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THE AESTHETIC ATTITUDE IS NOT A MYTH

by

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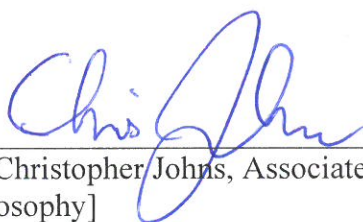
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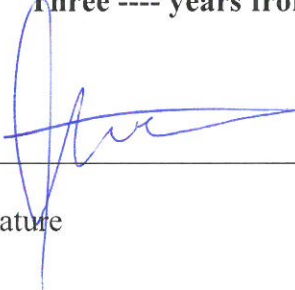
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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Arthur Schopenhauer is considered to have offered the first aesthetic attitude theory because he was the first to place the value of art on the psychological activity. The aesthetic attitude theory generally refers to a psychological state of perceiving entered into deliberately and on one's own initiative. It is a way of attending or experiencing aspects in the world in a *disinterested* way. However, it is commonly accepted that George Dickie was successfully able to undermine aesthetic attitude theories in his paper entitled "The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude." There are two main goals I hope to achieve in this thesis. The first is to prove that Dickie's criticisms were not successful in proving that the aesthetic attitude is empty. The second, is to provide my own view, relying on Schopenhauer, in an attempt to salvage the attitude theory and to show that the value of art lies in the subjective experience. I see the project of attacking Dickie as a precursor for working out my account of the aesthetic attitude.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Thesis Objective and Preliminary Remarks

The topic of this thesis is the aesthetic attitude theory. Aesthetic objects are distinguished from non-aesthetic objects by our ability to take the aesthetic attitude towards them. The *attitude* refers to a certain frame of mind. It is a way of attending or a state of perceiving aspects in the world in an aesthetic light. The attitude theory is a philosophical aesthetic theory that has significantly lost its popularity in recent years mainly due to George Dickie's criticisms in his article "The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude." There are two goals to be achieved in this thesis. The first is to reveal that Dickie's arguments are not sufficient to dismiss the aesthetic attitude as a myth. The second is to provide a new account of the aesthetic attitude in order to prove that art's significance and profound impact is truly appreciated once the aesthetic attitude is adopted. I believe had it not been for Dickie, the aesthetic attitude theory could have remained in the spotlight. The idea that art's value lies in its capacity to induce a powerful subjective psychological experience is worth examining in great detail. I believe taking the aesthetic attitude allows for an intensely pleasurable mental state brought about by art that allows for a rare experience of absolute tranquility. In this introductory chapter, I will briefly explain important preliminary remarks about the aesthetic attitude and its origins. In chapter 2 I consider Schopenhauer views on aesthetic disinterestedness since I rely strongly on his overall philosophical view. Schopenhauer is considered to have offered the first aesthetic attitude theory.

In chapter 3, I present my arguments against Dickie's criticisms. I see the explication of Schopenhauer's aesthetic view and the project of attacking Dickie as a precursor for working out my overall view of the aesthetic attitude. In Chapter 4, I present my own account to help resuscitate the aesthetic attitude and show that the value of art lies in the nature of the subjective psychological state.

The aesthetic attitude theory relies most centrally on the principle notion of disinterest. In everyday life, we constantly have both negative and positive experiences. We form opinions or judgments towards objects, landscapes, events, situations or even food (Hilgers 11). We can enjoy a good meal, appreciate a sunset, dislike a particular drink, or are repelled by certain smells. However, there must be more to judging something as beautiful and to making aesthetic judgments. Experiencing works of art is different from enjoying good weather or a delicious meal. On occasion, we do enjoy the way something feels, sounds, or looks *for its own sake and without any ulterior purpose*. Such attitudes are aesthetic. Objects in the world are distinguished from aesthetic objects by our ability to take the aesthetic attitude towards the latter. The aesthetic attitude theory generally refers to a psychological state of perceiving entered into deliberately and on one's own initiative (Fenner 20). It is a way of attending or experiencing aspects in the world in a *disinterested* way. For example, if a person reads a novel disinterestedly, then she enjoys reading it for its own sake and not because she needs to study the plot for an exam. Similarly, if one is interested in owning a painting for the sake of pride and prestige one is not aesthetically motivated. There is no desire for self-interest or end gain in making disinterested aesthetic judgments. Different guises of modern attitude theories all depend in one way or another on *voluntarily* and *consciously* entering into a disinterested mental state (Fenner 16).

1.2 Shaftsbury, Kant, and Schopenhauer

Starting from eighteenth-century British Empiricists to Kant and modern day aesthetic attitude theories, disinterest has always played a central role. It was first presented by British philosophers like Shaftsbury, Hume, and Hutcheson. They all agreed with the central idea that disinterested pleasure is independent of personal interest, which is the starting point of the disinterested aesthetic attitude. All three proposed that aesthetic appreciation involves disinterested pleasure. Initially, Shaftsbury used “interest” or “interestedness” to refer to an action motivated by egotistic nature which is driven by the need of the wellbeing of the agent rather than the community (Stolnitz, *Origins*, 132). The language was not necessarily aesthetic, for he used the same expressions for ethics and religion. “Interestedness” and its opposite, “disinterestedness,” were terms used by Shaftsbury to describe egoistic actions in general (Stolnitz, *Origins*, 132). He described an interested person as one who worships God for the sake of reward. And a disinterested person as one who does not think about consequences whatsoever and is devoted solely to the act of contemplation. He claimed that a man cannot be virtuous if he is acting out of self-love and love for reward. Also, if one is to love God disinterestedly, then they love God for His own sake, for the sake of perfection. Shaftsbury used disinterestedness in a unified view where all actions whether aesthetic, religious, or moral simply transcend selfishness, desire, and preoccupation with consequences (Stolnitz, *Origins*, 133). Immanuel Kant, who was influenced by early British thought, explores the basis for establishing wrong and right judgments of beauty. According to Kant, instances of liking or disliking particular types of food or drinks would fall under judgments of taste. He says that even if likes and dislikes differ, there is a way

