

*In Praise of Immoral Art*¹

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*Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise*

*As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—*

—Emily Dickinson

Bernard Shaw is said to have told Tolstoy, "I am not an 'Art for Art's Sake' man, and would not lift my finger to produce a work of art if I thought there was nothing more than that in it."² Shaw had a sympathetic audience in Tolstoy—at any rate, in the Tolstoy of *What is Art?*, that notorious tract which repudiates his previous career as a novelist. The common opinion among philosophers of art is that this later Tolstoy was a crank, who betrayed his artistic genius with philosophical naiveté. Tolstoy's aesthetics is widely held to be disastrously moralistic, both for its staunch anti-elitism and its demand that art communicate a morally good emotion to its audience. Shaw too is often criticized for being tendentious, both as a playwright and critic. His major theoretical work, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, advances so polemical a reading of Ibsen that Michael Meyer, the leading English Ibsen scholar, has written

that it “should have been called *The Quintessence of Shavianism*.”³ While this criticism of these authors’ theoretical work is to some degree apt, it overlooks much that is valuable in it. I will not attempt to examine either theory in any depth here; but I will try to demonstrate that, ironically, aspects of each can be used to remedy certain moralistic tendencies which have become widespread in contemporary philosophy of art.

The discipline of aesthetics has, I believe, perpetuated a false dichotomy between moralism and formalism. In its most general guise, *moralism* is the tendency to let moral considerations take over the entirety of evaluative space.⁴ Thus moralism is not limited to aesthetics, but the varieties to be examined here focus on art, though they do so in fundamentally different ways. First, there is a radical form of moralism, associated within philosophy primarily with Plato, but whose political influence has extended from the Puritan antagonists of the theater to many modern critics of popular culture. Rousseau, Tolstoy, and Shaw (after his own peculiar fashion) all advocate some form of Platonic moralism, the central tenet of which is that aesthetic strength is often morally dangerous.⁵ Thus Rousseau claimed that the effect of the very best tragedies, which most powerfully induce empathic emotional responses from their audience, is “to reduce all the duties of man to some passing and sterile emotions that have no consequences, to make us applaud our courage in praising that of others, our humanity in pitying the ills that we could have cured, our charity in saying to the poor, God will help you!”⁶ Brecht was so suspicious of empathic responses to the theater that he sought to block them with a dramatic technique he called the “alienation effect,” which he hoped would turn the audience’s attention away from the fiction and toward the real-life social concerns of his plays.⁷

But it is a quite different moralist turn, whose inspiration comes from Hume, which has been more influential in recent aesthetics. Humean moralists propose to bring the moral evaluation of works of art to bear, in some systematic way, upon their aesthetic evaluation. The simplest way to do so is to claim that all moral defects in a work of art are aesthetic defects as well. Let us stipulate that *immoral art* is art which has some intrinsic moral defect, while acknowledging that there are a diversity of views about what constitutes immorality in art, and about when such moral defects are aesthetic flaws. Of course, art can be instrumentally bad—it can have bad consequences, or be morally dangerous—without being immoral art. Some Humean moralists do not claim all immoral art to be aesthetically flawed; while others hold this not only of immoral art, but also of art that is merely morally dangerous. Obviously, we will need to explicate these claims further in order to understand and evaluate them.

Both Humean and Platonic forms of moralism locate the appeal and significance of narrative and dramatic art primarily in its ability to move us emo-

tionally. And both disparage immoral art by suggesting that, inasmuch as it does influence us, it can have only corrupting effects. Yet even here there are differences among compatriots as to how profound art's effects can be. Indeed, the greatest difference between Hume and his recent followers is that they are all more concerned than he was about the dangers of immoral art, and some are more hopeful about the beneficial effects of morally felicitous art. While the Platonic moralists are all agreed that art can harm, they differ as to whether or not it can help—in particular, over whether art can serve an ethically salutary function (a thesis I have elsewhere called *humanism*). Plato and Rousseau are most pessimistic in this regard; whereas Tolstoy, despite savaging the ill effects of decadent art, embraces a form of humanism on which good art joins us together with the bonds of fellow feeling. Shaw is idiosyncratic on this score in that he alone, I think much to his credit, holds that some significant moral danger is required for the moral development of both individual and society.

Formalism is even harder to capture succinctly, as it is a diverse program with differing origins, motivations, and dogmas. Nevertheless the term, which is used too variously to be identified with any single thesis, is commonly associated with a set of distinct but related doctrines. Hence I will speak of 'formalism' in an expansive way, without attempting to set any requirements as to how much of the program one must embrace in order to count as a formalist. The central tenets of formalism are as follows—

- (1) Bifurcation: The sharp and invidious distinction between Form, which is held to be aesthetically relevant, and Content, which is not.⁸
- (2) Aesthetic Hedonism: The identification of a *sui generis* aesthetic emotion, a type of pleasure which is a response to pure beauty, conceived as a formal property.⁹
- (3) Purification: The claim of a historical progression toward, or an evaluative bias in favor of, the purification of each artistic medium to its own unique essence.¹⁰
- (4) Autonomism: The thesis that the "ulterior" values of art, such as its moral and cognitive value, are irrelevant to its aesthetic value.¹¹
- (5) Art for Art's Sake: The view that art should be produced and consumed solely for its aesthetic value, rather than for any ulterior purpose, such as ethical improvement.¹²

Specific figures associated with formalism have held different combinations of these doctrines, while sometimes explicitly disavowing others; moreover, it is widely acknowledged that most formalists deviate in their actual artistic and critical practices from the severity of their theoretical commitments. While I will have something to say about each of these dogmas, our main concern is with autonomism, because this thesis most directly conflicts with Humean moralism. Furthermore, if aesthetic value is not autonomous from

other forms of value—if, as Horace suggested, poetry can mingle the useful and the sweet—then the force of “Art for Art’s Sake,” the antithesis of Platonic moralism, is significantly diminished.

The dichotomy between moralism and formalism, which is most evident in Tolstoy’s theory, surfaces in subtler ways in the work of a collection of eminent philosophers of art who have recently advocated more modest, Humean-style moralism. Noel Carroll and Berys Gaut, most notably, espouse claims very similar to Hume’s, while Kendall Walton flirts with Humean moralism without quite committing to it.¹³ These dichotomies are false, however, because one can reject moralism without embracing any formalist doctrine. Thus the aim of this paper will be to argue against these influential forms of Humean moralism, but without adopting anything like the “Art for Art’s Sake” slogan which so riled Shaw.

MORALISM AND FORMALISM

The classical statement of Humean moralism is his claim, in “Of the Standard of Taste,” that when a work of art deviates from our moral standards, “this must be allowed to disfigure the [work], and to be a real deformity. I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments; and however I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age, I can never relish the composition.”¹⁴ Hume held a substantive and dubious view of what it is for a work of art to be morally deviant, but moralism need not be committed to any particular conception. While Hume’s talk of disfigurement and deformity is somewhat florid, its gist is clear. He means to say that immoral art cannot be beautiful—or, at least, that a work’s beauty must be significantly diminished by its moral defects. A more precise gloss, which captures the spirit of Hume’s remark, can be given as follows: “Moral defects in a work of art are aesthetic flaws; insofar as they are present, the work’s aesthetic value is diminished.” Thus Humean moralism claims more than that a moral defect *can* be an aesthetic flaw, which I too would grant. It need not, however, be as sweeping as Hume’s casual suggestion that all moral defects are blemishes.

I will understand Humean moralism as the family of views on which *whenever an artwork’s moral defects are relevant to its aesthetic evaluation, they figure as blemishes—as aesthetic flaws*. Furthermore, it is to hold a theory or general explanation of when and why moral defects are aesthetically relevant, which focuses on art’s capacity to inspire emotional or more broadly evaluative responses. When Hume refers in this context to sentiments, he means to include both judgments and affections, specifically, the “sentiments of approbation and blame, love and hatred”,¹⁵ his recent followers include

more complex evaluative attitudes as well. Of course, autonomism entails the simple and wholly negative claim that, since moral defects are irrelevant to a work's aesthetic value, they are never aesthetic flaws. I will argue here against both positions.

Humean moralism is flourishing in contemporary philosophy of art, and the recent literature abounds with similar claims and arguments. In addition to the philosophers I am focusing on, Richard Moran and Matthew Kieran have recently written sympathetically on these issues, and I will draw on their essays, to a lesser extent, as well.¹⁶ The more precise thesis given above, as capturing the spirit of Hume's statement, is taken from Gaut, who offers an admirably clear argument in its defense. Gaut's claim is nearly as strong as Hume's and just as sweeping, though it is predicated on a more sophisticated conception of moral defects in art. Carroll defends a related collection of claims under the rubric of "moderate moralism": that some works of art properly engage our moral responses; that, in so doing, they can contribute, positively or negatively, to our moral understanding; and that art's effects on moral understanding figure into its aesthetic value. Finally, on Carroll's moderate moralism, although its immorality does not necessarily deform a work, a moral defect "will count as an aesthetic defect when it actually deters the response to which the work aspires."¹⁷ It is primarily this last claim which I will dispute, once it is made more rigorous, along with some details of the earlier ones. The thought that works of art aspire to provoke emotional or emotion-like responses figures centrally in the work of all the moralists under discussion. It is, however, the crux of the most significant difference between the Humean and the Platonic forms of moralism. Humean moralists hold that if a work is immoral, in the relevant sense, it will be unable to move a virtuous audience. Whereas Platonic moralists hold that the aesthetic power of immoral art is all too accessible, even to the virtuous—this is its insidious danger.

While Gaut, Carroll, and Kieran clearly endorse some form of Humean moralism, Walton and Moran are more circumspect, but in consequence their positions are rather less clear. Both display moralist sympathies, and some of their remarks seem to commit them to its central thesis, yet they also show signs of ambivalence on these issues. For instance, Walton claims that "there is a closer connection between moral and aesthetic value than some would allow"; and in explicating this claim he writes, of *Triumph of the Will*, Leni Riefenstahl's tendentious documentary of the 1934 Nazi rally in Nuremberg, that "[i]f the work's obnoxious message does not destroy its aesthetic value, it nevertheless renders it morally inaccessible. That must count as an aesthetic as well as a moral defect."¹⁸ While the first remark sounds congenial to Humean moralism, the second seems to be an overt endorsement of it. However, it will emerge that, as Walton intends these claims, they are too weak to support any version of Humean moralism.

Like Walton, Moran holds that it is often wrong to engage an immoral work of art in the manner required to experience its aesthetic value—a claim common to both forms of moralism. But, in Humean fashion, Moran goes on to suggest that when a work is morally bad (in the relevant sense) and I am morally good, the work will be unable to move me as it aspires to, and as a result it will be at least a partial aesthetic failure. Walton goes so far in this direction as to write that *Triumph of the Will* “can inspire only disgust,”¹⁹ but he has since backed off from this claim as overstated. He does not in fact hold that disgust is the only response a virtuous audience can have to the film, but merely that some viewers (such as Holocaust survivors) will be only disgusted by the film—a claim that can hardly be doubted, at least if we take ‘disgust’ as shorthand for the entire range of censorious response.²⁰ Both Walton and Moran make an analogy to offensive jokes, which is also taken up by philosophers not primarily interested in aesthetics. Ronald de Sousa has a theory of when it is wrong to laugh, and Elizabeth Anderson sketches an argument that offensive jokes cannot be funny which is strikingly analogous to Gaut’s argument for moralism.²¹

Despite their current prominence, the Humean moralists tend to suggest that by championing the *ethical criticism* of art, in which the critic evaluates a work of art in light of his own moral commitments, they defend a minority view. In fact, there has been no dearth of ethical critics about lately, most recently the generation of literary critics concerned almost exclusively with issues of race, class, and gender.²² An influential defense of this critical practice has been offered by Wayne Booth, a repentant aesthetic autonomist who has done groundbreaking work in narratology.²³ Booth’s credibility is enhanced by the fact that he resists the flaws of the vulgar ethical criticism often practiced by socially committed critics, whose motives tend to be Platonic, while defending the more sophisticated version favored by philosophical moralists in the Humean tradition. However, I will argue that there is a deep tension in Booth’s view, which persists in even the most sophisticated ethical criticism that remains committed to Humean moralism.

There is also a long history of dissent to moralism, of course, much of which is closely associated with aspects of the formalist program (such as the bifurcation thesis) which have by now been sufficiently criticized. One need not endorse an invidious distinction between form and content, however, to reject moralism; the autonomist thesis alone will suffice. Arnold Isenberg has, in series of essays, defended a version of autonomism which is unhindered by extraneous theoretical commitment.²⁴ Isenberg grants that the ideas and attitudes expressed in works of narrative art are aesthetically relevant features of them. Yet reasons for taking the ideas and attitudes expressed by works of art to be morally good or bad, he claims, never count as reasons for judging the work itself to be aesthetically good or bad. Since

this autonomist claim denies that moral defects are ever aesthetic defects, as such, it suffices to contradict Humean moralism. But it does not follow that, if autonomism is false, moralism must be true.

