

COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON

Merit, Aesthetic and Ethical

MARCIA MUELDER EATON

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minister in Great Britain, he did not undergo a metaphysical transformation; nonetheless, one can give evidence for his having attained that office. From where I now sit, the university's Student Union is to the north. The very same building can also be to the south, west, or east of other sitters. Or all around them, on every side.

I go beyond Goldman's inclusion of tastes and values of individuals to include standards and practices of communities. One kind of evidence that "our" community (the community of realists seeking rational explanations within certain, mainly Eurocentric, traditions) takes seriously is artistic intentions, something I considered as a kind of case study in the last chapter. We have seen that both warnings and requests are compatible with identical poetic words. What counts as evidence for one rather than the other will include the word sequence but also public conventions covering what distinguishes a request from a warning, the intentions of the poet, one's understanding of cultural norms of behavior, and similar factors—none of which it is unreasonable to consider.¹⁵ Indeed, it seems unreasonable not to consider them. The fact that various interpretations are compatible with a single set of words does not mean that justifying the decision to choose one interpretation over another is impossible. What it does show is that justification does not require supervenience.

When one participates in an aesthetic discussion with others who expect to give and receive reasons for their judgments, one acknowledges that one's own aesthetic experience is anchored in intrinsic properties of objects and events that are regarded as worthy of attention—properties that one must perceive for oneself but that one also believes are perceivable by others. Any remark that draws attention to and gives insight into intrinsic properties of artworks acts both as pointer and justifier. The fact that different sets of intrinsic properties may be picked out in different cultures to support different descriptions and evaluations does not undermine aesthetic realism. Within the conventions of a particular community, a word sequence may really be a warning, and a sound sequence may really be unified by the repetition of minor seconds. Justification, I have tried to show, simply consists in pointing to epistemologically intrinsic properties in a context of rules, conventions, values, and tastes that operate within cultures. Relativity to cultural practices undermines supervenience; it does not result in the sort of relativity that undermines aesthetic justification and realism.

PART II

Taking the Aesthetic Seriously

In part I, I argued that aesthetic properties are intrinsic to objects and events. To this extent, formalist theories get it right: to have an aesthetic experience, it is necessary that one attend directly to objects and events and perceive and reflect upon their properties. But formalists go much further than this. They insist that aesthetic experiences preclude any other kind of attention or reflection. In particular, they typically single out moral considerations as incompatible with aesthetic attention. As Richard Posner puts it, "The moral content and consequences of literature are irrelevant to its value as literature."¹ Extending this claim to all of the arts, he describes moral content as "almost sheer distraction."² In part III, I shall show that since moral properties are sometimes, at least, inseparable from aesthetic properties of an artwork, it cannot be irrelevant, let alone distracting, to attend and reflect upon the moral when one experiences it. The necessity of attending to intrinsic properties of objects and events does not preclude connecting one's attention to other real-life concerns—to interests in truth and goodness especially. Indeed, grounding aesthetic properties as I have in cultural traditions and recognizing the extent to which aesthetic response is socially constructed require that one give due attention to ways in which our aesthetic values are connected to other life values.

In this part, I shall first say more about what I call "the separatist mistake," the mistake of insisting that aesthetic experiences preclude or are isolated from other kinds of experiences. I shall claim that the correct approach is one that recognizes that aesthetic experiences (constituted as they are by responses to aesthetic properties) are special, that they can be distinguished from nonaesthetic experiences (responses to nonaesthetic properties), but that they are not always separated or separable from them. "Different but inseparable" is the motto of the first chapter of this part.

Before turning in part III to a positive account of ways in which moral and aesthetic values are integrated, I want to advocate that the aesthetic be taken more seriously than it often has. Too often, the aesthetic is considered a "frill"—the last thing to be attended to after the more "serious" moral, economic, political, medical, and other matters have been tended to. Separatists often become separatists not because they demean the aesthetic but because they want to give it equal time, as it were. They have thought that by creating a

special niche for the aesthetic, they can elevate it to the position it deserves. But, in fact, their insistence upon the “purity” of the aesthetic—its divorce from other concerns and values—has given comfort to those who devalue artistic and aesthetic pursuits.

I argue that separatism is a mistake, but that their motivation—trying to give the aesthetic its due—is admirable. In this part, I will introduce a nonseparatist account of the importance and seriousness of the aesthetic.

FIVE

The Separatist Mistake

A DEEP mistake has colored value theory.¹ The mistake is believing in the general separability of the aesthetic and the moral. This mistake extends to insisting that the aesthetic is separated from all other human ends and activities—the scientific, political, religious, economic, and so on. I am concerned with the aesthetic and the ethical, but I believe that much of what I say applies to the other areas of human value. A variety of factors have led to and reinforced this mistake. But first let us consider three examples that foreground the issue.

