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**The Role of Understanding in the
Evaluation of Moral Value of an Artwork**

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Introduction

When we are deeply moved by an artwork, it is by its narrative content that we are so impressed in most cases. The narrative describes a series of actions, thoughts, and feelings of characters, and their relations. Since a narrative artwork usually describes significant relations among characters, it must involve moral aspects of those characters and their relations. For, when our thoughts and actions are significant, they must have their own ends which must have some moral characteristics, and our feelings or emotions also have these features in the sense that they evoke our thoughts and/or actions. There are several different positions in explaining the moral value of an artwork. On the one hand, radical autonomism holds that the only value of an artwork is its aesthetic value, and moderate autonomism concedes that it can be evaluated morally, but holds that its aesthetic value has nothing to do with its moral value. On the other hand, radical moralism holds that the only value of an artwork is its moral value, and moderate moralism holds that its moral value has some relation to its aesthetic value. Both radical views are not accepted these days, so contemporary discussions focus on the plausibility of the moderate versions.

In this paper we will examine the relation between the aesthetic value and the moral value of an artwork, especially of narrative artwork, and the problem of so-called “imaginative resistance,” the thesis that we can not or would not imagine a narrative prescribed by its text, when it endorses its immoral perspective as a whole. I will argue that imagining an immoral perspective is possible only within the limit that we can understand the evil character’s way of thinking and feeling according to their circumstances given in the text. In other words, the immoral perspective of a narrative work can significantly contribute to its aesthetic value only in the case that it enables us to enlarge the horizon of our moral understanding.

The Relation between the Aesthetic and the Moral Value of an Artwork

Some aestheticians might think that the moral value of an artwork has nothing to do with its aesthetic value, according to the traditional notion of “the aesthetic.” The so-called moderate autonomist concedes that an artwork can be evaluated morally, but holds that its aesthetic value should not be influenced by its moral value. A work can be evaluated as good or bad as a whole with regard to the total sum of aesthetic, moral, and other values, but the aesthetic value, at least, has no relation to another, including moral, value. On the other hand, the moderate moralist or ethicist holds that the immoral perspective of a work not only determines its moral value but also is pertinent to its aesthetic value.

When we consider the moral value of an artwork, we must note first that there be a distinction between a work with an immoral perspective without endorsing it as a whole and a work which endorses its immorality. All of us know that there are usually many characters in a narrative work and some of them are evil, and the work represents relations between them. And a work with evil characters is not necessarily considered as immoral. Sometimes we do not even consider a work with an immoral protagonist as immoral, if the work as a whole does not endorse his immorality. Since the debate between the moderate autonomist and the moderate moralist is a debate on whether there is some relation between the two values, it is important to focus on the attitude of a work to its moral perspective, i.e. on its manner in which evil is represented. For we can tell, by focusing on its attitude or manner, whether it indorses its immorality as a whole or not.

Moderate moralism is defended by Noel Carroll.¹ Against the moderate autonomist's claim that the moral value of an artwork is never relevant to its aesthetic value, he tries to show that the moral defect of an artwork is *sometimes* its aesthetic defect. He holds that, if a work has a morally improper perspective, then the audience cannot appreciate it properly. When we appreciate a narrative artwork, we are absorbed in the work with sustained interest and keen attention. But when the work proposes and endorses an immoral perspective, we cannot keep our interest and give attention to the work because of its immorality. The work fails to elicit the proper response of an audience, e.g. pity and fear as in the case of a tragedy with an evil or flawless hero, as explained by Aristotle. Carroll enlarges Aristotle's view for it to be applicable to narrative works in general. It is considered as its structural failure that a work fails to elicit the response which it was designed to elicit. And a structural failure of a work is its aesthetical failure. Since this failure rests on the immorality of the work, a moral defect of a work results in its aesthetic defect or demerit.

