

Ethical Criticism: Standing for Ethical Arts

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: January 13, 2019
Accepted: February 16, 2020
Published: February 28, 2020
Volume: 3
Issue: 2
DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2020.3.2.8

KEYWORDS

Ethical criticism; moralism;
autonomism; art; aesthetics;
morality

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the importance of ethical criticism to a work of art. It focuses on analyzing both schools of ethical criticism which are autonomism and moralism. While autonomists see that art's value relies exclusively on its form, moralists believe that there is more into art than form, for the moral content's importance can affect the aestheticism of a work of art. Narratives, especially, strongly rely on morality in compassing a sustainable aesthetic whole because in many times a moral defect leads to an aesthetic one; if there exists a failure in communicating a sound moral value to the audience, the latter fails to see the art's form, which is its main value. The wrong ethical response devalues the art's aesthetics, which devalues its purpose. Thus, ethical criticism does not deny the formal values of art as much as it advocates morality in case it interferes with art's aestheticism.

Introduction

Ethical criticism refers to the study of a work of art from a moral perspective. It is quite controversial in that some critics of art think of it as unnecessary while others allow it as the only legitimate criticism to art. These two extreme positions are called "radical autonomism" and "radical moralism." Before discussing their more moderate versions, we shall consider first the chronological development that led every party to consider the importance, or rather the necessity, of the inclusion of form and morality in a work of art.

Radical autonomism is the critical position that focuses on discussing the formal and aesthetic properties of artworks and denies any other connection outside this realm. Radical autonomism does not only concentrate on the study of art from one perspective but it thinks of other perspectives, such as the ethical perspectives, as unnecessary or rather inappropriate. Moderate moralist Carroll (2001) defines it as follows:

Radical autonomism is the view that art is a strictly autonomous realm of practice. It is distinct from other social realms that pursue cognitive, political, or moral values. On this account, because art is distinct from other realms of social value, it is inappropriate or even incoherent to assess artworks in terms of their consequences for cognition, morality, and politics (p. 295).

This position can be traced back to Kant. Kant develops a theory of disinterestedness, although his theory is not radical in the above sense, arguing that art should be judged purely in aesthetic terms. Kant believes that the pleasure taken in the beautiful is nothing like the one taken with respect to the good. Guyer (2011) in "Is Ethical criticism a Problem? A Historical Perspective" sums up Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment as one that sees "our pleasure in a beautiful object is caused by a free yet harmonious play of the imagination that is not determined by any concept, and therefore not by any concept of the practical use or moral value of an object" (p. 17). Nevertheless, Kant is not a radical autonomist since his theory, as Guyer puts it, does not consider "what are for

Kant paradigmatic cases of fine art, such as works of literature or representational painting. For Kant, our response to fine art as such is much more complicated which he begins for expository purposes, and centrally involve a moral aspect” (p. 18). Guyer in his essay also refers to one of the first autonomists, the German author and essayist Karl Philipp Moritz (1756-1793). Moritz believes in the completeness of art in itself without any external proportional impacts. He insists that the pleasure taken in the contemplation of art is due to its autonomy from other moral aspects. He implies, as Guyer puts it, “that our pleasure in the beauty of a work of art arises precisely from the fact that it does not engage any of our other interests, moral interests included, thereby producing a state of blissful detachment from our usual preoccupation” (p. 26). Accordingly, art is valuable and appreciated because it is independent; it is not a tool to bring its audience to reality. However, it is not the audience alone that is connected to art. The artist is after all the first active member; can all artists exclude themselves from their creations? This question has been answered in many ways in literary criticism which asserts the impossibility of the total exclusivity and independence of a work of art. Maybe Moritz here is exclusively referring to the audience, even if it is not precise.

One of the prominent, radical autonomists is the formalist and a member of the Bloomsbury group Clive Bell (1881-1964). According to Bell, who rather focuses on the audience, art should, or rather must, be judged only in terms of aesthetic and formalistic values that cannot exceed the work of art in itself. In addition to his insistence upon the art’s autonomy, Bell believes that any other concerns, including the moral, are unintelligible; he implies that art, instead of being morally construed by readers, is aesthetically and subjectively construed by different readers with different moral backgrounds who suppose to respond emotionally to the particular formal properties it carries. Bell conceptualizes this emotion as the “aesthetic emotion.” He further clarifies this concept in the following passage from *Art*:

The starting-point for all systems of aesthetics must be the personal experience of a particular emotion. The objects that provoke this emotion we call works of art [...]. I do not mean, of course, that all works provoke the same emotion. On the contrary, every work produces a different emotion. But all these emotions are recognizably the same in kind [...]. This emotion is called the aesthetic emotion. (1914, p. 6-7)

The next question Bell asks is the common quality in all artworks that stirs such emotion for “when we speak of ‘works of art’”, Bell explains, “we gibber” (p. 7). Bell observes that this quality shared by all artworks from Mexican sculpture to the masterpieces of Cézanne is “significant form,” for he concludes that “in each, lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. These relations and combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, I call ‘significant form’; and ‘significant form’ is the one quality common to all works of visual art” (p. 8). There is an evident exclusion of other works of art that are not visual in this category of criticism. Literature is one of the most important fields of art, if not the most important since it is reachable to a bigger audience. It relies on characters, narratives, and plots that cannot be separate from any human’s moral life.

