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Fatal Prescription¹

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1. Introduction

Do an artwork's ethical properties determine its aesthetic ones? Berys Gaut's 'ethicism' is by far the most sophisticated answer to date. Ethicism says that when they are aesthetically relevant, an artwork's ethical merits always contribute positively to the work's aesthetic value, and its relevant ethical flaws likewise contribute negatively. We must be careful with this claim. It is *not* the claim that aesthetically relevant ethical merits always make the work aesthetically better overall and ethical flaws make it aesthetically worse overall. Rather, it is the claim that relevant ethical merits add, and ethical flaws subtract, something of aesthetic value from the work, regardless of the overall effect of their inclusion.²

Gaut offers three arguments for ethicism. The most influential is the 'Merited Response Argument' (MRA):

Ethicism concerns the intrinsic ethical defects of an artwork; these are ethical defects in the attitude that a work manifests. A work's

¹ Thanks to audiences at the annual meetings of the British Society of Aesthetics (2016), American Society for Aesthetics (2016), and UNAM's Instituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas. Thanks also to Adriana Clavel-Vázquez, Dan Jacobson, Andrew Stephenson, Lee Walters, and two anonymous referees.

² Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

attitude is standardly manifested in prescribing certain responses towards the events it describes. Prescribed responses are not always merited. One way in which they can be unmerited is in being unethical. If the prescribed responses are unmerited, that is a failure of the work; so, if the prescribed responses are unmerited, because unethical, that is a failure in the work. What responses the work prescribes is of aesthetic relevance. So, if the prescribed responses are unmerited because unethical, that is an aesthetic failure of the work—that is to say, is an aesthetic defect in it. So a work's manifestation of ethically bad attitudes in its prescribed responses is an aesthetic defect in it. *Mutatis mutandis*, a parallel argument shows that a work's manifestation of ethically commendable attitudes in its prescribed responses is an aesthetic merit in it.³

Take comedy:

a comedy presents certain events as funny (prescribes a humorous response to them), but, if this involves being amused at heartless cruelty, then the work is not funny or at least its humour is flawed, and that is an aesthetic defect in it.⁴

³ Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 233.

⁴ *Ibid.*

The idea is simple. Artworks often try to elicit responses from audiences. For example, take Ridley Scott's *The Martian*, a Robinsonade tale about astronaut Mark Watney (played by Matt Damon) stranded on Mars and engineering his own survival. The film is watchable enough—well produced, acted, and visually arresting. Yet it suffers an irritating flaw: Watney is too damn buoyant. Stuck, literally millions of miles from home, with too little food, no company, and bleak prospects for safe return, he tackles each new mortal challenge with a can-do optimism totally out of keeping with his existential emergency. So, when Watney tells his video diary that 'In the face of overwhelming odds, I'm left with only one option: I'm gonna have to science the shit out of this', or 'I'm going to be taking a craft over in [technically] international waters without permission, which by definition makes me a pirate. Mark Watney: Space Pirate.' I have to suppress a little vomit. This is because, as I see it, the film tries *way* too hard to make the audience love Watney. *The Martian*, does not earn our love for Mark Watney so much as strongarm it out of us.

Perhaps you disagree and find my take on Mark Watney snobbish or unconvincing. That is fine. The particular example is not important. Rather, what matters is the general phenomenon I claim *The Martian* exhibits. A less controversial example is *Birdemic: Shock and Terror*, whose attempt to elicit fear misfires so excruciatingly, it might as well be a

parody. ‘Trying too hard’ and ‘misfiring’ are descriptions we often use, like ‘sentimental’ or ‘overwrought’, to describe a type of aesthetic flaw in which works unsuccessfully prescribe a particular response to their audience. Another way to put the same point is that the response the work prescribes—love for Watney—is unwarranted, or unmerited. That is, there is an aesthetically relevant reason *not* to respond as the work calls for. MRA assumes that when works prescribe unmerited responses, this is an aesthetic flaw.

Sometimes, according to MRA, responses a work prescribes are unmerited because they are unethical. This operates in the same way as the failure in *The Martian*. Take the *African Renaissance Monument*, a 49-meter tall, bronze, social realist statue outside Dakar, Senegal. It depicts a bare-chested, cartoonishly muscular man thrusting forwards majestically. A scantily clad woman is heaved along by his right arm, while his left holds aloft an infant boy pointing forwards. The sculpture clearly prescribes a certain awe and pride (in Senegalese and perhaps African audiences in particular). But the misogynistic handling frustrates this goal; the piece relegates the depicted woman to serving as vaguely pornographic adornment in a narrative that centres the man and his boy. If it merits any response, it is not awe but the world’s hardest eye-roll. The ethical failure therefore undermines the response the work prescribes. So, according to MRA, prescribed responses can be unmerited because unethical, and thus generate an aesthetic flaw.

