



Art, Morality and Ethics: On the (Im)Moral Character of Art Works and Inter-Relations to Artistic Value

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Abstract

The (im)moral character of art works often affects how we respond to them. But should it affect our evaluation of them as art? The article surveys the contemporary debate whilst outlining further lines of argument and enquiry. The main arguments in favour of aestheticism, the claim that there is no internal relation between artistic value and moral character, are considered. Nonetheless the connection between art's instructional aspirations and artistic value, as well as the ways in which works solicit responses from us, underwrite the claim that a work's moral character can be directly relevant to a work's value as art. Various competing accounts of how the relationship goes, ethicism, moderate moralism and immoralism, are considered. The article goes on to elaborate novel considerations in favour of a suitably qualified cognitive immoralism and suggests avenues of further enquiry with respect to the moral character of art works.

1. Introduction

Imagine that you have just seen or read a work you find deeply troubling. Why? It is artistically inspired and yet deeply morally problematic. The imagery may be audacious, the use of the medium inspired, the characters gripping, by turns it may be extremely funny or sad and perhaps its portrayal of humanity runs deep. So what's the problem? It solicits responses or turns on attitudes that are immoral. Consider a paradigmatically immoral attitude. It doesn't matter which one. Nazism, racism, misanthropy, misogyny, the dispensability of human life for the greater good, quietism in the face of suffering, moral indifference to those external to a type, class, tribe or nation, the religious abnegation of human good, the commendation of rape or incest, the list could go on. Imagine a work that fits the description. What should we say about such a case? Is it just a matter of moral qualms getting in the way of appreciation? Or is a work's moral character integral to how we should evaluate it as art? Posed in the abstract the questions may lack bite. But consider the huge variety of works these questions might apply to. Homer's *Iliad*, Icelandic sagas, *Beowulf*, medieval Christian morality plays,

Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, the novels of the Marquis de Sade, Wagner's operas, some of Ezra Pound's and T. S. Eliot's poetry, hard-boiled fiction, gangster movies, rap music to name but a few, radically differ with respect to a wide range of what we take to be fundamental aspects of our moral conceptions. Nor is this a function of such works being some distance in the past from us or at radical odds with our moral conceptions. Consider the differences in moral outlook between Edith Wharton, Hardy, D. H. Lawrence, Francis Bacon, Hemingway, Brett Easton Ellis, Martin Amis, Philip Roth, Hubert Selby Jr. or Carol Shields. What's represented as worthwhile or being appropriate objects of pride, indignation, sympathy, shame or guilt vary immensely in ways that are at odds with each other. The very same racist attitudes D. W. Griffith's seminal film *Birth of a Nation* glorifies, culminating in the Ku Klux Klan coming to the rescue of the American nation, are the ones that *American History X* condemns. When considered *as art* should we thereby condemn the former and praise the latter for this reason?

2. *Autonomism/Aestheticism*

A standard line, traceable back at least as far as Kant (1790), is that we should not. Artistic value is held to be constituted by aesthetic features such as a work's harmony, complexity and intensity as constituted by its lower level features (Beardsley 1958). Thus what matters are such things as whether a work's imagery is coherent, its development of themes complex and its style vivid. It is the promotion of these features that are the goal of artistic endeavour and the object of artistic appraisal. This is what underwrites the distinction between art and journalism, history, philosophy and holiday photographs. Different aspects of the work such as its fictional status, cognitive content or instructional values are conceptually distinct. Hence the moral character of a work as such is strictly irrelevant to its value as art (Lamarque 1995). This is not to deny that interactions amongst these aspects can intrude upon one another. The moral didacticism of D. H. Lawrence or Spike Lee, say, may undermine the complexity or coherence of a work's themes or imagery. But the moral character of a work affects its artistic value only as an indirect side effect. There are no internal relations amongst these aspects so it is never the moral character of a work as such that affects a work's artistic value (Anderson and Dean 1998). A quick analogy might help. My laptop may be aesthetically appealing to look at but aspects of the design make it hard to use. Whether it is a beautiful object and whether it is good *qua* laptop are conceptually distinct questions. Unfortunately for me, aspects of one get in the way of the other. But that doesn't show there is any internal conceptual relation between a laptop's beauty as such and how good a laptop it is. We wouldn't say that an ugly laptop was thereby not as good, as a laptop, as a beautiful one (though we might not want to buy it). The aestheticist claims that the same holds true,

by analogy, in the artistic case. To ask whether a work is artistically valuable or not is to be kept conceptually distinct from asking how we should evaluate its moral character. Furthermore, this is held to be so even assuming that we often learn from art and works can enhance our moral understanding. For what insight we gain is distinct, in the same way, from whether a work is any good as art.

