



Dealbreakers and the Work of Immoral Artists

ABSTRACT: A *dealbreaker*, in the sense developed in this essay, is a relationship between a person's psychology and an aspect of an artwork to which they are exposed. When a person has a dealbreaking aversion to an aspect of a work, they are blocked from embracing the work's aesthetically positive features. I characterize dealbreakers, distinguish this response from other negative responses to an artwork, and argue that the presence or absence of a dealbreaker is in some cases an appropriate target of moral evaluation. I then use the concept of dealbreakers to develop a new approach to the question of our moral obligations with respect to the work of immoral artists, arguing that there is no general obligation binding us to cultivate or eliminate a dealbreaking aversion to their work. I conclude by suggesting several other philosophical debates that could benefit from a focus on dealbreakers.

Recall a time when you experienced an emotional association with an aspect of an artwork that made it impossible for you to engage with the work in a positive way. Perhaps you have euthanized a beloved pet and as a consequence cannot bring yourself to read *Old Yeller* to your child. Perhaps you lost a parent to Alzheimer's and as a consequence cannot enjoy watching *The Notebook*. Perhaps you have struggled with addiction and as a consequence cannot handle *Requiem for a Dream*. No matter how aesthetically good or bad the work, a specific feature that hits too close to home can ruin the experience. Associations such as these are *dealbreakers*.

In what follows, I characterize dealbreakers and use the concept to reframe a long-standing question at the intersection of art and morality. When it comes to the work of immoral artists, do we have a moral obligation to *cultivate or eliminate* dealbreakers for their work? I conclude by suggesting several other philosophical questions that could benefit from a focus on dealbreakers.

I. Dealbreakers: A Psychological Response at the Intersection of Ethics and Aesthetics

The use of the term *dealbreaker* in the sense I develop in this article traces its origin to psychological research on the paradox of painful art. A brief history of the term helps clarify what is distinctive about it.

Two anonymous reviewers wrote thoughtful comments that helped me improve this essay. I am also, as usual, diversely indebted to Jason Swartwood.



How can it be that works of tragedy, horror, and other genres intended to cause negative emotions, paradoxically bring audiences pleasure? This is the paradox of painful art—a puzzle that has interested both philosophers and psychologists. One important contribution to the psychological literature on the paradox of painful art is the distancing-embracing model, a description of the conditions under which painful art is pleasant, first published by Winfried Menninghaus et al. (2017).

Menninghaus and colleagues suggest that in order to be pleasant, painful art must be held at sufficient emotional distance by one of several psychological distancing processes. Menninghaus et al. name one example of a psychological distancing process the *art schema*. The art schema is simply the awareness of the fact that one is engaged with an art experience. It is ‘an ongoing situational awareness that one is reading a book or watching a movie or listening to a piece of music rather than being involved in ordinary action or communication contexts’ (Menninghaus et al. 2017: 6). Another psychological distancing process is the *fiction schema*: the awareness, when one is reading or watching fiction, that it is fiction.

When painful art is held at a psychological distance by these or other distancing processes, then one or more *embracing* processes can generate a positive experience of the negative emotions painful art causes. For example, the dread that *Midsommar* unfurls, when held at a suitable distance, spices the aesthetic enjoyment of its inventive cinematography and beautiful landscapes. The sadness *Hamlet* causes, held at a suitable distance, deepens the meaning readers find in the play. Terrifying moments in horror films, held at a suitable distance, provide an enjoyable communal experience when shared with friends (Bastian 2017; Egloff 2017).

Menninghaus et al. summarize the distancing-embracing model this way: ‘[distancing processes] keep negative emotions at a cognitive appraisal-driven *distance*, thereby preventing them from being outright incompatible with the hedonic expectations of art reception. This sets the stage, or clears the ground, for the second group of components. The latter even positively adopt, or embrace, the particular powers of negative emotions in the service of intensifying overall enjoyment and rendering the trajectory of art reception more varied, interesting, and profound in its affective nature and less prone to induce boredom’ (Menninghaus et al. 2017: 15).

The key insight is that *distance* is a precondition of the operation of the embracing processes. Without some requisite degree of distance from painful art, it is not possible to embrace it in a way that could generate a positive experience.

In the course of introducing the distancing-embracing model to nonspecialist readers, Matthew Strohl (2019) suggests a reformulation of the distancing side of the picture. Instead of requiring the *presence* of one or more psychological processes that actively hold art at a distance, Strohl requires the *absence* of the kind of emotional closeness that ruins the experience of the work: ‘Let the term *dealbreaker* designate an experiential element which is sufficient to render an experience [of art] overall aversive. Believing that one might actually die is usually a dealbreaker. Being reminded of a traumatic experience—or even just an unfortunate life event—is often a dealbreaker. The distance condition I propose simply requires the absence of any dealbreakers’ (Strohl 2019: 8).

Strohl's brief definition of dealbreakers is ambiguous between an experiential element that renders an art experience all-things-considered aversive—say, by outweighing the positive features of the work—and an experiential element that ruins an art experience by preempting the operation of embracing processes. Given the context of the distancing-embracing model, Strohl must intend the latter, and that is the concept I develop here. A dealbreaker is an element of an art experience that *blocks the operation of the psychological embracing processes* that could, were they operative, generate a positive experience.

For example, many fans of horror films are unwilling to watch movies that include rape scenes. Many of these fans are able to enjoy movies that depict cannibalism and torture, impalements and beheadings, geysers of pus and blood, but they are unable to enjoy movies that depict rape. Lucia Schwarz (2022) argues that a key component of the explanation is that, unlike cannibalism and pus geysers, rape is a form of violence that encroaches on the real lives of many viewers, whether as survivors of rape, as friends or family of rape survivors, or as people who must arrange their lives in a way that accounts for the threat of rape. It is easy for most horror fans to hold pus geysers at sufficient psychological distance, but 'for many viewers, "distance" collapses when they encounter a rape scene. Once this enabling condition is removed, other mechanisms that make horror enjoyable can no longer gain traction' (Schwarz 2022: 678). For many horror fans, in other words, depictions of rape are a *dealbreaker*.

