

# *Reflective Equilibrium, Art and Moral Knowledge*

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ABSTRACT. Experience of artworks can improve moral knowledge. Some philosophers say that this happens through radical changes of moral seeing. These proposals face the danger of irrationality and moral corruption instead of providing moral development. Artworks contribute better to the improvement of moral knowledge as part of gradual and reflective mutual adjustment and clarification of beliefs. In such a procedure, the moral epistemological role of experience of artworks is part of a wide reflective equilibrium and of the process of refinement of our understanding of general moral principles, in particular of the range of their application.

This paper is concerned with the contribution of art to the development of moral knowledge. The relevance of art for the development of moral knowledge is particularly remarked by philosophers who deny that moral knowledge is a matter of reasoning only (in particular, detached, distanced or impartial reasoning), and who remark the relevance of moral experience, intended as direct contact with morally relevant situations, and formative experience that enhances the moral sensibility of a person.

The stance about the epistemological relevance of art is challenged by at least three worries: the banality argument, the no justification argument, and the no argument argument. The banality argument says that art has no relevance for the development of knowledge because the beliefs that art offers us are banal and do not represent any cognitive improvement for us. For example, let us think about an important and affirmed novel as *Crime and Punishment*. The novel, as the critic says, offers us the belief that homicide is a morally condemnable action. Obviously, this is

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a belief that we already had before reading the novel. Moreover, the possession of this belief is required in order to understand the novel. We can say the same for a lot of other artworks. In some cases, we need to have already endorsed the relevant moral beliefs, as well as know some facts (for example historical facts) in order to understand an artwork. Let us take as an example the film *Der Untergang* that describes Hitler's last days. In order to understand the film, we have to know the craziness of Nazi beliefs (for example about the superiority of one race, or about the Jewish conspiracy against the German nation), the monstrosities of the Nazi political project, the amount of suffering that the war originated by it caused, the wrongness of racial or religious discrimination, and many other things.

The no justification argument says that art cannot provide knowledge because knowledge must be supported by evidence, while art does not give any kind of evidence. In order to better understand this position, let us think about science, or trials at courts. In these practices we require evidence in order to accept some statements. On the other hand, let us think about a novel like *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee. The author provides us, among else, a description of post-apartheid South Africa. The description, however, is not supported by evidence, and this is the reason why we cannot accept it as knowledge.

The third criticism is similar to the second, but differs in the statement that artworks do not provide arguments in support of the beliefs they offer (in the second argument the focus was on evidence). Neither the artwork, nor the critical discourse about it, appeal to arguments in order to confirm or refuse the beliefs included in the artwork. This indicates that obtaining truth is not one of the goals of art.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I intend to show one answer to these criticisms, precisely the proposal of Noël Carroll. I indicate how Carroll's proposal fits well with a relevant theory in moral epistemology, specifically with the method of reflective equilibrium. Carroll's aesthetic epistemology and reflective equilibrium can be combined in order to form an explanation of the relevance of the contribution of art to moral knowledge.

The plan of the paper is the following. First, I briefly describe the method of wide reflective equilibrium (WRE) as one of the leading metho-

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<sup>1</sup>textsffFor a more detailed description of these arguments, see Carroll (2002, p. 3-7).

dological proposals in moral epistemology. After that, I briefly describe a proposal (called balance and refinement — BR) that consists in an attempt to add formative experience to the traditional versions of WRE in order to refine moral cognition. I try to show some problems of this proposal common to proposals that support radical changes of moral seeing. After that, I indicate a different theory related to formative experience that avoids the problems of BR, and for which the formative experience we can have through art is crucial. This proposal is Noël Carroll's clarificationism (although I do not wholly endorse neither his proposal, nor the way he uses this concept).

