



Critical Note on James Harold's *Dangerous Art*

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CRITICAL NOTE

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines James Harold's book *Dangerous Art: On Moral Criticism of Artworks*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, 206 pp. ISBN 978-0197519769.

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The question of the ethical criticism of art has been one of the oldest and most widely debated issues in philosophical aesthetics. With artists like Kevin Spacey and Woody Allen being called out for their immoral behaviour, philosophers shifted their attention from the moral character of artworks towards the character of those making them. When disturbing information regarding the production of some works became public, such as the startling testimony of Maria Schneider regarding the filming of a rape scene with Marlon Brando under the directorial lead of Bernardo Bertolucci, a new set of issues presented itself to philosophers: how should we engage with and appreciate those works the making of which includes immoral actions or harm induced on the agents? Nowadays, as numerous statues and other artworks are being demolished worldwide due to the racist or sexist attitudes that these works or their makers allegedly express, a new dimension of complexity is added to the relation between art and morality. It is no surprise, therefore, that some excellent philosophical work is being done to address these challenges. James Harold's *Dangerous Art: On Moral Criticism of Artworks* certainly tops the list, together with Ted Nannicelli's *Artistic Creation and Ethical Criticism*, both of which came out in 2020 within the 'Thinking Art' series, edited by Noël Carroll and Jesse Prinz. Our focus here is on Harold's book.

Harold structures his book along two main questions: one related to exploring how art can be moral or immoral (Chapters 1 to 5) and the other asking about the function of the moral evaluations of art within the overall evaluation of art (Chapters 6 to 9). As Harold sees it, whereas the second question has been substantially addressed, the first question has not been taken by contemporary philosophers with a sufficient degree of seriousness. Their crucial fault, argues Harold in Chapter 5, is the assumption that works of art can be evaluated morally in the same manner in which human beings can. That is wrong, he argues, since artworks have neither agency nor intentions, two crucial aspects of ethical behaviour. Furthermore, Harold repeatedly insists that 'there is good reason to think that art might affect us morally, and if it does affect us in ways that matter morally, that we should care about those changes' (p. 26). Most theories, however, fail to do so, adopting instead what Harold calls an 'armchair approach' (p. 96).

To counter such approaches to morality of art, Harold (Chapter 2) offers strong reasons for first considering numerous ways in which art affects or might affect us morally, in the process trashing the approach most commonly advanced in this discussion: an evaluation of a perspective that the work allegedly manifests (that is, perspectivism). Harold argues that there is 'a compelling set of mechanisms by which artworks might affect us', one of the crucial ones being contagion: a process whereby one can be transformed by emotionally charged imaginative experience, without realizing that any change is taking place. As a way of responding to those philosophers who are sceptical over the possibility of measuring art's impact, such as Berys Gaut's worry over the reliability of empirical studies, Harold analyses A. W. Eaton's work on pornography, emphasizing her generalist approach to evaluation. Rather than considering individual works, Eaton argues that we should take into account genre as such, that is, the cumulative power of multiple exposure to certain artworks. The question of art's impact is further taken up in Chapter 4, primarily with respect to moral understanding. Discussing aesthetic cognitivism, Harold concludes that it is just as likely that art offers moral understanding as it is that it corrupts us.

Ethical evaluation of art cannot ignore those who create art and Chapter 3 is dedicated to the role of the artist and their character in the evaluation of art. While it is not so that an artist's immoral character mars the value of their works, or gets

transferred into the work, Harold argues that it is morally problematic for the audience to continue to associate with immoral artists, that is, to form what Ted Cohen referred to as 'affective communities'. Examples here include gatherings of the audience in museums or at concerts, their engagement in some form of correspondence with an artist or forming bonds with other fans via social media (pp. 61–64). Harold claims that members of such communities can become morally tainted through association with immoral artists. To delineate genuine vice from ordinary frailty, Harold offers three criteria of immorality: an artist is morally problematic if there is a pattern of wrongful conduct over an extended period of time, if their actions resulted in serious harm, and in cases when there was an abuse of power (p. 55). Interestingly and originally, Harold also considers morally praiseworthy – that is, virtuous – artists, as well as the question regarding the means of production and the cases in which an artist misrepresents themselves, a problem further related to the cultural appropriation issues.