1.1 Dealbreakers Characterized

Everyone I have spoken to about dealbreakers reports having experienced them, though they use different language to characterize the experience. Some describe the experience of stumbling on a dealbreaking aspect of a work as feeling *overwhelmed* with negative emotions, or as *shutting down*, or as *being forced out* of the art experience. The latter is how I would characterize my own experience of dealbreakers. I, for example, have a dealbreaking aversion to depictions of the deaths of pets. When a film I would otherwise enjoy depicts the death of a pet, I find myself forced out of the film experience. I cannot help but recall details of the deaths of my own cat companions; I feel awful; I miss them; the film becomes a noisy screen and ceases to be, for me, the immersive narrative the filmmakers intended.

A dealbreaker is distinct from the more common psychological reaction of *disliking* a feature of a work in a way that factors into our overall experience of it, as we might weigh excellent cinematography a contributor to, and an irritating score a hindrance to, our enjoyment of a film. Rather, a dealbreaker makes such weighing impossible by preempting our ability to interface with the work in the way the artist intended.

A dealbreaker is not, or at least need not be, an aesthetic evaluation in any sense. Someone could have a dealbreaking aversion to an aspect of a work they *know* is aesthetically excellent, even though they are unable to embrace it in a way that could generate a positive experience. For example, consider this paraphrase of a comment I once overheard in a library: 'I'm disappointed that Anne Washburn's

new play is a riff on *The Simpsons*. I'm sure it's good—it's Anne Washburn!—but I have such terrible associations with *The Simpsons* that I cannot get the mental space I need to watch a play about it'.

Although particularly intense imaginative resistance could be a source of a dealbreaker, dealbreakers are not synonymous with imaginative resistance. Imaginative resistance 'occurs when an otherwise competent imaginer finds it difficult to engage in some sort of prompted imaginative activity' (Gendler and Liao 2016: 405). If an imaginer were asked to imagine something so outrageous that it forced them out of the art experience entirely, that would be an instance of a dealbreaker. For example, '[i]n the fictional world of *The Turner Diaries*, genocide is praiseworthy rather than morally outrageous' (Dadlez 2005: 353). A reader asked to imagine violent racism as a virtue of the novel's protagonists might find that distance collapses, that they are forced entirely out of the fictional world, and that the usual mechanisms that embrace character, plot, and language cannot operate. Such a degree of imaginative resistance would constitute a dealbreaking aversion to the novel's racism.

Relatively few instances of imaginative resistance are so extreme. In most cases, resistance to imagining the moral perspective of an artwork merely *attenuates* our embrace of it. The sexism depicted and endorsed in many classic noir films may be a dealbreaker for some viewers, but most viewers are still able to engage with the writing, cinematography, and acting even if they are put off by the sexism. Imaginative resistance caused by sexism attenuates, to varying degrees for various viewers, our aesthetic embrace of noir films, but for most viewers it does not preempt the possibility of embrace.¹

And, of course, many dealbreakers have nothing to do with imaginative resistance. Most commonly, it is depictions consonant with the life experiences of viewers or depictions that verge too closely upon their deepest fears that generate dealbreakers. Depictions of rape, or of dying pets, or of dying babies, are dealbreakers for many people because those things are all too easy to imagine, and imagining them pulls many viewers out of the art experience.

One last instance of the many possible ways emotional distance between a viewer and a work could collapse: Menninghaus et al. (2017) specially highlight cases in which distance collapses because the viewer does not understand that they are having an art experience. For example, *Drive-In Massacre* is a mid-1970s slasher film in which a villain with an implausibly long sword murders drive-in patrons in their cars. The movie ends with a scripted interruption and announcement that the killer is loose *in this very drive-in*. The campy twist is fun, but it is only fun because everyone knows it is part of the show. For anyone who sincerely believed they were about to die, impaled like a cocktail olive on an impractical sword, their genuine fear would preempt the possibility of fun. In Menninghaus's terms, the absence of the art schema preempts the operation of psychological embracing

¹ Does the attenuation of engagement caused by a moral flaw in a work constitute an aesthetic flaw? This is a central question in the philosophy of art (Hume 1987; Carroll 1996; Anderson and Dean 1998; Gaut 2007; Eaton 2012). Under what conditions might audience dealbreakers for a work constitute an aesthetic flaw in that work? This is a related but distinct question I pose below.

processes. In Strohl's terms, believing you are about to die is a dealbreaker for *Drive-In Massacre*.

Although Strohl introduced the term in the context of the paradox of painful art, we can have dealbreakers for any aesthetic experience, including those that are intended to be straightforwardly pleasant. Imagine someone unable to embrace a romantic comedy because its lead looks like their abusive ex. Imagine someone unable to eat grilled cabbage because that was the dish they were eating the night their sibling unexpectedly died. In a huge variety of art domains, it is possible for some aspect of a work to scrape a raw spot in our spirit, forcing us out of the art experience and preventing us from embracing the art regardless of its merits.

Dealbreakers—many of them, at least—can be cultivated or eliminated with practice. Take as illustrations two experiences of mine that I believe are widely shared.

I was raised in a small, religiously conservative, homophobic town in the 1980s. The summer I turned twelve, my family pulled up stakes and moved cross-country to a big city. There, I discovered and bonded in the manner of a duckling with the music of 1980s synthpop icons Erasure. I did not know, for nearly a year of nonstop listening, that Erasure's vocalist is gay. When I learned that, it ruined their music for me. I could not play my tapes without feeling physically sickened by the shame of listening to the words and voice of a gay man. I had a dealbreaker for Erasure.

