

CONTRARY FEELINGS AND THE COGNITIVE SIGNIFICANCE OF ART

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Emotional response to artworks as a source of moral training or experimentation has long been disputed in the history of aesthetics. In this article I address the matter by focusing upon a kind of specimen that may be especially troublesome for an advocate of art's capacity to educate our sentiments. The cases I focus upon – which I place under the label of the asymmetry problem – are those in which our emotional or evaluative response seems contrary to the one we would have expected when the represented contents are real. I critically review some of the main arguments offered to explain these cases and to challenge the role of art in improving morals. I seek to explain why these responses are not as problematic as one may initially think and to consider in a new light art's capacity to shape our sensibilities.

Gegensätzliche Gefühle und die Bedeutung von Kunst für die Erkenntnis

In der Geschichte der Ästhetik wurde das emotionale Reagieren auf Kunstwerke lange Zeit als eine Übungs- und Experimentierfeld moralischer Verbesserung diskutiert. Der Artikel behandelt dieses Thema, indem er seine Aufmerksamkeit auf ein Phänomen richtet, das für jene besonders beunruhigend sein könnte, die die Fähigkeit der Kunst zur Erziehung unserer Gefühle verteidigen. Die hier in den Blick genommenen Fälle – die der Autor dem „Problem der Asymmetrie“ zuordnet – sind solche, in denen unsere emotionale bzw. evaluative Reaktion jener entgegen gesetzt scheint, die wir erwarten würden, wenn die vorgestellten Inhalte real wären. Zunächst werden die Hauptargumente kritisch gewürdigt, die vorgebracht wurden, um solche Fälle zu erklären und die Rolle der Kunst für die moralische Erbauung in Frage zu stellen. Dann werden Gründe dafür vorgebracht, warum diese Argumente gar nicht so problematisch sind, wie man zunächst annehmen würde, und dafür die Fähigkeit der Kunst, unser ethisches Empfindungsvermögen zu fördern, in einem neuen Licht zu betrachten.

It appears to be more or less generally assumed that we respond emotionally to representational works of art and, moreover, that this aspect of our engagement with them is a basic constituent of their appreciation.¹ This feature seems to afford an experiential dimension to our engagement with art, so that we really exercise evaluative and emotional abilities while engaging with works of art. Furthermore, it is by virtue of art's capacity for affording this experiential dimension that artworks may be considered good devices to employ in an attempt to test our moral psychology. Consequently, art sometimes allows one to experiment, judge, and respond to situations one would probably not encounter in real life, so that one's evaluative and psychological profile can be

¹ I will not address the problem known as the 'paradox of fiction'. For the purposes of this article we need only acknowledge some sort of response to the artwork regardless of whether those states are real emotions or quasi-emotions.

tested and expanded. On the basis of this feature of the appreciation of art a particular experiential cognitive value has been attached to art.² The way this cognitive value is understood is strongly linked to the capacity of works of art to arouse emotional responses – and corresponding evaluative judgements – to the events and characters represented. Consequently, rather than being a sort of propositional knowledge, artworks can provide a kind of experiential knowledge by making the spectator exercise her evaluative abilities.

I shall in this discussion more or less take for granted that art possesses this kind of experiential dimension and shall endeavour to defend the view that this dimension can be of cognitive importance. I will focus upon some cases that may reasonably be considered problematic for this assumption. These are cases where we seem to respond to the events represented by the work in ways that are at odds with the ways we would usually respond when those events are real. I have in mind, for example, the admiration, or at least, sympathy, one can feel for the main character of Patricia Highsmith's novel *The Talented Mr Ripley* or the indulgent attitude we may have towards Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. Since they typically prescribe and warrant evaluative responses that seem contrary to the responses one would take as warranted were the situations real – or so one thinks in principle – I will refer to these puzzling responses as 'asymmetry' cases. So an argument against the attribution of cognitive value to art could reasonably make reference to these asymmetry cases in order to ground a sceptical attitude towards the cognitive value of our responses to works of art. If they are sometimes contrary to what we think would be the proper judgement, they apparently cannot possess the epistemic validity we could have attributed to them in principle. The question then becomes: If some works of art make us respond in ways that are at odds with the response that would be warranted were the situations perceived real, can we still grant that the experiential aspect of our engagement with works of art is cognitively valuable? Can our responses to artworks be regarded as a form of *éducation sentimentale*? The problem has to do not only with cases in which we respond asymmetrically, but also with our general trust in art; that is, the asymmetry problem contaminates our general expectations about the cognitive value of our responses to artworks. As opposed to a more common discussion about the cognitive value of artworks, my concern is not whether

² Perhaps the earliest defence of this claim is in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Much later, Sir Philip Sidney and, well after him, Percy Bysshe Shelley became prominent defenders of this idea. In contemporary aesthetics the debate has been revived and Iris Murdoch, Eileen John, Dorothy Walsh, and Matthew Kieran, among others, have offered several reasons in support of the idea that art can afford this sort of experiential knowledge.

artworks can possess a propositional cognitive value. Rather, I am interested in a fine characterization of our typical responsive engagement with artworks and in the possible cognitive affordances that could derive from such experience. I shall now concentrate on asymmetry cases and on how we should explain and understand them in the first place and whether they really threaten our confidence in relying on our emotional engagement with artworks as a source of moral enhancement or knowledge.

