



# Teaching & Learning Guide for: Art, Morality and Ethics: On the (Im)moral Character of Art Works and Inter-Relations to Artistic Value

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## ***Author's Introduction***

Up until fairly recently it was philosophical orthodoxy – at least within analytic aesthetics broadly construed – to hold that the appreciation and evaluation of works as art and moral considerations pertaining to them are conceptually distinct. However, following on from the idea that artistic value is broader than aesthetic value, the last 15 years has seen an explosion of interest in exploring possible inter-relationships between the appreciative and ethical character of works as art. Consideration of these issues has a distinguished philosophical history but as the *Compass* survey article suggests ('Art, Morality and Ethics: On the (Im)moral Character of Art Works and Inter-Relations to Artistic Value.' *Philosophy Compass* 1.2 (2006): 129–43), it is only very recently that figures in the field have returned to it to develop more precisely what they take the relationships to be and why. Consensus is, unsurprisingly, lacking. The reinvigoration of the issues has led sophisticated formalists or autonomists to mount a more considered defence of the idea that aesthetic and literary values are indeed conceptually distinct from the justification or otherwise of the moral perspective or views endorsed in a work (Topic I). The challenges presented by such a defence are many but amongst them are appeals to critical practice (Lamarque and Olsen), scepticism about whether or not art really can give us bona fide knowledge (Stolnitz) and the recognition that truth often seems to be far removed from what it is we value in our appreciation of works (Lamarque).

One way to motivate consideration of the relevance of a work's moral character to its artistic value concerns the phenomena of imaginative resistance. At least sometimes it would seem that, as Hume originally suggested, we either cannot or will not enter imaginatively into the perspective solicited by a work due to its morally problematic character (Topic II). In some cases, it would seem that as a matter of psychological fact, we cannot do so since it is impossible for us to imagine how it could be that a certain attitude or action is morally permissible or good (Walton). The question then is whether or not this is a function of morality in particular or constraints on imaginative possibility more generally and what else is involved. At other times, the phenomena seem to be driven by a moral reluctance to allow ourselves to enter into the dramatic perspective involved (Moran) or evaluation of the attitude expressed (Stokes). Nonetheless, it is far from obvious that this is so of all the attitudes or responses we judge to be morally problematic. After all, it looks like we can and indeed often do suspend or background particular cognitive and moral commitments in engaging with all sorts of works (Nichols and Weinberg). If the moral character of a work

interacts with how we appreciate and evaluate them, then the pressing question is this: is there any systematic account of the relationship available to us?

One way is to consider the relationship between our emotional responses to works and their moral character (Topic III). After all, art works often solicit various emotional responses from us to follow the work and make use of moral concepts in so doing (Carroll). Indeed, whether or not a work merits the sought for emotional responses often seems to be internally related to ethical considerations (Gaut). Yet, it is not obvious that we should apply our moral concepts or respond emotionally in our imaginative engagement with works as art as we should in real life (Kieran, Jacobson).

A different route is via the thought that art can convey knowledge (Topic IV). There might be particular kinds of moral knowledge art distinctively suited to conveying (Nussbaum) or it may just be that art does so particularly effectively (Carroll, Gaut, Kieran). Either way where this can be tied to the artistic means and appreciation of a work it would seem that to cultivate moral understanding contributes to the value of a work and to betray misunderstanding is a defect.

Without denying the relevance of the moral character of a work some authors have wanted to claim that sometimes the immoral aspect of a work can contribute to rather than lessen its artistic value (Topic V). One route is to claim that there is no systematic theoretical account of the relationship available and what the right thing to say is depends on the particular case involved (Jacobson). Another involves the claim that this is so when the defect connects up in an appropriate way to one of the values of art. Thus, it has been claimed, only where a work reveals something which adds to intelligibility, knowledge or understanding in virtue of its morally problematic aspect can this be so (Kieran). The latter position looks like it could in principle be held whilst nonetheless maintaining that the typical or standard relationship is as the moralists would have it. Yet perhaps allowing valence change for such reasons is less a mark of principled explanation and more a function of downright inconsistency or incoherence (Harold).

The topics themselves and suggested readings given below follow the structure articulated above as further amplified in the Compass survey article. The design and structure given below can be easily compressed or expanded further.

