MORALITY AND ART

Lecture 2: Autonomism

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MORALITY AND ART: 3 QUESTIONS

• Can (and should) an artwork be assessed ethically in the first place?

• Are the ethical features of an artwork ever aesthetically relevant?

• If so, what’s the *relation* between a work’s aesthetic properties and ethical properties?
SERRANO’S IMMERSION (PISS CHRIST) (1987)
MORALITY AND ART: AUTONOMISM

- Formalist ➔ Autonomism

*The ethical assessment of artworks is always irrelevant to their aesthetic assessment*
MORALITY AND ART: AUTONOMISM

• Formalist ➞ Autonomism

The ethical assessment of artworks is always irrelevant to their aesthetic assessment

Radical

Moderate
MORALITY AND ART: RADICAL AUTONOMISM

Radical autonomists hold that the ethical evaluation of artworks is “always conceptually confused” (Carroll, 2000: 360)

• Can (and should) an artwork be assessed ethically? NO
• Are ethical features of an artwork ever aesthetically relevant? NO
• If ethical features of an artwork are ever aesthetically relevant, what is the relation between these ethical values and the artwork’s aesthetic value? n/a, there is none
MORALITY AND ART: RADICAL AUTONOMISM

The Common Denominator argument

- Only those features common to all art that are the essential defining features of art sit in the realm of the aesthetic
- Whatever the value of art is, it should be something such that every artwork can be assessed in accordance with it
- Much art has nothing to do with morality, so this universal standard cannot be an ethical one: ethics cannot be the correct standard to assess art against
MORALITY AND ART: RADICAL AUTONOMISM

Problems

1. Equivocation The fact that some art is not concerned with morality directly may indicate that some art is not an appropriate object of ethical criticism. But it does not follow from this that ethical criticism is not appropriate for any art. Some art does have ethical features, so with respect to that kind of art, ethical criticism can be a legitimate practice.
Problems

2. Assumes a false premise We can deny that there exists this global criterion of aesthetic value in the first place, and so radical autonomists haven’t shown that ethical criticism is illegitimate when assessing art’s value.
The Argument from Cognitive Triviality

- The ethical criticism of art supposedly involves extracting moral theses from works and treating them as knowledge claims, and then commending them as moral *insights* or condemning them as *defects*, increasing or flawing our moral knowledge.
- But in general, the moral messages of artworks are normally just truisms and not insights or discoveries.
- So, art does not impart new knowledge, and so can’t be valued cognitively.
- And so, ethical criticism is beside the point, because it lacks an object (moral claims).
MORALITY AND ART: RADICAL AUTONOMISM

Problems

1. Too narrow a view of knowledge Artworks can offer us non-trivial knowledge-how, even if its expressed knowledge-that is trivial
MORALITY AND ART: RADICAL AUTONOMISM

Problems

2. Too narrow a conception of education “the educative value of art resides in its potential to cultivate our moral talents” e.g. fictions can engage readers in a process of ethical judgment and forming moral evaluations of characters and situations, keeping “our powers of moral judgment lubricated” (Carroll, 2000: 366, 367)

= Noel Carroll’s ‘cultivation approach’ to art

• Fictions and other artworks can help us with the employment or usage of abstract moral concepts
MORALITY AND ART: RADICAL AUTONOMISM

Problems

2. Too narrow a conception of education So, the radical autonomist’s objection about trivial ethical maxims in art can be denied as an objection to the *educative potential of art*

- Art doesn’t teach us new maxims but “rather how to apply them to concrete cases, engaging and exercising our emotions and imagination, our powers of perceptual discrimination, moral understanding, and reflection, in ways that sustain and potentially enlarge our capacity for moral judgment” (Carroll, 2000: 368-369)
The Argument from Immoral Art

- Radical Autonomism explains why lovers of art tend to agree that some immoral works are excellent, and refrain from saying a work is good because it’s just ethically good.
- This suggests that morality has no role to play in assessing artworks.
- “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.” (Oscar Wilde, 1890)
MORALITY AND ART: RADICAL AUTONOMISM

Problems

All things considered judgments An immoral work can still be brilliant because its ethical defects are *outweighed* by its other merits such as its formal merits

