

Volume 9 Issue 3-4  
**09-12/2011**  
tamarajournal.com



## The Art of 'Perceiving Correctly': What Artists Can Teach Us About Moral Perception

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### Keywords

*Aesthetics*  
*Artistic practice*  
*Business ethics*  
*Ethical practice*  
*Moral imagination*  
*Moral judgement*  
*Moral perception*

### Abstract

'Moral perception' has long been identified as a key pre-requisite for ethical behaviour (Dewey 1974; Aristotle, 1976; MacIntyre, 1985). In order to respond ethically to a given situation, one must first recognise its ethical component. However, the question of how moral perception is developed is more difficult to address. Perceiving 'accurately' is itself recognised as being fraught with difficulties, ranging from the impact of motivation, expectations, mental schemas as well as mood and physical comfort. This paper turns to the habits of visual artists and musicians who each in their own ways must cultivate the ability to 'see the world afresh' in order to produce art of quality, either through visual artefacts or fleeting performances. The paper highlights how practices of 'staying with the senses', 'engaged detachment' and 'imaginative free play' can enhance our capacity to recognise the moral component of everyday situations encountered and thus increase the possibility of responding to them in ethically astute ways.

*She walks onto the stage clothed as I've never seen her before. Rather than formal concert dress, she wears a blue peasant's skirt and a white sleeveless t-shirt. A plate-sized golden medallion cinches a wide smile of leather at her waist. She is Viktoria Mullova, acclaimed Russian violinist, and she is joined in this concert by cellist Steven Barley and a trio of jazz players: Julian Joseph on piano and percussionists Paul Clarvis and Sam Wolton. The setting is medieval – the baronic Hall of the Dartington Estate nestled in a quiet Devonshire valley in the Southwest of England.*

*The concert is a panoply of musical genres and energies – jazz, contemporary classical, folk. In a stunning display of attention and imagination Mullova and Barley play Bartok's 'Seven Duos for Violin and Cello', and after each piece, one of the other musicians improvises on what he has just heard. Each miniature provides a new way of hearing the previously played music, so that nuances of tone and harmonic structure became apparent in fresh ways.*

*As I listen and watch, I am struck not just by the virtuosity and power of the playing, but by the way in which the musicians engage with one another. There is a palpable quality of attention working between them. They watch each other intently even as they perform their own solo licks. I notice how the*

*drummer constantly makes small adjustments in tempo and volume as he picks up tiny nuances from the others. Each musician seems able to attend simultaneously to his or her own musical idea, to one another's, and to the possibilities of the 'whole' they are creating together. It is this sense of immediacy and potential for surprise that brings me to the edge of my seat as I listen to their performance.*

This paper explores the possibility that artists can make a powerful contribution to the way in which we develop the ability to engage ethically with others and the world around us. It is grounded in the assertion that the ability to act ethically is dependent on our ability to perceive ourselves in relation to others 'correctly' (Aristotle, 1976). In the illustration above, the ability of each musician to express his or her own agency while being attentive to others' was crucial in creating the vitality and quality of their performance. Such relational excellence is grounded not in formal codes of practice or rules of engagement, but in living each moment with a particular perceptual orientation. It is this perceptual orientation, I am suggesting, which could inform not only great musical performances, but also sound ethical relations with others. In other words, we need to 'see' others 'correctly' before we can notice their claim to moral consideration and the implications of that for how we act in relation to them.

How might such an orientation be fostered? This paper speculates about the extent to which the habits practiced by artists and musicians to develop perceptual acuity might be transferable to others aspiring to develop their relational excellence. Of particular interest is how these ideas might be applied to organizational contexts and the managers and leaders working within them who aspire to take up their roles ethically in often stressful and morally ambivalent situations.

Before proceeding, it is important to position this paper in relation to others dealing with how ethical behaviour might be fostered within organizational contexts. Rather than addressing ways in which deliberate ethical malfeasance within organizations might be halted, here practices are offered which may assist those aspiring to perform their organizational roles with mindfulness and care. In drawing from arts-based practices for inspiration in this venture, it joins others such as Adler (2006), Collier (2006) and Waddock (2009) in exploring ways in which ideas from aesthetics and the practices artists use to develop their crafts might be applied to the development of moral capabilities.

Two further assumptions underpin the argument. The first is that the ability to respond ethically to the myriad of situations human beings face at the beginning of the twenty-first century requires skills born of conscious awareness and deliberate attention. That is, the ability to act ethically must be worked on – it does not just happen as a result of the intention 'to be a good person'. The second assumption is that the skills and capabilities required can be consciously practiced and learned. Much as a cellist must painstakingly practice scales and her bowing technique in order to develop the fluency required to give a recital, those wishing to become masters of ethical awareness can practice techniques which will enable them to identify previously overlooked moral aspects of situations.