Good deductive arguments have at least three virtues. They are valid, the premises are all true (when both of these obtain, they are of course sound), and they show something interesting. I argue that an ambiguity in ‘prescribe’ poses a trilemma for MRA.⁵ Either MRA uses ‘prescribe’ univocally, equivocally, or to combine two meanings at once. If ‘prescribe’ is univocal, then it is valid, but unsound. If it means two different things at different times, MRA is invalid. And if it means both things at once then, while it is sound, it is no longer interesting; it fails to show any interesting relation between ethical properties and aesthetic value in artworks. More than this, the arguments I give also show why the argument underlying Noël Carroll’s ‘moderate moralism’ also fails to show any interesting relation. Since Gaut’s and Carroll’s arguments are, if not the only, then at least the most load-bearing columns in the moralist edifice, this paper takes a wrecking ball to moralism more broadly.

I begin by laying out MRA in the context of what has been called the ‘*qua* problem’. This may seem an odd strategy, since this paper is not about the *qua* problem. However, I do things this way for three reasons. First, the criticism I make of MRA is essentially a meaner-looking cousin of the *qua* problem. Second, some of the arguments I support my central claim with draw on the same insight behind the *qua* problem; discussing the problem, therefore, allows me to motivate this insight. Third, it

⁵ Gaut has been accused of equivocating before, but on the term ‘merited’. See, for instance, Daniel Jacobson, ‘In Praise of Immoral Art’, *Philosophical Topics* (1997), 155-199. The ambiguity I identify is distinct from this one, even though they make interesting points of contact.

provides a rhetorically convenient way to lay out MRA in the kind of detail needed for the later arguments. With that, let us begin.

2. The Merited Response Argument

Daniel Jacobson, focussing on flaws (as I do),⁶ in criticizing MRA, helpfully schematizes it:

- (A) Immoral art expresses an unethical perspective, which involves calling for attitudes and feelings it would be wrong to have, even in imagination (call these ‘unethical responses’).
- (B) Unethical responses are never merited.
- (C) It is an aesthetic flaw for a work of art to call for an unmerited response.
- (D) Therefore, immoral art is aesthetically flawed.⁷

⁶ I assume throughout that what applies to ethical and aesthetic flaws applies *mutatis mutandis* to ethical and aesthetic merits. For brevity, I focus on flaws; nothing hangs on this.

⁷ Daniel Jacobson, ‘In Praise of Immoral Art’, *Philosophical Topics* (1997), 155-199, at 170.

Notice that MRA here only concludes that unethical art is aesthetically flawed and not, as Gaut requires, that it is aesthetically flawed *qua* unethical. Another property coinciding with the immorality may explain the flaw. Indeed, this worry has been raised against Noël Carroll's 'moderate moralism', ethicism's cousin. Adapting Jacobson's gloss on MRA, Carroll argues as follows:⁸

- (A) Immoral art expresses an unethical perspective, which involves calling for attitudes and feelings it would be wrong to have, even in imagination (call these unethical responses).
- (B) Unethical responses sometimes frustrate psychological uptake—that is, they prevent audiences from responding as called to.
- (C) It is an aesthetic flaw for a work to fail to secure the psychological uptake of a response for which it calls.
- (D) Therefore, immoral art is sometimes aesthetically flawed.⁹

⁸ Carroll gives a causal and, in later work, a constitutive version of this argument. I lay out the causal one here, though note that both versions succumb to my argument against MRA. Some claim the constitutive argument collapses moderate moralism into ethicism (e.g. Oliver Connolly, 'Ethicism and Moderate Moralism', *BJA* (2000, 302-316, at 306-307), but the views differ at least in scope.

⁹ Noël Carroll, 'Moderate Moralism', *BJA* (1996), 223-238.

Authors including Gaut have criticized Carroll for failing to show that works are aesthetically flawed *qua* unethical.¹⁰ In Gaut's words, 'what is aesthetically wrong with the work is that it fails to secure psychological uptake in its audience, not that it is morally defective'.¹¹ The idea is that even if immorality helps make a work aesthetically defective, it only does so via a further property—failure to secure uptake—which *truly* explains the aesthetic flaw; the work's immorality is explanatorily redundant. For comparison, consider the case in which I trigger a motion sensor while dancing the Macarena. If one wanted to explain why the sensor was triggered, strictly speaking, one would cite my movement, not my dancing specifically, and certainly not my dancing the Macarena, even though dancing the Macarena was my way of moving. That is, it is *qua* moving, not *qua* moving *à la Macarena* that one explains the sensor's triggering.

