History and Moral Exempla in Enlightenment Aesthetics

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Abstract
This essay proposes a new focus for studies in the relationship between aesthetics and morality in the Enlightenment period. Recent research, especially by Paul Guyer, seems to have established that the traditional question of whether a genealogy for autonomous aesthetics can be traced attending to the concept of disinterestedness in the era can be answered with an unambiguous no. This, however, should only encourage further research into the nature of the way in which the connection between the beautiful and the good was understood. It is argued here that with the gradual erosion of the humanist rhetorical understanding of history from the seventeenth century the specific content of the link between aesthetics and ethics undergoes a fundamental change, making it significantly more abstract and far less specific.
1. INTRODUCTION:
THE DEBATE ABOUT ETHICS AND AESTHETICS IN
THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Looking at standard reference books, it is easy to form the idea that the troubled relation between the beautiful and the good or between aesthetics and ethics has been a relatively unchanging part of our culture. Matthew Kieran’s chapter on “Art and Morality” in the *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* begins by stating that “[t]he idea that the moral character of a work may be intimately linked to its artistic value can be traced back to Aristotle” (Kieran 2015). Noël Carrol begins his chapter in the *Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics* by proposing that “[i]n all probability, art and morality arrived on the cultural scene at roughly the same moment, inasmuch as the earliest tribal moralities and values of the race were articulated and disseminated through the songs, poems, dances, narratives, and visual arts of our early forebears” (Carrol 2006, 126). The first sentence of Berys Gaut’s chapter in the *Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* claims that “[q]uestions about the relation of art to ethics run deep in the mainstream of the Western intellectual tradition” (Gaut 2013, 394). In his monograph on the subject Gaut is even more emphatic: “the relation of art to ethics has been a recurrent and central concern in Western culture from Plato to the present” (Gaut 2007, 5).

The sense that the relevant set of problems is historically continuous creates a relatively homogenous field, where the logically possible positions from the two spheres’ complete autonomy to their absolute interdependence have all been occupied. Sometimes it also leads to reluctance in taking historical change into account. In an
up-to-date overview of the options in the debate Gaut has provided the following sketch.

Autonomism (or aestheticism) holds that ethical flaws or merits of works of art are never aesthetic flaws or merits in them: ethical assessment is irrelevant to aesthetic assessment. The other two views deny this claim of irrelevance, but differ as to how the ethical and aesthetic interrelate. Moralism (or ethicism) holds that works of art are always aesthetically bad in virtue of their ethical flaws. Contextualism (or immoralism) holds that works of art are sometimes aesthetically good in virtue of their ethical flaws and sometimes aesthetically bad in virtue of them. (Gaut 2013, 395)

Probably Noël Carrol was the first, in a by now classic 2000 article, to appreciate that the number of positions taken in this debate necessitates a systematic overview of the field. Carrol’s article is also valuable because it adds (a glimpse of) a historical perspective on the debate, when saying that, “before the modern era (before philosophers of art were influenced by the writings of Hutcheson and Kant), the notion that art can and should be criticized ethically was generally unexceptionable” (Carrol 2000, 351). Commenting on this claim, Paul Guyer has written: “[p]resumably Carroll supposes that the decisive event that made this separation in the late eighteenth century was Kant’s insistence in his 1790 Critique of the Power of Judgment that judgments of taste are disinterested, while moral judgments express the interest of pure practical reason” (Guyer 2008, 3). The reference to “Hutcheson and Kant” also gestures towards one of the traditional narratives in the
history of aesthetics. This is a teleological narrative that describes eighteenth-century aesthetics as a fairly straightforward development from Hutcheson’s first attempt to write systematic aesthetics to Kant’s crowning achievement. All through the narrative the guiding concept tends to be disinterestedness: a hypothesized attitude that differentiates aesthetic types of experiences from all others, and thus also creates a gap between aesthetics and ethics (Szécsényi 2015). Debates surrounding this question routinely highlight the eighteenth century, revolving around questions of whether or to what extent it created a new language in which to discuss beauty, sublimity and a range of related experiences, and maybe even a new (“aesthetic”) way of looking at the world.

