

ART, MORAL VALUE, AND SIGNIFICANCE

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To Mum & Dad, Chloe, Diane, Richard, and Denis, thank you for everything.

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Abstract

Debate concerning the relationship between ethics and aesthetics has re-emerged in contemporary aesthetic literature. All of the major contemporary positions, I argue, treat this relationship as existing between the 'moral value' of art and its aesthetic value. Throughout this thesis I analyse the various 'value-based' positions (ethicism, moderate moralism, and contextualism) and examine whether their accounts of this relationship hold. My aim is to explore whether an alternative account — in which the aesthetic value of art can be enhanced or negated through its 'moral significance', rather than its 'moral value' — is plausible. I argue, that given the failure of these value-based positions we should favour a 'significance-based contextualist' approach that is better equipped to account for the complexity of both our engagement with art, and the moral reflection that it invites.

1. Introduction

There has long been debate over the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. Much of this concerns the extent, if any, by which these two realms of enquiry interact. One particular question that has, for the last two thousand years, failed to reach any kind of acceptable resolution concerns whether or not the value of art — or what we now commonly refer to as its ‘aesthetic value’ — is any way affected or constituted in part by its ‘moral value’.

Traditionally, both Plato’s *The Republic* and Aristotle’s *Poetics* have shaped the rhetoric and debate to which this relationship has given rise. Yet arguably the most important work to directly address this issue came in the form of David Hume’s *Of the Standard of Taste*, in which he laid down the mantle that has recently been influential in grounding a number of well formulated positions (Gaut, 1998, 2007) (Carroll, 1996, 1998, 2000a, 2003, 2006) (Kieran, 1996a, 2001, 2006a, 2006b, 2010) (Jacobson, 1997, 2007) which defend the claim that the moral value of art can indeed constitute part of its aesthetic value.

Further debates surrounding the notion of what constitutes ‘aesthetic value’ have also seen the rise of an ‘autonomist’ position, which stands in direct contrast to the moralism defended by Hume and his contemporaries. Influenced by the works of philosophers such as Clive Bell and Arnold Isenberg, autonomism holds that the concepts of moral value and aesthetic value remain distinct at all times, with one never directly affecting or constituting the other.

This thesis will offer an account of the debate as it currently stands. I will begin by offering an overview of the outlying positions (radical moralism and radical autonomism) with the purpose of setting the limits of the debate. An account of moderate autonomism (Anderson & Dean, 1998), arguably the strongest position in favour of such a view, will then be outlined and examined. The third chapter will explore and criticize a cognitive argument commonly defended by the moralist positions, with the aim of showing that moderate autonomism can, to an extent, be refuted, and the moralist argument can

advance.

However, this third chapter will also offer an alternative to the ‘value-based’ approach that, as it will be argued, is taken by the three major moralist positions (ethicism, moderate moralism, and cognitive immoralism).

This alternative position (Mullin, 2002, 2004) — which will be referred to as the ‘moral significance thesis’ — will be outlined with the aim of exploring whether or not, given the failure or success of the value-based accounts (that will be examined in depth in chapters 3, 4, and 5), the moral significance thesis might present a viable alternative for explaining the ways in which the moral perspectives of an artwork relate to its aesthetic value.

2. Autonomism

Currently, the debate surrounding the ethical criticism of art is framed by two opposing views. There are those who argue that the aesthetic value of art interacts with — and is affected by — its moral value (moralists); and there are those who firmly hold that moral value never directly interacts with or affects the aesthetic value of artworks (autonomists). The latter view, autonomism is a position that has strong ties with the aesthetics of Kant, as well as to later proponents of the formalism movement such as Clive Bell (1914) and Roger Fry (1920). However with both the decline of formalism and the recent resurgence of ethical criticism, there have been few attempts to clearly outline and defend the autonomist thesis¹. James Harold correctly points out that as a result, autonomism has been “defined largely by its critics” (2011, p. 137). Indeed, arguments both for and against autonomism in its various forms are often presented as quickly as those seeking to advance moralist arguments reject them, with few thorough accounts offered (Gaut, 2007) (Carroll, 2000a)

This chapter will begin by briefly examining two views: radical moralism, the thesis that

1 In the recent literature I am only aware of three direct attempts to defend autonomism, see Anderson, James C., and Dean, Jeffrey T., “Moderate Autonomism”, (1998), Dickie, George, “The Triumph in Triumph of the Will”, (2005), and Harold, James, “Autonomism Reconsidered”, (2011).

the value of art is reducible to its moral value; and radical autonomism, which alternatively holds that that moral value of art is not a legitimate aspect of its evaluation, and therefore never counts towards its value. Although neither of these two positions is seriously defended in the contemporary debate, they represent the polar extremes of both the autonomist and moralist arguments and offer valuable insights into the nature of the current debate. These positions will be briefly outlined and some reasons for our rejecting them will be discussed. A positive account of a 'moderate' autonomist position more recently defended by Anderson and Dean (1998) will then be offered. Moderate autonomism holds that the moral value of art *is* a legitimate aspect of its overall evaluation, but that this moral value never interacts with or affects the aesthetic value of an artwork. It will be argued that this form of autonomism offers the strongest opposition to moralism. Finally, some problems for this moderate position will be identified and discussed.

2.1. 'Radical Moralism' and 'Radical Autonomism'

Radical moralism is the thesis that the overall value of art is ultimately reducible to its moral value. Although this position fails to find any serious defenders in the contemporary debate concerning ethical criticism, historically the works of both Plato and Tolstoy have been linked to radical moralism.

One of Plato's major criticisms of art held that its expressive power was so strong that the ideal state would do well to censor it; Plato's censorship of art was in his view necessary to avoid the ethical corruption of those who came into contact with it. Berys Gaut points out that Plato's condemnation of art — which was at the time an important source of classical Greek education (Allen, 2002) — directly challenged the fundamental notion that the relationship between poetry and ethics was a positive one (Gaut, 2007, p. 3). Story-telling was especially prominent in the education of young Greeks, and it is here that Plato believed we should exercise caution by supervising, or to put it bluntly, censoring, the production of such stories (*The Republic*, 377c, 378e). For Plato, the ethical value of art superseded all other art relevant values. Furthermore, Plato argued that the more artistically pleasing a work of art was, the more powerful its corruptive influences could become. He wrote:

We shall ask Homer and the rest of the poets not to be angry with us if we strike out these passages, and any others like them. Not that they lack poetic merit, or that they don't give pleasure to most people. They do. But the more merit they have, the less suitable they are for boys and men who are expected to be free, and fear slavery more than death. (*The Republic*, 387b)

The passages Plato referred to above are those held to be either “untrue”, or which misrepresent the nature of things; for example, the mythologies of Homer and Hesiod were condemned as being ones that give “the wrong impression of the nature of gods and heroes” (*The Republic*, 377e). Plato explicitly attacks artists who present the gods as being, or performing any action, that is anything other than “good” or “right” (*The Republic*, 380c). Importantly, Plato’s fear of the moral debasement that art could inflict upon the youth of his perfect state was one borne out of respect for art’s power. He held that “[...] rhythm and mode penetrate more deeply into the inner soul than anything else does; they have the most powerful effect on it, since they bring gracefulness with them” (*The Republic*, 401e). However, because Plato held the instrumental moral value of art to be the overriding factor in its evaluation *qua* art, his position can be subsumed under the radical moralism banner: works that are morally praiseworthy are valuable as art, while unethical works are not valuable, regardless of their other artistic merits. Plato’s moralist views found later support from Tolstoy, who — in his infamous *What is Art?* — defended a similar ideal that effectively confined the value of art to its ability to “unite all men” through the “transmission” of proper moral and spiritual feelings (1904, p. 192). Tolstoy valued art’s ability to evoke emotion; however, like Plato, he argued that with this ability came a great responsibility. He wrote, “Art is not a pleasure, a solace, or an amusement; art is a great matter. Art is an organ of human life, transmitting man’s reasonable perception into feeling” (1904, p. 210). Furthermore, Tolstoy counted only art that “transmits” these “universal feelings” as being valuable. Regarding his vision for the “future” of art, he wrote:

[...] art transmitting feelings flowing from antiquated, worn-out religious teaching, - Church art, patriotic art, voluptuous art, transmitting feelings

or superstitious fear, of pride, of vanity [...] will be considered bad, harmful art, and will be censured and despised by public opinion" (1904, p. 193).

For both Plato and Tolstoy the value of art existed almost entirely in its capacity to act as a vehicle for moral and intellectual enlightenment. Both identify an element of art that we would now call 'aesthetic'. For Plato these existed in the "rhythm" and "mode" utilized by story-tellers (*The Republic*, 401e); while Tolstoy spoke of "form", and more specifically, the capacity for his 'future-art' to convey feeling briefly, simply, and clearly (1904, p. 197). However, in keeping with the thesis of radical moralism, both Plato and Tolstoy argue that the positive or negative moral effects of art are the overriding factor in its overall value.

Unsurprisingly, radical moralism has been heavily criticised. Its claim that the value of artworks is "reducible" to moral value (Kieran, 2006b, p. 56) stands in direct opposition to both contemporary autonomist and moralist accounts of ethical criticism. Both allow for a plurality of values: such as aesthetic, moral, cognitive, historical, and political value, to count towards the evaluation of art (Anderson & Dean, 1998) (Dickie, 2005) (Gaut, 2007) (Carroll, 2010). It should, however, be taken into consideration that Plato's goal in *The Republic* was very different from the goals of either autonomism or moralism as they stand today. Plato was far more interested in the instrumental effects of moral and immoral art, and less interested in the nature of the relationship between moral and aesthetic value; yet his claim that art containing "poetic merit" is more morally dangerous *by virtue* of what we would later call its 'aesthetic' qualities is one that implies such a relationship. Plato's argument regarding both the perceived effects of art on our moral education, and the need for state censorship of 'dangerous' or 'immoral' art, frames an important yet distinct issue from the one currently at stake between autonomism and moralism, with the former being concerned primarily with the effects of art, and the latter being concerned only with the relationship between moral and aesthetic value. Tolstoy was much like Plato in that he saw the value of art as being tied to its ability to "transmit" feelings and ideas. However Tolstoy was more optimistic in his vision than Plato, with his art of the future playing an increasingly positive role in the "union" of mankind, and negative or harmful works of art being self-censored through "public

opinion” rather than by some imperialistic third party (Tolstoy, 1904, p. 193). However it can be reasonably argued that there are many works of art which possess no moral dimension whatsoever. Carroll writes, “Much pure orchestral music as well as many abstract visual designs and decorations count as art, but they promote no ethical viewpoints and, therefore, are not susceptible to ethical evaluation” (Carroll, 2000a, p. 352). If Carroll is correct here, then Plato and Tolstoy would likely see little or no value in these particular works of art; this is an evaluation that stands in clear opposition to our current intuitions about these kinds of artworks. We can, and do, value the kinds of artworks that Carroll points to even if these *are* devoid of moral value; it therefore seems plausible to claim that their value must lay elsewhere. Exactly where this value *does* lie is contentious, but we need only to admit that it exists somewhere outside the moral sphere of value to show that the claim of the radical moralists is untenably strong.

Standing in direct contrast to radical moralism is the thesis of radical autonomism. Radical autonomism holds that the moral value of art is *never* a legitimate aspect of its evaluation, and therefore *never* contributes to its value as art. Furthermore, it stands in direct opposition to the radical moralist thesis as outlined above, which holds that moral value supersedes all others in our evaluation of art.

Our best account of radical autonomism comes from the work of Clive Bell, who, in *Art* (1914), proclaimed that “significant form” was not only the *essential* property present in all works of art, but furthermore that it was the *only* property by which art could be coherently evaluated (p. 6). Thus, Bell pursues a highly restrictive argument for formalism by claiming not only that the value of art lies outside any other domain of value, but also that it makes no sense whatsoever to hold art up against moral, cognitive, historical, or political value. Autonomism looks to fall out of formalism, and indeed Jacobson lists it as one of its central tenets (1997, p. 157). But where more moderate formalists argue for the autonomism of art on the grounds that the “ulterior” value of art has no bearing whatsoever on its “aesthetic value” (1997, p. 157), Bell’s radical thesis argues instead that it is simply inappropriate to evaluate art by anything other than its significant form (1914, p. 6). Furthermore, one need not reject formalism to argue against autonomism — although many do — and in chapter 4 we will see that Carroll goes some way in attempting to reconcile the formalist conception of aesthetic value and the claims of

moralism.

For Bell, significant form consisted of the combination of lines and colours that were able to produce what he called an “aesthetic emotion” in the viewer (1914, p. 6). He argued that only the grasping of the significant form alone could produce this aesthetic emotion, and that such an emotion was only likely to be found in art². It can be argued that Bell’s argument is circular in that he asserts significant form as being capable of producing an aesthetic emotion, yet defines the former primarily by its being able to produce the latter. However, as McLaughlin (1977) points out in Bell’s defence, Bell is attempting to distinguish between two kinds of emotion that he takes to be strictly distinct from one another: “aesthetic” emotion and “life” emotion (p. 434-5). Thus Bell is arguing for a notion of form as an “end in itself”, rather than one which opens us up to ‘feel’ things that we might do in our experience of the actual world (1977, p. 435-6). This being said, Bell does little to explain or clarify this view.

While Bell granted that certain works could “suggest” emotion or “convey” information, he maintained that such works do not count as art (1914, p. 8). For an object to be considered ‘art’, Bell argued that we must be moved by the significant form itself and not simply by the ideas or information suggested or conveyed by this form. He writes: “The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant. For, to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions.” (1914, p. 10). He claimed that all we must bring was, “[...] a sense of form and colour and a knowledge of three-dimensional space” (1914, p. 10). Bell’s latter claim leaves no room for the content of art to count towards its value. Content may of course be linked to the form of a work, for example: the overall unity of the lines, colour and use of three-dimensional space utilized in painting an elephant will be tied directly to what is represented. However, for Bell *what* is represented plays no role in the value of the artwork.

Roger Fry (1920) is to an extent sympathetic towards Bell’s notion of significant form. However, he asserts that Bell’s dismissal of content and meaning from his vision of art’s

² Bell admitted that certain people might have what seems like an “aesthetic emotion” towards nature. However, he believed that this phenomenon was only similar to, and not the same as the aesthetic emotion produced by works of art (1914, p. 7)

value is surely in error. Fry argues instead that, although the “meaning” and the “form” of a work are likely to produce distinct emotional responses the value of art, and what Bell describes as ‘significant form’, must be more than “harmonious patterns” and “agreeable arrangements of form” (1920, p. 167). Fry states, contrary to Bell, that significant form must exist in the “expression of an idea” rather than merely with the creation of a “pleasing object” (1920, p. 167). However, like Bell, Fry has little more to say regarding the exact nature of this significant form; his main objection towards Bell’s original conception of the term being that spectators able to focus *purely* on the formal features of an artwork are exceedingly rare (1920, p. 166).

Bell defends the claim that the form and the content of an artwork are distinct entities, and that only the former counts with regard to the evaluation of art. It follows for Bell that to evaluate an artwork in terms of its moral, political, or cognitive value is to evaluate the work in question as being something other than art. Addressing the ethical case specifically, Bell states: “You may, of course, make ethical judgements about particular works, not as works of art, but as members of some other class, or as independent and unclassified parts of the universe [...] In such a case you will be making a moral and not an aesthetic judgement.” (1914, p. 31). It should be restated here that radical autonomism is closely tied to the extreme nature of Bell’s formalist thesis. This thesis holds that the only *essential* and therefore relevant feature of art is significant form, which can be identified only through our knowledge of form, colours and three-dimensional space. Bell’s brand of autonomism is radical because it holds not only that the moral value of art has no bearing upon its aesthetic value, but rather that the moral evaluation of *art* is entirely inappropriate altogether.

Rejection of Bell’s extreme formalism has led radical autonomism to be likewise rejected. Objections have especially been levelled against Bell’s claim that the value of artworks rest upon their significant form alone, without any further appreciation being given to the representations, ideas, and themes that many works offer. While Bell’s conception of significant form — as well as the radical autonomism that it establishes — might be appealing by virtue of the way that it attempts to provide an explanation of the essential aesthetic features which may prevail in purely *visual* or *audible* art forms such as painting, sculpture, or classical music, significant form is unable to properly account for other

forms of art, including narratives. Carroll argues, contrary to Bell's earlier claim regarding the insignificance of content in our evaluation of artworks, that we *must* bring certain kinds of understanding and knowledge with us when appreciating narrative art. He writes:

No storyteller portrays everything that might be portrayed about the story she is telling; she must depend upon her audience to supply what is missing and a substantial and ineliminable part of what it is to understand a narrative involves filling in what the author has left out [...] Furthermore, what must be filled in this way comes in all different shapes and sizes, including facts of physics, biology, history, religion and so on (1996, p. 225).

By Carroll's view, not only do we utilise our own knowledge to fill-out narratives — by for example, presupposing that Hamlet is human, or has a heart, brain, and kidneys, although Shakespeare does not specifically point this out to us — we also bring with us a kind of knowledge which concerns human psychology. Carroll calls this “folk-psychological” knowledge (1996, p. 225). Such knowledge, he argues, allows us to understand why a character in a narrative may despair and weep when his love towards another is unrequited, as it allows us to infer the psychological states of characters and connect these states to circumstances and events within the narrative. In regards to the ethical dimension of artworks, of which, again, the radical autonomist holds to be inappropriate to the evaluation of art *qua* art, Carroll argues that in-fact the mobilisation of “moral emotions” is often integral to the intelligibility of narratives (1996). This view argues, for example, that it would be wrong to say that that we have understood or grasped *Oedipus the King* if we do not feel, or at least recognise, that pity and fear are emotions prescribed by the play.

Granted that many works of art deal with ethical, political, and social issues, if we accept Carroll's claim that many of these works require some form of ‘filling-in’ from the viewer, the rejection of the radical autonomist's thesis follows. This is because acceptance of such a thesis would result in many works being rendered unintelligible or denied status as art altogether. However, in arguing that we must bring part of ourselves to fill-out and make

sense of narratives, Carroll can only show that the content of artworks is relevant to our overall evaluation of art and not that this content is *aesthetically* valuable. His objection is therefore one that can stand against Bell's narrow account of formalism, but not against a more moderate account of autonomism that allows the content of artworks to count towards their aesthetic value.

Furthermore, it is possible that Bell might have argued that his account of significant form is only relevant to visual arts such as painting and sculpture, and therefore held that Carroll's objection regarding narratives are poorly aimed. Indeed, Bell does limit his argument to visual arts (1914, p. 6), although it is difficult to see how such an argument would strengthen rather than weaken Bell's claims. Narrative art including literature, film, theatre, and other performance based arts have a well established position in our conception of 'art'; and a theory which denied these practices 'art' status should only be considered a more impoverished view for doing so.

Although both radical moralism and radical autonomism are positions that should be rejected for their narrow accounts of aesthetic value, they do provide a kind of boundary in which the ethical criticism of art can occur. We should not accept, as the radical moralist does, that the value of art can be reduced to moral value, nor should we accept that the moral evaluation of art is always inappropriate. Fortunately, there is a more appealing version of autonomism that accepts both a broader account of formalism, and the legitimacy of ethical criticism.

2.2. Moderate Autonomism

Moderate autonomism is the thesis that the *moral value* of art is a legitimate aspect of its evaluation; however, it holds that this moral value remains distinct from and never directly affects the *aesthetic value* of an artwork. Unlike its more radical counter-part, moderate autonomism accepts that the moral dimensions of artworks are relevant in evaluating their 'overall' value as art. In doing so it absorbs the above objection levelled against Bell's formalism: that we must engage our moral knowledge in order to understand the content of art and make certain artworks intelligible. Instead, moderate autonomism readily grants this. Arnold Isenberg admits, "We are already moral beings

when we enter the theatre or open a book.” (1973, p. 276). Yet, in keeping with the autonomist tradition, the moderate thesis maintains that aesthetic and moral value are distinct, and that under no circumstances does a moral defect constitute an aesthetic defect, nor does a moral merit constitute an aesthetic one. Anderson and Dean, who have formulated and defended a more recent moderate autonomist thesis, state: “In short, both sorts of criticism are *appropriate* to works of art but the categories of moral [and] aesthetic criticism *always* remain conceptually distinct.” (1998, p. 153, my emphasis). As such, their account of moderate autonomism can be interpreted as holding that the ‘artistic’ value of an artwork consists of a plurality of relevant features, with aesthetic, moral, and cognitive elements all regarded as sub-sets, and legitimate candidates for the evaluation of art. However, the crucial claim of the autonomist position is that these other artistic values do not *directly* affect aesthetic value. They write:

In some instances the legitimate aesthetic criticism of an artwork can surround aspects of the moral subject matter of a work, i.e. the moral content of a work can contribute to or detract to the aesthetic aspects of a work. What distinguishes [moderate autonomism] from the views of [moralism], however, is our claim that it is never the moral component of the criticism as such that diminishes or strengthens the value of an artwork qua artwork [...] The conflicts are not within the aesthetic domain; they are between the aesthetic and the moral domains (1998, p. 153).

The challenge this statement sets for moralism is clear: where an artwork’s aesthetic value looks to be enhanced or deformed by its moral value, the burden of proof is on the moralist to show that it is the *moral value* that is responsible for positively or negatively affecting aesthetic value; Or, as Dickie (2005) claims, the moralist must show that the reason a work is morally and aesthetically defective is the same (p. 153). Anderson and Dean would allow, for example, that a novel’s exploration of morally felicitous or dubious perspectives might combine with the work’s formal and structural elements to offer an experience that we take to be highly aesthetically valuable. The mistake of the moralist, they would argue, is to claim that the moral value of the perspective prescribed by such a novel affects directly, to any extent, the aesthetic value of the work. While these distinct

spheres of value can play off against one another, they can never merge or overlap.

Anderson and Dean defend their claim that moral and aesthetic values remain separate by arguing that the moderate autonomist has a *prima facie* reason to suppose that these two values are conceptually distinct. Furthermore, they claim that rather than directly affecting one another, as the moralist argues, they sometimes “come into conflict” where the evaluation of art is concerned (1998, p. 151). Cain Todd puts this nicely, writing, “[...] it seems possible that a work’s moral defects could impair its aesthetic value, where this does not entail that the relevant ethical flaws in the work are *as such* aesthetic flaws” (2007, p. 217). Anderson and Dean argue that this supposition best explains the way we feel when we attempt to reconcile the alleged morality (or immorality) of an artwork, with its aesthetic success or failure (1998, p. 164). Due to this *prima facie* distinction they claim the burden of proof lies with the moralist to show that the moral value can directly affect its aesthetic counterpart. This claim is convincing to the extent that we seem to, more often than not, treat matters of aesthetic and moral value as separate as we go about our everyday lives. We might, for example, refuse to buy a suit that is on inspection both handsome and excellently tailored, if we find out that it was produced using child labour; but we would not take the suit to be less handsome or well tailored on account of its immoral production. Instead, either our fashion sense will win out over our moral concern, or the other way around. So why should it be any different where art is concerned? What reason do we have to think that these two kinds of distinct kinds of values will overlap rather than measure up against each other? Some answers will hopefully be provided in the following chapters, however for now it is enough to say that Anderson and Dean consider the ball to be squarely in the moralists’ court.

