

## Chadwick Prize Runner-up: Brenda Johnson

### Does *American Psycho* Succeed Aesthetically and Morally For The Same Reasons?

I will argue that the novel *American Psycho* succeeds aesthetically and morally for the same reasons. I will focus on the paper 'Defending Moderate Autonomism' given by Vincent Bergeron to the 2007 Annual Conference of the British Society of Aesthetics in Oxford, in which he argues in favour of moderate autonomism against Noël Carroll's Uptake Argument for moderate moralism. I will agree with Carroll but whereas he thinks the novel fails aesthetically and morally for the same reasons, I conclude that it succeeds.

We pre-philosophically practise ethical criticism of some artworks, but the theoretical debate at issue is whether the aesthetic and the ethical realms are autonomous. Autonomism argues that art and ethics are separate realms of value so we should not ethically evaluate artworks - they are valuable for their own sake (aestheticism). Much art does not concern morality so its value is not ethical and ethical evaluative criteria are inappropriate. Any standard should be applied to art qua art across the board and that is, does the artwork promote aesthetic experience (disinterested pleasure/attention)? This is independent of ethics and unique to art (essentialism). In response, we can argue that some art does involve ethics and there could be genre-specific criteria for evaluation. Moderate autonomism holds that we can logically argue for ethical criticism but this has nothing to do with an artwork's aesthetic value. This is Bergeron's position. (1)

Ethicism challenges moderate autonomism by asserting that certain kinds of ethical defects are always aesthetic defects. If an artwork prescribes an immoral response, this gives the audience or reader a reason for not responding in that way, and to give these countervailing reasons is an aesthetic flaw (the merited response argument). However not all ethically unmerited (inappropriate) responses are unmerited aesthetically; some such provoking artworks may be aesthetically powerful because they prescribe inappropriate responses. Moderate moralism argues only that sometimes an ethical defect can be an aesthetic defect and that sometimes an ethical virtue can be an aesthetic virtue. For example, a book may prescribe admiration for an evil character and fail to get this uptake so fails aesthetically on its own terms, and the reason it fails is because it is ethically defective. There is no uptake because the book is evil - the reason for the ethical defect and the aesthetic defect is the same. This is Carroll's position.

*American Psycho* by Brett Easton Ellis is a notorious political satire on 1980s yuppie culture and depicts the lifestyle of an arrogant, successful executive who gets away with his other career as a psychotic, sadistic serial killer. The violence in the novel is extremely brutal and graphically described. It was to have been published by Simon & Schuster in March 1991, but the publishers withdrew because of the content. An edited version was published by Vintage Books. It is not so much that the violence is repellent, though it is, but more that there seems to be no moral framework to put it in context, the author's satirical intention being to make the killer symbolic of wider society.

Carroll, writing in 1996 and quoted by Bergeron, claims that the novel fails aesthetically because readers are not able to secure uptake of the satire intended due to the gory descriptions of violence. Carroll's Uptake Argument for moderate moralism holds that a novel (say) is incomplete in itself; it needs the reader's imagination to complete it and, because it is response-dependent, if it is to succeed aesthetically on its own terms, the reader must get it, i.e. must respond emotionally in accordance with the author's purpose. In his paper 'Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research' (2) p 377 he writes:

'Moreover, an artwork may fail to secure the emotional responses it mandates because its portrayal of certain characters or situations fails to fit the moral warranting criteria appropriate to the mandated emotion. And one way it can fail to do this is by being immoral.'

In the case of *American Psycho*, Carroll's moderate moralism claims that the work fails aesthetically for the same reasons that it fails morally, i.e. the novel's perspective includes scenes so repellent to normal moral sensibilities that the satire is not taken up (aesthetic defect) and the perspective itself is immoral (moral defect). It is not only that evil acts are described but the attitude which finds them

amusing is morally defective. If this argument is successful, moderate autonomism ('the moral evaluation of an artwork is never relevant to its aesthetic evaluation' (Bergeron 2007) ) must be false.

Why should the evil perspective prevent uptake of the satire? Bergeron cites the objection to Carroll's argument made by Anderson and Dean (1998): the conditions which make satire qua satire not work are irrelevant to the conditions which make it morally defective. Carroll's answer (1998) is that the evil perspective which is the common reason for the book's aesthetic and moral failure, need not be a sufficient reason in itself; it need only be one of the reasons, even though central, which explains the failure, for the moderate moralist case to be made.

