



© 2013 Centre for Ethics, KU Leuven. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial No Derivatives license (CC-BY-NC-ND).

McGregor, R. (2013). Moderate Autonomism Revisited. *Ethical Perspectives*, 20(4), pp.403-426

## *Moderate Autonomism Revisited*

### ABSTRACT:

In this paper I propose a new argument for moderate autonomism. I call this the ‘critical argument’ to distinguish it from the empirical argument of James C. Anderson and Jeffrey T. Dean, and the no-error argument of James Harold. My strategy is to first employ the criticism of Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis to demonstrate the moralist failure to account for the complexity of the relationship between literature and morality, and then offer a more promising alternative. I set out the autonomist, moralist, and immoralist positions in the value interaction debate in §1, and identify problems with classifying the two critics in contemporary terms. In §2 I discuss Arnold’s cultural criticism as both a part of – and a reaction to – the public moralist tradition that dominated Britain in the nineteenth century, drawing attention to his criterion of ‘seriousness’. §3 examines Leavis’ literary criticism, focusing on his conception of the relationship between composition and life, and his criterion of ‘maturity’. Drawing on the similarities between Arnold and Leavis, I demonstrate that their concern with morality differs from that of the contemporary moralists in §4. In §5 I employ John Gibson’s distinction between normative and informative values to complete the argument for moderate autonomism. I test my argument against an extreme case, a hypothetical literary equivalent to *The Birth of a Nation*, in §6, and conclude that moderate autonomism provides the most compelling solution to the value interaction debate.

KEY WORDS: ethicism, literature, moderate autonomism, moderate moralism, value theory

### 1. THE VALUE INTERACTION DEBATE

I have adopted ‘value interaction’ from Robert Stecker’s (2005: 138) analysis of the discussion, and ‘value interaction debate’ is the term I shall employ for the late twentieth century instantiation of the historical question of the relationship between moral value and aesthetic value in art. The issue has taken different forms over the millennia, but the contemporary dispute is concerned with the relationship between moral defects and merits on the one hand, and aesthetic defects and merits on the other. Noël Carroll (1996) initiated the discussion with ‘Moderate Moralism’, arguing that a moral defect in a work of art is sometimes an aesthetic defect. In ‘The Ethical Criticism of Art’, Berys Gaut (1998) proposed a stronger version of moralism called ‘ethicism’, where a moral defect is always a *pro tanto* aesthetic defect in a work. Different versions of moralism have dominated historically, and

notable contributions have been made by Plato, Hume, Tolstoy, and Martha Nussbaum. Carroll defined autonomism as the position that different types of value – aesthetic, moral, cognitive, and others – are independent of each other in art. Anderson and Dean (1998) advanced ‘Moderate Autonomism’, the view that a moral defect is never an aesthetic defect, and criticised moralists for conflating two conceptually distinct categories of criticism.<sup>1</sup> Matthew Kieran (2003) offered a third alternative with ‘Forbidden Knowledge: The Challenge of Immoralism’, where a moral defect is sometimes a merit in a work of art *qua* art due to the cognitive value of that defect.

There have been numerous other contributions to an issue which is far from resolved, and has spread beyond the confines of aesthetics journals in the new century,<sup>2</sup> but the three main positions are moralism, autonomism, and immoralism. Moralism and immoralism support value interaction, while autonomism claims that the two types of value are independent of each other and do not therefore interact. Due to the limitations of space, I shall focus on the dispute between moralism and autonomism, confining my mention of immoralism to a brief comment in §5. I shall also focus on moral defects as opposed to moral merits. Broadly speaking, moralists make the additional claim that moral merits are (also) aesthetic merits, but the aesthetic relevance of moral defects is the most-debated. The discussion has primarily been concerned with defects in works of narrative art, with examples typically drawn from literature and film. As I am basing my philosophical argument on evidence from literary criticism, I shall restrict my claims to literature, although I close with an observation regarding the application of my conclusion to other art forms.

*Prima facie* there should be no difficulty classifying both Arnold and Leavis in terms of the debate. Arnold was a Victorian public moralist and maintained that literary criticism should be cultural criticism. Leavis did not belong to an intellectual or critical movement, but was known for his assertions that there were no exclusively literary values and judgements, only moral significance and criticism of life, and was designated “the Critic as Moralist” by T.S. Eliot (1965: 13). The classification of Arnold and Leavis is not, however, quite so straightforward. Eliot accused Arnold of paving the way for aestheticism, the late nineteenth century artistic movement which valued beauty above all else.<sup>3</sup> I shall place aestheticism in the same category as Clive Bell’s formalism, characterised by Carroll as ‘radical autonomism’, the view that it is incoherent, unintelligible, or inappropriate to evaluate art in moral terms (1996: 224).<sup>4</sup> Despite his reputation, Leavis was critical of both didactic art and didactic criticism, condemning Eliot and Samuel Johnson for the latter.<sup>5</sup> Leavis’ belief that art should ‘enact’ its moral valuations is somewhat opaque, but suggests that his moralism

might not match the positions advanced by Carroll or Gaut. In fact, both Arnold and Leavis have highly complex – and, at times, enigmatic – views on the relationship between aesthetic value and moral value, which I shall attempt to unpack in the following three sections.

