Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research

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I. INTRODUCTION

Ironically, though the philosophy of art emerged initially as part and parcel of Plato's ethically motivated criticism of art, the ethical criticism of art has received scant attention from analytic philosophers for most of the twentieth century. Influenced by Kant's aesthetic theory, especially as that was interpreted (or misinterpreted) by subsequent movements—including, for example, aestheticism ("art for art's sake") and formalism—and ostensibly reinforced by certain consequential critical practices (such as the New Criticism with respect to literature), many twentieth-century philosophers of art have not only neglected the topic of the ethical criticism of art; many have regarded the ethical criticism of art as either irrelevant or conceptually illegitimate.

Of course, despite the effective moratorium on ethical criticism in philosophical theories of art, the ethical evaluation of art flourished in the critical estate. Indeed, with regard to topics like racism, sexism, homophobia, and so on, it may even be the case today that the ethical discussion of art is the dominant approach on offer by most humanistic critics, both academics and literati alike. Nor have plain readers, viewers, and listeners of art been deterred by the absence of either philosophical acknowledgment or enfranchisement. Their assessments of artworks remain steadfastly linked to ethical considerations, as can be readily confirmed by listening to what ordinary folk talk about after seeing a film or a play or TV show, or when they trade opinions about the latest novels.

There has been, in other words, a gap between theory and practice with respect to the ethical criticism of the arts throughout the twentieth century—a gap intensified by philosophy's silence about the relation between ethics and art. This gap, moreover, is a recent one, since philosophers from Plato through Hume supposed that the pertinence of ethical criticism to art was unproblematic. It is only since the late eighteenth century that the view took hold that the aesthetic realm and the ethical realm are each absolutely autonomous from the other. Needless to say,

some philosophers of art, like Tolstoy, bucked this tide. But in the main, philosophical discourse about the arts has steered clear of the topic of ethical criticism, except, on occasion, to argue that it is logically inadmissible or beside the point.

Lately, however, this consensus itself is beginning to be challenged. Perhaps impressed by the pervasiveness of ethical criticism in our ongoing practices, philosophers are reevaluating traditional arguments against the ethical criticism of art, and they are also attempting to discover the premises upon which such criticism might rest. The purpose of this article is to survey some of the recent debates that address the ethical criticism of art. In order to organize thinking about this subject, I will start by sketching the leading traditional arguments against the ethical criticism of art, and then in subsequent sections I will explore contemporary responses to these arguments as a way of introducing various new approaches now available for defending the prospects for ethical criticism.

II. OBJECTIONS TO ETHICAL CRITICISM: AUTONOMISM, COGNITIVE TRIVIALITY, AND ANTICONSEQUENTIALISM

As already indicated, before the modern era (before philosophers of art were influenced by the writings of Hutcheson and Kant), the notion that art can and should be criticized ethically was generally unexceptionable. Since that time, however, several powerful arguments have taken shape that have called that practice into question philosophically. Since much current philosophical thought about the ethical criticism of the arts has taken shape against the background of those arguments—attempting either to show said arguments are dubious or that they can be outflanked logically—it is useful to initiate our discussion by reviewing the leading traditional objections to the ethical criticism of art. These can be called, respectively, the "autonomism" argument, the "cognitive triviality" argument, and the "anticonsequentialist" argument.

1. The Autonomism Argument

This argument concludes that art and ethics are autonomous realms of value and, thus, criteria from the ethical realm should not be imported to evaluate the aesthetic realm. Artworks, it is said, are valuable for their own sake, not because of their service to ulterior purposes, such as moral enlightenment or improvement. The epitome of this sentiment can be found in Oscar Wilde's slogan: "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all." [1]

This viewpoint is sometimes called "aestheticism." Several sociological accounts have been advanced for its popularity. One is that the doctrine is an art world maneuver to protect artworks from censorship;

1. Quoted by Wayne Booth (1988), p. 382.

in response to Plato and his puritanical descendants, it is asserted that, logically, art is its own locus of value and should not be assessed in terms of alien sorts of value, like morality.

A more historically specific hypothesis is that aestheticism is a response to the triumph of bourgeois culture in the nineteenth century, at which time the dominant tendency was to reduce all value to instrumental and/or commercial value. Bourgeois culture put a price tag on everything, including art. And the popular arts that emerged in tandem with the rise of mass urban society "cheapened" the arts, made them too "easy" as well as inexpensive. Aestheticism in this context, then, was a gesture of cultural resistance. It characterized art (or what is sometimes called "high art") as a source of esoteric value, separate from the everyday values of commercialism, morality, and any other sort of instrumental or practical purpose. Aestheticism attempted to seal off art hermetically from the surrounding bourgeois and mass cultures by declaring art to be autonomous.[2]

Aestheticism in particular and autonomism in general were not merely a matter of cultural polemics. The view could also be supported by formidable argumentation. One argument against the ethical criticism of art—which we may call the "common denominator argument"— takes note of the undeniable fact that much art has nothing to do with morality. Much pure orchestral music as well as many abstract visual designs and decorations count as art, but they promote no ethical viewpoints and, therefore, are not susceptible to ethical evaluation. If they have value, it must be other than ethical value, and, consequently, they need to be assessed in terms of criteria other than ethical criteria. Furthermore, whatever we identify as the value of art should be such that every artwork can be assessed in accordance with it. That is, art qua art should be beholden to standards that are universally applicable to all art. But since not all art concerns ethical matters, the standard cannot be ethical. The relevant value must reside elsewhere.

Where? Here the notion of aesthetic experience often comes to the fore. All artworks are supposedly intended to promote aesthetic experience; thus the capacity to promote aesthetic experience is the proper criterion for evaluating art. Moreover, since aesthetic experience is explicitly defined in terms of disinterestedness—disinterested pleasure or disinterested attention—aesthetic experience is strictly independent of ethics. Thus, the appropriate standard to raise with respect to any artwork concerns its capacity to afford aesthetic experiences. For some autonomists, called, predictably enough, "formalists," aesthetic experience revolves solely around the appreciation of the formal aspects of artworks, though other autonomists are somewhat broader in their conception of aesthetic experience, regarding it as any experience prescribed by an

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2. For a historical account of aestheticism, see Bell-Villada (1996).

artwork that is valued for its own sake (and not for the sake of anything else, including moral enlightenment or moral improvement).

Autonomism also finds a sympathetic audience with those who incline toward an essentialist view of the value of art. That is, if one is disposed to the opinion that whatever the value of art is, it is a value unique to art (and shared by no other human practice), then autonomism appears to offer a very compelling hypothesis, since art seems to be the only human practice whose products are uniformly intended primarily to afford aesthetic experiences. Sermons and ethical treatises may be aesthetically satisfying, but that is not the primary intention that motivates them. Only artworks are primarily intended to promote aesthetic experiences. Artworks should be evaluated in terms of that to which they uniquely aspire. That is not the production of moral insight or moral improvement; other things are primarily intended to do that. Only artworks (all artworks) are uniquely dedicated to the production of aesthetic experience. Thus, aesthetic experience, not ethics, provides the appropriate evaluative grid for art.

The notion of aesthetic experience, of course, is attractive to the essentialist because it, by means of the very definition of disinterestedness, excludes art from every other source of value—whether practical, cognitive, or ethical. Thus, in a single stroke, by invoking the notion of experiences of aesthetic disinterestedness, the essentialist automatically guarantees that the value of art will be divorced from that of every other human practice, including, for our purposes, ethics.

Autonomists also have some very powerful intuitions on their side. Most informed lovers of art are likely to agree that there are certain immoral works of art that are excellent, whereas, at the same time, they are loathe to count an artwork as good simply because it is (morally speaking) pure of heart. Indeed, many ethically sterling artworks turn out to be execrable when all is said and done. But these intuitions do not appear consistent with ethical criticism. One would, for example, expect the ethical critic to condemn immoral art, whereas the informed art lover maintains that some immoral art is superlative.

The art lover fears that the ethical critic is prone to reduce artistic value to something else, namely, ethical value. This is what makes the notion of art for art's sake attractive to the art lover who worries that ethical criticism is a reversion to the kind of Victorian moralism that Oscar Wilde abhorred.

2. The Argument from Cognitive Triviality

As frequently practiced, the ethical criticism of art proceeds by isolating a moral thesis associated with or implied by an artwork and then goes on to commend the artwork in light of its moral commitments. Perhaps the *moral* of *Emma* is that people (such as Emma) should not treat persons (such as Harriet) simply as means. Ethical critics typically abstract theses

like these from artworks, treat them as moral insights, and applaud them as such. This practice certainly makes it sound as though what the artist has done that is worthy of our approval is to have made some moral discovery, thereby contributing to our fund of ethical knowledge in such a way that attending to the artwork educates us in this or that moral truth.

But the opponent of ethical criticism balks at this, pointing out that, in general, the moral theses associated with artworks are usually in the nature of truisms. Suppose that Käthe Kollwitz's *Municipal Lodging* is taken to reveal that the poor are oppressed. That hardly counts as a moral *discovery*; it was surely well known before the picture was made. In fact, it makes little sense to say that the picture "revealed" this truism. Rather, the painting appears to presuppose it. That is, the painting requires viewers already in possession of this viewpoint in order to recognize its articulation in the picture and to be moved to indignation by it.

