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THE 'MORALISM' IN IMMORALISM: A CRITIQUE OF IMMORALISM IN AESTHETICS

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ABSTRACT

According to immoralists, some artworks are better aesthetically *in virtue of* their immorality. A.W. Eaton recently offered a novel defence of this view, seeking to overcome shortcomings in previous accounts, thereby occasioning a reconsideration of immoralism. Yet, as I argue in this paper, Eaton's attempt is unsuccessful, insofar as it consists partly in inadequately supported claims, and partly—and more interestingly, albeit paradoxically—on covert moralist assumptions that are, *eo ipso*, incompatible with immoralism. I then turn to a parallel debate in ethics concerning the possibility of admirable immorality, considering the state of which, I suggest, further supports my argument against immoralism. I close by suggesting some strategies by which immoralists may offer a rejoinder, though I note that their prospects are rather dim, not least because available defences of immoralism and similar positions all seem to share the same flawed pattern.

Fair is foul and foul is fair.

- William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

1. Introduction

Immoralism in aesthetics states that immoral artworks can be aesthetically better *in virtue of* their immorality. A.W. Eaton's recent defence of what she deems a robust version of immoralism occasions a reconsideration of that position, previously defended by Daniel Jacobson and Matthew

Kieran, among others.¹ Yet, I argue in this paper, Eaton's version of immoralism suffers from precisely the same problems that it seeks to overcome; namely, it consists partly in claims that are inadequately defended, and partly—and more interestingly, albeit paradoxically—on covert moralist assumptions that are, *eo ipso*, incompatible with immoralism.

I begin in section 2 by offering some context and clarifying the positions at stake. In section 3, I criticize Eaton's so-called 'robust immoralism'. In section 4, I introduce a parallel debate from moral philosophy, concerning the question of whether or not immorality can ever be admirable, and argue that consideration of the state of that debate further bolsters the thought that there is something wrong with the immoralist position. Before concluding, in section 5, I propose ways in which the immoralist may attempt to salvage her view, though I also suggest that the most promising of these, namely one which capitalizes on the special case of humour, appears to fail for similar reasons as those previously identified, thereby reinforcing my case *contra* immoralism.²

While the position that immoralism is false does not directly follow from these arguments, I think that, jointly, my arguments strongly suggest that immoralism is an unsustainable position, at least in the form advocated by the likes of Jacobson, Kieran, and Eaton. This is not only because immoralist arguments share the aforementioned fate, but also because, as I argue in sections 4 and 5, all similar arguments, including the argument for admirable immorality, the latest arguments for comic immoralism, and similar positions, share the same pattern of argument; that is, in seeking to show that some disvalue (or a disvaluable object) can actually amount to some value (or something valuable) *qua* disvalue, they do so by appealing to qualities or features of the thing in

¹ A.W. Eaton, 'Robust Immoralism' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70 (2012), 281-292; Daniel Jacobson, 'In Praise of Immoral Art' *Philosophical Topics* 25 (1997), 155-199; Matthew Kieran, 'Forbidden Knowledge: The Challenge of Immoralism', in José Luis Bermudez and Sebastian Gardner (eds), *Art and Morality* (London: Routledge, 2003), 56-73; Kieran, 'Emotions, Art, and Immorality', in Peter Goldie (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 681-703.

² My aim in this paper is not to defend moralism, but to critique immoralism; much of my critique, e.g. should be compatible with autonomism.

question that are valuable but in no way part and parcel of the disvaluable object. This, I think, shifts the burden of proof back to the immoralist; more ambitiously, it translates into a positive case against immoralism and similar views, by suggesting that they are, ultimately, unsustainable.

2. Moralism and Immoralism

While I assume broad familiarity with the moralism debate, there are some issues that call for clarification. First, let me explain how I understand immoralism here in relation to competing views, like moralism and autonomism. By ‘moralism’ here I refer to Gaut’s version of that view (which he terms ‘ethicism’).³ There are several reasons for this choice, not least of which is that I think that it is the most developed and robustly supported version of that view, and the one which most starkly contrasts with Eaton’s immoralism.⁴ According to this version of moralism, an artwork’s aesthetically relevant ethical merits always constitute aesthetic merits, while an artwork’s aesthetically relevant ethical demerits always constitute aesthetic flaws. By contrast, immoralists deny that aesthetically relevant ethical defects are always aesthetic defects. Instead, they argue, sometimes such *ethical defects* can be *aesthetic merits*. Autonomists oppose both of these views, by denying any interaction between artworks’ ethical and aesthetic features and values.

Second, there is the question of what counts as aesthetically relevant immorality in these views. I think that moralism, as understood here, and Eaton’s immoralism are in one mind about this. Specifically, in speaking of an artwork’s immorality, neither of them means representations of immorality, or a work’s inviting its audience to merely *imagine endorsing* an immoral perspective as part of properly attending to or appreciating the work;⁵ instead, artworks are immoral insofar as they appear to *condone, inculcate, advocate*, or otherwise invite the audience to *actually endorse*

³ Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (Oxford: OUP, 2007).

⁴ By contrast, e.g. Noël Carroll, ‘Moderate Moralism’ *BJA* 36 (1996), 223-238, does not explicitly rule out the possibility that sometimes moral defects can constitute aesthetic merits; if this possibility is not ruled out, however, then moralism is indistinguishable from immoralism and there is hardly a debate.

⁵ Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, 184-186, 247-251.

or *adopt an immoral attitude*, through the way in which they present certain characters, situations, and so on; in short, through their perspective.

A third issue concerns the relation between purported ethical and aesthetic merits and demerits. Immoralists state that sometimes artworks can be aesthetically better *in virtue of* being immoral. That is, an artwork's immorality sometimes contributes to its aesthetic value *qua (being an instance of) immorality*. The qualifications 'in virtue of', 'qua', etc. are crucial; this is not only because immoralism (like moralism) is best construed in *pro tanto* fashion,⁶ but more importantly because without them 'immoralism' turns into the truism that some artworks are both aesthetically good and immoral, which in turn collapses into either moralism (if the conjunction is interpreted as 'in spite of'), or autonomism (if it is read as implying that these are independent assessments). But if there is to be a meaningful debate between proponents of the aforementioned positions and immoralists, these positions should be construed as incompatible with immoralism, as indeed I construe them here.

Now, I am concerned here neither with specifying the logical relation or mechanism whereby ethical defects 'contribute to', 'constitute', or 'are' aesthetic merits or defects, nor with engaging in related technical debates. In this, I am hardly fashioning a straw-person or begging the question, since immoralists likewise use different locutions rather loosely and intuitively in articulating their views, e.g. speaking of ethical flaws as *being* aesthetic merits,⁷ as *contributing to* aesthetic merit,⁸ etc. That said, I think that these locutions, coupled with immoralists' aforementioned insistence on immorality *qua* immorality contributing to aesthetic merit, do point to something important, which tends to be overlooked in the literature: the connection between the ethical defects and the aesthetic merits should be robust. Consider de Sade's works, which may be said to be aesthetically meritorious partly in virtue of their immorality, *insofar as* their immorality makes them original. Originality is neither a constitutive, nor a necessary, nor even a statistically more likely feature of immorality compared to other features. Moreover, it is a merit that can be

⁶ Compare Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, 57-66.