As for Anderson and Dean’s claim that maintaining a clear distinction between moral and aesthetic value will “best explain” cases where these two kinds of value seem to be pulling in different directions, their position indeed allows for an explanation which is simple, yet that at the same time attempts to account for much of the complexity that surrounds our evaluation of artworks. Rather than claiming, as moralism does, that the moral value of an artwork, under certain conditions, constitutes an aesthetic merit or defect, Anderson and Dean hold that in such cases the moral and aesthetic value of artworks contend with one another, pulling in opposite directions. For example, while

works such as Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom* might possess some aesthetic qualities, these are not diminished, but buried by the sheer immorality of the works attitudes. Similarly, Anderson and Dean point out that the aesthetic value of Nabokov's *Lolita* is often taken to eclipse what some interpret to be its morally dubious perspective (1998, p. 163). Arguing as they do, Anderson and Dean require no further mechanism to explain how these two kinds of value can make themselves present in our experiences with art. Much like the way the lyrics of a song can sometimes make it difficult to focus on the melody, their argument holds that moral and aesthetic value, although conceptually distinct, can come into conflict with one sometimes winning out over the other. Moderate autonomism is therefore a position which attempts to provide an explanation regarding the conflict between our "aesthetic interest" and our "moral convictions", rather than one that sees these two kinds of value as directly affecting each other in any systematic way (1998, p. 150).

It was noted earlier that autonomism seems to fall out of formalism, in that, if only the formal components of artworks are aesthetically valuable, then moral value — although it may influence aesthetic value by, for example attributing to the 'unity' or 'integrity' of the work — is not *in itself* aesthetically valuable or disvaluable. In addition, as Todd has argued, the plausibility of the numerous positions present in the ethical criticism debate is crucially hinged upon exactly what counts as being "aesthetically valuable" (2007, p. 217); yet Anderson and Dean fail to offer an account of aesthetic value in regards to their defence of moderate autonomism. While they do not explicitly endorse formalism they do seem to allude at times to a formalist conception of aesthetic value. For example, they explicitly count as aesthetic merits: "narrative structure", "camera work", "dialogue", and elsewhere make reference to an artwork's "[...] richly detailed and highly aestheticized formal features" (1998, p. 165). But, as formal features might only make up a part of what they consider to be aesthetically valuable, we should not tie them to formalism because of this alone. However, without a positive argument of aesthetic value moderate autonomism leaves itself open to both criticism and alternative accounts concerning the ways in which moral and aesthetic value might interact. Furthermore, Todd has suggested that Anderson and Dean conflate 'aesthetic' and 'artistic' values to the extent that they see the value of art *qua* art as being "equivalent to its aesthetic value" (2007, p. 218). If Todd's claim is correct, then Anderson and Dean's argument concerning the moral

evaluation of art seems to face some confusion. Moderate autonomism grants that moral value is a legitimate aspect of arts evaluation; however, if the value of art is purely the sum of its aesthetic value, then it is difficult to see how these moral evaluations matter at all. Instead, this suggests that evaluating art morally would be, as Bell said, to evaluate it as something other than art (Bell, 1914, p. 31).

However Todd's claim may be too quick. If, as suggested above, we understand Anderson and Dean's argument to be distinguishing between 'aesthetic' and 'artistic' values, then they are able to allow that while moral value can count towards an artwork's artistic value, it will not count towards the aesthetic value of the work. Seen in this way artistic value includes as a subset both aesthetic and moral value, with the *overall* or *all-things-considered* value of art being tantamount to this artistic value. One reason for thinking that Anderson and Dean implicitly endorse this distinction can be found in their earlier argument that the moral and aesthetic components of artworks can pull us in different directions. If, as they argue, the moral evaluation of art is appropriate to art (as is aesthetic evaluation), and if as they also argue "[...] In the case of [some] works [...] what makes them so fascinating – *beyond* their command of narrative structure, and character development, and skill with language – is that while their moral perspectives are alien, the works are (perhaps disturbingly) commanding" (1998, p. 166); then there must surely be some sense in which both the moral and aesthetic spheres of value are contributing to some wider notion of artistic value. Furthermore, Anderson and Dean's claim that in some cases an artwork's moral value can 'override' its aesthetic value, or vice versa, indicates that they would be apt to evaluate works such as *120 Days of Sodom* to be artistically disvaluable in that the immoral perspective of the work buries the aesthetic element, yet still consider the work to be aesthetically valuable to some extent.

By any means, Anderson and Dean's failure to explicitly provide an adequate account of aesthetic value, or to clearly distinguish between aesthetic and artistic value, must be seen as a problem for moderate autonomism. Such an account is especially necessary if Anderson and Dean expect to shift the burden of proof to rest entirely with the moralists. Furthermore, while moderate autonomism provides a clear and simple explanation of how moral and aesthetic value can come into conflict, or alternatively, work in unison, its failure to properly define the latter domain of value opens their account to various

moralist accounts of how this kind of interaction occurs.

Now that the moderate autonomist position has been outlined we have an account against which we can measure the relative strength of the moralist positions that will be examined in the following chapters. The following chapter will examine a particular line of argument that forms a 'common ground', in that it is endorsed, to some extent, by all of the major moralist positions.

3. Art and Cognitive Value

The point of contention between moderate autonomism and moralism concerns whether or not the moral value of an artwork is ever relevant to, or constitutes a part of, its aesthetic value. In the previous chapter we saw Anderson and Dean present a case for the negative view, concluding that while moral and aesthetic values sometimes "come into conflict" with one another, the former never *directly* affects or constitutes the latter. Moralists have attempted to deny moderate autonomism by arguing that the cognitive and moral understanding manifested by artworks is not only artistically, but also aesthetically valuable. This brand of 'cognitive moralism' generally rests upon three common claims; the 'concept claim' that art, and our evaluation of it often utilizes cognitive concepts and terms (Kieran, 2006a), (Gaut, 2007), (Carroll, 1998); the 'understanding claim' that art can manifest moral understanding and convey insights (Kieran 2006a, 2006b), (Carroll, 1998, 2003, 2000a, 2002), (Gaut, 2007), (Jacobson, 1997); and the 'prescribed response claim', that art often aims at eliciting responses that rest upon cognitive and/or moral assumptions (Kieran, 2006a, 2006b), (Carroll, 1998, 2000a 2006, 2008), (Gaut, 1998, 2007). For these cognitive moralists the understanding manifested by artworks and the moral value of their content sometimes constitutes or directly affects the aesthetic value of those works. Throughout this chapter these claims will be examined and a number of problems for cognitive moralism will be outlined. It will be shown that all of these accounts inevitably take as aesthetically valuable only those cognitive and moral features that are meritorious. An alternative account of the interaction between the moral and aesthetic properties of artworks will then be

considered; this account, which we might call the ‘moral significance thesis’, claims that this interaction does not rest squarely upon cognitive or moral ‘value’. The aim of this chapter is to examine and address the problems surrounding cognitive moralism, as well as to offer an alternative non-value based approach.

Before we proceed, it should be made clear what is meant by talk of ‘cognitive value’ and ‘moral value’. Cognitive value as defended by moralism is a matter of whether a work manifests understanding — which is cognitively meritorious — or misunderstanding — which cognitively defective — in regards to the moral attitudes it demonstrates. For example, we might say that the understanding of horror or despair manifested in much of Goya’s *The Disasters of War* series is cognitively meritorious, insofar as it sits nicely with the way in which we already understand both horror and despair. Goya’s choice of black and white, his focus on the abject, and his refusal to glorify or celebrate any victory, defeat, or military action leaves us with an account of war, famine, rape and mutilation that offers no glimmer of hope or recourse for the inherent violence of mankind. D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* can conversely be held to misunderstand this same notion of horror, as the object it presents as being abject is merely mixed race marriage; something that should not square with our own notion of ‘horror’. Furthermore, Griffith’s portrayal of the Klu Klux Klan as ‘heroic’ surely rests on a cognitive misunderstanding of the concept, as does the gross characterization of African Americans as being simple-minded and overtly sexualized.

Moral value as construed by moralism is measured by the praiseworthiness or blameworthiness of the moral perspectives manifested by works of art. For example, the moral perspectives prescribed in de Sade’s *Justine* — especially the inverted value of virtue and vice — would often be taken as being morally blameworthy, and therefore lacking moral value; while conversely the attitudes prescribed in *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* are likely to be taken as morally praiseworthy, and therefore morally valuable.

3.1. The ‘Concept Claim’

There is little disagreement surrounding the idea that cognitive concepts and terms are utilized in many works of art, as well as in the vocabulary that we use to evaluate them.

As Kieran points out, “[...] we often praise works as being profound, subtle, nuanced, insightful and true to life or condemn them as being shallow, superficial, banal, sentimental, unintelligible or false” (2006b, p. 62). Furthermore, to recall a claim presented in the previous chapter, Carroll has written that audiences must “mobilize their cognitive stock” in order to make sense of artworks (1998, p. 420). The idea here is that to grasp the content of many artworks, especially narratives, we must apply our existing knowledge in order to properly comprehend them. For example, it would seem unlikely that someone could properly grasp Shakespeare’s *Othello* without understanding the concept of jealousy, or fully appreciate Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* without some prior knowledge of betrayal, grief, and revenge. These claims have been taken by cognitive moralists to be evidence that the cognitive value of art is at the very least an appropriate object of its evaluation. However their aims extend further, and they wish to show that cognitive value is under certain conditions aesthetically relevant. Berys Gaut (2007), like Kieran, argues that our vocabulary of critical evaluation is to a large extent cognitivist. He writes that:

Much of the vocabulary of critical appraisal and its applications seems to show that the practice of literary evaluation is cognitivist: we praise works for their profundity, for being psychologically penetrating, for giving an insightful perspective on the world. We decry them for being shallow, distorted, inane or full of worn clichés (2007, p. 167).

Furthermore, he makes a leap from this claim that ‘the description of art has cognitive concepts’, to the claim that the ‘description is cognitivist’. He asserts that an “[...] appeal to some of the vocabulary of critical appraisal shows that our aesthetic evaluative practices are cognitivist; so cognitive values are, when employed in these kinds of evaluations, aesthetically relevant” (Gaut, 2007, p. 168).

Yet at this point the autonomist might interject. They could accept, as Kieran and Gaut have rightly pointed out, that we do often both employ cognitive terms and attend to cognitive concepts when we evaluate works of art. However, while accepting this they might still argue that in maintaining the distinction between ‘artistic’ and ‘aesthetic’ value the cognitive value of an artwork can be artistically, but not aesthetically relevant. As they

do with moral value, the moderate autonomist may claim that cognitive value is appropriate when evaluating the overall artistic value of an artwork, but not when evaluating the sub-category of aesthetic value.

Furthermore, they might object that in claiming cognitive value is aesthetically relevant, and therefore sometimes aesthetically defective or meritorious, Gaut has simply begged the question against moderate autonomism. Whether or not this is the case will be a matter of how aesthetic value is defined, and yet a quick look at Gaut's account of what he takes aesthetic value to consist of will show that the moderate autonomist is certainly justified to object on these grounds.

Indeed, Gaut has attempted to broaden the definition of aesthetic value to include many of the values that the moderate autonomist would likely classify as being 'artistically valuable'. His account holds that, "[...] the (wide) aesthetic value of an artwork *W* is simply the value of *W* qua work of art [...] the notions of (wide) aesthetic value and artistic value turn out to be one and the same" (2007, p. 34). Here Gaut is attempting to assert an account of aesthetic value that exceeds what he calls the "narrow sense" of the term, by which aesthetic value is simply measured in relation to particular species of 'beauty' or 'ugliness' (2007, pp. 26-7). He wishes instead to include in his broad account all terms, which are both "evaluative" and relevant to "art-critical practice", making special mention of Frank Sibley's list of aesthetic properties (2007, p. 34). However, even if we do agree that this "narrow sense" of aesthetic value is too restrictive we might still reject Gaut's "wide" account in favour of some middling, or alternative position. Again, the moderate autonomist would surely reject Gaut's account of aesthetic value as begging the question, as whether 'artistically' valuable aspects of artworks can be 'aesthetically' relevant, or whether they remain conceptually distinct is exactly the question at stake in the argument between autonomism and moralism.

Therefore, although we may employ cognitive language to evaluate artworks and utilize our existing knowledge to aid in our comprehension, it is not clear that this is sufficient to show that cognitive value is either aesthetically relevant or aesthetically valuable.

3.2. The 'Understanding Claim'

As well as claiming that “we are naturally inclined to speak of [art] in moral terms” (Carroll, 2003, p. 270) and that many artworks contain content that requires prior cognitive knowledge in order for us to comprehend them, moralists who are pursuing a cognitive approach to aesthetic value often claim that artworks can manifest moral understanding and other cognitive insights. Matthew Kieran for example answers the question of “What is art particularly good at?” by claiming that: “It uses artistic means to engage the imagination and thereby see things in a new light, make connections, [and] convey insights [...]” (2006a, p. 132). Similarly, Berys Gaut claims that artworks are able to manifest “understanding”, which he takes to include knowledge concerning morality, psychological claims, and values in general (2007, p. 138). And to the same end Carroll writes:

Providing genuine, eye-opening moral insight; exercising and enlarging the audience’s legitimate moral powers of perception, emotion, and reflection; challenging complacent moral doxa; provoking and/or expanding the moral understanding; calling forth educative moral judgments; encouraging the tracing out of moral implications or the unravelling of morally significant metaphors that have import for the audience’s lives can all contribute to making an artwork absorbing (2000a, p. 378)

Cognitive moralism holds that this manifestation of cognitive or moral understanding will be, under certain circumstances, aesthetically relevant. Nevertheless, accounts of exactly how and why this moral understanding is relevant to the aesthetic value of artworks differ between positions and philosophers. Gaut’s wide definition of aesthetic value leads him to claim that moral understanding is aesthetically relevant when it is “expressed by artistic means” (2007, p. 170); a process that he does not explain in any detail other than suggesting that it has something to do with getting us to “feel the force” of certain insights (2007, p. 85). Kieran argues, “[the] value of engaging with many artworks derives from the particularly powerful ways in which they can get us to imaginatively explore different possible attitudes” (2006b, p. 71). In addition, he holds that an artwork’s

aesthetic value can be enhanced in virtue of its ability to “deepen one’s understanding and appreciation” where moral perspectives are concerned (2006b, p. 72). Carroll also argues in favour of the idea that artworks can “clarify” and “deepen” our moral understanding, although he explicitly avoids the claim that we can gain “interesting, new propositional knowledge” through such an experience (2003, p. 283). However, as Carroll is concerned primarily with arguing that the moral understanding manifested by artworks can be an appropriate aspect of our evaluation, a point which moderate autonomism already accepts³, it is unclear whether he further holds that this understanding can be *aesthetically* rather than only artistically valuable.

Importantly, there are two distinct claims present in the above line of argument that need to be clearly distinguished. First there is the claim that artworks can ‘manifest’ moral understanding or present moral perspectives in ways that are insightful. We should take this first claim as focusing on the understanding presented in the artwork itself. Second is the claim that in manifesting or presenting such an understanding artworks can clarify, increase, or enhance the moral understanding of those who engage with them; a claim that focuses on the audience rather than the work. It should be clear that these two claims are quite different; while the first has to do only with the artwork, the second is focused upon the effect the artwork has on its audience.

Against both claims it may be objected that any moral understanding present in works of art can be reduced to mere truisms. Objecting in this way would be to hold that the moral perspectives manifested by artworks are not interesting, new, or insightful, but are instead simply perspectives that we are already familiar with. Someone objecting in this way might for example argue that the moral understanding manifested in Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* can be reduced to “racism is bad”, or that “women’s rights are important” is all that can be taken from Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. If this were truly the case, then the cognitivists’ claim that artworks are able to manifest moral understanding would still persist, but the value of this understanding would be greatly diminished. In such cases we might also reasonably expect that the ‘aesthetic value’ of these moral understandings will be diminished along with the understanding itself.

³ Carroll’s quarrel in “Art Narrative and Moral Understanding” (2003) looks to be with radical autonomism, and as a result he focuses his efforts toward arguing that the moral evaluation of art is sometimes appropriate. Of course, moderate autonomism readily allows this.

Furthermore, one could object that if, as some cognitivists explicitly state (Carroll, 1998, 2003), (Kieran, 2006a, 2006b), (Gaut, 2007), we must utilize our existing moral knowledge to attend to the morally relevant content of some artworks, then the understanding manifested by the work must be one that we are already familiar with, given that we are to be able to grasp it. If we were to accept such an objection then we might also therefore hold that art could not manifest any significant or valuable moral understanding, and, as a result, would also be unable to 'deepen' or 'enhance' our moral understanding. However, here the moralist might reply that such an objection surely rests on an unacceptably simplified account of how artworks go about manifesting and promoting their moral perspectives. The moralist might argue that although many works of art likely deal with moral concepts and perspectives of which we have at the very least a basic understanding, some works of art aim to explore these in greater depth. As such the moralist could claim that the two examples offered above admit only an impoverished account of the understanding manifested in those works; and they would be right. The respective claims of "racism is bad" and "women's rights are important" are surely trivial, but the way in which these artworks go about exploring and presenting these perspectives is not. As Lamarque writes, "[it] is not the theme itself that gives the interest but the way the peculiarities of the subject give life to the theme" (2007, p. 137). Therefore, although it may be the case that works of art utilize moral perspectives and content that we are already familiar with, the moralist can argue that the moral understanding in such cases is located not with the general moral proposition manifested by the artwork, but rather with the specific ways in which the artwork explores, presents, and communicates these perspectives.

Even if one is willing to accept that art can manifest non-trivial moral understanding, one might still then deny both the claim that such understanding is able to clarify, increase, or enhance our moral knowledge, as well as the further claim that this boon to our moral understanding would be aesthetically valuable. In regards to the thought that art can be morally edifying Christopher Hamilton notes that, "What one makes of art and whether it is relevant to one's moral experience and, if so, in what way, depends a great deal upon the kind of person one is" (2006, p. 42). For Hamilton what we take from art depends largely on how we approach it. Where some might treat art as an occasion for reflection

with the possibility of self-improvement, others may treat it as a purely pleasurable pastime. Hamilton warily concedes that “[...] *some* works of art (or *some* novels) can, for *some* people *some* of the time, contribute to their moral education [...]”; but he warns that while we might sometimes feel that art contributes to our moral improvement, it may in fact simply be contributing to something else⁴. (2006, p. 43, his emphasis). Even Kieran, who endorses the claim that “[...] imaginatively experiencing morally defective cognitive-affective responses and attitudes in ways that are morally problematic can deepen one’s understanding and appreciation” (2006b, p. 72) limits this by adding that “[what] one is capable of learning from experience depends in a part upon the level of moral understanding one is already at” (2006b, p. 73). The problem for cognitivism is that it must not only show that our engagement with certain works of art is *able* to increase or deepen our moral understanding, which is a contentious issue in itself, but must further show that such artworks are aesthetically valuable for providing such edification.

Given that we have very little by the way of conclusive empirical evidence regarding art’s ability to educate us on moral matters (Hakemulder, 2000), we may have at least a *prima facie* reason to be wary of the conclusion that art’s ability to convey moral understanding is aesthetically valuable. Furthermore, this of course does not deny that art *may* be able to educate us on moral matters — where “educate” is construed broadly — but rather suggests that if this process of edification is hinged heavily upon the individual rather than the work, then we should be cautious of the cognitivist claim that it is an *aesthetic* value of the latter. Of course, an objection grounded on an account of individual responses could also extend to the concept of aesthetic value in that we are prone to disagreement regarding which works possess this value, as well as where, and why they possess it. Yet, given that cognitive moralism is attempting to advance their position through a general claim concerning art’s ability to enhance or deepen our understanding, such an objection should at least be seen as limiting the strength of their claim.

⁴ Hamilton continues, “Art can make one’s life more interesting; can make one a more interesting person to talk to; can deepen one’s sense of life in various ways, for example, by helping one to understand one’s own and others’ motives; can provide so much pleasure that one feels light of spirit; can give one a sense of being in touch with people more interesting than those one happens to find around one; can help one become wittier, or more outrageous or self-assertive, or quirkier or more uninhibited; can deepen and expand one’s sense of order and thus feeling of freedom; and much else besides. But it is very easy to confuse these with becoming more virtuous” (2006, p. 43).

In addition, if we accept that art is able to clarify, increase, or enhance our moral understanding, one might then object that the value in such cases has to do with our 'having learned something', and is therefore purely instrumental. One could argue for example that the value of art *qua* art is intrinsic, and therefore that any attempts to value art for its educative purposes is only extrinsically valuable. Yet here the moralist might reply that the process of clarifying or enhancing our moral knowledge through our engagement with art is not well served by invoking the terms 'learning', 'educating', or any other term that describes this process as "consequence" of our engagement with art (Carroll, 2003, p. 285). Rather, they might argue that the edification provided by art comes as a part of the "comprehension" of the moral perspectives that it explores (2003, p. 285). Indeed, Carroll asserts that "[it] is not the function of art to provide moral education" (2003, p. 276), and in turn he argues for an account of moral "clarification" which holds that the process of deepening our moral understanding is "part and parcel" of the process of "comprehending and following the narrative" (2003, p. 285). What Carroll looks to be suggesting here is that while artworks do not directly *aim* to increase our moral understanding, the process of engaging with artworks and seeing their moral perspectives as an example of how morality can be applied to specific cases can increase our "familiarity" with concepts, as well as allowing us to "draw" or alter "connections" between these concepts (2003, p. 284).

However, even if this process is a part of the comprehension of the work it may be that we should still only then value the understanding manifested in the work itself, and not whether it contributes to the deepening, or enhancement of our own moral understanding. Many works of art arguably do not set out specifically to educate or impart knowledge even when they may manifest moral understanding. On these grounds one might object, particularly if their conception of aesthetic value is of a formalist persuasion, that to value such works for their contribution to our moral understanding is to value them for their instrumental value, that is, to value them not as works of art but instead as vehicles for education.

We might by this view differentiate between an artwork's 'manifestation' of moral understanding on one hand, and our 'uptake' of this understanding on the other. Here, the manifestation might be taken to be an aesthetic value of the work *itself*, while the

matter of 'uptake' is instead related to the way in which the individual engages and reflects upon the moral perspectives and understanding manifested by the work.

