Chapter 9

Moral depth and pictorial art

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I

In the long history of visual art, painters have frequently endowed their pictures with moral content. The art of painting was, for long periods, largely given over to the presentation of individuals, actions and events that were held to be noble or good or worthy of respect and were presented as such.

But it has seemed to some theorists that painting could do more than delineate the objects of moral regard: it could, in the work of a sufficiently accomplished painter, enhance moral understanding. In fact the belief that paintings can make a substantial contribution to ethical understanding is at work in certain historically important conceptions of art and beauty. One influential thesis was this: visible beauty intimates spiritual beauty and spiritual beauty is an aspect of the Good. The painter can create images whose visible beauty surpasses that of any natural object and can, therefore, provide the spectator with a special opportunity for the recognition of spiritual beauty. Such recognition is itself a central feature of moral existence.1 Another account of the moral vocation of pictorial art was advanced by Ruskin. The proper aim of painting is the faithful recording of visual appearance, specifically those appearances which convey the most important truths about their subject matter. And because of his convictions about the purposes of God, Ruskin took it that such truths were the foundation of moral existence.2

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1 The central figure in this tradition is Plotinus. Plotinus conceived of goodness and evil partly in aesthetic terms: the good soul is beautiful and the evil soul is ugly. See Plotinus, The Enneads, trans. Stephen MacKenna (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), I.6, V.8.
2 In an extraordinary passage, which I quote at length, Ruskin suggests that the great artist can unfold for us the deepest and rarest truths about the world, truths which are central to any proper scheme of values. In other words, they are ethical truths:

A man is known to his dog by his smell – to his tailor by his coat – to his friend by the smile: each of these know him, but how little or how much depends on the dignity of the intelligence. That which is truly and indeed characteristic of the man is known only to God. One portrait of a man may possess exact accuracy of feature, and no atom of expression; it may be, to use the ordinary terms of admiration bestowed on such portraits by those whom they please, ‘as like as it can stare’. Everybody, down to his
Each of these claims – which I have abbreviated to the point of caricature – relies upon a framework of metaphysical assumptions which most people now find incredible. Neither can be used to support the claim that pictorial art can advance moral understanding; but each is testament to the fact that serious and intelligent lovers of painting have thought that it could.

The aim of this chapter is to investigate whether the general contention – that paintings can contribute to moral understanding – can be sustained. I examine and contrast two very different works, one by Sassetta and one by Poussin. Both have overt moral content but only the Poussin, I argue, makes a contribution to moral understanding.

Sassetta’s panel, now in the National Gallery in London, shows St Francis giving his cloak to a poor soldier.3 This early fifteenth-century Siennese work depicts a well-known act of charity from the celebrated life of the saint. The moral significance of the act is indicated by various features of the painting. The man giving the cloak is dignified by a halo and the cloak itself is painted with ultramarine blue – a pigment more costly than gold leaf.4 The recipient

3 The panel comes from a series painted around 1440 and would not originally have had a title of its own. Until quite recently it was known as St Francis and the Poor Gentleman; it is now called St Francis Giving his Cloak to a Poor Knight.

4 Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 11. Baxandall shows that the commercial value of this pigment was well known and that this knowledge would have coloured the experience of the educated contemporary spectator of Sassetta’s work.
Figure 9.1 Sassetti, *Saint Francis Giving Away his Clothes and Saint Francis Dreaming* (c. 1440). Reproduced here by kind permission of the National Gallery, London.
has no shoes – so we know he is poor. In the sky, above the action, floats a small castle. It represents the heavenly city, of which St Francis is said to have had a vision the night before he gave away his rich garments. And in fact we see him sleeping, in a charming bed, located on the lower right of the panel – a fairly common pictorial response, in the period, to the problem of narrative sequence. To any but a completely uninformed spectator of the time the moral content of the picture would be transparent. Charity is a virtue; one which the spectator is enjoined to cultivate in himself and admire in others. Such a picture might well have a salutary effect upon those who contemplate it. The elegantly painted panel is a prestigious and attractive object and this may lend authority to its important message; it may incite reflection on our own charitable actions, or the lack of them. By providing an image of memorable lucidity and grace, it may help keep the idea of charity fresh and present in our minds. Such a picture might, therefore, play an interesting role in an individual’s moral existence. Nevertheless there are grounds for doubting that it does so by making a contribution to moral understanding.