1. Gauguin: The example of the life of this French painter has recently figured in several writings of moral philosophers who discuss what is referred to as the “over-ridingness thesis.” (I summarize this discussion later.) Gauguin, with some remorse, left or, to put it less neutrally, deserted his family in order to travel to Tahiti to devote himself to a kind of painting that he evidently believed he could succeed at only in that island environment. Many people, even those who could not themselves possibly turn their backs on familial obligations, appreciate, even admire his decision. How, as the philosophers who discuss this example so intriguingly put it, can one admire Gauguin’s immorality?
2. A Goldfish Painting: I have been told that a Canadian artist creates bright and extremely interesting pictures by first dipping goldfish into pots of primary colors of paint and then placing them onto canvas surfaces. Their flipping about, at first frenzied and then sporadic as they die, produces unusual spatial, linear, and color effects. Some people, when told about the artistic procedure, insist that knowledge of it does not modify their positive aesthetic experience of this artist’s work. Others—and my informal survey indicates that they constitute a majority—insist that it does change their aesthetic experience. Many members of both groups take a nonjudgmental attitude toward the responses of others. “Maybe it makes a difference to you, but it doesn’t to me; that’s okay—to each his own.” “Yes, I can see that it might not make a difference to you, but it certainly does to me.” However, some representatives of both groups view members of the other group with suspicion; they feel either that soft hearts let concern about a few cheap goldfish get in the way of a satisfying aesthetic experience or, on the other hand, that detachment from or disregard for the artistic process precludes an appropriate response.
3. Goody Two-Shoes: This character from children’s fiction was probably created by Oliver Goldsmith, though there is some question about this. Few people have actually read the book that describes her life and urges young readers to model their own after it. Nonetheless, being a “goody two-shoes” is a fairly well-known epithet in popular English-speaking cultures; it is usually applied to someone who is shal-

low, mindlessly follows conventional moral rules just for the sake of following them, has no fun, seeks approval from authority figures, and is generally self-righteous and boring. A goody two-shoes cares more about the appearance of being good than about really doing the right thing. (This is why it would be a serious error to say that, for example, Mother Teresa was a goody two-shoes.) Having read the story about Goody, I believe that she has gotten a lot of bad press. (My critics will say that this is because I am a goody two-shoes, no doubt.) She devoted her life to helping and educating those less fortunate than herself. She was genuinely grateful for the smallest gifts, for getting two shoes instead of just one shoe, for instance. She married, came into a fortune, and shared it with others. Admittedly, she led a pretty boring life. But in many ways it was an admirable, if rather conventionally admirable, life. Is Goody more or less admirable or valuable than Gauguin or the artist who sacrificed goldfish to what she perceived was a greater artistic end?

Both popular and theoretical attitudes have supported the view that when one takes the aesthetic point of view moral considerations are to be put aside, and vice versa, or that aesthetic and moral values differ essentially in metaphysical or epistemological respects. In everyday discourse, it is not difficult to find apparently noncontradictory conjunctions of positive aesthetic and negative moral terms, or negative aesthetic and positive moral terms. There are handsome rascals and beautiful devils. People can be sloppy but kind, selfish but graceful. Who is so foolish or naïve as to believe that a course in drawing or art history makes one more virtuous, or that saints tend to create great works of art?

At the theoretical level, some philosophers (the eighteenth century abounds with them) have insisted that special psychophysical faculties function in aesthetic experience or judgment. Hume, for example, believed that judgments about the beautiful could be explained in terms of the operation of a special sense of taste. Deciding that a rose is beautiful depends on the proper operation of this sense, just as deciding that a rose is red depends on the proper operation of humans' color vision. Hutcheson posited two "internal" senses, one for moral and one for aesthetic judgments. And Kant, of course, carried the separation even further, by insisting that in aesthetic experiences, pure and practical reason play no role whatsoever.

Twentieth-century aesthetics has been marked in many circles by a drive to free aesthetic value of any dependence on the moral. There has thus been a strong formalistic strain that severely limits the properties considered aesthetically relevant. Formalists insist that only such features as color, shape, line, or volume in painting, rhyme, rhythm, or metaphoric images in poetry, and so on for the other arts are the proper focus of aesthetic attention and the true cause of a genuine aesthetic response. (See chapter 2 for a discussion of why I think aesthetic relevance extends beyond formal properties.) In contrast to nineteenth-century naturalism, utilitarianism, or romanticism, where maxims like "Beauty is as beauty does" were commonplace (and a motto Goody Two-Shoes would certainly have endorsed), critical schools of the twentieth century often dismissed any reference to artistic intentions or moral messages as distracting and out of place in aesthetic judgments.

Responding in part to nonobjective, "contentless" developments in art history, formalists seem intent on granting equal status to works that could not depend on derivative value arising from considerations of truth or goodness. "Separate but equal" is one way of articulating their view that works of art with no discernible moral value may be worthy of aesthetic praise.

Moral value has rarely been thought to depend on such formal features as beauty or gracefulness or harmony or dramatic rhythms.² And this attitude exemplifies a strong strain in moral philosophy (and perhaps Eurocentric cultures generally), namely, the inclination to consider moral concerns as more important than aesthetic concerns. However, "separate but maybe not always superior" is a way of expressing a growing worry among some moral philosophers, who increasingly, if sometimes grudgingly, admit that perhaps aesthetic value does not always take a back seat to moral value.

Previously, when I introduced the example of Gauguin's alleged "admirable immorality," I referred to a controversy in contemporary moral philosophy that addresses this question of whether moral value always supersedes aesthetic value, a debate over what is called the "overridingness thesis." A survey of some of the most widely discussed articles on this topic shows that some theorists are willing to grant status to some aesthetic considerations at least equal to that of some moral considerations. However, in doing so, they reinforce the separation of the two and hence further entrench the mistake of so doing. Nonetheless, the debate itself can point in the direction of correcting the separatist error, and it is primarily for this reason that I shall discuss it here at some length.

