

A production-oriented counterexample to Ethicism

Author

FREDERICK HULBERT

Affiliation

UNIVERSITY OF KENT

Abstract: The extent to which moral judgements are appropriate with respect to creative works has long been the subject of critical debate. More recently, attention has turned to whether or not moral defects found in a given work also count as aesthetic defects. Ethicism claims that moral defects are always aesthetic defects and characteristics that are morally praiseworthy are always aesthetically praiseworthy. I suggest a production-oriented counterexample, which seeks to undermine Ethicism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Broadly speaking, discussions in ethical criticism are concerned with whether or not it is appropriate to incorporate an ethical component into the critical evaluation of creative works. In the contemporary literature a more nuanced debate has arisen, which focuses on whether or not moral defects found in a given work also count as aesthetic defects. The two original positions defended in this debate were radical moralism and radical autonomism. Radical moralism reduces all aesthetic value to moral value in the sense that any immoral content renders the work immoral, while radical autonomism claims that ethical criticism is never appropriate since moral values and aesthetic values belong to non-overlapping magisteria.¹

II. THE RADICAL POSITIONS

Radical moralism holds that the aesthetic value of an artwork is determined by its moral value to the extent that it claims aesthetic value is irrelevant once there is something morally amiss. Proponents such as Tolstoy argue that art is purposive and one of our primary cognitive goals is to establish the purpose it serves in our lives.² Therefore, he believes that the moral value of a given work is crucial to understanding its aesthetic value. The social reductionism of Pierre Bourdieu would be another example of radical moralism, where focusing on the formal features of art are treated as an inappropriate preoccupation of the bourgeois class. Bourdieu suggests that what is needed is a socio-historic reading of aesthetics, which involves a reclamation of true aesthetic values.³ Art here is treated as an extension of life and Bourdieu believes that nothing should interrupt the personal or emotional identification with it. Form becomes subordinated to function, where the function of art is to affirm certain moral principles relevant to our everyday struggles.

The main problem with radical moralism is that it does not give adequate recognition to the importance of certain formal features in creative works. It is at risk of overlooking impressive craftsmanship, use of colour, creative design choices and technical skills, preferring instead to focus on moral or social commentary as a means of explaining artworks. This places too great an emphasis on the relations between the work and the cultural context and so, the formal features of the work become an arbitrary and interchangeable component in the evaluative process. Where autonomism treats the formal content of the work as part of its artistic merit, the radical moralist chooses to consider the moral content of the work the top priority.

In contrast, radical autonomism is motivated by the view that art is distinct from other forms of social enterprise which are themselves concerned with “cognitive, political or moral value”.⁴ Clive Bell is perhaps the best-known radical autonomist, who saw it as wholly inappropriate to equate intellectual acuity with aesthetic appreciation.⁵ Instead, he preferred to say that the value in art is derived solely from its significant form and visual properties. Radical autonomism has an intuitive appeal to those who do not feel that art should be constrained or guided by extraneous motives such as “promoting a moral education”.⁶ These extraneous considerations could be considered a form of “interested attention” with respect to the evaluation of creative works, where the interest stems from a desire to perceive works of art with an ulterior purpose.⁷ However, autonomism would prefer to say that the sole task of the critic is to be the analysis and evaluation of the object they perceive. The radical autonomist is fixed in the view that artworks have an intrinsic value which is linked more closely to the appreciation of design features and how these formal features engage us emotionally as an audience, than it is to the content or meaning behind the work. It is therefore never appropriate to invoke moral discussions or evaluations with respect to creative works.

Noel Carroll further explores the appeal of radical autonomism with a sym-

pathetic reading of the “common denominator argument”.⁸ This argument suggests that a consistent metric for evaluation should apply to all artworks, even if the actual fine details of that metric remain largely hypothetical or unestablished. The advantage here is that the radical autonomist already has a strict definition of art, which allows them to clearly establish its unique features and, by extension, the objective grounds for aesthetic value. It is difficult to see that moral considerations could be available across all mediums such as music, pottery or certain contemporary visual art forms, and so it would seem that moral considerations are not a common denominator to all artistic works.⁹ The challenge for radical autonomism is to justify such a limited construal of aesthetic value, such that it totally precludes these moral considerations. On a purely superficial basis, it seems intuitive to say that the moral aspects of a particular work of art play a role in determining whether or not we deem it to be good art.

Neither of these radical positions yielded promising solutions to the questions surrounding ethical criticism, and so three more moderate positions emerged in the contemporary literature: Moderate Moralism, Moderate Autonomism and Ethicism.