There are at least three further interrelated points that could be made in support of this line. Firstly, that the practice of criticism itself sets aside the direct evaluation of moral attitudes that are integral to works. It is not uncommon after all to see critics praising works despite or independently of the moral attitudes implicit in a work. Secondly, different works that have mutually inconsistent moral characters are often rated as highly as one another. The moral universe of James Ellroy's L.A. quartet, *The Black Dahlia*, *The Big Nowhere*, *L.A. Confidential* and *White Jazz*, is a Hobbesian one shot through with a heavy dose of Freud. Everyone is driven by self-interest. Where they appear not to be, this is only because they are driven by inner demons arising from earlier formative experiences. In many respects it is at odds with the moral world of Jane Austen. Here characters have a much larger self-determining role, altruism is possible and being morally good is straightforward (though becoming so is not). Yet we might rate the works of such authors just as highly as one another. How can that be unless we are prepared to set aside worries about the differences in moral character between these vastly contrasting works? Lastly we don't generally evaluate works in terms of truth (Lamarque and Olsen 1994, Lamarque 2006). It might further be claimed that if that's so, then there's little reason to think we should do so in terms of whether a work is morally right or appropriate.

3. *The Relevance of Moral Character to Artistic Value*

In the last decade or so this line has come under increasing attack, notably influenced by Aristotle and Hume. From Aristotle (367–322 BC) we get the idea that tragedy, and indeed art generally, can have cognitive value. We sometimes appreciate and value works in terms of their insight and understanding. One of the most important ways this is so is in terms of moral understanding. Now it is true that the idea of learning from art has been central to art since Greco-Roman times (even with respect to aesthetes such as Wilde). It might be thought that aestheticism can only be maintained by disregarding a core and recurrent goal of artistic practice (Gaut forthcoming). However, this would be too quick. It assumes that the instructional aspiration is central to the practice *qua* art rather than a central aim many people who are artists put art to (the latter is a weaker inference which, the aestheticist would say, doesn't beg the question). Here's an analogy. Governments often go on about the importance of training for the market place in university education. If you go back through the history of the development of universities it turns out that higher education has often gone in tandem with

the goal of training (obviously not just for the market place but for the clerisy and so on). Does this automatically show that the goal of training is internal to university education? No. This is consistent with university education having certain internal goals, in affording knowledge, understanding and developing the mind's intellectual virtues, which have the side-effect of making people more fitting for jobs or religious service.

The cognitivist could start by pointing to the ways in which narrative art is saturated with moral concepts, discourse and evaluation. We can't meaningfully engage with and respond to many works without drawing on moral assumptions (Carroll 1998). It is, for example, difficult to see how one could understand Jane Austen's novels unless one had some sort of a grip on concepts like blame, praise, pride, shame, guilt, responsibility, duty and snobbery. However, though the point is a challenging one, it is insufficient to establish an internal connection between the artistic value and moral character of works. The mere fact that we depend on moral understanding to engage with many works doesn't show that the moral appropriateness or otherwise of a work is relevant to artistic value. We can see this if we note that engaging with Shakespeare's history plays requires us to traffic in various historical concepts or appreciating Roman Catholic icons requires some kind of grasp of Christianity. It doesn't thereby automatically follow that evaluating the history plays as dramatic art is connected to whether or not Shakespeare got the history right or that evaluating icons as visual art depends on the truth of Christianity. This would be, the aestheticist will claim, to beg the question.

