Ordinary Monsters: Ethical Criticism and the Lives of Artists

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Abstract

Should we take into account an artist's personal moral failings when appreciating or evaluating the work? In this essay, I seek to expand Berys Gaut's account of ethicism by showing how moral judgment of an artist's private moral actions can figure in one's overall evaluation of their work. To expand Gaut's view, I argue that the artist's personal morality is relevant to our evaluation of their work because we may only come to understand the point of view of the work, and therefore the work's prescribed attitude, by examining the values, attitudes, and behaviors of the artist. This view is defended against a rival account offered by Bernard Wills and Jason Holt, which holds that the artistic evaluation of an artist's work is independent from the moral evaluation of their life except in extreme cases.

Key Words

art; autonomism; ethicism; Berys Gaut; Jason Holt; judgment; morality; Bernard Wills

1. Introduction

As a child growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, I was a big fan of Bill Cosby. My childhood was filled with many of his shows: *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids*, *Picture Pages*, and *The Cosby Show*. In 1983, Cosby released a film of his stand-up routine, titled *Bill Cosby: Himself*. My family owned a copy on VHS that I must have watched dozens of times. Cosby was funny and intelligent, but also seemed like a kind man. He was "America's dad."

Recently, Cosby has been convicted of sexual assault and aggravated indecent assault. The allegations against Cosby include charges of rape, drug-facilitated sexual assault, and child sexual assault. The accusations come from sixty women, two of which were fifteen years old at the time of the assaults, that begin as early as the 1960s.[1]

Should Cosby's fans revise their previous positive assessment of his shows? Is one's experience of watching his shows changed because of what we now know of the man? Is it now wrong for one to enjoy watching his old shows? While the case of Cosby might be the most recent, the issue is a general one. Audience members experience a deep sense of conflict when they discover that a once-beloved artist is guilty of some moral transgression. The source of the conflict is understandable; we might cherish our aesthetic experience of the artist's work while we detest the person of the artist. How do we, or should we, negotiate this sense of conflict? How can we hate the person but love their creation? Why do we sometimes feel compelled to "aesthetically divorce" the artist and his or her work, while at other times we extend a hand of forgiveness?

Discussion of how fans should think about such artists has exploded in the popular media recently. While many call for bans and boycotts of morally problematic artists, others insist that we must separate the artist's life from their work. Many of the discussions in the popular media are lacking in much nuance and woefully unhelpful. Turning to the work of philosophers, few have focused specifically on what possible impact the artist's private life could have on the appreciation of their works. However, related discussions of whether the moral evaluation of a work's content should play some role in our appreciation of art have a long history.[2] Many following a broadly Kantian tradition, including the formalism of Clive Bell and the later "aesthetic attitude" theorists, argue that we should never judge a work by some moral measure and that we act mistakenly when we do so. Kant's argument that judgments of moral goodness prohibit viewers from taking a disinterested stance toward aesthetic objects is familiar to many.[3] It is not difficult to see how this thought would be extended to moral judgments of the artist's personal life. Why deny ourselves the joy of appreciating an artist's work simply because we do not like their personal failings? A recent, though limited, account of this view is offered by Bernard Wills and Jason Holt.[4] They argue that aesthetic judgments about an artist's work are independent from moral

judgments of the artist's life, except in the most extreme cases. I will return to consider and ultimately reject this view, in section 3.

Against this Kantian tradition, many philosophers have argued that we cannot and should not separate moral matters from aesthetic matters, and chief among these are the many feminist aestheticians who have sought to draw attention to the inseparability of these issues.[5] Yet even within the literature on feminist aesthetics, it is unusual to focus on what contribution the private lives of artists might make to our aesthetic engagement with their works. Rather, it is more common to find discussion of the moral relevance of the work's content itself and the role that our moral judgment should play in reference to its aesthetics. These are deeply important topics, but they do not address the questions I raise here.

