic intolerance animating the French theatre of his time prevents an English audience from enjoying it. An enlightened actor would presumably also encounter some resistance to identifying with a bigoted character he despises but whose character *the play* obviously praises. It is one thing for an actor to make believe that he is a religious bigot, even if it requires "getting inside" such a character. It is quite another thing to enter into the sentiment that religious intolerance is good, if this is what *the play* asks the actor to do. Anyone unwilling to believe that religious bigotry is good would also resist imagining its goodness merely for the sake of the play. Resistance lies precisely in our *unwillingness to imagine we believe* such things. Our values leave their trace in what one is and is not willing to imagine.

II

How do values emerge in the general moral exercise of imagination? Desire permeates and guides imagination. If desire directs imagining, it can at the same time constrain it. Our most fundamental moral desires for having the world and ourselves a certain way are our values. Imagination not only finds itself constrained by our values, but also serves those values by envisioning situations and moral options in light of them. While values guide imagination, imagination can yield an indirect knowledge of those values.

We imaginatively vary counterfactual situations in order to take note of the morally significant features of those situations. Similarly to the case of imaginative resistance, in imaginative variation values reveal themselves as guiding imagination. We imagine a counterfactual scenario in order to test a moral proposition or examine an option for action. In doing this, we make comparisons and draw

contrasts. We rank some situational aspects as more significant or decisive than others. Implied in some of these evaluations are rules for what will count as identical, different, more or less decisive, etc. Even when not explicitly formulated, these normative rules of evaluation guide and respond to imagination. Beyond the application of rules in simpler cases, the complex arrangements of factors unique to the situations under comparison could generate significant similarities and differences, while these complex arrangements of factors themselves remain irreducible to any set of rules given in advance for guiding judgments. Determining how to proceed in these cases requires a situated and sometimes intuitive interplay among imagination, perception, and value-holding. Values leave their traces in moral thought-experiments, even when there is no thematic reflect upon those values. Likewise, imagined scenarios may let emerge unforeseen inconsistencies or complementarities among values, providing reasons for changing those values or their relative importance.

III

What can we learn from the manner in which values leave their traces upon our moral imaginings? To address this question, I will consider imaginative resistance and thought-experimental imaginative variation together. If we define values as those concerns which an agent is resistant to changing⁵ a look at imagination promises to tell us about the relation among value-holding, necessity and moral identity. In what follows I explore imagination's role and its constraints in order to point out some features of value-holding. The first feature I consider is the non-perceptual and first-personal basis of value-commitments. Next, I will examine the necessity accorded to values according to two senses of necessity: (1) the *necessitation* which binds the *actual* subject to believe, value, or act on the basis of reasons, and (2) the identity of the subject's moral values preserved across imagined *possible* worlds, forming a subjective conative analogue of objective necessity. An ideal of consistency emerges from both senses of necessity.

The First-Personal and Non-Perceptual Trace of Values in Imagination

Imagination maps the contours of value-commitments independently of perception. That moral judgments can be arrived at apart from perceptual experience does not preclude their being arrived at on the basis of perception as well. Imagining what is not perceived helps to form judgments. Moral judgments reflect precisely those values which constrain the power to imagine. Values reveal their traces in the willingness or reluctance to imaginatively enter into the spirit and identify with one or another moral attitude. Values also show themselves in the insight imaginative variation yields regarding essential relations and features of situations. In imagining, one's values appear *as* and *through* a first-person lived sensibility, rather than as objects of experience. Furthermore, imagination can operate in

the absence of any actual objects of perceptual experience. Imagining is always the imagining of having a first-personal experience of whatever is imagined (Peacocke: 1985). The contours of one's moral sensibility appear in imagining oneself endorsing one's approval or disapproval of something, or in the resistance against endorsing such feelings, even when one might make-believe that one has them. An irreducibly first-personal attitude supports the act of imagining, as well as the resistance to imagine. This means that the values guiding imagination cannot be divorced from a reflecting subject, and that the first-personal basis of values cannot be assimilated into a third-person account of moral character⁶

I can imagine someone else's perspective and judge in consideration of that perspective. This does not mean I endorse the other's attitude or action. My very attempt to understand the perspective of the other remains *my own* attempt to understand and *my own* compassion, rather than any attitude of endorsement experienced from within the perspective of the other. I may of course understand the feelings of the other in analogy with my own experience of similar feelings. Even so, the approval and disapproval, and the attitude of compassion or understanding remain the irreducibly first-personal experience of my own, anchored in the reality of my own values. Approval and disapproval may be observed as impersonal phenomena, but the very meaning of these acts requires a first-person perspective. This personal endorsement does not alter the content of approval or disapproval, but rather certifies those beliefs as genuinely my own. The imagining of myself genuinely approving or disapproving of a state of affairs requires that I *live* in this experience *as* the very one having the experience of genuinely approving or disapproving. Imagining is always the imagining of *oneself having* an experience, in this case of holding a particular reflectively endorsed moral belief.

