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*Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 2003; 29; 1190  
DOI: 10.1177/0146167203254600

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<http://psp.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/29/9/1190>

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# “ . . . As You Would Have Them Do Unto You”: Does Imagining Yourself in the Other’s Place Stimulate Moral Action?

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*Philosophers, psychologists, and religious teachers have suggested that imagining yourself in another’s place will stimulate moral action. The authors tested this idea in two different situations. In Experiment 1, participants had the opportunity to assign themselves and another research participant to tasks, with one task clearly more desirable than the other. Imagining oneself in the other’s place did little to increase the morality (fairness) of the decision. A different form of perspective taking, imagining the other’s feelings, increased direct assignment of the other to the desirable task, apparently due to increased empathy. In Experiment 2, participants confronted a different decision: either accept an initial task assignment that would give them highly positive consequences and the other participant nothing or change the assignment so they and the other would each receive moderately positive consequences. In this situation, imagining oneself in the other’s place did significantly increase moral action.*

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**Keywords:** *moral behavior; moral motivation; perspective taking; justice; fairness*

**M**oral motivation can be a problem. *Webster’s Desk Dictionary of the English Language* (1990) defines *moral* as “1. of or concerned with principles of right or wrong conduct. 2. being in accordance with such principles” (p. 589). Most principles of right or wrong conduct require that one give consideration of the interests and desires of others (Batson, 2002). Central among these are princi-

ples of fairness or justice, which often have been considered paradigmatic of morality (Kohlberg, 1976; Rawls, 1971). *Moral motivation* can be defined as a desire to act in accord with such principles. The problem is that when another’s interests and desires conflict with one’s own, moral motivation often seems quite weak.<sup>1</sup>

## *Appearing Without Being Moral*

Highlighting the problem, two articles recently reported the results of a series of six studies designed to determine the nature of moral motivation. These studies produced considerable evidence of moral hypocrisy—motivation to appear moral yet, if possible, avoid the cost of actually being moral (Batson, Kobrynowicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, & Wilson, 1997; Batson, Thompson, Seufferling, Whitney, & Strongman, 1999). These studies produced only limited evidence of moral integrity—motivation to actually be moral.

In the six studies, participants were given the opportunity to assign themselves and another participant (actually fictitious) to different tasks. One task was clearly more desirable; it had positive consequences (the

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*PSPB*, Vol. 29 No. 9, September 2003 1190-1201

DOI: 10.1177/0146167203254600

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chance to earn raffle tickets). The other task had neutral consequences (no chance to earn raffle tickets) and was described as rather dull and boring. Participants were told that the other participant would not know that they were allowed to assign the tasks. The other would think the assignment was made by chance. Most research participants faced with this simple situation assigned themselves the positive-consequences task (.70 to .80, depending on the specific study), even though in retrospect very few (less than .10) said that this was the most morally right thing to do. Their action failed to fit their moral principles.

Other participants faced a slightly more complex situation. The written instructions that informed them of the opportunity to assign the tasks included a sentence designed to make the moral standard of procedural fairness salient: "Most participants feel that giving both people an equal chance—by, for example, flipping a coin—is the fairest way to assign themselves and the other participant to the tasks." A coin was provided for participants to flip if they wished. Under these conditions, most participants said in retrospect that using a fair method such as the coin flip was most moral. Yet only about half chose to flip the coin.

Of those who chose not to flip, most assigned themselves to the positive-consequences task (.80 to .90, depending on the specific study). More interesting and revealing, the same was true among those who flipped the coin; most assigned themselves the positive-consequences task (.85 to .90). In study after study, the proportion of participants who assign themselves the positive-consequences task after flipping the coin has been significantly greater than the .50 that would be expected from an unbiased coin flip. This was true even in a study in which the coin was labeled "SELF to POS" on one side and "OTHER to POS" on the other side (Batson et al., 1999, Study 1); it was also true in a study in which the less desirable consequences were more negative—uncomfortable electric shocks (Batson, Tsang, & Thompson, 2001). To appear fair by flipping the coin, yet still serve self-interest by ignoring the coin and assigning oneself the positive-consequences task, suggests a desire to appear, not to be, moral.

Together, the results of these six studies suggest that true moral motivation—the desire to actually be moral—is limited and weak. This finding leads to our present concern: How can one stimulate the desire to actually be moral?

#### *Stimulating Moral Action Using a Carrot-and-Stick Approach*

Social psychologists have not been very quick to propose ways to stimulate morality. They have been quicker to point out problems with ways proposed by others. For

example, the way to stimulate morality most often suggested in the society at large seems to be to increase the rewards for being moral and the punishments for not (Burton & Kuncze, 1995). Theory and research on both cognitive dissonance (Festinger & Freedman, 1964) and the undermining of intrinsic motivation (Kunda & Schwartz, 1983; Lepper, 1983) raise doubts about this carrot-and-stick approach. Although it may increase the desire to act morally in the immediate situation, it may decrease moral behavior in the future. Acting under external pressure, people may infer that they do not value doing what is right, only avoiding the consequences of being caught doing what is wrong (Aronson & Carlsmith, 1963; Freedman, 1965; Lepper, 1983; also see Hoffman, 1977). Bandura (1991) pointed out further problems with the carrot-and-stick approach, outlining a number of techniques of moral disengagement that people use to deactivate moral rewards and sanctions in a given situation.

#### *An Alternative: Using Perspective Taking to Stimulate Moral Action*

We wish to consider a second and potentially less problematic strategy for stimulating morality: perspective taking. This strategy has been suggested by a range of religious teachers, moral philosophers, and moral psychologists.

