

2016

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## Recommended Citation

2016. "A Moral Problem for Difficult Art." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74 (4): 383-396. doi: 10.1111/jaac.12324.

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# A Moral Problem for Difficult Art

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**Abstract:** Works of art can be difficult in several ways. One important way is by making us face up to unsettling truths. Such works typically receive praise. I maintain, however, that sometimes they deserve moral censure. The crux of my argument is that, just as we have a right to know the truth in certain contexts, so too we have a right not to know it. Provided our ignorance does not harm or seriously endanger others, the decision about whether to know the truth ought to be left to us. Within this limit, therefore, difficult art is morally problematic if it intentionally targets those who have chosen not to know. To illustrate the problem, I discuss the literary writings of Søren Kierkegaard, which aim to deceive readers into seeing unpleasant truths about themselves that they seek to ignore.

## 1. Introduction

Works of art can be difficult in several ways. Enjoying them can take a lot of time and energy, for instance, as in the case of many classic novels. In addition, appreciating them can require the acquisition of substantial background knowledge, as do many pieces of modern art (Graham 2006). Further, works of art can be difficult because they endorse attitudes or prescribe responses that conflict with our moral commitments (see Anderson and Dean 1998; Carroll 1996; Gaut 2007; Jacobson 1997; 2005; John 2006). Finally, they can be difficult because they make us deal with unsettling issues or compel us to face up to distressing truths. The present paper is about art that is difficult in this last sense.

Art critics and theorists often celebrate art that gets us to attend to unsettling truths. This attitude is typically justified. For it usually benefits us to become acquainted with reality, however harsh it may be, and we are usually glad in the end to have learned how things really are. I will argue, however, that there are exceptions to these generalities. Difficult art sometimes harms us rather than benefits us, and we sometimes wish we had never encountered it. In at least some such situations, it deserves moral censure.

Two cases merit mention. The first is where a difficult work of art targets an audience that *is not able* to face up to the truth it conveys. On account of past trauma or inherent fragility, the people in question here cannot face up to the facts without suffering psychological harm. The second case is where a difficult work of art targets an audience that *does not want* to face up to the truth it conveys. Perhaps because they cannot acknowledge the truth without experiencing distress, or perhaps for some other reason altogether, the people at stake here have chosen to avoid the truth. Their ignorance is a willed ignorance.

Although the first case raises important issues of its own, I will focus on the second. The crux of my argument will be that, just as we have a right to know the truth in certain contexts, so too we have a right not to know it. Provided our ignorance neither harms nor seriously endangers others, the decision about whether to face up to the truth ought to be left up to us. With this qualification, therefore, works of art that use their power to make us attend to the truth against our will are morally problematic because they violate our autonomy.

## 2. The Humanist Tradition

The problem I wish to raise has its roots in two classic objections to the humanist view of the arts. According to humanism, a principal value of art is its ability to educate and instruct

(Gaskin 2013, 63; Gibson 2003, 224). Works of art and literature matter because they can teach us important lessons about our world and ourselves. In addition, engaging with them can help us to refine our emotional and imaginative faculties as well as to hone a range of other cognitive abilities.

One common objection to humanism is epistemic in nature (see Carroll 2003, 371–372; Lamarque and Olsen 1994, 365; Rowe 2009, 394–397). It is said that art may well be able to influence our beliefs. Art may even be able to get us to embrace truths we otherwise would disregard. But education is about more than instilling true beliefs. Education is about imparting knowledge, and knowledge is a matter of having justifications in addition to true beliefs. The problem with viewing works of art as educational tools, therefore, is that they seldom offer justifications. Even those that contain a discernible thesis—and this itself is rare—almost never provide rational support for it. In fact, most art does not even address us on a rational level. It engages our emotions and imaginations instead.

The humanist can respond to this first objection in several different ways. Perhaps the best tactic is to argue that the objection assumes an excessively narrow view of education. Presenting a thesis along with a justification reflects one paradigm of what it is to educate, but not the only one. In fact, part of the splendor of art is that it develops and improves us in so many other ways. It discloses unfamiliar perspectives, articulates new possibilities, makes truisms hit home, frames existing knowledge in terms of new *gestalts*, and sharpens faculties such as emotional perceptiveness (see D. Carr 2010; Carroll 1998, 141–149; 2003, 375–381; Hepburn 1998; Jobes 1974; Nussbaum 1990; Reid 1985). Providing evidence and arguments is typically not necessary for these pedagogical projects. Thus, art's failure to deliver them is no defect. In addition, appeals to emotion and imagination are often more effective here than appeals to rationality (Diamond 1982). Thus, the fact that art proceeds along these lines is to its merit.

Objections to humanism sometimes proceed on moral grounds rather than epistemic ones. Yet, here too the focus is often on art's tendency to address us on an emotional rather than a rational level. For instance, following a particular reading of Plato, it is sometimes said that appealing to people's emotions in order to get them to do or believe something is unethical (Hobbes 1994, bk. I, ch. 4–5; Hurley 2010, 78–81; Locke 1996, bk. III, ch. 10, sec. 34). One motivation for this criticism is the belief that emotional appeals undermine people's autonomy. To be autonomous, or so the argument goes, is to be able to make up one's own mind about what to do or believe. Making up one's own mind requires the opportunity and ability to examine the relevant evidence, reach a decision based on this examination, and enact said decision. Emotional appeals interfere with this process. They incline us to accept conclusions for reasons having nothing to do with the evidence. In addition, they warp our judgment of the evidence, leading us to overestimate or underestimate its force.

