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Immoralism is Obviously True: Towards Progress on the Ethical Question[1]

Nils-Hennes Stear

I. Introduction

Do ethical values in artworks determine their aesthetic value at all, and how?[2] Call this the Ethical Question. The literature delivers three broad answers. *Autonomists* answer 'no'. *Moralists* and *immoralists*, meanwhile, answer 'yes, sometimes', though they disagree about how. Moralists endorse the 'valence constraint',[3] according to which relevant ethical goodness always improves, and relevant immorality always worsens, a work aesthetically. Immoralists reject this constraint: immorality can improve, and ethical goodness worsen, a work aesthetically.[4]

The bold title may look like classic false advertising: a heady brew to be watered down in the coming pages. In one respect, this is fair; I argue that there are two readings of the Ethical Question and correspondingly, two immoralisms, only one of which is obviously true. However, since the version of the Ethical Question whose answer is obvious is the one almost everyone in the relevant literature addresses, in an important respect, the paper does exactly what it says on the tin.

This paper has several connected aims. In §2, I present two readings of the Ethical Question. In §3, I demonstrate the titular claim regarding one reading, thus undermining this reading's philosophical interest. In §4, I show how the existing literature has addressed this uninteresting reading, however unwittingly. In §5, I connect the discussion to the so-called *qua* problem. In §6, I

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[1] Thanks to Singa Behrens, Stephan Krämer, Stefan Roski, and Vita Saitta. Thanks also to audiences at UNAM's Instituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas for the 50th Anniversary Roundtable on Ethics and Aesthetics, Uppsala University's Higher Seminar in Aesthetics, the 2018 and 2021 annual meetings of the American Society for Aesthetics, the 2018 annual meetings of the British Society of Aesthetics and the Gesellschaft für Analytische Philosophie, the Universities of Sheffield, Reading, York, the University of Kent's Aesthetics Research Centre, the University of Michigan's Aesthetics Discussion Group, the Scottish Aesthetics Forum, and the first Prague Art & Ethics Conference at the Czech Academy of Sciences' Institute of Philosophy.

[2] While there are reasons to distinguish aesthetic and artistic value, I ignore them for ecumenical simplicity throughout. The name 'Ethical Question' is from (Lillehammer 2008).

[3] The term is from (Harold 2008). It is called the 'consistency of valence thesis' in (Patridge 2008).

[4] While the discussion is put largely in terms of interacting properties, it could easily be rephrased in terms of related states of affairs or propositions. Nothing substantive hangs on this here.

consider whether some ways of addressing the uninteresting reading might be interesting after all.

In summary, I aim to use immoralism's obviousness to argue that the literature has gone astray, understand why this has happened, and thereby help get it back on track.

II. Two Questions

The way I divide the Ethical Question follows a familiar split in ethics between intrinsic and (merely) instrumental value. Ethicists often ask whether some entity or property, such as pleasure, money, equality, etc., realizes ethical value directly or indirectly—in itself or merely by bringing some further valuable thing about. We can ask the same question in aesthetics.[5]

Doing so gives us two versions of the Ethical Question:

> **Direct Question:** Does ethical value *as such* ever contribute to or detract from an artwork's aesthetic value (and how)?
>
> **Indirect Question:** Does ethical value in an artwork ever contribute to or detract from its aesthetic value via other properties?

One can sharpen the questions up by distinguishing three kinds of artwork properties: [6]

(1) An artwork's **aesthetic values**. We capture these with our thinnest evaluative concepts—e.g., AESTHETICALLY GOOD or BAD. These serve a solely evaluative function and pick out a domain-specific kind of worth: aesthetic value or disvalue.

(2) An artwork's **aesthetic merits** and **flaws**. These are the *pro tanto* aesthetically good- and bad-making features of artworks. Examples include wit, elegance, ugliness, triteness, sentimentality, etc. They directly ground an artwork's aesthetic values. We capture them with thick concepts, which serve an evaluative and a descriptive function.

(3) An artwork's **aesthetically relevant properties**. These are all of an artwork's properties bearing in some way on the work's possession of merits, flaws, and therefore, values. Examples include being in 7/8 time, being made

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5 See (Flanagan 1986, 41) for a subtly different but similar distinction concerning admirable immorality.

6 Similar distinctions appear in (Sibley 1959), (Zangwill 2001, 9-23), (Kivy 2019, 98-100).

of marble or wood, and containing red paint. We capture many of these properties with merely descriptive concepts.

Note that just about every property of an artwork, including from categories 1 and 2, can fall into category 3. An aesthetic merit, for instance, might also help realize some other merit or flaw.

This tripartite distinction helps clarify our questions. Asking whether ethical values ever determine an artwork's aesthetic value directly amounts to asking:

Direct Question: Are ethical values ever aesthetic merits or flaws?

Asking whether ethical values ever determine an artwork's aesthetic value indirectly amounts to asking:

Indirect Question: Are ethical values ever aesthetically relevant?

The distinction makes something plain: one of the questions is very easy to answer. The answer to the Indirect Question is an obvious *yes*. And in response to it, immoralism is the correct theory. Now, as you know, dear reader, one can make such a bold pronouncement in philosophy only rarely. So, I invite you to pour yourself a drink, put your feet up, and bask, if just briefly, in the comforting glow of my certainty.