¹⁰ Louise Hanson is cited as introducing the name during a 2013 talk in Noël Carroll, 'Defending the Content Approach to Aesthetic Experience', *Metaphilosophy* (2015), 171-188, at 184n. The original argument appears in 'Moderate Moralism Versus Moderate Autonomism', *BJA* (1998), 419-424, and is fully worked out in James Anderson and Jeffrey Dean, 'Moderate Autonomism', *BJA* (1998), 150-166. It is also endorsed by Matthew Kieran, 'In Defence of the Ethical Evaluation of Art', *BJA* (2001), 26-38 and Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 234. Francisca Perez-Carreño, 'El Valor Moral del Arte y la Emoción', *Crítica* (2006), 69-92 mobilizes a general *qua* problem with respect to works striving for verisimilitude.

¹¹ Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 229.

Similarly, while being unethical is a work's way of frustrating uptake, it is the frustrated uptake that explains the aesthetic flaw. The immorality is explanatorily redundant.¹²

This is the so-called '*qua*' problem. To see whether it afflicts MRA, one must outline the argument more carefully than above:

For any work *w*,

- (1) If *w* prescribes an unethical response, it manifests an unethical attitude.¹³
- (2) If *w* manifests an unethical attitude, it is ethically flawed.
- (3) If *w* prescribes an unethical response, it is ethically flawed (from 1, 2).
- (4) If *w* prescribes an unethical response, it prescribes an unmerited response.
- (5) If *w* prescribes an unmerited response, it is aesthetically flawed.
- (6) If *w* prescribes an unethical response, it is aesthetically flawed (from 4, 5).

¹² See Brian Weatherson, 'Explanation, Idealisation, and the Goldilocks Problem', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (2012), 461-473 for insightful discussion from a different literature.

¹³ Gaut also requires that the response be prescribed *by artistic means*. I have left this qualification out for presentational ease.

- (7) If *w* prescribes an unethical response, it is ethically and aesthetically flawed (from 3, 6).

Clearly, MRA does suffer from the *qua* problem. Notice that it is not *qua* manifesting an unethical attitude, nor even *qua* prescribing an unethical response, that a work is aesthetically marred, but *qua* prescribing an unmerited response. In other words, though prescribing an unethical response may be an artwork's way of prescribing an unmerited response, it is the response's unmeritedness that explains the aesthetic flaw.

Gaut has an explanation for why his ethicism avoids the *qua* problem, while Carroll's moderate moralism succumbs to it. Moderate moralism, he says, relates the ethical and aesthetic flaws causally, whereas ethicism relates them constitutively. If I smash a window by throwing a rock, then my throwing the rock causes the window's smashing. But if I make a house out of wood, it is not as though the wood *causes* the house. Rather, it *constitutes* the house. Similarly, Gaut thinks, moderate moralism claims that the ethical flaw causes the failure of uptake, the aesthetic flaw. While, according to ethicism, the ethical flaw constitutes the aesthetic flaw. As he puts it, 'ethical demerits *are*, when manifested in prescribed responses, aesthetic demerits in works'.¹⁴ Gaut does not argue much for this claim,

¹⁴ Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 234.

except to point out that being unethical is one way responses can be unmerited (which, when prescribed, are aesthetic flaws):

We have seen that a work's prescribing an unmerited response is an aesthetic defect in the work. A prescribed response can be unmerited because unethical: being unethical is one way of being unmerited. Hence a work's prescribing an unethical response is an aesthetic defect in the work. Ethical defects in works are under these conditions aesthetic defects in them.¹⁵

One might read this claim, that ethical defects 'are' aesthetic defects, as an identity claim, in something like the way that being a polygon with exactly three sides is identical to being a polygon with exactly three internal angles. But if, as Gaut says, being unethical is a way for a response to be unmerited, it does not follow that being an unethical response and being an unmerited response are identical. Being in Oaxaca is a way of being in Mexico, but so is being in Tijuana. Since identity is symmetrical and transitive, it would follow that being in Oaxaca is the same as being in Tijuana, an insult to Oaxaqueños everywhere. Perhaps the identity Gaut has in mind is token identity rather than type identity. On this view, it is not that unethical prescriptions are the same thing as unmerited

¹⁵ Ibid.

prescriptions but that some (indeed, any, if Gaut is right) particular unethical prescription is also an unmerited prescription. But this does not help either. Some dances of the Macarena are also triggerings of motion sensors, but this just tells us that some token movements have two properties—instantiating the Macarena and triggering a sensor—not that these properties bear any interesting relation. So Gaut needs a relation other than identity.

