

# IN DEFENSE OF MODERATE AUTONOMISM: RAP MUSIC, PROPAGANDA, AND SERIAL KILLERS

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Do the moral qualities of an artwork affect our aesthetic judgment of it? Historically the moral and the aesthetic have been seen as connected. This view can be traced back at least as far as Plato, who believed that all art could be evaluated morally, and that the moral and aesthetic evaluations of a piece of art were deeply related. However, beginning in the nineteenth century a movement began that viewed the aesthetic and ethical as conceptually separate, giving birth to the predominant modern view that art should never be evaluated morally. More recently though, a number of philosophers have begun to argue for a shift back to the more historical view of art, where ethical and aesthetic considerations are, at least sometimes, treated as inseparable. One philosopher at the center of this new movement is Marcia Eaton, whose project in her newest book, *Merit, Aesthetic and Ethical*, is to defend the view that the aesthetic and the ethical are indeed importantly connected.

Although Eaton's recent book makes some important contributions to this debate, she ultimately fails to prove one of her main claims: that even the weakest forms of separatism are a mistake because the moral and the aesthetic cannot always be pried apart (i.e. *sometimes* the moral and the aesthetic cannot be pried apart). In this paper I will argue against Eaton's view, and show that a certain weak form of separatism—moderate autonomism—better explains the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. I will begin by first outlining two of the predominant positions in this debate: moderate moralism and moderate autonomism. Next, I will explain Eaton's position, and where it fits in this debate. Then I will raise objections to this view, and, using examples from propaganda art, rap music, and many other areas of art, show why Eaton's view is inadequate. I will conclude by showing why moderate autonomism escapes these criticisms, and better explains the relationship between ethics and aesthetics.

## The Debate

Art often has an intentional moral component. For example, most ancient art was religious, and in modern times, art has often been used as social criticism or political propaganda. From this apparent connection between some art and morality, many philosophers have

come to hold the extreme view that all art is open to moral evaluation. This view, which is most commonly referred to as moralism, argues that all art has a moral dimension, and that this moral dimension figures into our aesthetic evaluation of the artwork. However, since the nineteenth century, another view of art has come into conflict with this moral-centric view. This new view, which is usually referred to as autonomism (or separatism), argues at its extreme that the realms of art and morality are completely distinct, and thus, art (*qua* art) should never be evaluated on moral grounds.

Moralism and autonomism at their extremes are both seriously flawed, as I will soon show. In attempts to deal with these flaws, many philosophers have come to advocate variations of them. As a result, both moralism and autonomism now exist in a variety of forms. Two of these less extreme forms are moderate moralism and moderate autonomism.

Moderate moralism is the view that some art, but not all art, is morally accessible. Moderate moralists argue that clearly some art, like certain abstract paintings and classical music, cannot be evaluated morally, and thus, moralism at its extreme is flawed. However, they hold the view that much of art does have a moral dimension, and it is appropriate to evaluate this art morally. In other words, some art, because of the kind of art that it is, may be an appropriate object of moral evaluation.<sup>1</sup> Using this claim moderate moralists argue that sometimes a moral defect in an artwork can result in a negative aesthetic evaluation of that work.

For example, prominent moderate moralist Noël Carroll argues that an artwork with a morally inappropriate premise that prevents people from having the aesthetic experience the artist intends not only shows how connected the ethical and aesthetic aspects of a piece of artwork can be, but is also an example of a moral failure contributing to the aesthetic failure of a work. Carroll uses the novel

*American Psycho* by Brett Easton Ellis as an example of such a case. According to Carroll, Ellis intended his novel to be a political satire on the “rapacious eighties in the USA” in which he “presented a serial killer as the symbol of the vaunted securities marketeer of Reagonomics.”<sup>2</sup> However, many readers of Ellis’ novel were unable to get past the graphic brutality contained in the murders he depicted in order to appreciate the parody he had intended. Thus, Carroll notes, “*American Psycho*’s failure to achieve uptake as a satire is attributable to Ellis’ failure to grasp the moral inappropriateness of regarding his serial killer as comic.”<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, while moderate autonomism agrees with moderate moralism that some art can indeed be addressed from a moral

standpoint, it nonetheless argues that the aesthetic dimension of an artwork is always autonomous (and thus can be separated), from its moral dimension. Furthermore, although some artworks can be evaluated morally, this evaluation is never an aesthetic evaluation; that is, the moral evaluation of an artwork is irrelevant to the aesthetic evaluation of it. The result of this claim is that, for the moderate autonomist, a negative moral evaluation of an artwork never counts as an ipso facto negative aesthetic evaluation of the work. For example, in response to Noël Carroll's argument that a moral failure in a work can affect the aesthetic evaluation of that same artwork, James C. Anderson and Jeffrey T. Dean respond:

While ethical criticism of works of art is a legitimate activity, neither Gaut nor Carroll have succeeded in showing that the endorsement of an ethically reprehensible attitude entails that a work is in any sense aesthetically flawed. Moreover, that a work endorses ethically commendable attitudes does not entail that the work is to any degree aesthetically meritorious.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the main point of contention between the moderate moralist and the moderate autonomist is whether the aesthetic properties of an artwork are always separable from the moral properties of the piece, or if there are some cases in which these properties are inseparable. Furthermore, even if they are separable, there is the additional question of whether the moral evaluation of an artwork can ever affect its aesthetic evaluation, and vice versa. Moderate moralists argue that moderate autonomism is too strong of a view, and that there are some cases where a moral defect in a work amounts to an aesthetic defect. In those cases, a negative moral evaluation of a work will count negatively in aesthetic evaluations of the work.<sup>5</sup>

### **Marcia Eaton's View**

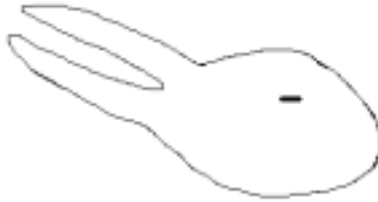
The main project of Marcia Eaton's recent book, *Merit, Aesthetic and Ethical*, is to argue that aesthetic activity is not isolated from all other activities (e.g., religious, scientific, moral, political) and thus, that it is a mistake for philosophers to view aesthetics as if it were always separable from the moral.<sup>6</sup> She writes:

Our experiences, our encounters with and in the world, and the decisions we make as a result do not typically come in separate packets, with the moral, aesthetic, economic, religious, political, scientific, and so on serving as viewing stands distanced from one another so that we look at the world first from one and then from another standpoint. I do not claim that aesthetic experiences or considerations are never separable from other sorts. What I insist is that it is not a requirement

of the aesthetic that all other interests or concerns are blocked off or out.<sup>7</sup>

In her new book, Eaton argues against all forms of separatism, including its weak forms like moderate autonomism.<sup>8</sup> To be successful in this project Eaton only has to prove that in some cases the aesthetic and ethical are inseparable. In other words, there must exist some cases in which the moral and the aesthetic aspects of a piece of art are one and the same, and thus, cannot be separated.

To clarify the distinction that she is trying to make, Eaton uses the example of the duck-rabbit figure.



She points out that some people will look at this figure and see a rabbit, and others will see a duck. Some people will look at this figure and will switch back and forth between seeing the duck and seeing the rabbit, but no one can see both a duck and a rabbit at the same time. Eaton argues that some separatists mistakenly believe that an analogous flipping of perspective is possible in our treatment of the aesthetic and moral aspects of a work of art. That is, we can always look at a piece of art and say, “aesthetically good”—shift—“morally bad”, or “aesthetically okay”—shift—“morally great.” This form of separatism argues that when we are shifted to the aesthetic aspects of the work, we are paying attention only to the intrinsic features of the work (a property is an intrinsic property if direct examination of the work is a necessary condition for verifying that the work has that property—shape, color, texture, taste, and smell are all intrinsic properties). Then, when we shift our attention to the moral aspects of the work, we will often take extrinsic properties into account (direct inspection is not necessary to verify an extrinsic property, e.g. where a piece of art was made, who the artist was, whether the artist was a murderer, etc.), in addition to just the intrinsic properties. For example, I can look at one of Gauguin’s paintings, and, attending only to the intrinsic properties such as the colors, the shapes, and so on, have an aesthetic experience of the work.<sup>9</sup> However, then I can shift and assess Gauguin morally (which requires me to include extrinsic considerations, such as his abandonment of his family in order to paint), but this type of assessment is different and distinct from the aesthetic assessment I just made. However, Eaton argues that this view is mistaken:

It is false that the intrusion of any other kind of consideration necessarily destroys or dilutes an aesthetic experience. Although attending to intrinsic features considered worthy of attention within a community that shares cultural traditions is a necessary and sufficient condition of aesthetic experience, it does not follow that attending to or reflecting upon other features at the same time dilutes or erases aesthetic experience. Thinking that it does is one version of the separatist mistake—one upon which is based the strong formalist view that insists that genuine aesthetic experience is necessarily devoid of any and all attention to features that go beyond an object's immediately presented properties.<sup>10</sup>