This line of attack is really a subsidiary of an even broader complaint about art criticism.[3] Art critics often write as though artworks were contributions to knowledge, including, in the case at hand, moral knowledge. In this way, critics treat art as if it were comparable to science—a mode of inquiry. However, the skeptic maintains that the putative cognitive accomplishments of art are paltry, especially when compared to science. Artworks, more often than not, presuppose articles of common knowledge or philosophy, recycling them, perhaps imaginatively, but hardly discovering them. If artworks are to be commended for their contribution of genuinely original insights to our body of knowledge, very few artworks would be worthy of our esteem. And what applies to artworks with respect to knowledge in general, applies equally to artworks with respect to moral knowledge. If James's *Ambassadors* shows the importance of acute perceptual discrimination for moral reflection, well, Aristotle already demonstrated that.

Furthermore, if many of the moral "discoveries" cited in the literature not only are known, but need to be known for readers, viewers, and listeners to recognize them, then the idea that we learn from art appears altogether without substance. For how does one learn what one already knows? The claim of the ethical critic that art is a source of moral education, then, rings hollow; art does not teach us what we already know and, indeed, must know if we are to grasp that a certain artwork is associated with a particular moral precept.

Not only can art not be said to impart knowledge, since the knowledge at issue is generally common knowledge, but art's epistemic prowess can also be disputed by pointing out that even if artworks can be said to advance knowledge claims, they supply no evidentiary support for them. Fictions, for example, provide no grounds for the knowledge

3. For a general discussion of this debate, see Lamarque and Olsen (1994), pp. 289–321.

claims they allegedly imply, since, after all, fictions are made up. Consequently, the claims to knowledge associated with artworks are merely notional, since no one can be said to know that such and such is the case merely by, say, reading a novel.[4]

Aspects of the cognitive triviality argument are also attractive to essentialists. The discovery of knowledge, including moral knowledge, cannot be the unique value of art, since many other human practices, including science, social science, history, and philosophy, are also engaged by it, and, in fact, are arguably even better suited to imparting authentic knowledge than art is. Thus, the revelation of new knowledge, including moral knowledge, cannot be the distinctive source of value in all art and, therefore, moral insight of the sort prized by ethical critics cannot be the appropriate standard for evaluating artworks.

3. The Anticonsequentialist Argument

Like the preceding argument, anticonsequentialism is a response to the way that ethical critics talk. It queries what ethical critics appear to presuppose as altogether uncontroversial. In both commending and condemning works of art, ethical critics speak as though they know what the ethically relevant behavioral effects of an artwork are likely to be. A film such as *In and Out* is approved not only because it advances the salutary moral insight that gays are persons deserving of moral respect, but also because broadcasting this message is likely to change people's behavior toward them. In contrast, the film *Con Air* is criticized because, it is thought, it will encourage violent behavior.

The autonomist will, of course, challenge such assessments, because rather than evaluating the works in question in terms of the unique values of art (in this case cinema), here critics are evaluating artworks for the sake of something else—the alleged moral/behavioral consequences of these films for society at large. But the anticonsequentialist's objection to these examples of ethical criticism is somewhat different than the autonomist's. The anticonsequentialist asks: how does the ethical critic know that the works in question will have the behavioral consequences that are imputed to them?

Since Plato, commentators have criticized art, usually negatively, by presuming that they know what the behavioral effects of the artworks in question would be. However, they have never had anything like sufficient evidence to back up these claims. Contemporary pundits, for example, maintain that media violence is a major causal factor in violence today. And yet crime rates in industrially developed countries have been falling recently, at exactly the same time that media violence appears to be on an upsurge. If there is, as alleged, such a strong causal correspondence

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4. Arguments like this can be found in Beardsley (1958), p. 429; and Putnam (1978), p. 90.

between media violence and social violence, how will ethical critics account for divergences like these? Of course, usually they don't bother, but this, the anticonsequentialist chimes in, is just the problem with ethical criticism.

Though the correlation between violent media and violent social behavior seems obvious to ethical critics, the empirical support for these hypotheses is famously wanting. Despite seemingly endless studies of the consequences of the media for violent behavior, there is little conclusive evidence for any claims, save the most empirically trivial and uninteresting ones (such as: excessive exposure to violent media on the part of violently predisposed subjects *may* lead to violent behavior).

Against such observations, the ethical critic is likely to respond that, sans social science, we know that art, especially literature, influences people. We have ample testimony that art has changed people's lives; some people say they tried smoking dope after reading *On the Road* (Booth 1988, pp. 227–63). However, such examples are too indeterminate and spotty to serve the ethical critic's purposes. What ethical criticism requires is knowledge of regularly recurring patterns of behavior that predictably follow from exposure to fiction (or certain kinds of fiction). The occasional anecdotal evidence to which the ethical critic appeals in order to affirm that art and fiction influence life is too vague to support the inferences the ethical critic wants to make. That art has a diversity of (unpredictable) consequences for everyday affairs is too broad a premise from which to infer that this type of novel causes antisocial behavior on the part of a significant number of readers.

For centuries, ethical criticism of the arts has proceeded confidently, as if we knew the behavioral effects of art on its audiences. However, no one really possesses reliable knowledge of the relevant order of specificity concerning art's behavioral consequences, nor do we have any dependable means for predicting the regularly recurring pattern of social behavior that any artwork will elicit—either in the short or the long run—from normal viewers, listeners, and/or readers. Anyone who claims to have access to this information, as participants in this debate often do, is simply bluffing. Inasmuch as ethical criticism of the arts rides on the possession of such knowledge about the behavioral consequences of art, the project is doubtworthy.

An even more extreme form of anticonsequentialism might go so far as to suggest that, insofar as there is no conclusive evidence concerning the behavioral consequences of art, the most prudent stance is to suppose that, until contrary evidence arises, art has no determinate, regularly recurring behavioral consequences. And if we adopt the view that art has no such behavioral consequences, then there is little point, it could be said, in attempting to evaluate art ethically. Thus, by a different route, anticonsequentialism joins forces with autonomism in the conviction that ethical standards should not be imported into the aesthetic realm.

The arguments from autonomism, from cognitive triviality, and from anticonsequentialism are well known and often repeated. In what follows, we will review various responses to them in order to explore a number of developments and debates currently evolving in this area of the philosophy of art.

III. RESPONSES TO AUTONOMISM

The strongest autonomist argument is the common-denominator argument. It presupposes that the appropriate criterion for evaluating art must be one that is applicable to all the arts. But since it is the case that much art does not concern morality directly, ethics cannot be the appropriate criterion for evaluating art.[5] This argument equivocates. That some art is not concerned with morality directly—that it lacks ethical content or implications—may indicate that some art is not an appropriate object of ethical criticism. But from this it does not follow, as the common-denominator argument suggests, that ethical criticism is not appropriate for any art. For some art, given the kind of art it is, does have ethical dimensions, and, therefore, with respect to that kind of art, ethical criticism has a prima facie claim to appositeness.

Sharpness and heft are appropriate criteria for evaluating meat cleavers, though sharpness and heft are not appropriate criteria for every kind of cutting instrument. They are irrelevant with respect to butter knives. One could say that sharpness and heft are not appropriate criteria for all cutting instruments. But it would not follow from that that they are not appropriate criteria for certain kinds of cutting instruments, namely, meat cleavers.

Similarly, certain kinds of art—for instance, Greek tragedies—possess an ethical dimension, not adventitiously but constitutively. Authors composed their work with this understanding; readers, comprehending the author's intentions, read them for ethical significance. The constitutory social contract that founds the consumption and production of many of our artistic genres encourages artists and audiences alike to focus on ethical concerns.[6] George Grosz's caricatures, consistently with

5. The motivation for adding the qualification "directly" here is that some ethical critics might maintain that even if an artwork does not contain ethical content, as an abstract visual design might not, it will still have ethical consequences, since the making and consuming of it will spend social resources which might be spent elsewhere. This, at least indirectly, makes it a candidate for ethical evaluation—has it contributed to or subtracted from overall social utility or to the common good? But even here the autonomist is likely to respond that still some art—e.g., an abstract design by a Sunday painter composed solely for herself—is, for all intents and purposes, neutral on this score. And, in any case, the autonomist might add, appealing to our intuitions, that it seems irrelevant to evaluate such a work not in terms of its design, but for its contribution to the commonweal.

