
Book Review

GAUT, BERYS. *Art, Emotion and Ethics*. Oxford University Press, 2007, 280 pp., \$85.00 cloth; forthcoming October 2009, 288 pp., \$37.95 paper.

Reviewed by Charles Repp

One of the central debates in the area of art and ethics concerns the relation between moral and aesthetic merit in artworks. Over the last decade, Berys Gaut has been the leading defender of a position known as ethicism, which holds that ethical merits in art (when aesthetically relevant) are always aesthetic merits and ethical defects (when aesthetically relevant) are always aesthetic defects. In *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, Gaut offers his most comprehensive explication and defense of this view yet.

Gaut takes these tasks one at a time, devoting the first half of the book (chapters 1–5) to clarifying and fleshing out his theory, and the second half (chapters 6–10) to making his case for it. Perhaps the chief highlight of the first half, if not of the whole book, is Gaut's innovative analysis of the main conceptual possibilities in the debate. According to the standard view, ethicists face three main rivals: autonomists like Peter Lamarque who deny any intrinsic connection between moral and aesthetic merit in art; moderate moralists like Noël Carroll who hold that moral merits (defects) in art are only sometimes aesthetic merits (defects); and immoralists like Matthew Kieran and Daniel Jacobson who claim that moral defects in art can sometimes be aesthetic merits and moral merits can sometimes be aesthetic defects. Gaut sees two problems with this schema. First, these options are not all on the same conceptual plane; rather, they are divided along two different issues. One, the issue of whether moral merits are ever aesthetically relevant, divides autonomists from the rest of the field, while the other, concerning the value relation between moral and aesthetic merits, gives rise to different forms of non-autonomism. The second problem is that both immoralism and moderate moralism, under their standard descriptions, are incomplete theories. Moderate moralism says nothing about moral merits that are not aesthetic merits; immoralism says nothing about moral defects that are not aesthetic merits. As a result, it is unclear whether these views are even incompatible with one another. When the missing parts of these theories are filled in, Gaut believes that there will no longer be two plausible non-autonomist alternatives to ethicism, but only one, according to which ethical merits (defects), when aesthetically relevant, are sometimes aesthetic defects (merits) and the rest of the time aesthetic merits (defects). Gaut introduces the term "contextualism" to designate this view and includes Kieran and Jacobson among its adherents. As for Carroll, Gaut claims that he is in fact an ethicist whose only disagreement with Gaut has to do with the conditions under which ethical merits are aesthetically relevant.

Besides clearing up some of the confusions regarding the alternatives to ethicism, Gaut also does significant work in delineating the specific notions of ethical and aesthetic merit with which his theory operates. Gaut explains that in referring to the aesthetic merits of an artwork, he means to refer not merely to those qualities that contribute to its beauty, elegance, or grace, but to all the

properties that make it valuable *qua* art. With this broad notion of the aesthetic, he combines a narrow definition of the moral, one that counts as virtuous not just any excellence of character but only “*other-regarding* actions, feelings, and motives” (45). Gaut later appeals to Guy Sircello’s theory of “artistic acts” in order to explain how moral qualities in this sense can be attributed to works of art. According to Sircello, we can speak of an artwork as having moral qualities insofar as it is the expression of acts that manifest these moral qualities, such as the act of representing its subject in a certain way. An artwork that represents its subject compassionately, for instance, may be properly characterized as compassionate insofar as it manifests a compassionate artistic act. Gaut suggests that we may also formulate our moral assessments of artworks in terms of the character of the agent performing the artistic acts, or what he calls the “manifested” artist.

In order to preempt certain objections, Gaut introduces two important qualifications to his view in chapters 3 and 4. First, in response to the objection that great artworks can be ethically flawed, Gaut insists on the *pro tanto* character of the ethicist principle. The formulation that best captures this character, Gaut suggests, is one that expresses the relation between ethical and aesthetic merit using the “insofar as” locution; that is, an artwork is always worsened aesthetically *insofar* as it is ethically flawed and an artwork is always improved aesthetically *insofar* as it is ethically meritorious. This formulation allows for the possibility that the aesthetic quality of an artwork may not be worsened *overall* by an ethical flaw, because while being ethically flawed, it may still succeed in being meritorious in some other aesthetically relevant way. Gaut’s second qualification allows for cases in which an ethical flaw or merit in an artwork does not affect its aesthetic quality *at all*. Such cases may arise, Gaut argues, because not all ethical qualities are aesthetically relevant. As a general rule, Gaut says, only ethical attitudes that are expressed in a work via “artistic means” (e.g. “conveying general insights by means of the treatment of particular examples”) should bear on our aesthetic assessments.

With his theory thus spelled out, Gaut goes on in the second half of the book to construct a case for its resting on three *a priori* arguments. The first of these arguments borrows from Colin McGinn the idea that moral virtues exemplify a kind of beauty and moral vices a kind of ugliness. For Gaut, who assumes that beauty is always an aesthetic merit and ugliness always an aesthetic flaw, it follows from the moral beauty claim that artworks are aesthetically meritorious insofar as they (i.e., their manifested artists) exhibit moral virtues and aesthetically flawed in so far as they exhibit moral vices.

Gaut’s second argument is grounded in aesthetic cognitivism, the view that art can give us knowledge and that its aesthetic value derives in part from its ability to do so. In cases where the knowledge communicated by an artwork is moral knowledge, it follows from cognitivism that the aesthetic value of the artwork will depend on its moral merit (meaning in this context the correctness of the moral understanding it expresses).

For his third argument, Gaut returns to the “merited response” argument that he originally used to defend ethicism in his 1998 “The Ethical Criticism of Art.” Gaut’s discussion of the argument addresses a number of concerns that have been raised in the interim, but the argument itself, consisting of just two simple premises, remains essentially unchanged. The first premise says that if an artwork prescribes an unwarranted response, that is an aesthetic failure in the work. The second premise claims that one way in which a response can be unwarranted is by being unethical. The argument concludes that an artwork can fail aesthetically as a result of prescribing an unethical response.

Measured against the extreme lucidity of the book’s early chapters, some of its later parts—in particular, the discussion in chapter 7 about the “disciplines” of imagination—seem a bit muddy. Also occasionally disappointing is Gaut’s handling—or mishandling—of examples, which in certain cases warrants some of the very charges against ethicism that Gaut wishes to escape, like the tendency among ethical critics toward oversimplistic interpretations and the inevitable banality of the moral insights that artworks have to offer. To foreground these problems,

however, is to underappreciate the impressive knowledge and sensitivity Gaut brings to most of the examples he uses, the penetrating grasp he has on the various and often complicated issues surrounding his subject, and the force and ingenuity of the arguments he marshals in defense of his theory. For anyone teaching a course or unit on art and ethics, Gaut's book offers a sound and accessible introduction to the area (chapters 1 and 3 in particular) and a cogent statement of one of the more important theories to come out of the debate.

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