The humanist can respond to this second objection by noting that it paints a one-sided picture of emotion. It is true that emotions sometimes warp our judgment and interfere with cognition. But not always. In fact, recent psychological research shows that the opposite is often true (Baumeister et al. 2007; Blanchette and Richards 2010; Carroll 1997, 199–203; Fredrickson and Branigan 2005; Robinson 2005, 105–135, 154–194; Yiend 2010). Our emotions can focus our attention on a given subject matter, bringing to the forefront of our minds considerations we would otherwise overlook or take for granted. They can also structure our conception of a topic in helpful ways by casting it in a certain light or by allowing us to see it through a particular lens. As a result, we are often able to reason more efficiently and accurately about the topic.

On the humanist view, good art leverages the epistemic advantages that accompany being emotionally well attuned (Aumann 2014; Hepburn 1998). It engages our affects and passions in ways that make us better able to understand our world and ourselves, and

thereby makes us better able to make up our minds about what to do or believe. In sum, the emotional appeals of good art augment our autonomy rather than undermine it.

### 3. The Moral Problem with Difficult Art

The forgoing account of the relationship between art and autonomy is generally attractive and fits many cases (Currie 2001, 163–165; Hepburn 1998, 174–175; Kovach 2010). Yet, there is good reason to think it does not fit *every* case. Part of the problem is that art, especially art with educational ambitions, does not always draw attention to truths that please and delight. Indeed, many works of art do the opposite. They traffic in emotionally difficult subjects. They bring before us ideas and perspectives that unsettle and vex us.

Of course, many of us value this kind of difficult art. We like facing up to challenging truths and we enjoy staring harsh realities in the eye. At least part of the reason is that we tend to believe facing up to the truth, however unpleasant, is integral to leading the good life. We agree with Socrates that the unexamined life is not worth living.

It is crucial to note, however, that not everyone shares these sentiments. Not everyone enjoys facing up to difficult truths. More importantly, not everyone agrees that it is always worthwhile to do so, or even that it is an essential part of a well-lived life. Many people side with Nietzsche in thinking there are some goods, such as psychological health, that are more important than the truth and with which pursuit of the truth sometimes conflicts (Nietzsche 1989, secs. III.24–28; Janaway 2007, 229–239; Leiter Forthcoming). As a result, they believe there are situations in which they are better off not knowing the truth, and they try to avoid the truth in these situations.

Now all would be well if the artists and authors who produced difficult works of art only targeted those who wanted to face up to the truth. But this does not always happen. As I will explain in the coming sections, artists and authors often intentionally target the unwilling. They use the emotional power of art to capture the attention of people who want not to know and then make these people face up to unpleasant facts and harsh realities.

This project is morally problematic. Making others aware of the truth against their will involves failing to respect their judgments and choices. In particular, it involves refusing to defer to their view about what is best for them to know and not to know. But—within certain limits I will discuss in the coming sections—we have a right to decide for ourselves what is best for us to know and not to know. This right is grounded in our more general right to autonomy. We have a right to determine for ourselves how it is best to live our lives. This includes how to conceive of our own good. Part of our conception of our own good is our view of what is best for us to know and not to know. In sum, we can say the reason works of difficult art are morally problematic is that they violate the autonomy of their target audience (Buss 2005, 233n71; see also Andorno 2004; Husted 1997; Strasser 1986; Wilson 2005).

### 4. The Sugar-Coated Pill Theory

The problem I have raised is more common than it might seem, for there is a venerable tradition of using art to educate people about matters they want to ignore. We see traces of this tradition among other places in the sugar-coated pill theory of poetry (see Lund 2010, 28). Some remarks made by Lucretius (2001, ll. 943–950) in *On the Nature of Things* bring out the basic idea.

Lucretius states that the off-putting doctrines he wishes to impart are like the wormwood physicians administer to sick children. Because the wormwood is bitter, the children shrink from it. To make them take it, the physician must secretly coat the rim of

the cup with honey. The unwitting children are thereby “victims of beguilement, but not betrayal” because the physician ultimately restores them to health. Similarly, Lucretius claims, he must coat his doctrines with “the sweet honey of the Muses.” Only by expounding his teachings in poetic form will he capture people’s attention and get them to take him seriously.

In *An Apology for Poetry*, Philip Sidney (2002; see Jacobson 1996) develops a wide-ranging defense of humanism that leads him at one point to expand on Lucretius’s ideas. Sidney notes that Lucretius was not alone in adopting the sugar-coated pill approach. The founding figures of almost every discipline and in almost every civilization proceeded in a similar fashion. Whether teaching science, history, or philosophy, nearly everyone wrote under “the masks of poets” (Sidney 2002, 82). And they did so of necessity. The people they sought to address had no immediate interest in the knowledge they purveyed. Only the charming sweetness of poetic verse would draw in their audiences. “Neither philosopher nor historiographer,” Sidney concludes, “could at the first have entered into the gates of popular judgments, if they had not taken a great passport of poetry” (2002, 83).

