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Ethics and Fiction: Imaginary Evil and Aesthetic Value

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Many fictional works aim to amuse audiences with accounts of immoral characters engaging in evil deeds. A number of positions have emerged to determine to what degree, if any, a work's treatment of unethical events shapes its aesthetic value. In this dissertation I will evaluate four existing positions and advance my own for consideration, empathic autonomism. I argue that it is not unethical for audience members to enjoy imaginary immoral acts and I will show how this affects various stances. I will present objections to rival views and argue that a fictional work's ability to allow audiences to empathize with characters is aesthetically meritorious regardless of the ethical value of attitudes prescribed by the piece.

For
Franki, Franki, Wallis, Emma,
Mom and Dad,
Madeline and Hopie

Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1 − Introduction

My dissertation focuses on how to best determine the aesthetic value of fictional works that cast imaginary immoral acts in a favorable light. Loads of excellent fictional narratives involve patently terrible characters carrying out horrendous deeds. Many depict unsavory individuals while aiming to engage and delight audiences with accounts of heinous activities. Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* allows readers to see what it is like to be a pedophile who will do anything to be with his object of affection. Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* lets us look inside the minds of two radically different men, a man on the run with drug money and the trained killer who has been hired to recover the cash and kill whoever has it. Michael Crichton's *The Great Train Robbery* shows us the many, many clever acts of an expert thief who plans for over a year to pull off the greatest heist in British history. These works have been celebrated as excellent artistic achievements. But some wonder exactly how much aesthetic credit works like these deserve. They claim that while these novels are excellent, they are less excellent because they elicit morally inappropriate responses from audiences. Grown men who orchestrate feats of manipulation to have sex with a child are just plain horrible, so no reader of *Lolita* should enjoy reading about the many steps of Humbert Humbert's deviant pursuits. And the same goes for folks reading the other books. We should not root for bad guys to succeed, critics maintain, even if their success is purely fictional and at the expense of entirely made-up victims.

Many philosophers claim that the aesthetic value of such works is diminished precisely because of how they treat unethical behavior. David Hume offers his thoughts on the intersection of aesthetics and ethics when he tells us:

> But where the ideas of morality and decency alter from one age to another, and where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation; this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity. I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments; and however I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age, I never can relish the composition.[1]

Hume makes moral and aesthetic claims in this passage. He explains that works suffer aesthetically if they depict unethical acts without a tone of condemnation. This aesthetic failure stems from audience members being unwilling and unable to respond favorably to fictional evil. When works aim to get readers to cheer for unsavory characters, we're just not going to play along, so we should think less of these works, according to Hume.

Hume's claims along these lines have served as a foundation for a couple of positions in the current debate over how the ethical features of fictional pieces influence their aesthetic value. Moralist stances hold that works are affected artistically as Hume tells us. The boldest of the moralist positions, ethicism, posits that works will *always* suffer aesthetically to the extent that they aim to elicit unqualified positive responses to imaginary evil. Ethicism embraces Hume's assertion that it is immoral for us to respond kindly to fictional evil. Another moralist stance, moderate moralism, is less bold in that it claims that works like these *may* be less valuable aesthetically because of their moral flaws. Moderate

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[1] Hume, D. (1985). Of the standard of taste. In *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 246.

moralism is consistent with another of Hume's claims, that audiences do in fact resist positive depictions of untoward behavior. I will also go over two other positions in this dissertation, cognitive immoralism and moderate autonomism, but these stray from the Humean tradition. Cognitive immoralists believe that works may be aesthetically stronger in case they help audiences realize epistemic gains resulting from their engagement with imaginary immoral acts. Moderate autonomists don't see a necessary link between the ethical value attitudes elicited by works and their aesthetic value. Moderate autonomists believe that works of fiction have a particular aim, to entertain audiences, and that this goal is different than a goal to morally enlighten folks. They claim that works endorsing unethical attitudes may be morally flawed, but that this moral flaw does not entail aesthetic flaws.

My primary focus in this dissertation is to determine to what extent, if any, the ethical value of a fictional work influences its aesthetic value. In addition to presenting and evaluating existing positions, I will offer my own view, empathic autonomism, which falls under the scope of moderate autonomism. I will examine the ethical value of our responses to imaginary evil according to a number of ethical theories. I will look at our responses to fictional evil to determine whether we should resist going along with unsavory imaginary acts as Hume has prescribed. And because my view involves the importance of audiences empathizing with fictional characters, I will examine what it is like to see the world through eyes of imaginary folks, people who don't exist in the real world at all. After all of this, I aim to show that works depicting fictional evil in a positive light

maintain their aesthetic value and can be stronger aesthetically if they allow us to empathize with unseemly characters. Here is a brief account of the my project:

Chapter two will examine whether it is immoral for us to enjoy imaginary wicked acts. I will consider how utilitarians and Kantians would judge our engagement with such works. Because utilitarianism focuses on the consequences of one's behavior, I will discuss various psychological studies that aim to determine to what degree, if any, people respond aggressively after consuming fictional violent acts. I will go over Kantian ethics to determine if audience members violate the categorical imperative when they respond favorably to imaginary immoral acts. I argue that it is not unethical for audiences to do so according to either moral theory.

Chapter three will continue the examination of our responses to fictional evil but will consider the matter from the perspective of virtue theories of ethics. According to some authors, enjoying imaginary immoral acts is unethical because it reflects our existing poor character. Other virtue theorists disagree and maintain that our consumption of fictional evil will damage our character going forward. I argue that these views are flawed and that our responses to imaginary immoral acts are not relevantly tied to our character. I will also argue that worries stemming from each brand of virtue ethics are suspect because they are contingent upon a mistaken notion of global character traits.

Because all of the participants in the debate agree that a work's ability to allow audience members to empathize with fictional characters is an important kind of artistic engagement, I will examine accounts of empathy with imaginary

entities in chapter four. In our daily lives, to empathize with others involves our ability to see events in the world from their perspective, to know what it is like to feel what they are feeling. Fictional narratives are not about real people but imaginary persons, so some philosophers have argued that we cannot empathize with people who do not exist. I will go over two different explanations of our apparently empathic responses to fictional characters and discuss how this may affect the aesthetic debate.

Some authors claim that works that offer positive depictions of imaginary immoral acts will not be able to produce their prescribed responses because audience members are unwilling or unable to go along with such misdeeds, even if they are purely fictional. This kind of phenomenon has been called imaginative resistance and I will examine two accounts of this response to unethical imaginary evil in chapter five. I will argue that the aesthetic theories that lean upon imaginative resistance have given an inadequate explanation of the moral justification of the phenomenon.

Chapter six includes accounts of four existing aesthetic positions: ethicism, moderate moralism, cognitive immoralism, and moderate autonomism. I will examine a number of works so that we may see how each position has us evaluate pieces with favorable depictions of imaginary immoral acts. I will critically examine three of these views in chapter seven and will present objections to each position.

I will present my own view, empathic autonomism, in chapter eight and will argue that a work is not necessarily less aesthetically valuable if it attempts to

engage audiences with fictional unethical acts. I will support the positive claim that a work's ability to allow audience members to empathize with fictional characters, even those who are hugely immoral, improves its aesthetic value. I will go over objections to moderate autonomism since they apply to my view as well, and I will argue that empathic autonomism gives us the best means to determine the aesthetic value of works that aim to please us with accounts of imaginary immoral acts.

Chapter 2 − Is it Immoral to Enjoy Imaginary Wicked Acts?

Several kinds of imaginative endeavors involve engaging in fantastic unethical events. People can be amused while reading about evil characters and they can be captivated by watching dastardly behavior in movies. The novel *No Country for Old Men* contains a most heinous villain, one who murders many and feels no qualms in doing so. The film *Ocean's Eleven* shows audiences how a bunch of crooks work together to pull off the heist of a lifetime. The video game *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* allows players to choose to stop a car in traffic and to beat the driver before absconding with a stolen car. Audiences engage in countless forms of imaginary immoral acts (IIA), and some hold that we should be held ethically accountable for our immorally active imaginations. Even though these acts involve only fictional events and characters, they claim that we are blameworthy for our attitudes towards such depictions of unethical acts. In this chapter, I will examine two different approaches to determine whether it is immoral to enjoy imaginary unethical acts.

Utilitarian Evaluation

According to utilitarianism, acts are moral in proportion to how they produce positive consequences, results leading to increased happiness, or immoral in proportion to how they produce negative consequences, results leading to decreased happiness or increased pain. When it comes to how we experience fictional works, we can suppose that in most cases audiences realize short-term happiness when they consume such pieces.   This will be the case for

narratives of all kinds, those with morally significant content and those without, along with those that entertain us by encouraging us to enjoy immoral behavior, and those that amuse us by depicting ethical behavior. Audiences consume fictions for a host of reasons, but by and large, we do so because we enjoy the imaginative experiences they afford us.

Because utilitarianism involves examining the states of affairs caused by a given act, one must consider whether consuming IIA produces any negative consequences. Such engagement may be considered unethical if it can be shown that it leads to negative consequences that outweigh positive ones. If it were determined that experiencing IIA were to lead audience members to behave immorally themselves, or even if it could lead to an increased likelihood of audiences acting unethically, then the negative consequences may outweigh gains of happiness produced by audiences enjoying fictions. This is a purely empirical question, one that may be investigated by the social sciences. Unless it can be determined that audiences who enjoy imaginary depictions of evil have their behavior affected negatively to such a degree as to outweigh the short-term pleasure felt while engaging in fictions, utilitarianism does not deem such forms of entertainment immoral. Whether one takes joy in works that elicit morally appropriate responses from the audience or one delights in imaginary unethical acts is ethically immaterial so long as the results are the same, if commensurate amounts of happiness are produced. If an audience member experiences pleasure while reading about IIA, these thoughts and feelings are not of ethical importance if they do not motivate her to commit immoral acts herself. Whether

she is amused by slap-stick comedy involving the likes of Jim Carey, slasher films with characters like Freddy Kruger or Jason Voorhees, or crime movies filled with sexist comments is of no consequence provided that her will is not influenced to the degree to lead her to carry out unsavory acts against others.

There has been an explosion in the psychological literature in the last decade about how engaging in violent fictional media may affect audience members. But relatively little of this has involved violent films, violent books, or music with violent lyrical content. Instead, researchers have focused their efforts on potential effects of playing violent video games (VVG). VVG have become hugely popular in America and around the world, and a great portion of video games involve terrific violence. As more and more people have violent video materials at their fingertips, more and more studies have been conducted to look for effects of playing VVG. Dozens of published papers report finding causal links between playing VVG and increased aggression and decreased empathy. Many authors have supposed that exposure to VVG is similar in kind to exposure to violent films or novels. Others have claimed that VVG engage players in a different way. Rather than merely passively witnessing fictional violent acts as they would if they were watching a movie or reading a violent book, playing VVG involves players actively engaged in violent acts; they bring about the violence by controlling their character. Since playing VVG involves audiences not only observing IIA but producing such violent acts, many have contended that our responses to VVG may be stronger than our responses to violent films and novels. I won't dispute that claim here. The studies I will address in this chapter

all involve persons being evaluated after their exposure to VVG.[2] In each study, persons who have just played VVG are examined and persons who have not just played VVG are examined as well, with the results compared in order to determine if playing VVG increases aggression. Before presenting the results of these studies, I will discuss different forms of aggression that are measured. All of the studies involve adult test subjects. The effects of children engaging with immoral fictions are important to determine and to measure but I will not tend to them in this project.

Persons can experience and display aggression in various ways. One way is called aggressive cognition, which involves activating aggression-related thoughts and knowledge structures.[3] To measure one's aggressive cognition, subjects are asked to identify words associated with aggression and words not associated with aggression and the times needed to make such identifications are recorded and compared. When a subject is able to identify aggression-related words significantly more quickly than nonaggression-related words, he is thought to display aggressive cognition. Another method used to measure aggressive cognition is story completion. In such tests subjects are presented a story missing an ending and are asked to complete the tale. A story might involve a kind of angry confrontation between two characters that results in a verbal disagreement. Lacking an ending, subjects are prompted to complete the

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[2] I do this for two reasons. There are relatively few studies that focus on the effects of engaging in violent song lyrics, books, and films. And few of these studies use modern testing procedures. Of the more recent studies, the results for these forms of media are markedly similar to those gleaned from most studies involving exposing persons to VVG.

[3] Anderson, C., Shibuya, A., Ihori, N., Swing, E., Bushman, B., Sakamoto, A., et al. (2010). Violent video game effects on aggression, empathy, and prosocial behavior in eastern and western countries: A meta-analytic review, *Psychological Bulletin* 2010, Vol. 136, 151-173.

story as they see fit. Subjects can tell of characters continuing to respond angrily, either verbally or physically, and they can tell of characters resolving the dispute peacefully (These are just two of myriad possible kinds of responses.). Subjects who offer endings containing aggressive behavior and thoughts are seen as having aggressive cognition. Word fragment completion tests are a third means to measure aggressive cognition. Subjects are instructed to fill in the blanks to create words. For example, a subject may be asked to complete the word, 'K I _ _'. If she selects 'KISS', then she is not considered to be experiencing aggressive cognition, but if she were to select 'KILL', then she would be.[4]

In addition to aggressive cognition, people can experience aggressive affect. This involves persons experiencing feelings of anger, hostility, or revenge. Aggressive affect is assessed by asking participants to complete questionnaires to report their feelings. Participants frequently complete the State Hostility Scale, which employs the Likert Scale.[5] This involves participants responding to questions about their feelings at the moment on a 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) scale. Prompts include statements such as "I feel mean" and "I feel irritated."

Decreased empathy is measured in a similar fashion. In order to determine how much one identifies with the emotional states of characters in a film or game, she is instructed to use self-reporting scales to report to what degree she empathizes and sympathizes with them. When subjects appear to

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[4] Barlett, C., Branch, O., Rodenheffer, C., and Harris, R. (2009) How long do the short-term violent video game effects last. *Aggressive Behavior*, Vol. 35, 225-236.
[5] Barlett, C., Branch, O., Rodenheffer, C., and Harris, R., 227.

empathize and sympathize very little with characters, the term 'desensitization' is frequently used. One is desensitized to violence she witnesses when she experiences reduced negative emotional responses.[6] In addition to employing questionnaires, researchers measure heart rates of participants as they witness violent acts, both fictional and real. Higher heart rates are associated with experiencing greater empathy and sympathy while lower heart rates indicate lower levels of identification and concern.

Aggressive behavior is not measured in any of these ways. Instead, subjects are prompted to behave in particular situations and their responses can exhibit different degrees of aggression. In studies employing the Taylor competitive reaction time test (TCRTT), participants are told that they are in a competition with another subject and the competition involves answering questions the most quickly. If the test subject answers first (by pressing a button), then he wins and the other participant loses. Participants are instructed to notify the loser of his performance by emitting a noise blast, and participants are allowed to set the volume and duration of the noise blasts. Choosing higher volume levels is linked with greater aggression, while choosing lower volume levels is not.[7] These blasts can be produced using standard settings on most computers, and the volume is not sufficiently loud to hurt the ears of those hearing blasts, nor is it loud enough to cause any damage to one's ears. As such, the blasts do not appear to be very stressful to experience or to

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[6] Anderson, C., Shibuya, A., Ihori, N., Swing, E., Bushman, B., Sakamoto, A., et al.,157.
[7] Anderson, C., Carnagey, N. (2009) Causal effects of violent sports video games on aggression: is it competitiveness or violent content?, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *45*(4), 731-739.

administer.[8] Similarly, long emissions of the blasts are considered aggressive while brief blasts are not. The Hot Sauce Paradigm is another test used to measure aggressive behavior. Participants are instructed to add an amount of hot sauce to a cup of chili sauce that is to be given to another participant. They are told that the other participant dislikes hot and spicy foods. Test subjects have two kinds of options. They can choose to add a certain number of drops of hot sauce to the dish and they can choose which sauce to add based on its degree of hotness. In such studies, choosing to add many drops to the bowl is considered aggressive behavior, as is choosing to use the hotter hot sauces.[9]

    With a laundry list of methods at their disposal, research teams have attempted to discover to what extent, if any, playing VVG leads to increased aggression and decreased empathy. To this date, the majority of studies have produced results consistent with one another. The evidence suggests that playing VVG is causally linked to increased aggressive cognition, increased aggressive affect, decreased empathy, and increased aggressive behavior. With such results at one's disposal, one might suppose that utilitarians now have the evidence they need to make a judgment about the ethical value of playing VVG and that they would find such behavior immoral. Playing VVG produces a number of negative consequences, even consequences that lead to increased rates of committing aggressive acts, so it may appear that playing VVG produces more harm than good.

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[8] Ferguson C.J., Rueda, S.M. (2009) Examining the validity of the modified Taylor competitive reaction time test of aggression, *Journal of Experimental Criminology*. 5,121–137.
[9] Barlett, C., Branch, O., Rodenheffer, C., and Harris, R, 226.

But utilitarians need not reach such a conclusion. While one can recognize the many negative effects caused by playing VVG, there may be many beneficial effects that outweigh them. Playing VVG appears to produce much joy for those who choose to play them. Playing such games provides players with many hours of entertainment and this may offset the production of aggressive cognition, aggressive affect, and decreased empathy that they might experience. Even after aggressive behavior is taken into account, the negative effects of playing VVG, and of engaging in immoral fiction, are rather slight. Many other activities may produce similar negative effects, but given that they produce more positive consequences than negative ones, we do not deem them immoral. Driving a car during rush hour traffic may very well lead to many forms of short-term increased aggression and to decreased empathy and sympathy, but we are not quick to label commuter driving immoral. Similarly, watching one's favorite sports team lose to its bitter rival appears to create a host of negative experiences for fans, and in some cases to the friends and family members around them, but it is not morally inappropriate to watch such games. Even if a person notices that he tends to feel and behave like a sore loser, watching the game is not unethical in and of itself. Plus, people are able to learn from their past behavior in such cases and combine this understanding with the findings of particular psychological studies. A person who tends to be a sourpuss after watching his favorite team lose a game can recognize his aroused state, recognize that he is more likely to snap or to be rude to others, and then try to behave properly. He can notice a pattern that has emerged from his own

behavior and he may look at findings of studies like the ones that I've addressed here to learn how people tend to become more aggressive. The ability to contemplate one's actions along with an understanding of how one is likely to act without such contemplation may reduce or eliminate the negative effects of watching sports events, of consuming unethical fiction, and of playing VVG. Agents can discover how certain events may prime them to be aggressive in various ways and they can deliberately work to overcome their aroused impulses.

Furthermore, many people report that watching slasher movies, rooting for their favorite teams, and playing VVG reduces feelings of stress, frustration, and hostility. These activities are selected by some as a way to blow off some steam. While many people prefer options such as exercise and loving on a pet to decrease pent up anger and stress, some choose other methods. Many people listen to death metal music, play first-person shooters (video games that allow players to shoot and kill creatures and to see such acts from the first person perspective), or view horror movies like *Saw* to provide a release of their unpleasant thoughts and feelings about the real world. Even though engaging in such activities has been shown to produce an assortment of negative short-term effects, these short-term effects may wear off and people may feel satisfaction and relief after indulging in forms of IIA. If the cathartic effects of enjoying violent media provide persons with a safe outlet for their aggressive feelings, thoughts, and desires, then spending one's free time this way may produce more benefits that we might suppose.[10]

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[10] John L. Sherry explores the cathartic effects of violent media and finds the studies lacking. He claims that to date, results of studies do not support belief in the claim that playing violent video

There are also concerns regarding some of the different kinds of aggressive effects supposedly demonstrated by various psychological studies, along with doubts about how results obtained in the laboratory environment correspond to effects that may occur in the outside world. Increased aggressive cognition after exposure to VVG may involve nothing more than our brains being primed to consider certain subject matter. If a person thinks about a given topic for a period then he may be more likely to think of things related to that topic shortly thereafter. If a person watches the movie *Speed Racer*, he may be more likely to think of words related to speeding and racing. If asked to complete word fragments, he may be more apt to spell 'FAST' than 'FACT' when given the prompt, 'F A _ _'. Similarly, if asked to complete a story about driving, he may be more likely to end the story with an account of someone breaking the laws of the road while speeding excessively and performing dangerous maneuvers. If this were to happen, I don't think we would be given good reason to be concerned about persons watching films filled with scenes of reckless driving. That a person who just viewed scenes of reckless driving on the screen has thoughts of reckless driving on his mind seems neither surprising nor troublesome. A certain topic may have just been brought to the height of his attention and this could influence how he completes words. Furthermore, mere aggressive cognition may not be a negative experience. Just considering certain kinds of acts or thinking of

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games is casually linked with providing such catharsis. Sherry, J.L. (2007) Violent video games and aggression: Why can't we find effects? In Preiss, R.W., Gayle, B. M., Burrell, N., Allen, M., Bryant, J. (Eds.), *Media Effects Research: Advances Through Meta-Analysis*. (245-262). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishing.

words associated with particular subjects does not entail any sort of approval of such words, nor does it entail an inclination to perform certain kinds of acts.

Even if watching *Speed Racer* or playing a violent racing video game produces effects similar to those described in the above-mentioned studies, we have still been given no evidence to support the claim that this activity will lead to any negative long-term consequences, serious or otherwise. The connection between one's thoughts, moods, and actions involving IIA do not seem tightly connected to his status in the real world. While there have been loads of studies measuring immediate effects of violent media, a paltry sum have measured effects that occur later. One study measured effects of playing VVG and it took measurements either four minutes after playing the VVG or nine minutes later.[11] This study employed the Hot Sauce Test and measured for aggressive cognition, aggressive affect, and aggressive behavior. The results from participants who were instructed to add hot sauce four minutes after playing a VVG mirrored those found in studies presented above. Participants who just played VVG were more likely to display aggressive cognition, aggressive affect, and aggressive behavior. But the results for participants who were told to add hot sauce nine minutes after playing such a game were markedly different. Researchers discovered that there was no significant increase in participants's levels of aggression after merely nine minutes had passed since playing a VVG. While playing VVG did lead to increased levels of aggression that lasted up to four minutes, the effects of VVG on aggressive cognition, aggressive affect, and aggressive behavior lasted fewer than nine minutes.

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[11] Barlett, C., Branch, O., Rodenheffer, C., Harris, R, 229.

These researchers conducted a second experiment. Since the causal link between playing VVG had already been established, this test did not involve any subjects who played nonVVG. Instead, all participants had just played a VVG, and they were instructed to administer hot sauce to a bowl of chili either zero, five, or ten minutes after playing. Again, while there was a causal link in increased aggressive behavior in most participants at the zero and five-minute mark, no such increase was present at the ten-minute mark. Since all of the forms of increased aggression faded away in as few as ten minutes, it seems that exposure to IIA does not produce sufficiently important negative consequences. Thus, utilitarians may judge forms of entertainment involving IIA not ethically problematic.

There are also a number of concerns about the testing conditions in the laboratory setting that call into doubt the supposed link between exposure to violent media and increased aggression. P. Niels Christiensen and Wendy Wood tell us that the displays of increased aggression could be caused by something other than exposure to violent content, and may be attributable to what they call experimental demand. They explain,

> A potential confound to interpreting participants' responses in the laboratory is that these behaviors might reflect experimental demand. Experimenters who show violent films might appear to the research participants to condone violence. Participants' aggressive behavior thus supposedly reflects their beliefs about what is expected of them, or what is permissible, rather than any direct film effects. We believe, however, that this kind of "demand" effect is an intrinsic feature of violent media presented in all contexts.[12]

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[12] Christensen, P.N., Wood, W. (2007) Effects of media violence on viewers' aggression in unconstrained social interaction. In Raymond W. Preiss, Barbara Mae Gayle, Nancy Burrell, Mike Allen, and Jennings Bryant. (Eds.), *Mass Media Effects Research: Advances Through Meta-Analysis*. (371-383). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishing, 150.

If participants believe that they are encouraged to behave aggressively by those conducting the test, then their aggressive behavior may be caused by this belief and not by exposure to the violent media. Christiensen and Wood explain, "We recognize that participants' beliefs about the experimenter's hypothesis in a research study add a dimension of complexity to sponsor effects in the laboratory that does not occur in natural settings."[13] Because all of the studies in question may involve the demand effect, results produced in the lab may not reflect how people respond to VVG in ordinary settings. When people play VVG outside of the research environment, the demand effect is not present, and the increased aggression may be absent as well.

Others have questioned the validity of the TCRTT. Christopher Ferguson and Stephanie Rueda point out that while it is widely held that the TCRTT stands as a measure of aggression, no evidence has been produced to indicate that selecting louder or longer noise blasts are associated with external indicators of aggression or violence.[14] If the TCRTT cannot be shown to be connected to aggressive behavior outside the lab, then findings based on the TCRTT are suspect. Ferguson and Rueda have conducted their own studies in order to surmise if a connection can be established. In one study, participants completed self-reporting surveys about violent and nonviolent crimes, and then the modified

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Ferguson, C.J., Rueda, S,M. (2009). Examining the validity of the modified Taylor competitive reaction time test of aggression. *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 5, 121–137,123.

TCRTT was administered. One questionnaire prompted participants to estimate how many times they had participated in particular kinds of violent acts, including behaviors such as striking a caregiver and seriously injuring a person on purpose. Participants also completed the conflict tactics scale (CTS), which is used as a measure of domestic violence perpetration.

After collecting data from the questionnaires and the modified TCRTT, Ferguson and Rueda examined correlations between the TCRTT results, which involved the intensity and duration of the chosen blasts, and violent criminal acts and domestic violence. If results from the TCRTT indicating aggression are connected with acts of real world aggression, one would suppose that those selecting longer or louder blasts would be more likely to have behaved violently in the past. That supposition was not confirmed by the test. Results indicate that "the intensity and duration measures of the modified TCRTT were not related to any violent outcomes."[15] Ferguson and Rueda continue,

> the modified TCRTT failed to perform as expected of a valid measure of aggression. The modified TCRTT was not sufficiently associated with violent criminal behaviors, domestic violence, or executive functioning measures that have previously been found to be predictive of aggression and violence. Specifically, results from the modified TCRTT should not be extended to serious aggressive or violent acts. The modified TCRTT has not seen clinical use as a measure of aggressiveness.[16]

Ferguson and Rueda go on to discuss various reasons why the TCRTT may not demonstrate sufficient validity. One explanation is that the supposedly aggressive acts performed by participants, selecting louder and longer noise blasts, may not be related closely enough to real potential acts ordinary

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[15] Ferguson, Rueda, 126-127.
[16] Ferguson, Rueda, 132.

aggression. Participants hear how loud the blasts are and they are able to recognize that the loudest blasts do not cause any harm. Because participants recognize this, they may not suppose that emitting louder and longer blasts is causally connected with any real harm to the other person, so they may not view this as an aggressive act. Furthermore, Ferguson and Rueda point out that participants are given no reason to suppose that persons exposed to the blasts attempt to avoid the supposed harm. It may also be the case that participants believe that those facilitating the test, those who appear as authority figures, would not allow them to actually harm anyone. If any of these lead participants to see the blasts as harmless, then this could lead them to not associate emitting louder or longer blasts with aggression or violence. Ferguson and Rueda claim that the measure cannot stand as a proxy for violent behavior because there is no physical danger involved and there are no repercussions for violence.[17] This does not mirror circumstances surrounding actual violence in any meaningful way. They explain, "[a]ggression measures in the laboratory perform as poor stand-ins for violence, as there are no consequences for the 'aggressive' acts," and go on to say, "[v]iolence in the real world carries risks of physical harm, legal repercussions and social sanctions. Participants in laboratory experiments experience none of these."[18]

Ferguson and Rueda present an additional aspect of the TCRTT that may make it an inadequate measure of aggression. Persons have far more options in the real world than they do in the lab. When we find ourselves in a predicament,

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[17] Ferguson, Rueda, 133.
[18] Ibid.

we can choose to behave aggressively but we can also choose to not behave aggressively. This kind of option is not present in this kind of test since there are no non-aggressive options available to participants. In an ideal test, participants would be able to choose from non-aggressive options and aggressive options, and we would expect that aggressive individuals would be more likely to choose aggressive acts, while we would expect non-aggressive persons to select non-aggressive acts. In the TCRTT, there are simply no non-aggressive options. All of the options available to participants are aggressive to one degree or another. One might state that participants can select a volume of zero, but Ferguson and Rueda do not consider this non-aggressive since "this is simply ignoring a provocation, not 'dealing' with it."[19] They claim that the lack of non-aggressive alternatives, options such as withdrawal or diplomacy, "may effectively set up 'demand characteristics', in effect shunting even non-aggressive individuals into the direction of behaving with more aggressive responses."[20] The TRCTT may suffer decreased validity specifically because it can lead participants to behave differently than they would when in actuality.

Finally, Ferguson and Rueda tell us that the TCRTT is even farther removed from reality in terms of how the participant is connected to or encountering his victim. In our ordinary lives we are provoked by persons whom we can see and hear and we can interact with them in many ways. If we choose to act aggressively toward someone, this act is carried out face-to-face. But that is not the case with the TCRTT. In the testing environment participants are led to

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[19] Ferguson, Rueda,133.
[20] Ibid.

believe that the target of their aggression is in another room. Participants cannot see or hear the persons to whom they expose the noise blast.

Another concern about most tests linking increased aggression to exposure to VVG is that they are conducted with inadequate samples. Most studies are fairly small and do not involve random sampling. Instead, they attract roughly one hundred participants and these participants tend to be undergraduate college students offered extra credit for taking part in a study.

