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ETHICAL CRITICISM OF ART

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It. *Critica etica dell'arte*; Fr. *Critique éthique de l'art*; Germ. *Ethische Kunstkritik*; Span. *Crítica ética del arte*. The ethical criticism of art – often referred to as simply “ethical criticism” – is the art-critical practice of admitting ethical considerations about artworks within artistic evaluation. More precisely, “ethical criticism” considers an artwork’s ethical merits or demerits as relevant to its assessment as art.

The interest of philosophers for the possible relationships between art and morality dates back to Plato’s condemnation, in Book X of the *Republic*, of the representational arts as morally suspicious. In contrast, in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, successful tragedies – and by extension, today, a wide range of artistic genres – appear to be seen as offering opportunities for moral growth. And, in *The Art of Poetry*, Horace (*Ars p.*, v. 332) introduced the maxim for which poetry – yet, again, by extension the arts more generally – ought to *delight and instruct*.

Especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, philosophers and art critics have also been wary of positing any relationship between the artistic and the ethical. Pierre Jules Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) made famous the “art for art’s sake” (fr. *l’art pour l’art*) motto, which became a slogan for such nineteenth-century literary figures as Charles Baudelaire, in France, and Oscar Wilde in England, and for Walter Pater (1839-1894) and the so-called aesthetic movement, or *aestheticism*. By insisting on the necessity for art to be judged according to strictly artistic criteria, and by condemning the attribution of any other duties to art or artists – most notably toward morality – aestheticism is, then, one way to reject ethical criticism.

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

The contemporary debate within analytic aesthetics reflects, if with greater sophistication and a wider range of positions, the divide between those who see the ethical as at least sometimes relevant to the artistic, and those who conceive of the two realms as fully independent of each other. Likewise, contemporary debate has also tackled the topic of the transformative – educational or corruptive – powers

of art. The renewed interest in ethical criticism is mainly due to Noël Carroll (e.g., 1996, and in Levinson, ed. 1998) and Berys Gaut (in Levinson, ed. 1998, and 2007), who have differently defended the thesis that artworks' aesthetic value is affected, positively or negatively, by their praise or blameworthy character – for Carroll, sometimes, for Gaut virtually always – and to Jerrold Levinson's influential edited collection (Levinson, ed. 1998). Such a renewed interest followed the attempt, by Wayne Booth (1988), of rescuing ethical criticism from a theoretical neglect that, he argued, never matched actual literary criticism practice. It must also be seen in connection to the advocacy of views about the place of literature in one's ethical growing, whether in an Aristotelian fashion (as in Nussbaum 1990; see also Carroll 2002) or within a Kant-influenced framework (as in Eldridge 1989). Relatedly, but by applying notions derived from cognitive science – significantly the mechanism known as mental simulation – Gregory Currie (e.g., in Levinson, ed., 1998) has attributed to our imaginative engagement with fictions a significant role for the improvement of our understanding of others, of ourselves, and of ethically relevant situations. Skeptics on the relationship between ethical and artistic value include T. J. D. Diffey (1997), Jerome Stolnitz (1992), and, if in more complex and less a dismissive way, Peter Lamarque (1996).

For the most part, contemporary debate has unfortunately occurred within an unclear conceptual framework. One source of confusion is failure to clarify whether the claims are being advanced in regard to artworks' *aesthetic* or, instead, *artistic* value. Of course, there are theoretical positions that reduce the value of art to aesthetic value (e.g., Zangwill 2001), and positions that conceive of aesthetic value in ultimately artistic terms (e.g., Gaut 2007). However, the debate on ethical criticism, as one on the legitimacy of an art critical practice, ought to regard the value of art as art – henceforth *artistic* value – whatever the conception of such a value.

Most significantly, lack of conceptual clarity has affected the distinctions between allegedly opposed positions. To their credit, Anderson and Dean (1998) state their "moderate autonomism" clearly, as the view that *never*, in a context of art criticism, ethical reasons count as artistic reasons. Such a view advocates what truly is a form of autonomism, in the sense of considering artistic value as fully independent from ethical value (cf. Giovannelli 2007). The temptation of seeing it as a "moderate" approach comes from the way in which such terminology was introduced and used by Carroll and others, given the theoretical possibility of denying that artworks can be judged ethically. In fact, the view for which artworks are so to speak shielded from ethical evaluation could be best named "aesthetic isolationism" (cf. Giovannelli 2013a). Whatever the terminology one adopts, a discussion on the possible relationships between artistic and ethical value arises only if artworks can be judged from the ethical point of view – a principle Giovannelli has dubbed *ethical amenability* (2007).