To illustrate the power of the sugar-coated pill method, Sidney (2002, 96) appeals to the famous story of Nathan and David found in the Hebrew Bible. King David has committed adultery with the beautiful Bathsheba and has concealed his transgressions by having her husband killed. To make the king see the error of his ways, God sends the prophet, Nathan. But Nathan does not approach David directly. He does not start in with harangues and remonstrances. Instead, he offers the following parable:

There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meagre fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him. (2 Sam. 12:1–4 (NRSV))

The imagery of the parable captures David’s imagination. The story tugs on his heartstrings and draws him in. Not realizing the parallels to his own life, the king proceeds to rail against the rich man’s selfishness. Then Nathan delivers that unforgettable line, “Thou art the man,” and David repents immediately.

Nathan’s parable exhibits some of the features found in the sort of works I consider problematic. First, it gets David to attend to truths he desperately wants to ignore. Second, it uses artistic means to pull David into this unwanted awareness. Yet, the parable does not seem morally objectionable. The reason, I believe, is that the truth it makes David see is not one he has a right to ignore. David’s failure to acknowledge his moral transgressions seriously endangers others. In particular, it cements a precedent whereby kings can take whatever they want from whomever they want with impunity. Autonomy is not protected in such cases, where the well-being of others is either harmed or seriously threatened.<sup>1</sup>

To locate a work that suffers from the objection I have in mind, therefore, we must look beyond the Biblical story. We must identify a piece that exhibits the core features of Nathan’s parable—using artistic means to make people attend to difficult truths against their will—but that deals with truths people have the right not to know.

Identifying an unequivocal example is tricky. One candidate is the novels written by Jonathan Franzen. In “Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels,” Franzen declares that the goal of his early works was to identify “negative moments” he could “trick Americans into confronting” (1996, 37). His struggle was simply to figure out how to “package his subversive bombs in a sufficiently seductive narrative.”

Although he claims to have despaired of this project to some degree, traces of it linger in *The Corrections*, *Freedom*, and *Purity*.

On my reading, Franzen's project is not motivated primarily by moral concerns. He does not want us to face up to harsh realities or "negative moments" for the sake of others. He wants us to do it for our own sake. Consider his most recent novel, *Purity* (2015). One of the hard lessons of the book is that giving into our culture's obsession with motivational purity is psychologically unhealthy. It turns us into wretched and loathsome versions of ourselves. Indeed, this is why reviewers have found so many of the characters in *Purity* so unlikeable (see Gay 2016; Morris-Lent 2016). Franzen intentionally made them that way. Their lives are supposed to reveal to us the miserable results of caring too much about having perfect intentions.

Franzen's agenda, however, may not be entirely paternalistic. He might be concerned about the moral costs of the kind of psychological unhealthiness he describes. Indeed, it is possible to interpret *Purity* as telling us how a mania for proper motivations will lead us to do more harm and less good than we otherwise would. Thus, in the end, I consider Franzen's novels an ambiguous case. They do not clearly deal with truths we have a right not to know.

Another possible instance of the sort of difficult art I have in mind is the "poetry of witness" championed by Carolyn Forché. The goal of such poetry is to prevent us from forgetting the "extreme situations" suffered by its authors. It combats our "diseased complacency," Forché maintains, by "marking us as [its authors] have been marked" (1993, 32, 41; 1996, 143).

Now I believe we possess an imperfect duty to attend to others' suffering. We have to do it some of the time, but not always. (That would be paralyzing.) In addition, I believe where and when we attend to others' "extreme situations" is up to us. As a general rule, therefore, any attempt to compel us against our will to face up to a particular instance of suffering is an violation of our autonomy. It is a refusal to defer to our judgment about when and where to dwell on others' misfortune.

Yet, there are exceptions to this rule. And these exceptions come into play when dealing Forché's poetry. The poems in *The Country Between Us* are a good example. They hit us out of the blue with difficult truths. One's heart is torn apart by the final lines of "The Colonel": "I am tired of fooling around he said. As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go fuck themselves. He swept the ears to the floor with his arm and held the last of his wine in the air" (Forché 1982). Yet, I am uncertain whether we—or, rather, Forché's target audience—had the right to ignore the message of this poem. The misery of the people in El Salvador was particularly horrendous. Moreover, readers in the United States might have been able to do something about it. Thus, my final judgment regarding Forché's poems is that they constitute another borderline case.

I believe we find what we are looking for if we turn to a more historical example, namely the literary writings of Søren Kierkegaard. Not only does Kierkegaard (1990a, 37–39; 1997, 235–236) celebrate the strategy employed by Nathan in the Hebrew Bible, but he explicitly uses it as a pattern for his own work. In Edward Mooney's (2007, 38n4) words, Kierkegaard sets himself up as the Nathan to our David. Unlike Nathan, however, Kierkegaard tells us that he is concerned with self-regarding matters. He wants to make readers aware of truths that concern *not* their relationship with others *but rather* with themselves. Specifically, he is interested in truths that have to do with the stories the members of his audience are telling about their own lives. Often, or so I will argue, ignorance of these truths does not harm or seriously endanger others. Thus, they are the sort of truths we have the right not to know. To develop these points, we must take a closer look at Kierkegaard's literary project.

