

Evaluating Art Morally

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Abstract: What is the value of art? Standard responses draw on the different kinds of value that we tend to ascribe to individual artworks. In that context, none have been more significant than aesthetic value and moral value. To understand what makes an artwork valuable we then need to examine the interaction between these two kinds of value and how this contributes (or not) to the artwork's final value. The main aim of this article is to highlight two areas of concern for interaction theories, in order to improve our understanding of the dynamic relations between kinds of value in art. In the first instance, I shall outline the main tenets of the three leading interaction theories. Next, I shall discuss what it might mean to say that an artwork has moral value, in an attempt to establish on what grounds interaction theories base their central claims. Subsequently, I will look at how our conception of art's moral value affects the possibility of a bona fide form of value interaction, or one capable of shaping a work's final value in conjunction with its aesthetic value. Finally, I shall turn to a discussion of the notion of aesthetic value.

Keywords: aesthetic value, moral value, art

Imagine a work that you find deeply troubling. Why? It is artistically inspired and yet deeply morally problematic ... what's the problem? It solicits responses or turns on attitudes that are immoral. Consider a paradigmatically immoral attitude ... Nazism, racism, misanthropy, misogyny ... Imagine a work that fits the description. What should we say about such a case? Is it just a matter of moral qualms getting in the way of appreciation? Or is a work's moral character integral to how we should evaluate it as art? (Kieran, 2002, p. 129)

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF ART? This question, if conceived as targeting a single quality or feature in a work, might be misleading in its simplicity. For standard philosophical responses have tended to rest on a plurality of instantiated values, drawing on the various *kinds* of value that we ascribe to artworks, ranging widely from sentimental, emotional or even therapeutic forms of value to historical, educational, political value and more.¹ No manifestations of value in art have, however, been more significant in this context than the following pair: aesthetic value and moral value. That is to say, philosophical debate concerned with what makes an artwork valuable has hitherto largely turned on the relation between aesthetic and moral value and, importantly, how that relation succeeds (or not) in contributing to the artwork's final value.

Attempts at theorizing the seemingly lively interaction between these two forms of value have primarily sought to explain exactly how the presence or

¹ See, for example, Budd (1995), Stecker (1997) and John (1998).

absence of one actively affects the presence or absence of the other.² How does the moral value of an artwork (W) impact on the aesthetic value we are inclined to ascribe to W and vice versa? These “interaction theories” thus build on two central claims: (i) aesthetic value and moral value interact in important ways in particular artworks, and (ii) understanding what makes an artwork valuable is, to a considerable extent, a matter of establishing the precise workings of the interaction between the forms of value manifested by the artwork and experienced as significant by us.

The main aim of this article is to highlight some concerns about the notion of interaction itself in this context in order to improve our understanding of the dynamic relations between kinds of value in art. The overarching objective is not to cast doubts on the soundness of specific interaction theories as such so much as to encourage them to disambiguate or clarify certain aspects of their key claims. If our initial question raises the issue of what, fundamentally, makes an artwork valuable, then it falls upon interaction theories to explain comprehensively how that value is, in fact, determined by its moral and aesthetic manifestations. In other words, such theories ought to provide more developed accounts of how an artwork’s final value is attributable to the object of appreciation in some sense collaboratively shaped by its various manifestations of value. Although I will not outline a fully developed alternative to interaction theories here, I hope that this broadly negative investigation will contribute to the strengthening of the current philosophical debate on interactionism.

In the first instance, I shall outline the main tenets of the three leading interaction theories. Next, I shall discuss what it might mean to say that an artwork has moral value, in an attempt to establish on what grounds interaction theories base their central claim. Subsequently, I will look at how our conception of art’s moral value affects the possibility of a bona fide form of value interaction, or one capable of shaping a work’s final value in conjunction with its aesthetic value. Lastly, I shall turn to the notion of aesthetic value and suggest a different way of understanding the role of the aesthetic in our moral encounters with art.

