Music’s Moral Character*

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RESUMEN
Aunque existe una larga tradición de debate en torno al problema del valor moral de la música en términos de las consecuencias comportamentales que el carácter emocional de la música pueda tener, la cuestión del carácter moral de la música pura no ha hallado una respuesta satisfactoria. De hecho, uno de los argumentos fundamentales señala que la falta de recursos representacionales de la música pura impide que podamos atribuir a ésta algún tipo de contenido moral. En este trabajo trataré de defender que es posible describir la música pura en términos morales explorando para ello la idea de que es posible la evaluación moral del carácter expresivo de la música.

PALABRAS CLAVE: expresión musical, carácter moral musical, experiencia musical.

ABSTRACT
Although there is an established tradition concerning music’s moral value in terms of the behavioural consequences that its emotional character may carry on, the issue of the moral character of absolute music has not found a satisfactory answer. In fact, the argument goes, the lack of representational devices of absolute music precludes the possibility of attributing any sort of moral content to these works. In this paper, I will try to defend the view that it is possible to describe absolute music in moral terms by exploring the idea of the evaluation of its expressive character.


I. MUSIC’S MORAL VALUE AND MUSIC’S MORAL IMPACT

Music’s relationship with morality has been largely discussed in terms of how music experience may affect or inform our moral character. The alleged emotional power of music has been, at least since Pythagoreanism and Plato, a reason in favour of the claim that there is a strong link between listening to expressive music and building a certain attitude or character. The emotional character of pure or absolute music together with some sort of contagion theory of expression may provide the simplest form of defence of this
claim. Moreover, psychological experiments have been also usually called forth in order to sustain this link and to settle the idea that, in spite of its lack of representational character, music may move us in ways that are not alien to moral considerations. However, the opponents to this idea are no less in number to those who find it convincing. In the first place, there is not much evidence that people’s cultivated musical sensibilities necessarily correspond with the enhancement of their moral profiles. If it were the case that music possessed some ability to modulate moral character and sensibility, then we would have to find it at least puzzling that some listeners who exhibit a great aesthetic sensibility do not reveal a similar moral profile or do not seem to morally improve in any significant way. In this respect, the case of the sensitive Nazi has become paradigmatic of the possibility of a total disentanglement between aesthetic sensibility and moral upbringing.

In this paper, however, I will not so much focus upon the alleged relationship between music and moral sensibility as upon the also disputed issue of whether absolute or pure music can possess moral content. Is it adequate at all to characterize musical works in moral terms? I will try to argue that there are grounds in music experience that do not only allow but also require this sort of predicates. Furthermore, I will try to show how our grasping of this kind of content informs music experience and strongly determines aesthetic judgement of a musical work. Whether moral life becomes enhanced due to the particular way in which this experience takes place in music is something that I will not discuss here. It may be the case that the precise way in which we experience moral qualities in music makes it particularly enlightening. But whether this is so or not, my aim will be to focus upon the grounds for correctly attributing a moral character to works of pure music.

II. SOME INITIAL DIFFICULTIES

Although it is not unusual to find in musical criticism a proliferation of moral terms both to characterize musical works and performances as when we say of a work, or a performance, that is sentimental, self-indulgent, or sincere, it has been much more problematic to provide a philosophical coherent ground for those descriptions. Are these terms simply a metaphorical way to characterize some aspects of music experience that we fail to describe in other less allegorical terms? If not, how can music acquire that sort of content? And how does the ascription of these properties impinge upon our overall aesthetic appreciation? Is a musical work less valuable aesthetically speaking if we think it is sentimental rather than sincere? The problem of the nature and relevance of these properties to music appreciation becomes starker when, following the challenge of formalist approaches, we focus upon pure or absolute music. While it may seem less paradoxical that program mu-
sic or music accompanied by lyrics may convey moral content in some sense; it seems much more difficult to make the case that pure or absolute music – what Peter Kivy called ‘music alone’ [Kivy, P. (1990)] – might convey anything close to moral content. The reason is obvious and it may be put in the form of a rhetorical question: how can an artistic form that typically lacks the ability to provide representational content be able to convey something as sophisticated as moral content?

In fact, it seems undeniable that whether music can be courageous, revolutionary or conservative at all, it cannot be so in the same way as a novel may be so. Thus, defending the claim that absolute music may possess moral content involves showing that this sort of content can be instantiated in works that lack representational resources and content.

