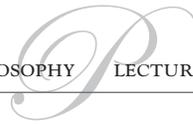

AESTHETIC RESPONSIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

Philosophers often suggest that the fact that we are morally responsible is an important mark of our distinctive humanity. But focusing exclusively on the attitudes and judgments we form toward people on the basis of their moral qualities leads to overly narrow conceptions both of responsibility and of humanity. As a corrective, this essay considers the attitudes and judgments we make of artists on the basis of their artworks, suggesting that there is such a thing as aesthetic responsibility that is both similar to and different from moral responsibility.

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Aesthetic Responsibility

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A QUICK SURVEY of the philosophical literature on responsibility will immediately reveal that the word “responsibility” is used in a multitude of ways for a multitude of purposes. The term is frequently invoked in the context of inquiries into the causes of things. What is responsible for that clump of dead trees – was it an avalanche or a storm or an infestation of beetles? What is responsible for the smile on your face – a good grade, a new friend, or the overdue sunny weather? This causal use of the term is often contrasted with another, and as it might be thought, deeper sense of “responsibility,” that is intended when one wants to know not only what caused an event or state of affairs, but whether anyone, and if so who, deserves blame or credit for it, or whether the event reflects something about the individuals who had a role in its occurrence that would make punishment or reward, condemnation or gratitude appropriate.

The contrast between these two broad uses (or senses) of “responsibility” is often marked with the labels of causal and moral responsibility respectively, for many of the most obvious illustrations of the distinction are ones in which it is the legitimacy or appropriateness of moral judgments and attitudes that are at issue. One would not blame (at least not morally blame) an avalanche or even a horde of beetles for killing the trees – they do not deserve punishment nor would indignation toward them be appropriate. If a camper carelessly dropped a cigarette that started a forest fire that killed the trees, on the other hand, that would be another story. Similarly, it seems, one would not credit (at least not morally

credit) the sunshine for one's good mood, but if someone had gone out of her way to benefit you, a certain kind of gratitude and praise might be appropriate.

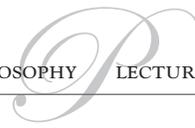
Philosophical interest in (what is typically called) moral responsibility also has a wide range of sources, and is linked to a correspondingly wide range of issues. Since moral praise and especially moral blame have serious consequences, it is a matter of great importance to know when and under what conditions the relevant moral judgments and attitudes are deserved. A less obviously practical but still clearly philosophical reason for being interested in this kind of responsibility, though, is the thought that such responsibility is somehow connected with what makes us distinctively human. For it seems that humans, and only humans (at least among the creatures with whom we are currently in contact) can be appropriate bearers of the kinds of attitudes and judgments we might bear toward the careless camper, as opposed to the beetles. And it does not seem unreasonable to think that this fact is reflective of something important about ourselves.¹

It is this sort of interest – an interest, that is, in the connection between our status as responsible agents and what sets us apart from other animals and at least present-day machines – that leads me to the topic of this essay. For I suspect that the tendency to identify the sense of responsibility that might be illuminating for this purpose with specifically moral responsibility leads us to overemphasize certain aspects of our psychologies and to neglect the importance of others. For this reason I want to look at what appear to be instances of responsibility that are akin to moral responsibility in being more than and deeper than causal responsibility, but but that are concerned with judgments and attitudes that are not particularly or essentially moral.

Aesthetic Responsibility

I WANT, SPECIFICALLY, TO LOOK at a range of phenomena that suggest that there is such a thing as *aesthetic responsibility*. By aesthetic responsibility I mean to refer to a kind of deep

1 A connection of this sort is explicitly suggested in Harry Frankfurt's famous article "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 1 (1971): 5–20, and it is close to the surface of some other seminal articles of that period.



but nonmoral responsibility that an artist may have for the aesthetic qualities of his or her artworks. That there is such a thing is suggested by several kinds of experience.

Consider first the following examples: You have a friend who is an aspiring painter, whose work is largely nonrepresentational. You walk into his studio one day and are struck by a canvas still on the easel. You are inclined to think it is the best thing he has ever done, but before you get beyond your initial “Wow!” he says, “Oh, that’s just a mistake. I knocked some paint cans over on the canvas and haven’t gotten around to cleaning it off yet.”

Or, suppose that you read a short story that impresses you for its ability to succeed on two levels: read straight, it has an interesting plot, decent characters, and a sensible message, but certain details call to mind a Greek legend that allow you to interpret it also as a wry commentary on an ancient tale. The protagonist is named Penelope, let’s say, and the story concerns her way of handling some overly aggressive suitors. Now imagine your reaction when you discover that the parallels to Homer are purely accidental – in fact, the author has never heard of the *Odyssey*, and she named her heroine after Penelope Cruz.

In both these cases, as I understand them, you are initially inclined to credit the artist, but reasonably withdraw your credit upon learning that the qualities in the art you admired were merely accidental. Although the artist in each case remains *causally* responsible for the artwork – *he* spilled the paint, after all, and *she* wrote the story, neither are *aesthetically* responsible for the qualities that made you initially admire the art.

The fact that in these examples we find it natural to withdraw credit highlights the fact that in more typical cases we give credit. Other things equal, we take it for granted that the features of an artwork that make it good – that is, that make it beautiful, interesting, moving, insightful, and so on, are due to the artist – they are not independent of the artist’s aesthetic vision and skill.

