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## Agonistic Moralism

Mark Silcox

### Abstract

Many otherwise admired authors in the Western tradition (e.g. Plato, Augustine, and Tolstoy) have defended views about the radical dependence of aesthetic value upon morality that are nowadays regarded with deep skepticism. In more recent work on the connection between moral and aesthetic properties, Noël Carroll, Anne Eaton, Berys Gaut, and others have tried to defend relatively moderate varieties of moralism about art, according to which the aesthetic value of ethically significant artworks sometimes overlaps with but might also independently vary from their moral status. Here, I develop an immoderate species of moralism that treats the type of ethical knowledge inculcated by good art as a species of quasi-competitive skill rather than an outcome of perception or inference. Such a view, I argue, avoids some of the weaknesses that have made earlier philosophers' claims about the moral significance of art seem excessively puritanical to contemporary sensibilities.

### Key Words

autonomism; Carroll; didacticism; Eaton; ethicism; Gaut; moralism; rough heroes; skill knowledge

### 1. Introduction

Malcolm Bradbury's 1975 novel, *The History Man*, is a lucidly pessimistic satire of British academic life. Its protagonist, Howard Kirk, teaches sociology at a provincial university, emitting a steady stream of self-serving, political bombast in the classroom, while neglecting his wife, persecuting his colleagues, and seducing his most vulnerable students. In the context of lauding the work as one of the best British novels of the late twentieth century, Anthony Burgess describes Howard as a "detestable character." But he also remarks that the story's "great aesthetic virtue" is its

total objectivity. No judgement is forced, we make up our own minds. There will be readers capable of seeing Howard Kirk as a personification of all the modern virtues.<sup>[1]</sup>

There is something fishy going on here. Burgess surely wouldn't have bothered to register his detestation of Howard unless he thought that it was, in some important way, *correct* to view the character as a nogoodnik. But at the same time, he wants to praise Bradbury for not inducing this very opinion in readers.

If Burgess is correct in his implicit suggestion that, despite the novel's objectivity, it succeeds to the extent that one is able to find reasons to find Howard contemptible, this will provide some support for what is usually referred to in philosophical aesthetics as *moralism*: the thesis, that is, that the ethical content of artworks is germane to our evaluation of them as art, or, to put it a slightly different way, that there is a significant overlap between moral and aesthetic value. In the recent literature, this view is usually contrasted with *autonomism*, the view that "art is a strictly autonomous realm of practice," or the closely related view that aesthetic and moral value vary from one another independently.<sup>[2]</sup>

I shall not be directly concerned here with defending aesthetic moralism against autonomism. Instead, I want to focus on the curious ways in which some contemporary aestheticians have tried to qualify or mitigate their endorsement of the former. I shall argue that the key to Bradbury's artistic success and to that of many other ethically significant artworks, in a diverse range of genres and media, is the way that they set a specific kind of challenge for the reader, the overcoming of which generates a distinctive variety of ethically salient skill-knowledge. Somewhat ironically, it has been the failure of philosophers to recognize the moral threat that so much good art presents us with that has led them to make ultimately implausible exceptions to the general principle that aesthetic value is a subspecies of moral value. But I shall try to demonstrate that, once one appreciates the fundamentally agonistic orientation of mind that ethically significant art requires of its audiences, one has grounds to be significantly more immoderate and unqualified in one's moralism. The value of such art is always to some extent dependent upon the effectiveness by which it provokes audiences to develop a keener capacity for distinguishing between what is genuinely ethically admirable and what might be attractive to them for other reasons.

Such an attitude toward the relationship between art and morality has had plenty of eloquent supporters throughout the history of aesthetics, from Plato and Augustine to Leo Tolstoy and Roger Taylor. But

philosophers in this longstanding tradition have usually defended uncomfortably monistic conceptions of morality that are these days widely perceived as undermining the plausibility of their views about aesthetic value. Although I shall not offer anything like a full defense of so-called radical moralism in the philosophy of art, I shall suggest that the more objectionable aspects of such a view can be mitigated to the extent that one acknowledges a greater separation between the form and the content of morality, as it is effectuated by the consumption of artworks.

Most of the specific examples discussed will be works of narrative literature, but I shall conclude with a few very brief and tentative suggestions about how the style of agonistic moralism that I defend might have broader application in philosophical aesthetics.

## 2. What we don't learn from rough heroes

A lot of the most intense skepticism about moralism arises from the suspicion that its defenders conceive of the value of art entirely in terms of its capacity to impart edifying doctrine. This is an entirely just complaint against some earlier proponents, such as Plato and Tolstoy. But the thesis, as it has been defended more recently, has a lot less to do with affording any sort of privileged status to overtly didactic art and is for this reason susceptible to much more interesting variation.

