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Thresholds, Defaults, and Cosbys: A Response to Bartel

Jason Holt & Bernard Wills

Our piece, "Art by Jerks," proved timely in two ways. Soon after its publication several celebrity scandals shook the entertainment industry—those involving Weinstein, Spacey, and C.K.—giving it a veneer of prescience.[1] It also thus served as a suitable foil for Christopher Bartel's "Ordinary Monsters," in which he furthers the debate about the ethical criticism of art.[2] Grateful as we are for the critique, we respond here to clarify and defend certain aspects of our view.

Bartel labels our view of the relationship between aesthetic and moral values "independence-with-exceptions," calling it intuitive though "obviously untenable," since "it is puzzling how one can maintain both *independence* as well as *exceptions*" (§3). Ours, however, is a threshold view. We posit a threshold of moral significance below which an artist's moral misdemeanors should not matter in evaluating their art but above which their moral crimes may indeed matter. This is no less principled than the concept of a boiling point. Likewise, there is no inherent problem with the notion of exceptionable principles, as with *ceteris paribus* scientific laws. Bartel seems to acknowledge at least the former point, with the idea that we set the bar *too high* in allowing that "some artists can be held accountable for their private moral failings" (§3).

Squaring such theory with actual practice, in most encounters with art we presume innocence and judge a work on its own merits. We are not necessarily remiss for doing so without conducting a background check on the artist to ascertain whether their work merits attention, which would be motivated by the assumption that the work's aesthetic interest may be compromised by the artist's private life. Where such information

is available, of course, it may and sometimes should affect our assessment of the work. In general, however, it would be excessive or simply absurd to subject every artist to vigorous biographical vetting. We resist a too-sensitive ethicism that would either deduct aesthetic worth because of minor moral flaws or automatically grant a measure of it to nice people's art. Not all ethical flaws have aesthetic implications. At any rate, one of us has a background in Classics; we do not know very much, empirically, about Sophocles, and, even worse, many works from this period are anonymous. Is our evaluation of them necessarily incomplete because we have little to no biographical information on the people who created them? Though there is room for debate here, it is in large part a modern prejudice that braids the artwork closely with the artist, a prejudice not shared by Gothic artisans, who virtually never thought to sign their work, or postmodern "death of the author" theorists, for whom the text, like Frankenstein's monster, escapes the control of its putative creator. We concede, though, that *if* we know the artist is a monster, there may be cases where we should take this into account.

Bartel also claims that above our threshold such "exceptions apply *only* to 'extreme cases'" (§3, added emphasis)—that is, the *extraordinary* monsters, the psychopaths, contrasting with his own ordinary monsters. This is a misimpression. We also admit other exceptions: (1) where immoral attitudes are not just depicted in but clearly endorsed by a work, for example, Gaut's cases, which Bartel is not interested in (§1), though we are; (2) where a viewer is understandably overwhelmed by morally appropriate responses to the artist (§2, 4). Being unable or unwilling to encounter such work with complete detachment may be permissible even where others may also appreciate it no less permissibly, not ignoring but bracketing such moral response to the artist. Our leanings here are pluralistic. As we point out, concerning fascist authors like Pound or Hamsun (§4-5), one may justifiably either find or fail to find the work thereby diminished.

The case of Bill Cosby adduced by Bartel (§1) is instructive—though the monstrosity here could hardly be called *ordinary*—since Cosby is a performer, where our examples were drawn mostly from creative art, such as literature, film, sculpture, and the like, where we expect a clear separation between creator and the created work. But with the performances of actors and comedians, it both is and ought to be harder to separate one's response to the artist from one's response to the work, since we must encounter the very person of the performer who realizes the work. It's Cosby himself on stage. Being repulsed by a performer's immoral acts in viewing their work thus becomes more understandable and harder to overlook, though the

reverse can be a problem, as when fans inexplicably blame actors for the evil of the characters they play. If the bar drops lower for performers than creators, that positions our view closer to Bartel's own than his critique of us suggests.

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Endnotes

[1] *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Vol 15 (2017)
(<https://contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=807>)

[2] *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Vol. 17 (2019)
(<https://contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=869>)

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