Thus, it seems that even if we accept that art is able to edify we might still reject the claim that its doing so constitutes an aesthetic merit. Instead, the moralist should accept that if artworks are indeed able to manifest moral understanding their cognitive value is situated with the way in which the work goes about manifesting this understanding, and not with the 'uptake' or educative outcomes themselves.

3.3. The 'Prescribed Response Claim'

Arguably the strongest claim developed in favour of cognitivism holds that artworks often aim at eliciting responses that depend upon cognitive and/or moral assumptions. This claim maintains that when artworks prescribe responses in this way the cognitive and moral content of the prescription is relevant in assessing whether or not the work succeeds in 'securing' the responses it aims for. Consequently cognitivism commonly holds that artworks manifesting cognitive and moral understanding are able to secure the responses they prescribe and are aesthetically valuable to that extent, while conversely, works that are prey to cognitive and moral misunderstanding fail to secure the responses they aim for and are aesthetically defective to that extent (Carroll, 1998, 2000a, 2006, 2008), (Kieran, 2006a, 2006b, 2009), (Jacobson, 1997), (Gaut, 1998, 2007).

This claim holds that an artwork prescribing an angry response towards a particular character must provide cognitive and moral reasons for us to respond as such; otherwise it runs the risk of failing to provoke our anger, and therefore failing to secure an aim of the work. For example, an artwork in which we are prescribed to respond with anger towards a character who commits some transgression could be seen as providing sufficient grounds for such a response, and may therefore be held by cognitivists as being aesthetically valuable for doing so; alternatively an artwork which prescribes the same response towards a character who has done nothing wrong whatsoever may fail to provoke our anger, and would therefore be taken by cognitivists to be aesthetically defective. In cases where artworks fail in this way, cognitivists generally agree that this constitutes an aesthetic defect as the work has failed to secure an aim internal to its

success (Carroll, 1998, 2000a, 2006, 2008), (Gaut, 1998, 2007), (Kieran, 2006a, 2006b, 2009). Daniel Jacobson describes this interaction between aesthetic and moral value as occurring when, “[...] artworks are morally and aesthetically flawed *for the same reason*” (2007, p. 348, my emphasis).

The thought that the responses mandated by artworks are to some extent reliant on their moral assumptions is not a new one, and its genesis can be traced back to the writings of Aristotle and Hume. Hume’s influence is particularly clear in contemporary arguments for moralism, many of which defend some form of the claim laid out in *Of the Standard of Taste* (1757) where Hume wrote:

[...] where the ideas of morality and decency alter from one age to another, and where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation; this must be allowed disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity. I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments; and however I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age, I never can relish the composition (2008, p. 111).

Aristotle’s views on tragedy are also influential where the securing of specific responses is concerned. In his *Poetics* he wrote that characters should be “good”, “suitable”, “lifelike”, and “consistent” in their actions if we are to respond with the emotions of fear and pity that are proper for tragedy (15: 1454a). Characters that fail to adhere to this schema, for example by being evil or unrealistic, will fail to provoke the proper emotions and will thereby thwart the responses aimed for by the work. We should not expect to feel pity for a mass-murderer, or feel fear when they are finally brought to justice; in such cases we would instead likely hold that the work in question has made some kind of moral error in expecting us to respond as such.

Both Carroll and Gaut hold that where works of art manifest moral misunderstanding in this way they are aesthetically defective. However, their reasons regarding exactly why this constitutes such a defect are quite different. For example Carroll’s argument concerning the aesthetic defectiveness of moral misunderstanding is empirically

grounded and holds that when artworks attempt to prescribe responses based on moral misunderstandings the audience will simply 'fail' or be 'unable' to respond in the way prescribed (1998, 2000a, 2006, 2008). Gaut (1998, 2007) on the other hand defends a normative argument, claiming that we have a moral obligation *not* to respond as prescribed when the response in question is grounded on a moral error. For both of these accounts, whether a work's prescribed responses are founded on moral understanding or moral misunderstanding can be translated into whether or not these responses are respectively morally 'praiseworthy' or 'blameworthy'. Therefore by these two accounts, artworks that prescribe immoral responses (blameworthy) will always be aesthetically defective, while artworks prescribing responses that are morally praiseworthy will be aesthetically meritorious (to that extent).

In this respect Kieran's account of cognitivism can be seen as a deviation from those defended by Carroll and Gaut. Kieran fills his cognitive account out in terms of "intelligibility" and "psychological closeness" (2006a, p. 135), allowing him to argue that artworks prescribing immoral responses are still able to be both cognitively and aesthetically valuable. Kieran writes that a work's moral perspective being "intelligible" is a matter of "[...] how plausible or psychologically probable, informative, explanatory, or insightful the understanding afforded through the imaginative experience is held to be" (2001, p. 35); while "psychological closeness" pertains to the manifested perspective of an artwork being able to "connect up with enough of our own attitudes and desires [...] such that we are able to respond to the works as solicited" (2006a, p. 135). Here what is of importance is not whether the moral understanding manifested by an artwork is morally praiseworthy or blameworthy, but rather that we are able to make sense of it (something that Carroll explicitly denies in the case of the latter). To offer one of Kieran's own examples: works like Greene's *The Destructors* may prescribe that we respond with glee and admiration towards the wanton destruction of an innocent man's property, and even though this prescribed response is immoral Kieran holds that it is manifested in a way that is "psychologically-close" to us (2006b, p69)⁵. Yet, although Kieran allows that morally defective perspectives can be aesthetically valuable, his argument for 'cognitive immoralism' maintains that here aesthetic value is constituted by the meritorious understanding that these perspectives are able to provide (2006a, 2006b). If Greene's

⁵ My treatment here of Kieran's example is purposefully brief, as I will return to it in chapter 5.

story had instead presented an unrealistic or incoherent account of how one might be persuaded to act in such a way, or why one might take pleasure in such destructive behaviour — perhaps by misrepresenting the psychology of the social ‘clique’ — then by Kieran’s account it would manifest a cognitively defective, and therefore aesthetically defective, understanding. In fact Kieran states this explicitly, writing, “[...] a work which promotes a false imaginative understanding of others and the world is disvaluable as art” (1996, p. 349). Consequently, Kieran’s account of cognitive immoralism should be taken to hold that artworks could be aesthetically valuable on account of their immoral perspectives, only if those perspectives are themselves ‘cognitively valuable’.

This is important as it shows that although cognitivists disagree in regard to whether or not moral defects or merits are always respectively aesthetic defects or merits, their arguments all share common ground in claiming that cognitive and moral *misunderstanding* is, when aesthetically relevant, always aesthetically defective, and similarly cognitive and moral *understanding* is under the same circumstances always aesthetically valuable. They can then be seen to hold that the moral *value* of an artwork is aesthetically relevant where this value is cast in terms of moral understanding or misunderstanding.

3.4. Moral Value and the ‘Moral Significance Thesis’

Although cognitivists make a strong case against moderate autonomism regarding the aesthetic relevance of cognitive and moral value, one need not accept that their account exhausts the ways in which these values might interact. An alternative position has been advanced (Mullin, 2002, 2004) in which, the ‘moral value’ of art does not constitute any part of its aesthetic value. Instead, this position argues that the moral *significance* of the attitudes and perspectives manifested by works of art is the important factor in determining the relationship between these two values. This section will begin by outlining the distinction that Mullin makes between ‘moral value’ and ‘moral significance’, before moving on to examine and offer some criticisms of the moral significance thesis (as it will be referred to).

The distinction between “moral value” and “moral significance” has been explicitly

defended over two papers by Amy Mullin (2002, 2004). Mullin acknowledges that the disagreement between moderate autonomism and moralism rests firmly upon the concept of moral value and the contentious issue of its aesthetic relevance. Furthermore she claims that this disagreement rests upon a conflation of the *value* and *significance* of the moral perspectives and attitudes of artworks and as such she seeks to untangle the two (2002, p. 137). Mullin explicitly denies the claims of the moralists who in adherence to the valence constraint claim that moral value is aesthetically valuable, and that moral defectiveness (being morally blameworthy) is an aesthetic defect. 'Moral value', as the term will be used henceforth involves our evaluations regarding the praiseworthiness or blameworthiness of the moral perspectives and ideas that are often manifested in works of art. For example, cognitive moralism would likely hold that certain moral perspectives said to be advocated for within Harron's film *American Psycho* — such as finding murder and dismemberment amusing — are, to put it simply, morally blameworthy (and therefore lacking moral value). Conversely, the moral messages and anti-slavery sentiments present in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are widely accepted as being exemplary ones (morally valuable). Again, in both examples the evaluation of the moral attitudes informs whether they are 'valuable' in the sense of their being either morally praiseworthy or blameworthy.

'Moral significance', however, disregards the 'value' of moral content focusing instead on the complexity, depth, and richness of the exploration and shaping of moral attitudes, ideas, and themes that artworks manifest. By this view it is possible for an artwork to advocate ideas that are morally valuable yet of no moral significance; ideas that are not morally valuable yet morally significant; or to explore ideas in a morally significant manner without advocating for any particular position. Returning to an example offered above; while *Uncle Tom's Cabin* can be reasonably interpreted to manifest moral attitudes that are praiseworthy and which also undoubtedly had both a tangible and positive impact on the anti-slavery movement, some have criticised the moral *significance* of the work. Richard Posner argues, "Uncle Tom's Cabin has not survived as literature — the only interest that it holds for us is historical — even though its author's opposition to slavery now commands universal assent." (1997, p. 7)⁶. Likewise, Gaut writes, "[...] there

⁶ Posner specifically argues against "ethical criticism", holding that the 'moral value' of an artwork never affects its aesthetic value.

are works such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which, though the ethical attitudes they display are admirable, are in many ways uninspired and disappointing" (1998, p. 182-3). It may strike some as intuitively strange to argue that an artwork, which had such a significant social impact by virtue of its moral message, could be accused of lacking moral significance. Yet, the idea of moral significance that Mullin advances is neither measured in terms of moral value or social impact, the latter being regarded as purely instrumental to the work's value *qua* art. Instead, the criticisms of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* rest on the notion that the work's moral message is explored in a banal and shallow fashion.

One question that needs to be examined here is whether or not we *require* a new concept such as 'moral significance' to properly capture the differences stated above. One might point out instead that the major difference between 'moral value' and 'moral significance' is not one of concepts, but merely one of objects; that is, in the former case the object of our appreciation is the moral 'idea' or 'perspective'; while in the latter case our appreciation is instead focused on the 'shape', 'exploration', or 'presentation' of this idea or perspective. If one were willing to accept that the fundamental difference between moral 'value' and moral 'significance' boils down to the object of our appreciation, then we might take Mullin's claim as being better expressed by holding that: the moral idea or perspective of an artwork is never aesthetically relevant, instead, it is the shaping, exploration, and presentation of these moral ideas and perspectives that links the moral and aesthetic categories together. Yet if one of Mullin's aims is to deny that aesthetic value is only enhanced by morally valuable exploration, then she might want to reject this object directed approach. This is because there are some (Stecker, 2005b), (Harold, 2006, 2008) who argue that the exploration of morally defective 'ideas' in ways that are "imaginatively or cognitively rich" is *always* morally valuable (Harold, 2006, p. 267)⁷. Therefore, Mullin's introduction of moral 'significance' could be seen as an attempt to keep the aesthetic relevance of an artwork's exploration, shaping, and presentation of moral ideas, and the possible moral value of this kind of exploration apart. If we were to argue, as Mullin does, that moral significance is aesthetically relevant while moral value is not, then it would suit our purposes to distinguish sharply between the two in a way that the object directed approach fails to do.

⁷ This will be examined further in chapter 5.

Mullin's view, which I will call the 'moral significance thesis' can be understood to defend the following claims: (1) the moral value of an artwork never directly affects its aesthetic value or constitutes an aesthetic defect or merit in the work (2002, p. 137-9), (2004, p. 255); (2) the moral significance of an artwork can affect its aesthetic value (2002, p. 137); (3) moral significance is aesthetically relevant by virtue of its ability to be new, novel, interesting, exploratory, or otherwise imaginatively engaging (2002, p. 140, p. 143), (2004, p. 255-6); (4) moral significance is distinct from questions regarding the 'value' of the moral or cognitive understanding that art manifests (2002, p. 137), (2004, p. 255). The aim of this section is to examine the moral significance thesis in light of these claims, as well as to investigate both: whether or not there is a need for the concept of moral significance, and whether or not we can, as Mullin suggests, completely separate moral 'value' from moral 'significance'. This will then provide a basis to explore whether or not the moral significance thesis provides a more plausible account of the interaction between the moral and aesthetic categories, than do the value based accounts defended by the major moralist positions (ethicism, moderate moralism, and cognitive immoralism). We will now turn to the claims that constitute the moral significance thesis.

Mullin's reason for holding (1) looks to be an endorsement of Anderson and Dean's claim that it is never the "moral component of the criticism as such that diminishes or strengthens the value of an artwork qua artwork" (1998, p. 153). However she explicitly denies their conclusion that as result moral and aesthetic criticism are "entirely distinct activities", holding instead that these kinds of evaluations can "overlap". Importantly, Mullin also denies the moralist claim that moral defects or merits *constitute* aesthetic defects or merits (Mullin, 2002, p. 139). Mullin should therefore be taken to be defending a position located somewhere between moderate autonomism, and moralism, whereby moral value does not directly affect or constitute an aesthetic defect or merit in an artwork, yet where as she writes, "intrinsic features of artworks that are morally significant are also aesthetically relevant" (2002, p. 137).

The strength of (2) inevitably relies on Mullin's ability to argue for claims (3) and (4), but in short it holds that the moral significance of an artwork can affect its aesthetic value. As she has already denied that moral value constitutes an aesthetic merit or defect her claim

might instead be taken to argue for some alternative relationship between aesthetic and moral value. She claims that “[...] a work may be morally significant because of its imaginative exploration of various moral ideas, emotions, and values” and further holds that “the work’s imaginative exploration of its moral subject matter should count as an aesthetic merit” (2002, p. 140). Moderate autonomism could at this point accept Mullin’s claim by arguing that the moral significance of artworks is aesthetically valuable by virtue of the eloquence of its expression, or the unity which the perspective provides for the work overall. They may argue that contrary to moralism whether or not the moral perspectives of artworks are morally valuable they may be both morally significant and aesthetically valuable for their contribution to these formal elements. However, Mullin is not solely concerned with formal aesthetic virtues of this kind but also with how the work addresses us as “moral agents” (2002, p. 144). Thus she claims the way in which artworks explore, present and ‘lay-out’ moral perspectives and ideas will play a role in our aesthetic evaluation of such works. For example, Mullin writes:

To succeed aesthetically, works that involve morally relevant subject matter need to manifest an understanding of the range of moral views people find familiar and easily accessible, and need to find ways to make less-familiar moral views also accessible to us so that we can adopt those points of view (whether immoral, amoral, or hypermoral) temporarily (2004, p. 255)

Here Mullin looks to be in accord with Kieran’s claim that the moral perspectives prescribed by works of art must be “intelligible” or ‘psychologically close’ (2006a, p. 135) if we are to respond as required, and indeed Mullin’s mention of ‘adopting points of view’ looks to be an endorsement of the earlier thought that a work’s success relies on some part with its ability to secure the responses it prescribes. In light of this Mullin can, to a certain extent, be seen as sympathetic to the cognitivist views outlined earlier in this chapter. However she departs from those accounts offered by Carroll, Gaut, and Kieran in that she does not necessarily hold cognitive flaws to be aesthetic flaws. Instead she claims that artworks that are cognitively flawed can still be aesthetically valuable when those cognitive flaws are either explored by the work in a complex and interesting way, or are themselves part of such exploration. Her suggestion here is that artworks can by their

very nature “circumvent certain demands of our intellect while engaging other aspects of it along with our emotions” (2004, p. 256).

Of course if the moral significance thesis is to hold Mullin needs to show that moral significance is at least sometimes aesthetically relevant. It is difficult to discern exactly where Mullin thinks such aesthetic relevance lies, as although she claims works that are “morally imaginative” (2002, p. 137) are to that extent aesthetically valuable, the details of how this relationship pertains are never explicitly stated. Her argument *could* be understood to follow a line similar to Gaut’s by which moral significance is aesthetically relevant when it is manifested through the artistry of the work (Gaut, 2007, p. 170). However, since such an approach is vague it tends to raise more questions than it answers.

More plausibly, Mullin could be taken to defend a complex relationship between aesthetic value and moral significance whereby the appraisal of one kind of value (moral) cannot then be imposed upon the other value (aesthetic). Rather, by this complex account, aesthetic value and moral significance may be seen as being to some extent *co-dependent* with the aesthetic value and moral significance of the work resisting separation. Such an account seems to fit nicely with a number of Mullin’s claims, such as that artworks like Riefenstahl’s *The Triumph of the Will* can be morally imaginative through their contrast of formal (aesthetic) elements and morally problematic perspectives (2004, p. 256); as well as her claim that the aesthetic value of some artworks lies to an extent with their ability to imaginatively explore moral perspectives (2002, p. 143, 2004, p. 255). Although Mullin does not explicitly endorse this complex view, others such as James Harold (2006) and Eileen John (2010) have suggested that this kind of account might best explain the relationship between the moral and aesthetic features of artworks. Harold claims that “Aesthetic judgements and moral judgements each take into account a set of considerations that overlap”, and continues to write: “Rather than saying that we make a moral judgement and then, on that basis, make an aesthetic judgement, or vice versa, it is more plausible to suppose that aesthetic judgements overlap in that they invoke *some* of the same considerations by appealing to some of the same qualities” (2006, p. 268). Similarly, Eileen John argues, “morality in literature may sometimes need to be acknowledged as morality-serving-the-needs-of-literature” (2010, p. 285). By John’s

view literature can sometimes be seen as ‘manipulating’ moral values or perspectives for the purpose of advancing the literary or aesthetic value of the work. John’s claim regarding the relationship between morality and literature has an important consequence for cognitive approaches that rely upon the ‘moral understanding’ of artworks to ground an aesthetic value; this will be addressed in the final chapter.

Importantly, both of these views posit a complex relationship between the moral and aesthetic contributions of the work, making it less plausible for us to think that we might be able to clearly separate the two. Furthermore while Harold’s argument is primarily concerned with the ‘moral value’ of the work, his discussion of the “morally salient” features of artworks which, he claims, are so “by virtue of [their] facilitating more or less sophisticated and reflective moral responses” (2006, p. 263), has much in common with Mullin’s notion of moral significance. For example, Harold and Mullin both agree that works which present us with moral perspectives (praiseworthy or blameworthy), yet which fail to explore these perspectives in any depth, will be neither morally ‘salient’ nor ‘significant’ (respectively). However, Mullin does not argue, as Harold does, that works offering a “complex” and “reflective” imaginative account of immoral perspectives may be, to that extent, morally praiseworthy (Harold, 2006, p. 266). Rather, Mullin claims only that these works will be both morally significant and to that extent aesthetically valuable. Simply put, moral significance is aesthetically relevant insofar as it is to some extent dependent on aesthetic value in the first place.

As noted earlier, Mullin seeks to make a clear distinction between moral value and moral significance (2002, p. 137). However it is not obvious that such a distinction, whereby the two concepts remain clearly separate, can be made. If moral significance rests, as Mullin claims, upon the way in which artworks are able to imaginatively explore particular moral perspectives, then surely the moral value of those perspectives must, at least in some cases, factor towards their moral significance — or lack thereof. The thought here is that it may just be that certain moral perspectives are simply too egregiously evil to be explored in any kind of intelligible or interesting way. For example, a novel advocating genocide, slavery, or rape might fail to explore its moral perspectives in a way that Mullin would take to be morally significant, just because the perspective of the work is irredeemably immoral; that is, there may be no intelligible or coherent way in which an

author might go about defending such practices. In such cases it seems plausible to hold that the moral value (or disvalue in this instance) of the work must contribute to their lack of moral significance. Mullin might of course object that such examples are merely philosophical constructs, and as such the likelihood of someone actually writing or publishing a novel of this persuasion, let alone its being taken seriously as a work of art, is effectively nil. Yet one need only look at works such as Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* to see that artworks defending perspectives that we take to be deeply immoral both exist, and can be plausibly evaluated, as lacking any kind of complex or imaginative moral exploration on account of their inherent immorality.

Of course, with works such as *Birth of a Nation* or *Triumph of the Will*, Mullin might also reply that their moral significance lies with the uneasy tension between their immorality and their other aesthetic features (2004, p. 256). However this seems to be less a reply to the above objection, and more an admission that the moral value of artworks can sometimes affect their moral significance. Indeed, if one defends the above view that the moral significance of such works lies with their interplay between aesthetic features and immoral perspectives, then it looks to follow that their moral value must form part of their moral significance. Therefore, while, in keeping with (1), Mullin might maintain that moral value does not constitute an aesthetic merit or defect within an artwork she may be forced to accept that moral significance is in some cases partly constituted by moral value. Furthermore, in keeping with (2), it might then be the case that moral value to some extent does have an effect upon the aesthetic value of artworks. Of course, if Mullin wishes only to deny that moral value *alone* constitutes an aesthetic defect then her overall argument remains for the most part unaffected. Rather, she should accept that moral value can at times limit or contribute to moral significance, while maintaining that as such, moral value will only contribute to the aesthetic value of an artwork when it either constitutes a part of its moral significance, or is a factor in denying the work of any interesting or intelligible morally significant exploration.

To conclude, while moralists attempt to advance their various positions by arguing that the moral value of artworks can directly affect or constitute part of their aesthetic value, on the grounds that the cognitive value — and especially the moral understanding manifested by certain works — is both aesthetically relevant and aesthetically valuable,

their arguments only find valuable, moral understanding that they take to be both cognitively meritorious and morally praiseworthy (or only the former in the case of cognitive immoralism). Conversely, the moral significance thesis holds that moral value never directly affects or constitutes an aesthetic defect or merit in an artwork. Rather, it holds that moral significance — which should be understood as being both limited, or partly constituted by moral value — best accounts for the complex relationship between the aesthetic and moral components of artworks. Furthermore, the moral significance thesis is not limited only to meritorious moral understanding, holding instead that where moral perspectives may be in the grip of some cognitive error, yet are explored in ways that are interesting, complex, and coherent, they will be to that extent aesthetically valuable.

In the following chapters three moralist positions will be outlined, and their arguments regarding the ways in which moral value might directly affect or constitute aesthetic value will be examined in depth. The aim will be to both: analyze the various ‘value based’ approaches and see whether they succeed or fail in establishing their claims; as well as to explore whether or not the moral significance thesis might offer a plausible, and alternative, account of the relationship between the moral content of an artwork and its aesthetic value.

