# Moral Imagination and Metaphors:

# How Members of the LGBTQ+ Community Use Metaphors to Make Sense of Moral Dilemmas in the Age of COVID-19

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**Abstract**

As emerging moral dilemmas are expected to increase over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to increase understanding on moral imagination, which can help individuals navigate moral challenges. Previous research has shown metaphor to be an important element in moral imagination. This study aims to explore how LGBTQ+ individuals use metaphors in moral imagination when making sense of COVID-19 related emerging moral dilemmas. The LGBTQ+ community is taken as an exemplary case of cultivated moral imagination because of their known communal response to adversity and history of creative language-use. A virtual focus group was conducted, where 8 LGBTQ+ individuals were shown 2 drawings of moral dilemmas with corresponding questions that could stimulate moral imagination. A group discussion allowed participants to share their attitudes, views, and opinions. A metaphor analysis revealed 1) an overall development of moral imagination, 2) a difference in metaphor-use for both dilemmas, and 3) a difference in the extent of imagination used depending on which overarching metaphor was adhered to (controlled environment metaphor, bounded environment metaphor, and measuring and weighing metaphor). Metaphors of measuring and weighing seem to be in favour of a communal and engaged type of moral imagination, although no definite conclusions can be drawn. Future studies should determine whether similar metaphors are found in different groups. Nevertheless, these findings suggest that dilemma complexity, interplay between person and dilemma, and giving individuals room to explore, play a role in stimulating and developing moral imagination. Finally, this study suggest that certain metaphors may produce a greater sense of agency and stimulate more flexible and creative mindsets to deal with emerging moral dilemmas which could be informative for communication practices that spread to the larger public.

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# Introduction

During the 1960s and 1970s, research on the topic of morality increased significantly. This increase in interest on morality was ascribed to the turbulent social context at the time, with the civil rights movement, feminist movement, and anti-war protests (Rest, 1986). Current issues like the COVID-19 pandemic, climate crisis, political polarisation, and social justice movements, could account for yet another upsurge in research on morality. The present study examines how LGBTQ+ individuals make use of metaphors in moral imagination.

In broad terms, moral imagination is a psychological activity used to explore possible courses of action in morally challenging situations. Examining how metaphors are used in this is advantageous because they provide entry to implicit knowledge on the capacity for moral imagination while reflecting cultural and social influences of understanding (Moser, 2000). Considering the current social context, it is not unlikely that more moral dilemmas will emerge as conflicting values are believed to increase over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic (Borges et al., 2020) . This, therefore, calls for a need to skillfully deliberate these emerging moral dilemmas.

This study offers important theoretical insights into how moral imagination can help in making sense of emerging moral dilemmas. Current western cultural practices serve more vicious and detached imagination than communal and engaged imagination and, thus, individuals facing moral problems would benefit from a more original and flexible use of moral imagination to create new experiences that are more just and compassionate (Narvaez & Mrkva, 2014; Samuelson, 2008). Moreover, it is vital to be able to distinguish between more and less cultivated moral imagining, for example, in certain professions in which consequences of decisions, and accountability are of great importance, for instance in government decision-making or healthcare policy (Yurtsever, 2006).

The LGBTQ+ population is of particular interest because of their unique way of responding to adversity that is assumed to illustrate engaged and communal types of imagination. The central objective of this study is to explore how individuals of the LGBTQ+ community use metaphors in their moral imagination to make sense of emerging COVID-19 related moral dilemmas.

## Theoretical framework

### *The role of imagination in morality*

Johnson (2016) describes that, historically, from a moral sentiment perspective, moral judgements were based on collectively shared sentiments or feelings and not on moral laws derived from reason. For example, in Hume's view, only emotions can elicit actions in us; to make a moral judgement, we need to imagine ourselves in others' place to feel whether certain behaviour is morally acceptable or unacceptable. Smith elaborated further how imagination plays a part in moral judgements, which are based on feelings of approval from others. According to Smith, we need the capacity to empathize to gauge a sense of approval from others in a given situation, and we do this by imagining ourselves in the experiences of others. Even though this idea was not generally acknowledged, the role of imagination was considered essential within moral sentiment theories.

Fesmire (2003) discusses Dewey's work on the psychology of deliberation, which Dewey labelled dramatic rehearsal. He writes that according to Dewey, the use of imagination is the most essential function of moral deliberation because when faced with complicated situations, imagination allows us to 1) search for different ways to settle difficulties, 2) imagine ourselves acting out these different ways, and 3) rehearse the consequences while taking into account important factors, like particular interests or needs, until we find a sense of harmony in the rehearsed options and feel stimulated to act. Moreover, dramatic rehearsal is not guided by rules but takes a story-structured form, in

which the right way to act has to make aesthetic sense to someone's life-narrative and cannot be taken out of this context. Taken together, dramatic rehearsal of events we play out in our minds provides a meaningful insight into the central role that imagination plays in moral deliberation.

***Use of metaphors in moral imagination***

As mentioned earlier, moral imagination is the psychological activity used to mentally explore possible courses of action. Certain elements of this mental exploration can inform the process of moral reasoning, deliberation, and, eventually, action. Cognitive science research has provided insight into which elements are involved in moral imagination (Pardales, 2002). Johnson (1993) argues that there are four basic elements: the prototype structure of concepts, the framing of situations, metaphor, and narrative. A detailed explanation on all elements is beyond the scope of this paper. However, according to Johnson (1993) metaphor has the foremost imaginative character. Furthermore, metaphors are essential to moral imagination because they help us in understanding unfamiliar situations by expressing them in known situations, and, are known to play a role in analysing problems and synthesizing solutions to problems (Casakin, 2007; Ortony, 1993). For these reasons, metaphor will be discussed in relation to moral imagination.

A metaphor is generally known as a figure of speech used to understand one thing in terms of another (Southall, 2013). However, some claim that metaphors are not solely a characteristic of language. Cognitive linguists, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) state that the human conceptual system is largely metaphorical. In other words, how people think and act in everyday life is shaped by metaphors. To elaborate, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain how 'an argument', in Western culture, is understood through the concept of 'war'. This metaphor, 'ARGUMENT IS WAR', shapes how people perceive an argument and how they think, act, and talk about it (i.e. defending a claim, attacking a point, or winning or losing an

argument). Conversely, if another culture understood 'argument' not in terms of 'war' but, for instance, as 'a dance performance', they would perceive and, therefore, experience an argument in distinctly different ways. Moreover, metaphors arise from the spatial orientation our bodies have (e.g. our concept of up-down, front-back, near-far etc.). An example of this type of metaphor is 'MORE IS UP; LESS IS DOWN". From our human perspective, if you add more of a certain substance, the level goes up and vice versa. Phrases such as 'he is underage' or 'my income rose this year' arise from this type of metaphor. In essence, metaphors have a basis in our physical and cultural experiences and are more part of our everyday life than is thought as it helps shape our understanding and experience of things.

As mentioned above, metaphor plays a large part in how we use our moral imagination. Johnson (1993) elaborates on how our moral understanding is largely metaphorical in two ways. First, our central concepts of morality, such as actions, purpose, rights, duties, and will are all defined by metaphors. For instance, there is a wide-ranging metaphorical system through which we understand the basic concept of an event, including actions and purposes. Linguistic expressions of the 'event structure' metaphor show that we can understand events as motions along a path from one location to another (e.g. "We're getting nowhere," or "Their project is coming along quickly"). Therefore, any moral concept that is related to actions will be metaphorical. Second, common metaphors provide a structure through which we understand morally challenging situations. Systematic metaphors lie at the basis of how we experience and understand a concept. For instance, the concept of morality could be understood through metaphors such as 'morality is accounting' or 'morality is an artwork'. These systematic metaphors each involve a set of beliefs, opinions, and behaviours related to the metaphor that are significant in how an individual perceives a morally challenging situation (Holland & Quinn, 1987). In sum, metaphors are essential for moral

imagination because they define our central concepts of morality and they provide structure in our understanding of morally challenging situations.

## Case description

### *COVID-19 context*

In the present study, the use of moral imagination to make sense of emerging moral dilemmas is specifically concerned with COVID-19 related-events. Although moral imagination can, indeed, be relevant beyond this context, the COVID-19 pandemic is especially fruitful as a case for the study of moral imagination because it has given rise to an unprecedented situation of widespread uncertainties where conflicting values increase, and in which it becomes unclear to individuals what courses of actions are most fitting. Moreover, the LGBTQ+ population was chosen as an example of more cultivated moral imagination which will be further substantiated in the following sections.