⁷ Eaton, 'Robust Immoralism', 282, 288.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 283.

realized by much else besides immorality. Because of this, I shall speak of such a connection between ethical demerits and aesthetic merits as a weak one. Compare, by contrast, the moralist's cognitivist claim, whereby moral merits in artworks are always aesthetic merits because, or so the argument goes, they are always truthful and contribute to our understanding.⁹ This sort of connection I will call robust. For in the latter case, the truthfulness is not contingent on the ethical perspective, say, that a work prescribes, but always a feature of moral aptness in artworks. So, by a *weak* connection between a work's ethical features and its aesthetic value, I mean one that is established in virtue of features that are largely incidental to the ethical features in question. By a *robust* connection, I mean one established on the basis of the immoral qualities themselves, or features that are constitutive of or necessary for such immorality. Note that the distinction between a weak and robust connection between ethical and aesthetic merits and demerits is not equivalent to one between a direct or indirect interaction between the ethical and the aesthetic, for it is possible for an ethical-aesthetic interaction to be both robust and indirect; for instance, in the aforementioned cognitive moralist argument, the connection is indirect, insofar as it is the cognitive merit that mediates between the ethical and the aesthetic; but it is robust, because the cognitive merit is part and parcel of the moral merit.

The reason this distinction is important is that moralism can concede that ethical flaws may confer aesthetic merits on an artwork via what I called a weak connection, without sacrificing its core claims that moral merits are always, as such, aesthetic merits, while moral defects are always aesthetic defects. For the moralist would argue that although moral defects may make a work original, shocking, and so on, thereby contributing to its aesthetic value, these merits are not part and parcel of immorality. In other words, the moralist can easily claim that *insofar as* the immorality goes, it is an aesthetic demerit in the work, but *insofar as* its originality goes, it is an aesthetic

⁹ It should make no difference for my purposes that this argument depends on cognitivism, whereby if an artwork is truthful or teaches its audience something, in an aesthetically relevant way, then it is to that extent ameliorated aesthetically. For this argument, see Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, chs.7-8.

merit.¹⁰ It is, of course, open to the immoralist to claim that that is all that her view amounts to, in which case the debate between moralism and immoralism turns out to have been illusory. But immoralists' emphasis on the claim that it is immorality *qua* immorality that does the trick points to a stronger view than one compatible with moralism.

The distinction's importance for a robust immoralism can also be gleaned from Eaton's criticisms of previous 'weak immoralisms',¹¹ notably Jacobson's and Kieran's. With regards to Jacobson, Eaton suggests that besides objections to moralism, he offers scant argument for his core claim that ethical flaws in artworks can be aesthetic merits.¹² Kieran's defence of immoralism offers an improvement over Jacobson's, in that at least Kieran offers a story linking the immorality in artworks to their aesthetic merit. However, if I understand Eaton aright, she seems to think that, *inter alia*, Kieran's account shows at best that sometimes works can be good, and their goodness *may* be weakly related to an immoral feature, which does not suffice to show that they are good *because* immoral;¹³ at worst, it collapses into moralism,¹⁴ as it argues for immoralism by claiming that immorality in art can be aesthetically meritorious insofar as it offers cognitive rewards, including broadening our moral understanding.¹⁵

I agree with Eaton that immoralism stands in dire need of stronger arguments, if it is to be considered a view to be reckoned with in contemporary aesthetics, or philosophy more generally. After all, hers is not the only critique of Jacobson's and Kieran's defences—they have been subject to several, powerful criticisms.¹⁶ Yet, I do not think that Eaton's version of immoralism is

¹⁰ E.g. Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, 64-65.

¹¹ Eaton, 'Robust Immoralism', 288.

¹² *Ibid.*, 290.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 289.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ These criticisms plausibly bear against both Matthew Kieran, 'Forbidden Knowledge' and his 'Emotions, Art, and Immorality'.

¹⁶ See James Harold, 'Immoralism and the Valence Constraint' *BJA* 48 (2008), 45-64; Robert Stecker, 'Immoralism and the Anti-Theoretical View' *BJA* 48 (2008), 145-161; Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, 54-55, ch.8.

robust, or that it overcomes the foregoing pitfalls. In fact, as I shall presently argue, I think that it suffers from precisely the same flaws as previous immoralisms: many of her claims are inadequately supported by argument, while her overall case for immoralism itself collapses into moralism.

3. Robust (Im)moralism?

In setting out to address shortcomings in previous immoralist accounts, Eaton argues as follows. (i) Sometimes vicious characters in artworks are likeable, and audiences are invited to like them, *because of* their immorality.¹⁷ Furthermore, (ii) works' inviting us to like such immoral characters because of their immorality constitutes a moral flaw in them.¹⁸ And, (iii) sometimes artworks become better *aesthetically, in virtue of* possessing such moral flaws. I argue against each of these claims in turn.

3.1. Likeable Immorality

In support of her first claim, Eaton identifies a group of characters that she calls 'rough heroes',¹⁹ namely villains in artworks who are nonetheless charismatic, and whom audiences are invited to like, admire, and identify with. She writes:

I am charmed by Humbert Humbert and revere Milton's Satan. I delight in the exploits of Bonnie and Clyde and their contemporary incarnations, Mickey and Mallory, rooting for them as they flee the police. I am enamored of Tyler Durden and admire Hannibal Lecter, even in their darkest moments.²⁰

Of course, there is nothing surprising about the phenomenon of admiring someone even though they are in many respects anything but admirable. This is because our affective response to one (aspect of a) thing can sometimes decisively influence our response to another. Nice weather can soften our response to bad news, and winning the lottery can extinguish our anger over getting

¹⁷ Eaton, 'Robust Immoralism', 287.

¹⁸ See *ibid.* and Eaton 'Reply to Carroll'.

¹⁹ And works featuring such characters, viz. 'rough-hero works'.

²⁰ Eaton, 'Robust Immoralism', 281.

fired. This does not show that getting fired or receiving bad news are any less unpleasant or disvaluable. Similarly, characters like Humbert Humbert, Vronsky, and Tony Soprano, are evidently suave, intelligent, witty, or handsome. If their latter qualities are captivating enough or sufficiently foregrounded in a work, they can outweigh their immorality. This phenomenon can plausibly explain most plausible cases of likeable immorality.

Importantly, however, a character's immorality remains distinct from their valuable attributes, even if manifestations of the latter often occur amidst atrocities, as Humbert Humbert's charm and eloquence are displayed as he seduces an underage girl. After all, rough heroes' positive qualities, which are often things like loyalty (Jesse in *Breaking Bad*), skill (Walt in *Breaking Bad*), intelligence and charisma (Satan in *Paradise Lost*), wit (Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*), humour (Tyler Durden in *Fight Club*), being a good parent (Tony in *The Sopranos*), in no way suggest or imply immorality, or otherwise make a character (or indeed a work featuring such a character) more likely to be immoral.

Eaton is aware of such problems with her argument,²¹ but she says that we do not neatly separate personality qualities, and so are likely to fall for the immorality also.²² However, even supposing that this is true as a psychological generalization, surely it does not follow that it is these

²¹ Partly in light of Carroll's criticisms in 'Rough Heroes'.

²² Eaton, 'Reply to Carroll', at 376-377.

