

RESTRAINT, ART AND MORALISM

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But what philosophical truths can be more advantageous to society than those here delivered, which represent virtue in all her genuine and most engaging charms, and make us approach her with ease, familiarity, and affection? The dismal dress falls off, with which many divines, and some philosophers have covered her; and nothing appears but gentleness, humanity, beneficence, affability; nay even, at proper intervals, play, frolic, and gaiety. She talks not of useless austerities and rigors, suffering and self-denial. ... And if any austere pretenders approach her, enemies to joy and pleasure, she either rejects them as hypocrites and deceivers; or if she admit them in her train, they are ranked, however, among the least of her votaries¹.

The conception of morality, or more precisely virtue, that Hume here presents us with, even if it does not deny a role for the supposed virtue of restraint – or temperance as it is also commonly called – certainly invites us to look on this virtue with some caution. For the concern one might naturally have in relation to restraint or temperance is that this may amount, in some cases at least, to what Hume calls ‘useless austerities,’ and worse, ‘suffering and self-denial.’ There are situations, I will suggest, where restraint does indeed become morally problematic; specifically, where what one is really attempting to restrain are certain natural responses and impulses in their entirety. Restraint in this case is not the exercise of the virtue of moderation or temperance; rather, it indicates a person’s distrust of, and attempt to deny, certain natural responses and impulses altogether. Further, this sort of self-denial I contend

¹ Hume, D *Enquiries concerning human understanding and concerning the principle of morals* 3rd Edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), pp279-80.

indicates a specific kind of vice: The vice as I will understand it of moralism: Restraint as a kind of moralism is what Hume would term a 'pretender' to virtue. To explain what I mean here by moralism I will consider two moral controversies over obscenity in art in Australia; the first is the quite recent controversy over the photography of Bill Henson, the second concerns the famous Ern Malley affair. What these controversies show is how restraint as the distrust and denial of one's natural responses – here one's responses to art – involves a failure, or even avoidance, of serious moral reflection and judgement.

Restraint and Temperance

But to begin some preliminary points: First, about restraint *as opposed to* temperance; for we may distinguish the two – as indeed Aristotle seems to. Restraint seems to be akin to what Aristotle calls 'self-control' or 'continence.' But for Aristotle, the person who displays merely continence, *egkratīa*, is distinct from the truly temperate person, the *sōphrōn*, in virtue of the fact that while both act according to reason, in doing so the continent person resists bad appetites while for the temperate person has no need to, since they have no bad appetites to resist.² As Nancy Sherman puts it,

To the extent that I struggle against what I view to be recalcitrant desires, my virtue is still only a kind of control or continence (*egkrateia*) and falls short of the more thoroughgoing harmony that the *sōphrōn* or truly temperate person exhibits.³

² Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1151b32-1152a7.

³ Sherman, N. *The Fabric of Character* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), p.167.

So if we say mere continence, or restraint, is a virtue it is a lesser state of virtue than temperance as Aristotle understands it. The distinction here is not merely a trifling one; rather, it goes to the heart of my concern with restraint, which is that there is something less than ideal, even something to be cautious of, about such a trait. A truly temperate man would have no need for restraint, his desires and his actions or responses would be totally in accord with the human good. But most of us do not enjoy the 'thoroughgoing harmony' of desire that the truly temperate person does, yet most of us – unlike what Aristotle calls the 'self-indulgent' person – do have a desire to live a life of virtue; which is to say most of us are in some respect merely continent. And for that reason moralism, on my account, is a vice that most of us are susceptible to in virtue of the internal motivational conflict we sometimes face. Anticipating my argument somewhat, we might explain the temptation to moralism here like this: Faced with this kind of internal conflict between their desire for the good and other seemingly recalcitrant desires the merely continent person may cease to trust, or attempt to deny, certain natural desires or impulses altogether.