### *The LGBTQ+ community*

The LGBTQ+ community has a unique way of responding to adversity that is interesting in the context of highly individualised western cultures. Bartoş and Langdridge (2019) synthesized 21 narrative studies on resilience within sexual minorities, in which they found that resilience was consistently conceptualized in relational terms, such as families, peers, friends, communities, as opposed to individual psychological factors. Community resilience, or collective resilience, is the ability of a community to develop, sustain, and engage in resources that helps its members thrive in unpredictable and uncertain environments (Magis, 2010). Previous research has established the significant role community resilience plays in the LGBTQ+ population in the face of traumatic events. Molina et al. (2019) reported that, following the Orlando-shooting in 2016, where 49 people were killed in a gay nightclub, community resilience grew stronger through the coming

together of civilians, community leaders, social services, law enforcements and religious institutions to support and help.

***Communal imagination.*** The apparent focus on community within the LGBTQ+ population could account for a more cultivated moral imagination. In their paper on the development of moral imagination, Narvaez and Mrkva (2014) distinguish between different types of imagination: vicious, detached, engaged, and communal. Vicious and detached imaginations serve ethical orientations that are either with an aggressive or emotionally disengaged stance towards the world. On the other hand, engaged and communal imagination serve orientations that focus on the present with positive interactions that extends to collaboration. Considering the supportive environment within the LGBTQ+ community, specifically in adverse situations, it seems plausible that this gives way to a type of imagination that is more engaged and communal.

### *Language-use & LGBTQ+*

Moving on now to consider the creative use of language by the LGBTQ+ community that has been documented within the field of sociolinguistics. Calder (2020) examines the development of literature on language-use in queer individuals (i.e. 'queer' being an umbrella term for the range of identities outside of the normative heterosexual binary). He mentions that early researchers argued that gay speakers escape derogatory terms by creatively using language. Notably, in the 1950s the positive term 'gay' emerged which was being used more frequently as opposed to the more medical and pathologizing term 'homosexual'. Furthermore, it was argued that gay-slang was used as a strategy to deal with increasing hostile attitudes towards lesbian and gay individuals, promoting solidarity within their community. Calder (2020) continues how more recent work highlights the importance of language-use in the construction of gender and sexual identities, and, how queer speakers are constrained by mainstream gender norms, but also use language as a form of resistance. A

recent study by Jenkins et al. (2019) examined how members of the LGBTQ+ community linguistically responded to the Orlando-shooting of 2016, by analysing online tweets. It was found that they used creative language to engage in collective identity construction (by demonstrating unity through love), community building (through a focus on pride), and resistance (by denying platitudes). Taken together, the LGBTQ+ community has a history of using language in a creative way which serves multiple purposes, including subverting disparagement, identity construction, in-group solidarity, and resistance.

**Study objectives / Research question**

On top of existing mental health issues, preventative measures, like social distancing, are shown to have a severe impact on mental health (Hossain et al., 2020). Therefore, it is of great importance to broaden our understanding on how people in various contexts cope in situations that are morally challenging. One way that people make sense of an increasingly complex environment and deal with moral dilemmas is by using moral imagination. The LGBTQ+ group is taken to be an exemplary case of cultivated moral imagination because of (a) their known communal and engaged response to adversity and (b) a history of creative language-use. Using metaphors as a lens to explore moral imagination is significant as it provides a tool to access knowledge that is rooted in context, experience, and values, and is reliable because of its subconscious nature, which leaves little room for self-presentation (Moser, 2000). The findings of this study could inform educational practices that aid in the development of this skill. The following research question was posed:

- How do LGBTQ+ individuals use metaphors in moral imagination to make sense of moral dilemmas during COVID-19?

# Method

The current study adopted a qualitative approach that incorporated an exemplary case design. A focus group was used to explore the metaphor-use in moral imagination of individuals of the LGBTQ+ in their sense-making of emerging moral dilemmas during COVID-19. The focus group audio recording was transcribed, and an analysis of the metaphors was conducted, based on Schmitt's (2005) systematic metaphor analysis. The study was approved in June of 2021 by the ethics committee of the faculty of Behavioural, Management, and Social Sciences of the University of Twente.

## Background

The present study was a follow-up study of an international comparative study conducted at the University of Twente, in the Netherlands. This comparative study had four measurement moments where moral imagination was elicited using visual prompts. In this study, 34 participants were shown a personal and a collective dilemma and asked to answer questions about the dilemmas. The present study builds on this last study and uses the same visual prompts and questions. The prompts were designed by a visual artist who was specifically selected for the international comparative study. Eight drawings were created that portrayed potential dilemmas, which were used to stimulate moral imagination. Opting for drawings instead of pictures was preferable as it allowed for (1) more control over what situations would be depicted, (2) more ambiguity in the visual prompts, and (3) inviting of narrative in participants. This projective technique of using visual prompts is similar to the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), which is used for uncovering thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that are not consciously perceived. Furthermore, the questions for the survey were also designed specifically for the comparative study. The opening question (i.e. "what is happening in the picture?") was intentionally narrative pointed whereas the questions that

followed were designed to elicit moral imagination (the complete set of questions is shown in Appendix A).

**Study design**

The present study followed an exploratory qualitative approach as it provides for greater depth and understanding of the views of participants. This qualitative research was conducted from a social constructivist paradigm. In social constructivism, knowledge and truth is viewed as something that is constructed as opposed to something to be discovered and emphasizes everyday interactions of people within society. Social constructivist seek to understand the world by looking at subjective meanings and incorporate specific contexts to understand the cultural and historical setting of individuals (Andrews, 2012; Creswell, 2007). The current research looked into the complex phenomenon of moral imagination through the use of metaphors, thus, this paradigm provided for a greater depth of the views of participants, who construct meaning out of inherently social embedded moral dilemmas. To elicit moral imagination in of moral dilemmas, two drawings of the original study were used in the current study. More or less ambiguous visual drawings allowed for an openness to read into the portrayed situations, eventually, resulting in different interpretations of the dilemmas depending on the individual. This feature was essential because the extent of what can be uncovered about attitudes, values, and views is subject to what an individual sees in social situations. To collect the data, a virtual focus group was conducted. This method was chosen because it facilitated a more naturalistic use of language, and thus metaphors, as opposed to written answers. Moreover, a group discussion allows for more elaborate and detailed answers and result in a richer use of metaphors.

**Participants and recruitment**

The study was conducted in June of 2021. A purposive and snowballing sampling method was used. The aim was to recruit 6-8 participants as this has been suggested to be the

optimum group size for focus group discussions (Bloor et al., 2001). Eight participants were recruited through social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. The inclusion criteria were self-identifying as part of the LGBTQ+ community, currently living in the Netherlands, and age (≥16 years).

## Procedure

The entire study was done online. After participants were recruited, they were sent information about the virtual focus group. Three days prior to the meeting they were sent two drawings and nine questions, and a link to fill out a consent form. The virtual focus group took place via Microsoft Teams. The researcher functioned as a moderator during the focus group. Steps for the moderator to guide the focus group were based on the work of Vaughn et al. (1996). The moderator started with a brief introduction, including a statement of the purpose and guidelines for the focus group. After the introduction, participants were asked to share their name and a small fact about themselves in which the moderator preceded. This served as a warm-up, to set the tone and activate participants. Following the warm-up, each drawing was shown separately, and the questions corresponding to the drawing were posed for the group so that a group discussion occurred. To avoid overburdening participants, the less complex dilemma was discussed first and the more complex dilemma second. The wrap-up and member check, after the group discussion, signalled the ending and gave the participants a chance to respond to how they perceived the focus group. Finally, the closing statements consisted of emphasizing anonymity of shared information, answering remaining questions, and expressing gratitude for participation.

## Materials

### *Drawings*

For the current study, two of the eight drawings of the original study were chosen (see Figure 1). The first drawing, which shows a funeral during the COVID-19 pandemic, depicts

issues that are collectively oriented as the impact of possible actions to be taken in this situation extend beyond just the individual. Similarly, the second drawing, presents issues that impacts individuals but offers the opportunity to reason and deliberate beyond individual interest. This drawing shows a post-COVID-19 situation of heightened surveillance. Both drawings show situations where it could be possible to reason beyond individual interest and include collective interest, this is particularly useful to see if communal and engaged imagination is present.

**Figure 1**

*Drawings of moral dilemmas*

**A**

**B**


*Note*. Panel A: Funeral during COVID-19 drawing depicts relatively less complex moral dilemmas. Panel B: Surveillance in 2025 drawing depicts relatively more complex moral dilemmas.