In a 1978 paper "Are Moral Considerations Overriding?" Philippa Foot discusses D. Z. Phillips's view that moral considerations must be the most important sort for anyone who cares about morality.³ Foot believes that this is simply false—that moral considerations are not always more important than other kinds of interests. A sizable financial cost, for example, will not be overridden by a small moral concern such as the fact that someone might feel minor embarrassment. Often, people say that they know what they are doing is wrong but still think it must be done—to save one's family or even to give themselves pleasure, for instance. Though they do care about morality in general, in specific cases they will not even feel very much remorse.

Foot was among the first to claim that moral considerations do not always override; later writers are interested in cases in which putting other types of considerations first actually seems admirable. They focus on cases of what they call "admirable immorality," such as Gauguin's decision to put his painting before his family. Michael Slote's paper on this topic is, perhaps, the most influential.⁴ He wants to show "that common [nonphilosophical] sense is right to reject the proposed limits on what is a virtue or personal good."⁵ In particular, he wants to show that there are admirable though immoral character traits and virtues. Do not confuse this, he warns, with cases of admiring admirable traits in overall immoral people or actions. Admiration for daring robbers is not a case of approving an immorality, for the daring can be separated off; we can imagine the same trait put to an admirable, moral end.

Slote has in mind a radically different case—one first presented by Bernard Williams in his paper “Moral Luck.”⁶ Williams there talks about Gauguin’s decision to desert his family and go to Tahiti to paint. (Williams, incidentally, thinks that the only thing that justifies Gauguin’s decision is “success itself.”⁷ I shall discuss this claim later.) Slote insists that Gauguin’s single-minded devotion to an aesthetic good, with the result that he hurt his family, cannot be separated off the way that the robber’s daring can, for single-mindedness *demand*s neglecting many considerations, including moral ones. Such devotion is a good that seems to entail wrongdoing, in a way that daring does not demand doing evil things.⁸

Artistic single-mindedness is not a generally good thing, Slote says, for there is no reason to expect that its general consequences will be worthwhile. “Gauguin’s single-mindedness is thus, if anything, a morally *un*justified motive or character trait, and any virtue we find in it, any admiration we feel for it, is predominantly *not* of a moral kind.”⁹ Thus, Slote thinks that admiration of Gauguin’s Tahiti venture is a genuine case of admiring immorality, that is, an example of overriding the overridingness thesis.

Owen Flanagan identifies three versions of the overridingness thesis:

- Strong: Immoral behavior as such is sometimes admirable.
- Weak: Sometimes certain nonmoral features of immoral actions are admirable, as are some features of persons that are contingently associated with the commission of immoral acts.
- Intermediate: Sometimes certain admirable features of persons are “intrinsically connected” with immorality. Such features cannot be admired without that admiration also accruing to or carrying over to the immorality.¹⁰

Slote, Flanagan says, denies the strong thesis, thinks the weak thesis is obvious, and so argues for the intermediate thesis. Although Flanagan does not buy the overridingness thesis, he does think there are no cases that satisfy the intermediate thesis. Three things need to be satisfied, he claims, for the intermediate thesis to be satisfied:

1. Immorality has occurred.
2. Traits of the agent are admired.
3. These traits are “intrinsically connected” to the immorality.

It is easy, he thinks, to imagine disagreement about the first and second, because admiration for particular character traits is invariably conditioned. The traits cannot be excessive, for instance. Furthermore, on certain moral theories, the acts associated with the traits may be moral, not immoral.

Even supposing that 1 and 2 hold, there are three senses of ‘intrinsic connection’:

- The action would not have been immoral without a particular trait’s entering into it. (For example, it is because Gauguin craved fame that his leaving is immoral.)
- No token of an action type could occur without a token of that trait’s figuring in the action’s production. (Gauguin would never have left if he had not craved fame.)
- Possession of a trait is sufficient for immorality. (Gauguin’s craving for fame is sufficient to make us disapprove of him.)

The last, Flanagan says, is clearly false; there are no examples of immorality that results simply from defects of character. There are so many examples of the first that it will not serve to distinguish between Gauguin and a daring robber. So the second must hold—but it does not, unless it is terribly watered down, that is, unless it is interpreted as claiming that artistic passion is necessary for the kinds of immorality caused by artistic passion.

Admiration of character traits, Flanagan writes, is based on “the views we have about over-all personal bearing. . . . The wily spy has an admirable trait relative to his job description, but this very same trait, if it carries over to his family life and friendships, will quite possibly end up implicated in an immorality.”¹¹ While this may be true of the wiliness of a spy, it is not true, I think, of the single-mindedness that one may admire in Gauguin. It is precisely the “carryover” effect that matters here. If Gauguin were not passionately single-minded in ways that affect *all* of his life, one would not forgive, let alone admire, his willingness to desert his family and live with his guilt. I shall return to this point later.

Flanagan concludes that the overridingness thesis will not be shown wrong via admirable immorality. Like Foot, he prefers a view that identifies acts as genuinely immoral, but nonetheless necessary or at least justifiable. He also agrees with a position that Susan Wolf takes in her paper “Moral Saints,” that being thoroughly good is incompatible with our idea of a desirable personal life.¹² (Here we see the relevance of Goody Two-Shoes.) Wolf writes that a person may be *perfectly wonderful* without being *perfectly moral*. Wanting to be a good cook, for example, will get in the way of being a moral saint.

