

INTRODUCTION: Art and Ethics

How should one think about the relation between the aesthetic value of an artwork and its moral value? There are two extreme positions in the theoretical mapping of the relations between the aesthetic and the moral value of an artwork (Carroll 2000; Levinson 1998).¹ At one of these extremes, we find ‘radical aesthetic autonomism’, according to which the moral or immoral value of an artwork is of no relevance (either intrinsic or instrumental) for its evaluation as an artwork. The aesthetic features of an artwork are thus the only necessary and sufficient conditions for its aesthetic value. At the other extreme, we find ‘radical aesthetic moralism’, according to which the aesthetic value of an artwork is intrinsically determined by its moral value. Morality is thus a necessary and sufficient condition for aesthetic value. These two extreme positions concerning the relations between aesthetic and moral value are implausible and in fact no one seems to defend them. So the debate about the relation between the aesthetic value of an artwork and its moral value is best conducted between two less extreme and more plausible positions, namely ‘aesthetic autonomism’ and ‘aesthetic moralism’. According to ‘aesthetic autonomism’, the aesthetic features of an artwork are a necessary condition for its aesthetic value, although they might not always be sufficient conditions. There are three main arguments in favour of aesthetic autonomism: first, the industry of art criticism usually does not take into account the eventual presence of moral features in artworks; second, some artworks are very similarly valued for their aesthetic features although they may provoke contradictory moral evaluations; and finally, the evaluation of artworks usually does not imply any conception of truth, and particularly of moral truth. Thus aesthetic moralism excludes the possibility that artworks may have greater aesthetic value by virtue of their immoral properties. Aesthetic immoralism shares with aesthetic moralism the claim that the moral value of artworks can be a necessary condition of their aesthetic value. But aesthetic immoralism departs from

moralism because it claims that in some cases the immoral value of artworks can also be a necessary (although not sufficient) condition of their aesthetic value. Aesthetic immoralism has to be distinguished from ‘extreme aesthetic immoralism’, since this position would hold that the immoral value of an artwork is always not only a necessary but also a sufficient condition for its aesthetic value. Extreme aesthetic immoralism seems too implausible and it is doubtful that anyone has defended this position. But aesthetic immoralism seems plausible because in fact some types of artworks have artistic success partly by virtue of their immoral features (for example, satire and other forms of humour are the most common artistic expressions of aesthetic immoralism, or *grand guignol* and pornographic art) as well as the immoral responses and attitudes they provoke. Artworks that are morally ‘defective’ engage our understanding and for that reason have artistically greater value by virtue of their immorality. As Matthew Kieran puts it: “The crucial claim is whether or not the (im)moral character of a work cultivates my understanding. Immoral or morally problematic aspects of a work, where they cultivate understanding, can contribute to a work’s artistic value rather than detract from it” (2006).² It is interesting to note that artworks can be judged immoral in at least three different ways: first, they can be immoral in the way they are produced; second, they can have immoral consequences on the audience; third, they can be immoral from the perspective they represent. The immoral value of an artwork may depend on only one of these immoral features, not necessarily on all.³

The papers composing this special issue are all significant contributions to the ongoing ‘ethical criticism of art’ debate. In his paper “Ethicism, Particularism, and Artistic Categorization”, Alessandro Giovannelli examines how an ethical evaluation of a work of art can be considered among the determinants of the work’s value as art, by critically examining Gaut’s ethicism. In his paper “Moderate Autonomism Revisited”, Rafe McGregor proposes an argument in favour of moderate autonomism as

INTRODUCTION

the best solution to the value interaction debate. He first examines Arnold's cultural criticism and Leavis' literary criticism, and then employs Gibson's distinction between normative and informative values to complete his argument for moderate autonomism. In his paper "Comedy as the Equal of Tragedy", Matthew Kieran argues against the common claim according to which tragedy is superior to comedy, first by examining three types of reasons given to underwrite the conceptual nature of the superiority claim, second by outlining a normative account of 'high comedy' which, according to Kieran, proves to be tragedy's equal. In her paper "Autonomy and the Confrontation between Ethics and Art in Art Criticism", Jolanta Nowak considers the issue of the ethics of art's claim to be art, first through an examination of the changing conceptions of art's autonomy in art criticism since the mid-twentieth century, and then by proposing a rethinking of both autonomy and ethics. Finally, in his paper "Science Fiction, Philosophy and Politics: *Planet of the Apes* as a Thought Experiment", Noël Carroll argues that science fiction can function as a philosophical thought experiment, and then demonstrates that the movie *Planet of the Apes* offers a challenge to the theory of natural slavery.

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WORKS CITED

- Carroll, Noël. 2000. "Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research." *Ethics* 110/2: 350-387.
- Giovannelli, Alessandro. 2007. "The Ethical Criticism of Art: A New Mapping of the Territory." *Philosophia* 35/2: 117-127.
- Kieran, Matthew. 2006. "Art, Morality and Ethics: On the (Im)Moral Character of Art Works and Inter-Relations to Artistic Value." *Philosophy Compass* 2/1: 129-143.
- Levinson, Jerrold (ed.). 1998. *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

NOTES

1. Cf. Noël Carroll, “Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research,” *Ethics* 110/2 (2000): 350–387. Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

2. Matthew Kieran, “Art, Morality and Ethics: On the (Im)Moral Character of Art Works and Inter-Relations to Artistic Value,” *Philosophy Compass* 2/1 (2006): 129–143.

3. Alessandro Giovannelli, “The Ethical Criticism of Art: A New Mapping of the Territory,” *Philosophia* 35/2 (2007): 117–127.