

Inculcating virtues (1): Example

- I. Introduction: Last time we talked about how the acts of the virtues are free acts. While the virtue gives a person a steady inclination to act in a good way (e.g., to eat the right amount), the act itself is a *free act* and has to be *chosen*. Chosen acts, we said, are done *deliberately*, that is, a person has to *think* about what he is doing. So the inculcation of a virtue is not just a matter of repeating good acts (it does require that), but also calls for a certain formation of the person's *reason or mind*.
- II. The Moral Imagination
 - A. What it is
 1. Definition: the store of possible actions that a person has in his mind/imagination along with the "classification" of those actions as good or bad (or indifferent).
 - a. When a person is faced with a situation that calls for action on his part, he will usually see the possible actions based on what he has stored up in his imagination. For example, one person, seeing a man walking alone at night, might not think about doing much of anything to him (maybe say "Good evening"). Another might see the possibility of mugging him.
 - b. These possibilities are seen as good or bad: one person sees that he could lie to avoid some difficulty, but also sees that it would be bad; another might see it as good (issues of justice).
 - c. Present day hyper-sexualized society, especially pornography, gives many young men ideas of how to act toward women (things that in other times only perverts would think of). Same thing with the gay stuff. One of the problems with sex-ed in schools: can actually put ideas into people's heads that they would be better off without.
 - d. Piety: in a more religious society, the idea of praying and doing acts of piety are much more in people's minds (Columbus's sailors in a storm vowing to make a pilgrimage to the Virgin if they returned safely. This would not occur to most modern sailors, or would be taken as laughable.)
 - e. Things that are no longer part of moral imagination: dueling; stoning people for bad actions; owning a slave.
 2. In forming one's sons, one has to think of their moral imagination: what sorts of actions do they conceive and which ones do they see as good and which ones as bad?
 3. Children need to be educated morally just as they need to be educated in other areas. Boys will ask, consciously or unconsciously: how does a man do this or that? How does a good man do this or that? What is the right

way to do this or that? (from table manners to handling money to lying to dealing with women).

B. How the moral imagination comes to be formed

1. *Example*: what they see others do and what they see others praise and blame.
2. *Literature*: actions that they see represented in books, movies, stories, etc. This is a kind of vicarious example: actions of person's are presented and usually presented as good or bad. E.g., Nathan Hale's famous statement, "I regret that I have but one life to lose for my country" seems to have come from a play, *Cato*, by Joseph Addison, commonly read by school-boys in which a very similar line appears. In other words, his moral imagination had been formed by this work of literature. We will talk about this more in coming months.
3. Explanation/direct teaching; e.g., the father of Ralph Moody in *Little Britches* explaining to him about how his character is like a house, and each time he acquires a vice like lying he is taking off one of the boards.

C. Need to consider what is in your son's moral imagination

1. How is it being formed? Who is forming it? The TV?
2. How much control do you have over its formation (usually less as he gets older)?

III. Example as a major source of the moral imagination

A. People naturally look to other people to know what is good and bad to do.

1. Most people don't have the creativity needed to come up with how to act in all situations; we learn by seeing others.
2. This is true of all ages, especially at a young age

B. People especially look to those they think are good; they spontaneously think that if a good person does it, it must be a good thing to do.

C. For young kids, this is a very important way of learning how to act.

1. They have little other source of learning (can't read).
2. They assume their parents are good and that how they act is how you should act.
3. Even if parents try to teach their kids what is good and bad directly, that teaching will be undermined by the bad example of the parents (the old "Do as I say, not as I do").

IV. Whose example is important?

A. Parents

1. First persons they see; they spontaneously take them to be good and what they do to be right.

2. As they get older, the parents will set the tone for how to live the virtues of temperance and fortitude (and justice and prudence as well).
 - a. The parents will transmit a sense for how one indulges his desires for food, drink, entertainment, etc.
 - b. So too with how you face difficulties (e.g., industriousness or laziness).
 - c. Generosity: giving money (e.g. tithing).
 3. In the area of *piety*, their example is extremely important; very important that sons and daughters see that their father prays; that he trusts in God's providence; that he respects the law of God, that he goes to confession, etc. In their moral imagination prayer, confession, etc. will be normal.
 4. Need to be aware that the example you set for them is always forming their moral imagination (for better or for worse).
- B. Other adults: teachers, grandparents, aunts and uncles, neighbors.
- C. Peers (or older kids)
1. A very important set of people.
 2. Many of the bad things kids learn they learn from other (older) kids (e.g., shoplifting).
 3. What's "cool" or "uncool" often depends on their peers. This is a formation of the moral imagination.
- D. Parents are still primary: they look to that example, even when they won't admit it.