The focus of the method of WRE is represented by the research of coherence between three different levels of moral thinking, as well as thinking related to morality: intuitive moral judgments on particular morally relevant situations (most frequently called considered judgments), moral theories, and background theories.<sup>2</sup> It is important to remark that wide reflective equilibrium is concerned with the coherence of all the beliefs relevant for moral thinking. Among them, there are, for example, epistemological beliefs about the reliability of moral beliefs relative to other beliefs (for example beliefs about the selection of cognitive mechanisms in natural evolution). In brief, WRE consists (at least ideally) of the considering of all of our relevant beliefs (with a focus on most directly morally relevant beliefs), establishing the coherent set of beliefs that we most firmly accept after due consideration, and selecting this set of beliefs as the best epistemological choice.

Michael DePaul has explained the fundamental virtue of WRE, and I take this explanation for granted in the rest of the paper: WRE is the only rational method. DePaul shows this by indicating that all alternatives to WRE are irrational. First, we may (at least ideally) consider all of our relevant beliefs, establish the coherent set of beliefs that we most firmly accept after due consideration and choose as the best epistemological choice an alternative set of beliefs. Second, we may (at least ideally) consider all of our relevant beliefs, establish the coherent set of beliefs that we most firmly accept after due consideration, and be epistemologically neutral between this set of beliefs and rival sets of beliefs. These are

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<sup>2</sup> The method was firstly proposed with this name by Rawls (1971).

the two alternatives to WRE. DePaul says that they are both irrational.

Although DePaul finds WRE as the only rational method, he sees a limit of the method as it is most frequently understood in its conservativeness. In this version, the main interest of WRE is the preservation of the greatest number of beliefs. For this reason, we can say that it represents an explication of the initial moral attitude of the individual. Although we can have a radical version of WRE (even if most frequently neglected by supporters of the method) that allows radical changes of view, the method nevertheless fails to consider the epistemologically important element of formative experience. This is the reason why DePaul proposes a further epistemological step, i.e. a method intended not to substitute WRE, but to supplement it with formative experience. This method is named balance and refinement (BR).<sup>3</sup>

BR is a procedure in which the cognizer tries to improve her moral sensibility in an analogous way as one can try to improve her perceptive sensibility. The example of the latter case that DePaul gives is that of a horse trainer who is more able than any other person to see the nuances of all the movements of horses running, in virtue of her long experience in training and observing them running. In a similar way, people may improve their moral sensibility by formative experience that may be represented by life experiences, or by artistic experiences. In DePaul's explanation, artistic experiences are particularly important, because no one can enter in all direct life experiences required to nurture moral sensibility. Art can be a valid substitute for direct life experiences.

There is, nevertheless, an important difference between the cases of formative experiences that DePaul offers when he speaks about perception and when he speaks about moral sensibility. In the former case, the cognitive changes are gradual, while in the second case the cognitive changes are radical.

Radical changes face a problem of which DePaul is aware. It is represented by the fact that some formative experience may be corrupting. For example, a person willing to test her moral beliefs of absolute condemnation of Nazism may participate to Nazi meetings, read Nazi books, experience aesthetically recognized Nazi artworks (like *Triumph of the Will*)

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<sup>3</sup> For DePaul's discussion of WRE and proposal of BR, see DePaul (1993).

and, in virtue of all this, arrive to enjoy some supposed valuable aspects of Nazism. As I suppose that my audience share my opinion that there is nothing at all valuable in Nazism, we can agree that this is a process of moral corruption.

At this point, the question appears about how much and what formative experience we need in order to develop our moral sensibility, by caring also to avoid its corruption. The strategy DePaul proposes is internalistic: each individual has to try as much formative experience as indicated by her internal standards. Precisely, she has to estimate whether she has had sufficient formative experience, and whether new formative experience may be corruptive. I will not question the choice of this internalistic strategy of rationality.