Perhaps the claim is rather that prescribing an unethical response suffices metaphysically for—fully grounds—being aesthetically flawed. This is better. But it will not quite do either; first, it is *qua* manifesting unethical attitudes, not *qua* prescribing unethical responses, that works are unethical, even if manifesting attitudes, in Gaut’s words, ‘standardly’ results from prescribing responses.¹⁶ So, the ethical and aesthetic flaws, as it were, sit at the end of distinct branches of an explanatory tree; the tree’s trunk is the prescription of an unethical response; on one branch, this leads to the manifesting of an unethical attitude, the ethical flaw; on another branch, this leads to the prescribing of an unmerited response, the aesthetic flaw. It is not that one flaw explains the other, but that they

¹⁶ Gaut thereby recognizes that the two notions come apart. In principle, prescribing a response is not necessary for manifesting an attitude.

share a common explanation.¹⁷ Most plausibly, however, prescribing an unethical response does not even suffice for manifesting an unethical attitude.¹⁸ But even granting that prescribing an unethical response suffices for both flaws, this does not show that any work is aesthetically flawed *qua* unethical.

No doubt one might produce other responses to the *qua* problem on Gaut's behalf, and certainly other problems loom.¹⁹ Nevertheless, these are made immaterial by my next argument, which shows why even two flaws rooted in a common explanation are not necessarily related in any interesting way (and thus why a defence Carroll gives for moderate moralism—namely, that both flaws are explained by a common reason²⁰—does not work either). In short, the next argument shows why the *qua* problem, or something like it, runs deeper than moralists have supposed: their arguments leave a yawning chasm between the aesthetic and ethical.

¹⁷ Compare 'branching' accounts in Scott Clifton, 'Non-Branching Moderate Moralism', *Philosophia* (2014), 95-111.

¹⁸ _____.

¹⁹ I show these in _____.

²⁰ Noël Carroll, 'Moderate Moralism', *BJA* (1996), 223-238, at 235-236; Adriana Clavel-Vázquez, 'Rethinking Autonomism: Beauty in a World of Moral Anarchy', *Philosophy Compass* (2018), 1-10, at 4-5.

MRA has two strands, premises 1-3 and premises 4-6. 1-3 connect the prescription with the ethical flaw. 4-6 connect it with the aesthetic flaw. But not even this common feature that suffices for both flaws shows that they are interestingly related. To use the earlier metaphor, it is not just that MRA places the ethical and aesthetic flaws on distinct branches; it places them on different trees.

To see this, consider an illustratively bad argument that parallels MRA. Call it 'MRfAiI'.

For any work *w*,

- (1') If *w* has the compound property advocating-genocide-and-containing-nothing-of-interest, it advocates something unethical.
- (2') If *w* advocates something unethical, it is ethically flawed.
- (3') If *w* advocates genocide and contains nothing of interest, it is ethically flawed (from 1', 2').
- (4') If *w* advocates genocide and contains nothing of interest, it is pointlessly dull.
- (5') If *w* is pointlessly dull, it is aesthetically flawed.
- (6') If *w* advocates genocide and is pointlessly dull, it is aesthetically flawed (from 4', 5').
- (7') If *w* advocates genocide and is pointlessly dull, it is ethically and aesthetically flawed (from 3', 6')

Obviously, this argument does not establish that an ethical flaw is in any sense an aesthetic flaw. While the compound property advocating-genocide-and-containing-nothing-of-interest suffices for both flaws in common, it does not show any interesting relation between them, let alone that such a work is aesthetically flawed *qua* unethical. This is because the property is a totally arbitrary combination, or conjunction, of two distinct properties. And each of those distinct properties—each conjunct—explains just one of the two flaws. In what follows, I show that if MRA is sound, then it must rely on a similar, though less obvious, compound property. Thus, it fails exactly like MRfAil.²¹

3. Ambiguities

The term ‘prescribe’ in MRA either means the same thing throughout, means two different things in different premises, or means both things throughout. Either way, it fails to establish ethicism. Specifically,

²¹ This is best case scenario, since even if p grounds r and q grounds s it need not be that $(p \ \& \ q)$ grounds $(r \ \& \ s)$, as grounding is non-monotonic, Gideon Rosen, ‘Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction’, *Modality: Metaphysics, Logic, and Epistemology*, Ed, Bob Hale and Aviv Hoffmann, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 109-136, at 116-117.