But how exactly can absolute music convey or express a particular character or point of view without the resources that the representation of some content provides? My suggestion will be that we morally evaluate absolute music works by assessing the quality of their expressive content. In the arts, we typically conceive the expression of a point of view or character after the literary case. In a novel for example, the (implied) narrator’s perspective informs the story in a manner that we come to see her point of view towards the characters and story represented. To morally assess the literary work we reflect upon the quality of the expression of the particular point(s) of view that gives form to the plot and characters. It is the attitude embodied in that point of view that can be morally judged and can be described as thoughtful or, alternatively, as one of contempt, sympathy or distance. By contrast, absolute music lacks precisely the representational means to convey a point of view in this way, for there are no musical characters or plot that can be put under the light of a particular point of view or attitude. Hence – it could be claimed – there are no grounds for a moral assessment of the attitudes or points of view expressed in the music, for there are none.

If music is to be describable in terms of moral qualities, it seems we have reached a dead end once it is acknowledged that it typically lacks the representational resources to provide some content upon which a perspective or attitude is projected and which can be, in turn, assessed in moral terms.

Nevertheless, even if music cannot be said to embody attitudes in this way, it may be conceived as expressing attitudes or psychological features in other ways. In fact, I would like to suggest that something similar to a psychological attitude or a point of view could be expressed in the absence of a story or represented content upon which it is projected. If this is so, and there can be instances of expression of a character or point of view in the absence of some representational content, then there is at least some possibility to consider the idea that music alone can convey some sort of moral content whose evaluation may, in turn, have some relevance for the aesthetic quality of the work.
I will turn first to ordinary expression in order to focus upon a particular case in which a subject can express some psychological quality in a way that might be illuminating here. It is more or less uncontroversial that in ordinary expression subjects usually exteriorize or express their character by projecting an attitude towards some external object or situation. We come to know, for example, whether someone has a shy character as she tends to show a lack of self-confidence in public situations or whether someone is courageous by noticing that her default attitude towards adversity tends to be one of facing the situation rather than stepping back. People’s characters are, thus, typically displayed when they project attitudes towards some external object or situation. However, sometimes, a subject may also express herself through some gestures, movements and behaviour that does not necessarily take any intentional object as something upon which her psychological life is projected. Thus, I sometimes judge a person to be so and so, to possess a frenetic or a calm character, through the way she usually moves, speaks, and behaves. These features may be informative about the person’s general psychological profile – as when we notice someone’s tone of voice is always slightly vacillating –, or a feature that reveals a particular temporal state. In these cases, the person is expressing herself (in the sense of revealing some aspects of her mental life and psychological profile) and the recognition of that expression can be successfully achieved without identifying any particular object upon which the person is projecting a specific attitude. Thus, in some instances of ordinary expression we find cases where there is no special need for the existence of an event or person that serves as an object upon which the attitude or character of a person is therefore projected. Finally, I think that we can – and often do – produce judgements of praise and blame about people’s expressive behaviour. That is, we tend to morally assess whether a particular expression is appropriate or whether someone’s more general expressive attitudes are proper. Judging that someone’s attitude towards some difficulty that has taken place in her workplace is overstated can be seen as a judgement of blame of the first kind. Judging that someone’s overall expressive attitude is distrustful or unnatural can be regarded as a judgment of blame of the second kind.

Now, by considering this second sort of expression as a model for expression of character – or of something like a psychological profile – in the non-representational arts, it seems less problematic to think absolute music can be expressive of a character despite its lack of representational content. By embodying certain features that we perceive as belonging to a piece with those features we usually take to be expressive of a mood or character, we may be able to recognize some expressed content of the kind we identify in the non-intentional case of ordinary expression. In fact, this might seem unproblematic even for a (enriched) formalist. After all, there is more or less agreement about the expressive character of absolute music even among those who emphasize the non-representational character of absolute music.
Howe
ever, while formalists do not deny that music can be expressive (of emo-
tions) they become much more reluctant to consider this fact as providing, in
any significant way, the grounds for a moral evaluation of it. While it may
be more or less assumed that moral evaluations of attitudes towards the
contents of a representational work of art are unproblematic, there seems to
be much more resistance towards the acceptance of the legitimacy of moral
assessments of non-representational expressive works.