Flanagan thinks that the possibility of wonderful though not thoroughly moral lives shows that the overridingness thesis is wrong with respect to what is morally *ideal* and even with respect to what is morally *required*. It is wrong here because “qua philosophical thesis it lacks content and does little action-guiding or dispute-resolving work.”¹³ It is no help in a society where there are disputes about what constitutes morality and about what is morally required. Wolf reads incompatibility between what is morally ideal and personally ideal in terms of differing points of view. Flanagan prefers to attack the overridingness thesis via a “direct assault on moral realism.”¹⁴ We can, he thinks, talk about the good life—“about actual and possible worlds and the visions of humans flourishing therein”¹⁵—without talking about “the moral” per se or thinking that it is primary.

Flanagan’s hunch that some people might not agree with Slote’s moral assessment of the examples he discusses is borne out by Marcia Baron.¹⁶ In particular, Baron does not conclude that the agents discussed really feel that on the whole they are doing the wrong thing. Surely she is correct that Gauguin felt some justification for going to Tahiti. I will spell this out in more detail later. For now, I want to suggest that Gauguin is choosing what appears to him to be a more *meaningful* life—and recognized that remorse was part of the price he had to pay because it is never possible to “have it all.” What finally shows up the overridingness thesis, I believe, is the existence of real dilemmas, where we recognize that not everyone will choose the same thing, and that different choices can be justified. (See chapter 6.) A cook who says, “Don’t you see—I had to try to prepare the perfect meal?” may

be admired for single-mindedness if the choice entailed hard work, dedication, and sacrifices. He or she will probably not be admired if the outcome was sought for merely material gain or short-term gratification. Further, as Baron says, we admire single-mindedness only if it knows some bounds. And those bounds are moral. For example, most people would not admire a cook who killed for fresh eggs, or Gauguin if he had killed for art supplies. So, like the daring of the robber, even single-mindedness can be separated off.

Richard McCarty also represents the group that Flanagan predicts will not accept Slote's analysis. He believes that Slote has not proven that admirable immorality negates the overridingness thesis but only that it may be difficult to *understand* how an immorality can be admired by someone who thinks the overridingness thesis is true. McCarty argues that, strange as it may seem, Kant's moral theory can explain how someone who adheres to the principle that moral considerations are always primary could still admire Gauguin's desertion of his family. According to McCarty, the Kantian notion of enthusiasm—sublime commitment to some good characterized by single-minded pursuit of that good—accounts for admiration that is not inconsistent with an inability to justify the desertion on moral grounds.¹⁷ McCarty also believes, "Contrary to Slote's suggestions . . . admitting the possibility of . . . contra-moral virtues does not require rejecting morality's overridingness, provided we take a suitably broad view of the scope of morality."¹⁸ I shall argue later that it is a suitably broad view of ethics that is required—one that points at how aesthetics and ethics are connected.

All of the discussants we have looked at separate the moral from other considerations, particularly, for our purposes, from aesthetic considerations. Whether they deny the overridingness thesis, as Foot and Slote do, or accept it by enfolding other considerations into a broad view of morality, as Flanagan, Baron, and McCarty do, they still put the moral and the aesthetic into distinct and disparate categories. This, I believe, is at least sometimes a mistake, and it is a mistake that incorrectly points to a separation between moral and aesthetic experience and value. Our experiences, our encounters with and in the world, and the decisions we make as a result do not typically come in separate packets, with the moral, aesthetic, economic, religious, political, scientific, and so on serving as viewing stands distanced from one another so that we look at the world first from one and then from another standpoint. I do not claim that aesthetic experiences or considerations are never separable from other sorts. What I insist is that it is *not a requirement* of the aesthetic that all other interests or concerns are blocked off or out.

There are, undeniably, situations in which things true of an object, perceiver, or context result in an experience in which one type of consideration wipes out all others. Moral, aesthetic, economic, scientific, and other considerations—all of these individually are potentially so important that on specific occasions one may be unable even to think about any of the others. Concern for a child may blind one to economic or aesthetic or political aspects. Aesthetic interest may erase concern for the pain of goldfish. And so on for all the others.

A comparison of the famous duck-rabbit figure helps here. The figure itself, the background, interests, psychology, or physiology of the observer, or the context of

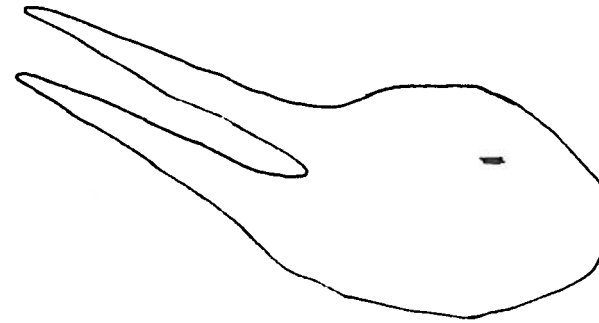


FIGURE 1

viewing may make it impossible for an observer to see the rabbit. But, of course, this is not the only possibility. Usually the situation with which we are more familiar—that in which we shift rather easily back and forth between the duck and the rabbit—obtains. Similarly, the blocking of the aesthetic by the moral, or vice versa, is not the only possibility. At will, we may sometimes consider first the moral features of something, then the aesthetic, and then the moral again. (And other aspects—the economic, parental, etc.—are possible candidates here; I am limiting myself to the aesthetic and moral.) One assesses Gauguin morally and then aesthetically. One looks at the goldfish painting first in terms of formal features and then considers the moral aspects of its production. These are different, and sometimes separable.

