

MORAL IMAGINATION, UNITY AND  
DIVERSITY

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Consider the following series of unrelated cartoons, events, anecdotes, and excerpts from newspaper columns and textbooks and magazines and the questions following each. [Note: As used here, the term “the other” refers to a category of people whose perspective is largely discounted or ignored by the dominant majority is a group or society.]

1. From a *Zits* Cartoon in which a teenage son speaking to his father:

“What do you mean I do not show an interest in other people? I like people!”

“Certain people.”

“Certain cool people.”

“Certain cool people around my age who think like me.”

“If that is not diversity I do not know what is!” (Scott & Borgman, 2004)

The humor comes from the teenager’s obvious misunderstanding of the meaning of the word ‘diversity’. But when I take away the last sentence and think honestly about myself, I find that I share something in common with this teenager (except that it is unlikely that I would use the word “cool” in this context). Do you really listen and take seriously the voices of others who you preconceive as not cool, not your own age and not thinking like you? Or are the voices of ‘others’ typically just so much background noise, voices that you habitually tune out? Should you really listen to ‘uncool’ people and people who do not think like you do?

2. From a Newspaper Column:

Since the start of the Iraq war, Rev. Fleming Rutledge said (in a sermon at Duke University Chapel) that she has visited lots of churches and heard prayers for U.S. servicemen and servicewomen at most of them but few for Iraqi civilians or insurgents. She commented: “Was it not Jesus who said, ‘Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ... Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful?’

Columnist Tom Schaefer wondered: “How does [this teaching] apply to the war in Iraq? Do you pray for Iraqis, both civilians and insurgents? ... If you do pray for your enemies, what precisely are you asking God to do?” (Schaefer, 2004)

Perhaps you pray for God to ‘smite our enemies’? There is plenty of Old Testament Biblical precedence for such a prayer, but is it what Jesus meant? How does it come to be that ‘those people’ (fellow human beings) are so different from ‘us’ (i.e. so much “the other”) that we might actually

pray for their demise? During the Inquisition of the Middle Ages and the infamous witch hunts of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Church officials often claimed that they tortured the ‘unbelievers’ and the ‘Satan-possessed’ because of Christian love for their immortal souls. So perhaps loving ‘us’ means kindness and mercy towards each other, but loving ‘them’ means torture and killing them ‘for their own good’?

### 3. From Chaim Potok’s The Chosen:

“The land of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob should be built by Jewish goyim, by contaminated men?” Reb Saunders shouted again. “Never! Not while I live! ... Why do you think I brought my people from Russia to America and not to Eretz Yisroel? Because it is better to live in a land of true goyim than to live in a land of Jewish goyim! Who says we should build Eretz Yisroel, uh? I’ll tell you who says it! Apikorsim say it! Jewish goyim say it! True Jews do not say such a thing!” (Potok. 1967. p. 198)

Who knew there was such diversity and even violent division among such a seemingly ‘unified groups’ as Orthodox Jews (or at least to ‘us’ Midwestern Christians, Orthodox Jews appear to be a single ‘them’)? How could one set of Orthodox Jews define another set of Orthodox Jews in such insulting terms of “other-ness”?

Reuven’s father, Mr. Malter is one of those accused by Saunders of being “apikorsim” and “Jewish goyim”. Like the Hasidic Reb Saunders, Malter is also an Orthodox Jew, but he is one who is a Zionist. Despite the insults, Malter refuses to accept his son’s hatred of Reb Saunders or to fling similar insults at him. Instead he repeatedly tells Reuven that he has no intention of quarreling with Reb Saunders because he respects his position in spite of its fanaticism.

To Saunders, Malter is (at that point in the novel) a despised “other”. Yet Malter does not “return the favor” and instead persists in “respecting” Saunders. Is it really possible to maintain unity and yet tolerate so much internal diversity?

### 4. From a newspaper column:

After much discussion with a gay couple, Rev. Richard Prendergast of St. Mary of Celle Church in Berwyn, IL., agreed to baptize their adopted child. They then became regular in attending Mass. But soon afterwards, the Catholic Church released a document criticizing adoptions by gay and lesbian couples because such adoptions would mean ‘doing violence to these children’ by establishing a relationship that would not be ‘conducive to their full human development’. When this ended the couple’s relationship with

the church, Pendergast was saddened but understood. “How could they possibly participate in a church that called their love for Chloe ‘violence’ and that claimed they were immoral for raising her?” he asked.

In association with other similar thinking priests, Prendergast wrote a letter to American Catholic bishops. They explicitly stated that they were not challenging the Church’s stand on homosexuality, yet they argued that “condemnations leveled at sincere Catholics attempting to make sense out of their journey are inappropriate and pastorally destructive.”

In responding to the letter, Cardinal Francis George, archbishop of Chicago noted that a tension exists “between welcoming people and calling them to change (which is the meaning of conversion).” Pendergast agreed that such a tension exists but also noted that “we who are heterosexual are also called to conversion.” (Schaefer. 2004)

Can we be so confident in our own understanding of “God’s Will” that we cut off association with those ‘others’ who do not share our interpretation? Are we ‘playing God’ when we condemn the sins of others or are we ‘following God’s will’? And, perhaps even more importantly, can we maintain participation in a civil, unified society in which some others do not share our own conception of certain aspects of morality and immorality. How much diversity can we tolerate and maintain unity?

