Les ateliers de l'éthique
The Ethics Forum

Imagining Evil

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Volume 5, numéro 1, printemps 2010

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1044413ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1044413ar

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Éditeur(s)

Centre de recherche en éthique de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

1718-9977 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Morton, A. (2010). Imagining Evil. *Les ateliers de l'éthique / The Ethics Forum*, *5*(1), 26–33. https://doi.org/10.7202/1044413ar

Résumé de l'article

Il est relativement facile d'imaginer des actes maléfiques, plus facile que ce que nous sommes prêts à supposer. Mais ce qui est ainsi facile à imaginer n'est pas ce que nous souhaitons comprendre à propos des actes maléfiques. Pour étayer cette conclusion, je distingue entre comprendre pourquoi quelqu'un fait ce qu'il fait et imaginer comment cette personne aurait fait une telle chose; j'essaie aussi de saisir ce qu'est la compréhension partielle, du moins en partie, en distinguant entre elles les différentes perspectives imaginaires d'un même acte. C'est ainsi qu'apparaît une asymétrie qui passe souvent inaperçue : nous n'imposons pas les mêmes exigences à l'égard de notre compréhension d'actes répréhensibles qu'à l'égard d'actions quotidiennes moralement acceptables.

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VOLUME 5 NUMÉRO 1
PRINTEMPS/SPRING 2010

IMAGINING EVIL

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ABSTRACT

It is in a way easier to imagine evil actions than we often suppose, but what it is thus relatively easy to do is not what we want to understand about evil. To argue for this conclusion I distinguish between imagining why someone did something and imagining how they could have done it, and I try to grasp partial understanding, in part by distinguishing different imaginative perspectives we can have on an act. When we do this we see an often unnoticed asymmetry: we do not put the same demands on our understanding of wrongdoing as on that of most everyday, morally acceptable, actions.

RÉSUMÉ

Il est relativement facile d'imaginer des actes maléfiques, plus facile que ce que nous sommes prêts à supposer. Mais ce qui est ainsi facile à imaginer n'est pas ce que nous souhaitons comprendre à propos des actes maléfiques. Pour étayer cette conclusion, je distingue entre comprendre pourquoi quelqu'un fait ce qu'il fait et imaginer comment cette personne aurait fait une telle chose; j'essaie aussi de saisir ce qu'est la compréhension partielle, du moins en partie, en distinguant entre elles les différentes perspectives imaginaires d'un même acte. C'est ainsi qu'apparaît une asymétrie qui passe souvent inaperçue: nous n'imposons pas les mêmes exigences à l'égard de notre compréhension d'actes répréhensibles qu'à l'égard d'actions quotidiennes moralement acceptables.

"No man and no woman is an island, but every one of us is a peninsula …. Every social and political system that turns each of us into a Donnean island and the rest of humanity into an enemy or a rival is a monster. …. The condition of peninsula is the proper human condition."
Amos Oz *How to cure a fanatic*

This is a collection of observations about how we can understand awful actions, acts that are not merely wrong but which appal us by their disregard for normal constraints. These are acts that fit the normal use of the English word "evil". (The best French equivalent, I believe, is "malefique". The sense of awfulness is much stronger than for "mal". It is similarly stronger than most uses of "uebel" in German. See chapter one of Morton 2004.) It can seem hard to understand how someone could consider such an act, let alone how someone could intend it, let alone how someone could actually perform it. So our capacities for intuitive grasp of another person's motives are challenged by this basic and not at all rare dimension to human life. (In this connection see McGinn 1997.)

My concern is with our capacities for intuitive understanding of our own and other people's actions, and not with the development of a scientific explanation of atrocity. I doubt that there is a single scientific explanation of atrocity. Evil, atrocity, wrong-doing in general are not scientific concepts. Each particular action may be explainable in terms of neurology or scientifically based psychology, but the explanations are unlikely to fit together into a satisfying pattern. Even the limited ambition of intuitive imagination of atrocity is well beyond the ambition of this paper. I shall present a series of linked observations that are meant to prepare the ground for an account of what is possible and impossible in the imaginative understanding of evil, and how we can sharpen or deepen our capacities for it. A prolegomena. One of my conclusions is at tension with the apparent direction of the introductory paragraph above. I shall argue that in some ways evil actions are easier to imagine than we often suppose.

