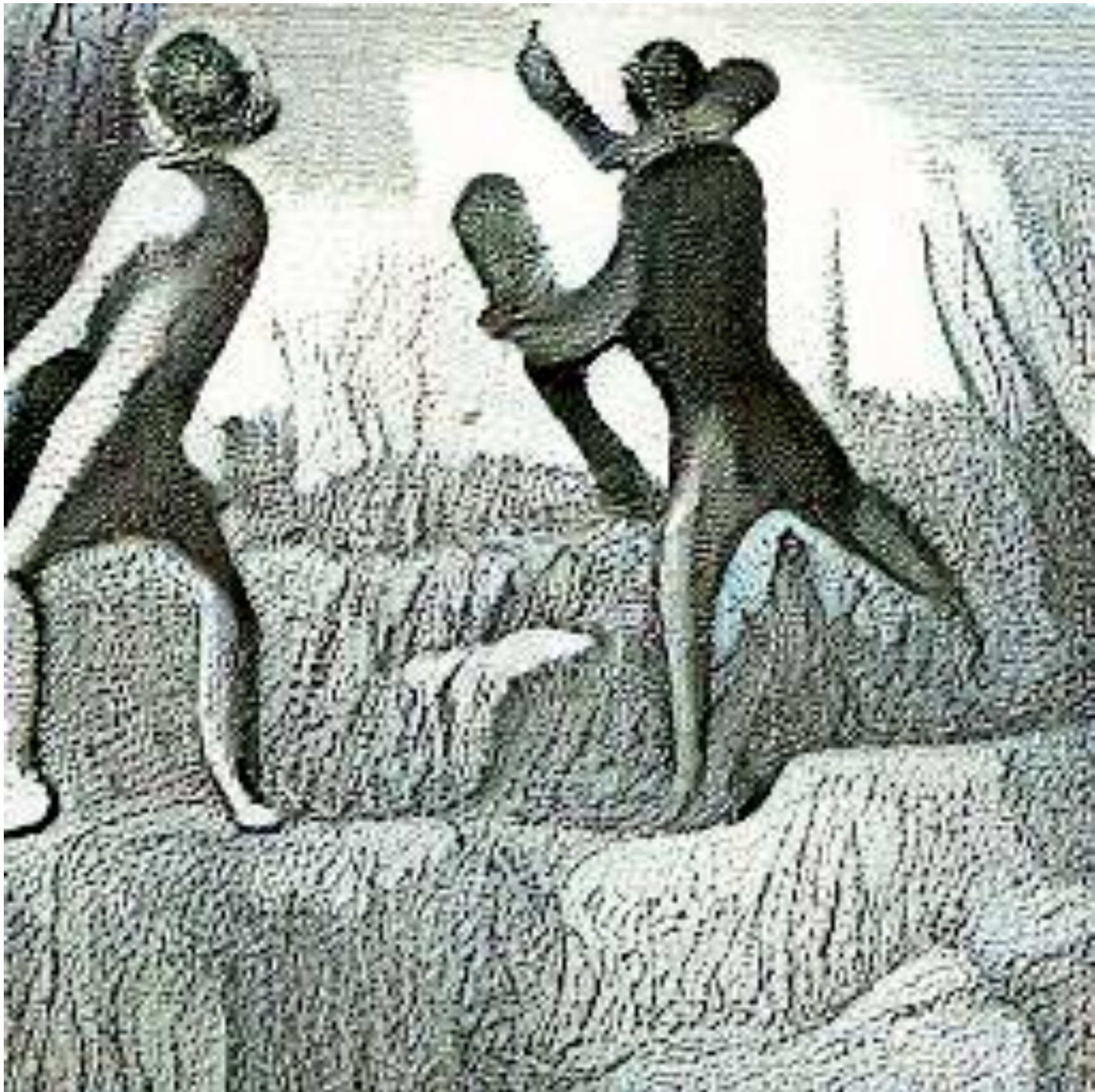


Pulling for Moralism: Rough Heroes and the Moral Aufheben Argument



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I. Introduction

In “Robust Immoralism,” Ann Eaton (2012) introduces the rough hero, a character we morally disapprove of, but one for whom we have sympathy, affection, or admiration. Positing that moral flaws in works of art can be aesthetic merits, Eaton argues that some rough hero works (RHWs), to the extent they endorse an immoral character, are morally defective and aesthetically good therefore. Noel Carroll and other “moralists,” who generally hold a tighter relationship between the morally and aesthetically good, resist Eaton’s claims. It is true that Carroll’s (1996) “moderate moralism,”⁷³ which I will focus on, is not in direct conflict with Eaton’s immoralism, but the two views are currently locked in a tug-of-war, wrangling over specific cases.⁷⁴

