

How Can We Justify the Aesthetic Attitude?

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This article looks at the question of the justification for the aesthetic attitude. Firstly, a distinction is made between external and internal justification of the aesthetic attitude. Secondly, epistemic, social-biological, ethical, artistic, aesthetic and hedonistic justifications are distinguished and analysed in the internal justification context.

1. Introduction

It has sometimes been argued that since, from a historical perspective, human beings lived without the aesthetic attitude for a long time, the aesthetic attitude is not necessary for human existence. However, no matter at what point in time bio-aestheticians and anthropologists put the birth of *homo aestheticus*, it is hard to find a person who does not have an aesthetic attitude. As we are specimens of an aesthetic species, we can ask what the individual or universal meaning of aesthetic ability is. Why do we adopt an aesthetic attitude towards an object (a phenomenon etc.)?

The justification of the aesthetic attitude can be carried out in two contexts. The first context is 'external justification': we justify the aesthetic attitude in comparison with other, non-aesthetic attitudes (whether they are utilitarian, moral, religious or something else). In this article, I focus on the internal justification, looking exclusively at the question of what considerations there are for the adoption of the aesthetic attitude. This analysis is based on the observation that, although during the last half century the concept of the aesthetic attitude has been subjected to the logical/conceptual critique¹, as well as the ideological critique², critics and the attitude theorists themselves have not normatively analysed it.

2. Epistemic justification

What the innumerable philosophers and artists talk about when they assert that in our everyday life, where concerns are overwhelmingly practical, we miss

1 G. Dickie, *The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude*. – *Introductory Readings in Aesthetics*. Ed. J. Hospers. New York: Free Press, 1969, pp. 28–44.

2 A. Berleant, *Art and Engagement*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991, pp. 9–50.

something about the world is epistemic justification. According to epistemic justification, the aesthetic attitude enables us to penetrate the individuality/uniqueness of surrounding objects – to see what the objects are ‘in reality’³, or (in their metaphysical shape) to cognise the idea of a thing (object or phenomenon)⁴.

The epistemic justification needs refinement as to what kind of knowledge is expected when the aesthetic attitude is adopted – whether it is knowledge by acquaintance, or ‘know-how’ (procedural) knowledge or propositional knowledge (that is, knowledge-that). Moreover, the understanding that the aesthetic attitude is a precondition for cognising the idea of a thing seems to be too extravagant in the context of modern epistemology, or everyday life. Firstly, this is because, except for simply declaring that in the aesthetic attitude we cognise the idea (Form) of a thing in a Platonic sense, this approach does not allow us to recognise in our own experience this cognition of the idea and takes for granted Platonic metaphysics, together with the acceptance of the existence of Forms, and other obscure things.

3. Social-biological justification

Since knowledge is often the source of pain and suffering, the aesthetic attitude can be justified, contrary to the previous justification, by the exclusion of knowledge. The aesthetic attitude can be seen as a universal remedy for all ailments, which, because of our practical minds and serious attitude

to life, we cannot escape.⁵ As such, the aesthetic attitude is a mechanism for adaptation at the level of the individual, as well as the species; so, we can speak of a social-biological justification.

Let us note that the aesthetic attitude in itself is ‘blind’, i.e. it does not say anything about the conditions under which it must be adopted. This creates many possibilities for abusing the (aesthetic) attitude, i.e. the aesthetic attitude is adopted in such a way that its social-biological benefits are outweighed. Although we do not know if Thales, who fell into the well as he was looking up at the stars, was a victim of the aesthetic attitude, the possible harm that the aesthetic attitude might cause is evident when a pilot takes an aesthetic attitude to the aurora borealis and loses his sense of direction. Secondly, what would remain of the social-biological justification for the aesthetic attitude if people related aesthetically to murder, rapes and other actions that are very often called ‘crimes against humanity’? Thus, the aesthetic attitude is, to use a hackneyed phrase, a double-edged sword when its adoption does not include the adoption of social norms.

4. Ethical justification

Both moralists and aestheticians have emphasised that there is an unavoidable antagonism between the ethical (moral) and the aesthetic. Very often the definitions of the aesthetic attitude are coloured by moral implications, and the ethical justification of the aesthetic attitude can be discussed first from a consequentialist and then from a conceptualist perspective. The first has been taken up by the justification of the aesthetic attitude in the

3 H. Bergson, *Le Rire: essai sur la signification du comique*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2007; J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*. New York: Capricorn Books, 1958 [1934], pp. 53–54.

4 A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*. Ed. D. Berman. London: Everyman, 1997, pp. 97–135.

5 R. M. Ogden, *The Esthetic Attitude*. – *The Journal of Philosophy* 1905, vol. 2 (15), p. 413.

educational-pedagogical context, where it has been frequently claimed that the aesthetic attitude plays an important role in shaping the morality of the individual, as it helps the individual to attain a higher level of moral development.⁶

On the other hand, the conceptualist justification proceeds from the observation that, in the definition of the aesthetic attitude, such notions as 'impersonal', 'disinterested', 'neutral', 'selfless', 'impartial' and 'objective' are frequent, and moral philosophers⁷ have regarded some of these qualities as necessary prerequisites for evaluating the morality of human action. This does not mean, however, that ethical and aesthetic evaluation is 'the same', as there is overlap only in one characteristic (e.g. 'interestedness'). Moreover, the conceptualist approach does not focus on what aesthetic and ethical evaluation have in common, but what the aesthetic attitude and ethical evaluation have in common.

