MORALITY AND ART

Lecture 3: Ethicism

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MORALITY AND ART: RECAP

**Autonomism**

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

- *Radical Autonomism*: artworks cannot even possess intrinsic ethical features, so ethical assessment of them cannot even get off the ground.

- *Moderate Autonomism*: concedes that ethical assessment of art is possible, because artworks can and do possess ethical properties, but these ethical features are not relevant to the work’s aesthetic value.
MORALITY AND ART: THE POSITIONS

- **Moralism** Radical forms (Tolstoy) and Moderate forms (Moderate Moralism – Carroll, and Ethicism – Gaut)
- **Autonomism** Radical and Moderate forms (Anderson & Dean)
- **Immoralism** Radical and Moderate forms (Eaton and Kieran)
MORALITY AND ART: THE (RE)POSITIONS

- **Moralism** Radical forms (Tolstoy) and Moderate forms (Moderate Moralism – Carroll, and Ethicism – Gaut)
- **Autonomism** Radical and Moderate forms (Anderson & Dean)
- **Immoralism** Radical and Moderate forms (Eaton and Kieran)
MORALITY AND ART: THE (RE)POSITIONS

- **Ethicism** (Remaining weaker Moralist position)
- **Autonomism** (Radical and Moderate forms - Anderson & Dean)
- **Contextualism** (Moderate Moralism and Moderate Immoralism)
MORALITY AND ART: THE (RE)POSITIONS

- **Ethicism** (Remaining weaker Moralist position)
- **Autonomism** (Radical and Moderate forms - Anderson & Dean)
- **Contextualism** (Moderate Moralism and Moderate Immoralism)
MORALITY AND ART: ETHICISM

“A work is always aesthetically flawed in so far as it possesses an ethical demerit that is aesthetically relevant; and a work is always aesthetically meritorious in so far as it possesses an ethical merit that is aesthetically relevant” (Gaut, 2007: 52)

• Monotonic and symmetric relation between aesthetic and ethical value (the relation always goes: ethical flaw-aesthetic flaw, ethical merit-aesthetic merit)
MORALITY AND ART: ETHICISM

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

• Are ethical features of an artwork ever aesthetically relevant? YES: Moderate or weaker forms of moralism such as Ethicism say that the ethical features of a work are only sometimes relevant, and there are other values that can affect a work’s aesthetic merit: ethical ones are neither necessary nor sufficient for a work to have aesthetic merit overall.

• If the ethical features of an artwork are ever aesthetically relevant, what is the relation between these ethical values and the artwork’s aesthetic value? It is always the case that, when aesthetically relevant, an ethical flaw = aesthetic flaw, and ethical merit = aesthetic merit.
MORALITY AND ART: ETHICISM & PRO TANTO PRINCIPLES

• Your action may be morally good in so far as its keeping a promise, but morally bad in so far as its failing to help someone in need.

• Honesty and kindness are examples of intrinsic moral merits “acts are always morally good in so far as they are honest and in so far as they are kind” And, telling a lie is an intrinsic moral flaw (Gaut, 2007: 62)

• But, you might only be able to perform a morally good action by doing something morally bad: such as being kind by lying.

• Here, your overall act of kindness has an extrinsic flaw: It has a flaw because lying undermines the presence of some other good ethical quality (like truthfulness) but, this is an extrinsic flaw because it’s not a necessary feature of being kind that you lie (it’s possible to be kind without lying!)
MORALITY AND ART: ETHICISM & PRO TANTO PRINCIPLES

• A work might be beautiful and is therefore aesthetically good in so far as it’s beautiful, but it doesn’t follow that an ugly work would be made aesthetically better overall by making it more beautiful.
MORALITY AND ART: ETHICISM & PRO TANTO PRINCIPLES

• A touch of humour and dramatic tension, for example, are both intrinsic aesthetic merits (they’re always a good thing in themselves)

• But in some cases they may each be extrinsic flaws: a touch of humour in a thriller/horror film will constitute an extrinsic flaw if it reduces or ruins the dramatic tension in the thriller, even though humour in itself is a good thing (Gaut, 2007: 63)
MORALITY AND ART: ETHICISM & PRO TANTO PRINCIPLES

- So, Ethicism is formulated with *pro tanto* principles, in terms of ‘the work has some aesthetic merit’ rather than in terms of ‘the work is aesthetically good’ to avoid slip into talk of overall principles.