In this paper, I respond to Eaton’s arguments for immoralism and support Carroll’s moderate moralism. I analyze several works, mostly films, to show that many seemingly immoral works are in fact moral, though in a way many moralists, including Carroll, have overlooked. While I agree with Eaton that RHWs challenge our moral intuitions by prescribing admiration for immoral characters and evoking “delicious” ambivalence (an aesthetic merit), I don’t find this challenge, or the works, *eo ipso* immoral. On the contrary, I argue, it often serves morality by helping to *improve* our moral intuitions. The paper has roughly two parts: first, I outline three rebuttals to Eaton’s immoralism and show why a fourth—my moral *aufheben* argument—is necessary. Then I show how my view allows (moderate) moralism to absorb Eaton’s most challenging RHWs.

⁷³ Moderate moralism holds that “some works of art may be evaluated morally...and that sometimes the moral defects and/or merits of a work may figure in the aesthetic evaluation of the work.” (p. 236).

⁷⁴ While Carroll generally thinks moral merits will be aesthetic merits, and moral defects aesthetic defects, he doesn’t rule out the possibility of switch-hitting. However, he says he has never seen a compelling example of immoralism (2013, p. 371).

II. Three Rebuttals to Immoralism

Eaton's (2012) RHWs are supposed to be examples in which moral defects in a work are aesthetic merits. However, like Carroll, I am skeptical that the elements Eaton identifies—in brief, prescriptions of admiration for immoral characters—are in fact moral defects. Here are three rebuttals to Eaton's claim. One is inspired by Aristotle (2016) whose *Poetics* suggests that tragedy may serve morality by evoking and purging [catharthis] pity and fear. Similarly, one can argue that an apparent moral defect in a work serves morality through its purgative or purifying effect—and so is not truly defective. Living vicariously through the likes of Travis Bickle and William Munny, perhaps we, in a controlled environment, exercise—and so exorcise—our immoral impulses, helping to redeem the work morally. A second rebuttal is inspired by Jacobson (1997) and Kieran (2003), who—perhaps unwittingly⁷⁵—offer another way in which a moral defect can serve morality. By showing how others are in error (Jacobson) or allowing us to “[experience] what’s bad to understand the good” (Kieran, p. 63), a moral defect may, one could argue, lose its defectiveness.

These arguments are unsatisfactory, however, because the way these moral defects serve morality might be entirely extrinsic to the work. That is, the moral lessons the work teaches might in fact be taught by others (audiences) who use the work as a kind of prop. Similarly, Dadlez's (2017) objection to immoralism—that, since the “moral confusion” RHWs produce is unlikely to change our moral beliefs, there's no moral defect—fails to chip away at *intrinsic* immorality. The advantage of the third rebuttal, Carroll's (2013) narrative argument, as I'll call it, is that it dissolves works' alleged immoral elements into mere depictions—rather than endorsements—of immorality, making the moral lessons intrinsic to the works. According to Carroll, we should consider a (narrative) work's apparent immoral elements in the context of the work *in toto*. If the

⁷⁵ These arguments are meant to defend *immoralism*, but as Eaton (2012) points out, they collapse into moralism.

narrative condemns the immorality it depicts, the element (the depiction, not the depicted) is not immoral, for it teaches us moral lessons. This accords with Hume's original quote,⁷⁶ where we find the qualification "without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation," suggesting that all is well if the immorality is condemned.

III. Two Kinds of Rough Heroes

Though it has its limits, the narrative argument can win back several rough heroes for moralism. I will call these figures the Martyrs, those rough heroes who receive their just deserts and so figure in a work's overall moral message. I regard characters like Darth Vader, Norman Osborn (Green Goblin), and *Breaking Bad's* Gus Fring in the same way that a Yankee fan hates, but does not despise, the Red Sox. Just as a Yankee fan needs the Red Sox in order to relish his own team beating them, perhaps my affinity for these characters is but a sign of my (moral) desire that good triumph over evil. Here, even my admiration for them isn't necessarily immoral: admiration and hatred may be compatible, for I can root for the Yankees, hate the Red Sox, and admire both teams' success without committing treason. Similarly, I can admire these hateful villains and give devils their due without endorsing them. My admiration merely acknowledges them as worthy opponents.

