

12

MORAL IMAGINATION (Darwinism and Morality)

Study Topics principles of moral ideas

12.0 Selection Of Idea To Realize In Action

A free spirit acts according to his impulses, that is, according to intuitions selected from the totality of his world of ideas by thinking. For an unfree spirit, the reason why he singles out a particular intuition from his world of ideas in order to make it the basis of an action, lies in the world of percepts given to him, that is, in his past experiences.

12.1 Concrete Mental Picture

Whenever the impulse for an action is present in a general conceptual form (for example, Thou shalt do good to thy fellow men! Thou shalt live so that thou best promotest thy welfare!) then for each particular case the concrete mental picture of the action must first be found.

12.2 Moral Imagination

The human being produces concrete mental pictures from the sum of his ideas chiefly by means of the imagination. Therefore what the free spirit needs in order to realize his ideas, in order to be effective, is moral imagination.

12.3 Moral Technique

Moral action, in addition to the faculty of having moral ideas (moral intuition) and moral imagination, is the ability to transform the world of percepts without violating the natural laws by which these are connected. This ability is moral technique. It can be learnt in the same sense in which any kind of knowledge can be learnt.

12.4 History Of Moral Ideas

Moral imagination can become objects of knowledge only after they have been produced by the individual. We therefore deal with them as with a natural history of moral ideas.

12.5 Normative Moral Laws

Some people have wanted to maintain the standard-setting (normative) character of moral laws. As a moral being, I am an individual and have laws of my very own.

12.6 Traditional Moral Doctrines

But can we not then make the old a measure for the new? Is not every man compelled to measure the products of his moral imagination by the standard of traditional moral doctrines?

12.7 Outcome Of Evolution Is An Ethical Individualist

Ethical Individualism, far from being in opposition to the theory of evolution, is a direct consequence.

12.8 Rejection Of Supernatural Influence

Monism rejects, in morality as in science, every transcendent (metaphysical) influence. Moral processes are natural products like everything else that exists, and their causes must be looked for in nature, i.e., in man, because man is the bearer of morality.

12.9 Characterization Of Action

The characterizing of an action, whether it is a free one, he must leave to the immediate observation of the action.

12.10 Action Is Image Of An Ideal Intuition

If a human being finds that an action is the image of such an ideal intuition, then he feels it to be free. In this characteristic of an action lies its freedom.

12.11 Freedom Is To Determine Own Motives

To be free means to be able to determine by moral imagination those mental pictures (motives) which underlie the action. A free being is one who can want what he himself considers right.

12.12 Submission To Others

Not until they would enslave my spirit, drive my motives out of my head, and put their own motives in the place of mine, do they really aim at making me unfree.

[top](#)

12.0 Selection Of Idea To Realize In Action

[1] A FREE spirit acts according to his impulses, i.e., intuitions, which his thought has selected out of the whole world of his ideas. For an unfree spirit, the reason why he singles out a particular intuition from his world of ideas, in order to make it the basis of an action, lies in the perceptual world which is given to him, i.e., in his past experiences. He recalls, before making a decision, what some one else has done, or recommended as proper, in an analogous case, or what God has commanded to be done in such a case, etc., and he acts on these recollections. A free spirit dispenses with these preliminaries. His decision is absolutely original. He cares as little what others have done in such a case as what commands they have laid down. He has purely ideal (logical) reasons which determine him to select a particular concept out of the sum of his concepts, and to realize it in action. But his action will belong to perceptible reality. Consequently, what he achieves will coincide with a definite content of perception. His concept will have to be realized in a concrete particular event. As a concept it will not contain this event as particular. It will refer to the event only in its generic character, just as, in general, a concept is related to a percept, e.g., the concept lion to a particular lion. The link between concept and percept is the mental picture (cp. pp. 68 ff.).

To the unfree spirit this intermediate link is given from the outset. Motives exist in his consciousness from the first in the form of mental pictures. Whenever he intends to do anything he acts as he has seen others act, or he obeys the instructions he receives in each separate case. Hence authority is most effective in the form of examples, i.e., in the form of traditional patterns of particular actions handed down for the guidance of the unfree spirit.

A Christian models his conduct less on the teaching than on the example of the Saviour. Rules have less value for telling men positively what to do than for telling them what to leave undone. Laws take on the form of universal concepts only when they forbid actions, not when they prescribe actions. Laws concerning what we ought to do must be given to the unfree spirit in wholly concrete form. Clean the street in front of your door! Pay your taxes to such and such an amount to the tax-collector! etc. Conceptual form belongs to laws which inhibit actions. Thou shalt not steal! Thou shalt not commit adultery!

