Chapter 3

# Forbidden knowledge

## The challenge of immoralism

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### I The renewal of ethical criticism

Since the ancient Greeks there has been a strand of philosophical thought which holds that the moral character of a work is internally related to its value as art. In its most extreme forms moralism imperialistically swamps the recognition of virtually every other artistic value – giving rise to the puritanical evaluation of works wholly on the basis of moral criteria.[1] Fortunately the poisonous idea that artistic value is ultimately reducible to moral value has flowered only rarely and briefly. But more sophisticated versions, according to which a work's moral character is only one of the features that contributes to an overall judgement of artistic value, have been hugely influential. Much critical and artistic thought from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment to the Victorian era embodied this kind of thought. With the rise of aestheticism, formalism and the new criticism this kind of view fell largely out of favour. For aestheticism denies any internal connection on the grounds that aesthetic and thus artistic value properly construed should not be conflated with the cognitive content and value of a work.[2] I am unsympathetic to aestheticism and so shall not be concerned with it here.[3] Yet towards the end of the last century, both in contemporary philosophical literature and critical practice, there was a reassertion and renewal of the importance of ethical criticism.

A very moderate formulation of the thought, which I now think is the right one, holds that the moral character of a work is relevant to its value as art to

1 See Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art? and Essays on Art,* trans. Aylmer Maude (London: Duckworth, 1930) [originally published 1898] for the claim that the moral and spiritual value of a work determines its value as art.

2 See Peter Lamarque, 'Tragedy and moral value', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73, 1995, 239–49, and Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) for a defence of sophisticated aestheticism.

3 See Matthew Kieran, 'Art, imagination and the cultivation of morals', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, 1996, 337–51, and 'The value of art' in Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes eds, *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 215–26, for reasons why I hold this to be the case.

the extent it undermines or promotes the intelligibility and reward of the imaginative experience proffered by the work.[4] Thus the morally commendable character of a work *may* be an aesthetic virtue where it enhances our imaginative engagement with a work and the morally reprehensible character of a work *may* be an aesthetic vice where it undermines our imaginative responses. To use an example cited by Noël Carroll, the hero of a tragedy must have a certain moral character if we are to pity him.[5] If we judge him to be unworthy of pity then a work cannot achieve its aims qua tragedy. But note that, contrary to the way this claim is often taken (including by Carroll himself), it is consistent with holding that in certain cases the morally reprehensible character of a work *may* constitute an aesthetic virtue rather than a vice.[6] Just because the moral character of a work can be related to its aesthetic value in one way does not preclude there being other possible relations in different cases. For example, in satire it seems that a work's morally reprehensible character may sometimes enhance our engagement with it and the achievement of its purpose qua satire, i.e. ridicule.

However, there is a much stronger version of the ethical assumption which, following Berys Gaut, I shall refer to as ethicism. Ethicism holds that where the moral character of a work is aesthetically relevant, a moral defect necessarily constitutes an aesthetic defect and a moral virtue necessarily constitutes an aesthetic virtue.[7] This is perfectly consistent with holding that morally defective works can be good and perhaps even great artworks. It is just that, nonetheless, they remain flawed qua art to the extent that the defective aspect of the moral character of the work is aesthetically relevant. Ethicism is most clearly articulated by Gaut as follows; 'if a work manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically defective, and if a work manifests ethically commendable attitudes, it is to that extent ethically meritorious.'[8] But he is far from being alone. David Hume suggested, in his 'Of the standard of taste', that 'where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation; this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity. I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such

4 See Matthew Kieran, 'In defence of the ethical evaluation of narrative art', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 41, 2001, 26–38, esp. pp. 33–8, for an argument to this effect.

5 See Noël Carroll, 'Moderate moralism', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36, 1996, 223–37, and his 'Art and ethical criticism: an overview of recent directions of research', *Ethics* 110, 2000, 350–87.

6 Thus it is really a misnomer to call the position moderate moralism at all. For in recognising the complexity of the relations between the (im-)moral character of a work and its artistic value in this way the position characterises a view that any moralist, no matter how weak, would surely be unhappy with. See Matthew Kieran, 'Art and morality' in Jerold Levinson ed., *The Oxford Handbook to Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

7 Berys Gaut, 'The ethical criticism of art', in Jerrold Levinson ed., *Aesthetics and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 182–203.

8 Ibid., p. 182.

sentiments.'[9] Wayne C. Booth, in arguing for an explicit return to literary ethical criticism, has claimed that our appraisal of the moral character of a work in this way should necessarily factor into our judgements concerning our evaluation of it as a literary work.[10] Martha Nussbaum has argued that serious or great works of literature necessarily deepen our moral understanding in virtue of the ways, as art, they experientially shape our attention and attitudes appropriately to the moral particularities of the narrative as represented.[11] And Iris Murdoch, in dialogue with Bryan Magee, articulated her conception of the relation between art and moral evaluation thus:

> The author's moral judgement is the air which the reader breathes. One can see very clearly the contrast between blind fantasy and visionary imagination. The bad writer gives way to personal obsession and exalts some characters and demeans others without any concern for truth or justice, that is without any suitable aesthetic 'explanation'. The good writer is the just intelligent judge. He justifies his placing of his characters by some sort of *work* which he does in the book. A literary fault such as sentimentality results from idealization without work . . . [in response to Magee's follow up question] the good artist has, I think, a sense of reality and might be said to understand 'how things are' and why they are.[12]

Contrary to what I once thought, in what follows I shall argue that ethicism cannot but be false. An upshot of the resulting argument is a position I shall term cognitive immoralism. It is immoralist because it holds that a work *may* be valuable as art in virtue of, rather than despite, its immoral character.[13] It is cognitivist because the account of how and why this is so relies on the assumption that the value of art, at least in part, is a function of the ways in which a work may deepen our understanding and appreciation.