Empirical investigations have not been able to show that engaging in IIA in fictional works, or even behaving unethically in the confines of a VVG, are causally linked with performing similarly base acts in the real world. Grisly stories we read, outrageous songs we listen to, gory movies we watch, and terrifically violent acts we commit in video games do not appear to spill over to our everyday lives. To make this clear, please consider a recent mega-selling VVG, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (*MW2*). I have chosen this work because of the heinous nature of the acts depicted in the game and because of its tremendous success. *MW2* has over one billion dollars in sales. The week it launched it sold approximately eight million units, earning five hundred fifty million dollars around the world.[21]

Players encounter a rather odd mission while playing this game. In most first-person-shooters, players attack and kill enemies, and the enemies are bad guys, usually soldiers waging an unjust war or attack on the main character's

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[21] Fritz, B. (1/14/10) *Los Angeles Times*, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 tops $1 billion in sales. Retrieved from http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-warfare-game14-2010jan14,0,6722636.story

people.   That is not the case in a particular mission of the latest *Call of Duty* franchise.   In the 'No Russian' mission, players do not attack bad guys, they do not merely protect themselves and others from evil attackers.   Instead, in one mission they attack innocent civilians in an airport.   They commit acts of terrorism.[22] During this mission, players see other terrorists open fire on a group of civilians waiting to pass through airport security.   The terrorists shoot everyone in sight, including security officials and passengers running for their lives.

The player has options before him.   He can simply walk along and witness the murders, not killing any civilians himself, or he can attack the civilians.   No points are awarded either way.   A player's performance in the game is neither helped nor harmed by killing civilians or by allowing some to live.   If a player wants to kill civilians he may do so and he has a host of options at his disposal. He can shoot passengers in the back while they attempt to flee.   He can shoot passengers standing still with their hands raised above their heads.   If he would like, he can walk to an injured passenger sitting bloodied against a wall and kill him with a slash of his knife.   If he sees one passenger dragging another injured passenger from harm's way, he can shoot the helpful civilian dead and then stand over the injured person and shoot him as well.   He can throw grenades into a crowd of passengers, sending their dead and injured bodies flying through the air.   He can use a grenade launcher to fire grenades at passengers beyond throwing distance.   He can toss a flash grenade at passengers.   When dazed by this device, affected passengers stop running and stand with their hands up.   If a

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[22] In an odd twist, the character is performing these atrocious acts in an attempt to prevent future larger crimes from being waged by a powerful terrorist organization.

player wishes he can toss a flash grenade at a group of passengers, wait for them to hold still, and then shoot them all with his gun, or he can throw a fragment grenade into the passive crowd to kill them all at once.

By now it is clear that *MW2* allows players to perform terrific IIA. But we have not been provided with any evidence that would lead us to believe that carrying out such acts of enormity in the confines of a VVG will cause persons to perform similar acts in reality, or to increase the likelihood of committing such acts. What's more, we have been given no reason to suppose that one's feelings, attitudes, or behavior will be affected by playing such a game in as few as ten minutes after putting down the controller. Rather, it seems that we have good reason to believe that players can draw a distinction between performing atrocious acts in a VVG and in the real world. A person can delight himself by playing the 'No Russian' mission in *MW2* while still holding appropriate attitudes and feelings toward acts of terrorism, real and possible, in the actual world. Please consider the movie *Speed Racer* once again. Let's imagine a fan of the movie who loves it to pieces. He adores it so much he even plays the *Speed Racer* video game. He could play this game and watch this movie *ad nauseam*, but learning of such a person is not likely to give us cause for concern. It would seem highly improbably to suppose that his thoughts and feelings about dangerous driving prompted by the movie and the game would bleed into his thoughts and feelings about driving his own car on streets in his hometown. It would also seem odd to be worried about his engagement with imaginary dangerous driving would lead to hazardous acts being carried out on the city

streets.   I maintain that the same is true of persons who play VVG and who digest immoral fictional works.   The evidence suggests that people may enjoy such past times and that they may do so without producing serious negative consequences.   Accordingly, following utilitarianism, I believe that such activities are not unethical.

Kantian Analysis

Following a Kantian account of ethics, rather than looking to the consequences of audiences taking pleasure in reading about imaginary immoral acts, we must consider whether such responses involve violating the Categorical Imperative.   Here are the two most commonly considered formulations of the Categorical Imperative:

> Universal law formulation: Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law.[23]

> Humanity formulation: So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any another, in every case as an end withal, never as means only.[24]

Applying the universal law formulation, it would be difficult to show that enjoying fictional immoral acts is unethical.   There appears to be no difficulty in universalizing the enjoyment of fictional works, no matter their moral or immoral content.   We can consider the maxim we would be following, to enjoy fictional works, and we can consider whether we could rationally hope that all persons were to follow this maxim.   We can envision a world of all rational agents abiding

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[23] Kant, I. (1949) *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals.* Trans. Abbott, T.K. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 38.
[24] Kant, 46.

by this law of nature, and we can rationally will to act on this maxim in such a world.

The humanity formulation of the Categorical Imperative does not rule out enjoying imaginary immoral acts either. While delighting in fictional works involving purely imaginary characters, no persons exist, so no persons are treated merely as a means. Since no persons are just being used in this process, Kantian ethics does not support the conclusion that it is unethical to enjoy any fictional evil acts. But if we consider fictional works that involve real characters, those containing depictions of evil acts enacted against characters with real-world counterparts, it may appear at first blush that we should reach a different conclusion. One may claim that a person has a right to control how his image is conceived, to restrain how others respond to information about himself, real or imagined. If an audience member were to enjoy a fictional account of a real person suffering, then it may be claimed that the person depicted in the narrative is being used merely as a means, violating the Categorical Imperative.

I do not believe that we have the right to control how our images are used in the minds of others and I will provide examples to support this claim. The first case involves responding favorably to morally appropriate fictional acts involving real persons. Consider the move *Glory*, which describes the experiences of those involved with the Union's first all-black company in the Civil War. This film is filled with accounts of heroic persons, persons willing to battle the tremendous pressures of racism to fight against the oppressive Confederate army. One person in particular, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, shines as a moral character

and the film aims to elicit responses of approval of his many ethical actions. He works successfully to have his men treated as real soldiers, men worthy of all of the consideration of white soldiers fighting for the Union. He tries to overcome many obstacles to do so, including working to get his men proper equipment and footwear and to ensure that they receive full pay for their service. If an audience member approves of Shaw's acts and takes pleasure in his many just victories, there does not seem to be anything the matter with this. It would seem rather peculiar to claim that such an audience member is responding immorally because she is using Shaw merely as a means to be entertained. In this instance, when her response to the account of Shaw's acts is positive and in keeping with our moral intuitions, there appears to be no conflict with Kant's humanity formulation of the Categorical Imperative. If no one is being used merely as a means when she enjoys an account of a real person's ethical acts, we have no reason to suppose that a person would be used merely as a means when an audience member takes pleasure in fictional accounts of a real person's unethical acts, or immoral acts committed against a real person.

We happen to be entertained by depictions of others in many ways. This can involve reading stories or watching films, but it may also involve looking at political cartoons or merely imagining images of other engaged in various events. It is not clear that a person is treated merely as a means when someone else uses mental images of the subject to some end. Consider another example: a student studying for an auditing accounting exam has a truckload of material to memorize. The course material's volume is so great that it feels like the student

must memorize the contents of a phone book. In an effort to successfully commit loads of information to memory, he creates mnemonic devices. He mentally links each set of principles with a particular NBA team, and he links each sub-principle with a particular player on that basketball team.   So, instead of merely memorizing about thirty different principles with about a dozen sub-principles each, he uses traits of real basketball players to help master the material. He is using information about real persons to promote one of his ends, to perform well in the class. No persons are being harmed in such a case, or even potentially harmed, and while the student is surely using players as a means to an end, it is not the case that the players are being disrespected in any way, so the humanity formulation is not violated.

The same would be true if a person were to entertain himself by using the mental images of a player in a positive light. Suppose that a child is shooting hoops in his back yard, and instead of simply taking shots, he imagines that he is Michael Jordan and that he takes and makes a game winning shot when he shoots a basket. He is using his mental image of Michael Jordan as part of a fun imaginary game, but he is not acting immorally. And the same would be the case if he were to have unpleasant imaginings of a real person, if he were to imagine Reggie Miller attempting to guard him but tripping and falling on his face. If the child were to giggle to himself about Reggie's imaginary pain, the humanity formulation is not broken.

When someone entertains himself with thoughts of other persons engaging in imaginary events, the others are not being used merely as a means.

Rather, the person with the active imagination is using his mental image of the other persons. So long as our mental images come from content that is publically observable, the person providing the fodder for one's imagination is not being used in a strict sense. Since neither formulation of the Categorical Imperative is breached when one enjoys fictional accounts of persons suffering, real persons or entirely imaginary characters, Kantian ethics does not lead us to conclude that it is immoral for audience members to respond favorably to fictional evil.

One might object to my account of a Kantian analysis and claim that Kant's ethical theory should be viewed differently. I have focused on our duty to not use actual others merely as a means, but Kant may not have only been concerned with obligations toward real persons, but to humanity in general.[25] If we take the Categorical Imperative to govern our treatment of all of humanity, then it applies to the notion of all possible persons, not merely those who actually exist. This extends our obligations beyond living persons to persons of the past, persons who will live in the future, and to possible imaginary persons. Following a different interpretation of humanity, that engaging in IIA does not involve using actual persons merely as a means does not let us off the hook. We are also bound by duty to not use additional sets of persons merely as a means. When one enjoys reading about Chigurh's violent exploits in *No Country for Old Men*, he uses fictional persons merely as a means by not feeling appropriate empathy and sympathy for their suffering. When one watches *Ocean's Eleven* and roots for the team to pull of an astonishing heist, she uses the crew's mark merely as a means by delighting in his great loss. And when one plays *MW2* and chooses to

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[25] My thanks to Michael Slote for raising this objection.

kill dozens of passengers while carrying out an act of imaginary terrorism, she uses all of her victims merely as a means. In each case humanity is treated merely as a means, thus violating Kant's Categorical Imperative.

If such an account of Kant's view of humanity is correct, then engaging in IIA is unethical according to Kantian ethics. However, I do not think that this renders being entertained by IIA immoral. Rather, I think it exposes a peculiar and unfortunate aspect of Kant's position. If we take humanity to apply to humanity in general and not just to individual, actual persons, then our moral obligations are spread thinly and to entities to whom we tend to not feel committed to respect. Kant's view would entail that we have the same sort of obligation to actual persons as we do to dead persons, future persons, and merely imaginary persons. But one rarely considers having any obligation to dead persons, future persons, or imaginary persons. Instead, we consider only our obligations to actual persons. An objector may point out that I have not refuted his account of Kant's view, that I have merely stated that I don't choose to accept it. That is true. Such Kantians, I contend, should present us with an argument to show that our obligations ought to apply to all possible persons, even to those who are purely imaginary.

I have attempted to show that engaging in IIA does not harm us in any serious way and that it leads to an increased likelihood to harm others. In the next chapter I will explain why I believe that indulging in IIA is not deleterious to our ethical character. In short, I will show that we and other actual persons suffer in no way by our unethical imaginative pursuits. Because of this, I do not think

that we have been given good reason to be concerned with moral obligations to merely fictional persons. Since many participants in the aesthetic debate claim that we are morally obligated not to enjoy IIA, their positions will be significantly weakened.

Chapter 3 − Virtue and Our Responses to Imaginary Immoral Acts

Most authors who argue that persons are ethically blameworthy for being entertained by thoughts of imaginary immoral acts (IIA) follow a virtue theory of ethics. Such critics claim that certain kinds of behavior are intrinsically evil, and that acceptance of evil, either involving actual occurrences or merely imagined instances, is incompatible with maintaining virtuous character. Two different approaches have emerged to justify this assertion. One view involves acceptance of the claim that enjoying IIA is ruinous to one's character. The other approach rests on the claim that we should not approve of immoral activities of any kind, whether committed in the real-world or merely in fictional works, because doing so reflects poorly on our moral character

Imaginary Acts Affecting Our Character

Matt McCormick advances the first of these stances and, following an Aristotelian account of ethics, considers the ethical standing of engaging in a particular kind of IIA, the act of playing violent video games (VVG). Even though he specifically considers whether we have a moral obligation to abstain from amusing ourselves by playing brutal video games, his argument applies to other forms of entertainment as well. Whether it involves enjoying imagined acts of violence that we control in a VVG or being entertained by evil acts depicted in novels or films, each of these kinds of imaginative enterprises have to do with persons responding favorably to unethical acts that occur in possible worlds and not in the actual world.

McCormick imagines video games in the future that will be much more realistic than the games of today and asks us to consider games that function like the holodeck from the *Star Trek* television series.[26] The holodeck is so sophisticated that it can produce experiences that look, sound, and feel exactly like the real thing. If a person chooses to do so, he can simulate solving crimes as Sherlock Holmes in the world created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, or he can be entertained by fighting side-by-side with Colonel Robert Gould Shaw against the troops of the Confederacy. Or, he could please himself by acting act out simulated pedophilia and murder. People may enjoy acting out the most heinous of activities in violent video games (VVG) that are currently available, and it seems that they will be able to immerse themselves into even more realistic depictions of violent acts in possible video games like the holodeck in the future. McCormick tells us,

> [I]n these cases most of us have a strong intuition that there is something morally objectionable about the act itself, isolated from anything that might happen outside the holodeck, and even though it is only simulated and no victim gets hurt.[27]

When people enjoy violent and immoral acts, whether in actuality or while playing a VVG, McCormick states their responses are unethical. His stance rests upon Aristotle's brand of virtue ethics, which maintains that agents must commit acts that stem from proper understanding of the act, from a free choice to commit

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[26] McCormick, M. (2001). Is it wrong to play violent video games?, *Ethics and Information Technology*, 3, 277-287.
[27] McCormick, 284.

the act for its own sake, and from one's long-term character.[28] Following an

Aristotelian moral framework, McCormick asserts that when people engage in IIA

they are fostering vicious character traits, and that persons who delight in playing

violent video games are "re-enforcing virtueless habits and dispositions in

themselves."[29] This may seem to be intertwined with utilitarian objections to

playing VVG, but McCormick's position isn't contingent upon negative

consequences becoming realized through immoral acts. According to some

utilitarians, people playing VVG would be unethical if it were to lead to them

carrying out acts of violence themselves, or even if it were to merely lead to a

greater likelihood of acting violently or aggressively. The Aristotelian claim

doesn't hinge upon such possible changes in behavior. Even if no harms are

produced as a result of engaging with IIA, McCormick finds such behavior

insalubrious to our moral character as it impedes our ability to flourish morally.

As he puts it, when we relish fictional unethical acts, "[w]e re-enforce virtueless

habits and make it harder for the individual to reach eudaimonic fulfillment."[30]

McCormick concludes that since experiencing IIA with relish in VVG erodes our

character, we have ethical grounds not to engage in such forms of entertainment.

As such, persons who choose to delight in fictional unethical acts can be held

morally blameworthy.

I disagree with McCormick's conclusions and believe that he has failed to

prove that it is damaging to one's moral character to have positive responses

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[28] Aristotle (1941). *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. McKeon, R. New York, NY: Random House, 1104a, 31-34.
[29] McCormick, 285.
[30] McCormick, 286.

toward IIA. In order to consider how playing video games may mold our character, let's imagine playing a different kind of video game, the kind that does not involve acting unethically toward fictional characters, but the kind that involves purely morally appropriate behavior. In the video game *Animal Crossing,* one of the major elements of the game involves doing favors for a player's neighbors. For example, while attempting to catch fish that can be sold at a hefty price, a player may be approached by another character who needs help. The player can choose to stop advancing his own interests in order to further the interests of his fictional neighbor. Many people find this game endlessly entertaining, and we can consider persons who choose to help others for hours on end while playing this game. A host of other video games allow players to perform other magnanimous acts. *Vet Emergency* allows players to help animals that have been harmed in one way or another, and gamers find themselves responsible for dogs, cats, birds, and a variety of other injured critters. The *Trauma Center* line of games puts players in a digital ER and gives them opportunities to perform life-saving surgeries and they even get to try to find a cure for a virus designed by terrorists. In *Second Life*, gamers can create a virtual family and spend their time nurturing a child and spoiling it with fun activities and toys.

       Following McCormick's argument, players of these games are reinforcing virtuous habits by helping these imaginary creatures and they are be building benevolent dispositions within themselves. If a person dedicates an hour of his day to tend to his child in *Second Life,* or spending two hours helping his

neighbors in *Animal Crossing*, he is strengthening his disposition to help others in reality. The player has acted morally in his imaginary leisurely activities, which builds his moral character.

I doubt that many would claim that people playing such games are doing much of moral value. Helping imaginary creatures in purely fictional settings is no substitute for helping actual people or animals in reality. That a person enjoys helping others and making personal sacrifices to benefit imagined characters while playing *Animal Crossing* or *Second Life* does not entail that she will be more disposed to make such sacrifices in actuality. It may be the case that performing magnanimous acts in video games will lead to stronger dispositions to be benevolent in the real world, but McCormick takes this for granted. He provides no evidence to support his claim about character development through playing video games.

Let's consider an avid player of *Second Life* and *Animal Crossing* who also reads novels about Alex Cross. She adores every second of these activities. She relishes every account of Alex saving the day while being there for his family. She feels good to help her imaginary friends in her community and she enjoys doing nice things for her virtual child. If we were to learn of such a person, would we be warranted in supposing that she is nurturing her dispositions to help others? I don't believe we would be. That she enjoys leisurely activities involving moral acts for imaginary characters is not a sufficient condition for her warming to those activities in reality, nor does is mean that she will be more inclined to leave her living room to help actual neighbors or children. She could read such books

and play such games merely because they are genres she enjoys. I don't think this is an implausible assessment of her. Consider fans of particular genres of books and movies. If persons tend to prefer mysteries, we don't normally suppose that they have built a strong disposition to help investigators solve real-world crimes. We wouldn't even suppose that their interest in fictional mysteries would carry over to their interest in works of nonfiction. We need not assume that they are more disposed to enjoy reading true-crime books that depict how actual criminals were apprehended by real-world investigators. Instead, we may simply suppose that she enjoys certain video games and novels and not make any other assumptions about her dispositions regarding works of nonfiction and real-world events. But if we were to suppose that her fictional activities were enriching virtuous dispositions within her, we would not be reaching a conclusion based on an assessment of empirical evidence. We would be making an assumption which is hardly warranted. At the moment, authors like McCormick have not provided evidence to support the claim that our acts and attitudes involving imaginary actions are causally connected to our dispositions to behave and to form judgments in reality.

Not only do we confront a lack of evidence to support this claim, but we encounter scads of anecdotal evidence to support the rival claim, that there is no connection between the two realms. Thousands and thousands of people play kind video games while never leaving the couch to help others. People play *Animal Crossing* specifically to help their imaginary neighbors without lifting a finger to assist the people who live next door. Sadly, we've seen a tragic case of

this sort of disconnection involving a couple playing *Second Life*. Even though they dedicated a dozen hours a day tending to their child in the game, they had a baby of their own in the real world and they allowed her to starve to death.[31] Instead of caring for the needs of their actual child, they neglected her entirely and devoted their time to caring for a virtual toddler. This is an extraordinary case to be sure, but it is an example of there being no connection between performing acts of kindness within video games and having relevant dispositions strengthened in the real world.

Simply put, imagined instances of virtual charitable acts are not of the same kind as charitable acts performed for actual people in the real world. While we would have no qualms with celebrating a person who chooses to help others in her day to day life, I believe that we would all be loath to honor the benevolent efforts of a person who simply dedicates her video game playing hours to acts of kindness that benefit fictional characters. A distinction can be made between the moral worth of actual acts and the ethical value of imaginary acts, and the same distinction can be made regarding how different kinds of acts shape our character.

Just as we have been shown no reason to believe that imaginary charitable acts for fictional creatures builds one's moral character we should deny that engaging in fantastic evil acts against imaginary individuals is ruinous to a person's character. Millions of people play violent video games while giving no indication of growing harmful dispositions toward violence. Let's considers a

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[31] Phillips, R. (3/4/2010). Gamers' tot' dies of starvation. *The Sun*. Retrieved from http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/2878357/Gamers-tot-dies-of-starvation.html

person who plays *Red Dead Redemption* and *Cabela's Big Game Hunter*.

Players can hunt for food and skins in *Red Dead Redemption*. You can shoot

and kill horses, wolves, foxes, and the like. In the *Big Game Hunter* series of

games, players can stalk and kill prey of seemingly every kind. A person could

love the thrill of the kill while playing such games while not stoking a disposition

toward killing animals for mere sport. Furthermore, there is no reason to suppose

that vegetarians and vegans couldn't enjoy playing such games while remaining

dedicated to lowering the amount of needless suffering of actual animals. Just as

we know that people can play VVG that allow them to kill and harm imaginary

persons without fostering malevolent dispositions toward actual persons, people

may play VVG that give them the ability to kill and harm fictional animals while

not shifting their sympathetic dispositions toward animals.

McCormick has not shown that persons who enjoy playing violent video

games establish or build upon their vicious moral character. As it stands, his

position hinges upon a guess, the supposition that a causal connection exists

between the two realms. There is nothing inconsistent with a person acting

magnanimously toward other characters in the imaginary realm of video games

who never treats actual people with the same benevolence. And, that a person

chooses to enact IIA against fictional beings in video games is not incompatible

with her treating others in the real world in ways that advance her moral

character. Because there is a distinction between acts performed in the fictional

realm and acts carried out in actuality, and because rational agents are aware of

this distinction, it is not the case that our attitudes toward fictional behavior either strengthen or weaken our moral character.

Even though McCormick argues otherwise, it seems that he is aware of this separation when he makes the following remark, "From my computer terminal, I can guide my game alter-ego to do and say things that I would never think of doing in real life."[32] Since McCormick readily admits that he would perform certain IIA against fictional characters in video games, yet maintains that it would not occur to him to perform the same acts in the actual world against real persons, he undermines his belief that actions performed in one realm affect one's character in the other realm. No matter how sophisticated the video game device, we are still able to distinguish between reality and virtual reality, and we are able to recognize that some acts may be permitted in one domain yet be abhorrent in the other. McCormick's comment also indicates that his attitude toward committing evil acts is contingent upon whether they take place merely in an imaginary possible world or in the real world. Because we can suppose that rational agents are capable of drawing this distinction, we can see that what may be accepted in one realm may not lead to an agent changing his attitude toward the same kind of act in another realm, and McCormick's charge that engaging in evil imaginary behavior is calamitous to one's character is unjustified. Hence, following an Aristotelian form of virtue theory does not show that engaging in evil imaginative activities is deleterious to our moral character, so we have no reason to find such engagement immoral.

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[32] McCormick, 287.

Along with Matt McCormick, James Harold holds that we may be negatively influenced by our exposure to IIA, and that this kind of influence may go unnoticed by audience members.[33] But before presenting more of Harold's assertions, I believe that it is important to address what he is *not* claiming. He does not hold that audiences engaging in IIA necessarily behave immorally for doing so. Nor does he claim that his arguments establish a causal connection between audiences entertaining IIA and those persons experiencing particular moral changes. He tells us that philosophers have been concerned with potential moral dangers stemming from exposure to immoral fictional works for centuries and he wishes to explore the nature of these ethical hazards. He'd like to know if such worries are well-founded, and after examining numerous philosophical stances and various psychological studies, Harold concludes that it is plausible to think that our engagement with IIA *may* lead to moral corruption. Virtue theorists such as McCormick share his concerns, and Harold's position, if successful, could help support their claim that persons should not consume IIA because it may lead to deleterious moral development.

Harold points out that many people accept the idea that we can be shaped by our responses to fictional works, that when we adore a character like Tony Soprano from *The Sopranos*, when we approve of his violent and selfish acts, we may become more likely to see things from Tony's perspective, which may very well lead to changes in our moral attitudes and behaviors. Just as Plato was worried that we could be swept away by our passions when we sympathize with unseemly characters in plays, Harold tells us that "someone who identifies with

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[33] Harold, J. (2005). Infected by evil. *Philosophical Explorations*, *8*(2). 173-187.

Tony Soprano… could well be possessed by more dangerous emotions, like rage, vengefulness, and contempt for ordinary people" after seeing events from Tony's perspective.[34] If audience members identify closely with Tony Soprano, "they are then at risk of being morally infected by that identification."[35] Such moral infection may manifest itself in changes to a person's moral attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

Various mental processes are employed when we read works of fiction. Harold explains that our minds are equipped with 'controlled' and 'automated' mechanisms and that both are engaged during our artistic encounters.[36] Automatic processes run immediately and unintentionally. We don't notice that they are operating while they are running and we can't stop them or change them while they are in use. Our controlled processes, on the other hand, operate at and under our command, they can be introspected, and they run relatively slowly.

Our view of the role and use of controlled and automated processes can strongly influence our stance on the potential moral dangers of consuming works with IIA. If we believe that audience members primarily engage their controlled processes during such activities then there is little to fear. If we are paying attention to our responses to fictional works, then we can recognize our natural responses and attempt to determine if these responses are appropriate. If we find that we tend to get riled up by evil deeds of a Tony Soprano and that we rather like him as a character, then we can surmise whether we really ought to

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[34] Harold, 73.

[35] Harold, 74.

[36] When talking of controlled and automated processes, Harold follows the distinction put forth by Ziva Kunda in Kunda, Z. (1999). *Social Cognition: Making Sense of People*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 267.

approve of his acts. If we strongly oppose beating others to resolve conflicts, then our exposure to *The Sopranos* is not likely to change our stance. Even if we feel a surge of excitement while watching Tony deliver beating after beating, we can recognize that his acts are merely fictional, that they don't match the real world, and we may choose not to allow our feelings about imaginary beatings to alter our moral assessment of real-world beatings.

While we shouldn't expect radical attitudinal shifts to occur as a result of our controlled responses to fiction, it may be that we are not entirely in the clear when experiencing IIA. Noël Carroll claims that our experiences with imaginary events may slightly modify our preexisting beliefs and attitudes.[37] If we already don't mind sexism too much, or if we find sexist humor pretty amusing, then repeated positive exposure to Tony Soprano cracking sexist jokes may make us feel better about our sexist attitudes. So, following Carroll's position, IIA may be harmful, but only to a small degree.[38]

If we believe that engaging with fictional works activates not just controlled processes but automatic mechanisms, then our exposure to IIA may be more troubling. Because automatic processes operate beyond our control, they may influence us in ways that escape our notice, and in ways that are morally significant. This is James Harold's primary concern. He states that fiction may modify some of our desires and attitudes, and when this involves IIA, a kind of moral contagion may occur. He explains that when we read or watch fictional works we identify with characters. Our imaginations begin to run at full speed and

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[37] Carroll, N. (1998). *A Philosophy of Mass Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 327.
[38] Harold points out that Carroll has not provided empirical evidence to support this assertion.

we imagine believing what characters believe, wanting what they want, etc. Our imaginations don't necessarily run wild, we still recognize the distinction between our own accepted beliefs and desires and those held by people in a given work, and "[we] normally keep that character's imagined desires and beliefs 'off-line', so that they do not drive [our] actions."[39] For example, while watching *The Bourne Identity*, we may get wrapped up in Jason Bourne's attempts to learn his identity and to determine who has betrayed him. We may come to share Jason's goals while watching, but Harold explains that these are 'off-line' imagined states. They don't go so far as to prompt us to leap from the couch and to run to track down people who may have answers to questions about our own situation.

While these imagined states run off-line, Harold claims that they are not 'perfectly distinct' from our own actual states, and that in some cases, off-line beliefs and desires may bleed into our own states.[40] He calls this phenomenon a form of contagion. Harold tells us that when a character has engrossed the minds of an audience, the stronger our off-line imagined desires become, making automatic contagion difficult to stave off, and he cites a number of psychological studies to support his claim. The first study looked into the effects of males watching pornographic films.[41] Men were split into two groups; some watched pornographic films and some watched videos that were nonsexual. After their exposure to a film they were interviewed by a female who asked various non-

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[39] Harold, 180.
[40] Ibid.
[41] McKenzie-Mohr, D., Zanna, M.P. (1990). Treating women as sexual objects: Look to the (gender schematic) male who has viewed pornography. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 16, 296-308.

sexual questions. Men who viewed pornographic material interacted differently with a female interviewer. They moved their chairs as to sit closer to the interviewer, remarked about her appearance, and stared at her body. The behavior of those who had viewed pornographic films was so markedly different from that of those who had not seen sexual material that the female interviewers were able to surmise which group of men to which subjects belonged. Plus, the subjects who viewed sexual films and behaved differently were unaware of a difference in their behavior. Harold tells us that this study indicates that one's exposure to fictional works may influence his attitudes, beliefs, even behaviors, and that contagion may occur without us recognizing it. Harold tells of other kinds of studies that further corroborate his claim, studies that show that a reader's attention will follow a protagonist most closely in a story. If sentences from a story depict events from the perspective of a protagonist, readers can recall details about her better than they can if they are presented from another point of view. [42] Readers can read sentences aloud more quickly if they are from the protagonist's perspective, and they also have improved recall of events described in such passages. Other studies show that readers also track the emotional states of protagonists when such states are implied.[43] For example, after reading a story describing a protagonist who stole money and who witnessed a friend get wrongly accused and fired, subjects read the word 'guilt'

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[42] Black, J. B., Turner, T. J., Bower, G. H. (1979). Point of view in narrative comprehension, memory, and production. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 18, 187-198.