What the cognitivist needs is an account of how the instructional aspiration connects directly up with what works do as art. As soon as we realise this aestheticism looks like it's in a weak position. What is art particularly good at? It uses artistic means to engage the imagination and thereby see things in a new light, make connections, convey insights and get us to respond emotionally. There are differences amongst cognitivists who push this line (see for example Carroll 1998, 2002, Gaut 2006, forthcoming, Kieran 1996, 2005). Nonetheless, looked at in this light, the difference between journalism, holiday photographs and art is not so much a difference in kind but one of degree. Art just uses certain aspects of the relevant media, genre constraints, style, devices and techniques to do these things particularly well. Thus respect for cognitive value is internal to artistic practice(s). The relevance of the moral character of a work may just fall out of the cognitive conception of artistic value. Where a work tries via artistic means to convey insight or get us to understand states of affairs and attitudes a certain way then the cognitive content of the work is relevant to its value as art. This will often include, though is clearly not exhausted by, its moral character. It may be tempting to make this both a necessary and sufficient condition of the relevance of moral character to artistic value. Perhaps the moral character of works, or features thereof, whose purpose is not directed toward the cultivation of

insight cannot be relevant to artistic value (Kieran 2001, Stecker 2005a). Nonetheless I will treat the claim as just a sufficiency condition here.

A distinct way of connecting artistic value to a work's moral character can be derived from both Aristotle and Hume (1757). Its commitments are more minimal since it does not rely on assumptions about the cognitive value of art being internal to artistic value. All it adverts to is the fact that works as art solicit responses from us. Indeed in order for a work of art to succeed it must elicit from us those emotions and feelings essential to the realisation of its artistic goals. For a tragedy to work as a tragedy we must feel sympathy for the central character, for a horror movie to succeed as a horror movie we must feel suspense, fear and horror. In some cases the responses solicited by a work will advert to or depend on moral features, assumptions and attitudes (Carroll 1996, Gaut 1998, forthcoming). Sympathy for a character, admiration or horror at their actions and approval of the attitude to life a work expresses, for example, can all be internally connected to moral assumptions. Where this is so, the moral character of a work is relevant to its artistic value.

What of the considerations said to favour aestheticism above? Firstly, that critics sometimes set aside the moral character of a work in evaluating it may show no more than that critics sometimes do this in order to highlight other artistic virtues or vices a work possesses. Moralising after all tends to remain blind to many good things. Furthermore, criticism commonly does advert to the moral character of works as directly relevant (Gaut forthcoming). Disagreements about the artistic worth of works as diverse as Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, Nabokov's *Lolita*, Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*, Shakespeare's *Othello*, Henry James's *What Maisie Knew*, Thomas Hardy's *Tess*, Sartre's *Roads to Freedom* trilogy and D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* often focus centrally on matters of moral character. Rating different works with mutually inconsistent moral characters just as highly as each other need not be a function of setting moral character aside. It may just show that such works have different artistic virtues. After all, we commonly rate mutually inconsistent philosophers highly, Aristotle and Kant say, since we consider them to have distinct philosophical virtues. Lastly, we do sometimes evaluate works with respect to truth. An easy case in point is non-fiction literary works such as James Ellroy's *My Dark Places* or Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. But even with respect to straightforward fiction we consider things like whether or not the psychology involved is true to life and so on. Obviously a whole range of other cognitive considerations are involved: cognitive virtues are hardly exhausted by or reducible to truth. Thus it is also with moral character. Of course matters are made more complex depending on the kind of genre a work is in and what its artistic purposes are. Nonetheless, this only goes to show that the interrelationships between artistic virtue and moral character are complex (not that there is no such relationship).

4. *Moralists and Immoralists*

Ethicism holds that, where the moral character of a work is relevant to its artistic value, wherever there is a moral flaw the work is of lesser value as art and wherever it is morally virtuous the work's value as art is enhanced (Gaut 1998, forthcoming). There are at least two arguments for the view deriving from the considerations suggested above. (1) Given that cognitive value is internal to artistic value, where this is directly linked to the artistic means deployed, ethicism follows. Why? The misrepresentation of moral features, the solicitation of morally inappropriate responses or the commendation of that which should be condemned involves misunderstanding how we should perceive, react or what our attitude should be. (2) Whether or not we should respond as solicited by a work depends upon whether that response is merited or not. If a horror movie solicits fear whether such a response is merited or not depends on whether we judge the monster as represented to be scary. Where the response concerns moral features, aspects of character and attitudes, whether a response is merited or not will in part depend on moral considerations. If a work solicits admiration for a character in virtue of killing someone, then whether such a response is merited will in part depend upon whether we judge they are morally justified in doing so.

