

Does the ethical criticism of art make sense?

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December 2010

Aesthetic criticism is divided on the admissibility of ethical claims in the correct analysis of art. On the one hand are those who advance Ethicism, averring that the ethical criticism of art is a legitimate enterprise. Such theorists point to the ability of art to cultivate or deprave our moral character. Gaut, the protagonist of Ethicism with whom I will primarily be concerned, suggests that “appreciating that a work can convey moral understanding can enrich our experience of the work.”¹ The claim of Ethicism, as Guyer notes, is not that there is an ethical ‘perspective’ we may adopt towards an artwork, but rather that ethical criticism is a legitimate part of the criticism of the artwork *qua* artwork.² I wish to suggest that there is both a strong and a weak version of Ethicism, and that the former suffers from defects which the latter avoids. I will provide reasons to think that the position defended by Gaut is *weak* Ethicism, and will suggest that the majority of objections against Ethicism miss their mark since they are directed at stronger theses. I will conclude with remarks on whether the weak thesis is so weak as to do no service to aesthetic enquiry

The nature of Ethicism

Gaut’s version of Ethicism holds that a work is aesthetically meritorious (or defective) insofar as it manifests ethically admirable (or reprehensible) attitudes. Put another way, an artwork is aesthetically good insofar as it is morally good. The suggestion is that two normative enquiries – the moral and the aesthetic – are mutually informative. The nature of this relationship, I believe, can be articulated in both a strong and a weak way. According to the *strong* thesis, a work’s manifesting morally virtuous properties is a necessary and sufficient condition for it to be aesthetically valuable. In other words, all and only morally good art is aesthetically good art. (There are perhaps variations on the strong thesis, say, that moral virtue is *either* necessary or sufficient for aesthetic virtue.) Gaut’s preferred theory, I contend, is a *weak*

¹ (Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, 2007, p. 15)

² As Guyer puts it, “the question whether ‘ethical criticism’ of art is possible and appropriate has been understood as the question whether ethical merits or flaws in works of art, but especially the latter, are themselves also aesthetic merits or flaws of those works, again typically the latter, or only merits or flaws of those works considered from some non-aesthetic point of view, not *qua* works of art” (Guyer, 2008, p. 3)

thesis: Gaut suggests that we ought not to read moral virtue as either necessary or sufficient for aesthetic virtue. Moral virtue is not a necessary condition, since there are many excellent artworks which may have morally dubious attitudes (such as some of the work by TS Eliot). It is not a sufficient condition either, since there are many artworks which manifest excellent moral attitudes yet which are aesthetically poor. Rather, the contention is that *the ethical criticism of art is a legitimate aesthetic enterprise*, that a work's ethical virtue (where it occurs) counts towards its aesthetic value.

Gaut recently has articulated three arguments for Ethicism.³ The first argues that moral excellence is a kind of beauty of character. If an artist has good moral character, he thereby has a sort of beauty, and his work is derivatively imbued with this beauty. The second argues that didactic efficacy is an aesthetic virtue. A work's capacity to teach us, especially about moral matters, might constitute an aesthetic virtue under certain circumstances. These arguments, while worthwhile, are not, I believe as successful as the 'merited response argument' (that the merited response argument has received the most critical attention is testament to this). I will focus on this third argument in somewhat reformulated terms in order to demonstrate its *prima facie* plausibility, and will then evaluate the arguments of its detractors.

A few points require clarification before we may assess the merited response argument. The argument is presented as a defence against the Autonomist position, which holds (in its various guises) that the ethical criticism of art is conceptually impossible, imprudent, or impractical. At one extreme, Autonomism suggests that "it makes no sense to evaluate works ethically, since works of art cannot possess ethical qualities, either ethical merits or flaws."⁴ The Ethicism that Gaut endorses must say then how it is that a work may possess ethical qualities; in this regard, Gaut suggests that we understand the ethical criticism of art as an understanding of the *attitudes* that an artwork takes on matters of moral significance. These attitudes can be cast as endorsing or reproofing, as either pro or con towards a moral issue.⁵ The attitudes which are the proper subject of our criticism are those *actually possessed by the work*, rather than those the artwork attempts to sustain, or those the artist ostensibly