##### 5. From a National Public Radio news report:

At the most recent world conference on population, some scientists expressed concern about the occurrence of they term a “birth dearth” as the birth rate of most highly developed “first world” nations has dropped below the average of 2 children per female (i.e. below the replacement rate for the population). However other scientists argued that this worry is really about “not enough of our kind” being born while there’s still “too many of them” being born. The latter scientists argue that there is sufficient food and productive work for the world’s population if those from high birth rate countries are allowed or invited to full citizenship in nations with low birth rates. But the “birth dearth” scientists argued that such population redistribution would inevitably lead to divisiveness, violence and bloodshed. (National Public Radio. Sept. 11, 2004)

For our own benefit, can we integrate and unify with those who’s cultural, social, political and religious background is very different from our own? Can ‘the other’ ever really become one of ‘us’, even if our survival depends on it?

6. From a recent personal experience:

One evening last Spring a gentleman living a couple of blocks away on my street knocked on my door and asked me to sign a petition to the City Council demanding that they stop Habitat for Humanity from building 4 new houses across the street from his home. When I told him that I am a strong supporter of Habitat for Humanity and that I was actually delighted to hear that there would be a Habitat site in our neighborhood, he said: “Ah but you probably do not realize that these homes will be built for Those Refugees. [The capitalization represents his emphasis and tone of voice.] He went on to add that this would result in a loss of property value throughout the neighborhood because he knew from personal experience that Those People just do not know how to keep a property neat and clean. He knew this because he once rented a house to a refugee family and, no matter how hard he tried to teach them, they just never could understand the right way to mow a lawn or mend a broken fence or prevent a drain or toilet from becoming clogged. “Now don’t get me wrong,” he continued. “I’m not prejudiced or anything. It’s not really their fault when you realize where they come from, but still we just cannot afford to have ‘their kind’ in our good neighborhood.” I told him that I respectfully disagreed with him and respected his civic engagement and right to seek signers on the petition. But, I also indicated that I was looking forward to meeting our new neighbors. Therefore I would not sign his petition. A glance at his clipboard showed me that he had no signatures as yet and I was greatly relieved.

Today, two of the planned houses have been completed and one is occupied with a family containing several small children. I am happy to report that the children have neighborhood playmates and I frequently see integrated groups of black and white children riding their bicycles on our sidewalks. Contrary to my clearly racist (in my opinion) neighbor’s expectations, the home and property remain impeccably neat with neatly mown grass and lovely flowers and vegetables. And, perhaps most importantly, I am not aware of any overt actions taken against this family. I hope that the gentleman is becoming convinced of the inaccuracy of his preconceptions.

As I recall this event, I am struck by how easy it was for me to dismiss this man as an “other” whose voice and perspective I can dismiss as “ignorant” and “racist”. The same is probably true of you since you only know of him through my voice and perception. Can I (and you) accept even voice like his as a part of “us” and respect him even while severely disagreeing with him? Should I (and you) do that? How are we to treat ‘skinheads’ and members of the KKK or right-wing militia groups? Is our

necessary unity as a society destroyed if we allow them to persist or is it destroyed if do not we allow them to exist?

Although I could keep going in this vein, this is surely a sufficient number of anecdotes and questions to stimulate your thinking. Please recognize that I will not provide you ‘The Answers’ in this presentation. Rather, what I hope to provide is some perspective on why they are important questions, and some analytical tools to use as you and I struggle with them.

## THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

The published title for this talk is “Moral Imagination, Unity & Diversity”. A more accurate (but possibly even more boring) title would be “Imagination (Sociological and Moral), Unity & Diversity”. In order for you to comprehend what I want say about morality, unity and diversity, I must first provide a brief overview of the sociological perspective. Of course if sociology were a more respected discipline in our country, I would not have to do that because you would already know at least as much sociology as you know psychology and literature and biology from your high school experiences. But that is not the case and since I cannot ‘not be sociological’, I have to at least try to briefly fill in this gap in your education.

## SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

In 1959, C. Wright Mills published a book introducing the concept of “sociological imagination”. In the first chapter (titled “The Promise”), Mills described what he saw as the value of ‘thinking sociologically’ for people. Although he never provided a nice concise definition of the phrase ‘sociological imagination’, the following quotation from early in the first chapter neatly captures the idea:

Seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary [people] do not usually know what this connection means for the kinds of [people] they are becoming and for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part. They do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of [person] and society, of biography and history, of self and world. They cannot cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to control the structural transformation that usually lie behind them. (Mills, 1959, p. 4) [underlining added for emphasis]

We can use the underlined phrase above as a definition for the concept ‘sociological imagination’. Here the term ‘imagination’ refers to the ability to ‘see’ or conceptualize what is not ‘available to the senses’. It is the same

type of ‘imagination’ that enables humans to conceptualize atoms and economies, neither of which can be literally seen.