This paper begins by placing these ideas within the wider literature concerning moral perception, paying particular attention to what has been written about moral imagination. This review draws from both broad-based philosophical and more specific business ethics literatures. Three practices which foster the ability of artists to 'see the world afresh' in order to create arresting works of art or performances are introduced. A case study of a situation faced by an academic colleague is introduced to bring these ideas alive and test their applicability to an actual organizational event. The paper concludes by suggesting that these practices can work together to foster the most important perceptual orientation of all; the willingness to frame mundane situations and every-day encounters as potent spaces for practicing moral perception.

## **WHAT IS MORAL PERCEPTION?**

Philosophers have long recognised the requirement of noticing the existence of an ethical component within a given situation before moral<sup>1</sup> judgement can come into play (Dewey, 1974; Aristotle, 1976; MacIntyre, 1985). Aristotle was among the first in his *Nichomechan Ethics* to highlight the role of perception in the exercise of virtue. According to him, ethical behaviour relies on the ability to 'perceive rightly', that is, to take proper account of the ethically salient features of a situation' (NEIII 5 1114a 32-b3). More contemporary proponents of the virtue ethics approach, such as the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1985) concur with the importance of moral perception in both recognising that a situation has a moral component, and identifying which option for subsequent behaviour is the most ethically sound. Taking MacIntyre's work as a starting point for his own thinking, the moral philosopher Lawrence Blum theorises extensively about moral perception (1991; 1994). For Blum, perception is 'anything contributing to or encompassed within the agent's 'take' on the situation – his salience perception – prior to deliberating about what to do' (1991: 707). Blum identifies three aspects of moral perception:

- Recognising the moral component, that is, simply recognising a moral problem exists in the present;
- Fully grasping what the moral component means to the parties affected (this often requires the engagement of sympathy);

- Recognising the moral difficulties that could arise from a situation; that is being able to infer possible future ethical issues which could arise from a set of circumstances or as a consequence of a decision.

What is interesting about Blum's categories is they include attention both to aspects of situations which are present, but perhaps unseen, and to aspects of situations which are not present, but could emerge. The requirement for both kinds of perceptual attention will be developed further later in this paper but is worth highlighting at this stage.

Within the field of business ethics Rest and his colleagues (Rest, 1986; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau and Thoma, 1999) have identified different 'stages' of the process by which ethical behaviour results: moral sensitivity, moral judgement, moral intention and moral behaviour. Following from Rest's work, a number of business ethics scholars have pursued the idea of moral sensitivity more closely, aligning it to notions of moral perception and moral imagination (Werhane, 1998; 2002; Butterfield, Trevino, & Weaver, 2000; Moberg and Seabright, 2000). Although each of these authors clearly makes the case for the importance of moral awareness, little work has been done to address the question of how this capacity might be fostered, especially within the context of busy, often time-pressured organizational realities.

This is an important question to answer, not least of which because lack of moral awareness is often seen to be the reason that people fall into 'unwitting' ethical behaviour (Bazerman and Banaji, 2004). The Special Issue of the *Social Justice Research Journal* which they edited in 2004 explicitly sets out to articulate what is known about 'ordinary ethical failures'; those caused not by people intentionally doing wrong, but through any number of social-psychological factors which inhibit well meaning people's ability to recognise and act in accordance with the ethical aspect of situations. Although the articles presented in that volume tease out many of the factors which contribute to unwitting unethical behaviour, there is little to help those who would wish to navigate these territories more successfully.

Others within the field of business ethics also note the role moral perception plays in a manager's ability to act ethically (Jones, 1991; Butterfield, Trevino, & Weaver 2000; Chikudate, 2002; May and Pauli, 2002; Dasgupta, 2004; Moore and Loewenstein, 2004). These authors cite a range of factors which contribute to the difficulties those in organizations can have in 'perceiving correctly'. For instance, Moore and Loewenstein (2004) consider the role self-interest plays in colouring the way in which a situation is read, suggesting that for human beings, self interest is 'automatic, viscerally compelling, and typically unconscious' (190-191). Dasgupta (2004) writes about the way in which 'in-group favouritism' can colour the way in which actions are interpreted, often leading people to discount the impact of their actions on out-group members in quite unconscious ways. Both of these malfunctions of perception can be attributed to the role 'schemas' play in how we select and interpret perceptual cues.

