Viciousness and the Beautiful Soul: A Critique of McGinn's Aesthetic Theory of Virtue

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Abstract:

This paper presents a sustained critique of Colin McGinn's aesthetic theory of virtue. The critique is twofold. First, I demonstrate that there are a number of theoretical flaws which suggest that McGinn's theory is unable to properly evaluate racist literature. Then, using the novel *Frankenstein*, I show that, practically, McGinn's theory incorrectly evaluates problematically racist characters, such as Victor Frankenstein.

Keywords: Aesthetic Theory of Virtue; Frankenstein; Colin McGinn; Racism; Vice and Virtue

In this paper, I argue that Colin McGinn's aesthetic theory of virtue, or ATV, is fundamentally flawed and inadequate. The argument against McGinn is both theoretical and practical. The paper will proceed as follows: First, I unpack McGinn's argument, to determine how he derives criteria of evaluation for the aesthetic theory of virtue. Then I highlight several flaws in his argument. Next, using the character of Victor Frankenstein, I show that on a practical level the aesthetic theory of virtue incorrectly evaluates a problematically racist character.

1. McGinn's Aesthetic Theory of Virtue

McGinn's aesthetic theory of virtue is built on how he understands the nature of ethical knowledge. Using Thomas Reid's understanding of morals and Noam Chomsky's theory of language, McGinn contends that one has an innate moral faculty. "As Reid suggests, this type of knowledge [i.e. moral knowledge] is not like specialized technical knowledge that only certain individuals can acquire, as with science; rather, like language, it is something that all humans are equipped to grasp short of mental pathology" (McGinn 1999, 45)

McGinn is claiming that simply by being human, one is naturally predisposed to be able to "perceive" moral qualities. Further, by basing the moral faculty on Chomsky's understanding of language, McGinn is able account for what appears to be different moral beliefs across various

cultures, though McGinn is not convinced that the differences really are as great as they appear. Just as different cultures have differences in the particulars of grammar and syntax but still have language, different cultures may have different views on what counts as good or evil, virtue or vice, yet all humans—because of their innate moral faculty—will hold that the good and virtuous is commendable while the evil and vicious is condemnable.

McGinn, then, goes on to "expound and defend the following thesis: that virtue coincides with beauty of soul and vice with ugliness" (McGinn 1999, 93). To begin, McGinn maintains that there are three categories of moral terms. The first two categories, McGinn calls thin and thick moral terms. Thin moral terms "are very general and abstract terms of moral appraisal that describe little or nothing about the object in question [...,] words like 'good', 'right', [and] 'ought'" (McGinn 1999, 92). Thick moral terms, on the other hand, "are specific and descriptive while also carrying evaluative force [...,] words like 'brave', 'generous', [and] 'miserly'" (McGinn 1999, 92). The final category of terms has an aesthetic connotation. "There are many terms of this type: for example, on the positive side, 'fine', 'pure', 'stainless', 'sweet', 'wonderful'; and on the negative side [...], 'rotten', 'vile', 'foul', 'ugly', 'sick', 'repulsive', 'tarnished' (McGinn 1999, 92).

> These words, or their uses in moral contexts, have certain distinguishing characteristics. They are highly evaluative or 'judgmental', expressing our moral attitudes with particular force and poignancy, somewhat more so than words like 'generous' and 'brave'. Correspondingly, they are less 'descriptive' than those words, telling us less about the specific features of the agent, though they are more descriptive than words like 'good' and 'right'. They convey a moral assessment by ascribing an aesthetic property to the subject. What they give us are *qualities* of character, morally laden, rather than traits of character. [...T]hese terms fulfill a particular evaluative need, not already covered by 'thick' and 'thin' moral terms; they are not conceptually redundant or mere stylistic variants. (McGinn 1999, 92-3)

McGinn believes that using such aesthetically laden terms implies a commitment to the notion that vice and virtue are allied with aesthetic qualities of a person. "That is what our ordinary ways of speaking suggest; and the ATV holds that this is indeed a correct way to think about vice and virtue" (McGinn 1999, 93).

McGinn explains that the best way to understand the connection between morality and aesthetics is with a supervenience thesis. Broadly, the supervenience relation amounts to this: "properties of type A are supervenient on properties of type B if and only if two objects cannot differ with respect to their A-properties without also differing with respect to their B-properties" (Audi 1999, 891). Thus, the presence of certain aesthetic qualities is a necessary and sufficient condition for certain moral qualities—for example, a person being beautiful is a necessary and sufficient condition for that same person being virtuous.