Eaton cites the 'halo effect' in support, claiming that it is well-documented that our global evaluations (e.g. in terms of attractiveness) influence our moral evaluations. Although she cites a couple of studies in support, it is worth noting that none of these actually deal with moral qualities specifically. On the contrary, according to two meta-analyses (Alice H. Eagly et al. 'What Is Beautiful Is Good But...: A Meta-Analytic Review of Research on the Physical Attractiveness Stereotype' *Psychological Bulletin* 110 (1991), 109-128; Alan Feingold, 'Good Looking People Are Not What We Think' *Psychological Bulletin* 111 (1992), 304-341) on the 'halo effect', overall evaluations have zero or near-zero effect on moral evaluations, even while they do significantly influence non-moral ones, concerning, e.g. intelligence or popularity.

characters' immorality that is likeable.²³ To see this, one need only consider, firstly, how different our responses are to more purely immoral works, such as the Marquis de Sade's novels, or Gaspar Noé's films, many of which arguably display an authorial fascination with gratuitous violence, including sexual violence; or again, consider how differently we respond to immoral characters who possess few if any positive features, such as David Brent, the narcissistic and insensitive boss in *The Office*, or Felicia 'Snoop' Pearson and Chris Partlow in *The Wire*. Secondly, consider how easy it is for us to like characters in artworks even if they are far from being rough heroes (that is, even if their positive qualities are not foregrounded and their characters are not central to the narrative); and how difficult it is to find characters (perhaps the aforementioned are such examples) that are unlikeable through and through: even the tiniest speck of humanity or the most trivial positive quality, like intelligence or wit, will get most audiences to like the character at least to some extent, however minimal, which is why we tolerate the mafiosi in *The Sopranos* and the drug dealers and murderers in *The Wire*. This by the way, is why these programmes are ethically praiseworthy (which point is worth bearing in mind for the discussion in section 3.2 below): because they allow us to glimpse the dignity and merit of human beings that are far from excellent and virtuous. Plausibly, the foregoing considerations suggest that, for all that has been said to the contrary, both the aforementioned characters' and rough heroes' positive traits, not their immorality, are both necessary and sufficient for rendering them adequately magnetic. While, importantly, as these considerations further suggest, if the characters in question were simply immoral, they would hardly engage (normal) audiences as they do.

Moreover, it is worth remarking, in the context of this discussion, on a feature that seems to me common to many works in the rough-hero genre, as opposed to more uncontroversially immoral works, such as the Marquis de Sade's novels, namely that our liking and other positive attitudes towards rough heroes are conditional. Rough-hero works as a genre seem to set up certain expectations, including that our positive attitudes towards immoral characters will eventually be frustrated. At the same time, and because of this, our liking and similar attitudes presuppose what seems like a pact between audience and manifested artists (by which I mean the artists as

²³ See Carroll, 'Rough Heroes'.

they appear through the choices culminating, and prescriptions contained, in artworks²⁴). That is, we all know that such characters are vile, and that we are *exploring* them, along with our attitudes towards them. But if at the end of a rough-hero work these heroes prevailed and this was presented as a desirable outcome; or if we, the audience, were invited to rejoice in this turn of events, it is plausible that we would be disgusted and would find the work importantly wanting,

²⁴ See *ibid.*, 72-76.

however skilful and clever it may have been in bringing about our liking, admiration, etc. for immoral characters.²⁵

²⁵ Indeed, some critics have recently raised the issue of ‘bad fans’, namely the sorts of viewers who ‘[cheer] on Walter White’s descent into villainy rather than recoiling from it’ (Gwilym Mumford, “I Loathe These People”: Rick and Morty and the Brilliant Backlash Against TV’s Bad Fans’ *The Guardian* (4 October, 2017) <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/oct/04/i-loathe-these-people-rick-and-morty-and-the-brilliant-backlash-against-tvs-bad-fans>> accessed on 2 April 2018). Such critics point to an interesting feature of some rough-hero works: instead of veering out at such fans and ruining the commercial success of their programmes, their creators insert characters that serve as ‘meta-commentary on the Bad Fan’ (Emily Nussbaum, ‘That Mind-Bending Phone Call on Last Night’s “Breaking Bad”’ *The New Yorker* (16 September, 2013) <<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/that-mind-bending-phone-call-on-last-nights-breaking-bad>> accessed 2 April, 2018). Nussbaum of *The New Yorker*, e.g. says the following of Todd, the character that she thinks serves this function in *Breaking Bad*:

Todd looked very much like the prototypical Bad Fan of “Breaking Bad”: he arrived late in the story, and he saw Walt purely as a kick-ass genius, worthy of worship (like Jesse, he called him Mr. White). Two episodes later, ... Todd excitedly re-told the entire Great Train Robbery desert caper to his Nazi uncle, including every single awesome, suspenseful detail but one: that pesky kid he’d shot. Bad Fan recapping in a nutshell! It was a short scene, but one that underlined what we all knew: if you ignore the dead kids, son, you are watching “Breaking Bad” wrong. (Ibid.)

It is important to note that these critics are absolutely adamant that so-called bad fans are poor judges: they are watching these series wrong and are not properly attuned to the relevant artistic and ethical considerations required for properly appreciating the works in question. If these critics are right, then there is all the more reason to agree with my argument here and question not only Eaton’s argument, but her general approach rough-hero works. These considerations are also worth bearing in mind in my discussion of (ii) in 3.2, below. See also Carroll, ‘Rough Heroes’.

This last claim needs some qualification. It is not only conceivable but true as a matter of fact that some people are not disgusted and indeed may cheer at an ending where the villain is triumphant.²⁶ The problem is that in doing so, such audiences fail to manifest due sensitivity to the features of the work and to respond as the work prescribes. For although there are many rough-hero works the endings of which are ambivalent, or even morally questionable, the fact that they are ambivalent is important and, in fact, just what we should expect of an ethically sensitive programme that explores ethical issues along with our engagement with them, not least because we are expected to see them as ambivalent or questionable. To see this, it is worth briefly discussing some seeming counterexamples to this claim. *Breaking Bad* is a great case in point, seeing as it is full of rough heroes: deeply immoral characters that are, at least for some moments, and at least in some respects, sometimes, likeable. Arguably, the programme presents us with a whole array of immoral characters of varying degrees of badness, whose complexity and interest do, I concede to Eaton, increase with their badness. But even this hardly shows that we like these characters for their immorality, or that their immorality cannot be separated from their likability, for reasons we have already come across, including the fact that rough-hero works like *Breaking Bad* make us vividly aware that we are entering morally ambivalent territory and are exploring it. Likewise, consider the fact that Bonnie and Clyde's death may be seen to be treated as a tragedy in the eponymous film. This is no objection to the claim that a full-on celebration of immoral characters would be repulsive; the death of likeable characters, or even dislikable characters, may still be appropriately seen as a tragedy, and to see it as such may still be deemed an appropriate response. Or consider the ambivalent ending of *The Sopranos*: the uncertainty and sense of perennial threat that the final scene suggests is the appropriate conclusion to a series about mafiosi whose lives, along with the lives and wellbeing of their families, are constantly under negotiation. This is, arguably, the most appropriate of endings for this series; a finale in which Tony Soprano meets his horrible end, or one in which he triumphs and the audience is prescribed to

²⁶ As indeed the existence of bad fans, introduced in the previous note, makes clear. But this is precisely why these fans are bad: as already noted, they 'are watching wrong' (Emily Nussbaum, 'That Mind-Bending Phone Call on Last Night's "Breaking Bad"').

rejoice in this, would hardly make for a better artworks because, respectively, the one would be coarse and uninteresting, and the latter would be prescribing attitudes that the audience could not reasonably be expected to engage in in response to a series that is ethically sensitive despite its prescribing liking for Tony on several occasions throughout its course.

