

On Art, Morality, and the Subject: Revisiting the Relation between Ethics and Aesthetics

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Abstract: Based on a Kantian conception of aesthetic judgments, this paper explores the conflict between ethics and aesthetics in valuations of art. In it, I argue for the insufficiency of the three existing camps in the philosophical literature on the question of whether ethics do and/or should influence aesthetic judgments of art. While Autonomism says *never*, Moralism *always*, and Moderate Moralism *sometimes*, I aim to show that they are all deficient because they lack due consideration for subjective interest, a key link between ethics and aesthetics. The argument proceeds with a critical look at two articles: Posner's *Against Ethical Criticism* and Carroll's *Moderate Moralism*, which support Autonomism and Moderate Moralism respectively. I conclude that, due to their being linked by subjective interest, both ethics and aesthetics inform art valuations, and yet are opposites that exclude each other. The role of an ethical and/or aesthetic judgment of art is wholly and solely dependent upon the level of subjective interest that exists between an audience and a work of art.¹

Keywords Art valuation · ethics · aesthetics · subjective interest

During a promotional conference for his film *Melancholia*, critically acclaimed film director Lars Von Trier found himself banned from the 2011 Cannes Festival and declared *persona non grata* for all future events.² The incident involved Von Trier's expression of sympathy with Hitler and the Nazis. Although this was the first official condemnation of the director, his work has oftentimes been accused of misogyny and misanthropy.³ The veracity of such accusations may be questionable, but instances such as this are practical examples of the much debated conflict between morality and aesthetics in valuations of art. On the question of whether a work's ethical content ought to influence our aesthetic valuation of it, arguments vary among three main camps; Autonomism, which answers *never*, Moralism, which answers *always*, and Moderate Moralism, which answers *sometimes*.

My goal for this paper is to show that all three camps are insufficient for they overlook an important link between morality and aesthetics: subjective interest. A moral outlook in valuations of art is certainly possible, but such valuations often fail aesthetically. Kant's discussion of the criteria of judgments of the beautiful/aesthetic will serve as the conceptual foundation of the present argument.⁴ I will proceed,

¹ The central argument of the paper is currently under development in a longer and more elaborate version, which purports to do justice to the role of subjective interest in judgments of art. I would like to thank [redacted for blind submission] for their constant guidance and support for the project. I presented a version of the paper at the [redacted for blind submission] Undergraduate Philosophy Conference, and I am grateful for the audience's enthusiasm and suggestions for revisions.

² The initial statement, banning had the director from all future events, was annulled by a later statement making Von Trier's ban effective for the 2011 festival only (<http://www.screendaily.com/news/von-trier-welcome-back-at-cannes/5054055.article> visited on Dec 30 2014).

³ http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2009/10/is_lars_von_trier_a_misogynist.2.html visited on Dec 30 2014.

⁴ In *Critique of the Power of Judgment* 5:205-211.

firstly, with an exposition of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, which are both linked and separated by subjective interest; and secondly, with an elaboration of the argument through a critical analysis of two articles: Posner's (1997) *Against Ethical Criticism*⁵ and Carroll's (1996) *Moderate Moralism*.⁶

Against autonomist claims, I argue that ethics and aesthetics are related and, as such, can both be considered in art valuation. The two domains are based on the same criterion that defines each, namely subjective interest.⁷ Kant advances that aesthetic judgment requires detachment from the object of judgment.⁸ The judge of beauty must not have the least interest in the object of judgment. Although complete detachment is hardly attainable, a certain level of detachment is required. To rephrase Kant's words one may say that aesthetic judgment is one in which all subjective interest is suspended as best as possible. An aesthetic appraisal acknowledges that subjective interest is prone to being present, and so it aims for the suspension of such interest to move from subjectivity towards objectivity. What about ethics? Ethical judgment is, likewise, based on the concept of subjective interest. When one ethically values a work of art, one departs from an objective stance. One has in mind some moral tenets that act as criteria for judgment. These tenets have to be as objective⁹ as possible, for otherwise there would not be a justification to posit any work of art or anything at all against them. Even though they are essentially objective, these moral tenets exist in the form of beliefs. Beliefs necessarily carry a subjective aspect because the believer—and, here, the judge—recognizes them as true, making them her own. It is only then that she can use them as criteria for judgment. We have, hereby, shown that ethics and aesthetics are closely related by their being founded on subjective interest.

