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ABSTRACT
My aim here is to provide a context within which we can develop an applied ethical criticism of narrative art – one which has a public relevance and is not limited to philosophical discussions characterized by value-interaction debate or conducted under the theoretical banner of aesthetic cognitivism. In the first part I reinforce the challenge of finding empirical evidence which either corroborates or denies the cognitivist's claim regarding the causal impact of art on the audience, and I argue, in the second part, that such evidence is needed in order to determine the possibility of moral corruption and/or moral enhancement via art. Taking cues from Ted Nannicelli, I end by offering pointers on domains of research we should incorporate into our ethical criticism of art, so as to come up with an informed understanding of an artwork and of spectators' engagements with it.

KEYWORDS
Aesthetic cognitivism, ethical criticism, causal challenge, perspectivism

Ted Nannicelli (2020) has recently offered an impressive account of the applied ethical criticism of art, arguing in favor of what he calls Production-oriented approach (POA). According to this view, within our public space and legal context, a dominant form of ethical criticism of art focuses on the means of production of a certain work and evaluates it ethically according to how it came about. One aspect in particular that is relevant concerns the character of its maker: when it figures into a causal explanation of the form or content of the particular work, then the work's artistic value can be marred by the ethically flawed character. Noting that representational and narrative art may not be as easily subject to this approach as performing art or animal/environmental art, Nannicelli builds a case for POA by first pointing to the limitations of what he takes to be the shortcomings of another, philosophically more dominant approach to ethical criticism of art, perspectivism (P). On this view, ethical criticism of art is directed at the

perspective presented and advocated for within an artwork: if such a perspective is for some reason morally blameworthy, the work itself is subject to ethical criticism[1] (and, some would add, aesthetic criticism, since ethical flaw can mar the work's overall value).[2]

Nannicelli is correct in claiming that P is dominant among philosophers but that it doesn't carry greater force within the public domain or among those who regulate legal aspects of our art-engagements. What this means is that, for all the philosophical finger-pointing to immoral perspectives found in different artworks, those works are neither prohibited from the public space, nor are those who created them held legally accountable or sanctioned. Nannicelli takes this to show the practical infertility of P outside of philosophical departments. One reason for that infertility, he claims, is the following: for P to stand, "it needs to demonstrate that a particular artwork has had specific, concrete effects on someone or some people in virtue of which the work is morally evaluable. Most philosophers of art writing on this topic acknowledge this difficulty and attempt to distance their views from these sorts of specific causal claims" (Nannicelli 2020, 23). However, claims Nannicelli, such distancing is unjustified: those who defend P need to face this challenge, for otherwise it is not clear how to maintain P.

Nannicelli's second argument concerns the implications of P: claiming that a work W prescribes a perspective P implies that we can know for certain that P is the proper meaning of W. In other words, claiming that certain works are morally blameworthy because they advance morally problematic perspective depends on the possibility of showing that the work indeed prescribes *that* particular perspective. This is problematic because there is hardly ever an agreement with respect to any artwork's exact meaning. Furthermore, identifying the artwork's exact meaning depends on knowing the artist's intentions, which raises complex issues concerning 'the single right interpretation' and those of knowing the author's intentions. Bottom line, since the plurality of our interpretative strategies employed in our engagement with art rules out these

[1] One of the most avid defenders of perspectivism, Berys Gaut, argues: „I construe intrinsic ethical value in terms of the ethical features of the attitudes that the artwork manifests. The notion of an attitude should be understood ... to cover not just characteristically affective states, such as showing disgust towards or approval of the characters, but also to cover more purely cognitive states, such as presenting characters in such as a way as to imply judgments about their being evil, good, inspiring and so on. Thus in assessing the ethical value of art we are assessing the ethical quality of the point of view, cognitive and affective, that it takes towards certain situations." (Gaut 2007, 9). See also Matthew Kieran: "... it is unsurprising that much art is aimed at prescribing and promoting, through the artistically manipulated conventions, particular ways of seeing the world" (Kieran 2005, 102).

[2] Whether or not ethical and aesthetic value interact, and whether one influences the other is the crucial issue behind the Value-Interaction Debate; see Eaton (2016) and McGregor (2014) for an overview.

possibilities, we have no way of determining what any given work in fact means, and consequently, no way of determining the perspective advanced by the work.