[43] DeVega, M., Leon, I., Diaz, J. M. (1996).The representation of changing emotions in reading comprehension. *Cognition and Emotion* 10, 303-321.

far more quickly than they read words tied to emotions not likely experienced by the protagonist such as 'proud'.

Harold makes the point that "audiences pay close attention to the world of the fiction as the protagonist of the fiction would see it."[44] He takes these studies to show that imagining events from the perspective of protagonists has primed readers to entertain the emotional and attitudinal states of these characters. When this kind of reading involves IIA, he says that a reader will see things from the evil perspective of the protagonist, which will in turn prime the character's views and feelings within the audience, such that "the thoughts, perceptions, and emotions of the character will be closer to the reader's or viewer's own than they would be otherwise."[45] When watching a typical episode of *The Sopranos*, Tony's likely to get very mad and vengeful, so we as audience members are more likely to have feelings of anger and revenge primed in our minds. At this point Harold uses a distinction made by Murray Smith to consider exactly what kind of association we make with a protagonist: we may experience 'alignment' or 'allegiance' with Tony.[46] The kind of automatic tracking subjects experienced while participating in many of the studies involves alignment. Alignment involves temporarily seeing things from the perspective of a character and to have certain thoughts or feelings primed, but allegiance involves the reader morally evaluating the acts of the character and endorsing them. Alignment involves empathy while allegiance involves sympathy.

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[44] Harold, 81.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Smith, M. (1995). *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Smith doesn't believe that alignment entails allegiance and neither does Harold. Harold tells us that while works may cause audiences to experience having particular beliefs and views, such fictions can't make us endorse them. We are free to not go so far as to endorse them. Consider, again, watching Tony Soprano meting out some violent revenge and enjoying every second of it. Harold says that we might get caught up in the work so much that we feel a bit of a pleasurable rush. But we also have the means to assess our thoughts about that reaction. After aligning with the character, we may deem those acts and emotional reactions disgusting, and we may feel disgust not just at Tony but at ourselves for allowing ourselves to see things from his evil perspective, hence not forming allegiance with the protagonist. If this kind of assessment involves just a controlled process, then it looks like we won't run the risk of contagion. But if the evaluation process just described is not entirely under our control, then we may be vulnerable to contagion according to Harold. And he holds that we do indeed engage our automatic processes such that alignment with unethical characters modifies our allegiances. We may not notice that it's taking place and it may not stem from a deliberate choice, but alignment can alter how we view a person. With repeated exposure to the likes of Tony Soprano, our many instances of alignment can cause us to think more highly of the character, to have pro-attitudes toward his actions. Harlold states, "[a]lignment facilitates allegiance, so the automatic mechanisms that guide our thoughts along a certain track do threaten to affect our values and character."[47] Harold points out that various studies indicate that we are more likely to reach positive value judgments

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[47] Harold, 182.

of people who are similar to us, even when the similarities of the slightest importance.[48]

It bears repeating that Harold does not take this to mean that fans of *The Sopranos* will run a serious risk of coming to blows with their coworkers or employees, or that they will morph into goons. But he does go so far as to say that our exposure to such shows over time does produce "real moral dangers."[49] These dangers involve our natural and automatic responses to certain kinds of stimuli. Tony Soprano reacts angrily and violently when people thwart his plans or go against his interests, and our aligning with him over time, Harold explains, may result in us responding to conflicts with others with less sympathy that we would normally experience or with more anger. Our thoughts about Tony's way of dealing with problems can bleed into our own way of reacting to certain kinds of situations, and it can do so to such an extent as to affect our behavior. Harold finds this risks to audiences greater because of the automatic nature of the contagion. That we are unaware of having our thoughts and attitudes infected means that we may never recognize that any moral damage has been done.

Before evaluating Harold's many claims about our responses to IIA, I need to make a distinction between Harold's assessment of the ethical value of consuming such works and how virtue theorists may reach a different judgment. Please recall that virtue theorists like McCormick maintain that audience members are blameworthy for carrying out horrendous misdeeds in violent video

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[48] Byrne, D. (1971). *The Attraction Paradigm*. New York: Academic Press. and Tajfel, H. (1981). *Human Groups and Social Categories*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
[49] Harold, 182.

games precisely because of the potential negative character transformation that we may experience as a result. Harold fears that the same kind of outcome could occur after we experience other forms of IIA, but, unlike McCormick, he does not hold audience members blameworthy specifically because contagion comes from automatic processes that we cannot control. Even though Harold assigns blame to the artwork and not the audience members experiencing it, virtue theorists could embrace his position as it relates to the processes involved with contagion. McCormick warns us that IIA may do harm to our moral character and Harold explains how this kind of harm can take place. So, McCormick and other virtue theorists could disagree with Harold's final judgment and claim that because we can recognize the risks associated with contagion, we should not choose to expose ourselves to such potentially damaging material. They could claim that it would not be unjust to hold audiences responsible for changes that they help bring about because of their preferences in fiction. While Harold lets us off the hook for moral impairment stemming from mental processes that we may not control, McCormick could hold that we are indeed responsible because we are aware of the risks of contagion yet still choose to expose ourselves to such risks. While we may accept that contagion results from automatic processes running beyond our control, which fictional works we choose to experience is within our control, so virtue theorists could claim that we should not engage in works that we realize involve legitimate moral hazard.

Since Harold's position may bolster McCormick's virtue theory account, objections that are damning to one may prove problematic for the other. The

primary problem with Harold's view is that it lacks proper empirical support. He recognizes that he has not shown us that a clear causal link exists between engaging in IIA and moral harm to audience members, yet he advances rather bold claims: that "there is good reason to believe that we can be influenced by fictions in ways that matter morally," [50] and "it is plausible to think that imagining evil might affect our attitudes and actions in insidious and powerful ways, and that [we may have] good reason to be worried that good people could be corrupted by fiction."[51]

I think Harold's first claim may be true. I'm willing to grant that we can be affected by our encounters with fictional works in morally relevant ways, but these ways are severely limited. They amount to short-term arousal. Harold shares findings from studies that have results similar to studies I brought up earlier in this book; they indicate that fictional works can produce nearly immediate changes to one's affect, cognition, and behavior. The studies presented earlier indicated that immediately after being exposed to IIA, participants displayed increased aggressive affect, aggressive cognition, and aggressive behavior. The study Harold brings up involving pornography appears to indicate a similar effect involving sexual arousal. Men exposed to pornographic works appeared to be in a more sexual mood (sexual affect), had sex on the mind (sexual cognition), and it spilled into their behavior toward women they encountered (sexual behavior). But these effects were significantly brief. They were only observed shortly after exposure to the sexually explicit material. That

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[50] Harold, 173.
[51] Harold, 183.

various forms of sexual arousal were observed right after participants experienced sexually explicit materials does not entail that any kind of long-term changes occurred.

Harold also discussed studies that showed the presence of certain cognitive phenomena within participants. Recall that people read words aloud more quickly if those words fit feelings felt by the protagonist of a story, they could read passages from the protagonist's perspective more quickly, and they could remember information from the story better if it was closely related to the protagonist. In each of these cases, I believe that Harold is right to claim that we can associate ourselves very closely with certain fictional characters, but this appears to amount to mere tracking and priming. While reading a work, we prime our minds to have particular kinds of thoughts and for our minds to operate in various ways. This appears to involve us seeing things from the perspective of a protagonist while we are reading and shortly thereafter. But none of the studies Harold cites indicate a lasting effect. In this sense, the findings are similar to those that I addressed in the section of this book on a utilitarian evaluation of engaging in IIA. That we tend to track feelings and the perspective of a particular protagonist in a work does not entail that we will continue to do so an hour after reading the work, a day after reading the work, let alone weeks or months after reading the work. Even if we accept Harold's claim that alignment can lead to allegiance, this allegiance may be very short-lived. If a reader were to gain an unintentional allegiance with a character, then she would make a positive moral evaluation of his acts and respond emotionally to the beliefs, acts, and emotions

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of the character. But this may only be in place while the activity of engaging with the work is fresh on the reader's mind. After the thrill of reading the material has waned, the reader may distance herself from the character and the allegiance may disappear. If our allegiance with immoral characters is fleeting in this way, then this affect is morally significant but not relevant in determining an agent's character.

Morally concerned audience members would be wise to take the results of these studies into account, particularly just after engaging in IIA. If fictional works can temporarily alter our affect, cognition, and behavior, then we can take extra steps to respond appropriately to moral situations for a handful of minutes after we watch a show or put a book down. But Harold has not shown that these changes are seriously insidious or powerful, or that they have so much power as to "threaten to affect our values and character."[52] Harold's merely supposes that allegiances with fictional characters can change the way that we respond to similar persons or situations in reality. We may be able to align with dastardly characters like Tony Soprano, and even to form an uncontrolled allegiance with them, but that doesn't mean that we'll be more likely to respond angrily to personal disputes or with less sympathy for people who obstruct our obstruct us.

Howard is concerned that we will become more like the evil characters we unwittingly form allegiances with, but not only does he not give iron-clad evidence to support his claim, he doesn't provide evidence that shows that contagion of this kind is plausible or even commonplace. He hasn't given us good reason to suppose that alignment and allegiance with evil characters will

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[52] Harold, 182.

lead to moral corruption. At most he's shown that a spectator's mental outlook may be affected immediately after exposure to IIA. But this kind of short-term arousal may be no stronger than what viewers experience just after watching a catchy commercial or seeing a product placed in a certain spot on a store shelf. If viewers watching a football game see a commercial advertising pizza from a particular chain, one that can deliver a hot, tasty pie within thirty minutes, it would not be odd at all for them to have pizza on the brain. Various kinds of pizza-related arousal may occur and viewers may be more likely to consider buying pizza, either from that chain or from some other. But once the game resumes and after some time has passed, their pizza-related thoughts and desires are likely to wane, and in many cases go away such that viewers don't feel urges to eat pizza until the next time pizza is brought to their attention. We can imagine similar phenomena occurring when someone watches *The Sopranos*. A fan can watch Tony beat up on character after character when his plans are thwarted to one degree or another. Such a fan can even appreciate the beatings and think that some other characters really have it coming. While caught up in the suspense of the episodes of the program, we can envision her having all sorts of aggressive thoughts and feelings aroused, particularly if she can empathize and sympathize with Tony. But once those episodes end, we can imagine her unwinding, calming down, and having thoughts that stray farther and farther from how a gangster might see things. She could go right back to her ordinary routine. If someone rudely gets in her way or simply proves to be a hurdle for her to surmount, she may even be reminded of how Tony might deal with such

circumstances, but that simply doesn't mean that she's more likely to get angrier when her efforts are frustrated or to see people just as problems to be eliminated. Hence, virtue theorists hoping to use Harold's position to bolster their own stance end up with a position that is lacking.

Imaginary Acts Reflecting Our Character

Berys Gaut employs a different form of Aristotelian virtue ethics than McCormick and provides an account of what persons accept when they are entertained by IIA.[53] According to Gaut, when we are confronted with such fictional depictions of evil we do not merely follow along passively and abstain from forming judgments or responses. Instead, we have an affective response to the imagined scenarios. We may find them entertaining, we may find them unappealing, or we may have a neutral response, and our responses are of moral significance.

People who accept the purely practical view of morality maintain that since desires or attitudes do not play a motivational role in an agent's actions, they are immaterial from an ethical point of view. Gaut denies a purely practical conception of morality. According to his stance, one's acts are ethically relevant and the desires and feelings that motivate those actions are also subject to moral evaluation. Gaut maintains that we *do* ethically judge persons for their feelings, even when these feelings are inert and do not motivate actions, and he provides a number of examples to support his claim. If Joe were to receive a promotion

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[53] Gaut, B. (1998). The ethical criticism of art. In Levinson, J. (Ed.), *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*. Ed. Jerrold Levinson. (182-203). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

and to hear praise from friends, only to later learn that they were jealous and resentful, we would think less of them. Even though their feelings have no motivational force in how they treat Joe, we would think less of their ethical character for harboring such sentiments. Gaut explains, "They are flawed because of what they feel, not because of what they did or their motives for doing it."[54] In his second example we are to imagine that we have experienced a hardship and that we were to discover that a friend was sympathetic toward us. Here we would think better of her merely in light of her thoughts and feelings about us.[55] In each case, that the feelings of others do not shape their behavior does nothing to weaken the claim that such feelings are appropriate subjects of moral appraisal. Gaut employs these examples to support his view that an affective-practical conception of morality should be used, that agents should be held accountable for actions, feelings, and desires, and he uses this approach to ground his claim that we are responsible for, or can be criticized for, our feelings and attitudes toward fictional evil.[56]

In an attempt to further support this claim, Gaut asks us to consider the ethical standing of a man who entertains violent rape fantasies of imaginary women. Even if he were to never act upon his fantasies, Gaut explains, "what a person imagines and how he responds to those imaginings play an important part in our ethical assessment of his character," and that the man in question "stands ethically condemned for what and how he imagines, independently of

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[54] Gaut, 186.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Gaut, 186-187.

how he acts or may act."[57]   When this man enjoys rape fantasies, and when

audience members of literature and film are entertained by depictions of evil and

suffering, how they respond is central to their ethical standing according to Gaut.

When we respond favorably to such unethical fictions, we have a pro-attitude

toward the depictions if evil. Gaut tells us,

> The notion of a response is to be understood broadly, covering a wide
> range of states directed at represented events and characters,
> including being pleased at something, feeling an emotion toward it,
> being amused by it, and desiring something with respect to it –
> wanting it to continue or stop, wanting to know what happens next.[58]

The man having rape fantasies is pleased by the events as they unfold in his

mind. While audiences watch shows about a dastardly character like Tony

Soprano, they are amused by Tony's cruel acts and care a great deal for him as

he endures his travails. Even though the evil depictions are of imaginary

characters in such cases, Gaut holds that our responses are not imaginary, but

they are real. Persons having rape fantasies have an actual pro-attitude toward

the events in their imaginations, just as readers of de Sade's *Juliette* have pro-

attitudes toward the fictional accounts of sexual torture. When we take pleasure

in such evil fictions, Gaut claims that we should be thought poorly of and that our

approval of such misdeeds "reflects ill on our character."[59] According to Gaut's

wide view of responses, being amused by a particular imaginary acts involves

approving of it in an ethically significant way. Works that amuse audiences with

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[57] Gaut, 187.
[58] Gaut, 193.
[59] Gaut, 194.

tales of suffering successfully get us to approve of such IIA, making us worthy of negative ethical appraisal.

Following his examples, I believe it is clear why Gaut holds us accountable for certain responses to IIA. Even though Gaut has provided numerous examples to pull at our ethical intuitions, he has presupposed that we are to be held accountable for our responses to unethical fictional acts. Gaut's stance is flawed in that he presupposes that our attitudes, feelings, and desires toward imaginary events should be judged in the same fashion as our responses and thoughts about actual events. Even if we grant that an agent's thoughts, feelings, desires, and attitudes toward actual events are of ethical importance, Gaut has not provided an adequate argument to show that pro-attitudes toward IIA are subject to moral evaluation.

Instead of presenting an argument to support his claim that our attitudes toward imaginary events fall under the scope of an affective-practical model of morality, Gaut makes an empirical claim about the nature and scope of our responses, and says,

> [T]he attitudes people (and works) manifest toward imagined scenarios have implications for their attitudes toward real-life counterparts, for the attitudes are partly directed toward kinds, not just individuals.[60]

According to Gaut, when a person fantasizing about rape has a pro-attitude toward the IIA, he not only adopts a pro-attitude toward that specific instance of raping a woman, but he also "adopts that attitude toward [its] real-life

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[60] Gaut, 187.

counterparts – and so reveals something of his attitude toward real-life women."[61] Similarly, when a person has a pro-attitude toward fictional accounts of immoral behavior in the arts, he maintains pro-attitudes toward other events of that kind in the actual world. Readers of de Sade's *Juliette* or Nabokov's *Lolita* who are entertained by and approve of the fictional portrayals of untoward treatment of females as mere sex objects do so in part because they implicitly harbor the same attitudes toward women being treated this way in the real world. Following Gaut's line of reasoning, people who hunt for the joy of the kill in *Red Dead Redemption* and *Cabela's Big Game Hunter* hold unsympathetic attitudes toward actual animals. He affirms that we should not approve of such evils in reality and that we should not approve of such depraved acts in any context, even those involving merely imaginary behavior, because "we have a cognitive interest in not seeing evil approved of, for such approval implies that there is something good about an attitude we know to be bad."[62] When we have a pro-attitude toward evil, real or imagined, we are culpable because we are endorsing evil of that kind and we should never desire for such ills to occur in any context.

As I mentioned earlier, Gaut merely takes all of this for granted. He has made an empirical claim yet has provided no evidence to support it. He presupposes that when persons approve of imaginary evil events that they also approve of events of that kind in reality. I see no reason to suppose that our acceptance of the specific imaginary events that we consider while engaging in

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[61] Gaut, 188.
[62] Gaut, 189.

malevolent fictional acts in literature, films, and video games should be seen in this way. To make this clear, please consider the following example:

> Jose is an avid *Sopranos* fan. In one episode, the character Tony learns that a boss from a rival mob named Coco has made rude remarks to his daughter. Tony, filled with anger, goes to the hangout of Coco and beats him to the ground. Not satisfied with the beating that he delivered, Tony raises Coco's head above a step on the floor, opens Coco's mouth so that his jaw is straddling the step, and then stomps on the back of Coco's skull. While Jose watches this scene, he giggles aloud and thinks that this fictional curb stomping is quite cool, and he could not be more pleased with the scene he just witnessed on the television screen.

If we were to follow Gaut's account, we should think poorly of Jose because, by having a pro-attitude toward this imaginary instance of savage revenge, Jose also endorses other events of that kind, both real and imagined. But, it is not necessarily the case that Jose's approval applies to all events of this kind. When we think of Jose's response to this scene in *The Sopranos*, we can express Jose's attitude as follows: 'Jose finds an instance of evil amusing.' But this attitude is markedly different than Jose finding all instances of evil amusing. Jose does not necessarily approve of all events of that kind and in all contexts; he need not approve of them in other fictional accounts of this kind of violent revenge and he need not approve of them in the actual world. No matter how much Jose relishes this particular violent depiction in one scene of *The Sopranos,* Jose may find the thought of this kind of act taking place in reality horrific and revolting. Again, let's consider a vegan who plays hunting video games. He may genuinely enjoy landing a kill shot on an animal, he may enjoy preparing its skin, and he may enjoy selling the hide for a profit, but such

enjoyment does not entail that he enjoys other depictions of fictional hunting and it surely doesn't entail that he has a pro-attitude toward actual acts of hunting performed in the wild. In the case of Jose, the specific evil act occurs in a work of fiction, and his pro-attitude is toward that particular imaginary unethical act. Similarly, when the vegan playing hunting video games enjoys killing imaginary animals for sport, he enjoys killing animals for sport in a very specific context within a video game.

I maintain that when we enjoy a particular act in a movie, book, or video game, we are responding particularly to that imaginary event, not to imaginary events of that kind. Our responses are relative to context; our response to one depiction of a fictional event in one imaginative creation need not correspond to our attitudes toward other depictions of fictional events of that kind in other fantastic constructions, and it surely need not correspond to our attitudes toward events of that kind taking place in reality.

It turns out that people are bombarded with IIA; we need not seek them out by selecting certain fictional works and video games. We confront them in countless imaginary realms. Here is just a small sample of different imaginary works that aim to amuse us with suffering of one kind or another:

> The television series *Mad Men*:
> Guy MacKendrick is introduced to the firm as the new head of the office. The firm later has a large party with much drinking and dancing. A couple of employees are riding a John Deere lawn mower around the office (John Deere had recently become a client at the firm.) while people watch and laugh. Then, another employee begins to drive the mower but quickly loses control and runs over Guy MacKendrick's foot. He screams in pain, blood flies and spatters on those nearby, and the mower eventually comes to a stop when it crashes into an office.

After the incident, various employees engage in conversations about the accident. A handful of employees are talking in an office about how such a thing could happen. The wall behind them is shaded glass, glass facing the location of the party, and blood droplets are visible. As the talk continues, the audience sees the silhouette of a cleaning person wipe away the blood. When Roger Sterling learns that MacKendrick might lose his foot, he responds with, "Right when he got it in the door." His comment is met with laughter from the whole room.

Don Draper and Joan are at the hospital and discuss how radically things changed for MacKendrick in the course of a single day. She says, "But that's life. One minute you're on top of the world, and the next minute some secretary is running you over with a lawn mower." She and Don both smile and laugh. Later we learn that MacKendrick loses his foot from the accident, that his career in sales will be dashed, and that he will no longer be able to lead the firm.

The movie *Silence of the Lambs*:

Hannibal Lecter is a murderer and a cannibal. Throughout the film we come to see how evil he is. He places the utmost priority on satisfying his bloodlust and gives the pain felt by others no mind at all. Hannibal describes many killings and how he cooked and consumed body parts of some of his victims, right down to accompaniments of the meals. We also learn that the warden at Hannibal's prison is rather irritating, that he deliberately makes life less pleasant for Lecter. Lecter doesn't respect the warden, a man who strives to be a respected psychologist who makes contributions to professional journal, and Lecter mocks him for failing to realize his goal.

At one point in the film Lecter escapes and is on the run. He calls the agent he worked with while in prison. We see Lecter on the phone near an airstrip and we see his warden stepping off a plane. Lecter tells the agent, "I do wish we could chat longer, but I'm having an old friend for dinner." The audience can recognize the pun and is left to imagine that Lecter plans to kill and eat the warden.

A Miller Lite commercial:

A guy and a girl sit at a table with a dog near them on the floor and have the following chat:
Girl: Here's one for you. If me and Buster [her dog] were hanging over a cliff, and you could only save one of us, which one would you save?
Guy: Easy, you.
Girl: Ooh, me or your mom?
Guy: Sorry, mom!
Girl: Your Miller Lite?
Guy: Hmmmm. How high is the cliff?

The girl gets upset and walks away from the table. We are led to believe that he had to seriously consider whether to save his beer or his girlfriend.

A Tide commercial:

    A mother sits on the couch while her daughter asks if she's seen her green blouse. The mom begins to think and the audience sees images of the mom talking the top from her daughter's closet and wearing it while having a fun night out on the town. She soils the shirt with wine, washes it with Tide, and returns it to the closet without leaving any signs of having taken and soiled the garment. The mother responds that she hasn't seen the blouse, then we see the daughter finding the top and wearing it. The blouse looks as good as new.

A Bud Light commercial:

    A Bud Light truck driver takes his car in for an oil change. The mechanics realize that the truck is full of beer, break into the back of the truck, steal loads of beer and throw a wild party with ladies dancing. They lie to the driver and tell him about a number of complications causing the oil change to take longer. The commercial ends with a shot of people having fun at the party, and we see a mechanic remove bottle tops using a drill with a wrench attachment.

A Captain Morgan commercial:

    Two friends are walking and one suggests that they buy some Captain Morgan rum and soda. His friend tells him that was the best idea he ever had. We see his eyes turn up as he remembers another great idea he had. Once, while getting a message at a parlor, we see a clock near him that shows that he's only got a few minutes remaining before his message is to end. While the masseuse turns away for an instant, he reaches up and pushes the minute hand back, causing the masseuse to think that there is far more time remaining, giving him a much longer massage than the one he paid for.

The song *I Love the Way You Lie* by Eminem, featuring Rihanna:

    Rihanna sings: "Just gonna stand there and watch me burn? But that's alright, I like the way it hurts. Just gonna stand there and hear me cry? But that's alright because I love the way you lie."

    The song is about abuse between a couple, and the boyfriend emotionally and physically tortures his girlfriend. All the while she accepts this treatment and repeats that she loves him. In the real world, Rihanna was the victim of physical abuse from her boyfriend.

The television show *The Office*:

    Andy is engaged in a dance off and he performs a split. He screams in agony and we learn that his car keys were in his pocket

and they cut his scrotum. Pam then drives him to the hospital. While on the way, he asks her to drive carefully because every bounce and bump hurts his privates very badly. At one point he says something that irritates her, so she deliberately swerves the car to cause him intense pain. Later we learn that Jim has spread a rumor about Andy to all of their friends. Jim has told them that Andy's testicles were cut right off. After seeing a couple of people poke fun at Andy for his loss, Andy says that he doesn't know where such a rumor was started. Andy's physical pain and embarrassment are the source of much laughter.

The Baby Shaker app for iPhones and iPods:
    An application for Apple devices shows the image of a baby and it plays loud crying. To stop the baby from crying, a user must shake the device back and forth very quickly, simulating the act of shaking a baby into submission. Once the device is shaken enough, red 'X's appear over the baby's eyes and the crying stops.

A Boost Mobile commercial:
    A women checking her luggage at an airport has her child dressed in a dog costume and in a dog cage. She explains that pets fly for less and that their savings can be applied to their cell phone payments. She's lied to the airline and is transporting her child this way to save money on her trip.

    Following Gaut's account, anyone who enjoys any one of these fictional accounts of suffering is displaying attitudes she holds about various real world kinds. For the sake of ease, let's imagine that one audience member has seen and heard all of these examples and enjoyed them all. According to Gaut, she lacks proper respect for persons hurt in freak lawn mower accidents who lose their careers, she finds actual instances of murder and cannibalism amusing, she enjoys the thought of a boyfriend placing the same weight on a light beer as he does his girlfriend, she thinks nothing of people stealing from a truck driver so that they can throw a wild party with cold beer, she accepts instances of mothers stealing from their daughters and cleaning up their mess so that they can lie about it, she finds it appropriate for people to mislead workers that they hire so

that they can inappropriately receive additional services at no additional cost, she has a casual and accepting attitude of a woman enjoying being lit on fire and lied to by her abusing boyfriend, she has a view of men that allows her to be amused by one being hurt in a most sensitive area and then ridiculed by his closest friends, she is amused by instances of babies being shaken violently to end their crying, and she thinks it's funny to lie to an airline and store a caged child in the cargo section of an airplane.

That's what we ought to think of such a person if we accept Gaut's position. Or, we could accept the claim that I've advanced, that when a person enjoys suffering in one imaginary context, doing so does not necessarily correspond with her attitudes toward those kinds of suffering in reality. I maintain that Gaut is mistaken to conclude that our enjoyment of imaginary depictions of unethical events have implications for our attitudes toward events of that kind in actuality. At most, Gaut has shown that our thoughts, desires, and attitudes toward *actual* persons and states of affairs are relevant. We may accept that people are blameworthy when they have unethical desires since we may agree that it is better to not desire to have bad states of affairs take place in actuality. We should not hope that bad things will happen, and when they do, we should not be pleased by the occurrence of such evil and unfortunate events. But that we should frown upon people for having pro-attitudes toward actual evil does not entail that we should do the same for people who have pro-attitudes toward merely imagined evil.

Gaut's position also conflicts with findings of many psychological studies that aim to determine the extent to which various virtuous traits affect our behavior. While virtue theorists have talked about character for centuries, it has always been supposed that one's character traits are global, that they apply to all of the kinds of circumstances that he may find himself in. When considering a person's character traits, we've considered his attitudinal and behavioral dispositions. According to virtue theorists like Gaut, one's exhibited dispositions in one context are supposed to be consistent with corresponding dispositions in all other contexts. So, a person who was amused by dishonest acts in the Tide, Bud Light, Boost Mobile, and Captain Morgan advertisements is displaying a global character trait, that of dishonesty. But empirical studies over the last few decades have shown no evidence to support such a claim. Rather, studies indicate that our character traits are situational rather than global.[63] Our dispositions to act certain ways or to form particular judgments are highly sensitive to context. When considering an agent's honesty, it may be the case that she finds honesty tremendously important, that she strives to be honest in most situations, but that she tends to be dishonest when it involves a specific context, such as professional scenarios. While she has a strong disposition to behave honestly in most cases, in this one particular context, her attitude toward honesty is different and she finds being dishonest acceptable, and she is more

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[63] Krahe, B. (1990). *Situational Cognition and Coherence in Personality: An Individual-entered Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 9.

inclined to not be honest in such cases.[64] Or, we can imagine an agent who has

dispositions favoring honestly in a wider set of situations, but that she has a

different attitude about it when it involves fictional circumstances. Such an agent

may value honesty in nearly all kinds of cases in her own life and deeply value

honestly in general, but at the same time not have such a disposition when it

comes to evaluating humorous dishonest acts that take place in some

commercials.

Kwame Appiah has discussed studies involving our character traits and

he's come to deny the sort of global and consistent traits that Gaut accepts. He

points out that numerous studies show that our moral character traits do not

display cross-situational stability.[65] We seem to respond to particular elements of

specific situations and this corresponds with our behavioral and attitudinal

dispositions. Such situational character traits allow agents to be reliably honest in

one kind of situation while being reliably dishonest in another kind of situation.