Isenberg defends his autonomism with a *tally argument*: one must ignore art's "philosophical" values, for one's verdicts to get it right—that is, for them to tally with our considered aesthetic judgments. But Hume denied that cognitive and moral values are equally adventitious; he thought there to be a disanalogy between art that deviates from the truth and from the good. Hume and Isenberg agree that factual deviation is not an aesthetic defect in a work of art; fiction is no worse for being false. So too for deviation from our norms of etiquette or fashion. Writes Hume, "Where any innocent peculiarities of manners are represented, they ought to be admitted; and a man who is shocked by them gives an evident proof of false delicacy and refinement."²⁵ (Delicacy is, of course, Hume's "standard of taste": the putatively empirical trait which makes one judge better than another, thereby vindicating his aesthetic judgments.) Yet, Hume continues, we are so "jealous" of our moral standards that we quite properly treat deviation from them, in a work of art, with extreme prejudice.²⁶ The discussion of moralism plays a minor role in Hume's essay, which is directed at the problem of disagreement in value judgment. He ultimately adopts a form of subjectivism subtle enough to distinguish blameless differences of taste, where neither party is in error, from those differences where one judgment can be established as correct. The most straightforward way to understand Hume's disanalogy is to see it as claiming that sensitivity to moral deviance is no false delicacy. Only judgments which excuse factual error, but hold fast to moral truths, will tally with the verdicts of ideally delicate judges.²⁷

While I will advance some of my own normative judgments in the course of this essay, I will not be making a tally argument. If I can convince the reader to embrace my judgments, and to reject Humean moralism on these grounds, so much the better. But if I cannot, I will be only a little dismayed, because my argument does not trade on judgments of taste. Indeed, I have nothing to say against a moralist who takes himself simply to be expressing, or even evangelizing for, his own evaluative convictions—for instance, that offensive jokes are never funny. Nothing to say, that is, except that he is wrong: some offensive jokes *are* funny. (Richard Pryor, for one, knew a lot of them.) When proffered merely as a value judgment, the only cost of moralism is bad taste. The Humean moralists harbor grander ambitions, however, and they suggest that features of our emotional engagement with art lend credence to their view. But I am unconvinced. Some of their suggestions reflect significant truths about the nature of immoral art and about the connection between aesthetic value and emotional engagement with art; yet, we should reject their primary conclusion.

In this paper I will offer a thoroughgoing opposition to Humean moralism, which does not appeal to any claim about the autonomy of aesthetic value. I argue for the unlikely conclusion that what is properly deemed a moral defect in a work of art can contribute positively and ineliminably to its aesthetic value. When this is so, it makes no sense to call such a moral defect an aesthetic flaw in the work. Thus we must be able to praise immoral art, and not simply as formalism allows: for its beauty, understood as being irrelevant to the content of a work of art, and hence to the source of its immorality. By analogy, I will consider jokes and *comic moralism*, the view that offensive jokes are never funny.²⁸ Morally dubious jokes can be funny, I claim; and when they are, what is funny about them is often just what makes them offensive. (I am not, however, claiming that offensiveness is always a virtue in a joke, nor immorality in art.) Finally, I will suggest an even more startling conclusion: that not only is some art better for its immorality, but it is precisely in virtue of its potential for immorality that narrative and dramatic art can serve an important ethical function. If so, then an ethically vital form of art cannot be kept morally pristine.

WHAT IS IMMORAL ART?

Let's begin by taking a step back from Hume's moralist thesis to consider the picture of immoral art in which it is embedded. It is specifically "where vicious manners are described without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation" that Hume claims a work of art to be disfigured by its immorality.²⁹ The idea that art can be morally pernicious long predates Hume, of course, and a variety of disparate views have been advanced as to the nature of immoral art. Yet there is a crucial difference between Hume's purposes and those typical of philosophers—both art's adversaries and its champions—who have offered these rival conceptions of what constitutes immorality in art.

This difference is most evident in comparison with Plato, who of course leveled the preeminent moral indictment of art, most significantly in Book X of the *Republic*. Plato's primary charge, which issues in the banishment of the poet, is that the pleasures of tragedy are insidious and treacherous. By providing a seemingly safe place to express such normally and properly inhibited emotions as sorrow, fear, pity, and ridicule, the theater lures even the good man, who would ordinarily be ashamed to express such feelings publicly, into emotional incontinence. On Plato's view, the theater is like a dress-rehearsal for real life; by giving free reign to these emotions in aesthetic contexts, one becomes habituated into loosening the tight rational control over them which is central to virtue.³⁰ This is by now a familiar story,

but I want to highlight a crucial feature of Plato's indictment: that what he thought morally dangerous about poetry is especially present in its best and most powerful instances. On Plato's view, all poetry is morally bad poetry; and the best poetry, as judged by the art's own criteria, is worst of all. Hence the dangers of poetry are essential to its nature, and cannot be guarded against except by its banishment or evisceration.³¹ For Plato—as for Aristotle, who thought the arousal of negative emotions in the theater to have a salutary, cathartic effect—what is morally significant about tragedy, for better or worse, is just what is pleasurable about it: the emotional release.

The next great age of the theater, after antiquity, came in the seventeenth century, with the neoclassical period of French drama and the Elizabethan period in England. By then the fear that dramatic poetry was inherently immoral had largely given way to the hope that it could be harnessed as a tool of moral instruction, so long as it was subject to the constraints of decorum. To this end, the classical rules of the theater (the so-called Aristotelian unities) were augmented by another demand, namely, for *poetic justice*: the requirement that virtue always be shown rewarded, and vice punished. On this picture, which predominated throughout the seventeenth and into the eighteenth century, on both sides of the channel, whether a play is moral or immoral is determined by what is fictional in it: specifically, to what end its virtuous and vicious characters come. Shakespeare, Racine, and Pierre Corneille were all criticized for failing to adhere to the strictures of poetic justice. Their critics never doubted that the theater can please despite its moral failings; on the contrary, immoral art is so dangerous because the spectator takes no more pleasure in the depiction of good action than of bad, and hence will be equally pleased by a play that violates the rules of decorum. Corneille defended himself by attacking poetic justice on aesthetic grounds, for precluding tragedy. As Aristotle noted, the fall of a scoundrel would not warrant the tragic emotions of fear and pity from the audience, but righteous satisfaction. Yet Corneille was not advocating "Art for Art's Sake," but advancing his own form of humanism: the thesis that art can serve an ethical function, whether through overt moral teaching or some less cognitive form of instruction.³²

Corneillean humanism is based on a thesis of moral psychology held by both Plato and Hume: that virtue, when clearly beheld, is inherently attractive. Contrary to the proto-associationist psychology of poetic justice, on which we are conditioned to love virtue by its constant association with reward, Corneille claimed that, when perspicuously portrayed on stage, virtue will be loved though it is unrewarded and vice hated despite being unpunished. If the theater imposes on its audience just the conditions of impartial or "disinterested" contemplation under which what we actually admire is truly admirable, then dramatic poetry would be uniquely well suited to serve

an ethical function. Given Hume's affinity for an impartial observer theory of moral judgment, one might think he would have pressed this point further. He might have hoped that the theater could offer us practice in attaining an objective perspective, since our own fortunes are not at stake. But it is much more evident that Hume did not take seriously the idea that the theater poses any danger to the spectator. He does not pay art the peculiar, Platonic compliment of thinking it powerful enough to be dangerous.

Of course, Plato did not think theater capable of offering a perspicuous portrayal of virtue. Quite the contrary, tragedy presents the emotional travails of its characters as being proper responses to their fortunes, when in fact the virtuous man would be stoic in the face of disaster. Worse, tragedy encourages the audience to participate emotionally, by empathizing with the protagonist and responding with reciprocal emotions—fearing for him in his danger, and pitying his downfall. Echoes of the Platonic indictment can be heard in much recent criticism of popular culture, with two modifications. First, Plato's pervasive emotional stoicism is narrowed to the base passions of aggression and sexuality. And, second, it is not the best art but the worst, or what is taken to be such, which is now targeted. The Platonic aspect of this culture criticism is that it inverts Corneillean humanism by claiming that dramatic portrayal makes vice, not virtue, inherently attractive, whatever its fictional consequences. Thus Hollywood's "nightmares of depravity" are said to glorify vice, even though the genres this charge is leveled against quite often adhere to a rough poetic justice, by depicting the wages of sin even more graphically than they do its pleasures.

It is therefore tempting to accuse these culture critics of committing a vulgar misreading of these works, or—as emerged about Bob Dole's curiously directed attack on Hollywood during the 1996 Republican primary campaign—of failing to read them at all. In these charges of glorification, satire is often mistaken for earnest, and the depiction of vice for its advocacy. It is easy to take an arch view of the entire discussion, and ask: What do such hermeneutic nuances matter to the standard bearers of the right's *fin de siècle* culture wars? There is, however, another way of understanding their complaint about the glorification of vice, which does not involve these neo-Platonic culture critics in misreading or ignorance. Those who accuse popular culture of glorifying vice may be claiming that the audience—or at least its most callow and impressionable members—does not in fact respond to narrative art as narrative, but in something more like a "monkey-see, monkey-do" fashion.³³ In this attenuated sense, a dramatic work glorifies vice, and is thereby immoral, simply by depicting it. This is a difficult view to hold consistently, since it seems to preclude much social criticism; and in fact the culture critics tend to make their own ad hoc exceptions—the most notorious and blatantly cynical being Dole's praise of violent movies made by prominent Hollywood Republicans.

Suppose it is true that the most morally significant effects of narrative art issue from its mimetic features (what it depicts) rather than its narrative features (what it makes fictional). Perhaps the most plausible way to formulate this contention is in overtly Platonic terms: violence is violence, and it always inures the viewer to its horrors, while feeding his bloodlust—regardless of whether it is, fictionally, the villain or the hero who gets a bullet in the chest. If our concern is with the consequences a work of art has on its audience, such as its effects on our character, then it hardly matters if some of these consequences flow from a misreading of the narrative. This locus of concern must be insensitive to aesthetic value, however, since it deliberately—and appropriately, given its aims—ignores the question of whether a work is being engaged in accordance with interpretive norms. Just as you are in no position to judge whether a joke is funny unless you “get” it, you cannot judge a work of narrative art’s aesthetic value without interpreting it properly.³⁴ This uncontroversial epistemic principle can be used to motivate a claim of *minimal aesthetic disinterestedness*, which is substantially weaker and less contentious than autonomism: In order to assess a work’s aesthetic value, one must ignore the actual consequences of its reception—its purely instrumental values. The Humean moralists should have no trouble with this claim. To their credit, they share a broad and inclusive picture of aesthetic value, on which the many inherent pleasures of art are all allowed. While they reject what Leo Steinberg calls the “interdictory stance” of formalism—“the attitude that tells an artist what he ought not to do, and the spectator what he ought not to see”³⁵—neither do they want to evaluate art by its consequences.

The results of doing so would be drastically revisionist in a way that would queer any tally argument, and could only be endorsed by someone prepared to dismantle the canon entirely. A strong case can be made for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* being the novel with the best social consequences, for its role in advancing abolitionism; but the Humean moralists would not take this as a measure of the novel’s value as art. Some works have morally significant effects, for better or worse, because of their narrative qualities and others because of their mimetic qualities. Some, like the clichéd bullet-stopping Bible—which might as well have been a phone book—because of qualities even more distant from their nature as works of art. But if we are interested in narrative art as art (rather than as armor, for instance), we need to insist that interpretive norms be obeyed and to focus our attention on what a work makes fictional. What a work makes fictional is what we are prescribed to imagine, in engaging it according to our implicit norms of interpretation.³⁶ This is not simply a matter of our imagining certain propositions, but also of imagining them with feeling—whether or not these feelings should be understood as real emotions.³⁷ Fictional propositions often entail prescriptions for how to feel toward a work’s characters and events. Tragedies call for fear and pity, for instance, in part by attempting to portray their denouement as

tragic—that is, as apt for these responses. But, as Gaut notes, it is crucial to distinguish between a work's provisional and its ultimate prescriptions of feeling, only the latter of which correspond to propositions about what is fictional in the work. (This suggests how much of aesthetic experience is *not* a matter of what a work makes fictional, or what is true of some "fictional world"; for these concepts cannot capture the kinetic nature of our emotional and evaluative responses to narrative and dramatic art.) Thus, one of Shaw's favorite dramatic techniques is to lure the audience into sympathizing with what, by dramatic and moral convention, ought to be the hero, in order to ultimately expose the hero's sentiments as so much foolish idealism.

Shaw's essay on Ibsen, and much of his career as a playwright, can be seen as an ongoing diatribe against the simplistic characterizations of virtue and vice offered by what he called "idealist" theater. In comparison with Ibsen or Shaw, even at their most tendentious, plays adhering to poetic justice seem childish and simplistic in their moral vision. Yet, whatever the faults of poetic justice, it at least takes narrative art on its own terms; its criterion of immoral art is a function of what the work makes fictional, rather than simply what it depicts. Although Hume does not elaborate on what it is to mark vice with blame and disapprobation, the most natural way to understand this "marking" is as a generic term for any of the narrative techniques that do what poetic justice does with reward and punishment: that is, to overtly direct the audience's sympathies and antipathies. This criterion is an improvement on poetic justice, from an aesthetic standpoint, since it does not preclude tragedy. Nevertheless, it is clear from his discussion of immoral art that Hume thought many formidable works, especially those of other cultures, to fail in this respect. Thus Hume criticizes even Homer and the Greek tragedians for their "rough heroes," for whom it is too difficult to feel affection; and he declares that modern authors, due to their enlightened moral sensibilities, have a great advantage in this respect.³⁸ However, the explicit marking of vice with blame and disapprobation is neither necessary nor sufficient to determine how a work attempts to portray what it depicts. It is unnecessary because subtler narrative techniques will suffice; indeed, works which resort to such heavy-handed techniques are often properly disparaged for their clumsy didacticism. As Harold Pinter puts it, "To supply an explicit moral tag to an evolving and compulsive dramatic image seems to be facile, impertinent and dishonest."³⁹ Moreover, explicit marking is insufficient for the task, because a work can be complicitous with an attitude it explicitly disavows. This is most evident in television tabloids, which affect an attitude of high dudgeon toward modern decadence, while cynically indulging their audience's prurient fascination with it.

The modern Humean moralists, with the benefit of two more centuries of literature and criticism, have a great advantage over Hume on this point.

