

On the Ethics of Imagination and Ethical-Aesthetic Value Interaction in Fiction

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Abstract

Advocates of interactionism in the ethical criticism of art argue that ethical value impacts aesthetic value. The debate is concerned with “the intrinsic question”: the question of whether ethical flaws/merits in artworks’ manifested attitudes affect their aesthetic value (Gaut 2007: 9). This paper argues that the assumption that artworks have intrinsic ethical value is problematic at least in regards to a significant subset of works: fictional artworks. I argue that, insofar as their ethical value emerges only from attitudes attributable to actual agents, fictional artworks only have *extrinsic* ethical value. I show that what is at stake for interactionism is whether ethical judgements concerning artists’ attitudes in a context, rather than manifested attitudes, are ever aesthetically relevant. I conclude that, without buying into extreme actual intentionalism, a still controversial theory of interpretation that ties artworks’ meaning to actual artists, interactionism fails to show that ethical flaws/merits are aesthetic flaws/merits.

Keywords: Fiction, imagination, ethical value of art, moralism, immoralism, autonomism, value interaction debate.

1. Introduction

The Birth of a Nation is reviled for representing the KKK as a justice-serving force and Black Americans as corrupt and evil. At the same time, however, it is lauded by critics for its technical prowess and aesthetic power. What is the relation between *Birth*’s ethical flaws and its aesthetic

value?¹ Advocates of *interactionism* in the ethical criticism of art argue that artworks' ethical and aesthetic values interact. Moralists argue that ethical flaws and merits are *pro tanto* aesthetic flaws and merits (see [Carroll 1996](#); [Gaut 2007](#); [Giovannelli 2013](#)). Immoralists argue that ethical flaws are sometimes aesthetic merits (see [Kieran 2006](#); [John 2006](#); [A. W. Eaton 2012a](#)). Arguments for interactionism so far focus on what Berys Gaut calls "the intrinsic question": the question of whether the ethical value of *the attitudes expressed and invited toward representational content* interacts with aesthetic value ([Gaut 2007: 9](#)). Against interactionism, *autonomism* argues that artworks' ethical and aesthetic values *don't interact*. Works' ethical flaws or merits aren't aesthetic flaws or merits (see [Bell 1987](#); [Anderson & Dean 1998](#); [Harold 2011](#)).

In the contemporary debate, interactionism has been widely embraced. Autonomism has proved unpopular because it faces two major issues. First, in establishing a separation between ethical and aesthetic values, autonomism seems to ignore that many representational artworks aim at engaging appreciators' ethical sensibilities ([Devereaux 2004: 8](#); [Carroll 2000: 357](#)). Second, in arguing that ethical considerations should have no bearing on our aesthetic evaluation of artworks, autonomism seems to attribute a widespread error to our critical practices, which often involve an ethical assessment of works ([Gaut 2007: 95–97](#); [Giovannelli 2013: 337](#)).

This paper aims at bringing back autonomism as a serious contender in the debate. I offer a burden of proof shifting argument for autonomism by showing that the assumption on which arguments for interaction depend, namely, that artworks have *intrinsic* ethical value, is problematic at least in regards to a significant subset of works: fictional artworks. I argue that fictional artworks' ethical value emerges from attitudes attributable only to actual agents and in specific contexts. Therefore, they only have *extrinsic* ethical value. Because arguments for value interaction focus on artworks' manifested attitudes, interactionism owes us an argument for how ethical value of agents' actual

¹ I use the terms ethical and moral interchangeably because the debate focuses on a narrow sense of the ethical that involves attitudes of concern/ill-intent towards others ([Gaut 2007: 41–43](#)). I follow Gaut in referring to aesthetic value in its more general sense as 'the value of an object *qua* work of art' ([Gaut 1998: 183](#)).

attitudes can interact with works' aesthetic value, rather than simply being a case of moral reasons overriding aesthetic considerations.

While there might be open avenues for interactionism, I show that they would involve challenging long-held assumptions in the philosophy of art regarding the relevance of flesh-and-blood authors for interpretation or even the relation between fiction and imagination. On the contrary, robust autonomism, according to which artworks can only have *extrinsic* ethical value, emerges as the least revisionist alternative that can offer a unified approach to fictional and non-fictional artworks without buying into still-controversial theses in surrounding debates.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 offers some preliminaries. Section 3 examines arguments for the intrinsic ethical assessment of fiction. Section 4 argues that fictional artworks merely prescribe attitude-imaginings, and Section 5 argues that these don't meet the conditions for intrinsic ethical assessment. Section 6 examines the case of actual ethical defects. Section 7 argues against the interaction of aesthetic and extrinsic ethical value. Finally, I present some consequences for the value-interaction debate.

2. Setting the Stage

The debate on ethical-aesthetic value interaction has mostly focused on artworks in which we can identify attitudes toward representational content. Artworks' ethically salient features are features they have *qua representational* artworks: they express and invite attitudes toward their content—for example, the disgust toward Black characters prescribed by *Birth*.² The ethical value relevant for interaction is *intrinsic*,³ it is one that results from assessing works' perspective, that is, the set of

² Perhaps artworks *could* have other ethically relevant features *qua artworks*. However, arguments for interactionism so far have focused on the ethical value of attitudes toward representational content, and thus on ethical value artworks have *qua representational*.

³ E.g., M. M. Eaton (1992), Freeland (1997), A. W. Eaton (2003; 2012a), Harold (2006). Notable exceptions include James Harold (2020), Robert Stecker (2005) and Ted Nannicelli (2020), who argue that works' consequences and production processes are sometimes relevant. I come back to this in the concluding remarks.

expressed and prescribed attitudes toward narrated events and characters as represented by the work.⁴ This ethical value is intrinsic because it considers artworks only in virtue of the attitudes we can attribute to them in their own right.⁵

Arguments for interactionism so far depend on intrinsic ethical value because ethical and aesthetic considerations are brought together in the evaluation of works' prescribed responses. Consider the merited response argument (Gaut 1998; 2007). Works' prescribed responses are subject to evaluative criteria: they aren't narratively appropriate merely in virtue of a work prescribing them, but in virtue of being warranted by how events and characters are represented. Because responses have implications for our actual attitudes, they are subject to evaluation under ethical criteria. Unethical responses are unmerited, and a work that prescribes unmerited responses is unsuccessful. Therefore, ethical defects are aesthetic defects. For ethical flaws/merits to be aesthetic flaws/merits, they need to emerge from the attitudes expressed and prescribed by works toward their content; ethical flaws in virtue of artworks' consequences, production processes or even artists' immoral attitudes aren't enough. The same is true for arguments that focus on failure of uptake (Carroll 1996; 2000), according to which ethical flaws are aesthetic flaws because the prescription of unethical attitudes precludes the possibility of uptake.

