

## Immoralism and the Valence Constraint

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Abstract: Immoralists hold that in at least some cases, moral flaws in artworks can increase their aesthetic value. They deny what I call the valence constraint: the view that any effect that an artwork's moral value has on its aesthetic merit must have the same valence. The immoralist offers three arguments against the valence constraint. In this paper I argue that these arguments fail, and that this failure reveals something deep and interesting about the relationship between cognitive and moral value. In the final section I offer a positive argument for the valence constraint.

For the last thirty years or so, many of the philosophical discussions concerning morality and art have centered on whether a moral flaw in a work of art can render that work aesthetically worse. Those who hold that it can are usually called moralists; their traditional opponents, who hold that aesthetic value is not affected by moral value (at least not *qua* moral value), are called autonomists.<sup>1</sup> More recently, however, a third view has emerged, distinct from both of these: immoralism.<sup>2</sup> Immoralists hold that in at least some cases, moral flaws in artworks can increase their aesthetic value. In this paper I argue that standard arguments for immoralism fail, and that this failure reveals something deep and interesting about the relationship between cognitive and moral value.

### 1. What is immoralism?

Immoralism is usually defined by contrast with autonomism and moralism. So it is helpful to begin with an account of these two views. The literature on this subject is now rich with variants of moralism and autonomism, making it difficult to give a general characterization of either view that all of those associated with that view would accept.

Nonetheless, it is possible to sketch these views in outline, and to capture most of the central tenets of each view.

Autonomists, among whose number one might count Jeffrey Dean, James Anderson, Peter Lamarque, Stein Olsen, and Richard Posner, hold that the moral value of an artwork, *qua* moral value, does not affect the work's aesthetic value.<sup>3</sup> They allow that certain works might indeed be immoral, and they even allow that the very features that make a work immoral might reduce its aesthetic value (e.g., Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, which (it is said) intends but fails to convey an ironic attitude towards its subject, can for that reason fail both morally and aesthetically), but they do not allow that the immorality of a work *itself* ever renders a work more or less valuable aesthetically, or that a book's moral virtues themselves affect the work's aesthetic value.

Moralists are a larger and more diverse bunch.<sup>4</sup> Most hold that the immorality of a work does (by virtue of its immorality) reduce the aesthetic value of the work, at least in some cases. Some (e.g., Gaut) hold that it always does. Most agree that the effect of moral value on aesthetic value is limited; other considerations might serve to make even an immoral work aesthetically valuable all things considered. Also, some authors (e.g., Eaton and Nussbaum) hold that the influence of moral on aesthetic value is due to deeper, conceptual connections between these two categories of value – that the distinction between morality and aesthetics is weak or mistaken. Finally, most (but not all) moralists focus not on the positive aesthetic impact of morally praiseworthy traits in artworks, but on the power of moral flaws to reduce aesthetic value.

All moralists do agree, however, on what I will call the *valence constraint*. If a moral flaw of a work affects that work's aesthetic value, it reduces that value; if a moral virtue of a work

affects that work's aesthetic value, it increases that value.<sup>5</sup> Immoralists deny the valence constraint. They hold that in some cases, the valence constraint does not hold: a single moral feature of an artwork may tend to decrease its moral value and, at the same time, increase its aesthetic value. Immoralists note that on some interpretations of moralism, moralism and immoralism are compatible views – in some cases, a moral flaw increases aesthetic value, and in others, a moral flaw decreases that value. (It is for this reason that Daniel Jacobson characterizes his immoralism as anti-theoretical.<sup>6</sup>) However, moralists are unlikely to agree that the two views are compatible, since they embrace the valence constraint, and immoralists reject it. (One might argue that the autonomists, since they deny the antecedent, accept the valence constraint by default. But it is more helpful to say that they do not take a side.<sup>7</sup>) So the best way to understand immoralism and the arguments supporting it is to examine the valence constraint.

## 2. Against the valence constraint

There is one rather obvious way of denying the valence constraint. One could argue that the same characteristics that increase the aesthetic value of a work also have deleterious effects on an appreciator's moral character. For example, consider Humbert Humbert's ruminations on the name 'Lolita,' in Nabokov's novel. The first paragraph of the main text (after the 'editor's foreword') reads:

Lolita, fire of my life, light of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the trip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.<sup>8</sup>

The reader is invited to play with the word 'Lolita' in just the way that Humbert Humbert does: to say it aloud (or *sotto voce*), slowly, to test whether one's tongue falls as the book says it does. The movement, and the sound, evoked here have aesthetic value – they even

create a kind of delight. Now suppose that the infectious nature of this passage invites the reader to sympathize with Humbert Humbert, and thus with his pedophilic desires. Perhaps reading such passages even alters the reader's moral personality and behavior in disturbing ways. If such effects could be shown, the case for rejecting the valence constraint would be strong – the very features that make the passage so mellifluous also make it morally harmful.

However, the proponents of immoralism, Daniel Jacobson and Matthew Kieran, reject this strategy for two reasons. First, there are doubts concerning the evidence for causal claims of this kind. It would be extremely difficult to show that reading *Lolita* has morally deleterious effects on behavior or character.<sup>9</sup> Second, even if there are such effects, they intend immoralism to establish a more intimate connection between moral flaws and aesthetic virtues. Jacobson writes:

Some works have morally significant effects, for better or worse, because of their narrative qualities and others because of their mimetic qualities ... But if we are interested in narrative art as art ... we need to insist that interpretive norms be obeyed and to focus our attention on what a work makes fictional. What a work makes fictional is what we are prescribed to imagine, in engaging with it according to our implicit norms of interpretation.<sup>10</sup>

The reason for rejecting this strategy is that it does not treat the artwork as an artwork – it treats the object simply as a cause of some later, morally suspect state of affairs. But Kieran and Jacobson believe, as the moralists do, that the connection between the moral and aesthetic value of artworks can be found by examining the works themselves *qua* works of art, without looking at their long-term social or psychological effects.