In this paper, I want to defend the claim that an artist's private life is a relevant concern when evaluating their work. The kind of cases that interest me are those where the viewer can find no direct trace of the artist's deeds in their works. For instance, in cases like *Bill Cosby: Himself*, there is no indication of anything sinister in the film. Why, then, should our knowledge of the man's deeds force us to reevaluate our aesthetic appreciation of the film? Here is a brief outline of what follows. Section 2 examines the nature of the question more closely. I distinguish three different questions that can be asked of the cases I am interested in and argue that the answers to each of those questions are independent of the others. Section 3 examines Wills and Holt's view that moral judgments are independent from aesthetic judgments except in extreme cases. Their account is rejected for failing to offer a principled reason to admit exceptions. Section 4 examines Berys Gaut's influential defense of *ethicism*, which holds that the evaluation of a work's moral content is relevant to one's aesthetic evaluation of the work.[6] However, Gaut's account is limited as it stands; it focuses on the work's contents, not on the artist's private life. So, in section 5, I offer an amendment to Gaut's account that would allow it to be extended to our target. In section 6, I return to Wills and Holt's essay to consider some general objections that they offer and demonstrate how such objections can be addressed by the view proposed here.

2. Three problems

The problem we are after is not one problem. In fact, there are at least three different problems, and a solution to one may have little impact on the others. It is not my intention to address all three problems in this essay. I would be happy if I could say something intelligent about any one.

The first problem concerns the nature of aesthetic experience: Does the personal morality of an artist have any aesthetic impact on one's experience of the work? We can call this the *experiential question*. There are some cases where the identity of the author and knowledge of his or her immoral acts will have an aesthetic impact on one's experience of their work. For instance, consider the self portraits produced by the serial killer John Wayne Gacy, while he was in prison awaiting his execution, that depict Gacy wearing his Pogo the Clown costume. When viewed without knowledge of their provenance, many of the paintings appear amateurish, flat, and lacking in any meaningful depth, but, when viewed with the knowledge that they are the work of Gacy, they take on a creepy, disturbing quality. For these works, their aesthetic character is partly shaped by one's knowledge of the artist's life. But there are also many cases where there seems to be little aesthetic impact or, at least, cases where the aesthetic impact is debatable. For instance, consider the work of the British sculptor Eric Gill. Earning admiration for his religious sculptures and design work in the early twentieth century, it was revealed long after Gill's death that he had sexually abused his daughters, held incestuous relationships with his sisters, and had engaged in sexual acts with the family dog.[7] In discussions of Gill's work, there is much debate over attempts to tie their aesthetic character to any facet of his private life. Some are able to view his works innocently while others claim to be incapable of doing so.[8]

The experiential question is fascinating in its own right and of great importance to aesthetics. Unfortunately, I have little to say about it. While it is possible to find instances of both sorts, those where the character of the work is changed by knowledge of the artist's life and those where it is not, I can discern no relevant difference to explain why. I draw attention to the experiential question only to pass over it.

The second problem, which will be the focus of this essay, is a normative question about aesthetic evaluation: Should we take into account an artist's moral failings when evaluating their works as art? We can call this the *evaluative question*. Again, there seem to be cases that suggest both positive and negative answers. For instance, it seems right to critically evaluate the works of William S. Burroughs with the knowledge of his murder of his wife, Joan Vollmer, in 1951. Burroughs' guilt over Vollmer's death served as an impetus for much of his work, particularly his short novel *Queer*. By contrast, it also seems right that the critical appreciation of Caravaggio's work is not changed by the knowledge of the artist's murder of Ranuccio Tomassoni. However, at this early stage in the investigation, these observations are little more than intuitions. I

will later offer a positive answer to the evaluative question but, for now, it is enough to acknowledge the conflict of our intuitions.

Importantly, our answer to the evaluative question need not depend on our answer to the experiential question, and vice versa. The reason for this is because the two questions fall on either side of an "is/ought" divide. The fact that aesthetic experience works in a particular way does not suggest how aesthetic judgment ought to work. The two are related of course, but the relation is complex. One could answer the experiential question positively but answer the evaluative question negatively. For instance, one might hold that knowledge of the artist's life indeed affects the character of one's aesthetic experience of their work, but this is a mistake when it comes to evaluating their work. We would do better to disregard our moral feelings and focus our aesthetic judgment solely on matters of technique, skill, and intention. Alternatively, one could answer the experiential question negatively but answer the evaluative question positively. On this account, knowledge of the artist's life has no impact on the character of one's aesthetic experience of their work, but this is a mistake. Taking into account the artist's private life in our judgment of their work offers the best, considered evaluation. These mixed positions on the two questions are not on the surface implausible.

