**Admiration and Education: What Should We Do with Immoral Intellectuals?**

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**Abstract:** How should academics respond to the work of immoral intellectuals? This question appears to be one that is of increasing concern in academic circles but has received little attention in the academic literature. In this paper, we will investigate what our response to immoral intellectuals should be. We begin by outlining the cases of three intellectuals who have behaved immorally or at least have been accused of doing so. We then investigate whether it is appropriate to admire an immoral person for their intellectual contributions. We will argue that such admiration can be a fitting response to the intellectual achievements of an immoral person but only if the person has indeed done something important. However, we then identify two moral reasons against openly admiring immoral intellectuals. First, that such admiration may give the appearance of condoning the immoral acts of the intellectual. Second, that such admiration may lead to emulation of the intellectual’s problematic ideals. This may be enough to persuade us of the moral reasons to avoid engaging with the work of unimportant and easily replaceable intellectuals in our research and our teaching. However, for more important intellectual figures we have weighty educational reasons to cite them and include them in our courses. This leads to a tension, which we attempt to resolve by proposing ways to accommodate the moral reasons against admiring immoral intellectuals and the intellectual reasons to include them in our courses, though we conclude on the pessimistic note that this tension may not be entirely resolvable.

**Keywords:** applied ethics;academic ethics; admiration; admirable immorality; honour

**Introduction**

In 2016 a group of 169 philosophy professors signed an open letter condemning the behaviour of moral philosopher Thomas Pogge, as allegations about his sexual harassment of young women came to light. Some of those who signed the letter took the further step of refusing to attend conferences at which Pogge was speaking. Other signatories refused to cite his work and to include Pogge on their syllabi. James Sterba, for example, explained his decision to remove Pogge’s work from the reading list of his graduate courses in the following way: “You don’t need him. He carries too much baggage — he doesn’t have to be cited anymore. He’s a negative image and we don’t need that. Maybe if he was Einstein we’d have to cite him, but he’s not” (Kingkade 2016). This decision was denounced by Brian Leiter as amounting to ‘educational malpractice’ (Leiter 2016).

In this paper, we will investigate what our response to immoral intellectuals should be. In §1 we outline the cases of three intellectuals who have behaved immorally or at least have been accused of doing so. We discuss only cases that involve important works. For this reason, we do not talk about intellectuals whose work involves significant academic malpractice (e.g. Paolo Macchiarini, who was found guilty of faking the effectiveness of the artificial tracheas he had implanted in several patients – see Rasko and Power 2017) because these works are not in fact of intellectual importance, given the kind of malpractice. In §2 we investigate whether it is appropriate to admire someone for their intellectual contributions if they are also an immoral person. We will argue that such admiration can be a fitting response to the intellectual achievements of an immoral person but only if the person has indeed done something important. However, in §3 we will then identify two moral reasons against openly admiring immoral intellectuals. First, that such admiration may give the appearance of condoning the immoral acts of the intellectual. Second, that such admiration may lead to emulation of the intellectual’s problematic ideals.

But can’t we include an immoral intellectual in our course or cite them *without* admiring them? In §4 we argue that (other things being equal) citing or including such immoral intellectuals in one’s course constitutes at least the appearance of an expression of admiration for that intellectual, which is enough for it to inherit the problems with admiring immoral intellectuals we identify in §3. This may be enough to persuade us to avoid engaging with the work of unimportant and easily replaceable intellectuals in our research and our teaching. However, for more important intellectual figures we have weighty educational reasons to cite them and include them in our courses. This leads to a tension, which we attempt to resolve in §5. We propose ways to accommodate the moral reasons against admiring immoral intellectuals and the intellectual reasons to include them in our courses, though we conclude on the pessimistic note that this tension may not be entirely resolvable.

1. **Immoral Intellectuals**
2. *John Searle*

Renowned for his work in philosophy language, philosophy of mind, and social philosophy, John Searle has been accused of sexual harassment and sexual assault, as well as creating a hostile work environment. While there have been other accusations against him, they have all come to light because of a lawsuit filed against him by Joanna Ong, a former consultant to his centre – UC Berkerley’s Center for Social Ontology – and research assistant to him. Ong’s complaint against Searle includes that he made sexist and racists remarks around her, that he groped her, that he openly watched pornography around her, and that he cut her wages when she did not comply with his sexual demands (Baker 2017).

We should note that these are accusations against Searle and that there is no definitive proof against him. Still, we might imagine that these or similar accusations being true for someone as important as him in 20th Century analytic philosophy. It is hard to imagine teaching many areas of philosophy adequately without mentioning him and his work. Among other things, he has done landmark work in philosophy of mind, social ontology and speech act theory. In short, many would regard his contributions to philosophy to be so important that he cannot simply be left out of a course in one of these areas.

1. *Martin Heidegger*

Martin Heidegger is one the most important figures in the field of phenomenology. His work *Being and Time* is considered to be a classic of the field. One could arguably not teach phenomenology without touching on some of the views suggested by Heidegger, as well as his many insights. Not only is Heidegger’s work important in its own right, it has also been influential on other important thinkers – such as Jacques Derrida and Hannah Arendt (Oltermann 2014).