III. Immoralism is True

Body warmed and thirst slaked, you might wonder why I am so certain. The short answer is this. In principle, *any* property of an artwork, potential or actual, can be aesthetically relevant. This is because its presence or absence can affect the artwork's other properties. *A fortiori*, any ethical property of an artwork can be aesthetically relevant.[7] But the long answer is more scenic and opens with a country song, *Chicken Fried*:

> Well it's funny how it's the little things in life that mean the most,
> Not where you live, what you drive, or the price tag on your clothes.

[7] Some autonomists do not merely deny ethico-aesthetic determination. They deny that artworks can have ethical values at all (Pérez-Carreño 2006), (Harold 2020), (Clavel-Vázquez forthcoming). While there are reasons to reject this kind of autonomism (Stear forthcoming), nothing I say here rebuts it.

> There's no dollar sign on peace of mind, this I've come to know.
> So, if you agree, have a drink with me, raise your glasses for a toast.
>
> To a little bit of chicken fried,
> And cold beer on a Friday night,
> A pair of jeans that fits just right,
> And the radio up. (Brown 2008)

Chicken Fried celebrates the simple country life, US-style. At least, it celebrates some Nashville-confected caricature of it, in which the endless appreciation of the fit of one's jeans is punctuated only by mouthfuls of breaded steak and icy beer. (It is also, by the end, a jingoistic paean to the American military-cultural nexus but ignore this inconvenience). The song is in F# major and has a simple, repeating chord sequence: I-V-IV-I-V. Like many works since the common practice period, its sequence ends on the dominant chord (C# major) before returning to the tonic (F# major). Many similar compositions include a minor seventh note in the concluding dominant, making it a dominant seventh chord. *Chicken Fried* does not, however. What aesthetic effect does this choice have, all things considered? Well, the song is less harmonically rich than it might have been. Ending the sequence with a dominant seventh would generate a more satisfying tension and release upon returning to the tonic chord—plausibly aesthetic improvements. Then again, so altered, the song would be less thematically unified. Chromatic harmonies would overcomplicate a celebration of simple country living. All things considered, I think the song aesthetically better as it is, though nothing hangs on my verdict.

This toy example illustrates the interdependence of an artwork's properties. Most, possibly all, of an artwork's properties are interdependent with various of its other properties. Because this interdependence spans the three levels of aesthetic register described above, any property of an artwork can, in principle, help realize, extinguish, amplify, or diminish any of its other potential or actual properties, including its narrowly aesthetic ones. So, any property might indirectly contribute to or detract from an artwork's aesthetic value. Partly, this is because aesthetic properties are fragile. Small alterations can effect huge aesthetic changes. Think here of how a small coffee stain affects a tie's 'look', subtle deviations in pitch affect a duet's sound, or a slight delay affects a punchline's impact.

So much for *Chicken Fried*. What about an example involving an ethical property? That ethical properties can have *some* effect, however indirect, on aesthetic ones is obvious. Sticking with music, could anyone truly maintain that the final movement in Beethoven's 9th Symphony would similarly soar had Schiller

penned an *Ode to Misery* instead; that Bob Dylan's *Hurricane* would stir as it does if it celebrated the criminal justice system it in fact condemns; or that Nina Simone's *Strange Fruit* would realize such poignancy if it lamented the 'strange fruit' of miscegenation instead of lynching? Whether the ethical values in these works count as aesthetic merits, they clearly impact the works' other features.

This alone makes the case against autonomism. To prove immoralism specifically, we need a work whose ethical value not only shapes its aesthetic value, but where the two values oppose one another; we need a work that flouts the valence constraint. Such cases may be rarer than those conforming to the constraint. Nonetheless, they are common enough. Reading the Ethical Question literature, this is hard to see, since it focusses on the most egregious works. *The Birth of a Nation* and *Triumph des Willens* are stock examples. However, works with minor flaws make immoralism an easier sell.[8]

Let us start with the abstract case and then turn to real examples. Consider comedic works. Pushed hard, a rough comedy routine can cut too deeply. But a little naughtiness sometimes adds a tolerable edge, intensifying the thrill, and thus the hilarity. Or consider ethically 'seductive' artworks (Stear 2019), which embroil appreciators in unethical responses in order to show their susceptibility to them. Plausibly, seeking to elicit such responses is sometimes unethical despite the seductive work's admirable aims. Provided the payoff is big and the immorality small, seductive works show another way that a work's being unethical can redound to a work's aesthetic betterment.

In general, relaxing moral constraints allows greater freedom to exploit artistic resources. Street photographer Jeff Mermelstein's series *#nyc*, for instance, captures people's intimate text conversations without their knowledge, candidly portraying a city's preoccupations (Mermelstein 2020). It also raises serious concerns about privacy and personal autonomy.[9] Yet, the series would have scarcely been possible, let alone enjoyed its authentic, voyeuristic power, had Mermelstein sought his subjects' permission.[10] Along similar lines, ethically dicey works can enjoy a bravado and swagger that more respectable counterparts lack. We sometimes admire such works much as we admire people who transcend minor pangs of conscience, even while we justly shake

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8 (Nannicelli 2014, 172) makes a similar, if narrower, point about immorality's effects on comic success.

9 On the moral importance of photographic consent, see (Nannicelli 2020, 91-102).

10 Antony Aumann discusses a case like this—Søren Kierkegaard's writings—which he takes, roughly, to offer profound personal insights but only by deceiving the reader (Aumann 2016).

our heads.[11] The point is quite general: moral goodness can be inspiring, admirable, even beautiful as many have remarked. But it can also constrain other broadly aesthetic values by being too strait-laced—values that attach to artistic freedom, boldness, excitement, panache, danger, and the forbidden.