6. Earlier I noted that autonomism is attractive to essentialists. But the case is not unmixed. For, as the argument above indicates, if one is an essentialist about certain genres

the genre in which they occur, make an ethical address which prescribes an ethical response from viewers. Ethical criticism, whether commendatory or not, of this kind of work is appropriate, even if ethical criticism is inappropriate with regard to a Handel concerto grosso.[7]

Of course, the common-denominator argument also presupposes that there must be a singular criterion of value for all art. Thus, the preceding conclusion—that ethical criteria are appropriate for some art—will not do. The ethical critic's response to this is twofold. First, even if there were a single global criterion of value for all art, that would not have to preclude the possibility that there are not also multiple, local criteria of evaluation for certain genres of art, consistent with whatever the global criterion turns out to be. But second, the ethical critic is entitled to be skeptical about whether there is a single global criterion of aesthetic value, or even a set of such criteria, applicable to every kind of art. There are so many different kinds of art which mandate so many different kinds of audience responses. What of any significance do the Sex Pistols, the Egyptian pyramids, and Rembrandt's *Girl Sleeping* have in common? Why imagine that there is a single global criterion of evaluation applicable to all arts?[8]

Needless to say, in the face of such skepticism, the autonomist is apt to weigh in with a proposal—there is such a criterion, namely, the intended capacity of the work in question to promote aesthetic experience. This proposal, however, is itself a vexed one, since the notion of aesthetic experience is highly controversial.[9] What is an aesthetic experience? If the autonomist says that it is an experience of significant form, then it will not serve as a global evaluative criterion, since there is some art, given the kind of work it is, that is designed to thwart such experiences. Arguably John Cage's *4′ 33″* is intended to subvert the apprehension of what is called (not very informatively) "significant form."

Another initially more promising route for the autonomist is to define aesthetic experience as any experience valued for its own sake. This construal not only supplies the autonomist with a candidate for the global criterion of art evaluation, but also ostensibly excludes even the possibility of additional ethical criteria, since ethics raises issues of practical rather than intrinsic value.

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and agrees that said genres possess an ethical dimension as part of their nature, then with respect to those genres, the essentialist in question will side with ethical criticism.

7. Responses to autonomism can be found in Carroll (1998*a*). See also Booth (1988), pp. 3–22.

8. For skepticism about the existence of such a criterion, see Marshall Cohen (1977), pp. 484–99. This line of questioning, of course, is meant to deter the essentialist attracted to autonomism. For even if essentialism is initially a good working hypothesis with which to approach a philosophical inquiry, it may have to be abandoned when the phenomenon under examination becomes too unruly.

9. For a taste of the controversy, see Dickie (1974).

On this reading of aesthetic experience, then, any artwork can be assessed in terms of its intended capacity to afford an experience valued for its own sake. But, again, this criterion is not universally applicable to all art, since some art is not created with the intended capacity to afford aesthetic experiences so defined. For example, tribal images of demons are meant to scare off intruders, not to enthrall them with pleasurable experiences valued for their own sake. And, of course, if in order to avert counterexamples like this, autonomists drop the requirement that artworks are *intended* to afford aesthetic experience (and merely require that they afford aesthetic experience), then they lose a criterion of value unique to art, since, putatively, waterfalls and songbirds afford the kind of experience they are talking about.[10]

So far, the autonomist has failed to come up with a plausible contender to serve as the unique, global criterion of evaluation for all and only art. This entails that, at least until the autonomist shows otherwise, the ethical criticism of some art is viable. And this, it seems to me, is all we need for the practice of ethical criticism as it commonly occurs—with reference to the kinds of works to which it is appropriate—to continue with a philosophically clean bill of health.

But what of the autonomist's other arguments? The claim that art is for art's sake and not for the sake of anything else is at best misleading, since "art's sake" (the interest for which an artwork is made) is frequently for purposes beyond the creation of captivating forms and/or aesthetic delight. The great cave paintings in the Buddhist temples of Ellora were intended to commemorate important events in the life of Gautama and to enable devotees to recollect their significance. In those cases, "art's sake" is religious and ethical. Indeed, the formal invention in these paintings is not for its own sake, but for the sake of facilitating concentration on the Buddha's message. The supposition that "art's sake" (art's interest) can only be concerned with form or disinterested experience is really just the flag of one partisan tendency in art history.

Similarly, the fear that ethical criticism, applied in appropriate circumstances, reduces all artistic value to something it is not is a red herring for three reasons. First, the ethical critic need not presume that all art is susceptible to moral criteria. Second, in the case of genres that have an ethical dimension, evaluating an artwork in terms of the quality of its moral perception (or misperception) is not invoking criteria alien to its value as the kind of artwork it is; it is a matter of evaluating the work in terms of the norms (genre norms) of the kind of artform to which it belongs. And third, the ethical critic need not claim that ethical considerations are the only ones to be brought to bear on an artwork; even artworks that are appropriate to evaluate ethically may have formal dimensions that call for independent evaluation. So, if what one means by

10. For further discussion, see Carroll (1999), chap. 5.

saying that ethical criticism reduces art solely to ethical value is that this neglects formal values, the claim is mistaken, since a critic may assess a given work with respect to both kinds of value.[11]

Moreover, this last comment suggests one way that the ethical critic can deal with the case of immoral art that is nevertheless excellent: such a work may, when all things are considered, contain ethical defects that are vastly outweighed by its other merits, such as formal ones. Likewise, an artwork that is morally upstanding but formally inept and experientially barren may, all things considered, be eminently dismissible.

Contemplating these remarks, the autonomist may be willing to concede that the ethical criticism of some art, given the kind of art it is, is valid. However, she will hasten to add that ethical criticism is nevertheless categorically distinct from something called "aesthetic criticism." Some art is made to be sold and can be assessed in terms of its marketability, but its market value is strictly independent from its aesthetic value. Similarly, the autonomist might agree that some art addresses ethical issues and may be assessed morally in terms of its ethical address, but this dimension of the work's value (or disvalue) is, the autonomist asserts, independent of its ethical value. Ethical criticism is logically feasible, but one should not confuse the ethical value of artworks with their aesthetic value.

This viewpoint can be called "moderate autonomism." It disavows the stronger autonomist claim that the ethical criticism of art is somehow a category mistake. It allows that artworks can be criticized ethically, but goes on to contend that the ethical value or disvalue of an artwork has no bearing on its aesthetic value or disvalue. No ethical defect makes an artwork aesthetically worse; no ethical virtue makes an artwork aesthetically better.

This position, moderate autonomism, introduces issues not yet broached. Thus far, in this section and the preceding one, we have only reviewed the arguments in behalf of what might be called "radical autonomism"—the view that the ethical evaluation of artworks is always conceptually confused. In the final section of this essay, we will explore responses to moderate autonomism.

IV. RESPONSES TO THE ARGUMENT FROM COGNITIVE TRIVIALITY

Thus far we have only spoken of the possibility of ethical criticism. But granted that it is possible, what exactly does ethical criticism criticize— what features of artworks serve as the locus of ethical criticism and on what grounds does ethical criticism criticize them? As already indicated, ethical critics typically abstract moral theses from artworks, generally by

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11. That artworks can be evaluated in terms of multiple dimensions, including ethical ones, is discussed in Dickie (1988), pp. 126–28.

means of interpretations,[12] treating them as knowledge claims (in terms of truth or falsity; aptness or inaptness) and, in the most favorable cases, often commending them as moral insights such that readers, viewers, and listeners can learn them from the works in question. Ethically good artworks afford the opportunity to gain moral insight; ethically suspect artworks palm off defective moral views as if they were insights. Such criticism, then, appears to regard the potential educative value of artworks as the grounds for ethical criticism.

But this picture of ethical criticism, of course, invites the objections from cognitive triviality rehearsed earlier. Where artworks presuppose, imply, or express outright ethical theses, the viewpoints are generally truisms; nor should this be surprising, since in order to be understood widely, artworks must trade in viewpoints that audiences recognize. Standardly, audiences use what they recognize to be the moral viewpoint of the work in order to organize what they are seeing, hearing, or reading.

But if audiences already know the pertinent truisms, it is silly to say that they learn such "insights" from artworks. One must already know that hypocrisy is noxious in order to appreciate Tartuffe's comeuppance. And it is such common knowledge that everyone can share in the laughter. We don't learn this maxim from Molière's play, but bring it to the theater with us. So there seems little reason to regard moral education as a plausible grounds for ethical criticism.

Previously, I noted that this line of objection not only pertains to the possibility that art affords moral education but is, more broadly, an objection to general claims about the cognitive value of art. Art cannot be regarded as valuable for the production of new knowledge claims, ethical or otherwise, and statable as propositions, because art, for the most part, engages in truisms. Even if the theses found in certain artworks are true, they are, in the main, hardly original, so it cannot be that they are insights. If ethical criticism is in the business of commending moral insights in art, there will be about as much call for it as for a fire department in a desert. So ethical criticism is, at best, largely beside the point. For the most part, it lacks an object.

One line of response to this argument is to claim that the model of knowledge employed by the skeptic here is too narrow. The skeptic, albeit encouraged by the apparent practice of many ethical critics, thinks that the knowledge that is relevant to ethical criticism takes the form of propositions—propositions such as "that hypocrisy is noxious"—and goes on to say that where such propositions are abstractable from artworks they are generally overwhelmingly trivial. But some ethical critics counter that there are more forms of knowledge than "knowledge that." Ryle spoke of "knowledge how." Ethical critics add to the list "knowl-

12. For one, albeit controversial, account of how this is done, see McCormick (1982), pp. 399–410.

edge of what it would be like," which itself is a form of knowledge by acquaintance.[13]

If one says that the moral knowledge available in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is that slavery is evil, then the skeptic can say: (1) that was already known by morally sensitive readers before the book was published; (2) it was knowledge that was or could have been stated in other than artistic forms, such as treatises, pamphlets, and sermons; and (3) the novel scarcely proved the case, since all its examples were made up. The ethical critic, however, might agree with all these points, but then continue by saying that the novel still afforded knowledge, namely, knowledge of what slavery was like. By providing richly particularized episodes of cruelty and inhumanity—of families callously sundered and savage beatings—the novelist engages the reader's imagination and emotions, thereby giving the reader a "feel" for what it was like to live in slave times.