In her influential 2012 paper, "Robust Immoralism," A.W. Eaton makes some fascinating observations about the class of narrative artworks that represent particularly morally distasteful characters to their audiences in ways that she thinks are both ethically and aesthetically significant. Eaton unequivocally endorses the basic intuition that artworks *qua* artworks are "candidates for moral assessment."<sup>[3]</sup> She agrees with orthodox moralists, such as Noël Carroll, that, when a story adopts a perspective that prompts us to applaud acts of racially-motivated violence, say, or the sexual conquests of a fictional child molester, there are likely to be good reasons to change one's opinion of its aesthetic merits on account of this fact. But she also suggests that some artworks can have a greater aesthetic value than they would otherwise possess by virtue of adopting immoral perspectives upon the characters they depict.

The examples that she provides to support this claim are narratives that depict the actions of "rough heroes," a term she borrows from David Hume. Fictional protagonists such as Milton's Satan, Tony Soprano, and Humbert Humbert appeal to us not just in spite of their ethical flaws but to a large extent because of them. These characters, Eaton claims, are different from mere antiheroes - Don Quixotes, Becky Sharps (*Vanity Fair*), and Tyler Durden (*Fight Club*) - because we view the sympathetic features of the latter as exculpatory. The spectacle of Don Quixote's courage and vigor prompts us to forgive his stubbornly delusive arrogance. But Satan's charisma and stoic resoluteness in *Paradise Lost* are far from sufficient excuses for his misotheism or his gratuitous malice. Eaton suggests that the unresolved tension we experience when confronted by the virtues and vices of rough heroes makes it especially difficult to glean any positive moral lesson from the works that prompt us to admire such characters.

A number of other contemporary philosophers have tried to explain the effects of such artworks via an approach that Eaton dubs "cognitive immoralism." Matthew Kieran, the most straightforward defender of this type of view, claims that what makes immoral artworks valuable is the way in which they "deepen our understanding."<sup>[4]</sup> Such works can, he thinks, provide us with otherwise unobtainable insight into esoteric forms of human motivation.<sup>[5]</sup> Noël Carroll makes the similar proposal that works with rough heroes only elicit sympathy for evil characters for "the purpose of ultimately inviting us to reflect upon our own moral weakness, a moral purpose if there ever was one."<sup>[6]</sup> And in his influential 1997 paper, "In Praise of Immoral Art," Dan Jacobson remarks that "evaluative discourse in a pluralistic society" requires us to "see the world as...others do," even when their perspectives prove to be systematically distorted. Immoral art, Jacobson suggests, might provide us with the only way to do this from something other than a "wholly external position."<sup>[7]</sup>

In opposition to these upbeat prognostications, Eaton very sensibly protests that treating the value of such works as though it were always intrinsically connected to the edification of audiences "saps immoral art of its threat and menace."<sup>[8]</sup> Just as any real life act of violence or degradation can be extrinsically beneficial if the whims of fate are kind - recall familiar thought experiments about Hitler being strangled in his crib - so any narrative artwork that does not destroy us might conceivably make us mentally stronger, perhaps in an otherwise unattainable way, even though it adopts an unambiguously immoral perspective upon the characters it portrays. But it by no means follows from this that deriving such epistemic benefits is a necessary condition for appreciating the relevant works as art.

When it comes to describing what it is about narratives depicting rough

heroes that makes their specific type of ethical toxicity aesthetically praiseworthy, however, Eaton's remarks are somewhat elliptical. First, she says,

the rough hero type sets up and then skillfully solves an ambitious and artistically interesting problem...The target audience is one who would be strongly reluctant to direct evaluatively positive affective states toward a morally undeserving character...The challenge that works with rough heroes set themselves, then, is to overcome this substantial imaginative resistance and make the audience feel something that it resists feeling on moral grounds.<sup>[9]</sup>

These remarks are intriguing and suggestive as far as they go. But it is surely also clear that, while there is always the possibility of some overlap between other types of value and the aesthetic, not every type of problem-solving is aesthetically significant. We tend to admire devious crossword puzzles and fuel-efficient cars for different reasons than we admire the works of poets, painters, and novelists. For Eaton, the aesthetic problems solved by artworks with rough heroes are distinctive insofar as these works bring about some state of internal conflict or tension in their audiences that they would otherwise be relatively unlikely to undergo. But why is this enough, by itself, to endow such works with distinctively aesthetic rather than, say, merely therapeutic or hedonic value?