³ (Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, 2007, p. 227)

⁴ (Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, 2007, p. 67)

⁵ (Gaut, *The Ethical Criticism of Art*, 1998, p. 183)

endorses.⁶ That is, frequently artists fail to execute their intention for their artwork, and we wish to be in a position to say that the artwork may not achieve the moral status that the artist wishes to claim for it. For example, an artist may intend his artwork to be ethically sound, but the work may nevertheless be racist if it portrayed people of a particular race as inherently possessing inferior intelligence.

At face value, often ethical considerations figure as aesthetic considerations. Recently, Guillermo Vargas produced *Exposición N° 1*, a work containing an emaciated dog tethered to the wall of a gallery with dog food just out of reach.⁷ Though the circumstances were contrived only to *seem* as though the dog was deliberately starved for the purposes of the exhibition, audiences (mainly internet voyeurs following the meme and ensuing mass emails) responded with outrage and contempt. Most importantly, when it was aesthetically condemned either as non-art or as bad art, the reasons cited were not formal but *ethical* – the moral defects in the attitudes displayed by the work appeared to count as *aesthetic* defects. Many further examples are forthcoming, such as Leni Riefenstahl’s famous film, *Triumph of the Will*, which, notwithstanding its otherwise good filmic attributes, seems flawed because it glorifies Nazism. The salient point is that these moral flaws seem to count as aesthetic flaws – the works are flawed *as works of art*.

I wish to consider briefly three objections to Ethicism, most of which do not present any real difficulty for the thesis, but which serve to elucidate certain central claims.⁸ (1) *Ethicism blurs the important distinction between ethics and aesthetics. They are two separate areas and methods of enquiry. The ethical attitude is distinct from the aesthetic attitude.* This might be true, but Ethicism does not suggest that the attitudes are one and the same, or that they even have the same objects. There are many features which one assesses in arriving at an aesthetic judgment, such as cognitive insight or raw expressive power. However, when we include these items among those we assess, we do not thereby collapse aesthetics into them, or suggest that inquiring after one is necessarily inquiring after the other. Neither do we do so with the ethical criticism of art. Also, when we attend to an artwork’s cognitive aspect, we are

⁶ (Gaut, *The Ethical Criticism of Art*, 1998, p. 184)

⁷ (Couzens, 2008, p. 43)

⁸ These objections are dealt with similarly by Gaut (*Gaut, The Ethical Criticism of Art*, 1998, pp. 184-189)

aware that our attitude is different from other forms of the aesthetic attitude, but we still allow that its cognitive aspect may be an important part of its assessment as an artwork. Ethicism suggests that we should similarly treat ethics as *one aspect* of the proper assessment of aesthetic value.

(2) *Ethicism is doomed to fail since it prescribes the ethical assessment of fictional characters, which is principally impossible. Artworks contain fictional characters whose actions do not affect or describe the real world. Since ethical assessment is directed at real actions and agents, the two fields of ethics and aesthetics never coincide.* Gaut notes first that not all artworks are fictional – many are specifically historical and have real characters as their subjects, like *Invictus* or *Schindler's List*. Thus this criticism, like the paradox of fiction, does not apply to all artworks alike. Nevertheless, we must note that part of our routine engagement with artwork is engagement with what might be called the fictional world of the artwork. In such cases we make psychological as well as ethical judgments as a matter of course. Indeed, our ethical judgements are an important part of our understanding of the artwork – if we failed to judge that Iago was evil we would have failed to appreciate the text as an artwork. That the characters are fictional does not detract from our ability to subject them to ethical scrutiny. Consider a man who fantasises about raping women, fictional women he makes up in his imagination. Surely we are not compelled to silence on the ethical aspects of this issue merely because his victims are imaginary. Insofar as the characters manifest actions or attitudes which, if real, would be the proper subject of scrutiny, then we may assess them in the terms of the fiction.

