

# Autonomism<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. What is Autonomism?

To the Ethical Question<sup>2</sup>—whether an artwork’s ethical values bear on its aesthetic value, or its value ‘as art’—autonomism answers ‘no’. Sometimes called ‘separatism’ or ‘aestheticism’, autonomism is both artistic ideology and philosophical theory. Some reach autonomism by a theoretical vehicle: explicit commitments regarding explanation (Anderson & Dean 1998), ethical or aesthetic properties (Harold, 2020) (Clavel-Vázquez ms.) (Dickie 2005), representation (Clavel-Vázquez) (Pérez Carreño 2006), or meta-normative obligation (Harold 2020). Others travel by art-driven modes of conveyance. One is formalism, whose spare evaluative machine traditionally bypasses ethical and social considerations (Bell 1914). Another is the idea that art’s value transcends practical affairs (Fry 1920) (Bell 1914), or that allowing practical affairs to determine artistic value undermines it (Balfour 1910, 37) (Pérez Carreño 2006, 72). Finally, some think subjecting art to ethical evaluation imperils it somehow (Gass 1987) (Posner 1997)—that, to paraphrase Cleanth Brooks, the ethical lion and the aesthetic lamb will not so much lie down together as with one inside the other (Brooks 1962, 358).

In contemporary philosophical discussions, autonomism opposes interactionism, and is often pitched as such.<sup>3</sup> Roughly, interactionists claim that ethical values can determine aesthetic values in artworks somehow. Broadly, interactionism comes in two flavours: moralism and immoralism. Moralists claim that, where ethico-aesthetic determination occurs, it obeys what Stephanie Patridge (2008) and James Harold (2008) respectively call the “consistency of valence thesis” or “valence constraint”: ethical goodness only contributes to aesthetic goodness, and ethical badness only to aesthetic badness. Immoralists deny this constraint: ethical badness *can* contribute positively to its aesthetic value and ethical goodness negatively. In short, autonomists think an

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<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Rohan Sud, Boris Hennig, James Harold, and Keren Gorodeisky for their help.

<sup>2</sup> The name is from (Lillehammer 2008).

<sup>3</sup> See (Locke 1928), (Anderson & Dean, 1996), (Posner 1997), (Pérez Carreño 2006).

artwork's aesthetic value is independent, or *autonomous*, of ethical value; interactionists think a work's ethical value sometimes contributes to, or *interacts* with, its aesthetic value.

Aestheticians addressing the Ethical Question distinguish two kinds of ethical value artworks might have, if any: intrinsic and extrinsic. Artworks bear intrinsic ethical values insofar as they 'manifest', 'express', 'promote', etc. ethically charged perspectives or attitudes, which is ordinarily understood as resulting from the responses an artwork 'prescribes'—that is, requires appreciators to undergo to fully appreciate the work.<sup>4</sup> To take a simplified example, Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls* (Gogol 1842/1998) prescribes (imagined) beliefs about a person named Chichikov, and (imagined) repugnance towards his scheme to acquire legal possession of dead serfs. It thereby manifests an ethically laudable attitude towards meretricious social aspiration (Nabokov 1944/2011, ch. 3). Artworks bear extrinsic ethical value, in contrast, insofar as they cause good or bad effects, such as the suicides inspired by *Die Leiden des Jungen Werther* (Goethe 1787/1986), or spring from good or bad causes, such as the animal slaughter for Hermann Nitsch's *Orgien Mysterien Theater* "actions" (Nitsch 1962-present). Aestheticians broadly agree that ethical criticisms of artworks are only properly directed, if ever, at their intrinsic ethical features, their effects or etiology being too incidental (Gaut 2001, 8-9, 11; Jacobson 1997, 165; Eaton 2003, 174-175; Harold 2006, 260; Clavel-Vázquez 2018, 2). Recent work, notably (Nannicelli 2020) (Harold 2020), challenges this agreement, however.

Some in the literature address an artwork's *artistic*, others its *aesthetic* value. I treat the corresponding terms interchangeably. Whether and how these values differ likely matters to the debate (Dickie 2005). Nevertheless, its participants are interested in the same thing—the value of the work *qua* artwork—and clearly mean to engage with one another's views, regardless of preferred term, the conflation is tolerable.<sup>5</sup> I likewise treat 'ethical' and 'moral' interchangeably.

If the literature's value language is unstable, its language about the disputed ethico-aesthetic relation is like a drunk on skates. Drawing from just four representative papers, authors talk variously about ethical properties that 'are pertinent to' (Carroll 1996, 227-

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<sup>4</sup> 'Prescribe' is a technical but ambiguously used term in the literature. I ignore this here for simplicity. See (Stear 2019, 465-466)

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., (Carroll 1996), (Gaut 1998), (Eaton 2003), (Kieran 2006), (Guyer 2008), (Hanson 2020),

228), ‘detract from’, ‘count against’ (Carroll 1996, 232), ‘are detrimental to’ (Smuts 2011, 48), ‘count as’, (Carroll 1996, 234), ‘result in’ (Smuts 2011, 48), ‘figure as’ (Jacobson 1997, 158), ‘contribute to’ (Carroll 1996, 236), ‘make a significant contribution to’ (Eaton 2012, 281), ‘constitute’ (Smuts 2011, 35), ‘are’ (Carroll 1996, 232, 233, 236) (Eaton 2012, 282, 283, 285, 287, 288) (Jacobson 1997, 159), are ‘the cause of’ (Smuts 2011, 45), and are ‘part of the causal story for’ (Smuts 2011, 48) aesthetic values. I treat these diverse locutions as getting at the same relation: ethical properties determining aesthetic ones. We should remember, however, that, strictly speaking, they express different ones.