Eaton is aware of this lacuna. "We do not just evaluate works based on whether they solve their problems," she observes, "we evaluate the problem itself." Questions she thinks we should ask include the following: "Is it an interesting problem? Does it constitute a genuine challenge? Is it a problem *worth* solving?"<sup>[10]</sup> While a "yes" answer to any of these questions would certainly indicate that the work had some kind of value, she leaves it unclear exactly how they are all supposed to add up to a recipe for specifically aesthetic value.

Can such criteria be provided? Probably not in an entirely decisive way, at least not without also developing a more general account of the nature of the aesthetic, a task that far exceeds my ambitions here. What I shall attempt to do instead is rely upon a mostly unexamined, rough-and-ready understanding of the distinction between artworks and other potential objects of appreciation (e.g. police reports, political slogans, and religious dogmas) in order to describe how the competent appreciation of just any work of art might be viewed as involving a single discrete, albeit very general, type of problem-solving activity, one that furthermore plays a constitutive role in human moral development. By taking this approach, I shall remain agnostic on the question of whether this sort of activity might be involved in all forms of aesthetic experience or just the type that we associate specifically with the appreciation of artworks.<sup>[11]</sup>

Before I expand upon this hypothesis about the role played by good art in moral development, however, it will prove useful to reflect a bit more carefully about exactly what conceptions of morality are in the offing when philosophers discuss its connection with aesthetic value.

### 3. A plea for broadness

In *Art, Emotion, and Ethics*, Berys Gaut refers to himself as an 'ethicist' rather than a moralist about art, at least partly because he wants his own belief in the connection between aesthetic and moral value to seem less qualified than those defended by Carroll and Eaton.<sup>[12]</sup> But he also distinguishes between "overall" and "*pro tanto*" versions of ethicism and only endorses the latter. To be an ethicist, as Gaut uses the term, is to believe that whenever an artwork has positive or negative moral value in an aesthetically relevant way it always also possesses the corresponding valence of aesthetic value. But this very general principle must be interpreted as merely *pro tanto* because some artworks might only be susceptible to ethical improvement at the expense of what makes them successful aesthetically.<sup>[13]</sup> In Camus' *L'Étranger*, for example, the protagonist, Meursault, is casually racist in a way that the novel somewhat culpably never treats as problematic. But if Meursault's inner life were presented more hygienically, the novel would be a less powerful and revealing depiction of a truly alien psychology. Likewise, Lars Von Trier's film *Dogville* would lose its vital political subtext if the otherwise sympathetic protagonist, Grace, chose to forgive the inhabitants of the village that held her captive rather than having them slaughtered. And Nabokov's *Lolita* would be barely recognizable if it were never intimated that Lolita and Humbert had sex.<sup>[14]</sup>

Gaut elaborates upon his position by drawing a distinction between what he calls "broad" and "narrower" conceptions of the ethical. According to the former, "any good or bad aspect[s] of character," from sincerity and patience to the ability to write well, may be characterized as ethical qualities. The problem with adopting this view in the context of debates about aesthetics, Gaut suggests, is that it would "afford an easy, though entirely trivial, victory for ethical criticism."<sup>[15]</sup> For, according to Gaut, it

is surely beyond dispute that one has accomplished at least something good when one has managed to correctly discern a work's aesthetic value. Aestheticians should therefore confine themselves to a more narrow or restrictive conception of the ethical, according to which its content is strictly limited to "the kinds of motivations and feelings" that "we have toward other people."<sup>[16]</sup> Gaut also denies that ethical judgments, considered narrowly, possess any claim to overridingness.<sup>[17]</sup> The question of whether we should, "all things considered," act upon our specifically ethical obligations should always be viewed within the context of aesthetics as "a non-trivial query."<sup>[18]</sup>

Gaut's suggestion that the ability to recognize aesthetic value always represents the manifestation of some admirable character trait or other is dubious at best. Why mightn't this ability often, perhaps even always, be merely a desirable side-effect of some broader disposition that is, in itself, unequivocally malign? An awareness of this dim but disturbing possibility is surely part of the reason why many are so horrified when they hear about Nazi officers weeping at Schubert recitals. Gaut also acknowledges that regarding the scope of the ethical as limited to specifically other-regarding obligations represents a distinctively modern perspective upon the nature of morality. But many philosophers of the past half-century have, in fact, endorsed the view that ethics is only distinguishable from other forms of philosophical enquiry to the extent that it addresses the utterly self-regarding question, "How should I live?"<sup>[19]</sup>

As for Gaut's insistence upon the non-overridingness of moral judgments, while this view derives some surface plausibility from the fact that almost any grammatically well-formed question can be made to look non-trivial from a sufficiently esoteric point of view, I also suspect that most speakers of ordinary English would be pretty flummoxed if they were asked whether one really should do something that was uncontroversially required by morality. Such intuitions might perhaps be less robust if the judgment were being made about a fictional character's obligations rather than one's own. But this latter fact does not, by itself, seem to provide any special reason for thinking of these topics more narrowly in philosophical aesthetics than anywhere else.