‘prescribe’ can mean *attempt to elicit*, *endorse*, or both. I explain these terms now.

A work attempts to elicit a response by presenting it as appropriate within the context of appreciating the work by means of its design and content.²² For instance, when Lady Bracknell remarks to Jack in Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* ‘To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness’ (Wilde 2008/1895, 361), the play attempts to elicit laughter from readers. As described above, often such attempts fail; jokes can be unfunny, car-chases unexciting, romance ruined by stilted writing, etc. In such cases, works still attempt to elicit responses despite not meriting them.²³

A work endorses a response, by contrast, when it presents the response as appropriate to actual entities relevantly like those depicted. So, for instance, Käthe Kollwitz’s lithograph *Not* (‘need’, ‘distress’), a harrowing depiction of a dying child and a helpless family, does not merely attempt to elicit sympathy for the people depicted; it also enjoins audiences to feel sympathy for actual people suffering similar tragedies.

²² ‘The depicted *x*’ is ambiguous between (a) the thing depicted *as* depicted and (b) the actual thing, if anything, being depicted. I intend (a).

²³ See (____ _).

To use Tamar Gendler's term, endorsing a response involves asking appreciators to 'export' their response to the actual world.²⁴

On the one hand, a work's endorsing a response, attitude, or perspective is a wholly familiar and straightforward idea; propagandistic and didactic artworks paradigmatically endorse in the sense intended. The idea is so straightforward, indeed, that the term even features without comment in such practical venues as the British Board of Film Classification's classification guidelines.²⁵ Yet, considered more carefully, what exactly presenting a response or attitude or perspective for 'export' consists in is an interesting question. A little later, I offer two ways of understanding endorsement. But the familiar idea will do for now.

Returning to MRA, (1) and thus (3), I argue, are true only if 'prescribe' means *endorse* or something that entails it. These are the ethical premises, connecting a work's prescribing an unethical response to its being ethically flawed. And (4) and thus (6) are true only if 'prescribe' means or entails *attempt to elicit*. These are the aesthetic premises, connecting a work's prescribing an unethical response to its being aesthetically flawed. The idea is simple: endorsing gets one the ethical but not the aesthetic flaw, while attempting to elicit gets one the aesthetic but

²⁴ Tamar Szabo Gendler, 'The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance', *Journal of Philosophy* (2000), 55-81.

²⁵ British Board of Film Classification, 'BBFC Classification Guidelines', London: British Board of Film Classification, 2019, 22, 24.

not the ethical flaw. Therefore, on either reading of ‘prescribe’, some premises are false, meaning the argument is unsound. And if ‘prescribe’ is read differently in different premises to preserve their truth, then the argument is no longer valid, and is thus also unsound. MRA is sound only if ‘prescribe’ means or entails endorse *and* attempt to elicit. But if ‘prescribe’ means both, then the relation it shows between any artwork’s ethics and its aesthetics is as trivial as the one established by MRfAil: one could in principle show such a relation between any two kinds of property picked at random. To see why, one must first clarify another expression: ‘unethical response’.

First, ‘unethical’ in ‘unethical response’ predicates the response, not necessarily the prescription, let alone the work, just as ‘malty’ predicates the beer served, but not its serving, let alone its server. That a work prescribes an unethical response does not entail conceptually that the prescription or the work is unethical (nor metaphysically, as I show).

Second, ‘unethical response’, like ‘prescribe’, is ambiguous. Call a response to an object ‘actually unethical’ if having that response to that object is unethical, plain and simple. For example, being amused at someone’s decapitation is actually unethical. Call a response to an object ‘counterfactually unethical’ if having that response to that object *would* be unethical were the object actual. For example, being amused at depicted

decapitation is counterfactually unethical, since it would be actually unethical were the depicted capitation actual.²⁶

I begin with the most straightforward case: the ethical premises. Consider (1) again:

(1) If *w* prescribes an unethical response, it manifests an unethical attitude.

(1) is false if ‘prescribe’ means ‘attempt to elicit’. To show this, one must show its falsehood on both readings of ‘unethical response’. I will do so with counterexamples.