in which they can be reconciled. And it is based on disinterest (Hilgers 13). The personal sentiments and variations of judgments are eliminated if we are disinterested, and it is expected that we all judge similarly since humans have both mental and physical similarities. Thus we are all able to universally agree on whether or not something is beautiful. Kant thinks that the only judgments that are disinterested are judgments of beauty and not judgments of taste. He believes that viewing disinterestedly means viewing an object without any interest in the actual physical existence of the object and without regard to any function the object might have (Fenner 18). Take for example Duchamp's fountain. To look at it aesthetically and thus disinterestedly, it is necessary that one must take no notice of its use as a urinal. Highly influenced by Kant, Schopenhauer too uses the notion of disinterest in his aesthetics. But the starting point for Schopenhauer is his turbulent view of daily life. Existence for Schopenhauer consists of endless struggle and is dominated by the blind striving of an all encompassing world force: The Will. He formulates three methods to help escape the Will, and one of these methods is to pursue aesthetic experiences (Fenner 18). He believes that through aesthetic experiences we can leave the physical world and enter the spiritual, where we have access to the platonic essences and forms. Through mental contemplation of art, we enter into a timeless realm where we are at one with the artistic object. The individual becomes pure and will-less and is able to 'lose oneself in the object' (Diffey 132). And this can only happen if we view things *disinterestedly*. In Schopenhauer's sense, we adopt the disinterested attitude when we do not pay attention to the things in the world that contribute to our desire. His view is considered closest to the aesthetic attitude theory because he is the first to place the focus and value of art as aesthetic *experiences* as opposed to aesthetic *judgments*. The link then between Schopenhauer and the attitude tradition is the idea that aesthetic appreciation lies in the psychological activity (Fenner 19). The notion of disinterest will be

clarified further when explained in the context of contemporary attitude proponents like Stolnitz and Bullough in the following section.

1.3 Stolnitz, Bullough, and Dickie

British sentimentalists have set the stage for aesthetic disinterestedness. They influenced Immanuel Kant, who in turn has influenced all writings of the aesthetic attitude since. Thus far in this chapter I have discussed briefly the role disinterest played in Shaftsbury, Kant, and Schopenhauer. Now I present the views of Jerome Stolnitz and Edward Bullough. What differentiates their accounts from Kant and Schopenhauer is that they do not fit the notion of disinterest into any metaphysical theory (Fenner 20). Bullough and Stolnitz are both modern day proponents of the aesthetic attitude and both have been attacked in Dickie's article. Bullough was the first to introduce the term aesthetic attitude and like Schopenhauer, referred to it as aesthetic consciousness (Bullough 90) Bullough suggests that a subject must distance herself from the object in order to experience it aesthetically. He believes we should not think about practical interests like – our own person, our emotions or actions – when trying to engage with an artwork. The distance is a state of consciousness experienced as a result of putting the aesthetic object 'out of gear' with our practical interests (Bullough 89). In this sense, distance seems synonymous with disinterest.

Stolnitz has defined the aesthetic attitude as disinterested and sympathetic. Similar to Kant, Stolnitz believes that taking the aesthetic attitude means taking the artwork on its own terms and for its own sake (Fenner 14). He suggests that we look at an artwork without any biases, moral background or end goals. Simply, interest in Stolnitz's terms can be understood as

sympathy and disinterest as lack of purpose (Stolnitz, *Aesthetics*, 35). The difference between Bullough's distance and Stolnitz's disinterest is that Bullough characterizes distance as an *effect* the object has on our mental state, while Stolnitz's disinterest has to do with *attending disinterestedly* to the specific *properties* of the artwork (Fenner 24). These are two different approaches to forming an aesthetic attitude. Bullough's formulation seems to suggest that the art spectator must actively engage with the object first for him to experience it aesthetically.

All formulations of attitude theory described thus far have faults. Like all philosophers, each attitude theorist has been analyzed separately for their respective merits and problems. Since George Dickie's publication of "The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude" in 1964, most aestheticians believe his criticisms provide conclusive evidence that the aesthetic attitude is empty. The interest in aesthetic attitude is noticeably declining. If one is to search in aesthetic anthologies or any article concerning the subject, they will most certainly be met with references to Dickie's supposedly final and conclusive criticism. Dickie presents two main criticisms in his article. First, he claims that there is no distinction between interested and disinterested attention, there is only focused or not focused attention. And that disinterested attention is nothing but focused attention. Dickie's second criticism is that the difference between disinterested attention and interested attention is a difference and reference to motives or intentions, and not a difference in attention. I think the attitude theorist can resist both of Dickie's criticisms by reevaluating the assumptions and definitions he uses to argue against aesthetic disinterestedness. I will reply to Dickie in Chapter 3 by attacking his main premise that disinterested attention simply collapses into focused attention.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW: SCHOPENHAUER