Mills is arguing that humans not only need to be able to ‘see’ abstract social realities (like family, economy, government, etc.) but also desperately need to be able to ‘see’ the connections between concrete individuals and those abstract realities. Briefly stated humans are both social products (‘produced’ by the social structures in which we live) and social producers (the creators of those same social structures). We are born into a pre-existing society, a set of social structures and cultural beliefs. Those social and cultural patterns heavily influence who we come to be, how we behave, what we assume to be truth, what we believe, even our conceptions of who we are.

Yet, simultaneously, from the moment of birth we act on those abstract realities and participate in constructing them anew. Ask the parents of a newborn child who has the ‘power’ in that family and they probably tell you it is the child. From birth, the child determines how much sleep Mom & Dad get and that alone makes a huge difference their lives. The reality of being a couple is changed dramatically with the entrance of a child, - a helpless being who exerts great power. Yet that child is also being shaped by the parents (and grandparents and babysitters and TV and toys and siblings, etc.) Each individual is simultaneously a product of that person’s social environment and a producer of the social environment and thus a powerful influence on others. It is a paradox, but is true nonetheless and it is important that we recognize our dual natures.

When we forget that we are social products, constantly influenced and constrained by the social structures in which we live, there is a strong tendency to place the blame for ‘bad experiences’ on either ourselves (e.g. “I am just not good enough”) or on other specific individuals (“He’s out to get me.”). While it is true that the causes of a problem may well be partially within ourselves or within the motives and actions of certain specific other individuals, we will often misdiagnose the problem if we limit ourselves to within-individual causes. Our problems often have social causes (perhaps in addition to individual ones).

For example, consider the circumstance of a corporation where all the top level management personnel are males. The company has many female employees and lots of them have been promoted to middle management positions, but they tend to stay at the level, not being promoted ‘to the top’. This is the phenomenon called ‘the glass ceiling’. It may be that the leaders of a corporation can each sincerely swear “I am not sexist”. Believing them, other individuals could then say, “Ah – so it’s really not a glass ceiling

problem at all. It's just that the current women in the company are not really competent enough or sufficiently dedicated to the job to achieve promotion." The argument could then continue with those on each side blaming the individuals on the other side.

However when we look at the problem from a sociological perspective, we may be able to 'see' something other than (or perhaps in addition to) individuals' alleged sexism or alleged lack of qualification. In other words, the full cause of the problem might not be within (or only within) the individual male leaders or individual female un-promoted employees.

One of the features of bureaucracy, as a form of social organization, is the fact that higher level positions tend to be ones for which job descriptions are vague. In lower level positions, objective criteria can often be created (and objective tests administered) so that it is clear which applicants are qualified and which are not. However, the qualifications for higher level positions are often described in vague terms such as "good leadership skills" or "creativity" or "ability to motivate others", etc. Likewise a key (but often unpublished) job qualification for a top level position is the vague idea of "fit" as in: "We need a person who's a 'good fit' with the current management team". When hiring faculty and staff here at Augustana, we often use that phrase.

But what constitutes a 'good fit'? And how could one objectively test "leadership skills"? In the absence of clear cut, objectively measurable job qualifications, what current leaders tend to want in the new person is someone with whom 'it's easy to communicate', someone who shares 'our way of thinking' –in short, someone 'like us'. Leaders need not consciously think "men like us" (or "whites like us"). But the reality is that it is most likely going to be white males who 'fit in' – who share the same language of metaphors, find humor in the same kinds of jokes, have wives to deal with matters like childcare and cooking and cleaning so that those chores do not distract attention away from work, etc.

In short, the cause of the 'glass ceiling' problem is not necessarily sexist male leaders or incompetent female employees. It may be, at least some extent, literally built into the form of social organization. Making the male leaders go to 'sensitivity training' sessions and the female employees go to 'assertiveness training' sessions may well help each of them individually but, by itself, actions like this will not solve the problem.

So if the problem is structural, the solution must also be structural. We might solve it by creating a new rule for the organization – perhaps one that says that, given equal qualifications, however we measure them, we will

promote the individual who is most different from us, even if it means we will have to work a little harder at insuring clear communication and even if it means that we will have to create different kinds of ‘small talk’ and accept that the same old jokes do not always work and adapt ‘family friendly’ work policies that enable all of us to better integrate family and work life, etc. Creating such a new ‘rule’ for the organization itself means that we are defining both the cause and solution to the problem in realm of social structure.

A sociological perspective then leads us to pay attention to the social structure and social processes rather than only paying attention only to individuals and their personalities, traits, skills etc. Please recognize that in claiming the value of a sociological perspective, I am not proposing that it be used instead of a psychological perspective. Rather my argument is that developing the ability to “think sociologically” (i.e. to use the sociological perspective) is a valuable additional analytical tool. We should each be able to use a variety of different points of view - a psychological perspective, a theological perspective, a biological perspective, an economics perspective, an aesthetic perspective, etc.

Although Mills said that “...ordinary [people] do not usually know what this connection means ... for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part”, he really did not tell us much about how human individuals collectively ‘make history’. To understand that process, I turn now to another classic sociological concept – the ‘social construction of reality’.

