

## How bad can good art be?

---

KAREN HANSON

Worries about the immorality of art can arise from a number of apparently quite different considerations. One line of thought, as old as Plato and as current as Catherine MacKinnon, emphasizes the continuity of art and life and contends that some artistic productions may corrupt the minds, hearts, and behavior of those who experience them.

Another concern, less historically pervasive perhaps but still potent, is grounded on an assumption that art is removed, or removes us, from life and thus from the strictures and obligations that properly bind us. This anxiety may stand as a vexed tribute to the cultural power of the doctrine of art for art's sake. It may be that Oscar Wilde's claim that "[a]ll art is quite useless"<sup>1</sup> is granted, but the claim is treated as an anguished accusation and not a proud proclamation. Or one may believe, with Walter Pater, that "art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake,"<sup>2</sup> and yet want to turn from such a proposal, as from the seductive allure of the lotus land, because one remembers that one has duties, that there are tasks to attend to in the passing moments of the responsible life. The separation of art and life is also delineated in accounts of "psychical distance" and of "the aesthetic attitude" and "disinterestedness," and here again apprehension may arise that absorption in art can be defined in specific contrast to moral responsiveness.

I shall take up first this second line of concern, the worries about discontinuities between art and life. Critically examining a number of versions of this uneasiness about art, I shall conclude that there is, from this direction, little ground for strong complaint. Exploring this

## *How bad can good art be?*

territory will lead, however, to a surprising point of contiguity with the first worry, the apprehension about the continuity between art and life. Returning, then, to the first, the historically recurrent complaint, and finding it both empirically and conceptually complex, I shall use it as a point of entry for a more general discussion of the role of ethical considerations in judgments of art. Defended in that discussion will be a particular idea of the invocation of moral considerations in aesthetic contexts, an idea that leaves some – but not unlimited – room for us to judge aesthetically excellent a work whose moral quality we firmly condemn.

First, though, we must canvass the idea that art can be condemned because of its separation from the moral life. An interesting version of this concern is voiced by Arthur Danto, who thinks

there would be cases in which it would be wrong or inhuman to take an aesthetic attitude, to put at a psychical distance certain realities – to see a riot, for instance, in which police are clubbing demonstrators, as a kind of ballet, or to see the bombs exploding like mystical chrysanthemums from the plane they have been dropped from. The question instead must arise as to what one should *do*. For parallel reasons, . . . there are things it would be almost immoral to represent in art, precisely because they are then put at a distance which is exactly wrong from a moral perspective. Tom Stoppard once said that if you see an injustice taking place outside your window, the least useful thing you can do is to write a play about it. I would go further, suggesting that there is something wrong in writing plays about that sort of injustice in which we have an obligation to intervene, since it puts the audience at just the sort of distance the concept of psychic distance means to describe: something like this has been offered as a criticism of the photographs of Diane Arbus.<sup>3</sup>

Danto's disquieting rumination suggests ethical perils on all sides: the art itself may be immoral, because it puts the audience at a distance; the artist may be judged morally wrong, for producing an object that has this effect; the audience may be judged wrong or inhuman, for taking an aesthetic attitude or remaining still, at a distance, when there is an obligation to intervene. How serious are these dangers?

Before we gauge the perils, before we affix blame or condemnation, we need to think more about the conditions of this assessment. The grounds for censure seem always roughly the same: some circumstances or events require action, and art in those circumstances or about those events not only does not count *as*, but in fact *blocks*, appropriate action. How does it do this? The example of art that might have the Medusa-like power to turn those who look upon it to

stone – namely, the photographs of Diane Arbus – seems to me not a help but a puzzle. Arbus's freakish or socially marginalized subjects do not, in any straightforward way, suggest injustice in need of our active intervention. If we had been there with Arbus as she shot photographs, had been there in the living presence of, say, a dwarf or a transvestite, what would morality have demanded that we *do*? If there is no obvious answer to this, if no action is obviously required in the presence of her subjects, then how can Arbus's photographs be blamed for blocking the requirements of morality or sapping our will to act?

Perhaps, in this example, the moral objection is subtler. Is it that Arbus's photographs put us in a position to stare, to look without consequences at sights from which, in practical life, we might turn away in discomfort? Perseus was able to see and slay the freakish Medusa because he avoided a direct, unmediated glance. He used Athena's shield to catch Medusa's reflection, and it was only the reflection that he kept in view. That might be a metaphor for the looking and seeing we can achieve through photographs, but it so far carries no hint of moral fault. I can imagine – I have seen – photographs that would elicit misgivings about the morality of looking, about personal privacy, exploitation, and unjustifiable intrusion. But if, with Arbus's work, we are made to stare frankly at those who, in life, we would ignore or spy upon with furtive glances, then it is not clear that our real-life responses have much positive moral weight. And we do not, after all, come close to killing or even wounding the dignity of Arbus's subjects. We do not, in looking at their photographs, override their wishes or participate in an evident abridgment of their sense of privacy.

We might also remember, about the medium in general and not just about Arbus's use of it, that a photograph offers the viewer a sight of the *past*, so the idea of active intervention in the very particular event or circumstances photographed is, strictly speaking, vain. It may be, of course, that that is a nicety of airy metaphysics that weighs very little in grave matters of morality. A photograph shows you a Sudanese child starving, and you are moved to *do* something. By the time you reach Sudan to help, perhaps even by the time you write a check to a relief agency, perhaps even when you first see the photograph, that child may have already died; but the famine goes on and a practical response is surely not in vain. But, then, if photographs – and plays (think of *A Doll's House*) and novels (think of *Bleak House* or *The Jungle*) and so on – can in fact thus serve as spurs to action,

## *How bad can good art be?*

are we flatly rebutting the claims made by Danto and Stoppard, or obtusely missing their point?

