Philosophia (2008) 36:285–298
DOI 10.1007/s11406-007-9116-2

Affective Responses, Normative Requirements, and Ethical-Aesthetic Interaction

Steven A. Jauss

Received: 1 March 2007 / Revised: 22 November 2007 / Accepted: 6 December 2007 /
Published online: 13 June 2008

Abstract According to what Robert Stecker dubs the "ethical-aesthetic interaction" thesis, the ethical defects of a literary work can diminish its aesthetic value. Both the thesis and the only prominent argumentative strategy employed to support it the affective response argument have been hotly debated; however, Stecker has recently argued that the failure of the ARA does not undermine the thesis, since the argument "fails to indentify the main reason [the thesis] holds, when it in fact does." I critically examine Stecker's objection to the familiar versions of the affective response argument and the line of support for ethical-aesthetic interaction he proposes to install in their place. I conclude that neither is compelling; however, an important insight can be salvaged from his positive proposal, and I argue that the insight does, in fact, point toward a novel defense of the thesis.

Keywords Robert Stecker · Ethical criticism · Ethics and literature · Moralism · Ethicism

In a recent book and article, Robert Stecker criticizes what he calls "the most common argument" for a thesis he dubs *ethical-aesthetic interaction*, which is "the view that ethical defects in [an artwork] diminish aesthetic value and ethical merits enhance aesthetic value."[1] This thesis is true only if a more general thesis in the theory of value is also true – namely, what Stecker dubs *interaction*, or the view that it is possible for "the presence of one kind of value" in something to affect "the degree of" another kind of value present in it (*I*, p. 138).

Whether ethical-aesthetic interaction is true is clearly an issue of some practical significance. After all, which literary or other narrative artworks we judge aesthetically excellent – and so choose to include in anthologies or purchase for

[1]Stecker (2005b), hereafter referred to as '*I*', p. 138. Cf. Stecker (2005a), especially pp. 183–223.

S. A. Jauss (✉)
Department of Philosophy & Liberal Studies, University of Arkansas at Little Rock,
2801 S. University Ave., Little Rock, AR 72204-1099, USA
e-mail: sajauss@ualr.edu

museums *for that reason* – ought to depend in part on whether, how much, and in what way the ethical character of such works might matter aesthetically.[2] In particular, ethical-aesthetic interaction threatens the idea that certain morally controversial works will count as aesthetic masterpieces so long as their ethical features are set aside. However, whether the thesis is true is also an issue of some theoretical interest as well, for a successful argument for ethical-aesthetic interaction would, *ipso facto*, establish *interaction* as well, and thereby hold implications for prominent debates in value theory concerning the nature of – and the point of drawing – distinctions between evaluative domains. "In what way, if any," we might ask, "do aesthetic considerations form a distinct type?" And the success of an argument for ethical-aesthetic interaction would presumably block certain answers and encourage others.

The argument Stecker finds fault with – he calls it the *affective response argument* – is not just an argument for ethical-aesthetic interaction, and it is not only what he modestly calls the "most common argument" for that thesis. Rather, it is, in fact, the *only* line of defense the vast majority of the view's contemporary proponents and critics take seriously, and it is an argument with a history reaching back at least as far as Hume.[3] Criticisms of this influential argument have been piling up of late, and one of its former admirers has recently taken recognizing the affective response argument's ailments to require withdrawing support for ethical-aesthetic interaction.[4] Stecker's objection is an interesting contribution to this pile; however, what is perhaps more striking than his objection, given the special prominence of the affective response argument in debates over ethical-aesthetic interaction, is his insistence that the failure of the affective response argument does *not* undermine that thesis, since the argument "fails to identify the main reason why [the thesis] holds, when it in fact does."[5]

In what follows, I critically examine Stecker's objection to the familiar versions of the affective response argument and the line of support for ethical-aesthetic interaction he proposes to install in their place. I find both unconvincing. However, I do think an important insight can be salvaged from his positive proposal, and one aim of this paper is to bring out that insight and begin to follow it where it leads – namely, toward the articulation of a genuinely novel defense of ethical-aesthetic evaluation. Along the way, I redress some problems in recent attempts (both by proponents and critics of ethical-aesthetic interaction) to state and explain (1) the

[2] Whether, how much, and in what way the so-called 'ethical character' of works might matter *morally* is, of course, a separate – though important – issue.

[3] See Hume (1757). Two contemporary formulations of the affective response argument – Carroll (1996) and Gaut (1998) – have been especially influential. Cf. the steady stream of subsequent defenses, clarifications, and refinements, including Conolly (2000), Mason (2001), Dadlez (2002), and Eaton (2003).

