Art and Moral Revolution

ABSTRACT

Traditionally, questions about the role of the arts in moral thought have focused on the arts’ role in the acquisition of new moral knowledge, the refinement of moral concepts, and the capacity to apply our moral view to particular situations. Here I suggest that there is an importantly different and largely overlooked role for the arts in moral thought: an ability to reconfigure the structure of our moral thought and effect what we might call a revolution in that framework. In this article I explain this distinction between two kinds of change in view, suggest the second type has not been addressed by the extant literature, provide examples of this role, and argue for its importance.

Can the arts shape our moral outlook? Can novels and narratives, plays and poems, symphonies and sculpture color our ethical attitudes and help us think through moral problems? Might they even enlighten us about what is right, just, virtuous, and good? In recent years philosophers have framed these questions with an emphasis on one function of the arts in moral thought, sometimes to the neglect of others. The function that has received attention is the arts’ role in what I will call accretionary changes in moral thought: the acquisition of new moral knowledge, the refinement of moral concepts, and the capacity to apply our moral view to particular situations. A function that has received less attention is the arts’ potential to reconfigure the structure of our moral thought—their ability not only to offer new inputs to be schematized by an existing moral framework but to effect a revolution in that framework. This is the possibility I explore here.

1. TWO KINDS OF COGNITIVE CHANGE

I trust that the distinction I am suggesting is familiar, even if in a rough form. We can change our view on a subject by acquiring a belief, revising a credence, or sharpening a concept, but we can also change our view in a more pervasive and fundamental way—by making a change in the background framework that conditions our thinking about that subject. This may include a change in our conceptual scheme, in the rules for making inferences about the subject matter, in the criteria we use for evaluating good and bad beliefs about that subject, in the contrast space we employ in articulating explanations, or in the kind of unity and coherence we seek in that view.

Scientific revolutions are the archetype of the second kind of change. Most of the time scientists work with a fixed and largely unquestioned battery of methods, concepts, presumed connections between those concepts, experimental standards, and background assumptions. But sometimes, according to some historical accounts anyway, these things—the scientists’ paradigm or background framework—can also give way. This is a scientific revolution. Of course the distinction between these two kinds of change in the scientific case is difficult to draw with any real clarity or precision, and we should expect that difficulty to be a general feature of the distinction. It may be better to talk not about two kinds of changes in view but about a whole spectrum of more and less pervasive changes: from adding or subtracting a solitary belief to adding a new class of concepts.
to reorganizing our conceptual scheme under an entirely new principle. Whatever we end up saying about this, it seems clear that the same distinction or gradient of distinctions is possible, at least in principle, for changes in our moral view. Simple examples are easy to find. We can decide that Pinocchio broke the rule never tell a lie, but we can also rethink how rigid the prohibition on lying ought to be. We can learn that Hester Prynne is a wanton, but we can also reconsider the appropriateness of the concept wanton.

These are relatively mild forms of reconfiguration, limited as they are to a single rule or concept. But there are also more extreme examples that we might justly call moral revolutions in the same way we call Einstein's a scientific revolution. One is the transition Nietzsche describes in the *Genealogy of Morals*. A moral slave revolt overthrew the traditional dichotomy of good and bad, which understood goodness as a kind of nobility. In its stead a different dichotomy was introduced—between good and evil, the latter side of which overlapped with the old notion of goodness. This was a reorganization of the hierarchy of moral concepts according to an entirely new scheme. The overall structure of conceptual space was rearranged, and as a result the way agents saw the moral world and came to moral conclusions was fundamentally transformed.

The development of “modern moral philosophy” as described by G. E. M. Anscombe is a second example. According to Anscombe, this period saw a transition from a character-based ethics concerned with what sorts of habits of mind and dispositions best promote human flourishing to a law-based ethics that sees morality as constituted by sanctions that we are obligated to follow because they have some special authority. If she is right, then this transition is also an example of a moral revolution. For it involves not just a revision in the moral facts we accept or a small-bore conceptual change but a transformation in what we take the locus of moral evaluation to be, what sort of activity we identify as moral thought, and the regulative principles we aspire to as moral ideals.

We can revisit the question of the precise borders of this distinction when we have examples in hand, but for now let us assume that there is an interesting, albeit imprecise distinction to be made between two kinds of change in moral outlook: one exemplified by our learning or unlearning moral propositions, better grasping the extension of the moral concepts we use, and getting the hang of applying our moral principles and another exemplified by systematic changes in the structure of moral thought and discourse, like Nietzsche’s moral slave revolt or the rise of modern moral philosophy. Just so we have names, let us call these change by accretion and change by reconfiguration.

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How do these changes come about? Are there any cognitive devices that might encourage or abet them? Call the view that works of art have some role to play in the development of our moral thought *artistic cognitivism*. There are good arguments for the species of artistic cognitivism concerning change by accretion. But the species of the view concerning the role of art in reconfiguring moral thought has, to my knowledge, been largely overlooked. This is reflected in prominent arguments for and against artistic cognitivism.

Berys Gaut defends a version of artistic cognitivism by arguing that literature can play an important role in moral imagination. The imagination plays a crucial role in the process of bringing our moral judgments into reflective equilibrium, he says, because it can vividly present cases to us that must be captured by those judgments and may reveal latent tensions among them. The richness, depth, and psychological sophistication of the kind of imagination we have when engaging with literature makes it especially robust in this respect. Literary devices make these “imaginings more vivid, precise and powerful, and at the same time (not coincidentally) more cognitively instructive.” Thus, Gaut argues, “By deploying the full force of affective and experiential imagination, we can be made to feel the wrongness, rightness or sheer imponderability of certain moral choices, and so we can learn through imagination. And that is just what the epistemic claim of the cognitive argument maintains.”