Critic Carroll argues that the autonomist relies on our intuition in evaluating art. The audience is always attracted to the design rather than the content of artworks. The advantage Carroll sees in radical autonomism, although he is not a defender of the approach, is the ability to define the nature of art “with essentialist biases” (p. 277). This nature, as seen by Bell, is common to all artworks, and, as Carroll puts it, “by declaring art to be utterly separate from every other realm of human practice, the autonomist secures the quest for essentialism at a single stroke” (p. 277). This argument is called by Carroll the “common dominator argument.” Autonomists believe that, following this argument, the only evaluative measure to any kind of art should be common to all artworks. Thus, morality and any exterior evaluation to art which is not universally applicable are inappropriate; moral evaluation

does not decide upon the value of art because a good art has, first, an aesthetic property inherent in its form. All works of art have this common value that separates them from other practices and so morality is irrelevant.

Carroll sees that one of the limitations of radical autonomism is the claim that art aims at being aesthetically absorbing. Art, according to Carroll, has many aims apart from this property. Carroll believes that there are other ways for art to be absorbing; for instance, it “may be absorbing exactly because of the way in which it engages, among other things, the moral life of its audiences” (p. 278). Another point Carroll makes is that moral considerations might be remote to achieve from some artworks, but it can be applied to specific artworks. One cannot judge abstract paintings morally, but there are other artworks, especially narratives, that can be evaluated morally. Narrative artworks, according to Carroll, “are designed to awaken, to stir up, and to engage our moral powers of recognition and judgment” (p. 282). Realistic literature, especially, is essentially a microcosmic portrayal of society and its morals. Its aim is to engage, and even change, the reader to the moral being that he should be. However, I disagree with Carroll here in excluding visual artworks, for even visual artworks can serve an aim or an idea that provokes a certain morality. Cartoonists in USA, before the independence of African Americans and other minor categories of immigrants, were free to draw figures of huge lips and noses (referring to Africans and Jews) in a comical way that aims at defining certain beauty standards and excluding others. Their work ceased to be called a “good” work of art since it has some prejudices. If any work of art is to be judged only by its “significant form” only, then feminist and postcolonial criticisms are unnecessary, which is unsound.

Carroll, however, validly admits that radical autonomism is a valuable position against radical moralism which believes that artworks must be evaluated only in terms of moral values. This extreme version of moralism is held by Plato and Tolstoy. Radical moralism tends to reducing the aesthetic value of art into, as described by not only autonomists but also moderate moralists, a political one.

The more plausible form of autonomism is moderate autonomism. Moderate autonomists believe in the moral evaluation of some artworks especially narrative artworks, but they also believe that evaluating an artwork morally is separate from evaluating it aesthetically. This position states that moral evaluation of art is possible but it does not affect the aesthetic value of art. Carroll clarifies their claim as follows:

A given artwork may legitimately traffic in aesthetic, moral, cognitive, and political value. But these various levels are independent or autonomous. An artwork may be aesthetically valuable and morally defective, or vice versa. But these different levels of value do not mix, so to speak. An aesthetically defective artwork is not bad because it is morally defective and that provides a large part of the story about why a work can be aesthetically valuable, but evil. (p. 301)

This position neglects the importance of morality and its effect on the aesthetic value of art (which, in addition to my personal example of cartoonists, will be proved after discussing moderate moralism). Moderate moralism, which is the best alternative position according to Carroll, is the claim that moral evaluations are not only legitimate to some artworks but sometimes those evaluations are not outside the realm of the aesthetic. In many times, according to moderate moralists, the reason an artwork is aesthetically defective is, often, because of its moral incoherence. This approach, Carroll explains, “contends that some works of art may be evaluated morally [...] and that sometimes the moral defects and/or merits of a work may figure in the aesthetic evaluation of the work. It does not contend that artworks should always be evaluated morally, nor that every moral defect or merit in an artwork should figure in its aesthetic evaluation” (p. 306).