This question formed the subject matter of the much commented-on interchange between Jerome Stolnitz and George Dickie. In his 1961 article “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness’” Stolnitz looks at standard early eighteenth century British authors claiming that the concept of disinterestedness is found with such a coherent insistence in their work that it suffices as a proof that a new discipline in gradually coming into existence. At the beginning, he states that “[t]he present paper is concerned with aesthetic theory solely”, and when later on he is forced, for instance in the case of Shaftesbury, to treat of ethics as well, the explanation is “that Shaftesbury’s ethical theory thus turns out to be very nearly indistinguishable from an aesthetic theory” (Stolnitz 1961, 131, 133). This seems to indicate that, whether or not Stolnitz is right about his analysis (and following Dickie a number of interpreters have pointed out its mistakes), his argument cannot be used to substantiate a split between aesthetics and ethics occurring in the eighteenth century. More importantly, however, one is entitled to doubt how far either contestant’s point of view is properly historical. Concerning the issue of
“historical priorities” Stolnitz was quite explicit that “I share Dickie’s view that it is less important than distinguishing the theory models we are to use in the analysis and classification of the writings of this period” (Stolnitz 1978, 409). Stolnitz’s own theory demands that aesthetics be seen as something autonomous and rooted in a distinctive subjective “attitude” so he looks for precursors to this thought in the eighteenth century, while Dickie’s “institutional analysis” requires that this hypothetical autonomy be done away with and so he turns to eighteenth-century theories of taste to provide a genealogy for just that. As Carrol has convincingly argued:

[that Dickie’s rejection of the various notions of aesthetic faculties/attitudes/experiences comes prior to his proposals concerning the theory of art can be seen as part of an argumentative ground-clearing operation, one devoted to dismissing aesthetic theories of art as viable contenders in the realm of art theory by calling into question the acceptability of any characterization of the correlative state in spectators that artworks putatively engender. (Carrol 2001, 22)

So strong is the connection between present-day concerns and supposed historical reconstructions that Miles Rind’s worries are very easy to share. “The decline of the theory of the aesthetic attitude […] should not be allowed to take the eighteenth-century writers with it: they are worth recovering from Stolnitz’s own recovery attempt.” (Rind 2002, 69)

Paul Guyer has presented a very powerful argument about the impossibility of disentangling aesthetics and ethics in
eighteenth-century thought along lines defined by the concept of disinterestedness. He proves that “neither Kant himself nor those of his predecessors who first introduced the idea of the disinterestedness of judgments of beauty, namely Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, and Francis Hutcheson, thought that the disinterestedness of judgments of taste in general precluded the centrality of ethical issues to works of art in particular, and thus the appropriateness of ethical criticism of such works” (Guyer 2008, 4). Guyer demonstrates that in all above-mentioned theoreticians (and in many others) disinterestedness actually enables the ethical criticism of works of art. I will mention just a few of his examples. From Baumgarten, he quotes that “nothing can be beautiful that is not moral” (Guyer 2008, 6). In Diderot also he demonstrates a strong connection between art and ethics. “To make virtue attractive, vice odious, and ridicule effective: such is the project every upstanding man who takes up the pen, the brush, or the chisel should make his own” (Guyer 2008, 9). In Lord Kames, art is a means of sympathy: the better the art the stronger the moral impact. “Thus, not only history but also novels and plays are ‘the most universal and favourite entertainments’, because in them we ‘enter deep into the concerns’ and ‘partake of [the] joys and distresses’ of other human beings” (Guyer 2008, 10). Moving on to the theory of disinterestedness, he states that “Shaftesbury’s separation of the contemplation of beauty from the fulfillment of desire and of true virtue from mercenary and self-regarding interest was meant precisely to open the way for the recognition that at bottom beauty and moral goodness are closely connected, thus ‘That Beauty and Good are still the same’” (Guyer 2008, 13). When it comes to Hutcheson, Guyer also demonstrates his unquestioning assumption that the point of a work of art is to engage our passions of “Honour and Virtue,” […] there
is no suggestion in Hutcheson’s account of the sense of beauty that ethical criticism is distinct from aesthetic criticism, or the criticism of a work of art as a work of art” (Guyer 2008, 16). Ultimately “[f]or Kant, our response to fine art as such is much more complicated than the simple case of pure aesthetic response and judgment with which he begins for expository purposes, and centrally involves a moral aspect.” (Guyer 2008, 18) In short, we can say that the answer to the question in Guyer’s title—“Is Ethical Criticism a Problem?”—is a clear no: not in the eighteenth century.

In this essay, I would like to argue that even if we accept Guyer’s argument that the developing notion of disinterestedness does not lead to a separation between aesthetics and ethics in the eighteenth century, we should still be careful not to let the problem disappear from sight altogether. I believe that ethical criticism is a problem in the eighteenth century (and even before that in the Enlightenment) not simply because of the rise of aesthetics, but because of the increasingly complex and troubling awareness of history as a factor in the critical act. It is the complications about the historical point of view in criticism that make ethical criticism a problem.

To appreciate the change in the understanding of history we have to begin our narrative earlier than what we are accustomed to and to look at texts other than the standard philosophical treatises we call (sometimes anachronistically) aesthetic. I propose that an examination of the critical practice in the decades leading up to Shaftesbury and Hutcheson reveals the confusions surrounding the meaning of history and also the reasons why this makes ethical criticism more problematic than it had been earlier.
2. ETHICAL CRITICISM IN THE LATE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

The late seventeenth century displays the parallel existence of two markedly different understandings of history: a newer and an older one. Humanist tradition, which is the older one, is characterized by using history as the storehouse of exempla in the service of rhetoric (Nadel 1964). Anthony Grafton’s summary is apt.