This argument and the examples Gaut offers along the way are concerned with the power of art to prompt accretionary changes in our moral view. Literature has the ability to provoke us into imagining cases that elicit novel considered judgments. These judgments must then be brought into reflective equilibrium with the rest of our moral outlook, and in doing this we may take on new
moral beliefs, revise some old ones, and reject others. The learning that literature can further in this fashion consists in the addition and subtraction of items from our web of moral belief. Now Gaut does characterize his view more liberally than this, as concerning the power of art to further moral knowledge and understanding, but he does not suggest any means by which imagination might bring about more systemic changes—how it might, for example, reconfigure the methods by which we bring our beliefs into reflective equilibrium, what we are apt to keep or abandon in this pursuit, or the conception of equilibrium we are after. Indeed, it is prima facie difficult to see how imagination could do such a thing. Gaut’s attention therefore seems to be focused solely on the uses of art in accretionary changes in view.

Another example comes from Noël Carroll. In an influential article he addresses three arguments against the possibility that the arts may have a function in moral education. The “banality argument” concedes that works of art may communicate truths about morals but suggests that these truths are by nature so banal that we cannot seriously call them educational. The “no evidence argument” maintains that while works of art may suggest moral hypotheses, they are not capable of providing evidence for them. The “no analysis argument” says that artworks lack the ability to provide a philosophically satisfactory analysis of an issue to render a judgment that we would be justified in believing. I am not concerned with these arguments themselves, but only in how they understand their target. They are arguments against the ability of an artwork to justify its audience in coming to believe particular moral propositions. As they have it, a certain kind of evidence or argument is required for this justification, and works of art are not capable of furnishing that justification. Their claim, then, is that art cannot aid in the accretion of moral knowledge.

Carroll sets about rebutting these arguments, and in doing so he accepts much the same conception of artistic cognitivism. Like Gaut, Carroll’s statement of his thesis is not merely that art can help us accrete particular moral propositions. He endorses the more general thesis that artworks are useful for “stimulating ethical understanding.” Nonetheless if we look at his argument and the examples he uses to support it, I think it is clear that his conception falls on the accretionary side of the distinction. Carroll’s argument is that works of art are in certain respects like thought experiments, and they may perform a similar epistemic function. In particular, he points to thought experiments that help us better delineate the boundaries of our concepts. In the moral case, these thought experiments can “encourage conceptual discrimination of our virtue schemas through the imaginative deployment of structures of studied contrasts that function argumentatively.” This is something that works of art can do especially well. His primary example is E. M. Forster’s novel *Howards End*. By reading this novel, Carroll says, “we not only learn that, but also we become conscious of why we ought to withhold ascription [of certain virtues to certain people].”

This is indeed a kind of moral understanding cultivated by engagement with a work of art, but notice what this understanding consists in. It involves learning propositions about borderline cases of concepts we already employ: “Helen is too imaginative because … whereas Margaret is not too imaginative because …,” “Charles is too practical because … whereas Henry is not too practical because ….” This kind of change in view is clearly not a reconfiguration or structural transformation of our moral thinking but a *fleshing out* and *refinement* of that thinking: we are becoming better acquainted with the boundaries of the concepts we already employ. And for that reason, it is not an example of reconfiguration.

It would be wrong to say that John Gibson believes that literature can help us accrete moral knowledge, since he thinks that what literature offers its readers is not so much knowledge but, borrowing a word from Stanley Cavell, *acknowledgment*.

What literary narratives are able to do especially well is take the concepts we bring to our reading of a work and present them back to us as concrete forms of human engagement. When we read *Othello*, *Notes from Underground* or *Bartleby the Scrivener*, we see jealousy, suffering, and alienation presented not as mere ‘ideas’ but as very precisely shaped human situations. And this contextualization of these concepts, this act of presenting them to us in concrete form, is literature’s contribution to understanding.

Nonetheless, Gibson’s suggestion is that literature can flesh out our moral knowledge in a way not so very different from the one described by Carroll. Literature connects abstract and
idealized moral knowledge to those human capacities that enable action and affect by presenting that knowledge in “precisely shaped human situations.” For example, I can have a very good grasp of the concept jealousy and know quite a bit about the moral dimensions of the phenomenon in a detached sort of way, but I can still gain a kind of understanding by reading Othello because it “returns to us this knowledge as placed on the stage of cultural practice and human comportment.”

Perhaps “fleshing out” is not the best term to describe this, since it may suggest that such a business is ancillary, and what Gibson has in mind is certainly not that. But with the distinction I am interested in in mind, it seems appropriate. Gibson is not claiming that literature changes our moral knowledge in any deep or structural way (for example, by urging us to abandon the concept jealousy or reposition it in the pantheon of vice) but that it places that knowledge “on the stage of cultural practice and human comportment.” Such a staging could of course affect a reconfiguration of the moral thought we started with, but it is not clear why we should expect it to, and, anyway, it does not seem to be Gibson’s aim to suggest that it does.

A final example comes from Martha Nussbaum’s brief for artistic cognitivism. Nussbaum is a difficult case because she claims so much for literature. Here I look at one particularly clear argument she makes concerning the moral power of Henry James’s novels. “There are candidates for moral truth,” she says, “which the plainness of traditional moral philosophy lacks the power to express, and which [James’s novel] The Golden Bowl expresses wonderfully.” Literature can express these elusive moral truths, Nussbaum says, because “the person of practical wisdom lies surprisingly close to the artist and/or perceiver of art, not in the sense that this conception reduces moral value to aesthetic value or makes moral judgment a matter of taste, but in the sense that we are asked to see morality as a high type of vision of and response to the particular.” Nussbaum thinks that engagement with art can cultivate a moral capacity.