While the debate focuses on representational artworks, I examine only works of fiction with the aim of removing noise: What matters for the intrinsic question are the attitudes works express and invite toward representational content. Focusing on fictional artworks removes from consideration the actual attitudes of flesh-and-blood agents that could impact, not works' aesthetic value, but

⁴ We might also assess artworks for *how* they explore ethical issues: whether they are “sensitive or obtuse, original or clichéd, insightful or dull, fine grained or general, and so on” (Stecker 2008: 150). However, this broad sense of the ethical involves qualities with both an ethical and an aesthetic dimension. This is problematic. On the one hand, as Gaut notes, the broad sense of the ethical would grant interactionism an easy but trivial victory (Gaut 2007: 142). On the other hand, the autonomist could easily claim that in those cases we use terms only in their aesthetic sense.

⁵ It is now widely accepted that extrinsic features, such as art-historical facts and (at least some) authorial intentions, are relevant in identifying works' intrinsic features. Nevertheless, they are relevant only insofar as they are realized in works' intrinsic features, i.e., only insofar as they determine works' content and aesthetic properties, and only insofar as they determine the attitudes we are justified in attributing to works. An intrinsic ethical assessment is thus concerned with art-historical facts and authorial intentions only insofar as they are relevant to identifying the attitudes we are justified in attributing to works.

how we approach them. What I will show is that the case of fictional artworks reveals that there is no ethical value without attitudes attributable to actual agents. Works' manifested attitudes are, it turns out, a red herring.

3. Intrinsic Ethical Assessment

Gaut (2007: 69) and Susan Feagin (2010: 20–21), note that artworks aren't the sort of thing that can straightforwardly possess ethical qualities. However, few authors offer explicit arguments for their ethical amenability. Here, I reconstruct the clearest arguments in the literature so far: Alessandro Giovannelli's 'Ethical Fittingness Theory' (EFT), and Gaut's Affective-Practical ethical assessment.

Works' perspective involves both an expressive and a teleological dimension. Fictional artworks prescribe imaginings about the fictional world as seen from a specific point of view. Their perspective *expresses* attitudes toward representational content by prescribing imaginings and by means of specific aesthetic features. By prescribing imaginings, works' perspective also *prescribes responses* to the events and characters as represented in the work.

An intrinsic ethical assessment is firstly grounded on the expressive dimension of works' perspective. According to Giovannelli (2013: 338–39), an intrinsic ethical assessment amounts to assessing artworks' commitment to fitting extra-fictional reality. Giovannelli thinks that artworks belong to a supergenre of ethically realistic works in that, insofar as their perspective involves an ethical dimension, they are committed to "getting things right" and to fitting the actual world. Fictional artworks can be legitimately intrinsically assessed because we can attribute to them *extra-fictional* commitments, that is, a commitment to attitudes being appropriate for extra-fictional events and characters. We can understand extra-fictional commitments as prescriptions to *export*

evaluative attitudes, that is, to take prescribed attitudes and apply them to events and characters in the actual world.⁶

This needn't mean that works' perspective can only be ethically assessed when looking at its extra-fictional application. According to Gaut (1998; 2007), in prescribing genuine affective responses, fictional artworks endorse the perspective's attitudes toward represented events and characters. Genuine affective responses are amenable to ethical assessment because they are indicative of one's character and dispositions, and they are other-regarding, that is, they involve attitudes toward others (Gaut 2007: 45–47). Fictional artworks are amenable to intrinsic ethical assessment under Gaut's affective-practical conception because, although they concern imagined events and characters, they prescribe—and thus endorse—genuine emotional responses that have implications for actual attitudes toward similar states of affairs in the real world. Put differently, by endorsing genuine emotional responses toward imagined states of affairs, fictional artworks sign off the extra-fictional application of their prescribed attitudes.

We can thus say that intrinsic ethical value of fictional artworks is grounded on their *extra-fictional* commitments: 1) on their commitment to export evaluative attitudes to fit extra-fictional reality, and 2) on their commitment to the extra-fictional implications of the responses they prescribe.

4. Attitude-Imaginings

In the case of fictional artworks, the ethically salient features identified by interactionists are features that works have *qua fiction*: by prescribing imaginings, they express attitudes and invite responses toward representational content. In order to assess whether fictional artworks are amenable to intrinsic ethical assessment, it is important to examine what these prescriptions involve.

⁶ I take the terminology of quarantining, import, and export from Tamar Gendler (2000).

Fictional artworks prescribe imaginings. For our purposes, it isn't necessary to specify the *exact* relation between fiction and imagining. Prescribing imaginings might be a necessary and sufficient condition for fiction (Currie 1990; Stock 2017), constitutive given certain norms of speech acts (García-Carpintero 2019b), or just a standard feature (Friend 2011). What matters is that, on the basis of our practice, prescribing imaginings is what we are *justified in attributing to fictional artworks*. Nevertheless, when examining intrinsic ethical value, it is important to further specify the *kind* of imaginings fiction prescribes, since not all imaginings are equal in how they relate to the rest of our attitudes.

While fiction is traditionally characterized by its connection to imagination, the literature doesn't explicitly specify what sense of "imagination" is relevant in this context. The most plausible interpretation of the received view is one that cashes out imagination in its attitude sense.⁷ Thus, fiction prescribes *attitude-imaginings*:⁸ it prescribes adopting a specific cognitive attitude, that of imagining, toward a given content. Attitude-imaginings are the cognitive attitude that treats its content *as if* it was satisfied or true (Van Leeuwen 2013; 2014). In fictional artworks, this *as if* is satisfied by what is stipulated by the work. The contents toward which we are prescribed to adopt an attitude of imagining can take many different forms depending on the work: they might be sensory, propositional, experiential, etc. Regardless, fictional artworks prescribe to attitude-imagine their content. This is what we are justified in attributing to the work. Because these prescriptions involve adopting the attitude of imagining toward a given content, nothing rules out that in other circumstances subjects, both artists and appreciators, might also adopt a different attitude (e.g., belief or desire) toward the same content. But what matters is that, qua fiction, fictional artworks prescribe attitude-imaginings.

⁷ The other available alternatives are imagination in its mental imagery sense or in its constructive sense. These seem implausible because they would be unhelpful in characterizing fiction in opposition to non-fiction. Both mental imagery and constructive imagination are plausibly involved in our engagement with non-fiction (see also note 9).