Perhaps the most universal religious prescription for morality is the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (e.g., Matthew 7:12). This rule implies an act of perspective taking in which you mentally place yourself in the other's situation. Presumably, imagining how you would like to be treated provides the standard for how you should treat the other, leading you to consider the other's interests as well as your own.

Philosopher Mark Johnson (1993) made the moral significance of perspective taking explicit in his analysis of moral imagination. He argued that moral insight and sensitivity requires the ability to imagine ourselves in the other's place.

Unless we can put ourselves in the place of another, unless we can enlarge our own perspective through an imaginative encounter with the experience of others, unless we can let our own values and ideals be called into question from various points of view, we cannot be morally sensitive. . . . It is not sufficient merely to manipulate a cool, detached "objective" reason toward the situation of others. We must, instead, go out toward people to inhabit their worlds. (Johnson, 1993, pp. 199-200)

Similarly, Kohlberg (1976) made perspective (role) taking integral to his cognitive-developmental analysis of morality: "Moral judgments entail role taking—putting

oneself in the place of the various people involved in a moral conflict" (p. 49; also see Selman, 1980). Karniol and Miller (1981) suggested that the process whereby one individual imagines himself or herself in another person's situation is "the most important process in becoming moral" (p. 83). They call this process "projective role-taking" (p. 83), noting that many other philosophers and psychologists have argued for its centrality, including Cahn (1949), Dewey (1922), Hare (1962), Harman (1977), Hospers (1970), and Smith (1759).

The logic implicit in these views seems to be that if individuals can be induced to take the perspective of another with whom their own interests conflict, then they will be more inclined to move beyond narrow self-interest to consider and give weight to the interests and desires of the other. As a result, they will be more likely to adhere to moral principles that require consideration of the interests and desires of others, such as principles of fairness and justice.

#### *Two Different Perspectives on Another's Situation*

Social psychologists have given little attention to the possibility that perspective taking can stimulate morality. They have, however, given considerable attention to the possibility that perspective taking can stimulate empathic emotion (feelings of sympathy, compassion, and the like) (Coke, Batson, & McDavis, 1978; Stotland, 1969) and, thereby, altruistic motivation (Batson, 1991).

In his classic early studies on empathy, Stotland (1969) identified two different forms of perspectives taking. Using both self-report and physiological measures, Stotland found that (a) imagining what one's own thoughts and feelings would be if one were in the situation of a person in need (an imagine-self perspective) and (b) imagining the thoughts and feelings of the person in need (an imagine-other perspective) both led to increased emotional arousal compared to an objective perspective condition. However, the emotions aroused by these two imagine perspectives were not the same. An imagine-self perspective appeared to produce a mix of self-oriented distress feelings (tense, upset, etc.) and other-oriented empathic feelings, whereas an imagine-other perspective produced relatively pure empathic feelings (for further evidence of this difference in emotions produced by these two imagine perspectives, see Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997).

*An imagine-self perspective as a stimulus to morality.* The Golden Rule, philosopher Johnson, and psychologists Kohlberg, Selman, Karniol, and Miller all seem to agree that an imagine-self perspective is the one that should stimulate morality. To act morally, in accord with principles that give weight to the interests and desires of

another, the person should first imagine himself or herself in the other's place.

In spite of these claims, we know of no research that has clearly tested this causal relationship. The research that has been done on perspective taking and morality has measured role-taking capacity and its moral correlates; perspective taking has not been experimentally manipulated by inducing randomly assigned participants to adopt a given perspective in a specific situation, as Stotland (1969) did. Such a design would provide a much clearer test of the idea that an imagine-self perspective can stimulate moral action. Specifically, in the task-assignment paradigm, this idea suggests that participants experimentally induced to imagine themselves in the other participant's situation prior to making the task assignment should be more likely to act fairly. That is, they should be more likely to flip the coin, and among those who flip, the outcome should be more fair.

*An imagine-other perspective as a stimulus to altruistic motivation.* Results from a number of experiments have indicated that an imagine-other perspective evokes empathic emotion, which in turn leads to increased altruistic motivation, not to increased moral motivation (Batson, 1991; Batson, Klein, Highberger, & Shaw, 1995). This research suggests that in the task-assignment paradigm, participants induced to imagine the other's feelings prior to making the assignment will not be more fair. Instead, they will be more likely to assign the other participant to the positive-consequences task directly, without flipping the coin.

#### EXPERIMENT 1

Employing the task-assignment paradigm, we gave participants in Experiment 1 the chance to assign themselves and another participant (actually fictitious) to tasks, with one task clearly more desirable than the other. Participants were provided a coin to flip if they wished. There were three experimental conditions. In the first condition, participants were given no perspective-taking instructions. This condition, which replicated the procedure of Batson, Kobryniewicz, et al.'s (1997) Study 2, served as a baseline. It allowed us to assess the effects of the two different forms of perspective taking. In a second condition, the procedure was the same except that before making the task-assignment decision, participants performed a brief imagination exercise in which they imagined their own thoughts and feelings were they in the place of the other participant (imagine-self condition). The third condition was the same as the second except that the imagination exercise involved imagining the thoughts and feelings of the other participant (imagine-other condition).

### Predictions

In the no-perspective condition, we expected task-assignment decisions to replicate the pattern found in Batson, Kobrynowicz, et al.'s (1997) Study 2. Even participants who flipped the coin were expected to show a preference for assigning themselves to the positive-consequences task.

If putting oneself in the other's shoes stimulates morality, then we would expect a more moral pattern of assignment in the imagine-self condition than in the no-perspective condition. A sincere desire to be fair might lead to increased use of the coin; it should certainly lead to an unbiased flip. Roughly 50% of those who flipped the coin should assign the other participant to the positive-consequences task.

