Contrary feelings and the cognitive significance of art

It seems more or less assumed that we emotionally respond to artworks[1] and that this aspect of our engagement with them is a basic constituent of their appreciation. This feature seems to afford an experiential dimension to our engagement with art. In fact, one could claim, we actually exercise evaluative and emotional abilities while engaging with artworks. If this is so, it seems artworks could be good devices to try and test our moral psychology; for it sometimes allows us to experiment, judge, and respond to situations one may not likely encounter.

I will more or less assume this view as settled and I will focus upon some possible cases that may be regarded as problematic given this view. These are cases where we seem to respond to the events represented by the work in ways that are at odds with the ways in which we would usually respond where those events actual ones. I have in mind, for example, the admiration, or at least, sympathy, one can feel towards the main character of Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr Ripley* or the indulgent attitude we seem to have towards Humbert Humbert in *Lolita***.** I would like to examine to what extent these cases may threaten our confidence in relying upon our emotional engagement with artworks as a source of moral enhancement or knowledge.

If some artworks may make us respond in ways that are at odds with the response that would be warranted were the situations perceived real, can we still grant that the experiential aspect of our engagement with works of art is cognitively valuable? Can our responses to fictional works be regarded as a form of *éducation sentimentale*?

Several reasons have been offered in order to challenge this conclusion. I will broadly classify them into two groups: i) The fact that our responses

[1] I will not address the problem known as the 'paradox of fiction'. For the purposes of this paper it is sufficient that we acknowledge some sort of response towards the artwork independently of whether those states are real emotions or quasi-emotions.

towards artworks are the outcome of an imagined situation leaves them without epistemic robustness and ii) Emotional responses to fictions are not on a par with real emotions because (a) either they involve mechanisms that are different from those that characterize real emotions or (b) their warranting conditions are different.

i) Lack of epistemic robustness .

Most authors agree upon the fact that imaginative processes are related to current beliefs and attitudes in significant ways. We tend to process imagined and believed contents in similar ways. For example, if I imagine that $p \Rightarrow q$, and that p, I would probably imagine that q holds. Similarly if I tend to value positively someone's generosity, I would probably tend to imaginatively respond with a positive feeling to my imagining that someone is generous.

However, it also follows from a common view about imagination that this faculty is typically unconstrained. In fact, it seems that several examples confirm that one can imagine whatever one wants to imagine. I may imagine that 2+2=5 or that someone may travel in time, or speak a new language out of the blue. Furthermore, it has been claimed one can imagine responding to the contents imagined in ways that are at odds with the ways one would respond in the corresponding real contexts. For example I may imagine that someone's generosity is dreadful instead of admirable.

If this is so, my responses to fictional events need not always match those I would be inclined to have or that I consider as warranted. Thus, the unlimited freedom to imagine and respond as I please may threaten in significant ways the alleged connection between my imaginings and my beliefs in terms of the corresponding attitudes.

The idea that imagination is fully unconstrained can be challenged,

though. Kathleen Stock[2], among others, has defended that there are some constraints to what one can imagine. Still, one may wonder whether these limitations determine the ways in which we emotionally respond to what we imagine. For it is plausible that there are some limits to what one can imagine, but that they are such that our emotional responses do not submit to them.

In any case, even if this account of imagination as partly constrained turns out to be false, we can still hold that there are limits to the ways in which one can *respond* to the imagined content. Cases of the phenomenon known as 'imaginative resistance'[3] seems to confirm that there are at least some constraints to the ways in which we can respond to our imaginings.

The phenomenon of imaginative resistance shows that even if we might be free to imagine all sorts of contents, we do not seem to be equally free in responding to those contents as we want or as the work prescribes. As one of the typical examples makes evident, I may imagine that Giselda killed her baby but I cannot imagine she did the right thing, in the sense of responding with approval to that fact. We do not seem to be free in responding to our imaginings as we please. Even when the work prescribes a particular sort of answer, one may find it difficult to respond in the required way.

The phenomenon of imaginative resistance shows not only that

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[2] Stock, Kathleen, 'Are we free to directly imagine?, draft of the paper presented at the 67th ASA Annual Meeting, Denver, October, 2009.

