

ETH350H1, Topics in Value Theory: Aesthetic and Moral Value

Time and day: Tuesdays, 3 – 5PM

Location: Gerald Larkin Building (15 Devonshire Place), room 341

Instructor: Rachel Cristy (“Dr. Cristy,” not “Professor”; I’m a postdoctoral fellow)

Office: Gerald Larkin Building, room 243 (in the Centre for Ethics)

Office hours: Wednesdays, 2 – 3 PM

E-mail address: rachel.cristy@utoronto.ca

Course description

This course will explore the relationship between moral and aesthetic value. Can one be explained in terms of the other? Does the value of art consist in the moral valence of its content or effects? Can moral and aesthetic reasons ever come into conflict, and if so, must we always adjudicate in favor of the moral? These questions will be addressed with a combination of historical and contemporary philosophical readings and examples from literature and film.

Required texts

Plato, *Republic*, translated by C.D.C. Reeve, Hackett Publishing

Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, translated by David Grene, University of Chicago Press (available on its own or with the other Theban plays, *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, edited by Grene and Lattimore)

Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by Malcolm Heath, Penguin Classics

Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art?*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Penguin Classics

Sorry these aren’t at the university bookstore; I was not fully registered in the university’s online system by the time I would have needed to order textbooks. However, all of these editions are available to order on Amazon and should also be available at normal bookstores (possibly even in the non-textbook section of the university bookstore). All other required reading materials will be posted on Canvas.

Film screenings

As noted in the schedule below, the material to be discussed in class will include three films. I will hold a screening of each film in the week before the class meeting for which it is assigned. See notes on schedule for how to watch the films if you cannot attend the class screening.

Evaluation

The assignments and their contribution to the final grade are as follows:

- Argument analysis and critique (1200–1500 words): 25%
- Final essay (2500–3000 words): 45%
- 5-to-10-minute presentation on one week’s reading: 15%
- Class participation: 15%

Course policies

- Each student will present the main idea of one of the readings for one session of the course and propose some questions for discussion. Presentations should be between 5 and 10 minutes (no longer than 10, since each class session will start with several).
 - o Sign-ups for the second week will be done during the first class session; for everyone else, please e-mail me if there's a class session when you know you will be absent, and I will assign the rest of the presentations randomly.
- Assignments are to be turned in via Canvas before noon on the designated date (because that's when I plan to start grading them). Extensions will be granted for reasons that don't sound bullshit.
- I'm permitting laptops in class because so much of the reading is online, though this privilege may be withdrawn if they start to be a problem. Tablets that lie flat on the desk are preferable to laptops. Phones are to be on silent and put away.

Schedule

A note about readings: as the course progresses, we will continue to talk about readings from earlier weeks. So if you don't finish a reading before the target week, it's still worth your while to get caught up before the following week.

Week 1 (Sept. 11) Ethics and aesthetics in the age of #MeToo

Nicole Hemmer (2018), "How to think about consuming art made by sexual predators":
<https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2018/1/9/16866080/erase-predators-work-spacey-louis-weinstein-morality-art-artist>

Emily C. A. Snyder (2018), "Art and the artist: can we like anything after #MeToo?":
<http://emilycasnyder.blogspot.com/2018/03/art-and-artist-can-we-like-anything.html>

Matthew Strohl & Mary Beth Willard (2018), "Aesthetics, Morality, and a Well-Lived Life":
<http://dailyous.com/2017/11/21/philosophers-art-morally-troubling-artists/#StrohlWillard>

Week 2 (Sept. 18) Back to the very beginning: Plato's ethical criticism of art

Plato (ca. 380 BCE), *Republic*, Book II, 376 c – Book III, 402a; Book X
Sophocles (ca. 429 BCE), *Oedipus the King*

Week 3 (Sept. 25) Aristotle's ethical art-criticism (see what I did there)

Aristotle (ca. 335 BCE), *Poetics*, sections 1–17, 25–26
There's a lot of reading for next week so I advise you to get started on it early.