Regarding the first point, I will review some possible explanations of why asymmetry cases occur. In doing so, I will touch on some general arguments against the idea that emotional responses to fictional or imagined contents and to real or believed situations should not be regarded as being in a continuum. Not surprisingly, these explanations also provide indirect support to the idea that we should not take our responses to artworks as possessing the particular cognitive value that I am interested in here. I thus wish to explore the accuracy of these explanations with regard to the asymmetry problem as I have presented it here.

We can usefully classify them into two broad groups. The first group attributes the lack of epistemic value of the outputs of the imagination to the unconstrained character of imagination. Given that imagination – unlike belief – is usually characterized as unrestricted, no firm epistemic value can be acknowledged to our responses in imagined contexts. Moreover, since our engagement with artworks is usually imaginative, we should not attribute any cognitive worth to our responses in artistic imaginative games.

The second group holds that we cannot take at face value our emotional responses to art because they are not structurally similar to real emotions; there could be two different sorts of reasons for their dissimilarity: (a) either artistic emotions involve mechanisms that are different from those that characterize real emotions or (b) their warranting conditions are different.

As I will try to demonstrate, none of the reasons offered within these two strategies undermines the possibility of taking our responses to artworks as a sort of moral exercise. They basically fall short of showing that our evaluative reasons fail to apply in the manner they ordinarily do and, hence, they are unable to prove there is a radical asymmetry or discontinuity between our emotional responses to art and life. This will also lead us to a reconsideration of the basic examples I have characterized as core cases of the asymmetry problem. It is an aim of this essay to show that this asymmetry is only apparent and, hence, poses no threat. In short, there are no sufficient reasons for showing that these sorts of puzzling responses are not valid exercises of our evaluative profile.

I. LACK OF EPISTEMIC ROBUSTNESS

Many authors agree upon the fact that imaginative processes are related to current beliefs and attitudes in important ways.³ It seems that, in many cases, we tend to process imagined and believed contents similarly or, at least, that both in belief and in imagination we respect equivalent constraints. For example, it is expected that if I imagine that $p \rightarrow q$, and I imagine p , I would probably imagine that q holds. The logical relations between the contents of my imagination tend to be on a par with the logical constraints on belief. Similarly, if I tend to value positively someone's generosity, I would probably tend to respond imaginatively with a positive feeling to my imagining that someone is generous. That is, the parallelism between imagination and belief also extends to evaluative dispositional abilities. So far, these similarities provide some reasonable ground for thinking our imaginative responses to certain events can be considered a useful guide in testing or anticipating possible responses in real life.

It also follows from a common view about imagination, however, that it is in many respects unconstrained and subject to the will. In fact, it seems that several examples confirm that one can at will imagine contents one cannot believe at will. For example, I may imagine that $2+2=5$ or that someone may travel in time or speak a new language out of the blue, whereas I cannot – at least, given evidence I can count on – believe any of these contents at will. It seems one could even imagine responding to the contents imagined in ways that are at odds with the ways one would respond in the corresponding real contexts. For example, I may imagine that someone's generosity is dreadful instead of admirable; and, hence, in doing so, I imagine myself responding and valuing people and events in ways that are contrary to my current evaluative profile.

If this is true, my responses to the imagined events presented in a particular work of art need not always match those that I would be inclined to have in real life – or that I consider warranted in an ordinary situation. Hence, this unlimited freedom to imagine and respond as I please may in important ways threaten the alleged connection between my imaginings and my beliefs in terms of the corresponding attitudes.

The idea that imagination is fully unconstrained can, however, be challenged. Many authors have addressed the limits of what can be imagined