But Heidegger’s recently published “black notebooks”, written between the 1930s and the 1970s, reveal that anti-Semitism is at the core of Heidegger’s philosophical views (Oltermann 2014). It is not just that Heidegger was anti-Semitic – many suspected as much – it is also that his anti-Semitism is seemingly *part* of his work, part of the motivation for his views. This makes his case harder than someone like Searle’s for whom the (alleged) sexism and racism do not seem to be present in his work. One German critic is reported to have said that Heidegger’s thinking would now be “hard to defend”. But Jonathan Rée, the editor of the recently published black notebooks, thinks that you can still “engage with Heidegger constructively” (Oltermann 2014). While Rée believes that even if anti-Semitism is built into Heidegger’s views, they may still be taught because “Philosophy is about learning to be aware of problems in your own thinking where you might not have suspected them” (Oltermann 2014; cf. Abundez-Guerra 2018). Rée, then, seems to believe that Heidegger’s anti-Semitism can be turned into an educational advantage. While others do not explicitly say that Heidegger should not be taught, they clearly see the problems that arise from engaging with his work (Oltermann 2014).

1. *Hans Asperger*

Hans Asperger was once widely admired. According to Szalai (2018), “It wasn’t long ago that the autism community considered Asperger a hero, a Nazi-era paediatrician who championed neurodiversity and the special talents of his “high-functioning” patients in order to save their lives.” Some recent books about Asperger reveal some deeply unsettling truths about his involvement with Nazism. Rather than being a moral hero, he seems to have actually been part of the Nazi death machine. Documents discovered by Herwig Czech seem to some to reveal Asperger’s complicity in Nazi eugenicist policies. As reported in John Donvan and Caren Zucker’s (2016) book *In a Different Key*, Asperger referred patients to a mental institution where many of them were killed. Indeed, it seems he was a willing participant in child euthanasia. Because of his apparent complicity, Edith Sheffler believes that the term Asperger Syndrome, “should be consigned to the dustbin of history” (Sparrow and Silberman 2018). Sparrow and Silberman don’t take as strong a line as Sheffler. They note that some diagnostic manuals have already removed that term, but it has been an important term of identification for those considered to be on the Autism Spectrum. Indeed, they note a strong sense of betrayal for such people because Asperger was previously thought to have been “Schindler-esque” – saving from death those who were not considered to be neurotypical enough – but this seems not to have been the case. Even so, it seems hard to imagine not citing Asperger, or not mentioning him in courses about autism.

1. **Immoral Intellectuals and the Fittingness of Admiration**

One way in which the use of immoral intellectuals in education could be criticised is that it involves encouraging people to admire these intellectuals when doing so is unfitting. As

D’Arms and Jacobsen (2000) point out, an emotion’s *fittingness* should be distinguished from its

*all-things-considered* *appropriateness*. To say that an emotion is fitting is just to say that it represents the value of its object accurately. Pride fits something pride-worthy simply because it properly represents the object’s value as being worthy of pride. But just because an emotion is fitting does not mean that it is all-things-considered appropriate to feel that emotion. Let us suppose pride is fitting when we achieve something important to us due to our own talents and abilities. Even given this, we might have an overriding reason not to feel pride. Suppose that if we feel pride we will cause something terrible to happen. Perhaps feeling pride after winning a marathon will cause us to overlook the injury of a fellow runner. In this situation, while pride is fitting it is not all-things-considered appropriate to feel pride. While we might lack the power to not feel pride in this situation, we still have reason not to feel pride. Hence, fittingness is not sufficient for all-things-considered appropriateness.

Why might we think that admiration for immoral intellectuals is unfitting? In order to answer this question we must first say something about the evaluation involved in admiration. As many have noted, admiration involves a positive evaluation of its object (Ben-Ze’ev 2000: 56; Lyons 1980: 90; Smith 1759/ 2007: I.i.4.3). Of course, other positive attitudes – such as adoration and gratitude – involve a positive evaluation of their target. What sets admiration apart from these other attitudes is that admiration involves a kind of *wonder* (Schindler et al 2012).

The important question in this context is what needs to be true of something for this positive attitude of wonder to be fitting? According to Macalester Bell (2011; 2013), the intentional object of admiration is the *whole person*, where the “whole person” is taken to refer to at least a person’s psychological elements – for example, her emotions, dispositions, values, cares, and commitments. If we accept that admiration involves an evaluation of the whole person as Bell suggests, then this provides the resources to object to the use of immoral intellectuals in education. If we encourage people to admire immoral intellectuals then we are encouraging them to experience an unfitting emotion, at least if we think that their immoral behaviour prevents them from being worthy of a positive evaluation of their whole person.