Three other arguments are offered instead. The first comes from Jacobson. The second is found, in slightly different versions, in both Kieran and Jacobson. The third is not strictly speaking a part of immoralism, though Kieran makes use of it. I shall call the first the *identity argument*, the second the *valuable perspective argument*, and the third the *sentimental art argument*.

## 2a. The Identity Argument

The identity argument denies the valence constraint by imposing a condition on what can count as an aesthetic flaw; once we accept this condition, we can see that the valence constraint is either inappropriate or unnecessary. Jacobson begins his argument by considering the case of a poem assumed for sake of argument to be morally defective. His example is Emily Dickinson's op. 1129: 'Tell all the Truth but tell it slant ...'. He then considers whether, in accordance with the valence constraint, we should say that the poem's moral failings constitute an aesthetic flaw in the work. He writes:

... [T]he moral defects of the poem's ethical perspective can sensibly be deemed a blemish – that is, an aesthetic flaw – only if the poem would be improved, aesthetically, by its alteration. And this is impossible, even in principle, for one cannot conceive of this poem expressing a Kantian view of truth-telling.<sup>11</sup>

Jacobson makes the same point again in discussing *Triumph of the Will*, though he denies that the principle expressed here is universal. However, he does think that with at least a sizable number of artworks  $\psi$ , a necessary condition for  $\phi$ 's being an aesthetic defect in work  $\psi$  is that the absence or alteration of  $\phi$  in  $\psi$  would leave  $\psi$ 's identity unchanged. Jacobson then adds to this the very plausible claim that to alter the moral character of Dickinson's poem would be to produce an entirely different poem, not the same poem with some new features.

The product of any such alteration would be an entirely new work of art, to be evaluated on its own terms.

The identity argument is not a direct attack on the valence constraint, but if we accept this argument, the valence constraint looks rather implausible. If Jacobson is right, and if we accept the valence constraint, then the more important the ethical flaw is to the identity of the work, the less reason there is to think that this flaw could significantly affect the work's aesthetic value. This result is quite counter-intuitive. Autonomists, of course, would be pleased by this conclusion, but Jacobson rejects autonomism – he claims that the best account of the aesthetic merit of narrative works must include some attention to their moral features. A better alternative, he suggests, is to reject the valence constraint. The (purportedly) immoral perspective afforded by Dickinson's poem is so essential to its identity that it cannot be an aesthetic flaw; yet we would also be wrong to say that this moral flaw does not affect the aesthetic character of the work. Hence, we should conclude that the moral flaw in this poem affects it aesthetically by *increasing* its aesthetic value.

The difficulty in Jacobson's argument lies in its first step: his condition for what can count as an aesthetic flaw. This condition is far too strong to be plausible, and if accepted, would silence most serious aesthetic criticism. Jacobson says that  $\phi$  cannot count as aesthetic flaw in  $\psi$  unless changing or removing  $\phi$  would not alter  $\psi$ 's identity as work of art. We do not need a full account of the identity conditions of a work of art to see that this principle, even if it applies only to some artworks, is wildly implausible. The principle, if adopted, would block a great deal of appropriate aesthetic criticism. Imagine a poem filled from beginning to end with cliché. Not a single image or metaphor appears in the poem that has not been used by high-school poets thousands of times. Would such a poem be *the same poem* if these features

were altered? I cannot see any reason why it would – to remedy this deficit would be to write a new, probably much better, poem. Yet surely the clichés are indeed aesthetic flaws in the work!

In fact, it seems likely that in a wide range of cases, remedying an aesthetic flaw while retaining the work's overall identity would not be possible. Any flaw that pervades a whole work, rather than a part, will be part of that work's identity. The sentimentality in Coleridge's 'To a Young Ass' is certainly an aesthetic flaw, and yet it would not be the same poem without that sentimentality.<sup>12</sup> To limit our aesthetic criticisms to those flaws that can be corrected while preserving the work's identity is unnecessarily limiting.<sup>13</sup> Finally, Jacobson gives us no reason why we should accept his condition. We should have good reason for accepting any principle that limits *a priori* what can count as an aesthetic flaw. Any constraints on what is an appropriate target for aesthetic critique ought to be minimal, and should be motivated by the best account we have of the role and purpose of art criticism.

## 2b. The Valuable Perspective Argument

The second argument offered against the valence constraint is what I call the *valuable perspective* argument. This argument is explored most fully by Kieran, though both writers make use of it. The main idea is quite straightforward. Both Jacobson and Kieran hold that some narrative artworks have *perspectives* that it would be morally wrong to take up, and that are at the same time cognitively valuable. The cognitive value of these perspectives contributes to the works' aesthetic merit, but not their moral value. The argument has three basic parts: first, an account of what makes works containing these perspectives immoral; second, an argument that these perspectives have cognitive value; and last, a claim that this cognitive value is also aesthetically valuable. If this argument is sound, the valence constraint does not hold.