⁸ E.g., Lamarque and Olsen's (1994) fictive stance, Stock's (2017) and García-Carpintero's (2019b) F-imaginings, Cooke's (2014) fictive imaginings.

Attitude-imaginings are characterized in the literature as being *quarantined* in that they are off-line states that are isolated from the rest of our cognitive stock (Gendler 2003; Nichols 2006). Neil Van Leeuwen, for example, argues that there is an anti-symmetric inferential relation between beliefs and attitude-imaginings, so that imaginings aren't part of the informational background for inferences from beliefs to other beliefs (Van Leeuwen 2014: 795). Further, he notes that, even when we can find cases of what Gendler calls cognitive contagion, in which imaginings behave cognitively as beliefs do, quarantine is the rule, not the exception. If it were otherwise, the distinction between believing and imagining would disappear (Van Leeuwen 2014: n. 15).

To understand the scope of works' prescriptions, it is important to distinguish the sense in which they prescribe imaginings from other senses of imagination that aren't necessarily quarantined. In its constructive sense, imagination is a process by which we form novel representations, and which can have different sources, such as perceptions, beliefs, biases, desires, etc. (Van Leeuwen 2013). Crucially, we can take different cognitive attitudes toward the resulting representations, so that not all representations resulting from constructive imagination are attitude-imagined.⁹ For example, hearing a loud thud downstairs, I might engage my constructive imagination and represent my toddler falling and bumping his head. Rather than taking my toddler being hurt to be fictional, I adopt the attitude of belief toward the mental representation and run downstairs. But we might equally adopt an attitude of imagining toward the mental representations that result from constructive imagination. Hearing the loud thud, I might engage my constructive imagination and represent a ghostly figure emerging from my television and knocking it down. Rather than believing that there is a poltergeist downstairs, I adopt the attitude of imagining toward the mental representation and remain unbothered. In such cases, imaginings are quarantined because of the attitude I take toward the resulting representations.

⁹ Constructive imagination plausibly plays a role in our engagement with non-fiction. As I read Valeria Luiselli's essay *Tell Me How It Ends*, I might engage my constructive imagination to form a representation of migrants riding "La Bestia", the train that takes them across Mexico to reach the U.S.

Fictional artworks prescribe attitude-imaginings rather than simply inviting us to engage in a constructive imaginative process. It might be that, in order to generate the necessary representations toward which we are prescribed to adopt the attitude of imagining, we engage our capacity to constructively-imagine works' representational content. But even if this was the case, the attitude one is prescribed to adopt toward the result of the constructive imaginative process is that of imagining, so that prescriptions are quarantined.

The presence of non-accidentally true statements in fictional artworks might make us think that they prescribe belief. But we can still make sense of these statements by appealing simply to the prescription of attitude-imaginings and genre norms. The generation of attitude-imaginings takes by default subjects' actual beliefs as informational background, and it is subject to norms that partly depend on genre. Genre norms determine which elements of our actual cognitive stock are to be used to generate attitude-imaginings. The genre in which attitude-imaginings are prescribed determines rules of *import* of actual attitudes in that it *determines which actual attitudes one is meant to attitude-imagine during the engagement with the work*. In realist genres, the generation of attitude-imaginings takes subjects' actual beliefs as background. Here, genre determines that we import to the imaginative project most of our belief stock: we are to attitude-imagine most of what we believe. But once imported, the work prescribes us to adopt an imaginative attitude toward that content. The fact that these elements are non-accidentally true doesn't entail that they are prescribed to be exported. It entails that given certain genre norms, the generation of attitude-imaginings is governed and constrained by our beliefs. But, crucially, this doesn't mean that fictional artworks prescribe belief. Non-accidentally true statements in fictional artworks are only indicative of specific rules of *import* governing the generation of attitude-imaginings.

This leaves us with a picture according to which, in principle, fictional artworks only prescribe attitude-imaginings that are quarantined. Nevertheless, this doesn't mean that quarantine won't

sometimes be breached. As the argument moves forward, I will tackle two cases in which fictional artworks do more than merely invite attitude-imaginings. First, we might identify an agent to whom we can attribute relevant epistemic commitments and intentions to use works' prescriptions to attitude-imagine to invite beliefs (Section 5). Second, we might identify a sociohistorical context in which specific social structures use works' prescriptions to attitude-imagine to promote beliefs (Section 6). However, I'll argue that, although in such cases quarantine is broken and fictional artworks are used to do more than prescribe attitude-imaginings, prescriptions to export cannot be straightforwardly attributed to works themselves, so that the resulting ethical value is not the intrinsic ethical value that can sustain ethical-aesthetic interaction.

5. Against Intrinsic Ethical Assessment

Interactionism as formulated so far in the literature depends on the claim that artworks are amenable to intrinsic ethical assessment. Intrinsic ethical value is grounded on works' extra-fictional commitments. I argue here that, because what we are justified in attributing to fictional artworks are prescriptions to attitude-imagine, we cannot justifiably attribute to them the relevant extra-fictional commitments that could ground intrinsic ethical value.

Giovannelli identifies works' commitment to their ethical perspective with a commitment to fit extra-fictional reality. But no extra-fictional commitments follow just from works' commitment to their ethical perspective. Works are committed to a perspective if we are justified in attributing to them the relevant prescriptions to attitude-imagine toward events and characters as represented in the work. Interactionism needs to show that in addition to this commitment to prescribe attitude-imaginings, we can identify in fictional artworks a commitment to the perspective fitting extra-fictional reality in the form of *prescriptions to export* the relevant attitudes. Without prescriptions to export, fittingness commitments only involve a commitment to certain norms governing the generation of attitude-imaginings, namely, that attitude-imaginings follow what we believe.

Prescribing inappropriate imaginings would simply involve a subversion of works' own (morally realistic) genre. But insofar as genre is an intra-fictional criterion concerning the generation of attitude-imaginings, it is only aesthetically—rather than ethically—relevant. Intrinsic ethical value is grounded on extra-fictional commitments understood as prescriptions to export attitudes because what is of ethical import is that they involve a commitment to take attitudes as extra-fictionally ethically appropriate as well.

As argued in the previous section, however, in principle, fictional artworks only prescribe attitude-imaginings. Absent other conditions, we cannot identify in fictional artworks a prescription to export attitudes. What we are justified in attributing to fictional artworks on the basis of our practice are prescriptions to attitude-imagine, which are quarantined. Because attitude-imaginings are quarantined, the prescriptions to attitude-imagine *by themselves* don't involve any extra-fictional commitments. If attitude-imagining refers to treating contents *as if* satisfied, a work's commitment to fit extra-fictional reality is only a criterion for *narrative* appropriateness (Goldie 2003: 61–64). Put differently, it is a criterion for whether the prescriptions to take certain things as satisfied in the work are fitting given the norms the work is committed to.

