

A robust discussion has arisen in the last twenty years or so over the possibility of connections between aesthetics and ethics. Several different issues have come to the fore as a result—including, but not limited to: whether ethical criticism bears on aesthetic criticism, whether audience members can become better or worse moral agents as a result of experiencing art, whether some individual works of art can be considered evil.

In this paper I will consider the question of whether ethical criticism should have any bearing on aesthetic criticism. One view that seems universally rejected in the field is that works of art might be aesthetically bad *simply because* they are morally bad. When we talk about whether and how evaluations of works of art are affected by moral evaluations, we have a tight connection in mind between the moral defects/virtues and aesthetic defects/virtues¹ a particular work has. We don't want to say that merely being morally offensive causes a work to be aesthetically bad. We have examples, especially in the last century, of works that are aesthetically good *precisely because* they are morally offensive. We can call this particular view the “tightness constraint”.

For this reason positive accounts arguing for a connection between moral and aesthetic evaluations have to provide evidence that is stronger than a contingent connection between the work's moral content and a particular audience's response. There needs to be a substantive connection between the moral features and the aesthetic experience of an artwork in order to justify the claim that moral judgments can affect aesthetic ones. This is a feature that should remain pretty central to any positive view.

In the rest of this paper I am going to explore the prospects of a positive view. I will do so by focusing on the view of a major player in this area—Noël Carroll. In considering a criticism of his view, I will try to determine whether the most appropriate representation for positive views—conforming to the tightness constraint I have just described—is what I call the branching or the non-branching model.

Carroll (1996) has done us the service of providing a conceptual mapping of the landscape of the debate over the connection between art and ethics. He describes four views which he calls (1) radical autonomism, (2) moderate autonomism, (3) moderate moralism, and (4) radical moralism. Radical autonomism holds that it's conceptually incoherent to ask moral questions of works of art. Simply put, it's a category error. Moderate autonomism holds that even if it's not conceptually incoherent to ask the moral questions, the answers to these questions shouldn't affect the aesthetic evaluations of the work. In Carroll's words: “it remains committed to the view that the aesthetic dimension of the artwork is autonomous from other dimensions, such as the moral dimension” (231). Moderate moralism, of which Carroll is an advocate, holds that it's occasionally appropriate to allow moral judgments to affect aesthetic judgments. Radical moralism is

¹ This leaves room for both valence consistency and inconsistency—that is, whether moral defects are always aesthetic defects and moral virtues are always aesthetic virtues or moral defects are sometimes aesthetic virtues and moral virtues are sometimes aesthetic defects.

stronger still, holding that moral judgments are always relevant to aesthetic judgments. In this paper I will be dealing only with Carroll's argument for moderate moralism and his argument against moderate autonomism.

He argues for his view in several papers (1996, 1998a, 1998b, 2006), but the view stays consistent. He focuses primarily on narrative arts and begins by noting that narratives are, by their very nature, incomplete. It's left up to the reader² to fill in much of the narrative. Moreover, the author makes assumptions about the backgrounds of the readers. In the typical case the author and the reader will share a large portion of the respective sets of background knowledge. In order even to understand many narratives the reader has to draw from her cognitive and emotional stock. Some of the filling-in involves having emotional responses, some of which will be moral emotions. For instance, in a scene where Nicholas Nickleby is cheated, the reader feels anger *because* Nicholas was wronged. Thus, the reader is called on to make a moral judgment in order to render the narrative intelligible.

This would be sufficient to refute the radical autonomist, but Carroll hasn't yet shown that there is a relation between the moral and aesthetic judgments. He goes on to make the point that a central aim of most narrative works is to engage the reader—that is, to draw in the reader such that she is absorbed in the work. Works that aim to be absorbing and fail to do so are then aesthetically flawed as a result. Some works will fail to be absorbing, and they will so fail as a result of inviting readers to take up a perspective that the reader finds morally offensive. The reader will be unable to take up the perspective, thus keeping the reader from becoming absorbed in the work. The work then fails as art because of its being morally offensive to the reader.