Fortunately for me, I was living in a new community with less barbaric norms, and I was quickly convinced, intellectually speaking, that sexual orientation is not a moral issue. For a while I still felt sick when I tried to listen to Erasure; I still had the dealbreaker. But I was able to eliminate it through practice. The trick was to listen to my tapes even though they sickened me, while repeatedly reminding myself that it was my stomach that was the problem, not Erasure. Eventually it worked and I reclaimed an unspoiled popfan experience.

I have told this story before (Stoner 2017) and was surprised by the number of responses from readers who had similar experiences with musicians and actors whose work they had bonded with as teens. I have learned that *many* children of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s were raised with dealbreakers for the work of gay artists and worked to dissolve those dealbreakers in order to reclaim the delight they felt before they learned a beloved artist is gay. We have eliminated dealbreakers we were saddled with by the circumstances of our upbringing.

I have also cultivated a dealbreaker I wanted to have. In my late twenties, I became convinced that the best arguments for ethical veganism are sound and that I had a moral obligation to stop eating animals. I was raised an omnivore, and, like most omnivorous humans, I was good at psychologically sequestering animals, which I love and would never willingly hurt, from meat, which is tasty. That ability to compartmentalize animals and meat made my initial attempts at vegetarianism and veganism exhausting. I was happy when I lucked into meat I felt I could blamelessly eat, as when I was served the wrong burrito at the taco stand or a friend planned to throw away a slice of pepperoni pizza. But those ethical windfalls were rare, and otherwise my meatless diet felt like a deprivation, a penance, a constant exercise of will.

The key to making veganism easy, for me, was to put some effort into *feeling* the obvious numerical identity between meat and the creature it was cut from. Some simple tricks helped. For example, I kept pictures of frolicking piglets on my computer and found that looking at them before I ordered a pizza drained away the nagging urge to request pepperoni. Eventually those urges subsided, and several years ago, when I was mistakenly served pork in what was supposed to be a bean burrito, the experience was awful. I *felt* my mouth filled with morsels of a vulnerable pig who had suffered and died for no good reason. I could no longer access positive aesthetic features such as savoriness, tenderness, or juiciness, because I had cultivated a dealbreaking aversion to meat.

It is my impression that this experience is widely shared among adults who adopt vegetarian and vegan diets for ethical reasons. Soon after the switch, meat remains appealing in a narrow gustatory sense and windfall meat can be a pleasure. But after some months or years of practice, that changes. Once the psychological distance between animals and meat is reduced or eliminated, dishes that once were a delight become an ordeal. The flavor and texture of meat remains unchanged, and meat can of course be prepared with thoughtfulness, skill, and creative flair, but a psychological dealbreaker, cultivated through practice, ‘turns it to ashes in the mouth’ (Korsmeyer 2012: 98).

In sum,

1. A *dealbreaker* is a relationship between a person’s psychology and an aspect of an artwork to which they are exposed. A dealbreaker is distinct from *disapproved of* and *disliked* aspects of a work. When a person has a dealbreaker, they are emotionally close to an aspect of the work in such a way that they are blocked from embracing its positive features.
2. The dealbreaking aspect of an artwork can be something inherent to it, as with pet-death dealbreakers for *Old Yeller*. The dealbreaking aspect could be related to the causal history of the work, as with homophobic dealbreakers for the music of Erasure or animal-suffering dealbreakers for dishes that incorporate meat. The dealbreaking aspect could be related to the circumstances of the work’s presentation, as with confusion-related dealbreakers for a showing of *Drive-In Massacre*.
3. At least some dealbreakers can be cultivated or eliminated with practice.

1.2 Dealbreakers as Targets of Moral Evaluation

That (at least) some dealbreakers can be cultivated or eliminated with practice opens the possibility that the presence or absence of some dealbreakers can be an appropriate target of moral evaluation. Once the possibility is mooted, it is easy to find examples of dealbreakers that are, in fact, morally wrong and others that are morally required.

Some people have dealbreakers they ought to eliminate. Dealbreakers arising from bigotry, such as homophobic dealbreakers for the work of gay artists, are dealbreakers people *should* work to eliminate.

Conversely, some people *lack* dealbreakers they ought to cultivate. This is the less familiar case, so allow me to begin with a fanciful example inspired by a true story. In 1991, so the true story goes, Charlie Sheen watched *Guinea Pig 2: Flower of Flesh and Blood*, a brutal, humorless Japanese gore film in which a man dressed as a samurai kidnaps, tortures, dismembers, and murders a young woman. Sheen was so convinced that he had watched a genuine snuff film—a film of a real murder—that he reported it to the Motion Picture Association of America, who in turn reported it to the FBI. FBI agents investigated and closed the case after determining that *Flower of Flesh and Blood* was not, in fact, a snuff film (Stine 1999; Kosuga 2009).

Now the fanciful example. Imagine a gorehound who loves the experience offered by *Flower of Flesh and Blood*. He watches it every year or so, because he finds paradoxically pleasant the extreme levels of fear and disgust its images cause him. Imagine that in this version of the story, FBI investigators discover that *Flower of Flesh and Blood* is a genuine snuff film. It is a video of the real torture, dismemberment, and murder of a young woman. On learning this, our gorehound finds his experience of the movie little changed. The terrifying and disgusting images that he found paradoxically pleasant when he believed them to be special effects remain paradoxically pleasant after he learns he is watching images of real torture and murder. That is worrying. Our imaginary fan *should* work to cultivate a dealbreaking aversion to real snuff. His perspective *should* be sufficiently close to the victim that he cannot enjoy footage of her murder.