If we focus on Danto's assertion that "there is something wrong in writing plays about that sort of injustice in which we have an obligation to intervene," we may see traces of a Rousseauian objection to theater, to its capacity to pervert and dissipate true sentiment and its role in obscuring the genuine needs of our fellow human beings.<sup>4</sup> If the spectacle in the theater provokes us to tears, but then, refreshed and self-satisfied, we step outside and are blind to the sight of our freezing coachmen – or the freezing homeless – isn't there room for moral complaint? It may not be clear, however, just where – against what or whom – the complaint should be lodged. If we do not see the connection between the pitiful events portrayed on stage and the dreadful circumstances on the street, why blame the play or playwright and not ourselves? The idea is farfetched that a play might exhaust our capacity for sympathy and purge us of any inclination to behave responsibly in the face of real opportunities for doing so; but if there were such plays, isn't it we who should still be faulted for indulging in them, in preference to other works, as we might be faulted for choosing to dull our reactions to the misfortunes of others by indulging in drink or drugs? It is, in any case, hard to see that – why or how – plays about *injustice* would *necessarily* have this deeply enervating effect.

It may well be that it is simply psychological distance itself, or some instances of it, that Danto wants to condemn, and plays and playwrights are viewed with moral disapproval insofar as they present occasions for the realization of blameworthy distance. Moral suspicion of psychological distance could certainly be grounded on the fact that the latter notion is routinely defined by differentiating it from practical attitudes and moral concerns. Thus Bullough speaks of "the *negative, inhibitory aspect*" of distance, "the cutting-out of the practical sides of things and of our practical attitude to them,"<sup>5</sup> so that distance can supply "one of the special criteria of aesthetic values as distinct from practical (utilitarian), scientific, or social (ethical) values."<sup>6</sup> And, of course, though Kant does not speak of "psychical distance," he may be understood to lay the foundation for the notion with his account of the judgment of taste as "devoid of all interest" and his conceptual location of the beautiful in contradistinction to the agreeable and the good.<sup>7</sup>

Now the very idea of a disinterested aesthetic attitude has been subjected to a great deal of critical scrutiny, and many philosophers

question the coherence of the traditional accounts of psychical distance. (Indeed, and somewhat puzzlingly, Danto himself notes that art "has often had useful roles to play as . . . didactic, edificational, . . . or whatever, and the theory [of psychical distance and the aesthetic attitude] thus presupposes a degree of detachment available only in special periods of art history." "For this reason," he says, he "applaud[s] the polemic of George Dickie, who contests what he speaks of as 'the myth of psychic distance.'")<sup>8</sup> If psychical distance is a mythological construction, Danto's moral worry may collapse. It is worth remarking, however, that even if some plausible notion of psychical distance can be preserved, it is not immediately clear that such distancing ever in itself constitutes a moral mistake. Something that might be described as distance – a space for thought and choice – seems fundamental to the realization of a developed moral life. A salient feature of the human condition is that our responses to the world are not always reflexive reactions to immediate impingements. (Compare, for sharp contrast, the life of the clam or the slug.)<sup>9</sup> *Deliberate* action – with options held out enough to be weighed – may not be all there is to the good human life, and objectivity – understood to involve a distinction between knower and known, between a thinker and an object of thought – may be an overrated or misunderstood epistemological ideal. Still, if "the question [is to] arise as to what one should *do*," it seems one must *already* be at *some* sort of distance from what "must" be addressed.

Nonetheless, the examples used to suggest the moral questionableness of psychical distance seem somehow to carry argumentative force. Do they persuade by implying, perhaps illicitly and certainly without proof, that an aesthetic attitude or a distanced perception erases a prior, or precludes a subsequent or, say, alternating, practical or moral concern? Would we condemn a psychologist studying the development of toddlers' problem-solving strategies because, at a moment when a subject child exhibits unhappy frustration, the psychologist maintains a cognitive attitude, seeking not to offer immediate comfort to the child but to record and make sense of the child's behavior? If an individual shows nothing but a cognitive interest in others, we might, of course, be dismayed and disapproving, as appalled as we would be at one who sees a bloody riot only as a kind of ballet. But the scientific observer may also be a warm and responsive parent, may indeed, even at the same time as she is engaged in scientific observation, be emotionally attuned to register and react to the moment when a subject child's unhappiness should

*How bad can good art be?*

be soothed and not merely noted. Similarly, one who attends to the perceptible form and sensuous surface of an event may also be capable of seeing the event's moral import and taking the implications for conduct. If by a definition of "psychical distance" aesthetic and moral attitudes cannot be *simultaneous*, why may they not be realized by an individual at what *practically* amounts to the same time?

If it is argued that split seconds can make a difference or, more plausibly, that something like the *order* or the *predominant* category of an individual's attitudes is signally important to our estimation of his or her moral character, this must be granted. After all, an adult whose first reaction to a crying child is always curiosity about what facts might now be revealed about the immature psyche, and who only subsequently remembers to offer some comfort, has a different – we might say "colder" – character than one who comforts first and reflects later. And so, with Danto, we might judge "wrong or inhuman" a person whose first or typical reaction to violence is to aestheticize it, even if this individual manages also to behave appropriately in the face of violent events. But this does not show that putting certain realities at a psychical distance is inherently wrong or inhuman, any more than the example of the cold psychologist shows that trying to understand people is *inherently* at odds with caring for them. Danto himself elsewhere recounts "Monet's anguished discovery that, sitting by the body of his late wife Camille, his model, love, support, angel, he had, instead of grieving, been studying the purple on her eyelids. He wondered what manner of monster he had become."<sup>10</sup> Monet's horrified self-discovery, if it showed him to be a monster, showed him to be a monster of the sort Pascal calls "human." In the combination of his reaction and his reaction to his reaction, Monet must be seen as neither angel nor beast but a fragile thinking reed – loving, creative, and perceptive, a complex man.

It might finally be said, now as a flat counterassertion, that Danto's claim "that there is something wrong in writing plays about that sort of injustice in which we have an obligation to intervene" just seems decidedly implausible. If, as Danto admits, art *can* be didactic and edifying, why prohibit the theater from, or condemn it for, addressing large social issues and serious moral and political problems? Stoppard's weaker line – "that if you see an injustice taking place outside your window, the least useful thing you can do is write a play about it" – is more tenable, but its reach as moral criticism is unclear. It echoes Wilde's "All art is quite useless," but while that is a defense against charges of immorality, Stoppard's comment is clearly depre-

catory. Should it be taken as a summary of empirical evidence, a generalization about the marginality of theater's edifying powers or the fragility of art's connection to social action?

