

When Morality Meets Aesthetics: How Immorality Shapes Art Experience and Value

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Abstract. This essay analyzes the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, and explores how moral aspects affect the appreciation of art. While aesthetic appreciation is controversial from a philosophical perspective, this research focuses on the psychological and cultural issues underlying moral judgments of art. This essay first talks about the emotive and rational responses evoked by art and moves on to analyze two central axes of moral appraisal. Having discussed private and public opinion, this essay focuses on the role played by social reputation, peer group pressure, and group dynamics in shaping aesthetic judgments. Also, the value of art is evaluated in four realms, economic, cultural, social, and political, and each is informed by moral systems that elevate or diminish artistic worth. Cross-cultural comparison demonstrates the way differential emphasis in societies on different moral bases produces varying receptions of the same works of art. Finally, the discussion points to the practical applicability of the inclusion of morality in teaching art, museum practice, and cultural policy. Limitations of past research, including limited samples and shifting standards, are noted, and directions for the future outline the demands for longitudinal, cross-cultural, and experimental research.

Keywords: Moral judgment, aesthetic experience, moral psychology, cross-cultural aesthetics, ethics of art

1. Introduction

One's aesthetic views are undeniably related to one's moral beliefs. People determine their attitude towards an art piece not only by its pure artistic value, but also, sometimes unconsciously, by ethical standards [1]. For instance, artists involved in unethical behavior may face public backlash, leading to a decline in the public's evaluation of their work. While existing research usually explores this relationship from a philosophical or art history perspective, psychological investigations are still scarce and fragmented. Particularly, there is a lack of empirical studies and cross-cultural comparisons examining how moral judgments shape aesthetic experiences [2].

This essay aims to start from the emotions an art piece triggers, then connect this to one's cognitive systems. Then, this will be explained from social signals, the morality of the art and the creator, and the comprehensive process of experiencing an art piece. Although the complete model of aesthetics is complex, it can be broadly summarized by a theoretical framework involving the aesthetic experience itself, the individual qualities of the viewer, and cultural differences.

Understanding how people perceive art through a moral lens enables individuals to engage with art more deeply. It provides a basis for the public to evaluate or regulate art that is deemed immoral at a policy or social norm level.

The goal of this research is to comprehend the role of psychology in morally judging a piece of art, and then focus on the effect of cultural background on this issue. Some questions discussed in this essay are: how do moral evaluations influence aesthetic experiences, how do the moral attributes associated with both the artist and the artwork shape public judgments of its artistic value, and what moderating role do cultural differences play in this process? A central question of this research is how moral judgments, shaped by both psychological processes and cultural norms, influence the way individuals engage with art.

2. The aesthetic experience

2.1. Aspects of moral information

The moral aspect of an art piece is made up of two fields of information: one related to the morality of the artist, and another related to the morals the art itself presents or advocates. Back in 1977, Arnold Berleant mentioned in *Morality and the Artist: Toward an Ethics of Art* that there are two “axes” of the ethical discussion of an art piece: the moral status of the art object, which concerns the effects it has on the audience, and the moral stature of the artist, which is concerned with the own conduct of the artist and is often viewed in a social order [3].

In his article, Berleant focused on the second axis, the artist’s morality as a person. Berleant claims that because artists are considered public figures, society will have a higher expectation of them, and will also magnify their moral misconducts, if they have done any. They have a higher responsibility for what they do or what theme they explore in their artworks, as they create things that have major social effects, blended into the aesthetic experience. For example, Virginia Woolf, who was an important figure who shaped literary modernism and feminist thought, is considered among the greatest writers of the 20th century. However, she held anti-semitic views in her private writings [4]. While it is widely acknowledged that Virginia Woolf is an important figure in literature and feminism, her prejudice cannot be ignored.

As for the first axis, about the moral status of the art itself, it is sometimes more controversial. Some people think that the theme an art piece depicts reflects the artist’s own morality; however, making art about immoral themes does not represent that the artist is morally flawed, it is the artist’s intention that is crucial. Artists may depict immoral themes for critique, satire, or attention, but what matters in moral evaluation is the intention behind the depiction. Still, the artist’s intention does not represent everything, as the results of their intentions may turn out harmful or inappropriate to certain audiences.

To sum up, the moral aspect of the art piece is strongly related to the intention of the artist and the outcome of this intention. The impact of an art piece is relative to its moral value, but to decide whether it is moral or not, the impact must be viewed under the premise of the artist’s intention.