Carroll uses many examples for various reasons, but the two most relevant to this discussion are a hypothetical tragedy featuring as its tragic hero Adolph Hitler—what we might call *The Sorrows of Young Hitler*—and the actual novel *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis. In considering *The Sorrows of Young Hitler* we can see that problems arise as soon as we recall the Aristotelian standards of tragedy, which require that the tragic hero evoke our pity. Aristotle argues that, morally speaking, the tragic hero must be a mixture. He can't be flawless, but he can't be evil, either. Unfortunately, featuring Hitler as the tragic hero of *The Sorrows of Young Hitler* is a great mistake, since the standards for tragedy—what Carroll calls the local standards of tragedy, as opposed to the global standards of art or narrative art in general—invite us to do something we simply cannot do: pity Hitler. We can't pity him because he's evil. Thus, the work fails to engage us because of the morally repugnant perspective it invites us to adopt, and is thus flawed as a work of art.

The same kind of problem exists for the novel *American Psycho*. Carroll says that “the author intended it as a satire of the rapacious eighties in the USA,” but that the violent scenes are described in such graphic detail that “readers are not able morally to get past the gore in order to savour the parody” (1996 232). Ellis invites his reader to take up a

² Recognizing that narratives can exist in non-literary format, for convenience's sake, I will refer to the relevant audience member as a reader.

perspective that treats horrific murders as objects of satire, but the readers reject the invitation and fail to take up the narrative as prescribed by the author. Thus, the work's design is flawed because it involves a miscalculation of the moral judgments naturally arrived at by the readers.

Carroll concludes that, as these examples show, moral defects can have effects on aesthetic evaluations. In each of these examples, he writes, "the reason the work is aesthetically defective—in the sense of failing to secure uptake—and the reason it is morally defective may be the same" (235). Thus, moderate autonomism is refuted.

Maybe not, say the moderate autonomists. Anderson and Dean (1998) argue that Carroll has not shown that the aesthetic defects in the previous examples are due to their moral defects. Specifically, they think he's wrong when he says that "the reason the work is aesthetically defective [...] and the reason it is morally defective may be the same." Anderson and Dean call this the argument from common reasons. They think that the common reason for the aesthetic defect and moral defect is not a sufficient reason, which casts doubt on Carroll's argument. They distinguish two arguments—called the moral defect and aesthetic defect arguments, found on the handout³—concerned with Carroll's two examples *The Sorrows of Young Hitler* and *American Psycho*.

³ **(FH)** *The Moral Defect Argument*

1. The perspective of the work in question is immoral.
2. Therefore, the work 'invites us to share [this morally] defective perspective' (In one case, we are invited to find an evil person sympathetic; in the other case, we are invited to find gruesome acts humorous.)
3. Any work which invites us to share a morally defective perspective is, itself, morally defective.
4. Therefore, the work in question is morally defective.

The Aesthetic Defect Argument

1. The perspective of the work in question is immoral.
2. The immorality portrayed subverts the possibility of uptake. (In the case of the tragedy, the response of pity is precluded; in the case of satire the savoring of parody is precluded.)
3. Any work which subverts it[s] own genre is aesthetically defective.
4. Therefore, the work in question is aesthetically defective. 156-157

They note that in the moral defect argument, there is nothing suggestive of aesthetic defect. This is why the aesthetic defect argument is needed as well.

Carroll's claim, however, is that the moral evaluation made in each example has the effect of lowering the aesthetic evaluation. Thus, the moral defect argument would have to either imply or have some effect on the aesthetic defect argument. Anderson and Dean think this hasn't been shown. They conclude, "The plausibility of Carroll's claim rests entirely on the fact that the two arguments share one common premise, but the premise is not sufficient to show that the work in question is either morally or aesthetically defective." (157)

The common premise they refer to is

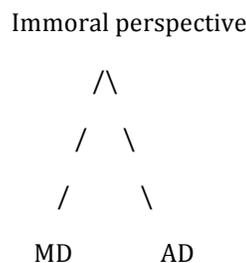
1. The perspective of the work in question is immoral.