This sort of dispositional flexibility can explain how so many audience members

respond to fictional works involving immoral acts in ways that do not correspond

with how they respond to such acts taking place in reality. Since agents respond

to relevant features of their situations, it may be the case that the fictional nature

of a TV show, commercial, book, or video game allows agents to have attitudinal

dispositions that only emerge when confronted with imaginary content. Hence,

when they enjoy IIA in one fictional context it is in no way related to their

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[64] Candace L. Upton's book is filled with examples involving agents with moral dispositions that are context sensitive. Upton, C.L. (2009). *Situational Traits of Character: Dispositional Foundations and Implications for Moral Psychology and Friendship*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
[65] Appiah, K. (2008). *Experiments in Ethics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 39.

character trait involving honesty in general, or as it applies to a wide range of cases that take place in reality.

While it may appear that there is something the matter when people are entertained by imaginary instances of unethical acts, it is quite hard to adequately justify this intuition. McCormick and Gaut have argued that responding favorably to fictional depictions of violence is unethical because of how it affects or reflects our character. But the distinction between our attitudes toward fantastic events and our attitudes toward actual events remains morally relevant. When an agent is amused by IIA she need not approve of all events of that kind, she need not desire that kind of event take place in actuality, and she need not have any intention whatsoever to help bring about that sort of state of affairs in the real world. Since our attitudes toward imaginary evil occurrences do not directly correspond with our attitudes in general, or with our desires, intentions, and feelings about real persons or states of affairs, it appears that they are not harmful to our moral character, and that they are not emblematic of character flaws. When we are amused by reprehensible behavior in film and literature, and by nasty events in video games, we are simply expressing pro-attitudes toward those specific imaginary instances, and we are able to recognize the difference between evils that occur merely in the fictional realm and those that may take place in reality. Because of our ability to recognize this distinction, our responses to imaginary evils are not incompatible with maintaining virtuous character, and we are not ethically culpable for being entertained by these kinds of imaginative immoral constructions.

I think it'd be helpful to consider a view advanced by Michael Slote.[66] He tells us, "[t]he moral(ly good or decent) life depends on our being altruistically concerned with others and on refraining from harming them and treating them unjustly"[67] and that "being moral involves some sort of substantial concern for those beyond one's immediate family or circle of friends."[68] I suppose Gaut's view is consistent with these claims and I'm willing to accept this aspect of Slote's ethical position. I also grant what Slote has to say about unethical people:

> What the unvirtuous, morally bad, unempathic persons feels toward others may be indifference or may be malice, but both of those feelings contrast with warmth and show a lack or absence of warmth. Comparitively speaking, then, such people are cold (or cold-hearted or very cool) in their attitudes or feelings toward other people, and someone who empathically registers that coldness will thus be *chilled* by the attitudes or desires of a morally bad person (as expressed in certain actions).[69]

He goes on to explain that moral folks will find such unethical and unempathic persons off-putting, and that ethical people, when considering behaving selfishly or with malice, "will have some motive/desire not to that kind of action (similarly, if the disapproved action is a merely potential action of the agent)."[70] I believe we may grant all of these claims as they apply to *actual* persons. When judging the ethical standard of *real* persons, it is perfectly appropriate to consider how they view and care for the interests of *actual* others, and if they are indifferent to the suffering of *actual* others, then we should think poorly of them. But it seems possible and plausible that some people with properly developed empathy and

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[66] Slote, M. (2010) *Moral Sentimentalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[67] Slote, 14.
[68] Slote, 20.
[69] Slote, 37.
[70] Slote, 46.

ethical leanings toward *actual* others may have different responses to some imaginary others. They may be as good as can be to real people of all stripes but enjoy playing a VVG like *Grand Theft Auto*. They could even be empathic and compassionate toward strangers whom they encounter in traffic, yielding to let people merge and deliberately never engaging in aggressive driving, all while relishing carjacking imaginary drivers and driving recklessly on purely fictional roads in the imaginary brought to life by *Grand Theft Auto*. That such persons use different empathic and moral standards when dealing with fictional persons seems readily apparent given the leisurely activities of countless people around the world. Shows like *The Sopranos* get terrific ratings and VVG like *Grand Theft Auto* and *Call of Duty* break sales records virtually every time they release a new title. A virtue theorist like Gaut has failed to provide empirical proof that our attitudes, feelings, and dispositions about fictional immoral acts have some sort of carry-over effect on our attitudes, feelings, and dispositions about real-world events, actual persons, and real events. A *Grand Theft Auto* player may be unempathic, indifferent, and malicious toward imaginary folks in the VVG while not having a lack of warmth for actual people.

Chapter 4 − Empathy and Fiction

Fictional characters don't exist. When we read most fictional works, we learn about imaginary people doing imaginary things, with imaginary conversations and imaginary thoughts. Given that these things are not real and did not happen, one might think that audiences have little reason to care much at all about fictional states of affairs. But audience members of all kinds get wrapped up in fictional works. Millions of readers cannot wait to see Harry Potter tackle adventures or fight off the evil attacks from Voldemort. Loads of readers could not get enough of Ignatius J. Reilly in *A Confederacy of Dunces*, and they delighted in hearing what he had to say about wild events unfolding around him. In addition to be moved by what is happening within such works, audiences are, in many cases, able to see the world through the eyes of fictional characters. While reading *The Old Man and the Sea*, we got to feel Santiago's loneliness, his exhaustion, his respect for the giant fish he catches, and his fondness of the boy he helped train. When we empathize with others, either people in the real world or characters in fictional works, we are able to understand what it is like for them to have particular perceptions. When we experience empathy for someone else, we are able to identify with the other person. We feel what they feel and see what they see.

This is something we do on a day-to-day basis with those around us and it is something we do almost as often when we consume fictional works. Whether in books, TV shows, or movies, we get glimpses of what it is like to see things from another person's vantage point. We also sympathize with fictional

characters and experience emotions because of what those characters are going through. When we read or watch *No Country for Old Men*, we feel anxiety for Llewelyn. We know that there is a brilliant and heartless killer tracking him down, and we may come to loathe and fear this assassin, Chigurh. When we empathize and sympathize with our friends, we have these experiences about real people and we care about how they will do. Things will happen to *them* and *they* will experience events. But nothing is going to happen to Llewelyn and Chigurh isn't going to hurt anybody. We still have emotions toward these fictional characters and events, we still empathize and sympathize with them.

Many philosophers have asked if we can have genuine emotional responses to objects and events that don't exist and this has been labeled the paradox of fiction. In this chapter, we will consider typical emotional responses to two novels. I will also present two different responses to the paradox of fiction. Some maintain that we do not have genuine emotional responses to fictional works while others claim that our emotional responses to these works are just as real as the emotions we feel about our friends or family members. We will then consider how each of these positions shapes how audiences experience the two works in question. All of the rival theories in the debate about aesthetic value (ethicism, moderate moralism, cognitive immoralism, and empathic autonomism) accept the value of our emotional responses to fiction, and I will look to see how the paradox of fiction may affect their standing. The first work to consider is *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemmingway[71]. This novel tells the story of Santiago, an old fisherman who goes far, far, from shore in hopes of catching a

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[71] Hemmingway, E. (1995). *The Old Man and The Sea*. New York: Scribner.

marlin. Before he embarks on his trip, we are told that the fisherman is having a horrible dry spell. It has been over 80 days since he last caught a fish and others in his village have lost hope in his abilities. They also believe that he is bad luck. Santiago used to serve as a mentor of sorts to a younger fellow, Manolin. When Santiago thinks of his former apprentice, he calls him 'the boy', and the boy's parents have limited his exposure to Santiago because they do not want him to be a negative influence on the youth. The boy still cares for Santiago and he helps Santiago with various tasks when Santiago returns from fishing trips. The boy also packs Santiago small bits of food to take on his long trip.

After months of no fish, Santiago sets his sail to go farther than he ever goes in hopes of breaking his stretch of poor luck. He's alone in his boat with just his tools, the sea, and after a short while, a very large fish. A giant marlin bites his line and gets hooked. Catching this fish is not so simple as just reeling him in. Santiago fights with this marlin for days, through the intense heat of the sun and the solitary darkness of the night. This ordeal takes a physical toll on Santiago; he suffers a cut to his hand (which is particularly painful since he must use his hands to pull the fish in on the line), and his muscles fatigue and ache. Readers also experience what Santiago is thinking. We learn of his fondness for the boy and respect for the great fish. We become keenly aware of his isolation, his exhaustion, and tender feelings for his loyal, young friend. We also learn of his despair when, after he's caught the enormous fish, sharks attack wave after wave and eat his prized catch while he tries to get back home. After all of his

effort and his apparent triumph, Santiago does not bring home a valuable, prized catch, but just small remnants of the fish that took him so much to catch.

Readers learn of another man's struggles in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*.[72] In this book, a man named Llewelyn finds a briefcase full of money at the site of a gun battle among drug dealers. Even though everyone involved in the fight dies, another man, Chigurh, has been tasked with recovering the money. Throughout the book, we see Llewelyn take steps to stay undetected and to keep his wife safe from his new foe. We also see Chigurh operate as an ultra-focused killer who does whatever it takes to complete his job. We see Llewelyn become exhausted through the ordeal and we see how much his feet hurt after being torn to bits inside his shoes. While on the run from Chigurh, we see Llewelyn buy a new pair of boots and some fresh socks. We see that Chigurh feels no sympathy for people he kills, and during an exchange with a clerk at a gas station, we see him get irritated by the small talk of the man behind the counter. Unbeknownst to the clerk, Chigurh has flipped a coin and the result of the toss will determine whether he will kill the man. After Chigurh has successfully obtained the case and the money, readers see Chigurh track down Llewelyn's wife and kill her. She tells him that he doesn't have to kill her, and he calmly explains that people always tell him that, that he doesn't have to kill anybody, but he believes that, in this case, he does have to kill her because he must keep his word. Chigurh had offered Llewelyn a deal earlier in the book. Chigurh said that if Llewelyn returned the case, then Chigurh would only kill him,

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[72] McCarthy, C. (2006). *No Country for Old Men*. New York: Vintage International.

but that if he did not give up the money, that Llewelyn and his wife would be killed.

Readers get to witness a man dealing with a most trying ordeal in each of these books. These books aim to get audience members to care about these men, to sympathize with them as they tackle their tremendous challenges. Most people think that these books are successful to that end. We care a great deal about Santiago and hope that he'll be able to get home safely with a much-needed catch. We hate to see him grow tired and sore and we feel sorry for him as he suffers a great loss all by himself out on the waters. We also come to root for Llewelyn. We hope he will escape Chigurh's relentless search and we feel disappointed to see that both Llewelyn and his wife die while Chigurh succeeds. These works also allow us to empathize with a number of characters. We don't have a back-breaking experience while reading the book, but we come to know what it is like for Santiago to ache while propping himself up in his boat, reeling in the giant fish with his hands hour after hour. We can experience Santiago's longing for the boy, his caring friend who helps him out and talks about baseball (Santiago and the boy loved to read about Major League Baseball games in the paper and listen to games on the radio.). We can understand that Santiago truly respects the beast with which he wrestles, and his crushing defeat when he can no longer fight off the sharks that bite away at his catch. We also get to feel how tired Llewelyn becomes during his flight from Chigurh. We get to see how both men think in practical terms. They have tasks at hand, they have to improvise according to the trappings of their situations, and they must work through a

number of physically painful experiences. With Chigurh's exchange in the gas station, we get to see how a perceived small slight transforms into due cause to kill a man. At the end of the book, after he's completed all of his tasks, Chigurh is involved in a bloody car accident and is badly injured. We get to feel what it is like to ignore the pain, to not be distracted by it for an instant, and to focus only on leaving. We see Chigurh strike a deal with some kids who witnessed the accident. He needs to get away. He can't be there when the cops come to the site of the crash, so he buys a shirt from one of them, pays them to remain silent, and fashions a sling for his harm. He silently limps away. From our first encounter with Chigurh to our last, we get to experience what it is like to have a laser-sharp focus on the task at hand.

One of the earliest people to tackle the paradox of fiction was Kendall Walton. He gives us an example of man named Charles who watches a movie in a theater. The movie is a horror film depicting some frightening green slime on the screen. Charles watches the slime destroy anything it touches. Eventually the slime starts to come at the camera. People in the audience see the slime approaching them and Charles becomes scared. He lets out a shriek and clutches the armrests of his chair. After considering Charles's experience watching the movie, Walton asks, "Was he terrified of it? I think not."[73]

Walton points out some key facts about Charles's experience. The slime is not real. Charles is in no danger. The slime depicted on the screen is not dangerous, and even if it were, it cannot leave the screen, enter the theater, and kill Charles. And Charles knows all of this. According to Walton, Charles may

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[73] Walton, K. (1990). *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 196.

think that he is experiencing fear, but in fact he is experiencing something else,

quasi fear. Walton explains,

> He experiences quasi fear as a result of realizing that fictionally the slime threatens him. This makes it fictional that his quasi fear is caused by a belief that the slime poses a danger, and hence that he fears the slime.[74]

Even though Charles seems scared of the slime, Walton points out Charles

knows that the slime does not pose a threat, so he does not fear the slime itself.

Walton also describes the feelings audiences may experience when they read

Death of a Salesman, *Anna Karenina*, or when they watch *Superman*. He says,

> We should be wary of the idea that people literally pity Willy Loman or grieve for Anna Karenina or admire Superman while being fully aware that these characters and their sufferings or exploits are purely fictitious.[75]

When one experiences pity, Walton states that the pity involves the belief that the

object of pity actually suffers to some extent. When a reader learns of the sad

state of Willy Loman, she knows that Willy Loman is not suffering at all, so he is

not a suitable object of pity. When a viewer watches Superman do amazing

things on the screen, she knows that Superman is not saving any lives or

standing up to any powerful villains. As such, Superman is not a proper object of

admiration.

When audience members experience quasi fear, quasi pity, or quasi

admiration, their experiences aren't necessarily phony. Walton recognizes that

when we engage with these fictional works, we truly feel certain things happen in

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[74] Walton, 245.
[75] Walton, 203.

our minds and in our bodies, and these responses may be phenomenologically similar to what we experience when we respond to real objects. These feelings are quasi emotions, and they differ from emotional responses to actual objects and events in that they are directed toward fictional creations. To experience real emotions, a person must believe that the object in question exists and that the object possesses traits that merit a particular emotional response. Let us consider Charles watching the horror movie. The slime cannot cause genuine fear within Charles because it does not exist and because Charles knows that the slime that he sees does not possess the murderous properties he imagines. Charles can get legitimately tense while watching the movie and experiencing quasi fear, but his experiences are markedly different than they would be if he were to experience actual fear about real slime. For starters, he would not just sit there and watch. He wouldn't grip the chair and remain firmly seated. Charles would run if he were feeling real fear about real slime that were actually dangerous and coming at him. He would get the heck out of that theater to escape the perceived threat. But Charles does not do that and he does not do that because he is not really scared of being devoured by the green slime.

Berys Gaut doesn't accept Walton's view of quasi emotions, and he believes that audience members feel real pity for Willy Loman and genuine admiration for Superman. He thinks Walton's two necessary conditions to experience real emotions are mistaken and he addresses a number of examples to support his claim:[76]

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[76] Gaut, B. (2003). Reasons, emotions, and fictions. In Kieran, M., McIver Lopes, D. (Eds.), *Imagination, Philosophy, and the Arts* (15-34). London: Routledge.

Fred had a traumatic experience with a dog as a child and he is horrified of dogs to this day. Fred comes across Fido, a dog who is old and clearly harmless. Nonetheless, Fred is scared to death of Fido. He knows that Fido in particular poses no threat to his safety, but he is still horrified.

Berys imagines having his hand mangled by a machine. He feels fear when he imagines this but he knows his hand is not caught in the machine.

Berys stands at the top of a cliff and looks down at the rocks below. He imagines falling to his death and he gets scared. He also knows that he is safely behind a protection wall.

If a person were to imagine what it would be like if Hitler had won the Second World War, she could feel fear about it.

The CN Tower in Toronto is quite tall and it has an observation deck equipped with a glass walkway. Visitors can walk over the glass and look straight down hundreds and hundreds of feet. A person can walk on this glass, recognize that it is perfectly safe to do so, but feel a vivid sensation of fear of falling.[77]

In each of these cases, Gaut says the person experiences a genuine emotion, fear, toward different objects (a dog, a machine, a different state of affairs involving Hitler being victorious, etc.), and this fear of the object takes place when the person merely imagines certain things. Fred knows that Fido is a real dog and he imagines that Fido is a threat. Berys knows that he is safe on the cliff yet he imagines not being safe, falling, and he sees the rocks as a threat. One can know that Hitler is dead and not a threat, but she could imagine if Hitler were real, and if he were real, then she can imagine him being a legitimate threat, and she could fear this threat. All of these examples involve a person being perfectly safe yet imagining that a threat exists. Imagining this threat, and presumably imagining what it would feel like to fall, to be attacked by a dog, etc., causes

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[77] Gaut, 2003,19.

people to respond with fear. So, whether a person thinks of imaginary persons facing make-believe threats or of real objects posing fictional threats, Gaut claims that he experiences the same emotional responses. Suppose that we were friends with Fred, we were there with him when he saw Fido, and we heard him explain his reaction. Fred knows that his fear is irrational but he also knows that he's scared of Fido. We know the fear is irrational, we know that Fido is a threat to no one, yet we see how Fred responds with dreadful anxiety. In this case, it seems appropriate to say that Fred isn't feeling quasi fear but actual fear. That his experience is caused by his overly active imagination and mistaken perception of a threat does not change or diminish the fear he experiences.

I have given the briefest accounts of Walton and Gaut's positions, and I will not be able to adequately address them in this project. I also will not be able to evaluate the positions on their merit or cover the laundry lists of objections that people have raised to their stances. For the purpose of this project, I will consider how either of these views, if we were to accept one, would affect how we aesthetically judge fictional works. Earlier, I asked readers to consider two novels that depict men caught in a long, frightening, and dangerous struggle. If we were to adopt Walton's irrealist position, then we would conclude that we did not experience real pity for Santiago, but quasi pity. We did not experience anxiety for Llewelyn but quasi anxiety for him. Chigurh did not scare us but caused us to experience quasi fear. At first glance, it may seem that experiencing quasi emotions about these fictional characters would belittle our engagement with the works. But, as Walton admits, quasi emotional responses may be

phenomenologically similar to genuine emotional responses. From the perspective of the audience member, the responses one experience can feel just as real, even though they are prompted by imaginary objects and events. In terms of aesthetic engagement, these two works would not be worse off because of their inability to cause genuine emotional responses by audience members. If Walton is correct, it just so happens that any and all fictional works cannot produce certain kinds of emotional responses. They can, instead, produce quasi emotional responses that are just as enjoyable and captivating as the real ones, so they should be seen to have different aims. Rather than aiming to create characters whom we pity, admire, or fear, these works aim to depict characters who elicit quasi pity, quasi admiration, or quasi fear. When audience members experience these sought after quasi emotional responses, the works would be successful to a degree, and this success would be recognized by the four rival stances (ethicism, moderate moralism, cognitive immoralism, and empathic autonomism).

If we were to follow Gaut's realist position, then audience members would indeed experience real emotional responses to these works, genuine responses that feel much the same as quasi emotional responses, so the works would be viewed in similarly high regard. These works manage to produce particular emotional responses within audience members, so they would remain aesthetically successful to that extent. According to all of the aesthetic positions addressed in this project, works that are capable of arousing sought after responses would be meritorious for doing so. *The Old Man and the Sea* was

capable of making audiences care a great deal for Santiago and to experience a range of emotions as we see him struggle through a few torturous days of fishing by himself. Our sympathy for him is real, and our ability to identify with his loneliness and exhaustion amounts to genuine empathy. *No Country for Old Men* caused us to sympathize with Llewelyn and even to empathize with Chigurh, who cared only about accomplishing the task at hand. My own view, empathic autonomism, would deem both of these works as aesthetic successes whether we were to follow Walton's or Gaut's position. If an audience experiences quasi empathy or empathy with a book's characters, the works were still able to produce their sought after responses. They got the results they were supposed to produce. Audiences tend to enjoy seeing situations from different perspectives and these books gave us an awful lot of something that we desire. None of us (I suppose) are old, failing fishermen who take to the deep sea to try to make a living. We have never personally experienced the despair of not catching fish for months and the elation of snagging a giant Marlin, but while reading Hemmingway's book, we are able to experience what it is like to go through those emotions and events. Whether these are quasi emotions or genuine emotions, quasi empathy or genuine empathy, they feel the same to us as we read the book, and they engage us in aesthetically positive ways.

Chapter 5 − Imaginative Resistance

Much of the debate about the aesthetic value of works with imaginary immoral acts (IIA) hinges upon audience responses to such pieces. Both Berys Gaut and Noël Carroll base their positions on how audience members respond when confronted by IIA. Gaut explains that audience members should not respond positively to IIA. They recognize that the depicted acts are immoral, they surmise that to approve of such acts, even if they are only fictional, would be immoral of them, so they simply do not respond favorably. Carroll explains audience responses differently. Audiences don't necessarily make an ethical calculation; they are simply put off by IIA. A work tries to cast IIA in a positive light, audiences don't see IIA that way and they will experience a kind of emotional disconnect with the work. They just can't buy into the narrative as the work's creators have hoped. And, as mentioned previously, this notion of audience disconnect goes back to Hume, who explained that audiences cannot and should not respond favorably to IIA. In more recent literature, this phenomenon has been called imaginative resistance. In this chapter, I'll present different explanations of imaginative resistance. If imaginative resistance is a phenomenon that affects all audience members who encounter IIA, then moralist positions will appear quite strong. But if imaginative resistance is not such a wide-spread phenomenon, or if it is contingent upon personal traits or biases of individual audience members, then moralism will be undermined. I will argue that when imaginative resistance is experienced, it does not necessarily indicate a moral or aesthetic problem of the work, but of a kind of preference within affected

audience members. I will also argue that significantly many audience members fail to experience imaginative inertia, and this phenomenon gives us good reason to not make sweeping claims about imaginative resistance.

Even though authors have discussed audiences' aversion to be swept up by IIA for hundreds of years, even going so far back as Aristotle, the phenomenal wasn't given a clear label until 2000, when Tamar Szabó Gendler explored the matter.[78] She gives us the following definition of imaginative resistance: "the puzzle of explaining our comparative difficulty in imagining fictional worlds that we take to be morally deviant."[79] Gendler finds this most unusual since we tend to be willing and able to imagine all sorts of fictional events and characters that stray quite radically from how things are in the real world. Consider the movie *Back to the Future*. This is what I take to be a case where audience members do not experience imaginative resistance. In that movie Marty McFly sees his friend and mentor get murdered, and to escape being killed himself, he unwittingly enters a time machine and travels to the past. Before hopping into the time machine, Marty was the child of two parents, two dorks who met and fell in love while in high school. Marty also had two older siblings, a brother and a sister. In the first view of the present that we see, the entire family was terrorized by a jerk named Biff, Marty's dad's boss. Marty's parents fell in love after an odd series of events but two were hugely important: the dad and mom first came to know each other when the dad was hit by a car and taken into the mom's home for medical treatment, and the mom and dad shared their first kiss at a school dance. That is

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[78] Gendler, T.S. (2000). The puzzle of imaginative resistance. *The Journal of Philosophy*, *97*(2), 55-81.
[79] Gendler, 56.

how the parents met and fell in love, so these events are primary causes of the family being created and, eventually, Marty being conceived.

When Marty arrives in the past, he appears just before these two events had taken place. This is when things get really crazy. Marty accidentally intervenes when he sees a younger version of his father in peril and Marty, not his father, sustains an injury and is taken in by his younger mother and her family. As the movie unfolds, Marty's younger mother develops a crush on Marty. During the whole movie, Marty is trying his hardest to not undo the past and to try to get his parents to romantically unite. But step after step, Marty seems to undo more and more events from the past and the audience sees his older siblings vanish from existence. Since they are both older than Marty, they are the first to apparently be erased from reality. Marty believes that if he doesn't fix things in the past and lead his parents to kiss at the big school dance, then he too will be erased. Luckily for Marty and his family, he manages to produce the desired result and his parents fall in love almost exactly as they did the first time around. Marty returns to the present and when he arrives he notices many things have changed. Marty's present is no longer bleak. His parents are now cool. Instead of working for Biff and being forced to endure mean conditions, Biff is now working for Marty's dad and he is a nice guy who tries to help the McFlys. His siblings are also alive and well. Since he engineered his parent's first kiss at the big dance, all of the children were created just as they were before Marty's trip to the past. Marty also returns to the present to see that his mentor has no longer been

murdered. It turns out that, while in the past, Marty warned his mentor of his future murder, so the mentor took adequate precautions to avoid being killed.

This is a tale of many fantastic events (time travel, vanishing people, murders, and the past and present being changed). Given an ordinary understanding of how things work in the real world, along with an understanding of physically and logically impossible events, *Back to the Future* asks audience members to go along with loads of wild stuff. Even though the movie strays from how we think things can happen in reality, to my knowledge, most audience members don't experience imaginative resistance while watching it. *Back to the Future* was a gigantic blockbuster when it was released, later two successful sequels were released, and the movie airs year after year on cable. As Gendler points out, "for the most part, we have no trouble fictionally entertaining all sorts of far-fetched and implausible scenarios."[80]

After considering why audiences experience cases of imaginative resistance when experiencing IIA but not when engaging in works like *Back to the Future*, Gendler advances two major claims. The first is that when audiences come across fictional proposition *M*, and fictional proposition *M* involves immoral claims that they do not accept in actuality, they cannot engage with the proposition imaginatively because they are actively interested in not engaging with immoral propositions. She disagrees with Hume as to the cause of this phenomenon. Hume states that our resistance stems from an *inability* to imagine IIA, but Gendler claims that audience members experiencing imaginative resistance do so because they are *unwilling* to go along with the work. Her

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[80] Gendler, 55.

second claim is that this kind of imaginative resistance occurs when proposition

M is one that audience members do not wish to export from the fictional work to

the real world. To export a proposition is to allow it to shape one's beliefs about

reality.

Gendler says that creators of fictional works wield great power. They have

the ability to direct our imagination in many ways. When a director like Steven

Spielberg gives us *Back to the Future*, Gendler tells us that he can make many

incredible and crazy events fictionally true. In this movie, it is fictionally true that

time travel can take place, that the past can be changed, and that the present

can be changed. When watching the movie, it is fictionally true that physically

and logically impossible events can take place. Gendler states that this kind of

creative freedom has limits and those limits are tied to our moral appraisal of

various unethical acts. Suppose we are asked to imagine a fictional story

involving *A* murdering *B*. If the story aims to have audiences find the murder just

or admirable, then problems emerge. She says that we just will not believe that

murder is good, even if the murder in question is make-believe. Gendler gives us

two statements to consider:

> (1) I am asked to believe that *P* holds (where *P* is some nonmoral
> proposition that I do not believe holds).
> (2) I am asked to believe that *M* holds (where *M* is some moral
> proposition that I do not believe holds).[81]

First, let's consider these propositions about things in the real world. Gendler

says that we rightly experience similar resistance in each case. If our available

evidence indicates that *P* and *M* do not hold, then we just won't manage to

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[81] Gendler, 59.

accept *P* and *M*. She states, "We do not seem able to bring ourselves to believe

arbitrary things at will."[82] This is because we aim to have true beliefs. So when

we encounter false propositions, these propositions are not candidates for belief.

That's the case when (1) and (2) are about things in the real world but not

necessarily so when they are about fictional objects and events. Gendler gives

us a third proposition to consider:

> (3) I am asked to make-believe that *P* holds (where *P* is some
> nonmoral proposition that I do not believe holds).[83]

When this takes place, we don't experience imaginative resistance. Gendler says

that is because no conflict emerges. We can reject *P* about the real world while

accepting it about a make-believe world. While we reject acquiring false beliefs

about actuality, we don't face any impediments to acquire false beliefs about

fictional situations. When the propositions in question are nonmoral in nature,

she states, "[w]here belief is concerned with tracking states of affairs, make-belief

is concerned with constructing scenarios."[84] Gendler presents a fourth

proposition:

> (4) I am asked to make-believe that *M* holds (where *M* is some moral
> proposition that I do not believe holds).[85]

Even though we have no trouble going along with (3), we hit a bit of a speed

bump when (4) occurs. Gendler asks us to consider a poem that talks of white

man's burden. The poem implies that whites are superior to nonwhites and when

whites take it upon themselves to try to lift up members of inferior races, they are

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[82] Gendler, 59.
[83] Gendler, 60.
[84] Gendler, 60-61.
[85] Gendler, 61.

to be lauded. In this poem, audiences are guided to make-believe that whites are better than nonwhites merely because of their skin color. In such a case, Gendler is not willing to go along as prescribed. In the real world, it's just not the case that members of one race are superior to others. Even though we can take the poem to be a work of fiction, Gendler won't make-believe that such racial disparities exist because that would involve accepting an immoral belief. She then presents a famous proposition from Kendall Walton,

> (5) "In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl."[86]

Gendler states that we won't imagine this; we won't make-believe that killing a baby is acceptable because infanticide is wrong and sex-based infanticide is even worse. It is horribly wrong in the real world and she states it is wrong in the fictional world, even if characters in that world think nothing of it.