### **Author Recommends**

1. Carroll, Noël. 'Art, Narrative and Moral Understanding.' *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essay at the Intersection*. Ed. Jerrold Levinson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. 126–60.  
This article develops the idea that engaging with narrative art calls on moral concepts and emotions and can thereby clarify our moral understanding.
2. Carroll, Noël. *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009.  
Part IV consists of six distinct essays on questions concerning the inter-relationships between art and morality including the essay cited above and the author's articulation and defence of moderate moralism.
3. Gaut, Berys. 'The Ethical Criticism of Art.' *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essay at the Intersection*. Ed. Jerrold Levinson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. 182–203.
4. Gaut, Berys. *Art, Emotion and Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007.  
This monograph provides the most exhaustive treatment of the issues and defends the claim that, where relevant, whenever a work is morally flawed it is of lesser value as art and wherever it is morally virtuous the work's value as art is enhanced. Chapters 7 and 8 defend concern ethical knowledge and chapter 10 is a development of

the article cited above concerning emotional responses. Chapter 3 also gives a useful conceptual map of the issues and options in the debate.

5. Jacobson, Daniel. 'In Praise of Immoral Art.' *Philosophical Topics* 25 (1997): 155–99.  
A wide ranging and extended treatment of relevant issues which objects to generalising moral treatments of our responses to art works and defends the idea that particular works can be better because of rather than despite their moral defects.
6. Kieran, Matthew. 'Forbidden Knowledge: The Challenge of Cognitive Immoralism.' *Art and Morality*. Ed. Sebastian Gardner and José Luis Bermúdez. London: Routledge, 2003. 56–73.  
A general argument for immoralism is elaborated by outlining when, where and why a work's morally problematic character can contribute to its artistic value for principled reasons (through enhancing moral understanding).
7. Kieran, Matthew. *Revealing Art*. London: Routledge, 2005. Chapter 4.  
This chapter argues against both aestheticism and straightforward moralism about art, elaborating a defence of immoralism in relation to visual art whilst ranging over issues from pornographic art to the nature and demands of different genres in art.
8. Lamarque, Peter. 'Cognitive Values in the Arts: Marking the Boundaries.' *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. Ed. Matthew Kieran. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, 127–39.  
This article concisely outlines and defends a sophisticated aestheticism that denies the importance of truth to artistic value.
9. Stolnitz, Jerome. 'On the Cognitive Triviality of Art.' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 32.3 (1992): 191–200.  
This article articulates and defends the claim that no knowledge of any interesting or significant kind can be afforded by works appreciated and evaluated as art.
10. Walton, Kendall. 'Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality, I.' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Suppl.* 68 (1994): 27–51.  
This article builds on some comments from Hume to develop the idea that when engaging with fictions it seems impossible imaginatively to enter into radically deviant moral attitudes.

### **Online Materials**

'Aesthetics and Ethics: The State of the Art.' *American Society of Aesthetics* online (Jeffrey Dean):

<[http://www.aesthetics-online.org/articles/index.php?articles\\_id=15](http://www.aesthetics-online.org/articles/index.php?articles_id=15)>.

'Art, Censorship and Morality' downloadable podcast of Nigel Warburton interviewing Matthew Kieran at Tate Britain (BBC/OU Open2.net as part of the Ethics Bites series):

<<http://www.open2.net/ethicsbites/art-censorship-morality.html>>.

'Art, Morality and Ethics: On the (Im)Moral Character of Art Works and Inter-Relations to Artistic Value.' *Philosophy Compass* 1.2 (2006): 129–43 (Matthew Kieran):

<<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/118557779/abstract>>.

'Ethical Criticism of Art.' *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Ella Peek):

<<http://www.iep.utm.edu/a/art-eth.htm>>.

'Fascinating Fascism.' *New York Review of Books* Piece Discussing Leni Riefenstahl (Susan Sontag):

<<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/9280>>.

'The Beheading of St. John the Baptist (1450s), Giovanni de Paolo' (Tom Lubbock):

<<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/great-works/great-works-the-beheading-of-st-john-the-baptist-1450s-giovanni-di-paolo-1684900.html>>.

Vladimir Nabokov and Lionel Trilling discuss Lolita (CBS):

<<http://www.listal.com/video/3848698>>.

## Sample Syllabus

### Topic I Autonomism/Aestheticism

- Anderson, James C. and Jeffrey T. Dean. 'Moderate Autonomism.' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38.2 (1998): 150–66.
- Beardsley, Monroe. *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958. Chapter 12.
- Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgement*. Trans. James Creed Meredith. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1952 [1790].
- Lamarque, Peter. 'Cognitive Values in the Arts: Marking the Boundaries.' *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. Ed. Matthew Kieran. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, 127–39.
- ——. 'Tragedy and Moral Value.' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73.2 (1995): 239–49.
- Lamarque, Peter and Stein Olsen. *Truth, Fiction and Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994. Chapter 10.
- Stolnitz, Jerome. 'On the Cognitive Triviality of Art.' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 32.3 (1992): 191–200.