There is a considerable force in Nannicelli's claims, and if one wants to defend P as a valid form of ethical criticism of art, one should address them. While I have my doubts regarding P, I agree with Nannicelli that it is the most dominant form of evaluation of the ethical character of narrative works of art; a practice that, I believe, has an immense educational and cultural value. In order to defend the validity of such a practice, we have to diminish the power of Nannicelli's criticism. My plan thus is the following: I first situate P against a wider background in which it emerges, that of aesthetic cognitivism and the question of art's causal impact on the audience. I reinforce Nannicelli's concerns regarding the empirical evidence with the aim of showing that ethical criticism should not be confined solely to philosophical departments. I then turn to Nannicelli's second worry, which I try to mitigate by providing an account of the applied ethical criticism of narrative art.

PERSPECTIVISM, AESTHETIC COGNITIVISM AND MORAL KNOWLEDGE

The question of art's moral influence on the spectators originates with Plato and it has been reappearing in different forms throughout the human history and culture. In contemporary research, this discussion leads back to Berys Gaut's "five big questions" regarding the relation between art and ethics. The first of this is the causal question: the one asking if "exposure to works of art tends to affect us morally – morally to improve or morally to corrupt us" (Gaut 2007, 6). Since Nannicelli dismisses P in part due to its incapacity to face this question (i.e. to either corroborate it or to refute it empirically), here I want to examine what precisely is at stake for those, like me, who defend P (or some of its variations)[3] even if P may not be supported by conclusive empirical evidence. I will refer to this challenge as empirical challenge to causal claim regarding art's impact on the audience (EC for short). I share Nannicelli's skepticism regarding the plausibility of P if one fails to provide empirical evidence, and here I offer several reasons as to why we cannot ignore EC.

As Nannicelli argues, P emerges from the tradition of aesthetic cognitivism (AC), the view, roughly, that art is a source of knowledge, truth and beliefs, and that we can learn from art. There are various sorts of things we can thus learn, but here we will focus on art's capacity to instill moral knowledge. Thus, on this version of AC, art is a

[3] I say variations because I am not entirely committed to P; I offer a slight modification below.

source of moral knowledge, and it has the capacity to influence our moral sensibility. Martha Nussbaum is one famous advocate: "For stories cultivate our ability to see and care for particulars; ... to respond vigorously with senses and emotions before the new; to care deeply about chance happenings in the world, rather than to fortify ourselves against them..." (Nussbaum 2010, 255).[4]

Within the AC, P presupposes that an artwork defends a certain moral attitude, or moral perspective, and it is that attitude that the readers pick up and insert into their body of knowledge (or can be persuaded to consider as true, or as worthy of their endorsement, or use as a moto for their behavior). Ethical evaluation of artwork is thus a matter of ethical evaluation of that particular perspective. If the perspective is morally praiseworthy, we tend to praise the work. If the perspective is morally deficient, we tend to criticize it. This is why we think there is something morally problematic with *Lolita*, why we feel that our caring for Tony Soprano may not be the most ethical choice we can make, and why we praise works such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Traditionally, AC was postulated as a response to Plato's unsympathetic views on art. Plato presented numerous reasons for censorship of art, but he mostly feared moral contamination and degradation that might follow from our art engagements.[5] He explicitly saw art as closely related to our ethical agency, with the capacity to causally influence us. Such causal link is most dominant in the psychological account of our art engagements that he provides: we take pleasure in imitating fictional characters, and we thus identify with them. In light of such identification, it is easy for us to act in a morally blameworthy way we saw them acting. For Aristotle, who is considered the first cognitivist, the pleasure we take in mimesis is not morally corruptive, quite the contrary: art experiences are not only educational but they also trigger affective processes which purify our emotions.[6] In centuries that followed, philosophers and poets echoed such optimism, assuming, rather than proving, that the causal claim holds: art impacts us, and for the most part, that impact is positive. It was only occasionally, with philosophers like Joshua Landy (2008) or Alan Goldman (2013), that more careful views started to emerge: art has a certain impact on us, but that impact can go both ways. Art can make us either morally better, or morally worse.