The formal study of history, according to this tradition, was a matter of production rather than consumption: of defining the devices which enabled the historian to instruct, and at the same time to touch, the reader. Good history narrated past events, in an accurate, prudent, and eloquent way. Readers studied it in the hope of understanding the political calculations of ancient leaders, as expressed in speeches, and of sharpening their grasp of moral precepts and their applications, as embodied in crisp, specific historical examples. (Grafton 2007, 11)

A classic example in the English language comes from Francis Bacon’s *The Advancement of Learning* (1605). “[T]he form of writing which of all others is fittest [is] discourse upon histories or examples. For knowledge drawn freshly and in our view out of particulars, knoweth the way best to particulars again” (Bacon 1996, 270–271). The moral hermeneutic that Bacon sketches here (the cultured reader’s ability to recognize a general principle in a given human act and then to apply it again specifically in his or her own life) means that history has a clear practical value, it serves the present with guidance in a range of
matters mostly regarding the right behavior in public life. History in this context is typically seen as more powerful than philosophy because we are moved by the individual examples of the first in a way that we are not by the general theories of the second. Poetry (literature) here is strongly connected to history: it gives specific, sensuous examples of the right (or wrong) form of behavior in given situations. This theory, thus, made a clear break with the tradition established by Aristotle’s *Poetics* that associates poetry with philosophy and contrasts it with history because of its ability to dwell on the potential and not just record the actual. According to the early modern tradition glimpsed here it is rather poetry’s perceived ability to mediate between the vivid specificity of an instance of behavior and a general moral rule, which then the readers can again apply to their individual circumstances that makes it uniquely significant (Youngren 1968). The most eloquent argument for the nobility of poetry along these lines belongs to Sir Philip Sidney, who in his *An Apology for Poetry* (printed in 1595) compares poetry to both history and philosophy, saying that it offers the best of both: the specificity of history is here combined with the principled nature of moral philosophy.

The philosopher therefore and the historian are they which would win the goal, the one by precept, the other by example; but both not having both, do both halt. For the philosopher, setting down with thorny arguments the bare rule, is so hard of utterance and so misty to be conceived, that one that hath no other guide but him shall wade in him till he be old, before he shall find sufficient cause to be honest. For his knowledge standeth so upon the abstract and general that happy is that man who may
understand him, and more happy that can apply what he doth understand. On the other side, the historian, wanting the precept, is so tied, not to what should be but to what is, to the particular truth of things, and not to the general reason of things, that his example draweth no necessary consequence, and therefore a less fruitful doctrine.

Now doth the peerless poet perform both; for whatsoever the philosopher saith should be done, he giveth a perfect picture of it in some one by whom he presupposeth it was done, so as he coupleth the general notion with the particular example. A perfect picture, I say; for he yieldeth to the powers of the mind an image of that whereof the philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description, which doth neither strike, pierce, nor possess the sight of the soul so much as that other doth. (Sidney 1965, 106–7)

Creating a “perfect picture” in which “general notion” is tied to “particular example”—there could be no more succinct summary of this tradition. Timothy Hampton has demonstrated how “the texts of the Renaissance stress the importance of their relationship to their readers. They seek to provide the reader with a variety of options for possible action in the world. They educate the faculty of judgement and seek to influence behavior within a specific social sphere. They aim to move readers to various types of moral and political behavior. And the representation of exemplary figures from history is a principal rhetorical technique in this process of shaping the reader.” (Hampton 1990, 4) While the exempla used tended to be taken from antiquity, what mattered was not the dialogue between two specific
moments in history (the exemplum’s point of origin and the moment of its application) but the educated ability to move between certain images (or narratives) and the general “precepts” of philosophy (Trousdale 1973; Wallace 1974). According to Reinhart Koselleck, the famous “historia magistra vitae” formula implies a thorough apprehension of human possibilities within a general historical continuum. History can instruct its contemporaries or descendants on how to become more prudent or relatively better, but only as long as the given assumptions and conditions are fundamentally the same. Until the eighteenth century, the use of our expression remained an unmistakable index for an assumed constancy of human nature, accounts of which serve as iterable means for the proof of moral, theological, legal, or political doctrines. [...] The temporal structure of past history bounded a continuous space of potential experience. (Koselleck 2004, 27–8)

