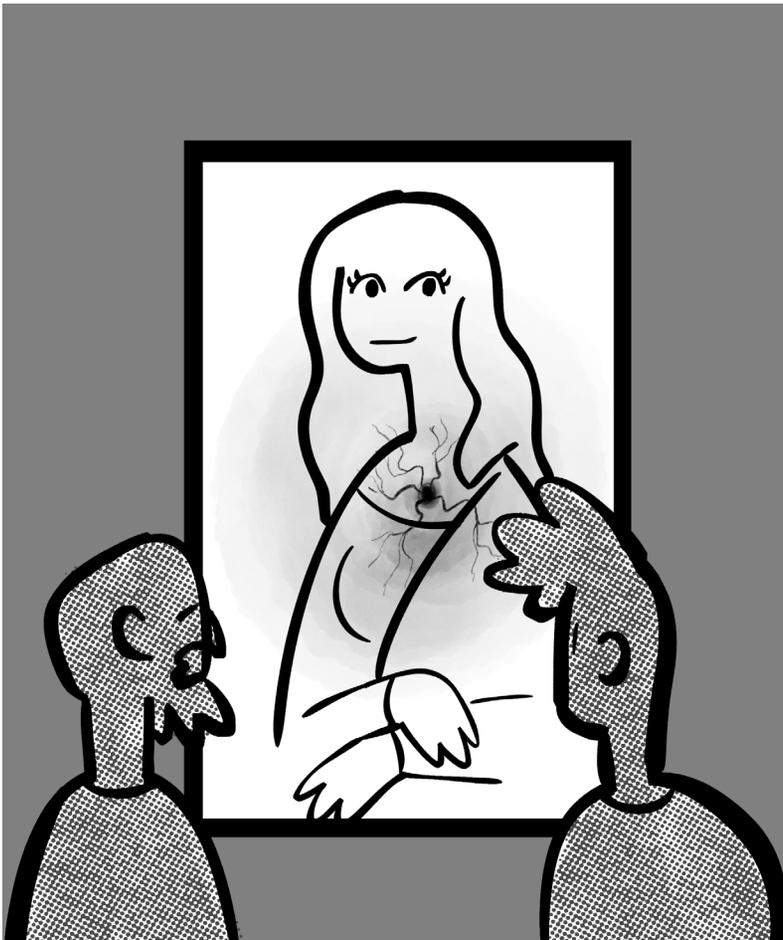


IN DEFENSE OF IMMORALISM: Can an Ethical Flaw in an Artwork Make It Aesthetically Better?



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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates whether an ethical flaw in an artwork can be an aesthetic merit. I explore two versions of immoralism from Eaton and Kieran. I will defend the immoralist claim that artworks containing rough heroes are ethically flawed. I will then argue that an indirect connection between an ethical flaw and aesthetic merit is sufficient for immoralism, so long as it is a necessary connection. On this understanding of immoralism, I will argue that Eaton and Kieran are both successful in showing that an ethical flaw in an artwork can make it aesthetically better.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Whilst it is generally acknowledged that a work of art can have both ethical and aesthetic values, there is debate about the extent to which these values coincide; do the ethical values of an artwork impact its aesthetic value in any way? Moralism answers that yes, ethical values are tied to aesthetic value. Autonomism, on the other hand, argues that a work of art should not be evaluated morally. Then, there is a relatively new view which goes by the name of immoralism. This is the theory that, in some cases, an ethical defect in an artwork can make it aesthetically better; that the art is aesthetically good *in virtue of* its ethical flaws. In this essay, I will explore immoralism, particularly as it is argued for by A.W. Eaton and Matthew Kieran. I will first defend the claim that works containing rough heroes are ethically flawed. I will then use Panos Paris' distinction between direct and indirect immoralism to argue for robust, indirect immoralism. I will argue that an indirect connection, so long as it is necessary, between an ethical flaw and aesthetic merit is sufficient for immoralism. I will then argue that both Eaton and Kieran succeed in showing that an ethical flaw in an artwork can be an aesthetic merit because they have both shown there to be a necessary, indirect connection between the two.