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I shall say something about Schopenhauer's metaphysics and his view of a world expressed in two different ways: the objects of *representation* and a force called the *Will*. Then I explain how his aesthetic theory and the notion of disinterestedness fit into his metaphysical system. I focus solely on Schopenhauer in this chapter because I later rely on some aspects of his arguments to formulate my account in order to salvage the aesthetic attitude theory. Schopenhauer believed that life is full of striving and suffering for no ultimate purpose whatsoever (Diffey 1). The initiative for my attitude account (explained in chapter 4) is influenced mainly by Schopenhauer's position that existence is essentially aimless and painful in character and that aesthetic contemplation, to some degree, allows for a momentary escape or cessation of pain. Schopenhauer was considered to have offered the first aesthetic attitude theory because he is the first to articulate and focus on consciousness and how to *view* aesthetically – as apposed to judge aesthetically. We are no longer evaluating or correctly judging whether or not something is beautiful, we are now in contemplation, in an aesthetic state of mind. This is not a claim about whether or not beauty is a property of the object, and not an attempt to define beauty or art. The aesthetic attitude is precisely a theory about the nature of the psychological subjective experience. In any case, Schopenhauer does not use the term 'attitude' in his book, instead he refers to aesthetic contemplation. His aesthetic theory is explained in the third book of his most famous work *The World as Will and Representation*.

2.2 The World as Will and Representation

Given this short introduction, I now explain his account in further detail. It is important to understand Schopenhauer's overall metaphysical philosophical system in order to grasp his aesthetic theory. Firstly, Schopenhauer believed that the essences of things existed outside the objects themselves and not in the objects. In other words, they exist in a realm outside of the material world around us. Second, he believed in a world and in a life driven by a Will, an all encompassing urge or force that exists through incessant desire. This desire is the source of immense suffering for all sentient beings (Fenner 18). We are creatures perpetually and blindly striving to satisfy unending desires. And if we obtain our desires, the satisfaction is short-lived, and we end up experiencing overwhelming boredom which another agonizing state.

Schopenhauer presents the Will as a blind striving energy that consumes itself and turns against itself which consequently makes existence insufferable. He writes, "Further, desirousness lasts long, its demands continue *ad infinitum*; fulfilled desire makes way at once for a new one... No object of willing, once attained, can give lasting, unabated satisfaction but it is always like alms tossed to a beggar, gets him by for another day of life so as to renew his torment tomorrow" (Schopenhauer WWRI, §38). It is a vicious cycle. However, Schopenhauer does offer a solution for his well-known pessimistic view of life. He formulates three methods to help escape the service of the Will. The first is for one to become ascetic, the second to become a philosopher, and third is to pursue aesthetic experiences (Fenner 19). After saying more about Schopenhauer's views in what follows, I will explain only the third method of escape relevant to the discussion, which is the pursuit of aesthetic experiences (in section 2.3 below). His theory of

aesthetics is part of his whole metaphysical view. Therefore, I will explain in more detail his overall theory before turning to explain his aesthetics in the next section.

According to Schopenhauer, the world can be understood in two ways: as Will and as Representation. The physical world we live in is a world of a multiplicity of representations that are structured and organized in relation to each other in space and time. At the start of *The World as Will and Representation* he explains that appearances are not things in themselves, they are non-conceptual, and are organized according to the modes of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. A subject can operate within the world of representation even with mere knowledge of perception or “intuitive cognition.” Knowledge of perception is the knowledge from sensibility which we get from the particulars, which are the objects of representations (Hilgers 40). Schopenhauer further adds that there must be some properties of objects that give rise to their cognizability in the subject’s thought otherwise no representation would be perceived or fully known. The content of the object must come from a place that transcends the representational world. Schopenhauer calls this the *form* of the object, or the thing in itself (WWRI § 1). It is in this sense that Schopenhauer is sometimes considered a Platonist. For he believes that all the world of non-conceptualized representation can only become fully cognizable through accessing each representation’s universal corresponding Ideas. In Plato’s sense, each Idea is related to its representation through eternal forms (Young 92). In the beginning sections of Book II, Schopenhauer gives a way in which we can have access to the things in themselves. He first explains that every representational object has two sides which are one and the same. For example, our bodies are on the one hand a *representation* and on the other *Will*. Schopenhauer writes:

The act of the will and the action of the body are not two distinct objectively cognized states that are

connected by a bond of causality, do not stand in relation to cause and effect, but they are rather one and the same, only given in two entirely distinct manners: once quite immediately and once in perception for the understanding. (Schopenhauer §18)

Schopenhauer believes that it is only through understanding our inner-subjective side, or the nature of our Will, that we can transcend the world of representation and access knowledge of the universal forms. All the world's dispersed representations are merely objectifications of the Will. Kant did not believe that knowledge of things in themselves was possible. In contrast, Schopenhauer thought that it is possible through an internal investigation of the two sides present in every representation. Schopenhauer claims that all representational objects have access to the Will, which is a singular unified force existing in the plurality of all things in time and space. Of the two distinct manners representations have, it is through the subjective side - through the Will - that we can grasp things in themselves. In other words, Schopenhauer believes the essences of representations become entirely cognizable if we understand the nature of the underlying and unifying Will which exists within us. This will, is a drive, which makes individuals perceive objects in the world in terms of their function or use to us. Under the service of the will the subject is oblivious to the functions objects have that are independent of human interest (Young 83). Thus in Schopenhauer's sense, the Will clouds our awareness of the object's intrinsic features that are independent of their practical use. This means that will-driven ordinary consciousness is subjective, lacking the required objectivity to understand things in themselves. Therefore, the objective apprehension and correct understanding of objects in themselves can only be attained when we consider them not for their practical uses, but for what they are in themselves. If we are able to understand this by understanding the nature of the will, then perhaps we can try to achieve a will-less state in order to grasp what each object is in itself,

independent of its practical interests for us.