Clearly, however, McGinn does not mean to suggest that a "pretty" person is good and an "ugly" person is evil, such that supermodels would be paragons of virtue, and someone like

Gandhi—who was not a particularly visually attractive person—would be at best morally sub-par. Using Reid's understanding of morality, McGinn clarifies: "[v]irtue equals beauty *plus* the soul. The particular *kind* of beauty proper to the soul is what virtue consists in" (McGinn 1999, 97). So, McGinn can go on to claim that "[a] person's *body* can be said to have positive aesthetic attributes and no moral implications be carried, but I [i.e. McGinn] do not believe we shall find any terms that describe the soul aesthetically that are morally neutral" (McGinn 1999, 100).

The notion of a soul which has both moral qualities and supervening aesthetic qualities is important for McGinn's ATV. First, it is important as it takes care of the above-mentioned, superficial objection. Moreover, it allows McGinn to argue that if the ATV is wrong,

> [t]hat would mean that a person could present an observer with both aesthetically positive and morally negative characteristics, these being instantiated by the same thing, namely a soul. This would imply that we should be both attracted and repelled by the same thing: we admire the beauty of it but deplore its immorality, valuing and disvaluing it simultaneously. (McGinn 1999, 100-1)

McGinn admits that while it is not logically impossible to value and disvalue the same object simultaneously, it does seem to strike one as psychologically awkward, and hard to tolerate. "This suggests a convergence of the two sets of characteristics is built into our normal psychology of moral reaction: we would be lost and confused if the two came apart; we proceed on the assumption of their coincidence" (McGinn 1999, 101).

Further, if one supposes, as McGinn does, that "[e]vil is *expressed* in ugly acts", then one cannot have a beautiful soul and commit wicked actions—which would be "characteristically evil" (McGinn 1999, 101). For McGinn, this commends the ATV because morality and beauty are connected by the way one normally sees the relation between character and action. Thus, aesthetics and morality are intimately connected, because by McGinn's account one does not naturally believe that the beautiful can create that which is not beautiful, and "[u]gly actions reflect ugliness within" (McGinn 1999, 101).

There is another aspect of McGinn's theory, that is, how one determines what is beautiful. First, he explains the kind of property beauty is such that it can be a possession of a soul. The definition must be sufficiently abstract in order to make it applicable "across all aesthetically evaluable objects" (McGinn 1999, 108). McGinn puts forth an idea he takes from author Vladimir Nabokov: "an object is beautiful if and only if it affords aesthetic bliss, and aesthetic bliss is a state of mind in which one is connected to other states of being in which art is the norm—where art involves curiosity, tenderness, kindness, and ecstasy. [...] In a word it puts us into contact with certain ideals" (McGinn 1999, 110).

Nabokov's formula suggests the aesthetic puts one in contact with the explicitly moral domain by using the terms 'tenderness' and 'kindness'. Conversely, the aesthetic theory of virtue takes the moral into the aesthetic domain by using terms like 'fine', 'pure', and 'ugly'. McGinn believes that "[t]his is a nice result [...] because virtue, especially exceptional virtue, *does* make

us think of—even yearn for—a world in which virtue is the norm. [...] And this is a direct consequence of two ideas that have intrinsic appeal—the ATV and Nabokov's formula" (McGinn 1999, 112).

To sum up, McGinn's aesthetic theory of virtue can be explained as follows: All humans that are not affected by some sort of mental pathology are able to perceive and understand morality. One is able to determine what is good/evil, vice/virtue, naturally and without mediation. Further, one's understanding of morality is closely allied to one's understanding of the aesthetic. In particular, that which is moral is necessarily and sufficiently connected to the beauty of the soul. Finally, the aesthetic connects one with the moral domain, and puts one in touch with certain moral ideals.

2. Theoretical Shortcomings and Concerns

I now turn to some general problems with the aesthetic theory of virtue. First, McGinn's theory seems to violate Occam's Razor. Second, McGinn appears to equivocate terms on a number of occasions.

"Occam's Razor suggests that simpler theories should be preferred to more complex theories. Simpler theories are generally preferable, however, only when other things (such as their respective clarity, scope, and power) are equal" (Fetzer 1993, 100). According to McGinn, one has a natural and innate ability to "perceive" moral qualities. Thus, to attach aesthetic qualities to the moral qualities is at best redundant. The aesthetic does nothing that cannot be accomplished by the moral alone. One can read a novel, and be moved by it morally, without having to attach aesthetic attributes to the novel in order to fully appreciate the moral import. So, the onus is on McGinn to explain why supervening aesthetic qualities makes one's moral understanding richer, etc.