## 2. CRITICISM OF LIFE

John Stuart Mill was the most influential British philosopher of the nineteenth century, his work dominating Victorian intellectual development in the period between romanticism and modernism. His most significant rival as a social critic was Arnold, and Stefan Collini (1991) classifies both men as *public moralists*. Like the German *Bildung* tradition that preceded it, Victorian public moralism valued a humanist education delivered through art and literature, focusing in particular on the significance and cultivation of character, for which altruism was the highest virtue and selfishness the lowest vice (1991: 67-68). The views of the two public moralists on the value of literature were, however, very different:

Now I set no value whatsoever on writing for its own sake and have much less respect for the literary craftsman than for the manual labourer except so far as he uses his powers in promoting what I consider true and just (Mill cited in Collini 1991: 125). But for supreme poetical success more is required than the powerful application of ideas to life; it must be an application under the conditions fixed by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty. Those laws fix as an essential condition, in the poet's treatment of such matters as are here in question, high seriousness; – the high seriousness which comes from absolute sincerity (Arnold 1880: 48).

Arnold's contribution to public moralism was the role he envisaged for literary criticism as *criticism of life*, the social criticism now known as 'cultural criticism'. Criticism, and the literature upon which it commented, had a moral task. Where Mill maintained that literature was instrumentally valuable – to the extent that it promoted truth and justice – Arnold saw poetry as setting the standards for truth in the first instance. Poetry was not thus a means to an end, but the end itself and the literary critic was a cultural critic whose goal was to refine the prevailing *provinciality* of the narrow-minded *Philistines* (middle class) in favour of a balanced *urbanity* (1864a: 60-61). Arnold's public moralism set out to challenge the morals of the public, drawing attention to its political and religious prejudices while promoting the Victorian concern with character and the virtue of selflessness. Literature was intimately related to morality, politics, and religion, and the role of the cultural critic was to inspire, nurture, and direct the literary aspiration for truth and beauty. Arnold defined his cultural

criticism as: “*a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world*” (1864b: 38).

Arnold’s use of *disinterest* suggests a Kantian perspective on aesthetic judgement, which is supported by his view that the cognitive free play produced by poetry was pleasurable and valuable in itself (1864b: 16).<sup>6</sup> He maintained that disinterest was the most important rule for criticism and that it could be achieved by “keeping aloof from what is called ‘the practical view of things;’” i.e., by distancing critical judgement from moral and political motives (1864b: 18). Indeed, it

is the business of the critical power, as I said in the words already quoted, ‘in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is’ (1864b: 6).

The differentiation of the cultural and practical spheres and the desire to see the object itself are further reminders of Kant’s aesthetic theory. The differentiation also distinguishes Arnold from contemporary critics – like Edward Said and Terry Eagleton – who believe that literary criticism should be a cultural commentary rather than an academic discipline: in contrast to Arnold, postcolonial and Marxist cultural criticism has a decidedly political (and moral) basis.<sup>7</sup>

The Kantian elements in Arnold provide the first evidence that his moralism may not fit the contemporary mould. There is a peculiar tension between his views on literature and his views on criticism, between the moral function of the former and the moral neutrality of the latter. As a public moralist Arnold is concerned with the moral task of literature, the identification of literature with life, and the close relation between morality, religion, and art. As an aesthete he is concerned with critical objectivity, the pleasure produced by the free play of poetry, and the protection of critical judgement from moral, political, and religious prejudice. Viewed from the perspective of the value interaction debate, *criticism of life* seems a clear indication of moralism, but Arnold’s explicit concern that criticism should avoid the issue of practical and instrumental application seems an equally clear indication of autonomism.

The complexity of Arnold’s view of the value of literature is also reflected in his conception of the relationship between form and content. Regarding content, “the substance and matter of the best poetry acquire their special character from possessing, in an eminent degree, truth and seriousness” (1880: 21). These criteria are derived from Aristotle’s famous observation on the superiority of poetry over history:

the one tells of what has happened, the other of the kinds of things that might happen. For this reason poetry is something more philosophical and more worthy of serious attention than history; for poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars (*Poetics*, 1451b4-8).

Seriousness is particularly important for Arnold, and its absence is the reason he holds Chaucer in lower regard than Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare. Chaucer lacks the high and excellent seriousness, which Aristotle assigns as one of the grand virtues of poetry. The substance of Chaucer's poetry, his view of things and his criticism of life, has largeness, freedom, shrewdness, benignity; but it has not this high seriousness (1880: 33).

Given that one might expect to find the moral value of a literary work in its content, the criterion of seriousness seems singularly amoral for a public moralist. Recall that Mill's second criterion for instrumental literary value is justice. Justice is clearly a moral term, but *seriousness* is somewhat neutral: if 'serious' means thoughtful, sincere, or earnest then a poem might have value in spite of promoting injustice – as long as its content is sincere. With regard to form, Arnold's criteria of judgement were *movement* and *diction* (1880: 22). His position is further complicated by the fact that although he believed content and form could be distinguished for critical purposes, they were in fact inseparable:

In proportion as this high stamp of diction and movement, again, is absent from a poet's style and manner, we shall find, also, that high poetic truth and seriousness are absent from his substance and matter (1880: 22).

This link between form and content, the way in which style and manner affect truth and seriousness, means that truth and seriousness cannot be evaluated independently of poetic form. I shall return to Arnold and the criterion of seriousness in §4.

