

The background is a dark purple pattern featuring various Halloween motifs: white ghosts with large eyes, yellow tombstones with red crosses, purple bats, and white spiderwebs. The motifs are scattered across the entire page, creating a festive and spooky atmosphere.

In Defence of Problematic Faves

Villains, Vices, and Imaginative Engagement with Evil



Talk Outline

Section 1: Imaginative Engagement with Evil

Section 2: Moralism, Libertinism, and Explorationism

Section 3: Against Direct Moralism

Section 4: Against Libertinism

Section 5: Against Indirect Moralism

Section 1: Imaginative Engagement with Evil

I'm interested in the moral status of 'imaginary Evil':

Imaginary Evil: Affect felt in imagining, or in response to imagined things, with a 'contra-moral' valence.

Contra-moral means:

- **Positive feelings (pleasure, desire, attraction) about things that are bad (suffering, immoral actions)**
- **Negative feelings (annoyance, sadness, aversion) about things that are good (happiness, virtue)**

Section 1: Imaginative Engagement with Evil

Imaginary evil comes up in 3 areas:

1. Responses to fiction

- We may enjoy or admire an objectively evil character.
- We may love them specifically for their evil traits.
- We may relish watching fictional people suffer and fail.

(Also possible: negative reactions to virtuous characters, to admirable acts, or just to people being happy.)



Section 1: Imaginative Engagement with Evil

2. Fantasising

We may enjoy imagining evil things ‘privately’, i.e. without being guided by public texts, objects, games, rules, etc.

(Hating to imagine good things is less of a thing because you can just... not.)

E.g. I might enjoy imagining my rivals being turned into llamas.

(I might enjoy imagining my friends being turned into llamas!)

(This doesn't require me to want anyone really turned into a llama.)



Section 1: Imaginative Engagement with Evil

3) Empathy

- Suppose your friend relishes the idea of turning people into llamas.
- It's not your thing, but you want to understand them.
- You might try 'putting on' their attitudes in imagination.
- This seems to involve imagining taking pleasure in a bad thing.

(Maybe they're a lovely person and would never actually do it; Maybe they're plotting it right now and you're trying to figure out how to stop them!)





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Section 2: Moralism, Libertinism, and Explorationism

These 3 aren't the same, but they have some common dynamics, involving:

- 'Moralistic' positions (certain imaginings are bad: morally wrong, vicious, or otherwise regrettable)
- 'Libertine' positions (imagining is beyond moral evaluation)

Moralism can often be divided into:

- Direct moralism: imaginary evil is bad *in and of itself*
- Indirect moralism: imaginary evil is bad because of other things (actions, traits, beliefs) which it reflects or reinforces

Section 2: Moralism, Libertinism, and Explorationism

In fiction, imaginary evil is often discussed under the heading of ‘Response Moralism’ (as distinct from the morality of authorial choices).

- E.g. Alan Hazlett writes “How to Defend Response Moralism”; Aaron Smuts writes “How Not to Defend Response Moralism” in response...

This isn't just a debate among philosophers: moral criticism of art is a hot-button culture war issue.

*Meme by
reddit user
tinytim1956,
2020.*



Section 2: Moralism, Libertinism, and Explorationism

Similar issues are discussed in papers on ‘the ethics of fantasy’.

Several philosophers argue that it’s immoral to take pleasure in imagining:

- The suffering of others (Smuts 2016)
- Things designed to make others seem less dignified/intimidating (Mullin 2004)
- Doing immoral things (Corvino 2002)
- Having immoral things done to you (Cherry 1988)

Again, not just an issue for philosophers - a fraught topic at least since the ‘feminist sex wars’ of the 70s and 80s, ramifying into the present (e.g. debates over kink at pride).



Section 2: Moralism, Libertinism, and Explorationism

The discussion of empathy starts from the observation that interpersonal differences tend to make empathic understanding harder.

Hence good people are likely to be worse at understanding bad people.

But is this:

- A regrettable side-effect of virtue?
- Partly constitutive of virtue?

I.e. is the inability to imagine enjoying evil itself part of being a good person?
(Morton 2011 and Bailey 2021 both take an equivocal stand on this.)

Section 2: Moralism, Libertinism, and Explorationism

Explorationism consists of three claims:

1. Against Direct Moralism: Imagining is never morally bad in and of itself - imaginings don't warrant direct moral evaluation.
2. Against Libertinism: Imagining is connected to morally important things, and warrants moral engagement - it's not a moral free-for-all.
3. Against Indirect Moralism: Imaginative engagement is likely to have the morally best consequences when it's non-judgemental.



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Section 3: Against Direct Moralism

Arguments about direct moralism tend to come down to intuitions.

Philosophers will describe a hypothetical example and invite us to intuit that there's something morally bad going on.

Often the examples are extreme and lurid, involving the most distressing and horrifying things they can think of (turning people into llamas, and worse!).

This is understandable (aiming for stronger, clearer, results) but it makes me suspicious (shocks us, encourages us to distance ourselves).

