

CHAPTER 26

ART AND MORALITY

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1. INTRODUCTION

THE connection between an artwork's value as art and its moral character remains a deeply puzzling matter in contemporary aesthetics. Tolstoy's unqualified moralism (Tolstoy 1930), which holds that the worth of a work as art is entirely determined by its moral character, is unacceptable. We commonly recognize that the moral character of a work may be problematic and yet hold it to be of value as art. J. G. Ballard's *Crash*, Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, and Jean Genet's *The Balcony* may commend, in different ways, morally problematic conceptions of sexuality, yet none the less they remain intriguing, original, and valuable works. The moral and sexual content of the Earl of Rochester's poetry is deeply nihilistic, but well formed and expressed. Despite the inappropriateness of their moral character, we still consider such works to be artistically good. Yet the radical autonomists' claim that the moral character of a work is irrelevant, since the content of a work *tout court* is irrelevant to its value as art (Bell 1914), is just as inadequate. We standardly hold that the constellation of a work's formal features can be exquisite and yet its value lessened in some way because of its content. Much of the time this may have nothing to do with the moral character or otherwise of a work, but in at least some cases it does. The formal construction of Dickens's *David Copperfield* may be superb, yet its purple sentimentality in places is commonly held to diminish its value as art. Dickens's

sentimentality in part consists in an overly simplistic and naïve idealization of the moral character of the poor. If the characterization were more morally complex and adequate, then at least in this case the work would be less sentimental. Thus, here at least, it looks as if there is some relationship between the moral character of the work and our evaluation of it as art. D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* and Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* are held to be good artworks because of their formal virtues and the original film techniques deployed; none the less, the manifest racism of the one and the glorification of Hitler of the other arguably preclude an unqualified endorsement of their value as great art. The problem that faces us is thus not whether there is any kind of relationship between a work's artistic and its moral character: rather, the real problem concerns what the nature of that relationship is.

The idea that the moral character of a work may be intimately linked to its artistic value can be traced back to Aristotle, who suggests that moral criteria help pick out tragedies that are good or bad as such. Indeed, when outlining the correct standards in dramatic art, he claims that 'it is correct to find fault with both illogicality and moral baseness, if there is no necessity for them and if the poet makes no use of the illogicality (as with Euripedes and the case of Aegeus) or the baseness (as with Menelaus's in *Orestes*)' (Aristotle 1986: chapter 25). One way of taking this claim is to hold that the moral character of a work may affect its artistic value indirectly. I shall turn first to an examination of this kind of view in the following section. However, quite another way of taking it is famously articulated by Hume. Hume claimed that, where a work is at odds with our moral standards, 'this must be allowed to disfigure the [work], and to be a real deformity. I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments; and however I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age, I can never relish the composition' (Hume 1993: 152). This is a much stronger conception, amounting to the claim that a moral flaw is as such an aesthetic one. In Sections 3 and 4 I critically examine two distinct variants of this kind of view. In the final two sections I go on to outline two contrary lines of thought, in relation to obscene and pornographic works, which suggest that we have some reason to doubt this claim. For, contrary to Hume's thought, in some cases a work's value as art may be enhanced in virtue of its immoral character.

2. SOPHISTICATED AESTHETICISM AND MODERATE AUTONOMISM

In his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde wrote 'there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written.'

In one sense the claim is obviously false. A work that glorifies and commends to us the persecution, rape, and pillage of others is, to say the least, morally problematic. But what Wilde is really getting at is the idea that as literature, or more generally as art, works are not to be evaluated in terms of their moral character. What matters is whether they artfully develop the imagery, characters, story, and theme concerned in ways we find to be beautiful. It is consistent with such a view to recognize that the moral character of a work may affect its aesthetic character, hence a didactic work may be clumsy and artless, but there is no internal relation between its moral character and its value as art.

This kind of quasi-formalist view as it has been articulated and developed has come to be known as sophisticated aestheticism (Beardsley 1958; Lamarque 1995) or moderate autonomism (Anderson and Dean 1998). The claim is that a work's moral character affects its artistic value, in an indirect manner, if and only if it either mars or promotes a work's aesthetically valuable features, such as its coherence, complexity, intensity, or quality of dramatic development. What a work makes fictional, what its literary qualities are, and the nature of its moral character are conceptually distinct, though the last explains why certain kinds of work, such as tragedy, are taken so seriously. Thus, to criticize a work on the grounds that its moral characterization fails to be 'true to life' is irrelevant to its value as art. But if a theme is not of human interest, if it is badly or incoherently developed, both of which may be indirectly affected by the moral character of a work, then the work's value as art is significantly lessened. Consider, from his *Lives of the English Poets*, Samuel Johnson's criticism of Milton's *Lycidas*:

With these trifling fictions are mingled the most awful and sacred truths, such as ought never to be polluted with such irreverent combinations. The shepherd likewise is now a feeder of sheep, and afterwards an ecclesiastical pastor, a superintendent of a Christian flock. Such equivocations are always unskillful; but here they are indecent, and at least approach to impiety, of which, however, I believe the writer not to have been conscious. (Johnson 1964: 96)

Milton's poem is being criticized because the moral characterization of Christianity manifest in the imagery betrays clumsy and crude poetic equivocations, thereby marring its aesthetic unity or coherence, and thus diminishing its artistic value.

