

An Aristotelian Approach to Moral Imagination

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Introduction

We who work in the field of practical ethics find ourselves in an embarrassing position. Our task is to show people how to make moral decisions, but we ourselves cannot agree on how to do it. Our disagreements range over all but the most trivial and obvious moral principles, and we do not know how to resolve them. Worse, even when we do agree about the principles, we do not agree about how they apply to particular cases.

In recent years some philosophers, having seen the need to find a way to link particular actions, actual or contemplated, to applicable moral principles, have invoked the faculty of moral imagination to solve at least two problems.¹

The first problem is that, in practice, we may simply fail to notice the applicable moral principle. Stanley Milgram's (1974) experiment is the old war horse with respect to this problem. Milgram's feckless subjects had assented to the salient principle before beginning the experiment: they would not, they said, intentionally cause serious pain to an innocent person. Then they did, and afterwards realized that they had done precisely that.

In cases of this sort it is often difficult to tell whether the agent has somehow failed to notice that an action is wrong, or knows that fact

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