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AESTHETIC DISINTEREST

By Roberta Dreon

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It. *Disinteressato/disinteresse*; Fr. *désintéret/désintéressement*; Germ. *ohne Interesse, uninteressiert/Interesselosigkeit*; Sp. *desinteresado/desinterés*. The concept of “aesthetic disinterest” first emerged in the eighteenth century with the rise of aesthetics as an autonomous discipline. It is generally regarded as a distinctive feature characterizing the aesthetic attitude toward natural and/or artistic beauty, i.e. a kind of aesthetic experience involving peculiar features and differing from ordinary kinds of experience. Hence, the negative prefix (di-/de-/un-) or the privative proposition (without, ohne, senza) plays a structural role in defining the aesthetic by distinguishing it from other experiential dimensions. As such, “aesthetic disinterest” includes a variety of meanings, depending on the background (cognitive, practical, or moral) from which it is seen to stand out: it can involve a kind of attention focused on the mere form of the object, independently from the cognitive content included within the concept; it can mean an attitude excluding any practical concern; it can imply the absence of moral concern and the idea that aesthetic pleasure cannot be assessed through ethical criteria. The term does not usually involve significant references to any kind of altruistic action or practice, although it does entail a disregard for private reasons in appreciating an object. Frequently, it overlaps or is strictly associated with similar concepts, such as “aesthetic distance”, “detachment”, “abstraction”, and “contemplation”, and is opposed to “utility” and “purposiveness”.

THE DEBATE ON THE ORIGIN OF THE CONCEPT

Most scholars attribute a pivotal role to the concept within the affirmation of aesthetics as an autonomous discipline, more precisely in the definition of a peculiarly aesthetic attitude, differing from other kinds of experiences, and complementing a view of the aesthetic object as self-contained. According to Jerome Stolnitz’s leading narrative (Stolnitz 1961), the concept

originated in eighteenth-century British aesthetics, particularly through the insights formulated by Lord Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, Archibald Alison, and Joseph Addison. Within a Neoplatonic context, the concept of disinterest acquired a mainly anti-utilitarian, non-instrumental meaning, characterizing attention to the beautiful for its own sake, independently of practical consequences.

“Disinterest” was used with reference to the beautiful considered as something to be appreciated in itself and involving a form of contemplation of harmony and order, similarly to the contemplation of virtue for its own sake, independently of the consequences of an action. Although the emergence of the concept of “disinterest” also involved a criticism of Hobbes’ characterization of human nature as selfish, the term – Stolnitz argues – does not imply any reference to altruistic actions, alternatively excluding connections to actions and practical purposes. Among eighteenth-century British thinkers, “disinterested” primarily came to be conceived of as the property of a specific kind of perception of – or attention toward – beautiful objects (qualifying the “aesthetic attitude”), rather than as a kind of action. In 2002, Miles Rind questioned the consistency of Stolnitz’s interpretation, arguing that no technical definition of aesthetic disinterestedness as the mark of a properly aesthetic attitude can be found in the texts of Lord Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Alison, and Addison.

Rind contends that these thinkers were interested in defining taste, rather than the “aesthetic”, a word that is not yet present in their texts. It is only with Kant that disinterest becomes a peculiar property of aesthetic taste. Bart Vandenabeele claims that disinterest plays a pivotal role in Kant’s strategy to overcome the limits of Edmund Burke’s empirical aesthetics: Kant sought to emancipate the beautiful from the continuity with physiological and/or empirical pleasures, whose connections with individual propensities could undermine universalistic claims about taste (Vandenabeele 2012a). Disinterest served as a decisive feature to establish an essential distinction between different kinds of pleasure: empirical pleasure was associated with the agreeable, as it was seen to entail a clear interest in the existence of the desired object, whereas disinterested pleasure was associated with the beautiful, as it was seen to concern the mere representation of an object independently of any concern about its existence or even its conceptualization.

Sharing Rind’s thesis, Bart Vandenabeele points out that it is only with Schopenhauer that disinterest becomes a distinctive feature of a properly aesthetic attitude, i.e. of contemplation understood as a distinctive kind of insight into the true world, and an alternative to conceptual cognition, while Kant still considered disinterest to be a character of pleasure (Vandenabeele 2012b). Later, Nietzsche will challenge Kant’s and Schopenhauer’s transcendental strategy by emphasizing the physiological roots of aesthetic pleasure: in his book *On the Genealogy of Morality*, he contrasts Kant’s disinterested conception of the beautiful with Stendhal’s *promesse de bonheur* and claims – contra Schopenhauer – that disinterested aesthetic contemplation is the way in which intellectually sophisticated but physically weak individuals try to free themselves

from the constrictions of the sexual instinct and to subjugate it to the will to power (Nietzsche 1998).