However, there is a further problem: does BR fit with DePaul's conception of rationality? It may appear to be a basic problem for the method represented by the reduced space for correcting naiveté (insufficiently nurtured moral sensibility) because of the fear of corruption. Let us think again about the example of the person who considers about whether she has to test her beliefs of absolute condemnation of Nazism. It may appear as not rational for her to have experiences that risk changing her view. I suppose that this will be affirmed even by people who do not follow DePaul's internalistic position. But, if we endorse DePaul's internalistic conception, it may appear that it is always rational not to have experiences that might cause a radical change of moral outlook. The reason is that the only guideline we can have is represented by our actual cognitive achievements. This means that if we already have a formed system of moral beliefs, it tells us that the view alternative to ours is wrong, and that we must not risk to embrace it, or to embrace a positive evaluative stance toward it. This is true for a person who endorses liberalism in WRE and who thinks about the possibility of a shift to a Nazi worldview, but also for a Nazi in WRE who thinks about a shift to a liberal worldview. If a subject is in WRE with a liberal system of beliefs, she cannot think that it may be rational to enter in formative experience that may change her moral outlook so that she appreciates Nazism (or appreciates some relevant aspects of Nazism). The analogous case is true for a Nazi.

This, however, seems too conservative, although the problem is genuine. The final dictate of this vision is always to remain encapsulated in the

original worldview, which is a good recommendation only for the most extremely adverse to innovation, I would add obtuse, outlooks. Moreover, a problem is represented by the fact that frequently we do not choose whether to have formative experience or not. This is true even in relation to experiences with artworks, that sometimes surprises us as a source of formative experience, but it is even more true for life experiences that happen to us unexpectedly (I will show below one of these possible life experiences). If we do not want to choose a totally controlled life closed for any possible kind of new experience, we must do better to consider an approach to moral thinking that cares about the desirability, as well as the inevitability, of formative experience.

This is the reason why, despite the problem I have indicated above, I do not claim that, after one has reached WRE, changes of moral outlooks are never rational except in limited and marginal cases. My point is only that radical changes of moral seeing related to projects of formative experience as described by the method of BR are not suitable ways for reaching advancement of moral knowledge.

DePaul's problem is common to authors who support radical changes of moral worldviews. This is, for example, the case of Christopher Cowley. He says that the most interesting cases of moral cognition are those where all empirical and rational resources between disputants are consumed, and it is possible only to provoke a radical change of seeing in one of the disputants through an experience (that according to Cowley may be a direct life experience or an experience through an artwork). He gives the example of a vegetarian V and a carnivore C who debate about the moral status of animals. After they have exchanged all the relevant empirical data and consumed proper reasoning, they remain firm in their positions (we can say that each of them is in WRE). At this point, each of them can only hope to change the opinion of her interlocutor by leading her to a radical change of seeing by an experience. In the example, V invites C to a slaughterhouse, and V hopes that this will help C, for example, to make a connection "*— at a deeper than merely intellectual level —* between the harmless living creature and the tidily packaged lump of meat in the local butcher's", (Cowley, 2008, p. 26) and that this will change C's attitude toward animals.

However, Cowley himself is aware that experiences and changes of see-

ing can be corruptive. The example that he gives is that of a doctor who feels strong humanitarian solidarity and who goes to work in an environment with the prevalence of ethnic minorities. After a while, he changes his mind about these people, disappointed by what he recognizes as their laziness, resentment, sexism, etc., and he converted to a racist position. Cowley says that, here, there is still room for reflection on the experience, on the conversion, and on the new inclination to racism. The doctor has still the possibility to refrain from racism because of the ethical ideal that he still cherishes. Here the notion of 'endorsement' is crucial: even though the doctor sees the ethnic communities in a new way, he does not endorse the new judgment, because he does not absorb the reasons in support of it.

Cowley's answer to the doctor's case, however, shows that we must evaluate in a different way than his the cases of radical change of seeing. It seems to me that Cowley does not offer us sufficiently clarified explanations to understand properly what happens in the morally relevant experience, and that this vagueness supports the vision of an unrealistic dissociation between moral experience on one side and appeal to facts and moral argumentation on the other side.