What do we mean by a *perspective* in this context? Jacobson and Kieran use the term 'perspective' to emphasize the distinction between propositional knowledge and 'knowing what it is like'. Narrative artworks excel at providing the latter, but not the former. They give us 'ways of seeing'<sup>14</sup> the world around us. Kieran writes that 'imaginative experience can be an indirect and informative means of learning from experience.'<sup>15</sup> It is not that works of art instruct us by teaching us facts, but rather that they afford us experiences which themselves constitute forms of knowledge.<sup>16</sup> The experience of imagining Humbert Humbert's life from the inside offers a *perspective*: our experience in reading carefully allows us a new way of looking at what we might already know.

According to the immoralist, some of these perspectives are inherently morally defective. One example Kieran considers is Martin Scorsese's film *Goodfellas*. Kieran writes of the film: '...[T]he moral perspective here is deeply defective. Any internalized moral code which deems group outsiders to be morally insignificant and group loyalty to be the supreme moral code, and any response which commends or endorses such a code, is deeply flawed.'<sup>17</sup> We might say, more generally, that any perspective is morally defective if it would be morally wrong to adopt it as one's own.

Still, it does not follow that works with morally defective perspectives are themselves morally flawed works. To read a book (or watch a film) and to imaginatively participate in the experience is not to adopt the work's perspective as one's own. It is rather to *imagine* that perspective, or perhaps even to imagine adopting it. Imagining and adopting are not the same thing. So we still need an account of what is morally wrong with a work that offers a morally defective perspective. There seem to be two possibilities. First, these works not only offer us perspectives; they also invite us to respond to those perspectives. In some cases, we are asked



not only to imagine a defective moral perspective, but also to approve of it. The approval is not imagined; it is real. The work gets us to feel warmly towards a way of seeing the world of which we ought to disapprove. This approval is solicited by the work and it is not merely imagined, and perhaps the approval is morally wrong.

The second possibility is that some works are morally flawed simply because they invite us to *enjoy* imagining the defective moral perspectives they offer. On this view, simply taking pleasure in imagining a defective perspective is morally wrong, and a work which invites one to do so, even if the work does not invite approval of that perspective, is morally wrong. Kieran suggests that one would be better off, morally speaking, if one never enjoyed imagining certain defective points of view. He writes:

... [O]ne 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.<sup>18</sup>

Having an experience of morally defective perspectives, and enjoying that experience, in other words, is immoral, even if one does not approve of that perspective.

So: there are two principles that immoralists appeal to in defending their claim that some works are morally flawed by virtue of their morally defective perspective. First, a work is morally flawed if it invites audiences to approve of morally defective perspectives (or, perhaps, to disapprove of morally correct perspectives). Second, it is claimed that a work is morally

flawed if it invites audiences to experience in imagination a morally defective perspective, and to enjoy that experience.

The only reason I can see for accepting either of these principles are the consequentialist considerations that both Kieran and Jacobson disavow. Consider these principles in turn. Why is it wrong for one to approve of a morally defective perspective if that approval does not mark any change in one's character or behavior? The approval is in the usual case limited to the experience of the work of art; on putting down the novel, one also withdraws or forgets one's approval of its perspective. Why would the approval itself be wrong if it does not linger or affect one's character? One need not be a consequentialist to see the difficulty here. If this approval does not affect one's long-term character traits, then it is hard to see why a virtue-theorist would object; and if such approval is consistent with the full exercise of autonomy and the respect for rationality, it is clear that a Kantian also would have no grounds to object.

The same concerns arise for the second principle. What is wrong with *enjoyment* of an imaginative experience of a morally defective perspective, once we put aside the concerns about harmful consequences to one's character and actions? Enjoyment of imaginative experience is not morally bad, and if it were, then enjoyment of all fiction would be bad, not just fiction with a morally defective perspective. The enjoyment one gets from these imaginative experiences might not vanish immediately on leaving the movie theater, but it is hard to see how that enjoyment is morally problematic in and of itself. And if neither approving of nor enjoying imagining a morally defective perspective are in and of themselves wrong, a work cannot be held to be morally flawed simply for inviting one to do these things.

Kieran responds to this objection in a recent article. He writes:

[The critic says] that the work isn't immoral in character since my merely being asked to imagine having an immoral attitude isn't immoral. Well it depends. The work actually invites having an immoral attitude. We laugh at and are amused by the slaughter of innocents as mediated by the film (we are not just imagining laughing or imagining being amused at such things).<sup>19</sup>

It is certainly correct that these responses (laughter and amusement) are real. However, the things that we are responding to are not. There is a difference between real amusement as a response to real events, and real amusement as a response to imagined events. It might be immoral to respond with laughter to a newspaper story about 'the slaughter of innocents' but it is not obviously immoral to respond with laughter to a novel about the same slaughter. This is because in the former but not in the latter case my laughter is not at any real person's expense. It is precisely the distinctively seductive nature of art that it can produce in us responses to imagined events that we would not have to their real-life counterparts. Unless, however, those responses change our actions or our characters when we deal with real events, there is nothing morally wrong with them.

The second step in the argument is to show that such morally defective perspectives are in fact cognitively valuable. Kieran argues, for example, that there is distinctive cognitive value to be found in the perspective of the bully. One might already know that bullying is harmful, and understand that it brings humiliation to the victim and pleasure to the bully. But experiencing (in reality or in imagination) the bully's perspective can bring new cognitive rewards: one can come to understand the nature of that pleasure, and what it is like to feel superior to another in this way. This perspective contains knowledge that is not propositional, and that cannot be had by imagining a morally sympathetic perspective, such as the victim's.

