

Amoralism and Aesthetic Apathy
Allan Hazlett
Fordham University

I would like to explore some question about moral and aesthetic value – some ways in which these two sorts of value might be thought to be different – by considering two characters: one who suffers from *amoralism*, and the other who suffers from *aesthetic apathy*.

I am thinking of amoralism (in the extreme case) as consisting in a complete lack of concern for morality. The amoralist is someone who does not care at all about morality. The word “amoralist” is not always used in this way; for example, it is sometimes used to refer to someone who refrains from making any moral judgments. If it is impossible to make moral judgments without caring (at least to some extent) about morality, then this other usage of “amoralism” comes very close to my usage: no one could *not* be an amoralist (in the sense of refraining from moral judgment) without *not* being an amoralist (in the sense of not caring about morality). But here I will leave open the possibility that someone could make moral judgments and also not care about morality.

Who do I mean when I say that the amoralist “doesn’t care about morality”? I assume that those who care about morality are either *moralists* or *immoralists*; the former care about morality in such a way that they are disposed or motivated to be moral, while the latter care about morality in such a way that they are disposed or motivated to avoid being moral. I adopt this motivational/dispositional account of what it is to care about something for the sake of convenience (and because I think it is roughly correct as an account of how we use the words “care about” in ordinary language). But we could define “caring about something” just as well by appeal to phenomenology, so that to care about something is to *feel* a certain way about it. I think nothing I say below will hinge on my choice of a motivational/dispositional account of caring, but from here I’ll talk that way.

So an amoralist does not care about being moral, in the sense that he is not motivated or disposed to be moral. He may act immorally, or he may not; he is indifferent to this. He may (although many would deny this) know a great deal about morality, about what it demands, permits, and forbids. The amoralist bears to morality (something like) the relation that I bear to chivalry, or (on my bad days) to etiquette.

The amoralist fails to care about morality, both as such (i.e. under that description) and not as such (i.e. under some other description). He is not, in other words, like the person who cares deeply about other people’s rights and wellbeing, but insists that morality is a bunch of nonsense.¹ Such a person cares about morality, but not as such. The amoralist also does not care about morality as such, but in addition, he doesn’t care about morality under any description.

Aesthetic apathy is the analogue of amoralism, but in the domain of the aesthetic, broadly construed. On this conception of the aesthetic, it concerns such things as art as well as aesthetic properties, more narrowly construed so as to include only such properties as beauty, ugliness, balance, grace, grotesqueness, unity, etc. There may be some art –

¹ See Arpaly, N., *Unprincipled Virtue*, p. 8

conceptual art, or the “anti-art” of Duchamp and others – which has no interest from the (narrowly) aesthetic point of view, because this sort of art is not significantly beautiful or ugly or whatever. However, this is interesting and significant art, and so from the (broadly) aesthetic point of view, this art is interesting and significant. So, the aesthetically apathetic person is someone who does not care at all about art, nor about (narrowly) aesthetic properties such as beauty and ugliness. In what follows I will use “aesthetic” in the broad sense, unless noted.

Again, I leave open the possibility that such a person could know a lot about art and the (narrowly) aesthetic, and be capable of making aesthetic judgments. This person, however, does not care about art and the (narrowly) aesthetic, in the sense that he is not motivated or disposed to emotionally respond to art or the (narrowly) aesthetic, nor to seek out experiences of the (narrowly) aesthetic, nor to look at works of visual art, to listen to music, read works of literature, nor to create any of these sorts of artworks, etc. If we consider the art and the (narrowly) aesthetic to be putative goods, we can sum this up by saying that the aesthetically apathetic person is not motivated or disposed to pursue or promote these putative goods.

In what ways, if any, do the amoralist and the aesthetically apathetic person differ (apart from the content of their indifference)? In very roughly other words, is there any kind of asymmetry between moral and aesthetic value?

1. Morality as objectively important

It might be argued that amoralism and aesthetic apathy differ in *rationality* or *reasonableness*: amoralism is irrational or unreasonable; aesthetic apathy is not necessarily irrational or unreasonable.

Whether this argument can plausibly be maintained will depend on how we understand the notions of rationality and reasonableness. Assume that being rational and reasonable requires, at a minimum, responding appropriately to the reasons that one has. Two very different accounts of *reasons* are available:

Subjectivism: What reasons a person has supervenes on (and is explained by) her motivational set (her desires, motivations, cares, loves, what she values, etc.).