Since Noël Carroll’s germinal paper ‘Moderate Moralism’ (1996), autonomism has been divided into two kinds: radical and moderate. Radical autonomism denies AMENABILITY (Giovannelli 2013, 336-338):

#### AMENABILITY

Artworks can bear ethical value and, accordingly, warrant ethical evaluation. (Carroll 1996, 224, 231)

Radical autonomism maintains that artworks are just not the kinds of things in which ethical properties inhere; an artwork can no more be immoral than driftwood, the set of all bicycles, the number 5, volcanic eruptions, or the flavour of beer (with the heinous exception of Bud Light). One who evaluates them ethically commits a kind of category error. Moderate autonomists, by contrast, accept AMENABILITY. They deny INTERACTION (Clavel-Vázquez 2018, 2):

#### INTERACTION

An artwork’s ethical value, if any, determines its aesthetic value—its value *qua* artwork—to some degree. (Carroll 1996, 231-232)

Moderate autonomism maintains that ethical value is somewhat like doorstep value; an artwork might stop doors well, though this is irrelevant to its aesthetic value.

Finally, there are the ‘robust’ autonomists, who are radical and moderate in different respects.

I begin with radical autonomism and end with its moderate cousin, considering robust autonomism in between.

## 2. Radical Autonomism

Radical autonomism, in the past, principally proffered a punching bag on which other theories honed their physique, rather than a genuine sparring partner. Its most glaring difficulty is accounting for the ethical and political ways artists and appreciators discuss art (Freeland 1997, 11-12) (Carroll 1998, 132) (Gaut 2007, 91-97) (Giovannelli 2013, 337) (Clavel-Vázquez 2018, 3-4). Nonetheless, it enjoys some serious defenders, contrary to at least one commentator (Giovannelli 2007, 118-119).

Various belletrists are sometimes trotted out to extol radical autonomism's virtues and demonstrate its literary cred. Oscar Wilde's quip that 'There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book' (Wilde 1891/1992, 3) is by now cliché. Richard Posner, ostensibly a radical autonomist, presents George Orwell as an ally for remarking that good art must embody a "sane", rather than a (morally) true viewpoint (Orwell 1946/2002b, 1107-1108) (Posner 2009, 456). This chimes with a chorus of philosophers who, echoing (Aristotle 1898), argue that a perspective's *plausibility*, not truth *as such*, matters aesthetically (Lamarque & Olsen 1994), (Pérez Carreño 2016), (Clavel-Vázquez ms.).<sup>6</sup> However, under interrogation, these literary figures often confess to more divided loyalties. Wilde's writings about sentimentality, which he sees as cynicism's other face, (Eaton 2001, 114-115), and some of his short stories belie the quip (Eaton 2001, 141-143). Orwell's claims elsewhere that, echoing WEB Du Bois, 'all art is propaganda' (Du Bois 1926) (Orwell 1940/2002), or that his aesthetically weakest work is that written without a political point (Orwell 1946/2002) seem to cut in the opposite direction, too.

Within the last quarter century of intense focus on the 'Ethical Question', Posner's represents the first thoroughgoing defence of autonomism, and arguably of radical autonomism, at least partly, though it is hard to tell, since Posner conflates AMENABILITY and INTERACTION.<sup>7</sup> Unlike many in the debate, Posner is more interested in literature than art generally, and in literature's effects rather than its intrinsic ethical value (Posner 1997) (1998) (2009 456-493).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Clavel-Vázquez's and Pérez Carreño's views are discussed below. See also (Lamarque 2014, 138-139) and his examples of authors appealing to verisimilitude (126-127).

<sup>7</sup> Though, see the worry the about moderate autonomism's coherence, below.

<sup>8</sup> (Harold 2020) also does this, though deliberately.

For all their literary erudition, Posner's arguments have proved as hardy as Blake's Sick Rose. Posner's first argument is that a work's prestige is "little damaged by the discovery that the work condones a morality that later readers find monstrous" (Posner 1997, 6). If Posner means that such works are still regarded as great, then this is inconsequential; interactionists could concede that the aesthetic differences moral values make are slight. Moreover, the argument's main premise is also false. An obvious, recent counterexample is Woody Allen's *Manhattan* (Allen 1979). The award-winning film was widely lauded when released. But its forgiving portrayal of a manifestly sexual relationship between its middle-aged protagonist (played by Allen) and a 17-year old girl, paired with revelations of Allen's appalling behaviour towards non-fictional girls and younger women, has clearly marred the work's prestige. As writer Ayelet Waldman (Brown 2021) puts it, "I think we can only view *Manhattan* now as a grotesquerie of Ephebophilia". Quite.

Posner's second argument concedes that moral affairs are often literature's raw material crafted into an artistic form. Yet, this material is as irrelevant to an artwork's value as "the value of the sculptor's clay as a building material" is to "the artistic value of the completed sculpture" (Posner 1997, 7). One might respond, as suggested elsewhere, that when morality is its subject matter, this *does* make a work ethically amenable (Giovannelli 2013, 118). But that cannot be right; a novel about food is not thereby edible, nor flavoursome.