### *Questions*

The same questions that participants received prior to the focus group (see Appendix A) were presented one by one during the focus group. Initially, the participants were told they could respond to each other, and asked to share whether they agreed or disagreed with what was being said while being respectful towards the other participants. This allowed for a group discussion in which participants could share their interpretations, thoughts, deliberations, perspectives, and opinions without being dismissed. A good rapport between participants was important as this is known to be related to more honesty and disclosure (Kühne, 2018). The moderator engaged as little as possible in the conversation to avoid interjecting metaphors and reducing the risk of participants adopting metaphors used by the moderator. However, occasionally the moderator did engage to manage the speaking time or to ask participants to elaborate on certain answers. In these cases, the principles of the Clean Language technique were adopted which involved posing questions with the participants' exact words when asked to elaborate on answers, for example, 'what kind of X is that X?' or 'how do you know X ?' (X are the participant's exact words) (Tosey et al., 2014).

### Reflexivity statement

In qualitative research, the researcher is the tool through which a phenomenon is measured. For this reason, it is important to reflect on the social, cultural, and political context that influences the research. I, Esther Zaloumis, am a cisgender, straight, non-disabled, light-skinned woman of colour. Before conducting this study, I had no previous experience with doing qualitative research. Choosing the LGBTQ+ community as subject for my research came from being aware of and having certain characteristics that marginalize certain individuals in today's society. While acknowledging the privilege that other characteristics bring, I find myself in alliance with causes that promote greater equality. This mix of characteristics combined with a multicultural upbringing brings about in me a socially

progressive stance, in that I see the benefit and necessity for inclusive and diverse practices across society. Furthermore, another important consideration that influenced the approach of this study is that I am a student of positive psychology, a discipline that looks at positive human functioning and how people flourish. With respect to the participants, some I knew personally (i.e., either through previous work or study), others through acquaintances, and again others I had no prior relationship with whatsoever. None of the participants were aware of my personal reasons for doing the research or any personal goals.

**Analysis**

After the audio-recording of the focus group was transcribed, the transcript was read through multiple times to become familiarized with the content. The steps of the metaphor analysis were based on Schmitt's (2005) systematic metaphor analysis and involved 1) identifying linguistic metaphorical expressions (LME's) and 2) synthesizing collective metaphorical models into metaphorical concepts (MC's). The coding and analysis procedure was done at 3 different levels. First, the level of linguistic metaphorical expressions. Second, the level of metaphorical concepts and, last, the level of overarching themes found in metaphorical concepts. An online version of a Dutch dictionary, van Dale, was used in the process of identifying linguistic metaphorical expressions. This was done in the following order. After two rounds of underlining what the researcher understood to be metaphorical, the quotations where evaluated for meaning in the context of the conversation and then checked against in the dictionary for literal/basic level meaning. To illustrate, in relation to being watched by camera's, one participant mentioned the need to 'keep the balance in privacy' ( 'de balans in het privacy houden'). The word 'balans' or 'balance' in the context of the conversation relates to what acceptable proportions of privacy are in relation to fairness and personal freedom. However, the Dutch dictionary defines the word 'balans' as an even distribution of weight as well as a weighing scale consisting of two equal arms. Therefore,

the meaning in the context is an abstract balance between privacy and control but ‘balans’ also has a more literal and basic level meaning.

A word or phrase was identified as metaphorical when its meaning could be understood on a more basic level beyond the meaning in the context of the transcript. For example, in the sentence “I would be fine with working from home because going against it would be putting too much at stake.”, the first part is not metaphorical, but the second part is. ‘Working from home’ is a literal phrase and it would be difficult to understand on a more basic level beyond the meaning in the context. However, ‘putting too much at stake’, a phrase that in this context refers to a certain risk, can be understood on a more basic level (e.g. the act of putting an object in a place). Similarly, ‘going against it’ is metaphorical as the context-meaning of this phrase (i.e. opposing or being defiant) contrasts a literal explanation which would involve the act of going or moving in an opposite direction of something. Therefore, words or phrases are identified as metaphorical; a target area is mapped onto a source area, like the abstract areas of risking something or being defiant that is mapped onto literal/basic meanings of the act of putting an object in place or moving oneself in an opposite direction.

While identifying the LME’s, notes were taken of what the source and target area of each LME could be which was necessary for the second part of the analysis; synthesizing metaphorical models into metaphorical concepts. All metaphorical expressions that relate to the same mapping of a target area onto a source area were grouped. This group of metaphorical expressions made up the metaphorical concepts, in the same notation as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) use in Metaphors We Live By: ‘Target is source’, e.g. LIFE IS A GAMBLING GAME. For instance, the phrases ‘putting too much at stake’ and ‘you’re not really losing too much’ both belong to the same metaphorical concept of LIFE IS A GAMBLING GAME. The process of developing MC’s was an iterative process of constant

comparison and circular refinement. This process was part guided by the theory and part interpretive. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) build up their theory from conceptual metaphors in English language. Thus, only examples of metaphorical concepts they elaborated on that made sense when translated to Dutch could be used. The phrase ‘so that you don’t fall into the deep right away’ (‘dat je dan niet meteen in het diepe valt’) belongs to the metaphorical concept SAD IS DOWN. This is an example of a clear and obvious fit with a metaphorical concept that was directly informed by the theory. In contrast, some metaphors required a combination of a theory-driven and interpretative approach. To illustrate, when looking at the LME ‘the government throws tons of money at it’ (‘de overheid smijt er bakken met geld tegenaan’), Lakoff and Johnson (1980) demonstrate that we understand nonhuman entities by giving them human traits. ‘The government’ in this example is understood of as a person. So, the metaphorical concept could be THE GOVERNMENT IS A PERSON. However, this MC does not fully exhaust the LME because ‘throwing tons of money’ is an essential part of it. Therefore, through interpretation and including the LME in the context of the conversation the MC that is distilled from it is THE GOVERNMENT IS A CARELESS PERSON.

The unit of analysis was the metaphorical concept. These were first analyzed per dilemma and then thematically. This second thematic analysis was done by using steps of Braun and Clarke (2006). An inductive approach was used here with no previous existing coding frame to find latent themes within the list of metaphorical concepts. After the initial MCs were generated, the search for themes began by sorting through MCs and grouping those who seemed related. This was done in an iterative way by going back and forth between the transcript, the list of MCs and the emerging themes while reviewing and adjusting these emerging themes until all MC’s were placed under a theme. The final list of themes was used to create networks of interrelated themes and their respective group of metaphorical concepts.

# Findings

This study found a distinct difference between the first and the second dilemma in the way individuals of the LGBTQ+ community used metaphors in their moral imagination. Metaphor-use was substantially more profound and pervasive in the second dilemma considering the frequencies in LME's and MC's compared to the first dilemma, (see Table 1 for frequencies). However, in both dilemmas the overall themes in MC's discussed were the same, apart from three themes that were exclusively related to dilemma 2 (Society, Rights, and Value). The findings that emerged from the analysis can be placed in a frame of three realms: being (situating the dilemma), feeling (sensory and bodily response), and doing (reflected action) (see Figure 1). Each realm consists of a network of connected themes and metaphorical concepts. However, how each network is structured and specific types of metaphors it contains differs for the three realms. Generally, the findings show that the realm of being has four relatively distinct groups that are still connected through a few metaphorical concepts and consist of mostly ontological metaphors, with some structural and one orientational metaphor. Likewise, the realm of feeling has two distinct but connected groups and consists of almost exclusively of structural metaphors. Conversely, the realm of doing has a considerably more interwoven network and has a mix of types of metaphors, and evidently more orientational metaphors than the other two realms (See Figure 1). In the following sections, each realm with its respective clusters is elaborated on separately.