[4] The most influential critic has been Daniel Jacobson. (See Jacobson 1997, 2006 and D'Arms and Jacobson 2000.) Kieran (2002) recounts its author's falling out with the affective response argument and ethical-aesthetic interaction.

[5] *I*, p. 138. As it turns out, what Stecker identifies as the "main reason" (the one the affective response argument allegedly fails to capture) is closely related to the affective response argument. In fact, he even describes it as "a version of" that argument (*I*, p. 148).

affective response argument and (2) the ways in which works of art can be ethically evaluated.

I

I begin with some brief remarks about the terminology I will adopt. "Ethical-aesthetic interaction" is a new name for an established view, a view more familiarly described as a form of "moralism" about aesthetic value in art. This more familiar name is also more appropriate, in my view; however, it is also unfortunate, since "moralism" and its cognates are terms whose pejorative uses are common both in and out of philosophy. Perhaps as a result, some philosophers prefer to call their version of the view "ethicism" or even "cognitivism," since these terms do not have standard pejorative uses. Other philosophers stress that they endorse only a "moderate" moralism, as opposed to moralism in its "unqualified" (or "radical" or "extreme" or "crude") form. Finally, still others prefer to talk about "models of" (or "approaches to") the interaction of ethical and aesthetic features rather than theses and theories burdened with "-ism" names.[6]

Like these popular locutions, "ethical-aesthetic interaction" also invites no obvious negative association, and for the sake of convenience in responding to Stecker's arguments, I will adopt it. However, to avoid any possible confusion I will refer to the thesis in question as the e–a interaction *thesis* (or *the e–a thesis* for short), and I will refer to the phenomena the thesis is about as *e–a interaction*.[7] Stecker and the proponents of the diverse views mentioned above I call "moralists," though not in any pejorative sense of that term.

The notion of an "ethical defect" (or "merit") in art also deserves some preliminary comment. "A work can be ethically evaluated," Stecker says, in at least three respects:

(1) in terms of its "micro-" or "macro-" consequences (on individual audiences or on entire social groups, respectively), which may be either good or bad,
(2) in terms of its "ethical point of view," the ethical "judgment" or "attitude" a work not merely contains but also "expresses" toward one or more "institutions, practices, systems of values, characters, or actions," and
(3) in terms of the "insight" offered by its "explorations" of "moral issues."[8]

[6] For "ethicism" and "a modified version of ethicism," see, respectively, Gaut (1998) and Eaton (2003). ("Model" talk also figures prominently in the latter.) For "cognitivism," see Freeland (1997). For "moderate moralism" and "approach" talk, see Carroll (1996, 2000), respectively, both of which single out "radical" moralisms for harsh criticism. Kieran (2002) criticizes "extreme" moralism as a "poisonous idea," while Kieran (2003) more modestly complains against "unqualified" moralism.

[7] Stecker uses "interaction" and "ethical-aesthetic interaction" sometimes as names of "views" and sometimes to refer to the phenomena these views are views about – namely cases in which the ethical defects or merits of a work (allegedly) diminish or enhance its aesthetic value.

[8] Stecker (2005a), pp. 207–213.

The three respects are meant to be independent of one another, in ways that have only recently become commonplaces of the literature on e-a interaction.[9] For example, it is supposed to be possible for an artwork to have good consequences (morally speaking) partly in virtue of its endorsing a morally reprehensible attitude. After all, the argument goes, encountering a morally reprehensible attitude in a work might cultivate in some audiences a refined sensitivity to manifestations of that attitude in oneself and others, as well as a disposition to greater vigilance in fighting the attitude in question.[10] And similarly, it is supposed to be possible for a work to be ethically good partly in virtue of its insightful (or rich or subtle) "explorations" of moral issues, even if the perspective the work endorses is repellent. In fact, "there is *more moral value* in such an exploration," Stecker claims, than there is in the endorsement of the ethically correct perspective, which he acknowledges may very well have no positive moral value (*I*, p. 143).

This newly popular conception of the potential sources of moral goodness and badness in art should not be accepted uncritically, of course, and I will reconsider – and reject – it after I have explained just what role the conception plays in Stecker's argument. In the meantime: the least controversial examples of an ethical *defect* in art involve considerations of type (2). As Gaut puts it,

> a work is intrinsically ethically flawed just in case it manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes. When works manifest attitudes, they do so by prescribing or inviting their audiences to have certain responses: de Sade's *Juliette* manifests its sadistic attitudes by inviting readers to have erotic responses towards the scenes of sexual torture it depicts.[11]

While there may be some debate about the proper ethical interpretation and evaluation of many alleged examples of ethically defective art, many of most vocal critics of the e–a thesis are prepared to accept that a work that "manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes" must be ethically flawed. And that manifesting ethically reprehensible attitudes in a work is an ethical flaw I will not question here.