But my interest in aesthetic responsibility is not restricted to the question of whether artists deserve credit (or its opposite) for the aesthetic qualities of their artworks. At least as important is the appropriateness of a range of judgments and attitudes that are not solely or primarily evaluative. Most of us, when we respond to art, do not just judge it on a scale of aesthetic excellence (insofar as we do this at all). We *like* some art, some music, some novels more than others; and in many cases the way we feel about the art gives rise to, or perhaps is inseparable from, feelings or attitudes toward the artist. I love Henry James but not James

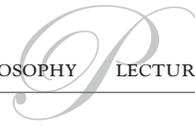
Joyce, Matisse but not Picasso, even though I readily admit that the artistic excellence of the artists I prefer is no greater than that of the ones who leave me cold. It is not just credit that I give the ones who are my favorites; it is also a kind of affection.

There is, in other words, an emotional aspect to the attitudes many of us have toward our favorite authors, composers, and filmmakers. In some people, it fuels an interest in the biographies of these artists; in others (like me), it explains a reluctance to learn about the rest of the artist's life (for fear of spoiling or complicating the image that supports one's positive feelings). There are fan clubs, or more formally named societies for artists ranging from Smoky Robinson to Chopin, from A. A. Milne to Dante. And I suspect that most of the members of such organizations would describe their attitudes to their subjects in warmly personal terms.

These attitudes seem to me of a piece with the sorts of attitudes the philosopher P.F. Strawson discusses in "Freedom and Resentment."² Wanting to bring out the close connections between our practice of holding people morally responsible for their actions and our tendencies to regard them as appropriate objects of such attitudes as gratitude and resentment, Strawson contrasts these "reactive" attitudes with "the objective attitude." "To adopt the objective attitude to another human being," Strawson writes, "is to see him, perhaps, as an object of social policy; . . . as something certainly to be taken account, perhaps precautionary account, of; to be managed or handled or cured or trained; perhaps simply to be avoided, though *this* gerundive is not peculiar to cases of objectivity of attitude. The objective attitude, [he continues] may be emotionally toned in many ways, but not in all ways. It may include repulsion or fear, it may include pity or even love, though not all kinds of love. But it cannot include the range of reactive feelings and attitudes which belong to involvement or participation with others in inter-personal human relationships; it cannot include resentment, gratitude, forgiveness, anger, or the sort of love which two adults can sometimes be said to feel reciprocally, for each other."

As Strawson notes, we can take the objective attitude towards *any* individual, at least for a limited time; but there are some individuals, and some kinds of individuals, about

2 P.F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," in *Free Will*, ed. Gary Watson, 2nd. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 79. Originally published in *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48 (1962): 1–25.



whom we think that only the objective attitude is appropriate – lower animals (at least significantly lower animals), young children (at least very young children), and machines (at least present-day machines) presumably belong to this category, as do adult human beings with certain severe forms of mental illness or incapacity.

Strawson's focus, like that of most philosophers who write on freedom and responsibility, is on moral responsibility and on the moral or near moral attitudes that are reactions to the good or ill will one person exhibits toward another. But insofar as he includes "the sort of love which two adults can sometimes be said to feel reciprocally, for each other" in his list of reactive attitudes, he suggests that the moral and near moral attitudes are part of a larger set. For the basis for such love is hardly limited to the degree to which the parties show good will to each other. Whom we love, and how our loving relationships go, may have as much to do with the individuals' senses of humor, their responses to nature, or their political engagement.

It seems to me that the attitudes of love, affection or alternatively of chilliness or distaste that one might have toward an artist on the basis of her artwork falls into this broader range. Indeed, it seems easy to imagine a person literally falling in love with a poet or painter on the basis of his poetry or painting (for better or worse), and to see how an already established loving relationship can suffer as a result of how the one responds to the other's art. In any case, it seems that the tendency to form attitudes of affection or distaste toward an artist on the basis of her artwork is premised on assumptions about the kind of creature the artist is in ways significantly similar to the way our paradigmatic reactive attitudes are conditioned. If one learned that a cherished painting had been painted by an elephant (there are such things!) or that a musical composition one admired had been produced by a machine, I suspect that any tendency one had to "love" the artist would spontaneously disappear.³ (One's attitude toward the artwork would be apt to change, too.) Insofar as our tendency to resent or feel grateful to another for his actions is indicative of our taking him to be *morally* responsible, then, I suggest that our tendency to feel affection or distaste for an artist on the basis of her artworks is a sign that we take her to be *aesthetically* responsible as well.

3 For examples of elephant paintings, see <http://www.elephantartgallery.com>.

Distinguishing Aesthetic from Moral Responsibility

IT IS EASY TO CONFUSE what I mean to call aesthetic responsibility with a kind of moral responsibility, however, and one might reasonably entertain the suspicion that the one is really just a species of the other. In fact, there are two aspects to this concern that I shall take up individually.

First, in connection with the claim that we typically give aesthetic credit to artists for work we judge to be aesthetically excellent, one might object that what credit we give is, or at least ought to be, based solely on the qualities of will that are involved in producing the art. Such qualities would include hard work, self-discipline, and artistic integrity – but all of these might arguably be considered moral virtues. We ought not give credit for talent that it is not up to the artist to have (any more that we would be justified in blaming someone for a lack of talent). To be sure, the objector might be willing to admit, when we see (or hear or read) an artwork, we cannot separate the contributions of the artist's virtues from those of her talent, but insofar as any credit or praise is deserved, it must be based on the former and not the latter.⁴

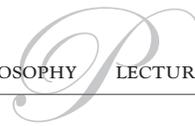
I have two comments in response to this challenge. On the one hand, I want to acknowledge that we can and do give credit to artists, as we do to craftsmen, athletes, farmers, firemen and others for their hard work, self-discipline, professional integrity, and so on. As the objection suggests, such credit is not distinctively aesthetic. The exercise of such “executive virtues” is a familiar basis for credit, as the corresponding vices (such as laziness and carelessness) and their consequences are familiar bases for blame. I have no objection to calling these virtues and vices moral, and for thus understanding our tendency to praise and blame on these bases as reflective of a species of, rather than an alternative to moral responsibility. But it is worth noting that one here invokes a broad sense of “morality,” that is quite independent of any display of good or ill will to others, or of a person's tendency or even ability to act in accordance with moral principles.