## II Counter-examples, affective responses and cognitivism

In light of the ethicist's claim consider Martin Scorsese's *GoodFellas*. The film concerns the rise and fall of a group of tightly knit minor Mafioso gangsters. The gangster demotic is richly captured and the tension between

9 David Hume, 'Of the standard of taste', p. 152, in his *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) [originally published 1757].

10 Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley and LA: University of California Press, 1988), esp. Ch. 9 and Part III.

11 Martha Nussbaum, '"Finely aware and richly responsible": literature and the moral imagination' in her *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), esp. pp. 142–4.

12 Bryan Magee, *Men of Ideas*, 'Philosophy and literature: dialogue with Iris Murdoch', p. 249.

13 Note that this is compatible with the moderate formulation given above of the way in which sometimes the moral character of a work may enhance its artistic value. Hence use of the

mundanity, danger and fear is used to great effect. And the characters are represented as being attractive, witty and admirable in crucial respects. In particular the forged bonds between them and more generally the underlying Mafioso code is characterised as being attractive. In part this is explicitly linked to the nature of the American Dream and in part to a much more primitive and 'authentic' tribal ethic of fidelity and loyalty to 'the family'. Those outside 'the family' do not count morally while those within it are due respect, loyalty and hierarchical homage no matter what their individual failings or foibles are. Ultimately everything falls apart because the three main characters fail to respect the group ethic – they come to define themselves too closely as the group to which such loyalty is due and others in the Mafia as thus being outside it. Hence they start to scam others within the Mafia and, in the extreme case, Tommy DeVito's violence explodes upon other Mafioso to whom such bonds should apply; hence their 'tragic' downfall. Our responses of admiration and pity, at least for Henry Hill and Jimmy Conway, depend upon our admiring not just their personal characters but their commitment to the Mafioso code. Pity arises because we are shown how their individual flaws lead them to violate that very same code. The film itself is a kind of eulogy for the very values that bring about the demise of the 'wise guys'.

In very rich ways the film draws upon and mobilises our judgements, attitudes and responses in ways found to be rewarding. We come to admire their chutzpah, humour and creative scamming and see how these traits are closely related to the American Dream. We come to admire their fundamental tribal loyalty and see how it enables them to take advantage of the American Dream in ways which individuals acting alone could not. Hence we realise how such bonds of loyalty enable the success of individuals as members of the group. We also come to see how such tribal loyalty can have great personal costs (such as having to go down for a stretch) despite enabling the success of the group as well as great personal benefits (the intimate bonds of deep friendship being just one). All of which contributes to the intelligibility of the characters, the theme of the film and the subsequent rewards. Moreover our responses, at least for Henry Hill and Jimmy Conway, depend upon our holding in what we imagine that their personal characters and their commitment to the Mafioso code are worthy of our admiration. Hence at the end of the film we're supposed to think that Harry gets what he deserves for breaking the Mafioso code by being condemned to a humdrum life of subterfuge in nowheresville, mid-west America.[14]

term immoralism is itself perhaps overly strong. Nonetheless I do so in keeping with the relevant literature. See Berys Gaut, 'Art and ethics', in Gaut and McIver Lopes eds, op. cit., pp. 341–52, and Daniel Jacobson, 'In praise of immoral art', *Philosophical Topics* 25, 1997, 155–99.

14 No doubt some will balk at my characterisation of the film and the way it works. If you think I have misrepresented it then imagine a close cousin of the actual film that fits the characterisation.

It is crucial to note that *GoodFellas* is not just a case which involves sympathising or even empathising with Henry Hill who one imagines believes the Mafioso code to be admirable, attractive and noble. If that were so all that would be required is that one imagine Henry believes what he is represented as so doing and that one comes to care enough about him such that we can appreciate the pleasure he derives from acting on the basis of his beliefs. Appreciating a narrative with central immoral characters is not necessarily tantamount to appreciating a work which gets us to endorse, in imagination, that which we actually take to be immoral. The point is, rather, that for *GoodFellas* 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. In other words, *GoodFellas* requires us to imagine that the object of our sympathy or empathy, Henry Hill, is worthy of our responses. So I take it that *GoodFellas* is as good a film as it is partly because our moral judgements, attitudes and responses are mobilised in ways that render the imaginative experience both more intelligible and rewarding than it might otherwise be. But I also take it that the moral perspective here is deeply defective. Any internalised moral code which deems group outsiders to be morally insignificant and group loyalty to be the supreme value, and any response which commends or endorses such a code, is deeply flawed. So here we have a case of a work that is aesthetically intelligible and rewarding in part due to, rather than despite, the defectiveness of its moral perspective. Nor is *GoodFellas* a rare exception in this respect. From Homer through the Icelandic sagas to novels by Henry Miller, Philip Roth and Martin Amis there are many works which are rendered intelligible and rewarding because they draw upon moral assessments, attitudes and responses we properly consider to be problematic or defective. Drawing on our moral judgements, reactions and assessments should not be conflated with arriving at and making the appropriate ones. Thus, it would seem, there are many such counter-examples to the ethicist's thesis.

