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Monstrous Thoughts and the Moral Identity Thesis

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> The responses are not simply imagined: we are prescribed by *Justine* actually to find erotically attractive the fictional events, to be amused by them, to enjoy them, to admire this kind of activity. So the novel does not just present imagined events, it also presents a point of view on them, a perspective constituted in part by actual feelings, emotions, and desires that the reader is prescribed to have toward the merely imagined events. Given that the notion of response covers such things as enjoyment and amusement, it is evident that some kinds of responses are actual, and not just imagined.[1]
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> I can criticize someone for taking pleasure in others' pain, for being amused by sadistic cruelty, for being angry at someone when she has done no wrong, for desiring the bad. The same is true when responses are directed at fictional events, for these responses are actual, not just imagined ones.[2]

We often find ourselves deep in moral conversations about artworks in which we willfully subject them to moral evaluation. We claim that the endorsement of racism in *Birth of a Nation* is repugnant, that the presentation of virtue as vice in *Justine* is deplorable, and that the disavowal of extreme aestheticism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is morally praiseworthy. Our tendency to subject artworks to moral evaluation raises other questions: How should we as audience members respond to such artworks? What are the moral constraints, if any, that limit the kinds of attitudes that we should take toward artworks?

In "The Ethical Criticism of Art," Berys Gaut provides what looks like a promising answer to these questions. Roughly, he claims that we should not respond negatively to a morally positive scene, and vice versa. For our purposes, such responses come under the general heading of intentional attitudes. In virtue of being intentional, all intentional attitudes are object directed. They are about something. In virtue of being attitudes, they involve taking an evaluative stance, however we are to make sense of this, toward the intentional object. Desires, emotions, and evaluative judgments are examples of intentional attitudes. Unlike moods, emotions are object directed. A fear is fear of something or

other. Furthermore, fear involves taking an evaluative stance toward its object: something is harmful and thereby is to be avoided. While moods may be attitudinal in so far as they involve evaluation, they are not intentional attitudes because they are not object directed.

What is interesting about Gaut's theory of intentional attitudes is that he claims that imaginative attitudes have the same moral constraints as their real world analogs. What marks out an intentional attitude as imaginative is controversial. For our purposes it is sufficient to think of an imaginative attitude as an attitude whose intentional content, what the attitude is about, is at least partially a product of the agent's imagination. The most obvious cases of imaginative attitudes are attitudes whose objects do not exist at all. Let us consider fear of a particular movie monster. Movie monsters are fictional entities. As such, they lack independent existence. Properly situated audience members are fully aware of this fact. They know that the movie monster does not really exist, that they are engaged in an imaginative enterprise, and as a result, their fear is imaginative. Thus, the claim is not that audiences imagine having an attitude, but that they take an attitude toward an object or state of affairs that they imagine obtains. However, not all attitudes that are properly called imaginative are aimed at non-existent entities. For example, we might imagine winning a big promotion and experience joy at the thought of so doing. Here, our joy is imaginative, because even though it is in some sense about an existent object, ourselves, the attitude is a response to our imagining winning the big promotion. In order for an attitude to be imaginative, it must involve some acknowledged, imagined content that the imaginer takes to be false. On Gaut's view, that an intentional attitude is imaginative is largely morally uninteresting. If he is right, then the moral assessment of an intentional attitude will be unaffected by finding out that its object is a character in a play, and not an actual person. The evaluative stance involved in both cases will be roughly identical. While this view is certainly appealing in many respects, it turns out that it is not nuanced enough to accommodate the rich complexity of our imaginative attitudes. However, thinking through Gaut's view will provide us an opportunity to deepen our understanding of the normativity of imaginative attitudes and provide some direction for thinking about the proper responses to immoral art.

1. The Moral Identity Thesis

There are three features of Gaut's analysis that are appealing to a certain kind of moral theorist. First, it is consistent with the intuition that

imaginative attitudes are subject to moral constraints. For example, someone might reasonably claim that we should not be moved even imaginatively by the call in *Birth of a Nation* to resist miscegenation or be sexually excited by the tortures that befall Justine. Second, on this view, the evaluation of imaginative attitudes is a relatively straightforward affair, or at least no less straightforward than evaluating our ordinary work a day attitudes. We can reliably infer from the moral permissibility or impermissibility of a non-imaginative attitude to its corollary imaginative one, and vice versa. Third, this view applies equally to all imaginative attitudes, whether they are partially constituted by our own productive imaginative faculty or a response to an artwork.

