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Aesthetic Value of Immoral Fictions

ELISA PAGANINI
University of Milano, Milano, Italy

Can one have an aesthetically valuable experience of fiction that takes an immoral perspective? Some have argued that one can. However, some important objections have been raised against this idea. Two objections are: that the immorality involved is confined to fictional reality, and that the aesthetic value of immoral fiction is dictated by a pluralistic attitude that not everyone accepts. My aim is to respond to these challenges and to argue, on the basis of two examples, that even an unlimited immoral perspective can enhance a widespread aesthetic value.

Keywords: Aesthetic value; immoral fiction; moral concepts; human values; fictional/actual ethical defects.

Suppose you are confronted with a fiction whose perspective is immoral by your standards. Some have argued that such a fiction can produce an experience of aesthetic value. The objections to this claim are that, in such a case, (i) the immorality is confined to the world of the fiction, and (ii) the aesthetic value is dictated by a pluralistic attitude that not everyone accepts. I argue instead that even an unrestricted immoral perspective can enhance a widespread aesthetic value.

I will first outline how philosophers have come to argue for the aesthetic value of immoral fictions or works of art (§1). I then present two objections that have been raised against this view and outline a response to them (§2). Finally, I consider two case studies in support of my response (§3 and §4).

1. Immorality, art, and fiction

Ethical criticism of art was accepted and encouraged from the dawn of philosophy (see Carroll 2000: 350) until modern times, when philosophers began to advocate the autonomism of art, according to which “artworks are valuable for their own sake, not because of their service

to ulterior purposes” (Carroll 2000: 351). While radical autonomists claimed that no moral evaluation could be given to works of art, moderate autonomists acknowledge that moral considerations can complement aesthetic ones in the evaluation of an artwork with moral content; but they all claim that “the ethical value or disvalue of an artwork has no bearing on the aesthetic value or disvalue” (Carroll 2000: 360).

The radical division between aesthetic and moral appreciation can be argued by appealing to the difference between the truth-dependence of morality and the truth-independence of aesthetic appreciation in the following way:

Moral reasoning is concerned with truth, with ‘getting it right’, whether the nature of moral reasoning is thought of as the application of general rules or as discriminating between conflicting moral claims in a complex situation and balancing them against each other. However, [...] appreciation of a literary work can proceed independently of judgements about the truth of the work (or its content). (Lamarque and Olsen 1994: 389)

This division is challenged by radical moralists, for whom, on the contrary, the appreciation of a morally committed artwork depends on the truth of moral evaluations. Berys Gaut, for example, argues that

Responses outside the context of art are subject to ethical evaluation [...] The same is true when responses are directed at fictional events, for these responses are actual, not just imagined ones. [...] If a work prescribes a response that is unmerited, it has failed in an aim internal to it, and that is a defect. (Gaut 1998: 194)

A crucial assumption in the radical moralist’s argument is that a work of art must be morally instructive whenever it deals with a situation of ethical significance; on this basis, a work that prescribes an ethically incorrect attitude is defective in its educational role and therefore aesthetically flawed.

The role of artistic moral education is reconsidered and deepened by the moderate moralist Noël Carroll, who distinguishes between two aspects of moral education: (1) “having access to abstract propositions and concepts” and (2) “apply[ing] [such concepts] appropriately” (Carroll 1996: 230). The first component develops independently of artworks through our relationships with the world, while the second component is enhanced through artworks because “in *exercising* [...] pre-existing moral powers in response to texts, the texts may become opportunities for enhancing our already existing moral understanding” (Carroll 1996: 237, original emphasis; see Carroll 1998: 153–154). This means that truth-dependent morality is acquired outside our engagement with artworks, as the autonomists argued, but the deepening of this acquisition can be achieved through such engagement, and this is the space for moral education/miseducation through artworks.