What is this capacity, this “high type of vision”? Nussbaum gives an Aristotelian characterization. It is a form of practical wisdom, an ability to engage with the particulars of a situation, to be alive to the morally relevant facets of a choice, and to respond to those facets fluently, intelligently, and virtuously. She contrasts this attention to the particular with the universal, abstract doctrines that one encounters in treatises on moral philosophy. Art is useful precisely because of its role in cultivating the capacities we need to bridge the gap between the universals we find in these treatises and the particulars we encounter in our lives.

Nussbaum therefore seems to see art as occupying a cognitive niche similar to the one Carroll and Gibson carve out. The arts are useful for cultivating abilities necessary to fleshing out our moral view. Not because they help us appreciate the boundaries of our concepts, as Carroll argues, but because they support the engagement of that view with the world in all its particularity. So this too is a relatively circumscribed role for art that falls on the accretionary side of the distinction.

I have no bone to pick with Gaut, Carroll, Gibson, or Nussbaum. I find their arguments convincing and perspicacious. Nor do I claim that anything they say excludes the possibility of art reconfiguring moral thought. Indeed, some of their examples may very well qualify as revolutionary in my sense. And I certainly stop short of denying that any extant account of the cognitive function of art can accommodate such reconfiguration. All I want to observe is that even defenses of artistic cognitivism as liberal and sophisticated as Gaut’s, Carroll’s, Gibson’s, and Nussbaum’s do not explicitly reckon with that possibility; they do not take on the question of whether the arts may be cognitively useful in a second, more profound kind of change—in effecting a reconfiguration of our moral thought.

III. ART AND RECONFIGURATION

The thesis I defend is that works of art can indeed play a role in reconfiguring our moral thought. Most of the argumentative burden for this claim falls on two examples that I will introduce in a moment, but before coming to that I want to offer a small morsel of circumstantial evidence. One reason for thinking that the arts can morally reconfigure is that artistic devices can induce an analogous kind of reconfiguration in the epistemic domain.

“According to the dominant view,” Catherine Elgin writes, “cognitive progress is the growth of knowledge, the acquisition of new (justified or reliably generated) true beliefs. A person learns a hitherto unknown but properly grounded truth and smoothly incorporates it into his epistemic
What Elgin is describing here is a first cousin of the accretionary model. But this view, she says, “constricts and distorts the subject” through its “indifference to the fact that cognitive progress often consists in reconfiguration.”

Science is not just an accretion of truths but aims at explanation and understanding, and because different frameworks make different regularities salient and different kinds of understanding possible, epistemic progress will not always consist in the accretion of new truths.

It will sometimes involve switching from one “framework” or “paradigm” to another. This reconfiguration can be prompted by devices we commonly associate with the arts. For example, the role of some experiments in ushering scientific revolutions seems to depend on their use of exemplification. In the Michelson-Morley experiment, light travels at a constant speed no matter its frame of reference. This is no great feat: the same is true of any flashlight. But the design of the Michelson-Morley experiment exemplified this fact, just as Pollock’s *Number 1* exemplifies the viscosity of paint. This was the experiment’s crucial cognitive contribution—a contribution that hastened the demise of classical mechanics.

Elgin’s general thesis is that epistemic change sometimes comes in the form of reconfigurations of our scientific frameworks and that devices we often associate with the arts—like exemplification—have an important role in that reconfiguration. I want to say something similar about morals, though perhaps even stronger. Elgin focuses on certain devices and techniques that we usually associate with the arts—but the route from particular works of art to scientific reconfiguration is more obscure: it is not clear how a novel or opera could advance scientific understanding. I argue that works of art themselves—opera, films, paintings, performance—can reconfigure the moral thinking of their audiences.

As I said, most of the burden of this argument will fall on a few examples. A few caveats first, however. These are not necessarily examples of works of art succeeding at reconfiguring moral thought. They are examples of works part of whose content is capable of reconfiguring the thought of their audience. Second, I should also say that the means of reconfiguration in these examples are different. I do not think there is a single avenue by which the arts can reconfigure moral thought, but many. Finally, while I briefly visit the question of evaluating these reconfigurations, I do not claim that the ones I describe are necessarily for the better.

### IV. Moral Performance: The Cynics

The Cynics held that artificiality, especially social convention, was the primary hindrance to virtue. Central to this conceit was a distinction between things endowed in us by nature, God, or the plan of the universe and the things we create for ourselves. Living the good life meant freeing oneself from artificial impositions, and insofar as the Cynics’ ethics had a didactic goal, it was to promote that emancipation. The Cynics further held that living according to artificial conventions was part of the deep methodological mistake of thinking of virtue as rooted in a doctrine to be debated, studied, and believed. This was an error, the Cynic Antisthenes said, because “excellence is a matter of acts [erga], not of words [logoi] or learning [mathemata].”

The Cynics conceived of the dissolution of artificial convention not as a movement from one regime of rules and principles to another but as part of a reconfiguration in ethical thought: from a conception of right action as the implementation of a correct doctrine and ethics as rational inquiry into that doctrine, toward a conception on which virtue amounts to a flexible, spontaneous capacity to improvise and adapt oneself to novel circumstances.

