



VALOR ESTÉTICO Y VALOR MORAL AESTHETIC VALUE AND MORAL VALUE

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Resumen

Déborá Arango fue la primera artista colombiana famosa internacionalmente. Su trabajo se desarrolló entre 1930 y 1989; este exploró temas controversiales de su época. Por esto, sus obras fueron retiradas de museos locales. En defensa propia, ella dijo: "Estoy convencida de que el arte, como una manifestación cultural, no tiene relación alguna con códigos morales. El arte no es ni moral ni inmoral. Simplemente, su campo no interfiere en ningún principio ético." Hay diferentes puntos de vista sobre la relación entre los valores estéticos y los valores morales: moralismo o eticismo, immoralismo, moralismo oportunista y autonomismo. En este texto quiero i) discutir las semejanzas y diferencias entre estas, y ii) encontrar una forma alternativa de pensar este asunto.

Palabras clave: arte, Déborá Arango, valores estéticos, ética Valores morales.

Abstract

Déborá Arango was the first internationally well-known Colombian female artist. Her work was developed between 1930 and 1980, and it explored controversial issues from that time. Because of that, her works were removed from local museums. In her defense, she said: "I am convinced that art, as a manifestation of culture, does not have anything to do with moral codes. Art is neither amoral nor immoral. Its domain simply doesn't intersect with any ethical principle." There have been many views about the relation between moral values and aesthetic values. Those views are called moralism or ethicism, immoralism, opportunistic moralism and, autonomism. Here, I want to i) discuss the differences and similarities, ii) find an alternative way to think about this matter.

Keywords: aesthetic values, art, Déborá Arango, ethics, moral values.

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Déborá Arango was the first internationally well-known Colombian female artist (at least in Latin America). Her work was developed between 1930 and 1980, and it explored issues that were controversial at that time, like the power of the Catholic Church, the corruption of the government and the nude female body. Because of that, some people asked for her excommunication, and her works were removed from local museums. In her defense, she said in an interview in 1939: “I am convinced that art, as a manifestation of culture, does not have anything to do with moral codes. Art is neither amoral nor immoral. Its domain simply doesn't intersect with any ethical principle.” Is this true? Are aesthetic and moral values completely independent? Should they be? What could follow from any sort of answer to these questions?

There have been many views about this question. On one side, there is the moralist or ethicist view according to which there is a systematic relationship between moral and aesthetic values such that a moral flaw detracts from aesthetic value. Then there is the view that seems to be on the opposite side, called immoralism, which says a moral flaw in a work of art could contribute to its aesthetic value. There is also the view according to which it is not necessary for a work of art to have moral value in order to have aesthetic value, but it is often better if it has it, called opportunistic moralism. The autonomist view, on the other hand, says that it is not necessary at all to think that moral and aesthetic values go together, because they sometimes could be regarded as independent.

Although those positions are sometimes depicted as conflicting with each other, I think there are a lot of common points among them. Here, I want to i) discuss the places where they agree and those where they are inevitably opposed, ii) find an alternative way to think about this matter.

I. Some similarities and differences¹

In “The Ethical Criticism of Art”, Berys Gaut defines his ethicism or moralism in these terms:

Ethicism is the thesis that 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 manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically defective, and if a work manifests ethically commendable attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically meritorious. (283).

That is, moral flaws detract from aesthetic value, and moral virtues give value to a work of art. In this sense, it seems that in Gaut's view aesthetic value is in some sense dependent on moral value. He states that it implies a cognitive-affective view of the value of art, and that the best argument in favor of his thesis is “the merited-response argument”. This argument says that each work of art prescribes certain attitudes, and those prescriptions constitute a work's manifestation of its attitude toward a

¹ It could be worthwhile to recall that definitions, differentiations, and taxonomies are meant to help us understand either reality or theories, but they are in certain sense reductions. The sort of taxonomy I am offering here doesn't escape to this. I am grouping theories and views as opposing one to each other, but I am fully aware it is not completely true all the time. In the debate between descriptive versus prescriptive approaches, for instance, some authors have both kinds of considerations, as well as in the debate between cognitivists versus hedonists, but my point here is that in order to hold their view, the authors emphasize one side of the debate.



subject matter. “If the responses are unmerited, because unethical, we have reason not to respond in the way prescribed” (Gaut 290). And failure to secure the response required is an aesthetic failure of the work.

