

The Duties of an Artist

Casting directors are tasked with selecting a suitable actor for a given role. “Suitable” in this context typically means possessing a combination of physical attributes and acting skills. But are there any moral constraints on the choice? I wish to argue here that there are. It is not common to suppose that there are, or even to entertain the question, but I will argue that there are. And I will extend the argument to cover the work of artists other than directors. I wish to begin with a little thought experiment, the purpose of which will become clear in due course. Suppose you are casting for the roles in a movie version of *Cinderella*. What actress would you select for the roles of *Cinderella* and the step-mother, respectively? Would you, for instance, choose an actress with a pleasant voice and angelic face to play the stepmother, and another one, with a voice that sounds worldly and laughter with notes of malice in it, to play *Cinderella*? Probably not. Just the opposite: you’ll want *Cinderella* to look angelic, and the step-mother worldly. This is because you will want the movie to be “believable.” If, by contrast, you pick an actress with an innocent-looking face to be the step-mother and one with an assertive manner and raucous laughter to play *Cinderella*, this will likely be perceived as miscasting. It may even generate unintended comic effects, leading not just to criticism but to derision. Unless your real purpose is to make a parody, the angelic step-mother version of the tale will flop.

Real directors know this. Thus, actress Charlize Theron shares in an interview that when she first auditioned for the part of Mary Anne Lomax in *Devil’s Advocate*, director Taylor Hackford said to her, “If I were blind, the part would be yours. But the problem me and Warners have is that you might be too beautiful for the character.”¹ Theron describes the process she went through in order to get the part thus, “I had to stop wearing makeup, wake up at 6 in the morning, beat myself up, not brush my hair, not put any concealer under my eyes, and went in to read with dark circles under my eyes. And let go of everything that I’d held in my system for the last three months of my life, like a therapy session. I had to go through hell to make them believe the devil could be in me.”² When directors fail to secure actors with what’s perceived as suitable physical attributes, they get criticized. Hayden Christensen as Anakin Skywalker in *Star Wars Episodes II and III* was said not to look “bad” enough to pull off the transition to the dark side, and Vince Vaughn has been seen as too innocent-looking to play serial killer Norman Bates in *Psycho*. Relatedly, one writer said of Colin Ferrell’s part as Alexander the Great that Ferrell’s “bleached hair and sulky pout don’t *look* like the marks of a man tutored by Aristotle himself.”³

All this may seem to be just as it should. After all, films, like all fictional art, must try to be believable. That ought to be one of an artist’s top priorities. And choosing actors who look and sound the part helps achieve that aim. Yet upon reflection, there is a problem, or so I wish to argue. The problem is in that our intuitions of what a given character should look like or sound like, as well as how he or she ought to act, think, and feel, are often shaped – surreptitiously or quite directly – by all manner of stereotypes. There is thus a natural tendency to embrace stereotypes in order to make a fictional world and the characters populating it persuasive to viewers. This is not the only reason for going along with stereotypes – intellectual laziness, lack of imagination, etc., have their role to play as well – but it is one of the main reasons. What interests me here is whether this tendency is morally questionable, and whether artists have a duty to try to counteract it.

These questions can be seen as aspects of the problem concerning the relation between moral and aesthetic values. The focus of the latter discussion, traditionally, has been on the aesthetic merits or demerits of immoral art. Moralists argue that immorality is an aesthetic flaw, autonomists – that it isn’t, while immoralists contend that immorality can actually be an aesthetic

merit.⁴ I myself believe that at least some kinds of immorality – such as the use of stereotypes, which will be my focus here – do constitute aesthetic flaws, but this is not the problem I wish to address. My inquiry concerns the duties of an artist. Even if the perpetuation of stereotypes can be shown to be an aesthetic flaw, nothing regarding an artist’s moral duties follows directly from that. Saccharine art may be aesthetically flawed too, but there is no duty – certainly not a moral duty – to abstain from producing such art. (Indeed, if there are more consumers who derive pleasure from such art compared to those who prefer something more serious, a utilitarian argument can be made for the claim that saccharine art is preferable). There are, however, moral constraints on artistic choices.

My argument has a few steps. I begin by suggesting that expectations about an actor’s appearance often parallel expectations about actual people (section 1). I then argue that the real-life tendencies to judge on the basis of such expectations are morally problematic (section 2). I go on to suggest that artists, therefore, have a prima facie duty to avoid feeding morally problematic tendencies through art. I ask whether there is a way to “get artists off the hook,” i.e., find an argument for the view that either there isn’t such prima facie duty or that it is overridden by weightier reasons. I examine what I take to be the most promising arguments in that regard and find them lacking. This leads me to the conclusion that the prima facie moral duty stands (section 3). Finally, I ask what the scope of the duty for which I have argued is (section 4).

I.

Though I wish to discuss the use of stereotypes more broadly than is, stereotypes not only about appearance, but about values, behavior, and so on – I will, for the moment, focus on physical attributes. As we shall see later, different kinds of stereotypes are not unrelated.

Even if we often expect the actor playing certain roles to have particular physical attributes, what follows? Isn’t that in the order of things? For instance, we expect a child to look like a child, and an old person to look old. 41-year-old Barbara Streisand cast as 17-year-old Yentl in *Yentl* was seen as miscast. How does that differ from wishing Cinderella to have a pleasant voice or Norman Bates to be dangerous-looking?

The difference is in the fact that a 41-year-old woman playing a 17-year-old girl does not match her character’s attributes. But in what sense would a non-innocent looking Cinderella be a mismatch for the role? Perhaps a film director could argue that Cinderella is described as innocent-looking in the fairy-tale. I do not recall whether this is true, but directors have no qualms about changing details of the story to suit the requirements of the big screen. And in any event, *if* the fairy tale describes Cinderella as innocent-looking, all this means is that the Grimm brothers were relying on the expectation that inferences about personality characteristics can be drawn from physical attributes.