It is one thing to be told that roadways in Mumbai are massively overcrowded; it is another thing to be given a detailed description full of illustrative incidents, emotively and perceptively portrayed. The first presents the fact; the second suggests the flavor. The first tells you that the streets are congested; the second gives you a sense of what that congestion is like. The ethical critic, or at least some ethical critics, then, answer skeptics by first agreeing that the propositional knowledge available in art is often trivial or platitudinous; art is not competitive with science, philosophy, history, or even much journalism in supplying "knowledge that." But this is not the only type of knowledge there is. There is also "knowledge of what such and such is or would be like." And this is the kind of knowledge that art excels in providing and that the best ethical critics look for, or at least should look for.

Moreover, this kind of knowledge is especially relevant for moral reasoning. In entertaining alternative courses of action, there is a place for the imagination. To take an extremely dramatic example, if one is contemplating murder, one should, among other things, reflect on what it would be like to live as a murderer. Reading a novel such as *Crime and Punishment* can give one an inkling of this. It engages the imagination and the emotions in a way that yields a feeling for what being a killer is like that one can consult in one's imaginative reflections on this alternative line of action. Furthermore, this kind of information is not only relevant to deliberating about how one should act; it is also pertinent to making judgments about others. Having a sense of what slavery is like

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13. The notion that literature trades in "knowledge of what *X* would be like" first appears, I believe, in Walsh (1969). It also is used in Scruton (1974). Neither of these authors applies the idea specifically to the claims of art and/or literature to moral knowledge. However, that move can be found in Putnam (1978); Palmer (1992); Currie (1995, 1998).

contributes to the indignation we feel toward surviving instances of it in the world today.[14]

Supposing that there is ethically relevant "knowledge of what X would be like," ethical critics can assess works that pretend to it: positively—when said works convey such knowledge accurately—and negatively—when the works in question falsify or distort what such and such a situation would be like (e.g., by portraying antebellum plantation life as idyllic for all concerned). Furthermore, though art and literature are not the only means for conveying knowledge of what X would be like, this is one of their leading specialties, and they have developed and continue to develop an astonishing number of strategies to this end (an end to which a substantial number of artists and writers have been and still are primarily committed). And, of course, the artist can offer us "knowledge of what X is like," which is unprecedented, and which, therefore, has a claim to being educative.

This approach to art's claims to moral knowledge, which we might call the "acquaintance approach," is promising, though it faces certain challenges. One would appreciate hearing a lot more than is currently available in the literature about the nature of "knowledge of what X is like." What precisely does it take to be a certifiable instance of it? What conditions must obtain for a candidate to count as "knowledge of what X is like?" And, once those conditions are spelt out, will this sort of knowledge really turn out to be categorically distinct from "knowledge-that" or will it be reducible to long conjunctions of propositional knowledge? More needs to be said about this intriguing, though still vague, proposal.

Even among proponents of this view, there seems to be an ambiguity about the object of this knowledge—does it focus on characters or situations? That is, in reading a novel, do we learn what it would be like to be a certain character in a certain kind of situation, or do we learn what the situation is like from the perspective of an onlooker? Some theorists in this vein suggest that what we learn is not what a situation is like, but what it would be like to view the situation as the real or the implied narrator does—to learn, for instance, what it is like to see the world as loveless, as Céline does.

Which of these alternatives does the acquaintance theorist have in mind when talking about knowledge of what X is like? And if the answer is that it could be any one of them, how does a critic know which one is relevant with respect to a particular artwork? There are also questions about the nature of the pragmatic mechanisms that underlie the communication of knowledge of what X would be like, though as we will see

14. On the relevance of this sort of knowledge to moral reasoning, see especially Currie (1995).

in the next section, some work on this problem has been undertaken by simulation theorists.

Perhaps a more troublesome problem for the acquaintance approach than the preceding requests for more detail is that the ethical critic who adopts the acquaintance approach appears to presuppose that the kind of situations and characters about whose haecceity we learn from art and literature are sufficiently like those we might encounter in everyday life to be morally relevant to practical and moral reasoning and judgment. But are they really? We almost always know more about situations and characters in literature than we do about the situations and people with whom we must interact morally. Also, novelists and dramatists can enter the minds of characters, disclosing their motives and feelings, and they can omnisciently limn factors that no one could suspect.

How often do we find ourselves in situations with such epistemic mastery? Furthermore, given the frequent epistemic disparity between the situations and characters in fiction and what we are likely to find in everyday life, how can we match the information accessed through fiction to our own circumstances? And finally, even if we could, an earlier skeptical complaint returns: why would we rely on a novel's portrayal of what some situation would be like, since it is made up? The fiction does not provide any evidence that comparable situations really are like this.[15]

Another response to the cognitive triviality argument is what might be called the "subversion approach." On this view, ethically commendable artworks present readers, viewers, and listeners with depictions or descriptions that call into question or subvert our (lamentably) settled moral views.[16] Novels that reveal conventional sexual mores to be the agency of sickness and oppression, or that show ethnic minorities undemonized and worthy of common human respect, undermine complacent stereotypes and maxims and invite the reader to revise his moral opinions and adopt a superior moral perspective. These are the sorts of things that artworks can do effectively, and ethical critics are keen to praise them when they do.

Of course, the subversion approach can be combined with the acquaintance approach,[17] since the way in which an artwork or fiction

15. Perhaps an answer to this objection is to concede that the fiction does not present knowledge, but rather hypotheses—hypotheses which we may then bring to the world for confirmation or disconfirmation. This is what we do with much nonfiction, like diet advice. The article offers a hypothesis for which we may then seek evidence (sometimes in our own case, but usually not mine). Similarly, the proponent of the acquaintance approach could suggest that what fictions do is offer us hypotheses about what *X* would be like, where such hypotheses can be of cognitive and ethical value. For further discussion, see Novitz (1987), esp. pp. 130–32.

16. Variations on the subversion approach include Putnam (1978); Wilson (1983); Beardsmore (1984); Harrison (1991); Passmore (1991); Eldridge (1992).

17. Indeed, in Putnam (1978), the subversion approach and the acquaintance approach blend into each other.

might challenge complacent moral views is by bringing home experientially to audiences, through imaginative examples, how degrading, alienating, or unjust are the kinds of situations that follow from conventional morality. That is, a harsh work ethic toward the poor might be subverted by showing what it is like to worry about one's next meal on a day-to-day basis. Or, a morally condescending, though socially enfranchised, view of women might be shaken by narrating what it is like to be a woman in a man's world.

On the other hand, artworks like Eisenstein's film *Potemkin* may place more weight on argument than empathy in overthrowing entrenched, though dubious, moral convictions. But whether by example or argument or an admixture of the two, it seems that there can be little doubt that artworks have contributed to the social transformation of moral values. Think of all those stories about young lovers who defy parentally arranged marriages; such tales are very romantic, but they also represent confrontations with conventional moral hierarchies for the sake of asserting the autonomy of individuals. In our own times, much avant-gardism has been predicated on unsettling moral pieties, while throughout the ages, this has been the terrain of satire. Whether through acerbic ironic assertion after the fashion of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* or through showing what colonialism was like à la Forster's *Passage to India,* artworks have functioned as opportunities or occasions for revising moral conceptions, even at times facilitating ethical conversion experiences.

At this point, the skeptic is likely to chime in with a familiar refrain: the challenges to complacent morality advanced in artworks are almost never original to the artwork or artist in question. The moral insight in question is most often an illustration or rhetorically effective reframing of something derived from already existing social criticism, or philosophy, or religion, or whatever. It is still at best recycled knowledge. The artist has not discovered it, but only retooled it.

Yet this argument seems irrelevant. It is one thing to claim that most artworks are not genuinely insightful or educative because they usually broker truisms. But it is strange to say that they cannot be conduits of innovative knowledge because they disseminate moral views heretofore shared only among small coteries of progressive thinkers. Given the context in which artists operate—given their audiences—it does seem correct to say that, relatively speaking, they are introducing new moral insights, and, to the degree that those insights justifiably challenge accepted moral wisdom and clear the path for audiences to revise their moral beliefs, it seems perfectly natural to describe the value of the relevant artworks as educative. The kinds of artworks the subversion approach commends are not telegraphing truisms; they are impugning truisms for the sake of moral ideas that are new and informative for the relevant audiences, even if they are already known to savants.

Thus, the subversion approach provides the ethical critic with an answer to the charges of cognitive triviality. Some art affords what, relative to its audiences, counts squarely as moral insight, including even propositional knowledge. This provides the ethical critic with grounds to praise the relevant art in terms of its educative value. Maybe the subversion approach also suggests a way to evaluate some art negatively, namely, the art which tends to reinforce settled moral convictions that are pernicious.