- The ethical critic needn’t be forced to reduce all artistic value to something it is not: we needn’t presume that all art is susceptible to moral standards (*aka* the Radical Moralist)

- The Radical Autonomist may concede and admit that ethical criticism of some art is legitimate – BUT it is still distinct from ‘aesthetic criticism’: *ethical value is still independent from artistic value*
MORALITY AND ART: MODERATE AUTONOMISM

Moderate autonomists hold that artworks *can* be legitimately criticised or applauded for having an ethical blemish or merit, but this blemish or merit is conceptually distinct from an artistic or aesthetic blemish or merit: the two realms are “always necessarily independent” (Carroll, 2000: 373)

• “the *aims* of art – to engage and please the intended audience – are different from, and at odds with, the goals of moral enlightenment and elevation” (Anderson & Dean, 1998: 151)
MORALITY AND ART: MODERATE AUTONOMISM

An indirect relation between aesthetic and ethical value

- It is consistent with Moderate Autonomism to hold that the moral character of a work can affect its aesthetic value, so an immoral work may be poorly executed, but there’s no internal or direct relation between the moral and aesthetic.

- While ethical qualities don’t matter aesthetically directly, these ethical attitudes may possess other qualities, like unification or coherence or complexity, which can contribute to the aesthetic value of a work (Gaut, 2007: 77).
An indirect relation between aesthetic and ethical value

- E.g. Milton’s moral characterisation of Christianity manifested in the poem’s imagery might betray clumsy and crude poetic devices, thereby marring its aesthetic unity and coherence, and thus diminishing its aesthetic value.

- But it’s not the case that the work is marred because of its morality – its marred because of its clumsy structure, which may happen to be related to a moral standpoint.

- “The moral content of a work can contribute to or detract from the aesthetic aspects of a work” BUT, “it is never the moral component of the criticism as such that diminishes or strengthens the value of an artwork qua artwork” (Anderson and Dean, 1998: 152)
MORALITY AND ART: MODERATE AUTONOMISM

• Can (and should) an artwork be assessed ethically? YES

• Are ethical features of an artwork ever aesthetically relevant? Not really. We can evaluate a work ethically, BUT this has no bearing on the artwork’s value as art: a work’s ethical qualities are irrelevant to the work’s aesthetic merit but they may indirectly affect the work’s value

• If ethical features of an artwork are ever aesthetically relevant, what is the relation between these ethical values and the artwork’s aesthetic value? At most, there’s an ‘indirect relation’
An advantage of Moderate Autonomism is that they allow and easily explain the frequency with which ethical and aesthetic values in artworks come into tension or conflict.

E.g. *Lolita* “these are cases in which one’s moral sensibilities and one’s aesthetic sensibilities are in conflict. These are not cases in which there is a conflict internal to one’s aesthetic dimension.” (Anderson & Dean 1998: 164-166)
Problem Against the indirect relation

(a) The problem of imaginative resistance If the moral character of a work in some way prevents us from undertaking the imaginings and attitudes prescribed to us by the artist, then it’s tempting to think that the work fails on its own artistic terms – it is an aesthetic matter.
Problem *Against the indirect relation*

(b) The nature of this tension between ethical and aesthetic value

Berys Gaut argues that judging a work to have such a tension between the moral and aesthetic is an aesthetic matter – “the nature of the judgment on which possibly conflicting moral and aesthetic values bear is clearly an aesthetic judgment” (Gaut, 2007: 81)
Problem **Against the indirect relation**

(b) The nature of this tension between ethical and aesthetic value

A. W. Eaton: such a tension is an aesthetic feature (an aesthetic *achievement* of the work) supporting *Moderate Immoralism*

• “the capacity to make an audience feel and desire things inimical to their considered views and deeply held principles is for this very reason and to this extent an aesthetic achievement. In this way, moral flaws of a particular kind can make a significant contribution to a work's aesthetic value.” (Eaton, 2012: 281)
• To properly refute Moderate Autonomism we must provide an argument that shows that the relation between aesthetic value and ethical value is more than just a merely indirect one – that, contra Moderate Autonomism, some ethical features of works can be aesthetically relevant and so can constitute aesthetic merits or flaws.