Jacobson emphasizes that perspectival knowledge has pragmatic value as well – we can put our knowledge of what it is like to be a bully or a fascist to work for us.

Evaluative discourse in a pluralist society, if it is to rise above dogmatism, requires its participants to understand how others will respond to their proffered claims and reasons. Perhaps one must be able to at least imagine seeing the world as these others do, in order to wield their evaluative vocabulary and hope to offer reasons they can adopt, short of conversion.<sup>20</sup>

The final step in this argument is to show that the cognitive value of these defective perspectives increases the aesthetic value of the works. Jacobson and Kieran ally themselves with aesthetic cognitivists in holding that some of the cognitive virtues of artworks are aesthetically significant.<sup>21</sup> The particular cognitive values emphasized here emerge out of the ways in which works of art get us to imagine their subjects, and the nature of the imaginative perspectives they offer. These features are central to the work's status as an artwork and to the work's being the particular artwork that it is. For that reason, the perspectives a work offers contribute to the work's overall aesthetic value. The alternative, Jacobson suggests, is an unacceptable version of formalism. Since the perspective is the perspective it is because of both the form and the content of the work, he argues that it would be a mistake to think that one could separate out a work's purely aesthetic qualities and evaluate it on that basis alone.<sup>22</sup>

It is indeed difficult to see how one could deny this without embracing a version of formalism. However, one wonders why one couldn't make a parallel argument about the moral significance of cognitive value? Why should one be an aesthetic cognitivist and not a moral cognitivist?<sup>23</sup> That is, why not say that the cognitive value of imagining the morally defective perspective is worthwhile from a moral point of view – that one is better off, morally, for having

that experience or that the experience is intrinsically morally valuable? On this question Jacobson and Kieran part ways. Jacobson seems willing to grant this point, though he does not seem to recognize its importance. He doubts that 'moral understanding can be deepened by acquaintance with morally felicitous perspectives only.'<sup>24</sup> Jacobson acknowledges that this cognitive value might also increase the work's moral value.

Kieran does not admit this possibility. He thinks that the distinctive cognitive value of imagining morally defective perspectives redounds to the work's aesthetic value, but adds nothing to the work's moral value. His reasons are not entirely clear, but two arguments are suggested by his discussion. First, perhaps Kieran thinks that the only way moral value can be generated by cognitive value is if the knowledge has instrumental moral value. That is, only if this new knowledge improves one's moral behavior or character in the long run should the knowledge be counted as morally significant. Since the immoralist puts aside the question of consequences in order to assess art on its own terms, this way of accruing moral value would not undermine his position.

Second, Kieran is at pains to distinguish *epistemically better* from *morally better*. In the passage quoted earlier, Kieran employs an analogy to make his point. It is possible, he thinks, that we might all be better off epistemically in a world that is far worse morally speaking - one with more suffering, for example. Similarly, a person might be better off epistemically for having had a number of imaginative experiences (e.g., reading de Sade) that morally speaking would not leave us better off. The first case seems right. A world in which certain kinds of knowledge are widely disseminated (say, knowledge of how to make a nuclear device) might very well end up being a world that is much worse, morally, than ours. But the second case is different. Given Kieran's and Jacobson's own account of the particular sort of knowledge

afforded by imaginative experiences of other moral perspectives, it is very hard to see how one with those imaginative experiences is worse off morally than one without them.

In fact, very much the same argument, which the immoralists endorse, that is used to support aesthetic cognitivism can be used to support moral cognitivism. The distinctive kind of perspectival knowledge offered by artworks with defective moral perspectives offers increased aesthetic rewards because its cognitive character is deeply intertwined with artistic goals and features of the work. Kieran claims that perspectival knowledge can deepen one's appreciative capacities:

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.<sup>25</sup>

Kieran's claim here is that one cannot separate the epistemic goods of morally defective perspectives because these epistemic rewards are deeply bound up with capacities essential to the appreciation of art. But Kieran's own analysis suggests that the same connection exists between the cognitive goods of these perspectives and morality. If acquaintance with a morally defective perspective brings with it perspectival knowledge that deepens one's appreciation of the value of friendship, as Kieran suggests, then unless one denies that such appreciation has moral value, one will be forced to say that the epistemic goods that the aesthetic cognitivist so closely associates with aesthetic goods are also closely associated with moral goods. The

perspectival knowledge that Kieran and Jacobson praise has *both* aesthetic and moral worth. The moral rewards of exploring in imagination a defective moral perspective are great: the understanding gained is *moral* understanding, and a richer moral understanding of the world is itself morally valuable.

Note that the claim here is not a narrowly consequentialist one.<sup>26</sup> Having a richer moral understanding might not improve one's moral character, or one's moral behavior. (It might do so; it might equally do the opposite.) The claim is not that this moral understanding is only morally good simply because it leads to other things that are morally good. The claim is that moral understanding is of moral value because of the general ways in which it enriches our moral thinking, and works that promote it deserve to be called morally better *pro tanto* before one looks at consequences.