Eaton then introduces a weaker form of separatism, identical to the moderate autonomist view discussed above, which she also argues is wrong. Separatists of this type agree with Eaton that sometimes the aesthetic-ethical is not like the duck-rabbit, and that one might not be able to shift cleanly back and forth between the two as described above. However, unlike Eaton, they still insist that the aesthetic and ethical are entirely distinct and can always be pried apart. Put another way, this type of separatism agrees with Eaton that sometimes the aesthetic and ethical aspects of an artwork are assessed simultaneously, but differs with Eaton in claiming that these aspects are nonetheless entirely distinct. Eaton examines this view, but ultimately determines that it is flawed also:

Of course, on this view, one can see both that something is red and that it is tall at the same time, but nonetheless one can always think of the one property wholly independently of the other. Likewise, one might notice simultaneously that an action is graceful and evil, but one will be wholly able to abstract the gracefulness from the evilness. I believe that even this weaker version is wrong.<sup>11</sup>

Eaton makes this claim because she believes there are some cases in which we apply moral and aesthetic considerations simultaneously and inseparably (one such example is sentimentality, which will be discussed shortly).

In summary, the main point of contention between Eaton and moderate autonomists is Eaton's belief that we are sometimes unable to pry apart the aesthetic and ethical aspects of a piece, and further, that in some cases the aesthetic or ethical elements of a work necessarily influence our evaluations of elements of the other type. Thus, her view can be classified as a form of the moderate moralist position described above. In addition, it should be clarified that Eaton's project is also

broader than what is described above—this is just one of the many claims she makes in her book. However, I am focusing singly on this claim about moderate moralism because it underlies many of her other arguments and because this claim is at the center of one of the most heated debates taking place in aesthetics today.

Before I move to the objections to Eaton's view, it will be helpful to lay out an example that Eaton uses in an attempt to prove one of the claims that I am addressing: that the ethical and aesthetic cannot always be pried apart. This example is sentimentality. Eaton believes that examining the case of sentimentality brings to light the incorrectness of both the weak and strong separatist views. This is because when we use sentimentality to describe people or artworks we apply moral and aesthetic considerations simultaneously and inseparably.<sup>12</sup> That is, calling something sentimental requires attending to both the intrinsic properties of the work and moral principles (extrinsic properties) simultaneously. As Eaton argues:

One must know, for example, something about how people react to death or unrequited love before one can decide that these topics are being treated sentimentally in a song or novel, and this takes us beyond the song or novel *per se*. Moral uses of sentimental depend on what is typically taken to be aesthetic considerations, for attention must be given to intrinsic features—how something is done, as well as what is done.<sup>13</sup>

If the aesthetic and ethical were separable, as the separatist contends, two different sets of criteria would be involved in each sort of assessment. However, the discussion above shows that the aesthetic assessment of sentimentality is performed simultaneously and in necessary conjunction with the ethical assessment, and vice versa. Eaton believes this shows why separatism fails, because, as she argues, when we use sentimentality to describe a piece of art or a person we are making both an ethical and aesthetic assessment, and these assessments are inseparable.

In addition, Eaton believes the example of sentimentality illustrates how both the strong and the weak form of separatism get it wrong. She argues that this example shows that strong separatism is clearly wrong because we would have to be able to do something analogous to the duck-rabbit shift when attending to the moral and aesthetic properties of the work, and this is not possible since the very nature of sentimentality prevents it. More specifically, if the strong form of separatism were correct, we would never be able to notice

simultaneously that something is both morally sentimental and aesthetically sentimental. Furthermore, Eaton argues that the weak form of separatism is incorrect because, although it grants that simultaneity is possible, it still holds that it is possible to consider moral sentimentality wholly independently of aesthetic sentimentality and vice versa. To summarize the case of sentimentality, Eaton says:

If the aesthetic and the ethical were truly separate, then judging that something is aesthetically or ethically sentimental should involve two different meanings of the term, two different sets of criteria for application, or two different and separable ways of looking at something. A situation like seeing the famous duck-rabbit figure, where we can see either a duck or a rabbit but not both at the same time, should obtain. We should be able to see that something is ethically sentimental or aesthetically sentimental, but not as both simultaneously. However, in order to use ‘sentimental’, we have to look at all features of an object or situation at the same time.<sup>14</sup>