First, the explanation Cowley offers when he says, about C, that she "has not hitherto made the connection — *at a deeper than merely intellectual level* — between the harmless living creature and the tidily packaged lump of meat in the local butcher's" seems vague to me. I think that the problem is not that she has not hitherto made the connection *at a deeper than merely intellectual level*, but that she has not made any intellectual connection between her beliefs, as well. As I interpret the situation, before the experience of a slaughterhouse C knows that the tidily packaged lump of meat in the local butcher's was once a harmless living creature with the possibility to enjoy pleasure and suffer pain, but she does not make the relevant conclusion from her beliefs. Perhaps, at time T C thinks that it is not morally acceptable to inflict pain to harmless living creatures, and that such cruel practices must be opposed. At moment T<sub>1</sub> C sees the tidily packaged lump of meat in the local butcher's, she knows that this is one of the same harmless creatures living earlier in the slaughterhouse, and does not have any moral reaction — this is simply a potential piece of food. In this case, however, we have a clear case of intellectual failure because of

the disconnection of beliefs and absence of the relevant inference. Experiential knowledge can be helpful in this case in the focusing of attention, in enlightening, rendering vivid, and activating the relevant beliefs, and, therefore, activating the proper inferences. This may, at the end, lead us even to important revisions of our beliefs. But the revisions must not be radical; they must proceed carefully and gradually.

My position is reinforced by the analysis of the doctor's example. In this case, it seems to me that the crucial fact is that the doctor controlled by other cognitive resources that he had the attitudinal impulse caused by the experience (among others, the doctor can make use of: (a) factual beliefs on the subject matter (facts about the ethnic communities, among else facts about natural characteristics of the members of ethnic minorities, as well as about the social origin of the underdevelopment of these communities; comparative facts about these communities and the community to which the doctor belongs — e.g. real statistics about behavioral phenomena in all these communities, or a comparison between these communities and the recent cultural history of the community to which the doctor belongs), (b) a reflection on the coherence of his beliefs (about whether endorsing racism would fit in his best coherent system of beliefs), (c) a reflection on himself and on the origin of the situation that created his view (whether his reaction was created by morally distortive influences, for example by a bad influence of personal pride related to the fact that he did not receive the gratitude of the members of the ethnic community in the way that he expected), etc. These reflections can lead the doctor not to endorse the racist view. If the doctor refuses a reflection like that which I have indicated above and becomes a racist his attitude to morality is simply unreflective and irrational, and, as a consequence, we could blame him for this failure.

The relevant teaching of the doctor's case is that although formative experiences are an important part of the process of moral cognitive development, they must be constantly controlled by all other cognitive resources of the subject, like her empirical beliefs, the moral beliefs that she already has, and her capacity of reasoning. Formative experience is a support to WRE, and not a supplement that is active after WRE has spent its resources, or that can operate autonomously.

The conclusion of this part is that formative experience must not be

feared because of the danger of corruption, not even involving formative experience, but only approached carefully and reflectively. Contrary to what DePaul indicated, it must not be a step forward from WRE, but proceed in interaction with the beliefs in WRE. This is true for real-life experience, as well as for experience of artworks. In relation to artworks the problem exists not only because they may be too involving and, therefore, distort our capacity of judgment, but also because they do not put us in direct contact with reality, but only through the perspective of the author. For this reason, when we try to improve our knowledge through artworks, we must not only consider whether our reaction to the experience is proper (like in the doctor's case), but also whether the artworks provide a proper experience, in the sense that they offer a perspective that corresponds to the real world, or whether they are misleading. As James O. Young indicates, even if a perspective is abhorrent, by employing the same artistic techniques used by artists in offering proper perspectives, "a clever writer may be able to make such a perspective appealing". (Young, 2001, p. 105) However, as Young says, although fallible, the representations offered in artworks are testable: "Audience members need to ask themselves whether the perspective provided by an artwork is supported by their past experience. They may need to seek additional experience before they can decide whether some perspective is right". (Young, 2001, p. 105-106)