Ethicism is controversial. There is a huge range of alternative positions one could take but I will consider several alternatives that are gaining some ground in the literature. One way into the first alternative is via moderate moralism (Carroll 1996). This holds that the moral character of a work is sometimes relevant to its artistic value. This is so where a morally sensitive audience fails to respond as solicited to a work due to its defective moral perspective. Hence a work's (im)moral character can thereby lessen its value as art. Nonetheless as defended the position holds that a work's value as art can never be enhanced in virtue of its morally defective character (Carroll 2000). The moderateness of the claim may appeal. A work's morally defective character may not always mar its artistic value and its morally admirable character may not always enhance its artistic value. However it looks like an inherently unstable position. Either the morally sensitive audience is an idealised notion to be cashed out in something like the terms of merited responses articulated above, in which case it collapses back into ethicism, or the notion is not so heavily idealised in which case it is far from clear that the relation between moral virtue and vice and artistic virtue and vice always goes the same way. If it is the latter it's far from clear why it deserves the term 'moralism' at all (Kieran 2003).

Once we have granted the relevance of a work's moral character why assume that the relation to artistic character must go a particular way? After all, lots of good and great art is challenging, gets us to laugh at or respond to things in ways that, in real life, we would not. But why assume how we ought to respond in real life should govern our responses to art works? In

real life there are all sorts of considerations that apply which may not with respect to reading or seeing particular works. Consider a work like James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. It's a noirish study of romantic passion written in a hard-boiled style. A drifter turns up at a roadside diner, ends up getting a job there and seduces the wife of the owner. They end up killing the owner, a well-meaning older Greek man, and in the ensuing police enquiry the couple implode amidst acrimony, jealousy and distrust. The complex of responses required, for the narrative's suspense to work, centrally includes our sympathising with the murderous couple. It is a mark of the novel's success that it manages to get us to do so. This isn't an isolated phenomenon. Consider common responses to *The Sopranos*, *The Godfather*, gangsta rap music or Homer's *Iliad*. Perhaps what matters is not so much whether responses are merited or not but rather whether they are intelligible (Kieran 2001, 2005). Alternatively perhaps ethicism is being overly moralistic about the notion of merit (Jacobson 1997).

In real life we wouldn't sympathise with the couple in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* for putting their own passion above the life of the Greek husband. In real life many of us wouldn't root for Michael Corleone in *The Godfather*, Tony in *The Sopranos* or delight in N. W. A's attitude toward the police. But then this isn't real life. So we can allow the force of our internalised moral prohibitions to slacken and go with the responses sought from us. Furthermore, the distinction between attitudes we allow ourselves to take up in our imaginative activities and those we allow ourselves to have when directed toward the real world doesn't just apply to art works. Think about sexual fantasies for example. Some involve actions, responses and attitudes that we would not wish for or enact in real life. But because we recognise a distinction between indulging in desires, attitudes and responses in make-believe and doing so in real life, we can and do allow ourselves to respond to what we imagine in ways we would not with respect to actual states of affairs. This is not to deny that there may not be slippage or interaction between the two. Nonetheless, this basic distinction is all that is required to explain how and why we legitimately allow ourselves to entertain thoughts and respond in ways we would not in real life. Perhaps all that is required is that the artistic mediation renders intelligible or psychologically close to us the responses sought for – as opposed to being merited morally speaking. There are many works that have this sort of dynamic from admiring the warrior glory sought by Achilles in *The Iliad* to the cluster of attitudes upon which *Sin City* depends. Think about the incongruities, cruelties or downright unfairness that comedies and satires often depend on. We would not find many such attitudes and responses to be morally merited in real life. Nonetheless, they connect up with enough of our own attitudes and desires for us to find them intelligible. Indeed the artistic mediation of states of affairs may render them psychologically close enough to us such that we are able to respond to the works as solicited. This opens up the possibility that a particular work may be better as art in virtue of its immoral character.