Werhane (2002) in particular attends to the role schemas play in influencing what is perceived within organizations. Starting with the example of ongoing wrong-doing within the USA-based General Electric Company (GE), she considers how organizational schemas operate to reconfigure ideas about what might be morally acceptable. Rather than attending to the inherent unfairness of insider trading for instance, she cites how schemas operating within GE encouraged its members to focus on being 'opportunistic' and 'clever'. Moberg and Seabright (2000) point out how frequently managers rely on schemas rather than evidence in making decisions, where 'script processing' takes precedence over staying with details of what is happening. They emphasise the importance of 'paying attention to the available information instead of relying totally on schematic interpretation' (849).

In considering these business ethicists' writings and those of Blum, it is apparent that in order to exercise moral awareness individuals must actively expand their habitual patterns of perception. Identifying those affected by one's actions who might otherwise easily be overlooked is critical, as well as being able to empathise with how those others might respond to a given situation. Furthermore, in order to anticipate how one's actions and decisions might affect those not currently present, the ability to imagine into the future is required. This is the work of the moral imagination.

## **Moral Imagination**

Whereas 'imagination' is sometimes thought to be too irrational to be of aid to ethical deliberation, pragmatist philosophy in particular treats imagination as a key element of the ability to respond ethically to situations. In fact, Adam Smith – a writer not usually renown for writing in favour of 'irrational' approaches, brings to the fore the importance of imagination in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759/1976). The American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey follows Smith in foregrounding the role of imagination within ethical deliberation as a key enabler of empathy. As such, it enables the capacity to 'go beyond ourselves and our concerns and imagine ourselves as the other so that we come to understand and sympathise with their aspirations, interests, and worries' (Dewey, 1974, p. 313). Broader than just empathy, moral imagination enables us to 'imaginatively discern various possibilities for acting within a given situation and to envision the potential help or harm that are likely to result from a given action' (Johnson, 1993, p. 02).

Colloquially, the moral imagination enables us to ‘put ourselves in someone else’s shoes’ and through that process to gain insight into the feelings, reactions and emotions that might accompany a given action on our part. In enabling us to have such insight, it is an essential element of being able to make moral decisions and enact them.

Business ethics scholars such as Dennis Moberg, Mark Seabright and Patricia Werhane have noted the critical role moral imagination plays in the ability for managers and organizational leaders to act ethically. For instance, Werhane (2002) writes that ‘moral imagination is by and large an affective facilitating process that influences but is not identical to ‘reasoning’. Werhane further argues that moral imagination enables one to ‘disengage from a particular process, evaluate it and the mindsets which it incorporates, and think more creatively within the constraints of what is morally possible’ (34). In her writing, Werhane often alludes to the importance of ‘creativity’ in this process – without being explicit about how such creativity comes about. Along with others, she does not address how those working within stressful organizational contexts might realistically make time to do this creative work.

The skills of both really seeing what *is* there, while also seeing what is *not* there which are so essential to exercising moral imagination and moral perception are core to artistic processes as demonstrated by Viktoria Mullova and her fellow musicians in the illustration which opened this paper. Excellence within artistic endeavours largely depends on the ability to make these capacities habitual ways of being in the world. Really seeing what *is* there, and imagining what *could* be there, need to become ‘second nature’ to artists who want to continue to create arresting art. I am suggesting that the practices cultivated by artists to develop these capacities could similarly be practiced by managers and organizational leaders. Like artists, they could learn to habitually draw from these perceptual capacities, rather than experiencing them as time-consuming ‘add-ons’.

In this way I am offering a way in which the arts could inform ethical enactment which is different from that suggested by Sandelands and Buckner (1989) and Moberg and Seabright (2000). These authors propose that literature, film, theatre, and visual art – that is, actual artistic outputs -- can be useful in helping individuals develop moral imagination. Instead, here the case is made that artistic practices themselves can provide a powerful means of creating ‘habits of perception’ which become second nature to the way an individual engages with their world. The following section explores how artists learn and develop the capacities to ‘really see’, both what *is*, and what *isn’t* present, and how these practices might be applied to the development of moral perception.

## ARTISTS’ PRACTICES OF PERCEPTION

The ideas offered here have been developed through engaging with a variety of different sources including artists’ written accounts of their perceptual habits, scholars’ writing about artistic processes, as well as conversations with practicing artists. Through this exploratory work, three recurring practices emerge which seem to have particular relevance to the question of how moral awareness might be developed. These are: ‘staying with the senses’, ‘engaged detachment’ and ‘imaginative free play’.

### Perceiving like an artist: Staying with the Senses

*We don’t draw well because we don’t learn to see – learn how to draw, you will learn how to see*  
(Franck, 1973, p. 34).

