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**THE INTERSECTION OF ART AND MORALITY: CONTEMPORARY
DEBATE**

SUBHAM SAHA

I

Aesthetics and ethics are two branches of value theory, each connected to human values, yet distinct in their focus on aesthetic and moral concerns. But do these values intersect in the realm of art? Moralism acknowledges a relationship between art and ethics, arguing that aesthetic values can be subsumed under moral values. In contrast, aestheticism or autonomism denies any such relationship, leading to criticisms of the moralist position. This article surveys the contemporary debate concerning the relationship between art and morality. For this purpose, I first examine moralism, which asserts the relevance of ethical criticism of art. The subsequent section counters this view, rejecting the relevance of ethical criticism in artistic evaluation. Finally, I discuss moderate moralism, which considers whether ethical criticism of art can be justified under certain conditions.

II

It would be better to begin our primary discussion regarding the relationship between art and morality with one of the most prevalent conceptions, namely, moralism. As Noël Carroll (2021) explains, moralists believe that artworks are, in one way or another, subject to ethical considerations and that evaluating works of art in terms of their moral excellences or moral blemishes is appropriate. If we consider the fact that the arts evolved alongside religion in the earliest stages of human development, there is an almost natural relationship between art and morality. Even though there are reservations about this today, many artists are committed to the foundational role of art in disseminating moral values; contemporary works of art often engage with social justice and injustice. However, moralism exists in both radical and moderate forms.

Ella Peek defines, “Radical moralism is the view that the aesthetic value of an artwork is determined by its moral value. The most extreme version of this position reduces all aesthetic value to moral value” (“Ethical Criticism of Art,” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy). As Carroll (2021) suggests two forms of radical moralism. The first is Puritanical, which holds that all artworks are morally bad. In contrast, Utopians believe that all art is inherently good, asserting that there is always something morally uplifting or improving in art due to its capacity to engender empathy. In this context, the views of Plato and Aristotle on art can be seen as

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roughly analogous to the positions of the Puritans and Utopians, respectively. Tiger C. Roholt (2013) highlights Plato's critical stance on art, arguing that many forms of art are dangerous. For Plato, art is merely a representation of appearances that appeals to emotions - the irrational side of human nature. He posits that art has the power to provoke emotions that threaten the authority of reason, which is essential for self-governance. Consequently, in *The Republic*, Plato advocates for the exclusion of emotionally provocative works of art from his ideal state. John Hospers (1978) aptly illustrates Plato's prohibition in the following way:

Plato spends many pages describing in detail the training of these rulers-to-be. If their morality is to be pure and undefiled, they must be kept away from all undermining influences, however subtle. They must not be permitted to listen to sensuous music, or to witness stage presentations in which bad people triumph, or in any way exposed to art which would loosen the moral fiber of the impressionably growing child or cause him to swerve from the path of austerity which must be his if he is to remain incorruptible in his future position of state. (p. 28)

In contrast, Aristotle's perspective on this matter is more positive. Roholt explains that, for Aristotle, tragedy exerts a therapeutic effect on its audience through a process known as *catharsis*. Traditionally, catharsis is understood as a form of emotional purging. In this context, emotions such as fear and pity are aroused in the spectators of a tragedy, allowing them to release or vent these emotions, thereby preventing them from becoming disruptive in their lives. According to Aristotle, the ultimate purpose of tragedy is to achieve this emotional purging, which ultimately contributes to psychological development.

Another proponent of radical moralism is Tolstoy (Hospers 1978; Carroll 2021; Peek). Tolstoy (1898/1995) argues that art serves a social function by morally uplifting society. In this sense, his theory of art aligns more closely with Aristotle's view. Tolstoy rejects all the previous definitions of art that equate it with beauty or pleasure. He remarks,

The imprecision of all these definitions proceeds from the fact that in all of them ... the aim of art is located in the pleasure we derive from it, and not in its purpose in the life of man and of mankind. (Tolstoy, 1898/1995, p. 37).

According to him, art serves mankind and promotes unity among people. He believes that art should be moral, influencing people to embrace virtues such as universal love and brotherhood. Therefore, he contends that art should be judged in terms of moral criteria. Tolstoy categorised many renowned works of art as bad art including his own art, and similar to Plato, comments that it is better to have no art than to have morally corrupt art.

The above considerations demonstrate that moralism, as a view on the relationship between art and morality, holds that art can profoundly affect people on the one hand, and

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morality is inseparable from art on the other. These premises lead to one of the most radical claims of moralism: that art has a significant moral influence on people. If this is the case, two causal theses follow from moralism. Firstly, art provides moral education, and second, art causes behavioural changes in people.