However, Johnson's criticism may also be taken to suggest that the aesthetic flaw is compounded because the equivocation concerns, and thus confuses or denigrates, what are taken to be certain fundamental moral truths (Hume 1993). This kind of thought—that the moral character of a work can play a direct role in promoting or lessening the aesthetic virtues of a work—is a common one among professional critics and ordinary appreciators alike (Booth 1988). The sophisticated aestheticist can always retort that such artistic evaluations are conceptually confused. But there is good reason to think critical practice should, at least in certain circumstances, be this way.

Appraisals of a work as banal, sentimental, trivial, shallow or profound, significant, subtle, insightful, and nuanced are not always wholly specifiable without appeal to considerations such as plausibility, insight, and explanatory informativeness (Miller 1979; Kivy 1997: chapter 5). Hence the sharp separation between the quality of the imaginative experience and cognitive considerations, at least with respect to much representational art, is difficult to support (Kieran 1996). This is not straightforwardly to reduce the question to considerations of truth; for many works that we value highly explore issues such as free will, the nature of evil, and moral redemption and endorse, reject, or give conflicting characterizations of such notions, from Mazzini's *The Betrothed* to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. How the vision is developed is crucial, and the understanding conveyed can be insightful yet partial. None the less, in order for the vision to be well developed, it must be at least intelligibly developed.

Furthermore, there is the phenomenon of imaginative resistance we sometimes experience with respect to a work's moral character (Moran 1994). When we engage with fictional works we are often asked to imagine things that are fantastical, improbable, and far-fetched. Now with respect to factual matters, we have little problem doing so—imagining that, fictionally, humans can mind-read, time-travel or live for thousands of years is not problematic. Yet, with respect to moral matters, we often experience difficulty in imagining states of affairs or taking up attitudes towards them that we consider to be unacceptable; we cannot (Walton 1994) or will not (Gendler 2000) entertain or condone the prescribed attitudes. For example, engaging with works such as the Marquis de Sade's *Juliette* or Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, which prescribe us to respond with admiration to, respectively, the violent satiation of sexual appetite against someone's will and fascism as personified by Hitler, is phenomenologically difficult for most people who hold that such things are unequivocally evil. Now if the moral character of a work in some way prevents us from undertaking the imaginings and attitudes as prescribed by a work, then it is tempting to think that it fails on its own terms.

However, matters are not quite so straightforward. One of the things we seem to find most troubling about certain works is precisely that they can and do get us to assent to views we take to be morally problematic (Tanner 1994). It is not so much a question of fictionally assenting to particular propositions, but rather the world view expressed by the work within which the propositions are located. Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, for example, does not merely make it fictionally the case that Charles Ryder moves from indifference to the acceptance of Roman Catholicism; the work makes certain factual and normative claims that are expressive of a particular kind of Roman Catholicism which is to be taken as being true of the actual world. The novel expresses and exemplifies, in the development of the fictional stories of Charles, Julia, and Sebastian, the view that one's relationship with God should be central to one's existence and that this will often involve great

self-sacrifice. For the cost of following the will of God is, perhaps even necessarily, the sacrificing not only of one's own happiness but also that of others. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that we find this kind of Catholicism deeply problematic. What *Brideshead Revisited* does is attempt to get us not merely to understand such a view but, in engaging with it, fictionally to assent to it. The trouble with reading the novel, given that it works well, is that we are moved from fictionally assenting to claims about Charles's development to fictionally assenting to the view of our place in the world as embodied in this kind of Catholicism. And this is standardly the case with good fictional works that trouble us. After all, we would not be so troubled by works that did not manage to do this. Of course, works that embody world views that are utterly alien to us may not challenge us in this way because we make no connection between this fictional world and our own. But works that do have a strong connection to at least some of our own beliefs and values, or that are at least a real possibility for us, will. So adducing the problem of imaginative resistance cannot in and of itself settle the issue, since many works do seem, successfully, to get us to assent fictionally to world views we are resistant to. The above considerations are what motivate the claim that moral considerations may directly affect a work's value as art, but further argument is required. There are two competing accounts—ethicism and moderate moralism—which attempt to provide just that.

3. MODERATE MORALISM

Moderate moralism (Carroll 1996) holds that a moral defect *may* count as an aesthetic one and a moral virtue *may* constitute an aesthetic one where the emotional responses a work solicits to achieve its purposes are, respectively, withheld or forthcoming because of the work's moral character. An artwork that fails to achieve its purposes is a failure on its own terms. The advantages of such an account are that it recognizes that great art need have no moral character whatsoever; it does not seem to presuppose a cognitivist account of the value of art; and it maintains that, even where a work does have a morally deficient character, this is not always relevant to its value as art, but only where it blocks our capacity to be absorbed in the work or to react to it as sought.

