

IMMORAL ARTISTRY?

REFLECTIONS ON OMAR LITTLE, TONY SOPRANO, AND VALUE INTERACTION DEBATES

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THE RELATIONSHIP between moral and aesthetic value has preoccupied philosophers at least since Plato and animated many influential treatments of art criticism since David Hume’s “Of the Standard of Taste.” Contemporary philosophers have been especially interested in the status of *autonomism*—the view that an artwork’s moral virtue or vice is irrelevant to its aesthetic value—and in a variety of nonautonomist positions.¹ Here I will be exploring the controversial position known as *immoralism*. According to immoralists, moral flaws can make a positive contribution to a work’s aesthetic value.²

I hope to provide a distinctive perspective on debates about immoralism and value interaction more generally, grounding this perspective in philosophically engaged art criticism. Unlike many other writers on these topics, I am not primarily interested in whether immoralism is true. Immoralism is supposed to provide an answer to a philosophically significant question about the interaction of values. Yet the standard formulations of this question are frustratingly ambiguous. Can a moral flaw make an artwork better aesthetically? In order to evaluate this question, we must ask another, that is, “better than what?”

Consider the oft-rehashed case of *Triumph of the Will*.³ According to Daniel Jacobson, following Susan Sontag, the film’s moral defects are “inseparable”

- 1 I am not concerned about the distinction between artistic and aesthetic value in this paper and will employ the notions interchangeably.
- 2 Several formulations of this thesis appear in the literature. Panos Paris understands immoralism as the view that an artwork can be aesthetically better in virtue of its immorality (“The ‘Moralism’ in Immoralism”). Moonyoung Song argues that we should understand it as the view that a moral defect can itself be an aesthetic merit (“The Nature of the Interaction between Moral and Artistic Value”).
- 3 I agree with Rafe McGregor that *The Birth of a Nation* is a more compelling example (“A Critique of the Value Interaction Debate,” 462). But my point in the text is that this does not matter. All examples like this are of limited interest.

from its aesthetic value: its political and aesthetic ideals are unified.⁴ Berys Gaut claims, similarly, that the film is held together by its offensive celebration of Nazism.⁵ We seem to be off and running. If we were to extricate the Nazism, the film would be morally better. But it would also be aesthetically worse, since a sanitized *Triumph* would be incoherent at best. So, its moral defects make the film better as art. Immoralism is true.⁶

I am not impressed. *Triumph* could not exist without its Nazism!⁷ That is why the claim that the work would have been aesthetically better if it had vilified rather than glorified Nazism is puzzling. Jacobson says this claim is “either meaningless or false.”⁸ I am happy to admit that *Triumph* has more aesthetic value than no film at all. But that is not an energizing comparison, and it does not do much to support immoralism.⁹

Central examples from the literature on comic immoralism are awkward for the same reason. Here is the main shtick of Sacha Baron Cohen’s *Da Ali G Show*: the comedian manipulates people into embarrassing revelations on camera via lies about his identity. Suppose the manipulation is immoral and the revelations are funny. Argument: without the manipulation, the show would be morally better but comically worse. So, (comic) immoralism is true.¹⁰

Again, this is inconclusive. *Da Ali G Show* would be totally unrecognizable without Baron Cohen’s manipulative methods; the methods are an essential condition of the work’s existence. What could we mean in claiming that his immorality makes the work comically better? Better than what? We certainly cannot say: “A completely different artwork he might have made instead!”¹¹

- 4 Jacobson, “In Praise of Immoral Art,” 192; Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism.” See also Jacobson, “Ethical Criticism and the Vice of Moderation”; and Kieran, “Forbidden Knowledge.”
- 5 Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics*, 190.
- 6 John, “Artistic Value and Opportunistic Moralism”; and Stear, “Immoralism Is Obviously True.”
- 7 Stecker, “Immoralism and the Anti-Theoretical View”; Song, “The Nature of the Interaction between Moral and Artistic Value.”
- 8 Jacobson, “In Praise of Immoral Art,” 193.
- 9 See Kieran, “Art, Imagination, and the Cultivation of Morals,” for further discussion of *Triumph*.
- 10 Nannicelli, “Moderate Comic Immoralism and the Genetic Approach to the Ethical Criticism of Art.” I think comic immoralism entails immoralism about aesthetic value more generally, because comically valuable properties are often aesthetically valuable. Nothing here will depend on that contention. Nils-Hennes Stear gives a noncomic example with a similar structure: photographer Jeff Mermelstein’s *#nyc* series, which captures people’s intimate text messages without their consent (“Immoralism Is Obviously True”).
- 11 Some fans of Baron Cohen will deny that his deceptive practices are immoral. Maybe his deception is *prima facie* wrong, but ultimately justified because of the socially valuable

It would probably be more useful to appeal to cases in which transgressions are less global, where the immorality is not so essential to the work's identity. The "Better than what?" question might have, in such examples, the following answer: better than the sufficiently similar version of that artwork would have been were the immoral feature removed. For the sake of argument, I assume there are such examples. That is because my aim is to pursue a slightly different question, one that I think is much more central to the practice of art interpretation and criticism than the question of whether immoralism is true. Supposing that moral flaws can make artworks better aesthetically, how can they do this? More specifically: Are there general strategies that artists can, do, and should (sometimes) pursue to exploit immorality for aesthetic ends?

I have explained why I am not interested in the answer that is implicit in the *Triumph* example and many others like it, which is that moral flaws can make artworks "better" aesthetically when the artwork could not exist without them. Ditto for the related answer that is implicit in some treatments of comic immoralism, which is that comedy of some valuable forms requires cruelty, or deception, or other moral transgressions. These claims might be true, but they do not amount to illuminating characterizations of artistic strategies. After all, everyone admits that some racist artworks are bad as artworks and no better for their racism. Everyone, comic immoralists included, admits that cruelty often backfires comically. Even if we agree that racism can produce artistic value or that cruelty can produce comic value, it is reasonable to be curious about when and how they do so. Gaut's convincing discussion of artistic strategies shows how artists can deliver moral understanding in aesthetically valuable ways.¹² My guiding question is whether his immoralist opponents can provide similarly compelling conceptualizations of immoral artistry.

The discussion is structured around the best attempt to outline an aesthetically productive immoralist strategy. We find this attempt in the work of A. W. Eaton.¹³ Eaton examines what she takes to be a widely employed artistic strategy involving a distinctive character type (the "rough hero"). She gives a fascinating and provocative argument for immoralism on the basis of the achievements of rough hero works. Though this argument has been discussed by a number of philosophers of art, I will be drawing out several themes that deserve more attention, stressing the ways that value interaction debates can be usefully connected to broader moral psychological inquiry.

revelations it prompts. See Nannicelli, "Moderate Comic Immoralism and the Genetic Approach to the Ethical Criticism of Art," 174.

12 Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics*, 186–94.

13 Eaton, "Robust Immoralism" and "Reply to Carroll."

I will also be exploring the philosophical significance of detailed art interpretation and its relationship to the methodology of aesthetics. In discussions of comic value, immoralists have at times recognized the difficulties with popular example-based arguments they would like to endorse.¹⁴ A similar dynamic complicates the evaluation of favored immoralist examples from the history of literature and film, as I have already suggested. These examples are often “too messy to be effective.”¹⁵ Even philosophers committed to immoralism tend to recognize that many such arguments are inconclusive.¹⁶

My interpretations of *The Wire* and especially *The Sopranos* aim to convince readers that various moves in value interaction debates have presupposed misguided readings of the artworks invoked as evidence. The main goal is not to vindicate a final judgment on immoralism itself but to facilitate exploration of the question about artistic strategies via philosophical interpretation that sensitively engages with the relevant artworks—as well as the insightful art criticism about them that already exists and is seldom written by philosophers. In addition to expressing a point of view on the way we use examples in aesthetic theorizing, I aim to contribute to critical appreciation of these works, *The Sopranos* in particular. Fans of the show will have to judge whether my interpretation is at all original and whether the philosophical backdrop contributes to a convincing critical appraisal.

1. OVERVIEW OF EATON'S ARGUMENT AND MY CRITIQUE

Here is my understanding of Eaton's argument:

1. The rough hero is irredeemably vicious.¹⁷
2. It is morally bad to sympathize with an irredeemably vicious character.¹⁸

14 Ted Nannicelli writes: “In the context of comedy, at least, it is rarely the case that a work actually endorses the immoral behaviors that it represents” (“Moderate Comic Immoralism and the Genetic Approach to the Ethical Criticism of Art,” 171).

15 Stecker, “Immoralism and the Anti-Theoretical View,” 157 (commenting on John, “Artistic Value and Opportunistic Moralism”).

16 Compare Li, “Immortality and Transgressive Art.”

17 This is a simplification of Eaton's argument in “Robust Immoralism” (284), where she claims that the hero is (a) grievously flawed, (b) flawed at the level of deep character, (c) remorseless, and (d) lacks virtues sufficient to outweigh his flaws. I use “irredeemable viciousness” as a term of art that stands in for this account. I discuss various difficulties below.

18 This too is a simplification. Eaton also worries about our *endorsement of, admiration for, and siding with* the rough hero. In the present formalization I state the relevant claims as concisely as possible. My later formulations will remind readers of this crucial ambiguity.