4 Such a view would have to acknowledge a puzzling phenomenon of “aesthetic luck” parallel to that of moral luck, discussed for example, by Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 20–39, and Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 24–38.

On the other hand, and more important for my purposes today, is the fact that although this objection calls attention to one kind of credit that we can give good artists, it is not the kind of credit that I had in mind. Indeed, I suspect that it rarely occurs to an art-, music-, or movie-lover to give or to withhold the kind of credit of which the objector is reminding us. That kind of credit is more likely to be considered by an art teacher having to evaluate his students, or a parent trying to decide what to say when her child shows her his early attempts at free verse. The credit I give Henry James, or for that matter, James Joyce, on the other hand, is simply credit for *writing great literature*. I neither know nor very much care whether the writing was easy or difficult for them, whether they exercised self-discipline or overcame great obstacles; whether they did it for money or prestige or “art’s sake.” It is for their brilliance, their insight, their originality, and so on, as realized in their extraordinary novels that they deserve credit (that is, the kind of credit I mean to be talking of: aesthetic credit). The moral quality of their activities in producing them, whether we are talking about morality in a broad or a narrow sense, has nothing essential to do with it.⁵

A different aspect of the concern that aesthetic responsibility might be just a species of moral responsibility shows up in connection with my claims about the other ways I have claimed our assumption of aesthetic responsibility is manifested, in the more emotional and not primarily aesthetically evaluative attitudes we form toward artists on the basis of their artworks. The concern here is that insofar as one loves (or at any rate feels warmly toward) some artists and dislikes (or feels cold or hostile to) others, one might suspect that one’s reactions are no different in kind from the reactions of affection, chilliness, or hostility we have towards people who display their moral characters – their generosity or stinginess, their openmindedness or prejudice, their humility or arrogance – in other ways. In other words, one might suspect that, when a person’s response to an artwork (or set of artworks) leads her to have such emotional and personal attitudes toward the artist, it is because she is taking the artworks as evidence about the artist’s character, and, more specifically, as evidence about the artist’s *moral* character.

5 I should think it is this kind of credit that matters most to the artists, too. It would hardly be gratifying to have someone respond to one’s poetry, any more than it would be to one’s philosophy, with “You get an A for effort.”

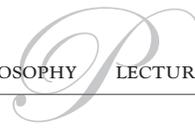


Responding to this challenge allows me to elaborate and I hope clarify the kinds of attitudes I have in mind. (Hereafter I shall refer to these as reactive attitudes, thus stressing the connections between these attitudes and the ones that Strawson explicitly mentions, but it must be kept in mind that these attitudes are not reactions specifically to the good or ill will that the artist exhibits towards others.) Again, I have several comments.

First, while I admit that insofar as one forms attitudes toward an artist on the basis of the work she has created, one is necessarily taking the artwork as evidence of *something* about *her*, I deny that we must be taking it as evidence of her character in any familiar sense. I can (and do) love Jane Austen for creating the character of Elizabeth Bennet without assuming that Austen was anything like Miss Bennet in her day-to-day (or face-to-face) life. I need not even assume that Jane Austen would have *wanted* to be like Miss Bennet (though, really, who wouldn't want to be like her, if that were open to one?). I do take the fact that Austen could create so appealing a character to show that she was able both to recognize and communicate that appeal. But I need not infer or extrapolate any more general facts about Austen's dispositions or behavior.

To put this point in abstract terms, one cannot intelligibly form attitudes toward an artist on the basis of her artworks without assuming that the artist had it in her, psychologically, to create the work with the aesthetic properties it has. With respect to Austen, this assumption involves the idea that Austen had the values, the sensibility, the perceptiveness, and so on, that made it possible for her to create the very characters, plots, and dialogues that she did. This is not quite a tautology, for it requires that the aesthetic qualities of the work are not accidental. But it does mean that one may love an artist for her work, or, if you like love an artist, *qua* creator of that work, without any commitment to loving her in respect to any other features of her life or personality.

In the case of Austen, one might well insist that nonetheless what one is reacting to is a moral aspect of her character, however narrowly confined its behavioral consequences or predictive power. For Austen's novels express a particular moral point of view, which takes a particular attitude toward people, their foibles and their flaws; it implicitly commends a particular set of virtues, and reflects a certain set of values. If, as seems plausible, the point of view expressed by an artwork is to be considered an aesthetic feature or aspect of the work, then what attitudes we form toward an artist on the basis of it may be at once moral



and aesthetic, a reflection of our taking the artist to be both a morally and an aesthetically responsible individual.⁶

Once again, I would note, that even when this is so, the attitudes that are both moral and aesthetic are moral in a broad rather than a narrow sense. Jane Austen, Henry James, and Charles Dickens (to name a few) are all moral novelists, in the sense that their works express moral, even *good* moral perspectives. But one might feel warmly toward one without liking the others, and even if one likes all of them, one need not like them all in the same way. Such attitudes, after all, are not reactions to the bare facts that these authors endorse admirable moral values and principles. They are rather responses to a richer and more nuanced evaluative perspective to which one may be more or less attracted according to one's moral temperament or taste.