Come to think of it, there are several rough heroes on Eaton's list I don't admire. I'll call them the Spiders—those who, if we don't completely despise them, evoke a spidery disgust, despite their positive portrayal. Figures like Humbert Humbert, Hannibal Lecter, Alex from *A Clockwork Orange*, and *American Psycho's* Patrick Bateman are fascinating, but not, I think, admirable. Eaton thinks some are, but for

⁷⁶ The quote cited by Eaton (2012) and others in this debate begins, "where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation; this must be allowed to disfigure the poem and be a real deformity..." (Hume, 1987).

myself, I'd rather *watch* them than associate with them or *be* them, if only for a day,⁷⁷ and I certainly don't think I have anything to learn from them. I regard these ignoble figures—more creature than character—as I regard *Triumph of the Will's* Hitler, who, while despicable, is hardly uninteresting. But one's *interest* in psychopaths or mass-murderers isn't immoral—one's *admiration* is, and none is available for Spiders.

Moreover, the affinity I have for them is not primarily due to their likable qualities, as Eaton contends. I detect in myself a similar fondness for the Wicked Witch of the West, Gollum,⁷⁸ and Freddy Kreuger. These characters aren't rough heroes—they lack the humanizing portrayal Eaton describes—and yet, I unabashedly relish the scenes in which they appear. My affinity for them is borne of my own curiosity about evil, not of a moral defect in the work.

IV. The Moral Aufheben Argument

The narrative argument can only get us so far: I think Eaton (2013) successfully shows that it meets its end at the hands of Tony Soprano. For Eaton, *The Sopranos* is morally defective (therefore aesthetically better) to the extent it endorses its immoral protagonist (2012, p. 282). Carroll, on the other hand, views the show's treatment of Tony as didactic, asserting that it may warn us “not to allow our moral radar to be jammed by...irrelevant moral static,” like Tony's wittiness (2013, p. 372). In response, Eaton (2013) insists that audiences cannot keep their nonmoral approval from contaminating their moral disapproval, and I agree. It is exceedingly difficult to parse out the good and bad in Tony, and I find myself in limbo with him, which is quite “delicious.” Nor, as Eaton points out, does anything in the show directly rebuke my admiration for the man; Carroll's narrative Authority is but absent. The question arises: have we reached the limits of moralism, or might another argument account for Tony Soprano?

⁷⁷ I'd happily have a beer with Tony Soprano and wouldn't mind being him for a day, if that's a useful barometer.

⁷⁸ Not only is he hideous, he's not even smart (he's bad at riddles). I'm referring to his depiction in the first two books/movies, before he redeems himself morally.

To account for Tony, I'd like to build on a part of Stecker's (2008) attack on immoralism. According to Stecker, whether a work contains a moral flaw does not supervene upon whether our prior moral intuitions match those the work exhibits. Just as a match might add nothing of moral value to the work because the intuitions are so banal, a mismatch might be a moral merit if it offers us an alternative "reasonable moral assessment of [a situation]" (p. 158). What seems to be a moral flaw might be a forgivable "error in judgement," and so we may praise an allegedly immoral work (and call it moral) "for exploring an alternative that has some claim to be true in its own right" (p. 159).

To apply Stecker's insights to RHWs, I must make two modifications. First, RHWs *endorse* (not only "explore) characters with immoral perspectives, as Eaton (2012) shows us, by prescribing admiration for them. Second, we should apply "reasonable moral assessments" cautiously: many rough heroes behave unreasonably, and their hamartia is often worse than a mere "error in judgement." But for other rough heroes, these terms are not far off the mark. For instance, Tony's judgement that crime is the best way to support his family is erroneous, but not entirely unreasonable—not, at least, in the way that sponsoring gratuitous torture (as Spiders often do) is. Let's compromise that rough heroes like Tony have immoral but "*sort of* reasonable" intuitions. Even with these qualifications, RHWs can still (intrinsically) serve morality, so I argue.

With Stecker, I contend that we, a work's target audience, may have flawed or incomplete moral intuitions that seemingly immoral works can rectify. Going beyond Stecker, I think a work that *endorses* characters' "*sort of* reasonable" intuitions can be moral: if these intuitions have "some claim to be true in [their] own right," the work, by espousing their owners, may have something to teach us about morality. Some RHWs do this through what I call moral *aufheben*.⁷⁹ By challenging their target audiences' flawed

⁷⁹ The name is after Eaton's invocation of the word to describe how rough heroes overcome our imaginative resistance (2012, p. 287).

moral intuitions and offering them new moral truths (or *sort-of* truths), a work may, I submit, serve morality. And serve it intrinsically—the moral lessons are its own. Importantly, I think they do not merely destroy their audiences’ prior intuitions (which also have some claim to truth) but, in Hegelian fashion, at once cancel, preserve, and lift them up,⁸⁰ thereby improving them. In this way, a work may intrinsically help us, following Eaton (2012, p. 288), solve a problem worth solving. A *moral* one, I hasten to add.