On the other side, in *Robust Immoralism* A. W. Eaton argues in favor of the thesis that “moral flaws of a particular kind can make a significant contribution to a work’ s aesthetic value.” (2012 281). She says a work’ s moral value could be intrinsic or extrinsic, depending on whether or not it prescribes a moral response, and that immoralism obtains only when the moral flaw is intrinsic (283). She makes her case with the rough hero, and shows that certain works of art are constructed and presented in such a way as to have a “peculiar” aesthetic achievement. This achievement consists of: i) overcoming the audience’ s imaginative resistance to the moral flaws of the rough hero², and ii) leading us to a state of dividing-ourselves-against-ourselves. She concludes: “The result is that we are pulled in opposing directions without hope of relief and left to linger in a delicious state of irresolvable conflict with ourselves.” (287). Like Gaut, she thinks there is a relation between moral and aesthetic values, but unlike him she argues that sometimes moral flaws in a work of art can constitute an aesthetic value.

We have a third view by Eileen John, who argues in favor of moral evaluation of art, but against Gaut’ s thesis says that moral value does not systematically affect the value of art. Nevertheless, art is opportunistic in the sense that:

[...] it seizes on whatever it can in order to make itself matter to us... If so, then seeking to convey and articulate moral truth will often be a good opportunistic choice. We happen to need to have moral matters explored and presented accurately, and we often take great satisfaction in that process as well. Presenting moral truth is thus a promising thing for a work or art to do, if it is to be valued as worth having around (John 340).

In other words, John thinks artistic evaluation can -and in fact most of the time does- include “prioritization of the moral” . This is so because it seems that the art we value the most is that which regards moral matters in a manner that fits with our moral commitments.

James Harold says in “*Autonomism Reconsidered*” that moral and aesthetic values are independent or, in his words, that “neglecting to integrate one’ s moral and aesthetic evaluations is not itself a failure on the agent’ s part” (Harold 140), and it also isn’ t “a failure of rationality” (145). Although it is possible that the evaluator/critic wants to bring her evaluations into line, autonomism says doing so is neither necessary nor required. It just depends on the evaluator’ s psychology (142); but, Harold says, this doesn’ t necessarily entail unrealism about value (146).

Regarding similarities and differences, there is at least one issue on which most of these views appear to agree, namely about the existence of moral value, or the holding of moral realism. Roughly, moral

² The notion of “imaginative resistance” plays a central role in her thesis. It could be understood as the experience of being “made to feel sympathy, admiration, and affection for a character not only despite but sometimes even because of his immorality.” (286). Eaton also says this resistance should be seen as reluctance, rather than an inability to engage in morally deviant considerations; and that it admits of degrees.



realism is the thesis according to which one of the main purposes of moral claims is to report facts, and they are true if they depict the facts rightly. There is a big debate between moral realists about what exactly it means to say that a moral claim (such as “racism is wrong”, for instance) is true, and what facts in the world make it so. I think it is not necessary to go deep into this debate here. For what matters in this paper, moral realism is just the idea that there is moral value in the world.

Having this in mind, we can see that moralism, ethicism, immoralism, and opportunistic moralism presuppose realism about moral value (MV), whereas the autonomist position about this matter is not so clear. On one side, the first four views say there is some kind of MV and it interacts with aesthetic value (AV) in certain sense. The strongest claims about this interrelation seem to come from moralists and ethicists, and then they become more modest. That is, moralists say AV is dependent of MV, ethicists say MV is just relevant to AV – but not determinant of it-, opportunistic moralism say AV tends to come associated with MV, and immoralists say that in some works a negative MV raises AV. On the other hand, it is not necessary for an autonomist to affirm or deny the existence of MV in order to hold her view. In fact, this is what Harold says about this issue:

Autonomism does not imply irrationalism. The autonomist might be an irrealist, but she need not be. The autonomist can be a realist who simply claims that the norms interactionists defend are false; this is consistent with her believing that her first-order moral and aesthetic judgments are true. The autonomist can claim that it is true that it is rationally permitted to evaluate art as both morally good and aesthetically bad, without mixing the two. (Harold 146)