II. IMMORALISM AND ROUGH HEROES

For an artwork to be ethically flawed, it must endorse an immoral attitude. An artwork contains an ethical flaw if it seems to “*condone, inculcate, advocate* or otherwise invite the audience *actually to endorse or to adopt an immoral attitude.*”¹ If a film depicts a brutal murder, it can evoke horror from the audience. Perhaps the murderer is a sadist, intent on inflicting the greatest possible harm, while the victim might be a character that we have grown to love. In instances such as this, where the audience is encouraged to be disturbed by the scene and to condemn the murderer, there is no ethical flaw. Alternatively, a film may depict a brutal murder but encourage viewers to enjoy and condone it. Perhaps the murderer is magnetic and charismatic, whilst the victim is cruel or just dull. Similarly, the murder could be shown in a way that is comical, causing an audience to laugh at the victim's demise. It is this *endorsement* of an immoral attitude that constitutes the ethical flaw in the artwork. If a piece of art contains an ethical flaw, encouraging an immoral attitude,

the question is if this takes away from the art's aesthetic value. In other words, if a film is beautifully shot and expertly written, but manifests an immoral attitude, is the aesthetic value of the artwork diminished?

Immoralism has an interesting answer to this question. It argues that, sometimes, an ethical flaw in a work of art can make it aesthetically better. The claim is not that an artwork can be aesthetically great despite being ethically flawed, rather it can be aesthetically great *because* it is ethically flawed. Some immoralist arguments appeal to “rough heroes,” or characters who display distinctly likable traits such as being charismatic, funny, or caring, but are in some way deeply immoral, for example they regularly commit immoral acts.² According to immoralism, an artwork that encourages us to admire, like, or empathize with overtly immoral characters is both ethically flawed and aesthetically meritorious.

An example of rough heroes can be found in Vincent and Jules from *Pulp Fiction*, for whom murder is part of their daily routine. It hardly needs pointing out that people do not ordinarily condone murder. Despite this, *Pulp Fiction* encourages us to admire and root for Vincent and Jules due to their likable attributes of being charismatic, humorous, and loyal. We know that we should not like them, because they casually murder people throughout the film, and yet we cannot help but love them.

Eaton and Kieran offer slightly different arguments for immoralism. In order to grasp Eaton's argument, we must understand what she calls “imaginative resistance,” which refers to the reluctance we may feel to empathize with fictional characters that we deem to be immoral.³ For Eaton, the aesthetic achievement in immoral art is the artist's ability to influence the audience into liking rough heroes, overcoming their imaginative resistance in doing so. It is a mark of aesthetic achievement that we are fond of Vincent and Jules, despite being reluctant to admire murderers. Eaton also argues that works containing rough heroes are aesthetically good because they cause us to be in conflict with ourselves. A part of us knows that we should not sympathize with these immoral characters, yet the other part of us cannot help but do so. Eaton claims that “this indefinite protracted state of ambivalence is precisely what makes certain immoral works *compelling.*”⁴

Kieran begins his argument with the cognitivist claim that “the value of art, at least in part, is a function of the ways a work may deepen our understanding or appreciation.”⁵ Therefore, an artwork's ability to

2 A.W. Eaton, “Robust Immoralism,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70, no. 3 (2012): 282.

3 Eaton, “Robust Immoralism,” 285.

4 Eaton, “Robust Immoralism,” 287.

5 Matthew Kieran, “Forbidden Knowledge: The Challenge of Immoralism,” in *Art and Morality*, ed. José Luis Bermúdez and Sebastian Gardner (New York: Routledge, 2003), 58.

1 Panos Paris, “The ‘Moralism’ in Immoralism: A Critique of Immoralism in Aesthetics,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 59, no.1 (2019): 15-16.



deepen our understanding is an aesthetic merit. He then argues that ethically flawed works achieve this merit by affording us knowledge that would not be gained without this ethical flaw. Kieran discusses Greene's short story *The Destructors*, in which two boys are competing for the leadership of a London gang. The less likely candidate for leader devises a plan to destroy the house of a widower who gave the boys some chocolates. As a reader, we are delighted by the meticulous and devastating destruction of the house because we are rooting for the underdog to be accepted as the gang's leader. Kieran argues that our ability to empathize with the motivations behind such a vindictive act teaches us how far people may go to be accepted by a group, and why this acceptance is considered so important. Moreover, this story teaches us something about ourselves. We may be shocked to discover that our desire for the boy to become leader takes precedence over our concern about the widower, showing us that "ordinary good people may be seduced in perpetrating and delighting in evil acts."⁶ Kieran makes the additional point that "in order to fully appreciate and understand the nature of an experience, we require comparative cases."⁷ So, experiencing immoral attitudes and perspectives can actually enhance and enrich our understanding of what it means to be moral.