III. MORAL CHARACTERIZATIONS AS ASSESSMENTS OF EXPRESSIVE CONTENT

At this stage, I will consider the hypothesis that the moral ascriptions
we usually find in musical critical descriptions are not only possible but also
adequately grounded in a judgement of music’s expressive character. As well
as we sometimes judge whether some expressive behaviour may be adequate
or inadequate, sincere or insincere, judging the way in which a music piece is
expressive may result in a moral characterization of the piece. The point may,
again, be illustrated more clearly by a common example from ordinary ex-
pressive behaviour. Imagine that we perceive someone expressing a mental
state or mood in a particular way. We may gauge both the adequacy of the
mental state in relation to the object that allegedly warrants it, as well as the
way in which the subject is expressing it. Thus, we may judge both the pro-
priety of a mental state to a particular represented content as well as its ex-
pression. Both the state and its expression may be subject to the judgement of
adequacy, proportion, etc. Sometimes, as when someone expresses a fair re-
gret but in an inflated manner, it is not her mental state as such that we judge,
but the way in which it is given outward expression. That kind of judgement
grounds our moral evaluation of the expression. Hence, the way in which a
particular mental state (or emotion) is expressed is something one can per-
ceive and judge as adequate or inadequate. Grieving may be the adequate re-
sponse in certain circumstances, say a funeral; now, if we notice someone is
exaggerating or overstating her grief, we judge that the expression is (morally)
inappropriate. It is not unlikely that the inadequacy is perceived as a moral de-
fect in the person who is trying to express her emotion; for by partly distorting
it, she is failing to show – or to have – true emotion, at the same time that she is
trying – maybe unconsciously – to make other people believe she is more
moved than she actually is. Thus, our judgements about expressive adequacy
may ground moral judgements both of people and works of art – although not all
expressive flaws need to be considered in terms of lack of sincerity or distortion.

Although expression has been mainly conceived as emotional expres-
sion other sorts of mental states can, in principle, be expressed as well. One
can express a thought, a mood or a psychological feature; and in every case
there can be some perceptual aspects of the way in which the expression is
being informed that can provide with reasons to judge the work from a moral perspective. Thus, I will try to motivate the idea that moral evaluations of pure music rely upon the perception of the expressive character of music and the way in which this expressive character is presented and articulated.

It can be said that this way of understanding moral characterizations of music say little about the specific way in which music can be so characterized. I assume this can be a reasonable criticism. But I am not so much interested in proving music’s moral profile is distinctive, than in showing how absolute music, despite its lack of representational content, can still be morally judged and how this judgement contributes to the enrichment or diminishment of music experience.14

Finally there could be some concerns about the assumption that music can be expressive in the way I am suggesting here. Although it is quite generally admitted that music – even absolute music – can possess expressive features such as sadness, happiness, melancholy, etc., this phenomenon has to be distinguished from the sort of expression I am referring to. To this problem I will devote the first half of the following section.

In order to support the claim that our moral judgements of music works are grounded in our assessment of the work’s expressive character, I need to deal with a couple of issues that may affect the way we understand this hypothesis. The first issue concerns the very problem of expression and how is it to be understood in music. The second enquires into whether an emotional response to the expressive content conveyed by the music is necessary to judge the work’s moral character.

If I am to rely upon the perception of expression in music in order to explain how certain moral descriptions may inform our experience of it, it may seem that I should commit myself with a particular view of what musical expression amounts to. In recent years the issue has been set in terms of perceiving expressive properties in the music.15 Those perceptual features warrant descriptions such as ‘the music is sad’ or ‘the piece is melancholic’. For many the phenomenon can be explained without taking into consideration that any sort of genuine expression of an actual mental state is taking place – in fact, avoiding such a problematic commitment has been one of the reasons why the reflection about music expressivity has taken this turn. Music is sad not because it expresses the sadness of the composer, but because it possesses features which we cannot but perceive as of a piece with the features that typically serve for the expression of sadness in ordinary contexts of expression. Using a distinction that has become familiar since Peter Kivy,16 music is not expressing a particular mental state or emotion, but it is expressive of that particular mental state or emotion. As well as the weeping tree and the Saint Bernard dog are, in virtue of their appearances, expressive of sadness without this implying we actually think they are sad, music can be expressive of the garden variety emotions – and maybe of a more complex
set of emotional states – without being expressive in the ordinary sense of the word. This form of understanding the problem severs, however, the perception of expression in the music from the perception of the music as expressive of some mental state or attitude the composer may aim at conveying. There are several reasons for preferring this isolation of the expressive perception from any commitment with the actual expression of a mind in the music; but, as Jenefer Robinson (2005) has, in my view, persuasively defended: expression, both in music and other arts, is not simply a matter of mastering the technique that produces expressive features in the music but sometimes requires, as a general assumption, that we regard those features within a broader, more psychologically committed way, of understanding expression. In short, expression in the arts can sometimes be understood in the completely ordinary sense of the word.