An example that is more than a little naughty comes from David Sedaris' *Santaland Diaries*. The monologue drolly recounts Sedaris' experience working as a disaffected Christmas elf in a New York department store. Here is an excerpt:

> At noon, a large group of retarded people came to visit Santa and passed me on my little island. These people were profoundly retarded. They were rolling their eyes and wagging their tongues and staggering towards Santa. It was a large group of retarded people and, after seeing them for 15 minutes, I could not begin to guess where the retarded people ended and the regular New Yorkers began. Everyone looks retarded once you've set your mind to it. (Sedaris 1992)

Within the context of the mostly misanthropic monologue, the last two lines are exquisitely funny. They are also unmistakably ableist and, to that extent, morally criticizable. These two features are connected. Part of what makes the penultimate line so scintillating is the contempt it expresses towards the strain of New Yorker thronging to Macy's 'Santaland'. But to express this contempt, the line must presuppose a demeaning attitude towards the kinds of disability Sedaris describes. Sedaris also repeats 'retarded' to echo his sense of an endlessly repeating line of indistinguishable, visibly disabled visitors. This literary device enhances the text aesthetically, even while repeating an ableist slur and thereby presenting the disabled visitors as a homogenous horde. In both cases, again, immorality contributes to the work's aesthetic success.[12]

Such examples bear immoralism out well enough. Yet, the abstract case delivers the slam dunk. Consider artworks, imagined or actual, which marshal elaborate artistic resources to realize minor ethical merits or flaws. The effect that removing or altering such ethical properties would have on the work's other properties is potentially enormous. It would be a metaphysical miracle if these or other ethico-aesthetic relations always obeyed the valence

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[11] The literature on moral 'overridingness' and 'admirable immorality' gives many examples of this. See, e.g., (Wolf 1982), (Flanagan 1986), (Baron 1986).

[12] One might argue that Sedaris is portraying a fictionalized version of himself and that we are laughing at this character's outrageousness. This may be part of the story, but only part. It lets us (and Sedaris) off the hook too easily. Furthermore, it is dubious whether, this would free the text of ethical blemish. For an account on which the text would remain blemished, see (Zheng & Stear, ms.).

constraint. It is *literally* incredible to think that, for every possible artwork, morally improving it would redound only to its aesthetic betterment and making it morally worse only to its aesthetic detriment. Believing this is akin to believing that adding chocolate cake necessarily improves a party, or that lower prices necessarily make merchandise more saleable. These things are surely powerfully correlated. But the world is complicated, and interventions often cut in surprising directions. So, again, it would be a miracle for the valence constraint to hold universally, even if it should hold for all direct forms of ethico-aesthetic determination. Barring miracles, then, indirect immoralism is true.

At the risk of over-kneading the dough, I will briefly consider one of the literature's favourite examples to allay any remaining doubts: Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens*. As others note, one cannot disentangle the film's aesthetic success from its grotesque ethics. Mary Devereaux writes that 'the film is aimed not simply at stylistic innovation and formally beautiful images, but at using these means to create a particular vision of Hitler and National Socialism', (Devereaux 1998, 237). Daniel Jacobson, echoing Susan Sontag (1975), describes this phenomenon as 'the unity of the film's political and aesthetic ideals' (Jacobson 1997, 192). Matthew Kieran adds:

> the specific technique, composition, and editing is purposefully designed to promote the glorious certainties and vision of fascism. [...] The oppressive beauty of the images, the dynamic moving shots, the framing of the crowds, the heroic isolation of Hitler, the sweep of banners, and the torch light resolve are all edited together to evoke the feeling of a heroic, certain destiny. (Kieran 1996, 346)

Because the work's immorality is baked into its form, purifying it must change its aesthetic properties. At minimum, the sanitized *Triumph* would cohere less than before since, in Berys Gaut's words, the film 'is held together thematically by its offensive celebration of Nazism' (Gaut 1998, 190).

Triumph shows that ethical properties in artworks enjoy the right kinds of dependency relations with their aesthetic ones, *contra* autonomism. And since a Bowdlerized *Triumph* would be aesthetically worse overall than the original, even if ethically better (Gaut 2007, 59), it also refutes moralism. At the very least, *Triumph* shows how immorality *could* improve a work aesthetically overall in one of the literature's paradigm works.

With this, I consider the case for immoralism made, if it ever needed making. Can an artwork's ethical value affect its aesthetic value *in some way or other*? Of course. Can the valences flip? Yep. In answer to the Indirect Question, immoralism is obviously right.

So, we can read the Ethical Question in two ways, one of which makes it easy. Perhaps surprisingly, this has been

insufficiently appreciated in the literature, as I show in the next section.

IV. Indirect Theories

Knowingly or not, many philosophers have exerted considerable energy pushing what, following the Indirect Question, I will call 'indirect theories'. Indeed, most theories in the relevant literature are of this kind. While space prevents me from putting this general claim beyond doubt, three examples will help substantiate it.

