1. 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)

- 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

2. Pro tanto principles

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’:

- 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
- Similarly, a work might possess a morally good perspective, and is therefore aesthetically good in so far as it’s morally good, but it doesn’t follow that an immoral work would be made aesthetically better overall by making it more moral
- Intrinsic flaws and merits vs. Extrinsic flaws and merits
- 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)

3. Three main arguments

- **Argument from Moral Beauty** Ethical values are a kind of beauty. Works that manifest ethically good features thus possess a kind of beauty. Beauty is an aesthetic value. Therefore, in so far as the work possesses ethical goodness, it is aesthetically valuable (same for moral badness—ugliness).
- **Argument from Cognitive Value** Artworks have their artistic value in part through their cognitive merits, and art can teach us about ethical values, as well as other things, so this cognitive merit can also be an aesthetic one (ethical insight is an aesthetic value)
- **The Merited Response Argument** The question of aesthetic value rests not on how we actually respond to things but how we ought to respond to things (whether the invited responses are merited), and this merit is sensitive to moral considerations. So, ethically merited prescribed responses are aesthetic values, (and unmerited ones are flaws)
4. The Merited Response argument

- 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
- 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)

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)

× **Problems**

× **The Moralistic Fallacy**

- While some (un)merited responses are aesthetically relevant, it’s not clear why ethically (un)merited responses are aesthetically relevant
  - Fittingness-to-the-object notion of warrant
  - Prudential or moral notion of warrant
- It’s only warrant in the (a) sense (and not (b)) regarding whether a response fits the object, that is aesthetically relevant
  - a response that is unmerited because unethical can be aesthetically relevant, in the **first** (a) sense that the **response doesn’t fit the object** – for example, finding funny something that is not funny (because unethical)
  - given that a moral view can be expressed **through** paint and composition, suggests that ethical features can be aesthetic features

× **The Problem of Immoral Art**

- The relation between ethical value and aesthetic value 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.
  - The aesthetics of gore
  - ‘Obscene art’
  - Dark comedy

**Reading list**


---------(2007) Art, Emotion and Ethics (OUP) [Chapter 10]

**Further reading**


Gaut, B., (2007) Art, Emotion and Ethics (OUP) [Chapters, 6, 7, & 8]