

## REVIEW

# A Solid Introduction to an Interesting Field of Aesthetics

Elisabeth Schellekens: *Aesthetics and Morality*.

London and New York: Continuum, 2007. 162 pp. ISBN 978-0-8264-8524-3

In his influential article “Moderate Moralism” (1996), Noël Carroll observes how from the different traditions of aesthetics, analytic aesthetics has been the slowest to devote more substantial attention to the relationship between art and morality. To bring moral concerns to bear on issues of criticism and evaluation of art was considered illegitimate, as it was thought to move attention from the art object itself to something ultimately irrelevant to a proper evaluation of its aesthetic value. Much has changed since Carroll’s article, for the question of the effect of an artwork’s moral value and content, on its aesthetic value as a whole, has received growing attention and the discussion revolving around it has become one of the liveliest ones in current analytic aesthetics with different compelling positions. One important strand of Elisabeth Schellekens’s book *Aesthetics and Morality* tackles this discussion and it offers a nice overview of the debate and the crux issues it involves. Besides presenting an analysis of the discussion initiated by Carroll’s article, other major issues Schellekens covers concern for example the overlap between aesthetics and ethics as fields of enquiry, the values of art, the role of aesthetic experience in developing our sense of morality and in building a meaningful life, as well as the relationship between beauty, virtuousness, and the morally good. Especially in this last case, Schellekens’s account has a strong historical emphasis, discussing the ideas of Plato, Reid, Hume and especially Kant’s view of beauty as the symbol of morality, but she also quickly points out some possible consequences that ideas rising from analytic aesthetics may have on how the relationship between beauty and the morally good should be understood.

For Schellekens, aesthetics and ethics are closely related fields already on a fundamental level, in that for both of them the notion of value occupies center stage. Hence, similar metaphysical issues, for example, about the reality of the values these fields examine, that is, aesthetic and moral, rise in both. Moreover, some of the questions they address intersect with

the same aspects of human life, particularly those regarding how one should live, what sorts of goals one should consider worth pursuing, and the kind of relationship one ought to build to one's neighbors to ensure a meaningful life. Given these apparent similarities between aesthetics and ethics, Schellekens asks whether the attempt to distinguish these two branches of philosophy as distinct fields of philosophy is even meaningful. She refers to Wittgenstein's famous statement from the *Tractatus* according to which "Ethics and Aesthetics are one and the same" and uses it as a backdrop for her own exposition of the subject without, however, offering that detailed a reading of what Wittgenstein might mean by this claim in the transcendental context of the *Tractatus*. The view of the relationship of aesthetics and ethics Schellekens ultimately arrives at in the book is much more modest than what she takes Wittgenstein's view to be. Indeed, there are some evident connections between these realms, but it appears differently in different contexts, taking different levels of strength, and it needs to be analyzed on a case-by-case basis.

Schellekens begins her investigation of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics by tracking the limits of the aesthetic. She goes through two influential accounts of aesthetic experience, Monroe Beardsley's view of aesthetic experience as a unified, intensive, and complex mental state and Jerome Stolnitz's aesthetic attitude theory, however, finding them both unsatisfactory, at least as attempts to nail down the necessary and sufficient conditions of aesthetic experience. However, Schellekens thinks there is a positive side to these failures. That aesthetic experience cannot be neatly demarcated from other kinds of experience and that the elements that have an effect on it cannot be exhaustively singled out in her view actually provides a fruitful basis for exploring the ways in which the realms of the aesthetic and that of the moral, might intersect and interact with one another.

Despite finding it impossible to list definitive criteria for aesthetic experience, Schellekens nevertheless believes that it is tightly connected with the notion of aesthetic value. Aesthetic experience is primarily the experience of aesthetic value. Schellekens hopes that by extracting this variant of value, and by investigating the position other kinds of value have within the realm of art, we will achieve a better grasp of how aesthetic value is related to them, particularly to moral value. Schellekens examines the value of art by a fairly traditional set of concepts. Art can have both intrinsic and extrinsic value, as well as be valuable instrumentally. Intrinsic value is something a thing possesses in virtue of its own qualities alone, while extrinsic value is explained in terms of the value a

thing acquires as a result of the relationships it bears to other objects in the universe. Art can be valuable in many ways and in many contexts. It can, for example, enhance religious feeling (religious value) unite society (societal value), and reveal facts about the past (historical value). All of these variants are for Schellekens examples of the kinds of extrinsic value artworks may possess. The significant amount of the extrinsic values that may be attributed to art does not exclude art from having purely intrinsic value, that is, value that it possesses for its own sake. Schellekens locates the source of this value to the experience art affords.