Epistemic goods are not always entirely separable from other sorts of goods. Morality has as intimate a relationship to seeing the world from different perspectives as aesthetics does. Indeed, one might argue that epistemic value is what ties morality and aesthetics together.<sup>27</sup>

### 2c. The Sentimental Art argument

The last argument is not an argument for immoralism, since it concerns the possibility that a work of art is diminished aesthetically by its moral virtues, but it is an argument against the valence constraint. Kieran illustrates the argument with an example, Norman Rockwell's 'Freedom from Fear.' The painting depicts parents putting their children safely to sleep while the newspaper held by the father describes 'Bombing' and 'Horror' elsewhere. Kieran's analysis of the painting is that the 'sound' moral sentiment behind the paintings cheapens its artistic merit, because 'there is nothing of interest to be won or learnt' from the painting about its subject.<sup>28</sup> It is hard to disagree that the painting offers little insight, and that its aesthetic

merits are few. But it is not easy to see why Kieran thinks that the work's moral sentiment is sound. The painting seems to offer a moral lesson that is at best shallow, and at worst quite horrible. The story suggested by the painting is one in which children are appropriately kept safe by sheltering them from and keeping them ignorant of dangers abroad. That is, the painting embraces a highly clannish morality in which outsiders are ignored completely.

The same reasons that Kieran uses for thinking that the work is weak aesthetically would seem to count in favor of thinking that the work is rather weak morally: the message of the painting offers little by way of moral understanding, and might even serve to narrow or muddy a broad, careful moral understanding of war and family, since the painting can be seen as suggesting that the suffering of other families far away is not of much moral consequence. In short, if morality is connected with epistemic goods just as aesthetics is, then there is no reason to think that cheap sentimental art will be any more morally praiseworthy than it is aesthetically meritorious.

### 3. For the valence constraint

The three objections to the valence constraint just considered fail, but the issue is not settled. We should look at what can be said in favor of the valence constraint. The case for the valence constraint that I offer here builds upon the failures of immoralist arguments against it. I shall argue that immoralists fall prey to an anti-cognitivist, highly moralistic view of what makes art morally bad or good. A better, cognitivist conception of morality can help correct this tendency, and this approach suggests a strong case for the correctness of the valence constraint.

In fact, all three groups – moralists, immoralists, and sometimes even autonomists – have taken a rather dubious approach to evaluating artworks morally. While most of these philosophers have been very careful in their claims about what makes an artwork aesthetically



valuable, a dangerous and moralistic tendency often shadowed their claims about the moral value of artworks. Recall some of the cases discussed or mentioned earlier: Scorsese's *Goodfellas*, Dickinson's 'Tell all the Truth but tell it slant ...', Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*. Works like these are condemned as morally flawed by both moralists and immoralists, but in most of these cases, this moral condemnation is undeserved.

I think that philosophers tend to think that works like these, which traffic in morally defective perspectives, are morally bad for two related reasons. First, exposure to these works, which invite us to imagine admiring an immoral way of life, might have long-term detrimental effects on our moral character and behavior. Though Jacobson and Kieran both insist that their moral judgments are *not* based on consequentialist considerations, the fact that such works might in fact have these dangerous consequences makes Jacobson's and Kieran's claims seem more plausible. Like Plato, we worry about the effects that artworks are likely to have on us, particularly when artworks imitate immoral behavior. (And we are right to do so.)

The second reason is that the moral value of artworks is often tied up with the aims of educating children. Books like *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* are praised morally in part because they seem like appropriate vehicles for imparting moral principles to children. The works that the immoralists (and the moralists) condemn are works that would clearly not be suitable for children's reading. Children, we presume, are less able to distinguish clearly between imagining a moral perspective and adopting one, and so we tend to think that the works that are morally appropriate for them are those works that offer only admirable moral perspectives.<sup>29</sup> However, a philosophical account of what makes a work of art morally good or bad should not be based on what is morally good or bad for children, unless the work is intended for children. A work of art should be evaluated on its own terms, meaning

that we should consider its intended audience when considering its moral value. *American Psycho* was not written for children.

What we want is a means of evaluating art morally that looks at the work as a work of art in its own right, putting aside the long-term consequences of reading or viewing it, and just considering the value of engagement with that work on its own terms.<sup>30</sup> A work with a defective moral perspective might be morally praiseworthy, and it will tend to be so exactly when the perspective in question is also aesthetically valuable. To see this, let us focus on two qualities that a response to a work's moral perspective can have, depending on the form of imaginative engagement. As the immoralists note, artworks invite us not only to imagine certain ways of seeing the world, but also to respond to those perspectives. But responses are not only approving or disapproving. A response can be *rich* (or not) and it can be *reflective* (or not).

Richness of response is a matter of degree. The question is how to distinguish between responses that are relatively rich and those that are relatively spare. One plausible way to do this is to begin with the profile of emotions that psychologists consider 'basic': emotions with minimal cognitive content, maximal cross-cultural and cross-species applicability, and with a clear, recognizable phenomenology and physiological profile. Though lists of basic emotions vary somewhat, they usually include anger, fear, happiness, surprise, amusement, and disgust. The basic emotions, further, are the constituents of the more complex emotions. So, for example, contempt is a mix of anger and disgust.<sup>31</sup> If this view (or something like it) is right, then relatively rich responses will be highly complex, multi-layered combinations of these basic emotions. Most of these rich responses have no name; they are best described by combining simpler responses into a more complex brew.<sup>32</sup>

Richness need not consist only in the combination of simpler responses into larger wholes. There is also a temporal aspect to responses, and works may prescribe a chain of responses, building and incorporating earlier responses into later ones. So a work that prescribes anger, then regret, then sympathy, engenders a different response than one that prescribes first sympathy, then regret, then anger. Richness is the combination of individual responses over time.

For example, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* prescribes a quite rich response to Ruth, the character who, for selfish reasons, keeps Tommy and Kathy apart for many years. We are asked to respond to her with a curious mix of resentment, irritation, contempt, and, in the end, sympathetic sadness. On the other hand, the character of Colonel Cathcart in *Catch-22* is portrayed in such a way as to elicit only contempt (and amusement). The response that *Never Let Me Go* prescribes is relatively rich compared to that of *Catch-22*.

