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ETHICS, EVIL, AND FICTION Colin McGinn, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1997, ISBN 0 19
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There are rogues, bastards, and utter shits. The central aim of Colin McGinn's book is to remind us what we think of really bad people. Revulsion is of a different order to disapproval, and revulsion is the right reaction to evil. It is, McGinn, argues, a deeply aesthetic reaction. We react to evil as to something ugly, perhaps something uglier than anything we can physically perceive. And conversely, our understanding of a morally admirable person is like our reaction to something extremely beautiful. We marvel at it, and wonder that the world can contain such things.

McGinn defends an aesthetic theory of morality. It is quite literal. Evil is not just like ugliness; it really is ugly, and the "soul" of a good person really is beautiful. Moreover our capacities to know what is good and what we ought to do are linked to our capacities for aesthetic appreciation. We know that someone's actions are wrong when, having considered them fully, we react to then as if they were repellent. These are striking views, at odds with most contemporary moral philosophy, most of the aesthetics of this century, and most enlightened thinking about right and wrong. So McGinn needs to offer some striking arguments.

The book begins in a remarkably conventional manner, with an introduction and two full chapters which engage with current debates in philosophy about moral knowledge and the objectivity of moral judgment. McGinn believes that we can know what is right and wrong using innate capacities, analogous to those which assign grammatical structures to language. These are perhaps associated with innate capacities to conceive of other people as having states of mind. Using these capacities, we can think about objective moral properties of people and situations: how good and bad they are. McGinn's position and arguments here are not nearly as unconventional or original as he suggests. Currently much is being done on forms of moral realism, and moral epistemology is undergoing a wonderful rebirth. McGinn's contribution to the debate is rather along the lines of G. E. Moore. He suggests a method of adapting current theories of how the mental supervenes on the physical to resuscitate a picture of moral properties as thoroughly real - if non-causal - aspects of people and situations.

These early chapters are written in a rather leaden academic language, as if to establish McGinn's credentials for the more exciting remainder of the book. They are less than scintillating and all

readers, except those deeply interested in current debates about moral realism, might well skip them, and go straight to chapter 4. At that point evil enters, and things become more lively. McGinn's definition of evil is prescriptive: evil is taking pleasure in another's pain. He argues that many everyday phenomena, such as jealousy, envy, revenge, seduction, and even intellectual persuasion, are often rooted in motives that are in his sense evil. McGinn's aim here is to show his readers that evil is ubiquitous, and that their revulsion at it as akin to their revulsion at something physically ugly. He is less than persuasive that much of what we count as evil is really caused by pleasure in another's pain, for its own sake, rather than by a lust for power, the combination of ideology and moral indifference, or self-aggrandisement. The efforts of a despot to secure a place in history and to impress himself on the thoughts of millions, may produce the most intensely evil consequences. His motives, however, may have nothing to do with the pain he produces. They could be based instead on a conviction that only glory of the most grandiose kind can give meaning to his worthless life. Another difficulty is McGinn's description of evil as ugly. We are not really told where to locate this ugliness. Sadism fits McGinn's definition more plausibly than other evils; but suppose we could contemplate the sadist's patterns of experience and see the concentration, anticipation, and delight in purely aesthetic terms, as patterns of experience and thought. They might then be as complex and fascinating as a tree-covered mountain range or a Beethoven symphony.

If an evil person's mind is repellently ugly, then that of a morally admirable one should be beautiful. McGinn's discussion of what he calls "beauty of soul" begins with an intriguing observation. The language of morality has both "thin" words such as "good" and "thick" words such as "honest". (The terms are Bernard Williams'.) But McGinn points out a middle stratum of words such as "fine", or "wonderful". Or, on the negative side, "rotten" or "repulsive". These words both describe very general features of character and focus on particular values. They describe qualities or styles of character, rather than specific traits. McGinn claims that these middle level words are predominantly aesthetic. This is not obviously true even of McGinn's examples of "fine", and "wonderful", and is pretty dubious for other words of the same stratum, such as "admirable" or "exceptional". What does seem true is that we have a rich stock of negative terms for summing up people's character; these are largely shared with the language of invective, and many of these words have the function of arousing disgust. Moral disgust is surely a very deeply rooted feature of human psychology: we think of ourselves as soiled by deeds of which we are ashamed, and we recoil from people of foul character. McGinn is right to point out that no account of morality should ignore this. But is the disgust a reaction to what is ugly, and is its opposite, moral admiration, a reaction to beauty? Might the truth not be instead that we react to evil as we do to the disgusting - shit, decay,

putrefaction - and that these are often taken to be ugly? (Perhaps wrongly, as some painters remind us.)