Berys Gaut proposes a similar position, which he names "ethicism." He holds that "the ethical assessment of attitudes manifested by works of art is a legitimate aspect of the aesthetic evaluation of those works."² If a work is morally good, it is aesthetically good to that extent and if it is morally bad, it is aesthetically bad to that extent. His main argument for the generality of moral evaluation of an artwork is as follows: The narrative work often manifests attitudes toward the persons and events described in its text and this prescribes our response to them, if we appreciate it properly. Since the immoral perspective of a work prescribes immoral response on the part of the audience, an audience's positive attitude to the evil characters and immoral events in the work would be subject to moral evaluation. For not only an actual state of affairs or action which is immoral, but also the imagining of an immoral state of affairs or action in favor of it is subject to moral criticism. The work with an immoral perspective prescribes our positive response to its immorality, which is morally bad. Therefore, we should not respond to the attitude of the work in the way it prescribes, and it will fail to achieve its artistic purpose. Since this artistic failure is a failure qua work of art, it is an aesthetic defect. Therefore, a moral defect of an artwork is its aesthetic defect.

Arguing for moderate moralism or ethicism, both Carroll and Gaut presuppose the cognitivist conception of artistic value. The value of an artwork partly consists in its cognitive value, since the artwork, especially narrative artwork, can deepen our understanding of ourselves and the world. By reading novels, or watching plays or movies we sometimes learn something about or think about moral features of our lives and the lifes of others. Therefore, an important consideration in evaluating works of art is

the extent to which they deepen our understanding of ourselves and the world. Since a work which tries to show the significant aspects of ourselves and the world must contain the moral aspects of our lives, it enables us to understand our morality more deeply and finely by provoking imaginative experience proffered by the text.

Our response to a narrative is an imaginative experience evoked by its text. And this response is not only intellectual but also emotional. Contrary to hypothetical imagination, which enables us to think about only the relation between propositions, e.g. from given premises to a conclusion, dramatic imagination which we adopt in the appreciation of a narrative work involves not only beliefs but also emotions. When we appreciate the moral content of a narrative, we not only imagine the states of affairs and the feelings of characters provided by the text, but also make our own moral judgments and have our own emotions towards them, which may or may not be congruent with the judgments and emotions represented in the text. If the emotions in the text are congruent with ours, then we can get the intellectual knowledge clearly and vividly, which Gaut calls "an affective mode of cognition." Artworks teach us not just some moral knowledge, but bringing that knowledge home to us. "And the way knowledge is brought home to us is making it vividly present, so disposing us to reorder our thoughts, feelings, and motivations in the light of it."³ The cognitive-affective perspective of a narrative is the reason why one of the fundamental aesthetic effects of narratives is intimately bound up with our moral responses, both in terms of our emotions and judgments.

Against these claims, the moderate autonomist holds that, even though an artwork can be evaluated morally, the categories of aesthetic value and moral value of an artwork are conceptually distinct. Anderson and Dean contend that the examples Carroll and Gaut make, which are cases in which we do not have such responses as the works in question were designed to elicit, are only aesthetic defects. If the audience does not properly respond to the prescription of the text or does not elicit the proper reaction, it only shows that the work has an aesthetic defect. So Carroll and Gaut are not successful in showing that a moral defect qua moral defect is an aesthetic defect. They argue that Carroll's assertion that the immorality portrayed in a narrative work subverts the possibility of uptake does not show that for the work to be aesthetically defective is for it also to be morally defective.⁴ They criticize Carroll for not providing a sufficient reason that a moral defect is an aesthetic one. They also criticize Gaut's view that all the immoral perspectives are not necessarily aesthetic flaws on the ground that some moral defects can be aesthetically good. For, even if the moral perspective of an artwork is evil, it can be aesthetically good, if it represents the perspective eloquently.

