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MODERATE MORALISM

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I. INTRODUCTION

FOR ALMOST three decades, public discourse about art has become increasingly preoccupied with moral issues. Indeed, the discussion of literature in some precincts of the humanities nowadays is nearly always in terms of morals, or, as its proponents might prefer to say, in terms of politics (though here I must hasten to add that the politics in question are generally of the sort that is underwritten by a moral agenda). Moreover, the artworld itself has begun to reflect this preoccupation to the extent that disgruntled critics have started to wonder aloud when artists are going to become interested in making art again and are going to give up preaching. Remember the fracas over the 1993 Whitney Biennial? Or, look at virtually any issue of the *New Criterion*.

Of course, by remarking that this is a tendency recently come to the fore, I mean to signal that things have not always been this way. Within living memory, or, at least, within my memory, I still recall being admonished as an undergraduate not to allow my attention to wander 'outside the text'—where such things as moral questions lurked, as if, so to speak, on 'the wrong side of the tracks'.

My own initiation into the artworld occurred during the heyday of minimalism, which was understood alternatively as a project of aesthetic research into the essential conditions of painting or as an exercise in the phenomenology of aesthetic perception. In either case, it went without saying that the appropriate focus of one's attention was what was imprecisely called formal problems rather than, say, moral or political ones. In those days, it remained a common article of faith that the artistic realm is autonomous, somehow hermetically sealed off from the rest of our social practices and concerns. To talk about art from a moral point of view belied a failure of taste or intelligence, or, more likely, both.

The changes in criticism and artistic creativity to which I have already broadly alluded are, in part, explicit departures from and rebellions against the belief in the autonomy of art. Though admittedly often excessive, if not sometimes even downright paranoid, these developments, I feel, provide a generally healthy corrective to formalism and its corresponding doctrine of artistic autonomy. Yet of all the disciplines ready to acknowledge the

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limitations of the presupposition of art's autonomy, contemporary analytic philosophy of art has been the slowest. A brief examination of the philosophical literature that has been produced since the end of World War II easily confirms that the relation of art to morality is a topic that has received and that continues to receive scant attention.

Perhaps one reason for this temporal lag is philosophy's status as a second-order discipline; the owl Minerva needs a functioning runway from which to take off. But, in any event, the recent resurgence of moralistic art and criticism should remind us, as Plato, Aristotle and even Hume already knew, that there are intimate relations between at least some art and morality that call for philosophical comment. One of the purposes of this paper is to contribute to the discussion of the relation of art to morality.

Moreover, it is my conviction that philosophy has a useful job to perform within the context of renewed interest in the moral dimension of art. For, although a great deal of contemporary criticism presupposes that art can be discussed and even evaluated morally, little effort has been devoted to working out the philosophical foundations of moral criticism beyond loudly and insistently protesting that the doctrines of formalism and artistic autonomy are obviously wrongheaded, repressive and undoubtedly pernicious. But this stance, it seems to me, simply ignores the powerful intuitions that underlie the claims in favour of artistic autonomy. Thus, in this paper, I will review two forms of autonomism—what I call radical autonomism and moderate autonomism—in order to argue dialectically for an alternative position which I call moderate moralism.[1]

II. RADICAL AUTONOMISM

Radical autonomism is the view that art is a strictly autonomous realm of practice. It is distinct from other social realms which pursue cognitive, political or moral value. On this account, because art is distinct from other realms of social value, it is inappropriate or even incoherent to assess artworks in terms of their consequences for cognition, morality and politics. In fact, according to Clive Bell, perhaps the best known radical autonomist, it is virtually unintelligible to talk of art *qua* art in terms of non-aesthetic concerns with cognition, morality, politics and so on.[2]

Autonomism of any sort provides an attractive antidote to the views of Plato, Tolstoy and innumerable other puritanical art critics. Opposing them, the autonomist maintains that art is intrinsically valuable, and that it is not and should not be subservient to ulterior or external purposes, such as promoting moral education. In this, autonomism appeals to the intuition, though maybe it is only a modern intuition already informed by autonomism, that artworks can be valuable, perhaps in virtue of the beauty they deliver to disinterested attention, irrespective of their social consequences.