III. THE MODERATE POSITIONS

Moderate Autonomism (MA) acknowledges the presence of moral features in works of art and even admits that sometimes moral judgements are appropriate, however, MA still treats moral value and aesthetic value as autonomous and fundamentally separate. According to MA a moral defect will not detract aesthetically from a work, nor will an aspect of ethical merit ever enhance the aesthetic value of a work. In the contemporary literature this theory is most associated with the writing of Anderson and Dean (1998) who argue that whilst “both sorts of criticism are appropriate to works of art [they] remain conceptually distinct”.¹⁰

James Harold has put forward a more sophisticated defence of MA, arguing that moral and aesthetic evaluation are independent and do not require adjustment in light of each other.¹¹ He presents a formulation of autonomism centred around the valuer’s perspective, discusses its practical implications, and introduces an argument in favour of autonomism.

Moderate Moralism (MM) claims that in some cases moral defects can count as aesthetic defects and equally, in some cases a moral virtue can enhance works aesthetically. If a piece of art has a narrative element, then it is designed to elicit certain responses from the audience. Should it fail to elicit the desired response, then it has in some sense failed aesthetically on its own terms.¹²

Both MA and MM agree that ethical evaluations can be formed with respect to creative works, the key point of departure is that MM holds that sometimes these ethical evaluations can also be aesthetic evaluations, while MA claims that ethical evaluations always fall outside the purview of aesthetic considerations. Therefore, the debate between the two is really about where to draw the boundary lines around the domain of aesthetic consideration.

In contrast, Ethicism states that ‘the ethical assessment of attitudes manifested by works of art is a legitimate aspect of the aesthetic evaluation of those works, such that, if a work manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically defective, and if a work manifest ethically commendable attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically meritorious’.¹³ In other words, wherever a creative work displays a moral defect this always amounts to an aesthetic defect and whenever a creative work displays a characteristic that is morally praiseworthy, it will always be aesthetically praiseworthy. Anderson and Dean claim that these positions are essentially synonymous, but there are in fact important differences.

The position Carroll defends is a far weaker position than that of Gaut, in the sense that it makes less significant claims. Carroll claims that only in some cases will a moral defect count as an aesthetic defect, which is far narrower in terms of scope than Gaut who claims that all moral defects are aesthetic defects. A closer inspection of Gaut’s ethicism will clearly show how Ethicism differs from MM. First, Gaut is committed to the claim that whenever a creative work exhibits a moral defect this will have to count as an aesthetic defect. For Gaut the moral defect is focused on whether or not a work invites an immoral response and that response is integral to its appreciation – if it is, then Gaut argues that this moral defect is also an aesthetic one. The ethicist does not argue that promoting morally praiseworthy attitudes is a necessary condition for good art and Ethicism does not say that all creative works do contain moral features. What it says is that where moral features are present these features always have an impact on the aesthetic value of the work.

Not only do these two positions differ in scope but they differ in detail as well. For instance, MM is reliant on the dubious concept of an ideal morally sensitive audience. In order to claim that MM is true, Carroll must have a rough basis for claiming that a work exhibits morally defective or praiseworthy qualities and his basis for this claim is that an ideal morally sensitive audience will always react positively to moral virtue and negatively to morally defective works.

Carroll is postulating morally sensitive audiences as the only ones whose responses should be taken into account, he seems to be introducing a strong normative element into his argument. If only ideally moral audiences count, then even if we accept the idea of the instrumentality of the value of morality in art, it follows that all moral virtues/defects are also aesthetic virtues/defects. This is because ‘morally sensitive audiences’ will always react favourably to moral virtue and unfavourably to moral vice.¹⁴

There is a considerable challenge posed by the concept of an ideal morally sensitive audience, not least that it presupposes we can know exactly what it means to be appropriately morally sensitive to a moral defect. However, it is not in the scope of this paper to investigate this particular problem in greater detail – such a problem requires an entire paper of its own. Instead, I want to suggest that there is a much greater and much more pertinent threat to Ethicism, namely those

counterexamples which demonstrate that in some cases moral defects can actually contribute to enhancing aesthetic value. Philosophers who believe such counterexamples exist belong to a school known as immoralism. Immoralism states that “some artworks are better aesthetically in virtue of their immorality”.¹⁵ In the next section, I will offer the work of Banksy as one possible counterexample.

IV. ETHICISM AND GRAFFITI

Banksy is the alias of a British-based street artist, political activist and film director, whose true identity remains the subject of debate. He is famous for producing amusing and controversial graffiti art often combined with subversive commentary, designed to make a political statement. These works can be found on buildings, walls, bridges and pavements across the world and the phenomenology of their placement is an important part of their success and intrigue. Banksy regularly uses controversial images of policemen in his work to help convey his anarchistic, antiauthoritarian message and his works are often deployed in areas where injustice is prevalent.

