On Criticisms of Art: Subjective Interest as a Link between Ethics and Aesthetics

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Abstract Based on Kant’s discussion of aesthetic judgment, this paper explores the conflict between ethics and aesthetics in valuations of art. It argues that the three existing camps in the philosophical literature on the question of whether ethics should influence aesthetic judgments of art are insufficient. While Autonomism says never, Moralism always, and Moderate Moralism sometimes, the paper aims to show that they are all deficient because they lack due consideration for subjective interest, a key link between ethics and aesthetics. The argument proceeds with a critical look at two articles: Posner’s Against Ethical Criticism and Carroll’s Moderate Moralism, which support Autonomism and Moderate Moralism respectively. It concludes that, due to their being linked by subjective interest, both ethics and aesthetics inform art valuations, and yet are opposites that exclude each other. The role of an ethical and/or aesthetic judgment of art is wholly and solely dependent upon the level of subjective interest that exists between an audience and a work of art.¹

Keywords Art valuation ∙ ethics ∙ aesthetics ∙ subjective interest

During a promotional conference for his film Melancholia, critically acclaimed film director Lars Von Trier found himself banned from the 2011 Cannes Festival and declared persona non grata for all future events.² The incident involved Von Trier’s expression of sympathy with Hitler and the Nazis. Although his canon has often been accused of misogyny and misanthropy, the ban was the most public condemnation of the director’s provocative style.³ While the veracity of such accusations remains questionable, instances such as this are practical examples of the often debated conflict between morality and aesthetics in valuations of art. On the question of whether a work’s ethical content ought to influence our aesthetic valuation of it, arguments vary among three main camps; Autonomism, which answers never, Moralism, which answers always, and Moderate Moralism, which answers sometimes.

¹ The central argument of the paper is under development in a longer and more elaborate version, which purports to do justice to the role of subjective interest in judgments of art. I would like to thank Prof. Jason Smith for his constant guidance and support for the project.
² The initial statement, banning had the director from all future events, was annulled by a later statement making Von Trier’s ban effective for the 2011 festival only (http://www.screendaily.com/news/von-trier-welcome-back-at-cannes/5054055.article visited on Dec 30 2014).
This paper aims to show that all three camps are insufficient for they overlook an essential link between morality and aesthetics: subjective interest. A moral outlook in valuations of art is certainly possible, but such valuations often fail aesthetically. Kant’s discussion of the criteria of judgments of the beautiful/aesthetic will serve as the conceptual foundation of the present argument.\(^4\) I will proceed, firstly, with an exposition of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, which are both linked and separated by subjective interest; and secondly, with an elaboration of the argument through a critical analysis of two articles: Posner’s Against Ethical Criticism\(^5\) and Carroll’s Moderate Moralism.\(^6\)

Against autonomist claims, I argue that ethics and aesthetics are related and, as such, can both be considered in art valuation. The two domains are based on the same criterion that defines each, namely subjective interest. Kant advances that aesthetic judgment requires detachment from the object of judgment.\(^7\) The judge of beauty must not have the least interest in the object of judgment. Although complete detachment is hardly attainable, a certain level of detachment is required. To rephrase Kant’s words one may say that aesthetic judgment is one in which all subjective interest is suspended as best as possible. An aesthetic appraisal acknowledges that subjective interest is prone to be present, and so it aims for the suspension of such interest to move from subjectivity towards objectivity. What about ethics? Ethical judgment is, likewise, based on the concept of subjective interest. When one ethically valuates a work of art, one departs from an objective stance. One has in mind some moral tenets that act as criteria for judgment. These tenets have to be as objective\(^8\) as possible, for otherwise there would not be a justification to posit any work of art or anything at all against them. Even though they are essentially objective, these moral tenets exist in the form of beliefs. Beliefs necessarily carry a subjective aspect because the believer—and, here, the judge—recognizes them as true, making them her own. It is only then that she can use them as criteria for judgment. We have, hereby, shown that ethics and aesthetics are closely related by their being founded on subjective interest.