In part I, I defined 'aesthetic' in a way that highlights differences between the aesthetic and the moral.

A is an aesthetic property of O (an object or event) if and only if A is an intrinsic property of O and A is culturally identified as a property worthy of attention (i.e., of perception and reflection.)

Aesthetic experience and aesthetic considerations, it follows, will be directed at these intrinsic features, understood epistemologically as explained in part I. Formal and expressive properties like color or treatment of nature or the speech act performed by a protagonist are paradigmatic instances of the aesthetic.

Typically, moral considerations turn toward extrinsic features, the consequences or principles being followed. These are features that cannot be directly perceived in a person or in the action that he or she performs. It might seem to follow that, as with the duck-rabbit, where you cannot see both animals simultaneously, a shift from the aesthetic is required before one can see the moral, and conversely. But this inference does not hold, I believe. What is wrong is the claim that when one looks, reads, or listens to works of art or aesthetic objects, the only genuinely aesthetic experiences are those solely or exclusively directed at intrinsic features. Or, to put it another way, it is false that the intrusion of any other kind of consideration necessarily destroys or dilutes an aesthetic experience. Although attending to intrinsic features considered worthy of attention within a community that shares

cultural traditions is a necessary and sufficient condition of aesthetic experience, it does not follow that attending to or reflecting upon other features at the same time dilutes or erases aesthetic experience. Thinking that it does is one version of the separatist mistake—one upon which is based the strong formalist view that insists that genuine aesthetic experience is necessarily devoid of any and all attention to features that go beyond an object's immediately presented properties.

A weaker version of the separatist mistake admits that the aesthetic-moral is not like the duck-rabbit, that is, agrees that there is not anything like a gestalt shift involved, but still insists that the aesthetic and the moral are completely different—analogue more to size and color properties. Of course, on this view, one can see both that something is red and that it is tall at the same time, but nonetheless one can always think of the one property wholly independently of the other. Likewise, one might notice simultaneously that an action is graceful and evil, but one will be wholly able to abstract the gracefulness from the evilness. I believe that even this weaker version is wrong.

The incorrectness of both versions of the separatist mistake becomes clearer when one considers an interesting case: sentimentality. I discuss this fascinating “ethico-aesthetic” concept in chapter 9. Here, it is interesting chiefly because works like *Goody Two-Shoes* are precisely the sort often described as sentimental, and people who are called goody two-shoes often suffer from some of the defects associated with sentimentality. We use ‘sentimental’ to describe both people and artworks, and I shall argue that when we do we apply moral and aesthetic considerations simultaneously. Works of art are judged to be sentimental because of content, facts about the artist, effects on the audience, or formal properties that they possess. All of these judgments demand reference to what are typically taken to be moral principles or consequences and also to intrinsic properties of the object. One must know, for example, something about how people react to death or unrequited love before one can decide that these topics are being treated sentimentally in a song or novel, and this takes us beyond the song or novel per se. Moral uses of ‘sentimental’ depend on what is typically taken to be aesthetic considerations, for attention must be given to intrinsic features—*how* something is done, as well as *what* is done. The superficiality or excess that often marks sentimentality resides in intrinsic features of a person or her or his actions. It is not enough to know that Goody Two-Shoes expressed gratitude for having two shoes, not just one, to accuse her of being sentimental. Intrinsic qualities—degree or means of expression, for instance—must be given due attention, and extrinsic features such as the appropriateness of her response to the situation are also relevant. Evaluation of Goldsmith's portrayal of Goody as sentimental or not also requires attention to both what he tells us and how he presents it—to form and content at the same time. If the aesthetic and moral were separable, two different sets of criteria would be involved in each sort of assessment. If version one of the separatist mistake were correct, something like seeing the duck-rabbit figure (where we look first at the duck and then at the rabbit) would characterize our judgments: we should be able to notice that something is morally sentimental or aesthetically sentimental, but not notice both simultaneously. If the second, weaker version of the separatist mistake were cor-

rect, we should be able to consider moral sentimentality wholly independently of aesthetic sentimentality and vice versa. However, to use ‘sentimental’ we *must* look at intrinsic and extrinsic features at the same time. Form and content in this case cannot be pulled apart.

The separatist mistake is generally reinforced by members of both sides of the overridingness controversy. The very question “Do considerations like *x* always override considerations like *y*?” makes sense only if *x* and *y* are always separable. If they are not, the question is misleading. One way of avoiding the mistake is to see that admiration is often not purely moral or aesthetic, but an aggregation of both. And I shall argue later for an even stronger point: admiration should not be segregated, for this precludes a rational life.