But if we are thus engaged in utilitarian calculations, then doesn't it matter keenly to know what *kind* of injustice is "taking place outside our window"? Is someone being assaulted by a gang of muggers, or is a deadly epidemic being ignored by the medical establishment because most of its victims are politically powerless or socially "other"? Don't we need to know, too, about our particular abilities and our other available options for action? If we see someone being mugged, then, depending on our strength and circumstances, it may be useful to intervene directly, and certainly we should call the police. (And might we not then also, when the immediate crisis is over, usefully incorporate something of this episode in our new play?)<sup>11</sup>

But suppose we are concerned about the epidemic. Should we demonstrate in the streets, write letters to our political representatives and to the NIH, go back to school to learn to do medical research, establish or contribute to a new charity? Both the nature and the extent of our obligations are, in this sort of case, much more difficult to discern. One of the obstacles to seeing the best course is that individual action, no matter how wisely chosen, is likely to be only slightly ameliorative, given the nature and the scale of the problem. This in fact is the case with most of the problems we might typically call "injustices" – economic inequities, violations of human rights, practices of racism, sexism, political domination, and so on. Now if these sorts of injustices cannot be solved by any individual's actions and may not be solved in any of our lifetimes, then, while we certainly have no excuse for doing nothing about these problems, we may have good reason not to belittle any serious attempts to address them. The cynic might note that the difference between "the least useful" and the most useful course of action is essentially negligible, given the enormity of these problems, and there is some truth to this. But the more optimistic assessment is that writing a play may be as good a way as any to take constructive action.

Writing a play about the neglect of the AIDS epidemic may be as good a way as any other to address the problem – the problem of this *injustice*. We can leave aside for now, as only strengthening this defense of art, that the play may offer or sustain moral values – for example, compassion, individual comfort – other than those directly related to promoting social justice. Writing a play may be as useful a

### *How bad can good art be?*

mode of action as any other, provided, of course, that one has some writing talent and some opportunity to have the play produced and seen, provided one isn't already employed as, say, an AIDS researcher, or the head of the NIH, or the president of the United States, or. . . . Remembering that both our native endowments and our acquired roles, our untapped personal talents and our undischarged social debts are among the conditions that determine the reasonableness or defensibility of a given course of action, we must assume that for each of us, at each stage of our lives, there will be better and worse bets about what course of action is likely to be most useful. If I am a middle-aged scientist with a good track record in medical research but no previous literary experience or calling, it is probably true that devoting myself to writing a play about AIDS is likely to be among the least productive things I might do (about AIDS).<sup>12</sup> We should thus at least qualify, relativize, the flat generality of Stoppard's claim. Remembering, though, that action is *never* accompanied by a guarantee of its felicitousness, we may also want to challenge more directly the assurance of Stoppard's assertion, but now with a worry about the uncertainties of moral luck.

Bernard Williams memorably sketches the problem of moral luck by drawing out the considerations relevant to the personal justification of an *artist*, an exemplary or schematized Gauguin. When Gauguin leaves his family destitute in order to pursue in Tahiti the development of his art, there can be nothing, at the time of his departure, that can justify his action: "Justification, if there is to be one, will be essentially retrospective."<sup>13</sup> Success as an artist, the creation of world historically valuable art, is the only thing that can redeem his decision to depart, to abandon his domestic responsibilities, but success cannot be guaranteed – or even confidently predicted on reasonably adequate grounds – at the time of his departure. If the justification of important life projects – such as writing a play – sometimes depends on moral luck, on the projects' *happening* to turn out well, then we cannot say, as we commit ourselves to them, that these projects are definitely worthwhile or, more crucially, that they may rightfully take precedence over our standing obligations or over other tasks we might as reasonably undertake.

Philosophers who accept the idea that morality and rational justification are subject to the vagaries of luck have various reactions to this disturbing thought. Either the nature or the scope of morality, or both, may seem deeply unsettled. Without proceeding further into this contested conceptual territory, we can simply note that if there



is a problem of moral luck, it affects not just art and the artist, but every human enterprise. It is not just Gauguin, after all, but also, say, the medical researcher, at the lab all day and into the night, who may, for example, neglect real family needs in order to pursue work. He or she might not need to discover a vaccine for AIDS in order to justify this one-track devotion, but something more than unimaginative dead ends and plodding bench work had better be discernible if a grim life judgment is to be escaped. If that is the bad news about moral luck, however, the good news is that the present decision to write a play cannot, at this moment, be definitively and conclusively condemned.

Thus, Stoppard's particular judgment cannot be sustained. It may have been, in any case, only lightly offered. But another, more obdurate concern about the utility of art may still be pressed. If art is understood to be discontinuous with life, if it is thought that either the production or the enjoyment of art removes an individual from the practical and moral sphere of human existence, then, since the practical world is always brimming with injustice, indulgence in art must entail the gross neglect of some vital obligations. Given the apparent omnipresence of undeserved pain and dreadful suffering in the world we inhabit, there are *always* already some very basic claims upon our time and energy – so many, in fact, that we cannot possibly justify in terms of utility turning away from those problems and toward the development of art.

The austerity of this moral outlook will, of course, dry up not only art, but also science and all liberal learning, and its account of our moral obligations will render all but the Mother Teresas among us exhausted failures. That some forms of utilitarianism seem to have these sorts of implications for moral assessment is now generally seen as a problem for those *theories*, not as a revelation that should come to guide our lives. It is worth remarking, however, that this complaint about art, grounded as it is on considerations of utility, often gains cultural currency through an edgy political alliance with an opposing view.

If art can be condemned because, trafficking with it, we are moved to ignore the basic evil and suffering all around us, art can also, with adequate practical if not deep theoretical consistency, be condemned because, trafficking with at least some of it, we are corrupted, made more likely to contribute to the sum total of evil and suffering in the world. Blaming art for a purported *discontinuity* with life thus joins blaming art for purported *continuities* with mistaken lives, and the

## *How bad can good art be?*

moral space from which one might praise or even just leave art alone seems precipitously eroded. We have not, however, so far found much real reason to worry about a depraved discontinuity between art and life. Is the moral quicksand in fact on the other side, in the *connection* between art and life?