The point made here relies on emphasising how the fictional or make-believe context of a work allows us to engage with and enjoy putatively immoral imaginative activity. Let us start from the recognition that something's being fictional can set up an aesthetic distance between us and that which the work portrays. We are free to contemplate events portrayed as we could or would not were the events themselves real – we know this is a fiction and so it has an artificial status – and this helps to explain both how we get pleasure from engaging with works we take to be morally problematic and how they may deepen our understanding. This is supported by the recognition that knowing whether or not something is fictional seems to make a crucial difference to the way we respond to representations. Where we are conscious of a work's fictional status we are able to attend to aspects of the represented events in ways we could or should not were they real. However it's not straightforwardly a play's fictional status that is crucial to a work's successfully soliciting morally problematic responses from us, though what is required are two things non-contingently closely associated with fictionality: (1) artistic devices mediating the representation of events portrayed, for example in literature these range from style, poetic form, imagery and metaphor to interior monologues; and (ii) the states of affairs represented are at a distance from us, i.e. we cannot intervene. This is as true of past events or modal facts as it is of fictional ones. These two features enable us to appreciate represented events in a distinctive way such that we can cope with and respond to morally problematic responses and attitudes in ways we would not in real life.

Now a challenge to this line of thought can be presented thus. Artistic mediation may facilitate the separating off of immoral imaginative activity from our normal responses. Nonetheless we are often unable or unwilling to imaginatively enter into the dramatic point of view from which certain responses and attitudes to a work follow. For our genuine moral attitudes concerning what is admirable, blameworthy or repellant often do affect our take up of prescribed authorial attitudes or what we are prepared to allow as true in the fiction (Moran 1994). We sometimes are alienated from or withhold responses to works in virtue of the fact that they involve attitudes we deem to be immoral. This point can be linked up with a larger issue. In the contemporary debate most discussion has focused on the content of works and the moral appropriateness or otherwise of responses solicited. This is partly due to the cognitivist presumption that we can gain moral insight or understanding from art. As suggested above cognitivists may thus be tempted to argue that excellences of artistic expression will thus coincide with moral excellences in a work and that a defect in the latter will constitute a defect in the former. But the cognitivist could argue for a further claim. Namely that because of the ways in which this is so, through the artistic cultivation of perception, imagination and feeling, works can develop our moral character. In other words great works can train us not just in terms of the possession of further moral knowledge but in terms of our capacities

for apprehending and responding to morally relevant features (Nussbaum 1990, Kieran 1996). Where a work does so, in virtue of its artistic mediation, this is a virtue in the work as art. It may also be tempting to conclude that where a work effectively seeks to coarsen or distort our moral capacities this constitutes a defect in it as art. Furthermore, it might be suggested, this is what explains our reluctance in certain cases to indulge in responses and dramatic points of view we take to be immoral. For we are not prepared to enter into ways of apprehending or responding to states of affairs that are at odds with or undermine our moral competencies.

There is something important here but the line of argument isn't quite right. It fails to account for how and why our responses and attitudes to works sometimes differ though the relevant moral character is the same. For example the moral character of works by James M. Cain and Jim Thompson are in many relevant respects the same. The central characters are anti-heroes we identify with despite their fecklessness and the ease with which they dispatch the lives of others for their own good. Yet I find myself much more easily prepared to enter into the responses sought for by the former rather than the latter. Why? At least in part because doing so with Cain's novels brings some kind of payoff in a way that isn't usually true with Thompson's novels (with a few exceptions such as Thompson's *After Dark, My Sweet*). I find myself in a similar position with respect to jokes, some sick ones I laugh at, others I don't, works by Graham Greene extolling the virtues of Roman Catholicism, some I feel the pull of, others I resist, and novels by Henry James, some I feel drawn into and others I'm not. At least part of the explanation concerns an evaluation of the costs and benefits of doing so. In some cases allowing my moral scruples to be overridden looks likely to bring some kind of payoff and in other cases it doesn't. No doubt the particular cases I've mentioned reflect much about my moral character and where it's at (or indeed isn't). I sometimes even find my responses varying according to, psychologically speaking, where I am in my life. The particular examples are immaterial. The important point here is that when engaging with fictions we are all often prepared to entertain and enter into moral responses and attitudes we take to be, in real life, deeply morally problematic.