**Table 1**

*Frequency Distribution in Use of Metaphors in Moral Imagination of Members of the LGBTQ+ Community*

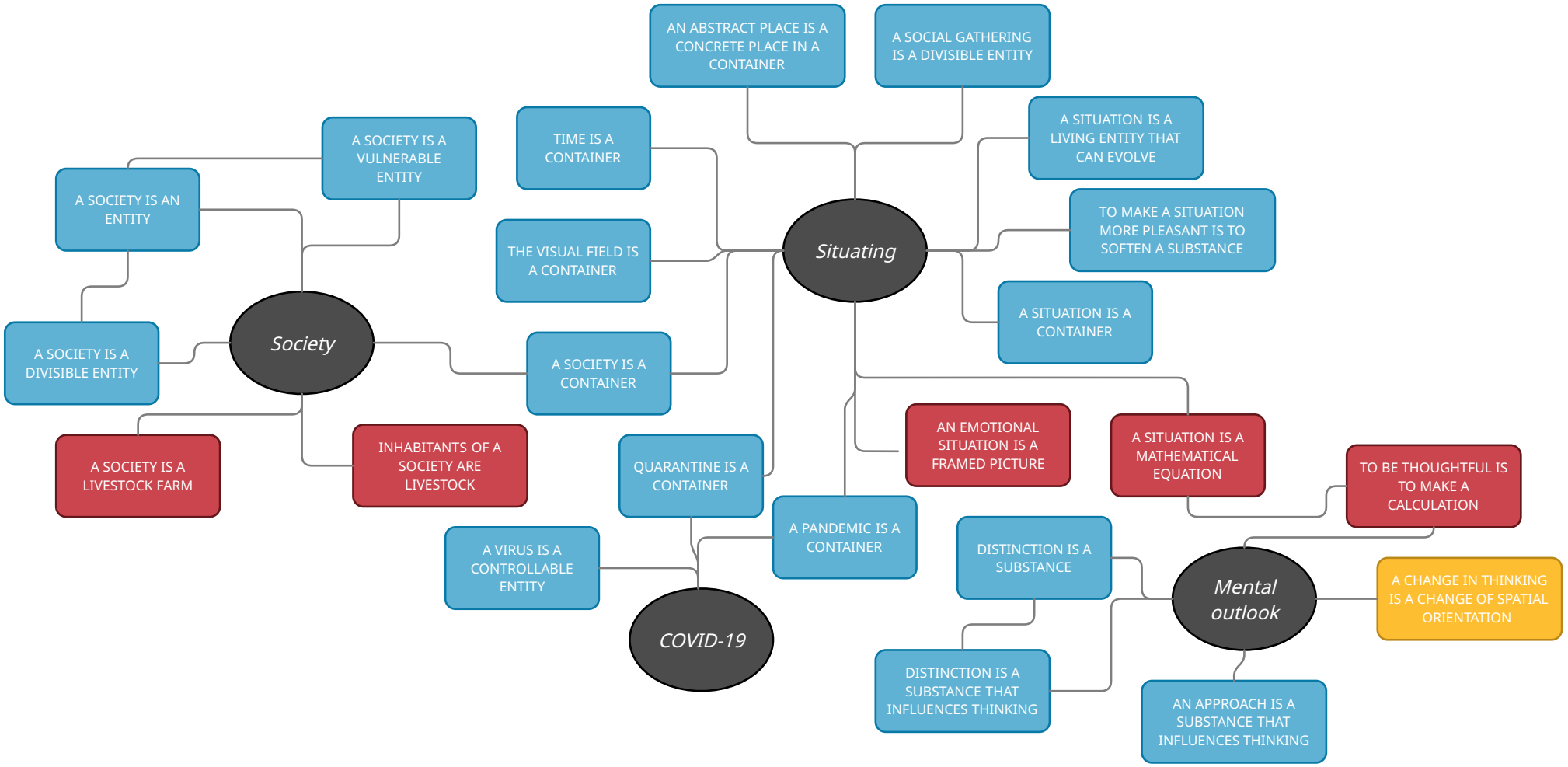
| Level of Analysis | Dilemma 1 | | Dilemma 2 | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % |
| LME[a] | 51 | 27.7 | 136 | 72.7 | 187 | - |
| MC[b] | 33 | 29.9 | 83 | 88.7 | 97 | - |
| Ontological | 20 | 36.4 | 47 | 85.6 | 55 | - |
| Structural | 11 | 35.5 | 25 | 80.1 | 31 | - |
| Orientational | 2 | 16.7 | 11 | 91.7 | 12 | - |
| Themes within MC | 14 | - | 20 | - | 20 | - |

*Note.* [a] Linguistic metaphorical expressions. [b] Metaphorical concepts.