A demand to make the causal claim more explicit was first raised by those who, for various reasons, opposed AC. Echoing many of the challenges originally raised by Plato, Peter Lamarque challenged the well-read to prove they are cognitively better (or better off), and his argument can extend to moral knowledge: is it so that the art-lovers

[4] Other ACs who implicitly assume the causal claim and art's positive impact include Carroll (1998, 2001, 2002), Kieran (2005) and Baccarini (2018).

[5] Plato's dialogues *Ion*, *Apologia* and the *Republic* are the most relevant in this context.

[6] Aristotle develops this view in his *Poetics*.

are in any way morally better or superior to those who do not read?[7] Even some who were occasionally in favor of art's cognitive value, such as Greg Currie, raised concerns regarding the empirical confirmation of causal claim within AC: "Everything depends in the end on whether we can find direct, causal evidence: we need to show that exposure to literature itself makes some sort of positive difference to the people we end up being".[8]

Finding such direct causal evidence is what sociologists and psychologists have been trying to do. Primarily, they were considering whether forms of art intuitively considered morally problematic, such as pornography, violent movies and video games, have morally corruptive impact on people. Unfortunately, for all of their efforts, their research remains inconclusive.[9] With philosophers, research into the causal impact of narrative art was mostly concerned with its capacity to make us morally better: some link this improvement to spectators' developed sensitivity towards misfortunes of others, some believe art makes us more empathic and still others argue that literary fiction cultivates virtues and helps us understand others and social interactions better.[10] Sadly however, such research has not been unequivocally corroborated and there are many who remain on the fence when it comes to causal claim. Thus, nothing much is settled if we turn to empirical evidence for answers regarding art's causal impact on people and the EC is still an open issue. On Nannicelli's view, such inconclusiveness is a serious problem for AC. "I am skeptical", he argues, "that there is a principled distinction to be made between the kind of specific causal claims philosophers tend to avoid and the broader causal claims some of them endorse, such that our engagement with certain artworks inculcates moral knowledge or clarifies moral understanding" (Nannicelli 2020, 23).

Unfortunately, troubles with EC are not exhausted by the inconclusive research. There are all sorts of problems one encounters when one decides to conduct experiments to either confirm or deny the causal claim. For one, it is not easy to decide which works should be used in the experiment, who are the subjects to be tested and how should the results be verified. How is one to prove that one has developed/deteriorated morally, and did so due to the artistic experience? Questions also relate to issues concerning the longevity of the alleged changes in moral character: if one abolishes one's racist attitudes in light of engaging with works such as *A Raisin in the Sun*, as Carroll suggests one might (2001), is it so that one will remain anti-racist or

[7] Lamarque (2007). For Plato's demand for empirical evidence of art's positive inpact, see the *Republic*, 10, 599, d, 600.

[8] Currie (2013, 2020, ch. 6).

[9] See McGregor (2018).

[10] In this part I mostly rely on a critical study by Young (2019); see also McGregor (2018).

could it be that one will return to one's original views, perhaps under the influence of some pro-slavery piece?

Similar skeptical arguments regarding the research into the causal claim are voiced by McGregor (2018). Having examined a considerable amount of research, he remains pessimistic with respect to conducting empirical research and opts for dismissing the empirical evidence from AC debate altogether.[11] Gaut is on the same path. Convinced that there is no way for empirical research to be included in the general philosophical theory, he continues the debate on the relation between art and morality by focusing on the conceptual link between ethical and aesthetic value of a work. The theory he develops, ethicism, "holds that an artwork is aesthetically flawed in so far as it possesses an ethical flaw that is aesthetically relevant, and conversely, that an artwork has an aesthetic merit in so far as it possesses an ethical merit that is aesthetically relevant" (Gaut 2007, 10). Gaut does not find it necessary to settle the causal claim in order to defend ethicism. Rather, he claims, "there is no entailment from the claim that ethicism is true to the claim that one ought to censor morally bad work. For all that ethicism shows is that an artwork with certain moral defects thereby has an aesthetic defect, yet having an aesthetic defect is no ground for censoring art." (Gaut 2007, 12).

