

If Art is Good for the Soul Can Education Do Without Art?

Hilary E. Davis

The Ontario Institute of Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

John Rethorst's argument that the imagination is central to moral decision-making, even prior to deductive reasoning, cognitive categorization, or abstract thinking, is a compelling one. Focusing on prototype recognition, Rethorst maintains that real-life moral dilemmas rarely fit objective laws but are instead rooted in the situatedness of moral actors and the social contingencies of a particular event. Since abstract moral principles are recognized via metaphorical mappings which move from concrete experience to general concepts, imagination is essential for all moral thought. Rethorst's defense of the imagination echoes Martha Nussbaum who writes:

Moral knowledge...is not simply intellectual grasp of propositions; it is not even simply intellectual grasp of particular facts...It is seeing a complex, concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking in what is there, with imagination and feeling.¹

For Rethorst, like Nussbaum, moral knowledge is felt as well as thought; it engages the passions and emotions as well as the mind. Furthermore, as it is grounded in an individual's experience in discourse and the tangible world, imagination is not only a mental faculty but an embodied experience. Biologically constrained by the limitations of the human species, our moral imaginations are partial and imperfect.

As a feminist philosopher, I welcome such a theory which makes the imagination central rather than supplemental to rationality. Reclaiming the importance of such an embodied faculty works toward mending the rift between mind and body embedded within Western philosophical discourse; a move which begins to dismantle hierarchical dichotomies such as reason/emotion and their sex metaphorical associations which devalue the feminine. Rethorst's notion of embodied moral "reasoning" resonates in particular with the feminist philosophy of Donna Haraway who argues for "situated knowledges," "politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims."² Moral decision-making grounded in embodied imagination provides a more epistemically humble, more sensitive approach to negotiating the differences in location and power among moral thinkers.

Rethorst goes beyond asserting the imagination's importance in moral decision-making to suggest that the moral imagination is stimulated by aesthetic experience, or as he says when paraphrasing Iris Murdoch, "art is good for the soul." Such a recuperation of the imagination seems to offer a conclusive justification for aesthetic education and this is especially appealing to a philosopher of education such as myself whose research and teaching interests focus on the visual arts and literature. If the imaginative processes in moral thinking can be proven similar to those involved in aesthetic experience, viewing art and reading literature are not merely educational frills but essential parts of any curriculum focused on moral

education. Or so an “aesthetic-type” like me might hope. Rethorst establishes certain links between moral thinking and aesthetic experience — their mutual inability to be articulated and interpreted solely rationally and deductively, the similarity of their semantic density, the richness, complexity, and variety of their syntactic repleteness. Yet, despite my desire for an irrefutable rationale for arts education, I am not entirely convinced that the similarities shared by the moral and aesthetic imaginations provide sufficient proof that “teaching art is teaching morals.”³

Iris Murdoch, whose theory of imagination Rethorst discusses, maintains that there are moral absolutes, notions of “Goodness” and “Truth” which are first expressed by the artist (in “great” works of art) and then comprehended by the imagination of readers and spectators. She writes ‘[t]he art object conveys...the idea of transcendent perfection. Great art inspires because it is...for itself. It is an image of virtue.’⁴ I, however, feel that such a moral and aesthetic absolutism does not fit with Rethorst’s description of moral decision-making as embodied, partial, and imperfect, where what is “good” or “true” is context dependent. Rethorst suggests that a work of art will provoke a multiplicity of responses. His argument further implies that some of these responses might be ethical, others not, and still others might be ethically ambiguous (and there will be still other responses which may involve no aesthetic or imaginative experience at all). The excess of meaning accompanying all works of art provides no guarantee of a one-to-one correspondence between the moral and aesthetic imaginations.