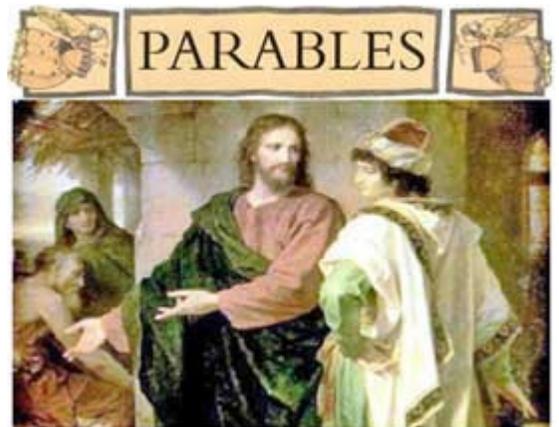
But these laws, too, influence the unfree spirit only by means of a concrete mental picture, e.g., the idea of the punishments attached by human authority, or of the pangs of conscience, or of eternal damnation, etc.

[top](#)

12.1 Concrete Mental Picture

[2] Even when the motive to an action exists in universal conceptual form (e.g., Thou shalt do good to thy fellow-men! Thou shalt live so that thou promotest best thy welfare!), there still remains to be found, in the particular case, the concrete mental picture of the action (the relation of the concept to a content of perception).

For a free spirit who is not guided by any model nor by fear of punishment, etc., this translation of the concept into a mental picture is always necessary.



An unfree spirit models his conduct less on the teaching than on the example of the Saviour.

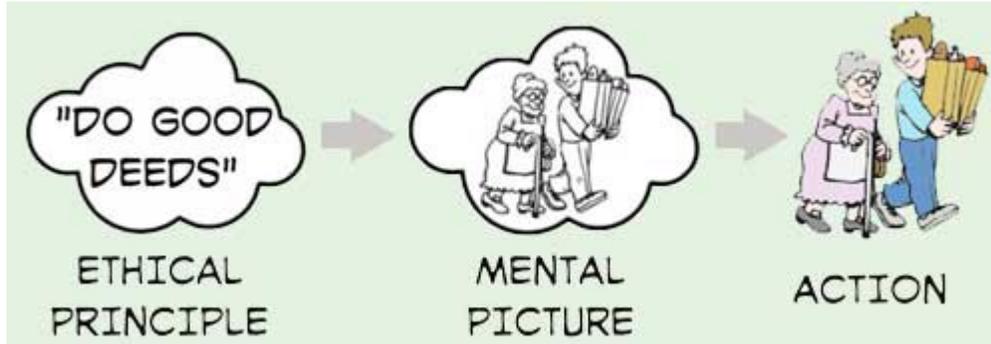


Concrete mental picture of action.

[top](#)

12.2 Moral Imagination

[3] Concrete mental pictures are formed by us on the basis of our concepts by means of the imagination. Hence what the free spirit needs in order to realize his concepts, in order to assert himself in the world, is moral imagination. This is the source of the free spirit's action. Only those men, therefore, who are endowed with moral imagination are, properly speaking, morally productive. Those who merely preach morality, i.e., those who merely spin out moral rules without being able to translate them into concrete mental pictures, are morally unproductive. They are like those critics who can explain very competently how a work of art ought to be made, but who are themselves incapable of the smallest artistic productions.



Imagination translates an ethical principle into a concrete mental picture, envisioning an action before it is carried out.

[top](#)

12.3 Moral Technique

[4] Moral imagination, in order to realize its mental picture, must enter into a determinate sphere of percepts. Human action does not create percepts, but transforms already existing percepts and gives them a new character. In order to be able to transform a definite object of perception, or a sum of such objects, in accordance with a moral mental picture, it is necessary to understand the object's law (its mode of action which one intends to transform, or to which one wants to give a new direction). Further, it is necessary to discover the procedure by which it is possible to change the given law into the new one. This part of effective moral activity depends on knowledge of the particular world of phenomena with which one has got to deal. We shall, therefore, find it in some branch of scientific knowledge.



Moral technique is learned in the study of the relevant fields of science.

the ability to transform the world without violating the natural laws is moral technique

Moral action, then, presupposes, in addition to the faculty of moral concepts and of moral imagination, the ability to alter the world of percepts without violating the natural laws by which they are connected.

This ability is moral technique. It may be learnt in the same sense in which science in general may be learnt.