There is a strong reason to keep these two phenomena apart, though. Even if one admits a work of art may express a mental state, the properties in virtue of which this expressive content is conveyed need not be identified with the expressive properties perceived in the music. One may perceive the music as possessing a blissful character but as expressing contempt. What the music is expressive of – i.e., the expressive features that can be heard in the music – and what the music expresses – i.e., the attitude or mental state conveyed- does not need to coincide. Nevertheless, even if the phenomenon of expression can be partly characterized without any reference to ordinary cases of expression, there is still some room for music to be able to convey expressive content in the deeper sense of manifesting an attitude or expressing a character. A work may be expressive in this sense by, say, producing a piece in which we can hear expressive properties, but it does not need to do it in this way. In fact, a work lacking in expressive properties may be quite expressive of a mental attitude or mood.

I cannot offer an account of what expression in this sense can amount to in the case of music. However, there are at least some acknowledged attempts to provide a view of artistic expression that can be appealed to in order to defend the view that music can be expressive in this deeper psychological sense. The accounts that, I think, have tried to show more prominently the structure through which art can be expressive in this sense are those of R. G. Collingwood (1938), R. Wollheim (1974) and more recently, J. Robinson (2005).

I think that it is this deeper sense of expression that is involved in our moral appraisals of musical works. When we judge a musical piece to be arrogant or sentimental we detect some default in the expression conveyed by the music. We judge the particular way in which the work is expressing some mental state as adequate or inadequate. Similarly, when we praise a piece of music for being honest or truthful, we are not implying that the piece is stating any particular true proposition, but that its expressive character rings true to us.
The second issue I would like to introduce in order to support my hypothesis is that it is constitutive of morally judging a particular musical work that we recognize some sort of emotional response as prescribed or demanded by the expressive character of the work.

Going back to ordinary cases of expression, one can see that expressive behaviour is not only performed with the intention of exteriorizing, and hence telling someone else about a particular mental state one is in, but also with the aim to make the viewer to feel something or to develop some sort of attitude or state. Maybe this can be better illustrated with the literary case, although I think it also holds for the sort of expression that is more frequent in the music case.

As we have seen, the moral aspect of a literary work partly derives from the particular attitude or point of view under which the story is displayed. This attitude is normally responsible for the sort of (moral and emotional) responses that are normally thought to be an essential constituent of the literary experience and understanding. If the author or the narrator’s voice is presenting a particular character despicably or contemptuously, making his actions, thoughts and emotions look stupid or bold, and if the author is able to persuade the reader that his point of view is itself warranted, we may feel warranted in responding with emotions coherent to that attitude; on the contrary, if we consider the narrated facts under a different, maybe more charitable light, we may judge the author’s despising attitude as underserved or unjustified. And, therefore, we won’t find the prescribed response justified.

Hence, noticing that a certain perspective is being projected partly involves realizing that certain responses are prescribed by that perspective. Perspectives in literary works are not simply unifying devices that help to tie up the different situations and characters. They are also the sources of the evaluations that ground the emotional responses that the reader acknowledges as prescribed by the work. Since recognizing the perspectives and attitudes expressed in a work involves the reader’s engagement with the emotional responses prescribed, a usual way in which the reader may assess whether the narrator’s perspective is adequate or convincing is by noticing whether the prescribed emotional responses are warranted. That is, the reader may assess the expressed attitude by gauging whether the emotional response that follows from it is an adequate one.