However, counter-examples as such cannot do the work of philosophical argument. One of the problems with the current debate is that too often the appeal to examples is relied on in place of argument. Yet competing characterisations and explanations can be offered. The trouble with over-reliance on examples is that they can be cut different ways to suit distinct positions.

The ethicist can claim that although we sometimes can and do respond with sympathy and admiration for characters who do not deserve it, nonetheless we should not. How we should respond to characters and a work as a whole depends upon the responses we judge to be merited. Where the merited response comes apart from the response sought from us by a work it is, in that respect, a failure – and where a response is morally defective it is unmerited. Indeed we should recognise that it is a fault in the film that it attempts to seduce us into responding in ways we take to be morally bad or problematic. Thus moral flaws in a work, where they bear on the responses sought

from us, will always be aesthetic flaws and moral adequacy, wherever it bears on our responses, an aesthetic virtue.[15] So, according to the ethicist, either: (1) All that is required in the *GoodFellas* case is my capacity to sympathise (in a sense that is morally grounded) with Henry Hill which does not require me to endorse, in what I imagine, his moral beliefs. In which case the relevant responses do not require me to endorse a morally defective perspective. Or (2) if my conceiving of Henry Hill as getting what he deserves at the end requires me to have endorsed in what I imagine cognitive-affective attitudes that I actually take to be morally defective then it is indeed flawed as art in that respect.

Yet there is a competing characterisation on offer. As Daniel Jacobson has argued, it is one thing for an emotional response to be 'fitting' with respect to its object and another for it to be morally proper. What it is for an emotion to be fitting is for it to accurately present its object in terms of certain evaluative features. So, for example, indignation may be fitting when you have been insulted, joy may be fitting when your achievements are recognised or hilarity may be fitting when someone presents a surreal incongruity. It is a further distinct question as to whether feeling the fitting emotion is morally (or prudentially) appropriate. For example, although the surreal incongruity between two fat ladies at the bus stop and the billboard model may be hilarious there is good moral reason not to respond with mirth. That a response is not morally proper does not show that it is not a fitting one. Thus, Jacobsen argues, a work can solicit responses which are immoral but nonetheless fitting.[16] A work may seek admiration for an intellectual, cultured and astute serial killer (Hannibal Lecter), vicious hilarity at the pathetic delusions of someone who is depressed (David Foster Wallace's *Interviews with Hideous Men*) or delight in the wreaking of vengeance (Clint Eastwood's *High Plains Drifter*). My responses to such cases, and indeed to Henry Hill in *GoodFellas*, may be fitting (which is all that is required) while nonetheless I recognise them to be, in actuality, morally defective. But all that is required, on this view, is that a work should aim for and successfully solicit a fitting response. What is missing in the argument for ethicism is a suppressed premise to the effect that we should respond to works not merely in ways which are fitting to the nature of what is represented but, furthermore, in ways which are *morally* speaking right or proper.

How might we adjudicate between these two claims? One way the ethicist can support her claim is by adverting to the underlying cognitivist conception of artistic value. How we evaluate a work depends upon both the quality of the imaginative experience afforded and what we take the understanding implicit in the imaginative experience to be. To the extent that a work deepens our understanding of the world, ourselves and the interrelations of states of

15 See Gaut, 'Art and ethics'.
16 Jacobson, op. cit.

affairs, attitudes and values it is a good work. To the extent that a work misrepresents, mischaracterises and distorts them it is a bad work. Hence we often praise works as being profound, subtle, nuanced, insightful and true to life or condemn them as being shallow, superficial, banal, sentimental, unintelligible or false. Now it looks as if ethicism falls out of cognitivism. If a work, through the prescribed imaginative experience, mischaracterises moral attitudes, values and morally relevant states of affairs then it is defective as art to that extent. For the imaginative experience thus afforded cultivates (moral) misunderstanding rather than deepening it. So, given cognitivism, where the moral character of a work is aesthetically relevant a moral defect necessarily constitutes an aesthetic defect and a moral virtue necessarily constitutes an aesthetic virtue.[17]