Perceiving accurately is fraught with difficulties. Writing about managers’ ability to perceive their organizations ‘correctly’, Meziar and Starbuck (2003) note how factors such as the subject matter being perceived, individual differences, experience, context, organizational and societal proclivities – even physiology – impact on individuals’ ability to do so. One of the most habitual ways in which human beings perceive incorrectly is through moving too quickly from the actual sense-data offered by a situation, to interpreting and labelling what that sense data ‘means’. ‘Really seeing’ involves forgetting the labels so quickly applied to sense data and lingering with the sense data itself. As Weschler notes, ‘to see is to forget the name of the thing one sees’ (Weschler, 1982: 95). That is, rather than jumping immediately to the conclusion, ‘that is my friend John’, when I notice a man walking down the street of similar build and comportment as my acquaintance, I pause and take in more data. Is the person dressed similarly to the way John dresses? Does this person move the same way John does? Staying with my sense perceptions provides much more accurate perceptual data and enables me to avoid the embarrassment of enthusiastically greeting someone I don’t know.

Springborg (2010) introduces a distinction between ‘sense-making’ and ‘description-making’ which is helpful in elaborating this capacity. ‘Description making’ involves a conceptual process through which ‘yesterday’s sense-making’ is used to interpret and respond to situations. Suppose that yesterday my boss walked into the office with a grim look on his face, and later in the day twenty people in the firm were fired. Today, when he enters the office with a grim look on his face, I might immediately interpret his look as indicative of further layoffs. I fail to notice that in addition to looking grim, he has developed a limp because of a fall he suffered the evening before. By carefully seeing him today rather than relying on ‘yesterday’s sense-making’ I might be able to interpret his grimace in the light of new, additional sensory data.

Springborg (2010) argues that art is 'an arrangement of conditions intended to make us perceive some part of the world more directly to our senses, and less through our concepts and ideas about the world' (244). In order to create art which does this, artists themselves must 'stay with their senses'. What are the practices which cultivate the capacity to do so?

### Practicing staying with the senses

One of the most popular teachers of amateur visual artists' is Betty Edwards. Her book, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* (2001) provides a range of techniques which those hoping to improve their drawing ability can practice. Many of them aim to increase perceptual acuity by really seeing what is present, rather than one's 'story' of what is seen. A common difficulty in drawing portraits, for instance, is that in observing a face, features such as the nose or eyes are readily identified. It is very easy to jump to a concept about what a 'nose' looks like and draw that idea rather than staying with the actual sensory data of the actual bumps, colouration and contours of *this* nose. One of the practices Edwards recommends is to turn any picture one wants to copy upside down and draw it from this perspective. In upturning a face, a 'nose' is no longer recognised as a 'nose', but as a collection of contoured relationships. It is much easier to pay attention to this unrecognisable form and 'see' it clearly to copy it accurately.

A second aspect of drawing accurately is attending to the spaces 'between' obvious objects, as much as to the objects themselves. Students of Edwards' technique are encouraged to draw the 'invisible spaces', rather than the objects, and to attend to nuances of light and shade which contribute to the materiality of that which is in central focus. This attention to the way light – a seemingly immaterial quality – forms that which we see and how we see it has long been the focus of visual artists. One need only look at the multiple images of water lilies depicted by Monet in the later years of his life to understand how light alters what is seen. Paradoxically, sometimes an 'unreal' rendition of an object can provide a more 'truthful' experience of it. For instance, writing of van Gogh's *Portrait of Patience Escalier* (1889) Johnson suggests:

(it) could violate accepted rules for the realistic use of color by painting eyes with red irises and beard and hair of a bluish green cast, yet what he gives us rings true to our experience, reshapes it, and reveals hitherto hidden dimensions not captured by our received aesthetic canons. In painting after painting he undermines any canonical presentation of color (e.g. the green faces of his self-portraits, the blue tree trunks in an olive grove) only to create an intensity of color that holds us captive and convinces us utterly of the rightness of what he has seen and done – not according to any set of rules for making art, but according to the flexible logic of our imaginative understanding of things. (1993, p. 213).

In other words, by seeing deeply into the way in which light creates what is seen and staying with that rather than collapsing into set ideas of what a face looks like, van Gogh reveals a truth about *Patience Escalier* that might otherwise have been overlooked.