A third problem is another normative question about our engagement with an artist's works: Is it morally wrong to engage with the work of an immoral artist? Call this the *engagement question*. Prior to his incarceration, would it have been wrong for me to buy tickets to see Cosby's stand-up routine? One might argue that patronizing Cosby then would have helped him fund his legal defense, which is wrong to do. But, consider a less immediate case. Would it be wrong of me now to watch my family's old copy of *Bill Cosby: Himself*? In this case, there is no direct patronage that Cosby benefits from, but one might argue that watching *Bill Cosby: Himself* now is insensitive to his victims or that my watching it now demonstrates a tolerance of his crimes on my part, which itself is morally reprehensible.

I think there is important work to be done regarding the audiences' responsibilities for their engagement with art, which is an under-explored issue in aesthetics. But again, my focus in this essay is on the evaluative question. I have little to say about the engagement question here, except that how we answer it question is not dependent on how we answer either the experiential question or the evaluative question.[9] Even if we were to answer both previous questions positively, the engagement question remains open. In some cases, perhaps it is wrong and I should not go see Cosby's stand-up routine, while in other cases, perhaps it is not and I am still free to enjoy *Bill Cosby: Himself*.

3. Aesthetic independence, with exceptions

Recently, Wills and Holt have argued for the separation of art from life. While there are likely to be other arguments for such a separation available, I take Wills and Holt's view to be representative of such accounts.

Wills and Holt's position attempts to capture two intuitions that they describe as "sufficiently firm if not absolutely solid:" "that aesthetic judgment is independent of moral judgment, and that this independence is not absolute but can legitimately be challenged in some instances" (§2). The view that aesthetic judgments are independent from moral judgments often goes by the name of 'autonomism,' which justifiably describes their position.[10] Wills and Holt allow that moral judgment can play some role in the appreciation of a character in a fiction and indeed, one must at least make the moral judgment that some character is a villain or is undeserving of their cruel treatment in order to appreciate the drama of the fiction, and yet these sort of moral judgments are properly restricted to something within the work.[11] Drawing on Shelley's essay, "A Defence of Poetry," they claim that we should distinguish between moral imagination as a "capacity to imagine significant moral conflicts" and the will to act morally (§3). The former is relevant to one's engagement with art while the latter is not, according to Wills and Holt. More to the point, artists' moral or immoral actions in their private lives should bear no impact on our aesthetic judgment of their work. However, Wills and Holt's position is also limited as they admit of exceptions, though the exceptions only apply to "extreme cases." As they say:

> We think this is the case when an artist's vices are not ordinary vices of passion but have a cold calculating aspect. The cool head and icy heart that plans a mass murder is just what we do not want in an artist. The art of a Hannibal Lecter could be a triumph of intellect in shaping intricate form, perhaps, but not of warmth or sympathetic imagination. If a mass murderer or serial killer were also a fine poet, this total disjunction would itself be a kind of ugliness or aesthetic imperfection. Art that ceases utterly to be good thereby ceases to be art. Under this limitation no painting of a Hitler or a Hannibal Lecter could possess an unspoiled beauty no matter how seemingly exquisite the brushwork, although short of such extremes we seem permissibly able to value Eric Gill's sculpture and typeface. (§4)

Wills and Holt's view of independence-with-exceptions is likely the default position for many people when thinking about these issues. However, such a view is obviously

untenable. If we assert an independence between aesthetic judgment and moral judgment, then it is puzzling how one can maintain both *independence* as well as *exceptions*. If there is no interaction between aesthetic and ethical values, as claims of independence would maintain, then there is no logical space left to defend exceptions. It is a poor autonomism that admits of exceptions.