## 5. Kierkegaard's Literary Project

Kierkegaard (1980, 22–24; see Podmore 2009) fashions himself a physician of the soul, someone out to diagnose and treat the psychological and spiritual problems of our age. He often appears to identify our illness as a preoccupation with knowledge and reflection. On a closer reading, however, it becomes clear that he has something more specific in mind. He is not against knowledge, reflection, or rationality *tout court*. What concerns him is our love of a particular kind of knowledge, namely that which is devoted to abstract or impersonal issues, and our predilection for a particular sort of reflection, namely that which proceeds in an objective or dispassionate manner. The problem with these things is that they distract us from ourselves.<sup>2</sup> They lead us away from thinking about how things are going with us personally or existentially. More precisely, we tend to pursue abstract knowledge and disinterested reflection instead of attending carefully to the unfolding narratives we are in the process of authoring about our own lives (see Lippitt 2007; Lippitt, John and Stokes 2015; Rudd 2009; 2012; Stokes 2010). To use Kierkegaard's (1982, 1:242; 1967ff., sec. 3.3587) technical terms, we engage in them at the cost of forgetting about “subjectivity” or “inwardness.”

On Kierkegaard's view, there is an important reason why we flee from ourselves in this way. Namely, we do not want to know the truth (Kierkegaard 1990b, 139–140; 1997, 170–171; 1998a, 45). We are afraid that if we look carefully at the stories of our lives we will not like what we see. We may shudder at the shape of our past or recoil from the scope of our possible futures. Alternatively, we may despise our bodies, our minds, or their unities. In one way or another, we will not want to be who we are, but will want to be different people with different pasts, different futures, and different narrative arcs connecting the two together. In short, we are afraid if we look at ourselves, we will despair (1980, 14). To handle this fear, we concoct fictional stories about ourselves that are more palatable than the truth. And we cling to these illusions with all our might (1998b, 16–20, 41–44; 1997, 163–187).

Consequently, the project Kierkegaard sets for himself—getting us to attend to the existential truth about ourselves—is a difficult one. A straightforward approach carries little promise. Simply telling us the truth about ourselves, or even just that we ought to learn the truth about ourselves, will probably be no more effective with us than it would have been with King David. We will see Kierkegaard coming and arm our defenses. We will dismiss, discount, or ignore what he has to say. Thus, much like Nathan and for much the same reasons, Kierkegaard resorts to an indirect approach. He wraps his messages in pleasing poetry and enticing narratives. He draws us in with humor, irony, sarcasm, satire, and wit. By hook and by crook, he “compels us to become aware”; he “deceives us into the truth” (Kierkegaard 1998b, 6n, 12, 50–54; see Aumann 2010; Jansen 1997; McCreary 2011; Sæverot 2011).

One of Kierkegaard's most notorious strategies is to anaesthetize us by telling stories that appear not to concern us at all (cf. Novitz 1997). For instance, Part I of *Either/Or* focuses on a fictional character named A. It tells us about A's refusal to take a stand on anything whatsoever, and about the fragmented existence he leads as a result (Rudd 2012, 168–173). In Part II, we encounter Judge William, who sends A lengthy and insightful letters of advice, but whose authoritative voice is compromised by a self-certainty about his own story that often seems misplaced.<sup>3</sup> *Fear and Trembling* acquaints us with Johannes de Silentio, who hides his craven inability to take a decisive step in his own life behind praise of his hero, Abraham, who has done just that (Lippitt 2003, 177–208). Finally, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* presents us with the humorous Johannes Climacus, who offers endless reflections on the perils of avoiding oneself by engaging in endless reflection .

Only after we have waded deep into the lives and thoughts of these characters, only after we have opened up to them and given ourselves over to them emotionally, does it dawn on us that their stories are really about us. Each of us is in our own way A, the judge, Silentio, and Climacus. Each of us suffers from our own versions of their missteps. Thus, quite unexpectedly, but also quite like Nathan's parable, Kierkegaard's writings become mirrors that reflect back to us the dark truths about the stories of our lives we have sought to ignore (Kierkegaard 1988, 8; 1990b, 7–51; Gregor 2011; Stokes 2009, 113–133).

Of course, sometimes these dark truths are like David's. They concern patterns of moral transgression or underlying moral vice. In such cases, we have no grounds for complaint against Kierkegaard for disabusing us of our illusions. But many cases are *not* like this. In fact, as Galen Strawson argues, failure to attend to the narrative structure of one's life typically does not have negative moral consequences (Strawson 2004).

The example that most concerns Kierkegaard is a case in point. The primary illusion he seeks to remove is his readers' impression that they are Christians (Kierkegaard 1998b, 16–20, 41–44). They wrongly take themselves to be earnestly and wholeheartedly devoted to God despite not giving God a second thought in their daily lives. This error, however, does not necessarily have ethical ramifications. Failing to see that one is not the Christian one takes oneself to be does not necessarily harm others or put them in serious danger. People can and frequently do have misguided beliefs about their religious commitments and still manage to treat others with adequate dignity and respect. In such cases, therefore, we are entitled to our illusions, and anyone who removes them against our will does us wrong.

Another example comes from my experience teaching Kierkegaard. Many happy-go-lucky undergraduates enter my class without having thought hard or at great length about their lives. They are not bad people, just unreflective ones. Kierkegaard comes as a shock to such students. After studying *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *Sickness Unto Death*, they often experience a personal awakening. They come to see their life narratives as fragmented, unstable, or otherwise deeply dissatisfying. Some students take this hard. They have trouble finding a good way out of their newfound predicament. And they do not consider Kierkegaard's (1980, 14) religious solution—rest in God—a live option. As a result, they despair. Those who reach this point sometimes tell me they resent Kierkegaard's meddling. They would have been better off without it.

