

The ethical criticism of art

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ETHICISM

This essay argues that the ethical criticism of art is a proper and legitimate aesthetic activity. More precisely, it defends a view I term *ethicism*. Ethicism is the thesis 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 manifests ethically commendable attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically meritorious.

This thesis needs elucidation. The ethicist principle is a pro tanto one: it holds that a work is aesthetically meritorious (or defective) *insofar as* it manifests ethically admirable (or reprehensible) attitudes. (The claim could also be put like this: manifesting ethically admirable attitudes *counts toward* the aesthetic merit of a work, and manifesting ethically reprehensible attitudes *counts against* its aesthetic merit.) The ethicist does not hold that manifesting ethically commendable attitudes is a necessary condition for a work to be aesthetically good: there can be good, even great, works of art that are ethically flawed. Examples include Wagner's Ring Cycle, which is marred by the anti-Semitism displayed in the portrayal of the *Nibelungen*; some of T. S. Eliot's poems, such as *Sweeney among the Nightingales*, which are similarly tainted by anti-Semitism; and Leni Riefenstahl's striking propaganda film, *The Triumph of the Will*, deeply flawed by its craven adulation of Hitler. Nor does the ethicist thesis hold that manifesting ethically good attitudes is a sufficient condition for a work to be aesthetically good: there are works such as

The ethical criticism of art

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which, though the ethical attitudes they display are admirable, are in many ways uninspired and disappointing. The ethicist can deny these necessity and sufficiency claims, because she holds that there are a plurality of aesthetic values, of which the ethical values of artworks are but a single kind.¹ So, for instance, a work of art may be judged to be aesthetically good *insofar as* it is beautiful, is formally unified and strongly expressive, but aesthetically bad *insofar as* it trivializes the issues with which it deals and manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes. We then need to make an *all-things-considered* judgment, balancing these aesthetic merits and demerits one against another to determine whether the work is, all things considered, good. And we should not suppose that there is any mechanically applicable weighing method that could determine the truth of such a judgment: overall judgments are plausibly ones that resist any form of codification in terms of mechanically applicable principles. These kinds of pro tanto and all-things-considered judgments are common in other evaluative domains, notably the moral domain.²

The notion of the aesthetic adopted here should be construed broadly. In the narrow sense of the term, aesthetic value properties are those that ground a certain kind of sensory or contemplative pleasure or displeasure. In this sense, *beauty, elegance, gracefulness, and their contraries* are aesthetic value properties. However, the sense adopted here is broader: I mean by "aesthetic value" the value of an object *qua* work of art, that is, its artistic value. This broader sense is required, since not *all* of the values of an object *qua* work of art are narrowly aesthetic. Besides a work's beauty, we may, for instance, aesthetically admire it for its cognitive insight (subject, as we shall see, to certain conditions), its articulated expression of joy, the fact that it is deeply moving, and so on. However, this broader sense of "aesthetic" ~~does not mean that~~ just any property of a work of art counts as aesthetic. Works of art have many other sorts of value properties that are not values of them *qua* works of art: they can have investment value, value as status symbols, and so forth.³

The notion of manifesting an attitude should be construed in terms of a work's displaying pro or con attitudes toward some state of affairs or things, which the work may do in many ways besides explicitly stating an opinion about them.⁴ (Such attitudes can run the gamut from unmixed approval through neutrality to unmixed disapproval, and also include various complex and nuanced attitudes that display both approbatory and disapprobatory aspects, such as those

revealed in jealous or conflicted attitudes.) What is relevant for ethicism are the attitudes really possessed by a work, not those it merely claims to possess; so the attitudes manifested may be correctly attributable only by subtle and informed critical judgment. A novel may state that it condemns the sexual activities it describes, but from the subtly lubricious and prying manner in which it dwells on them, it may be correct to attribute to it an attitude of titillation, not of moralistic disgust. Just as we can distinguish between the attitudes people really have and those they merely claim to have by looking at their behavior, so we can distinguish between real and claimed attitudes of works by looking at the detailed manner in which events are presented.

Ethicism does not entail the causal thesis that good art ethically improves people.⁵ Since the ethicist principle is a pro tanto one, it allows for the existence of great but ethically flawed works; and even if all aesthetically good works were ethically sound, it would not follow that they improve people, any more than it follows that earnest ethical advice improves people, for they may be unmoved by even the most heartfelt exhortation. Much of the ethical discussion about art, particularly concerning the supposedly pernicious effects of some popular films and music genres, has been concerned with the question of whether such art morally corrupts. This is a version of the causal thesis and should be kept distinct from ethicism. Further, ethicism has nothing to say about the issue of censorship, nor does it give any grounds of support to either the friends or foes of artistic censorship. All that follows from ethicism is that if a work manifests morally bad attitudes it is to that extent aesthetically flawed, flawed as a work of art. The fact that a work of art is aesthetically flawed is not grounds for its censorship: if it were, the art museums of the world would suffer serious depletion.

OBJECTIONS TO ETHICISM

1. Ethicism fails to distinguish sharply enough between ethical and aesthetic evaluation. There is an aesthetic attitude in terms of which we aesthetically evaluate works; this aesthetic attitude is distinct from the ethical attitude we may adopt toward works; and ethical assessment is never a concern of the aesthetic attitude. So the ethical criticism of works is irrelevant to their aesthetic value.