What I will argue is that it is the sense of continuity and the sense of iterability that has become strained by the time classical aesthetics begins to get written. History will no longer be a collection of rhetorical commonplaces, proving that the best patterns of behavior and the most valuable virtues are the same, irrespective of time, place or culture. The reasons are probably manifold, but two of them, at least, seem to have a bearing on the present subject. The first is a significant growth in “history method literature” which shows a certain professionalization of history. This means that history’s automatic subordination to rhetoric
(and through rhetoric to ethics and politics) is increasingly problematic (Witschi-Bernz 1972). In Grafton’s words

[...] the ars historica [...] formed part of a much larger effort to master and use the floods of information pouring into Europe from travelers, navigators, and missionaries [...] The most prominent and original writers in the field [...] all insisted that the critical reader of history must embrace the known world in all its immense variety. Doing so, however, put unbearable strain on traditional theories of history. (Grafton 2007, 198)

Also central to our purpose is the celebrated quarrel between the ancients and the moderns which in Britain culminates around the turn of the eighteenth century. The ancients were concerned with preserving the unquestioned (indeed, practically unexamined) authority of a rather limited canon of texts from classical antiquity, and the possibility of those texts’ mobilization as the unsurpassed sources of the best forms of behavior against what they perceived as the onslaught of irreverent and (for them) irrelevant questions coming from the moderns. Questions like does it matter if we cannot be sure who the author is? Do we know when exactly this or that text was written? Do we understand the exact meaning of a word at a specific moment in time (in a given dialect, etc.)? What do we make of competing textual traditions? Such questions had a lot to do with history, but not with history conceived as a majestic continuum, rather as something that leads the researcher on to ever more subtle distinctions, to an ever more complex understanding that while certain values might be eternal, human behavior is at least influenced by the times we live in. Much of what passed as heroism in
the days of Homer would seem barbaric in enlightened Europe (Levine, Pask).

What is most striking, however, is the parallel presence of the two concepts of history in many works, whereby, for instance, certain phenomena can be explained (or explained away) through claims to the effect that “those were different times”, while the timeless quality of central human values is still upheld. John Dryden (who was not only a poet, a critic and a translator, but also had the title of historiographer royal), presents excellent examples both of the modern relativist spirit and of its opposite. In his *Of Dramatic Poetry: An Essay* (1668) he treats English and French drama as two distinct traditions, and subordinates neither to ancient drama, because he believes that drama is necessarily dependent on local customs and the expectations of the audience. The strongest-worded statement of his historical position can be found in a never-elaborated and only posthumously published sketch written in 1677 and usually referred to as “Heads of an Answer to Rymer”. Thomas Rymer’s *The Tragedies of the Last Age* (published in 1678) contained a harsh indictment of English drama based on its violation of the eternal rules that can be derived from ancient practice. The same set of rules applies in present-day London as in ancient Athens because “Nature is the same, and Man is the same; he loves, grieves, hates, envies, has the same affections and passions in both places” (Zimansky 1971, 19). Dryden disagrees:

*tho’ nature, as he [Rymer] objects, is the same in all places, and reason too the same, yet the climate, the age, the dispositions of the people to whom a poet writes, may be so different that what pleased the Greeks would not satisfy an English audience. (Dryden 1962, 1, 214)*
Two things are noteworthy here. The first is that a certain understanding of “period” is beginning to emerge in these lines. This is the argument that John Dennis will elaborate in his anti-Rymer *The Impartial Critic* (1693). He argues that disregarding historical period is not permissible, because “to set up the *Grecian* Method amongst us with success, it is absolutely necessary to restore not only their Religion and their Polity, but to transport us to the same Climate in which *Sophocles* and *Euripides* writ” (Hooker 1, 11). The second important point, however, is that Dryden is not a thoroughgoing relativist and does not want to let go of the humanist assumption that human nature is ultimately the same, irrespective of period or culture, which ensures that works of art can have influence over time. Probably his most elaborate discussion of history along these lines is to be found in his 1683 “The Life of Plutarch”. Here he claims to have always read history for pleasure and entertainment.

But they who have employed the study of it as they ought, for their instruction, for the regulation of their private manners, and the management of public affairs, must agree with me that it is the most pleasant school of wisdom. […] It informs the understanding by the memory. It helps us to judge of what will happen, by shewing us the like revolutions of former times. For mankind being the same in all ages, agitated by the same passions, and moved to action by the same interests, nothing can come to pass but some precedent of the like nature has already been produced, so that having the same causes before our eyes, we cannot easily be deceived in the effects if we have judgment enough but to draw the parallel.
God, ‘tis true, with his divine providence, overrules and guides all actions to the secret end he has ordained them; but in the way of human causes, a wise man may easily discern that there is a natural cause betwixt them; and tho’ he cannot foresee accidents, or all things that possibly can come, he may apply examples, and by them foretell that from the like counsels will probably succeed the like events; and thereby, in all concernments, and all offices of life, be instructed in the two main points on which depend our happiness, that is, what to avoid and what to choose. (Dryden 1962, 2, 4)

This passage contains all the traditional ingredients. It creates the expected link between history and poetry since both can profitably be read for pleasure and for instruction. It relies on an explicitly stated hypothesis about the fundamental sameness of human nature. Crucially, it sketches a model, assumed to be universally accepted, in which history functions as a storehouse of examples, kept in the memory and applied to any given situation by the judgement. As long as this framework of understanding is intact, it makes the connection between the enjoyment of reading and its moral usefulness direct, conceptually clear, and easy to translate into critical practice whenever a specific work is under consideration.