(3) *Maybe ethicism is mistaken because it seems that some works are good precisely because they invoke a sense of moral wrong. Surely we think that Shakespeare's 'Othello' is a better play for the great duplicity of Iago?* This objection sadly confuses the ethicist claim. The claim is not that an artwork is bad if it *represents* moral depravity; it is bad only insofar as it adopts a morally dubious *attitude* towards that depravity. If the play displayed an endorsement of Iago's duplicity or Othello's jealousy, then we should think it aesthetically flawed. Indeed, the success of the play is that it conveys precisely what is reprehensible in Iago's duplicity, and to do this, it must of course show us a character who is duplicitous. This objection fails because we are able easily to distinguish between the portrayal of a character's evil, and the artwork's endorsement of it.

I agree with Carroll that, at least when it comes to artworks which incorporate a narrative (such as films, fiction, poetry and theatre), “we seem to fall effortlessly into talking about them in terms of ethical significance – in terms of whether or which characters are virtuous or vicious, and about whether the work itself is moral or immoral, and perhaps whether it is sexist or racist.”⁹ However, though we certainly act *as though* ethical concerns might be aesthetic concerns, the question at issue is whether we do so legitimately. Aside from the matter of fact that we do engage in moral approval and disapproval of artworks for being cruel or crude, is there any theoretical basis for Ethicism? I will now present the merited response argument as the strongest reason I see for answering this question affirmatively.

The merited response argument

The merited response argument proposes a way of tethering ethics to aesthetics. As I see it, the argument advances two premises in support of this relationship: (1) *ethics are relevant to prescribed responses*, and (2) *prescribed responses are relevant to aesthetics*. I will explicate these terms in order to demonstrate the plausibility of each premise before remarking on how they support the conclusion that the ethical criticism of art is a legitimate enterprise.

The starting point of the argument is the relationship between an artwork and the (variously expected, intended, unwitting or merited) responses to that artwork. It is plain that artworks elicit responses – laughter, disgust, discomfort, boredom etc. – and frequently the express *purpose* of an artwork is to elicit some or other response in the audience. Aesthetic engagement or experience involves imaginings, such as imagining Desdemona killed at Othello's hands, or imagining what it is like to win the Quidditch House Cup. When we respond to an artwork, our responses are usually informed by these imaginings, and our responses will be rich or rewarding to the extent that the artwork facilitates rich imaginings. This provides grounds for criticism, as we will criticize an artwork if it fails to produce in us the response that it prescribes. If it is a serious film about a war, for example, it might be clear that the intention is to rouse the audience into feelings of pity and horror. Such a film might fail to induce these responses if the acting was poor or the props unrealistic. We would judge correctly that the film did not merit the response it prescribed. More generally articulated, we will say that that a work is good or

⁹ (Carroll, Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding, 2003, p. 270)

bad according to the extent it demonstrates a coincidence between the response the work prescribes the reader to feel and the response actually merited by the imagined situation. This suffices, I think, to show that (2) is true, that prescribed responses are relevant to aesthetics.

I think a similarly strong argument could be mounted for (1), that ethics are relevant to prescribed responses. It seems correct to aver that many prescribed responses to art have a moral nature – they prescribe approbation or disapprobation towards their objects. In order properly to appreciate *Othello*, we must make a number of moral appraisals. We must judge Iago to be duplicitous and conniving, and we must judge Othello to be naive and hasty in his jealousy. These moral appraisals are central to our appreciation of the play *qua* work of art: we will have failed to appreciate the work *aesthetically* if we do not make these moral appraisals. Much practical evidence can be adduced for the relevance of ethics to prescribed responses. In diagnosing the moral component of a work, we consider what the prescribed responses to the work are. Consider Sade's *Juliette*; it seems that Sade wishes us to respond in ways which are morally deficient, that is, we are invited to view with relish and intrigue the torturous activities in the text. Gaut's thesis would suggest that the work is aesthetically flawed as a result of its moral defects, manifested in the immorality of the prescribed response to the work. Also, consider slapstick comedy – a genre critically agreed to wallow in aesthetic poverty, and aesthetically denounced as merely crude or superficial. The aesthetic defects, Gaut would argue, arise because the works invite us to respond in morally dubious ways or to respond positively to morally dubious things. Often slapstick comedy attempts to make us laugh at things which are morally unsavoury, such as other people's ugliness, or their ailments, or their palsy. Insofar as laughter or delight is the prescribed response to such things, we may say that the work is aesthetically defective.