## **Objections**

Now that I have explained Marcia Eaton’s position, I will provide what I see as the strongest objections to her view. I will present four main objections. First, I will further discuss Eaton’s example of sentimentality and show why it does not prove the inseparability that she claims it does. Second, using examples from propaganda, rap music, and other forms of art, I will argue that Eaton has also failed to give us a clear example of when a moral flaw in an artwork will affect our aesthetic assessment or vice versa. Next, I will show why, even in the cases where it appears that our assessment of either the aesthetic or ethical is affecting our evaluation of the other, we are mistaken. Finally, I will argue that Eaton’s failure to provide criteria that will allow us to distinguish artworks where the ethical affects the aesthetic from those where it does not, points to the ultimate inadequacy of her theory. In raising these objections I will demonstrate why Eaton’s view—the view that moderate moralism best describes the connection between ethics and aesthetics—is flawed, and why moderate autonomism is a superior theory.

Eaton’s claim that the moral aspects of an artwork are sometimes inseparable from its aesthetic aspects and vice versa rests heavily on her discussion of sentimentality. However, I believe that her example of sentimentality, and a number of other examples that she uses, do not prove the inseparability that she claims they do.

Under closer examination, it becomes clear that all she has really proven with her example of sentimentality is that in English (and presumably in other languages) there are words that simultaneously address ethical and aesthetic aspects of artworks. However, the conclusion that she draws from this observation is much farther reaching: she claims that, “If the aesthetic and the ethical were truly separate, then judging that something is aesthetically or ethically sentimental should involve two different meanings of the term, two different sets of criteria for application, or two different and separable ways of looking at something.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, Eaton is arguing that the case of sentimentality proves not only that we sometimes attend to aesthetic and moral aspects of artworks simultaneously, which the weak separatist would not contest, but also that these aspects are inseparable from each other.

That is, she must demonstrate not just that we attend to these aspects simultaneously, but also that they are inseparable from each other. To prove inseparability though, she has to do more than prove that we sometimes use words that address a feature, or a combination of features, that can be both aesthetic and ethical at the same time. Instead, she needs to prove that it is impossible to talk about the ethical aspects of sentimentality separately from its aesthetic aspects, due to their intrinsic inseparability. However, she has not met this burden.

In fact, in her book, Eaton even does exactly what I have shown, on her view, it should be impossible to do: talk about the ethical aspects of sentimentality separate from its aesthetic aspects. For example, during her extensive discussion of sentimentality in Chapter 9, she lists the ethical features of sentimentality (e.g. compassionate, misrepresentative, unrealistic, etc.) and then the aesthetic features of sentimentality (e.g. insubstantial, trite tricks, stock descriptions, etc.), demonstrating that these two aspects are separable.<sup>16</sup> Thus, by providing these lists she concedes my very point: that the ethical aspects of sentimentality can be separated from the aesthetic aspects. To use another example from Eaton, when she talks about Charles Dickens’ description of the death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* she says it is aesthetically sentimental because it uses, “trite phrases, clichés, inflated vocabulary, stock metaphors, and more.” Then she says it is ethically sentimental because, among other things, it presents death in an unrealistic and deceptive way.<sup>17</sup> Thus again illustrating that these two aspects can be separated. In conclusion, as I have now shown, Eaton’s example of sentimentality fails because it only proves that there are words in the English language that address the ethical and aesthetic aspects of an artwork simultaneously, but as shown above, proves nothing about the inseparability, in principle, of

the aesthetic and ethical (on which her claim would rely).

Before I move to my next objection, it will be helpful for me to explain something about Eaton's position that I am now in a position to make more clear. As I have stated previously, Eaton's project is to show that the aesthetic and ethical are connected in important ways. To this end, Eaton asserts a two-part claim: 1) that the aesthetic and ethical aspects of an artwork are sometimes inseparable, and 2) that the moral failure or success of an artwork can contribute respectively to the aesthetic failure or success of that same work and vice versa. The first objection I raised demonstrated Eaton's failure to prove the first part of this claim. The objection I will turn to now will show how Eaton is also unable to prove the second part of this claim.

As stated above, a central part of Eaton's argument is that the moral failure or success of an artwork can contribute respectively to the aesthetic failure or success of that same work, and vice versa. If this is true, we should be able to find clear examples of each. However, I will show that Eaton is unable to give us any clear examples in which something like this actually takes place. Next, I will consider several examples in which Eaton's theory seems to suggest that a moral failure would contribute to an aesthetic failure, and, in showing that this does not actually take place, I will further impugn her claim.