Now a real example with a similar structure. When, in high school, I first watched Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, I thought his sex scene with Rosie Perez—nudity! ice cubes!—was about the sexiest thing I had ever seen. Later in life I read Perez characterize the filming of that scene as coercion, a violation: 'And when Spike Lee puts ice cubes on my nipples, the reason you don't see my head is because I'm crying' (Udovitch 2000). Knowing that Perez was so cornered by circumstances that she felt helpless to refuse, knowing that she was crying and yet Lee rolled film—that, for me, is a dealbreaker. I can now appreciate the film only if I skip that scene. I am relieved that I no longer find that scene thrillingly sexy, because if I did, I would believe I had an obligation to cultivate a dealbreaker for it. Knowing what we now know, someone who watches the scene for a sexy thrill probably does something wrong. We *should* be emotionally close enough to Rosie Perez that we cannot enjoy artfully shot footage of her sexual assault.

These initial examples (of obligations to eliminate dealbreakers arising from immoral bigotry and to cultivate dealbreakers for real suffering) are examples of *general* obligations. *Anyone* who recognizes that some aspect of the artist's identity blocks their access to the art *because they harbor immoral prejudice against that identity*, should work to eliminate that dealbreaker. General obligations can of course be overridden in particular circumstances in which more important obligations conflict with them. Imagine, for example, that x has a dealbreaking aversion to art produced by members of ethnic group E, an aversion

born of past trauma inflicted by members of E. During the time it takes to metabolize that trauma, it is not hard to imagine that x could have obligations of prudence or fiduciary obligations to dependents that outweigh their duty to eliminate their bigotry-based dealbreaker. Having a bigotry-based dealbreaker for the art of Es *is still bad*, even in x's case, but in x's case, the duty to take care of themselves and their dependents currently outweighs the duty to work to eliminate that dealbreaker.

To classify as *general* obligations the examples above of obligations to cultivate and eliminate dealbreakers is not to say these obligations are universally binding, all things considered. A general obligation is universally binding only in the sense that it persists as a moral reason for everyone, even in situations in which it is overridden. Contrast *general* obligations with *special* obligations that arise only for specific agents in specific situations. Roles can yield special obligations to eliminate dealbreakers. It is a duty of a competent music critic, for example, to eliminate dealbreakers that would interfere with the experience and evaluation of music. Suppose a folk music critic develops a dealbreaking aversion to the sound of accordions. For most people a dealbreaking aversion to accordions is not a moral failing. But the role of folk music critic yields a special, role-specific obligation to eliminate that dealbreaker.

Relationships can also yield special obligations to eliminate dealbreakers. Suppose a parent has a dealbreaking aversion to depictions of elves, but their teen child is an aspiring writer of fantasy fiction. For most people, a dealbreaking aversion to elves is not a moral failing. But the relationship of parent yields a special, relationship-specific obligation to eliminate dealbreakers for the morally innocent passions of one's children.

These examples establish that dealbreakers are candidates for moral evaluation—it is possible to get them wrong. But most dealbreakers are mere psychological differences that are neither morally good nor morally bad. Consider this shard of an infinite list of dealbreakers that have no moral valence:

- People who have suffered gunshot wounds who have dealbreakers for *The Matrix*.
- People who have suffered gunshot wounds who do not.
- People who have never been shot who do (or do not).
- People who have euthanized beloved pets who have dealbreakers for *Old Yeller*.
- People who have euthanized beloved pets who do not.
- People who have never had pets who do (or do not).
- People who have struggled with heroin addiction who have dealbreakers for *Requiem for a Dream*.
- People who have struggled with heroin addiction who do not.
- People who have never struggled with heroin addiction who do (or do not).

Although the presence or absence of *some* dealbreakers can be evaluated in moral terms, most dealbreakers are mere psychological differences, much like other morally innocent matters of taste in art.

1.3 Key Features of Dealbreakers

Dealbreakers are binary, not scalar, responses to art. A dealbreaker does not *attenuate* psychological embracing processes; it *preempts* them. The binary nature of dealbreakers potentially simplifies discussion, relative to discussions of scalar responses to art.

The presence or absence of *some* dealbreakers is an appropriate target of moral evaluation. This makes dealbreakers an especially clear example of a psychological response to art that can be morally right or wrong.

Dealbreakers can attach to an inherent feature of a work—an aspect of its content or form—or to its causal history, or to the circumstances of its presentation. Dealbreakers thus span responses that are usually understood to be primarily aesthetic (to the content and form of a work) and primarily ethical (to a work's causal history and circumstances of presentation).

These three features of dealbreakers make them well suited to support clear and, perhaps, simplified discussion of controversies at the intersection of ethics and aesthetics. Below I suggest several debates to which dealbreakers could potentially contribute. But first, I demonstrate the usefulness of dealbreakers by offering a new argument about a familiar question: How should we react to the work of immoral artists?

2. Dealbreakers for the Work of Immoral Artists

Recent history offers us a groaning cornucopia of artists unmasked as predators, criminals, racists, misogynists, lechers, and creeps. Several questions related to the work of immoral artists have received sustained attention from philosophers, but the moral question on many people's minds is one philosophers have not directly addressed: Knowing what I now know, should I have a dealbreaker for these artists' works?

2.1 Dealbreaker Talk about Immoral Artists

In the wake of revelations of a beloved artist's immoral behavior, many people resort to language strikingly like the language of dealbreakers. Consider the following examples.