4. Ethicism

According to Berys Gaut ethicism is the thesis that an artwork is: “[...] aesthetically flawed in so far as it possess an aesthetically relevant ethical flaw and aesthetically meritorious in so far as it possess an aesthetically relevant ethical merit.” (2007, p. 229). Thus, ethicism emerges as the most far-reaching of the moralist positions (except for of course ‘radical moralism’) inasmuch as it maintains that when aesthetically relevant, ethical flaws/merits are *always* aesthetic flaws/merits respectively. Bontekoe and Crooks elsewhere defend a similar position in regard to moral flaws, claiming: “[...] the expression of a bad moral vision does indeed constitute an *aesthetic* defect in a work of art, and that it is always necessary to judge a film, a novel, a painting or a poem to be flawed *as an art work*

because of its mishandling of moral themes.” (1992, p. 210). This strong view distinguishes ethicism from the allegedly weaker position of ‘moderate moralism’, (the focus of the next chapter) which claims only that aesthetically relevant ethical flaws *sometimes* constitute aesthetic flaws.

Ethicism maintains that although an artwork might be flawed or enhanced aesthetically on account of its ethical content, this does not imply that an artwork containing ethical defects will be ‘bad’, or that, conversely, an artwork which contains ethical merits will be ‘good’ (aesthetically speaking). Ethicism of the form advanced by Gaut is a *pro tanto* theory: moral defects are *to that extent* aesthetically defective and vice versa for moral merits (2007, pp. 63-4). It follows from being a *pro tanto* position that a work that is morally defective can still be aesthetically powerful, while works that we might evaluate as being morally praiseworthy can be aesthetically poor, overall.

Ethical defects and merits are considered by ethicism to be perspectives that are not merely *represented* within an artwork, but are rather *endorsed* or *advocated* by the work. In reference to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Gaut writes: “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 ethical thesis.” (1998, p. 188). Gaut’s point here is that although Milton shows Satan as being powerful and fascinating the attitude of the work condemns his actions as being evil, and because of this, ethicism holds that the work contains no moral defect. Of course, if Milton had instead failed to condemn Satan's actions, or had in some way advocated for them, the ethicist would likely be quick to point out a moral defect. Indeed, Bontekoe and Crooks remark: “Evil, accurately described, may disturb us intensely with its unmistakably human face, but it never recommends itself as something to be embraced.” (1992, p. 217).

Yet in light of the ethicist’s claims, let us consider an alternative example. While Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a society in which women are valued only for their reproductive capacities — a view which most of us would find reprehensible — the work does not in any way *endorse* such a view, and therefore ethicism would not (by Gaut’s account) consider the work to possess an ethical defect. Furthermore, *The Handmaid's Tale* could be plausibly interpreted as *condemning* the ethical perspective which it

explores, a point which would likely lead ethicism to evaluate the attitude of the work as being one which is, instead, morally meritorious. However, because ethicism applies only to works of art that exhibit moral defects — or merits — in the sense that such attitudes are endorsed or advocated by the work, it is therefore not in a position to evaluate works which simply explore, remain ambiguous, or refuse to either advocate for or condemn the ethical content they represent. This could be taken as a limitation of the ethicist position, as it simply does not apply to works of art that explore, or develop, moral perspectives without endorsing or advocating that we respond in a specific way. For ethicism to apply, a moral defect or merit arising from the manifestation or endorsement of a particular moral attitude must be present.

Recently, Berys Gaut has developed and defended ethicism in great detail, and so the following examination of this position will focus primarily on his account. In arguing for the establishment of the ethicist thesis Gaut has put forward three distinct arguments that together constitute his version of the position. These will be referred to as: the ‘moral beauty argument’, the ‘cognitive argument’, and the ‘merited response argument’. Of these three, the merited response argument is the most complex and controversial, and for that reason it will be discussed in depth further on in this chapter.

4.1. The ‘Moral Beauty Argument’

Gaut’s moral beauty argument unites two claims regarding the way in which we evaluate artworks. First, Gaut claims that the attitudes of an artwork constitute the psychological and moral “character” of a “manifested artist”. (2007, p. 107) He writes: “We can smoothly substitute, for talk of a *work* manifesting or expressing certain attitudes or views, talk of the *artist* manifesting or expressing certain attitudes or views.” (2007, p. 72, my emphasis). This manifested author is posited as being distinct from the ‘actual’ author of the work, with Gaut claiming that the attitudes *intended* by the actual artist, and those that are *actually* present are not always identical or compatible (2007, p. 108). For an artist might intend to offer an open-minded and sympathetic account of a character affected by a pressing social issue, but instead produce one that is biased and belittling. For example, by intending to produce a work addressing the prevalence of racism in the southern states of America, yet in doing so haplessly and unintentionally utilizing various

racial stereotypes in the crafting of characters and their actions. Gaut's version of ethicism maintains that this 'manifested artist' is the "core object" of our ethical encounters with, and subsequent evaluation of such works (2007, p. 107). Gaut writes:

[...] it is the artist's attitudes manifested in the work that are a central object of ethical assessment. And we can recast this statement in terms of assessing the character of the manifested artist. The manifested artist simply is the set of characteristics we would ascribe to the artist on the basis of the attitudes that he manifests in the work. If, for instance, he manifests sympathy and shows insight, then we can talk of a sympathetic and insightful manifested artist. And this way of putting the matter shows that a core object of ethical assessment of artworks is the character of the manifested artist. (2007, p. 108)

Gaut's notion of 'manifested attitudes' should, by his account, be understood broadly to cover "[...] characteristically affective states, such as showing disgust towards or approval of the characters, [and] also to cover the more purely cognitive states, such as presenting characters in such a way as to imply judgements about their being evil, good, inspiring and so on." (2007, p. 9). Gaut looks to be correct here, for in art — and especially in literature — discerning the attitude of the work plays a distinctive and fundamental role in how we will respond. Let us consider an example: novels often manifest different attitudes towards their villains and heroes in order to guide and often prescribe particular responses towards them; the former are often (but not always) presented in ways which invite us to view them as cruel, untrustworthy, or capable of evil (think Darth Vader, Bill Sikes, Nurse Ratched, Moriarty, Satan, and so on); while, heroes are more often (again, not always) presented as kind, amicable and worthy of our care and good-will (think Atticus Finch, Robin Hood, Superman, and Forrest Gump). When a work manifests certain attitudes Gaut holds this as being tantamount to the 'artist' manifesting those attitudes.

There are, however, many artworks whose characters, and their actions, refuse to fall squarely into pre-defined categories like those of 'good' and 'evil'. These are works in which the manifested artist refuses either to endorse or condemn the actions and nature of her characters, or alternatively, artworks in which the attitudes of the manifested artist

remain ambiguous. Consider characters such as Tom Ripley (*The Talented Mr. Ripley*), Patrick Bateman (*American Psycho*), Tyler Durden (*Fight Club*), or Humbert Humbert (*Lolita*). In cases such as these it is often difficult to discern the intended response of the manifested artist; we are unsure whether we are asked to condemn these characters for their immoral actions, applaud their knavery, or be amused by what is described. All of these seem to be live options, yet arguably, none of them seem to be explicitly manifested by the attitude of the work. Consequently, cases of this kind prove to be problematic for ethicism, for if one cannot interpret the manifested attitude of the work then one cannot properly evaluate the moral value of the work. In fact, the way in which ethicism defines moral 'defects' and 'merits' precludes the evaluation of works which refuse to endorse or condemn that which they represent, as the manifestation of a pro or con attitude is, according to ethicism, necessary for the existence of a moral defect or merit. In such cases ethicism refuses to offer any kind of evaluation.

Works that on the other hand remain 'morally ambiguous', in the sense that we are able to plausibly interpret a variety of different attitudes that could each be manifested by the author, must be dealt with by ethicism through either: claiming that they manifest a single, correct interpretation (critical monism), or allowing that they manifest a plurality of acceptable interpretations (critical pluralism). In the latter case, ethicism would be forced to relativise its evaluations on the basis of the various interpretations. For example, ethicism would be forced to argue that *The Talented Mr. Ripley* was morally defective and to that extent aesthetically defective, according to an interpretation of the novel that held the manifested attitude as being one of 'admiration and support' for Tom's actions. Conversely, ethicism would hold that the work was both morally and aesthetically meritorious, given an interpretation of the work that viewed the attitude manifested as being one of condemnation and disapproval where these same actions were concerned. And, of course were an interpretation to hold that the manifested author neither approved of, nor condemned Tom's actions, ethicism would withhold any kind of moral evaluation. Although the ethicist thesis can survive this kind of plurality, it certainly narrows the scope of the thesis and renders it, as Raja Halwani points out, less significant as a theory that aims to help in the evaluation of art (2009, p. 85). Ethicism might of course align itself with the former position and argue, in favour of critical monism, that there is only a single correct interpretation regarding the manifested

attitude of an artwork. However, as Gaut has elsewhere defended a form of critical pluralism (1993) we should assume that this is not the path taken by his account of ethicism. Instead, we should take both the problem of ethicism's relative stance concerning artworks that yield multiple interpretations, as well as its silence in regard to works that remain ambiguous, or fail to endorse or condemn their moral perspectives, as being indicative of a possible weakness in the ethicist thesis.

Gaut's second claim for the moral beauty argument states: "[...] moral virtues are beautiful [and] moral vices are ugly." (2007, p. 115). In combining this claim with the attitude of the manifested author as previously introduced, Gaut puts forward an argument for ethicism which holds that we can evaluate the character of such a manifested author to be either virtuous and therefore beautiful, or vicious and therefore ugly. Furthermore, because he holds that beauty is most certainly an aesthetic value, the first case constitutes an aesthetic merit, while the second constitutes an aesthetic defect. The claim that the artist's manifestation of a virtuous moral character is a 'beautiful' aspect of an artwork is crucial to the moral beauty argument. Gaut writes:

[...] a manifested artist with a morally good character has to that extent a beautiful character, and since his or her character is by definition manifest in the work, the work has to that extent a beautiful feature, and hence an aesthetic value. (2007, p. 115).

His basis for holding that a 'morally good character' can be assessed on aesthetic grounds comes via an observation regarding our everyday practice of using aesthetically evaluative terms in just this way⁸. Gaut begins by stating: "Talk of moral beauty and moral ugliness has been widespread in a heterogeneous variety of philosophical traditions, and that talk has not been meant metaphorically." (2007, p. 116). After calling attention to the tradition of equating the good and the beautiful that has often been patronized within philosophy, he intends to draw our attention toward common language. He suggests:

8 Colin McGinn establishes a similar moral beauty argument on these same grounds. See, *Ethics, Evil and Fiction*, (1997).

[...] the philosophical attraction finds an echo within common modes of speech. We may call someone who exhibits many moral virtues a beautiful person; we may say of a kind and generous action that it was a beautiful action; we may say of someone who has done something wicked that it was an ugly action; and so on [...] So within common speech and experience and also within the philosophical tradition there is much support for the idea of moral beauty. (2007, p. 117)

Colin McGinn, who defended an earlier thesis regarding the beauty of virtuous character, also made use of the common language example. His claim, compatible with Gaut's, is that when we utilize our aesthetic vocabulary to describe a virtuous character, "It can hardly be that whenever we say such things we are uttering outright falsehoods or making silly category mistakes." (1997, p. 99).

In assuming that we commonly talk of people as being 'beautiful' by virtue of their character, or consider a certain choice or action to be 'ugly', Gaut maintains that his moral beauty claim is — at least from the outset — intuitively plausible. However, some (Burke, 2008), (Stecker, 2008b), (Carroll, 2010) have questioned our tendency to employ aesthetic terms in our evaluation of character traits. Where Gaut sees these as being applied literally, some question whether their use might instead be metaphorical, or even misplaced. Burke asserted that the (metaphorical) application of beauty to virtue tended to "confound our idea of things". He continued: "This loose and inaccurate manner of speaking, has therefore misled us both in the theory of taste and of morals [...]" (2008, p. 111). Similarly, Stecker objects that our ascription of aesthetic properties to character traits could be either literal, metaphorical, or simply just "loose", in the sense that we may use such language to praise them "without a commitment to their possessing any further qualities [...]" (2008b, p. 200). Simply put, we might call people 'beautiful' or describe them as such without a commitment to the claim that they possess any particular aesthetic qualities. Furthermore, Stecker objects that Gaut both misinterprets the ways in which we may utilize our aesthetic vocabulary (creating a false dichotomy between 'literal' and 'metaphorical' usage), and that he also fails to provide an adequate argument defending his claim that virtuous character traits are 'beautiful' in an *aesthetic* sense (2008b, p 200).

Carroll (2010) offers a succinct way of expressing this particular objection, in arguing that Gaut's moral beauty argument engenders an equivocation. Carroll accepts that the term 'beautiful' can be used to demarcate an aesthetic property, but also suggests that the term can be used correctly in a manner equivalent to "*fine*" or "*excellent*" (2010, p. 252)⁹. Carroll's objection is therefore that Gaut invokes one specific sense of the term when he claims that character traits may be 'beautiful' (they may be *fine* or *excellent*), and another when he goes on to claim that character traits are therefore aesthetically relevant (the *aesthetic* sense) (2010, p. 252).

Gaut might be seen as providing a reply to this kind of objection, in writing: "[...] one should first note that the application of a term in a context is prima facie evidence of literal usage. Metaphorical employment is established typically by the evident falsehood of the phrase." (2007, p. 124). That is, unless our attribution of the term 'beautiful' is, when referring to a person's virtuous-character, evidently false, we should accept that our use of the term is literal or meant in an *aesthetic* sense. Unfortunately, the problem with Gaut's claim here is that while we possess widely accepted definitions where other common metaphors are concerned (such as that we can know a person is not *literally* a pig, although he may be one metaphorically), aesthetic terms such as 'beautiful' and 'ugly' are more difficult to pin-down. If I am to understand whether my calling someone's character "beautiful" is literal or metaphorical, I must first understand what kind of thing beauty is, and what it should *properly* refer to. It may therefore simply be the case that 'aesthetic beauty' does *not* apply to character traits and that our utterances in such contexts *are* purely metaphorical, yet without a clear definition and understanding of the concept of beauty itself the truth or falsehood of such utterances must remain a point of contention.

Ethicists further attempt to pump our intuition by drawing an analogy between our evaluation of virtuous character traits, and our evaluation of other non-perceivable entities such as theories, arguments, proofs, or ideas. It seems plausible that we can evaluate the latter list of entities as being 'beautiful' in an aesthetic sense, so why might we deny the aesthetic value of the former? Yet, it may be objected that the latter entities

9 Carroll refers to the notion of *kalon* that Socrates seeks in the Plato's *Hippias Major*.

all possess some *other* kinds of aesthetic qualities (Stecker calls these “lower-level aesthetic qualities (2008b, p. 200)) that can be offered as evidence — or at least support — for our calling them beautiful. For example, upon analyzing our attribution of ‘beauty’ to an idea or argument, we might point to other qualities such as ‘simplicity’, ‘clarity’, or ‘unity’ on which this attribution can be said to rest. Yet in the case of virtuous character, it becomes unclear as to whether such “lower-level” qualities can be found. If one accepts this objection then the analogy between virtuous character traits and other non-perceivable entities which, we accept as having aesthetic value, breaks down. If Gaut wishes to further defend this analogy, he must either deny that these lower-level aesthetic qualities are necessary, or offer an account of where they can be found in regards to morally virtuous character.

The objections outlined above suggest that Gaut’s moral beauty argument falls short of securing its conclusion. First, ethicism faces problems in discerning whether the ‘manifested artist’ of an artwork possesses a morally virtuous or defective character. These problems are especially clear in regards to artworks that remain ambiguous in their moral stance, as well as with artworks that can offer up a plurality of plausible interpretations. Second, Gaut’s argument regarding our common use of the terms ‘beautiful’ and ‘ugly’ fails to provide convincing reasons for why we should hold such utterances as being an attribution of *aesthetic* value rather than meaning simply *excellent* or *fine* as Carroll suggests. Finally, the analogy between virtuous character-traits and other kinds of non-perceivable entities requires that Gaut either give an account of how the former can possess lower-level aesthetic qualities, or provide reasons for why these lower-level qualities are not necessary.

4.2. The ‘Cognitive Argument’

As noted in the third chapter ethicism is defended, in part, through the claim that the cognitive value of artworks is under certain circumstances aesthetically relevant. With specific regard to the ethicist thesis Gaut formulates this cognitive claim as follows:

[...] an artwork is aesthetically good in so far as it manifests aesthetically relevant moral understanding (and conversely for aesthetic badness and

moral misunderstanding or failures to understand) (2007, p. 138).

Two arguments specific to ethicism are developed with the aim of establishing the aesthetic relevance of this cognitive claim. These are the 'cognitive vocabulary argument' (examined in the third chapter) and the 'replacement argument'. If we recall, the common language argument faced the objection that it begged the question against moderate autonomism, and should thus be not taken as sufficient for establishing the relationship between cognitive and aesthetic value.

Gaut's 'replacement argument' holds that when engaging with artworks, we consider the cognitive and moral understanding provided by the manifested artist to be an important aspect of our overall evaluation: furthermore, where this understanding is lacking or deficient we will consider the manifested artist to "lack a core literary [or artistic] skill" (2007, p. 166). His attempts to defend this claim focus on the intuition that if we were to 'replace' this understanding as it is manifested in the work with an account prone to misunderstanding, then we would inevitably evaluate the work as being *aesthetically* less valuable. Hence, the claim is that the manifestation of cognitive or moral understanding constitutes an aesthetic merit, while the manifestation of a moral perspective that is confused or incoherent will conversely constitute an aesthetic defect in the work.

Gaut asserts that we should accept that an artwork's ability to convey cognitive and ethical understanding is a matter of "considerable aesthetic importance." (2007, p. 166). To qualify this assertion he offers a literary example in William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*; a novel which reaches its moral and psychological climax when the reader learns that the main protagonist Sophie, was forced, on her arrival at a Nazi death-camp, to choose which one of her two children would be sent directly to the gas chamber. Furthermore, we learn that if she hesitated in making this decision both would be condemned to die. Styron presents this moral dilemma as being terrifyingly real, and its consequences as inescapable; eventually Sophie is utterly consumed by her decision (she chose her son, condemning her daughter to death) and takes her own life. Gaut argues that if Styron were to 'replace' the psychological and moral understanding manifested in the novel with some lesser account — for example, by showing Sophie as being indifferent or flippant in deciding which child she saves, treating it instead as a matter of mere triviality — the

novel as a whole would be aesthetically worse off for doing so (2007, p. 166). Gaut's point here is that, if by undermining the moral understanding manifested in *Sophie's Choice* we come to evaluate the novel as being aesthetically worse *qua* art, then we have a reason to accept the connection between aesthetic value and moral understanding. Yet exactly where this connection exists, and how it should be understood, remains open to debate.

Consequently, his argument seems to hold that if in undermining the moral understanding manifested in an artwork — through the replacement of some key feature of that work — we evaluate its overall aesthetic value to be diminished, then we should accept that the manifestation of moral understanding is aesthetically relevant (2007, p. 166).

One line of objection might proceed as follows: it is not so obvious that we are able to justify the comparison of an original work that proceeds with its perceived manifested understanding intact, to an exact replica of that work that is postulated minus this understanding (or with this understanding significantly sabotaged). This is because it is not obvious that we can accurately declare that these two works are the *same work*¹⁰; and in light of this, it could be objected that the initial appeal of Gaut's example is weakened. As Stecker writes, this kind of argument fails to show that a work will be improved or weakened by such alterations due to the simple fact that the 'work' "[will] not survive them" (2008a, p. 149). However, because the example offered above only intends to alter a single, albeit crucial, event outlining the major moral dilemma of the novel we might accept that it still maintains a modicum of intuitive appeal. Granted that, what Gaut is aiming for is the intuition that by replacing a 'real' and well-explored moral dilemma with a simple, indifferent, and altogether unexplained choice, the work will be aesthetically worse off through either its lack of moral understanding, or its reliance on a moral perspective that he regards as being incoherent.

However, a more promising line of objection could proceed by arguing that this alternate version of *Sophie's Choice* in which Sophie is either oblivious or cares little about the moral implications of her decision, is not aesthetically worse off due its apparent lack of psychological or moral *understanding*; rather, the work is aesthetically defective to the

10 Robert Stecker defends a similar claim in, *Immoralism and the Anti-Theoretical View*, (2008), p. 149.

extent that it fails to *explore* Sophie's ultimate decision in any complex or 'interesting' way. In other words, the objection is that what Gaut has removed from the original work is *not* its ability to convey moral understanding, but rather its ability to explore the decision in an interesting or valuable way. It is specifically his stipulation that Sophie's decision in this alternative account is a matter of "[...] comparative indifference, like choosing between which particular item on the menu one wanted for dessert [...]" (2007, p. 166) — coupled with the fact that this alteration is forcefully inserted into a work which is not specifically written with the aim of exploring this particular choice — that strips the work of any kind of moral interest or complexity.

This line of objection maintains that it is not the cognitive *value* that is aesthetically valuable within works of art, but is instead *the way in which* moral and cognitive content is shaped and explored. Gaut might have instead claimed that his alternate version of the novel possesses a different level of cognitive or moral understanding: one that is less plausible or valuable than the original work. However this avenue seems unavailable to him as he denounces the altered version in which Sophie's choice is postulated as being free from moral deliberation as follows: "To treat [the choice] thus would represent a profound failure to understand the nature of moral choice, and would thereby wreck the novel, depriving it of its power to display and explore a devastating moral dilemma" (2007, p. 166). Gaut shows here that he considers this alternative novel to represent a cognitive and moral *failure* to understand, rather than one that instead explores other moral or cognitive avenues. What comes to light here is that the ethicist approach of arguing that cognitive and moral value constitutes aesthetic value lacks the kind of explanatory power that is offered by the moral significance thesis. The latter better accounts for why we might agree that Gaut's alternative version of *Sophie's Choice* is aesthetically worse off than the original; not because it involves a case of serious cognitive or moral misunderstanding, but rather because this alternative version fails to shape or explore the psychology that Gaut forces upon it.

Furthermore, one could maintain that if Sophie had instead chosen which child to save in this blasé fashion it would still be *possible* for the novel to explore, in a complex and imaginative way, her psychological reasons for doing so, as well as the moral implications and consequences of her choice. Sophie's detached and cool manner in choosing may

have, for example, been explored in a way that painted this method as being the only one available to a loving parent faced with such a situation: a situation in which a more reasoned or emotional decision might have simply been impossible, and on account of this impossibility, likely to doom *both* of her children. As such, it is possible that this alternate novel could be both aesthetically valuable and morally significant in regard to the way in which it explores a particular moral avenue, even if in the end we take Sophie's method of deciding to be misguided or morally flawed.

Consequently, all that Gaut's replacement argument is able to show is that the substitution of a complex and well-considered exploration of moral and psychological matters with an account — which due to its lack of exploration strikes us as incoherent — is likely to count as an aesthetic defect. It fails to show that cognitive or moral misunderstanding therefore *constitutes* an aesthetic defect. Cases like the alternative offered above, in which we are able to explore Sophie's indifference in deciding between the lives of her two children, may be rendered coherent and aesthetically meritorious even if we decide that we ourselves would have acted differently.