Nevertheless, Posner's excellent analogy may mislead. If Posner means "the value of the sculptor's clay as a building material" as a species of what Karl Marx calls "use value" (Marx 1867/1990, 126)—i.e. its utility as a medium—then the claim is false; the softness Gian Lorenzo Bernini realizes in marble would be unremarkable in clay. If Posner intends instead what Marx calls its exchange value (Marx 1867/1990, 126-127)—what it trades for—then his point is more plausible, but inapt. For, what moralists, at least, appear to show is that ethical value *is* relevant to artistic form, and not merely in securing or jeopardizing coherence, as Posner suggests. Whether the artwork accomplishes its ends depends on the nature—including the moral nature—of the responses it enjoins appreciators to have. The moralists might be mistaken, but Posner needs more than an analogy to show how. Posner does marshal one datum—namely, that most readers accept "obsolete ethics in literature" as calmly as "obsolete military technology" (Posner 1997, 7). If Posner means the *representation* of immoral views, such as a

character's, then this is correct but irrelevant. If, he means the views the work *endorses*, then the enormous literature on 'imaginative resistance' would beg to differ.<sup>9</sup>

Third, Posner says that "to devalue a work of literature because of its implicit or explicit politics, morality, or religion is to cut off one's nose to spite one's face". The implicit argument resembles those value maximizers give: insofar as an interpretative approach (in this case, worrying about the work's ethics) impedes aesthetic enjoyment, one should abandon it. Hence, ethical value is properly discounted.

But this is too quick. Posner is right that bracketing one's moral misgivings often makes a work's aesthetic delights accessible. However, I also have to bracket the dreadful orchestration in most early 90s pop songs to appreciate their musicality without this making the orchestration aesthetically irrelevant. Posner must show how edifying works differ from such cases.

Finally, Posner criticizes the view that works that edify through their moral insights are thereby ethically good. He argues that such insights are, at bottom, merely psychological and, echoing a theme in Kant's *Groundwork* (Kant 1785/1998, 4 [4:393]), can be used for ill as well as good—for manipulation as well as compassion (Posner 1997, 20).

That psychological insight can be abused is correct but does not support autonomism. Knowing how to read crime scenes might help one plant evidence or conceal crimes as well as solve them—i.e. help one be a worse detective overall. Nonetheless, knowing how to read crime scenes remains a *pro tanto* good-making feature of detectives, if only because such knowledge is necessary for being a good detective at all. Again, Posner needs to show how a work's furnishing moral knowledge differs from cases like these.

Others have challenged AMENABILITY. Harold (2020) questions the claim that artworks are ethically amenable (henceforth just 'amenable') in virtue of manifesting attitudes. Harold agrees that artworks can manifest ethically charged attitudes. He also agrees that when people harbour unethical attitudes, say, this is criticizable on broadly virtue-theoretic grounds, even when they are not acted upon. But he denies that this suffices for AMENABILITY. The attitudes artworks embody differ crucially from morally evaluable

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<sup>9</sup> See (Tuna 2020) and (Gendler & Liao 2016) for overviews. Though, see (Stear 2015, 15) for the possibility of "morality fiction".

attitudes: the latter form part of a person's psychology; an artwork's do not:

Artworks do not have attitudes in the sense that people do; artworks do not desire, hate, mourn, or intend that we respond in any particular way, or at all. We can speak of an artwork as having a particular "character," but we are not thereby ascribing a set of mental states to the artwork. Artworks do not have minds. (Harold 2020, 41)

Harold follows this up with a *reductio* by analogy between *Pride & Prejudice* and an engagement ring.:

[T]he way in which an artwork celebrates an engagement is like the way in which a ring celebrates one. Rings and artworks are both artefacts that we understand as having particular meanings, but the attitudes they manifest are not mental states, or aspects of a person's character or inner life. (Harold 2020, 42)

If an artwork is morally evaluable for its attitudes, then so is an engagement ring since they exhibit their attitudes in relevantly similar ways. But an engagement ring obviously is not morally evaluable in this way. So, nor is the artwork.

There are two ways to defend AMENABILITY against this argument: affirm that rings *are* morally evaluable; or deny the analogy. The former strategy seems tricky. What about the latter?

Typical rings celebrate their engagements only incidentally. A ring used to celebrate a child's betrothal to a middle-aged man, for instance, could equally serve an unproblematic engagement between consenting adults. But artworks do not possess meaning so incidentally. One could not redeploy a painting celebrating the child's engagement to commemorate the unproblematic one (imagine something like Carl Willhelm Hübner's *The Timid Suitor* (Hübner, 1853) or Vasili Pukirev's *The Unequal Marriage* (Pukirev 1863) but with the opposite tenor). That is, unless the painting, like the ring, abstracts away from the engagement's particularity. The incidental attachment of a ring to any particular engagement—the attachment that exhausts what we take the ring to "mean"—is what makes morally evaluating it inappropriate. Arguably, the ring does not really celebrate anything (this is, after all, Harold's point); rather, *we* celebrate something with the ring. But a painting glorifying adult-

child marriage bears its meaning inherently—as inherently as anything can bear a meaning.

There is perhaps a deeper problem with Harold's challenge to AMENABILITY. His argument might appear to rest on this:

PERSONS ONLY

Ethical properties properly inhere only in the attitudes and characters of persons.

PERSONS ONLY cannot be true. Actions are neither attitudes nor characters of persons. But they are amenable, paradigmatically so. As Susan Feagin notes in outlining a similar argument to Harold's:

[A]ttributing moral properties to works of art is *prima facie* problematic: generally speaking, moral properties are attributable to persons *and their behavior*, but not to inanimate objects.” (Feagin 2010, 21, my emphasis)

On closer inspection, however, Harold is committed to a narrower claim than PERSONS ONLY:

When we say that an *agent* has a particular attitude, say, jealously (sic) of his friend's success, we mean that this attitude is an aspect of that agent's mind, moral disposition, and character. It is this connection—the connection between an attitude and the mind and character that generated it—that grounds our moral judgement. (Harold 2020, 42)

Putting aside his aversion to framing the debate as concerning ethical properties (Harold 2020, 145), Harold is committed to a restricted version of PERSONS ONLY:

PERSONS ONLY<sup>A</sup>

Ethical properties properly inhere in attitudes and characters only when these belong to persons.