The foregoing considerations show that it is plausible, albeit perhaps somewhat paradoxical given our liking for some rough heroes, that we would feel dissatisfied, and certainly uncomfortable, if our positive attitudes were not subverted by the end of a rough-hero narrative, provided we are appreciating these artworks properly.²⁷ Thus, it seems highly implausible that we like or admire rough heroes even partly *for* their immorality.

3.2. Immoral Art

Largely for the same reasons as (i), (ii), namely the claim that rough-hero works invite us to like immoral characters because of their immorality constitutes a moral flaw in them, is also problematic. According to Eaton, a work is immoral if ‘moral judgment is among the responses prescribed by the work’,²⁸ and the judgement prescribed by the work in question is a positive attitude of liking, approval, and so on, of an immoral character. But if what I said concerning (i) is correct, it should bear, *mutatis mutandis*, on (ii) also. How can a work that prescribes liking for, say, Tony Soprano’s parenthood, Humbert Humbert’s suaveness, or Satan’s charisma, be stipulated as an ‘immoral work of art’ short of begging the question in favour of immoralism? The immorality of

²⁷ Compare Kieran’s discussion of artistic hypocrisy in Haneke’s *Funny Games* (‘Emotions, Art, and Immorality’, 699-700).

It is worth clarifying that talk of watching these programmes appropriately serves to rule out that ‘we’ are the sorts of bad fans discussed in note 25.

Note also that the artworks in question are the sorts of rough-hero works that are the focus of Eaton’s paper. There are works, including de Sade’s novels, and certain splatter films, that do prescribe pleasure in and endorsement of horrifying attitudes and behaviours, but which I do not think the immoralist would claim are better because of this.

²⁸ Eaton, ‘Robust Immoralism’, 282.

the characters in question stem from their being murderers and thieves, paedophiles, etc., not their charisma or intelligence. According to Eaton, a work that prescribes liking for these characters is immoral. But consider the converse: would not a work that prescribed dislike for them through and through, and that took no heed of their positive qualities, be likewise immoral, shallow, or hypocritically moralistic? Surely the proper response to characters like these is mixed, and it is this response that *The Sopranos*, *Lolita*, *Paradise Lost*, and all such works prescribe.²⁹ Whence, then, their immorality?

In response to this, it may be said that we like characters, not particular traits of characters—Satan, and not his charisma; Omar Little, and not his devotion to his loved ones. But of course it is in virtue of their traits that we like different characters; that is to say, their traits explain why we like them. We like people for their qualities, and may like them for some whilst disliking them for others. So the issue is whether the works in question prescribe liking these characters for their immorality, and whether in fact we do so in properly engaging with the works in question; or, to put it differently, whether their immorality explains our liking them. And, at the very least, the immoralist has given us no reason to think so besides an assertion to that effect. Hence, to the extent that the immorality of such works is supposed to stem from their prescribing liking immoral characters for their immorality, and given that we have no reason to think that this is actually the case, we also have no reason to agree with Eaton that these works are immoral.

3.3. Immoralism

Importantly, even if (i) and (ii) were true, they would fall short of establishing immoralism, which also requires, (iii), defending the claim that sometimes works become better *qua* artworks, in virtue of being morally flawed.³⁰ Eaton has two main arguments for this claim.

²⁹ See also Carroll, 'Rough Heroes', 373.

³⁰ Eaton is adamant on this: 'a moral flaw can be an aesthetic merit in a work—that is, ... an immoral feature of an artwork can make a significant positive aesthetic contribution *precisely in virtue of its immorality*' ('Robust Immoralism', 283, emphasis added).

According to Eaton, one way in which the immorality of certain works constitutes an aesthetic value in them is by arousing in audiences a state of emotional ambivalence between their moral condemnation and liking or admiration for rough heroes, which makes said works particularly ‘compelling’.³¹ Since being compelling is an aesthetic merit, and their being compelling comes down to their arousing morally ambivalent emotions partly because of their immorality, their immorality contributes to their aesthetic merit.

But this chain of reasoning is shaky, especially given that Eaton does not show—as opposed to assert (see also 3.1, above)—that such works’ being compelling is grounded in their alleged immorality; moreover, as I noted earlier (in 3.2), it is far from clear that the responses such works prescribe or evoke is anything over and above what is merited by characters who have both good and bad qualities, especially if their good qualities are foregrounded. Even if that were the case, however, and even if audiences, as Eaton says, ‘are captivated by and savor [the] ambivalence’³² of being torn between liking and moral disapproval, this is not an instance where *immorality*—as opposed to an ambivalent experience’s being indulged—grounds a valuable aesthetic experience; for, consider a parallel: it would be possible to achieve a similar experience by casting a ridiculous character and endowing him with likeable qualities; this would plausibly still generate an interesting (non-moral) ambivalence; but it neither follows that aesthetic value is grounded in ridiculousness, nor would it be plausible to trace aesthetic value there.

But perhaps the claim is that the ambivalence between our moral repugnance and liking for rough heroes, which Eaton takes to be a value in the work, requires, or may even be partly constituted by, immorality.³³ If so, then immorality may contribute to aesthetic value after all.

However, it is unclear whether the experience of the relevant ambivalence is fine-grained enough to represent immorality. As aforementioned, it is plausible that we might experience a similar ambivalence when we like someone who has non-moral flaws. If so, then it would seem that immorality is neither constitutive of, nor necessary for, the valuable emotional ambivalence in

³¹ Eaton, ‘Robust Immoralism’, 287.

³² *Ibid.*, 288.

³³ I owe this objection to Adriana Clavel-Vazquez.

question. If the immoralist wants to deny this claim, she will need an independent argument to the effect that the ambivalence aroused in audiences of rough-hero works is *sui generis* and that it (or a qualitative equivalent thereof) could not be brought about by a tension between our attitudes toward something both likeable and non-morally defective (or dislikable but not morally defective for that matter).

In any case, importantly, the critic of immoralism could still grant both that the ambivalence itself makes the works compelling and thus is valuable; and that the immorality contributes to, or is even necessary for, the emotional ambivalence; whilst coherently maintaining that the immorality itself remains a defect—a necessary sacrifice of aesthetic value, as it were—even while the ambivalence may be all-things-considered meritorious.³⁴

But Eaton has a second argument for (iii). She thinks that works' seducing us into liking morally bad characters, and hence (by Eaton's (i) and (ii)) their immorality, is a considerable merit in those works, because of the skill, etc. required to achieve this result, viz., to get audiences to overcome their imaginative resistance and come to like or admire characters they morally condemn.³⁵

One response to this would be to claim that the so-called achievement involved in rough-hero works is trivial. For instance, Carroll thinks that the seductive strategies of rough-hero works are 'pretty routine', and that the positive responses garnered by such works for their rough heroes are 'not the result of some impressive artistic achievement, but the effect of rather mundane, highly reliable genre gambits'.³⁶ Now I do not think that Carroll is right about this, but will put aside my views on this. For even if he were right, Eaton's argument would not have failed, but would have diminished in force, insofar as the achievement, and so the aesthetic value, of rough-hero works, would be less than perhaps she makes it out to be.

Notice, however, that an implication of the claim that artworks' seducing us into liking immoral characters is a worthwhile artistic achievement is that, absent considerable manipulation,

³⁴ The discussion below further corroborates this claim.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 287-288.

³⁶ 'Rough Heroes', 374.

exposure, and other techniques—i.e., were we presented with the relevant immoral traits or behaviours—we would not respond in the same way. If so, then presumably if a work appeared to us to manifest immorality,³⁷ it would be disliked, etc., unless, that is, it masked the immorality in question. What this shows is hardly that immorality can contribute to a work's aesthetic value. On the contrary, immorality may be helpful in setting up a challenge, the solution to which can demonstrate skill, thereby contributing to aesthetic value—provided that the work does not in fact embrace the immorality itself. This is because immorality as such, as in a work that flatly endorses or prescribes approval of its characters' immorality, will neither be likeable nor arouse positive responses.