The previous discussion calls for a clarification on the difference between ethics and aesthetics; for if they are closely related, it is not evident how they are mutually exclusive. It is important to note that the two are somehow opposed to each other. Whereas Kantian aesthetics call for the suspension of all interest, ethics require this interest for their very existence. Morality, though being objective, exists concretely in relation to the beings with whom it is concerned. If morality is about right and wrong, and what one ought or ought not to do, it has to be based on the behavior of the subjects. However universal the behavioral consideration may be, it remains subjective at least in relation to a species if not to an individual. This subjectivity is strengthened by the aforementioned belief component. We see, therefore, how the two domains are mutually exclusive.

But if it is impossible to completely suspend subjective interest, as is required by aesthetic appraisal, could ethics and aesthetics be as removed from each other as we seem to suggest? The claimed impossibility to attain pure disinterestedness is an exaggerated statement. I was once

\(^4\) In Critique of the Power of Judgment 5:205-211.
\(^7\) “Everyone must admit that a judgment about beauty in which there is mixed the least interest is very partial and not a pure judgment of taste”, he says. (Kant, Immanuel, and Paul Guyer. “Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment.” In Critique of the Power of Judgment. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000:5:205)
\(^8\) I use the term “objective” in this work, not as the opposite of “subjective,” but as an expression of the Kantian concept of the universality of laws or tenets postulated from an individual—subjective—stance with an assumption of general applicability.
standing by a river and the misty morning view was one the most beautiful sights I have ever
experienced. Deep in contemplation, I could testify for total suspension of subjective interest,
even of that of wanting the view to continue to exist. Such contemplation may be attainable in
some cases but probably not as effortlessly, or it might even be unattainable especially if the
object of contemplation bears immediate connection with the contemplator. It could thus be
granted that some subjective interest may exist in aesthetic judgment. However, that level of
interest cannot equal that which is required by morality. Morality, as beliefs, is at the core of
human experience; it is very readily available to the subject so much so that it creates a very
strong subjective interest. People may peacefully disagree on their particular judgments of the
beauty of music, but certain uneasiness and potential conflict arise when it comes to
disagreements on the right to kill animals for food, for example. It is in the consideration of this
level of interest that ethics and aesthetics oppose each other; where one is fully present, the other
is not. Therefore, when a viewer of Von Trier’s Antichrist detects its deeply misogynistic aspects,
she is automatically made unable to judge the film’s aesthetic value; that is, she cannot valuate it
as beautiful.\footnote{My conception of aesthetics as judgment of beauty, as discussed by Kant in the Critique
of Judgment, is that whatever object allows itself to be viewed aesthetically is but beautiful. Thus, aesthetic
judgment, due to its disinterestedness, is a lack of judgment if it requires contemplation. Whoever contemplates does not judge but
simply beholds. This point is further supported by Schopenhauer in The World as Will and Representation p. 210
“Now since, on the one hand, every existing thing can be observed purely objectively and outside of all relation, and,
on the other, the will appears in everything at some grade of its objectivity, and this thing is accordingly the
expression of an Idea, everything is also beautiful.” I, however, have to express my disagreement with the concept
that everything can be objectively/aesthetically observed. It is true that contemplation of anything, when possible,
suspends all subjective interest. However, if one is to judge a certain object aesthetically, one needs also to take into
account the universality of such possibility for contemplation (Here, I invoke Kant’s concept of universal voice in
judgments of beauty). It is certain that very few—and dare I say insane—people would agree on the beauty of
murder for example, even if someone may testified to being able contemplate it objectively.}

The relatedness and mutual exclusion of aesthetics and ethics sum up to a position that
rejects both autonomism and moralism; it partially agrees with moderate moralism, which it
views as making a just but weaker claim. The aim is to present a certain stance of moderate
moralism, which refutes not only the view of the autonomist and the moralist but also some
aspects of current arguments for moderate moralism.