More importantly, one may form reactive attitudes toward artists on the basis of their artworks that have nothing to do with morality at all. I mentioned my love of Matisse, as opposed to Picasso, in part because I cannot find anything either moral or immoral about the qualities in his paintings that are the basis of my affection. People's strong reactive attitudes to composers seem to me to be similarly independent of anything that would be conventionally considered an expression of moral character. Further, one may feel a special and reactive sort of admiration for an artist even when the artworks express something morally unsavory. I love Caravaggio for his paintings and Roman Polanski for some of his films, but this does not mean that I would want to invite either of them over for dinner.

Thus, even though one's moral and aesthetic attitudes toward an artwork may overlap, and so the attitudes we form toward the work's creator may manifest our taking her to be both morally and aesthetically responsible, neither kind of responsibility is a species or subset of the other.⁷

6 See Berys Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 182–203.

7 There are many interesting questions about what sorts of moral responsibilities an artist bears for her artworks, and under what conditions it would be appropriate to morally credit or blame an artist for aspects or consequences of her work. For example, does an artist have a moral responsibility to present historical events and characters accurately? Is an artist responsible for foreseeable consequences of the reception of her work, even if these consequences are based on misinterpretations of the work? But these are ques-

Skeptics and Critics

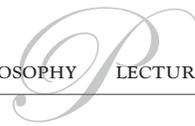
I HAVE INTRODUCED THE IDEA of aesthetic responsibility by calling attention to phenomena that I suggest are best understood as manifestations of a tendency to regard artists as aesthetically responsible for their creations. Although I hope and expect that my discussion will call up experiences that will be familiar to much of my audience, I also expect that some will be skeptical of my interpretation of these phenomena, and that others, even if they agree that we have a tendency to hold artists aesthetically responsible, will think that the tendency should be suppressed rather than validated or encouraged.

My claim that we have reactive attitudes towards artists on the basis of their artworks will not resonate with everyone. Some will not find in themselves any feelings towards the artists of the work they admire or despise. When they watch a movie or look at a painting or listen to music, they will say, they focus on the artwork and don't give the artist a moment's thought. Though they might have a favorite painter, composer, or director, they take that to mean only that the artist in question is a reliable creator of work they feel confident they will find rewarding. It reflects no deeper or more reactive an attitude toward the artist than one would have toward a bird whose song one finds particularly pleasing, or a car manufacturer whose cars one has been consistently satisfied with.

My first response to such a skeptic is to wonder whether our experiences of art can really be as different as our words seem to reflect. Perhaps my descriptions of the attitudes and judgments I mean to refer to have highlighted aspects of these phenomena in misleading ways. For I, too, focus on and even get immersed in the experience of the artworks themselves. What attitudes I have toward the artists are, in most contexts, of secondary interest and often go by unnoticed. Nor do I mean to claim that the tendency to form reactive attitudes or even judgments awarding more or less aesthetic credit to artists is universal among artlovers, or that people who sometimes form such attitudes and judgments form them in connection with every artist whose work they appreciate.

Some kinds of art and some individual artworks are more apt to evoke such reactive attitudes than others. Some artworks express a point of view or an emotional experience that

tions for another day (or essay).



one naturally takes to be a reflection, if not an intentional communication, of a person's soul. Other works, either more purely sensual or more purely cerebral are less likely to be seen as outpourings of a unique human sensibility. Furthermore, different people engage with the arts for different reasons; they look for and receive different kinds of rewards.

In speaking of the phenomena that I take to reflect a tendency to see artists as aesthetically responsible, then, I have no wish to make normative much less universal judgments about how people *should* experience art. It is enough, for my purposes, to bring attention to the fact that many people do respond to art in this way. If the skeptic does not find such experiences in himself, he can consider the reactions of others.

It is important to me, however, that such reactions be legitimate, so I need to respond to objections that charge that the tendency to regard artists as aesthetically responsible for their artworks is in some way wrong or misguided. Two sorts of objections seem especially likely, one epistemic, the other aesthetic.

The first objection concerns the thought that the judgments and attitudes we form toward artists on the basis of their artworks are frequently based on assumptions that are epistemically unsound. Who has not been tempted to infer, from a particularly realistic and insightful novel or film that the events portrayed by the novelist or filmmaker must be partly autobiographical? (The author must himself have had a summer home in New England, one thinks, or have an alcoholic parent or be a gay man.) Many of us may also tend to assume that in order for emotions to be effectively conveyed in a piece of music or a poem, they must have been experienced by the artist herself, or even that an actor who convincingly portrays intelligence must *be* intelligent, or that one who excels in portraying psychologically twisted characters must be somewhat twisted himself.

To the charge of inferring more about the lives and characters of artists from their artworks than is warranted, I plead guilty. I often make unsound leaps from artists' works to their lives and personalities, and I am often proved wrong. (Though I am often right, too!) But I have already acknowledged that such inferences are not a necessary part of attributions of aesthetic responsibility, and though much of the time such false attributions are harmless (for example, when the artists in question are dead and we keep our beliefs and attitudes about them to ourselves), these are not the attitudes and judgments I am concerned to defend. As I said earlier, the judgments and attitudes that constitute attributions of aesthetic

responsibility can be and often are narrow: they presuppose that the aesthetic qualities of the artwork come from the artist in a way that is more than merely causal, but they need not assume that they show anything more about him than that he had it in him, psychologically, nonaccidentally to create this very work.

