

Analysis of the Concept of "Aesthetic Disinterest" British Empiricism in Eighteenth-Century

Delin Liu^{1, a}

¹College of Literature and Media, Taishan University, Tai'an, 271000, China

^atsxyldln@163.com

Abstract

"Aesthetic disinterest" is an important proposition put forward by British empiricist aestheticians in the 18th century, and later it became one of a core concept in western modern aesthetics. At that time, "aesthetic disinterest" conveyed two meanings: it was either disinterested or beyond personal interest. The aestheticians of the empirical school explained this concept from two perspectives respectively. Among all of the comments, the "inner sense" proposed by Shaftesbury and Hutcheson provided the sensory basis for aesthetic disinterest. Hume and Bok explained the super individuality of "aesthetic disinterest" with "imagination" and "compassion".

Keywords

Aesthetic disinterest; Gout; Experiential aesthetics.

1. Introduction

The concept of "aesthetic disinterest" appeared in the 18th century. It was first proposed by the British empirical aesthetician at that time. After the summary and development of The German aesthetician Kant, it has become a basic principle of modern aesthetics and the main art theory in the West. Later, the aestheticism movement of "art for art's sake", which spread across the whole Europe, obtained the theoretical foundation from this thoughts, and made artistic activities free from the bondage of church, political power and economic activities, making itself a self-disciplined existence. That is to say, the concept of "aesthetic disinterest" was once regarded as the golden rule of normative aesthetic activities. On the basis of empirical aesthetics and Kant's aesthetics, estheticians such as Bullough, Schopenhauer and Croce respectively put forward the concepts of "mental distance", "aesthetic contemplation" and "art is intuition", which further promoted the concept of "aesthetic disinterest". However, since the end of the 19th century, it has been constantly criticized by later estheticians such as Nietzsche, Dewey and Berleant, who regarded it as an iron chain that limited aesthetic activities. Therefore, it is of great importance to correctly understand the characteristics and evolution of western modern aesthetics in order to clarify the original meaning of the concept, distinguishing the subtle differences in its application in different periods and different aestheticians, and grasp the deep meaning and make criticism of it by later generations.

1.1. The Analysis from the Perspective of Semantics

From the view of morphology, the English word "disinterestedness" is formed like this: first of all, the root of the word "interest" is a noun with eight meanings including interest, attraction, hobby, interest, interest, share, interest and interest group. Secondly, the root of the word "interest" combined with the affix "ed" and resulted as the adjective "interested". In daily use, it has two meanings: one is the emotional state of wanting to know or to understand someone or something, and the corresponding Chinese characters mean having interest, paying attention to or showing interest. The second meaning is to gain benefits or be affected by a situation,

which corresponds to the Chinese words such as “interested party”, “stake”, etc. Thirdly, when “interested” is combined with the negative prefix “dis” it forms “disinterested”, which has two basic meanings: one is impartial in judgment, and the other is not affected by personal interests. It is worth noting that interested has another antonym, uninterested, which basically means that one is not interested or interested. The authoritative Contemporary Oxford English Dictionary makes a comparison between the two words, and that is: “uninterested” emphasizes the total exclusion of interest and “disinterested” opposes the unfairness and pure individuality of interest considerations. [1] Thus, in the use of daily life, the term is pure objectivity on the one hand, emphasizing the cognition, while on the other hand it refers for people to know or action beyond the interests of the individual benefits, it is against the selfish mentality of individualism, rather than a fundamental denial of benefits, interests and benefits. Finally, when disinterested is added with the suffix “ness”, the nominal “Disinterestedness” is formed. Before it became an aesthetic concept, “disinterested” was widely used in Christian philosophy, ethics, and science, where it was described as the selfless love of God, the pursuit of the universal good of mankind beyond personal self-interest, and a source of knowledge unaffected by personal beliefs, emotions, and feelings. [2] Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Bock, Hume and other British aestheticians in the 18th century extracted the term from the above fields and combined it with aesthetic theories, thus becoming a core concept of aesthetic taste and attitude. From the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, Chinese scholars introduced the concept of “Aesthetic Disinterestedness” to Chinese academia, and when it was transformed into Chinese different expressions were adopted, such as aesthetic without utilitarianism, interestlessness, super-utilitarianism, useless use, etc. Later, the academic field reached a basic consensus and generally adopted Mr. Zhu Guangqian's translation : “aesthetic disinterest”.