3. So, it is morally bad to sympathize with the rough hero.
4. Rough hero works encourage us to sympathize with the rough hero.
5. So, rough hero works encourage us to do something morally bad.
6. Getting us to sympathize with the rough hero is an aesthetic achievement.
7. So, rough hero works encourage us to do something morally bad, and if they get us to do this thing, it is an aesthetic achievement.¹⁹

Alternatively: sympathy for the rough hero is morally bad, so if an artwork encourages us to have this mental state, it is in that respect morally bad. But successfully getting us to feel sympathy is aesthetically good, because it represents an interesting, indeed “delicious,” overcoming of imaginative resistance.²⁰ Immoralism is true.

I will note one subtlety before we move to the fun stuff. For Eaton, a character’s being irredeemably vicious *implies* that it is wrong to sympathize with them—that is, wrong to like them, admire them, and root for them (premise 2). Indeed, Eaton’s definition of the rough hero genre invokes two conditions that embody this connection and explain the supposed immorality of the relevant works. First, the rough hero is irredeemably vicious. Second, the work presents them sympathetically.²¹ In other words, the work’s sympathetic presentation of an irredeemably vicious character is what makes it morally flawed.

By contrast, I think it is important to sharply distinguish claims about the viciousness of characters from claims about how we are morally required to respond to them. And it is important to distinguish both from claims about whether an artwork encourages or prescribes specific reactions to its characters. The structure of my formulation of the above argument reflects this division, as does the structure of my critique in the rest of the paper. I pursue a response to Eaton that is best understood disjunctively. My suspicion is that most or all of Eaton’s examples have at least one of the following properties:

- A. The relevant character is not irredeemably vicious (*contra* premise 1).

- 19 Encouraging us to sympathize is not the same thing as getting us to sympathize. So, according to Eaton, the moral defect is in one sense prior to the aesthetic merit. I do not share Song’s judgment that this means the work can only be aesthetically valuable despite its moral defect rather than in virtue of it (“The Nature of the Interaction between Moral and Artistic Value,” 292).
- 20 Eaton, “Robust Immoralism,” 287. See Tamar Gendler’s “The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance” for a classic discussion of imaginative resistance.
- 21 For the latter condition, see Eaton, “Robust Immoralism”: “Although the rough hero is supposed to be morally hateful, he is also supposed to be a *hero*; that is, a sympathetic, likeable, and admirable protagonist” (285).

- b. It is not morally bad to sympathize with the relevant character in the relevant way (*contra* premise 2).
- c. The artwork does not encourage the relevant form of sympathy (*contra* premise 4).

Finally, some of the best responses to my arguments will commit proponents of immoralism to the view that getting us to sympathize with the rough hero is no special achievement at all (*contra* premise 6).

2. OMAR LITTLE AND IRREDEEMABLE VICE

My first main claim is that some of Eaton's "rough heroes" are not rough heroes. They are not rough heroes because they are not irredeemably vicious. It would take several books to adequately explore all the fictional works Eaton mentions, so I will concentrate on one specific case, the character of Omar Little in the phenomenal television series *The Wire*. I focus on this example because the erroneous categorization of Omar as a rough hero is particularly suggestive.

Eaton regards Omar as a "glorified criminal."²² She briefly defends this judgment by saying that "while Omar adheres to a strict code, his criminal activity is always aimed solely at promoting his own good rather than taking law enforcement into his own hands."²³ This is not true. Omar pursues the good of various others in addition to his own and a brand of justice to the detriment of his own good. More importantly, the characterization of Omar as a rough hero on these grounds is unconvincing.

It gives me a peculiar delight to stick up for Mr. Little, one of the most beloved characters in modern American television—a favorite of critics, most of the show's viewers, and even President Obama. Omar inspires these affections because he resists easy categorization and evaluation. He glitters with moral complexity and invites question as much as judgment. The complexity that attracts many of us to Omar is incompatible with irredeemable immorality as Eaton understands it.

Omar is a freelance bandit who makes his living stealing from violent drug kingpins. He does so with a "splendidly and improbably diverse troop of soldiers," including women, fellow members of sexual minorities, elderly former gangsters, and a blind man.²⁴ Omar's courage and cunning make him an object

22 Other examples include Bonnie and Clyde from *Bonnie and Clyde*, Michael Corleone from *The Godfather*, Gus Fring from *Breaking Bad*, William Munny from *Unforgiven*, Vincent and Jules from *Pulp Fiction*, and her paradigm case, Tony Soprano from *The Sopranos*.

23 Eaton, "Reply to Carroll," 380n12.

24 Cormier, "Bringing Omar Back to Life," 210.

of *sui generis* admiration. His legendary exploits, spectral materializations, and ridiculous chutzpah are singularly capable of inspiring fear, even in the most hardened criminals.²⁵ His nemesis Marlo Stanfield revealingly compares him to Spider-Man. Further, Omar thinks of his victims as evil or at least as undeserving of their money. The latter thought is not misguided. In sum, he is uniquely and attractively threatening to the corrosive institutions of the criminal underworld.

Despite these capacities, and unlike many of *The Wire's* villainous characters, Omar carefully avoids gratuitous violence and illegality. He does not deploy his considerable criminal talents beyond the special sphere of extorting traffickers and dealers. "A man gotta have a code," he says. "Don't get it twisted, I do some dirt too, but I never put my gun on no one who wasn't in the game." He refuses to snitch unless there is just cause. When he does collaborate with law enforcement, he does so not primarily because it serves his financial interests but because he is morally interested in punishing the most indiscriminately violent members of Baltimore's drug trade—when, and only when, they have violated what he sees as the rules of the game. This scrupulousness is laudable notwithstanding the idiosyncrasy of his moral code, which also involves forswearing curse words, regularly taking his grandmother to church in a taxi, and observing all gang truces religiously.

When he wants to be, of course, Omar is a brutal executioner. But even brutal executioners can have good qualities. He is bold and streetwise, cool and meditative, laconic and witty, fearless and determined. From his iconic showdown with another likable criminal, Brother Mouzone: "This range? This caliber? Even if I miss I can't miss."

Omar also exhibits compassion and loving-kindness. He is sensitive and affectionate with many acquaintances, including some police officers. He is even more sensitive and loving with friends and romantic partners. Our justified sympathy for Omar intensifies when his lover Brandon is tortured, mutilated, and killed by Avon Barksdale's enforcers. Though the risk of death is "all in the game," this kind of treatment is not. The experience makes Omar's desire for retribution understandable. A similar desire brings him out of retirement years later and precipitates his downfall: he only returns to Baltimore from Puerto Rico to avenge the torture and murder of his old friend Butchie.

Finally, Omar is an openly gay Black man living on the margins of an intensely heteronormative culture. He represents queer masculinity unapologetically in a particularly hostile context. This courageous pride moderates our condemnation. Thematically speaking, the bitter homophobia occasioned by Omar's sexuality dramatizes deep questions about how heteronormative

25 Shuster, *New Television*, 108.

patriarchy contributes to “toxic masculinity,” male deviancy, and urban decay.²⁶ To its credit, *The Wire* positions homophobia as a social ill afflicting the police as much as boys on the corner, intensifying our appreciation of Omar’s radical challenge to damaging stereotypes of masculinity.

None of this means Omar Little is a paragon of virtue. *The Wire* explicitly disavows any triumphalist interpretation of his character. In a celebrated scene, Detective Bunk Moreland eloquently condemns Omar’s callousness and his complicity in poisonous structures of violence. Bunk: “As rough as that neighborhood could be, we had us a community . . . nobody, no victim who didn’t matter . . . and now all we got is bodies . . . and predatory motherfuckers like you. . . . Out where that girl fell, I saw kids acting like Omar, calling you by name, glorifying your ass . . . makes me sick motherfucker how far we done fell.” That this speech expresses part of *The Wire*’s perspective on Omar is confirmed by the stickup man’s reaction. As Bunk walks away in disgust, a tear rolls down Omar’s cheek, and he spits in an ambiguous gesture of rejection. Bunk turns around to look at him. Omar’s spit hangs on his chin, as if confirming that Bunk’s moral force has overcome his attempt to dismiss it. This “rough hero” is not rough enough to raise his eyes and meet the detective’s.

Omar exhibits grave moral defects alongside admirable moral virtues. He exhibits nonmoral virtues—streetwise intelligence, physical dexterity, coolness, wit, style—that are hard to weigh against moral ones in any sort of definitive evaluation. He appears to exhibit deep remorse. Whether Omar’s virtues ultimately outweigh his flaws is a question that I find odd, and that I will address at a general level momentarily. In any event, no viewer of *The Wire* could conclude that he is on a moral par with the villainous Stanfield or the more unequivocally malevolent of Eaton’s glorified criminals. For these reasons, he is a poor candidate for the sort of “morally hateful” protagonist needed to underwrite the argument for immoralism.

Here is a transitional observation. I have been using the notion of irredeemable vice to stand in for the more expansive set of properties Eaton employs to conceptualize the rough hero: being grievously flawed, remorseless, and “more bad than good.”²⁷ However, these are coarse-grained evaluations, whose

26 I use “deviancy” here in a nonmoralized way to refer to illegal and often imprudent behavior. One of the most compelling features of *The Wire* is its extended presentation of the idea that moral corruption is only one causal ingredient in patterns of deviant behavior. Compare Shelby, “Justice, Deviance, and the Dark Ghetto.”