We do seem to have a background belief in the existence of such a connection, and this belief has a crucial role to play in shaping our expectations regarding an actor’s appearance. By way of evidence that we take physical and psychological characteristics to be linked in predictable ways, consider another thought experiment. There is a passage in Charles Dickens’ urban gothic novel *Little Dorritt* in which Dickens describes a character named “Miss Wade” as having a “handsome and compressed and even cruel mouth.”⁵ If you are like me, you will accept this description and picture a face. You won’t, for instance, say, “Cruel mouth? I have no clue what that means. Is that a shape of a mouth?” Although you do not actually believe that there *is* such a thing as a “cruel mouth,” strictly speaking, you understand the description. You suppose you can see a person’s propensity to be cruel by looking at the person’s mouth. And if a director were to stage an adaptation of the novel and cast the alluring Marilyn Monroe or the innocent-looking

Audrey Hepburn, you might think that is miscasting, since neither of the two actresses has a “cruel mouth.”

We make such judgments about fictional characters because we make them about real people. Anecdotally, Charles Darwin’s nose almost blocked his career: when he applied to go on a voyage with Beagle Captain Robert Fitzroy (the voyage which eventually made him famous), Darwin nearly failed to secure a spot on the ship because the captain, sympathetic to the claims of physiognomy, thought that Darwin’s nose betrayed insufficient energy.⁶

Non-anecdotally, there are multiple studies suggesting that it is not only books we judge by their covers, but people as well. In one study, researchers found that we judge higher eyebrows and more pronounced cheekbones to indicate trustworthiness, and take lower eyebrows and hollow cheekbones as signs of lack of trustworthiness.⁷ In other studies, baby-faced men were seen as less likely to be guilty of a crime⁸, while attractive people are seen as possessing a variety of desirable personality traits and social skills, depending on the prevalent values in a culture. Thus, in individualistic Western societies, physically attractive people are seen as more trustworthy and worth listening to, while in less individualistic non-Western cultures, physical attraction is taken to be correlated with values central to the local culture, such as loyalty and integrity.⁹ Other social psychologists found that political candidates’ faces were a remarkably good predictor of congressional race outcomes.¹⁰

Nor are facial features the only aspects of a person’s appearance that give rise to judgments about personality characteristics. Height and weight do so as well. Thus, taller people are judged to have leadership qualities, while thinner people are seen as more competent.¹¹ We make judgments about people on the basis of how they sound as well. Margaret Thatcher was probably quite right to take lessons to lower the pitch of her voice. People with deeper voices are perceived as having leadership qualities.¹² Accent, on the other hand, affects perceptions of intelligence. Thus, a person I know shared with me once that when she first arrived at Oxford for a 1-year visit, everyone sounded very smart to her. At some point, she realized it was the accent that made people sound unusually smart. My acquaintance is hardly alone in expecting a British accent to be an expression of intelligence. Recently, there was a video that went viral of Donald Trump giving interviews, his voice dubbed by actor and comedian Peter Serafinowicz in a posh British accent.¹³ The point of it was to show that everything Trump says could be made to sound reasonable and even intelligent, if the accent were changed.

The American southern accent tends to create – perhaps especially in northerners – the opposite impression. A colleague shared with me once that he met a philosopher from the south at a conference some years ago. They had a talk, and my friend experienced “cognitive dissonance” – the philosopher from the South was obviously very intelligent and knowledgeable, but his accent somehow made my acquaintance expect a less educated person. Research shows that my colleague’s experience is by no means atypical.¹⁴

I do not wish to suggest here that we are slaves to such rough-and-ready ideas. Indeed, once we have known someone for a long time, we typically stop drawing inferences on the basis of the person’s physical attributes. Some of the most professional people we know may not look professional, and some of the most trustworthy people may look untrustworthy, because of a tendency to glance away furtively due to shyness, for instance. My point is simply that we have a strong propensity to judge in these ways, and that propensity often persists even when other information is present. While we may scoff at the old ideas pedaled by phrenologists and physiognomists regarding the correlation between personality characteristics and features of the skull or face, one may wonder to what extent we have actually renounced those ideas.

But we can go further still. We often make judgments about people on the basis of their race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, or profession. If, for instance, we went to a law

firm and saw a white man and a black woman in the office, we would be likely to suppose that the white man is the lawyer, and the black woman – his assistant. Many expect that the lives of homosexuals revolve entirely around homosexuality, that religious people are poorly educated, and that teachers and social workers are principled and caring, while financiers and politicians are not.¹⁵

All of these tendencies are reflected in movies and other art forms. CEOs and Presidents in movies tend to be quite tall and don't have Southern accents.¹⁶ Perhaps, directors suppose that shortness or the wrong accent will produce cognitive dissonance similar to that experienced by my acquaintance. The same goes for an angelic-sounding stepmother. Characters can be stereotypical in their values, pursuits, and behavior, not just in their physical attributes. The world of film is populated with ruthless financiers and politicians, while criminality from a teacher is so unexpected that the title of a show about a teacher turned drug dealer is "Breaking Bad." A show about a financier or a politician involved in criminal activities is unlikely to be named that way. After all, financiers and politicians are already bad, or so we assume.

I do not wish to argue that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the stereotypes in fiction and those in real life. Some of the snap judgments we make about fictional characters are based on experience with other fictional characters rather than on life, but many of the stereotypes we use in interpreting fictional characters and real people, respectively, are very similar.

Suppose I am right about all this. Is there anything morally problematic about art embracing the tendency to make inferences about psychological characteristics from physical and other attributes? The answer to this question partly depends on the answer to another one: is there anything morally questionable about the tendency to make appearance-based judgments about real people?

II.