There are three features of the moral content of this picture to which I want to draw attention. First, its derivative character; second, its discursive simplicity; and, third, its weak relation to the aesthetic character of the work.

When Sassetta painted this panel it was entirely orthodox to regard charity as a cardinal virtue, as indeed it is today. And St Francis was already regarded as an exemplary man. The painter is not responding to the question: why is St Francis a good man?; or, why is charity a virtue? Those questions are regarded as settled. Rather he is seeking to provide an attractive, even beautiful, image which will illustrate the conclusions: St Francis is a good man; he is doing a good deed.5

Over a long period Christianity had developed a sophisticated discourse around the idea of charity. The question why we should be charitable had been approached in various ways – for example, through interpretation of the teaching and example of Christ; through Augustine’s psychology of happiness (selfishness, he argued, makes happiness impossible). The question of what makes an action charitable had also been seriously considered. Is an action charitable only if it contributes to the good of another? In which case we need to know what use they will make of our donation. Is charity only a virtue if you miss what you give? As was well known at the time, St Francis soon gave away all his possessions and regarded complete poverty as a blessing. Is this the best kind of charity?6

5 The derivative status is not tied to the content’s being commonplace. A painter with the unusual conviction that St Francis was a very bad man, and who replaced the halo with a set of horns, could still have painted a derivative picture with respect to the moral content. The rationale for the conviction is offstage; we are presented, as it were, with an illustration of a conclusion.

6 Central to the Christian view is the parable of ‘the widow’s mite’. ‘And he [Jesus] looked up and saw the rich men casting their gifts into the treasury. And he saw also a poor widow
When we consider the picture in relation to this discourse, it is evident that it has nothing to contribute to our understanding of any of these issues. Through the use of the halo and precious pigment the picture simply asserts the commonplace conviction that St Francis performed a good deed in giving away his cloak. The moral content of the picture is thin and insubstantial in comparison with the complexity and subtlety of Christian ethics. Sassetta’s picture does not seem to engage with those issues: it does not tell us anything about the nature of charity or about its human worth. It does not enrich our understanding of the morality of the action it illustrates. It is not, morally considered, a deep work. However, it would be a mistake to see this as a failing on the part of the artist. There is no reason to believe that Sassetta sought, but failed, to endow his picture with more complex or subtle moral content.

Sassetta’s picture might stimulate moral reflections of the greatest subtlety and insight – but such reflections are the work of the spectator not achievements of the artist. To the sensitive and intelligent individual any object can be the starting point for moral reflection. In making these reflections the spectator is not grasping the content of the work but reflecting upon the content. Even in cases where an artist has tried to elaborate a more complex content the core problem of simplification remains. The Last Day in the Old Home (Tate Gallery, London) painted in 1861 by Robert Braithwaite Martineau shows a youngish man (the head of the family) who has lost his family fortune through gambling on horses. Around him we see the accumulated wealth of generations which is about to be auctioned and dispersed; but the man is unaffected; he lifts a champagne glass and teaches his young son to drink a toast. Propped against the wall is a picture of a race-horse. The content is (by the standards of painting) quite complicated and this picture is famous as an example of pictorial narrative. But in comparison with serious moral discourse the work is simple. Pictures are – in virtue of the limits of the art form – seriously restricted in their capacity to engage with moral understanding. For example, the picture cannot articulate differences in modality: are we to think that the son might imitate his father, or that he will do so – is he exposed to a corrupting force, which he may in time resist, or is he already corrupted? To what extent could the father have behaved casting in thither two mites. And he said, Of a truth I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast in more than they all: For all of these have of their abundance cast in unto the offerings of God: but she of her penury hath cast in all the living that she had’ (Matthew, 21, 1–4). The cost to the giver is, here, what matters from a moral point of view. For a helpful study of St Augustine’s psychological thesis see Hannah Arendt, Love and St. Augustine (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 18–24. Aquinas argued that the ‘natural’ purpose of material goods is the alleviation of human needs. ‘Whatever a man has in superabundance is owed by natural right to the poor for their sustenance’ (Summa Theologica, II-II, q. 66, a. 7.c. [An Aquinas Reader, ed. Mary T. Clark (New York: Fordham University Press, 1988), p. 384]).
otherwise – was he himself corrupted before he could develop any indepen-
dence of character? Such questions which are surely central to the discourse
of morality are not addressed by this picture and, perhaps, could not be
addressed by any picture.