In his article Against Ethical Criticism, Richard A. Posner presents arguments against the
inclusion of ethics in aesthetic judgment. Therein are some points that call for replies; these will
be addressed in what follows.

To justify his rejection of moral judgment of art, Posner presents an objectionable moral
definition of aesthetics: “The aesthetic outlook is a moral outlook, one that stresses the values of
openness, detachment, hedonism, curiosity, tolerance, the cultivation of the self, and the
preservation of a private sphere—in short, the values of liberal individualism.”\footnote{Posner 1997, 1.}
The moral outlook hereby expressed is ill-conceived because it is of a solely contemplative nature.\footnote{Liberal individualism, as conceived to be present in Posner’s arguments, is highly problematic in that it excludes
the fact that there is such thing as objective truth, the very foundation of much search for wisdom through
philosophical discourse.} Although it is true that aesthetics are grounded in contemplation, the morality evoked could not
apply to human beings. Morality cannot be merely contemplative because of its necessary
subjective component presented earlier. Were it the case that human life were enclosed in
contemplation, aesthetic evaluation of this sort would be morally permissible but, alas, it is not
the case. The viewers of Von Trier’s films will not be detached from the judgment of their misogyny for the moral conflict that the films bring about can neither be ignored nor be tolerated.\(^1\) Perhaps in support for this tolerance, Posner says that “great literature must somehow cause the reader to suspend moral judgment.”\(^2\) However, this is the very danger against which ethical valuation comes as an additional requirement for aesthetic appreciation. For if the most immoral literature can suspend the reader’s ethical valuation of it, the ethically minded is rightfully alarmed because morality is menaced by such aesthetic approach which could take over the reader’s “alief” and probably lead to a more or less disinterested, drawn in approach to real life situations that would normally arouse hostility or sympathy on moral grounds.\(^3\) The concept of “alief,” as introduced by Gendler, elaborates on subconscious-level behaviors, which, when strongly aroused, can influence conscious belief and action. If individuals who engage in contemplation eventually immerse from it to engage in action, and if the outlook taken in the contemplation can affect future actions; then ethical judgment from within contemplation should be also determined by one from without.\(^4\) Furthermore, what could we possibly mean by morality if it is mere disinterestedness?\(^5\)

One could summarize Posner’s position in his statement that “a work of literature is not to be considered maimed or even marred by expressing unacceptable moral views.”\(^6\) The statement, however, seems to ignore the consequences of aesthetic appraisal of a work on its consumption and, thereby, on its influence on the audience’s attitude toward the values that the work expresses. A work of art that is valued as beautiful is likely to be promoted for greater consumption and this is clearly alarming if the work is immoral. Though one might be aware of what is immoral or moral in the work, one is inevitably affected also subconsciously through one’s alief. A work of art shapes and is shaped by the society which produces it. Therefore, aesthetic evaluation should overlook ethics only when the work is not targeted at a human audience, which is not the case for any humanly produced works, objects of the present discussion. Insofar as morality is an integral part of citizenship for the wellbeing of society, aesthetic appreciation cannot be considered as separate from ethics. Viewers of Von Trier’s films may, on moral grounds, be unable to aesthetically enjoy his work when feminist ideals in mind clash with misogynistic aspects of the films.