THE ILLUSION OF CHARACTER

We do not want to be like those who do acts we abhor. Sometimes they are our enemies, and we ignore the abhorrent acts that we have performed towards them. Then we find it convenient to divide the world into Us and Them, with an accumulation of good characteristics in our direction. This tendency can occur in very subtle forms, as a result of the bias noted by social psychologists of the 1970s: we underestimate the variability of individual people's behaviour, taking the variation in human action to be due to the tendency of some people consistently to perform acts of one kind and of some others consistently to perform acts of another. So we assess the variability of acts over the whole population correctly, but underestimate how much of this variability is shared by each member of it. As a result, once we admit that an individual has more than a slight tendency to some kind of behaviour, we are inclined to classify her as one of those who do that kind of thing: there is no middle ground. And in particular if we admit any tendency in ourselves to evil actions we are in danger of assimilating ourselves to the evil-doers we imagine to be a certain proportion of the world. (Nisbett and Ross 1991, Doris 2002.)

Evil-doers can imagine evil actions, notably in planning them. So the ability to imagine evil is one step towards the ability to do it. So we resist the suggestion that we can even imagine the motivation of the acts that we abhor. And in so doing we encourage and solidify the demonic attitude to evil, the attitude that most awful deeds are the acts of a small number of awful people, very different from the rest of us. In so characterising it I do not want to assert that the attitude is false of all sub-categories of evil. There probably are kinds of horror that are the speciality of special kinds of people. (The obvious example is people who are obsessed with sadistic sex, requiring unwilling victims.) But very many awful actions have no such psychological story. The immediate point is the psychological pressure to accept such an attitude in advance of any serious evidence for it.

The resistance to believing that we can imagine the motivation behind atrocious acts has another source. We fear that by imagining such acts we might make it easier to imagine them. And if we find it easier to imagine them we might find it easier to intend them. Is this fear justified?

IMAGINING HOW VERSUS IMAGINING WHY

Many awful actions are performed for perfectly straightforward motives, which we can easily grasp. To that extent we have no difficulty understanding *why* the acts were performed. Someone tortures an old woman to make her reveal where her money is hidden: why? To get the money, of course. What is more difficult is to imagine *how* he could have done it. That is, we find it hard to imagine how this way of getting money would occur to him as a serious possibility, and how he could overcome all the reasons to prefer other sources of money or simply to remain poor. To say that these are harder to imagine is not to say we cannot do it ; at the very least we need more detail of the case. (There is a connection here with the now classic themes of Arendt 1963, 1971.)

The how/why distinction does not apply only to evil actions. It applies to all actions. It is also quite vivid with regard to disgusting but morally acceptable actions. Someone is locked in a room for 4 days, and his only way of surviving is to drink his own urine and to eat dog shit. We have no problem knowing why he did this: he did not want to die and he was overwhelmingly hungry and thirsty. We may find ourselves balking when we try to imagine how he did it. How could he bring himself to it? The obstacle is a lack of imagination, or better a barrier to imagination. After only one day in the locked room most of us could easily imagine it. And it is easy to ridicule squeamish people whose aversion to such an act makes them reluctant even to imagine it. But it is true of most of us that our imagination of the motivational process would lack a certain vividness. This will matter for some purposes, but is irrelevant for others.

(It is curious that the disgusting act here is rational. In fact it could be irrational not to perform it. Many people will *not* have difficulty imagining performing an irrational alternative to drinking the urine, such as waiting and suffering extreme thirst. So we have an irrational act, for which "how could someone do it?" is easier to answer imaginatively than for an alternative rational act. Of course, the imagination here is misleading, in that when put in such a situation a person is unlikely to hold out for as long as they imagine. It would be interesting to describe situations in which it is hard to imagine how someone could have made herself perform a morally good action, while some somewhat immoral alternative is easy to imagine.)

The how/why distinction is not restricted to imaginative understanding of actions. Consider a pebble hitting a window, and the window breaking. It is not hard to understand why the window broke: it broke because of the impact of the pebble. It is harder to understand how the impact of a small pebble could have caused a solid window to shatter. We may have to postulate some crack in the glass, or a way in which the pebble is hurled at extraordinary velocity.

Here is a hypothesis about everyday psychological understanding. When we are asked to explain why someone did something we appeal first of all to a socially-shaped theory of standard motives and standard reactions to situations. The usual problems and their usual solutions. This gets us through most of our everyday needs to explain and predict one another's actions and to make sense of ourselves to others. When, on the other hand, we have to explain *how* someone did (could do) something, we appeal first of all to our capacities to imagine the motivation involved. We require a projection into the situation of the other person and into the exact play of their motives and emotions. This is harder, and we do it less. (We do it more at a pre-articulate level, for example in anticipating the movements of someone coming towards us on the sidewalk or the decisions of another driver, than, in ordinary circumstances, we do in response to a verbal request for an explanation.)