The Cynics’ toolbox of persuasion reflected this outlook. The Cynic discipline of philosophy was an “ad hoc improvisation,” whose purpose was “a demonstration of a *modus dicendi*, a way of adapting verbally to (usually hostile) circumstances.” Just as life was to be lived as an ad hoc improvisation, not the implementation of an ethical code, so too was the doing of ethics to be an improvisation. Cynic discourse revolved around evocative anecdotes, usually involving some naughty apercû. For example, about the most famous of all Cynics, Diogenes of Sinope, we are told, “in reaction to the man who claimed that there is no movement, he got up and walked around for a while.” Within a few moments of Plato’s suggestion that the concept “man” can be analyzed as “featherless biped,” Diogenes appears with a plucked chicken announcing, “here is Plato’s man!”
That Diogenes went and got a chicken is crucial to the example. Obviously, one could verbally proffer a plucked chicken as a counterexample to Plato’s analysis. But Diogenes chose a more theatrical approach for a few reasons. First, Diogenes’s response exemplifies a certain silliness, and part of his point is that Plato’s endeavor is very silly. This parodic effect remains even when Plato sidesteps the counterexample by adding a clause about “flat nails.” Second, it was far more important to Diogenes to demonstrate Plato’s error than it was to establish it, since the proper test for a claim is whether it can be “lived,” not whether it stands up as part of an abstract system. Such is the moral of another anecdote. “When Hegesias asked to borrow one of his writings Diogenes said, ‘you are a fool, Hegesias. You wouldn’t choose painted figs over real ones, but you’re overlooking the real discipline in your eagerness for a written version.’”25 The “real discipline” here is the question of how to live; the “written version” is the doctrinal approach to that question that Diogenes associates with Plato. Just as we would no sooner choose painted figs over the real ones, we should not choose Plato’s doctrines over practice at living.

Other Cynic anecdotes [chreia] follow the same pattern. When Diogenes first came to Athens he planned to take a small cottage to live in. But when this plan fell through, he improvised and shacked up in a wine tub.26 This act exemplifies both the fact that man can, despite our prejudices, live in such a condition and the fact that life is a constant improvisation. Diogenes’s choice of a wine tub is an instance of a general refusal to distinguish between types of spaces. He will argue in the temple, eat in the market, and micturate on Plato’s rug.27 Each of these acts transgresses individual conventions—it inverts practical symbols, in the rhetoricians’ terms. And when he involves other people in these acts, they have a more general effect. Diogenes’s provocations, as Ineke Sluiter puts it, “force the people he is interacting with to be ‘on stage’ with him” and take up the improvisational stance toward practical reason.28

I want to claim two things about these antics. First, while the Cynics clearly have a philosophical purpose, we cannot grasp it just by analyzing the literal content of their claims or reconstructing their anecdotes as arguments. Instead, we can only appreciate what they are up to by understanding it as a performance—and not just any performance but as tokens of particular Greek performance traditions.

The Cynics’ cardinal technique in these performances is a multilayered exemplification. Diogenes’s chicken exemplifies the inadequacy of Plato’s analysis of “human.” It is a counterexample and, in context, presents itself as such. But Diogenes’s presentation of the counterexample also involves a different kind of exemplification. His flouting of conventions about where to eat, where to sleep, and when to flatulate exemplifies the possibility of living successfully in contravention of particular conventions. And that draws attention to their artificiality and arbitrariness, the same way a paint swatch draws attention to its color.29 Finally, Diogenes’s performance exemplifies an alternative approach to philosophy, one on which philosophical discourse is an “ad hoc improvisation,” and on which the standard of success is something like “livability.” In effect, Diogenes’s performance exemplifies its own use of exemplification as a move in ethical discourse. It exemplifies the possibility of practical improvisation—plucking a chicken when Plato talks about featherless bipeds—as a way of doing ethics and, more broadly, as a practicable approach to life.

Of course not all performances are art, so simply saying that the force of the Cynics’ arguments depends on their rhetorical techniques is not yet to say that their performances function as works of art. But if we look closer at the context of Cynic performance, we see that it was indeed conceived of and received as a part—an innovative, even iconoclastic part, to be sure—of recognizable Greek artistic traditions and that its engagement with these deepened the effect of the techniques I just described. Cynicism was, as Sluiter puts it, “uncompromisingly literary and artistically contrived.”30

The first tradition was the performance of epic poetry. Diogenes’s anecdotes display a deep familiarity with the themes, structures, and compositional techniques of epic poetry. He quotes Homer, uses characteristically Homeric constructions and turns of phrase, and alludes to Homeric themes—just as a performing poet would do. But he turns this tradition on its head. He makes puns on Homeric verse, replaces words with their etymological cousins that reverse the original meaning, and substitutes approximate homophones into familiar passages that make them scandalous. In doing this, Diogenes “refashions [Homer]
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The Cynics pursued the same kind of innovation, on an even larger scale, with respect to artistic forms and genres. "No other philosophical 'school'," Branham says, "engaged in such diverse and original forms of literary production." The Cynics "renovated traditional forms such as the proverb, ... turned extraliterary genres such as the will or the diary into full-scale literary productions, ... wrote in iambics, elegiacs, and hexameters, ... invented a new meter, the meliambus, ... put [old meters] to novel use, such as the iambics of Crates' *Diary,*". Both kinds of "refashioning" are part of Diogenes's performative exemplificaton. The Cynics are at once defacing the received tradition and exemplifying the possibility of spontaneously refiguring that tradition — both the particular tradition of the performance of epic poetry and the traditional artistic forms and genres more generally — and in so doing exemplifying the potential for ad hoc improvisation.

The Cynics were able to do all this without frustrating their audience through their participation in a second artistic tradition, comedy. Cynic performance was considered by many, including Marcus Aurelius centuries later, to be heir to the Old Comedy of Aristophanes. There are obvious reasons for this association. Both combined liberality of expression — bawdiness, obscenity, personal abuse — with the avowed aim of frankness [*parthesia*]. The Cynics performed in an archetypal costume: bare feet, folded cloak, wallet, and staff. They also always performed onstage and in front of an audience, even if the stage was frequently an untraditional one. Nor was this brand of comedy a dead end: the satires of Menippus, Lucian, Seneca, and Petronius bear the marks of Cynic influence. Comedy served the Cynics' dialectical ends in many ways. One of the most important, however, was that it permitted them to aggressively flout norms — and draw attention to their doing so — without alienating their audience in the way that such rudeness usually would.