In a similar vein James Harold holds that "Even admiration for an evil character might be a morally merited response if that admiration is reflective and complex."⁵ He argues that, even though there may be some relation between the two values, it is indirect in such a way that the same artistic properties which determine the aesthetic value of the work play quite a different role in determining its moral value. To show that the same artistic properties play a different role in determining its moral value, he adds to Gaut's explanation of the audience's prescribed attitudes the form and depth of the prescribed responses. He claims that, when the psychological depth or complexity of the character is simple, which he calls "flat," regardless of the character's morality, the text is morally bad, because it does not provide us an occasion to think about our moral nature. On the other hand, when the character is "round," we have such a chance which makes the work morally praiseworthy. Surely when we encounter a simple and unreflective story, our

response will be simple and unreflective. When the characters of a story are sophisticated and reflective, our response will be profound. Thus, he holds that the same artistic properties play a different role in determining its moral value. But Gaut would say that the relation between the two values is direct in the sense that the aesthetic value of reflectivity and complexity is reduced because of its immorality. Harold holds that there is a moral difference between real life and fiction, so a work which prescribes an immoral response (e.g. *The Sopranos*) or no particular response (e.g. *Lolita*) can be morally praiseworthy. But it seems not the case that we would have a different morality for a narrative, when it deals with significant and important matters of our life.

Carroll responds to the criticism of Anderson and Dean by saying that he provides the reason why a moral defect can be an aesthetic defect. When we appreciate a narrative work, we respond to it with emotions, since it does describe fictional states of affairs to arouse our emotions. This is what Gaut also calls "cognitive-affective responses." Needless to say, this emotional response is subject to moral evaluation. The issue is why this is also the object of aesthetic evaluation. Carroll answers that, as he already showed in "Moderate Moralism," the evil perspective of the work plays an explanatory role in the account of why the story fails aesthetically.⁶ He does not need to show that a moral defect is a sufficient reason for a work to have an aesthetic defect, for he claims only that a moral defect of a work will be sometimes an important factor to determine its aesthetic defect. If Carroll's response is a correct one, then Gaut would be able to respond in a similar way to the objection Anderson and Dean made against him, even though it is more difficult for him to do so because of his general claim of ethicist.

Cognitive Immoralism

In discussing the moral value of a narrative work, we presuppose the cognitivist concept of artistic value. If we can learn something about ourselves and the world in an artwork, that thing must be a correct one. Challenging this assumption of moralism, the immoralist holds that we can learn something by having an incorrect one, because the latter provides us with an occasion to compare and contrast the objects in question.

Cognitive immoralism holds that in explaining a morally defective perspective a work may deepen our appreciation and understanding in ways that would not happen otherwise. The immoralist thinks that we can learn something about human nature by exploring the evil characters' thoughts and emotions or feelings. In reality usually we do not have such occasions, but in fiction we have a chance to compare and contrast many types of characters and may learn or understand why an evil character thinks and does in such a way represented in the text. By understanding the dark side of human nature we can realize that there are many fine and, sometimes dubious, points in human nature yet unknown to us. Many narratives make us reflect on the complexity of our own nature. Therefore, if a work provides us such a chance, it is aesthetically meritorious regardless of whether it endorses such an evil perspective or not. For us to have such an occasion the work must be imaginatively rich, and being imaginatively rich is an aesthetic merit regardless of its moral character.

Kieran holds that "What matters in evaluating a work's value as art is the intelligibility and reward of the imaginative experience proffered by the work. Works ... can, through getting us to take up a perspective we would not otherwise entertain, enhance the value of the imaginative experience afforded." He holds that we suspend our moral beliefs and judgments because of the potential cognitive rewards. Therefore, a work may be valuable

as art in part due to its morally defective aspect. Whether his explanation is plausible or persuasive depends on the issue of whether we can properly appreciate an artwork with an evil perspective. He mentions Martin Scorsese's *Good Fellas* as an example and holds that "for *Good Fellas* to work we are required to imagine certain propositions and commitments as holding, though one in fact believes they do not hold and are immoral in some respect."⁷ To appreciate it properly we have to share their immoral beliefs and, thus, have sympathy or even empathy for its evil characters.