On the other hand, there is a main idea that seems to emphatically separate those positions into two different groups, it is the idea that MV and AV interact (or not). In this case again, moralism and ethicism appear on the side of the interactionists. Immoralism and opportunistic moralism seem to be in between; and autonomism on the side of those who, like Débora Arango, affirm there is no place in which moral value intersects the sphere of aesthetic value. The latter are autonomists in the sense they say AV is independent of MV but, as we saw, it is not even necessary to mention MV. They can just say AV stands by itself, and for this reason I think they can also be called aestheticists. Immoralism, as defended by Eaton (2012), holds a thesis similar to that of moderate ethicism, but now saying that in some cases AV rises in virtue of a moral flaw. But it is worth to notice that in some other cases, immoralism sees AV as independent of MV (at least it is not the case in Eaton’s view). This immoralism is consistent with (a) a moralist view that says moral flaws sometimes detract from AV and (b) the view that in some instances MV is irrelevant to AV. Moralistic opportunism say there is no such thing as an essential or necessary relation between AV and MV, but it is better for art if it establishes one. Moralism establishes a systematic and symmetric relation between the two kinds of values, such that AV goes up or down in sync with MV. In this sense, AV is seen as dependent on MV. Although some say moralism and ethicism are the same, sometimes ethicism is characterized as the thesis that ethical features of an artwork are relevant to its AV, but not determinative of it (Eaton 2003). Nevertheless, as moralism, it establishes the relationship between the two realms.

It seems to me there are still some other important differences among those views. One of them has to do with the approaches themselves, in the sense that some of them are presented more as descriptive



theses whereas others are prescriptive. In this sense some say that, when appreciating art, one cannot (mainly for psychological reasons) take on immoral attitudes as it is required for some artworks or that one in fact sometimes does so, which seems to be a descriptive thesis about our behavior. The prescriptive or normative claim says, on the other side, that we sometimes should take on immoral attitudes when appreciating art or that we should never do so.

With the descriptive approach, there is Walton on one side who argues that when we read fiction, for instance, we have no problem accepting assertions we know are false. That is, we sometimes violate the Reality Principle if the work asks us to do so. We accept the existence of fairies, unicorns, and even the violation of physical laws. But it is not the same when we are asked to imagine ourselves taking immoral positions. In his words, “when it comes to moral matters (moral principles anyway), however, I am more inclined to stick to my guns, and it seems to me that most interpreters are also. I judge characters by the moral standards I myself use in real life.” (Walton and Tanner 37). In few words, according to him, there is moral fiction but there cannot be morality fiction, and he claims it is so because we have an “inability to imagine” (46) other worlds being morally contrary to ours. Eaton calls this model “the interference model” (*cf.* Eaton 2003 172).

On the other hand but still with the descriptive approach, Kieran says that because we clearly recognize the difference between fiction and real life, “we can allow the force of our internalized moral prohibitions to slacken and go with the responses sought from us... we legitimately allow ourselves to entertain thoughts and respond in ways we would not in real life” (Kieran 2006 135). This, he claims, opens up the door to immoralism, the idea that some works are aesthetically better because of their moral flaws, which is precisely what Eaton (2012) says.

To support her Robust Immoralism, Eaton argues that we are lured by the rough hero, seduced “into feeling not just fondness and concern, but also admiration and respect, for an abhorrent and malevolent character” (Eaton 2012 285). This is the descriptive part of her theory. But she goes beyond that, and also makes a prescriptive claim: she says that in order to appreciate the AV of some works, it is necessary that we feel in a certain way, we must enter into immoral considerations: “It is not enough, then, to merely recognize that the rough hero is morally condemnable in the eyes of other characters; we, the audience, must condemn him ourselves in order to understand and appreciate the work in which he appears” (285). Although this means she takes both approaches, my point here is that in order to hold both her immoralist view (Eaton 2012) and her ethicism (Eaton 2003) she needs to emphasize the prescriptive approach. It is so, because her ethicism supposes that we sometimes have good reasons to not take up an ethically defective perspective. In her words:

It can happen that appropriate engagement with an artwork requires adopting an ethically defective attitude or perspective. This is an ethical flaw in the work and renders inaccessible those features that depend upon it. In the case where those features are artistically significant, then the work’s call for an ethically defective response will impede the work’s artistic success in that regard. (Eaton 2003 176)

Then, she says that that influence of the moral flaw upon the AV has degrees, and suggests there are some moral flaws that are universally reprehensible, such as rape (Eaton 2003 176). This is interesting,



because it seems to connect her view with that of Hume, although she has said it is different from that of moralism. And it is so in the sense Hume's moralism entails the idea that we should *never* respond to works of art that require from us immoral responses. Hume says:

[. . .] where the ideas of morality and decency alter from one age to another, and where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation; this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be real deformity [. . .] The want of humanity and of decency, so conspicuous in the characters drawn by several of the ancient poets, diminishes considerably the merit of their noble performances [. . .] We are displaced to find the limits of vice and virtue so much confounded [. . .] (Hume 32)

But maybe one of the most interesting and insightful features of those theories that appears to differentiate them is that related to the idea of the function of art. On one side, there are those called cognitivists because they share the Aristotelian idea according to which art has as its main goal some sort of understanding. Because of that, the point goes, to respond to a work of art which requires us to take up immoral considerations could misguide us.