In fact, it may be more accurate when thinking of Wills and Holt's account to reject the notion of independence entirely and instead think of their account as advocating for aesthetic and ethical interaction, though one that sets the bar for moral criticism very high. It is only truly horrific individuals–serial killers or mass murderers–whose work is aesthetically marred by the immorality of the artist's life. But then, if we are willing to accept some interaction between aesthetic and ethical values, why set the bar that high? Is there a principled reason for such a high boundary? A clue to this question is found in Wills and Holt's comments that such artists are incapable of "warmth or sympathetic imagination," while lesser crimes can be dismissed as matters of "passion." The works of Emperor Nero must be second-rate, they say, because of his inhumane cruelty, while the poet François Villon deserves some sympathy: "Is it not plain that this thief and scoundrel [Villon] wins our sympathy by being in the grip of self-destructive passions and mystifying compulsions just as we ourselves too often are? A great sinner can create great art, while an inhuman monster cannot" (§4). Ordinary crimes are motivated by forces and passions that any sensitive person would be familiar with. So, we should treat such artists with sympathy. But, the crimes of serial killers and mass murderers leave their humanity unrecognizable. We cannot (or will not?) enter into sympathetic imagination with the "cool head and icy heart" of sociopaths.

While we might accept the idea that the art of a sociopath is quite different from that of an artist with more run-of-the-mill moral failures, we should still wonder about the relevance of this difference. Notice that the difference, according to Wills and Holt, is between according *no significance at all* to the moral failings of ordinary artists while dismissing the work of sociopaths as no longer art. As Wills and Holt say, "Art that ceases utterly to be good thereby ceases to be art" (§4). For Wills and Holt, it is all or nothing. They offer no proportional weighting of an artist's moral failures. Either you are a sociopath who is entirely incapable of producing art or you are an ordinary criminal, in which case your crimes lack any moral relevance to the evaluation of your work.

Wills and Holt accept that some artists can be held accountable for their private moral failings and, on this point, I agree. But where I disagree is how high the bar should be set. They say, hold none accountable except for the absolute worst. We should ignore completely the moral failings of Gill and Villon. But then, shouldn't we also ignore the crimes of Bill Cosby? This seems too generous. There are many crimes that fall short of mass murder that still seem monstrous to me, for example, rape, child abuse, and sex trafficking. Why should the art of ordinary monsters get a complete pass? Instead, we should consider a proportional criticism of the artist's crimes against the aesthetic merits of their work.

4. The limits of ethicism

An influential view of the ethical criticism of art is that offered by Berys Gaut, according to which, "the ethical assessment of attitudes manifested by works of art is a legitimate aspect of the aesthetic evaluation of those works, such that, if a work manifest ethically reprehensible attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically defective, and if a work manifest ethically commendable attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically meritorious."[12] While there is much of Gaut's ethicism that is worthy of attention, I will focus solely on three points that are relevant to our current concerns.

First, Gaut notes that works of representational art "manifest" attitudes as well as "prescribe" both attitudes and responses. For illustration, consider a film like Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream*. The film offers a lesson in the various ways that individuals can become enmeshed in a life of drug abuse. Throughout the film, the characters are shown getting high, committing crimes, and making bad choices. Certain values and attitudes are manifested in the characters, both through what they say and what they do. Those values and attitudes can be open to the viewer's moral scrutiny but, of course, viewers should not automatically assume that Aronofsky endorses or wishes to promote the actions or attitudes of his characters. *Requiem* is not a work of glorification. Instead, it prescribes a critical attitude toward the actions of its characters. It is central to Gaut's ethicism that it is not the content of the work that is of moral concern but, rather, it is the attitude toward that content prescribed by the author. If one believed that Aronofsky sought to prescribe an attitude of admiration for the self-destructive lives that his characters lead, then one would have some room to ethically criticize the work. But this is clearly not the attitude prescribed by the work. Rather, *Requiem* is a warning, though one that humanizes characters that all too often are demonized. On this score, the film would have an aesthetic credit in its favor.

Second, according to Gaut, works of art are made aesthetically better *to the extent* that they prescribe morally praiseworthy attitudes, and they are made aesthetically worse *to the extent* that they prescribe morally reprehensible attitudes. It is not an all-or-

nothing matter, rather it is *pro tanto*. Aesthetically evaluating works of art is a subtle and complex endeavor that requires one to balance all aesthetically relevant features against one another. *Requiem for a Dream* is again illustrative. The film is harrowing. It falls into the rare category of *masterpieces that I never want to see again*. What makes the film good is not just its cinematography, its editing, or its powerful acting. Additionally, it is the delicate balance achieved by the prescribed attitude that neither glorifies drug abuse nor demonizes addicts. Its characters are recognizable people with real humanity and substance. Yet, *Requiem* is also gruesome and deeply upsetting. Each of these points must be taken together in an overall evaluation of the film.