The favorite example of Eaton and other moderate moralists (and even numerous extreme moralists) to show that a moral failure can contribute to an aesthetic failure is from Aristotle. Aristotle argued that for a tragedy to be successful, the major character has to be of a certain moral type. That is, if we are to pity her, she cannot be evil, because then we will regard any harm to her as deserved. However, she cannot be flawless either, because then the audience will be brought to outrage and not pity if she is harmed. Thus, for a tragedy to work, the major character must be somewhere in between these two extremes.<sup>18</sup> For a tragedy to succeed, according to Aristotle, it must be consistent with the correct moral principles.<sup>19</sup>

This example is used by many, including Eaton, to illustrate that if an artwork fails morally, this failure can also contribute to an aesthetic failure in the work. Noël Carroll summarizes the position he shares with Eaton:

In short, the playwright must bring a morally appropriate understanding of characters and situations to the composition of a drama. Where the playwright's understanding is defective, and where those defects are manifest in the composition of the drama, the drama will not elicit a morally appropriate response. The play will not secure tragic uptake

qua tragedy. This should count as an aesthetic defect, if anything does. But it is also a moral defect.<sup>20</sup>

However, I do not believe this example really shows what Eaton and Carroll want it to—that a work must embody the “correct moral principles” to succeed aesthetically. This failure is due to Eaton and Carroll’s equivocating use of the word “correct.” They ostensibly use “correct” to mean “morally good”; that is, that in order to succeed aesthetically, the work must embody “good” moral principles. However, under closer examination, it becomes clear that all “correct” can really mean in this example is that the embodied principles are consistent with the audience’s particular moral principles, which is clearly not the same thing as their being necessarily “good.” Indeed, it would be just as consistent with their argument for a morally atrocious movie to be received by an ethically bankrupt audience as an aesthetic success, despite its moral failings.

This counterexample is problematic for Eaton and Carroll because it shows that all their claim amounts to is simply that for an artwork to “work” (i.e., to do its job by being an aesthetic success), the content of the artwork cannot be completely inconsistent with the audience’s views and assumptions about the world (this is just to say that formalism is false). It does not show that for an artwork to be an aesthetic success it has to be a moral success. To use another example, a totally implausible science fiction novel, resting on incoherent science, would probably not be considered an aesthetic success, because it would contradict the audience’s understanding of science. More generally, failing to match the beliefs of one’s audience (whether those beliefs be moral, scientific, economic, etc.) can cause a piece of art to fail. Thus, Aristotle’s tragedy example does not get us any closer to the claim that the moral failure or success of an artwork can contribute respectively to the aesthetic failure or success of that same work and vice versa, because there exists no moral failure in the sense that Eaton and Carroll intend to prove. In short, they show only that failing to match the moral beliefs of your audience can aesthetically harm a work, which many separatists would not dispute.

Another example will help to clarify further why I do not believe the tragedy example has the same result as Eaton and Carroll argue it does. They want it to prove that when an artist gets the morals “wrong” in an artwork (i.e., when the artist’s moral assumptions about the audience are wrong, causing him to write a story that the audience will aesthetically reject because they morally disagree with it), that this shows a moral failure contributing to the aesthetic failure of a work. I believe this failure—getting the morals “wrong”—is really just an aesthetic failure of the work. Not knowing how to connect with one’s

audience, or how to push certain buttons in them, is an aesthetic failure. For example, when a speechwriter misjudges her audience and writes a speech that does not resonate with the values of her audience, and thus, that does not have the results the author intended, it is referred to as an aesthetic failure of the work, not a moral failure. Similarly, using the example of *American Psycho* again, Ellis' misjudgment (that graphically depicting brutal murders would be a good way to represent a parody about the eighties in the USA) seems to be an aesthetic flaw of the artwork.<sup>21</sup> That is, if he were writing for extremely violent people, the book might not be aesthetically flawed in this way, because very violent people would not be put off by violence and thus would be more likely to be able to appreciate the parody.

In addition to not being able to provide a persuasive example where the moral failure or success of an artwork contributes to the aesthetic failure or success of that same work, Eaton is also unable to show the reverse: that an aesthetic failure or success of an artwork can contribute to the moral failure or success of it. She attempts to prove this claim by showing that we learn moral lessons better from aesthetically successful pieces. Put another way, that the more aesthetically successful the piece is, the more likely we are to learn moral lessons from it. However, to say that an aesthetically good story will better teach us moral lessons is only to say that packaging matters, which is not a very contentious claim. Clearly aesthetically good pieces are more effective than aesthetically bad pieces at teaching all types of lessons, including morally bad ones (propaganda art illustrates this point well). What is contentious, and what Eaton fails to prove, is her jump from "packaging matters" to the claim that this somehow shows that an aesthetic success can lead to a moral success.