If imagining the other person's feelings stimulates empathy-induced altruistic motivation, then participants in the imagine-other condition should show increased partiality in favor of the other participant. Although this might be done by flipping the coin and biasing the outcome in the other participant's favor, we thought it unlikely that participants would feel the need to conceal altruistic motivation behind the appearance of morality. The altruistic goal could be pursued directly by simply assigning the other participant to the positive-consequences task without flipping the coin.

Our predictions for the effects of the two different forms of perspective taking were not mutually exclusive. It was possible that each could be supported.

### Method

**Participants.** Participants in Experiment 1 were 72 general psychology students (48 women, 24 men) at the University of Kansas. They received credit toward a course requirement. Using a randomized block procedure, we assigned 24 participants (16 women, 8 men) to each of the three experimental conditions (no perspective, imagine-self perspective, and imagine-other perspective). Based on probes during debriefing, one additional woman was dropped from the design and replaced because she expressed doubt about the presence of a second participant.

More women than men were included in the sample because two of the three experimenters were women and we wished to keep gender of participant and experimenter the same to minimize cross-gender self-presentation concerns (Jones & Pittman, 1982). The different number of men and women did not seem to be a problem because we found no reliable sex effect (main effect or interaction) on task assignment, and sex effects had not been found in prior research using the task-assignment paradigm to study moral motivation (Batson et al., 1999).

**Procedure.** The general procedure for Study 1 was the same used by Batson, Kobrynowicz, et al. (1997, Study 2). Therefore, only aspects of the procedure not described by them are presented in detail.

Participants were run individually. Alone in a research cubicle, they read that they had the opportunity to assign themselves and another same-sex research participant to tasks. One task had positive consequences (the chance to earn raffle tickets); the other task had neutral consequences (no chance to earn raffle tickets) and was described as rather dull and boring. Participants were reminded of the standard of fairness and were provided a coin (a quarter) to flip if they wished. They also were reminded that they could make the assignment however they chose and that "the other participant does not and will not know that you are assigning the tasks; he or she will think that the task assignment was purely by chance."

**Perspective-taking manipulation.** After the task-assignment options were outlined, participants in the two perspective-taking conditions read that they would perform a brief imagination exercise:

We know that this is a lot of information. To be sure that you understand the task assignment decision you will make, we would like for you to engage in a brief imagination exercise.

Participants in the imagine-self condition then read,

In this exercise, we would like for you to *imagine yourself in the place of the other participant*. That is, imagine you are waiting to learn which task you will be assigned, believing the tasks are to be assigned by chance. Imagine also how you will feel when told which task you are to do. *Take about one minute* for this imagination exercise, getting as clear a sense as possible of how you would feel if you were in the other participant's place. Then, at the end of the minute, *write down in the space at the top of the next page what you imagined*. We have found that carefully following this procedure can ensure understanding.

There were eight blank lines at the top of the next page for participants to write down what they had imagined. The writing part of the exercise was included to ensure that participants imagined as instructed. We presented the imagination exercise as a way to guarantee understanding of the task-assignment decision to provide a plausible rationale that avoided experimental demand (Orne, 1962).

Participants in the imagine-other condition were to perform a parallel imagination exercise, except their instructions read,

In this exercise, we would like for you to *imagine how the other participant likely feels*. That is, imagine how the other



participant likely feels while waiting to hear which task he or she will be assigned, believing the tasks are to be assigned by chance. Imagine also how the other participant will likely feel when told which task he or she is to do. *Take about one minute* for this imagination exercise, getting as clear a sense as possible of how the other participant likely feels. Then . . .

Participants in the no-perspective condition read nothing about an imagination exercise. Folders containing the imagination-exercise information were prepared in advance so that the experimenter could remain unaware of whether a given participant received perspective-taking instructions and, if so, which ones. After receiving the written information about the opportunity to assign the tasks and the imagination exercise, participants were left alone until they had made their task assignment.

*Task assignment.* All participants read that they should indicate their task-assignment decision on the task assignment form provided. One line on the form said, "Participant assigned to *positive* consequences task \_\_\_\_\_"; the next line said, "Participant assigned to *neutral* consequences task \_\_\_\_\_." Instructions stated, "Please indicate your assignment of yourself and the other participant to the tasks by putting an *S* in one blank (for self) and an *O* in the other blank (for the other participant). Thank you." The response on this form was the major dependent measure.

*Empathic feelings.* Once participants filled out the assignment form and indicated that they were ready to proceed, the experimenter entered the research cubicle, collected the form, gave participants several questionnaires to complete concerning their feelings and reactions, and left—ostensibly to go prepare the tasks. The first questionnaire assessed feelings while making the task-assignment decision. Participants were asked to indicate how much they had felt each of a number of emotions by rating emotion adjectives on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*). The adjectives included six used in much previous research to measure empathy: *sympathetic*, *softhearted*, *warm*, *compassionate*, *tender*, and *moved* (see Batson, 1991, for a review).

*Report of how the task-assignment decision was made.* The second questionnaire assessed reactions to assigning the tasks. It included an open-ended question asking participants to describe how they made the task-assignment decision. Participants' indication on this question that they had used the coin (cross-checked by covert observation of the coin flip by the experimenter) was the basis for determining whether participants flipped the coin.

## Results

*Effectiveness of the perspective-taking manipulation.* To ensure that participants in the two perspective-taking

conditions adopted their assigned perspective, two independent judges (unaware of perspective condition) read and rated participants' written descriptions of what they had imagined during the imagination exercise. Each participant's description was rated by each judge on two 6-point scales, one scale for how much the description indicated adoption of an imagine-self perspective and one for how much the description indicated adoption of an imagine-other perspective (0 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much* for both ratings).