V. Why *Aufheben*?

Except Stecker’s and mine, the above arguments for moralism take a limited view of what it means to serve morality. For them, it roughly means to serve our considered views, to use Eaton’s phrase. Carroll (1998), for instance, believes that morally good works can improve our moral intuitions, but not so much by challenging them: his “clarificationist” view holds that moral works “deepen our moral understanding” not by giving us new moral knowledge, but by teaching how to apply our present knowledge (p. 142). Let’s canvass this trouble with this view. Carroll’s leading example of a *clarifying* work is *A Raisin in the Sun*, which, he argues, allows white audiences to *understand* what they already *know*, that African Americans are people and deserve equal treatment. Per Carroll, the work encourages audiences to apply this knowledge when, in the play, a black family encounters discrimination.

But if this were simply a case of being “prompted to make connections between the beliefs [white audiences] already possess” (p. 143)—rather than gaining new moral knowledge—why should the play go to lengths to humanize African Americans as Carroll says?⁸¹ If white audiences already knew they were persons, this element would be extraneous, even distracting. We can read the play now as if we knew that blacks were

⁸⁰ See Kaufmann (1974, p. 236) for these three meanings of *aufheben*.

⁸¹ Carroll says the play shows “that the dreams and the family bonds of the major characters are no different from those of other persons” (p. 143).

persons, but the work doesn't assume we know this; if we do not *understand* what we know, it asks Carroll, do we really know it? Contra Carroll, I suggest it is *Raisin's* challenging the audience's prior (racist) beliefs—not affirming and teaching how to apply them—that gives it its moral bite. Here is what I suspect occurs when a *Raisin's* target audience receives the work: the audience comes in with flawed moral priors, those priors are challenged, and the audience leaves with better moral intuitions—not perfect ones, nor necessarily the self-same ones espoused by the work, but better ones.⁸²

Challenging our moral intuitions is not a rare way to teach moral lessons. Consider how such clearly moral films as *Crash* and *In Bruges* challenge our prejudice that immorality is for other people—specifically, for cold-blooded monsters. Encouraging us to admire the wrongdoer, just as Dostoevsky has us admire a wayward but all-too-human Raskolnikov, these films teach that everyone is an amalgam of good and bad. *Bruges'* Ken is not only a hitman: he is an honest and loyal friend; nor is Ray just a (accidental) child-killer—as the film stresses, he can redeem himself; and even the villainous Harry has admirable integrity, as he demonstrates by his “you've got to stick to your principles” suicide. *Bruges'* moral lesson, if agreeable in abstract, is unsettling in the moment. Like *Crash*, which portrays, inter alia, a racist police officer who rescues a woman he once assaulted, *Bruges* challenges our moral priors, but it is for our benefit.

These challenges don't make us doubt everything, but neither do they simply affirm what we already know and show us how to apply it. When *Do the Right Thing's* Mookie hurls a trash can at Sal's pizzeria, igniting pandemonium, the film directly challenges our bias against violent civil disobedience. As the film's competing epitaphs—quotes from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X—emphasize, the film offers new moral knowledge: that violence may be an appropriate response to racism. We need not have already believed this to find Mookie's action just—the film can generate this belief

⁸² I further suspect that this benefit is renewable and additive, such that each new interaction with the work can continue to benefit the same audience.

on its own, just as *Raisin* and *Crash* can alone convince racists of their error. That many will initially recoil, as I did, from Mookie's action—or from the invocation of Malcolm X, often regarded as an extremist—does not indicate a moral defect. Rather, if *Do the Right Thing* is (even partially) right about violence, this jolt may be just what its target audience needs to improve its views via *aufheben*.