They succeed, I think, in making Hume's criterion of immorality in art more sophisticated, while charitably preserving his intentions. Their central idea is in line with the pioneering work of Wayne Booth, the critic whose discussion of "unreliable narrators" and "implied authors" has much advanced these issues, even if its details are contentious.⁴⁰ Booth is certainly right to insist on what he terms an elementary point, a fundamental interpretive norm which is nevertheless often ignored: "No matter how offensive such views [as are expressed in a work] seem, they cannot prove [the work] offensive unless we discover that, in context, they seem to us intended as the views of the implied author (or—what amounts to the same thing—they remain uncorrected . . . by the rest of the book)."⁴¹ Thus an immoral work of art does not merely depict but advocates, or is complicitous with, a morally suspect point of view. I have argued elsewhere that the points of view manifest in works of narrative and dramatic art cannot be understood on a purely propositional model, as articulable moral messages. Rather, they should be taken as expressing *ethical perspectives*: ways of seeing the world, in the light of a particular set of evaluative concepts.⁴² Of course, if we differ over whether a given perspective is pernicious, we will differ over what art is immoral; but we can expect no more agreement about immoral art than there is about morality.

Here too I am in accord with the Humean moralists. As Carroll notes, one principal way in which a narrative work manifests an ethical perspective is by calling for certain responses from its audience—whether these responses are best understood as sentiments, emotions, quasi-emotions, or attitudes. Comedies, thrillers, melodrama, horror, erotica, and classical tragedy are all defined by the response they call for: they aspire to portray their subjects as funny, exciting, sad, frightening, erotic, or tragic. Since Hume and the Humean moralists are centrally concerned with the moral implications of such emotional engagement, I propose to narrow our focus to these issues. There are certainly doubts that one can raise about this simplification, including the worry that this picture, which is most naturally applied to genre pieces, is just too simple to be applied to "high art" or even nongeneric drama, which can be more complex and ambiguous in the evaluative responses it demands. Many of these worries can be met, I think, by further elaborating the notion of an ethical perspective manifested by a work of narrative or dramatic art; but we cannot pursue that task here. Our primary concern is with Hume and his followers, who focus on the most fundamental emotions and moral responses (for Hume, simply love and hatred, praise and blame).

Hence we can adopt the following criterion of immorality in art, as being the most charitable development of Hume's suggestions: "An immoral work of art is one that expresses a pernicious ethical perspective, which condones or winks at vice—especially by calling for emotional responses to its

characters and events which it would be wrong to provide."⁴³ This criterion accords with the assumptions and aims of the Humean moralists, and though it makes several problematic assumptions, I think these challenges can adequately be met. Judgments of this sort, concerning the immorality of specific works of art, should be familiar. Indeed, Shaw immortalized Clement Scott, then drama critic of the *Daily Telegraph*, for his moral outrage at a certain play he had the misfortune to attend, where Scott found himself "exhorted to laugh at honor, to disbelieve in love, to mock at virtue, to distrust friendship, and to deride fidelity."⁴⁴ That play, which was roundly excoriated by the popular English press for its immorality, was Ibsen's *Ghosts*. Although Shaw pillories Scott's moral judgment, he does not accuse the critic of misreading the play. Rather, he writes, "Clement Scott's judgment did not mislead him in the least as to Ibsen's meaning. Ibsen means all that most revolted his critic."⁴⁵ Scott was simply engaging in ethical criticism, bringing his own moral values to bear in evaluating the play. So long as it does not violate our norms of interpretation, including Booth's elementary injunction that we not mistake depiction for advocacy, ethical criticism is endorsed and practiced by all the Humean moralists.

Perhaps it should give pause to moralists to consider the litany of works condemned as immoral by ethical critics in the last century or so: *Ghosts*, *Ulysses*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Lolita*, etc., ad nauseam. Yet defenders of ethical criticism are unlikely to be taken aback by this thought. They will protest that Scott's error is not in his ethical criticism but in his ethics, that of the English middle class at the turn of last century, which has proven inferior to Ibsen's more progressive stance. Of course, the works picked out as immoral have always seemed indisputably corrupt to their critics, and it is exceedingly difficult to press worries about fallibility against those who find the particular judgments at issue to be beyond doubt.⁴⁶ But a more foundational worry arises when we look closely at the practices of the most circumspect ethical critics, even with regard to easy cases. Consider, for instance, how Booth defends the charges of sexism and misogyny which he and others level at Rabelais, against the complaint that such ethical criticism is anachronistic and ahistorical: "I read [Rabelais] as I read anyone: *in my own time*. Whatever he does to me will be done within my frame of values, not his. For me, here and now, the power of any 'past' text to work on me and to reshape me, for good or ill, is thus in this one sense ahistorical."⁴⁷

This response is perfectly appropriate, inasmuch as one is worried, as Booth expressly is, about the effects of engaging a work of art on one's character. The trouble is that this locus of concern, which is fundamentally instrumental, is in tension with his own injunction that we distinguish what is depicted in a work from what it advocates. Such concerns must therefore be at odds with aesthetic value, which is—by the minimal thesis of aesthetic

disinterestedness—confined to art's intrinsic values. If we are really worried about the dangers of art, there is no principled reason to ignore the consequences which flow from misreading, or from whatever more direct effects works of art might have—consequences which are just as morally significant as those issuing from readings that obey interpretive norms. Like the Humean moralists, Booth wants to treat narrative art as narrative, so as to maintain a connection with aesthetic value; but he also fears that, if we engage an immoral work of art as it enjoins us to, we will be reshaped by it in potentially dangerous ways. This uneasy tension, between concern for art's intrinsic values and concern about its instrumental effects, will prove fatal to Humean moralism.

Furthermore, although Booth is a more sophisticated reader than Hume, he is considerably less sensitive to the nuances of ethical judgment. Thus Hume distinguishes, as Booth does not, between moral assessments of the art and the artist: "However I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age," Hume writes, "I never can relish the composition."⁴⁸ This is a particularly telling oversight for Booth, due to the central (and at times overwrought) metaphor of his work on the "ethics of fiction": of books and their authors as friends. Simply to apply the moral standards of one's own time—even if we grant them to be correct—to people from other times and cultures would be to commit gross miscalculations of character. This is a bad way to choose a friend, even if one chooses one's friends as instrumentally as Booth seems to suggest, with an eye toward what they can do for you (albeit for your character, not your purse). On any plausible ethical view, the rightness or wrongness of an agent's actions has to be distinguished from the evaluation of his character. To judge Rabelais or anyone else by one's own ethical standards, without regard to his historical and cultural context, is to fail to take into account the immense degree to which we humans are subject to normative influence by others. It is to congratulate ourselves too much for our moral correctness, and to respect our predecessors too little. Moreover, the danger of ethical criticism is that it encourages us to ignore what might be learned from ethical perspectives which distort the world in important ways, by persuading us to refuse to encounter them, or to view them through jaundiced eyes. And this error seems to be just as vulgar and pervasive of late—within and outside aesthetics—as the elementary interpretive mistake which Booth properly warns us against.

However, Hume differs from both the adversaries and defenders of art, including our contemporary Humean moralists, in a crucial respect. Even if he does suggest that aesthetic experience can be ethically valuable, by giving us practice in adopting the impartial perspective, Hume is clearly unconcerned with art's ability to harm. Indeed, there is no sign that he takes the possibility seriously. His complaint against immoral art is not a moral complaint at

all. Hume's worry is not that immoral art has too much power to move us, but that it has too little; the problem with immoral art is that it isn't enjoyable. Thus Hume makes two charges against immoral art, which together form the basis for the argument for moralism embraced by contemporary philosophers of art: that he *cannot* enter into the sentiments a work of immoral art calls for and that it would be *improper* for him to do so.

VARIETIES OF NORMATIVE JUDGMENT

Several philosophers with moralist sympathies have suggested that there is an instructive comparison to be drawn between immoral art and offensive jokes. Moreover, Berys Gaut advances an argument for Humean moralism which is strikingly analogous to an argument for comic moralism. He calls this the Merited Response Argument, which I will formulate as follows:

- (1) Immoral art expresses a pernicious ethical perspective, which involves calling for attitudes and feelings it would be wrong to have, even in imagination (call these *unethical responses*).
- (2) Unethical responses are never merited.
- (3) It is an aesthetic flaw for a work of art to call for an unmerited response.
- (4) Therefore, immoral art is aesthetically flawed.

The conclusion of Gaut's argument, proposition (4), is as sweeping a moralist claim as Hume's, though it might not be as strong. And so long as the notion of merit at play in premises (2) and (3) is univocal, this is a valid argument for Humean moralism. However, we will need to look more closely at those two related claims: that an unethical emotional response cannot be merited, and that it is an aesthetic defect for a work to call for an unmerited emotional response.

While the gloss of immoral art given in premise (1) jibes well with the conclusions of our previous discussion, it should be understood as providing only a partial and simplified account of immoral art, for reasons already discussed. This general picture of immoral art is shared by all of the authors under consideration, and myself; our differences here are largely in terminology and emphasis. Thus, Gaut glosses morally defective art as that which "manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes."⁴⁹ Carroll primarily considers art that invites its audience to "entertain a defective moral perspective."⁵⁰ And Moran suggests that immoral art calls for attitudes and emotions which it would be wrong to adopt, even in imagination. Though Walton's central example deals with the message and purpose of a work, he also suggests that immoral art advocates a repugnant moral perspective. I prefer the locution

“ethical perspective,” since the points of view manifest in artworks can be actively hostile to morality. More important, we must keep in mind that works of narrative and dramatic art express ethical perspectives not simply through overt didactic purposes or propositional messages, but also by calling for certain responses to its characters and events—as a simple comedy attempts to portray something as funny. Hence our primary focus here will be on the range of emotional and evaluative responses which art calls for from its audience.

The Merited Response Argument has the virtue of making it clear why offensive jokes provide such a useful model of immoral art. First, they cohere with our simplified criterion of immorality in art: that a work of art is immoral when it calls for an emotional response it would be wrong to provide. Jokes, like pure comedies, call for amusement—they attempt to portray something as funny. But it is wrong to be amused at an offensive joke; at any rate, this commonplace moral judgment is accepted by all the moralists under discussion, and I propose to grant the moralist all his specifically moral claims. Moreover, while amusement is one of the simplest and least structured emotions, whose affect often seems frivolous, it is nonetheless morally serious. We routinely criticize one another in ethical terms for our tendencies to have emotional responses, including fear, pity, anger, and jealousy—or amusement. When someone laughs at the wrong things, we disparage him in terms of vice, for instance accusing him of being cruel, insensitive, or boorish. Indeed, merely to fail badly enough at tracking the funny is deemed a flaw of character, for which one is called silly or dour, if too often or not often enough amused. And Elizabeth Anderson has gestured at an argument for comic moralism which is quite similar to Gaut’s Merited Response Argument. Anderson writes, “A person may laugh at a racist joke, but be embarrassed at her laughter. Her embarrassment reflects a judgment that her amusement was not an appropriate response to the joke. The joke was not genuinely good or funny: it did not merit laughter.”⁵¹

As this is an extremely brief remark, which is not exactly made in her own voice, I hesitate to attribute this view to Anderson. Indeed, I am deeply sympathetic with many aspects of Anderson’s program: her focus on response-dependent evaluative concepts (such as *funny*); the claim that values are plural and frequently incommensurable; and the psychological insight, manifest in this example, that our actual responses do not always reflect our critical judgments. On her view, what it is for something to be funny, for instance, is for it to merit amusement; and this closely resembles what I will claim. I am worried, though, about her conflation of the judgments that the joke is good and that it is funny, which is further encouraged by the use of such crucially ambiguous terms as ‘appropriate’ and ‘merited.’ The fact that this is a racist joke is a reason to think it isn’t genuinely good,

but only if comic moralism is true does it count as a reason to think the joke isn't funny. Hence this passage leads me to think that Anderson does indeed endorse comic moralism. In any case, we shall see that Gaut's argument and Carroll's commit them to similar views.

The crucial thought behind these arguments is that moral considerations—such as that the joke is racist—show us when an emotion is and isn't appropriate to feel, and inappropriate emotions do not accurately track the evaluative properties of which they purport to be perceptions, such as the funny. These arguments, I will claim, trade crucially on unanalyzed concepts of *merit* and *appropriateness*, which conflate logically distinct questions of the propriety and of the correctness of an emotional response. A first clue to this effect can be drawn from the emotion which Anderson attributes to her fictional protagonist. Embarrassment seems more apt a response to finding oneself amused by a harmless but juvenile joke, which on reflection one judges not to be funny. Shame and guilt are more apt as responses to the case at hand, of finding oneself amused by a joke one deems morally repugnant. Of course, there is an obvious sense in which a racist, sexist, or otherwise offensive joke—one that it would be wrong to be amused by—is not a good joke: it is morally bad. But that doesn't mean the joke isn't funny. Morally bad jokes can be more or less funny; and the judgment that a joke is offensive does not settle the question of its comic value, even in part, because what is offensive about a joke can be just what is funny about it. Or so I will argue.

Premise (2) of the Merited Response Argument claims that unethical responses are never merited, but before we can evaluate this claim we need to know what it is for an emotion *F* (such as amusement) to be merited by its object *X*, and what that has to do with the question of whether or not *X* has some evaluative property Φ (is funny). There are quite a few such response-dependent concepts, whose predication involves a judgment about an associated emotional response, including *offensive*, *funny*, *pitiful*, *dangerous*, *outrageous*, and *enviable*. (Many of the property terms are built upon the name of an emotion, but this is neither ubiquitous nor entirely germane.)⁵² To judge that some *X* is Φ is not to report that one has the associated emotion *F* toward *X*, but to endorse the response in a particular way: it is to hold the emotion to be *warranted*—that is, to judge that it fits its object (though it may fail to do justice to a variety of other, more urgent considerations).⁵³ Let us stipulate that considerations of warrant for an emotion *F* are all those considerations which count as reasons to think *X* is Φ . For example, the fact that someone deliberately humiliated you in public is a consideration of warrant for your anger at him, because this is a reason to think his act outrageous. However, if what he did was to expose you for defrauding him, then that is a reason his act was not outrageous, and hence that it would be unwarranted for you to be angry at him for it. By contrast, the thought that revenge

is best served cold is a reason to control your anger until the time is ripe, but it is not a consideration of warrant.