Gendler affirms that beliefs about reality are constrained by what is true and our beliefs about make-believe scenarios are bound by what is possible. Statements like (4) ask us to make-believe what Gendler calls morally deviant propositions, but such propositions "are simply not make-believable, because they represent conceptually impossible states of affairs."[87] In this case, we should not imagine that killing an innocent person is right and that it is right because it is an instance of murder. She says, "So our resistance arises from the feeling that at a certain point, we simply lose a handle on what it is that we are

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[86] Walton, K. (2002). Morals in fiction and fictional morality. In Neil, A. (Ed.), *Arguing About Art: Contemporary Philosophical Debates* (339-357). London: Routledge.
[87] Gendler, 64.

even supposed to be imagining."[88] She explains that this can also happen in

moral cases when we don't experience impossible states of affairs. Gendler asks

us to consider a fictional story about mice.[89] The mice with white fur were hard

working and prosperous while those with black fur were lazy. Rather than work,

most black-furred mice ate watermelon or became addicted to drugs. The mice

with white fur were quite nice, helping out the black-furred mice by giving extra

food and supplies. After receiving aid, most black-furred mice continued to do

little work and they became dependent on the generosity of the white-furred

mice. Most white-furred mice thought this was inappropriate, so they stopped

giving. The story ends by telling us that things happened as they should since

groups should end up with what they deserve.

Most readers would have problems with this story. For starters, in reality,

there is no reason to believe that the color of a mouse's fur will be connected to

its mental abilities and habits. Furthermore, this story doesn't seem to be really

about mice, but about members of different races, and we know that skin color

doesn't determine one's work ethic. The story may depict things as if whites

deserve to be better off than blacks but that is simply wrong. In this case,

Gendler makes it clear that no impossibilities are present. We can comprehend

the content of this story with no difficulty. But what we will not do is go along with

the moral of the story. She says, "And my unwillingness to do so is a function of

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[88] Gendler, 66.
[89] Gendler, 73-74.

my not wanting to take a particular perspective of the world – this world – which I do not endorse."[90]

Gendler claims that when we engage with fictional works, we don't merely consider facts presented by the statements that make up the story. We bring a lot to our experience of the work and our beliefs about the real world shape how we view facts presented about the fictional world. To use Gendler's terminology, we import various beliefs. If we were to consider *Back to the Future*, when we imagine Marty, we imagine a male human, one with two arms and two legs. Without any effort, we suppose that he's vulnerable the ways that humans are and that he will experience risks and challenges in ways that we know that real people do. We import our beliefs about how people respond to real-world scenarios when we engage in fictional scenarios in the movie. The film does not tell us explicitly that Marty does not want to be erased from the world if his parents don't become a couple, and Marty does not utter any lines to that effect, but we know that in the real world the prospect of having one's existence come to a premature end would be most unsettling. Gendler holds that in addition to importing some beliefs while we engage in fictional works, we also export beliefs. When we experience realistic works of fiction, we should "feel free to export from the fictional world fictional truths that [we] take to not be merely truths in the story."[91] If we read a period piece, then we could export beliefs about how women of that day wore their hair, or how far one city is from another. We could also export beliefs about the ill effects of rigid class structures.

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[90] Gendler, 74.
[91] Gendler, 76.

According to Gendler, imaginative resistance will occur when an audience member feels that she is being asked to export a way of viewing the real world that she does not find appropriate.[92] Moral matters are likely to produce resistance specifically because "moral claims are often taken to be categorical, in the sense that, if they are true at all, they are true in all possible worlds."[93] If we read a fictional work about a collection of human body parts being assembled and reanimated, we know full well that such things cannot take place, so we easily recognize that we are not to export beliefs about the reanimation process. But when we read a book like *Frankenstein*, and we see how women in the book are treated much like property to be dealt with as men see fit, we are to export beliefs about the injustices of sexism. Since we think sexism is immoral and harmful in actuality, we won't experience imaginative resistance while reading *Frankenstein*. Works like *Back to the Future* and *Frankenstein* make it abundantly clear that they are not trying to depict various physical events realistically, so audiences are given a clear signal that we are not to export particular beliefs about reanimating dead folks or traveling in time and changing the past. Audience members recognize this so no imaginative resistance occurs. When moral matters are present in a fictional story, we are prompted to export particular beliefs, and when those beliefs are such that we would not want to carry them over to our view of the real world, we experience imaginative resistance, and this involves us not being able to make-believe what the creator wants us to imagine. Gendler explains, "we are unwilling to follow the author's

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[92] Gendler, 77.
[93] Gendler, 78.

lead because in trying to make that world fictional, she is providing us with a way of looking at this world which we prefer not to embrace."[94]

After considering Gendler's account of imaginative resistance, I believe it is relevantly suspect. She makes it seem as if all audience members experience this phenomenon and that we do it for the same reason. These are unfounded assumptions on her part. Even if we consider fairly vile material from works like *Lolita* or *The Sopranos*, many audience members simply don't experience imaginative resistance. As Kathleen Stock tells us, people have markedly different sensibilities about what is or is not morally repugnant.[95] What could lead to imaginative resistance in audience member *X* could not trigger any resistance in audience member *Y*. Stock explains that many factors may contribute to our sensitivity to willingness to make-believe various moral propositions.

One's upbringing, education, personal experiences, religion, moral leanings, are just but a few things that could shape how he is willing to engage with fictional material. Consider Hank, a Christian brought up in the south who embraces the divine command theory. How might he respond to *Brokeback Mountain*? The movie urges us to accept the homosexual relationship between Ennis and Jack and to sympathize with the many difficulties they face being gay in the 1970s. We see them struggle with their feelings for each other throughout the film. Someone like Hank might loathe homosexuality since it is a sin and he may be highly sensitive to fictional works that depict acts he finds despicable. Now let us consider Elizabeth and her reaction to the movie. Suppose that she is

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[94] Gendler, 79.
[95] Stock, K. (2005). Resisting imaginative resistance. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, *55*(221), 607-623.

25 years old and doesn't consider herself very religious. She's grown up around lots of openly gay people and she's seen that their romantic relationships are in most ways just like those had by straight folks. While watching the movie, she could sympathize with Ennis and Jack and think that it just plain stinks that society at that time placed impediment after impediment before them. According to Gendler, should audience members in general experience imaginative resistance when they experience *Brokeback Mountain*? Is Hank right to be unwilling to follow the filmmakers' lead? Is Elizabeth correct to willingly go along? When Gendler explains imaginative resistance, she appears to suppose that audience members who experience it are right to do so. In Hank's case, I think most would say that his imaginative resistance, while real, could be tied to moral misunderstandings on his part along with a very particular aesthetic leaning (that works should not stray from Christian values). All of Gendler's examples of experiencing imaginative resistance involve cases where not wanting to export certain propositions from the fictional work to the real world are justified. But people may disagree about which propositions should or should not be exported. There may be differences between audience members who *do* experience imaginative resistance and those who *should* experience imaginative resistance.

Gendler hasn't given us the means to determine when imaginative resistance is warranted or unwarranted. She says that audiences do experience it when unsettling propositions are shared in what she calls a work of 'realistic fiction'.[96] When we engage in realistic fiction, it is clear to us that we are to export propositions from the piece, and when we encounter inappropriate propositions,

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[96] Gendler, 76.

she says imaginative resistance will come into effect. When we consume unrealistic fiction, about things like wizards and warlocks, we can recognize that the works are not providing us with propositions to export, so we do not experience resistance. I believe that many works are not so cut-and-dried. A movie like *Alien* involves purely fantastic events, including an alien killing people on a space ship, but this movie presents audiences with many propositions that seem suitable for export in that they seem realistic. The main character and hero, Ripley, is a strong female character who uses her brains and physical endurance to surmount a most horrifying foe. When the movie was made, there simply were not females acting as heroes in big-budget action movies. According to Gendler, *Alien* seems to send audiences a mixed message. It seems as if it may not intend to tell us things about the real world since it involves intergalactic battles against an alien, but given the way it presents a particular female character, it does, in other ways, appear to give us material that could shape how we feel about the real world. Imagine a sexist male who thinks that men are natural leaders and that women, lacking courage, are ill-equipped to lead. He might experience imaginative resistance while watching *Alien* since it conflicts with his view of women. If he were unwilling to go along with *Alien*, would this sort of imaginative resistance be warranted? I do not believe that it would be.

It also seems reasonable for some audience members to never experience imaginative resistance and for them to do so because they do not feel compelled to export any beliefs about make-believe states of affairs to the real world. They could watch *Brokeback Mountain*, *The Sopranos*, or even all of the

Saw movies (These show people being tortured and killed in create ways.) and have no problem making-believing as the filmmakers prescribe. They could view the IIA on the screen as merely fictional events that are meant to engage us just for the sake of entertainment. Audience members could find much of the material upsetting but still be able to imaginatively engage in the work without impediment.

At this time I'd like for us to reconsider a less obvious work that could produce imaginative resistance, *Back to the Future*. There are a few events in the movie that I did not spell out earlier. They involve Marty breaking the law and acting quite dangerously. Early in the movie, when we see Marty's present, we see him skateboarding. He is in a hurry and rather than skating faster by kicking his leg more and more, he grabs the bumper of a moving car and tags a ride. The driver of the car did not see him do this, and Marty smiles as he scoots along quite quickly. Later in the movie, when Marty is in the past, he faces a similar situation and he does this on an improvised skateboard, one with metal wheels. The movie depicts these acts as if they are cool, as if they involve Marty being clever, able to think on his feet, and physically skilled.

If we follow Gendler's account of imaginative resistance, I think that audience members should be unwilling to go along with that Spielberg has shown us. Marty is breaking the law and he's breaking the law in an obviously dangerous way. Skateboards are not meant to travel at very high speeds because their wheels slide from side to side rather than roll in an aimed direction once they reach a certain speed. Keeping control of a skateboard like this is

rather hard, and if anything were to go wrong, Marty would be seriously hurt. Not only are his acts reckless for himself, but he is a threat to other drivers on the road. When Marty did this on a board with metal wheels while in the past, the dangers were even greater. If he were to fall from a moving car in the middle of the road, he could cause other drivers to have an accident.

To my knowledge, most audiences simply enjoy *Back to the Future*. They like Marty, they like the crazy and dangerous situations he faces, and they hope things will work out well for him and his family in the end. That the events in the movie are physically and logically impossible doesn't faze them. They recognize that this is just a movie and they don't think about exporting much at all, if anything, from the film. Even audience members who are well versed in the logical impossibility of contradictory events and highly concerned with moral living can engage with this work. They don't experience imaginative resistance when Marty changes the past (he makes events that did happen not happen) and they similarly don't experience imaginative resistance when Marty immorally risks his life on a skateboard. The movie depicts Marty's skateboarding acts as being cool but in reality they are most certainly not cool, they are recklessly immoral. Gendler explains that when we experience immoral material in works, audience members rightly resist since we are resistant to export particular elements from the work to the actual world. In the case of *Back to the Future*, audience members do not resist and don't appear to be doing anything wrong by willingly engaging in the work. So, that some audience members desire not engage in

certain kinds of immoral make-believe does not preclude them from imagining IIA or from engaging with the fictional work.[97]

This sort of failure to experience imaginative resistance happens with countless audience members who consume innumerable fictional works. Consider caper books and movies. All of these works depict characters breaking the law, getting away with it, and enjoying the many spoils of pulling off a brilliant heist. Let's consider an audience member as Gendler has depicted them watching a movie like *Contraband*. Within the first few minutes of the movie, we are told that the main character, John, was the best smuggler going. We are to be amused by the clever ways in which he got elicit items across the border and into the hands of other crooks. Suppose an audience member was unwilling to make-believe that stealing and smuggling were acceptable forms of employment. Suppose that despite this reluctance and beyond her control, she ended up enjoying the movie, right down to the happily-ever-after ending of Ryan ending up Scott-free with stolen goods worth over twenty million dollars. It seems that this audience member's moral sensitivity to IIA waned to the point of her not experiencing imaginative resistance. I'd say that this is not a problem for her, morally speaking or as a person who consumes narrative fiction, and that she had no reason to be so morally sensitive to IIA to begin with since fictional works are, more often than not, just forms of entertainment. I've presented arguments supporting this claim earlier in the dissertation so I won't rehearse them here.

Gendler's account of imaginative resistance is problematic for moralists like Gaut and Carroll since she does not account for the fact that imaginative

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[97] Kathleen Stock raises this objection as well.

resistance does not happen to many audience members when they experience innumerable cases of IIA. And of audience members who do experience it, they may not experience it while engaging in the same fictional works. Even if we were to suppose that she does adequately explain *why* some people experience it, she does not show that they *should* be unwilling to engage in some IIA. It may be appropriate for moral audience members to imagine various immoral propositions and to not allow them to alter how they view the real world. Properly ethical audience members may employ different standards than those that Gendler has in mind when it comes to responding to fictional acts and attitudes that may or may not be suitable for exporting to the real world.

Another account of imaginative resistance comes from Greg Currie.[98] Much like Gendler, Currie claims that imaginative resistance comes from audience members *not wanting* to go along with certain claims, beliefs, or desires put forward by a work. Please reconsider the statement that Kendall Walton shared with us earlier about a woman being right to kill her baby since it was a girl. For audiences to respond positively to that statement, according to Currie, they would have a particular 'desire-like imagining'. This desire-like imagining would be that the murder of a female baby is something that is appropriate in the fictional world, so it should be brought about. For a reader to have such a desire-like imagining, he would first have a similar set of beliefs about the real world, namely, that it is appropriate for young females to be killed and that this kind of infanticide should be carried out. Currie explains that our desire-like imaginings

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[98] Currie, G. (2002). Desire in imagination. In Gendler, T.S., Hawthorne. J. (Eds.), *Conceivability and Possibility* (200-221). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

correspond with our desires and beliefs about objects in the real world. For most readers, since we do not in fact find female infanticide morally appropriate, we most certainly don't want it to occur in actuality. As such, we won't find it ethical in fictional works, so we won't want it to fictionally occur. If a work attempts to garner our approval of killing a baby just because it is a girl, then we will experience imaginative resistance.

Currie's account of imaginative resistance is lacking in a way that is relevant to our current aesthetic debate. Much like Gaut, Currie appears to suppose that a certain link exists between one's views of a fictional work and reality. It may be the case that some audience members have desire-like imaginings about IIA that are governed by their moral commitments in reality, but it is not the case that all audience members do. Some readers, including those who accept Gaut's practical-affective view of morality, might abhor some beliefs, desires, and attitudes in reality and resist desiring them to take place fictionally. But many audience members don't believe that one's beliefs, desires, and attitudes about fictional events must line-up with their beliefs, desires, and attitudes about real persons, so they could have all sorts of desire-like imaginings about IIA and experience no imaginative resistance to speak of.

Gaut's ethicism and Carroll's moderate moralism hinge upon, to some extent, imaginative resistance. Ethicism relies on the premise that audiences *should not* respond in certain ways to IIA and moderate moralism invokes the claim that in many cases audience *will not* respond as prescribed to IIA. To my knowledge, while a host of stances have emerged to describe the phenomenon

of imaginative resistance, none of them prove that audiences *ought to* experience it when engaging with IIA. Both Gaut and Carroll state that audiences will not respond as prescribed when encountering various instances of IIA but, as I argued in earlier chapters, it is by no means clear that audience members have a moral obligation not to aesthetically engage with IIA. Gendler and Currie are not the only people writing about imaginative resistance but I chose to include them in this dissertation since their positions would, if sound, best corroborate Gaut's and Carroll's claims. Unfortunately for ethicism and moderate moralism, neither Gaut nor Carroll has shown that it is unethical to enjoy fictional accounts of evil behavior. Since it is not clear that audiences should experience imaginative resistance to positive depictions if IIA, it has not been shown that audiences should or will fail to respond as prescribed by various fictional works, so they won't necessarily be less valuable aesthetically. Neither Gaut nor Carroll have advanced an adequate argument to support the claim that audiences should imaginatively resist fictional events like Marty McFly skateboarding behind a moving car in traffic while they should experience no imaginative resistance when they consider Marty changing past events.

Chapter 6 − Ethics and Aesthetics: Rival Views

Some fictional works pull our ethical and aesthetic intuitions in different directions. Novels such as Nabokov's *Lolita* are decidedly beautiful works of art but they may seem less beautiful since they are crafted as to cause audience members to be amused by patently evil characters like Humbert Humbert. This phenomenon has led philosophers to look into whether a work of fiction is more or less aesthetically valuable because of its moral value. Most have claimed that a work's moral value *does* affect its aesthetic value, and in this chapter, I will address three competing views of this stripe. Relatively few have stated that a work's moral value *does not* necessarily have a bearing on its artistic value. That's the view I accept and in a later chapter I will spell out a defense of the stance and provide additional reasons in order to show that it better explains the aesthetic value of various fictional works.

While David Hume is by no means the first renowned philosopher to talk of the intersection between aesthetics and ethics, his words provide a clear foundation for two positions in today's debate, ethicism and moderate moralism. Hume proposes that works that endorse attitudes that we deem unprincipled are aesthetically defective as a result and explains,

> But where the ideas of morality and decency alter from one age to another, and where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation; this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity. I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments; and however I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age, I never can relish the composition.[99]

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[99] Hume, 245.

According to Hume, audiences should not entertain immoral sentiments proffered by a work, nor should we approve of any characterization of depraved behavior. When a work elicits such responses it is aesthetically blemished for asking of audiences what we cannot provide, as we are loath to hold ethical views alien to our own moral convictions.

This passage is only two sentences long but it shares the essence of two of today's views. Let's examine the statements in turn. First, Hume makes an aesthetic claim, telling us that works exhibiting immoral acts will suffer aesthetically if they don't display appropriate disapproval. This is the major claim of moralism. Moralists agree that works that favorably depict unethical deeds, sentiments, or characters may be less valuable as works of art specifically because of these moral elements of the art objects. Second, Hume tells us about how audiences respond to such works, and he makes two distinct claims, one descriptive and one prescriptive. He states that audiences *cannot* take on such sentiments. This descriptive claim provides the basis of moderate moralism, a view espoused by Noël Carroll. Hume also states that audiences *should not* take on such sentiments. This prescriptive claim gives us the basis of ethicism, a stance supported by Berys Gaut.

Hume says more about how audiences respond to works depicting immoral imaginary acts (IIA),

> The want of humanity and of decency, so conspicuous in the
> characters drawn by several of the ancient poets, even sometimes by
> Homer and the Greek tragedians, diminishes considerably the merit of
> their noble performances, and gives modern authors an advantage
> over them. We are not interested in the fortunes and sentiments of
> such rough heroes: We are displeased to find the limits of vice and

> virtue so much confounded: And whatever indulgence we may give to the writer on account of his prejudices, we cannot prevail on ourselves to enter into his sentiments, or bear an affection to characters, which we plainly discover to be blamable.[100]

Hume's stance permits no exceptions in two distinct ways. According to Hume, a work displaying the wrong sort of attitude toward IIA is a sufficient condition for it being aesthetically defective to an extent. This is a claim that Gaut accepts but one that Carroll rejects. Carroll states that *in some cases* a work's treatment of IIA will diminish its aesthetic value, but he does not go so far as to say that this will be so in all cases. Hume also tells us that when confronted by IIA, audiences *cannot* respond favorably. Again, Gaut is on-board but Carroll does not accept such a bold claim. Instead, Carroll holds that *in some cases* a work's presentation of IIA will be enough to prevent us from experiencing the sentiments the work aims to elicit.

Gaut's Ethicism

Berys Gaut argues that works of art that prescribe unethical attitudes suffer aesthetically to a certain extent because of those attitudes, and that works that prescribe ethical attitudes benefit aesthetically. Gaut's thesis is the strongest of the moralist positions that we will discuss as ethicism entails that any work that prescribes unethical responses without qualification is necessarily aesthetically defective to a degree for doing so. Gaut's ethicism also holds that works are aesthetically commendable when they prescribe responses that endorse proper moral standards.

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[100] Hume, 45.

Narratives are crafted as to impart certain responses within the audience, and according to Gaut, when works are designed to garner our support toward immoral characters, or to amuse us through depictions of unsavory behavior, they promote pro-attitudes toward these fictional characterizations.[101] Movies such as *Pulp Fiction*, *Ocean's Eleven*, and *Harold and Maude* portray characters engaging in a number of unethical acts and they manifest an attitude of approval toward the main characters. In short, these films aim to get us to root for bad guys and bad gals carrying out bad deeds while having bad attitudes. To make the nature of the works clear, I'll discuss key elements of each film. *Pulp Fiction* shows us a batch of characters whose lives intersect in fascinating ways. The two main characters, Vincent Vega and Jules Winnfield, are hitmen working for a powerful drug dealer, Marsellus Wallace. They have been hired to kill a boxer, Butch Coolidge.[102] Wallace is upset with Butch because he paid the fighter to throw a match, to go down at a particular time since Wallace hoped to gain from large bets made on the fight. Butch agreed to rig the match but he didn't go through with the plan. Instead he made bets of his own, on himself, and he won the match by knocking out his opponent. Vincent and Jules have been hired to kill Butch. Vincent waits for Butch in his home but Butch kills Vincent. Butch goes on the run but while he's preparing to leave town, he and Wallace see each other while he's in traffic. Wallace is walking at an intersection and Vincent is in his car

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[101] Gaut, 1998, 183.

[102] Vince and Jules have also been hired to collect a valuable item that belongs to Wallace. While performing this task, they shoot and kill one man on purpose and later shoot and kill another person on accident. Their second victim was a man they had kidnapped at gunpoint.

stopped at a light. Butch drives his car through Wallace, the two fight and eventually they end up being taken hostage and locked in a sex dungeon.

Ocean's Eleven is a caper film that depicts eleven men with particular skills who team up to rob a casino's vault. Members of the crew don't like the casino's owner, Terry Benedict. Benedict is an arrogant jerk who also happens to be dating the ex-wife of Danny Ocean, the leader of the criminal crew. The scheme is tremendously elaborate and brilliant, and by the end of the movie Ocean and his buddies successfully steal millions. Danny even manages to reunite with his ex-wife after he convinces her that Benedict is a genuine sleaze.

Harold and Maude is not a movie that focuses primarily on the acts of criminals. It's a love story with two peculiar characters. Harold is a young man whose hobby is to fake his own suicide. His mother enters a room to make a phone call only to find Harold hanging from a noose. His mom submits Harold to a computer dating service and asks him to answer survey questions designed to find an ideal match. While she reads the questions to Harold, he produces a gun and shoots himself in the head. A number of young women come to meet Harold through the dating service and instead of going on a date, they find him apparently dead from one kind of suicide or another. Harold eventually meets a woman called Maude at a funeral (He goes to those for entertainment.). He walks her to a car and she enters the vehicle and drives away like a maniac, running over a curb and running through an intersection without the right of way. A priest runs out yelling, exclaiming that she stole his car. She drives like hell on wheels each time she goes on the road, putting lives in danger each time. At the end of

the movie, Harold proposes to Maude. Maude then tells him that she's poisoned herself and that she'll die that day. Harold isn't happy with her plan and has her rushed to the hospital. She dies and he later drives his car off a cliff into the ocean. He doesn't kill himself since he left the vehicle. He dances and plays a banjo that Maude taught him to play.

I've left many key details out of these quick accounts of these movies, but what I hope is clear is that they each involve dangerous people who pull off unethical acts throughout the films. To use Gaut's terminology, these movies "prescribe the imagining of certain events."[103] *Pulp Fiction* prescribed imagining various violent criminals acting violently toward each other, *Ocean's Eleven* prescribed imagining eleven uniquely skilled crooks combining their talents to carry out the biggest con job of their lives, and *Harold and Maude* prescribed the imagining of two rather strange people being tremendously insensitive to others. Gaut holds that these films also prescribe specific responses to these IIA.[104] In *Pulp Fiction*, audiences are to appreciate Vince and Jules and hope that they'll both make out okay amid all of the murders. In *Ocean's Eleven*, we're supposed to like each of the guys on the team and want them to win big while sticking it to Benedict. And in *Harold and Maude* audiences are prescribed to care for Harold and Maude and to relish their friendship and romance. Gaut says, "The point is quite general: the attitudes of works are manifested in the responses they prescribe to their audiences."[105] He continues, these works do "not just present imagined events; [they] also present a point of view on them, a perspective

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[103] Gaut, B. (2007). *Art, Emotion and Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[104] Gaut, 2007, 230.
[105] Ibid.

constituted in part by actual feelings, emotions and desires that the [viewer] is prescribed to have towards the merely imagined events."[106]

According to Gaut's ethicism, since these films manifest pro-attitudes toward unscrupulous individuals and acts, and because audiences *ought not* embrace any sentiment they know to be unethical, their intended reactions will not be realized by viewers. These films aim to convince audiences to think well of the IIA depicted on the screen, but since audience members know better than to respond favorably to IIA, these films miss the mark. They don't produce their intended reaction from the audience. Since these films fail to achieve their prescribed responses, they fail in an important aesthetic respect, and Gaut states they are less valuable as works of art as a result.

The same can be said of many other kinds of artistic failures, such as horror movies that do not frighten, thrillers that do not thrill, and love stories that fall short of garnering our interest in the fate of the would-be lovers. When such works prescribe unmerited responses, they fail to meet an aesthetically significant internal aim and are defective as art *qua* art. Gaut would not deem the above-mentioned films aesthetically bankrupt for prescribing responses that are unmerited because they are unethical, but their value as art is diminished specifically because of their manifestation of immoral attitudes.

Gaut puts forward the merited-response argument to support his brand of ethicism,

> A work's manifestation of an attitude is a matter of the work's prescribing certain responses toward the events described. If these responses are unmerited, because unethical, we have reason not to

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[106] Gaut, 2007, 231.

respond the way prescribed. Our having reason not to respond in the way prescribed is a failure of the work. What responses the work prescribes is of aesthetic relevance. So the fact that we have reason not to respond in the way prescribed is an aesthetic failure of the work, that is to say, is an aesthetic defect. So a work's manifestation of ethically bad attitudes is an aesthetic defect in it.[107]

Let's focus on the second premise of Gaut's argument. A response is unmerited in this case if it is morally inappropriate, and a response is morally inappropriate if it involves audiences being amused by unethical acts. As I've explained in an earlier chapter, Gaut maintains that it is unethical for us to enjoy IIA. So when we, as audience members, come across IIA depicted in a supposedly desirable way, we won't find them desirable and the work in question will prescribe an unmerited response.

Carroll's Moderate Moralism

Moderate moralism, a view defended by Noël Carroll, advances a weaker thesis than that of ethicism. Carroll maintains that in *some* cases moral flaws of an artwork stand as aesthetic flaws.[108] Novels are crafted as to produce certain responses within the audience, and in many cases, works attempt to elicit specific emotional responses. Works are more valuable aesthetically if they are able to evoke sought after responses within the audience, and they are less valuable aesthetically if they fail to garner the feelings they seek to produce. Carroll uses tragedies as an example. For a tragedy to work *qua* tragedy, the work must cause the audience to feel sympathy for the tragic hero, and if it fails

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[107] Gaut, 1998, 195.
[108] Carroll, N. (1998). Moderate moralism versus moderate autonomism. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, *38*(4), 419-424.

to elicit sympathy, then the piece has failed *qua* tragedy. This work has failed on its own terms since it fell short of realizing one of its internal aims, to elicit a particular prescribed response, and this failure stands as an aesthetic defect.

When fictions cannot secure audience uptake as prescribed their aesthetic value is diminished, according to Carroll, and he provides a couple of examples of this kind of aesthetic failure.[109] He asks us to consider a thriller involving a superhero squaring off against a rather weak and harmless foe. Carroll tells us that such a piece is sure to fail since he cannot imagine audiences feeling suspense, and hence, the work is aesthetically blemished. His second example addresses the moral nature of some prescribed responses in fiction. We are asked to imagine a story involving a Nazi concentration camp supervisor being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. If such a piece were designed to create admiration for the main character, then the work would be aesthetically flawed since morally sensitive audiences could not respond as prescribed. Carroll holds that a "morally sensitive viewer cannot get her mind around the idea – it is so morally obnoxious, so evil."[110]

In this case, Carroll maintains that the work contains a glaring ethical defect in that it advances an immoral perspective. This moral blemish is of aesthetic importance because the evil point of view is precisely what causes audiences to fail to respond as prescribed, or as Carroll puts it, "it repels the mandated emotive uptake from morally sensitive audiences."[111] Because the piece contains immoral elements that block emotional uptake within the

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[109] Carroll, 1998, 421.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid.

audience, it has failed to realize an aesthetically relevant internal aim of the work *qua* artwork, and has diminished aesthetic value as a result.

Carroll holds that morally sensitive audiences are "psychologically incapable of providing the requisite uptake," and he claims that, "as Kendall Walton has pointed out, audiences are particularly inflexible about the moral presuppositions they bring to artworks."[112] Carroll recognizes that audiences can be expected to suspend some of their deeply held commitments, and that audiences frequently entertain fictional accounts of events that cannot or do not take place in actuality, but he believes that audiences are loath to suspend judgments concerning morality, and explains, "we are *not willing* to go with the notion, for example, that in the world of some fiction, killing innocent people is good."[113] According to Carroll, some evil perspectives depicted in fiction run so afoul of our moral commitments that we, as morally sensitive audiences, are "incapable of supplying the emotive uptake the work demands on its own terms."[114] In such instances, the root of the failure of audience uptake, the malevolent nature of the espoused view, is surely a moral defect of the work, and because this element blocks audiences from appreciating the piece, it stands as an aesthetic defect as well.