Within this “exercise” way of interpreting the moral education offered by art, the relationship between morality and aesthetics has been explored. Morality (or immorality) in works of art—if present—is sought in the “purposiveness” or “work’s *perspective* on its ethical

content” (Clavel-Vázquez 2020: 145),¹ while external aspects such as the process or means of production, the author’s actual interests or intentions,² and harmful effects on the audience³ are not considered relevant, nor are internal factors such as the unethical characters or situations depicted. As for the aesthetic dimension, it is assumed, with Carroll, that “the bottom line, aesthetically speaking, with respect to narrative works is that we are supposed to be absorbed by them” (Carroll 1996: 235). And with such a definition of the moral and aesthetic dimensions, it is admitted that:

A narrative may be more absorbing exactly because of the way in which it engages our moral understanding and emotions. [...] And in such cases the way in which the narrative addresses and deepens our moral understanding is part and parcel of what makes the narrative successful. (Carroll 1996: 236)

Now, the interesting question that moderate moralists and immoralists have focused on is whether an immoral perspective in a narrative can contribute to the aesthetic value of the work.⁴ The moderate moralist Carroll observes that an artwork can have aesthetic value if the immoral perspective escapes people, even the morally sensitive audience (see Carroll 2000: 378). Immoralists, on the other hand, note that the immoral perspective allows for the “exercise” of moral faculties, i.e. “the immoral character of the imaginative experience afforded by a work may directly *deepen our understanding*” (Kieran 2003: 63, my emphasis). Daniel Jacobson, for example, notes that “a cunning political cartoon can make you *see someone* in a manner which you would repudiate as a judgment. Then it is a good caricature, albeit a bad political statement” (Jacobson 1997: 187, my emphasis). And A. W. Eaton adds that “the capacity to make an audience *feel and desire* things inimical to their considered views and deeply held principles is for this very reason and to this extent an aesthetic achievement” (Eaton 2012: 281, my emphasis). Immoralists thus argue that the immoral perspective

¹ Clavel-Vázquez reports that, on this characterization of morality inherent in fiction, Gaut (1998, 2007), Eaton (2003, 2012), Devereaux (2004), Stecker (2005) and Harold (2006) all converge.

² On a different attitude towards the actual interests or intentions of the author see Clavel-Vázquez (2020) and Matthes (2022).

³ See Wimmer et al. (2021) for experiments showing that fiction does not have cognitive effects on audiences.

⁴ Both the moderate moralist and the immoralist maintain that moral defects may contribute to aesthetic valuation. For moderate moralism, see Carroll (1996: 236, my emphasis): “This is moderate moralism. It contends that [...] sometimes the moral defects and/or merits of a work *may figure* in the aesthetic evaluation of the work.” Immoralists claim that sometimes moral defects *figure* in the aesthetic evaluation of a work. Therefore, moderate moralism is not challenged by immoralism as Carroll observes: “I have been agnostic about immoralism, while also conceding that if it were true, immoralism would nevertheless be logically consistent with moderate moralism” (Carroll 2013: 371). I am indebted to a reviewer for asking me to clarify the relationship between the moderate moralist and immoralist claims.

draws us into the fiction through understandings, visions, feelings and desires that are at odds with our habitual ways of thinking and acting, and therein lies the aesthetic value of the work of art.

2. *Two weaknesses*

Two weaknesses have been identified in the arguments of the immoralists; I will call them the Quarantine Limitation and the Value Challenge. My aim in this work is to overcome these difficulties and to allow for a different interpretation of how an immoral perspective in a narrative work can constitute an aesthetic value.

2.1. *The Quarantine Limitation*

Adriana Clavel-Vázquez (2020), drawing on Tamar Gendler (2000, 2006), distinguishes between works whose immoral prescriptions are quarantined in fiction without reference to actual situations—that is, they have *fictional ethical defects*—and works whose immoral prescriptions involve actual attitudes to real events—that is, works with *actual ethical defects*. In her words,

Fictional ethical defects fulfill the following conditions: 1) works present an unethical perspective, that is, they express and prescribe unethical attitudes toward narrated events and characters; 2) authors recognize, and the intended audience is put in a position to recognize the unethical character of the attitudes expressed and prescribed; 3) the unethical attitudes are directed only at fictional events and characters. (Clavel-Vázquez 2020: 148)

while

Actual ethical defects fulfill the following conditions: 1) works present an unethical perspective, that is, they express and prescribe unethical attitudes toward narrated events and characters; 2) authors do not recognize, and the intended audience is not meant to recognize, the unethical character of the attitudes expressed and prescribed; 3) the make-believe moral outlook mirrors an unethical real-world outlook actually endorsed by agents (both artist and intended audience); 4) the unethical attitudes are directed at both fictional and actual entities. (Clavel-Vázquez 2020: 150)

She observes that immoralists have convincingly argued that works with fictional ethical defects can have aesthetic value; but—she claims—the main concerns are about works with actual ethical defects, which cannot have aesthetic value (Clavel-Vázquez 2020: 153). I argue instead that actual ethical defects can contribute to the aesthetic value of a narrative work. But before arguing for this, I need to consider what the aesthetic value of a fictional narrative is; this is what I will present in response to the Value Challenge.