Thus the homily “Don’t cry over spilt milk” is a prudential norm for sadness, not one about the emotion’s warrant. It *is* sad that the milk spilled, even if it does no good to mourn. Whereas “The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence” expresses a norm for the warrant of envy. It cautions us against the emotion not because it is bad for us, nor even because it is wrong, but because we are prone to overestimate the value of what we don’t possess. If something isn’t good, indeed better than what you have, then it is unwarranted for you to envy its possession. This should be an uncontroversial claim about the structure or shape of envy.⁵⁴ In general, only certain reasons count as considerations of warrant for an emotion, the range of which is determined by its specific shape. As with belief, the fact that an emotion is warranted is a consideration which bears on, but doesn’t settle, the practical question of what to feel, all things considered.⁵⁵ Judgments of warrant merely establish what there is most evidence to feel, desire, or believe; they focus on epistemic, as opposed to moral or prudential, reasons. Our norms often vindicate our actual responses, but (as Anderson’s example aptly reflects) not always. You might be offended by a joke yet think it not really offensive, if you deem your response unwarranted. It is no coincidence, though, how rare this attitude is. *People grant their actual emotional responses a defeasible presumption of warrant*—especially about offense and other kinds of moral censure. If you offend me, I will likely take your behavior to have been offensive, at least until a powerful countermanding reason is presented. We tend, however, to be much less respectful of other people’s responses, and to grant them no such favorable presumption.

There are several ways one might query someone’s offense at a joke, before granting that it is offensive. Perhaps the auditor is overly sensitive, and his offense unwarranted. Or perhaps, while offense is warranted from his position (as the butt of the joke), others don’t owe it that response. I will defend neither of these claims, though, because I am inclined to grant normative authority *on matters of offense* to those at whose expense a joke comes. We should not, however, grant such authority on the question of whether the joke is funny. On the contrary, the butt of a joke is in the worst position to make that judgment.⁵⁶ Even on questions of offense, the authority of the slighted is by no means absolute. For one thing, unless you get the joke, you are in no position to judge either its humor or its offensiveness. Moreover, even if it is granted that a joke is offensive, and that it would therefore be wrong to be amused by it, it does not follow that the joke cannot be funny. The judgment that an emotion is wrong to feel, or that it would be bad for you to feel it, is logically distinct from the judgment that the response is unwarranted (that X isn’t Φ). Some considerations which bear on the morality or the expedience

of having a response are clearly irrelevant to the question of its warrant. Hence these three types of normative assessment must be distinguished, though each of them might, loosely and misleadingly, be called a judgment of whether or not to be amused.

Consider an example designed to highlight the difference between the kinds of consideration relevant to these judgments. Suppose we are sitting next to each other at a tiresome public lecture, and you make a witty remark under your breath. I think it would be bad for me to laugh, as that would attract embarrassing attention. Another way to put this is that I would be better off not laughing or that, prudentially speaking, I shouldn't laugh. Furthermore, it would be deeply rude to distract the audience and perhaps to humiliate the speaker by laughing. Hence, on moral grounds, I ought not to laugh: it would be wrong. But I can consistently hold that your remark warrants laughter nonetheless; it was a very funny remark, even though it would be inexpedient and wrong to laugh at it. Since none of the considerations so far mentioned have anything to do with the object of my amusement—the joke—they cannot be relevant to the question of whether or not it is funny.⁵⁷ These considerations are all *strategic*, in that they are considerations of the consequences of feeling a certain way, for yourself or others. Strategic considerations never determine whether or not an emotion is warranted, and hence do not bear on whether the object of the emotion has the Φ -property in question (in this case, whether the joke is funny). This claim can hardly be doubted, since the considerations broached obtain regardless of what joke it is, simply in virtue of the circumstances of its telling.

However, an offensive joke is one which it would be wrong to be amused by, one might think, regardless of the consequences. Perhaps even private amusement involves taking up a pernicious attitude, which it is wrong to adopt even in jest, or in imagination. Although both de Sousa and Moran explicitly endorse this moral claim, their stance toward comic moralism is more difficult to discern.⁵⁸ The two fundamental tenets of their position are much clearer. First, both claim that amusement at a joke manifests a real attitude. “To find the joke funny,” de Sousa writes, “the listener must actually share those sexist attitudes.”⁵⁹ Second, they think that to adopt the suspect attitude, even merely in the context of making or appreciating a joke, marks you as vicious. Thus Moran writes, “the person who finds himself chortling with appreciation at a racist joke cannot excuse himself by insisting that he [doesn't] *really* [share] in the attitude his laughter expresses.”⁶⁰ Hence their moral conclusions do not rely on strategic considerations; rather, they suggest that it is intrinsically vicious to take up the attitude required for amusement at such jokes.

Even non-strategic moral considerations about whether to feel an emotion F at X , however, do not bear on whether X is Φ . Although this general

claim cannot be defended here, it will suffice to demonstrate that this is true of amusement, for comic moralism to be belied.⁶¹ I will then use this result, and the obvious irrelevance of strategic considerations to questions of warrant, against Humean moralism. De Sousa identifies the “evil element” in laughter, which makes it sometimes wrong to laugh, as the attitude of malicious ridicule which some humor requires one to adopt. The trouble is that this attitude seems so close to the heart of much comedy—and not just the jokes which offend the moralists. Many jokes have a butt, at whose expense their humor comes. Even self-deprecating humor is nonetheless deprecating, though it is presumably not malicious. To call ridicule malicious seems to imply that it is wrong to indulge; the question at hand is why we should think it is any less funny for that. To those who lack the moralist’s sense of humor, the fact that a joke unjustly slights someone, and portrays this slight as amusing, just doesn’t look like a reason to deny that it is funny. To the contrary, that is, intuitively, *just what is funny about it*: the panache with which this is done.

Moran and de Sousa focus their discussion of offensive jokes on those which are racist or sexist; but malicious ridicule is as much a part of humor born of resentment toward such attitudes. Roseanne Barr’s reputation as a feminist comic, for instance, is founded on her trenchant ridicule of male attitudes, not just overtly sexist ones, and of men. Thus consistency pressure can be brought to bear on the moralist who insists that, because they involve malicious ridicule, racist and sexist jokes are never funny. Someone who never found a joke belittling women funny might prefer this one: “What’s the difference between divorce and circumcision? In a divorce, you get rid of the whole prick.” If de Sousa is right that the evil element of humor consists in its malicious ridicule, then it seems it must be wrong to be amused at this joke as well. Perhaps considerations about whether the butt of the joke “has it coming to him” bear on whether it is permissible to laugh.⁶² But to hold that even such non-strategic moral considerations are relevant to whether or not a joke is funny is to claim that amusement has a “moral shape,” which is sensitive to questions of justice and desert. This theory of amusement has the dubious virtue of making it a much nicer emotion than a clear-eyed view of the matter suggests. Many emotions, including amusement, are not sensitive to moral considerations; one cannot get sufficient leverage to unseat the presumption of warrant behind our actual dispositions to laughter, envy, and shame, for example. (There are good treatments of these emotions elsewhere, which support these claims.)⁶³

As a last resort, the comic moralist might take the heroic step of offering a Theory of Humor, which aspires to establish when jokes are funny—and concludes that offensive jokes never are. This very endeavor is, I think, ill-conceived. All such theories fail to acknowledge that *funny* is a

response-dependent concept, which we have no independent access to, save through our sense of humor. It should come as no surprise, then, that the theories offered in the literature are all deeply suspect and suffer from a pervasive flaw. They attempt to shoehorn cases into their favored paradigm, typically either Incongruity or Superiority; but the attempt to make the theory sufficiently broad succeeds only in draining the paradigm concept of its content. As Roger Scruton remarks of attempts to expand the notion of incongruity so as to accommodate more of what we find funny: "To know what is meant by 'incongruous' you would have to consult, not some independent conception, but the range of objects at which we laugh."⁶⁴ Both Incongruity and Superiority theories get at something true about humor, though neither comes close to being adequate. But we don't need a Theory of Humor for our purposes; it will suffice if the best of these efforts suggest that ridicule, whether malicious or not, is a central aspect of humor. Henri Bergson's account of humor is typically categorized as a Superiority Theory, and hence criticized for focusing too exclusively on the cruel aspects of laughter, but it can be modified so as to avoid the brunt of this criticism.

On Bergson's picture, one central aspect of laughter is that it serves the social function of repudiation and reparation. Since, as the moralists themselves suggest, amusement requires that we take up an attitude of repudiation rather than one of sympathy, the butt of a joke is typically in the worst position to judge its humor. This explains too why those who are most morally sensitive, and wont to take up sympathetic attitudes toward others (especially the socially marginalized), don't often find offensive jokes funny. As Bergson puts it, "Depict some fault, however trifling, in such a way as to arouse sympathy, fear, or pity; and the mischief is done, it is impossible for us to laugh."⁶⁵ This point about amusement demonstrates something more general and important: that while justice may be a cardinal virtue, it is not therefore an epistemic virtue. Moral sensitivity can be a handicap in assessing the warrant of emotions which are themselves insensitive to moral qualities, since it encourages one to substitute considerations of propriety for those of correctness. That said, it must be allowed that someone can consistently hold norms for the warrant of amusement which are in accord with his judgments of offensiveness.⁶⁶ This normative stance, or sense of humor, is only normatively mistaken; it is the arguments offered for it which are philosophically suspect.

The most common counterexample offered against Superiority Theories is self-deprecating humor; yet, in fact, Bergson's account can accommodate self-deprecation nicely (which is one reason it is misleading to call it a Superiority Theory).⁶⁷ When the butt of a joke can join in and laugh at himself, this offers an opportunity for reparation of the social rift created by his ridicule. Self-deprecating humor can thus be seen as a sort of pre-emptive

maneuver, which joins us to others by inviting them to laugh at an aspect of oneself which one thereby demonstrates the ability to repudiate. Bergson's account also provides a rough-and-ready characterization of what makes ridicule malicious: when it offers no opportunity for reparation of the social rift. But people do not simply use ridicule to get others to conform; sometimes we use it to cast them out of society altogether, or to keep them around as permanent whipping boys. Such humor may be evil, and perhaps it is wicked to laugh at it, but this is no reason to think it less funny for its cruelty.⁶⁸ Of course, we can take a critical stance toward the less attractive aspects of our emotions and refuse to endorse having them in circumstances where we grant that people are regularly disposed to; but it is highly misleading to put this criticism in terms of warrant. That would constitute an untenable moralizing of the emotions.

In fact, a trenchant explanation of the specious temptations of comic moralism can be found in Walton's use of the familiar analogy between immoral art and offensive jokes. He writes: "Compare a racist joke or a political cartoon that makes a point we find offensive. We may declare pointedly that it is not funny—precisely because its message is offensive. To laugh at it, we may feel, would amount to endorsing its message, so we refuse to laugh. Even judging it to be funny may feel like expressing agreement. . . ."⁶⁹ I find Walton's diagnosis astute, though I draw a more dire prognosis for comic moralism from it than he does. I think it is exactly right that people say "That's not funny" even when they don't really mean it, simply because they don't want to endorse the joke *in any way*. Walton himself stays neutral on the issue, writing, "We must not simply assume that this declaration is to be taken literally (although I doubt that much is to be gained by deciding this question)."⁷⁰

Obviously, I think there is much to be gained from disentangling the types of normative judgment made of emotions—indeed, more than can be illuminated here. And the question of whether such declarations are to be taken literally is at the crux of the debate: if and only if they are literal, are these statements of comic moralism. Walton's argument does not require that these declarations be taken literally, because if it is wrong to be amused by a joke, then its comic value (if it has any) is *morally inaccessible*, by definition. And on Walton's view, the moral inaccessibility of immoral art suffices to constitute an aesthetic defect in it. By analogy, the same conclusion applies to offensive jokes: their moral inaccessibility is a comic defect. However, Walton's idiosyncratic notion of an aesthetic defect will prove too weak to support Humean moralism.

We are now in a position to see what is so problematic about the Merited Response Argument: its central concept of *merit* is crucially ambiguous, between an endorsement of warrant and an ethical endorsement. If merit is glossed as warrant, then premise (3) is plausible but premise (2) is false, since

some unethical responses are warranted. But if merited is glossed as ethical, then though premise (2) is trivially true, premise (3) is flatly question begging, since it asserts exactly what is at issue in the dispute. Moreover, since none of the argument's advocates adequately distinguishes between the varieties of normative judgment of the emotions, and the terms of their argument are ambiguous on just the crucial point, it is tempting to dismiss these arguments as equivocal. Yet Humean moralism has proved so attractive to formidable philosophers of art as to earn a more charitable exposition. The virtues of the Merited Response Argument will emerge, along with its ineliminable defects, if we understand 'merit' as a more generic term of rational endorsement, which is sensitive to various types of reason to feel. This stipulation renders (2) true but trivial, and shifts the argument to premise (3), which should be the controversial premise, since it advances the central claim about aesthetic value.

As Gaut's version of the Merited Response Argument is the most straightforward, it displays the crucial conflation most flagrantly. On his view, "the fact that we have reason not to respond in the way prescribed is an *aesthetic* failure of the work, that is to say, an aesthetic defect."⁷¹ But this claim is far too coarse-grained. There are a variety of different kinds of reason for and against an emotional response, only some of which are relevant to whether the response is warranted. And Gaut's use of the argument makes it clear that he needs to be talking about warrant, since he wants to draw conclusions about when Φ -properties obtain. As he writes, "Though a work of art may prescribe a response, it does not follow that it succeeds in making this response merited: horror films may be unfrightening, comedies unamusing, thrillers unthrilling."⁷² That it would be disastrous or wrong for me to have an emotion is a powerful reason not to respond, but it is not one that bears on whether the emotion fits its object. Thus premise (3)—the claim that it is an aesthetic flaw for a work to call for an unmerited response—gains specious support from its conflation of various forms of endorsement of the emotions. When a joke does not warrant amusement, it is not funny; but this does not follow from the fact that it would be wrong to be amused by it. Nor can Gaut's thesis about aesthetic value be restricted to the claim that when a work calls for an *unwarranted* response, this constitutes an aesthetic flaw. That would traduce his argument for moralism, since not all unethical responses are unwarranted, contrary to (a revised) premise (2). In particular, strategic considerations bear on the propriety of our responses, but not on their warrant.