Gaut's moralism about intentional attitudes then relies on the following three claims: that non-imaginative attitudes are proper objects of moral evaluation; that imaginative attitudes are proper objects of moral evaluation; and that both non-imaginative and imaginative attitudes are subject to the same, or at least relevantly similar, moral constraints–what may be called the moral identity thesis.

Though there are some philosophers who dispute the first claim, it seems relatively non-problematic, and our focus will be on the second and third claims. While Gaut is correct to claim that all imaginative attitudes are subject to moral assessment, as it turns out, their moral assessment is a far more nuanced affair than the third claim, the moral identity thesis, allows. In defense of the moral identity thesis, Gaut argues that imaginative attitudes are actual attitudes, and are thereby guided by the same moral constraints as their real world analogs, what may be called the actual attitude hypothesis. As things stand, however, it is not clear what he means by the claim that we experience actual attitudes in imaginative contexts. ''Actual'' may simply stand opposite to ''pretend'' or ''imagined.'' On this reading, we do not imagine that we are experiencing an attitude; we experience a non-imagined attitude in response to an imagined scene**.** Yet, it is not obvious how being actual in this sense supports the moral identity thesis. If the claim here is that imaginative attitudes are not imagined attitudes, then this fact does not settle the normative question at hand. On the face of it, there is no reason to think that we would be inconsistent to hold that we actually experience emotive states, a kind of attitude, when we engage with fiction, and that the emotive states do not have the same evaluative standards as their real world analogs.

Perhaps then we should interpret ''actual'' to mean type-identical with its real world analog. On this reading, there is a single emotional concept of fear which allows us to correctly picks out emotional states in response to certain states of affairs, whether or not they are fictional. Fear is fear is fear. However, we have at least *prima facie* reason for being suspicious of

this version of the actual attitude hypothesis. In at least some respects, the normative structure of imaginative attitudes is significantly different from the normative structure of non-imaginative attitudes. What counts as a reason in an imaginative case, may not count as a reason in a non-imaginative case. This is so for a couple of reasons. First, as indicated earlier, they have different intentional objects. Imaginative attitudes are directed at acknowledged imaginative entities or events; non-imaginative attitudes are directed at real entities or events. Second, they differ with respect to the kinds of responses that each legitimates.[3] Running out of the theater screaming due to fear at the presence of a vampire in *Dracula* is unreasonable, while running out of the room screaming due to fear at the presence of an actual vampire is entirely appropriate. Hence, it seems that there is some difference in the normative structure of imaginative attitudes and their non-imaginative counterparts.

In light of observations like these, a foe of the moral identity thesis might offer the following line of argument, which we may call the epistemic symmetry argument: Artworks serve as invitations to entertain facts that violate real-world epistemic constraints, and to experience emotions in response to these facts. Moreover, we recognize that ordinary epistemic constraints do not apply in the world of fiction. We are willing to accept that a pig can talk, and even to feel moved by what she has to say. When we accept the invitation to imagine a world that is different from the actual world, we do so without being called out for violating epistemic norms. Similarly, when we are invited to imagine a fictional world that violates real-world moral constraints, and to experience a similar fictional emotion, we should be able to do so without being called out for violating moral norms. In fictional contexts all normative bets are off.

Clearly, however, advocates of the epistemic symmetry argument go too far. If they are right, then all imaginative attitudes lack a recognizable normative structure. They are not norm governed at all. If imaginative attitudes lack a normative structure, then there are no standards of correctness for imaginative attitudes, neither epistemic nor moral. Yet, if this is right, then it follows that we can never get our imaginative attitudes wrong. But certainly anyone who reads *The Little Engine that Could* and experiences horror is open to rational criticism in this regard. Horror simply is not a fitting response to this book.[4] In order for horror to be a fitting response, minimally, some element of the book must be monstrous.[5]

