

A Case for Books as Amoral

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There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book.
Books can be well written or badly written. That is all.”

– Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

We have seen the banning of books time and time again throughout the course of our intellectual history, often motivated by no more than shortsighted political or social manipulation. This manipulation, however, is often done under the guise of a moral stance against immoral text. Regardless of whether this is the true aim of these criticisms, it brings to light a provocative question: can books be immoral?

Impossibility of Immoral Books

Simply stated, I will argue that we cannot judge books to be either immoral or moral. To justify this belief, however, we must first interrogate what we mean by “moral.”

“Moral” and “immoral” can be used as evaluative terms in ethical discussions, or more specifically, used in conversation with oftentimes universal, prescriptive imperatives. Ethics develops systems by which

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normative statements can be produced, often describing an agent's actions and character based on their moral virtue, or lack thereof. Once defined, these terms are used to judge any number of things, from rational, active agents, to mere objects. It is, however, all too often that we throw around the word "moral" and have muddled its meaning to the point of near meaninglessness. These words only seem to garner any meaning when evaluating actions.

When attempting to ethically evaluate anything other than an action, genuine efforts are consistently frustrated, for the following questions always remain: What is truly being said about the object? What is being evaluated? Is it being judged by some practical standard of usefulness in context? Then the better evaluation would be to call it "useful" or to say it "fulfills a purpose." Even if the object's purpose is to allow for a moral or immoral action (a gun, for example), it would be inaccurate to state it is immoral for this reason; it simply is very good at allowing for bad. Such statements express mere practicality or efficiency of design. To *create* such an object may be judged morally, but it would be a mistake to try and label the object itself as such.

When we use ethically evaluative language to determine whether an action is moral or immoral, it entails a normative statement of equivalent meaning. The sentence "Killing an innocent person is immoral" means the same as, "One ought not to kill an innocent person." The ethicality of the action of *killing an innocent person* is being judged. The assumption here is that this action is unethical,¹ so we can prohibit it, saying one ought not to commit said action, and meaningfully label it immoral. Evaluation of the morality of actions allows us to identify whether they should or should not be prescribed. Labeling an action moral or immoral then seems meaningful.

Alternatively, the prescriptive nature of the terms make the labeling of anything other than an action nonsensical. When we attempt to replicate the move from ethical evaluative language to ethical normative language in the case of objects, such as books, there is a clear failure of translation. Attempting to prescribe an object or an agent will only result in an obviously nonsensical sentence. If we say, "book x' is immoral," then it should follow that, "Thou shall not 'book x'" or "One ought not 'book x.'" At best one may be trying to say that one should not *read* the book or *own* it, but then we have returned to evaluating and judging actions

¹ This evaluation is done in a number of ways, the most common of which support this view, but this will be discussed at length later.

rather than the object in question. To label an object “moral” seems to be a meaningless misuse of evaluative language. It then follows that a book, *which is an object*, cannot be meaningfully labeled as moral or immoral.

One who wishes to maintain the possibility of evaluating a book’s ethicality may attempt, then, to treat a book as an agent, and argue that we can meaningfully evaluate a book’s ethicality because it performs an action: conveying meaning through text. But here we would once again be making a sloppy error and misusing the term. Morality cannot be accurately used to describe the agent of a moral or immoral action either.

Misleading Common Usage

We often use “moral” and “immoral” to describe agents.² An agent who acts morally is thereby dubbed *moral*, where one who acts immorally is dubbed *immoral*. This is not, however, what these labels mean. The evaluative-to-normative translation fails with regard to agents as it does with books. In fact, the evaluative language for the agents importantly differs from evaluative language that would warrant the evaluative-to-normative inference. Furthermore, granting that kind of inference may enable destructive and unhelpful practices.

As explored in the previous section, to use the evaluative label “moral” or “immoral” means to prescribe or prohibit the *thing* being labeled. Thus, attempting to label an object moral or immoral results in a nonsensical attempt to prescribe or prohibit an object. Similarly, if we attempted to adhere these labels to an agent, we would be left with an equally inaccurate sentence.

This may strike many readers as an unorthodox conclusion. Using these ethically evaluative adjectives to describe and label agents is a fixture of common speech. We label criminals “bad,” charitable citizens “good,” and seem to have no problem conveying our meaning when we do so. I believe, however, that when we use these phrases, what we are *really* doing is using a kind of shorthand to convey something meaningful about the person’s *actions*.

When we say a person is immoral, we generally do not mean to say that immorality is some essential aspect of that person. If we did, we would run into the same problem as outlined above, as we would be attempting to prescribe what can not be prescribed. Instead, we mean something

² We will avoid entering into a discussion of the requirements of rationality for moral evaluations so as to keep our discussion focused.

like, “One ought not *act* like that person has *acted*,” or, “This person has exhibited a pattern of immoral *behavior* in the past,” or even, “This person is likely going to do some immoral *action* in the future.” The meaning behind our uses of the label in reference to agents seem always to refer to the actions of the agents, not the agents themselves.