Gaut may have a point in claiming that aesthetic flaw is not a reason for censorship. And certainly, we can discuss the relation between work's ethical character and its artistic value without implying that work's ethical character will impact the spectators. However, I doubt such philosophical discussions would matter for the wider context in which art matters for us, and in which ethical criticism is relevant. Let me elaborate on the trouble with such a narrow approach to ethical criticism.

REINFORCING THE EMPIRICAL CHALLENGE

To begin with, I share Nannicelli's concerns regarding the force of AC in the absence of empirical evidence. Can we really theoretically defend AC, if we cannot prove its main claim about art's cognitive or ethical impact on people? It seems that, if we decide to do so, we can at best provide convincing theoretical accounts of art's impact. It is to expect that such accounts will originate in one's personal belief that one has undergone some kind of morally or cognitively relevant experience when engaging with art, and that they will likely be vulnerable to some kind of EC. [12] A telling example

[11] McGregor (2018, 123).

[12] For example, Spivak (2012) argues that the effects of reading literature are not verifiable and goes on to develop an impressive account of how reading trains the imagination and enhances our epistemological performances, primarily in ethical domain.

comes from McGregor. His work is in particular worth considering, as it is developed with the hope of producing actual social benefits, namely, reducing inhumanity. McGregor argues forcefully that art has the capacity to make us morally better by enabling us to understand the sources of evil and misbehavior. The gist of his view is the following: ethical improvement takes place when "exemplary works" manage to enable one to undergo the relevant experience described in the work and to thus gain "lucid phenomenal knowledge" of how certain things feel. Such knowledge enables one to gain an understanding of the sources of morally problematic behavior, which in turn enables one to modify one's behavior so as not to commit moral harm.

A crucial problem with this account is that it is not necessarily so that a spectator indeed undergoes the relevant experience and gains lucid phenomenal knowledge. Our reading practices are not, I think, as personal (i.e. internal and subjectively deep) as this view suggests, and *there is no empirical evidence* that they are. Even assuming that Plato was right and that we indeed undergo the process of identification as we engage with art, it is highly unlikely that we manage to duplicate the experience at the level at which McGregor seems to think we do, i.e. at the level necessary for his theory to work.[13] In addition, morally complex works tend to present a moral conflict among two (morally) opposed characters; for McGregor's argument to work he would first need to show that the reader is committed to undergoing the experience of (to put a bit simplistically) a morally better character in order to claim that artworks make us better in virtue of their capacity to provide moral knowledge via lucid phenomenal knowledge. However, if the reader does so, she already has good moral judgments and therefore does not stand to gain much in terms of ethical knowledge or refinement in the engagement with the work. On the other hand, if she adopts the attitudes of the morally worse-off character – a suggestion McGregor does not consider – then Plato's concerns are validated and we might be careful with turning to art for moral education.[14]

A second reason for considering the relevance of EC concerns the practical and social aspects of our art engagements. Recall that any talk of the causal impact of art is committed to two claims: one, let's call it moral improvement through art (MItA), is that art makes us morally better. This is in line with those ACs who see art as contributing positively to our morality. However, there is also the possibility of moral

[13] See Carroll (2011) for a skeptical take on identification as a mode of engagement with fictional characters.

[14] For criticism of McGregor along these lines see Vidmar Jovanović (2020). It should be noted that McGregor is largely aware of the issues with obtaining lucid phenomenological knowledge, stating himself that it is rare, and shifting his attention to phenomenological knowledge (knowledge, rather than a first-hand experience, of what is like). However, knowing what is like, while a valuable epistemic gain, may not have a motivational component needed to inspire one to become morally better.