Finally, Gaut's ethicism does not and need not demand an objective conception of ethics. Though this point is often overlooked, an ethicist about art criticism could be a thoroughgoing subjectivist about ethical values (and aesthetic values). One must only remember that individuals have their own moral values, and individuals make both moral and aesthetic judgments. Then, it is an open question whether one's (subjective) moral values ought to play a role in one's (subjective) aesthetic evaluations. We can adopt Gaut's ethicism regardless of how we might think of the reality or subjectivity of moral and aesthetic values.

Gaut's view is a nuanced and sensitive account of how works themselves can manifest attitudes that are open to moral evaluation. However, it cannot directly handle cases of artists' personal moral failings that we are considering here. The problem, simply put, is that an artist's moral failures are not manifested in the contents of his or her works. So, Gaut's account cannot get us the full way to our goal.

5. Expanded ethicism

Gaut's view can be expanded to account for the cases we are after. To do so, I must begin by stating some positions I take to be true about our aesthetic experience but are not universally accepted. Still, these positions have been widely defended and will likely be familiar to many.

I accept the following. All works of art are produced from a certain point of view. The point of view that I have in mind is not what one might call the *perspectival view of the work*. Many works of art have a point of view, in the sense that they present a distinctive perspective. However, many others do not; think of abstract paintings or pure music. By contrast, all works of art are produced from a particular *socio-historical point of view*. It is this latter point of view that informs my account.[13]

Filling out the point of view of a work would be a very complex affair, but it would at least include the socio-historical context that is relevant to understanding the artist's work. This may include not only art-historical information about the artist's influences, styles, and their relationships to other contemporary artists, but also the social, political, economic, and religious climate in which the artist was working and the artist's own beliefs concerning those. More importantly, the point of view of the work takes certain values and assumptions as its norm. The values of family and middle-class respectability that form the backdrop of *Bill Cosby: Himself* are never openly announced to the viewer, just as the audience does not need to be explicitly told that Darth Vader is the villain of *Star Wars: A New Hope*. Rather, it is assumed that viewers will recognize such assumptions and values.

If the reader accepts the above, then the account I suggest goes like this. The point of view for all works is underspecified. One cannot discern the socio-historical context of the work just by viewing its surface, and it is often a difficult matter to uncover the implicit values and assumptions of any work. Some additional study must be done outside of one's scrutiny of the work to fully understand and evaluate it, which typically is part of the work of art critics and historians. To fill out the point of view of a work, it is common to turn to biographical information about the artist. Certainly, this practice is controversial, as can be seen by the ongoing debate over intentionalist theories of interpretation.[14] However, it is not necessary to defend intentionalism here. The general practice of looking to the artist's biography, in order to uncover the implicit assumptions and values of their work, remains a common art critical practice. Consider two paintings by Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Marat* and *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*. How did a man who once painted images extolling the French Revolution come to paint adoring images of Napoleon? Were David's shifting political loyalties the result of a sincere change in his views or were they simply the product of a cynical opportunism? Insofar as our appreciation of David's *oeuvre* is informed by the sincerity of the values and loyalties that his works express, then the answer to such questions lies within David's biography, not within his paintings. But, at the point where some research into the artist's biography is needed, then we are already encroaching onto the artist's personal life. To adapt a point once made by Wollheim, if we allow ourselves to consider some background knowledge from the artist's life, then why stop short at the artist's own personal morality?[15] This seems like an arbitrary restriction on our critical practices.