Rethorst argues against such a one-to-one correspondence when he speaks of types of arts education which should be avoided. He rejects specifically arts education which sets out to teach moral lessons. This would exclude the use of parables and allegories, “cautionary tales,” and visual arts which have specific political or moral messages. Nor would he support the position of philosophers of literature such as Martha Nussbaum who maintain that the moral significance of aesthetic experience lies in the respondent’s conversion to a particular point of view via sympathetic identification.⁵ And neither would Rethorst endorse the claim that art’s moral function is as *ostranenie*, described by Deanne Bogdan as that which “clarifies values by destabilizing ordinary existence — the making strange of reality,”⁶ art which opens minds by decentering consciousness. According to Rethorst these are bad pedagogical approaches because they dictate the moral messages meant to be derived from a particular text. He tells of observing a class of children on a museum visit where the “correct” interpretation of art-works was prescribed by teachers and other observations were labelled deviant or ignored. In this example, arts education inhibited imagination.

Although rationales for arts education which guarantee moral enlightenment have a certain seductive appeal, we know from our experiences as educators that changing consciousness is a difficult if not impossible task. Moreover, the recent debates over text selection and canon formation remind us that “words (and images) do wound,” that the power of literature and other arts is such that it can influence for ill as well as for good.⁷ Rethorst’s position rejects the educator’s quest for mappable

“transformative moments” but argues that aesthetic experience is no less educationally valuable because of this.

He reclaims aesthetic experience by defining it broadly so that it transcends the traditional boundaries of art to include everyday experience. Rethorst agrees with Dewey that the “aesthetic” can be present in any human experience⁸ and would like to see free imagination at play in history and science classes as well as those which focus on art and literature. He envisions the best kind of school as one “where the prevailing energy is one of excited exploration — about any subject.” The best moral education, Rethorst concludes, avoids “corrective” approaches; instead, it is learning which engages the passions and imagination in which (to quote Dewey) the individual “does not remain a cold spectator.”⁹ What is needed, his argument suggests, is not necessarily the study of art or literature per se, but education experienced aesthetically which would stimulate the imagination and in so doing would exercise an individual’s ability to make moral decisions.

While I endorse such a “pedagogy of engagement,”¹⁰ what role, I wonder, does reading literature or experiencing the visual or musical arts have in such a curriculum? What troubles me about Rethorst’s paper is that it presents a justification for aesthetic education where the “arts” themselves are superfluous. Yet, given that there are no guarantees for psychic transformation nor necessary one-to-one correspondences between the aesthetic imagination and moral thinking, how can the arts be proven an essential part of moral education? Are such justifications even necessary?

During the week in which I wrote this response, I also immersed myself in a mini-festival of films by the Bengali director Satyajit Ray. In less than a week, I saw restored prints of *The Apu Trilogy* and five of Ray’s other films. Each moved me deeply; even when I could guess what was to come, I gasped with shock and pain (or joy in the case of *The World of Apu*) at the turn of events. I left each screening exhilarated, the beautiful images still lingering in my mind, the stories replaying in my memory. These were profound aesthetic experiences; they stimulated my imagination, but I do not know if they necessarily exercised my moral imagination. If they didn’t (and I suspect I may never know if they did), I still wouldn’t dismiss their importance to my spiritual and general well-being. I would say these aesthetic experiences were good for my soul because they prompted such deep feeling — a rare, not a common-place sensation. If, as Rethorst maintains, the integration of sensibility is to be sought in all educational subjects then perhaps the arts need to be recuperated in non-arts classrooms since they have the ability to prompt such moments of passionate engagement.

1. Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 152.

2. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 195.

3. Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 322.

4. *Ibid.*, 8.

5. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 166.

6. Deanne Bogdan, *Re-Educating the Imagination: Toward a Poetics, Politics, and Pedagogy of Literary Engagement* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Boynton/Cook, 1992), 180.

7. *Ibid.*, 152.

8. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1934), 5.

9. *Ibid.*

10. See Bogdan, *Re-Educating the Imagination*, 163, for her definition of "pedagogy of detachment" as it reproduces the dissociation of sensibility.