In other words, all Eaton has proven with her discussion of art's moral lessons is that, to use Eaton's own example, Watty Piper's children's story *The Little Engine That Could* will probably better teach children the simple moral lesson of "perseverance always wins" than a typed list of moral virtues that includes the statement: "Perseverance always wins."<sup>22</sup> However, the aesthetic success or failure of an artwork will still not make the morality of the artwork's message (if it contains one) better or worse, which is what seems should be the case if an artwork's aesthetic success will contribute to its moral success. Thus, Eaton seems to be alternating between two different meanings of the phrase "moral success": the moral goodness of the message put forth by the artwork, and the success of the artwork in teaching a moral message. To support her argument Eaton needs to prove "moral success" in the first sense of the phrase, but as I have shown, all she is able to prove is the latter.

Now I will consider several examples in which Eaton's theory would suggest that a moral failure should contribute to an aesthetic failure, but show that this does not actually take place, further calling into question the accuracy of her claim. However, in these examples I am going to explore only the possibility of moral failures contributing to aesthetic failures in artworks, because I believe if Eaton's view is correct these should be the easiest types of cases for her to find.

Leni Riefenstahl's famous film *Triumph of the Will* is a perfect example of an artwork that on Eaton's view should be an example of the moral failure of a work contributing to its aesthetic failure. This is because the film is widely considered to be aesthetically wonderful, yet morally reprehensible. As one critic put it, the film "embodies an overwhelming contradiction: it is cinematically dazzling and ideologically vicious."<sup>23</sup> This example creates three problems for Eaton's view.

First, even according to Eaton the moral failure of this work does not harm the aesthetics of it. She is able to make this claim because she argues that sometimes some people are able to separate the moral and aesthetic aspects of an artwork, while others are not. She argues that *Triumph of the Will* is one of these cases for most people. However, this seems to be a clear case of when a moral failure should contribute to the aesthetic failure of an artwork. In addition, further unseating Eaton's argument, many philosophers who share Eaton's view<sup>24</sup> disagree about how *Triumph of the Will* should be evaluated. For example, contrary to Eaton, Mary Devereaux argues that the moral failure of the film does contribute to its aesthetic failure.<sup>25</sup> This disagreement among moderate moralists indicates that (as I will soon argue) they cannot give a workable explanation of when the moral and aesthetic are separable. Lastly, propaganda art is altogether a problematic case for Eaton's view because of its very nature.<sup>26</sup> That is, often times with propaganda art, its success rests on its ability to create an aesthetically successful image of a morally reprehensible message.<sup>27</sup> Thus, it fails to be "good" or "successful" propaganda art if it is unable to be both an aesthetic success and a moral failure. Clearly then, *Triumph of the Will* and other successful propaganda art directly contradicts Eaton's argument.

In addition to propaganda, there are numerous other cases that illustrate the inadequacy of Eaton's view. For example, I believe many people (especially of my generation) would agree that you could find a rap song with morally reprehensible lyrics aesthetically pleasing. That is, many people enjoy music that we have no problem admitting we also find morally bad. A perfect illustration of this point is the music of rap artist Eminem. Eminem, who has won five Grammys and

numerous other awards for his music, is also widely recognized as not only promoting morally reprehensible views in the lyrics of his music (“Take drugs, rape sluts, make fun of gay clubs” is a typical line from one of his songs), but also being a contemptible person (in refusing to pay child support to his ex-wife, being sued by his mother, etc.). However, although people readily admit that he is a morally bad person whose art more often than not promotes morally bad messages, many also believe that this should have no bearing on the aesthetic assessment of his work—a claim that directly contradicts Eaton’s view.

Cathedrals, pyramids, the majority of Renaissance Art, and a great deal of classical literature also create the same problem as described above. That is, in each of these cases people clearly separate their moral evaluation from their aesthetic evaluation. For example, there are atheists who enjoy cathedrals architecturally and opponents of slavery who still find the pyramids beautiful. In addition, there are good-looking people who are evil, and there could be beautiful photographs or paintings of moral monsters. Thus, if Eaton admits that in so many cases we can separate the moral and the aesthetic and say that they have no influence on one another, why does she argue that we cannot do this all the time?