VI. Admirability, Endorsement, and Moral Teachers

Let's shift gears to consider the morality of admiration and endorsement, a topic that will help us understand how RHWs like *Sopranos* are moral. Here, I'll use admiration and endorsement interchangeably as I think that (a) admiration for an object is an effective endorsement of it and (b) the way works endorse is by prescribing admiration.⁸³ Our admiration for characters in the above "clearly moral" films is justified, I think, not only because they are moral, but because they teach us moral lessons. Of course, these often go together (Mookie), but some characters, like *Bruges*' Harry and Ray and *Crash*'s Anthony, Jean, and Farhad,⁸⁴ teach us moral lessons without themselves being moral. Nor are their lessons merely the narrative's condemnation of them: Harry's suicide, for instance, is a lesson in integrity that *he* teaches—it's not simply a Carrollian narrative condemnation of evil. Harry is thus a member of a third class of rough heroes: the Teachers.

This brings me to a larger point, that admiration for an immoral character is not necessarily immoral. When we admire someone, I suggest we are holding him up as a kind of good teacher, broadly construed. That is, we are acknowledging that he may help us solve a problem worth solving. Admiring someone with virtually nothing worthwhile

⁸³ I focus on admiration as I think Eaton's other children, sympathy and affection, are not as strongly tied to endorsement (I feel some sympathy for Kreuger and some affection for Humbert, but approximately zero *admiration* for either).

⁸⁴ Anthony is an unprincipled carjacker, whose only moral merit is that he frees twenty Asian slaves he inherited, (I think another Anthony, the mob boss, would have done the same). Similarly, Jean doesn't make a dent in her bigotry by hugging her Hispanic housekeeper, and Farhad, who ragingly tries to kill an innocent locksmith, is more stunned than self-reflective when his gun fails.

to teach us, like Riefenstahl's Hitler, is immoral. But it is simply not true that all immoral characters and rough heroes have nothing worthwhile to teach us. Still, it's not compelling that the fact that a rough hero has *something* worthwhile to teach us warrants admiration for him (should we admire Hannibal Lecter, say, if he can teach us how to juggle?). Thus, the following argument is insufficient:

1. Admiration is morally warranted for good teachers.
2. Good teachers help us solve a worthwhile problem.
3. Some rough heroes help us solve a worthwhile problem.
4. These rough heroes are good teachers.
- C. Admiration for them is morally warranted (Teacher-RHWs are moral).

Admiration for the specific thing they teach is warranted, but if Eaton is right that we cannot parse apart rough heroes' good and bad characteristics, then admiration for them—for their *whole character*—seems as immoral as they are. Thus, Eaton may counter that I need to factor in the following and conclude that admiration is not warranted:

5. Admiration is anti-warranted for immorality.
6. Rough heroes' immorality outweighs their good pedagogy.

As I grant (5), I intend to overturn (6) to justify admiration for Teachers (and so call Teacher-RHWs moral). Some rough heroes' good pedagogy outweighs their immorality, I argue, because their immorality uniquely—and intrinsically—positions them to help us solve certain worthwhile problems via *aufheben*.⁸⁵ Whereas juggling can be taught just as well by a saint as a sinner, some worthwhile lessons, I maintain, cannot—and they are worth the extra immorality required to learn them.⁸⁶ Thus, I propose that C holds because some rough heroes (Teachers) meet the following:

⁸⁵ I recognize that these might be (or are) extrinsic facts about the moral lessons, meaning that RHWs are not themselves *intrinsically moral*. But I didn't claim that: all I said was their *lessons are intrinsic to them* and so, by teaching them, *they intrinsically serve morality*. To justify this whole enterprise as moral, I'm happy to rely on some extrinsic facts, which I defend below.

⁸⁶ To be so worth it, they de facto will always be *moral* lessons (Super-juggling, which only Hannibal can teach, say, is plausibly not worth our admiration for him, given what else he represents).

6A. One's good pedagogy outweighs their immorality iff his immorality uniquely and intrinsically allows him to teach valuable moral lessons via *aufheben*.

Interestingly, this pits me against the bulk of Stecker's (2008) argument in the very article I build upon: Stecker and I agree that seemingly immoral works may teach us moral lessons, but he thinks that doing so is not intrinsically tied to *endorsing* immorality. In dissent, I offer Tony Soprano:

VII. Learning Morality from a Gangster

Consider what lessons Tony can teach us that less immoral characters cannot (or teach far less effectively). First, from Tony we can learn that most people, even gangsters, are morally complex. (*Unforgiven* and *Pulp Fiction*, two RHWs Eaton cites, teach similar lessons about cowboys and hitmen, respectively). Eaton (2012) acknowledges that rough heroes are not bereft of moral virtues, but she really ought to give Tony more credit. When we admire him, we endorse someone who does not only have moral flaws and non-moral merits, as Eaton and Carroll all but suggest, but someone with pluses and minuses in *both* categories—moral and non-moral. Tony is immoral, no doubt, but he's also “sort of reasonable:” he's principled, devoted to family, often honest, and even, at times, merciful.⁸⁷ He thus cautions me against neatly dividing people up into categories of good and evil, inviting me to appreciate their nuances. *Crash* and *Bruges* teach this too, but to the degree they don't endorse immoral characters as much as *Sopranos* does—and so challenge our moral priors as strongly—I think they are less effective.