I want to argue that there is, though the answer will have some qualifications. My positive view will grow out of a response to what I take to be the central argument in favor of going along with the tendency. We can call it the "kernel of truth" argument. Though this argument is rarely asserted out loud, I suspect that many, to paraphrase Hobbes, believe it in their hearts (if we didn't, film and other genres would be different from what they are), and a failure to engage with it seriously is likely to lend it support, creating the impression that the argument succeeds and opponents have no way of refuting it. Let me try to dispel this impression.

Proponents of the "kernel of truth" view sometimes make empirically unsupported claims to the effect that, the brain being a sort of (mostly unconscious) scientist making inductive inferences, we just wouldn't draw the inferences we draw if there weren't *something* to them. However, some types of inferences are completely baseless – we can be fooled by outmoded evolutionary mechanisms. Thus, there is a resemblance between a face with naturally downturned eyebrows and an angry face with normally shaped eyebrows. As a result, we tend to perceive people with downturned eyebrows as angry. When we do so, we are responding to a cue associated with anger even though there is no reason to expect that the person we are looking at is actually angry. In this case, something like prejudice against people with a certain shape of the brows arises. Again, we see taller people as possessing leadership qualities. This is likely a remnant of our evolutionary past – physical prowess used to be a necessary condition of a leader. Physical prowess is no longer necessary, but we continue to connect height to leadership. Examples of this sort can be multiplied.

Pointing these things out is insufficient to refute the kernel of truth argument, however, only to question some of its particular applications. Perhaps, we are sometimes fooled by evolutionary mechanisms. But are we always? Proponents of the argument may point to actual evidence concerning the reliability of inferences about psychological attributes from physical characteristics. For instance, there are data suggesting that judgments of trustworthiness based on facial appearance are better than chance;¹⁷ likewise for judgments of extraversion and conscientiousness.¹⁸ The idea that personality and character traits and other attributes can be inferred with some reliability on the basis of facial cues certainly sits well with the currently popular view that snap judgments may be quite good.¹⁹

There are a few things to note here. First, such findings have limited scope – much more limited than the scope of the tendency to make inferences of this sort. For instance, of the “Big 5” personality traits – extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and agreeableness – only two, extraversion and conscientiousness, appear to be judged somewhat accurately with relative consistency, and even there, consistency is found at the extreme ends of the scale (i.e., a “very” extravert-looking or “very” conscientious-looking face).²⁰ In addition, “accuracy” in this context often means agreement with the self-reports of the judged subjects, and it is possible that raters respond to cues about a person’s self-conception, not necessarily to his or her actual traits.²¹

Second, snap judgments of the sort I have been discussing are rigid and stereotype-based. In some sense, they are truly not judgments about an individual case. By way of evidence, consider the fact that those judgments can often be explained entirely by an appeal to the rater’s “implicit personality theory,” quite independently of any actual traits possessed by the ratee.²²

Third, getting things right at a level *better than chance*, while it may be good enough in many cases (you stand to make a fortune in the stock market if your predictions are better than chance) is just not good enough here, at least in a large number of cases. For instance, even if we could make somewhat reliable judgments of trustworthiness in some instances, there will be many individual cases in which we will be wrong. Many people just don’t look the part. Baby-faced people may really be guilty. For instance, those who have seen a video of Ted Bundy have probably thought that Bundy comes off as a very pleasant man.²³ Perhaps more importantly, guilty-looking people may be actually innocent. Similarly, I know some very serious professors who don’t look the part at all: they are athletic, have multiple tattoos, or are unusually good-looking. Examples can be multiplied. People whose appearance does not match their personality, skills, or history are frequently misjudged by others, and in many cases, the errors have a moral ring to them as they may affect such things as sentencing, hiring, firing, granting and denying promotion. And even those who are not misjudged may find it offensive that a judgment about them is formed without an adequate basis.

Last but by no means least, many appearance-based judgments of deeper and more central aspects of a person function as self-fulfilling prophecies. For instance, people’s trustworthiness appears to be mediated by their beliefs about what others expect of them: those who expect to be trusted tend to behave in a trustworthy manner and vice versa.²⁴ Similarly, the correlation between height and leadership qualities – for which the height of CEOs may seem to provide evidence – is likely mediated by expectations that people internalize. (This tendency has exceptions, of course – Napoleon²⁵ and Hitler spring to mind – but the exceptions are so rare that everyone knows about them.)

Most of these considerations apply with equal force to judgments and intuitions about a person’s values, goals, and social role. *Pace* Hollywood, Asian men and older women can be very sensual and passionate and not at all see their identities as exhausted by professional or motherly duties, respectively, while homosexuals need not be obsessed with their own sexuality. Similarly,

Latin women can be intellectuals, while poor people can have concerns and aspirations unrelated to their material needs.

All this suggests that there *is* something morally problematic about snap judgments. In some cases, as when we draw inferences about personality traits from physical features, they “unlevel” the playing field, giving some an unfair advantage and others an unfair disadvantage. They may even partly determine what we become. In all cases, they are apt to interfere with judging an individual on the basis of his or her actual traits and merits.

It could be objected that, being largely based on sub-agential, automatic processes, such tendencies are impossible to eradicate. But this is true of just about any morally problematic tendency based on automatic processes, including many varieties of xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, or racism. I take it that *those* tendencies ought to be counteracted, and at any rate not reinforced. The question is whether it follows from here that *artists* ought to counteract them. I will now suggest that the answer is a qualified “yes.”

III.

I will start with what I take to be an uncontroversial assumption: that every moral agent has a prima facie moral duty to abstain from reinforcing stereotypes, and everyone has a good prima facie moral reason – possibly a duty, though I will not make a case for the latter point – to counteract stereotypes. The question is whether there are any overriding moral reasons which would exempt artists from this prima facie duty, at least in the context of art-making.