[3] Some prominent contributions to the subject of imaginative resistance are: Walton, Kendall, 'Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality/I' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 68 (1994), pp. 27-50. Tamar Szabó Gendler, 'The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance' *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 97, 2000, pp. 55-81. Moran, Richard, (1994) 'The expression of Feeling in Imagination' *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 103, pp. 75-106; Weatherson, Brian (2004) 'Morality, Fiction, and Possibility' *Philosophers' Imprint*, Vol. 4, n 3, pp. 1-27. Stock, Kathleen, (2005) 'Resisting Imaginative Resistance' *Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 5; Stokes, Dustin, R., (2006), 'The Evaluative Character of Imaginative Resistance' *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 46, nº 4, October, pp. 387-405. Walton, Kendall L., (2006) 'On the (So-Called) Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance' in Shaun Nichols, *The Architecture of the Imagination* Oxford University Press, pp. 137-148; Tamar Szabó Gendler, (2006) 'Imaginative Resistance Revisited' in S. Nichols (ed.), *The Architecture of the Imagination*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 149-174.

imagination might be constrained –or at least that the attitudes developed towards what we imagine may be so- but it also reveals there seems to be some continuity between responding to artistic and real contexts. This could bring some support to the claim that our emotions towards artworks are reliable devices to test our moral psychology. Basically, one could claim, emotional responses to artistic representations are sensitive to the same patterns and reasons that current emotions are in real contexts. If the latter are trustworthy devices to capture our evaluative relationships so are the former.

ii) Emotional responses to artworks are not on a par to real emotions.

ii.i) Emotional responses to artworks are structurally different from real emotions.

Emotions in response to fictions cannot be compared with real emotions because sometimes there is some difference in the way in which the content is processed. That is, at least in some cases, imagining and belief do not process the content in the same way and, therefore, the emotional output diverge. This is compatible with the fact that, in general, imagination and belief behave alike. However, the possibility that emotional responses to imaginings may *sometimes* differ from those to belief can undermine the possibility of taking the former as reliable sources of moral training. I suggest naming these cases after the expression the 'asymmetry problem'.

Shaun Nichols has not strictly speaking offered a view about the

epistemic status of our emotional responses towards imaginings. Nonetheless, he has attempted to provide a theory of imagination that aims at showing that belief and imagination basically involve processes that are alike. According to this view of imagination, known as the 'single code hypothesis'[4], imagination and belief tend to process their content very much in the same way. As a result, our emotional responses to an imagined content tend to be also alike to those we would have in real life situations. However, he has noticed that this predicted behaviour of our responses to our imaginings does not always take place. Sometimes -as the cases I am interested in this paper make evident- we enjoy the misfortune of someone weak or we admire the villain.

In order to save the basic structure of his view, Nichols has claimed – partly relying upon empirical evidence about how our desires towards what we imagine or belief may determine the resulting affective state- that, sometimes, the emotional output of imagining or believing a particular content may be different due to the presence of a desire that alters that output[5].

I have some reservations about the role this amendment to Nichols' theory actually plays. In particular, I doubt whether this move preserves the basic intuition behind the 'single code hypothesis'. In any case, if things are as described in Nichols' account, we may have a reason not to regard emotional responses to artworks as trustworthy means to test our evaluative stances. For the presence of a desire may alter the usual way in which a particular content may be emotionally or evaluatively processed.

I think some reasons can be offered in order to question i) whether Nichols' answer is adequate to explain what is at stake in cases of asymmetry and ii) whether his solution undermines the possibility of ethical enhancement through artistic engagement.

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[4] Nichols, Shaun, 'Imagining and Believing: The Promise of a Single Code' Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, spring, 2004, 62(2), 129-139.

[5] Nichols, Shaun, 'Just Imagination: Why Imagining Doesn't Behave Like Believing" *Mind & Language*, Vol. 21, nº 4, September 2006, 459-474.