1. Three Interaction Theories

Three theories have dominated philosophical debates about the interaction of aesthetic value and moral value in individual artworks in the last 25 years or so: moralism, ethicism and immoralism. Importantly, these accounts are not

2 The exception here is the view known as autonomism, which holds that aesthetic value and moral value are entirely autonomous from one another in art. For more on this position, see, for example, Anderson and Dean (1998). See also, more recently, Clavel-Vazquez (2018).

committed to the idea that all artworks must bear witness to such interaction in order to be artworks. Rather, the focus lies on artistic appreciation and the ways in which works of art should be interpreted and evaluated. That is to say, interaction theories aim not at isolating the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be an artwork in aesthetic and moral terms but, instead, at capturing how artworks that are both morally and aesthetically valuable are to be experienced and appraised by us. Interaction theories are thus both (i) descriptive, insofar as they seek to capture our artistic phenomenology and the ways in which various forms of value succeed in influencing our actual experience of artworks, and (ii) normative, to the extent that they rely on the idea that there are more or less appropriate ways of appreciating individual artworks.

The theory known as “moralism”³ is grounded in the observation that appropriate engagement with narrative works often calls for the exercise of our moral understanding. The full appreciation of Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, for example, requires getting to grips with the broader moral content the novel tackles. As a result, moralists hold, it is sometimes the case that a moral defect in a work also counts as an aesthetic defect or demerit since it (i.e., the moral defect) may prevent us from fully engaging with the work; if a work prescribes a moral attitude we find morally repugnant or otherwise difficult to endorse, we will be unable to respond to it in the way prescribed and thus our aesthetic appreciation will be impeded. Conversely, any work that encourages or enables such engagement is aesthetically meritorious. On this line,

Moralism: (At times) The moral value of W interacts with W’s aesthetic value since it can either enable or prevent us from fully engaging with W.

Building on this idea, ethicism seeks to defend the stronger view that whenever an artwork displays moral features, be they merits or defects, these will always impact on the aesthetic value of that work to some degree: manifesting morally or ethically admirable attitudes counts *toward* the aesthetic value of a work, whereas manifesting morally or ethically reprehensible attitudes counts *against* its aesthetic value. When a work of art displays moral merits these also count as aesthetic merits (and moral flaws also count as aesthetic flaws). In the words of its main proponent, Berys Gaut (1998, p. 182), “[t]he ethical assessment of attitudes manifested by works of art is a legitimate aspect of the aesthetic evaluation of those works, such that, if a work manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes, it is

3 Also known as “moderate moralism”, this view rejects the stronger version of the claim, supported by “radical moralism”, that art can *only* be aesthetically valuable if it serves a moral purpose. For more on this stronger and nowadays rarely defended version of moralism, see, for example, Tolstoy (1995). My description of the central claims of moralism henceforth apply to moderate moralism. See, for example, Carroll (1996) or (1998).

to that extent aesthetically defective, and if a work manifests ethically commendable attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically meritorious".⁴

Ethicism: The moral value of W always interacts with its aesthetic value since W is aesthetically meritorious (or defective) *insofar as* it manifests ethically admirable (or reprehensible) attitudes.

Positioning itself in contrast with the claim that a defective moral perspective always leads to aesthetic demerit, the view known as immoralism instead takes as its starting point the idea that in some artworks a defective or immoral perspective can lead to interesting tensions with our personal (or indeed collective) moral convictions in such a way that an artwork can, in fact, be aesthetically valuable *in virtue* of its immoral character. In contradistinction with the other two main interaction theories, immoralism thus rests on the claim that the strong dependence between the two kinds of value need not imply that the valence of the work's moral value singlehandedly determines the valence of that same work's aesthetic value.⁵ In other words, a negative moral value need not entail a negative aesthetic value, as we see, for example, in Nabokov's *Lolita*, where it is precisely because of the work's morally problematic perspective that we find aesthetic merit in it.

Immoralism: The moral value of W interacts with W's aesthetic value since W's negative moral value can affect its aesthetic value positively.

Many arguments for immoralism are closely connected to the cognitive possibilities that arise when we engage with morally controversial artworks (see, for example, Kieran, 2002). That is to say, by inviting us to engage with morally defective attitudes, these artworks may appeal to some of our own morally prohibited desires, perhaps even fulfil some of them, or satisfy our curiosity to some extent, thereby contributing to our emotional, moral or philosophical cognitive stock. Similarly, by soliciting our attention and appealing to some interest of ours in the larger phenomenon under scrutiny, say extra-marital love or moral justice, such works can also strengthen our grasp of emotional, moral and philosophical concepts in phenomenological and propositional terms.