Before getting to that, however, I want to discuss aestheticians who have made the separatist mistake, for it is not only moral philosophers who have muddied the waters. Art theorists in the first quarter of the twentieth century argued for a strong formalist position—one that insists that aesthetic experience totally excludes concern with anything except manifest properties of objects or events. In particular, they insisted that moral considerations be separated from aesthetic ones.¹⁹ These strong formalists have recently undergone severe criticism by myself and others, and I have already shown why I think this criticism is well founded. However, two respected aesthetic theorists from the last quarter of the twentieth century, Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, present a weaker version of a view that insists on the difference between and separation of the aesthetic and the moral. They argue that the aesthetic value of narrative fiction (and, by implication of other art forms) is different and separable from any moral value that might attach to it. They do not deny *that* content matters to an aesthetic experience (as strong formalists insisted), but they do put a limit on *how* content can matter. Literature is not disconnected from truth and knowledge of the world, but there is nothing integral to the value of literature that “makes expression, embodiment, revelation, etc. of truths indispensable to their value.”²⁰ Works of literature are, of course, *about* something, and what they are about matters to the reader's experience. But this “aboutness” is of a special kind, one that has to be explained not in terms of matching the world but in terms of thematic content and structure that is within the work itself. “We must avoid the trap of aestheticism, which cuts off fiction (or art) from the world, but we must also avoid the indulgent pursuit of special kinds of reference and truth.”²¹

This special feature of narrative fiction follows, these authors argue, when one correctly understands the character of this linguistic entity and persons' responses to it. Writing and reading fiction are interrelated practices that involve following “the conditions governing the way descriptions are presented, the purpose they seek to fulfill, the responses they elicit.”²² Writers present word sequences that invite readers to intentionally make believe that they are being told something about people who may or may not exist, and both authors and readers recognize that there is no engagement of “standard speech act commitments [involving] inferences from a fictive utterance back to the speaker or writer, in particular inferences about beliefs.”²³ The fact that as readers we know that we are not supposed to in-

fer anything about the world or form any new beliefs shapes the response that we have. We “entertain” statements made about people and things, but we do not make any judgment about their truth or falsity, according to Lamarque and Olsen. We recognize that an act of creative imagination produced the story; we “construe” passages—recognize that the elements go together in a unified, patterned way. We even find some of them of great human interest. But all of this is achieved without commitments on the part of the creator or the reader to any assertions being made about the world.²⁴

In chapters 10 and 11, when I come to discuss that nature of narrative art and its relation to ethics, I will say more about Lamarque and Olsen’s theory of narrative. Here, I want to concentrate on their insistence on the separability of fictional value from truth or moral insight. They grant that part of the value of fiction (and art) is its human interest—and this interest is directed to what they call the “themes” of narrative literature. These are organizing propositions that create intelligible patterns of events and situations. Lamarque discusses these themes more explicitly in his paper “Tragedy and Moral Value,” where he again warns that “the search for moral wisdom in the great works of tragedy . . . can become just another form of appropriation, losing sight of what is truly distinctive about tragedy conceived as literature or art.”²⁵ Again, his fear is that the special value of literature will be overlooked: the value that resides at least as much in the response to the mode of telling as in what a story is about. Moral principles become literary themes when they are tied to a particular work and its specific features. Their importance and value are as organizers of intrinsic properties of the work rather than as asserters of independent moral truths about the world, he insists. It is the former that enhances understanding of a work and sheds light on specific elements. A radical difference between themes and assertions calls for radically different kinds of assessment.²⁶

My quarrel with Lamarque and Olsen stems not from their claim that works are organized by themes but from their claim that something cannot simultaneously be a theme and an assertion. Why must there be a radical difference? Why cannot one, as I proposed in chapter 2, go back and forth and back and forth between a work and the world? Interpretation, they propose, is a matter of applying concepts to works in such a way that themes are both discovered and constructed; it does not go the other way. That is, they think that aesthetic response does not involve applying concepts uncovered in works to the world. “A literary work ‘implies’ general propositions only in the sense that the practice of literary appreciation makes use of such propositions to organize into an intelligible pattern the events, and situations described in literary works.”²⁷ I certainly agree that attention must be paid to the work, but I do not see why this precludes also paying attention to the world. We expect to find themes in narrative fiction, but I think another part of our expectation (though admittedly one that we recognize may not be fulfilled) is finding themes that have some relevance to the world. Works can help us to find intelligible patterns in the world. It may not be a defining property of ‘art’ that it includes content that engages us with the world as well as the work, but that it can be and is a property of some artworks remains a possibility. Finding intelligible patterns in one place not only does not preclude finding them in other places but also makes

it more likely. I will discuss this in detail in later chapters—both the fact that it does happen and how it happens.

However, an example of the connection between themes and assertions might help here. Consider the ways in which two poets describe flight:

Casting the body’s vest aside,
My soul into the boughs does glide:
There, like a Bird, it sits and sings,
Then whets and combs its silver wings;
And, till prepared for longer flight,
Waves in its plumes the various light.

—Andrew Marvell

He rises and begins to round,
He drops the silver chains of sound,
Of many links without a break,
In chirrup, whistle, slur, and shake.
For singing till his heaven fills,
’Tis love of earth that he instills,
And ever winging up and up,
Our valley is his golden cup.
And he the wine which overflows
To lift us with him as he goes.
Till lost on his aerial rings
In light, and then the fancy sings.

—George Meredith

Surely the assertions made here point to different but equally true things about birds and flying and the human longing to join them, among other things. Would the language be so admirable, would the themes that bring the parts into a coherent whole work as well, were the claims made about the real world false? I think not. Furthermore, Ralph Vaughn Williams’s musical version of Meredith’s poem relates to both the real world and to the poem; in both cases, correspondence to things outside the work contribute to the successful patterns created within the work. In chapter 10, I will give examples of ways in which the success of some artworks depends on the correctness of the moral claims therein.