THE DEBATE ON THE DIFFERENT MEANINGS OF THE CONCEPT IN KANT'S THEORY

At the very beginning of his *Critique of Judgment* (§ 2), Kant qualifies the pleasure grounding the pure judgment of taste as *ohne Interesse* (=disinterested), namely as involving no taking in (*einnehmen*) of the existence of the beautiful object, or as excluding any reference to the appetitive faculty. In other words, pure pleasures (namely pleasures connected with the beautiful) would not entail any desire for the objects at stake, in contrast to pleasures associated with the agreeable (Zangwill 1995). However, Kantian scholarship has pinpointed a variety of meanings of "interest" and "disinterest" in Kant's texts. According to Clewis (Clewis 2021), Kant uses the term "interest" according to at least five different meanings: (1) pleasure in the existence of the object; (2) sensual or rational desire, whose satisfaction is pleasurable, i.e. empirical or intellectual interest (Kant 2000: §§41, 42); (3) self-interest, namely the direct promotion of one's own life, well-being, and happiness; (4) an incentive to action, through which reason becomes practical and determines the will (Kant 2015); (5) active interaction and engagement with an object.

Consequently, according to Clewis we can discern at least five senses of disinterestedness: (1) disregard for pleasure in the existence of the object (Kant 2000: §§2, 3, 4, 5); (2) disregard for both empirical and rational desire; (3) indifference to the preservation of one's own life, well-being, or happiness; (4) an abstraction from the pursuit of moral or prudential ends identified as an incentive for action; (5) impartiality (Kant 2000: §13) and disregard for private reasons and conditions for feeling interest (Kant 2000: §6). Kant scholars (Guyer 1978; Zangwill 1995; Zuckert 2002) also disagree as to whether the meaning of disinterest as disregard for the existence of the beautiful object is sufficiently robust to support the German philosopher's claim about pure judgments of taste as qualitatively different from empirical judgments of taste and hence as potentially universal.

DISINTEREST AND ITS CRITICISM WITHIN CONTEMPORARY DEBATES

The concept of aesthetic disinterest has been broadly criticized in contemporary debates from both philosophical and sociological points of view, although scholars from different traditions continue to support it for various reasons (Zangwill 1992; Brady 1998; Hilgers 2019).

- In 1964, George Dickie criticized disinterestedness within a broader attack on the very notion of aesthetic attitude, conceived of as an "encrusted article of faith" (Dickie 1964). With the ultimate purpose of denying the role of aesthetic experience as what defines art, in favor of an institutionalist approach, he focused on Stolnitz's characterization of disinterestedness as a form

of contemplative attention, excluding any reference to further purposes as well as to cognitive assessments. Dickie argued that there are no specifically aesthetic mental states or actions, but only different ways of being attentive to the circumstances at hand. His main point is that the very concept of disinterested attention is a “confused notion” because it involves an unjustified shift from the perceptive dimension (i.e., a form of attention) to the motivational dimension to which interests properly belong.

- Another powerful criticism of the concept of aesthetic experience as a disinterested attitude came from Pierre Bourdieu, whose famous book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Bourdieu 1984) involves an explicit criticism of Kantian aesthetics from the point of view of the social dynamics implied in artistic practices and experiences. Far from being a universal and shareable stance, in his view the aesthetic attitude expresses the kind of taste that is typical of those who are rich in cultural capital, and who profit the most in terms of symbolic capital, which is to say of the social recognition of their dominant position in the social space – although this mainly occurs by means of their habitus of behavior rather than intentionally. Later, Bourdieu was to express his thesis by speaking of “an interest in disinterest” that in his view implicitly governs the fields of cultural production, especially those, such as French Symbolist poetry, where economic profit is less important than – if not in contrast to – recognition by one’s peers (Bourdieu 1983).
- Another important criticism of aesthetic experience as involving a disinterested attitude comes from environmental aesthetics, which seems to require “mutual involvement of spectator and object” or “embedment” in nature (Hepburn 1966) rather than detachment. Arnold Berleant explicitly criticized the idea that disinterest is the hallmark of the aesthetic attitude to both the arts and the natural environment (Berleant 1991; Berleant 1994), proposing instead an “aesthetic of engagement” (Berleant 1992). By taking into account living beings’ structural embeddedness and situatedness in their environment, he endorses a view of aesthetic experience as involving fully embodied, dynamically structured, and active forms of experiencing. However, other authors in the field prefer to adopt a more moderate view of engagement and to maintain a role for disinterest in the aesthetic appreciation of nature, so as to avoid hedonistic views of nature or the instrumental exploitation of the environment, as well as to preserve nature's otherness with respect to human needs and desires (Brady 1998).
- Finally, an implicit challenge to disinterest as a crucial feature of aesthetics comes from the field of evolutionary aesthetics. Although Richard Dawkins famously introduced the idea of the “selfish gene” (Dawkins 1976), the terms “interest” and/or “disinterest” have not been made an explicit object of discussion in most of the scholarship on the evolutionary origin of art. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the so-called “evolutionary anomaly” of the arts has been considered to be the pivotal issue in the field: in a nutshell, why do humans devote so much time and energy to activities that have no clearly adaptive significance? To put it in the language of evolutionary psychology, what is the utility of the highly complex cognitive machinery scaffolding artistic practices and pretend play, given that the “selective benefits that would favor the evolution of such adaptation remains obscure” (Tooby and Cosmides 2001)? By contrast, Dissanayake and

Brown (2009) have expressed their concerns about a field of study that risks elevating a culturally specific concept of art, centered on disinterested contemplation, to the rank of a universal paradigm for investigating the roots of the arts in human nature.

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