### 3. INTEREST IN LIFE

Leavis may resist classification as a critic, but he was clearly influenced by contemporaries such as I.A. Richards. Like Richards, he advocated the close, analytical reading of texts, but unlike Richards and the other New Critics, his internal approach to criticism retained the link between literary and cultural concerns. In his evaluation of the novels of Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and Charles Dickens, Leavis makes a distinction between *composition* and *life*. The distinction goes by different guises: "art" (1948: 2), "composition" (1948: 7), and "form" (1948: 29) on the one hand; "life" (1948: 2), "moral significance" (1948: 7), and "human interest" (1948: 29) on the other. Having distinguished

between composition and life, Leavis then seeks to show the intimacy of their relation, which is similar – if not identical – to that which Arnold envisaged for form and content. With respect to Austen, Leavis states:

her interest in ‘composition’ is not something to be put over against her interest in life; nor does she offer an ‘aesthetic value’ that is separable from moral significance (1948: 7).

As a matter of fact, when we examine the formal perfection of *Emma*, we find that it can be appreciated only in terms of the moral preoccupations that characterize the novelist’s peculiar interest in life. Those who suppose it to be an ‘aesthetic matter’, a beauty of ‘composition’ that is combined, miraculously, with ‘truth to life’, can give no adequate reason for the view that *Emma* is a great novel, and no intelligent account of its perfection of form (1948: 8).

Leavis rejected the pursuit of composition as a literary end in itself, a tendency he attributed to Gustave Flaubert and other “Aesthetic writers” (1948: 8). Commenting on Henry James’ critique of George Eliot, he asks:

Is there any great novelist whose preoccupation with ‘form’ is not a matter of his responsibility towards a rich human interest, or complexity of interests, profoundly realized? – a responsibility involving, of its very nature, imaginative sympathy, moral discrimination and judgement of relative human value (1948: 29)?

In his criticism of Conrad’s *Nostromo*, Leavis demonstrates how the richness and subtlety of the writing – the formal pattern of (and interplay between) moral significances – reflects the richness and subtlety of the moral interest (1948: 191-195). The implication is that superficial and insensitive writing will reflect a superficial and insensitive moral interest.

R.P. Bilan notes the difficulty of determining whether the standards Leavis sets for the novel are literary, moral, or a hybrid of the two (1979: 164). Leavis’ criteria were concreteness, realisation, pattern, impersonality, maturity, and specificity. Bilan identifies *concreteness* and *impersonality* as both being concerned with the author, the extent to which the novel is “a direct manifestation of the richness of the life of the author” (1979: 170). Leavis regarded the work as a counterpart to the life of the artist in the sense that, e.g., Conrad’s experience of the sea is evinced in many of his novels (1979: 169). Bilan maintains that *maturity* “involves control of the emotions by the intelligence, or, at least, a proper balance of emotion and intellect” (1979: 178). *Specificity* refers to inclusiveness, which Leavis describes as “an adequacy to the complexities of the real in its concrete fulness” (1948: 91). I shall summarise his criteria for literary value as concreteness, realisation, pattern, maturity, and inclusiveness

– noting that all five terms appear to be concerned with breaking down the distinction between composition and life, emphasising instead the *artistic interest in life*.

If Leavis' literary criticism employs terms which straddle the aesthetic-moral divide, and aim at eradicating the art-life divide, there seems no reason to describe his position in the moralist-autonomist debate as complex. Leavis did indeed seek to establish an identity between moral and literary criticism: criticism of life in a work of literary art *is* literary criticism, just as criticism of the art of literature *is* criticism of life. He also, however, sought to distance himself from the overt and explicit judgements of literature by moral standards. His commentary on Johnson demonstrates that he is not a moralist in contemporary terms. Johnson criticised Shakespeare for prioritising pleasure over instruction in his work and believed that it was a writer's duty to improve the world and promote the virtue of justice (1765a: 129). He even suggested that while *King Lear* had value in accurately representing the miscarriages of justice common in human life, an ending where justice was served would be more likely to improve than detract from the play (1765b: 221).<sup>8</sup>

Leavis' observation is:

Johnson cannot understand that works of art *enact* their moral valuations. It is not enough that Shakespeare, on the evidence of his works, 'thinks' (and feels) morally; for Johnson a moral judgement that isn't *stated* isn't there. Further, he demands that the whole play shall be conceived and composed as statement. The dramatist must start with a conscious and abstractly formulated moral and proceed to manipulate his puppets so as to demonstrate and enforce it (1952: 110-111).

The difference between Leavis and Johnson is in the *enacting*, and Leavis later writes that "all works of art *act* their moral judgements" (1967: 210). Enacting is a function of the relationship between composition and life: the richness and subtlety of the composition both fashions – and is fashioned by – the moral interest or significance. The kind of explicit moral statement Johnson seeks is therefore typically immature, in contrast to a mature work which enacts its morality in its writing. In the next section, I shall examine Leavis' view of Arnold and in so doing explain the relevance of the criteria of seriousness and maturity to the contemporary debate.

#### 4. SERIOUSNESS AND MATURITY

Leavis is very critical of Arnold, agreeing with T.S. Eliot's description of him as a "propagandist for criticism" rather than a literary critic (Leavis 1982: 54). Following Eliot again, Leavis nonetheless accords Arnold's 'The Study of Poetry' high praise, singling out

the “best-known tag from the essay, ‘criticism of life’” (1982: 57). Although Leavis admits that the concept is not entirely clear, he believes it is an indication of the “seriousness” – significantly, one of Arnold’s own criteria for literary value – with which Arnold conceived of the function of poetry (1982: 57). The phrase constitutes precisely the type of term one would expect to find in Leavis’ elucidation of *interest in life*.