Except at the most basic level, that of denying cognitivism as an adequate account of how any art as such should be evaluated, this line of argument has remained relatively unchallenged. There is, however, one notable exception. Jacobson, following up his criticism of ethicism, has argued that immoral works could be valuable as art in virtue of, rather than despite, their moral character in a way that is consistent with cognitivism.[18] The argument is as follows: there are many different conceptions of the human condition, the nature of morality and the rightness, goodness or otherwise of many kinds of actions, attitudes and character traits. One of the things art is particularly good at is enabling us to engage with and understand different ways of conceiving of such matters. Thus immoral works can afford us knowledge. We can come to understand better how and why people think or feel differently by engaging with works we deem to be immoral. Now, according to Carroll, this argument looks like a purely instrumentalist justification of immoral art.[19] For though we may come to understand much more about how a racist may see black people from watching *Birth Of A Nation* nonetheless it misrepresents the nature of moral character and commends to us moral attitudes that should be condemned. Consider, by analogy, our judgements of philosophical works. No matter how useful it is to read Kant or Nietzsche in terms of our cognitive stock and philosophical understanding, if we think their philosophy fundamentally mistaken then we hold it to be flawed in that respect. For the flaw consists in the failure to realise one of the cognitive goals of philosophy – namely truth. The instrumentalist line may be significant in showing why immoral artworks (or false philosophical works) should not be censored, along Millian lines, but it doesn't give any reason to think that a work's value as art may be enhanced in virtue of its morally defective character.

17 I once argued for such a line of thought in 'Art, imagination and the cultivation of morals', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, 1996, 337–51, and Gaut, Nussbaum, Booth and Murdoch in the aforementioned references all argue for or assert a cognitivist conception of the value of art.

18 Jacobson, op. cit., pp. 193–4.

19 Carroll, 'Art and ethical criticism', p. 381.

We should grant that one way of interpreting the immoralist claim is wholly instrumental and that as such it poses no threat to the inference of ethicism from cognitivism. But in what follows I shall attempt to give a more robust argument to underwrite the immoralist's claim. The core thought is this: what matters in evaluating a work's value as art is the intelligibility and reward of the imaginative experience proffered by the work. Works which commend or fail to condemn characters and states of affairs that we would judge to be morally bad can, through getting us to take up a perspective we would not otherwise entertain, enhance the value of the imaginative experience afforded. In effect we are sometimes prepared to suspend our moral judgement or entertain moral judgements other than those we would actually assent to because of the (potential) cognitive rewards this may bring. For in exploring a morally defective perspective a work may deepen our appreciation and understanding in ways that would not happen otherwise. Thus the immoral character of the imaginative experience afforded by a work may directly deepen our understanding. Therefore a work may be valuable as art in part due to its morally defective aspect.

To substantiate the argument however we will have to take several steps back. The most crucial move is the claim that morally defective imaginative experiences, including taking up attitudes and responding in ways that are morally problematic, are required to enable one more fully to understand things than one could otherwise have done. This is related to the general thought that a full appreciation of how and why something is good generally depends upon having experienced that which is bad. But the general thought is insufficient for the immoralist claim. What is needed is a justification of the claim that experiencing bad things in ways that are problematic, in particular morally speaking, affords a certain understanding that could not otherwise be had. I shall focus on this part of the argument in the following section. However we also need reason to hold that imagination can afford the relevant kind of experience and that it is possible to suspend our actual moral judgements. Consideration of these matters is deferred to Section IV.

## III Experiencing what's bad to understand the good

A primary means of learning, for example that something is the case, and understanding, grasping how and why something is the case, is experience. Of course it is by no means the case either that everything can be so learnt and understood (think of logic or quantum mechanics) nor that everything that can be so learnt and understood needs to be or is experienced (think of authoritative testimony regarding how bad the university cafeteria's coffee is). However, in order to fully appreciate and understand the nature of an experience we require comparative cases. This suggests we must have experienced, in some sense, the bad in order to understand the good. The first part of the argument I take to be fairly uncontroversial so I shall merely sketch it:

1 Experiential grounding – having a certain kind of experience is a primary way of coming to know what that kind of experience is like.
2 Appreciation constraint – the appreciation and understanding of the nature of an experience ('what it is like') admits of degrees and depends upon the capacities to attend, take different perspectives on, and discriminate between, elements of the experience and how they interrelate.
3 Comparative experience requirement – coming to a fuller understanding and deeper appreciation of a kind of experience, to the extent that kind admits of attending to different aspects, taking up different perspectives and exercising different and finer discriminative capacities, requires comparative experience both within the relevant kind and of relevantly contrasting kinds.
4 Psychological claim – the grounds adduced for (1)–(3) entail that comparative experience is required not just to more fully appreciate certain appearances to the different senses and our lower level mental life but also with respect to (a) certain higher order occurent cognitive-affective mental states *and* (b) certain higher order cognitive-affective attitudes and character traits (many of which are partly evaluative).

It follows from (1)–(4) that suffering bad experiences, responses and attitudes can happen to deepen our understanding and appreciation of good ones. But as articulated this seems like a fairly trivial claim. We all know that bad experiences sometimes do so, but it is not yet obvious that bad experiences are either primary or required to have a full understanding and appreciation of good ones. What is additionally required is the substantiation of the following:

5 Primacy claim – experiencing bad responses and attitudes in ways which are problematic, with respect to moral and non-moral values, affords a kind of comparative experience or perspective that could not otherwise be had.

The argument for this comes in two parts;

5.1 Certain bad experiences can primarily or distinctively afford discriminatory capacities or perspectives which are required for a full grasp and appreciation of certain good experiences.