Why accept PERSONS ONLY<sup>A</sup>? Harold gives two reasons. First, we otherwise end up ethically evaluating bare artefacts, such as engagement rings (Harold 2020, 43-44). I have considered this worry already. Second, it makes sense to respond to a person's character and attitudes, but not an artwork's, with the reactive

attitudes of “gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love, and hurt feelings” etc. (Strawson 1962) (Harold 2020, 43).

One way to deny PERSONS ONLY<sup>A</sup>, then, is to simply deny this difference: it *does* make sense to respond to artworks with many of these reactive attitudes. I can certainly love an artwork and have my feelings hurt by it. I think I can also resent and maybe even feel gratitude towards an artwork. True, I cannot forgive one, but such differences may be unimportant ones grounded in, for instance, the differing capacities of artworks and persons to bear culpability and make amends.

Another is to accept that “the connection between an attitude and the mind and character that generated it” is what “grounds our moral judgement” but account for it differently. PERSONS ONLY<sup>A</sup> requires attitudes to find themselves *inside* a person to be ethically evaluable. But perhaps the attitudes need only bear an appropriate *relation* to persons. This suggests the following alternative:

PERSONS NEEDED

Ethical properties properly inhere in attitudes and characters if and only if they are related to persons in the right way.

Whether PERSONS NEEDED is true depends on what relating “in the right way” means. That said, I am optimistic about some reasonable account making the claim plausible. PERSONS NEEDED explains why the attitudes and character manifested in actions are ethically evaluable, even ignoring their effects. Like artworks, actions lack minds. But in both cases, their relation to agency imbues them with a potential for rich, contextually-mediated, representational meaning that *seems* amenable.

Now, if one squints, one can see how PERSONS ONLY<sup>A</sup> and PERSONS NEEDED might be confused. Both entail that erasing people from the picture means erasing any ethically evaluable attitude. This makes it tempting to see people as the real repositories of value, which is a natural way to read PERSONS ONLY, i.e., as claiming that attitudes and character are only ethically evaluable when part of a person. But this inference is fallacious. Depending on a person need not rob something of its value any more than such dependence must rob behaviour of its action-status, or an object of its artwork-status. Agential involvement in both actions and artworks make them eligible for ethical evaluation much as formally entering a diving competition makes one’s dive eligible for an official score. Still, ethically evaluating actions and artworks is not

therefore merely an indirect or figurative way of evaluating the agent any more than officially scoring the diver's entry into the water is *really* scoring her entry into the competition.

The autonomist might retort that this is precisely the point: the dive is *not* inherently scorable, just as an artwork is not inherently amenable. In both cases, the properties are relational, not intrinsic. And so, the ethical value is not the artwork's. But this argument is truly nuclear. Marie-Gabrielle Capet's *Self-Portrait* (Capet ca. 1783) depends upon Capet in order to be a portrait of her. Her dress is blue only because of how our visual system is constituted. Most troubling, the painting is only vivacious, barring the naivest aesthetic realism, because of how it strikes beings like us. So, in a strict sense of interest to metaphysicians, being a portrait of Capet, blue, vivacious are all relational properties not intrinsic to the work.<sup>10</sup> So, though this argument disposes of an artwork's ethical properties, it also annihilates almost everything else. This cannot, then, be the sense of 'inhere' relevant to the debate. (Zheng & Stear, ms.)

Perhaps I have dented Harold's arguments against AMENABILITY. Are there arguments *for* it? I will gesture at some positive reasons.

First, as an aside, one might worry that 'character' and 'attitude' apply only figuratively to artworks, while literally to people. Interestingly, their etymologies flip this worry on its head. 'Attitude' is an early 18<sup>th</sup> Century term of art for a sculpted or painted figure's posture (OED 2021). 'Character', meanwhile, comes from *χαρακτήρ*, a mark, engraving, or stamp and an engraving tool in Ancient and Hellenistic Greek, respectively (OED 2021b). If anything, characters and attitudes are literal features of artworks applied figuratively to persons.

Second, if one accepts that actions can manifest attitudes and character in ethically evaluable ways, then one has reason to accept this for artworks, too. Arthur Danto noted that art and action exhibit "parallel structures", which he exploited for his theory of art. And with reason (Danto 1987, esp. 4-6). Whether Danto's theorizing hits the mark, his most famous insight is bang on: both artworks and actions can be indiscernible from mere objects and behaviours, respectively (and from other artworks and actions); a spasm might be materially indistinguishable from a dance move, just as a urinal might be from a Duchamp. The differences in both

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<sup>10</sup> See (Lewis 1983).

ontology and significance depend on various contextual and agent-internal features.

Various philosophers treat this as more than a parallel. Gregory Currie has argued that artworks are action-types (Currie 1989), David Davies that they are performance tokens (Davies 2004), and Berys Gaut takes ethical assessment specifically to address “the artistic acts performed in the work” (Gaut 2007, 7). At the very least, artworks are meaningful entities in virtue of their non-accidental relation to context and agency in ways strikingly similar to full-fledged actions.

### 3. Robust Autonomism

The ‘robust autonomists’, as Adriana Clavel-Vázquez calls them (Clavel-Vázquez 2018) (Clavel-Vázquez ms.), appeal to the nature of representation to motivate their conclusions.<sup>11</sup> While some artworks may be amenable, they claim, lots of them are not, or at least not in aesthetically relevant ways. This is due to the amenability of representation as such.