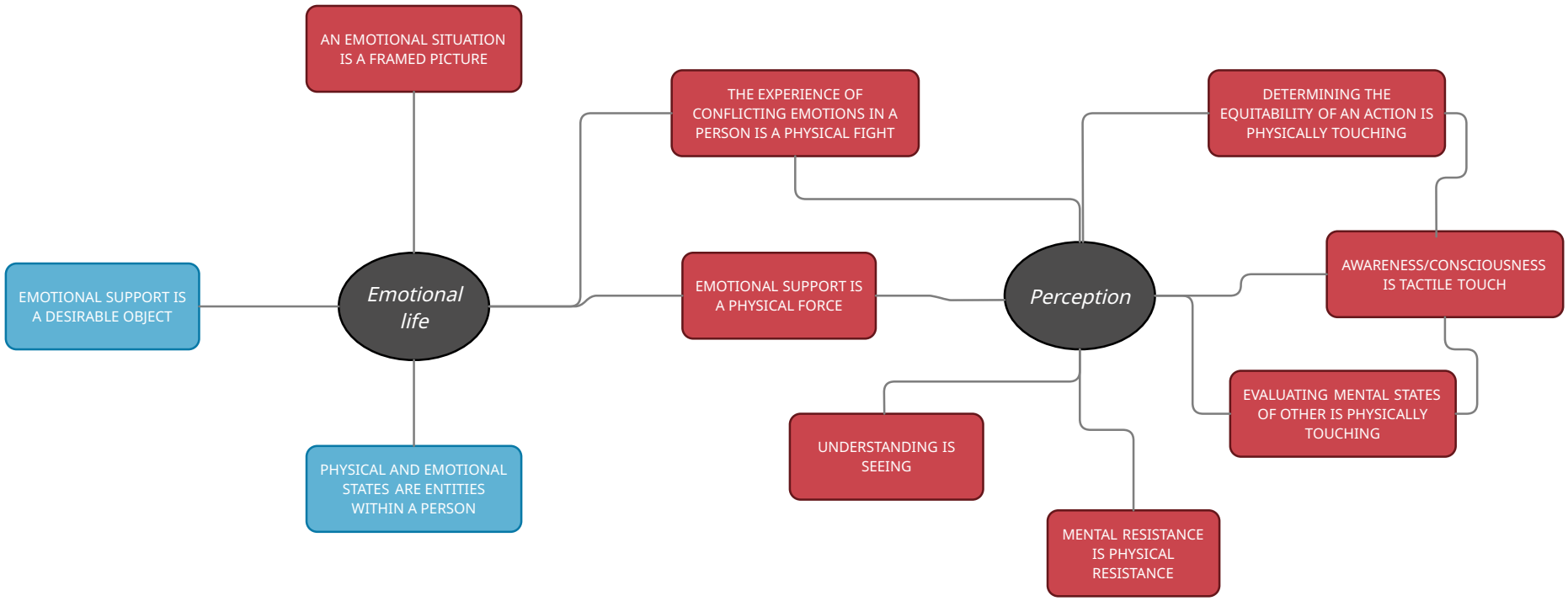
**Figure 1**

*Networks of the realms of Being, Feeling, and Doing*

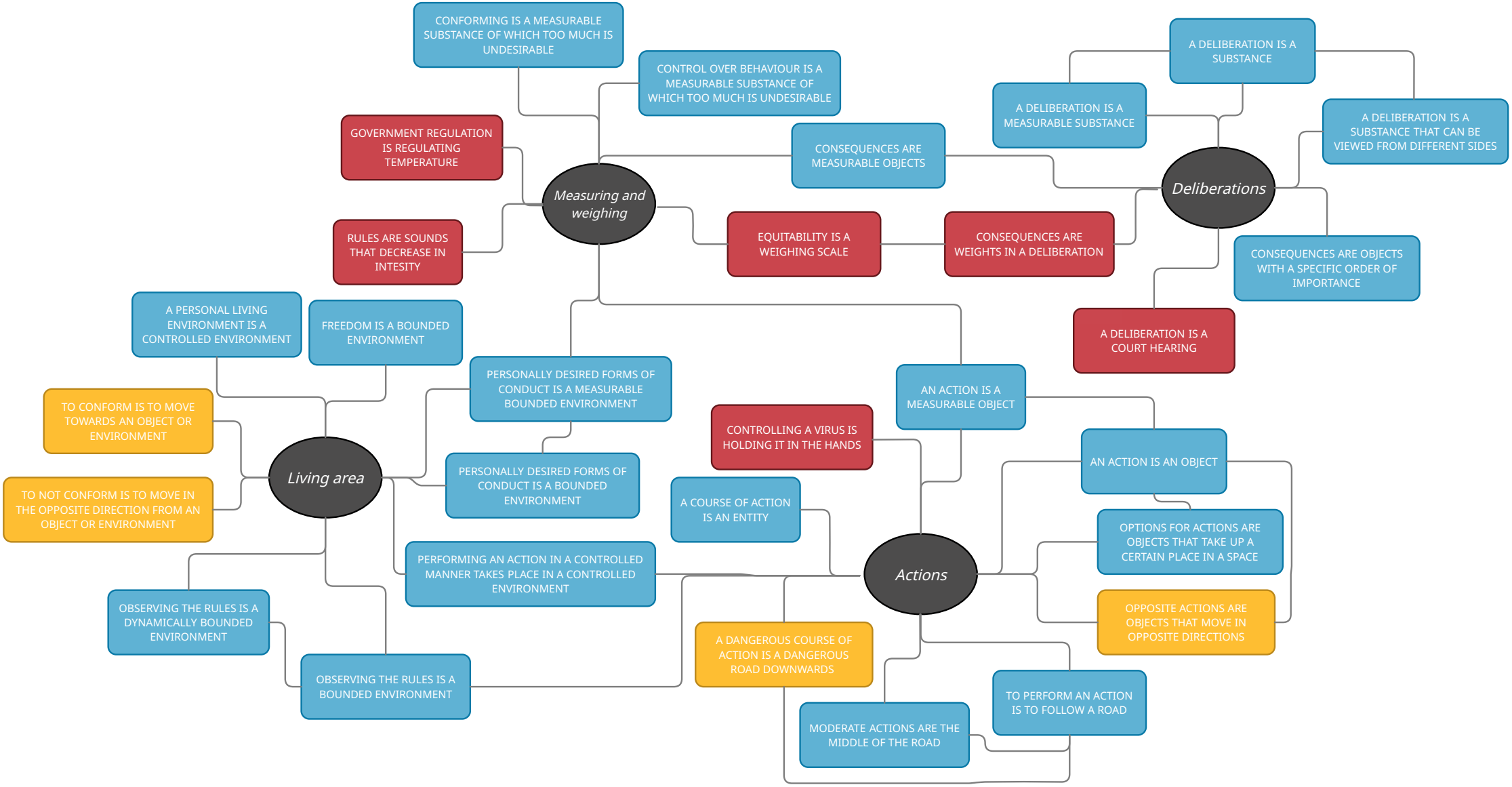
**A**



**B**


AN EMOTIONAL SITUATION IS A FRAMED PICTURE
THE EXPERIENCE OF CONFLICTING EMOTIONS IN A PERSON IS A PHYSICAL FIGHT
DETERMINING THE EQUITABILITY OF AN ACTION IS PHYSICALLY TOUCHING
EMOTIONAL SUPPORT IS A DESIRABLE OBJECT
Emotional life
EMOTIONAL SUPPORT IS A PHYSICAL FORCE
Perception
AWARENESS/CONSCIOUSNESS IS TACTILE TOUCH
EVALUATING MENTAL STATES OF OTHER IS PHYSICALLY TOUCHING
UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING
PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL STATES ARE ENTITIES WITHIN A PERSON
MENTAL RESISTANCE IS PHYSICAL RESISTANCE

**C**


CONFORMING IS A MEASURABLE SUBSTANCE OF WHICH TOO MUCH IS UNDESIRABLE
CONTROL OVER BEHAVIOUR IS A MEASURABLE SUBSTANCE OF WHICH TOO MUCH IS UNDESIRABLE
A DELIBERATION IS A SUBSTANCE
A DELIBERATION IS A MEASURABLE SUBSTANCE
A DELIBERATION IS A SUBSTANCE THAT CAN BE VIEWED FROM DIFFERENT SIDES
GOVERNMENT REGULATION IS REGULATING TEMPERATURE
CONSEQUENCES ARE MEASURABLE OBJECTS
Measuring and weighing
Deliberations
RULES ARE SOUNDS THAT DECREASE IN INTESITY
EQUITABILITY IS A WEIGHING SCALE
CONSEQUENCES ARE WEIGHTS IN A DELIBERATION
CONSEQUENCES ARE OBJECTS WITH A SPECIFIC ORDER OF IMPORTANCE
A DELIBERATION IS A COURT HEARING
A PERSONAL LIVING ENVIRONMENT IS A CONTROLLED ENVIRONMENT
FREEDOM IS A BOUNDED ENVIRONMENT
PERSONALLY DESIRED FORMS OF CONDUCT IS A MEASURABLE BOUNDED ENVIRONMENT
AN ACTION IS A MEASURABLE OBJECT
TO CONFORM IS TO MOVE TOWARDS AN OBJECT OR ENVIRONMENT
CONTROLLING A VIRUS IS HOLDING IT IN THE HANDS
AN ACTION IS AN OBJECT
Living area
PERSONALLY DESIRED FORMS OF CONDUCT IS A BOUNDED ENVIRONMENT
TO NOT CONFORM IS TO MOVE IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION FROM AN OBJECT OR ENVIRONMENT
A COURSE OF ACTION IS AN ENTITY
OPTIONS FOR ACTIONS ARE OBJECTS THAT TAKE UP A CERTAIN PLACE IN A SPACE
PERFORMING AN ACTION IN A CONTROLLED MANNER TAKES PLACE IN A CONTROLLED ENVIRONMENT
Actions
OBSERVING THE RULES IS A DYNAMICALLY BOUNDED ENVIRONMENT
OPPOSITE ACTIONS ARE OBJECTS THAT MOVE IN OPPOSITE DIRECTIONS
A DANGEROUS COURSE OF ACTION IS A DANGEROUS ROAD DOWNWARDS
OBSERVING THE RULES IS A BOUNDED ENVIRONMENT
TO PERFORM AN ACTION IS TO FOLLOW A ROAD
MODERATE ACTIONS ARE THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD

*Note.* Dark colored oval shapes are themes. Connected to each theme are metaphorical concepts, squared shapes, consisting of ontological (blue), structural (red), and orientational (yellow) metaphors. Lines show which metaphorical concepts belong to themes and related metaphorical concepts. Panel A: Network of the realm of Being. Panel B: Network of the realm of Feeling. Panel C: Network of the realm of Doing

**The Realm of Being – Situating the dilemma**

As participants began speaking about moral dilemmas, situating the dilemma often was the first thing that was done, as this provided context of where and when the moral dilemma is taking place, who or what are important influences, and in what way to best approach a presented situation. This gave rise to three clusters of metaphorical concepts in how they situated the dilemma: time and place, narrative characters, and ways of thinking. First, the cluster time and place consisted of mostly container metaphors. A container has properties, like an in-out orientation, a beginning and an end, and boundaries that are useful when speaking of abstract concepts, such as time, a pandemic, or a situation. Generally, when speaking about where and when something is taking place (i.e. the time and place) served as a precondition for further deliberation of moral issues. Second, the cluster of narrative characters consisted of metaphorical concepts that are understood as if they were an entity, with a capability to act or upon which actions could be performed. Situating entity metaphors, such as a virus, or a society as narrative characters, provides the opportunity to speak about them as active agents in a story. In situating the dilemma, concepts that are used as metaphors are not exclusively either an entity or a container metaphor. In fact, the same concept can be used as a container metaphor as well as an entity metaphor. For example, COVID-19 as a container metaphor is used to define a period in time, and, conversely, COVID-19 as an entity

metaphor is used to characterize the virus as an active agent in a narrative structure. Last, the cluster of ways of thinking consisted of metaphors that related to what kind of mindset is used to approach possible moral dilemmas. In situating the dilemma, this cluster has a more active component than the other clusters because participants seemed to make a choice in what sort of mindset to best approach a presented issue. This approach, then, further determines whether someone views the issue as a moral dilemma or not. Therefore, this cluster is not part of the response to a moral dilemma but part of situating a moral dilemma.

***Time and Place – Container metaphors***

To delineate the time and place of what participants were speaking about, MC's that were being used were mostly 'container-metaphors'. For example, TIME IS A CONTAINER was the most frequently used metaphor in the theme of Situating the Dilemma. The following quotes of participants show that when speaking about time, it is understood as if time were a container.

P8: "Yes you would say that *in times* of corona funerals were being livestreamed."

P5: "But *half the time* no one wears a mask."

P1: "Yes, what I mean is that *in the beginning* it sounded very intense, a lockdown and having to stay inside."

Another example of a container-metaphor is SOCIETY IS A CONTAINER. Society, like Time, is understood in similar manner as if it were a container. One participant put it:

P8: "In the meantime, we are now *in a surveillance society*."

Similarly, COVID-19 related metaphors consisted of participants speaking of COVID-19 as a period in time and place. This gave rise to the MC's: QUARANTINE IS A CONTAINER, and THE PANDEMIC IS A CONTAINER. The expressions bellow illustrate these MC's:

P3: "… what if they'd really came to check if I'm *in quarantine*."