II

The e–a thesis is an answer to the general question, do ethical and aesthetic values in art ever interact? The answer is affirmative: "ethical defects in [a] work diminish aesthetic value and ethical merits enhance aesthetic value" (*I*, p. 138). However, the e–a thesis is not the only affirmative answer possible, of course. (The view sometimes described as "immoralism," for example, allows that it is possible for ethical defects to *enhance* the aesthetic value of a work.[12] Another answer would

[9] In addition to Stecker (2005a, b), see also Mullin (2002) and Kieran (2002).

[10] As Stecker (2005a) puts it, such a work might "inadvertently harden us against behavior based on such an attitude or make us aware of the great range of attitudes that may gain adherence and guide behavior" (p. 210).

[11] Gaut (2001), p. 351.

[12] See Kieran (2002) and Jacobson (2006).

affirm only the first part of the e–a thesis: while ethical defects sometimes diminish the aesthetic value of a work, ethical merits *never* enhance the aesthetic value of a work.[13] Finally, yet another affirmative answer suggests that aesthetic features sometimes diminish or enhance the ethical value of a work.[14]) Nor is the e–a thesis meant to be an answer to the narrower question (italicized below):

> [I]f a work's expressing (rather than merely containing an expression of) a morally reprehensible attitude is an ethical defect, would that diminish the aesthetic value of a work? *If it ever does so, does it always or does it do so only under special circumstances?* (*I*, p. 138, italics added).

This narrower question is somewhat misleading. It is true that the view known as "ethicism" is sometimes criticized as overly strong on the grounds that it (allegedly) entails that a work's expression of a morally reprehensible attitude *always* diminishes its aesthetic value.[15] And so-called "moderate moralists" sometimes boast that their view is "less sweeping" than ethicism.[16] However, if we take ethicists and moderate moralists at their word, we should conclude that both factions agree that ethical defects diminish the aesthetic value of a work only "under special circumstances" – namely, only when the defects in question are aesthetically relevant.[17]

Stecker, therefore, sides with everyone else in the moralist camp in arguing only for a weak version of the e–a thesis: "an ethical flaw can *in the right circumstances for the right type of work* diminish the aesthetic value of a work" (*I*, p. 149, italics added). (He does not explicitly argue for or against the corresponding thesis that an ethical merit can "in the right circumstances for the right type of work" enhance the aesthetic value of a work.) Where he departs from most other contemporary moralists is in rejecting – or, rather, downgrading – their favorite argument. To be precise, the "affective response argument," as Stecker initially describes it, is not so much a determinate argument as it is a "style of argument," which he says "can either take a factual or normative form" (*I*, p. 145). His initial sketch of the argument "intentionally combines a number of distinct lines of thought and attempts to identify something all these lines of thought share in common" (*I*, p. 144). But Stecker promptly dismisses the factual form in order to focus on the normative form of the argument. I will deal only with the normative form here.

[13] Eaton (2003).

[14] See *I*, pp. 149–50 and Bonzon (2003).

[15] For two rather different versions of this complaint, see Carroll (2000), p. 374 and Eaton (2003), p. 169.

[16] Carroll (2000), p. 377.

[17] Even if there is no *modal* difference in strength between moderate moralism and ethicisim – a point implied in Conolly (2000) and emphasized in Jacobson (2006) – there may yet be important differences in strength between them.

III

The first premise of the normative version of the affective response argument, as Stecker states it, is that

> certain features of a work…ought to prevent a response that the work 'requires' of or prescribes for its audience. (*I*, p. 145).

"Consider," for example, "a thriller which fails to make the bad characters very menacing. Then the audience will not (or ought not) fear for the vulnerability of the protagonists, and the piece will fail *as a thriller* in virtue of…being unworthy of such a response" (*I*, p. 145).

There are two problems with this preliminary formulation of the argument's first premise. First, as the name of the argument suggests, it is only *affective* responses that concern the argument's proponents, and so the statement of the premise ought to reflect that fact. And second, as the scare quotes surrounding "requires" may be intended to convey, this formulation does not make explicit the character of the normative relation that is being invoked. In fact, moralists generally treat as interchangeable a number of strikingly different ways of describing this relation: "prescribes," "invites," "calls for," and "requires" are clear favorites, yet "licenses," "endorses," "demands," and even "conjures" make occasional appearances in the literature as well.