The previous discussion calls for a clarification on the difference between ethics and aesthetics; for if they are closely related, it is not evident how they are mutually exclusive. It is important to note that the two are somehow opposed to each other. Whereas Kantian aesthetics call for the suspension of all interest, ethics require this interest for their very existence. Morality, though it may be objective, exists concretely in relation to the beings with whom it is concerned. If morality is about right and wrong, and

⁵ Posner, Richard A. "Against Ethical Criticism." *Philosophy and Literature* 21.1 (1997): 1-27.

⁶ Carroll, N. "Moderate Moralism." *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 36.3 (1996): 223-38.

⁷ It should be clear that what arouses interest in each case is different: for aesthetics, the consideration of objects in themselves; and for ethics, the concern with believing and/or doing that which is right

⁸ "Everyone must admit that a judgment about beauty in which there is mixed the least interest is very partial and not a pure judgment of taste", he says. (Kant, Immanuel, and Paul Guyer. "Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment." In *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.5:205)

⁹ I use the term "objective" in this work, not as the opposite of "subjective," but as an expression of the Kantian concept of the universality of laws or tenets postulated from an individual—subjective—stance with an assumption of general applicability.

what one ought or ought not to do, it has to be based on the behavior of the subjects.¹⁰ However universal the behavioral consideration may be, it remains subjective at least in relation to a species if not to an individual. This subjectivity is strengthened by the aforementioned belief component. We see, therefore, how the two domains are mutually exclusive.

But if it is impossible to completely suspend subjective interest, as is required by aesthetic appraisal, could ethics and aesthetics be as removed from each other as I seem to suggest? The claimed impossibility to attain pure disinterestedness is an exaggerated statement. I was once standing by a river and the misty morning view was one the most beautiful sights I have ever experienced. Deep in contemplation, I could testify for total suspension of subjective interest, even that of a continued existence of the view. Such contemplation may be attainable in some cases but probably not as effortlessly, or it might even be unattainable especially if the object of contemplation bears immediate connection with the contemplator. It could be granted that some subjective interest may exist in aesthetic judgment. However, that level of interest cannot equal that which is required by morality. Morality, as beliefs, is at the core of human experience; it is very readily available to the subject so much so that it creates a very strong subjective interest. People may peacefully disagree on their particular judgments of the beauty of music, but certain uneasiness and potential conflict arise when it comes to disagreements on the right to kill animals for food, for example. It is in the consideration of this level of interest that ethics and aesthetics oppose each other; where one is fully present, the other is not. Therefore, when a viewer of Von Trier's *Antichrist* detects its deeply misogynistic aspects, she is automatically made unable to judge the film's aesthetic value; that is, she cannot value it as beautiful.¹¹

¹⁰ For this to be the case, I take on a theory of moral motivation that advances that belief alone is sufficient for motivation (as developed by Danielle Bromwich in "Clearing Conceptual Space for Cognitivist Motivational Internalism." *Philosophical Studies* 148 (2010): 343-367.) The direct link between belief and behavior is what informs the statement that morality is based on behavior.

¹¹ My conception of aesthetics as judgment of beauty, as discussed by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* is that whatever object allows itself to be viewed aesthetically is but beautiful. Thus, aesthetic judgment, due to its disinterestedness, is a lack of judgment if it requires contemplation. Whoever contemplates does not judge but simply beholds. This point is further supported by Schopenhauer in *The World as Will and Representation* p. 210 "Now since, on the one hand, every existing thing can be observed purely objectively and outside of all relation, and, on the other, the will appears in everything at some grade of its objectivity, and this thing is accordingly the expression of an Idea, everything is also beautiful." Of course the pleasure in the beholder also provides some interest, thus aesthetic judgment is only possible as long as she is not aware of the pleasure—the pleasure is disconnected from the judgment. I should also express my disagreement with the concept, implicit in Schopenhauer, that everything can be objectively/aesthetically observed. It is true that contemplation of anything, when possible, suspends all subjective interest. However, if one is to judge a certain object aesthetically, one needs also to take into account the universality of such possibility for contemplation (Here, I invoke Kant's concept of universal voice in judgments of beauty). It is certain that very few—and dare I say insane—people would agree on the beauty of murder for example, even if someone may testified to being able contemplate it objectively. Arthur Penn's 1967 movie *Bonnie and Clyde* depicts the killing of the pair as an aesthetic

The relatedness and mutual exclusion of aesthetics and ethics sum up to a position that rejects both autonomism and moralism; it partially agrees with moderate moralism, which it views as making a just but weaker claim. The aim is to present a certain stance of moderate moralism, which not only refutes the view of the autonomist and the moralist but also some aspects of current arguments for moderate moralism.