Of course, highlighting a genuine instance of immorality in art does not necessarily entail that the artwork endorses that immoral perspective. After all, a work can represent immoral characters, deliberations or events without thereby recommending them to us as suitable courses of action. What immoralists are on to here is perhaps best interpreted as an account of how and why we, among other things, can be attracted to behaviours we know to be unacceptable, how we can

4 Although ethicism considers that every moral virtue always contributes positively to the overall value of an artwork and that, conversely, every moral flaw always detracts from that overall value, it is not committed to the view that for a work to possess aesthetic value it is *necessary* that it manifests morally admirable values.

5 For more on immoralism, see, for example, Jacobson (1997), Harold (2008) and Eaton (2012).

be drawn to people with questionable personalities, and even why we might nonetheless feel sympathy, empathy or understanding for them.⁶ Engaging with these immoral aspects as they are represented in the work can improve us as moral agents and increase our understanding of our own inclinations, deliberations and commitments.

Two features shared by these accounts are worth noting straight away. The first has to do with the direction of the alleged interaction between aesthetic and moral value. The question that arises here concerns the extent to which the influence under scrutiny is, in fact, reciprocal, since moralism, ethicism and immoralism seem exclusively concerned with tracking the ways in which the moral value of an artwork can affect its aesthetic value.⁷ The second point has to do with the manner in which interaction theories simultaneously rely on a pluralism about kinds of value – moral, aesthetic and artistic value – while also, arguably, failing to maintain clear boundaries between them. To demonstrate a case where one thing interacts with another thing, one needs to retain a clear idea of what distinguishes the two things in question. As we shall see, the true extent to which these accounts can rightly be considered *interaction* theories – if by that term one refers to a mutual form of interaction between different kinds of value in particular artworks – might well prove to be more contentious than is usually assumed.

2. Art and Moral Value

Let us assume that interaction theories are right and that a dynamic relation between moral value and aesthetic value is central to the appreciation and evaluation of at least some artworks. Let us further take it as read, in accordance with interactionist theory and debate, that it is specifically the *moral* value of a work that can command the power to affect and alter the same work's aesthetic value. What does it actually mean to say that artworks have some specific moral value with which that same work's aesthetic value can interact?

In the first instance, the question invites reflection upon its most central notion, namely moral value. What, to be precise, *is* the moral value of art? Generally speaking, interaction theorists rely on the broad idea that the moral value of a particular artwork is to be understood in terms of the “morally relevant attitudes” manifested by that work (see, for example, Gaut, 1998). The moral value at the

6 For more on this point, see, for example, Eaton (2012).

7 One notable exception in the interactionist literature is the recent work by Alcaraz León (2018). Alcaraz León defends a particularist version of interactionism and discusses how aesthetic properties may partly explain our attribution of moral or cognitive value not only to art, but also to non-artistic artefacts and human behaviour by appealing to the affective character of aesthetic properties. See also McIver Lopes (2005) for a discussion about aesthetic, moral and cognitive properties in pictures.

heart of interactionist accounts is, then, that of the moral perspective adopted and prescribed by the work with respect to the events and characters represented. But how can an artwork ‘adopt’ a moral perspective?

On the face of it, there are at least three ways in which we can understand this idea. The first has it that the morally relevant attitude in question is grounded in the moral value of the phenomena and events addressed by the artwork:

- (i) Morally relevant attitude of W is or derives from the moral value of the subject matter treated in W.