The existence of the aesthetic attitude has, of course, been much disputed.⁶ But, even if we accept its existence, its adoption is com-

patible with ethicism. To see why, we need to specify in more detail what the aesthetic attitude is. There are two basic ways of doing this: the aesthetic attitude may be individuated by some feature intrinsic to it or by its formal objects.

Consider the case in which the attitude is individuated by its formal objects: these may be understood in narrow aesthetic fashion, as beauty and its subspecies, such as grace and elegance, or characterized more broadly by the criteria to which formalists appeal, such as Beardsley's unity, complexity, and intensity.⁷ Since the presence of these properties arguably does not require, or suffice for, the presence of ethical properties, it may be held that ethical assessment is irrelevant to aesthetic evaluation.⁸ Yet this objection is unconvincing, for the list of properties deployed is too narrow to embrace all those of aesthetic relevance. In the assessment of art, appeal is made to such properties as raw expressive power and deep cognitive insight as well as to beauty, elegance, and grace; and the relevance of these expressive and cognitive values explains how there can be great works, such as *Les Desmoiselles d'Avignon*, that are militantly ugly. So the narrow aesthetic view fails. In more sophisticated fashion, the formalist appeals to purely intrinsic properties of works as aesthetically relevant, an appeal motivated by a conception of the work of art as autonomous from its context. But that conception is flawed, for a work can be fully interpreted only by situating it within its generative context.⁹ There is reason, then, to spurn the restricted diet of aesthetically relevant properties offered by the narrow aesthetic and formalist views, and as yet no reason to exclude ethical properties from a heartier menu.

The alternative is to individuate the aesthetic attitude by some feature intrinsic to it, and for the opponent of ethicism the most promising feature is the detachment or disengagement we purportedly display toward fictional events. Since it is logically impossible to intervene in such events, the will is detached, practical concerns are quiescent, an attitude of contemplation is adopted. Given the practical character of morality, it follows that ethical assessment plays no role in aesthetic attitude and therefore no role in aesthetic evaluation. But the step from the claim that the will is disengaged and therefore that ethical assessment has no role to play does not follow: there is similarly no possibility of altering historical events, and we are in this sense forced to have a detached or contemplative attitude toward them, but we still ethically assess historical characters and actions. If it is objected that we are ethically engaged in history

because we hope to draw from it lessons for our current practice, the same may be said of the lessons we can draw from fiction, such as the psychological insights that Freud discovered there.

The point about ethics and the will deserves elaboration, for it will be relevant to the position defended later. On what might be termed the *purely practical* conception of ethics, the ethical assessment of a person's character is determined only by what he does and by the motives that determine his actions. Any feelings or thoughts that play no role in motivating actions are ethically irrelevant: thoughts, fantasies, and desires, however gruesome, inappropriate, or corrupt we would judge the actions they motivate to be, are not themselves ethically bad, unless they issue in actions that express these feelings and thoughts. So a person may be ethically good while having these feelings and thoughts, and his goodness may consist partly in his capacity to resist their influence on the will, for these feelings and thoughts may have arisen purely passively in him, and he is not to be held responsible for their occurrence.¹⁰ This view, as has just been noted, speedily runs into problems in historical cases where the will cannot be engaged, yet where ethical assessment is still appropriate. But it can be shown to be flawed on other grounds too. Much of our ethical assessment is directed at what people feel, even though these feelings do not motivate their actions. Suppose that Joe is praised for some deserved achievement by his friends, but he later discovers that they are secretly deeply jealous and resentful of him. Their feelings have not motivated their actions, yet we would properly regard these people as less ethically good were we to discover this about them. They are flawed because of what they feel, not because of what they did or their motives for doing it. Also, that people feel deep sympathy for us, even though they are completely unable to help us in our distress, is something that we care about and that properly makes us think better of them. In fact, much of our vocabulary of ethical assessment is directed wholly or in part at the assessment of feelings: we criticize people for being crude, insensitive, callous, or uncaring; we praise them for being warm, friendly, and sensitive. So for the ethical assessment of character an *affective-practical* conception of assessment is correct, a conception which holds that not just actions and motives, but also feelings that do not motivate, are ethically significant. Virtue of character is "concerned with feelings and actions," as Aristotle correctly observes.¹¹ Such an affective-practical conception of ethical assessment allows the ethical assessment of the feel-

ings that people have when they respond to fictions, even though they cannot act toward the fictional events described.

2. A more radical objection holds that ethical assessment has no place in the assessment of art. Works of art can at best manifest attitudes toward those fictional characters and situations they describe, and such attitudes are not ethically assessable, since they are directed toward merely imagined objects – such objects cannot be harmed or hurt in reality, for they do not exist. What is ethically assessable, in contrast, are attitudes directed toward real characters and situations, but works of art do not manifest attitudes toward such things, for they do not describe them. Hence, there is no place left for the ethical assessment of art.