However, she does not believe that intrinsic value in the case of art can be explained in purely aesthetic terms. Other sorts of values can come into play in constituting an artwork's intrinsic value, that is, the experience it affords. In Schellekens's view, moral value in particular has an important role in this, for the moral point of view a work provides to its characters and their actions has a direct effect on how we experience the work. The moral value of a work is thus different in kind compared to its possible historical value, for only the former has a bearing on our experience of the work and, thus, unlike historical value, moral value is intrinsic to art. Schellekens also introduces the notion of artistic value to explain cases where the value of an artwork cannot be properly accounted for in purely aesthetic terms. This is the case, for example, with most avant-garde art.

Schellekens offers a more detailed examination of the effect a work's moral content can have on its aesthetic and artistic value by going through the different positions that have been presented in debates on the issue within analytic aesthetics – autonomism, moderate moralism, ethicism, sophisticated aestheticism, immoralism, and most moderate moralism – as well as discussing some historical theories, mainly Bell's formalism and Tolstoy's moralist theory of art, that have a direct bearing on the issue. As noted, the position Carroll supports, that is, "moderate moralism" has been an important initiator in the current debate. Carroll famously holds that in some cases the moral value of a work can have an effect on its aesthetic value. This is particularly so in cases where a work prescribes an attitude from the audience to its characters and events portrayed in the work that the audience cannot take on because of the morally reprehensible character of the proposed outlook. In these kinds of cases, the moderate moralist claims, the reprehensible moral content of the work will reduce the work's aesthetic value. This, of course, is presumed to work the other way around as well: if a work prescribes a morally praiseworthy attitude, this will increase the aesthetic value of

the work, though it must be said that usually moderate moralists seem to be more concerned with pointing out how the morally reprehensible content diminishes an artwork's aesthetic value.

According to Schellekens, there is a set of artworks that occupy a particularly vital position with respect to the question of the relevance of an artwork's moral outlook to its overall value as art. These are cases where a work seems worthy of artistic praise *because of* the morally reprehensible outlook it prescribes audience members to take on. She lists some concrete instances of artworks in which this arguably is the case, in other words, in which, the work's artistic success is explained by the work's morally reprehensible character. These examples fly in the face of the moralist's view of the effect of a work's moral reprehensibility on its aesthetic value.

Schellekens concentrates especially on Mathew Kieran's assessment of the relevance of these kinds of cases for the debate. However, her own standing on the issue does not become fully apparent. In fact, it appears a bit wary, for she seems to find something true in both moderate moralism and immoralism. Schellekens' discussion of immoral art and the place she sees it occupying in the debate suggests that she agrees with the immoralist's claim that an immoral character of an artwork can enhance its value as art. But on the other hand especially her use of the example of Leni Riefenstahl's *The Triumph of the Will*, one of the main examples the moralists have cited in favor of their position, throughout the book gives the impression that she also thinks the moderate moralist manages to capture some important aspect of our appreciation of art, namely that an artwork's reprehensible moral content, in this case the celebration of Nazi ideology, can have a negative effect on an artwork's aesthetic value. In the preface to the book, Schellekens remarks how it is not the goal of the book to present any specific theory as absolutely true. Nowhere is this intention more apparent than in the part focusing on the moralist debate of analytic aesthetics and it seems that Schellekens's outlook on the debate is similar to Daniel Jacobsen's, who is quite skeptical of the possibility of providing a fully-fledged single theory of the relationship between aesthetic and moral value. In this instance, ethics and aesthetics do not appear to be one and the same, but to exhibit crisscrossing influences on each other.

One thing that is clear is that Schellekens does not agree with any form of autonomism or aestheticism, not even of the sophisticated kind, that sees no essential connection between moral and aesthetic value. For her, the evidence arising from immoral art, and from cases like Riefenstahl's

*Triumph of the Will*, is so strong that the existence of such a connection just cannot be denied. The problem is how it should be accounted for. However, it is a shame that Schellekens does not consider the version of autonomism which has been presented in the current debate, though she does mention the article in the bibliography of the book,<sup>1</sup> instead presenting Bell's formalism as the main representative of an autonomist view of the relationship between moral and aesthetic value. The problems that have been raised against autonomism may indeed be insurmountable, but much more effort has been put on meeting them than Schellekens' investigation implies.

The third part of the book addresses the relationship between ethics and aesthetics from the perspective of art's and aesthetic experience's capacity to function in moral education as a means to an improved moral life. This discussion is set up in the final chapter of the previous part of the book with an illuminating discussion of what it might mean for an artwork to convey moral knowledge. Some of the reflections found on the educational power of art and the aesthetic are developed on the basis of an assumption seeming to imply that ethics and aesthetics are indeed one and the same. Aesthetic experience's, or to be more exact, beauty's ability to improve moral perception serves for some as a sign that beauty and moral goodness are, in fact, tied to each other on a metaphysical level. They are, in other words, two instances of the same thing. Beauty of a soul is a mark of a virtuous person and the love of beauty is identical with the love of the good. In the history of aesthetics, Plato and Thomas Reid can be singled out as holding some variant of this view, but it also receives a contemporary expression in Colin McGinn's aesthetic theory of virtue.