Philosopher Mary Beth Willard on Bill Cosby, the actor and comedian who drugged and raped scores of women: 'I find that I can no longer endure Cosby's comedy. I can no longer watch or listen to his comedy without his crimes immediately intruding, thinking that while he was joking around, snuggling Rudy, doing Julia Child impressions while making soup, he probably had Quaaludes waiting backstage for his next victim. I am surprised at the strength of my own feelings' (Willard 2021: 83–84). Willard, I submit, is describing a *dealbreaker* for *The Cosby Show*; she is emotionally close to Cosby's crimes in such a way that she is no longer able to access the wholesome, quotidian comedy she previously enjoyed.

Actor Wil Wheaton on Morrissey, frontman of the Smiths, who has made increasingly xenophobic, right-wing political statements and gestures: 'I don't

listen to The Smiths anymore. After Morrissey turned into . . . what would we even call him, now? He's such a dick. I can't stand to hear his voice any more (Wheaton 2021, ellipses Wheaton's). He continues: 'It's a giant bummer. And The Smiths was SUCH a significant and meaningful part of my life, I can't just look past him and separate the art from the artist. Believe me, I've tried' (Wheaton 2021). Wheaton, I submit, is describing a dealbreaking aversion to Morrissey's voice.

Music critic Ann Powers on Michael Jackson, the pop star who sexually abused children: 'The problem with listening to Michael Jackson now isn't the nausea that takes over or the anger at being fooled—at letting myself, maybe yourself, be fooled. It's the pleasure. . . . [T]he music still makes me feel good. And I know I'm not alone. If anything will get me to stop listening to Michael Jackson's music, it's my own unwillingness to keep living with this problem presented by my own pleasure' (Powers 2019). Powers feels guilty that she lacks a dealbreaker for Jackson's songs.

Essayist Claire Dederer on her changed reaction to Woody Allen's *Manhattan* after the revelation of his sexual relationship with his stepdaughter: Dederer reports that '*Manhattan* makes me feel icky', and that her inability to enjoy the movie has invited the ire of other critics in her circle. She asks: 'What do I do about the monster? Do I have a responsibility either way? To turn away, or to overcome my biographical distaste and watch, or read, or listen?' (Dederer 2017). Dederer is asking whether she has moral reason to work to eliminate her post-revelation dealbreaker for *Manhattan*.

Bill Cosby is the focus of an exchange between comedians Stephen Colbert and Jerry Seinfeld. After the revelations of Cosby's crimes, Seinfeld appeared as a guest on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. Colbert asked which comedians most influenced Seinfeld when Seinfeld was a boy.

Seinfeld: *The* comedian [of my childhood] was Bill Cosby.

Colbert: Well, of course . . .

S: Greatest . . . body of work, I think, in comedy, is his.

C: Can you still listen to his comedy?

S: Oh yeah.

C: I grew up on his stuff. I think he saved my life. Because when I was a kid I had a tragedy in my life but for the next two years I listened to Bill Cosby albums every night, *every night* before going to bed. I would hide the speakers under my pillow so my mom wouldn't hear Bill Cosby every night. You could drop a needle *anywhere* on those albums. And I can't listen to them now.

S: [visibly taken aback] No? Oh, you can't?

C: I can't separate it.

S: You can't separate it?

C: I can't.

S: [alarmingly long pause, confused face] (Hoskinson 2017)

Colbert reports that he has a dealbreaker for Cosby's comedy. Seinfeld not only lacks that dealbreaker but is baffled by Colbert's report.

The language of dealbreakers naturally captures the responses briefly cataloged here. Knowledge of the off-stage misdeeds of immoral artists sometimes, for some people, causes a dealbreaking aversion to the artist's work. And some people pose the moral question: *Should* this artist's immoral behavior be a dealbreaker for me?

2.2. Against a General Obligation to Cultivate or Eliminate Dealbreakers for the Work of Immoral Artists

In the wake of revelations of the immorality of an artist, some people find themselves with a dealbreaker; others do not. *Should* we cultivate or eliminate dealbreakers for the work of immoral artists? Philosophers have worked on a variety of related questions. Should the immorality of artists affect our aesthetic evaluation of their work? Does the bad behavior of artists give us moral reason to enjoy their work only in private? Or to boycott, deplatform, or cancel them?² But even if we had answers to these questions, we would not yet have an answer to the question on many minds, the question etched in Seinfeld's face: Knowing what I know, *should I have a dealbreaking aversion to this artist's work?*

The question of dealbreakers is the one that I find most personally gripping. Of the embarrassment of recent cases of artists acting badly, the one that hits closest to home for me is Morrissey. I have been a fan of the Smiths since junior high, when, as a socially isolated preteen in a new town, their songs helped. These days I wince when I see Morrissey's name mentioned in the news—what has he done now?—and I do not envy the plight of my Asian and Muslim contemporaries who have also been fans since childhood but as adults find themselves the targets of exclusionary speech from a lyricist who helped them through periods of teenage isolation (Sandhu 2011; Vasagar 2007). However, I confess that I lack a dealbreaker for the Smiths—listening to them still brings me much of the same joy it always has.

It is unlikely that my continued enjoyment of the Smiths does any harm. When I listen, I listen in private to files ripped from CDs I bought decades ago. Listening to those files does not bestow any public honor on Morrissey (Archer and Matheson 2019), nor do I direct any revenue to him, publicly endorse him as an artist, or otherwise contribute to his ability to say xenophobic things (Elicker 2021). I lack the personal relationship with Morrissey that would allow me to express my disapproval lovingly (Emerick 2016); he will never know, nor would he have reason to care, that I disapprove of his xenophobic speech. When I queue up *The Queen Is Dead* my effect on Morrissey, the art world, British politics, the United Kingdom's immigrant community, and my junior high contemporaries is precisely the same as if I were to queue up something else. Whatever decision I make about my Smiths collection, *I cannot hurt or help anyone*. Should I not feel the moral license of the impuissant? If this decision is utterly inconsequential, how could I get it wrong?