27 I ignore Eaton’s additional “deep character” condition. Genuinely grievous flaws must be deep character flaws. If a flaw is superficial or not a matter of the agent’s character, then it is not grievous enough to contribute significantly to irredeemable viciousness. See Eaton, “Robust Immoralism,” 284.

relations to distinctive prohibitions on sympathetic reactions are highly contestable. First, deep character flaws regularly cohabit with virtues, and it would take some argument to motivate the idea that such flaws make sympathetic reactions to virtues or the persons possessing them morally suspect. Second, the moral value of remorse is a topic of legitimate philosophical disagreement, and remorsefulness is only one kind of appropriate reparation for immoral behavior—which is sometimes unnecessary for redemption and often insufficient for it. Third, though we sometimes judge that people or characters are *bad overall*, most of us do this relatively rarely and only in egregious circumstances of immoral behavior. It is possible that we are in general too quick to do this.

This is not to say that there are no evil people or evil characters. It is to express skepticism about the ease of identifying irredeemable vice. The observation may seem unimportant given my admission that some rough characters are likely irredeemably vicious on any reasonable understanding. But this misunderstands the shape of the critique. The point of the observation is to remind us that most interesting fictional characters are, like Omar Little and many real people, complex mixtures of good and bad, inviting appropriately ambivalent reactions, including some appropriately sympathetic ones.²⁸ I will now discuss the subtlety of these appropriateness conditions in more detail.

3. TONY SOPRANO AND SYMPATHIZING WITH EVIL CHARACTERS

I will now argue that Eaton oversimplifies the nature of character evaluation. Taking for granted that there are some irredeemably vicious characters in fiction, I will cast doubt on the view that it is morally bad to sympathize with them. This skepticism expresses a general perspective on moral evaluation that has implications beyond the value interaction debate and the sphere of art appreciation, though its implications in the context of art are distinctive.

The reader will have gathered that I may not have much of a handle on the notion of irredeemable vice. Nonetheless, I can recognize some plausible candidates. Consider the real-life killer Robert Alton Harris, who brutally murdered two teenage boys and was executed in 1992 in San Quentin State Prison,

28 It seems to me indicative, for instance, that Fyodor Dostoevsky's "underground man" (a rough hero, for Eaton) is a far more interesting figure than most more unambiguously villainous characters. Usually, artistic prescriptions and actual audience reactions track these differences. We are encouraged to sympathize with the underground man in unique ways, we do tend to sympathize in these ways, and this is morally appropriate. See Richard Pevear's foreword to *Notes from Underground* for discussion of this complicated protagonist.

California. In the leadup to his execution, fellow inmates on death row pledged money for a candy and soda party so they could celebrate his demise.²⁹

Gary Watson analyzes the life of this reviled killer at length in a brilliant and famous essay. An arresting feature of the discussion is that it encourages us to sympathize with Harris, largely on account of his abominable upbringing. Successfully encouraging this sympathetic reaction is an essential feature of Watson's argument about the nature of reactive attitudes—as is the claim that this sympathy is *appropriate*. It is appropriate sympathy for Harris that explains our confused and unstable responsibility judgments, and this is the fact about reactive attitudes that Watson aims to explore.³⁰

It is hard to believe that Watson is doing something immoral in provoking sympathy for Harris. It is better to say what Watson says: that some forms of sympathy for evil people are permissible and even appropriate or laudable. Other forms of sympathy for such people are morally unacceptable. Sympathy with Harris on account of his terrible childhood is compatible with antipathy toward his behavior and his character as an adult.

Why not tell a similar story about sympathizing with irredeemably vicious fictional characters? For the moment I set aside the fact that a character's fictionality itself has serious implications for what forms of response are possible and appropriate, though I will return to this below. Consider Eaton's chief example of a rough hero, the mob boss Tony Soprano from *The Sopranos*. When we say that we like or admire Tony, one reading of this thought is that we "compartmentalize" our sympathy: we like or admire some things about Tony while being repulsed by other aspects of his character. Sensitive viewers are attuned to his faults just as they are attuned to his charms. One of the main joys of engaging with the series is becoming invested in this jumble of reactions.

This perspective is common.³¹ I will respond to some objections to it later in this section. But first, I want to begin providing a substantive interpretation

29 Miles Corwin, "Icy Killer's Life Steeped in Violence":

"The guy's a misery, a total scumbag; we're going to party when he goes," said Richard (Chic) Mroczko, who lived in the cell next to Harris on San Quentin Prison's Death Row for more than a year. "He doesn't care about life, he doesn't care about others, he doesn't care about himself."

30 Watson, "Responsibility and the Limits of Evil":

What appears to happen is that we are unable to command an overall view of his life that permits the reactive attitudes to be sustained without ambivalence . . . in light of the 'whole' story, conflicting responses are evoked. The sympathy toward the boy he was is at odds with outrage toward the man he is . . . each of these responses is appropriate. (244)

31 See Carroll, "Rough Heroes": "One can admire Tony's attempts to be a good father . . . without morally endorsing Tony's garroting squealers" (373). Paris asks: "Would not a work

that can help motivate and develop the claim about compartmentalized sympathy for evil characters. As I hope is clear, “compartmentalized sympathy” is shorthand for the compartmentalization of a large set of reactive attitudes and emotional responses.

Though Tony is Eaton’s motivating example, and though many philosophers have discussed Eaton’s argument and Tony’s role in it, the literature on immoralism does not often engage with the large body of critical work on *The Sopranos*. That is unfortunate, because many writers have addressed moral objections to the show in sophisticated ways. It is worth remembering that two decades ago, this series was the topic of extraordinary public attention, prompting denunciations from conservative writers, Republican politicians, feminist media critics, and various Italian American organizations—as well as awed praise from prominent film theorists, crime reporters, psychotherapists, and even the real-life Donnie Brasco.³² Sensitively contextualizing longstanding debates about *The Sopranos* must be part of any serious moral reckoning with it. Similarly, thorough interpretation is the inevitable groundwork for theoretical arguments that turn on claims about its ambitions and achievements.

In this section and the next, I will explain what philosophers invoking the example of Tony Soprano have tended to overlook. In this section, I will focus on the surprising difficulties we encounter in providing a succinct evaluation of Tony’s moral character and the reactive attitudes it ought to occasion. In the next section, I will say more about why it is unfair to convict *The Sopranos* of encouraging us to sympathize with its central character in immoral ways. My broader contention is that elements of the perspective defended here likely generalize to other examples of supposed immoral artistry, though I cannot make good on that claim in this paper.

Let us begin with a comparison. On the face of it, Tony Soprano is much worse than Omar Little. We have discussed Omar’s code and his sincere commitment to honoring it. Tony similarly thinks of himself as a scrupulous soldier, a champion of “family” and “honor,” but he prioritizes “business” in a way that reveals his rhetoric to be little more than narcissistic grandstanding. After all, he unhesitatingly eliminates all obstacles to his criminal enterprising even if they belong to the family—with efficient, remorseless brutality. He orders the killings of Big Pussy and Adriana as soon as he knows the risks they pose. He executes his nephew and protégé, Christopher, himself.

that prescribed dislike for [such characters] through and through, and that took no heed of their positive qualities, be likewise immoral, shallow, or hypocritically moralistic?” (“The ‘Moralism’ in Immoralism,” 21).

32 For discussion, see Lavery, “‘Coming Heavy’”; and O’Brien, “A Northern New Jersey of the Mind.”

Tony is also unapologetically sexist, racist, and homophobic. What is more, he is outrageously hypocritical about these prejudices.³³ He justifies his anti-Black racism by invoking Black criminality and parades a zealous fatphobia despite self-identifying as a “fat fucking crook from New Jersey.”

As this hypocrisy suggests, Tony’s cruelty results from a profoundly stunted moral character. His constant fat shaming most obviously reveals his “rage turned inward,” which is how his therapist Dr. Jennifer Melfi evocatively characterizes his depression. He is pathologically incapable of engaging with difficult emotions. His wife Carmela calls him a “wall” because of his expertise in deploying the silent treatment. Of his preferred emotional modes, silence is at least less scary than rage. Even Tony’s experience of positive emotions is diseased. He cries over his dead horse Pie-O-My but does not spare a thought for Adriana. As Melfi observes in the wake of the horse’s death: “The only other time you’ve been this emotional in here was for the ducks. You haven’t grieved for your mother or other human beings.”

So, all reasonable viewers agree that Tony is an angry, violent, vulgar, hateful, duplicitous, callous, self-hating, alexithymic, homophobic, racist, misogynistic, manipulative, entitled, sociopathic extortionist and murderer.³⁴ But this is just the beginning of the story! Notwithstanding these abominable characteristics, many viewers feel affection for Tony.³⁵ I think there are two main sources of this affection and our resulting fascination. First, Tony has admirable qualities. Second, we learn about his terrible moral qualities while also learning many judgment-complicating facts about his moral formation.