We should step carefully here, if only to mark off one serviceable path for exploration rather than another. To investigate the idea that art may corrupt, we need, of course, not only a standard of morality or, at any rate, some defensible moral judgments, but also some detailed empirical evidence. It may be no more difficult to gather and interpret properly evidence about art's effects than it is to obtain useful evidence about a host of other matters, but it is certainly not obvious that philosophy, or even what philosophy may call "common sense," has this evidence to hand.

It must be admitted that current U.S. law has a different, a less cautious or more generous view of the disclosures here of common sense. Writing for the majority in *Paris Adult Theatre I v. Slaton*, and citing Justice Cardozo's assertion that "all laws in Western civilization are 'guided by a robust common sense,'" former Chief Justice Warren Burger dismisses the import of the argument that no scientific data conclusively demonstrate "that exposure to obscene materials adversely affects men and women or their society":

If we accept the unprovable assumption that a complete education requires the reading of certain books, and the well nigh universal belief that good books, plays, and art lift the spirit, improve the mind, enrich the human personality and develop character, can we then say that a state legislature may not act on the corollary assumption that commerce in obscene books, or public exhibitions focused on obscene conduct, have a tendency to exert a corrupting and debasing impact leading to antisocial behavior?<sup>14</sup>

Leaving aside the crucial issue of this case, the controversy about state censorship, we can focus just on Burger's string of suggestions about the relations between art and morality and on his sense of the logical connections between those basic propositions. There seem to be no clear rules of deduction guiding an inference to the "corollary" that grounds the legislative action here in dispute, but, after all, Burger also acknowledges that all these contentions may simply be assumptions. Is there in fact widespread, common, acceptance of these claims? Surely at least the first of these propositions – "that a complete education requires the reading of certain books" – is openly *debated*. That we do not have here a settled social assumption is

shown by the intensity of current discussion about the content and aims of liberal education and by the attacks on, and even the defenses of, the viability of "the canon." (Given the reality that school time, and indeed life, is limited, and apart from an admirable commitment to the idea that no education is ever truly complete, even the most conservative of the proponents of a traditional canon are likely to offer not a fixed list of "certain books," but at least some range, usually open-ended, of prized options.) Still, acceptance – or rejection – of the first assumption may be quite irrelevant to one's sense of the plausibility of the other propositions. Perhaps these other two ideas – that good books (plays, etc.) uplift and enhance the character of the reader and that bad books (plays, etc.) debase the reader's character – are widely held. They are certainly not real corollaries of one another, but Burger may be right that, in many minds, they are convictions somehow bound together. Is Burger also right that nearly everyone would immediately admit that good books develop good character?

Too many people are acutely aware of the emblematic, but historically real and genuinely problematic figure of the cultivated Nazi officer, so that universal assent to this simple account of the relations between art and life will probably not be forthcoming.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, polling ourselves about the plausibility of these substantive, general claims – that good art has good effects and bad art corrupts – may not be the only, or the best, way of investigating something that, in these matters, is often called common sense. We might notice instead that, whether we hold or reject what Burger calls "the well nigh universal belief" about art's effects, we seem to have accepted the referential clarity of the phrase "good books, plays, and art." What do we have in mind here when we think of "good art"?

What particularly needs sorting out, in the context of these issues, is the extent to which – willfully or not, appropriately or not – we intertwine or even fuse moral and aesthetic judgment. Burger, for example, must not *define* "good art" as art that will "lift the spirit, improve the mind, enrich the human personality, and develop character," or he would not feel obliged to give a hypothetical form to his consideration of what he takes to be common assumptions. Plato is sometimes thought to draw no distinction between aesthetic and ethical/political criticism of poetry, music, and drama, but his accounts of our common judgments of the poetry he would banish show that he recognizes, even as he hopes to counter, appraisals of art that are not drawn from ethical thought. (See, e.g., *Republic* 10, 605d [trans. Shorey]: "We praise as an excellent poet the one who most strongly

*How bad can good art be?*

affects us,” [the one who makes us] “feel pleasure, abandon ourselves and accompany the representation with sympathy and eagerness.”) Tolstoy, too, is often understood as a moralist about aesthetic merit, and he does argue that art’s value is ultimately determined by the religious perception of each era and society, with the best art now being Christian art, uniting humanity. Even Tolstoy, however, wants to make a clear distinction between judgments of “the quality of art as art” and a definition of “good and bad art with reference to its subject matter.”<sup>16</sup> It is only the latter that is grounded on the moral goal of human brotherhood. The quality of art as art is measured by its infectiousness – the individuality, clarity, and sincerity of the feelings it transmits – “apart from whether the feelings it transmits are good or bad.”<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, Wilde – with his famous assertion that “[t]here is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all” – presumably stands antipodean to Tolstoy, and yet Wilde too notes that “[t]he moral and immoral life of man forms part of the subject matter of the artist.”<sup>18</sup> If it is generally agreed that morality may be a part of the subject matter of art, part of its content, we must still consider disagreements concerning moral judgments about that content. Is moral criticism of art a thing apart from aesthetic criticism, with moral concerns trumping aesthetic ones, or not reaching their rarefied heights, or coequal but simply different? Or should we expect a merging of moral and aesthetic values in our judgments about art? Or does art possess immunity from ethical criticism, existing on an altogether different plane?

