

A robust discussion has arisen in the last twenty years or so over the possibility of connections between aesthetics and ethics. Several different issues have come to the fore as a result—including, but not limited to: whether ethical criticism bears on aesthetic criticism, whether audience members can become better or worse moral agents as a result of experiencing art, whether some individual works of art can be considered evil.

In this paper I will consider the question of whether ethical criticism should have any bearing on aesthetic criticism. One view that seems universally rejected in the field is that works of art might be aesthetically bad *simply because* they are morally bad. When we talk about whether and how evaluations of works of art are affected by moral evaluations, we have a tight connection in mind between the moral defects/virtues and aesthetic defects/virtues¹ a particular work has.

stronger still, holding that moral judgments are always relevant to aesthetic judgments. In this paper I will be dealing only with Carroll's argument for moderate moralism and his argument against moderate autonomism.

He argues for his view in several papers (1996, 1998a, 1998b, 2006), but the view stays consistent. He focuses primarily on narrative arts and begins by noting that narratives are, by their very nature, incomplete. It's left up to the reader² to fill in much of the narrative. Moreover, the author makes assumptions about the backgrounds of the readers. In the typical case the author and the reader will share a large portion of the respective sets of background knowledge. In order even to understand many narratives the reader has to draw from her cognitive and emotional stock. Some of the filling-in involves having emotional responses, some of which will be moral emotions. For instance, in a scene where Nicholas Nickleby is cheated, the reader feels anger *because* Nicholas was wronged. Thus, the reader is called on to make a moral judgment in order to render the narrative intelligible.

This would be sufficient to refute the radical autonomist, but Carroll hasn't yet shown that there is a relation between the moral and aesthetic judgments. He goes on to make the point that a central aim of most narrative works is to engage the reader—that is, to draw in the reader such that she is absorbed in the work. Works that aim to be absorbing and fail to do so are then aesthetically flawed as a result. Some works will fail to be absorbing, and they will so fail as a result of inviting readers to take up a perspective that the reader finds morally offensive. The reader will be unable to take up the perspective, thus keeping the reader from becoming absorbed in the work. The work then fails as art because of its being morally offensive to the reader.

Carroll uses many examples for various reasons, but the two most relevant to this discussion are a hypothetical tragedy featuring as its tragic hero Adolph Hitler—what we might

perspective that treats horrific murders as objects of satire, but the readers reject the invitation and fail to take up the narrative as prescribed by the author. Thus, the work's design is flawed because it involves a miscalculation of the moral judgments naturally arrived at by the readers.

Carroll concludes that, as these examples show, moral defects can have effects on aesthetic evaluations. In each of these examples, he writes, "the reason the work is aesthetically defective—in the sense of failing to secure uptake—and the reason it is morally defective may be the same" (235). Thus, m

They note that in the moral defect argument, there is nothing suggestive of aesthetic defect. This is why the aesthetic defect argument is needed as well.

Carroll's claim, however, is that the moral evaluation made in each example has the effect of lowering the aesthetic evaluation. Thus, the moral defect argument would have to either imply or have some effect on the aesthetic defect argument. Anderson and Dean think this hasn't been shown. They conclude, "The plausibility of Carroll's claim rests entirely on the fact that the two arguments share one common premise, but the premise is not sufficient to show that the work in question is either morally or aesth

defect causes the aesthetic defect. Similarly, in cases where there aren't defects, but virtues, we would still be able to see that the invitation to take up the moral perspective would lead on to the aesthetic virtue of being absorbing.

Prima facie it looks like a branching model of moderate moralism is incoherent. The moral judgment is made on one branch, the aesthetic judgment is made on the other. There is a common element—the immoral perspective—but as we've seen, this isn't sufficient for either the moral or the aesthetic judgment. Thus, it looks like a moderate moralist must adopt a non-branching model.

Maybe not, says Carroll. More specifically, he asks, What's so great about sufficient reasons anyway? That is, rather than accept the criticism and try to show that his view is in fact a non-branching theory, he stays the course and argues that one can be a moderate moralist and adopt a branching model. He does this by saying that the common reason alluded to in the moral defect and aesthetic defect arguments doesn't have to be a sufficient reason to make his case. "The moderate moralist," he writes, "need only contend that among the complex of factors that account for the moral defectiveness of the artwork in question, on the one hand, and the complex of factors that explain the aesthetic defectiveness of the artwork, on the other hand, the evil perspective of the artwork will play a central, though perhaps not sufficient, explanatory role in both" (1998a 423).

Thus, he wants to stay with the branching model, which seems mysterious to me. First, the seems to face a dilemma. Either the immoral perspective renders the artwork immoral or it doesn't. If it doesn't, then the aesthetic judgment doesn't result from any moral consideration at all. If it does, then we don't need the invitation superadded to the immoral perspective to demonstrate a moral defect.

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Second, Carroll's argument seems dangerously close to violating the tightness constraint. He might be interpreted as arguing that a work of art could be aesthetically bad *simply because* it has some immoral elements or presents an immoral perspective. I admit that Carroll's position does have an intermediate step between the immoral perspective and

interprets the purported tragedy *The Sorrows of Young Hitler* as a satire. The reader then holds the work up against the standards local to satires. But the work was written *as* tragedy, so the author will have made decisions based on the standards local to tragedy. In all likelihood, then, the work will not be positively evaluated. Does this happen in every instance? No, but this is moderate moralism after all.

This is a non-branching model because the moral defect causes an interpretation—one that results from the reader’s not taking the work as intended by the author—that then determines which local standards to apply to the work.⁷

Someone might worry that I have violated the tightness constraint with which I began the paper. We have an intermediate step between the moral and aesthetic defects and it’s an interpretation, which might vary from reader to reader. Should we worry that we don’t have a direct relation between the moral and aesthetic judgments?

I don’t think so. What we were guarding against were aesthetic judgments based *simply* on moral judgments. We don’t have that here. Isolate the last two steps. Imagine an interpretation adopted by readers which directed them to the set of standards for satire, when the author wrote the work as tragedy. The set of standards for satire and tragedy will be very different, so there will be some dissonance between the reader’s judgment and the author’s intention. This will in many cases be an aesthetic defect. Now bring the last two steps back into the non-branching picture. What caused the interpretation that caused the dissonance? The moral defect. Thus, the aesthetic defect is caused by the moral defect. Moderate moralism.⁸

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Anderson, James C. and Jeffrey T. Dean. (1998) "Moderate Autonomism." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38.