We have already seen, however, that in the criticism of this period history was increasingly construed less as a site of sameness and generality (an awe-inspiring pattern of the same forms of behavior against the backdrop of the perceived sameness of human nature) and more as one of difference and specificity (specific forms of human behavior that can only be judged in the context of the
norms of a given period). The result is, I believe, a certain ambiguity. The connection between aesthetics and ethics never disappears altogether but it does become more difficult to give it specific substance.

The ambiguity is visible, even if we disregard art for a moment. Dryden seems to believe in the ever greater refinement of human interaction. In 1672, he argues that one advantage contemporary writers have over those of the Renaissance is a result of a different type of culture: “the wit of this age is much more courtly”, this “greatest advantage of our writing [...] proceeds from conversation. In the age wherein those poets lived, there was less of gallantry than in ours; neither did they keep the best company of theirs. [...] I cannot find that any of them were conversant in the courts, except Ben Jonson” (Dryden 1962, 1, 180–1). Especially when it comes to refinement of language use and versification, Dryden likes to talk about gradual improvement. Concerning Chaucer, for instance, he says that, “he lived in the infancy of our poetry, and that nothing is brought to perfection at the first. We must be children before we grow men. There was an Ennius, and in the process of time a Lucilius, and a Lucretius, before Virgil and Horace; even after Chaucer there was a Spenser, a Harington, a Fairfax, before Waller and Denham were in being; and our numbers were in their nonage till these last appeared.” (Dryden 1962, 2, 281) Clearly, none of these scattered remarks (and many more could be quoted) amount to a philosophy of history, but they indicate a manifest interest in matters of context-dependent change in human affairs.

In the field specifically of literary criticism and theory the offshoot of this hesitancy to unequivocally embrace either change or stability is a two-layered model of literary works, where linguistic and artistic form together with specific
cultural norms are only the surface (that can be further polished in later ages). In revising *Troilus and Cressida*, Dryden says,

because the play was Shakespeare’s, and that there appeared in some places of it the admirable genius of the author, I undertook to remove that heap of rubbish under which many excellent thoughts lay wholly buried. Accordingly, I new modelled the plot; threw out many unnecessary persons; improved those characters that were begun and left unfinished. [...] I need not say that I have refined the language, which before was obsolete… (Dryden 1962, 1, 240–1)

While many have been shocked by the extent to which restoration writers interfered with Shakespearean texts, what we should notice is that this boldness is capacitated by an equally strong belief that something essential will remain the same. “[M]oral truth is the mistress of the poet as much as the philosopher: poesy must resemble natural truth, but it must *be* ethical. Indeed the poet dresses truth, and adorns nature, but does not alter them [...] though the fancy may be great and the words flowing, yet the soul is but half satisfied when there is not truth in the foundation.” (Dryden 1962, 1, 121) In other words, ahistorical morality is still at the heart of the response to the work of art. However, the (much abbreviated) list of what needs to be changed for the moral lesson to shine through in Dryden’s present also shows that the iterability of ancient examples has come to be far more problematic than it used to be. Despite the increased awareness of period and culture specific factors in human behavior the insistence that art is moral has remained unchanged, but what exactly its morality consists in has become harder to pin down.
A similar ambiguity can be observed in John Dennis, whose argument for taking historical context into account has already been quoted. He is no less averse than Dryden to uniting attention to period with emphasis on eternal truths in art. In his 1701 *The Advancement and Reformation of Poetry*, for instance, aesthetic effect is dependent on a transhistorical order.

