



Ethics Bites

Art, Censorship And Morality

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This is *Ethics Bites*, with me David Edmonds.

Nigel Warburton

And me Nigel Warburton.

David

Ethics Bites is a series of interviews on applied ethics, produced in association with The Open University.

Nigel

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David

The German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl was (a) a Nazi propagandist or (b) a great artist? Or (c) both of these? Discuss. Photographer Joel-Peter Witkin, artists Jeff Koons, Egon Schiele and Balthus poet Ezra Pound - to name a few - have all produced works that many people find deeply disturbing. But can art be immoral? And if it's immoral does that mean, for that reason, that it can't be great art?

Some thinkers want to draw a distinction between pornography and erotic art – with pornography by definition not art. In an interview at London's Tate Britain Matthew Kieran, of Leeds University, author of *Revealing Art*, discusses the relationship between art and morality - and the question of whether art should ever be censored.

Nigel

Matthew Kieran, welcome to Ethics Bites.

Matthew Kieran

Morning Nigel.

Nigel

The topic we're going to focus on today is art, morality and censorship. One of the commonest arguments for censorship is that something is pornographic. Do you think something could be both pornographic and a work of art?

Matthew

Yes I do, though a lot of people deny that. A lot of people commonly make a distinction between the erotic and the pornographic, and think, sometimes almost by definition, and sometimes just in terms of the purposes of pornography, pornography just cannot be art or at least good art. Whereas I think that, sometimes, it can be the case that something can be both pornographic and good as art. For example, there are lots of sketches by Rodin, works by Schiele; Schiele was actually commissioned to make pornography for an Austrian patron and it's no coincidence that he was paid a lot of money for it and that some of those works are in art galleries.

Nigel

Doesn't that beg the question about what pornography is? Because for some people pornography is simply material that is sexually stimulating and nothing else whatsoever, but

when we're in the realm of drawings by Egon Schiele or Rodin, we know that whatever they drew would have artistic qualities.

Matthew

That's right, but one thing to remember is that the same artefact can have multiple purposes. Think about iconography for example. Back in mediaeval times lots of things were made for the purposes of, essentially, prayer. Now many of those things can be art. So too by analogy, is it the case with pornography. So something can be pornography and made with artistic purposes, and sometimes, though fairly rarely, the way in which it's pornographic is manifested through the use of artistically appreciable techniques.

Nigel

That's interesting, so you can have a Madonna and Child that was created as an altar piece for religious devotion but ends up in the Sainsbury wing of the national gallery in London.

Matthew

Exactly and I think the same can be true with particular pieces of pornographic art. So contemporary art. Think about the work of Jeff Koons. Now I myself don't rate him as highly as Schiele or Klimt. Nonetheless, he's an interesting artist. He made a series of photographic prints with himself and his then wife, who was in fact a pornographic actress, in various states of conjugal bliss. They're pretty explicit, they're pornographic, but you know, they're on display in art galleries.

Nigel

So you're saying that many things created as pornography, can serve very well the functions of art because of qualities that they have or because of the context in which they're presented.

Matthew

That's exactly right and I'd go one step further. In some cases, the way in which something is made as pornography is made with an artistic intention in a way which is not separable from it. So in order to appreciate the way in which it solicits your desire, and your arousal is tied up with the very way in which it's artistic. But because of the way in which pornography is standardly made and standardly consumed, it's not surprising that most of it is rubbish. And, moreover, partly because of the way pornography seeks to solicit and arouse sexual desire it's actually very difficult to make something that is both pornographic and good as art, but that doesn't mean that some people haven't succeeded. And that, I take it, is a mark of how good they are as artists.

Nigel

This brings us quite naturally to a question about the relationship between morality and art. Some people argue that you should judge works not just for their artistic skill, but for the kinds of ideas that are embodied within those works, so that an immoral idea embodied in a work, makes that work a lesser work.

Matthew

I think I agree with the underlying thought. How good a work is can partly depend upon what you judge the appropriate thing to say about what it's trying to show you about say humanity or the world. So for example one of the reasons why I take it Goya's disasters of war sketches is so highly regarded, is not just because of the technical artistry, but because the technical artistry is in the service of something we take to be important and true. Namely there is something horrific about the degradation involved in that kind of warfare and brutality.

And I think it's sometimes true that a morally problematic character should affect how we think of its value as art. So take a very famous film; Leni Riefenstahl's Triumph of the Will. Leni Riefenstahl was a German filmmaker. She used all sorts of filmic techniques before lots of people in Hollywood did. Aesthetically the imagery is amazing. And in Triumph of the Will, in very short opening sequence, we see a plane coming down from the clouds, the shadow, the light behind it. We have a demigod descending onto the crowd and it's Hitler. It's a glorification of Hitler in person and Naziism. And I think it's true to say that, in so far as we

take it, the film is trying to get us to admire something that we should condemn, that's a bad making feature of the work as art.

Nigel

So does it follow then that any movie that glorified Naziism would be a bad work of art?

Matthew

No it doesn't follow. Because the claim is this. In so far as a work seeks to get us to admire something that should be condemned, that's a bad making feature. But a great work can still have bad making features. For example, Ezra Pound. In his Cantos he combined certain kinds of modernist structuralist concerns with the embodiment of very strong poetic tradition going back to Dante. And it's a very singular poetic achievement. Nonetheless, in at least two of the stanzas where he talks about the Jews being the money-grabbers for hire and the pleasure seekers, in so far as we judge that attitude not to be merited, we withhold our assent, and therefore the poem is flawed, because it doesn't merit the kind of attitudes it's trying to seek from us. Doesn't mean it's not a great work. Think about philosophy works for example. Immanuel Kant's Third Critique, clearly a great work of philosophy. We might think however it suffers from the following fault – we might think it's not true.