2.3 Schopenhauer's Aesthetics

The preceding explanation of the world as both Will and Representation is important for understanding the way in which Schopenhauer thinks we perceive a beautiful object.

Schopenhauer explains the importance of aesthetic experience in the third book of *The World as Will and Representation*. As mentioned, every representational object has a corresponding idea.

He says that experiencing a beautiful object -as apposed to any other object in the world- means we are experiencing and perceiving a representation whose idea has become extraordinarily clear and vivid (Hilgers 44). There are different degrees to the ideas of different representations.

Schopenhauer believes that ideas of beautiful objects strike us as clearer, definite, and more distinct than non-beautiful objects. And as a result we enter into aesthetic contemplation where we are at once transcended into another type of consciousness that is not under the service of the will or the spatio-temporal structure of representations. Schopenhauer presents two types consciousness, ordinary and aesthetic consciousness. Aesthetic consciousness is Will-less. And as previously mentioned, this state can help us gain the correct apprehension of things in themselves, i.e. independent of personal interest.

Since our cognitive faculties are in a state of continuous striving after desires, egotistical end goals and purposes, a state of Willing means a state of constant service to our desires. Thus through aesthetic experiences the subject is transported from *ordinary cognition* to an *aesthetic cognition*. It is a pure and time-less state where the subject is freed from the Will's demands and the anxiety of existence (Young 85). When a subject is no longer viewing objects as

representations standing in relation to each other, and instead views the object aesthetically and loses herself in perception, she becomes one with the object (Schopenhauer, WWRI, §34).

Schopenhauer says that entirely losing oneself in the perception of the aesthetic object means “precisely forgetting the individual one is, one’s will, and remaining only as a pure subject, as clear mirror of the object, so that it is as if the object alone existed without anyone perceiving it, and thus no longer separates the perceiver from the perception, the two have become one, the entirety of consciousness entirely filled and occupied by a single perpetual image”

(Schopenhauer, WWRI, §34). Schopenhauer believes that through aesthetic experiences we no longer view ourselves as spatio-temporal subjects who are striving to obtain the interested demands of the will. The object is at once transformed into a “Platonic Idea” (Hilgers 85).

2.4 Disinterest

Schopenhauer says we lose ourselves in aesthetic contemplation when we view the object *disinterestedly*. A disinterestedness mental state in Schopenhauer’s aesthetics can be understood as a will-less state. It is when the subject is no longer in pain restlessly striving to satisfy desires. In Schopenhauer’s sense, we adopt the disinterested attitude when we do not pay attention to the things in the world that contribute to our wants. This is now a transcendence from ordinary consciousness to aesthetic consciousness. This way we appreciate the thing in itself and on its own. By viewing disinterestedly, we are viewing without the interested eye of the will, and contemplating the thing in-itself disregarding any purpose or use it has in fulfilling our personal desires. And by contemplating art, we are able to enter into aesthetic consciousness.

Schopenhauer writes:

But when an external occasion, or inner state of mind, suddenly lifts us out of the endless stream of willing, tears our cognizance away from enslavement of the will, our attention is then no longer directed towards motives of willing, but rather apprehends things free from their relation to the Will, *thus without interest*, without subjectivity, regarded purely for themselves entirely given over to them so far as they are merely presentations, not so far as they are motives. (Schopenhauer, §38)

The notion of disinterest plays an important role for aesthetic contemplation. It is precisely when our attention is not directed to the needs and motives of the striving will. For example, Schopenhauer believes that art genres which stimulate our desires are undeserving of the title since transcending to aesthetic consciousness can only occur when we are will-less and our appetites and desires are not stimulated. Schopenhauer refers to certain genres of art as ‘stimulating’ or ‘charming.’ He classifies still-life paintings of food and drink or portrayals of nudity as ‘stimulating,’ since they are inclined to stir the desire of the will and produce the prospect of satisfaction (Schopenhauer, WWRI, §39). These types of art are not to be considered as objects for aesthetic contemplation because they arouse either the appetite in the first case or lust in the second. Or in other words, they do not allow for disinterested contemplation. Schopenhauer claims that this kind of arousal of the will immediately puts an end to aesthetic contemplation and are unworthy to be in the domain of art (Schopenhauer, WWRI, §39). Therefore, Schopenhauer regards disinterestedness as a necessary condition for correctly apprehending objects independent of their end goal, and consequently, a necessary condition for aesthetic consciousness. In other words, understanding the nature of a will driven interested state helps understand how to achieve a will-less state.