According to our view, admiration is not a globalist emotion. Rather it can be a fitting emotion in response to a person as a whole, more local traits like dispositions, values, cares, and commitments and to a person’s individual actions. While we do not defend this view here, note that the view that admiration is not globalist is taken for granted by Michael Slote (1983), Marcia Baron (1986), and Owen Flanagan (1986) in the debate about admirable immorality. While they disagree on whether there is such a thing as admirable immorality (that is, whether a person can be admirable for traits that are conceptually inseparable from traits that issue immoral actions), each at least agrees that an immoral person may *also* be admirable, such as Bernard Williams’s (1981) description of the artist Gauguin. It strikes us as plausible that at least some immoral intellectuals may be admirable for their work despite their immoral behaviour. As a result, we will turn our attention elsewhere in the search for reasons to object to the use of immoral intellectuals in education and citation practices. In the next section, we identify two moral reasons against openly admiring immoral intellectuals.

1. **The Ethics of Admiration**[[1]](#endnote-1)

The first moral reason against openly admiring immoral intellectuals that we identify is that it may appear to condone the acts of the immoral intellectual. We endorse a broad conception of condonation in this paper. We take it to mean that we either approve or tolerate a piece of bad behaviour, but not that we think it is good (cf. Hughes and Warmke 2017). For example, suppose a friend mistreats us. When we condone their mistreatment of us, we are not saying this behaviour is good. But we are saying that we are not willing to respond to them with appropriate negative emotions, such as resentment or contempt.

The most relevant problem with condonation is that it might *legitimate* bad behaviour in certain contexts. By legitimating, we mean that it might make the wrongdoer believe that they can get away with acting in this manner. By not responding with appropriate negative emotions, we do not express that they have wronged us. And this may have the consequence of leading our friend to believe that their bad behaviour is not in fact bad. This is not a good thing to cultivate in someone, and gives us a moral reason not to condone our friend’s bad behaviour.

We discuss two ways we might condone an immoral intellectual’s behaviour by admiring them. The first is through emotional prioritization, and the second is through exemplar identification. Exemplar identification then provides a second moral reason against admiring immoral intellectuals: it may lead to emulation of the immoral intellectual’s problematic ideals.

1. *Emotional Prioritization*

By choosing to openly admire an immoral intellectual, we are often choosing to express it over other emotions that are also fitting. While they may be admirable, they are also fitting targets of emotions such as indignation. Openly admiring over openly being indignant displays that we are *prioritizing* admiration over indignation. In other words, it displays that we prioritize positive over negative emotions towards this person. Openly admiring might in itself be problematic, for it may disrespect the victims of an immoral intellectual. But there are further problems with such emotional prioritization. Not only does this express their own emotional prioritization, but it may also communicate that such emotional prioritization is how everyone should prioritize their emotions.

The most obvious way that openly admiring someone can convey this is through the *intended meaning* of these expressions.[[2]](#endnote-2) Suppose a person says that Heidegger was the best philosopher of the 20th Century and that this means we should overlook any of his immoral behaviour. In saying this, the person intends to condone his anti-Semitism. They want to communicate that his anti-Semitism ought to be accepted or tolerated given his philosophical talents and achievements.

But one need not communicate condonation so explicitly. Another way to do so is through *attitudinal meaning*.[[3]](#endnote-3) This is the meaning that a speaker’s attitudes, such as her values and care, communicates. Importantly, attitudinal meaning can come apart from intended meaning. Suppose a man interrupts a woman. Even if the man does not intend his interruption to express sexist values, it may be that his sexist values are expressed nonetheless. Similarly, one might defend Heidegger without intending to condone his anti-Semitism. But a person’s admiration-laden defence might still express attitudes of theirs that say that such bigotry is acceptable or tolerable because of his important philosophical work.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Even if those who openly admire immoral intellectuals do not possess these problematic attitudes, our actions and emotional expressions also have a *public* *meaning*. This is the meaning that others can justifiably attribute to our acts given the context in which we perform them. Importantly, this meaning can come apart from both intended and attitudinal meaning. Suppose a man interrupts a woman in an important business meeting. In a patriarchal business culture, it is reasonable to understand this interruption as revealing sexist attitudes or intentions, even if in fact the man has neither. This interruption can have a sexist public meaning, then, even if it lacks a sexist intentional or attitudinal meaning. Similarly, admiration for immoral intellectuals can have a bad public meaning even when it doesn’t express any problematic intentions or attitudes. Part of this depends on the background context. When the admired figure is a powerful figure in a social or institutional hierarchy (for example, a patriarchal society), it seems reasonable to infer that admiration for that figure condones their wrongdoing even if in actual fact it does not. In effect, such admiration sends the message that immoral behaviour or vicious character can be ignored when the figure is a sufficiently gifted intellectual. Such admiration contributes to a culture of legitimation by reinforcing the message that gifted intellectuals’ immoral behaviour will be accepted or tolerated. This applies not only to a background context in which sexism and misogyny are rampant, but also one in which racism, bigotry and identity-prejudice in general – including anti-Semitism – are common.

To summarise, the decision to express admiration rather than indignation for immoral intellectuals can convey that the immoral behaviour is condoned. It can do this even when the admirer’s intentions or attitudes don’t express condonation. Note that we aren’t claiming that this public meaning will be conveyed whenever an immoral intellectual is admired. We are rather defending the weaker claim that this will be communicated *in certain contexts*. One clear context is within academia where there is a history of powerful figures avoiding not only social but also legal punishment for their misdeeds. In these contexts, we have a clear moral reason not to openly admire immoral intellectuals because it may appear to condone their behaviour.