The idea that art is somehow beyond the reach of moral criticism may seem immediately implausible. Since art is, or is a product of, human activity, and since human action is among the natural subjects, is perhaps the central object, of moral evaluation, a theory that exempts art from moral evaluation may seem an untenable *deus ex machina*. Faith in this doctrine can be made more reasonable by taking care to limit its scope. It can be acknowledged that art, art making, and the experience of art may be considered from a variety of perspectives, placed in a variety of categories of activity or social practice. Art is, for example, economic activity. Material resources are used to make, exhibit, buy, and enjoy it, and the economic ramifications of a given piece or the conditions for a whole practice of art may be morally criticized. Art may be employed, say, to educate the young or to enhance a community’s sense of cohesion, to break down or to build up common prejudices, and so on; and when we focus on

these sorts of functions, on how well or how poorly they are performed, on whether they should be performed at all, our concerns may be primarily moral. When art is considered *as art*, however, and not in terms of any of its functions, why should it not be understood to ascend to a dimension that is its alone?

A parallel for this line of thought, a confirmatory model, may perhaps be drawn from a popular view of science. Scientific truths may be supposed unsusceptible to ethical criticism, though it is readily admitted that their pursuit and application are appropriately evaluated from the moral point of view. Again, to sketch some parallel examples, the economic resources devoted to some scientific inquiry may be questioned, or we may praise or condemn the uses to which a discovery is put, but the discovery itself, the truth revealed through inquiry, cannot be placed on a moral grid.

Philosophers have, of course, disputed the accuracy of this picture of value-free science,<sup>19</sup> but even if we set aside those fundamental controversies, we should notice two ways in which this comparison between art and science – far from enhancing the plausibility of the idea of art's immunity to moral judgment – tends instead to diminish the prospects for that idea. The first problem is that, in both science and art, the distinction between pursuit or practice, on the one hand, and finished achievement or accomplishment, on the other, is not always sharp or easily discerned. This may be only a minor problem, if a problem at all, for science, with its working commitment to epistemological fallibilism, its open and productive embrace of the possibility that today's best scientific theory may one day have to be scrapped or revised, may not yet be the final truth. An equivalent fallibilism in the realm of art would, however, vitiate utterly the aesthete's prohibition of moral criticism of artistic productions. For then, whenever this theorist declared a book, play, painting, or whatever off limits to moral evaluation, the question would inevitably arise, and with real force, "But is that book [play, painting, or whatever] *art*?" If we cannot be sure that something *is* art, if the possibility always exists that what we are evaluating is instead only a wasteful attempt at art, or a shameless shamming of art, or retrograde political propaganda disguised as art, then we cannot be sure that moral evaluation *is* out of line.

Waiting behind and related to this difficulty is the second problem with the scientific model's usefulness as an ally in art's attempt to exempt itself from moral evaluation. When – or if – scientific truth is granted an exemption from morality's scope, it is *because* this truth

*How bad can good art be?*

is conceived to be responsive only to brute reality, to be utterly independent of human desires, needs, and efforts.<sup>20</sup> Scientific truths may be uncovered because of human efforts, out of human needs and desires, but, on this picture, we pursue and discover, we cannot *make*, the truth. We do, of course, make art. It is wholly a product of our desires, needs, efforts, skill, intelligence, and so on. If there is such a thing as free will, then art, perhaps more than anything else, is made freely and willfully. Why should it not be a candidate for moral judgment?

If, after all, we are judged for making bombs or making peace, why can we not be judged for making a painting? If we are judged for telling lies and for telling the truth, why can we not be judged for telling stories, writing novels? If it is now granted that *we*, and our choice of activities, may be subject to moral scrutiny, but it is still insisted that art, the product of our activity, is beyond morality, the distinction seems desperate. It is, we must note, the nature of peace and the properties and consequences of bombs that help make our efforts to construct one or the other so appropriately subject to moral evaluation. Furthermore, the lies we tell, not just we in telling them, may be judged from the moral point of view: this lie, because of its superficial content and its function as a routine social gesture, is not so bad; that one, because of its cruelty and its significance, is despicable. In the end, though, as at first glance, it is the obvious fact that people make art, that art making is a human activity, that makes it inappropriate to try to isolate the realm of art from all prospect of moral evaluation.<sup>21</sup>

Accepting the idea that the *content* of art may be subject to moral evaluation, we may still disagree about the force and operation of such evaluation and, in particular, about its import for aesthetic judgment. There are at least two leading possibilities: art may be subject to moral assessment, but ethical judgments always remain distinct from aesthetic ones; or moral considerations are sometimes properly invoked in aesthetic criticism.

Defending the first view, and arguing that the values of ethics and aesthetics (and all other "value areas") are "different and independent," William Gass admits:

In life, values do not sit in separate tents like harem wives; they mix and mingle. . . . A dinner party, for example, will affect the diners' waists, delight or dismay their palates, put a piece of change in the grocer's pocket, bring a gleam to the vintner's eye. . . . And if I, Rabbi Ben Ezra, find myself seated next to Hermann Goering, it may quite put me off the quail – quail which the

*Reichminister* shot by machine gun from a plane. We should all be able to understand that. It would be a serious misunderstanding, however, if I imagined that the quail was badly cooked on account of who shot it, or to believe that the field marshal's presence had soured the wine, although it may have ruined the taste in my mouth. . . . [T]he meal will be well prepared or not quite independently of the guests' delightful or obnoxious presence, and it would be simple-minded to imagine that because these values were realized in such close proximity they therefore should be judged on other than their own terms – the terms, perhaps, of their pushier neighbors.<sup>22</sup>

Granting the idea that a dinner party can be analyzed from a variety of perspectives – in terms of the calories the guests consume, or in terms of the monetary cost of the food and wine, and so on – the crucial question remains, even with this deliberately impudent example: Can we neatly separate aesthetic from moral judgment? If a dinner party were just the consumption of calories, Gass's claim might be easier to make. Then a "well-prepared" meal would just be one that makes those calories available for consumption, "quite independently of the . . . delightful or obnoxious presence" of the others sharing the trough. But a good dinner party requires conviviality, and conviviality may be a product of the *mix* of food, drink, and guests. A "well-prepared" meal is not just a matter of culinary expertise directed toward an abstract, idealized gustatory receptor. Beefsteak in bearnaise sauce prepared by Jacques Pépin doing his best is still not a meal well prepared for baby's dinner on her first birthday.

