

Mar 22: Noël Carroll, “Moderate Moralism”

1. Thesis and Background

“[Moderate moralism] contends that for certain genres, moral comment, along with formal comment, is natural and appropriate. Moreover, the moderate moralist also contends that moral evaluation may figure in our evaluations of some artworks. [...] some artworks may be evaluated in virtue of the contribution they make to moral education. (p. 229)

“Narrative artworks [...] must be filled in by the moral responses of readers, viewers and listeners. Securing the right moral response of the audience is as much a part of the design of a narrative artwork as structural components like plot complications. Failure to elicit the right moral response, then, is a failure in the design of the work, and, therefore, is an aesthetic failure.” (pp. 232-233)

Carroll points out that in the early- and mid-twentieth Century, discussing art in ethical or political terms was seen as a “failure of taste or intelligence, or, more likely, both” (p. 223). Further back, Plato, Aristotle, and Hume, among others, each in different ways, thought ethical considerations bore on artistic, or what we might now call “aesthetic” ones (p. 224).

2. Radical Autonomism

Radical Autonomism is the view that it is “inappropriate or even incoherent to assess artworks in terms of their consequences for cognition, morality, and politics” and “virtually unintelligible to talk of art *qua* art in terms of non-aesthetic concerns with cognition, morality, politics, and so on” (p. 224). Radical autonomism:

- Provides an “antidote” to puritanical views of art. (p. 224)
- Explains how works with radically different moral values can still be valuable as art. (p. 225)
- Is supported by essentialist views of art—that all art shares some essential characteristic(s) (the “common denominator” argument). (p. 225)

Carroll’s Objections

- While ethical evaluation of, and talk about, some artworks (e.g. highly abstract works) is out of place, this says nothing about works that “mobilize moral discourse”. (p. 226)
- Even if the common denominator argument—that artwork can be discussed or evaluated along a dimension *d* if and only if all artworks can be evaluated along *d*—is right, different artworks may make different considerations relevant to the common dimension(s) of evaluation. Moral considerations might be among them. (pp. 226-227)
- More plausibly, the common denominator argument is unsound; different types of artworks require different kinds of assessment; (some) narrative artworks require ethical assessment. (p. 227)

3. Moderate Moralism

Appreciators must fill in details not made explicit in stories (that they take place on Earth, that $E=MC^2$ etc.), including folk-psychological details (e.g. that death is *ceteris paribus* distressing). In the same way, Carroll argues, they must also fill in certain *moral* details (e.g. that a character is loathsome, a fate undeserved, or that a situation calls for indignation). Without doing so, certain narratives cannot succeed. (p. 228)

Artworks can also be evaluated according to whether they deepen or pervert our moral

understanding—that is, with respect to their contribution to moral education (p. 229). This may seem in conflict with the claim that appreciators must mobilize moral presuppositions in order to understand a narrative; the thought is that a work cannot teach us what we already bring with us. But, Carroll argues, moral learning isn't just about learning new moral precepts. It also involves learning how to apply existing moral principles to concrete situations; narrative artworks afford us practice and guidance in doing this. This learning is “built into” the experience of appreciating a narrative, not merely a consequence of it. (pp. 229-230)

4. Moderate Autonomism (and Responses)

Carroll offers another possible position: moderate autonomism, according to which ethical discussion and evaluation of (some) artworks is appropriate, but such evaluations are irrelevant to its *aesthetic* value—i.e. there are a number of values an artwork possesses which are autonomous. (p. 231)

Carroll objects to moderate autonomism by appeal to Aristotle's discussion of tragedy: the tragic hero can't be too vicious or virtuous, or else the tragedy will fail as tragedy. More generally, to secure the right (sought after) response, a work must strike the right moral tone. *American Psycho* for instance fails because Brett Easton Ellis misjudges the moral tenor of using the gory violence of a murderous psychopath to parody 1980's business excesses: the moral failure is an aesthetic failure. “Where the artist fails to anticipate the moral understanding of the audience [...], the work may fail on its own terms, which is to say in terms of its own aesthetic aims”. (pp. 232-233)

Carroll then faces the problem of a morally defective work that successfully elicits responses in its (morally defective) audiences. He argues that such a work is still aesthetically flawed since such defects sit like aesthetic “time-bombs” ready to fail to elicit uptake from “morally sensitive” viewers. (pp. 233-234)

Carroll acknowledges that the moral autonomist can counter that such a work is not aesthetically flawed in virtue of being morally flawed, but in virtue of failing to secure uptake. That is, the moral and the aesthetic failures are separable: (1) the aesthetic defect is the failure to secure audience “uptake”, a “tactical error”; (2) the moral defect is the work's contains a failure in moral perspective. (p. 234)

Carroll responds that insofar as the aesthetic defect is explained as existing *because of* the moral defect, moderate autonomism is undermined: “the reason the work is aesthetically defective and the reason it is morally defective may be the same” (p. 235)

Carroll argues that what goes for moral blemishes goes also for moral virtues. Insofar as one way works succeed aesthetically is by being absorbing, a work that deepens our moral understanding will make a work better by making it more absorbing. (pp. 235-236)

Carroll Questions

- 1) Carroll argues that a moral feature is an aesthetic feature when the former explains the latter? Is that right?
- 2) Carroll says that without mobilizing the moral emotions of the audience, a work can't succeed. Is that right? And, relatedly, is that a moral failure *per se*, or a mismatch failure?
- 3) Is Carroll's appeal to morally sensitive viewers a problem?
- 4) Is being absorbing an aesthetically good-making feature? What about car-crash or *Planet 9* kinds of cases?
 - a. *Deservedly* absorbing? Is this now trivial (i.e. = good-makingly absorbing?)
- 5) The "common denominator argument" collapses the distinction between *identity* conditions, and *evaluative* conditions. Should we collapse them?