If ‘unethical’ is counterfactual, then (1) is false because, while actual decapitation would make amusement inappropriate and outrage appropriate, this is not true for all depicted decapitations. In a horror

²⁶ The distinction echoes that between attempting to elicit and endorsing. Compare similar distinctions in Amy Mullin, ‘Moral Defects, Aesthetic Defects, and the Imagination’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (2004), 249-261, at 253; Alessandro Giovannelli, ‘The Ethical Criticism of Art: A New Mapping of the Territory’, *Philosophia* (2007), 117-127, at 126; Shen-yi Liao, ‘Moral Persuasion and the Diversity of Fictions’, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* (2013), 269-289, at 272; Scott Clifton, ‘Non-Branching Moderate Moralism’, *Philosophia* (2014), 95-111, at 100; and Adriana Clavel-Vázquez, ‘Rethinking Autonomism: Beauty in a World of Moral Anarchy’, *Philosophy Compass* (2018), 1-10, at 6.

comedy, for instance, moral outrage at depicted decapitation is (usually) inappropriate and amusement appropriate.²⁷ A horror comedy attempting to elicit such a counterfactually unethical response, therefore, need manifest no (actually) unethical attitude.²⁸

If ‘unethical’ is actual, (1) is also false. Some artworks attempt to elicit actually unethical responses to reveal how appreciators are susceptible to so responding. I call these ‘seductive works’. Ethically seductive works constitutively attempt to elicit an actually unethical first-order response in order to attempt to elicit and endorse a second-order response repudiating the first-order one, as when a work attempts to elicit amusement at suffering in order to attempt to elicit and endorse shame about that amusement, thereby manifesting an ethically good attitude. While bungling seductive works might deserve ethical criticism for attempting to elicit the first-order response ineptly, sophisticated ones do not.²⁹ So, understanding ‘prescribe’ as attempt to elicit, however one

²⁷ Shen-yi Liao, ‘Moral Persuasion and the Diversity of Fictions’, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* (2013), 269-289, at 277-278.

²⁸ Saving (1) by claiming horror comedies *do* manifest a *counterfactually* unethical attitude (whatever that means) only renders (2) false. See also James Harold, ‘On Judging the Moral Value of Artworks’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 259-270, at 262-263).

²⁹ _____.

understands ‘unethical response’, (1) is false. Since (1) is false, (3) no longer follows. That is, the ethical premises do not go through.

(1) is plausible, however, when ‘prescribe’ means endorse. One need not consider both senses of ‘unethical response’ to see this. Since *endorsing* an unethical response means recommending it for the actual world, endorsing counterfactually and actually unethical responses amounts to the same thing. A work doing this clearly manifests an unethical attitude. And if (1) and (2) are true, (3) follows.

Now for the trickier case: the aesthetic premises. Consider (4) again.

(4) If w prescribes an unethical response, it prescribes an unmerited response.

(4) and thus (6) are true only if ‘prescribe’ means attempt to elicit. This is because the immorality of a response can only matter aesthetically insofar as a work attempts to elicit the response. For, whether the work endorses the response—that is, whether it stands behind the attitude the response embodies—is irrelevant to the response’s meritedness, as I now argue.

In arguing for the relevance of ethical considerations to aesthetic value, Gaut reminds us that ‘warrant conditions of a range of responses are sensitive to ethical considerations’. He continues,

Some so-called moral emotions have ethical concepts built in as part of their evaluative content: [...] anger or indignation involves the evaluative thought of someone else having done something wrong (including morally wrong). But the role of ethical criteria extends further than this. Plausibly, fear, pity, pleasure and being thrilled do not have moral concepts analytically as part of their evaluative content, yet the having of these responses can be unwarranted on moral grounds. If I fear for someone, my emotion may be criticised because that person is someone who does not deserve my concern for the discomfort or danger he is undergoing: perhaps I am fearing for someone who is being justly punished. [...] And even being thrilled by something can be criticised on moral grounds: someone who found it thrilling to watch a child being tortured to death might properly be criticised, in part because what he is watching is not thrilling, but deeply morally disgusting. In fact, there are good reasons to believe that the ethical must have a purchase on whether a wide range of responses is merited (warranted) or not.³⁰

I agree. However, notice that Gaut's reason for thinking that these ethical considerations influence whether a response is merited has to do with the nature of the thing being responded to. Pity is unwarranted insofar as the

³⁰ Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 240.

pitied person does not deserve it; being thrilled is unmerited by gratuitous suffering, etc. On an intuitive way of understanding endorsement, it consists in having a specific kind of purpose. Having attempted to elicit a response, the work that endorses the response also has the purpose of recommending this response or the associated attitude for export. Kollwitz's *Not*, again, does not merely attempt to elicit indignation at the depicted poverty; it uses this for a particular end—to recommend indignation towards actual poverty. But having a purpose has nothing to do with the nature of the thing being responded to. In other words, endorsing a response has nothing to do with whether the response is merited. So endorsement, it would seem, has no bearing on aesthetic value.