One could never imaginatively identify *wholeheartedly* with a morally repugnant attitude without surrendering the values that constitute one's identity. Moral sensibility resists such surrender. In the identification with another person, including variants of one's self and situation in different possible worlds, one's moral sensibility carries across, limiting the identification. The *one who* imagines is the *one who*, in imagining, brings along her actual values with her first person perspective. This is the case whether one is trying to understand someone one thinks despicable or someone whose values overlap significantly with one's own. Consider the following example of imagining, which does not have the element of moral repugnance. I imagine myself to be a war widow, facing various hardships and struggling to protect and feed my young children. If this is really to count as an act of imagining myself to be a war widow, rather than merely the imagining of a war widow, then it is *I*, with my own *actual* moral commitments and feelings, who is imagining myself in a particular situation but not *as* a person with different values, *whatever* those alien values might be. Imagining oneself in an unreal situation does not imply sharing an alien moral sensibility, even when that alien sensibility is not repugnant. The first-person participation of the subject in these acts of imagining means that one cannot substitute alien moral values for one's own. In imagining, values leave their irreducibly subjective trace, without turning into experienced objects.

What about *metanoia*? If the reality of our values stays in all of our imaginings, how do anyone's values ever change? Resistance arises in response to any particular invitation, literary or otherwise, to identify with an attitude found to be morally repugnant. So, how does it happen that an attitude I found morally repugnant yesterday might be one I endorse wholeheartedly today? This does *sometimes* happen to people who maintain a genuine concern for their moral health. Two obvious examples are religious conversion and loss of religious faith.⁷ Here a radical difference emerges between the former values now considered repugnant and the present ones wholeheartedly endorsed. Someone so changed could well testify to being "a different person."

Less catastrophic changes in moral sensibility do occur, of course. I might once have felt strong and self-sufficient, which led me to adopt an individualist libertarian stance, having contempt for slavish people who wallow in their social and moral dependence on others. Then, repeatedly defeated by bad fortune, I might have slowly changed into a communitarian, admiring those who embrace their empowering social and moral connection with others. Or vice-versa⁸ How might such a change have occurred? Whatever the precipitating factors happen to be, they give *reasons* to feel or judge differently than before.⁹ Something observed or something merely imagined in a thought-experiment can give such reasons for feeling or judging differently. A new awareness that the way one feels or judges about one thing is inconsistent with the way one feels or judges about something else can furnish a reason. That these sorts of things count as *reasons* merely means that one can give *an account* if someone asks why a change of mind occurred. Such an account might be an argument, but could just as easily be a story or an imagined scenario. A commitment to being bound by reasons is itself an axiological feature of one's identity, particularly resistant to surrender. In this case, reason is the meta-value at the basis of moral necessitation, which can compel one to change one's others values.

Necessity and Necessitation

The word "ought" expresses the normative necessity claimed by judgments concerning actions and states of affairs. Of course, normative objective necessity does not eliminate subjective contingency. Leibniz puts the matter nicely when he points out that normative necessity means that obligatory acts are necessary "*for a good person.*"¹⁰ If what is objectively necessary remains subjectively contingent, then does it make sense to speak of necessity on the subjective side of value-holding? What follows here aims to show that there is indeed a subjective necessity at work in two senses.

One sense of subjective necessity emerges in normative necessitation: the necessitating force exercised upon subjects by reasons accepted by these subjects as compelling. Another sense of subjective necessity has to do with moral judgments holding in all imaginable worlds, as indicated by the resistance to imagining morally deviant worlds. Imaginability here provides a *subjective* analogue of possibility,¹¹ while the unwillingness to imagine any world where one's moral judgments do not hold provides a *subjective* conative analogue of necessity.

Necessitation is a subjective first-personal uptake of a necessity (which itself could be objective or subjective). Korsgaard draws attention to the phenomenon of necessitation, illustrating it by what she calls *rational necessity*, which I take to be one kind of normative necessity:

That there is this kind of necessity - a necessity we confront - is familiar from ordinary reasoning....If Diotima believes that all women are mortal, and Diotima reflects that she is a woman, and the relation between these two propositions is evident to her, then Diotima *must* believe that she is mortal. She is confronted with the necessity of believing in her own mortality. This kind of necessity is not reducible to causal or logical necessity, and cannot be translated without loss into anything third-personally describable. (Korsgaard: 2003, p. 7)

The necessity binding the subject to believe or act on reasons derives from the first-person dimension of value holding. We can imagine variant perspectives and counterfactual situations for the sake of moral thinking, and imagination serves the inalienable values guiding the effort. The first-personal uptake of the reasons issuing from this first-personal exercise of imagining is moral necessitation. When the meta-value of rationality is in force, every act of imaginative variation clarifying and specifying moral propositions necessitates belief in those propositions and action in light of them.