Furthermore, Gaut's thesis may handle more complicated kinds of responses, such as those prescribed to films such *Crash* or *Borat*. In such films, there are many levels of prescribed response. In *Borat*, for example, Sacha Baron Cohen pretends to be a backwards and bigoted Kazakhstani national (Borat), and erupts in a wide array of racist, sexist and homophobic slurs. He acts out his throwback Borat character in the company of real (i.e. non-acting) Americans, who respond to his slurs with bigoted vitriol which matches his own – but, of course, theirs is unscripted. The prescribed responses in these circumstances are manifold and complex. At the first-order level (so to speak) we are invited

to join in the prejudicial humour, to laugh at the expense of some or other group. We are also invited to reflect upon our inclination to laugh, to observe in ourselves certain prejudiced views, and, in this moment of second-order reflection, to form a nuanced moral opinion about the pervasion of stereotypes in society. As Gaut argues, we may assess the aesthetics of the film in terms of those attitudes it prescribes. Insofar as it is clear that the film endorses the second order response as taking precedence over the first order response then we will commend the film aesthetically, say it is enlightened, savvy, challenging, or whatever. If, however, it seems that the film relishes too much in the first order response (humour through stereotypical or prejudicial jokes), we will have cause to say that the film is thereby *aesthetically* flawed, lacks nuance, is unsophisticated or crude. These cases provide strong support for (1), that ethics are relevant to prescribed responses.

The argument defended

I wish first to suggest why one might be attracted to Ethicism in the first place – that is, why it is a thesis worth defending. After mounting a defence against certain unconvincing objections, I will conclude by suggesting what a good objection might look like, and will remark on the strength of weak Ethicism in general.

To recap then, the merited response argument is supported on the strength of two premises, that (1) ethics are relevant to prescribed responses, and (2) prescribed responses are relevant to aesthetics. I think I have shown, albeit briefly, that both premises are well supported, but it remains to be shown that they jointly entail the conclusion that ethics is relevant to aesthetics. The question of entailment depends on the *form* of the argument. Here, one must consider the relation expressed by ‘_ is relevant to _’. If A is relevant to B, and B is relevant to C, does it always follow that A is relevant to C? That is, is relevance a transitive relation? I wish to answer affirmatively, to suggest that A is necessarily relevant to C, and that it is relevant in proportion to the relevance of A to B and B to C.

To consider an easy example, suppose my studying for the exam (A) is 80% relevant to my passing the exam (B), and my passing the exam (B) is 50% relevant to my passing the course (C). I would suggest that my studying for the exam is relevant to my passing the course, and is relevant in proportion to the two contributing factors. So if $\text{Relevance}(A|C) = \text{Relevance}(A|B) \times \text{Relevance}(B|C)$, then the relevance of my studying for the exam is relevant to

passing the course is $80\% \times 50\% = 40\%$. I think that many cases of relevance match this simple rubric, though it might be suggested that other examples can be provided where relevance seems not to obtain in a transitive fashion. I suggest, however, that these examples show only that the relevance is *weak* (rather than non-existent), and that the cases fall within the model I have provided here.