Presumably, all such locutions are elliptical for talk about something else, and some philosophers would surely wish to spell out the normative relation in question in terms provided by a theory of author–audience communication.[18] My own view, which I will simply presuppose here, is that the normative relation in question is a relation not between works and responses (or, for that matter, authors and responses), but rather between one activity of an audience member and another: your imaginatively engaging with a thriller, I will say, "normatively requires" you to have certain affective responses, such as fear (or quasi-fear[19]) for the protagonists, or perhaps fear (or quasi-fear) of the bad characters, or perhaps just some thrills.[20]

[18] See, for example, Hornsby (2000) and Carroll (1998).

[19] There is a lively current debate concerning whether affective responses to what we know to be fictions always, sometimes, or never involve "genuine" emotions. See, for example, Gaut (2003) and Friend (2003).

[20] The term "normatively requires" here is borrowed from Broome (2004): "as a useful piece of terminology, when you ought (to *F* if *X*), I say that *X normatively requires* you to *F*" (p. 29). This is "a useful piece of terminology" insofar as there are some truths about, say, what we ought to feel in response to a thriller that are difficult to express in unambiguous – yet ordinary and comfortable – language. It would not be correct to say, for example, that, if you are imaginatively engaging with a thriller (any thriller), you ought to feel fear for its protagonists, since you might be engaging with a thriller whose protagonists are not vulnerable and whose villains are decidedly less than menacing. The problem is not that the relation between imaginatively engaging with a thriller and feeling fear for its protagonists is not governed by an ought. Rather, the problem is that the correct expression of the ought which governs that relation requires the use of cumbersome punctuation – as in "you ought (to feel fear if you are imaginatively engaging with a tragedy)" – in order to avoid the false implication that you ought to feel fear, no matter whether the thriller is thrilling or not. The language of normative requirements permits being explicit about the relation being invoked, while sidestepping the cumbersome use of overly punctuated phrases.

The revised version of the first premise, then, is as follows:

1. Certain features of a work ought to prevent a *normatively required affective response*.

And the rest of the argument's claims fall into place rather swiftly:

2. "[S]ometimes a moral defect will be the feature that prevents (or ought to prevent) the [normatively] required response" (*I*, p. 145).
3. Features of a work that ought to prevent some normatively required affective response are aesthetic defects of the work.
4. Therefore, *moral* defects that ought to prevent normatively required affective responses are aesthetic defects.

IV

The problem with this argument, according to Stecker, is that there "appear to be counter-examples" to the third premise (*I*, p. 145). The objection begins with a modest point: those features of works that ought to prevent normatively required *non-affective* responses are clearly not aesthetic defects. Imaginatively engaging with Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, he alleges, normatively requires one to believe the theory of history presented in that work. (Belief, of course, is a "cognitive rather than affective" response (*I*, p. 146).) Yet, he also asserts, no one ought to believe that theory, since it is "ultimately implausible" (*I*, p. 146). Thus, *War and Peace* has a feature (namely, the implausibility of the theory of history presented in it) that ought to prevent a non-affective response (viz., belief in that theory) that is normatively required by imaginatively engaging with the work.

As Stecker stresses, cases such as *War and Peace* are "not yet counter-examples to the normative version of the affective response argument" (*I*, p. 146). Why not? Presumably, a successful counter-example would be analogous to the one just discussed in every respect except:

(1) that the normatively required response in question is *affective*, not cognitive, and
(2) that the defect in question – the one that *ought to prevent* a normatively required response – is some *ethical* defect in the work, not, say, an implausible theory of history.

Stecker claims not only that such examples "can also be provided," but also that they are "especially prevalent" (*I*, p. 146).

In fact, he discusses only one example: the *Iliad*. Perhaps surprisingly, what the "moral affective responses" normatively required by imaginatively engaging with the poem are supposed to be he doesn't say; however, I take it he means moral *admiration* for the protagonists' pursuit of what they judge an "essentially noble enterprise," which is to see to it that "Troy…be destroyed, its men killed, its women and children enslaved, and its fields made barren," no matter the cost, in order "to restore honour" (*I*, p. 146).

Here is Stecker's discussion of the upshot of this case:

> We do sometimes react with horrified disapproval when we encounter this outlook in the work, but I doubt that it makes us think one iota less of the *Iliad*

> or interferes with our aesthetic engagement with the work. Nor does it make us think the work is less worthy of such engagement. In this case, the explanation maybe [sic] the huge distance in time and culture that separates us from the world of the poem. We are simply grateful to be allowed entry into the world in so effective a fashion. Finally, we do not say the work would be even better if it displayed a set of values we would approve of. There is no counterfactual situation where this work could do that, and if, somehow, it did, we would lose one of the things we most value about the poem: access to a world dominated by a very different outlook than ours. (*I*, p. 147).