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We value artworks for their own sake, it is said—i.e. for the way in which they engage us, apart from questions of instrumental value. Autonomism squares with the intuition that what is valuable about our experiences of art is the way in which artworks absorb our attention and command our interest which, in turn, is part of the reason that artworks associated with obsolete systems of belief, both cognitive and moral, can nonetheless remain compelling. For, the autonomist claims, it is the artwork's design rather than its content that holds our attention.

In addition, autonomism is a satisfying doctrine for anyone who approaches the question of the nature of art with essentialist biases—that is, with the expectation that everything we call art will share a *uniquely* common characteristic which pertains distinctly to all and only art. This is the card that Clive Bell plays when he announces that unless we can identify such a common, uniquely defining feature for art, then when we use the concept, we gibber.

Of course, by declaring art to be utterly separate from every other realm of human practice, the autonomist secures the quest for essentialism at a single stroke, if only by negation, by bolding asserting that art has nothing to do with anything else. It is a unique form of activity with its own purposes and standards of evaluation, generally calibrated in terms of formal achievement.

That those standards do not involve moral considerations, moreover, can be supported, autonomists argue, by noting that moral assessment cannot be an appropriate measure of artistic value, since not all artworks possess a moral dimension. I call this the common denominator argument. It presupposes that any evaluative measure that can be brought to bear on art should be applicable to all art. But since certain works of art—including some string quartets and some abstract visual designs—may be altogether bereft of moral significance, it makes no sense, so the argument goes, to raise issues of morality when assessing artworks. Moral evaluation is never appropriate to artworks, in short, because it is not universally applicable.

Likewise, that we are willing to call some artworks good despite their moral limitations—despite the fact that their moral insights may be paltry or even flawed—fits nicely with the autonomist contention that art has nothing to do with morality, as does the fact that with certain works of art, questions of morality make no sense whatsoever. The autonomist accounts for these putative facts by saying that art is valuable for its own sake and that it has its own unique grounds for assessment; art has its own purposes, and, therefore, its own criteria of evaluation.

Autonomism rides on the unexceptionable observation that art appears to aim, first and foremost, at being absorbing. The so-called aesthetic experience is centripetal. Thus, if the artwork essentially aims at our absorption in it, then it is valuable for its own sake. The thought that art is valuable for its

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own sake, in turn, is believed to imply that it is not valuable for other reasons, especially cognitive, moral and political ones. However, this conclusion is a non sequitur. For, in ways to be pursued below, some art may be absorbing exactly because of the way in which it engages, among other things, the moral life of its audiences. That is, just because we value art for the way in which it commands our undivided attention, this does not preclude that some art commands our attention in this way just because it is interesting and engaging cognitively and/or, for our purposes, morally.

The autonomist is certainly correct to point out that it is inappropriate to invoke moral considerations in evaluating *all* art. Some art, at least, is altogether remote from moral considerations. And in such cases, moral discourse with reference to the artworks in question may not only be strained and out of place, but conceptually confused. Nevertheless, the fact that it may be a mistake to mobilize moral discourse with reference to some pure orchestral music or some abstract painting has no implications about whether it is appropriate to do so with respect to *King Lear* or *Potemkin*, since those works of art are expressly designed to elicit moral reactions, and it is part of the form of life to which they belong that audiences respond morally to them on the basis of their recognition that that is what they are intended to do, given the relevant social practices. That is, with cases like these, it is not peculiar, tasteless or dumb to talk about the artworks in question from a moral point of view, but normatively correct or appropriate, given the nature of the artworks in relation to the language game in which such talk occurs.

The common-denominator argument presupposes that there must be a single scale of evaluation that applies to all artworks. Whether or not there is such a scale—a vexed question if there ever was one—can be put to the side, however, because even if there is such a scale, that would fail to imply that it is the only evaluative consideration that it is appropriate to bring to bear on every artwork. For in addition to, for example, formal considerations, some artworks may be such that, given the nature of the artworks in question, it is also appropriate to discuss them in terms of other dimensions of value.

We may evaluate sledge hammers and jewellery hammers in terms of their capacities to drive nails, but that does not preclude further assessments of the former in terms of their capabilities to deliver great force to a single point in space or the latter to deliver delicate, glancing blows. These additional criteria are, of course, related to the kinds of things that sledge hammers and jewellery hammers respectively are. Similarly, the conviction that there may be some common standard of evaluation for all artworks, even if plausible, would not entail that for certain kinds of artworks, given what they are, considerations of dimensions of value beyond the formal, such as moral considerations, are out of bounds.