As to my second problem, McGinn depends on our common use of language to defend the necessity of combining the moral and the aesthetic. While McGinn claims that the frequent occurrence of aesthetic terms in moral discourse suggests an implicit acceptance of the aesthetic, Noël Carroll has a different explanation. He claims that the aesthetic terms "only support the hypothesis that there is an enduring mythology of the aesthetic theory of virtue. They corroborate the fact that people have believed it in the past and that the remnants of that belief live on in our language and its vocabulary [...]. That the mythology once gripped people's imagination in no way argues in behalf of the truth of the aesthetic theory of virtue" (Carroll 2000, 652). I believe the problem is deeper.

It seems to me that McGinn is equivocating. While one may refer to a piece of art as "repulsive" and a person's character as "repulsive", it does not seem necessary to suppose that one is making a category mistake in the application of repulsive to morality, nor is it necessary to assume that repulsive in the moral sense has an aesthetic connotation, per se. Similar to the case of two entrees in a restaurant, both can be 'hot', but one can mean two entirely different things

by that. One dish could have a high temperature, while the other dish is very spicy. In ascribing the term 'hot' to both dishes, one has not said something false or erred in the attribution of the term. Further, one is not using the term to suggest that temperature is present in spiciness. Thus, it is conceivable that one can use terms that are used to describe aesthetic qualities to describe moral qualities, and *not* be implying an aesthetic connection.

Another concern I have is McGinn's suggestion that it is highly unnatural for one to be attracted and repelled by the same object at the same time. Consider: one can be very attracted to the aesthetic qualities of a piece of jewelry, yet be repelled by the extremely high price. This is not unnatural because what attracts one is one thing—the beauty—and what repels is an entirely different attribute—the price. Yet, these are both characteristics of the same object. Thus, it is not unreasonable to assume that a beautiful soul could attract one by its beauty but repel one by its lack of virtue. It is not that the soul is different, it is the various qualities that attract or repel within that one soul.

Finally, Noël Carroll has some additional objections to McGinn's theory, which I find quite compelling. Carroll points out that according to McGinn "[b]eauty of soul, if there is such a thing, would [...] be striking, as perceptible beauty is" (Carroll 2000, 652). Yet, most people seem to be virtuous/good, but do not come across as striking. "Thus, if the intuition that no person can be good and have no beauty of soul is supposed to support the aesthetic theory of virtue, I am not convinced that it is up to the task" (Carroll 2000, 652). Carroll further points out that beauty is a perceptible quality. "Thus, to the extent that beauty-talk has its natural home in perceptibilia, I find it hard to get my mind around the notion of a beautiful soul; it strikes the ear as a category mistake" (Carroll 2000, 654).

Carroll has two final objections. First, McGinn never addresses the Kantian view of beauty. "[T]he Kantian view [maintains] that beauty is disinterested in the sense that judgments of beauty are categorically separate from assessments of advantage, including morality" (Carroll 2000, 653). Carroll finds it "perplexing that McGinn does not even air his reservations about the most formidable theory of beauty we have, especially since it appears to be logically at odds with his own view" (Carroll 2000, 653).

Carroll, further, does not believe that the Nabokov formula is an acceptable definition of beauty. For the Nabokov formula, "an object is beautiful if and only if it affords aesthetic bliss, and aesthetic bliss is a state of mind in which one is connected to other states of being in which art is the norm—where art involves curiosity, tenderness, kindness, and ecstasy. [...] In a word it puts us into contact with certain ideals" (McGinn 1999, 110). Carroll argues:

> Surely there are all sorts of examples of beauty that do not put us in contact with kindness, tenderness, curiosity, and ecstasy. For example, the simple [...], delicate, bejeweled designs on the face of the Taj Mahal. There is no question of kindness, tenderness, or curiosity here, and, though these designs afford pleasure, it is tranquil—nothing like ecstasy. Moreover, things other than beauty are frequently (perhaps more frequently than our commerce with beautiful things) the source of contact with ideals of

> kindness, tenderness, curiosity and ecstasy: sermons, even lackluster ones (kindness and tenderness), science (curiosity), and mind-altering substances (ecstasy) are cases in point. (Carroll 2000, 654)

The lack of persuasiveness of the Nabokov formula is problematic, then, for McGinn because he uses the Nabokov formula to ground the connection of beauty and virtue.