That is, I take it, the *Iliad* has features that ought to prevent – and "sometimes," as when we react with "horrified disapproval," in fact *do prevent* – some of the affective responses that imaginatively engaging with the poem normatively requires. Further, these features are, he claims, ethical defects in the work. Yet this doesn't seem to make us think "one iota" less of the poem, or even feel any noteworthy difficulty in achieving a satisfying "aesthetic engagement with the work." Hence, he concludes, the affective response argument's third premise (that features of the work that ought to prevent some normatively required affective response are aesthetic defects of the work) must be false. At the very least, moralists should acknowledge that, in some cases, features of works that ought to prevent normatively required affective responses *do not diminish* the aesthetic value of those works.

V

I am not persuaded by Stecker's objection. To explain why, I will discuss in greater detail some aspects of the cases mentioned so far: *War and Peace*, the failed thriller, and the *Iliad*. The required response to *War and Peace* is a non-affective response (namely, belief) that is blocked by a non-ethical defect. The required response to the failed thriller is some species of fear (or quasi-fear) that is blocked by a non-ethical defect. And the required response to the *Iliad* is moral admiration (or something like it), and it is that response that is supposed to be blocked by one or more ethical defects.

One respect in which the latter pair of cases are not analogous is that fear and moral admiration are rather different sorts of affective responses. Given the "general adaptive problem" fear presumably "solves" – namely, "the problem of confronting dangers" – it is unsurprising that fear is among the more immediate and simple affective responses, and perhaps one more closely tied to action (and in particular to the fight or flight response) than any other.[21]

Moral admiration, on the other hand, seems to be a more complex and reflective affective response. As Philippa Foot suggests, agents can be admired or not for "different formal features of a single action" – features that are ordinarily recognized

[21] Griffiths (1997), p. 238.

as independent of one another.[22] "[G]oodness can come from the nature of the action itself – from what it is that is done," of course, but that is not the whole story:

> [T]he end for which an action is done is an independent source of goodness or badness in it. A good (even obligatory) action may be bad in that it is done for a bad end….Or, again, a bad action may be done for a good end but one that does not justify it….A third source of goodness or badness in an action lies in its relation to the agent's judgment of whether he or she is acting badly or well. Here, too, goodness or badness may be combined with either goodness or badness in either act or end. It is often supposed that the fact that someone is doing what he *thinks* right is a circumstance that annuls actual badness of act or purpose.[23]

We needn't agree with Foot in every detail, of course. In my view, for example, the claim that an agent's wholeheartedly positive evaluation of what she is doing can be an independent "source *of goodness…in* [that] action" is implausible. At least, assent to that claim is not required by the task of making sense of the familiar exclamation, "but I was doing what I thought was right!," as Foot apparently supposes.[24] And more importantly, Foot's claim most certainly does not follow from the badness of seeing *as wrong* what one chooses to do anyway.

However, what we can learn from Foot's reminder is that we can feel admiration for characters in fictions, the actions they perform, and their "enterprises" (such as that of the *Iliad*'s protagonists) either in some or all respects. And we can both admire these things in some respects and vehemently disapprove of them in others.

Consider, for example, the controversial recent film *The Woodsman*, directed by Nicole Kassell. The film's protagonist – Walter, played by Kevin Bacon – is a pedophile newly released from prison after serving a 12-year sentence for molesting prepubescent girls. During the first third of the film, it becomes clear that Walter does not believe his sentence was just, since, as he explains, he "never hurt" the girls. (At times, the film seems to suggest that, like Humbert Humbert, Walter mistakenly believes that he treated at least some of his victims in such a way that his actions would go undetected by them.[25]) He also follows young girls at a mall and in a park and, even more disturbingly, fails to prevent or report a number of attempts – some presented as *successful* attempts – by another pedophile to abduct young boys at the primary school across the street from Walter's apartment. The film has been

[22] Foot (2001), p. 72.

[23] Ibid., pp. 72–73.

[24] Foot's proposal is that the appeal to the fact that one was doing what one thought was right could not have the force it is meant to have, unless it is a way of acknowledging a respect in which the act was, indeed, good – one the speaker hopes her hearers will (rightly or wrongly) decide "annuls" badness of act or purpose. However, it seems to me that the appeal may be interpreted at least as comfortably as an attempt to ameliorate blameworthiness by appealing to what the speaker wishes his hearers to treat as a responsibility-undermining factor.