The prescribed attitude manifested by the work is a part of the work's point of view, according to Gaut. To know whether *p* is the prescribed attitude of the work, I suggest

that we may be required to look into the artist's biography. For illustration, think again of *Requiem for a Dream*. It seems likely that our understanding of the film's prescribed attitude would be affected somehow if we were to discover that Aronofsky was an unrepentant drug pusher. Perhaps we would negatively view the work as insincere. Or, perhaps we would positively view the work as a brave form of confessional. Regardless of how exactly such information would impact our aesthetic evaluation of the work, the point is that such information will have *some* impact on one's evaluation of the film. Thus, we can adopt an expanded version of Gaut's ethicism: A work of art is morally flawed to the extent that its assumed point of view is morally flawed and a work is morally praiseworthy to the extent that its assumed point of view is morally praiseworthy. The artist's own personal morality is aesthetically relevant to our evaluation of their work because we may only come to understand the work's point of view, and therefore the work's prescribed attitude, by examining the implicit values and attitudes of the artist. For instance, *Bill Cosby: Himself* manifests an attitude that appears wholesome. However, we now know that this point of view is incomplete. By drawing on our knowledge of Cosby's personal life, we must see his on-stage persona as an insincere façade.

Finally, there are interesting cases where we seem to positively enjoy and evaluate some works *because* of the artist's moral flaws. Such cases are likely very familiar: the chauvinism of Ernest Hemingway, the cantankerousness of Charles Bukowski, the licentiousness of Hunter S. Thompson. Notice that these are not cases where the artist's work is admired despite their moral flaws, which the ethicist already can address through the *pro tanto* claim, but are arguably cases where the work is admired by virtue of their moral flaws. These cases seem like a challenge to ethicism, and to my expanded ethicism, because the view holds that moral merits are always aesthetic merits while moral flaws are always aesthetic flaws. So, how can an expanded ethicist explain these?

To do so, I want to distinguish two kinds of cases. The first is what we might call the *counter-morality artist*. For many fans of Hunter S. Thompson, his licentiousness is not a moral flaw but is, in fact, a point of admiration. Indeed, Thompson represents a counter-culture, one that rejects the standard morality of mainstream society. Within the values of the counter-culture, actions that are called "licentiousness" by the mainstream are positively valued as a rejection of the standard morality. Interestingly, in these cases the fan who aesthetically admires Thompson's work because of their admiration for his private life is doing exactly what expanded ethicism recommends. Those traits that are seen as positive moral values in the artist's life become positive aesthetic values of the artist's work. These cases of counter-morality are quite common. For instance, some artistic genres view an artist's immoral and illicit activities as a positive sign of the artist's authenticity, for example, in musical genres like gangsta rap, punk, and narcocorrido.

The second sort of case is what we might call the *hardship artist*. The main characteristic of the hardship artist is that the artist, in some way, deserves sympathy, understanding, or forgiveness. It is not the artist's moral transgressions that are positively appreciated but rather the transgressions occasion a morally positive regard for their hardship. Johnny Cash was both addicted to amphetamines and a devout Christian. So, wouldn't Christian fans morally fault his music because of his drug addiction? In fact, no. Instead, Cash's hard-living is viewed positively by Christian fans as part of "his struggle," and it is the struggle that such fans find morally admirable. These cases too can be explained by expanded ethicism. Fans of Cash aesthetically admire his work partly because they morally admire Cash's hardship.

I suggest that cases where the aesthetic value of an artist's work is improved by virtue of his or her moral failings will invariably turn out to be cases of either counter-morality artists or hardship artists. Such cases can be handled by an expanded ethicism. Indeed, our appreciation of both sorts of cases would appear meaningless, if it were not for the fact that the artist's private life indeed plays a role in the aesthetic evaluation of their works.

Certainly more needs to be said. In particular, we should want to identify what sort of factors about an artist's private moral failings contribute to one's understanding of their work and how such private moral failings are to be weighed in one's artistic evaluation. While these questions deserve answers, it is enough for my purposes here to demonstrate how ethicism could be expanded and therefore close the gap that has been missing from the moral criticism of art.

6. Objections

Wills and Holt offer three potential objections. In this section, I will show how expanded ethicism can address those.