None the less, there are significant worries. On moderate moralism, the moral features of a work as such seem to play no direct role in its resulting artistic value. Whether a work is absorbing or succeeds in eliciting the emotional responses from us may be an aesthetic matter—but whether it does so in virtue of soliciting

a defective moral perspective is a conceptually separate matter (Anderson and Dean 1998). Objects can have multiple aims—my computer may be designed to be both beautiful and easy to use. To be sure, whether it is easy to use may be affected by how it was designed to appeal to the eye. But it does not automatically follow from this that its aesthetic appeal is internal to the evaluation of the object *qua* computer as opposed to *qua* aesthetic object. At best, it has been claimed, Carroll's argument establishes that sometimes we are not in a position to judge how good an artwork is because of our reaction to its moral character (Jacobson 1997). If I find Roman Catholicism deeply repugnant, I may not be able to engage with and respond as prescribed to Dante's *Divine Comedy* or Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*; but this only shows that I am not in the best epistemological position to evaluate how good they are as art, not that they are no good.

A different worry arises in relation to works that may fail in their aims and yet be all the better for it (Kieran 2001a). For example, propaganda or didactic works might fail as such in ways that enhance their value as art. Consider Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*. One of Lee's didactic aims in making the film was to get the audience to respond to the racists portrayed as clearly contemptible. Yet the film fails in this respect, because one of the central characters, Sal, is in many ways a deeply morally admirable man despite his incipient racism. Thus, the film fails in one of its didactic aims precisely because the responses it elicits are more complex, sophisticated, and less sentimental than those it sought to evoke. Yet, in virtue of the way it fails, it is of greater value *qua* narrative art than it would have been had Lee succeeded in realizing his didactic aim.

Carroll has pointed out (1998b, 2000) that his claim concerns not what we may voluntarily be reluctant to imagine, but what we cannot or find very difficult to imagine—if a work requires of us what it is impossible or virtually impossible for us to do, as opposed to what we are simply unwilling to do, then there must be something wrong with the design of the work. Furthermore, there seem to be moral constraints internal to certain artistic genres. So one response to the above worries might be to point out that propaganda or didacticism are art-indifferent classifications while tragedy is an essentially artistic one—and, moreover, one that does have an inherently moral character. For a tragedy to be successful as such, we must pity the central character as well as fear what may befall him. If, however, we judge him to be unworthy of pity, perhaps because of the thorough viciousness of his actions as represented, then, whatever else is the case, the work must fail as a tragedy. But further argument is required, since at best this shows only that works of a certain moral character cannot be appropriately classified as tragedies, not that they cannot succeed as works of art. Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* is famously problematic when considered as a tragedy in just this way; nevertheless, considered as a savagely dark comedy, it is ferociously successful.

4. ETHICISM

In the nineteenth century Matthew Arnold defended the greatness of Wordsworth for his depiction of moral ideas concerning man, nature, and human life. In particular, he claimed that 'a poetry of revolt against moral ideas is a poetry of revolt against *life*: a poetry of indifference towards moral ideas is a poetry of indifference towards *life*.' One might perhaps agree with Eliot that there is too much of a danger of confusing poetry and morals here (Eliot 1933: 116). But Arnold's presumption that serious art should be concerned with communicating deep responses to and an understanding of human life prefigures a dominant strand of criticism from Henry James through to Lionel Trilling and F. R. Leavis. In this tradition it is a profound criticism to make of a work that it fails to characterize adequately and get us to respond appropriately to the human experiences represented. Naturally this applies particularly to moral characterizations, evaluations, and attitudes.

It is this critical tradition that is most closely allied to the assumption that a moral flaw in a work is as such an aesthetic one (Hume 1993; Kieran 1996; Gaut 1998a). One argument put forward for this kind of view, termed 'ethicism', concerns the relation between the moral character of a work and the sought for cognitive-affective responses (Gaut 1998a). The claim is that, where a work prescribes cognitive-affective responses, which are thus intrinsically tied to the work's value as art, and where those responses depend upon ethical evaluation, the moral character of a work is always relevant to its value as art. Where we believe that the states of affairs as represented do not warrant the endorsement of the evaluation prescribed by the work, then the response it seeks from us is not merited and we can and often do legitimately fail to respond as prescribed. Where the merited response comes apart from the prescribed response, the work is, in that respect, a failure. We have again the recognition that great art need have no moral character and that good art may be morally flawed, for a work may be highly valuable in other respects. Ethicism also appears to address some of the worries that arose in relation to moderate moralism. What matters, according to ethicism, is whether or not the responses prescribed by a work are merited—hence problems concerning works that fail in their didactic aims by eliciting more appropriate responses do not arise. Furthermore, what an actual audience's responses are is irrelevant—it is a matter of whether they are merited in responding as they do. The value of de Sade's *Juliette* as art, for example, is lessened by virtue of soliciting admiration for that which should be condemned, independently of whether or not an actual reader responds in the manner solicited.

However, the appeal of ethicism rests in part on how willing one is to grant some degree of cognitivism concerning the value of art. Whereas moderate moralism, at least under one construal, merely appeals to whether a work is absorbing and we *can* react as solicited, ethicism, by contrast, is concerned with whether we *ought* to

react as solicited in terms of what we believe the right responses to be. But it can only be a criticism of a work as art that it prescribes the wrong responses if one already presumes that part of the function of art as such is to convey truth, insight, and understanding. Yet it is precisely this premiss that sophisticated aestheticists and moderate autonomists reject (Beardsley 1958; Lamarque and Olsen 1994). The very notion of unmerited responses as adduced by ethicism requires further defence.