My purpose here has not been to fully demonstrate the failure of the aesthetic theory of virtue. I have mentioned a few objections merely to suggest that there is reason to doubt the efficacy of the overall theory.

3. Practical Problems and the Case of Victor Frankenstein

Beyond the theoretical problems with McGinn's aesthetic theory of virtue, implementing it practically raises, or underscores, additional concerns. To demonstrate this, I will consider the novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. For the purpose of this paper, I will be interpreting the novel as racist. In particular I will be interpreting the character Victor Frankenstein as a racist. In this way, I will show that McGinn's aesthetic theory of virtue is not able to correctly interpret, or explain the situation, and is thus inadequate to condemn racist literature, or at least morally problematic.

First, I will establish that Victor Frankenstein is presented as a beautiful soul. In describing Frankenstein to his sister, Captain Walton states: "Sometimes I have endeavoured to discover what quality it is which he possesses that elevates him so immeasurably above any other person I ever knew. I believe it to be an intuitive discernment; a quick but never-failing judgment; a penetration into the causes of things, unequalled for clearness and precision" (Shelley 2003, 24). Here, not only is Walton pointing out the attractiveness of Frankenstein's soul, but in addition, his understanding is based on language that is similar to McGinn's Reidean understanding of moral knowledge. If it is not clear that Walton is referring to Frankenstein's soul, it becomes clearer as he continues describing Frankenstein. "[H]is full-toned voice swells in my ears; his lustrous eyes dwell on me with all their melancholy sweetness; I see his thin hand raised in animation, while the lineaments of his face are *irradiated by the soul within*" (Shelley 2003, 25-6 emphasis added).

Now, I will show that Frankenstein can indeed be understood as immoral and a racist. First, it should be pointed out that the Creature can best be understood as the child of Frankenstein. Not only is Frankenstein the Creature's father, but perhaps more accurately, he can be interpreted as the Creature's mother. Frankenstein is the creator and gestator of the Creature. He describes the creation as "labor", further the passage of winter, spring, and summer during the creation of the Creature suggests the nine-month gestation period of a typical human (Shelley 2003, 54). Finally, Frankenstein describes the "agony" of child-birth the night the Creature is brought to life (Shelley 2003, 55).

Frankenstein fully understood his responsibilities as a parent. "I created a rational Creature, and was bound towards him, to assure, as far as was in my power, his happiness and

well being. This was my duty" (Shelley 2003, 214). He also had parents who were exemplary models of parenting, and who instilled in him the understanding of the appropriate relationship of parent to child. The child was bestowed on the parent by Heaven, "to bring up to good, and whose future lot [i.e. the child's lot] it was in their [i.e. the parents] hands to direct to happiness or misery, according as they fulfilled their duties towards [the child]. With this deep consciousness of what they owed towards the being which they had given life" (Shelley 2003, 29).

However, knowing all the above duties and responsibilities incumbent on him as a parent, Frankenstein totally rejects his child, the Creature. Moreover, the reasons why Frankenstein rejects the Creature, I contend, are superficial racist reasons. Frankenstein describes his first reaction to his child:

> How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endevoured to form? [...] His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shriveled complexion and straight black lips" (Shelley 2003, 55).

Upon observing his ugly creation, Frankenstein runs out of the room and rejects the Creature. Rejecting the Creature for being ugly, while unbecoming and perhaps morally blameworthy, is not necessarily racist—e.g., one might argue that it is more an example of the discriminatory practice of straightforward lookism. Yet, Frankenstein goes farther.

Not only does Frankenstein find the Creature physically ugly, but Frankenstein goes on to ascribe moral qualities to the Creature based on the Creature's superficial appearance. The main problem is that Frankenstein views the Creature, in the words of McGinn, as "the dangerous alien other" (McGinn 1999, 147), when nothing about the Creature suggests this interpretation beyond his superficial physical appearance. The Creature is certainly human in form and has all the organs and functions of a human—though on a slightly larger scale. The Creature was rational, as Frankenstein himself admits (Shelley 2003, 214). He further had the ability to learn language, and "[t]hrough acquiring language the Creature becomes truly one of us; he acquires the capacity that defines the human community. [...] He has *reason*" (McGinn 1999, 160). Finally, as demonstrated in his interaction with the cottagers and saving the rustic child from drowning, the Creature conveys his possession of morality and fellow-feeling. The Creature describes himself as "benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity" (Shelley 2003, 98).