## 6. An Analogy in Medical Ethics

To bring into focus the objectionable aspect of Kierkegaard's project, consider the following analogy. Suppose I go to my doctor for a routine check-up, and she discovers the worst. The slight cough I cannot kick is not the result of a simple cold. I have cancer. Tests reveal the details: Stage IV; untreatable. At this point, I decide that I want to hear no more. I do not want to know how long I have left. For I do not want to spend the rest of my days with an expiration date hanging over my head. My doctor, however, disagrees with me. She thinks it would be best for me to face up to the facts, however terrible they may be. On her view, people should make the final decisions of their lives in a fully informed manner. So, she tricks me. She sends me an unmarked letter containing my prognosis, which I unwittingly open.

It is common to maintain that my doctor wrongs me here (Andorno 2004; Bortolotti 2013; Bortolotti and Widdows 2011; Husted 1997; Wilson 2005). Indeed, this view is codified in several international agreements on human rights.<sup>4</sup> The motivating idea behind these agreements is that, in addition to possessing a right to know our medical condition, we possess a limited right not to know it. Provided our ignorance does not harm or seriously endanger others, it ought to be up to us whether to face up to the truth.



After all, no one else is in as good a position to determine what is best for us in this context. My doctor wrongs me because she does not respect this right. My ignorance of my prognosis does not harm or seriously endanger others. Thus, she should have left to me the choice of whether to know it, but she did not.

I believe Kierkegaard wrongs us for similar reasons. By making us face up to difficult truths about our self-narratives against our will, he too imposes on us his judgment about what is best for us to know. The only difference is that the truths at stake in his case concern our psychological, spiritual, or existential well-being rather than our physical well-being. Yet, ignorance of these truths is no more likely to harm or seriously endanger others. It is possible to remain in the dark about the unfolding stories of our lives—the structure of our past, the contours of our possible futures, and whether our projects give our lives adequate continuity—while living up to the demands of morality (McCormick 2014, 52–74; Strawson 2004, 431–432; cf. Rudd 2012, 207–208). Indeed, this is how it goes for many people. Although they give their own lives little thought and so hold many false beliefs in this domain, they manage to respect the dignity of others. They may be existentially impoverished by Kierkegaard's standards, but they are morally fine. Consequently, the decision about whether it is best for us to face up to the stories of our lives is usually ours to make. And so by arrogating this decision to himself, Kierkegaard fails to respect our autonomy.

It is worth adding at this point that it does not matter whether Kierkegaard is correct about its being better for us to know the truth about ourselves. We have the right to make less than fully rational choices and to follow less than ideal paths through life (Arneson 1980, 474, 485; Mill 1989, 13). Kierkegaard himself appears to acknowledge this point. He maintains that it is not permissible to force people down any particular path. We must be allowed to go our own way, even if it is a questionable one. He writes, “In the world of spirit, precisely this, to become one's own master, is the highest—and in love to help someone toward that, to become himself, free, independent, his own master, to help him stand alone—that is the greatest beneficence” (Kierkegaard 1995, 274).

## 7. Tacit Consent

There are several ways someone might try to defend Kierkegaard and likeminded authors or artists from the foregoing charge. One option is to argue that when we pick up a book or enter a gallery, we tacitly consent to learning from the artist or author. After all, we know the stakes. It is no surprise that an artist or author might want to teach us something, even something disturbing. Artists and authors are well known for having such aspirations. Moreover, there is ample opportunity for us to opt out. We can put down the book or walk out of the gallery if it starts to make us uncomfortable. No piece of art or literature can literally force us to continue engaging with it.

The problem with this response is that it is overly simplistic. It ignores the fact that works of art often surprise us. They frequently have different purposes or messages than they initially seem to have. As a result, even the most astute appreciators of art and literature do not always realize what they are getting themselves into. Moreover, when they finally grasp what is going on, it is often too late. Putting down the book or walking out of the gallery does no good. They have already seen the unwelcome truth, and it is difficult to un-see such things.

There are two reasons why the foregoing considerations are particularly important in the case of people who want to ignore difficult truths about themselves. First, such people might happily engage with artworks that do not instruct. They might enjoy poems, paintings, etc. that delight or divert. Unfortunately, whether a given piece will educate or

merely please is not always transparent right away. It would be understandable, for instance, if someone stumbled into a work such as Kierkegaard's "The Seducer's Diary" because he or she thought it was just supposed to be an interesting story.

Second, those who prefer not to learn difficult truths about themselves might be willing to learn other sorts of truths. Their resistance to knowledge might be domain specific. Thus, they might even pursue instructional works of art that deal with what they consider innocuous subject matters. But, once again, predicting the exact topic a work will address is not always an easy affair. Initial indicators can be misleading, and reliable guidance from previous viewers or readers is not always available. So, someone might recognize that Kierkegaard's writings have serious pedagogical goals, but mistakenly read them on the assumption that they do not actually address distressing issues.

I do not believe consent to instruct about difficult truths has been given in such cases. Granted, consent need not be overt or explicit; it can be tacit. Yet, on all but Locke's most extreme account, even tacit consent has to be deliberate or intentional. It cannot be unwitting or accidental (Locke 1960, sec. 119; see C. L. Carr 1990, 338–339; Simmons 1976, 281–282). Thus, merely picking up a book or entering a gallery is not sufficient for consent. The people performing these actions must see themselves as thereby granting the author or artist the right to instruct about difficult truths. This condition is not met if they do not actually believe the author or artist has such a goal.