Arguably, in some cases unrelated to art-making, there are such reasons. Thus, if Amelia chooses the stereotypically female occupation of housekeeping cleaner while Peter chooses the stereotypically male occupation of truck driver, both Amelia and Peter act in a way which leads to the reinforcement of stereotypes, possibly making it ever so slightly more difficult for men who want to be housekeeping cleaners or women who want to be truck drivers to get hired for those jobs. But Amelia and Peter have a right to decide what to do with their lives, and that right trumps the prima facie duty of moral agents to abstain from reinforcing stereotypes. The question is whether there are parallel reasons which apply to artists. In what follows, I will discuss a few plausible candidates.

One possible way of absolving artists from the sorts of responsibilities I just ascribed to them is to say that artists have a license (as well as a good reason to) portray the values of the society they depict realistically. On this view, artists cannot be tasked with correcting or creating values and implicit theories. If and when society corrects its own tendencies to use a particular stereotype – whether based on evolutionary processes or culturally transmitted models and beliefs – so does art. Surely, it is not art’s fault that we, the audience, find an angelic-looking stepmother unbelievable, or that we expect Asian men to be highly professional asexual eunuchs. Compare: there are many disagreeable things in art created at distant times and places. Both human and animal sacrifice are at least tacitly condoned by Homer; Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* is, arguably, anti-semitic (with the character of Shylock being a rather stereotypical Jew); and stereotypes about Jews are used by Balzac as well. Many of the movies from the 1920s may seem quite sexist by contemporary standards. We do not, however, typically lay the blame for this on a writer’s or a director’s doorstep. After all, artists are like observant journalists, reporting on social habits and mores, they should not be expected to be moral visionaries or leaders for moral progress.²⁶

This argument is fine as far as it goes, but it cannot entirely alleviate the worry. For the question here is not about demanding that artists prove more prescient than anyone else and become moral visionaries rather than accurate reporters of what they say – though some

undoubtedly do²⁷ – but rather, that they not go along with the lowest common denominator. While Homer may have been unable to see what was wrong with sacrifices preceding battle, my argument is about tendencies we, both viewers and artists, *can* see critically now.

Moreover, it is simply not true that art is *just* a reflection of the culture that produces it, and that it ought to be a realistic reflection. Artworks are not only passively influenced by pre-existing conceptions and patterns; they *shape* beliefs and expectations in turn. We often *acquire* stereotypes by consuming art.

But if we do, perhaps this is not the artist's fault but ours. This brings us to the next argument.

It could be claimed that artists are not responsible for the effect their works have on us, and that the responsibility is on the viewers to engage with an artwork critically. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus writes, "Do I need to develop the idea that an example is not necessarily an example to be followed ... one becomes ridiculous when drawing from Rousseau the conclusion that one must walk on all fours and from Nietzsche that one must maltreat one's mother."²⁸ What Camus says about philosophy applies – possibly with greater force – to film and other genres. Thus, in the movie *House of Games*, murdering someone for revenge and stealing to satisfy an impulse are presented as good things. But surely, it would be the viewer's fault if she draws the conclusion that an actual murder under similar circumstances would be justified. While there is no doubt something tragic, there is also something absurd about the fact that *The Catcher in the Rye* has been used as a justification for murder.²⁹ Again, a viewer has no one but herself to blame if, on the basis of movies, she forms the belief that secret agents look stunning rather than average, while professors are tweed-wearing, balding men with glasses.

There are two things to note here. First, some of the morally unacceptable actions presented as acceptable and even desirable in film and fiction -- for instance, murder to exact revenge -- are so incongruous with our moral standards that there is simply no danger that a reasonable person will take them as examples to be followed. By contrast, when such danger is present -- as when torture, which is favored by many in the actual world, is portrayed as acceptable in such popular television shows as *24* and *Alias* -- criticism may be warranted.³⁰ Similar considerations apply to appearance: viewers *can* be expected to make certain adjustments and be aware of the fact that a gorgeous person is unlikely to be inconspicuous enough to be a secret agent (and even if they don't, no moral harm will result from that). On the other hand, they may not make the necessary adjustments when it comes to what an innocent person or a professor may look like and may expect that an innocent defendant should be baby-faced, or that an attractive young woman cannot really be a professor.

Of course, I do not wish to deny that viewers can, do, and should engage with artworks critically, including in those cases in which morally unacceptable tendencies endorsed in artworks are widely shared.³¹ The question is what follows from this. Does it follow that artists, therefore, are exempt from responsibility for the effects of their works? Note that one can say the same about pernicious propaganda: a sufficiently critical audience won't fall for it. Yet it does not follow from here that the responsibility for the effects of propaganda fall exclusively on the shoulders of the audience.

There are limits to this analogy: propaganda is in many ways worse (though on the flip side, the effects of art can be more insidious), in that it aims to shape people's views in often undesirable ways, while in art, the molding of opinion is a side effect, or at best an instrument to art's own ends. But there are limits on what side effects and means are permissible.

There is another argument in the vicinity of those I have been discussing: it has to do with artworks as products. Viewers, it may be thought, pay for movies and others kinds of fiction. They therefore have a right to get what they want. But artists cannot be failing to fulfill a duty in giving people what they have a right to want. And many viewers, it can be further suggested, *want* a confirmation of their own stereotypes. There are multiple reasons for this. One is that stereotypes are not cognitively demanding. Their use therefore makes art easier to process, more like entertainment than like work. Viewers may also be cognitively invested in their stereotypes – like voters who elect a candidate with morally questionable proposals, they may want what seems morally questionable, for instance, that there be no open homosexuality in film. Why shouldn't directors try to give viewers what viewers want? After all, they are people selling a product, and those who sell a product are typically expected to try to satisfy their customers.