Yet I worry: *Should* Morrissey's xenophobia spoil his music for me, as it has spoiled it for Wil Wheaton? Is Wil Wheaton a better person than I am?

² For good entry points into this cluster of questions, see Willard (2021), Matthes (2022 and forthcoming), and Liao (forthcoming).

It is of course possible for someone to be socially positioned in such a way that their roles or relationships yield special obligations regarding dealbreakers for the work of specific immoral artists. But relatively few people are in such positions. For most of us, when we worry, as I worry about Morrissey, we worry that there is a *general* obligation we have failed to recognize—an obligation that gives *everyone* a moral reason to cultivate or eliminate a dealbreaker for the work of immoral artists.

I argue that there is no such general obligation. My argument develops from cases. That is, I argue that in several notorious cases of artistic immorality, there is no general obligation to cultivate or eliminate a dealbreaking aversion to these artists' works.

I begin with what is arguably the worst of the best-known cases: Bill Cosby, a man who drugged and raped scores of women, many of whom he purported to mentor (Malone 2015). In the exchange transcribed above, Jerry Seinfeld and Stephen Colbert report starkly different experiences of Cosby's comedy now that they know he is a serial rapist: Colbert has a dealbreaker for Cosby's comedy, Seinfeld does not. Is one response *morally better* than the other? I see only three possibilities: Seinfeld's response is better, or Colbert's response is better, or Seinfeld's and Colbert's are merely different in a nonmoral sense.

Possibility 1: Seinfeld's response is morally superior; Colbert should work to eliminate his dealbreaker, because there is a general obligation that gives everyone, including Colbert, moral reason to evaluate the art separate from the artist. This is the view Claire Dederer attributes to a trollish internet acquaintance in a conversation about her dealbreaker for Woody Allen's *Manhattan*. She reports that his accusation was that 'I had failed in what he saw as my task: the ability to overcome my own moralizing and pettifoggery—my own emotions—and do the work of appreciating genius' (Dederer 2017). This is the view Christopher Bartel reports that he was trained to endorse: 'Thinking back on how I have been trained to evaluate and engage with art, I feel as though I have been taught to look the other way [from the behavior of immoral artists]. . . . We must look the other way for the sake of appreciating the artist's genius. After all, artists are complex beings. Or so I was told' (Bartel 2019).

Possibility 1 is untenable. There cannot be a general obligation that gives everyone, including Colbert, a reason to eliminate their dealbreakers for Cosby's comedy, because that would wrongly indict those of Cosby's victims who have a dealbreaker for his work. Consider Sammie Mays's comments in *New York Magazine*: 'When I see a Jell-O pudding, it comes flooding back. Bill Cosby, that encounter, that one time, played a major factor in the direction my life took, toward the dark side' (Malone 2015). And consider Lili Bernard's *Democracy Now* interview. In that interview, host Amy Goodman shows Bernard, who was drugged and raped by Cosby, a clip of her guest appearance on the *Cosby Show*. Watching that clip, Bernard visibly (and audibly) wobbles on the edge of panic (Goodman 2018: 35:00–39:00). I would be shocked if anyone believes that Mays and Bernard have any reason at all to eliminate their dealbreakers for Cosby's comedy.

To be clear about the belief I am attributing to you, reader: it is not that you think that Mays and Bernard *do* have an obligation to eliminate their dealbreaking

aversion to Cosby, though that duty is currently outweighed by a special obligation to care for themselves. Rather, it is that you think there is no moral reason *at all* for them to eliminate their dealbreakers for Cosby—not even the thinnest residue of one. There is more than enough art in the world to fill up many lifetimes, and if Mays and Bernard choose to write off Cosby and find other art that speaks to them then that is perfectly fine.

But if Mays and Bernard have no moral reason to eliminate their dealbreakers for Cosby's work, then there cannot be a general obligation that gives everyone a reason to eliminate their dealbreakers for Cosby's work.

Possibility 2 is that Colbert's position is morally superior; Seinfeld should cultivate a dealbreaking aversion to Cosby because Cosby's crimes are of the sort that everyone should have a dealbreaker for his work. Possibility 2 is appealing because it rests, at least superficially, on empathic connection with victims. It may speak well of Colbert that he is so empathically close to Cosby's victims that he cannot help but see Cosby, at least partially, through their eyes. If you were sitting next to Lili Bernard while she watched the clip shown to her on *Democracy Now*, you would probably lack the psychological distance necessary to embrace it as art. That is how Colbert is all the time—Cosby's victims and the traumas he caused them are stubbornly present in Colbert's mind in a way they are not in Seinfeld's.

The method by which Seinfeld, or anyone else, could cultivate a dealbreaker like Colbert's is clear. Seinfeld could practice a Colbert-like orientation toward victims by finding ways to keep them at the front of his mind. When he is tempted to listen to his old Cosby records, he could watch Lili Bernard's *Democracy Now* interview first. He could review the criminal complaint or transcripts of testimony from Cosby's trial. He could include portraits of survivors inside the sleeves of his Cosby records. Steps such as these are likely to draw Seinfeld's perspective close enough to Cosby's victims that he will develop a dealbreaker for the performances he previously loved.

Although any of us could work to cultivate a dealbreaker for Cosby's work, it cannot be true that we all have a moral obligation to do that. First, note that in other contexts it is not the case that people have an obligation to cultivate the same dealbreakers that others have. Descriptively speaking, people have dealbreakers for all sorts of art. These dealbreakers are grounded in their own experience and if the rest of us lack them, that need not suggest insensitivity toward, or a lack of empathy for, or a failure to express solidarity with, the people who have them. For example, some parents have lost a child to suicide and as a result have a dealbreaker for *Romeo and Juliet*. Their dealbreaking aversion to depictions of teen suicide are entirely understandable; nevertheless, 'their dealbreakers do not give the rest of us moral reason to avoid' reading or watching *Romeo and Juliet* (Stoner 2020: 522). Kindness, empathy, and solidarity appropriately shape our behavior toward parents who have lost a child to suicide. (It would be at best callous to give them tickets to a production of *Romeo and Juliet* or to suggest it as a book club text.) But kindness, empathy, and solidarity do not require us to adopt their dealbreaker as their own.