The sugar-coated pill approach used by Kierkegaard exacerbates the problem. He purposefully disguises his agenda in order to reach readers who want to ignore his message. He gives the impression of producing pleasing works about non-threatening subjects; he makes it so that his audience will recognize what is at stake only after they have been drawn in to his writings. Implicitly speaking about his own strategy, he says:

Therefore the religious author first of all must try to establish rapport with people. That is, he must begin with an esthetic piece. This is earnest money. The more brilliant the piece is, the better it is for him. Next, he must be sure of himself... [H]e must have everything prepared in order, yet without any impatience, to bring forth the religious as swiftly as possible as soon as he has gained their attention, so that with the momentum of being engrossed in the esthetic the same people come face-to-face with the religious. (Kierkegaard 1998b, 44)

To the degree that Kierkegaard succeeds in executing his strategy of "deceiving people into the truth" (1998b, 53–54), there can be little question of consent on the part of his readers. They cannot be expected to know what he has concealed. It is too much to ask them to see through his machinations. Thus, if people stumble into his works because they erroneously believe he aims to please, the fault is not theirs but his.

## **8. The Difficulty of Deliberately Choosing Ignorance**

There is another way to challenge the objection that Kierkegaard and likeminded authors and artists fail to respect our autonomy. It is true that by using the power of art to get us to face up to difficult truths they inhibit some of us from doing what we want. They impede some of us in our pursuit of our immediate desires and inclinations. But the ability to do what we want or to pursue our desires is not autonomy. Or, if it is a kind of autonomy, it is a weak sort that does not deserve moral protection. Moreover, once we restrict ourselves to talking about protection-worthy autonomy, it no longer seems as though the author or artist who compels us to become aware of the truth violates our autonomy (cf. Harris and Keywood 2001; Malpas 2005).

To see why this is so, recall that earlier I described autonomy as having to do with making up one's own mind about what to do or believe. I added that making up one's own mind requires deciding what to do or believe on the basis of rational deliberation. The

problem with the objection I have been developing in this paper is that the choice of ignorance is seldom made in this way. Of course, there are times when it happens—situations in which a person’s decision to ignore a difficult truth is the result of careful reflection. But these cases tend to be aberrations for the following reasons.

First, choosing ignorance in a deliberate fashion is somewhat self-defeating. Doing so involves weighing the pros and cons of facing up to the truth. This process, however, inevitably involves thinking about the truth itself. And thinking about the truth itself is precisely what the person who prefers ignorance wants to avoid.

Second, choosing ignorance on the basis of deliberation is difficult to do. In principle, someone could reflect on whether to devote future thought to a given truth, decide against it, and then never return to that truth. But short of extreme measures, such as electroshock therapy, this maneuver is hard to execute in practice. Especially when dealing with emotionally unsettling truths about ourselves, it is hard to un-ring the bell. Once these truths have become the focus of our conscious awareness, we struggle to push them out of our minds.

Thus, for the most part, people do not deliberately choose the path of ignorance. They vaguely sense the presence of difficult truths on the margins of consciousness and then instinctively turn away. They avoid problematic lines of inquiry the same way they avoid potholes on the road: automatically and unthinkingly. Such things rarely become the explicit focus of their conscious awareness.

In sum, if autonomy is a matter of deliberately or reflectively making up one’s own mind, the objection I have been developing in this paper appears to collapse. Artists and authors who compel their audience to become aware of difficult truths may be inhibiting their audience from doing what their audience wants. Yet, in all but the most exceptional cases, they are not preventing their audience from doing something their audience has deliberately chosen to do. Thus, they are not violating their audience’s autonomy. Moreover, since it is autonomy that is morally protected, rather than merely the ability to do whatever one wants, the artists and authors in question are not doing anything morally wrong.

## 9. Autonomy without Deliberation

The problem with the foregoing argument is that it raises the bar for autonomy too high. By maintaining that deliberation is necessary for autonomy, it excludes from being autonomous any action that is made instinctively, habitually, or automatically. This consequence is unacceptable because there are many such actions we intuitively consider autonomous. Consider the Muslim who routinely turns to Mecca for prayer, the mother who instinctively rushes to answer her infant’s cry in the next room, or the vegetarian who selects the only meatless option at a dinner without giving the matter a second thought. To handle such cases, John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza (2000a, 85–86; see Wallace 1994, 189–190) have developed a well-respected account of autonomy that does not make deliberation a requirement. In this section, I will provide an overview of their account and then apply it to the case of choosing ignorance. The upshot of the discussion will be that such a choice can be and often is autonomous.

According to Fischer and Ravizza (2000a, 240–241; 2000b, 441), being autonomous is a matter of having the right kind of control over our actions. They acknowledge that deciding how to act on the basis of rational deliberation is sufficient for having the requisite control. But it is not necessary. All that is required is for the mechanism or process that issues in our action to be responsive to reason to a “moderate” degree. Moderate reasons responsiveness consists in being regularly receptive to reasons and at least weakly reactive to them (2000a, 81–82; 2000b, 443–445). We are *weakly reactive* to reasons if there

is at least one possible scenario in which we would do otherwise than we actually do in response to a sufficient reason to do otherwise (2000a, 73–76). We are *regularly receptive* to reasons if we are able to recognize an understandable pattern of reasons to do otherwise than we actually do (2000a, 69–73). In other words, although we do not need to be able to appreciate every reason to do otherwise, our grasp of such reasons must not be erratic or nonsensical.