Consider an analogy to jokes (Jacobson 1997). There are many jokes we are warranted in finding funny—say, because they present surreal incongruities—but which are immoral—say, because they are deeply racist. It may be morally bad to laugh at such jokes or repeat them, but *qua* humour that does not of itself obviously affect whether or not such jokes are funny; hence the psychological discomfort we often feel in such cases. The only thing that matters is whether the joke is well designed to elicit the response of hilarity, and this is a matter, cashed out in terms such as incongruity, which concerns non-moral criteria. So too, the critic may go on, consistency of reason dictates that the same is true with respect to artworks. A work may solicit responses that are immoral but none the less are merited in terms of non-moral aesthetic criteria—namely in virtue of being aesthetically well designed, complex, coherent, and engaging. Of course, the ethicist could attempt to resist the analogy or, as Gaut has argued (1998*b*), could accept the analogy but deny that immoral jokes are unqualifiedly funny, but further argument is required if he is to resist the charge of begging the question.

Furthermore, the claim that moral aspects of a work, where they relate to our prescribed emotional responses, always figure in our evaluation of a work as art seems overly strong (Kieran 2001*a*). First, we commonly distinguish between the incidental character of a work and that which is essential to its point and purpose, disregarding much of the former in our assessments. Second, the moral character of a work that merely seeks to please or entertain tends to figure less in our artistic evaluation of it than in the case of serious art where the moral character of a work seems more closely tied to its artistic value.

It should be noted in passing that Carroll's moderate moralism is articulated specifically only in relation to narrative art, while Gaut's thesis is a claim about all art generally. It might be thought that the wider scope of Gaut's claim is much more difficult to defend in relation to artforms such as abstract art and pure music. But, to the extent that non-representational works seek to elicit cognitive-affective responses from us, Gaut's argument still applies and, specifically in relation to music, the thought that the moral value of a piece may constitute part of its artistic value has been argued for by Levinson (1998).

Particular problems aside, both moderate moralism and ethicism hold that, at least in certain cases, a work may be good as art and yet aesthetically defective in so far as it commends a morally defective perspective. In other words, despite its morally defective character, a work may be, all told, a good artwork. If, however, we

had grounds for holding that a work could be valuable *in virtue* of its immoral character, then we would have strong reason to hold that neither ethicism nor moderate moralism could be the right accounts of the interrelations between the moral character of a work and its aesthetic value.

It has been argued that immoral works can be valuable as art because there are many different plausible views on the nature and morality of a great number of things (Jacobson 1997). Hence it is a boon that we engage with works that advocate views different from our own—if only to understand those different viewpoints better. But, Carroll has argued, such a line of thought affords only an instrumentalist justification of immoral art (Carroll 2000). This may be important in providing an argument against the censorship of immoral art, or for the importance of engaging with immoral art as a means to gaining knowledge and understanding. But, as such, it fails to offer any reason to think that, *qua* art, a work may be aesthetically enhanced in virtue of its immoral character. However, I think the immoralist line can be understood more sympathetically than this, and in what follows I outline two arguments which suggest we have reason to take such a possibility seriously.

5. OBSCENE ART

Certain kinds of artworks are often adjudged obscene and, as such, their moral character is condemned. So if we had grounds for claiming that obscene works, in virtue of their obscenity, can be valuable as art, then we would have strong reason to doubt the accounts of ethical criticism reviewed above.

What obscenity consists in is a controversial matter. But, minimally, an account of obscenity *per se* cannot be framed in terms of standard causal considerations, since the latter are neither necessary nor sufficient for a judgement of obscenity. Even if it were granted that there are causal links from obscene representations to immoral acts or to the social exclusion of certain groups, the causal assumption would apply to many representations we would not judge obscene. Certain films might represent women as dependent, empty, or flighty, and Pre-Raphaelite paintings, certain kinds of romantic fiction, and representations of the chivalric ideal often represent women as passive and utterly submissive to male desire. So someone might worry that an artistic diet consisting wholly of such representations would cultivate morally dubious attitudes or behaviour with respect to women. But we would nevertheless not condemn such works as obscene. Conversely, much of the Earl of Rochester's poetry, de Sade's fiction, or jokes about eating Holocaust victims would be deemed obscene without anyone thinking they would affect people's dispositions regarding how they treat others or what they eat. So the judgement of obscenity is not predicated on

actual or foreseeable causal effects, but rather concerns the prior matter of the particular moral character a work is deemed to have.

The judgement of obscenity cannot arise in relation to anything we cognitively-affectively respond to as being morally prohibited—otherwise it would be merely a rhetorical term for picking something out as immoral. Of course there are a variety of features that are marks of the obscene, such as certain kinds of subject matter—principally sex, violence, death, and the corporeal—or the soliciting of certain kinds of objectifying interests in persons. But obscenity is centrally a matter of the *ways* in which such subject matter and interests are treated by representations in order to solicit certain kinds of responses from us. In the case of sex and violence, the judgement of obscenity arises where we judge a work to solicit and commend cognitive-affective responses of sexual desire or delight in the infliction of pain that are taken to be morally prohibited. Hence we distinguish Sadean type works, where rape, paedophilia, or brutally violent and intrusive sexual activities are represented as sexually arousing and desirable, from works such as Jonathan Demme's film *The Accused*. *The Accused* is not obscene, though it portrays rape from both the victim's and the perpetrators' viewpoints, since, far from commending the represented desires to us, it condemns them. More generally, any account of obscenity must give due recognition to a central feature of the phenomenology involved in paradigmatic cases of judgements of obscenity—namely the feelings of repulsion—by virtue of a representation soliciting responses taken to be morally prohibited, and of attraction towards indulging or delighting in those very responses.