The practice of attending deeply to relationships and subtleties which are not available through our habitual ways of noticing is also used by musicians wanting to perfect their ability to hear nuances of compositions. In his autobiographical account of learning to play the piano, T.E. Carhart writes about lessons with his teacher, Anna. The foundation of his practice became understanding the underlying chord progressions upon which any composition is built. He writes:

Much of her time was spent developing my ear, which she said was particularly sensitive. She would have me sing the melody voicings as I played harmony and vice versa, and even in the simple pieces she continually exhorted me to hear subtle harmonies and dissonances....From my very first lessons with Anna I experienced a satisfaction and a kind of pleasure that I had not expected. Even the simplest figuration in those first pieces – a change of key, an unexpected chord – could fill me with joy as I grasped with my ear and my mind what was intended, however straightforward.(2000 , p. 103).

Carhart's experience here speaks to the way in which an understanding of the underlying structure of a piece of music enabled him to 'hear' it properly. In both the practices suggested by Edwards and those offered to Carhart by his teacher, the student is encouraged to carefully attend to what is 'there' but potentially overlooked. In Edward's case this is achieved by 'upsetting' students' habitual ways of seeing, and in Carhart's case by attending to the underlying structure and the way in which it informs what is heard. The ways in which these practices might be transferred into the organizational realm will be explored later. For now, let us consider the second capacity artists develop in order to create excellent work, that of 'engaged detachment'.

## Perceiving like an artist: Engaged Detachment

In particular, one had to practice a form of alert detachment in order to give expression to one's art. 'Stop thinking about relaxation!' cried the master to the student. 'It's only because you're not really detached that you feel tension. And yet everything is so simple!'(T.E. Carhart, 2000, p. 105).

Being able to take a detached standpoint from one's work is a critical aspect of being able to perceive accurately. Artists especially need to be able to judge the extent to which their performances or creations approach the standard to which they are striving. In order to do this, they need to be able to step back and appraise their work with a dispassionate, but interested gaze.

One of the most helpful treatises about the role of this kind of engaged detachment in aesthetic judgement is offered by the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790/2005). Kant stresses that in order to judge whether or not something is beautiful, the onlooker must be able to approach that which is being assessed through a 'disinterested' gaze. The term 'disinterest' here is not meant in its colloquial sense, suggesting that aesthetic judgement is not 'concerned' or 'engaged'. Instead, 'disinterest' means that in aesthetic judgement – and particularly aesthetic judgements of the beautiful – one is concerned not with how that which one is observing relates to the self, but rather with that which is being observed on its own merits.

Kant's idea about 'disinterest' is related to his notion of 'lack of purposiveness'. 'Purposiveness' relates to a thing's 'utility'. According to Kant, a thing's 'aesthetic', particularly in terms of its quality of 'beauty' should be judged separately from its usefulness. This emphasis on disinterest suggests a clear distinction between that which brings us 'pleasure', and that which is 'beautiful'. Something is considered to be 'beautiful' because it stands on its own merits as a thing of beauty, rather than because of its relation to the observer in terms of the pleasure it brings. For instance, I might enjoy great pleasure from eating chocolate fudge brownies, but that does not mean that chocolate fudge brownies are beautiful. In making aesthetic judgements, the observer must stand back and observe that which is being perceived without reference to how it might be of use to the self. Similarly, 'engaged detachment' is vital to those aspiring to perceive the ethical components of situations. In order to recognise the impact of an action on others, it is critical to be able to detach from the way in which the self might be affected. How do artists foster this capacity?

## Practices of detachment

Visual artists and musicians are often reminded of the importance of disinterest when judging their own work. In his book, *Beyond the Music Lesson* (2003) the musician (cellist, conductor and composer) Riki Gerardy extols the importance of detachment in developing the judgement required in order to critique and improve one's playing. 'The way forward,' he writes, 'is to become a bit more detached, so as to see things clearly. Not impersonal – just enough to allow understanding and control, to prepare the way for more complete involvement. Then it is possible to rediscover missing qualities' (3). Of note here is the balance required between standing back and still maintaining interest.

Gerardy (2003) is very clear about the kinds of habits which foster creative detachment. Firstly, he suggests, one should always put space between themselves and their playing. Whenever possible, musicians should listen to recordings of their playing a little while after the performance has taken place. When listening, performers should always do so as a critical member of the audience. It is essential to always put oneself in the shoes of the audience – how will the person at the very back of a crowded auditorium hear what has been played? What about the person in the front seat?

A key practice advocated by the visual artist and writer Alan Bleakley is the development of an identity as a 'connoisseur' (2003). In a consulting project which involved visual artists working with doctors to help them increase their aptitude at diagnosing diseases, Bleakley found that encouraging doctors to think of themselves as 'connoisseurs of perception' enabled them to develop detachment from their habitual ways of seeing. Rather than being overly attached to 'being right' about the way in which they were diagnosing illnesses, this identity encouraged them to take a broader, more eclectic view. One of the outcomes of this expansion of attention was that they began to seek out alternative interpretations of what they were seeing, rather than relying on their first insights.

