

# On the Cultivation of Children's Moral Imagination

Tingwen Xiao<sup>1, a</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne, Melbourne 3010,  
Australia

<sup>a</sup>3751528149@qq.com

## Abstract

**Moral imagination, as a psychological activity that creatively explores moral situations, aims to construct a positive link between "self" and "others". Under the guidance of traditional moral cognition theory, children's moral education emphasizes their understanding and compliance with norms, strengthens the "discipline" of children, and neglects the stimulation of moral imagination, which hinders the establishment of children's moral relationships and affects the effectiveness of moral education. Children's moral imagination is a kind of "creative imagination", which is manifested not only in the ability to creatively explore moral situations, but also in the ability to perceive "what things are" through "what things can be", and also in the ability to project empathy. To cultivate children's moral imagination, the first step is to trigger moral perception and cultivate moral imagination in situational creation. Secondly, it is necessary to promote moral understanding and cultivate moral imagination in perceiving others. Finally, it is necessary to stimulate moral empathy and cultivate moral imagination through shared feelings and contracts.**

## Keywords

**Moral imagination; Children's moral imagination; Moral education.**

## 1. Introduction

How to construct an effective connection between "self" and "others" in the psychological world of children is the key to achieving practical results in children's moral education. To achieve the goal of "cultivating their conscience" in children's moral education, it is necessary to first enable children to understand "others" and learn to treat them correctly. Moral imagination, the moral psychological activity of "creatively exploring multiple possibilities of the situation", provides an effective psychological mechanism for linking "self" and "others".

## 2. Lack of Moral Imagination: The Dilemma of Subjectivity in Children's Moral Education

In social interaction, morality regulates interpersonal relationships through the concept of good and evil. Morality is not generated or obtained by the subject out of thin air. The most important foundation for the generation, development, and optimization of morality is the subject's conscious understanding and active grasp of social relationships. Children's moral education aims to enable them to learn how to correctly understand and handle interpersonal relationships during the process of receiving moral education, and to achieve psychological identification with the moral normative system.

The pure psychological world of children is a "moral whiteboard". How to construct an effective connection between "self" and "others"? This is the fundamental issue that enables children to achieve "enlightenment" and "transformation into their hearts" in receiving moral education.

American educational philosopher John Dewey believed that imagination is crucial for moral understanding and judgment, because only through moral imagination we can feel the situation of others. In other words, moral imagination is the process of empathizing with others' situations through the "place oneself in others' position" approach, thereby establishing an equal subject relationship between "I and you" rather than a subject object relationship between "I and it".

The fact is that for a long time, both theoretically and practically, children's moral education has lacked emphasis on moral imagination, resulting in a dilemma of subjectivity in children's moral education and hindering its effectiveness.

From a theoretical perspective, traditional moral cognition theory holds that the acquisition of children's morality is a process of the subject accepting rules, and there is a lack of exploration and emphasis on moral imagination in moral education theory. Whether Piaget regards how children understand and abide by rules as the essence of children's moral education, or Kohlberg regards the development of children's morality as a gradual process from passive obedience to active recognition of rules, their commonality is to place the subject under "norms" and be "virtuous", rather than the subject actively acquiring and being "virtuous". They believe that all moral qualities of children are reflected in learning and applying norms and standards.

From a practical perspective, due to the lack of attention to moral imagination in cognitive theory of traditional moral education, educational practices guided by it inevitably overlook the stimulation of moral imagination, resulting in the dilemma of moral subjects being "disciplined". Due to the lack of emphasis and encouragement on children's moral imagination, children only receive admonitions such as "what must be done", "what cannot be done", and "what is wrong with you" in moral education. Such admonitions for long term can lead to the shrinkage of children's subjectivity, constantly squeezing their "self", and even gradually causing the loss of their "self". Due to the narrowing of the "self" at both ends of the relationship between "self" and "others", it can lead to an imbalance in the relationship. Children have not learned how to treat themselves or others, and therefore cannot develop morality.

The ultimate solution to the dilemma of children's moral education is to promote the growth of children's moral subjects or the establishment of their moral subjectivity, and to establish a harmonious relationship between the "self other" subjects. In this sense, the cultivation of moral imagination ability that can effectively link "self" and "others" should be fully valued in the practice of children's moral education.