Bilan maintains that Leavis’ defence of criticism of life indicates his agreement with Arnold that moral judgements do in fact differ from literary judgements: “Moral values certainly enter into evaluation of the work of art, but they can only be invoked by the critic’s sensibly bringing them in with due relevance” (1979: 69). I have shown that Arnold’s insistence on objectivity, disinterestedness, and urbanity in criticism point towards a view which is sympathetic to autonomism. Similarly, Leavis differentiates Arnold’s moralism from that of Johnson, and the difference seems to be in the implicit or mature moralism of the former as opposed to the explicit or immature moralism of the latter. Leavis’ view is that while the judgement of literature is the judgement of life, literature is distinguished from didactic works (involving either direct or indirect instruction) by its enactment of morality, which is in turn a function of the relationship between composition and life. The notion of enacting requires further clarification, however, and I turn to Bilan and John Casey.

Casey refers to Leavis’ commentary on the formal perfection of *Emma* (quoted above), and Bilan to Leavis’ commentary on George Eliot:

It is important to notice what Leavis does *not* say. He does not say that Jane Austen arrives at the right moral conclusions about life; [...] Nor does he suggest that the moral code which emerges in Jane Austen’s novels is one which, if we admire her as a writer, we should in some sense be prepared to adopt, or at least to approve (Casey 1966: 181).

Again, though, it is interesting to note what Leavis does not say: she, and her novels, are ‘wholesome’ not because of the ethical code, but due to the nature of her ‘moral sensibility’ (Bilan 1979: 189).

Casey claims that Leavis uses ‘moral’ in contrast to *amoral* rather than *immoral* (1966: 181), which is consistent with Bilan: “It seems to me that by ‘moral’ Leavis often means ‘fully human’. [...] To be immature is to fail to be fully human” (1979: 185). Both characterisations appear accurate and Leavis’ view on the relationship between art and life might easily be called a *human* rather than *moral* concern. The distinction in Leavis is between the immature and mature, art which is *morally didactic* and art which *enacts its morality*. His requirement

is that a work exhibit moral maturity rather than promote a particular moral view. Leavis' moral concern is thus opposed both to amorality and didacticism, and mirrors Arnold's differentiation between moral judgements and literary judgements in criticism. One may pass a moral or political judgement on a literary work, but this is not a literary judgement because judging a work of literature *qua* literature requires disinterest and urbanity, which preclude such practical concerns.

There is further evidence for the compatibility of Leavis' and Arnold's views in Leavis' (1982: 57-58) defence of Arnold against Eliot's accusation of radical autonomism. Eliot claimed that Arnold's desire to keep criticism free from moral and religious prejudice was the beginning of an aestheticism which separated art and literary value from life and moral value, and emphasised the former at the expense of the latter (1932: 439). Leavis notes that *criticism of life* is directly opposed to the aesthete's view of art and beauty as detached from – and more significant than – life and morality. One can see how Arnold's insistence that criticism should maintain a distance from the practical could be interpreted in this way, however, and the significance Arnold accords to this distance is shared by Leavis: both critics rejected didacticism, and recognised the tension between the moral function of literature and the need not to subsume it under this function. The perspective which emerges from Arnold and Leavis is that art and life, literature and morality, are inseparable, but that the moral value of literature involves mature human interest rather than an explicit moral code. Moral seriousness and moral maturity are thus the key, rather than a just ethical code.

I am not suggesting that the correct characterisation of Arnold and Leavis in contemporary terms is as autonomists, because I think that both would ultimately fall on the moralist side of the division. Arnold's brand of public moralism is probably compatible with moderate moralism, especially when one considers Carroll's insistence that moral defects only *sometimes* feature in the aesthetic evaluation of a work (1996: 236). The internal relation between literature and morality suggested by Leavis' enacting corresponds to at least some extent with 'most moderate moralism', Kieran's initial position in the debate:

The moral features implicit in and central to the imaginative experience afforded by a work are relevant to the narrative's value as art to the extent that they undermine or promote the intelligibility, with respect to appropriately sensitive audiences, of the characters, events, and states of affairs as represented (2001: 34).

I do not actually wish to classify either critic in terms of the contemporary debate. I have focused on the complexity of their respective positions,<sup>9</sup> particularly those aspects which are sympathetic to autonomism, in order to apply these aspects to my argument against moralism.

## 5. MODERATE AUTONOMISM

The three theories in the contemporary debate with which I am concerned are:

Moderate moralism: a moral defect is sometimes an aesthetic defect in a work of art.

Ethicism: a moral defect is always a *pro tanto* aesthetic defect in a work of art.

Moderate autonomism: a moral defect is never an aesthetic defect in a work of art.

In the course of my argument, I shall also mention the following two theories:

Immoralism: a moral defect is sometimes an aesthetic merit in a work of art.

Radical autonomism: a work of art cannot be morally defective.