On this line, the morally relevant perspective of a novel such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, for example, is duplicated by the moral value of the central theme of the work, namely that of the struggle against nineteenth-century American slavery.⁸ The value of that which the work is about – as it stands externally to that work – is thus reassigned to the work itself, and we find it in the attitude prescribed in the novel.⁹

Yet even a brief examination of (i) reveals serious concerns. For one, we should be wary of the idea that art can – or even aspires to – transpose the moral values we are committed to in the non-fictional or non-artistic world to artistic contexts. In fact, and as we saw in our discussion of immoralism, many artworks seek to do precisely the reverse, namely to present us with moral perspectives that we specifically do *not* endorse in our day-to-day life, perhaps in order to enable us to better explore those views imaginatively. Others are considered valuable because they succeed in portraying a phenomenon or event from a handful of *different* moral perspectives, thereby enabling a more authentic portrayal of life’s moral complexity and intricacy. Indeed often what an artwork offers is, precisely, a selection of perspectives – where that selection cannot be said to uphold a unified moral value of its own. What is more, many artworks tackle several distinct themes with moral undertones. In *Beloved*, for example, Morrison tackles not only the struggle against slavery both in its social and psychological dimensions, but also concepts such as loyalty, collective pain, shared guilt, the relation between parent and child, and more. Can these different themes be integrated into one morally cohesive whole, capable of grounding the moral value of an artwork?

8 This is not the simple point that the moral value of the examined phenomenon is transferred to the work *tel quel*, since a work depicting slavery can have a positive value in depicting it negatively.

9 For more on this point, see, for example, Hanson (1998).

A second possibility has it that the central characters portrayed (either literally, visually or otherwise) in the artwork are the apt “holders” of the moral attitudes in question.¹⁰ To that end,

- (ii) Morally relevant attitude of W is or derives from the moral value of the (fictional) characters’ attitudes in W.

Possible advantages of this suggestion include the convenience of ascribing moral value not to the work of art itself, but to an agent, albeit a fictional one, whose agency pertains to the world of the work. Unfortunately, this way of conceiving the moral value of art gives rise to its own worries. For one, we are left to wonder how to account for the moral and psychological distance to their central characters on which artists and authors rely in order to introduce the narrative construal or commentary crucial to the overall artistic value of the work. For many artworks are characterized, specifically, by the unique angle from which characters and situations are presented (or *re-presented*), the manner in which a whole set of events or deliberations are woven together, parallels drawn or merely insinuated with previous characters and situations, patterns of behaviour developed over time (perhaps even generations), or the deeper analysis of psychological types. Artistic explorations of this kind are crucial to works such as *Crime and Punishment*, for example, where the moral perspective or attitudes held by Raskolnikov in no way exhaust the moral dimension of the novel itself. Indeed, it is the novel’s continual revelation of the limitations implicit in Raskolnikov’s moral perspective (and its strongly aestheticist dimension) that arguably constitutes the novel’s most pertinent moral.¹¹

Our third alternative way of thinking about how the moral value of an artwork can be said to belong or pertain to the artwork involves a greater shift toward the artist or author and can be captured thus:

- (iii) Morally relevant attitude of W is or derives from the moral value of the perspective conveyed by the artist or author in W on a particular subject matter.

An account of this kind – that is to say one whereby the meaning of a work is determined by the artist or author – can take different expressions.¹² On the more mainstream intentionalist reading, (iii) stipulates that the morally relevant attitude of the work is that which the artist or author intends to convey through the work

10 For more on this point, see, for example, Walton (1994).

11 The same objections would surely hold for the moral attitudes of a work’s fictional narrator.

12 For more on some classical versions of this theory, see, for example, Wimsatt and Beardsley (1948) and Hirsch (1976).

such as, say, the virtue of forgiveness.¹³ Anti-intentionalist interpretations of (iii) are not ruled out, however, since a work's moral attitude may not be an aspect of the work necessarily tied to the self-ascribed expressive intention of the author. Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* may be a case in point here, since racist undercurrents have been said to characterize parts of the narrative despite the author's intentions.¹⁴

Now, although an intentionalist need not hold that it is a necessary condition for the artist or author herself to actively hold the moral belief or attitude conveyed in the work at the time of artistic creation, she is committed to the view that the artist or author has the intention that the work itself conveys or endorses a certain attitude or belief. In some cases, it will be the artist's own moral perspective that transpires in the attitudes manifested by the work.¹⁵ In other cases, the artist may intend for the work to have an altogether different approach than the one held by her.¹⁶ Of course, and as we mentioned just above, it is also possible for the author or artist to fail in her ambitions and only manage to convey an altogether unintended meaning or attitude.