If it is the case that all uses of the labels that attempt to ascribe them to agents are merely shorthand for sentences that evaluate the actions of the agents, then it appears, once again, that labels can only be meaningfully used to evaluate actions. Our common usage is mere shorthand that misuses these evaluative terms. Although this can be an effective means of communication, this frequent misuse can be destructive.

On its surface, it is clear how common misuse is destructive in the sense that it spreads misinformation, and popularizes mistaken and possibly nonsensical expressions. This taints and muddles the general understanding of these concepts. In regard to the terms “moral” and “immoral,” this can, and arguably has, become a real problem. Because they are value-laden terms, it is all too tempting to use them to disparage and disavow anyone or anything one dislikes or disapproves of. If it is possible to ascribe these terms to anything and forget their proper usage in prescribing and restricting actions, then there is nothing stopping these terms from being used as general labels of personal value judgments that are presented under the guise of ethical evaluations. “That person is immoral,” is a much stronger statement than, “that person’s actions are immoral,” or, “I don’t like that person.” But there is a significant difference between those sentences and those sentiments. If things are immoral, it is very easy to make the argument that they should be avoided or even eradicated. A society with no unjust murder seems like something we would all advocate for. But if we are not careful, and begin to use this term on people, we may find it possible to argue for avoidance or eradication of a certain person or group of people.

If we are attentive and careful about our usage of the term, we may find ourselves becoming more accepting and charitable as a human community. To label a person as immoral is to say something disapproving and negative about *that individual*. This immediately begins to construct a perspective that ostracizes that person. Depending on one’s perspective on guilt, forgiveness, and the possibility for an agent to change, this sentiment may be so strong that it brands the person with a kind of scarlet letter. Alternatively, if the term is used only to accurately refer to the person’s actions, it is likely that a much more tolerant attitude would be affected. The person themselves may still be admonished for their guilt, but there would be an understanding that the person themselves is not immoral and is capable of moral action in the future.

This common, but inaccurate, usage of the word then seems to further support my argument. The terms moral and immoral are used to convey meaning only when referring to actions. Any other usage, namely in reference to objects or agents, can, at best, result in inaccurate and potentially destructive sentiments being expressed and, at worst, merely convey nonsense.

Compatibility with Major Approaches to Normative Ethics

Considering that this view seems to contradict some common usages of the terms in question, one may expect that it conflicts with the common approaches to normative ethics. Since we are able to communicate the ethical evaluation of objects and agents with ease and often intuitively understand and agree with them, one may assume that they are accurate representations of, and consistent with, our common ethical views. It seems, however, that after an analysis of this view's compatibility with the three major approaches to normative ethics (deontology, teleology, and virtue ethics), the common usage is what expresses the conflicting sentiment.

Deontology, the first of the three major approaches that we will consider, is easy to reconcile with our theory. The deontologist is concerned with duty-bound and obligatory *action*. This approach evaluates actions themselves, constructing arguments for the inherent rightness or wrongness of the action, without (much) concern for the consequences. The terms moral and immoral are then used as the labels that come from such evaluations. On this model, it seems that my theory tracks the evaluative-to-normative inference better than the common usage of the term, as there seems to be no room here for the ethical evaluation or labeling of anything other than actions.

Teleology, otherwise known as consequentialism, seems to be compatible with my theory for similar reasons. Contrary to the deontologist, the consequentialist's ethical evaluation is done on the basis of *ends* rather than *means*. To the deontologist, the *means* through which an end is obtained matters far more than the end itself. The ends matter in so far as they help us evaluate means. The consequentialist, on the other hand, does their evaluation on the basis of whether or not some value has been brought about by the means in question. To them, the ends justify and allow for ethical evaluation of the means.

Upon first inspection, it may seem as though this approach allows for something beyond actions to be ethically evaluated, namely, the consequences of said action. However, this does not have to be the case. All

that the consequentialist must maintain in order to justify their evaluation on the basis of an action's consequence is that the consequence is valuable in some way or another. This value is often expressed as the consequence being "good"; however it does not need to be understood as "goodness" in the ethical sense. It merely means something like "worth pursuing" or "ought to be obtained." In this case, the consequence is being evaluated, in such a way that allows for the ethical evaluation of actions that obtain it, without needing to be ethically evaluated themselves. Understood in this way, it seems my view is consistent with consequentialism. It does not seem to be the case that any of the consequentialist's positions allows for the ethical judgment of items or people.