Week 4 (Oct. 2) 2500 years later: aestheticism and the moralist backlash

Oscar Wilde (1891), Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Grey*:
<http://mason.gmu.edu/~rnanian/Wilde-Preface.html>

Wilde (1891), “The Decay of Lying”

Leo Tolstoy (1897), *What Is Art?*, sections I–II, IV–IX, skim the first part of section X for the basic idea but read pp. 78–83, XIV–XVI, XIX–XX (ignore the appendices)

George Bernard Shaw (1894), *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* (skip the “Author’s Apology,” unless you really want to read it): http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1097/1097-h/1097-h.htm#link2H_4_0002

Week 5 (Oct. 9) Art as imaginative moral education

Film screening, Wednesday, Oct. 3, 8pm: *The Merchant of Venice* (2004), dir. Michael Radford

This film is available to stream from Criterion On-Demand through the University of Toronto library.

Martha Nussbaum (1985), “‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible’: Moral Attention and the Moral Task of Literature”

Stephen Greenblatt (2017), “Shakespeare’s Cure for Xenophobia,” *The New Yorker*: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/07/10/shakespeares-cure-for-xenophobia>

Week 6 (Oct. 16) Wilde’s revenge: contemporary challenges to ethical criticism

Richard Posner (1997), “Against Ethical Criticism” (*I apologize for the word in quotation marks on p. 7; sensibilities have changed even in the last 20 years.*)

Daniel Jacobson (1997), “In Praise of Immoral Art”

James Harold (2011), “Autonomism Reconsidered” (ignore the last section, starting p. 145)

Week 7 (Oct. 23) An ethicist interlude: imaginative resistance

Tamar Gendler (2000), “The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance”

Dan Flory (2013), “Race and Imaginative Resistance in James Cameron’s *Avatar*” (*I’m not going to make you watch Avatar. I’m going to assume you’ve seen it. If you haven’t... it’s basically Disney’s Pocahontas with blue aliens.*)

➔ Argument analysis assignment due at noon on Wednesday, October 24

Week 8 (Oct. 30) “You keep using that word (resistance)... I do not think it means what you think it means”

Film screening, Sunday, Oct. 28, 8pm: *The Usual Suspects* (1995), dir. Bryan Singer

The DVD can be checked out from the University of Toronto library or the video can be rented online (e.g., from Amazon). Unrelatedly, the internet is a magical place.

Joshua Landy (2008), “A Nation of Madame Bovarys: On the Possibility and Desirability of Moral Improvement Through Fiction”

A.W. (Anne) Eaton (2012), “Robust Immoralism”

Adriana Clavel-Velazquez (2018), “Sugar and Spice, and Everything Nice: What Rough Heroines Tell Us about Imaginative Resistance”

Landy (2012), “The Devil, the Master-Criminal, and the Re-enchantment of the World (On *The Usual Suspects*)”

No class November 6: Fall reading week.

Week 9 (Nov. 13) Back to #MeToo: the problem of authorship

W.K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe Beardsley (1954), “The Intentional Fallacy”

Roland Barthes (1967), “The Death of the Author” (*read for the basic idea*)

Alexander Nehamas (1981), “The Postulated Author: Critical Monism as a Regulative Ideal”

Week 10 (Nov. 20) We’ve seen ethicist aesthetics... what about aestheticist ethics?

Film screening, Sunday, Nov. 18, 8pm: *The Brothers Bloom* (2008), dir. Rian Johnson

This film can be rented through Google Play or iTunes (but not Amazon, for some reason). The internet is still magical.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1882), *The Gay Science* sections 290, 299, 341

R. Lanier Anderson (2005), “Nietzsche on Truth, Illusion, and Redemption,” sections 2 and 3 (start p. 196)

Anderson and Landy (2001), “Philosophy as Self-Fashioning: Alexander Nehamas’s Art of Living”

Week 11 (Nov. 27) Aestheticist ethics, continued

Bernard Williams (1974), “Moral Luck” (just the first part, by Williams; don’t read the second part by T. Nagel, also in the PDF) (*I recommend that you look up some paintings by Paul Gauguin, just to get a general sense.*)

Susan Wolf (1982), “Moral Saints”

Marcia Muelder Eaton (1992), “Integrating the Aesthetic and the Moral”

Week 12 (Dec. 4) Wrap-up

Claire Dederer (2017), “What Do We Do with the Art of Monstrous Men?”, *The Paris*

Review: <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/11/20/art-monstrous-men/>

➔ Final essay due at noon on Wednesday, December 5