2. Imaginative Attitudes and Moral Assessment

Still, someone might insist that imaginative attitudes have a normative structure, but that the structure is fully specified by appeal to epistemic

standards. There are no relevant moral standards for assessing imaginative attitudes.[6] If we are to accept the view that imaginative attitudes are subject to moral evaluation at all, it must be on the basis of an independent argument. Berys Gaut provides a case that appears to help us out. He asks us to consider what we would say about a prisoner who consistently fantasizes about rape. He writes: "Consider a man whose sexual life consists entirely of rape fantasies, fantasies he has not about women he sees in real life, but women he only imagines. Would we say that there is nothing to be said from an ethical point of view about the attitude he manifests in his imaginings about these fictional women? Clearly, what a person imagines and how he responds to those imaginings play an important part in the ethical assessment of his character. The mere fact that the women he imagines cannot be harmed does not bracket his inner life from ethical assessment, since what is at issue are the attitudes he manifests in his fantasy life. And nothing in our judgment about him requires us to assume that what is bad about his fantasies is that he may act on them—perhaps he is confined to prison for life. He stands ethically condemned for what and how he imagines, independently of how he acts or may act."[7] Gaut is right to claim that there is something wrong with an individual whose sexual life consists solely of rape fantasies. One cause for concern is a fear that such an individual would be likely to act on his fantasies. In Gaut's example, however, we are asked to assume that the subject of this thought experiment is not in a position to so act. Someone might further be concerned about the subject of his fantasies. Having brutal sexual fantasies about someone in particular constitutes, at the very least, disrespect for that person. But, in Gaut's case, we are told that the prisoner's imaginings always involve fictional women. Yet, once we have eliminated these reasons, there still appear to be grounds for criticizing the prisoner; grounds that we might take to be focused exclusively on the fact that he is given to fantasies about rape.

Still, we must be careful. Our moral criticism cannot be leveled simply at what the prisoner is capable of imagining. We can imagine all kinds of horrific states of affairs and this fact all by itself does not open us to moral criticism. We can, for example, imagine a murder, or a robbery, or cruelty, or any number of morally depraved scenarios. The mere fact that we can imagine such horrid scenes is no indication that there is something morally wrong with us. In the case of the prisoner, however, the example is not focused on the descriptive content of his imagining—that he simply imagines a brutal rape. Instead, it appears to be focused on the kind of attitude that he takes toward an imagined scene, in particular the evaluative stance that is involved in such an attitude. The prisoner takes his

imagining as an object of sexual fantasy. According to Gaut, the having of a sexual fantasy is tantamount to endorsing the content of the fantasy. What might he mean here? One way of understanding Gaut's analysis is as follows: sexual fantasies are pleasurable, and pleasure is a positive response. That the prisoner has a positive response to the content of his imagining means that he has a certain normative commitment—that there is something worthwhile about rape. The attitudes that the prisoner actually holds are made evident in virtue of the imaginative attitudes that he experiences in connection with his imagining. As a result, Gaut maintains, the prisoner's imaginative attitudes are open to a straightforward moral evaluation.

It is important to note that on Gaut's view the prisoner is not blameworthy for the imaginative element of his intentional attitude. Instead, his claim is that the prisoner's imaginative attitude involves at least some non-imaginative elements including actual moral commitments. While the content of some beliefs may not be part of the normative structure of an imaginative attitude, the content of moral beliefs are. We do not have to actually believe that pigs can speak English, or that we are really witnessing a brutal rape. We do have to believe that the content of the pig's speech is laudatory in order to be moved by it, or that there is something worthwhile about rape in order to experience sexual pleasure.[8] Since moral beliefs are subject to a straightforward moral evaluation, in light of our imaginative attitudes we too are so subject.

Yet, there is an added level of complexity to Gaut's account that may bother some philosophers. We are asked to imagine that the prisoner's entire sexual life consists of rape fantasies, that he never sexually fantasizes about anything but rape. This additional detail certainly adds weight to our inference that the prisoner has certain doxastic commitments. It is hard to believe that he does not in some sense endorse rape. But we can also imagine a prisoner who experiences rape fantasies only intermittently or who experiences only one rape fantasy. What is the strength of our inference from imaginative attitude to doxastic commitment then? As the number of fantasies diminishes, so does our justification for attributing a particular evaluative commitment to him. But, if Gaut wants to maintain that we are open to moral assessment for our imaginative attitudes, that we are morally blame worthy for any putatively immoral imaginative attitude, and that our blameworthiness in such cases stems from the repugnant evaluative commitments underlying this attitude, then he must convince us that an individual who fantasizes about rape only once exposes a morally repugnant evaluative commitment.