³ Walton and Currie, among others, have pointed out that some intrinsic features of understanding fiction would be impossible if we did not assume that certain mental processes work in the same basic way in both fiction and reality. See, for example, Kendal L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), and Gregory Currie, *The Nature of Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

as well as the limits of how we can respond to what we imagine. In fact, the problem of 'imaginative resistance'⁴ has become commonplace in addressing the more general matter of the relationship between imagination and belief (or judgement). The restrictions upon imagination have been understood either in terms of the contents one can imagine or in terms of how one can possibly respond to her imaginings. Thus, authors such as Kathleen Stock have addressed the matter by focusing on the nature of the content that we seem unable to imagine.⁵ Stock's explanation, for example, is a version of the impossibility thesis, which holds we cannot imagine contents that involve some impossibility.⁶ On the other hand, authors such as Tamar S. Gendler or Richard Moran have defended the view that the inability or reluctance to respond to certain imagined contents in the ways prescribed by the fictional work is only apparent.⁷ For them, the main reason to explain 'imaginative resistance' is not that we are unable, strictly speaking, to imagine certain contents; rather, we refrain from responding in the ways prescribed because doing so would have unwelcome consequences for our psychological and moral life. Thus, it is not so much that one cannot imagine that another's torture might be fun, as it is that one feels reluctant to respond in the corresponding manner – that is, with the pleasure associated with its alleged 'funny' character – because responding in this way would turn some of one's basic attitudes and beliefs upside down. One may therefore find it difficult to respond as a particular work prescribes, because of the emotional and psychological payoff it entails.

In any case, the phenomenon of imaginative resistance shows not only that imagination might be constrained – or at least that the attitudes developed to what we imagine may be so –, but it also reveals that there seems to be continuity between one's responses to artistic contexts and to real contexts.

⁴ Some prominent contributions to the subject of imaginative resistance are Kendall L. Walton, 'Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality I', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 68 (1994): 27–50, and idem, 'On the (So-called) Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance', in *The Architecture of the Imagination*, ed. Shaun Nichols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 137–48; Tamar Szabó Gendler, 'The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance', *Journal of Philosophy* 97 (2000): 55–81; eadem, 'Imaginative Resistance Revisited', in Nichols, *Architecture of Imagination*, 149–74; Richard Moran, 'The Expression of Feeling in Imagination', *Philosophical Review* 103 (1994): 75–106; Brian Weatherson, 'Morality, Fiction, and Possibility', *Philosophers' Imprint*, 4 (2004): 1–27; Kathleen Stock, 'Resisting Imaginative Resistance', *Philosophical Quarterly* 5 (2005): 607–24; Dustin R. Stokes, 'The Evaluative Character of Imaginative Resistance', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 46 (2006): 387–405.

⁵ Kathleen Stock, 'Are We Free to Directly Imagine?' (conference paper, 67th ASA Annual Meeting, Denver, October 2009).

⁶ At face value, however, this view has at least some obvious counterexamples, such as some well-known drawings by Escher.

⁷ Szabó Gendler, 'Puzzle of Resistance'; Moran, 'Expression of Feeling'.

Thus, despite the alleged freedom of the imagination, the phenomenon of imaginative resistance could bring some support to the claim that one's emotions concerning works of art are responsive to similar constraints, just as one's emotions are responsive to real contexts. And it could therefore help to support the claim that they are symptoms of the presence of a similar evaluative profile. Given this continuity, one could legitimately claim that emotional responses to artistic representations are sensitive to the same patterns and reasons as current emotions are in real contexts. If the latter are trustworthy devices to capture our evaluative profile, why are not the former? Appealing to the flexible character of the imagination does not therefore seem to provide a conclusive argument against the possibility of testing our moral profile by means of our engagement with art.

One could reasonably argue that this picture of the relationship between the products of our imaginative responses and our responses to real events is not very promising if we aim at establishing that asymmetry cases do not undermine the cognitive value of artworks. The reason is that the asymmetry cases look exactly as if the continuity between our moral outlook in fiction and reality breaks down. The asymmetry cases clearly show that the evaluative profile of the spectator has different standards of application when dealing with imaginative cases. We would therefore still be obliged to provide an explanation for how to preserve confidence in emotional responses to art.

There is, however, still a possibility to dispel scepticism about asymmetry cases possibly enriching our moral outlooks. The interesting thing about these cases is that they do not typically trigger imaginative resistance on the part of the spectator. As a spectator one might be puzzled about one's response being quite unexpected compared to what one usually thinks one's evaluative profile is; but part of the puzzle consists precisely in one's not finding it difficult to respond in such a way, and that one felt that one's ordinary values and ways of judgement were in place. That is, the odd thing about the asymmetry cases lies more in the result than in the process through which the spectator – by applying her values and by exercising her judgemental abilities – reaches her judgement or gets to respond to the work. And in this sense the asymmetry cases do not reveal less attachment to our ordinary evaluative profile than the imaginative resistance cases do. The explanation of why they take place cannot therefore appeal to the unconstrained character of the imagination; for, in relation to that question, the asymmetry cases and the imaginative resistance cases have the same basis.

II. EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TO WORKS OF ART ARE NOT ON A PAR WITH REAL EMOTIONS

Another broad strategy to challenge the possible continuity between our emotional responses to works of art and reality is to focus upon the differences between the sorts of emotions that each can arouse. Within this general strategy we can identify at least two possible kinds of explanations. According to the first explanation, the reason that emotions aroused by fictional works of art and real events cannot be on a par is that each sort of emotion has a distinct underlying mechanism. As for the second explanation, fictional emotions distinguish themselves from real ones because they have different warranting conditions.