Even this, however, a critic might object, is apt to be an ungrounded assumption. Who knows which aesthetically relevant features an artist put into her work on purpose, as opposed to ones that appear in the work accidentally? Sometimes, it is true, an artist leaves notes or gives an interview that tells us what went through her mind; sometimes an artist makes clear in a work's title what she thinks the work is about. But often she does not, and when artists do speak about what they take their work to mean, or about what they find aesthetically significant about it, their remarks are often disappointingly vague, pretentious or full of spiritual gibberish.

Moreover – and here the epistemic objection blends into the aesthetic one – why should we care about what the artist put into her work nonaccidentally in the first place? Isn't it better to just look (or listen) to the works themselves, to see what we can find in them independently of the artists' intentions? For an artist does not have privileged access to or authority over the meaning or the value of her work: The fact that an artist intends her work to express something is no guarantee that the work succeeds in doing so, nor does the fact that an artist did not intend her work to express something mean that it does not express it nonetheless. To the charge that our tendency to regard artists as aesthetically responsible for their art encourages us to accept inaccurate images of the artists, we now add the objection that this tendency encourages a regrettable approach to appreciating and understanding art.

This second criticism is a form of “the intentional fallacy,” a critique especially of an approach to literary interpretation given prominence by William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley in the 1950s.⁸ Though I am largely sympathetic with the core of Wimsatt and Beardsley's position, their criticisms are often understood in ways that seem to me unacceptably broad. Specifically, although the fallacy that Wimsatt and Beardsley argue for is literally

8 W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” *The Sewanee Review* 54, no. 3 (1946): 468–88; reprinted in Steve M. Cahn and Aaron Meskin, eds., *Aesthetics: A Comprehensive Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 547–55.

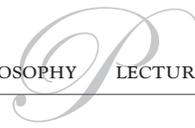
(and eponymously) directed at the idea that an artist's *intentions* are of key importance to a correct understanding of or approach to her work, the objection is frequently (if not typically) interpreted as a rejection of the tendency to connect the meaning and significance of an artwork with the psychology of the artist at all.⁹

The broad interpretation of the intentional fallacy blurs the distinction between the question of whether an aesthetic feature of a work reflects the artist's intentions and the question of whether it is the product of something in the artist's psychology more generally. And, although I agree with Wimsatt and Beardsley that emphasis on the former question is usually a bad strategy for the appreciation of art, to utterly dismiss the latter question seems to me, with respect to a great deal of art, disastrous. For the fact that an artist did not intend to communicate what in fact the art calls up to much of its audience does not imply that what the artwork evokes does not come from the artist in a significant way. We can easily imagine a songwriter saying "I didn't mean to write a sad song," while simultaneously acknowledging that the sadness that is there is an unintentional manifestation of something in him.¹⁰

I have tried to be careful, in characterizing aesthetic responsibility, to describe the assumed connection between an artist's psychology and the aesthetic features of her work in vague terms: I have said that it is a condition of holding an artist aesthetically responsible in this way that the features be "non-accidental," that when we credit or form a reactive attitude to the artist on the basis of her artwork, we presuppose that it shows "something" about the artist – namely, that the artist had it "in her" to create precisely this work. But I deliberately avoided any talk of an artist's intentions, decisions, and choices, or any suggestion that the artist would know, much less be in a position to say, exactly what he was doing aesthetically, or why.

9 There is much in their own articles that support this broad interpretation, and I would (fittingly) hesitate to infer their intentions about how the alleged fallacy associated with their names is to be understood. But my concern here is not with understanding Wimsatt and Beardsley but with defending a view about connections between an artist's psychology and her artwork it is reasonable and appropriate to make.

10 The same thing occurs in philosophy, and presumably in many other creative endeavors. I have often found myself thinking "I did not mean to write yet another paper about..." only to discover my philosophical preoccupations coming through an essay that I thought was on a new and different topic.



We are too familiar with stories of artists whose poetry, paintings, or songs were composed when they were on drugs or in dreamlike states, of others who talk about being taken over by their muses, and of the mysteries of the creative process to expect or assume that all the aesthetic features of a work to which we respond are the result of an artist's intentions. But this does not stop us from crediting the artist with the particular aesthetic vision that is realized in her artwork.

To deny that it matters to our understanding and appreciation of art whether an artwork reflects an artist's psychology at all would commit one to the view that it is irrelevant even that an artwork is a product of a human (or any other intelligent) sensibility. It would imply that it is or should be irrelevant to one's experience of an interestingly shaped piece of stone whether it was sculpted by a human agent or shaped by the forces of wind and rain; that it is or should be irrelevant to one's experience of a set of words on a page whether it was composed by a poet, or was rather, as some fanciful philosophical essays would have us imagine, the product of a monkey randomly plunking on a keyboard. Recalling examples I brought up earlier in the paper, it would imply that it shouldn't matter to our experience of a painting whether it was done by a person or an elephant, or to our experience of a piece of music whether it was composed by a human or a machine.