Correlations between the two judges' ratings were high for each scale, both  $r_s(46) > .92$ , indicating good interrater reliability. Therefore, we averaged the two judges' ratings for each participant on each scale. Comparison of these average scores on the two scales both within and across conditions indicated that the perspective-taking manipulation was highly effective. In the imagine-self condition, the mean average scores on the imagine-self and the imagine-other scales were 3.08 and 1.27, respectively; in the imagine-other condition, scores were 0.10 and 4.38, respectively. Both within-cell comparisons (the comparisons in each perspective condition between scores on the condition-relevant scale and scores on the other scale) and both between-group comparisons (the comparisons for each of the two scales between the scores in the scale-relevant condition and in the other condition) were statistically reliable (all  $p_s < .03$ ) and in the predicted direction. For only one of these four comparisons—the comparison between the imagine-self and imagine-other scales in the imagine-self condition—was  $p > .001$ . (Unless noted, all statistical tests are reported two-tailed.)

*Effect of perspective taking on task-assignment decisions.* Table 1 presents the proportion of participants in each perspective condition of Experiment 1, including the no-perspective condition, who assigned the other person to the positive-consequences task. Results are reported separately for those who flipped the coin and those who did not. Overall, there was a significant effect of experimental condition on task-assignment decisions,  $\chi^2(2, N = 72) = 7.60, p < .025$ . (All between-cell comparisons on proportional data are based on log-linear analyses; see Fienberg, 1980; Wickens, 1989. As in previous research using this task-assignment procedure, there were no significant sex effects, so results are reported collapsed across sex.) The proportion assigning the other participant to the positive-consequences task was .25 in both the no-perspective and the imagine-self conditions; it was .58 in the imagine-other condition. A more detailed analysis of responses in each condition follows.

*No perspective.* The no-perspective condition provided a baseline against which we could assess the effects of the two forms of perspective taking. Given that the

**TABLE 1: Proportion of Participants Assigning Other Person to Positive-Consequences Task in Each Perspective Condition of Experiment 1**

Did Participant Flip Coin?	Perspective Condition		
	No Perspective	Imagine Self	Imagine Other
No	.36 (4/11)	.11 (1/9)	.73 (11/15)
Yes	.15 (2/13)	.33 (5/15)	.33 (3/9)
Total	.25 (6/24)	.25 (6/24)	.58 (14/24)

NOTE: For the proportion measure, assignment of self to positive consequences was coded 0; assignment of the other participant to positive consequences was coded 1. The numbers in parentheses are the ratio of the number of participants assigning the other to the positive-consequences task divided by the total number of participants in the cell.

procedure in this condition was an exact replication of the procedure in Batson, Kobryniewicz, et al.'s (1997) Study 2, we expected to find evidence of moral hypocrisy rather than moral integrity—and we did. Roughly half (13) of the 24 participants in the no-perspective condition chose to flip the coin. Of the 11 who chose not to flip, 7 assigned themselves to the positive-consequences task, leaving the dull and boring task for the other participant; only 4 (.36) assigned the other person to the positive consequences. More important, of the 13 who chose to flip the coin, only 2 (.15) assigned the other person to the positive-consequences task. The proportion assigning themselves to the positive-consequences task after flipping the coin differed significantly from the .50 that would occur by chance,  $z = 2.50, p < .02$ . Apparently, in the absence of perspective-taking instructions, egoistic motives influenced the task assignment more than did moral motives. (As in prior studies using this procedure, most participants—.71 in the present experiment—said in retrospect that flipping the coin was the most morally right way to assign the tasks; very few—.08 in the present experiment—said that assigning oneself to the positive-consequences task was most moral.)

*Imagine self.* Contrary to what we were led to expect by those who advocate imagining oneself in the other's situation to increase morality, the impact of an imagine-self perspective seemed quite limited. The overall proportion of participants in the imagine-self condition who assigned the other to the positive-consequences task, .25 (6 of 24), exactly matched the proportion in the no-perspective condition. Apparently, the dominant motivation in this condition remained self-interested egoism. On one hand, bias of the coin flip was not as clear in the imagine-self condition as in the no-perspective condition. The proportion who assigned the other to the positive-consequences task after flipping the coin (.33) did not differ significantly from the .50 that would be expected by chance,  $z = 1.29, ns$ . But this proportion also

did not differ significantly from the .15 in the no-perspective condition,  $z = 1.07, ns$ . On the other hand, there was even clearer evidence of partiality toward the self among those who chose not to flip the coin. All but one assigned themselves to the positive-consequences task, leaving the dull and boring task for the other participant (see column 2 of Table 1).

*Imagine other.* In the imagine-other condition, the overall proportion assigning the other to the positive-consequences task was .58 (14 of 24), which was significantly higher than the .25 in both the no-perspective and the imagine-self conditions,  $z_s = 2.29, ps < .02$ . We had expected the imagine-other perspective to evoke empathy-induced altruistic motivation directed toward increasing the other participant's welfare, not to stimulate a desire to be fair. Consistent with this expectation, the unusually high proportion assigning the other to the positive-consequences task was not a result of an unusually fair coin flip. Of the nine who chose to flip the coin (a smaller proportion, .38, than in the other two conditions, where the combined proportion was .58), three (.33) assigned the other to the positive-consequences task. This proportion was exactly the same as the proportion in the imagine-self condition and did not differ reliably from the .15 in the no-perspective condition (see column 3 of Table 1).