II.1. EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TO WORKS OF ART ARE STRUCTURALLY DIFFERENT FROM REAL EMOTIONS

The main reason this strategy offers to undermine the continuity between real and artistic emotions is that occasionally there is some difference in the way in which the content of each type of emotion is processed.⁸ That is, at least in some cases, imagining and belief do not process their contents in the same way and therefore the emotional outputs naturally diverge. This is compatible with the fact that, in general, imagination and belief generally are structurally similar. Nevertheless, one need only acknowledge the possibility that emotional responses to imaginings may sometimes differ from emotional responses to belief to question the validity of taking the former as reliable sources of moral training.

Additional substance for this strategy can be derived from some of Shaun Nichols's ideas on the relationships between belief and imagination. Although he has not, strictly speaking, offered a view about the epistemic status of our emotional responses towards imaginings, he has attempted to provide a theory of imagination in which the claim that there is some continuity between the processes of belief and of imagination⁹ and the claim that the output of imagination and of belief sometimes differ can both be accommodated. He thus claims that although in standard cases we expect the emotional output to

⁸ Although no one has elaborated this strategy as I present it here, I propose it as a possible view that could be elaborated along the lines of some of the ideas developed by Shaun Nichols.

⁹ According to his 'single code hypothesis', imagination and belief each tend to process their content in much the same way. As a result, our emotional responses to an imagined content also tend to resemble those we would have in real life situations. See Shaun Nichols, 'Imagining and Believing: The Promise of a Single Code', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62 (2004): 129–39.

be the same in belief and in imagination, he notes cases where this predicted behaviour does not take place. Sometimes – as the asymmetry cases that I am interested in this article make evident – we enjoy the misfortune of someone weak or we admire the villain.

Relying in part on empirical evidence about how one's desires for what one imagines or believes may determine the resulting affective state, Nichols claims that emotional responses differ because a further element, a desire, affects how the information is presented to one, either in belief or in imagination, and it expresses other general concerns one may have.¹⁰ In other words, that one believes a particular content may trigger desires towards the content different from the ones to be expected if one merely imagines that same content. Nichols's example comes from the different outputs that the participants in an 'end of the world' mental experiment would offer. According to Nichols, one's behavioural and emotional reactions to one's believing that the end of the world will take place tomorrow would very much differ from one's response to the mere imaginative entertainment of that content because of the desires involved in imagining the imminent end of the world; for example, the desire to say good-bye to friends and family or the desire not to die.

If things are as described in Nichols's account, we may therefore have a reason not to regard emotional responses to works of art as a trustworthy means of testing our evaluative stances. The presence of a different desire in each case may alter the usual way in which a particular content may be evaluated or emotionally processed. We may actually expect that our responses to fiction and reality differ from each other given the possibility that different desires affect the way a particular content is processed in imagination and in belief.

Nevertheless, I would argue that some good reasons can be given in order to question (i) whether Nichols's answer is sufficient to explain what is at stake in cases of asymmetry and (ii) whether his solution undermines the possibility of ethical enhancement by means of engagement with art.

Concerning the first point, I would argue that Nichols's solution can be shown to be wanting, at least with regard to some of the paradigmatic examples of asymmetry. What is the desire that one has when reading *The Talented Mr Ripley* that alters one's response with respect to the warranted response in real life? There seems to be no clear candidate for this desire. If one's admiration results partly from the presence of a desire that one would have lacked had the story been real, what could this desire be? If, on the contrary, one says that in the work of fiction one lacks, for example, a desire for

¹⁰ Shaun Nichols, 'Just Imagination: Why Imagining Doesn't Behave Like Believing', *Mind & Language* 21 (2006): 459–74.

justice, how again could this explain one's admiration? Admiring someone entails more than a lack of a desire for justice; one must regard that character as possessing admirable features or doing admirable things. Thus, one's admiration for Mr Ripley does not seem to stem from a desire that one has or that one lacks for the content because it is *imagined* rather than believed; nor does, for similar reasons, one's tolerant attitude to Humbert Humbert. The asymmetry here, wherever it comes from, cannot be fully explained by referring to the presence or lack of a desire that alters the corresponding emotional response. The emotion felt by the spectator cannot be simply accounted for in terms of the role a desire could play; for the response is partly identified by the evaluative judgement that the spectator has made and this results not merely from a desire or a lack of it, but from the application of some values regarded as relevant to the overall assessment of the character or the situation. To this extent, Nichols's amendment fails to explain at least some of the paradigmatic examples of the asymmetry problem.