For those who accept that ethical value can be among the determinants of artistic value, one of the fundamental questions should be whether the relationship between the two values occurs systematically – with merits/demerits of one sort counting as merits/demerits of the other sort – or not. In that regard, a possible position, including (but not coextensive with) what Gaut (2007) calls "contextualism," and which might be helpfully named "particularism" (cf. Giovannelli 2013b), is that of accepting that, on occasion, a work's ethical status can affect its artistic worth – e.g., a work is worse, artistically, because of an ethical

flaw –, yet with no generalization possible. For the particularist, situations ought to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Such is the view Daniel Jacobson has defended as “the antitheoretical view” – namely, that “a moral defect or merit in an artwork can figure *either* as an aesthetic defect or merit, or can be aesthetically irrelevant” (2006, 344; see also 1997). It is quite significant to note how theories that are meant to be in opposition to an approach like Jacobson’s, are formulated in ways that might make them, in fact, forms of particularism. Carroll’s formulation of his own thesis (which he dubs “moderate moralism”), for which “sometimes” ethical evaluation bears on artistic evaluation, underdetermines the theory, as such a statement is compatible with Carroll’s moralist aspirations but also with particularism. Matthew Kieran has defended what he calls “ethicism,” the view that ethically praiseworthy works – he glosses – “deepen our understanding and appreciation” (2003, 58; cf. Kieran 1996), and are better works of art for that reason. Yet, he has also claimed that, in some works, their *immoral* character may promote “the intelligibility and reward of the imaginative experience” they proffer (2003, 56-57). If so, Kieran’s position, too, might fall under particularism (as indeed Jacobson 2006 notes).

The tendency towards particularism might partly be the result of theorists’ concentrating on specific artistic examples (as done, e.g., by Mary Devereaux in Levinson, ed. 1998, yet indeed by many others). Yet, particularist temptations creep up even within views that make the most comprehensive claims. Gaut, for instance, defends what he calls “ethicism” as the thesis for which artworks’ ethical merits and ethical flaws, when artistically relevant, are merits and flaws of the artworks when valued as art. Such a statement, then, advocates the existence of a systematic relationship between ethical and artistic value across the realm of art. Yet, when explaining his added clause, for which the relationship obtains only when “aesthetically relevant,” he adds that artistic relevance may have to be decided, within an art-critical context, on a case-by-case basis (Gaut 2007, 87-89).

Despite the widespread tendency towards particularism, the logical space of possible positions includes the possibility of confining the moralist claim to only certain kinds of works, that is, to certain genres or otherwise art-critically relevant categories. The practice of ethical criticism, then, could be endorsed only with respect to such categories, or, in any event, within such categories the relationship between the two values be considered systematic. Carroll himself suggests this type of approach when he refers to “kinds of artworks – genres if you will – that naturally elicit moral responses [...], genres [for which] moral considerations are pertinent, even though there ere may be other genres” for which such considerations are not pertinent (1996, 227). Similarly, but in reverse manner, Anne Eaton (2012) argues that some narratives that endorse morally blameworthy characters have a moral defect that, however, counts as an artistic achievement. Again, the claim could be relativized to the art-critically relevant category of works that include such characters and successfully portray them as at once morally despicable and attractive.

Whatever the scope of a theory, it ought to be specified which ethical respect it addresses, as artworks can be ethically assessed from different points of view. Most notably, a work can be judged for the perspective it embodies, or its effects on the beholder, or the modes of its production (cf. Giovannelli 2007). Most theorists have been clearly looking at the first kind of ethical assessment; they endorse, that is, what Nannicelli (2020) calls “perspectivism.” As seen above, several theorists have also been making claims

about the possible cognitive gains (or the detriments) that engaging with certain artworks can bring about. Though in itself the corresponding ethical merits or flaws – of works that can be deemed ethically enlightening or corruptive – is distinct from judging a work’s perspective, several theorists have linked, and sometimes confused, those two different kinds of considerations. On the other hand, ethical criticism based on a work’s modes of production has so far received limited attention (with Cyril Barrett 1982, Alessandro Giovannelli 2010, and Ted Nannicelli 2020 as exceptions).

The vast majority of arguments in support of a relationship between ethical and artistic assessment refer to some notion of response or other, including the quality of the imaginative experience had when engaging with a work. Carroll claims that moral works will tend to receive “uptake” – that is, audiences will respond in the ways intended – while immoral works will tend to fail at receiving uptake. The issue is related to the phenomenon known as “imaginative resistance,” which Carroll explicitly mentions – that is, resistance to imagining what we find (or would find in real life) to be ethically repugnant (cf. Gendler 2000). Gaut construes an argument on the notion of meritedness of responses, with morally praiseworthy works meriting the responses they aim at, and morally blameworthy works failing to merit them. Kieran looks at how the experience proffered by a work might be enlightening (because of qualities that make a work ethically praise- or instead blame-worthy). In these and other accounts, however, it is often not quite clear, *what* makes certain forms of engagement, say, problematic; indeed, it is often just assumed that it be so (for skepticism on such an assumption, see Cooke 2014). The issue is interesting in itself, for it invites reflection on the scope of ethical evaluation (is endorsing evil, albeit just in imagination, ethically problematic and, if so, why?); it also has implications outside the realm of art, e.g., in regard to some pornographic representations. Nonetheless, it might turn up that the issue is after all not that relevant to the question of the legitimacy of ethical criticism. First, when ethical criticism targets the modes of production, the available arguments will unlikely appeal to the ethical status of imaginative states. Second, even when pursuing arguments within a perspectivist approach, there might be no reason to link either the construal of a work’s perspective or its ethical evaluation to the mental states a work aims at producing or their alleged ethical status. Giovannelli (2013a), for example, has argued that the very attribution of ethical judgment to a work, when legitimate, reveals an artistically relevant commitment of the work to endorsing an ethical perspective as correct. If so, then artworks’ succeeding or failing in such an ethical respect – that is, according to the perspective’s status – may turn out counting as, respectively, an artistic merit or demerit, quite independently of any reference to responses or imaginative states of those who interact with the work.

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