But though the subversion approach has several advantages, it also has certain shortcomings. It is rather limited in scope. It is best suited to deal with artworks that undermine complacent moral views. This biases the ethical critic's attention to radical works. But most artworks, including most fictions, are not morally radical. A great many artworks, notably fictions, operate within established moral frameworks and are not morally pernicious, though they may yet possess an ethical dimension. The subversion approach leaves the ethical critic nothing to say about work like this. It enables the ethical critic to commend the morally revolutionary and to deplore the morally reactionary. But won't the ethical critic also want to have a way of talking about artworks that do not push the moral envelope, yet which are still nevertheless morally praiseworthy? Thus, the subversion approach makes the case for ethical criticism with respect to some art, but it is not comprehensive enough.

A third response to skeptical objections concerning the educative powers of art can be called the cultivation approach.[18] Whereas defenders of the acquaintance approach contend that the skeptic's conception of knowledge is too narrow, defenders of the cultivation approach maintain that the skeptic's conception of education is too narrow. For the skeptic, education is the acquisition of insightful propositions about moral life. For the advocate of the cultivation approach, education may also involve other things, including the honing of ethically relevant skills and powers (such as the capacity for finer perceptual discrimination, the imagination, the emotions, and the overall ability to conduct moral reflection) as well as the exercise and refinement of moral understanding (that is, the improvement and sometimes the expansion of our understanding of the moral precepts and concepts we already possess). As the label for this approach indicates, the educative value of art resides in its potential to cultivate our moral talents.

Most fiction, for example, engages audiences in a constant process of ethical judgment, encouraging readers, viewers, and listeners to form moral evaluations of characters and situations virtually on page after

18. Some recent examples include: Kieran (1996), p. 351; Carroll (1996, 1998). The view is also suggested in passages in: Murdoch (1970, 1992); Palmer (1992); Booth (1988). I would also interpret Martha Nussbaum as a representative of this approach; see, e.g., (1986, 1998). I call my own version of the cultivation approach "clarificationism."

page, and in scene after scene. Though the call for rendering moral judgments is intermittent in everyday life, in fiction it is generally pervasive. Thus, through constant exercise, narrative fiction can keep our powers of moral judgment lubricated.

Much art mandates emotional responses from audiences. The emotions, in turn, are typically governed by criteria, and with respect to many emotions, like anger and pity, the appropriate criteria for having the emotion are moral (perceived justice with respect to anger; perceived undeservedness with respect to pity). Thus, exposure to certain art can sensitize us to, as Aristotle would say, the right reasons and objects for the emotions in question. In the best cases, artworks can also expand our emotional powers of discrimination by appealing to our imagination in such a way that we come to apprehend some objects, say AIDS victims, as worthy of emotions such as sorrow, where previously we had been oblivious or even hostile toward them. Where artworks cultivate our moral emotions by exercising and/or expanding them, the ethical critic can commend them. But, of course, many artworks encourage audiences to indulge in morally flawed emotional responses for the wrong objects and/or the wrong reasons. In those cases, the ethical critic is in a position to castigate them.

The cultivation approach can be wedded to the acquaintance approach. An encounter with a fiction, for instance, encourages audiences to imagine what working in a sweatshop would be like, thereby not only perhaps expanding the focus of our emotion of indignation, but augmenting our imaginative resources. Insofar as the imagination (the capacity to entertain contrary-to-fact situations) is integral to moral judgment, fictional explorations of what such and such would be like are, in general, relevant to keeping our powers of moral judgment in working order, while specific fictions may enrich the scope of our imaginations by giving us more food for thought. Here, the cultivation approach need not fall afoul of the problem confronting the acquaintance view, since on the former view it is only claimed that exposure to fictional situations may cultivate our imaginative powers and reach, and not that we take fictional situations as exemplars that correspond and are directly applicable to living cases. On the cultivation view, the ethical critic can regard artworks as object lessons in moral reflection in general; they need not take artworks to be lessons for dealing with certain specific kinds of situations.

Art can also amplify our morally relevant powers of perceptual discrimination. Fictions, for example, present us with characters, such as Mr. Skimpole in *Bleak House,* who, we come to realize, are not what they initially appear to be—beneath the charm, for instance, we may gradually discover heartless egoism. Fiction, that is, can train us to be—and how to be—on the lookout for telltale signs of character. Moreover, as we read certain fictions, we often simultaneously run through a process

of moral reflection—one that is coincident with one conducted by the real and/or implied author or some character. In the best cases, this tutors us in how to attend to and weigh details, and in the appropriateness of casting our reflective net broadly. This exercise enhances our ability to reflect on further moral situations, just as running through logic exercises prepares us to solve theorems we have never seen before. Here, once again, we are not talking about treating specific fictional reflections as models for real-life cases, but only of the way in which fictions exercise and potentially augment our general powers of moral reflection. Thus, once again, the cultivation approach evades the charges leveled at the acquaintance approach.[19]

Art, especially fiction, can contribute to the enlargement of our capacity for moral understanding. We learn many moral rules and concepts, but they are very abstract and, as a result, we may not be able to connect them to particular situations. By providing detailed examples, fictions help us evolve a sense of how to employ these abstractions intelligibly and appropriately. Aesopian fables provide a simplified example of this. But even more complex works like Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Melville's *Moby-Dick* can be read as vivid prototypes for admonitions about pride. Experience with such vivid prototypes enables us to employ abstract moral maxims with greater facility when we are called upon to make moral judgments.

In addition to abstract maxims, we also possess abstract moral concepts, such as those pertaining to virtue and vice. By providing concrete examples, art can advance our understanding of how to apply them to particular cases. Shakespeare's *Henry VI,* for instance, provides an array of contrasting characters that enable us to clarify our understanding of the nature of political virtue and vice. Moreover, that the specimens of virtue and vice found in fiction are often more clear-cut than those found in life does not compromise their educative serviceability. Like the use of heuristic devices, such as diagrams, in the education of medical students, the fact that literary examples are generally less messy than real-life cases aids the refinement of our practice of moral judgment.

The skeptic denies that art and literature provide a resource for moral education because the ethical maxims and propositions found there generally are already known by audiences and, indeed, usually must be known if the audience is to recognize their connection to the artworks in question. Under the cultivation approach, the ethical critic can concede that this is most often the case, but then adds that this is no objection to the educative potential of art and literature. For what art teaches us generally is not new maxims and concepts, but rather how to apply them to concrete cases, engaging and exercising our emotions and

19. The themes of perception and reflection are especially central in Nussbaum (1986).

imagination, our powers of perceptual discrimination, moral understanding, and reflection, in ways that sustain and potentially enlarge our capacity for moral judgment.

The proponent of the cultivation approach can also take on board the insights of the subversion approach. Though agreeing with the skeptic that most often artworks instantiate already known moral propositions and concepts, the ethical critic need not concur that this is always the case. Sometimes artworks do introduce innovative moral perspectives or reorient moral emotions and understandings in unexpected ways. This often occurs by showing that our moral convictions apply more broadly than reigning prototypes suggest or by bringing our attention to hitherto ignored, but morally significant variables. But this is just a special case of the cultivation of our moral powers, the enlargement of our imaginative, perceptive, reflective capacities for moral judgment.

Most of our preceding examples have been ones in which art and literature enhance our moral powers. But, of course, there are also many cases in which art ill serves morality. For example, there is a particularly nasty short story by F. Paul Wilson, entitled "The Wringer," which blinkers the reader's reflection on the story (concerning a revenge kidnapping) in such a way as to encourage the reader to assent to the proposition that torture is sometimes not only permissible, but required, oddly enough to buoy family values.

From the perspective of the cultivation approach, it is easy to see how the ethical critic deals with cases such as this. Since the cultivation approach commends artworks that exercise and enlarge our moral powers by clarifying our moral understanding, it will deplore artworks that encourage confusion by misdirecting moral perception and emotion and by proffering distorting instantiations of moral maxims and concepts.

Earlier it was argued, against the autonomist, that ethical criticism is possible. The cultivation approach gives a sense of what the ethical critic looks for in order to commend or to censure artworks. Here the educative potential (or lack thereof) of art figures centrally, while skeptical charges about the cognitive triviality of art are circumvented by appealing to the cultivation of moral powers. Thus, the cultivation approach appears to be a feasible avenue of research for ethical criticism, though admittedly one whose chief concepts—moral perception, reflection, understanding, imagination, and judgment (as engaged by artworks)—require further elaboration.[20]

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20. One aspect of recent writing germane to issues of the cognitive triviality of art not canvassed in this section is Martha Nussbaum's contention that certain kinds of novels are indispensable to moral philosophy. This viewpoint is advanced frequently in the essays in Nussbaum (1986). For discussion and criticism of it, see Kalin (1992).

V. RESPONSES TO ANTICONSEQUENTIALISM

The consequentialist suspects that ethical criticism rests on presuming knowledge that, in truth, no one has. Ethical critics appear to commend artworks morally because they maintain the relevant artworks will abet morally admirable behavior; they seem to condemn artworks because they suppose the works in question will bring about antisocial behavior. And, admittedly, ethical critics sometimes talk this way. But, the anticonsequentialist observes, we know next to nothing about the regularly recurring effects of artworks, and, therefore, the predictions on which the ethical critic feigns to rely are ultimately groundless.