In his article *Against Ethical Criticism*, Richard A. Posner presents arguments against the inclusion of ethics in aesthetic judgment. Therein are some points that call for replies; these will be addressed in what follows.

To justify his rejection of moral judgment of art, Posner presents an objectionable moral definition of aesthetics: “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.”¹² The moral outlook hereby expressed is ill-conceived because it is of a solely contemplative nature.¹³ Although it is true that aesthetics are grounded in contemplation, the morality evoked could not apply to human beings. Morality cannot be merely contemplative because of its necessary subjective component presented earlier. Were it the case that human life were enclosed in contemplation, aesthetic evaluation of this sort would be morally permissible but, alas, it is not the case. The viewers of Von Trier’s films will not be detached from the judgment of their misogyny for the moral conflict that the films bring about can neither be ignored nor be tolerated.¹⁴ Perhaps in support for this tolerance, Posner says that “great literature must somehow cause the reader to suspend moral judgment.”¹⁵ However, this is the very danger against which ethical valuation comes as an additional requirement for aesthetic appreciation. For if the most immoral literature can suspend the reader’s ethical valuation of it, the ethically minded is rightfully alarmed because morality is menaced by such aesthetic approach which could take over the reader’s “alief” and probably lead to a more or less disinterested, drawn in approach to real life situations that would or should normally arouse hostility or

dance/ballet of blood; but I would inquire about what is meant by the word “aesthetic” in this case. My guess is that it cannot be the same as that which I refer to in this paper.

¹² Posner 1997, 1.

¹³ Liberal individualism, as conceived to be present in Posner’s arguments, is highly problematic in that it excludes the fact that there is such thing as objective truth, the very foundation of much search for wisdom through philosophical discourse.

¹⁴ Tolerance as it relates to morality is possible only in the sense that one lets others believe what they may. However, the moral conflict cannot be resolved by such tolerance. The moral conflicts make disinterestedness impossible and therefore no aesthetic outlook—which requires disinterestedness—can be achieved then.

¹⁵ Posner 1997, 4.

sympathy on moral grounds.¹⁶ The concept of “alief,” as introduced by Tamar S. Gendler (2008), elaborates on subconscious-level behaviors, which, when strongly aroused, can influence conscious belief and action. If individuals who engage in contemplation eventually immerse from it to engage in action, and if the outlook taken in the contemplation can affect action; then ethical judgment from within contemplation should be also determined by one from without.¹⁷ Furthermore, what could we possibly mean by morality if it is mere disinterestedness?¹⁸

One could summarize Posner’s position in his statement that “a work of literature is not to be considered maimed or even marred by expressing unacceptable moral views.”¹⁹ The statement, however, seems to ignore the consequences of aesthetic appraisal of a work on its consumption and, thereby, on its influence on the audience’s attitude toward the values that the work expresses. A work of art that is valued as beautiful is likely to be promoted for greater consumption and this is clearly alarming if the work is immoral. Though one might be aware of what is immoral or moral in the work, one is inevitably affected also subconsciously through one’s aliefs. A work of art shapes and is shaped by the society which produces it. Therefore, aesthetic evaluation should overlook ethics only when the work is not targeted at a human audience, which is not the case for most humanly produced works, objects of the present discussion. Insofar as morality is an integral part of citizenship for the wellbeing of society, aesthetic appreciation cannot be considered as separate from ethics. Viewers of Von Trier’s films may, on moral grounds, be unable to aesthetically enjoy his work when feminist ideals in mind clash with misogynistic aspects of the films.

Posner further rejects moral judgments of art because he judges them as misguided and intolerant. He says that “the moral content of a work of literature is likely to be obsolete whether or not it conforms to our current moral views.”²⁰ But the “current moral views,” by their very currentness, are not obsolete; the moral appraisal of a work of literature or any art should be based on its immediate moral value, which cannot be eliminated on grounds of the obsolescence of the moral content of the work. This only explains the evolution of morality with regard to time and space, but the valuation of a certain work of art is done from the audience’s, and not the artist’s, point of view. The argument goes further to accuse moral

¹⁶ Gendler, Tamar S. “Alief and Belief.” *Journal of Philosophy* 105.10 (2008): 634-663.