Carroll states that the moral content of a work – such as *Madame Butterfly* – is essential to understanding the narrative (1996: 228-229). He claims that narratives deepen moral understanding by providing a moral education and that the failure to elicit the required moral response – he employs the example of Brett Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* – is an aesthetic failure. An aesthetic defect is thus a flaw which “actually deters the response to which a work aspires” (1996: 234). Using the example of tragedy, he notes that a tragic hero must have a particular type of character (admirable, but with a fatal flaw): “the tragedy will fail on its own terms – terms internal to the practice of tragedy – when the characters are of the wrong sort” (1996: 232). Where the required response is morally defective, the moral defect remains an aesthetic defect even if the audience takes it up because the morally defective response constitutes a potential obstacle to engagement with the work (1996: 230-233). Carroll explains this apparent contradiction by using the example of a war-time film that depicts the enemy as sub-human, claiming that in such films “the moral flaws sit like time-bombs, ready to explode aesthetically once morally sensitive viewers, listeners and readers encounter them” (1996: 234).

Gaut's argument begins with the claim that representational works of art manifest an attitude by prescribing certain responses. Of de Sade's *Juliette, Or Vice Amply Rewarded*, he states:

the novel does not just present imagined events, it also presents a point of view on them, a perspective in part constituted by actual feelings, emotions, and desires that the reader is prescribed to have towards the merely imagined events (1998: 289).

There are two ways in which prescribed responses can fail: *Jane Eyre*, e.g., could fail to engage the empathy of the reader for the protagonist; or, the novel could successfully engage the empathy of the reader for John Reed, a morally defective character. In the first instance, the novel would have failed to prescribe the *merited response*; in the second, the work would have successfully prescribed an *unmerited response*. An unmerited response constitutes a

failure because there is an ethical reason for not responding as prescribed (1998: 289-290). Gaut's explanation is reliant upon his "cognitive-affective view of art": by promoting an ethically reprehensible attitude, the work advances an immoral perspective as a moral one and therefore commits an epistemic error by showing falsity as truth (1998: 290).

Moderate moralism is, at the very least, guilty of over-simplifying the relationship between morality and literature: *Madame Butterfly* invites a moral judgement; if the morality the novel endorses is judged as defective then that (im)morality is either an obstacle to engagement or a potential obstacle to engagement, and therefore an aesthetic defect. For Gaut, *Jane Eyre* prescribes a response that can be stated as a proposition or assertion, which is then judged as virtuous or vicious. But the relationship between morality and literature is not as simple as portrayed by the moralists, and this seems to be precisely the criticism that Leavis levels at Johnson. Many great works of literature enact their morality by focusing on the complexity and ambiguity of human actions and motives; where a work does have an explicit message, this is often a literary failing, an indication of immaturity in Leavis' terms, of statement rather than enactment. For moderate autonomists the right or wrong moral conclusions or codes – if, indeed, these are invited or prescribed by a work – are simply not part of a literary judgement. This does not, however, mean that literature is severed from life or that the autonomist must adopt a radical position whereby the moral judgement of literary works is prohibited. John Gibson's work on *thick narratives*<sup>10</sup> demonstrates exactly how this separation without severance is achieved.

Thick – as opposed to thin – narratives

have as their goal the articulation of a kind of content that is clearly ethical but that has very little to do with the specification of duties, obligations, or methods for determining the moral worth of possible courses of action. In fact, it has very little to do with ethics conceived as a matter of making moral *judgments*, of offering verdicts concerning the rightness or wrongness of actions and intentions (or representations of them, such as we find in art) (2011: 76).

Essential to the conception of the thick narrative is the distinction between morality and ethics. Drawing on Hegel, Bernard Williams, Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, and others, Gibson identifies *morality* as treating "moral thought as most naturally and perfectly expressed in moral *judgments*", and ethics as insight into "the complex tissue of norms, customs, and interests that gives our cultural practices their point" (2011: 80).<sup>11</sup> The distinction is thus between *moral philosophy*, which seeks to elucidate the demands of morality, and *ethical life*, which explores the arrangement of values in a culture. Gibson's

interpretation of the distinction is that morality is prescriptive and ethics descriptive. Thick narratives can provide an insight into ethical values without promoting a particular morality, and moral value or ethical significance in literature is therefore composed of two components, the *normative* and *informative*.<sup>12</sup>

Gibson claims that his account supports immoralism by showing that “it is possible for a literary work to fail morally yet still offer readers a very significant kind of ethical insight” (2011: 86).<sup>13</sup> His argument also provides evidence for moderate autonomism in proposing the *separation* of the normative and informative. He maintains that a consequence of the moralist position is that – e.g. – Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* would be a better work of literature without the sexism (2011: 85), which recalls Johnson’s evaluation of *King Lear*. Gibson does not go into more detail, except to say that the failure to harmonise morality and ethics in a novel cannot be considered a literary defect (2011: 85). Framing the debate in this way matches Harold’s re-conceptualisation of autonomism: “Autonomism’s distinctive idea is that neglecting to integrate one’s moral and aesthetic evaluations is not in itself a failure on the agent’s part” (2011: 140). Harold’s subsequent argument for autonomism is beyond the scope of my inquiry, but his definition shows the relevance of the normative-informative distinction to moderate autonomism.

The normative value of a work is determined by the extent to which the judgement a work invites or prescribes – if any – is virtuous or vicious. These are the moral defects and moral merits of literature described in the debate. The informative value is the extent to which a work provides a serious and mature exploration of ethical issues, the concern with human interest and moral significance. With the normative-informative distinction in mind, the moralist-autonomist debate can be re-classified according to the moral judgements of literary works each permits:

Moderate moralism & ethicism: normative value only.

Moderate autonomism: normative value and informative value.