corruption through art (MCtA): certain works of art, perhaps in light of the perspective they advance, may harm our moral sensibility by making us adopt an immoral perspective. Almost exclusively, these options are negotiated within the Value interaction debate (VID) – a debate concerning the interaction of a work's aesthetic and ethical aspects. Philosophers engaged with this debate are primarily concerned with examining the intrinsic relation between artistic and ethical value: whether the presence of one interferes with the other. For example, it can be argued that the moral value of a work always determines its aesthetic value, in the sense that works which present or advance morally praiseworthy attitude are for that reason aesthetically more valuable. On the contrary, a work's advancement of immoral perspective counts against or diminishes its aesthetic value. This view has been met with the so called immoralism, whose proponents argue that moral flaws can yield aesthetic merits.[15] Interesting as the debate may be, it is almost exclusively concerned with our theoretical understanding of art/ethics relation and it is almost always confined within domain of aesthetics and philosophy of art. But notice that, if true, both, MItA and MCtA have serious consequences for our ethical character, perhaps even for who we are as human beings,[16] and therefore, the question of how does a work's ethical character affect us should not be secondary to the question of how its ethical character impacts its aesthetic qualities. If pornographic art has the capacity to mar our sexuality and our expectations of the forms that sexual conduct takes, that might be a powerful reason for one not to engage with it. On the other hand, if *Raisin in the Sun* can make us better human beings, that would be a good reason for its inclusion in education and culture. Thus, the causal claim is more than theoretically interesting speculation. Limited and inconclusive as it may be, research seems to suggest that there is *some kind* of an impact of art on the spectators. That in itself should motivate a further research into this impact. Ethical character of a work of art, in other words, has (or could have) consequences not only for the aesthetic/artistic character of a work, but for the ethical character of the spectators themselves, and we should care about the character of our fellow beings.

Furthermore, there is a social side to the matter. Even if our art engagements are mostly private, and our art responses idiosyncratic, we live in a social world where we need to treat and respect others as moral agents and adhere to certain moral norms. If art is capable of somehow diminishing our moral sensibility, that might be a strong reason either to exclude it from our community, or to consider certain paternalistic framework within which we should engage with it, much like Plato suggested. On the other hand, if artworks are capable of making us morally better, perhaps by turning us

[15] I rely here on Eaton's summary of the debate in her (2016).

[16] See Fingerhut et all. (2021) for a relation between ethical agency and identity.

into more empathic creatures, that would be a very strong reason to include it into our education. Thus, understanding the actual impact that art has on us is a serious matter with important consequences, both private and social. It is not and it should not be a 'philosophers only' game conducted as part of their conceptual analysis of art. Rather, it should include matters of public policies.

In addition, notice that the issue of causal impact does not relate only to art, understood honorifically, even if most philosophical discussion tends to be focused on it. Many instances of 'low art', such as popular sitcoms or TV series are populated with characters who do not represent positive moral qualities, but are likeable and can serve as role models. Barney Stinson and Charlie Harper are such examples. For all their easy going charm, it is questionable whether we want our youth growing up and developing their views on romantic love under their influence. Of course, there are many morally praiseworthy characters in this domain as well: most of our television detectives, such as Olivia Benson or Kate Beckett, are morally praiseworthy. Thus, low art should not be exempt from the challenge of its causal impact. For one thing, low art is the most dominant and the most searched-after art form currently available. Not taking it into account in our discussion (both theoretical and practical) about art's impact on people might seriously jeopardize our understanding of such impact. For another, by focusing more on the low art, we would get a better understanding of the relation between artistic aspect of an artwork and its apparent moral impact.[17] The impact of such conclusions would be relevant for the VID and for our understanding of those forms of AC which operate under the assumption that knowledge is available via art *in light of a work's artistic features*. If our research showed, for example, that low art is less efficient in having an impact on people, that might give us a reason to conclude that there is a special bond between artistic and ethical (and vice versa). Ethical criticism of art was so long concerned with high art, brining low art into the picture just might turn the debate upside down.

APPLIED ETHICAL CRITICISM OF NARRATIVE ART: HOW TO PROCEED?

Before moving on, let me address one worry that can be directed at my treatment of the ethical criticism of art. My account can be seen as supporting or presupposing some form of paternalism or censorship, and it can be taken as promoting an

[17] This is an important point, since most AC tend to develop their theories by arguing that it is via *artistic* means that art influences us. I can't pursue this issue here, but I will briefly return to it in the next part.

instrumentalization of art for the purpose of moral education, thus misusing or neglecting its artistic value. An autonomist might insist that art is an autonomous practice, to be kept separately from other domains, free to (mis)use ethical norms for artistic purposes. Or, one might agree that art and ethics interact but nevertheless insist that art should not be put at the service of moral improvement, simply because one is not supposed to be looking for one in art. These are valid concerns, but misdirected. My point here is not to deny the autonomy or artistic value(s) of art, or to claim that art should exclusively or primarily be praised or chastised for its alleged contribution to our morality. My point is that, to unite again with Nannicelli, ethical criticism of art is a much needed practice which matters to the public and to the community, and should not be confined solely within art and philosophy departments. What I am ultimately aiming at is to raise the awareness of the need for more informed discussions on art. In the next part I sketch how such discussion should take place, and I offer this sketch also as part of my response to Nannicelli's second worry, the one regarding the proper identification of P.