Young offers us a relevant indication. Think about *Triumph of the Will* and about *The Great Dictator*. We test each of these opposed perspectives by the relevant information we have about Nazism and its consequences, as well as about other regimes and ideologies supportive of the claim of dominance of one race over others, as well as dominance of the collective over the individual. In this way we are justified in accepting the perspective offered by *The Great Dictator* and we do not accept the perspective offered in *Triumph of the Will*. Although an artwork can be a source of knowledge, it does not need to do this in insulation from other sources of knowledge. To the knowledge of facts, I add all other sources of knowledge that we have, including moral beliefs, like I indicated in the case of the doctor shown above, but also comparison with other formative experience, as, for example with other artworks.

Now, a question appears: why do we need *The Great Dictator* to ad-

vance our knowledge about Nazism (and, perhaps, dictatorial regimes in general), or *Born on the Fourth of July* to advance our moral knowledge on the issue of (actual or potential) engagement in war activities of our country if we already have knowledge of relevant facts about these matters, or can obtain this knowledge independently, or through more reliable sources? The answer is that the artwork can help us “make better sense of the phenomena”. (Young, 2001, p. 106) For example, *Born on the Fourth of July* can help us make sense of events related to war by the perspective that the proper concept of patriotism is not represented by the view that we must always blindly support our country, but by the view that we must always care about the moral development of the country. *The Great Dictator* offers us a proper view about the achievement of the sense of belonging to a great and powerful community when this sense is reached through disdain of other communities and disrespect of human rights.

The “making better sense” is explained by Carroll, as well. The epistemic development we achieve through formative experience with artworks is part of WRE. Formative experience helps the development of moral knowledge not by favoring radical changes of seeing, the endorsement of a system of moral beliefs that is alternative to ours. This formative experience may be helpful, for example, because, as Carroll says, we may have beliefs that are mutually isolated, while the experience of an artwork can help us to put them in the proper relation, or we may know moral principles or abstract concepts without knowing their precise meaning, and without being able to connect them to specific situations. We need not only to know them, but also to understand them properly. Better understanding is defined by Carroll in this way:

Understanding is meant to mark our capacity to manipulate what we know and to apply it with a sense of intelligibility — not simply to have access to abstract propositions and concepts, but to apply them intelligibly and appropriately. [...] Understanding is the activity of refining what we already know, of recognizing connections between parts of our knowledge stock, of bringing what we already know to clarity through a process of practice and judgment. (Carroll, 1998, p. 145)

However, if we read carefully, we see that the clarification and better understanding described by Carroll sometimes lead to important revisions such as, for example, when the concept of discrimination is so clarified that after the formative experience we interpret some situations or social relations previously not understood as such as cases of racism or gender discrimination. These situations are analogous, for example, to the situation I have described earlier, where the experience of an artwork such as *Born on the Fourth of July* helps us clarify the concept of patriotism in such a way that we interpret people as Ron Kovic, and not people who blindly support their country, as real examples of patriots.<sup>4</sup>

How does this clarification and better understanding happen? Experience with artworks can help us to reorganize the hierarchy of our moral categories and premises, to interpret these categories and premises in a new way with the help of new paradigmatic cases and hard cases, to classify already known phenomena in a new way (as in the example offered by Carroll, in *Up the Sandbox* of Anne Richardson Roiphe a housewife's fantasies are juxtaposed to her everyday life, in order to compare her life to that of her husband, and to highlight as injustice what was usually seen as culturally normal) and to connect disconnected beliefs (and in this way overcome, for example, racist attitudes, where we can be helped by artworks like *A Raisin in the Sun* of Lorraine Hansberry). (Carroll, 1998, pp. 126-160) For example, a person who enjoys in an artwork can realize the possibility to see how deeply a belief is rooted in her system of beliefs. By seeing the connection of this belief with other beliefs, the person can become more vividly aware of other beliefs, or she can better understand the proper interpretation of the meaning and scope of moral concepts: "Audience members come to see that [a] perhaps already known moral fact is deeply embedded in their structure of moral beliefs. That is, they