1.2. The Sensuous Basis of “Aesthetic Disinterest”

Shaftesbury (1671-1713) was the first scholar who put forward the concept of “aesthetic disinterest”. His elaboration of this concept was closely related to his theory of beauty and aesthetic feeling. Shaftesbury saw the universe as a harmonious whole unity, a beautiful work of art created by God. For him, God was the first artist, the source of all beauty, and the model for all artists. He said, “The true poet is really a second Creator, a Prometheus under heaven and earth. Like the supreme artist of God, or the universal nature of the form, he forms a whole, which is consistent and in proportion, in which the constituent parts are in their proper subordination...” This discourse reflects Shaftesbury's views on the origin of beauty, the identity of the artist, the relationship between art and nature, and it clearly embodies the color of neo-Platonism. [3] It is easy to see that in Shaftesbury 's view, the poet is an imitator of God. He creates poems just as God creates the universe, and poetry is a beautiful art because it has the quality of harmony just like the universe. Moreover, according to this view, everything is made up of two parts: mind and matter, form and material. And so, quite naturally, he came to the conclusion that “beauty, beauty, and beauty lies not in matter (material), but in art and design; never in the object itself, but in the form or the power given to it.” [4] Shaftesbury's views on beauty are very similar to those of Protin in ancient Rome, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas in the middle Ages. It can even be said that Shaftesbury basically follows the views of his predecessors on the understanding of the essence of beauty. He advocated the universe was created by God as “the first beauty”, and also confirmed harmony as the first quality of beauty, and, further more, he regarded the beauty seen in natural objects and art as the shadow of “the first beauty”. He believed that the root of the beauty of natural objects and art was that they shared the quality of harmony.

Shaftesbury's outstanding contribution to aesthetics is his description of beauty. “As soon as the eyes see a shape and the ear hears a sound, it immediately recognizes beauty, elegance and harmony,” he said. As soon as action is perceived, as soon as human emotions and passions are

discerned (and they are for the most part recognizable when they feel them), there is an inner eye that sees what is good and right, what is lovely and admirable, and what is ugly and vile and despicable. Since these distinctions are rooted in nature (nature means human nature), how can it be denied that the faculty of discrimination is itself natural, and comes only from nature?" [5] People's senses, such as eyes and ears, touch beautiful things, but only with the "inner eye" can people obtain beauty, and the generation of beauty is direct, without thinking and reasoning. Here what we have to mentioned is that the notion of "inner eye". It is in the shaft we sometimes referred to as the "inner senses" or "inner sense of rhythm", etc., and it does not belong to seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching-the five outward senses, and human nature (or natural) has the inner senses, equivalent to the posterity calls a "sixth sense". In order to better explain the "inner eye" unique to humans, Shaftesbury compared humans and animals: they have external senses in common, but they differ in that only humans have internal senses. The "inner eye" is used to distinguish good and evil, beauty and ugliness. Animals only have external senses without inner eyes, they cannot recognize and appreciate beauty. In addition, because the inner eye is a natural ability, people are born with the ability to distinguish good and evil, beauty and ugliness. Monroe Beardsley, a contemporary American aesthete, highly praised the concept of "inner eye". "The theory of 'inner eye', or Shaftesbury 's theory of 'moral sense', is his contribution to the ethical theory of the 18th century, as well as his contribution to aesthetics. [6]

Since the quality of beauty lies in harmony and the acquisition of aesthetic feeling depends on "inner eyes", people's aesthetic activities are naturally characterized by "no interest". In Shaftesbury's aesthetics, "aesthetic disinterest" has three meanings: first, it refers to the necessary condition for rational and elegant contemplation of beauty, which makes us consciously focus on the external form and harmonious quality of things; secondly, it refers to the special nature that aesthetic feeling is different from other pleasures, that is, aesthetic feeling is free of interest and cannot be derived from selfish motives. He said, "Although pleasure and pleasure reflected from the doctrine of perceived pleasure can be interpreted as a passionate and interested interest in the self, original satisfaction can only come from truth, proportion, order, and love in the external." [7] Thirdly, "primary beauty" is good, it is beyond concrete things, people can only catch concrete things, but can not catch the sense of beauty.

In a word, Shaftesbury has a strong moral consciousness, and his interpretation of philosophy and aesthetics is determined by his moral concept, so is "aesthetic disinterest". He was very dissatisfied with Locke's epistemological claim of "blank state of the mind", which excluded the original moral foundations of human nature. He severely criticized Hobbes' view that people are born selfish and all human actions are carried out with selfish motives, arguing that it denied human benevolence and compassion. On the one hand, Shaftesbury's view of "aesthetic disinterest" points out that people's appreciation of beauty is different from their desire for concrete things, and is not an action driven by people's practical interests, so it surpasses the practical utilitarian behavior. On the other hand, it also shows that "inner eye" is the innate sense of human beings, which is shared by all people. Therefore, aesthetic appreciation transcends individual limitations and has the characteristics of universality.

