

An autonomist view on the ethical criticism of architecture

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Abstract

It is a fact that there is ethical criticism about art. Art critics, the general public and even artists point out moral flaws in artworks while evaluating them. Philosophers, however, have maintained a hot debate on the meaning of such criticism. This debate can be understood as a disagreement about the kind of relation between the artistic value of artworks and their alleged moral value. While some claim that moral value can contribute to artistic value (moralism), others claim that there cannot be such a contribution (autonomism). Since at least some works of architecture are artworks, that debate also concerns architecture. A moderate moralist view claims that *some* works of architecture have moral flaws/merits that bear on their artistic evaluation. In an apparently promising version, the contention is that some moral flaws/merits are aesthetically relevant. In this paper I argue against such contention and defend an autonomist view. Following some taxonomy remarks I distinguish the views in the debate and present two points in favour of autonomism: its simplicity and not having the burden of proof. Then I discuss Carroll's merited response argument for moralism and I argue that in its best interpretation either it begs the question against autonomism or it is compatible with it. I conclude with some possible objections that may help further investigations on the subject.

Keywords

Architecture; autonomism; ethical criticism of art; philosophy of art; moralism

1. Ethical criticism of art and its philosophical debate*

Ethical criticism of art is the practice of ethical evaluation of artworks. These are often considered good/bad or better/worse in virtue of some moral properties. For example, a story where the hero is a wicked person is considered to be ethically flawed, but the one where the evil character is punished is ethically approved. This kind of judgements is widespread and assumed to be artistically relevant. And they are not specific to art critics since the general public and even artists engage in ethical criticism. And even though, like Carroll said, there has been, throughout the twentieth century, “a gap between theory and practice with respect to the ethical criticism of the arts”,¹ it is now safe to say that philosophers are trying to bridge this gap. Still, they disagree about how this should be done. This disagreement, then, gives rise to the debate on whether and how ethical criticism is relevant to artistic evaluation.

I take the philosophical debate on ethical criticism to be essentially about answering the question *can moral value contribute to the artistic value of artworks?* In a similar way, Gaut shapes the debate around the question “are the ethical flaws (or merits) of works of art also aesthetic flaws (or merits) in them?”² Although values and properties are two different things, I will ignore this difference here for it is commonly assumed in the debate that artworks may have moral properties and that these determine a corresponding value. The issue is rather if moral properties or, as in the question above, moral value, also help to determine artistic value. This is why I will freely move from talk about properties to talk about values and vice versa. However, since, in this context, scepticism about values is not even a view to take into account, I believe that Gaut’s question depicts the problem in a restrictive way. If some ethical property is identical to, or part of, some aesthetic property, then surely moral value can contribute to artistic value. But this contribution might occur even if there is no identity nor mereological relation between the properties. Unless there is some additional argument that precludes such contribution, I believe it is better to pursue the more general question.

2. Taxonomy remarks

There are two main answers to the question above: (1) moral value can

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1. Carroll 2000, 350.

2. Gaut 2013, 394.

contribute to artistic value – Moralism; (2) moral value cannot contribute to artistic value – Autonomism. These two views are usually divided into more specific theses, each one having a radical and a moderate version.³ Radical moralism states that moral flaws in artworks always count as aesthetic defects in them, while the moderate version only makes the particular claim that moral flaws in artworks sometimes count as aesthetic defects in them. On the other hand, radical autonomism says that it is nonsense to ask if moral value can contribute to the artistic value of artworks, just like it is nonsense to ask e.g. what is the square root of a building. It is a category mistake. The point of radical autonomism is that moral value and aesthetic value are so independent of each other that thinking about their interaction is meaningless. As for moderate autonomism, despite accepting the meaningfulness of the question, it insists that the two values are independent.

A first taxonomy remark is that there are good reasons to deny that radical autonomism is a relevant view to this debate. Firstly, such a view does not seem to have any supporters. As Giovannelli points out, the foremost figures of autonomism do not fit under Carroll's 'radical' tag.⁴ Following Giovannelli, another, more significant reason to set Carroll's radical autonomism aside is that it provides no answer to the question that frames the debate.⁵ Claiming that the question is nonsense is not really an answer to it. To be sure, even granting that such claim represents a legitimate logical view, it is not one on a par with all the others that agree with the meaningfulness of the question. And the interesting, lively debate is about these last views' different answers to a sound question, not about the soundness of the question itself.

