The Good, The Bad, and the Beautiful

McGinn, Colin. **_Ethics, Evil, and Fiction_**. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997, x and 186pp, £25.00 cloth, £11.99 paper. ISBN: 0198237162 (hb), 0198238770 (pb).

McGinn’s book is a book of two halves. While the first part constitutes an essay on the nature of morality in general, and evil in particular, the second part dwells on the relationship between morality and aesthetics, especially as these phenomena are explored and revealed through works of fiction. These two halves are framed by considerations of ‘method’ in moral philosophy: what, McGinn asks, is the appropriate form of discourse for the investigation of moral life ? McGinn argues that the significance of fictional discourse for moral thinking has never been properly taken on board by moral philosophy; his aim in this book is to suggest how moral philosophy might properly accommodate fiction’s moral dimension.

Over the first two major chapters (‘Goodness’ and ‘Knowledge of Goodness’), McGinn mounts a defence of moral realism along with a critique of dispositional theories of morality which reduce moral concepts and values to psychological ones. This is then bolstered by a comparison between moral and scientific knowledge, through which McGinn aims to demonstrate that moral knowledge is at least as robust as scientific knowledge; moral knowledge may be different in nature from scientific knowledge, but it is not ‘epistemologically queer’. The basic strategy here is to show that the supposedly unique fragility, or fallibility, of moral knowledge only arises in the context of a highly-dubious empiricist metaphysics, which measures all types of knowledge by the single, arbitrarily privileged, yardstick of knowledge-through-sense-experience. Moving closer to the target of the second part of the book, ‘The Evil Character’ sets forth an

investigation and analysis of the moral psychology of evil. McGinn begins with an abstract formula for a type of being for whom the pain of others is pleasurable (‘the evil who are happy,’ as Nietzsche described such persons), and the pleasure of others is painful. He then goes on to survey a range of actual and imagined types of immoral behaviour, including sadism (analysed in terms of the power and pleasure derived from destroying the most basic values of the victim – above all, her attachment to life itself), cruelty motivated by envy, revenge, rivalry, as well as ‘primitive evil’ – a brute pleasure in the pain of others for its own sake.

From the point of view of aesthetics, the next chapter, ‘Beauty of Soul’, is the pivotal chapter in the study. Drawing on Thomas Reid, McGinn argues that the mind (or ‘soul’, in the language he inherits from Reid) and moral character of an individual possess aesthetic qualities (and thus, by extension, that aesthetic qualities are not restricted to objects of perception). This claim is buttressed by the pervasiveness, in ordinary language, of ‘aesthetic-moral’ terms – words which deliver moral judgements by attributing aesthetic qualities to the object of judgement: you might say that someone’s behaviour ‘stinks’, or that someone has a ‘sweet’ personality, for example. (I cannot resist citing another piece of evidence in support of this thesis, from Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia*. ‘But you’re not ugly inside’ says Jamila to the unprepossessing Changez. ‘Yes, inside I look like Shashi Kapoor, I know that for sure’ he replies.) The final two major chapters then pursue the implications of this thesis, which McGinn dubs the ***aesthetic theory of virtue*** (ATV), through two complementary literary case studies (thus making good on his ambition to bring together two modes of

moral investigation – metaethical analysis and the moral exegesis of fiction). ‘The Picture: Dorian Gray’ examines Wilde’s novel in which outward beauty co-exists with ugliness of soul, in part as a means of testing the *amoral aestheticism* for which Wilde is (somewhat misleadingly) famed. Noting that all human lives run ‘on separate aesthetic rails’ (145) – beauty of body and of soul – McGinn turns his attention to another case of radical ‘aesthetic bifurcation’ (117), though one which inverts the polarities of *Dorian Gray*: the conjunction of a monstrous body with inner beauty in the monster of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. If in the first case we see the corruption of soul by the overvaluing of outer beauty, in the second we witness the destruction of soul by outward ugliness – insofar as the initially gentle and generous monster is driven to revenge (an evil state of mind on McGinn’s analysis, if not the most nefarious) by the hostile reactions of others to his appearance. (Changez continues in *The Buddha of Suburbia*: ‘But some people are really ugly pig-faces, and they have a terrible time and all. I’m beginning a national campaign to stop this prejudice.’) The existential difficulties and moral dangers of our aesthetically-riven existence lie at the heart of both cases.

McGinn pairs the ATV with a complementary thesis (developed on the basis of Nabokov’s remarks on ‘aesthetic bliss’ in the Afterword to *Lolita*). Call this the ***moral theory of beauty***, or MTB: ‘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’ (110), these qualities all being construed as moral ones. McGinn is clear that the ATV and MTB taken together are not intended to reduce morality to aesthetics or vice versa,

but rather to show how intimately and systematically the two are interrelated: ‘The ATV takes us from morality to aesthetics, while Nabakov’s formula takes us from aesthetics to morality: the upshot is that morality leads back to itself, after taking a detour through aesthetics’ (111-2). This culminates in the case for *moral aestheticism*, as a superior alternative to the amoral aestheticism examined in *Dorian Gray*: ‘The true aesthete must be a moralist, since he cares about the beauty of his soul’ (139), as well as the beauty of appearance.

