

Pulling for Moralism: Rough Heroes and the Moral Aufheben Argument

David Veldran

In a Tortoiseshell: *In his paper for Aesthetics and Film, David Veldran discusses immoral fictional characters and their potential benefits for improving our moral intuitions. He weaves together a complex **scholarly motive**, which allows him to clearly demonstrate the necessity of his original argument, “aufheben.”*

Excerpt

Introduction

In “Robust Immoralism,” Ann Eaton (2012) introduces the rough hero, a character we morally disapprove of, but one for whom we have sympathy, affection, or admiration. Positing that moral flaws in works of art can be aesthetic merits, Eaton argues that some rough hero works (RHWs), to the extent they endorse an immoral character, like *The Sopranos*’ Tony Soprano, are morally defective and therefore aesthetically good. While I agree with Eaton that RHWs challenge our moral intuitions by prescribing admiration for immoral characters and evoking “delicious” ambivalence (an aesthetic merit), I don’t find this challenge, or the works, *eo ipso* immoral. On the contrary, I argue, it often serves morality by helping to improve our moral intuitions.

The Need for a New Defense of Moralism

Noel Carroll and other “moralists,” who generally hold a tighter relationship between the morally and aesthetically good, resist Eaton’s claims about, *inter alia*, *The Sopranos*. According to Carroll, we should consider a narrative work’s apparent immoral elements in the context of the work in toto. If the narrative condemns the immorality it depicts, the depiction is not immoral, for it teaches us moral lessons. Though this defense may work for some seemingly immoral works, I think Eaton (2013) successfully shows that it fails to account for *The Sopranos*. For Eaton, *The Sopranos* is morally defective (therefore aesthetically better) to the extent it endorses its immoral protagonist (2012, p. 282). Instead of condemning Tony, the show procures our admiration for him: we are meant to like Tony, and many of us probably, like Eaton, regard him as if he were an old friend. If Carroll’s “narrative argument” is not up to the task, might another defense of moralism account for *The Sopranos*?

The Moral Aufheben Argument

To reclaim Tony Soprano and company for moralism, I'd like to build on a part of Robert Stecker's (2008) attack on immoralism. According to Stecker, whether a work contains a moral flaw does not supervene upon whether our prior moral intuitions match those the work exhibits. Just as a match might add nothing of moral value to the work because the intuitions are so banal, a mismatch might be a moral merit if it offers us a fresh "reasonable moral assessment of [a situation]" (p. 158). We may praise an allegedly immoral work (and call it moral) "for exploring an alternative that has some claim to be true in its own right" (p. 159).

With Stecker, I contend that we, a work's target audience, may have flawed or incomplete moral intuitions that seemingly immoral works can rectify. Going beyond Stecker, I think a work that endorses characters' "sort of reasonable" intuitions can be moral, if these intuitions have "some claim to be true in [their] own right." Some RHWs do this through what I call moral aufheben [1]. By challenging its target audiences' flawed moral intuitions and offering them new moral truths (or sort-of truths), a work may, I submit, serve morality. Importantly, I argue that they do not merely destroy their audiences' prior intuitions (which also have some claim to truth) but, in Hegelian fashion, at once cancel, preserve, and lift them up [2], thereby improving them.

Learning Morality from a Gangster

Consider what lessons Tony Soprano can teach us, which less immoral characters teach far less effectively. First, from Tony we can learn that most people, even gangsters, are morally complex. When we admire him, we endorse someone who does not only have moral flaws and non-moral merits, as Eaton and Carroll all but suggest, but someone with pluses and minuses in both categories—moral and non-moral. Tony is immoral, no doubt, but he's also "sort of reasonable": he's principled, devoted to family, often honest, and even, at times, merciful [3]. He thus cautions me against neatly dividing people up into categories of good and evil, inviting me to appreciate their nuances. Similarly, the Eatonesque ambivalence Tony generates in me is itself a moral lesson: at once admiring and recoiling from Tony, we may learn that morality is not as simple as we often assume, that good and evil lack a clear dividing line.

Most notably, Tony teaches the value of devotion to family. By portraying family devotion as if it were more important than others' suffering, Sopranos, via Tony, sears its moral value into my mind (I am thinking of Eaton's (2013, p. 377) "curb stomp" example, in which Tony maims a man who bad-mouthed his daughter). Consider that the show's trademark scene is not Tony ranting about enemies or engaging in crime, but him toasting to his family. That a

show about gangsters can revolve around this scene—and make me feel its moral pull as if I were a child at Tony’s table—is a testament to both aesthetic and moral merit. Tony shows me what counts in life, and his violent, dramatic, and only “sort of reasonable” way of doing so is, I think, necessary. Who can better teach the value of devotion to family than men like Tony, who would sooner turn the world upside-down than rest at a harm done to his family?