Objectivism: The denial of this. There are objective reasons to do certain things and to care about certain things.

On the subjectivist view of reasons, it is impossible that I should have a reason to pursue or promote some putative good and at the same time care not at all about that putative good. Exemplary of this view is the following view of practical reasons:

Humean Theory of Practical Reasons: S has a reason to Φ iff S desires (alternatively: S has, or would have, an informed desire) that p and Φ ing would make it more likely that p (alternatively: and S believes that Φ ing would make it more likely that p).²

Objectivists balk at the suggestion that my lacking a desire, whose satisfaction I Φ ing would make likely, implies that I lack a reason to Φ . On their view, it is entirely possible that I have a reason, even a decisive reason, to Φ , although Φ ing would not make likely the satisfaction of any desire of mine.

A relevant case of dispute is the case of the amoralist. The objectivist can maintain, with some plausibility, that the amoralist is irrational and unreasonable, because he fails to meet the minimum requirement assumed above: that of being responsive to reasons. The amoralist fails to respond to the objective moral reasons that he has – reasons to care about other people's rights and wellbeing. He is therefore unreasonable or irrational in his not caring about morality.

Amoralism is a problem case for subjectivism, for the subjectivist cannot condemn the amoralist as irrational or unreasonable. She cannot appeal to the argument of the previous paragraph, and it is hard to see how she could appeal to anything about the *reasons* that the amoralist has to care about morality, given her insistence on the supervenience and explanation of reasons by elements of a person's motivational set. She is therefore left with the challenge of explaining why the amoralist is irrational or unreasonable in his lack of concern for morality. The subjectivist, of course, may accept the claim that the amoralist is neither irrational nor unreasonable in his lack of concern for morality, and proceed to explain why he seems irrational or unreasonable.

Recall that we sought a defense of the idea that amoralism and aesthetic apathy differ in rationality or reasonableness. I think that there is no plausible defense of this, if subjectivism is true. The amoralist's lack of concern for morality means that he does not have reasons to be moral, or to care about morality,³ and the aesthetically apathetic person's lack of concern for the aesthetic means that he does not have reasons to pursue or promote, or to care about, putative aesthetic goods.

What if objectivism were true? What I want to argue here is that objectivism does not support an asymmetry between the moral and aesthetic domains. If there are good reasons to think there are objective reasons to be moral, or to care about morality, then there are good reasons to think that there are objective reasons to pursue or promote putative aesthetic goods.

What reasons, then, are there for thinking that there are objective reasons to be moral?

I think the best reason that can be given is this: that the amoralist *obviously* has an objective reason to, for example, prevent someone else's agony, when it costs him (the amoralist)

² See Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book II, Part III, section 3, and Williams, "Internal and External Reasons."

³ Apart from, perhaps, prudential instrumental reasons.

nothing. This reason is provided (roughly) by the nature of agony itself, regardless of the amoralist's lack of concern about this. There is something *crazy* and *wrong* about the amoralist's lack of concern. As Thomas Nagel and Derek Parfit have pointed out,⁴ subjectivism implies not only that the amoralist has no reason to care about other people's rights and wellbeing, but also that someone who cares not a whit about his own wellbeing has no reason to prevent his being in agony tomorrow. This, it could be argued, is just too crazy a consequence to accept. And once objective reasons to care about yourself are admitted, there is no principled reason to resist admitting objective reasons to care about morality.

However, this argument applies in the domain of the aesthetic as well. There is something *crazy* and *wrong* about the aesthetically apathetic person; he *obviously* has an objective reason to, for example, see the Morandi exhibition. And this reason is provided (roughly) by objective features of the paintings in the exhibition, regardless of the aesthetically apathetic person's lack of concern about them.

It could be objected that many people do not share the intuition that we obviously have objective reason to see the Morandi exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum, just like we obviously have objective reason to prevent someone else's agony, when it will cost us nothing. Many people intuit that art does not matter in the same way that morality matters; art is optional in a way that morality is not.