Many critics take the core accomplishment of *The Sopranos* to be its convincing juxtaposition of the mobster genre with the kind of suburban domestic drama more commonly associated with soap operas and sitcoms.³⁶ Central to

33 Baldanzi, “Bloodlust for the Common Man,” 86. Tony is just as hypocritical about the value of work and community, waxing poetic about the church built by his grandparents while scamming the Department of Housing and Urban Development (Polan, “*The Sopranos*,” 139), selling out his longtime poultry shop tenants to collect Jamba Juice dollars, etc.

34 Melfi puts it more simply in response to his stalking her (and demanding her reasons for rejecting his advances!): “Well ... you’re not a truthful person. You’re not respectful of women. You’re not really respectful of people. ... You take what you want from them by force, or the threat of force.” Tony’s response: “Fuck you! You fucking cunt!”

35 Carroll, “Sympathy for the Devil”; Harold, “A Moral Never-Never Land”; and Eaton, “Robust Immoralism.”

36 Most obviously, the technique of “crosscutting” (made famous in *The Godfather*) explicitly associates scenes of extreme violence and domestic warmth (Holden, introduction to *The New York Times on “The Sopranos*,” xiii). According to Geoffrey O’Brien, Tony represents the “domesticated end point for the romance of gangsterism that looks to be America’s most durable contribution to world folklore” (“A Northern New Jersey of the Mind,” 167). For

this conceit is Tony's authentic investment in the life of his immediate family.³⁷ He experiences deep, believable parental love for his children, Meadow and A.J. He is committed to becoming better as a father and apologizes sincerely when he lets them down. He cares about the friends and acquaintances of his children (at least the Caucasian ones). He listens to Carmela when it concerns his children's well-being, restraining his otherwise notoriously ungovernable impulses. And though he is a prodigious philanderer, his marital relationship is in other respects surprisingly respectful. Ellen Willis calls Carmela Tony's "emotional equal."³⁸ Cindy Donatelli and Sharon Alward say that Carmela, his mother Livia, and his sister Janice "have him by the balls, and he knows it."³⁹ These claims might be overstated, but it is plausible that Tony cares deeply about Carmela, as he cares deeply about his children and perhaps some other family members, and that we identify with his genuine attachment to the value of family.⁴⁰ These features of Tony's psychology fascinate because they are so jarringly incongruent with the cruelty he exhibits outside the home.

Tony is also loved by his children, by Carmela, and (at least on the face of it) by many of his friends and associates. This has obvious consequences for our sympathies: when decent people love someone, this licenses at least some justifiable hesitation about, for example, gleefully rooting for their death. Carmela is a complicated, compromised character, but I think it is appropriate to sympathize with her in various ways. Adriana is also compromised, but it is impossible not to sympathize with her, as successive FBI agents setting out to manipulate her discover. Both these characters love Tony; their love is grounded in value judgments that are skewed yet comprehensible. We have no reason to doubt the comparison when Adriana says: "You're such a good father. I wish my dad had been like that." Indeed, Tony is evidently a much better father than his own, though his mother Livia is fond of declaring her husband Johnny to have been "a saint" while venting about the inadequacies of her son. (More on this in a moment.) Whether or not we think of Meadow and A.J. as innocent, they are certainly not moral monsters, and they love their father. Many other characters describe Tony as a good dad, husband, brother, and friend.

general reflections on the series' genre bending, see Polan, "*The Sopranos*," 40-44, 108; and Carroll, "Sympathy for the Devil," 121.

37 Gini, "Bada-Being and Nothingness," 14.

38 Willis, "Our Mobsters, Ourselves," 3.

39 Donatelli and Alward, "I Dread You?" 65.

40 How much is the value of Tony's love undermined by his selfishness? By his (unconscious?) smokescreen of sentimentality? These are good questions, and the series asks them intelligently and consistently.

Besides loving and being loved, Tony has many charming traits. He is hilariously sarcastic. He says to A. J. when he is flirting with existentialism: “Even if God is dead, you’re still gonna kiss his ass.” He is a master of quick witticisms: “Well, sit down and dig into this medley of pastas that Janice whipped up.” He is the *capo dei capi* of Soprano speak, that New Jersey–Italian patois “so compressed and inventive in its mix of tones and jargons that it sound[s] like a new dialect, a poetically charged speech welded out of obscenities and banalities, misconstrued catchphrases and newly minted messages from the unconscious.”⁴¹ He even has a goofy penchant for punning, which seems especially dissonant with his thoughtless malice. And, of course, he has the gift of gab.

Though this is less obvious, Tony’s storytelling prowess is connected to his capacity for astute political vision. His cunning as an operator depends on discerning perception and a flair for imaginative narrativizing. *The Sopranos* presents this partly as hard-won wisdom—as when Tony seeks and internalizes advice from older mobsters such as Jackie Aprile and shrewd advisors such as Hesh Rabkin—and partly as an unteachable, intuitive grasp of subterranean realities, at certain points budding first in his active unconscious—as when the knowledge that Big Pussy is an informant comes to him in a dream. It is no coincidence, in short, that Tony becomes the boss of the DiMeo crime family. He is a savvy manager of his soldiers, a tough negotiator, and a preternaturally talented charmer.⁴² He is also a tenacious, courageous warrior, regularly compared to a bull and an ox.

Additionally, Tony is something of a mental health awareness pioneer. He is suicidally depressed and suffers from panic attacks. In an obviously basic sense, the series is about his search for therapeutic help. He even brings his wife in for couples therapy. Though prudence restrains his ability to publicize this mental health journey, he does gain some moral credit for struggling to break free of his highly limiting milieu.

Facts about Tony’s formative environment complicate our perspective on him at least as much as these personal charms. Consider Tony’s toxic familial relations and especially the intimated details of his treatment as a child. His mother, Livia, is a classic victim turned villain, a “monster out of Balzac” whose misery expresses itself in joylessness, repression, nostalgic delusion, and

41 O’Brien, “A Northern New Jersey of the Mind,” 161.

42 The contrast between Tony and his gang is emphasized when a trip to Italy sees Paulie mocked for classlessness, Christopher holed up in the hotel high on heroin, and a lone wolf Tony emerging triumphant from a sticky encounter with a female boss of the Neapolitan camorra. On Tony’s uncharacteristic overcoming of sexual temptation in this scene, see Green, “I Dunno about Morals, but I Do Got Rules,” 67. Compare Polan, “*The Sopranos*,” 36.

misanthropy.⁴³ Whether or not Melfi is correct in diagnosing her with borderline personality disorder, she is certainly correct in urging Tony to reckon with the fact that his mother abused him emotionally in childhood (“I could stick this fork in your eye!”), continuously mocks and repudiates his desire for parental love (“Poor you!” is her favorite refrain), and vindictively orchestrates an attempt to assassinate him (Tony to Carmela: “What kind of person can I be, where his own mother wants him dead?”).⁴⁴

I am inclined to extend this analysis further. Tony’s rage toward the mother who ignores his love—only acknowledged once he admits she wanted him dead—is a convenient cover for his more completely repressed rage toward his father, Giovanni “Johnny Boy” Soprano.⁴⁵ It was his father who denied him love most devastatingly, by serially abusing him, his siblings, and his mother, and by nudging him into the family business while Tony was still a child. In a scene whose psychic primacy is emphasized, Johnny praises his son for not expressing fear when he walks in on Johnny and his brother (Tony’s uncle Corrado “Junior” Soprano) cutting off Satriale’s pinkie finger as payment for a debt. This is the first step in Tony’s rise to the top—and also, the series implies, in his descent to the bottom.

Melfi is perceptive in noticing from the start that Tony’s desperate need for love is connected to his early family life and that the disappointment of this need leads to his own version of a split personality. He can seek love from Uncle Junior even after a feud over who should be head honcho eventuates in the attempted whacking. (Years later, Tony asks Junior, “Don’t you love me?” after swearing over and over that “He’s dead to me.”) The germination of this hostility is one of the heights of narrative achievement in *The Sopranos*. Corrado has thrown away a joyful love affair that lasted for sixteen years. Why? Because his lover Roberta reveals to an acquaintance that Junior performs cunnilingus expertly, and the secret gets out. Mafioso misogyny being what it is, a predisposition to pleasing apparently renders even a boss unmasculine. “They think that if you suck pussy, you’ll suck anything. It’s a sign of weakness.” Tony initially restrains himself, only mocking Junior in private, but eventually succumbs to slighting him publicly in retaliation after Junior needles him about going to therapy. Tony suspects he has made a mistake and expresses remorse in one of

43 O’Brien, “A Northern New Jersey of the Mind,” 162.

44 “Poor you!” is repeated unknowingly by Gloria Trillo, one of Tony’s many volatile mistresses, who is, as Melfi observes, much like his mother—to wit, a deeply damaged person who wants to die. Tony’s wince when Gloria says this registers his uncomfortable recognition.

