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# Art, Right or Wrong?

Art and Ethics

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# Two General Topics

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- ❖ Plato's Criticisms of the Arts
- ❖ Three Views of the Interconnection between the Aesthetic and the Moral as regards this question: 'are the ethical flaws (or merits) of works of art also aesthetic flaws (or merits) in them?' (Gaut, *RCA*: 394)

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# Plato: Two Criticisms of Art

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- ❖ Moral: Artists often depict immoral activities in a favorable light, treating the gods, for instance, as lascivious, devious, or violent.
- ❖ Metaphysical (or, perhaps, moral-metaphysical): Mimesis is multiply problematic, and all art is inherently mimetic. (N.b. that Plato is, however, mainly focussed on poetry.)

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# Mimeticism

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- ❖ Works of art are doubly removed from reality, and thus prone, or perhaps destined, to distort what is good and true.
- ❖ The contours of Plato's Theory of Forms is disputed, but let us think of it this way:
  - ❖ A Platonic Form is a perfect particular, an ideal which is flawlessly what it is, the essence of some kind or feature.
    - ❖ There is a Form, for instance, of Beauty—Beauty Itself, Alone and by Itself
  - ❖ A particular in the material world 'participates' in the Form by imitating it as far as it is able.
    - ❖ Helen, let us say, is the most beautiful human. She participates in the Form of Beauty by imitating it. Yet, though she is beautiful, she is also not beautiful. She is beautiful compared with other humans, but not beautiful in comparison with the beauty of the gods.
  - ❖ A painting of Helen captures, let us allow, some aspect of her beauty—but not her beauty in its totality.
- ❖ The painting is thus thrice removed from the truth, from the reality of the Form of Beauty.

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# So, what's the problem?

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- ❖ *Rep.* 605e: art corrupts people, by giving them false views of reality and inducing them to develop the non-rational parts of their souls to the exclusion of their highest and most divine faculty: their reason.
  - ❖ This is the sense in which art, especially mimetic poetry, falsely masquerades as knowledge.
- ❖ Further, perhaps depicting dishonorable people in favorable lights gives us a distorted view of the Good, and disposes us to engage in conduct we would otherwise find abhorrent.
  - ❖ This is why mimetic poetry should be banned from the ideal city, until such time as it can redeem itself and lay to rest 'the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy' (*Rep.* 607b).
- ❖ Finally, non-philosophers are ill-equipped to grasp the difference between beautiful things and Beauty Itself, the Form of Beauty, and so are apt to make mistakes of all kinds in running their affairs, in conducting their lives, and in educating their children.

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# Returning to the Contemporary Scene

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- ❖ Are the ethical flaws (or merits) of art works also aesthetic flaws (or merits) in them?
- ❖ Or can we / should we keep the categories of moral and aesthetic value distinct?

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# The Character of Our Question

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- ❖ Notice that in all of this we are focussing on the *intrinsic* features of works of art, not on their *extrinsic* or *relational* features.
  - ❖ Suppose, as seems true, sadly, that Picasso was sexist, exploitative, and misogynistic with respect to his models and assistants.
    - ❖ This is surely relevant to our moral assessments of the man and his character.
    - ❖ It may also well be relevant to our assessment about the value of his artistic production in context.
      - ❖ So, we do not discount such questions. They too are important.
  - ❖ But, in our present focus, we are asking about the moral dimensions *internal* to the work.
    - ❖ So, for example, if Picasso or any other artist depicts women as being objectified, harmed, or degraded, then his depiction pertains to our question. Our question: Is this depiction relevant to our assessment of the aesthetic value of the work of art?
    - ❖ Conversely, if someone writes a play which is uplifting, ennobling, and consciousness-raising, is that relevant to the value of the play as a work of art?

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# Triumph of the Will

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- ❖ Consider Leni Riefenshtahl's *Triumph of the Will*, a documentary of a Nazi rally held in Nuremberg in 1934.
- ❖ Innovative camera work
- ❖ Professional cutting and editing
- ❖ A well integrated motivational soundtrack (by the illustrious composer Herbert Windt)



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# Three Possibilities

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- ❖ What is the connection between morality and aesthetic value?
  - ❖ Aestheticism: no connection at all
  - ❖ Contextualism: sometimes yes, sometimes no
  - ❖ Moralism: a work of art is always aesthetically flawed insofar as it possesses an aesthetically relevant ethical flaw

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# Aestheticism

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- ❖ Marries well with Formalism: significant form seems, as form, value neutral
  - ❖ It would be a sort of category mistake, as if one were to triangles are virtuous but pentagons morally reprehensible.
  - ❖ Same again for pieces of music, except for, possibly, programmatic music.
- ❖ Note here, though, that the expression of an immoral view can mar the aesthetic value of a work when, and only when, its expression is done in awkward, ungainly, or aesthetically unpleasing sorts of ways.
  - ❖ Cf. Monroe Beardsley on anti-Semitism and anti-usury expressions in Pound's *Cantos*.
- ❖ On behalf of Aestheticism: (i) some arts works are great despite their presentation—and evident endorsement—of immoral views; (ii) Aestheticism is the only or best explanation of this possibility; so, (iii) we should endorse Aestheticism

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# Contextualism

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- ❖ The question of whether the expression of a moral view is relevant to aesthetic value does not admit of a single answer: sometimes yes and sometimes no.
- ❖ Yes: consider the character of Cecil Vyse in Forster's *A Room with a View*: he is an aesthete and a snob, and, arguably, part of the plot and our appreciation of it turns on our finding him an object of scorn *and* compassion.
- ❖ No: sometimes we must (or, should) apply a *pro tanto* principle: an artwork is bad in so far as, or to the extent that, it embraces an immoral view, but is none the less all things considered a fine work. Consider the treatment of Shylock in *A Merchant of Venice*: very plainly the work indulges in anti-Semitic tropes, but it also teases out the morally unacceptable consequences of doing so.
  - ❖ Indeed, one might think that the power of art in some cases precisely involves our entering imaginatively into the complexities and affective responses of characters that we find morally problematic.

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# Moralism (Ethicism)

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- ❖ A work of art is always aesthetically flawed by expressing an ethically relevant but morally objectionable view.
  - ❖ Note that put this way, Moralism in principle tends to overlap with Contextualism in spirit, but differs in insisting that aesthetically relevant moral flaws *always* mar the aesthetic value of a work of art.
- ❖ On behalf of Moralism:
  - ❖ (i) In some cases, in poetry in particular, the cognitive content of a work of art is inextricably connected to the aesthetic value of a work; (ii) the best or only explanation of the aesthetic merit of such cases is Moralism; so, (iii) we should be Moralists about aesthetic value.
  - ❖ (i) The failures of some works of art (some horror films, some comedies, some tragedies) are often best explained by their moral shortcomings (sexism, racism, gratuitous cruelty is not, for instance, funny—so comedies relying on these features are not funny); (ii) the merited responses to such works of art is an aesthetic response; (iii) the best or only explanation of the aesthetic merit of such cases is Moralism; so, (iv) we should be Moralists about aesthetic value.