A second remark is that I part ways with Giovannelli regarding his characterization of autonomism. Even though he dismisses Carroll's radical autonomism, he preserves the 'radical' predicate to describe the view that I simply call 'autonomism', that is, the view that accepts (2) above. As a consequence, we disagree about the characterization of moderate moralism as a view "allowing for the ethical status of artworks to bear, on occasion, on their artistic value, but claiming that it always does so in an unsystematic way."⁶ Under the approach I am favouring, this would be a moralist view since it accepts the answer (1). Giovannelli, in contrast, takes it as an autonomist view because he believes that the relevant property to

3. I am following Carroll's 2000 characterization of the views.

4. See Giovannelli 2007, 118-119.

5. Giovannelli presents his taxonomy under three principles and Carroll's radical autonomism does not satisfy the principle of ethical amenability. This principle says that we ought to look at theories that "at least agree on the fact that art can be subject to ethical evaluation" (Giovannelli 2007, 118).

6. Giovannelli 2007, 122.

distinguish between the basic views is not the acceptance of (1) or (2) but whether there is or not a systematic contribution of moral value to the artistic value. Instead, I believe that differences in such systematicity only allow for distinctions between moralist views. Otherwise we would be using the terms ‘radical’ and ‘moderate’ with different meanings in relation to autonomism and moralism.⁷

The last taxonomy remark is about immoralism, which is the view that positive moral value contributes negatively to the artistic value and that negative moral value contributes positively to the artistic value. Giovannelli dismisses a radical version of immoralism and says that a moderate version is “germane to this discussion”.⁸ However, in my view radical immoralism is not irrelevant to this debate. It may be a very unappealing view to defend but, contrarily to Carroll’s radical moralism, it provides an answer of the sort that is relevant to this debate.

So, to summarize, if we are trying to answer if moral value can contribute to the artistic value of artworks, then there are two basic views, moralism and autonomism, which offer a positive and a negative answer, respectively. Moreover, moralism can be divided into two more specific views, according to the quantity or the generality of the relation between the moral and artistic values: the radical view claims that the relation holds for all kinds of artworks while the moderate claims that the relation only holds for some kinds of artworks. In more detail, moralist views can also be distinguished by the quality of the relation between the two values: it can be symmetric, where moral merits and moral defects correspond, respectively, to artistic merits and defects; it can be inverse, where moral merits and moral defects correspond, respectively, to artistic defects and merits; and it can be contextual, where the context will determine whether moral merits and moral defects will count positively or negatively to artistic value, which means, using the taxonomy just given, that the relation between both values is not always symmetric or inverse.⁹

7. Regarding moralism the terms distinguish the generality of the relation (systematic, in this case) between both values, being radical when it concerns all types of artworks and moderate when it concerns only some. On the other hand, in the case of autonomism, ‘radical’ and ‘moderate’ are not used to distinguish generality since radical autonomism accepts no contribution of moral value to the artistic value, be it systematic or not.

8. Giovannelli 2007, 122.

9. See Gaut 2013, 397, where he considers immoralism and contextualism as the same view. In the light of the remarks above these are two different views, although they are both forms of moralism. See also Baumberger 2015, to whom I owe the “symmetric” and “inverse” jargon. I should also mention that I do not claim that this taxonomy is original. Most of it was already present in the literature and these remarks are a mere rearranging of the relevant views according to the central question from section 1.

3. Ethical criticism in architecture

Turning our attention to architecture, I believe that the great majority of works are buildings with little or nothing to do with art. Most of them are homes and workplaces. Some of us are fortunate enough to live or work in good buildings, that is, buildings capable of providing shelter and comfort beyond the level of basic needs. Also, I think that the really lucky ones inhabit artworks or have their daily occupations inside them. Fortune aside, the point is that even though not every work of architecture is an artwork, some of them are. Now it is certain that trying to offer a detailed explanation for this will necessarily involve a conception of art. And it is well known that the debate about what is art stands on its own and is much more demanding than the ethical criticism debate. Still, it seems rather uncontroversial that, say, Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum or Gaudí's Casa Batlló are artworks. This, then, is enough to extend the debate between moralism and autonomism to architecture.