The first theory is Anne Eaton's 'robust immoralism', on which 'an immoral feature of an artwork can make a significant positive aesthetic contribution *precisely in virtue of its immorality*' (Eaton 2012, 283, emphasis in original). More specifically, she argues, certain ethical flaws in a work make securing audience sympathies difficult, thereby posing an interesting artistic challenge, overcoming which represents an aesthetic achievement. Eaton considers 'rough heroes', whose moral flaws, unlike those of anti-heroes, are central to their personality, unforgivable, not outweighed by virtues, and wielded for bad ends. Her examples include Tony Soprano, Milton's Satan, and Hannibal Lecter. While audiences are made 'acutely aware' of these 'irredeemable moral flaws', the rough hero must remain a hero—sympathetic, likeable, admirable—in virtue of humanizing traits, her contrast with yet worse villains, or her adherence to a strict 'moral' code. For a rough hero work to succeed, audiences must support the hero's evil schemes and spurn the 'forces of good' obstructing them (283-285). This is the artistic challenge rough heroes pose. The work must make audiences concurrently side with a deeply immoral protagonist and feel revulsion at her flaws, striking a 'delicate equilibrium […] between the sympathetic and monstrous' and leaving audiences lingering 'in a delicious state of irresolvable conflict'. This delicious state is compelling and, given the difficulty of realizing it, marks an aesthetic achievement (287). In this respect, Eaton argues, an artwork can be aesthetically valuable '*precisely in virtue of its immorality*'.

Let us grant that such works are immoral, although this is contentious (Paris 2019, 20-21). Even so, 'precisely' here is misplaced. The work's immorality plays some role in the aesthetic success Eaton describes. But the immorality is not itself an aesthetic merit any more than being in a challenging artistic medium is. Both raise interesting artistic problems and thus enable their solution, where this solution is an aesthetic merit in the work if anything is. As Eaton herself says, it is the delicious and delicate equilibrium and its realization that count as merits. But the immorality itself, like the difficult medium, plays only an indirect role. Therefore, Eaton more accurately describes her

findings when introducing her view earlier: 'moral flaws of a particular kind can make a significant contribution to a work's aesthetic value' (281). The immorality *does* contribute. It just contributes indirectly, much as it does in Sedaris' essay or Riefenstahl's film. Without it, the work solves no artistic problem, lacks ingenuity, skill, etc. But it is not an aesthetic merit itself.

Aaron Smuts (Smuts 2011) defends a form of moralism about art on which 'moral flaws can be detrimental to an artwork's aesthetic value' (34). Smuts remains explicitly neutral on ethical flaws improving a work's aesthetic value (49), though he 'prefer[s]' to say they do not (35). Smuts argues, roughly, that any property of an artwork can be an aesthetic defeater. Defeaters work against the strength or presence of other aesthetic properties. Since being unethical is a property that artworks can have, it too can be an aesthetic defeater. So, by defeating aesthetic merits, ethical flaws can diminish an artwork's aesthetic value.

Smuts is explicit about defending what I am calling an indirect theory.[13]

> If the question we are attempting to answer is whether or not moral flaws with a work of art can be detrimental to its aesthetic value, then all we need to show is a causal or explanatory chain linking the moral flaw and the aesthetic flaw. (Smuts 2011, 48)

And yet, Smuts' preference for denying that ethical flaws can *improve* a work aesthetically, and thus that immoralism is true, is curious. His theory has everything immoralism needs. Among the defeaters of aesthetically good properties are morality *and* immorality. Additionally, the defeasible properties include aesthetic merits *and* flaws. So, by the letter of Smuts' own theory, morality and immorality can both improve or worsen a work aesthetically. In favouring moralism, then, Smuts is like one who, beholding the full moon, concludes that it must be bright all the way around.

One last example: Kieran's 'cognitive immoralism'. Kieran focusses on works that make us take up unethical perspectives and attitudes we otherwise avoid. These works, he says, sometimes deepen our understanding and appreciation. This is because some kinds of moral knowledge are only fully available to those who have had certain experiences. We can only come to fully grasp the mind of a bully, for instance, once we have felt the thrill of dominating another. Another example is temptation:

> If someone has never been tempted they will lack certain experiences that are a primary means to a proper

[13] Compare Louise Hanson's 'direct-' and 'indirect strategies' in (Hanson 2020).

> understanding and appreciation of the human condition. Hence their moral proclamations and proscriptions are more likely to be naively utopian. Where there is a failure to grasp the difficulties involved for mere mortals in striving to be good, the pressures we are subject to, and an inability to appreciate how resisting temptation constitutes an achievement then any resulting ethic cannot but be inhumane and unforgiving. (Kieran 2003, 67)

Deepening our understanding in this way makes such works better as artworks (Kieran 2003, 72).

Kieran is surely right that some immoral artworks aid our understanding in this way. However, like Eaton, Smuts, and many others, his argument establishes an indirect ethico-aesthetic relation at best. It is not immorality as such that enhances it aesthetically, any more than a film's being in black and white as such enhances it in virtue of deepening our understanding of what watching a monochrome film is like. At best, it is *insightfulness* as such that counts as an aesthetic merit in the works Kieran considers.

It is particularly interesting that Kieran offers an indirect theory for immoralism since he is motivated to improve upon Jacobson's 'instrumental' defence of immoralism. The problem with Jacobson's defence, Kieran notes, is that it is insufficiently 'robust' (63). Jacobson notes how a morally noxious artwork might still teach us how moral degenerates think. Such works, he argues, are thereby better for aiding our moral understanding. The problem with this argument is that, as Kieran puts it, it 'doesn't give any reason to think that a work's value as art may be enhanced in virtue of its morally defective character.' (62). This is correct. One should hardly *credit* an imperialistic work, say, for teaching us how imperialists think, any more than one should credit US Senator Ted Cruz for teaching us how not to be a human being or, come to think of it, any sort of vertebrate. The credit in both cases is with the sensitive onlooker. In this regard, Kieran's argument is an improvement on Jacobson's; Kieran identifies features of the works themselves. Nonetheless, Jacobson could easily return the criticism. For, in defending an indirect immoralism, Kieran fails, in a different way, to show 'that a work's value as art may be enhanced in virtue of its morally defective character'. The ethico-aesthetic relation he presents is no more interesting, in the relevant sense, than any I have discussed.