One might object that it is the responsibility of others to *not* read things into our actions that aren’t expressive of our intentions and attitudes rather than it being *our* responsibility to be wary of problematic readings others might have of our actions. We agree that audiences have this responsibility, but this does not mean that we have no responsibility to think about how our actions will be interpreted. Suppose a comedian thinks their ironic racist joke, which they intend to lampoon racists, will in fact be used as a slogan by neo-Nazis to galvanise a popular movement. The audience is at fault for reading that into the comedian’s joke, but the comedian also bears some responsibility for saying the joke in that context. It is a difficulty that these public meanings are context-sensitive and so the public meaning of our actions might sometimes be difficult to determine. But there are some clear cases. And while we don’t have direct control over our feelings of admiration, we do typically have such control over our expressions of admiration. We discuss further worries about the role of the audience in §5.

1. *Exemplar Identification*

Openly admiring a person also has the function of identifying them as someone to be emulated – that is, as an *exemplar*. We do this with intellectual figures all the time. By admiring a person for their intellectual achievements, we identify them as someone we should try to be like. Of course, such admiration might be thought to only be identifying the person as an *intellectual exemplar*. Given this, such admiration may seem to only be evaluating a person’s intellectual abilities and not their moral qualities.

But there are two reasons to be concerned about identifying an immoral person as an exemplar of any kind. Central to both reasons is admiration’s *tendency to spread*. It is a common experience to find that once we admire a person for something that we subsequently find ourselves admiring them for other things. Admiration’s spreading tendency doesn’t mean that it necessarily spreads to the whole self (as claimed by Mason 2003 and Bell 2011; 2013). For example, suppose you admire a friend who is an excellent writer. Your admiration for her writing might seep into other evaluations you make of her. It might make you more understanding of her crankiness. But this does not mean your admiration will typically seep into *all* your interactions with her. You might not see her as a better percussionist just because you admire her for her writing. Now let us consider these two reasons.

First, identifying an immoral intellectual as an intellectual exemplar may condone their behaviour. This is because openly admiring an immoral intellectual may sometimes be reasonably interpreted as expressing admiration for their whole self. In these cases, admiration has spread in our perception. While the admirer may only be admiring the intellectual for their work and associated traits, we may perceive it as admiration for their whole self. This doesn’t imply that we perceive the intellectual is being admired for their immoral behaviour. Rather, it means that we perceive that the admirer is judging that the immoral intellectual is admirable overall. Open admiration for immoral intellectuals may therefore be understood as at least condoning their immoral behaviour. As with emotional prioritization, such condonation may not reflect the intentions or attitudes of the admirers. But condonation may be the public meaning of such admiration.

Second, identifying immoral intellectuals as exemplars may encourage others to emulate them. Emulation is the action tendency typically associated with admiration. We could understand this view in the way Zagzebski (2015, 209; 2017) does, as identifying one of the “fundamental features” of admiration. Less ambitiously, we might simply view this connection as an empirical one, supported by a number of social psychological studies (e.g. Immordino-Yang et al. 2009; Algoe and Haidt 2009). Either way, there is good reason to think that admiration often does lead to a desire to emulate.

One reason to think that the link between admiration and emulation is problematic in the case of immoral intellectuals is that it may lead to others to want to emulate an intellectual’s immoral behaviour. While Zagzebski’s (2017, 43) holds that admiring someone, “gives rise to the motive to emulate the admired person *in the way she is admired*,” (emphasis added), we can see the problem with admiring someone despite their immorality by considering admiration’s spreading tendency. Recall that admiring a person for one thing can lead us to admiring them for other things. For example, a graduate student’s admiration for his supervisor’s intellectual abilities may lead him to admire the way he talks and dresses. Once admiration spreads to these features this may then lead to a desire to emulate these aspects of the person as well. If the supervisor is also an immoral person, then this gives us reason to worry about admiration for such an intellectual, as this may lead to the graduate student to imitate their immorality.

We aren’t suggesting that anyone is going to become an anti-Semite as a direct result of admiring Heidegger. But emulating exemplars needn’t involve straightforward imitation. As Kristjan Kristjánsson (2006, 41) argues, the proper role of exemplars is to, “help you arrive at an articulate conception of what you value and want to strive towards”. Emulation should therefore be seen as a process by which one attempts to achieve these values. Even if it doesn’t lead to us imitating him, holding Heidegger to be an exemplar can be problematic by encouraging us to pursue or uphold problematic ideals. In his case, those ideals may include being open to bigotry and identity-prejudice. Hence, there are two moral reasons not to admire Heidegger and other immoral intellectuals. First, because it may lead to an attachment to morally problematic ideals. Second, because it may appear to condone their immoral behaviour.

1. **Citation, Teaching, and Admiration**

In §3 we identified two moral reasons against openly admiring immoral intellectuals in general. We have not commented on the strength of these reasons but have rather made the case that they exist and have non-negligible strength. In this section, we argue that these moral reasons are strengthened when we consider how admiration is expressed through honours, such being cited and being included in one’s course.

