Morality and Art Lecture 4: Contextualism
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0. Reconceptualising the Debate

Art as transgression – Immoralism (Radical and Moderate)

• Recall Gaut's restructuring of the debate to help simplify the landscape by classifying the main positions using the kind of relations they hold (or don't hold) between art and morality
• Immoralism is more or less the same as a certain weaker form of moralism – Carroll’s Moderate Moralism
• Moderate Moralism and Moderate Immoralism seem to say something very similar, though with different focuses.
• So Gaut packages both these positions as Contextualist positions, encompassing the broad view of Contextualism which attempts to give arguments to show that the relation between aesthetic value and ethical value is more than just a merely indirect one (contra Moderate Autonomism) but, that this relation is not always symmetric [flaw-flaw, merit-merit] (contra Ethicism)

1. 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? 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
  o Ethicist Contextualism
  o Immoralist Contextualism
  o Neutralist Contextualism

2. 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)

• Creates a push and pull of imaginative resistance [Unwillingness to imagine morally deviant perspectives (Gendler 2000) or, an Inability to imagine morally deviant perspectives due to a contingent incomprehensibility (Stock 2005)]
• This tension is an aesthetic achievement
• Fittingness-to-object type of warrant or meritedness explains 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
3. The Argument from Cognitive Reward (Kieran)

- There could be works that succeed as the works they aim to be precisely in virtue of their immoral character, such as 'obscene art'
  - Desire Fulfilment
  - Meta-desire fulfilment
  - Cognitive rewards
- 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)

* Problems

* 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?
- 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)
- E.g. Nabokov’s Lolita looks like 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)
- 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

Reading list
Gaut, B., (2007) Art, Emotion and Ethics (OUP) [Chapters 3 & 10.3]

Further reading