Schellekens's attitude towards these conceptions of beauty and moral goodness seems to be a bit of two minds. She believes they embody some important truths, but simultaneously Schellekens finds the metaphysical underpinnings of these views objectionable. For her, they are primary examples of views where ethics and aesthetics are considered to be one and the same, and this of course squares rather badly with Schellekens' skeptical attitude towards universal conceptions of that relationship. In other words, the views emphasizing the essential connection between beauty and moral goodness are right in drawing attention to the positive impact that art and other aesthetic objects may have on moral perception and on moral life, but the metaphysical package they bring into the explanation just needs to be dropped. The relationship between the aesthetic and the moral should in this case be understood in more pragmatic

terms. Aesthetic and moral perception are united in that they require the utilization of similar mental capacities and Schellekens rounds up her investigation of this topic with a nice discussion of the role the imagination occupies in both aesthetic and moral life and how they can mutually reinforce one another.

It is hard to find anything that bad to say about Schellekens' book. It provides a succinct overview of the issues it addresses and will be useful reading material to anybody wanting a concise introduction to them. A lot has, of course, been said about the relationship of aesthetics and ethics in other traditions of philosophy, but perhaps it was wise for the sake of unity to concentrate on the analytic tradition with some informative sidesteps to the history of aesthetics.

The only thing I had a hard time figuring out is the intended audience of the book. I doubt it can be aimed at advanced scholars in the field of aesthetics, as the book does not introduce views a person well-read in the subject matter of the book would not know beforehand and neither does it provide detailed novel answers to existing problems. For example, after her analysis of the moralist debate in analytic aesthetics, Schellekens writes that what is needed now "is a new framework that overcomes the limitations of the debate and provides us with fresh spectrum of philosophical alternatives" (91). However, she does very little herself to develop such a framework in the book.

Arguably the primary audience of the book is intended to be students of philosophy and aesthetics, as well as people with a general interest in philosophical questions. The book is written in a highly untechnical style and Schellekens gives explanations of the general terms used in the book that are accessible without prior substantial knowledge of philosophical concepts. The interpretation that the intended audience of the book is wider than mere professional aestheticians, though they will surely benefit from reading the book as well, is supported by observing the defense of the field of aesthetics Schellekens presents at the beginning of the work. One strand of that defense consists in showing that aesthetics is in no way a lesser subject compared to some other fields of philosophy such as metaphysics and epistemology, for metaphysical and epistemological issues have a direct bearing on questions of aesthetics. The second line of skepticism addressed to aesthetics that Schellekens raises comes from the practice of art. It accuses aesthetics for reducing a rich, complex, and meaningful experience's affording phenomenon into abstract concepts and theories. Schellekens insists that this criticism, too, rests on a misconception of the discipline. Aesthetics in no way makes a

living organism into a skeleton, but in fact, in her view, a detailed philosophical analysis of the concepts and qualities pertaining to aesthetic phenomena will make “our experience of them... considerably richer and more rewarding than our pre-philosophical ones” (2). “Philosophical Aesthetics is thus the key to not only an adequate theoretical understanding of aesthetic value and the phenomena derived from it, but also to a more satisfying and worthwhile aesthetic life”, she argues (2).

Now, it seems that Schellekens believes that a focus on the varied intersections between aesthetics and ethics will help in showing both criticisms of aesthetics she outlines as unfounded. However, I think she succeeds only in the second case, for there is very little effort in the book to connect issues of aesthetics to wider epistemological and metaphysical questions, to the issue of realism, for example. There is virtually no reference to the different ways in which the metaphysics of aesthetic properties has been conceived in recent literature and how those relate, for example, to the issue of supervenience present in the philosophy of mind and ethics. Schellekens is indeed right in defending the field of aesthetics against the sorts of criticism she raises, but the defense she herself formulates remains rather underdeveloped.

In the second case, however, Schellekens manages to meet her goal. The careful examinations of the different ways in which the realms of the aesthetic and the moral intersect she presents, succeed in bringing out the complexity and richness of the factors having a role in the experience of art and other aesthetic phenomena. In this respect, Schellekens’ book shows that philosophical aesthetics can indeed make invaluable contributions to our aesthetic life.

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### Note

1. James C. Anderson, and Jeffrey T. Dean, “Moderate Autonomism”, *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 38, no. 2 (1998): 150–66.