Consider Gaut's claim that when a comedy calls for laughter at "heartless cruelty," we have (moral) reason not to laugh. So far this is unassailable. He concludes, though, in an implicit endorsement of comic moralism, that when this is the case, "the work's humor is flawed, and that is an aesthetic

defect in it.”⁷³ But the fact that it would be malicious or heartless to be amused by a particular joke doesn’t imply that the joke isn’t funny—even though, as Walton suggests, some may be prone to declare that a joke isn’t funny whenever they don’t endorse laughing at it. The relevant question is whether or not amusement at the joke or comedy is warranted; and moral considerations about when it is wrong to be amused, whether strategic or intrinsic, do not bear on the warrant of amusement. Yet Gaut explicitly embraces even strategic reasons to be amused: “If the comedy’s humor is revelatory, emancipating us from the narrow bonds of prejudice, getting us to see a situation in a different and better moral light and respond accordingly, we have reason to adopt the response, and the work succeeds aesthetically in this respect.”⁷⁴ That a comedy has these beneficial effects on our character is a reason to engage it, and to be amused by it; but it is the wrong kind of reason to use in support of the claim that the comedy is funny. Indeed, Gaut’s argument requires just what Walton’s argument from moral inaccessibility might be thought to offer: a defense of the claim that whenever it is wrong to appreciate a work’s aesthetic value, this constitutes an aesthetic defect in it.

THE INCORRIGIBILITY OF ART

The first and crudest form of the dichotomy between moralism and formalism lies in the opposition between Platonic moralists such as Tolstoy, for whom the value of a work of art is determined by the moral worth of the emotions it arouses, and the proponents of “Art for Art’s Sake,” who are concerned only with the satisfactions of aesthetic experience. If art’s ability to induce pleasure can be considered apart from its subject matter—as both Tolstoy and the most severe formalists hold—then perhaps its moral and aesthetic evaluation can be sharply distinguished, and their contention is just over which value to privilege. For those who take moral considerations to override all others, the answer is easy; but it is more problematic for those who want to defend art against moralistic intrusion, without abandoning morality altogether. A. C. Bradley sought a reasonable compromise in his essay “Poetry for Poetry’s Sake.” Bradley held that the imaginative experience of appreciating a poem is an end in itself, which is intrinsically valuable, and that aesthetic value is this intrinsic worth alone. But despite his embrace of autonomism, Bradley grants that poetry might also have “ulterior” values such as those claimed by Tolstoy’s humanism. Nevertheless, Bradley defended “Art for Art’s Sake” to this extent: he thought consideration of the ulterior values of poetry, whether by the poet or the reader, to be always distracting and often deleterious to aesthetic value. Even so, he

granted that “the intrinsic value of poetry might be so small, and its ulterior effects so mischievous, that it had better not exist.”⁷⁵ Bradley could afford to be sanguine about this possibility because, like Hume, he was much less convinced of art’s power either to harm or to profit.

While Tolstoy’s interdictory moralism has been widely repudiated, along with the formalist dogmas of bifurcation and hedonism, the strengths of these positions are less clearly recognized. Platonic moralists grant that immoral art can be affecting, even for a virtuous audience; and the hard-line formalists appreciate that our emotional responses, in aesthetic contexts, cannot be just what they seem: direct and unmediated responses to art’s representational content. We shall see that, in both these respects, the radicals had it right. Where both theories go wrong is in the antithetical conclusions they draw from a commonplace which is itself hard to deny—that, as Isenberg put it: “If factual or moral truth is the standard, some very great works will have to be condemned.”⁷⁶ Formalists and Platonic moralists agree that there are ineffectual works which express true and morally good ideas, and compelling works which express false and pernicious ones. But they differ, of course, in their willingness to praise art that is insipid but virtuous, and to condemn the wicked but sublime.

Indeed, the formalist defense of the bifurcation thesis starts from this commonplace, and proceeds by what Isenberg terms an argument by subtraction. That is, since the same content can be found in both weak and powerful works, they conclude that content must not be an aesthetically relevant quality of an artwork. This banishment of content engenders a wholly negative conception of form, as whatever is left once a work’s content has been subtracted. (It’s easy to think that Bell’s notion of ‘Significant Form,’ for instance, is this empty.) But Isenberg also realized the explosive potential of arguments by subtraction. An analogous argument can be run on any putative criterion of artistic excellence, unless some positive evaluation is built into the quality semantically. (Which is just what ‘significant’ does, for Bell’s pet phrase.) At least, this is true if Isenberg is right about the nature of aesthetic reasons: that there are no universally good-making features of art, such that one can conclude that any work which has this feature is thereby better. Therefore Isenberg concluded that the only formalist doctrine we can properly draw from the commonplace is autonomism (via the tally argument canvassed earlier).

Although the Humean moralists never flatly reject the commonplace, they are clearly more ambivalent about it. While it is particularly difficult to deny that good ideas and virtuous perspectives don’t always make for good art, both Gaut and Carroll suggest that certain moral merits of art are also aesthetic merits. This is not to say that they suffice to make a work aesthetically powerful, simply that (other things equal) the better the moral, the bet-

ter the story. Kieran further develops the idea motivating this conviction, that one of art's primary values is the opportunity it affords for the cultivation of moral insight and understanding. If it is also assumed that this humanist project can be advanced only by morally upright works, then the moral merits in a work which contribute to such insight will be aesthetic merits as well. The Humeans are even less comfortable with the other half of the commonplace: the suggestion that good art can express false ideas and evil perspectives. This asymmetry is reflected in the fact that Humean moralism is typically put in the negative, as Hume's classical statement has it: that moral defects are aesthetic flaws. Hume goes so far as to suggest that the moral defects of art often totally efface their aesthetic value, by saying he "can never relish" such works of immoral art, but contemporary philosophers of art with Humean sympathies are more circumspect. Walton does not commit himself as to whether *Triumph of the Will* has any aesthetic value, or if it is all effaced by the work's "obnoxious message." And Kieran takes it to be a virtue of his account that it treats this film as a hard case, about which he ultimately concludes that "though it is of artistic value, *Triumph of the Will* cannot be a truly great artwork."⁷⁷

The central dichotomy thus endures in a subtler form, between autonomism and Humean moralism. Since Isenberg argues for autonomism by rejecting the claim that (other things equal) the better the moral, the better the story, he is implicitly committed to this form of the dichotomy. Carroll's commitment is more overt, since he proposes to argue "dialectically" for his version of Humean moralism by rejecting the autonomist claim that the moral evaluation of an artwork is irrelevant to its aesthetic evaluation. Hence the arguments of both Isenberg and Carroll depend for their validity on there being no viable position between autonomism and Humean moralism. I will argue, with the Humean moralists and against Isenberg, that an artwork can be more valuable *as art* in virtue of the truth or goodness of its ideas. Yet, although this claim is sufficient to belie autonomism, it entails only Carroll's weakest statement of his thesis: that "sometimes the moral defects and/or moral merits of a work may figure in the aesthetic evaluation of the work."⁷⁸ But this is not yet Humean moralism, nor is it Carroll's ultimate position. He then goes on to offer an explanation of when and why moral defects are aesthetic flaws, in terms of art's capacity to move us emotionally. This explanation manifests the implicit assumption that when the moral merits and defects of a work figure in its aesthetic evaluation, they do so in corresponding fashion: moral defects as aesthetic defects, and moral merits as aesthetic merits. Yet, however reasonable this claim sounds, it is false.

Aesthetic value is not autonomous, because a work's moral, cognitive, and aesthetic values are sometimes inextricably linked. Rather, what Isenberg should have claimed is that these forms of value can vary independently of

one another. The truth and moral worth of a work's ideas sometimes do contribute to its aesthetic value, and hence are aesthetic reasons in its favor; but the immorality of some art—like the offensiveness of some jokes—is equally inseparable from its aesthetic value. Then it will be false to say either that the work's immorality is an adventitious feature of it, or that the work would be better were it not morally flawed. In such cases it makes no sense to claim that the aesthetically relevant moral defect in the work is a blemish upon it. Hence both autonomism and Humean moralism founder. Neither view succeeds in adequately capturing the complexity of the relationship between the moral and the aesthetic. Yet I will not be offering another theory of this relation, thereby adding to the surfeit of 'isms'; if I succeed in showing that both sides to this debate have been mistaken, that will be success enough.

When the Humean moralists venture into practical criticism, they are wont to focus on easy cases—praising works that “emancipate us from the narrow bonds of prejudice,” which they seem already to have escaped, and excoriating works with moral defects at odds with the pieties of the academic left: racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. (Of course, the targets of the Platonic moralists on the political right are equally predictable: art that is soft on sex and drugs, or hard on traditional religion.) The irony here is that the easiness of the moral judgments expressed by a work threatens to be an aesthetic flaw in itself. Isenberg echoes Cleanth Brooks and T. S. Eliot in holding that the “primary” philosophical values of ideas—truth and goodness—are overrated. Their thought is that an idea must be original and interesting, rather than true or good, to be worthy of publication, whether in aesthetic or other contexts. This point is all the more salient when applied to art's moral claims (and non-propositional moral commitments), which are especially prone to be truisms or banalities. Thus David Mamet, lamenting the prevalence of theater which embraces moralist social aims, writes: “Plays which deal with the unassailable investigate nothing and express nothing save the desire to investigate nothing. It is incontrovertible that deaf people are people, too; that homosexuals are people, too; that it is unfortunate to be deprived of a full happy life by illness or accident; that it is sobering to grow old.”⁷⁹

Therefore, my own example, the Dickinson poem which serves as this paper's epigram, is deliberately chosen to be morally contentious. To an admirer of this poem, such as myself, it seems absurd to suggest that the veracity of its ethical perspective is irrelevant to its intrinsic value. This intuition can be challenged, it seems, only by theoretical arguments (such as the argument by subtraction) and principles (such as the dogmas of formalism) which are less plausible than the intuition itself. Moreover, the autonomists are inconsistent, since there is no principled way to include the secondary philosophical values, as they want to do, while excluding the primary ones.⁸⁰ My claim that the poem's insight is an aesthetic merit does not in the least

diminish the import of the poem's "purely poetic" devices, in particular the brilliance of its central trope: the truth as a source of overwhelming, electric power—a sun too bright to be viewed straight on. On the contrary, the poem's ethical perspective and its metaphor are perfectly suited for each other. We are as children before this terrible truth, whose power (called, in a wickedly slanted irony, its "superb surprise") threatens to devastate us, like lightning. Not only is this idea aesthetically relevant, its profundity must count as an aesthetic reason in Isenberg's sense: it is a good-making feature of the work. Hence autonomism is false. Of course, one can easily imagine a bad poem which expresses essentially the same ethical perspective, or any other idea or sentiment which is claimed to be an aesthetic merit of some artwork.⁸¹ But this is true of all aesthetic reasons, on Isenberg's account. There are no qualities which are guaranteed to be merits in any work possessing them.

This is not, however, a poem which deals with the unassailable. I am sure some readers will question the propriety of its ethical perspective. They will likely see the poem as an apologia for deception, all the more dangerous for its seductive eloquence; and like Clement Scott, in his criticism of *Ghosts*, they would not be wrong about the work's meaning. Suppose that the Dickinson poem were granted to be morally defective, on these grounds. Of course, just as a reader who thinks some work's ethical perspective to be interesting, original, *and* insightful will be partial to it, one who thinks it false or evil will be likely to deny that it constitutes an aesthetic merit.⁸² Nevertheless, the moral defects of the poem's ethical perspective can sensibly be deemed a blemish—that is, an aesthetic flaw—only if the poem would be improved, aesthetically, by its alteration. And this is impossible, even in principle, for one cannot conceive of *this* poem expressing a Kantian view of truth telling. This is not meant as a universal generalization about art, or even poetry; hence it is not, to use a fashionable term of abuse in literary criticism, an "essentialist theory" of poetry. It merely registers the absurdity of supposing one can always sanitize a work's ethical perspective while keeping its aesthetically valuable qualities intact. There may well be moral defects in art which are shallow enough to be effaced, but this isn't one of them. The poem's central trope does not admit of this possibility; if the truth is, like the sun, too bright to be viewed head on, then to advocate always telling it straight is to say we would be better off blind. Hence even if the poem were morally defective, in just the relevant sense, this could not be held to be a blemish.