Nigel

Though if you took the Leni Riefenstahl example it's at the heart of the film; that is basically created as Nazi propaganda. And there, it seems to me, if you start aestheticising this and saying 'oh look at the wonderful film work, look at the camera work', you're shutting your eyes to fundamentally what it is. It's a piece of propaganda.

Matthew

That's true but it's an artistic piece of propaganda. I think there can be mere propaganda. Most propaganda just isn't artistically interesting. In the Riefenstahl case you're right, the content isn't something you can just set to one side. But it doesn't follow from that, that it doesn't have artistically appreciable good making features.

Nigel

Ok, well let's take another example. I want to push you on this. With an artist like Balthus there's an unhealthy obsession, it seems to me, with looking up young girls skirts. And are you saying, oh well it's just Balthus, wonderful painter, subtle use of tone and so on and he happens to have as his subject matter this pornographic, paedophilic gaze. That seems to me to miss out something fundamental. Some kinds of faults should be utterly damning.

Matthew

Well, here's what I think the root of the problem is. Art at its best is particularly stimulating, affecting and moving. So it's particularly powerful. Now one of the reasons that art is both attractive and provocative and dangerous, is precisely because when you combine that with morally problematic attitudes or a morally problematic interest, so for example in children, it's very difficult for us, because at one and the same time at least if the artist is any good they can get us to start looking at, for example, children in ways in which we suddenly find are morally problematic. They can, as it were, almost seduce us in taking up that kind of aspect. Whilst at the same time holding that what they are trying to get us to take up, say a way of looking at children, is damning. But you can't say it's damning overall. Because if you damned it overall you would thereby ignore the power of the art which gets you to respond and to be worried about the morally problematic content in the first place. If it wasn't powerful we wouldn't be worried.

Nigel

I agree that art often challenges us. If you go down that route though there's always the danger that Plato identified that art of certain kinds could generally be corrupting. In the way in which it seduces us into not just entertaining a viewpoint, but actually endorsing it.

Matthew

I think that's right. That is a serious worry. And I think that's a challenge that often isn't taken seriously enough. Because everybody, naturally, is well motivated to think that art refines and

civilizes. With respect to art works, exposure to a particular work in and of itself won't degrade. Though we might be worried about it because it does get us to take up a perspective on, for example, children or violence or certain ethnic groups or social groups of people in a way which we find disquieting. But it's up to us then as to whether we want to seek out more works of that kind or not.

We're not just passive victims of art works. I have certain worries about the work of Joel-Peter Witkin; it shows people who are deformed in all sorts of ways. Some of his photographs show them with masks on their faces. The point of the photographs is to look at them as an object. Now I find them morally disquieting. In and of itself I don't feel corrupted and degraded, though I do feel a certain kind of resistance. That's very different from going out and seeking out as many of such works as I can. Indulging in a surfeit of that kind of thing might well degrade and corrupt me but in a way that would be my responsibility for seeking it out.

Nigel

What you've just expressed is a classic liberal position on censorship. In the arts lots of people think that what we need to do is actually control access to the kinds of images that people see.

Matthew

Yes I think that's right. The moral character of an art work is often relevant to its artistic value and explains why it can be deeply troubling. But I'm not in favour of censorship of any such works. We're only going to be in a position to understand what we think, or to be able to combat dangerous ideas, if we understand the ideas or the ways of looking at the world properly that we're supposed to be dealing with.

Nigel

Are you saying then that a public institution like Tate Britain where we are now, should give space on its wall for racist works, for homophobic works, for pornographic works, surely there's an argument for public institutions censoring what they display.

Matthew

Well if you look at the present standing collection of the Tate: if you took that attitude about half to two thirds of it would have to be removed. For example, there are lots of works here that commend imperialism. There are lots of works that objectify women. I think if you take that attitude you're not going to have very much art to hang in art galleries. You're just going to be left with a lot of very beautiful things which don't necessarily say much about the world.

Secondly the role of public art institutions is to give place to good and great art. And the point of good and great art is to get us to engage with not just the world but finding out about ourselves. One of the primary ways in which you do that is by coming up against and thinking about ways of looking at the world, ways of responding to the world, ways of thinking about the world which you disagree with. Through doing so you will suddenly find that things that you had assumed previously you have now changed your mind about. If you only speak to, or only ever look at, works which conform to your own world view, you're going to have a very narrow world view.

Nigel

But is it really as simple as that? Often in talk about free expression there's a distinction to be drawn between complete freedom, which you seem to be advocating, and a rationally grounded liberty where there are some limits to what it's acceptable to produce, display, publish and so forth. So for instance in the literary world, most people aren't arguing that you should be free to libel people, or free to plagiarize other peoples' works.

Matthew

I don't think there's anything special about the visual arts in that case. Most of the limitations that hold with respect to the literary I would be happy for them to hold with respect to the visual case. What I am worried about is that some people think the visual case requires greater prohibition and that's what I'm against. It's because of its power and the way art can get us to see the world through a different lens.

I remember as a young child of about 12 seeing a Frances Bacon triptych for the first time and it was absolutely jaw dropping and I started looking at people almost as if they were dead meat and I started looking at butcher shops in a different kind of way, and it was really scary. Now that is the basis for which people often think that there are extra special grounds for censoring art works precisely because of its power. Liberals who want to deny censorship will often talk down the power of art. And I think that's a mistake. I think you should recognize the power of art but be firm and say that there's no extra case. Because how do you learn about the world, how do you learn about yourself, it's by coming up against different things, by testing yourself and how you respond is ultimately up to you.

Nigel

Matthew Kieran, thank you very much.

Matthew

Thank you Nigel.

David

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