Morality and Art Lecture 2: Autonomism
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1. Autonomism
   - Autonomism emerges out of an Aestheticist or Formalist mindset, which took hold in the 19th century
   - The main slogan of autonomism is: “the ethical assessment of artworks is always irrelevant to their aesthetic assessment” (Gaut, 2007: 51)

2. Radical Autonomism
   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

(a) 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

   ✗ Problems
   ✗ 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
   ✗ The argument 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

(b) 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 flawed 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)

   ✗ Problems
   ✗ Too narrow a view of knowledge: knowledge-how vs. knowledge-that
   ✗ Too narrow a conception of education: Noel Carroll’s ‘cultivation approach’ to art Fictions and other artworks can help us with the employment or usage of abstract moral concepts

(c) 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)

   ✗ 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
3. Moderate Autonomism

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.

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).
- “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).

- 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.

* Problems

* 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.
  (b) The nature of the tension between ethical and aesthetic value
    - 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).
    - Eaton: such a tension is an aesthetic feature (an aesthetic achievement of the work) supporting Moderate Immoralism.

* The way to properly refute moderate autonomism is to provide an argument that shows that the relation between aesthetic value and ethical value is more than just a merely indirect one – some ethical features of works can be aesthetically relevant.

Reading list
Gaut, B., (2007) Art, Emotion and Ethics (OUP) [Chapter 4]

Further reading