This is a formally articulated version of the thought many of us often have that one may not be able to fully appreciate the nature of good things or their achievement unless one has in some sense experienced the bad. A person in Arcadia may find their existence deeply pleasurable but unless she has experienced hardship or suffered in some way she may lack a proper appreciation of how and why her existence may be deeply happy. As she experiences many

different kinds of pleasures in Arcadia, the delights of friendship that never goes awry, the fruits of love that is never betrayed and indulgence in art that is never merely vulgar or crass, she may come to have a highly refined sense of what distinguishes certain kinds of pleasurable experiences from others, grasp much about how they interrelate, what they mean and appreciate their different qualities. Nonetheless there is something important to the thought that such a charmed life might only be deeply shallow. For if one has never experienced betrayal by a friend or lover, never seen a bad play or heard a great novel badly dramatised then there will be certain features of friendship, love and great art that one probably will not fully understand and appreciate. For example, such a person may well lack the discriminatory capacities which would enable her to pick out how certain features and traits constitutive of friendship can actually undermine it. Thus they would be unable to see how the desire to please in friendship can be self-defeating (where it habitually trumps the desire to tell the truth say) or lack the discrimination required to see how introducing elements of farcical comedy into a tragedy may render it absurd. Thus given the lack of certain capacities, because without the relevant kinds of bad experiences she has not exercised them, she may fail to appreciate in a deep sense the nature or quality of the achievements of true friendship or great art. A proper estimation and appreciation of the worth of a friend or a work of art depends not merely on recognising that they keep to their word or afford us pleasure but upon the realisation of the multifarious ways in which they can easily go wrong or fail. A lack of experience, both of the kind in question and relevantly contrasting kinds, is thus likely to preclude full understanding and proper appreciation.

5.2 The claim holds not merely for bad experiences as such but for experiences which are morally problematic (including those which are truly immoral).

If we grant (5.1)–(5.2) then bad experiences, including morally bad experiences, are a primary means of coming to have a full understanding and appreciation of good ones. But note that 'bad experiences' is ambiguous between (a) being subject to experiences which are themselves bad in some respect and (b) experiencing things in a way which is bad in some respect. Consider an instance of voyeurism which is morally bad because it consists in some persons delighting at the humiliation of another through personal revelations. I can be the subject of this kind of bad experience because I am the object of voyeuristic delight. It is bad for me in many respects, since I am the object of humiliation, but it is not the case that I am implicated in it in any way which is morally bad. Alternatively I might experience such a state of affairs as one of the voyeurs. Although it is not bad for me in many ways, I experience amusement and delight, I am implicated in the experience in a way which is morally bad. Note that one can be implicated in an

experience of a state of affairs which is not in and of itself morally problematic in a morally bad way. For example, I may voyeuristically spy on someone undressing in the privacy of their own home. Given the disambiguation it might be thought that all (1)–(5.2) establishes is that being subjected to bad experiences, responses and attitudes is a primary means of deepening our understanding and appreciation of good ones.

However, the argument applies to both disambiguations since experiencing something morally bad does not exhaust the ways in which experiencing something in ways that are morally problematic enables us to come to know certain things. For example, if I am subjected to bullying as a child or see it occur I will obviously know that the infliction of pain and humiliation can give rise to pleasure in others. To that extent I will find bullying intelligible since it follows from something's giving pleasure that there is a motivation for doing it. Thus, in virtue of being subjected to, or witnessing, a certain morally bad experience, I may learn something I might not have otherwise done. I come to be able to discriminate between merely physical and psychological bullying or between bullying which works by social humiliation, by the assertion of individual dominance and by the destruction of self-worth in ways I would not otherwise have done. But I may well fail to understand how and why it may be found pleasurable. It is no coincidence that often what makes bullying such a psychologically painful experience for a child is their failure to fully understand why someone bullies them. For a parent to explain that the bully derives pleasure from their actions does not give rise to an understanding of the phenomenon that is found so puzzling but is merely to reiterate that which is found so puzzling by the child. Rather, understanding depends upon having had, and being able to relate bullying to, relevantly similar kinds of experiences. For example, I may have a competitive relationship with my younger brother and be drawn into play fighting with him on occasion. During a particular play fight I may suddenly find myself drawn to use just that extra bit of force required to hurt him slightly or hold him down just that extra bit too long to humiliate him. In doing so I come to find that I derive pleasure from so doing precisely because it is a slightly painful, and thus particularly vivid, way of highlighting to him that I remain superior to him vis-à-vis physical strength. Such an experience is relevantly close enough to, if not actually constitutive of, a minor episode of bullying such that I can come to understand why it is that people may derive pleasure in bullying others.

It does not follow that only by bullying someone myself will I come to understand how and why the activity may be found pleasurable. But it does follow that I am more likely to do so if I have had some kind of experience where I derived pleasure from something which is bad in ways relevantly close enough to bullying in order to do so. For example, a more indirect way I may come to understand bullying is by watching someone else being bullied and coming to recognise how the subjugation of another may afford

me pleasure precisely because their humiliation reinforces my sense of superiority. Where I have experiences that are morally problematic in this way I will more likely be able to recognise and understand how and why people may derive pleasure in different ways from so acting. As articulated the kinds of cases discussed are not ones which merely appear to be immoral or are only prima facie immoral but not all things considered immoral or are merely immoral from the viewpoint of a particular agent but, rather, they are immoral simpliciter. Thus a primary means of coming to a full understanding and appreciation of the nature of morally problematic experiences does not just encompass being subject to or witnessing morally problematic states of affairs but also includes actually experiencing certain states of affairs in ways that are morally problematic i.e. immoral.

