MODERATE AUTONOMISM

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I. INTRODUCTION

It is not uncommon to find oneself with a conflict between one's aesthetic interests and one's moral convictions. Suppose, for example, that you have been persuaded that *The Merchant of Venice* is not meant for tragedy, and that the role of Shylock is drawn in such a way as to provoke laughter and derision (rather than, say, to develop an argument which starts with anti-Semitic premises but builds to a conclusion which complicates and questions prevailing Elizabethan stereotypes of Jewish greed and malice).1 Or, take the case of the white civil rights worker in Alice Walker's *Meridian*, for whom

the black people of the South were Art. This she begged forgiveness for and tried to hide, but it was no use. . . . 'I will pay for this,' she often warned herself. 'It is probably a sin to think of a people as Art.' And yet she would stand perfectly still and the sight of a fat black woman singing to herself in a tattered dress, her voice rich and full of yearning, was always—God forgive her, black folks forgive her—the same weepy miracle that Art always was for her.2

The woman knows that her highly aesthetic attitude toward the desperate struggle of other individuals is morally troublesome, and yet finds herself unable to resist indulging in this 'weepy miracle'. In either of these cases—a deeply layered and brilliantly versed comedy which also relies on a bigoted attitude toward Jews, or the morally inappropriate yet tearfully miraculous aestheticization of another human being's hardship—and in countless others, real or easily imagined, one may be confronted with a serious tension between moral and aesthetic value. In such instances, we feel torn between our commitment to

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moral integrity on the one hand, and our pursuit of aesthetic interests on the other.

Such tension provides us with a prima-facie reason to suppose that there are two distinct sorts of value, moral and aesthetic, and that they sometimes come into conflict. Plato felt this conflict, believing that the superficial and illusionistic aims of representational art (as generally practised) stood at odds with the truth-bearing, transcendent object of morality. Augustine and Rousseau also felt it. Augustine, for his part, while acutely aware of the aesthetic pull of the theatre, calls the pleasure received from the viewing of tragic plays a 'miserable madness', and appears to worry that the release of emotion in such circumstances—circumstances in which 'the auditor is not called on to relieve, but only to grieve'—may indulge moral emotions for inappropriate ends. Rousseau, in his Letter to M. D'Alembert on the Theatre, also has misgivings about this 'purging of the passions', wondering whether it is 'possible' that in order to become temperate and prudent we must begin by being intemperate and mad', and seconds Augustine's claim that no good can come of discharging one's emotions in the face of fictional tragedies. What is more, Rousseau argues that the theatre, because its aim is to please the audience, must follow the public sentiment, and is thus incapable of improving or in any way altering the public conception of morality. The aims of art—to engage and please the intended audience—are different from, and at odds with, the goals of moral enlightenment and elevation. And while aesthetes such as Oscar Wilde and Clive Bell saw no real room for strain (since on Wilde's view aesthetic interests always trumped conventional moral ones, and Bell appears to have worked it out to his satisfaction that art always contributes to the overall good), their views certainly reflect a clear division between the different sorts of value. Richard Posner has also recently defended this division, and mentions (along with Wilde) Cleanth Brooks, Orwell, and Croce as being among those who share his outlook.

3 Plato's position with respect to artistic representation is much more subtle and complicated than it is often made out to be. None the less, it is clear that he has moral and (thereby) epistemic reservations about particular modes of mimesis.


5 Rousseau writes, 'If, according to the observation of Diogenes Laertius, the heart is more readily touched by feigned ills than real ones, if theatrical imitations draw forth more tears than would the presence of the objects imitated, it is because they are pure and without mixture of anxiety for ourselves. In giving our tears to these fictions, we have satisfied all the rights of humanity without having to give anything more of ourselves; whereas unfortunate people in person would require attention from us, relief, consolation, and work, which would involve us in their pains and would require at least the sacrifice of our indolence, from all of which we are quite content to be exempt. It could be said that our heart closes itself for fear of being touched at our expense' (Politics and the Arts: Letter to M D'Alembert on the Theatre, trans. Allan Bloom (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U.P., 1991], p. 25).

6 Ibid., pp. 18–19.

7 Regarding the case of Wilde, however, see n. 44.
Without erasing the distinction between moral and aesthetic value, several authors have recently suggested that at times the division between them is not so clear, and that, in fact, there are occasions upon which they merge. Berys Gaut argues that ethical criticism of art is a proper and legitimate aesthetic activity, that 'if a work manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically defective, and if a work manifests ethically commendable attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically meritorious'. He calls this view *ethicism*. Noël Carroll labels a similar view *moderate moralism*. We will be arguing that while ethical criticism of works of art is a legitimate activity, neither Gaut nor Carroll have succeeded in showing that the endorsement of an ethically reprehensible attitude entails that a work is in any sense aesthetically flawed. Moreover, that a work endorses ethically commendable attitudes does not entail that the work is to any degree aesthetically meritorious.

In contrast to the views articulated by Gaut and Carroll, we will argue for a conception of the relationship between moral and aesthetic evaluation which Carroll calls *moderate autonomism*. According to this view, moral criticism of works of art is legitimate as is, of course, aesthetic criticism. In some instances the legitimate aesthetic criticism of a work can surround aspects of the moral subject matter of a work, i.e. the moral content of a work can contribute to or detract from the aesthetic aspects of a work. What distinguishes our view from the views of Carroll and Gaut, however, is our claim that it is never the moral component of the criticism as such that diminishes or strengthens the value of an artwork qua artwork. In short, both sorts of criticism are appropriate to works of art but the categories of moral aesthetic criticism always remain conceptually distinct.