So why does Eaton think that this is an argument for immoralism, indeed a robust version thereof? An analogy may help to shed light on this. Although Vincent Van Gogh's drawing skills were arguably not particularly strong, he had mastered certain other skills, including colouring. He therefore drew on the latter to redeem his defective drawing, lest it should mar his works.³⁸ Now, his works were redeemed overall. But while there is a sense in which his defective drawing explains Van Gogh's reliance on colour and, given his superb handling of the latter, thereby also some of the merit of his work, it would be thoroughly implausible to talk of his defective drawing as contributing to his works' aesthetic value. Likewise, assuming Eaton's interpretations of rough-hero works are correct (something I previously questioned), there is a defect in such works, viz., in their prescribing liking for, or even endorsement of, immoral characters and behaviours, but the artists draw on other skills and techniques to redeem or 'overcome' these flaws.³⁹ In this sense, the flaws can be cited in an explanation of a work's merit; but it would be a mistake to think, additionally, that they themselves constitute merits or contribute to the work's aesthetic value. The distinction that explains this is the one I drew earlier between a weak and a robust relation between ethical and

³⁷ Recall that by manifesting immorality I mean not merely that works represent immoral characters or actions, but in fact embrace, advocate, endorse, or otherwise positively assess immorality.

³⁸ I am grateful to Berys Gaut for this example and for suggesting this line of argument to me. If the reader disagrees with the specific example, any analogous example will do.

³⁹ Eaton, 'Robust immoralism', 287.

aesthetic value; the idea is basically that the disvalue in Van Gogh's drawing, like the immorality to be 'overcome' in rough-hero works, are incidental to the aesthetic value that is realized through the exemplary colouring, in the one case, or the cinematic and narrative techniques, in the other. What is more, if, in fact, immorality is introduced deliberately as a challenge to be overcome in rough-hero works,⁴⁰ then it is in a sense tacitly granted by the manifested artist that the immorality constitutes a defect in the work, and that she or he needs the redeeming techniques Eaton identifies⁴¹ if she or he is going to make up for it.⁴² So, not only does Eaton's argument not succeed in showing that the ethical defect is not an aesthetic defect, but, on the contrary, it reveals a more general phenomenon that is grist to the moralist's mill.

In other words, what Eaton's argument succeeds in showing is one way in which immorality can (mistakenly) *appear* to contribute to a work's aesthetic value—even though *qua* immorality it cannot actually do so: when used as a foil against which certain techniques etc. can be put to use, one may think that immorality is contributing to aesthetic value, even though it is only the skill and achievement that are constitutive of (or that contribute to) aesthetic value. But Eaton's argument depends on the assumption that immorality *sans phrase* cannot engage audiences in the ways that her 'rough heroes' supposedly do. If it were not the case that immorality itself constitutes a *prima facie* flaw (and can only thereby constitute an artistic *challenge*), then it would be unclear why works that succeed in arousing audiences' liking for immoral characters are said to manifest considerable skill. Of course, an autonomist may deny all this, and explain why rough-hero works succeed in getting audiences to like immoral characters manifests considerable skill by appeal to the fact that people typically resist liking immoral characters and such works use techniques etc. that efficiently get audiences to like these characters. The merit would then be down to the fact that this is a tricky or difficult achievement, but this is independent of the immorality, since it is consistent with autonomism, as the autonomist will probably deny both that liking immoral characters is morally wrong, and so that rough-hero works are immoral, and that immorality, as

⁴⁰ As suggested by the critics' remarks cited in note 25.

⁴¹ Eaton, 'Robust Immoralism', 285.

⁴² In which case, once again, they turn out not to be immoral in the sense required for immoralism.

opposed to the considerable skill involved in overcoming resistance to immoral characters, constitutes an artistic merit in the work. Thus, to escape this conundrum, it seems to me that one will either have to deny that there is a flaw, in which case the immoralist argument is cut short, or suggest that immorality constitutes a flaw that needs to be overcome. But to say the latter is at once to endorse moralism, by granting that an artwork's being immoral is always a demerit in a work, and, *eo ipso*, to admit that immoralism cannot be true: that is, works cannot possess aesthetic merit *in virtue of* their immorality. They may appear to do so, but can at best only ever be aesthetically meritorious despite their immorality.

3.4. Further Claims

But perhaps this conclusion is premature. For besides the arguments already discussed, Eaton makes a further observation that purportedly directly supports the immoralist case. She claims that some rough-hero works are successful at getting us to root for immoral characters: we like them, are excited by their immoral behaviour, want them to continue doing what they are doing, be it murder, theft, or cooking meth.⁴³ This might look like a case where immorality does truly contribute to rough-hero works' value, since it makes them compelling, enjoyable, and so on, and one with which I have yet to grapple. But I think that this is a mistake, and that there are a number of things to say in response.⁴⁴

Firstly, the points I made earlier in 3.1 about the assumptions we make and expectations we form when watching rough-hero works, carry over to the present argument. For, plausibly, unless we knew, for instance, that the rough hero's life is not a good life, impressive though it may be, and that it will not, in the end, be glorified in the artwork, we would not be excited by or root for rough heroes' mischiefs. But it is only if these conditions do not obtain that the work is truly immoral and our rooting for rough heroes complicit in immorality.

Secondly, our rooting for rough heroes is more readily explained as a side-effect of our liking these characters, than as a result of our having heeded an artistic prescription to root for

⁴³ Eaton, 'Robust Immoralism', 281. I owe this objection to Bob Stecker.

⁴⁴ See also note 22.

immorality as such. Indeed, Eaton seems to invite this interpretation when she writes: '[i]f ... I simply despised Tony Soprano and desired his downfall, then I would not root for him in key chase scenes and would feel disappointment rather than relief when he narrowly escapes from the FBI'.⁴⁵ But just as our liking for rough heroes, as I have suggested, is not grounded in their immorality, so our wanting them to flee the police, continue cooking meth, and the like, may simply be ways of expressing our liking for them, and not grounded in immorality either.

Thirdly, although scenes featuring car chases, murder, theft, and the like, are compelling, thrilling, and suspenseful, and we are invited to enjoy them. These are merits, but of course do not as such stem from immorality; after all, such content remains thrilling, compelling, etc. even when the relevant behaviours serve morally praiseworthy ends. Hence, the claim must be *pro tanto*: these scenes are meritorious insofar as they are suspenseful, gripping, etc.; they remain defective if, and insofar as, they are immoral.

Lastly, if, after all, it is true that rough-hero works try to get us to ultimately admire and root for immorality, or at least endorse rough heroes' behaviours and values, and they do so deliberately, i.e., they are designed in such a way as to bring these attitudes about (or can be plausibly interpreted in this way), then, in light of previous considerations, it seems plausible that this is a defect in the works—unless, that is, their doing so is intended to make a point that offers some sort of reward—presumably cognitive—so that the latter would be a redeeming feature, and hence the work would not be immoral. But perhaps all this is not deliberate (or may not be deliberate under plausible interpretations); that is, perhaps rough-hero works get us to root for immorality, etc. because of oversights, miscalculations, or as an unintended side-effect; if so, then their doing so is a defect on two counts, that is, both immorality and lack of skill in the design of the artwork.⁴⁶

4. The 'Moralism' in Immoralism: Admirable Immorality and Immoralism

⁴⁵ Ibid., 285.