[25] "Blessed be the Lord," Humbert cries at *Lolita* I.13, "she had noticed nothing!" (Nabokov (1970), p. 63). However, the evidence Humbert offers for this conclusion is famously shaky, and Nabokov opens I.13 by reminding readers that the ensuing description has been influenced by "a private talk" Humbert has had with his lawyer (p. 59).

controversial precisely because some admiration for Walter – and some sympathy for the unpleasantness of what he faces when his secret is found out – seems to be normatively required. Of course, if admiring Walter *for the features of his character and actions mentioned above* were the normatively required affective response, the film would be seriously flawed. However, *some* admiration for Walter is clearly warranted, insofar as he struggles to become "normal," as he puts it, and to arrive at a more honest appreciation of the damage he has done to his victims. Neither struggle results in any especially decisive victory for virtue and justice, but it is hard not to recognize in Walter some modest moral progress – and to admire him for it.

Surely we are also capable of feeling – and surely we sometimes do feel – *some* admiration for the protagonists of the *Iliad* as well. Supposing that their evaluation of what they do were wholeheartedly positive, morally speaking, we might admire them for so ardently and persistently acting as they believe they ought, in the face of great obstacles. We needn't think that their doing so "annuls badness of act or purpose," nor need we think that their doing so is an independent "source of goodness in" what they do. However, we might manage to admire them for it nevertheless, even if we would have considerably more difficulty feeling such admiration for real agents who wholeheartedly approve of the awful things they do. The conditions governing our ability to feel admiration for fictional characters may, after all, be rather different from those governing our ability to feel admiration for actual persons.

These considerations should, I believe, at the very least shed some doubt on the idea that the *Iliad* has features that *ought to prevent* the normatively required affective response in question, if that response is moral admiration. Obviously, we shouldn't admire the protagonists in all respects. Nor should we admire them even in all the respects in which the work's first audiences might have admired them. However, perhaps the admiration we are capable of feeling for them is nevertheless sufficient to count as what is normatively required.[26]

VI

Stecker's objection leads him to conclude that the third premise of the affective response argument must be rejected. But he does not think that all of the conceptual resources the argument draws on deserve to be junked: there is "a subclass" of modern novels focused on exploring (in a broad sense) "ethical aspects of societies, cultures, traditions, and individuals," and this subclass is friendly to "a version of the affective response argument" (*I*, p. 148).

Again, Stecker does not specify what affective response imaginative engagement with such works normatively requires; however, he does hint in his discussion of the

[26] A second point about the case of the *Iliad*: it is not clear that the Greeks' evaluation of their enterprise – or, for that matter, the moral outlook of the work more generally – is quite as Stecker suggests, though he does acknowledge that the poem "by no means represents the Greeks as good and the Trojans as bad" (*I*, p. 146). The reader of Book X, for example, may find there that the Greeks recognize the dishonor in the night mission they nevertheless send Menelaus and Odysseus to carry out. For more on this point, see Susan Stewart's helpful discussion of the "break" between the ethics of Book X and the ethics of "the rest of" the poem in Stewart (2002), pp. 6–7.

example he gives (Gottfried Keller's *Green Henry*) that he means something like a form of anxiety associated with the experience of moral dilemmas, of the choice between lives, or of a "clash of values."[27] If so, then I take it his suggestion is that a botched representation of such a clash, which he thinks ought to count as an ethical flaw insofar as it displays a "lack of insight," "would ruin *Green Henry* in just the way a lame thriller is ruined by unconvincing villains."[28]

While Stecker calls this "a version of the affective response argument," he is quick to point out that it differs somewhat from the versions of the argument endorsed by other contemporary moralists:

> In the example just discussed [the imaginary case of the 'ruined' *Green Henry*], the ethical defect is of a cognitive nature: lack of insight. This is an important type of example, because novels of the type under discussion here are often evaluated on such grounds. However, it is not the typical example envisioned by those who put forward a version of the affective response argument. They are more commonly concerned with such things as expressions of a morally egregious attitude, where these are endorsed by the work itself. Contempt for a particular race or pleasure in the suffering of others are examples of such attitudes.

This argument is built around the idea that a "lack of insight" in the exploration of ethical issues – in particular, a failure to represent "a convincing clash of values" – is an "ethical defect" in a work. That it is, I take it, is supposed to follow from Stecker's classification of "ways in which a work can be subjected to moral evaluation" discussed above:

> [N]arrative works seem to be able to explore moral issues through the stories they tell. A work can be evaluated for the insight such explorations offer. (*I*, p. 139)

His main example is the actual *Green Henry*, about which he says:

> If it makes the presentation of its moral issues compelling, and convinces us that it sensitively explores them, we will take seriously the attitude it expresses, and find the exploration worthwhile. There is more moral value in such an exploration than in the endorsement of more obvious ethical truths. (*I*, p. 143)

That "a work can be evaluated for the insight such explorations offer," is surely true, as is that "novels of the type under discussion here are often evaluated on such grounds." However, it is not so clear that "a work can be *ethically* evaluated for the insight such explorations offer," and so I also doubt that there could be "more *moral value* in such an exploration than in the endorsement of more obvious ethical truths," if only because it is not obvious that such explorations have *moral* value.