Both 'staying with the senses' and 'engaged detachment' are underpinned by a third critical capacity, one recognised in literatures concerning both artistic and ethical excellence; that of 'imaginative free play'.

## Perceiving like an artist: Imaginative Free Play

In order to utilise 'staying with the senses' and 'engaged detachment' in ways that lead to creating excellent art, musicians and visual artists must allow their imaginations to play. Sensory perception can only lead to new ways of perceiving if the imagination is encouraged to fly towards new interpretations and possibilities for that which is sensed. Johnson (1993) writes extensively on the ways in which artistic imaginative processes could inform the moral imagination. In particular he notes how

creativity is central to both – and how within creative processes established 'rules' are often broken in order to illuminate other aspects of an experience which can paradoxically enable us to see it more 'truly'.

As previously illustrated, van Gogh's *Portrait of Patience Escalier* revealed something more 'essential' about the sitter than a seemingly more truthful rendition. However, being able to perceive that truth relies on our ability to imagine what van Gogh is representing with his use of bold colours and lines of paint. In fact, any artistic representation relies on the imaginative capacity of an audience to see – to 'make' something of what the artist has portrayed. Similarly, perceiving the link between the surface layer of a composition's rendering and its underlying harmonic structure requires the imagination to weave the two together.

Being able to engage the imagination also requires detachment – the person imagining must be able to let go of assumptions about how something 'should be' in order to perceive something different. The world-wide financial market crash of 2008 provides a clear example of how the inability to 'detach' from what one wants to see in order to imagine the potential impact of actions on others can have far-reaching, moral consequences. Noting the collective lack of perception in recognising the systemic nature of the situation, Lord Turner, head of the UK's Financial Services Authority said:

With hindsight, the FSA, like other authorities throughout the world, was focused too much on individual institutions, and the processes and procedures within them, and not adequately focused on the totality of the systemic risks across the whole system, and whether there were entire business models, entire ways of operating, that were risky (Lord Turner, 2009).

Turner's statement highlights the critical role of imaginative free play in identifying possible outcomes which could result from interactions which are not readily apparent. Similar reflections could be made about the lack of imagination on the part of those responsible for BP's oil spill in Louisiana. With a bit of imagination, such disasters could have been recognised as being possible, if not probable.

### **Practicing imaginative free play**

In her book, *Learning How Not to Paint* (1965) the visual artist Teah Lealand describes a process of learning to draw which is different but complementary to that advocated by Betty Edwards. Her method seems clearly indicative of utilising 'free play of the imagination', in that it is largely improvisational. Using her technique the painter just begins to make lines and shapes on the paper, and while doing so, attends to both the inner impulse of 'what to do next' as well as the emerging image being created. She suggests that the job of the artist is to be sensitive to the dialogue which occurs between the artist's impulse and that which 'wants to emerge'. Imaginative free play is at the heart of this process, involving 'in the moment' experimentation as well as on-going responses to the question, 'what if?'

This kind of imaginative free play is nowhere more apparent than within the realm of jazz improvisation. The jazz pianist and Organization Studies scholar Frank Barrett has written extensively about the practices jazz musicians hone in order to cultivate imaginative fluency (1998; 2001). That of 'continually negotiating and dialoguing towards dynamic synchronization' (Barrett 2001, p. 154) is perhaps most apt to the argument here. This involves developing a keen sensitivity to the unexpected and emergent ways in which fellow musicians alter set chord or rhythmic patterns. Improvisational jazz musicians must be nimble at responding to emerging musical sound-worlds without being overly attached to their own ideas of where the music might go. This ability requires both an extremely sensitive awareness of the present moment, while simultaneously being open to the possibilities imaginative engagement enables. This quality of awareness was apparent in the Dartington concert described at the beginning of this article. Entering into dialogue between the sensory fullness of the present moment and possible 'lines of flight' to which it might extend is at the heart of imaginative free play. Such a capability could also inform moral awareness by fostering the acuity required to attend both to a given situation's nuances and undercurrents as well as to its nascent possibilities.

### **CULTIVATING ARTISTIC PERCEPTION WITH ORGANIZATIONS**

In order to explore the implications of these ideas for those working within organizations, I will draw from an account offered to me by a fellow academic. 'Jordon' (a pseudonym) agreed to keep a journal of 'ethical dilemmas' he encountered in his role as Director of a Masters Level degree programme as part of a small co-operative inquiry group I established to conduct exploratory work into this area. Here his edited account is presented, along with parts of a reflective conversation we had together to analyse the situation.