Similarly, the Eatonesque ambivalence Tony generates in me is perhaps itself a moral lesson: at once admiring and recoiling from Tony, we may learn that morality is not as simple as we often assume, that good and evil are more like day and night—lacking a

⁸⁷ Eaton and Carroll seem to miss Tony's many moral virtues: in addition to trying to be a good father, he reconciles his misdeeds with his attempt to support his family; he is loyal to his friends; he values honor and respect; he has a moral compass and is no psychopath; he is often honest with himself and others (he even goes to therapy!); he feels guilt and remorse—for instance, when his cousin returns from prison for a crime Tony was supposed to commit; and he is, of all things, merciful: he doesn't celebrate Vito's homosexuality, for example, but he also doesn't think it warrants death (a minority view).

clear dividing line—than left and right. Even if Tony is immoral on balance, his flaws, as Eaton points out, are so entangled with his virtues that his portrayal complicates our moral judgments and “mudd[ies] the waters” (2013, p. 376-7). But I don’t think this muddiness signals a moral defect—rather, it may be its own moral lesson, another way of showing us, with *Talk to Her’s* haunting epitaph, that “Nothing is simple.”⁸⁸ If this is indeed a worthwhile lesson, I can think of no better way to teach it than by getting an audience to admire an immoral, but “sort of reasonable” character.

Most notably, Tony teaches the value of devotion to family. By portraying devotion as if it were far more important than others’ suffering (I am thinking of Eaton’s (2013, p. 377) “curb stomp” example, an immoral but “sort of reasonable” way to protect his daughter), *Sopranos*, via Tony, sears its moral value into my mind. Consider that the show’s trademark scene is not Tony ranting about enemies or engaging in crime, but him toasting to his family:

To my family. Someday soon, you're going to have families of your own, and if you're lucky, you'll remember the little moments, like this...that were good (S1, E13).

That a show about gangsters can revolve around this scene—and make me feel its moral pull as if I were a child at Tony’s table—is a testament to both aesthetic and moral merit. Tony, I submit, does not only help solve Eaton’s aesthetic problem of delicious ambivalence; he also helps me solve moral problems: Tony shows me what counts in life, and his violent, dramatic, and only “sort of reasonable” way of doing so is, I think, necessary. Who can better teach the value of devotion to family than men like Tony, Walter White, and *Mystic River’s* Jimmy Markum, who would sooner turn the world upside-down than rest at a harm done to their family?

⁸⁸ Tony’s moral entanglement may not evince Carrollian (2013) “moral clarity,” but why should clarity be our standard? If morality *itself* is not clear, clarity can only teach us so much.

I emphasize *help* me solve problems; my ambivalence towards them keeps me from uncritically accepting Teachers' lessons and letting them solve them for me (only bad teachers to that). Here is how I envision the *aufheben*: I initially think I believe in devotion to family, but I really don't. In Tony, I encounter beliefs that challenge mine, but perhaps believe in devotion too much. Both my and Tony's beliefs have "some claim" on truth, and our values are part moral and part immoral. When they collide, I think their truth is preserved and some of their falsity is cancelled, leaving me with a better set of beliefs than I had before. Thus, from Tony I do not learn that it is right to maim those who bad-mouth my family—I just learn that, as family is truly what counts in this life, I should up my devotion.

This is new moral knowledge: despite what I may have advertised to myself and others, I simply did not (functionally)⁸⁹ know that family was what counts. In learning this, however, I don't simply abrogate my moral priors and, as Eaton says, turn "against the forces of good" (2012, p. 285). In admiring Tony, rather, I participate in a kind of dialogue with an immoral, but not despicable, opponent, and it is for the benefit of (my) moral improvement. There is collision, but no collusion.

