

AESTHETICS AND MORALITY

Reviewed by Lisa Grover

University of Kent

Aesthetics And Morality. By Elisabeth Schellekens, London: Continuum, 2007, Pp Vii + 162. £55.00 (hardcover).

Elizabeth Schellekens aims to provide a philosophical examination of the relation between aesthetics and morality, directed towards students of aesthetics, as well as those with a general interest in philosophy and the arts.

In Part One, Schellekens argues that aesthetic or moral value is necessarily part of the intrinsic value of a piece of art and that both contribute to its overall artistic value. The argument is derived from a concern that philosophical enquiries into aesthetics and morality overlap and that there may not be a clear boundary between them. She argues that aesthetic experience is philosophically different from moral experience. According to her, the ancient Greek philosophers were wrong to think that aesthetic value cannot be understood independently of moral value, for we cannot reduce aesthetic value to moral value. One important difference identified is that we expect moral judgement to have behavioural implications, whereas aesthetic judgement does not.

For Schellekens, it is not possible to define aesthetic experience by outlining the necessary and sufficient conditions for a specifically aesthetic mental state. She thinks that attempts to do this fail because either the definition narrows the sphere of aesthetic experience for no good reason or it assumes that aesthetic experience is uniform. Instead, she thinks that aesthetic experience is best defined as the experience of aesthetic value. It consists of a multitude of different mental states that vary from case to case; for example, she argues that the mental states involved in the experience of looking at a painting vary from those in reading a poem. Despite this lack of a clear definition of aesthetic experience, she argues, we can contrast aesthetic value with moral value, as the former is grounded in aesthetic qualities such as serenity and gracefulness and the latter is grounded in moral qualities such as cruelty or justice.

Concerning the value of art, she claims that it is constituted by many different types of value, which fall under two categories: valuing art for its own sake (intrinsic value) and

valuing art because of some further purpose (extrinsic value). She then identifies three types of intrinsic value important to our experience of art; aesthetic, moral and artistic, concluding that aesthetic and moral value jointly contribute to the overall artistic value.

In Part Two, she commences by defending the position that art has cognitive value and that it can yield knowledge. Art, for her, can not only yield general knowledge, but can also have moral content and value. She does not think that this knowledge necessarily takes propositional form, but that we may gain from art a broader understanding of the morally good person. Having established that art can have moral value, she questions whether the moral value of an artwork can determine its aesthetic or artistic value and whether good art must also have a moral purpose. In answering the former question she draws contrasts between Autonomism and Aestheticism, whose general argument is that aesthetic beauty can, to a varying extent depending upon the particular theory, be evaluated independently of moral issues, and Moralism and Ethicism, whose general argument is that moral assessment is central to our aesthetic assessment. She elaborates the advantages and challenges posed by each position, before concluding that we cannot fully answer this question without first deciding whether art must have a moral purpose to be good art.

She argues that there are problems when aesthetic and moral value appear to conflict, drawing the surprising conclusion that the aesthetic or artistic value of an artwork can actually be enhanced because it promotes a morally reprehensible position. She cites three arguments to support this position: firstly, that a work of art that promotes a morally reprehensible view can be good because we can enjoy it even if this is not something we would wish to do ourselves; secondly, it can be good because we enjoy the depiction of a lack of an inhibition that we ourselves have; thirdly, it can be good because it satisfies some morbid curiosity. This problem that Schellekens identifies regarding the conflict between aesthetic and moral value is interesting, but it appears to depend upon an agreed convergence upon moral norms that is perhaps too strong. It is not clear that there is agreement on what is morally reprehensible, so we may want to question whether those who find value in a 'morally reprehensible' work themselves find what is depicted morally reprehensible.

She takes the possibility that the aesthetic value of an artwork can be enhanced because it promotes a morally reprehensible view to cause problems for the position that aesthetic beauty can be evaluated independently of moral concerns, and also for the position that

moral assessment is central to our aesthetic assessment. She concludes that art need not have a moral purpose to be good art.

In Part Three, she argues that there is a divergence between the concepts of beauty and goodness. She thinks it impossible to identify a uniquely aesthetic sensibility because it is not possible to adequately explain an aesthetic sensibility independently of appeal to aesthetic qualities, resulting in explanatory circularity. She also rejects the position that aesthetic judgement is reducible to moral judgement, but she does draw from this position the idea that similar psychological abilities are used in aesthetic and moral judgement. She argues that aesthetic sensibility is a competence in grasping aesthetic qualities that is developed through experience, akin to our development of moral sensibility. However, she does not think that there is a causal relation between our ability to sense moral qualities and our ability to sense aesthetic qualities, as there are too many counter examples, such as a charity worker with no appreciation of Shakespeare.

She concludes that we cannot identify a uniquely aesthetic sensibility because the aesthetic domain shares some ground with the moral domain. Yet, for Schellekens, it does not follow that we can go so far as to argue that the same skills are involved in aesthetic and moral judgements and hold that being a morally good person entails having aesthetic skills. She argues that the shared ground between the aesthetic and moral domains does not affect the character of the original the aesthetic experience, so there is a perceptible divergence between aesthetic and moral concepts.

This is a good introduction to the issues that emerge at the intersection of aesthetics and morality. The philosophical challenges raised are illuminated with pertinent examples to engage the reader and make the arguments clear.