Interestingly, this claim gives us some reason to be suspect of moral saints (at least as they are naively understood to be).[20] If someone has never been tempted they will lack certain experiences that are a primary means to a proper understanding and appreciation of the human condition. Hence their moral proclamations and proscriptions are more likely to be naively utopian. Where there is a failure to grasp the difficulties involved for mere mortals in striving to be good, the pressures we are subject to, and an inability to appreciate how resisting temptation constitutes an achievement then any resulting ethic cannot but be inhumane and unforgiving. It is surely cruel to demand what most of us cannot meaningfully hope to achieve.

## IV Artworks and imaginative experience

(5.1)–(5.2) entail that the experience of bad things and the experience of things in ways which are bad are a primary means of reaching a full understanding and appreciation of good things. It follows that one has a prima facie epistemic duty to seek out bad experiences and experience things in bad ways where one believes one may lack a full and proper understanding of good experiences of the relevant kind. This is because I take it we have a general prima facie epistemic duty to seek out evidence (whether it be that afforded by experience or critical reflection) which can confirm, undermine or deepen our understanding. It does not follow, however, that one has a prima facie epistemic duty to do so with respect to actual states of affairs. For imaginative experience, construed here in terms of the entertaining of represented states of affairs, can indirectly and informatively enable us to have bad experiences or experience things in bad ways independently of the existence of the states of affairs as represented. But it can only do so given our capacity

20 I take the naive understanding of a moral saint to be one who is never tempted because their natural desires already converge with what is right and good. I happen to think there can be no such people, given the human condition, and moral saints should properly be understood as those who achieve such convergence. The greater the achievement, in overcoming temptation, the greater the understanding of the human condition is likely to be.

to suspend our moral judgements in engaging with artworks. Thus there are two distinct elements to the following claim:

6 Imagination claim

6.1 imaginative experience can be an indirect and informative means of learning by experience; and
6.2 it is possible to suspend our actual moral judgements or allow ourselves to take up moral judgements and attitudes in imagination that we would not actually endorse.

(6.1) Good artworks can deepen our understanding and appreciation of certain kinds of experiences, states of affairs, cognitive-affective attitudes and characters in many ways. They can refine our grasp of concepts and how they are to be applied, crystallise incipient assumptions we already hold, show how certain traits and connections may be interlinked, proffer an imaginative simulation or quasi-experience of what certain kinds of experiences are or could be like, show us different ways of looking at, perceiving, or conceiving of, certain states of affairs. I will concentrate on one kind of case where a work may deepen our understanding and appreciation of (a) how certain responses and attitudes of approval can be taken up to a state of affairs we would normally be repulsed by and disapproving of and (b) how the desire for social approval and strength of character can be interlinked in ways which may result in someone being motivated to deeply harm another. I needn't bully anyone, be subject to it or witness actual bullying in order to understand much about it if I can read a work like Graham Greene's *The Destructors*.

Greene's short story concerns a gang of boys in post-World War II London and the competitive rivalries between two central characters. The resolution of their individual rivalries and the gang's collective identity is achieved in the final act by the wanton overnight destruction of the house of a widower who has been unusually kind to them. It is a vicious and nasty piece of work precisely because through our identification with the central characters, their struggles to attain group acceptance and our admiration at their achievements, we come to respond with delight at their devastating achievement. The ruthless imaginative vision of such an epic act of destruction, the callous thoughtfulness underlying it, the sheer gall and qualities of leadership shown in bringing the annihilation of the house about are breathtaking.

Crucially we do not merely admire the breathtaking nature of the gang's achievement while disapproving of the moral character shown. Rather, at least to the extent the story succeeds, our cognitive-affective responses are shaped in such a way that the reader, like the minor characters in the gang, wishes the act to succeed, desires the central characters to show the leadership required to bring it about and is left in awe at its completion. Hence, at

the end, when the gang recognises their rightful leader we think this only fitting and appropriate. If our moral beliefs and judgements were operating as they ought to be with respect to such a state of affairs then we would be repulsed and horrified. Indeed, we would judge the very nature of the callousness and gall shown to disqualify anyone from being an appropriate leader. But having read the story, and assuming we respond as solicited, we can come to recognise how and why the destruction of things deeply precious to another can be joyful, an exercise of power and an assertion of strength. Furthermore we learn not just how and why this can be the case with respect to other people but, importantly, how and why this can be the case with respect to ourselves; precisely because we have come to respond in ways we actually deem to be immoral. Thus *The Destructors* shows us not merely how and why children can come to enjoy bullying but, on a much larger scale, how ordinary good people may be seduced into perpetrating and delighting in evil acts. We have come to endorse in imagination cognitive-affective attitudes we do not actually believe or hold and which we actually take to be, in part, immoral.