### Social Construction of Reality

In The Social Construction of Reality (1966), Peter Berger & Thomas Luckmann explicate, on several levels of analysis, the actual process by which humans collectively create (and maintain or change) social reality. Although this paper cannot do justice to the thoroughness or complexity of their ideas, I can briefly describe the three-stage social construction process they present. The ‘stages’ in this process are: externalization, objectivation, and internalization. As I describe them, please keep in mind that they are not posed by Berger and Luckmann as a neat, linear progression, but rather as a complex, open-ended, not fully predictable and often circular process.

Externalization occurs when some individual (or sometimes multiple individuals in different locales) expresses a “new” idea. To ‘externalize’ simply means to get the idea out of the individual mind and into the ‘external world’. For example, at some point some bright person looked at the ‘glass ceiling problem’ and said: “Maybe it’s not a matter of either sexist male bosses or incompetent female employees. Maybe there’s

something about the social structure that's causing this problem.” That person was ‘externalizing’ a new idea.

The new idea might be tentative or it might be a fully developed new explanation or plan of action developed quietly by that person over years of painstaking writing and finally published. Clearly it requires some degree of creativity and courage by the individual(s) initiating the idea because to be “new” means that it is posing some challenge to the taken for granted assumptions of the society. When people who are classified as ‘the other’ in a society, externalize a new idea (at least to members of the dominant category of people) they are likely to be dismissed as ‘not smart enough to understand’ or as ‘whining’ or as ‘irrational’ or as ‘utopian’. One of the defining characteristics of being ‘the other’ is that your perspective is not likely to be heard or, if literally heard, then not likely to be granted legitimacy. But the paradox is that ‘the other’ often does have good understanding of the perspective used by the dominant category, especially if those who are ‘the other’ are in a subordinate structural position in the group or society. They typically must ‘hear’ and understand the dominant category’s perspective in order to survive. Yet their own perspectives are silenced. In order to literally ‘be heard’ members of ‘the other’ sometimes resort to dramatic acts and utterances (angry outbursts and protest marches and street dramas). Even though some of those dominant individuals react negatively to drama and reinforce their own preconception that ‘those people’ are not worth listening to, this strategy is often effective. It does often get the silenced perspective ‘heard’ by at least some members of the dominant category. It also makes it much more likely that those in the dominant category will now redefine the more ‘sedate’, less ‘dramatic’, more ‘rational’ members of the ‘the other’ as ‘worth listening to’. For example, Martin Luther King was widely seen as a “radical”, until the Black Panthers became active. Then King suddenly came to be perceived as a ‘moderate’.

The important point for the social construction process is that the ‘new idea’ must get into the social realm before it can have any effect. Once in the social realm it must become the object of attention of other individuals. People must interact with each other about this new idea. If no one listens or responds to the initiator of the idea, then no social construction process can occur.

Objectivation refers to the point in the process when the idea is becoming a social object in itself. It no longer necessarily matters who the creator of the idea is or even that it was, at some point, one person’s creative act. The idea (or theory or proposed new way of doing things) begins to

seem to take on a life of its own, sometimes in ways carefully controlled by the original creator of the idea (if that person is skilled in the exercise of social power and has access to the means to control the dissemination of the idea), but also sometimes in ways not intended or envisioned by the original creator. In other words the objectivation process may take the form of marketing a fully developed idea and persuading others of its validity or it may take the form of ‘brainstorming’ on a massive scale in which no single person controls the process or it may take any form in between these two extremes. What is important is that it involves lots of interaction among lots of individuals.

Returning to the example of the ‘glass ceiling problem solution’, we can see today that most textbooks in management highly tout the value of diversity, especially as a means of avoiding the phenomenon of ‘group think’. As an idea or set of words, it has achieved considerable acceptance today. Yet CEOs and Boards of corporations remain overwhelmingly male (and white). The ideas are accepted but not yet reflected much in actual practice. The bureaucratic social structure still exerts its influence toward promotion of ‘folks like us’. On this matter the objectivation stage of the social construction of reality is not yet complete.

The life of a new idea (or new form of social organization) may be short-lived. The interaction involved in the objectivation process may result in “killing” the idea (either temporarily or permanently) without it ever becoming fully objectified. Or, at the other extreme what was once a strange, weird, new idea may eventually come to seem so obvious that people define questioners of that idea as strange and weird. In between these extremes are periods when the idea may become a ‘hot topic’ with some completely convinced of its validity and others hotly arguing that it is “bogus”. Thus among some groups it may become “reality”, while among other groups, even in the same society, it is a “lie” or a “heresy”.

The final stage of this social construction process is internalization. At this stage, the new idea has become a part of the society’s or group’s ‘taken-for granted’. It appears ‘obvious’ and ‘what everyone knows’. For example if I say to you: “The earth is round”, you would likely reply: “Yeah. Well of course it is. What’s your point?” Yet the idea of the earth being round was a truly radical new idea not so very long ago in human history. Today that idea is well internalized. It is now taught to new members as objective, obvious reality, part of what ‘everyone knows’ and no one much thinks about.