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It is my contention that there are many kinds of artworks—genres, if you will—that naturally elicit moral responses, that prompt talk about themselves in terms of moral considerations, and even warrant moral evaluation. The common-denominator argument cannot preclude this possibility logically, for even if there is some global standard of artistic value (a very controversial hypothesis), there may be different local standards for different genres. This much is obvious: decibel level has a role to play in heavy metal music that is irrelevant to minuets. Moreover, with some genres, moral considerations are pertinent, even though there may be other genres where they would be tantamount to category errors.

Though no autonomist to date has been able to offer a positive characterization of the essence of art, the autonomist frequently relies on some conception of the nature of art in order to back up the common-denominator argument. That is, art, given its putatively generic nature, supposedly yields generic canons of assessment. However, we can challenge this appeal to the nature of art with appeals to the natures of specific artforms or genres which, given what they are, warrant at least additional criteria of evaluation to supplement whatever the autonomist claims is the common denominator of aesthetic evaluation.

In order to substantiate this abstract claim, let us take a look at the narrative arts (narrative literature, drama, film, painting and so on). It is of the nature of narrative to be incomplete. No author is absolutely explicit about the situations she depicts. Every narrative makes an indeterminate number of presuppositions and it is the task of readers, viewers and listeners to fill these in. Part of what it is to follow a story is to fill in the presuppositions that the narrator has left unsaid. If the story is about Sherlock Holmes, we presuppose that he is a man and not an android, though Conan Doyle never says so. If the story concerns ancient Rome, we presuppose the message was delivered by hand, not by fax.

No storyteller portrays everything that might be portrayed about the story she is telling; she must depend upon her audience to supply what is missing and a substantial and ineliminable part of what it is to understand a narrative involves filling in what the author has left out. It is of the nature of narrative to be incomplete in this way and for narrative communication to depend for uptake upon audiences supplying what has been left unremarked by the author.

Furthermore, what must be filled in in this way comes in all different shapes and sizes, including facts of physics, biology, history, religion and so on. Notably, much of the information that the author depends on the audience's bringing to the text is folk-psychological. The author need not explain why a character is saddened by her mother's death. The audience brings its understanding of human psychology to bear on the situation.

But it is not only the presupposed, implied or suggested facts about the fictional world and human psychology that the audience must fill in in order for

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narratives to be intelligible. Understanding a narrative also requires mobilizing the emotions that are appropriate to the story and its characters. One does not understand *Trilby* unless one finds Svengali repugnant. Moreover, and this is where the connection with morality begins to enter, 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, like anger (inasmuch as 'being wronged' is conceptually criterial for its application), possess ineliminable moral components, and in the sense that many of the emotions that are pertinent to narratives are frequently moral emotions, such as the indignation that pervades a reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Without mobilizing the moral emotions of the audience, narratives cannot succeed. They would appear unintelligible. One does not, I submit, understand the wedding scene in Ken Russell's production of *Madame Butterfly* unless one feels that Pinkerton is unworthy of his bride. Thus, activating moral judgements from audiences is a standard feature of successful narrative artworks. And this is the case, not only where the moral judgements play a role in emotional responses, but also where the audience understands the logic of a plot that deals wrongdoers their just deserts.

Part of what is involved, then, in the process of filling in a narrative is the activation of the moral powers—the moral judgements and the moral emotions—of audiences. Moreover, it is vastly improbable that there could be any substantial narrative of human affairs, especially a narrative artwork, that did not rely upon activating the moral powers of readers, viewers and listeners. Even modernist novels that appear to eschew 'morality' typically do so in order to challenge bourgeois morality and to enlist the reader in sharing their ethical disdain for it.

Earlier I noted that according to the radical autonomist, moral concern with artworks is regarded to be either a failure in taste or intelligence insofar as such concern is inappropriate with respect to art. Talk about morality is, on this account, out of place, if not conceptually incoherent. However, if understanding a narrative artwork is, as I have argued, so inextricably bound up with moral understanding, then at least with narrative artworks, it will be natural for moral concerns to arise in the course of our appreciation of narrative artworks and in our discussions of them.