This isn't to deny that we might learn from fictional artworks. They might be cognitively valuable, but not because they prescribe attitudes for export. That isn't how learning from imagination works. We might derive beliefs from certain imaginative projects that involve attitude-imaginings when other conditions are in place, namely, when imaginings are subject to certain constraints and consistent with the rest of our cognitive attitudes. Learning from imagination isn't the result of export mandates in imaginative projects. Because we cannot attribute to fictional artworks themselves prescriptions to export, assessing whether audiences derive beliefs would surpass an intrinsic ethical assessment. We would no longer be concerned with what we can attribute to fictional artworks, with what they prescribe, but with what appreciators *do* with those imaginings, which concerns *extrinsic* ethical value.

Against this last point, one might counter that works can prescribe attitude-imaginings with a specific audience in mind, namely, one that has the relevant background attitudes as to derive the relevant beliefs. However, since fictional artworks are characterized by prescriptions to attitude-imagine, the notion of intended audience should be understood in terms of what works expect appreciators to *import*, not what they expect appreciators to *export*. The notion of an intended audience involves the necessary set of beliefs meant to act as informational background to derive attitude-imaginings as prescribed by fictional artworks. Artists might pander to specific audiences in that they assume certain attitudes to derive attitude-imaginings, but works' prescriptions are still, absent other conditions, quarantined.

Interactionism could reply that prescriptions to export aren't attributed to fictional artworks but to artists, and that because we cannot make such a radical distinction between works and artists, we can attribute to works an aim to promote certain beliefs. To respond to this objection, note that even when authorial intentions are relevant, they are so only insofar as they are realised in works themselves. Artistic aims might help us in fixing and identifying intrinsic features of works, but these aims are only realised in fictional artworks as prescriptions to attitude-imagine. This is so even if one embraced actual intentionalism, the view that actual artists' intentions determine the meaning of works. Actual intentionalism is a theory of how to determine what we are justified in attributing to works, namely, that which was intended by actual artists as manifested in the work. Absent other conditions, we are only justified in attributing to fictional artworks prescriptions to attitude-imagine, even if we are justified in making such attributions on the basis of actual artists' intentions. While we might be able to attribute to *artists* extra-fictional aims, to *fictional artworks in their own right* we can only attribute prescriptions to attitude-imagine.

5.1. *Morally Realistic Fictions*

At this point, Giovannelli could respond that extra-fictional commitments follow from the morally realistic genre to which fictional artworks belong. I argue here that genre cannot ground the attribution of extra-fictional commitments to fictional artworks in their own right.

Genre is an *intra-fictional* criterion. It involves conventions that constrain the construction of fictional artworks and audiences' expectations (Liao 2016). A morally realistic genre might *import* extra-fictional criteria in virtue of its commitment to, in Giovannelli's words, "getting things right" (2013: 340). But this "getting things right" should be interpreted intra-fictionally. Imported criteria are relevant in determining whether prescriptions to attitude-imagine are consistent with the constraints imposed by a morally realistic genre. Understood in this way, genre only determines if prescriptions are narratively appropriate in light of genre norms. Prescriptions that violate the morally realistic genre are merely aesthetically, rather than ethically, relevant because they violate genre conventions and expectations.

Against a purely intra-fictional understanding of genre, however, Shen-yi Liao argues that genre determines rules of export too. One could think that extra-fictional commitments of fictional artworks come from the rules of export set by a morally realistic genre. Realist genres, according to Liao, include an invitation to export works' prescriptions that comes from a symmetrical import/export relation: given genre norms of realism, because we are meant to attitude-imagine what we believe (import), we are meant to believe what we attitude-imagine (export) (Liao 2013: 281). The symmetry highlighted by Liao is about what we are epistemically warranted to export from the work on the basis of its genre. Presumably, this is what could be regarded as a prescription to export that involves extra-fictional commitments.

However, while it might be true that the genre of moral realism *allows* for a symmetrical import/export relation, export *isn't warranted or prescribed* by our practice of *fiction*. In realistic fiction, while it might be that we attitude-imagine most of what we believe (import), we don't believe all

of what we attitude-imagine (export). While realism as a genre *allows* for the symmetrical relation, export is only warranted when other conditions are in place. Gendler (2000: 76) thinks that export is warranted partly on the basis of testimony, so testimony could ground prescriptions to export. Nevertheless, testimony requires assertion, so one basic condition for prescription and warrant for export is that we take the speaker to be asserting, with the commitments this brings.

Interactionism might turn to theorists of fiction like García-Carpintero or Stock. García-Carpintero (2019a: 455–57) argues that authors might indirectly assert by means of fiction-making: given certain genre norms, we assume that authors with specific ambitions commit themselves to the truth of what is put forward as fiction-made content. Likewise, Stock (2017: 108–10, 115–21) explains assertion through fiction by appeal to her *extreme* intentionalism, which completely erases the separation between artists and their work: we can take some prescriptions to imagine as assertions because we can identify an actual speaker who is committed to the truth of what is said.

This reveals one of the conditions under which we might take quarantine to be breached, namely, when we can identify an agent with the relevant epistemic commitments as to attribute assertion by means of fiction-making. In such cases, we might take authors to be using fictional artworks not merely to invite attitude-imaginings, but to put forward assertions by using specific genre conventions. Given the symmetrical import/export relation, an author might use a fictional work in a realist genre to make assertions by highlighting other ways in which the generation of attitude-imaginings is driven by uncontroversial imports. For example, D. W. Griffith, director of *Birth*, exploits realism to make assertions about Black Americans that are aimed to pass as uncontroversial imports along with, for example, certain facts about the American Civil War.

Nevertheless, note that in these cases of quarantine breach, assertions are attributed to *authors*: authors sometimes assert by means of fiction-making. As Stock argues, the actual commitments to the truth of what is put forward, which are necessary for assertion, cannot simply be attributed to manifested or implied authors. Moderate actual intentionalism would allow that, taking certain

facts about authors, certain epistemic commitments and intentions, we postulate authors as manifested in the work. But these manifested authors are only fictional constructs that help in identifying which prescriptions to attitude-imagine we are justified in attributing to the work. Manifested authors aren't enough for assertion. As fictional constructs, they are only construed *as if* having the relevant commitments. For prescriptions to attitude-imagine to be assertions, we would need to get rid of merely manifested authors and bring in actual authors and their actual epistemic commitments. In short, we would need to embrace extreme intentionalism, whereby there is no distance between actual authors and their work. Without extreme intentionalism, the attribution of the relevant extra-fictional commitments is to actual agents, not to fictional artworks.