Gaut has a reply available. He considers the scene from *Fargo* where a character is ground in a woodchipper for dark comic effect. He imagines a counterfactual scenario in which the Coen brothers had themselves engaged in similar murderous acts. In such an alternative reality, *Fargo* would most aptly be interpreted as endorsing the violence it depicts. 'Would we then correctly view the woodchipper scene as wonderfully funny?', Gaut asks. No: 'it would be like laughing at child-abuse jokes told by a convicted paedophile'.³¹ Gaut is onto something. The example seems to show that endorsing a response is relevant to the meritedness of

³¹ *Ibid.*, 251.

responses, and thus to an artwork's aesthetic value, after all. But is it? Compare another counterfactual scenario. Suppose in making *Jaws*, Spielberg intended to manipulate people into wiping out great whites, or to bankrupt an innocent acquaintance's surf shop. These would be good reasons to boycott the film, to criticize it ethically, and to refuse to engage with it on its terms. But it would be silly to think they would make the depicted shark any less frightening. The endorsement might justify calling the film unfrightening garbage, just as one might call the paedophile's (otherwise amusing) child-abuse jokes unamusing, but as a figurative expression of disapproval, not a literal judgement of aesthetic value.³² In short, endorsing looks irrelevant to aesthetic value, an observation for which we have a good explanation: endorsing a response does not alter the kinds of properties Gaut (rightly) cites as relevant to whether responses are merited: what is fictionally true of the response's depicted objects. This is so, even when an endorsement deserves ethical criticism. At minimum, Gaut has provided no reason why endorsement is aesthetically relevant. One may feel yucky responding with laughter to a paedophile's jokes, or a murderer's film. But ethicists lack the resources to show that such yuckiness undermines aesthetic value, rather than, say, imposing social obstacles to its appreciation.

³² Kendall L. Walton, 'Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1994), 27-50, at 30.

Perhaps the above is a little quick. For, one might defend MRA by appealing to a further factor determining whether a response to an artwork is merited that the previous paragraph ignores, but which Gaut acknowledges.³³ To ignore it—to assume that all that matters to whether a response is merited is what the work makes fictional—is to commit what Jacobson calls the fallacy of ‘norm-equivalence’: ‘that the same norms [...] apply to our responses towards fictional events and persons as would apply were they actual’.³⁴ Perhaps this further factor allows endorsement a role in determining which responses are merited.

Norm-equivalence is false because, in addition to what a work makes fictional, one must consider *how* it does so, as is demonstrated by the horror comedy case mentioned earlier. Whether a depicted, bullied child merits pity, say, depends not merely on whether, fictionally, the character deserves pity, but also on the work’s mode of presentation. Is the child’s predicament portrayed honestly, sentimentally, unrealistically, etc.? Depending on the answer, pity will be more or less merited, even holding

³³ E.g. Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 232.

³⁴ Daniel Jacobson, ‘In Praise of Immoral Art’, *Philosophical Topics* (1997), 155-199, at 186. See also Flint Schier, ‘Tragedy and the Community of Sentiment’, *Philosophy and Fiction: Essays in Literary Aesthetics*, Ed. Peter Lamarque, Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1983, 73-92, at 73-74 and Matthew Kieran, ‘In Defence of the Ethical Evaluation of Art’, *BJA* (2001), 26-38, at 31-32.

fixed what is fictional about the child's situation. That is, two works that make precisely the same claims fictional might merit different kinds of responses because of how each presents its fictional world (masterfully, ineptly, as comic, tragic, etc.). As Jacobson puts it,

[W]hen we are left cold by a clumsy work of fiction, it would be ludicrous to think that we are failing to respond to its characters as we ought, simply because the story has made something fictional which, if actual, would be pitiful'.³⁵

This mode of presentation often makes clear whether a work endorses a response it attempts to elicit. Consider another counterfactual *Fargo* that Gaut imagines:

[S]uppose that the means of death and dismemberment were dwelled on lovingly by the film, so that we were invited to relish the minutiae of agony and death; and we therefore had reason to think that the film wanted us actually to view murder as fun.³⁶

³⁵ Daniel Jacobson, 'In Praise of Immoral Art', *Philosophical Topics* (1997), 155-199, at 186.

³⁶ Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 271.