Even at first blush, the objection is hyperbolic, since not all works of art are fictions: Riefenstahl's film is a documentary of the 1934 Nuremberg rally, and Hitler was not a fictional character. So, at best, the argument would apply only to a subclass of works of art. Second, attitudes directed toward only imagined states of affairs can in fact properly be ethically assessed. Consider a man whose sexual life consists entirely of rape fantasies, fantasies he has not about women he sees in real life, but about women he only imagines. Would we say that there is nothing to be said from an ethical point of view about the attitude he manifests in his imaginings about these fictional women? Clearly, what a person imagines and how he responds to those imaginings play an important part in the ethical assessment of his character. The mere fact that the women he imagines cannot be harmed does not bracket his inner life from ethical assessment, since what is at issue are the attitudes he manifests in his fantasy life. And nothing in our judgment about him requires us to assume that what is bad about his fantasies is that he may act on them – perhaps he is confined to prison for life. He stands ethically condemned for what and how he imagines, independently of how he acts or may act. (Here again, we return to the ethical importance of feelings, but see now that feelings toward merely imagined people can be ethically relevant too.) Further, the attitudes people (and works) manifest toward imagined scenarios have implications for their attitudes toward their real-life counterparts, for the attitudes are partly directed toward kinds, not just individuals.¹² When the rape fantasist imagines his fictional women, he is imagining them *as women*, that is, as beings of a kind that also has instances in the real world; and that he imagines them as women is, of course, essential to his imaginative project. Thus, by

virtue of adopting such an attitude toward his imagined women, he implicitly adopts that attitude toward their real-life counterparts – and so reveals something of his attitude toward real-life women. Indeed, it is inevitable that, however apparently exotic the fictional world, the kinds shared between it and the real world will be vast, given the limits on the human imagination, the interests we have in fiction (which include exploring possibilities that reorder the actual world), and interpretive constraints, which involve drawing on background information about the real world in the interpretation of fictions. So the attitudes manifested toward fictional entities will have many implications for attitudes manifested toward real entities.

3. Ethical assessment is relevant to a work's aesthetic merit, but ethicism gives the connection the wrong valence: works can be good precisely *because* they violate our sense of moral rectitude. Often the most fascinating characters in works are the evil ones, such as Satan in *Paradise Lost*. And recall the passage in *King Lear* in which blind Gloucester asks Lear, "Dost thou know me?" and Lear replies, "I remember thine eyes well enough. Dost thou squiny at me? / No, do thy worst, blind Cupid, I'll not love." As Lawrence Hyman writes, "The dramatic effect requires our moral disapproval," but Shakespeare manages to "transfigure that moral shock into aesthetic pleasure."¹³

It is important to distinguish between the evil or insensitive characters represented by a work and the attitude the work displays toward those characters. Only the latter is relevant to the ethicist thesis. Satan is indeed fascinating because evil, but the work represents him as such, showing the seductive power of evil, and does not approve of his actions. Milton was not a Satanist. And while the power of Lear's bad joke does rest on its hearty heartlessness, it is part of the point of *Lear* that the flamboyant insensitivity displayed by Lear in his derangement is of a piece with the gross egoism that leads to disaster, an egoism overcome only by grief and loss, and transmuted into a finer moral wisdom. Lear's attitude toward Gloucester is represented by the play, but not shared by it. It is true that some works, such as de Sade's *Juliette*, not merely represent evil, but also manifest approval toward that evil. If this work has indeed any serious aesthetic merit, it can in part be traced to the literary skill with which it represents the attitude of finding sexual torture erotically attractive; yet the ethicist can consistently and plausibly maintain that the novel's own espousal of this attitude is an aesthetic defect in it.

It may be objected that the novel's approbatory attitude toward evil is a reason why it is aesthetically good: evil arouses our curiosity, for the evil person may do and experience things we can scarcely imagine, let alone understand; and the novel's ability to satisfy this curiosity, to show us what it is like to engage in such actions, is a prime source of its aesthetic merit. Yet from the fact that we are fascinated by the attitudes manifested, we cannot conclude that our interest in them is aesthetic: our fascination with Adolf Hitler or Jeffrey Dahmer is not an aesthetic one, and our interest in de Sade's work may similarly stem from a curiosity about psychopathic states of mind. Suppose, however, that our interest in *Juliette* is aesthetic, perhaps because of the way that interest is inflected by a concern with the work's stylistic and rhetorical system. This still does not undermine ethicism. For our interest here is in being able to imagine what it is like to have evil attitudes, and so in coming to understand them, and this is satisfied by the vivid *representation* of an evil attitude. But, again, representation of an attitude by a work does not require the work itself to share that attitude: works may manifest disapproval toward characters or narrators who are represented as evil. Moreover, if, as the objection holds, it is our curiosity that is aroused, we have a cognitive interest in not seeing evil approved of, for such approval implies that there is something good about an attitude we know to be bad.

SOME ARGUMENTS FOR ETHICISM

There are, of course, further objections and elaborations open to the opponent of ethicism, some of which will be touched on later, but enough has been said to give rational hope that they may be laid to rest. The question remains as to why ethicism should be endorsed. Part of the answer is to be sought in its congruence with our considered aesthetic judgments; we do decry works for their insensitivity, their moral crudity, their lack of integrity, their celebration of cruelty, their slimy salaciousness. But it is the mark of an interesting philosophical thesis that, while some find it obviously true, others find it obviously false; and ethicism is, fortunately and unfortunately, an interesting philosophical thesis. So it would be good to have an argument for its truth.

1. George Dickie has advanced a simple argument for the truth of ethicism. A work of art's moral vision is an (essential) part of that work; any statement about an (essential) part of a work of art is an

aesthetic statement about that work; so a statement about a work of art's moral vision is an aesthetic statement about the work.¹⁴

However, it is not true that any statement about an essential part of a work is an aesthetic statement about it. For instance, it is essential to a poem that it be composed of the particular words that comprise it. So it is essential to it that it have in it the particular letters that it has. So, if it is true of a particular poem that it has in it exactly as many letter *e*'s as it has letter *c*'s, then that is an essential feature of the poem. But that is not an *aesthetic* statement about the work, since it standardly plays no role in our appreciation of it.¹⁵ Likewise, consider a statue carved in limestone. It is essential to its being the particular statue which it is that it be composed of the crushed shells of ancient sea creatures. But whereas the statue's texture and color are generally relevant to its aesthetic merits, the mere fact that it is composed of crushed shells is not. For, again, this fact standardly plays no role in our appreciation of it as a work of art. So a premise on which Dickie's argument rests is false.