The first causal thesis of moralism endorses the idea that art can be used as a tool of moral education. In contemporary discourses, as Berys Gaut (1998) suggests, Richard Eldridge and Martha Nussbaum support this position that art can morally educate us. Gaut notes that for Eldridge, one's moral self-understanding cannot be fully captured by abstract theories, rather, this understanding is developed through an awareness of the connection between one's own story to those of others, which literature helps to extend and articulate. Likewise, Nussbaum argues, as mentioned by Gaut, that morality involves appreciating particular cases, and literature enhances our understanding of moral complexities in a way that philosophy cannot. Nussbaum suggests, that by presenting the complexity and difficulty of moral choices, literature can provide deeper and more precise insights into moral reality. These moral insights are offered by literature that also contribute to the work's aesthetic merit. For example, Jane Austen's *Emma* teaches us that no person should be treated merely as a means to an end. Ethical critics abstract such insights from artworks, implying that the value of artistic achievement lies in the artworks' capacity to reveal moral truth, which in turn, adds value to our moral knowledge. This suggests that our engagement with artworks educates us, thereby determining a work's aesthetic merit.

The second causal thesis acknowledges that artworks profoundly influence people and can lead to behavioural changes. In this context, Carroll (2000) argues that moralism holds true in some cases. For example, the film *In and Out* is praised not only for its moral message promoting respect for gay people but also for bringing about favourable changes in people's behaviour towards them. Conversely, the film *Con Air* is criticised for promoting violent behaviour in its audience. This behavioural change to some extent determines whether a work is aesthetically merited or demerited.

III

Autonomism, unlike moralism, opposes the ethical criticism of art by rejecting any intrinsic relationship between art and morality. However, the autonomist stance is "associated not with any clear-cut account of the relationship between art and morality, but rather with a complex ... reactions to the moralist position" (Beardsmore, 1971, p. 22). Autonomists argue that aesthetics and morality are distinct realms of value. Autonomism also known as

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aestheticism, asserts that aesthetic values cannot be reduced to moral values. In this context, it is worth mentioning Wilde's famous line: "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all" (Wilde, 1890/1985, p. 3). Thus, autonomism is the view that primarily asserts that morality has no relation to artworks, and based on that, autonomists argue that ethical criticism of art is irrelevant to its aesthetic evaluation. Moreover, critiques of moralism are not limited to autonomist arguments. The cognitive triviality argument and anti-consequentialist argument also challenge the causal theses of moralism, thereby questioning the relevance of ethical criticism in the aesthetic evaluation of art. The arguments that critique the moral evaluation of art are discussed below.

1. According to Carroll (2000), the first response from autonomists against moralism is the "common denominator argument." This argument asserts that certain works of art – such as pure orchestral music, decorations and design arts, abstract visual arts, and others – cannot be meaningfully evaluated based on moral criteria. These forms of art require at least one criterion other than morality for their evaluation. As aestheticists argue, this criterion should be the *aesthetic experience*, which applies to all works of art. Since aesthetic experience is defined as the experience of disinterestedness or disinterested pleasure, it must be independent of any other value, including moral value. This aesthetic experience can be defined in two ways (Carroll, 2000; Gaut, 1998). Firstly, formalists claim that the aesthetic experience lies in the formal properties of artwork, such as form, beauty grace, etc., and these formal properties do not necessarily involve or include moral value. And second, some philosophers define aesthetic experience as any experience prescribed by art that is valuable for its own sake, rather than for moral upliftment. Thus, autonomists clearly support the view of "art for art's sake," valuing art solely for the unique experience it provides - the aesthetic experience, which is nothing but disinterested pleasure valued for its own sake. Thus, morality cannot be the proper criterion for aesthetic assessment of art.

2. The autonomists' rejection of the plausibility of ethical criticism of art leads to another objection against moralism. According to Carroll (2000), the argument from the "cognitive-triviality," particularly targets the first causal thesis of moralism. The first causal thesis of moralism asserts that art is valuable because it provides us with moral insights or education. The cognitive-triviality argument challenges this claim, arguing that there is no substantial evidence that artworks morally educate us. Even if art does offer moral insights, the argument suggests that art should not be valued primarily for this reason, as the moral knowledge conveyed by artworks is often trivial rather than providing any novel insights. For instance, Käthe Kollwitz's *Municipal Lodging* depicts the oppression of the poor, but this

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insight is hardly new; rather the painting rearticulates a well-known perspective. The painting relies on the audience's pre-existing knowledge in order to evoke an appropriate response, such as indignation. Furthermore, it can be argued that works of art are products of imagination, and the knowledge associated with them is notional, lacking the empirical evidence necessary for validation. Consequently, it is unlikely that one can gain new knowledge from artworks.