After Shaftesbury, Hutcheson (1694-1747) was the second aesthete who emphasized "aesthetic disinterest". He had studied under Shaftesbury and inherited the latter's main idea that beauty and moral sense are sensible, consistent and innate. Like his teacher, Hutcheson believed that people are born with inner senses, and that there are differences and similarities between inner and outer senses. The external senses are what people often referred to the five senses, which can only deal with a certain kind of object, accepting simple ideas, perceiving things outside the mind and obtaining simple and weak pleasure. The objects perceived by the inner senses are internal to the mind, through which we can accept complex concepts such as "orderliness and harmony", and furthermore the feelings acquired are intensive. Moreover, the

internal sense is not a specific sense, but a moral sense, aesthetic sense, sublime sense and other senses.

Hutcheson believes that "aesthetic disinterest" is determined by special aesthetic senses, namely inner senses. Basing on Shaftesbury's ideas, Hutcheson further explained the inner senses. In his opinion, aesthetic feeling has the function of beauty characterized by "unity of diversity" and has the character of directness and pleasure, which is similar to the feeling obtained by external senses, but different from external senses in complexity." It is proper to call this higher faculty of receiving ideas a 'sense,' for it resembles the other senses in that the pleasure derived does not arise from knowledge of principle, cause, or utility of an object concerned, but immediately awakens in us ideas of beauty." [8] As far as aesthetic immediacy is concerned, it is an unthinking immediate response to beauty, an immediate sensation like the taste of salt or sugar, in a way that differs from selfish utilitarian considerations. As far as the content of beauty is concerned, "the consciousness of beauty cannot come from any knowledge of the principle, proportion, causality and use of the object". It grasps the feature of "unity of diversity" (beauty), and does not involve the content of the object. In this regard, it is disinterested. [9] The main problem left by Hutcheson is that he regards the taste, which originally belongs to human's appreciation ability, as an objective quality, which can show the super-individual nature of aesthetic feeling, but cannot solve the difference of taste. Meanwhile, his explanation of aesthetic feeling has the color of mysticism.

2. The Analysis from the Perspective of Imagination and Compassion

For Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, internal sense provides an important basis for their idea of "aesthetic non-utility", which is also the prerequisite for the establishment of this theory. At that time, there were also some empirical aestheticians, such as Hume and Burke, who did not agree with the existence of internal senses, but admitted the idea of "aesthetic disinterest". The following will briefly analyze the two philosophers Hume and Burke from this perspective.

Hume (1711-1776) is the most prominent representative of English empiricism and one of the aestheticians who had the greatest influence on Kant. His book *On the Criteria of Aesthetic Taste* is regarded as the most important theoretical work on taste in the eighteenth century. In this short essay, Hume mainly deals with the problem of aesthetic taste. In his opinion, "The numerous different emotions aroused by the same object are real. The same emotion does not represent the real things in the object, but only marks a certain coordination or relationship between the object and the psychological organs or functions. Without this coordination, emotions would not be possible. Beauty is not an attribute of the thing itself; it exists only in the mind of the beholder. Each heart sees a different kind of beauty. One person thinks ugly, another person may think beautiful." [10] Here, Hume made a completely subjective judgment of beauty, denying the objective nature of beauty such as "harmony" and "diversity and unity", and equating beauty with some emotion aroused by the object in the mind of the subject, which explains the subjectivity and relativity of taste and beauty. However, Hume also maintains that taste and beauty are not completely relative, that is to say, although beauty "exists only in the mind of the beholder", there is a common standard for the judgment of taste beyond the individual. This is because beauty is an emotion, however, such an emotion is different from other emotions in that it arises from some harmony between human nature and some quality within the object. In this sense, subjective taste has a universal objective standard. In *On the Standard of Aesthetic Taste*, the main purpose of the full text is to refute the relativism of taste, arguing that no matter how different aesthetic taste is, there is still a universal measure, and people still show basic consistency in this respect. Compared with his contemporaries, Hume's progress is also reflected in his dialectical understanding of beauty and interest.