Trying to locate the work's moral value in the perspective (intentionally or non-intentionally) projected on to that work by the artist or author might duck some of the concerns raised in connection with (i) and (ii), and have the additional advantage that the moral value can be ascribed to the product of an action, conviction or word of a non-fictional agent. Notwithstanding these benefits, the model runs against some of the basic intuitions about the way artworks tend to transcend the context of their creation. If the moral value of an artwork fundamentally tends to be the value of those moral attitudes which the artist or author seeks to represent in that work, then accessing or tapping into relevant moral perspectives now not only becomes a matter of detecting subtle nuances, interpreting and re-interpreting, and succeeding in grasping all sorts of connections, moral and other, between attitudes at several different levels of meaning or detached parts of the work, as we are used to. It also becomes a

13 Intentionalism can either hold that the artist's or author's intention single-handedly determines the meaning of the artwork ("actual intentionalism"), or that the meaning of a work is determined by the best available hypothesis about the artist's intention: to interpret the meaning of artworks we need to hypothesize about what the artist intended when creating the work ("hypothetical intentionalism"). For more information on the former, see, for example, Hirsch (1967) and Livingston (2005). For the latter, see, for example, Levinson (1996).

14 Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

15 Nazi party member Leni Riefenstahl's documentary film from 1935, *Triumph of the Will*, serves as a well-examined case. In this work Riefenstahl portrays a world entirely aligned to her own political beliefs with the aim of either consolidating that moral vision in others or recruiting new adherents to it.

16 For example, at least some critics and scholars maintain that Shostakovich wrote some of his symphonies in praise of the Communist regime despite not adhering to that ideology himself.

matter of construing the moral dimension of that artwork *accurately*, perhaps even in accordance with the artist's own intentions. The relative freedom to be found in exploring a work's many morally relevant threads and lines of inquiry is now replaced by the detective work required to establish which set of attitudes is to take moral precedence over another, which perspectives are the ones to rightfully prescribe certain responses from us, and how all the relevant attitudes align in accordance with the perspective projected on to the work by the artist or author.

This raises problems for intentionalists and anti-intentionalists alike. While the former may face difficulties that the anti-intentionalist can avoid in this process, such as explaining how the relevant attitudes conveyed by a work can extend beyond its maker's intentions – as in the case of non-intentional content, or indeed the alterations that a work's morally relevant attitudes can undergo due to external factors including the evolution of our changing moral mores over time – the latter will be hard-pressed to determine quite how autonomous we as readers or audience can be in pinpointing specific moral attitudes fundamental to a work's moral value.

In some respects, these concerns lead us back to our discussion of (i) and the way in which many artworks are considered valuable precisely because they succeed in portraying a phenomenon or event from different moral perspectives. And, just like the moral life it seeks to represent, this complexity rarely allows for a unified value of its own, or at least one sufficiently unified to be able to alter that same work's distinctly aesthetic value. To be sure, an artwork offers us clues, indicators and parameters guiding our moral forays into art. But an alternative view of how any of this can be merged into a moral attitude reflecting some central commitment or belief, places greater emphasis on how it is we as readers or spectators who have to piece or weave together a form of moral narrative which makes sense to us at that time. The works of art we deem most valuable are rarely morally dogmatic. Instead, such works encourages us to do the moral work in such a way that allows for various attitudinal possibilities in the very act of artistic appreciation.

Perhaps these difficulties are not intractable. Perhaps interactionists will purport that there is no need to try to determine an artwork's moral value *as such*, and limit their claim to the idea that there can be individual and identifiable morally relevant attitudes toward specific events or phenomena in the work capable of influencing the more localized impression a work makes upon us. To be sure, the ultimate fate of interactionist theories will lie in the philosophical ambitions it settles upon. But if that considerably more limited claim is to be the benchmark of interaction, then we might also have to abandon the objective of contributing to our original question about the value of art.