To circumvent reliance on actual authors' commitments, interactionism could argue, like García-Carpintero, that fictional artworks might assert indirectly by bringing to our attention considerations in favour of certain claims. This might be particularly helpful when considering fictional artworks that aim at speaking to real-world issues, such as novels like *The Handmaid's Tale*. Unfortunately, García-Carpintero (2020: 445) acknowledges that appealing to indirect assertions creates a great deal of indeterminacy in regards to what we can attribute to works. Given the complex hermeneutic process required to identify the relevant claims, we have two options. Either audience members are responsible for export on the basis of the conclusions they choose to draw, in which case the prescription to export cannot be attributed to works, or we turn to actual authors to attribute the relevant commitments and identify what is being asserted.

Indeterminacy needn't be problematic when dealing with fictional artworks that aim at bringing specific issues to our attention. There is a way to make sense of their aims that doesn't depend on export mandates. In these cases, artworks' aims should be understood thematically: some morally realistic artworks aim at offering opportunities to examine particular moral themes. But themes should be characterized *intra-fictionally*, as interpretive keys to engage with the work that structure an artistic vision (Lamarque 2014: 135). The views that are put to our consideration shouldn't be

understood as involving prescriptions to export, but as opportunities to think through complex issues and arrive at considered views. Indeterminacy is thus a feature, not a bug. Themes are richer the more open they are, the more room there is for appreciators to interpret them freely, and the more they speak to different audiences, regardless of cultural or temporal distance. Moreover, these works are cognitively valuable because they invite appreciators to do the hard work of figuring things out for themselves, and not because they offer answers for export.

More complex are cases of fictional artworks that don't simply aim at inviting us to think through real-world issues, but whose genre trades on realism with the explicit aim of denouncing specific unjust conditions, as is the case of social novels.¹⁰ It would be a mischaracterization of, for example, César Vallejo's *Tungsten* to say that its realism is only meant to set constraints for the generation of attitude-imaginings. Vallejo's aim is to use the novel to denounce the exploitation of Indigenous miners at the hands of American companies in Peru in the early 20th century. In this sense, one might think it fair to identify in the novel invitations to export certain factual claims. Nevertheless, note that the framework I've offered so far can account for the aims of social novels like *Tungsten*. On the one hand, if we take the novel to partly aim at inviting readers to reflect on the dangers of accelerated industrialization in vulnerable Latin American communities, we might be better off characterizing its aims thematically: *Tungsten* aims at inviting readers to think through complex issues around colonialism and its continuing impact on Indigenous populations. On the other hand, if we take the novel to invite readers to export certain claims about working conditions in American-owned mines in Peru in the 20th century, export is warranted on the basis of testimony, and not on the basis of prescriptions to attitude-imagine alone: we can identify in *Vallejo* the relevant epistemic commitments that allow us to attribute assertion through fiction-making, and that license the export of these claims.

¹⁰ I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me on this.

Interactionism might insist that attributing commitments to actual agents needn't entail that we no longer attribute assertion to fictional artworks in their own right. After all, extrinsic features, such as artists' intentions, ground intrinsic features of works: given certain facts about the author, we attribute certain properties to the work. However, note that in identifying assertion on the basis of genre we have inverted the direction of attribution: given certain genre rules and prescriptions to attitude-imagine, we attribute beliefs and commitments to the author. Changing the direction of attribution entails that we are no longer assessing the work, but the author *through* the work.

Assertion through fiction illuminates cases in which we are justified in thinking that the usual quarantining nature of fiction is breached. However, the fact that it depends on identifying an actual agent means that quarantine breach isn't enough to ground *intrinsic* ethical value unless one is ready to commit to extreme intentionalism. Intrinsic ethical value depends on what we can justifiably attribute to fictional artworks. What we can justifiably attribute to *fictional artworks in their own right* are prescriptions to attitude-imagine, even if we are justified, for example on the basis of a realist genre, to attribute to specific epistemic agents an intention to assert by means of fiction-making. Without export mandates that can be derived from the prescriptions to attitude-imagine themselves, we cannot say that fictional artworks involve extra-fictional commitments. And without extra-fictional commitments, we are left without reason to think that fictional artworks are amenable to intrinsic ethical assessment.

5.2. *Ethically Significant Imaginings*

Even without prescriptions to export, one could think that fictional artworks have intrinsic ethical value in virtue of the implications that imagining has for our actual attitudes, as argued by Gaut. I argue that, while some imaginative projects might have implications for our actual attitudes toward non-fictional others, this isn't the case for attitude-imaginings.

Emotional responses are subject to fittingness criteria, which determine whether an emotional response is suitable for its object in light of subjects' interests. Gaut argues that emotional responses are subject to criteria of *ethical* appropriateness as well because they are indicative of our character and attitudes towards others. Let us grant for the sake of argument that emotional responses to actual states of affairs are amenable to ethical assessment. This isn't enough to establish the ethical significance of emotions prescribed by fictional artworks because these are responses toward *imagined scenarios*.

This is an important difference obscured by Gaut's framing the question in terms of the ethical import of genuine emotional responses. Even if we concede that emotional responses toward imagined scenarios are genuine, debates surrounding appropriateness of emotional responses toward fiction recognize the need to distinguish between emotions directed at actual scenarios and emotions directed at imagined scenarios (see, e.g., [Gilmore 2011](#); [Song 2020](#)). Indeed when discussing differences in criteria of rationality of emotions, Gaut (2007: 203) recognizes this distinction. This means that the question shouldn't be whether genuine emotional responses have implications for our actual attitudes, but whether genuine *imagining-directed* emotional responses have implications for our actual attitudes.

There is one more important distinction that is blurred by Gaut's argument. He conflates a question about the ethical value of imagining, with the question about the ethical value of imagining *fiction*. Imaginings come in very different forms, and they have different implications for our actual attitudes because not all imaginings relate to the rest of our cognitive stock in the same way. *Some* imaginings might be indicative of our actual character and attitudes toward others. But, crucially, some others will not. We need to examine how *specific types* of imaginings might interact with the rest of our mental states. So it isn't enough to just talk about imagining-directed emotional responses. What is crucial for interactionism is whether *attitude-imagining-directed* emotional responses are indicative of our actual character and attitudes.