VIII. The Immorality is the Point

Perhaps Eaton will object that I overlook that RHWs themselves regard their heroes as immoral and that we don't understand the work unless we appreciate their immorality (2012, p.283). How, then, can they teach us moral lessons? Because, I submit, teachers' immorality is inseparable from their moral lessons. Thus, to gain these lessons, we must appreciate their immorality. To understand just how important devotion to family is, we must appreciate that characters like Tony are willing to do deeply immoral things for their sake (if they drew the line at immorality, they might fail to convince us they *really*

⁸⁹ I might think I know, but my actions tell a different story.

cared). Thus, even admiring a teacher *for* his immorality, as Eaton believes we sometimes do, is justifiable if his immorality is intrinsic to his good pedagogy.

Films like *Fight Club* and *Talk to Her* expertly blend teachers' immorality with their pedagogy. Tyler Durden, for instance, teaches us to live authentically through his violent anarchism, not despite it. Sans Durden's hellraising, there is no moral lesson—or it is far weaker. When he pulls a gun on a shop owner, threatening to kill him unless he snaps out of his Sartrean bad faith, he teaches existentialism more effectively than such peaceful figures as Kazantzakis' Zorba and Hesse's Siddhartha. Like God asking Abraham to prove his faith not with words but with his son's blood, Durden raises the stakes of his lesson to the point of immorality, thereby driving it home.

Similarly, *Talk to Her's* Benigno teaches us (improbably) how to care for others through—not despite—his rape of Alicia. The film's sympathetic treatment⁹⁰ of his act does not, contra Eaton (2008, p. 18), apologize for rape. Rather, it serves a broader moral purpose—prescribing admiration for a character who, while deeply flawed, teaches Marco and us, as Shpall (2013) argues, how to care for and “talk to” others and treat them as ends-in-themselves. Benigno's rape of Alicia is not, paradoxically, a selfish act, nor one that treats the latter as mere means: in Benigno's mind, it's a mutual, even consensual one, a natural part of their relationship. If Tony's “curb stomp” takes devotion to family too far, Benigno's rape takes his selflessness to its perverse extreme. Both, thus, teach us moral lessons via their immoral, but “sort of reasonable,” intuitions.

Because the sympathetic treatment of the rape serves morality, *Talk to Her* does not apologize for rape *simpliciter* (if it did, it would be immoral). That is, the extent to which it does apologize for rape is instrumental, and necessary, to the moral lessons it teaches. In the same way that *Talk to Her* is not fundamentally (as Eaton seems to imply

⁹⁰ Not only does the film encourage us to pity the naïve Benigno, but it romanticizes his rape of Alicia as Eaton (2008, p. 18) says, even anticipating it with *The Shrinking Lover*, a silent which, as Eaton points out, winks at nonconsensual penetration. Amparo, the shrinking man's lover, enjoys the experience, and Benigno wakes Alicia from her coma by raping her, two points that, along with the dance teacher's “Nothing is simple” remark, give us mixed messages about Benigno's transgression.

it is) a meditation on whether it's permissible for a childlike nurse to penetrate his unconscious patient, *Pulp Fiction* is not, as Carroll (1996, p. 230) seems to think, in the business of judging that rape is worse than murder. That one scene in the latter film *might* suggest this is not *eo ipso* a moral defect. On the contrary, the scene Carroll refers to serves morality by teaching us to love our enemies.⁹¹

In admiring immoral characters like Durden and Benigno—and Jules and Butch for that matter (Vincent is a Martyr)—we attest that they, with their “sort of reasonable” moral intuitions, have something to teach us. Perhaps, like *Fight Club*'s Narrator, we are deficient in authenticity, or, like Marco, in empathy—and we need a teacher, even an immoral one, to set us right. Note that neither Durden's nor Benigno's death functions merely to condemn their immorality. Rather, it seals their moral lessons, turning them into kinds of martyrs. In killing Durden, the Narrator shows that he's *learned from him* (indeed, his new authenticity allows him to be with Marla). And in losing Benigno, Marco can finally absorb what his friend taught about connecting with others, allowing him, of all things, to be with Alicia.

Ridding themselves of the excesses of their foils, Marco and the Narrator can still incorporate what was valuable and “reasonable” in them, completing an *aufheben* that leaves them more moral. Like the Narrator's and Marco's, when our moral intuitions are challenged by Durden and Benigno, they do not perish—neither we, the Narrator, or Marco suddenly believe that the evils of society justify anarchy, or that devotion to women justifies rape. Rather, I think they get *aufgehoben*, becoming more nuanced—and true.

⁹¹ In a film rife with redemptive themes, it's hardly accidental that Butch, after rescuing Marcellus from rape, meets a “chopper” named Grace.