I believe Eaton cannot adequately answer this question because something else is actually going on. That is, in the cases where Eaton believes a moral failure is contributing to an aesthetic failure or vice versa, a more accurate description is just that one of these aspects is actually overshadowing the other aspects. More specifically, I believe there is something going on when we evaluate these artworks that is similar to what we do when we buy a car. For example, when I am car shopping, I evaluate the safety, cost, aesthetics, environmental friendliness, and a number of other qualities of the cars I am seeing. Then I decide which car scores the highest on the scales that matter most to me. That is, a car could be a 2 on the aesthetics scale but a 10 on the environmental friendliness scale and I would decide to buy it because the environmental friendliness of a car is the most important factor to me. Thus, all of these aspects—the cost, aesthetics, and so on—will weigh in on my decision to buy a certain car, but I consider each of them separately, and further, my evaluation of one does not affect my evaluation of the others.

I believe that what I have described above is a much more plausible explanation of what we do when we evaluate artworks than what Eaton says we do. Eaton says that in some cases the moral qualities of an artwork actually affect the aesthetic qualities of an artwork, but that we cannot say when, where, why, or exactly how this happens. I think it is far more plausible that what is actually happening

is that in some cases we let considerations besides aesthetics affect our overall assessment of artworks and confuse this with our aesthetic assessment changing. That is, the immorality of a particular work does not actually affect the work's aesthetic quality, but it does affect my overall assessment of the work. Thus, a painting might separately score an 8 in aesthetics and a 3 in morality, but one score does not affect the other, and my overall assessment takes account of these scores to varying degrees.

This leads into my fourth objection, namely that it is a serious failing of Eaton's view that she cannot provide us with any criteria for how to distinguish cases where separatism is necessary for evaluating the artwork (like *Triumph of the Will*), from cases where separatism is not possible. Eaton argues that this distinction is all relative; that is, that it all depends on the person attending to the artwork. For example, when watching *Triumph of the Will*, she can separate the ethical and the aesthetic aspects of the work, while a person who is a survivor of Auschwitz may not be able to. This admission seriously harms her argument, because it completely leaves it up to the individual to decide when separatism is necessary and when it is not. Thus, the result of this relativism can be none other than moderate autonomism (or what Eaton calls weak separatism), the very thing that her project was designed to deny. By making this admission of separatist relativism, her claim essentially becomes: in some cases, for some people, separatism is not possible. The moderate autonomist now has two possible responses to Eaton's argument, both of which seem to make her position fail. First, the moderate autonomist could say, "Well for me it is always possible to separate the aesthetic and the ethical and now, even your view allows this, so I am justified in my position that I am always able to separate the aesthetic from the ethical." Or, the moderate autonomist could argue that even if Eaton's claim is only that in some cases, for some people, separatism is not possible, is it not more likely that these select people are simply mistaken, than that separatism does not always work?

Noël Carroll tries to correct this problem by arguing that even if a moral failing does not entail an aesthetic failing for some people, it will in morally sensitive people, and thus all that is necessary to show that a work's moral failure contributes to its aesthetic failure is to have the "right" people attend to it: "The work is flawed if it contains a failure in moral perspective that a morally sensitive audience could detect, such that that discovery would compromise the effect of the work on its own terms."<sup>28</sup> However, as Matthew Kieran points out, Carroll's attempt to solve this problem of lacking separatism criteria also fails, because it results in Carroll's view having a much stronger consequence than he

(or Eaton) intends. By arguing that if a morally sensitive audience can detect a moral flaw in a work, then that flaw will influence the aesthetic success of the work for that audience (and thus the artwork contains a moral failure that contributes to its aesthetic failure), his position turns into a form of ethicism (or extreme moralism)—holding that any moral flaw in a work will constitute an aesthetic flaw.<sup>29</sup> That is, by admitting that whether a moral failure contributes to an aesthetic failure depends on the audience, Carroll opens the door to ethicism when artworks are evaluated by extremely morally sensitive people for whom any moral failure leads to an aesthetic failure. Thus, unless Carroll is willing to say that some people are too morally sensitive (and give us a definition of who those people are), his view turns into ethicism.

But this is a position that by Carroll's own admission is flawed.<sup>30</sup>

By raising these objections I believe I have shown why Marcia Eaton's view is flawed, and why moderate autonomism is a superior theory. However, although I believe her view ultimately fails, there are still reasons why Eaton's view is attractive. First, intuitively her position seems to reflect the way we sometimes talk about art. That is, sometimes, the way we talk makes it seem like we are letting the moral aspects of an artwork affect our aesthetic evaluation of it. For example, we hear people all the time say things like, "I just don't know how anyone could ever call pornography art; it has no aesthetic value." However, as I have shown above, when we say things like this we are actually letting our evaluation of one aspect of a piece override the other in our ultimate appraisal (in this case, the moral evaluation is overriding the aesthetic evaluation).