Schopenhauer explains the two types of disinterested aesthetic experiences which arouse no desires: the beautiful and the sublime. According to Schopenhauer, the difference between

the two is that with the sublime the subject is aware of her relation to the will whereas in the beautiful she is not. The beautiful is an experience where a person is absorbed in the beautiful object and the disengagement is caused from losing herself and becoming unaware of any relation she has to her will (Young 89). In contrast, the intuition of the idea of the sublime is of a different kind and the nature of disinterestedness is different. The sublime arouses a terrible feeling of danger, and unlike the beautiful, the subject does not intuit the idea and simply disengage from the world. The sublime is an overwhelming and threatening experience which *forces* our cognition to break from the will (Hilgers 44). It involves a kind of struggle. The experience is frightening and threatening yet we have no impulse to take flight because the feeling of fear does not appear to belong to us. Schopenhauer claims that the subject is ‘elevated above himself’ and is ‘separated from that individual’ (Young 90) The experience of the sublime is disinterested in the sense that it occurs with a dissociative objective stance and the subject is unaware of their own bodily identity.

To conclude this chapter, I will say a little more about Schopenhauer’s account of the experiences of the beautiful and the sublime and the way in which aesthetic consciousness is a valuable state to be in. In addition to disinterested aesthetic experiences, Schopenhauer claims that the sublime and the beautiful also have two sides like all other representations. The first is that they produce a vivid idea and the second is that they allow for a temporary loss of self through the state of pure aesthetic contemplation (Schopenhauer, WWRI, §38). The aesthetic experience of the beautiful and the sublime means one is no longer taking cognizance in the individual object of space and time, rather, perceiving the universal Idea (Hilgers 46). The universal idea is the Platonic Idea. For example, art allows us to perceive not the particular human being, but the universal idea of humanity. This is grasped when we are transported (from

ordinary consciousness) into aesthetic consciousness. However, this does not mean that the subject loses *all* sense of self and becomes a different being entirely, rather she experiences a new form of self-consciousness: that of a will-free cognition (Schopenhauer, WWRI, §38). This is what happens through the experiences of the beautiful and the sublime. One is transported from the painful ordinary consciousness to aesthetic consciousness. Art has a very important function for Schopenhauer. It is not only responsible for communicating necessary and universal truths, but is also capable of solving the painful ‘problem of existence.’ Pain and suffering are written into the human condition. And the will to life is striving blindly and aimlessly after unobtainable desires, clinging desperately to a meaningless and painful existence. Fortunately, Schopenhauer places high value on art because it allows for a momentary escape into a tranquil mental state from an otherwise turbulent existence. In chapter 4 I explain this further. In the next section, I turn to Dickie’s criticisms of the aesthetic attitude and the notion of disinterest.

CHAPTER III

DICKIE: THE MYTH OF THE AESTHETIC ATTITUDE

3.1 Response to Dickie's First Criticism

Before attempting to give my defense of the aesthetic attitude which is inspired by Schopenhauer's philosophy, I will tackle the arguments presented by George Dickie since they are considered by most aestheticians to have delivered the final blow to the aesthetic attitude. Very few replies have been made to Dickie's essay entitled "The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude." I will refer regularly to Gary Kemp who is one of the few who have offered an extensive response to Dickie. Dickie gives two main criticisms of the aesthetic attitude. By following the arguments Dickie provides in the essay, I attempt to show that he has not succeeded in undermining the aesthetic attitude.

Dickie compares the ordinary attitude with the aesthetic attitude which requires disinterested attention. He then contrasts disinterested attention with interested attention and his first criticism goes like this: if disinterested attention means focusing solely on the aesthetic object with no ulterior purpose and interested attention is attention to something other than the object, or *distracted* attention, then disinterested attention is nothing more than focused and undistracted attention. Gary Kemp points out that Dickie's first criticism fails to recognize that not necessarily all cases of full and undistracted attention is the same kind of attention that is exercised during an aesthetic experience (Kemp 393). Thus disinterest does not simply collapse into focused attention. Kemp says there are cases where attention to an object is undistracted but not aesthetic. Kemp writes in his article entitled "The Aesthetic Attitude" that:

There is a distinction to be drawn amongst cases of full undistracted attention to the work of art that is too evident simply to be denied, which must therefore be accommodated or reconstructed in some way or other. For example, a music student might listen closely to a piece in order to identify key modulations or rhythmic groupings. This is not a case of *distraction*, not a case of *not* attending to the music. Yet it is not an aesthetic attitude either, as the struggling music student will attest (we murder to dissect). It would be a diversion from the potential aesthetic experience but not diversion from the music. (Kemp 393)

Kemp is saying that Dickie's first criticism of claiming that disinterested attention is nothing more than focused attention (which means there is nothing special to the aesthetic attitude) fails to recognize that full focused attention is not always aesthetic (Kemp 393). An attitude theorist would not say that all cases of full focused attention would classify as aesthetic attention. Focus, although important, it is not sufficient on its own to in order to properly adopt an aesthetic attitude towards an aesthetic object as Dickie seems to think. Although Kemp does not give his own views on the necessary conditions for taking the aesthetic attitude, he does mention that Dickie's analysis has completely ignored Jerome Stolnitz' requirement that the attention be *sympathetic* and not only disinterested (Kemp 393).

Thus Dickie's criticism that the notion of disinterest is merely focused attention is lacking. He is also wrong in thinking that attacking the notion of disinterest is sufficient for proving that the aesthetic attitude is empty.