The above considerations have been taken to motivate a kind of anti-theoretical position. Namely, a work's moral character can be relevant but how so just depends on the particularities of the work in question. In one case a work's immoral character may mar it and yet in another it may enhance it. Perhaps there is no essential relation between artistic and moral value (Jacobson 2006). This is consistent with holding that artistic value is linked to our non-artistic needs and desires, which happen to include the need for moral truth, so it will often turn out that we value art which is morally speaking on target (John 2006). A different basis for the anti-theoretic approach is grounded in the recognition of the moral ambiguity of art and our 'unfinished' moral state (Hamilton 2003). Morally problematic works, after all, often provide us with the means of questioning our own moral

commitments. The worry with the anti-theory approach is that it just seems to be a restatement of the problem rather than a solution to it. For surely we are owed some kind of account as to how and why the relationship can go differently in distinct cases (Gaut forthcoming). A shrug of the shoulders to the effect that this is just the way it goes looks like unjustified quietism. If we have a general account of artistic value then there's good reason to think that there will be a general account of how it links to the assessment of a work's moral character.

An alternative position, cognitive immoralism, marshals the kind of points raised in favour of the anti-theoretic move into a general account of the link to the cognitive aspect of artistic value. It starts by agreeing with the relevance condition underlying one argument for ethicism. Where the moral character of a work is tied to its cognitive value then its moral character is relevant to its value as art. Furthermore, where a work's moral character is tied up with a work's cognitive value, in many such cases the link will be as articulated by ethicism for the reasons grounded by cognitivism. However what is distinctive about cognitive immoralism is the claim that in at least quite a few cases cognitivism also explains how and why the relationship can invert. Works that solicit responses and attitudes we judge not to be merited can, in virtue of the way in which they do so, enhance our understanding. In other words the relationship is often as characterised by ethicism but not always so – and this is so for a principled reason. Where there is a cognitive pay off in virtue of the immoral character of a work, and this is sufficient to outweigh our reluctance to indulge in the responses sought from us, then the immoral character of the work turns out to be an artistic virtue rather than a vice (Kieran 2003, 2005). A morally problematic work can thus, artistically speaking, redeem itself.

Consider the Belgian film *Man Bites Dog*. The dramatic conceit is that the audience is watching a pseudo-documentary where a crew follows round and records the everyday life of a serial killer called Benoit. The opening sequence establishes him as funny and charming, talking about having to do a postman on the first day of every month and the difficulties involved in getting rid of dead bodies (especially midgets). He loves his girlfriend, respects his family, is worn down by mundane aspects of his 'job' and is given to articulating considered discourses on the nature of life and death. The surreal humour is maintained, though gradually things get somewhat darker, until a pivotal scene involving the camera crew being drawn into a vicious rape. When I saw the film at the cinema everyone laughed up until the central scene and from then on the atmosphere was deadly quiet. The switch in framing suddenly foregrounds how being fascinated by, laughing at and delighting in screen violence both manifests and perpetuates the brutalisation of society. It highlights how both the media and by extension we ourselves may be complicit in the very things we pruriently condemn. For the audience experiences how easily they can be seduced into laughing at actions that delight in extreme violence. The film gets us to both learn something about

ourselves and treat more seriously than we might otherwise have done the possible links between our responses to fictions and to real life. Note that for the film to work, for us to get that cognitive gain, it must be the case that for much of the film we respond as solicited in ways we would judge to be unmerited in real life.

There are two main objections to the account. The first starts from the form of a dilemma. Either we are being asked to imagine having an immoral attitude, in which case there's no moral problem, or a work is immoral in virtue of getting us to have immoral attitudes but then we don't learn anything since we can't learn what is false (Gaut forthcoming). I have suggested that in the *Man Bites Dog* case we learn something, namely that we can be seduced into responding to violence in ways we should not. Thus, the objection goes, we are forced on to the first horn of the dilemma. Surely, if anything is, this is a film with a moral character. It seduces us for a moral purpose. Gaut has a sophisticated discussion of Nabokov's *Lolita* along these lines to drive the point home. Hence works like *Man Bites Dog* cannot constitute counter examples to ethicism.