Let me first point out that I dislike P as the main instance of the ethical criticism of art. For sure, some works tend to advance certain perspectives and we can often explain some of what works are about by pointing to the perspectives they offer. On the whole however, reducing the work's ethical character to a single perspective is an impoverished way of engaging with it. Not only does such a treatment presuppose an oversimplified phenomenology of our art engagements and of what goes on as we seek to understand and interpret a given work, but it diminishes thematic complexity of a work, its educational value and the usefulness of ethical criticism. If ethical criticism is a worthwhile activity for what it reveals to us about the ethical conundrum of human beings as depicted, developed and contextualized in a work's ethical character – rather than a theoretical, conceptual discussion – then reducing the work to a single perspective will not do. To see why, consider the criticism that philosophy occasionally gets for its treatment of moral issues: in light of its focus only on norms, rules and regulations, moral philosophy fails to reveal what is truly at stake, why such rules, norms and regulations are passed on in the first place and what is involved in (dis)respecting them. In other words, our moral sensibility cannot be enhanced simply because we are told what the right thing to do is. In the same way, to explain work's causal impact on us by claiming that one becomes morally better because one manages to extract a certain perspective from a work will not get us far. Ethical criticism of art should not be concerned with extracting, or evaluating, the alleged perspective. Rather, it should aim at a more informed understanding of the ethical character of a work itself, where the perspective is but one element. If we engage with the ethical criticism of art so that we profit from what art has to offer in addition to aesthetic and artistic satisfaction and

rewards – enable us to gain new knowledge and develop moral sensibility by exercising our moral agency – we should undertake a more elaborate, and a more informed ethical criticism. In the next part I offer a sketch of what such an approach might include.

TOWARDS AN APPLIED ETHICAL CRITICISM: A SKETCH

My suggestion is that ethical criticism of narrative art should follow Nannicelli's lead in advancing a wider context of research that should come united in our engagements with works, particularly when it comes to educating people on how to engage with art. Recall that one worry with P was that perspective advanced by the work might be hard to identify, or hard to corroborate by critical agreement on the exact meaning of a work, or on author's intentions. The same worry relates to properly identifying "circumstances of creation" of a certain work, which are, on POA, crucial for work's ethical value. To solve the challenge, Nannicelli advices us to turn to the wider context of art creation, where this context includes areas such as anthropology, sociology and history, as well as philosophical disciplines other than aesthetics and philosophy of art.[18] His own approach to standup comedy, which incorporates linguistics and pragmatics, exemplifies the benefits of a wider context.

Several other philosophers offer telling examples on the importance of a wider theoretical context within which discussions on a work of art is carried out. Gaut urges us to turn to political philosophy and free speech debate to settle the issue of censorship, and I would suggest adding political theory and public policies here. McGregor's crucial motivation is to unite his work on narrative and aesthetic cognitivism with criminology, in order to make substantial differences to how criminologists use the narratives of crime in order to prevent further damaging and harmful behavior.[19] Patrick Colm Hogan has done insightful work in uniting literary criticism with cognitive aesthetics. Applied to the study of *Madam Bovary*, his interpretation of this great novel enables us to understand more profoundly the psychology of the main characters, and to use that understanding to better grasp the manner in which human beings are brought to act. Rather than debating the question

[18] I am simplifying both Nannicelli's position and mine; Nannicelli does not think the disagreement with respect to author's character is as extensive as with regard to his intention; I think the challenge may be just as pressing (see Vidmar Jovanović and Stupnik 2021). Furthermore, his proposal to include wider area or research is partly motivated by a problem that emerges with respect to art where the context of creation is not the same as the context of reception and criticism. On my view, relying on the wider context can always help us to understand art's ethical character, and its impact on us.