These features of Cynic discourse suggest that they were, as a functional if not metaphysical matter, practitioners of a handful of related performance traditions. Some might resist this claim and instead characterize the Cynics as co-opting artistic techniques while remaining decidedly philosophical. We need not detain ourselves too long with the thorny issue of the line between philosophy and art, however. It is enough to show that the Cynics used the techniques of performance in furtherance of their dialectical aims. This suggests, indirectly at least, the potency of those techniques.

What are these dialectical aims, exactly? That is my second claim: one of the Cynics' aims was the reconfiguration of the moral thought of their audience in the rough sense from above. If moral thought is conditioned on moral frameworks, then this conditioning may obscure certain ethical possibilities and conceptions of the practice of ethics from view, just as it makes certain possibilities and conceptions more salient. The Cynics seem to believe that the conception of ethics one finds in Plato and his followers does just this. It obscures the fact that one could, after all, live in a wine tub or that practical reason may be no more than a constant improvisation. Exemplification forcibly refocuses attention; it makes an audience reflexively reckon with what has been pushed in front of their noses. It can cast a spotlight on these silently excluded ethical possibilities and in doing so prompt a reexamination of the framework that made these possibilities overlooked in the first place. This is the aim of the Cynics' performance art — to act in a way that forcibly focuses attention on ethical possibilities, and ways of doing ethics, that are systematically excluded by their contemporaries. The Cynics' goal, then, is to change how we think about how ethics is done, not just to add to or refine an existing conception. Diogenes is not just pointing out that there are domicile options not dreamt of in the Platonists' philosophy or helping us refine the boundaries of the concept of "human being." Producing a counterexample to some Platonic theory would merit a patch, but that move would be part of the same game — of a piece with the same conception of practical reason. Through their rhetorical performance the Cynics are urging us to give up on that game.

One further, brief example, especially for those who might still worry about the status of Cynic performance as art. The Cynics' aims and techniques were adopted, adapted, and expanded by future writers, including by provocateurs of the Enlightenment. Diderot in particular had a fascination with the Cynics, and armed with an understanding of their techniques, we can appreciate *Le Neveu de Rameau,* Diderot's "Second Satire," as a piece of neo-Cynical literature. *Le Neveu de Rameau* is
not itself a performance, but it depicts the dialogical performance of a character—the eponymous nephew—who explicitly dons the mantle of Diogenes. The narrator sums him up thus: “He shocks us, he stirs us up; he forces us to praise or blame; he brings out the truth; he identifies honorable men and unmasks scoundrels.” The satire unfolds as a conversation between the narrator and Rameau’s nephew on standard philosophe fare—genius, freedom and determinism, the relationship between taste and morals. But the nephew’s half of the conversation is full of irony, self-contradiction, pantomime, scatology, prurience, and proclamations that hover between sarcasm and frank truth telling. The effect of all this is much the same as that of Cynic performance. It broaches a question about the necessity of the kind of discourse the narrator tries to engage in and makes us wonder whether it may be just as pointless as “pushing the wood about”—the nephew’s scornful description of chess. Le Neveu de Rameau is too complex and frankly too strange a work for me to say anything so definitive as that Diderot was aiming to foment a moral revolution. But in leading us to entertain this sort of question, I do think it is fair to say that he was doing something in the ballpark. Diderot thinks that the particular form that philosophical discourse has taken in his time—the manners of salon culture, the worship of “reason,” the lionization of the arts and sciences—deserves the same kind of radical critique that the Cynics offered, and he uses the performance of Rameau’s imaginary nephew, the Diogenes of the salon, to make it.

V. ECSTASY AND TRANSCENDENCE: WAGNER

Wagner was an obsessively philosophical composer, and his explicit engagement with philosophical ideas puts us in a superior position to faithfully identify moral purposes in his music. When he wrote Tristan und Isolde Wagner was knee-deep in Schopenhauer, and the opera abounds with Schopenhauerian themes. The most obvious of these is the idea that human beings are driven by pathological but ineluctable desires that, in sum, lead them to misery. Wagner further believed that the world could only be saved from this state by the recovery of a “Platonic” ideal of the Good—not by conventional politics. Finally, he thought, as Schopenhauer did, that art, especially music, had a special part to play in this recovery because aesthetic experience can be revelatory. It can acquaint us with ideals that are obscured from the view of the understanding. For this reason, art had a special part to play in disrupting the malaise of modernity and offering a glimpse of the “Platonic” ideal.

All this background makes Wagner’s moral goals for Tristan relatively clear. He wants to (i) expose the spiritless malaise of the world created by pathological desire and (ii) offer a revelation of a higher, “transcendent” ideal—one purged of the corrupting forces of desire—that he thinks can redeem and ennoble mankind. By his own lights, then, Wagner’s aim was the reconfiguration of the ethical thought of his audience: he aimed to replace a conception of ethics as grounded in immanent, socially conditioned norms with one organized around a higher, transcendent ideal. Wagner’s efforts involve all aspects of the opera. I will go through them one at a time, beginning with an account of the malaise of (i) before turning to the revelation of (ii).