First, Wills and Holt point out that moral saints are "vanishingly rare." If we pause to look closely enough into the lives of any artist, we will surely find something morally objectionable. Moreover, it is difficult to know where to draw the line. It is easy to be

morally outraged by artists who sexually abuse children or physically assault women but, as they say,

> ...why restrict our judgment to these forms of criminality? Villon was a thief and inveterate rogue. Nina Simone was a physically and verbally abusive parent. What about Dostoevsky's addiction to gambling? What about hard drugs? Are tax cheats, like Willie Nelson, off limits? What about artists we enjoy but whose biographies we have not yet read? Are we obligated to investigate their lives for potential crimes against women and children? (§2)

The difficulties presented by the need to be thorough are too great. So, their suggestion is that it is better not to look.

This objection has some intuitive appeal–indeed, there are no moral saints–and yet it poses no real challenge to the view defended here. The point of expanded ethicism is not to dictate what sort of crimes matter, nor is it to determine what sort of ethical values one ought to hold. Rather, the point is to defend the relevance of an artist's private moral failings in the aesthetic evaluation of their work. Are an artist's moral failings serious enough to warrant a negative appraisal of their work? That depends on whether the artist's actions conflict with one's moral values and how strongly they conflict. For some, Nina Simone's parenting is a turn-off to appreciating her work while others are able to tolerate and forgive. The example of Willie Nelson is instructive, and is another example of a counter-morality artist. For many fans, his tax avoidance adds something positive to his outlaw image. More recently, Willie Nelson has also emerged as a defender of recreational marijuana use. This, too, is viewed positively by many of his fans; he has become somewhat of a stoner hero. Are there some fans who, disappointed by his tax avoidance and drug use, have sworn off their love of Nelson? Almost certainly. But it is important to recognize here that the fans who positively appraise Nelson's music because of his transgressions are themselves drawing on facts from the artist's private life to evaluate his music, just like those fans who negatively appraise Nelson's music for the same private acts. Expanded ethicism goes both ways. One may praise an artist's work because one approves of the artist's private life just as another may condemn an artist's work because one disapproves.

Second, Wills and Holt argue that the ethical criticism of artists would seem to ignore the effects of moral luck. They offer the example of many African-American blues, jazz, and hip hop musicians–people facing oppression as racial minorities–whose crimes may be the product of living in dire and unjust circumstances. As they say, "Bourgeois liberal morality, admirable or not, may well be a luxury people from the underclass can ill afford, and the lives of many jazz and blues giants surely reflect this pressure" (§2). Therefore, it seems wrong to negatively judge the quality of their work.

The spirit of this objection is admirable. We should certainly recognize the injustice that drives many to commit petty crimes. But this too is not a reason to reject expanded ethicism. There are two things to say in reply. First, moral luck is as much a problem for morality itself as it is a problem for art. Moral luck is no reason to accept amoralism, and so it is no reason to accept aesthetic autonomism, either. Insofar as any moral theory must sensitively account for the effects of moral luck, then so too should any theory of the ethical criticism of art. Second, the version of ethicism that I defend here is already sophisticated enough to admit the need for moral sensitivity. When taking into account an artist's moral transgressions, of course one would also take into account the circumstances of those transgressions and the degree of moral responsibility that the artist should be assigned. A work of art is an aesthetic failure to the extent that the artist's private life is morally condemnable. For those artists whose moral luck has placed them in an impossible situation, we should aesthetically condemn the work only to the extent that we would morally condemn the artist, which in some cases may be not at all.

Finally, Wills and Holt observe that many are inconsistent in their judgments. Often we are willing to condemn some artists for their personal failings while ignoring the same moral failings in other artists. "Why," they ask, "do many people who disdain the films of [Leni] Riefenstahl admire those of [Sergei] Eisenstein when both filmmakers performed comparable services for their respective tyrants?" (§2).

In reply, we should first wonder why this observation offers a reason to reject the ethical criticism of artists. While it is true that many people are inconsistent in holding artists morally accountable, it is equally true that many people are inconsistent in their moral judgments generally. Many of us employ double-standards, cherry-pick examples, and willfully turn a blind eye when it suits us. Why should we think such inconsistency poses a special problem for art? More importantly, however, we should acknowledge that the inconsistency they draw attention to is not the fault of expanded ethicism. There is nothing about expanded ethicism as a theory that invites such inconsistency. The observation that we are often inconsistent should prod us to aim for better consistency, not to abandon the theory entirely.