III. DO WORKS CONTAINING ROUGH HEROES MANIFEST AN IMMORAL ATTITUDE?

Noël Carroll argues that Eaton has not successfully demonstrated that rough hero works are immoral, writing that "liking bad guys is not immoral, so long as you don't endorse their misdeeds."⁸ Carroll contends that we are able to separate the admirable traits of a rough hero from their immoral traits, so we can find them funny or charming while still condemning their immoral actions. Of Tony Soprano, another rough hero, Carroll claims that "you can acknowledge his intelligence without morally approving of his use of it to dispose of the bodies of his victims."⁹ If Carroll is correct, then there is nothing immoral about liking rough heroes, for we only admire the nonmoral aspects of their character, remaining morally opposed to their wrongdoings. Works containing rough heroes do not endorse an immoral attitude after all, and therefore are not ethically flawed.

6 Kieran, "Forbidden Knowledge," 69.

7 Kieran, "Forbidden Knowledge," 63.

8 Noël Carroll, "Rough Heroes: A Response to A.W. Eaton," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71, no. 4 (2013): 373.

9 Carroll, "Rough Heroes," 373.

I do not find Carroll's objection convincing. I agree with Eaton that the best rough heroes are the ones whose appealing qualities are caught up in their immoral activities, preventing us from claiming that we only like one aspect of their character. It is also worth noting that this dissecting of personality traits is unnatural, and we are not usually able to isolate certain aspects of a person's character. This artificial way of viewing humans likens our personalities to a pie chart of distinct traits. Instead, we tend to think of our personalities as complicated Venn diagrams, where different traits overlap and influence each other. I also agree with Eaton's point that, on some occasions, we do root for the rough heroes to be immoral. The character of Jim Moriarty in BBC's *Sherlock* is a psychopath, and also incredibly charismatic. In one episode, Moriarty stylishly breaks into three top security locations.¹⁰ We watch as the police scramble to catch him, and root for Moriarty to succeed. In instances like this, we like the character so much that we actively want them to continue with their misdeeds, a straightforward contradiction to Carroll's objection.

Furthermore, even if we do not explicitly condone the rough hero's immoral behavior, our admiration of them is an ethical flaw itself. We are willing to overlook that these characters are deeply immoral because we find them funny or charming. We may say: "I love Vincent and Jules even though they are murderers." According to Carroll, this phrasing suggests that we are able to separate their likable traits from the immoral actions, and thus are not endorsing their crimes. On the contrary, I argue that this statement still displays an immoral attitude. In *Pulp Fiction*, when Vincent accidentally kills an innocent character, neither of the pair show any remorse, but treat it as another problem to deal with. This scene is intended to be comedic, and indeed, we laugh as the characters quibble about what to do. Clearly, our ordinary moral judgements are not at play here. Ordinarily, we would not find it amusing if someone accidentally shot someone else in the face then complained about the mess. Similarly, in real life, if someone said of a charismatic killer: "I love them even though they are a murderer," then we would be appalled. Rough hero works do not need to encourage us to want the character to do immoral things to be ethically flawed. The mere fact these works encourage us to empathize with and admire such immoral characters is in itself manifesting an immoral attitude.

10 *Sherlock*, series 2, episode 3, "The Reichenbach Fall," written by Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, directed by Toby Haynes, aired January 15, 2012, on BBC.



IV. ROBUST, INDIRECT IMMORALISM

I have defended the claim that a rough hero is an ethical flaw in an artwork, but immoralism must also show that this flaw is an aesthetic merit. Paris states that for immoralism to succeed, the connection established between the ethical flaw and aesthetic merit must be a “robust” one.¹¹ It cannot be that there is a weak connection between the flaw and merit, or that the merit might have been caused by something other than the flaw itself. Paris allows that this robust connection can be direct or indirect. An indirect connection may include a “merit that mediates between the ethical and aesthetic.”¹² This connection remains robust if the mediating merit is “part and parcel” of the ethical flaw.¹³ For reasons I will shortly discuss, Paris argues that Eaton fails to establish a robust connection of either kind.