These are just three examples of theories that, in different ways, fail to recognize the straightforward case for (indirect) immoralism. I touch on one or two more in the ensuing sections. The failure is endemic in the literature, though space (and mercy) prevents me from showing this exhaustively.

If immoralism is so obviously the right answer to the Indirect Question, one might wonder why anyone addresses that question. I think there are several grounds. First, many theorists addressing the Indirect Question do not take themselves to do so. That is, even if they recognize the straightforward case for indirect immoralism, these theorists presume to answer something like the Direct Question. This explains frequent uses of 'robust' and 'non-accidental'[14] to describe authors' preferred views. Such terms are meant, I suppose, to insulate these views from the kind of triviality I have made explicit. Second, to call the Indirect Question uninteresting is not to call it uninteresting in every respect. Noël Carroll addressed his seminal contributions to the debate, for instance, partly to art critics and practitioners less versed in the metaphysics of determination than philosophers. Many of these took and still take autonomism for granted. In that cultural context, offering an answer to the Indirect Question has plenty of practical and theoretical point. Nor is it an ahistorical claim. Whatever obviousness there is results partly from contributions to an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the Ethical Question. For example, Gaut introduced Monroe Beardsley's distinction between *pro tanto* and overall principles of aesthetic contribution to the debate. This made it easier to distinguish the two questions as I have (Gaut 2007, 57-66). Finally, I suspect that despite its importance, Gaut's Beardsleyan distinction has misled some by implying a false dichotomy. Something like the following thought seems implicit in the work of authors like Eaton and Kieran: since they are not showing how ethical values determine *overall* aesthetic value, they must be showing how they do so *pro tanto*. After all, these are the two ways the distinction describes by which ethical value can determine aesthetic value. Evidence of this dichotomy appears in an otherwise excellent recent article by Moonyoung Song:[15]

> I distinguish between two kinds of value interaction: (1) a moral virtue or defect's *intrinsic* or *pro tanto* artistic valence that does not vary with context, and (2) a moral virtue or defect's contribution to a work's overall artistic value *in the context of that particular work* (Song 2019, 285, emphasis in original).

The dichotomy is false because an ethical property might help determine any number of aesthetically relevant features, about any portion of which one can make aesthetic judgements. One need not consider *all* of them when doing so. So, while many authors are not discussing an ethical value's *overall* aesthetic contribution,

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14 (Kieran 2003, 63), (Eaton 2003, 165), (Liao & Meskin 2018, 3, 14-15), (Paris 2019, 15).

15 Song's is one of two articles that I think grapples deeply with the central issues this paper addresses. The other is (Hanson 2020). I commend both to readers.

they are not thereby addressing its *pro tanto* contribution either. Rather, they are addressing *part* of its contribution via further properties.

To dispel any lingering fog around this point, consider *Chicken Fried* again. Rightly or wrongly, I claimed that the song's omitted minor seventh note made it better overall. That is a judgement about a property's overall contribution to a work's aesthetic value. I also claimed the omission made the work aesthetically better because it is more unified and worse because it is less harmonically rich. These are not judgements about a property's overall aesthetic contribution. But nor are they judgements about its *pro tanto* contribution. Even if thematic unity is a *pro tanto* merit, omitting a minor seventh is not. My suspicion is that Beardsley's distinction makes it seem as though this latter judgement concerns a *pro tanto* contribution, since it is evidently not an overall one. But it is neither.

With this oversight marked out, we can disambiguate the Indirect Question further. One can read it as either concerning an ethical property's overall or its partial aesthetic contribution. I have argued that where overall contributions are concerned, immoralism is obviously true. That is, sometimes ethical value, positive or negative, makes artworks aesthetically better or worse overall. Once one accepts this, the case for immoralism regarding *partial* contributions follows immediately. Most obviously, since anything is a part of itself, whatever is true of something is true of at least one part. As far as proper parts go, consider a simple analogy. The more I push a balloon under water, the more it pushes back. Therefore, it must be that the more I push a balloon under water, the more some part of what it does is push back; it cannot push back more if no part of what it does contributes to this. Similarly, if an ethical value contributes the opposite valence to an artwork's overall aesthetic value, then some portion of the contribution must help flip the valence too.

Answering the Indirect Question is, then, a more or less trifling business that surprisingly many philosophers have made their own. They include those who have made the most influential contributions to the debate. I have already discussed Eaton's and Kieran's work. Carroll's (1996, 1998, 2015), and Gaut's (1998, 2007) are further examples. In many cases, the authors evidently try to address the Direct Question but end up with arguments addressing its indirect cousin.

The discussion so far may remind readers of the so-called '*qua* problem', which besets theories that try but fail to show an ethical value making an aesthetic difference *qua* ethical value. The problem's original formulation is levelled at Carroll's 'moderate moralism' (Anderson & Dean 1998), which I discuss shortly. But its core insight appears repeatedly.[16] In what remains, I want to

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[16] See, e.g., (Stecker 2008, 152), (Smuts 2009, 156), (Paris 2019), (Stear 2020).

use the preceding discussion to deepen our understanding of the *qua* problem and with it the Ethical Question.