New members may occasionally question a reality that has gone through all the stages of this process, but when they do others respond

simply by validating the ‘reality’ and discouraging the questioning. Yet, eventually, some stubborn or brave soul may actually persist in questioning and suggest an alternative and be skillful enough or lucky enough to engage others in dialogue about some new ‘externalization’. At this point the process begins anew.

If you look at human history through the lens of this social construction process you can see that it is a tenuous, non-deterministic process. It depends on there being someone who is not totally ‘brainwashed’ by the current cultural assumptions and on that person having the courage to question ‘out loud’ those assumptions and there being lots of other individuals who are willing to actually listen to what is widely perceived as a ‘crazy’ idea. When you think about that, it may seem amazing that the process ever actually occurs. Yet we have “democracy” today only because some daring people were willing to argue that it would be possible to actually organize a country without a king and other daring people were willing to listen to that ‘crazy’ idea and eventually act on it. Likewise slavery was made illegal in this country only when courageous individuals were able to ‘dream up’ effective arguments to counter the economic and Biblical justifications for slavery that most ‘everyone’ knew to be obviously true and others were willing to die for that ‘new idea’. Women did not get the right to vote in this country until someone questioned what everyone knew to be true – that women were made by God to be child-care providers and keepers of the home and to not worry about the dirty world of commerce and politics. Most of these ‘dreamers’ died still labeled ‘crazy’, ‘radical’, ‘weird’ or, at best ‘utopian’ and ‘unrealistic’. Yet social construction process continued because other individuals actually listened, engaged the ‘new’ ideas, persuaded still others of their validity and acted together to make the ‘dreams’ actually come true.

I find this an empowering realization and I hope that you do also. However, just as this perspective opens our realizations to our own importance in maintaining or transforming social realities, it also should result in the recognition of individual responsibility for making conscious moral evaluations. The perspective implies that we have a responsibility not merely for following the moral rules laid down by authorities, but also for making judgments ourselves about the appropriateness of those rules and those authorities. In short, if individuals each participate in the constructing and maintaining of social structure then individuals also have a responsibility to morally evaluate existing social structures. This is where the concept of moral imagination enters my argument.

## Moral Imagination

From the sociological perspective as I described it above, we are led to see morality itself as a social construction, as aspect of a group's or society's culture. I realize that I may have just lost some of you, especially those who see morality as a universal set of God given principles. Please bear with me.

I am not saying that there is no God as a giver of moral standards. And I am not claiming that there are no universal moral standards. What I am saying is that God's moral standards have to be interpreted by us (humans) and humans have, through history and continuing today, developed different understandings of God's will. The determination for any particular society or group of "God's real will" occurs through the social construction process I described above. Remember that Martin Luther told the Church authorities that they were wrong in their theological interpretations (i.e. he externalized a 'new idea'). He persuaded some and was reviled by some, but eventually his ideas became 'reality'. A slight majority of you in this audience are Lutheran today because a human challenged the interpretation of "God's will" made by the religious authorities of his time.

Second, while we can identify some abstract moral values that appear to be present in all societies, the application of those abstract values varies enormously from society to society. For example, virtually every society has some conception of 'killing another person' as an immoral act. The Christian Bible says "Thou shalt not kill". Yet when we sing "Onward Christian Soldiers" we are not encouraging Christians to go forth and hug and kiss 'the enemy'. The job of soldiers is to kill. Few Christians today interpret that Biblical commandment in purely pacifist ways. So, when is killing another an immoral act? When the other is an innocent? But what constitutes "an innocent"? It depends on the society.

Some passionate defenders of the death penalty today are devout Christians but so are some devout opponents. The defenders claim that those criminal sentenced to be killed are so deviant, so much an "other" that the moral prohibition against killing simply does not apply to them. The opponents of the death penalty often argue that the convicted person is still 'human' (one of 'us humans') and thus that if "we" (the state) kill that person then we are doing the same immoral act that the convicted person did. So who is right in this argument? Well I have my opinion and I assume that each of you also has an opinion. But I am confident that the 450 or so folks in this room do not share the same opinion even though I assume that all of us define "killing" as immoral. The objectivation stage of the social

construction of reality is not yet completed in our own society on this issue. At this point in history those who favor the death penalty are “winning” the debate in that most states do today have a constitutionally legal death penalty in their laws and are implementing that penalty frequently. But opponents continue to actively work to repeal those laws. As a society, we are still interacting and trying to persuade each other of the rightness of a particular interpretation of God’s commandment. Among nations in the world, we remain quite unusual in that the ‘winners’ in most nations are those making the interpretation that the exercise of the death penalty is immoral. This is an example of what I mean when I claim that morality is a social construction.

Sociology is the wrong perspective to use if your desire is to discover an ‘objective’ definition of evil. But it is a valuable perspective to use if you are fascinated by the process by which people come to define their conception of evil and to apply that conception to real life events and persons. It is an even more valuable perspective if you are passionate enough to want to convince others of some particular moral value that you hold dear.