However, ethical criticism need not depend on spurious behavioral predictions. If one endorses certain variations of the cultivation approach, one may argue that one's moral assessments of artworks are based not on forecasts of the behavior that the artworks are likely to elicit, but on the quality of the moral experience that the artwork encourages as the audience engages with it.

As we have seen, fictions generally invite or prescribe ongoing processes of moral judgment. We can ask of the ongoing processes that the fiction encourages or mandates whether they exercise our moral powers appropriately and/or deepen them, or whether they confuse or distort moral understanding, blind moral perception, stunt reflection, and/or misdirect moral emotions. Questions about the direct behavioral consequences of the artwork need not arise in order for the ethical critic to be in a position to approve or reprove an artwork. Rather the ethical critic can focus on the probity of the moral experience that an artwork shapes or prescribes as a condition for correctly assimilating it. Do those interactions cultivate our moral powers, or do they deform them?[21]

As we read, view, or listen to an artwork with a significant ethical dimension, our consciousness is occupied by content that has been shaped in a certain way—that prescribes and facilitates certain moral responses. Without claiming anything about the likely behavioral effects of the work, we can nevertheless still comment on the moral value of the pathways that we are invited to follow. Thus, ethical criticism can proceed, as it has for millennia, without claiming knowledge of behavioral generalizations that it has not got. Instead of attending to the putative behavioral consequences of artworks, ethical criticism, properly so-called, takes the experience the work is designed to engage as its object of scrutiny.[22]

Since so much emphasis is being put on the experience of the art-

21. For example, Wayne Booth writes: ". . . even when we do not retain them, the fact remains that insofar as the fiction has *worked* for us, we have lived with its values for the duration; we have been *that kind of person* for at least as long as we remained in the presence of the work" (1988, p. 41). See also Carroll (1998).

22. Determining the experience that the work is *designed* to engage, of course, is a matter for critical interpretation. This is why ethical criticism is generally interwoven with interpretation.

work, at this point it will be instructive to look at the most precise account of that experience put forth by an ethical critic so far. Developed by Gregory Currie (henceforth called "the simulation theorist"), it derives inspiration from the notion of simulation that figures currently in debates about the philosophy of mind.[23]

Like most contemporary philosophers of fiction, the simulation theorist presupposes that fiction mandates audiences to imagine the states of affairs the author lays before them. The simulation theorist, however, has a very specific notion of imagination; for him, imagination is simulation. That is, the experience of reading a novel is a simulation of how a person like us (equipped with beliefs and desires like ours), under the guidance of the author, would respond to the discourse, if it were assumed to be narrated as true.

When simulating—when imagining—we take ourselves "off-line" (we decouple the connection of our belief/desire system to the world) and use our standing repertoire of emotional and cognitive responses to fill in the story with what we know and feel in order to make sense of it. All fictions require that audiences complete them by supplying background presuppositions about the world of the fiction as well as appropriate affect. How does this come about? The simulation theorist says that the mechanism is simulation, the same process that we use to understand conspecifics in everyday life.

Furthermore, experiencing a fiction involves two kinds of simulation: primary and secondary imagining. Primary imagining is a matter of simulating belief in the propositions advanced in the text. If the story says "the house was made of stone," then the reader makes believe the house was made of stone, along with whatever we normally think goes with that. Secondary imagining, however, involves simulating the experience of characters. Since secondary imagining is what is most relevant to ethical criticism, we will now turn to that.

According to simulation theory, in ordinary life we understand others not on the basis of some folk-psychological theory, but by simulating them, by taking our own belief-desire system off-line (by disconnecting it from the disposition to act) and by putting ourselves in their shoes. Why is Jones speaking in such a strangely guarded manner? Put yourself in his place—the boss has just insulted him. Using your own beliefs about the world and your own emotional inclinations, simulating his predicament will disclose to you that he is probably angry and yet simultaneously fearful of saying something that will get him in deeper with the boss. You now understand why he is so circumspect. You know, through your simulation, that that is how you would be too, were you to find yourself in his circumstances.

23. Currie (1995). For a more extensive discussion of this view, see Carroll (1998*b*), pp. 342–56.

Encountering characters in fiction, the simulation theorist suggests, is not so very different. In order to understand them—a project that occupies a large amount of our experience when attending to fictions—we simulate their situations. Why is the character walking so cautiously down that dark alley? Simulate his situation—he is being pursued by the SS—and his caution becomes evident. Moreover, it is our secondary imagining—our simulation of the mental states of characters—that makes fictions feel vivid, rather than dull and lifeless.

But what does character simulation have to do with ethical criticism? Our capacity to imagine—to simulate—is adaptive. It enables us to scope out the intentions and other inner states of our conspecifics. But we are not only able to simulate others; we are also able to simulate our own future selves. Simulation of our future selves is an indispensable element of practical deliberation.

It is an aid to planning, a way of engineering cost-free trial runs. In contemplating a future line of action, we can simulate it. Before we decide to embezzle, we can simulate what it would be like to be an embezzler. The simulation will yield information about whether we could live comfortably being an embezzler or rather be stricken by the pangs of conscience. And this sort information is relevant to deciding to embezzle or not.

What does this have to do with fiction? "Good fictions give us, through the talents of their makers, access to imaginings more complex, inventive and instructive than we could often hope to make for ourselves. Constructing my own imaginings would also require of me a prodigious capacity to stand aside from my own immediate desires, since a natural tendency is to rig the narrative so as to get from it the lesson we want to hear. Better on the whole to listen to the narrative of another, more competent teller of tales. In this way we can think of fictions as just further examples of endogenously supplied survival mechanisms" (Currie, 1998, p. 171). So the simulation of fictional characters yields information of what it would be like to undertake certain lines of action, and this is pertinent to practical and moral reasoning.

Simulation theory is a worked-out version of the acquaintance approach discussed in the previous section. Through secondary imagining (the simulation of fictional characters), we learn what it would be like to be a nun or a pickpocket. Could we stand being a murderer? Simulate Raskolnikov and see. Because of the role that the simulation of fictional characters can play in moral reasoning, the ethical critic negatively evaluates fictions that distort our imaginings in such a way that we come to value what is not valuable, while positively evaluating fictions that promote imaginative experiences that predispose us to value what is valuable.

Simulation theory is an attractive account of the moral relevance of our experience of artworks, notably fiction, because of the way in which

it ties together aesthetic issues with the philosophy of mind and evolutionary psychology. However, at least two kinds of questions must be raised about it. On the one hand, does it provide anything like a plausible, comprehensive account of our experience of fictional characters? And, on the other hand, do fictions really play the role in moral reasoning that the simulation theorist suggests?

In answer to the first question: there is little call for character simulation, construed as secondary imagining, when reading fiction, since novelists, dramatists, short story writers, and so on typically give us access to what the characters are thinking and feeling, most frequently by omnisciently narrating their inner states. Even in popular films and TV programs, characters usually tell us what is on their mind. There is small cause to simulate them, and so, I propose, we don't. There are, of course, modernist examples, like the film *Eclipse,* where the characters are opaque and enigmatic, but such films do not give us enough background information for simulation to get off the ground (and that is probably part of their point—that the springs of human action are impenetrable).

Character simulation is just not as pervasive as the simulation theorist suggests. If it occurs at all, it is a marginal feature of the process of experiencing fiction. For that reason alone, it is hard to believe that the phenomenon could play the central role for ethical criticism that the simulation theorist assigns to it.

Similarly, the role in moral reasoning that the theorist claims for simulating fictional characters appears strained. With the possible exception of literature professors, how many consult fictions when contemplating how to act? This is not to deny that simulation is important to moral reasoning. But it is the simulation of our future selves that is relevant here, not the simulation of fictional characters. Indeed, recalling a criticism of the acquaintance approach, I am prone to suspect that we would not be very likely to rely heavily on simulations of characters in moral reasoning, even if we did simulate them more than we do, because we realize that such characters are artificially contrived and their situations made up.[24]

Simulation theory, though presently the most rigorous account of

24. Currie seems aware of this criticism, which he frames in terms of skepticism about fiction as an epistemically reliable process for generating moral knowledge. His response is rather obscure. He appears to say that fiction can be a reliable process for acquiring moral knowledge where the person who employs it as such knows how to use it (knows how the genre in question works, understands its rhetorical resources, and comprehends how to reflect vividly and imaginatively on literature). But this seems to suggest that it is critics or people under the tutelage of critics who use secondary imagining in moral reasoning in the way he describes. Both prospects strike me as unlikely. Criticism, even less than fiction, is rarely, if ever, consulted by plain moral reasoners as they deliberate. And I would be surprised if it turned out that a significant number of critics make moral decisions by simulating fictional characters. I wouldn't say that it never happens. But I speculate that if it does, it is too idiosyncratic to serve as the keystone in a theory of ethical criticism.

the moral significance of our experiential engagement with fiction, is extremely controversial. This is not to say that the ethical critic's emphasis on the moral quality of our experience to artworks does not, in principle, suffice to evade the anticonsequentialist's objections, but only makes apparent the need for more exact thinking and theorizing about the express contours of that experience.