### 3. Children's Moral Imagination: A Creative Moral Ability

The so-called moral imagination refers to the ability of moral imagination. Moral imagination is the ability to creatively explore possibilities in a situation and to project empathy, thereby achieving a concrete perception of "what is before us" based on "what could be". [1] In terms of the essential characteristics of moral imagination, children's moral imagination is a creative moral ability in the process of moral realization.

As a form of 'creative imagination', the creativity of children's moral imagination is fundamentally manifested in three aspects: its main characteristics, goals, and methods of implementation.

Firstly, the main characteristic of children's moral imagination is the creative exploration of moral contexts. Dewey divided imagination into mechanical imagination, fantasy, and creative imagination in his *Psychology*. Unlike the previous two, moral imagination is a form of "creative imagination"- "all things that do not contribute to the development of the image of this whole are discarded; all things that can accomplish the meaning of details and elevate them to universal and permanent significance are incorporated." [2] Through moral imagination,

children's psychological world creates a variety of moral contexts, such as how to understand themselves? How to understand others? How to perceive the situation of others? What would I do if I were him? How to solve moral problems? and so on. Encouraging children to place themselves in a certain moral context, "place themselves in others' position" and strive to "feel indebted as if it were received in person", thus providing more possibilities for achieving morality. It can be seen that the ability to creatively explore moral situations is the ability of children to approach others and the world with their own weak, sensitive, and pure psychology. Secondly, from the perspective of the purpose of moral imagination. Children's moral imagination is manifested in the ability to perceive "what things are" (to perceive the current state and trigger the "longing of my heart") through "what things can be" (how they should become and how they should be better). In moral imagination, when human psychological activity points towards the "beautiful" state of truth, goodness, and beauty, it is not an endless "fantasy", its purpose is to perceive the reality state with beautiful expectations. The richness of children's moral imagination is reflected in whether and to what extent they can "perceive reality with beauty", "guide reality with beauty", and ultimately move towards "indicating the future with beauty". Isn't the purpose of children's moral education to guide them to constantly pursue "what things can be" of the truth, goodness and beauty based on their perception of "what things are"?!

Thirdly, in terms of the realization of moral imagination, it is achieved through the method of "Empathy-Projection". Then children's moral imagination also manifests as the ability of Empathy-Projection. "Moral imagination refers to the dynamic learning and transformation of how we establish social relationships with others, how we see ourselves in relationships, how we value relationships with others, and how we decide what it means to be someone who supports or sympathizes with relationships." [3] That is to say, everyone is a "self-in-relation", and building good interpersonal relationships for children who are not yet experienced in the world is an important task of children's moral education and an important goal of cultivating their moral imagination. Empathy-Projection refers to an individual projecting their subjective consciousness forms such as emotions, concepts, and motivations onto external things or others, in order to actively "approach others" and "care for others". Through active "Empathy-Projection", children can start from themselves, actively perceive, recognize, and understand others, thereby promoting "self" towards "other".

## 4. Cultivation of Children's Moral Imagination

"The power to create imagination is a natural principle in moral life". Without moral imagination, there can be no moral acquisition, and moral education will lose its effectiveness. How to cultivate children's moral imagination should become an important way to improve the effectiveness of current children's moral education.

### 4.1. Triggering Moral Perception: Cultivating Moral Imagination in Situational Creation

Moral perception is the feeling and anticipation of moral values in the creation of different contexts, thereby cultivating moral imagination. Moral perception has the characteristics of "shared perception" and "shared knowledge", so that people can convey a common moral understanding and form a common moral consciousness. To cultivate children's moral imagination, the first step is to enable them to form an interconnected moral perception through continuous situational creation.

Moral perception contains two fundamental abilities: sensory ability and precognitive ability. Sensory ability is a universal ability, just as different people have similar visual, auditory, and tactile senses - in the cool breeze, everyone can feel the coolness. Different children will develop

similar moral emotions or moral feelings towards the same moral situation. For example, in the face of "elderly people who have fallen", a common moral perception is that it will lead to a moral reflection of "must help". Precognitive ability is the ability to respond to different situations that may arise in the future. Faced with new situations, children are able to understand what moral choices to make based on their existing moral perceptions, and can imagine similar events happening again, what the correct direction of moral behavior should be. For example, when faced with situations that require assistance or help again, children will naturally exhibit positive moral behavior. It is in this constantly creating moral imagination that children's moral thinking and behavior will be constantly consolidated, thus forming stable moral qualities.