(6.2) It is implicit in the argumentation thus far that we can and do suspend our actual moral judgements or allow ourselves to take up moral judgements and attitudes we would not actually endorse. But, it might be claimed, this cannot be. In a much discussed paper Walton considers the problem of imaginative resistance to works which seem morally repugnant to us, in virtue of getting us to respond in ways we judge to be immoral, by considering the following question:

> can an author simply stipulate in the text of a story what moral principles apply in the fictional world, just as she specifies what actions characters perform? If the text includes the sentence, 'In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl' or 'The village elders did their duty before God by forcing the widow onto her husband's funeral pyre', are readers obliged to accept it as fictional that, in doing what they did, Giselda or the elders behaved in morally proper ways? Why shouldn't storytellers be allowed to experiment explicitly with worlds of morally different kinds, including ones even they regard as morally obnoxious? There is science fiction; why not morality fiction?[21]

Walton's claim is that there cannot be morality fiction, or rather we cannot engage with fiction which is at radical moral odds with us, because given that moral properties supervene on 'natural' ones we cannot grasp what it would

21 Kendall Walton, 'Morals in fiction and fictional morality I', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 68, 1994, 27–50, p. 37.

be for something we believe to be morally bad to be morally good. Hence we cannot meaningfully entertain in any full sense that slavery is not evil. But I do not see why the representation of supervenience relations being other than we believe them to be, assuming this is the right way to talk, precludes understanding in this way. Consider a non-moral case. Although I take mental facts to supervene on physical ones I can certainly imagine in a large amount of detail a Cartesian conception of the interrelationship between the mind and the body and, in so doing, come to understand much about what such a picture of ourselves implies. So why think supervenience as such makes a difference? One explanation is to hold that moral claims are categorical (they hold in all possible worlds) whereas this is not the case for relations between the mental and the physical (there is a very distant possible world where Cartesianism holds). But many works which solicit responses, cognitive-affective attitudes and claims we deem to be morally problematic do not conflict with what we take to be categorical morality. Thus even granting the claim it does not show we cannot meaningfully engage with works we take to be morally defective. Second, it's quite clear that we can and do engage with works which do conflict with what we take the categorical demands of morality to be depending upon how close the state of affairs as represented either is, or is made to seem, psychologically possible. Consider someone who once was a Roman Catholic but is now a confirmed atheist reading Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. Given her secular conversion she firmly believes that morality categorically cannot depend upon the commands issued by God. Nonetheless, in reading *Brideshead Revisited* she responds with sympathy, admiration, awe and ultimately affirmation to the culmination of the novel. And yet her responses depend on a pro attitude towards Charles Ryder's sacrifice of everything that is most humanly valuable in favour of the decrees of God. Here we have someone responding in a way which is at odds with what they take to be conceptually possible. What matters is not what is taken to be conceptual possibility but what, psychologically speaking, someone is able to entertain. No doubt in some cases this will be because the world as represented is already psychologically very close to who someone is or was. Yet sometimes this is possible because of the artistry of the work and the ways in which what is rendered can be made to seem psychologically vivid and close to the reader. And the latter is the mark of a work being good as art.

The right explanation is surely that we take up a kind of conditional assent to the states of affairs as represented. If Roman Catholicism were true then Ryder's self-abnegation would be deeply sad and good. And *Brideshead* enables us to take up such a stance to the extent that it renders intelligible and psychologically close to us certain things we already incipiently value while developing them, interrelating them and characterising the resultant attitudes in ways we would not actually assent to. The suspension of moral judgement in this way is no different from Coleridge's suspension

of intellectual belief. We can, and do, enjoy both intellectually and morally surreal works. And such works can show us something not merely about what such surreal views are like but, furthermore, something about what is the case. Consider Swift's intellectually and morally surreal *Gulliver's Travels*. Of course parts of the work have localised targets in mind but the underlying thrust of the book is to make humanity in general seem ridiculous, craven, petty, idolatrous of reason, lacking in curiosity and corporeally disgusting. It is certainly true that suffering, repugnance towards the corporeal world and the ridiculousness of our rational ambitions is part of the human condition but such a conception and the responses they give rise to leave most of what is humanly valuable out. The overarching attitude toward human existence solicited from us is one of vitriolic resentment and a conception of death as the only blessed relief. It is an attitude I take to be deeply wrong and I take many of the moral attitudes and responses we are solicited to take up to be pernicious. It is an intense concentration on a partial aspect of our existence which is over-generalised, magnified to preclude all else and deeply distortive. And yet many of us respond to it because we are presented with a highly imaginative exploration of an attitude that is at times psychologically close to us, and thus can be invoked by the artistry of the work. The value of engaging with many works derives from the particularly powerful ways in which they can get us to imaginatively explore different possible attitudes. In some of these cases the works involve characterisations, responses and attitudes we judge to be morally defective and yet nonetheless they are rendered close to us in ways we find to be intelligible.