According to Baumberger we can morally evaluate works of architecture in two ways: i) through a work's causal impact on well-being and environment during planning, construction and use; ii) and through its symbolic meaning or endorsement of moral attitudes.¹⁰ It is obvious that, e.g., a house can cause quite an impact, and not just on the lives of those who inhabit it. All those involved in its construction are also affected. The architect, for example, may be happier with a few more digits in his bank account or maybe with another entry in his portfolio. And if we suppose that health and safety rules were broken, some of the workers would be better off if they had declined that particular job. Furthermore, if the materials used are harsh to the environment, then future generations will be affected as well. Accounting these and other less obvious causal impacts of architecture will, one assumes, lead to the conclusion that morality is really important when it comes to the evaluation of architecture. And, in a broad sense, it is. Architecture involves actions and these are morally relevant (or some at least are). Nonetheless, the debate about ethical criticism is concerned with artistic value and there is no such thing in architecture in general. What this means is that by looking at the causal impact of architecture we are taking it as an action in general and not specifically as art. Consequently, we need to focus on the moral assessment of architecture *qua* art. This is why I will ignore the causal impact of a work as a way in which we can morally evaluate works of architecture and instead I will concentrate on the work's symbolic meaning.¹¹

10. See Baumberger 2015, 184-185. In my point i) I am merging Baumberger's first three ways of morally evaluating works of architecture.

11. With this agrees Gaut: "Ethical flaws should not be understood in terms of the causal powers of works to affect audiences (...) rather, we should understand flaws in terms of the intrinsic

3.1. Two points for autonomism

Before I go on to consider and criticize a well known argument for moralism, I would like to present two points that favour autonomism in this debate. The first one is about the burden of proof and second is about theoretical simplicity. Although important, these points are not in any way decisive and function more as advantages that contribute to an overall comparison between the theories.

Starting with the burden of proof, we can say that moralists accept a restricted autonomist thesis: that in some cases moral value does not bear on artistic value; so, they agree with the autonomist thesis that artistic value can be independent of moral value. Therefore, given that the autonomist view is a generalization of what both parties accept, and also that moralism implies the interaction between the two values, it is moralism that needs substantially different support to it. This, then, is why the burden of proof is on the moralist.

The moralist might reply that the autonomist view also demands additional evidence because it implies the universal claim that denies the interaction between moral value and artistic value. And this is right, but the relevant difference is that moralism, but not autonomism, needs evidence of a kind that goes beyond what is already assumed. That the two values sometimes interact, if it is a fact, it is one over and above what both theories agree. On the other hand, the autonomist can be pictured as saying that what moralists accept in some cases – that the moral and the artistic values do not interact – actually apply to every case. Thus, in this sense, the autonomist thesis requires nothing substantially new to the debate. Its initial plausibility remains until moralists are able to provide convincing evidence for their claim.

The second point that favours autonomism is its relative theoretical simplicity. If I am right about the taxonomy remarks from the last section, then there is only room for one autonomist view while there are many ways of being a moralist. As described above, moralist views differ according to the structure of the relation between the two values. Hence, we have symmetric, inverse and contextual moralisms. Moralist views can also differ about the relative weight given to the two values, that is, about whether moral value always worth more, always worth less or, say, if it depends on the kind of artwork and/or on the moral properties involved. As one may suspect, these issues are tricky to tackle. Additionally, owing to the varieties of moralism, moralists need not only to argue against autonomism, but they also need to argue against competing moralist views.¹² As such,

properties of works.” (Gaut 2013, 395) And one of these properties is the artwork’s symbolic meaning, which may involve moral attitudes.

12. Jacobson 1997, for example, argues against moderate autonomism from a moralist view (immoralism).

having a more demanding conceptual apparatus, all those tricky questions to address and also various opponents to argue against, moralism lacks simplicity when compared to autonomism.