Do we openly express admiration for an immoral intellectual through citing them and including them in our courses? One might object that such inclusion amounts only to an honour and that honours need not express admiration. While honours will normally express admiration, it is possible for an honour not to express admiration. A soldier who receives a medal is honoured, but it is possible that no one in the army or even the army as a collective admires the solider. Despite this conceptual possibility, there remains a necessary connection between honour and *appearing* to express admiration. Even though it is conceptually possible a solider may receive a medal without being admired, it still seems that we can justifiably infer that at least someone in the army or the army as a collective admires the soldier. Being given an honour, then, is excellent evidence that one is admired. Indeed, it seems like it is even better evidence that one is being picked out as someone who *should* be admired. Even more weakly, while an honour might not actually express admiration in some cases, it is part of the (widespread) public meaning of honours that they express admiration.

Let us now consider academic honours. Some academic honours are formal. These include awards such as the Nobel Prize for Chemistry. Other academic honours an informal. The two that we focus on here are being cited and being included in a course. These are honours, we submit, because they involve someone being judged to be *worth* citing or taught. Part of this worth derives from certain people being chosen to be cited or taught *over* others.

Consider citations first. We might think that in an ideal world we would cite everyone relevant to the topic when we write a research paper. However, this is practically untenable. It would not only ruin the flow of a paper (at least in humanities or philosophy), but it would take up too much space to cite everyone it was possible to cite. We therefore need to exercise discretion over who we cite in a paper. By choosing to cite someone in such a context, we are honouring that person because we have chosen them over someone else.

Now consider teaching. It would be fantastic if it were possible to teach every single person who has every written about a particular topic. However, this is not feasible. We are limited beings with limited time, intellectual capacities and attention spans. Teachers therefore have to be selective. The focus should be on the most important figures, then. By choosing to teach one figure over another, we are honouring that figure because we had to choose them over someone else.

There is some evidence of gender biases in citation practices (e.g. Voeten 2013). Even given constraints on space and time, we would hope that those who merit being cited get cited. This is not a *moral* sense of merit, but rather an *intellectual* sense. We can accept attempts and movements to remove gender biases from citation, as well as teaching, practices without thinking that we are moralising education. The point of these movements, it seems, is not that it is *morally* good to remove gender biases in these honorific practices but rather it is *intellectually* good. We are missing out on important scholarship because of these biases. Of course, something being intellectual good may also be morally good. It certainly seems morally good to cite those who have not been cited because of gender bias. But the point remains that the core motivational force behind citing underrepresented groups in academia is not moral, but rather intellectual.

One might worry, then, that moving to not cite immoral intellectuals might display the vice of moralism. But we can avoid this worry in many cases. In many cases, we are dealing with *replaceable* intellectual figures. As Jennifer Saul (2017) suggests, “If you can avoid teaching/discussing them, that may be the best strategy”. We can talk about certain discoveries without referencing a particular person. This is because ideas are often had independently by others. While we might have to cite both figures if we are writing on the *history* of those discoveries, we don’t really need to if we are writing on the discovery itself. The same is true with teaching. Human knowledge is not impoverished by not citing or teaching one of these figures. And if one of them is immoral, then this gives us a reason to not cite them or include them in our courses.

What about the accusation that this amounts to “scholarly malfeasance”? (Leiter 2018a). To repeat, space and time constraints limit who and what we teach. Given this, what is wrong in principle with using an intellectual’s immoral conduct as a deciding factor in not citing or teaching him? Brian Leiter objects to this in principle. He says:

You should not — under any circumstances — adjust your citation practices to punish scholars for bad behavior. You betray both your discipline and the justification for your academic freedom by excising from your teaching and research the work of authors who have behaved unethically” (Leiter 2018a).

If we remove *all* immoral intellectuals from our research and teaching *only because* they are immoral, then perhaps we have done something wrong as Leiter claims. But Leiter’s claim seems overblown. Our citation and teaching practices are sensitive to intellectually arbitrary factors such as time and space. Perhaps if this were an ideal world we would teach and cite everyone, but this is not an ideal world. In the case of replaceable intellectuals, we are merely exercising our academic discretion and freedom in deciding who we cite and teach. Changing our teaching and citation practices because of immorality does not seem inherently problematic. In short, there seems to be no moral or intellectual bar against allowing moral reasons against admiring immoral intellectuals to factor into our deliberation about who and what we should cite and teach.

Of course, wrongdoings differ in significance. We think that the respective strengths of the moral reasons we have identified are dependent on the significance of the moral wrongdoing in question and the way the background context is likely to influence the public meaning of our action. For example, it does not seem particularly problematic to admire an academic who also happens shoplifts from major supermarkets. The cases of immorality we have discussed so far have all involved background social and institutional hierarchies, which has helped us make the point that these moral reasons have non-negligible strength and so should be given proper consideration. The upshot is that there is much less of a problem with citing and teaching the work of intellectuals who commit moral transgressions that do not involve background structural injustices. Of course, that does not mean that doing so is completely unproblematic. However, it is beyond the scope of the present paper to comment on how much of a problem citing and teaching the work of such intellectuals may be.