And what would Gass say if the field marshal brought to the cook not quail, but the body of a person he had shot? Would the moral circumstances of cooking and consumption still be utterly independent of this meal's aesthetic merit? Would this meal be well prepared if the thigh had been slow-roasted to an internal temperature of 165 degrees, or should it be 180? And is it only if the meat thermometer registers 200 that I may justifiably complain that this joint is "badly cooked"? Is it "simple-minded" of me to be unable to stomach, on any terms, the sight of this corpse on the table?<sup>23</sup>

Gass seems to assume that one who intelligently commands value judgments *can*, in the end, sort values into separate tents and that intercourse with one "value area" is unaffected by the presence of the other tents. But just as the women of the harem affect one another, apart from the presence of or unbeknownst to the male, before he sends them to their separate tents, our values may be more intimately interrelated than we admit, and our analytical separation of value areas may simply disclose the partiality of our perspective, our igno-

*How bad can good art be?*

rance of the ways in which our “distinct” value “types” affect and depend upon one another.

In a memorable illustration of what he calls “a certain blindness in human beings,” William James recounts his aesthetic horror when, journeying in the mountains of North Carolina, he saw valley after valley cleared of forest and scarred by primitive squatter farms. Upon hearing a mountaineer speak of these coves’ “cultivation,” however, James suddenly felt he had been missing “the whole inward significance of the situation.” The clearings meant home, safety, and security for the mountaineers and their families: “[What] to me was a mere ugly picture on the retina . . . was to them a symbol redolent with moral memories and sang a very paeon of duty, struggle, and success.”<sup>24</sup> The values here realized evidently vary according to one’s material relation to the clearings, but it is not merely that the mountaineer saw a positive economic value in the raw homestead, while James, from his comfortable academic position, had overlooked this aspect of the situation. It is rather that the very sight of the cove – the sight James initially saw as “ugly,” “unmitigated squalor,” oppressive “dreariness” – was *seen* by the mountaineer as suffused with spiritual warmth and the glow of fulfilled aspirations. Gass wants the aesthetic value of the sight to be judged “on its own terms,” but it is the character of those terms, *not* just which term is “pushier,” that is precisely what is often in dispute. Gass insists that the realization in close proximity of an array of values should not lead us to mistake one for another, but in fact the character of a term of evaluation – like our own character – may be deeply influenced by the neighborhood in which it was developed.

Gass contends that “[a]rtistic quality depends upon a work’s internal, formal, organic character, upon its inner system of relations, upon its structure and its style, and not upon the morality it is presumed to recommend.”<sup>25</sup> Among the problems with this blunt and sweeping declaration, however, is that it is not obvious that a work’s “organic character” is inherently amoral or that the most salient inner system of relations will never have a moral cast. Nor is it clear that considerations of the morality of a work must take the form of a presumption about the work’s “recommendations.” Arnold Isenberg reminds us that even didactic literature – which, he says, either “features regular ethical terms, such as ‘good’, ‘evil’, ‘right’, ‘wrong’,” or is “cast in the imperative mood,” or “assembles descriptive propositions in such a way as clearly to point to a moral conclusion”<sup>26</sup> – while it may seem the strongest case “of moral involvement among



the fine arts,"<sup>27</sup> need not necessarily be understood as making recommendations. The content of, for example, a poem, what it says, may be moral (or moralistic), but whether the poem must – or even should – be taken to be hortatory is another matter.

It is not just that some apparently didactic stanzas may be, for example, part of a parody or satire, or that they may be dialogue in a play and thus the dramatic utterance, the expression, of a particular character in the drama, or that the lines may be quoted in another poem, only to be poetically disputed. The more fundamental point is that the moral content of a work of art does not always serve as a moral precept. If one does not see this, according to Isenberg,

it is because one does not understand what other roles may be played by moral ideas: one does not, for instance – though understanding very well how the side of a mountain can be an object of interest for one who is neither a geologist nor a surveyor – see how a "side" of a moral question can be an attractive thing, in itself and apart from its merits as a solution to that question.<sup>28</sup>

This way of putting what can serve as a rejoinder to Gass serves also, however, to lay the groundwork for Isenberg's own argument that didactic content can be put to a purely aesthetic use. The aesthetic assimilation of moral content occurs, according to Isenberg, when the moral understanding is called "into a kind of free play"; we "give ourselves over to the reception of moral ideas," "occupying a middle position between sensory enjoyment and moral deliberation."<sup>29</sup> But Isenberg's confidence that there *is* a middle position here may depend upon his situating deliberation too far toward the side of practical action – and indeed he suggests that, in aesthetic criticism, we stop "trying to evaluate moral ideas depthwise – that is, in terms of their connections with action and eventual result."<sup>30</sup> But in fact moral deliberation may often stop well short of fixing a course of conduct, and it can be called out by considerably less than a currently pressing practical problem. It is true that deliberation will weigh what might be called the "merits" of a given "side" of a moral question. But then how could something called "moral understanding," even if engaged in "free play," find a moral side "attractive" *apart* from its merits?

When Lionel Trilling argues for the aesthetic relevance – not assimilation or reductive resolution – of *ideas*, and intellectual cogency, in literature, he notes that

we can take pleasure in literature where we do not agree, responding to the power or grace of a mind without admitting the rightness of its inten-

## *How bad can good art be?*

tion or conclusion – we can take pleasure from an intellect's *cogency*, without making a final judgment on the correctness or adaptability of what it says.<sup>31</sup>

There seems no reason why ideas, in literature or in any other art that might supply them, may not be moral as well as nonmoral, but to respond to their cogency we must *see* their cogency, understand how they fit together (their "inner system of relations," according to Gass), and the relative force of the case this work makes for them. If we then can take pleasure in, or judge aesthetically excellent, a work whose moral quality we might judge evil, we may indeed be responding to "the power and grace" exhibited on behalf of that "side" of the moral question. It would be a mistake, however, to think of this response as "purely aesthetic." Power and grace are intellectual and moral virtues, as much as they are aesthetic qualities, and it may require clear thought and some moral deliberation to grasp their presence.