One of Banksy’s earliest pieces of work is known as *The Mild Mild West* and still sits on the side of a building in Stokes Croft, Bristol. The work depicts a giant teddy about to throw a Molotov cocktail at a small group of riot police hiding behind shields. It was painted over a three-day period in 1998 and was meant to be a response to the closing down of raves in the Bristol area by police around this time. It was felt by many who attended these raves that police were using unnecessary force to break up the parties and so Banksy’s work is a protest piece that aims to show the partygoers as teddies who do not pose a serious threat.¹⁶ The artwork is now very popular among local Bristolians but this was not always the case. Soon after its inception it was defaced by an anti-graffiti organisation called *Appropriate Media* and the police naturally took it as an affront.

Graffiti such as this poses a problem for Ethicism because one could argue that the aspect of graffiti that renders it morally defective is simultaneously the aspect that makes it aesthetically praiseworthy. Graffiti is criminal damage and an offence for which prosecution can be brought. Whilst illegality is not always the soundest gauge for moral standards, it seems intuitive to say that even an ideal morally sensitive audience – whatever that may be – would consider a criminal offence of this sort a moral defect in an artwork. *Appropriate Media* objects to graffiti because they view it as a form of vandalism that damages property and promotes disorder in public spaces. These are all objections to graffiti on moral grounds. However, the unauthorised marking of public space using words or images is also often used to make a political or artistic statement, as is the case with Banksy. In the case of *The Mild Mild West* both the content and the location seem to suffer from moral defects and yet both seem to be integral to the overall aesthetic value of the work. The location and the general objections to graffiti are one aspect of this discussion, but another inescapable aspect is the content. Graffiti often contains offensive language, gang symbols and references

to various anti-establishment rhetoric. There are always those in a morally sensitive audience that would find these aspects of graffiti morally objectionable, yet the fact that they are displayed in public spaces is integral to their impact and significance. In Banksy's case, this particular work contains images of Molotov cocktails being thrown at law enforcement officers, in an attempt to trivialise or legitimise violence against the police.

Were it not for the illicit nature of the act and the public locations chosen for effect, Banksy's artwork would almost certainly not have the same significance. For instance, Banksy's art would not have garnered the attention and aesthetic value it has had if it been produced on inoffensive canvases or pieces of paper. In other words, what makes the work morally defective is also what makes the work significant, interesting and powerful – all features which trespass overtly on the domain of aesthetic value. Therefore, it would not seem to be the case that all moral defects detract from works and all moral attributes enhance the aesthetic value of works.

The Ethicist could respond that this is not a counterexample since they are interested in the moral contents of artworks and the perspectives that they invoke, not the act of producing artworks. My counterexample seems to focus on the moral status of graffiti, where the means of creating the artwork are the subject of moral evaluation rather than the actual content. This response appears powerful but actually struggles under scrutiny.

This objection presupposes a sharp metaphysical distinction between work-meaning WM1 and the meaning behind the actions that lead to the creation of said work AM2, when there is little reason to suppose that such a distinction matters. In the case of graffiti, we see that the WM1 is in some sense wrapped up in the contextual nature of graffiti itself and its production. Graffiti makes a political statement as an act of protest and graffiti artists such as Banksy understand the historical significance of their actions, therefore we can appreciate that the creation of the art and the meanings that we read into these creative processes in the form of AM2 and its meaning in WM1 are logically tied together.¹⁷ Furthermore, in his recent work Ted Nannicelli has argued that we should take a production-oriented approach to ethical criticism.¹⁸ The main arguments he makes are (1) that ethical judgements of artworks often revolve around their creative process, particularly in art forms that lend themselves well to this type of evaluation. (2) This production-oriented approach tends to have more practical consequences in terms of censure, dismissal, legal actions, policy changes as its claim to objectivity is less disputed than other forms of ethical criticism. And (3) taken together, (1) and (2) form a rational and justifiable approach to ethical criticism of art that aligns with common art appreciation practices. In essence, there could be cases where it is appropriate to ethically evaluate artworks based on their creation process, as this approach covers situations that other approaches cannot, yielding plausible assessments of the works' ethical merits and flaws.

Another way to overcome this objection is to reiterate that narrative works of art are incomplete structures, where the informed and morally sensitive audience

has to engage with them in order to fill in the blanks:

[I]t is vastly improbable that there could be any substantial narrative of human affairs, especially a narrative artwork, that did not rely upon activating the moral powers of readers, viewers and listeners. Even modernist novels that appear to eschew ‘morality’ typically do so in order to challenge bourgeois morality and to enlist the reader in sharing their ethical disdain for it.¹⁹

Devices such as metaphor and irony operate on the basis that an audience needs to use their powers of reason to deduce certain messages from the work, which have additionally illocutionary force. Part of this process for the audience is to appropriately understand context and convention in order to appreciate whether or not a work is breaking with social norms or abiding by common practice with respect to certain socio-cultural standards and shared practice. Completing the work of Banksy, as a member of the audience, means attending to AM2 in order to properly understand the significance of WM1. The audience must understand why graffiti is an act of protest and how this medium is therefore intertwined with the subject matter and the content. This does not just hold true for protest acts like graffiti, but any intentional action from which we derive meaning. Just as the meaning of an action is understood by identifying the description of what a person is trying to achieve, the meaning of an artwork is established by identifying the description of what the artist was trying to achieve through making it.²⁰ On that basis, the sharp metaphysical distinction between AM2 and WM1 collapses.