But the movie can be seen as not to prescribe the positive response of an audience to the evil characters as a whole and, if we enjoy that movie, it is not because we accept the immorality of its characters, but because we can understand their evil thoughts and feelings without approving of them. Why don't we just watch the movie in such a way that the immoral beliefs hold for them but not for us and, thus, observe them without sympathy in imaginative experience? Surely sometimes we have sympathy for some characters, but that is the case only when what they think or feel is the same as we would do, if we were in such circumstances. We may learn something about the world of gangs, and this may satisfy our curiosity, but there is no need for us to suspend our moral beliefs and judgments to appreciate that movie. We can enjoy the movie, while seeing the evil characters as evil, as long as we understand how and why they act and think and feel in such a way. Understanding something is not necessarily to approve of it morally. We can sometimes understand someone's action or feeling without empathy or even sympathy for it. Even if we feel pity for an evil character, it is not because of his evil actions, but because of his surroundings which forced him to do so. We may have sympathy for him, but this does not mean that we endorse his immorality or his insanity even in the dramatic imagination. And this is possible only in the case that the moral perspective of the work is not much different from ours. If its moral perspective is totally unintelligible, we cannot understand it and there is no emotional response.

Moreover, if there can be an infinite variety of immoralities most of which are not even worthy of imagining, the most important factor of imaginative experience is its intelligibility, but not its immorality. The crucial point in appreciating a narrative work properly is whether we can understand the moral perspective of a work, for our appreciation of the work depends on it. And understanding its moral perspective is possible only when it does not basically or radically conflict with our moral beliefs. Kieran's claim can be taken to emphasize not the immorality of a narrative, but the intelligibility of it to deepen our moral understanding.

Imaginative Resistance

Many scholars who argue for immoralism holds that moralism would give us no chance to understand moral perspectives different from ours, since, if a work endorses an evil perspective, we cannot appreciate it properly. But we need to think whether our morality is dogmatic or not by understanding other moral perspectives, and must understand the evil to remind us of our own moral flaws and resist its charm. Here the issue is whether we can get some knowledge through an immoral perspective, which requires us to examine the way and the extent to which our imagination works in appreciation of narrative works. The so-called "imaginative resistance" to the immoral perspective of an artwork is relevant to its aesthetic evaluation, since, if we can not or would not imagine the thoughts and feelings of evil characters in the work, its moral defect results in its aesthetic defect.

Walton argues that fictional worlds cannot be morally different from the real world.⁸ We can not imagine that what is morally wrong in the actual world is true in the fictional world. Even though someone in the fictional world believes that slavery is morally acceptable and we can imagine that he believes so, we cannot imagine that his belief is true even in that fictional world. When we read a novel, we can easily imagine counterfactual states of affairs such that there is a flying dragon and a witch or the earth is flat or Romeo and Juliet loved each other, both of whom did not exist in the real world. But Walton claims that we would not concede that there is such a case in the realm of morality, which he calls the "imaginative resistance." We would not imagine that the criteria of moral judgments change in the fictional world. If a character who would be evil in the real world is described as a good one in a narrative work, we can not or would not imagine that he/she is a good person and, therefore, we can not appreciate the narrative work properly. If we cannot appreciate the work properly because of its moral characterization, its moral perspective is an aesthetic flaw, let alone a moral flaw, according to the moderate moralist.

But, since there are many cases in which we cannot appreciate artworks properly, we have to consider other cases first, which are not relevant to imagining an immoral perspective. At first, it is the most common case that the narrative is unimaginative, boring, or banal, which Harold calls a narrative with flat characters. Secondly, there is a narrative with disturbing imagination. When a narrative prescribes that we imagine something which we find disturbing, we would resist imagining it regardless of its morality, as in a case that it vividly represents dismemberment of a human body. Thirdly, there is a work which is not sensitive to moral situations, which looks to its audience as amoral. It might be more difficult for us to understand a narrative work with amorality than immorality, because of its total lack of moral sensitivity.

