Art and Morality

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LECTURE 2

Autonomism and Ethicism

Answers to the ethical question

The Ethical Question: Does the ethical value of a work of art contribute to its aesthetic or artistic value, and if so how?

Autonomism – the ethical value of an artwork is irrelevant to its aesthetic/artistic value.

Ethicism – the ethical value of an artwork does affect its aesthetic/artistic value; ethical value can enhance the aesthetic/artistic value of a work, and ethical disvalue can diminish it.

Contextualism – the ethical value of an artwork does affect its aesthetic/artistic value; but the nature of the connection varies in different contexts. Contra ethicism, sometimes ethical features are an aesthetic/artistic defect, and sometimes unethical features enhance the aesthetic/artistic value.


Arguments for autonomism

1. The common denominator argument

See: Carroll, ‘Art and Ethical Criticism’, and also Gaut, Art, Emotion and Ethics, p.67.

- Any criterion for evaluating an artwork must be applicable to all artworks (‘art should be beholden to standards universally applicable to all art’ – Carroll, ‘Art and Ethical Criticism’ p.352)
- Ethical criticism is not applicable to all artworks; ‘pure orchestral music’ and ‘abstract visual designs’ are artworks, but cannot be ethically evaluated (Carroll, ‘Art and Ethical Criticism’, p.352)
  - So ethical criticism is inappropriate.

This is obviously a terrible argument:

- The first premise is not very plausible. There is no general reason to think that the criteria for evaluating something must be generally applicable. Moreover, it doesn’t
seem specifically plausible in the case of art – surely we should use different criteria for evaluating the Sex Pistols, the Egyptian Pyramids and Rembrandt’s *Girl Sleeping* (Carroll, ‘Art and Ethical Criticism’, pp.357-358).

- Carroll claims that the second premise is an ‘undeniable fact’ (Carroll, ‘Art and Ethical Criticism’, p.352). But recall Adorno’s claims about music, discussed last week.

2. The incomprehensibility argument

An autonomist could argue that the ethical value of an artwork is irrelevant simply because it is impossible to make sense of the idea that an artwork has ethical value. (Cf. Oscar Wilde’s much-quoted quip: ‘There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all.’) The most plausible way to defend this claim is to argue that ethical assessment only makes sense when attributed to agents. So although we may condemn Nabokov as immoral for writing *Lolita*, it makes no sense to condemn *Lolita* itself for being immoral. (For a discussion of a similar argument, see Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, pp.69-76). Compare with the debate about expression in music (see: Matravers, *Art and Emotion*; Levinson, ‘Musical Expressiveness’; Davies, ‘Artistic Expression and the Hard Case of Pure Music’).

Two difficulties:

- We often seem to use moral language to praise or condemn things other than agents, e.g. ‘the bedroom tax is evil’. Of course, these too could be merely metaphorical uses, but that’s at least not obvious.
- There seems to be many ways to make sense of the idea that artworks have ethical value, which we looked at last week. Many of these seem, on the face of it, relatively commonsensical.

3. The aesthetic argument

A more hopeful argument:

- Aesthetic value should be understood in terms of aesthetic experience, which in turn should be understood as disinterested experience. (This way of thinking about aesthetics is often associated with Kant. For further discussion see: Kant, ‘The Analytic and the Beautiful’ in *The Critique of Judgement*; Beardsley, ‘The Aesthetic Experience’ in his *The Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays*; Dickie, ‘The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude’.)
- Artistic value should be understood in terms of aesthetic value (i.e., a work is artistically valuable to the extent that it produces a disinterested aesthetic experience).
- Insofar as we engage with the ethical content of an artwork, we are not engaging with it disinterestedly.
- Therefore, a work’s ethical value is irrelevant to its aesthetic/artistic value.
Ways of criticizing this argument:

- Deny that the notion of disinterestedness underlies an appropriate characterization of the aesthetic experience.
- Deny that aesthetic experience – whether or not it is bound up with disinterestedness – should underscore our understanding of aesthetic or artistic value.
- Deny that appropriate characterization of ethical value, on the one hand, and disinterestedness, on the other, excludes the possibility that we can engage with ethical value in a way that is disinterested.

4. The negative approach

An autonomist might argue that, even if there is no good ‘positive’ reason to think that the ethical value of an artwork is always aesthetically/artistically irrelevant, there is simply no reason to think that the ethical value is aesthetically/artistically irrelevant. If correct, this is a perfectly plausible way to defend autonomism. Establishing it, however, depends upon looking at the arguments for ethicism and contextualism and finding them wanting.

Arguments for ethicism

1. The moral beauty argument

One argument, offered by Gaut, is as follows:

- Artworks that are moral are so in virtue of having a ‘manifested author’ with morally virtuous traits. Similarly, artworks that are immoral are so in virtue of having a ‘manifested author’ with vicious traits.
- If a character trait is morally virtuous, then it is beautiful; if a character trait is immoral, then it is ugly (see Gaut, Art, Emotion and Ethics, p.120).
- If a trait is beautiful, then it has positive aesthetic value; if a trait is ugly, then it has negative aesthetic value.
- Therefore, if a work is moral, it is to that extent more beautiful; and if an artwork is immoral, it is to that extent more ugly.