Lamarque and Olsen sometimes talk as if they themselves want it both ways. They distinguish what they call “internal perspectives” and “external perspectives.” In the first, one reflects on fictional characters as persons; in the second, one identifies them as characters *per se*.²⁸ But they admit that these perspectives interact. They also acknowledge that great artworks embody themes of perennial human interest. I fail to see how something that embodies perennially interesting human themes could not stimulate a response to not only intrinsic properties of a work but also thought about the world which generates that very interest. Artworks engage us often by presenting content that interests us as human beings. Fair enough—but built into the very notion of human interest is a concern with the world, as well as with the work.

Themes, they argue, are not asserted, so “the question of truth is separate from the question of intelligibility.”²⁹ But we are not simply after intelligibility. Consider the theme that they attribute to *Middlemarch*: “The best human hopes and aspirations are always thwarted by forces beyond human control.” Suppose we substitute ‘never’ for ‘always’ in this generalization. As a theme per se, it would still be as intelligible; but if Eliot had used it *Middlemarch* would have been a very different work—no better, probably, than *Goody Two-Shoes*. To object that this substitution results in a less “interesting” work would be only question-begging. It is difficult for me to imagine a great work of art that had as its theme human hopes and aspirations never thwarted. This is precisely one of the reasons for denying the separability of moral and aesthetic value.

Of course, one might *ironically* begin a novel with a line to the effect that human hopes are never thwarted by external forces. But recognizing irony will not be a matter simply of reading what follows; it will also involve the reader’s recognition that things in the real world contribute to its being a false sentence used ironically. Again, the work-world fit goes both ways. The appropriateness of form to content is not a positive value of literary works only because it demonstrates how effective authors can be at fitting patterns and meanings. Part of what we value, in some artworks at least, is the efficiency or cleverness with which a relatively ordinary but truthful claim is made. Consider Robert Frost’s description of the leaves of early spring: “Nature’s first green is gold.” In one sense, this is hardly an original thought; most of us have noticed that special shade of green that graces early foliage. What makes Frost’s words noteworthy and delightful is not just the fact that these words fit into a pattern that unites it with other lines of the poem—although they do. It is satisfying in itself, because it so aptly describes something that is true of the world and something that we have noticed is true of the world but have not been able to describe so well ourselves. I do not see how recognizing the truth of the claim could distract us from recognizing the aesthetic merit of the line. Quite the contrary—the former draws attention to the latter. As Malcolm Budd writes, “Artistic value does not exist in a watertight compartment impermeable by other values. . . .”³⁰

Jerrold Levinson provides a powerful example of the way in which knowledge of the real world is relevant to the interpretation of the rap song “High Rollers.” It is impossible to see how one would relate to the song at all if one did not have knowledge of the kinds of things Levinson points to in the work:

Any adequate interpretation of the song would have to take into account (1) the import of the vocal delivery at various places, for example seductive and sinuous at the start, taunting and cynical on the rhetorically posed ‘right?’ near the end, (2) the comically exaggerated colours in which the pusher is painted (e.g. as ‘a titan of the nuclear age’ or one who ‘eats fly guys for breakfast’), (3) the animalistic painting at the end of each stanza, which evokes the hunger for material goods of pushers and those who envy them, and (4) the abrupt way the music, with its standard pulsating bass rhythm, cuts off after prefacing the final refrain (‘you wanna be a High Roller’) with a warning about watching one’s back, suggesting sonically the kind of termination one can expect if one chooses that path. All of these features seem to point toward the net force of the song being one of counsel against the lure of pusherdom.³¹

Attention to and sensitivity to aesthetic features, crucial though it is, would not result in a very full appreciation of the work if one lacked knowledge about the world of drug dealing. As Levinson puts it, “[W]ith art we appreciate the *unique way* in which the artwork embodies and carries its message.”³² But we also pay attention to whether the work has gotten the message right or not, and this is impossible without knowing whether the message is true or false and does or does not capture important, correct insights about the world.

Lamarque and Olsen stop short of strong formalism precisely because they admit that content and form merge. Once this admission is made, it is hard to keep people from thinking about truth and morality while they read, I think. They agree that “we identify ‘large’ themes in daily life, and they tend to be literary themes. We then tend to view reality in artistic terms, either in terms of a particular work to which we have given some attention, or in terms of an artistic technique that we have come to appreciate.”³³ This comes very close to my notion of going back and forth between works and the world; if one is willing to allow that people reflect on the world in terms of art, why not allow that they also reflect on art in terms of the world? The fear that somehow concerns with truth and goodness will dilute or confuse literary value with other sorts is misplaced. Blurring the line between artworks and the world is exactly what is called for, I think. Immediately following the passage just quoted, Lamarque and Olsen add, “However, seeing life in terms of art is an optional extra. . . .” Quite the contrary, I believe. It has been and continues to be at the core of aesthetic value.