The Act I prelude begins with a melancholy, yet unchallenging chord progression. But at the moment when we expect the standard resolution, we get a surprise: the dissonant “Tristan chord.” The Tristan chord is not any old clangering of pots, though. For one thing, the notes that create the dissonance are brought in by new orchestral voices that flank the inner voices. This creates the feeling that the dissonance is an external intervention, something imposed on an otherwise harmonious musical progression. The chord is also harmonically unique. Technically, it is a half-diminished seven chord. What makes Wagner’s use of the chord especially unsettling is its context. The chord resolves into a dominant seventh, but of a key it does not belong to. This transition creates a feeling of rootlessness.

The same effect recurs throughout the opera. Wagner frequently “resolves” a tension chord into itself while, as Roger Scruton explains, “instrumentation and inner voices are carefully managed to give a sense of forward and harmonically driven movement, even though the harmony in fact remains static—producing an effect of oppressed and mournful helplessness.” Wagner writes well-behaved, tonal melody lines that are matched against bass lines that shift the key chromatically—that is, outside any recognizable harmonic progression. This creates a local
feeling of sense—each phrase is comprehensible within its immediate context—but a global effect of anomie. This duality mirrors the world that Wagner saw around him. Just as Wagner’s melodies are locally tonal but systemically unstructured, men’s actions are rational and sensible in the narrow context of modern forms of life, even while these forms of life have become unmoored from the ideals that might give them a deeper meaning. Wagner’s pseudo-resolutions reflect the illusoriness of our connection with value: we live in a kind of normative order, but this order is not anchored in what is actually good and noble. In this way Wagner’s deft deviation from the standard compositional structure enables the music to express a complicated thought about the loss of meaning.

Wagner’s second task is the revelation of an ideal, and the most important part of the opera for this is its final aria, the “Liebestod.” Isolde sings the “Liebestod” over Tristan’s dead body as she herself slowly dies. This process, according to Wagner, represents Isolde’s “transfiguration.” She simultaneously embraces love and renounces her own life, and this allows her to appreciate transcendent ideals that were previously obscured. Through this renunciation cum recognition Isolde is redeemed.

Wagner wants the listener to experience a corresponding transfiguration and revelation. To do this he employs techniques characteristic of “ecstatic” art—art that aims to give one the feeling of standing outside of one’s physical (or, in Schopenhauer’s terms, phenomenal) self in union with some higher, sacred (noumenal) being. It is, as Baudelaire said of his experience listening to Wagner, “a full conception of a soul moving about in a luminous medium, of an ecstasy composed of knowledge and joy . . . hovering high above the natural world.”

This ecstatic feeling is not without purpose for Wagner. In feeling ourselves standing outside of our physical or phenomenal selves, we come to contemplate what it would be like to transcend these things, to see our usual experience of the world as conditioned on contingent features of our physical body, social position, historical moment, and cultural commitments. In doing this we come to an “Idea,” to use Schopenhauer’s word, of the good that is unconditioned by these things, a purer Idea of the good that is timeless and universal.

Wagner pulls out all the stops to create this kind of ecstasy in our experience of the “Liebestod”: harmony, orchestration, rhythm, drama, and libretto all push us toward feelings of self-transcendence. Some of Wagner’s techniques are stock in trade of late romanticism. The emotional climax of the aria is a series of orchestral swells involving very rapid dynamic shifts played against Isolde singing in the extreme upper register. The orchestral and soprano voices wind past each other, but at the moments where they meet in harmonic union, the effect is a feeling of deep satisfaction. Wagner also makes liberal use of Phrygian cadences and triumphantly orchestrated rising thirds, which were associated with moments of higher consciousness. More prosaically, Wagner has Isolde leap into higher registers to create a feeling of uplift and excitement. In the climax of the aria, Wagner follows several bars of increasing tempo with a dramatic ritardando, which is a common device for inducing a feeling of arrival and release.

Some techniques are more innovative. Wagner is notorious for larding his operas with leitmotifs, and Tristan is no exception. Here Wagner closely associates a particular leitmotif with desire; indeed, the connection is so close that this music has come to be called the “desire music.” But in the “Liebestod” the desire music and its pet instrument, the English horn, drop out before the final strains of the aria. This relieves the anxiety created by the desire music and in so doing suggests that Isolde’s transfiguration involves the cessation of desire. That this is a cessation is important to the ecstatic effect. Isolde’s ecstasy is not the acquisition of something, but a loss. It is a departure from her embodied form.

The idea that revelation comes through renunciation is expressed by other facets of the aria as well. In the drama, for one: Tristan and Isolde find transcendence not by being given some divine gift, but only in death, in the absence of “phenomenal” life and all its wants. And in the orchestration: throughout much of the aria, Wagner sets the orchestral and soprano lines “off” from each other. He staggers them rhythmically, uses hemiola figures, and pairs a diatonic melody line against a chromatic harmonic progression. Before the reunion between Isolde and the orchestra in the climax, there is a curious false climax. Isolde and the orchestra crescendo, building anticipation of the
resolution of their tensions, but instead of actually getting to this point, the orchestra abruptly drops out, leaving Isolde naked and alone. A few bars later the process begins again and this time succeeds in bringing about the climax. The false climax reinforces the central role of renunciation in Wagner’s aesthetic: Isolde’s transfiguration is only possible through a painful separation. The libretto also reinforces this effect. The tense buildup to the climax is prefaced by Isolde asking of those Shopenhauerian desires, “as they seethe and roar about me, shall I breathe, shall I give ear? Shall I drink of them, plunge beneath them? Breathe my life away in sweet scents?” And in the climax itself, where Isolde and the orchestra finally and resoundingly come into sync, we get a tellingly self-contradictory answer: “in the heavy swell, in the resounding tones, in the breath of the world—to drown, to sink down—highest ecstasy.”