The formalist doctrines of bifurcation and purification are notoriously more difficult to hold of literary art than of music or painting. Meter, rhyme, and the other purely aural qualities of poetry seem no more fundamental to the medium than is metaphor; at any rate, it would be extremely implausible to consider metaphor an adventitious aspect of poetry. But if what endows this metaphor with aesthetic value is how perfectly it expresses the poem's

ethical perspective, then it is impossible to conceive of any adequate notion of the work's "formal beauty" as divorced from its content—regardless of whether this moral content is deemed virtuous or vicious. When this is true of a work of immoral art, it can be said to be *incorrigible*: it cannot be sanitized, only expurgated. Ironically, we shall see that the Humean moralists are forced into a half-hearted embrace of an untenably formalist conception of aesthetic value, in order to deal with immoral art in an even remotely plausible manner. In the final section of this paper I will consider their favorite example, *Triumph of the Will*, and argue that even this film's acknowledged moral defects, though aesthetically relevant, cannot be deemed blemishes on the work. But I am not engaged simply in a search for counterexamples; I also want to take on the moralists' best argument. In broad brush, this argument is that, since our responses to works of narrative and dramatic art depend upon the fictional qualities of its characters and events, the emotional and evaluative responses they warrant depend upon how it is ethical to respond to what these works make fictional.⁸³

Carroll offers a clear exposition of this view, using tragedy as his example. According to Aristotle, tragedy must portray the explicable but undeserved ruin of a largely good and highly placed man, thereby calling for fear and pity from its audience. No doubt Aristotle's definition is too restrictive: tragedy need not involve a man, much less a highly placed one, and even the explicability of the disaster can plausibly be abjured. Yet it seems indisputable that tragedy must portray its protagonist so as to allow some sympathy for him, if it is to arouse the tragic emotions (which surely include more than just fear and pity). As Carroll writes: "Tragedy will fail on its own terms—terms internal to the practice of tragedy—when the characters are of the wrong sort. This failure will be aesthetic in the straightforward sense that it is a failure of tragedy qua tragedy."⁸⁴ While this does not yet say anything about immoral art, it points in the direction the Humean moralists are headed. If the protagonist of a tragedy is too vicious to win our sympathy, his downfall will not warrant fear and pity (or any other tragic emotion), but something more like righteous satisfaction. And if the work's aesthetic success depends upon its arousing emotional responses which it fails to warrant, then the work will be an aesthetic failure, in virtue of its moral defects.

Indeed, when art does not move us, or moves us in the wrong way (e.g., to disgust), we typically think it aesthetically flawed. Yet this is not always so, for we might be to blame for our failure to respond as the work requires, due to a failure of imagination or attention, or to some prejudice. When we think we *should* be moved, even though we in fact are not, we properly blame ourselves rather than the work. The question is what is the force of this aesthetic 'should'? When the work itself is the object of our response—as when we ask if the comedy is funny, or the thriller thrilling—then these are questions about

the warrant of our responses. But we must avoid simply concluding that whenever the characters and events of a work of fiction do not warrant the responses which are requisite for the work to succeed, this constitutes an aesthetic flaw; for this way of speaking courts confusion. The fear and pity aroused by a tragedy are unlike the amusement caused by a joke, in that they are directed at the fictional characters and events, rather than at the work itself: we (take ourselves to) pity Anna Karenina, and fear for Oedipus' inevitable fall. Whereas, although the clichéd traveling salesman joke makes something fictional, and calls for amusement, it does not enjoin us to feel anything for the salesman. Jokes don't prescribe us to imagine having any emotional response toward their characters—we don't have to pity the foolish salesman, or lust after the farmer's daughter. Walton famously argues that such responses, which are directed at fictional objects, are only "quasi-emotions"; they are grounded in pretense, and our attributions of them, to ourselves and others, should not be taken literally.⁸⁵

The main concern of Moran's essay is to argue against Walton's theory of make believe, and one of his principal arguments is intimately related to moralism. Moran argues that the fact that we subject these responses to fictions to "real-world accountability" shows that they should not be understood as being make believe. "Rather," he writes, "the responses of laughter, lust, indignation, relief, delight in retribution, etc. are normally treated as expressions of genuine attitudes that we actually have, and are esteemed or repudiated accordingly."⁸⁶ Here Moran calls upon the familiar analogy with offensive jokes, pointing out that to laugh at a racist joke marks one as a racist: "It's only a joke" is no excuse. But Walton can (and does) grant that it is sometimes wrong to respond as a work enjoins us to, whether or not these responses are make believe, because what we are willing to imagine or to pretend reflects aspects of our actual character. It follows that a virtuous person must sometimes exhibit what Moran calls *imaginative resistance*, which he characterizes as the attitude we take toward "form[s] of imagination in which we are unwilling to engage," despite being enjoined to do so by a work of art.⁸⁷ Hence, for our purposes we need not settle the controversy over Walton's theory (which I happen to think is largely correct).

Moran goes on to assimilate these cases of morally grounded resistance with some clearly aesthetic complaints, in what seems an implicit endorsement of Humean moralism. He writes that "many familiar terms of aesthetic criticism (for example, the sentimental, the pretentious, etc.) can be seen as expressing judgments of this kind—roughly, judgments of the distance between what we are enjoined to feel and what we are actually inclined to feel."⁸⁸ Thus Moran deliberately likens responses directed at the characters and events of a fiction (e.g., delight in retribution) with responses to the work as a whole (that it is sentimental). Both sorts of response, we have granted,

in some way reflect genuine attitudes, as Moran claims, and are “esteemed or repudiated accordingly.” But there is a danger here of implicitly accepting a further claim, which I will call the thesis of *norm-equivalence*: that the same norms (whether of morality or warrant) apply to our responses toward fictional events and persons, as would apply were they actual. And this thesis, as we shall see, is not merely false, but patently absurd.

Here the formalist insight, that our emotional responses to art are not direct and unmediated responses to its representational content, is telling. Although our emotional responses are sensitive to what a work makes fictional, they are clearly only partially determined by it. The most banal melodrama, which would be dismissed as a “tear-jerker,” typically depicts events which would surely warrant pity, were they actual. Though it would be callous and wicked to turn a cold shoulder to them in reality, we can shrug them off with impunity in fictional contexts—because, of course, we know they aren’t real. By contrast, compare an overbearing documentary on the dismal conditions of coal miners. While the work’s didactic rhetoric might be off-putting, as long as the facts are not in doubt, pity for the workers and outrage at their mistreatment is no less warranted; perhaps it is even morally required. But when we are left cold by a clumsy work of fiction, it would be ludicrous to think that we are failing to respond to its characters as we ought, simply because the story has made something fictional which, if actual, would be pitiful, outrageous, or what have you.⁸⁹ Indeed, the term ‘resistance’ is infelicitous for these cases, since we need not resist what we are not tempted to feel. Even when such a story succeeds in “jerking” our tears, we will complain that we have been emotionally manipulated and will disparage the work as sentimental.

This point reveals another, less overt, assimilation or conflation in Moran’s discussion. The phrase “what we are actually inclined to feel” is ambiguous, between inclination as willingness and as ability. Is a decent person unwilling or unable to feel the response a work of immoral art calls for? Let us stipulate that the *virtuous audience* will resist feeling, in aesthetic contexts, what they deem it wrong to feel; while a *morally sensitive audience* will be unable to feel that way. Of course, enough practice in resistance might, through habituation, make a virtuous spectator into a morally sensitive one. (Thus, to adapt Anderson’s case, the person who feels guilty enough about being amused by racist jokes can be expected eventually to cease finding them funny.) Nevertheless, the Platonic fear that immoral art is capable of moving even good people is more plausible than the Humean confidence in our immunity to seduction. Narrative and dramatic art often succeeds in portraying even vicious characters in a sympathetic light, because we are so dangerously prone to empathy; as Mamet remarks, drama has the capacity to affect us because “we identify *subconsciously* (uncritically) with the pro-

tagonist.”⁹⁰ Of course we do not always succumb and sometimes actively resist; but we are able to view *Macbeth*, for instance, with sufficient sympathy that this play is seldom said to fail as tragedy. Yet surely, as Isenberg has noticed, our responses to it would be abhorrent, by the lights of our norms for responding to reality: “In practical life it would be our business to correct the distorted evaluations which result from the nearness and prominence of certain objects [in works of art] . . . and not to bother about the conflicts in the soul of *Macbeth* when he is every day murdering innocent people.”⁹¹ If it is granted that *Macbeth* does not fail as tragedy, then either the norm-equivalency thesis is false, or immoral art is more powerful, and we are less like the morally sensitive audience, than Humeans acknowledge. In fact, I think both sides of this disjunction are true. It is precisely because we are only sporadically and capriciously morally sensitive (in our technical sense) that spectators who aspire to virtue should ever need to practice resistance to the charms of immoral art.

Against Humean moralism, and in praise of immoral art, I will argue that art can succeed in portraying its subject in a distorting, or even an evil light. Such immoral art can induce even a good person to see what it depicts as it is portrayed—as shameful, funny, pitiful, glorious, et al.—despite the fact that one’s critical judgment remains always vehemently to the contrary. Immoral art can succeed, that is, if one does not resist imagining as prescribed by our interpretive norms. Moreover, sometimes resistance is futile, because once exposed to the work, one cannot help but see the subject in this light. This is obviously true of caricature, and more subtly the case with portraiture. A cunning political cartoon can make you see someone in a manner which you would repudiate as a judgment. Then it is a good caricature, albeit a bad political statement. In these cases it would be closer to the truth to say that the relevant moral defect is an aesthetic merit of the work. At any rate, it cannot sensibly be termed an aesthetic flaw or blemish without rendering those terms empty.

MORAL SENSITIVITY: DELICACY OR PREJUDICE?

Recall that Hume wrote that when a work of art enjoins him to respond with “sentiments of approbation and blame, love and hatred” which differ from his confidently held moral norms, “I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into its sentiments.”⁹² A bit of a muddle over the distinction between psychological and normative claims (over what we *can* feel in response to a work, and what we *should*) has infected Humean moralism from its beginnings. Strictly speaking, neither of these claims entails any conclusion about the work’s aesthetic value. Hume’s inability to respond might be a “false delicacy,” the result

of prejudice or a failure of imagination; and even if it is granted that it would be (morally) improper for him to respond, more argument is needed to show that this is an aesthetic defect in the work. Humean moralism can be seen as attempting to give just this argument.

Carroll makes a weaker claim than either Hume or Gaut, since he does not insist that every moral defect in an artwork is a disfiguring blemish upon it; but neither is he claiming merely that some moral defects are aesthetic flaws. Rather, a moral defect “will count as an aesthetic defect when it actually deters the response to which the work aspires. And it will also count as a blemish even if it is not detected—so long as it is there to be detected by morally sensitive audiences whose response to the work’s agenda will be spoiled by it.”⁹³ Although this passage is Carroll’s most careful statement of his Humean moralism, it is still insufficiently rigorous. Carroll recognizes that an actual audience will not recoil from an immoral work of art if they don’t appreciate its viciousness. But, by the same reasoning, Carroll should grant that sometimes members of an audience will in fact be deterred from responding to a work by their moral qualms, though there is no moral defect. This is the lesson to be drawn from the scandalous response to the first performances of Ibsen’s social realist plays. Hence the responses of actual audiences, positive or negative, are quite beside the point; the real work is being done by the notion of how a morally sensitive audience would respond.

Moreover, Carroll’s notion of the morally sensitive audience is quite substantive. Were moral sensitivity simply the psychological trait of being unable to respond to a work as one judges it would be wrong to respond, that would belie Carroll’s criterion of when a moral defect is an aesthetic one. Under this description, Clement Scott is morally sensitive; but though he was unable to respond as Ibsen enjoined him to, that is no reason to think *Ghosts* immoral. The morally sensitive audience Carroll refers to must be understood not simply as being highly discriminating, but also correct in their moral judgments. The question is whether even such substantive moral sensitivity is a delicacy in the Humean sense—that is, an epistemic ideal for aesthetic judgment. Carroll clearly think so, but I disagree. When one examines the practical criticism of the Humean moralists, it’s easy to conclude that moral oversensitivity is possible. Consider Hume’s complaint about the rough heroes of Greek epic, with whom he thought it impossible to sympathize. Or Walton’s claim that *Triumph of the Will* can inspire only disgust; I expect that some readers, who are neither formalists nor fascists, will find this report to be at odds with their experience of that film.⁹⁴

Suppose it is granted that a morally sensitive audience’s experience of an artwork would be spoiled by some moral defect in it. They are not inclined to respond as prescribed, because it would be wrong to do so. Nevertheless, if it is possible for the question of how it is morally permissible to respond

to a work to be distinguished from the question of how an aesthetically ideal judge would respond to it, then this is not decisive. And the moral relevance of purely strategic considerations guarantees that these questions can come apart. If we are unwilling even to attempt to imagine what a work prescribes us to, then surely we are in no position to judge its aesthetic value. Similarly, you might be able to tell that a joke is offensive without even getting it—you resist as soon as you realize it's one of those "traveling salesman and the farmer's daughter" jokes—but if you don't get a joke, you are in no position to judge its humor. And if you fail to engage a work of narrative art as interpretive norms demand, then you cannot judge its aesthetic value. Such morally grounded resistance to engaging a work, however praiseworthy it may be, undermines one's epistemic position for aesthetic judgment.

Although Walton is careful to distinguish immoral art from morally dangerous art, he raises considerations which cut against both. Even works which simply illuminate immoral attitudes, without advocating them, can be dangerous. Moreover, when the perspective illustrated is sufficiently repugnant, Walton suggests that it is proper to resist taking it up in imagination, for overtly strategic reasons: "Adopting even in imagination a moral view that I reject in reality, allowing myself to think and feel in imagination as though my convictions were different from what they actually are, might change my moral orientation; it might in this sense 'pervert the sentiments of my heart,' even if it doesn't change my convictions."⁹⁵ Thus, while Walton shares Booth's concerns about the moral dangers of art, he is more consistent about the implications of this stance. If such fears are worth taking seriously, then an inclusive view of moral inaccessibility seems forced upon us. But the price of this consistency is that Walton is forced to treat even art which is granted not to be immoral, but merely dangerous, as being inaccessible. However virtuous this policy, it violates Booth's elementary narrative injunction, and thus puts one in just the wrong epistemic position to assess a work's aesthetic value. The fact that a virtuous audience would resist a work of art entails only that the work's aesthetic value, if it has any, is morally inaccessible. Hence Carroll's argument, like Gaut's, depends on the success of the argument that moral inaccessibility is an aesthetic defect, as such.