Further, we will argue that understanding moral and aesthetic criticism as

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8 See Richard A. Posner, 'Against Ethical Criticism', *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (April 1997), pp. 1–27. Posner's position is much stronger than ours, in that he claims that 'the formal properties do not exhaust the worth and appeal of literature, but the moral properties . . . are almost sheer distraction' (p. 24). His target is also different than ours, in so far as he is concerned to dispute what he takes to be the exaggerated claims of some authors—e.g. Martha Nussbaum, Wayne Booth, and Richard Eldridge—regarding the positive moral effect of immersion in literature, a subject we will not address in this essay. What Posner does maintain, relative to our project, is the insistence on the separation of the moral from the aesthetic (p. 2). Posner qualifies this claim with a caveat: the separation of moral from aesthetic values is not a rejection of the former. The aesthetic outlook is a moral outlook, one that stresses the values of openness, detachment, hedonism, curiosity, tolerance, the cultivation of the self, and the preservation of a private sphere—in short, the values of liberal individualism (p. 2). The sense in which Posner sees the moral and the aesthetic merging here is different from what we are concerned with in this paper, though the position is somewhat reminiscent of one defended by Clive Bell in his book *Art* (New York: Capricorn, 1938), which one of us has criticized earlier; see Jeffrey T. Dean, 'Clive Bell and G. E. Moore: The Good of Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (April 1996), pp. 135–145.


distinct helps us to better comprehend the sort of perplexity one experiences when confronted by works in which these sorts of values are at odds with one another. Such cases cannot be adequately understood as instances in which excellence in one aesthetic category is in conflict with deformity in another aesthetic category—as when, say, the expressive character of a passage undermines the unity of a work. The values involved in the examples we have presented above are in deep conflict. The conflicts are not within the aesthetic domain; they are between the aesthetic and moral domains. Finally, we will suggest that treating moral criticism as a sort of aesthetic criticism precludes success in certain aesthetic endeavours—e.g. the aesthetically successful endorsement of evil as such—and that there is no legitimate reason to suppose such endorsement may not have aesthetic, if not moral, value.

II. THE ARGUMENT FROM COMMON REASONS

In 'Moderate Moralism', Carroll distinguishes four logically distinct conceptions of the relations between aesthetic and moral value: radical autonomism, radical moralism, moderate autonomism, and moderate moralism. After having set forth a series of arguments designed to demonstrate the implausibility of radical autonomism and radical moralism (views which find allegiance in, e.g., Clive Bell and Plato, respectively), Carroll turns his attention to moderate autonomism. This view grants that artworks (at least some of them) may be evaluated morally as well as aesthetically, but contends that the moral evaluation is never relevant to the aesthetic evaluation. The moral dimension of an artwork, when it possesses one, is strictly independent of the aesthetic dimension. Because of this independence, a corollary to moderate autonomism is that 'an artwork will never be aesthetically better in virtue of its moral strengths, and will never be worse because of its moral defects'. It follows, according to the moderate autonomist, that 'an artwork may invite an audience to entertain a defective moral perspective and this will not detract from its aesthetic value'. It is this last claim that Carroll believes to be false.

Carroll's main argument against moderate autonomism is, roughly, a generalization of one made by Aristotle in the Poetics. According to Aristotle, the central figure in a tragedy must have a certain type of moral character, and if he does not, the audience will not be able to respond to his plight appropriately, i.e.

11 Radical autonomism is the view that works of art are never appropriate objects of moral criticism. Radical moralism is the view that moral evaluation is the only appropriate mode of artistic criticism. We accept Carroll's criticisms of these views, and will not consider them in this paper.

12 Carroll, 'Moderate Moralism', p. 231.

13 Ibid., p. 232.

14 Ibid.
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with fear and pity. The character must be neither evil nor flawless, for in the first case the audience will likely find a bad end well deserved, and in the second case a bad end will move the audience not to pity, but to anger. As Carroll puts it:

If certain characters are inserted into the tragic scenario . . . tragedy will not secure the effects that are normatively correct for it. That is, tragedy will fail on its own terms—terms internal to the practice of tragedy—when the characters are of the wrong sort. This failure will be aesthetic in the straightforward sense that it is a failure of tragedy qua tragedy. And the locus of the failure may be that the author has invited the audience to share a defective moral perspective.  

Carroll expands on Aristotle’s point and, as an example of the sort of thing he has in mind, refers to Brett Easton Ellis’ recent novel, American Psycho. On Carroll’s account, what was intended to be a satirical allegory of the ‘rapacious eighties in the United States’ failed to elicit the appropriate response (wry smiles and knowing nods, presumably) because of the graphic brutality of the serial killings which the novel represents. As Carroll puts it, readers were unable to ‘get past the gore to savor the parody’.  