In the one case this premise leads to the moral defect conclusion, in the other it leads to the aesthetic defect conclusion. In neither case, however, does it lead us straight on to the conclusion. Other steps are needed between (1) and (4) in both arguments. We can envision the two arguments then existing as a forking road—splitting off at premise 1 and going in two different directions. This I will call the branching model.⁴

The moral defect (MD) comes at the end of the first branch, while the aesthetic defect (AD) comes at the end of the second branch. The work's having an immoral perspective, taken in and of itself, is not a moral defect, evident in the fact that in addition to the work's having this perspective, we also need to suppose an invitation to take up that perspective. But if the MD is at end of one branch and AD is at the end of a second branch, and it's not necessary that MD and AD be on the same branch, then how can Carroll make the case that the AD results from the MD?

It looks like what Anderson and Dean believe Carroll needs to adopt is not a branching model, but a non-branching model.⁵ A non-branching version would show how the moral

⁴ For handout (FH):
The Branching Model



⁵ (FH):

defect causes the aesthetic defect. Similarly, in cases where there aren't defects, but virtues, we would still be able to see that the invitation to take up the moral perspective would lead on to the aesthetic virtue of being absorbing.

Prima facie it looks like a branching model of moderate moralism is incoherent. The moral judgment is made on one branch, the aesthetic judgment is made on the other. There is a common element—the immoral perspective—but as we've seen, this isn't sufficient for either the moral or the aesthetic judgment. Thus, it looks like a moderate moralist must adopt a non-branching model.

Maybe not, says Carroll. More specifically, he asks, What's so great about sufficient reasons anyway? That is, rather than accept the criticism and try to show that his view is in fact a non-branching theory, he stays the course and argues that one can be a moderate moralist and adopt a branching model. He does this by saying that the common reason alluded to in the moral defect and aesthetic defect arguments doesn't have to be a sufficient reason to make his case. "The moderate moralist," he writes, "need only contend that among the complex of factors that account for the moral defectiveness of the artwork in question, on the one hand, and the complex of factors that explain the aesthetic defectiveness of the artwork, on the other hand, the evil perspective of the artwork will play a central, though perhaps not sufficient, explanatory role in both" (1998a 423).

Thus, he wants to stay with the branching model, which seems mysterious to me. First, the seems to face a dilemma. Either the immoral perspective renders the artwork immoral or it doesn't. If it doesn't, then the aesthetic judgment doesn't result from any moral consideration at all. If it does, then we don't need the invitation superadded to the immoral perspective to demonstrate a moral defect.

The Basic Non-Branching Model

Immoral perspective

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MD

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AD

Second, Carroll's argument seems dangerously close to violating the tightness constraint. He might be interpreted as arguing that a work of art could be aesthetically bad *simply because* it has some immoral elements or presents an immoral perspective. I admit that Carroll's position does have an intermediate step between the immoral perspective and the aesthetic defect, but if the intermediate step could be understood to be part of the aesthetic defect, we would have a case in which the aesthetic defect is solely due to the immoral perspective.

I am also not sure why Carroll focuses his argument on the lack of uptake, and talks about this lack in terms of failures on the author's part to achieve one of his aims. Is it so clear that an author's failure to secure one of his aims—taken in isolation—is therefore an aesthetic defect? Can't we imagine an artistic work that is aesthetically better precisely because one of the author's aims were not secured?