It is important to have the moral and aesthetic defect arguments clear so I am going to quote them much as Bergeron sets them out on page 4 of his paper.

#### The Moral Defect Argument

- 1 The perspective of the work in question is immoral.
- 2 Therefore, the work invites us to share a morally defective perspective (in the present case, we are invited to find gruesome acts humorous).
- 3 Any work that invites us to share a morally defective perspective is, itself, morally defective.
- 4 Therefore, the work in question is morally defective.

#### The Aesthetic Defect Argument

- 1 The perspective of the work in question is immoral.
- 2 The immorality portrayed subverts the possibility of uptake (in the present case, the savoring of parody is precluded).
- 3 Any work which subverts its own genre is aesthetically defective.
- 4 Therefore, the work in question is aesthetically defective.

(adapted from Anderson and Dean 1998, p. 156-7)

Anderson and Dean are arguing that the pattern of reasons for the two arguments are different: premise 2 of the Aesthetic Defect Argument shows that the work is aesthetically defective but this premise is not required to show that the work is morally defective. We would need to know how satire is taken up, how the intended response from readers is achieved, and these issues are not part of ethical evaluation.

Bergeron agrees that Carroll successfully avoids Anderson and Dean's objection, but claims that Carroll's defensive move suggests that there may be some other reason which accounts for both moral and aesthetic failure, and that these failures do not involve direct interaction between the two. He distinguishes between an artwork's moral content and the moral perspective towards the content. This is clear. A novel, for example, can feature morally defective characters but promote an ethical perspective towards them. In the case of *American Psycho*, the perspective matches the content, i.e. brutality is portrayed as funny, so both content and perspective are immoral; they are related though still remain distinct. Bergeron argues that

'It is only the moral *perspective* adopted by an artwork which is relevant to the moderate moralist thesis. Moral content enters the picture only in so far as it plays a role, together with a multitude of other features of artworks (internal and/or external), in the development of a moral perspective.'  
(p 6)

He claims that it is a specific part of the moral content of the work, not the moral perspective which is responsible for the aesthetic defect in the Aesthetic Defect Argument.

The first premise of Carroll's Aesthetic Defect Argument is that the perspective of *American Psycho* is immoral, i.e. the point of view that finds gruesome acts funny, but the second premise is that the immorality portrayed prevents uptake of the satire. (If an artwork subverts what it is trying to do, it is aesthetically defective.) Bergeron claims that Carroll equivocates between the two, i.e. the argument is logically fallacious because the terminology changes from immoral perspective to immorality portrayed, and the immorality portrayed is about content not perspective. The author's intended

message is subverted not by the book's perspective but because readers are turned off by the brutality and sheer evil of a character.

The role this evil plays in the moral defectiveness (adopting an immoral perspective) and in the aesthetic defectiveness (some of the moral content subverts uptake of the writer's intention) is different; Bergeron claims that he can defend the moderate autonomist position against moderate moralism because although the novel is defective in both aspects, it is so for different reasons. Carroll argues that it is the factor of this evil which mostly explains both defects. Bergeron argues that this evil is the evil perspective in the moral defect, and the evilness of the character in the aesthetic defect. He illustrates this by suggesting that if *American Psycho* were rewritten and toned down the brutality but kept the immoral perspective, uptake might succeed, and, indeed, he thinks this may be so in the case of the film of the book (*American Psycho* (2000)). His error theory is that because aspects of the moral content of the artwork feature in both moral and aesthetic defects, there is a mistaken impression of that genuine interaction between the two forms of evaluation which the moderate moralist looks for.

Against Carroll and Bergeron I will argue that the novel *American Psycho* succeeds morally and aesthetically for the same reasons. I think its content is moral not immoral and its ethical virtue is also an aesthetic virtue, so I take a moderate moralist position in this case. The title tells us that the main character is a psychopath, a term loaded with moral condemnation, so we know from the outset that his perspective is skewed. His absurd over-the-top lifestyle coupled with his monster flip-side would alert even naive readers to the symbolism of the juxtaposition and, therefore, to the satirical intention of the author. Carroll argues that readers cannot morally get past the depiction of the brutality, so are unable to take up his intention.