For, in general, men are better able to find concepts for the world as it is, than productively to originate out of their imaginations future, and as yet non-existing, actions. Hence, it is very well possible for men without moral imagination to receive moral mental pictures from others, and to embody these skilfully in the actual world. Vice versa, it may happen that men with moral imagination lack technical skill, and are dependent on the service of other men for the realization of their mental pictures.

[5] In so far as we require for moral action knowledge of the objects upon which we are about to act, our action depends upon such knowledge. What we need to know here are the laws of nature. These belong to the Natural Sciences, not to Ethics.

[top](#)

12.4 History Of Moral Ideas

[6] Moral imagination and the faculty of moral concepts can become objects of theory only after they have first been employed by the individual. But, thus regarded, they no longer regulate life, but have already regulated it. They must now be treated as efficient causes, like all other causes (they are purposes only for the subject). The study of them is, as it were, the Natural Science of moral ideas.

[7] Ethics as a Normative Science, over and above this science, is impossible.

[top](#)

12.5 Normative Moral Laws

[8] Some would maintain the normative character of moral laws at least in the sense that Ethics is to be taken as a kind of dietetic which, from the conditions of the organism's life, deduces general rules, on the basis of which it hopes to give detailed directions to the body (Paulsen, System der Ethik). This comparison is mistaken, because our moral life cannot be compared with the life of the organism. The behaviour of the organism occurs without any volition on our part. Its laws are fixed data in our world; hence we can discover them and apply them when discovered.

Moral laws, on the other hand, do not exist until we create them. We cannot apply them until we have created them. The error is due to the fact that moral laws are not at every moment new creations, but are handed down by tradition. Those which we take over from our ancestors appear to be given like the natural laws of the organism. But it does not follow that a later generation has the right to apply them in the same way as dietetic rules. For they apply to individuals, and not, like natural laws, to specimens of a genus.

Considered as an organism, I am such a generic specimen, and I shall live in accordance with nature if I apply the laws of my genus to my particular case. As a moral agent I am an individual and have laws of my own.



Some want to maintain the normative character of moral laws.

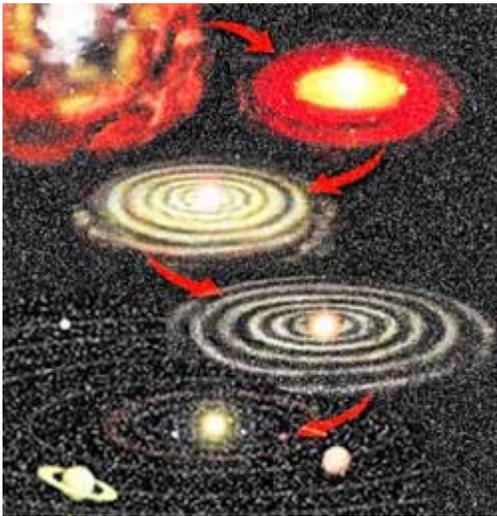
[top](#)

12.6 Traditional Moral Doctrines

[9] The view here upheld appears to contradict that fundamental doctrine of modern Natural Science which is known as the Theory of Evolution. But it only appears to do so. By evolution we mean the real development of the later out of the earlier in accordance with natural law. In the organic world, evolution means that the later (more perfect) organic forms are real descendants of the earlier imperfect forms, and have grown out of them in accordance with natural laws. The upholders of the theory of organic evolution believe that there was once a time on our earth, when we could have observed with our own eyes the gradual evolution of reptiles out of Proto-Amniotes, supposing that we could have been present as men, and had been endowed with a sufficiently long span of life.



In the organic world, evolution means that the later (more perfect) organic forms are real descendants of the earlier imperfect forms, and have grown out of them in accordance with natural laws.



According to this theory the solar system formed through the progressive condensation of a gassy nebula. As this nebula rotated and contracted, rings of gas were cast off to condense into the planets.

Similarly, Evolutionists suppose that man could have watched the development of the solar system out of the primordial nebula of the Kant-Laplace hypothesis, if he could have occupied a suitable spot in the world-ether during that infinitely long period. But no Evolutionist will dream of maintaining that he could from his concept of the primordial Amnion deduce that of the reptile with all its qualities, even if he had never seen a reptile. Just as little would it be possible to derive the solar system from the concept of the Kant-Laplace nebula, if this concept of an original nebula had been formed only from the percept of the nebula. In other words, if the Evolutionist is to think consistently, he is bound to maintain that out of earlier phases of evolution later ones really develop; that once the concept of the imperfect and that of the perfect have been given, we can understand the connection. But in no case will he admit that the concept formed from the earlier phases is, in itself, sufficient for deducing from it the later phases.