There is nothing in Nature that is great and beautiful, without Rule and Order; and the more Rule and Order, and Harmony, which we find we find in the Objects that strike our Senses, the more Worthy and Noble we esteem them. I humbly conceive, that it is the same in Art, and particularly in Poetry, which ought to be an exact imitation of Nature. Now Nature, taken in a stricter Sense, is nothing but that Rule and Order, and Harmony, which we find in the visible Creation. The Universe owes its admirable beauty to the Proportion, Situation and Dependence of its parts. And the little World, which we call Man, owes not only its Health and Ease and Pleasure, nay, the continuance of its very Being to the Regularity of Mechanical motion, but even the strength too of its boasted Reason, and the piercing force of those aspiring thoughts, which are able to pass the bounds that circumscribe the Universe. As Nature is Order and Rule and Harmony in the visible World, so Reason is the very same throughout the invisible Creation. For Reason is Order and the Result of Order. And nothing that is Irregular, as far as it is Irregular, ever was or ever can be either
What Dennis’s metaphysics of beauty and sublimity highlights is the simultaneous development around the turn of the eighteenth century of an increasingly thorough recognition of period and culture dependent factors regarding art (especially the drama where changing audience expectations clearly had to be taken into account) and an increasingly abstract, philosophical discourse regarding the religious, moral, social aspects of our experience of beauty. Both types of discourse have very far reaching roots but what I take to be distinctive of the period is their parallel presence, often in the same piece of writing, because it indicates a strained relationship between the eternal and the temporal aspects of art, an anxiety concerning the iterability of the moral patterns that it was assumed to convey.

3. ETHICAL CRITICISM IN EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AESTHETICS

Lord Shaftesbury’s “A Notion of the Historical Draught or Tablature of the Judgment of Hercules” seems to present a textbook example of an old-fashioned understanding of art which is morally exemplary. That essay is a very detailed description of how a classical *topos* from antiquity, displaying its hero in the moment of choosing virtue over pleasure, is best depicted. One problem here is that, obviously, the resulting (or imaginary) artwork will present moral choice as abstract to the level of being completely empty in terms of specific content. What Shaftesbury focuses on is a visual language that best displays the rhetorical clash between the two allegorical women and the inner *agon* of the hero, the moment his moral character
finally takes shape (Leatherbarrow). “By the word Moral is understood, in this place, all sort of judicious Representations of the human Passions.” (Cooper 1981, I.5, 118) The passions a work of visual art is taken to represent are universal, but art itself is seen as very much influenced by the cultural politics of the times.

[W]ithout a publick Voice, knowingly guided and directed, there is nothing which can raise a true Ambition in the Artist; nothing which can exalt the Genius of the workman, or make him emulous of after-Fame, and of the approbation of his Country, and of Posterity. For with these he naturally, as a Freeman, must take part: in these he has a passionate Concern, and Interest, rais’d in him by the same Genius of Liberty, the same Laws and Government by which his Property and the Rewards of his Pains and Industry are secur’d to him, and to his Generation after him.

Every thing co-operates, in such a State, towards the improvement of Art and Science. […] When the free Spirit of a Nation turns it-self this way; Judgments are form’d; Criticks arise; the publick Eye and Ear improves; a right Taste prevails, and in a manner forces its way. Nothing is so improving, nothing so natural, so con-genial to the liberal Arts, as that reigning Liberty and high Spirit of a People, which from the Habit of judging in the highest Matters for themselves, makes ’em freely judge of other Subjects, and enter thoroughly into the Characters as well of Men and Manners, as
of the *Products* or *Works* of Men, in Art and Science. So much, My Lord, are we owing to the Excellence of our national Constitution, and legal Monarchy… (Cooper 1981, I.5, 50)