2. Perhaps the most influential opponents of ethicism have been formalists.¹⁶ However, David Pole not only has argued that ethicism is compatible with formalism, but has tried to derive ethicism from it. He holds that the immorality of a work is a formal defect in it, since it is a type of internal incoherence. For if a work of art presents a morally bad view, it will do so by distorting or glossing over something it presents. But then something is lacking within the work itself and so "some particular aspect [of the work] must jar with what – on the strength of the rest – we claim a right to demand." This jarring is an internal incoherence in the work and thus a defect that the formalist would acknowledge as such.¹⁷

If a work is morally corrupt, it follows that it distorts something and so jars with a truth about the world, but it does not follow that it has to jar with anything else in the work, for the work may be systematically immoral. *The Triumph of the Will*, for instance, is held together thematically by its offensive celebration of Nazism. So Pole's formalist derivation of ethicism fails.¹⁸

3. An approach glanced at by Hume and elaborated by Wayne Booth holds that literary assessment is akin to an act of befriending, for one assesses the implied author of a work as a suitable friend. A good friend may possess a variety of merits (being intelligent, good company, lively, etc.), and some of these are ethical: she is trustworthy, sensitive, kind, and so on. So assessing someone as a friend involves among other things assessing her ethical character, a char-

acter displayed in the case of the implied author in the literary work in which she is manifested.¹⁹

The approach has its merits, and captures the pro tanto structure of ethicism well, but it is ill-equipped to cope with some Hollywood films whose impersonality and industrial-style production may give the audience little sense of an implied author or authors, but whose ethical stance may elicit their aesthetic condemnation. And the approach also runs afoul of one of the objections considered earlier; for the implied author is a fictional construct, albeit one implicit in, rather than described by, the text. If fictional characters, such as Satan and Lear, can be interesting because of their moral failings, the corrupt fictional character of an author can similarly be interesting, and the aesthetic merit of her work be accordingly enhanced. Appeal to the characters of fictional beings will not ground ethicism.

4. More promising is an argument that may be extrapolated from views defended by Richard Eldridge and Martha Nussbaum. For Eldridge a person's moral self-understanding cannot completely be captured by general theories, but must be developed and sustained by an awareness of the relation of her story to the stories of others, an awareness that literature is peculiarly well placed to articulate and extend: "all we can do is to attempt to find ourselves in cases, in narratives of the development of persons."²⁰ For Nussbaum, too, morality is a matter of the appreciation of particular cases, and literature can refine our awareness of moral particularities in a way that eludes the flailing grasp of philosophy: "To show forth the force and truth of the Aristotelian claim that 'the decision rests with perception,' we need, then – either side by side with a philosophical 'outline' or inside it – texts which display to us the complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer *difficulty* of moral choice."²¹ This conception of literature as moral philosophy naturally suggests a cognitivist argument for ethicism: it is an aesthetic merit in a work that it gives insight into some state of affairs, and literature can yield insights into moral reality of a depth and precision that no other cultural form is well placed to match; so the moral insights delivered by literary works enhance their aesthetic worth.

There is much here that should be retained and accounted for in any successful defense of ethicism, and an attempt will be made to do so in what follows. Yet the argument rests on a radically particularist account of morality, which denies the existence of any general and informative moral principles. If that view be denied, as I believe it should,²² the idea of literature as the culmination of moral philos-

ophy is rendered less compelling. And even if the claims of literature were rendered more modest, we would still require an explanation of why the insights literature can provide are aesthetically relevant. Works of art can be interesting and informative as social documents, but the fact that much can be learned from them about the attitudes and circumstances of their time does not ipso facto make them aesthetically better: one can learn much about Victorian agricultural politics from *Tess*, and on the subject of nineteenth-century whaling practices *Moby-Dick* is excruciatingly informative. Likewise, old photographs and films can have great value as documentary sources of their times, but these cognitive merits do not thereby improve these objects *qua* works of art. So the cognitivist approach must be supplemented in order to give an account of the conditions under which cognitive merits are aesthetically relevant.²³

THE MERITED-RESPONSE ARGUMENT

Ethicism is a thesis about a work's manifestation of certain attitudes, but in what does this manifestation of attitudes consist? It is obvious that works prescribe the imagining of certain events: a horror film may prescribe imagining teenagers being assaulted by a monster; *Juliette* prescribes imagining that acts of sexual torture occur. Perhaps less obviously, works also prescribe certain responses to these fictional events: the loud, atonal music of the horror film prescribes us to react to the represented events with fear, *Juliette* invites the reader to find sexual torture erotically attractive, to be aroused by it, to be amused by the contortions described, to admire the intricacy of their implementation, and so forth.²⁴ The approbatory attitude that *Juliette* exhibits toward sexual torture, then, is manifested in the responses it prescribes its readers to have toward such torture. The attitudes of works are manifested in the responses they prescribe to their audiences.