As Ronald W. Hepburn writes, “We particularly cherish the presentation of a perspective that we can make our own, ‘inhabit,’ see as sustainable, as capturing what seems to us to be the truth about the world.”³⁴ Part of art’s power resides as well in its power to modify our grasp of reality and even partially to constitute it, he thinks. This is certainly true of many readers’ experiences. It supports the view that theorists who insist on a separation of the moral and the aesthetic make a mistake. In an attempt, perhaps, to solidify the position of artistic value, they deprive it of that which gives a great deal of art, at any rate, a great deal of value to a great many people. If separatists have made a mistake, the right way of accounting for the nature and value of the aesthetic must be a nonseparatist, integrational direction. To this right way, we now turn.

Part II

1. Richard Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism," *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 21, No. 1, April 1997, p. 1.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Chapter Five

1. This chapter is based on an earlier published paper, "Integrating Moral and Aesthetic Value," *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 67, 1992, pp. 219–40.
2. Plato in Republic 3, esp. 400–1, says that music imitates character and has a profound ethical effect. He extends this idea to the other arts. However, his view, particularly since the Renaissance, is not common. I am grateful to Elizabeth Belfiore for this example. Norman Dahl has also pointed out to me that for the Greeks 'virtue' would have encompassed both ethics and aesthetics.
3. Philippa Foot, "Are Moral Considerations Overriding?" in *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), pp. 181–88.
4. Michael Slote, "Admirable Immorality," in *Goods and Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 77–107.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
6. Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck," in *Philosophical Papers: 1973–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 20–39.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
8. Slote gives other examples of what he thinks constitute admirable immorality: a father who refuses to turn his son in to the police even though he knows that morality demands that he should do so and a political decision to bomb or torture in order to bring an enemy to its knees. I am not convinced by either of these examples. Parental love, for instance, can be a case of a paradigmatically morally admired trait within some moral systems. One can certainly imagine cultures in which such love would be "socially constructed" (see chapter 1) as a primary good. Foot talks about a gap between what we are told or taught and what we learn to do, and her point may be relevant here. In a "man's world," motherly love may be denigrated. By "man's world," I intend to suggest two things. First, feminist philosophers have pointed out that rule-oriented moral systems do not define the moral systems of many women. In a woman's world, it might be considered evil to turn one's child in to the authorities. Second, in the Gauguin example, it is interesting to consider how the case might change if a woman artist were to decide to desert her children and pursue a career in a far-off, exotic locale. However, it is Slote's aesthetic example that concerns me in this paper.
9. Slote, "Admirable Immorality," p. 91.
10. Owen Flanagan, "Admirable Immorality and Admirable Imperfection," *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 83, No. 1, 1986, pp. 41–60.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
12. Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 79, No. 8, August 1982, pp. 419–39.
13. Flanagan, "Admirable Immorality and Admirable Imperfection," p. 53.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
16. Marcia Baron, "On Admirable Immorality," *Ethics*, Vol. 96, No. 3, April 1986, pp. 557–66.
17. Richard McCarty, "Admirable Immorality and the Overridingness Thesis," draft.

18. Richard McCarty, "Are There Contra-Moral Virtues?" draft.
19. Two of the most influential members of the formalist school are Clive Bell and Roger Fry. See Bell's *Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1914) and Fry's *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1920).
20. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 5.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 45–46.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 265.
25. Peter Lamarque, "Tragedy and Moral Value," in *Art and Its Messages*, ed. Stephen Davies (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1997), p. 59.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 63–64.
27. Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, p. 327.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 144–45.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 328.
30. Malcolm Budd, *Values of Art; Pictures, Poetry, and Music* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 10.
31. Jerrold Levinson, "Messages in Art," in Davies, *Art and Its Messages*, p. 80.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
33. Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, p. 455.
34. Ronald W. Hepburn, "Art, Truth, and the Education of Subjectivity," *Journal of the Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 1990, p. 187.

Chapter Six

1. This chapter is based on an earlier published paper, "Serious Problems, Serious Values: Are There Aesthetic Dilemmas?" in *Ethics and the Arts*, ed. David Fenner (New York: Garland Press, 1996), pp. 279–92.
2. Stuart Hampshire, "Logic and Appreciation," in *Aesthetics and Language*, ed. William Elton (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), pp. 162–63.
3. Many philosophers distinguish between conflicts of belief and conflicts of desire, and many assert that moral conflicts are of the latter sort. I do not want to prejudge the issue of whether moral (or aesthetic) dilemmas belong exclusively to the desire, not to the belief, category. But there is a useful distinction to be made—and, possibly, applied. Bernard Williams claims that when beliefs conflict, they either conflict obviously (i.e., are such that they clearly cannot both be true: 'It is raining' and 'It is not raining') or are by themselves consistent but would not be consistent in combination with some third belief. 'The woman is tall' and 'The woman is the boss' do not conflict, per se. But they do conflict if it turns out that 'the woman' refers to the boss, and 'The boss is short' is true. Desires, on the other hand, according to Williams, conflict when some contingent fact makes it impossible for two desires to both be satisfied. I want a drink and I want to be warm, and the drinks are out in the cold. See Bernard Williams, "Ethical Consistency," in *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 42–43. A moral conflict, he thinks, is simply "a conflict between two moral judgments that a man is disposed to make relevant in deciding what to do" (p. 45). For example, one believes one ought to do something in light of some features of a situation and ought to refrain from doing that thing in light of some other features of the same situation. Moral conflicts, he says, are more like conflicts of desire than conflicts of belief, for the discovery that two beliefs cannot be true weakens belief