To be clear, our goal here is simply to outline a moral reason that counts against including immoral intellectual figures in our teaching and citations. Our intention is not to defend the claim that these reasons generate moral requirements, nor is it to blame those who continue to include such figures in their syllabi or citations. Nevertheless, the worry about moralism rears its head again when we consider *pivotal* intellectual figures – that is, figures who we just cannot overlook when teaching topic without impoverishing our knowledge of that topic. The moral reasons against admiring such intellectual figures therefore are in clear tension with our intellectual reasons to cite and include these figures in our courses.

1. **Can this tension be resolved?**

In this section, we consider whether the tension identified in §4 can be resolved. We first (§5.A) consider the possibility that we can express negative attitudes alongside teaching these figures, and we discuss two objections to this approach. We then (§5.B) propose that we should focus on the immoral intellectual’s *ideas* rather than about them as a person. However, this faces the problem that we create a mystique around the figure that might be counter-productive in the long run. We end (5.C) by suggesting that this tension may not be fully resolvable. We draw from Claudia Card’s (2003) work on grey zones to support out point. In short, when an important intellectual does something immoral, they may not only be blameworthy for that, but may also be blameworthy for making it such that we cannot educate adequately without mentioning them and their immorality.[[5]](#endnote-5)

1. *Negative Attitudes*

In §3, we identified two moral reasons *not* to admire immoral intellectuals. In §4, we argued that citing or including immoral intellectuals in one’s course is an honour and so (at the very least) appears to express admiration for them and pick them out as people others ought to admire. This is clearly in tension with the intellectual need to cite and teach the work of some immoral intellectuals.

Our first suggestion to resolve this tension initially focuses on teaching the work of immoral intellectuals. Given that including them in our courses gives at least the appearance of admiring them and identifying them as people who ought to be admired, we could negate the effects of such admiration by expressing fitting negative attitudes to those figures whilst teaching them. For example, when teaching about Searle we might explicitly highlight the claims that have been made against him, as suggested by Saul (2017). But then go further and express indignation or contempt for those that commit the kind of acts he has been accused of committing.

There is no conceptual bar to experiencing or expressing two conflicting emotions towards one person. Consider the mother whose love for her teenage daughter leads to her anger when she stays out past her curfew. This is obvious insofar as one can be said to have an emotion when one is disposed to feel certain ways (e.g. love and anger towards the same person when exposed to different stimulus), but it also seems that one can have conflicting feelings at the same time. While we have argued there is a problem if we *prioritize* admiration over (say) indignation with respect to immoral intellectuals, we aren’t always forced to make such a prioritization. We can instead express both simultaneously. And so, even if we are expressing admiration for an immoral intellectual by including them in our course, we can negate the effects of such an appearance by explicitly condemning them as we teach them.

One advantage of this approach is that it might make our practice of admiring better, something which Spurgin (2012) has argued for in the context of sporting role models. He argues we should come to see sportstars as exemplars for particular *qualities* rather than exemplars *simpliciter*. In effect, we may help to teach others and ourselves how to admire without it spreading problematically. By actually teaching these immoral figures, we can therefore actively help to improve our admiration practices. In terms of the moral reason we identified, we may *reduce* the appearance of condonation (or indeed, actual condonation in many cases) for immoral intellectuals as a consequence of them being included in our courses.

There are two objections one might raise here. First, one might think that emotions have no role to play in teaching or research. Second, one might think that our arguments rest on an unflattering view of our audience as unable to see that (among other things) intellectual honour and admiration only pick out a person as an intellectual exemplar.[[6]](#endnote-6)

In response to the first objection, note that emotions are already a feature of teaching. When atrocities are taught, it seems hard to imagine teachers not expressing emotions such as horror, dismay, anger, and contempt about the event and about its perpetrators. Of course when we are not dealing with such events, we might think emotions should not be involved. But then teachers often praise and blame students for doing well or badly. And we often read about works being “excellent” or “seminal” and these expressions (while sometimes misplaced) seem to clearly express emotions on the part of their author – at least in the minimal sense that the works are being picked out as worthy or not worthy of a particular set of emotions. Indeed, as we argued above, merely including an author in a course is an honour and so at least appears to pick them out as someone who ought to be admired. We are emotional creatures and it seems implausible that we could completely screen off those emotions in all forms whilst we are teaching. In light of that, we need to think about what effect our positive emotions about immoral figures have on our audience and we have reason to negate the effects of those positive emotions by pairing them with negative emotions.

This leads us to the second objection. We might think that some audiences – such as school children – will be less critical to expressions of admiration for immoral individuals, whereas other audiences – such as graduate students or professional academics – will be much more critical such that it is less problematic (perhaps completely unproblematic) to teach the work of immoral intellectuals to these audiences. Strictly speaking, this seems correct: more advanced audiences are likely to be more critical. But we must be wary. Part of the problem, as we discussed earlier, is that admiration spreads and this typically occurs unconsciously. Consider the following case as evidence of this.