Moralism and Hypocrisy

Second, we need to distinguish moralism from another vice with which it very commonly associated: the vice of hypocrisy. It is often suggested that one thing that is so offensive about moralism and the person who suffers from this vice, the moraliser, is that the moraliser condemns immorality in others while remaining silent on

their own similar moral failings. This is indeed simple hypocrisy. However the moraliser need not be a hypocrite; sometimes the moraliser's pronouncements and judgments will be inconsistent with their own conduct, but this need not be so. The politician who condemns adultery while cheating on his wife is a hypocrite. But if he managed to resist *the temptation to do so* as the continent person does, while he is not guilty of hypocrisy he may still be guilty of moralism. The hypocrite we might say is concerned with the mere appearance of virtue whereas the concern of the moraliser may go deeper than this; he is concerned in some sense to be virtuous. Though even in the case of moralism – and here we can see a similarity with hypocrisy – our worry may be that the moraliser's concern for morality is not quite deep or serious enough. To illustrate consider the following example. After the publication of his famous dictionary Dr Johnson was praised by two ladies for his omission from it of all 'naughty' words, to which Johnson replied 'What! my dears! then you have been looking for them?'⁴ Dr Johnson question reminds us that we cannot always take a person's concern for morality at face value; that serious moral reflection, which is to say the proper activity of the moralist as opposed to mere moralism, requires of us something more, and more onerous, than a mere concern for morality. But in order to explain what more morality requires of us I need to look at an

⁴ Best, H.D. *Personal and Literary Memorials*, London, 1829, printed in *Johnsonian Miscellanies Vol. 2*, G. Birkbeck Hill (ed.) (London: Constable & Co.,1897).

example.

The Henson Case

Bill Henson was not widely known in Australia before the recent controversy over his 2008 exhibition of new work at the Oxley9 gallery in Sydney. The invitation to the exhibition opening, anyone in Australia at the time will recall, reproduced an image from the exhibition of a naked twelve-year-old girl. Similar images from the exhibition also appeared on the gallery's website. The image of the girl, like other images of nude adolescents from the exhibition, was immediately condemned as obscene or sexualised in a variety of quarters. The Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, said that the image of the girl was 'absolutely revolting' and that, 'kids deserve to have the innocence of their childhood protected.' Morris Iemma (NSW Premier at the time) declared 'I find [the images] offensive and disgusting. I don't understand why parents would agree to allow their kids to be photographed like this.' Many in fact saw the issue of consent here as the crucial one arguing that these images were clearly sexualised and that as such the parents could not give consent to have their daughter photographed in this way.⁵ Still others claimed that the children in these images were exploited by Henson⁶. But as it happens the parents did not see Henson's photograph of their daughter as either obscene or sexualised and they defended the artist who they admired. Further, the

⁵ See here Guy Rundle 'Time the best got brighter in defence of Henson.' *The Age*, June 1, 2008.

⁶ See here Moira Rayner 'The ethics of "kidsploitation"' in *Eureka Street* (July 10, 2008).

governments own classification board, itself made up of broadly representative members of the public, did not, it appears, find the image obscene or sexualised either as they eventually classified it 'PG.'

There is no doubt that these commentators in condemning Henson were concerned with morality. They were also, arguably, guilty of moralism. A central characteristic of moralism, that this example makes plain, is that the moraliser fails in an important sense to recognise that morality is hard. I don't mean that it is hard to follow morality's dictates – the point here is not, for example, that it is difficult to resist temptation – but that morality requires the will to be hard on *oneself*. More important for morality than a willingness to judge others is the courage to critically examine one's own actions and motivations. For the moraliser however the situation is reversed: While the moral scrutiny of others is central for them, they almost never subject themselves to the same critical gaze. In the debate over Henson then Germaine Greer had a point in suggesting that any man who calls a picture of a naked adolescent girl 'revolting' protests too much.⁷ If a heterosexual adult male tells us that such an image is revolting we would be wise, much as Dr Johnson was in the example above, to be suspicious. Even if we think that there is a genuine moral concern with Henson's photograph, to put the point like that does not indicate serious moral reflection but an evasion of it.

