

Aesthetic attitude is a myth philosophy essay



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In 'The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude', George Dickie argues that the notion of the aesthetic attitude is a myth and attempts to argue against all forms of the idea. Whilst there are other compelling theories concerning the existence of the aesthetic attitude, he presents a strong case against it, arguing that all attempts to precisely describe such an attitude fail. His argument focuses on the notions of the aesthetic attitude proposed by Bullough and Stolnitz, which I will outline in this essay.

Initially, Dickie considers Edward Bullough's theory of psychical distance. Bullough suggests that in order to obtain an aesthetic attitude and judge an object aesthetically, the subject must distance themselves from that object and separate "...the object and its appeal from one's own self, by putting it out of gear with practical needs and ends." [1] In doing so, Bullough says that "contemplation of the object becomes alone possible" [2] and you are no longer directly involved with the object. Bullough illustrates his idea using his fog at sea example, where he describes how unpleasant and dangerous the fog might seem to a person, but also how beautiful the fog is. Bullough thinks that it is the aesthetic attitude which enables one's view of the fog to change through a "transformation by distance" [3] as the fog is allowed to "stand outside the context of our personal needs and ends" and one can look at it objectively.

For Bullough, only the right amount of distance enables the aesthetic attitude to be employed and he discusses "...cases in which people are unable to bring off an act of distancing or are incapable of being induced into a state of being distanced." [4] Bullough's example of "...the jealous husband at a performance of Othello" [5] unable to concentrate as he is thinking of his

own wife's suspicious behaviour demonstrates being under-distanced as the subject is too emotionally involved with the play. Similarly, a light technician working on the play might be over-distanced as he is preoccupied with the lights and missing any emotional involvement with the play itself. Dickie may undermine Bullough's concept of distance here as he questions whether one can deliberately distance oneself or whether one can be induced into a "... consciousness denoted by being distanced." [6] Dickie undermines the concept of distance here - suggesting that there is no such experience as being distanced - and so undermines Bullough's theory.

Furthermore, Dickie criticises Bullough's use of new terms referring to distance, as he thinks to introduce these terms " does nothing but send us chasing after phantom acts and states of consciousness." [7] Dickie infers that " there is no identifiable psychological experience of being distanced" [8] and so no value in Bullough's idea of distance. Furthermore he suggests that being under or over-distanced is simply being more or less focused on something and just " two different cases of inattention." [9] Therefore, being distanced means just focusing one's attention on something and is not a new " kind of act" [10] or special " state of consciousness" [11].

Whilst Dickie puts forward a fairly persuasive argument against psychical distance, his description of aesthetic experiences as simple cases of attention or inattention may not be adequate in explaining what it truly is to have an aesthetic experience. If, as Dickie suggests, we reject the aesthetic attitude, one might argue that we would be unable to answer some important questions about aesthetic experience. Specifically, one might argue that the aesthetic attitude is required in order to pinpoint what exactly

the judgment of taste is and what prompts us to recognise objects as aesthetic objects. Therefore, Dickie's argument may be less effective in refuting the aesthetic attitude, as Bullough's theory of distance may be closer to providing answers to such questions.

Importantly, Dickie continues his argument by criticising another way of conceiving the aesthetic attitude when he discusses Jerome Stolnitz's theory which suggests that the aesthetic attitude is "...marked out by its disinterestedness..."[12]and its detachment from practical purposes.

Stolnitz's definition is that it is the " disinterested and sympathetic attention to and contemplation of any object of awareness whatever, for its own sake alone."[13]Stolnitz elaborates on this idea - explaining that disinterested attention means looking at the object with " no concern for any ulterior purpose".[14]Similarly he says that sympathetic attention means that the subject can experience the object's individual qualities with no prejudice. For Stolnitz, such an aesthetic perception involves the subject's active attention being directed at the object alone, without thinking or asking questions and being emotionally open and able to respond to it. This results in an enhanced experience of the object which enables us to focus on "...the look of the rocks, the sound of the ocean, the colours in the painting,"[15]whilst contemplating an object with a practical perception prevents us from truly appreciating it and limits our experience of the object.