¹⁷ For a moral influence on audiences of morally charged art is almost guaranteed. Although some say that art does not (and should not) aim at action, aliefs may help us see the inescapability of art’s call to action.

¹⁸ Evidently the objective component of morality calls for certain disinterestedness, but ultimately any moral view has to carry a subjective belief-based aspect for it to qualify as moral.

¹⁹ Posner 1997, 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

judgment of intolerance: “To devalue a work of literature because of its implicit or explicit politics, morality, or religion,” Posner says, “is...intolerant, philistine, puritanical, illiberal, and when it expresses itself in an assumption of moral superiority to our predecessors, complacently ethnocentric.”²¹ However, morality is not liberal, at least not when liberalism implies, as it does here, indiscriminate toleration. Moreover, if morality involves at all any notions of good or bad, right or wrong, then our understanding of it necessarily evolves/changes over time. Therefore, there is generally nothing ethnocentric about the assumption of superiority to the predecessors of a generation; it is a historical truth.

Along the same lines, the argument states that “People obsessed by politics, religion or morality may be incapable of an aesthetic response to literature.”²² One characteristic that these so-called obsessions share is that they provide the “obsessed” with greater sensitivity to the corresponding values. This supports the view expressed earlier that works of art with vivid moral aspects resist aesthetic contemplation. In a world that is more or less political, religious and moral, everyone is, according to this claim, obsessed. Thus, the impossibility of an aesthetic response, if caused by those factors, would be quasi-universal. But this is not the case; aesthetic experience is possible.

In his attempt to discard all that calls for ethical criticism in art, Posner paints empathy as amoral and all effects of art as merely psychological.²³ Empathy could be amoral iff associated with things that are altogether remote from the livelihood of the art’s audience. However, that is not the case as Posner remarks: “the characters and situations that interest us in literature are for the most part characters and situations that capture aspects of ourselves and our situation.”²⁴ Feelings aroused by literature are not always amoral; they require a certain understanding based on the audience’s association with the object of empathy, an association that could be moral in nature. Thus Noël Carroll (1996) asserts that “many of the emotions that the audience brings to bear, as a condition of narrative intelligibility, are moral both in the sense that many emotions [...] possess ineliminable moral components, and in the sense that many of the emotions that are pertinent to narratives are frequently moral emotions.”²⁵ In support of the amorality of feelings that literature brings about, Posner contends that the disinterested, ‘art for art’s sake’ pleasure that much literature affords is particularly remote from morality.²⁶ It is, indeed, true that

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³Ibid., 10. “Empathy is amoral”; 12. “Literature...moves as well as pleases, shocks as well as delights, intoxicates as well as soothes, braces as well as relaxes. But all these effects are psychological rather than moral.”

²⁴ Ibid., 12.

²⁵ Carroll 1996, 228.

²⁶ Posner 1997, 12.

disinterested pleasure is immediately amoral but this is not the kind of pleasure that one gets from literature—unlike the pleasure afforded by the sight of the misty morning by the river. The claim that effects of literature are merely psychological is not sound because even if the immediate effect were psychological, it would eventually bear moral consequences.²⁷ Here again, one can consider the concept of “alief,” which is psychological but which can lead to the formation of beliefs and actions that could be moral in nature. Posner’s claim that “immersion in literature does not make us better citizens or better people” is false.²⁸

Let us now turn to Noël Carroll’s arguments for moderate moralism. Although the arguments of this paper mostly align with moderate moralism, there are three points in Carroll’s arguments that we need to contest.

The first point concerns moral judgment of works of art when their moral aspects are not readily noticeable. On the subject, Carroll says that “even where given audiences do not detect the moral flaws in question, the artwork may still be aesthetically flawed, since in those cases the moral flaws sit like time-bombs, ready to explode aesthetically once morally sensitive viewers, listeners, and readers actually are deterred from the response which the work invites.”²⁹ This assertion is correct inasmuch as it presupposes objective morality. However, if there is such thing as objective morality, it is an eternal absolute and the understanding of it evolves with regard to time and space, but the human mind is unable to have a complete grasp of the eternal/timeless. With that in mind, assessment of an artwork is only meaningful if it takes into account *only* the understanding of the immediate audience and judge of the artwork. In other words, it is impossible to assess its *potential* moral value. Outside of eternity, an artwork is valuable with regard to time and space, and only in relation to its immediate audience.