Some philosophers might also be concerned that the content of the prisoner's attitude is a sexual fantasy. Someone might contend that the

pleasure involved in sexual fantasies is a unique kind of pleasure in that it is distinctly non-evaluative, as in just about any sexual fantasy that involves role-playing. It seems reasonable to think that an individual might be sexually aroused by playing a role, while explicitly rejecting such a role outside of the sphere of the safety of the fantasy. If this is right, then what sexual fantasies we are given to may not provide reliable grounds to infer who we are, or what our commitments are, and arguing from a case of sexual fantasy to the morality of imaginative attitudes in general may be dubious.

Instead of trying to argue that sexual pleasure is evaluative, it might be best to eliminate this concern by considering a similar single imaginative attitude that does not involve a sexual fantasy. Let us consider, for example, an individual who imagines beating women in general for no other reason than it gives him a feeling of satisfaction. Most of us would agree that this kind of response is at least indicative of a moral failing, if not a moral failing itself. There must be something wrong with someone who takes pleasure in his imaginative entertaining of the beating of women. It is hard, if not impossible, to even imagine that such an individual does not hold the corollary immoral commitment. In a case like this, and perhaps also in the case of the rape fantasy, it is reasonable to hold that an individual's imaginative attitudes are expressive of his or her real moral commitments.

Assuming that we find either of these cases compelling, we are committed to the claim that some imaginative attitudes fare poorly from the moral point of view. If this is right, then the second claim of Gaut's moralism about imaginative attitudes has been established: imaginative attitudes are subject to moral assessment. However, we should be clear that on this analysis our moral assessment of an imaginative attitude is not aimed at its imaginative intentional content *per se*. Instead, the claim is that an individual who can experience this kind of response must also have immoral commitments. Anyone who did not would be incapable of such a response. If this is right, then the moral evaluation of imaginative attitudes is parasitic on the evaluation of our actual moral beliefs or attitudes, depending on how doxastic you want to be here. While it seems likely that anyone except the most hardened of amoralists will be persuaded to concede this claim, someone who advanced Gaut's moralism would want us to accept the view that all of our imaginative attitudes presuppose such evaluative commitments. This is a substantive claim that cannot be adequately supported by the argument thus far. If we are to be convinced by this version of the moral identity thesis, that imaginative attitudes presuppose the same moral commitments as their real world analogs and in light of this are subject to similar moral assessment, then it

must be on the basis of an independent argument. Such an argument has yet to be produced.

3. Monstrous Thoughts

In absence of a compelling argument in favor of the moral identity thesis, let us consider the following four cases. In so considering let us ask ourselves the following two questions: Would the mere fact that we experience the imaginative attitude described imply that we have the kind of moral commitments insisted upon by an advocate of Gaut's moralism? Would it even make it likely that we have such commitments?

Here is the first case: with an important deadline approaching, Jane's sour boss has been riding her particularly hard. The fact that he is doing so has caused her some stress, but she knows in the end his pushing her is causing her to produce good work. One evening, feeling frustrated, she fantasizes about punching him in the nose. While she actually respects him, and in a cool hour is adamant that she does not wish him harm, she nevertheless finds the thought of her pugilist self amusing.

Here is the second case: Kurt has just finished watching the latest South Korean monster movie *Gwoemul*, also known as, *The Host*. After the movie, he returns to his home and finds himself thinking about the details of the creature's physical manifestation. He considers the acrobatic elegance with which it performed its terrible rampage on the citizens of Seoul. He begins to imagine himself as a similar sort of creature, gliding out of the Han River and terrorizing the population. He enjoys and is even amused by the thought of his terrible rampage.

Here is the third case: Linda is playing a video game called *Thief*. The object of the game is to use skills of stealth in order to steal as much loot as possible without getting killed. In the game she often encounters fictional characters that could thwart her thievery, alert the authorities to her presence, or even kill her character. In order to get around the fictional characters, it is often best to knock them out with a blow to the back of the head, though in very tight corners she has to kill them. When she gets past an individual in the game in any of these ways, given that she has sized up the situation appropriately and used only the necessary amount of force, she is thrilled. Moreover, when one of the pesky do-gooders in the game intervenes in her wicked plans, making her game-life more difficult, she gets annoyed.