Now both ethicism and moderate moralism rely on the basic thought that, to the extent that we deem the cognitive-affective responses solicited from us by a work to be morally prohibited, we will either fail to respond or will deem the response to be unmerited. But there are at least three distinct reasons that could underwrite the claim that we may be motivated or merited in responding as solicited by obscene works.

1. *Desire fulfilment* Many obscene representations solicit and shape the indulgence of basic motivating desires that are deemed to be intrinsically morally wrong, misdirected in morally prohibited ways, or inviting a morally problematic over-indulgence. Consider a representation of a rape where one is directed to delight in and be aroused by the victim's pain, powerlessness, and sexual subjugation. Despite judging such responses to be immoral, the work—at least to the extent that it is successful—evokes a sense of sexual excitement, desire, and arousal. Desires for sexual power, domination, and supremacy on the one hand or, on the other, to be sexually subjugated to another's will are not uncommon among both men and women. Similarly, with respect to certain representations of violence, suffering, and death, a work may solicit responses that speak to desires to see or make others suffer, to exercise power by subjugating another, or to victimize. Again, such desires are common enough. Given the opportunity to actually fulfil such desires, a morally decent person would not act on them, would feel overwhelmingly repulsed by

witnessing such actions, and would feel no excitement at the prospect of so doing. But with respect to effective representations that speak to such desires whose fulfilment does not involve acting upon and harming others, the force of the moral prohibition slackens and it is easier to feel the pull of the desires spoken to.

2. *Meta-desire fulfilment* Certain kinds of obscene representations may not speak to first-order morally prohibited desires but may concern morally prohibited second-order desires, such as the desire to be morally transgressive or the desire to delight in the first-order feelings of repulsion that a representation affords. For example, a narrative may represent its anti-hero as undertaking the repulsive violation of one moral taboo after another. The work does not solicit or commend the particular desires that the acts represented may themselves speak to. But what the work does seek is excitement, interest, and delight in moral transgression as such. Such a work speaks to a common enough desire to break free from the fundamental moral norms and mores we standardly take to be binding. We are not attracted to do so in real life because of the high moral costs to oneself and others and the likely prudential costs. But such costs are far less with respect to representations that indulge such desires but do not obviously involve harm to anyone. Hence, again, a work may successfully solicit the pull of a morally prohibited meta-desire in us.

3. *Cognitive rewards* The motivating attraction in some obscene representations need not arise from particular morally prohibited desires, or from a meta-desire such as the desire to be morally transgressive. None the less, a representation may be adjudged obscene in representing persons in ways deemed morally prohibited and yet may solicit attraction in virtue of the cognitive interests spoken to—for example curiosity or fascination. Consider the work of the photographer Joel-Peter Witkin. Many of his works solicit a compulsive interest in the freakish, deformed, and mutilated bodies of persons. The works do not solicit responses based on delight in pain or suffering, nor do they speak to a desire to be morally transgressive as such. Rather, they arguably seek to direct our attention, and solicit responses based upon, sheer curiosity and fascination with the appearance of such persons. It is important to note that the object of fascination and delight is not the appearance of deformity or physical contortions alone. Rather, we are prescribed to look upon and delight in the subjects portrayed as sub- or other than human. Again, the cognitive desires spoken to here are not uncommon—as testified to by Plato's characterization in *The Republic* of Leontion, who delighted in the appearance of executed corpses, or by the fascination of many for the death, disaster, and car crash films and television programmes that attract such high audience ratings.

As a rough characterization, then, let us take an obscene work to be one that elicits or commends, in repulsive ways, morally prohibited cognitive-affective responses which are none the less found to be attractive for some of the reasons articulated above. (For a more sophisticated characterization, see Kieran 2002a.) Now the question is, could there be such a work which, partly by virtue of its obscenity, is a good artwork? Consider Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. The central character is

an exiled writer living in Paris moving among ordinary low-life individuals, drunks, deadbeats, prostitutes—the hardened, feckless, sentimental, and callously indifferent. The baroque narrative, swirling around incidents of stupidity, drunken fights, lusts, adulteries, and deceptions, is conveyed in coarse, rhythmic, adjectival prose which highlights the visceral yet mundane aspects of the central character's experiences. The reader's responses are shaped in such a way that one is prescribed to be simultaneously morally repelled and yet attracted to the vulgar, indecent, and sordid immorality portrayed. The overarching attitude solicited from us towards such a characterization of human life is one of passive acceptance. Thus, the narrowly literary aspects of the novel, the incidents portrayed, and the underlying narrative theme symbiotically enhance one another in conveying a deep sense of Miller's understanding of and attitude towards humanity.