One result of the division of labour between theory and imagination, and the relative rarity of articulate expressions of imagination, is that we think that evil actions are inherently hard to understand. Or, rather, that they are inherently even harder to understand than they are. For our more practiced and mechanical means of understanding give us a grasp of why things are done, and our more delicate and virtuosic means of understanding give us our grasp of how the agents could perform them. With everyday actions we usually ask for why, and with exceptional acts we more often ask for how, so that we generate a pressure to exaggerate the inexplicability of the latter.

GRADES OF IMAGINATION

Focus now on imagination. We speak of imagining what lies behind an action (and to some extent, *mutatis mutandis,* of imagining other causal processes) in several different ways, involving different degrees of involvement of our image-making and story-telling capacities. At the most basic level imagination is a rather vivid form of thinking.

We express this with embedded-sentence constructions "if you come to town I imagine that you will stay at the hotel Bristol." "Can you imagine why he refused to buy the stock at a discount? Yes, he expected the market to crash and thought that even at a discount it was worth less than the cash." The main difference between imagining a motive and simply believing or hypothesising it, is that in imagining it one links it to one's own capacities to think and to plan. One does what Jane Heal (1995) calls "cocognition", predicting that another person will solve an intellectual or practical problem in the way that one would.

A deeper level of imagination, further removed from theorizing about motives, involves a perspectival element. One's representation of the other person's situation embodies a point of view similar to theirs. This can be a matter of seeing spatial relations the way they do. If you are imagining someone's efforts to get to the other side of a crowded room you image the obstacles as they will see them, ignoring the short-cut that would be clear if one was looking down on the scene from above, even if one is aware of it. In such cases one organizes the information that one is in imagination relating the person to, in a way that is intended to match her organization of it. One way, a typical and central human way, of organizing information is to prepare a framework into which present and anticipated information can be fitted, and from which it can be quickly retrieved and related to other relevant information. A simple example is seeing space in terms of directions and distances to ones own location, even as one moves, providing a quick guide to bodily actions, reactions to things coming towards one, and paths of approach and escape. The result is like a coordinate system in geometry, with oneself at the origin. Another example is understanding past and future in terms of stages in the lives of a few particular people, oneself in particular. These two data-organizing templates, spatial perspective and narrative structure, are often combined, to give the typical human perspective on the world: a fabric of interweaving person-strands, each strand at each moment being the origin of a self-centred coordinate system.

When a person plans an action in terms of an information-organizing framework with an origin and coordinates she is in effect centering her imagining of her performance on this origin. Now suppose that the action is a reaction to some aspect of the environment and that someone else is imagining it by pretending to react to the same situation, that is, arriving at a sequence of actions governed by an information-organizing framework attributed in imagination to the first person. That framework *centres* the second person's imagination of the first person, to use Peter Goldie's terminology, in terms of the first person's perspective. (See Goldie 2000 for perspective in imagination. For narrative structure in fiction and its connection with imaginative perspective see part II of Currie 1995.) Most of our imagination of people is centred, though the perspective can vary depending on the states being imagined and the imagining person take on the imagined.

A third grade of imagination adds to perspective a reproduction of something like the feelings and emotions of the other person. Sometimes this will result naturally from the effort of perspectival imagination. (And sometimes it will happen independently of it. There can be affect-loaded non-centred imagination, impersonal empathy, though there is something rather un-natural about it.) Suppose for example that you are comforting a friend who is recently bereaved and extremely upset. His feelings, as you imagine them, are for you just a definite fact about the situation. You are doing a lot more than simply describing his feelings to yourself. Your belief that he is in despair is richer than an application of the predicate "is in despair" to him, since you also have a sense of what kind of despair he is in, what it is like for him, a sense that you can only partially express in words. You think "he feels like *this*" where the demonstrative points to the emotions you imagine him to have. So at this more delicate and dangerous moment, where imagination is more distinct from simple ascription, one has to entertain an emotion while at the same time realizing that it is a representation of another person's emotion and not something that one is feeling oneself. This can be quite demanding. (See chapter 1 of McGinn 2004 and chapter 1 of Currie and Ravenscroft 2002 for the differences between imagination and belief. See Tappolet 2000 and Deonna 2007 for the immediacy of other's emotions. And see Harris 2000 on imagination in children and human life generally.)

There is in fact a fourth level of psychological imagination, though I will not say much about it. Besides taking the perspective of the person one is imagining, and feeling some representation of what they feel, one can *identify* with them. One can take their pain as a bad thing, and the achievement of their aims as desirable. This does not follow from the other levels. Someone trapping or manipulating another person, for example, may do so by imagining very vividly what

the other is thinking and feeling, but may do so in a way that takes the other person's ends as alien to their own. This is an important distinction in ethics, but less so for our purposes now. It does bring out a verbal difficulty, though. We might call perspective plus affect "empathy" and empathy plus identification "sympathy". And people often make a contrast between empathy and sympathy. But it is not always clear that this is the contrast they are making. Sometimes people seem to use "empathy" for what I am now calling "sympathy", and vice versa.