This, Carroll thinks, is clearly an aesthetic failing—the audience was unable to respond in a manner appropriate to social and political satire—but what is more, this aesthetic failure ‘rests on’ a moral mistake, since American Psycho appears to suppose that ‘the sustained, deadpan, clinically meticulous dismemberments it presents to the reader could be taken in a comically detached manner’. Since American Psycho failed on its own terms—failed, that is, to elicit the kind of aesthetic response is was designed to elicit—the novel can be said to be aesthetically defective; and because this defect is attributable to a flawed moral understanding—the supposition that graphic serial murders could be funny—it would appear ‘that sometimes a moral flaw in a work can count against the work aesthetically. Therefore, moderate autonomism seems false’.  

The concomitant of the moderate autonomist’s claim that a work’s moral flaws never count as aesthetic flaws is the claim that a work’s moral merits never count as aesthetic merits, which Carroll also disputes. The problem with this claim, Carroll thinks, is that one of the central aims of narrative art is to encourage

15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., p. 233.
18 Ibid. Carroll further argues that moral flaws can count as aesthetic flaws even when they go undetected, i.e. even when such flaws do not in fact deter the sort of audience uptake which is supposed to be appropriate to the work. The reasoning here is that anyone appropriately positioned with regard to the flawed moral perspective of a given work would have a difficult time taking up the intended response, were he or she aware of the flaw. Flaws of this nature are like ‘time bombs’ waiting to go off upon discovery. This is intended to parallel the fact that unobserved aesthetic flaws—such as the initially unobserved weaknesses in Van Meegeren’s forgeries of Vermeer—are flaws none the less.
sustained interest and absorbed attention on the part of the audience, and that such interest and attention are ‘intimately bound up’ with our moral emotions and judgments. Part of what standard consumers of narrative art find absorbing and compelling, part of what engages our emotions and imaginations, are themes, situations, turns of events, and characters that are essentially moral in nature, and require the use of moral judgments and emotions on the part of the audience for proper comprehension. What is more, Carroll argues, ‘a narrative may be more absorbing exactly because of the way in which it engages our moral understanding and emotions. That is, the deepening of our moral understanding and emotions may contribute dramatically to our intense absorption in a narrative.’

As an example, Carroll asks us to imagine that Jane Austen had a twin who had the same power of prose, but who chose to write a version of *Emma* which, while containing the same plot line, did not engage our moral understanding at all. Carroll’s claim is that ‘we would not find the alternative version of *Emma* as aesthetically compelling as the real Jane Austen’s version. And the reason would be that it is the moral dimension of the original *Emma* that, in large measure, absorbs us.’ So, once again, the central claim of moderate autonomism would appear to be false, since the moral content of works like *Emma* is part of what determines their aesthetic merit.

Carroll outlines a possible response on the part of the moderate autonomist, but finds it unconvincing. The response is essentially this: the sorts of defects Carroll adduces—ones stemming primarily from a flawed moral perspective—can be categorized in two ways: as aesthetic defects (i.e., they present psychological problems with respect to audience uptake), or as moral problems (i.e., they project an evil point of view). Furthermore, the moderate autonomist may contend that all I have really offered are cases of the first type. And this does not imply a moral problem qua moral problem is an aesthetic defect in an artwork. Thus, the moderate autonomist adds, it has not been shown that something is an aesthetic defect because it is evil; rather it is an error concerning the audience’s psychology. Call it a tactical error.

Carroll finds this response unpersuasive. He writes:

> I agree that the aesthetic defect concerns the psychology of audience members; they are psychologically incapable of providing the requisite uptake. But I am not persuaded that this failure is unconnected from the evil involved. For the reason that uptake is psychologically impossible may be because what is represented is evil. That

19 Ibid., p. 235.

20 Ibid., p. 236.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., p. 234.
is, the reason the work is aesthetically defective—in the sense of failing to secure psychological uptake—and the reason it is morally defective may be the same.\textsuperscript{23}

If this were true, then moral defects could sometimes count as aesthetic defects, and moderate autonomism would be false. The same holds, \textit{mutatis mutandis}, for moral and aesthetic merits.

Carroll's rejection of this form of moderate autonomism rests on his claim that the reasons for the work's being aesthetically defective and the reasons for the work's being morally defective are the same. But are they the same? Let us trace the pattern of reasons for the two sorts of defect. Consider first the sorts of reasons Carroll offers for the work's having the relevant \textit{moral} defect; the argument would run as follows:

\textbf{The Moral Defect Argument}

1. The perspective of the work in question is immoral.
2. Therefore, the work 'invites us to share [this morally] defective perspective' (In one case, we are invited to find an evil person sympathetic; in the other case, we are invited to find gruesome acts humorous.)
3. Any work which invites us to share a morally defective perspective is, itself, morally defective.
4. Therefore, the work in question is morally defective.

The inference from (1) to (2) is grounded in the nature of a work's having a perspective. The work's perspective is exactly what the audience is 'invited' to take up. Reasons for accepting (3) include Carroll's claim that such works tend, at least, to 'pervert the moral understanding' by means of their defective perspectives.\textsuperscript{24} In any case, from the premises of this argument nothing follows concerning whether or not the work in question is aesthetically defective.