When I use the term ‘moral imagination’, I am referring in part the ability to “see” that abstract, not-directly-available-to-the-senses “thing” called morality. But, since this abstract phenomenon is socially constructed then the concept also refers to the ability to conceptualize the possibility that some current moral value application is inappropriate or “wrong” and/or that some other moral value application is “better” or “more moral”.

The exercise of moral imagination most often occurs when the individual is faced with an actual instance of a different moral value application. Thus when the individual who has been taught that the death penalty is simply, obviously ‘right’ (and who therefore takes this belief for granted), first hears that others sincerely believe that the death penalty itself is immoral, then that person has a direct opportunity to exercise “moral imagination”. Exercising moral imagination would occur if the person listens to opponents’ arguments, honestly evaluates those arguments, weights ‘the pros and cons’, and is open to the possibility that ‘they’ might be right. Even if the person ends up continuing to believe that the death penalty is ‘right’, but now it is a conscious choice for which she can accept responsibility rather than a ‘taken for granted’. This person may not engage her moral imagination. When faced with these arguments she may unquestionably reiterate that the death penalty “just is, obviously” moral and that any one who claims otherwise is ‘just wrong’ or is ‘stupid’ or ‘ignorant’. Far too often this is precisely what occurs when debates over moral values occur. Persons on each side of the debate tend to reduce the

argument to the level of personal name-calling without actually listening to each other, engaging in an active exchange of reasons for their different stances and being open to the possibility of change in their own moral perspective. In other words, many people have no moral imagination and this is a sad state of affairs. I am a child of the '60s and one of the mottos of my generation was "question authority". Many older Americans assumed that we meant "disregard authority". But when I use the phrase, I truly mean "question" – as in wonder about why a particular rule or definition of morality exists, find out why some people support that rule or interpretation, engage them in conversation, weigh the 'pros' and 'cons', see if you can think of a different moral rule or interpretation that might support the same end or if you can think of a different end that all of us could support. This is what I mean by valuing a moral imagination. But, if I truly value the moral imagination, then I must actively seek out those I believe to be different from me. It is unlikely that I will ever consciously recognize that which I take for granted if I limit my interactions to those who are 'like me'.

Passionate differences of opinion on moral matters or different interpretations of the same moral rules can provide a divisive form of diversity. But they can also provide the opportunity for us to grow intellectually and morally and end up becoming a more unified society. Now I am prepared to talk about the remainder of this paper's title – i.e. about "unity" and "diversity".

### Unity and Diversity

First consider the dictionary definitions of these terms. Merriam-Webster's online dictionary offers the following definitions.

Unity – the quality or state not being multiple: oneness; a condition of harmony: accord.

Diversity – the condition of being diverse.

Diverse – differing from one another: unlike; composed of distinct or unlike elements or qualities.

At first glance these seem to be opposites of each other with "unity" referring to "sameness" and "diversity" referring to "difference". The implication is that the same "thing" (e.g. a group or society) cannot be both unified and diverse but rather must be one or the other.

However, when we are referring to a human group (or society), not only can it simultaneously have unity and diversity, but it actually must have both by definition. A group must have some degree of unity or that collection of individuals is not a group. A group is not solely made up of a collection of individuals. Rather it is, by definition, a collection of

individuals plus the interaction patterns and shared beliefs that make them a group. Therefore, for a group to even exist there must be some ‘unifying’ factor. However every human being is unique, is different from every other human being. Even so-called identical twins are each unique, different beings. Therefore it is impossible for a group to not have some degree of diversity.

To illustrate this paradox, consider the fact that, for most of us, the family is probably the most unified group to which we belong. But my family (and presumably yours) is made up of folks who are distinctly different from each other in age, sex, personality, kinds of skills, and variety of life experiences. I am truly different from every member of my family (and at times our “different-ness” seems the most salient aspect of our relationship). Yet we are also tightly unified, bound together by shared sentiment, perspective and experience. Perhaps you experience more unity in your team, band or choir, or friendship than you do in your family. But the principle is the same. You are different from every other group member and friend and yet you experience a unity there. You experience unity in spite of difference.

Sometimes we actually experience unity because of ‘different-ness’. This occurs when it is the intertwining of our different skills, perspectives, styles, and personalities that makes us “feel stronger as a group” (or feel more unified) because we are more effective in accomplishing our shared goal.

Ultimately, whether we define another category of people as “like us” or “not like us” is a matter of social construction of reality. Objectively every other human being is “like me” in that every other human is human. Yet, also objectively, every other human is also “not like me” because every human is unique. Whether we define other individuals as the “same” or “different” is, then a matter of social construction of reality. It depends on which characteristics we are emphasizing. The moral question is which characteristics of other individuals should be emphasized in different social contexts?

Should we for example emphasize the differences between men and women or the commonalities between them? When is it appropriate to emphasize how members of different races are different from each other and when is it appropriate to emphasize how they are alike?

The earlier description of the social construction of reality and the moral imagination become useful concepts when applied to these kinds of questions. Race, sex, ethnicity, sexuality, physical ability, religion, etc. are very real categories in our society. People are treated differently based on

their membership in those categories. Yet the categories are not “natural” – they are social constructs. Some societies have existed which categorized humans into three distinct sexes (whereas we, seemingly ‘naturally’, categorize humans into two different sexes). Not all known human societies have categorized people by race and among those that have and do, the categorical system is often quite different from the one that ‘seems natural’ to our 21<sup>st</sup> century American categorical system (for example, some people who are “black” in the North American racial categories are “white” in the racial categories used in some Latin American societies).