These features of Tristan coalesce into a work with two complementary artistic goals: (i) to induce in listeners a feeling of anomie and frustration and (ii) to bring them into a state of ecstasy in which they can transcend the source of this frustration and be acquainted with a “higher” ideal. This latter goal involves a kind of moral transformation, and even working with our rough conception of our two kinds of change in view, I think it is obvious that it is a reconfiguration of our moral thought. The goal is not merely to flesh out our moral knowledge, to teach us some moral propositions, to develop greater skill at applying moral principles, but to completely reorient the way we think about the good and the source of our duties.

VI. TAKING STOCK

With two examples on the table, we can revisit the question of how to understand the distinction driving my concerns here, the distinction between accretion and reconfiguration. To put it baldly, what is it about Tristan und Isolde that makes it more morally ambitious—or differently ambitious anyway—than, for example, Howards End?

We can best answer this question by imagining the ideal audience member in both cases, the person who fully internalizes whatever moral content each work has to offer. Carroll argues that by working through the structured contrasts between characters that Forster lays out in Howards End, this reader will come to have a much better appreciation of the subtleties of several virtues, notably imagination and practicality, and be able to make finer distinctions—to understand the role that empathy and restraint plays in imagination, for example. This is a relatively circumscribed change that leaves much of the reader’s moral thought untouched: the centrality of virtue within moral theory, the idea that imagination is a virtue at all, the general location of imagination within the field of virtues, the core cases of imagination, the most basic conceptual connections between imagination and other notions, and the kind of unity of virtues we are out to achieve. According to Carroll, the novel will refine one small corner of this reader’s moral web.

This is not insignificant, but compare it to the change experienced by Wagner’s ideal audience member. He comes to question his values root and branch. He wonders if all his moral convictions and the methods he uses to reach them are pieces of ideology in the pejorative sense—a kind of false consciousness reflecting insidious effects of man’s desirous nature—and unconnected to any ultimate source of value. He goes in search of some ideal that is not grounded in these contingent aspects of human frailty that might serve to organize a different system of values. This might be the crypto-Christian morality of renunciation and redemption that Wagner explores in Parsifal. It might be something else. But it will follow from a change in this person’s conception of what morality ought to be—a change in his fundamental framework for moral thought.

VII. THE POTENTIAL FOR REVOLUTION

At this point we might hope to venture beyond examples and ask about this power in the abstract. Why are works of art the sorts of things capable of prompting a reconfiguration of our moral frameworks in the way I have suggested? It would be a mistake to locate this power in any one specific technique—in exemplification or ecstasy, say. But I think we can say something more cautious and schematic, yet not altogether vacuous, by extrapolating from our two examples.

So begin, again, with the Cynics. If I want to argue with the Platonists I have to play their game. I have to say things they will recognize as arguments, use concepts intelligible to them, and rely on premises that they are apt to see as
reasonable. Any direct engagement with them must be, so to speak, conditioned on their framework. And this means that any argument against that framework—an argument that we should not see ethics as logoi but as a regimen of improvisational practice—risks pragmatic self-defeat: the conclusion of the argument will be at odds with the giving of the argument. Anyone who made such an argument would be sawing off the branch she sat on. And if, instead, the Cynics just went about their own business doing ethics as erga, the Platonists would be unlikely to recognize it as an alternative so much as a mistake or eccentricity. The problem, then, is one of critical engagement.

Diogenes’s shtick offers a solution to this problem. It is not a condition on the intelligibility of Diogenes’s distinctive kind of performance that it conforms to anything like the Platonists’ background framework for moral theorizing. There are constraints it must conform to, at least to a degree, like the constitutive requirements of comedy or epic poetry, and these may have some moral content. Nonetheless Diogenes’s performances can substantially flout the norms of traditional ethical discourse without fear of unintelligibility. They can do this because they are not part of traditional ethical discourse.\textsuperscript{42} And yet Diogenes manages to bring these performances into substantive engagement with the Platonists. He does this in two ways. The more prosaic is that his performances are plainly about ethical questions, about how to live. The more interesting way involves his skillful use of exemplification. There is a congruence of form and content in Diogenes’s performance. It transgresses ethical discourse in a way that reflects the principal criticism that the Cynics have of that discourse, namely, that it conceives of ethics as a doctrine instead of a practice. Diogenes’s performances exemplify both of these features at once. The same antics exemplify their own transgressiveness and the possibility of living life as an ongoing improvisation. Exemplification focuses attention, and that is what happens here. By focusing our attention on these two things, Diogenes’s performance makes us aware of the Cynical challenge in a way that makes it obvious that it is a challenge to the traditional ethical framework. This is how he manages to engage with that framework.

We see something similar in Wagner. It would not do for Wagner to write a pamphlet about how terrific transcendent ideals are. The cogency of such a thought requires greater expressive powers than are to be found there, powers that may be exclusive to music. But here we face the same problem of engagement. A three-part invention may be just as capable of acquainting us with transcendent ideals as \textit{Tristan} is, but it is much harder to locate any relevance to moral, political, or social problems in pure music. Wagner himself recognizes this problem, and it is why he thinks drama has an indispensable place in the \textit{Gesamtkunstwerk}, or comprehensive artwork.

The dramatic action, as the first principle of drama, is the respect that insures its widest understanding. Directly borrowed from life, past or present, it forms the intelligible bond that links the work therewith. … In the dramatic action, therefore, the necessity of the artwork displays itself. Without it or some degree of reference to it, all artistic production is arbitrary, unnecessary, accidental, and unintelligible.\textsuperscript{44}

This is precisely the role of the drama in \textit{Tristan}. We recognize the ideal we are acquainted with by Isolde’s ecstatic aria as a practical ideal relevant to our own lives because of its place in a kind of drama we recognize: it is sung at the tragic conclusion of a forbidden love affair by a woman overcome by feeling. So what Diogenes accomplishes with exemplification Wagner achieves with a conspiracy between different aspects of opera. To put it too crudely, the music acquaints us with the ineffable ideal while the drama engages that ideal with our ethical thought.