Interactionism might argue that ethical import comes from the fact that fictional artworks engage imagination in its constructive sense, and this process involves not only propositional states, but also conative and affective attitudes. Because constructive-imaginings can take beliefs and desires as sources, we might think that they are revealing of our character and attitudes towards others, and that they are good candidates for ethical assessment. Consider Gaut's (1998: 187–88) example of a man who imagines raping women. The man's constructive-imagining of raping women is amenable to ethical assessment because it takes as its sources his desires and beliefs, and is thus revealing of his attitudes toward actual women.

However, this isn't enough for the intrinsic ethical assessment of fictional artworks either. Even if we conceded that fictional artworks always prescribe appreciators to engage their constructive imagination, *qua fiction* they prescribe to adopt an attitude of imagining toward the resulting representations. However complex the process might be, and even if it involves conative and affective attitudes, fictional artworks prescribe attitude-imaginings toward the result of the process. As said before, not all exercises of constructive imagination involve attitude-imagining. In decision making, mind-reading, and fantasising we might constructively-imagine *without* adopting an attitude of imagining. We might concede that these exercises of constructive imagination are revealing of our actual character and attitudes, and might thus be amenable to ethical assessment.

Moreover, the examples brought up by Gaut are cases in which the imaginer *imagines herself* undergoing certain experiences. Cases of ethically significant imaginings highlighted by Gaut are, therefore, cases of constructive-imaginings that: (1) take the imaginer's attitudes as a source, (2) have the imaginer herself as their object, and (3) are spontaneous, rather than guided imaginative projects. These features are presumably what make them amenable to ethical assessment.

But that *isn't* the case of fictional artworks. Even if appreciators engaged their capacity to constructively imagine, fictional artworks prescribe that they adopt an attitude of imagining toward the resulting representations. Attitude-imaginings are quarantined. So attitude-imaginings

prescribed by fictional artworks aren't indicative of our character and attitudes. Without these implications, we have no argument to claim that prescribed responses should be subject to criteria of ethical appropriateness, and no argument to claim that fictional artworks have intrinsic ethical value in virtue of the implications of prescribed responses for appreciators' actual attitudes.

Gaut might reply that the aim for engaging in imaginative projects is relevant for determining their ethical value. Insofar as some fictional artworks aim at showing understanding, their prescriptions to attitude-imagine are subject to criteria of ethical appropriateness. However, it is worth bringing up the differences in epistemic normativity between beliefs and attitude-imaginings. While a belief with inaccurate contents is an epistemic failing, imagining inaccurate things isn't in and of itself an epistemic failing. It might be inappropriate in regards to the type of imaginative project in which one is engaged; for example, prescribing inaccurate attitude-imaginings might be inappropriate in a realist genre. But imagining falsely is only an epistemic failing *when* it leads to false beliefs, and *only because it so leads* (Van Leeuwen 2021: 646-647). We might say the same in regards to ethical value. Since attitude-imaginings only involve adopting the cognitive attitude of *as if*, attitude-imagining ethically inappropriate things is only a moral failing *when* it leads to inappropriate attitudes, and *only because it so leads*.

While some fictional artworks might be *content-immoral*, in that they prescribe *content-immoral* attitude-imaginings, they don't have intrinsic ethical value insofar as they lack in themselves extra-fictional implications. When these content-immoral imaginings lead to unethical attitudes, we might be able to attribute to works *extrinsic* ethical value. But as prescriptions to attitude-imagine, these prescribed responses are what Nils-Hennes Stear calls "counter-factually unethical", that is, responses that would be unethical if prescribed toward actual events and characters (Stear 2020: 158). Additionally, as Stear rightly notes, Gaut's argument concerns whether *responses* are amenable to ethical assessment, and not whether *prescriptions* are.

Prescribed emotional responses toward fiction are responses toward attitude-imagined states of affairs. Appreciators are prescribed to take the representation and everything that follows *as if* it were the case. Responses are guided by what is narratively appropriate: not all-things-considered appropriate, but only merited by what is made the case by the fictional artwork, by what we are prescribed to attitude-imagine. This isn't reflective of our actual character and attitudes. Thus, the prescription of attitude-imaginings isn't enough to ground an intrinsic ethical assessment of works.

6. Actual Ethical Defects

Against what I have argued so far, someone might note that some works feature what I've called actual ethical flaws (Clavel-Vázquez 2020), which involve not only prescriptions concerning representational content, but equivalent attitudes toward real events and entities. Thomas F. Dixon, author of *Birth's* source material *The Clansman*, actually supported white supremacy; and D. W. Griffith claimed that *Birth* was aimed at presenting a 'historically appropriate' rendition of the American Reconstruction. One might insist that by inviting us to attitude-imagine, and by exploiting genre norms of realism to pass immoral attitudes as imports, *Birth* and *The Clansman* legitimise actual immoral attitudes. The prescribed racist attitudes toward Black characters aren't only meant to be regarded as narratively appropriate, but extra-fictionally appropriate as well.

I have argued that authorial intentions and other contextual considerations are relevant only insofar as they are realized in works. Griffith and Dixon Jr.'s racism is certainly relevant, but only in virtue of fixing *Birth's* intrinsic features. Qua fiction, its relevant intrinsic features are prescriptions to attitude-imagine. Artists' racist attitudes are interpretive tools to identify prescriptions to attitude-imagine. Take, for example, a sequence in the film in which Gus, a freedman, chases the protagonist's (white) little sister through the woods. The film explicitly presents Gus asking Flora to marry him. But Griffith is counting on the racist trope of Black men as sexual predators to implicitly prescribe appreciators to attitude-imagine that Gus will sexually

assault Flora. Racist attitudes are meant to function as informational background to derive prescriptions to attitude-imagine, for example, that the white supremacist cause is righteous.

But this is about *import*. Griffith and Dixon Jr.'s intention is that racist beliefs are also attitude-imagined as appreciators engage with the work. The work certainly panders to racist attitudes, in that it assumes immoral attitudes in the target audience, but it does so to mobilise the narrative and generate prescriptions to attitude-imagine. The work's realist genre, as intended by Griffith, sets certain norms for what those attitude-imaginings can be. But these are all intra-fictional considerations that say nothing about a prescription to export. While we might identify racist attitudes doing the work in setting norms for prescriptions to attitude-imagine, absent other conditions, we cannot justifiably attribute to the fictional artwork anything but these prescriptions to attitude-imagine, which are quarantined. This doesn't ground intrinsic ethical value.