⁴⁶ One might think that there is only one flaw here, because unintended immorality does not make for an immoral artwork. However, negligence of this sort plausibly counts as immorality.

If the foregoing is right, then it looks like the most promising defence of immoralism is based on appeals to moralist intuitions or premises.

In order to support immoralism in the way that they envisage it, immoralists have to show that immorality as such can sometimes contribute to aesthetic value. At this stage I think it is worth remarking that this sort of debate is not without precedent. In fact, it is rather surprising that no mention is made in debates concerning aesthetic immoralism (or comic immoralism, which I broach in section 5) to a counterpart debate in moral philosophy, which concerns whether so-called *admirable immorality* exists. While this is not the place to properly enter this debate, there are certain features that are worth pointing out in the debate over admirable immorality, as they make for interesting parallels with the aesthetic immoralism debate. Before I indicate what these are, and how they relate to the issue at hand, I should clarify that, for our purposes, the ‘admirableness’ in the admirable immorality debate can be broadly understood as referring to an act’s or character trait’s being valuable in some (moral or non-moral, though usually non-instrumental) sense, such that it would warrant a relevant pro-attitude. Sometimes, for instance, the value appears to be of an aesthetic nature,⁴⁷ though there are some who have even argued for morally admirable immorality,⁴⁸ which will be of little help to the immoralist, since the value in such cases, if indeed they are a possibility, is not grounded in the immorality as such. This brings me to the first key feature of the admirable immorality debate, which is the following.

Participants in the debate standardly distinguish between the following three theses:

⁴⁷ Bernard Williams, ‘Moral Luck’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 50 (1976), 115-135; Michael Slote, ‘Admirable Immorality’, in his *Goods and Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 80-92; Michael J. Zimmermann, ‘The Moral Aspect of Nonmoral Goods and Evils’, *Utilitas* 11 (1999), 1-15, at 10-12.

⁴⁸ Troy Jollimore, ‘Morally Admirable Immorality’ *American Philosophical Quarterly* 43 (2006), 159-170.

Weak Thesis (WT) = ‘we may sometimes admire certain aspects of immoral actions or find people admirable for traits whose possession makes them more likely to act wrongly’;⁴⁹

Strong Thesis (ST) = ‘immoral behaviour *as such* may (sometimes) be admirable’;⁵⁰

Intermediate Thesis (IT) = certain admirable traits or behaviours that ‘do *not* permit ... a neat separation between what is admirable and what is immoral’.⁵¹

Now, it is commonly agreed between those partaking in the debate that ST is an indefensible position for anyone save perhaps those with extreme Nietzschean tendencies.⁵² By contrast, as proponents of admirable immorality grant, their claim cannot be that WT is true, for this is a trivial thesis that amounts to claiming that a thief may be admirable for his skill and stealth, or a pirate for her resolution and bravery. Thus, on Slote’s articulation, it is IT that best characterizes what he means by admirable immorality. In seeking to clarify things, Slote suggests that cases of admirable immorality are those the admirable features of which cannot be ‘conceptually prised’⁵³ from their immorality, or those where the admirableness is ‘intrinsically connected’⁵⁴ to the immorality.

The first thing worth noting is that immoralists in aesthetics construe their view not as a counterpart to the admirable immorality thesis (i.e., IT), but as ST instead, insofar as their claim is that works are aesthetically valuable *because* of their immorality, in Eaton’s words, ‘not only

⁴⁹ Slote, ‘Admirable Immorality’, 79.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid. Now, I do not wish to open this can of worms, but all I am suggesting is that unless one subscribes to a view that is, mildly put, unpopular among analytic philosophers, one will have to reject ST. Conversely, if one endorses such a view, one will have to concede that one’s views cannot be treaded on as common ground.

⁵³ Slote, ‘Admirable Immorality’, 79.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 84-84.

despite but sometimes even because of [their] immorality'.⁵⁵ As I have argued, I do not think that they succeed in showing this. But the point here is to show how extraordinary the claim seems, especially by comparison to alternatives, and what one would have to show in order to secure it.

But the immoralist may, at this stage, object that, just as IT satisfies the admirable immorality thesis, so it might satisfy the immoralist one. Perhaps the point is that the aesthetic value of immoral artworks cannot be 'conceptually prised' from their immorality. Now, it is very difficult to assess this claim,⁵⁶ but if it means, as we already saw Eaton suggesting, that we cannot distinguish between, say, liking Jesse, in *Breaking Bad*, for his loyalty, from disgust at his killing innocent people, then I do not think that this is right, for the reasons we have already come across in sections 3.1 and 3.2. In fact, it is telling that considerations such as those discussed there can be adduced against the proponent of admirable immorality. Stock examples of admirable immorality are supposed to be things like Gauguin's artistic single-mindedness, which led him to abandon his family and pursue his art in Tahiti; Churchill's single-minded and passionate anti-Nazism that led him to authorize the bombing of civilians in order to crush the Nazis; and other similar cases. But, as has been noted in the literature, it is far from clear that these are cases where there is an intrinsic, conceptual relation between the admirableness and the immorality, and exponents of the view have been criticized for failing to show that there is such a connection.⁵⁷ In fact, not even Slote, who argues for such an intrinsic connection, seems to do so more in word than in spirit, since the language he uses belies any such connection. In discussing the case of Churchill, for instance, he writes that '[i]f Churchill's passionate single-mindedness is admirable *despite* its countermoral tendencies, we have ... an example of admirable immorality'.⁵⁸ He also writes that traits such as Gauguin's and Churchill's passionate single-mindedness are "admirable

⁵⁵ Eaton, 'Robust Immoralism', 286.

⁵⁶ For an extended critical discussion of this requirement, see Owen Flanagan, 'Admirable Immorality and Admirable Imperfection', *The Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986), 41-60.

⁵⁷ See Marcia Baron, 'On Admirable Immorality', *Ethics* 96 (1986), 557-566; Flanagan, 'Admirable Immorality and Admirable Imperfection'.

⁵⁸ Slote, 'Admirable Immorality', 96.

for [their] rarity and value'.⁵⁹ Now both of these passages actually suggest both that it is possible to conceptually prise the single-mindedness and passion from the immorality, hence he can perfectly intelligibly speak of admiring the former *despite* the latter (as opposed to speaking, for instance, of something's being a square despite having only three right angles), and that the immorality is not the ground for our admiration, as opposed to the rarity and value of the single-mindedness. The same is suggested by Slote's discussion when he compares allegedly (immorally) admirable traits like Gauguin's or Churchill's with other purported examples, which he thinks are not admirable (or at least not comparably admirable), such as the father who knows that his son has committed a gross crime yet cannot but hide that fact from the authorities, or cases like the love between Tristan and Isolde. Of the former, he writes that although '[b]oth the devoted parent and Gauguin may recognize that they are doing wrong and yet also stand by what they feel they must do ... such parental devotion is more in the ordinary run of things, less rare, than Gauguin's single-minded devotion to his art; also, its object is purely personal (familial), whereas what Gauguin tried to do is thought relevant, perhaps important, to all of us'.⁶⁰ And of the latter, he says that 'it is actually somewhat difficult to evoke admiration of the kind we feel in connection with Gauguin's passion or Churchill's [because] [i]n order to admire the passion of a Tristan and Isolde, I think we must import and insist upon artistic or political metaphors that imply the objective or public value of their love'.⁶¹ All of the foregoing strongly point against any strong interpretation of the phenomenon of admirable immorality, insofar as they imply the conceptual separability between traits' admirableness and their immorality. So, even those who argue for conceptual inseparability between the admirableness and immorality of certain traits and behaviours cannot coherently maintain this view in argument. It is thus perhaps no accident that arguments for a position like robust immoralism, which consists in a possibility that exponents of admirable immorality are not even prepared to seriously entertain, should fail.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 99.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 88.