*I had just returned to the University from a week's holiday. Within five minutes of entering my office, the Programme Manager for the Masters Programme for which I am Academic Director knocked on my door. He seemed to be in a state of agitation. Two of the students on the programme had failed a resit of an exam which they had taken while I was away. According to the University regulations for this course,*

*registration for students who failed retaken exams had to be terminated. It was up to me to contact the students and to tell them the news and to begin the termination procedure.*

*In retrospect I am amazed that at this point I hardly asked any questions. One of the students had only failed the resit by 3%, but I never questioned the rules governing the decision. As suggested by the Programme Manager, I contacted the students and arranged meetings that day with each of them in which I conveyed the news. They were both shocked and at one point I became aware that I had no idea about their stability and the impact this news would have on them. However, the wheels were clearly in motion and I dismissed these concerns.*

*That night I mulled over what was happening. I thought that there must be a better way of handling the situation, however, I never really pursued these questions with anyone else, but instead kept moving forward with the 'rules' of the University. Although I did have one-to-one discussions with the students' supervisors and other University officials, interestingly we never gathered together to consider these cases. I proceeded to prepare a case in support of the terminations. The University required that the terminations be ratified within a meeting of Faculty Board. It became clear that it would be very difficult to convene a meeting with a quorum of Board members present.*

*At this point a colleague somewhat removed from the situation suggested there was another way forward. The students could be allowed to continue on the programme and their marks discussed at the upcoming Examiners' Meeting. That body could indeed decide to condone the failures. We decided to proceed in this way. However, by this point both students had decided to withdraw from the Programme.*

The analysis of this case focuses the extent to which moral awareness was invoked rather than whether the outcome was ethically 'right' or 'wrong'. Let us first consider the extent to which Jordan 'stayed with his senses' in order to perceive the situation correctly. According to his account, Jordan seemed not to acknowledge his sense-making of the situation at all. He reports to have move directly to action, rather than in any way interrogating what he was perceiving. He noted this himself in our further discussion of the incident:

*Once I was told what needed to happen, I started moving in that direction without really questioning the impact of this action on the two students or other students on the course. I actually consider myself to be someone who is both morally aware but I never questioned whether or not this situation had a moral component.*

In other words, it seems that Jordan barely paid attention to his sense-making in this situation at all—whether he was falling into the trap of 'yesterday's sense-making' or actually attending to his present set of awarenesses. When asked why he believed this happened, Jordon responded:

*It is interesting to me that this occurred so soon after my return from holiday. I can remember walking up the stairs to my office worrying about all of the email that would be waiting for me. This instance became another thing to 'clear', so that instead of stepping back and taking more time to really see what was happening, I sprang into action, in an effort to 'close it down' as soon as possible.*

This response suggests two factors at work; firstly, Jordon was bringing a pre-set agenda into the day; i.e. to 'clear the email' and get things done as quickly as possible. Rather than really seeing this situation 'for itself', he immediately responded to it as a 'task' to be cleared. He failed 'to stay with' the particular characters involved, to consider their performance in a wider context. He also failed to see any other responsibility he might have to these students other than to fulfil the requirements of the larger system.

Neither did Jordan apply the second of the two practices offered here, 'engaged detachment'. Jordan acted promptly, without stepping back to gain a different perspective on its many aspects. It can also be seen how the two, using 'yesterday's sense-making', and not giving himself time to 'detach' from this preset perspective – exacerbated each other. The more this issue was seen as another thing on his list to 'clear', the less likely it would be for him to take time to engage with it from a different perspective.

Some reading this account might at this point be raising their hands in protest – 'but he was only following the University's Regulations – why is this even a case to which Jordan should have brought moral awareness?' Scholars such as Tenbrunsel and



Messick (1999; 2004) have examined the ways in which sanctioning systems within organizations can hinder organizational members from doing the work involved with being morally aware. Such systems can act as 'schemas' through which individuals view their responsibilities and decisions and thus discourage them from attending to the deeper moral aspects of situations. Certainly, with hindsight Jordan believed he should have at least tested the rigidity of the regulations before acting to uphold them. In our conversation he remarked:

*Usually I am of the view that 'rules are there to be broken' – but this time I acquiesced to what my perception of the rules were...I never explored 'why' the rules were in place, or anything about their historic legacy.*

In other words, Jordan did not try to discover either the underlying patterns informing the regulatory system, or the underlying patterns relating to the poor exam performance on the part of his students. He made no attempt to see the situation differently, but instead took 'the facts as presented' at face value.