\textbf{The Aesthetic Defect Argument}

1. The perspective of the work in question is immoral.
2. The immorality portrayed subverts the possibility of uptake. (In the case of

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 235. There is an ambiguity in the argument presented here by Carroll. He claims that the reason that uptake is impossible and the reason that the work is aesthetically defective is 'because what is represented is evil'. The ambiguity is in the phrase, 'what is being represented'. Carroll could mean either \textit{the subject matter of the work being represented} or \textit{the perspective being represented by the work}. We take him to mean the latter for two reasons. First, the examples he uses, portraying Hitler as a tragic figure and the dismemberments in \textit{American Psycho}, both suggest this reading of the phrase. In these cases, it is not so much (or merely) that what is represented is evil, but that \textit{the manner in which they are represented} (sympathetically and humorously), \textit{given their content} (totalitarian genocide and protracted, torturous murder), is evil. Secondly, the alternative interpretation of Carroll's remark would leave his argument with very little plausibility. Works which represent (depict) evil are neither aesthetically nor morally flawed in virtue of that fact alone.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 229.
the tragedy, the response of pity is precluded; in the case of satire the savoring of parody is precluded.)

3. Any work which subverts its own genre is aesthetically defective.
4. Therefore, the work in question is aesthetically defective.

The arguments differ, of course. The Aesthetic Defect Argument requires a premise (premise 2) about the sort of work it is, linking the perspective of the work to the failure of uptake specific to that sort of work. This is what makes the defect aesthetic in character, as Carroll says 'a failure of tragedy [or satire] as such'. To show that the work is morally defective, no such premise is required. As we have suggested above, any (overall) sympathetic portrayal of evil would be morally defective whether or not it undermined a genre which the work instantiates. Further, the sorts of reasons one would offer for the second premise of the Aesthetic Defect Argument are not required by the Moral Defect Argument. The second premise of the Aesthetic Defect Argument would require support (supplied by Aristotle and Carroll) about the nature of tragedy or satire, i.e. what the conditions for success in those genres are. No such evidence is relevant to the Moral Defect Argument.

We fail to see how the arguments can be reconstructed such that 'the reason it is aesthetically defective . . . and the reason it is morally defective may be the same'. The plausibility of Carroll's claim rests entirely on the fact that the two arguments share one common premise, but this premise is not sufficient to show that the work in question is either morally or aesthetically defective. In short, the objection Carroll raises to his own rejection of moral autonomism stands; he has not shown that 'a moral problem qua moral problem is an aesthetic defect in an artwork . . . it has not been shown that something is an aesthetic defect because it is evil'.

III. ETHICISM

Berys Gaut, in 'The Ethical Criticism of Art' defends a position which is similar, if not identical, to that of Carroll. He defends the thesis that

the ethical criticism of art is a proper and legitimate aesthetic activity . . . that the ethical assessment of attitudes manifested by works of art is a legitimate aspect of the aesthetic evaluation of those works.

25 Of course, one could argue more simply that the fact that the work offers a morally defective perspective, by itself, entails that the work is morally defective. It is then even more difficult to see how this argument provides the same reasons as the Aesthetic Defect Argument which follows.

26 Carroll cites an earlier version of this article, and his characterization of such works as ones in which 'the author has invited the audience to share a defective moral perspective' suggests that his view is very close to Gaut's.

27 Gaut, 'Ethical Criticism', p. 182.
He goes on to clarify his position, claiming that a work is aesthetically worse in so far as it manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes and that it is aesthetically better in so far as it manifests ethical attitudes which are commendable. He calls this view ethicism. Gaut's view deserves special attention since the reasons he offers for ethicism are quite different from those offered by Carroll for moderate moralism.

The argument offered by Gaut centres on the notion that works of art often manifest attitudes towards the persons and events described in the works. The manifestation of an attitude is a prescription of various responses on the part of the audience toward the persons and events described in the work. He goes on to argue that these prescribed responses can be evaluated from an ethical point of view and that when such an evaluation shows that the prescribed response is unmerited we have, at once, an ethical and an aesthetic defect in the work.

As an example, Gaut refers to de Sade's *Juliette*, where we are not only presented with the representation of sexual torture, or even the representation of a character taking pleasure in sexual torture, but with a narrative that appears to encourage its readers to take pleasure in—to find humorous and erotic—sexual torture. In this case the narrative perspective seems to be one of hearty pleasure and sexual gratification with regard to a form of deliberately inflicted pain and humiliation. This example recalls Carroll's claims regarding *American Psycho*. In that novel, Ellis appears to be inviting his readers to experience his detailed account of brutal serial killings under the description of satirical social commentary; appears, that is, to expect the audience to consume his clinical representation of murderous mutilation under the rubric of humour. As in *Juliette*, it is not the mere representation of evil in *American Psycho* that is morally objectionable, but the manner in which it is represented, i.e. as the appropriate object of amusement. Such representations manifest ethically defective perspectives, and in so far as these defects undermine the extent to which the prescribed responses are merited, they count as flaws in the work qua work of art.

The argument for ethicism presented by Gaut can be summarized as follows:

1. Prescribed responses to art works are subject to evaluation.
2. Some of the evaluative criteria for prescribed responses are ethical ones.
3. If a work prescribes a response that is unmerited, then the work has to that extent failed qua work of art.
4. Any defect in a work of art qua work of art is an aesthetic defect.
5. Therefore, ethical defects are aesthetic defects.