Concerning the negative character that Nichols's solution may have when one reflects upon the value of emotional responses to art, I would also argue that his solution to the asymmetry problem may not be as damaging as it seems at first. As he has presented the case, even if differences in one's desires for the content may alter one's emotional and behavioural output, a certain continuity seems to exist between the evaluative mechanisms involved. One may not respond with obvious fear to one's imagining that the world will end tomorrow, but one still contemplates the possibility as something fearful; though one may not react with full terror to the content, one still regards it with the same sort of evaluative thought, that is, as something negative or fearful. Although Nichols's amendment to his single-code hypothesis may be offered as an explanation of why the behaviour in each case is radically different,¹¹ it appears not to explain why our evaluative output can seemingly be different in asymmetry cases.

What is important for our purposes, at least within the framework provided by Nichols, is that one's assessment of the situation does not differ, or need not necessarily differ, because of the absence of the desire to stay alive. In both cases, one evaluates the situation as frightening. Consequently, even if it is true that some of our reactions may differ, I still think that within this theoretical framework there is no reason to regard our emotional responses to art as

¹¹ This is something that many thinkers have already pointed out as evidence in support of the idea that our emotions related to fiction are not real emotions but quasi-emotions. See especially Kendall L. Walton, 'Fearing Fictions', *Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1978): 5–27.

a deceitful means to achieve emotional enhancement. The fact that when I see Dracula on the screen I remain in the cinema rather than fleeing does not prevent me from exhibiting the same sort of evaluative profile as in real life.

II.2. EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TO FICTION AND TO REALITY HAVE DIFFERENT WARRANTING CONDITIONS

The second broad strategy also focuses upon the differences between emotional responses to real events and to artistic emotions. This time the asymmetry relies upon the different warranting conditions each sort of emotion has.¹² In order fully to appreciate the scope of this strategy a word must be said about the warranting conditions of artistic emotions.

It is more or less generally assumed that an emotion is warranted if one can point to an evaluative belief that presents the object to which the emotion is directed in a certain way.¹³ Thus, one's emotion of fear of snakes is rational only if one believes that snakes are dangerous. Similarly, if one finds Anna Karenina pitiable one must hold something like a belief-like attitude to her fate. One must think she lives in an imprisoning society and that she has been deceived by false love. In both cases one's emotional responses are fitting because the thoughts or beliefs under which the object of one's emotion is presented to one justify one's emotion. To this extent, real and fictional emotions are alike. They both seem to involve an evaluative thought that plays the justificatory role of the particular emotion one feels for the object. Moreover, it seems that, unless one encounters cases of asymmetry, one's emotions and thoughts accord much in the same way in fiction and in reality. One tends to think both in art and in life that another's misfortune warrants one's pity and that another's courage justifies one's admiration.

Several authors have noted, however, that the warranting conditions of artistic emotions do not depend only upon the evaluative belief that presents the object as deserving a particular emotion.¹⁴ According to these authors, the

¹² See, for example, Susan L. Feagin, 'Imagining Emotions and Appreciating Fiction', in *Emotion and the Arts*, ed. Metthe Hjort and Sue Laver (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 50–62.

¹³ Patricia S. Greenspan, *Emotions and Reasons: An Inquiry into Emotional Justification* (New York: Routledge, 1988), and Robert C. Solomon, *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993).

¹⁴ Susan L. Feagin, *Reading with Feeling* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), and eadem, 'Imagining Emotions'; Daniel Jacobson, 'Sir Philip Sidney's Dilemma: On the Ethical Function of Narrative Art', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54 (1996): 327–36; Paisley Livingston and Alfred R. Mele, 'Evaluating Emotional Responses to Fiction', in Hjort and Laver, *Emotion and Arts*, 157–76. Flynt Schier, 'Tragedy and the Community of Sentiment', in *Philosophy and Fiction: Essays in Literary Aesthetics*, ed. Peter Lamarque (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1983), 73–92.

way, or aesthetic presentation, in which that object is presented (including its aesthetic presentation) also plays a justificatory role in the sort of emotion one takes as deserved by the fictional events. One responds not only to the represented content but also to the aesthetic or formal aspects of the representation. These formal or aesthetic aspects wrap the actions and the characters so that they may trigger and, hence, justify a particular emotional response and thus justify it. According to this view, in spite of the similarity between fictional and real contexts, artistic emotions are not simply the output of an evaluative belief that is common to both cases; responses to fiction or works of art in general are partly determined by formal aspects that in some cases contribute to make one's evaluative belief more appealing and in some others they work against what would be taken as the appropriate evaluative belief. For this reason some have preferred to call these emotions 'art emotions' in order to differentiate them from current, ordinary, emotions.¹⁵ The fact that artistic emotions possess some warranting conditions that play no role in real emotions has been thought a reason not to take the former as a possible source of moral training. After all, the conditions under which each emotion is warranted or justified are different. The argument goes back to Plato, and resonates with the way rhetorical figures have sometimes been conceived and been subjected to criticism because of their persuasive role. Thus, since artworks have the power to bring about emotional responses not only by virtue of the sort of objects they present us with, but also by virtue of their aesthetic aspects, they cannot be sources of emotional training.