‘Nature’ (or God) creates differences but it is we humans who determine which ‘natural’ differences we choose to emphasize and which ones we choose to ignore. It is just as ‘easy’ to categorize people as blue-eyed or brown-eyed as to categorize them as brown skinned or white skinned, but in our society today color of eyes is a category system that we rarely use. We have no assumptions about how blue-eyed people act or should act as compared to brown-eyed people. So why do not we treat color of eyes as a category that ‘makes a difference’? Why do not we have stereotypes of blue-eyed and brown-eyed people? Why do not we expect blue-eyed people to act differently or have different personalities or different abilities than brown-eyed people? In short why do not we socially ‘pay attention’ to that readily identifiable difference?

Answering that question would require a detailed treatise on the history of race in human societies. However, the basic answer is that we humans have not chosen to treat color-of eyes as a social category. We have socially constructed eye color as a ‘difference that does not make a difference’. But we have a long and complex and varied history in different societies of emphasizing color of skin as a ‘difference that does make a difference’ because humans socially constructed the phenomenon of race as a socially relevant category.

How we categorize people, who we define as ‘like us’ and as ‘not like us’, is a moral matter. It is logically possible to differentiate categories of people without stratifying them – i.e. without defining certain categories as superior to other categories. However, once we have emphasized a difference as one that “makes a difference” then our strong tendency is to treat certain categories of people not only ‘differently’ but ‘better’ or ‘worse’. Thus the social construction of ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ is typically also a social construction of ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ and in constructing the categories we are also making moral evaluations.

At this point you may be expecting me to say something like: “Do not label (categorize, stereotype, etc.) other people.” Or “Treat everyone alike.”

Or “Everyone is beautiful (like the old song title: “Everything is Beautiful”). But that is not what I am going to say. First I am not going to tell you to do that because it’s not humanly possible to “not categorize” people. Our brains and senses are organized in such a way that we must categorize objects and people and our languages consist in large part of categorical systems that influence our perception. However, this does not mean it is necessary to categorize by color of skin or color of eyes or treat either kind of categorization as one that ‘makes a difference’ in how we interact with others.

Secondly, I am not going to tell you that you should ‘treat everyone the same’. That would be morally irresponsible. You should, in fact, not treat a rapist in the same way you treat your pastor – or at least not unless you discover that your pastor is a rapist. There is nothing beautiful or good about rape or torture or murder and the people who do those acts should be treated “differently” from those who not. If you do not differentiate among different kinds of actions and people then you cannot exercise any moral judgment.

I am sure we will all agree that torture is bad and torturers deserve to be treated differently than non-torturers. But we must develop the moral imagination necessary to determine when an action is “torture” and when it’s not. Did American soldiers “torture” innocent Vietnamese as John Kerry claimed in the 1970s? Did Hussain’s regime torture prisoners prior to the American take over of Iraq? Did American soldiers ‘torture’ Iraqis this year at Abu Ghraib? The current American government answers “no” to the first question, “yes” to the second question, and “not much” to the last question. If you do agree with these answers to the questions, then ask yourself why? Did you arrive at that judgment after listening to the administration’s rationales and to the arguments of those who answer the questions differently? Did you weigh the evidence and logic of the arguments? If so, then good for you; you have exercised your moral imagination. But if you simply accept the answers because you “like/support” President Bush, then you have considerable room for both intellectual and moral growth. The same is true if your answers these questions are different from those provided by the administration simply because you ‘dislike’ President Bush.

Yes you should categorize people and you should accept moral responsibility for the categorizations you make. You should participate in the social construction of reality, the social construction of difference and sameness, the social construction of morality. As a morally responsible person you should classify some individuals as ‘the other’, as people whose ideas and activities are morally corrupt and who therefore have forfeited

their right to be heard. But, please do that only after you have first listened to them.

The issue of unity and diversity is one that touches every part of our lives every day. Recognizing that social categories are social constructed and have a moral dimension to them does have ‘real life’, here and now, consequences for each me and each of you.

Relatively speaking, Augustana is pretty homogenous community in that we who make up this organization (faculty, staff and students) are overwhelmingly white, Caucasian, middle to upper class, Christian, heterosexual, from the Midwest, hear, and see and do not use wheelchairs, etc. In other words, there is a lot of “sameness” about us. I suspect that at least some of you (or your parents) intentionally chose Augustana precisely for that reason – because you wanted to ‘fit in’, to interact with other folks ‘like you’ and not be contaminated by those who are ‘different’.