There is something overly restrictive about being required to respond to such a work only in the ways we take to be good and right. For part of the value of engaging with artworks generally seems to derive from the peculiarly powerful ways in which they can get us to entertain or imagine different possible attitudes and responses. There are many responses that works elicit from us which we judge in actuality to be unmerited but which we none the less find understandable—a matter that concerns not what the correct moral perspective is or should be but how the moral perspective could have been or could be seen to be. For *Tropic of Cancer* not only successfully prescribes imaginings about characters who are represented as being rotten and corrupted, but gets us to respond in ways concomitant with an attitude of acceptance towards such a picture of humanity generally. Yet, to the extent that we hold such a characterization of humanity to be at the very least partial, we will regard such responses and the overall attitude commended to us as unmerited—and partly for moral reasons. For presumably one will maintain that, in the face of the horrors and corruption of humanity, embracing and celebrating passive acceptance is not the right attitude to have. But it is a mark of the novel's success rather than failure that it renders such responses intelligible through evoking them in the reader, even though we may take such responses to be, in actuality, unmerited.

The claim is not merely that *Tropic of Cancer* is instrumentally valuable in so far as it expands our understanding of an attitude we take to be morally partial, misplaced, or downright wrong. One could agree with this claim while holding that, to the extent that the work commends a morally flawed attitude, it is nevertheless, in that respect, flawed. Rather, the claim is the stronger one that our absorption in the work as art is in part enhanced by the morally flawed attitude commended to us as conveyed through the rough, coarse, and rhythmic prose, the concerns with the ordinary and mundane, and the narrative as a whole. And at least some of the reasons why we can be and often are attracted and absorbed by subject matter, responses, and attitudes we take to be immoral were sketched above. Importantly, then, the worth of *Tropic of Cancer* seems in part to arise from its obscenity rather than

despite it. For it is hard to see how the inducement in the reader of a passive acceptance of the sordid horror of the human world could have been achieved without the novel's preoccupation with the indecent, vulgar, and coarsely immoral. It could be replied that Miller could have focused on such matters but the overarching attitude the novel embodies and elicits could have been otherwise—for example, the narrative could have aimed to induce a sense of shame rather than acceptance regarding the human condition. But in so doing the intensity, integrity, and coherence of the work would have suffered, and the novel would have turned out a lesser rather than a better work for it. What this suggests is that what matters is not so much a question of whether or not the moral perspective endorsed is one we take to be merited, but, rather, whether it is conveyed in such a way that we find it intelligible or credible. What matters is whether an artist can get us to see, feel, and respond to the world as represented as he intends us to, not whether those are the responses one morally ought to have. Furthermore, the morally reprehensible cognitive-affective responses solicited from us by such works can be epistemically virtuous because they may deepen our understanding and appreciation. Where this is the case, the value of the work is enhanced (Kieran 2002b).

It has been argued that moderate moralism, unlike ethicism, could be reformulated to allow for such cases (Kieran 2001a): the moral features implicit in and central to the imaginative experience afforded by a work are relevant to a work's value as art to the extent that they undermine or promote the intelligibility, for appropriately sensitive audiences, of the characters, events, states of affairs, responses, and attitudes as represented. Let us call this most moderate moralism. A primary virtue of such a reformulation is the recognition that many artworks of the past, not to say many contemporary works, have moral aspects that we believe to be dubious if not downright wrong, but none the less we can and do respond to them as solicited. From Homer's poetry and the Icelandic sagas, which prescribe admiration for certain heroic virtues at odds with an emphasis on forgiveness and mercy, to Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and Jean Genet's *The Balcony*, which at least in part prescribe disdain for traditional sexual morality, many works successfully get us to imagine what we take to be, in real life, ethically undesirable. Yet we take this as a mark of their success, their imaginative power, rather than think less of them for it. The value of such works is not straightforwardly a question of whether they conform to what we take to be right or good in real life as it is a matter of whether or not we find the characters, states of affairs, and attitudes as represented intelligible. But notice now that most moderate moralism is very weak indeed, if not downright at odds with the original spirit in which moderate moralism was put forward. It allows both that a work *may* be enhanced as art partly in virtue of its moral character, and that in certain cases the immoral character of a work *may* constitute an aesthetic virtue rather than a vice. Thus, it would be a minsomer to characterize such a position as moralism in any shape or form (no matter how weak).

6. GRAND GUIGNOL AND PORNOGRAPHIC ART

A rather different kind of argument can also be adduced to support the claim that there are works that realize their artistic value in virtue of their immoral character. Remember that one of the arguments Carroll used to support moderate moralism emphasized the moral constraints internal to certain genres such as tragedy, the core thought being that for a work to succeed as tragedy we must pity the hero or central character. If the hero's moral character is such as to be unworthy of pity, the work cannot succeed as tragedy. Ironically, the very same kind of thought suggests that there could be works that succeed as the works they aim to be precisely in virtue of their immoral character. Consider such genres as grand guignol and pornography. Grand guignol was primarily a nineteenth-century French theatrical artform of short plays, popular in Parisian cabarets, where the emphasis was on sensational violence, horror, and sadism; but, crucially, to qualify as grand guignol the mangled beauty, innocent victims, mutilation, and depravity involved had to be represented as abrogating moral taboos. Similarly, pornographic art, as such, can realize its goals only in virtue of soliciting, via the explicit representation of sexual attributes, sexual thoughts, responses, and arousal. For many at least, the very explicit nature of the means used to realize this goal are morally problematic. But unless such means are used, a work cannot succeed as pornographic art, although it may succeed as something else.