At least one influential theorist of art, Clive Bell, advocated this radical doctrine. His extreme doctrine of aesthetic formalism claimed that the only thing of aesthetic significance in the visual arts was "significant form" defined as "combinations of lines and colors that provoke a distinctive aesthetic emotion..."¹¹ For Bell, the aesthetic qualities of a painting do not even depend on whether the painting is representational (or, if the painting is representational, on what it represents). Indeed, Bell goes so far as to say that representation in a painting is at best a distraction.¹² But this is an absurd thing to say of Hopper's *Nighthawks* or Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* or a late Rembrandt self-portrait. Part of what it is to appreciate these paintings is to recognize the sense of human isolation, of beatific serenity, and of psychological insight, respectively, that is inextricable from seeing these paintings as the evocative representations they are. If it is not literally impossible to see paintings in this way

11 Clive Bell, *Art* (London: 1914); excerpted in Cahn and Meskin, *Aesthetics*, 261–69.

12 Cahn and Meskin, 266, 267.

without assuming that they were produced nonaccidentally by human beings, it is at least a distraction rather than an aid to appreciation to try to suppress or deny this assumption. If we turn to literature, the idea that the author or poet is irrelevant to literary interpretation is even more obviously outrageous. For the very recognition of the marks on the page (or the sounds on the audiotape) as words, much less as metaphors and puns, character sketches and plots, presupposes that they are products of a human intelligence, and indeed of a human intelligence equipped with a culturally and historically specific language.¹³

At any rate, few aestheticians would go so far as Bell. Even Wimsatt and Beardsley admit that “a poem does not come into existence by accident. The words of a poem . . . come out of a head, not out of a hat.”¹⁴

Clarifying the assumptions on which the according of aesthetic responsibility rests should, I believe, put both the epistemic and the aesthetic objection to our tendency to regard artists as aesthetically responsible to rest. The assumption that the aesthetic features of artworks show something about their artists, though falsifiable, seems innocent enough, and if that assumption, along with one’s experience of a work, grounds an impulse to credit or feel affection or distaste for its artist, so be it. Still, those who don’t find such a tendency in themselves might continue to feel uncomfortable, suspicious that those who do have such a tendency are likely to come to art for the wrong reasons and to experience art in a less than optimal way.

Again, let me emphasize that I have no wish to make any normative claims about the appreciation of art. I do not mean to suggest that people *ought* (consciously and deliberately) to regard artists as aesthetically responsible, much less that the point of art is to give you insight into the artist’s soul or to put you in a relationship with him, giving you results that would be more efficiently and straightforwardly achieved by reading the artist’s autobiography or just taking him to lunch. In my opinion, there are too many different kinds of art and too many different kinds of rewards afforded by art, for any such universal normative claims to be plausible. In defending the tendency to regard artists as aesthetically responsible for

13 Or of a divine intelligence – thus, the miracle of the shroud of Turin or of the Virgin Mary’s face turning up on a rock is a miracle because it is assumed that it must be an expression of God’s presence, and not just a random coincidence.

14 Cahn and Meskin, 548.

their art, then, I do not mean to propose that we should be exhibiting more of it. It is rather that for many consumers of art, including myself, we just do automatically and spontaneously regard artists this way. We cannot help but experience much art as the nonaccidental product of an intelligent artist, sometimes as a reflection of the artist's soul, or as an expression of the artist's point of view or of her distinctive aesthetic vision. If we particularly admire or even love the work of art, we may naturally find ourselves crediting and feeling grateful to the artist.

At the least, I have argued, such responses are typically unobjectionable, but for large categories of art they are more than that. Leo Tolstoy, in his treatise on aesthetics, *What is Art?*, wrote that "Every work of art causes the receiver to enter into a certain kind of relationship both with him who produced, or is producing, the art, and with all those who, simultaneously, previously, or subsequently, receive the same artistic impression. Speech, transmitting the thoughts and experiences of men, serves as a means of union among them, and art acts in a similar manner. The peculiarity of this latter means of intercourse, distinguishing it from intercourse by means of words, consists in this, that whereas by words a man transmits his thoughts to another, by means of art he transmits his feelings."¹⁵

Although Tolstoy over-generalized and over-moralized in offering this claim as a universal norm, the continued appeal and popularity of his theory of art testifies to the fact that the kind of glimpse into another's heart and soul, and the communion with the artist as well as with other similarly-responding appreciators of art, are among the deepest and most common rewards art has to offer. Another immensely important benefit of art is its ability to expand our knowledge and understanding of the range of human character and sensibility our world contains. Both such rewards are premised on the assumption that art is a reflection of what the artist feels, sees, and thinks. Both such rewards thus rely on the assumption that, in the sense I have been meaning to point out, artists are (commonly) aesthetically responsible for the aesthetic features of their artworks.

15 Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?* (1897); excerpted in Cahn and Meskin, *Aesthetics*, 236.

Responsibility

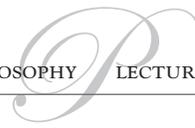
BUT SHOULD WE REALLY REFER to the phenomena I have been discussing as involving a kind of responsibility? Although the term seems natural when introduced in some contexts, it may seem out of place or misleading in others.

The word comes easily when contrasting the relationship of an artist to a canvas he painted with his relationship to one on which he clumsily knocked over some cans of paint, or when explaining the shift in our attitudes when we discover that the artist of a strikingly colored painting was colorblind or, that the writer of an evocative string of words does not speak the language of the words he wrote down.¹⁶ There is an enormous difference between learning that an aesthetically interesting object (a visual or tactile form, or a series of words, or a set of musical notes) was painted or written or composed by a conscious human being and learning that it came about by someone slipping on some paint, or copying words from a dictionary or plunking random keys on a keyboard, and this difference affects our attitudes and judgments about both the object and its creator. It does not seem unnatural to express this difference by saying that in the first case but not the second we find the creator or artist (defeasibly) responsible for the aesthetic features of her creation. And to say this is to suggest that there is a difference between merely causal responsibility and another kind, which is deeper.