We will not be concerned with premises (1) and (2) since we accept both that works can be evaluated in terms of the responses they prescribe and that these evaluations are sometimes moral evaluations. In support of (3), Gaut marshals a host of examples in which unmerited responses represent failures of the artwork qua artwork; 'thrillers that do not merit the audience being thrilled, tragedies that
do not merit fear and pity for their protagonists, comedies that are not amusing, melodramas that do not merit sadness and pity. . . . And in general . . . art that leaves us bored and offers no enjoyment at all. He correctly concludes that the prescription of these responses are failures of the artwork qua artwork. Hence, by premise (4), they are aesthetic flaws. But do all unmerited prescriptions represent aesthetic flaws? Could there be prescribed unmerited responses that are not properly viewed as failures of the artwork qua artwork? Are prescribed moral responses among them? These questions are left open by the strategy of presenting examples.

The examples presented by Gaut in this context, like those presented by Carroll and considered above, are straightforward aesthetic failures. A thriller that fails to thrill is aesthetically flawed. But that does not show that moral flaws are aesthetic flaws. Even if the thriller fails to thrill because of some unmerited moral response called forth by the work, Gaut has not shown that the moral criticism qua moral criticism is an aesthetic criticism. The per se reason that the thriller fails from an aesthetic point of view is that it fails to thrill. This reiterates the point we made above concerning Carroll’s use of such examples.

That not all prescribed but unmerited responses are failures of artworks qua artworks can be seen by an example Gaut considers in another context. In discussing the views of Nussbaum and Eldridge, Gaut points out that Moby Dick is (excruciatingly) informative on the subject of nineteenth-century whaling practices. Further, it is reasonable to suppose that the work prescribes belief in its descriptions of such practices. Let us suppose that in some respect, Melville was mistaken in his descriptions of whaling. In this case, the work would prescribe a response that is unmerited and, by premise (3), the work would, in this respect, have failed qua artwork. But as Gaut points out, this is not a failure in the work qua work of art; or, if it is, it certainly does not constitute an aesthetic flaw in the work. Gaut remarks, ‘works of art can be interesting and informative as social documents, but the fact that much can be learnt from them about attitudes and circumstances of their time does not ipso facto make them aesthetically better’. Consequently, works of art can, as social documents, mislead us about the attitudes and circumstances of their time. This would not ipso facto make them aesthetically worse.

Taken by itself, this objection to Gaut’s argument is not decisive. Gaut does attempt to narrow the range of prescribed responses that are of aesthetic interest. The relevant responses, he claims, must be of a certain sort, namely ‘cognitive-affective responses’. The main argument for premise (3) centres on

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28 Ibid., p. 194.
29 Ibid., p. 192.
30 It is not clear that the misdescribed whaling case does not involve an unmerited cognitive-affective response. If the reader feels disdain for the whaling practices (mis)described in the work because the reader is an avid animal rights activist, it might be case that the disdain, as well as the belief, is
the view that 'much of the value of art derives from its deployment of an affective mode of cognition—deriveth from the way works teach us, not by giving us merely intellectual knowledge, but by bringing that knowledge home to us'. Certainly art does function in this way. Further, some of the knowledge that art 'brings home to us' may be moral knowledge. All this is granted when we agree that art is properly subject to moral evaluation. But why is this value aesthetic value? Gaut's response is as follows:

On the cognitive-affective view of art, whether prescribed responses are merited will be of aesthetic significance, since such responses constitute a cognitive-affective perspective onto the events recounted. For such responses are not merely affective, but include a cognitive component, being directed towards some state of affairs or thing, and bringing it under evaluative concepts.31

We have already seen, however, that there are other responses that 'include a cognitive component' that are of no aesthetic significance. Further, the above argument for premise (3) is clearly circular. Granting that moral responses are of a cognitive-affective sort, it will, of course, follow that they are of aesthetic significance if all such responses are of aesthetic significance. But this is exactly what is at issue. Gaut's introduction of the cognitive-affective response view of the value of art was designed to overcome the objection that not all unmerited responses are of aesthetic significance. In order to make this point, he must argue that all cognitive-affective responses are of aesthetic significance. But there is no such argument to be found; there is only the assertion that this sort of value is aesthetic in nature. Even if we grant that some such responses are of aesthetic value, even some such moral responses, the perfectly general claim of ethicism will not have been established. Given the prima-facie distinction between moral and aesthetic criticism with which we began, and which is illustrated by the fact that Gaut (as well as Carroll) are compelled to argue against it, we believe that the burden of proof has not been met by Gaut.

Gaut considers the objection that his argument rests on an equivocation, arguing, as it does, from a premise about ethical merit to a conclusion about aesthetic merit. He replies that his argument rests on the additional 'substantive' premise that 'whether prescribed responses are merited is aesthetically relevant, and amongst the criteria that are relevant . . . are ethical ones'.32 But, at best, Gaut has shown that the evaluation of some prescribed responses is an aesthetic matter.

unmerited. We do not see that this would be an aesthetic failing of the work. It is also interesting that Gaut's use of the cognitive-affective view to include ethical criticism turns exclusively on the cognitive side. It is not merely that some emotion is felt; it is the 'cognitive component, being directed toward some state of affairs or thing, and bringing it under evaluative concepts' that renders the response of moral significance.

31 Ibid., p. 195.
32 Ibid., p. 197.
Whether moral evaluations of works fall within the domain of the aesthetic remains to be shown.