2.2. *The Value Challenge*

Noël Carroll (2000), considering Jacobson's defense of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* "not [being] good in spite of its moral defec-

tiveness, but because of it” (Carroll 2000: 380), challenges the immoralist supporters of artworks with actual immoral perspectives to explain the aesthetic value in them in the following terms:

Whoever praises *Triumph of the Will* for its artistic value owes us an explanation here. That it can be made to serve educative needs in a pluralistic society does not sound like an artistic value in any traditional sense. It sounds like a strategic value from a certain, perhaps liberal, point of view. If indeed it is an artistic value, more needs to be said to connect it with better-known sources of artistic or aesthetic value. (Carroll 2000: 381)

Carroll does not consider it an aesthetic value that fictions with immoral perspectives allow us to experience viewpoints that we do not and would not experience in real life, because this evaluation is dictated by a pluralistic attitude that may be of value to some but not to others. He claims that it is necessary for the artistic or aesthetic value to be defined as a value that is more widely shared.

In my view, a useful starting point for attempting to define pervasive artistic or aesthetic value is the following observation by Lamarque and Olsen:

The interest which literature has for human beings, it has because it possesses a *humanly interesting content*, because what literature presents or says concerns readers as human beings. (Lamarque and Olsen 1994: 265, my emphasis)

The expression “humanly interesting content” refers to content that has to do with characteristics that are shared by humanity and that arouses interest in whoever is able to recognize them.⁵ This does not mean that every human being, whatever her point of view, whatever she does or believes, can recognize the characteristics she shares with every other human being; there are misanthropists or people who have no interest in other human beings. But when people are interested in the humanity of others and recognize human qualities where they didn’t expect to find them, they can have the rewarding experience that their understanding of humanity is broadened by this recognition, and this is the experience of “humanly interesting content.”

We can recognize people who are open to the experience of “humanly interesting content.” A case in point is Chremes, a character in Terence’s II century B.C. comedy *The Self-Tormentor*, who has a deep interest in the concerns of his neighbor Menedemus and manifests it with the following words: “I am a human being; nothing human is alien to me” (my translation; see Terence 2006). In these words we recognize the receptive attitude of anyone who is open to “humanly interesting content.”

⁵ On the human value of aesthetic experience, see also Murdoch (1970: 65): “what we learn from contemplating the characters of Shakespeare or Tolstoy or the paintings of Velasquez or Titian [...] is something about the real quality of human nature.” See also Lamarque (2012: 279) for an interesting analysis of what it takes to seek “transcultural instead of culture-specific truths.”

The suspicious reader may reasonably ask why we need literature (or art) to understand what is humanly interesting. The reason has to do with the fact that we are all educated in morality and social conventions, which have their own virtues: they give us the tools to distinguish right from wrong, to behave sensitively towards other people, to interact in a useful and constructive way. But they also have a downside: by teaching us to classify actions and people, our education can prevent us from seeing our common humanity, which we are not always able to experience.

Literature and art—at their best—have the power to pull back the curtain of classifications that we have every right to make, and to make us recognize some human qualities even where we did not expect to find them. This creates surprise, confusion, and from this perspective, different from that of our classifications, we think we can recognize our humanity more fully. When this happens, we feel that we have had a valuable aesthetic experience.

The nature of this valuable aesthetic experience is, in my opinion, very well expressed in the following passage by Joseph Conrad, an author who is able to make us recognize humanity in unexpected and exceptional situations:

the artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom; to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition—and, therefore, more permanently enduring. He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty and pain. (Conrad 2017: 6)

In my view, the crucial observation in the above passage is that our experience of interesting human content does not depend on “wisdom,” on what we have acquired through moral and social education, but is seen as a “gift” that is human and available to anyone who wishes to exercise it.