While the consequentialist approach can be undermined by doubting the concepts of 'the moral person' or 'moral development', the conceptualist approach can be undermined by critiquing the criteria of the moral evaluation of human action. This last line of thought has been developed by those who assert that moral evaluation of an action does not require 'disinterestedness', 'selflessness', 'impartiality' etc. in a situation; it requires empathy, sympathy and other emotional and subjective states, which in rationalist conceptions have unjustifiably been pushed into the background. At

the same time, there are theories in the varied family of attitude theories that define the aesthetic approach through the concept of empathy⁸, so that, within the framework of the *Einfühlung* theories, moral justification of the aesthetic attitude has become possible again.

5. Artistic justification

It has sometimes been argued that there is a cultural practice (i.e. art), in whose products (i.e. artworks) the aesthetic attitude is logically compelled. The artistically 'right' approach (art as art) is for many supporters of aesthetic definition of art the aesthetic attitude⁹, i.e. any non-aesthetic attitude (practical, political or moral) to art is the wrong approach to art.

Although there are very many works that are aesthetically ambitious (and the adoption of the aesthetic attitude towards them is possible and justified), it is an impossible or at least frustrating enterprise to confine the artistic experience of the works that belong to our artistic heritage to the framework of the aesthetic attitude (Aiken and Goodman). This is even more true of contemporary art, which in its nature is often non-aesthetic, and sometimes anti-aesthetic. We may not like feminist or political art (this might be the intention of this art) but the exclusively aesthetic attitude (viewing and evaluation) is in contradiction with the very nature of this art.

Moreover, it is possible to adopt the wrong attitude: the appeal to the aesthetic attitude makes it possible to expurgate any political/moral content

6 A. J. Newman, Aesthetic Sensitizing and Moral Education. – *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 1980, vol. 14 (2), pp. 93–101.

7 E.g. R. Firth, Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer. – *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 1952, vol. 12, pp. 317–345.

8 H. S. Langfeld, *The Aesthetic Attitude*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920, pp. 109–138.

9 M. C. Beardsley, An Aesthetic Definition of Art. – *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art. – The Analytic Tradition*. Eds. P. Lamarque, S. H. Olsen. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, pp. 55–62.

that is antagonistic/reactionary from the point of view of the ruling political structure as irrelevant to art.

6. Aesthetic justification

When we justify the adoption of the aesthetic attitude with aesthetic experience, we could call it aesthetic justification. Starting from the beginning of the 20th century, apparently in protest against this justification, the theorists who denied the specific aesthetic experience *sui generis* called this aesthetic experience 'phantom'.¹⁰ But we need not define the aesthetic experience as a psychological phenomenon, because there are other choices available, including the possibility of defining the aesthetic experience through the aesthetic attitude: people have an aesthetic experience when they have adopted the aesthetic attitude.¹¹ It is important to note that these approaches to the aesthetic attitude are formal, and so the question of the psychological content of the aesthetic experience does not have any importance.

But we can ask, if the aesthetic experience by definition is something that takes place when the aesthetic attitude is adopted, is it then possible to talk about the justification of the aesthetic attitude by aesthetic experience? It would be the same as if I justified my wish to draw two squares with the explanation that I wanted to draw a rectangle. This justification of the aesthetic attitude is theoretical and 'artificial', as well as not being very motivating, as it does not say why a person should desire to have an aesthetic experience. Such axiological

clichés as 'aesthetic experience has self-value' or 'aesthetic experience is an end in itself' seem to be too abstract to motivate the aesthetic attitude.

7. Hedonistic justification

Even the most ascetic purists would probably agree that, in spite of the dubious status of enjoyment, hedonism makes the desire for the aesthetic attitude at least humanly understandable. So, why not use hedonistic justification for the aesthetic attitude, i.e. justify it through its hedonistic or gratifying results?¹² This justification does not assume the existence of a specific enjoyment, 'aesthetic enjoyment', at least not in the sense of a psychological state.

The latest research in psychology and philosophy has shown that people may be wrong about the nature of and the causes for their tastes, likes and enjoyment.¹³ However, the confusion about whether the source of enjoyment is a particular object of the aesthetic attitude (for example, as in epistemic justification), or just the 'bracketing' (as in social-biological justification) – does not make the justification non-hedonistic.

Of course, the justification of the aesthetic attitude with the wish for enjoyment does not mean that this wish will be successfully fulfilled, because enjoyment can be repressed or hindered by an aesthetic object of little potential, as well as a weak aesthetic attitude, or *akrasia*. Moreover, a striving for enjoyment that is too direct may prove fatal to the aesthetic attitude in the conceptual sense. A wish

¹⁰ E.g. I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*. London, New York: Routledge, 2002 [1924], pp. 7–13.

¹¹ J. Stolnitz, *Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art Criticism: A Critical Introduction*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960.

¹² R. Scruton, *Art and Imagination: A Study in the Philosophy of Mind*. London: Methuen, 1974.

¹³ K. Melchionne, 'On the Old Saw 'I Know Nothing About Art but I Know What I Like''. – *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 2010, vol. 68 (2), pp. 131–141.

to view the object by taking an aesthetic attitude may be merely an overt wish to enjoy the object, and then we do not have the aesthetic attitude any longer; aesthetics and hedonism are not the same thing.

9. Conclusion

Although this essay has not tried to promote one justification over another, the reader may naturally want to inquire as to whether we should not discuss which is the right (better or more preferred) justification for the aesthetic attitude now that the different justifications of the aesthetic attitude have been outlined. However, we do not know if the question is worth posing within the framework of philosophical aesthetics. While in the normative sense the wish to make sure that human beings will adopt the aesthetic attitude seems to lead to a dogmatic attitude, which we should avoid for the sake of freedom in the sphere of aesthetic, in the descriptive sense the aesthetician might delegate this question to a sociologist, who by applying quantitative and qualitative methods would give a better picture of the hierarchy of the motives of *homo aestheticus*.