As for the first point, I think it can be shown that Nichols' solution may not be wholly adequate, at least to some of the paradigmatic examples of asymmetry. What is the desire that I have in the case of Mr Ripley that alters my response with respect to the warranted response in real life? My admiration towards Mr Ripley does not seem to be due to a desire that I have towards the content because it is *imagined* rather than believed. In fact, if any desire is involved in my emotional response, it is likely that it will also hold in a real context. It is not because I *imagine* that Mr Ripley is such and such that I have a different sort of desire towards his fate. I would probably have a similar desire if he was a real character and I was aware of his exceptional talent. The asymmetry here, wherever it comes from, cannot be explained by appealing to the presence of a desire that alters the corresponding emotional response.

As for the negative character that Nichols' solution may have when one reflects upon the value of emotional responses to art, I also think his solution to the asymmetry problem may not be as damaging as one may think in the first place. As he has presented the case, even if differences in my desires towards the content may alter my emotional output, there seems to be certain continuity between the evaluative mechanisms involved. I may not respond with bursting fear to my imagining that tomorrow is the end of the world, but I still contemplate the possibility as a fearful situation. That is, despite the fact that I may not react with full terror to that content, I still regard it under the same sort of evaluative thought.

What is important for our purposes is that, whether there is a desire to flee or not, my assessment of the situation does not differ or does not necessarily differ due to the absence of the desire to flee. In both cases, I regard the situation as fearful. Thus, even if it is true that some of our reactions may differ, I still think there is a reason to take our emotional responses to art at face value, after all; and even when I remain sat down in the cinema, I exhibit the same sort of evaluative profile as in real life.

i.ii) Emotional responses to fiction and to reality have different warranting conditions.

It is usually assumed that an emotion is warranted if there is an evaluative belief that presents the object towards the emotion is directed to in a certain way[6]. Thus, my emotion of fear towards a snake is rational only if I believe that snakes are dangerous. Similarly, if I find Anna Karenina pitiful I must hold something like a belief-like attitude towards her fate. I must think she lives in an imprisoning society and that she has been deceived by false love. In both cases my emotional responses are adequate because the thought or belief under which the object of my emotion is presented to me justifies my emotion. To this extent, real and fictional emotions are alike. They both seem to involve an evaluative thought that plays the justificatory role. Moreover, it seems that, unless we encounter cases of asymmetry, our emotions and thoughts accord very much in the same way in fiction and in reality. I tend to think both in art and in life that someone's misfortune warrants my pity to her and that someone's courage justifies my admiration.

However, it has been noticed by several authors[7] that the warranting conditions of artistic emotions do not *only* depend upon the evaluative belief that presents the object as deserving a particular emotion. According to these authors, the *way* in which that object is presented also plays a justificatory role

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[6] Greenspan, Patricia S., *Emotions and Reasons: An Inquiry into Emotional Justification.* New York and London. Routledge, 1988. Solomon, Robert C., *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life.* Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993.

[7] Feagin, Susan, (1996), *Reading with Feeling*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press and "Imagining Emotions and Appreciating Fiction" in *Emotion and the Arts*, Mette Hjort and Sue Laver (eds.) Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 50-62. Jacobson, Daniel, 'Sir Philip Sidney's Dilemma: On the Ethical Function of Narrative Art' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 54:4 Fall, 1996, pp. 327-336. Livingston, Paisley, Mele, Alfred R., "Evaluating emotional responses to fiction" in *Emotion and the Arts*, Mette Hjort and Sue Laver (eds.) Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 157-176; Schier, Flynt, 'Tragedy and the Community of Sentiment' in *Philosophy and Fiction. Essays in Literary Aesthetics*, Edited by Peter Lamarque, Aberdeen University Press, 1983, pp. 73-92.

in the sort of emotion we take as deserved by the fictional events. We do not only respond to the represented content but also to the aesthetic or formal aspects of the representation. These formal or aesthetics aspects *wrap* the actions and the characters and they may trigger and, hence, justify a particular emotional response. According to this view, however close our responses in fictional and real contexts are, they are not simply the output of an evaluative belief that is common to both cases; responses to fictions or works of art in general are partially determined by formal aspects that in some cases contribute to make our evaluative belief more appealing and in some others work against what would be taken as the appropriate evaluative belief. For this reason some have preferred to name these emotions 'artistic emotions' (Feagin, 2006) in order to differentiate them from current emotions.

