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# Moral Imagination Holds the Key

## This crisis shows we might be able to overcome political tribalism.

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Statue of Edmund Burke on painting by Hubertine Heijermans; flickr.com



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On the surface it may seem nothing has changed. The reactions to this pandemic have been pulled into the same old political binaries. Many on the left marshal medical opinion in support of an extensive and seemingly endless lockdown, while many on the right, energized by well-organized not-for-profits, call for total economic and social freedom.

Yet even as the tribalized reflexes endure, exploited by our most irresponsible and opportunistic politicians, it is also the case that polls show an overwhelming majority supportive of the unprecedented restrictions on their liberty. The significance of this cannot be overstated. In adhering to the lockdowns, or at least to precautionary measures as the lockdowns are eased, people are essentially electing to put the lives of remote fellow-citizens—people they will never know and from whom they expect nothing in return—above their own cherished freedoms and self-interest.

We need to take stock of just how remarkable that it is. The current pandemic is revealing something quite extraordinary about ordinary people, something even the most cynical among us should not rush to dismiss: We citizens in the deeply divided nations of the West are showing that we can still come together to make sacrifices for the common good. The lessons of this moment should not be lost. We need to find ways to make this sense of solidarity an enduring part of any new normal that emerges after the pandemic passes.

“Moral imagination” is the term literary critic David Bromwich borrows from Edmund Burke to describe this aptitude for sacrifice. To deploy moral imagination is to bring into view the fates of distant fellow-citizens as they are likely to be affected by our actions. And “the more unlikely or remote the path of sympathy,” Bromwich writes, “the surer the proof of moral imagination.”

The big question, of course, is how such reservoirs of moral imagination might be drawn on to overcome the profound tribalism that has come to paralyze most Western democracies today. How do we more lastingly move beyond the impasses we have reached on a host of ethical issues at the heart of our highly politicized culture wars?

Those impasses, as I argue in my new book, *Vexed: Ethics beyond Political Tribes*, result in large measure from the ways in which moral positions have been bundled up into “package deals” that in turn are adopted by citizens according to their chosen positions on the political spectrum. Political identification shapes every moral stand one takes on the most fundamental and personal questions. So if I care deeply about the environment and embrace affirmative action, I will likely approve the legalization and the commercialization of “recreational” drugs. Or if I’m pro-life and bemoan the rise of identity politics, I can be expected to support greater sanctions on welfare for the unemployed.

Instead of allowing our political allegiances to shape our moral reasoning in this way, why not draw on what we are now learning about our newly discovered—or rekindled—moral imaginations? What might that lead to?

Consider, for example, the vexed issue of gun control. Conservatives often seek recourse to a “way of life,” asking why law-abiding Americans should have their freedom curtailed because of what happens in cities they’ll never visit or in states that might as well be different countries? As the chief executive of the National Shooting Sports Federation put it so clearly:

If you are in a city environment, where all you see are the anti-personal uses of firearms, you think guns are anti-personal; if you grow up in rural areas where guns are accepted, are part of life, used for recreation... you see that there is nothing wrong [with owning them].

His assumption is that one’s immediate situation determines the horizon of one’s concern. If you live in the city, you will identify with one group; if you live in the country, with another.

What we are learning at present, however, is to extend the borders of our identifications. We are learning again what it means to belong to one another as fellow-citizens, and that only by collective action can we defeat what might be most threatening to many of those citizens, even if not to all of them. If we can preserve that kind of moral imagination, perhaps it will be possible for those who inhabit rural regions to understand how a more responsible exercise of the right to bear arms is bound up with the fates of children caught in the lethal crossfires of initiation that plague so many of our inner cities.

Equally, there are issues on which the greater deployment of moral imagination would challenge progressives.

Consider assisted suicide. In a fine expression of moral imagination, the late John Arras, who was a professor of philosophy at the University of Virginia and a member of President Obama’s Council on Bioethics, identified one of the key factors complicating the debate on this troublesome issue:

These victims of the current policy [prohibiting assisted dying] are easy to identify: They are on the news, the talk shows, the documentaries [...] The victims of legalization, by contrast, will be largely hidden from view.

Arras went on to give examples of those invisible potential victims: the clinically depressed eighty-year old man who could have lived another year if he’d been adequately treated; the fifty-year-old woman who requests death because doctors in her insurance scheme won’t treat her mysterious and excruciating pelvic pain. Bringing those potential cases into view, Arras concluded, militates against legalizing assisted suicide.

It is a tragic fact that the most marginalized older people often voice fears of becoming a burden to the state, to society, or even to their families. Therefore, any robust account of how power is dispersed and coercion subtly insinuated will be alert to the way those who are already prone to see their lives as burdens will be pressured to end their lives prematurely if assisted suicide is introduced as the default option in this country.

I mention only two issues here. But applying moral imagination to many others—sexual consumerism, environmental degradation, a criminal justice system in which a person never escapes his criminal record, an economy that immiserates so many workers—holds the key to defeating the tribalistic, package-deal thinking that now aggravates so many of our social and political divisions. An awakening of this imagination may be one of the few positive things to come out of the tragedy we are now living through.



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