3. Questioning Interactionism

It is fair to say that our work so far has brought more questions than answers. Reflecting on the workings of the relation between moral and aesthetic value led us to ask “What is the moral value of art?” This query steered us in the direction of what it might mean to say of a work that it displays “morally relevant attitudes” – an issue which, in turn, left us wanting for a definitive sense in which art can be said to do so. But if the way in which art can have moral value is ambiguous, what of the central precept of interactionism, namely that the final value of art is largely to be understood in terms of how moral value on the one hand, and aesthetic value on the other hand, successfully interact with one other? Can we talk of a bona fide interaction between distinct kinds of value? And is there a cohesive account of interaction available to us?

Recall our opening question in section 2. The key issue is not just *whether* a work has some moral value or attitude, but what it means to say that that moral value can interact with aesthetic value in particular artworks. According to ethicism, a work’s aesthetic value is strongly dependent on its moral counterpart, since the former is *invariably* affected by the latter. The ethicist’s claim rests on the so-called “merited response argument” (Gaut, 2007), and the idea that when a work prescribes a certain response which depends on ethical evaluation, the moral character of a work is *always* relevant to its aesthetic value.¹⁷ Now, for moralists, as we saw earlier, in those cases where moral evaluation is pivotal to our understanding and appreciation of the work, the moral merits or demerits figure in the aesthetic evaluation of that work. In Noel Carroll’s (1996, p. 236) words, “[w]orks that we commend because of the rich moral experience they afford may sometimes, for the same reason, be commended aesthetically”. Again, immoralism seeks to highlight the fact that sometimes a reprehensible moral attitude can be the key to a meritorious aesthetic value not only despite but precisely *because* it is reprehensible.¹⁸

Although our examination of the issue here can hardly be exhaustive, let us make the following observations. First, the prospects of a reciprocal influence between moral and aesthetic value are partly thwarted by interactivists’ underlying conceptions of aesthetic value. For a moralist such as Carroll (1996, p. 235),

17 In practice, then, when we form the opinion that the person or situation in question does not warrant the endorsement of the evaluation prescribed by the work, then the response it seeks from us is not merited and we can (as we often do) legitimately fail to respond as prescribed. For critical discussions of Gaut’s merited response argument, see, for example, Stear (2019, 2020).

18 Of course, a challenge for immoralism has to do with the extent to which these allegedly immoral artworks, which tend to benefit us morally in the ways just outlined, might not more accurately be described as morally meritorious.

the aesthetic value of a work is understood primarily in terms of psychological uptake, absorption in a narrative, the ability “to engage our emotions, and to stimulate our imaginations”. Aesthetic value, it seems, has to do with how an object strikes us, makes us feel, appears to us, or otherwise makes a more or less sensory impression upon us, generally speaking, all things considered. But, as has been argued convincingly by Robert Stecker, “Carroll’s conception of the aesthetic is at best a work in progress”. Aesthetic experience seems to have “any of the following objects: form, aesthetic properties, expressive properties, the interaction of any of these, the relation of any of the preceding items with our response to a work”. The trouble, Stecker (2006, p. 6) concludes, is that “[t]his proposal raises more questions than it answers” since what Carroll offers is merely “an open-ended disjunction of sufficient conditions” for the aesthetic. Surprisingly perhaps, according to ethicists such as Gaut the aesthetic value of a work of art is identified with its artistic value (or its value *qua* art). To claim, then, that the responses a work of art prescribes are *aesthetically* relevant is the same as to say that the responses a work prescribes are *artistically* relevant. Similarly, aesthetic merits and demerits are, fundamentally, just artistic merits and demerits (McIver Lopes, 2011). However, in reducing the aesthetic to the artistic, it is no longer clear what particular role – if indeed any – the aesthetic can play in artistic experience, let alone in a meaningful interaction with moral value. To use Stecker’s (2006, p. 7) words again, “it [ethicism] eliminates the aesthetic as a concept that can shed light on art. Whereas it was once thought to be an important fact that art is specially suited to deliver aesthetic value, this becomes a tautology on Gaut’s view”. In short, if the aesthetic value of a work is, fundamentally, its artistic value, then the ethicist’s interaction claim basically holds that a work’s moral value affects its value as art – a claim that seems difficult to deny.¹⁹ How can we talk of the moral interacting with the aesthetic to influence the artistic if the aesthetic *is* in fact the artistic?