P1: "I don't think anyone of us has ever been *in a pandemic* before."

***Narrative characters – Entity metaphors***

The second type of metaphor became visible in how participants spoke about certain concepts as if they were a character with a capability to act or upon which actions can be performed. For instance, related to the theme of COVID-19, the virus is spoken about as if it is an agent which generated the MC, A VIRUS IS A CONTROLABLE ENTITY. This MC emerged from the following expression:

P3: " … *to control the virus*."

As mentioned above, society can be spoken about as a container but also as a narrative character. SOCIETY IS AN ENTITY, which is further defined as A DIVISIBLE ENTITY and VULNERABLE ENTITY. The following excerpts illustrate this MC:

P8: " … *anonymity for society must be preserved*."

P5: "… *society was divided."*

P8: "*Protecting society* is really important to me."

***Ways of thinking – Substance metaphors***

The last type of metaphor in the realm of being related to ways of thinking. Most of these metaphors were substance metaphors but there were some diverging MC's. Participants spoke of discriminating or differentiating as if it were a substance, which led to DISTINCTION IS A SUBSTANCE that was further defined as A SUBSTANCE THAT INFLUENCES THINKING. Examples of expressions from which these MC's emerged, are:

P7: "But can you *make a distinction* in …"

P5: "… even then, I don't think it is morally okay *to start thinking in groups*."

As participants spoke about how to approach an issue or how to view it, gave rise to a similar type of metaphorical concept. AN APPROACH IS A SUBSTANCE THAT INFLUENCES THINKING emerged from the following expressions:

P3: "You can also *see it in a beneficial sense*."

P7: "In itself, you could also *view this in a positive manner.*"

**The Realm of Feeling – Sensory and bodily responses**

In the realm of feeling, it became apparent that participants relayed on metaphorical concepts that had a sentient nature, relating to senses and bodily responses. Three clusters

were found in sensory and bodily responses to moral dilemmas: vision and touch, physical force, and friction. First, the two main ways participants took in moral dilemmas were through vision and touch. Vision was used to understand the presented issue cognitively and created more of a distance between the speaker and the issue. However, touch was used as a way of bringing the entire body closer to physically feel out a certain situation and determining a course of action based on that feeling. Second, the cluster of physical force related to the way participants spoke about an emotional weight that needed to be distributed for the reason that this type of physical force should not be dealt with individually. Last, the cluster of friction shows metaphorical concepts of a kind of bodily experience that relate to feelings of unease. However, this is not only spoken about as something to be avoided but also something to engage in.

***Vision & touch***

MC's relating to perception entailed two senses, seeing and touch. The MC, UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING, was commonly used and consisted of phrases where mentally understanding something is understood through the concept of seeing, such as:

P5: "… it was *seen as* a disease."

P1: "… that they got more and more resistance to it, but they didn't *see it* that well for themselves."

P3: "… sometimes the rules don't always reflect *what is seen as good or less good*."

The sense of touch brought about the MC, AWARENESS/CONSCIOUSNESS IS TACTILE TOUCH, that came about from phrases, such as:

P6: "… *giving people the feeling* as if they are a pariah."

P5: " … I kind of *had the feeling* that society was divided."

Moreover, two associated MC's that build upon the previous MC were about evaluating and determining something. The MC, DETERMINING THE EQUITABILITY OF AN ACTION IS PHYSICALLY TOUCHING, emerged from the following excerpt:

P1: "Even though *it somehow feels good and somehow bad*."

Similarly, the MC, EVALUATING MENTAL STATES OF OTHERS IS PHYSICALLY TOUCHING emerged from the phrase:

P7: " I would set a limit on [kinds of interaction] I am okay with. And, furthermore, *feel out* those people with who I would want to [interact with]."

***Physical force***

When evaluating the emotional features of moral dilemmas, participants spoke in phrases that gave rise to MC's relating to a physical force. For example, EMOTIONAL SUPPORT IS A PHYSICAL FORCE appeared from phrases that indicated a certain weight that needed to be carried or shared, like:

P2: "For those who want, just *support* each other."

P6: "…*carry* care for each other." (directly translated from Dutch which means 'to take care of each other')

***Friction***

In a like manner, THE EXPERIENCE OF CONFLICTING EMOTIONS IN A PERSON IS A PHYSICAL FIGHT came about through understanding emotional states through a more tangible concept like a physical fight. This MC was associated to the LME:

P3: "… especially because those people *struggle* with it so much."

Interestingly, not just emotional states but also mental states are understood through physical forces, MENTAL RESISTANCE IS PHYSICAL RESISTANCE, which came about from the LME's:

P1: "… that they got more and more *resistance against it*."

P8: "I would see myself, for example, *scrubbing against it*."

**The Realm of Doing – Reflected action**

In the realm of doing, the clusters that were found related to metaphorical concepts of controlled and bounded environments, and of measuring and weighing. The cluster of environment metaphors were grouped in reflected action instead of situating the dilemma because situating the dilemma deals with a more abstract and societal level whereas the environment metaphors in this realm relate more to concrete situations in which specific events occur. Depending on which of these concepts takes precedence, moral imagination

differs in the extent to which it is used by participants. When adhering to controlled-environment metaphors, there was nearly any imagination in the way participants spoke about the dilemmas. This was because features within this environment were largely determined, fixed, and fell under an either-or dichotomy. This prototypical controlled environment leaves little room for forms of conduct as it solely surrounds the individual, and, thus, no interaction with others occur. Nevertheless, not everything is static within this cluster. To escape this rigid environment, a characteristic was added to the metaphorical concepts, i.e. measuring control and conformity. Adding the quality of measurement provides more flexibility and mobility in this restraining environment as it allows to variate between degrees of control and conformity.

Within the bounded-environment metaphors, the environment becomes more dynamic and less fixed than in the controlled environment-metaphors. For instance, in the bounded environment, features that were fixed in the controlled environment, such as 'following the rules', move away from an either-or situation and towards a wider range of possibilities. Moreover, interaction with the outside world takes place here which makes way for forms of conduct with others. Taken together, more possibilities and interaction with others allows for more flexibility in moral imagination. While the bounded-environment metaphor is still primarily bounded by borders, meaning that there is only a certain space in which one can move around, these borders are susceptible to change.

Finally, the cluster of measuring and weighing integrates deliberations, consequences, and actions. This provides the most imaginative framework because it does not adhere to constricting environmental structures and, therefore, is the most flexible and fluid cluster in the realm of doing. By measuring and weighing these elements an attempt can be made to reach congruity in moral issues. Moreover, in reaching congruity different metaphorical

concepts appear depending on what root-metaphor it is grounded in (e.g. sound or temperature).

***Environment – controlled & bounded***

Although the types of metaphors that deal with environment could also fall under the category container-metaphors, these MC's had a specific active and spatial character, which the container-metaphors mentioned earlier did not. Two types of environment metaphors were extracted, bounded and controlled environment metaphors. The controlled environment metaphors emerged from participant speaking of personal living environments and actions that were definite, which yielded A PERSONAL LIVING ENVIRONMENT IS A CONTROLLED ENVIRONMENT and PERFORMING AN ACTION IN A CONTROLLED MANNER TAKES PLACE IN AN CONTROLLED ENVIRONMENT. The associated LME's were:

P8: " … the *controlled environment* of someone."

P4: "But I think you can do that *in a controlled manner*."

Two associated MC's that were also definite and spatial were TO CONFORM IS TO MOVE TOWARD AN OBJECT OR ENVIRONMENT and TO NOT CONFORM IS TO MOVE IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION OF AN OBJECT OR ENVIRONMENT. Interestingly, all but one of all the LME's of 'conforming' were found in dilemma 1 and every LME of 'not conforming' was extracted from dilemma 2. The following LME's belonged to these MC's:

P4: " … *following* the rules."

P2: “Most of my co-workers *don’t really follow the rules either*.”

To escape the overall controlled-environment metaphor the following MC’s suggest there can be a varying degree in control and conformity. To illustrate, both the MC’s ‘CONFORMING’ and ‘CONTROL OVER BEHAVIOUR’ are A MEASURABLE SUBSTANCE OF WHICH TOO MUCH IS UNDESIRABLE. Associated LME’s were:

P2: “I would not be happy in that way; *constantly being controlled*.”

P2: “But I think you should follow the rules but *to a certain extent*.”