There is something to this argument. For instance, the creators of a website where married people can find partners for illicit affairs are not generally thought to be to blame for the fact that many people end up being cheated on. They are responding to a “demand of the market,” so to speak.

It is unclear to me whether one is morally to blame for creating a website that facilitates cheating. Many would feel guilty for running such a service, but leave that aside. There are two other important points. First, in the particular comparison case involving a website, creators may be thought to have plausible deniability: they do not know whether their clients are in fact cheating, and it is none of their business. The clients could, for instance, be in an open relationship. Second, the people who sign up for that website make a conscious decision to do so and may be thought thereby to assume responsibility. But artists who embrace stereotypes are complicit in their perpetuation in more insidious ways. People do not sign up for having their automatic processes shaped in the particular ways in which they are shaped, yet this is what they get. Worse still, there is evidence that source memory is weak: we tend to confuse movie facts and real facts, even when we try not to.³² Finally, there are limits to morally permissible sales. For instance, if someone actually wanted to become more racist, sexist, or xenophobic, say because the person wants to join an occupation in which those attitudes are widespread, developing a pill to help fulfill such a desire would be morally unacceptable (though it might be legally permissible).

There is another important argument to consider, to which I cannot do full justice here but wish to respond to briefly. One might think that the purpose of art is to give aesthetic enjoyment, not to improve us morally. Artists, therefore, fulfill all their duties qua artists if they give us such enjoyment. I confess to having a good deal of sympathy with this “aestheticist” line. Historically, those who have tried to subject art to moral standards were either philistines or ideologues – such as the art critic in Henrik Ibsen's time who proposed to ban Ibsen's play *Ghosts*,³³ or the censors in North Korea who tried to turn art into a tool for the promotion of the government's ends.³⁴

Note, however, that I am not arguing that art has any more important mission than an artistic one. The question is not what the goal of art is but what ways of achieving art's goal are permissible.

In addition, this argument is further weakened when we consider the fact that the use of stereotypes, unlike creating morally challenging situations, does not help reap any deeper aesthetic benefits.³⁵ It is not because great art would result from the use of stereotypes that artists resort to such use.

I wish to come full circle and address the point with which I began: believability. Even if one agrees in theory with everything I've said so far, one is likely to have the lingering suspicion that at least some stereotypes are truly essential to believability and that the possession and enjoyment of believable art are so important for society that allowing a few moral failures is a small price to

pay. By way of an example, it may be thought that an angelic-looking stepmother or a worldly-looking Cinderella just wouldn't cut it. Similar considerations apply to baby-faced villains, short CEOs, or plump field operatives. One may think that this is particularly true of fairy tales meant for an audience of children.

The task of creating a character at once believable and non-stereotypical is not an easy one. Movie directors who attempt this very often insert a superficially non-stereotypical character that's not quite believable. For instance, Donald Deane, a blogger for *Screen Crush* had this to say about the sensual Denise Richards's performance as nuclear physicist Dr. Christmas Jones in Michael Apted's *The World is Not Enough* (part of the James Bond series): "Denise Richards has the requisite pouty good looks and belly-baring sex appeal of a bond girl. But the filmmakers unnecessarily complicated the role by making Dr. Christmas Jones a nuclear physicist. Of course, beautiful women can also be intellectual. We just don't believe Richards has the acting chops to pull off *smart* and sexy."³⁶

The problem, of course, is not in the attempt to go beyond the stereotypical "Bond girl" character and make Dr. Jones a scientist. The problem is in failing to select an actress who can pull it off. In contrast, Bryan Cranston is thoroughly believable as educated and mild-mannered high school chemistry teacher Walter White in *Breaking Bad*, who, while struggling with terminal illness, little by little becomes a hardened criminal.

There are some wonderfully compelling non-stereotypical characters, even in fairytales. Munro Leaf's *Ferdinand the Bull*, for instance, is a children's story about a bull who likes to smell flowers and does not enjoy bullfights.³⁷ Sometimes, believability can be purchased by imparting stereotypes to characters who gradually come to look at them critically. For instance, in Pulitzer and Tony Award winning playwright Wendy Wasserstein's play *Third*, a high school teacher accuses a student of having plagiarized portions of his Shakespeare essay, because the teacher just can't believe that the student, who votes Republican, loves sports and is otherwise a non-stereotypical Shakespeare fan, actually loves Shakespeare and knows a lot about the Bard's writings. *Third* would have likely flopped if the playwright, in her attempt to counteract widespread assumptions, had simply inserted a non-stereotypical high school admirer of Shakespeare without making the teacher doubt the student's sincerity. The play would have flopped because the audience would have likely found the student's character unbelievable. By making the teacher a skeptic and a doubting Thomas, the playwright gives an expression of a view many spectators are likely to share – that a student with the characteristics of the high school adolescent boy in the play is highly unlikely to be a Bard connoisseur. This then allows the playwright, by taking viewers through the skeptic teacher's doubts and internal struggle, to gradually persuade viewers that the atypical Shakespeare fan is a genuine Shakespeare fan.

More generally, from the fact that creating believable, non-stereotypical characters is not easy, it does not follow that artists are not under an obligation to undertake the task. The situation is similar to that of meeting prima facie conflicting demands. It may be difficult to be a morally upright CEO or to meet both one's professional and one's familial obligations when both sets of duties are demanding, but neither set of duties thereby dissolves.

Moreover, in many cases, a stereotype is only superficially more believable than a character with more life and individuality. This is demonstrated in some of Edith Wharton's exquisite novels. For instance, in *The Custom of the Country*, social climber Undine Spragg gradually discovers that she quickly tires of, and begins to bore, the aristocrats she wants to associate with, for she shares none of their interest in art and literature. She divorces two men with old family names and ends up marrying a successful financier whose company she would have been ashamed of in the days when her primary goal was to succeed in high society.

In Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, on the other hand, society cannot see beyond its own prejudices in judging the protagonist, Lily Bart. When they hear that a wealthy married man has given Bart money, they jump to the conclusion he must have done so in exchange for sexual favors. It does not occur to anyone that she may have been mistaken about the nature of the rich man's offer, much less that she intends to repay him, if and when she can. In addition, no one suspects that Lily Bart is in possession of compromising letters which she can use against the bitter enemy who brings her undoing, but she just can't stoop to that level of revenge. In the eyes of the world, Lily Bart is just another social climber, who equates virtue with success. Undine Spragg and Lily Bart are so believable that one almost feels one has met them personally, and the reason for this is that Wharton probes deeper and reveals the ways in which real human beings often fail to fit into their social roles without a remainder.

IV.

I have discussed some of the ways in which stereotypes pervade art and talked about the avenues via which real-life tendencies to make snap judgments seep into artworks. I then argued that the real-life tendencies are morally problematic, and that so are the parallel tendencies in art. Finally, I responded to what I take to be the best arguments for the view that artists have no duty to abstain from reinforcing stereotypes, much less to combat them, and mentioned some successful examples of non-stereotypical characters. The remaining question is: what is the scope of the duty?

It would be foolish to try to specify with precision that which cannot be precisely specified. As Aristotle observed: "...it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs."³⁸ All I wish to suggest is that artists have a duty to be mindful of the ways in which their work may perpetuate mental models too simplistic and one-dimensional to capture the whole truth. Like any duty to be mindful, this one does not come with an application manual. Nonetheless, examples of a blatant violation of this duty are not hard to find. Consider, for instance, the following casting call for *Staight Outta Compton*:

A girls: These are the hottest of the hottest. Models. Must have real hair.

B girls: Fine girls. Really nice bodies. Long natural hair. Small waist, nice hips. You should be light-skinned. Beyoncé is a prototype here.

C girls: African-American girls. Medium to light-skinned. With a weave.

D girls: These are African-American girls. Poor. Not in good shape. Medium to dark skin tone.³⁹

It is difficult to see what justification there could be for the crude play to stereotypes here – the darker the skin tone, the more likely the girl to be poor and in bad shape, and even a beautiful brown girl like Beyoncé can, at best, aspire to the status of a "B girl." Neither is this an isolated phenomenon. Consider two more real casting calls:

Female, Hispanic/Latin, 50s to 60s, the Latina maid at James's wife's funeral.

Male, 30-45, Middle Eastern looking [human trafficker role].⁴⁰

Numerous actors and actresses have spoken about these problems.⁴¹ Actress Lucy Liu, for instance, says in an interview that people see her only as, "the Asian girl who beats everyone up, or the Asian girl with no emotion. People see Julia Roberts or Sandra Bullock in a romantic comedy, but not me." Actor Jonathan Braylock has this to say about notices he and his friends had gotten about major studio projects: "One was for a 'prisoner who looks like a real prisoner [...]' The only reason I 'look like a real prisoner' is because I'm black." While a Muslim friend of

his received notices for roles described as “terrorist.”⁴² And writer Katrina Day began a web series called “Lady Parts: A Webseries” in reaction to sexist casting calls sent out daily. The following is a call from the website:

[Seeking] Whores for Quentin Tarantino project... No highlights. Natural breasts. Natural eyebrows. Natural hair color...Please send photo and write “Whore” in the subject line.⁴³

While the scope of the duty I have been speaking of cannot be precisely specified, we could, perhaps, start with an attempt to eliminate the most egregious – and therefore, most clear cut – violations of it.

None of this is to suggest that there aren’t examples – and wonderful ones – of combatting stereotypes. For instance, in 1959, Hollywood’s director Sam Fuller produced *The Crimson Kimono*, a movie starring Asian American actor James Shigeta, who plays the romantic lead, winning the affections of a white woman for whom a white male is a rival.⁴⁴

More generally, great artists already do what I would like more artists to do. This brings me to my last point. I suspect that, for instance, great writers such as Edith Wharton create multi-dimensional characters, not out of a sense of moral duty but out of duty to their own art. They may well experience that as a moral duty – and of the deepest kind – but this is primarily an artistic duty, which in a truly talented person may be perceived as a calling, and therefore as having moral gravity equal to that of one’s parental or spousal duties. My task would be easier if I could say here that I am not making an attempt to impart to artists any moral duties but simply to remind them of the commitments they’ve already undertaken in choosing a profession.

But I cannot say that. While the drive to create a great work of art may be experienced as a call of duty by a truly creative mind, it is not the case, in general, that all artists should try to create only great art. There is certainly room for B-movies in the world, as well as for second-rate books, probably more room than for great works of art. Sometimes, we want a film or a book that is easy to process. Sometimes, we don’t need a mental challenge. We may be just too tired to engage with serious work. My claim is that even then, the moral duties I have spoken about, without precisely defining their scope, persist, and they can be violated.

Great art is no doubt one of the most important achievements of any civilization. However, art does not, morally speaking, have to be great or even good. But it does have to be – or at least aspire to be – morally decent.

¹ Dennis Hamil, “At First, She Was Too Beautiful to Get the Role,” *New York Daily News*, October 27, 1997. Available at: http://articles.philly.com/1997-10-25/entertainment/25538376_1_modeling-business-card-bank-teller. Accessed June 20, 2016.

² Ibid.

³ Nathan Ditum, “29 Worst Miscastings,” *GamesRadar*, January 15, 2010. Available at: <http://www.gamesradar.com/the-29-worst-movie-miscastings/>. Accessed June 20, 2016.