Whilst it is clear from the title of her paper that Eaton aims to establish a robust form of immoralism, she does not distinguish between direct and indirect connections. However, her criticisms of Kieran’s argument imply that she wishes to posit a direct connection between flaw and merit. Eaton complains that, in identifying the aesthetic merit of immoral work as the ability to deepen our moral understanding, Kieran has shown that “what makes an artwork aesthetically good is not the immoral feature per se but, rather, the moral insight that it yields.”¹⁴ He traces the aesthetic merit to the fact that the artwork enhances our understanding rather than to the ethical flaw itself. This objection suggests that Eaton wishes to trace the aesthetic merit to the ethical flaw, not to some intermediate merit. This is further reinforced by the fact that Eaton recognizes that Kieran’s merits are achieved by “first drawing the audience into an immoral perspective,” but insists that this is not sufficient for immoralism if the resulting merit is not immoral.¹⁵

If Eaton desires to establish a robust, direct immoralism, then I agree that she fails to do so. This is because, as Paris points out, she identifies the merit of ethically flawed works as a compelling feature caused by moral ambivalence, not as the ethical flaw itself. Interestingly, this is the very issue that she identifies with Kieran’s immoralism. The resurfacing of this problem implies that it is not only an issue for Kieran or Eaton’s individual arguments, but for immoralism generally. It seems that robust, direct immoralism is a rather difficult position to

defend. When the immoralist attempts to explain *why* an ethical flaw is also an aesthetic merit, they will inevitably run into the objection that they are identifying the merit as something other than the ethical flaw. Alternatively, if the immoralist states simply that the artwork is meritorious because it is immoral, they will likely be accused of begging the question. Fortunately for immoralism, I do not think that a direct connection between the ethical flaw and aesthetic merit is required to demonstrate that an artwork can be aesthetically better in virtue of an ethical flaw. I will now focus on using both Eaton and Kieran’s arguments to defend a robust, indirect immoralism.

When outlining what is required for a robust, indirect connection, Paris reiterates that it must not be possible for the intermediate merit to be caused by anything other than the ethical flaw itself. He argues that Eaton has failed to show this, as her merit of ambivalence could be caused by some other nonmoral feature. He imagines a character who is ridiculous but has many likable attributes, claiming that this character would generate a similar ambivalence in us, albeit a nonmoral one, and would therefore make the work compelling by Eaton’s own argument. He then claims that “it neither follows that the aesthetic value is grounded in ridiculousness nor would it be possible to trace aesthetic value there.”¹⁶

I agree that, in this instance, we would not trace the aesthetic value to ridiculousness. However, the point of rough heroes is that they encourage an immoral attitude, and thereby are immoral. This causes the aesthetic merit, not the immorality of the character per se. Therefore, this analogy would only succeed if this character encouraged a ridiculous attitude in the audience. So, the immoralist can acknowledge that we would not identify the aesthetic value as ridiculousness but rather deny that this has any relevance to their argument.

Moreover, I do not agree that a similar ambivalence could be created from such a character. There is nothing problematic about liking someone ridiculous. There is no reason for us to feel any imaginative resistance to liking such a character. Perhaps we would be surprised to find that we like someone so ridiculous, but since being ridiculous is quite harmless, I do not see why we would find this disturbing in any way. There is something very different about liking a deeply immoral character, and we are far more resistant to doing so. The uncomfortable feeling we experience when endorsing an immoral attitude is not remotely similar to finding that someone’s likable traits outweigh their nonmoral, but otherwise unlikeable traits. It is this troubling ambivalence that makes ethically flawed works compelling, not just any ambivalence. The unsettling “state of irresolvable conflict with ourselves” that Eaton speaks of could not be

11 Paris, “The ‘Moralism’ in Immoralism,” 15.

12 Paris, “The ‘Moralism’ in Immoralism,” 16.

13 Paris, “The ‘Moralism’ in Immoralism,” 16.

14 Eaton, “Robust Immoralism,” 289.

15 Eaton, “Robust Immoralism,” 289.

16 Paris, “The ‘Moralism’ in Immoralism,” 22.



brought about by something so mundane.¹⁷ Admiring or rooting for an immoral character violates our most basic principles, and it is this tug-of-war with ourselves that makes the works so compelling. Therefore, the ethical flaw is necessary for the meritorious ambivalence to occur.