The second point is about the relationship between ethical and aesthetic defects. Carroll argues that an ethical defect “will count as an aesthetic defect when it actually deters the response to which the work aspires.”³⁰ However, it is often not possible to talk of an artwork’s aspirations. Many artworks do not

²⁷ Maybe the immediate effects just are feelings, but Posner does not consider the reality of *moral* feelings or their possible progression from mere feelings to moral action.

²⁸ Posner 1997, 1. The statement is not always false. It is, however, false if, as understood, Posner presents it as a declaration of some absolute truth. Immersion in literature does not *always* make us better citizens or better people, but it does *sometimes* do so.

²⁹ Carroll 1996, 234.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

have an intended purpose besides being art,³¹ especially when the artists produce *art for art's sake*. It is not meaningful to consider aesthetic value of an ethical aspect of a work based on the aspired response. Assessment of artwork, whether aesthetic or otherwise, is done from the point of view of the audience and not of the artist. Since the audience is often not able to detect the artist's intention, if there be one, ethical judgment is only possible from the audience's point of view. Furthermore, detected moral defects automatically discard aesthetic valuation, rather than become aesthetic defects.³²

The third point relates to the intention within an artwork and the success of its absorption of the audience. Carroll advances that morality may contribute to the intention of absorbing the reader, and may therefore make the artwork more aesthetically valuable.³³ I contend that this may be true only when the moral value is not so strong as to be present in the reader's mind without further assessment. If the reader of a narrative artwork is very consciously aware of the moral aspects in play into her absorption, then she is in no position to assess the aesthetic value of the work. This is because the awareness of the moral aspects of the work creates a subjective interest that should be non-existent in aesthetic judgment. But this should not necessarily be a worry because if the reader is truly absorbed, she would not be able to detect the moral defects or strengths leading the process of absorption in the work. If the interest in morality is less intense as not to immediately evoke interestedness in the audience, then it can be included in aesthetic evaluation; but if it is so intense as not to escape moral assessment without further investigation, then it discards any aesthetic valuation.

In conclusion, I have shown the relationship that I think exists between ethics and aesthetics. Although the two domains are based on the same criterion, subjective interest; they are mutually exclusive. They are, however, not autonomous of each other. If we fully consider the nature of ethics and of aesthetics, we discover that the question of *whether* they should both participate in valuations of art is not a most relevant question.³⁴ As Karsten Harries (1968) notes, "to isolate aesthetics from ethics, is to misunderstand what art is all about."³⁵ The pertinent question rests on *when* the two domains can both be

³¹ And if they do, it becomes questionable whether they remain pure art or something like propaganda. The latter seems to be the case in line with Kantian aesthetics, which drive this paper's argument.

³² This assertion is based on the subjective interest evoked by morality. If one finds moral defects into a certain artwork, one cannot assess the artwork's aesthetic value, at least insofar as the moral defects are salient in one's mind (cf. Schopenhauer. The moral interest awakens the will, and that makes aesthetic judgment impossible.)

³³ Carroll 1996, 236.

³⁴ The "should" question addresses the distinction between analytical and normative approaches to discussions of the relationships between ethics and aesthetics. In this paper, I proceed mostly analytically, showing how the two areas are connected, and hope to thereby dissolve the normative question of whether ethics should play a role in aesthetic judgments.

³⁵ Harries, Karsten (1968). *The meaning of Modern Art: A Philosophical Interpretation*. (p. 75). Northwestern University Press. Print.

considered and *how* they influence each other's participation in appraisals of art. Whether ethics are to be considered in aesthetic valuation is determined by the level of interestedness that moral aspects of a work of art bring about. This determination is automatic for it becomes evident upon consumption of a certain work of art. The present arguments would support the views of those who, after considering the deeply misogynistic aspects of Von Trier's films, assess them as aesthetically displeasing; which means that the works do not qualify for aesthetic judgment because of their inability to allow for an aesthetic experience.