3.2. The merited response argument and replies

I will now discuss Carroll's version of the merited response argument (MRA) for moralism. Here is the argument:

- (1) "Securing audience uptake to the responses a work prescribes is a leading feature of any artwork's agenda (...) [and] failing to secure uptake, then, is an aesthetic defect in an artwork".
 - (2) Some artworks prescribe emotional moral responses.
 - (3) "An artwork may fail to secure the emotional responses it mandates (...) by being immoral."
- ∴ "Sometimes a moral defect in an artwork can be an aesthetic flaw".¹³

The intuitive idea of the MRA is that in some cases moral properties are aesthetically relevant. Consider, for example, *Volkshalle* (the people's hall), a work by the Nazi architect Albert Speer that was part of Hitler's project to rebuild Berlin after the war. For obvious reasons this work was never built. But from its model and concept we can say that this building was conceived to praise the Aryan superiority, represented in the huge, non-human proportions of its dome. These aesthetical features of *Volkshalle*, then, are assumed to be connected with racism, which, in turn, *somehow*, blemishes the appreciation of the work.

Returning to the MRA, I think that the conclusion is somewhat misleading because it omits the connection between morality and aesthetics which figures in premiss (3). This connection is where the aesthetic relevance of moral properties comes from, namely, their effect on audience response. However, the conclusion ignores this and states only that it is possible to have an identity between moral properties and aesthetic properties. Therefore, as presented, the MRA is invalid: one thing is immorality *leading* to an aesthetic flaw (through failure to secure audience uptake); another is immorality *being* an aesthetic flaw.

So, in order to maintain the argument's intuitive idea in a valid form, the MRA needs some rephrasing. Here is a more adequate version of the argument:

- (4) Failing to get the prescribed emotional moral response is an aesthetic defect in an artwork.

13. Carroll 2000, 377.

- (5) In some cases, an artwork being immoral explains its failure to get the prescribed emotional moral response.
 ∴ In some cases, an artwork being immoral explains an aesthetic defect in an artwork.

Now that the validity problem is solved, it may look like the autonomist must reply by showing that at least one of the premisses is false. I will consider this case but I also think that other, more interesting replies are available to the autonomist. A first thing he might say is that the MRA presupposes, in (4), that artists' intentions about the consequences of their work in the audience are relevant to artistic value. This makes moralism incompatible with theories of art that deny such a relevance. Although this alone is not enough to dismiss (4), it might be considered an unnecessary limitation to place on one's theory of art. In addition, to defend that (4) is false he might ask us to consider the following: think of a great architectural work of art; now suppose that the author had immoral intentions regarding the work that no one knew about; would you say that, after all, you were mistaken about the work's artistic evaluation? If not, does it become a worse work of art after his intentions become known? I admit that intuitions can go both ways here, but these are questions that the moralist needs to address while the autonomist is able to avoid them and offer a parsimonious explanation for the case. He can simply say that the author's intentions are part of his moral character and, accordingly, the moral blame is on the author, not on his artwork.

A more damaging reply consists in arguing that the explanation relation involved in premiss (5) and in the conclusion can have two different readings, but that none of them serves the moralist thesis. On the first reading, the moral property is, by itself, the *explanans*. If this were so, aesthetic properties would play no explanatory role and, as a consequence, the moral property would have itself an aesthetic defect or it would be simultaneously aesthetic. The problem is that this begs the question since it assumes that moralism is true. Maybe moral properties have aesthetic defects, but this requires argument just like moralism.¹⁴ On the second reading of the explanation relation, the moral property is only a part of the *explanans* – its role consists in causing aesthetic properties. The trouble for the moralist is that now the autonomist will be happy to agree that *in this way* moral properties contribute to the artistic value of artworks. Yet, he will insist that such contribution is not *qua* moral value. Ultimately, aesthetic properties are what is relevant to artistic evaluation, not moral value by itself.¹⁵

14. The following argument might be used by the moralist: every aesthetic defect contributes to the artistic value; some moral properties of artworks have aesthetic defects; *ergo*, some moral properties of artworks contribute to the artistic value. Notice that the autonomist may accept the first premiss. But then he cannot accept the second one because it would lead to the conclusion that moralism is true.