⁷ Greer, G. 'Through a lens darkly.' *The Age*, June 2, 2008

The sort of extreme and self-deceiving reaction to Henson's work indicated above only serves to obscure important distinctions we might need to make here. So a frustrating aspect of the debate about Henson's photographs was that one could not in this context talk positively about the representation of human sexuality without seeming to endorse the sexualisation of children. Obviously Henson's images represent human sexuality, but that is not the same thing as sexualising children. The point is so obvious it reminds me of a scene in the spoof rock documentary *This is Spinal Tap*. The band's manager informs the group that the record company won't release their new album *Smell the Glove* because the cover image is sexist, to which the guitarist Nigel replies, confused, 'What's wrong with being sexy?' It seems that many of Henson's critics have something in common with Nigel in that they think any description with the word 'sex' in it amounts to only one thing. Nigel misses the point but at least he is honest about his own motivations. The same, I fear, cannot be said about many of those who have so rudely described Henson's image of an adolescent girl as revolting or disgusting.

Ern Malley

The case of Henson and the moralism it engendered is by no means unique in the history of art and censorship in Australia. Indeed the Henson case has similarities to, and is further illuminated by, an earlier instance of moralism in this country: The prosecution in 1944 of Max Harris, editor of *Angry Penguins*, for publishing a

number of allegedly obscene poems by Ern Malley. Harris, later the founding editor of *Australian Book Review*, must be the most unlucky literary editor of all time. Not only was Harris the victim of Australia's most famous literary hoax – Ern Malley never existed, his poetry was created by two young conservative Australian poets, Harold Stewart and James McAuley (later the founding editor of *Quadrant*), to mock the modernist style – he was then charged because the works were thought to be either 'indecent advertisements' or 'indecent, immoral or obscene.'⁸

The hoaxers' point in the Ern Malley affair was to show that since, as they thought, modernist poetry was all pretentious nonsense Harris would not be able to spot that their poems were meaningless. But the fact that the poems were meaningless was no deterrent to the police or prosecution. As Michael Heyward says in his account of the Ern Malley affair, 'the Crown case seemed to be that where the poetry was not obscene it was unintelligible, and that was almost as bad. ... [the prosecutor, D.C. Williams] sought to deny a paraphrasable content where he could detect nothing risqué, but was on the alert for meaning if the poem looked naughty.'⁹ And as Heyward goes on to suggest the magistrate, L.E. Clarke, seemed to want it both ways too. So Clarke thought that interpreting the poem 'Sweet William,' was 'rather like attempting

⁸ For an account on the censorship of obscenity in the arts in Australia, including the Ern Malley trial, see Coleman P. *Obscenity, blasphemy, sedition: 100 years of censorship in Australia* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1974). For an extended account of the whole Ern Malley affair see Heyward, M. *The Ern Malley Affair* (St Lucia: Queensland University Press, 1993).

⁹ Heyward, *op cit*, p.200.

to unravel a crossword puzzle with the aid of only half the clues and without the satisfaction of seeing the solution in the next issue,¹⁰ yet at the same time he wanted to claim the phrase ‘unforgivable rape’ that appears in the poem could only be referring to the actual act of rape despite the alternative interpretation Harris had offered him.

As Heyward puts it, ‘The *Angry Penguins* trial concluded a script which nobody without a sense of humour could have invented, and nobody with one could resist.’¹¹ Most ridiculous, and telling, of all was the cross examination of the arresting officer Detective Vogelesang, whose testimony Heyward says ‘brought the house down.’ Questioned about the meaning of the poem ‘Night Piece’ Vogelesang had this to offer: ‘Apparently someone is shining a torch in the dark... visiting through the park gates. To my mind they were going there for some disapproved motive... I have found that people who go into parks at night go there for immoral purposes.’¹² Just as we might think that Vogelesang’s thoughts about parks at night or the tendentious speculations of Williams and Clarke led these men to see immorality where there was none except in their own imaginings, we might also think that those who see pornography, sexualisation or exploitation in Henson’s night-like images of naked adolescents see nothing except the content of their own imaginings.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp 208-9.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 185.

¹² Ibid, p. 191.