2.2. Public opinion and personal opinion

When deciding if an artwork is valuable or not, people are more or less affected by social aspects, such as how they want to present themselves to others. This makes it possible for a difference to appear between a person's decision when made privately and when made publicly. This is primarily because people are aware of others watching them, so people’s choices about art differed when they

believed experts or others were watching, compared to when they were making the choice privately. People face social reputation concerns in public situations, which will shift their opinion on artworks, while private preference is more stable [5].

Especially when art is controversial or a public group has a strong normative stance, peer pressure is one major factor that influences one's opinion on art. People care about their social reputation, so because of their willingness to conform to prominent ideas, they tend to be influenced by peer pressure and express similar opinions on art [6]. In a social group, people also have an unconscious motivation to maintain consistency or avoid conflict with others. They do so by suppressing unconformative thoughts in public to avoid interpersonal conflict with the majority of people who hold a different opinion, or to preserve their identity in this group. For example, if a student in a music club expressed dislike of a piece of music that most people in this club, including leaders or people with authority, this student would likely face a conflict with the club. To avoid creating conflict, the student would express nothing or mild interest in this music composition.

3. The value of art, and how morality alters it

Art has carried values beyond pure aesthetics. There are four perspectives of art's other values: the economic, cultural, social/fashion, and policy values. Each of these aspects is influential to the viewers' moral considerations, whether through any of the three dimensions of the aesthetic experience mentioned above. Recent studies also indicate that when moral vitality or virtue is visually represented in art, viewers experience higher aesthetic pleasure and attribute greater "goodness" to the work, reinforcing the role of moral perception in shaping artistic value [7].

The economic value of art refers to its financial worth when placed in markets, which include auction prices, gallery sales, and private collections. This value is both positively and negatively affected by morality, as an artist's reputation, authenticity, and the work's relevance to social trends. Works by artists are more celebrated when they portray social justice themes. They gain higher market value because they address what most people are interested in, and cause more resonance among viewers. For instance, art connected to human rights or environmental activism often catches the attention of certain collectors seeking works that align with ethical themes [8]. Oppositely, scandals about an artist can devalue their works.

The cultural value of art can emerge when they are displayed in museums, represented in art history, or is part of heritage and represents customs. Art has a long-term role in shaping cultural identity, and morality influences this aspect by affecting the context of the artwork. Some works achieve high cultural status because they have the power to pass on values across generations and cultures. At the same time, institutions intervene with the display of morally problematic artworks to prevent them from having negative cultural impacts on the audience [9]. This interference evolves with the improvement of social values. For example, while Paul Gauguin's paintings were celebrated for their vibrant colors and innovation, they are now displayed with contextual notes acknowledging his sexual exploitation of young Tahitian girls, unlike before, with no notes to inform the viewer. This does not make Gauguin a totally bad artist, but the canon is reshaped to hold his aesthetic achievement while telling viewers how Gauguin's cultural value should be understood. Thus, morality transforms institutional value from a static recognition into an evolving one.

Art also carries social and fashion value. It is not only consumed but also used as a signal of belonging, as purchasing some artworks or participating in artistic activities shows one's identity or even political stance, and is used by people for constructing their self-image. When art aligns with socially admired values, it is more valued by viewers who care about fashion. Take Banksy's art as an example. Owning his art showcases not only aesthetic taste, but also one's alignment with anti-

capitalist or anti-establishment ideas. The thought of owning an art piece with strong moral opinions raised the price of Banksy's Love is in the Bin to £18.6 million, a record for the artist [10].

Finally, art has policy or political value, which is grounded in both its regulation and promotion. Governments and cultural associations decide which artworks receive subsidies, which are displayed in larger museums, and which should be restricted as offensive or dangerous. The reason behind this phenomenon is that art circulates in society, shaping people's perception of what could be defined as good art. Here, it is often morality that sets the boundaries between "good" and "bad". For example, Andres Serrano's Piss Christ had a great negative impact on society, which led to congressional debates in the U.S. about public funding for art [11]. More recently, UNESCO's ReShaping Policies for Creativity highlights a tension between protecting artistic freedom and restricting hate imagery [12]. These cases show that policies are inseparable from a society's moral judgements on what is counted as too offensive, harmful, or politically destabilizing. Without moral frameworks, policies have no standing point when distinguishing art that deserves support from art that must be restricted.

To conclude, art's value is seen in its economic, cultural, social, and normative perspectives. And, across these four axes, morality acts as a filter and a force to enhance value when art aligns with moral ideals, diminishes it when art or artists clash with ethical norms, and reshapes the public's understanding of art and morality in the process. Morality functions as a dynamic element that redefines what art means, and what should be considered as aesthetic.