I find the argument quite compelling but I tend to think it is not sufficient to reject the possibility of exercising our emotional abilities while engaging with art. In a certain respect, one's evaluative beliefs tend to be at work in artistic contexts too; one does not completely disregard the information that Mr Ripley is a murderer or that that consideration plays no role whatsoever in one's overall evaluation of, and response to, the character. One plainly recognizes that feature and it definitely enters into one's overall appreciation of the character. Yet this feature of his, which would probably warrant one's rejecting him in reality, is not the only reason that one may have in order to respond to his behaviour and character as one does. The author has managed to present Mr Ripley as an intelligent and sensitive person and she has succeeded in making the reader respond sensitively to those features. Partly by depicting the character in an apparently appealing way and partly by providing him with a full package of virtues that one usually values highly,

¹⁵ See Feagin, 'Imagining Emotions'.

the author has succeeded in making one respond in a way that one may find contradictory to one's belief that Mr Ripley is a cold-blooded murderer.

Two sorts of devices can, I believe, collaborate to trigger this sort of response. On the one hand, literary works make vividly evident that the same character or situation may have both positive and negative features. Mr Ripley is, for example, simultaneously a murderer and an intelligent person, cold and sensitive, heartless and well mannered. This has long been acknowledged as a virtue of art and in particular of literary works. The minute detail with which some artworks present their characters and situations helps the reader to achieve a sort of understanding that is usually unavailable given one's practical interest in reaching overall judgements.

As a reader or spectator one may reasonably feel awkward when presented with a character that is both sensitive and well educated, but ill intentioned. Characters and situations that have this double-sided moral profile continue to be puzzling, especially when one is supposed to end up with an overall judgement of that character or situation. Is Mr Ripley admirable overall? Or is his being a murderer an overriding reason not to admire him at all?

In this case, I think, there is no substantial distinction between the responses a work of fiction may demand or prescribe and the warranted response in a real-life situation. Some of the puzzling examples that illustrate this puzzling phenomenon are from real life: think, for example, of the sensitive Nazi, where the contrast between two different sets of values seems to be exemplified in the extreme.¹⁶ In this respect, works of art superbly manage to present the reader with something that could also be perceived in reality – namely, people and situations are normally a mixture of virtues and vices and our overall evaluative judgements do not always clearly condemn vice. In this sense, one's admiration for Mr Ripley does not need to be obliterated or denied. Despite his being regarded as a murderer, our response of admiration is warranted.¹⁷

On the other hand, there is a second way – maybe not completely unrelated to the first – in which works of art may trigger judgements and responses contrary to those expected in real contexts. I propose to use 'aesthetization' as

¹⁶ For a comment on this, see Daniel Jacobson, 'Seeing by Feeling: Virtues, Skills, and Moral Perception', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 8 (2005): 387–409.

¹⁷ Jacobson has pointed out judges' underlying desire to achieve a positive or negative overall judgement so that the judged situation or character falls on one side or the other of the morally acceptable. He thinks this tendency prevents people from realizing that there might be, and usually are, positive features instantiated in vicious people and situations. See Jacobson, 'Seeing by Feeling'.

a general term to define this phenomenon.¹⁸ The rhythm with which an action is presented, the angle from which a character is portrayed, the delicacy with which a particular concern is presented, and so forth, may warrant an emotional response that would not have been deserved if one were paying attention only to the action, character, or concern. Typical examples of this phenomenon are those in which violence is presented in a glorified manner or evilness is given a charismatic appearance.

As the authors I mentioned at the beginning of this section maintain, one can therefore respond differently to a particular content because of the effect that the aesthetic aspects of the work have upon one's response. In any case, this claim about the differences in the warranting conditions between artistic and real emotions is supposed to apply across the board, not only to cases where one finds an asymmetry between one's response in the fictional context and in the real one. Aesthetic features may also contribute or enhance a response that would nevertheless be warranted. As when a pitiable character – say, a poor, neglected child – is represented with features that tend to enhance the pitiable condition. In these cases, the response is caused not only by the belief that the child is poor, but also by the aesthetic appearance the artist has endowed the character with. In this case, the aesthetization of the character or situation enhances the alleged emotional response that would be warranted. But in the extreme cases, we in fact blame the representation for being sentimental. As Oscar Wilde famously claimed: 'One must have a heart of stone to read the death of little Nell without laughing.'