VI. RESPONSES TO MODERATE AUTONOMISM

In Section III, we examined the case for radical autonomism—the view that the ethical criticism of art is always inappropriate or irrelevant. Argument showed this is false; sometimes ethical criticism is appropriate, depending on the kind of artwork in question. Some artworks, given the kind of work they are, may be appropriate objects of ethical criticism. But we also noted previously that this line of argument may only result in the autonomist's adoption of a new tack, which we called "moderate autonomism." Qualifying autonomism, the moderate autonomist agrees that some art may be evaluated ethically, but adds that ethical criticism should not be confused with artistic criticism. A favorite example is the film *Triumph of the Will,* of which it is alleged that, though it deserves negative ethical evaluation, it is artistically good. The negative ethical evaluation has no impact on its artistic evaluation.

Hume claimed that where artworks contain ethical defects, "they confound the sentiments of morality, and alter the natural boundaries of vice and virtue. They are therefore eternal blemishes . . ." (Hume, 1993, p. 153). That is, an ethical blemish counts as an artistic (or aesthetic) one. This is what moderate autonomism denies. An artwork may contain ethical blemishes and be legitimately criticized for that reason. But an ethical blemish is conceptually distinct from an artistic or aesthetic blemish. An artwork is not aesthetically less for being ethically degraded, even though it may be incumbent on a critic to deplore its moral failings. Nor is an artwork better for being morally correct. Ethical evaluation and artistic evaluation with respect to artworks are always necessarily independent.

Two recent challenges to moderate autonomism are ethicism and moderate moralism.[25] Ethicism maintains that certain kinds of ethical failings in an artwork are always aesthetic defects and should be counted as such in an all-things-considered judgment of the work qua artwork. Moderate moralism contends only that some of the relevant ethical defects in artworks can also be aesthetic defects and must be weighed that

25. Ethicism is defended in Gaut (1998). Kieran (1996) also calls his position ethicism, but since Kieran appears to be primarily concerned with refuting radical autonomism, I will focus on Gaut's view. Moderate moralism is defended in Carroll (1996, 1998*c*). Ethicism and moderate moralism are criticized in Jacobson (1997); and Anderson and Dean (1998).

way in all-things-considered judgments. Since ethicism is the stronger position, we will turn to it first.

As we have already seen, many artworks prescribe or mandate certain responses, including emotional responses, from their audiences. Structuring such an artwork so that it gets the response it prescribes is part of the artistic or aesthetic design of the work. Amusement is one of the responses that *Guys and Dolls* prescribes. If an audience has some problem, due to the way the work is structured, with complying with the work's prescribed response, that is a problem with the artistic or aesthetic design of the work.

Prescribed responses to a work can be merited or unmerited. A mystery story may prescribe that readers be gripped by curiosity about whodunit, but if the culprit is transparent from the get-go, the story does not merit the prescribed response of curiosity. Failure to support a work's prescribed responses is an artistic or aesthetic flaw in an artwork. That is, where an artwork does not merit the responses it prescribes, that is an aesthetic flaw in the artwork qua art. An artwork may be, on balance, considered good, even if it fails to merit some of the responses it mandates. However, such failures to merit some of its prescribed responses must be assessed as debits in contrast to whatever other of its virtues are also placed on the scale.

Moreover, if an artwork prescribes a response that is immoral, such as a pro-attitude toward torture, then that response is unmerited. Why? Because immoral responses are unmerited, and this gives the audience a reason to refrain from responding to the work in the way the work mandates. But failures to design a work in such a way that the work's mandated responses are not prey to countervailing reasons is a failure in the artistic design of the work—an aesthetic flaw. So moral defects in a work, notably prescribing immoral cognitive-affective responses, are aesthetic flaws, contrary to moderate autonomism.[26] This has been called the "merited response argument."

A central problem that critics of the merited response argument raise concerns the notion of an unmerited response. What is built into it? All immoral responses are alleged to be unmerited in a way that is relevant to aesthetic response. But are they? Drawing an analogy with immoral jokes, the critic points out that there are many jokes that are immoral, but which are nevertheless humorous—not funny despite their immoral appeal, but sometimes because of it. Laughter at such jokes may be unethical, but it seems strange to say that it is, from the

26. Gaut writes: "If these responses [to an artwork] 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. 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" (1998, p. 195).

point of view of humor, unmerited, at least if 'unmerited' means "un-warranted." For surely the laughter is well warranted by the structure and content of the joke. So, if aesthetic effectiveness is analogous to humor-ousness, then indulging a prescribed though immoral response to an artwork may be warranted, as in the case of humor, even if it is evil. And being aesthetically moved is like being amused.[27]

We may be warranted in conceding that an immoral joke is funny at the same time that we agree that it is evil. In many cases, it would be wrong to say that such a joke is not funny—that it does not warrant amusement. We simply say that it is evil. Perhaps we think that it would be wrong to repeat such a joke—suppose it is a racist joke. But that is not because it is defective as a piece of humor, but because we think it is morally bad. Yet this has no bearing on its status as an aesthetically effec-tive specimen of humor. The joke qua humor is well designed and, to the extent that it is well designed, our laughter is warranted by it. So, by parity of reasoning, if the ethicist means by 'unmerited' "unwarranted," then the claim with respect to artworks that all prescribed, though im-moral, responses are unmerited is false, since, like a joke, the structure and content of an artwork may warrant a prescribed response that is im-moral. On the other hand, if the ethicist protests that by (aesthetically) 'unmerited' he means to include "morally unmerited," then he can be charged with begging the question.

With regard to jokes, the ethicist points out that amusement, like other emotional states, has certain criteria of appropriateness, and, therefore, can be evaluated in terms of whether it is appropriate (that is to say, merited). However, the anti-ethicist responds that those criteria of appropriateness are amoral, involving factors like incongruousness. An evil joke can be incongruous—in fact, its incongruity may be connected to its evil—and, thus, appropriate in the relevant sense. To suppose that cognitive-affective appropriateness in a joke must involve appropriate-ness in the moral sense is an equivocation. Similarly, artworks may meet the appropriate conditions for engendering a powerful aesthetic re-sponse—for example, they may be viciously humorous—and this re-sponse may be well warranted, even if morally regrettable. The only way to avoid this conclusion is to build moral propriety into the criteria of appropriateness for being aesthetically moved, but that, of course, courts circularity.[28]

Critics of the merited response argument, then, maintain that not all ethically unmerited responses to artworks are unmerited aesthetically.

27. The analogy between jokes and artworks at the expense of the merited response argument is pursued at length by Jacobson (1997).

28. Though Gaut has addressed the relation of ethicism to humor at length, he has not confronted an argument exactly like this one. See Gaut (1998*b*). Though Gaut does not seem prone to take this option, questions could be raised about the aptness of the art/joke analogy. For example, see Carroll (1991).

Some artworks that prescribe ethically unmerited responses may be aesthetically powerful, not despite the ethically unmerited responses they prescribe, but because of them. This debate remains to be played out in the literature. Nevertheless, however it eventuates, there is a weaker position to which the ethical critic can revert in order to oppose moderate autonomism. It is moderate moralism.

Moderate moralism is less sweeping than ethicism. Against moderate autonomism, it claims only that sometimes a moral defect in an artwork can be an aesthetic flaw and that sometimes a moral virtue can be an aesthetic virtue. Like ethicism, moderate moralism begins the case for moral defects being aesthetic defects by reflecting upon the ethically relevant responses prescribed by artworks.

Securing audience uptake to the responses a work prescribes is a leading feature of any artwork's agenda. Failing to secure uptake, then, is an aesthetic defect in an artwork, and, as such, needs to be balanced against whatever other, if any, aesthetic virtues the work possesses. Many (most?) artworks prescribe emotional responses. Some of these emotional responses contain, among their warranting conditions, moral considerations (in the way that anger requires the perception of injustice); and some of these emotional responses are moral through and through (for example, a feeling of social indignation). An artwork that fails to secure emotional uptake is aesthetically defective on its own terms. Moreover, an artwork may fail to secure the emotional responses it mandates because its portrayal of certain characters or situations fails to fit the moral warranting criteria appropriate to the mandated emotion. And one way it can fail to do this is by being immoral.

Imagine a novel that calls upon audiences to deliver the moral sentiment of admiration for a sadistic colonizer who cruelly and relentlessly tortures every Indian he encounters, not only braves but women and children. He presumes the moral rightness of his actions on the grounds that his victims are vermin and the point of view of the novel concurs. The graphic violence and the malevolence of the work are impossible to miss. The work would be criticized for its evil; it is morally defective. But also it would come as no surprise if audiences were unable to feel admiration for the colonizer. That is, *ex hypothesi,* they would not be able to respond emotionally in the prescribed manner, since he not only fails but contravenes the morally relevant criteria for admiration.[29] All things being equal, this is an artistic defect, a failure to design the character in accordance with the warranting conditions for the emotional response prescribed.

But the reason the work is aesthetically defective is that it is morally defective. Though the work prescribes admiration as part of its aesthetic

29. The view that audiences cannot just suspend their moral beliefs in such cases is defended in Walton (1994).

agenda, it fails to secure it, precisely because it is evil. The relevant explanatory reason the work fails aesthetically is the same as the reason it is ethically defective. It is evil. Nor are cases like this récherché. We often have problems mustering the prescribed affect for fictional characters and situations just because they are inappropriately sympathetic from a moral point of view. Thus, contra moderate autonomism, sometimes a moral defect in a work is an aesthetic defect. Presuming that typically artists intend to address their works to morally sensitive audiences, then where characters and situations are portrayed in ways that block said audiences from responding in the prescribed manner, due to an immoral instantiation of the appropriate warranting conditions, an ethical defect can also be an aesthetic defect.