Carroll holds that in order to engage in a fictional narrative correctly, audiences must have appropriate emotional responses. Fictional works elicit particular affective reactions, and if a piece fails to produce the emotions it

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[112] Carroll, 1996, 235 and 233. Carroll discussed the claims of Kendall Walton, Walton, K. (1994). Morals in fiction and fictional morality. *Aristotelian Society Supplemental Volume* 68, 27-50.
[113] Carroll, 1996, 233.
[114] Carroll, 1998, 422.

intends to educe, then it will have failed on its own terms. The aesthetic success or failure of a work is contingent, in part, upon how an audience responds, and in some instances, immoral attitudes prescribed by a piece will block emotional uptake within the audience. When such mandated emotional responses fail to occur, Carroll asserts that the work in question has failed aesthetically. Morally sensitive audiences cannot bring themselves to hold approbatory attitudes of patently evil behavior, and some works that prescribe such responses produce disconnect between themselves and the audience. In such cases, works are morally defective because they sanction unethical attitudes, and they are aesthetically blemished *qua* art for the very same reason.

Kieran's Cognitive Immoralism

Cognitive immoralism, advanced by Matthew Kieran, is the last of the views to posit a relationship between the ethical and aesthetic values of a work.[115] Kieran suggests that works depicting immoral acts and characters may be aesthetically valuable because of their ability to enable audiences to temporarily adopt perspectives that we would not embrace otherwise. When works depict unsavory events in imaginatively rich and compelling ways, they can cause audiences to suspend their moral commitments and to see things from a morally alien point of view, and in doing so, can provide us with epistemic gains and precious imaginative exploration. Some narratives allow us to take on unethical attitudes and they can add to our moral understanding. Kieran affirms

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[115] Kieran, M. (2003). Forbidden knowledge: the challenge of immoralism. In. Bermudez, J.L., Gardner, S. (Eds.), *Art and Morality* (56-73). London: Routledge.

that such cognitive rewards increase the aesthetic merits of the works in question because they "enhance the value of the imaginative experience afforded."[116] He continues, "Thus the immoral character of the imaginative experience afforded by a work may directly deepen our understanding. Therefore a work may be valuable as art in part due to its morally defective aspect."[117]

Kieran's position hinges upon epistemic gains to be had by engaging in IIA. As mentioned earlier, Carroll states that when morally sensitive audiences confront IIA in a given work, we may be so put-off by the work that we cannot manage to get fully entrenched into the fictional world. Kieran doesn't see things that way. Rather than IIA standing as a barrier to our artistic engagement, he claims that we are willing to lower our guard and to be open to attitudes and feelings that we would not entertain otherwise. Why do we do this? What's to cause us to consider unseemly attitudes, feelings, and beliefs? According to Kieran, not only could this lead to an aesthetically pleasing experience but it can serve as a valuable learning activity. In the real world, we're rightly hesitant to do bad deeds, to hope for ills to occur to others, and to cheer for others to realize misfortune. Consider bullying as an example. Bullying is a phenomenon many of us are familiar with but few of us, if any, know what it feels like to be a bully, to torment others and to beat them into emotional submission. He states, "one may not be able to fully appreciate the nature of good things or their achievement unless one has in some sense experienced the bad."[118] For those of us who have been targets of bullying, we've had the relevant kind of experiences to

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[116] Kieran, 2003, 63.
[117] Kieran, 2003, 63.
[118] Kieran, 2003, 64.

understand what it's like to be bullied. When we hear of others being bullied, we

can grasp their experiences because we've had "relevantly similar kinds of

experiences" ourselves.[119] But we'd likely be at a loss if we wanted to know what

it feels like to bullies to bully others. Bullies seem to get something enjoyable out

of their efforts, but as non-bullies, Kieran says we "may well fail to understand

how and why it may be found pleasurable."[120]

Kieran claims that "one has a prima facie epistemic duty to seek out bad

experiences and experience things in bad ways where one believes one may

lack a full and proper understanding of good experiences of that kind."[121] To

meet this epistemic duty, in order to fully know what it's like to be a bully, we

could surely become bullies and we could learn first-hand what it's like to cause

unwanted pain. That would give us a relative store of experiences from which to

contemplate, but that would be patently indecent so it comes at a prohibitively

high price. Luckily for us, we're not destined to fail to meet our epistemic duties,

for Kieran explains that we can turn to IIA to learn what it's like to be a bully. He

tells us,

> imaginative experience, construed here in terms of the entertaining of
> represented states of affairs, can indirectly and informatively enable
> us to have bad experiences or experience bad things in bad ways
> independently of the existence of the states of affairs as
> represented.[122]

Since there are potential epistemic gains to be had by engaging in IIA in a certain

way, Kieran holds that we have the means to temporarily suspend our normally

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[119] Kieran, 2003, 66.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Kieran, 2003, 67.
[122] Ibid.

held moral commitments and judgments. While in the real world we abhor

bullying and would never bully actual others, or even consider bullying actual

others, we can read fictional works that depict bullying from the perspective of a

bully and we can appreciate those feelings without actually endorsing them in the

real world. In this way, fictional works depicting IIA in various ways can provide

us with tremendously rewarding experiences. Kieran maintains,

> Good artworks can deepen our understanding and appreciation of
> certain kinds of experiences, states of affairs, cognitive-affective
> attitudes and characters in many ways. They can refine our grasp of
> concepts and how they are to be applied, crystallize incipient
> assumptions we already hold, show how certain traits and connections
> may be interlinked, proffer an imaginative simulation or quasi-
> experience of what certain kinds of experiences are or could be like,
> show us different ways certain kinds of experiences are or could be
> like, show us different ways of looking at, perceiving, or conceiving of,
> certain states of affairs.[123]

To make this clear, Kieran asks us to consider Graham Green's *The*

Destructors. This is a story about a gang of youths who destroy the home of an

older man who was kind to them all. He explains that the story succeeds, as a

work of art, because it pulls us into the world of the work, and

> our cognitive-affective responses are shaped in such a way that the
> reader, like the minor characters in the gang, wishes the act to
> succeed, desires the central characters to show the leadership
> required to bring it about and is left in awe of the completion.[124]

When audiences are absorbed by such a story, we can make significant

epistemic gains. We may get to learn what it's like to be a bully and we can do so

without actually bullying anyone. And because the fictional work managed to

produce a certain response within the audience, it realizes an aesthetic success.

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[123] Kieran, 2003, 68.
[124] Kieran, 2003, 69.

To use Gaut's terminology, the work has produced a merited response.

Audiences enjoy making epistemic gains and we delight in having enriching

experiences through works of art. It just so happens that many works depicting

IIA allow us to achieve both of these ends. Because we seek these ends, Kieran

states "we take up a kind of conditional assent to the states of affairs as

represented."[125] He continues,

> And yet many of us respond to it because we are presented with a
> highly imaginative exploration of an attitude that is at times
> psychologically close to us, and thus can be involved by the artistry of
> the work. The value of engaging with many works derives from the
> particularly powerful ways in which they can get us to imaginatively
> explore different possible attitudes. In some of these cases the works
> involve characterizations, responses and attitudes we judge to be
> morally defective and yet nonetheless they are rendered close to us in
> ways we find to be intelligible.[126]

Carroll claims that readers who encounter IIA depicted a certain way get shutout

by the work, that morally sensitive audience members are incapable of

responding as prescribed. When this happens, it seems, audiences try to engage

in a fictional work but they just can't pull it off because the unethical content is

sufficiently disruptive. Kieran states that not only should we attempt to fight

through this impediment for epistemic reasons, but that we are willing and able to

do so when an aesthetic pay-off is possible. When a work delivers the goods,

when it provides us with epistemic gains and aesthetically rewarding

experiences, then it is aesthetically meritorious for doing so, according to Kieran,

and this is the case when the works deal with patently immoral content.

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[125] Kieran, 2003, 70.
[126] Kieran, 2003, 71.

Anderson and Dean's Moderate Autonomism

Moderate autonomists James C. Anderson and Jeffrey T. Dean stray from the Humean tradition and claim that fictional narratives may prescribe affective responses that are indeed morally defective, yet the ethical depravity of the attitudes manifested by the pieces by themselves does not lead to diminished aesthetic value of the artworks.[127] Anderson and Dean hold that moral criticism and aesthetic criticism are fitting to works of art, but the two remain conceptually distinct. According to moderate autonomism, that works endorse moral or immoral attitudes is, by itself, no indication of their aesthetic worth. Instead of assessing whether the prescribed responses of works are ethically acceptable or untenable, what is of aesthetic relevance is the way in which the endorsed attitudes are expressed. Works that are absorbing and insightful are aesthetically praiseworthy regardless of the moral value of their commitments (which can be either ethical, ethically neutral, or unethical). If we were to judge the aesthetic merits of *The Godfather* or *Harold and Maude*, we would not first consider whether the protagonists are good or evil, nor would we determine whether or not we should approve of their behavior, but we would bear in mind how compelling the films are. If these movies successfully garner our interest in the characters' fate and captivate us, then they are aesthetically successful, and that the fictional persons and events depicted are unscrupulous in various ways is immaterial in grounding the pieces' artistic value as artworks. Because my own view is a brand of moderate autonomism, I'll address objections to this view in a later chapter

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[127] Anderson, J.C., Dean, J.T. (1998). Moderate autonomism. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, *38*(2), 150-166.

Chapter 7 − Evaluating Each Position

In what follows, I hope to make it clear that ethicism, moderate moralism, and cognitive immoralism have significant flaws. These views don't adequately explain how works suffer or benefit aesthetically based on their ethical standing. Both Noël Carroll and Berys Gaut ground their forms of moralism by citing a work's inability to garner prescribed responses to positive depictions of evil as the source of its aesthetic weakness, and I will address their views in turn.

Carroll's Moderate Moralism

Carroll holds that morally sensitive audiences cannot bring themselves to be absorbed by favorable depictions of evil characters but he does very little to defend this assertion. He mentions that David Hume and Kendall Walton share this belief. He does not provide any empirical evidence to support his claim about the psychological dispositions of morally sensitive audiences. He simply takes for granted that it is psychologically impossible for morally sensitive audiences to provide the uptake that such works seek to elicit. But this will not do.

Carroll has made specific empirical claims about the psychological character of audience members, yet he only attempts to justify this contention by presenting rather shallow potential cases involving works of art failing on their own terms. He presumes that a suspenseful story could not garner our concern if it involves a meek villain and he declares outright that no work could successfully produce admiration for a Nazi murderer. Based merely on his scant account of such possible works, at first blush, we may agree with him. Given our

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imaginative limitations, it may be the case that we cannot conceive of works of fiction along these lines being compelling in any way, and we might suppose that an artist attempting to craft such pieces would be doomed to fail. But Carroll should not simply declare that it is impossible for fictional works to succeed to produce such responses. That Carroll cannot fathom such works bringing about emotional uptake within audiences does not entail that artists cannot create such fictions.

In fact, the arts are replete with purely diabolical characters that have managed to absorb audiences, even audiences who rightly consider themselves morally sensitive. Characters like Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* and Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* perform the most wicked of imaginary evils yet we can find depictions of them gripping and entertaining. That we would not endorse their behavior if it were to occur in reality, and that if we were confronted by such characters in reality we would meet them with scorn does not preclude us from relishing fictional accounts of them. Carroll presupposes that morally sensitive audiences rigidly adhere to their moral convictions in all contexts and he appeals to Walton's account of imaginative resistance to corroborate this assertion, but it is possible for audiences to make ethical judgments that are context relative.

We may be amused by and approve of depictions of evil in the fictional domain in cases where we would find the same actions abhorrent in reality. Frank Palmer makes a distinction between *agreement* and *acceptance* that can

be applied to this kind of case.[128] While Carroll is right to claim that morally sensitive audiences cannot *agree* with evil perspectives because they cannot whole heartedly adopt moral convictions that are ethically repulsive, audiences may be able to temporarily *accept*, or go along with, depraved outlooks while engaging with fictional works. By merely accepting perspectives represented in fiction, we need not agree with those outlooks in the real world.

That an artwork attempts to absorb audiences with positive accounts of vile characters need not block emotional uptake within morally sensitive audiences, so such works are not necessarily failing to realize internal aims. Since these works are not necessarily falling short of aesthetically relevant goals, they are not less valuable aesthetically, and moderate moralism is false. Accepting or being compelled by base characters in a fictional context does not mean that audiences must agree with such evil in all contexts, and breakdowns of emotional uptake need not occur. Works depicting evil in this way will be aesthetically meritorious if they can sufficiently engage audiences so that they are moved by the positive accounts of such unethical acts. Carroll has not shown that audiences will invariably experience imaginative inertia that would prevent them from sympathizing with evil characters, nor has he proven that such works are destined to disappoint morally sensitive audiences.

Please recall that Carroll doesn't state that audiences will always fail to experience the elicited uptake when they confront IIA. In some cases, presumably those involving less dastardly fictional evil, audiences will find themselves drawn into the story and having positive responses to unethical

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[128] Palmer, F. (1992). *Literature and Moral Understanding*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 158.

characters. And in some cases, the imaginary bad guys or bad gals may be less immoral than other unethical characters in a work, so we can find ourselves rooting for the ethically superior bad guys or gals.[129] So Carroll could object to my claims and to my use of some particular works of art. He could state that moderate moralism wouldn't necessarily deem a show like *The Sopranos* less aesthetically valuable since while the show does aim to garner our sympathy for Tony, it also aims to garner our disapproval of Tony's rivals, men who are significantly morally worse than Tony. In such cases, while prompting audiences to pick the less bad guy over worse bad guys, works *can* aim to elicit positive responses to IIA and be no worse off for doing so. Since they hope to get audiences to root against the worst guys, if we end up responding as prescribed, then the works aren't doomed to be less excellent, so my objections to moderate moralism miss the mark.

I've got two responses to this defense of moderate moralism. One is tied to a specific artistic work and the other is tied to some of Carroll's claims about how audiences should or should not respond to different instances of IIA. Suppose that Carroll claims that *The Sopranos* contains morally appropriate messages since it doesn't try to get us to root for a sufficiently evil bad guy without qualification, but it aims to garner our approval of Tony's misdeeds just to the extent that we would rather see his interests advanced than to see his rivals succeed at his expense. If Carroll were to make such a claim about *The Sopranos*, then I'd disagree about the kinds of responses this particular show is trying to elicit. Tony Soprano is about as bad as they come. He is a sociopath

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[129] Carroll, N. (2008). *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 147-191.

who does whatever it takes to advance his own interests no matter how doing so will harm others, including various others he happens to care about. Tony lies, cheats, steals, and kills time and time again and he shows virtually no signs of changing his ways.

The show puts Tony's sociopathic tendencies front and center to the audience, not just by showing us his innumerable immoral acts, but by showing us Tony's psychiatric care at the hands of Dr. Melfi. Dr. Melfi comes to believe that Tony is a sociopath and she worries that her treatment is not helping Tony become a better person but it is emboldening him. Throughout the entire series, audiences are given depictions of Tony being as evil as all get-out. This is by no means Tony's most evil deed, but at one point he kills his own nephew since he supposed doing so would make things easier for his family business (the mafia). Since Tony is so thoroughly evil, he doesn't appear to be the least bad guy of a bunch of bad guys. By asking audiences to root for Tony's interests over the interests of his rivals (who, in some cases are cruel mob bosses), the show does not appear to prompt audiences to pick the lesser of two evils. Because Tony is so darn evil, *The Sopranos* seems like a common case of a fictional work trying to amuse audiences with compelling depictions of IIA.

But let's suppose that I'm mistaken about *The Sopranos* and that moderate moralism wouldn't render it less aesthetically valuable because of its treatment of IIA. Does that mean that Carroll's view is off the hook? I don't think so. There are still endlessly many works that just try to get audiences to respond kindly to IIA and not in the sense that we are to pick the lesser of two evils. In

these cases, moderate moralism would have us make inappropriate aesthetic judgments. Consider Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs.* Lecter is a murderous cannibal. After he's been convicted and detained, he still inflicts pain on innocent people at every given opportunity, whether by being mean to the mother of a kidnapping victim or by killing law enforcement officers to escape police custody. Hannibal Lecter is an exceedingly bad dude and audiences are meant to be amused by his evil deeds. We are to appreciate his biting remarks to the mother of a girl who's been captured by another serial killer and the brilliance of his plan to escape (In addition to killing two guards, he swaps clothes with one of them, cuts his face off, covers himself in his victim's blood, and places the dead man's face over his own so he appears to be a badly injured guard. He is then taken away from the crime scene on a stretcher that's placed in an ambulance. He later kills the emergency responders in the ambulance and gets away.).

The movie ends on a high note for Hannibal. He remains free and he calls Clarice Starling to tell her that he plans on having an old friend for lunch. This exchange over a phone line is depicted in such a way to make it clear to the audience that Lecter has just used a pun. He plans on literally having a person for lunch. Lecter sees the warden of his prison and he plans on killing and eating the man. Audiences are prescribed to be amused by Lecter's wit even when it involves murder and cannibalism. In this case, and in countless other movies, books, and TV shows, audiences are just supposed to be delighted by IIA. And in these cases moderate moralism holds that works depicting tremendously evil

characters in a positive light will fail to produce their intended responses. Loads

of works just try to engage us with accounts of IIA and we as audience members,

even those who rightly consider themselves morally appropriate, may respond as

prescribed, which means that these works won't fail on their own terms, so they

won't be less aesthetically valuable as moderate moralism would have us

believe.[130]

And, if psychological uptake does not happen with some audience

members, it may not because of the presence of IIA, but instead be caused by

how poorly the events are being depicted. Please reconsider the movie

Contraband. Audiences are supposed to care a great deal about the main

character, the brilliant smuggler, and we are meant to be happy when he

successfully carries out his biggest heist ever. This movie happens to stink. It's

not thrilling, none of the characters are sympathetic, the bad guy as a character

is paper-thin, and the movie is like a poor copy of hundreds that have come

before it. When audiences fail to respond as prescribed in cases like these, Gaut

says, "But what is aesthetically wrong in this work is that it fails to secure

psychological uptake in its audience, not that it is morally defective."[131] When we

watch rotten movies that contain favorable depictions of IIA, the works may fail to

be absorbing just because they are dull, not because they aim to get us to

respond favorably to IIA.

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[130] Caper films, novels, and TV shows are particularly problematic for moderate moralism since they attempt to garner unqualified approval of wrongdoers. I will address this later in the dissertation since this is also a problem for Gaut's ethicism.
[131] Gaut, 2007, 229.

Furthermore, as others in the literature have pointed out, Carroll's notion of 'morally sensitive' audiences does not perform the heavy lifting as he has hoped. For starters, he has given us no reason to suppose that artists creating such works of fiction have the sensibilities of morally sensitive audiences in mind as their target audience. It may be the case that artists do not aim to elicit favorable responses from morally sensitive audiences but from different kinds of audiences. We can imagine some artists creating works hoping to appeal to audiences who are not morally open-minded or people who are eager to explore IIA from the perspective of unethical points of view. Furthermore, Peter Lamarque asks:

> Might not the "right" audience be less one that is morally sensitive, more one that is sensitive to *literature*? It would beg the question to presume that the ideal reader of literature, one best able to recognize literary value, must have a heightened moral sensibility.[132]

Plus, the very concept of morally sensitive audiences remains unclear. Presumably, we are to suppose that one criterion of being a morally sensitive audience member is to experience failure of uptake when experiencing some particularly morally offensive material. Even if we are willing to grant this conception of a morally sensitive audience, we can envision a number of different kinds of potential audiences. There are morally insensitive audiences, those who are not phased by and not concerned with morally inappropriate depictions of unethical behavior, and there are morally sensitive audiences. But there are different kinds of morally sensitive audiences. Those that Carroll discusses, the ones who are morally sensitive and who experience uptake failures when

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[132] Lamarque, P. (2009). *The Philosophy of Literature*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 289.

confronted by certain kinds of IIA, and those who are morally sensitive yet *do not* experience this sort of imaginative and cognitive breakdown when meeting many IIA. It is surely possible that significantly many audience members are morally sensitive and they may reach judgments about acts that occur in reality that are morally appropriate, but they may also not always reach the same kind of judgments when confronted by fictional evil acts of the same sort. That one is morally sensitive does not entail that she will be incapable of responding as artists prescribe to dastardly fictional acts.

Let's consider an example to try to flesh this out. In an episode of the TV show, *The Office*, the characters of work at for a paper company and sell paper.[133] A shipment of paper has gone to many customers and it contains a rude watermark (an angry employee inserted the watermark to cause trouble for the company). The watermark depicts a cartoon duck performing a sex act upon a cartoon mouse. Customers who notice the watermark are outraged and they bombard the paper company with phone calls to complain. As company employees answer the phones, they respond with rather rude customer service. Some associates call the customers mean names and others simply hang up on them. A company manager, Michael Scott, is shown taking a call from a particularly upset customer. She tells Scott that she is a valued customer, she deserves an apology, and she will report the company to the Better Business Bureau if she is not handled with appropriate care. Scott interrupts her and says, "I'm calling the ungrateful beeyatch hotline!"[134] Later in the episode, we learn that

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[133] *The Office*, season 3, episode 'Product Recall'.
[134] 'Beeyatch' is a slang term for 'bitch'.

an employee, Andy, has had a girlfriend who works at an ice cream parlor. Andy supposed she was an adult but it turns out that she's a high-school student. When he finds out, he goes to her school and reports her to the principal. He scolds the principal for having students who lack character and he tells him that one of the students is "a real bitch."[135]

These two scenes involve patently inappropriate behavior and sexist remarks. That much is clear, but what is not clear is how different kinds of morally sensitive audience members may respond. Some morally sensitive audiences may embrace a distinction between imaginary immoral acts and real immoral acts, and they may not be put off by these accounts if IIA specifically because they are fictional. Some morally sensitive audience members may be put off by IIA in some cases, including some involving sexist material, but not be put off by these particular bits. And some morally sensitive audience members may be put off by IIA in some cases and respond disapprovingly in these cases. Carroll makes a blanket statement about morally sensitive audiences and he claims that they will be so put off by some IIA that they won't be able to respond as prescribed (in these cases audiences are meant to find the IIA amusing and humorous). Well, that could explain the responses from one kind of morally sensitive audience members but it could not apply to various other kinds of morally sensitive audience members. Carroll claims that a work's treatment of IIA will block psychological uptake in morally sensitive audiences, but this is not necessarily the case. Berys Gaut also attacks Carroll's use of morally sensitive audiences and states,

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[135] *The Office*.

no reason is provided for why this kind of audience is the appropriate one against which to measure the value of artworks. Indeed, the relevance of an appeal to such an audience is just what the autonomist would deny. So the crucial appeal to a morally sensitive audience simply begs the question in favor of some version of moralism.[136]

Amy Mullin targets Carroll's use of morally sensitive audiences but she uses a different approach.[137] She points out that we have no reason at all to suppose that morally sensitive audiences are the intended audience of various works. She uses two films, *American Psycho* and *Brokeback Mountain* as examples. These films are filled with material that some morally sensitive audiences (particularly fundamental Christians who oppose homosexuality and premarital sex) would find repulsive. That some audience members would be intellectually, morally, or emotionally cut-off from such films need not affect the artists' goals. It may be the case that some artists simply don't create works that appeal to divine command theorists. Since appealing to such an audience is not an aim of the works, the works don't fail to meet an intended goal, so psychological uptake problems by some morally sensitive audiences does not indicate an aesthetic failure of the works.

Gaut's Ethicism

According to Gaut's ethicism, since various fictional works manifest pro-attitudes toward imaginary immoral acts, and because audiences *ought not*

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[136] Gaut, 2007, 228.
[137] Mullin, A. (2002). Evaluating art: Morally significant imagining versus moral soundness. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *60*(2), 137-149.

embrace any sentiment they know to be unethical, their sought after reactions will not be realized by viewers. Gaut claims that elicited responses are unmerited when they are unethical because we have reason to respond differently than prescribed. Because these works do not achieve their prescribed responses, they fail in an important aesthetic respect and are less valuable as works of art as a result. And they are aesthetically flawed because of the immoral attitudes presented in the works. Gaut would not deem the above-mentioned films aesthetically bereft for prescribing responses that are unmerited because they are unethical, but their value as art is diminished specifically because of their manifestation of immoral attitudes.

When fictions cast immoral characters in a favorable light, Gaut states that they aim "to get us to approve of the imagined events, to think of them as in some way desirable, and so to endorse an evaluation about events of that kind."[138] Because these works manifest attitudes that we ought not embrace or find amusing, we have grounds not to respond as the works prescribe. He maintains that we should not have a pro-attitude toward immoral acts whether they occur in actuality or in fiction as "such approval implies that there is something good about an attitude we know to be bad."[139] When we have a pro-attitude toward evil, real or imagined, we are culpable because we are endorsing evil of that kind, and we should never desire for such ills to occur in any context.

Let's revisit Gaut's examples of how we morally assess individuals based on their attitudes toward various events. Joe gets a raise at his job and some of

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[138] Gaut, 2007, 233.
[139] Gaut, 1998,189.

his friends congratulate him to his face. Later he learns that they did not mean what they said and they were resentful since they believed he was unworthy of the promotion. In such a case, Gaut claims that Joe would rightly think less of his friends because of their beliefs and attitudes. Gaut asks us to consider another example involving a person's pro-attitudes toward purely imaginary evils. Please recall the man who fantasizes about raping women.

Even if this man merely imagined raping ladies and never committed an act to make his dreams come to life, Gaut tells us that the man having such thoughts about carrying out such horrible acts makes him worthy of blame. Similarly, audience members who respond as prescribed to *Ocean's Eleven* and *Pulp Fiction*, films that glorify criminal activity and elicit approval of patently immoral characters, should be thought poorly of because their pro-attitudes toward IIA are indicative of their own ethical character. Gaut affirms that audiences will not allow themselves to approve of imaginary evil, and since these films cannot realize their prescribed responses, they have failed to meet an aesthetically relevant aim, and they are aesthetically defective as a result.

Gaut claims that audiences should not approve of affirmative accounts of fictional evil because if a person has a pro-attitude toward such depictions, then she necessarily holds the same pro-attitude toward all events of that kind. But this is not the case. When a person responds to a given work, she forms attitudes based on that specific piece and her sentiments are relative to the context of that artwork. Gaut has provided no justification of his empirical claim that harboring attitudes toward certain fictional characters or acts necessarily

shape or reflect our attitudes toward corresponding kinds, nor does he explain how beliefs about one depiction of events in a fictional work world apply to all events of that kind.

Gaut wrongly presupposes that in order to have a pro-attitude toward a particular fictional state of affairs in a work, one must have a similar pro-attitude toward that sort of event in other domains. But it is possible for audiences to have pro-attitudes toward states of affairs depicted in the narrative while at the same time not having pro-attitudes toward events of that kind obtaining in any other realms, including the real world. Consider a person named Sally who happens to be a huge fan of a particular violent act of revenge carried out by Hannibal Lecter in *Hannibal Rising*. Following Gaut's account, we should think poorly of Sally because, by having a pro-attitude toward this imaginary instance of savage revenge, she also endorses other events of that kind. This need not be the case. When we think of her approval of this fictional act we should not suppose that Sally approves of comparable evil acts, either real or imagined since Sally does not necessarily approve of all events of that kind in all contexts. No matter how much Sally relishes the violent depiction of revenge in the book, she may find the thought of this act taking place in reality horrific and revolting. Rather, Sally merely has a pro-attitude toward that particular instance of evil.

Please consider a less obvious example taken from scenes of the movie *Ice Age* involving a pre-historic squirrel working to obtain an acorn, only to have his efforts frustrated time and time again, much to his displeasure. Once he finally seizes the acorn, he and the acorn are frozen solid in a block of ice.

Audiences find the trials of the squirrel amusing and delight in watching him lose it from his clutches in such a comical fashion. According to Gaut, by treating the squirrel's mishaps in this manner, the movie prescribes a certain response, to be amused by the repeated and ultimate misfortune of the squirrel. Following Gaut's assertion, by enjoying the tribulations of the squirrel, these audience members also make an endorsement of all other events of this kind. I highly doubt that this is the case. I am sure that few audience members, if any, who found the sketch entertaining would ever hope to hear of such events happening to a real squirrel, nor would they watch with glee if they were to witness a hungry squirrel fight for his life through a marathon of perils in an attempt to secure a meal.

Whether considering the most evil of human acts, such as murder and cannibalism, or cartoonish experiences had by a hungry animal, we can see that our responses to those particular IIA may involve only our thoughts about those particular IIA. Despite Gaut's claims, our attitudes may take many forms. Let's look over some of the possibilities involving laughing at animal suffering:

> We could enjoy this and only this fictional, animated, humorous instance of animal suffering, and enjoy no instances of real-world animal suffering.

> We could enjoy this instance of fictional, animated, humorous animal suffering along with some other instances of fictional, animated, humorous animal suffering (but not all), and enjoy no instances of real-world animal suffering.

> We could enjoy this instance of fictional, animated, humorous animal suffering along with all other instances of fictional, animated, humorous animal suffering, and enjoy no instances of real-world animal suffering.

We could enjoy this instance of fictional, animated, humorous animal suffering along with some other instances of fictional, animated, humorous animal suffering (but not all) along with at least one instance of real-world animal suffering.

We could enjoy this instance of fictional, animated, humorous animal suffering along with some other instances of fictional, animated, humorous animal suffering (but not all) along with many instances of real-world animal suffering.

We could enjoy this instance of fictional, animated, humorous animal suffering along with some other instances of fictional, animated, humorous animal suffering (but not all) along with all instances of real-world animal suffering.