I think a good way to illustrate this ability of fiction to make us respond in ways that might differ from the corresponding responses in real life is to think of the beginning of Lars von Trier's *The Antichrist* (2009). The first scene of the film shows a couple passionately making love while their son (aged two or three) climbs out of his cradle, opens up a window, and throws himself out into the void. The whole scene is projected in slow motion, in fine black-and-white cinematography, and with Handel's *Lascia ch'io pianga* aria (1711) in the background. The whole aesthetic effect is impressive despite the dreadfulness of the events; in a sense this produces or may produce in the spectator an uneasy feeling of enjoying the scene, deriving pleasure from it.

In such cases one's emotional reaction to the work is clearly affected by the aesthetic aspects that make one perceive a scene with a particular feeling, that is, a feeling of pleasure; the feeling seems warranted not by the nature of the

¹⁸ A similar, but I believe narrower, term has been suggested by Arthur Danto. In his book *The Abuse of Beauty* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003) he introduces the term 'beautification' in order to capture the pragmatic aspects of an artwork that are responsible for the work's effects upon the viewer (ibid., 68).

content but by the aesthetic work put into it. Alternatively, one could adopt a moralistic view and claim that the terrible nature of the scene depicted overrides, or should override, any possible pleasure one could derive from it; but, unless we exercise self-censorship, the scene is indeed pleasant and pleasure in looking at it is warranted by features of the scene.

Such cases tend to be puzzling and seem to reappear whenever something regarded as demanding a negative assessment or attitude is presented so that it triggers, or may trigger, aesthetic pleasure. When the photographs taken of the people at the S-21 extermination camp who were about to be killed were presented to the public in an art exhibition in Arles, France (that is, as something beautiful or as deserving aesthetic attention), they were immediately rejected.¹⁹ The complaint was directly related to the possibility of deriving any pleasure from the photographic report of a crime about to be committed.

In these cases, the emotional response that could be warranted in real life is turned upside down by virtue of its aesthetic potential, so that one ends up liking or getting pleasure from what should be rejected. Do these responses threaten one's confidence in appealing to artistic engagement as a sort of self-understanding? Does aesthetization systematically threaten one's confidence in the ability of art to be a source of moral or practical enhancement?

I have no definite answer to the problem that this kind of case may pose to the original project of defending the epistemic value of emotionally responding to fiction. In one respect, I think, our evaluative framework is not completely undermined. I recognize the terrible nature of the situation – and hence this might be part of its force –, while deriving pleasure from the scene or acknowledging the possible pleasure it may trigger. It is also true, however, that one virtue of certain great artworks is that they have been persuasive in changing a prejudiced morality by exploiting the aesthetic dimension of the representation of that particular content. That is, aesthetic seduction has shown some morals to be obsolete and others, more advanced, to be appealing and desirable. This suggests that moral attitudes can be revised when put into a convincing, creative, aesthetic light; in other words, evaluative considerations may be considerably sensitive to aesthetic features, for example, when one is convinced by Rembrandt's successful use of aesthetic means to

¹⁹ S-21 was the name of one of the extermination camps that proliferated in Cambodia under Pol Pot's regime (1975–79). One of these exhibitions took place in Arles, France, in 1997, as part of the annual *Rencontres photographiques d'Arles* festival. The photographs were also shown at museums of modern art in New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. For reflections on regarding S-21 as art, see Thierry de Duve, 'Art in the Face of Radical Evil', in *Proceedings of the XVII Congress of Aesthetics: 'Aesthetics Bridging the Cultures'; Congress Book 1*, ed. Jale N. Erzen (Ankara: SANART, 2008), 407–21.

portray common folk as morally noteworthy. Here an insightful perspective upon humanity and its embodiment in ordinary people becomes clearly exemplified and strikingly obvious. As a spectator one is somehow enriching one's view of humanity in a particularly vivid way; this could not have been achieved without the aesthetic contribution of Rembrandt's pictorial art. As has been well known since Plato, however, this is not always the case and aesthetic seduction has frequently been used to make compelling the very morals that one would otherwise easily find repulsive, as some portraits of Stalin or Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* confirms.

It seems paradoxical that the ability of aesthetization to change the polarity of our feelings about the situations assessed has been regarded both as one of the main reasons to dismiss the contribution of aesthetics to sentimental education and as a virtue of artworks to change our moral beliefs in a positive way and to flex our imaginations.²⁰ I tend to think this ambivalence does not necessarily undermine the possibility of trying our moralities out by engaging with art even if we end up responding in an unwarranted manner. One may think this threat might be enough to adopt a sceptical stance on taking our emotional response to fiction at face value. One may have good reason not to consider the response to be an indication of the presence of cognitive value, especially when such responses are the outcome of aesthetic vivacity.