It is important to construe this claim correctly to avoid an objection. Consider a novel that prescribes its readers to be amused at a character's undeserved suffering but that does so in order to show up the ease with which the reader can be seduced into callous responses. Then one response (amusement) is prescribed, but a very different attitude is manifested by the work (disapproval of the ease with which we can be morally seduced); hence, the manifestation of attitudes is wholly distinct from and independent of the prescription of responses. What this objection reveals is that prescriptions, like

attitudes, come in a hierarchy, with higher-order prescriptions taking lower-order ones as their objects. Thus, my amusement at the character's suffering is prescribed, but there is a higher-order prescription that this amusement itself be regarded as callous and therefore as unmerited. So the complete set of prescriptions that a work makes must be examined in order to discover what attitudes it manifests: taking individual prescriptions out of context may mislead us about the work's attitudes. Here, as elsewhere, the application of the ethicist principle requires a grasp of interpretive subtleties and contextual factors. Talk of prescriptions from now on should be construed as involving the complete set of relevant prescriptions that a work makes toward fictional events.

The claim that works prescribe certain responses to the events described is widely applicable. *Jane Eyre*, for instance, prescribes the imagining of the course of a love affair between Jane and Rochester, and also prescribes us to admire Jane's fortitude, to want things to turn out well for her, to be moved by her plight, to be attracted to this relationship as an ideal of love, and so forth. Similar remarks apply to paintings, films, and other representational arts. Music without a text is also subject to ethical criticism if we can properly ascribe to the music a presented situation and a prescribed response to it. If Shostakovich's symphonies are a musical protest against the Stalinist regime, we can ethically assess them.

The notion of a response is to be understood broadly, covering a wide range of states directed at represented events and characters, including being pleased at something, feeling an emotion toward it, being amused about it, and desiring something with respect to it – wanting it to continue or stop, wanting to know what happens next. Such states are characteristically affective, some essentially so, such as pleasure and the emotions, while in the case of others, such as desires, there is no necessity that they be felt, although they generally are.

The responses are not simply imagined: we are prescribed by *Juliette* actually to find erotically attractive the fictional events, to be amused by them, to enjoy them, to admire this kind of activity. So the novel does not just present imagined events, it also presents a point of view on them, a perspective constituted in part by actual feelings, emotions, and desires that the reader is prescribed to have toward the merely imagined events. Given that the notion of a response covers such things as enjoyment and amusement, it is evident that some kinds of response are actual, not just imagined. Some philosophers

have denied that we feel actual emotions toward fictional events, but there are, I believe, good reasons for holding this to be possible.²⁵

Though a work may prescribe a response, it does not follow that it succeeds in making this response merited: horror fictions may be unafrightening, comedies unamusing, thrillers unthrilling. This is not just to say that fear, amusement, and thrills are not produced in the audience; for people may respond in a way that is inappropriate. Rather, the question is whether the prescribed response is merited, whether it is appropriate or inappropriate to respond in the way the work prescribes. If I am afraid of a harmless victim in a horror movie because of her passing resemblance to an old tormentor of mine, my fear is inappropriate. And my admiration for a character in a novel can be criticized for being based on a misunderstanding of what he did in the story. So prescribed responses are subject to evaluative criteria.

Some of these criteria are ethical ones. As noted earlier, responses outside the context of art are subject to ethical evaluation. I can criticize someone for taking pleasure in others' pain, for being amused by sadistic cruelty, for being angry at someone when she has done no wrong, for desiring the bad. The same is true when responses are directed at fictional events, for these responses are actual, not just imagined ones. If we actually enjoy or are amused by some exhibition of sadistic cruelty in a novel, that shows us in a bad light, reflects ill on our ethical character, and we can properly be criticized for responding in this fashion.

If a work prescribes a response that is unmerited, it has failed in an aim internal to it, and that is a defect. But not all defects in works of art are aesthetic ones. From the point of view of shipping them to art exhibitions, many of Tintoretto's paintings are very bad, since they are so large and fragile that they can be moved only at great risk. But that is not an aesthetic defect. Is the failure of a prescribed response to be merited an *aesthetic* defect (i.e., is it a defect in the work *qua* work of art)? That this is so is evidently true of many artistic genres: thrillers that do not merit the audience being thrilled, tragedies that do not merit fear and pity for their protagonists, comedies that are not amusing, melodramas that do not merit sadness and pity are all aesthetic failures in these respects. Works outside these genres, which similarly prescribe a range of responses, are likewise aesthetic failures if the responses are unmerited. And in general it is a bad work of art that leaves us bored and offers no enjoyment at all. We are also concerned not just with whether a response occurs, but with the

quality of that response: humor may be crude, unimaginative, or flat, or may be revelatory, profound, or inspiring. And the aesthetic criticism of a work as being manipulative, sentimental, insensible, or crude is founded on a mismatch between the response the work prescribes the reader to feel and the response actually merited by the work's presentation of the fictional situation.

The aesthetic relevance of prescribed responses wins further support from noting that much of the value of art derives from its deployment of an affective mode of cognition – derives from the way works teach us, not by giving us merely intellectual knowledge, but by bringing that knowledge home to us. This teaching is not just about how the world is, but can reveal new conceptions of the world in the light of which we can experience our situation, can teach us new ideals, can impart new concepts and discriminatory skills – having read Dickens, we can recognize the Micawbers of the world. And the way knowledge is brought home to us is by making it vividly present, so disposing us to reorder our thoughts, feelings, and motivations in the light of it. We all know we will die, but it may take a great work of art to drive that point fully home, to make it vividly present. We may think of the universe as devoid of transcendent meaning, but it may take *Waiting for Godot* to make that thought concrete and real. We may believe in the value of love, but it may take *Jane Eyre* to render that ideal unforgettably alluring. On the cognitive-affective view of the value of art, whether prescribed responses are merited will be of aesthetic significance, since such responses constitute a cognitive-affective perspective on the events recounted. For such responses not merely are affective, but include a cognitive component, being directed toward some state of affairs or thing, and bringing it under evaluative concepts.²⁶ By prescribing us to be amused, to enjoy, to be aroused by scenes of sexual torture, *Juliette* aims to get us to approve of the imagined events, to think of them as in some way desirable, and so to endorse an evaluation about events of that kind.