Francisca Pérez Carreño, for instance, begins her argument from the abovementioned Aristotelian insight that art, unlike history, aims at “verisimilitude”—a plausible depiction of events and their causes “according to the law of probability or necessity” (Aristotle 1898). Against the moralists, therefore, a work’s immorality need not mar it, provided the work presents a coherent narrative in this Aristotelian sense. And insofar as an artwork is a *fiction*, its veracity, and thus its *moral* veracity, has no bearing on its verisimilitude, except insofar as true stories are *ipso facto* verisimilar; its veracity is thus aesthetically irrelevant (Pérez Carreño 2006, 82-83). This also applies, she argues, to non-fictional works, whose genre constraints require veracity for verisimilitude (Pérez Carreño 2006, 89-91). Even here, it is Aristotelian verisimilitude that matters aesthetically—the genre constraints merely restrict the ways of achieving it. Such works can, therefore, be evaluated ethically insofar as the work’s ethical perspective adheres to or deviates from moral reality. Nonetheless, to put it in terms other autonomists have used, it is *qua* verisimilitude, not *qua* truth or moral truth, that such works succeed or fail aesthetically (Clavel-Vázquez 2018, 6). Since Pérez Carreño’s crucial claim hangs on this ‘*qua*’s viability, I will

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<sup>11</sup> Pérez Carreño describes her autonomism as ‘moderate’.

postpone discussing it until I consider the so-called *qua* problem in the next section.

Clavel-Vázquez takes a similar line to Pérez Carreño, restricting her claim to works of fiction, or ‘fictional artworks’: fictional artworks lack intrinsic ethical value. Now, this argument does not cover every artwork. However, since (a) intrinsic value is the kind of ethical value interactionists care about; and (b) fictional artworks comprise most of the works subject to the Ethical Question, Clavel-Vázquez’s arguments, if they work, would support autonomism for *most* artworks relevant to the debate.

To reach her destination, Clavel-Vázquez travels via Alessandro Giovannelli’s ‘Ethical Fittingness Theory’ (EFT). On EFT, to be intrinsically amenable, a representational artwork must embody (a) an ethical perspective and (b) a commitment to that perspective’s befitting the actual world (Giovannelli 338-339).<sup>12</sup> *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (Hamid 2007), for instance, is intrinsically amenable not because it presents an ethically charged perspective on post-9/11 attitudes towards South Asians, but because it also *endorses* it.

The crucial premise in Clavel-Vázquez’s argument is that fictional artworks *qua* fictions lack such actual-world pretensions. Fiction *qua* fiction is “quarantined” from actuality. Here, Clavel-Vázquez draws on Neil Van Leeuwen’s argument that the inferential relation between beliefs and the kinds of imaginings fictions prescribe—attitude imaginings—is asymmetric; beliefs feed information to these imaginings, but the imaginings do not reciprocate (Van Leeuwen 2014, 794-795). So, the kinds of imaginings they prescribe are themselves quarantined from our remaining psychological economy, including those parts—beliefs, desires, etc.—that reach out to actuality. This dovetails with the idea that any perspectives fictions embody, *qua* fiction, are merely part of the representation (Pérez Carreño 2006, 85). Accordingly, *qua* fiction, a fiction’s prescriptions concern its representational content only.

Clavel-Vázquez offers a powerful case for thinking that, in an important sense, fictions *as such* lack the extra-fictional ambitions they are widely assumed to have. The flipside is, as noted, that the argument applies only to fictional artworks. As such, Clavel-Vázquez has built a large ark to accommodate most works subject

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<sup>12</sup> (Cooke 2014) also endorses this claim. See also Tamar Gendler’s discussion of ‘export’ (Gendler 2000).

to the Ethical Question. But not all; works like Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens*, to take a prevalent example, are left at sea.

Another difficulty with both forms of robust autonomism is that structural, socio-political considerations threaten to puncture the hull, as Clavel-Vázquez, to her credit, acknowledges. Some fictional artworks lack ethical value when considered in isolation. Yet, they may nonetheless exhibit such value by having what Susan Feagin calls “*de facto* significance” as part of a pattern of works (Feagin 1995). A work featuring socially advantaged characters in its deep centre and the disadvantaged on its shallow periphery, for instance, might be ethically mute by itself. But as part of an enduring tradition of similar works, it may contribute vociferously to a roar of *marginalizing* and *privileging* (Clavel-Vázquez ms.).<sup>13</sup> Similarly, even wholly fictional works that stake no claim beyond the fiction's borders can instantiate problematic social meanings (Patridge 2011) or contribute constitutively to oppressive ideologies (Zheng & Stear ms.).

Perhaps Clavel-Vázquez's biggest difficulty, however, is that the Ethical Question concerns *artworks*, not just fictions. Even granting her conclusion that fictions *qua* fictions are not amenable, the question remains whether fictional artworks *qua artworks* are amenable. Wooden chairs might not seat people *qua* wooden thing, but they do *qua* chair, and perhaps *qua* wooden chair. Similarly, a fictional artwork might be eligible for inclusion in a museum exhibition *qua* artwork, or even *qua* fictional artwork, for instance, even if not *qua* fiction. Nothing in Clavel-Vázquez's otherwise compelling arguments shows that being amenable is any different from being so eligible.

#### 4. Moderate Autonomism

Moderate autonomism, recall, is the view that accepts AMENABILITY (artworks can have ethical value) but denies INTERACTION (such ethical values contribute to their aesthetic value, or value *qua* artwork).