PARTIAL IMAGINATION

I have been talking about "imagining the motivation behind an act". *The* motivation? *All* of it? Relevant to almost every act of almost every person is an immense body of desires, with unique complex internal conflicts, inhibitions, capacities and incapacities, beliefs, confidence, arbitrary assumptions, half-thoughts, … . No one could imagine all of these. No one could represent to another all of their own motivation for all but the most trivial of actions. (Don't be fooled by the Aristotelian practical syllogism, according to which someone sees the end, sees the means, and if they are rational chooses the mean. It's not like that. In this connection see Richardson 1994.)

So one almost never understands all that lies behind an action. One has partial understanding, and usually what one understands is enough for a contrastive explanation, that is, an explanation of why the person did A rather than B or C. The contrasts are typically different in ordinary cooperative or at any rate non-extraordinary acts, and in remarkably clever, remarkably stupid, or remarkably wicked acts. With the former one explains, for example, why the driver picked up the hitch-hiker rather than driving on. With the latter one explains why she picked him up rather than running him over or doing a U-turn on the spot or driving into the woods. The alternative actions in the former case are other standard solutions to the same problem ("how to be helpful without exposing oneself to a lot of risk or inconvenience") while the alternatives in the latter case are solutions to other problems that a person might take herself to be confronting ("how to prevent the hitchiker from identifying me", "how to kill someone in a way that will not be traced to me".) So it is not surprising that the former are relatively easy to achieve and the latter are relatively difficult: we are not comparing like with like.

Another way of putting the point. There are apriori an enormous number of options a person has in a given situation. In everyday explanation one presupposes a winnowing procedure which has eliminated 95 percent of them. In fact the usual explanatory principles will only engage once one has eliminated the 95 percent. But in order to explain an extraordinary act one has to understand the winnowing too, and this requires a deeper imaginative grasp. Or, to be precise, we demand that the winnowing be explained, that one make intelligible why the person thought of the problem in a way that made torturing the old woman a solution, rather than simply saying "to get the money".

REGULAR AND UNUSUAL

If what I have been saying is right, it is easier to imagine than we often suppose. The "why" is often obvious, and an imaginative grasp of the perspective from which one means to an evil end was preferable to another is often not hard to get. These answers may seem to trivialise the original question. We wanted to know the source of the barriers to imagining awful actions. A short esssay like this is certainly not going to reveal their deeper sources. But instead we seem to be learning that the barriers are less steep than we thought, so that the question itself is misleading. This is partly true. Let me expand on it in two ways.

asymmetrical curiosity Our grasp of many actions is fairly shallow, without our remarking on it. Why does your neighbour put on his bicycle helmet before his sunglasses, so the two get tangled up. Why does your boss prefer to gossip in her office and talk business in the coffee shop? These things are morally neutral, and not very important, so you do not linger on the fact that your grasp of what it is about the people that makes them act these ways is superficial and tentative. If the acts were shocking or disastrous you might be more bothered by your limited comprehension.

One reason for the asymmetry is that the neighbour and the boss are not doing anything very interesting or surprising or important, so we do not think much about them. This cannot be the whole explanation, though. If a horrible person acts in their usual predictable horrible way on a perfectly trivial matter that still reveals their nasty tendencies, we may not shrug it off but linger in puzzlement. Why on earth would anyone do that?

Another reason is the integration between imagination and action-planning in one's own case. Consider a person performing a complicated intentional action which takes some time to perform. She first plans it in general outline, and then when carrying it out thinks out the details in increasing detail as the times for putting them into action approach. Some of this thinking is very intuitive, depending heavily on spatial imagery and kinesthetic rehearsal. The details vary from person to person and action to action, but the general effect is that one imagines oneself performing parts of the action somewhat in advance of the actual performance, with a perspective that will aid the performance. Many details of the production of the action, and of the motivation that led to it, are omitted from this imagination. But one ignores these ; their absence does not make a problem. Then when one considers a possible action as performed by oneself, or a similar action performed by someone else, one runs through the kind of exercise that would be involved in the imagination that prepares for and partially manages such an action. One then says "yes, I can imagine doing that", skipping over all the details one has not imagined. This will happen for actions of kinds that are in one's regular repertoire. For unfamiliar actions one will attempt a more fundamental imagination, and often one will report failure.