Works of art have the power to reconfigure because of their ability to circumvent the more standard modes of ethical discourse — modes which, as a structural matter, may not accommodate more radical critiques and calls for reconfiguration — while simultaneously bringing what they have to say in this mode into engagement with that discourse. Naturally, not all genres are equally endowed with these capacities. Some may require hewing more closely to the audience’s accepted moral categories for their intelligibility than others. Still others may lack the resources to bring their alternatives into engagement with ethical discourse. Finally, it is worth noting that this suggestion is not all that remote from more familiar ideas about the cognitive function of art. For example, a metaphor allows us to escape the limitations of a particular classificatory scheme and bring another such scheme into engagement with the subject we are interested in. It is
similar with my examples, only here the departure is much more comprehensive, and consequently engagement is a much greater feat.

VIII. WORK TO BE DONE

If what I argue here is correct, then the doctrine of artistic cognitivism ought to be liberalized. It should not only be the claim that works of art can aid in the acquisition of moral knowledge, the application of that knowledge, or the refinement of moral concepts. It should be the thesis that art is cognitively potent in all those ways plus other, further-reaching ones. This liberalization raises a sticky question about the evaluation of such cognitive change, however. Are reconfigurations of the sort that Tristan and the Cynics aspire to for good or ill? Are the processes by which they occur rational, or more like a bump on the head? Are they cognitively responsible ways of having our moral outlook changed?

It is hard to know where to start on these questions. This should not be surprising given parallels with the venerable question of the rationality of scientific revolutions. I think that such revolutions can be rational and cognitively responsible, and so I am inclined to say the same about moral reconfigurations. But it is far from clear how to make good on this claim—how to separate the rational from the arational in a robust and principled way.

One obvious thought turns to a kind of reliabilism. Works of art are cognitively good if a proper appreciation of them leads us to true moral beliefs and cognitively bad if such appreciation leads us to false beliefs. It is hard to apply this template to the case of Tristan and the Cynics, though, since their cognitive goal is not to communicate moral propositions that may be true or false (at least not just to do that) but to change the framework we use in formulating and entertaining such propositions. For this reason, it seems inappropriately reductive to evaluate them in such terms.

We could instead ask whether these transformations are intrinsically rational ones, as we might think certain logical and semantic inferences are. But the diversity of avenues by which works of art can prompt reconfiguration makes it difficult to imagine a unified story here. The Cynics’ use of exemplification would seem to put them in the company of the Michelson-Morley experiment, which we are probably apt to regard as a rational and responsible contribution to scientific progress. Wagner’s cultivation of feelings of malaise and ecstasy, on the other hand, promises to be a more controversial case, depending as it does on what we think of the rational character of emotion in general.

My suspicion is that it will be impossible to settle questions about the cognitive responsibility of particular changes independently of the understanding they might bring us to. That is, I suspect that it will be impossible to identify the rational forms of artistic reconfiguration in advance of actually experiencing them. This means that there will be no absolute, objective answer to such questions. Instead, we will in each case come to a certain plateau of moral understanding and answer such questions from that perspective by, among other things, giving a rational reconstruction of what brought us to that understanding. All such perspectives will agree, I expect, that there are rational reconfigurations brought about by experiencing works of art, but they will likely disagree on what they are.45

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1. Kuhn’s theory of scientific revolutions is the most famous account positing this distinction, but far from the only one. Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (University of Chicago Press, 1962).
2. This is Paul Thagard’s view in Conceptual Revolutions (Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 35.
14. Nussbaum, Love’s Knowledge, p. 84.
16. In my remarks about Nussbaum I mention just one role in moral thought that she explores. But elsewhere she argues for literature-induced changes to our moral thought that are more plausibly reconfigurations. For example, she says that the reader’s experience with another James novel, The Ambassadors, can show them the possibility of a rival conception of what kind of coherent ethical thought aims for. Instead of the “reflective equilibrium” of Rawls, we aim for a perceptive equilibrium “in which concrete perceptions ‘hang beautifully together,’ both with one another and with the agent’s general principles; an equilibrium that is always ready to reconstitute itself in response to the new” (Nussbaum, Love’s Knowledge, p. 183). This example needs to be fleshed out further for us to be sure that it is a case of reconfiguration, but on its surface it appears promising. Some of the examples of “art as transgression” that Gaut discusses in chapter 5 of Art, Emotion and Ethics may also qualify.
22. This notion of “improvisation” is a much more thoroughgoing and general one than the one Nussbaum uses in connection to James and Aristotle.
34. See again Elgin on exemplification, Considered Judgment, pp. 171–178.
40. I take several of the interpretive claims of the preceding paragraphs from Chafe, The Tragic and the Ecstatic, pp. 279–284.
42. This issue is more familiar, perhaps, in a slightly different guise—one concerning the reconfiguration of social frameworks. For a recent treatment, see Sally Haslanger, “‘Mom, Crop-Tops Are Cute!’ Social Knowledge, Social Structure and Ideology Critique,” Philosophical Issues 17 (2007): 70–91.
45. For helpful discussion and suggestions, I am grateful to participants in reading groups at Dartmouth and MIT. I am also grateful to Daniela Dover, Catherine Elgin, David Plunkett, Adrian Randolph, and two anonymous referees for very helpful comments on drafts. Most of all, I thank Alice Phillips Walden, who is in many respects just as responsible for this article as I am.