It was the behavior of those who did not flip the coin that was unique in the imagine-other condition. Of the 15 participants who chose not to flip the coin, 11 (.73) assigned the other person to the positive consequences. As predicted, this proportion was significantly higher than the parallel proportion in the no-perspective condition (.36),  $z = 1.83, p < .04$ , one-tailed. It was also significantly higher than the proportion in the imagine-self condition (.11),  $z = 2.55, p < .015$ , one-tailed. Having imagined the other's feelings, participants in the imagine-other condition seemed more willing to eschew the procedural fairness of the coin and show partiality—not partiality toward themselves but toward the other participant. This pattern of responses was entirely consistent with what one would expect if the imagine-other perspective evoked empathy-induced altruistic motivation directed toward the goal of increasing the other's welfare.

Further supporting this interpretation, among participants who did not flip the coin, scores on an index of self-reported empathy created by averaging responses to the six empathy adjectives (*sympathetic, softhearted, warm, compassionate, tender, and moved*; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .90$ ) were, as predicted, significantly higher in the imagine-other condition ( $M = 4.16$ ) than in the no-perspective condition ( $M = 3.12$ ),  $t(24) = 1.86, p < .04$ , one-tailed. They were also significantly higher in the imagine-other condition than in the imagine-self condition ( $M = 2.40$ ),  $t(22) = 2.57, p < .01$ , one-tailed. Moreover, in the imagine-

other condition, scores on the empathy index were significantly positively correlated with assigning the other participant to the positive-consequences task,  $r(22) = .60, p < .01$ . Of interest, and again consistent with what the empathy-altruism hypothesis would predict, in this condition (and only in this condition), scores on the empathy index were significantly negatively correlated with choosing to flip the coin,  $r(22) = -.53, p < .01$ .

Finally, when asked in retrospect, .58 of participants in the imagine-other condition reported that assigning the other to the positive consequences task was the most morally right thing to do, whereas only .17 of those in the no-perspective condition and .25 of those in the imagine-self condition said this,  $\chi^2(2, N = 72) = 10.50, p < .005$ . In the latter two conditions, .71 and .63, respectively, thought that flipping the coin was most moral, whereas among participants in the imagine-other condition, only .33 thought this,  $\chi^2(2, N = 72) = 7.54, p < .03$ . Whether these retrospective reports reflect the effect of the imagine-other instructions on perceptions of morality or simply the effect of one's own action on perceptions of morality, we cannot say. It seems possible, however, that the empathy felt for the other participant in the imagine-other condition tipped the balance away from a morality of justice (Kohlberg, 1976) and toward a morality of care (Gilligan, 1982).

### Discussion

In Experiment 1, we found that an imagine-self perspective, the form of perspective taking advocated by religious teachers, moral philosophers, and moral psychologists as a stimulus to morality, had little effect on task-assignment behavior. Participants induced to adopt this perspective were no more likely to assign the other participant to the positive-consequences task than were participants in the no-imagination condition. This lack of effect did not seem to be due to an ineffective experimental manipulation. Analysis of what participants wrote on the imagination exercise clearly indicated that most participants in this condition did indeed imagine themselves in the other participant's situation.

In contrast to the very weak effect of an imagine-self perspective, an imagine-other perspective had a clear, strong effect on the behavior of those who did not flip the coin. Across the other two conditions, 5 of 20 participants who did not flip assigned the other participant to the positive-consequences task (.25); in the imagine-other condition, 11 of 15 did (.73).

Participants in the imagine-other condition were more likely than those in the other two conditions to assign the other to the positive-consequences task. Still, their task assignment decisions did not appear to be due to an increased desire to be fair. Instead, their decisions appeared to be a function of empathy-induced altruistic

motivation. Their reported empathy correlated negatively with flipping the coin and positively with assigning the other to the positive-consequences task. This other-oriented partiality was precisely what we would expect if participants in this condition experienced increased altruistic motivation to enhance the other's welfare (also see Batson et al., 1995).

Why did the imagine-self perspective, widely touted as a stimulus to morality, have such a small effect in Experiment 1? Is it possible that those extolling the virtues of this form of perspective taking are simply wrong? We suspect more. The moral dilemma faced by participants in Experiment 1 was of a particular type: Procedural justice could be realized if one flipped the coin and abided by the result, but distributive justice could not. One person had to be assigned to the positive-consequences task and the other to the dull, boring, neutral-consequences task. Moreover, the preassignment plight of both participants was exactly the same; each faced the prospect of being assigned either to a more desirable or to a less desirable task. In a symmetrical dilemma such as this, to imagine oneself in the place of the other participant may not lead one to give more weight to the other participant's interests as morality requires. Instead, it may lead one to focus on one's own interests.

If the ineffectiveness of the imagine-self perspective in Experiment 1 was due to the symmetrical nature of the dilemma, then an imagine-self perspective should be more effective in stimulating morality when one's own and the other's initial situations are not the same. When each is in the same initial situation, imagining oneself in the other's place may lead one to focus on one's own interests, not the other's. When the situations differ—when, for example, the other's need is clearly greater than one's own—imagining oneself in the other's place may provide insight into what it is like to be in the other's position of disadvantage and, as a result, lead to a more productive focus on the other's interests. To illustrate, when considering whether to vote for an increase in one's own taxes to fund a job-training program for the unemployed, imagining oneself in the place of someone in need of a job may stimulate moral action.

### EXPERIMENT 2

To test the idea that an imagine-self perspective may be effective in stimulating morality when one is initially in a position of advantage relative to another with whom one's interests conflict, we conducted a second experiment. As in Experiment 1, participants were led to believe that they and another participant would perform tasks. In Experiment 2, however, participants learned that they and the other participant had been initially assigned to "asymmetrical" consequences, which meant that they would receive two raffle tickets for each correct



answer on their task and the other participant would receive nothing. Participants were then given the chance to change the consequences to "symmetrical" if they wished, which meant that they and the other participant would both receive one raffle ticket for each correct answer on their tasks.