In children's moral education, the creation of different contexts triggers children's moral perception, cultivates moral imagination, and enhances their moral sensitivity and perception. This is a positive method to improve the effectiveness of children's moral education.

In children's moral education, the creation of different contexts triggers children's moral perception, cultivates moral imagination, and enhances their moral sensitivity and perception. That is a positive method to improve the effectiveness of children's moral education.

#### **4.2. Promoting Moral Understanding: Cultivating Moral Imagination in Perceiving Others**

It is generally believed that understanding is a "rational cognitive activity" in the cognitive process, "which is a logical or non logical thinking process through analysis, comparison, generalization, connection, intuition, etc." [5] In moral education, understanding is not only the understanding or acquisition of moral knowledge, but more importantly, the realization of mutual understanding and communication between people based on moral knowledge. In this sense, moral education is the education of understanding people, and this understanding must be achieved through interpersonal communication. Finally, it also needs through people's construction of self-awareness to condense and form individual virtues.

"Understanding" is an important link in the psychological activity of moral imagination, and it is a bridge between "self" and "others". It can be said that moral comprehension is the most effective element of moral imagination.

Understanding is the questioning of what is "good". Compared with the modern moral cognitive theory of American developmental psychologist Kohlberg, it is believed that children's moral development follows the law of "three levels and six stages". "Understanding" is neither the "punishment and obedience orientation" and "utilitarian orientation" in the "pre-custom level", nor the "good child orientation" and "good citizen orientation" in the "custom level", but the "universal moral principle orientation" stage through the "social contract orientation" in the "post-custom level". The stage of "universal moral principles orientation" is the stage of achieving true "understanding", because in this stage, children's moral concepts tend to be fair, equal, and just, rather than making judgments based on fixed rules rigidly, but starting from care and sympathy. It is precisely because children have a moral intention towards what is "good" that they can understand and perceive others based on such standards.

"Understanding" is still the experience of how to be "good". After learning what is "good", children's understanding of "good" is still superficial and variable. Only through experiencing how to be "good" can they obtain a stable "

Understanding" of good. For example, children experience the joy of helping others through the act of returning lost property, learning from other's good deeds, and experiencing the ease and satisfaction of honesty through honest and trustworthy behavior... These are all experiences of goodness. In these experiences, children are able to perceive and understand others.

Based on the questioning of what is “good” and the experience of how to be “good”, a moral imagination scene of meeting, knowing, and communicating between “self” and “others” is constructed in the young minds of children, thus promoting the formation of a harmonious moral relationship of “people with the same heart and mind with the same principle”.

### 4.3. Stimulating Moral Empathy: Cultivating Moral Imagination in a Synesthesia and Contract

Empathy is the emotional resonance between moral subjects, which provides support of Social Emotions for the formation of children's morality.

Empathy is not a one-way emotional transmission, but a mutual emotional rush that achieves empathy and agreement in communication. Martha Nussbaum believed that “empathy is an imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience.” [7] In other words, empathy is obtaining “empathy” in imagining others.

Why can inspiring moral empathy effectively cultivate children's moral imagination?

Firstly, moral empathy aims to construct sincere relationships between subjects, providing a subjective foundation for the cultivation of children's moral imagination. Martin Buber emphasized that “the generation of emotional resonance requires a sincere relationship between two subjects, which is built on mutual respect and acceptance.” [8] In fact, when individual children can truly understand and feel the emotions and needs of others, they are more inclined to interact with others in a positive, caring, and constructive way, which helps to establish friendly and sincere interpersonal relationships, thereby promoting the growth and self realization of individual children. In the process and development of empathy, a sincere mutual relationship is actually constructed between subjects, providing a possible space for the emergence of morality.

Stimulating children's moral empathy is actually cultivating their social emotional competence/skills. In the practice of moral education for children in New Zealand, cultivating children's social and emotional abilities is considered an important way to reduce bullying. [9] The New Zealand government attaches great importance to cultivating children's moral empathy in its education development plan, emphasizing the importance of multicultural understanding and tolerance, and focusing on cultivating children's empathy. [10]

Secondly, moral empathy can promote the formation of common moral values and provide value guidance for the cultivation of children's moral

imagination. Moral empathy provides emotional support for the formation of a moral community, which first exists as an imagined landscape. Children's moral education regards cultivating collective consciousness as an important task,

which is to construct an “imaginary community” in their psychology, and encourage children to work hard to promote this community to become better.