Let's now turn to reflectiveness. Some of the responses that works invite require reflection, and others do not. Some that require reflection require more reflection and some require less. What I mean by reflection in this context is a conscious deliberative process of weighing competing considerations that aims at arriving at a conclusion (although many times reflection does not arrive at a clear conclusion). Reflection may also include, in addition to deliberation, further consideration of the object in order to re-evaluate the weight of a consideration or to introduce a new one. Reflection is prompted by conflict – it is when two or more aspects of a prescribed response conflict with one another that one is required to deliberate in order to resolve the apparent tension. For example, a prescription to feel both resentment and fellow-feeling for a character causes tension; these two responses have opposing valences. (Think again of Ruth from *Never Let Me Go*.) Such a mixed response

involves a clash of judgments: on the one hand, one is invited to believe that the character deserves to come to a bad end, and on the other hand, one is invited to judge that such a bad end would be unfortunate. When a prescribed response is internally incoherent in this way, we are invited to reflect on the considerations underlying that response, in order to resolve it into a more coherent whole.

It is important to distinguish between artworks that *invite* reflective responses, and those that merely serve as an occasion for reflection. Almost any artwork can *occasion* a reflective response. For example, Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* can certainly serve as an occasion for reflection. The film prescribes that one respond with amusement to Mr. Blonde's torturing of the policeman. Now when I watch this film, I tend to respond first with enjoyment, but then, quickly the enjoyment is mixed with disgust. The film serves as an occasion for me to reflect on the conflict between my enjoyment and my horror that I am capable of enjoying such a thing. However, this reflection is not prescribed by the work. There is no sense in which the film itself, or any perspective in it (not even Mr. Orange's, who kills Mr. Blonde) is disgusted by the enjoyment of Mr. Blonde's perspective, or that the overall point of view of the film when it comes to torture or violence is serious or reflective in any way. (On the contrary, Tarantino is expressly *not* interested in promoting greater reflection about violence. He is interested in the surface characteristics of violence.) One difference between works that invite reflective responses and those that are merely occasions for such responses is that the former works require the audience members to respond reflectively in order for them to understand and appreciate other aspects of the narrative. So, though one might have a reflective response to *Reservoir Dogs*, it does not follow that *Reservoir Dogs* prescribes a reflective response. If this were not so, *all* works would prescribe reflective responses.

It is worth noting that, though they often go together, richness and reflectiveness are independent characteristics. A work can be rich but not reflective and *vice versa*. A work can prescribe a highly complex, but also highly coherent, response to its events and characters; or a work can prescribe reflectively without being particularly rich. Now, when the perspective of the work is morally defective, we should ask *how* these works ask us to respond to those perspectives, not simply whether they ask us to approve of or enjoy imagining those perspectives. The richer and more reflective the response, the greater the cognitive moral reward. Complex, even contradictory responses to defective moral perspectives have real moral value, because these sorts of responses expand our view of moral possibility. Spare, unthinking responses have less moral value, or even disvalue, because they do not increase our moral sensitivity or appreciation.

Immoralists have focused, mistakenly, on the simple question of whether we are asked to enjoy or approve of a morally defective perspective, but what really matters morally with artworks is the depth and richness of the response we are asked to have. Some morally valuable responses to defective perspectives are neither approving nor disapproving. Consider Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The central event of *Beloved*, which sets the entire novel in motion, is Sethe's murdering her child with a handsaw in order to prevent that child from returning to slavery. Insofar as the novel offers us an inside look at Sethe's way of seeing the world, it invites us to imagine a morally dangerous, even terrifying, worldview.

However, the critic James Phelan's study of the novel makes clear that the work purposely dissuades us from taking up a simple attitude towards that perspective: '... Morrison stops short of taking any clear ethical stand on Sethe's rough choice, but instead presents it as something that she, like Baby Suggs, can neither approve nor condemn.'<sup>33</sup> He goes on to

conclude:

At the level of audience-author communication, Morrison's unusual treatment of Sethe's choice also creates an unusual ethical relationship with her audience. The treatment is simultaneously a challenge and a compliment. She challenges us to have the negative capability to refrain from any irritable reaching after ethical closure about Sethe's rough choice, even as that challenge implies her faith that we will be equal to the task. ... By limiting her guidance, Morrison gives up some authorial responsibility and transfers it to the audience. By accepting that responsibility – and by attending to the parameters within which Morrison asks us to exercise it – we have a moral difficult and demanding, but also richer, reading experience. By guiding us less, Morrison gives us more.<sup>34</sup>

Phelan's reading of *Beloved* is that the novel itself does not tell us just how to respond to Sethe's moral perspective. Instead, it asks us to consider the matter for ourselves. As Phelan points out, the novel requires serious reflection on the part of the reader to sort out her responses to Sethe's choice. The response that this book prescribes with respect to its moral subject is much more valuable, morally speaking, than a prescription that comes ready-to-eat, no work required.