Further, we believe that Gaut’s treatment of proposed counter-examples to his thesis is unconvincing. He does consider the objection that there are some intended cognitive-affective responses that are at once unmerited and not instances of aesthetic flaws in a work—the royal portrait designed to impart a sense of (undeserved) awe, or a religious work that aims to enhance the viewer’s reverence for God. Gaut asserts that such cases ‘can also embody a way of thinking . . . about its subject and this perspective on its subject is an important object of our aesthetic interest in the work’.33 But, again, the argument for ethicism requires a stronger premise, since its conclusion is perfectly general. Gaut’s own comments on such examples suggest that the evaluation of some prescribed responses do not fall within the domain of the aesthetic—that the required universal premise is not forthcoming. One need not be a beauty theorist to believe that a portrait of Louis XIV is aesthetically beyond criticism while noting that the king, so regally portrayed in the portrait, was a morally objectionable person. Indeed, as Gaut points out, ‘a painting is not just . . . a beautiful object’,34 but having said that, the issue of whether moral features of works, including the cognitive-affective responses called forth by them, are aesthetic features is left entirely open. To insist that they are aesthetic features because they are features of the work qua work of art (premise 4) only raises the question of whether they are features of the work of art qua work of art or not. It does not answer the question of their aesthetic significance.

A final aspect of Gaut’s treatment of the unethical in art is worth commenting on. In response to the objection that sometimes ‘works can be good precisely because they violate our sense of moral rectitude’, Gaut notes that ‘it is important to distinguish between the evil or insensitive characters represented by a work and the attitude the work displays towards those characters. Only the latter is relevant to the ethicist thesis’.35 While this is certainly a legitimate distinction to make, it does not meet the objection, since, presumably, evil characters and actions that are represented as evil will not violate our sense of moral rectitude. Gaut seems to see this complaint coming, for he goes on to say

It may be objected that the novel’s approbatory attitude towards evil is a reason why it is aesthetically good: evil arouses our curiosity, for the evil person may do and experience things which we can scarcely imagine, let alone understand; and the novel’s ability to satisfy this curiosity, to show us what it is like to engage in such actions, is a prime source of its aesthetic merit.36

33 Ibid., p. 198 (our italics).
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., p. 188.
36 Ibid., p. 189.
Gaut points out, again correctly, that not all fascination with evil or psychopathic perspectives is an aesthetic fascination: our interest in Hitler, Jeffrey Dahmer, and other demented individuals is not an aesthetic interest, and our interest in Sade's *Juliette* may not be either. But, notes Gaut, even if our interest in literary works which manifest evil perspectives were aesthetic, this still would not undermine ethicism:

For our interest here is in being able to imagine what it is like to have evil attitudes, and so in coming to understand them, and this is satisfied by the vivid representation of an evil attitude. But, again, representation of an attitude by a work does not require the work itself to share that attitude: works may manifest disapproval towards characters or narrators who are represented as evil. Moreover, if, as the objection holds, it is our curiosity which is aroused, then we have a cognitive interest in not seeing evil approved of, for such approval implies that there is something good about an attitude which we know to be bad.\(^{37}\)

There are two connected points to be made here. First, while it is true that one can represent an evil perspective without endorsing that perspective, it is equally true that we are fascinated by the artistically deft portrayal of perspectives which we ourselves find repugnant—perspectives, that is, which are manifest in the work as a whole, not in just one of its characters—and which we would condemn in persons who genuinely adopted them. Such works manifest morally alien or troubling perspectives without apology, without condemnation or rebuke of the characters and actions depicted in them, and are, in part, aesthetically interesting because of their morally skewed perspectives.\(^{38}\) It is sometimes precisely the fact that fictive representation calls on our imaginative capacities, without attendant doxastic commitments, that allows us to entertain in fiction what we would repudiate in reality. Surely it would be difficult to make the ethical case for an actual Humbert Humbert, and few people would like to spend time with his real-life counterpart; none the less, *Lolita*, with much sympathy and rather little apology for Humbert, is compelling fiction, and Humbert an excellent companion of the mind. Likewise, it is rather doubtful that there are or could be any cannibalistic serial killers as strangely alluring and insightful as Hannibal Lector, and genuine sociopaths do not 'thrill'; it is quite thrilling, however, to imaginatively engage Hannibal's character in *Silence of the Lambs*. And while there is certainly nothing funny about professional hitmen, those that appear in the

\(^{37}\) Ibid.

\(^{38}\) It is important to note that it is not our view that moral flaws are themselves sometimes aesthetic merits. While such a view, if true, would certainly show that ethicism is false, it is not one we wish to defend. Our claim is simply that there are occasions when the manifestation of an ethically flawed perspective in a work can positively modify or amplify the aesthetic qualities of that work, since some of the work's engaging aesthetic properties—its capacity to move an audience in unfamiliar ways, a lively and challenging tension between the beauty of the representation and the (moral) ugliness of what is represented, etc.—may depend on the presence of precisely those flaws.
recent comedy *Grosse Pointe Blank* are portrayed as if there were. The point is that in general, there appears to be a distinct gap between the values we are willing to imaginatively adopt in the context of fiction for the purpose of aesthetic satisfaction, and those to which we actually hold allegiance.\(^{39}\) So while we are apt to find it amusing when, in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Sir Henry Wotton declares, ‘I like persons better than principles, and I like persons with no principles better than anything else in the world’, it is also true that the serious expression of such views in non-fictional contexts would be morally disturbing.\(^{40}\) The fact is that we seem sometimes to have an aesthetic interest in the imaginative embrace of perspectives alien to our own, and not merely their portrayal.