These observations can be assembled into an argument for ethicism. A work's manifestation of an attitude is a matter of the work's prescribing certain responses toward the events described. If these responses 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. What responses the work prescribes is of aesthetic relevance. 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. So a work's manifestation

of ethically bad attitudes is an aesthetic defect in it. *Mutatis mutandis*, a parallel argument shows that a work's manifestation of ethically commendable attitudes is an aesthetic merit in it, since we have reason to adopt a prescribed response that is ethically commendable. So ethicism is true.

To illustrate: a comedy presents certain events as funny (prescribes a humorous response to them), but if this involves being amused at heartless cruelty, we have reason not to be amused. Hence, the work's humor is flawed, and that is an aesthetic defect in it. If a work prescribes our enjoyment (as almost all art does to some extent), but if we are supposed to enjoy, say, gratuitous suffering, then we can properly refuse to enjoy it, and hence the work fails aesthetically. If a work seeks to get us to pity some characters, but they are unworthy of pity because of their vicious actions, we have reason not to pity them, and hence the work is aesthetically flawed. Conversely, if the comedy's humor is revelatory, emancipating us from the narrow bonds of prejudice, getting us to see a situation in a different and better moral light and respond accordingly, we have reason to adopt the response, and the work succeeds aesthetically in this respect. If the enjoyment it offers derives from this kind of revelatory humor, we have reason to enjoy the work. And if a work prescribes pity toward characters who suffer unfairly and through no fault of their own, we have reason to pity them, and the work succeeds aesthetically in this way. Similar remarks apply to the range of other responses prescribed by works, such as admiring characters, being angry on their behalf, wanting things for them, and so forth.

The merited-response argument for ethicism captures what is plausible in the last two of the arguments surveyed earlier, but sidesteps the pitfalls into which they stumble. If a work prescribes certain attitudes, these may be sufficiently patterned to justify crediting an implied author to it, and this explains why the befriending argument looks plausible. But the merited-response argument has the advantage of avoiding the problems that stem from taking the implied author as foundational in an argument for ethicism. And the cognitive argument is not so much rejected as incorporated into the current argument, which makes use of a cognitive-affective view of art. Art can teach us about what is ethically correct, but the aesthetic relevance of this teaching is guaranteed only when the work displays it in the responses it prescribes to story events. While tacking on to a novel a claim that a certain type of committed love is an ideal will not do much for its aesthetic worth, getting us to *feel* the attraction of that

ideal as embodied in a particular relationship is the central and animating excellence of several novels, including *Jane Eyre*.

OBJECTIONS TO THE ARGUMENT

1. The argument does not support ethicism. To say that a prescribed response is unmerited is to say that the work is emotionally unengaging; but then the work's failure is a result of the failure to engage, and not of its ethical corruption. Indeed, if, despite its ethical corruption, the work does emotionally engage, then its ethical badness is not an aesthetic defect.

The objection misconstrues the argument, even in respect of responses that are emotions. A work may engage an emotion even when it does not merit it (it may, for instance, manipulate us into feeling a sort of pity we know is merely sentimental), and only merited emotions are relevant to the argument. It is whether the emotion is merited that is important, and ethical merits are partly constitutive of whether the emotion is merited; hence, ethical values play a direct role in determining whether the work is aesthetically defective.

2. The argument is structurally unsound. Starting from a claim about ethical merit, ethicism ends up with a claim about aesthetic merit, so the argument commits a fallacy of equivocation in moving from an ethical reason to an aesthetic one, for there are no other resources available for making the transition.

There is no equivocation: the claim used to make the transition is that whether prescribed responses are merited is aesthetically relevant, and among the criteria that are relevant to determining whether they are merited are ethical ones. This is a substantive claim, and one that has been argued for by appeal to the language of art criticism and a supporting claim that art deploys an affective mode of cognition.

3. The aesthetic defects of a work cannot be reduced to a failure of prescribed responses: while some works clearly prescribe responses, other works need not, or may fail in respects in which no particular response is prescribed.

The point is correct, but the ethicist defense does not require that all aesthetic defects be failures of prescribed responses, for it is enough to establish its truth that some aesthetic defects are of this kind.

4. Works may prescribe responses that are not aesthetically relevant: a royal portrait may be designed to impart a sense of awe and respect toward the king depicted, and a religious work may aim at

enhancing the viewer's sense of religious reverence, but such responses are aesthetically irrelevant. So ethicism rests on a false premise.

This is not so. A painting is not just (or even) a beautiful object: it aims to convey complex thoughts and feelings about its subject, providing an individual perspective on the object represented. Thus it is that a painting not only can be a representation, but can also embody a way of thinking in an affectively charged way about its subject, and this perspective on its subject is an important object of our aesthetic interest in the work. So if a painting does not succeed in meriting the responses prescribed, it fails on a dimension of aesthetic excellence.