Since narrative artworks necessarily depend upon activating our antecedent moral beliefs, concepts and feelings, it is no accident that we will be predisposed to discuss, to share, and to compare our moral reactions with other readers, listeners and viewers concerning the characters, situations and the texts that portray them, where, indeed, the authors of said texts have presented them to us with the clear intention of mobilizing, among other things, our moral responses. It is natural for us to discuss narrative artworks by means of ethical vocabularies because, due to the kinds of things they are, narrative artworks are designed to awaken, to stir up and to engage our moral

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powers of recognition and judgement. The radical autonomist claims that moral discourse is alien to all artworks. But, given the nature of narrative artworks, it is germane to them. We may discuss the formal features of narrative artworks, but it is also apposite, given the nature of the beast, to discuss them from a moral point of view.[3]

The radical autonomist undoubtedly has a case against what might be called the radical moralist or Puritan—someone, perhaps, like Plato—who maintains that art should *only* be discussed from a moral point of view. But radical moralism is not my position, since I freely admit that some works of art may have no moral dimension, due to the kind of works they are, and because I do not claim that moral considerations trump all other considerations, such as formal ones. My position, moderate moralism, only contends that for certain genres, moral comment, along with formal comment, is natural and appropriate.

Moreover, the moderate moralist also contends that moral evaluation may figure in our evaluations of some artworks. For inasmuch as narrative artworks engage our powers of moral understanding, they can be assessed in terms of whether they deepen or pervert the moral understanding. That is, some artworks may be evaluated in virtue of the contribution they make to moral education.

Of course, there is a longstanding argument against the educative powers of artworks, *viz.* that what we typically are said to learn from artworks are nothing but truisms, which, in fact, everyone already knows and whose common knowledge may in fact be a condition for the intelligibility of the artworks in question. For example, no one *learns* that murder is bad from *Crime and Punishment* and, indeed, knowing that murder is bad may be a presupposition that the reader must bring to *Crime and Punishment* in order to understand it. Artworks, in other words, trade in moral commonplaces, and, therefore, do not really teach morality. They are not a source of moral education, but depend upon and presuppose already morally educated readers, viewers and listeners.

However, the characterization that I have offered of the relation of moral understanding does not fall foul of this objection. I agree that the moral emotions and judgements that narratives typically call upon audiences to fill in are generally already in place. Most narrative artworks do not teach audiences new moral emotions or new moral tenets. They activate pre-existing ones. Nevertheless, it is a mistake to presume that this may not involve moral education. That is, it is an error to presuppose that moral education only occurs when new moral emotions or tenets are communicated.

Moral education is not simply a matter of acquiring new moral precepts. Moral education also involves coming to understand how to apply those precepts to situations. Moral understanding is the capability to manipulate abstract moral precepts—to see connections between them and to be able to

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employ them intelligibly with respect to concrete situations. Understanding is not simply a matter of having access to abstract propositions and concepts; it involves being able to apply them appropriately. This, of course, requires practice, and narrative artworks provide opportunities to develop, to deepen and to enlarge the moral understanding through practice.[4]

We may believe certain abstract principles—like 'all persons should be given their due'—and possess abstract concepts—such as 'virtue = that which promotes human flourishing'—without being able to connect these abstractions to concrete situations. For that requires not only knowing these abstractions, but understanding them. Moreover, it is this kind of understanding—particularly in terms of moral understanding—to which engaging with narrative artworks may contribute.[5]

Furthermore, since the emotions have a conceptual dimension—in virtue of possessing formal criteria concerning that which can function as the object of an emotion – it makes sense to talk about deepening or enlarging our emotional understanding. Narrative artworks promote such understanding by providing occasions for clarifying our emotions, or, as Aristotle might say, for learning to bring the right emotion to bear upon an appropriate object with suitable intensity.

So, understanding a narrative artwork may involve a simultaneous process of deepening or enlarging one's moral understanding. And this, in turn, is an important element of moral education. Of course, learning from a narrative artwork through the enlargement of one's moral understanding is not well described as a consequence of engaging the story. Understanding the work, enlarging one's moral understanding and learning from the narrative are all part and parcel of the same process, which might be called comprehending or following the narrative. In reading a novel, our moral understanding is engaged already. Indeed, reading a novel is itself generally a moral activity insofar as reading narrative literature typically involves us in a continuous process of making moral judgements. Moreover, this continuous exercise of moral judgement itself contributes to the expansion and education of our moral understanding through practice.

