

## Drawing the Line: Reconsidering the Basis for Judging Work by Morally Flawed Artists

With the media-dominated age of the 21st century comes the scrutiny of artists who, despite impressive artistic feats, are revealed to be morally flawed with unsettling histories such as child molestation and sexual harassment. People who have liked art from artists such as Woody Allen and Michael Jackson now must reconsider whether they perpetuate moral flaws by enjoying their works. Consequently, does the moral character of the artist now impact the quality of their art? In this paper, I will argue that it is morally permissible to enjoy art by seriously morally flawed artists because enjoying the art is not the tipping point for viewers to behave in further morally flawed ways while also demonstrating how giving morally flawed artists monetary validation is not morally impermissible because does not sufficiently punish the artist for their immoral behavior.

To begin this discussion, we must establish the metric for considering things morally impermissible. Given that moral flaw is presented through actions that affect other people in immoral ways, judging the morality of a person or behavior hinges on actions that manifest, not internal ideas. For instance, it is not morally permissible to try to kill somebody, regardless of whether it harms the victim, but it cannot be proved morally impermissible to fantasize about killing somebody, as long as the person does not actually try to commit murder; the thought of killing does not harm anybody. Fundamentally, morally impermissible actions share the key trait of harming an individual other than yourself. Hence, merely thinking about murder is not morally impermissible because there is no target receiving harm. Therefore, a thought that never manifests into a morally flawed action is not morally impermissible. Consequently, for it to be morally impermissible to enjoy art from seriously morally flawed artists, there must be an

immoral action that is committed due to influence or reinforcement from the art. Thus, using this metric, I must prove that an artist's moral flaw does not influence people who consume their art to act immorally. Additionally, I must prove that it is not morally impermissible to give revenue to a morally flawed artist, given that monetarily benefiting somebody who acts immorally can constitute a morally impermissible action because it allows the person to continue acting immorally and harming people.

Since we are discussing whether enjoying the art is morally permissible, it is the art itself, rather than the artist, that should be considered for prompting morally impermissible behavior; appreciating the art does not necessarily mean one also appreciates the artist. Given art's ability to influence people and spread ideologies, I focus this paper on morally flawed messages that the artist transmits in their work and whether the transmission is the tipping point to viewers doing morally impermissible actions, which is the criteria for viewing the work to be morally impermissible. Art from a morally flawed artist either includes their moral flaw or does not. In the latter scenario, there is no risk to consuming that work because it contains no immoral influence. For instance, it is almost impossible for me to be influenced to behave immorally after watching a play that is moral just. Therefore, the worst case is the former, where the flaw is shown in the art, which, presumably is also a good work of art so that it has maximal reach and potential for harmful influences. Thus, this paper will engage with the highest burden of proof – a high quality artwork in which the artist's moral flaws are made manifest, because that has the highest possibility to influence others to morally impermissible actions.

Art's appeal rests on how much viewers can resonate with it; usually, this refers to articulating an emotion the viewer subconsciously feels, but cannot consciously express. As Tolstoy highlights, "the perceiver merges with the artist to such a degree that [...] everything expressed by the object is exactly what he has long been wanting to express" (Tolstoy 121). Intuitively, this subconscious stimulation implies that messages present in good art must be delivered with some degree of taste and finesse that is unique to the viewer. If delivered too obviously, the potential for emotional resonance decreases, because that message is symmetrically more accessible and obvious to the sole viewer. This implies that the message in a good work of art, if morally wrong, is implicit and woven into the art. For instance, a play focusing on pedophilia might incorporate enlarged general themes of youth and love, without making pedophilia an explicitly critical theme. Consequently, an artwork's moral flaw is difficult to pinpoint, especially if its viewer is not tipped towards interpreting those themes by any positive disposition to the same morally wrong position. Furthermore, given that interpreting art is a personal process that differs between viewers, it is likely easier for the viewer to extract some other meaning from the art that they connect to more. Hence, it is actually difficult for the individual to internalize morally flawed messages in art because they are likely to be presented implicitly and indirectly, in which case the viewer is more susceptible to other general, broader interpretations. With this, implicit moral flaws the artist imparts becomes dormant in the art and does not perpetuate harm by influencing others to act similarly.

From there, consider the other circumstance wherein the moral flaw in the art, indeed, leads the viewer to morally flawed actions, in which case the art can be considered morally flawed to enjoy. Fundamentally, art's influence is largely determined by the individual's

preferences and opinions, insofar as the viewer must already be positively predisposed to or subconsciously searching for a message in the art. For example, as somebody who does not follow the Roman state religion, I consider Vitruvius' architecture to be aesthetically pleasing, despite being personally disconnected from the devoutly religious undertones in his art.

Alternatively, a viewer of Vitruvius' time would have been far more likely to be influenced to behave more piously, because their ideas overlap in terms of religion. Critically, this overlap of ideas is the tipping point to viewers engaging substantially with messages in art and being influenced. Though this example differs from moral flaw in that it is obviously not morally impermissible to be faithful to a religion, it demonstrates that the viewer must already agree with an aspect of a work of art to be moved by it. An artwork's scope of influence is controlled by the viewer because they must, firstly, be attentive enough to notice or meaningfully engage with to receive the message; and, secondly and more critically, choose to be influenced by the art.

Therefore, a moral person, somebody who behaves morally permissibly, is likely not influenced by morally flawed art, because there is no ideological overlap that gives the art influence. Conversely, somebody who already behaves morally impermissibly is more likely to be influenced by the similarly morally flawed art to continue acting in morally flawed ways. However, given that this person is morally flawed to begin with, the art itself has little to no influence in exacerbating the morally impermissible actions this individual might do. As such, the highest burden case becomes a wash, where one cannot use the specific instance of a morally unjust person to argue against the art of a morally flawed person, because the moral flaw of the individual already exists outside the scope of the morally flawed art.

The final lens to consider is the morality in financially supporting morally flawed artists. One might argue that continuing to enjoy immoral artists' art is not morally permissible because it principally supports immoral people through giving them revenue. However, we also recognize that continuing to allow a morally flawed artist to make money is not endorsing their immoral actions, nor does it give any means for that artist to go unpunished for their behavior. Given that boycotts are intended to retaliate against the artist's moral flaws and not some inherent flaw with their art, there is no reason why it is morally impermissible to still enjoy the art and simultaneously criticize the artist. Though this continues to give revenue to immoral artists, their flaws can be targeted through other means, such as legal action against their crimes, which directly addresses their faults, which, as discussed above, might otherwise not be presented in their art. If the art itself is valuable, the trade-off to punishing an artist for immoral behavior should not have to be their art and continuing to appreciate this art is not mutually exclusive to criticizing their actions.

Through these ways of examining moral flaw and moral permissibility through the highest burden cases, I believe that it is clear that it is indeed morally permissible to continue enjoying art from seriously flawed artists. Considering our complex relationship with art, it would be a shame to reject brilliant works that do not perpetuate their creator's moral flaws. Continuing to appreciate these works does not necessarily affirm immoral artists, but rather affirms our desire to preserve beauty and expression in art.

Works Cited

Tolstoy, Leo. *What is Art?* Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Penguin Books, 1995.