To the extent that one is prepared to countenance a broader conception of morality in aesthetics than Gaut allows for, can one also defend a more robust (but still non-trivial) version of moralism? In what follows I shall provide a brief outline of just such an immoderate species of moralism and try to anticipate a few of the most serious objections that could be brought against it. Its ultimate plausibility, I shall argue, depends upon the extent to which aesthetic appreciation can be understood as a fundamentally agonistic orientation toward the specific type of psychological challenge that is presented to us by ethically significant art.

#### 4. Aesthetic appreciation and ethical knowledge

It is supremely unlikely that consumers of art will learn the truth of principles such as "murder is bad" or "intellectual honesty requires self-sacrifice" as the result of their aesthetic experiences, even when the artworks under scrutiny may be taken to implicitly endorse these claims. Such moral knowledge simply does not appear to come to us fresh via the medium of art. As Noël Carroll observes, the belief that murder is bad is something more like "a presupposition that the reader must bring to *Crime and Punishment* in order to understand it." Carroll tries to defend the idea that some works may have a more limited role to play in moral education by teaching their audiences "how to apply...precepts to situations."<sup>[20]</sup> But even this view of the ethical content of art is difficult to sustain when one considers how few of the situations depicted in works like Dostoyevsky's novel are likely to bear a sufficiently close similarity to real events in the lives of their readers. Coming to understand how one should best proceed upon being tempted to kill one's pawnbroker with an axe does not seem to have the sort of direct practical applicability that we associate with genuine ethical knowledge.

But the broader character-based conception of ethics that Gaut thinks aestheticians would be better off ignoring has traditionally been associated with an understanding of ethical knowledge that emphasizes its similarity to perception over its derivability from highly abstract principles, such as the Categorical Imperative or the Principle of Utility. As Aristotle famously put it, the discovery of the most basic goods is like "the knowledge whether this is a loaf [of bread] or is cooked the right amount;" it is too tied to specific situations to be the outcome of a self-consciously inferential process.<sup>[21]</sup>

Consider the following example of a situation of everyday moral deliberation. A teenager hired as a babysitter is watching television and working on homework when, at about the same time, the telephone starts ringing and the toddler in the next room starts frantically screaming. At this moment, the teenager is subject to a number of discrete normative demands. The precepts of academic diligence require the math problem to be finished, whereas etiquette demands that the phone be answered before it rings too many times. The babysitter

also clearly has, at the very least, a fiduciary obligation to his or her employers to check up on the child. Most of us would feel that there is no real contest amongst these obligations when it comes to determining which is the most pressing; the babysitter should first look in on the toddler. But we might find it at least a bit harder to formulate a principle explaining why this responsibility overrides the others. And if our hypothetical babysitter succeeds at checking on the infant before performing the other two tasks, we would surely not fault the babysitter much if he or she was unable to articulate why he or she made this decision.

We view the capacity to detect overridingness amongst the various types of obligations that present themselves to us as a type of skill-knowledge, something that is possibly aided by, but not necessarily equivalent to, a belief in any particular theory of morality. It is something more like a highly context-sensitive type of receptivity to the features most salient to action in one's present environment.

What I want to suggest is that for many, if not most, narrative artworks, to appreciate them aesthetically requires the same type of mental act involved in apprehending the property of overridingness itself, considered as a general feature that is shared by all genuine moral obligations, regardless of how they might otherwise differ in their specific prescriptive content. And the ability to do this reliably is a very general type of skill or virtue that most, if not all, good art can help to inculcate.

When Burgess expresses admiration for the *The History Man* because "no judgment is forced" about the protagonist's moral character, he surely does not mean that the book completely avoids didacticism, nor that it adopts a laudably neutral perspective upon the events that it chronicles.<sup>[22]</sup> What he commends, rather, is the fact that solving the work's central puzzle, by figuring out what's truly important about the shabby treatment Howard Kirk doles out to his family, students, and colleagues, is not made too straightforward or facile an undertaking for the reader. For, to the extent that it presents him or her with a genuine challenge, the reader will develop, at least temporarily, an increased capacity to distinguish what in human nature is merely attractive from what is genuinely worthy of emulation.