Posner further rejects moral judgments of art because he judges them as misguided and intolerant. He says that “the moral content of a work of literature is likely to be obsolete whether or not it conforms to our current moral views.”\(^7\) But the “current moral views,” by their very currency, are not obsolete; the moral appraisal of a work of literature or any art should be based on its current moral value, which cannot be eliminated on grounds of the obsolescence of the moral content of the work. This only explains the evolution of morality with regard to time and space, but the valuation of a certain work of art is done from the audience’s, and not the artist’s, point of view. The argument goes further to accuse moral judgment of intolerance: “To devalue a

\(^1\) Tolerance as it relates to morality is possible only in the sense that one lets others believe what they may. However, the moral conflict cannot be resolved by such tolerance. The moral conflicts make disinterestedness impossible and therefore no aesthetic outlook—which requires disinterestedness—can be achieved then.
\(^4\) Moral influence on audiences of morally charged art is almost guaranteed.
\(^5\) Evidently the objective component of morality calls for certain disinterestedness, but ultimately any moral view has to carry a subjective belief-based aspect for it to qualify as moral.
\(^6\) Posner 1997, 1.
\(^7\) Ibid., 4.
work of literature because of its implicit or explicit politics, morality, or religion,” he says, “is…intolerant, philistine, puritanical, illiberal, and when it expresses itself in an assumption of moral superiority to our predecessors, complacently ethnocentric.” However, morality is not liberal, at least not when liberalism implies, as it does here, indiscriminate tolerance. Moreover, if morality involves at all any notions of good or bad, right or wrong, then our understanding of it necessarily evolves over time. Therefore, there is generally nothing ethnocentric about the assumption of superiority to the predecessors of a generation; it is a historical truth.

Along the same lines, the argument states that “People obsessed by politics, religion or morality may be incapable of an aesthetic response to literature.” One characteristic that these so-called obsessions share is that they provide the “obsessed” with greater sensitivity to the corresponding values. This supports the view expressed earlier that works of art with vivid moral aspects resist aesthetic contemplation. In a world that is more or less political, religious and moral, everyone is, according to this claim, obsessed. Thus, the incapability of an aesthetic response, if caused by those factors, would be quasi-universal. But this is not the case; aesthetic experience is possible.

In his attempt to discard all that calls for ethical criticism in art, Posner paints empathy as amoral and all effects of art as merely psychological. Empathy could be amoral if and only if associated with things that are altogether remote from the livelihood of the art’s audience. However, as Posner remarks, that is not the case: “the characters and situations that interest us in literature are for the most part characters and situations that capture aspects of ourselves and our situation.” Feelings aroused by literature are not always amoral; they require a certain understanding based on the audience’s association with the object of empathy, an association that could be moral. In relation to this, Carroll asserts that “many of the emotions that the audience brings to bear, as a condition of narrative intelligibility, are moral both in the sense that many emotions […] possess ineliminable moral components, and in the sense that many of the emotions that are pertinent to narratives are frequently moral emotions.” In support of the amorality of feelings that literature brings about, Posner contends that the disinterested, ‘art for art’s sake’ pleasure that much literature affords is particularly remote from morality. It is indeed true that disinterested pleasure is immediately amoral but this is not the kind of pleasure that one gets from literature—unlike the pleasure afforded by the sight of the misty morning by the river. The claim that effects of literature are merely psychological is not sound because even if the immediate effect were psychological, it would eventually bear moral consequences. Here again, one can consider the concept of “alief,” which is psychological but which can lead to the formation of beliefs and actions that could be moral in nature. Posner’s claim that “immersion in literature does not make us better citizens or better people” is false.

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 10. “Empathy is amoral”; 12. “Literature…moves as well as pleases, shocks as well as delights, intoxicates as well as soothes, braces as well as relaxes. But all these effects are psychological rather than moral.”
22 Ibid., 12.
23 Carroll 1996, 228.
24 Posner 1997, 12.
25 Maybe the immediate effects just are feelings, but Posner does not consider the reality of moral feelings or their possible progression from mere feelings to moral action.
26 Posner 1997, 1. The statement is not always false. It is, however, false if, as understood, Posner presents it as a declaration of absolute truth. Immersion in literature does not always make us better citizens or better people, but it does sometimes do so.
Let us now turn to Noël Carroll’s arguments for moderate moralism. Although the arguments of this paper mostly align with moderate moralism, there are three points in Carroll’s arguments that we need to contest.