We did not include an imagine-other condition in Experiment 2 because we already had clear, consistent evidence concerning the effects of this form of perspective taking. Results of three experiments had indicated that an imagine-other perspective leads to empathy-induced altruistic motivation, not to increased fairness (Batson et al., 1995, Experiments 1 & 2; our Experiment 1). At issue in Experiment 2 was the possibility that an imagine-self perspective could stimulate moral behavior in individuals in an initial position of relative advantage.

We included the coin flip option in Experiment 2 even though we expected this option to rarely be used. The symmetrical consequences provided a conspicuous form of distributive justice, so participants wishing to be fair could do so by choosing to change to symmetrical consequences. Indeed, we thought that participants in Experiment 2 might well perceive a coin flip as a lame attempt to appear moral without having to give up their position of advantage.

We were not able to think of a meaningful way to introduce a symmetrical condition into the procedure of Experiment 2. Therefore, we were not able to provide a direct test of the role of symmetry in moderating the effect of an imagine-self perspective on morality. Rather, the goal was simply to test the idea that an imagine-self perspective will lead to more moral behavior on the part of individuals in an initial position of advantage.

Our prediction for the effect of an imagine-self perspective in Experiment 2 was essentially the same as the prediction that was unsupported in Experiment 1. We expected that participants induced to imagine themselves in the other participant's situation would be more likely to act morally than would participants given no perspective-taking instructions. That is, they would be more likely to change from their position of advantage (asymmetrical) to the fair and equal distribution of resources (symmetrical).

### Method

**Participants.** Participants in Experiment 2 were 48 general psychology students (32 women, 16 men) at the University of Kansas. They received credit toward a course requirement. Using a randomized block procedure, we assigned 24 participants to the no-perspective and 24 to the imagine-self perspective conditions (16 women, 8 men to each). Based on probes during debriefing, 6 additional students (2 women, 4 men) were dropped from the design and replaced because they

expressed doubts either about the presence of a second participant or about the purpose of the research. As had been true for Experiment 1, more women than men were included in the sample because two of the three experimenters were women. Once again, there was no reliable sex effect (either main effect or interaction).

**Procedure.** Participation was by individual appointment. On arrival, participants were met by a same-sex experimenter and escorted to a research cubicle on another floor of the building. The experimenter explained that two participants were taking part in the study and it was important that they not talk to or even see each other; therefore, each was being met at a different location. In reality, there was no second participant.

Once seated in the research cubicle, participants were left alone to read a written introduction. The introduction explained that the study was part of a research project on the effects of task characteristics:

In this particular study, we are focusing on the effects of *symmetrical* and *asymmetrical* task consequences. When consequences are symmetrical, all people in a situation receive the same consequences; when consequences are asymmetrical, different people in a situation receive different consequences. The consequences we are using are positive, meaning that correct responses are rewarded; there is no penalty or punishment for incorrect responses. . . .

The total possible reward in each research session is the same, so if you are in a *symmetrical* consequences condition, then you will receive *one* reward for each correct answer on your task; the other participant will receive *one* reward for each correct answer on his or her task. If you are in an *asymmetrical* consequences condition, then one of you will receive *two* rewards for each correct answer on your task; the other will receive *no* reward for correct answers.

To ensure that you care about the consequences of your performance, it is necessary to use real rewards. The rewards we are using in this study are raffle tickets. The prize in the raffle is a \$30 gift certificate at the store of your choice. Only participants in this study are eligible for this raffle, so if you receive a number of tickets you have a good chance of winning a gift certificate.

**Opportunity to choose the task consequences.** After participants finished reading the introduction, the experimenter returned, answered any questions, asked participants to name the store from which they would like a gift certificate were they to win the raffle, and gave them a folder containing an information sheet describing the assignment of task consequences. Participants were left alone to read this sheet, which began,

There is one aspect of the procedure of this study that we purposely did not explain earlier but about which we can tell you now. In addition to studying the effect of task

consequences—symmetrical or asymmetrical—on feelings and reactions, we are also interested in studying the effect of having a choice about whether consequences are symmetrical or asymmetrical. To this end, in some sessions, one of the two participants is given a chance to decide whether to keep the initial assignment randomly made by chance or to change this assignment. The other participant is entirely unaware of this opportunity to choose, simply being told that the assignment was made by chance.

As you have probably guessed by now, *you* are the participant in this session who has a choice about whether to keep the initial assignment made by chance or to change this assignment. The initial assignment made by chance for the present session is as follows:

\_\_\_\_\_ ; *you* will get \_\_\_\_\_ raffle ticket(s) for each correct response on your task, and the *other participant* will get \_\_\_\_\_ raffle ticket(s) for each correct response on his or her task.

But you can change this assignment if you wish. If you change the assignment, it will be:

\_\_\_\_\_ ; *you* will get \_\_\_\_\_ raffle ticket(s) for each correct response on your task, and the *other participant* will get \_\_\_\_\_ raffle ticket(s) for each correct response on his or her task.

For all participants, the initial assignment handwritten in the first blank was *Asymmetrical*. The two subsequent blanks had handwritten numbers specifying that the participant would receive 2 raffle tickets for each correct response and the other participant would receive 0 for each correct response. Thus, all participants, ostensibly by chance, were placed in a position of initial advantage. Information written in the second section specified that if the participant wished to change the assignment, then it would become *Symmetrical*, meaning that the participant would receive 1 raffle ticket for each correct response and the other participant would also receive 1.