Walton explicitly refrains from claiming that every moral defect is a disfiguring aesthetic flaw; like Carroll, he suggests that some moral defects are sufficiently subtle as not to deter the responses of even a (reasonably) morally sensitive audience. And, as we've seen, he professes neutrality on the question of comic moralism. Yet Walton's discussion is very easily read as an endorsement of just the argument from moral inaccessibility which Humean moralism requires. For instance, about his primary example, *Triumph of the Will*, Walton writes: "If the work's obnoxious message does not destroy its aesthetic value, it nevertheless renders it morally inaccessible. That must count

as an aesthetic defect as well as a moral defect.”⁹⁶ The argument from moral inaccessibility fails, however, because strategic considerations contribute—and when dire enough, suffice—to make a work’s aesthetic value morally inaccessible. Therefore, by the thesis of minimal aesthetic disinterestedness (that the purely instrumental effects of art do not contribute to its aesthetic value), moral sensitivity, while perhaps a virtue, is an epistemic vice: a false delicacy.

But Walton does not actually endorse this argument, despite appearances. In claiming that, because the aesthetic value of *Triumph of the Will* (if it has any) is morally inaccessible, this “must count as an aesthetic defect as well as a moral defect,” all Walton means is that the inaccessibility of the work’s aesthetic value is unfortunate from the aesthetic point of view.⁹⁷ The high price of opera tickets is similarly unfortunate. Hence, to say that a work has an “aesthetic defect,” in Walton’s idiosyncratic sense, is not to claim that it has any blemish, or aesthetic flaw in the sense common to the other authors under discussion. When Walton writes that the moral inaccessibility of the film is an aesthetic defect, he means nothing more than that any aesthetic value it may have is morally inaccessible. This usage is, I think, highly misleading. Worse, Walton claims that since the moral defects of the film are, in this peculiar sense, aesthetic defects, “there is a closer connection between moral and aesthetic value than some would allow.”⁹⁸ But even the most severe autonomist can allow, as A. C. Bradley does, that it is possible for a work to be so morally dangerous or pernicious that it would be wrong to appreciate it. As Bradley notes, the offensive consequences ascribed to the slogan “Art for Art’s Sake” follow not from autonomism, nor even from the claim that concern for art’s instrumental effects is typically harmful to its aesthetic value, but from “the doctrine that Art is the whole or supreme end of human life.”⁹⁹ Only someone who held that thesis would deny that it is possible for art to be morally inaccessible. And Bradley is surely right to say that this position is “quite absurd,” a *reductio* of what was always more of a battle cry than a philosophical thesis.

Hence, while the moral inaccessibility of an artwork is some kind of defect in it, it is no blemish or aesthetic defect, properly speaking. Consider again the analogy between immoral art and offensive jokes. It is certainly true that the moral inaccessibility which I am granting offensive jokes to have is a flaw in a joke: it means you can’t appreciate it, on pain of immorality. If that is a price you are never willing to pay, then you simply can’t appreciate such things. There is a Monty Python routine about a joke so funny that it kills the hearer—one literally dies laughing. (The joke gets used as a kind of unconventional weapon, with various soldiers yelling different parts of the joke at the enemy—since, of course, none of them can know the whole thing.) If such a joke existed, it would be as inaccessible as can be, both morally and prudentially. It would be quite odd, though, to adopt a philo-

sophical theory which forced us to conclude that this quality makes the joke *any* less funny. Were this claimed to be a comic defect in a joke, that would be merely to change the subject. What we were interested in is how funny a joke is—that is, whether or not it warrants amusement—not whether it is permissible to tell it or to laugh at it.

We have granted, however, that art is more complex than jokes, and it might be too simple to conclude that built-in obstacles to the appreciation of a work never bear on its aesthetic value—that they are never in some sense disfiguring. Couldn't excessive use of a regional dialect constitute an aesthetic defect in a work, simply because of the way in which it imposes gratuitous obstacles to the imagination?¹⁰⁰ If such uncompensated obscurity is granted to be an aesthetic defect, then it seems that our assessments of aesthetic value are sensitive to thoughts about the economy of returns on our consideration. And then, the moralist might continue, why can't the obstacles put up by moral resistance be counted against a work's aesthetic value in just this sense: they are obstacles which must be overcome, in order to appreciate a work, which do not themselves contribute to any satisfaction to be gained from it.

Of course, were the complaint of obscurity to be leveled against *Light in August* or *Ulysses*, say, it would surely be dismissed as philistine. The obscurity of their language and allusions isn't taken as even a minor defect in these works, though it must be allowed to be an obstacle to their appreciation—they are not the most accessible novels. Hence the moralists' argument trades crucially on the claim that moral obstacles to appreciation are fundamentally different in nature. First, moral defects in a work of art are uncompensated—there is either nothing valuable in them, or at most there is a superficial pleasure derived from their formal beauty. And, second, these defects are gratuitous, because whatever value the works can be granted to have could be possessed without risk of infection—immoral art can be sanitized. Both these assumptions are necessary, because a moral defect relevant to a work's aesthetic evaluation cannot be considered a blemish if it is inseparable from some significant intrinsic value of the work. I have already argued against the second assumption; now I want to turn briefly to the first. Of course, some offensive jokes do offer the compensation of amusement, however meager that is when compared to their cost in virtue. I want to claim that if immoral art's dangers are more profound, then so are its compensations. I want, that is, to praise immoral art.

Since the morally sensitive audience is, by definition, incapable of responding to art as it would be wrong to, the only positive response to immoral art that one can safely admit to having is pleasure at the work's formal beauty, which is not implicated in its immoral content. The only other option, for a morally sensitive spectator, is to deny that the work has any aesthetic value at all. Of course, if *Triumph of the Will* has no aesthetic value,

then it is no better as art than standard-issue Nazi kitsch. This aesthetic judgment is clearly preposterous, though someone whose only response to the film is disgust—which might, for all I’ve said, be the only morally justifiable response—cannot be expected to see that. Walton does concede the possibility that the film has aesthetic value, of a sort: he allows that its images might possess “formal beauty.” And Kieran acknowledges, in a similar vein, “the power and numbing beauty of [the film’s] aesthetic imagines.”¹⁰¹ (Carroll too writes that *Pulp Fiction*, despite being morally defective and thereby aesthetically blemished, is “formally compelling.”) The Humean moralists’ ambivalent embrace of an untenably formalist conception of aesthetic value shows why Hume’s vulgar complaint about the rough and unsympathetic characters of Greek poetry is not simply an embarrassing gaffe which can be easily dropped, but an expression of the fundamental commitment of moralism: that the flaws of immoral art are gratuitous and uncompensated obstacles to its appreciation.

Susan Sontag’s essay on Riefenstahl, “Fascinating Fascism,” demonstrates clearly how much the Humean moralists miss about *Triumph of the Will* and the best immoral art, and how their theoretical stance contributes to these errors.¹⁰² Sontag’s essay is, in the first place, a repudiation of the formalist rehabilitation of Riefenstahl going on in such avant-garde circles as *Cahiers du Cinéma*, during its heyday in the 1960s. The formalist stance toward these works is disingenuous, Sontag maintains, because “somewhere, of course, everyone knows that more than beauty is at stake in art like Riefenstahl’s”; yet she grants nevertheless that “*Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia* are undoubtedly superb films.”¹⁰³ Moreover, she adamantly resists the reduction of their value and power to the formal beauty of their images. Quite to the contrary, Sontag writes: “The force of her work being precisely in the continuity of its political and aesthetic ideas, what is interesting is that this was once seen so much more clearly than it seems to be now, when people claim to be drawn to Riefenstahl’s images for their beauty of composition.”¹⁰⁴ While the Humean moralists do not claim to be very much drawn by the beauty of Riefenstahl’s images, they are forced to adopt a formalist approach to the work’s aesthetic value, because any greater concession would jeopardize either their claims to moral sensitivity or their central thesis.

The continuity of the film’s political and aesthetic ideas—what might once have been called the unity of its form and content—is thus now obscured not by formalism but by moralism. If beauty was what Sontag’s avant-garde antagonists claimed to be drawn to in Riefenstahl, it has now become the only aspect of these films that philosophers can safely admit to being moved by. The poverty of this approach demonstrates why the Humean moralists’ thesis is inadequate even to their favorite case. The moral defects of the film are not aesthetic blemishes, because they are inseparable from the work’s aesthetic

value. As Sontag writes, “Hitler describes *Triumph of the Will* as ‘a totally unique and incomparable glorification of the power and beauty of our movement.’ *And it is.*”¹⁰⁵ Like all the best immoral art, this film is incorrigible: it cannot be sanitized, as the moralists’ appropriation of the notion of formal beauty promises, it can only be expurgated. Thus, what is most valuable in such art cannot, as Walton imagines of *Triumph of the Will*’s beautiful images, be “embedded in an unobjectionable context.”¹⁰⁶ And Kieran’s claim that “the work would have been better, *qua* art, if it had vilified just as well that which it seeks to glorify” is either meaningless or false; for whatever such a work would be, it would not be *Triumph of the Will*.¹⁰⁷

The greatest difference between Hume and the Humean moralists is that, as we’ve seen, his followers pay art the compliment of thinking it powerful enough to be dangerous. They also harbor the humanist ambition that narrative and dramatic art can serve an ethical function. Thus Gaut claims that “art can teach us about what is ethically correct”;¹⁰⁸ Kieran that it can aid in the cultivation of morals; and Carroll notes that part of what we intrinsically value in some narrative and dramatic art is “the opportunity it affords for deepening our moral understanding.”¹⁰⁹ I am in broad sympathy with the idea that by moving us to emotion, and requiring that we makes sense of these emotions as responses to the narrative, art can significantly contribute to something like moral understanding. However, there is an assumption implicit in the Humean moralists’ development of these ideas which needs to be called into question: that moral understanding can be deepened by acquaintance with morally felicitous perspectives only. This assumption might be thought self-evident. How can you come to the truth through exposure to error?

But if it is an important fact about the world that many people are in the grips of some error, then it must be admitted that we need to know what they think, and why. Such knowledge is often available from a wholly external position, which does not put us at risk of infection or disorientation, but this is much less certain when it comes to value judgments. Evaluative discourse in a pluralist society, if it is to rise above dogmatism, requires its participants to understand how others will respond to their proffered claims and reasons. Perhaps one must be able to at least imagine seeing the world as these others do, in order to wield their evaluative vocabulary and hope to offer them reasons they can adopt, short of conversion. And for those of us who are less confident that we, or anyone else, counts as being morally correct in some final way—perhaps because we are dubious of the very notion—a more radical approach to the epistemology of value also needs to be considered. It is that objectivity in ethical matters is less a view from nowhere than an ability to view things imaginatively from a variety of ethical perspectives—even though some of them (such as Riefenstahl’s, whether in her role as aesthete or as

fascist) will be systematically distorted. Of course, these metaphors of moral vision and perspective need to be developed further before anything like a theory can seriously be broached.

The seemingly obvious assumption that moral defects in a work of art—when they are granted to be relevant to its aesthetic evaluation—must be blemishes proved false. Like autonomism, Humean moralism offers too simple a conception of the relationship between moral and aesthetic value. It is doomed by the incorrigibility of the best immoral art, even if this point cannot be appreciated by the morally sensitive audience. Perhaps then this equally innocuous assumption about moral epistemology should not simply be taken for granted.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Kendall Walton and especially David Hills for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Several of the arguments in this paper were forged in extensive conversations on related issues with Justin D'Arms, to whom I am greatly indebted.
2. Shaw, cited in *Major Critical Essays* (New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1986).
3. Michael Meyer, *Ibsen* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin Books Ltd., 1971), 478.
4. There are other influential forms of moralism besides the aesthetic moralisms which will be considered here. The tendency to bring moral considerations too widely to bear on the justification of emotions is the topic of an unpublished collaborative paper, written with Justin D'Arms, entitled "The Right Way to Feel."
5. See Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun* (New York: Viking, 1977), for a tendentious but illuminating account of the puritanical impulses of Plato, Tolstoy, and Kant—who will not be discussed here.
6. Rousseau, "Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theatre," in *Politics and the Arts*, trans. Allan Bloom (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1968), 26.
7. See Bertolt Brecht, "The Street Scene," trans. John Willett, reprinted in *The Theory of the Modern Stage*, ed. Eric Bentley (Middlesex, U.K.: Penguin Books Ltd., 1985), 85–96. How successful Brecht was is another question. For some reasons to doubt the efficacy of Brecht's technique, and an excellent overview of these issues, see Paul Woodruff, "Engaging Emotion in Theater: A Brechtian Model in Theater History," *Monist* 71 (Apr. 1988): 235–57.
8. See Ortega y Gasset, "The Dehumanization of Art," in *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art, Culture, and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 1–54. I will offer a single work for and against each of these doctrines, but these choices can certainly be disputed. For criticism, see Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1975).
9. See Clive Bell, *Art*, ed. J. B. Bullen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). But see also Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), esp. 246.
10. See Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, vol. 4: *Modernism with a Vengeance: 1957–1969* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 85–93. Also, Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 55–91.