45 Greene, “Is Tony Soprano Self-Blind?”

the most famous speeches in the show's history.⁴⁶ He is right: Junior sets up the hit attempt, one of the most crystallized expressions of the family dynamic just analyzed, both in the obvious sense that it is an instance of pathological intrafamilial violence and in the less obvious sense that being shot reinvigorates Tony (i.e., remasculinizes him) and temporarily quells his depression. Prozac and therapy cannot compare to the "kickstart" of warfare.⁴⁷

The preceding reflections also begin to explain how the institution of masculinity is a powerfully corrosive force that stifles the moral development of all the male Sopranos. As Willis argues, Tony's gangsterism gives him a sense of power and control, excitement and action, and an outlet for his unacknowledged rage "without encroaching on his alter ego as benevolent husband and father."⁴⁸ But panic attacks and depression reveal the underlying conflict that alcoholism and sexual decadence can only intermittently conceal. *The Sopranos* is widely understood to be an investigation of the so-called "crisis of masculinity"—and the more general nostalgia for a lost postwar order characterized in part by its uncritical patriarchy.⁴⁹ In Tony's words, "Outside it may be the 1990s, but in this house it's 1954." Seeing how noxious but pervasive ideals of masculinity mediate Tony's psychological development rightly affects our judgments and sympathies.⁵⁰

My point is not that a quick tongue or toxic family dynamic or the oppressiveness of masculinity *excuses* Tony's character. The point is that *The Sopranos* explores the moral development of evil across close to ninety hours of storytelling and that this exploration alters the complexion of our reactive attitudes. The parallel to Watson's story about Harris is undeniable, though I think Tony Soprano is far more interesting than Robert Harris.

Having explained why some sympathetic reactions to Tony are unobjectionable and desirable, I can now more usefully reconstruct and critique Eaton's

46 "Uncle Junior and I, we had our problems with the business. But I never should have razed him about eating pussy. This whole war could have been averted. Cunnilingus and psychiatry brought us to this!"

47 Walker, "Cunnilingus and Psychiatry Have Brought Us to This," 119.

48 Willis, "Our Mobsters, Ourselves," 6.

49 Lacey, "One for the Boys?"; Wolcott, "Bada Bing's Big Bang."

50 In the next section, I will discuss another morally complicating feature of the narrative: its representation of masculinity in crisis gives female characters more agency than is traditional in cinematic depictions of the mafia (Donatelli and Alward, "I Dread You?"). Ironically, it can be argued that the work is a feminist improvement on the gangster film not just because it more seriously investigates pathological masculinity but also because it convicts some female characters of full-fledged complicity in organized crime. See Carmela's admission: "I have forsaken what is right for what is easy." And compare Valerie Palmer-Mehta's essay "Disciplining the Masculine" on Janice Soprano's feminine masquerade.

reasons for thinking that at least some of our reactions to Tony are morally suspicious.

Here is my understanding of the suggestions.⁵¹ First, Eaton claims that some of us *love* or have great affection for Tony rather than merely sympathizing with him in the attenuated ways just canvassed.⁵² Second, Eaton claims that we like Tony in part *because of his badness* and that we “take a strange satisfaction in his morally repugnant deeds.”⁵³ Third, Eaton claims that we *take his side*, desiring that he commit more crimes, escape the police, and triumph over the forces of good.⁵⁴

Were these claims correct, they would distinguish our reactions to Tony from our reactions to Harris. Suitably spelled out, they might undermine the interpretation I have sketched and, with it, the viability of my appeal to compartmentalized sympathy. Further, these claims depend on some stimulating moral psychological theses that are both controversial and underdiscussed. I will consider each of them in turn.

Can viewers love Tony Soprano? My preferred answer is that we can love him only in a special, nonliteral sense. We love Tony in the sense that we view him as an extraordinarily engaging fictional creation. He provides us with valuable aesthetic and moral experiences. We love watching him—that is, we love watching James Gandolfini play this role, and we love watching the show that revolves around him. We do not literally love Tony. According to almost all philosophers of love, love involves robust concern for the beloved and/or devotion to their good. It is hard to see how we could have this kind of relationship to a fictional character.⁵⁵

We can set aside the question of whether to call this “love.” The more immediate concern is that our reaction to Tony is supposed to involve morally bad forms of sympathy or identification—for instance, an affection that minimizes his flaws. An account is needed of why this would be. More specifically, we need an account of the kind of love that it is possible to direct at morally repugnant *fictional characters*. I have sketched one: this state is a special form of *appreciation*, that is, appreciation of the aesthetic experiences that their existence

51 Some of this reasoning is stated in general characterizations of the rough hero, some in specific discussions of Tony.

52 Eaton, “Robust Immoralism,” 281.

53 Eaton, “Robust Immoralism,” 285, 287.

54 Eaton, “Robust Immoralism,” 285.

55 I have defended a view about love’s possible objects that is more permissive than the views of many philosophers (Shpall, “A Tripartite Theory of Love”). Nonetheless, I do not think my view can be extended to “love” for a fictional character, except in very special circumstances.

makes possible. This form of affectionate appreciation is probably distinctive to fiction. It is different in many respects from love for people who exist outside of fictions. Among other things, appreciating a character in this way is not so obviously connected to the danger of minimizing his flaws. Our appreciation might well involve being interested in keenly perceiving and evaluating such flaws. Fictional characters give us opportunities to appreciate in this way that real people usually do not.

Eaton's opening formulations are instructive in this connection. Consider the claim that we "miss" Tony. This claim is true on one natural understanding. The character was a stimulating, surprising narrative spectacle, and we were sad when the experience ended. It was also a delight to watch Gandolini's incomparable performance, and it is easy to miss that too. Consider, by contrast, the claim that Tony "feels like an old friend." This is straightforwardly metaphorical. There are many ways in which Tony could not possibly feel like an old friend: friendship is necessarily reciprocal, we feel deeply alienated from our friends when they murder people, and so on. That we love or appreciate Tony in the special sense in which that is possible reveals no moral problem with our responses. The defender of Eaton's analysis must reject my suggestion about how to understand our love for Tony and propose another.⁵⁶

Now consider Eaton's claim that we like Tony in part because of his badness. For me, this is the most compelling of Eaton's responses, though we disagree about its implications. Evaluating these issues requires a contentious foray into highly uncertain areas of philosophical psychology that philosophers writing on these issues have not yet pursued.

Attraction to badness in virtue of its (perceived) badness appears to be a real phenomenon. Here are some plausible examples from ordinary life. First, the disruptive humor of the class clown makes us laugh partly because the disruption is disrespectful. Second, for those of us seduced by drugs or other addictive substances or behaviors, such temptations may have a special magnetism precisely when we believe it is wrong to pursue them. Third, sexual fantasies frequently involve norm transgression, sometimes including the transgression of norms the fantasizers would never consider violating in real life.⁵⁷

For me, even this preliminary catalog suffices to motivate the possibility of attraction to the bad. However, the examples also suggest, appropriately, that the psychological nature and normative status of this attraction are poorly

56 See Eaton, "Robust Immoralism," 281. On the related metaphor of being friends with authors, compare Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics*, 109–12.

57 See Aaron Smuts, "The Ethics of Singing Along," 125, for a related discussion and the claim that imaginative engagement with fiction involves fantasies that we do not want to be actualized.

understood. If this phenomenon is real, it is both fascinating and puzzling. Indeed, the topic has perplexed artists and philosophers for a long time.⁵⁸

Let us assume that attraction to the bad occurs. If we observe it in ordinary life, how could it reveal something particularly significant about the responses we have to certain fictions? Suppose it is wrong to be attracted to Tony on account of his badness. Suppose for the time being that *The Sopranos* encourages this attraction (though I will dispute this in the next section). Still, this does not constitute an aesthetic achievement that increases the value of the series *qua* art. If attraction to badness on account of its badness is a common psychological phenomenon, then there is nothing aesthetically special about capitalizing on it. Genuine achievement requires success where success is not easy.⁵⁹

So, the proponent of Eaton's argument must defend a more detailed account of the psychology of attraction to the bad, an account that vindicates the aesthetic achievement claim. It is not sufficient to say that overcoming our imaginative resistance is such an achievement, since attraction to the bad *always* involves overcoming resistance, even when it occurs in everyday contexts where any claim about artistry would be misplaced. It could be that artists who encourage our attraction to evil characters are simply tapping into abiding psychological dispositions that it is easy to activate. The argument's proponent must also defend an account of the norms on attraction to badness such that, for example, being attracted to Tony on account of his badness is morally problematic. In doing so, they will have to contend with various complications, for instance, the fact that sexual fantasies often seem to involve attraction to the bad and that it seems harsh to condemn these fantasies as morally problematic on these grounds alone.⁶⁰ Additionally, more needs to be said about whether and how we should differentiate attraction to the bad in fiction and fantasy from attraction to the bad in reality.

Finally, consider Eaton's claim that we take Tony's side, desiring that he commit more crimes, escape the police, and prevail over the forces of good.⁶¹ To this claim there is an easy rejoinder. Tony is the heart of *The Sopranos*, which we enjoy watching tremendously. If Tony is killed, captured, or subdued, the

58 Compare Poe, "The Imp of the Perverse"; Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*; Stocker, "Desiring the Bad"; and Velleman, "The Guise of the Good."

59 To be clear, in this paragraph I am granting premises 1–5 for the sake of argument and denying premise 6 (the aesthetic achievement premise). In the next section, I explain how *The Sopranos* unwaveringly encourages *condemnation* of Tony's badness, even if it also encourages fascination with it.