In Cosby's case, kindness, empathy, and solidarity with his victims give us reason to shape the way we behave. Those values may even require us to give up Cosby's

work. But just as we can act with appropriate kindness, empathy, and solidarity toward bereaved parents while lacking a dealbreaking aversion to the depiction of teen suicide in *Romeo and Juliet*, we can act with appropriate kindness, empathy, and solidarity toward rape survivors while lacking a dealbreaker for *The Cosby Show*.

If there were a general obligation to cultivate a dealbreaker for Cosby's work, it could, of course, be grounded in something other than empathic closeness or solidarity with his victims. But it cannot be the case that there is a general obligation that gives everyone, including Seinfeld, reason to cultivate a dealbreaking aversion to Cosby. Possibility 2 is untenable because if true, it would classify morally deficient any of Cosby's victims who are able to embrace any of his work, and that is absurd.

I do not know if any of Cosby's victims are currently able to embrace any of his work. But Samantha Geimer provides a real-world example of a rape survivor who no longer has a dealbreaker for her rapist's art. In 1977, when she was thirteen years old, film director Roman Polanski drugged and raped her. For years, she has been clear that she has healed from the trauma of the rape itself and has forgiven Polanski for his crime. When he was nominated for an Oscar for *The Pianist*, she wrote an op-ed for the *Los Angeles Times*, 'Judge the Movie, Not the Man' (Geimer 2003). Her public opposition to a boycott of Polanski (Willard 2021: 47) suggests that she does not believe other people should have dealbreakers for Polanski's films.

But more than that, it appears that Geimer *herself* lacks a dealbreaking aversion to Polanski. In a 2018 interview, she recounts a phone conversation with Quentin Tarantino, who had phoned her to apologize for saying crass and stupid things about her rape. Their conversation eventually turned to movies. 'He told me that he liked Roman's early movie, "The Fearless Vampire Slayers," that he'd seen it on TV. I was like, "Oh my god, I love that movie"' (Kohn 2018). I think it unlikely that anyone believes, on reflection, that Samantha Geimer has any moral reason to cultivate a fresh dealbreaker for *The Fearless Vampire Killers*.

Two clarifications about what I am *not* saying. First, I expect that some readers are bothered by the *avidity* of Geimer's embrace of *The Fearless Vampire Killers*. Such readers may believe that Polanski's crimes are so grave that they should attenuate her aesthetic evaluation of the work and, at the very least, leave her less enthusiastic about it (Wills and Holt 2017; Bartel 2019). I am not saying such readers are right or wrong; I take no position here.

Second, I expect some readers are bothered by Geimer's *public* embrace of a Polanski film. Such readers may believe that Geimer has a duty to express solidarity with other rape survivors, and that this duty requires her to avoid watching the films of convicted rapists or, at least, to do so privately (Matthes 2022: 72). It may be that Geimer erred in announcing her affection for a Polanski film; I take no position here.

What I *do* claim—a claim I expect that you, reader, already accept—is that Geimer is not morally required to nurture the trauma of her rape, to keep it forever fresh and raw in such a way that Polanski's name on a title card is enough to collapse the requisite psychological distance from the film, preempting the

possibility of embrace. To be clear about the belief I am attributing to you: it is not that you think that Geimer does have an obligation to cultivate a dealbreaking aversion to Polanski, though that duty is currently outweighed by a special obligation to care for herself. Rather, it is that you think there is no moral reason at all for Geimer to maintain her dealbreaker for Polanski—not even the thinnest residue of one. If her process of healing and the passage of time have eroded her dealbreaker for *The Fearless Vampire Killers*, that is perfectly fine.

Possibility 2—that there is a general obligation to cultivate a dealbreaking aversion to Cosby—was appealing because it appeared to be, at least at first blush, a prescription to remain empathically close to his victims. But I have suggested two problems with possibility 2. First, sensitivity toward and solidarity with those who have suffered may require many things of us, but sensitivity and solidarity do not typically require us to adopt another person's dealbreakers as our own. Second, there is no moral problem with Cosby's *victims* lacking dealbreakers for his work, which means there cannot be a general obligation binding *everyone* to cultivate dealbreakers for his work. Just as there is no general obligation binding Colbert to eliminate his dealbreaking aversion to Cosby, there is no general obligation binding Seinfeld to cultivate one.

That leaves possibility 3: there is no *general* duty to cultivate or eliminate dealbreakers for Cosby's comedy. There could of course be special obligations of role or relationship to cultivate or eliminate dealbreakers. Perhaps close friends of Lili Bernard have a special duty of friendship to cultivate a dealbreaker so that they may share with her an important aspect of her life. Television scholars and critics may agree with Emily Nussbaum that they have a professional obligation to eliminate dealbreakers for *The Cosby Show*: 'My job is actually to respond to the art itself and find a way to do that' (Gross and Nussbaum 2019, as quoted in Matthes 2022: 43.)

But most people lack such special obligations. For those who lack special obligations, laughing at 'Noah's Ark', an early Cosby bit, is conspicuously unlike enjoying the imaginary real-snuff version of *Flower of Flesh and Blood*. For most people, having a dealbreaker for 'Noah's Ark' is conspicuously unlike having a homophobic dealbreaker for the music of Erasure. For most people, the presence or absence of a dealbreaker for Cosby's work is more like the presence or absence of a dealbreaker for *Old Yeller*, *Requiem for a Dream*, or *Romeo and Juliet*. Many people have these dealbreakers, and that is fine, but their dealbreakers do not morally bind *everyone* to cultivate similar dealbreakers. For people who lack a special obligation due to roles or relationships, the presence or absence of a dealbreaker for Cosby's comedy is mere psychological difference with no moral valence.

