

Project Research Bible: Aesthetics of Evil

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Abstract

In medieval bestiaries, there are two classes of evil represented by beasts; those which deceive and those which generate fear and death. Among the first class of beasts, those which are notable for their abilities to deceive, there are three kinds of deception: these are noted by the camouflages of the chameleon, accurate imitations of the manticore, and the “seductive skills of sirens”. While we might think this to be a medieval taxonomy of epistemic harms only, the kinds of epistemic harms the medievalists worried about are not far off from contemporary epistemic harms and risks; misinformation, false and inauthentic narratives, and bullshit.

Project Overview

Prinz ([2004](#))

- ☐ Thesis statement: ...
- ☐ Main question: ...
- ☐ Target length / deadline: ...

Outline / Structure

1. Introduction
2. Exposition of Primary View

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Key Sources & Notes

Primary Texts

! Important

Elizabeth Fricker's (2007) Epistemic Injustice

- Key claim: Good will as unconditionally good (4:393–394)
- Quote: “Nothing ... can possibly be conceived ... which could be called good without qualification except a **good will**.” (4:393)
- My reaction: This seems vulnerable to Schiller's objection about inclination...
- Relevance: Core premise for my argument in section 3

Secondary Literature

💡 Tip

- ☐ Fragility of Goodness
- ☐ Wandering in Darkness

- Argument summary: ...
- Weakness: Assumes too much about rational agency
- Supports my thesis because...

Objections & Responses Folder

- Objection 1: Consequence argument (van Inwagen)
 - Tags: free-will, incompatibilism
 - Notes: ...

Reading Log / To-Read

- ☐ Fragility of Goodness
 - ☐ Luck and Ethics
 - ☐ Aeschylus and Practical Conflict
- ☐ Wandering in Darkness
- ☐ Elizabeth Fricker's (2007) Epistemic Injustice
- ☐ Cost of Being Real
- ☐ Imago Dei
- ☐ Talyor's Identity
- ☐ Gregory Currie's “On Fiction”

The Manticore

The Manticore is a fictionalized beast that was born in Persian art and literature sometime around its cultural zenith. It at once symbolizes evil, death and hell, but in medieval religious art, it came to symbolize the power of Christ over death and hell.

The Manticore is an imagined beast that has been found in literature as early as the 5th and 4th century BC. In his Photius, the Greek historian working for the Persian court describes the Manticore as a beast with red skin, as large as a lion, three rows of teeth, a human-like face and the tail of a scorpion. Later writers would quote Ctesias' description of the Manticore, adding emphasis on the dietary habits of it, including that it ate men. Though it is likely that many of these descriptions were of predatory animals passed by word of mouth until they reached the Persian king's court, what is even more important is the way in which these descriptions began to stand in for imageries of evil in the Medieval literature.

On some accounts, the manticore is a union between a hyena and Ethiopian lioness. It imitates the voices of men and possesses a fixed and immovable gaze. In addition, it does not possess gums in either of its jaws, and rather than having multiple teeth, it has one large one.

Ctesias argued that the Manticore had a triple row of teeth which fit into each other like a comb, the face and ears of a human, blood colored eyes, the body of a lion and a stinging tail similar to a scorpion. While Pliny the elder argued that it imitated the voices of men, Ctesias tells us that its voice resembles a union of a flute and trumpet, that it is exceedingly swift, and has an appetite for human flesh [p. 280].

Aristotle questions Ctesias' account, but nevertheless preserves it in his own writings. He gives Ctesias' account, that the Manticore possesses a double row of teeth, similar feet and size of a lion, with ears and face like a man. Grey colored eyes and a red body, with a tail like that of a scorpion. [p. 30-31; also see Aristotle, History of Animals 8.28, 605b22-606a10]

Owing to the fantastical nature of these accounts, it is highly probable that they are either misguided or motivated by some purposes other than truth. In the 57th question of the 1st of the second part of the Summa Theologica, Thomas Aquinas defends the view of art as a form of right reason. There is a distinction here between the right reason for making objects, and the right reason for doing good actions. We should first focus on the point that is important to both of these activities, is the right use of one's cognitive faculties. The difference lies in the produced object, whether an action or thing.

The Manticore in Medieval Art

We might think that medieval art has no place in a discussion about epistemic injustice, but I argue that the depiction of the fictional beast called the manticore, as a personification of deception lends credibility to this claim. According to the modern function of art summed up by Gilmore (2020), art's function is oriented to ends such as pleasure, entertainment, and absorption [132]. Conversely, the medieval function of art is directed at more orthodox ends intending to

motivate desirable behaviors and behavioral responses. On one account of this deception, a person holds false beliefs about themselves. These beliefs stem from hermeneutically unjust environments where the individual lacks access to resources that would lead to accurate self-understanding and moral beliefs. Such beliefs are rooted in irrational actions performed by the individual.