7. Conclusion

Thinking back on how I have been trained to evaluate and engage with art, I feel as though I have been taught to look the other way. And for many years, I did. We must look the other way for the sake of appreciating the artist's genius. After all, artists are complex beings. Or so I was told.

I don't want to look the other way anymore. Artists are not special, and neither is their genius. We should regard the moral failings of artists in the same way that we regard the moral failings of our friends.[16] Sometimes we regard our friends' moral failings as mere embarrassments or as regrettable stains on an otherwise brilliant person. At other times, our friends' moral failings are serious enough to call our friendship into question. We may stand by some friends while yet feeling the strain of having to do so. At other times, a friend's moral failings may be so extreme that we denounce them. A friend's sense of humor, charm, and charisma may be only slightly diminished by his or her possession of one moral blindspot, or may be revealed as a sinister façade. Our regard for our friends is informed by our knowledge of their moral actions, and we can do the same for artists and their works. By expanding Gaut's ethicism, we can account for the aesthetic relevance of an artist's private moral actions in a way that is subtle, that neither demands puritanism nor excuses insensitivity.

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Endnotes

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[1] Kyle Kim, Christina Littlefield, and Melissa Etehad, "Bill Cosby: A 50-Year Chronicle of Accusations and Accomplishments," *Los Angeles Times*, June 17, 2017. http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-bill-cosby-timeline-htmlstory.html, accessed July 9, 2019.

[2] The literature on the topic is large. Two excellent collections of essays are Garry Hagberg, *Art and Ethical Criticism* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) and Jerrold Levinson, *Aesthetics and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). For monographs, see Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) and Elisabeth Schellekens, *Aesthetics and Morality* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

[3] *Critique of Judgment*, §4.

[4] Bernard Wills and Jason Holt, "Art by Jerks," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 15 (2017). https://contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=807.

[5] The literature here is also vast. For a general introduction, see Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2004). For an excellent and wide-ranging collection of essays, see Peggy Z. Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

[6] Berys Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," in *Aesthetics and Ethics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 182-203; and Gaut (2007). For criticism, see Matthew Kieran, "Forbidden Knowledge: The Challenge of Immoralism," in *Art and Morality*, eds. Sebastian Gardner and Jose Luis Bermudez (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 56-73; and A. E. Eaton, "Robust Immoralism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70 (2012), pp. 281-292. For responses to criticisms, see Panos Paris, "The 'Moralism' in Immoralism: A Critique of Immoralism in Aesthetics," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 59 (2019), pp. 13-33.

[7] Fiona MacCarthy, *Eric Gill: A Lover's Quest for Art and God* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1988).

[8] Rachel Cooke, "Eric Gill: Can We Separate the Artist from the Abuser?" *The Guardian*, April 9, 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/apr/09/eric-gill-the-

body-ditchling-exhibition-rachel-cooke, accessed July 9, 2019.

[9] But for some of my views on this, see Christopher Bartel, "Free Will and Moral Responsibility in Video Games," *Ethics and Information Technology* 17 (2015), pp. 285-293; and Christopher Bartel and Anna Cremaldi, "'It's Just a Story': Pornography, Desire, and the Ethics of Fictive Imagining," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 58 (2018), pp. 37-50.

[10] For an overview of autonomism, see Matthew Kieran, "Art, Morality and Ethics: On the (Im)Moral Character of Art Works and Inter-Relations to Artistic Value," *Philosophy Compass* Â½ (2006), pp. 129-143. The standard rejection of autonomism comes from Noel Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (1996), pp. 223-238.

[11] Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," pp. 227-228.

[12] Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," 182.

[13] Thanks to an anonymous referee for this suggestion and for pushing me to clarify here.

[14] Intentionalist theories of interpretation are most notably defended by Jerrold Levinson ("Intention and Interpretation," in *The Pleasures of Aesthetics* (Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 175-213) and Robert Stecker ("Apparent, Implied, and Postulated Authors," *Philosophy and Literature* 11 (1987), pp. 258-271).

[15] Richard Wollheim, "Criticism as Retrieval," in *Art and Its Objects*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 185-205.

[16] Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).

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