As in Experiment 1, participants were presented with a coin (a quarter) to flip if they wished and were reminded that the decision whether to change the assignment or to accept the initial assignment was entirely up to them. They also were reminded that their anonymity was ensured.

*Perspective-taking manipulation.* Participants in the *imagine-self condition* next read exactly the same information as in Experiment 1 about engaging in a brief imagination exercise in which “we would like for you to *imagine yourself in the place of the other participant*” (except that the information referred to “consequences” instead of “tasks”), ostensibly “to be sure you understand the task assignment decision you will make.” As in Experiment 1, participants were instructed to imagine for about 1 min and then write down in the space at the top of the next page what they had imagined. Participants in the *no-imagination condition* read nothing about an imagine

exercise. As before, the experimenter was unaware whether a given participant received perspective-taking instructions.

*Assignment of consequences.* Once participants completed the imagination exercise—or not—they filled out an enclosed Assignment of Consequences form. On this form, participants were asked to check one of two options: “I wish to accept the consequences initially assigned” or “I wish to change the consequences assignment.” Participants also were asked to specify, based on their decision, what the consequences for the session would be—symmetrical or asymmetrical—by circling the appropriate choice.

*Report of how the assignment decision was made.* After filling out the assignment form, participants completed the same questionnaires used in Experiment 1, with minor wording changes to accommodate the different assignment decision. As before, the reaction questionnaire included the open-ended question asking participants to describe how they made the assignment decision, which was the basis for determining whether participants flipped the coin.

### Results and Discussion

Table 2 presents the proportion of participants in the no-perspective and the imagine-self conditions of Experiment 2 who chose to change the consequences from asymmetrical—where they would receive double reward and the other participant would receive nothing—to symmetrical—where they and the other participant would receive the same moderate reward. Results are reported separately for those who flipped the coin and those who did not. Overall, there was a highly significant effect of experimental condition on the assignment decision,  $\chi^2(1, N = 48) = 11.09, p < .005$ . The proportion changing to the symmetrical consequences was .38 in the no-perspective condition and .83 in the imagine-self condition. (In retrospect, .67 of participants in the no-perspective condition and .83 in the imagine-self condition reported that switching to the symmetrical consequences was the most morally right thing to do.)

As expected, when given an opportunity to change from asymmetrical (unfair advantage) consequences to symmetrical (fair) consequences, few participants in Experiment 2 chose to flip the coin. Only 7 of the 48 participants (.15) flipped, 5 in the no-perspective condition and 2 in the imagine-self condition. (And only .10 thought flipping the coin was the most moral thing to do.) The small number flipping made statistical tests of the fairness of the flip inappropriate; still, it is worth noting that the coin flip seemed fair in each condition. There was not the clear deviation from .50 that has been taken as evidence of moral hypocrisy (Batson et al., 1999;

**TABLE 2: Proportion of Participants Changing the Task Consequences to Symmetrical in Each Perspective Condition of Experiment 2**

Did Participant Flip Coin?	Perspective Condition	
	No Perspective	Imagine Self
No	.37 (7/19)	.86 (19/22)
Yes	.40 (2/5)	.50 (1/2)
Total	.38 (9/24)	.83 (20/24)

NOTE: For the proportion measure, choosing to accept the asymmetrical consequences was coded 0; choosing to change to the symmetrical consequences was coded 1. The numbers in parentheses are the ratio of the number of participants changing to the symmetrical consequences divided by the total number of participants in the cell.

Batson, Kobrynowicz, et al., 1997). This may have been because in the present procedure the personal cost of being fair was perceived to be less. Participants who chose to change to the symmetrical consequences would still receive some reward, which had not been true for participants who assigned themselves to the neutral-consequences task in the previous studies.

Clearly, results of Experiment 2 supported the claim that an imagine-self perspective can stimulate fairness. All participants in this experiment were placed in an initial position of advantage relative to another with whom their interests were in conflict; they were then given a chance to surrender their advantage, opting instead for a fair and equal distribution of rewards. Participants who faced this choice without perspective-taking instructions tended to retain their position of advantage. For them, self-interested motives seemed dominant. Asking participants to imagine themselves in the other person's situation had a dramatic effect. Those asked to imagine were far more likely to give up their position of advantage in favor of an equal distribution. For them, the desire to be fair seemed stronger.

#### GENERAL DISCUSSION

The belief that imagining yourself in another's shoes can stimulate morality is widespread. It is found in religious teachings, moral philosophy, and moral psychology. Yet, insofar as we know, this belief has never before been put to direct experimental test.

To provide an initial test, in Experiment 1, we placed participants in the simple task-assignment dilemma developed by Batson, Kobrynowicz, et al. (1997). In addition, we took advantage of prior social psychological research on perspective taking, which has identified two different perspectives toward another person's situation: an imagine-self and an imagine-other perspective.

To assess the effects of each of these forms of perspective taking, task-assignment decisions made by participants instructed to adopt one of these perspectives were

compared to decisions made by participants not given perspective-taking instructions. In the absence of perspective-taking instructions, the dominant motive appeared to be self-interest. Even among participants who displayed the appearance of fairness by flipping the coin, task assignment was heavily biased in their favor.

Contrary to what we were led to expect, instructing participants to imagine themselves in the place of the other participant before making the task-assignment decision did little to strengthen the desire to be fair (moral). Among those in the imagine-self condition who flipped the coin, assignment of self to the positive-consequences task was a little less extreme than in the no-perspective condition; among those who did not flip the coin, it was a little more extreme. The net result was that the overall proportion assigning themselves to the positive-consequences task was exactly the same in the imagine-self condition as in the no-perspective condition. It did not seem possible to attribute the lack of effect to an ineffective experimental manipulation.