Avital Ronell is Professor of German and Comparative Literature at New York University (NYU). She is described by one of her colleagues as “one of the very few philosopher-stars of this world” (Greenberg 2018). Recently, however, Ronell was found to have sexually harassed Nimrod Reitman, a graduate student of hers when the harassment took place. What is notable about Ronnell’s case is not just that she was found culpable after an 11-month long investigation by NYU, but also that leading scholars came to her defence as signatories on the following letter, which was apparently written by leading feminist scholar Judith Butler, that was intended to be sent to the President and Provost of NYU:

We wish to communicate first in the clearest terms our profound an enduring admiration for Professor Ronell whose mentorship of students has been no less than remarkable over many years. We deplore the damage that this legal proceeding causes her, and seek to register in clear terms our objection to any judgment against her. We hold that the allegations against her do not constitute actual evidence, but rather support the view that malicious intention has animated and sustained this legal nightmare.

As you know, Professor Ronell has changed the course of German Studies, Comparative Literature, and the field of philosophy and literature over the years of her teaching, writing, and service.  […] There is arguably no more important figure in literary studies at New York University than Avital Ronell whose intellectual power and fierce commitment to students and colleagues has established her as an exemplary intellectual and mentor throughout the academy.  […]

We ask that you approach this material with a clear understanding of the long history of her thoughtful and successive mentorship, the singular brilliance of this intellectual, the international reputation she has rightly earned as a stellar scholar in her field, her enduring commitments to the university, and the illuminated world she has brought to your campus where colleagues and students thrive in her company and under her guidance.  She deserves a fair hearing, one that expresses respect, dignity, and human solicitude in addition to our enduring admiration.[[7]](#endnote-7)

The explicit expressions, as well as the various implicit expressions, of admiration for Ronell are particularly jarring given that this was *after* she had been found culpable of sexual harassment. Part of the explanation for this, we submit, is that admiration for her intellectual talents and achievements has spread. She is seen as not just an intellectual exemplar, but as a moral one too. Because of their admiration for her intellectual achievements and their related perception of her moral character, these scholars could not imagine that she would do such things. This is especially surprising given that some of the signatories are feminist scholars who are apparently familiar with the effect that power structures (whether society-wide or institutional- or context-specific) can have for facilitating and legitimating this kind of wrongdoing. So it seems that even the most advanced audiences can be subject to the pernicious effects of admiration spreading.

In light of these considerations, we have reason to express indignation when teaching or discussing immoral figures *at all levels*. It might be that we have to avoid teaching immoral intellectuals for younger audiences, but it seems better to teach them but also highlight their immorality in the course of doing so. This would aid in the Spurgin-inspired project of developing our honour and admiration practices. Indeed, as Abundez-Guerra (2018) argues, it may also be intellectually beneficial. And we also have reason to express indignation when we cite these figures. We might add a footnote noting their immorality, for example. But, as Nikki Usher (2018) notes, it is highly unlike that current journal editorial practices would allow such a thing. Given that we can make a good case for this in the classroom, an analogous case can be made for it in print. Of course, there are reasons to resist modifying our citation practices. For one thing, it could become ground for unjustified vengeance. Whilst this is also true for teaching, the more permanent nature of publications makes the problem weigh much heavier. We suggest, then, that this kind of practice in citation is only engaged in with clear and uncontroversial cases of immoral intellectuals. With teaching, we are more open to discuss allegations that have been made against a figure. If anything, it will help us to focus on their intellectual qualities rather than allowing us to mistakenly form the view that they are an overall admirable person.

One drawback of such an approach, though, is that it might make the immoral figure seem more alluring. It might seem as if they *had to* do these bad things to make all the intellectual progress they did. There is certainly more to be said here. We raise this problem to show there is no straightforward way to resolve this tension.

1. *Teach the idea, not the person*

Our second suggestion is that we should teach immoral intellectuals’ ideas rather than teach about them. Clearly, this may counteract the moral reason against teaching them, but it won’t counteract the moral reason against citing them. By not teaching about the immoral person, we help to distinguish them from their ideas. We can still, then, encourage admiration for the ideas without also encouraging admiration for the person who had those ideas.

The underlying thought with this approach is that giving *attention* to such figures is problematic. In other areas, there is a move not to give attention to immoral figures. Many have argued that we shouldn’t show photos of mass killers on TV because this may glamorise them (e.g. Frank 2018). In effect, it seems these people think we should focus on the killers’ acts and the effects it has had rather than to focus on them as persons. Likewise, our suggestion is that we might focus on the ideas and their importance rather than on the immoral person who had those ideas.

One worry with this approach, though, is that it might create a sense of mystique or intrigue about the immoral intellectual. In an age where most information is easily attainable on the internet, we seem to be all but delaying those who want that information getting it. Then again, it still seems good that we don’t glamourize immoral intellectuals in the eyes of those who wouldn’t otherwise seek to get more information about them.

Another worry with this approach is that it closes off the possibility of using a thinker’s immorality as an educative opportunity, as we mentioned Reé suggested with respect to Heidegger. It might be difficult to teach this kind of lesson without discussing Heidegger’s life in relation to his works. Similarly, Abundez-Guerra (2018) claims that the right way to teach Kant’s philosophy is one that involves “deep recognition” of his racist beliefs such that these beliefs inform how we interpret his work. Again, such engagement will be difficult (if not impossible) to accomplish without discussing the person alongside their work.