Art and ambiguity

From our viewpoint the concerns of the prosecution and the police in the Ern Malley case may seem laughable. Yet one thing that was driving that concern can be seen to be driving the concern over Henson as well. It seems clear from the Ern Malley case that one thing that worried people was that they did not know what to think or make of Malley's poems. And that seems to be part of the problem in the Henson case as well. Henson's photographs are not obviously pornographic or obscene in the ordinary sense of those terms. That I think explains why the debate quickly turned from the issue of obscenity to one of consent and child exploitation. But that hardly clarified matters, for to claim that the girl in Henson's photograph was exploited just begs the question. If Henson's photograph was obscene or sexualised then the girl would have been exploited by Henson. But Henson's images were not in any obvious sense obscene or sexualised; that was the original problem with accounting for many peoples concern with them. Certainly the girl's parent actually admired Henson's work and thought that posing for Henson was a worthwhile thing for their daughter to do. But then where is the exploitation? One might claim that the parents got it wrong and that their daughter will regret the affair later in life. But children often grow up to regret or even resent some aspect of their upbringing. So a child may grow up to regret or resent being brought up in accordance with strict religious rules or practices. The issue in all such cases is not whether a child

regrets or resents aspects of their upbringing but whether their rights were infringed or whether they were harmed. But any claim that this girl has been exploited or harmed is no more plausible in the end than the claim that Henson's photographs are straightforwardly obscene. Here as in the case of Ern Malley people were clearly troubled but were unable to adequately account for that feeling.

I do not want to deny that Henson's images of naked or semi-naked adolescents are in a way disturbing. But if we are to avoid moralism here we need to ask ourselves why. I remember the first time I saw Henson's photographs; it was at an exhibition in Melbourne in the nineteen-eighties. In some of the works in that exhibition Henson had juxtaposed images (characteristically dark and squalid) of naked or semi-naked street kids with images of grand interiors. I found these images hard to look at. There is in these photographs as in many of his later photographs of adolescents as well a disturbing *ambiguity*, by which I mean that they are apt to produce conflicting responses in the viewer. As John McDonald observes in his excellent review of Henson's 1980s photographs 'Henson leaves the viewer with an unbearable dilemma. Is this an exercise in gruesome voyeurism or social comment? ... This dangerous and difficult ambiguity seems central to the experience of Henson's work.'¹³ But of course, it is precisely this sort of ambiguity, and the consequent lack of clear moral

¹³ McDonald, J. 'Gruesome voyeurism or social comment?' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, November 26, 1988.

meaning or purpose, which many people find so offensive about Henson's work – and much other artistic achievement as well.

To illustrate, consider another morally contentious work with which Henson's photographs have been compared: Nabokov's novel *Lolita*. Attempts to defend Henson by making comparisons with Nabokov's great novel may fail because many people regard *Lolita* as morally objectionable for much the same reasons as they find Henson's photographs of naked adolescents objectionable. For Nabokov's book too is ambiguous, in fact it is multiply ambiguous; this story of a paedophile's obsession with a twelve-year-old girl is variously shocking, poignant and even funny. And one objection is then that a book on such a subject ought not to be funny; being funny it may be thought counts against it being shocking in a morally edifying sort of way. According to a certain, moralistic, turn of mind, if you are going to tell a story about a paedophile or photograph adolescents nude you had better have a clear and unambiguous moral purpose. So according to this way of thinking it is acceptable to, say, photograph a naked adolescent running in terror from her napalmed village, but only because such a photograph serves openly a noble cause.

Of course art and literature too can wear its moral purpose, as it were, on its sleeve. Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* along with some of his other novels is an example here. But art, including literature, does not always serve morality or truth in such an openly didactic way. It may be that an artist has no very clear

conception of what they want to say – artist are not essayists – and that their work is itself a way of working that out. In that case all an artist can do is trust in that particular mode of responsiveness to the world that is manifest in their work. And the viewer (or reader) faces a similar challenge; we too may need to trust in our own potentially conflicting responses to the artist's work, to accept them and to be willing to learn from them. Which brings me back to moralism, for it is characteristic of the moraliser that he does not trust his own responses, he does not trust himself.