Here is how I would have thought Carroll might have argued, adopting a non-branching model, and ignoring the question of whether the reasons are sufficient or non-sufficient. He makes the following comment in his response to Anderson and Dean, after they have reconstructed his argument using the failed tragedy and failed parody as examples: "I am not sure why they insist on talking about genres here, since it will be an aesthetic defect of the work if it fails to secure its aims, whether or not those aims are genre specific" (423). I have already registered my unease at the part of the statement discussing the securing of authorial aims, but the part about genre-specific aims is interesting to consider more closely here. He acts surprised that they would speak of genres, but it shouldn't be that surprising. After all, the two examples he relies on most are a purported tragedy that fails to conform to the local standards of tragedy and a purported parody that fails to conform to the local standards of parody.⁶

So if we want to say more than that it's mere lack of uptake that causes the aesthetic defect and to adopt a non-branching model, how could we do it? Carroll argues that the work's having the immoral perspective is explanatorily crucial to the work's having the aesthetic defect, but it seems to me that the immoral perspective *combined* with the invitation to take up the immoral perspective causes the moral defect, to which, if I am a morally sensitive reader, I will respond by refusing to take up the perspective. Carroll would say that we have an aesthetic defect here, but I would argue that the aesthetic defect comes, if it does, when the lack of intended uptake causes the reader to adopt a set of local standards different from the one intended by the author. Of course, it's not just the lack of overlap between the sets of standards that causes the aesthetic defect. The defect can be seen when the work overall is written intended to conform to the author's set of standards, while the reader has constructed an interpretation of the work in such a way that it's intended to conform to the other set of standards. For example, a reader

⁶ Of course, Carroll might argue here that the problem isn't a failure to conform to standards, but that the work cannot even be entertained long enough to ask the question of whether it conforms to the standard. But at least in these examples, it's the local standards that make it the case that the reader isn't able to take up the work. After all, we have no problem in thinking of Hitler as the villain in a horror film, because horror films—good horror films—ask us to loathe or greatly fear the villains. It's thus the standards of tragedy in combination with Hitler as the purported tragic hero that prevent uptake.

interprets the purported tragedy *The Sorrows of Young Hitler* as a satire. The reader then holds the work up against the standards local to satires. But the work was written *as* tragedy, so the author will have made decisions based on the standards local to tragedy. In all likelihood, then, the work will not be positively evaluated. Does this happen in every instance? No, but this is moderate moralism after all.

This is a non-branching model because the moral defect causes an interpretation—one that results from the reader’s not taking the work as intended by the author—that then determines which local standards to apply to the work.⁷

Someone might worry that I have violated the tightness constraint with which I began the paper. We have an intermediate step between the moral and aesthetic defects and it’s an interpretation, which might vary from reader to reader. Should we worry that we don’t have a direct relation between the moral and aesthetic judgments?

I don’t think so. What we were guarding against were aesthetic judgments based *simply* on moral judgments. We don’t have that here. Isolate the last two steps. Imagine an interpretation adopted by readers which directed them to the set of standards for satire, when the author wrote the work as tragedy. The set of standards for satire and tragedy will be very different, so there will be some dissonance between the reader’s judgment and the author’s intention. This will in many cases be an aesthetic defect. Now bring the last two steps back into the non-branching picture. What caused the interpretation that caused the dissonance? The moral defect. Thus, the aesthetic defect is caused by the moral defect. Moderate moralism.⁸

⁷ (FH):

The New Non-Branching Model

Immoral Perspective

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MD

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Interpretation

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AD

⁸ I recognize that I have spoken here about particular genres and local standards, which might worry some that I have made an assumption about all narrative works belonging to a genre. I don’t hold this

References:

- Anderson, James C. and Jeffrey T. Dean. (1998) "Moderate Autonomism." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38.
- Carroll, Noël. (1996) "Moderate Moralism." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36.
- Carroll, Noël. (1998a) "Moderate Moralism Versus Moderate Autonomism." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38.
- Carroll, Noël. (1998b) "Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding." In *Aesthetics and Ethics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson. NY: Cambridge University Press.
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assumption. But if moral judgments of artworks belonging to genres have bearing on the aesthetic judgments of these works, then moderate moralism is true. I have thus spoken only of genre works.