Gaut, for instance, says this is a “cognitive-affective view of the value of art” in which that value “derives from the way works teach us, not by giving us merely intellectual knowledge, but by bringing that knowledge home to us... by making it vividly present, so disposing us to reorder our thoughts, feelings, and motivations in the light of it” (Gaut 290). Kieran, who holds a cognitive immoralism, states that his position “starts by agreeing with the relevance condition underlying one argument for ethicism. Where the moral character of a work is tied to its cognitive value then its moral character is relevant to its value as art... However what is distinctive about cognitive immoralism is the claim that in at least quite few cases cognitivism also explains how and why the relationship can invert” (Kieran 2006 138). Nevertheless, on this side there is also the idea that immoral considerations are not always misleading, but rather illuminating because they expand the horizons of our understanding (Walton and Tanner; Kieran 2006).

We could call those who deny this thesis, expressionists or hedonists. It is common to those in the second group to say art is just for fun, which need not be thought to play down the importance of art. Rather, it reminds us that we need to exercise our imagination, and says that the freer that exercise can be the better I suppose autonomists could be in this category, along with immoralists and those who hold that we can just view taking up immoral attitudes as playing a role game, as a kind of chance to do, be or feel what in real life is not allowed. This is the way Walton and Tanner puts it: “we are the victims, often willing and eager ones, of two conflicting impulses. On the one hand there is the delight of expanding our imaginative lives by adopting one variety of what we think of as the aesthetic attitude [. . .] On the other hand we are stuck by, however much the details may alarm or amuse us, Tolstoy's late-found insistence that art should tell us the truth and that we should reject that which doesn't” (65).



II. Dealing with contradiction and trying to sketch a better answer

As Kieran suggests, all these problems have motivated a sort of anti-theoretical position, according to which there is not essential relation between AV and MV. Roughly, this position argues in favor of the moral opportunistic view, and is mainly grounded in the difficulty to establish the moral character of an artwork (Kieran 2006 137). But as he himself notices, this does not seem to solve the problem. Maybe we can look for a clue in other side.

In moral philosophy, contextualism is the thesis according to which there are some objective values but their instantiation in each particular culture is different. Aristotle is commonly seen as holding this view when he characterizes the virtues (*cf.* Nussbaum). It is not a rigid position, because it does not imply absolute values; and it is not a relativist one because it does not entail that everything is acceptable. I think it would be interesting if we could find something similar in aesthetics.

Lucian Krukowski defines contextualism in aesthetics as opposed to autonomism. He says autonomists think of artworks as a unique class with intrinsic properties, holding internal relations in a tradition. They are mostly worried about meaning and value, instead of about ontological issues. They also think appreciation of art is a matter of sensory enjoyment, and artworks are mainly sources of pleasure. In few words, he says the independency of artworks is defined by the fact that neither artist's intentions nor spectator's or critics responses have ontological force to what the work is (Krukowski 126). Contextualists, on the contrary, do not think artworks form part of a unique class, or that they have a specific set of properties that deserve a unique kind of response. They are mostly worried about ontology, and think that appreciation of art not only involves perceptual properties, but rather concepts. Meaning and value cannot be identified through examination of any unique set of sensory properties, and artworks shouldn't be seen mainly as sources of pleasure. The function of art is essentially cognitive.

I think one of the most important differences between the postures sketched by Krukowski here has to do with the way both sides tend to think about the role of history in appreciation and evaluation of art. He says history of art or traditions of art are of primary importance to autonomists because the status of artworks and the value of them are established through internal relations. The reliance on continuity, tradition, and acculturation is very important (Krukowski 132). The approach to history from contextualists is different in two senses. First of all, history of art or traditions of art are just part of the whole history, and do not have a preeminent part in the appreciation of artworks. The realm of art is open and ubiquitous. Because of that, there is no institutional reverence and there is "skepticism about the normative claims of traditions – particularly those traditions that presume to be dominant" (Krukowski 133). Second, there is a change in the direction in which history is read: to autonomists the past gives meaning to the present, while to contextualists the present gives meaning to the past.