Although an imagine-self perspective had little effect on task-assignment behavior in Experiment 1, an imagine-other perspective had a clear, strong effect on the behavior of those who did not flip the coin. Across the other two conditions, 5 of 20 participants who did not flip decided to assign the other participant to the positive-consequences task; in the imagine-other condition, 11 of 15 did. The effect on task assignment of imagining the other's feelings did not appear to be due to an increase in the desire to be fair but to an increase in empathy felt for the other and, as a result, an increase in altruistic motivation.

In Experiment 2, participants were placed in a position of initial advantage relative to the other participant. Ostensibly, random assignment to asymmetrical consequences put them in line for double reward, whereas the other participant would receive nothing. Participants were then given the option of giving up their privilege in favor of symmetrical consequences, meaning that both they and the other participant would each receive moderate reward. Under these circumstances, adopting an imagine-self perspective did seem to stimulate moral behavior. Compared to participants not induced to imagine, participants who first imagined themselves in the other participant's situation were far more likely to give up their position of advantage—and half their reward—in favor of an equal distribution of rewards.

#### *Why the Different Effect in the Two Experiments?*

The dramatically different effect of exactly the same induction of an imagine-self perspective suggests that this form of perspective taking is neither universally effective nor universally ineffective as a stimulus to morality. In Experiment 1, where the participant's own



situation was essentially the same as the other's situation, imagining oneself in the other's place did not lead participants to be, in Johnson's (1993) words, "morally sensitive." Instead of leading participants to give more weight to the other participant's interests and desires, it seemed to focus attention on their own interests and desires—on how much they would prefer the positive consequences—and they acted accordingly. In Experiment 2, where the participant was initially in a more advantageous situation than the other, imagining oneself in the other's place did seem to stimulate moral sensitivity. It seemed to sensitize participants to the other's plight and to prompt them to act as they might wish the other to act had the roles been reversed, just as the Golden Rule prescribes.

What features of the dilemma in Experiment 2 accounted for this effect? Was it the fact that one's own and the other participant's circumstances differed that made an imagine-self perspective effective, or was it the more specific fact that the other was in a position of relative disadvantage? Given that these two features varied together in Experiment 2, we cannot say with confidence. It is, however, our suspicion that the other's position of relative disadvantage was the key. Had the other been placed in the position of initial advantage, and participants then been given a chance to change the consequences to symmetrical, we doubt that imagining themselves in the other's position would have deterred them from improving their lot at the other's expense; that is, we doubt that many would have done as they might wish the other to do to them were the roles reversed—leave them in the position of advantage. Rather than following the Golden Rule, we suspect that disadvantaged participants would adopt a principle of equal treatment for all, and do so independent of perspective taking.

We also suspect that participants in the imagine-self condition would have been less willing to give up their position of advantage had the only alternative been to advantage the other participant—by, for example, having the other receive two raffle tickets for each correct response while they received only one. In this case, as in Experiment 1, we suspect that imagining oneself in the other's place might heighten awareness of one's desire to be in the more advantageous position.

If our suspicions are correct, then an imagine-self perspective may have a limited, but still quite important, role in stimulating morality. Imagining oneself in the other's place may provide a corrective lens for the specific moral myopia to which a position of advantage is prone. The moral myopia of the advantaged is legendary. Those who, like *Candide*, live in the best of all possible worlds (Voltaire, 1759/1930) are not likely to trouble themselves thinking about the worlds in which others live. Those innocently born with a silver spoon in their

mouth are not likely to ask whether it is morally right to keep it there. If introducing an imagine-self perspective can effectively stimulate the moral sensitivity of persons of privilege, then it has done important work.

#### *Resistance to Imagining Oneself in the Other's Place*

This very effectiveness may, however, lead to a less salutary consequence. Persons of privilege, aware of the potential power of imagining themselves in the place of the less advantaged, may not simply neglect to adopt this perspective. They may actively resist it. If so, admonition or instruction to imagine oneself in the other's place is likely to fall on deaf ears. This possibility, which raises the specter of motivation to avoid imagining oneself in the place of the less fortunate to avoid moral motivation (analogous to motivation to avoid empathy to avoid altruistic motivation; see Shaw, Batson, & Todd, 1994), seems worth pursuing in future research.

#### CONCLUSION

What have we learned about the use of perspective taking to stimulate morality? Many situations of moral conflict are symmetrical; your wants and others' wants are much the same, but if you satisfy yours there will not be enough to satisfy theirs, and vice versa. In such situations, results of Experiment 1 suggest, putting yourself in their shoes may do little to stimulate you to act morally. If anything, it may focus you more intently on your wants, making you even more likely to ignore theirs. On the other hand, in an asymmetrical situation, specifically one in which you are in a position of advantage, getting you to imagine yourself in the other's shoes may indeed stimulate moral action, as in Experiment 2. Religious teachers, moral philosophers, and moral psychologists who claim that imagining yourself in the other's place will stimulate morality appear to be right—some of the time.

#### NOTE

1. Moral motivation should not be equated or confused with *altruistic motivation*. The goal of the former is to act in accord with moral principles; the goal of the latter is to increase another's welfare (Batson, 1994). Research has documented the difference between these two distinct forms of prosocial motivation. Batson, Klein, Highberger, and Shaw (1995) found evidence that empathy-induced altruism—much like self-interested egoism—can conflict with and, at times, overpower moral motivation.

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Received July 2, 2002

Revision accepted October 14, 2002