Let's consider an ostensibly difficult example. Suppose that the coffee store's temporary worker's ordering faulty lids is 70% relevant to the store's providing faulty lids to their customers on a particular day, and the store's providing faulty lids to their customers that day is 60% relevant to Jones' accidentally spilling coffee on Jill's notes, and Jones' accidentally spilling coffee on Jill's notes is 50% relevant to his talking to and asking Jill out on a date that day, and his talking to and asking Jill out on a date that day is 2% relevant to their subsequent marriage. Some might wish to say that the coffee store's temporary worker's ordering faulty lids that day is *completely irrelevant* to Jones' marriage. However, I don't think that one should say, strictly speaking, that it made *absolutely no difference* whatsoever. I think it more plausible to say that it is relevant, just relevant to a very low degree – it is 0.42% relevant, to be precise.¹⁰ I do not think the critic could sensibly reply that it is 0% relevant rather than 0.42% relevant. However, someone might object further that a case like this is a prime example of *irrelevance*, and that my formulation deprives the notion of irrelevance of its meaning. To this I would reply that the notion of relevance is like that of resemblance or similarity. It is a truth of logic that everything is similar (in some way) to everything else. However, this does not deprive 'dissimilarity' of its meaning: 'dissimilarity' is just a reflection of a very low *degree* of similarity. Likewise, 'irrelevance' is a reflection of a very low degree of relevance. I do not think it deprives 'irrelevance' of its meaning to suggest that when people say 'x is totally irrelevant to y', they are speaking loosely, and intend by their expression just that there is a very low degree of relevance between x and y.

Thus, if we may agree in principle that relevance is a transitive relation, then the question of ethics' relevance to aesthetics becomes a question of degree: how relevant is ethics to prescribed response, and how relevant is prescribed response to aesthetics? Again, I wish to suggest that there are stronger and weaker claims that might be advanced here, and that the weaker claims are

¹⁰ $R(A|D) = R(A|B) \times R(B|C) \times R(C|D)$, so $(0.7) \times (0.6) \times (0.5) \times (0.02) = 0.0042$

more plausible. A strong thesis would suggest, say, that there is some very high fixed percentage of relevance between the factors – at one extreme it would say that ethics is the only relevant factor to prescribed response, and prescribed response is the only relevant factor to aesthetics, so ethics is the only factor relevant to aesthetics. Such a claim is open to a wide range of objections and counterexamples. However, as mentioned, Gaut expressly denies this sort of necessary or sufficient condition for aesthetic value – he suggests only that ethical virtues or flaws *may count for or against* a work when they occur. He does not need to set some fixed high degree of correlation between a work's ethical qualities and its aesthetic qualities: this would make his thesis more potent, to be sure, but it would be philosophically poorer for the number of objections that might be brought against it.

Indeed, the weaker thesis is quite attractive, since it legitimizes many present practices in art criticism as theoretically sound. It is frequently the practice of critics to remark on the ethical qualities of a work as having pertinence to the piece *as a work of art*, and Gaut's thesis explains why this is a sound endeavour. When we grasp the links between aesthetics, merited responses, and ethics, we see that they are not wholly isolated fields of inquiry, but often inform each other. The weak thesis is also attractive because of what it *doesn't* say. It does not insist that a work may not be aesthetically good if it suffers from some moral flaw, and neither must we reserve our aesthetic praise for those works which obtain the highest ethical standards (these, I have mentioned, would be untenably *strong* theses). All we are licensed, according to the weak thesis, is to make aesthetic criticisms which are informed by the ethics of the work.

The hallmark of the weak thesis is that it is an 'all-things-considered' claim. It does not suggest that the ethical criticism of art is the *only* criticism of art, or that ethical properties hold some special status by which they might 'trump' other properties. The weak thesis sees ethical concerns as *part of a range* of concerns that count towards a work's aesthetic qualities. When we enumerate those features which contribute to a work's aesthetic qualities, we see that they are manifold: we may comment on any number of formal and substantive qualities – in a painting, say, on the choice of canvas size and cloth, and of the density of the paint and the intensity of the hues, as well, of course, as the historical milieu in which the work obtains, and how this-or-that motif has been overused in works of this genre. Now, the qualities enumerated above certainly fall within the canon of art criticism and count towards the aesthetic virtues of a work, yet none of them provides a necessary or sufficient condition

for aesthetic value. We would never say, for example, that in order for a sculpture to be aesthetically good it must represent figures as life-size. Nevertheless, it is surely permissible *in some circumstances* to suggest that such a feature is an aesthetic virtue (as in Antony Gormley's work, which is concerned with the nature of the body in space). From this we may conclude that *a property may be an aesthetic property (and thus may feature in aesthetic criticism), even if it does not always obtain in a work, or receives divergent criticism in its different instances.* This conclusion provides the support required for weak Ethicism: ethical properties *may* be aesthetic properties. Kieran astutely recognises the way the merited response argument is intended to support weak Ethicism: "the morally commendable character of a work *may* be an aesthetic virtue where it enhances our imaginative engagement with a work and the morally reprehensible character of a work *may* be an aesthetic vice where it undermines our imaginative responses."¹¹