Moral necessity in another sense pertains to what is obligatory or forbidden in all possible worlds. I have already briefly delineated the subjective conative analogue to this necessity, and I will now flesh it out a bit more. I will try to refrain from plunging into the controversies surrounding moral and modal realism, as my investigation focuses here only on the subjective dimension of value-commitments. I cannot imagine my values being different than they actually are without surrendering some aspect of my moral identity. The reason for this is that imagining is always a first person lived experience - it is always *I* who am present doing the imagining and it is this same *I* whose values I cannot imagine away. The affective strength of normative necessity stands, despite its relativity to the subject. From a third-person perspective my values are contingent, but from my first-person perspective they are necessary.

Let's consider an example of honor killing. There is no possible world (similar enough to the actual world to save the senses of words in the example) in which I could imagine myself praising a father for killing his daughter in order to save his family's honor that has been besmirched on account of his daughter having been raped. I am unwilling to imagine myself praising such an act. On the contrary, I would condemn the father together with the social *mores* pressuring him. Even though the necessity claim remains rooted within my first-personal exercise of imagining, I would demand that others share my repugnance at this sort of honor killing. (If they did not share my repugnance, I would disapprove of their attitude as well.) Furthermore, I would demand that others believe with me that it is immoral not because we feel it is, but because it *really is immoral*. If we believed the father's act immoral only *because we feel it is so*, we could not accord necessity to our disapproval. Even though we can imagine other people having different values, we do not believe them to be right. Of course, there are people whose sensibility and whose *mores* differ from ours. We can imagine these people. We can

also imagine ourselves in their external situation. We can even imagine ourselves feeling some of the feelings they feel, e.g., shame and insult, insofar as we too have had these feelings. What *I* cannot imagine is that *I* would ever consider honor killing to be praiseworthy under any circumstances, despite the shame and insult such killing might relieve. This effort of imagining that honor killing is praiseworthy threatens to dissolve my sense of moral identity in a way that the other sorts of imagining do not. Imagining away my values amounts to imagining away my ability *to mind*, taking this latter term in its phenomenological meaning. Imaginatively sharing a morally repugnant attitude amounts to imagining my mind as not existing and imagining a different mind as existing instead of it. It is impossible to imagine one's mind as not existing, though, because imagination is itself a first-person mental experience. Taking *mind* in its phenomenological sense, the only answer to the question "do you *mind*?" is "yes."

We have the capacity to imagine ourselves at other positions in space and time and to imaginatively alter the remembered past. When we do imagine ourselves at other positions in space and time, we do so from a first-person perspective. This is so in one sense, for example, when I am observing myself and attending to my observed self as I would attend to any impersonally describable object, while the act of attending remains a first-person experience. It is also so in a different sense in the event I am imagining what it would be like, or remembering what it was like, to live within a different spatio-temporal perspective than the one I actually embody. In all of these cases my perspective carries along with it my moral feelings of approval and disapproval. Whether I am imagining another person (including my observed self in the example) or imagining myself living within a spatio-temporal and social situation different from my actual one, my imagination does not leave my values behind. Values are contingent when considered from an *external* perspective. Values claim a subjective necessity in that we cannot genuinely imagine them from within a *first-person lived experience* as being different than they are. Subjectively necessary values leave traces in the exercise of imagining counterfactual situations and alternative perspectives. This exercise of imagination furnishes reasons, which, in turn, necessitate belief and action, and this necessitation is also a *first-person lived experience*.

Consistency

A double ideal of consistency within moral sensibility emerges here: (1) consistency with the *actual* world, taking account of the suitability of imagined variants to the actual world, and (2) the ideal of consistency supported by self-agreement across imagined *possible* worlds. Values preserve themselves in the transporting of the first-person perspective across variant worlds, and also remain rooted in the actual world. Being rooted in the actual world means taking account of the actual situation as a field for suitable courses of moral action, and it also means staying anchored to our actual values which we cannot imagine away.

Values simply being what they happen to be, how could a criterion or ideal of consistency be meaningful? Let us start by attending to how self-consistency hinges on the subjective necessity discussed

earlier. Let's say I imagine myself approving of an act in one situation while not doing so in a different imagined situation. In order to maintain moral consistency, imagination generates and compares variables, discerning their significant difference in a way that preserves or questions the self-consistency of my moral judgments. If I approve of an act in one case but not in another, I should be able to discern the relevant difference between these imaginatively varied counterfactual situations. The subjective necessity of values directing this exercise of imagination drives the concern for consistency. I should be able to formulate my discernment in terms of reasons for approving in one case but not in the other case. These reasons necessitate: under pain of committing treason against my moral identity I am obligated by these reasons. I stand under the obligation to maintain consistency in applying my values across different situations.