“When moral subjects resonate emotionally with each other, they are actually sharing an emotional collective consciousness, which enhances their mutual understanding and cooperation.” In this way, the collective consciousness based on moral empathy shapes the social value orientation of children's morality.

Thirdly, moral empathy optimizes people's moral emotions and guides the cultivation of children's moral imagination in the direction of beauty. Mencius said, “What can be desired is called goodness, what has oneself is called faith, and what is enriched is called beauty.” (*Mencius: Devotion to the Heart*) This means that what is worth pursuing is called goodness, having one's own goodness is called faith, and having goodness that fills the whole body is called beauty. In children's education, the advancement and leap of “goodness”, “faith” and “beauty” are precisely the goal pursuit of moral education. In achieving moral empathy between “goodness” and “faith”, “beauty” must become the goal of children's education. “Beauty”, as a beautiful

realm, is a construction of moral imagination. In this sense, children's moral imagination is the ability to pursue and achieve moral beauty. When children understand and acquire goodness, they achieve the goals of "beautiful body" and "beautiful heart".

## 5. Conclusion

It should be pointed out that although moral imagination is an individual psychological activity, its function or influence is a kind of collective effect.

Moral imagination is not only the ability to achieve personal morality, but also a driving mechanism for promoting the moral level of collectives or organizations. As American management ethicist Patricia Werhane has said, "Moral imagination operates at the organizational and system level, like a

convenient mechanism that can stimulate more comprehensive and reliable moral thinking and judgment." [12] American scholar Timothy J. Hargrave places the starting point of exploring moral imagination on the "collective behavior model of institutional innovation". He points out that "although 'direct evaluation behavior' such as empathy towards stakeholders is a constituent element of individual moral imagination, the 'best purpose' can only be realized if combined with the application of collective behavior dynamics." [13] Therefore, the cultivation of children's moral imagination is not solely about stimulating individuals, but should be a collective action of moral education that requires the participation of teachers, schools, families, and society.

Undoubtedly, moral imagination, as a form of "creative tension," promotes children to form a stable psychological state from "self" towards "others," and the improvement of moral qualities will become a "rewarding" achievement in the process of children's growth.

## References

- [1] Steven Fisher, Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics. Peking University Press, 2010. p.99.
- [2] John Dewey. The Collected Works of John Dewey: The Early Works (1882-1898), Volume 2: Psychology (1887) [M]. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press,1967. p.171.
- [3] J. Vadeboncoeur, R.E. Vellos. Recreating social futures: The role of the moral imagination in student-teacher relationships in alternative education. International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies,7(2)(2016), p.307-323.
- [4] Berdyaev. On the Mission of Man. Translated by Zhang Baichun, Xuelin Publishing House, 2000. p.190.
- [5] Feng Qi. Dictionary of Philosophy. Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House, August 17, 2001. p.817.
- [6] Lu Jie. Understanding People to People: The Foundation of Moral Education - Reflections on the Contemporary Transformation of Moral Education. Education Research, 2000 (07),p. 3-10+54.
- [7] Martha Nussbaum,Upheavals of Thought: the Intelligence of Emotions [M], Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.p.135.
- [8] Martin Buber. Me and You]. Translated by Chen Weigang. Life, Reading, New Knowledge Sanlian Bookstore, 1986.p.23.
- [9] FERGUSSON D M, HORWOOD L J, STANLEY L. A preliminary evaluation of the Incredible Years teacher programme. New Zealand Journal of Psychology, 2013, 42 (2): 77-82.

- [10] DALLI C, ONE S T. Early childhood education in 2002: pathways to the future. *New Zealand Annual Review of Education*, 2003 (12): 177-202.
- [11] Sophie Gaillar Delatur. Rawls' Concepts of Justice and Community: A Durkheim style Reading. Pompey, translated. *Tsinghua Western Philosophy Research*, 2017,3 (02): 385-408.
- [12] Norman E. Bowie, Patricia H. Werhane. *Management Ethics* [M]. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005.p.129.
- [13] Moral Imagination, Collective Action, and the Achievement of Moral Outcomes [J]. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 2009, 19 (1).