In comparison with literature, philosophy and ordinary discussion, painting
may seem a feeble resource for moral investigation. The best a painter can
do, it might seem, is to convey attractively moral values we espouse; the worst
is to convey attractively values we reject. What seems to be impossible is that
the art of painting should itself be the arena in which moral understanding is
generated.

Sassetta was an accomplished artist but the exercise of his artistry was not
required in endowing the picture with the moral content it has. The status of
St Francis as morally exemplary is indicated by the presence of a halo. And
the halo has the symbolic value it does whether or not it is very skilfully
drawn. The importance of giving the coat is marked by the kind of pigment
used, but it did not require much skill or imagination on the part of the artist
to depict the cloak in this way. The picture has considerable aesthetic merit:
the outlines of the figures are clean and elegant; both the saint and the poor
soldier have a refinement of pose; the little building off to the right, in which
the saint is shown asleep, is delicately painted. The floating castle is rather
sweet. But we do not need to see these qualities in order to grasp the moral
content of the work.

The morally relevant features of the work are not ‘syntactically replete’ –
to use Goodman’s phrase.7 The constitutive aspects of the cloak – constitu-
tive with respect to its moral significance – are expressly and narrowly
specified. The particular outline it has, the depiction of the folds, its absolute
size on the surface of the panel could all be changed without changing its
moral significance. Of course, such changes might be detrimental to the work
considered aesthetically.

illustrates his notion of ‘syntactic repleteness’ by way of an example. Consider two visu-
ally indistinguishable images – one a momentary electrocardiogram, the other a drawing of
Mt Fujiyama by the great Japanese artist Hokusai. In the graph, only the points through
which the line passes have significance. (The ‘syntax’ of the line is such that, in principle,
between any two points there is a third, different in significance from either of the original
pair.) The colour of the line, its thickness, the quality of the paper on which it is printed, its
absolute size: these are irrelevant to its meaning. However in the case of the picture of the
mountain every one of these features is important; a slight variation in any of them would
change the character of the work. The meaning of the graph is sensitive to change only with
respect to one visual aspect. The meaning of the picture is sensitive to change with respect
to any aspect of its visual appearance: this is what Goodman means by ‘replete’.
With this sort of case clearly in view we can ask whether it represents the full extent of visual art’s capacity for moral content. Is it possible for a work of art to possess a deeper moral content; and – if so – to what extent is its possession of such content bound up with the exercise of artistry on the part of the painter? In what way, if at all, can a specifically artistic and pictorial presentation of moral content matter to the spectator with respect to moral understanding? Is painting, at best, simply an attractive mode of presenting a thought which could, in fact, be more adequately rendered in another way; or do the resources of vision, handled with artistic skill, have some specific and special contribution to make to moral understanding?

*Landscape with the Gathering of the Ashes of Phocion* was painted by Poussin in 1648. For its intended audience, the story – which was famous through Plutarch’s telling of it – would have been well known. Unjustly condemned as a traitor, the aged Phocion was forced to drink hemlock. Consequently he was denied the right to have his remains buried on Athenian soil. His body was carried to the nearby city-state of Megara and burned outside the walls and without adequate rites. The following night a loyal serving woman – Poussin, following an inadequate translation, believed it was his widow – came out to Megara and collected his ashes. And it is this scene which the picture illustrates.