But caution should be exercised here. Dismissing an emotional response because it has been triggered mainly by the aesthetic aspects of a work may also bar the possibility of revising our moral beliefs in a positive way. As some great works of art make clear, aesthetic reasons for feeling a particular way may also play a role in our evaluative and emotional responses in general. If this is so, works of art can be good sources not only of moral training and self-knowledge but also of moral discovery.

III. A FINAL REMARK ABOUT ASYMMETRY CASES

At the outset of this article I inquired into the possible consequences that certain seemingly asymmetrical cases could have when we think about the possibility of taking our engagement with artworks as a source of cognitive value. The fact that some works seem to elicit evaluative responses that are asymmetrical with the corresponding responses one would likely have in a real situation has led to some reasonable scepticism about the powers of works of art, fiction, and representations in general to enlighten our moral profile. I have reviewed some possible reasons that can explain the asymmetry and provide

²⁰ James Harold, 'Flexing the Imagination', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 61 (2003): 247–57.

further support for the Platonic idea that we had better get away from art if we aim to shape our moral outlooks in a proper rational way.

I have sought to demonstrate that most of these reasons are inconclusive in defending the idea that we should not trust our responses to art. In the first place, the freedom that is usually attached to imagination is still restricted by constraints that apply in both imagined and real contexts. Our evaluative profile does not seem, at least if we follow the debate about the problem of imaginative resistance, to be radically different in imagined and real contexts. This leaves some room for accepting that imagination can produce trustworthy evaluative outputs.

Second, I have considered whether the account offered by Nichols can both explain the asymmetry cases as well as provide some clue about the epistemic status of our responses to fictional or imagined contexts. My view is that his model can only account for the *behavioural differences* that are obvious when we compare our responses to certain imagined contexts and to real ones. In terms of the evaluative responses that both contexts may trigger, however, there seems to be no significant difference.

Third, I have examined the possibility of challenging the epistemic status of our responses to fiction because of the different warranting conditions that emotional responses to representations and real situations possess. The key idea of denying any possible cognitive value to emotional responses to artistic representations was that they were triggered and justified not only by the nature of the particular content that was conveyed, but also by the formal or aesthetic aspects which present that content in a certain way. This aesthetic, formal, aspect of representations is responsible both for the difference between real emotions and artistic emotions and for the possibly deceitful nature of artistic emotions that Plato was so concerned about.

I then introduced the notion of aesthetization in order to characterize the peculiar way in which formal or aesthetic features of representations manage to provoke particular emotions. I noted that these emotions need not always be contrary to those that would have been warranted. Aesthetization may sometimes (as it does in sentimental art) reinforce a sound moral response but it can also be responsible for the seemingly unwarranted feelings that some works trigger in the spectator.

It seems that the force of this argument leaves little hope for optimism about the epistemic value of emotional responses to artistic representations. I have tried, however, to promote the idea that the negative characterization of aesthetization has been misguidedly extended to cases in which the aesthetic features that partly ground our emotional responses to works of art not only play an important role in determining the right emotional response to

a particular situation, but also reveal something profound about it and our moral texture, which are normally overlooked. The idea can be neatly summarized as follows: in both art and life, aesthetic features are not only mere adornments of the situations under evaluation; they may constitute reasons for valuing something and for seeing new aspects of those situations. They reveal the complexity of our evaluative profiles and indirectly confirm that our overall evaluative judgements depend on more than just moral concerns.

If this idea is sound, we have an alternative way of looking back at the examples I introduced at the beginning of this article as a source of scepticism. I characterized them as cases in which the emotions triggered were seemingly contrary or asymmetrical to those that we should have expected in real contexts. If what I have just claimed about the possibility of considering aesthetic features to be reasons to ground our overall judgements is sound, there is now room for believing that the asymmetry will not really hold up if we were facing a similar case in real life. In short, if we encountered someone like Mr Ripley we would most likely respond as we do when reading about him in Highsmith's novel. In life, as in art, we do not respond only evaluatively to what might be considered the narrow moral content of a situation or to a person's narrow moral profile. Our overall evaluation takes into account features that belong to different evaluative realms, the aesthetic included. And sometimes an aesthetic feature may make all the difference when it comes to an overall positive or negative judgement. For example, one may be in complete agreement with another person's thoughts but may find the affected way in which that person expresses them to be repulsive. It is the aesthetic quality of the expression of those ideas that provokes one's rejection and perhaps one's unwillingness to support that person, not the content of the view that person defends.

I am aware that the claim that aesthetic aspects can constitute reasons determining overall evaluative judgements might require further support. After all, the threat of aesthetization can always be summoned to undermine this idea. But, if there are, as I have sought to demonstrate, at least some paradigmatic cases in which we must accept that our overall judgement has been precisely grounded in an aesthetic aspect, this idea surely opens up a new way of approaching the cognitive value of a work of art. Contrary to Plato's suspicion, the aesthetic potential of art is not an enemy of perceptive moral insight.

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