

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art

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Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art"; Wilde "The New Aesthetics"

Gaut

\*Ethicism: "Ethicism is the thesis that the ethical assessment of attitudes manifested by works of art is a legitimate aspect of the aesthetic evaluation of those works, such that, if a work manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically defective, and if a work manifest ethically commendable attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically meritorious." (283)

--Gaut argues for Ethicism.

--For the Ethicist, ethical values are just one kind of aesthetic value amongst others. (Read 'artistic value' for 'aesthetic value'.)

\*Objections:

1. Ethical and aesthetic evaluations are wholly distinct.

--But in evaluating art, we go beyond the narrow aesthetic properties:

"In the assessment of art, appeal is made to such properties as raw expressive power and deep cognitive insight as well as to beauty, elegance, and grace." (284)

Ethical properties are as legitimate as the former kinds, according to Gaut.

--An opponent of Ethicism can argue that art involves the fictional, and a detachment from reality that makes ethical concerns (which are practical, and involve action) irrelevant.

--But Gaut compares fiction to viewing the past (we can intervene and alter neither), yet with regard to historical events we offer ethical assessments. Gaut also argues that feelings, even if they are irrelevant to our actions or motives, can be ethically relevant. (285) The feelings we experience in response to fiction can be evaluated, for example.

2. Merely imagined or fictional objects are not appropriate for ethical evaluation.

--Gaut responds by offering the case of a man who engages in rape fantasies involving fictional women. Of course, the attitudes we bear toward fictions can also taint our attitudes toward real-life individuals.

3. It can be a *virtue* of an artwork that it *violates* our moral sense.

--Gaut notes that a work can represent evil without endorsing it. Otherwise, Gaut simply denies the objection:  
“Moreover, if, as the objection holds, it is our curiosity that is aroused, we have a cognitive interest in not seeing evil approved of, for such approval implies that there is something good about an attitude we know to be bad.” (287)

\*Arguments For:

1. Dickie’s Argument (287)

--This is too bad to worry about.

2. A moral defect is a formal defect, as it is “a type of internal incoherence.” (287)

--But, the work might be systematically (coherently) immoral.

3. Literary assessment is like befriending, and ethical worth is a desirable trait in friends.

4. Literature, as well as other art forms, provides us with the necessary narratives to develop our moral understanding.

--This argument depends on the absence of general moral truths, and the necessity of examining particular cases.

\*Artworks not only represent certain things, they also prescribe ways of responding to them. And these responses can be merited, or not, depending on how well the artwork is executed and/or whether the response is appropriate. (E.g., a comedy may prescribe laughter, but fail to merit laughter—it’s simply not funny.) Gaut presents an argument for Ethicism, the merited-response argument, utilizing these points as premises:

“A work’s manifestation of an attitude is a matter of the work’s prescribing certain responses toward the events described. If these responses are unmerited, because unethical, we have reason not to respond in the way prescribed. Our having reason not to respond in the way prescribed is a failure of the work. What responses the work prescribes is of aesthetic relevance. So the fact that we have reason not to respond in the way prescribed is an *aesthetic* failure of the work, that is to say, is an aesthetic defect. So a work’s manifestation of ethically bad attitudes is an aesthetic defect in it.” (290)

--Many examples of aesthetic defects of the ethical kind are given on the right hand column, p. 290.

\*Objections:

1. Meriting a response is simply a matter of execution—of actually engaging that response.

--Gaut simply denies this.

2. The argument has an invalid inference from ethical claims to aesthetic claims.

--Gaut correctly points out that there is a proper connecting premise.

3. Not all aesthetic defects are due to a failure of prescribed responses.

--Gaut grants this.

4. Works can prescribe responses that aesthetically irrelevant.

“Thus it is that a painting not only can be a representation, but can also embody a way of thinking in an affectively charged way about its subject, and this perspective on its subject is an important object of our aesthetic interest in the work. So if a painting does not succeed in meriting the responses prescribed, it fails on a dimension of aesthetic excellence.” (291)

5. The argument rests on the dubious claim that we can have genuine emotional responses to merely fictional works and characters.

--Gaut thinks that we do have genuine emotional responses to fiction, but does not think this is necessary for the argument to go through. Reactions of pleasure/displeasure, which all parties must agree occur, are enough. And, Gaut has already argued that such feelings can be ethically evaluated.

Wilde

\*Vivian reverses the usual order, and claims that life, including nature, imitates art.

“For what is Nature? Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us.” (41)

\*The Principle of the New Aesthetics: “Art never expresses anything but itself.” (42)

--This new aesthetic rejects, as above, the conception of art as imitating nature: “Remote from reality, and with her eyes turned away from the shadows of the cave, Art reveals her own perfection, and the wondering crowd that watches the opening of the marvelous, many-petalled rose fancies that it is its own history that is being told to it, its own spirit that is finding expression in a new form. But it is not so.” (42)

“No great artist ever sees things as they really are. If he did, he would cease to be an artist.” (43)

--On pp. 44-45 Vivian lists the central theses of the new aesthetics, that collectively establish the autonomy of art:

1. Art expresses only itself.
2. Bad art comes about by idealizing Nature.
3. Life and Nature imitate Art, rather than the other way around.
4. “Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art.” (45)