It is, at first sight, a strange kind of illustration. The widow occupies only a very small part of the surface of the canvas. We can just make out the features of her face; there are white accents on her dress but much of her figure is obscure. Her compact, crouching form is in the starkest contrast to the majesty and spaciousness of the rest of the picture. This is a striking instance of a fairly well-established pictorial procedure: the subversion of visual order. The title of the work gives prominence to the woman and her action; but the city, mountains, trees and sky are visually much more eminent. It might be argued that the story from Plutarch is just a learned excuse for depicting a pleasant landscape with buildings. The classical reference raises the work from being a mere landscape to the exalted category of history painting. This was certainly true of the work of Poussin’s contemporary and friend, Claude Lorraine. It seems clear that in most of Claude’s paintings the figures are there for the sake of the landscape. The landscape has nothing to tell us about the figures.

However, there is reason to think that the relationship between the figure of the widow and the rest of the Phocion picture is more complex and interesting than this. Consider the use of the subversion of visual order in a remarkable picture, *Fishmarket with Ecce Homo* by Jan Buëckelaar (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm) dated 1570. In that work the foreground is dominated by a market scene with stalls selling fish and bread; it is only in the far distance that we can just make out the tiny figure of Christ. If we did
Figure 9.2 Nicholas Poussin, Landscape with the Gathering of the Ashes of Phocion (1648). Reproduced here by kind permission of the Board of Trustees of the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool).
not know the title of the work we might very easily fail to notice the figure of Christ. Thomas Puttfarken has drawn attention to the way such a device generates moral content:

We are invited to interpret, to assess our own position both to the fish-market in front and to the Ecce Homo behind and actively to re-evaluate the respective importance of each for us. Yet this is primarily a moral and spiritual question, and the material we need to resolve it is present and recognizable partly in us, in our knowledge of spiritual and religious hierarchies, and partly in the display of the pictorial world before us.8

In other words, the visually eminent scene is not just a chance setting in which the smaller, but morally significant, portion of the picture is lodged. Rather the reversal of expectation is used to make a point. In making sense of the picture we are invited (even required) to consider the foreground scene in the light of the sacred scene background. We see Christ’s mission being played out in an everyday setting. We are, perhaps, reminded of how our own priorities in life may display a similar reversal of proportion.

Following this suggestion, recognition of the moral content of Poussin’s picture may require that we ‘spread our attention over the rest of the picture’.9 Many elements of the picture seem, at first sight, nothing to do with its moral content. They may easily appear as padding or decoration; they make it visually interesting or attractive but have no direct bearing upon its moral content.

Consider, for example, the depiction of the part of the city which we see in the middle band of the canvas. The buildings accord with Poussin’s understanding of what a Greek city of the period might have looked like. This reconstruction gives us a sense of witness – we are with her as she performs her risky but pious task. The imaginative realism of the setting sets the tone of the picture so that we feel that we are seeing the act as it might have happened. There is, in this way, a pitiful contrast between her furtive efforts and the apparent calm and ease of the city: the marble temples, the athletes at their games. Phocion was cast out from just such an attractive architectural world; his widow – in her loyalty to him – is severed from it. The path of dignity is walked alone. In other words, our sense of her isolation is furthered by the attractiveness of the city. This is to see the city as the setting for the action. There are, however, other ways in which we may relate the city to the woman. Ways, that is, in which we may see the visually eminent features of the work as relevant to its moral content.

9 Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), p. 220. Wollheim discusses the Phocion picture but this phrase occurs in his consideration of another Poussin work, the *Landscape with Diogenes*. 
Poussin regularly gave the buildings in his pictures a symbolic significance. In *The Exposition of Moses*, of 1654 (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford) for example, we see, in the background, the famous form of the Castel St Angelo – originally built in Rome as the tomb of the Emperor Hadrian; it eventually became the papal fortress. Its presence in Egypt many hundreds of years before its construction is not some absurd anachronism or geographical oversight. On the contrary, it alludes to the belief that the Church of Rome is the direct and true descendant of Moses. God’s protection of Moses (seen in this picture at the point of maximum vulnerability as he is set upon the waters of the Nile) is presented as a conspicuous moment within a general providential history of the Church. The physical fact of the building is a final material realisation, a completion, of God’s care of the Church.

The ordered, beautiful city which rises above Phocion’s widow stands in a similar relationship to her action. The perfect city is the realisation of the woman’s action. Her loyalty to a good man and her refusal to bow to an unjust proscription, her maintenance of an ideal in the face of persecution, is the moral foundation of the city. By her action she participates in and helps to bring into being the perfect human community; and by our appreciation of the painting we participate too.