15. These two readings are not a problem of the explanation relation itself. The problem remains philosophy @LISBON

4. Possible objections and conclusion

I will now discuss some possible objections to what I have been defending. In doing so I am not trying to bulletproof my view on this debate. This would require a much more in depth discussion than the one I am able to offer here. In a sense, in this last discussion I suggest some ways that opponents might explore to enrich the debate. At the same time, considering these objections will also be useful to clarify some of the points I made.

One possible objection is that I have dismissed too lightly utility considerations concerning artistic evaluation (in section 3). Someone might say that even architecture *as art* is also about utility and, in this manner, its causal impact cannot be ignored in ethical evaluation. Maybe this could provide another way to bring ethical and artistic evaluations closer. My worry with this approach is that by considering a work's consequences we face epistemic difficulties that might lead to scepticism about artistic evaluation. For instance, we would need to discriminate which consequences are relevant (all, foreseen, or foreseeable?). This seems hard to achieve, but even assuming that such work is done we could still wonder, for any given artwork, if some significant consequences were not accounted for. Consequently, we might end up as sceptics about artistic evaluation. In the end we would have to choose between pursuing this approach and somehow get around its drawbacks or abandon it in favour of a simpler type of evaluation, like the aesthetics-based one.

Another objection consists in claiming that it is sufficient for moralists that moral properties cause aesthetic properties. For this to be true, my argument at the end of section 3.2 cannot be right and the opponent needs to show why. Besides this, he also needs to frame such a reply against Carroll's moderate moralism, since Carroll recently presented his view by saying that "sometimes an ethical defect in an artwork can also count as – i.e., be identical with – an aesthetic defect."¹⁶ With this I am not assuming that Carroll's authority about how to describe moderate moralism cannot be challenged. Rather, this is reminder that there might be good reasons to talk about the identity of those properties instead of there being just a causal relation between them. If the relevance of this difference is yet to be discussed, then this is something that might be explored to bring about new and interesting results.

The last objection I will consider has to do with practical implications of autonomism. Someone may argue that if architects as artists embrace autonomism, they will be careless about the morality of their artworks. And, arguably, this is dangerous. But this objection misses the point. It is based on a poor understanding of the autonomist thesis as being about

even when 'explains' is replaced by 'leads to' or 'causes'.

16. Carroll 2015, 151-52.

prescribing actions when, in fact, it is solely about values. Moreover, in practice, architecture continues to be subject to moral assessment as an action in general. A building can be admirable as an artwork and yet terrible regarding the actions which caused it – it would have been right not to build it even at the cost of losing a fine work of art.

To conclude I will just underline the key points that I have defended. I started by presenting what is the ethical criticism of art and its philosophical debate. In accordance with some authors my approach is centred on the question *can moral value contribute to the artistic value of artworks?* The varieties of answers to this question led me to present a taxonomy of the views on this debate that is slightly different from the ones already available.

Then I showed that the debate between moralism and autonomism also applies to architecture since at least some works of architecture are artworks. Before discussing an argument for moralism I offered two points in favour of autonomism: its simplicity and not having the burden of proof. These points should be viewed only as advantages that affect an overall comparison between the theories. While discussing the merited response argument I concluded that, in its original formulation, the argument is invalid. In order to give the idea behind the argument some more credit I rephrased it into a valid form. Yet, even with this adjustment the autonomist has at least two kinds of replies: firstly, he can argue that premiss (4) is false; secondly, he can say that there are two readings of the explanation relation involved in (4), both of them leading to an unsuccessful argument for moralism. The problem with the first reading is that the premiss already assumes moralism to be true. And the problem with the second reading is that it is harmless against autonomism.

Finally, I am aware that moralists have other arguments on their behalf. I choose to discuss only the MRA because it seems to be a staple among moralists and my goal was never to offer a comprehensive refutation of moralism. Rather, I wanted to present an autonomist view and how it fares relatively well against moralism. Even though I am convinced that the advantages of autonomism would retain their salience on a thorough comparison with moralism, the ethical criticism debate is still lacking such a work.

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