⁶¹ Ibid., 104.

The second interesting parallel between the immoralism and the admirable immorality debates is this: not only do defences of admirable immorality seem to fail by their own lights, but, after a hiatus in the admirable immorality debate, the most recent contributions to the debate have been reconsidering the possibility of admirable immorality by claiming that the admirability is, in fact, indirectly moral. This has been supported by different philosophers in different ways. For instance, Zimmermann⁶² argued that admiration for non-moral goods is a moral requirement, such that all that admirable immorality means is that some behaviours or traits are both immoral and admirable in some respects, but admiring them is a moral requirement, such that their admirableness is not contrary to morality. Curzer⁶³ recently argued that there can be virtuous but morally wrong acts, and it is these that constitute cases of admirable immorality. The argument is somewhat technical, and this is not the place to discuss it, but it is worth pointing out that, even so, such acts are admirable, once again, on moral or other valuable grounds, rather than their immorality, and that admiration is called for *despite* rather than *because of* the immorality. Finally, Jollimore⁶⁴ recently argued that admirable immorality is possible because some acts can be both immoral and morally admirable. This brings us full-circle to the collapse into moralism that we witnessed earlier in discussing Eaton's immoralism. The crux of Jollimore's position is that 'there is no inconsistency in holding an agent ... to have acted immorally, while at the same time admiring her action for the good judgment and moral courage it exhibited'.⁶⁵ What is crucial for my purposes is that none of these arguments supports anything like admirable immorality in any form that would be conducive to an immoralist. Moreover, in light of the parallels indicated above, and to the extent that these positions seem saliently comparable, it looks like the trajectory of the debate over the possibility of admirable immorality further corroborates my scepticism about immoralism and its prospects.

⁶² Zimmerman, 'The Moral Aspect of Nonmoral Goods and Evils'.

⁶³ Howard Curzer, 'Admirable Immorality, Dirty Hands, Ticking Bombs, and Torturing Innocents', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 64 (2006), 31-56.

⁶⁴ Jollimore, 'Morally Admirable Immorality'.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

5. Immoralism Without the 'moralism'?

Taken together, the foregoing considerations cannot but seriously undermine the odds for immoralism: immoralism appears not only unsupported but also oddly self-defeating. So what now for the immoralist? Here are three simple suggestions for how an immoralist might go about launching a rejoinder.

(i) First, the immoralist may identify more plausible and unambiguous examples. This will be difficult since examples that immoralists have put forward have hardly shaken their opponents. But if the immoralist can show that an obviously and highly immoral work, like some of Marquis de Sade's novels, derives some of its aesthetic merit directly from its being immoral, then that should considerably strengthen her case.

(ii) Conversely, the immoralist may find a poor artwork, which is but of little merit, but the merit of which can plausibly be traced to its immorality. This would offer the immoralist a dialectical edge, since she would now be in a position to show clearly the role of immoral features in improving a work aesthetically, as can arguably the moralist through examples like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.⁶⁶

But it is unlikely that the immoralist can benefit from either of the foregoing, since chances are that if there were such examples around, immoralists would have already identified them.

(iii) A more promising option for immoralists may lie in pursuing an old suggestion of Jacobson's to the effect that jokes are sometimes funny because of their immorality.⁶⁷ In pursuing

⁶⁶ Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, 128.

⁶⁷ Jacobson, 'In Praise of Immoral Art'.

this option, the immoralist can capitalize on a growing literature on ‘comic immoralism’,⁶⁸ according to which jokes can be made funny (or funnier) by their immorality. For if funniness (or humour) is a positive aesthetic property, and immorality can contribute to it, it follows that immorality can contribute to aesthetic value.

However, I think that defences of comic immoralism, to the extent that they conceive of that position saliently like, and are conducted in a way that is conducive to, aesthetic immoralism more broadly, will likely encounter the problems already discussed, not least since the funniness of immoral jokes seems more readily explicable by appeal to the immorality of their audiences rather than anything intrinsically funny about the jokes. Since the debate over comic immoralism has for the most part remained distinct from the immoralism discussed in previous sections, critiquing comic immoralism would take me well beyond the remits of this paper. However, allow me to briefly discuss two recent defences of comic immoralism, by way of both grounding my scepticism about its prospects for rescuing aesthetic immoralism, and further bolstering my conclusion *pace* immoralism.

Woodcock defends comic immoralism by proclaiming that relativism holds of judgements of funniness, while moral judgements are objective. Immoral people find some immoral jokes funny because of their immorality; so these jokes are funny (relative to the immoral appreciators) because immoral (objectively).⁶⁹

⁶⁸ See: Aaron Smuts, ‘Do Moral Flaws Enhance Amusement?’ *American Philosophical Quarterly* 46 (2009), 151-162; Ted Nannicelli, ‘Moderate Comic Immoralism and the Genetic Approach to the Ethical Criticism of Art’ *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72 (2014), 169-179; Scott Woodcock, ‘Comic Immoralism and Relatively Funny Jokes’ *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 32 (2015), 203-216; Nathaniel Sharadin, ‘In Defense of Comic Pluralism’ *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 20 (2017), 375-392.

In this section, I will refer to immoralism as understood heretofore as ‘aesthetic immoralism’ or simply ‘immoralism’, to distinguish it from ‘comic immoralism’, which refers to a special case.

⁶⁹ Woodcock, ‘Comic Immoralism and Relatively Funny Jokes’.

But of course, this is unhelpful for the aesthetic immoralist. Firstly, the debate about aesthetic immoralism is interesting to the extent that we assume a considerable degree of objectivity in judgements of both aesthetic and moral value. To question the metaphysics or epistemology under which the moralism debate is conducted is, therefore, either to retreat from common ground (making comic immoralism unhelpful to the aesthetic immoralist), or to classify humour as an exception to the rule (which seems *ad hoc*). Secondly, and more importantly, relativizing judgements of humour and arguing that immoral—e.g. racist or sexist—jokes are, in fact, funny, relative to the communities of sexists or racists is to reassert my point in this paper; for the implication of this claim is that in order for immorality to be aesthetically valuable (in this case, funny), it must be treated as morality (or at least not be cognized as immorality). Woodcock is aware of this objection and seeks to address it by suggesting that being conscious of the immorality of a joke is not required for the immoralist position to go through. This is true if what we are interested in is a merely descriptive claim, i.e., that some people find some jokes funny because they are immoral (regardless of whether they consider them immoral): the sadist likewise finds inflicting pain pleasurable, ergo ‘inflicting pain is sometimes pleasurable’ holds as a matter of empirical fact.⁷⁰ But it also makes the outcome of the debate rather trivial. No moralist (or critic of immoralism) would question the descriptive claim that some people enjoy, find funny, or even value artworks, jokes, behaviours, etc., because they are immoral. These people may be deviants, but they verify the descriptive claim. So, interpreting (or re-interpreting) the debate as concerning a descriptive point trivializes it. Returning to Woodcock’s response that we need not cognize the immorality in order for the immoralist claim to go through, it should be obvious that this response fails if we are conducting the debate with a normative claim in mind, viz., by seeking to arbitrate whether immorality is ever funny as such or whether it ever gives reasons for being amused. For regardless of whether or not funniness is relative, the racist and the sexist are failing to grasp the

⁷⁰ Indeed, much of the debate on comic immoralism is conducted as a debate about the empirical or descriptive, rather than the normative, question; e.g. Sharadin, ‘In Defense of Comic Pluralism’, explicitly favours a descriptive claim. I take the descriptive point to be orthogonal to the aesthetic immoralism debate, and so ignore it here.

object of their judgement properly, namely the fact that it is immoral. Thus, seeking to support the claim that immorality in jokes can *as such* be funny, ends up, in this case at least, requiring a substitute for the role that I claimed moralist considerations play in Eaton's arguments; in Woodcock, this is an insensitivity to jokes' immorality, via relativization of judgements of funniness.