Section 3: Against Direct Moralism

I think imaginary evil, broadly defined, is incredibly widespread:

- Villains are fun and cool, often much more than heroes.
- Most plots rely on drama and tension, and evil and suffering are standard ways to create this.
- Horror, tragedy, gore, cringe comedy, etc. seem essentially to involve imaginary suffering, and derive enjoyment from it.
- Most stories have some characters we don't like, and provide enjoyment when those characters suffer. (So does real life!)



Possible objection: in some or all cases, the evil element is not enjoyed for its own sake, but only by being 'transmuted' (overcome, discharged, sublated, etc.)

Response: quite possible, but not introspectively obvious or simple. Hence exactly the same may be true of any lurid and horrifying imagining we're meant to intuit is bad.

Section 3: Against Direct Moralism

If imaginary evil is actually very widespread, but people are inclined to judgmental intuitions about extreme and lurid cases, why?

- A. Direct moralism is true across the board, and we're just all corrupt. Plato was right! Nobody should enjoy any art that's not 100% edifying.
- B. There is some objective threshold or other complicated way to tease apart the cases, such that philosophers intuitions are right.
- C. Direct moralism is false, but people are prone to be weird about any unfamiliar sort of pleasure, especially if it's sexual (cf. queerphobia).

I can't prove that C. is the correct explanation, but it's what I suspect.



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Section 4: Against Libertinism

So why not be a libertine?

Feelings in imagination are often *connected* to feelings at other times, and those feelings can influence behaviour and beliefs:

- My pleasure at imagining someone turned into a llama often *reflects* how I am disposed to feel about their suffering (albeit often only partly).
- My pleasure at imagining someone turned into a llama might *influence* how I react to or rationalise their suffering in the future.

Imaginary evil isn't evil, but it carries moral *risks* and *warnings* worth attending to.

Section 4: Against Libertinism

I like what Gendler says about imaginative resistance:

“...my hypothesis is that cases that evoke genuine imaginative resistance will be cases where the reader feels that she is being asked to export a way of looking at the actual world which she does not wish to add to her conceptual repertoire...”

for a story even to make sense, a great number of things that are held to be true within the fiction must be held to be true outside it, and vice versa... [so] when, as is the default, we understand the story as demanding that we take on a certain way of looking at the actual world, we are inclined to resist.”

(Gendler 2000, pp.77-78)

Section 4: Against Libertinism

A third complication: there can be moral reasons not to share or endorse even morally neutral feelings.

- I shouldn't tell my assistant that I have a crush on them - not because the crush is bad, but because of social dynamics.
- I *also* shouldn't tell everyone else at work about it, discuss how attractive they are, etc.
- Possibly, I should even *deny it* if asked directly at a public event.
- (But I should also not spontaneously volunteer my lack of attraction.)



Similar things might go for e.g. pleasure at imagining certain people turned into llamas: I shouldn't make that part of the shared social background.



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The case against libertinism might seem to support indirect moralism.

Imaginative evil risks corrupting us! We should refrain from engaging in it, and shame others for doing so!

This doesn't follow.

Here's two optimistic thoughts and two pessimistic thoughts to convey why.

Section 5: Against Indirect Moralism

Optimistic Thought 1

It is entirely possible to monitor and manage one's imaginings so as to avoid imaginative evil corrupting your real-life actions and beliefs.

- Partly an empirical question, but not really an experimentally tractable one (what are the independent variables? what are the dependent variables?).
- Partly a matter of demographic observation, but same problems (correlation vs. causation etc.)
- Partly a matter of lived experience: the more kinky friends one has, the less plausible it becomes that their fantasies corrupt them.

Section 5: Against Indirect Moralism

Optimistic Thought 2

Careful, open-minded, engagement with imaginative evil can improve moral self-understanding.

If my dark imaginative pleasures reflect potentialities of my real psyche, isn't it better that I know about them, so as to evaluate, understand, and hopefully control them?



Section 5: Against Indirect Moralism

Pessimistic Thought 1

Imaginative evil isn't uniquely risky: 'righteous' imagining can also be corrupting.

Hating a villain for their evil and loving a hero for their goodness could be used to inculcate evil attitudes.

- E.g. if all the evil villains are modeled on drag queens, hating them more strongly might make you more sympathetic to people who send violent threats to drag queen story hour.



Section 5: Against Indirect Moralism

Pessimistic Thought 2

A judgmental attitude to imaginative evil (or good!) will lead to *more* moral corruption than an exploratory attitude.

Underlying thought: moral judgements are usually easier to change (by rationalisation) than pleasures and desires.

If my fave being problematic reflects badly on me, I have two choices:

- Stop liking them (hard)
- Insist they're not problematic, and anyone who says they are is puritanical, prudish, censorious, etc... (easy)

Conclusions

None of these arguments for explorationism are watertight.

Lingering Questions:

- **How important are the differences between fiction, fantasy, and empathy?**
- **How far should we trust our intuitions about the morality of imaginings?**
- **How much of our psychology operates similarly, or differently, across real and imaginary contexts?**
- **How much can we really know about empirical consequences of different approaches to imaginary evil?**

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