I think this can explain why Débora Arango's art and A. W. Eaton's view seem contradictory, and at the same time why Eaton's theory seems richer than the other theories. I believe Arango was not fully aware of what she was doing with her work (or she was pretending not to be). Maybe she claimed art does not have any to do with morals because she was called immoral. Nonetheless, she criticized the Catholic Church, the Colombian government, and tried to honor women in different ways



(even taking the risk of being the first Colombian female artist to portray the nude women body)³. It just seems contradictory to point out social injustices and moral flaws through art and then say art has nothing to do with moral issues.

But if we ignore her declarations and think of her as a contextualist, as it is defined by Krukowski, we can see her as expressing both her lack of institutional reverence and her “skepticism about the normative claims of traditions – particularly those traditions that presume to be dominant” (Krukowski 133). Because of that, she appears as immoral to those who want to preserve tradition: those who thought at her time women shouldn’t act on public issues, criticize the Church, the government or, in general, do what men do (like make art and portray nude women, for instance).

Eaton’s view about the relation between AV and MV seems contradictory because she can be seen as a moralist and also as an immoralist. This is because she holds both that aesthetic flaws in some works of art detract from aesthetic value (2003), and that aesthetic flaws in some other artworks raise the aesthetic value (2012). But her position seems very coherent if we understand it as a contextualist. Since contextualists think it is the present what gives meaning to the past, Krukowski says that for them there is not something like a “real” value that stands forever. It is what Eaton manifests as follows:

Although we today consider rape morally reprehensible, the painting (Titan’s Rape of Europa) itself does not invite moral disapproval of Europa’s rape. But nor does the painting invite moral approval of the event depicted; rather, taking the painting on its own terms means suspending moral judgment of any sort altogether. This is not to say that moral judgment is misplaced in such cases, but it does mean that when we bring our twenty-first century moral concerns to bear in this way, it should be done with the awareness that we are disregarding the work’s perspective. (Eaton 2012 283).

Nonetheless, she had also argued in favor of the thesis that the moral flaw of the same painting detracts from its AV (Eaton 2003)⁴. Obviously, it can only be true if she also holds the idea that it is our present moral rejection of rape what should make us reevaluate what we consider to be the AV of the work.

Here I would like to suggest a last point. I think Eaton’s position is the most promising because it is flexible enough to give room to moralisms and immoralisms, but at the same time avoids the risk of relativism. It is worth to notice that the previous point about the importance of the present to the meaning and the value of the work does not mean something like the total absence of value. Here is how I see her construction of this notion.

She says the moral flaw of Titan’s Rape of Europa consist on its calling upon the viewer to respond to its problematic depiction of rape with erotic feelings. I will quote *in extenso* her argument to show why this is problematic:

³Obviously, this could be interpreted in many ways. Like Eaton, we could say she was rather perpetuating women social situation, but the right interpretation of her work with nude woman bodies is something that goes beyond my interest in this paper.

⁴As far as I know, she hasn’t retracted from that thesis.



1. In many societies, women, just because they are women, are denied equality of opportunity in many arenas and often suffer abuse, harassment, and discrimination of various sorts.
2. This is a grave injustice.
3. The subordination of women is not inevitable but rather is sustained and reproduced by a complex of social factors that can be explicit (as in the denial of rights and privileges, or in discriminatory practices) or more subtle (as in the influence of religion, television, advertising, etc.).
4. Rape and the constant threat of rape play a significant role in women's subordination. That is, rape is a *mechanism* of gender inequality and not merely a symptom of it.
5. Eroticizing rape is a part of what sustains and promotes this inequality. Its efficacy stems from the fact that tying gender inequality to sexual pleasure – a pleasure in which almost all are deeply invested – renders that inequality not just tolerable and easier to accept but attractive, pleasurable, and even desirable. (167).

This argument shows Eaton does not think moral value is relative to what individuals or specific groups believe as right or wrong. In fact, she says rape is universally reprehensible (Eaton 2003 176). I like this position because I also think there are good and bad things for us as human beings, citizens, women, men, parents, friends, as well as members of big and small groups. But I am fully aware that all those “identities” sometimes give us and require from us conflicting considerations and responses. Maybe that's why at the same time we want art that fulfills conflicting tasks.

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