Poussin has clearly sought that we should find the scene compellingly attractive. We are required to see this not just as a depiction of a particular city but, in addition, as an image of the perfect city – the built expression of the good society. And, crucially, this is intimated not through convention or by reliance upon abstract learning. The artist has worked to make this vision appealing: he has painted the green lawns before the temple with an eye to the appeal of their cool shade, he has grouped the buildings to feed our yearning for such a habitat. Much of the city is hidden from us, behind the trees and the rocks; we see the tops of towers and domes behind the central, high out-crop of rock. In reality the picture is 178 cm in width and 116 cm in height. This scale allows the spectator to see much of the detail which is inevitably obscured in reproduction. Gazing at the picture we might spend much time looking at the actions of the figures by the water, we might make our imaginative way in between the buildings.

When we attend to the picture in this way the city is seen as a product of the woman’s devotion and respect for a dead and noble man. Her action encapsulates, enacts in microcosm, precisely the qualities upon which the good society is founded, and it is those qualities which are themselves embodied in the buildings. It took artistic skill and imagination to endow the painting with this character.

What is it that makes her action seem noble? One of the things is its harmony with a vision of social order and of human life – not the lives we actually do lead but the lives we feel a longing to live. The spectator is invited to an aesthetic response – a response to the beauty and human dignity of the city – which is itself related to the way in which the woman’s action
is seen. It takes imagination to see the city not just as a backdrop but additionally as an evocation of certain values which are then also recognised in her conduct.

This is a work which is composed to a very high degree. Within the picture every element is visually and intellectually justified in terms of its role in relation to the rest. But our apprehension of this, in our engagement with the painting is, in turn, relevant to our engagement with its depicted content. The woman is an element within a pictorial scheme which is much larger than her. She does not look up at the sky or the trees or the city. Her attention is wholly given over to a patch of dust, over which she crouches in the archetypal posture of those who lack power and dignity. We are not invited to think of her as aware of the splendour which the artist has created around her. We see what she does not see – the grandeur of her action.

III

The notion of ‘seeing from’ – where the position from which we see is psychological, rather than spatial – is crucial to an understanding of how certain pictures work. I want to invoke this perceptual process to add one more layer to our understanding of the Poussin picture. But to give some precision to this notion I want first to examine it in relation to another, much simpler, picture where it is exemplified with great clarity.

One of the few portraits by Eugene Delacroix, one which hangs in the National Gallery in London, depicts a young man of twenty-eight, the artist’s friend and fellow painter, Baron Schwitzer. The Baron is shown close up standing on a terrace, and behind and below him runs a quiet garden, with cypress trees in the distance. The mood of the garden, seen at dusk, is sombre but tranquil; it is redolent of quiet and serious self-absorption. And it seems clear that the choice of setting and the mood it conveys is not accidental. It is not meant, as another painter might have meant it, simply to record the particular setting in which the artist happened to see his friend. It displays an aspect of the man: the mood of the garden is the man’s mood. More than that (and this is the point I wish to hold onto) it is designed to frame our contemplation of the man. That is, we must be in touch with such a frame of mind if we are to see him as the painter intends. It is when we see him from within a certain attitude – from within a certain frame of mind – that we are in a position to appreciate his character and qualities.

It is a general truth of our engagement with other people that their virtues and attractive qualities may easily pass us by if we do not find the right point of view from which to see them as individuals. Snobbery, for example, is the tendency to see people exclusively from the point of view of social standing; and from this point of view many aspects of personality are irrelevant and invisible. This is a crude instance of a process which is often much more subtle. We could imagine, for example, that when the Baron walks out of
Delacroix’s picture and goes into dinner he might end up with people who will think him dull and unimpressive. Their engagement with him (we might suppose) will be framed by their mood of frivolity and excited vanity. Seen from this point of view the Baron is uninteresting. Delacroix’s message to the dinner guests is this: calm down, think of the mood of which the garden is expressive, remember or imagine what it is like to feel drawn to such an atmosphere. Now see what you can make of Baron Schwitzer.