Where does this leave aesthetics ? The MTB is introduced as a subordinate thesis, designed to show us how the ‘beauty’ of a virtuous person takes us through aesthetics and back to morality. But it is also a thesis about the nature of aesthetic experience, and since McGinn adheres here to what he calls ‘panaestheticism’ (‘We are aesthetic beings through and through; we apprehend the world through aesthetic eyes’ (121)), one must ask: just how tight is the fit between morality and aesthetics ? Compared with the precision with which McGinn discusses the relationship between psychological and moral concepts earlier in the book, the discussion here, though never less than stimulating, is relatively loose. There are hints that McGinn doesn’t regard the MTB as an exhaustive theory of beauty, that aesthetics can’t be equated with or reduced to questions of beauty, and that morality and aesthetics ‘do not exist in perfect harmony’ (141). But the formal statement of the MTB as it stands allows precious little space for any aesthetic quality or experience which does not lead us to a moral quality, or have a moral dimension. We are warned, for example, that architectural forms, or the patterns and rhythms of modern city life, might not just be exhilerating or unpleasant, but morally

edifying or corrupting. By the time that we reach the statement that 'the better a society's taste in outer things, the better placed it will be to promote virtue' (120), one feels an urgent need to know just what the moral status of (say) platform shoes and long hair is, and how one would decide this matter.

McGinn's own examples, and indeed his own notion of aesthetic bifurcation, suggest how much of aesthetic experience escapes the zone of overlap between the moral and the aesthetic. One of the lessons of both *Dorian Gray* and *Lolita* is that there are types of beauty – physical, perceivable beauty – that don't reliably tell us anything about the moral character of the person or thing exhibiting them. It is precisely because physical beauty may tell us nothing about a person's moral character that we can be betrayed by it. If a harmonious appearance necessarily carried some sort of moral implication, then in being swayed by the handsome charmer we would not really be deceived, or at least not so devastatingly, for we would be responding to something morally good (and not merely aesethetically pleasing) in that person. These aesthetic-moral virtues might co-exist in that person with other moral defects of character, but they would themselves be moral virtues. The challenge, then, is to the comprehensiveness of the MTB, and to the exclusivity of the circuit which McGinn argues runs between morality and aesthetics. No doubt there is significant interconnection; but surely the aesthetic network runs off in other, non-moral directions as well.

A recurring worry for McGinn, which arises out of his analysis of the evil moral psychology (one for whom the pain of others causes pleasure, and the pleasure of others

causes pain), is ‘entertainment.’ Usually McGinn’s chosen examples are modern media (movies and TV), where we find pleasure in depictions of violence, disaster, and suffering. But the problem never comes properly into focus. The vast majority of mass media representations are, in one way, very conservative: where spectacular, graphic violence is represented as something to take pleasure in, it is the violence of revenge against figures of evil. True, revenge is one of McGinn’s evils; but in that case, the problem extends back through history to vast swathes of representation in all media. McGinn’s chief examples, *Dorian Gray* and *Frankenstein*, are full of appalling moral acts, but both works afford considerable pleasure. Taking some form of pleasure in representations of suffering or evil – as we do from forms like tragedy, the sublime and horror which depend on negative emotions, or dystopian fictions which depict wholly undesirable states of affairs – is a long-standing problem in aesthetic debate. But the problem surely isn’t that these forms might promulgate sadism or detached aestheticism – McGinn’s worries – but that we (non-sadists) can find some sort of satisfaction and pleasure in such depressing things. McGinn’s use of the word ‘entertainment’ seems to play the purely rhetorical role of separating worthy, legitimate depictions of evil and illegimate ones, as if ‘art’ and ‘entertainment’ were mutually exclusive terms, when they clearly are not. Most of the difficult questions, concerning how we evaluate a depiction of evil which gives us pleasure, are left unaddressed. The simple conjunction of depictions of evil with pleasure in those depictions tells us very little; responding with pleasure to a work can’t be assumed to equate with responding with pleasure to an evil act or character within the work.

McGinn’s book is a bracing read, raising challenging questions and proposing provocative, intriguing, and often compelling solutions in equal measure. Written with considerable verve, the tone of the book is nevertheless uneven. While there are many passages of meticulous argumentation, at times McGinn comes across as a querulous moralist. The book is also compact, more like a sustained essay than a comprehensive statement, and some disappointments arise from its impatient momentum. McGinn shares with Martha Nussbaum an emphasis on the value of fictional explorations of moral life in stressing specificity over abstract prescription. While acknowleging an overlap in interest, however, McGinn hurries us by the likeness, devoting no space whatsover to a comparison. Similarly, Hegelian objections to the ‘beautiful soul’ are swept aside as ‘obscure’ – a little odd, since Hegel characterizes this state of being as a sort of moral narcissism, a problem that McGinn does address. It is testimony to the interest and originality of McGinn’s book, though, that one is left wanting more of it, so that the gaps and difficulties touched on here might be more fully addressed.

Murray Smith, University of Kent at Canterbury
M.S.Smith@ukc.ac.uk

Journal of Moving Image Studies
Copyright, 2004