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## ART AND ETHICS

*Berys Gaut*

### The issues

Questions about the relation of art to ethics run deep in the mainstream of the Western intellectual tradition. Plato in *The Republic* (1961) famously attacked almost all kinds of mimetic art for undermining reason at the expense of the unseemly stimulation of emotion and the advancement of a mere simulacrum of knowledge. A great deal of the subsequent debate about the value of art has been shaped by this seminal attack, so that the issue of the relation of art to ethics has been of recurrent and central interest both to philosophical aesthetics and to literary theory. These concerns are not merely academic: in popular culture worries about the ethics of some artworks, condemned because of their violence, explicit sexual content, sexism and so on.

The general issue of the relation of art to ethics admits of several distinct questions. One, most overtly posed in the contemporary popular debate, is this: does exposure to works of art that are ethically suspect (because of their advocacy of violence, sexism, etc.) tend morally to corrupt their audiences? This is essentially a causal, empirical question: we need to find the answer from psychological and sociological experiments. A second question concerns censorship: does the ethical badness of certain works of art justify their suppression? Some of the points made in the present chapter will be relevant to answering that question, but we will not address it directly: it is chiefly a question in political philosophy and a full answer would have to develop a general theory about freedom of expression. A third question concerns what are sometimes called the 'moral rights' of artworks: do we have moral obligations towards artworks to preserve them in certain ways – for instance, do we have obligations not to colorize movies? Again, we

will not address that question here. A fourth question, of great interest to eighteenth-century philosophers, including Hume and Kant, is of whether there are structural parallels between aesthetic and moral judgments: are both kinds of judgments, for instance, objective or relative, are they governed by principles, are they about response-dependent properties and so on? This question will also not be addressed here, since it would lead us away from the core issues that have animated the debate about art and ethics.

What interests us is a question distinct from all of the above. Put most simply, it is this: are the ethical flaws (or merits) of works of art also aesthetic flaws (or merits) in them? Consider Leni Riefenstahl's famous film, *Triumph of the Will*, which is a glowingly enthusiastic account of the 1934 Nuremberg Nazi Party rally. Is the film aesthetically flawed because of its advocacy of Hitler's cause? For it has frequently been denounced as bad art because of its message. Or is its immoral stance simply an irrelevance to its merit as a work of art? For many regard it as a good, even a great, work of art. Or is it in contrast a great work of art partly because of its immorality? For if great art disturbs and challenges our convictions, then this film could surely qualify as great art.

As the example illustrates, there are three plausible contending answers to our question. They will need refining later, but we can initially roughly characterize them as follows. Autonomism (or aestheticism) holds that ethical flaws or merits of works of art are never aesthetic flaws or merits in them: ethical assessment is irrelevant to aesthetic assessment. The other two views deny this claim of irrelevance, but differ as to how the ethical and aesthetic interrelate. Moralism (or ethicism) holds that works of art are always aesthetically bad in virtue of their ethical flaws. Contextualism, as I shall call it, holds that works of art are sometimes aesthetically good in virtue of their ethical flaws and sometimes aesthetically bad in virtue of them. The goal of this chapter is to establish which of these three views is correct.

Before proceeding, we need to clarify what counts as an ethical flaw in an artwork. Ethical flaws should not be understood in terms of the causal powers of works to affect audiences, since assessing this would be relevant chiefly to the causal question. Rather, we should understand flaws in terms of the intrinsic properties of works. We will characterize these flaws thus: a work is ethically flawed just in case it manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes. For instance, *Triumph of the Will* is ethically flawed because of the attitudes it displays of wholehearted approval of Hitler and Nazism. Its causal power to convert some audiences to Nazism is conceptually distinct from this (though of course this power partly rests on its intrinsic ethical flaws).