Thus, we may speak of moral education with respect to narrative artworks without supposing that they trade in new moral discoveries or that moral education is an alien imposition on the narrative artwork. Moral education, in terms of the exercise of moral understanding, is a constituent in the appropriate mode of responding to narratives, i.e. following the story. And, if moral education is built in, so to speak, to responding to narratives, there is a straightforward way to evaluate narratives morally. Those narratives that deepen moral understanding, in the manner of, say, James' *Ambassadors*, are, all things being equal, morally commendable, whereas those that muddy moral understanding, as does *Pulp Fiction*, which suggests that homosexual rape is much worse than murder, are morally defective. Moreover, *pace* radical

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autonomism, such moral evaluations of narrative artworks are not inappropriate. Given the relation of narrative understanding to moral understanding, and the basis of that relationship in the (incomplete) nature of the narrative artwork, such evaluations are quite natural. It is not a category error to find that *Pulp Fiction*, no matter how formally compelling, is also, in certain respects, morally defective. *Pulp Fiction*, because of the kind of artwork it is, engages the moral understanding and can be assessed in terms of the efficacy of that engagement.[6]

III. MODERATE AUTONOMISM

The radical autonomist contends that all art is autonomous and takes this to entail, among other things, that discussing and evaluating art from a moral perspective is conceptually ill-founded, indeed, incoherent. I have argued that for some artworks, notably narrative artworks, this view is mistaken. For, given the nature of the narrative artwork, it is appropriate to discuss it and evaluate it morally. However, confronted by arguments like the preceding one, the autonomist may reconceive his position, conceding that some art may by its very nature engage moral understanding and may be coherently discussed and even evaluated morally. Nevertheless, the autonomist is apt to qualify this concession immediately by arguing that with such works of art, we need to distinguish between various levels of address in the object.

A given artwork may legitimately traffic in aesthetic, moral, cognitive and political value. But these various levels are independent or autonomous. An artwork may be aesthetically valuable and morally defective, or vice versa. But these different levels of value do not mix, so to speak. An aesthetically defective artwork is not bad because it is morally defective and that provides a large part of the story about why a work can be aesthetically valuable, but evil. Let us call this view moderate autonomism because, though it allows that the moral discussion and evaluation of artworks, or at least some artworks, is coherent and appropriate, it remains committed to the view that the aesthetic dimension of the artwork is autonomous from other dimensions, such as the moral dimension.[7]

The radical autonomist maintains that moral discussion and evaluation is never appropriate with respect to any artwork. The moderate autonomist maintains only that the aesthetic dimension of artworks is autonomous. This grants that artworks (at least some of them) may be evaluated morally as well as aesthetically, but contends that the moral evaluation of the artwork is never relevant to its aesthetic evaluation. The moral dimension of an artwork, when it possesses one, is strictly independent of the aesthetic dimension.

For the moderate autonomist, the narrative artwork can be divided into different dimensions of value, and, although it is permissible to evaluate such an artwork morally, the moral strengths and weaknesses of an artwork, *vis-à-vis* moral understanding, can never provide grounds for a comparable

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evaluation of the aesthetic worth of an artwork. That is, an artwork will never be aesthetically better in virtue of its moral strengths, and will never be worse because of its moral defects.

On a strict reading of moderate autonomism, one of its decisive claims is that defective moral understanding never counts against the aesthetic merit of a work. An artwork may invite an audience to entertain a defective moral perspective and this will not detract from its aesthetic value. But this central claim of moderate autonomism is false.

Recall Aristotle's discussion of character in the *Poetics*.[8] There he conjectures that for tragedy to take hold, the major character must be of a certain moral sort, if we are to pity him. He cannot be evil, because then we will regard his destruction as well deserved. The historical Hitler could not be a tragic character; his ignominious death would not prompt us to pity him. Indeed, we might applaud it. Likewise, Aristotle points out the tragic character cannot be flawless. For then when disaster befalls him we will be moved to outrage, not pity. Mother Theresa could not be a figure of tragedy, because she has no fatal flaw. The right kind of character, Aristotle hypothesizes, is morally mixed, elevated, but in other respects more like the average viewer.