Here is the fourth case: Mike is an actor charged with playing the part of Gloucester. Part of his acting method is to become the character. He dedicates a great deal of effort to understanding Gloucester. He identifies

his goals and aims, his normative commitments, and the kinds of experiences that could have operated to shape his particular character. On the basis of his study, he tries to predict what it must feel like, from the inside, to be him. Eventually his study, coupled with additional training in method acting, puts him in a position to imaginatively take on his thoughts and feelings, so that on stage he finds himself proud of his fictional cruelties.

In each of the four cases, were the object of the attitude actual, then the attitude would fare poorly from the moral point of view. Moreover, the moral assessment of the relevant attitude, not to mention the relevant action, would be sufficiently weighty to render it generally impermissible. Enjoying either punching someone's lights out, or terrorizing individuals is a sign of a deeply flawed character, as is being thrilled at knocking someone out with a good blow to the back of the head, or taking pride in wanton cruelty. But, if Gaut's analysis is correct, then these imaginative attitudes are morally problematic because they presuppose a certain moral commitment. How plausible is such a claim? While many of us can imagine ourselves experiencing at least one, if not all, of the imaginative attitudes described in the above four cases, it is doubtful that we would see this as a reason to worry about our character. Let us consider, for example, Linda's annoyance at the pesky do-gooder in *Thief*. Playing the game requires imaginatively taking on the role of a thief. The player literally sees the world from the thief's vantage point, and exercises the theif's skills. Furthermore, it requires her, in some measure, to imaginatively identify with the thief's character. In order to play the game, she must imaginatively share the character's end of theft. Still, there are limits to this kind of character identification. Despite the fact that a player is generally immersed in any game world worth its salt, game play cannot be completely divorced from her actual character. For example, some players may be bothered more by resorting to blackjacking, as opposed to sneaking, because they value the game skills involved with sneaking. In tighter corners, it is more difficult. Moreover, that she can identify with characters at all when it comes to video games probably says a bit about the kind of person she is. Still, there is a real sense in which many of the imaginative attitudes that players experience do not implicate their moral character in the way that Gaut insists. That Linda enjoys playing *Thief* is no indication that she would be tempted to actually steal from others for the thrill of it. Even if we were to do so, she would not need to infer that we would experience thrill and not the appropriate sense of shame and guilt at our actual theft. More telling, however, is that intentional attitudes like shame and guilt are not only missing from game specific emotional repertoire, but that in this case it seems they should be. Shame

and guilt at the imaginative theft seem ill placed in the context of playing *Thief*. After all, nothing is ever actually stolen. Players know that they are playing a game, and that doing so need not involve their actual moral commitments. They know that they are only imaginatively identifying with a thief, a fact that grants them a temporary, albeit limited, release from ordinary moral evaluation. This may even be part of the fun involved. While enjoying actually giving someone a good blow to the head, or worse yet, enjoying plotting the demise of our own family is morally repugnant, doing so in the context of playing *Thief* or playing the part of Gloucester is morally innocuous.

What these four cases show is not only that our imaginative attitudes can be isolated from our actual moral commitments, but that they often are so isolated. The claim is not that all of our moral commitments are fully isolatable. Imaginative attitudes may require some degree of consistency with our moral commitments. Furthermore, some imaginative attitudes may require a substantial degree of evaluative consistency. The rape and beating fantasies support this claim. Moreover, in the four cases, we can imagine some agents whose imaginative attitudes are reflective of their actual moral commitments. For example, we can expect there to be a very real difference between the joy and annoyance that we might experience while playing *Thief* and the joy and annoyance that a committed sadist or immoralist would experience. A committed sadist might well endorse the attitude she takes toward *Thief* as the correct moral attitude to take toward cruelties, both fictional and actual. While the sadist's imaginative attitude would expose a flaw in her character, in other non-sadistic agents it might not. What is being denied is that our imaginative attitudes by themselves provide a reliable inference to the kinds of moral commitments identified by Gaut.

4. The Evaluative Asymmetry Argument

In response, Gaut might simply deny that the four cases are convincing, and insist that in each the individuals expose a flaw in their characters. However, taking line this of argument is not attractive for a couple of reasons. First, it would commit us to a radical revision of our ordinary moral practices. While only four cases have been outlined here, there are numerous others that could be constructed, cases that raise similar doubts about the inference from imaginative attitude to moral commitment. Denying the legitimacy of such an inference, does not entail the truth of amoralism about imaginative attitudes. We can conceive of cases where the inference is compelling. Enjoying the thought of beating women is one

such case. The point is that the inference does not hold in many cases, and this suggests that the moral identity thesis is not nuanced enough to accommodate our moral intuitions in a wide range of cases.