3.2 Response to Dickie's Second Criticism

Both Dickie's first and second criticisms are an attack on the definition of disinterest

which is the central feature of the aesthetic attitude. In the first criticism he claimed that there is nothing special about viewing disinterestedly, it only means viewing with full attention. Dickie's second criticism is directed at Stolnitz's version of the attitude theory. Stolnitz defines the aesthetic attitude as a certain way of attending to something disinterestedly and sympathetically for its own sake. According to Stolnitz, listening to music disinterestedly requires a person to listen without any ulterior motive. Additionally, he understands the aesthetic attitude as one which requires focus and thought, and it involves an active and engaged yet disinterested mental state. Stolnitz believes this mental state must involve 'sympathy' where the subject is *interested* in analyzing the range of aesthetic qualities of the object. Therefore, Stolnitz thinks that attending interestedly, meaning not apathetically in this context, will result in the desired disinterested state (Fenner 20). Overall, Stolnitz's attitude theory offers a way for correctly attending disinterestedly to works of art in order to have an aesthetic experience. Dickie claims in contrast that the difference between disinterested and interested attention is not difference in *attention* as Stolnitz believes it to be, it is a reference to the different *motives* or *intentions*. He writes:

Suppose Jones listens to a piece of music for the purpose of being able to analyze and describe it on an examination the next day and Smith listens to the same music with no such ulterior purpose. There is certainly a difference in the motives and intentions of the two men: Jones has an ulterior purpose and Smith does not, but this does not mean Jones's *listening* differs from Smith's ... There is only one way to *listen* to (to attend to) music, although there may be a variety of motives, intentions, and reasons for doing so and a variety of ways of being distracted from the music. (Dickie 58)

Dickie thinks that attitude theorists are wrong for thinking there is a special way of viewing or attending to artworks. He believes the aesthetic attitude is empty, and it is nothing more than a

reference to the purpose behind each individual's attention and not about the attention itself. For example, Jones is listening in order to analyze and describe the music piece for an exam, while Smith is listening with no such purpose. And it is possible for both men to be either bored or pleased by the music regardless of their motives or intentions. He says there is only one way of listening to music. In other words, their way of *attending* is the same regardless if one is studying or not. Therefore, attending with an ulterior purpose (interested) and attending with no ulterior purpose (disinterested) is nothing more than a reference to their motives. And that motives do not change the way they attend to music.

Kemp disagrees, and suggests that "in any case the main claim of the theory can without evident loss be put by saying that attention is aesthetic precisely when it is not *pragmatically motivated*. That there are clear cases of close, pragmatically motivated attention does nothing to show that there is no such thing as close attention which is not so motivated. If that is how the aesthetic attitude theory is defined, then Dickie's point does nothing to undermine it" (Kemp 394). So Jones is paying attention to work of art but he is not attending or engaging with the work the way required of an aesthetic attitude. So to use Kemp's terminology, Jones is *pragmatically motivated* since he listening to key modulations with the purpose of studying and doing well on his exam. In order for Jones' attention to be not pragmatically motivated and thus aesthetic, he should be attending to the music for its own sake and without any ulterior purpose. In the next chapter, I will attempt to give an account of what attending aesthetically is like.

Both of Dickie's criticisms do nothing to undermine the aesthetic attitude theory. However, tackling Dickie's well-known criticisms was necessary before moving on to my account of the aesthetic attitude in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV

MY ACCOUNT OF THE AESTHETIC ATTITUDE

4.1 A Momentary Solution to the ‘Problem of Existence’

As I mentioned in the introduction of this thesis I plan to rely greatly on Schopenhauer in an attempt to give my account of the aesthetic attitude theory. The main goal of my account in this final chapter is to prove that the underlying and most valuable feature of art is its ability to transport us into an aesthetic state of mind. It is important to note that by placing the value of art on the psychological subjective experience does not mean I consider other properties of art as insignificant. And I am not denying that beauty and other aesthetic properties like expression, form, and representation are important features of art. However, I will not attempt to define neither beauty nor art in this thesis. I am only trying to prove that the most valuable feature of works of art is their ability to transport us into an aesthetic mental state. Or what Schopenhauer calls the will-less state. I will focus on the subjective aesthetic experience. In this section, I begin by giving an account of the nature of existence as such because it is necessary to show why we *need* art. Next, (section 4.2) I explain the criteria for taking the aesthetic attitude which are *disinterest* and *contemplation of essential emotions*. Finally, (section 4.3) after having presented my account of the value and necessary conditions for taking the aesthetic attitude, I tackle possible criticisms of my view that could arise.

Before explaining the nature of aesthetic consciousness, I will explain the nature of existence according to Schopenhauer. Firstly, I agree with Schopenhauer’s world view. He is a well-known pessimist for his blunt yet truthful description of life as painful in character and that suffering is

embedded into the human condition. He regards life as “a uselessly disturbing episode in the blissful repose of nothingness” and that “the longer you live the more clearly you will feel that, on the whole, life is a disappointment, nay, a cheat” (Schopenhauer, *Studies*, 7). He believes and I agree, that our suffering is a result of a blind and utterly aimless force within us, the Will, which is constantly striving restlessly to satisfy pointless desires of all kinds and clinging to an essentially meaningless existence. Schopenhauer writes:

That this most perfect manifestation of the will to live, the human organism, with the cunning and complex working of its machinery, must fall to dust and yield up itself and all its strivings to extinction—this is the naive way in which Nature, who is always so true and sincere in what she says, proclaims the whole struggle of this will as in its very essence barren and unprofitable. Were it of any value in itself, anything unconditioned and absolute, it could not thus end in mere nothing. (Schopenhauer, *Studies*, 18)

Life has no intrinsic worth for Schopenhauer, and yet we continue to strive for existence itself knowing with certainty that we will lose it in the end. Life is kept in motion by our constant wants and needs. The overwhelming struggle and strife one goes through in life seems comic given that everything is inevitably destined to extinction. In order for life to become tolerable, our continuous striving must be put to a halt, and that is possible only with the silence of the will. Art, according to Schopenhauer, helps us escape our ordinary consciousness and its service to the will and transports us into a tranquil state of mind.