We can see now what was more or less implicit in the Ern Malley trial: why ambiguity *itself* is so offensive to the moraliser. The moraliser wants to know what the work is about so that he can respond (morally) appropriately, but we may only come to understand the meaning (or meanings) of a work through our responses to it. We have to be open then to such responses *whatever they may be*. The moraliser, though, is unable or unwilling to be open in this way. That may be because the moraliser is unable to accept the responsibility that such openness entails: If he condemns child nudity in art it is perhaps not because he believes he will find the image of a naked teenager revolting but because, and notwithstanding his denials, he is worried he might not. Or if he is disgusted at the very fact or idea that such photographs are produced it may not be his fear for children that is driving him but maybe his fear for himself. But at many other times a moraliser's lack of openness may indicate simply a fear that with

only his own responses to go by he may not know what to think when he feels that he *should* know; or, what this amounts to, a want of confidence in his *own* judgement as mediated by those very responses.

Art and moral reflection

What the moraliser misses in relation to art (but not just in relation to art) is what we might learn through our various responses to the work (as to the world). To illustrate, an important feature of art as I have already noted is that it may produce a number of *conflicting* responses in us. Think again for example of John McDonald's review of Henson. Looking at Henson's photographs of young people we *may* derive a voyeuristic pleasure. But at the same time the reference to this mode of viewing in the work itself – Henson uses low directional light which seems to draw his subjects out of the darkness – not to mention the overall level of abstraction of the images is apt to produce in one an unsettling consciousness of this very pleasure, and which may undercut it; the taste, as it were, turning to dust in one's mouth. And that conflict, a conflict at the level of immediate response, may be the point. It is perhaps through this kind of conflict that the work succeeds in revealing certain truths. So, Henson's images do not simply appeal to voyeuristic tendencies or responses they play such responses off against other conflicting responses, thereby exposing and undermining the voyeuristic gaze.

Consider another example of how the possible response of the viewer may be not just undercut but turned on its head by a work of art. In discussing Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* Isaksson and Furhammar comment on the way the viewer is 'not only called upon to observe the crowd's enthusiastic reactions to its leader... but also forced into a state of participation.'¹⁴ Yet as they go on to say, while 'the power of crowds in films may be quite overwhelming... it is surprisingly easy for a commentator to undo the effect – not just minimising it but actually reversing it.'¹⁵ So they suggest for example that in *These are the Men* (1943), in which sequences of Riefenstahl's film are given a hostile English commentary, 'the enthusiasm of the mass constitutes a sounding board, but... for emotions that are directed *against* all that the mass stands for.'¹⁶ In the film *These are the Men* we can see how art can reveal what is corrupt or corrupting in a particular moral viewpoint, in this case the moral viewpoint of the Nazis.¹⁷ This is just one further example of the complex ways in which a work of art may exploit our capacities of response in illuminating, including morally illuminating, ways. But it also

¹⁴ Isaksson, F. and Furhammar, L. 'The First Person Plural,' in J. Tulloch (ed.) *Conflict and Control in the Cinema* (Adelaide: Macmillan, 1977), p. 392. I thank George Couvalis for this example.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 393.

¹⁷ To consider a different but closely related point, it may be that a work of art is corrupt yet not corrupting. Indeed it may be that a work of art that we recognise as corrupt can be morally edifying in virtue of that very act of recognition. As Robert Stecker says on this point 'the expression in a work of attitudes ranging from the morally uncertain to the reprehensible may do some good . For example, the later may inadvertently harden us against behaviour based on such an attitude' (Stecker, R. *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* (Lanham MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2005), p 210 .

illustrates again how our assessment of a work of art may depend on the way, and how successfully, it exploits those capacities; and that is not an assessment that can be made in advance of one's experience of the work.