V. The *Qua* Problem

Arguments vulnerable to the *qua* problem share a common feature. They span the gap between ethical and aesthetic value with a bridge property. In doing so, the objection goes, these theories show only that the aesthetic change is effected *qua* bridge property, not *qua* ethical value.

Take Carroll's 'uptake argument' for moderate moralism. Carroll says a work's immorality can detract from its aesthetic value by blocking 'uptake'—that is, by frustrating the appreciator's ability to emote as the work demands. A film, say, might try to elicit love for its hero but fail by making him too morally odious. Carroll says that in such cases, the work's ethical and aesthetic failures are the same; casting a morally odious hero is both an ethical and aesthetic flaw. (Carroll 1996, 1998, 2015)

This argument succumbs to the *qua* problem. Granting that immorality mars a work aesthetically as Carroll says, it only does so via a bridge property. How is this possible if the ethical and aesthetic defects are identical? Well, the properties only look identical if one smears enough Vaseline on the lens. While attempting to elicit love for a morally odious character may sometimes be immoral,[17] it is not an aesthetic flaw. The aesthetic flaw is one step removed, consisting not in the attempt to elicit the response but in the failure to secure it. As such, it is not *qua* moral flaw that the work suffers aesthetically, but *qua* failure to secure uptake. This is the problem for the causal version of Carroll's account, in which the immorality causes the failure of uptake. But the same problem arises *mutatis mutandis* if the theory is put in the constitutive terms preferred by (Gaut 2007) and towards which Carroll sometimes leans.[18] In that case, it is not the work's attempting to elicit an immoral response, but its being uptake-frustrating (or, on Gaut's theory, its failing to *merit* the response) that counts as the aesthetic failure.

Readers may shrug at what seems like pedantry here. But the *qua* problem is not just hair-splitting. I will now argue that it is grounded in considerations of what good explanations consist in that reach beyond the Ethical Question. Specifically, the *qua* problem washes up in certain cases of explanatory superfluity. Put simply, theories prone to the *qua* problem give poor explanations of aesthetic value—so poor, in fact, that the ethico-aesthetic relations they posit are trivial.

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[17] I have argued elsewhere that this is never, strictly speaking the case. See (Stear 2020).

[18] See (Carroll 2015, 185).

Explanations can be too *strong* by containing too much information, too *weak* by containing too little, or just right—*proportional*—by committing neither sin. The *qua* problem arises for explanations of aesthetic value that are too strong. In theories like Carroll's, ethical value is superfluous to explaining the aesthetic value that, in some sense, it helps bring about.

A smug illustration is needed! In 2015, in the dying seconds of a football semi-final, I scored a spectacular goal for Michigan's intramural philosophy team. Picking the ball up in our 18-yard box, I dribbled it the length of the field past the entire opposing team and slotted home. The goal elicited a squeal of delight from a teammate, completed my hat-trick, and secured our team (Soccertes) a 3:2 victory, sending us to the semi-final. True story. Now, suppose afterwards I claimed, ego-drunk, that scoring spectacularly was what won Soccertes the game. One may read this causally or constitutively. My team-mates could rightly have replied that while scoring *spectacularly* was how we *scored*, and in that sense brought about our victory, it was not *qua* spectacularness but *qua* goal that Soccertes won. The spectacularness is as surplus to explanatory need as the fact that I scored on a Saturday, by propelling the ball at 19.3 miles per hour, or with an even number of hairs on my head.

Compare this to Carroll's account, on which a work's immorality makes it aesthetically worse by blocking uptake. It is *qua* the blocking of uptake, goes the objection, not *qua* immorality, that the work suffers aesthetically. Again, explanatory strength helps one see what this means. Being immoral might be the work's way of blocking uptake, just as scoring spectacularly was my way of scoring. But the immorality as such no more explains the aesthetic disvalue than spectacularness explains the victory. And since the ethical value *as such* is explanatorily redundant, Carroll has failed to show any interesting ethico-aesthetic connection. The broader worry is that *any* answer appealing to bridge properties will suffer the same redundancy. Realizing the moral value will be the work's way of realizing the bridge property. But it will be *qua* bridge property that any aesthetic effects materialize. Put simply, were the ethical value not explanatorily redundant, one would need no bridge property.

VI. Robustness to the Rescue?

One might think the Direct Question interesting, albeit difficult, because it seeks a *robust* ethico-aesthetic relation—namely, an identity relation between the ethical value and the aesthetic merit/flaw (or, equivalently, a direct grounding relation from the ethical to the aesthetic value). This suggests a way to rescue indirect forms of ethico-aesthetic determination from triviality. So far, I have treated all indirect determining relations as equally

uninteresting. But some forms might be more robust than others. If one could secure enough robustness without going so far as to *identify* the ethical value and aesthetic merit/flaw, then one might show an interesting *indirect* relation after all.