Gaut's ethicism hinges upon the premise that works that elicit pro-attitudes toward unethical events are aesthetically defective because they prescribe unmerited responses. But Gaut is unwarranted in asserting that approbatory attitudes toward particular imagined events are indicative of approval of all events of that kind, imagined or real. Because it is possible to approve of particular fictional events in isolation, he is wrong to maintain that it is immoral for audiences to have pro-attitudes toward all imaginary evil acts, and he has failed to prove that works with favorable depictions of wicked behavior necessarily prescribe unmerited responses. Since audiences can have genuine responses to unscrupulous imaginary events without being of undesirable ethical character, it is not the case that all works prescribing approbatory attitudes to immoral happenings seek an unmerited response. Given that such works do not necessarily fail to realize an aesthetically relevant internal aim, these narratives are not aesthetically flawed simply as a result of manifesting ethically bad attitudes, and Gaut's ethicism is false.

Earlier I addressed objections to the kind of virtue ethics that Gaut espouses, and because his merited response argument hinges upon this belief, this warrants further attention. His position is contingent upon the existence of global character traits. Not only does he not provide any evidence to show that global character traits exist, the evidence at our disposal indicates that character traits, if they exist at all, are highly contextual. If one were to accept a different view of our character traits, one focusing on situational character traits, then audience members could still be virtuous even if they respond favorably to IIA.

Let's consider Candace Upton's distinctions about different kinds of character traits.[140] Global character traits involve agents having relevant responses "across a broad range of normal situations."[141] If we were considering a compassionate person, if his compassion were a global character trait then he would behave compassionately toward friends, coworkers, even to strangers. If his compassion were not global, but instead is a situational character trait, then he would not always behave compassionately. Upton says a situation "is a state of affairs having features to which an agent is potentially morally sensitive, such that encountering a situation might impact the agent's behavioral or attitudinal responses."[142] He may act morally toward coworkers and friends while being callous to strangers. When Upton describes a person with such a situational character trait, she says that the agent in questions may be 'coworker-

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[140] Upton, C. (2009). *Situational Traits of Character: Dispositional Foundations and Implications for Moral Psychology and Friendship*. Maryland: Lexington Books.
[141] Upton, xiii.
[142] Upton, 12.

compassionate' and not 'stranger-compassionate'.[143] I believe most readers can think of many people exhibiting situational character traits. We may have a friend who's compassionate to friends and family members but who behaves rudely to coworkers and to employees at many stores. Or a family member may have a giant heart when it comes to taking care of her own pets, always paying for expensive veterinary care and filling he home with play toys, yet she enjoys eating veal when she goes out to eat and she considered vegetarianism but has no interest in pursuing it herself. Or a politician who serves admirably in his office and who is a loving father, all while cheating on his spouse by having sexual relations with someone other than his wife. The friend seems 'friend-compassionate' and 'family-compassionate' but is not 'coworker-compassionate' or 'service-employee-compassionate'. The family member appears 'personal-pet-compassionate' but is not 'animal-compassionate', and the politician looks 'politics-compassionate' and 'personal-child-compassionate' but is not 'spouse-compassionate'.[144]

Because we routinely come into contact with people who don't display the global character trait of compassion, but instead interact with countless people who display situational character traits of compassion, Upton argues that virtue ethicists should abandon the notion of global character traits. She claims, "[p]roponents of the virtues should view the concept of a character trait as

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[143] Upton, xiii.

[144] 'Spouse-compassionate' may be too broad. The husband may be compassionate toward his wife in most ways but not in one. He may treat her well in all of his direct dealings with her while cheating on her when away on business trips. He could do more than his fair share of chores, provide a kind ear to her concerns, sacrifice loads of his time tending to their children, and take great interest in her friends and family members. In just about every way, he treats her compassionately. It's possible him to only not be compassionate as it relates to his infidelity.

relativized to the situations in which the trait would produce morally appropriate attitudes or behavior."[145] In additional to appealing to anecdotal evidence, Upton addresses empirical studies aimed to learn how people behave differently given slight changes to context. The most famous study of this kind involved seminary students on their way to attend a lecture on good Samaritanship.[146] All of the subjects were instructed to walk from one end of the campus to another to attend the event. They took this walk under three different situations. Some were told that they had plenty of time to make the trip, some were told that they'd have just enough time to get there, and others were told that they were running late so they had better scoot. Members of each group came across a person involved with the study feigning distress. Over half of the students who believed they had more than ample time helped the person in need. Almost half of the students who thought they were cutting it a little close helped out. Of those who believed they were running late, only 10% stopped to help.

Upton, a situationalist, finds such results compelling evidence proving that the student's behavior was strongly shaped by the particular trappings of their situation, and not exclusively "by their preexisting internal mental states or traits of character."[147] She shares results from many studies similar to those I addressed briefly in an earlier chapter involving placing people in ethical situations after they had just played violent video games or peaceful video games, and their results paint the same picture. In each case, people are

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[145] Upton, 44.
[146] Darley, J.M., Batson, C.D. (1973) From Jerusalem to Jericho: A study of situational and dispositional variables in helping behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 27, 100-108.
[147] Upton, 76.

significantly more likely to act morally if the situation is tweaked just slightly in one way and less likely to be good if the situation's not just right. Behavioral economists, social psychologists, and members of various disciplines have been conducting such studies for years. Two have become wildly popular in the literature. One involves people walking in a mall near someone who apparently drops a bunch of belongings.[148] People are more likely to help if the mall is currently filled with the smell of fresh-baked bread. Another study involved passersby coming across a person in need of help just after they found some money left in a phone booth or right after they did not find money in the phone booth.[149] Folks who just found money are more likely to help than those who didn't just experience some slightly good luck. Upton summarizes her findings as follows:

> A vast collection of social psychological experiments leads to the situationist's conclusion. The psychological situationist literature suggests that human helping behavior is highly correlated with factors such as pleasant weather, noise level, familiarity with a potential victim, and nonurban origins. Human beings are much more likely to help others in the presence of sunshine, moderate temperatures, and low wind velocity, in the absence of loud, grating noises, when they have personally met a potential theft victim, and if the potential helper was raised in a rural environment.[150]

Gaut's ethicism rests on his acceptance of global character traits. While it may be intuitive for some to suppose that they exist, there's inadequate empirical evidence to support his view. The growing body of studies and literature indicate

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[148] Gueguén, N (2012). The sweet smell of…implicit helping: Effects of pleasant ambient fragrance on spontaneous help in shopping malls. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, *152*(4), 397-400.
[149] Isen, A.M., Levin, P.F. (1972). Effects of feeling good on helping: cookies and kindness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 21, 384-388.
[150] Upton, 77.

that they don't exist, but that instead people exhibit character traits that are hugely contingent upon situational factors.[151] So, Gaut's claims about how we audience ought to respond to IIA have been undermined, significantly weakening ethicism.

Gaut's ethicism has another trait that is rather peculiar for aesthetic evaluation. If we accept that works dealing inappropriately with IIA are less valuable aesthetically, then we can correctly know that such pieces hit a ceiling of sorts in terms of artistic value. We may hear about a book like *Lolita* and its treatment of Humbert Humbert and realize that the book can only be so good since it has an ethical, and hence, aesthetic, blemish. No matter how the IIA is dealt with in the novel, it's just going to be harmful to its aesthetic value to one degree or another. This gets odder when we consider works of art like TV shows. *The Sopranos* aired for six seasons and by now we've all heard that it aims to garner our sympathy for Tony Soprano, a mob boss. So without watching a single episode of the show, we can know that the show can't be all it's cracked up to be since it has an ethical flaw. Aesthetic evaluation necessarily involves experiencing works of art. If ethicism is true, then we can make valid assessments of the artistic merits of some works without ever experiencing those works.

Ethicism also runs into trouble with fictional works that try to garner support for characters that commit moral acts. Consider the James Patterson

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[151] Barbara Krahe engaged in a project similar to Upton's. Like Upton, after evaluating the results of numerous studies, she has concluded that personality traits aren't consistent over all of an agent's acts as globalists have maintained. She found that our traits are influenced by "characteristic features of the situation as either encouraging or counteracting the performance" of particular kinds of acts. Krahe, 14.

series of murder mysteries about the character Alex Cross. Alex is a fantastic

person. He loves his family members and friends and makes giant personal

sacrifices to promote their best interests. He finds time to interact with them even

when he's caught up in intense murder investigations, and he always manages to

let them know exactly how much they mean to him. He's also an honest officer of

the law who follows the rules. Those are things that any reader can recognize by

reading any fifty-page section of any book about Alex Cross. Here's another thing

reader can notice: the books positively stink. The murder mysteries are as

formulaic as can be and they invariably contain sections detailing Alex's romantic

pursuits, which involve him sweeping a woman off her feet. It seems like Alex

doesn't work with single women whom he doesn't bed. When Alex is single (his

love interests tend to get kidnapped and murdered in the novels) and works with

a woman, she will throw himself at him. These sections are about as good as

those in romance novels for sale on the impulse racks at grocery store

checkouts. It's my claim that these books are of low aesthetic quality. James

Patterson and his co-authors churn out books every month or two and you don't

have to get too far into one to see that these mysteries are pretty rotten. But if we

follow ethicism, then no matter how stinky these books are, they do have a

couple of things going for them aesthetically: Alex solves murders and always

catches the bad guy, and Alex is a nice man who takes proper care of those

close to him. So, merely in virtue of the book positively depicting a moral person,

ethicism would have us deem these works aesthetically meritorious to some

degree.

This sort of thing will happen to all sorts of fictional genres. Imagine something like *The Adjustment Bureau*. This movie tells the story of two people who meet and instantly fall madly in love. But unbeknownst to them, the world is supposed to follow a particular plan mapped out by mysterious beings. This couple falling in love was not part of the plan and a number of beings pull all sorts of strings to keep this couple apart. It ends up being an action-adventure love story. Each lover is a good person and they behave morally throughout the film. According to ethicism, since this work aims to garner our support of these two ethical folks, it succeeds aesthetically to an extent. Unfortunately for audience members watching the movie, we're given little reason to see why these folks are in love. The movie fails as a love story since with all of the sci-fi chases and special effects, the love story, which is a key component of the plot, feels tacked on. Ethicism would allow that the movie is artistically flawed for being a love story that doesn't garner much sympathy, but its artistic value will rebound at least a little since it prescribes morally appropriate responses. This problem pops up when we consider late-night crime programs that have dominated U.S. TV ratings the last ten years. Shows like *Law and Order*, *Law and Order: SVU*, *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*, *CSI*, *CSI: NY*, *CSI: Miami*, *NCIS*, *NCIS: LA*, and the like are cookie-cutter murder procedurals. Each episode involves a new case that is tidily solved by episode's end. You can tune into any of these shows and you're sure to hear something like "this guy's a cold-blooded killer, and he'll kill again unless we stop him." No matter how poorly these shows are constructed, following ethicism, they have at least one

aesthetically successful trait in that that they depict ethically commendable characters carrying out good deeds.

Anderson and Dean have offered a remark, one with which I agree, that applies to both Gaut's and Carroll's view of how audiences ought to experience works of narrative fiction:

> While it is true that we have a cognitive (not to mention ethical) interest in not having persons believe that bad people or actions are good, it does not follow that we do not have an *aesthetic* interest in seeing bad people or actions represented *as if* they were good. Indeed, our curiosity about seeing one thing represented as another is a hallmark of aesthetic interest.[152]

Kieran's Cognitive Immoralism

Matthew Kieran's cognitive immoralism embraces this notion, but, in my mind, does not go far enough in recognizing the potential aesthetic merits that works depicting IIA may possess. According to Kieran, such works are aesthetically valuable because of the cognitive insights they may provide. Works that provide audiences with rich and engaging imaginative experiences of evil characters are not aesthetically valuable merely because of the qualities of those mental explorations, but because they may be able to make alien moral perspectives accessible to us. Kieran states, "[f]or in exploring a morally defective perspective a work may deepen our appreciation and understanding in ways that would not happen otherwise."[153] What Kieran neglects, and what empathic autonomism addresses, is that such imaginative experiences can be

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[152] Anderson and Dean, 163.
[153] Kieran, 63.

just as aesthetically meritorious when they depict moral perspectives with which we are already familiar, even in cases involving immoral characters. I suspect that most readers of this essay are by in large morally sound individuals, and that Kieran's view speaks to what we may find aesthetically valuable in certain works. Films like *The Godfather* and *Lolita* are praiseworthy as works of art partly because of their ability to enable us understand what it is like to see the world through the eyes of immoral characters, individuals with moral convictions and priorities that are alien to those that we actually hold. But that these works enable audiences to empathize with such characters need not only be aesthetic virtues to audiences who realize epistemic gains while engaging with the work, they may be just as rewarding to audience members who are keenly aware of the moral commitments depicted in the films. I take it that most audience members know nothing of what it would be like to be driven by the urges and interests of a monstrous character like Humbert Humbert, and such individuals would experience the cognitive benefits that Kieran addresses, but people who have already experienced such immoral sentiments may be able to find empathizing with Humbert Humbert just as aesthetically rewarding as the rest of us. People familiar with Humbert's urges and responses to his fantasies being realized wouldn't necessarily gain any epistemic benefits from *Lolita* but they could enjoy and appreciate the experience of seeing the world through his eyes to a great degree. Whether we're aware of what it's like to be Tony Soprano or Humbert Humbert or not, the works about these men are masterful to the extent that they engage us and pull us into the people living in their depicted worlds. Their ability

to make us empathize with them, and their ability to draw our sympathy for characters within them, to one degree or another, stand as aesthetic virtues regardless of potential epistemic gains to be had by some audience members.

Kieran's position also leaves us having quite a hard time fully appreciating much celebrated comedies that aim to make us find IIA humorous while clearly not providing us with gains in moral understanding (ethicism and moderate moralism face the same problem). Consider the works of the actor Eddie Murphy. His movies aim to get audiences to be amused by all sorts of immoral comments and activities and they don't allow (or aim to allow) audiences to better understand what it's like to feel like the depicted unethical characters. These films offer little to no empathic engagement. In *Trading Places*, Eddie's character, Billy Ray Valentine, is part of an elaborate test that two exceedingly rich men carry out to settle a bet. Randolph and Mortimer Duke are billionaire brothers who own an investment firm. While having an argument about the nature versus nurture debate, they each take rival sides. To settle the matter, they decide to have two radically different people trade places. They pluck a homeless hustler, Valentine, from the streets and put him in posh environments to work as an investor. They fire one of their most successful investors, Louis Winthrop III, and cast him upon the streets with nowhere to turn.

Both pawns in the Duke game find out about the bet and their parts in it and they seek revenge. Their plan involves stealing a crop report that will determine how the frozen concentrated orange juice (FCOJ) futures market will

fare.[154] The Duke's had a plan to get the report in advance, make the appropriate

purchases, and then later, after the contents of the report are officially released,

sell their futures at more attractive prices to make a killing. Valentine and

Winthrop steal the report early and swap it out with a bogus report. The actual

crop report indicates that the orange crop was healthy, meaning that the supply

of oranges will be high, which would lead to lower future prices on FCOJ. The

fake report states that the orange crop was harmed by winter freezes, decreasing

the supply of oranges, which would significantly increase the future cost of FCOJ.

Valentine and Winthrop then execute the Duke's plan to benefit from insider

trading and unbeknownst to the Dukes, the brothers buy loads of futures at the

wrong price and go bankrupt in the process.

At first glance, *Trading Places* may not seem to involve many instances of

IIA. The Duke brothers engage in unethical behavior and selfishly throw the lives

of two people into chaos just to settle a bet. And the stakes of the bet are just $1.

Valentine and Winthrop get back at them and, to many audience members, give

the Duke brothers just deserts. But when we look closely at their acts of revenge,

they carry out immoral acts that harm far more people than just the Duke

brothers. By stealing the crop report prior to its official release, they engage in

insider trading, giving them an unfair advantage over all participants in a

worldwide commodity market.

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[154] The details of the scheme are quite complicated and an episode of a podcast made all of the details delightfully clear. Smith, Robert & Mars, Roman (2013, July 9). The Eddie Murphy Rule. *Planet Money Podcast*. Podcast retrieved from http://www.npr.org/blogs/money/2013/07/09/200401407/episode-471-the-eddie-murphy-rule

While this manages to stick it to the Dukes, it also harms many investors in the futures market. Since the Duke brothers are such major players, many investors follow their trades, buying at the wrong prices in the process. While Valentine and Winthrop benefit from their illegally obtained information, the rest of the investors trading FCOJ futures suffer directly from their market manipulation. According to Kieran, works containing IIA are stronger aesthetically so long as they provide audience members with epistemic gains. But viewers of *Trading Places* don't obtain valuable moral lessons. Regardless of a lack of potential moral lessons in the work, I claim that *Trading Places* will succeed aesthetically if it gives audiences an imaginative account of hilarious events and characters.

This is the primary difference between cognitive immoralism and moderate autonomism, and in my mind, is what makes brands of autonomism preferable. Moderate autonomists hold that works like *Trading Places* are aesthetically valuable just because of their entertainment value. The movie tries to engage audiences with a tale full of odd encounters and funny dialogue, and because it elicits its sought after responses from viewers, it works artistically as a comic narrative. *Trading Places*' educational value is worthy of consideration, but it, by itself, does not influence its artistic value. And its lack of moral educational value does not count against it. Following cognitive immoralism, favorable depictions of IIA count as demerits unless they are accompanied by moral epistemic gains. This *Trading Places* example indicates that a positive depiction of IIA can be

good on its own, while or while not producing moral lessons for audience members.

Trading Places does happen to have some educational value but this has nothing to do with morality. It spells out how transactions work in futures markets. As a rule, traders simply wish to buy low and sell high to maximize profits. But it's not so simply in futures markets. In these markets, as we see in the movie, transactions have temporal traits that radically alter how trades are executed. Valentine and Winthrop don't first buy low and then sell high. Instead, they first engage in transactions committing them to sell FCOJ at a later date, and this price is unusually high because the Dukes are driving up the prices to sell FCOJ later since they believe the future price of FCOJ will be even higher still. Valentine and Winthrop don't own a single pound of FCOJ when they agree to make future sales. The lack of current ownership of FCOJ doesn't matter in futures markets. Valentine and Winthrop will have to deliver FCOJ at a specified later date, and they can obtain the necessary quantity of FCOJ any way they please so long as they can meet their future commitments. Valentine and Winthrop engage in short-selling. They agree to sell FCOJ high at a later date and plan to buy the FCOJ later at a much lower price before then to lock in profits. Once the details of the real crop report are announced, all players in the market realize that the future cost of FCOJ will be low, so they make transactions to sell FCOJ at a lower price hoping to minimize their losses. When the other traders, including the Dukes, do this, they are locking in giant losses. Because

Valentine and Winthrop have carried out transactions to sell FCOJ later at high prices and to buy FCOJ slightly earlier at rock-bottom prices, they make a killing.

Trading Places gets all of this stuff right. This is how futures markets operate and this is how investors engage in short selling. So, audience members who don't know much about these kinds of financial markets can learn quite a bit (if they can keep up) by watching the movie. According to kinds of moderate autonomism, that *Trading Places* can produce this kind of epistemic gains may make it a source of practical information but doesn't alter its aesthetic value. The work isn't better as a work of art because it can be used to learn about economic activities. The movie aims to entertain audiences, it entertains audiences, so it has realized an aesthetically relevant aim. Comedies aren't supposed to serve is tutorials on financial markets, so that it happens to also serve in this function isn't aesthetically relevant.

Chapter 8 − Empathic Autonomism

My own position, empathic autonomism, falls under the scope of moderate autonomism. Along with Anderson and Dean, I believe that a work's manifestation of morally repugnant attitudes does not entail that the work is aesthetically defective *qua* artwork, and I hold that "a work's moral flaws never count as aesthetic flaws."[155] Narratives may endorse attitudes and prescribe responses that we deem either morally appropriate for the real world, morally culpable in actuality, or morally neutral. But the value of the particular moral attitudes prescribed by an artwork are not by themselves aesthetically relevant. It is possible for an art object to be just as valuable as a work of art regardless of the moral standing of the attitudes manifested in the work. Hence, a given piece may attain the same level of aesthetic value *qua* art under the following circumstances: by prescribing moral responses, by prescribing immoral responses, or by not endorsing positive or negative attitudes toward the depicted states of affairs.[156]

One area in which all of the participants in this debate agree is the claim that works prescribe certain responses; pieces attempt to elicit particular emotional and cognitive reactions within the audience. There is also consensus regarding the assertion that these responses can be identified as either pro-

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[155] Anderson and Dean, 154.
[156] In addition to Anderson and Dean, Amy Mullin reaches a similar conclusion (but she does not agree with all of the tenets of moderate autonomism). Mullin, 137-149.

attitudes or con-attitudes. Berys Gaut provides the following explanation of our attitudes toward fictions:

> The notion of a response is to be understood broadly, covering a wide range of states directed at represented events and characters, including being pleased at something, feeling an emotion toward it, being amused by it, and desiring something with respect to it – wanting it to continue or stop, wanting to know what happens next.[157]

I claim that it is possible for narratives to be absorbing, compelling, imaginative, and fascinating, even if they aim to garner our approval of unprincipled behavior. What is germane in determining an art object's aesthetic value is not the moral value of the attitudes expressed but how artfully and engagingly it addresses these attitudes. All of the participants in this debate, myself included, agree that artworks are in part aesthetically successful if they are able to provide audiences with rich and rewarding imaginative experiences. I hope to show that works entertain us with unscrupulous behavior not only fail to be aesthetically blemished because of such manifestations of evil, but they can be aesthetically meritorious in their treatment of such unethical characterizations.

Much of the debate hinges upon an art object's ability to provoke certain responses within an audience, and much of this has to do with a work's ability, or lack thereof, to cause audiences to sympathize with the narrative's characters. Here I will use a rather broad notion of sympathy, one put forward by Gaut. For audiences to sympathize with a character amounts to their having care or concern for the conditions and experiences of the fictional individual, to be affected by and to respond to the feelings of the character. When audiences

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[157] Gaut, 1998, 193.

sympathize with a character, it follows that they have some positive attitudes toward her and feelings about her.

While I agree that many works do aim to produce sympathy for characters, I also believe that they aim to engender empathy, and that if a work is able to realize this end, it is aesthetically meritorious for doing so. Furthermore, I hold that a work's successful production of empathy for its characters may serve as an aesthetic strength regardless of the moral soundness of the characters in question. If a work is able to allow the audience to see objects and situations of the world, real or imagined, from a particular depicted perspective, and to allow audiences to temporarily embrace a point of view and to identify with the character possessing it, then it has met an internal aim of the work and is of higher aesthetic value for doing so.

Many compelling works of narrative fiction strive to do just that. Countless tales aspire to allow audiences to imaginatively identify themselves with fictional characters, to see things from a particular vantage point, and this can be the case involving characters who engage in moral, immoral, or amoral activities. My view also rests upon the notion that the creation of empathy is a good-making quality in works of art, and that audiences can enjoy being able to adopt new perspectives, even if the perspectives taken up are not those they would wish to embrace in the actual world. If this is true, then even if an artwork fails to produce sympathy for its characters, it can be aesthetically commendable by realizing the internal aim of producing empathy with them.

I call this brand of moderate autonomism empathic autonomism and offer the following merited-response argument: A narrative work's ability to elicit its prescribed responses is relevant in shaping the aesthetic value of the artwork *qua* artwork. If a work successfully elicits its sought after response, then it prescribes a merited response. If a work prescribes a merited response, then the work is aesthetically praiseworthy *qua* artwork to that extent. A work's prescribed response may be one of empathy (a work may prescribe an audience to entertain a certain imagined perspective, and this perspective can be either moral, immoral, or amoral). If a work successfully elicits empathy (causes the audience to entertain a certain imagined perspective), then it has prescribed a merited response and is aesthetically praiseworthy *qua* artwork to that extent.

As you can see, my argument draws heavily from the work of Berys Gaut and Matthew Kieran. It's structurally similar to Gaut's merited-response argument supporting ethicism, but I maintain that a work won't necessarily fail if it tries to garner positive responses toward IIA. While this view is strikingly close to Kieran's cognitive immoralism, empathic autonomism does not find a work's aesthetic value in its ability to teach audiences a moral lesson through engaging us empathically. According to my view, that these pieces can enable audiences of all moral leanings and experiences to empathize with the depicted characters is an aesthetic virtue of the works. I believe that excellent works of narrative fiction arouse curiosity within all kinds of audiences, and works that successfully stoke and engage that curiosity are aesthetically meritorious because of their ability to drive different moral perspectives home to us in an imaginative way. In

virtue of being able to create empathy with its characters, fictional works may be aesthetically valuable, whether prescribing positive attitudes toward moral, immoral, or amoral states of affairs, and do so regardless of the moral commitments held by the audience.

Let's consider *Lolita* one last time. At one point in the novel, Humbert has the object of his affection right where he wants her. She's sitting next to him while eating an apple and skimming through a magazine.[158] She accidentally drops the magazine and ends up placing her legs over his lap. He wanted very much to have more of her body pressing against his own so that he could have her rub against his penis, and he went to work to make it so. Here's how Nabokov explains the event:

> Then, with perfect simplicity, the impudent child extended her legs across my lap. By this time I was in a state of excitement bordering on insanity; but I also had the cunning of the insane. Sitting there, on the sofa, I managed to attune, by a series of stealthy movements, my masked lust to her guileless limbs. It was no easy matter to divert the little maiden's attention while I performed the obscure adjustments necessary for the success of the trick. Talking fast, lagging behind my own breath, catching up with it, mimicking a sudden toothache to explain the breaks in my patter – and all the while keeping a maniac's inner eye on my distant golden goal, I cautiously increased the magic friction that was doing away, in an illusional, if not factual, sense, with the physically irremovable, but psychologically very friable texture of the material divide (pajamas and robe) between the weight of two sunburnt legs, resting athwart my lap, and the hidden tumor of an unspeakable passion… and all the while I was mortally afraid that some act of God might interrupt me, might remove the golden load in the sensation of which all my being seemed concentrated, and this anxiety forced me to work, for the first minute or so, more hastily than was consensual with deliberately modulated enjoyment… Her legs twitched a little as they lay across my live lap… and every movement she made, every shuffle and ripple, helped me to conceal and to improve the secret system of tactile correspondence between beast and beauty… Under my glancing fingertips I felt the minute hairs

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[158] Nabokov, V. (1997). *Lolita*. New York: Vintage Books, 58-61.

bristle ever so slightly along her shins. I lost myself in the pungent but healthy heat… Let her stay, let her stay… As she strained to chuck the core of her abolished apple into the fender, her young weight, her shameless innocent shanks and round bottom, shifted in my tense, tortured, surreptitiously laboring lap; and all of a sudden a mysterious change came over my senses. I entered into a plane of being where nothing mattered, save the infusion of joy brewed within my body. What had begun as a delicious distention of my innermost roots became a glowing tingle which *now* had reached that state of absolute security, confidence, and reliance not found elsewhere in conscious life. With the deep hot sweetness thus established and well on its way to the ultimate convulsion, I felt I could slow down in order to prolong the glow… Everything was now ready. The nerves of pleasure had been laid bare. The corpuscles of Krause were entering the phase of frenzy. The least pressure would suffice to set all paradise loose. I had ceased to be Humbert the Hound, the sad-eyed degenerate cut clasping the boot that would presently kick him away. I was above the tribulations of ridicule, beyond the possibilities of retribution. In my self-made seraglio, I was radiant and robust Turk, deliberately, in the full consciousness of his freedom, postponing the moment of actually enjoying the youngest and frailest of his slaves… while my happy hand crept up her sunny leg as far as the shadow of decency allowed… and she wiggled, and squirmed, and threw her head back, and her teeth rested on her glistening underlip as she half-turned away, and my moaning mouth, gentlemen of the jury, almost reached her bare neck, while I crushed out against her left buttock the last throb of the longest ecstasy man or monster had ever known… I wiped the sweat of my forehead, and, immersed in the euphoria of release, rearranged my royal robes.[159]

As we can see, Humbert just masturbated against a child without her consent while she was pressed against his lap. He also enjoyed himself a great deal. We can imagine two kinds of audience members: those who have no prior knowledge of what sorts of things Humbert is thinking or what kinds of urges he has, and those who are keenly familiar with his particular cravings and feelings as he achieves his own brand of personal success. I suppose that folks of each kind can appreciate this section of *Lolita* because it so vividly brings Humbert's

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[159] Nabokov, 58-61. Colin McGinn has also written about part of this passage. McGinn, C. (2003). *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 110.

experiences and thoughts to life. While reading this book, we can see what it's like to be a pedophile having an orgasm against a young girl. Nabokov's prose makes Humbert's perspective accessible to us, allowing us to empathize with an absolute monster.

According to Kieran's moderate immoralism, this part of the novel is aesthetically meritorious to audience members of the first group, folks who aren't pedophiles and who don't know what it's like to be a pedophile trying to surreptitiously molest a child. This novel, through making Humbert empathically accessible, gives audience members a clear lesson on pedophilia. They get to learn something new without doing anything untoward in reality. I agree to a large degree with Kieran's stance and how it would judge this passage. It lets us see the world through a very peculiar and particular set of eyes. From Humbert's perspective, there is an awful lot going on when a girl sits on his lap. There is much to enjoy and much to do to prolong and heighten the enjoyment, and once the enjoyment has reached its zenith, there is much to celebrate.