4.3. The 'Merited Response Argument'

Gaut's third argument in favour of ethicism, which he calls the 'merited response argument' (2007, p. 227) (referred to hence forth as the MRA), holds that artworks prescribe certain responses towards the moral content they represent, and furthermore, that these responses are 'unmerited' when they are judged to be 'unethical'. That is, we *ought not to* respond in the way prescribed by an artwork (more accurately, by the manifested artist) if doing so has us responding in a way that is unethical. The MRA claims that in cases where an artwork prescribes us to respond in a particular way this is of aesthetic relevance; and furthermore, when these responses are 'unmerited' they constitute an *aesthetic* flaw in the work (they conversely constitute an aesthetic merit when they are 'merited'). Gaut lays out the basic tenets of the MRA as follows:

A work's attitude is standardly manifested in prescribing certain responses towards the events it describes. Prescribed responses are not always *merited*. One way in which they can be *unmerited* is in being *unethical*. If

the prescribed responses are *unmerited*, that is a failure of the work; so, if the prescribed responses are *unmerited* because *unethical*, that is an aesthetic failure of the work – that is to say, is an aesthetic defect in it. So a work's manifestation of ethically bad attitudes in its prescribed responses is an aesthetic defect in it. Mutatis mutandis, a parallel argument shows that a work's manifestation of ethically commendable attitudes in its prescribed responses is an aesthetic merit in it (2007, p. 233, my emphasis).

As a basic example of how the MRA works, Gaut offers the following:

[...] a comedy presents certain events as funny (prescribes a humorous response to them), but, if this involves being amused at heartless cruelty, then the work is not funny or at least its humour is flawed, and that is an aesthetic defect in it. (2007, p. 233).

The basic claim of the MRA is a normative one, and Gaut points out that whether we *ought* or *ought not* to respond in the way prescribed by an artwork is a matter of whether it is “appropriate or inappropriate” to do so (2007, p. 231). Gaut takes this claim to be trivially true in cases where ethical criteria might be absent; he points out that, “[...] horror fictions may be unfrighting, comedies unamusing, thrillers unthrilling.” (2007, p. 231). In such cases the MRA will maintain that the respective fear, amusement, and suspense prescribed by the manifested artist are, due to some aesthetic failure of the work, unmerited. Ethical cases, however, are more complex, and if the MRA is to succeed it must show two things: first, it must show that the defectiveness of an ethical response means that it is *always* unmerited; and secondly, to do this it must also show that our responses to fiction are morally evaluable in the first place.

It should also be noted that the analogy Gaut draws between the above moral and non-moral cases of merited responses is not as strong as it may first appear. In the moral case Gaut seems to be claiming that responding as prescribed is ‘impermissible’, whereas in the non-moral case the method of securing our responses is merely ‘ineffective’. Hence, while Gaut might be correct in his analysis of artworks that fail to secure responses of horror, amusement, or suspense, there remains a conceptual gap between these notions

of 'ineffective' and 'impermissible' that he fails to bridge.

This section will begin by outlining a crucial objection made by Daniel Jacobson against the MRA, followed by Gaut's attempt to deal with this objection. Whether or not this reply is sufficient in deflecting the Jacobson's objection will be considered. Then an argument developed by Alan Hazlett defending a form of 'response moralism', which is implicitly endorsed by Gaut's MRA, will be examined. It will be argued that Hazlett's defence of response moralism is unconvincing on the basis that it fails to provide any convincing reasons for why we might accept that our responses towards works of art are morally culpable.

To establish that ethical defects are always unmerited, Gaut must respond to an objection offered by Jacobson. Jacobson has objected that although we may withhold a response prescribed by an artwork on account of its defective ethical perspective, it does not follow that the work fails to *warrant* such a response. For example, we may decide against responding with amusement to a comedy which engages in racist or sexist stereotypes (we may even say that to respond in such a way would be "inappropriate" (Gaut, 2007, p. 231)), however; withholding our amusement, Jacobson claims, does not settle the question of whether or not the comedy is *funny* — that is, whether or not our amusement is *warranted* (1997, p. 172). This objection stems from Jacobson's claim that: "[...] moral considerations – such as that the [attitude] is racist – show us when an emotion is and isn't *appropriate* to feel, and *inappropriate* emotions do not accurately track the evaluative properties of which they purport to be perceptions, such as the funny." (1997, p. 172, my emphasis). Furthermore, if Jacobson is correct then Gaut's original formulation of the MRA will fall short of securing its claim that unethical responses are always aesthetic defects.

Jacobson claims that judging a response (such as amusement or fear) to be warranted is a case of establishing what there is "most evidence to feel, desire or believe", and as such he asserts that these judgments are based on "epistemic, rather than moral or prudential reasons." (1997, p. 173). Jacobson's argument holds that although a comedy might *warrant* our amusement by presenting certain situations in a farcical or incongruous fashion we may withhold our amusement; that is, choose not to respond, due to ethical

reasons. Yet, he further holds that a refusal to respond on our part does not weigh in on whether or not the comedy is actually *funny*; that is, whether it warrants our amusement.

Instead, Jacobson proposes that there are three distinct kinds of reasons for having or withholding a response: these can be described as 'strategic reasons', 'intrinsic reasons' and 'reasons of warrant'. Strategic reasons, he claims, are those that weigh upon whether or not it is appropriate to respond in a given situation: for example, if the butt of a joke is present I might withhold my amusement in order not to hurt their feelings (1997, p. 174). Intrinsic reasons are of the kind that we might hold that it is simply *wrong* to respond in the manner prescribed by certain artworks; responding in a way that requires us to adopt a sexist or racist attitude can stand as examples of intrinsic reasons for withholding such a response. However Jacobson argues that neither strategic nor intrinsic reasons are sufficient to constitute an aesthetic defect where art is concerned. This is because he holds that while they both offer us reasons to withhold or refuse certain responses that artworks prescribe, neither kind of reason concerns the actual evaluative properties of the artwork. While we might withhold our amusement towards a comedy for strategic or intrinsic reasons, neither of these is sufficient to establish whether or not the work is actually *funny*; only the third kind of reason, reasons of warrant, he claims, are able to determine this. Consequently, Jacobson argues that the MRA must show that unethical responses are *unwarranted* (rather than simply unmerited) if it is to succeed in showing that the prescription of unethical responses is a *pro tanto* aesthetic defect.

Gaut's initial reply to this objection is to argue that unethical responses are, simply, always *unwarranted*. He maintains, contrary to Jacobson, that *intrinsic* reasons (those which lead us to evaluate certain responses as being morally wrong) are sufficient for grounding an aesthetic defect where artworks are concerned. He writes:

What is wrong (rationally and morally) with being angry with someone who has done no wrong is that the formal object of the emotion of anger (someone having done something wrong) does not correspond to the intentional content of the thought, that they have done no wrong. What is wrong in taking pleasure in others' pain is that this is not pleasurable, in the

proper, normative sense of that in which we ought to take pleasure. (2007, p. 239).

Gaut's claim here is that these intrinsic moral reasons for withholding our responses do not result in an aesthetic defect *only* because they reveal a vicious attitude on our part, but that they do so also because they entail a failure of the work to *warrant* such responses. He claims that in such cases: "[...] the response prescribed does not correspond to the evaluative properties of the object – it is the cognitive-evaluative aspect of rationality that in each case is impugned by its immorality." (2007, p. 239). Gaut further attempts to clarify this with an example, citing people such as those who took pleasure in watching public executions during the French Revolution: he writes that while they may have indeed taken 'pleasure' in such events their doing so shows neither that they *ought* to have responded with pleasure, or that they were *warranted* in doing so (2007, p. 239).

Yet, replying to the warrant objection in this way forces the MRA to hold that unethical responses are *never* warranted; otherwise the MRA would remain at the mercy of Jacobson's objection. Furthermore, it also seems to follow that the MRA must now maintain that warranted responses are *always* ethical; for if it were possible for a warranted response to be *unethical* then both the MRA and by extension, ethicism, would be crucially flawed. Yet, this looks to be a stronger commitment than Gaut has previously acknowledged.

The dispute between Gaut and Jacobson concerning whether or not responses are warranted focuses upon what constitutes 'evidence' for responding as such. Again, Jacobson claims that warrant rests upon epistemic reasons regarding "what there is the most evidence to feel desire or believe", adding that such evidence is free from "moral or prudential reasons" (1997, p. 173); while, conversely, in defence of the MRA Gaut states that our responses have "ethical criteria among their warrant conditions." (2007, p. 239).

To test the strength of Gaut's reply let us consider an example: the film *Waking Ned Devine* follows the exploits of Tulleymore village in Ireland as, after the death of the titular character, its inhabitants pull together in an attempt to defraud the lottery

commission. Lizzie Quinn, an elderly and reclusive resident, refuses to cooperate and threatens to turn whistle-blower after she is refused a larger share of the winnings. As part of the climax of the film Lizzie reaches the only working telephone in Tulleymore (conveniently situated on the precipice of a cliff) and calls the lottery commission. However, before she is able to expose the remaining villagers the phone booth, with Lizzie still inside, is accidentally struck and sent sailing over the cliff by the van of the local Parish Priest. Rather than being an occasion for despair or solemnity the film can be plausibly interpreted as prescribing that we respond to Lizzie's death with equal parts pleasure and amusement. We *want* to see the people of Tulleymore succeed in acquiring the fortune of the deceased Ned Devine. However, our pleasure and amusement at the demise of Lizzie Quinn *must* be unethical as far as they are directed toward the death of an elderly lady who was, all things considered, attempting to report a fraudulent act. What we have in the case of *Waking Ned Devine* is an artwork in which our responses of pleasure and amusement at the death of an innocent (although obnoxious) woman are *warranted* in the sense that there is much in the work to support such a response. Yet, while our response may be warranted it is almost certainly *unethical*, or at least would be evaluated as being so given Gaut's account of ethicisim.

With consideration to the above example the MRA might proceed in one of three possible ways. The first would be to claim that our response towards the death of Lizzie Quinn is unethical and therefore unwarranted; the second would be to claim that our response is ethical and therefore warranted; and the third would be to claim that the work is ambiguous in regards to the responses it prescribes and therefore, as ethicisim would maintain that the work possessed neither a moral defect or moral merit on that account, the MRA would not apply.

As Lizzie's trip to the village phone on her mobility scooter stands as the climax of the film, with her abrupt and unexpected demise coming as a sigh of relief for the audience, we might rightly put aside this third way of responding. Yet this leaves the two previous claims, both of them problematic. While the response prescribed is surely on reflection *unethical* the film does an excellent job of making sure that we are likely to respond in exactly this way. That is, the work offers us plenty of cognitive-evaluative reasons to *warrant* such a response. What this example seems to show is that artworks are able to

offer us good reasons, 'reasons of warrant', to enter into the unethical responses that they prescribe. Or, to put it another way: although our responses to certain works of art might be unethical upon reflection, these works can sometimes succeed in making these responses warranted within the confines of the fictional world, or context in which they occur. If this is indeed the case, as the above example would suggest, then the MRA must be false, as it is unable to account for the cognitive-evaluative properties within the film that secure our unethical response.

4.4. Merited Responses and Response Moralism

As noted earlier, if the MRA is to be successful then Gaut must show that our responses to fiction are morally evaluable. Included in the MRA is a premise maintaining that the prescription of unethical responses is a failure of the work: this premise ultimately assumes that our responses towards artworks in general are open to ethical scrutiny. Such a claim, which has been recently defended by Allan Hazlett (2009) under the nomen of 'response moralism', is again apparent in Gaut's following statement:

I can criticize someone for taking pleasure in others' pain, for being amused by sadistic cruelty, for being angry when someone 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. (2007, p. 231).

However, as Hazlett correctly points out, Gaut's defence of response moralism is insufficient. This is because, while our responses towards fictional characters and events might be *actual* rather than merely *imagined* (assuming for argument's sake that this is the case), such responses are still then only *actual* responses towards *fictional* content (2009, pp. 244-245). The point here is that, as Hazlett puts it, "[...] delight at the suffering of a merely fictional person is *not* delight at the suffering of another person" (2009, p. 248). It does not follow then that our responses towards a fictional character, attitude, or situation, should be morally evaluated. One could protest, for example, that such responses towards fiction do not have as their object something to which we owe any kind of moral consideration. This concern is central to what Hazlett labels the 'reality

argument' (2009, p. 244). He formulates the argument as follows:

1. "Morality concerns how we think about, feel about (i.e. emotionally respond to), and treat (in action) other people."
2. "A person's emotional responses to the content of a fiction are not emotional responses to other people."
3. "Therefore, a person's emotional responses to the content of a fiction cannot be morally right or wrong." (2009, p. 245)

First, it should be noted that Hazlett's formulation of this 'reality argument' is contentious. Hazlett intends to argue against the second premise in order to show that our responses towards fiction can be morally evaluated; however, one might object that the first premise is also faulty in that it is too narrow (morality might also be argued to matter in our responses towards other things, such as animals, religions, cultural practices, and actions). Yet, it should at least be clear that for the claims of both response moralism and the MRA to be secured the second premise of the reality argument must be rejected. If our unethical responses towards fiction are to be considered failures of the artwork on account that we *ought not* to respond as prescribed, then the response moralist must first show that such responses *can* be unethical. In order to reject this second premise Hazlett argues that the response moralist must offer an account that extends our ethical responses to fictional content to their non-fictional or real-world counterparts. Gaut himself presents a similar line of thought although he does not elaborate, or defend his claims. He writes:

[...] works that manifest certain attitudes towards fictional entities implicitly manifest the same attitudes to real entities of that kind. Reading this in terms of prescribed imagined responses, the irrealist can hold that works prescribing an imagined response towards 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. (2007, p. 236)¹¹

Although it is unclear as to exactly what is entailed in Gaut's notion of 'implicitly manifesting attitudes', if this is taken to mean *actually* manifesting those attitudes towards real-world content then an argument for response moralism can be formed.

In developing the claim that our responses to fictional people and events extend also toward *real* people and events (2009, p. 253), Hazlett asserts that our engagement with fictional content is mediated by two distinct principles. One concerns the kind of non-fictional information that we "import" into fictional scenarios, and the other concerns the content we "export" from fiction into the real world (2009, p. 251).

As we have already established in the previous chapters the notion of importing content to 'fill out' fictions is a well-patronized one (Carroll, 1998, 2003) (Kieran, 2006a, 2006b) (Gaut, 2007). For example, Gregory Currie claims that our engagement with a work of fiction proceeds as a game of "make-believe", in which "[w]hat is said in the text, together with certain background assumptions, generates a set of fictional truths: those things that are true in the fiction" (1990, p. 71). Hazlett himself draws from the work of David Lewis (1983), who points out that when reading Arthur Conan Doyle's novels we assume both that Sherlock Holmes wears underpants, and that he has never visited the moons of Saturn (2009, p. 251). Hazlett takes this thought as showing that these underlying assumptions about fictional characters, situations, and events seem to be integral to our imaginative engagement with fictions¹². Hazlett's own import principle holds that where relevant, we will assume that the fictional world operates in the same way that the real world does — unless the author tells us otherwise¹³ (2009, p. 251).

Furthermore, Hazlett specifies that what we 'import' into fiction is mediated by what he

¹¹ The 'irrealists' that Gaut mentions here object along similar lines as those offered in Hazlett's 'reality argument'. Here, they object that our emotional responses towards fiction are 'real', rather than 'imagined' or even 'quasi-real'.

¹² See also, Tamar Szabo Gendler on the importance of assuming background propositions in, "The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance", (2000), pp. 75-77.

¹³ Hazlett's 'import principle' is very similar to the 'reality principle' that Walton (1994) proposes.

calls a “similarity class” (2009, p. 251). He holds that this similarity class is founded upon the assumption that “fictional worlds are similar (in certain respects) to our own world” (2009, p. 251). As such, Hazlett holds that this similarity class will in some way ‘filter’ the assumptions that we bring to certain works of fiction. He holds, for example, that we will not assume that the characters in *The Lord of the Rings* have bank accounts, yet will assume that like us, they must eat food to survive (2009, p 251). With regard to the above example Hazlett’s “import principle” operates as follows: “For all true [propositions] in [the similarity class of *The Lord of the Rings*], assume [the proposition] is true in [*The Lord of the Rings*] unless you already know [that proposition] is false in [*The Lord of the Rings*]” (2009, p. 251). For Hazlett, this similarity class is a crucial element in determining which propositions we import (and export) to and from artworks.

Hazlett’s second and crucial “export principle” arises from his assertion that “similarity is a symmetric relation”; hence when we take fictional worlds to be similar in certain respects to the real world, Hazlett holds that this relationship should be assumed to work in both directions. (2009, p. 251). Hazlett fails to provide any further reasons or evidence for this assertion, yet he proposes that in a way inverse to that by which we ‘fill out’ fictions through importing certain assumed propositions, we also ‘export’ propositions that we take to be ‘true’ in the fiction and assume their truth in the real-world. His “export principle” proceeds as follows: “For all [propositions] in [the similarity class of the fiction] that are true in [the fiction], assume [that proposition] is true, unless you already know [that proposition] is false” (2009, p. 251). What Hazlett has in mind here I suspect is something close to, for example, the way one might export ‘fictional truths’ about nineteenth century whaling practices from *Moby Dick*, assuming their truth and accuracy until they are either confirmed or denied by a more trustworthy source. Yet, there is nothing by the way of evidence or argument offered by Hazlett to support this process of ‘exportation’, or recommend that we should accept his claim, other than his assertion that “[by] convention, the author and the consumer will both assume that the consumer will employ the Export principle” (2009, p. 252) [Is there not?]. Furthermore, as we will see even if we do accept Hazlett’s formulation of the export principle, the claim effectively entails that our responses towards works of art will not be morally culpable unless we *import* our own morally defective beliefs.

For his own purposes, Hazlett utilizes an example offered in a previous paper by Tamar Szabo Gendler¹⁴ (2000, pp. 73-4). This brief story which Gendler calls *The Mice* describes a society in which the well-off white mice who are described as “hardworking and industrious” look down upon — and to an extent, support — the lower class black-mice, who are in turn described as “slothful and shiftless” (Gendler, 2000, p. 73). Gendler’s story concludes with the white mice refusing to support the poorer black mice, and in finishing thus makes the manifested attitude of the work clear: “And that was the right thing to do. For the distribution of resources in the mouse world reflected the relative merits of the two mouse groups. All the mice got what they deserved. The end.” (Gendler, 2000, p. 74). Hazlett argues that if we respond to *The Mice* in the way that is obviously prescribed in the previous passages, then we have responded in a way that is morally defective. Our response is morally defective, he argues, because the story is not only about mice, but also about race, class, and most importantly, *people* (2009, p. 253). Given that Gendler’s brief tale is anthropomorphic in nature it is easy to see why Hazlett might fill his ‘similarity class’ with other relevant assumptions imported from the actual world. Furthermore, upon engaging with the fiction he assumes that the import/export principles will take effect, and not only will we bestow upon the fictional mice many imported human traits, but we will also — in responding as the work clearly prescribes — *export* the ‘fictional truth’ that racial and class disparity is ‘justified’.

However, it can be objected that even if we accept Hazlett’s version of response moralism he misses something important about the way we might import and export propositions from fiction, if indeed we do at all, and that with further exploration of this process response moralism begins to falter. First, the argument for response moralism fails to account for what we might call the ‘revision’ of the propositions we assume to be true in any given fiction. What is being suggested here is that when we engage with fictions we are often involved in something akin to ‘trial and error’ where importing the correct background assumptions is concerned. It may be that when we assume certain propositions to be true in the fictional world that are later explicitly denied we are forced to ‘revise’ our background assumptions. For example, in Peter Ackroyd’s *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* (2008) we assume throughout that Victor is the victim of his creation’s

¹⁴ Gendler created *The Mice* example with the explicit intention of showing how we seem to resist imagining certain moral perspectives. Hazlett’s goal is to show that we have a normative reason to resist such responses, rather than an empirical one, as in Gendler’s original argument.

wrath, dogged and haunted by both the murder of those close to him and his own guilt for the actions of 'the creature'. While we may attribute some small amount of blame and moral approbation towards Victor as the work progresses, it is not until the final pages of the novel that we are forced to radically revise these assumptions when it is revealed that there is in fact no creature, only a deranged and murderous Victor. If we are willing to accept that we do indeed make these kinds of background assumptions during our engagement with fiction, then something like this kind of 'revision' must occur if we are to accurately track the content and propositions of the work.

Such revisions would surely also be made in the case of 'fictional moral truths', such as the one that we find in Gendler's *The Mice*. Although Hazlett is correct in assuming that the fiction is not only about mice but is also about people and race (as Gendler created the story with this intention), his account holds that we are likely to begin by importing certain moral assumptions that we take to be true in the actual world. Now, if we are ourselves non-racist we should assume that we will import certain moral attitudes regarding what is 'fictionally true' in *The Mice*; assumptions that must be revised once the fiction makes clear that it does not share our non-racist attitudes. Therefore, there is now a disparity between what we the reader hold to be true in the 'actual world', and what the fiction claims is true in the 'fictional world'. Given that by Hazlett's account, we begin by importing our non-racist attitude (which we hold to be true in the actual world) into the fiction, there is little reason to suggest that we will export the work's racist attitude into the actual world (unless, of course the work convinces us to revise our moral attitude, however, this is not a necessary result). The reasons for this are clearly stated in Hazlett's own formulation of the export principle; we will not export the racist attitude of the work because we already hold it to be false in the actual world (2009, p. 251). Under these circumstances, Hazlett's response moralism could at the very most, hold only that our responses towards fiction are morally culpable, when they square with our responses towards the real world. Yet even this is contentious.

Furthermore, the argument for response moralism ignores the fact that we, as readers of fiction are widely regarded as being sophisticated enough to distinguish between responses to fiction and responses to the actual world (Dutton, 2009) (Posner, 1997) (Patridge, 2008) (Stecker, 2005b) (Harold, 2006). It is intuitively plausible that we could,

for example, acknowledge that *The Mice* manifests an attitude which, if held in the actual world, would be grossly immoral; yet that we could, at the same time, remain able to respond as the fiction asks, limiting our response to the *confines of the fiction*. That is, we might separate our fictional and actual responses, holding the former to be fictionally true (or fictionally praiseworthy) and the latter to be actually blameworthy. In his last publication, Dutton claimed that our ability to distinguish between the ‘real’ and the ‘imagined’ is an undeniably important aspect of such experiences, and one that he claims develops with great accuracy at an early age of cognitive development. He writes:

[What’s] remarkable is the way children can invoke consistent rules and limitations within freely invented yet coherent fantasy worlds. What’s more, children are also able with remarkable accuracy to keep fantasy worlds separate from one another, and to quarantine multiple imaginary worlds from the actual life of the real world [...] If human beings did not possess this capacity, which develops spontaneously in very young children, the mind’s ability to process information about reality would be systematically undercut and confused by the workings of imaginative fantasy. (2009, p. 107)

The above claim is empirical and needs to be supported by proper examination and evidence if it is to persist, however its intuitive appeal is strong. There may also, of course, be situations in which our responses towards fiction could be morally condemned in the way that Hazlett claims. For example, if one were to mistake *The Mice* or any other work prescribing morally defective responses as being non-fictional or ‘real’, then a person responding in this way might well be open to the kind of criticism that Hazlett proposes. However, these cases only square with response moralism insofar as such a person would have to ‘import’ this morally defective attitude in the first place; such cases do *not* show that we will necessarily ‘export’ these morally defective attitudes if we do not already hold them to be true in the real world.