But the patterns according to which we form and withdraw attitudes and judgments towards artists on the basis of their artworks are in some ways quite different from those that characterize our practices of according *moral* responsibility, and when we focus on these differences, we may find the idea that there are two kinds or species of responsibility here more confusing than helpful.

In particular, it is commonly thought that whether a person is morally responsible for something he's done depends on whether he could have done otherwise, on whether he had control of his behavior, or on whether he knew what he was doing. If a person is morally responsible, it has been said, he should be able to explain or justify his behavior. It is, at the

16 Exactly how we shift our attitudes, and even whether we shift them permanently, is another matter. After all, when we learn that Beethoven was deaf when he composed his later works, this does not lead us to deny aesthetic credit for these works to him.



least, appropriate to ask him to do so: he is answerable for what he has done.¹⁷ As I pointed out in the previous section, however, we apply no such conditions in cases of aesthetic responsibility. We don't expect Shakespeare or Cezanne or Mozart to be able to explain their choices of words, lines and notes. And the question of whether they could have done otherwise – written different plays, painted different paintings, composed different symphonies, seems utterly beside the point in determining what attitudes to have to these artists on the basis of their art.¹⁸

Focusing on these contrasts may make us think that the attitudes we form toward artists on the basis of their artwork – even the attitudes of credit – are not really manifestations of a belief in anything properly called responsibility. We admire Shakespeare, certainly, for his richly insightful, clever and moving plays, but it sounds odd to say that we hold him responsible for these works.

In part, I believe the oddness reflects the fact that both in philosophy and in many other contexts, we assume that when we are not using the word to make a merely causal claim, “responsibility” just means *moral* responsibility, and our attitudes and judgments about Shakespeare have little to do with morality. It would beg the question to use this as a basis for rejecting the idea of aesthetic responsibility, however – for the idea is meant to challenge that assumption, not to ignore it. There is, however, another basis for the discomfort we might feel in using “responsibility” in aesthetic contexts that is more philosophically illuminating. This has to do with the strength of the connection between responsibility and control.

It is a standard assumption that a person is only responsible for events and states of affairs that are under her control, or, relatedly, that a person is only responsible for doing something if she could have done otherwise. Control in turn is closely associated with what is within the sphere of a person's will, with what she does or is able to do intentionally, knowing what she is doing. “She couldn't help it,” “he didn't mean it” are standardly taken to be excuses that exempt or mitigate a person's liability to blame. The fact that these features of artists' relation to their artwork play so minor a role in the attitudes we form toward them

17 See, e.g., Angela Smith, “Responsibility as Answerability,” *Inquiry* 58, no. 2 (January 2015): 99–126.

18 For further discussion, see also Susan Wolf, “Responsibility, Moral and Otherwise,” *Inquiry* 58, no. 2 (January 2015): 127–42.

(on the basis of their art) may suggest that these attitudes are not indications of attributions of responsibility at all.

To be sure, the common tendency to associate responsibility with control is strongest when considering cases in which being responsible would open one to blame and censure. It is thought, reasonably, that it would be unfair to blame someone for something he cannot avoid. And since blame and censure are typically if not exclusively appropriate only when someone has done something *morally* bad or wrong, this issue is not wholly independent of the common identification of deep (or at any rate, non-causal) responsibility with moral responsibility. Still, the issue is distinct, as can be seen by noticing that debates about the relevance of control can be found *within* the philosophical literature on moral responsibility itself. Although it is standardly assumed that one should not be held responsible for what is not under one's control, the assumption is not universal.¹⁹ To some, the fact that, due to a person's upbringing, say, he cannot help being a racist or a spoiled brat is not enough to get him off blame's hook.

Those familiar with the philosophical literature on responsibility may have heard of the distinction, introduced by Gary Watson in "Two Faces of Responsibility," between two aspects or senses of responsibility (both different from and deeper than causal responsibility) that Watson called "attributability" and "accountability."²⁰ According to Watson, when we say *X* is responsible for *Y*, we sometimes mean to *attribute* *Y* to *X*, in the sense that we take *Y* to show something about *X*, to be disclosive of *X*'s self. In other instances, Watson reminds us, we use the expression to say *X* may properly be held *accountable* for *Y*. If *Y* is bad, this would justify our blaming *X* or punishing him, or expecting him to explain, apologize, or compensate the victims for *Y*'s effects. The idea that an individual must be in control of something in order for him to be responsible for it makes a lot of sense if one is thinking of responsibility as accountability, but not perhaps in connection with attributability. The question of whether we should think of responsibility as actually having these two "faces," rather than one or three or even more, is a matter of much debate.

19 See Robert Adams, "Involuntary Sins," *Philosophical Review* 94, no. 1 (1985): 3–31; and Angela Smith, "Guilty Thoughts," in *Morality and the Emotions*, ed. Carla Bagnoli (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 235–56.

20 Gary Watson, "Two Faces of Responsibility," *Philosophical Topics* 24 (1996): 227–48.

I do not want to enter into this debate here, but Watson's distinction may be useful in helping us understand the ambivalence or confusion some might have toward the idea of aesthetic responsibility. For once this distinction is articulated it seems clear that my discussion of aesthetic responsibility had attributability rather than accountability in mind. Indeed, as I have been using this phrase, to say that an artist is aesthetically responsible for her art is simply to say that the work can be attributed to her in a deeper or stronger than a merely causal sense; that it has a stronger and more personal connection to her than a mere causal connection would imply; that it comes from her and says something about her; that it is disclosive of her self.