However, even if we are prepared to say, with Stecker, that there is *moral value* in insightful explorations of moral issues, it does not follow that the *lack* of the sort of moral insight in question is ever a moral *defect* in a work. There is an interesting

[27] Stecker discusses Keller's *Bildungsroman* (the German title is *Der grüne Heinrich*) at *I*, pp. 142–143 and pp. 148–149.

[28] 'Interaction', p. 148.

similarity here to the flaw I identified in the passage quoted above from Foot. She notes that a person's negative assessment of what he does anyway is an independent source of badness in what he does, and assumes that a person's positive assessment of what he does must be an independent source of goodness in what he does. Stecker claims that the insightful exploration of moral issues can be an ethical merit in a work, and assumes that an uninsightful exploration of such issues must be an ethical defect in a work.

As far as I can tell, neither assumption makes for a good fit with our ordinary evaluative practices: we do not think artworks are morally defective insofar as they fail to contain moral insights. At least, the failure to represent a convincing "clash of values" does not sound like an *ethical* flaw, even if it is (or reflects) a "cognitive defect."

Therefore, while I think Stecker has described a way in which a feature of a work that is about ethical issues may bear on the aesthetic value of the work, I do not believe he has provided any support for the e–a thesis, which is the view that ethical *defects* (and merits) diminish (or enhance) the aesthetic value of a work: he has failed to describe a case in which an ethical *defect* diminishes the aesthetic value of the work in question.

VII

There is, though, an important insight that Stecker is in the vicinity of, and I would like to close with a preliminary statement of what I think that insight is. A "standard feature" of the "subclass" of novels Stecker describes "is that they investigate ethical aspects of societies, cultures, traditions, and individuals in ways that explore real options for us." Now, I have suggested that uninsightful explorations of ethical issues are not *ethically* criticizable in any obvious sense, even if insightful explorations are ethically praiseworthy, though I find that doubtful as well. But works that belong to this subclass are works that can reasonably be said to "promise" to explore ethical issues in an insightful way – they introduce ethical issues as their subject matter, as it were. And there is a critical predicate in common use for describing the defect in works which promise to explore a subject matter in an insightful way but fail to do so: such works are often ridiculed as "pretentious," in the sense of that term clarified by Arnold Isenberg in a series of posthumously published essays.[29] Pretentious works do not do what they lead the reader to believe they will do.

Now, it seems to me that pretentiousness in art is as plausible a candidate as we might have for a flaw that is both an ethical flaw and an aesthetic flaw. There may be others – many others, in fact – as well: sentimentality, for example, and decadence, both of which have been the subject of some discussion in recent years.[30] However, unlike those concepts, pretentiousness has, I think, a much tighter connection to the aesthetic character of works. For insofar as pretentiousness in a work amounts to the breaking of a promise (or something we might judge analogous to breaking a

[29] Isenberg (1952, 1959).

[30] See Bermúdez (2003) and Eaton (1989).

promise in relevant respects), it also amounts to a sort of *disunity* in the work: the part of the work that makes the promise fails to make for a good fit with the part of the work that aims to deliver on that promise. And disunity in a work in which unity is called for (indeed, in some sense promised) is as noncontroversial a type of aesthetic flaw as there is.

In any case, if pretentious novels, such as the example of the imaginary ruined *Green Henry*, are instances of e-a interaction, then it *is*, in fact, possible to establish the e–a thesis independently from the *affective response argument*. And that is what Stecker set out to try to accomplish, going very much against the grain of recent work. And so, while I have suggested that his arguments are not compelling, the upshot is hardly negative: the apparent mistakes have, in the end, suggested a way of perhaps successfully doing just what he set out to do.

References

Bermúdez, J. L. (2003). The concept of decadence. In J. L. Bermúdez, & S. Gardner (Eds.) *Art and morality* (pp. 111–130). New York: Routledge.

Bonzon, R. (2003). Fiction and value. In M. Kieran, & D.M. Lopes (Eds.) *Imagination, philosophy, and the arts* (pp. 160–176). New York: Routledge.

Broome, J. (2004). Reasons. In R. J. Wallace, P. Petit, S. Scheffler, & M. Smith (Eds.) *Reason and value: Themes from the moral philosophy of Joseph Raz* (pp. 28–55). New York: Oxford University Press.

Carroll, N. (1996). Moderate moralism. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, *36*, 223–237.