A great virtue of a painting is its “natural Simplicity and Grace” (Cooper 1981, I.5, 120), which reminds the reader that in the earlier and far more elaborate pieces of the *Characteristics* Shaftesbury, much like Dennis, regards nature as a harmonious, divine order that works of art should imitate and extend. In “Sensus Communis”, for example, he says the following about nature, art and morality. “Let Poets, or the Men of Harmony, deny, if they can, this Force of *Nature*, or withstand this *moral Magick*. They, for their parts, carry a double portion of this Charm about with ’em. For in the first place, the very Passion which inspires ’em, is it-self *the Love of Numbers, Decency and Proportion*; and this too, not in a narrow sense or after a *selfish* way (for Who is there that composes for *himself*?), but in a friendly social View; for the Pleasure and Good of others; even down to Posterity, and future Ages.” (Cooper 1981, I.3, 112) Thus, it seems that for Shaftesbury both the form and the moral (and social, political) power of a work come from its continuity with harmonious nature. Obviously, then, the beautiful and the good are very strongly connected here, but morality no longer comes from the vivid representation of specific forms of morally meaningful action (as in the traditional understanding of history) but from a very abstract philosophical understanding and aesthetic enjoyment of order in created nature. Historical change is very important for Shaftesbury in talking about art in general, but not when we turn specifically to its moral meaning.
Francis Hutcheson’s *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue in Two Treatises* (1725) is a very good example of the type of difficulty I discuss. The fact that the two treatises it is made up of (‘An Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, &c.’ and ‘An Inquiry Concerning the Original of our Ideas Concerning Virtue or Moral Good’) separate the discussion of the beautiful and the good in a marked way should not be taken as a proof of a complete isolation of aesthetics. Indeed, Hutcheson opens up many avenues to connecting our experience of beauty or order to moral qualities. However, the fact that most of the discussion of art and especially poetry can be found in the second treatise (the one about morality) suggests that it is not the formal discussion of beauty where we should seek for insights into art, especially the moral element in art. What I think we see in this early work is the parallel presence of an emphatically modern discussion, rooted in Lockean epistemology, of the ideas of beauty and a very traditional discussion of the moral impact of poetry and the arts (embedded in an again very innovative proto-utilitarian argument). Hutcheson professes a strong belief in the power of “Statues and Panegyricks” to “accomplish” acts of disinterested goodness (Hutcheson 2004, 98). Moreover, he repeatedly uses conventional examples of preferable behavior from classical poetry and mythology. “Why do not we love Sinon, Pyrrhus, in the *Aeneid*? for had we been Greeks, these two would have been very advantageous Characters. Why are we affected with the Fortunes of Priamus, Polites, Choroebus or Aeneas? It is plain we have some secret Sense which determines our Approbation without regard to Self-Interest; otherwise we should always favour the fortunate Side without regard to Virtue.” (Hutcheson 2004, 92) When it comes to poetry, Hutcheson is content to reiterate the old conviction that its moral value is due to the ability to present lively images of human behavior that helps us make the right choices in our lives.
Where we are studying to raise any Desire, or Admiration of an Object really beautiful, we are not content with a bare Narration, but endeavour, if we can, to present the Object itself, or the most lively Image of it. And hence the Epic Poem, or Tragedy, gives a vastly greater Pleasure than the Writings of Philosophers, tho both aim at recommending Virtue. The representing the Actions themselves, if the Representation be judicious, natural, and lively, will make us admire the Good, and detest the Vitious, the Inhuman, the Treacherous and Cruel, by means of our moral Sense, without any Reflections of the Poet to guide our Sentiments. (Hutcheson 2004, 173)

But the point is that this old-fashioned humanist conviction is very difficult to connect to the first part of the Inquiry, the one that was to have a lasting influence on aesthetics.

Lord Kames’s Elements of Criticism (1762) discusses aesthetics in the context of the morally significant subject of sympathy. “The principles of the fine arts, appear in this view to open a direct avenue to the heart of man. The inquisitive mind beginning with criticism, the most agreeable of all amusements, and finding no obstruction in its progress, advances far into the sensitive part of our nature; and gains imperceptibly a thorough knowledge of the human heart, of its desires, and of every motive to action; a science, which of all that can be reached by man, is to him of the greatest importance” (Home 2005, 1, 32). Through the description of the way they affect the passions, Kames has important claims to make about the moral significance of art but the discussion takes place on a plane far too general to leave space for a detailed investigation of
moral exempla. Lord Kames bases his strong belief on a “sense or conviction of a common nature” (Home 2005, 2, 720). Here the parallel between moral and aesthetic universalism is most pronounced. “This conviction of a common nature or standard and of its perfection, accounts clearly for that remarkable conception we have, of a right and a wrong sense or taste in morals. It accounts not less clearly for the conception we have of a right and a wrong sense or taste in the fine arts” (Home 2005, 2, 722.) “The sympathetic emotion of virtue” is the most important moral passion that art is allowed to incite. This, however, Lord Kames places firmly outside culture and characterizes as one of the rather primitive components of human nature. “This singular feeling, which may be termed the sympathetic emotion of virtue, resembles, in one respect, the well-known appetites that lead to the propagation and preservation of the species” (Home 2005, 1, 50.) Clearly, this leaves very little room for consideration of history—in any possible sense of the word.

Hugh Blair’s Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (1783) makes a similar point about the usefulness of inquires (parts of which) today we would style aesthetic for “the philosophy of human nature”.

To apply the principles of good sense to composition and discourse; to examine what is beautiful, and why it is so; to employ ourselves in distinguishing accurately between the specious and the solid, between affected and natural ornament, must certainly improve us not a little in the most valuable part of all philosophy, the philosophy of human nature. For such disquisitions are very intimately connected with the knowledge of ourselves. They
necessarily lead us to reflect on the operations of the imagination, and the movements of the heart; and increase our acquaintance with some of the most refined feelings which belong to our frame. (Blair 2005, 7)

One might even say that, despite the many differences, in this regard British and German discourse progresses in a similar direction: from practical tracts on how to create and appreciate beauty in a way which includes morality to increasingly speculative works which treat aesthetic experience as source material for the philosophical analysis of the workings of the human mind. In Kai Hammermaister’s succinct summary, “[t]he aesthetics of Baumgarten and Mendelssohn can be considered an undertaking to claim epistemological relevance for sensual perception” (Hammermaister 2002, 4).