- There’s a plurality of aesthetic values, and Ethicism denies that ethical merits are either necessary or sufficient for an artwork to be aesthetically good overall (Gaut, 2007: 66).
MORALITY AND ART: ETHICISM
3 MAIN ARGUMENTS

• Argument from moral beauty
• Argument from cognitive value
• The merited response argument
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MORALITY AND ART: ETHICISM
THE MERITED RESPONSE ARGUMENT

• This argument centres around the notion of artworks prescribing or inviting certain responses from its audience, towards what is depicted or represented in the artwork e.g. loud discordant music in a horror film prescribes the viewer to react to the depicted events with fear.

• A work’s attitude towards its subject manifests in these prescribed responses: “the approbatory attitude that 120 days of Sodom exhibits towards sexual torture…is manifested in the responses it prescribes its readers to have towards such torture” (Gaut, 2007: 230)
A work might prescribe a certain response, but not succeed in making this response *merited*: it doesn’t succeed in making it appropriate for the audience to respond in the invited way e.g. horror films might be unfrightening, and comedies not funny.

The key question “is whether the prescribed response is merited: whether it is appropriate or inappropriate to respond in the way the work prescribes” (Gaut, 2007: 231)

These prescribed responses are subject to evaluative criteria, and some of these evaluative criteria are *ethical* ones.
A work that prescribes an unmerited response fails “in an aim internal to it, and that is an aesthetic defect”. (Gaut, 2007: 231)

Not all defects in artworks are aesthetically relevant (and so not aesthetic defects)

But, when prescribed responses are presented through an artistic mode of expression, involving, for instance, “painting the woman in such a way as to invite sympathy for her, they are clearly of aesthetic relevance” (Gaut, 232)
MORALITY AND ART: ETHICISM
THE MERITED RESPONSE ARGUMENT

1. A work’s attitude is standardly manifested in prescribing certain responses towards the events it describes or depicts

2. Prescribed responses are not always merited

3. One way in which they can be unmerited is by being unethical

4. If the prescribed responses are unmerited, that is a failure of the work; so, if the prescribed responses are unmerited, *because unethical*, that is a failure of the work

5. What responses the work prescribes is of aesthetic relevance

6. So, if the prescribed responses are unmerited because unethical, that is an *aesthetic* failure of the work – that is to say, is an aesthetic defect in it

7. So a work’s manifestation of ethically bad attitudes in its prescribed responses is an aesthetic defect in it

*(mutatis mutandis for ethically commendable attitudes being aesthetic merits)*

Gaut (2007: 233)
MORALITY AND ART: ETHICISM
THE MERITED RESPONSE ARGUMENT

Problems 1. The aesthetic demerit isn’t found directly in the ethical demerit

The Moderate Autonomist might object here that to say a prescribed response isn’t merited is to say that the work is emotionally unengaging, but then the failure of the work is to be located in its failure to engage, not in its ethical corruption
MORALITY AND ART: ETHICISM
THE MERITED RESPONSE ARGUMENT

Problems 1. The aesthetic demerit isn’t found directly in the ethical demerit Response

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• But it’s not the case that the ethical flaws in a work bring about some aesthetic flaws in the work (such as its being emotionally unengaging) which are distinct from the ethical realm

• Rather, “ethical demerits are, when manifested in prescribed responses, aesthetic demerits in works”

• A work inviting a response that is unmerited is a way of being aesthetically defective, and one way a response can be unmerited is by being unethical, so a work’s invitation of an unethical response is an aesthetic defect in the work (Gaut, 2007: 234)
MORALITY AND ART: ETHICISM
THE MERITED RESPONSE ARGUMENT

Problems 2. The Moralistic Fallacy

• While some (un)merited responses are aesthetically relevant, it’s not clear why *ethically* (un)merited responses are aesthetically relevant.