There is a question, for which a thorough answer must be postponed, whether moderate moralism is coherent. Specifically, does it make sense to say that an *artwork* has some value which it

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<sup>13</sup> For a vividly described example of this kind of phenomenon, see James Baldwin's discussion of the maid (Baldwin 1976/2013, 69-70).

lacks *qua artwork*? Insofar as the entity picked out by ‘the artwork’ has a property but lacks it “*qua artwork*”, it seems that entity is, in fact, non-identical with the artwork, and the *artwork* simply lacks the property. Put differently, if something does not stop doors well *qua artwork*, one might wonder whether the artwork really stops doors at all.<sup>14</sup>

As stated, this is too quick; identity is tricky. For one, as John Locke notes (Locke 1690/1997, 299-300 [II, XXVII, 7]), whether *a* and *b* are identical will depend on the categories under which they are subsumed. Relatedly, as the literature on ‘contingent identity’ shows, if  $a = b$ , it does not follow that they share all their properties; I may destroy your snowman by melting him, without thereby destroying the water with which he was identical, for instance.<sup>15</sup> And there are, of course, acceptable instances of the above *qua* schema: my wooden chair *really is* flammable, despite not being flammable *qua chair*.

At the very least, there are some difficulties here to clear up. Artworks differ ontologically from chairs, for instance; artworks but not chairs have been thought to bear many of their properties necessarily,<sup>16</sup> which might complicate *qua* claims about artworks if such claims have a modally inflected semantics. So, moderate autonomism’s coherence hinges on questions about the ontology of art, contingent identities, and what is meant by ‘*qua*’.<sup>17</sup> The upshot could be significant. If moderate autonomism were incoherent, any loyal autonomist would have to fly the radical flag—a flag waving for a view that, as Elisabeth Schellekens puts it, is “highly implausible” and characterizes the separation of the value types in “excessively strong terms” (Schellekens 2005, 65). With this potential issue noted, I now set it aside.

One of the most enduring arguments for autonomism has been given by moderates James Anderson and Jeffrey Dean. Their argument responds to Carroll’s so-called “uptake” argument.

Carroll observes that many artworks require appreciators to meet them halfway. For instance, a film depicting its protagonist in grave

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<sup>14</sup> The same doubt arises *mutatis mutandis* for the descriptions of moderate autonomism on which artworks can bear ethical values which are never relevant to its value *qua artwork*.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., (Yablo 1987)

<sup>16</sup> For some artworks, this view is implicit or explicit across much of aesthetics, regarding their etiological (Borges 1939) (Danto 1981), representational (Goodman 1968, esp. 116, 186), and other (Lord 1977, 147-149) (Sagoff 1978) properties.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., (Bäck 1996) (Loets forthcoming).

danger ordinarily prescribes vicarious fear, a farcical novel prescribes laughter, and so forth. Sometimes, however, artworks fail to elicit such responses. If the protagonist is obnoxious or the scene unfunny, for instance, appreciators may fail to “take up” the prescription to feel afraid or laugh. Where the audience is blameless for such failures, this typically indicates an aesthetic flaw in the work.

From this Aristotelian blueprint, Carroll builds his argument: one way works can induce uptake failure is by being morally flawed. A work prescribing sympathy for a monstrous protagonist, for instance, is (so the argument goes) ethically criticizable. But it also makes sympathy barely possible for the same reason. One way to rob a scene of humour is by making it one for which laughter is ethically inappropriate, to take another kind of case. When this happens, Carroll argues, the reason for both the aesthetic and ethical failures is the same. Thus, the uptake argument shows how ‘a moral problem *qua* moral problem is an aesthetic defect in an artwork’ (Carroll 1996, 234).<sup>18</sup>

Anderson & Dean disagree. They do not dispute that the immoral artworks Carroll describes suffer an aesthetic flaw. Nor do they oppose the Aristotelian structure relating the moral and the aesthetic flaw, broadly speaking. What they dispute is that the works are aesthetically flawed *qua* immorality; there are distinct arguments for the work’s moral and aesthetic failures, respectively, which share just one premise. As such, no common reason supports both flaws.<sup>19</sup>

One might dismiss this argument as a technicality. But that would be rash. In denying that the ethico-aesthetic relation Carroll establishes is of the right kind, the ‘*qua* problem’, considered carefully, suggests a question vital to the debate at hand: what kind of ethico-aesthetic relation would be of the right kind? I suggest the answer has something to do with virtues in explanations, even if Anderson & Dean do not frame things this way.

Suppose I drink lots of limoncello and get drunk. If you ask me the next day why I was drunk, I might muster that I drank lots of limoncello. If, unmoved by my hangover, you probed further, you

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<sup>18</sup> Gaut’s “Merited Response Argument” is structurally similar. See (Gaut 1998, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> One can, (as Anderson & Dean partway do) raise more or less same objection to Gaut’s ‘ethicism’, by replacing all causal talk with constitutive talk and substituting ‘meriting a response’, ‘giving cognitive insight’, or ‘being beautiful’ for ‘being uptake-frustrating’, depending on which of Gaut’s arguments one considers. See (Gaut 2007), (Stear ms.).

might object that the explanation is too strong: it includes information surplus to explanatory need (just as the explanation that I ingested something would be too weak, since it includes too little information). The fact that I drank *limoncello* specifically is no more relevant to the explanation than the fact that I drank with my right hand, or on a Tuesday, or with exactly 83 sips, or while Venus was in retrograde. A better, if still imperfect, explanation would be that I ingested lots of *alcohol*.<sup>20</sup>

I propose the problem with Carroll's account mirrors the problem with my explanation. An artwork prescribes pity for a morally repugnant protagonist. Soliciting pity for such a character mars the work morally, let us grant. And because the solicitation is unsuccessful, it also blemishes the work aesthetically. But what matters here, say Anderson & Dean, is the failure to secure uptake, not the immorality. Another way to put this: what *explains* the failure is the uptake, not the immorality. One way to motivate this thought is through what we might call a 'substitution argument':<sup>21</sup> being immoral might be how the work induces uptake-failure, much as drinking limoncello was how I in fact became drunk. But there are many ways works can induce uptake-failure, just as many kinds of drink will get me drunk. Each is germane to explaining the aesthetic failure *only insofar as* they are uptake-failure-inducing.