Concluding remarks on the cogency of the weak thesis

If Gaut had suggested that only ethically good works may be aesthetically good works, he would be proffering a heady but over-inflated thesis, one which requires little effort to burst. Weak Ethicism, on the other hand, does not suffer from such hubris, and it is less susceptible to these simple criticisms. It could not be an objection to the weak thesis that some aesthetically good works have no ethical content – for example, certainly much orchestral music (aside, perhaps, from Wagner) seems to have no ethical properties at all.¹² It is not a valid criticism because the weak thesis does not suggest that ethical virtues are a necessary condition for aesthetic virtues. It could not be objected that Weak Ethicism is mistaken because a work might be aesthetically good even if it suffers from some ethical vice. This is no objection, first, because of the reason just provided: the weak thesis does not suggest that ethical virtues are a necessary condition for aesthetic virtues. It is not a valid objection also because it forgets that the weak thesis is an 'all-things-considered' claim, which takes on board that ethical properties form part of a *range* of properties which have

¹¹ (Kieran, *Forbidden knowledge: the challenge of immoralism*, 2003, pp. 56-57)

¹² Carroll suggests that "not all art is equally suitable for moral evaluation. Some absolute music and some abstract painting may be bereft of moral content altogether, thereby rendering moral criticism inapposite in such cases. However, so much art traffics in moral matters and presents moral viewpoints that when moral considerations are raised with respect to the relevant artworks, nothing seems amiss – at least to the plain reader, viewer, or listener" (Carroll, *Art and the Moral Realm*, 2004, p. 127).

aesthetic value, and in which ethical properties do not necessarily trump the others in competing for aesthetic influence. For similar reasons, it is clear why it is no objection to the weak thesis that a work may be ethically excellent yet aesthetically poor.

Gaut's claim is not easily assailable precisely because it makes so few demands. It may then be objected that his thesis is so weak as to be of no philosophical interest or benefit. If Gaut's claim has no falsification conditions (i.e., circumstances under which the claim could be said to be false) then it is hard to see how it could be informative. However, it seems to me that there clearly are such falsification conditions, even for weak Ethicism. If the Autonomist had succeeded in showing that aesthetic criticism logically excludes ethical criticism, or had shown that the ethical criticism led to the impoverishment of aesthetic criticism, or that it was improper in some other sense to engage in the ethical criticism of art, then we would have grounds to think Weak Ethicism is false. However, as I have shown, the majority of the good arguments presented by the Autonomists are successful only insofar as they are directed at Strong (or at least Stronger) Ethicism: the Autonomist arguments target theses which assume a greater degree of relevance or necessary tethering between ethics and aesthetics. Insofar as Weak Ethicism avoids advancing a necessary or sufficient connection between ethical and aesthetic value, it is not rendered false by the Autonomist objections.

However, if weak Ethicism is to be a worthwhile thesis, it requires reasons not just to deny its falsehood, but positively to affirm its truth. Here, the merited response argument makes plain precisely why the ethical criticism of art is a legitimate and helpful enterprise: ethics matters to prescribed responses, and prescribed responses matter to aesthetics – and they *matter* a great deal. If we left out ethics when discussing prescribed responses, we would leave out something which really matters. And if we left out prescribed responses when discussing aesthetics, we would likewise be remiss. When coupled with the long-standing and rich tradition of ethics in art, this argument presents powerful reasons to believe that ethical criticism is a valuable and occasionally indispensable component to aesthetic criticism.

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