A different type of environment metaphor was the bounded-environment metaphor. Several MC’s that involved bounded environments entered a world where things become less certain, such as FREEDOM IS A BOUNDED ENVIRONMENT, which was derived from:

P2: “… that people with a red wristband are *being limited in their freedom*.”

Another MC that involved a bounded environment related to observing the rules. This was spoken about as if the act of observing rules takes place within an environment with borders. Interestingly, these borders were spoken about as if they had a dynamic nature, eliciting OBSERVING THE RULES IS A (DYNAMICALLY) BOUNDED ENVIRONMENT which emerged from the following LME:

P3: “It would be legal to visit your girlfriend in Amsterdam but not in France while both would be by train. Or yeah … Sometimes you have these things that you think, *where*

*are the boundaries exactly*? And I think this situation kind of *pulls it to even more extremes*" (directly translated from Dutch which means 'takes something to extremes')

The last MC related to bounded environments was PERSONALLY DESIRED FORM OF CONDUCT IS A (MEASURABLE) BOUNDED ENVIRONMENT. This MC emerged from LME's, like:

P8: "… *adhere to the limits* of people."

P7:" … *set a limit* that I'm okay with myself."

P6: "… *gauge* what other people prefer."

***Measuring and weighing***

The main purpose of the MC's in this cluster is to measure what justifiable actions are. The metaphors in this cluster relate to actions, deliberations, and consequences that are quantified and have measurable character but with different qualities. MC related to 'actions' had a spatial quality that gave rise to the concept of measuring distance. To illustrate, AN ACTION IS A MEASURABLE OBJECT was the main MC and the spatial qualities can be seen in COURSES OF ACTION ARE OBJECTS THAT TAKE UP A PLACE IN A SPACE and OPPOSITE ACTIONS ARE OBJECTS THAT MOVE IN OPPOSITE DIRECTIONS. The associated LME's of these MC's were:

P3: "*How far can you go* with controlling things?"

P1: “But I have also seen it *go the other way*.”

The MC’s related to ‘deliberations’ consisted of weighing and observing qualities, which belong to the concept of mass. To illustrate, A DELIBERATION IS A WEIGHABLE SUBSTANCE, and A DELIBERATION IS A SUBSTANCE THAT YOU CAN LOOK AT FROM DIFFERENT ANGLES were the MC’s that emerged from the following LME’s:

P4: “That offering comfort *outweighs* following the measures.”

P1: “[On the one side] Because you want to see your partner and *on the other side* it is against the rules.” (translated directly from Dutch which means ‘on the other hand’)

The MC’s related to ‘consequences’ had both qualities of weighing and of measuring. On the one hand CONSEQUENCES ARE WEIGHTS IN A DELIBERATION illustrates a weighing quality, emerging from LME’s such as:

P3: “The consequences, then, have to *weigh up* …”

On the other hand, CONSEQUENCES ARE MEASURABLE OBJECTS which encompasses weight but also measuring distance. These different ways of viewing consequences were used interchangeably which can be seen in the following LME’s:

P3: “But it *depends*, I think, and to *what extent*…” (the metaphorical property of weight that is measurable is lost when translating the original Dutch ‘het hangt er van af’ to the English ‘it depends’)

Other MC's that indicate the balancing of intensity of concepts, namely, GOVERNMENT REGULATION IS REGULATING TEMPERATURE and RULES ARE SOUNDS THAT DECREASE, which belong to the following LME's:

P8: "*To put the digital surveillance on the back burner* …"

P1: "What I mean is that in the beginning *it sounded very heavy*, for example a lockdown."

# Discussion

## Discussion of the findings

This exploratory study aimed to answer the research question of how individuals of the LGBTQ+ community use metaphors in moral imagination to make sense of emerging moral dilemmas during COVID-19. As mentioned in the introduction, current western cultural practices serve more vicious and detached types of imagination (Narvaez & Mrkva, 2014), therefore, it is beneficial to increase our understanding of using moral imagination in a more original and flexible way to create more just and compassionate experiences. Four main findings helped to answer the research question and contribute to additional theoretical insights regarding the use of moral imagination. First, participants used metaphors more frequently and elaborately while discussing the surveillance dilemma. Second, the extent to which imagination could be stretched varied depending on which overarching metaphor participants adhered to. Third, participants used two types of sensory metaphors when they considered moral issues, vision and touch. Last, when situating the dilemma, participants showed a story-structured form in moral imagination by using metaphors of 'time and place' and 'narrative characters', while showing flexibility in thinking through metaphors that allowed participants to switch between different mental outlooks. These four findings are discussed in the following section.

Several possible explanations exist for the more frequent and elaborate use in metaphors in the second dilemma. One explanation could be that the nature of the dilemma determined the extent to which metaphor use in moral imagination was possible. This seems plausible because the funeral dilemma was relatively straightforward compared to the surveillance dilemma so little analysing of the problem and synthesising of solutions was needed, which is known to play a role in metaphor-use (Casakin, 2007). Another explanation for the difference in use of metaphors in moral imagination is the real-life experience

participants had with the dilemma. Metaphors are used to comprehend the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar (Ortony, 1993). Since most participants mentioned to have attended a funeral during the COVID-19 pandemic, the funeral dilemma might not have actually stimulated moral imagination. Because participants had already experienced a similar situation, they were inclined to describe their actions in those situations which might have generated more literal than metaphorical language. Therefore, the first dilemma could have accounted for a less elaborate use of metaphors, either by its nature or by the experience participants had with it. An alternative explanation is that the first dilemma functioned as a warm-up phase, resulting in a better developed metaphor-use in moral imagination in the second dilemma. Another finding that supports this explanation is that nearly all metaphors about 'conforming' were found in the first dilemma whereas all metaphors of 'not conforming' were found in the second dilemma. This could be due to the fact that good rapport between participants was established, which is associated with willingness to disclose less socially desirable information and more honest answers (Kühne, 2018). Therefore, participants may have spoken more freely after the first dilemma because they felt less constricted by social expectations which, in turn, led to a more elaborate use of metaphors in the second dilemma.

Contrary to what was expected, the second finding showed that participants did not exclusively use communal and engaged types of imaginations. When participants were considering possible actions, use of imagination differed depending on what overall metaphor was being used (i.e. controlled environment, bounded environment, and measuring and weighing). This finding is in line with the work of Narvaez and Mrkva (2014), who distinguished between different types of imagination in moral development: vicious, detached, engaged, and communal. The 'controlled environment' metaphors which was the most constricted in imagination, seem to be consistent with vicious and detached imaginations as these are non-imaginative, rule-based, and self-focused. The 'bounded environment'

metaphors allowed for more room to explore possibilities, and therefore somewhat more imagination, but was still constricted to a certain degree. It seems that when participants adhered to this metaphor they switched between detached and engaged imaginations. It may be that this metaphor bridges the gap between restrictive and imaginative thinking. The 'measuring and weighing' metaphors, which allowed for the most imagination, seem consistent with engaged and communal imaginations because these call on empathy, compassion, attunement with others, and the ability to address concerns beyond what is instantly present. In other word, taking into account multiple components, like actions, consequences, and deliberations with a concern and care for not just self but also others.

The two kinds of sensory metaphors through which the participants took in the moral issue were vision and touch. These metaphors relate to fundamentally different ways of perceiving an issue. Using the metaphors of vision engages cognition, objectifies the issue, and tends to create a distance between person and situation. Conversely, using metaphors of touch engages a completely different sense, which brings a person closer to the situation and enables them to interpret the situation based on subjective feelings. The latter form shows similarities with Smith's ideas on moral imagination, as described by Johnson (2016), as he emphasized that imagining ourselves in the experience of other people is needed to gauge if a situation is morally approved.

Regarding the last main finding, participants often started speaking in metaphors of 'time and place', and 'narrative characters', when situating the dilemma. This finding reflects Dewey's theory of dramatic rehearsal which asserts that moral imagination takes a story-structured form, while highlighting the importance of the narrative sense a moral deliberation must make in someone's life-context (Fesmire, 2003). Furthermore, the 'way of thinking' metaphors show that participants were able to be flexible in their approach to certain issues and not necessarily holding on to one specific outlook when situating the dilemma. This

flexibility early in the deliberation is favourable because this moves away from rigidity in thinking, providing a more imaginative mindset.

To conclude, as expected, LGBTQ+ individuals did show more communal and engaged moral imagination when making sense of COVID-19 related emerging moral dilemmas. This may be due to the type of dilemmas or their own experiences and ability. Perhaps COVID-19 related dilemmas sparked this type of imagination in LGBTQ+ individuals because of their known communal response to adversity. Nevertheless, it may also be that this finding is more general, and that due to the method used, participants were able to explore their moral imagination in a safe space. Rather than being a fixed characteristic, moral imagination may be an ability that can be developed and cultivated, provided people are given time and room to explore it.