Immanuel Kant is obviously the most discussed philosopher in the Enlightenment tradition of aesthetics. Even to try to list the debated areas in this part of his work would be far beyond the limits of a paper like this one. There are widely differing interpretations and appraisals, for instance, of the way in which he tries to present aesthetics as an autonomous discipline but as one that still creates the vital links between theory and practice or nature and morality or the sensible and the supersensible, respectively the subjects of his two first Critiques.

One specific problem area derives from the fact that according to §6 of Kant’s Critique of the Power of Judgment “there is no transition from concepts to the feeling of pleasure or displeasure”, which is to say no “pure judgment of taste” has any connection to recognition (Kant 2000, 97). One does not experience beauty as an instance of
anything. About this, even Ted Cohen’s and Dabney Townsend’s otherwise markedly different readings seem to converge. Cohen claims that “in an experience of beauty, one is attending to the absolute and complete particularity of the beautiful object. Beautiful things, of nature and of art, are thus unique.” (Cohen 2002, 3) Townsend argues that “‘Beauty’ as a taste predicate cannot be generalized” (Townsend 2003, 78). Although the context is very different, one can see this as the logical endpoint of the erosion of the humanist belief in the moral function of art. That, we remember, depended on recognition: on recognizing in artistic representation an example of morally significant behavior. Kant’s aesthetics, however, quite specifically disables such connections. This does not mean that he never tries to forge new connections between the beautiful and the good, but it will no longer be based on the recognition of a specific morally significant act that one could then iterate.

Again, Kant’s system makes it impossible to interpret works of art as vivid pictures of moral behavior that connect specific situations to abstract dilemmas, since by definition the realm of the moral is the realm of the supersensible, the concepts of reason are indemonstrable (cf. Zuidervaart 2003). Nor do we fare much better if we want to reconnect to the old humanist convictions if we look at Kant’s striking formulation of “aesthetic ideas”. In Henry E Allison’s interpretation, the essential thing about the relationship between aesthetic and moral ideas is that it is merely based on a formal similarity, and is not realised in any particular work of art: “it is in virtue of the same formal feature through which aesthetic ideas symbolize ideas of reason that they also symbolize morality, whether or not the particular ideas they evoke are directly related to morality (Allison 2001, 260–1).
4. SOME CONCLUSIONS

What this article has argued is that while we can agree that it is misleading to talk about the rise of aesthetics as a process of emancipation from moral philosophy we should still talk about the nature of the connection between the beautiful and the good, because that does seem to undergo remarkable change during the Enlightenment period. From a model which is based on the repetition and application of a closed number of specific cases that a work of art is supposed to powerfully represent we move to a far more abstract model whereby the connection between the beautiful and the good is still hypothesized but the humanistic belief in the power of moral exempla is gradually replaced by broader philosophical principles. Probably there are many factors that contribute to this process. The one I have tried to highlight was the transformation of the understanding of history which at the start of the process can be seen as an inventory of exempla in the service of rhetoric, but which with an increased awareness of history as a site of change can no longer be seen as merely such. As the hold of the exempla gradually erodes it is the principle of iterability as the substance of the moral value of art that comes to be threatened leaving the question open whether aesthetics can eventually do more than wishfully gesture towards morality.

Additionally to the strict historical scope of this paper I would suggest that the above line of thought holds two more valuable lessons for contemporary discussions of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics. The first is that we should probably be somewhat more wary in applying the Aristotelian model to the moral import of art. In what has been one of the most influential treatments of the subject Martha C. Nussbaum categorically states that it is the Aristotelian conception of art’s ability to dwell with the
potential that releases its moral potency to help us, through the sympathetic imagination, to place ourselves into other people’s (fictitious) words, which might be radically different from our own.

Aristotle is correct. Unlike most historical works, literary works typically invite their readers to put themselves in the place of people of many different kinds and to take on their experiences. In their very mode of address to their imagined reader, they convey the sense that there are links of possibility, at least on a very general level, between the characters and the reader. (Nussbaum 1995, 5)

We do well, however, to remember that while the moral understanding of art tends to require that we be able to place ourselves in other people’s shoes, historical record tends to show that the point about this ability has more often than not been to recognize sameness and not to overcome difference. The typical example did not use to be Nussbaum’s Harvard student sympathetically identifying with the urban poor in a Dickens novel, but a statesman from the social elite of a given society recognizing the types of dilemmas he (almost invariably he) faces in the actions of another statesman from the social elite of a given society with which he feels his own to be largely continuous. The radical questions in a democratic understanding of the moral power of art only begin to emerge when we face the difficulty of transforming that model and seeing whether it survives in the face of real difference in culture, gender, religion, etc.

The second lesson worth emphasizing is simply the importance of history to any such discussion. Contemp-
orary aesthetics should not disregard either its own history or indeed history as such as a factor in both moral and aesthetic judgments. Nor should it forget that history itself is a concept that tends to change with history.

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