### Topic II Imaginative Capacities, Intelligibility and Resistance

- Moran, Richard. 'The Expression of Feeling in Imagination.' *Philosophical Review* 103.1 (1994): 75–106.
- Nichols, Shaun. 'Just the Imagination: Why Imagining Doesn't Behave Like Believing.' *Mind & Language* 21.4 (2006): 459–74.
- Stokes, Dustin. 'The Evaluative Character of Imaginative Resistance.' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 46.4 (2006): 387–405.
- Tanner, Michael. 'Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality, II'. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Suppl. Vol.* 68 (1994): 51–66.
- Walton, Kendall (1994). 'Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality, I'. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Suppl. Vol.* 68 (1994): 27–51.
- Weinberg, Jonathan. 'Configuring the Cognitive Imagination.' *New Waves in Aesthetics*. Eds. K. Stock and K. Thomson-Jones. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 203–23.

### Topic III Moralism and Emotions

- Carroll, Noël. 'Moderate Moralism.' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36.3 (1996): 223–37.
- Carroll, Noël. 'Art, Narrative and Moral Understanding.' *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essay at the Intersection*. Ed. Jerrold Levinson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. 126–60.
- Gaut, Berys. *Art, Emotion and Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. Chapter 10.
- ——. 'The Ethical Criticism of Art.' *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essay at the Intersection*. Ed. Jerrold Levinson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. 182–203.

- Hume, David. 'Of the Standard of Taste.' *Selected Essays*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993 [1757]. 133–53.
- Kieran, Matthew. 'Emotions, Art and Immorality.' *Oxford Handbook to the Philosophy of Emotions*. Ed. Peter Goldie. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 681–703.
- Tolstoy, Leo. *What is Art?*. London: Penguin, 2004. Chapters 5 and 15.

#### **Topic IV Moralism and Knowledge**

- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. M. Heath. London: Penguin, 1996 [367–322 BC].
- Carroll, Noël. 'The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature and Moral Knowledge.' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60.1 (2002): 3–26.
- Gaut, Berys. *Art, Emotion and Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. Chapters 7 and 8.
- Gaut, Berys. 'Art and Cognition.' *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. Ed. Matthew Kieran. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006. 115–26.
- Kieran, Matthew. 'Art, Imagination and the Cultivation of Morals.' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54.4 (1996): 337–51.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible: Literature and the Moral Imagination.' *Love's Knowledge*. New York: Oxford UP, 1990. 148–68.
- Plato. *The Republic*. Trans. D. Lee. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974. Book 10.

#### **Topic V Immoralist Contextualism**

- Harold, James. 'Immoralism and the Valence Constraint.' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48.1 (2008): 45–64.
- Jacobson, Daniel. 'In Praise of Immoral Art.' *Philosophical Topics* 25 (1997): 155–99.
- ———. 'Ethical Criticism and the Vices of Moderation.' *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. Ed. Matthew Kieran. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006. 342–55.
- John, Eileen. 'Artistic Value and Moral Opportunism.' *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. Ed. Matthew Kieran. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006. 331–41.
- Kieran, Matthew. 'Forbidden Knowledge: The Challenge of Cognitive Immoralism.' *Art and Morality*. Ed. Sebastian Gardner and José Luis Bermúdez. London: Routledge, 2003. 56–73.
- Kieran, Matthew. *Revealing Art*. London: Routledge, 2005. Chapter 4.
- Patridge, Stephanie. 'Moral Vices as Artistic Virtues: Eugene Onegin and Alice.' *Philosophia* 36.2 (2008): 181–93.

#### **Focus Questions**

1. What is the strongest argument for the claim that the moral character of a work is not relevant to its artistic value? Does artistic or literary criticism tend to concern itself with the truth or morality of works? If so, in what ways? If not, why do you think this is?
2. What different explanations might there be for difficulty with or resistance to imaginatively entering into attitudes you take to be immoral? How might this relate to the way our imaginings work as contrasted with belief? How might different literary or artistic treatments of the same subject matter make a difference?
3. How do narrative works draw on our moral concepts and responses? Can we suspend our normal moral commitments or application of moral concepts in responding

emotionally to art works? Should we respond emotionally to art works as we ought to respond to real world events we witness? Why? Why not?

4. How, if at all, do art works convey moral understanding? How, if at all, is this related to the kinds of moral knowledge art works can teach or reveal to us? When, where and why might this be tied to the artistic value of a work? How can we tell where a work enhances our moral understanding as opposed to misleading or distorting it?
5. What art works do you value overall as art which commend or endorse moral values and attitudes that you do not? Is appreciation of them always marred or lessened by the morally dubious aspect? If not, what explains the differences in evaluation? What, if anything, might you learn by engaging with works which endorse moral attitudes or apply moral concepts different from those you take to be justified? How, if at all, might this connect up with what makes them valuable as art?