Now, the fact that artistic emotions possess some warranting conditions that play no role in real emotions has been thought as a reason not to take the former as a possible source of moral training. After all, the conditions under which each emotion is warranted or justified are different. In fact, the argument goes back to Plato and it resonates in the way rhetorical figures have been sometimes conceived and subject to criticism due to their persuasive role. Thus, since artworks have the power to cause emotional responses not only in virtue of the sort of objects they present us with, but also in virtue of their aesthetic aspects, they cannot be sources of emotional training.

I find the argument quite compelling but I tend to think this fact is not sufficient to reject the possibility of exercising our emotional abilities while engaging with art. In one respect, our evaluative beliefs tend to be in place; it is not the case that we completely disregard the fact that Mr Ripley is a murderer or that that consideration plays no role whatsoever in our overall evaluation and response to the character. We plainly recognize that feature and it enters into our overall appreciation of the character. However, this feature of his that would warrant our rejection in a real case is not the only reason that we may have in

order to respond as we do. The author has managed to present him as an intelligent and sensitive person and she has succeeded in making our response sensitive to those features. Partly by depicting the character in a way that seems appealing and partly by providing him with a full package of virtues we tend to value, the author has succeeded in making us respond in a way that we can find problematic given he is a cold murderer.

I think two sorts of devices can collaborate in order to trigger this sort of response. On the one hand, literary works make vividly evident that the same character or situation may have a set of both positive and negative features. Mr Ripley is simultaneously a murderer and an intelligent person, cold and sensitive, etc.

One may feel awkward if she is presented with a character that is both sensitive and well-educated but bad intentioned. Characters and situations that have this double-sided moral profile keep being puzzling, especially when one is supposed to end up with an overall judgment of that character or situation. Is Mr Ripley admirable overall? Or is the fact that he is a murderer an overriding reason not to admire him?

In this case, I think there is no substantial distinction between the sort of responses a work of fiction may demand or prescribe and the warranted response in a real life situation. Actually, some of the puzzling examples that typically illustrate this phenomenon are actual ones: think, for example, of the case of the sensitive Nazi, where the contrast between two different sets of values seems to be at its extreme exemplification[8]. In this respect, works of art manage to present to the reader something that could also be perceived in reality: the fact that people and situations are normally a mixture of virtues and vices and that it is not clear that our evaluative judgments always condemn vice.

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[8] For a comment on this case, see Jacobson, Daniel, 'Seeing by Feeling: Virtues, Skills, and Moral Perception' *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 8: 387-409, 2005.

On the other hand, there is a second way –maybe not completely unrelated to the former- in which works of art may trigger contrary judgments or responses to those expected in real contexts. I propose to use 'aesthetization'[9] as a general term to define this phenomenon. The rhythm with which an action is presented, the angle from which a character is portrayed, the delicacy with which a particular concern is presented, etc, may warrant an emotional response that, were we only paying attention to the action, could not have been deserved. Typical cases of this phenomenon are cases in which violence is presented in a glorified manner or evilness is tinted with a charismatic appearance.

Thus one can respond in a different way to a particular content due to the effect that the aesthetic aspects of the work have upon our response. However, this claim about the differences in the warranting conditions is supposed to apply across the board and not only to cases where we find an asymmetry between our response in the fictional context and our response in the real one. Aesthetics features may also contribute or enhance a response that would be nevertheless warranted. As when a pitiful character is presented with features that tend to enhance his pitiful condition. In these cases, the response is not only caused by the belief that the kids are poor, but by the aesthetic appearance the artist has brought to them. The aesthetization of the character or situation enhance the alleged emotional response that would be warranted but, in fact, in the extreme cases, we blame the representation for being sentimental. As Oscar Wilde famously claimed: "One must have a heart of stone to read the death of little Nell without laughing."