I do not think this is a serious problem, however, for there is also a class of people who do not intuit that morality matters, who do not think that we have objective reason to prevent someone else's agony, when it will cost us nothing: those who suffer from amoralism. Amoralism and aesthetic apathy obviously come in degrees (the characters we considered at the outset suffered from these conditions to the highest possible degree). Many people in our society exhibit significant degrees of aesthetic apathy. Some people – people who commit a number of violent crimes, perhaps – exhibit significant degrees of amoralism. Just as we should not take seriously the intuitions of a serial violent criminal, when it comes to the existence of objective moral reasons, we should not take seriously the intuitions of a significantly aesthetically apathetic person, when it comes to the existence of objective aesthetic reasons. The objectivist could plausibly say that a big problem with some violent criminals is that they do not recognize (not fully, anyway) the objective value of other people's rights and wellbeing. But then she should also admit that many people do not fully recognize the objective value of art and the (narrowly) aesthetic.

For those of us who do recognize (more or less fully) the value of art and the (narrowly) aesthetic, the aesthetically apathetic person seems crazy. And it is *our* intuitions that should count here, when thinking about the value of the aesthetic. To consult more aesthetically apathetic people would be like consulting an amoralist about the value of morality.

To conclude: whether objectivism or subjectivism is true, we have not yet found any substantial asymmetry between the case of the amoralist and the case of the aesthetically apathetic person.

⁴ See Nagel's *The Possibility of Altruism* and Parfit's forthcoming book, *On What Matters*.

2. Morality as overriding

It is sometimes said that moral requirements are *overriding*, in a way that other requirements are not. The amoralist, therefore, would either violate (through his lack of concern) or run the risk of violating (in action) one or more overriding requirements, while the aesthetically apathetic person would not. Consider the following case from R.M. Hare:

[S]uppose that I have in my room in College a scarlet sofa, and that my wife gives me for my birthday a magenta cushion to go on it; and suppose that I am, in so far as aesthetics go, vehemently of the opinion that one ought not to juxtapose scarlet and magenta. I may nevertheless think that I ought to keep the cushion on the sofa; because I may think, so far as morals go, that one ought not to hurt the feeling of, or lie to, one's wife.⁵

This exhibits, Hare argues, that on what is “perhaps the most important” sense of the word ‘moral’, “it is characteristic of moral principles that they cannot be overridden,”⁶ in the way that Hare’s aesthetic principle of colors is overridden in the case of the sofa and the cushion. “[M]oral principles are,” Hare says, “in a way that needs elucidation, superior to or more authoritative than any other kind of principle.”⁷ Let us attempt such an elucidation.

We shall say that my reason to Φ *overrides* my reason to Ψ when, though I have both reason to Φ and reason to Ψ (and I cannot do both, and no other reasons are relevant my decision), I ought, all things considered, to Φ , i.e. when, in such a situation, I have *decisive* reason to Φ . We, again, can consider objectivist and subjectivist accounts of reasons, but, as above, the only hope for an asymmetry between the moral and the aesthetic lies within an objectivist framework. Let us assume one. Consider:

Thesis 1: Moral reasons always override aesthetic reasons. If S has a moral reason to Φ and a aesthetic reason to Ψ , but cannot do both, and no other reasons are relevant to her decision, then she ought, all things considered, to Φ .

I believe this thesis is subject to the following counterexample:

Marcel, an aspiring but occasionally successful artist, is trying to decide how to spend what remains of his paycheck, after covering his basic expenses (rent, groceries, etc.). He needs oil paint if he is to paint anything this month, and the paint he needs costs \$50, but he also knows that a \$50 donation to Oxfam would likely prevent some of the suffering of some other people, who are presently suffering very much.⁸

⁵ *Freedom and Reason*, p. 168

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 168-9

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 169

⁸ Although it perhaps hardly needs mentioning, I add the following: that Marcel’s paintings are not pleasant to look at, nor do they tend to produce any other morally relevant consequences, i.e. he has no moral reason to make them.

I maintain that it is not plausible (or at least not obvious) that Marcel ought, all things considered, to donate his last \$50 to Oxfam, at the expense of his artistic project. Note that I do not maintain that Marcel is morally permitted to spend his \$50 on paint, only that he is not all things considered required not to. Perhaps his purchase of the paint will be morally wrong, but it is not plausible that, in this case, this moral reason overrides his aesthetic reason to buy the paint.