IX. Immoralism's Last Stand

There is one more class of rough heroes I want to address. A subset of Teachers, the Stylists, as I'll call them, may escape the moralist's grasp (though I have my doubts). Taking their cue from Nietzsche, especially *The Gay Science*: 290 and *The Birth of Tragedy*: 5,⁹² these rough heroes, in Nehamas' (1985) reading of Nietzsche, make their life into an (literary) art. With Nietzsche, they teach the convergence of aesthetic and moral values (or the former's swallowing of the latter)⁹³ through their stylistic "immoralism."⁹⁴ Some of the above Teachers—Tony, Durden, even Benigno—teach style, but they don't *exclusively* teach it. And there are untold numbers of failed Stylists (Spiders, like Patrick Bateman), who don't even get us to *consider* that aesthetic values could justify their immorality.

A select few—perhaps Nietzsche's Zarathustra, *Rope's* Brandon (accidentally),⁹⁵ *There Will Be Blood's* Daniel Plainview, and *A History of Violence's* Tom Stall—primarily teach lessons in style, and I think successfully. I find myself admiring them mostly, if not all, for their style. Is admiration for these rogue characters moral? Here, two paths diverge: whereas Eaton and Carroll likely regard style as "irrelevant moral static," Nietzsche insists upon it lest we become dissatisfied with ourselves—"For the sight of what is ugly makes one bad and gloomy" (1974, p. 233). Without engaging in metaethics, I wish to suggest the possibility that Nietzsche's lesson, that art (style) has

⁹² *Gay Science* 290: "One thing is needful.—To "give style" to one's character—a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye..." (1974, p. 232). *Birth of Tragedy* 5: "...only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* is existence and the world eternally *justified*" (2016, p. 50).

⁹³ See Came (2014) for Nietzsche's penchant for aesthetic values and his attempts to "replace" traditional morality.

⁹⁴ Nietzsche means "immoral" in contrast to Judeo-Christian morality, meaning it is noble and, in a wider sense, moral. See Kaufmann's footnote of Nietzsche's "All experiences are moral experiences..." (Kaufmann, 1974, p. 174).

⁹⁵ Brandon, who makes explicit reference to Nietzsche's teachings, is technically a Martyr, but Rupert's closing speech is so corny that it fails to undo my admiration for Brandon as a Teacher.

something to teach us about morality (in the wider, Greek sense of *ethikos*⁹⁶), is worth learning. If style is *not* a problem worth solving (or not worth the immorality required to solve it), admiring Stylists would be like admiring Patrick Bateman for his looks or Hannibal for juggling, cases of immoralism. The Stylists are tricky and require far more analysis than I can provide here, but I'm not convinced a moralist must concede them.

X. Conclusion

Let me briefly summarize. Roughly, the Aristotle- and Kieran-Jacobson- inspired arguments assert that a work that endorses an immoral character can extrinsically serve morality. Carroll's narrative argument holds that a work can intrinsically serve morality if it condemns an immoral character's immorality. My moral *aufheben* argument contends that a work can intrinsically serve morality if it *endorses* an immoral character for moral—or “sort of” moral—ends. It also holds that prescribing admiration for an immoral character is moral if the character uniquely teaches us valuable moral lessons via *aufheben*. The narrative argument can account for rough heroes whose immorality is condemned (Martyrs), and some rough heroes, since they aren't admirable, don't need accounting for (Spiders). The moral *aufheben* argument, I hold, can account for the other rough heroes (Teachers), possibly excepting Stylists.

If my argument succeeds, where does it leave immoralism? Near banished from narrative art? Perhaps Stecker (2008) and other moralists can show that when other forms of art, like humor, broach immorality, they merely *explore* rather than endorse immoral perspectives or they fail to merit the intended response (a joke isn't funny, say).⁹⁷ But, as Stecker himself notes, exploration and endorsement are often hard to pull apart: with jokes and, perhaps, visual art, I find myself more susceptible to being pulled from my moral moorings towards unreasonableness. But there is something about stories that

⁹⁶ Brobjer (2003) argues that Nietzsche, aware of this word's etymology (it comes from *ethos*, meaning character), incorporated it into his (virtue ethicist) morality.

⁹⁷ See Gaut's (2007, Chapter 10) “merited response argument,” especially as it applies to humor.

keeps me morally awake: many RHWs make me consider how my own beliefs have no monopoly on truth, how I can learn something deeper from seemingly vicious heroes—without sacrificing everything I know. Contra Eaton, some of these heroes—the Teachers—do not only give me pleasure: they teach me how to live.

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