The point can be put more formally in the following way. The portrait, in its landscape element, expresses a mood. To recognise the expressive aspect of the picture is to be in a particular frame of mind. From within that frame of mind the spectator then sees the Baron, the ‘subject’ of the portrait. Seen from within this frame of mind the Baron appears interesting, attractive and sympathetic.

In Poussin’s *Ashes of Phocion* the same relation is at work. The visually eminent portions of the work have a complex expressive aspect. The picture asks us to view the woman’s action from within the frame of mind constituted by recognition of that expressive aspect. We see what she does through the atmosphere of the picture. This atmosphere is one of solemnity, repose, and the sober awareness of the difficulties of existence. An emotional and cognitive ‘background’ is constructed in the picture. It matters for the moral content of the picture that the evening sky glimmers with the last light of afternoon, that pale clouds are streaked with darker bands of colour, that the clumps of trees on each side of the foreground have a monumental and gloomy quality. The massive rocks above the temple have a grand solidity and permanence. It is by these devices that the spectator’s sense of solemnity and grandeur is elicited. They help generate the mood within recognition of which we are invited to contemplate the woman’s action.

In this picture it is only via aesthetic experience that we can properly grasp the moral content. It is only through appreciation of its composition, of mood and atmosphere, of the visual appeal of the city, of the grandeur of the trees and the rocks, that we can come to recognise the moral content that the work has. It follows from this that changes in these qualities would change the moral content of the picture. If the sky looked very different, or the city

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10 It has widely – and correctly – been argued that the criterion of recognising the expression of emotion in a painting cannot be that the work puts the spectator into the state of being in that emotion. There is disagreement about the correct way to specify the state of mind that does constitute recognition of the expressive aspect of the picture. Nevertheless an adequate elucidation of that state of mind will have to accommodate at least the following: that in seeing the expressive aspect, the spectator is richly aware of what it is to be in the emotional condition expressed by the work. Whether this awareness draws upon recollection or projection or on some other imaginative capacity remains in dispute. The point I am concerned with does not require a precise elucidation of the condition of recognition. It relies only on a feature of that state, a feature which more detailed accounts try to explain. Namely that there is some species of intimate awareness of the character of the emotion which the work expresses.
were not so noble and appealing, then the woman’s action would not be framed in the same way. The features of this work by which its moral content is constituted are syntactically replete.

The Poussin picture, therefore, stands at the opposite extreme from Sassetti’s panel – with respect to the way in which moral content is generated in the picture and to the extent to which the work contributes to moral understanding. Clearly they do not exhaust the possible ways in which pictures can have moral content.11

IV

One of the central questions which any account of moral content in art has to face is this: what explains our continued return to a picture? Why do we go back again and again to the same work? This is an important feature of our actual relationship with works of art. If we think of the picture as propounding a particular moral content, we will (as soon as we appreciate the work) fully grasp that content. Why should we return to it? And if we return specifically to the moral aspect of the picture this raises questions about the nature of that aspect. What do we return to the picture for?

The notion of state of mind – elicited by recognition of the work’s expressive character – from which we regard the depicted action, however, provides a strategy of explanation. We may value a particular frame of mind but find it hard to retain in ordinary life; it might be under threat internally and externally. Think of the artist who strives to make visual objects which express tranquillity and ease but who is – in fact – generally subject to bile and irritation. The power of the work lies not in its presentation of his ordinary state but in its capacity to give a point of refuge and point of return to something which is, precisely, vulnerable and fleeting – yet highly valued. The return, therefore – the draw – is to be understood partly with reference to the frame of mind which the picture encapsulates – at once valuable and vulnerable – making its reappropriation via the painting both intelligible and desirable.