Consider also Nannicelli's defence of immoralism, which largely rests on examples, coupled with the claim that immoral behaviours undertaken as part of the creation of an artwork can count as ethical features thereof, and thereby pertain to its aesthetic evaluation.⁷¹ Granting the latter thesis, let me briefly comment on two examples. First, Nannicelli considers a show wherein children are used to comic effect, for example by being dressed up as Hitler and greeting passersby with sinister remarks such as 'Come with me to the trains'. Nannicelli is quick to observe that the immorality is not in the representation or evocation of Hitler and his ideology. Instead, he thinks that this is a case of deceit, and failure to acquire valid consent. Although he concedes that this problem is widespread with casting children, he suggests that even parental consent does not lift the immorality, for there may be dire future consequences for children who have participated in such shows (they could be bullied or humiliated, for instance). But I suspect that this sort of worry is true of all children actors. It is no more plausible that a child having featured in a comedy programme as Hitler will be bullied or humiliated later in life than one who played in *Harry Potter*, or, indeed, one whose parents posted funny or embarrassing videos of her or him on Facebook or Youtube. But in none of these cases is it plausible to say either that the casting of children is immoral, or—if one thinks otherwise—that the immorality contributes to their funniness or amusement; if we laugh or value the performance it is despite any potential negative consequences to the children in question.

Nannicelli's second example involves jokes such as those made by Sacha Baron-Cohen, through personas like Borat, a seemingly unintelligent racist, homophobic, and sexist Kazakh journalist. In this guise, Baron-Cohen deceives people into expressing what are sometimes deeply misguided, and often repugnant, views. Again, Nannicelli is aware of the obvious objection: these

⁷¹ Nannicelli, 'Moderate Comic Immoralism and the Genetic Approach to the Ethical Criticism of Art'.

are morally sound jokes that expose and ridicule prejudices, even if we are also horrified by people espousing and expressing such views in our day and age. Yet he insists that the deception is immoral and such immorality is necessary for the funniness. He says that '[i]f one does not think these people have been duped—perhaps if one does not himself realize that Borat [is fictional] or if one thinks the audience members are in on the act—the works are no longer funny or, at least, significantly less funny'.⁷² But note that this fails to support the crucial point, namely that immorality is funny-making in such cases; this is both because the deception is also necessary to preserve the morally sound features of the comedy; and because it is no less (if not more) plausible that this sound moral aim, plus the absurdity and outrageousness of the whole situation, make the examples in question funny. Yes, the deception is required, but it is plausible despite their immorality that people are amused by such programmes (assuming that they are immoral).⁷³ To merely deny this or claim otherwise is to assert, rather than defend, immoralism. Hence, at least tentatively, comic immoralism appears to offer little hope for aesthetic immoralism.

So what conclusions can we draw from the foregoing?

First, the discussions above jointly reveal a pattern of argument traceable to defences of such views as aesthetic and comic immoralism and admirable immorality, whereby something bad is said to be good by an assertion to the effect that this is due to the flaw in question, coupled by arguments that, in fact, appeal to some other feature to ground the value in question—a feature that even opponents of the view in question would accept is valuable—most conspicuously Eaton's claim that immorality constitutes an aesthetic achievement which would be granted by any moralist because the achievement seems to derive from the skill required to overcome the flaw that is the

⁷² Ibid., 174-175.

⁷³ Anecdotally, I have spoken to several people for whom Borat's sketches are not funny precisely because they perceive Borat's behaviour as immoral.

immorality, and the fact that successfully and skilfully overcoming a flaw is a value in an artwork,—but which is only incidentally connected to the bad feature.⁷⁴

Second, it seems unlikely that it is by chance that this mode of argument is shared by accounts seeking to show that some disvalue or other (usually moral) constitutes an aesthetic merit.

These considerations, coupled with the eminently plausible assumption that claims to the effect that (moral) flaws in artworks are (aesthetic) merits because they are (moral) flaws are *prima facie* odd and implausible,⁷⁵ and seem to fly in the face of most art-critical practices,⁷⁶ at the very least raise suspicions concerning immoralism and related views; indeed, they seem to suggest that such positions are, in fact, unsustainable, hence attempts to support them are unlikely to succeed.

⁷⁴ Indeed, consider the latest version of this argument, which concerns artworks that apparently are so bad that they are good, insofar as we enjoy them ‘*just for their bad artistic features*’ (John Dyck and Matt Johnson, ‘Appreciating Bad Art’, *Journal of Value Inquiry* 51 (2017), 279-292; my discussion here is extremely brief and so inevitably ignores the subtleties of Dyck’s and Johnson’s account, but I do not think that it misrepresents the crux of their argument). Once again, the argument works by identifying a positive feature that is related to the artistic badness, in this case a species of ‘*bizarreness*’, and claiming that this shows that artistic badness can be enjoyable or an aesthetic merit. But again, what is going on is that whether or not one thinks a given work is artistically bad, the bizarreness, which is independent of the badness, is sufficient for the work’s possessing an aesthetic merit and for it to be enjoyable. After all, if artistic badness could ever give rise to aesthetic value as badness, then no appeal to an additional value would be necessary to explain it.

⁷⁵ See John Dyck and Matt Johnson, ‘Appreciating Bad Art’, *Journal of Value Inquiry* 51 (2017), 279-292, at 280

⁷⁶ See Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, 90-106.

A notable exception to this may be the intuitive plausibility of comic immoralism, which is why I suggested earlier that it may help immoralists with advancing their case, though I also offered my reservations as to why this is unlikely to succeed.

Even if this is not the case, it is now up to the proponent of immoralism and similar views to show us why.

6. Conclusion

I began by arguing that Eaton's recent defence of immoralism suffers from precisely the flaws that she attributes to previous accounts and that she purports to overcome: most conspicuously, it rests on covert moralist assumptions. I then introduced a debate from moral philosophy concern whether or not there is such a thing as admirable immorality, by way of showing that, first, no one in that debate construes their position in the way immoralists in aesthetics do, and that, second, some proponents of admirable immorality also betray moralist sympathies. By way of ending on a conciliatory note, I suggested three simple strategies that would boost the immoralist case, though I also expressed my reservations, particularly with regard to the most promising of these, namely an appeal to comic immoralism, since adherents of this view follow a similar pattern of argument as aesthetic immoralists and proponents of admirable immorality. My arguments reveal a pattern of flawed argument that cannot but seriously undermine the prospects of immoralism: immoralism stands either unsupported, or, when supported, it is covertly moralistic and so unsustainable. At any rate, the burden of proof clearly lies with proponents of immoralism and related positions.⁷⁷

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