If the distinctive type of value possessed by ethically significant artworks is instrumental in the way just described, it should furthermore be expected to increase in proportion to the difficulty of the problems that audiences must solve in order to properly appreciate those works. It is in this specific sense that the thesis I wish to defend about the nature of aesthetic value deserves to be called agonistic moralism, hereafter AM. AM provides a neat elucidation of what Eaton might mean by her remark that the artworks she discusses must somehow address themselves "to a problem worth solving." For the type of value just described seems to me to be exactly the distinctive species of merit that is exhibited by artworks with Humean rough heroes. The psychological tension between sympathy and revulsion that Eaton describes such narratives as provoking in their most receptive audiences could not be achieved unless these works made it simultaneously possible to admire some features of a rough hero's personality and to sense that the considerations that have prompted one's esteem are not genuinely overriding. Fans of *The Sopranos* or *Lolita* who find themselves experiencing a troubling degree of sympathy for Tony or Humbert haven't necessarily arrived at the level of moral achievement reached by our hypothetical babysitter and may not have learned any especially important truths about either the principles of morality or the idiosyncrasies of human motivation. But they will at least have gotten some practice at exercising a crucial mental ability that serves as a prerequisite for both such accomplishments- a type of moral perceptiveness, to use the idiom favored by contemporary Aristotelians.

This is a considerably more modest claim than the cognitive immoralist's proposal that works containing rough heroes should be valued for the psychological knowledge they make available to us about our own ethical vulnerabilities or the otherwise inscrutable motivations of the wicked. And it is perfectly compatible with Eaton's proviso that such works pose a certain "threat and menace" to their audiences. For clearly, in art just as in life, sometimes failing to solve a puzzle or overcome a challenge is far worse than never having tried at all. We should also concede the Kantian point that no type of discriminatory skill (other than *phronesis* itself perhaps), however necessary its possession might be to competent moral deliberation, is so immune from perversion that it could not be put to ill use.<sup>[23]</sup> That having been said, it does strike me as a subtle misrepresentation to suggest that audiences who identify unreservedly with characters such as Tony Soprano or Milton's Satan, without any trace of accompanying discomfort with themselves for doing so, might nonetheless have fully apprehended the aesthetic value of the works in which these characters appear.

What about the types of artworks that motivate Gaut's retreat *topro tanto* ethicism on the grounds that they could not be purged of unethical content without also making them less aesthetically admirable? It seems

to me that such works will be singularly useful for inculcating the ability to detect the overridingness of moral considerations precisely because of the fact that their ethically dubious characteristics are so difficult to separate from what gives them their distinctive value. When one has achieved a deep enough appreciation of the aesthetic merits of works such as *L'Étranger* or *Lolita*, and thereby necessarily finds oneself unable to imagine them transformed in such a way as to render them aesthetically undamaged but morally unobjectionable, this will surely do at least something to increase one's sensitivity to unresolved tensions and instabilities within his or her own moral sensibility.

The plausibility of the claims just made depends upon the possibility of drawing a principled distinction in ethics between propositional knowledge and the knowledge that is embodied in certain sorts of practical skills. Some philosophers have argued for the intellectualist hypothesis that knowledge-how, in general, is either reducible to or just one species of knowledge-that. But I do not think that any of these arguments undermine the plausibility of my claim that aesthetic value should (often, at least) be understood as the capacity of artworks to produce a particular type of skill-knowledge in their audiences. For it seems to me that the ability to detect overridingness amongst all of one's various reasons for action is more accurately thought of not as a type of know-how at all but rather as an instance of what David Wiggins describes as "knowing to." A person might know how to ride a bicycle while also knowing to stop riding if his bicycle gets a flat tire. Wiggins points out that the latter idiom, while perhaps less common in English than the former, is perfectly grammatical.<sup>[24]</sup> Knowledge-to does not seem to be susceptible to the type of analysis of know-how favored by intellectualists, according to which the latter type of knowledge is paradigmatically expressed by declarative responses to *wh*-questions.<sup>[25]</sup> But even if the psychological difference between these two types of states, know-how and knowledge-to, deserves to be regarded as negligible, they certainly do appear to differ in *normative* kind, in the sense that attributing know-how to someone indicates merely that he or she has the ability to successfully perform some action *X*, whereas attributing knowledge-to indicates that he or she also has the capacity to discern when doing *X* is optimal relative to any other available option.