This pattern of argument is robust and adaptable to many controversies. As I said, the instance of the question with the most personal bite for me involves Morrissey. Do I have an obligation to cultivate the same sort of dealbreaking aversion to Morrissey's voice that Wil Wheaton already has? The answer, by the same pattern of argument, is that Wheaton and I are merely different. There cannot be a general obligation to cultivate a dealbreaking aversion to Morrissey, because that would bind those targets of his exclusionary speech who still enjoy the Smiths, and that

is absurd. Nor can there be a general duty to eliminate a dealbreaking aversion to Morrissey, because that would bind those targets of his exclusionary speech for whom his bigotry blocks access to his talent, and that too is absurd. I have no special obligations of circumstance, role, or relationship with respect to Morrissey. Neither, I assume, does Wheaton. Our different psychological responses to Morrissey's voice are morally innocent variation—they have no moral valence.

The controversy that grips the largest fraction of my students concerns several statements from J. K. Rowling widely read as transphobic. Some of my students report that learning of Rowling's views regarding sex and gender has left them with a dealbreaker for *Harry Potter*. Others report an attitude toward Rowling much like mine toward Morrissey. Neither of these groups could have a general obligation to cultivate or eliminate dealbreakers for Rowling's works. A general obligation would bind trans readers who still enjoy *Harry Potter* to cultivate a dealbreaker or bind trans readers who are unable to embrace her books to eliminate their dealbreakers. At most, my students could have special obligations of circumstance, role, or relationship to cultivate or eliminate dealbreakers for *Harry Potter*.

If my arguments from cases are sound—if there is no general obligation to cultivate or eliminate dealbreakers for Cosby, Polanski, Morrissey, or Rowling—I am inclined to entertain the possibility that this argument generalizes. It is unlikely that the off-stage immoral behavior of an artist will ever yield a general obligation to cultivate dealbreakers we lack or eliminate dealbreakers we have; only special circumstances, roles, or relationships could generate obligations for specific people to cultivate or eliminate a dealbreaking aversion to the work of specific immoral artists.

3. The Philosophical Usefulness of Dealbreakers

When a person has a dealbreaking aversion to an aspect of a work, they are blocked from embracing the aesthetically positive features of the work. More or less everyone has experienced a dealbreaker and understands, from the inside, how dealbreakers differ from the more common experience of disliking or disapproving of an aspect of an artwork. Because they are psychological responses to art that are binary (as opposed to scalar) and are in some cases appropriate targets of moral evaluation, dealbreakers are potentially useful for exploring a variety of questions at the intersection of ethics and aesthetics.

On the aesthetics side, dealbreakers could potentially support new arguments expanding the scope of debates about autonomism and ethical criticism of art. Under what conditions, if any, might audience dealbreakers for a work constitute an aesthetic flaw in that work? Imagine a work for which, descriptively speaking, many people have a dealbreaker. Or, fancifully, a work for which *everyone* has a dealbreaker. Is that a mark against the aesthetic evaluation of the work? Does it matter if it is a dealbreaker that people morally should (or should not) have?

Another: in searching for examples of special obligations to cultivate or eliminate a dealbreaker, I found it easy to identify uncontroversial cases in which someone has a special obligation to *eliminate* a dealbreaker. I have not yet identified an uncontroversial example of a situation in which someone clearly has a special

obligation to *cultivate* a dealbreaker. Is this a genuine asymmetry? If so, does that reflect anything important about the relationship between aesthetic and ethical values?

On the ethics side: dealbreakers could potentially revive, in more fruitful terms, moribund debates about trigger warnings in college classrooms. The debate about trigger warnings was from the beginning muddled by an absence of consensus about what they are intended to accomplish. Dealbreakers could focus the discussion on a clearly noble goal. No instructors *want* their students to have dealbreakers for the content they assign, because dealbreakers prevent them from accessing that content in the way we intend it. For works that are likely to invite student dealbreakers, are there teaching or framing strategies—perhaps strategies more effective than trigger warnings—that might allow more students to access the work? Should we teach techniques for overcoming unwanted dealbreakers? Should we avoid assigning works for which dealbreakers are likely to be concentrated among students from marginalized or oppressed groups?

Another: in a discussion that anticipates dealbreakers, Yuriko Saito (1998) considers the aesthetic appreciation of natural disasters. In the terms developed in this article, she argues that people do *and ought to have* dealbreakers that preempt the aesthetic appreciation of natural disasters that cause human suffering and death: ‘Some phenomena in nature overwhelm us with their endangering aspects, making it very difficult, if not impossible, for us to have enough distance, physical and/or conceptual, to listen to and aesthetically appreciate their story. Furthermore, even if we are able to do so, I question the moral appropriateness of doing so’ (Saito 1998: 109). Is she right that we should be unable to bracket our awareness of human suffering during natural disasters? If so, does this duty extend to the aesthetic appreciation of other objects and endeavors that conceptually or practically include human suffering and death? Does it extend to the aesthetic appreciation of football, or the pyramids, or the works in Andy Warhol’s *Death and Disaster* series?

These are a few of the questions that have most interested me since I began thinking in terms of dealbreakers. There are others. In the years since I first recognized in myself a distinctively dealbreaking response to some works of art, I see them lurking in the background of many questions at the intersection of ethics and aesthetics. I hope this essay demonstrates the philosophical value of dealbreakers and encourages more work using them.

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