60 For an outstanding recent discussion of rape fantasies, see Fraser, "Rape Fantasies."

61 See also Clavell-Vazquez, "Sugar and Spice, and Everything Nice." Clavell-Vazquez agrees that "appreciators are prescribed to *ally* with rough heroes."

series will end, or it will be radically transformed in ways that curtail our pleasure. We want him to commit more crimes in the sense that we want more crimes to happen in the world of Father Brown and that we want the bank heist in *Rififi* to continue to its successful consummation. If we take some satisfaction in his morally repugnant deeds, this is because those deeds are appreciated as apt continuations of an enjoyable yarn. Just as some aspects of our “love” for Tony are best understood as a distinctive form of aesthetic appreciation, our alliance with him is best understood as a desire that the filmmakers allow this appreciation to continue.⁶²

What I emphatically deny is that most viewers take intrinsic enjoyment in the suffering of Tony’s victims.⁶³ On the contrary, we are regularly appalled and disgusted by his crimes. I still feel a queasy repulsion whenever I recall the scene of Tony calling Adriana from a payphone to set up her horrifying murder by Silvio. Of course, moral crimes can be depicted with artistry, making their depiction enjoyable to watch even when we regard the depicted actions as abominable. I will later note that *The Sopranos* is often lauded for its grotesquely realistic and absurdly comic representations of violence, which resist the congenial cinematic temptation to romanticize violence for aesthetic ends.⁶⁴ I will also say more about how the series consciously departs from *The Godfather* and other mob cinema, including in its commitment to depicting the pathetic ugliness of evil. But these claims are unnecessary for the present argument.

I have explored several challenges to the idea that our sympathy for characters like Tony Soprano is morally problematic. I conclude this section by emphasizing how these reflections have also helped to locate some intriguing differences between sympathetic engagement with fiction and sympathetic engagement with reality.

We rarely desire to spend time with actual people we regard as despicable, though we may still like or admire some of their qualities. If Tony were really your neighbor, and after hearing his life story on National Public Radio you met him at a Parent-Teacher Association meeting, you might be curious and courageous enough to have a beer with him in a well-lighted place, but you probably would not invite him over for a family barbecue.⁶⁵ Your reasonable

62 For an account of the underlying psychology of imaginative engagement with fiction and an application to “desiring the safety of Tony Soprano,” see Doggett and Egan, “How We Feel about Terrible, Non-Existent Mafiosi,” 290.

63 For some provocative claims about whether artworks in general invite us to enjoy suffering, see Smuts, “The Ethics of Singing Along,” 127.

64 Polan, “*The Sopranos*,” 25–31.

65 Carroll, “Sympathy for the Devil”; and Harold, “A Moral Never-Never Land.”

hesitation would be grounded in distrust, fear, and moral condemnation—as it is for some fictional characters in *The Sopranos* who avoid Tony like the plague.

But *we* need not distrust or fear the fictional Tony Soprano, because he does not exist.⁶⁶ It would be unsurprising if this made it easier to like or admire him than it would be to like or admire a real-life Tony counterpart. A separate though related point is that the appropriateness conditions governing reactions to a fictional character with grievous moral flaws are surely different from those governing reactions to a real person with the same flaws. It is not just easier to like and root for the fictional Tony. It is less objectionable—if it is objectionable at all.⁶⁷

What is more, there is an argument for thinking that most of us are too judgmental and hard-hearted in personal relations and that having more fictional sympathy, even for bad characters, could be a kind of virtuous training. I am not sure whether this is true. It does help highlight the range of concerns one might have with the claim that sympathy, affection, admiration, and other positive reactions to bad fictional characters are morally bad.

I have given my reasons for rejecting Eaton's second premise—that it is morally bad to sympathize with an irredeemably vicious character—when it is applied to Tony Soprano (assuming for the sake of argument that he is irredeemably vicious). As before, I acknowledge that a full analysis of the force of Eaton's argument needs to consider other cases. I doubt the essential points made here depend on idiosyncratic features of *The Sopranos*, but evaluation of this suspicion must be left to the enterprising reader.

4. THE CONTENT OF ARTISTIC PRESCRIPTIONS

I will now complete my argument by showing how difficult it is to make good on the claim of *immoral* artistry, that is, the claim that artworks—and especially great artworks such as *The Sopranos*—prescribe immoral responses in a way that contributes to their artistic achievement. I do not deny that some artworks prescribe some immoral responses. I do deny Eaton's claim that such

66 Walton, "Fearing Fictions."

67 Kieran, "Art, Morality, and Ethics," 135. This set of observations also puts pressure on Eaton's contention (premise 6) that rough-hero works are special aesthetic achievements. The special achievement is supposed to be a distinctive overcoming of imaginative resistance. But it may be that our interest in and sympathy for bad fictional characters has little resistance to overcome, because we recognize that our interest and sympathy is, on account of being directed at a fiction, unproblematic.

prescriptions are endemic to the works she identifies. It convicts too many artworks of too much immorality, and it does so in the wrong places.⁶⁸

I will defend my skepticism by defending *The Sopranos* from the charge of immorality, articulating my own view about its most important prescriptions and their moral status. The interpretation I have offered already shows why we must ask more precise questions than “Does the series encourage us to sympathize with Tony?” The series encourages various forms of sympathy, condemnation, ambivalence, and many other attitudes and emotions.⁶⁹ I will develop my interpretation by defending three main theses about what reactions the filmmakers appear to be encouraging.

First, to the qualified extent that we are encouraged to identify with Tony, we are also encouraged to realize that our susceptibility to him is striking and problematic. In other words, we are encouraged to entertain an indictment of our dispositions and the (American) culture that has shaped them. *The Sopranos* is a sharp, absurdist critique of the moral-psychological foundations of American capitalism. We see ourselves not in Tony’s murderousness but in his atavistic consumerism. More interestingly, we see our own perhaps inchoate misgivings dramatized as Tony vaguely grasps the tension between his unrestrained individualism in business and his valorization of family and community.⁷⁰

At one point, Tony’s mistress Gloria says: “You really are in love with yourself . . . you deprive yourself of nothing.” This is only true in the sense that he takes whatever he wants, often prompting Carmela and Melfi to analogize him to a child—which highlights, not incidentally, the important connections between Tony and his father, who is almost always referred to as Johnny Boy. Properly understood, Tony’s compulsive eating, drinking, and fucking are not

68 For discussion of the distinction between an artwork that presents a perspective and one that expresses a commitment to it, see Giovanelli, “Ethical Criticism in Perspective.”

69 Compare the idea that *Paradise Lost* “prescribes our wonder, reverential admiration, and respect for the grand but evil being” (Eaton, “Robust Immoralism,” 284). See McGregor, “A Critique of the Value Interaction Debate,” in which he claims that Eaton oversimplifies both habitual reactions to Milton’s Satan and the reactions prescribed by the work (449–66). Likewise, are we really lured into condoning the pedophilia of Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* (Eaton, “Robust Immoralism,” 284)? For persuasive arguments against this, see Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics*, 194–202; and McGregor, “A Critique of the Value Interaction Debate,” 457–58.

70 The theme of callow consumerism is emphasized in numerous ways. Paulie’s appalling crimes fund a life of watching mindless infomercials. Even Neapolitan mobsters delight in the ability to purchase Mont Blanc pens cheaply in New York because of the weak American dollar. The representation of gangsters as superficial, social-climbing bores departs markedly from cinematic traditions of representing them as rugged individuals or bastions of family values.

really expressions of self-love but of repressed despair.⁷¹ Melfi suggests that “many Americans” identify with this brand of American malaise, with Tony’s sense that he “came in at the end, that the best is over.”⁷² She is right. Viewers feel attached to this sentiment not because they lament the decline of the mafia but because they recognize Tony is really talking about the (perceived) decline of traditional sources of meaning: family, honorable and fair work, community, faith. They may also recognize that *The Sopranos* offers a diagnosis of the roots of these social changes—in secular capitalist individualism—that may emphasize our own collaboration.

Of course, some people are attracted to the nihilistic hedonism and apparently unaccountable patriarchy of Tony’s world outside the home. That reaction raises interesting moral questions, and I will conclude this essay by briefly commenting on it. However, though Tony fantasizes that he can arrest social movement and sustain the old orders by force of will, this facade of control is represented as a hopeless death rattle. To the extent that *The Sopranos* encourages us to identify with Tony, it does so to make us recoil from our own problematic tendencies toward nostalgia and narcissism, and to laugh at the craven spectacle of hegemonic capitalism, whose apparently “law-abiding citizens” are often insider traders or tobacco executives.⁷³ The series does something morally serious in issuing such provocations.

Second, *The Sopranos* encourages viewers to reflect on American film’s long-standing patterns of depicting and glorifying violence and, more specifically, on the meaning of cinema’s obsession with the mafia.⁷⁴ Melfi’s son Jason says: “At this point in our cultural history, mob movies are classic American cinema, like westerns.”⁷⁵ Characters such as Silvio and Tony affectionately mimic gangster films, model themselves on their archetypes, and explicitly associate the rugged stoicism of the gangster with a broader tradition of masculine iconography, epitomized by Tony’s compulsive habit of lionizing Gary Cooper via

71 As Carmela’s covetousness is a mask for her unhappiness—and an Achilles’ heel that Tony regularly exploits to win back her good graces.

72 Hayward and Biro, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Tony Soprano”: “Tony’s problems are symptomatic of a more generalized cultural anxiety, or a more widely felt insecurity generated by commodification and the decline of community” (211). And it is not just Americans who so identify. Lacey, “One for the Boys?”: “Tony Soprano functions as a cipher for the lived contradictions of the British middle-aged, or middle-aging, middle management lifestyle but with the escapist fantasies of Mafia masculinity” (100).