One might be tempted to argue that works like *Birth* have intrinsic ethical value in virtue of the fact that they *express* immoral attitudes. The problem is that expressing attitudes requires assertion, either outright or indirect (Ichino & Currie 2017: 73–74). Stock and García-Carpintero think that authors can express belief while prescribing attitude-imaginings because they allow that prescriptions might function as assertions. Nevertheless, their views hinge on the attribution of the relevant epistemic commitments to actual authors. As argued in Section 5, interactionism cannot simply attribute the necessary commitments to the truth of what is put forward to manifested authors who are construed merely *as if* being committed. Unless one is willing to embrace extreme intentionalism, fictional artworks don't have intrinsic ethical value in virtue of expressing immoral attitudes. They don't properly express immoral attitudes because their prescriptions to attitude-imagine lack the relevant truth commitments. Actual authors express immoral attitudes through their works, it is to them that we attribute the relevant commitments. The ethical judgement in these cases is reducible to an ethical judgement of authors who hold and express immoral views.

In the absence of assertion, perhaps the option available to intrinsically assess fictional artworks is to argue that they are *expressive of* immoral attitudes (Ichino & Currie 2017). This would just mean that, given certain genre norms, we can take *artworks as evidence* to attribute to authors ethically significant attitudes. There are two replies, however. First, if we take prescriptions to attitude-imagine as evidence to attribute attitudes to artists, we have once again inverted the direction of attribution. It is no longer that, given certain facts about authors, we attribute properties to artworks; rather, it is that given certain genre rules and prescriptions to attitude-imagine, we attribute attitudes and commitments to authors, who are then ethically assessed. Second, the attribution needs to be to an actual author, rather than merely to an author as manifested in the work. It wouldn't be enough to attribute beliefs to a manifested author *as if* she had the relevant beliefs because this *as if* lacks extra-fictional commitments and would just be counterfactually immoral. Relying on works being merely expressive of beliefs runs into the same issues as before: interactionism ends up having to retreat back to assessing artists, even if the window through which we have access to the relevant attitudes are artworks.

This isn't to say, nevertheless, that we aren't justified in taking quarantine to be breached in cases like *Birth*. Quarantine is breached because we can identify an epistemic agent with the relevant commitments. But unless we are willing to embrace extreme intentionalism, this quarantine breach isn't enough to ground intrinsic ethical value of fictional artworks, or to move from a condemnation of the artist to a condemnation of the work in itself.

Furthermore, looking at cases of actual ethical flaws just from the perspective of artists' attitudes misses an important aspect of the ethical significance of artworks. Often, what is of ethical import is that artworks are expressive of immoral attitudes that are live options in specific contexts, and that by prescribing attitude-imaginings they are used to pander to biases, reinforce implicit attitudes, or support oppressive cultural patterns. This brings forward another sense in which the usual quarantine of prescriptions to attitude-imagine might be breached. Invitations to attitude-

imagine break quarantine when we can identify a context in which they become part of a pattern that makes attitudes well-established.

A single work's prescription to attitude-imagine that a Black man is a sexual predator is quarantined. But a group of significant works repeating a prescription to attitude-imagine an unethical attitude normalizes immoral views. This is how racist tropes take off. What is of ethical import is, therefore, the role fictional artworks play *as cultural artefacts that partly constitute social organizations* in legitimising unethical attitudes in specific contexts. Crucially, ethical value is grounded not on prescriptions to attitude-imagine themselves, but on works as they form cultural patterns. Ethical value of fictional artworks emerges from what Feagin (1995) calls their *de facto* significance, their impact on broader cultural configurations.

This quarantine breach doesn't depend on artists' intentions that can ground attributions of export mandates. In this case, quarantine is breached by *repeated imports* of widespread unethical attitudes that end up forming patterns that legitimise those same attitudes. Artworks stand in relation with each other, with other artefacts and cultural practices, and with individuals in specific social organizations. Repeated prescriptions to attitude-imagine that form a pattern break quarantine because they are partly constitutive of the social structures in which these views are deployed.

The problem is that this isn't enough to ground intrinsic ethical value either. Legitimising unethical attitudes by being partly constitutive of social structures isn't something that fictional artworks do by themselves, in virtue of prescribing attitude-imaginings. It is something that groups of artworks do in virtue of their relations with other cultural artefacts (A. W. Eaton 2012b: 301; Harold 2020: 97). Since patterns of ethical significance don't emerge from isolated objects or individuals, ethical value cannot be accounted for by simply looking at artworks' manifested attitudes (Feagin 1995: 313–14). On the contrary, we need to appeal to a "macroscopic view" that focuses on "*relational features*" and "*patterns seen in aggregate artistic categories*" (A. W. Eaton 2012b: 301). Fictional

artworks therefore have *extrinsic* ethical value in virtue of being cultural artefacts that partly constitute patterns in certain contexts.

7. Ethical-Aesthetic Value-Interaction

While some fictional artworks have extrinsic ethical value in virtue of their *de facto* significance, I have argued that, unless one buys into extreme intentionalism, they have no intrinsic ethical value because they prescribe attitude-imaginings. I now briefly suggest how this isn't enough to sustain ethical-aesthetic value-interaction.

Against the merited response argument, we can say that because prescribed responses have no implications for our actual attitudes, ethical criteria *aren't* part of the evaluative criteria for responses prescribed by artworks. Prescribed responses are merited insofar as they are warranted by works' content and expressive features. Other authors (e.g., [Jacobson 1997](#); [Jacobson & D'Arms 2000](#); [Kieran 2010](#)) have argued against the conflation of responses being warranted, which concerns how content is represented, and responses being all-things-considered appropriate, which includes ethical and prudential considerations. Since fictional artworks have no intrinsic ethical value, ethical considerations should have no bearing on conditions of warrant. An artwork is successful if the responses it aims to elicit are warranted by the *as if* that is stipulated by the work. This means that aesthetic value concerns whether responses are narratively appropriate, not all-things-considered appropriate. All-things-considered inappropriateness that stems from extrinsic ethical value isn't an aesthetic flaw. Therefore, ethical flaws aren't aesthetic flaws.

Ethical critics might object that ethical criteria are built into narrative appropriateness because the relevant prescribed responses are moral emotions (e.g., anger, indignation, admiration, praise). Therefore, ethical criteria play a role in determining whether responses are warranted by works. However, given that fictional artworks have no intrinsic ethical value, these ethical criteria should still be cashed out in terms of narrative appropriateness. Moral emotions involve the appraisal of

events and characters in light of ethical concern. In the case of fictional artworks, ethical concern is determined by what the perspective makes salient, so that moral emotions are appropriate according to whether they fit the moral concern motivated by works. For example, in *Birth*, our ethical concern is motivated by the film's emphasis on Flora's vulnerability, rather than by Gus, who is represented as a sexual predator. Because of how this ethical concern is motivated in the work, admiration for Ben as he avenges the death of his sister is narratively appropriate.