The case for AM could be strengthened considerably if it were possible to find some empirically independent basis for believing in the distinctive type of ethical skill-knowledge that I have associated with the appreciation of ethically significant artworks. Unfortunately, I think that any attempt to present direct evidence for the existence of this sort of psychological trait, however apparently well-grounded in the methods of experimental psychology, would be bound to come across as question-begging. For in order to treat AM as a testable hypothesis, one would have to start out not only with some antecedent conditions for when a person counts as a competent appreciator of suitably serious artworks, but also with clear criteria for what sorts of behaviors would qualify as manifestations of the relevant moral skill. Perhaps the first task is not so difficult. The mere decision to spend one's time consuming art, as opposed to, say, watching sports or getting drunk, surely counts for something, and such patterns of consumer behavior are fairly easy to track. The second task is more problematic, though. Until the experimentalist has committed to a particular moral theory -Kantianism or Utilitarianism, say- and thereby decided what sorts of substantive reasons for action really should be counted as overriding, it would be impossible to determine whether the artworks under examination really brought about ethically significant changes in character or attitude. Recent research by psychologists that has identified a correlation between the reading of literary fiction and the development of empathy and theory of mind is certainly encouraging.<sup>[26]</sup> But it cannot be taken as providing direct support for AM, since neither species of psychological trait may be regarded as just self-evidently beneficial to an individual's moral development.<sup>[27]</sup>

One species of artworks does provide a more serious challenge to the universal applicability of AM.<sup>[28]</sup> Certain narratives that represent an intriguing subclass within the broader category of tragedy seem designed to give rise to the conviction in their audiences that, in some circumstances, there is simply no unambiguously overriding reason to pursue any determinate course of action. In the first half of Sophocles' *Antigone*, when Creon chastises the heroine for disobeying his edict not to bury her brother, one is left with a much stronger sense of the inevitability of their mutual destruction than of either party's unequivocally being in the right. And in Martin Scorsese's 2006 film *The Departed*, after a pair of otherwise sympathetic characters decide to betray the competing organizations they work for (the police force and a criminal syndicate), power relationships become so convoluted that one is left radically uncertain whether either had a plausible ethical basis for choosing between loyalty and duplicity in the first place.

The tragic situations that these works depict seem to be explicable only in terms of the unavailability of such reasons to the characters in the narrative. For this reason, I do not think it is plausible to say of these



works that their aesthetic value consists in the inculcation of a skill at discerning overriding reasons for action.

The extent to which this is a problem for AM will depend upon rather delicate considerations about the scope and limitations of morality in general. In spite of certain perennially attractive intuitions to the contrary, for example, that 'ought' implies 'can,' it seems to me undeniable that sometimes morally good actions are performed by an agent as the result of external intervention in that agent's activities or deliberations, and sometimes morally bad actions are performed by agents for whom no better option was available. Other philosophers who have defended the possibility of this type of moral good or ill luck have characterized the real-life circumstances in which it occurs as being themselves fundamentally tragic in nature.<sup>[29]</sup> So this special type of narrative artwork only qualifies as a genuine counterexample to AM to the extent that its defenders would also be prepared to deny that the deliberations of unlucky agents depicted therein have any ethical significance whatsoever. But such tragic works do also represent a small embarrassment for the defender of AM, even if he or she does believe in moral luck, insofar as the ethical knowledge that they convey cannot be explained in terms of the inculcation of a practical skill but has to do with the nature of morality itself.

### 5. A postscript on formalism

AM treats the apprehension of aesthetic value as involving detection of the property of overridingness that is shared by all truly ethical obligations,<sup>[30]</sup> without attempting to specify what any of those obligations actually are. This sets AM significantly apart from the types of radical moralism defended by authors such as the Tolstoy of "What is Art?" and the Plato of the *Republic*, who derive their views about the value of art from substantive assumptions about what morality dictates.

AM is closer in spirit to a view that Iris Murdoch defends in *The Sovereignty of Good*. Murdoch characterizes art as a means to virtue on account of its capacity to "enlarge the sensibility of its consumer" and thereby achieve "a kind of goodness by proxy."<sup>[31]</sup> She takes this view to be implicit in Plato's discussion of the nature of beauty in the *Symposium*, from which she also derives the suggestion that moral ideas "are perhaps most clearly seen in the context of the *technai*."<sup>[32]</sup> Here she is referring not only to the technical capabilities of artists but to all forms of sufficiently rigorous and abstract study, including even mathematics.

These remarks suggest that there might be an interesting sense in which a view like AM deserves to be classified as a type of formalism about aesthetic value. Yet the most influential types of aesthetic formalism in modern aesthetics are widely regarded as being starkly incompatible with even the most moderate species of moralism. While I lack the space to investigate the reasons behind this view in any detail, I think that this is at best a crude oversimplification.