73 Green, “I Dunno about Morals, but I Do Got Rules,” 61.

74 Symonds, “Show Business or Dirty Business?”

75 For more on how *The Sopranos* engages with the figure of the cowboy, see Polan, “*The Sopranos*,” 103–4; and Gini, “Bada-Being and Nothingness,” 9.

the phrase “the strong, silent type.”⁷⁶ Christopher does them one better by producing *Cleaver*, a ridiculous shlock-mafia-horror flick that premieres to a packed house of tickled mob families. Many critics have analyzed the aims of this intertextual play and the dozens of references in the series to films such as *Public Enemy* and especially *The Godfather* trilogy.⁷⁷ I will briefly sketch a core departure from tradition that supports the view that *The Sopranos* encourages a distinctive perspective on violent representation.

It is sometimes claimed that *The Godfather* anticipated the conservative “family values” revival of Reagan-era America.⁷⁸ The stately Corleone family and the Don who takes justice into his own hands when the state fails to live up to its promises expressed a germinating reactionary response to widespread feelings of social disintegration prompted, supposedly, by the 1960s counterculture and the upheavals of the civil rights and antiwar movements.⁷⁹ This context helps explain the Soprano crew’s mythologizing. *The Godfather* presents at least a chosen few mobsters as refined and worldly-wise guardians of the family, justice, and Italian American identity.⁸⁰

It also helps to contextualize the self-conscious exploration of violence in *The Sopranos* within the broader history of the gangster film. The domesticated gangster inhabits a narrative still characterized by outsized misogyny but in which women are now accorded “equal dramatic weight.”⁸¹ For example, Lorraine Bracco’s casting as Jennifer Melfi functions to recall her role as Karen Hill in *Goodfellas*, which was itself “a breakthrough gangster film for the female

76 The careful viewer sees cracks in this story. Compare James Harold on Tony’s viewing of *Public Enemy*, his favorite film, after his mother’s death, which prompts him to imagine having a loving mother, smile, and then cry (“A Moral Never-Never Land,” 140); and Christopher Kocela on Tony’s admission that he resents Dr. Melfi because the therapeutic relationship makes him feel like a pussy (“From Columbus to Gary Cooper,” 106).

77 Pattie, “Mobbed Up.”

78 Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, 164.

79 This is not to say that the filmmakers endorsed this reactionary perspective. Francis Ford Coppola thought of the film as an anti-capitalist allegory, though he also conceded that it projects an idealized vision of the mob (Cowie, *The Godfather Book*, 66).

80 According to David Pattie, this also explains why Scorsese’s mob films are not objects of adoration, even though they are evidently familiar with them (“Mobbed Up,” 143). These films are “despairing, blackly humorous tales of a mob in decline,” which too clearly express Tony’s anxieties about the family business, the family, and society. The idealized mob of *The Godfather* and the America of the 1950s are—like the idealized version of Johnny Boy Soprano and the New Jersey mob of the 1970s—fictional Gary Coopers at the heart of Tony’s self-constitution.

81 O’Brien, “A Northern New Jersey of the Mind,” 168.

narrator.”⁸² In *The Sopranos*, Melfi’s repudiation of violence accelerates this humanizing critique of the genre. Besides foregrounding the “feminine,” emotionally engaged, peaceful practice of psychotherapy in its very first scene, and besides sympathetically presenting Melfi’s absorbed devotion to her patients, the series explores Melfi’s own successful struggle to uphold her principles even when it is most tempting to violate them. After suffering a horrifying rape, Melfi refuses to reveal details about her injuries, evading Tony’s prying even though police misconduct has led to a perversion of justice and she has confirmed the identity of the perpetrator. She understandably fantasizes about the retribution Tony would eagerly enact on her behalf. She openly explores her rage and vindictive desire with her own therapist. Nonetheless, this flirtation with temptation all the more convincingly frames her courage in resisting it and effectively reprimands those audience members who want her to acquiesce to Tony’s corrupt system of justice.⁸³ The series prescribes respect and sympathy for this struggle and Melfi’s strength of character. I will extend this crucial point momentarily.

More generally, *The Sopranos* centers the perspectives of female victims of patriarchal control in the form of central and not so central characters as different as Adriana and Tracee and Rosalie Aprile, characters who are to varying degrees complicit in the wrongdoing of those who oppress them.⁸⁴ And it depicts violent acts by employing a destabilizing mixture of tones, eschewing the aesthetic trappings that are often used to sanitize or even beautify them.⁸⁵ These are conscious, enduring departures from the implicit prescriptions surrounding depictions of violence in many classic works of American film and television in the gangster and western genres and beyond.

82 Akass and McCabe, “Beyond the Bada Bing!” 148. Similarly, Suzanne Shepherd plays the mother of Karen Hill (Lorraine Bracco) in *Goodfellas* as well as Carmela’s mother in *The Sopranos*. See Plourde, “Eve of Destruction.”

83 Baldanzi, “Bloodlust for the Common Man.”

84 It should be noted that Carmela is arguably the show’s greatest character and, as I have suggested, a highly ambiguous figure in the context of this critique. She recognizes Tony’s flaws, rebukes him, and often outwits him. She is an engaged mother, a caring friend, and a charitable figure in the community. But she is living high on blood money and she knows it—though she is able to maintain certain delicate fictions about whose blood is on her hands. This is put to her once with harsh directness by a psychoanalyst named Dr. Krakower. She weeps for a night, extracts \$50,000 from Tony to donate to Columbia University, and takes refuge in the Catholic assurance that divorce is out of the question. For discussion, see McCabe and Akass, “What Has Carmela Ever Done for Feminism?” 47.

85 On the grotesque, horrifying, and absurdly comic depictions of violence, which the creators employ to stimulate questions about our responses to violence in film and television, see Polan, “*The Sopranos*,” 25–31.

Third, Melfi is the moral center of the series. Notwithstanding her flaws, she is worthy of our sympathy and admiration. This identification colors all our reactions to the work. No plausible interpretation of the series and its moral prescriptions can ignore this pivotal fact.

Some critics make much of Melfi's fascination with Tony, which does sometimes veer into the prurient.⁸⁶ They may conclude partly on this basis that *The Sopranos* has no clear moral perspective and engages instead in a satirical post-modern sendup of bourgeois moralism.⁸⁷ I am not convinced. Questions about Melfi's professional obligations—whether she should have treated Tony in the first place, when she should have stopped—are left dangling, appropriately. Questions about her voyeuristic interest are emphasized throughout, with her therapist accusing her of seeking a “vicarious thrill.” This set of questions is framed so starkly because Melfi's fascination mirrors our own.⁸⁸ But these observations do little to motivate any thoroughgoing skepticism about Melfi's character or her central role in articulating the ethical identity of *The Sopranos*.

Consider an interpretive puzzle at the heart of the work's conception. The puzzle concerns Melfi's faith in therapy. More specifically, it concerns her conviction that therapy has transformative potential even for someone as vicious as Tony.⁸⁹ Some characters believe this faith is naïve. Her ex-husband criticizes her (and her profession) of a “cheesy moral relativism” in the face of evil. Others suspect Melfi is just one more victim of Tony's expert manipulations.⁹⁰ At the very least, we are encouraged to wonder if her optimism owes more to motivated reasoning than evidence. Tony himself incessantly maligns the therapeutic process, lampoons Melfi's urbanity, and insultingly compares her to a useless con artist.

Yet Tony keeps coming to Melfi's office, paying what he claims to be extortionate rates for the privilege. Why? Because he knows Dr. Melfi is no dummy and no pushover. She is certainly no moral relativist. She condemns Tony more audaciously and insightfully than any other character, attacking his

86 Polan, “*The Sopranos*,” 84, 121–22, 131.

87 Polan, “*The Sopranos*,” 119.

88 She even rightly chastises Dr. Eliot Kupferberg, *her own therapist*, who has often urged her to stop treating Tony, for returning to the topic of Tony in a session when she is speaking about unrelated things. The implication is that we are all in glass houses and should be careful about throwing stones. See Schulman, “An American Existentialism,” 24. Schulman claims that Melfi is a “stand-in for the project of the show itself.”

89 Baldanzi, “Bloodlust for the Common Man,” 89.

90 Schulman, “An American Existentialism”: “Psychoanalysis does not help Tony”; more generally, “no one on the show changes much” (34).

tribalism and his hypocrisy during many episodes of eloquent exchange.⁹¹ She sees through Tony's defenses, urging him to repudiate his "high sentimentality mode" and to "own [his] feelings." Her brand of toughness is more convincing than his, at least to this viewer. She demonstrates astonishing poise and fortitude in dealing with an impossible patient—which Tony recognizes and respects to the point of thanking her sincerely for saving his life. And her brand of compassion is also compelling. She feels compassion for Tony not (primarily) because she is inappropriately fascinated by criminality or transfixed by his charms but because she understands him and his pain better than anyone else, even better than the people who know him best. This compassion is continuous with her compassion for her other deeply troubled and troubling patients, which is displayed vividly in the confrontation with Tony after Gloria's death. Finally, she is animated by an inspiring, philosophical-religious hope in the human potential to grow, particularly as a result of therapeutic intervention. She says that the process of talk therapy is "like giving birth." Revealingly, Tony accepts some aspects of this characterization while proposing an alternative metaphor: it is "more like taking a shit." In this context, that seems like a resounding endorsement.