We might try, alternatively:

Thesis 2: Moral reasons sometimes override aesthetic reasons. It is sometimes the case that S has moral reason to Φ and a aesthetic reason to Ψ , but cannot do both, and no other reasons are relevant to her decision, and she ought, all things considered, to Φ .

Hare's case of the sofa and the cushion would be, perhaps, a case in point. However, Thesis 2 does not support an asymmetry between the moral and the aesthetic. For this is also plausible:

Thesis 3: aesthetic reasons sometimes override moral reasons. It is sometimes the case that S has aesthetic reason to Φ and a moral reason to Ψ , but cannot do both, and no other reasons are relevant to her decision, and she ought, all things considered, to Φ .

The case of Marcel, above, is evidence for this. But this is even more obvious in more outré cases, as when I must violate some moral principle to save a beautiful and significant painting, for example. (Imagine, if you like, a pair of trolley tracks upon which are fastened a kitten, on the one hand, and *Guernica*, on the other.)

Thesis 1 proves too strong, since strong aesthetic reasons can override weak moral reasons. Thesis 2 proves too weak, since it does not establish any asymmetry between moral and aesthetic reasons. The following is between these in strength:

Thesis 4: There are some moral reasons that cannot be overridden by any aesthetic reasons. For some Φ , we have moral reason to Φ , and no aesthetic reason to Ψ could ever override our moral reason to Φ .

So, for example, it could be argued that we have a standing (as it were) reason not to commit murder, and that this reason cannot be overridden by any aesthetic reason, no matter how strong.

At least in the case of this example, I do not think it is obvious what we should say. If I am responsible for protecting the contents of the Metropolitan Museum, and I have opportunity to kill a villain who will otherwise destroy the art inside (though he will do this in some way that will not harm anyone)⁹, I am tempted to say I ought to kill him. But I do not think it

⁹ And I really mean that he will not harm anyone; imagine, e.g., that he plans to destroy the art and replace it with indistinguishable replicas.

sounds right to say that I am *morally* required to kill him.¹⁰ Destroying all the art in the Met would be a terrifying aesthetic crime, and although murder is a terrifying moral crime, it might be that the latter would be justified to prevent the former.

If there are any overriding moral reasons, of the sort described by Thesis 4, then surely one of them is the moral reason fathers have not to abandon their children. However, a plausible assumption of Thomas Nagel and Bernard Williams' classic discussions of Gauguin's abandonment of his family is that Gauguin did what he all things considered ought to have done.¹¹ (Indeed, this is what Nagel and Williams agree on about the case; they disagree about whether this shows that there is moral luck.) As Williams puts it, "we may admire the amoral Gauguin's achievements, and indeed admire him,"¹² and it is at least possible in principle that Gauguin end up "ultimately justified,"¹³ but what else could this mean but that it is possible that he did what he all things considered ought to have done? If this is possible, then I maintain it is possible for an aesthetic reason to override the moral reason fathers have not to abandon their children – and surely that is the kind of supposedly non-override-able principle that motivates Thesis 4.

Recall that we sought a vindication of the idea that the amoralist fails to respond to overriding moral reasons, whereas the aesthetically apathetic person only fails to respond to non-overriding aesthetic reasons. But we have failed to discover a sense in which moral reasons are overriding, in a way that aesthetic reasons are not. Thus we have still not found any substantial asymmetry between the case of the amoralist and the case of the aesthetically apathetic person.

3. Morality as concerning our treatment of others

My discussion so far as failed to touch on something, which many would insist makes for the difference between the domains of morality and the aesthetic. Morality, it might be argued, concerns our treatment of other people, vis-à-vis their rights and wellbeing. Moral concern – that which the amoralist lacks – is primarily *other-directed* concern. aesthetic concern – that which the aesthetically apathetic person lacks – is not primarily other-directed. For example, the amoralist will almost surely end up *harming other people*, as a result of his amorality, but we have no reason to think this about the aesthetically apathetic person.

I have no objection to this conception of morality – indeed, I have assumed it above. But I do not think that this fact – that morality concerns our treatment of others, while the domain of the aesthetic doesn't – can explain or justify our claiming any substantial difference between amorality and aesthetic apathy.