Radical autonomism: neither normative value nor informative value.

Moderate moralists and ethicists judge literature by normative standards; moderate autonomists make two independent judgements, one normative and one informative; radical autonomists judge literature in terms of abstracted form (or perhaps ‘beauty’) and neither the normative nor the informative value feature. For the moderate autonomist a moral defect is thus never an aesthetic defect because ‘moral defect’ belongs to the moral-normative judgement and ‘aesthetic defect’ to the literary-informative judgement. Unlike the radical autonomist, the moderate autonomist can make moral judgements of literature without being

inconsistent. In making such an evaluation, however, the judge is considering the moral value of the work not its value *qua* literature. Gibson's crucial insight is that moralists restrict the moral value of a work of literature to a very narrow sense, which seems to be precisely what Arnold warned against. The fault with Carroll and Gaut is therefore that they make moral judgements about moral defects and then claim that these evaluations are judgements of literary or aesthetic value.

## 6. THE TRUE KNIGHTS

My critical argument for moderate autonomism begins with the acceptance of seriousness and maturity as criteria for literary merit, acknowledges the complexity of the relationship between moral value and literary value, and articulates this complexity in terms of the normative and informative values of literary works. Once the various positions in the debate are re-evaluated in these terms, it becomes clear that moderate autonomism is more compelling than either ethicism or moderate moralism, which are both reliant upon the normative value of literature alone.<sup>14</sup> Moderate autonomism not only avoids this pitfall, but also avoids severing literature from life in the manner of radical autonomism. There remains a vital test which the argument must pass if it is to convince, a concern which is raised by Casey when he asks: "Can there not be a poem which is mature, intelligent, poised and yet, at the same time, wicked" (1966: 182)? His answer relies on the peculiar relationship between form and content he attributes to Arnold and Leavis, but the example he uses – W.K. Wimsatt's criticism of *Antony and Cleopatra* – is instructive. The idea is that the literary value of the play is dependent upon, amongst other things, the "immoral acts" of the protagonists, where the presentation of these acts is not in such a way as to promote them (i.e. a didactic immorality), but to reveal the complexities of human motivation (1966: 182). On this view one could therefore say that although immorality is essential to the work and its value *qua* work, it is the serious and mature handling of the immorality – the human interest or moral concern of the play – from which that (literary) value is derived. This would be in contrast to the moral value of the work, which may be limited or even negative if it was seen as promoting or excusing the immorality in which Antony and Cleopatra engage. *Antony and Cleopatra* is a fairly innocuous instance, however, so I shall consider whether the moderate autonomist position would hold for an extreme case.

The most controversial and frequently discussed example in the value interaction debate is Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. For a variety of reasons which I do not have space to discuss (but which begin with its status as a record of historical events), I think the film is a

poor – if not irrelevant – choice. D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* is a far better example.<sup>15</sup> Although the film involves a real organisation – the Ku Klux Klan – the events and characters depicted are fictional. The work is immoral in portraying the KKK as heroic defenders of liberty in the former Confederacy, but aesthetically meritorious in its dramatic expansion of the horizons of the then (1915) fledgling art form. It is difficult to approach *The Birth of a Nation* with critical disinterest because of its role as an apologia for racial segregation in the United States, and practical consequences that included the immediate revival of the KKK. The moderate autonomist is, in Arnold's terminology, committed to *keeping aloof* from such concerns, but will nonetheless note the film's didacticism – which is almost as congenital as in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, albeit it in the opposite direction. Interestingly, Griffith's *Intolerance*, which was itself an apologia for *The Birth of a Nation*, is just as didactic as its predecessor, and the absence of sound and novelty of an art form with which audiences were still coming to grips may be partly responsible. Didacticism aside, I have derived my argument from the *literary* criticism of Arnold and Leavis, so employing a film as an example is unsatisfactory.

I therefore propose a hypothetical novel called *The True Knights* as a test of moderate autonomism.<sup>16</sup> *The True Knights* closely parallels the narrative of *The Birth of a Nation* and invites similar normative and informative judgements in Gibson's terms. Unlike the film, the novel is not didactic. It is often cited for its literary merit, and critics compare it to Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* and Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons*. Like the film, the novel has had deplorable practical consequences and presents the following view of the reconstruction of the Confederacy: that the Union government punished the Confederates for the assassination of Abraham Lincoln by garrisoning the southern states with black soldiers; that these soldiers treated the white population harshly in reprisal for slavery; and that the only way for the Confederates to protect their human rights was to form a defence league. The novel thus justifies the formation of the KKK and advocates the retention of white supremacist practices. Casey's question is: *could the (wicked) novel be mature, intelligent, and poised?* My question is: *could The True Knights enact its (im)morality and present a serious and mature treatment of ethical life?*

I think it could. If one takes Arnold's advice and focuses on the work's literary value (or lack thereof), one might well find evidence of seriousness and maturity. For all its obvious failings, *The True Knights* is not *amoral*. It deals with a subject of human interest, the treatment of the defeated by the victors in the aftermath of a war, a subject which is all the more poignant in the aftermath of a civil war. At the very least, the novel raises an important

issue: given the circumstances of the reconstruction of the Confederacy, there was a tension between 1) uniting the American states, and 2) ensuring that the citizens of the new nation accepted that their former practices had to change. *The True Knights* makes one realise why, e.g., well-motivated steps towards achieving racial equality and integration may have caused racial violence and the creation of extremist organisations such as the KKK. There are close parallels with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa, but the human interest is not in fact restricted to a historical time and geographical place. The theme of the novel deals with Aristotle's universals, with the issues of transitional justice, post-war reconstruction, and the ethical question of how to treat one's former enemies, especially when those enemies are fellow citizens of the same nation state.