Crucially, Fischer and Ravizza (2000a, 85–89) claim we can meet the two conditions for having control over our behavior without engaging in reflection or deliberation. First, being able to recognize reasons to do otherwise does not require having explicitly thought about them. It can be a matter of disposition. That is to say, we have the ability in question so long as we would acknowledge the legitimacy of reasons to do otherwise if they were presented to us by an interlocutor. Second, being able to react to reasons to do otherwise is also a dispositional affair. It is not a function of how we actually respond to the reasons we actually possess. It is a function of how we would respond in a hypothetical situation where we were presented with different reasons. Thus, it too is an ability we can possess when choosing instinctively, habitually, or “without a second thought.”

On Fischer and Ravizza’s account, it does not follow from the fact that people rarely choose ignorance deliberately that they rarely choose it autonomously. Indeed, the choice will often meet the conditions for autonomy. First, those who choose ignorance non-deliberately will typically still be weakly reactive to reasons. There will be at least one situation in which they will do otherwise in response to a sufficient reason to do otherwise, namely the situation in which the truth is not threatening. Kierkegaard and likeminded authors and artists rely on this fact. They make their message appear harmless precisely because they know their target audience will pay attention to it then. Second, people who choose ignorance non-deliberately will often still be fully functional adults who are regularly receptive to reasons. They will be able to understand and willing to acknowledge the legitimacy of a range of reasons to face up to the truth. Of course, they may not react to all of these reasons. They may suffer from weakness of the will and thus stick to the path of ignorance in scenarios where they admit they should attend to the truth.

If we accept Fischer and Ravizza’s account of autonomy—and I think we should—the objection I have been developing in this paper still stands. Since people can choose ignorance in an autonomous fashion, using the power of art to make them face up to the truth will sometimes violate their autonomy. This violation will be morally unjustified if ignorance of the truth in question does not harm others or put them in serious danger.

## 10. A Possible Paternalistic Justification

There is one more issue worth considering. Suppose the criteria just articulated are met. By compelling his readers to become aware of difficult truths, Kierkegaard is violating their autonomy. In addition, his readers’ ignorance does not harm or seriously endanger others. It still might seem as though a purely paternalistic justification of Kierkegaard’s project is possible. Someone might try to defend him on the grounds that he is violating his readers’ autonomy *for their own good*.

There are several ways to develop this argument. One strategy, forward by Gerald Dworkin (1972, 76) in another context, involves thinking in a more sophisticated way about the autonomy of Kierkegaard’s audience.<sup>5</sup> It may be that Kierkegaard is violating his readers’ autonomy *in the short term*. But there is a sense in which he is opening up a greater degree of autonomy for them *in the long term*. By making them aware of the truth about themselves, he is ultimately putting them in a better position to govern their own lives. In Dworkin’s words, he is “enhancing for the individual his ability to rationally consider and carry out his own decisions” (1972, 83). If this is the right way to think about the matter,

then Kierkegaard's interference with his readers' lives might be morally permissible after all.

There are two problems with this objection. First, a paternalistic defense of Kierkegaard's literary strategy is most attractive if we assume a narrow notion of autonomy (Arneson 1980, 474). In particular, it is most attractive if we assume autonomy requires rational deliberation. Since it is not possible to deliberate rationally about something without being aware of it, increasing our awareness entails increasing our autonomy. Or, at least, it involves providing us with the conditions for becoming more autonomous.

As I argued in the previous section, this account of autonomy is too narrow. We need to accommodate the idea that intuitive, habitual, and automatic choices can be autonomous. We can do so only if we abandon the requirement of rational deliberation. Once we abandon this requirement, however, it is less clear that increasing people's awareness of difficult truths entails increasing their autonomy.

The second and related problem is that it is difficult to measure autonomy. After all, what principle might we use to determine how much autonomy Kierkegaard's intervention is costing his readers versus bringing to them?

One partial answer comes from Richard Arneson. He claims "the more important to the agent the desire that an autonomy-restricting interference frustrates, the greater the loss of autonomy" (Arneson 1980, 475). We can apply this principle to Kierkegaard's case like so. Kierkegaard is frustrating the desire of his audience to live a life free from the stress that accompanies attending to difficult truths. Now some members of his audience may not regard this desire as important. But others might. They might place a high value on their own psychological well-being and honestly think attending to difficult truths would compromise it. In these cases, Arneson's principle would entail that Kierkegaard is effecting a great loss of autonomy.

Yet, perhaps Arneson's principle is no good. Maybe what matters when determining how much an intervention decreases autonomy is not whether the frustrated desire is *important to the agent*. Instead, maybe what matters is whether the frustrated desire is *objectively important*. After all, people find all kinds of trivial things subjectively important. It might be best not to get worked up about such cases. Thus, perhaps a better principle than Arneson's is the following one: the more important to the agent's objective well-being the desire that an autonomy-restricting interference frustrates, the greater the loss of autonomy.

Applying this rule will be difficult. It is often unclear whether a particular desire is important to an agent's objective well-being. As Mill (1989, 76) points out, we are rarely in good position to say what someone else's objective well-being is. But it is easy to make too much of this point. Outside observers are not always poor judges. Our friends and even mere acquaintances sometimes manage to know us better than we know ourselves. This appears to be how Kierkegaard (1998b, 41–44) views himself vis-à-vis his audience. He thinks he sees something crucial about their lives that they miss.