¹⁰ There are questions here about boundaries of the domain of the moral that I have been ignoring. Suffice it to say that I have employed (and will continue to employ) a narrow notion of morality, on which it concerns, primarily, our treatment of other people vis-à-vis their rights and wellbeing. See §3.

¹¹ Their papers are revised and reprinted in Nagel's *Mortal Questions* and Williams' *Moral Luck*.

¹² *Moral Luck*, p. 38

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 23

The reason for this has to do with what a “substantial” difference would be. Above I said that we sought a difference between the amoralist and the aesthetically apathetic person, *apart from the content of their indifference*. There is, of course, a difference between them, for the one cares not a whit for *morality*, and the other cares not a whit for the aesthetic. A *substantial* difference, then, would be some other difference, some difference above and beyond this one. (The proposals considered in §§1-2, for their part, proposed differences that were substantial, in this sense.)

If morality *just is* that domain which concerns our treatment of other people vis-à-vis their rights and wellbeing, however, then it does not state a substantial difference, between the domains of morality and the aesthetic, to say that morality (and not the aesthetic) concerns our treatment of other people vis-à-vis their rights and wellbeing. The same applies to the (entirely correct) point that amoralists tend to harm other people, while the aesthetically apathetic don’t. My objection is just that this restates, in different language, the fact that amoralists don’t care about morality, and the aesthetically apathetic don’t care about the aesthetic. And so it can’t *explain* any supposed asymmetry.

Perhaps this is OK. Some things can’t be explained, some differences are brute differences, so perhaps we should say that amoralism is *objectively worse* than aesthetic apathy, but that the fact of its being worse is a brute normative fact. But this, I think, leaves the defender of the asymmetry in an awkward spot, at least if her motivation is that there is something *wrong* with amoralism, something that is not wrong with aesthetic apathy. For if it is just a brute fact that amoralism is worse than aesthetic apathy, then we will have nothing to say to someone who *doubts* that there is something wrong with amoralism that is not wrong with aesthetic apathy.

4. Subjectivism

I have so far considered, for the most part, defenses of an asymmetry between amoralism and aesthetic apathy which took the asymmetry to be objective – in the sense that these defenses took the difference between these two brands of indifference to lie in some objective facts about the relative value or importance of morality and the aesthetic. I have found these defenses unsatisfying (though to varying degrees). I now want to consider what a subjectivist could and should say about amoralism and aesthetic apathy.

I said above that the subjectivist can’t maintain that the amoralist and the aesthetically apathetic person differ in rationality or reasonableness. But there is one difference between these two people that the subjectivist can embrace, and which is substantial (in the sense defined above): the fact that *the subjectivist herself* cares more about morality than about the aesthetic. A person’s deep concern for morality, a concern that is deep by contrast with her more shallow concern for the aesthetic, gives her reason (given that concern, according to subjectivism) to react to amoralism in a way that is different from how she reacts to aesthetic apathy, just as it is reasonable (according to subjectivism) for someone who cares deeply about etiquette to be offended when a boor eats peas with a spoon.

This difference between amoralism and aesthetic apathy would be a relative difference, but it would be a difference nonetheless. This would explain many people’s different reactions to the two cases – the intuition that something is drastically wrong with the amoralist, but not

so much with the aesthetically apathetic person. People's differing reactions to the two cases would reveal different commitments to morality and to the aesthetic.

Twenty-first century Westerners may, perhaps contingently on account of our socio-cultural time and place, perhaps necessarily on account of our human nature, tend to care more about morality than the aesthetic. In either case, such a tendency would tend to generate different reactions to amorality and aesthetic apathy.

For those committed to subjectivism, I think this is the only sense in which an asymmetry between moral and aesthetic value can be maintained. That is the take-home lesson of the above discussion. Subjectivists, for their part, will need to learn to live with this. Objectivists, for their part, may take this as further evidence of the poverty of subjectivism. But, as I have argued, I cannot see how the objectivist can give a satisfying and plausible account of any asymmetry between moral and aesthetic value, an asymmetry apart from the subjective asymmetry described in this section.¹⁴

¹⁴ Thanks to Simon Feldman, Stephen Grimm, Nick Zangwill, and Derek Parfit, for inspiration and conversation on these issues. I wrote this in the Bronx in 2008.