The first point concerns moral judgment of works of art when their moral aspects are not readily noticeable. On the subject, Carroll says that “even where given audiences do not detect the moral flaws in question, the artwork may still be aesthetically flawed, since in those cases the moral flaws sit like time-bombs, ready to explode aesthetically once morally sensitive viewers, listeners, and readers actually are deterred from the response which the work invites.”

This assertion is sound inasmuch as it presupposes objective morality. However, if there is such thing as objective morality, it is an eternal absolute and the understanding of it evolves with regard to time and space, but human beings are unable to have a complete grasp of the eternal/timeless. With that in mind, assessment of an artwork is only possible if it takes into account only the understanding of the immediate audience and judge of the artwork. In other words, it is impossible to assess the potential moral value of anything. Outside of eternity, an artwork is valuable with regard to time and space, and only in relation to its immediate audience.

The second point is about the relationship between ethical and aesthetic defects. Carroll argues that an ethical defect “will count as an aesthetic defect when it actually deters the response to which the work aspires.” However, it is often not possible to talk of an artwork’s aspirations. Many artworks do not have an intended purpose besides being art, especially when the artists produce art for art’s sake. It is not meaningful to consider aesthetic value of an ethical aspect of a work based on the aspired response. Assessment of artwork, whether aesthetic or otherwise, is done from the point of view of the audience and not of the artist. Since the audience is often not able to detect the artist’s intention, if there be one, ethical judgment is only possible from the audience’s point of view. Furthermore, detected moral defects automatically discard aesthetic valuation, rather than become aesthetic defects.

The third point relates to the intention within an artwork and the success of its absorption of the audience. Carroll advances that morality may contribute to the intention of absorbing the reader, and may therefore make the artwork more aesthetically valuable. I contend that this may be true only when the moral value is not so strong as to be present in the reader’s mind without further assessment. If the reader of a narrative artwork is very consciously aware of the moral aspects into play in her absorption, then she is in no position to assess the aesthetic value of the work. This is because the awareness of the moral aspects of the work creates a subjective interest that should be non-existent in aesthetic judgment. But this should not necessarily be a worry because if the reader is truly absorbed, she would not be able to detect the moral defects or strengths leading the process of absorption in the work. If the interest in morality is less intense as not to immediately evoke interestedness in the audience, then it can be included in aesthetic evaluation; but if it is so intense as not to escape moral assessment without further investigation, then it discards any aesthetic valuation.

Carroll 1996, 234.
Carroll 1996, 234.  
Ibid.
And if they do, it becomes questionable whether they remain pure art or something like propaganda. The latter seems to be the case in line with Kantian aesthetics, which drive this paper’s argument.
This assertion is based on the subjective interest evoked by morality. If one finds moral defects into a certain artwork, one cannot assess the artwork’s aesthetic value, at least insofar as the moral defects are vividly present in one’s mind (cfr. Schopenhauer. The moral interest awakens the will, and that makes aesthetic judgment impossible.)
Carroll 1996, 236.
In conclusion, I have shown the relationship that exists between ethics and aesthetics. Although the two domains are based on the same criterion, subjective interest, they are mutually exclusive. They are, however, not autonomous of each other. If we fully consider the nature of ethics and of aesthetics, we discover that the question of whether they should both participate in valuations of art is not a most relevant question. The pertinent question rests on when the two domains can both be considered and how they influence each other’s participation in appraisals of art. Whether ethics are to be considered in aesthetic valuation is determined by the level of interestedness that moral aspects of a work of art bring about. This determination is automatic for it becomes evident upon consumption of a certain work of art. The present arguments would support the views of those who, after considering the deeply misogynistic aspects of Von Trier’s films, assess them as aesthetically displeasing; which would mean that the works do not qualify for aesthetic judgment because of their inability to allow for an aesthetic experience.