Despite the recurrence of 'robust' and 'non-accidental' in the literature, no-one has explicitly analyzed these notions. A passing discussion that makes some progress is Panos Paris' in (Paris 2019, 15-16).[19] Here, Paris briefly gestures towards various potential conditions on robust ethico-aesthetic determining relations:

> Consider de Sade's works, which may be said to be aesthetically meritorious partly in virtue of their immorality, insofar as their immorality makes them original. Originality is neither a *constitutive*, nor a *necessary*, nor even a *statistically more likely* feature of immorality compared to other features. Moreover, it is a merit that *can be realized by much else* besides immorality. Because of this, I shall speak of such a connection […] as a weak one. Compare, by contrast, the moralist's cognitivist claim, whereby ethical merits in artworks are always aesthetic merits because, or so the argument goes, they are always truthful and contribute to our understanding. This sort of connection I will call robust. (Paris 2019, 15 – my emphasis)

Which conditions? I see four:

> CONSTITUTION: the aesthetic merit/flaw is constitutive of the ethical value.
>
> PROBABILITY: the ethical value increases the probability of the aesthetic merit/flaw.
>
> SUFFICIENCY: the ethical value is sufficient for the aesthetic merit/flaw.
>
> NECESSITY: the ethical value is necessary for the aesthetic merit/flaw.

Do these conditions rescue answers to the Indirect Question from triviality? Let us take them in reverse order.

Beginning with NECESSITY, the idea is that a robust ethico-aesthetic relation would be instantiated wherever only an ethical value could realize a work's aesthetic merit/flaw. Since not just *any* old property is necessary for this, relations meeting this condition avoid triviality, so runs the thought.

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[19] Another is (Eaton 2012, 190), where she suggests certain 'general and systematic' ethico-aesthetic relations count as robust. This criterion succumbs to the criticisms I make shortly.

However, the thought is mistaken. Some theorists have noted that an overly strong explanation can be made proportional by precisifying or 'fine-graining' the explanandum (Yablo 1992), (Weatherson 2012). Recall the spectacular goal (please, I *insist*). The suggestion is that while scoring spectacularly cannot feature in a proportional explanation of the victory, it can feature in a proportional explanation of the *spectacular* victory. This presents a way around the *qua* problem: fine-grain the aesthetic flaw being explained by the ethical value. If one takes a work's ethical value not as explaining the aesthetic flaw, but as explaining, for instance, the aesthetic flaw *precisely as realized in this specific work*, or *as realized by this moral value*, then it is explanatorily relevant after all.

Consider Sedaris' monologue to illustrate. Let us grant that the immorality indirectly makes the work more aesthetically valuable because funnier. The *qua* problem arises because it is the funniness, not the immorality as such, that directly grounds the aesthetic value. Precisifying the merit gets around this problem. The immorality may not explain the funniness, but it explains the funniness-as-realized-through-immorality. True, this fine-grained property also bridges the divide between the ethical and the aesthetic. But since the immorality is necessary for its realization, explanatory redundancy is dodged. Nor is this fine-graining tactic mere sophistry. After all, few, if any, art critics care merely about the fact that, say, a novel is funny. Rather, they care much more about the way the novel realizes its funniness. So, identifying a merit more nuanced than funniness fits what we mean to explain: what makes an artwork tick. Equally, it fits the critical discourse in which these explanations are offered. Most importantly here, fine-graining like this means the ethico-aesthetic determining relation satisfies NECESSITY; there can be no funniness-via-immorality, for instance, without immorality.

The problem with this strategy, and thus NECESSITY, however, is that it can make *any* property of an artwork whatsoever necessary to an aesthetic merit/flaw. Thus, one can make the relation between any such property and the merit/flaw satisfy NECESSITY, which means NECESSITY does not guarantee robustness. All one has to do is take the coarse-grained aesthetic merit/flaw that has been realized and fine-grain it into the merit/flaw *precisely as realized in the work in question* or *as realized by F*, for any property F. Notice, for instance, that the quoted excerpt of Sedaris' monologue contains two definite articles. Even though the use of two articles is, in part, what realizes the excerpt's funniness, this is explanatorily irrelevant to its aesthetic success (if you disagree, choose some other arbitrary feature). My spectacular goal was, you will recall, scored on a Saturday without this fact having any explanatory relevance either. The number of articles *is* relevant to explaining funniness-precisely-as-realized-in-the monologue's excerpt, however. So, for any ethical value

playing some incidental role in the realization of an aesthetic merit/flaw, we can always 'fine-grain' that merit/flaw to make the determining relation satisfy NECESSITY.

Evidently, NECESSITY does not guarantee robustness. What about SUFFICIENCY, which states the converse entailment to NECESSITY: the ethical value *entails* the aesthetic merit/flaw? The idea is that if an ethical value entails, perhaps because it fully grounds, an aesthetic merit/flaw, then showing this would be far from trivial.

However, like NECESSITY, SUFFICIENCY also fails to avoid triviality. A quick way to see this is to note that my scoring *spectacularly* entailed scoring, which, given certain background conditions, entailed Soccertes' victory. But, accepting the argument so far, it is the *scoring* not scoring *spectacularly* that is explanatory. So, SUFFICIENCY looks like the wrong tool for avoiding triviality.

Returning to art, we can show this using Paris' own example, in which ethical goodness in art entails the supposed cognitive-aesthetic merit of 'truthfulness', understood as veracity. Notice that this entailment in fact fails; ethical value, even ethical value realizable in artworks, does not entail truthfulness. Truthfulness is plausibly entailed by ethically good *claims*, *theories*, maybe even *perspectives*—in other words, by the kinds of things that are truth-apt. By contrast, ethically good states of affairs, actions, or characters, for instance, do not entail truthfulness. 19th and 20th century campaigns for a five-day working week were ethically good but they were not true, except in a poetic sense. To say otherwise is to commit a category error.