To consider just one famous example, Clive Bell's characterization of the aesthetic value of paintings in terms of their significant form, which he usually associates with physical patterns in the distribution of color and geometrical composition, doesn't seem to have much to do with the types of value-claims that aesthetic moralists normally make. But in a famous remark that addresses the issue directly, he says, "Once we have judged a thing a work of art, we have judged it ethically of the first importance, and put it beyond the reach of the moralist." What he means by distinguishing the ethical from the moral in this way becomes clear in a much less well-known passage from *Art*, where Bell remarks that to classify something as a genuine artwork is "to credit [that] object with being so direct and powerful a means to good that we need not trouble ourselves about any other of its possible consequences."<sup>[33]</sup> This indicates that, while he might have balked at the sort of overtly instrumentalist account of aesthetic value implied by AM, his otherwise famously elusive notion of aesthetic 'significance' could plausibly be construed in a way that harmonizes with moralism. I suspect that a similar treatment might be available of the otherwise rather murky notion of 'formal purposiveness' that Kant associates with judgments of beauty.<sup>[34]</sup>

What is less easy to extract from the work of either of these authors, though it is hinted at in a few of Kant's remarks about the sublime,<sup>[35]</sup> is the idea, central to AM, that the detection of an artwork's value through the apprehension of its form arises from something like a contest or some interplay of challenge-and-response between the artwork and its audience. I hope to have shown how such a view might help to solve puzzles that arise in the interpretation of some narrative artworks that do not at first glance seem to provide particularly robust support for moralism.

To what extent can AM be generalized to other forms or species of art? Works that are conventionally classified as abstract, absurdist, or (in the case of music) 'pure,' frequently evoke only the very most ephemeral of ethical judgments from even their foremost devotees. There certainly



does not seem to be a great deal of similarity between the experience of, say, listening attentively to a Bruckner symphony or confronting the spectacle of a Dadaist assemblage and the dawning awareness of an overriding reason to perform some ethically significant action. Noël Carroll describes his particular version of moralism as moderate partly because he thinks it is just obvious that these and similar works "have no moral dimension" whatsoever.<sup>[36]</sup>

But such intuitions have been held much less universally at other points in the history of aesthetics. Consider Schopenhauer's account of the capacity of all music, pure and otherwise, to induce a state of ethically beneficent self-transcendence. Or consider Walter Benjamin's characterization of the type of moral shock effect provoked by Dadaist paintings and poems as intimating a "sacrifice of market values."<sup>[37]</sup> Both of these authors clearly conceive of the types of aesthetic experiences that such works bring about in both moralistic and agonistic terms. For Schopenhauer, music challenges the listener to achieve a profound knowledge of the inner nature of the world that can never be attained while one's attention is focused on the subordinate expressive or imitative properties that it always also to some extent possesses.<sup>[38]</sup> And for Benjamin, Dadaist art prompts a struggle within its audiences to resist adopting the default attitude of mere detached contemplation toward artworks, which he regards as a symptom of "the decline of middle-class society."<sup>[39]</sup> Such interpretative strategies might strike many as forced or excessively ideological but the mere capacity to prompt them serves as a sign that even the sorts of artworks Carroll deems beyond the scope of moral assessment can, when placed in the right environment, serve to challenge, puzzle, or confound us in ways that might make us into better audiences and better people.

It is a philosophical commonplace that part of what makes aesthetic experience distinctive is some sort of active engagement with its objects rather than the type of mere passive receptivity characteristic of ordinary sense perception. I have argued for the less widely accepted thesis that what makes many, if not most, aesthetic experiences valuable is the role that they play in the development of a type of discriminatory skill, a skill that also happens to be a prerequisite for successful moral deliberation. The sorts of artworks that Carroll, Eaton, and Gaut appeal to in defense of 'moderation' are, in fact, better viewed as having just this type of instrumental value. It is only once we have taken up the challenge offered by artists as diverse as Milton, James Gandolfini, Vladimir Nabokov, and Malcolm Bradbury to elevate to consciousness the morally perilous deliberative tensions their works are designed to provoke that we may apprehend these works in all of their aesthetic profundity.<sup>[40]</sup>

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#### Endnotes

<sup>[1]</sup> Anthony Burgess, *Ninety-Nine Novels: The Best in English Since 1939* (London: Allison and Busby, 1984), p. 11.

<sup>[2]</sup> See Noël Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 36 (1996), 223-8; ref. on 224.

<sup>[3]</sup> A.W. Eaton, "Robust Immoralism," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 70 (2012), 281-92, ref. on 282.

<sup>[4]</sup> Matthew Kieran, "Forbidden Knowledge," in *Art and Morality*, eds. J. Bermúdez and S. Gardner (London: Routledge, 2003) pp. 66-7; ref. on 58.