5. Finally, the argument rests on a claim that real responses, not merely imagined ones, can be had toward fictions. Yet that claim has in respect of emotional responses been powerfully contested: some philosophers have argued that certain emotions cannot be really directed at fictional entities.²⁷ Thus, ethicism rests on a contentious claim, and its truth is hostage to the fortunes of this thesis.

The merited-response argument has indeed been framed by appeal to real emotions directed at fictions, both because I hold that such emotions can be had toward fictions and because the argument proceeds smoothly with this claim. But it is not in fact essential to the argument to appeal to fiction-directed real emotions. (The thesis that fiction-directed real emotions are possible I shall refer to as *emotional realism*, as opposed to *emotional irrealism*, which denies the possibility of such emotions.) There is a class of responses toward fictions – responses of pleasure and displeasure – that both sides to the dispute can agree to be real. It is evident that one can actually enjoy or be displeased by fictional events: one can actually enjoy Jane Eyre's (fictional) happiness at the end of the novel. Scarcely more contentious is the thought that there are many other fiction-directed responses that are real: I don't have to check to see whether a story is fictional or not in order to know whether I am really amused by it or only imagining that I am so. I don't have to know whether described events really occurred to know whether I am disgusted by them.²⁸ The battle between realists and irrealists is over the reality of those specific kinds of responses that are emotions, and indeed chiefly over the reality of pity and fear directed at fictions.

Ethicism can be fully defended by appeal to those responses the reality of which is relatively uncontentious. For these include pleasure and displeasure, which are pervasive in our responses to fictions, and, as we noted, a person can be ethically criticized for what

she takes pleasure or displeasure in. Someone who actually enjoys imagined suffering can properly be condemned for this response. Hence, pleasure and displeasure felt toward fictions are the only kinds of responses the reality of which one needs to appeal to in order to defend ethicism successfully.

Further, the appeal to actual responses was made in order to avoid a possible objection that the audience's responses are only imagined, and the audience is not ethically at fault if it only imagines a response, as opposed to actually possessing it. But the claim that imagined responses are not ethically assessable can be denied in its full generality. Certain imagined responses, particularly when they are compulsive, vivid, or ones that in various ways fully engage their imaginers, may ground ethical criticism, for they too may be deeply expressive of the imaginer's moral character (for instance, the rape fantasist discussed earlier may be ethically criticized, even if he only imagines being aroused by the imagined scenarios). Hence, emotional irrealists can support ethicism on the grounds that people can be ethically condemned for some of their merely imagined responses.²⁹ Further, as we noted earlier, works that manifest certain attitudes toward fictional entities implicitly manifest the same attitudes toward real entities of that kind. Reading this in terms of prescribed imagined responses, the irrealist can hold that works prescribing an imagined response toward fictional entities implicitly prescribe the counterpart real response to real entities of that kind. Since no one denies that real emotional responses can be directed at real entities, the irrealist can hold that artworks are aesthetically flawed by virtue of the moral reprehensibility of the implied emotions directed at real states of affairs.³⁰ Thus, it is not essential to the success of the merited-response argument that emotional realism be true: emotional irrealists can and should sign up to it as well.

So the merited-response argument stands. And the truth of ethicism shows that the aesthetic and the ethical are intertwined. While those who have supposed them to form a unity have overstated their closeness, the two evaluative domains have proved to be more tightly and surprisingly interconnected than many had thought possible.