**Limitations, Implications, and Recommendations**

The findings of this study are based on the responses of this specific group of individuals, so a note of caution is due. A different group of individuals of the same population would provide a different conversation, and likely, a different set of metaphorical concepts. One area of interest is to see if the clusters of overarching metaphors (e.g. controlled/bounded environment and, measuring and weighing) are specific to this population or are, in fact, more general. It is possible that the way this study was set up allowed for a particular use of metaphors in moral imagination. By giving the participants room to explore their own views while asking them to be respectful towards others' views, might have accommodated a particular set-up that gave way to communal and engaged moral imagination. These findings suggest the possibility that initially contrasting views become more nuanced when given room to explore moral imagination which then becomes more cultivated within a limited amount of time.

The findings carry important implications for how we understand different types of imagination mindsets, i.e., not as fixed but more malleable. This raises the questions if certain metaphors give way to more engaged and communal type of imaginations and if these metaphors can be used as tools to stimulate these types of imagination. Similar studies with a specific selection of the sample compositions, such as intersecting identities, age specific characteristics, or explicit opposing views within samples (e.g. pro and anti-vaccination), would give a broader understanding into what metaphors are used by individuals of different backgrounds. Moreover, a focus on providing a supportive setting in which participants feel comfortable to share their views while being respectful of other perspectives could be an interesting way to test if the (group-based) method played part in the finding of a more cultivated moral imagination as the conversation between participants developed.

Another important limitation lies in the problem of subjectivity that is involved in the metaphor analysis. Metaphor analysis attempts to uncover patterns in thinking and comprehensions about a specific topic that forms or inhibits the beliefs or actions of individuals (Armstrong et al., 2011). A way to deal with this for future studies, would be to perform follow-up interviews where linguistic metaphorical expressions and their corresponding metaphorical concepts are checked with participants. Instead, the present study added a thematic analysis to improve triangulation. This second analysis was performed inductively to reveal latent themes within the metaphorical concepts and checked if the themes where consistent with the content of the transcript. This dual-analysis approach provided a holistic perspective that helped to confirm and disconfirm metaphorical concepts and themes emerging from the data.

In addition, other limitations concerned sample size and the way the focus group was held. First, the sample size was too large for all participants to speak for an equal amount of the time. Due to composition of the focus group some participants spoke more and others less,

which is generally the case in focus groups. However, this means that the data can be skewed in favour of those who spoke more. For future reference, splitting the focus group into two separate focus groups would help in reaching equal speaking time, and, in addition, would allow for verification by providing a way of examining if the findings of both groups hold when checked against each other, preferably by separate researchers. Moreover, incorporating written answers to survey questions could help a moderator in guiding equal speaking time in similar future studies. Second, the focus group was held online via Teams. On the one hand, an online environment is an easy way to reduce the barrier of geographical distance for participants to participate in the study. On the other hand, during the focus group, the internet connection would occasionally get lost and what was being said did not fully come across. There will always be some uncertainty regarding technical issues when doing a virtual focus group. Nevertheless, emphasizing the need for a stable internet connection beforehand is one way to reduce the likelihood of this happening during a virtual focus group. Finally, it is argued that valuable non-verbal information of communication between or within participants gets lost when opting for virtual instead of in-person focus groups (Bloor et al., 2001). However, at the same time the benefit of using an online environment for a focus group lies in the fact that people are known to be less inhibited and, therefore, may feel more safe to openly discuss sensitive topics because of the physical distance between them and other participants (Budman, 2000; Suler, 2004).

The present study incorporated knowledge from several academic fields such as psychology, philosophy, cognitive linguistics, sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology. While preliminary, the findings could inform research questions for further studies within and across these fields. As mentioned in the introduction, our current cultural practices serve more vicious and detached imaginations. This calls for reflective understanding of what types of metaphors lead to moral distress, specifically in a turbulent social context. In addition, it is

essential to explore what types of metaphors give people the tools to navigate these morally challenging situations. The findings in this study suggest that a sense of agency is less likely in controlled environments-metaphors compared to measuring and weighing-metaphors, which is why it would be advantageous to have knowledge of what types of metaphors would evoke a greater sense of agency.

**Conclusion**

The current exploratory research provides some useful insights into our understanding of metaphor-use in moral imagination. By analyzing metaphors used while making sense of COVID-19 related emerging moral dilemmas, this thesis has shown in members of the LGBTQ+ community a flexibility in situating a dilemma, a duality in processing moral issues, and an overall development of communal and engaged moral imagination. Moreover, this study found that generally metaphor-use in moral imagination became more elaborate and flexible over time. The findings of this study suggest that communal and engaged moral imagination, under certain circumstances, can be stimulated, trained, or developed. Although no definite conclusions can be drawn based on these findings, several variables were identified that may stimulate the use of moral imagination. The complexity of the dilemma could be a factor for the degree to which imagination was stimulated. A more complex dilemma may produce more elaborate metaphor-use because it invites for more creative and imaginative solutions than a less complex dilemma. In addition, it is possible that moral imagination is ascribed to the interplay between person and dilemma. If a person can easily empathize to a dilemma because of certain experiences, this could likely invite for more moral imagination. On the other hand, it may be that because individuals were given room to explore their imagination, they were able to develop it, regardless of the type of dilemma or interplay between their experiences and the dilemma. Future studies could address these variables in relation to metaphor-use in moral imagination to better understand the implication

of the findings. This research demonstrates that a group of LGBTQ+ individuals can make sense of emerging dilemmas in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and, show a cultivated moral imagination through their metaphor-use. However, this research also raises the question if different groups show a similar type of metaphor-use, if they would need help in developing moral imagination, and, what would be found for dilemmas in different contexts (e.g. dilemmas unrelated to COVID-19 or dillemmas concerning only a specific population). Understanding moral imagination is especially important in the context of a rapidly changing society where pressing issues cause complex problems that call for the need to creatively, flexibly, and imaginatively think about these problems. The present study lays the groundwork for future studies into metaphor-use and moral imagination. The current research showed that under specific metaphors people can, indeed, come up with more communal and engaged action possibilities to emerging moral dilemmas than under other metaphors. Because our current cultural social practices tend to serve more vicious and detached imaginations, this research is promising as it showed a possibility of development in metaphor-use in moral imagination. Most recommendation are academic because of the preliminary nature of the research. However, a more practical implications with societal relevance lies in the way communication is spread to the larger public. This present study suggests that if you want people to feel a sense of agency and stimulate flexible, creative, and imaginative mindsets it is important to use metaphors that allow for this. The world is becoming increasingly complex, and even though this complexity may seem daunting, it also may provide an opportunity. It seems that people are, indeed, able to grasp the complexities of life, if only we allow ourselves and each other the room to explore our imagination.

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# Appendix A

Survey Questions Attached to Moral Dilemma Drawings

| | Questions Funeral | Questions Surveillance | Rationale |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Could you describe what is happening in the picture? What is the situation? Who are the characters? What do they do, feel or think? | Could you describe what is happening in the picture set in 2025? What is the situation? Who are the characters? What do they do, feel or think? | These questions allow people to recognize dilemmas from their own narrative and imaginative frame of reference. |
| 2. | What are the moral dilemmas you think the characters are facing in this picture? Try to make explicit as many moral dilemmas as you can. | What are the moral dilemmas you think the characters are facing in this picture? Try to make explicit as many moral dilemmas as you can. | These questions stimulate moral imagination through divergent thinking. |
| 3. | Given the moral dilemmas you've identified, what should the characters do in this situation? Try to imagine as many morally acceptable options as you can. | Given the moral dilemmas you've identified, what should the characters do in this situation? Try to imagine as many morally acceptable options as you can. | These questions are posed in the third person perspective, which creates distance and allows for a wider range of action possibilities. |

| | Questions Funeral | Questions Surveillance | Rationale |
|---|---|---|---|
| 4. | Suppose you were to attend a funeral during the coronavirus crisis, what do you think you should do? Please make explicit the reasons for your choice. | Out of these options, what would you choose in this future if you were a person who is for/opposed to digital surveillance? Please make explicit the reasons for your choice. | These questions allow for the reasoning about options in the process of anticipatory moral imagination. |
| 5. | Suppose you were either a very close family member of the deceased person or a mere acquaintance, what do you think you should do then? Please make explicit the reasons for your choice. | | Empathy is stimulated by imagining oneself in another perspective, which allows for a more elaborate reasoning about choice. |