This responsive aspect of literary appreciation is related to the reasons in virtue of which we tend to morally judge expression. If we did not feel some sort of response is prescribed or demanded when recognizing some expression, we would not be so concerned about the adequacy or inadequacy of that piece of mental exteriorization. I think that part of the significance we attribute to expression is due to the fact that expression is not only a means to exteriorize mental life, but also a way to provoke a response in those who witness it. In fact, I think there are some aspects of expression and its rec-
ognition that point to a function that is both richer and more complex than mere communication. When a subject is expressing some mental state, she is not simply reporting it; as Richard Moran has emphasized, the whole subject is involved in the expressive act: a sense of the whole subject, and of her commitment to what she is expressing, is implied.\textsuperscript{18} In short, if expression were simply a matter of communication it could be more difficult to explain why failures in expression can be judged from a moral point of view. After all, a failure to communicate something may be due to some inability and, therefore, it can be blameless.

Thus, it is common to all cases of musical expression that the expressed features may trigger and warrant some particular emotion in the listener. As well as in the case where our assessment of the adequacy of the perspective projected is partly based upon our emotional engagement with the work, we can take our emotional response in musical cases as an indication to gauge whether the expression is adequate or disproportionate.

Similarly, when we are listening to a piece of absolute music where a certain character seems to be informing the music through its expressive character, we may notice the sort of response the work is prescribing and judge whether it deserves it or not. It may be more difficult to gauge the expression in these cases, for we lack the typical means of assessing the adequacy of an emotion as it appears in the literary case; in a novel we can always appeal to features of the events upon which the perspective is projected in order to determine its soundness. Nevertheless, both in music and literature, we seem to judge expression as flamboyant or restrained, exaggerated or subtle as part of our experience.

Feeling that a particular piece aims at provoking a cheap emotion or triggering undeserved emotional responses may adequately ground a moral judgement of the work. Aiming at false or distorted expression is clearly something that can be subject to moral consideration. It may be that the abilities to perceive expressive fiascos can only be possessed by deeply-trained and refined sensibilities. Maybe, only those who are sensitive to the nuances of a style or mode of composition may be able to detect the sort of misfit that causes unsound expression. However, the difficulty to tell the sound apart from the unsound, the deep from the cheap, does not render these differences less real.

Finally, if the quality of a work is partly constituted by its expressive character, I think we have everything we need in order to support the idea that moral descriptions of musical works—understood in the sense that I have outlined here—surely have an impact upon the work aesthetic value. Hence, a work’s insincere or inflated expression or character can be both a moral flaw and an aesthetic defect.\textsuperscript{19}
IV. SUMMING UP

I have tried to defend the view that a moral judgement of the music work may be grounded upon the listener’s judgement of the expressive character of the work. This is to be understood as a matter of how the perspective expressed by a work tries to emotionally engage the listener. To judge that a work is, for example, ‘over the top’ is a matter of noticing that there is a sort of expressive inadequacy between what is presented and the emotional responses that are prescribed by the work. In this sense, our moral assessments of artworks are based upon an evaluation of the adequacy or inadequacy of the way in which the spectator is required to respond to the expressive character of the work. This sort of evaluation may in turn be considered as relevant for the overall aesthetic judgement of the work. One can properly aesthetically condemn a musical work that fails to embody a true character.

NOTES

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1 Peter Kivy has examined different ways in which music could be said to influence our moral profile [Kivy (2008)]. See also Walhout (1955).
2 As for example, Tolstoy (1897).
3 See Carroll and Alperson (2010).
4 For an example of the kind of description I have in mind see for example this paragraph by Constant Lambert [Lambert (1967), p. 91] referring to Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913) “In *Le Sacre* rhythm is dissociated from its melodic and harmonic components for the purposes of empathic expression, and the same may be said of the orchestration. It is used not abstractly but nervously and emotionally, and the lack of any intrusive melodic element is only a perverted and negative example of romanticism designed to give the rhythm and orchestration a moral romantically barbaric quality”.
5 At least there is an explanation of how music may acquire moral content once we take into account how the musical experience becomes tinted with the propositional content expressed by the lyrics or the program.
6 Although there has been some debate about what it means to morally judge a work of art, there seems to be some agreement for the idea that the moral character of
a work derives from the moral perspective or attitude that is expressed upon the things, characters and events represented in the work. See, for example, Gaut (2007).