Without taking time to detach himself from the situation and consider it from a different perspective, there was never going to be the opportunity to engage in 'free play' of the imagination. In fact, this case shows the inter-relations and dependency of these three perceptual skills. Without taking time out to see a situation differently, no space is afforded to extend one's imagination into it. In this case, Jordan didn't spend any time putting himself into the shoes of the students; wondering what might be going on for them. He failed to appreciate the way in which their cultural backgrounds would prohibit them from telling him important information about why their performance slipped. (Weeks after the event, Jordan learned that over the period of the examinations the mother of one of the students had been seriously ill and in hospital. Although he had asked at the time about the presence of any 'extenuating circumstances', the student had been reluctant to share this information as it was not seen as appropriate to do so from his cultural background.)

Exacerbating this lack of imaginal play was the fact that he acted largely on his own, without gathering those colleagues together who might have brought additional insight to the situation. In the language of this article, he and his colleagues never 'jammed' together in an improvisatory way to play with different interpretations of the situations, or imagine together different options for moving forward. Talking a situation over with others can be critical in providing new ways of interpreting what is happening. By labelling this incident as a task to complete (even at an unconscious level) Jordan limited the possibility that he would spend the time required to gather colleagues together to 'play' at developing a different understanding of it. When time is at a premium creating the space to engage in imaginative free play can seem like an indulgence, rather than a moral necessity.

Finally, the case also shows the interplay between moral awareness and engaging moral consideration. Because Jordan did not perceive the situation as one in which there was a moral component, he consequently failed to consider his relational duty towards the students as individuals worthy of deeper moral consideration. In particular, he failed to reflect on questions concerning his duty of care to these students and to consider ways in which his role might have extended beyond 'maintainer of the Academy's rules', to 'advisor' or even 'friend'.

## **APPLYING ARTISTIC PRACTICES IN EVERY DAY SITUATIONS**

Let us return to the concert with which this paper began. There we saw five musicians engaged in a performance which I experienced as embodying a high degree of perceptual acuity. They were attentive both to their individual parts and to the playing of others – and to the whole they were simultaneously creating. Their 'in the moment' improvisations demonstrated they could engage imaginatively with one another even within the stressful environment of a concert performance. Each seemed able to work with detached engagement in the way in which they fluidly exchanged 'leading' roles; offering and letting go of musical ideas as new possibilities arose.

Something more seemed to be at work here as well. There was an intentional quality about the way they played as an ensemble. The way in which they watched one another, how they took cues from one another, the way in which they moved together – indicated that really 'seeing one another' was critical to their understanding of how they would create the performance together. In other words, from my perspective in the audience the musicians framed the event as one requiring a high degree of perceptual, as well as musical, engagement.

In contrast, Jordan never seemed to frame the situation with his students as one requiring a particular kind of perceptual orientation. Instead, dealing with their exam failures was seen as another task among many to which he had to attend on returning from holiday. As the story unfolded, Jordan never stopped to question this framing or to consider whether he should pursue a different way of relating to the two students involved. In her paper about how artists can inform the ethical practice of architecture, Collier (2006) asserts: 'Those of us who are not artists know that our artistic friends notice what we do not see, imagine in ways we had not thought of, and sense the deficiencies in our own approach to artworks, situations or experiences'

(315). Perhaps the difference Collier is noticing is not so much about non-artist's inability to notice or imagine – but of a lack of an orientation tilted towards such noticing and imagining. Once we begin to frame the quotidian, day to day ways in which we relate to one another as being situations for seeing, noticing and imagining, we may find we are as good as artists at perceiving in these ways.

This speaks of a particular kind of intentionality – not the general intentionality of ‘wanting to do good’, but an intention to actively look for and frame situations as having potential moral ramifications. Such perceptual orientation is critical if we are to heighten our moral sensitivity and through that enhanced awareness, to increase the likelihood of acting in ways aligned to our best ethical intent.

What the musicians showed us at the beginning of this article is that such attention is possible – and that the intention to attend in this way enables it to happen. However, such attentional excellence does not arise from happenstance. Many hours of background practice which will have enabled that quality of perception to be present in the moment of the concert. Similarly, the practices of ‘staying with the senses’, ‘detached engagement’ and ‘free play of the imagination’ can be practiced by managers in ‘off-line’ contexts in order to bring them to bear more fluidly within the every day performance of their roles.

Finally, perhaps the most important insight managers and organizational leaders can learn from artists about developing perceptual acuity is the importance of framing situations as ones worthy of such attention. Just as artists challenge us to see the world differently through their own intention to consider the familiar, the quotidian, in new ways; so managers and organizational leaders might develop the capacity to view the many tasks and requirements of their roles as rich spaces for the enactment of moral perception.

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<sup>i</sup> Within this paper the terms 'ethics/ethical' will be used interchangeably with 'moral'.