If certain characters are inserted into the tragic scenario, in other words, 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, asking us, for example, to regard Hitler as an appropriate object of pity.

A recent example of such a failure is Brett Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho*. The author intended it as a satire of the rapacious eighties in the USA. He presented a serial killer as the symbol of the vaunted securities marketeer of Reagonomics. However, the serial killings depicted in the novel are so graphically brutal that readers are not able morally to get past the gore in order to savour the parody. Certainly, Ellis made an aesthetic error. He misjudged the effect of the murders on the audience. He failed to anticipate that the readers would not be able to secure uptake of his themes in the face of the unprecedented violence. He invited the audience to view the murders as political satire and that was an invitation they could not morally abide. His moral understanding of the possible significance of murders, such as the ones he depicted, was flawed, and he was condemned for promoting it. But that defect was also an aesthetic defect, inasmuch as it compromised the novel on its own terms. *American Psycho*'s failure to achieve uptake as satire is attributable to Ellis' failure to grasp the moral inappropriateness of regarding his serial killer as comic.

Narrative artworks are, as we have argued, incomplete structures. Among other things, they must be filled in by the moral responses of readers, viewers and listeners. Securing the right moral response of the audience is as much a

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part of the design of a narrative artwork as structural components like plot complications. Failure to elicit the right moral response, then, is a failure in the design of the work, and, therefore, is an aesthetic failure. The design (the aesthetic structure) of *American Psycho* is flawed on its own terms because it rests on a moral mistake, supposing, as it does, that the sustained, deadpan, clinically meticulous dismemberments it presents to the reader could be taken in a comically detached manner. A great many of the readers of *American Psycho* reacted to the flawed moral understanding of *American Psycho*, and rejected it aesthetically. Thus, this case, along with Aristotle's observations, indicate that sometimes a moral flaw in a work can count against the work aesthetically. Therefore, moderate autonomism seems false.

Many artworks depend for their effect upon the artist's understanding the moral psychology of the audience. Where the artist fails to anticipate the moral understanding of the audience, as Ellis did, the work may fail on its own terms, which is to say in terms of its own aesthetic aims. Of course, the Ellis example is one in which large parts of the audience rejected the aesthetic contract that Ellis extended to them. They were not about to laugh at prostitutes with holes methodically drilled into their heads.

But, one might ask, what about cases where there is a defective moral perspective in a work, but the audience is not so aware of it—that is, a case where the average reader, viewer or listener buys into it. Imagine, for example, a propaganda film that treats enemy soldiers as subhuman, worthy of any amount of indignity. Here, let us suppose, most of the audience embraces the flawed moral perspective that the film promotes. Does it make sense to call the work aesthetically defective because it endorses a flawed moral perspective which is also readily adopted by the average viewer?

I suspect that it may. Because as long as the moral understanding promoted by the film is defective, it remains a potential obstacle to the film's securing the response it seeks as a condition of its aesthetic success. Audiences during the heat of war may not detect its moral defect, but after the war such a defect will become more and more evident. Movies that thrilled people may come to disgust them morally. And even if they do not disgust the majority of viewers, the films are still flawed, inasmuch as they remain likely to fail to engender the planned response in morally sensitive viewers.

Moderate autonomists overlook the degree to which moral presuppositions play a structural role in the design of many artworks. Thus, an artist whose work depends upon a certain moral response from the audience, but who has proffered a work that defies moral understanding, makes a structural, or as they say, aesthetic error. This may be one way in which to understand Hume's contention that a moral blemish in an artwork may be legitimate grounds for saying that the work is defective.[9]

Moreover, as Kendall Walton has pointed out, audiences are particularly inflexible about the moral presuppositions they bring to artworks. Whereas we are willing to grant that the physical worlds of fiction may be otherwise—

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that objects can move faster than the speed of light—we are not willing to make similar concessions about morality—we are not willing to go with the notion, for example, that in the world of some fiction, killing innocent people is good. Thus, artworks that commerce in flawed moral conceptions may fail precisely because the failed moral conceptions they promote make it impossible for readers, viewers and listeners to mobilize the audience responses to which the artists aspire in terms of their own aesthetic commitments.[10]