Dickie's criticism of Stolnitz's aesthetic attitude only really focuses on this notion of disinterested attention. Stolnitz distinguishes between disinterested attention and interested attention which he says differ according to the purpose of the attention. For example when looking at Warhol's Campbell

Soup Cans, if I admire it as a beautiful piece of art then I experience it with disinterested attention. On the other hand, if I look at it and think about how hungry I am and how I would like to eat the soup, I experience it with an interested attention.

However, Dickie objects to Stolnitz's idea that such a difference in purpose results in a difference in attention. Dickie proposes that the concept of disinterest does nothing to explain what it means to "attend to"[16]an object. To reinforce his point, Dickie uses an example of two people listening to music with different purposes - Jones with the purpose of analysing the music for an exam and Smith with no such purpose other than simply listening to it. Dickie suggests that " Jones has an ulterior purpose and Smith does not, but this does not mean Jones's listening differs from Smith's."[17]Dickie demonstrates that the only difference between the listening of Jones and Smith is their purpose and suggests that in reality there is nothing different about their attention at all. Therefore, Dickie argues that the notion of disinterestedness cannot be used to refer to a type of attention, as attention has no special attribute such as disinterest. Instead, Dickie thinks that it can only refer to whether attention is motivated by a purpose or not. Hence, Dickie may challenge Stolnitz's theory as he questions the validity of the concepts of interested and disinterested attention which is key to Stolnitz's whole theory of the aesthetic attitude.

In addition, Dickie reinforces his argument using the example of the art critic attending a piece of art. Dickie points out that according to Stolnitz's theory, the art critic could not critique the art as well as appreciate it, as the critic has an ulterior purpose - " to analyse and evaluate the object he

perceives.”[18]Dickie claims that Stolnitz “ confuses a perceptual distinction with a motivational one”[19]as the critic only differs from other subjects attending the art in his motives and purpose. For Dickie, this example only further highlights that it is not possible to attend to art interestedly nor disinterestedly – only with or without a motive or purpose.

Whilst Dickie develops a convincing argument against Stolnitz’s theory of the aesthetic attitude, he does only really focus on one aspect of it – disinterestedness – and doesn’t effectively address the idea of sympathetic attention, for example. In his argument, Stolnitz stresses the importance of considering all the aspects of his definition of the aesthetic attitude, so for this reason, Dickie’s attempt at challenging Stolnitz’s theory may not be as successful. Furthermore, Stolnitz himself argues in response to Dickie’s criticism that, “ Leading aestheticians continue to take disinterestedness to be foundational in their thinking.”[20]Stolnitz suggests that the incomparable longevity of the concept demonstrates its validity, as it “ continues to engage thought.”[21]As engaging as the concept may be, however, this point might not succeed as an effective counter-argument to Dickie.

Dickie’s argument convincingly refutes Bullough’s and Stolnitz’s theories of the aesthetic attitude, but it may not follow that rejecting the ideas of distance and disinterestedness means that no special aesthetic attitude exists. One might argue that from the “ vantage point”[22]of the subject there are a “ set of features that identify aesthetic experience”[23]which, whilst difficult to describe accurately, constitute the aesthetic attitude. Furthermore, it might be argued that Dickie is more concerned with the <https://assignbuster.com/aesthetic-attitude-is-a-myth-philosophy-essay/>

aesthetic object than the aesthetic experience, as his own alternative for the aesthetic attitude – the institutional theory of art – focuses on the nature of art and how an object can become art, rather than on aesthetic experience and our response to an object. Ultimately, however, whilst there are several compelling counter-arguments in favour of the aesthetic attitude, I think that Dickie's argument that it is a myth is convincing and effectively undermines both Bullough's and Stolnitz's notions of the aesthetic attitude.