We should conclude that ethicism fails to provide arguments sufficient to establish its claim that moral defects/merits constitute aesthetic defects/merits. The moral beauty claim fails to convince us that our talk of ‘beautiful’ character traits is meant in a purely

aesthetic, rather than metaphorical, sense. The cognitive argument falls short of establishing both, that moral misunderstanding is aesthetically defective, while moral understanding constitutes an aesthetic merit. And finally, the MRA fails to show: (1) that unethical responses are never warranted, and (2), that we have a normative reason not to respond as artworks prescribe, in that such a response would be morally defective. Furthermore, in failing to establish its claims, ethicists fail to establish that 'moral value' can constitute aesthetic value.

5. Moderate Moralism

Noel Carroll has argued over a series of papers for a position that he calls 'moderate moralism' (1996, 1998, 2000a, 2003, 2006, 2010). Carroll succinctly describes his position as holding "[...] that in some instances a moral defect in an artwork can be an aesthetic defect, and that sometimes a moral virtue can count as an aesthetic virtue." (1998, p. 419). He intends to differentiate his position from that of ethicists, claiming his own thesis to be weaker by virtue of its holding that moral defects and merits only *sometimes* constitute aesthetic defects or merits. This is intended to sharply distinguish moderate moralism from the ethicist's claim that moral defects and merits *always* constitute aesthetic defects or merits (2006, p. 82)¹⁵. This chapter will examine Carroll's central argument for moderate moralism, and argue that one of its claims introduces a strong normative element that not only dissolves the perceived difference in strength between moderate moralism and ethicists, but also begs the question for the former. Then an account of 'imaginative resistance' — which, as we will see, is crucial to Carroll's argument for moderate moralism — will be analyzed. This will be followed by a number of criticisms and objections showing why this central concept of imaginative resistance is unconvincing.

Carroll's primary argument in establishing moderate moralism is what will be referred to as the 'uptake argument'; and like Gaut's MRA, the uptake argument draws attention to

¹⁵ Of course, as seen in the previous chapter, Gaut has argued that only *aesthetically relevant* moral defects or merits will constitute an aesthetic blemish or boon.

art's capacity to elicit emotional and moral responses from an audience. As previously mentioned, Carroll holds that artworks require us to "fill in the gaps" left by the artist (1998, p. 419). This process of 'filling in' artworks, Carroll argues, is not only a matter of fleshing out the details of the story, but also a matter of responding in a way which "facilitates the aim of the work" (1998, p. 420). He claims further that such responses are the result of 'formal choices' made by the artist with the intention of securing the 'uptake' of specific emotional and moral responses, which Carroll claims, "secure a point or purpose of the work" (2006, p. 85). As such, Carroll might expect that a horror film seeking to elicit fear from its audience would include appropriate formal choices, such as (but of course not limited to): poorly lit rooms, drawn out silences punctuated by sudden loud noises, gruesome or graphic deaths, and abject, alien, or supernatural antagonists. These choices, he argues, would have been included purposefully and specifically to secure a fear-response from the audience and are therefore, according to Carroll, a formal and structural property of the film (1998, p. 420, 2006, p. 85-6).

Carroll argues that when these formal choices are poorly made they may work against, or thwart uptake of, the response mandated by the work. Offering an example, he writes, "[...] if a putative thriller presents an invulnerable superhero who is cornered by a ninety-pound weakling, it will fail to engender suspense. It will fail to engender suspense because, all things being equal, its design is flawed." (1998, p. 420). For Carroll, the above formal choice constitutes an aesthetic defect in the artwork. He holds that these formal choices are formal properties of the artwork, and as such, they can be recognized also as aesthetic properties (2006, p. 85). Where a formal feature of an artwork is effective, or defective, by virtue of its helping to realize, or impede, the point or purpose of the artwork, Carroll argues that it will further count as an aesthetic merit or blemish (respectively) (2006, p. 85). Furthermore, he claims that many responses sought by artworks are "dependent on moral assessments" (1996, p. 420). In order to be angry, for example, Carroll holds that we must believe that some form of wrong-doing has been committed (1996, p. 420)¹⁶. Consequently, he claims that if the moral perspective present in an artwork is immoral or "evil", then it will fail to secure the required moral assessments and, as a result, the required response from the audience (1996, p. 421). He

¹⁶ Carroll's claims here have much in common with those made by Gaut in his reply Jacobson's 'warrant objection'. (See chapter 4)

writes, “an artwork may fail to secure the emotional responses it mandates because its portrayal of certain characters or situations fails to fit the moral warranting criteria appropriate to the mandated emotion. And one way it can fail to do this is by being immoral.” (2000a, p. 377). This claim is strikingly similar to the line of argument that Gaut takes in his reply to Jacobson’s ‘warrant objection’ (see previous chapter).

However, it is important to note that where Gaut formulates his version of ethicism along normative lines — arguing that we *ought not* to respond as an artwork prescribes if that response is immoral — Carroll’s uptake argument for moderate moralism makes, instead, empirical claims about our *inability* to respond in this way.

Carroll argues that when a moral defect is present in a work of art, that defect will render the audience *unable* to respond in the manner prescribed. In such cases, Carroll claims that the immorality of the work’s perspective will “block” the responses mandated by the work, and furthermore, that in such cases the work’s failure to secure these emotional responses constitutes an aesthetic defect (1998, p. 421). In order to show how an immoral perspective might thwart the very response that it aims to elicit, Carroll offers the following example:

Imagine a story in which a Himmler is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. This is not a comedy, but is meant as an old-fashioned, adulatory bio-pic, like *Dr Ehrlich's Magic Bullet*. That is, it is intended to elicit our admiration. But it cannot elicit the admiration of the *morally sensitive audience* because, all things being equal, the proposition that a Himmler should receive the Nobel Peace Prize is morally offensive. The *morally sensitive viewer* cannot get her mind around the idea - it is so morally obnoxious, so evil. (1998, p. 421, my emphasis)

Importantly, Carroll does not appeal to just any audience but specifically to one that is “morally sensitive” (2000a, p. 378). Exactly what this morally sensitive audience consists of is not explored or explicitly stated by Carroll other than his mentioning that its members will possess a “healthy moral sensibility” (2006, p. 86). He assumes that “typically artists intend to address their works to morally sensitive audiences”, yet his

reasons for making such an assumption also remain unclear (2000a, p. 378). However, his assertion of a morally sensitive audience does clearly circumvent a possible objection to the uptake argument, namely that, given the variety of social, cultural, political and indeed, moral beliefs that are globally present at any one time, it is likely that certain audiences *will* respond as prescribed to immoral artworks (for example, one might respond with admiration to Himmler receiving the Nobel Peace Prize). In such cases Carroll objects that the audience is “not as morally sensitive as they should be” (2000a, p. 378). Rather, Carroll’s morally sensitive audience will *always* react in an ‘appropriate’ manner when confronted with moral virtues, and will always be unwilling to respond in any immoral or ‘inappropriate’ fashion; an assertion which effectively leaves Carroll begging the question for moderate moralism.

Furthermore, as a consequence of its reliance on a morally sensitive audience, Carroll’s ‘moderate’ position turns out to be no more moderate in regards to the strength of its claims than Gaut’s ethicism. All moral defects that the morally sensitive audience encounter result in a failure to secure emotional and psychological uptake. The only exception for Carroll comes by the way of moral defects so subtle that a morally sensitive audience will fail to identify them. In cases where these subtle defects exist, Carroll argues:

Morally defective portrayals may elude even morally sensitive audiences and may require careful interpretation in order to be unearthed. Of course once they are excavated, they can be ethically criticized. But the moderate moralist will not, in addition, criticize them aesthetically, if they are so subtle as to escape a morally sensitive audience. Moderate moralism is not, then, committed to the proposition that every moral defect in an artwork is an aesthetic defect. (2000a, p. 378)

Yet moral defects so subtle that they elude this sensitive audience are not *aesthetically relevant* by Carroll’s account, as they neither secure nor subvert the aims of the work. Yet, all other moral defects and virtues, that is, those that are ‘detected’ by Carroll’s audience, are claimed to be aesthetically relevant by means of their role in securing or subverting certain responses. Hence, the inclusion of a normatively specified audience

forces moderate moralism to hold that *all* aesthetically relevant moral defects and merits constitute aesthetic defects and merits, respectively. Consequently, the moderate moralist thesis stands alongside ethicism in measure of the scope of its claims. Furthermore, it looks as if Carroll has no easy way out of this corner. If he decides *not* to rely only on the responses of a morally sensitive audience then he must rely on the responses of actual ones; actual audiences that would be free to respond as they saw fit to an artwork's immoral perspectives, and whose responses would surely at times run contrary to the claims of Carroll's uptake argument. Here, Carroll must choose between a morally sensitive audience that has his thesis begging the question, or as Conolly puts nicely, "the vista of an objectionable relativism" that opens up in attempting to account for the responses of an 'actual' audience (2000, p. 307).

5.1. Imaginative Resistance

Although Carroll's reliance on a morally sensitive audience shifts the scope of his position closer to that of ethicism, the method by which Carroll argues that moral defects and merits constitute aesthetic defects and merits differs significantly from Gaut's; and it is therefore important that we examine this. As established, Carroll's uptake argument holds that the audience will be *unable* to respond as prescribed where immoral responses are called for. This empirical claim stands apart from those claims defended in Gaut's MRA, which instead has as its focus the normative claim that audiences *ought not* to respond in ways that are immoral. Carroll's crucial claim that we are unable to respond in ways that are morally defective has been defended by Kendall Walton elsewhere (1994), and is often broadly referred to as 'imaginative resistance'¹⁷. If Carroll is correct that morally defective prescriptions will always block the responses that they seek to secure, or in other words, that they will always result in 'imaginative failure', then moderate moralism will have a strong empirical argument in favour of the claim that moral defects constitute aesthetic defects. In what follows the general problem of imaginative resistance will be outlined with an emphasis on Walton's influential account of the matter and how it relates to Carroll's general argument. Then, a number of concerns regarding both Walton's account and the phenomenon itself will be raised. In doing so it should

¹⁷ For a more in depth account of 'imaginative resistance' and some of its criticisms, see: (Walton, 1994), (Tanner, 1994), (Moran, 1994), (Mothersill, 2002), (Gendler, 2000), (Stock, 2005), (Todd, 2009), and (Weatherston, 2004).

become clear that Carroll's claim that we are "unable" to psychologically entertain morally defective imaginings, is unsubstantiated.

First, it must be noted that much of the literature concerning the phenomenon of imaginative resistance tends to distinguish between, and deal with both, an *inability* to imagine and an *unwillingness* to imagine. Yet, Carroll's claim entails only the former and therefore my attention will be directed primarily at this 'inability' claim. Carroll clearly states that he sees the problem as being one of 'imaginative failure' rather than an unwillingness to imagine, he writes; "[...] the reluctance that the moderate moralist has in mind is *not* that the ideally sensitive audience member voluntarily puts on the brakes" (2000a, p. 379, my emphasis). Furthermore, this weaker claim regarding the 'unwillingness' of the audience to respond in a morally defective way is cut-off from Carroll by means of a possible objection. The complaint is, that an audience that remains unwilling to even attempt to imagine as the work prescribes is in no real position to judge the aesthetic value of that work¹⁸ (Jacobson, 1997, p. 189). Carroll makes it clear that this 'unwillingness' is not what he intends to pursue, writing:

For if the reluctance here is akin to that of a person who turns off when encountering a racist joke and refuses, in principle, to laugh, then it seems that that person has simply made whatever the work has to offer inaccessible to himself. And if what the work has to offer is inaccessible to that person, he is in no position to judge the work aesthetically since he has not experienced it fully. (2000a, p. 379)

The concern here is that Carroll's argument considers a failure to secure 'emotive uptake' as an aesthetic defect, based on the failure of certain 'formal choices' that are intended to elicit specific emotional responses. However, someone who is 'unwilling' to respond cannot stand as testament to the failure of these formal choices, as they have 'opted out' of the emotional response, rather than 'failed' to experience it. As shown, Carroll avoids this objection by endorsing the claim that when faced with morally reprehensible artworks the audience will find the moral perspective 'unintelligible', and will therefore be *unable* to respond in the manner mandated by the work.

¹⁸ This objection is offered by Jacobson (1997, p. 189), and is acknowledged by Carroll (2000, p. 379)

Walton (1994) has argued that there are certain fictional propositions that we may find impossible to imagine as being *fictionally true*, and furthermore, that these problematic propositions are often moral in nature. “We usually don't flinch”, he writes, “at imagining accepting as true non-moral propositions that we firmly believe to be false: the proposition that there is a ring that makes its wearer invisible, or that a village in Scotland appears and disappears every hundred years” (1994, p. 31). However when fictions present us with *moral* propositions that diverge significantly from our own real world moral beliefs, Walton argues that unlike the non-moral, case we will be unable to accept these principles as being ‘true’ in the fiction. In such cases, he writes:

When it comes to moral matters (moral principles anyway), however, I am more inclined to stick to my guns, and it seems to me that most interpreters are also. I judge characters by the moral standards I myself use in real life. I condemn characters who abandon their children or engage in genocide, and I don't change my mind if I learn that the author (and the society he was writing for) considered genocide or abandoning one's children morally acceptable, and expected readers to think this is so in the world of the story. *If the author is wrong about life, he is wrong about the world of his story* (1994, p. 37, my emphasis).

Thus, Walton is sceptical as to whether an author possesses the authority to dictate the morality of their fictional worlds. Of course, he admits, they may create a world populated by a civilization that considers a racial caste system to be ‘moral’, however, he doubts that it could be fictionally true that they are “right” (1994, p. 37). This point is expressed more clearly by Todd, who writes: “[...] the difficulty lies not in any purported resistance to imagining offensive fictional moral perspectives, entertaining in imagination alien moral sentiments, or even imagining oneself holding perverted moral beliefs. The problem concerns our *imagining the truth* of certain fictional moral *propositions* [...]” (2009, p. 189, his emphasis).

With an example intended to highlight this problem Walton claims that if an author were to present us with the sentence, “In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all,

it was a girl” (1994, p. 37), we would not only condemn the immorality of the narrator, but also find ourselves completely unable to imagine that in the proposed fictional world the moral goodness of infanticide is fictionally true (1994, p. 38). Likewise, Walton believes the sentence: “The village elders did their duty before God by forcing the widow onto her husband’s funeral pyre”, will result in imaginative failure (1994, p. 37).

In his defence of the uptake argument Carroll offers similar examples of artworks, which he argues would, were they real, result in imaginative failure. Unlike Walton however, Carroll’s examples do not consist merely of single propositions. Instead, he offers us short descriptions of postulated artworks and includes some of their ‘formal features’ (which Carroll argues are purposefully chosen), as well as the responses that they seek to elicit from the audience. We have already encountered one such example, (Carroll’s ‘Himmler and the Nobel Peace Prize’) and now two further examples will be provided so that we may investigate whether — and if so why — these postulated works of art might result in an imaginative failure.

First, Carroll offers an alternative literary example that I will refer to here as the *Sadistic colonizer* example. He describes it as follows:

Imagine that a novel calls upon audiences to deliver the moral sentiment of admiration for a sadistic colonizer who cruelly and relentlessly tortures every Indian he encounters, not only braves but women and children. He presumes the moral rightness of his actions on the grounds that his victims are vermin and the point of view of the novel concurs (2000a, p. 377).

Second, Carroll gives us an example of a painting that he refers to as *Saviour*:

[...] imagine a painting of Hitler’s dead body being lowered by SS officers into a pit where it will then be incinerated in a looming fire. Suppose, as well, that the disposition of Hitler’s limbs and the portrayal of the SS officers unmistakably allude to certain Renaissance paintings of Christ’s descent from the cross. Hitler’s arms and legs take on a cruciform configuration and the encroaching flames remind us of hell, one of Christ’s

scheduled destinations after shaking of his earthly coil. Moreover, if the pictorial allusions are not enough, the title clinches it – the painting is called *Saviour* (2006, p. 84).

Like Walton, Carroll firmly holds that these examples will result in the audience becoming morally and psychologically stranded, on account that the work will proceed on moral ground that the audience is unable to tread. In cases such as this Carroll insists that the audience will be rendered, “[...] unable to get their minds around the idea – it will strike them as downright morally outrageous, a veritable ethical category error” (2006, p. 84).

Before we proceed it should be made clear that almost every specimen offered as an example of a fictional proposition that is either impossible, or at the very least extremely difficult to imagine, are creations of philosophy rather than art or literature. In cases where actual works of art or literature are indeed used the philosopher often alters them in one way or another in order to provoke an instance of such resistance. Richard Moran, for example, offers an altered account of *Macbeth* in which we are prescribed to respond with “relief” at the murder of Duncan, rather than with the usual responses of horror or anger (1994, p. 95). In regards to rarity of examples from the art world itself both Carroll and Walton offer Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* as an existing example, which, they claim, will render the audience unable to respond with the admiration that the film mandates. However, the list of actual artistic examples remains surprisingly brief in the literature supporting imaginative resistance¹⁹.

For Walton our inability or unwillingness to imagine (he fails to clearly distinguish between the two) occurs when we are unable to avoid application of what he calls the ‘reality principle’. Succinctly described, the ‘reality principle’ holds that we should imagine fictional worlds to be as much like the real world as possible in cases where the work does not explicitly or implicitly make things otherwise (1990, p. 144), (1994, p. 36)²⁰. This principle looks to have inspired part of Hazlett’s argument for response moralism (see

¹⁹ Other examples include *American Psycho* and *Birth of a Nation*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *120 Days of Sodom*, and *Juliette*. However, all of these examples rely on a specific interpretation of the moral perspectives and mandates present in the works, which often become the focus of debate.

²⁰ For my purposes a brief account of Walton’s reality principle is sufficient, however, see Walton’s *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, pp. 144-150 for a detailed account of how explicit fictional propositions generate other, implicit, propositions.

previous chapter), although this is not explicitly stated. It is also similar to Carroll's (1998) notion of 'filling out' artworks inasmuch as they both attempt to deal with the grey area between what is supplied by the author, and what is supplied instead by audience, when it comes to fictional works of art. Walton believes that when an author attempts to stipulate — either explicitly or implicitly — a set of moral principles that deviate from our own we will be unwilling to "give up" the reality principle, and will instead be unable to imagine the fictional truth of such moral principles (1994, p. 37). This notion of being unable to 'override' the reality principle is analogous to Carroll's own description of imaginative failure. He writes,

[...] the reluctance that the moderate moralist has in mind is not that the ideally sensitive audience member voluntarily puts on the brakes; rather it is that he can't depress the accelerator because it is jammed. He tries, but fails. And he fails because there is something wrong with the structure of the artwork. It has not been designed properly on its own terms. (2000a, p. 379)

Walton suggests that part of the answer as to why we are unwilling to set aside the reality principle, and are therefore unable to allow the fictional truth of certain moral principles, rests with the idea that certain evaluative properties — such as 'funny' or moral properties like 'good' and 'bad' — "depend or supervene on 'natural' [properties]" (1994, p. 45). These natural properties and characteristics along with their "relationships of dependence" cannot, he suspects, "easily be different in fictional worlds and in the real one" (1994, p. 44). Exactly what these supervenience relationships consist of and why they cannot be altered between the real, and fictional worlds, are questions that Walton takes to remain a mystery (1994, p. 44).

It might be objected here that this notion of supervenience, as Walton describes it, implies that we would be left unable to understand or see any possible justification for the divergent moral beliefs of other people. Yet as Gendler points out we are often willing to admit that some of our moral judgements could be wrong, and to do this, we must accept that our assessment of these supervenience relationships is fallible (2000, p. 65). The point here is that if we can accept the possibility of a different set of such

relationships in the real world, we should also be capable of doing so in fictional worlds; a point that runs contrary to Walton's account of imaginative failure.

Where moral properties are concerned, Walton seems to believe that our failure to imagine when confronted with the 'Giselda' or 'Elders' cases arises because our notion of 'evil' or 'bad' supervenes upon the actions that constitute infanticide, genocide, slavery, forced immolation, or other morally despicable practices. Michael Tanner has not only challenged this idea, claiming instead that such ideas, "[...] are not so much activities upon which evil supervenes, as part of the definition of evil" (1994, p. 60), but has also, along with others, attacked the examples intended to provoke imaginative failure that have been created by the likes of Walton and Carroll.

Objections raised by Tanner (1994), Todd (2009), Mothersill (2006), Stock (2005), and Gendler (2000) all draw attention to what they take to be a major problem concerning Walton's choice of examples; specifically, that they lack any form of supporting context. We cannot, they rightfully argue, imagine a world in which infanticide or forced immolation is morally good without any further context to justify or render these moral principles coherent. If Walton's example, "In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl" (1994, p. 37), causes imaginative failure, or even just resistance, then this is not primarily due to its transgression of conceptual properties or supervenience relationships, but rather, due to its lack of a relevant and intelligible context. As Mothersill notes, "A novel may depict genocide or slavery in a favourable light but its author is unlikely to write: 'I approve of genocide (or slavery)'" (2002, p. 78). When a supporting context is offered to supplement Walton's examples, the problem of imaginative failure all but vanishes.

Even with only minor alterations these propositions seem to be much easier to process, and we can imagine holding them as being 'fictionally true' in some fictional world. Consider the following examples²¹:

²¹ Gendler also offers two examples that she believes dissolve the imaginative resistance surrounding Carroll's 'Giselda' example. However, her examples differ from mine, on account that where I add further contextual information, she alters the original proposition (switching 'girl' for 'changeling' and 'was born on the January 19) (2000, p. 75).

1. 'In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl. And Giselda knew too well the horror that her daughter would face if she were allowed to live.'

Or slightly more subtle:

2. 'In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl. And on planet Vhorn this was unacceptable.'