A similar argument can be made for Kieran's immoralism. We could not discover that we are able to find pleasure in the destruction of a kind man's house unless *The Destructors* did not encourage us to do so. If we were not rooting for the boy to gain the respect of the gang and were horrified by his plan, then there would be no ethical flaw; but also, the merit of deepening our cognitive understanding about the potential consequences of the human desire for approval could not be achieved. Kieran also argues that we need to experience immorality to gain a deeper appreciation of morality. Once more, this understanding is dependent on us being exposed to an immoral attitude, such as the endorsement of the boys' act. It seems that, again, the merits that Kieran argues for could not have occurred without the ethical flaws.

If a robust, indirect connection between ethical flaw and aesthetic merit requires that the latter be necessarily caused by the former, then both Eaton and Kieran have succeeded in establishing such a connection. I recognize that Eaton would not want her argument grouped in with Kieran's, due to her complaint that his immoralism collapses into moralism, through his identification of the overall aesthetic merit as a moral one. Eaton only seems to be considering one aspect of Kieran's account, as the aesthetic merit of deepening our understanding about ourselves is not necessarily a moral outcome. Even so, identifying the aesthetic merit as enhancing our non-moral understanding would still fall prey to Paris' objections that we saw previously. For this reason, I do not think the fact that Kieran's aesthetic merits have a moral shape is nearly as relevant as Eaton believes. Whether the ultimate merit is moral or not, the crucial point for immoralism is that the ethical flaw in the artwork is necessary for this merit to occur. I argue that Kieran demonstrated this.

Paris would likely respond that I still have not shown the ethical flaw *itself* to be an aesthetic merit. He writes that "immorality contributes to, or even is necessary for, the emotional ambivalence, whilst coherently maintaining that the immorality itself remains a defect."¹⁸ I simply do not see how one could do this. Ethical flaws aside, if we believe a feature of an artwork to cause an aesthetic merit to occur, then we would not label it an aesthetic defect. This can be seen in skilled writing that causes the aesthetic merit of well-developed characters or in skillful camerawork that causes the aesthetic merit of being visually beautiful. Insofar as

these features directly contribute to their meritorious outcome, we consider them to be meritorious themselves. Paris must therefore offer an argument as to why this would be different in the case of an ethical flaw. He attempts to do so by using Eaton's imaginative resistance argument. He claims that, in emphasizing the artistic skill involved in getting us to like rough heroes, Eaton presents immorality as a flaw to be overcome, so in itself it remains a defect. He appears to read Eaton as identifying the immorality of the rough hero as a flaw which the artist skillfully overcomes by endowing them with likable qualities and encouraging us to admire them. In this sense, the immorality of the character is "introduced deliberately as a challenge to be overcome."¹⁹

This appears to be a straightforward misreading of Eaton and contradicts Paris' own definition of an ethical flaw. Again, for an aspect of a work to be considered immoral, it must encourage an immoral attitude rather than merely depict one. If we were presented with an immoral character but not encouraged to like them, there would be no ethical flaw. The artistic skill involved in getting us to overcome our imaginative resistance to liking such immoral characters *creates* the ethical flaw in the work. It is not that the artist skillfully overcomes the immorality of the character, rather, the skill is in the artist's ability to manifest an immoral attitude in the audience, one that would not be manifested if our imaginative resistance to liking an immoral character was not overcome. If Paris intends here to strengthen his objection that the ethical flaw remains an aesthetic defect, then he fails to do so.

V. CONCLUSION

Immoralism is the theory that some artworks can be aesthetically better because they contain an ethical flaw. An ethical flaw is defined as the endorsement of an immoral attitude. I have defended the immoralist claim that rough hero works, which encourage us to admire and root for immoral characters, do indeed endorse an immoral attitude, and are therefore ethically flawed. A problem occurs when immoralists attempt to explain the aesthetic merit that an ethical flaw produces, as it appears that they are identifying the merit as something other than the flaw itself. This is why Eaton criticizes Kieran and why, in turn, Paris criticizes Eaton. This is only an issue for robust, direct immoralism. I have defended a robust, indirect version of immoralism, arguing that both Eaton and Kieran demonstrate a necessary connection between the ethical flaw and aesthetic merit that it produces. This is sufficient to show that an ethical flaw in an artwork can be an aesthetic merit.

¹⁷ Eaton, "Robust Immoralism," 287.

¹⁸ Paris, "The 'Moralism' in Immoralism," 22.

¹⁹ Paris, "The 'Moralism' in Immoralism," 24.





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