How should the objection be responded to? To address the first horn of the dilemma think about what we learn or are reminded of in watching *Man Bites Dog*. We are made aware that we too can easily be seduced into responding in ways we ought not to with respect to vicious people and actions. This is true and it is something I learn or that is brought home to me. Now the ethicist will respond by saying that the work isn't immoral in character since my merely being asked to imagine having an immoral attitude isn't immoral. Well it depends. The work actually invites an immoral attitude. We laugh at and are amused by the slaughter of innocents as mediated by the film (we are not imagining laughing or imagining being amused at such things). Just because the overall aim of the film is to make a moral point it doesn't automatically follow that the lower level strategies used or our responses to them are thereby merited or rendered moral. If a film shows me my capacity to be seduced into delighting at cruelty by actually getting me to do so then the means are still morally problematic even if the end is morally good. Here's an analogy. The end of punishing me for my own good as a schoolboy may be morally good and right. It doesn't automatically mean that the strategy or means used, caning or whipping me say, must be. To address the second horn of the dilemma it need only be pointed out that we can learn from things that are false because although they overgeneralise attitudes that are sometimes psychologically close to us they can be appropriate in more limited cases. If we look at the paintings of Francis Bacon or read Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, they may show us something about how a certain kind of bestial view of mankind ties up with attitudes of despair, acceptance and so on. We can learn this even though the view manifested in their works is overgeneralised and false—considered as a complete view of humanity. The attitude is represented as applicable to all mankind whereas, for the sake of argument, it is only merited with respect

to particular people and situations. Nonetheless in virtue of the way the attitude is artistically represented we learn what it is like to see humanity under this aspect (and our understanding of what's bound up with such a mode of apprehension may thereby be deepened).

The second objection goes as follows. A work with an immoral character may cultivate understanding. However, we could just as easily have learnt the same thing from a work that doesn't have an immoral character: whatever the insight, it is not essentially tied to the immoral aspect of any work (Stecker 2005b). Thus the morally problematic character of a work remains an artistic flaw. But this is too quick. It is far from obvious that learning certain things isn't closely tied to responding in morally problematic ways. At least, given the kind of creatures we are, it certainly seems psychologically true that we sometimes only learn after having made mistakes – especially moral ones. One of the things that art enables us to do is to explore attitudes and responses we would try not to in real life given our moral prohibitions. So perhaps we might only learn how we might respond to the appeal of violence, the allure of adultery and so on through works that deliberately speak to those desires. Quite apart from that, why grant that what we learn must be peculiar to the morally problematic responses in order for it to enhance a work's value? We don't think this must be true of what we learn generally from art works. I can learn something about the ways in which racism is bad from reading a philosophy article and reading *To Kill A Mocking Bird*. This doesn't thereby mean that what I learn from the novel doesn't thereby contribute to its value as literature. There are many avenues to understanding. The same structural claim operates with respect to immoral works. It may be true that I could have learnt the same thing about the appeal of violence from a work that condemns it rather than one that glorifies it. However, that is neither here nor there. The crucial claim is whether or not the (im)moral character of a work cultivates my understanding. Immoral or morally problematic aspects of a work, where they cultivate understanding, can contribute to a work's artistic value rather than detract from it. None of this is to deny that we do sometimes imaginatively resist responses and attitudes sought from us by works because they are morally problematic. Where we resist it is because we suspect or judge that there won't be a sufficient pay off for doing so. The point is that we can and sometimes do allow our moral scruples to go on holiday where we judge that there will be a significant pay-off in terms of appreciation or understanding.

5. *The Moral Character of Artworks*

All are agreed that many works have no moral character at all, a piece of pure music or a still life say, and that the most obvious cases tend to be narrative and representational art. But one of the most marked features of the contemporary debate is that just what a work's moral character consists in, where there is one, has been taken to be unproblematic (an exception

is Devereaux 2004). In essence it is taken as the overall responses and attitudes that involve or depend on the characterisation of moral features and evaluations endorsed by the work. It is assumed that we can leave it an open matter as to whether these should be identified with those intended by the actual author, the hypothetical author or those taken as such by some kind of suitably idealised or historically informed audience. But there are at least two reasons why the lack of enquiry here is unsatisfactory. Firstly, we need to know what we should identify the moral character of a work with if we are to know how to make the right judgement. Secondly, what the right account is may constrain or affect the plausibility of some of the claims made above concerning the interrelations between moral character and artistic value.