With respect to the second point, recall that in the passage above Gaut claims that we have a cognitive interest in not seeing evil approved of, since ‘such approval implies that there is something good about an attitude which we know to be bad’. While it is true that we have a cognitive (not to mention ethical) interest in not having persons believe that bad people or actions are good, it does not follow that we do not have an aesthetic interest in seeing bad people or actions represented as if they were good. Indeed, our curiosity about seeing one thing represented as another is a hallmark of aesthetic interest. And it is the potential for conflict between these kinds of interest which we hold to be possible—the kind of conflict to which we referred at the beginning of this paper—that ethicism and moderate moralism deny.\(^{41}\)

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\(^{39}\) Kendall Walton, in his ‘Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality,’ *The Aristotelian Society,* Suppl. Vol. lxviii (1994), pp. 27-50, claims that he is ‘sceptical about whether fictional worlds can ever differ morally from the real world’ (p. 37), by which he means not that the characters of fictional worlds cannot have moral beliefs opposed to our own, but that we cannot bring ourselves to suppose that these beliefs are true, even in the world of the fiction. Thus, while a character in the world of some fiction may believe that slavery is morally acceptable, and while we can believe that this character believes this, we cannot bring ourselves to believe that this character’s beliefs about slavery are true, even in his world. Of course, this is a matter of moral psychology (and perhaps of the truth value of moral propositions across possible worlds). But even if Walton were right, this gets us only to the point where Carroll and Gaut start their arguments; it does nothing to further them.

\(^{40}\) This example appears in Susan Feagin, *Reading with Feeling* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U.P., 1996), p. 138. The quote is from Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York: The Nottingham Society, 1909), p. 11. Of course, there are those who would claim that films like *The Wild Bunch* and *Pulp Fiction*, or novels like *Lolita* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are simply reprehensible. But such claims generally rest on the supposition that these films have some sort of negative impact on the moral understanding or behaviour of typical auditors, and this sort of supposition has nothing to do with the aesthetic aspects of such works per se. Even if such claims turned out to be true, this would not establish any relation between their moral and aesthetic value; it could still turn out that these works are morally deplorable but aesthetically commendable. To simply assert at this point that, regardless of how people actually feel, a morally sensitive audience would have difficulty taking up the perspective endorsed by these works would be to beg the very question that is at issue, since the moderate autonomist’s claim is that while this may indeed count as a moral obstacle to uptake, not all problems with uptake are aesthetic problems.

\(^{41}\) Of course, there may instances of the sympathetic representation of unethical perspectives which we feel are liable to slip too easily from prescribed imaginative response to actual belief. In such cases, strenuous ethical objections may well be in order.
It is tempting to argue against ethicism by offering counter-examples such as those mentioned above. But examples will be inconclusive taken by themselves. Defenders of ethicism and moderate moralism will argue that the film or novel in question possesses other aesthetically relevant features, that the work might be judged good overall in spite of its moral (and putatively aesthetic) defects. Because of the complexity of particular cases, we have taken pains not to rest our case on the examination of them. Rather, we have concentrated on the arguments offered for ethicism and moderate moralism. There are two additional reasons for our having taken this approach. First, both Gaut and Carroll recognize the prima-facie distinction between moral and aesthetic criticism. This is why they present arguments for their views (rather than demanding arguments from those who oppose their views.) Second, the arguments for and against such views will, in the end, provide the conceptual tools for understanding the alleged counter-examples to ethicism and moderate moralism. So while examples will not be decisive, we feel they are illuminating with respect to the intuitive appeal of the moderate autonomist’s conceptual framework. Having addressed the arguments, we now turn our attention to the analysis of relevant examples.

IV. THE EXAMPLES RECONSIDERED

There are cases in which the moral flaw in a work overrides the work’s other merits. Is this because this flaw is the central aesthetic flaw of the work, so glaring that appreciation of the other aesthetic virtues are masked by its presence? It seems more plausible to maintain that it is the moral flaw as such, and often in conflict with the aesthetic virtues of the work, that justifies the overriding negative evaluation of the work.

Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* provides what is doubtless a classic case of moral and aesthetic value going their separate ways, and other cases are not hard to come by. While *Birth of a Nation* has historical significance and certain aesthetic merits as a film, it is an instance of a work in which its corrupt moral vision is dominant. Carroll’s example of *American Psycho* also falls within this category. Whatever other virtues these works may embody, the morally flawed perspective they represent is unredeemed. To borrow an analogy from Gaut, the timing of a joke might be perfect, the accompanying gestures appropriate, the animation of the comic’s face exciting, but if the joke is racist in content, telling it is morally unacceptable none the less. The unacceptability is morally grounded and is not a kind of aesthetic flaw.42

In other cases the moral flaws in a work can be overridden by the aesthetic virtues of the work. The moral flaws are there, but we forgive them in the name of the aesthetic virtues of the work. This seems to be the prevalent attitude

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42 Gaut employs the example of the telling of a racist joke and an audience’s appreciation of it to suggest that audiences reacting positively to flawed perspectives in works of art reveal moral flaws in themselves. This point is compatible with moderate autonomism.
toward The Merchant of Venice and Othello, and indeed, as Richard Posner has argued, may be the only sensible option with respect to most 'classic' literature, since nearly all of it manifests ethically troublesome perspectives. The best-known films of the enormously popular and much emulated writer and director, Quentin Tarantino—Reservoir Dogs and Pulp Fiction—are notorious for being intensely absorbing but morally adrift; critics of these films are apt to concede their aesthetic merits—their distinctive qualities of narrative structure, camera work, inventive allusion, sharp character portrayal and dialogue, etc.—while at the same time maintaining that the film's appealing and sympathetically portrayed central figures all share, to varying degrees, murderous, sexist, homophobic natures.