The problem of moralism in relation to art might be put like this: The moraliser insists on assessing the work from what they take to be the point of view of morality. But in refusing to give free expression to the kinds of capacity of response that I have indicated the 'moral' point of view from which they assess the work remains a fundamentally impoverished one. Our responses to a given work of art might surprise and disturb us; nevertheless I contend that these responses are an essential constituent of moral thought and reflection. For this reason it is simply an evasion of serious moral thought and reflection to attempt to suppress or deny such natural responses in such a case. While there are obviously occasions where we need to exercise the virtue of restraint, the debate over Henson indicates the limits of that virtue, and how beyond those limits restraint amounts to the vice of moralism.

To expand on the above point, what the example of Henson's photographs and art more generally makes plain is the large gap between the natural responses that *express* certain desires, including troubling and sometimes conflicting desires, and *acting* on those same desires. This then indicates one place a clear line might be drawn between the proper role of restraint and mere moralism; that while it is sometimes right to refrain from acting on

certain desires it is mere moralism to deny any expression to such desires, to deny as it were that one has such desires at all.

Conclusion

Nothing I have said is to deny that some art may be obscene or that it may involve in its production the exploitation of children. Of course *once we have determined* that a work sexualises children we can say that it exploits them. My point, though, is that in many cases one cannot *read off* whether a work of art is obscene or exploitative in this way simply by attending to certain general facts or moral considerations. So, for example, it is a mistake to think that one can determine in advance of viewing a work of art – and on independent moral grounds – that simply because it involves child nudity it is morally objectionable. For I claim that whether or not that charge is appropriate – or beyond that narrow question whether or not the work provides valuable (even moral) insights of its own – may only be revealed by what we might make of the work through our various responses to it.

In more general terms, to think that moral ideas or principles *always* settle the question of whether a work of art is morally objectionable – settle the question that is to say *in advance* of what might be revealed through our responses to the work – is to suppose that art itself cannot have anything independently illuminating to say about morality, or at least our conception of it. But that, I am suggesting, is simply false: It is true that morality might reveal a work of art to be obscene; but it is equally true that

art may reveal a particular moral point of view to be impoverished or moralistic, it may even be – as we can see from the example of *These are the Men* – that art may bring home to us how a moral point of view is fundamentally corrupt. However that is something we are not going to be able to appreciate unless we trust in our basic human impulses or responses not just to art but to the world more generally. Herein lays a danger of restraint: that restraint may not just deprive us of certain goods but also of *understanding* – of ourselves, of the nature of human desire and of our fear of that desire, of our humanity and our avoidance of it.

Henson himself did not comment directly on the controversy surrounding his work, though we might detect one rather oblique contribution to that debate in a speech he gave opening another exhibition of photographs at the National Gallery of Australia at the time,

The greatness of art comes from the ambiguities, which is another way of saying it stops us from knowing what to think. It redeems us from a world of moralism...It stops us in our tracks as we are formulating the truth we think we believe in.¹⁸

I cannot say whether Henson would endorse the more detailed argument I have presented here, but if art can as I have claimed, and as Henson seems to think, help expose the distorting influence of moralism on moral thought and debate then we should take care to consider what an artist might, in their own way, have to say to us

¹⁸ From a Speech by Bill Henson given at the opening of *Picture Paradise: Asia-Pacific Photography 1840s-1940s* at the National Gallery of Australia, July 10, 2008.

about the distinction between morality and mere moralism. So are Henson's images of naked adolescents morally objectionable? I can only suggest – what follows from what I have said – that one would have to look at the images themselves with the kind of attention and openness I have indicated to determine that; not simply to focus on the very idea of child nudity in art but to reflect on one's potentially varied responses to these images and what that might show. But if, alternatively, we choose to suppress such images and in so doing deny those very responses we will of course learn nothing. In any event, if I am right, in the debate over Henson it was perhaps not the *girl's* exposure that was a cause of anxiety for many. But like Hume, with whom I started, we may hold a gentler more optimistic view of our nature. In which case we may perhaps allow the 'dismal dress' to fall off confident that we do not need 'useless austerities, rigours, suffering and self-denial' to save us from moral peril.