The flip side of this analysis is that spare, unreflective responses to defective moral perspectives, even if they appear to be the 'right' ones, will have little or no intrinsic moral worth, and might even be morally bad. Take, for example, Coleridge's 'To a Young Ass.' This poem asks us to approve of a perspective which appears (at least at a quick glance) to be morally appropriate. Yet the approval it invites is hardly a rich or reflective one. One's moral understanding of the cruelty involved in animal husbandry is not enhanced by reading

Coleridge's poem, because the perspective offered is shallow and anthropomorphic. To approve of that perspective is perhaps to approve of a general principle (avoid cruelty to animals) worth embracing, but it is not to enhance one's moral understanding of the relationships between animals and human beings. A novel like J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* is much more likely to enhance moral understanding, by confounding our moral intuitions. In that novel, the main character's sympathetic perspective towards animals is complicated by the book's focus on her rather serious moral shortcomings and self-doubt. Works like 'To a Young Ass' and 'Freedom from Fear' have little intrinsic moral worth because they oversimplify morally complex issues, and thus tend to impoverish, rather than enrich, our moral response.<sup>35</sup>

I do not mean that prescribing richly and reflectively are necessary (jointly or otherwise) for a work to be morally praiseworthy, nor even that they are sufficient. But richness and reflectiveness are good *pro tanto* reasons for thinking a work morally praiseworthy. Other features of the work which are morally blameworthy might outweigh or override these reasons. I have *not* tried to give a complete theory of what makes an artwork morally good or bad, but I have tried to defend one criterion (possibly among many) that we should use when deciding whether works are morally good or bad.

Finally, the richness and reflectiveness of a response to an artwork not only contribute to its moral value, but also to its aesthetic value. Works that possess these features have aesthetic value because they have epistemic value – they increase and broaden our aesthetic appreciation and sensitivity, and as the immoralists argued, epistemic value is aesthetically relevant. That is, according to aesthetic cognitivism, a work's cognitive rewards can increase that work's aesthetic merit. And there seems to be no reason why moral knowledge should not be counted as one of these cognitive rewards. Morally good responses have cognitive value; cognitive value has

aesthetic value; and so the *prima facie* case for the valence constraint is strong.

The immoralists seem to assume that what matters morally in artworks has little to do with challenging or broadening our moral principles and sensitivities.<sup>36</sup> A criterion for judging artworks morally that takes more seriously the connection between epistemic and moral value will recognize that the same qualities that tend to produce aesthetic interest and merit also increase moral value.

There is, however, an objection to the foregoing account. Matthew Kieran suggests that even if works that feature morally defective perspectives do produce morally valuable knowledge, the means by which that knowledge is produced remain morally bad. In other words, perhaps *Lolita* is morally good in one respect (epistemically) but not in another (the approval it secures of a morally defective viewpoint), even though the former depends on the latter. Again, he uses an analogy:

The end of punishing me for my own good as schoolboy may be morally good and right. It doesn't automatically mean that the strategy or means used, caning or whipping me say, must be.<sup>37</sup>

This is certainly correct. However, is approval or enjoyment of immoral perspectives in art like whipping or caning? We have good reasons for thinking that whipping and caning are immoral – they involve rather severe physical harm to the person. As we saw in the last section, however, there is no reason to think that approval of imagined immoral perspectives is in and of itself morally wrong.

The preceding argument suggests a strong case for the valence constraint, and against immoralism, but it does not help to settle the issue between autonomists and moralists. This is because the argument between moralists and autonomists rests on whether the moral value of



an artwork, considered *qua* moral value, affects aesthetic value. The defense I have offered here of the valence constraint is based on a common value that matters morally and aesthetically: epistemic value. The moral value of the work is relevant to aesthetic value because of its cognitive value. Cognitive value, I have argued, has both aesthetic and moral relevance. The case for the valence constraint, and against immoralism, is strong: there is good reason to think that a decrease in moral value will *not* produce an increase in aesthetic value. Other important issues, however, remain.<sup>38</sup>

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Notes

1. Sometimes autonomism is called aestheticism.
2. See Daniel Jacobson, 'In Praise of Immoral Art,' in *Philosophical Topics* vol. 25, no. 1 (1997), pp. 155-99; Daniel Jacobson, 'Ethical Criticism and the Vice of Moderation,' in Matthew Kieran (ed.), *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 342-55; Matthew Kieran, 'Forbidden Knowledge: The Challenge of Immoralism,' in Jose Bermudez and Sebastian Gardner (eds.), *Art and Morality* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 56-73; Matthew Kieran, 'Art and Morality,' Chapter 4 of his *Revealing Art* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 148-204; Matthew Kieran, 'Art, Morality, and Ethics: On the (Im)moral Character of Art Works and Inter-Relations to Artistic Value,' in *Philosophy Compass* vol. 1, no. 2 (2006), pp. 129-143.
3. James Anderson and Jeffrey Dean, 'Moderate Autonomism,' in *British Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 38, no. 2 (1998), pp. 150-166; Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, 'Fiction, Literature, and Value,' Chapter 17 of their *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 440-456; Richard Posner, 'Against Ethical Criticism,' in *Philosophy and Literature* vol. 21, no. 1 (1997), pp. 1-27.
4. A representative sample would include: Noël Carroll, 'Moderate Moralism,' in *British Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 36, no. 3 (1996), pp. 223-238; Marcia M. Eaton, 'Integrating the Aesthetic and the Moral,' in *Philosophical Studies* vol. 67, no. 3 (1992), pp. 219-240; Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), especially Chapter 5, 'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible': Literature and the Moral Imagination,' pp. 148-167; Berys Gaut, 'The Ethical Criticism of Art,' in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 182-203; and Wayne Booth, 'Why Banning

Ethical Criticism is a Serious Mistake,' in *Philosophy and Literature* vol. 22, no. 2 (1998), pp. 366-393.