From this it follows for Ethics that, whilst we can understand the connection of later moral concepts with earlier ones, it is not possible to deduce a single new moral idea from earlier ones. The individual, as a moral being, produces his own content. This content, thus produced, is for Ethics a datum, as much as reptiles are a datum for Natural Science. Reptiles have evolved out of the Proto-Amniotes, but the scientist cannot manufacture the concept

of reptiles out of the concept of the Proto-Amniotes. Later moral ideas evolve out of the earlier ones, but Ethics cannot manufacture out of the moral principles of an earlier age those of a later one. The confusion is due to the fact that, as scientists, we start with the facts before us, and then make a theory about them, whereas in moral action we first produce the facts ourselves, and then theorize about them. In the evolution of the moral world-order we accomplish what, at a lower level, Nature accomplishes: we alter some part of the perceptual world. Hence the ethical norm cannot straightway be made an object of knowledge, like a law of nature, for it must first be created. Only when that has been done can the norm become an object of knowledge.

it is not possible to deduce a single new moral idea from earlier ones, the individual produces his own moral content

to measure what moral imagination gives by the standard of traditional moral doctrines is absurd

[10] But is it not possible to make the old a measure for the new? Is not every man compelled to measure the deliverances of his moral imagination by the standard of traditional moral doctrines? If he would be truly productive in morality, such measuring is as much an absurdity as it

would be an absurdity if one were to measure a new species in nature by an old one and say that reptiles, because they do not agree with the Proto-Amniotes, are an illegitimate (degenerate) species.

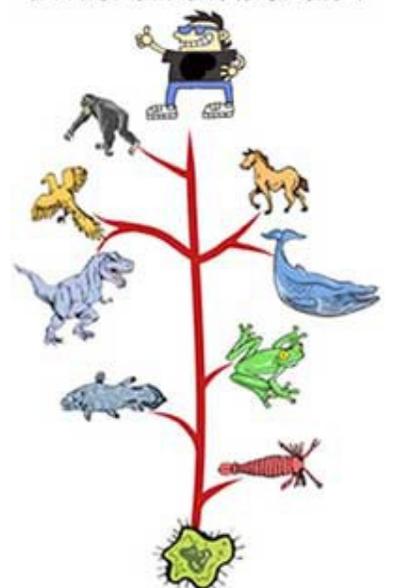
[top](#)

12.7 Outcome Of Evolution Is An Ethical Individualist

[11] Ethical Individualism, then, so far from being in opposition to the theory of evolution, is a direct consequence of it. Haeckel's genealogical tree from protozoa up to man as an organic being, ought to be capable of being worked out without a breach of natural law, and without a gap in its uniform evolution, up to the individual as a being with a determinate moral nature. But, whilst it is quite true that the moral ideas of the individual have perceptibly grown out of those of his ancestors, it is also true that the individual is morally barren, unless he has moral ideas of his own.

[12] The same Ethical Individualism which I have developed on the basis of the preceding principles, might be equally well developed on the basis of the theory of evolution. The final result would be the same; only the path by which it was reached would be different.

ETHICAL INDIVIDUALIST



[top](#)

12.8 Rejection Of Supernatural Influence

[13] That absolutely new moral ideas should be developed by the moral imagination is for the theory of evolution no more inexplicable than the development of one animal species out of another, provided only that this theory, as a Monistic world-view, rejects, in morality as in science, every transcendent (metaphysical) influence. In doing so, it follows the same principle by which it is guided in seeking the causes of new organic forms in forms already existing, but not in the interference of an extra-mundane God, who produces every new species in accordance with a new creative idea through supernatural interference. Just as Monism has no use for supernatural creative ideas in explaining living organisms, so it is equally impossible for it to derive the moral world-order from causes which do not lie within the world. It cannot admit any continuous supernatural influence upon moral life (divine government of the world from the outside), nor an influence through a particular act of revelation at a particular moment in history (giving of the ten commandments), or through God's appearance on the earth (divinity of Christ). Moral processes are, for Monism, natural products like everything else that exists, and their causes must be looked for in nature, i.e., in man, because man is the bearer of morality.

[14] Ethical Individualism, then, is the crown of the edifice that Darwin and Haeckel have erected for Natural Science. It is the theory of evolution applied to the moral life.