Harold's analysis of the moral evaluation of art is situated against three wider philosophical debates, the most famous of which is the often-discussed difference between Plato's and Aristotle's views on the cognitive value of poetry. Harold's original contribution to the question of moral evaluation of art is strengthened by his incorporating two less-familiar examples: a debate between the fifth-century BCE Chinese philosophers Mozi and Xunzi regarding the justifiability of music production given its financial expenses, and a debate on art and propaganda between W. E. B. DuBois and Alain LeRoy Locke with respect to the art produced by Black artists in the early 1920s.¹

Locke's theory is at the centre of Harold's crucial argument in the second part of the book, dedicated to the refutation of a relativist's denial of a difference between aesthetic and moral judgements (Chapter 6). As Harold interprets Locke's version of expressivist value theory, 'values are [...] products of the agent's sentimental engagement with the world', and different kinds of values are 'distinguished [...] in terms of the feelings and dispositions that accompany them' (p. 109) – disgust or satisfaction in the case of aesthetics; conscience or temptation in the case of ethics.² Relying on Locke, Harold develops his own theory on the difference between the two kinds of judgements (Chapter 7), centred on seven dimensions, such as emotional content, scope, practicality, acquaintance, strength, and so on. This chapter in particular is successful in highlighting various dimensions of our lives that are governed by our ethical and aesthetic agency. Recognizing the difference between these two judgements is, on Harold's view, a first step towards explaining why the conflict arises in cases when we judge a work of art to be ethically flawed and aesthetically superb, and vice versa.

The resolution of this conflict is at the centre of Chapter 8, in which Harold defends his account of the interaction of moral and aesthetic value, a solution he identifies as moderate autonomism. Whereas most autonomists, following the original definition provided by Noël Carroll, discuss the interaction of ethics and aesthetics in the work of art, Harold shifts the focus from the work to the viewer, that is, to the person judging a certain work. On his account, 'a person who reaches a moral verdict μ and an

1 Harold cites Paul C. Taylor's *Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016) as the main source on DuBois's views.

2 Harold cites *The Philosophy of Alain Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, ed. Leonard Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989) as his main source on Locke's views.

aesthetic verdict α of the same object or event is not rationally required to adjust α in light of η or to adjust η in lights of α ' (p. 147). This means that a 'failure to care about the coherence of moral and aesthetic judgment is not in itself a failure of rationality' (p. 153), given that the two domains are separate and do not interact. Central aspect of this account is 'the no-error argument', which Harold formulates to show that a valuer is not making any error in failing to modify either their aesthetic or their moral judgement when the two are in conflict. If in fact they are, it is on an interactionist to explain what that error consists in. However, the variety of interactionists' positions on how a work should be evaluated shows that there is no consensus on the value that everyone should accept in judging a work of art. Without such a consensus, or such a value, it is up to individuals to decide how they want to go about evaluating works of art, without necessarily modifying their conflicting judgements. As Harold concludes, the autonomist, unlike the interactionist, does not need to accept any kind of value realism, which is yet another advantage of that approach.

There is much to recommend in Harold's book: the depth of argumentation and the breadth of the accounts discussed, the introduction of new arguments, inspired by Locke and Mozi, into a debate that has for so long centred on Plato and Aristotle, a variety of metaethical arguments, an array of interesting and thought-provoking examples that address contemporary issues as well as traditional problems, the emphasis of art's impact on the audience, and so on. Autonomism has rarely been defined and defended with such precision and plausibility, and we can expect the interactionists to have a hard time dealing with the no-error argument. However, it is not clear that the solution Harold provides can turn the tables, as there are several concerns with his overall project. Notwithstanding his claim that 'there may not be easy answers to the question of whether an artwork is morally dangerous', there is a sense in which Harold fails to meet his own criteria on how to handle dangerous art – other than by concluding, in Chapter 9, that 'art matters, and we are right to care about how to evaluate it' (p. 177). Consequently, while he provides valid theoretical pointers on how to evaluate art, his theory is only useful when confined to individual perspective – that is, an individual's encounters with works of art – and it does not help us decide on practical issues concerning the regulation of our art-related practices, or on the ethical criticism of art that takes place in a wider social context. Let us elaborate.

Harold's version of autonomism fits well with the intuition that the conflict of norms is something to be explicated in relation to the spectator, rather than with respect to the work, since the spectator needs to decide how to attend and how to interpret those works that give rise to the conflict of values – that is, after all, the practical nature of the problem that Harold's autonomism seeks to solve (p. 147). Harold's shift of this burden towards individual's preferences is a valid step in the value-interaction debate, particularly given the fact that all the philosophical discussion thus far has failed to provide any concrete pointers on what to do with immoral works. However, it is not clear that Harold is any more successful in solving the practical issues that arise with respect to the immoral works of art than his opponents are, for several reasons. Most notably, given his focus on the individual evaluator, how are we to settle disagreements that arise in social and public contexts, some of which may have a significant cultural aspect? In other words, given the plurality of evaluators, how are we to settle the question of evaluative conflict when those evaluators disagree among themselves?