5. Compare Kieran (2005), p. 183: 'The [moralist] claim remains that, where artistically relevant, a moral defect is always an artistic vice and a morally commendable character an artistic virtue.'
6. See Jacobson (1997), p. 182 and Jacobson (2006), p. 346.
7. Of course, with respect to another issue, the immoralists and moralists are on one side, and the autonomist on the other. For an analysis that divides up the terrain rather differently, see Robert Stecker, 'The Interaction of Ethical and Aesthetic Value,' in *British Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 46, no. 2 (2006), pp. 138-150.
8. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York: Vintage International, 1997) p. 9. C. Namwali Serpell suggested using this passage, and also provided the analysis of it that I outline below. Serpell's interpretation of *Lolita* is given at greater length in her "Collusion and Differentiation in Nabokov's *Lolita*," Lecture delivered at Harvard University (Cambridge, MA, November 8, 2004).
9. For a defense of the view that immoral perspectives in works of art can produce morally dangerous consequences, see James Harold, 'Infected by Evil,' in *Philosophical Explorations* vol. 8, no. 2 (June 2005), pp. 173-187.
10. Jacobson (1997), p. 165.
11. Jacobson (1997), p. 183.
12. One might argue that this sentimentality also constitutes a moral virtue. I return to this kind of argument in section (2c) below.
13. It is open to Jacobson to argue that cases like 'To a Young Ass' do not fall under his principle – that only in special cases, like 'Tell all the Truth but tell it slant ...' or *Triumph*

*of the Will*, should we insist that aesthetic flaws preserve the work's identity if corrected.

But then Jacobson would owe us account, which is not *ad hoc*, that can distinguish these special cases from the rest.

14. Jacobson (2006), p. 333.

15. Kieran (2003), p. 68.

16. For a critique of knowledge of 'what it is like,' see Lamarque and Olson (1994), pp. 370-386.

17. Kieran (2003), p. 60.

18. Kieran (2003), p. 73.

19. Kieran (2006), p. 139.

20. Jacobson (1997), p. 193.

21. For a detailed discussion of aesthetic cognitivism, see Berys Gaut, 'Art and Knowledge,' in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 436-450.

22. Jacobson (1997), p. 192.

23. This terminology is potentially misleading. 'Moral cognitivism' is usually meant to describe a view according to which moral avowals are expressions of beliefs, not sentiments. I use it here to mean a parallel view to aesthetic cognitivism: that cognitive value in some cases contributes to moral value.

24. Jacobson (1997), p. 193.

25. Kieran (2003), p. 65.

26. It is possible that an indirect consequentialist account can indeed capture the kind of value I have in mind here. That is, an indirect consequentialist might take moral knowledge to be valuable even when it does not directly cause better consequences, if *on*

*the whole*, valuing such knowledge tends to lead to decision-making that brings about better consequents. The sort of consequentialism I have in mind here is described in Peter Railton, 'Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality,' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* vol. 13, no. 2 (1984), pp. 134-171. I owe thanks to Walter Sinnott-Armstrong for raising this question.

27. This is a claim that Kieran might have endorsed earlier in his career, before his conversion to immoralism, though his conception of what constitutes valuable moral understanding is rather different. See 'In Defence of the Ethical Evaluation of Narrative Art,' in *British Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 41, no. 1 (2001), pp. 26-38.
28. Kieran (2005), p. 184.
29. I am not sure that this presumption is correct. Philip Pullman, the author of the children's fantasy series *His Dark Materials*, has argued that children can and should be challenged to consider many sides of complex moral questions. See Laura Miller, 'Far From Narnia,' *The New Yorker*, December 26, 2005 and January 2, 2006, pp. 52-75.
30. The view to follow builds on arguments offered in James Harold, 'On Judging the Moral Value of Narrative Artworks,' in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* vol. 64, no. 2 (2006), pp. 259-270.
31. See Jesse J. Prinz, *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 92.
32. Jenefer Robinson offers a compelling account of how complex emotional responses build upon one another, become more complex, and change over time. See her *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), esp. Chapter 3, 'Emotion as Process,' pp. 57-100.

33. James Phelan, 'Sethe's Choice: *Beloved* and the Ethics of Reading,' in Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack, *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), p. 93.
34. Phelan (2001), pp. 106-7.
35. Once again, it is worth emphasizing that the issue of the moral value of responses is quite distinct from what can be said about the moral effects of certain works of art on society. 'To a Young Ass,' Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* all had powerful impacts on society that led to important positive moral changes in society. But it does not follow that, considered in terms of the imaginative experience of these works as works of art, they have positive moral value. Thanks to Tom Wartenberg for suggesting this.
36. As noted earlier, Jacobson does seem to be aware of the tension between his own moral evaluations of works of art, and his view of how we should best ethically evaluate these works. He writes: '... [O]bjectivity in ethical matters is less a view from nowhere than an ability to imagine things from a variety of ethical perspectives – even though some of them (such as Riefenstahl's, whether in her role as aesthete or as fascist) will be systematically distorted.' (Jacobson (1997), pp. 193-4) But he is tentative about this claim and he does not retract his moral condemnations of these works as morally bad.
37. Kieran (2006), p. 139.
38. I wish to thank a number of people for ideas and suggestions that were very helpful in developing this paper, especially Jennifer Pyke, C. Namwali Serpell (who suggested using the lovely Nabokov passage), Robert Stecker, and Thomas Wartenberg. A section of this paper was delivered at Dartmouth College, and I am very grateful there for a lively discussion and some careful critical comments that led me to make several

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