In the end, however, I do not find this argument plausible. For suppose Kierkegaard does know what is objectively best for his readers. In addition, suppose he would only be preventing his readers from doing what was objectively bad for them. Even then, an intervention would not be morally permissible. Why not? Well, permitting an intervention here would entail something problematic. To wit, it would entail we only have the right to choose something if it is objectively good for us. Our autonomy is only protected if we select what is in our true best interest. As a result, we do not have the right to make our own mistakes and suffer the consequences. I follow Arneson (1980, 485) in finding this implication intuitively unacceptable.

Thus, a paternalistic defense of Kierkegaard's literary project is not viable. An artist or author is not justified in compelling his or her audience to attend to difficult truths

simply for the sake of the audience's own well-being. An intervention is justified only if the audience's ignorance compromises the well-being of others.

## 11. Practical Implications

To summarize, critics and theorists often celebrate difficult art because they value awareness of the difficult truths it brings into view. The problem is that such art does not always target those who welcome difficult truths. It frequently addresses those who prefer ignorance, attempting to compel them into unwanted epiphanies or, to use Kierkegaard's words, "to deceive them into the truth.: Now sometimes this is morally permissible, viz. when ignorance of the relevant truths either harms or seriously endangers others. But sometimes it is not, viz. when ignorance does not harm or seriously endanger others. People have a right to decide for themselves what is best for them to know and not to know in these cases—a right they have in virtue of their more general right to autonomy. Thus, the point of this paper has been to show that in these cases difficult art deserves moral censure because it violates the autonomy of its target audience.

It is important to be clear about the practical implications of this position. First, what I have said does not entail that artists and authors should stop producing the kind of difficult art I have been discussing. Nor does it imply that we should cease distributing or teaching the pieces that already exist. I am not calling for censorship. For one thing, difficult works of art frequently benefit more people than they harm, and so an overall evaluation of their moral merit often comes out in their favor.<sup>6</sup> In addition, difficult works often have aesthetic or other non-moral virtues of sufficient magnitude to offset whatever moral harms they inflict.

In addition, my argument does not necessarily lend support for so-called "trigger warnings." The concerns about autonomy I have raised do not entail that authors and artists always ought to advertise their agendas. Nor do they entail that we always must provide notice when sharing works of difficult art with others, including our students. The reason is that, once again, warnings can do more harm than good. They can dissuade people from attending to a work that would benefit them tremendously and that they might appreciate after the fact. In addition, and perhaps more interestingly, warnings can compromise the aesthetic value of a work. The ability to take an audience by surprise is an important aesthetic achievement. It is something we praise when judging a work from an aesthetic point of view. The surprise is spoiled if the audience is told ahead of time what the work seeks to do.

Thus, I do not universally endorse trigger warnings when it comes to difficult art. Yet, neither do I universally reject them. Sometimes the surprise factor in a work is of minimal importance and the benefits of letting people know what is coming outweigh the costs. I tend to think Kierkegaard's writings fall into this category. Thus, when teaching them, I tell students what he has up his sleeve. But, it is worth emphasizing, not every work of difficult art will be like Kierkegaard's in this regard. Sometimes the aesthetic considerations will be so momentous that they will trump concerns about autonomy. In such cases, moral censure still will be order. But warnings and the like will not.

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Mill says, “the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others” (Mill 1989, 13). Most defenses of the right not to know acknowledge that it is not absolute but rather limited by concerns about harms to others (Andorno 2004, 437; Wilson 2005, 495–496).

<sup>2</sup> The pseudonymous Johannes Climacus repeatedly describes the problem of the age as a kind of self-forgetfulness stemming from excessive knowledge and reflection (Kierkegaard 1982, 1:120). Of course, knowledge and reflection are not the only things that lead us to neglect ourselves. Elsewhere Kierkegaard identifies other culprits, including busyness, gossip, and mass society (Kierkegaard 1978, 68–112; see Aumann 2009; Roberts 1980, 88; Stewart 2003, 486).

<sup>3</sup> In the introduction to the “Ultimatum,” Judge William declares that everything the pastor says in the ensuing sermon is “what I have said and what I would like to have said” (Kierkegaard 1987, 338). Yet, the sermon is ultimately about how we need God’s assistance, which contradicts the judge’s Pelagian confidence that he can extricate himself from his problems (Kierkegaard 1982, 1:258).

<sup>4</sup> The European Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine states, “Everyone is entitled to know any information collected about his or her health. However, the wishes of individuals not to be so informed shall be observed” (art. 10.2) The UNESCO Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights states, “The right of every individual to decide whether or not to be informed of the results of genetic examination and the resulting consequences should be respected” (art. 5.c)

<sup>5</sup> Rousseau makes a similar argument in defense of his claim that some people must be “forced to be free” (Rousseau 1997, sec. 1.7.8; see Neuhauser 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Some readers may balk at my appeal to consequentialist-style reasoning at this point. *Prima facie*, it fits poorly with my insistence throughout the paper on the value of autonomy. I believe, however, that we should embrace value pluralism. Autonomy is the only moral good. Nor is respect for autonomy our only moral duty. Thus, determining what to do in a situation often will require balancing respect for autonomy with other moral concerns, including consequentialist ones.