4. Cross-cultural viewpoint

There are different moral foundations and value systems in the world. The Moral Foundations Theory (harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity) shows that cultural differences are formed by emphasizing these foundations differently.

Across societies, the same subject matter can be received either as art or as offense. This is because cultures emphasize different moral foundations mentioned above. For example, some prioritize individual freedom, while others preserve collective purity or harmony. Therefore, a single piece of artwork will be viewed differently in different cultures, such as Michelangelo's David or Sandro Botticelli's The Birth of Venus. These artworks are appreciated in European cultures as a celebration of the human body, but in more conservative cultures, they are often rejected or censored [13].

Different cultures with diverse mindsets or cognitive styles also view artworks differently. For example, Chinese and American cognitive styles respond differently to the same artworks and information on either the artwork or the artist. As mentioned in Appreciating Paintings of the Virtuous, Chinese participants preferred Chinese landscape paintings by "high morality" artists more than paintings by "low morality" artists. Additionally, compared to Western landscape and abstract paintings, the effect of moral information was strongest for Chinese landscape paintings, while it had no significant effect on judgments of Western landscape or abstract paintings among Chinese viewers. During cross-cultural comparisons, the perceived morality of artists influenced Western participants' aesthetic judgments, regardless of painting styles. Researchers explained that this is because of Chinese and Western cognitive style differences: while Chinese people value dialectical thinking, Western people value analytic thinking [14].

While art is a global human practice, its moral evaluation is not. Cultural values determine how people see the same work. Thus, morality is not just universally attached to art, it is filtered through the morals of different societies, eventually producing admiration in one place and outrage in another. Moreover, recent philosophical work suggests that moral reflection and aesthetic

appreciation can reach equilibrium across cultures when viewers engage reflectively with differing moral norms rather than reactively judging them [15].

5. Discussion

5.1. Practical significance

By understanding the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, people can use this insight in various applied applications. Museums and galleries can provide context for problematic art. By providing explanations of what the artist meant or the history behind it, they can reduce misinterpretation and ensuing offense. Additionally, art education can make moral components part of it, teaching viewers to look at artistic as well as ethical dimensions of an art piece. Policy makers and cultural institutions can increase moral sensitivity, resolve problems of public funding, and address the censorship of art. By understanding the morality of art and its variance among cultures, these institutions will be able to make their judgments according to artistic freedom and societal values.

5.2. Limitations and advice for further research

The researchers included in this essay mostly had small and culturally narrow samples, which may lead to a lack of reliable results. Also, part of the researches date back decades, which also affects credibility, as cultural norms and morals shift over time.

More longitudinal studies could be conducted in the future to explore how the moral evaluation of art changes over time. These studies could focus on evolving social norms or how a culture responds to new cultural contexts. Cross-cultural studies should include more diverse cultures and investigate subcultures to minimize overgeneralization, while experimental research could focus on the behavioral or neuroscientific perspectives of the morality of art. Researchers can conduct experiments on differences between private and public moral judgments of art, exploring how social pressure and reputation alter the aesthetic experience.

6. Conclusion

Humans cannot truly appreciate a work of art without taking into account its ethical content, whether these are derived from the artist's intentions, the content of the piece, or the consequences it brings. There are two general axes of ethical concern, which are the moral character of the artist and the ethical content of the work of art, that form a framework used to describe how audiences experience art for aesthetic taste while taking ethical considerations into concern.

The conflict between the private and public judgments was also addressed in the essay. While individuals may have private preferences, their public perception is often reformed by peer pressure, reputation factors, or cultural conventions. The moral evaluation of art is not a private matter, but more of a kind of social performance. In addition to individual experience, morality intersects with the general economic, cultural, social, and political values of art, where moral structures act as filters of artistic value.

The intersection between art and morality is relative and varies by culture. Different societies have different moral bases, leading to different receptions of the same artwork. An artwork that another culture is proud of may be detested in another as offensive or immoral, which highlights the need to view art as a cultural and moral phenomenon.

In the future, studies still need to resolve the limitations of existing studies, such as only relying on narrow samples or dated cultural assumptions. Longitudinal studies could indicate changes in judgments across time, while cross-cultural and subcultural analyses could shed light on the diversity of the interaction between aesthetics and morals. Experimental research could also investigate the effect of public and private situations on judgments. With a psychological and cultural perspective, society can better negotiate the tension between aesthetics and ethics.

A moral perspective to art enriches people's vision of the role of art in society, as art is not solely concerned with beauty, but also with responsibility, identity, and human values.

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