As far as I can tell, fictional works rarely get more imaginatively engaging than this. Nabokov wanted us to experience what it's like to be Humbert and we were able to do just that. But, what are we to think of how another kind of audience member might think of this passage? The folks who are all too familiar with pedophilia, maybe even those who have carried out acts of sexual abuse against children? I suppose they'd not get the sorts of epistemic gains that readers of this dissertation achieve. They get to see the world through Humbert's eyes just like we did but this perspective is one that's familiar to them. Nabokov's

words allow them to empathize with Humbert as well, even to the point of being

so vivid and rich as to put them in Humbert's shoes. Since readers of that sort

aren't learning anything new, since they're not acquiring morally relevant

knowledge, this passage would not be aesthetically stronger according to

cognitive immoralism. There are not ethical cognitive gains to be had, so the

immoral nature of the work and how it's presented to the audience don't stand as

artistic merits. Kieran made the following remarks about readers of strong

fictional works and I think it sheds light on how all sorts of audience members

respond to passages like the one above from *Lolita*:

> And yet many of us respond to it because we are presented with a
> highly imaginative exploration of an attitude that is at times
> psychologically close to us, and thus can be involved by the artistry of
> the work. The value of engaging with many works derives from the
> particularly powerful ways in which they can get us to imaginatively
> explore different possible attitudes. In some of these cases the works
> involve characterizations, responses and attitudes we judge to be
> morally defective and yet nonetheless they are rendered close to us in
> ways we find to be intelligible.[160]

Humbert's perspective may seem impossibly far from our own moral and sexual

outlooks, but Nabokov's prose has made it abundantly clear to us. The author's

words provide a most imaginative exploration of Humbert's attitude and bring it

shockingly and grippingly close to us.

There are loads of works that give audience members a chance to

empathize with characters and this may or may not involve realizing epistemic

gains. We can imagine audiences who know how it feels to be like one of the

characters having depicted experiences and those who don't. Consider

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[160] Kieran, 2003, 71.

Brokeback Mountain. I claim that this movie is aesthetically meritorious to a degree (I don't think the movie is very good overall.) because of how well it depicts two gay lovers experiencing joy with each other's company and the pains they suffer when they are apart. The film makes the emotional lives of the characters come to life, making them vivid and accessible to us. We get to feel what it's like for the men to love each other even though their love could be ruinous to their families and careers. Each man is married and eventually their wives find out about their affairs, and the movie makes the sadness and frustration felt by the wives abundantly clear.

According to empathic autonomism, this movie is aesthetically strong to an extent specifically because of its ability to allow folks to empathize with characters experiencing a rich set of thoughts, feelings, and experiences and it's good regardless of how much different audience members know about the subject matter. Kieran's position seems to award artistic merit in a way that's contingent upon the knowledge base of the audience, or of various audience members and mine does not. No matter how much one knows about hidden and societally forbidden love, we can all be empathically engaged while watching the movie. This film brings participants in a particular relationship come to life and feel familiar to us. Some audience members will watch *Brokeback Mountain* and learn something. Following empathic autonomism, they get to experience artistically valuable elements of the movie *and* they get to gain a lesson about how some other folks feel. But the lesson about how others may feel is separate from its aesthetic value and it doesn't add to it. Some folks watching the movie

may know exactly what the characters are going through. They still get to

empathize with the characters and feel sympathy for them, but they don't

necessarily learn anything from their empathic engagement. That they don't gain

a moral lesson through their experience with the work doesn't detract from its

aesthetic value. Whether they learn something or not is aesthetically immaterial.

Whether they are able to empathize with the characters or sympathize with them

is aesthetically material since it determines the extent to which audiences

respond to the work as the artist intended. If people do empathize with the

characters and care for them, then the work succeeds by meeting an artistically

relevant aim, and it succeeds to the same degree regardless of whether

audience members make epistemic gains.

At this time please consider *The Stranger* by Albert Camus.[161] This novel

is about a man, Meursault, who has two remarkable experiences. First, his

mother dies, and later he up and kills a man on the beach and then has to deal

with the consequences of his act. In each case, Meursault isn't terribly bothered

by what happens and he isn't emotionally unsettled by what's happening to him

or what he's done. Here's how the book opens:

> Maman died today. Or yesterday, maybe. I don't know. I got a
> telegram from the home: "Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow.
> Faithfully yours." That doesn't mean anything. Maybe it was
> yesterday.[162]

Even though he's just lost his mother, Meursault's unfazed. While he's at his

mom's funeral we get a glimpse of his thoughts. He wants to smoke, so he

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[161] Camus, A. (1988). *The Stanger*. New York: Vintage Books.
[162] Camus, 1.

smokes. He wants some coffee with particular items to flavor it and he drinks coffee that way. A lady was sad and crying and he wished she'd cut it out. He was feeling drowsy early in the process but his drowsiness waned by the end of the event. He got tired and his back hurt. Here's how he describes the end of that episode:

> My neck was a little stiff from resting my chin on the back of the chair for so long. I went downstairs to buy some bread and spaghetti, did my cooking, and ate standing up. I wanted to smoke a cigarette at the window, but the air was getting colder and I felt a little chilled. I shut my windows, and as I was coming back I glanced at the mirror and saw a corner of my table with my alcohol lamp next to some pieces of bread. It occurred to me that anyway one more Sunday was over, that Maman was buried now, that I was going back to work, and that, really, nothing had changed.[163]

That's how Camus presents virtually all of Meursault's experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Meursault sees the world as a series of tiny events, none of which are too important, and doing things like having a mother die, killing a stranger while walking along a beach, or being found guilty of murder and sentenced to death are given no more weight than feeling an urge to smoke or to lie down to go to sleep. Again, we can imagine two kinds of audience members, those previously in the know and those who were not. Some readers of this book are familiar with absurdism and are absurdists themselves. Some aren't absurdists and know nothing of absurdism. My claim is that in either case, this book succeeds in allowing readers to empathize with Meursault as he experiences a number of events. We get to see what it's like for him not to care too much about anything and to view personal relationships as no more important than responding to bodily urges of hunger or sleepiness. If someone is

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[163] Camus, 24.

unfamiliar with the kind of philosophical outlook that Camus espoused and that

Meursault exhibits, then this empathic experience may produce epistemic gains.

If someone is keenly aware of this worldview and holds it herself, then while she

may see things from Meursault's perspective while reading the book, it's not a

perspective that's new to her so reading the book may not produce any epistemic

gains to speak of. But for each kind of reader, according to empathic

autonomism, a particular worldview comes to life and people can perceive what

it's like to be Meursault. To determine the book's aesthetic value, I think it'd be

helpful to use some Kieran's words,

> What matters is not so much a question of whether the moral
> perspective of a work is what we take to be the right one but, rather,
> whether it is conveyed in such a way that we find it intelligible or
> psychologically credible. If this is achieved then what matters is
> whether an artist can get us to see, feel and respond to the world as
> represented as he intends us to and how…[164]

In the case of *The Stranger*, this kind of empathic engagement is apparently a

prescribed response from the book, so the work succeeds aesthetically by

producing the desired result. Where my view differs from Kieran's stance is that I

don't further say that a novel like this is artistically successful "because the ways

in which [it is] morally defective enhance our understanding."[165] Colin McGinn

has made comments that, to my mind, highlight the kind of artistic value that I

have in mind. He says fiction serves as

> one of the prime vehicles of ethical exploration… In reading a novel
> we have ethical experiences, sometimes quite profound ones, and we
> reach ethical conclusions, condemning some characters and admiring

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[164] Kieran, 2003, 72.
[165] Ibid.

> others. We *live* a particular set of moral challenges (sitting there in our armchair) by entering into the lives of the characters introduced.[166]

He goes on to say, "The fictional work can make us *see* and *feel* good and evil in a way that no philosophical tract can…"[167] I'm not willing to accept the limitation of philosophical works in this way (It's possible, I suppose, for philosophical papers to produce such empathic engagement, even if we may have never read such papers.), but McGinn's remarks address a claim that I believe all participants in the debate will grant. Fictional works may possess a remarkable power to pull us into the mental lives of characters. The imaginative journey pays aesthetic dividends whether we acquire moral epistemic gains or not.

Whether our moral understanding happens to be enhanced or not plays no role in shaping *The Stranger*'s value. Another work that I think succeeds beautifully is Maya Angelou's poem, "Caged Bird."[168] In this poem she has readers consider what birds feel when they soar with the wind and feel the warmth of the sun's rays on their wings. We also get to imagine how a caged bird feels, one "that stalks down his narrow cage" and that "can seldom see through his bars of rage" while his wings are clipped and his feet are bound. He can't fly and he can't soar, but he does have the freedom to sing.[169] I think that this poem succeeds in two striking ways. It allows us to empathize with different kinds of birds, those free to take flight and those bound in a cage. But this poem isn't just about birds, it's about race and how members of a particular race may feel in a

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[166] McGinn, 174.
[167] McGinn, 176.
[168] Angelou, M. (1983) Caged Bird. *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* New York: Random House.
[169] Ibid.

country that has limited their freedom at every turn. Readers can empathize with oppressed people while reading this work. Some folks may learn something new while reading this poem and some may learn nothing about birds or racial discrimination, but in either case this work is aesthetically virtuous because of the rich imaginative experience it offers.

The last book I'd like to go over is Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. This novel is about a father and his son living in a most bleak post-apocalyptic world. Things are just horrible. Virtually everything on the planet is dead. There are no more plants or animals and nearly all people have died. Readers hear of the family's journey to the ocean. They walk along roads with hardly a thing to eat and persistently face starvation. But the world's cruel conditions are not their greatest threat. They could face circumstances far worse than malnourishment: they could come across other people. The father and boy call most other people bad guys. Bad guys don't simply try to survive on their own. They try to capture, rape, and eventually eat as many folks as possible.

The Road is relevant in this discussion in two ways: it's a clear example of a work that allows audience members to empathize with and care for its main characters and it tries to get readers to root for the good guys. It makes a miserable and cruel world vivid and accessible to readers. Furthermore, it makes the thoughts, feelings, and fears of the main characters come to life for readers. Following ethicism and moderate moralism, *The Road* is an aesthetic success because of its excellence and it is even *more* successful because it espouses morally appropriate attitudes. But I claim that it doesn't gain aesthetic value in

virtue of it asking us to root for good guys. It's more artistically valuable because it gets us to root for the guys the author had in mind whether they be good guys or not. Following empathic autonomism, the book is artistically outstanding because of its ability to engage readers. The book is fascinating, gripping, and touching and that, by itself, shapes its aesthetic value. It pulls us in and makes us care for the fate of this family facing horrific circumstances. It frightens us when the father and the boy have run-ins with murderous marauders and it makes us cheer when they survive such encounters. *The Road* aims to engage readers and it does just that. By meeting its relevant artistic aims, it is aesthetically valuable, and it is so regardless of how much some audience members might learn or whether our attitudes about people and events in the book would be appropriate to hold about people in the real world.

Objections to Empathic Autonomism

Empathic autonomism hinges upon the premise that if a work successfully elicits its sought after response, then it prescribes a merited response. Much like Carroll, I claim that fictional works aim to engage their audiences, that they attempt to garner our interest and to absorb us. I just explained that *The Road* is so aesthetically strong because of its ability to do just that, and that it's ability to absorb us through empathizing with the main character, the father, involves absorbing us to an exceedingly high degree. I believe all of the examples I've shared so far share the aim to engage audiences imaginatively by commanding our attention. But not all fictional works aim to absorb us. Some works have

different aims entirely.[170] Suppose a fictional work had the aim of using a particular letter some certain number of times and imagine that it successfully contained that letter the intended number of times. In that case the work would have met one of its aims so it seems to have been aesthetically successful to some degree. Is a work aesthetically better for having met this artistic aim? It'd be hard to argue that it is. That a fictional work happens to contain a particular number of a letter doesn't seem to make audiences appreciate it more even if they are aware of its successful realization of a goal. Gaut raises a similar point while arguing against moderate moralism and it applies to empathic autonomism.[171] He says "the argument assumes that a general goal of art is absorption and that this is invariably a positive aesthetic value."[172] Gaut gives examples of some works of art that clearly don't aim to absorb audiences. Instead, they're meant to alienate audience members. He also points out that while John Grisham churns out page-turning suspense novels that engage the heck out of readers, none us would deem him one of the best writers ever. Gaut states, "For the question needs to be asked of why one is absorbed by the work."[173]

I accept both Bueno's and Gaut's claims about the potential value of engagement. Bueno is right to point out some aims aren't aesthetically meaningful, so a work producing a warranted response would not improve its artistic value. And Gaut's correct to note that some works evidently don't intend

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[170] My thanks for Otávio Bueno for bringing this kind of objection to my attention.
[171] Gaut, 2007, 229.
[172] Ibid.
[173] Ibid.

to absorb audiences and that absorption, by itself, does not entail artistic excellence. In response to Bueno, we've got to determine if allowing audiences to empathize with characters is aesthetically meaningful. I've argued that this trait is in fact a good-making quality in most fictional narratives. As a rule (but certainly not in all cases), narratives *are* meant to draw in audiences and to make elements of the fictional world come to life. And as a rule (but certainly not in all cases), audience members hope to be absorbed by a work, to be transported to a different place or to interact with different characters. Consider once again the *Harry Potter* series of books and movies along with the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. A clear aesthetic goal of these works is to flesh out a different world with different laws of physics and magical powers. It's also a clear aesthetic goal to engage audience members by pulling them into the world and to earn the interest of audience members. We are meant to care for certain characters, the good guys, and to hope they will do well. As Gaut points out, works like these, along with *The Road*, do "not just present imagined events; [they] also [present] a point of view on them, a perspective constituted in part by actual feelings, emotions and desires that a reader is prescribed to have toward the merely imagined events."[174] Horror movies are supposed to spook us, love stories are meant to get us to care about the would-be lovers and to cause us to want them to unite, suspenses are meant to thrill us, and comedies are supposed to make us laugh. In each of the genres that Gaut describes, he talks about different ways in which works try to engage us. In such cases, cases that are ostensibly different than the works that mean to alienate audiences, a work's ability to produce strong

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[174] Gaut, 2007, 231.

imaginative engagement is taken to be a clear strength of the piece. I hold that the same is the case when we consider *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Road*. It makes little sense to read one of these books and to walk away disappointed that the world was depicted so vividly and richly as to draw us in. It would be an odd complaint to say that these works fail to the extent that they get us to give a damn about the main characters, that they're flawed because we care too much about them. Similarly, it would be peculiar to gripe that a work managed to put us in the head of the father in *The Road*, Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, or Tony Soprano in *The Sopranos*. Many narratives aim to make different worlds come to life. When works allow audiences to empathize with characters, they do so by making the mental lives of characters come to life to us, so much to life that we can imagine just what they're thinking. This is a different way for audiences to be imaginatively engaged.

Berys Gaut could object to my treatment of ethicism and hold that I have not shown how empathic autonomism better allows us to evaluate the aesthetic value of key works. I've used *Lolita* to show that a work may be artistically splendid even though audiences are prescribed to be engaged by Humbert Humbert's immoral thoughts and actions. Up to this point, I've explained that ethicism hinges upon the claim that audience members should not enjoy IIA because to do so would be unethical. That claim is true of Gaut's original account of ethicism, but he's further explained his view and believes that ethicism can allow us to properly assess works like *Lolita*.[175]

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[175] Gaut, 2007, 191-200.

Gaut tells us that fictional works may prescribe pro-attitudes toward IIA and be no worse off aesthetically for doing so if their creators employ a seduction strategy. A work may aim to draw us into the evil minds of unethical characters in order "to show the audience how easily it can be seduced into false, idealizing, morally tainted, or even plain evil views," and to make it clear to us "that we are prone to adopt attitudes that we may consciously abhor or dismiss."[176]

Gaut uses *Lolita* as an example of the seduction strategy at work. Of course readers are meant to be captivated by Humbert's accounts of his malicious and depraved acts, but we are not supposed to believe that the work invites us to embrace Humbert's attitudes ourselves. Instead, we should recognize that the book ultimately casts Humbert's deeds and perspective into a negative light, so we should end up disapproving of him. By doing this, *Lolita* is not an immoral novel after all, so it does not prescribe an unmerited response and it will not suffer aesthetically because of its treatment of IIA.[177] If Gaut is right about this, then my claim that empathic autonomism is stronger than rival positions will be suspect and some of my objections to ethicism will be significantly weaker.

There is disagreement about the primary goals of *Lolita*. Some, including myself, hold that the work may be called unethical in that it aims to engage readers with positive accounts of horrendous acts, beliefs, and feelings. Gaut

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[176] Gaut, 2007, 192.
[177] Gaut and I disagree about the primary aims of *Lolita* and I will explore this disagreement presently. He also disagrees with Matthew Kieran's account of Graham Greene's 'The Destructors'. Gaut claims that this short story employs the seduction strategy, so it also does not indicate a problem for ethicism or serve as a case exhibiting cognitive immoralism's supposed strengths. I won't fully address the apparent primary aim of 'The Destructors' but I will tell you that my own view of the story is similar to what Kieran explained in his article.

doesn't see the book that way and tells us that while the novel prescribes audiences to be amused by its initial treatment of Humbert Humbert, the tone of the work shifts as the book unfolds. Early on we are to find Humbert charming and sympathetic, but as time goes by in the story and as pages go by in the novel, Humbert sees his own acts differently and the work urges us to see him differently as well. At the end of the book, Humbert no longer considers himself a champion who has managed to realize his dream of having sex with just the right child. The work ends with an account of Humbert's demise. He is filled with remorse and he is sorry for what he did to that poor child. Gaut sees this change as evidence of a seduction strategy. Audiences *were* invited to delight in Humbert's pursuits, and even if we found ourselves caught up in them, *later* we are prescribed to be utterly revolted by what Humbert did and who he has become.

If Gaut is correct about the book's use of a seduction strategy, then he is right to claim that the novel does not stand as a problem case for ethicism. Ethicism's treatment of this book could serve to show how ethicism may handle other works using a seduction strategy and many works that critics like myself of Kieran have brought up may not be problematic after all. If that's so, then some, possibly many, particular works would be eliminated from the discussion since they do not tip the scales in the favor of any one position or another. But even if we accept Gaut's take on *Lolita*, ethicism faces the same sort of objection that I addressed earlier when confronted with countless other fictional works, those that aim to garner pro-attitudes toward IIA while *not* being part of a seduction

strategy. I have covered a number of works like this in this dissertation. They include *Pulp Fiction*, *Harold and Maude*, and even the sections of *Ice Age* that aim to please us with the torturous obstacles facing a prehistoric squirrel.[178] Ethicism gives us the wrong ruling on the aesthetic value of such works because of their prescribed responses.

I think the easiest way to see this lingering problem is to consider caper novels and films. So far I have covered one such work at length, *Ocean's Eleven*. This work obviously aims to garner the audience's approval of the acts of Danny Ocean and the other ten members of his criminal crew and no seduction strategy is at play. Ethicism would find this work aesthetically damaged to an extent since it has an unmerited response. The flaw in question may be hugely important since the point of a caper movie is to captivate audiences by the caperers trying to pull off their caper. If a thriller fails aesthetically because it fails to thrill, then a caper film may be artistically doomed since it fundamentally prescribes audiences to have pro-attitudes toward immoral acts. Gaut claims that audiences should not respond as elicited because to do so would be immoral, so when they do not the work will be worse off aesthetically.

I don't think *Ocean's Eleven* is nearly bad as Gaut's ethicism would have us find it, but I don't find it particularly excellent. It is only a slightly above average film, so I think we should consider a significantly better work to make ethicism's

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[178] I believe that *The Old Man and the Sea* may count as another of these problem cases for ethicism. People ought to object to unnecessarily harming animals and should find fishing immoral. In Hemmingway's book, Santiago puts a giant fish through hours and hours of pain and exhaustion and readers are to approve of his valiant fight. The novel depicts Santiago's IIA in an attractive light, so ethicism would have us find the prescribed response unmerited because it is unethical, hence diminishing the aesthetic value of *The Old Man and the Sea*.

failing clear. The best caper work that I can think of is Michael Chrichton's *The Great Train Robbery*.[179] This book is about a man's attempt to pull off the most remarkable job in the history of England. Within the first few pages of the book, readers discovery how fantastically complex and challenging such a heist can be. Even though the book has dozens of twists and turns, one thing remains constant: the crook uses a number of people merely as a means to get what he wants. Our first encounter with the thief, Edward Pierce, is presented as follows: A young man is detected on a train. He didn't belong in the luggage car and a security guard found him and the two began to fight. The two duked it out briefly and the much larger guard tossed the lad from the moving train. The young man bounced off the terrain like a rag doll and suffered fatal injuries. Edward Pierce watched all of this from afar, approached the injured youngster and watched him die without offering aid. This is the first of many preparations Pierce was making for his heist. He hoped to learn whether a person could successfully hide as a stowaway in a particular train car. It turned out that one could not. Pierce hired the young man to hide for him, and ultimately paid the young man to die as part of an experiment.

Later in the book, Pierce needed to steal a particular key from a man who worked for a particular bank. The banker is called Henry Fowler. Pierce befriended Fowler and Fowler later confided in him that he suffered from a venereal disease. The symptoms were most painful and Fowler hoped to find some kind of relief. Fowler was embarrassed to be in such a condition so he was reluctant to seek professional medical care. In the mid-1800s, many people

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[179] Chrichton, M. (1975). *The Great Train Robbery.* New York, NY: Harper Collins.

believed that sexually transmitted diseases could be cured by having sex with a young virgin. Such a girl was called a 'fresh' at the time. Pierce arranged for Fowler to enjoy the services of a fresh from a respected brothel in the town. Pierce knew full well that having sex with a virginal child would not cure any ailment, let alone a swollen and tender penis. Nonetheless, he had Fowler go to a hotel room to have sex with a child, a girl who was hardly taller than his waist. Fowler wore the prized key on a chain around his neck. The child came across it as she undressed him and asked him to remove it so that it would not hurt her. Unbeknownst to Fowler, the child was part of Pierce's plan and a person hidden behind the curtains reached out and took the key at just the instant Fowler was having an orgasm inside the young girl.

The Great Train Robbery is filled with Pierce devising and executing clever moves to get some thing or access to some place because about a year later they would help him carry out his criminal plan. According the Gaut's ethicism, no matter how compelling and creative the work is, it will be less aesthetically valuable since it prescribes an unmerited response. And as I showed earlier in the dissertation, Gaut's claim that it is unethical to have pro-attitudes toward IIA is ill-justified and in all likelihood false. It is not the case that audiences enjoying Pierce's fictional evil acts as they are depicted in *The Great Train Robbery* approve of acts of that kind in the real world. This book does not employ a seduction strategy of any kind. Audiences are not to be amused and thrilled by Pierce's activities so that later we can come to frown upon them and make a morally appropriate judgment of the character and his misdeeds. As

such, ethicism leads to an unsound aesthetic judgment of this novel and many others that are relevantly similar. Forms of autonomism, on the other hand, allow us to get to the aesthetic heart of the matter. Given the aims of works like *Ocean's Eleven* and *The Great Train Robbery,* we should ask whether they provide audiences with imaginatively rich experiences. Do they thrill us with the intricacies of the plan and the players' ability to respond to setbacks on the fly? Are the characters likeable? Do the works get us to care about their characters' fate? If these works successfully produce their prescribed responses, then they are aesthetically meritorious for doing so. Unlike ethicism, moderate moralism, or cognitive immoralism, according to brands of moralism, that is all that matters.

So far I have been examining how ethicism fares if Gaut's claims about the true nature of *Lolita* are correct. Now I would like to consider another possibility, that *Lolita* does not prescribe the response that Gaut has in mind. Gaut's account of *Lolita* can be roughly expressed as follows:

> *Lolita* aims to engage audiences with accounts of Humbert Humbert's unethical perspective of his IIA, and *Lolita* does this to show audiences that they are prone to accept some number of horrible attitudes, and *Lolita* aims to cause audiences to turn on Humbert Humbert later in the work when they realize that he is a complete monster, a failure, and a bad person who recognizes his own poor moral state.

According to ethicism, *Lolita* will succeed aesthetically if it has three kinds of merited responses. As Gaut has explained, *Lolita* elicits its sought after responses in each case, so it is aesthetically successful. Here is another account of *Lolita*:

> *Lolita* aims to engage audiences with accounts of Humbert Humbert's unethical perspective of his IIA.

That is a view of *Lolita* that I think is appropriate. Humbert Humbert is an exceedingly rich character. That much is clear and accepted by each member of the debate. *Lolita* draws readers into the world of the novel by drawing us into the mind of its main character.

I maintain that in order to determine the aesthetic value of the book, we should focus on whether the work succeeds in that end. We need not make additional suppositions about further moral aims of the novel. Plus, it not clear to me that the book aims to do what Gaut says that it does. *Lolita*, much like some of Nabokov's other late works including *Pale Fire* and *Look at the Harlequins!*, is about a man who finds himself quite brilliant. The book is told from the perspective of the main character and over the course of the novel we learn of this man's view of his supposedly brilliant plan to fake out and manipulate others to get what he wants. Things start to fall apart for the main character as people won't be manipulated just as he had planned and some folks start to suspect his behavior. The main character is delusional and he has been delusional all along, but audiences are not made aware of this from the get-go. Instead, the nature of the main character's looniness is slowly revealed as we learn of his many wild attempts to carry out his ultimate plan. In many ways, these books are like caper films and novels that were addressed earlier. With some late Nabokov books, including *Lolita*, audiences are supposed to be drawn in to care about the main character and to be amused by his wild acts, beliefs, and attitudes along every point of his giant plan.

I am not certain of the absolute aims of *Lolita* and I'm not in a position to state that Gaut's view of the work is decidedly wrong and that my own stance is obviously right. What I do believe and hope to have shown is that Gaut's view of the book is not the only viable take and that his use of his reading of the book does not support ethicism as he might hope, nor does it deflect some objections to his aesthetic theory. Furthermore, empathic autonomism remains capable of giving us an adequate account of *Lolita*'s aesthetic value given either reading of the novel and it may do so in cases that do or do not employ a seduction strategy.

Carroll has raised an objection to moderate autonomism that applies to empathic autonomism as well. Please recall that Carroll holds that the aesthetic success of a work is contingent upon its ability to produce its intended responses. If a work mandates one response and the audience is unwilling or unable to respond in kind, then the work has failed aesthetically to an extent. Earlier we addressed thrillers failing aesthetically because they fail to thrill and a love story failing in virtue of failing to get audiences to care for the outcome of the would-be lovers. Carroll presents an example that gets to the heart of the matter. We are to imagine a fictional work that tries to garner admiration for Himmler, the Nazi who helped carry out the Holocaust.[180] Himmler receives the Nobel Peace Prize in the work. Carroll claims that such a work is doomed to fail since audiences won't respond as prescribed. The work just won't elicit our admiration for a Nazi war criminal. Carroll says, "The morally sensitive viewer cannot get her

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[180] Carroll, 1998, 421.

mind around the idea – it is so morally obnoxious, so evil."[181] Because the work

will not elicit its sought after response, it will have failed aesthetically and this

aesthetic failure is caused because of its morally offensive message. Hence, the

moral elements of the work are aesthetically relevant. Anderson and Dean have

a response to this kind of objection and I find it adequate.[182] They explain that

thrillers that fail to thrill are failures just because they fail to thrill. If a work aims to

produce admiration for a character, then the work has not failed because the

character in question happens to be immoral, but because the work was

constructed in such a way as to be unable to elicit admiration. In Carroll's

example involving Himmler, he has built audience failure into the case. But let's

consider some other fictional works. Consider a TV show that aims to elicit

fondness for a murderous mob boss who cheats on his wife at every turn and

who's selfish in virtually every way. Let's imagine a movie with two hitmen who

accidentally shoot a man they'd just kidnapped in the head, making a mess of

their car with his brains and skull. Furthermore, when they clean his mess from

their vehicle, they crack jokes and the audience is supposed to be amused by

their banter. Carroll presupposes that morally sensitive audiences won't be able

to respond as prescribed in such cases. We've addressed problems with his

appeal to morally sensitive audiences earlier and I won't rehearse those

objections now. I will appeal to Anderson and Dean's line of reasoning. If

audiences don't respond as the work mandates in such cases, it's not

necessarily because of moral elements of the work, but because of how the work

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[181] Ibid.
[182] Anderson and Dean, 159.

executed its vision. If the mob boss isn't engaging or sympathetic, it's because the producers of *The Sopranos* failed in making their main character sympathetic. If audiences aren't amused by the jam the two hitmen have gotten themselves in with an accidental murder, then the creators of *Pulp Fiction* similarly failed in making the exploits of its main characters amusing. The root of potential aesthetic failures of works that aim to captivate audiences by depicting supposedly attractive imaginary immoral characters is that they are not captivating, not that the characters happen to be unethical.

Conclusion

I have argued that a fictional work's positive depiction of IIA does not make it less aesthetically valuable. Philosophers who accept rival aesthetic positions disagree with that claim and do so, in part, because they believe that it is immoral for us to have unqualified positive responses to fictional evil acts, beliefs, and attitudes. I have examined various ethical arguments to support their view and have shown how they are all lacking. Because it is not unethical for audience members to enjoy IIA, they may be willing and able to respond as prescribed when a work attempts to elicit their approval of accounts of fictional evil. I have also argued that narrative works are aesthetically meritorious when they allow audience members to empathize with imaginary immoral characters.

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