Such a line of thought may be challenged in various ways. For example, it might be thought contentious to claim that it is essential to the sensationalism of grand guignol that it involve moral abrogations. In relation to pornography, it could be denied that pornography of any kind—unless its production involves physical or psychological harm to its subjects—is immoral. I am sceptical of both claims. Grand guignol plays were often decried when it was deemed they were insufficiently immoral or taboo-breaking. Pornography that solicits delight in and arousal by the violent rape of someone strikes me as morally problematic in and of itself, and, at least from Greaco-Roman culture onwards, pornographic representations have been produced that do just this. But I shall not debate these issues here. A broader and more interesting objection consists in the denial that such narrative genres could meaningfully aspire to serious artistic merit. If, for example, pornography *per se* cannot be valuable as art, then it can hardly constitute a challenge to any form of moralism. So I shall concentrate on the often asserted claim that there can be no such thing as pornographic art.

Pornographic representations are standardly characterized as having the sole or predominant aim of seeking to elicit sexual arousal. By contrast, although erotic representations may well have this aim, they may and often do have other aims as well. Hence an erotic representation may qualify as art, and be highly valuable

as such, because of the way in which it realizes artistic intent, given its subject matter. However, a pornographic representation can never be art, or be valuable as such, since by definition a pornographic representation cannot possess artistic intent (Levinson 1999).

But what reason do we have to grant this characterization? Pornography essentially involves the explicit representation of sexual behaviour and attributes. Of course, this is insufficient for a representation's being pornographic, since anatomical drawings, medical textbooks, natural history programmes, and educational videos may be sexually explicit without being pornographic. It is often suggested that the distinguishing mark of pornography, in contrast to erotica, is the sexual objectification of its subjects in virtue of which it is commonly held to be degrading. The notion of objectification being appealed to here is difficult to disentangle, but, at the very least, it would seem that not all sexual objectification is as such inherently degrading. After all, one might be rather disappointed if one's partner did not sexually objectify oneself in certain contexts in the service of sexual arousal. But let us grant for the sake of argument that pornography involves sexually explicit objectification in order to elicit sexual arousal or desire on the part of the audience. So pornography is that which primarily seeks to elicit sexual arousal or desire via the explicit representation and objectification of sexual behaviour and attributes. How does the pornographic stand in relation to the erotic? The erotic need not involve any sexually explicit objectification of sexual behaviour and attributes. Robert Mapplethorpe's photographic studies of flowers or Degas's portraits of brothel scenes, for example, are devoid of sexual explicitness, yet they successfully solicit sensuous thoughts, feelings, and associations that may be arousing and are thereby erotic, though notice that the erotic may still involve the objectification of the body. The erotic essentially aims at eliciting sexual thoughts, feelings, and associations found to be arousing. Thus, there are many things that are erotic but not pornographic, for example a representation of someone suggestively eating strawberries; but anything that is pornographic is erotic. For pornography seeks to realize the aim internal to all that is erotic but via distinctive means, i.e. sexually explicit objectification, which many other erotic representations do not utilize. Pornography is thus a subspecies of the erotic or of erotica.

Now a work whose primary aim, *qua* erotic representation, is sexual arousal may have other aims, including artistic ones. An artist may intend to produce a work that is arousing and, moreover, may intend to do so in such a way that the artistry conveys to the audience certain cognitive-affective states or attitudes to what is depicted. This is no different in principle from the recognition that Eisenstein can intend to produce, and be successful in producing, a work that aspires to be both propaganda and to be artistically valuable. Furthermore, a work produced solely in order to be sexually arousing without any artistic intention may yet artfully convey a suggestive insight, view, or attitude in a manner found to be valuable. Just as we recognize that someone may intentionally produce a religious icon with the sole

intent of evoking religious devotion, and yet also produce an icon of artistic worth, so too the same is possible with respect to erotic art.

In terms of definitional characterization alone, we have no reason to suppose that, as a matter of principle, what is possible with respect to the erotic is precluded with respect to a particular sub-category of the erotic—the pornographic. What we require is a reason explaining why the pornographic is or may be inimical to the realization of artistic value. It cannot be ruled out by definitional fiat.

Carving out the difference between the pornographic and the erotic in terms of sole *v.* multiple intent may acquire some plausibility from a quick consideration of representations that we deem erotic and pornographic. There are many representations we consider to be paradigmatically erotic and artistically valuable—certain works by Klimt, Degas, Gill, Rodin, Canova, Tintoretto, Goya, Ingres, some of Shakespeare's sonnets, Ovid's *The Art of Seduction*, Scheherazade's *Tale of 1001 Arabian Nights*, or Bunuel's *Belle de Jour*, to name but a few. By contrast if we think of paradigmatic pornographic representations, from late Victorian flick books to the swaths of magazines available on the top shelf in newsagents, there seems to be nothing betokening artistic intent or merit.