But 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 encounter them. That is, it need not be the case that viewers or readers actually are deterred from the response which the work invites. The work is flawed if it contains a failure in moral perspective that a morally sensitive audience could detect, such that that discovery would compromise the effect of the work on its own terms. Thus, a moral defect can count as an aesthetic defect even if it does not undermine appreciation by *actual* audiences so long as it has the counterfactual capacity to undermine the intended response of morally sensitive audiences.[11]

That Nazis *circa* 1943 could fail to recognize morally that Hitler was not a tragic figure does not show that a play encouraging us to pity the dictator is not aesthetically ill-conceived. This may not be enough to show that a moral flaw is always an aesthetic flaw. But it is enough to show that it may sometimes be an aesthetic flaw, and that is sufficient to show that moderate autonomism is false.

Many artworks, such as narrative artworks, address the moral understanding. When that address is defective, we may say that the work is morally defective. And, furthermore, that moral defect may count as an aesthetic blemish. It will count as an aesthetic defect when it actually deters the response to which the work aspires. And it will also count as a blemish even if it is not detected – so long as it is there to be detected by morally sensitive audiences whose response to the work's agenda will be spoilt by it. A blemish is still a blemish even if it goes unnoticed for the longest time.

In response to my claim that a moral defect—such as representing Hitler as a tragic figure—counts as an aesthetic defect, the sophisticated moderate autonomist may respond that such defects might 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 viewpoint). Furthermore, the moderate autonomist may contend that all I have really offered are cases of the first type. And this does not imply that 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.

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But I am not convinced by this argument. 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 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. Thus, insofar as the moderate autonomist may not be able to separate the aesthetic and moral defects of artworks across the board, moderate autonomism again seems false.

The moderate autonomist also contends that the moral merit of an artwork never redounds to its aesthetic value. Even if an artwork is of the sort where moral evaluation is legitimate, a positive moral evaluation is never relevant to an aesthetic evaluation. The positive moral evaluation is just icing on the aesthetic cake. But this seems too hasty, especially if our previous discussion of narrative art is accurate, since one of the fundamental aesthetic effects of stories—being absorbed in them, being caught up in the story—is intimately bound up with our moral responses, both in terms of our emotions and judgements.

Let us suppose that the bottom line, aesthetically speaking, with respect to narrative artworks is that we are supposed to be absorbed by them. Let us suppose that this is what authors aim at aesthetically. But if it is the purpose of the narrative artwork to absorb the audience, to draw us into the story, to capture our interest, to engage our emotions, and to stimulate our imaginations, then it should be obvious that by engaging moral judgements and emotions, the author may acquit her primary purpose by secondarily activating and sometimes deepening the moral understanding of the audience.

The autonomist is correct to say that it is not the function of the narrative artwork *per se* to provide moral education. Typically the aim of the narrative artwork is to command our attention and interest. But very frequently the narrative artwork achieves its goal of riveting audience attention and making us care about what happens next by means of enlisting our moral understanding and emotions. The author aims at drawing us into the story. But engaging the audience's moral understanding may be, and generally is, a means to this end.

Narrative art does not necessarily serve ulterior purposes like moral education. Nevertheless, this does not preclude that there may be moral learning with respect to narrative artworks. For in many instances the moral learning issues from following the narrative, in a non-accidental fashion, but rather like a regularly recurring side reaction, as the author seeks to absorb readers of the narrative by addressing, exercising and sometimes deepening our moral understandings and emotions. This need not be what the author has in the forefront of his intention, but it happens quite frequently in narratives of

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human affairs where it is our moral interest in the work and our moral activity in response to the work that keeps us attentive to the object *for its own sake.*

The aesthetic appreciation of a narrative involves following the story. The more a narrative artwork encourages us to follow the story intensely, the better the narrative is *qua* narrative. I hope that I have shown that following the story involves our moral understanding and emotions. 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. And in such cases the way in which the narrative addresses and deepens our moral understanding is part and parcel of what makes the narrative successful.