Although interactionist views about aesthetic value clearly differ in some respects, what they share is an idea of aesthetic value as fairly passive. And, in broad terms, this would of course explain the lack of reciprocity we have found in the alleged interaction relation since it would surely be awkward to claim, say, that the value we deem a work to have *qua* art can (retroactively?) exercise an influence on one specific and distinct manifestation of value (i.e., moral) in it. At the same time, to say that a work’s moral character can feed into our assessment of its artistic value is perhaps not an idea that needs to garner an entire

19 Unless, of course, you question the whole idea that a work can have moral value. For more on that, see section 2.

philosophical strategy to support it.²⁰ Despite the obvious difficulties any delineation of the notion in question faces, we should not, then, underestimate how these musings about what constitutes aesthetic value have led to its disempowering, and a weakening of the role we are willing to concede to it in our engagement with artistic content.

Leni Riefenstahl's artfilm *Triumph of the Will*, a work frequently discussed in the interactionist literature, serves as a case in point here. For although it is important to investigate, as immoralists have done, the way in which the repugnant Nazi perspective endorsed might obstruct our aesthetic appreciation of it (or not), it is also possible that there is a sense in which it is by virtue of its distinctly aesthetic appeal that the film can be experienced as quite so immoral. As María José Alcaraz León (2018, p. 24) has pointed out, there is a case to be made for the view that "the alleged beauty of Leni Riefenstahl's fascist cinematic propaganda purportedly increases its malevolent effect". That is to say, the moral content strikes us as so powerful in part due to the affective response triggered by the work's aesthetic qualities. To that extent, the aesthetic value of the work may be relevant for the very impact its immoral stance has on us.

Now, can we go further and defend the bolder claim that the aesthetic value of a work can not only influence the (strength of the) effect the work's moral content has on us, but succeed in shifting or forming that content itself? To this end, let us look at another film pertinent in this context, namely Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas*. Here, Scorsese's compelling portrayal of Henry Hill, as a nice kid who gets drawn in by the glamour and perverse moral clarity of the Italian mafia, gives us a more nuanced moral insight into what life as a "wise-guy" was really like. It is, arguably, the distinctly aesthetic merits of the work that allow this moral perspective to gain a foothold in it, raising the film from being a morally questionable glamorization of mob violence to a morally enriching study of 1970s Brooklyn. In this film, as in many other cases, the aesthetic value of art "lights up" and gives the moral content of the work its sense of necessity or even urgency.

A case for an even stronger instance of the aesthetic value of an artwork "acting" upon its putative moral value might also be made of *Triumph of the Will*. A moment ago we noted that the aesthetic merits of the film, in rendering it more effective as a vehicle for Nazi propaganda, may in some way exacerbate its moral demerits. We could argue, however, that it is precisely the aesthetic merits of the film that prevent us from discarding it as a *mere* document of Nazi propaganda, and allow us to appreciate it as a work of art. If we allow that *Triumph* stand as a

²⁰ For more on why we should reject the idea that aesthetic value and artistic value coincide, see, for example, Stecker (2019).

work of art, for a non-Nazi public, then we can make a contrasting case to the effect that the film's aesthetic merits act on the work not in a way that enhances its propaganda value but rather negates it. In this sense, then, the film's aesthetic merits encourage us to perform an imaginative exercise as a result of which, in a similar vein to the viewer of *Goodfellas*, we come to understand how easily we under different circumstances might have been taken in by the idea that Nazism represented the moral triumph of the human spirit. That is, through taking the film seriously as an object of aesthetic appreciation, we can enrich ourselves morally by reflecting on just how seductive the idea of Nazism was to so many ordinary German citizens in the 1930s.

This realization in turn further complicates the interactionists' standard narrative about the moral content of a work influencing its aesthetic value. This is because not only would we thereby have a case of aesthetic value influencing moral value in which the one cannot be said to enhance the other so much as entirely reverse it: the "moral" of watching *Triumph* today is in fact precisely the opposite of what Riefenstahl and her political overlords envisaged. Moreover, if this so-called interaction is to be permitted, it opens up for criticism the entire tenet of immoralism. Where a moral attitude so manifestly evil as the one espoused in *Triumph* becomes, by virtue of the superior aesthetic qualities through which the attitude is expressed, recast as a work of positive moral content, it allows us at least to ask the question of whether there may be any such thing as immoral works of great art.