[19] See his (2021) for such an account.

of whether Emma was selfish or immature, and evading the question of the moral aspect of her cheating, Hogan gives us means to understand her emotions and desires, and actions that follow from these.[20] In terms of benefits available from art, such understanding is much more important than a moral perspective on adultery that the work may contain under P's framework. The width of the analysis offered by these philosophers reveals how much we can gain by incorporating other scientific areas into our criticism of art. Incorporating such findings into our ethical discussions of works would significantly contribute to our understanding of them; and consequently, to what these works reveal to us about morality itself and moral conundrums that humans face.

While there might be a point to the troubles related to identifying author's proper intentions, there is, I suggest, a sufficient space left to debate the ethical character of a work independently of its maker's intentions and independently of whether we can know them. Understanding art-historical context of work's creation is one aspect which would significantly increase our understanding of the ethical complexities expressed, and this includes knowledge from anthropology, sociology, history, etc., as well as insights from literary, film and art scholars. Such understanding is significant in revealing a work's mimetic force, which is particularly relevant for works which belong to different time, place and culture, such as colonial literature or art pertaining to earlier historical periods. For example, explaining the social and political circumstances of Emma Bovary would get us a long way towards eliminating the overly simplistic readings of the work according to which her misery was the sole outcome of her obsession with cheap romances (and her death a warning against adultery, as a proponent of P might argue). Whether Flaubert wanted to chastise adultery or to expose social circumstances confining female liberty and autonomy, close engagements with his masterpiece could certainly bring about profound understanding of how all these factors impact one.[21]

Another telling example of why incorporating insights from wider social and political context is relevant for the assessment of the ethical character of a work of art is the case

[20] Consider for example his explanation of Emma's tragic mistake in chosing her husband, so unfit for her character: „She saw Charles, but only briefly, and at his best. What she does not see is necessarily filled in by imagination - and, in her case, that imagination is guided by the sublime protoypes of romantic tragedy. (...) Emma's emotional needs and limited knowledge brought her into error here." (Hogan 2011, 296).

[21] Insightful examples of such analyses are provided by Hogan (2011) whose account of emotions enables a more encompassing understanding of Emma and Charles's motivation, as explicated above; and by Porter and Gray (2002) whose insight into historical context of *Madam Bovary* counters the interpretation according to which Emma's adultery is fueled by her passionate readings of cheap romances. Armed with such knowledge, those who publically rebuked Flaubert for immoralism would certainly have reconsidered their misreading of his great work.

of works such as *Gone with the wind*. Considered for decades to be one of the most important novels (and movies) depicting the ante-bellum and post-bellum area, it has recently been called out for its embracement of slavery. And while that fact in itself cannot be denied, a more informed approach to the work would have the audience understand the manner in which literary authors of that period used to advocate certain social and ethical policies regarding slavery, dominant within their culture at the time when the work was created.[22] Of course, we know now that the moral attitude, the perspective, defended in the work was wrong, but that was not the case for the intended audience, for whom Margaret Mitchell was seen as advocating a just social order and as calling for maintenance of the existing cultural values. My point here is not to deny the moral fault of this work, but to point to the fact that our culture has had its shameful moments and sometimes, artists (as well as philosophers, scientists, and other intellectuals as well as men of religion) have promoted them and helped maintain them. But certainly, Mitchell is much less to blame for her pro-slavery attitude than say, Mitchell* who were to defend such views in contemporary society which unequivocally condemns slavery – we would be justified in dismissing Mitchell*'s work in ways in which we are not when it comes to Mitchell's original one. Once the spectators properly understand the circumstances of creation of the work, *Gone with the Wind* can serve an important educational function, in bringing to our view an insight into a given historical period, its values and manners of being, thus helping contemporary audience understand a particular state of affair. Through an informed discussion, the audience should be made aware of the faulty ethical perspective, but nevertheless be encouraged to appreciate numerous other dimensions of the work which ground its value. Most importantly, the audience could understand how faulty moral views get maintained and protected by the societies, and it could use this knowledge to stay attentive of contemporary views which may be couched in accepted social morality but are in fact unjust or discriminatory. Such insights are lost if the work is reduced to a moral perspective and on those grounds expelled from our culture.