It is perhaps worth mentioning, in this context, that when Hume sets out his famous attack on immoral art – his denunciation of the "deformity" of vicious art, and his claim that to "confound the sentiments of morality and alter the natural boundaries of vice and virtue" is, in art, "an eternal blemish" – the factors he specifically mentions as art's deforming malefactors are "bigotry and superstition."<sup>32</sup> Hume may not have been careful enough, in his appraisal of art, to recognize that "vicious manners" could be "described without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation"<sup>33</sup> and yet still not be recommended. And he should have seen that even if an artwork were to recommend viciousness, the boundaries of vice and virtue would not then necessarily be conflated.

Nonetheless, in identifying bigotry and superstition as the spoilers of art, he effects a point of contact with those of us who are attracted to the case for the moral evaluation of art, but who grant the excellence of some art whose morality we deplore. For bigotry and superstition, as Hume understands them, are exactly the opposite of cogent thought and genuine deliberation. Thus, art marked by bigotry and superstition is art deprived, to that extent, of power and grace. This is not to deny that bigotry and superstition can be powerfully conveyed and inculcated by means of art. It is to insist that bigotry in art, patently weak thought, and intellectual confusion count as artistic, as aesthetic, flaws. The work is, as art, worse for their presence, and we should find unredeemed displeasure in the surfacing of these defects.

If it is objected that this suggestion aestheticizes morality, and we

are brought curiously full circle to earlier worries about aesthetic distance and inaction, then we must note, first, that moral ideas, whatever their source, are felt as well as thought and, second, that the moral content of art, if such there be, is subject to deliberation as well as delectation. In our lives – and in and through the art that is a part of our lives – we can remain alive to the force of ideals we do not now share and to the pull of alternative evaluative schemes. We in fact cannot, in our conduct, honor all the moral ideals that may, in abstract thought and even in the lives of others, seem worthy, admirable, or in some way attractive. This is not because – or not alone because – of pervasive weakness of the will. The more fundamental problem is the practical incompatibility of, the friction between, a wide variety of recognized, or tempting, ideals. One may try to combine a commitment to, say, humility and nobility, but the sharp edges of each virtue are likely to be substantially smoothed if they are subject to a common incarnation. Or one may, out of deliberation or temperament, utterly reject some durable calls to moral responsiveness. One may, for example, conclude, and for good reason, that duty structures the moral life and that unprincipled compassion is a mistake. An artwork that makes a plea for the value of compassion may then seem troublesome. Alternatively one may, upon equally defensible reflection, see sympathy and fellow-feeling, not rules and laws, as the core from which the highest morality is built. An artwork that is a brief for duty and nobility may then seem worrisome.

But, as Emerson claims, “In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this.”<sup>34</sup> Art’s capacity to keep alive certain moral perspectives, even if these views diverge radically from our present moral outlook, can help us remain alert to life’s possibilities and our own potentialities. This is a benefit that is neither merely aesthetic, nor solely moral; it is both at once.

#### Notes

1. Oscar Wilde, Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in *The Portable Oscar Wilde*, ed. R. Aldington (New York: Viking Press, 1946), 139.
2. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (New York: Modern Library, 1873), 199.
3. Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 22.

## *How bad can good art be?*

4. It would be exegetically crude to attribute this objection, in just this form, to Rousseau himself. But Rousseau certainly worries about the corrupting possibilities of theater and about tragedy's capacity to excite "a barren compassion indulging itself in a few tears, but never productive of any act of humanity" (*An Epistle from J. J. Rousseau to Mr. D'Alembert*, in *Miscellaneous Works of J. J. Rousseau*, vol. 3 [New York: Burt Franklin, 1972], 34).
5. Edward Bullough, "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle," *British Journal of Psychology* 5 (1912): 89.
6. *Ibid.*, 118.
7. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard, First Part, First Book, First Moment (New York: Hafner, 1968), 37–45.
8. Danto, *Transfiguration*, 23.
9. See the American pragmatists, especially G. H. Mead and John Dewey, on this point. Mead, in *Mind, Self, and Society* and *The Philosophy of the Act*, argues that conscious control and intelligent behavior depend upon a capacity for delayed reactions; and he and Dewey – the latter in, e.g., *Human Nature and Conduct* and *Experience and Nature* – characterize deliberation, including moral deliberation, as imaginative rehearsal, the playing out in thought of habits and tendencies to act that are temporarily blocked from external manifestations in conduct.

Consider as well Emerson and Nietzsche on distance. Their different but related treatments of this idea are differently ambivalent and equivocal. Emerson and Nietzsche seem to agree, however, on the epistemological importance of the idea, and they suggest that a kind of distance is not merely a valuable human achievement but also a necessity for the realization of art. (For a comparison of Nietzsche and Emerson on the notion of distance, see K. Hanson, "Approaching Distance," *International Studies in Philosophy* 24, no. 2 [1992]: 33–40.)

This notion that ideas of distance have surfaced in accounts of practical reason and successful epistemology – consider also the power imputed to "theoretical distance" – is not an assertion that, in these various occurrences, the meaning of "distance" is always the same. Indeed, part of what is in question here *is* the meaning, the import, of the idea of aesthetic or psychical distance. But if the latter is characterized essentially in negative terms, as the inhibition of the practical, then it certainly baffles an immediate moral condemnation of psychical distance that coherent accounts of moral deliberation seem to secure a space for this inhibition.