[top](#)

12.9 Characterization Of Action

[15] Anyone who restricts the concept of the natural from the outset to an artificially limited and narrowed sphere, is easily tempted not to allow any room within it for free individual action. The consistent Evolutionist does not easily fall a prey to such a narrow-minded view. He cannot let the process of evolution terminate with the ape, and acknowledge for man a supernatural origin. Again, he cannot stop short at the organic reactions of man and regard only these as natural. He has to treat also the life of moral self-determination as the continuation of organic life.

moral self-determination does not have a supernatural origin, but is the continuation of organic life

[16] The Evolutionist, then, in accordance with his fundamental principles, can maintain only that moral action evolves out of the less perfect forms of natural processes. He must leave the characterization of action, i.e., its determination as free action, to the immediate observation of each agent. All that he maintains is only that men have developed out of monkeys. What the nature of men actually is must be determined by observation of men themselves. The results of this observation cannot possibly contradict the history of evolution. Only the assertion that the results are such as to exclude their being due to a natural world-order would contradict recent developments in the Natural Sciences.

Footnote: That we speak of thoughts (ethical ideas) as objects of observation is fully justified. For, although during the activity of thinking the products of thinking do not appear at the same time in the field of observation, they can nevertheless become objects of observation afterwards. And it is in this way that we have arrived at our characterization of action.

[top](#)

12.10 Free Action Is Image Of An Ideal Intuition

[17] Ethical individualism has nothing to fear from a natural science that understands itself: for observation shows that the perfect form of human action has freedom as its characteristic quality. This freedom must be allowed to the human will, in so far as the will realizes purely ideal intuitions. For these intuitions are not the results of a necessity acting upon them from without, but are due only to themselves. If a man finds that an action is the image of such an ideal intuition, then he feels it to be free. In this characteristic of an action lies its freedom.

the perfect form of human action has freedom as its characteristic quality

[top](#)

12.11 Freedom Is To Determine Own Motives

[18] What, then, from the standpoint of nature are we to say of the distinction, already mentioned above (p. 13), between the two statements, "To be free means to be able to do what you will," and "To be able, as you please, to strive or not to strive is the real meaning of the dogma of free will"? Hamerling bases his theory of free will precisely on this distinction, by declaring the first statement to be correct but the second to be an absurd tautology. He says, "I can do what I will, but to say I can will what I will is an empty tautology." Whether I am able to do, i.e., to make real, what I will, i.e., what I have set before myself as my idea of action, that depends on external circumstances and on my technical skill (cp. p. 118).

To be free means to be able to determine by moral imagination out of oneself, those mental pictures (motives) which lie at the basis of action. Freedom is impossible if anything other than I myself (whether a mechanical process or God) determines my moral ideas. In other words, I am free only when I myself produce these mental pictures, but not when I am merely able to realize the ideas which another being has implanted in me.

A free being is one who can will what he regards as right. Whoever does anything other than what he wills must be impelled to it by motives which do not lie in himself. Such a man is unfree in his action. Accordingly, to be able to will, as you please, what you consider right or wrong means to be free or unfree as you please. This is, of course, just as absurd as to identify freedom with the faculty of doing what one is compelled to will. But this is just what Hamerling maintains when he says, "It is perfectly true that the will is always determined by motives, but it is absurd to say that on this ground it is unfree; for a greater freedom can neither be desired nor conceived than the freedom to realize oneself in proportion to one's own power and strength of will." On the contrary, it is well possible to desire a greater freedom and that a true freedom, viz., the freedom to determine for oneself the motives of one's volitions.



Freedom is to determine by moral imagination out of oneself, those mental pictures (motives) which lie at the basis of action.

[top](#)

12.12 Submission To Others

[19] Under certain conditions a man may be induced to abandon the execution of his will; but to allow others to prescribe to him what he shall do—in other words, to will what another and not what he himself regards as right—to this a man will submit only when he does not feel free.

[20] External powers may prevent me from doing what I will, but that is only to condemn me to do nothing. Not until they enslave my spirit, drive my motives out of my head, and put their own motives in the place of mine, do they really aim at making me unfree. That is the reason why the church attacks not only the mere doing, but especially the impure thoughts, i.e., motives of my action. And for the church all those motives are impure which she has not herself authorized. A church does not produce genuine slaves until her priests turn themselves into advisers of conscience, i.e., until the faithful depend upon the church, i.e., upon the confessional, for the motives of their actions.



Their intention is to make me unfree when they drive my motives out of my head, and replace them with their own.