Finally, let us not forget the value of literary or film aesthetics. With its emphasis on notions of value, originality and artistic influence, this domain can offer extensive analysis of work's artistic value – something which can be lost from sight if we only focus on P or on the context of artistic creation. Insight from this domain can help us develop an appreciation of an artwork which emphasizes its artistic status and which enable one to understand how and why such status is warranted by the work itself. Educating people on how to properly appreciate a work of art can serve as a countermeasure to its instrumentalization, as the audience can thus learn to discriminate work's overall value from the educational uses to which it can be put.

[22] See Crane (2002) for insightful analysis of the literature's participation in this debate.

So far I argued that various disciplines inside and outside of philosophy and art theory should come together in ethical criticism of works of art, but it is also worth pointing out that more research is needed in order to understand better the phenomenology of our artistic experiences. Such an understanding is available in empirical psychology and cognitive sciences. While there are philosophers who object to philosophy's turning to these disciplines or adopting their methodologies, the research within these areas seems promising when it comes to settling out the EC.[23] As our brief overview showed, MItA and MCtA can both take place. We should try to understand what determines either to do so, and psychology and cognitive sciences might substantially help us here, more so than armchair philosophical contemplation. For example, is it a matter of developing attachment to different characters that determines the ethical bent of a viewer? Is it the question of authorship? For some reason, we might be more willing to trust some, and distrust other authors, particularly when an author created a considerable body of work of particular ethical valence.[24] Or, is it that the spectator's character and preexisting ethical sensibility makes the difference, in which case perhaps we do not need to worry about the causal claim at all? It is my impression that the research on causal claim ignores several important aspects of art engagements, such as the affective bond we develop with different characters, moral views one holds independently of one's art experiences, or, in particular, the issue of spectators' moral motivation. Perhaps art can impact us positively, but we just do not care to be so impacted. If that is the case, AC is still a valid position: art offers knowledge, we just do not care to receive it. This is a relevant point, since, some who defend and some who criticize AC do so on the grounds of art's impact or lack of thereof. However, whether or not such impact takes place might be a matter of human psychology, more so than of an artwork itself.[25] For instance, McGregor may be right in claiming that certain works can enable us to gain phenomenal knowledge, perhaps even its lucid variant, about what it is like to be a victim of homophobia, but we may feel that our community would discard us were we to adopt non-homophobic view and we for that reason resist accepting such a perspective.

Much can be gained if we look at the phenomenology of our art experiences, particularly those of its aspects related to what we imagine, believe and feel in the process of reading (watching) and afterwards, as we contemplate on the work. Jonathan Gilmore's recent work is an excellent case in point (2020). Relying on numerous cognitive and psychological research, Gilmore explores whether our cognitive and

[23] See Smith (2017) for an overview.

[24] Tarantino is one such example, given the excessive violence depicted in his movies.

[25] I develop this view in my (forthcoming).

emotional economy operates differently in the context of art, and he questions the normativity of such operations. If our art engagements are indeed governed by epistemic/moral norms which differ from those governing our beliefs and emotions in nonfictional domains, then perhaps MCtA should not worry us and we can happily laugh at Charlie Harper, rather than rebuke him for his "continual drunken whoring" (as his fictional brother tends to). As a particular bonus, exploring art's impact on us and the more general manners of engaging with art can advance our understanding not only of art practices but of our own cognitive and emotional economy.

To conclude, I provided an account of the ethical criticism of narrative art which is applied in the sense that it looks at the concrete instances of ethically challenging works in the contexts in which ethical character of those works has wider social significance. It is applied in the sense that it not only offers theoretical suggestions on how works of art can be cognitively valuable and install knowledge and morally relevant perspectives, but it looks to understand the underlying cognitive mechanisms of the spectators which are responsive to incentives from art. As I argued, this is why taking the causal challenge seriously is more important than some of the leading proponents of AC acknowledge. Our debates on art and its ethical character should consider people's actual reactions to works in order to ground any plausible theories on whether or not there is a cognitive or ethical impact that art has on spectators. I also argued that ethical criticism should not be reduced to a perspective that is to be derived from a work. Rather, it should be a lively debate spanning a wide range of humanistic and scientific areas, thus addressing various layers of a work that come together in generating a piece of art of standing significance for humans.[26]

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