Melfi's faith in self-examination and conversation may be overblown, in short, but it is also a beacon of sincerity and generous human feeling in a narrative world teeming with hypocrisy and egoism. Whether Tony does grow as a result of therapy is a more difficult issue. I am tempted to say that he improves in some modest ways and that Melfi deserves the credit.⁹² This is an unpopular view, which Melfi herself apparently repudiates as the story ends. Having finally terminated their sessions, she says that psychopaths like Tony "sharpen their skills as con men on their therapists." That does not settle matters, but I need not defend any characterization of Tony's moral trajectory. The important thing is that Melfi is the perspectival core of *The Sopranos*, the character with whom we are encouraged to identify most. We are prescribed to use her thoughts and feelings as (fallible) guides to the moral realities of the fiction—and as checks on our own voyeuristic impulses.

91 Harold, "A Moral Never-Never Land"; and Plourde, "Eve of Destruction."

92 One example: Melfi appears to succeed in softening Tony's homophobia, *almost* to the point of getting him to pardon Vito Spatafore and welcome him back into the fold. It is the powerful homophobic hatred of others—his captains, the Leotardo family, even Carmela—that eventually forces Tony's hand. Another example: Tony's impulse control does seem to improve, if slightly. It is almost unbelievable that he refuses to sleep with Julianna, but he does appear to walk away from the encounter because of his desire to honor Carmela's devotion to him. Larger and more difficult examples concern the evolutions in Tony's relationships with characters such as A. J. and Janice.

I have now provided an interpretation of *The Sopranos* and an analysis of some of its structuring prescriptions that show the series to be pursuing a variety of artistic strategies that are *prima facie* morally praiseworthy. How might the immoralist respond? I will close by considering two objections. I hope this demonstrates how my analysis of the series facilitates useful responses that help clarify the state of play in value interaction debates.

Noel Carroll and others emphasize that there is distinctive value in artworks that expose our own limitations as moral reasoners.⁹³ Eaton thinks this view commits us to inconsistency.⁹⁴ In order to claim that works such as *The Sopranos* serve as a cautionary warning about irrelevant moral static, it must be that they do in fact lead us to, for example, inappropriately minimize the moral failings of characters such as Tony, at least for a time. So, immoral prescription is an essential condition of these works' achievements.

The Sopranos is an interesting test case here. On the one hand, it is particularly adept at prompting viewers to reflect on how personal charm can distort patterns of affective response and the causally related processes of moral judgment. On the other hand, it never shrinks from presenting the disgusting, appalling brutality of evil. Some viewers may minimize Tony's awfulness because they are charmed by his jokes or stupefied by his magnetism. Yet that is their mistake, and we learn something from it.⁹⁵ Most viewers are not at all confused about how bad Tony is, as I argued at length in the previous section. That suggests the series is less invested in uncovering flaws in our moral responses than some have believed. I think it is much more invested in ironically distancing us from a relatively uncritical interest in cinema's mobsters, that is, from more traditional cinematic representations of violent men. In any event, even if the series does encourage local minimization of Tony's flaws, this does not suffice for immoral prescription, assuming that *The Sopranos* encourages it in order to facilitate valuable reflection.⁹⁶

93 Carroll, "Rough Heroes." On artworks that dramatize "how easily we can be moved to take up attitudes we would reject if we thought more carefully" and that show us "the manipulative power of rhetoric in general and of art in particular," see Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics*, 201. Compare George Wilson on *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (*Narration in Light*, ch. 6) and Gaut on *The Destroyers* and *Lolita* (*Art, Emotion, and Ethics*, 192–202). For a recent discussion of "seductive artworks," see Stear, "The Paradox of Seductive Artworks."

94 Eaton, "Reply to Carroll," 376.

95 On bad fans, see Nussbaum, "The Great Divide." On the cult of *Scarface* worship and how it subverts the intentions of the film's creators, compare Smuts, "The Ethics of Singing Along."

96 Some claim that even if the higher-level artistic aim is morally good, and even if the lower-level ambition to stimulate morally problematic judgments is instrumental to this aim, the lower-level aim suffices for immoral artistry (Kieran, "Art, Morality, and Ethics,"

Eaton is also skeptical about the claim that we do successfully compartmentalize our reactions to characters such as Tony. This skepticism is grounded in her account of what rough hero works characteristically prescribe. Here is an interesting passage:

It is, on my account, a paradigmatic feature of [rough hero works] that they deliberately make it nearly impossible for us to resolve the conflict between our approval and disapproval by neatly cordoning off the deplorable from the admirable . . . good instances of the Rough Hero solicit a powerful cocktail of pro attitudes directed at a complex multiplicity of intertwined traits, and this serves to land the audience in a state of deep ambivalence and moral confusion: we approve of something that we also condemn and are kept from settling on any consistent position.⁹⁷

How exactly might *The Sopranos*, or any artwork, encourage *morally problematic inconsistency* in moral judgment about its characters? The key hypothesis is that there is “something” we are prompted to both approve of and condemn, which renders ambivalence deep and irresolvable and compartmentalization impossible. This something is Tony Soprano himself or a set of his traits.⁹⁸

It is my contention that detailed interpretation undermines this claim about the structure and moral status of our ambivalence by isolating many of the separably evaluable components of his character as well as potentially mitigating facts about his history and milieu. Moreover, *The Sopranos* is a great work of art partly because it prescribes this complex yet explicable and consistent suite of reactions. Consider this passage from my favorite essay on the series:

By the time we got to the end we had seen a thousand Tonys—sheepish, serpentine, commanding, calculating, lecherous, self-pitying, savagely sarcastic, tenderly paternal, fatuously self-pleased, teary-eyed over an old radio hit, racked by paranoid mistrust, exploding in feral rage—and seen one switch to another in an instant. Guileless self-revelation was not a possibility, least of all in a psychiatrist’s office. *He had so many of him to choose from.*⁹⁹

Such clarity of analysis does not suggest moral confusion. Tony charms us, beguiles us, repulses us, and we happily submit to it all. We are not often

139). I do not see why. For a useful recent discussion, see Stear, “The Paradox of Seductive Artworks,” 478.

97 Eaton, “Reply to Carroll,” 378.

98 Eaton, “Reply to Carroll”: “We are moved to *simultaneously approve and disapprove of the same character* yet are offered nothing to resolve the conflict” (379, emphasis added).

99 O’Brien, “A Northern New Jersey of the Mind,” 162 (emphasis added).

confused about whether and when to condemn him or about which of his traits are good (tenderly paternal) and which bad (feral rage). But we are often entranced by this artwork's capacity to give even evil characters the sorts of traits and histories that inspire justified admiration and sympathy.

The Sopranos shows how difficult it is to make good on the claim of immoral artistry. If the series encourages immoral reactions, they are not the ones Eaton suggests. Here are two better candidates. First, it may encourage the stereotyping of Italian Americans. I will not defend a view about this topic. I will note that the series regularly engages in metafictional play aimed at drawing attention to both the ills of prejudice and the often sanctimonious, hypocritical follies of ethnic pride. I also note that David Chase, the show's creator, has addressed criticism from Italian Americans forcefully and with intelligence.¹⁰⁰ Suppose for the sake of argument that the series does encourage pernicious anti-Italian American stereotypes. It would be an uphill battle to make this moral flaw into an artistic virtue, even if those stereotypes are necessary for the work's existence. As I argued at the beginning of this paper, racist punchlines do not on their own constitute valuable artistic strategies.

Second, *The Sopranos* may encourage viewers to identify with a misogynistic ideal of manhood and, particularly, with a problematic ideal of male sexual conquest and what facilitates it. For example, it may do this by too uncritically bringing attractive women into the sexual-romantic orbit of Tony and other sociopathic criminals.¹⁰¹ It is tempting to note in reply that Tony's affairs are much less satisfying than he hopes (indeed, some are positively traumatizing); that the problems with gendered beauty standards in film and television are general ones, in no way specific to this artwork; and that power, mysteriousness, and even dangerousness do in fact contribute to sexual attraction, presumably in gendered ways. But I can see an argument that *The Sopranos* overplays its hand here. If it does encourage a crassly misogynistic vision of male achievement, then I think this is a dual defect, an unfortunate deviation from the moral

100 See Peter Bogdanovich's terrific interview with Chase, especially the discussion beginning at 1:05 (Bogdanovich, "Exclusive Video Interview with Sopranos Creator David Chase").

101 In a sharp bit of intertextual commentary, this view—that mob films not only display a pre-existing masculine fantasy of sexual promiscuity and objectification but actively create and perpetuate it—is forcefully articulated in *The White Lotus* (season 2), a recent HBO series, by Albee Di Grasso, the young adult son of the sex-addicted Dominic Di Grasso. Dominic is played by Michael Imperioli, who everybody associates with Christopher Moltisanti. Though Albee is there critiquing his father's and grandfather's adoration of *The Godfather*, the audience knows that in some sense he must also be commenting on *The Sopranos*.

and aesthetic standards of an otherwise extraordinary contribution to American culture.

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