Note: by manifested author or artist, Gaut simply means the artist to whom we attribute qualities that are present in the artwork. He says:

‘The manifested artist is ascribed the qualities that are possessed by the artistic acts performed in the work. The manifested artist is, then, the artist as manifested in the artist acts performed in the work.’ (Gaut, Art, Emotion and Ethics, p.72)

Criticisms:

- It could be argued that Gaut has an implausible understanding of the ethical value of an artwork. See alternatives from last week’s lecture.
- Why think that moral virtues are beautiful and vices ugly? Gaut’s argument for this basically consists of the observation that sometimes the language of beauty is used to
describe virtuous people. But by itself this certainly doesn’t seem sufficient to motivate such a strong claim about the affinity between these two evaluative categories. (For his argument, see Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, pp. 114-127).

- Even if there is a *sense* in which moral traits are beautiful, it doesn’t follow that this is the *same sense* in which we use beauty as a term of aesthetic praise.
- Consider the third premise: ‘If a trait is beautiful, then has positive aesthetic value; if a trait is ugly, then it has negative aesthetic value.’ It could be argued that (a) it is straight-forwardly false, sometimes ugly things can have positive aesthetic value or (b) although beauty is an aesthetic value, this does not mean that it is a better artwork.

2. The ‘merited response’ argument

An argument that has various slightly different formulations. I will outline the most discussed version from Gaut (see Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics* pp.227-252).

- Artworks often prescribe certain responses.
- If the response that is prescribed by an artwork is unmerited, then that is a failure of the artwork. It is, to some extent, less aesthetically and artistically valuable.
- Unethical prescribed responses are always unmerited. This is because it reflects badly on us if we engage with the immoral features of artworks, so we have a reason not to do so. Gaut says: ‘I can criticize someone for taking pleasure in others’ pain, for being amused by sadistic cruelty, for being angry at someone who has done no wrong, for desiring the bad. The same is true when responses are directed at fictional events, for these responses are actual, not just imagined ones’ (Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, p.231).
- Therefore, ethical defects are aesthetic/artistic defects.

This establishes ‘negative’ part of the ethicists’ claim, i.e. that ethical disvalue lessens aesthetic/artistic value. Gaut also thinks that a parallel argument can be offered to support the ‘positive’ claim that ethical value enhances a work of art (see Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, p.233).

Criticisms

- It is not obvious that unmerited responses necessarily constitute aesthetic/artistic defects. Can something be a failure in its own terms but nonetheless a success?
- Is it true that it reflects badly on me if I fictionally engage with an immoral artwork? Some argue that this is too puritanical.
- It could be argued that engaging with immoral artworks does indeed reflect badly on you, but only if you do it for the wrong reason. Engaging with immoral artworks in order to gain insight into an immoral world-view ‘from the inside’, thus enabling more sophisticated engagement with and criticism of that world-view, might be a good reason to engage with them.
3. The distraction argument

Finally, an argument from Noel Carroll (see Carroll, ‘Moderate Moralism’):

- If a feature of a work distracts the audience from engaging with work in the intended way (as Carroll sometimes puts it, if it failures to ‘secure uptake’), then that feature is an aesthetic defect. This is because it constitutes a failure of the work on its own terms.
- Immoral features of an artwork at least sometimes distract audiences in this sense, and so immoral features of a work are (at least sometimes) aesthetic defects.

He uses the example of American Psycho:

‘The author intended it as a satire on the rapacious eighties in the USA. He presented a serial killer as the symbol of the vaunted securities marketeer of Reagonomics. However, the serial killings depicted in the novel are so graphically brutal that readers are not able to get past the gore in order to savour the parody… that defect was … an aesthetic defect, inasmuch as it compromised the novel on its own terms.’ (Carroll, ‘Moderate Moralism’, p.232)

Criticisms:

- As we saw above, it is not obvious that we can move from the claim that an artwork is a failure on its own terms to the claim that an artwork is a failure.
- American Psycho doesn’t seem to be a very good example since (a) it is often held up as one of the great modern novels, rather than a failure, and (b) it is unclear whether what is distracting is the immoral content or the grossness.
- Even if people are distracted by the content of American Psycho, this might seem to be a rare case. So, at best, this argument is very limited. Carroll shifts from the actual responses of audiences of an artwork, to the hypothetical responses of morally sensitive persons:

  ‘Movies that thrilled people may come to disgust them morally. And even if they do not disgust the majority of viewers, the films are still flawed, inasmuch as they remain likely to fail to engender the planned response in morally sensitive viewers.’ (Carroll, ‘Moderate Moralism’, p.233)

But why should we care about the perhaps merely hypothetical reactions of morally sensitive viewers?

- It could be argued that when readers find American Psycho distracting, the fault lies with them, not with American Psycho. Aesthetic merit should be determined by the judgement of a (perhaps idealized) critic who has a strong stomach, and an ability to enter dark places. If you fall short of that, then it is you who is at fault not the artwork. This claim lines up with some of the arguments for contextualism, to be explored next week.