MOODS, EXISTENTIAL FEELINGS

We easily think of evil actions as performed by evil people: sadists, psychopaths, fanatics. The evidence is that people of determinate pathological kinds are responsible for a small proportion of the horrors of the world. Still, when wanting to imagine what it takes to harm a child deliberately or to throw a cat through a window, we try to imagine not so much the motives one might have as the frame of mind one might be in. Roughly, the kind of temporary person one might be.

I have been neglecting this topic in this essay, and I will not do justice to it now. It is the subject of an interesting recent book by Matthew Ratcliffe (Ratcliffe 2008). We wonder "what it is like to be" someone who is in an interesting situation or an unusual state or who has done some noteworthy action. This is one of the foci of our informal curiosity, and we are disappointed in informal or psychological accounts that do not address it. But it is not clear what we really want, and what can be had. There may be no stable facts about what it is like to be a particular person, or the only facts may be disappointingly banal ("well, it's to be human"). The vocabulary we have on everyday life, and the things that many philosophers suggest, may feed on illusions about mood, character, and consciousness. There is an important opening here for critical and imaginative philosophy. Still, the conviction persists, that if we could connect our own experience of being enraged, paranoid, jealous, or vindictive with the motives that lie behind atrocity, we would understand better what we have in common with and what differentiates us from the perpetrators.

There is an obvious warning to give. Almost everyone is sometimes enraged, paranoid, jealous, or vindictive. So almost everyone has some knowledge of what is is like to be in these states. But most people do not do unusually awful things, remarkably, given how common rage, despair, and contempt are. So knowing what it is like to be in these states may tell one little about what it is like - may give one few resources for imagining - not to have or to be able to overcome the barriers that prevent most of us from giving in to impulses to act in awful ways.

And there is a slightly less obvious response to the warning. Most of us have never done anything really atrocious, but most of us are in various degrees complicit in various atrocities. We know that our actions help these atrocities to proceed but we do not think how to change our ways. So reflection on our moral numbness and akrasia might give us some insight into the ways that objections to atrocity are sometimes ignored. Moreover, when we free ourselves from the idea that people have fixed characters which govern their behaviour more than their responses to the situations they find themselves in, we realise that what we have to acquire in order to project imaginatively from the rage, dislike, and numbness that is familiar in our lives, to real evil, is not an additional mood but more insight into the ways in which we can be pushed by what is happening around us.

HOW MUCH WE DO NOT KNOW

We should keep three things separate in our thinking. There are moral categories, the kinds of acts and motives that we ought to favour or avoid. There are psychological categories, the underlying processes and causes that as a matter of mental fact produce our acts. And, third, there are imaginative categories, kinds of acts and states of mind that we can simulate in the same ways. We should not confound these. There are morally similar acts that are psychologically very distinct. And there are psychologically similar acts that are imagina-

tively very different: the ways of imagining one kind may not succeed with the other. For all that, the study of our imagination of act, motive, and character must bring all three together. We need to discover what ways of imagining a given state are actually, as a matter of psychological fact, effective in giving an accurate impression of what it is like to be a particular person in a particular environment doing a particular thing. But any discoveries we make here will be much more significant if they concern kinds of actions that we have good reasons to care about, and this includes acts in morally important categories. So we have to fit all three aspects together, carefully.

To end this essay I will state a conjecture. Our tendency to run together the moral and the psychological disposes us to model evil actions on morally similar, though less drastic, ones. So we try to imagine sadism along the lines of petty cruelty. My conjecture is that this is a mistake, in that we can imagine more accurately by comparing evil acts to acts which are morally neutral or even admirable, but which are psychologically and imaginatively more similar (in morally relevant ways, even though the moral character of the acts is different.) For example, I have argued elsewhere (Morton 2009) that acts of childish naughtiness are in some ways good comparators for some acts of moral heroism. In another publication (Morton 2004) I have argued that naughtiness can be a comparator for some kinds of evil (as is suggested by one ambiguity of the French *méchant*: naughty or noxious). These are surprising claims and deserve a long argument, but in a nutshell the idea is that we should consider cases in which there is an emotional route to circumvent a natural human barrier to a natural human motive. After all, as remarked above we do not want to make a comparison that leaves us with no intuitive hold on something essential to the act, namely that it requires the suspension of a normal obstacle.

There is much that we do not know here. We do not have a clear grasp of the concept of accurate versus inaccurate imagining. But without it the project of imaginatively grasping the motives of people who do evil acts is trivial. We do not know how deep into the psychology of action accurate imagination can penetrate. And we do not know what chains of intermediary steps can best exercise our capacities to imagine what we now cannot. There is a lot to be done.

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