It does this by contrasting the concept of hermeneutic justice as popularized by Miranda Fricker (2007) but developed by earlier feminists. We might think that medieval art has no place in a discussion about epistemic injustice, but I argue that the depiction of the fictional beast called the manticore, as a personification of deception lends credibility to this claim. According to the modern function of art summed up by Jonathan Gilmore (2020), art's function is oriented to ends such as pleasure, entertainment, and absorption (Gilmore 2020, 132). Conversely, the medieval function of art is directed at more orthodoxical ends intending to motivate behaviors and behavioral responses. As an artistic object, the Manticore is a fictionalized beast that was born in Persian art and literature sometime around its cultural zenith. It at once symbolizes evil, death and hell, but in medieval religious art, it came to symbolize the power of Christ over death and hell.

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Pinero

Piñero Moral (2021) argues that this is because art's purpose in the middle ages is to represent reality. It is one thing to accurately and factually represent a tree, however, Pinero is talking about more complex reality, especially moral reality. One example of medieval representations of moral reality include the Persian Manticore. The manticore as depicted in medieval art is said to represent evil.

There are several ways in which some art objects may represent more complex realities. One may think that the purpose of a painting is to reflect the experiences one had during a war, or peace time event. Such a painting may express the given facts of the case, for instance an artist could paint the signing of the Magna Carta. If the painting were painted by an artist who was alive to witness the signing of the Magna Carta, then the artist would merely be representing contemporary reality. If the art were not alive at the time, then we could argue that the artist is representing historical reality. If the artist is relying on trusted sources that are well-known, then this would be different than if the artist were imagining

an event in which not many direct sources exist. But an artist can represent a projection of reality as well when the reality they want to convey is obscure, not well known, highly contested etc.

By definition, medieval art implies metaphysical aspirations and normative elements (Also see [De Bruyne 1959](#)). Its commitment with reality is undeniable yet the reality which it attempts to represent is so complex and vast that the limits between what is and what is not, between what we believe and what we know, between what we are and what we wish to be, are often blurred. (Cronin 1941)

Here, the artist can represent facts as they believe them to be, or as they wish them to be. It is this latter motivation that Pinero suggests motivated medieval artwork representing the manticore. I will claim that there is a difference between modern and medieval artistic function. This in itself is uninteresting. However, what may be more interesting to the reader, is the further claim that this difference can be applied in response to the contemporary account of epistemic injustice.

On Greek Tragedy

Three Kinds of Tragic Conflict

1. Good people being ruined because of things that just happen to them, things they do not control.
2. Good people doing bad things, things opposite of their ethical character and commitments because of things they do not control.
3. Good people doing bad things without direct physical compulsion and opposite of their ethical character and commitments though done in light of circumstances of equally bad choices.

Agammenon is waiting on the shore with his entire fleet. He intends to carry out a directive from Zeus to avenge his brother whose wife ran away with Paris, prince of Troy. However, because of an earlier transgression against Artemis, Artemis is holding back the wind, stranding his fleet. Agammenon, as the result of an omen of an eagle devouring a hare, is told that in order to appease Artemis, he must sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia.

As such, Agammenon is faced with two impossible choices, fail to carry out Zeus's command, or kill his daughter. It is important to point out that the fleet is already facing starvation being stranded on the coast.

However, Agammenon's sin, is not that he chooses sacrificing his daughter, instead it is the way he sacrificed his daughter.

- Like in the biblical story of Abraham, a good man must kill an innocent child "out of obedience to a divine command" [35].
- Agammenon's sin however, is not the choice, but rather how the choice was made:
 - Agammenon now begins to cooperate inwardly with necessity, arranging his feelings to accord with his fortune.

- From the moment he makes his decision, itself the best he could have made, he strangely turns himself into a collaborator, a willing victim [35].

Progression of loss of agency:

- Necessity of the act
- to the rightness of the act
- to the rightness of the feelings of the act

De Bruyne, Edgar. 1959. *Estudios de Estética Medieval*. Vol. 17. Editorial Gredos.

Gilmore, Jonathan. 2020. *Apt Imaginings: Feelings for Fictions and Other Creatures of the Mind*. New York, US: Oxford University Press.

Piñero Moral, Ricardo. 2021. “Aesthetics of Evil in Middle Ages: Beasts as Symbol of the Devil.” *Religions* 12 (11): 957. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12110957>.

Prinz, Jesse J. 2004. *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of the Emotions*. Oxford University Press.