10. Danto, *Transfiguration*, 143.
11. I do not wish, with this question's utilitarian spin, to deflect attention from a different, and I think deeper, moral problem that hovers at the edge of this discussion. What constraints, if any, govern the use, in art, of events and experiences drawn directly from life? Morally salient questions about sincerity, authenticity, fidelity, and personal loyalty may well arise when there is narrative incorporation, within an artwork,

- of one's own or others' particular experiences. Issues of privacy are also pertinent, and it must be remembered that even autobiography involves the appropriation, the use, of (at least one version of some portion of the lives of) others – friends, enemies, relatives, strangers.
12. For this schematic example to have force, the stipulations must of course be taken seriously, as must its probabilistic formulation; otherwise, one may well think of Dr. Chekov.
  13. Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 24.
  14. U.S. Supreme Court 413 U.S. 49 (1973).
  15. Jerrold Levinson offers an interesting discussion of this sort of case, the cultivated Nazi, in "Evaluating Music," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 198 (1996): 593–614. He suggests that such cases are so striking precisely because they are exceptional, because they "violate an empirically based norm of artistic taste comporting with some degree of moral awareness." My own view is that it is the extremity of the case that is exceptional. It is the literal monstrousness of artistic sensitivity coupled with participation in *genocide* that strikes us. We would not be at all surprised, I think, by the case of a person with exquisite taste in music, someone who exhibits a sensitive ear and discerning appreciation, who nonetheless is, say, callous and self-centered, insensitive to friends and associates.
  16. Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art?* trans. A. Maude (Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts, 1960), 142.
  17. *Ibid.*
  18. Wilde, Preface to *Dorian Gray*, 138.
  19. The issue goes back at least as far as William James, who argues for a conceptual connection between truth and human interests and values. More contemporary attention to a range of related questions about the content of science can be seen in, e.g., Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 2d ed. 1970; Israel Scheffler's *Science and Subjectivity* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967) and "Vision and Revolution: A Postscript on Kuhn," *Philosophy of Science* 39 (1972): 366–74, reprinted in Scheffler's *Inquiries* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986); Evelyn Fox Keller's "Feminism and Science," in *Sex and Scientific Inquiry*, ed. S. Harding and J. O'Bar (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 233–46; E. McMullin (ed.), *The Social Dimensions of Science* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992); and many of the essays in *The Philosophy of Science*, ed. R. Boyd, P. Gasper, and J. D. Trout (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991).
  20. It should be underscored that this point is intimately related to the one in the preceding paragraph. The embrace of fallibilism can work in science to reinforce the idea of objectivity because, if it is nonsubjective reality that ultimately controls or coerces scientific results, then the terms in which one might criticize proffered achievements – claims that proffered claims do not accord with reality – are relatively clear, clearly agreed upon, and clearly not moral. But comparable constraints on prof-

## *How bad can good art be?*

ferred art are not clearly available. Thus, it will not do to pretend to embrace a comparable fallibilism in the realm of art, suggesting that we cannot be sure, for any candidate art, whether it really *is* art, but insisting, still, that true or genuine art may yet be immune from moral criticism. It is precisely because there is no practical agreement on the ultimate constraints of art that an aversion here to the idea of the “true” or the “genuine” is quite empty – radically undeveloped conceptually and, partly because of that, of no use in furthering a possible parallel between moral immunity in science and in art. (John Brown’s useful commentary, at the University of Maryland conference for which this essay was originally prepared, prompted this elaboration.)

21. Indeed, the linkage between something’s being the product of human activity and something’s being an appropriate subject for moral concern is so tight that it may supply an inappropriate bit of support for Danto’s thoughts about psychical distance. It is perhaps no accident that Bullough’s original illustration of the phenomenon of psychical distance, the example he uses to establish the meaning of the term, is the sea fog abstracted in experience from “its danger and practical unpleasantness.” The natural world, apart from human beings, is not a natural locus for moral concern and assessment, so when Bullough asks us to imagine putting aside practical considerations about the sea fog in order to achieve the thrill of psychical distance, morality does not impede our compliance by standing before us with stern practical demands. A move to relish the sensuous surface of the situation may proceed without serious obstacles. Danto’s politically charged riot (with “police clubbing demonstrators”) and bombs dropping from airplanes are, however, situations already fraught with moral agency and essentially defined by sociopolitical responsibilities. Abstracting in these situations from considerations of morality may indeed, then, be “wrong or inhuman,” but not (just) because we have an obligation to intervene; the problem is rather that the human responsibility *for* these situations, the human agency that stands *behind* them, demands, appropriately calls out for, moral *assessment*. This is not to say that the issues at stake could not be recast in a less prejudicial form. We could consider whether it would be wrong or inhuman to put at a psychical distance a natural catastrophe now threatening or claiming human lives: an earthquake is beginning to rumble through our town, or the sea fog leads to the collision of two ships . . .
22. William Gass, “Goodness Knows Nothing of Beauty: On the Distance between Morality and Art,” in *Reflecting on Art*, ed. John Fisher (Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield, 1993), 110, 112.
23. In his conference commentary on this essay, John Brown suggested that this response to Gass turns on a conflation of the “well-planned party” and the “well-prepared dish.” Brown noted that *dishes* are typically judged not by moral criteria but by culinary ones, the standards of a cuisine being assumed to be morally acceptable.

Karen Hanson

That is probably a correct account of our typical practice, but it begs the question I take the extremity of the example to highlight. We do not "assume" the acceptability of a cannibalistic cuisine, and if we were in the untypical position of being served cooked human flesh, then moral, not culinary, criteria would surely come to the fore. The more general lesson of the extreme example is that our assumptions about moral acceptability, or irrelevance, may sometimes be unsettled and our typical practices of judgment open to confoundment. Gass suggests that it is simple-minded not to judge things on "their own terms." But the very question at issue may be "What are the relevant terms of judgment?"

A focus on the cooked quail can lull us into the belief that we can always sustain a distinction between value areas, always make a distinction between a bad thing done and a thing badly done. For many of us, though of course not for all, the cooking of quail does not seem a bad thing, and the dish is simply well or badly prepared. But the idea of a thing "badly done" depends for its sense upon assumed standards, tacit expectations, a relatively clear notion of what the "thing" is that has been botched. The creative and innovative character of art, however, suggests there may be trouble, in this sphere, with the idea of assumed standards and tacit expectations.

24. William James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," in *Talks to Teachers* (New York: Norton, 1958), 152.
25. Gass, "Goodness," 115.
26. Arnold Isenberg, *Aesthetics and the Theory of Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 270.
27. *Ibid.*, 269.
28. *Ibid.*, 272.
29. *Ibid.*, 274.
30. *Ibid.*, 280.
31. Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Viking Press, 1950), 291.
32. David Hume, *The Standard of Taste*, in *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (London: 1758), 146.
33. *Ibid.*, 145.
34. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *The Works of Emerson* (New York: Tudor, n.d.), 1: 31.