Eaton's view is also attractive because aesthetics and ethics, as Eaton has shown, use similar skills. Thus, Eaton's position seems to help explain why we so often transfer skills back and forth between the two disciplines. Furthermore, intuitively we seem to want certain things to be incapable of achieving beauty, e.g., murder and rape.<sup>31</sup> Eaton's view makes allowances for these cases by allowing for one aspect of an artwork to influence our evaluation of another aspect. However, although in these cases Eaton's view may again fit with our intuitions, I have shown above that in cases like these, we are actually just letting our evaluation of one element of a work override the others at the level of our overall impression. Clearly Eaton's view is attractive for many reasons. However, because of the numerous objections that I have discussed above, her argument remains unconvincing, and I believe that a view like moderate autonomism better accounts for the relationship between aesthetics and ethics.

In conclusion, my project in this paper has been to show that Marcia Eaton's view is inadequate and that a weak form of separatism,

moderate autonomism, better explains the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. I began by outlining two of the predominant positions in this debate: moderate moralism and moderate autonomism. Next, I explained Marcia Eaton's position and where it fits into this debate. I then raised objections to this view, showing why Eaton's view is inadequate through examples from many types of art, including propaganda art and rap music. Finally, I argued that a position that can account for the moral assessment of artworks but also holds that this assessment is always separate from the aesthetic assessment of the work is superior. Ultimately, the attractiveness of Eaton's theory is overwhelmed by the objections she has left unanswered.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Noël Carroll, "Morality and Aesthetics: Historical and Conceptual Overview," Encyclopedia of Aesthetics, ed. Michael Kelly, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), p. 281.
- <sup>2</sup> Noël Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," British Journal of Aesthetics 36.3 (1996), p. 232.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> James C. Anderson and Jeffrey T. Dean, "Moderate Autonomism," British Journal of Aesthetics 38.2 (1998), p. 152.
- <sup>5</sup> Carroll, "Morality and Aesthetics: Historical and Conceptual Overview," p. 281.
- <sup>6</sup> Marcia Muelder Eaton, Merit, Aesthetic and Ethical (New York: Oxford UP, 2001), p. 57.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 62.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 115.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 11 and 46.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 64.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 129.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 120.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 124 and 125.
- <sup>18</sup> Carroll, "Morality and Aesthetics: Historical and Conceptual Overview," p. 282.
- <sup>19</sup> Marcia Muelder Eaton, "Morality and Aesthetics: Contemporary Aesthetics and Ethics," Encyclopedia of Aesthetics, ed. Michael Kelly, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), p. 282.
- <sup>20</sup> Carroll, "Morality and Aesthetics: Historical and Conceptual Overview," p. 282.

- <sup>21</sup> I would not disagree that this could be a moral flaw of the novel at the same time. However, as shown above, this does not imply either that the aesthetic and ethical are inseparable in this case, or that a moral failure is contributing to an aesthetic failure (simultaneity does not imply inseparability).
- <sup>22</sup> Marcia Muelder Eaton, "Merit, Aesthetic and Ethical," p. 139.
- <sup>23</sup> Richard Meran Barsam, Filmguide to Triumph of the Will, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1975), pp. 17-18.
- <sup>24</sup> Or hold views very similar to Eaton's, e.g. Noël Carroll, Mary Devereaux, Berys Gaut, etc.
- <sup>25</sup> Mary Devereaux, "Beauty and evil: the case of Leni Riefenstahl's Triumph of the Will," Aesthetics and Ethics, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), pp. 227-257.
- <sup>26</sup> Toby Clark, Art and Propaganda in the Twentieth Century: The Political Image in the Age of Mass Culture, New York: Abrams, 1997, pp. 7-15 and 49.
- <sup>27</sup> Of course propaganda can also be put to good uses, but my focus here is how it can be put to bad uses.
- <sup>28</sup> Noël Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," p. 234.
- <sup>29</sup> Matthew Kieran, "In Defence of the Ethical Evaluation of Narrative Art," British Journal of Aesthetics 41.1 (2001), pp. 29-30.
- <sup>30</sup> Noël Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," p. 229.
- <sup>31</sup> One might also object to the very idea of evaluating these things aesthetically at all. It seems like although we "can" evaluate certain things aesthetically (including the examples above), we shouldn't.

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