MORALITY AND ART

Lecture 4: Contextualism

Ms. Daisy Dixon
**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)

- The merited response argument: a work inviting from its audience a response that is unmerited (merited) is a way of being aesthetically defective (meritorious), and one way a response can be unmerited (merited) is by being unethical (ethical), so a work’s invitation of an unethical (ethical) response is an aesthetic defect (merit) in the work
MORALITY AND ART: RECAP

3. The Problem of Immoral art

The relation Ethicists posit between ethical and aesthetic value isn’t always merit-merit, flaw-flaw.
MORALITY AND ART: IMMORALISM

• The relation between a work’s ethical features and its aesthetic features is not monotonic or symmetric, but polytonic and inverted: there can be cases where a work’s ethical flaw is an aesthetic merit, and an ethical merit an aesthetic flaw

• Transgression ➔ Immoralism
MORALITY AND ART: IMMORALISM

- **Radical Immoralism** (mirror opposite of Moralism) “a work is always aesthetically flawed in so far as it possesses an ethical merit that is aesthetically relevant; and that it is always aesthetically meritorious in so far as it possesses an ethical demerit that is aesthetically relevant.” (Gaut, 2007: 53)

[Has no defenders]

- **Moderate Immoralism** “a work is sometimes aesthetically flawed in so far as it possesses an ethical flaw that is aesthetically relevant and is sometimes aesthetically meritorious in so far as it possesses an ethical flaw that is aesthetically relevant...a work is sometimes aesthetically meritorious in so far as it possesses aesthetically relevant ethical merits, and sometimes aesthetically defective in so far as it possesses aesthetically relevant ethical merits.” (Gaut, 2007: 53)

[Kieran, Eaton, possibly Carroll]
MORALITY AND ART: IMMORALISM

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

• Are ethical features of an artwork ever aesthetically relevant? YES Radical immoralism: they are always aesthetically relevant or just sometimes relevant (What makes this position radical is the type of relation they posit; see below (iii)) Moderate immoralism: they are only sometimes aesthetically relevant

• If ethical features of an artwork are ever aesthetically relevant, what is the relation between these ethical values and the artwork’s aesthetic value? Radical Immoralists: monotonic and inverted\(_m\) and inverted\(_{in}\) (It is always\(_m\) ethical flaw-aesthetic merit, ethical merit-aesthetic flaw\(_{in}\)) Moderate Immoralists: polytonic and both symmetric and inverted depending on the work: It can be flaw-flaw\(_s\), flaw-merit\(_{in}\), merit-merit\(_s\), merit-flaw\(_{in}\) (Gaut, 2007: 53)
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* (the remaining weaker Moralist position)
• *Autonomism* Radical and Moderate forms (*Anderson & Dean*)
• *Contextualism* (Moderate Moralism and Moderate Immoralism)
MORALITY AND ART: THE (RE)POSITIONS

• **Ethicism** (the remaining weaker Moralist position)

• **Autonomism** Radical and Moderate forms (*Anderson & Dean*)

• **Contextualism** (Moderate Moralism and Moderate Immoralism)
MORALITY AND ART: CONTEXTUALISM

- The ethical value of a work, when aesthetically relevant, does contribute to its aesthetic value, but Contextualists deny that aesthetic value *always* varies *symmetrically* with ethical value.
- A work’s aesthetic value can be both enhanced and hindered by ethical flaws or ethical merits.
Can (and should) an artwork be assessed ethically? YES

Are ethical features of an artwork ever aesthetically relevant? YES Like Ethicism, Moderate forms of Immoralism and Moralism (Contextualism) say that they are only sometimes aesthetically relevant.

If ethical features of an artwork are ever aesthetically relevant, what is the relation between these ethical values and the artwork's aesthetic value? Contextualists: polytonic and both symmetric and inverted depending on the work:

Sometimes, an ethical flaw in a work constitutes an aesthetic flaw, and sometimes, an ethical flaw in a work constitutes an aesthetic merit, and sometimes, an ethical merit in a work constitutes an aesthetic merit or an ethical merit in a work constitutes an aesthetic flaw.
MORALITY AND ART: CONTEXTUALISM

• Ethicist Contextualism
• Immoralist Contextualism
• Neutralist Contextualism
1. THE ARGUMENT FROM THE ROUGH HERO (EATON)

• Some works portray immoral characters but express an approving attitude towards them e.g. The Sopranos’ Tony Soprano, Killing Eve’s Villanelle, Hannibal Lecter
1. THE ARGUMENT FROM THE ROUGH HERO

• Some works portray immoral characters but express an approving attitude towards them.
MORALITY AND ART: CONTEXTUALISM

1. THE ARGUMENT FROM THE ROUGH HERO (EATON)
MORALITY AND ART: CONTEXTUALISM
1. THE ARGUMENT FROM THE ROUGH HERO (EATON)

“The rough hero is often vividly imbued with humanizing and idealizing traits. For instance, the rough hero can be affectionate, caring, and loyal toward family, friends, children, or animals; he [or she] can be suave, charming, and charismatic, features that are enhanced in moving images by the use of magnetic and often sexually attractive actors; he [or she] can be highly learned, intelligent, perceptive, and shrewd; he [or she] is often witty, funny, or affable…” (Eaton, 2012: 285)
The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance

“We are lured – or… seduced – into feeling not just fondness and concern, but also admiration and respect, for an abhorrent and malevolent character” (Eaton, 285)

- *Unwillingness* to imagine morally deviant perspectives (Gendler 2000)
- *Inability* to imagine morally deviant perspectives due to a contingent incomprehensibility (Stock 2005)
1. THE ARGUMENT FROM THE ROUGH HERO (EATON)

- We feel the push and pull of our moral values and our liking of the rough hero who we morally condemn: “We are torn between our positive feelings for the rough hero, on the one hand, and our strong disapproval of him, on the other.” (Eaton, 2012: 287)

- Eaton argues that this tension is an aesthetic achievement
MORALITY AND ART: CONTEXTUALISM
I. THE ARGUMENT FROM THE ROUGH HERO (EATON)

• Eaton uses the fittingness-to-object type of warrant or meritedness to explain an immoral work’s aesthetic virtue: if a work with an immoral perspective (using perhaps a rough hero type) succeeds in making its target audience adopt this immoral perspective, it is to that extent morally flawed but also for that reason aesthetically good because our response fits the artwork.

• A work that successfully prescribes both moral disapproval and also of sympathy and admiration for its characters is an overcoming of the audience’s imaginative resistance, which Eaton argues is a major artistic achievement.
2. THE ARGUMENT FROM COGNITIVE REWARD (KIERAN)

- Distinction between moral aptness (should we see this as morally bad or good) and aesthetic aptness (should we have this response given the work in front of us and its context and other internal/external evidence?),
- Gaut builds moral-aptness into general aptness of successes of the work’s goals
- But Kieran argues there could also be works that succeed as the works they aim to be precisely in virtue of their immoral character, such as ‘obscene art’
MORALITY AND ART: CONTEXTUALISM
2. THE ARGUMENT FROM COGNITIVE REWARD (KIERAN)

• Desire Fulfilment
• Meta-desire fulfilment
• Cognitive rewards
MORALITY AND ART: CONTEXTUALISM
2. THE ARGUMENT FROM COGNITIVE REWARD (KIERAN)

• Works not only get us to take things as good or right; they also engage us to imagine different possible attitudes and responses, some of which will be unmerited.

• We will regard such responses as unmerited for moral reasons but it’s a mark of the work’s success rather than failure that it renders such responses intelligible even though in actuality they are unmerited, morally speaking.

• What matters is not so much a question of whether or not the moral perspective endorsed is one we take to be merited, but rather whether it is conveyed in such a way that we find it intelligible or credible.
MORALITY AND ART: CONTEXTUALISM
2. THE ARGUMENT FROM COGNITIVE REWARD (KIERAN)

• Insofar as a work increases our understanding, it is aesthetically good (because it meets its cognitive goal).

• Immoral works can do this by making us more open-minded and consider perspectives different from our own (enhances emotional capacities)
MORALITY AND ART: CONTEXTUALISM PROBLEMS

1. Cognitive value in immoral art? Against Kieran

- False things cannot be taught or known! “…the work is immoral in this respect, but does it teach us anything about immorality? Since it presents an immoral state of affairs as morally good, then it does not, since one cannot (successfully) teach someone something false…it falsely represents what is immoral as being morally permissible” (Gaut 2007: 185)
Are these works actually immoral?

- Different levels of responses that can be prescribed by a work: shallow or deep
- A work can seduce a viewer/reader into a morally false or tainted or evil view of the world, [shallow] but the work can also “provide evidence to undermine the proffered view, so that the audience can learn both the wrongness of the view, as well as how easily they can be led to adopt it [deep]” (Gaut, 2007: 192)
MORALITY AND ART: CONTEXTUALISM PROBLEMS

2. Are these works actually immoral?

- Nabokov’s Lolita looks a morally subversive work, and great because of this immorality.
- But we might deny that it actually invites an immoral attitude simpliciter.
- “the reader is invited to be amused by Humbert and is also appalled by the nature of what is going on…we are shown that we can be seduced to take a kind of enjoyment in something that we simultaneously abhor” (Gaut, 197)
MORALITY AND ART: CONTEXTUALISM PROBLEMS

2. Are these works actually immoral?

- This could explain the tension Eaton draws on between the response we’re merited in feeling (shallow) and the response we know we should be having on moral grounds (deep), e.g. amusement at something we know is immoral, but the work ultimately invites us to have moral disapproval at this immoral thing.

- This could explain the cognitive value in immoral works that Kieran draws on: those works that expand our moral horizons do so by luring us into a morally bad perspective on things, but the cognitive value is found in this seduction fact itself.
KRAFFT’S IDAHO TEAPOT (2003)
MORALITY AND ART: SUMMARY

• Perhaps the notion of aesthetic value that underpins the debate could be the key to deciding which view, broadly, autonomist or moralist, is correct

• Aesthetic value (narrow) only formal, internal features of a work can be aesthetic features

• Aesthetic value (wide) as well as formal, internal features, moral and cognitive features can sometimes be aesthetic features themselves