The perspective of the book is shown in such a way that readers are repelled.

I think it is worth exploring what the moderate moralist means by failure of uptake. This is because I could argue that some readers are just inadequate to the task or over-sensitive, and that most will appreciate what Ellis intends, so the book succeeds aesthetically. Alternatively, it could be argued that if readers are turned off by the violence before they have had a chance to understand what it is all about, they cannot make any considered response as uptake has not really been tested. However what the Uptake Argument entails is that the fault lies with the artwork itself, not with readers. Carroll is very eloquent on this point:

'Yet the reluctance that the moderate moralist has in mind is not that the ideally sensitive audience member voluntarily puts on the brakes; rather, it is that he can't depress the accelerator because it is jammed. He tries, but fails. And he fails because there is something wrong with the structure of the artwork. It has not been designed properly on its own terms.' (p. 379)

I sometimes come across 'poetry' which is trying hard to elicit a certain emotional response, but fails to do so in me because I detect the manipulation and the emotion does not ring true. It is not that I am unable to see the writing techniques at work, it is just that there is something wrong with them; perhaps the rhyme is too pat or the tone too didactic. In this sense, the artwork fails on its own terms.

Does *American Psycho* fail on its own terms? Carroll and Bergeron argue that uptake fails due to the immoral perspective (Carroll) or due to some parts of the immoral content (Bergeron). I think it succeeds provided the reader understands the moral perspective, and I would have thought that most readers who pick up the book would be Ellis's target audience. No doubt there will be some who are not able to 'complete' the work or who misinterpret it for their own ends, but this will always be the case with artworks - it is not especially true of this one. The way the brutality is depicted would be immoral if the book were not a satire, but the whole point is to expose the nature of a particular unjust, immoral society, and this is most effectively done, I would argue, by hard hitting symbolism. Bergeron claims that the book fails aesthetically because

'it involves a defective handling of some parts of its moral content in relation to the overall picture and themes it intends to communicate.' (p. 8)

I think it is because of its overall theme that the specific content is meaningful aesthetically. It is not that the accelerator is jammed but rather that the satire is too close to home for some readers.

It seems very plausible to me that some readers will find personal reasons to reject the book because they take up the author's intention only too well.

For my argument to work I have to show that the moral perspective which I think *American Psycho* has, contributes to its alleged aesthetic success. Bergeron (moderate autonomist position) claims that it is doubtful that an artwork's moral perspective can ever be the reason for its aesthetic success or failure. My moderate moralist position needs to explain how uptake of the satire occurs due to the direct interaction between ethical and aesthetic evaluation. An analogy might be made with jokes which are in bad taste Stand-up comedians before a certain sort of audience may succeed very well in achieving uptake because of a joke's immoral perspective - the joke is funnier for it, so works aesthetically on its own terms. Against this we might argue that when we know we are hearing a joke, we are not really making any ethical evaluations at that moment; we are just going with the absurdity of the situation the joke sets up. However in the case of *American Psycho*, I maintain that a possible fictional world is created in such a way that the satire on the real world is clear. In judging the fictional world, we judge the factual, and in this judgment we appreciate the novel - the satire aesthetically.

In conclusion, *American Psycho* succeeds aesthetically and morally because of its moral perspective and, as this is for the same reason in both respects, I take the line of moderate moralism. Bergeron has tried to defend moderate autonomism by assuming that Carroll's interpretation of the novel is correct. His defence would be equally interesting if he were to accept my interpretation.

#### **References:**

(1) Bergeron, V. University of British Columbia, 'Defending Moderate Autonomism' Paper given to the 2007 Annual Conference of the British Society of Aesthetics, Oxford, cited in that paper and referred to in this essay:

Anderson, J.C.&Dean, J.T. (1998) Moderate Autonomism. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 38: 150-66

Carroll, N. (1996) Moderate Moralism, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 36: 223-38

Carroll, N. (1998) Moderate Moralism versus Moderate Autonomism. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 38: 419-24

(2) Carroll, N. (2000) 'Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research' *Ethics*, 110 pp 350-87. The University of Chicago.