This corresponds to a general feature of moral psychology. Suppose, for example, one has committed some act of folly which might well be deprecated

11 One obvious gap should at least be mentioned: the role of observation and depiction. The Phocion picture does not convey its moral content primarily by depiction of the action with which it is concerned. Of course the widow is depicted but we could gain no moral understanding at all from scrutiny of that portion of the canvas on which her figure is sketched. It is not what the woman looks like which matters, but the point of view from which we contemplate her. The contrast when we consider a painter like Rembrandt is dramatic. Consider the late self-portrait in the Wallace Collection. The picture’s moral significance depends almost entirely upon the visual scrutiny to which Rembrandt has subjected his own face, and on the way in which this scrutiny is recorded in the created image. This kind of observation is a natural part of moral experience, not least because the look on another person’s face is linked to the experience of love, sympathy, tenderness and remorse.
by others. Acutely aware of one’s own blameworthy state one is met by another with ordinary kindness. From within the frame of mind constituted by self-blame that person’s ordinary decency seems especially admirable and morally valuable. Some time later, restored to high self-esteem, one might look upon ordinary kindness as unremarkable and uninteresting. In this later state one’s recognition of the moral value of ordinary kindness is blunted. However, if one could hold onto the insight gained in that earlier acute state one would benefit from an increased sensitivity to the real moral worth of that kindness. By ‘holding on’ what is meant is a rich awareness of what it is to be in that earlier state.

V

So far this chapter has been concerned with describing the way in which moral content can be achieved within a picture – how the possession of a particular content can depend upon the exercise of many pictorial resources. I want now to proceed to consider the ways, if any, in which we could think of such content as ‘deep’. This is to move to the question of why, or how, it might matter to us that paintings can articulate moral content in the way I have suggested they can. I don’t pretend, in what follows, to give a full analysis of the notion of depth. I only aim to bring out one strand of this highly complex, and rather vague, term.

In discussion of the painting by Sassetta I remarked that the rationale for the moral evaluation (that charity is a virtue) was not itself in any way present in the picture. But what exactly is the ‘rationale’ for a moral evaluation? One helpful way of expanding upon this idea has been advanced by Charles Taylor, in his account of what it is to understand a moral evaluation.

What is involved in seeing the evaluative point of a given term? What kind of understanding do you need to grasp it? There seem to be two orders of consideration which interlock in most cases to form the background of a term. First one needs an understanding of the kind of social interchange, the common purposes or mutual needs, how things can go well or badly between people in the society where this term is current. And second one needs to grasp what I have been calling the qualitative discriminations that the people concerned make; one needs to get a sense, in other words, of their perception of the good.12

The ‘rationale’ for a moral evaluation places that evaluation within a framework; it paints in ‘the background picture which underlies our moral intuitions’.13 That background is constituted by a set of beliefs, practices,
experiences, and concerns. Taken together these make sense of an evaluation – make sense of why a person (living within that framework) might take certain sorts of behaviour to be extremely important and good. The framework may be tacit; it may be so obvious that we do not need to refer to it; it may be that certain individuals (even exemplary ones) are ignorant of, or uninterested in, the articulation of the framework. The individual may simply accept the evaluation or precept without having any curiosity as to its rationale. This is naive goodness. What I am calling the depth of someone’s moral convictions is just their grasp of the rationale for those convictions: their awareness of how those convictions are sustained and informed by the framework.

Much that is relevant to the rationale for moral evaluation is either lost upon us or something of which we are only vestigially, or transiently, aware. It is a standard feature of moral phenomenology that we move in and out of appreciation of many aspects of experience and thought which are, overall, relevant to our moral outlook and values. We keep on forgetting things, underplaying what we – for a time – saw to be important, exaggerating, defending, ignoring. The framework is, therefore, often not available to us – even though it is present in a distorted or diminished form. Part of the framework is constituted by certain kinds of experience – by the experience of finding certain sorts of states of affairs desirable or noble or inspiring. We can understand Poussin’s picture as articulating this kind of experiential background or framework. Our sense of why it is important (to the woman, or to Poussin) to undertake this action is given a rationale via the presentation of the city, the sky, the trees – and specifically via the mood and atmosphere these convey. It is a crucial step in the discussion to recognise that these elements are not presented as statements but as experiences (the experience of recognising the expressive character of various aspects of the picture). In other words, the specific quality of the rationale would be lost on someone who knew (but did not see) that the trees are lowering, that the sky is heavy and glowing, that the city is beautiful. The rationale is built up as a set of experiences which the picture affords the attentive, sensitive and patient spectator. Such features of the work – features with which only a highly accomplished artist could endow a picture – are crucial to the presentation of a rationale for its central moral commitment.