• Gaut supports premise (4) of his argument with examples in which unmerited responses constitute failures of an artwork *qua* artwork: So, “thrillers that do not merit the audience being thrilled, tragedies that do not merit fear and pity for the protagonists, comedies that aren’t amusing, melodramas that don’t merit sadness and pity...” (Gaut, 1998:194)

• But the issue is: are unmerited – because *unethical* – responses aesthetic flaws too?
Problems 2. The Moralistic Fallacy

• The Moderate Autonomist can push her own agenda here - while works can have ethical values, these never constitute aesthetic values:

“Even if the thriller fails to thrill because of some unmerited moral response called forth by the work, Gaut has not shown that the moral criticism qua moral criticism is an aesthetic criticism. The per se reason that the thriller fails from an aesthetic point of view is that it fails to thrill.” (Anderson & Dean, 1998: 159)
Problems 2. The Moralistic Fallacy

- The problem is that the merited response argument supposedly conflates two distinct ways in which a response to an artwork can be warranted or unwarranted (merited or unmerited)

(a) Fittingness-to-the-object notion of warrant

(b) Prudential or moral notion of warrant
MORALITY AND ART: ETHICISM
THE MERITED RESPONSE ARGUMENT

Problems 2. The Moralistic Fallacy

(a) Fittingness-to-the-object notion of warrant

(b) Prudential or moral notion of warrant

• It can be true that I have a reason (prudential or moral) not to be amused by a play, but it can also be true that the play possesses features correctly picked out by the response of amusement

• So, the play is funny, and my being amused is therefore warranted because this response fits the object (Eaton, 2012: 286)
MORALITY AND ART: ETHICISM
THE MERITED RESPONSE ARGUMENT

Problems 2. The Moralistic Fallacy

(a) Fittingness-to-the-object notion of warrant

(b) Prudential or moral notion of warrant

There’s a “faulty inference from the claim that it is morally wrong to have a given emotional response toward some object to the claim that the response does not fit that object” and so apparently fails as a work in some way (so aesthetically). (Eaton, 2012: 286)

- It’s only warrant in the (a) sense (and not (b)) regarding whether a response fits the object, that is aesthetically relevant
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Prominently, it is wrong (rationally and morally) when one is angry at someone who has done no wrong because “the formal object of the emotion of anger (someone having done something wrong) does not correspond to the intentional content of the thought, that they have done no wrong” (Gaut, 2007: 239).
Problems 2. The Moralistic Fallacy Gaut’s response I

• Here, the response invited doesn’t correspond to the evaluative properties of the object, so are not warranted in so far as they are unethical.

• So, a response that is unmerited because unethical can be aesthetically relevant, in the first sense that the response doesn’t fit the object – for example, finding funny something that is not funny (because unethical).
MORALITY AND ART: ETHICISM
THE MERITED RESPONSE ARGUMENT

Problems 2. The Moralistic Fallacy Gaut’s response II

• Give an argument as to how ethical features can be aesthetically relevant in general

• Ethical qualities are aesthetically relevant when the insights are “deployed by the use of artistic means…” (Gaut, 2007: 84)
MORALITY AND ART: ETHICISM
THE MERITED RESPONSE
ARGUMENT

Problems 2. The Moralistic Fallacy
Gaut’s response II
Problems 2. The Moralistic Fallacy Gaut’s response II

- Given that a moral view can be part of a work in the aesthetic sense – given that a moral view can be expressed through paint and composition – suggests that ethical features can be aesthetic features.

- So where we believe that the events represented don’t warrant the endorsement of the evaluation prescribed by the work, then the response it seeks from the audience is not merited and we can and often do legitimately fail to respond as prescribed.
Problems 2. The Moralistic Fallacy

Gaut’s response II

• When the merited response (e.g. this represented rape is morally bad and not erotic) comes apart from the prescribed response of the work (e.g. rape is erotic), the work fails in the aesthetic sense.
MORALITY AND ART: ETHICISM
THE MERITED RESPONSE ARGUMENT

Problems 3. The Problem of Immoral art

• The relation Ethicists posit between ethical and aesthetic value isn’t always merit-merit, flaw-flaw

• There can be cases where a work’s ethical flaw is an aesthetic merit, and an ethical merit an aesthetic flaw

• In some cases we have grounds for holding that an artwork could be valuable in *virtue* of its immoral character: not aesthetically valuable *despite* its immoral character, but aesthetically valuable *because* of its immoral standpoint
MORALITY AND ART: ETHICISM
THE MERITED RESPONSE ARGUMENT

Problems

3. The Problem of Immoral art
   • The aesthetics of gore
   • ‘Obscene art’
   • Dark comedy

I’m going to skin your family alive!!!