Here, through the inclusion of only a minimal amount of context, Walton's Giselda example becomes (at least for me) easy to imagine. In addition, Todd suggests that on encountering Walton's original propositions our initial reaction might not be to *resist* imagining that the actions of Giselda or the village elders were morally praiseworthy, but rather, to try and imagine what kind of context might *justify* such a statement (2009, p. 208). Of course, while this strategy might work for Walton's truncated examples, when engaging with a *complete* fictional story we would not likely have the creative authority to 'import' our own intelligible context in order to make sense of dubious moral propositions. Instead, we would expect the author to supply us (either explicitly or implicitly) with sufficient reasons to imagine and respond as prescribed.

It may be for this very reason that Carroll's examples are less prone to the above form of dismissal. Carroll's examples consist not only of a single proposition but rather of a description which is intended to firmly fix the context, intended response, and with it the moral deviance, of the fictional work. Assuming that Carroll intends both Hitler and Himmler to be exactly the same in the fictional world (by means of their character and actions) as they were in the real world, then we are given little room for interpretation in any of his examples. Added to this is the assumption that Carroll intends his examples to be set in *this* world; that is, the world of his examples is as much like the real world as possible with the exception of the specific changes that Carroll himself has made²². These changes roughly consist of the following propositions: 'Himmler deserves a Nobel Peace Prize' (1998, p. 421), 'Hitler gave his life for the greater good and should be revered' (2006, p. 84), and 'American Indians are vermin that deserve to be tortured' (2000a, p. 377). Again, given that the fictional world of these examples is almost identical to the real

²² Walton would likely see this as being a strong case in which his 'reality principle' would apply.

world it becomes difficult for us to find any intelligible reasons to accept that these propositions are fictionally true, without any significant alteration of the context. Hence, Carroll's examples seem at this point to suggest that we will find ourselves either unable or unwilling to imagine the fictional truth of deviant moral propositions, where justification is either not present or unable to be supplied. Kathleen Stock acknowledges the problematic nature of propositions such as those found in Carroll's examples²³. She writes:

[...] certain propositions which prompt imaginative failure, yet for which it is not the case that the reader is unsure about what context to posit for them – where, for instance, we *already* have detailed information about which context is being fictionally posited, and this is such that the moral or other judgement employed by the relevant proposition is straightforwardly incompatible with that context (2005, p. 623)

Because of this contextual constraint, she argues that these examples will cause imaginative failure through their conceptual impossibility (2005, p. 623). Stock's view implies that the concepts of 'imaginative failure' and 'fictional truth' are closely connected: if we cannot imagine the truth of particular proposition then we cannot accept it as being fictionally true. And although this connection has come under serious scrutiny — with Weatherston (2004) arguing that the two components are in fact, distinct, and Todd (2009) lending weight to this claim through offering examples of propositions that are unimaginable, yet fictionally true²⁴ — Carroll's uptake argument relies upon the integration of imagination and fictional truth.

If one were to experience imaginative failure in regard to Carroll's '*Saviour*' yet still accept the fictional truth of the prescribed perspective (that Hitler gave his life for the greater good and should be revered) then one could still participate in what Richard Moran calls

²³ Stock's main example here is Moran's alternative version of *Macbeth*, which I made mention of earlier on in the chapter.

²⁴ "It seems that some unimaginable things can be fictionally true. There is a general consensus amongst philosophers, for example, that metaphysical, conceptual or logical impossibilities can be fictional, such that in a story it can be the case that $7 + 5 = 13$, that Godel's theorem is refuted, that talking eggs make words mean whatever they wish, or that one can frequently dine well at the end of the universe." (2009, p. 199)

“hypothetical imagining” (1994, p. 105). Hypothetical imagining with regard to the *Saviour* example would involve something along the lines of imagining what it would be like, or ‘what would follow’ in the event that Hitler really *did* give his life for the greater good and really *was* an object of reverence. However, because as Moran points out, hypothetical imagination involves neither a “reference to oneself either as believer or as any sort of psychological subject”, or “feigning belief in [a] proposition or determining what would follow from the fact of one’s believing it” (1994, p. 105), it fails to secure the ‘emotive uptake’ demanded by Carroll’s moderate moralism. Rather, what is required by Carroll is what Moran calls “dramatic imagination”, which, unlike its hypothetical counterpart involves “[...] a point of view, a total perspective on the situation, rather than just the truth of a specifiable proposition [...] ‘trying on’ the point of view, trying to determine what it is like to inhabit it” (1994, p. 105). It is this dramatic imagination that Carroll claims will fail when we are asked to ‘try on’ the moral perspectives present in *Saviour*. And, although we might be able, through hypothetical imagination, to determine what a world in which Hitler was an object of worship would be like, Carroll maintains that the failure of our dramatic imagination we will be unable to secure emotive uptake or ‘inhabit’ the perspective of one who does indeed revere such a despicable man.

As was specified earlier in the chapter, Carroll’s notion of imaginative failure is dubiously connected to a ‘morally sensitive audience’. Again, his reason for turning to such an audience is to avoid the apparent plurality and relativity that is inevitably present in actual, ‘less-than-perfect’ audiences. However, Todd claims that imagination itself should be understood as being, “[...] subject to degree, and dependent on and relative to a range of further beliefs, commitments, values and so on” (2009, p. 198). More specifically, he persuasively argues that the phenomenon of imaginative resistance is dependent on certain realist commitments and assumptions where morality is concerned (2009, p. 198). He takes it as an “ineliminable feature of moral judgement” that the actions and motives performed by an agent may be interpreted or perceived in a multitude of different ways, by different people, with different perspectives (2009, p. 195). As an example, he asks us to imagine that it were possible to journey back in time in order to ‘kill’ Hitler, and to consider the divergence of moral judgements that would be likely to occur between those who adhere to a consequentialist moral system, and those who follow a Kantian, or

deontological approach (2009, p. 195)²⁵. He suggests that, the dependence of our imagination on these “theoretical and pre-theoretical moral presuppositions and principles [...] raises the prospect that those with fixed, articulated moral positions, such as professional philosophers, may be more prone to imaginative resistance of the type under discussion than non-philosophers” (2009, p. 196). Furthermore, Todd proposes that imaginative failure is not only subject to moral commitments or concerns, but also others, such as one’s sense of humour or aesthetic taste. He further suggests that such commitments could trigger imaginative failure when attempting, for example, to imagine the hilarity of a particular joke in a story, or upon attempting to imagine that a work of poetry claimed to be excellent within the fiction, is truly excellent (2009, p. 197). Considering the differences between the imaginability of moral and non-moral propositions, Todd writes:

These observations [...] suggest that, on one hand, the imaginative projects of those holding realist commitments *may* be more susceptible to resistance and inability than those holding non-realist commitments, and those holding articulated theoretical commitments yet more susceptible than those possessing less articulated pre-theoretical ones; and on the other hand, that the imaginability of normative concepts and propositions may be *more* relative to the factors discussed than non-normative, and hence more susceptible to resistance and inability²⁶ (2009, p. 197, his emphasis)

If we are to accept Todd’s claims regarding the connection between the phenomenon of imaginative resistance and the nature of various commitments held by individuals, then Carroll is presented once more with the threat of unwanted relativism. His claim that moral defects are responsible for imaginative failure is again only true of a particular spectrum of an artwork’s ‘possible audience’. Carroll might proceed by replacing his

²⁵ I placed the word ‘kill’ in inverted commas because, depending on the moral commitments of the person making the judgement, it could be replaced with either ‘assassinate’ or ‘murder’.

²⁶ Todd’s point is that it is difficult to argue that realist commitments will *ceteris paribus* be more likely to encounter imaginative resistance or failure. He writes, “[...] one might, for instance, be an expressivist about morality with very strong moral principles that make it at least psychologically difficult to imagine certain claims. Conversely, one might be a ‘relaxed’ moral realist and able to imagine certain claims one does not think are actually true” (2009, p. 198). However, this only adds to the relativity of imaginative resistance or failure.

‘morally sensitive’ audience with an ‘audience of moral realists’, in order to preserve the claims of his uptake argument by in some sense ‘stacking the deck’ with an audience that are prone to imaginative failure. However, this would again beg the question for moderate moralism.

Regardless, it may remain the case that we are unable to overcome the imaginative failure that Carroll’s examples invoke. Yet again, this seems to be a result of their contextual constraints; being that the moral perspectives advocated for within the work are in some sense ‘incompatible’ with the context supplied. In these cases, attempts to engage our ‘dramatic imagination’ might fail, and will at the very least, encounter high degrees of resistance. However, we should maintain that the tenacity of Carroll’s examples does *not* lend credibility to the moderate moralist thesis. Even though they may, as Carroll claims, block emotive uptake where the audience is concerned, they fail to provide any evidence that such a phenomenon is likely to occur where actual artworks are at stake. This is because Carroll’s *Saviour*, ‘Himmler’ and ‘Sadistic Colonizer’ examples are simply unlikely to spawn any close relations in the actual world; and even if they did it would be folly to think that they would be taken seriously as *art*, rather than, say, propaganda²⁷.

In conclusion, Carroll’s defence of moderate moralism fails to show that moral defects or merits *constitute* aesthetic defects or merits. As was argued, Carroll’s assertion that the only reliable audience is one that is “morally sensitive” (1998, 2000a, 2006, 2008) leaves moderate moralism begging the question, while, a move away from such an audience opens his account up to responses contrary to his claims. Furthermore, the crucial claim that we are ‘unable’ to respond as prescribed where such responses are morally defective was shown to hold only where these prescriptions are removed either from any wider context, or where the prescription and the context are ‘incompatible’. As argued, we have little reason to accept that any serious artworks will prescribe responses of the kind found in the examples marshalled by Carroll and Walton, and we should therefore reject that their account of imaginative failure will apply in any reliable sense where our engagement with actual artworks occurs.

²⁷ Both Carroll’s *Saviour* and ‘Himmler’ examples would make excellent pieces of propaganda.

6. Contextualism

While both ethicism and moderate moralism both adhere to the valence constraint — holding that when aesthetically relevant the moral value of an artwork will always positively vary with its aesthetic value (moral defects will always constitute aesthetic defects, and moral merits will always constitute aesthetic merits) — contextualism argues instead that this value relationship can co-vary. Although general support for contextualism has been forthcoming in the recent literature there has been little by the way of well-established positive argument for the position; Matthew Kieran’s defence of cognitive immoralism being the only notable exception. This chapter will begin by examining the contextualist claim that moral defects are sometimes fundamental to aesthetic value; an objection provided by Berys Gaut will be considered, and a reply offered. Kieran’s cognitive immoralism will then be considered, along with a number of objections that have been levelled against both Kieran’s cognitive position, and contextualism in general. Finally, a suggestion as to how contextualism might be reconciled with the moral significance thesis will be offered. This will specifically address the ways in which contextualism presents itself as a more attractive option than ethicism or moderate moralism, with regard to its ability to better accommodate for both the complexity of our engagement with art, and the established critical practices that surround aesthetic evaluation.

6.1. The Argument for ‘Ineliminable’ Moral Defects

In Jacobson’s paper *Ethical Criticism and the Vice of Moderation* he defends the claim that “[...] the moral defects in a work of art can be among its aesthetic virtues”; a claim that as he notes has been called ‘immoralism’, but which he instead chooses to describe as “[...] an antitheoretical view of the relation between moral and aesthetic value” (2007, p. 343). His reasons for adopting the ‘antitheoretical’ label should be taken as a product of his belief that “[...] there is no true theory of the relation between moral and aesthetic value, although there are some true propositions about it [...]” (2007, p. 346). While Jacobson

prefers his own label, his position is certainly a contextualist one; and as such, evidence of this is seen by his welcoming of other contextualist positions into the antitheoretical camp (2007, p. 343). In defence of his above claims, Jacobson argues mostly in the negative²⁸, objecting specifically to Gaut and Carroll's adherence to the valence constraint. He does also, however offer a positive argument for contextualism, holding that where an artwork's immoral perspective is an 'irrevocable' feature in explaining why the work is aesthetically valuable, then the moral defect *must* constitute an aesthetic merit (2007, p. 352).

In defending this claim, Jacobson takes his lead from an assertion put forward by Carroll in his defence of moderate moralism. Where Carroll argues that in some cases "[...] the evil perspective of the artwork is an ineliminable factor in explaining why, as a matter of fact, it is aesthetically defective" (1998, p. 423), Jacobson proposes that the valence of this relationship can co-vary so that the evil perspective of a work can, under certain circumstances, become an 'ineliminable' yet *positive* feature of that work's aesthetic value²⁹. What Jacobson has in mind here is that in some cases an artwork's moral defect can, as Eileen John cleverly puts it, "[be] pulling its weight along with the work's other virtues", rather than being "[...] just a drag on the positive contributions of other features" (John, 2007, p. 336). Drawing an analogy between jokes and works of art, Jacobson claims that "what is funny about some jokes is what is cruel about them", concluding that in such cases "their offensiveness is integral to their humor" (2007, p. 352). Stephanie Patridge has also recently advanced a contextualist position³⁰ in which she claims that the moralist's commitment to the "consistency of valence" thesis forces them to depart radically from typical "art critical practices" (2008, p. 181). In making her case for this position she defends a claim in many ways similar to Jacobson's: "[...] some artworks are artistically good, in part, because they are morally bad" (2008, p. 182). Her method of arguing for this claim involves an examination of Pushkin's novel *Eugene Onegin*, and Balthus' erotic painting *Alice*, in which she attempts to positively link the moral (or more accurately, immoral) attitudes that they prescribe with their aesthetic

²⁸ See chapter 3 for Jacobson's 'warranted response' objection against Gaut's ethicistism.

²⁹ He refers to this an earlier paper as "the incorrigibility of art" (1997, p. 179)

³⁰ Patridge develops what she calls 'weak moralism'. Her rejection of the soundness constraint makes this position a contextualist one, in that, an artwork's moral defect might count as an aesthetic defect or merit, depending the way in which the work engages us.

value. In regards specifically to these works Patridge rejects the suggestion that when engaging with them we ignore or “tolerate” their morally disturbing attitudes³¹. Rather, she holds that the immoral attitudes prescribed by these works constitute a crucial part of our engagement and aesthetic evaluation of them. With regard to Balthus’ *Alice*, she writes:

Seeing the world in the way that Balthus recommends, attended with sexual titillation, moral disturbance, discomfort, or unsettledness is part of why we find the works of interest; part of why we think so hard about them; part of why we find ourselves returning to them; part of why we enjoy them [...] If this is right, then we do not tolerate the immoral vision of *Alice*, we engage it directly so that it is a virtue of the work (2008, p. 191).

Thus, both Jacobson and Patridge argue that there are cases in which an artwork’s moral defect is *integral* to its aesthetic value. Jacobson argues that these defects are ineliminable by virtue of their being crucial to the work’s aesthetic value; and, Patridge argues similarly, that it is our direct and full-blooded engagement with some moral defects, rather than our merely ‘tolerating’ them, that reveals their full aesthetic contribution: their ability to ‘pull their own weight’. Both of these arguments take aim directly at the valence constraint and intend to show that a systematic relationship between an artwork’s moral and aesthetic value cannot hold; that is, sometimes, moral defects can be aesthetic merits.

6.2. An Objection and Reply to the ‘Ineliminable’ Defects Argument

In his defence of ethicism Gaut argues that although contextualism might be correct when the “overall aesthetic merit” of an artwork is considered, the valence constraint only applies, for ethicism at least, in regard to *pro tanto* or *intrinsic* moral defects (2007, p. 63-5). Consequently, he argues that although a moral defect might be both an ‘ineliminable’ and aesthetically valuable feature of an artwork, this value is *extrinsic*, and because of this the contextualist’s claim fails to nullify the *pro tanto* claim of ethicism:

³¹ The thought that we can ‘tolerate’, or in some sense ‘forgive’ to a certain extent, the immoral perspectives present in an artwork, is suggested by A. W. Eaton in “Where Ethics and Aesthetics Meet: Titian’s *Rape of Europa*”, (2003).

that the same moral defect will ground an *intrinsic* aesthetic defect. To elaborate, Gaut offers an example:

[...] suppose that you have a colleague who is prickly and with whom you have had a difficult history. He corners you and asks you what you *really* think of him. You dislike him. To say so would be truthful but unkind (he is very sensitive). To dissemble would be to lie (silence is not an option, since silence would be eloquent), though it would be kind to do so [...] Telling him that you like him would be good insofar as it would be kind, bad insofar as it would be dishonest; telling him what you really think of him would be good insofar as it is truthful, bad insofar as it is unkind (2007, p. 61).

Gaut believes that the above example is able to capture the nature of intrinsic and extrinsic merits and defects in a way that is analogous to our evaluation of artworks. He argues that if we choose to be kind (and lie) to our colleague then our kindness, which Gaut claims is an intrinsic moral merit, will also entail an extrinsic moral defect (as lying is by Gaut's view an intrinsic moral defect). He writes, "This demerit is extrinsic, since it is not a necessary feature of a kindly action that it be an untruthful one – we are often kindly without having to lie" (2007, p. 62). Subsequently, Gaut claims that artworks that rely on a morally defective perspective for part of their aesthetic value will remain *pro tanto* aesthetically defective to that extent; and consequently they will remain bound by the valence constraint.

In evaluating his claim regarding what is not a 'necessary' feature of a kindly action we should assume that Gaut considers morally defective artworks to be analogous; that is, it may be possible for moral defects to increase the aesthetic value of an artwork, yet these defects are never a *necessary* feature of the work's aesthetic value. However, Gaut's objection fails to account for the central claim of the contextualist argument outlined above. This claim is not merely that such artworks would cease to be aesthetically valuable *without* the immoral attitude that they prescribe (Gaut grants this), but rather, that this immoral attitude is exactly what *makes* them aesthetically valuable in the first place. As Jacobson puts it, "[...] such works cannot be morally sanitized even in principle" (2008, p. 352). In these cases, the contextualist holds that an artwork's morally defective

perspective is not seen as adventitious to its aesthetic value, but rather, as fundamental. Furthermore, if an artwork's immoral attitude *can* be fundamental to its aesthetic value — meaning that it is in fact a *necessary* feature of the work's aesthetic value — it becomes difficult to imagine how one might justify a negative *pro tanto* evaluation.

However, although the contextualist argument concerning the 'ineliminable' nature of some moral defects can slip away from Gaut's objection, it still fails to show that in such cases it is the 'moral value' (or lack thereof) that is responsible for the work's positive aesthetic value, as opposed to some other feature(s) of the work that might directly surround or support these moral defects. For example, it may just be that we value the coherency, clarity, or even incongruity that surrounds the immoral attitudes that are prescribed in some works of art. In such cases contextualism is correct in saying that the moral defect is 'ineliminable' with regards to the aesthetic value of the artwork, however it does not follow from this that it is the 'immorality' itself that is responsible for positively contributing to the aesthetic value of the work.

6.3. Cognitive Immoralism

Kieran's formulation and defence of cognitive immoralism is by far the foremost, well-developed argument in the contextualist repertoire. It argues that under certain circumstances, the immoral attitudes manifested by an artwork can be aesthetically valuable by virtue of the cognitive understanding that can be gained from our imaginative engagement with the work. He writes:

[...] the moral character of a work is relevant to its value as art to the extent it undermines or promotes the intelligibility and reward of the imaginative experience proffered by the work. Thus the morally commendable character of a work *may* be an aesthetic virtue where it enhances our imaginative engagement with a work and the morally reprehensible character of a work *may* be an aesthetic vice where it undermines our imaginative responses (2006b, p. 56-7, his emphasis).

Kieran of course intends to differentiate his position from that of the other moralist

theories by denying that the valence constraint for moral and aesthetic value holds. Instead, he writes that his position is “[...] consistent with holding that in certain cases the morally reprehensible character of a work *may* constitute an aesthetic virtue rather than a vice” (2006b, p. 57, his emphasis).

Like Gaut and Carroll, Kieran is primarily interested in the affective-responses that artworks elicit from their audiences, and throughout his work on the relationship between moral and aesthetic value he has argued that, as was mentioned in chapter two, artworks are able to secure the responses they prescribe when they offer an imaginative experience that is both ‘intelligible’ and ‘rewarding’ (2001, pp. 34-5) (2010 pp. 699). Indeed, it is this notion of reward that Kieran takes to distinguish great artworks from lesser ones. Whereas a lesser work might draw upon emotional responses for merely conventional purposes (consider generic works such as *Scream*, or *Amityville Horror*), a more rich and complex work, he argues, will attempt to put these emotional responses to some greater purpose. When a work attempts to utilize our emotional responses in ways which we would normally consider to be, at best, morally dubious, Kieran claims that we are likely to respond when there is some expectation of a cognitive of ‘reward’ or “payoff” (2010, p. 699). Although Kieran is not entirely clear as to what such a ‘reward’ or “payoff” consists of, one might take him simply to mean some kind of ‘exploration’ of, or ‘novel’ approach toward, the moral ideas and attitudes manifested by the work. Furthermore, he argues that by persuading us to engage with and imaginatively explore moral perspectives that we hold to be defective, these ‘payoffs’ can “deepen our appreciation and understanding in ways that would not happen otherwise” (2006, p. 63). The crucial claim for cognitive immoralism is that: ‘we need to experience the bad to understand the good’. Or as Kieran points out, “[...] that morally defective imaginative experiences, including taking up attitudes and responding in ways that are morally problematic, are *required* to enable one more fully to understand things than one could otherwise have done” (2006b, p. 63, my emphasis). This claim is crucial for cognitive immoralism, as it attempts to show that as only morally defective perspectives can offer certain, valuable understanding, such defects are essential to the cognitive and aesthetic value of the works that possess them.

This claim that morally defective experiences provide a kind of ‘exclusive’ understanding

is of course a contentious one³². However, it is important to note that Kieran talks of the kind of understanding that such perspectives manifest as being one of “comparative experience” (2006b, p. 64). For example, one might feel that they possess a full and rich understanding of why someone should always tell the truth without ever himself or herself having told a lie, or having been lied to. Yet, Kieran’s claim is that if such a person were to consciously lie to another, or find out that they themselves had been lied to, they would gain from this bad or morally problematic experience; a deeper understanding or appreciation of why someone should, or should not, lie. It is implicit in Kieran’s argument that the understanding offered by this kind of comparative experience could not be had if one were only to attend to instances in which one told the truth. If one never lied, never acknowledged that they had been lied to, or never witnessed the consequences of one person lying to another, then one would by Kieran’s account, possess only a shallow understanding of why lying is ‘wrong’, and, would furthermore, fail to properly understand, for example, why telling a lie might in some situations be considered a kind, or ‘acceptable’ action (“Does this dress make me look fat?”).

In addition, Kieran argues that one need not actually lie to someone, be lied to, or witness an example of lying and its consequences in the *real-world* to have this comparative experience. Rather, he holds that one could dramatically imagine (to borrow Moran’s term) what might happen if they were to lie, or how they might feel if they were lied to. Kieran’s claim here is that “imaginative experience can be an indirect and informative means of learning by experience” (2006b, p. 68).