Second, taking this line of argument would put Gaut's own argumentative strategy in jeopardy. In order to support his conclusion that imaginative attitudes are legitimately subject to moral criticism, Gaut relies on our moral intuitions about a particular case, the rape fantasy. But, if our intuitions are supposed to be unreliable in the four structurally similar cases, then it seems that we should see them as similarly unreliable in the rape fantasy case. It will not do to rely on our intuitions when they suit our argumentative purposes only to deny them when they do not.

Still, Gaut might argue that the four cases are problematic, because they involve an unexpressed evaluative component that is missing from their non-imaginative counterparts, which may be called the evaluative asymmetry argument. Moreover, Gaut might continue, it is the asymmetry that is responsible for our judgment that each of the four cases is morally permissible, though their non-imaginative counterpart would not be. In each of these four cases, *prima facie* moral reasons count against the imaginative attitude involved, but are out-weighed by competing non-moral reasons, the evaluative asymmetry. In considering how the asymmetry argument might be applied to the four cases, Gaut might begin by reminding us that enjoying plotting the demise of our own family is morally repugnant, though doing so in the course of playing Gloucester is not. Moreover, he might continue, this difference in judgment is due to artistic considerations that are present in the imaginative case, but absent in the non-imaginative one. In this case the *prima facie* immorality of the imaginative attitude is outweighed by the artistic merit of the performance, which explains our intuition that it is generally permissible for the actor to experience the imaginative attitude that he does. Even stronger, he might point out, when we eliminate the artistic elements from the case at hand, the wrongness of the imaginative attitude comes to the fore. We should not enjoy even the thought of harm coming to our family, and anyone who engages in these kinds of imaginative attitudes must be morally flawed.

Though this line of defense is *prima facie* plausible in the Gloucester case, it appears less so in the other three cases. In these cases, it is not obvious what the extra evaluative considerations would be. Moreover, even if we could be convinced that there is a similar asymmetry involved in all four cases, they still raise a serious concern for Gaut's account of the immorality of imaginative attitudes. Since Gaut insists that our imaginative attitudes imply a consistency of moral commitment, the subjects in the cases must actually endorse monstrous rampages, a boss having his

lights punched out, blackjacking individuals for profit, or the destruction of the person's family. But, the four cases raise doubts about this claim, an evaluative asymmetry notwithstanding. In order for the evaluative asymmetry argument to be credible, we need a more plausible account of the immorality involved in each case than the one provided by Gaut.

Perhaps a moral identity theorist of a different stripe might concede that our imaginative attitudes can depart from our actual attitudes and commitments, but insist that in fact they should not do so: all of our attitudes ought to reflect sound moral commitments. On this understanding of the moral identity thesis, it would be morally better if we did not experience such fantasy attitudes, even when they are not expressive of our actual moral commitments. While such a solution avoids the unconvincing claim that imaginative attitudes generally reflect our actual moral commitments, it is not clear why we should accept this solution. It is far from obvious what kinds of moral considerations we would point to in the case of Gloucester. How would the actor be morally better off for lacking this kind of moral slippage? It seems to make more sense to simply admit that morality does not require us to speak poorly of the actor's imaginative attitude at all. The same analysis can be applied to the other three cases.

5. Toward a Moral Theory of the Imaginative Emotions

Any adequate theory of the normativity of imaginative attitudes will have to allow us to accommodate the four considerations that have come to the fore in light of our discussion of the moral identity thesis. First, it is not reasonable to demand that an adequate theory will allow us to determine in advance what the moral status of any given imaginative attitude will be. We will have to admit that these kinds of attitudes are highly context dependent, and determining their moral status will require paying close attention to the particular details of the case at hand. For example, in the case of Gloucester it seems right to point out that the artistic context informs our moral judgment. However, we certainly should not infer from this particular case to the general principle that all imaginative attitudes are morally permissible when in service of any artwork whatsoever.