⁴ For an ethicist’s perspective, see, e.g., Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) For an autonomist view, see James Anderson and Jeffrey Dean, “Moderate Autonomism,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38 (1998): 150-166. For an immoralist perspective, see Daniel Jacobson, “In Praise of Immoral Art,” *Philosophical Topics* 25 (1997):155-199; Matthew Kieran, “Art, Morality, and Ethics: On the (Im)Moral Character of Art Works and Inter-Relations to Artistic Value,” *Philosophy Compass* 1 (2006): 129-143; and Kieran’s “Forbidden Knowledge: The Challenge of Immoralism,” in *Art and Morality*, edited by Jose Luis Bermudez and Sebastian Gardner (New York: Routledge, 2006), 56-73.

⁵ Charles Dickens, *Little Dorritt* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1875), 44.

⁶ David Stack, “About Faces: Physiognomy in 19th Century Britain,” *Victorian Studies* 53 (2011): 331-332, review of Sharrona Pearl’s *About Faces: Physiognomy in 19th Century Britain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁷ Jonathan Freeman et al., “Amygdala Responsivity to High-Level Social Information from Unseen Faces,” *The Journal of Neuroscience* 34 (2014): 10573-10581.

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- ⁸ See, e.g., Donald J. Shoemaker, Donald R. South, and Jay Lowe, “Facial Stereotypes of Deviants and Judgments of Guilt or Innocence,” *Social Forces* 51 (1973): 427-433; and Diane Berry and Leslie Zebrowitz-McArthur, “What’s in a Face: Facial Maturity and the Attributions of Responsibility,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 14 (1988): 23-33.
- ⁹ Ladd Wheeler and Youngmee Kim, “What is Beautiful is Culturally Good: The Physical Attractiveness Stereotype has Different Content in Collectivist Cultures,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 23 (1997): 795–800.
- ¹⁰ Alexander Todorov, Anesu N. Mandisodza, Amir Goren, and Crystal C. Hall, “Inferences of Competence from Faces Predict Election Outcomes,” *Science* 308 (2005): 1623-6.
- ¹¹ Nancy Blaker et al., “The Height Leadership Advantage in Men and Women: Testing Evolutionary Psychology Predictions about Tall Leaders,” *Group Processes Intergroup Relations* 16 (2013): 17-27; and Gert Stulp et al., “High and Mighty: Height Increases Authority in Professional Refereeing,” *Evolutionary Psychology* 10 (2012): 588-601; on the influence of weight on social perception, see Emma Levine and Maurice Schweitzer, “The Affective and Interpersonal Consequence of Obesity,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 127 (2015): 66-84.
- ¹² William Mayew, Christopher Parsons, and Mohan Venkatachalam, “Voice Pitch and the Labor Market Success of Male Chief Executive Officers,” *Evolution and Human Behavior* 34 (2013): 243-248; and Care Tigue et al., “Voice Pitch Influences Voting Behavior,” *Evolution and Human Behavior* 33 (2012): 210-216.
- ¹³ The video is available at: <http://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2015/12/22/donald-trump-accent-daily-hit-newday.cnn>. Retrieved June 29, 2016.
- ¹⁴ See Katherine Kinzler and Jasmine DeJesus, “Northern=smart and Southern=nice: The Development of Accent Attitudes in the United States,” *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 66 (2013): 1146-58. Tamara Rakić, Melanie C. Steffens, and Amélie Mummendey, “Blinded by the Accent! The Minor Role of Looks in Ethnic Categorization,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 100 (2011): 16-29, found that accent is more important than physical appearance in social categorization, and also that American subjects are somewhat taken aback when a black person speaks with a British accent or a rapper with a “black” accent turns out to be white.
- ¹⁵ Though many might make an exception for the people they know personally, for instance, the seemingly uncaring high-school teacher of one’s son or daughter or one’s own seemingly caring financial adviser.
- ¹⁶ President Frank Underwood, from *House of Cards*, may seem to be an exception to the “no short presidents” rule, but Kevin Spacey, who plays the role, is actually 5 feet 10 inches, slightly taller than an average American man. He may just seem *short for a president*.
- ¹⁷ Michael Slepian and Daniel Ames, “Internalized Impressions: The Link Between Apparent Facial Trustworthiness and Deceptive Behavior is Mediated by Target’s Expectations of How They Will be Judged,” *Psychological Science* 27 (2016): 282-288.
- ¹⁸ Anthony Little and David Perrett, “Using Composite Images to Assess Accuracy in Personality Attribution to Faces,” *British Journal of Psychology* 98 (2007): 111-126.
- ¹⁹ Malcolm Gladwell’s *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005) has probably contributed much to its popularity. The general idea that personality may be, to some extent, possible to gauge on the basis of facial cues is referred to as the “zero acquaintance” paradigm. See David Kenny et al., “Consensus in Interpersonal Perception: Acquaintance and the Big 5,” *Psychological Bulletin* 116 (1997): 245-258.
- ²⁰ Linda Albright et al., “Consensus in Personality Judgments at Zero Acquaintance,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 55 (1988): 387-395
- ²¹ This is, for instance, what “accuracy” was taken to mean in Albright et al. (1988), *op. cit.* Note, however, that sometimes behavior rather than self-reports is the measure of accuracy, as in Slepian and Ames (*op. cit.*).
- ²² Warren Norman and Lewis Goldberg, “Raters, Ratees, and Randomness in Personality Structure,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 4 (1966): 681-691.
- ²³ This was, for instance, the reaction of many of my students to James Dobson’s interview with Bundy on the night before his execution: <https://vimeo.com/96877731>. Accessed June 20, 2016. In *Guilty by Reason of Insanity: A Psychiatrist Probes the Minds of Killers* (New York: Random House, 1998), Dorothy Lewis says that Bundy continued to have amorous relationships with female attorneys in prison, suggesting that he likely did not at all look to people like a ruthless murderer.
- ²⁴ Michael Slepian and Daniel Ames, “Internalized Impressions.”
- ²⁵ It is also not entirely true that Napoleon was short. He was 5 feet 8 inches, average for his time and place. The British appear to have labeled him “short” to disparage him, but I suspect the label stuck because Napoleon, while average for a Frenchman in his time, was, much like Kevin Spacey’s character in *House of Cards*, perceived as *short for a leader*.
- ²⁶ That is generally true of philosophers as well, including moral philosophers – neither Plato nor Aristotle opposed slavery, and Kant was, arguably, quite sexist.
- ²⁷ Henrik Ibsen is a case in point.