Yet appealing to examples in this way cannot sustain the definitional distinction. It is obvious that most pornographic representations are of little artistic interest. But the same is true with respect to most representational forms generally. There are swaths of pictures, novels in run-of-the-mill bookshops, soap operas, television dramas, and films that are of little artistic interest. We do not take this to show that visual depiction, novels, or films cannot be of artistic merit. Indeed, in particular genres the ratio of artistically worthless to artistically worthwhile seems exceedingly high. For example, photographic portraiture, romance, fantasy or science fiction novels are all dominated by formulaic, flat, and artistically uninteresting works; none the less, this does not preclude some of this work from being of very high value as art. Moreover, if one studies the history of some of these genres, such as science fiction, one sees that much of the early work produced in pulp form is of little artistic interest, except in relation to the development of science fiction as a distinct genre, and only as the genre evolved did the first novels and films of artistic merit start to emerge. It could be objected that at least the makers of such works had low-level artistic aims or concerns, whereas this is distinctly not the case with respect to pornographic works. But there do appear to be at least a few works that are pornographic yet seem to manifest artistic intent.

What do these reflections show? The mere fact that it may be difficult to think of pornographic works of artistic value, in contrast to erotic works, does not of itself underwrite the claim that pornographic works, as a matter of principle, could not be valuable as art. First, even were one to grant that there are no such works, as yet it remains an open matter as to whether this is due to the nature and limitations inherent in pornography *per se* or is a contingent fact arising from certain historical and socio-cultural factors. It could be that, owing to institutional and social pressures, since pornography is held to be deeply immoral, obscene, and subject to

stringent censorship, those who possess artistic talent simply have not exercised it in relation to pornographic subject matter—we would not really expect hucksters looking to make money illicitly from pornography to concern themselves with artistic considerations. This might explain why pornography has not evolved in a manner amenable to artistic considerations whereas other genres that emerged from the unpromising beginnings of pulp fiction, such as science fiction, adventure stories, and detective thrillers, have. Second, it is far from obvious that there are no artistically valuable pornographic representations. George Bataille's *Story of the Eye*, Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses*, Nicholson Baker's *Vox*, certain illustrations of the *Kama Sutra*, some of Egon Schiele's nudes, the work of the later Picasso, and some of Hokusai's woodblock prints, to name but a few, are all explicitly pornographic and yet of no little artistic merit. Indeed, if we look back as far as the ancient Graeco-Roman world we find many representations that are highly sexually explicit and objectifying but are also valuable as art—as the Victorians found out, much to their shock and dismay, when Pompeii was discovered. So there are grounds for claiming that a pornographic representation could or, in the above mentioned cases, does aim to be, and is, valuable as art. As such, their value arises in part *from* rather than *despite* their putatively immoral character.

There are various ways in which this argument might be resisted. It could be claimed that we are mistaken in thinking that the works cited either really are pornographic or possess much by way of artistic intent or merit. But the onus here is on someone who would claim that our pre-reflective judgements are in error. However, a more promising and interesting line of thought can be pursued. For there remains something to the thought that, to the extent that a representation seeks to elicit sexual arousal via the explicit representation of sexual behaviour, a work cannot be of value as art.

The objection can be put in the form of two challenges. The first I shall term the *problem of pornographic purposiveness*. It may be argued with some plausibility that pornographic representations are inherently formulaic, banal, and fantastical. Repetitive concentration on genitalia, signs of sexual stimulation, and the mechanics of intercourse against a one-dimensional narrative backdrop may be arousing, but can convey little of aesthetic interest or imaginative insight into what it might be like to be a certain kind of character, face certain kinds of dilemmas, or view the world in a certain way. So, it might be claimed, representations seeking to realize the goal of arousal via sexual explicitness and objectification cannot but be indifferent to the kind of concerns that render works aesthetically elegant, graceful, subtle, nuanced, profound, or true to life.

The second challenge, possibly implicit in part of Levinson's objection to the notion of pornographic art (Levinson 1999), I shall term the *problem of pornographic reception*. Even if it were granted that a pornographic work is created with great aesthetic skill, originality, elegance, grace, and unity, its aesthetic properties or aspect still cannot be appreciated as such to the extent that it is received as

pornography. The nature of a pornographic interest concerns attention to explicit body parts and behaviour in the service of sexual arousal and satiation. To the extent that such an interest is taken in a representation, it precludes attention to and the savouring of a work's aesthetic aspect. It is, one might note, no coincidence that, in prisons and other such institutions, among the first books to disappear from the libraries are art books with various nudes in them. No one would deny, for example, that Manet's *Olympia* is a work of high artistic merit. None the less, it might be thought, where such a work is being used pornographically, the interest in its aesthetic features cannot but be minimal if not downright absent. Hence, the second challenge goes, a work cannot be appreciated at the same time as both pornography and art. Thus, *qua* pornographic art, a work cannot be of artistic value.

Both challenges can, I think, be met (Kieran 2001*b*), but further argument is required to show why such scepticism about the idea that there are or could be representations that are valuable *qua* pornographic art is unjustified. Nevertheless, with respect both to obscene works generally and certain genres, such as grand guignol and pornography, there are grounds for claiming that the value of certain works as art can be *enhanced* rather than *undermined* in virtue of their immoral character. Thus, we have reason to doubt that ethicism or any substantial version of moderate moralism can be adequate accounts of the criticism of art in its moral aspect.

See also: Value in Art; Art and Emotion; Art and Knowledge; Art and Politics; Aesthetics and Ethics; Tragedy.

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