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<sup>4</sup>textsfa specification is needed. On one aspect Carroll's discussion is not related to my present concerns. In Carroll's discussion clarificationism is opposed to propositionalism, which means that art does not give us new propositional knowledge, but it only deepens the understanding of our moral knowledge. For my present discussion it is relevant only to establish by what means we can improve our epistemological status in WRE. My view is that these means are clarificatory, and not radical changes of seeing. I remain neutral in relation to the question about whether their result is only better understanding without new propositional knowledge, or clarification provides also new propositions. For a discussion of this problem, see Conolly & Haydar (2001)

come to appreciate it in the sense that one appreciates a chess move. They not only acknowledge that it follows from their beliefs in a formal sense, but apprehend its interrelation to other beliefs in a way that also makes those other beliefs more vivid and compelling inasmuch as their relevance is brought home powerfully with reference to a particular case". (Carroll, 1998, p. 158) Experience with artworks can provide conceptual deepening by the clarification of concepts, by reducing their vagueness and by enlightening the criteria that guide in the application of the concepts in one way or the other. (Carroll, 2002, pp. 11-19)

Carroll explains with more details the procedures of refinement on examples related to virtues. (Carroll, 2002, pp. 7-19) As he says, artworks contribute to our better understanding of virtues by use of thought experiments similar to that of philosophical thought experiments. For example, they can give us a better understanding of a virtue by providing counterexamples to our earlier understanding (e.g., we can have a better understanding of the virtue of friendship, by the help of a film like *Third Man*, that teaches us that it is not always our duty to help our friends; similarly, as I indicated in my previous example, we can have a better understand of patriotism through *Born on the Fourth of July* — although we can start with a view that patriotism is best represented by offering support to our country whenever it requires it, the story of Ron Kovic, i.e. the perspective offered in the film and the illustration of this view, can support our change to a view according to which patriotism is best represented by our engagement in the moral development of our country). But artworks can have a more positive role, as well. Here Carroll appeals to a method that he calls wheel of virtue that consists of comparisons and contrasts of different characters that in different ways and measures instantiate some virtues, for example, the virtues of practicality and imagination as exemplified in *Howards End* by the Schlegals and the Wilcoxes. By the usage of this method we identify the characters who instantiate a virtue properly. The wheel of virtue operates by cultivating our capacities of moral perception and by directing our attention to the criteria we depend upon in judging the moral characters of others.

Analogical procedures to those described by Carroll in relation to virtues may be applied in relation to principles, as well. An example that helps to explicate this is related to *The Merchant of Venice* and principles like:

“Judge not, lest yet be judged” and “All persons should be given their due”. The play can help us refine our ability to see the proper meaning and reasonable range of application of these principles. The play achieves this by indicating a counterexample to a principle, precisely, by showing how the full application of the latter principle can be unacceptable even to those who initially find appealing to require its enforcement. *The Merchant of Venice* indicates also how we must understand the latter principle in order to make it harmonious with the former, in a similar way like *Howards End* indicates the harmony between (and the proper understanding of) the virtues of practicality and of imagination, as Carroll shows.

The conclusion is that the epistemological improvement by refinement that includes experiences with artworks as a relevant aspect is acceptable in central cases of moral thinking. It relies on our earlier achievements and, therefore, the formative experience does not represent a threat from the subject’s rational perspective. By this interpretation of refinement, the improvement of moral thinking does not represent a step outside of WRE, but it happens inside of WRE. Carroll’s clarificationism (in the limits in which I use the concept, as I have already explained), and reflective equilibrium are mutually supportive, and they form a view of moral thinking that invites us to rely on various resources: rational thinking about the relations of our beliefs, proper knowledge of relevant facts, proper awareness of the relevance of our beliefs, and the refinement of our sensibility.

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