<sup>[5]</sup> Kieran also asserts, perhaps somewhat more tendentiously, that "we must have experienced, in some sense, the bad in order to understand the good." See Kieran, "Forbidden Knowledge", pp. 66-7.

<sup>[6]</sup> Noël Carroll, "Rough Heroes: A Response to A.W. Eaton," in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 71 (2013), 371-5; ref. on 373. Carroll does not, in fact, classify himself as an *immoralist* at all, but in this response to Eaton he seems to wander closer to this sort of position.

<sup>[7]</sup> Daniel Jacobson, "In Praise of Immoral Art," *Philosophical Topics*, 25 (1997) 155-99; ref. 193-4. Jacobson has more recently expressed reservations about this humanist understanding of the ethical significance of immoral art. See Daniel Jacobson, "Ethical Criticism and

the Vice of Moderation," in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Matthew Kieran (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 342-55; ref. on p. 353.

[8] Eaton, "Robust Immoralism," 289.

[9] *Ibid.*, 287.

[10] *Ibid.*, 288.

[11] For a plausible defense of the view that the former type of experience is considerably more widespread than the latter, see Yukio Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[12] Gaut briskly dismisses the intuitions that motivate Eaton's commitment to immoralism. When a work of art succeeds at presenting an ethically flawed character sympathetically, he claims, it is merely employing a 'seduction strategy,' the goal of which is "to show the audience how easily it can be seduced into false, idealizing, morally tainted, or even plain evil views of what is going on in the work." See Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 192.

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 53-4.

[14] Of course, these three examples are only illustrative of Gaut's position to the extent that one suspects any of them might really be as ethically problematic as their critics have claimed.

[15] Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics*, pp. 41-2.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 48.

[17] The concept of overridingness was introduced into the lexicon of philosophical ethics by Samuel Scheffler, who characterizes it as follows: "if there is a consideration supporting the conclusion that one ought to do A, but a weightier consideration supporting the conclusion that one ought to do B, then it is natural to speak of the second claim overriding the first." See Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) p. 55.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 44.

[19] See, e.g., Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1985) pp. 1-4, Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 16, and Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 17.

[20] Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," 229.

[21] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985) pp. 63-4. See also Iris Murdoch's discussion of moral perception in *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), p. 77.

[22] It should perhaps be remarked I am using the term 'didacticism' in a non-pejorative sense here, since it seems to me that part of what any form of moralism in aesthetics entails is that it is not always an unequivocally bad thing.

[23] See Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1959), p. 9.

[24] David Wiggins, "Practical Knowledge: Knowing How to and Knowing That," *Mind*, 121 (2012), 97-130; ref. p. 113.

[25] See Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson, "Knowing How," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 98 (2001), 411-444.

[26] See R.A. Mar, K. Oatley, and J.B. Peterson, "Exploring the link between reading fiction and empathy: Ruling out individual differences and examining outcomes," *Communication*, 34 (2009) 407-28 and D.C. Kidd and E. Castano, "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind," *Science*, 18 (2013), 377-80.

[27] For a thoughtful critique of the view that empathy is always an unambiguous moral asset see Michael Stocker, *Valuing Emotions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For a discussion of the extent to which moral philosophy can proceed without assuming that moral agents must possess a theory of mind, see Alvin Goldman, "Empathy, Mind, and Morals," in *Mental Simulation: Evaluations and Applications*, eds. Martin Davies and Tony Stone (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 185-208.

[28] The concerns addressed in the next few paragraphs were first brought to my attention by James Shelley, to whom I am extremely grateful.

[29] See, e.g., Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 1999).

[30] It is worth remarking that not all moral philosophers share this view that morality, or any single, identifiable class of obligations, should be viewed as overriding. See, for example, Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 79 (1981), 419-439 and Donald C. Hubin, "The Groundless Normativity of Instrumental Reason," *The Journal of Philosophy* (2001), 445-468.

[31] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Schocken, 1971), p. 87.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 89.

[33] Clive Bell, *Art* (Scott's Valley, CA: CreateSpace, 2013), p. 42.

[34] See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1951), p. 62.

[35] Part of what makes an artwork or a natural object sublime, Kant observes, is the way that it "discover[s] in us a faculty of resistance... which encourages us to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature." See Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, pp. 100-1.

[36] Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," p. 229.

[37] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. H Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969) pp. 217-252; ref. p 238.

[38] See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E.J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), pp. 261-267.

[39] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 238.

[40] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 72nd Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics in 2014. I am grateful for the extremely helpful and constructive feedback I received there, as well as for the thoughtful comments of an anonymous reviewer for *Contemporary Aesthetics*.