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# Erich Hatala Matthes, "Drawing the Line: What to Do with the Work of Immoral Artists from Museums to the Movies"

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**Erich Hatala Matthes.** *Drawing the Line: What to Do with the Work of Immoral Artists from Museums to the Movies.* Oxford University Press 2021. 184 pp. \$24.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780197537572).

Knowing what we know about the sexual predation of Bill Cosby, or of the charges of child abuse against Michael Jackson, engaging with their works and enjoying their artistic mastery may no longer be ethical. Add to this the various racist, misogynist or homophobic outbursts of numerous artists, and it is easy to see why the problem of immoral artists has attracted so much interest lately, replacing old Platonic worries regarding the corruptive influence of (im)moral art. On the other hand, the cancel culture and various forms it takes on social media have never been more powerful. Film students refuse to engage with Woody Allen's movies, J. K. Rowling has been erased from all social events (including the one honoring her very own literary achievements), and as I am writing this, even the untouchable Beyonce is rapidly changing the lyrics to her latest hit in order to silence an outburst on social media regarding the use of the word 'spaz' in the original text.

All things considered, the timing is perfect for Erich Hatala Matthes' book *Drawing the Line: What to Do with the Work of Immoral Artists from Museums to the Movies.*

Devoid of elaborate theories and hair-splitting arguments, the book is an interesting stream of well-developed and studious claims regarding the phenomenon that has been occupying the public for the last several years. Matthes writes in a reader-friendly way about unsettling issues that speak directly to the core of the concerns that audiences all over the world are facing as various charges mount against their favorite artists. His book does not offer an overview of philosophical views on immoral artists, but it is well suited to respond to the needs of audience members who are at a loss over how to engage with works of their favorite artists whose immorality has been made public. That in itself is a praiseworthy philosophical achievement.

As Matthes states in the introduction, his aim is to do justice to the morality on the one hand and our love for art on the other. He relies on nuanced analysis of individual cases (including autobiographical reveries) in order to come up with guidance on how to engage with works whose aesthetic and artistic value may be tainted by the immoral deeds of their makers. He points to subtle differences among certain cases that are often tossed together and treated as the same kind of ethical harm. The author never loses sight of the tremendous impact that the issues he is considering have had on people, from the actual victims to those potentially harmed by sexist (racist, homophobic) jokes, to the audience members who feel betrayed by the artists' deeds, to artists themselves.

Each of the book's four chapters analyzes one main ethical concern that the phenomenon of immoral artists raises: the artistic qualities of their work (ch. 1), the ethics of audiences' private engagements with their work (ch. 2), wider social reactions (ch. 3), and the proper reactions toward their art (ch. 4). Uniting these chapters are three main themes: the question of whether art can, or should, be separated from the artist, the concept of ethical consumerism and the sharp criticism of cancel culture. Matthes makes a convincing case for the claim that a work of art cannot be separated from the person who made it; examining various views on the relation between an artist



and his work, he concludes that the immoral behavior of an artist can damage the aesthetic quality of their work only when an artist's personal actions change the meaning of their work. Such is the case of artists like Gauguin, a sexual predator who often depicted the terror he himself caused in his models, after having subjected them to sexual abuse. In cases where the immoral actions of an artist are not relevant for the work, or when the work was created prior to the ethical misdemeanors, the work itself suffers no ethical harm. Neither of these cases however invites our rejection of created artworks; rather, they provide an opportunity for an audience to become aware of the complexity of our moral character and of the convoluted relation between an artist and his actions, including his creative ones. This is not to say that immoral artists should be excused or forgiven on the account of their being genius— as Matthes argues, 'the real world isn't set up to provide a protected sphere for interpretation in the way the word of art is' (63), where immoral artworks offer a chance to explore the dark side of morality. However, Matthes repeatedly stresses that immoral artists provide valuable incentives to consider our ethical commitments. While acknowledging that certain unethical deeds represent brutal violation of morality, he nevertheless sees this as an opportunity for the audience to educate themselves, or, by sticking by the artist (rather than canceling her), to give her a chance to overcome her moral trespasses.

The central notion in such a theory is that of an ethical art consumer who should be primarily concerned with how she engages with a work: crucial here is her readiness to evaluate the relation between immoral behavior and the work itself, once such behavior becomes public knowledge. As Matthes argues, taking art seriously means giving a serious consideration to immoral art and immoral artists. Morality calls upon us, but in deciding how to treat works of immoral artists we have a chance to reconsider our own values. Nothing in the work itself asks us to reject it, and a world in which all works created by immoral artists are destroyed is not desirable – for one, it would eliminate a chance for us to engage ethically with works. The claim here is not that we ignore the victims, become complicit with the immoral artists or turn a blind eye towards their misdeeds; rather, 'the decisions we face when it comes to the work of immoral artists present an opportunity to express something about our moral personality, about the kinds of issues that we are sufficiently invested in that we will make personal sacrifices in order to take a stand' (72-3).

Such decision should be sensitive to the kind of ethical misdemeanor that has been committed, considering whether the artist can do it again, and whether there were actual victims harmed through actions (as in cases of sexual abuse) or only potential victims harmed through (racist, homophobic or otherwise insulting) words. As Matthes argues, canceling an artist for committing an action can prevent her from causing further harm, but that is not a proper response to the harm already committed, or to artists no longer alive. In addition, canceling might deny the audience an opportunity for ethically engaging with the work. Canceling is also futile with sexism or racism, since no single person is the sole cause of these harms. However, cancel culture is often blind to such factors, treating inappropriate jokes as equally harmful as rape. Matthes' is an impeccable and much needed criticism of the cancel culture, which is shown to be nondiscriminatory and irreversibly damaging, and ultimately an unreliable mechanism for restoring justice. And while anonymous voices on the social media think they are doing the right thing by demanding

someone's cancellation, they fail to recognize that by doing so, they often enable the very cause of some kind of harm to go on undetected. What is really needed in response to the immoral artists is a fundamental institutional change: for example, instead of canceling one racist comedian, more diversity is needed to give proper opportunities for under-represented minorities.

The final chapter seeks to explain the sense of betrayal that fans feel when their favorite artists are exposed for their immorality. Crucial here is the question of how to engage with our favorite artworks in full knowledge of the immorality of those who created them. Inspired by the paradox of tragedy, Matthes suggests we should embrace this duality and take it as an opportunity to cathartically face the ambiguous nature of such emotions and experiences. Some may find this unsatisfying, perhaps even failing to do justice to both art and morality, but Matthes reminds us that there is no art without the artists, and artists, like other human beings, are deeply flawed. The best we can do is to snatch at the chance to learn about such flaws from them, in the process reaffirming art's unique capacity to respond to our ethical concerns.

Perhaps this is as good a solution as we can hope for. But the job is only half done for those of us who wonder what to do in other domains in which immorality of the agents held in high regard for their achievements – think of science – is coming to light. I am hopeful however that Matthes' particular way of salvaging the value of works created by immoral artists can give us pointers on how to keep the dignity and preserve the relevance of Aristotle, Kant and other philosophical geniuses who nowadays stand accused of sexism, racism and other -isms deemed inappropriate by the blind, ignorant and unreflective force of cancel culture.

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