If anything entails truthfulness, it is ethically good claims or theories. But now triviality rears its head again. For, this amounts to saying that truthfulness is entailed by things that are, well, ethically true. This is no more interesting than ethical triteness sufficing for triteness or ethical subtlety sufficing for subtlety etc. In all of these cases, the ethics is baked into a thicker property whose further elements—triteness, subtlety, and truth—do everything towards satisfying SUFFICIENCY. The ethical values only ride their coattails.[20] Indeed, this thickening of the ethical is the mirror image of the fine-graining of the aesthetic. In the earlier case, the aesthetic merit/flaw was 'thickened up' to secure NECESSITY. Here, ethical value is thickened up to secure SUFFICIENCY.

What about PROBABILITY? It will not work either. The argument for this is straightforward: every ethico-aesthetic relation satisfying SUFFICIENCY also satisfies PROBABILITY. If F entails some non-certain G, then being F makes being G more

20 This is why I believe accounts appealing to 'thick' properties combining both ethical and aesthetic ingredients also fail. See, for instance, the appeal to sentimentality in (Eaton 2001, 114-130).

probable (it raises G's probability to 1). So, since SUFFICIENCY does not avoid triviality, nor will PROBABILITY.

That leaves us with CONSTITUTION. It is not entirely clear what Paris means by talking of one property's being 'a constitutive part' of another. He cannot mean material constitution, as when the clay constitutes the statue, since the relata in question are not material objects. But we might suppose that, like material constitution, the intended relation is irreflexive and asymmetric (Rudder Baker 1999). Accordingly, I think 'constitution' here concerns a determinate-determinable relation.

Even so, the constitution-talk is potentially confusing. Ordinarily, with a determinate, e.g., blue, and a determinable, e.g., colour, it is being blue that 'constitutes' being coloured. The determinate constitutes the determinable. This is 'constitutes' in the sense of 'realizes': But 'constitutive *of*' suggests the converse relation. *a*'s being constitutive of *b* means that *a* is part of what makes *b* the thing it is, much in the way that Kant viewed concepts (e.g., YELLOW, METAL) as constitutive of other concepts (e.g., GOLD). On this view, being coloured is constitutive of being blue insofar as being blue is being coloured plus some other stuff. With this, we would say that the determinable is constitutive of the determinate. This latter reading is what Paris seems to have in mind, because his interest is in the aesthetic flaw, say, being 'contained in' the ethical value, such that an artwork's immorality occasions its aesthetic flaw.

Understood like this, the argument against CONSTITUTION is, again, straightforward. Many of the examples we have discussed satisfy this condition without avoiding triviality. Being truthful, for instance, is constitutive of being morally truthful. Yet, as we have seen, the determining relation between moral truthfulness and truthfulness does not avoid triviality.

Are there other conditions that might work? Indirect theories, I have claimed, give explanations in which ethical value is redundant. I appear, therefore, to be committed to the idea that indirectness entails redundancy. However, we might hesitate to accept this. After all, explanatory redundancy is familiar in discussions of causation.[21] And there it seems obvious that an indirect explanation is not necessarily a redundant one. So, either the demands on causal and aesthetic explanations differ, such that aesthetic but not causal indirectness entail redundancy, or there are kinds of indirect aesthetic explanation that involve no redundancy at all. If explanation works the same in both domains, then there will be conditions under which indirect ethico-aesthetic explanations avoid redundancy.

What these might be, I leave for another time. My goal has been to show, above all, that some condition is needed. And in this I think I have succeeded. Or, putting it differently, I think I

[21] See, e.g., (Paul & Hall 2013, 70-172).

have successfully shown that we need an argument against taking the *qua* problem to beset *all* indirect explanations.[22]

My secondary goal has been to show that finding such a condition is tricky and in so doing, suggest—but only suggest—that there may not be a suitable condition at all. The discussion of NECESSITY and SUFFICIENCY, at least, suggests that any condition securing robustness will have to do more than spell out narrowly modal constraints. The *qua* problem's concerning explanatory adequacy, as I propose, helps account for this. Though explanatory relations have modal constraints, they require more than these (Fine 2012, 38). I leave this here as a suggestion to develop on another occasion.

Should no robustness-securing condition be forthcoming, the consequence for answering the Ethical Question would be profound. We would have to address the Direct Question; we would have to show an identity relation. What the prospects are for showing this is a question for another time. [23] For now, we might observe that were this question unanswerable—perhaps because there is no way to argue that some ethical value *just is* an aesthetic merit/flaw without begging the question—then the consequence would be profounder still. It would mean that the Ethical Question is solved. For, without the Direct Question, all we have is the Indirect Question, to which we have the answer: immoralism, obviously.

VII. Conclusion

I argued that the Ethical Question has an Indirect and a Direct reading and that only the latter is philosophically interesting. I connected this discussion to the *qua* problem, which I argued instances a more general problem of explanatory redundancy. Finally, I considered some ways of distinguishing more from less 'robust' answers to the Indirect Question. I argued that none of the considered approaches works, even if others might. The discussion's upshot is simple. Those seeking to answer the Ethical Question must either abandon the Indirect in favour of the Direct Question, or else show why the former is worth pursuing.

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[22] One possibility would be to argue that direct explanations are too abstract. Applying the reasoning in (Blanchard 2020) to the current discussion, for instance, suggests this.

[23] See (Hanson 2020, 219-221) for some suggestions about how to do this.

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