I think a good way to illustrate this ability of fictions to make us respond in ways that might differ from the corresponding responses in real life is to think of the beginning of Lars von Trier's last film, *The Antichrist*. The first scene of the

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[9] A similar, but I believe narrower, term has been suggested by Arthur Danto. In his book *The Abuse of Beauty* (2003) he introduced the term 'beautification' in order to capture the pragmatic aspects of an artwork that are responsible for the work's effects upon the viewer.

film shows a couple making love passionately while their son (average age two or three) gets out from his cradle, opens up a window and throws himself out into the void. The whole scene is projected in slow movement, in black and white –with a very fine photography-, and with Händel's aria *Lascia ch'io pianga* (1711) as the background. The whole aesthetic effect is impressive despite the fact that the events narrated are terrible; in a sense this produces or may produce in the spectator the uneasy feeling of enjoying -and hence getting pleasure from- the scene.

In these cases our emotional reaction to the work is clearly affected by the aesthetic aspects that make us perceive the scene with a particular feeling, i.e., pleasure. Alternatively, one could adopt a moralistic view and claim that the terrible nature of the scene depicted overrides any possible pleasure one could derive from it; but the fact is that, unless we exercise some sort of self-censorship, the scene is pleasant and pleasure in looking at it is warranted by features of the scene.

Cases like the former tend to be puzzling and they seem to reappear over and over again any time something regarded as demanding a negative assessment or attitude is presented in such a way that it triggers aesthetic pleasure. When the exhibition S-21 was first presented to the public as an art exhibition –read here as beautiful or as deserving aesthetic attention- the photographs taken in the Phnom Penh prison just before those people were about to being killed, a response of rejection immediately followed[10]. The complaint is precisely related to the possibility of getting *some* sort of pleasure out of the photographic report of a crime to be committed.

In these cases, the emotional response that could be warranted is turned upside down in virtue of its aesthetic potential so that we end up liking or getting pleasure from what should be rejected. What can be said about these

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[10] For a reflection about the problem of regarding S-21 as art see de Duve, Thierry, 'Art Facing the Radical Evil' in http://www.sanart.org.tr/congresses/ICA/plenaries/DeDuveT.pdf

examples? Are these responses threatening our confidence in appealing to fictional engagement as a sort of self-understanding?

I have no definite answer for the problem this kind of cases may pose to the original project of defending the epistemic value of emotionally respond to fiction. In one respect, I think our evaluative framework is not completely undermined. I recognize the terrible character of the situation –and hence this might be part of its force- while taking pleasure in the scene. However, it is also true that it is precisely one of the virtues of some great artworks that they have been persuasive in changing a prejudiced morality by exploiting the aesthetic dimension. That is, it has been through aesthetic seduction that some morals have been shown obsolete. This suggests moral attitudes might be revised under a creative aesthetic light, or that evaluative considerations may be sensitive to aesthetic features. In some cases this might considered as a positive contribution. As when one find with sympathetic eyes Rembrandt's alleged success in rendering plain common men morally significant. However, this is not always so, and aesthetic seduction has been frequently used in order to make compelling moral stances one can easily find repulsive as some portraits of Stalin typically show or Leni Riefenstalh's *The Power of the Will* confirms.

What seems paradoxical is that this ability of aesthetization to change the polarity of our feelings towards the situations assessed has been regarded at the same time as one of the main reasons to dismiss the contribution of aesthetics to sentimental education and as a virtue of artworks to change our moral beliefs in a positive way. I tend to think this fact does not undermine the possibility of trying our moralities out through artistic engagements even if, sometimes, we may end up responding in an underserved manner. One may think this might be enough to adopt a sceptical stance towards taking our emotions towards fictions at face value. Especially when they are the outcome of aesthetic vivacity one may have a reason not to take her response as

indicating the presence of value.

However, as I see it, caution should be recommended here. Dismissing an emotional response because the aesthetic aspects of a work have mainly triggered it may also foreclose the possibility of revising our moral beliefs in a positive way, as the examples from great art confirm. In short, maybe aesthetic reasons for feeling in a particular way have also a role to play in our evaluative and emotional responses in general.