

Improving the Moral Imagination

Extensive work in many fields recently has shown how sadly ineffectual rational arguments can be in inspiring people to behave better. Unconscious context cues, implicit cognition and the power of habituation all point to the ways that human beings act without conscious thought. This presents a challenge to a traditional Ethics curriculum that would aim to help students become more morally “better.” One of the most important areas related to this involves the idea of moral imagination. In this case, from our earliest age, ideas of in and out-group identification are stamped into us. As a result, numerous forms of bias begin to sprout up, usually without anyone’s intent to develop these.

Given how much of our behavior flows from unconscious sources including emotions, our implicit grasp of what and who occupies the moral universe significantly impacts habitual, day to day behavior. These same impulses can be the source of both our best and worst instincts. In order to improve student moral behavior, an ethics course would need to address this area.

This presentation aims to briefly discuss problems implicit bias holds for teaching Ethics. The primary aim of the presentation will focus on recently emerging methods for expanding the moral imagination, and in particular how these can be employed in a pre-college Ethics curriculum. The discussion for this presentation would emphasize concrete strategies for affecting the moral imagination.

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Stephen Kekoa Miller teaches Philosophy and Religious Studies and is Humanities Department Chair at Oakwood Friends School and is an Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, New York for 19 years. Stephen is the Treasurer and member of the Board of Directors of PLATO (Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization). Stephen is also the President of the United Nations Association Mid-Hudson Valley chapter. Stephen speaks and publishes in the areas of philosophy for children, philosophy of emotions, ethics education and virtue ethics. Stephen recently served on the Teachers Advisory Council of the National Humanities Center.

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