This position, even merely sketched out as I have done here, at least shows that even in seemingly clear-cut cases of moral or immoral art, the boundaries between what are supposed to be distinct spheres of value – the moral and the aesthetic – are so porous that the very concept of interaction becomes almost impossibly unclear. In cases such as these, a work's aesthetic value can actively serve to sharpen the moral perspective in question and bring it into piercing focus, perhaps even to the extent that the moral value is fashioned or crafted precisely in our aesthetic engagement with that work.²¹ While it seems plausible that a work's moral perspective can begin to appear or take form in the first place thanks to our aesthetic engagement with it, it also seems likely that that perspective, for example by being fleshed out far more substantially, acquires its peculiar moral character. Aesthetic value can be conceived as that which sustains our engagement with much art – an engagement that may very well involve the processing of, adapting, working through and cultivation of the work's distinctly

21 After all, in much religious art, the beauty of the portraits is secondary to the religious devotion that this feeling of beauty intensifies.

moral content.²² When we return to great artworks, such as Jane Austen's novels or Rembrandt's paintings, we often find new moral content in accordance with our changing aesthetic appreciation of that work over time. Indeed, one might even argue that one of the signal qualities of great art is precisely that it transcends the changing fashions of morality; that is, its greatness somehow lies in its being available for contrasting moral interpretations.

An approach of this kind would certainly be better equipped to explain how we can learn from art. Engaging with the work aesthetically thus also becomes a matter of sustaining an interest in the work's content such that we come to see new cognitive openings, moral possibilities, and more. In theory, allowing for this sharpening of the moral content in aesthetic experience could also eventually feed into clarifying what it means to say that a work has moral value. Such a conception of how the moral and the aesthetic can interact in art would also be able to make better sense of an aspect of artistic experience left out of most interactionist debate, namely the specifically *added* moral value we often find in the art we deem valuable. By that I mean the moral value an artwork seems to have which does not strictly derive from any mere interpretation of the morally relevant attitudes endorsed by that work but, rather, emerges from what we as readers or audiences can be said to bring to the work itself.

Morally dogmatic or morally rigid art is rarely deemed valuable. Art should instead encourage us to take part in shaping its moral content in such a way that allows for various attitudinal alternatives in the very act of aesthetic appreciation. By enabling us to detect, identify and influence the many moral combinations a work offers, the aesthetic can be reinstated as an equal partner in the interactionist relation. For now, we can conclude that an unsatisfactory conception of aesthetic value renders the concept of interaction ambiguous. The same, as we have seen, goes for moral value. And indeed, at the risk of bending the nail by hammering it too hard, it only really makes sense to speak of interaction if we can specify the two entities that are allegedly acting on each other, and also specify the result as something distinct.

4. Conclusion

That said, rather than sealing the fate of the interaction approach to the value of art, our discussion should be seen as giving us reason to be hopeful. In principle,

22 In other words, this need not always occur through the work's aesthetic qualities' affective components but may well take a more cognitive and extended character. For more on how the affective component of aesthetic properties may enable them to contribute to other values in general, see Alcaraz Léon (2018).

an interaction model could capture quite well how the purpose of art-making has been conceived by artists, patrons and audiences for most of the history of art: meeting different qualitative standards and fulfilling different functions and goals has long been part of what we seek in making and engaging with art. In this sense, the interaction view is the one that comes closest not only to our common-sense phenomenology, but also to what it is we expect to find in art.

To be sure, the philosophical prospects of interaction theories will rely heavily on a concerted effort to sharpen the tools available to such theories, and the working concepts most central to them. If the relation at the heart of interaction theories remains obscure or only partial, the prospects of any attempt at explaining the value of art along such lines will itself not be particularly compelling. What we need are theories better equipped to chart the flow and scope of a richer interaction. Motivating such attempts, however, should be an acknowledgement of the idea that the philosophy of art itself calls for an account of why – and how – we value much art. Remaining pluralists about the kinds of value that art can have, and simultaneously being able to provide clear explanations of how these different manifestations of value contribute to our experience of art in general, is surely the soundest starting point.

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