It is relatively unimportant whether one wants to use the word "responsibility" to refer to this connection, though unfortunately, to substitute talk of "attributability" here would bring problems of its own. One problem is that the word is so vague and colorless that it gives no indication of a difference between attributing something to an individual and simply predicating it of her, and mere predication is much too broad to capture what is intended by the term. The other is that, in the domain of art in particular, attribution already has a fixed and different meaning. (To attribute a work of art to an artist is simply to ascribe the work to him or her as the person who created it, as opposed to its having been produced by students in his workshop or others in his school.)

In any case, I believe that our ambivalence and confusion about how to refer to and think about the phenomena that manifests what I have been calling aesthetic responsibility shows us something about both the concepts of responsibility and attributability that philosophers discuss and about the relation of these concepts to our lives and self-understanding. Let me conclude by pointing out some of the lessons that I think can be learned from these reflections.

One lesson that can be learned or reinforced is that the concept of (deep, not merely causal) responsibility is not as clear or as clean as many people take and want it to be. There are some contexts in which the term seems apt in thinking about the relation between artists and their artworks, and other contexts in which it seems inappropriate even though one is referring to the very same relation. As I have mentioned, one way philosophers deal with this distinguishes different senses of responsibility, including at least responsibility-as-attributability and responsibility-as-accountability. Another, or perhaps only a verbal variant of

the first, understands “responsibility” to refer only to accountability, and treats the notion of attributability as an independent concept. Thinking about the phenomena that I have been referring to as indications of aesthetic responsibility gives added reason to think that some such distinction or clarification of our use of the term “responsibility” is necessary.

But attributability itself, if it is meant to refer to a substantial and interesting relation between individuals and their actions, properties, and effects, is far from well understood. Earlier, following Watson, I characterized it as having to do with a disclosure or reflection of a self. (Something is attributable to an individual insofar as it proceeds from or expresses her self.) But what is a self? On what basis do we or should we regard beings as having (or being) selves, as opposed to just being creatures or objects of other sorts? Can a robot be or have a self? What about a chicken? An infant? A two-year-old? And on what basis do we or should we decide what is part of someone’s self and what is alien to it?

Strawson’s discussion of the contrast between reactive attitudes and the objective attitude, mentioned earlier in this essay, is suggestive in this context. For there is something plausible in the idea that the only kinds of creatures to whom we find it reasonable to robustly attribute things – that is, the only kinds of beings that we tend to think of as having sufficiently complex, intelligent and sensitive “selves,” are the ones to whom we find it appropriate to have reactive attitudes. Moreover, this thought seems equally plausible with respect to aesthetic cases as it does in connection with moral ones. We don’t have reactive attitudes to elephant-painters, to typing monkeys, or to finger-painting toddlers, but we do, or at least we may, to Jackson Pollock and Virginia Woolf.

Remembering that Strawson also connects the appropriateness of the reactive attitudes with the potential for “involvement or participation with others in inter-personal human relationships” suggests that the task of understanding what it is to be or to have a self is closely related to the task of understanding what it is to be distinctively human. It is perhaps with respect to this topic that attention to the phenomena I have been discussing in this essay can be most philosophically useful, as a corrective to an unduly narrow identification of humanity with rational agency that has dominated philosophical thought.

When we ask what it takes to be human, understanding this as a broadly ethical rather than a scientific and biological question, the first thing that leaps out at us tends to be our intelligence, which we have to a higher degree than any other creatures with whom we are

acquainted. Historically, we have tended to identify intelligence with the capacity to reason, the ability to think abstractly and the ability to use language. These in turn have led to our ability to justify our beliefs and actions to ourselves and to others, and our abilities to act in accordance with laws we give to ourselves and with values we endorse. No doubt these abilities play a large role in what makes us, as a class, especially interesting and important to each other. They are essential to our ability to engage in scientific inquiry and to our ability to be moral agents.

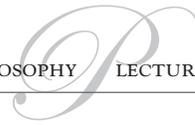
But our experience of art – at least the experience of some of us of the experience of some art (as well as the urge to make art, which I have barely mentioned in this paper) also suggests or points to features that make us especially interesting and important to each other. And it is interesting to note that when we ask ourselves what kinds of individuals might be capable of what I have been calling aesthetic responsibility, we are unlikely to focus on the same traits and capacities, or to identify the same range of creatures. It seems possible to imagine rational creatures (perhaps extraterrestrials or very advanced machines) who lack the capacity to create or appreciate anything we can recognize as art, and to imagine if not actually find individuals who do create significant art even though they lack the deliberative powers and control that would be needed to regard them as fully morally responsible agents.

The importance of art in people's lives – both the drive to create it and the passion to experience it – is a remarkable fact of human life, universal across place and time and culture. Arguably, it is as much a mark of the human as is the use of language. Presumably part of why art moves or speaks to us so strongly is that through art we can discover and make contact with the emotions, experiences, thoughts and perspectives of other human souls. Thinking about what it takes to create art that we respond to in this way, as opposed to what might fortuitously bring about an interesting or appealing array of words, sounds or shapes, and also perhaps about what it takes to be responsive to the art of others, can thus provide clues to what it is to be human, of what it is to be a “self (or a soul) like us” that are different from what one gets when one thinks about what it takes for someone to be able to engage in moral deliberation.

Thinking along these lines, then, is apt to highlight a somewhat different set of faculties, abilities and sensitivities from those we notice when we take the paradigm of human activity to be deliberative rational action. Insofar as we cherish those qualities that make



us capable of aesthetic responsibility as well as moral responsibility and those faculties that drive us to create art as well science, it is important that we not neglect these qualities and faculties in our educational practices, our social policies, or our philosophical theories about what it is to be human.



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