Carroll, N. (1998). Art, narrative, and moral understanding. In J. Levinson (Ed.) *Aesthetics & Ethics: Essays. at the Intersection* (pp. 126–160). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Carroll, N. (2000). Art and ethical criticism: An overview of recent directions of research. *Ethics*, *110*, 350–387.

Conolly, O. (2000). Ethicism and moderate moralism. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, *40*, 302–316.

Dadlez, E. M. (2002). The vicious habits of entirely fictive people: Hume on the moral evaluation of art. *Philosophy and Literature*, *26*, 38–51.

D'Arms, J., & Jacobson, D. (2000). The moralistic fallacy: On the "Appropriateness" of emotions. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, *61*, 65–90.

Eaton, M. M. (1989). Laughing at the death of Little Nell: Sentimental art and sentimental people. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, *26*, 269–282.

Eaton, A. W. (2003). Where ethics and aesthetics meet: Titian's *Rape of Europa*. *Hypatia*, *18*, 159–188.

Foot, P. (2001). *Natural goodness*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Freeland, C. (1997). Art and moral knowledge. *Philosophical Topics*, *25*, 11–36.

Friend, S. (2003). How I really feel about JFK. In M. Kieran, & D. M. Lopes (Eds.) *Imagination, Philosophy and the Arts* (pp. 35–53). London: Routledge.

Gaut, B. (1998). The ethical criticism of art. In J. Levinson (Ed.) *Aesthetics & Ethics: Essays. at the Intersection* (pp. 182–203). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Gaut, B. (2001). Art and ethics. In B. Gaut, & D. M. Lopes (Eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (pp. 341–352). New York: Routledge.

Gaut, B. (2003). Reasons, emotions, and fictions. In M. Kieran, & D.M. Lopes (Eds.) *Imagination, Philosophy, and the Arts* (pp. 15–34). New York: Routledge.

Greenspan, P. (1988). *Emotions and reasons*. New York: Routledge.

Griffiths, P. E. (1997). *What emotions really are*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hornsby, J. (2000). Feminism in philosophy of language: Communicative speech acts. In M. Fricker, & J. Hornsby (Eds.) *The Cambridge companion to feminism in philosophy* (pp. 87–106). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Hume, D. (1757). Of the standard of taste. In E. F. Miller (Ed.) *Essays, moral, political, and literary, revised edition* (pp. 226–249). Indianapolis: Liberty Fund 1987.

Isenberg, A. (1952). A Poem by Frost and some principles of criticism. In A. Isenberg (Ed.) *Aesthetics and the theory of criticism* (pp. 138–155). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973.

Isenberg, A. (1959). "Pretentious" as an aesthetic predicate. In A. Isenberg (Ed.) *Aesthetics and the theory of criticism* (pp. 172–183). Chicago: University of Chicago, Press 1973.
Jacobson, D. (1997). In praise of immoral art. *Philosophical Topics*, *25*, 155–199.
Jacobson, D. (2006). Ethical criticism and the vices of moderation. In M. Kieran (Ed.) *Contemporary debates in aesthetics* (pp. 342–355). New York: Routledge.
Kieran, M. (2002). Forbidden knowledge: The challenge of cognitive immoralism. In S. Gardner, & J. Bermudez (Eds.) *Art and morality* (pp. 56–73). London: Routledge.
Kieran, M. (2003). Art and morality. In J. Levinson (Ed.) *The Oxford handbook of aesthetics* (pp. 451–470). New York: Oxford University Press.
Kieran, M., & Lopes, D. M. (Eds.) (2003). *Imagination, philosophy, and the arts*. New York: Routledge.
Levinson, J. (Ed.) (1998). *Aesthetics and ethics: Essays at the intersection*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Mason, M. M. (2001). Moral prejudice and aesthetic deformity: Rereading Hume's "Of the standard of taste. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *59*, 59–71.
Mullin, A. (2002). Evaluating art: Morally significant imagining versus moral soundness. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *60*, 137–149.
Mullin, A. (2004). Moral defects, aesthetic defects, and the imagination. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *62*, 249–261.
Nabokov, V. (1970). *The annotated Lolita*. In A. Appel, Jr. (Ed.) New York: McGraw Hill.
Savile, A. (2000). The sirens' serenade. In A. O'Hear (Ed.) *Philosophy, the good, the true and the beautiful* (pp. 237–254). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Stecker, R. (2005a). *Aesthetics and the philosophy of art*. Lantham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
Stecker, R. (2005b). The interaction of ethical and aesthetic value. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, *45*, 138–150.
Stewart, S. (2002). *Poetry and the fate of the senses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Walton, K. (1978). Fearing fictions. *Journal of Philosophy*, *75*, 5–27.