Finally, I would contend that even when the Creature acts violently, those actions just further demonstrate his humanity. He is reacting, perhaps overzealously, with a sense of justice. While his actions of killing "innocent people" seem vicious, I would claim that at worst it demonstrates a lack of practical judgment but is not a violation of a formal definition of justice. One must remember that the Creature is merely trying to gain that which he feels is his by right,

and that which even on Frankenstein's account of the duties of parenthood, Frankenstein owes to him. Even if one will not grant me the above account, the Creature does not become "*inwardly* monstrous" (McGinn 1999, 163) as McGinn suggests. Nor does the Creature ever attain to the status of evil. "The evil person derives pleasure precisely from someone *else's* pain" (McGinn 1999, 65). Yet, despite the Creature's vicious actions, he does not take pleasure in them. The Creature tells Walton: "do you think that I was then dead to agony and remorse? [...] Think you that the groans of Clerval were music to my ears? My heart was fashioned to be susceptible of love and sympathy" (Shelley 2003, 216).

Before moving on, I will point out, that the case of the Creature was not an anomaly in Frankenstein's character, and why his discrimination against the Creature is better understood as broadly racist rather than lookist—though that would still prove my appointment against McGinn. In describing his nurse who took care of him in an Irish jail Frankenstein says "her countenance expressed all those bad qualities which often characterize that class. The lines of her face were hard and rude, like that of persons accustomed to see without sympathizing in sights of misery" (Shelley 2003, 176). Here again Frankenstein is stereotyping someone's character based on superficial physical appearances, and again the stereotypes have no basis in reality. The nurse expresses sympathy by asking about his health. She then goes on to show that she has a moral sensibility when she states: "I do my duty with a safe conscience it were well if everybody did the same" (Shelley 2003, 176). Thus, Frankenstein's personality generally is racist. Not only does he treat the Creature as inferior for racist reasons, but when one adds the Irish nurse it suggests that racism is a matter of habit for him.

All this together strongly suggests the problematic nature of McGinn's aesthetic theory of virtue. It shows that it fails to condemn racist literature. Frankenstein is portrayed as someone with a beautiful soul, yet he is capable of being evil through his racism against not only the Creature, but others as well—viz. the Irish nurse. The Creature is aware of the racism that surrounds him. He claims: "Once my fancy was soothed with dreams of virtue, of fame, and of enjoyment. Once I falsely hoped to meet with beings who, pardoning my outward form, would love me for the excellent qualities which I was capable of unfolding. I was nourished with high thoughts of honour and devotion" (Shelley 2003, 218). Then, when he demands justice for his mistreatment, he is further punished.

In short, in the novel, *Frankenstein*, beauty of soul is separated from morality. Aesthetic beauty is instantiated in the same soul as evil in Victor Frankenstein. Thus, one is attracted to and repulsed by Frankenstein at the same time, a view which McGinn feels is psychologically unnatural. Further, because according to McGinn's supervenience thesis aesthetic beauty of soul is both a necessary and sufficient condition for moral virtue, it does not seem that Frankenstein is logically possible. He is vicious because of his racism, yet his beauty requires him to be virtuous. Thus, McGinn is unable to condemn Frankenstein as a racist without at the same time abandoning the aesthetic theory of virtue. In order to maintain the aesthetic theory of virtue,

McGinn will have to claim that Frankenstein is not in fact a racist. However, I believe that I have given sufficient examples to show that Frankenstein does in fact have racist intentions.

4. Conclusion

It has been shown that Colin McGinn's aesthetic theory of virtue is unable to condemn racist literature. In applying the aesthetic theory of virtue to an example of racism in literature—viz. the novel *Frankenstein*—it was shown that either McGinn must prove that Victor Frankenstein was not a racist, or McGinn must abandon the aesthetic theory of virtue. I have also pointed out, with the help of Noël Carroll's article, several theoretical problems with the aesthetic theory of virtue generally. Interestingly, both the practical example and the theoretical issues derive a potentially similar result. The aesthetic theory of virtue is flawed precisely because it necessarily links virtue and aesthetics. If it did not, Frankenstein could be both beautiful and a racist, and many of the problems pointed out above would not be at issue. Granted, what would remain would be either no aesthetic theory of virtue at all or a very watered-down version thereof.

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