Gaut claims such a work would not merit the amusement of the actual *Fargo*. Why? Because it endorses a positive attitude towards death and dismemberment, Gaut thinks, thereby securing the connection between *endorsing* and (not) meriting a response that ethicists need. I agree that the work imagined would be ethically criticizable. Moreover, unlike with Gaut's first counterfactual *Fargo*, I also agree this work would (probably) be worse aesthetically; amusement would be less merited compared to the original. However, this is not because the work endorses positive attitudes towards death and dismemberment. It is because *this Fargo* employs a wholly new mode of presentation. Dwelling on the minutiae of agony and death, as the original does not, would significantly alter how the film attempts to elicit amusement. Yet, the endorsement *per se* would not make the difference, the mode of presentation would.

Another way to see why endorsement does not determine aesthetic value is by comparing it to other properties in artworks Gaut deems irrelevant to aesthetic value. Gaut considers a hypothetical painting of a woman conveying no feelings towards its subject but appended with a label reading 'please feel sympathy for this woman'. He argues that while it would prescribe sympathy, the moral message would be 'too extraneous to the painting itself' to be aesthetically relevant.³⁷ But granting, as Gaut rightly does, that authorial intentions help determine which attitudes a

³⁷ Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 84.

work endorses, this makes possible two indiscernible works, where one endorses an immoral claim and the other does not, merely because their respective authors' intentions tip the interpretative scales; one work might very subtly satirize some immoral attitude, whereas the other endorses it, for instance. If so, it is unclear how the author's standing behind the responses the work attempts to elicit in one case but not the other alters which responses the works merit.³⁸ The authorial intentions to recommend *p* seem no different to the extraneous sign demanding that viewers feel sympathy. Of course, Gaut could be wrong about the aesthetic relevance of such detached pronouncements though, if so, this needs arguing.

Maybe ethicists could accept the attempting to elicit/endorsing distinction but argue that endorsing is not a matter of *purpose*, of aiming to recommend an attitude. Instead, endorsing could consist in a commitment to the idea that the things depicted in the work and actual things in the world are the same in relevant respects. Endorsement would consist, as it were, in a commitment to something like norm-equivalence. It would then be aesthetically relevant because a work that endorses a response to a depicted object holds itself hostage to the normative and other properties of the actual object (or of relevantly similar actual entities). So, for instance, by endorsing admiration for a depicted Parvati

³⁸ Compare James Harold, 'On Judging the Moral Value of Artworks', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (2006), 259-270.

Giri, a work commits itself to a realist standard with respect to that response: namely, that admiring the depicted Giri is merited if and only if admiring the actual Giri (or relevantly similar dissidents) is.³⁹ If this account is right, then endorsement can affect which responses are merited after all, because it affects which standards are relevant for determining a response's meritedness—namely, the relevant standards of the actual world. And this would suffice to show that premise (4) is true, after all, since by endorsing an unethical response, a work would endorse an unmerited response.

However, (4) is rescued only by deserting (5):

(5) If *w* prescribes an unmerited response, it is aesthetically flawed.

For while it would now be plausible that works endorsing an unethical response thereby endorse an unmerited one, it would no longer be plausible that a work endorsing an unmerited response is thereby aesthetically flawed—even granting it was ever plausible. On the account under consideration, endorsing a response amounts to committing to an artistic constraint: that the response to the depicted object the work attempts to elicit be judged as though it were a response to a relevantly similar actual object. But being subject to such a constraint is not an

³⁹ Thanks to Adriana Clavel-Vázquez for this suggestion.

aesthetic flaw, any more than being written in iambic pentameter or being a lullaby is. The constraint may make certain flaws likelier, even inevitable if it is a poor constraint.⁴⁰ If I write a lullaby, then passages that are too rapid, or written in four-time, say, might make the work aesthetically flawed. But the constraint itself—being a lullaby—does not make the work flawed. Likewise, the endorsement constraint provides standards that will make unethical responses unmerited because responses to actual things, insofar as they are unethical are always unmerited. But the endorsement constraint *as such* does not make the work aesthetically flawed; the attempt to elicit the unmerited response does.

In summary, the ethical premises 1-3 go through only if ‘prescribe’ means or entails *endorse*. The aesthetic premises 4-6 go through only if ‘prescribe’ means or entails *attempt to elicit*. Thus, (7) is true only if ‘prescribe’ combines both meanings. As such, MRA fares no better than MRfAi; both arguments may be sound, yet they fail to establish any interesting relation between ethical properties and aesthetic values.

4. Conclusion

⁴⁰ See _____.

I have shown that if MRA is to be sound, 'prescribe' must mean or entail both attempt to elicit *and* endorse at the same time. Insofar as ethicism and other moralist theories like Carroll's rest on MRA or similar arguments, they fail to show any interesting ethico-aesthetic relation. Are ethicism and its moralist cousins false then? I do not claim to have shown this—only that the most prominent kind of moralist argument fails.