The problem with *The True Knights* is, of course, that it gives the wrong – morally wrong – solutions to the dilemmas it raises. There is no reason why the handling of the subject could not be serious and mature, however, and why the novel could not exhibit a rich and subtle moral pattern. One would no doubt be saddened that such a talented author lacked a moral compass, and perhaps agree to restrict the study of the novel to mature audiences (which is, as I have noted, entirely consistent with moderate autonomism), but the immorality would be a normative rather than informative flaw. As such, *The True Knights* is merely another, albeit more controversial, example of the phenomenon Gibson notes in mentioning the works of Henry Miller, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Wyndham Lewis (2011: 69) – works which are regarded as having high literary value and low moral value. Anderson and Dean have provided an explanation of the status of these works, and moderate autonomism becomes more compelling when revised in terms of the distinctions I have examined: literary versus practical, enactment versus statement, and normative versus informative. My claim is thus that moderate autonomism provides the correct resolution to the value interaction debate because a moral defect – even in an extreme case such as *The True Knights* – is never (also) an aesthetic defect.

I conclude with a brief comment on how far my argument for moderate autonomism extends. Although, as noted in §1, the debate has focused on *narrative* art, the theories I have discussed are taken to hold for *all* art – or at least all works which it is possible to evaluate morally (which may exclude works of conceptual art and pure or absolute music). My argument for moderate autonomism should hold for narrative arts in addition to literature. The distinction between the normative and informative which is so important to my account is as evident in theatre, opera, and film as it is in literature, and the criteria of seriousness and maturity can be applied to the moral aspects of such works. I am not so sure if my argument

will succeed beyond the typically narrative arts. Paintings and sculptures, e.g., offer less scope for the representation of what Gibson calls ‘ethical life’ and I have called ‘informative value’. The visual arts are certainly subject to moral evaluation: Carroll offers the hypothetical example of painting of Hitler entitled *Saviour* (2006: 84), but Jacques-Louis David’s *The Death of Marat* serves almost as well. Both paintings depict their subjects as fallen heroes and thus invite a negative normative judgement; it is not clear if and how they should be judged according to their respective depictions of ethical life. This is not to say that moderate autonomism does not hold for all art, only that the scope of my argument should be restricted to the narrative arts. I shall have to consider the non-narrative implications for my position elsewhere.<sup>17</sup>

## 7. WORKS CITED LIST:

- Anderson, James C. & Dean, Jeffrey T., ‘Moderate Autonomism,’ *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38 (1998): 150-166.
- Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Penelope Murray & T.S. Dorsch, in *Classical Literary Criticism*, ed. Penelope Murray (London: Penguin, 2004), 57-95.
- Arnold, Matthew, ‘The Literary Influence of the Academies,’ in *Essays in Criticism: First Series* (London: Macmillan, [1864a] 1925), 42-79.
- ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,’ in *Essays in Criticism: First Series* (London: Macmillan, [1864b] 1925), 1-41.
- *Culture and Anarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1869] 1960).
- *Literature and Dogma* (London: Macmillan, [1873] 1889).
- ‘The Study of Poetry,’ in *Essays in Criticism: Second Series* (London: Macmillan, [1880] 1925), 1-55.
- Bilan, R.P., *The Literary Criticism of F.R. Leavis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
- Carroll, Noël, ‘Moderate Moralism,’ *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (1996): 223-238.
- ‘Ethics and Aesthetics: Replies to Dickie, Stecker, and Livingstone,’ *British Journal of Aesthetics* 46 (2006): 82-95.
- Casey, John, *The Language of Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1966).
- Collini, Stefan, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850-1930* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1991).
- Eliot, T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, [1932] 1934).
- *To Criticize the Critic* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1965).

Gaut, Berys, 'The Ethical Criticism of Art,' in *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, eds. Peter Lamarque & Stein Haugom Olsen (Oxford: Blackwell, [1998] 2008), 283-294.

Gibson, John, 'Thick Narratives,' in *Narrative, Emotion, and Insight*, eds. Noël Carroll & John Gibson (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 69-91.

Harold, James, 'Autonomism Reconsidered,' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 51 (2011): 137-147.

Johnson, Samuel, 'Preface to the Edition of Shakespeare's Plays,' in *Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare* (London: Penguin, [1765a] 1989), 120-165.

— 'Selections from the Edition of Shakespeare's Plays,' in *Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare* (London: Penguin, [1765b] 1989), 166-248.

Kieran, Matthew, 'In Defence of the Ethical Evaluation of Narrative Art,' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 41 (2001): 26-38.

— 'Forbidden Knowledge: The Challenge of Immoralism,' in *Art and Morality*, eds. José Luis Bermúdez & Sebastian Gardner (London: Routledge, 2003), 56-73.

Leavis, F.R., *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (London: Chatto & Windus, [1948] 1960).

— *The Common Pursuit* (London: Chatto & Windus, [1952] 1958).

— *Anna Karenina and Other Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967).

— *The Critic as Anti-Philosopher* (London: Chatto & Windus; 1982).