There are also cases in which it is arguably part of the project of the work that it explores the boundaries of the moral and the aesthetic. Peter Greenaway's film The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover, while perceptively written, lushly filmed, and beautifully scored—in short, artfully crafted and aesthetically potent—is also relentlessly brutal and morally cynical. In this instance, one could make a case for the claim that the contrast between the film's richly detailed and highly aestheticized formal features and its preoccupation with moral baseness is intentionally provocative, specifically designed to play on the tension between moral and aesthetic value. In the case of works like Tarantino's Pulp Fiction or Nabokov's Lolita, part of what makes them so fascinating—beyond their command of narrative structure, character development, and skill with language—is that while their moral perspectives are alien, the works are (perhaps disturbingly) commanding. Further, part of what makes some works of art morally objectionable is the fact that they succeed all too well in making morally troublesome subject matters, characters, or perspectives aesthetically moving. Consider the voluptuous sensuousness of Peter Paul Reuben's representations of the wicked and the damned, or the choreographed beauty of flying lead, spinning, jerking bodies and spurting blood in the John Woo films, The Killer, Hard Boiled, and Hard Target (they are not called 'bullet ballets' for nothing). These works seem to belie, or perhaps even undermine, the morally appropriate attitudes toward the damned and vengeful killers. What is important to notice is that moral turpitude is not incompatible with aesthetic greatness, and that there are

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44 In Wilde's case, at least, part of the point of art is to challenge conventional morality, in order to transcend it with something more fulfilling and life affirming (Wilde is often taken to wish to replace 'the ethical' with 'the aesthetic', but this may be an oversimplification of Wilde's views on the matter; for a discussion of this point, see Richard Ellmann's excellent biography, Oscar Wilde [New York, 1988]).

45 The moral condemnation of aesthetic interest need not be limited to fictional contexts. Some people are morally disturbed by the voyeuristic aestheticization of crime, trauma, and disaster in the increasingly popular 'real-life drama' television programmes such as Cops, Rescue 911, or the recent broadcast on the Fox Network, When Disasters Strike.
times when it is precisely a moral venture or transgression combined with aesthetic acumen of one kind or another that draws us to such works.

Finally, there are cases where, in the minds of some, the moral values are thought to be overriding while, in the minds of others, aesthetic values are thought to be paramount. This is what characterizes the continuing debate over works such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The debate here is not whether the novel is aesthetically flawed where the aesthetic flaw is moral in nature, as Carroll and Gaut would have it. The issue is whether we can excuse the moral flaw in the work, the moral perspective manifest in the work, as an expected product of its time, and still savour the work of art as such. *Huck Finn* offends people's moral sensibilities, whatever their aesthetic sensibilities may be. The controversy is over whether, in light of the work's appeal to our aesthetic sensibilities, it should be read and cherished as a classic American novel. Some find this impossible to do; some feel so strongly about the matter that they do not want their children or the children of others to read the book. Some people are ambivalent about the work. The nature of this ambivalence is what is at issue. We maintain that these are cases in which one's moral sensibilities and one's aesthetic sensibilities are in conflict. These are not cases in which there is a conflict internal to one's aesthetic dimension.

We have argued that neither Carroll nor Gaut has succeeded in showing that a moral defect (merit) as such is ever an aesthetic defect (merit). We have shown that Carroll's argument from common reasons is mistaken. We have also shown that Gaut's argument from the manifestation of immoral perspectives is inconclusive and subject to counter-examples. Finally, we believe that the separation of the realms of the moral and the aesthetic provides a clearer way of understanding the conflicting assessments we make of numerous works of art, including those that take as their project the aesthetically pleasing portrayal (even endorsement) of evil.

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46 Of course, not everyone sees this novel as a moral failure (at least, not in all respects) See, for example, Jonathan Bennett's piece, 'The Moral Conscience of Huckleberry Finn', *Philosophy* Vol. 49 (1974), pp. 123-134, where Bennett treats Huck's turmoil over whether or not to give up Jim (as a runaway slave) as an exemplary and insightful treatment of the possible clash between moral principles and natural sympathy.

47 For an interesting playing out of the positions addressed in this paper—moderate moralism and ethicism on the one hand, and moderate autonomism on the other—see Vince Passaro's essay 'A Flapping of Scolds: The Literary Establishment descends on T. S. Eliot', *Harper's Magazine* (January 1997), pp. 62-68. Passaro defends a position which appears to mesh well with moderate autonomism against the claims of Anthony Julius (in his book, *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form*), which appear to have more in common with moderate moralism and ethicism.