Second, in some cases, moral considerations form part of the normative structure of an imaginative attitude *per se*. In these kinds of cases, the moral evaluation of the imaginative attitude is not parasitic on determining if the agent actually holds the moral commitment involved. For example, it seems plausible to insist that we should not enjoy thinking about the demise of our family members. Similarly, we should not be

angered by the thought of our family doing well. It will not help to insist that we do not really wish our family harm. Since a sound moral agent would not entertain such outlooks even imaginatively, moral reasons can form part of the normative structure of the imaginative attitude *per se*.

Third, in cases where moral considerations do not form part of the normative structure of the imaginative attitude *per se*, there may still be sense to be made of the claim that an agent is open to criticism in light of such an attitude. In some cases, making a sound moral evaluation about an imaginative attitude will require making a determination about its relationship to the agent's actual moral commitments. While Linda's annoyance at the pesky do-gooders in the video game *Thief* is morally innocuous, there are some cases where it may be morally problematic. For example, the annoyance experienced by a committed sadist will be subject to moral condemnation, assuming that his annoyance is a reflection of his actual moral commitments.

The fourth consideration has not been addressed explicitly here, though it has been operating to inform our judgments on all the cases. Sometimes, moral considerations form part of the normative structure of an imaginative attitude, but they do so only contingently. For example, in the actual moral world in which we currently live there are certain moral problems that are of paramount moral importance. A moral problem will be of paramount moral importance when it is pervasive and involves substantial violations of justice. Serious issues of oppression are likely candidates here. In such contexts, a competent moral agent will be much more resistant to taking up the kinds of imaginative attitudes that appear to endorse such moral violations. That the eradication of the oppression of women is an urgent moral priority in our particular society gives us a reason to avoid experiencing joy at the thought of beating women *qua* women. Generally, such thoughts are not enjoyable. While considerations of what is of paramount moral importance have the virtue of allowing us to accommodate our judgments in some special cases, like the case of the rape and beating fantasies considered earlier, they further help to explain our differing intuitions in the imaginative case of punching out a boss's lights. The protection of the interests of bosses is not an urgent moral priority for us, while the protection of the interests of women *qua* women is. A difference in contingent moral considerations may make a difference in our moral judgment. Other concerns that are of paramount moral importance are likely to be racism and homophobia. This serves to explain why we should not be emotionally moved by the call in *Birth of a Nation* to resist miscegenation. Part of why competent moral agents are resistant to imaginatively take on these kinds of attitudes is that they stand in stark contrast to the urgent moral priorities that we face.

If this is right, then sometimes moral reasons figure non-consequentially in the justification of an imaginative attitude, but do so only contingently. They do so contingently because what is of paramount moral importance will be different not only at different times, but also in different social and political contexts. It may be illustrative here to think of the shifting moral norms involved in ethnic jokes. Finding certain ethnic jokes funny, say a joke about the Irish, may be morally problematic and a fairly reliable indicator of our character, if we are in London in the 1980s. However, in the context of the United States today, where we no longer take the eradication of negative attitudes toward the Irish to be an issue of paramount moral concern, finding the same ethnic joke funny may not be morally problematic. The same joke then may be unfunny in certain contexts and yet funny in other contexts. This is not to suggest that anything goes with regard to Irish jokes. There may be some jokes whose offensiveness renders the joke unfunny. The claim is that there has been a loosening of the moral constraints on some ethnic jokes, and that there may be good moral reason for this loosening. Like ethnic jokes, the moral structure of imaginative attitudes is partially contingent on moral facts on the ground.

While the moral assessment of imaginative attitudes is quite complicated, possibly complicated enough to resist any complete explication, deepening our understanding of their normative structure brings theoretic rewards. With a more adequate theory of the imaginative attitudes we are able to say with greater accuracy when we should feel bad about not only our work a day imaginative attitudes, but also when we should feel bad about feeling good about immoral art.[9]

Notes

1. Berys Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," in Jerrold Levinson, ed., *Aesthetics and Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 193.
2. Ibid., p. 194.
3. See Kendall Walton, "Fearing Fictions," in *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 195–203.
4. See Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson, "The Moralistic Fallacy: On the 'Appropriateness' of Emotions," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 61, (2000).
5. See Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
6. See Thomas Nagel, "Concealment and Exposure," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 27, (1998).

7. See Gaut, op. cit., p. 187.
8. See Martha Nussbaum "Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love," in *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 292–294; also see William Lyons, *Emotion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 114.
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