Stecker, Robert, 'The Interaction of Ethical and Aesthetic Value,' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 45 (2005): 138-150.

---

<sup>1</sup> Anderson and Dean take the historical and folk psychological evidence of the tension between moral conviction and aesthetic interest as their starting point and then proceed to critiques of the moderate moralist and ethicist arguments, which is why I have labelled their argument 'empirical'. Harold's main contribution to the debate is to free it from the realist commitments he takes Carroll to have imposed. Subsequently, he employs the no-error argument to show that moralists cannot account for why the autonomist makes an error by failing to abide by a norm which he or she does not accept. I return to Harold briefly in §5.

<sup>2</sup> Since 2000, papers on the debate have appeared in *Ethics*, *The Philosophical Forum*, *Philosophy Compass*, *Philosophia*, the *South African Journal of Philosophy*, *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, and *The Philosophical Quarterly*.

<sup>3</sup> I discuss the accusation in §4.

---

<sup>4</sup> I have over-simplified for the sake of brevity, but both aestheticism and Bell's formalism are 'radical' by proscribing the moral evaluation of art. The moderate autonomist accepts the propriety of such an evaluation while denying that it has an effect on aesthetic evaluation.

<sup>5</sup> Eliot for his religious dogmatism and Johnson for his views on art as instruction.

<sup>6</sup> See: Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer & Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1790] 2001); *disinterest* is introduced in §2 and *cognitive free play* in §9.

<sup>7</sup> For this reason, Stein Haugom Olsen refers to Said and Eagleton as "*nostalgic critics*". See: 'Criticism of Literature and Criticism of Culture,' in Severin Schroeder, ed., *Philosophy of Literature*, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 65-89.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson's view was not as controversial at the time of writing as it is now: Nahum Tate's adaptation of *King Lear*, *The History of King Lear*, which concluded with Lear regaining his throne and Cordelia marrying Edgar, was popular from its first performance in 1681 until well into the nineteenth century.

<sup>9</sup> Both critics demonstrated similarly complex views on the relationship between art and religion. Arnold supported the Church of England (in the preface to *Culture and Anarchy* and in *St. Paul and Protestantism, with an Essay on Puritanism and the Church of England*), but also showed evidence of atheism (he describes God as "*consciousness of the not ourselves*" in *Literature and Dogma* [1873: 46]). Leavis maintained that the religious sense was most obvious in the work of D.H. Lawrence, and his description of this sense indicated a kind of situation in – or connection to – the universe, transcendence rather than a religion (1952: 240). Arnold wanted religious spirit without religious dogma, and Leavis religious sense without religion. The position matches my conception of Arnold and Leavis as separating moral sense from moral judgement in literature.

<sup>10</sup> The thick/thin distinction was introduced into philosophy by Gilbert Ryle for the purpose of identifying different levels of descriptions (in a 1968 lecture entitled 'The Thinking of Thoughts: What is "Le Penseur" Doing?'). Clifford Geertz subsequently applied thick and thin descriptions to cultural anthropology in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, published in 1973. Twelve years later, Bernard Williams initiated the contemporary debate in moral philosophy with *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, where he distinguished *thin concepts* such as 'good', 'right', and 'ought' from *thick concepts* such as 'brutality', 'courage', and 'treachery'. He claimed that thick concepts expressed a union of description and evaluation, and Roman Bonzon has recently argued that thick concepts are more natural to aesthetics

---

than ethics (see: ‘Thick Aesthetic Concepts,’ *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67 [2009], 191-199).

<sup>11</sup> The *locus classicus* of this distinction is Hegel’s critique of Kant’s *Moralität* (morality) in terms of *Sittlichkeit* (ethical life) in *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Elements of Philosophy of Right*. The distinction has been embraced by critical theory and developed by Jürgen Habermas, who contrasts moral discourse with ethical discourse in *Justification and Application* and *The Inclusion of the Other*.

<sup>12</sup> I have used ‘morality’ and ‘ethics’ as synonymous thus far, and shall continue to do so despite the acknowledgement above, which is why I employ the terms ‘normative’ and ‘informative’ to refer to Gibson’s conception of the distinction. I have selected ‘informative’ as representative of the ethical *insight* which he stresses.

<sup>13</sup> Recall Kieran’s position is that a moral defect in a work of art can have cognitive value and thus improve the work *qua* work.

<sup>14</sup> On this re-evaluation immoralism fares better, as one would expect from Gibson’s commentary. I do not have space to argue for the merits of moderate autonomism over immoralism, but the limited scope of the latter is immediately evident: it is not a theory of the relationship between morality and art, but a refutation of ethicism, where a moral defect is always an aesthetic defect.

<sup>15</sup> The film is frequently mentioned in the debate, but seldom discussed. For a notable exception, see: Aaron Smuts, ‘Grounding Moralism: Moral Flaws and Aesthetic Properties,’ *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 45 (2011), 34-53.

<sup>16</sup> *The Birth of a Nation* is in fact based on a novel, *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, which author Thomas F. Dixon, Jr. adapted into a play entitled *The Clansman* (both published in 1905). Unlike the film, neither the novel nor the play has entered the artistic canon, which is why I employ an invention.

<sup>17</sup> I would like to thank Noël Carroll, James Harold, Matthew Kieran, Stein Haugom Olsen, Karen Simecek, Richard Tamburro, Tzachi Zamir, and three anonymous referees from this journal for their invaluable assistance with this paper.