Nothing prevents axiological inconsistency except the necessitation, which flows from the meta-value of rationality. Some inconsistencies might be obscured by superficial consistency and thus go unnoticed. The diligence of conscience polices self-consistency for the sake of our concern to remain rational. In an extreme case, someone might willingly and consciously hold one moral attitude from the perspective of which another of her consciously and willingly held moral attitudes is taken to be repugnant. Here it is as if we encounter an actor who will so completely identify with any character that there are only masks with nothing behind them. There is a mephistophelean slipperiness in the inconsistency of someone without any resistance to adopting a moral stance at odds with another moral stance held simultaneously and consciously. In this case the meta-value of rationality is missing. The failure to acknowledge¹² morally rational necessitation endangers self-identity in a way that failure to acknowledge non-moral rational necessitation does not.

Let us turn to the second kind of moral consistency, which requires that sensibility and action be suitable for the given situation. Here imagination exercises its power to consider how states of affairs might be rearranged, keeping in mind the possibilities for such a transformation. Imagination considers how things could be different than they are and what variants of such difference are attainable and desirable. It has to take account of the possibility of realizing what ought to be, determining whether the desired state of affairs is sufficiently consistent with actuality. This restates the traditional formula of the ought—>can inference: “no one is obligated to do the impossible.” Given a concern for consistency, imagination aims to avoid entertaining fantastical desires inconsistent with the actual world to which moral action pertains. Moral action has to be projected within an already existing situational field, thus in a manner consistent with *actual* features of the world. Imagination discerns the proximity of projected possible worlds of action to the actual world, thereby providing a map of our freedom. The first-person perspective of approval or disapproval always attends such considerations of how we might rearrange states of affairs. When we aim to improve the world in this way, we necessarily do so in a manner consistent with our values.

Conclusion

Imagination connects our values to the world. By being constrained to the contours of our actual moral sensibility, even as it allows us to envision alternative perspectives, imagination maps our moral values. Comparing our situational field of action with its counterfactual variants, imagination maps our practical freedom. Imagination furnishes a non-perceptual manner of arriving at moral determinations anchored to the irreducibly first-person experience of moral approval and disapproval. The commitment to one's values, surviving through every willingly imagined alteration of perspective, indicates a *subjective necessity* to values. At the same time, the values leaving their trace in what we imagine direct imagination to furnish reasons which necessitate belief and action. This subjective necessity generates an ideal of moral consistency and a criterion of suitability for proposed action. This leaves to conscience the task of checking how consistently imagination maps our values and it gives to imagination the project of mapping our freedom.

Notes

¹ I am following Blackburn (1998, p. 67) in defining values as those practical dispositions an agent resists changing: “To hold a value, then, is typically to have a relatively stable disposition to conduct practical life and practical discussion in a particular way: it is to be disposed or *set* in that way, and notably to be set against hange in this respect.”

² For a recent discussion, see Gendler (2000).

³ For a thorough discussion of reflective endorsement, see Korsgaard (1996, *passim*).

⁴ This might arise in some instances as a dramaturgical issue when it becomes a matter of interpretation whether a play is animated by a morally repugnant attitude or not.

⁵ See note 1.

⁶ Nothing prevents a third-person account from being added. Also, Buddhist meditative psychology suggests that first-personal experience may be able to be broken down into a living experience of non-personal mental factors.

⁷ I am not suggesting that all cases of religious conversion will involve such a *metanoia*, nor that this Christian term is applicable to all cases of taking on a new religious identity.

⁸ I hope it is obvious that the current investigation does not turn on the merits of either social viewpoint!

⁹ I am using “reasons” in a weak sense to mean whatever compels someone to adopt, hold or change a moral belief or feeling.

¹⁰ In his prescient attempt to combine modal with deontic logic, Leibniz accounts for normative necessity in terms of the condition that obligatory acts are necessary “for the good man.” See: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Preussischen (later: Deutsche) Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin. (Darmstadt/Leipzig/Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1923-), VI, 1, 466 and VI, 4, 2758ff. as cited in Lenzen (2004) <http://www.philosophie.uni-osnabrueck.de/Publikationen%20Lenzen/Leibniz%20Deontic%20Logic.pdf>

¹¹ This does not mean that imaginability tracks logical, physical, or metaphysical possibility.

¹² A failure to *acknowledge* moral necessitation is not the same as *akrasia*, the common failure to *act* in light of it.

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