7 Sometimes, one can also find oneself judging a character or action from a moral point of view, but the evil character of a represented character or action does not by itself turn the novel into a morally bad novel. Just representing the evil is not enough to make a work evil.

8 See the notion of ‘bodily style’ in Taylor (1979).

9 I am aware that this sounds similar to J. Levinson’s idea that perceiving expression in music amounts to perceiving a musical persona who expresses himself. However, although I find Levinson’s idea very suggestive I think what I have in mind does not need the listener to imagine a musical persona as such. In my sense, evaluating music’s character does not require this further element as part of the musical experience. For Levinson’s account see his ‘Musical Expressiveness’ in Levinson (1996), pp. 90-125.

10 After all, the expressive character of non-representational painting has been more often than not accepted and has even become the paradigm of artistic expression.

11 This may be due to the coordination of two ideas usually defended within the formalist approach to musical expression. The first one has already been mentioned and it refers to the lack of representational resources of absolute music and, therefore, its inability to provide some content upon which some attitude may be expressed. If no attitude can be conveyed in the absence of a content upon which the attitude is projected, music expressiveness lacks the resources to express and attitude and hence to make that attitude available for moral assessment. The second idea relates to what I think is a narrow conception of what sorts of expressive content can be properly attributed to musical works. The range of emotions that can be expressed is, if we follow Kivy’s view here, very narrow. Music may be expressive of sadness, happiness, and melancholy, but human emotional repertoire is much wider and complex and it does not seem to have a counterpart in musical expressiveness. Music simply lacks the resources to express the great variety of emotional states that humans may undergo. Thus, while the formalist may admit to some extent that music might possess expressive content, he will certainly resist both the idea that this expressive content may be of the complex kind I am considering here and the idea that music expressive content can be morally assessed.

12 This claim may require some qualification, for moral assessments of works of art have been severely criticized by those who defend some form or another of Autonomism regarding aesthetic value. Thus, for example, Oscar Wilde famously claimed: “there are no good or bad books but only well-written and badly written ones”.

13 The reasons why intentional distortion in the expression of our own mental states may be regarded as a moral defect are related to the communicative function of expression. For some accounts about sincerity and why the lack of it may be regarded as a communicative and moral flaw see Williams (2002) and Moran (2005). Not every case of disproportion or inadequacy of the expression needs to be understood in terms of insincerity. Someone may sincerely express a disproportionate emotion, in which case we will also likely judge the expression as morally inadequate. Self-centred people may be morally blamed despite the fact that the may express themselves thoroughly sincerely.
If there is anything specific about the way music can be morally characterized, it is simply a consequence of the specific features of music as a distinct artistic medium, but I doubt anything beyond that assumption can be defended at least within the picture I will try to offer.

This has been understood positively as an attempt to relocate the phenomenon of expression in the music itself, that is, as a feature that the music possesses, as its rhythm or its melody. By doing so, expressive features become much more easily accountable as part of the musical experience. Among the main authors who have developed their theories along these lines are Kivy (1990), Ridley (1995), Davies (1994), and Levinson (1996).

The introduction of the distinction between being expressive of an emotion and expressing that emotion was first introduced by Kivy (1980).

One can illustrate this underlying mechanism of expression by looking at very simple examples of expression. When we feign a sad face in front of a child who, while playing with us does not share his toys with us, we aim not only at communicating a particular emotion to the child but also at provoking his sympathy and to make him become more willing to share the toy. Thus, expression seems to be intimately linked both to exteriorization and to affecting the other’s emotions and behaviour.

The involvement of the subject in the act of intentionally expressing a mental state is emphasized by R. Moran partly by drawing a contrast between involuntary expression and intentional expression “when I can read the gratitude in his face this may still leave me not knowing something, (…) What I don’t yet know is whether the person is willing to explicitly acknowledge it to me; not only direct my attention to it, (…), but also take up a role in constituting a reason for understanding him as grateful or sorry. Putting all this into words highlights the fact that it is the person as such who is asking to be relied on, his choices rather than the natural generalizations linking states of mind with actions and appearances” [Moran (2005), p. 352, my emphasis].

I am not committing myself in this paper with any of the alternative accounts that are currently debating the relationship between the moral value of a work and its overall aesthetic value. For a comprehensive exposition of the different views see Gaut (2007).

REFERENCES