This question is important for all sorts of reasons. Art is primarily public and we need a set of public policies regulating which works should be publically available to viewers and under which circumstances: the kinds of sculptures we want in our squares, the kinds of performances we want in our theatres and the kinds of movies we want in our cinemas. There is also a question of the liberal arts programme: which works get to be included on the list of mandatory readings, or which paintings one should attend to in visual art classes? Not least, there is a need to regulate financial support for art-related agents; who is to say that Damien Hirst can get public money for sending millions of butterflies to – arguably – pointless death? As recently shown by Rita Felski, our art engagements, primarily the processes of interpretations and evaluations, have an ineliminable public character.³ Within the public context, the question of what to do with immoral art (including the criteria to identify such art) cannot be settled by alluring to individual norms, preferences, or other aspects of individual psychology.

Another way to raise our concern is to challenge Harold's reluctance to engage with censorship. While he offers other mechanisms to regulate the availability of immoral art – including education of the audience or a more finely developed rating system – it may nevertheless be the case that a society lacks the proper means on how to decide which works should be thus treated. Harold may well deny that works should be judged for their (im)moral character but, given his numerous remarks throughout the book, he is genuinely concerned with what happens to individuals when they experience a certain work of art, and such concern is praiseworthy, given how often it is ignored in discussions. Harold, rightly, trashes perspectivism on the account of being an 'armchair' approach that avoids 'the more difficult work of looking to see how art actually affects us' (p. 96). It is therefore all the more confusing that this concern is entirely absent from his advancement of autonomism: if potentially harmful consequences are to be taken into consideration by philosophers debating these issues, how can an autonomist ignore them in coming up with their own solution to the evaluative conflict, or confine them exclusively to the *ethical* judgement of a given work, without worrying that they will spill over into other domains of our evaluative and behavioural schemas?

Another reason why we think Harold is more concerned with the social context of art than his autonomism can accommodate comes from his discussion of affective communities and immoral artists. If the spectators should disassociate themselves from immoral artists, why shouldn't they disassociate themselves from immoral works, given that such works may impact them in the long run? In both cases, Harold's statement that '[w]e want to surround ourselves with people who are good' (p. 65) is valid and should be incorporated into the account an autonomist ends up defending. Perhaps Harold could reply by arguing that whether or not one wants to protect oneself from the bad consequences an artwork may have is a personal choice, to be determined by the individual in accordance with their own norms and reasons. That is a good point, but it ignores the fact that in some cases individuals have no such choice or cannot control the art they are exposed to, as when one cannot avoid mandatory readings in school, a statue in a public garden or a song pervading the radio stations.

To be clear, Harold's defence of autonomism is plausible, but it seems divorced from his concerns over how art actually affects us, making his theory just as liable to the

3 See Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020). For the relevance of the public context of art evaluation, and for a discussion of Hirst's use of butterflies, see Ted Nannicelli, *Artistic Creation and Ethical Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

problems he identifies with perspectivism. As Harold himself cautions us, one can be morally tainted by the work even if one fails to recognize such a contagiousness, and it is not clear that a valuer's separation of ethical and aesthetic dimension of a work can safeguard them from such contagion. Given Harold's overall account, our intuition is that he would not rest satisfied with this option. In addition, it is not clear why his theory is not liable to charges against an armchair approach. Not only is he not considering the data on art's impact, but the solution he ends up with to the problem of interaction of norms is grounded in conceptual analysis of the norms of rationality, and makes no reference to any empirical or naturalist data over how people in fact judge immoral works of art.

To conclude, there seems to be a clash in Harold's approach to art as primarily individual experience and the wider social context in which our art engagements take place – a context he mostly ignores when he defends autonomism but seems genuinely concerned with in discussing interactionism. Furthermore, there are difficulties involved with Harold's advancement of autonomism given his concern for the effects that art has for an individual. While he is right to insist on the separation of aesthetic and moral judgement in the act of evaluation, he is wrong in dismissing (his own claims regarding) the possibility of the immoral impact of certain works, which can take place even against the evaluative autonomy of ethics and aesthetics. Nevertheless, Harold's book is genuinely interesting, thought-provoking and challenging, and it offers a new and original approach to the ethical evaluation of art while also considering our ethical and aesthetic agency and the way the two are effective in our everyday lives. His examples are well chosen, illustrative, and relevant in the context of our contemporary artistic practices. We deeply recommend the book to everyone interested in art, ethics, and their mutual relation.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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