This doesn't support ethical-aesthetic interaction. Some fictional artworks' prescriptions might be all-things-considered wrong because of the role representations play in legitimising actual unethical attitudes. They are extrinsically ethically flawed. If the prescribed content-immoral attitudes aren't warranted by how the perspective motivates our moral concern, they are also aesthetically flawed. But, crucially, *they aren't aesthetically flawed because they are ethically flawed*. Works are aesthetically flawed because they are internally inconsistent: they prescribe responses that either don't match the ethical concern motivated by the perspective or are inconsistent with works' realist commitments. And they are ethically flawed in virtue of their role in legitimising unethical attitudes, but not in virtue of how their prescribed responses are or aren't fitting.

If, on the other hand, the prescribed content-immoral attitudes *are* narratively appropriate, works *aren't aesthetically flawed*, even if they are extrinsically ethically flawed. We might even note that the extrinsic value of these works is realised insofar as they are aesthetically successful. These works are able to play a role in legitimising unethical attitudes because the unethical attitudes they prescribe are warranted by how events and characters are represented. It is in this way that they are tools to promote immoral attitudes: misrepresentations of Black men have been successful in promoting harmful stereotypes because, since they are represented as menacing or dangerous, fear is warranted by artworks.

Failure of uptake arguments might seem to be consistent with extrinsic ethical value. In this case, the aesthetic flaw would consist in works precluding appreciators to respond in the ways prescribed

by inviting all-things-considered unethical attitudes. Appreciators might fail to respond in the ways prescribed because they know artworks play a role in the legitimisation of immoral attitudes. Because failure of uptake would be caused by works' extrinsic ethical value, works would be aesthetically flawed in virtue of being ethically flawed.

Against this argument, we should say that many things that aren't relevant for determining the aesthetic value of works could cause failure of uptake. For example, appreciators might fail to respond in the ways prescribed because of personal preferences in regards to styles or genres, or because they aren't part of the intended audience. Failure of uptake is only relevant for determining aesthetic value if the work has failed to elicit the prescribed responses for aesthetic reasons, e.g., because responses weren't warranted by how events and characters are represented. Some works that are extrinsically ethically flawed might fail to secure uptake. If this uptake is caused by responses not being narratively appropriate, it is aesthetically relevant *but not so in virtue of its being unethical*, as said before.

Failure of uptake caused by appreciators rejecting artworks' role in legitimising unethical attitudes isn't aesthetically relevant because it says nothing about whether prescribed responses match the representation. This failure of uptake only reveals the normative strength of moral versus aesthetic reasons. Due to their extrinsic ethical value, we have reasons not to appreciate certain artworks in specific contexts. But ethical flaws aren't aesthetic flaws.

8. Concluding Remarks

I have argued that interactionism's core assumption that artworks have intrinsic ethical value in virtue of their manifested attitudes, is problematic at least in regards to fictional artworks. What options remain available? Interactionism might adopt an extreme version of actual intentionalism, whereby assessing works simply involves assessing actual artists. If interactionism won't commit to such a theory of interpretation, it would need to adopt a characterization of fiction that isn't

tioned to imagination, or offer an argument for the ethical amenability of attitude-imaginings. Otherwise, interactionism needs to point to a different source of intrinsic ethical value or agree that only non-fictional artworks have ethical value that can interact with aesthetic value, and revise its arguments. More promising might be interactionist approaches that focus on works' consequences (Stecker 2005), production processes (Nannicelli 2020), or political value (DuBois 1926), but which have so far remained at the margins of the debate.

Although what I have said doesn't entail that interactionism is false, note that the question at the centre has been transformed. What is at stake is no longer whether ethical flaws or merits in works' manifested attitudes are aesthetic flaws or merits. Instead, what matters is whether ethical judgements concerning artists and communities are ever aesthetically relevant. This question has surprisingly received little attention in the philosophical literature, although it has been repeatedly addressed in art criticism and popular writing. Although I have focused on fictional artworks, this new way of framing the question has the advantage of offering a unified approach to the ethical assessment of fictional and non-fictional, representational and non-representational artworks. In all cases, what concerns us is how artists' actual attitudes in a given context might impact our appreciation of their work.

Robust autonomism, according to which artworks can only have extrinsic ethical value, emerges as an attractive alternative that can offer a unified approach to fictional and non-fictional artworks. In some contexts, artworks, as cultural artefacts, and artists might play a role in legitimising unethical attitudes. While extrinsic ethical value might sometimes affect our appreciation of works, this failure of uptake isn't aesthetic but moral, so that ethical flaws aren't aesthetic flaws. Moreover, robust autonomism has the advantage of being the least revisionist option: it doesn't require either the adoption of a controversial theory of interpretation or the revision of the connection between fiction and imagination.

By shifting focus to extrinsic ethical value, robust autonomism can speak to the two worries raised against the prospects of autonomism. It can acknowledge that fictional artworks engage our moral sensibilities because they are opportunistic (John 2006): they aim at engaging our interest by dealing with *themes* of human import, such as morality. But as we saw, themes should be characterized intra-fictionally. Fictional artworks offer occasions for appreciators to explore moral themes, but they don't mandate attitudes for export. Robust autonomism can still leave room for the cognitive value of art even in the absence of commitments to export. Great fictional artworks afford opportunities for different appreciators to give meaning to the themes that are of import for their own lives.

Finally, robust autonomism doesn't involve attributing a mistake to art critical practices that invoke ethical considerations. Instead, by shifting focus to extrinsic ethical value, it can offer a plausible explanation for what art critics do when evaluating works. Critics don't approach artworks in isolation, but as part of institutions, and they consider them as part of cultural patterns. Given certain contextual considerations, critics might arrive at all-things-considered verdicts that highlight reasons appreciators might have not to engage with works because of the space artworks and artists occupy in social organizations. This doesn't mean that so-called immoral works are aesthetically flawed, but that as moral agents we might have all-things-considered reasons not to engage with them.

Highlighting extrinsic ethical value is useful in acknowledging artworks' cultural impact and the complexity of our engagement with art. Aesthetic considerations sometimes are beside the point: as moral agents in specific contexts, ethical reasons sometimes have primacy over aesthetic excellence. Robust autonomism makes room to argue that, aesthetically good as *Birth* might be, given its part in the cultural configurations that sustain white supremacy, we have overriding reasons not to celebrate its aesthetic value.

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