V. CONCLUSION

Ethicism claims that wherever a creative work displays or endorses a moral defect this always amounts to an aesthetic defect and whenever a creative work displays a characteristic that is morally praiseworthy, it will always be aesthetically praiseworthy. The graffiti of Banksy seems to provide a counterexample from immoralism, since the very attributes that make it morally dubious are those which simultaneously warrant aesthetic praise.

fth5@kent.ac.uk

NOTES

1. This term was originally used by Gould, *Rock of Ages*, to suggest that science and religion represent separate areas of inquiry: fact and value.

2. Tolstoy, *What Is Art?*

3. Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

4. Carroll, ‘Moderate Moralism’, 224.

5. Bell, *Art*.

6. Carroll, ‘Moderate Moralism’, 224.

7. Dickie, ‘The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude’, 62.

8. Carroll, ‘Moderate Moralism’, 226.

9. Carroll, ‘Moderate Moralism’, 226.

10. Anderson and Dean, 'Moderate Autonomism', 152.
11. Harold, 'Autonomism Reconsidered'.
12. Kieran, 'In Defence of Ethical Evaluation'.
13. Gaut, 'The Ethical Criticism of Art', 182.
14. Connolly, 'Ethicism and Moderate Moralism', 306.
15. Paris, 'The 'Moralism' in Immoralism', 13; For defenders of immoralism see Jacobson, 'In Praise of Immoral Art'; Kieran, 'Forbidden Knowledge'; Kieran, 'Emotions, Art, and Immorality'; Eaton, 'Robust Immoralism'; Stear, 'Immoralism is Obviously True'.
16. Banksy, *Banksy: Wall and Piece*.
17. As a Gricean intentionalist, I would go further and argue that the meaning of the artwork is given by identifying the description of what the artist was doing in making it. See Anscombe, *Intention*; Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*.
18. Nannicelli, *Artistic Creation and Ethical Criticism*.
19. Carroll, 'Moderate Moralism', 228.
20. Anscombe, *Intention*.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, J. C. and J. T. Dean. 'Moderate Autonomism'. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38, no. 2 (1998).
- Anscombe, G. E. M. *Intention*. 2nd edition. 1967. Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Banksy. *Banksy: Wall and Piece*. Century, 2009.
- Bell, Clive. *Art*. 1913. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Later edition 2010. 1979.
- Carroll, Noel. 'Moderate Moralism'. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36, no. 3 (1996): 223–238.
- Connolly, O. 'Ethicism and Moderate Moralism'. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 40, no. 3 (2000): 302–316.
- Dickie, G. 'The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude'. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1964): 56–65.
- Eaton, A. W. 'Robust Immoralism'. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70 (2012): 281–292.
- Gaut, Berys. 'The Ethical Criticism of Art'. In *Aesthetics and Ethics*, edited by J. Levinson. Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Gould, Stephen Jay. *Rock of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*. Ballantine Books, 2002.
- Harold, James. 'Autonomism Reconsidered'. *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 51, no. 2 (2011): 137–147.

- Jacobson, Daniel. 'In Praise of Immoral Art'. *Philosophical Topics* 25 (1997): 155–199.
- Kieran, Matthew. 'Emotions, Art, and Immorality'. In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion*, edited by Peter Goldie, 681–703. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- . 'Forbidden Knowledge: The Challenge of Immoralism'. In *Art and Morality*, edited by José Luis Bermudez and Sebastian Gardner, 56–73. Routledge, 2003.
- . 'In Defence of the Ethical Evaluation of Narrative Art'. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 41, no. 1 (2001): 26–38.
- Nannicelli, Ted. *Artistic Creation and Ethical Criticism*. Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Paris, Panos. 'The 'Moralism' in Immoralism: A Critique of Immoralism in Aesthetics'. *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 59, no. 1 (2018): 13–33.
- Stear, Nils-Hennes. 'Immoralism is Obviously True: Towards Progress on the Ethical Question'. *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 62, no. 4 (2023): 615–632.
- Tolstoy, Leo. *What Is Art?* Bristol, England: Bristol Classical Press, 1897.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Revised 4th edition. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, 2009. Wiley-Blackwell, 1953.

COPYRIGHT:

© 2026 Frederick Hulbert

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Aesthetic Investigations is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Dutch Association of Aesthetics.