11. See William Gass, "Goodness Knows Nothing of Beauty," in *Harper's* (Apr. 1987): 37–44. A revised version, "The Baby or the Botticelli," appears in his *Finding a Form* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 272–92. Criticism of autonomism can be found in the authors under discussion in this essay, and here.
12. This is by far the most nebulous of these doctrines and has been proclaimed by numerous artists, but defined and defended by few. See A. C. Bradley, "Poetry for Poetry's Sake," in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, 2d ed. (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1959), for both a measured defense of the slogan and a sensible criticism of its excesses.
13. I will be focusing here on the following papers: Noel Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (3) (July 1996): 223–38; Berys Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," in *Aesthetics and Ethics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); Kendall Walton, "Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 68 (1994): 27–50.
14. David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987), 246.
15. *Ibid.*, 247.
16. See Richard Moran, "The Expression of Feeling in Imagination," *Philosophical Review* 103 (1) (Jan. 1994): 75–106. Also Matthew Kieran, "Art, Imagination, and the Cultivation of Morals" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54 (4) (1996): 337–51.
17. Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," 234.
18. Walton, "Morals in Fiction," 30.
19. *Ibid.*, 41.
20. I must thank Kendall Walton for explicating some of the claims of his "Morals in Fiction" to me in more depth. While it is easy to read this paper as endorsing a variety of Humean moralism, Walton does not in fact hold any such view. At several points in my paper I will show how easily Walton's views on these issues can be misunderstood, and will explain his actual position, as it has been explained to me.
21. See Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993). Also, Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990). A deeper investigation of the morality of laughter in aesthetic contexts is undertaken by Paul Woodruff, "Rousseau, Molière, and the Ethics of Laughter," *Philosophy and Literature* 1 (1977): 325–36. See n. 68.
22. Thus Vince Passaro, writing on the recent obsession with the moral failings of our canonical authors, laments that "[i]t is as if we had woken one morning to discover that the majority of our critics had turned into parents who don't read. . . ." ("A Flapping of Scolds," *Harper's* [Jan. 1997], 63).
23. See esp. Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
24. See esp. "The Problem of Belief," "Ethical and Aesthetic Criticism," "Critical Communication," and "The Aesthetic Function of Language," all reprinted in Isenberg, *Aesthetics and the Theory of Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).
25. Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," 245–46.
26. Since 'prejudice' is a term Hume uses to describe a particular feature of a judge which makes him non-ideal, he would not express the point this way. But I will argue that the Humean moralists' treatment of work which deviates from their moral standards can be thought prejudiced in a broader sense: their moral sensitivity is a false delicacy, which makes them worse judges of aesthetic value.
27. Hume perhaps thinks it impossible for us not to be so jealous of our own moral standards. Hence his disanalogy could be at bottom either dispositional or normative; but I suspect it to be both. In any case, my concern here is not with Hume exegesis, but with what can be said for and against Humean moralism.
28. As I've defined it, comic moralism is stronger and simpler than Humean moralism has

to be, in two respects: it applies to all offensive jokes and claims that all their comic value is undermined by their immorality. One could be a weaker comic moralist, but as the point of the analogy is largely heuristic, and as those amenable to the view tend to adopt this version, I will only consider the strong thesis here.

29. Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," 246.
30. This discussion of Plato is indebted to David Hills, to whom I owe the beautiful trope in this sentence of the text. I have also benefited greatly from Alexander Nehamas's essay, "Plato on Imitation and Poetry in *Republic* 10," in *Plato on Beauty and the Arts*, ed. Julius Moravcsik and Philip Temko (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982), 47–78. It would be misleading to efface the inherently gendered notion of virtue at play here with inclusive language.
31. At least they are essential to its nature as a popular artistic medium. See Nehamas, "Plato and the Mass Media" in *Monist* 71 (2) (1988): 214–34, for an argument suggesting that Plato's complaints are tied to features characteristic of mass media, rather than dramatic poetry per se. While I will not treat these issues here, my discussion of the neo-Platonic aspects of modern culture criticism is indebted to this paper.
32. For a more detailed account of the varieties of humanism and their associated difficulties, see my paper "Sir Philip Sidney's Dilemma: On the Ethical Function of Narrative Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54 (4) (1996): 327–36. A good introduction to poetic justice can be found in George de Scudery, "Observations on *The Cid*," Thomas Rymer, *A Short View of Tragedy*, and Corneille, *Discourses*, all reprinted in *Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, ed. Dukore (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1974).
33. This charitable gloss of the glorification worry was suggested to me by David Hills, who is singularly capable of charity toward even the least attractive views.
34. This does not constitute any commitment to critical monism, but is merely a rejection of an "anything goes" attitude toward interpretation, on which no reading is any better or worse than another. No such view of interpretation is worth taking seriously.
35. Steinberg, "Other Criteria," 64.
36. See Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), for an elaboration of this gloss of the fictional.
37. See Moran, "The Expression of Feeling," who takes issue with Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, on this question. These issues are too complex to be broached here, so I will stay neutral on the question of whether these are real or quasi-emotions.
38. One wonders which modern authors Hume had in mind, given that Lear, Othello, and Macbeth are rough and often unsympathetic characters themselves. This is the point in Hume's writings on art where Wordsworth's declaration comes most readily to mind that Adam Smith was the worst critic Scotland has produced, excepting only David Hume.
39. Pinter, "Writing for the Theatre" in *Complete Works: I* (New York: Grove Press, 1976), 12. He continues: "Beware of the writer who puts forward his concern for you to embrace, who leaves you in no doubt of his worthiness, his usefulness, his altruism, who declares that his heart is in the right place, and ensures that it can be seen in full view, a pulsating mass where his characters ought to be."
40. See Gérard Genette, "Implied Author, Implied Reader?" in *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), for some minor dissent. I will follow Genette and Nehamas, whose work on these issues is most perspicuous, in speaking simply of the 'author.' See Nehamas, "The Postulated Author: Critical Monism as a Regulative Ideal," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1981): 133–49, and "What an Author Is," *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986): 685–91.
41. Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 397.
42. See "Sir Philip Sidney's Dilemma."
43. This gloss is in line with the assumptions of moral realism which are common to the debate. It can be recast without these commitments, however, as an analysis of what it is to *judge* a work to be immoral.

44. As cited in Shaw, *Major Critical Essays*, 38.
45. *Ibid.*, 39. Those worried about the so-called Intentional Fallacy can reformulate Shaw's claims in terms of an implied author ("Ibsen").
46. Indeed, a rather cozy assumption underlies the work of the Humean moralists, namely, that there is sufficient unanimity about right and wrong to assume that we share common moral standards. No doubt a partial explanation of this tendency would point to the cloistered atmosphere of academia, and to its ideological conformity, even simply as compared to American culture at large.
47. Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 412.
48. Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," 246.
49. Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," 182.
50. Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," 232.
51. Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics*, 2.
52. Nothing hangs on whether this meaning of the term is primary—and indeed in the case of 'enviable' it probably isn't—because an independent theoretical motivation can be given for such response-dependent concepts.
53. See Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), for a related treatment of these issues, from which my work with Justin D'Arms has greatly benefited. We want to distinguish, however, as Gibbard does not, between all-in judgments of rationality, expressed by the question of "What to feel?" and judgments of warrant, expressed by the question of "What feeling gets it right?" We follow Gibbard in distinguishing both from the moral question, "What is it right to feel?"
54. I prefer to talk of an emotion's shape, so as to mark my desire to remain ecumenical on questions of judgmentalism. All that is crucial for present purposes is that emotions have such a built-in epistemology, which restricts when they can be deemed warranted.
55. Pascal's wager shows (whether you accept his theistic conclusion or not) that strategic considerations about the consequences of one's beliefs are also relevant to the all-in judgment of what to believe.
56. In this paragraph I am expressing my own epistemic norms, which one might dispute; but although I think they are both compelling and widely shared, my argument does not stand or fall on their acceptance.
57. Of course, in this case the wrongness inheres not in the response, amusement, but in its expression, laughter. But laughter is not completely volitional—when sufficiently amused, we can't help but laugh.
58. De Sousa suggests, laconically, that offensive jokes are not merely morally wrong but "axiologically mistaken." This suggestion sounds like just the sort of claim which the comic moralist needs, but it is left undeveloped and obscure.
59. De Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion*, 290.
60. Moran, "The Expression of Feeling," 93–94.
61. The stronger and more general claim is defended in "The Right Way to Feel." There we argue that, although moral considerations about the object of one's emotion are relevant to judgments of the warrant of certain emotions—those which have a "moral shape," such as guilt and anger—considerations about the wrongness of feeling F, per se, are not.
62. Of course, the idea that men deserve to be ridiculed and women don't is a rather crude moral judgment. Moreover, de Sousa's claim to have identified the evil element in laughter is rendered trivial if malicious ridicule is just equivalent to immoral ridicule.
63. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1971), esp. 533, for a discussion of envy; Daniel Farrell, "Jealousy," *Philosophical Review* 89 (Oct. 1980): 527–59; and Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
64. Roger Scruton, "Laughter," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall

- (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 162.
65. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell (New York: MacMillan Co., 1913), 139. Bergson actually claims that all emotion is incompatible with amusement, but this claim is too strong. Some forms of anger at someone are certainly compatible with laughing at him—in fact, they encourage it.
 66. This is less possible with more structured emotions, such as shame and envy, where to hold certain sorts of norms seems to manifest a failure to grasp the concepts of the *shameful* and the *envious*.
 67. Bergson puts less stress on this second element, and he perhaps suggests that the butt of the joke must be able to appreciate its humor, at least in retrospect, because, for laughter to serve its social function, the rift must be possible to repair for laughter to serve its social function. But I doubt that the possibility of reparation is necessary, though it is indeed often allowed. This discussion of Bergson is indebted to David Hills, though he may not agree with its details.
 68. Woodruff holds that it will be less dramatically effective for a play to utilize this sort of humor, but his argument does not clearly apply to jokes. Moreover, I am skeptical of its metaphysical claims, regarding essentialism. For instance, the determining factor in what one can laugh at about oneself is what one is *psychologically* capable of repudiating, not what is *metaphysically* essential to one (if such a notion even makes sense). According to Kripke, the identity of our parents is an essential property of ours, but we can certainly laugh at them.
 69. Walton, "Morals in Fiction," 30.
 70. *Ibid.*
 71. Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," 195; emphasis his.
 72. *Ibid.*, 194.
 73. *Ibid.*, 196.
 74. *Ibid.*
 75. Bradley, "Poetry for Poetry's Sake," 5.
 76. Isenberg, "The Aesthetic Function of Language," 85.
 77. Kieran, "Art, Imagination," 347.
 78. Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," 236.
 79. From "Decadence," in *Writing in Restaurants* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 58.
 80. Although their argument is never made explicit, I suspect that the autonomists are motivated by what Wollheim calls the "Scrutiny Thesis": that any quality being brought to bear on a work's evaluation or interpretation must be perceptible in the work—as the truth or goodness of its ideas is not. For criticism of this view, see Richard Wollheim, "Art, Interpretation, and Perception," in *The Mind and Its Depths* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 132–43. But in order to assess the originality and interest of ideas expressed in a poem, it is just as necessary to appeal to norms founded on experience from outside the work.
 81. For instance, Shaw draws from Ibsen's plays the lesson that people "ought to be as careful how they yield to a temptation to tell the truth as to a temptation to hold their tongues. . . ." (Shaw, *Major Critical Essays*, 145–46). The fact that this applies equally well to Dickinson's poem as to *The Wild Duck* shows the poverty of propositional paraphrase. Our focus on emotional response is also impoverished, since a wide variety of emotions are apt responses to the poem. But we are not attempting here to provide an adequate account of aesthetic value, nor do I think one is forthcoming.
 82. Is there a fact of the matter here? One might think that whoever is morally correct must be right about the aesthetic judgment as well, but that is by no means certain. Moral correctness might be a delicacy, in Hume's sense, or this might be a "blameless" difference of taste, in which neither party is correct. I will go so far as to suggest that there is reason to treat certain kinds of moral sensitivity as a "false delicacy" or prejudice, which diminishes one's capacities as a judge of aesthetic value.

83. Walton and Moran both suggest that moral norms place constraints on what can be fictional in a work. I find their arguments for this point obscure and unconvincing, and think that their evidence can be better explained through Walton's notion of "unauthorized" games of make believe. But we cannot pursue this issue here, and their view needs further development, before it can be critically assessed.
84. Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," 232.
85. See Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. It is important to note that a variety of other emotional responses aroused by art, which are directed at the work itself or don't take objects at all (e.g., moods such as anxiety, melancholy, and joy) can be fully sincere.
86. Moran, "The Expression of Feeling," 93.
87. *Ibid.*, 95.
88. *Ibid.*, 95–96. It should be said that in other place he shows judicious hesitation over moralism.
89. Moran notes that authors cannot endow their characters and events with these properties by stipulation, but neither does it take any literary or dramatic technique to do so. As Ruskin archly advised novelists, when at a loss, kill a child.
90. Mamet, "Radio Drama," in *Writing in Restaurants*, 13; his emphasis.
91. Isenberg, "The Aesthetic Function of Language," 84.
92. Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," 246.
93. Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," 234.
94. Walton disavows Humean moralism and no longer endorses this claim about *Triumph of the Will*; nevertheless, this quotation points in the direction that such tendencies inevitably lead. Indeed, if Walton's claims about the dangers of immoral art are not exaggerated, then the virtuous audience should only be disgusted by the film—any other response would be wrong.
95. Walton, "Morals in Fiction," 34.
96. *Ibid.*, 30.
97. Although Walton does not use this phrase in his discussion of these issues, this is how he has explained his meaning to me in conversation. I am also indebted to him for the example that follows.
98. Walton, "Morals in Fiction," 30.
99. Bradley, "Poetry for Poetry's Sake," 5.
100. This argument is not made by any of the authors under consideration, but was suggested by David Hills.
101. Kieran, "Art, Imagination," 347.
102. Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982), 305–25. It is no coincidence that Sontag also recognizes what, in the throes of their disgust, the Humean moralists cannot: that aspects of fascist ideals can be compelling, even to decent people. And that various contemporary trends which are not racist, or even overtly political, are borne of similar impulses, including "the ideal of life as art, the cult of beauty, the fetishism of courage, the dissolution of alienation in ecstatic feelings of community; the repudiation of the intellect; the family of man (under the parenthood of leaders)" (319–20).
103. *Ibid.*, 319–20. On Sontag's view, Riefenstahl's *Olympia* is as much an expression of the fascist aesthetic as is *Triumph of the Will*. For a fascinating juxtaposition of Riefenstahl's apt, disingenuous, and downright deceitful self-justifications, see *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*, directed by Ray Muller (1993).
104. Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," 320.
105. *Ibid.*, 311n.; my emphasis.
106. Walton, "Morals in Fiction," 29.
107. Kieran, "Art, Imagination," 348.
108. Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," 196.
109. Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," 236.