So what might the right account be? There's a natural temptation to align the attitudes endorsed by a work with those of the actual author. Thus readers often assume that the conception of human nature and morality articulated in works like Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, James Ellroy's *L.A. Quartet*, Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* or D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* are a function of what the actual author's attitudes are. Why? Since the authors tell us this is so. This is not just unreflective prejudice since there is an underlying philosophical reason for why many are thus tempted. Consider action generally. Imagine you are at a social gathering. Within the group someone makes a faux pas that is apparent to all and this makes the individual concerned feel embarrassed. You then go on to tell a joke about a similar faux pas. How we evaluate the moral character of your action depends on many variables ranging from the resultant effects to the nature of the joke. Let us assume all those are constant. What also matters, to the moral character of what it is you've done, will depend on the intentional description under which you performed the action. If you told the joke because you intended to make the embarrassed person squirm then the act would have a different moral character than if you'd told it in order to divert attention away from them or make them feel better. Hence the moral character of an act in part depends on the propositional attitudes under which it was performed. Parity of reasoning, we may conclude, dictates that the same is true with respect to art works. Thus what the moral character of a work is must partly be fixed by the propositional attitudes under which it was made. Furthermore, if we were to consider whether or not we should laugh at your joke, it looks like primarily we're interested in what it is you're trying to do. If I think you're trying to make the other person feel better, *ceteris paribus*, I should laugh. If I think you're trying to do them down, *ceteris paribus*, I shouldn't. Thus, we might think, the same applies to the art case. If the authorial attitudes guiding the work involved are trying to get me to laugh at and thereby endorse the attitude that a race or class of people are endemically stupid then I shouldn't.

However, this looks overly simplistic for several reasons. It doesn't follow from establishing a role for propositional attitudes in fixing the character of

what is done or said that therefore what is done or said straightforwardly expresses the attitudes an author has. After all there can be many unintended aspects that conflict with or undermine what was intended. Furthermore an artist can intend to create a work that precisely does not reflect actual attitudes they may have. One might also want to push the line that we should separate the character of an artwork off from authorial attitudes since we are judging the value of a work as art. If the work is successful then we don't require reference back to authorial attitudes. If it isn't then it is a failure. Either way what the character of the work is must be separable from authorial attitudes. It's all very well to consider what's intended. Nonetheless if I tell a racist joke then no matter that my intention isn't racist it still might have that public character independently of my own attitudes. Furthermore it might be thought that there is a relevant disanalogy. The moral value of an action is partly constituted by the propositional attitudes underlying it whereas, on at least one dominant view, the value of art works is straightforwardly a function of the value of the experiences an artwork affords its audience (Kieran 2005 discusses but doesn't endorse this view). Any purported link to the actual author's character and attitudes, if there is one, must thus be more complex than originally stated.

What's the motivation for thinking we should try to maintain a link at all? Think about jokes that rely on or have as their focus disparaging attitudes about certain races, classes, religions or social attitudes. We might laugh at or gasp in horror at the same joke depending upon who's telling it and why. Take a joke that relies on assuming the fecklessness of black men. If Chris Rock tells the joke we might laugh but if someone from the Ku Klux Klan tells it we might be appalled. If a Jew or a Catholic tells an anti Catholic or Jewish joke we might find it funny but if told by the Rev. Ian Paisley or someone from the Aryan Nation we might react with disgust. Imagine that the joke is identical and that in each case it is told with the same verve. The difference concerns the underlying attitude we take to be expressed by the teller and, thus, what we take ourselves to be doing if we were to laugh. This should not be reduced to someone's explicit intention. The object of our judgement in part concerns the underlying attitudes or character that form the joke and the purposes to which it is put. This affects what we take to be expressed through the telling of the joke. It looks like no matter what account we go for it should hold onto the importance of a link in at least some cases between the attitudes expressed in and through the work and its moral character.

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