McGinn proceeds via a discussion of a series of works of fiction. In Brief Encounter only Alec sees the beauty of Laura's true self. In Lolita Humbert Humbert's suavity hides a repellent child molester. In The Picture of Dorian Gray Dorian's picture represents Dorian as he really is. In Frankenstein the monster's sense of his own repulsiveness captures the lonely insecurity about one's own worth that is part of being an individual human being. McGinn's discussions of all of these are evocative and thought provoking. He argues persuasively that Wilde intends us to think of the picture rather than the flesh and blood man as the real Dorian Gray, and that hidden in Mary Shelley's description of the monster and his self-loathing there is an ambivalent attitude to human sexuality. (McGinn may be arguing unecessarily hard: some of his conclusions have more initial plausibility than he supposes.)

McGinn's most significant discussions are of Lolita and The Portrait of Dorian Gray. In the latter work Wilde seems to be devising a reductio ad absurdum of the aesthetic theory of morality. Wilde shows that a person can be handsome and loveable, possessing not Humbert Humbert's greasy urbanity but a truly likeable personality, and yet be deeply depraved and corrupt. Does this not show that morality and beauty are completely separate matters? McGinn's reply is that the story "uses art to show that art is not all there is to care about. Or better: it argues for a form of beauty that might seem removed from art in the conventional sense." We might wonder what this form of beauty is. The answer lies in what McGinn calls "the Nabokov formula...that the beautiful is what puts us in mind of ... a world in which curiosity, tenderness, kindness, and ecstasy can be taken for granted". As McGinn points out, this formulation characterises aesthetic merit in moral terms: beauty is something that puts us into contact with certain moral ideals. The emphasis on a world in which moral ideals are normal manages a potential difficulty here, concerning the boring but essential virtues such as diligence, faithfulness, and patience. Instance by instance there seems nothing beautiful about them. But a whole world in which they could be taken for granted might have a depth and grandeur that could engage the aesthetic faculties.

Still, the whole picture is extremely hard to understand. The biggest mysteries concern McGinn's conception of beauty. Are we dealing with an aesthetic conception of morality, as early chapters suggest, or a moral conception of aesthetics, as suggested by the discussion of Nabokov and Wilde? What is it about an evil person that is supposed to be ugly: their actions, their character, their life, their mind as a whole? Is there really supposed to be a single property of beauty, which paintings, music, works of literature, and people's souls exhibit? The most unanswered of these questions is likely to be this

last. Few writers on aesthetics in this century think that there is a single property of beauty shared by things as different as paintings and works of literature, let alone human beings. In the absence of a coherent and informative conception of beauty, the declaration that the characters, minds, or lives of good people are also beautiful seems empty.

In his short final chapter, McGinn comes nearer to answering these questions. Here he points out that narrative, both in fiction and films, provides a central experience of moral situations for most people. It is there that most of us encounter situations which challenge our moral complacency, and which often touch our capacity for compassion and revulsion more strongly than anything in everyday life. A work of fiction can change one's attitude to life in a profound way, and a transformation of values is usually central to the change. Essential in this, McGinn argues, are the techniques specific to fiction, which engage our capacities for aesthetic appreciation and link them to moral reflection, so that "the fictional work can make us see and feel good and evil in a way that no philosophical tract can".

All this is true, and important. But we do not need an aesthetic theory of morality in order to acknowledge it. There are many other links between morality and fiction. Both draw on our abilities to ascribe states of mind to people, and to use thought and imagination to find explanations for their actions. Both turn crucially on relations between individual people and the others around them. Both examine the differences between appearance and reality in a person's conception of herself and of others. These factors could alone be at the root of the power of fiction to change our values. Or it could be that McGinn's explanation is right. But to show this he would have to engage far more with the kinds of thinking we bring to understanding fiction and to working through moral problems.

One purpose of McGinn's book is to awaken in the reader a vivid sense of moral character, a sense that can move us on the one hand to love and on the other to revulsion. There are many signs here of the effect of this sense on McGinn. Works of fiction, aspects of human life, and identifiable particular people arouse in him emotions of admiration or disgust located somewhere between the aesthetic and the visceral. As a consequence, he seems blind to the self-fulfilling aspect of the concept of evil; something that is clear to others whose attachment to morality is less primitive, if also perhaps less firm. If you think that some people have, as McGinn puts it, a "boiling inner ugliness", then your attitude towards them is likely to be much the same as your attitude to excrement. You will want to wash away or bury them. But these are reactions which, if applied to real human beings, would worry any responsible person. The aesthetic theory of morality can have a decidedly ugly side.