

BEAUTIFUL, TROUBLING ART: IN DEFENSE OF NON-SUMMATIVE JUDGEMENT

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I. The Question

Some artworks:

- “Age Ain’t Nothing but a Number”, sung by Aaliyah, produced by R. Kelley
- HBO’s *Game of Thrones*
- Ken Liu’s “The Paper Menagerie”

The Question: Do the ethical features (merits and demerits) of an object bear on its aesthetic value?

Two main kinds of answer:

AUTONOMISM “No!”

“The song is groovy. Unrelatedly, it’s troubling.”

“The show is epic! But as a separate matter, it’s misogynistic.”

“Wonderfully tragic. And moreover, an excellent basis for ethical reflection on immigrant experiences.”

And also an anti-democratic defense of technocratic authority!

ETHICISM “Yes! (At least sometimes.)”

“The song is groovy, but its also troubling, so is less good overall.”

“The show is epic, but its misogyny detracts from its goodness as a show.”

“The story’s enriching perspective is a *pro tanto* contributor to its overall goodness!”

When is “sometimes”? That is, *which* features? Does the ethical status of the artist matter? I won’t discuss this in the talk, but happy to address it in Q&A!

Something about this set up is off! Ethicism is the conjunction of two claims:

1. that ethical features are aesthetically relevant.
2. that they are so as *pro tanto* contributors/detractors(/enablers/defeaters) to(/of) overall aesthetic value.

Toni Morrison on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

The satisfactions were great.... Nevertheless,... curling through the pleasure, clouding the narrative reward, was... alarm, coupled... with a profoundly distasteful complicity....

...this amazing, troubling book

Morison is offering a *non-summative evaluative judgement*.

SUMMATIVE JUDGEMENT An evaluative judgement in which various evaluative elements are *combined* into an overall judgement.

“Summative” judgements need not be “additive.”

NON-SUMMATIVE JUDGEMENT An evaluative judgement that leaves some elements unsummed (not combined).

A irreducibly multidimensional evaluation.

A possibility: maybe we can accept (1) and not (2)—accept the ethical relevance of the moral without treating ethical merits/flaws as contributors to a single overall value.

The question: when do we need to sum?

II. Refusing to Sum

Global Refusal to form Summative Judgements

Imagine an agent who correctly identifies all of his reasons to act, but refuses to form summative judgements at all: that ϕ -ing is permissible, the thing to do, etc.

Two responses:

- Strong response: such an agent is impossible.
- Weaker response: such an agent manifests a profound normative failure.

Imagine an agent who correctly identifies all the reasons to believe various propositions but refuses to form summative judgements at all.

Epistemic summative judgements might be all-out “I should believe p !” or express a (more or less fine grained) likelihood, “One should have a credence of .6 in p .”

Now consider an agent who evaluates art but refuses summative judgements. Not even a whiff of impossibility!

Local Refusal to form Summative Judgements

Imagine Aisha is a classics professor teaching a freshman literature for the first time. She is torn on whether to include the *Odyssey* on her syllabus, and knowing you do ethics (and better yet aesthetics!), she comes to you for help!

YOU: Well, let’s start by telling me what you think of it. Is it good?

AISHA: [Long answer: plot, character, imagery, ethical perspectives]

Y: OK, but what’s the bottom line? How good is it?

A: This is literature, not accounting! What more do you want?

Aisha is right. To append to her answer something like “3/4 stars!” is needlessly reductive; it (maybe even) seems like a mistake. Contrast:

Y: Fair enough. But should you assign it?

A: [A long answer: great discussions, it's long, concerns about *the* canon]

Y: OK, but what's the bottom line? Should you assign it?

A: This is syllabus-construction, not accounting! What more do you want?

Y: An answer to the question you face—should you include it?

Or:

Y: Was Homer a single person?

A: [A long answer, lots of competing evidence.]

Y: OK, but what's the bottom line? Is this one guy?

A: This is ancient history, not accounting! What more do you want?

Y: An answer to my question—at least tell me how confident you are!

III. When and why is summative judgement correct?

Roughly: we should sum when (and only when) we need to!

Imagine Aisha is considering two actions: assigning the *Agamemnon* and assigning the *Medea*. There are reasons in favor of both. Need she sum them up?

Does Aisha need to come to a conclusion like “I have more reason to assign the *Agamemnon* than the *Medea*?”

If she only has one slot left on the syllabus, yes!

Otherwise, no!

Moderate Non-Summativism

Now let's return to aesthetic evaluation:

- *Huck Finn*'s being *A* makes it amazing.
- *Huck Finn*'s being *T* makes it troubling.

How does Morrison *respond* as an aesthetic evaluator?

- Pleasure curled with alarm.

What is it to evaluate?

Not deciding what to make, what to hang on the wall, what to repair, what to recommend, what to award.

Engaging, examining, appreciating, and in response to what we find: *feeling*. We have *room* to feel many different things at once!

This is *like* putting both items on the syllabus—she has *room* for both.

Where do we wind up at the end of this? At least:

MODERATE THESIS It is not incorrect to form non-summative, evaluative aesthetic judgements. (Summing is not required.)

There are ways of taking an evaluative stance on art which is non-summative and does not involve a mistake; Aisha and Morrison do not err; feeling all the things (pleasure and alarm) without a further ur-attitude is fitting.

Extreme Non-Sumativism

But is it *also* a mistake to feel a further attitude—some all things considered attitude of appreciation that takes all the dimensions as pro tanto considerations?

Put another way: If at the end of her essay, Morrison had said “so overall, its an outstanding work of art,” would her evaluation be tainted by some kind of mistake?

Consider an analogy with character:

While making summative judgements about people’s character is possible, it is a kind of ethical mistake.

“He’s a 7” or even “She’s a 10.”

The problem isn’t just that the number isn’t high enough.

The value of people’s character is irreducibly multidimensional; it is a mistake to attempt to *reduce* one’s evaluation to a single dimension.

Another case in which summative judgement is a mistake: judgements about action in which there are trace effects, e.g., “breaking my promise is, in this exceptional case, is regrettable, but the right thing to do.” We shouldn’t see each of those dimensions as bearing on a further, unidimensional assessment of the action.

IV. The Complication!

Sometimes, ethical features undermine the fittingness of certain affective responses: Gauguin’s nudes, “Age Ain’t Nothing But a Number”.

Not “remarkable in its color, beautifully erotic, revoltingly objectifying”. The third element undermines the second in this case.

When do ethical and non-ethical elements *combine*? Whenever considerations on either side really do bear on the *same response*.