I emphasize that these lessons help me solve problems, rather than solve them for me: my ambivalence towards them keeps me from uncritically accepting his pedagogical authority. Here is how I envision the *aufheben* that takes place when I absorb Tony’s lessons: I initially think that I value devotion to family, but I really don’t (I only say so). In Tony, I encounter beliefs that challenge mine, but perhaps value devotion too much. Both my and Tony’s beliefs have “some claim” on truth, and when they collide, they leave me with a better set of beliefs than I had before. What I gain is new moral knowledge: despite what I may have advertised to myself and others, I simply did not—functionally [4]—know that family was what counts in life. In learning this, however, I don’t simply abrogate my moral priors and, as Eaton says, turn “against the forces of good” (2012, p. 285). In admiring Tony, rather, I participate in a kind of dialogue with an immoral, but not despicable, opponent, and it is for the benefit of my moral improvement. There is collision, but no collusion.

Footnotes

[1] The name is after Eaton’s invocation of the word to describe how rough heroes overcome our imaginative resistance (2012, p. 287).

[2] See Kaufmann (1974. P. 236) for these three meanings of *aufheben*.

[3] Eaton and Carroll seem to miss Tony’s many moral virtues: in addition to trying to be a good father, he reconciles his misdeeds with his attempt to support his family; he is loyal to his friends; he values honor and respect; he has a moral compass and is no psychopath; he is often honest with himself and others (he even goes to therapy!); he feels guilt and remorse—for instance, when his cousin returns from prison for a crime Tony was supposed to commit; and he is, of all things, merciful: he doesn’t celebrate Vito’s homosexuality, for example, but he also doesn’t think it warrants death (a minority view).

[4] I might think I know, but my actions tell a different story.

Author Commentary

David Veldran

This essay was written for my Aesthetics and Film Junior Seminar in Philosophy. In the latter half of the course, I became fascinated by the connection between morality and aesthetics. I was specifically intrigued by the question of whether moral defects in works of art could redound on their aesthetic value: Are films like *Birth of a Nation* and *Triumph of the Will* aesthetically marred because of their support for heinous causes? While I felt the answer to that question was almost certainly “yes,” I felt torn when we analyzed an exchange regarding *The Sopranos* between Ann Eaton and Noel Carroll in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Eaton defended her “immoralism,” asserting that the show was largely morally defective, though aesthetically good. Carroll, a “moderate moralist,” insisted it was morally instructive as well as aesthetically good. I thought Eaton won this debate with Carroll, but I still felt that Carroll’s conclusion was right, that the show was morally good. So, in this paper, I tried a different approach to defend moralism—and *The Sopranos*.

What’s most successful in this paper is its development of a novel theory of how moral lessons are taught in film. Though my position in this essay can be called “moralist,” it diverges from many past moralist theories, which, I argue, have overlooked that some works, paradoxically, best teach moral lessons through immoral characters. This occurs via a pedagogical mechanism I call *aufheben*, after Eaton’s (2012) invocation of the word, which means overcoming, and also, in the Hegelian sense, canceling, preserving, and lifting up.

In writing this paper, I watched and re-watched several films or shows Eaton called “Rough Hero Works”—which are seemingly immoral but aesthetically good. I took detailed notes on the “lessons” works like *Fight Club*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Talk to Her*, and *Breaking Bad* offered, even when those lessons were distasteful and not obviously moral. Then I surveyed various defenses of moralism, including that in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Jacobson (1997), Kieran (2003), Carroll (2013), and Stecker (2008), and sought to separate the wheat from chaff in them and build on their strengths to defend many Rough Hero Works from the charge of immoralism.

Editor Commentary

Christina Cho

Many students—particularly first-year students tackling Writing Seminar—seem to find **scholarly motive** a difficult concept to comprehend and incorporate into their papers. I remember feeling really confused as well, and it took me some time to realize that **scholarly motive** doesn't necessarily entail tearing down (i.e., completely contradicting) a scholar's work. In fact, one can approach **scholarly motive** in a more delicate manner by pointing out, for example, how a scholar or a group of scholars overlooks a particular detail or idea. David does exactly this in his paper on moralism and film.

Through phrases like “I agree with” and “I'd like to build on,” David establishes a nuanced scholarly conversation that finally makes room for his original argument—*aufheben*. He initially introduces two scholars, Ann Eaton and Noel Carroll, and explains how their respective “immoralist” and “moralist” perspectives conflict with one another. David points out the strengths and weaknesses of each perspective but ultimately chooses to seek a “moralist” way of understanding his object of study—the character Tony Soprano from *The Sopranos*.

To better analyze and interpret Tony Soprano, David introduces another scholar, Robert Stecker, and uses Stecker's “attack on immoralism” to highlight how our moral intuitions can be “flawed or incomplete.” This idea later becomes the groundwork for David's *aufheben* argument, which claims that certain films help us sort through our “flawed and incomplete” moral intuitions. At the same time, David builds on the scholarly conversation between Eaton, Carroll, and Stecker by elaborating on Soprano's “sort of reasonable” character—the very thing that allows us to grapple with our oftentimes unclear moral intuitions.

The conversational tone that David uses at the end of this excerpt aligns well with the way he “converses” with his scholarly sources. Additionally, his conversational but precise explanation of *aufheben* allows us to “listen in on” this philosophical discussion with a sense of ease. David shows us that **scholarly motive** can be complex and approachable at the same time.

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Bios

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