Moderate moralism does not claim that every moral defect in an artwork is an aesthetic defect. Artworks can be immensely subtle in terms of their moral commitments. Morally defective portrayals may elude even morally sensitive audiences and may require careful interpretation in order to be unearthed. Of course, once they are excavated, they can be ethically criticized. But the moderate moralist will not, in addition, criticize them aesthetically, if they are so subtle as to escape a morally sensitive audience. Moderate moralism is not, then, committed to the proposition that every moral defect in an artwork is an aesthetic defect.

Of course, sometimes actual audiences may fail to be deterred by a moral defect in a work because, given the circumstances, they are not as morally sensitive as they should be (as opposed to as hermeneutically sensitive as they could be). Perhaps in the midst of a war, audiences who are ordinarily morally sensitive will miss the inhumanity portrayed in the treatment of enemy soldiers in a propagandistic artwork. Ethical critics will, needless to say, criticize the work on moral grounds. But moderate moralists may also criticize the work as aesthetically defective, if it is such that it would daunt the work's prescribed responses for ideally morally sensitive audiences because it is ethically defective.

Against moderate autonomism, the moderate moralist also claims that sometimes an ethical virtue in an artwork can also count as an aesthetic virtue. A central aesthetic aim of most artworks is to absorb the attention of the audience. Providing genuine, eye-opening moral insight; exercising and enlarging the audience's legitimate moral powers of perception, emotion, and reflection; challenging complacent moral doxa; provoking and/or expanding the moral understanding; calling forth educative moral judgments; encouraging the tracing out of moral implications or the unraveling of morally significant metaphors that have import for the audience's lives can all contribute to making an artwork absorbing. Thus sometimes an ethical virtue is also an aesthetic one.

One criticism of moderate moralism concerns the idea that it should count as an aesthetic defect that, due to the immorality of the artwork, the ideally morally sensitive audience is reluctant to join a pre-

scribed response. For if the reluctance here is akin to that of a person who turns off when encountering a racist joke and refuses, in principle, to laugh, then it seems that that person has simply made whatever the work has to offer inaccessible to himself. And if what the work has to offer is inaccessible to that person, he is in no position to judge the work aesthetically, since he has not experienced it fully.[30] It is not as bad as someone who pronounces on the dreadfulness of an artwork without ever having seen it. But it is in that ballpark.

Yet the reluctance that the moderate moralist has in mind is not that the ideally sensitive audience member voluntarily puts on the brakes; rather, it is that he can't depress the accelerator because it is jammed. He tries, but fails. And he fails because there is something wrong with the structure of the artwork. It has not been designed properly on its own terms.

Nor need the work be inaccessible to the ideally sensitive viewer in any way that compromises an aesthetic judgment of the work. The ideally sensitive viewer, or the critic speculating about his reactions, may understand (find accessible) what is intended by the work and go on to note that the work fails to realize its intentions, perhaps due to its moral structure. One does not say of a critic who realizes both how the music is trying to move him and that it fails that what the work is trying to do is inaccessible to him in a way that calls into question his credentials as a critic. Similarly, a moderate moralist with reasonable claims to being sufficiently, but not neurotically, sensitive morally, using himself as a detector, can attribute an aesthetic defect to an artwork on the basis of being discouraged in a fair attempt to enact a prescribed response due to its evil.

Another complaint about moderate moralism is that, though it allows that artworks can be morally defective without being artistically defective, it is nevertheless committed to the view that whenever morality is relevant to aesthetic evaluation, then the relation is such that the pertinent moral defects will only count as artistic defects, and the moral virtues will only count as artistic virtues. That is, moderate moralism, like ethicism, does not allow that a moral defect in an artwork might sometimes contribute to the positive aesthetic value of an artwork.[31]

It is not clear that the moderate moralist has explicitly made such a claim, nor that he is committed to it.[32] But, that notwithstanding, the

30. This seems to be the objection that Jacobson has in mind in (1997), p. 189.

31. This, I take it, is the leading theme in Jacobson's (1997).

32. Speaking as a moderate moralist, I note that I've always used examples of moral defects that are aesthetic defects because my argument has been with the moderate autonomist. The thesis that a work might be aesthetically good because it is morally defective is obviously not an autonomist viewpoint, moderate or otherwise, and so it introduces a new issue that requires moderate moralism to explore heretofore unexamined options. But I'm not convinced that a moderate moralist must be antecedently committed one way or another on this issue on the basis of what the moderate moralist has said so far.

issue of the praiseworthiness of immoral art is sufficiently interesting and important to merit discussion in the closing paragraphs of this review article.[33]

Are there immoral artworks that are aesthetically commendable because of their moral defectiveness? Few, if any, examples come to mind.[34] One that is often discussed is Leni Riefensthal's *Triumph of the Will*. It seems aestheticians need Hitler for an intuition pump as much as ethicists do. Personally, I have always found the proposition that *Triumph of the Will* is an aesthetically good film problematic. Seen in its entirety and not in the edited versions that are usually screened, it is immensely boring, full of tedious Nazi party speeches. But rather than quibble about examples, let us suppose that *Triumph of the Will* is an aesthetically commendable film.

Given this, the moderate moralist can tell a story about why it is aesthetically valuable, if it is. The film has some cinematically stunning scenes. The opening image of Hitler (Hitler's plane) flying through the clouds and then his descent, as if from heaven, is cleverly imagined and edited with flawless grace. And there are other parts of the film that in terms of their camera work and editing are fluid and arresting. The moderate moralist can say that if *Triumph of the Will* is aesthetically good, it is because, on balance, its cinematic virtues vastly outweigh whatever aesthetic costs its moral defectiveness incurs.[35] You could say that, if you thought it was a good film.

But now we will be told that *Triumph of the Will* is not good in spite of its moral defectiveness, but because of it, and moderate moralism cannot account for this. Perhaps. Yet at this point, we have to ask, why one would think so? What's the argument? It seems to be this: we live

33. One issue in contemporary ethical criticism that I have not introduced in this article is the notion that works of fictions are like friends and that our relation to things like novels should be assessed ethically as we assess friendships. This view is advanced by Booth (1988).

34. Jacobson suggests three. The first is a poem by Emily Dickinson of which I think he rightly believes that it only could appear immoral to some, but they would be wrong. Second, he seems to suggest that parts of *Macbeth* might be immoral, possibly because it elicits sympathy for the regicide. But, if this is what he has in mind, I think the case is unconvincing because it is sympathy for a good man gone bad. The play does not prescribe that viewers exculpate Macbeth. Perhaps Aristotle could argue that the tragedy works in accord with his predictions, since *Macbeth* raises the fear in us that ambition could blind us thusly. Jacobson's last example is *Triumph of the Will*, which I will deal with below.

35. Jacobson thinks that stories like this belie an untenably formalist conception of aesthetic value at the heart of moderate moralism. But I don't see why. Regarding things like elegant cutting, admittedly a formal value, does not imply a commitment to the notion that aesthetic value is solely a matter of formal value. Formal value is one aspect of aesthetic or, perhaps better, artistic value, but that is not the only type of artistic value the moderate moralist acknowledges. As we have seen, the moderate moralist thinks that securing uptake on prescribed responses can be aesthetically valuable and even that moral defects in artworks can be aesthetic blemishes.

in a world where there are a plurality of beliefs. Many of these beliefs are in error, including, notably, moral error. Nevertheless, we need to know about these beliefs and why people hold them (Jacobson 1997, pp. 193–94). Thus, we need to have these perspectives presented to us as vividly as possible. *Triumph of the Will* does that. Thus, its energetic portrayal of a morally defective position contributes essentially to its praiseworthiness.

Some artworks may present morally defective perspectives for scrutiny with the intention of informing us in the way sketched in the preceding paragraph. But works like this are generally not morally defective, since the distorted moral viewpoints in question are housed in larger structures that mark them as specimens, like Bigger Thomas's or Mack the Knife's conceptions of life, rather than exemplars. But *Triumph of the Will* is not like that; its portrait of Nazism is that of an advocate. Yet why should its advocacy count as an aesthetic virtue?

Whoever praises *Triumph of the Will* for its artistic value owes us an explanation here. That it can be made to serve educative needs in a pluralistic society does not sound like an artistic value in any traditional sense. It sounds like a strategic value from a certain, perhaps liberal, point of view. If indeed it is an artistic value, more needs to be said to connect it with better-known sources of artistic or aesthetic value.

If *Triumph of the Will* is heuristically valuable, one wants to know why it or Leni Riefensthal deserves praise, either ethical or aesthetic, for a use by us that it was never designed to serve. The virtually Millian heuristic value that has been advanced in its defense perhaps provides a reason that immoral art should not be censored, but not a reason why it should be praised. Of course, I suspect that these remarks will not end the discussion. But maybe they predict the next chapter in the debate about the ethical criticism of art—tbe question of the value, if any, of immoral art.

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