This consideration allows us to reconsider the two levels of moral education proposed by Carroll, namely (1) “having access to abstract propositions and concepts” and (2) “applying [such concepts] appropriately.” Carroll suggests that our engagement with morally relevant art enables us to exercise the second aspect and to seek aesthetic value in it, while the first aspect is acquired outside of artistic works. But even the second aspect depends on education (or “wisdom”) and is not a “gift.” Lamarque-Olsen-Conrad proposes another level of moral education that is a gift and does not depend on education: (3) the discovery of humanity behind any moral or social classification.

The two perspectives (that offered by Carroll on the one hand and that offered by Lamarque-Olsen-Conrad on the other) are considered as alternative ways of interpreting the aesthetic experience of fiction with moral concerns. Instead, according to the present proposal, whenever we have a valuable aesthetic experience of a work with moral implications, we activate both the exercise of our independently acquired moral concepts (i.e. a wisdom) and the experience of humanity (i.e. a

gift) (in more schematic terms: levels (2) and (3)). And these two aspects may not be in harmony with each other; in particular, when we experience a work with ethical defects, the two aspects may not be coordinated, they may require recalibration, and this is part of the valuable aesthetic experience of the work.⁶ My suggestion is that whenever a work approaches a moral concern, the aesthetic value is not simply the absorption in the work together with the application of moral concepts, but the discovery of interesting human content together with our agreement or disagreement with its moral evaluation.

In the following sections, I consider two case studies in which narrative works with actual ethical defects provide valuable aesthetic experiences. The examples can be seen as thought experiments in which works with actual ethical defects allow us to recognize the humanly interesting content, and these are cases in which actual ethical defects allow for aesthetic virtue.

3. *Actual ethical defect: Condemning homosexuality*

The perspective offered by Dante's *Divine Comedy* has many actual ethical defects. Among them, it considers homosexuality a moral defect to be punished in the afterlife. The fictional author does not recognize, and the intended audience is not meant to recognize, the unethical nature of the attitudes expressed and prescribed. The fictional moral outlook unfortunately reflects an unethical real-world outlook that is actually endorsed by the author and the intended audience. It is clear from the work that the unethical attitudes are directed at both fictional and real entities.

In Canto XIV of *Inferno* [*Hell*] Dante encounters homosexuals—sodomites, as they were called at the time—and in Canto XV Dante meets Brunetto Latini, a literary scholar who had such an influence on Dante's thought and literary career that he revered him as a mentor. Brunetto predicted Dante's literary fame and showed great admiration for his pupil. Dante shows him respect and friendship. Brunetto, like all sodomites, is condemned to walk naked on the burning sand and to be struck by tiny flames falling on him.

Now, it is obvious that the contemporary reader may have a very different attitude from that of the time in which Dante wrote. In the Middle Ages it was generally accepted that homosexuality was a sin, and even today there are people who maintain this belief. But fortu-

⁶ Eaton observes that immoral fiction may elicit "pro and con attitudes" (Eaton 2013: 376). I agree with her that the experience of immoral fiction is conflictual, but the terms of the conflict are different: Eaton claims that it is a conflict between the application of moral norms and our experiences of immorality, I claim that it is between the application of moral norms and the discovery of humanity beyond such norms.

nately, most people today have developed a critical attitude towards it, recognizing the moral error underlying such a belief.⁷

It may be interesting to observe that, whatever one's moral attitude, reading Canto XV for the first time can be a disorientating and rather unpleasant experience. What is perhaps most disturbing is that Dante has placed someone as esteemed and admired as Brunetto Latini among the sodomites, subjecting him to cruel humiliation. But then something may happen that changes the first impression.

Reflecting on punishment, one realizes that the experience of walking on burning sand—an experience almost everyone has at the beach in summer—is the experience of suffering from having a body. It is not only the sand that burns the feet, but the person experiencing it has a desire to lose the earth's gravitational pull and to avoid contact with the soles of the feet, which are the source of suffering. And this experience is intensified if we imagine small flames falling on the body. The body becomes the cause of suffering since it is because of it that the condemned cannot avoid suffering. Reflecting on this, we realize that the image of the otherworldly punishment of sodomites reflects the torment that homosexuals who believe they have sinful desires must suffer in life.

This discovery changes the perspective on Canto XV: the actual ethical defect endorsed by the fictional narrator is not a limitation of the work, but it allows us to understand what it is like to have certain moral beliefs and the suffering they cause—at least in earthly life—to some gay people. When confronted with this transformative experience, we may forget the enormous difference in moral perspective between Dante, who does not discuss the sinfulness of homosexual attitudes, and the prospective reader, who does not consider them worthy of moral condemnation. But the difference is there, and the greatness of Dante's perspective is not that he did not condemn homosexuals (he did, there is no evidence to the contrary), but that he was able to see the human condition as dictated by the moral conventions he endorsed. And that is a valuable aesthetic achievement.