Notes

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1. The view that the *only* aesthetic merits of works are ethical ones is known as *moralism* and is elegantly dispatched by R. W. Beardsmore, *Art and Morality* (London: Macmillan Press, 1971), chap. 2.
2. For a defense of this claim see my "Moral Pluralism," *Philosophical Papers* 22, (1993): 17–40, and my "Rag Bags, Disputes and Moral Pluralism," *Utilitas* (forthcoming).
3. For my account of what a work of art is, see my "'Art' as a Cluster Concept," *Theories of Art*, ed. Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, forthcoming). It may be objected to this broader sense of "aesthetic" that it does not encompass the aesthetic properties of nature. Since we are here concerned only with artworks, this restriction would not matter for present purposes; but also note that the notion naturally extends to include aesthetic properties of nature, since nature may share some of the value properties that objects have *qua* artworks. These include narrow aesthetic properties and also various formal and metaphorically ascribed properties. (For a discussion of the latter and their significance, see my "Metaphor and the Understanding of Art," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 97 [1996–7]: 223–41.)
4. Evidently, talk of works manifesting attitudes is quite in order – we can, for instance, properly talk of *Small World* manifesting an attitude of wry amusement toward academic conferences. Talk of works manifesting attitudes is, I would argue, equivalent to talk of artists manifesting attitudes in works, though the sense of the terms needs careful specification, and the artist here is not to be understood as a mere fictional construct. (See Guy Sircello, "Expressive Properties of Art," in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, ed. Joseph Margolis, 3d ed. [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987], for a suggestive discussion of the relation between what artists do and the properties their works possess.) However, given the fact that we can properly talk of works manifesting attitudes, investigation of this equivalence need not be pursued here.
5. Those who evince sympathy with this distinct causal claim include Kant, Matthew Arnold, Anthony Savile, and Anne Sheppard. Kant claims that the harmonious accord between cognitive faculties that beauty produces in the man of good taste "at the same time promotes the sensibility of the mind for moral feeling." *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 39. See also Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: an Essay in Political and Social Criticism*, 3d ed. (London: Smith, Elder, 1882), passim; Anthony Savile, *The Test of Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), chap. 5, sect. II; and Anne Sheppard, *Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 151.
6. For the locus classicus of skepticism about the aesthetic attitude, see George Dickie, "The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude," in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, ed. Margolis. As noted later, Dickie also uses an attack on the aesthetic attitude to argue for a variant of ethicalism.
7. Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, 2d ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), 462ff.
8. However, as will be seen later, some formalists, including David Pole, would deny this claim, and argue for the validity of ethical criticism.
9. See my "Interpreting the Arts: The Patchwork Theory," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993): 597–609. For an extended critique of autonomism in reference to its implications for the ethical assessment of art, see Noël Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (1996): 223–38.
10. This conception is Kantian in spirit, though Kant's own view differs from it in salient ways. His view is in one way narrower: it is only duty (not feelings) that can motivate actions that have genuine moral worth (or, on one reading of his position, feelings can operate only as primary motives of morally good action, while the secondary motive must be duty; see Marcia W. Baron, *Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996], chap. 4). In addition, Kant holds that actions are not directly assessable; only their maxims are.
11. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.6 1106b16, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985).
12. Interpretive skill is needed, of course, to establish what the relevant properties of fictional characters are toward which attitudes are manifested. This can be a subtle matter; for instance, in some jokes a character being Irish is merely a conventional way of indicating stupidity and need not imply any derogatory attitudes toward Irish people. For a discussion of humor that is closely related to the issues discussed in this essay, see my "Just Joking: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humor." *Philosophy and Literature* (forthcoming).
13. Lawrence Hyman, "Morality and Literature: The Necessary Conflict," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 24 (1984): 149–55, at 154–5.
14. George Dickie, "The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude," in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, ed. Margolis, 113. In his *Evaluating Art* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), chap. 7, Dickie also endorses the cognitivist derivation of ethicalism that I discuss later. I place 'essential' in parentheses, since Dickie makes the argument without explicitly using it, but appeals to it when giving the example of a novel; his argument is strengthened by appeal to the notion.
15. I do not mean to deny, of course, that in the case of certain poems this fact might play a role in the appreciation of the work. For instance, if a poet wished to demonstrate his skill by writing a poem containing exactly the same number of every letter of the alphabet, yet the resulting poem did not have this feature, this would reflect badly on his artistry. So in some unusual cases facts about the number of different letters in a poem might be aesthetically relevant. But Dickie's argument requires it to be *always* true that such facts are aesthetically relevant.

16. E.g., Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, 2d ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981). Though he attacks only moralism directly (564–7), it is clear from his remarks on page 457 that moral criteria play no part in the objective reasons that, he believes, exhaustively specify aesthetic evaluation.
17. David Pole, "Morality and the Assessment of Literature," in his *Aesthetics, Form and Emotion* (London: Duckworth, 1983), 49–50.
18. A parallel criticism is made by Dickie, "The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude," 113.
19. Hume remarks, "We choose our favourite author as we do our friend" in his "Of the Standard of Taste," in *Critical Theory Since Plato* ed. Hazard Adams (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 321. See also Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), esp. chaps. 7 and 8.
20. Richard Eldridge, *On Moral Personhood: Philosophy, Literature, Criticism and Self-Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 20.
21. Martha Nussbaum, "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy," *New Literary History* 15 (1983): 43.
22. See my "Moral Pluralism."
23. Richard W. Miller, "Truth in Beauty," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 317–25, argues that truth is sometimes aesthetically relevant, since the "aesthetic goals of some works include the combination, in appropriate ways, of the true depiction of certain aspects of reality with other, exclusively and uncontroversially aesthetic virtues" (319). If there are ethical truths, this would yield a cognitivist defense of the relevance in certain conditions of the depiction of ethical truths to aesthetic worth. Miller's piece is important, since it seeks explicitly to meet the relevance problem, and his strategy shares some features with that advanced in the present essay though it differs in an important respect in appealing directly to truth rather than to merited responses. But given his stress on the fact that it is not the truth of ideas per se that is aesthetically relevant, but their cognitive manner of expression, his approach appears to yield the result that if immoral views (such as Baudelaire's sexism) are well expressed in his poems, then their immorality does not constitute an aesthetic defect in the poems (322). Thus, the position yielded by Miller's argument is incompatible with ethicism and, given the argument for ethicism advanced later, is to be rejected as it stands.
24. The notion of prescribing imagined feelings is to be found in Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), chap. 7.2. The claim that actual feelings can be prescribed is defended by Richard Moran in "The Expression of Feeling in Imagination," *Philosophical Review* 103 (1994): 75–106. I am indebted at several points in this section to Moran's discussion.
25. For defenses of the view that real emotions can be felt toward events known to be merely imagined, see Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Hor-*

- ror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 60–88, and Patricia Greenspan, *Emotions and Reasons: An Inquiry into Emotional Justification* (New York: Routledge, 1988), esp. part I.
26. For cognitive-evaluative views of responses, see Greenspan, *Emotions and Reasons*; Robert C. Roberts, "What an Emotion Is: A Sketch," *Philosophical Review* 97 (1988): 183–209; and Elijah Millgram, "Pleasure in Practical Reasoning," *Monist* 76 (1993): 394–415.
27. See, e.g., Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, 241–55; and Gregory Currie *The Nature of Fiction* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), chap. 5.
28. Compare Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*.
29. A point I owe to Kendall Walton. See his "Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 68 (1994): 27–50, for an irrealist discussion of the ethical criticism of art.
30. I owe this point to Jerrold Levinson.