I believe this is also a good way to understand Pérez Carreño's aforementioned argument: there are many ways to achieve the aesthetic merit of verisimilitude. (Moral) veracity is just one of them and so does not interestingly explain the merit.

Worse still for Carroll, the above discussion indulges the confusion that his argument connects the immorality to the failed uptake to the aesthetic disvalue in linear fashion. Analyzed more carefully, however, the explanatory structure is a fork, not a line (Clifton 2014). Calling on appreciators to pity a despicable protagonist grounds a moral flaw (if it does) and it causes (or, alternatively, grounds) the uptake failure. But these are two distinct branches on an explanatory tree. My rose bush might blossom on one branch and leak sap on another, owing to a common mechanism: transpiration through the xylem. But it would be madness to therefore *identify* the blooming and the dripping.

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<sup>20</sup> See (Weatherson 2012), for a helpful discussion of these issues.

<sup>21</sup> For an example of such an argument, see (Harold 2020, 173).

Similarly for the ethical and aesthetic disvalue, though they stem from the same artistic choice.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, this suggests that Anderson & Dean do not make as strong an argument as they could. Even where a work's aesthetic and ethical values *are* rooted in a common reason, nothing interesting need follow. *Atlas Shrugged* (Rand 1957/2005) advocates selfishness in a tedious way. As such, it suffers at least one ethical and one aesthetic flaw for the same reason: the novel's tedious advocacy of selfishness. Yet each type of flaw is grounded in a different facet of this common reason: the tedium explains the aesthetic flaw; the advocacy explains the ethical one. No-one would argue on this basis that *Atlas Shrugged* demonstrates moralism's truth, since the two features—tedium and selfishness advocacy—have been conjoined arbitrarily to create a common reason for the two flaws. If, as has been argued elsewhere, the uptake argument rests similarly, if less obviously, on arbitrarily conjoined features (Stear 2020), then Carroll really will not have shown that “a moral defect can be an aesthetic defect” (Carroll 1998, 419, 423). Anderson & Dean's objection will stand.

One might wonder whether any of this really matters. Have the moralists not answered the Ethical Question? Well, yes. But whether autonomists or interactionists appreciate it or not, the troubled waters on which the *qua* problem floats are profound. The worry is, or ought to be, that the kind of ethico-aesthetic relation interactionists have established is fairly trivial.

Take some potential feature of an artwork of dubious aesthetic interest: containing RGB hue 255,15,135 (hot pink); featuring the name 'Pubert' 74 times; depicting a Wankel rotary engine; playing frequency 1396.913 Hz, being made while a Norwegian sneezes, or whatever. I might similarly ask whether such features could affect the work aesthetically (causally or constitutively). The answer is: of course! Using hot pink might make a work garish where before it was reserved, being made while a Norwegian sneezes might, if the Norwegian is close by, jog the artist's hand, deforming the final composition; playing frequency 1396.913 Hz (F6) might introduce dissonance if the piece is written in C# minor. Once one permits the 'contextual' (Gaut 2007) (Song 2018) or 'indirect' (Hanson 2020) accounts of determination like Carroll's, and the bridge properties they invoke in their explanatory stories—garishness, deformity, dissonance, uptake-failure—then, in principle, *any* property of an

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<sup>22</sup> See (Song 2018, 291) for a similar worry raised against (Eaton 2012).

artwork can determine its aesthetic value and, *a fortiori*, any ethical value can do so too. Moreover, it is clear that the valence constraint will not hold across all such determinations, which means allowing them gives us a straightforward answer to the Ethical Question: immoralism is true. But surely the interactionist aspired to show, and the autonomist did not mean to deny, *this* sort of ethico-aesthetic relation! (Stear, ms.).

On the other hand, there is something to the protest: what more could an interactionist *do* to establish an ethico-aesthetic relation? The *qua* problem is, in effect, a problem afflicting any theory invoking a third property bridging the explanatory gap from moral to aesthetic value (Hanson 2020) (Stear, ms.). So, avoiding it means establishing a more intimate ethico-aesthetic relation, perhaps even identity. In that respect, the moderate autonomist's *qua* problem sets a high price. Yet, if the interactionist does not pay up, she walks away with a ubiquitous item of dubious value: a fairly trivial, indirect, ethico-aesthetic relation.<sup>23</sup>

## 5. An Evaluative Turn

If ethical values determine aesthetic values in artworks, then presumably, ethical values in artworks also determine standards of correctness for aesthetic judgments. Inspired by Mary Devereaux (Devereaux 1998), Harold has mobilized an argument for autonomism that denies this inference (Harold 2006, 2020).

Harold's argument appeals to a constraint on reasons, which he borrows from reasons internalism. On this view, whether one has a reason to do something is constrained by one's motivational psychology. Its progenitor, Bernard Williams, for instance, writes that a person has a reason to perform some action "only if he could reach the conclusion to [perform that action] by a sound deliberative route from the motivations he already has" (Williams 1995, 35). If an action serves no end that one recognizes or could come to recognize as in any way desirable, then one has no reason to do it.<sup>24</sup> Harold adopts just as much of this meta-normative theory as he needs to defend autonomism.