3. The second causal thesis of moralism posits that art can bring about certain behavioural changes in its audience. In response to this view, Carroll (2000) presents the anti-consequentialist argument. Anti-consequentialists contend that since ancient times, critics have agreed about the behavioural effects of art, but there is insufficient evidence to substantiate this claim. In modern times, critics have often claimed that media violence is a cause of real-world violence. However, the simultaneous decline in crime rates in developed countries and the increasing media violence suggest otherwise. Ethical critics often rely on anecdotal evidence to support the claim that art influences behaviour. For example, some individuals have reported that they started smoking after reading *On the Road* (Booth 1988, as cited in Carroll, 2000, p. 356). However, anti-consequentialists argue that the dependence on anecdotal evidence - where individuals claim that literature has influenced their behaviour - is insufficient and inconsistent for proving this claim. To substantiate the causal thesis, it would be necessary to systematically record patterns of behavioural change associated with specific types of fiction. Without such evidence, it is not feasible to assert that artworks cause behavioural changes in people.

IV

The arguments presented by autonomists, proponents of cognitive-triviality, and anti-consequentialists may appear to sufficiently justify their claims and successfully deny the possibility of ethical criticism of art. Indeed, many artworks are not primarily concerned with morality, and ethical criticism could not apply to such works. However, some artworks, such as Marquis de Sade's *Juliette*, which depicts violent sexual acts against one's will, or Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, a Nazi propaganda film that glorifies Hitler (Matthew Kieran, 2003), present morally problematic subjects. In these cases, ethical criticism can be both legitimate and appropriate, particularly, when the artwork involves moral content or raises moral issues. This is where the perspective of moderate moralism becomes relevant, as it defends the ethical criticism of art while critiquing the more radical claims made by autonomists, proponents of cognitive-triviality, and anti-consequentialists. Before addressing the critiques of these radical claims against ethical criticism, it is important to first understand the principles of moderate moralism.

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Carroll advocates the view of moderate moralism. As Carroll (1998) defines it, “Moderate moralism maintains that in some instances a moral defect in an artwork can be an aesthetic defect, and that sometimes a moral virtue can count as an aesthetic virtue” (p. 419). Similarly, Gaut’s ethicisml¹, which is very close to Carroll’s moderate moralism, asserts 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” (Gaut, p. 182). However, neither of these views maintains that moral values are necessary and sufficient to determine the aesthetic value of artworks. To better understand this perspective, let us examine how Carroll justifies his moderate moralism.

According to Carroll (1998), artworks are incomplete structures that require appropriate responses from the audience; these responses complete the aims of the art. One of the responses that artworks demand from the audience is an emotional response, and “many emotional responses are dependent on moral assessments” (Carroll, 1998, p. 420). For example, a work such as *Juliette* prescribes that the audience respond with admiration to violent sexual acts against one’s will. However, it is difficult for a morally sensitive audience to respond with admiration to such work. Consequently, the work fails to elicit the intended emotional response from the audience. In this case, the moral flaw of the work renders it aesthetically defective. Thus, there are instances where the ethical assessment of art is not only possible but also necessary and relevant.

To support the relevance of the moral evaluation of art, moderate moralism critiques the arguments put forth by autonomism, cognitive triviality, and anti-consequentialism, which are discussed below:

1. Against autonomist arguments, moderate moralists can argue that, although the moral evaluation of art may be irrelevant in many cases, this does not prove that moral assessment is irrelevant for all works of art. As discussed earlier, certain works, particularly those with moral subjects, are appropriately judged through moral evaluation. For example, Greek tragedies are deeply concerned with ethical dimensions, which are integral to the works themselves. Authors create these works with moral intentions, and audiences engage with them and appreciate the works because of their moral significance. Therefore, some artworks inherently demand moral responses from the audience, making ethical criticism appropriate for evaluating such works (Carroll, 2000). The common-denominator argument attempts to reduce the criteria for evaluating art to a singular criterion – namely, the aesthetic experience. However, ethical critics counter this argument by noting that the concept of aesthetic experience is itself debated.

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¹ We can categorise ethicism as a form of moderate moralism, though it is not the same as Carroll's moderate moralism. Carroll himself differentiates his version of moderate moralism from Gaut's ethicism by saying that "Gaut seems willing to consider virtually every moral defect in a work of art an aesthetic defect, whereas I defend ... that sometimes a moral defect in an artwork can count as an aesthetic defect..." (1998, p. 419).