- ²⁸ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, translated by Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Publishing, 1991), 68.
- ²⁹ The most famous incident is Mark David Chapman's shooting of John Lennon. See Aidan Doyle, "When Books Kill," Salon.com, December 15, 2003. Available at: http://www.salon.com/2003/12/15/books_kill/. Last retrieved June 29, 2016. *The Catcher in the Rye* was also one of the books police found in the hotel room of John Hinckley, Jr. after Hinckley tried to assassinate President Reagan. See Stephen Whitfield, "Cherished and Cursed: Toward a Social History of *The Catcher in the Rye*," in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, edited by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2000), 135-158. Robert John Bardo, who was found guilty of the murder of Rebecca Schaeffer, was carrying the same book when he visited his victim in her apartment and murdered her. See Darrell Dawsey and Paul Feldman, "Police Directed to Evidence of Actress' Death," *Los Angeles Times*, July 21, 1989. Available at: http://articles.latimes.com/1989-07-21/local/me-4311_1_los-angeles-police. Retrieved June 29, 2016.
- ³⁰ While one of *24*'s co-producers, Joel Surnow (as well as some fans of the show), have argued that *24* is fiction and allowed to follow the demands of the story line, Army Brigadier General Patrick Finnegan personally met with and criticized the producers, insisting that viewers who watch the show will come to see torture as the patriotic thing to do and also, "They should do a show where torture backfires." Surnow is quoted in Adam Green's, "Normalizing Torture on *24*," *The New York Times*, May 22, 2005. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/22/arts/television/normalizing-torture-on-24.html>, accessed June 29, 2016. General Finnegan is quoted in Jane Mayer's "Whatever It Takes: The Politics of the Man behind *24*," *The New Yorker*, February 19, 2007. Available at: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/02/19/whatever-it-takes>. Accessed June 29, 2016.
- ³¹ See Mary FitzPatrick et al., *Portrayal versus Betrayal: An Investigation of Diverse and Mainstream Film Audiences*, a Research Report commissioned by the UK Film Council, April 2011. A summary of the report is available at: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/uk-film-council-portrayal-vs-betrayal-case-study.pdf>. A significant percent of audience members expressed the belief that various groups are portrayed in stereotypical and altogether inaccurate ways, though the percent of the people who expressed this belief was higher among members of the group concerned, for instance, 37% of the general public expressed the view that Asian religious culture ought to be reflected more authentically in movies, as compared to 74% of Asians (pp. 63-64 of the linked report).
- ³² Jeffrey Zacks, *Flicker: Your Brain on Movies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 94; and Elizabeth Marsh, "Using Popular Film to Enhance Classroom Learning: Mnemonic Effects of Monitoring Misinformation," *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 26 (2012): 556-567.
- ³³ The critic in question is Clement Scott, from *The Daily Telegraph*. The episode is related by George Bernard Shaw in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1994), p. 3. Shaw writes, "He [Clement Scott] calls on the authorities to cancel the license of the theater, and declares that he has been exhorted to laugh at honor, to disbelieve in love, to mock at virtue, to distrust friendship, and to deride fidelity."
- ³⁴ There is a fascinating story about North Korean leader Kim Jong-II, who kidnapped a famous South Korean director and his ex-wife, a famous actress, forcing them to make movies for him, explaining that North Korean movies are too boring. The story is featured in "Same Bed, Different Dreams," *This American Life*, May 1, 2015. Episode available at: <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/556/same-bed-different-dreams>.
- ³⁵ As one can on the immoralist's view.
- ³⁶ Donald Deane, "10 Horribly Miscast Movie Roles," *Screen Crush*, June 19, 2013. Available at: <http://screencrush.com/miscast-movie-roles/>. Accessed June 28, 2016.
- ³⁷ Thanks to Nomy Arpaly for this example.
- ³⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* section 3, available here http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/courses/wphil/readings/wphil_rdg09_nicomacheanethics_entire.htm
- ³⁹ "These 4 Racist and Sexist Casting Calls will Make You Rethink Everything You've Ever Watched," *BuzzFeed*, August 15, 2015. Available online at: https://www.buzzfeed.com/dayshavedewi/it-just-got-real-on-the-casting-couch?utm_term=.voqNdYWoyo#.tpeYqWPrRr. Last retrieved August 31, 2016.
- ⁴⁰ Jenny Jaffe, "The Terrible World of Casting Notices," *Slate*, September 15, 2015. Available online at:
- ⁴¹ One may wish to ask here whether directors have special duties to actors who will be asked to portray stereotypes, since actors may be harmed by those portrayals much more than the rest of the members of the stereotyped group. I am inclined to think that there is, but I leave this argument for another occasion.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ *Lady Parts*, posted on June 2, 2016. Available at: <http://someladyparts.com/post/145316745945/nottodayatanottoday>. Last retrieved August 31, 2016.

⁴⁴ This film was brought to my attention by a blogger who calls himself “Philip.” See his “Original Offenders: James Shigeta,” *You Offend Me, You Offend My Family*, July 29, 2014. Available online at: <https://www.yomyomf.com/original-offenders-james-shigeta/>, last retrieved August 31, 2016. See also: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0052713/>.