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<sup>23</sup> See (Hanson 2019, 12-13) for some suggestions about how to get around this dilemma.

<sup>24</sup> The view's original defence is in (Williams 1981).

To accommodate internalism, Harold changes register. Rather than discussing values, he considers reasons.<sup>25</sup> Autonomism is correct, he states, if there are appreciators for whom the ethical value of an artwork does not count as a reason. This is because, if interactionism is true, everyone must have a reason, in the appropriate cases, to reconcile their aesthetic and ethical evaluations of a work.

The interactionist must show that there is some norm (or set of norms) regulating how we make evaluations of art that all of us must accept, no matter what our values are. (Harold 2020, 152)

Put differently, interactionism entails that anyone refusing to alter relevant aesthetic judgements in light of conflicting ethical ones commits a rational error.

The question, whether interactionism is true, then, becomes the question whether revising one's aesthetic judgements in such cases is rationally required. Enter internalism. On internalism, a work's ethical value counts as a reason to amend one's aesthetic judgement only if that value has some purchase on one's psychology. Harold considers Julia, who has come to differently valenced ethical and aesthetic judgements of a work.

Julia does not commit any error at all if she doesn't reconcile ethical and aesthetic judgments with different valences. The reasons to which interactionist appeal do not move her, and there is no sense in which they should. As Williams emphasizes, any reason that a person can be said to have must be able to figure in an explanation of that person's action. And something can only figure in an explanation of a person's action if it has some purchase on his psychology. (Harold 2020, 150).

In short, reasons internalism concerning aesthetic judgement gives us autonomism: some people unmoved by ethical considerations do nothing irrational in sticking with their morally indifferent aesthetic judgements.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Halvard Lillehammer, not an autonomist, also outlines such an approach (Lillehammer 2008, esp. 384-394).

<sup>26</sup> In this respect, Harold's autonomism is logically weaker than classic autonomism (Harold 148-149). The latter quantifies universally: *no* artwork's ethical value determines its aesthetic value. Harold's quantifies existentially:

On first hearing, Harold's demand that the interactionist provide norms "that all of us must accept, no matter what our values are" sounds reasonable. One might reason as follows: if interactionists can show that ethical values sometimes determine aesthetic ones, then, with some caveats, the rational requirement to weigh ethical considerations in one's aesthetic evaluations follows. Rationality in evaluation tracks the value facts; establish these and the rational constraints on aesthetic evaluation drop out for free.

However, on closer inspection, things are much trickier. The problem is that once reasons internalism enters the room, the intimacy between value and rationality is disturbed. For, if some aesthetic knave cannot be made to care about whatever ethical facts there are, reasons internalism allows her to keep her discordant aesthetic and ethical judgements without rebuke. In other words, once we accept reasons internalism, the demand that the interactionist establish norms rationally binding on *everyone* is a huge ask. Any account shy of the transcendental kind Kant gives for ethics, in which the norms of morality are grounded explicitly in the norms of rationality itself, will always be susceptible to an aesthetic knave. The interactionist could protest that since she has shown how things stand with the values, she has shown how things stand with the relevant norms. Asking her to show that everyone could come to accept these norms as authoritative, while allowing for internalism's truth, is unreasonable. The interactionist could complain that Harold is no longer playing the same game. It is as though interactionists and autonomists had been debating whether the ball crossed the line when Harold rolled out his meta-normative Panzer, obliterated the goal, and started executing doughnuts on the turf.

One way to see why Harold's demand seems too strong is to consider whether we would accept an analogous application of reasons internalism to another debate. Suppose, as seems fair, that 'everyone ought to keep their promises' is true only if everyone has a reason to keep promises. Would we accept the argument that, since reasons internalism basically rules out this conditional's consequent, there is no obligation to keep promises? I should think this would be as unpersuasive as the argument that 3 is not prime because mathematical nominalism is true. Using second-order

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there is at least one appreciator for whom failure to revise an aesthetic judgement... is rational.

conclusions to settle first-order debates is suspect because of the way each level swings independently of the other.

Harold could retort that his argument is different. Promise-keeping, he might agree, could not be validated nor invalidated by an argument with a meta-normative premise. However, the Ethical Question concerns the reconciling of two distinct kinds of value. It is thus a second-order question to which reasons internalism is entirely pertinent.

Even granting that questions transcending value domains are second-order in the way needed, the problem with this argument is that it appears to beg the question against interactionism. That ethical and aesthetic values occupy entirely distinct domains in the cases in question is effectively what the interactionist denies. Or, to put it more carefully, whether ethical value counts among the aesthetic good or bad making considerations—whether it is part of aesthetics—is precisely what is under dispute. This is not relevantly different to asking whether any kind of property—elegance, originality, vividness, etc.—counts among the aesthetic good or bad making considerations. To justify deploying internalism on the grounds that autonomism is a meta-normative position, then, begs the question against interactionism.

Harold can counter. Interactionists (and, we should add, traditional autonomists) have their own meta-normative commitments—namely, to value realism or quasi-realism (Harold 2020, 160). So, if Harold's internalism begs the question against interactionism, the interactionist's realism begs the question against Harold's autonomism. In other words, what the interactionist mistook for a football match had been a panzer battle all along.

## 6. Conclusion

Having been reimagined as a position allowing ethical considerations a restricted role, whether as internal reasons, or in non-fictional artworks, autonomism has mellowed in its riper years. Whether this signals a broad movement towards détente, or just a repositioning of increasingly subtle positions remains to be seen.

Mellow or not, I have shown that autonomism faces some difficulties. Though, in that respect, it enjoys ample company.

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