One may still wish to argue that the consequentialist could maintain that a person or item that obtains or allows for the obtaining of a consequence that ought to be avoided could be dubbed immoral. In response to this, I would like to first point out that what seems to be the true object of evaluation, even in this objection, seems to be the actions that these people and items are doing and allowing. But beyond that, it would seem that taking such a stance would move beyond the scope and aim of consequentialist ethics. One may argue, on consequentialist grounds, that if all the consequences of a person's actions or an item's influence could somehow be evaluated, quantified, and totaled, then a person or item itself could be ethically evaluated based on this total. But if the prescriptive and restrictive aim of consequentialist's ethics is kept in mind, one will be reminded that if any such evaluation is done, it would be done for the sake of prohibiting or prescribing similar behavior or the creation of similar things, all of which are actions. It is important also to note that an action is deemed moral on the consequentialist account by virtue of said action bringing about some consequence "x," where "x" is some desired or valued consequence. This is meaningfully different from the attempted evaluation of people and items, which may be done on account of said person doing immoral things, or said item allowing for immoral things to be done. At best, one may prescribe that a person be punished for their actions, or an item be destroyed for its potential in aiding immoral behavior, but once again, we see that the actions in each case are what are being ethically evaluated and prescribed or restricted.

Virtue ethics, the third and final major approach we will consider, is rather different from the previous two. Unlike deontology and teleology, which both clearly aim to ethically evaluate actions and outline moral behavior, virtue ethics emphasizes virtues, or excellent character traits. Virtues like honesty, charity, and modesty are likely the kinds of traits that a virtue ethicist would argue are "moral," whereas traits like dishonesty, selfishness, and pridefulness would be labeled "immoral." Virtues,

however, are traits, not actions, which seems to pose a problem for my view. To make matters worse, the virtue ethicist may even hold that a virtuous person would also be considered a “moral” person.

My response is threefold. First, virtue ethics as a whole seems to be one major change away from admitting that actions are the only thing that can be ethically evaluated. Similar to many of the examples posed above, when the virtue ethicist asserts that a virtue is moral, or that a virtuous person is moral, they are also implying, if not directly asserting, that this virtue ought to be pursued, that the virtuous person ought to be emulated, that the actions associated with those virtues ought to be done, and a whole slew of other normative statements about actions. Their claims about virtue seem to act as shorthand for claims about actions, similar to common usage.

However, it seems rather probable that the virtue theorist would deny such a change to their theory, asserting instead that the foundation for their theory of ethics admits more than just the evaluation of actions. They are not merely expressing their evaluation of actions through shorthand when evaluating virtues, but they are asserting unique statements that actually evaluate the ethicality of those virtues, while implying other statements about actions relevant to those virtues. My second response would then be to reiterate that this seems incompatible with the prescriptive nature of ethics. As outlined above, moral and immoral are *prescriptive* terms, and function as labels that aid in the *prescriptive* aim of ethical philosophy. Merely labeling objects as moral or immoral does not allow for this aim to be brought about. If they can be used evaluatively, it is not obvious how this is possible without reducing such statements to more accurate statements about actions. “X vice is immoral,” does not imply, “One ought not pursue x vice.” It may imply the nonsensical statement, “One ought not X,” but it seems that only the statements, “X vice ought not be pursued,” or, “*Pursuing* X vice is immoral,” can bring about the relevant prescription. If this is the case, then it seems that virtue ethics must accept that its evaluations of virtues are mere shorthand used for evaluating actions. Otherwise, virtue ethics fails to be prescriptive, thereby failing to be ethics.

Third, we must remember that my view asserts that books cannot be meaningfully evaluated as moral or immoral because actions are the only thing that can be accurately ethically evaluated. The virtue ethicist holds that traits and virtues can be evaluated. Some may wish to claim that only virtues can be ethically evaluated. I will refer to these virtue ethicists as strict virtue ethicists. Although the strict virtue ethicist disagrees with my claim about actions, their view may be compatible with the idea that books cannot be moral or immoral. Very clearly, actions are not traits and traits are not actions. However, people and physical objects are *neither*. On my

view, books cannot be labeled as “immoral” because they fail to be actions. On the strict virtue ethicist’s view, they cannot be labeled “immoral” either, as they fail to be virtues.

Conclusion

Words are much like hammers. Used properly, they are indispensable tools, but used irresponsibly, they can cause grave harm. Despite its potentially harmful common usage, the term “immoral” is a necessary tool in ethical philosophy, without which we would have quite a difficult time navigating the complex space of evaluating actions. So, instead of abandoning the term altogether, we need to look for ways to use it responsibly. It does not seem, upon evaluation, that “moral” and “immoral” may be accurately used to describe and label books, or people, and it is high time we stopped pretending they could.