Why then, it might be asked, does the phenomenon of imaginative resistance seem stronger in the moral case than the scientific case? In both cases works can, and do, get us to respond in ways we take to be cognitively and morally surreal or defective. Yet we sometimes resist or resent being asked to do so more in the moral case. The asymmetry between the two kinds of cases is not as stark as is commonly supposed. Many people commonly do resent being asked to entertain states of affairs they take to be cognitively defective if there is no pay-off. If a novel attempts to get me to imagine a state of affairs I take to be incoherent, confused or surreal then unless there is some kind of pay-off in terms of understanding or appreciation I'm inclined to think it a waste of time and resent having being bothered to read it. What was the point? But in the moral case the resistance and resentment does go deeper. For I have not merely been asked to imagine and respond in ways I take to be cognitively problematic but also in ways I take to be morally defective. Hence whether there will be a pay-off in terms of understanding or appreciation matters more. In the cognitive case I will judge the unrewarding work to be silly, pointless and a mere waste of time. In the moral case I will, in addition, deem myself to have been seduced and gratuitously tricked into allowing myself to respond in ways I morally should not.

## V Cognitive immoralism and forbidden knowledge

Immoralism is the claim that a work's value as art can be enhanced in virtue of its immoral character. Cognitive immoralism holds that this is so because imaginatively experiencing morally defective cognitive-affective responses and attitudes in ways that are morally problematic can deepen one's understanding and appreciation. It follows from (1)–(6) that morally problematic cognitive-affective responses to 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. Thus cognitive immoralism holds and ethicism cannot but be false.

It strikes me as no accident that many novels, films and plays are concerned with evil, moral flaws and failings in ways we take to be morally defective. From the high art of Monteverdi's operatic love story *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, Marlowe's tragic-comedy *The Jew of Malta*, Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*, Homer's *Iliad*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* through to lesser works such as Octave Mirbeau's *Torture Garden*, Du Maupassant's *Bel Ami*, E. W. Hornung's *Raffles: A Gentleman Thief* and the work of Patricia Highsmith, this is a common phenomenon. We value many works which are morally problematic because the ways in which they are morally defective enhance our understanding. Thus there can be, and indeed are, works whose value as art is enhanced in virtue of, rather than despite, their morally defective character. What matters is not so much a question of whether the moral perspective of a work is what we take to be the right one but, rather, whether it is conveyed in such a way that we find it intelligible or psychologically credible. If this is achieved then what matters is whether an artist can get us to see, feel and respond to the world as represented as he intends us to and how, in so doing, we come to more fully understand and appreciate things we might not otherwise have done – and sometimes this means we must traffic in, and take up, immoral responses and attitudes.

A few words of clarification and elaboration are in order. It is important to emphasise that it is no part of the above argument that morally problematic experience, either actual or imagined, is necessarily sufficient for understanding. To revert to an earlier example, someone may be bullied, delight in the bullying of others or read Greene's *The Inheritors* and be none the wiser about distinguishing between different kinds of bullying, why it is found by some to be pleasurable or how ordinarily good people may be drawn into being such. This may be for a host of reasons such as lacking, to the relevant degree required, the capacity to empathise with others, the capacity to critically reflect on the nature of one's experience or the lack of other experiences of relevantly contrasting kinds. But this is no more problematic than the recognition that, say, doing philosophy is not necessarily sufficient for developing analytic skills since someone may lack the relevant kind of capacities or background experiences which would enable them to do so. Only given

certain background capacities and experiences is morally problematic experience sufficient for understanding. What one is capable of learning from experience depends in part upon the level of moral understanding one is already at. Hence we are sometimes surprised to find that a particular work has much more to offer us than we had previously judged when we read it much earlier in life. Thus the claim is that, *ceteris paribus*, a morally problematic experience is sufficient for deepening understanding where the ceteris paribus clause is filled in by a relativisation to the background capacities and other related experiences which enable someone to make sense of the experience they are subject to. It should also be noted that the argument does not claim that morally problematic experience is strictly necessary, even with the qualifications in place, for complete understanding. Although this is an interesting and suggestive claim, whether it stands up would be the subject of another paper. All that is needed and has been argued for here is the claim that morally problematic experience is a primary means of understanding.

This brings me on to a matter of elaboration. We should be at pains to distinguish the epistemic claim made from its close non-epistemic neighbours. A world in which there was a greater amount of suffering, morally problematic experiences and evil actions may be one where we would be at an epistemic advantage. But it in no way follows that this would be a better world. Clearly it would not. Similarly, one may be epistemically better off were one to make a point of exploring and subsisting on an artistic diet of Swift, de Sade, Michael Powell, the Earl of Rochester, Brett Easton Ellis, Jacobean drama and Icelandic sagas. But morally speaking this would be a worse state of affairs. Not, I hasten to add, in virtue of any crude causal worries about links to action. But merely in virtue of taking up a delight in the entertainment of thoughts that, morally speaking, one should be repulsed by. But, as I have argued, in certain cases the artistic value of the work in question is enhanced by the immoral character of the work though, morally speaking, we may have good reason not to engage with it. Morally contemptible works can be great art indeed.[22]

22 I would like to thank Dominic McIver Lopes, Peter Goldie and James Harold for their comments and helpful discussions of an earlier draft of this paper as well as the editors for their suggested amendments.