However, even in our homogenous community we do have a many different categories of people represented. In addition to white Caucasian, U.S. citizens, we have African Americans and Native Americans, and Japanese and Koreans and Russians and Norwegians and Mexicans, and Iranians and Germans and refugees and recent immigrants and foreign exchange students and faculty. In addition to heterosexuals, we have homosexuals and transsexuals. In addition to Christians, we have Jews and Muslims and Buddhists and agnostics and atheists. In addition to folks who can hear and see and do not use wheelchairs, we have deaf and blind and wheelchair using folks. I suspect that some of you probably think we have “too much” diversity, especially when it comes to sexuality and religion. But others of us on campus, while applauding the degree of variety we have (yes even the degree of variety in religion and sexuality) are still concerned that we have ‘too little’ diversity. Our concern is that your education (which will of course be excellent) would be ‘better’ if you had the opportunity to interact with more folks who are different in socially significant ways from you. Those of us with this concern continue to work to increase the diversity of our community.

Last spring Kirk Kolbo, a graduate of Augustana presented a convocation in this room. He is a distinguished Augustana graduate. He had argued two cases before the Supreme Court, both challenging the affirmative action procedures at the University of Michigan. One case was a challenge to the undergraduate policies and one a challenge to the law school practices. He won one case and lost the other. In his remarks on campus Kolbo clearly remained convinced that the Court was wrong in the judgment they made on the case he lost. Whether you or I agree with him on this particular

affirmative action case is not the point here. But a couple of his comments are important for our topic today.

He said that it was ridiculous for someone to claim that the education he received at his Watertown high school and at Augustana was ‘inferior’ because there was little racial diversity at the schools. He also said that “it just doesn’t make sense” to emphasize race if you are trying to get rid of racial discrimination. Although I am very pleased that an Augie grad has distinguished himself by becoming one of the few lawyers in our land to ever argue, much less win, a Supreme Court case, I also strongly disagree with those two comments.

I am quite willing to grant that the education he received was ‘excellent’ at his almost all white Watertown high school and Augustana College. But it also was less valuable (less ‘good’) than it could have been because of the lack of racial diversity in his experiences. All other things being equal, in contemporary U.S. society, a school that is all white is going to provide a ‘less good’ educational experience than one that is racially mixed. Too many taken for granted assumptions simply do not get brought to consciousness and socially examined without a variety of racial experiences among the school’s population. It is far too easy then to simply assume that our experiences (i.e. those of white Caucasians like me), our ways of viewing the world, our taken for granted assumptions, etc. are objectively ‘right’ or ‘the only way’ if we have no contact with those whose experiences, viewpoints and assumptions are different. In the current era of American history there remain strong racial differences in experience, viewpoint and assumptions. Just because we outlawed legal segregation and made it politically incorrect to verbalize overtly racist sentiments does not mean that differential racial treatment has disappeared.

Kolbo was also wrong when he claimed that “it doesn’t make sense to pay attention to race when you are trying to get rid of racial discrimination.” Although it is a paradox, it is true that today in the U.S. we do have to ‘pay attention’ to race now in order to achieve some future when racial equality will exist or when race will not then be a relevant social category. I, a white Caucasian, need to listen to the perspectives of African American and Native American and Hispanic American and refugee and new immigrant. I desire to be non-racist but I cannot guarantee that I do not have some taken for granted assumptions (of which I am not aware) that prevent me from achieving that goal. The only way I can be made aware of those assumptions so that I can consciously decide if they are accurate or not is to interact with members of other races. I cannot do that if I ‘ignore race’. This society is still organized in such a way as to insulate me from the fact

of my own white privilege. If I try to simply ignore race, that insulation continues and my white privilege continues. We do not seek racial and other kinds of diversity at Augustana simply to ‘help those poor people’. We seek it to help ourselves achieve our own moral standards.

In schools like ours the relatively few African Americans, Native Americans, folks in wheelchairs, Hispanic Americans, deaf folks, homosexual folks, Moslem and Hindu and Buddhist and atheist folks etc. remain far too easily treated as ‘the other’ and, at best, simply ignored. The potential quality of my life (and, I argue, of your life) is reduced by the fact that we have only a non-representative number of such people in our community (or in the case of atheists and homosexual folks, only a few that we actually know about, a few who are willing to publicly claim that identity and risk becoming outcasts)

So what can you do, in this relatively homogenous context to enhance the quality of your education? How do these abstract ideas actually apply to your life on campus today? My advice is that you seek out and pay conscious attention to the various ways in which each person you meet is both similar and different from you. In particular, make a conscious effort to meet and interact with someone else who you believe is ‘really different’ from you, someone in a social category that you have not encountered before in your life. First seek the commonalities you have with this person. Then, as you discover those and the interaction becomes more ‘comfortable’, probe for the differences. Really listen to the other’s ideas, opinions, experiences, assumptions. Express your own ideas, opinions, and experiences. When you discover the particular differences, do not simply ignore them, but openly and civilly discuss and debate those differences. As columnist Tom Schaefer put it:

“Talking with those who are different from us with the presumption on each side of the goodwill of the other is a first step toward greater understanding.” (Schaefer, 2004).

In summary – understand that you do participate in the social construction of reality process. Since it is not possible for you to not participate in this process, please do so consciously. Exercise your moral imagination. Take responsibility for your moral judgments. Help us accomplish unity and diversity at Augustana – for the benefit of all of us.

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