Formalists argue that the formal properties of a work determine the aesthetic experience. This view can be challenged by pointing out that many artworks such as various forms of literature, films, and drama, cannot create an aesthetic experience in the audience through form alone, without content. Secondly, Carroll argues, that essentialists or aestheticists believe that any experience prescribed by art is valued for its own sake constitutes an aesthetic experience, thereby excluding moral value. However, many artworks are created not to provide such intrinsic value, but for specific external purposes. For example, tribal images of demons are designed to scare intruders rather than to provide disinterested pleasure valued for its own sake. This demonstrates that while autonomist arguments may hold true for some artworks, they are not universally applicable.

2. As previously discussed, the cognitive triviality argument claims that ethical criticism of art is irrelevant because the moral knowledge that art provides is often trivial, and tends to engage in truism. Carroll (2000) notes that opponents of ethical criticism argue that the ethical insights yielded by art do not constitute propositional knowledge – knowledge that can be stated in propositional form, like "hypocrisy is noxious." Therefore, they contend that artworks cannot be valued for their moral insights. In response, as Carroll suggests, ethical critics can argue that a propositional form of knowledge is not the only valid form of knowledge. Gilbert Ryle introduces the concept of "knowing how," which refers to understanding what it would be like to experience X (Carroll, 2000). Similarly, Hospers argues that literature can impart moral lessons by presenting characters in situations of moral conflicts and crises, thereby allowing readers to engage with these situations imaginatively. Literature allows the readers to observe the struggles and moral crises of characters from a distance. This detached observation enables the readers to critically evaluate the characters' decisions and the moral implications of their actions, thus providing readers with moral education without involving in real-life situations. Moreover, readers often undergo a process of moral reflection while engaging with works such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Othello*, Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, etc. These works prompt readers to consider how the choices made by the characters depicted in these works impact their lives. Thus, understanding what a situation would be like is crucial to developing one's moral insights, and literature takes its readers through complex journeys that educate them.

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3. Anti-consequentialists critique the ethical criticism of art based on the premise that artworks can influence behavioural changes in the audience. In response, Carroll argues, that ethical criticism of art need not necessarily rely on the impact artworks have on people's behaviour; rather it hinges on the moral experiences that artworks offer to the audience. Previously, we examined how Hospers elaborates on the notion that artworks provide audiences with moral insights. In this context, Carroll draws attention to Gregory Currie's simulation theory, i.e., very similar to Hospers' view. According to this theory, through simulation, the audience can be morally informed by engaging with works of art. This requires the audience or readers to simulate or imagine two aspects: first, the environment described in the works (e.g., the readers believe that a house is made of stone as depicted); and second, the experiences of the characters within the story. It is the latter form of simulation or imagination that is essential for the ethical assessment of art, as the readers' ability to simulate others' mental states enables them to understand why a character behaves or acts in a certain way, leading to certain consequences. By engaging with these simulations, readers become aware of moral complexities, and to some extent, are better equipped to make informed decisions in potential real-life situations. In this way, artworks, by providing experiences, contribute to the moral education of the audience. Hence, the ethical evaluation of art, at least of the works which involve moral contents, is relevant, and this moral evaluation, to some extent, also determines aesthetic evaluation.

V

In conclusion, the discussion reveals a complex and nuanced relationship between art and morality, one that cannot be explicitly defined. Radical moralism posits a necessary relationship where morality dominates aesthetic values, while autonomists reject any connection between art and morality, thereby dismissing the validity of ethical criticism of art. Moderate moralism, on the other hand, recognizes a contingent relationship, suggesting that moral values can influence aesthetic evaluation under certain circumstances. The difficulty in pinpointing the exact nature of this relationship stems from the absence of a systematic method to determine it. The values attributed to art often guide one's perspective on this relationship. For instance, moralists argue that art should serve society, implying that art must incorporate moral content to fulfil this role. In contrast, autonomists value art for its own sake, leading them to separate it from moral concerns. Moderate moralists contend that the audience's response is integral to the purpose of art, and thus, aesthetic values may include moral values when these values contribute to eliciting an appropriate audience response. Nevertheless, it cannot be definitively stated that the sole purpose of art is to provoke an appropriate response from the

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audience. Romantic expression theorists, such as Collingwood (1938), argue that art is an expression of inner emotion, independent of audience reaction. Despite this, it is undeniable that many artworks engage with moral issues and often challenge prevailing moral norms. In such instances, moderate moralism offers a compelling argument for the validity of ethical criticism of art, while also maintaining that aesthetic value is not entirely reducible to moral value.

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