It is interesting to note that once the perspective has been changed, the whole of Canto XV assumes a different reading. The relationship between the fictional Dante and his teacher seems to be dictated by a deep understanding of the teacher's human condition, and Brunetto's physical and moral suffering makes us see his intellectual life and his generous attitude towards the narrator in a different light.

4. *Actual ethical defect: Endorsing Nazism*

In Jorge Luis Borges' *The Aleph*, there is a short story entitled *Deutsches Requiem*. It is the transcription of a manuscript written by the fic-

⁷ I am indebted to a reviewer for suggesting that I make these different perspectives explicit.

tional deputy director of the Tarnowitz concentration camp on the eve of his execution for crimes against humanity. It is clear that the perspective adopted by the author of the manuscript is indeed ethically flawed: not only is he responsible for horrific tortures and murders, but he also writes: “I have no desire to be pardoned, for I feel no guilt, but I do wish to be understood” (Borges 1999: 229). The fictional author does not recognize, and the intended audience is not meant by the fictional author to recognize, the unethical nature of the attitudes expressed and prescribed. And the unethical attitudes are directed at both fictional and real events.

It may be objected that Borges was not a Nazi, and that the fictitious immoral outlook does not reflect Borges’s actual attitude,⁸ so that the short story is not an example of an actual ethical defect. According to Clavel-Vázquez, “the *ethical value* of intrinsic ethical flaws depends on a reconstruction of historical authors,” which “is not only based on available evidence in the work, but also on authors’ sociohistorical context, their oeuvre as a whole, and even their public self” (Clavel-Vázquez 2020: 153, original emphasis). This is a prescriptive rule that is not reflected in the case in question; the reader who is aware of Borges’s actual political attitude cannot read this text by quarantining the fictional author’s perspective, but is forced to export it.⁹ Even if the work does not meet the given definition of “actual ethical defects,” it does meet the general requirement for “actual ethical defects:” “Actual ethical defects involve prescriptions that are licensed for export because the real-world perspective that accompanies the make-believe perspective expresses and prescribes unethical attitudes toward actual entities” (Clavel-Vázquez 2020: 150).

It is very difficult for me to reconstruct the reaction of a real Nazi to this text, but I can report the reaction of readers who have no desire to experience empathy with the main character. I believe that most readers approach this text without any desire to understand or forgive the fictional author, but with the sole intention of condemning him. The actual ethical flaws are therefore not shared by the readers (at least in most cases). But in reading this text, the readers encounter the disturbing, humanly interesting content: they encounter the humanity of a person they deeply despise; the experience is disturbing and unsettling, and therein lies the aesthetic value.

Readers discover that the protagonist has literary, philosophical, and musical sensibilities, thus dispelling the hope that cultural sensibilities can save people from evil. They learn that the author decides that Nazism and his work in the concentration camp allow him to better

⁸ See Burgin (1968: 104), where it is reported that Borges said: “People have known all along that I was, let’s say, against Hitler.” I am indebted to a reviewer for helping me to be explicit on this objection.

⁹ Borges himself encourages this attitude when he said: “I imagined that Nazi, and I wrote the story. Because there were so many people in Buenos Aires who were on the side of Hitler” (Burgin 1968: 31).

serve his political ideals through constant engagement, thus shattering the expectation that Nazi ideals were tolerated rather than chosen. But the climax is reached when the reader is told how he suppressed in himself all traces of mercy and sensitivity to others and cultivated the new ideal of violence, which is self-perpetuating because those who wish to suppress it exercise it; in the face of this, we are stunned by the depths of horror that humanity can reach. This destabilizing experience is aesthetically valuable because it forces us to confront the distortions that people like us can endorse.

5. *Concluding remarks*

I have argued that if the aesthetic value of fiction dealing with morality/immorality can be sought in the combination of the exercise of independently acquired moral concepts with the experience of humanity, we can find it even when the fictional immoral perspective is unacknowledged by the fictional author, reproduced by real agents, and applied equally to real and fictional events or agents.¹⁰

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