Returning to the topic of imaginative resistance, Amy Mullin claims that, following Aristotle, moral judgments are properly directed at habitual disposition of thoughts, passions, and feelings, and that they must be directed at acts of imagination, too. So only a narrative which forces us to repeatedly imagine an immoral sort is blameworthy. Therefore, "typically there are not sufficient reasons to think that works of art that merely supply examples of morally problematic imagining should be either condemned or resisted."⁹

Another reason against imaginative resistance which many scholars provide is that, since art is not life, the morality in real life does not apply to the fictional world. But this claim seems not so easily justifiable as they might think, since the counterfactual morality is not guaranteed because of the counterfactual states of affairs in the fictional world. The issue here to be explained is whether the fictional counterfactual morality is possible.

The plausible explanation of the thesis of imaginative resistance seems as follows: The appreciation of a narrative work requires us to take the assumption that the fictional world is in large part parallel to the actual world, for the narrative cannot represent every aspect of its world. We complement the fictional world with our actual world in terms of not only its relevant states of affairs but also its moral aspects. We bring the total system of our morality into the fictional world, against some portion of which the narrative may raise a question and try to persuade us to have another perspective. In such a case we can appreciate it as long as we understand it, and sometimes we might be persuaded to adopt that perspective. But this does not mean that cognitive moralism is false, because the

whole system of our morality is disposed to keep its relative equilibrium. In this sense moderate moralism does not insist on the unassailability of our moral understanding, nor lead us into moral complacency about our own moral characters and actions. And moral judgment and evaluation involve an emotional factor. When a narrative work provides a moral perspective which is so different from ours that we cannot understand its significance or plausibility, or so different that we think it does not fit us, we may find it repugnant or disturbing and would not imagine according to the text. Imaginative resistance is a matter of a whole moral system which implies that we can imagine an immorality in its local aspect. Therefore, we can imagine the immoral perspective of a narrative as long as we can understand it, and imaginative resistance is a matter of intelligibility of the text rather than of its immorality. We can change our moral view in some particular, and usually local, aspect by appreciating a narrative work, but this is possible only when the new moral perspective is within the limit of our moral understanding. Walton's thesis of imaginative resistance can be reconsidered as the resistance to imagining a totally different system of morality to which we cannot have a proper emotive response because of its unintelligibility.

Conclusion

We can and do imagine the immoral perspective of a work in most cases, especially when the immorality to which the work prescribes our response is only a part of the whole text and, sometimes, even the immorality the work endorses as a whole. I argued that those imaginings are possible only within the limit that we can understand, i.e. dramatically imagine, the evil character's way of thinking and feeling according to their circumstances given in the work. Therefore, the immoral perspective of a narrative work can significantly contribute to its aesthetic value only in the case that it enables us to enlarge the horizon of our moral understanding.

¹ Noel Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," *BJA* 36:3 (July 1996), 223-238.

² Berys Gaut, "The ethical criticism of art," in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the intersection* (ed. Jerrold Levinson), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. 182.

³ Gaut, 195. Carroll argues a similar view in his "The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge." (*JAAC* 60:1 (Winter 2002), 3-26.)

⁴ James C. Anderson and Jeffrey T. Dean, "Moderate Autonomism," *BJA* 38:2 (April 1998), 157.

⁵ James Harold, "On Judging the Moral Value of Narrative Artworks," *JAAC* 64:2 (Spring 2006), 266.

⁶ Noel Carroll, "Moderate Moralism Versus Moderate Autonomism," *BJA* 38:4 (October 1998), 423.

⁷ Matthew Kieran, "Forbidden knowledge: the challenge of immoralism." in *Art and Morality* (ed. Jose L. Bermudez and Sebastian Gardner), London: Routledge, 2003, 60.

⁸ Kendall Walton, "Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality," *The Aristotelian Society Suppl. Vol.* lxxviii (1994), 27-50. Walton argues the thesis of imaginative resistance on the ground that moral values supervene on natural facts. I would not examine the plausibility of his claim in this paper.

⁹ Amy Mullin, "Moral Defects, Aesthetic Defects, and the Imagination," *JAAC* 62:3 (Summer 2004), 252.

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