Moderate moralism came as a reaction to moderate autonomism since it does not prove such a relation. Carroll argues that moderate Autonomism is altogether false. He gives an example of the moral role of tragedy and agrees with Aristotle by stating that “for tragedy to take hold,” for instance, “the major character must be of a certain moral sort, if we are to pity him. He cannot be evil, because then we will regard his destruction as well

deserved" (p. 301-2). Sympathizing a tragic figure like Hitler is a moral as well as an aesthetic flaw. A famous example is Mary Devereaux's analysis of the movie *Triumph of the Will*. This movie presents Hitler as a tragic character who deserves the pity of the audience. The tragic picture is not thus achieved and this allows the moral defect to turn into an aesthetic one since "it is a failure of tragedy qua tragedy" (p. 302). Carroll explains this specific moral and aesthetic relation in narrative artworks as follows:

Narrative artworks are [...] incomplete structures. Among other things, they must be filled in by the moral responses of readers, viewers, and listeners. Securing the right moral responses of the audience is as much a part of the design of a narrative artwork as structural components like plot complications. Failure to elicit the right moral response, then, is a failure in the design of the work, and, therefore, is an aesthetic failure. (p. 302)

Accordingly, a failure at maintaining a certain ethical response of the audience is a failure in the aesthetics of art. Another less emphasized point in ethical criticism defended by American philosopher Martha Nussbaum is moral education. Nussbaum argues that some narrative artworks provide a useful practice to moral philosophy. The critic Geoffrey Galt Harpham (2001) thinks that Nussbaum's contribution is "not only concerned with the subject of ethics, but actually performs an ethical function" (p. 379) that may affect the audience. Nussbaum's thesis is about the power of morally good literature upon improving the attitudes of the audience. She argues that some narratives, like Henry James and Charles Dickens' realist novels, play an important role in moral education. She criticizes Richard A. Posner's, a prominent radical autonomist, thesis which does not only deny the role of moral education but also believes that the works that provide such a role are not artistic. Posner (2005) argues in his essay "against ethical criticism" that:

At the core of the aesthetic tradition, which I shall be defending in this essay particularly against its opponents in the "law of literature" movement, are three theses. First, immersion in literature does not make us better citizens or better people. One might be able to pick out some works of literature that would have such an effect because of the information they convey or the emotional state they induce, but they would constitute a skewed sample of literary works. Second, we should not be put off by morally offensive views encountered in literature [...] the proper criteria for evaluating literature are aesthetic rather than ethical. Third, authors' moral qualities or opinions should not affect our valuations of their work. (p. 64)

Posner sees that any moral consideration to evaluating an artwork is an offence against the aesthetic value of that art since it is irrelevant. His opinion is similar to that of Clive Bell and Oscar Wilde and the best answer against his these is that of Carroll, yet Nussbaum argues for a different approach. She accuses Posner's repulsive attitude towards ethical criticism as an anti-egalitarian political position (Tanner, 2005, p. 120). She promotes Henry James's philosophy of the importance of the moral responsibility of both the artist and the reader. Nussbaum believes that literature has many purposes among them formalistic criticism and moral education. Her claim, she insists, is not applicable to all artworks; her main interest are works that might have ethical significance like works of fiction, and this ethical significance is one property of that art among other properties. In her discussion of those selected works, she tries to analyze the developing role of imagination in promoting compassion in an audience towards its already established ethical knowledge. Nussbaum argues that we may have an ethical knowledge, but literature plays the role, when the reader is attentive, that engages the reader to such knowledge. She compares the process of reading to that of a child who benefits from a story telling that teaches him about the moral life.

Just like children, shaping their unsettled moral values by stories that convey such an ideology, attentive readers also benefit from reading novels with well-established moral ideologies. Realist novels of Dickens and James' play

the same role in engaging the reader into the inner depths of the story. An attentive reader to Dickens and James, Nussbaum argues, cannot ignore the ethical question of “how should we live?” Engaging to narrative artworks allows the reader to understand abstract ethical terms such as “virtue” which has to do with promoting “eudaimonia.” The attentive reader can add to his ethical knowledge a practical and concrete definition to such terms. It is this particular point which Nussbaum thinks of as making literature beneficial to moral philosophy. However, Nussbaum forgets that morality is in itself subjective and there are no common universal moral laws that everyone can abide by. Even if every artist is to provide a certain morality, that morality might differ from that of the reader, yet it is not always an offensive one. What is good and what evil (right/wrong) is not universal. It differs from one culture to another, and within the same culture we find people holding different moralities. Subjectivity is a human property, as discovered by many scientists and philosophers that revolutionized the modern world. A work of art can be judged from a moral perspective if that includes violating a moral law that is rather universal and risks affecting the aesthetic value of art, as Carroll argues.

Art is not necessarily didactic in the sense that it should teach the audience something about how they should live; moral philosophy has that aim. Art’s main aim is aesthetic, yet that aestheticism should not stir emotions of disgust in an audience because of its disregard for its morality, however subjective it is. It should neither recognize nor ignore the moral life of its audience. Ethical criticism, in addition to admitting the importance of the aesthetic value of literature, also recommends its moral one for the only reason that this latter value can affect an aesthetic one.

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