1. *Intellectual Grey Zones*

So far we have tried to find ways to resolve the tension between intellectual reasons to cite and teach immoral intellectuals and moral reasons against citing and teaching those figures. Our final point is that in some cases this tension may be unresolvable. We are forced into a kind of academic grey zone, where it is hard not to become implicated in wrongdoing. As we note below, this doesn’t mean that we should just do nothing. And nor does it mean that there is no moral problem – morality just isn’t that clean cut. But it does mean that we have to accept that it is likely that we will have teach and cite some immoral intellectuals.

Claudia Card (2003) argues that wrongdoers often put others in grey zones – that is, they make it such that it is very hard for others, including victims of the wrongdoer, not to commit further wrongdoing. One of the clearest examples involves prisoners in concentration camps in World War 2 who worked for the Nazis in order to get privileges. Given the situation, it was often very hard (but not impossible) for these prisoners to refuse to co-operate. The result is that the Nazis often implicated these otherwise innocent people in their wrongdoing.

The gravity of the wrongdoing committed by immoral intellectuals is not usually at the scale of the wrongs committed by the Nazis. And nor are the wrongdoings we might then be implicated in by immoral intellectuals – any harms caused by citing Heidegger cannot be compared to helping to process people to be executed at a concentration camp, for example. But the point we wish to make is that when *pivotal* intellectuals acts immorally, they may not only be guilty of that immorality but also of putting us in the position where it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for us to not do something morally wrong or bad by citing or teaching them. And it may be that we cannot fully resolve the tension between the intellectual reasons to teach and cite these figures and the moral reasons not to teach and cite them. It may be, then, a tragic fact that we have to live with honouring and so at least appearing to admire and saying that others ought to admire these immoral intellectuals. We may do wrong by teaching and citing these figures, but perhaps that’s just something we ultimately have to live with.

1. **Conclusion**

We have investigated the use of immoral intellectuals in education and citation practices. We first argued that admiration can be a fitting response to the intellectual achievements of an immoral person. However, we have argued that there are at least two moral reasons that count against admiring immoral intellectuals – namely, such admiration can at least appear to condone the immoral behaviour of the intellectual and that it may lead others to emulate their problematic ideals. We then argued that citing and teaching the work of immoral intellectuals counts as at least a minimal form of admiration. While we have highlighted moral reasons against admiring certain kinds of immoral intellectuals, we don’t want to rule out admiring them completely.We have not claimed that we have a duty not to admire these intellectuals nor have we claimed that it is always all-things-considered inappropriate to admire them. While we considered ways to mitigate the moral reason against citing or teaching them, we accept that sometimes it is necessary to cite or teach the work of such people. While in some cases this may be entirely unproblematic, we noted that there may also be cases where this puts us in an academic grey zone, where it is hard to not become implicated wrongdoing. But this doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try to mitigate the moral reasons against admiring them by focusing on their ideas or expressing negative attitudes towards them. Doing so seems like a step forward even if it doesn’t completely remove the moral taint in their work. In other words, we should avoid the overly simple “do nothing” approach and the radical “boycott” approach, at least in the vast majority of cases.[[8]](#endnote-8) We have only considered two ways to mitigating the harm with teaching and citing immoral intellectuals. It is a continuing project for us all to devise new and thoughtful ways to develop and improve our honour and admiration practices to further mitigate these harms. It is important that we do not simply assume that there are easy answers to these difficult moral problems. We should rather engage with them and exercise ethical sensitivity throughout this process.[[9]](#endnote-9)

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1. Our arguments in this section are adapted from Archer and Matheson (forthcoming). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Intended meaning is similar to what Grice (1957) calls non-natural meaning or what has become known as *speaker meaning*. Since we take intended meaning to go beyond speech acts, we prefer our terminology. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. What we mean by ‘attitudinal meaning’ is similar to what McKenna (2012) means by ‘agent meaning’ in his conversational theory of moral responsibility. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The idea that emotions might communicate something other than what the agent intends isn’t new. Macnamara (2015) argues this with respect to the reactive emotions, such as anger and resentment. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For another approach on how to resolve this tension with respect to Kant and his racism, see Abundez-Guerra (2018). He argues we should have an attitude of “deep acknowledgement” of Kant’s racism when teaching about this. Though we briefly discuss this idea later on, we unfortunately lack the space to fully engage with Abundez-Guerra’s arguments. Note though that he also avoids the simplistic “do nothing” approach and the radical “boycott” approach by taking a more nuanced middle ground approach. For an argument that Kant’s racism is not part of his work, see Hill and Boxill (2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing us to consider this second objection. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This letter was passed on to Brian Leiter who made it available on his blog. See Leiter (2018b). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. It is not clear if anyone actually endorses the radical boycott approach. Commentators on this might think Saul does, but even a quick reading of Saul’s points reveal her position is much more nuanced than advocating a mere boycott of the works of immoral intellectuals. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
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