Imagine, if you will, that Jane Austen had a twin. Let us also agree that part of what makes *Emma* absorbing is the opportunity it affords for deepening our moral understanding. The novel is better for the way in which it engages us in assessing the moral rectitude of Emma's interference with Harriet's love life. Now suppose that Jane Austen's sister wrote an alternative version of *Emma* that told the same story in the same elegant prose, but which did not address our moral understanding at all. All things being equal, I suspect 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, thereby enabling Jane Austen to discharge her primary goal as artist *qua* narrative author.

But if this is right, then moderate autonomism is false yet again. Sometimes it is the case that the way in which some artworks, such as narrative artworks, address moral understanding does contribute to the aesthetic value of the work. Works that we commend because of the rich moral experience they afford may sometimes, for the same reason, be commended aesthetically. This is moderate moralism. It contends that some works of art may be evaluated morally (contra radical autonomism) and that sometimes the moral defects and/or merits of a work may figure in the aesthetic evaluation of the work. It does not contend that artworks should always be evaluated morally, nor that every moral defect or merit in an artwork should figure in its aesthetic evaluation. That would amount to radical moralism, and I have no wish to defend such a view.

In conclusion, I have tried to show why with certain artworks, particularly narratives, we are naturally inclined to advert to morality when we think about and discuss them. I have attempted to defend this view by arguing that this disposition is connected to the nature of narrative. In this respect, I wish to urge that it is not a category error nor is it otherwise incoherent to talk about morality with reference to narrative artworks, given the kinds of things they are. Moreover, contra autonomism, since narrative artworks are designed

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to enlist moral judgement and understanding, assessing such works in light of the moral experiences they afford is appropriate. It is not a matter of going outside the work, but rather of focusing upon it.[12]

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NOTES

[1] Moderate moralism represents a departure from an earlier position of mine which I called soft-formalism. See Noël Carroll, 'Formalism and Critical Evaluation', in Peter J. McCormick (ed.), *The Reasons of Art* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1985).

[2] See Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1924).

[3] Though I have only discussed narrative artworks as a counterexample to radical autonomism, the case could be made with reference to other artforms or genres, such as portraiture.

[4] On one view of the morally educative powers of narrative, it is supposed that audiences derive novel, general, moral propositions from texts and then they apply those propositions to the world. I agree that this is not an accurate, comprehensive account because most of the propositions derived from narratives are truisms. But this is not the picture of the educative powers of narrative that I advance. I agree that narratives generally play off the moral beliefs and emotions that we already possess and that we already employ in our intercourse with the world. However, in *exercising* these pre-existing moral powers in response to texts, the texts may become opportunities for enhancing our already existing moral understanding. Thus, the direction of moral education with respect to narratives is not from the text to the world by way of newly acquired moral propositions. Rather, antecedent moral beliefs about the world may be expanded by commerce with texts that enlarge our moral understanding. In stressing the world-to-text relation between moral understanding and narratives, rather than the text-to-world relation, my position converges on the one defended by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen in their *Truth, Fiction and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

[5] This view of moral understanding is defended at greater length in Noël Carroll, 'Art, Narrative and Morality', in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ethics* (Cambridge U.P. forthcoming).

[6] See 'Art, Narrative and Morality' for further argumentation along these lines.

[7] I am not sure that moderate autonomism is explicitly represented in the literature. I have come to construct it as a logically possible position because something like it was a common manoeuvre with which critics confronted me upon hearing the previous arguments in this paper.

[8] Aristotle, *Poetics*, in Jonathan Barnes (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1984), vol. II, p. 2325.

[9] David Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', in John W. Lenz (ed.), *Of the Standard of Taste and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1965), pp. 23–24.

[10] See Kendall Walton, 'Morals in Fictions and Fictional Morality', in *The Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume LXVIII, pp. 27–50.

[11] For a more powerful as well as a more elegant argument along these lines, see Berys Gaut, 'The Ethical Criticism of Art', in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ethics*. Gaut delivered this article as a talk at the 1994 national meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics.

[12] Earlier versions of this essay were delivered as lectures at Columbia University,

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Northern Illinois University, and the University of Wisconsin at Madison. I would like to thank those audiences for their attentive criticisms. Alex Neill, Kendall Walton, Sally Banes, and Berys Gaut have also discussed these issues with me. I have profited from the comments of all these critics. Whatever inadequacies remain in my position are my own fault, not theirs.

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