4.2 The Aesthetic State of Mind

Schopenhauer places art in high regard because, even if only momentarily, it is capable of

ending suffering. It is no doubt that torment, hardship, and suffering can be seen everywhere in life. And if it is true that art can momentarily end all pain and solve the ‘problem of existence’, then figuring out how art is capable of doing so seems like a highly valuable project. In addition to the cessation of suffering, Schopenhauer believes art has a second role. He thinks aesthetic consciousness allows us to become a pure subject of knowledge by attaining knowledge of the universal forms that correspond to the particular representations. Similar to Schopenhauer, I place the value of art on the transcendence into a tranquil disinterested state which consists in the contemplation of our innermost emotions.

Given the dramatic view of life and the unbearable truth of the meaningless existence, Schopenhauer thinks aesthetic contemplation allows for a separation from the ordinary consciousness of the will and thus becomes a means to preserving serenity in misfortune. He writes that the objective aesthetic state of mind “almost always succeeds, suddenly striking our view, in tearing us, even if only for moments, from subjectivity, from enslavement to will, and in transporting us into the state of pure cognition. Therefore, even someone tormented by passions, or by hardships and concern, is so suddenly quickened, cheered, and uplifted by a single free glimpse into nature: the storm of the passions, the press desire and fear, and all the torment of willing are then at once and wonderfully quieted” (Schopenhauer, WWRI, §38). We are all at once transported from a state of pain into a state of tranquility. Will-lessness, or disinterestedness, is the first criteria of attending to works of art. I agree with Schopenhauer, we are driven by an underlying force which is constantly striving to attain desires for no clear and worthy purpose whatsoever. Thus we suffer from our very need to nourish and to cling to existence. Schopenhauer believes that aesthetic consciousness is a state where we *lose* ourselves in the aesthetic object. ‘Losing ourselves’ is a disinterested will-less state that is not driven by

desires. It can be recalled that it is a state where the subject becomes one with the object of contemplation, the mirror of it, and is no longer aware of herself as a subject among other objects in the spatio-temporal world. I will not go into Schopenhauer's views regarding the objective knowledge and transcendence into a platonic idea. The point here is my definition of disinterest as a will-less state is the first criterion of adopting the aesthetic attitude. The value of taking a disinterested attitude is that in the face of hardships, it is comforting to know there is always a way for momentarily escape to a painless, tranquil, and quiet place.

In the preceding quote, Schopenhauer is referring to the effects of contemplating nature since nature, as well as art, allows for transcendence into a tranquil state. The tranquility for Schopenhauer is a result of the apprehension of the timeless forms. In contrast, I believe that aesthetic consciousness (or disinterestedness) consists in contemplation of '*essential emotions*'. I find Schopenhauer's views on 'nostalgia' similar to what I believe the aesthetic contemplation consists of. Schopenhauer does not consider nostalgia as aesthetic because, although painless, it is a state of consciousness that is *deceptive* and one that is still under the thrall of the will. I believe that understanding the essences of our innermost emotions, should help achieve self-awareness and clarity of emotion, and should not be deceptive in any way. But I find Schopenhauer's account of the state nostalgia and the distanced contemplation of emotions appealing. The Schopenhaurian nostalgic state is considered willed because we are interested in deceiving ourselves intentionally by erasing knowledge of the past or the present that is unpleasant (Young 87). In other words, we are deceiving ourselves that our experiences were not under the thrall of the will, and thus were not painful. But this sort of response is interested. So Schopenhauer does not consider it equivalent to aesthetic consciousness where the subject is not trying to evade the unpleasant (Young 87). In any case, Schopenhauer believes there is kind of

loss of self or dissociation that occurs in both nostalgia and aesthetic consciousness. But the nostalgic state involves self-deception where the aesthetic state does not. He describes nostalgia as “that blessed state of will-less perception, finally, that spreads so wondrous a magic over the past and distant places and depicts them in so very flattering a light, by way of a kind of self-deception” (Schopenhauer, WWRI §38). Nostalgia then, according to Schopenhauer is a state of consciousness where we deceive ourselves about our individuality and our relation to reality and the plurality of representations within it. Schopenhauer believes this kind of nostalgic imagination feels will-less, even though it is a will-driven ordinary consciousness. Self-deception aside, I believe the important point in this discussion is the way Schopenhauer describes the objective imagination involved with nostalgia:

This is because when we picture days long past spent in a distant place, our imagination recalls only the objects, not the subject of the will, a subject that carried its incurable sufferings around with it then as well as now: but these have been forgotten because they have since made way for so many others. Now objective intuition operates in memory just as intuition of the present would operate if we were able to free ourselves from the will and surrender ourselves to intuition. That is why sudden memories of past and distant scenes fly past us like a lost paradise, especially when some difficulty troubles us more than usual. Imagination recalls only what is objective, not what is individual-subjective, and we imagine that the objective scene once stood before us as pure and unclouded by any relation to the will as we picture it now in the imagination: but in fact, the relation of objects to our willing was as painful to us then as it is now. We can avoid all the suffering that comes from objects in the present just as well as we can avoid it from those that are remote as soon as we raise ourselves to viewing them in a purely objective way, thus creating the *illusion* that these objects alone are present and we are not: then, as pure subject of cognition, we are rid of our suffering selves and fully one with the objects, and in such moments our needs are as alien to us as they are to the objects. The world as representation is then all that remains, and the world as will has vanished. (Schopenhauer, WWRI, §38)

My notion of what constitutes the tranquility of aesthetic consciousness entails this kind of contemplation of emotion. The kind Schopenhauer links to nostalgia. The imagination that is at play when we are nostalgic could very possibly be the kind of aesthetic contemplation required for adopting the aesthetic attitude. But first, it is important to remember that art is the ultimate expression of human emotion and I regard art as the only means in which we can achieve this completely disinterested and will-less state of mind. In order for consciousness to be aesthetic, the imagination must not only be disinterested and thus will-less, but also objective. In other words, if the imagination involves the contemplation of the essences of human emotion, then one must recognize the emotion objectively and with clarity as if independent from their own body. Schopenhauer says in the process of recollection, imagination calls back only the objective and not what is individually subjective. Somewhat similar to imagining watching ourselves as a character in a play. Again, this entire process does not only clarify the nature of emotions independent of the interested eye of the will, it is also tranquil, which renders it painless and worth pursuing for its own sake. Consequently, the value of art is not only the cessation of pain but its capacity for attaining self-awareness into the essences of our feelings and emotions.

4.3 Three Possible Criticisms of My Account

In order to get a deeper understanding of my account, it will help to tackle three difficulties that could arise. The first difficulty is this: it seems that if we are desiring a will-less state then that still classifies as a willed, interested intention. Which means that attending to works of art with the intention of a painless escape, makes the attitude interested and *not* disinterested. To will nothing is

still to will. Therefore, it would not make sense to classify aesthetic contemplation as disinterested. However, although this could be a devastating criticism to a theory which relies strongly on the notion of disinterest, there is a way it can be reconciled. For example, even if we have an initial interest in a disinterested mental state, it is still true that the encounter with the object is disinterested. Thus the resulting contemplation is in itself disinterested. So even if we are initially interested in a will-less state, it is only through art that our attention in the end becomes disinterested.

The second criticism that follows from the first is that if essentially the aesthetic attitude is a theory of art, then what differentiates aesthetic imagination from imagination in a general sense? What distinguishes the value of art and other attempts to escape and ease the pain of existence like that of drug use and videogames? First, I reply to this criticism by indicating that videogames, drug use, and similar activities are still under the thrall of the will. But according to my reply in criticism one, then another objection arises because it could be said that even if drug use is initially interested, once entered into the state of mind induced by drugs then the state itself becomes disinterested. Which means that drug use too, allows for a disinterested mental state, and we can get the same withdrawal from drugs as from art. But I believe there is a difference with the character of the disinterest. I have previously stated that aesthetic objects are the only medium which allow for a disinterested mental state. So I would reply that the character of disinterest is different in drug use since the drugged mind state essentially yields a lot of pain and negative side-effects. In addition, its nature can be described as an un-interested state rather than disinterested. The tranquility caused by drugs is passive and requires no active engagement of imagination and of our cognitive capacities. According to my presentation of the aesthetic mental state, I held that there are two necessary conditions, the first is disinterest and the second is the contemplation of essential emotions. Which means that the tranquility induced by drugs is of a different sort than the one caused by aesthetic

experience.

The third and final criticism is that there are activities in life that qualify as disinterested but not aesthetic. Thus there is nothing distinct about the disinterested aesthetic experience when compared to the disinterested experience of taking a walk for its own sake or daydreaming. Schopenhauer would claim that the subject is still considered a slave to the will since walking and daydreaming are states belonging to ordinary consciousness. A truly disinterested state is a quality of aesthetic consciousness. I reply to this criticism by emphasizing that nowhere did I mention that disinterest is a sufficient condition for entering aesthetic consciousness. It is necessary condition, but not sufficient. I stressed that aesthetic consciousness not only be will-less (disinterested), but also requires objective imaginative activity and clarification of the emotions. Without these two conditions the experience would not be aesthetic. Additionally, activities such as walking or daydreaming could be done for their own sake, but they are not disinterested and involve no such aesthetic contemplation.

4.3 Conclusion

What I hope I have accomplished in this thesis is first to reveal that Dickie's arguments against the aesthetic attitude are not as conclusive as believed to be. The second is providing an account of the aesthetic attitude inspired by Schopenhauer in order to prove that art's significance truly lies in the subjective experience. The necessary conditions I have provided for aesthetic consciousness are in need of a further and more detailed consideration. Art certainly allows for an intensely pleasurable mental activity which occurs in a tranquil and dissociated state. And understanding the connection between the withdrawn painless state and the knowledge attained from

imagination is something I hope to investigate further. What I hope to accomplish in future projects is to spell out clearly the role and the nature of the emotions involved in aesthetic consciousness. Additionally, I would like to pin point what it is about art that allows for such a powerfully engaging and creative imaginative process.

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