In order to defend this claim that we can enhance, or deepen, our understanding through morally problematic imaginings, Kieran offers an example from Graham Greene’s short story *The Destructors*. He argues that Greene’s work, as it depicts a gang of young boys that needlessly destroy an old man’s house, prescribes that we adopt a morally defective perspective towards the series of events that develop. Kieran claims that we “do not merely admire” the egregious acts of callousness and destruction presented by the work, but rather that our responses are guided by the work in a way that leads us to imaginatively endorse these actions and to want them to succeed.

³² Kieran claims, “[...] experiencing bad responses and attitudes in ways which are problematic, with respect to moral and non-moral values, affords a kind of comparative experience or perspective that *could not otherwise be had*” (2006, p. 64, my emphasis).

The upshot, Kieran argues, is that we can come to learn “[...] how and why the destruction of things deeply precious to another can be joyful, an exercise of power and an assertion of strength” (2006b, p. 69). Furthermore, he adds that in doing so we can understand “[...] not just how and why this can be the case with respect to other people but, importantly, how and why this can be the case with respect to ourselves: precisely because we have come to respond in ways we actually deem to be immoral” (2006b, p. 69). While Kieran’s interpretation of the moral attitude prescribed by *The Destructors* is arguably not the only one that could be defended, it is at least a plausible one. Another reading of the work might also plausibly interpret it as condemning the actions of the gang, and prescribing instead, that we respond with outrage and disgust. Nonetheless, Kieran’s interpretation offers an example of how he thinks that imaginatively taking up an immoral perspective might lead us to understand, in detail, the ways by which we might be persuaded into acting in ways that are morally reprehensible.

So, cognitive immoralism holds that while morally defective experiences might not *directly* contribute to our moral understanding, they can at the very least offer a comparative experience that is able to “confirm, undermine or deepen our understanding” (2006b, p. 67). Furthermore, it holds that these comparative experiences are achievable through the deployment of our imagination. Kieran suggests: “One of the things that art enables us to do is to explore attitudes and responses we would try not to in real life given our moral prohibitions. So perhaps we might only learn how we might respond to the appeal of violence, the allure of adultery and so on through works that deliberately speak to those desires” (2006a, p. 140).

If Kieran’s position is correct then although the moral value of an artwork’s perspectives might not constitute part of its aesthetic value the cognitive and moral understanding manifested by those perspectives will. Furthermore, because morally defective perspectives are in a position to present us with understanding — via experience — that we could not otherwise have these defective perspectives can positively contribute to the aesthetic value of the artwork. However, even if we accept Kieran’s account, in taking the cognitive approach all he has succeeded in showing is that the immorality of an artwork is a necessary feature for providing a certain kind of cognitive insight. Like the earlier

argument for ‘ineliminable’ moral defects, cognitive immoralism fails to show that it is the *immorality* of the artwork that is responsible for positively affecting the work’s aesthetic value. Rather, the immorality secures the cognitive insight, and this insight secures the aesthetic value³³.

6.4. Objections against Cognitive Immoralism

The obvious objection against cognitive immoralism would be to attack Kieran’s claim that in works such as Greene’s *The Destructors*, it is the ‘immorality’ of the work that is responsible for both its valuable understanding, and its aesthetic value. Indeed, Robert Stecker argues that this same understanding could be conferred by a work that condemns, rather than endorses, the kind of appetite-for-destruction that we find in Greene’s story, and as a consequence, this understanding is not *essentially* tied to the immoral perspective of the work (2005a, p. 442)³⁴. Stecker writes, “many ethical works [...] give us great insights into vices, gross immorality, and other morally suspect matters [...] So it is not clear why the immorality of a work that also gives us such insights is responsible for its cognitive advantages” (2008a, p. 152). If this objection holds, then cognitive immoralism will have failed to show that the ‘moral defect’ has played any crucial role in enhancing our understanding, and will, as a consequence, have failed to show that the moral defect has contributed to the aesthetic value of the work.

Kieran has attempted to dismiss this species of objection by replying that the fact that we might come to the same understanding through engaging with an artwork that is morally valuable is neither here nor there. That is, he claims that Stecker’s objection merely misses the point of cognitive immoralism. His point is, he writes, “whether or not the (im)moral character of a work cultivates my understanding. Immoral or morally problematic aspects of a work, where they cultivate understanding, can contribute to a work’s artistic value rather than detract from it” (2006a, p. 140). Unfortunately, for Kieran, it looks as if here he also misses Stecker’s point. Stecker does not seem to be disputing the idea that an artwork possessing an immoral perspective can cultivate one’s

³³ Eaton draws a similar conclusion (2012, p. 289).

³⁴ This line of objection has much in common with one presented by moderate autonomism: the reasons for an artwork being both morally and aesthetically defective are not the same. See, Anderson & Dean, “Moderate Autonomism”, (1998).

understanding, but rather that in those cases it not clear that it is the morality or immorality of the perspective that is essential in providing this cultivation. Inasmuch, Kieran's reply to the objection is insufficient.

Yet, more can be said in response to Stecker's objection. Kieran might argue, for example, that it is difficult to imagine how the objection could hold, as it is difficult to imagine how we might gain the same kind, or level, of understanding from an artwork which did not prescribe that we *actually endorse*, or *take-up*, a perspective that is morally defective. An artwork of the kind that Stecker has in mind — one that condemns Greene's perspective (as it is interpreted by Kieran) — might allow us to understand a number of things. For example, why the boys in the story acted in the way that they did, or how the need to 'fit-in' might cause people to do things that they normally would not. However, it would be plausible for Kieran to claim that in this case we would *miss* something; something that we might have gained if we ourselves had responded in a way that was morally defective. For example, if we were to endorse or take-up the moral perspective that Kieran claims is manifested in *The Destructors*, we might learn something about how *we* would respond under similar circumstances.

This reply holds that artworks prescribing immoral attitudes might differ from artworks which condemn those same attitudes in regards to the experiences they offer, and therefore, in the understanding that they manifest. If correct, this may occur because only in the former are we asked to endorse and experience *first hand* what it is like to hold such an attitude. So while it may be objected that the understanding Kieran takes as being both cognitively and aesthetically valuable could be manifested in a way that does not require us to adopt or endorse morally defective attitudes, it is at least intuitively plausible that doing so would offer us an understanding that was more rich, or valuable.

Another area of contention from which we might form an objection to Kieran's cognitive immoralist thesis concerns the definition of what constitutes a 'moral defect'. One specific line of objection here questions whether an artwork that affords us some kind of cognitive gain through its rich and vivid exploration of an 'immoral' perspective should be counted as being 'morally defective'. James Harold (2008) has claimed that cognitive immoralism fails to account for the complexity of the responses that artworks invite unto

their moral perspectives. He writes, “As the immoralists note, artworks invite us not only to imagine certain ways of seeing the world, but also to respond to those perspectives. But responses are not only approving or disapproving. A response can be *rich* (or not) and it can be *reflective* (or not)” (2008, p. 58-9, his emphasis). The crux of Harold’s argument holds that where artworks invite complex and rich responses towards moral perspectives that we take to be reprehensible, they possess “real moral value”, and are therefore not morally defective (2008, p. 61). Artwork’s that provide a rich or reflective imaginative experience that might “[...] expand our moral possibility” are, according to Harold, morally valuable, and can because of this be aesthetically valuable (2008, p. 61). Eaton agrees, herself providing an account of the above objection, she writes, “Like moralism, [cognitive immoralism] saps immoral art of its threat and menace, rendering it not just benign but even morally beneficial” (2012, p. 289). Furthermore, because these are the kinds of artworks that cognitive immoralism singles out as being cognitively valuable by virtue of their morally defective perspective both Harold and Eaton conclude that cognitive immoralism is flawed. However, unlike Eaton, Harold’s objection is committed to the valence constraint (which he explicitly endorses) and as such, he holds along with Gaut, that only morally valuable responses can provide the kind of cognitive value that Kieran’s immoralism counts as being aesthetically valuable.

Stephanie Patridge makes a suggestion similar to those above, writing that “[in] cases where our responses are immoral, and count as good making features, we should see them as cases where our responses, because artistically contextualized in a certain way, are not immoral, and are good making features” (2008, p. 193). Patridge, however, differs from Harold in that she argues against the valence constraint. She believes that the claim offered above should ground a form of “weak moralism”, by which artworks can be considered ‘immoral’ when we evaluate their moral perspective as presenting a defective account of how one should live, or behave. However, when evaluated as a work of ‘art’ she argues that the context of our engagement, in that our responses are not responses toward the real world, makes a normative difference that effectively strips the work of its immorality (2008). As such, Patridge is in agreement with Harold insofar as they both claim that when an artwork is evaluated as being aesthetically valuable by virtue of its morally reprehensible attitude, immoralism (cognitive or otherwise) need not follow.

The objection that Harold and Patridge make regarding the moral value of complex and contextualized perspectives that are, at first glance, morally defective recalls a point made in the third chapter. What both of these objections seem to value are not the moral ideas or perspectives themselves, but rather, the shaping or exploration of these moral ideas and perspectives. Harold makes this particularly clear in that he argues “It is not morally appropriate to feel simple joy at the triumph of good over evil, or evil over good [...] In real life, things are not simple, and we should not approve of simplistic, unreflective responses to serious moral situations” (2006, p. 265). He continues, writing, “[a] work that invites its reader to respond with enjoyment to scenes of torture, but that does so in mediated way, with round characters, may invite instead a complex, reflective response that is morally praiseworthy because the reader is encouraged not merely to accept simplistic moral rules” (2006, p. 266). In light of this, it may be that Kieran is attending only to the moral ideas or perspectives manifested by the artwork when he points to ‘moral defects’; and as such, if something like Harold’s account is correct then cognitive immoralism will be flawed insofar as what is cognitively valuable is not morally defective.

It is difficult to offer a reply on behalf of cognitive immoralism without first providing a clear and coherent account of exactly what counts as a moral defect. However, the problems presented in attempting to propose a clear and univocal definition of moral defects and merits plague not only cognitive immoralism, but the very foundation upon which the ethical criticism of art resides.

Jenn Neilson (2012) has argued that the debate surrounding ethical criticism has proceeded on an inadequate definition of exactly what counts as a moral defect or merit, and that as a result the discussion has continued in a fashion that confuses rather than clarifies the problems and positions involved (p. 66). While Neilson’s aim is to provide a definition of exactly what constitutes a moral defect, her argument is founded on the language of ‘moral realism’, and therefore, it is not clear that any such definition would be accepted univocally. Rather, her attempt is indicative of the problem surrounding ethical criticism, with each position assuming a definition of what constitutes a ‘moral defect’ that best suits its needs and rejecting those that thwart their ends.

Yet, contextualism might avoid this problem by taking an approach that is, as we will see, unavailable to ethicism and moderate moralism. By accepting that it is not the moral or cognitive *value*, but rather the *moral significance* of an artwork that is aesthetically valuable the contextualist can circumvent the problem of how to define a ‘moral flaw’, or ‘moral value’, while still being able to provide an account of how the ethical and aesthetic spheres interact.

In what follows we will see a brief attempt at reconciling contextualism with the moral significance thesis which, given the failure of the preceding value based accounts must stand as a viable account of how morality and aesthetic value might interact with one another where works of art are concerned.

6.5. Contextualism and Moral Significance: a Possible Approach

Contextualism is an attractive position in that it attempts to account for the complexity of our engagement with, and evaluation of, art. Whereas both ethicism and moderate moralism, as we have seen, formulate and defend a ‘systematic’ relationship of the interaction between moral and aesthetic value, based largely on the idea that our moral evaluations of artworks inform our aesthetic ones, contextualism, instead, proposes that our moral and aesthetic evaluations are not so clearly distinguished. Harold (2006) — although he does not explicitly defend contextualism — agrees that the relationship between our moral and aesthetic evaluations of artworks is a matter more complex than is often accounted for. As was noted in the third chapter, he writes that: “Rather than saying that we make a moral judgment and then, on that basis, make an aesthetic judgment, or vice versa, it is more plausible to suppose that aesthetic judgments and moral judgments overlap in that they invoke *some* of the same considerations by appealing to some of the same qualities” (p. 268, his emphasis). Here the suggestion is that in order to evaluate an artwork — either morally, or aesthetically, — we must attend to both its moral and aesthetic features. One cannot simply judge one kind of value as being entirely distinct from the other. As was also noted in chapter two, Eileen John proposes something similar in claiming that: sometimes we need to acknowledge the morally relevant features of an artwork as being “morality-serving-the-needs-of-literature” (2010, p. 285). John explores the idea that the moral attitudes that art

presents might be “exploited” for literary purposes; that is, rather than being “left-alone” and presented as true or substantiated moral attitudes, artworks might shape morality to realize specific literary goals. She writes, “[...] literary practice also takes great advantage of morality as a resource for creating compelling, complex, dramatic, engaging works” (2010, p. 285). John’s claim raises concerns for cognitive accounts trading on the value of the ‘moral understanding’, or lessons that they argue works of art offer; for if art does indeed treat morality as malleable, then surely we must question the nature of the understanding that it imparts. In addition, Eaton has recently defended a position that she calls “robust immoralism” (2012). She argues that in special cases, the immorality of an artwork can be aesthetically valuable, yet her account of how this relationship pertains is based neither on ineliminable defects nor on cognitive gains. Rather, Eaton claims that artworks that prescribe immoral response towards “rough heroes” (2012, p. 283) can be aesthetically valuable in virtue of their ability to “[set] up and skilfully [solve] an ambitious artistic problem and [induce] in its audience a complex and enduring sort of pleasure” (2012, p. 290). Eaton’s account thus squares nicely with our established notion of moral significance, in that her account sees the aesthetic value of the immoral perspective as resting with the complex way in which the work ‘sets-up’, explores, or shapes our responses towards certain types of morally defective characters. What all of these claims attempt to bring to light is that the complexity of our engagement with art makes it increasingly difficult to clearly distinguish or quarantine, as it were, these two spheres of value.

There is indeed little doubt that the relationship between ethics and aesthetics is a deeply complex one. And, as we have seen throughout the previous chapters, theories which seek to explain this relationship as a matter of one value directly constituting the other inevitably miss much of what we take to matter in our engagement with artworks. Both the argument for ineliminable moral defects and cognitive immoralism, although they attempt to account for a kind of complexity in their denial of the valence constraint, maintain that it is the moral or cognitive *value* (or lack thereof) that is responsible for affecting aesthetic value. Yet, if contextualism were to argue instead that it is the moral *significance* of artworks rather than their moral or cognitive *value* that interacts with their aesthetic value, they might both successfully deny the valence constraint. They might also offer an account of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics that does

not compromise complexity for explanatory power. The moral significance thesis, as it was outlined in the third chapter, argues that an artwork's moral content can be morally significant when the work explores or shapes its particular moral ideas, perspectives, or attitudes, in a rich, vivid, and complex way. Furthermore, the thesis holds that the moral significance of an artwork persists in a complex 'two-way' relationship with the work's aesthetic value. Furthermore, the moral significance thesis holds that we can evaluate an artwork's rich and complex exploration of moral ideas and attitudes as being aesthetically valuable even if we hold that such ideas and attitudes are morally defective. And, in the same way, we can evaluate the understanding (or misunderstanding) an artwork manifests as being aesthetically valuable, even if we take that understanding to be in the grip of some error.

Crucially, this relationship is not one whereby one value is taken to add or detract from the other, but one where both values are seen as mutually dependent. Indeed, the language of aesthetic cognitivism and value based moralism (including here the contextualist/immoralist positions outlined earlier in this chapter) often makes reference to the idea that artworks can "[get] us to *feel* the force of a particular claim or truth" (Gaut, 2007, p. 85, his emphasis), or "[use] artistic means to engage the imagination and thereby see things in a new light, make connections [and] convey insights" (Kieran, 2006b, p. 132). And, as such, throughout this thesis we have seen that ethicism, moderate moralism, and value based contextualism, only apply to the moral perspectives and attitudes that art prescribes when they are *aesthetically relevant*; a stipulation that lends weight to the claim that such perspectives and attitudes must be, in some sense, aesthetically valuable (or at least aesthetically *realized*) before they can be morally valued. What this seems to suggest is that the moral or cognitive *value* of an artwork is determined to some extent by its aesthetic value. And, therefore, any theory that simply holds the moral value of an artwork to count against or constitute part of its aesthetic value will have failed to account for the complexity of the relationship between the two.

Furthermore, an account of contextualism taking moral significance as being the focus of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics might better resist the valence constraint where a value based account would fail. As we have seen, value based accounts consistently fail to show that it is in fact the moral *value* that contributes positively or

negatively towards an artwork's aesthetic value; a point to which the moderate autonomist often draws attention. If we recall, Anderson and Dean grant that, "In some instances the legitimate aesthetic criticism of a work can surround aspects of the moral subject matter of a work, i.e. the moral content of a work can contribute to or detract from the aesthetic aspects of a work" (1998, p. 153). However, they argue "[...] it is never the moral component of the criticism as such that diminishes or strengthens the value of an artwork qua artwork" (1998, p. 153). The problem that the moderate autonomists identify within the value-based positions is that they are unable to show that the reason a work is morally defective and aesthetically defective is the *same*. This criticism is one that has been reinforced throughout the previous chapters. The moral significance thesis, however, agrees with moderate autonomism insofar as it holds that the moral or cognitive *value* of an artwork is never the aspect that adds or detracts from aesthetic value; instead it is the interaction between the moral and aesthetic properties of an artwork that produces an exploration or a 'shaping of ideas' that is both morally significant and aesthetically valuable.

Such a view can resist the valence constraint, as it does not take 'moral value' as the sole measure of what constitutes an aesthetic defect or merit. Rather, it allows that moral perspectives and ideas of *any* valence can positively or negatively affect the aesthetic value of an artwork, not by virtue of their 'moral value', but through their 'moral significance'.

In moving away from a value-based account of how moral and aesthetic values interact, contextualism might succeed in avoiding the problems that accounts focusing solely on moral and cognitive value face. Adopting a 'moral significance' approach would allow contextualism to retain much of what makes the position attractive: its account of the complex ways in which we engage with and evaluate art, its acknowledgement of the symbiotic relationship that exists between the moral and aesthetic realms of value, and its claim that the exploration of immoral attitudes and perspectives can be aesthetically valuable. Such an account would further avoid problems surrounding a proper, univocal definition of what constitutes a moral defect or merit, given that moral significance, remains (to the most extent) distinct from moral or cognitive value or disvalue. Therefore, significance-based contextualism — as it could be referred to — cuts a

position that could go a long way in providing an account of how the moral and aesthetic components of artworks interact with one another. Carving out a niche between moderate autonomism and value based moralism, this position can maintain that these two spheres of value are neither conceptually distinct (as the former argue), nor linked solely by the value or valence of their moral propositions (as claimed by the latter). Rather, they are — like an alloy — fused together in a way that seems to deny their being ‘teased-apart’ and evaluated one against the other.

Significance-based contextualism would provide an account that is able to capture the full range of works, including those works with ambiguous moral perspectives that positions such as ethicism are unable to account for. Furthermore, it would be able to evaluate works that offer-up multiple interpretations without weakening its scope. Indeed, it could even be argued that works in which a plurality of plausible interpretations are available are morally significant in virtue of this. Importantly, significance-based contextualism can square away our intuitions and feelings concerning the fact that we often find morally defective works of art both engaging and aesthetically valuable, while at other times we find morally praiseworthy artworks to be dull and shallow. In such cases there is no need to connect the ‘moral value’ of the work with its aesthetic value. Instead, we should see the aesthetic value of these works as being, to some extent, related to the moral significance of the work: to how it explores and shapes the ideas its represents, as well as to the way in which it addresses us as moral beings.

7. Conclusion

My aim throughout this thesis has been twofold. First, to examine the major moralist positions with specific regard to the success or failure of what I have argued are their ‘value-based’ approaches; and second, to determine whether an alternative ‘non-value-based’ account of the relationship between the moral and aesthetic features of artworks could present a plausible and attractive option. A general cognitive argument for moralism, as well as an account of the ‘moral significance thesis’ was offered in chapter 3.

In chapters 4, 5, and 6, the value-based moralist theories (ethicism, moderate moralism, and 'value-based-contextualism') have been examined in detail. It has been argued that none of these positions provides a convincing, or complete account of why we should accept that moral or cognitive defects and merits constitute or ground aesthetic defects and merits. There are a number of different reasons as to why each of the three moralist accounts failed.

Gaut's account of ethicism fails to, among other things; defend its normative claim that we *ought not* to respond to artworks as prescribed, if such a response would be unethical. Furthermore, although Hazlett (2009) has attempted to provide a supplementary account of response moralism in favour of Gaut's claim, his argument regarding our 'exportation' of moral propositions from fiction into the actual-world is unconvincing.

Carroll's moderate moralism was shown to fail on two counts. First, it was shown to beg the question by relying on a 'morally sensitive audience' that — in the case of an artwork that manifested an immoral perspective — would fail to respond as prescribed, thus securing the very claim that Carroll set out to argue. Second, it was argued that the empirical claim entailed by moderate moralism — that we are unable to achieve imaginative 'uptake' where immoral perspectives are concerned — was false.

And finally, (value-based) contextualism — including Kieran's account of cognitive immoralism — was shown to be unconvincing as it failed to show that it was the moral defect that was, in itself, responsible for directly contributing or constituting to the aesthetic value of the work.

Although these positions all fail for different reasons, all of them overlook or dismiss the complexity of our engagement with works of art, as well as the notion that our moral and aesthetic evaluations of artworks often refuse clean, or complete, separation. As these moralist positions fail to show that 'moral value' is able to constitute and directly affect aesthetic value, the moderate autonomist position introduced in the second chapter might be understood as being vindicated. However, although they may be correct in their claim that 'moral value' cannot constitute aesthetic value they are, I maintain, incorrect in their claim that the moral and aesthetic spheres of evaluation remain entirely distinct.

As was argued in chapters 3 and 6, the way by which an artwork explores or shapes its moral ideas can be both 'morally significant' and aesthetically valuable. This notion of moral significance presents itself as a viable option for those who wish defend a contextualist position for a number of reasons. The points in its favour are as follows. First, it avoids the valence constraint by dealing not with 'moral value' (or disvalue) but with moral significance. Second, it allows for both artworks that are morally ambiguous and artworks from which we can plausibly interpret a number of different moral perspectives. Third, it offers us an explanatory account as to why we sometimes feel that artworks might be aesthetically valuable *by virtue of* their immoral perspectives and attitudes. And last, it squares nicely with the intuition that art's greatest contribution to our understanding of that which we call 'moral', comes not through the manifestation of particular 'ideas' or 'perspectives', but rather comes through art's ability to shape and explore these ideas and perspectives in a way that allows us an opportunity for reflection.

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