Hume divides beauty into two categories : those that come from the senses and those that come from the imagination. The beauty of the senses is received directly by the senses and involves only the form of the object; beauty of imagination arises from the association of ideas such as convenience and utility arising from the form of objects, which inevitably involves the meaning of content. To appreciate, for example, a hill planted with grapes and olives, we get "a beauty which comes from the imagination and has no basis in what is presented directly to the senses. Fertility and worth have to do with utility, and utility has to do with wealth and joy and abundance." [11] That is to say, aesthetic feeling can involve utilitarian consideration, which was strongly opposed by the previous empirical aestheticians, such as Shaftsbury and Hutcheson, and was also rejected by the later aestheticians, such as Kant. In "On Human Nature", Hume further explained the relationship between beauty and function, "Many handicrafts are considered beautiful according to the proportion of their suitability for human function, and even many natural products obtain their beauty from that source and we like it only because it has a tendency to produce a pleasant result." [12] Does this mean that Hume's idea of "aesthetic disinterest" is inconsistent? In fact, Hume is opposed to Hobbes' notion that all human behavior is selfish. Previous empirical philosophers believed that if human behavior is interested or functional, it must be derived from the desire to possess a specific thing, and the desire to possess is exclusive, so it is selfish. Hume's view is that even if it is not for his own benefit, he can share the happiness of others with empathy through sympathy and imagination, so that he can feel beautiful while others feel beautiful. That is to say, aesthetic taste may involve utility, but utilitarian calculation does not necessarily involve selfish motives, which is different from Hutcheson's view that beauty does not involve calculation of interests, and from Hobbes' view that beauty must involve selfish motives.

To illustrate how self-interest can transcend selfish motives, Hume gives another example: "The landlord shows the house to us guests by pointing out all the convenient details, and Hume goes on to analyze it: it is evidential that the beauty of the house lies chiefly in these details. See the convenience of pleasure, because convenience is a kind of beauty. But how exactly does it induce pleasure? It is not in our own interest, of course, but it is a beauty that comes not from form but from profit, so it pleases me only through communication and our sympathy for the owner. We put ourselves in his place, by the aid of imagination, and feel the satisfaction which he naturally felt towards these objects." [13] In this case, the beauty of a house is first of all because its details are convenient for the occupants of the house. That is to say, the details of the interior structure and quality of the house make the occupants feel very convenient, thus causing pleasure, that is, "beauty". Secondly, as an appreciator, he can imagine himself in possession of the house, and the details of the house are equally convenient to him, which can elicit the same aesthetic sensation as the owner. Hume uses the word "sympathy" for the cause of beauty to show that we can get pleasure from making people feel sympathy without touching our own personal interests. Compassion here means putting oneself in the other's shoes and sharing the feelings or activities of others as well as the imaginary ones. In compassion, we override selfish motives by means of imagination.

Bock (1729-1797) is regarded as the epitome of English empiricism, and his important position in the history of aesthetics is established by his book *On the Origin of Two Ideas of Sublime and Beauty*. The distinction between the sublime and the beautiful is the most important literature on these two categories since Longinus and before Kant. Bock focused on the physiological and psychological basis of the sense of sublime and the sense of beauty, thinking that they involve two basic human passions: the former involves "self-preservation", that is, the instinct to maintain individual life; The latter is concerned with "social life", that is, the reproductive desire to sustain the life of the race and the general desire to socialize or herd instinct. Bock limited beauty to the perceptual nature of objects and gave the following definition: "WHAT I call beauty refers to a certain property or some property of an object that can arouse love or similar

passions. I confine this definition to the purely sensible nature of things....I separate this love from lust or lust. "Love" refers to the pleasure the mind feels in looking at anything beautiful, when desire or desire merely compels us to possess the mental power of objects that attract us not because they are beautiful but because they are something else entirely." [14] In the first place, the appreciation of beauty is only concerned with the perceptual nature of things, with the quality that arouses love in our hearts. Secondly, love is quite different from possessive desire. Possessive desire is selfish and utilitarian, while love has the nature of society. Therefore, aesthetics has the nature of "no interest" beyond personal and possessive desire. That is to say, beauty is only about love and not about desire, a view developed by Kant and endorsed by many later aestheticians.

Burke is clearly opposed to Hume's view that beauty is in utility, but he agrees with Hume's theory of "sympathy" and holds that the basis of literary appreciation lies in "sympathy". "It is through compassion that we care about what others care about, that we are moved by what moves them. Compassion should be regarded as a form of substitution. It is to put ourselves in the position of others, and in many things we feel as they feel. This passion, therefore, may also have a quality of self-preservation. ... It is primarily this principle of compassion that poetry, painting, and other moving arts can transfer emotion from one heart to another, and often add branches of joy to the roots of trouble, disaster, and even death. You see that what is shocking in real life can be a source of high pleasure in tragedy and other similar artistic expressions." [15] Clearly, for Burke, "sympathy" is a common psychology, a social quality, involving what he calls "the passions of social life in general." Beauty, therefore, based on compassion, naturally has a quality that transcends personal interests.

3. Conclusion

In a word, The British empiricist aestheticians changed the direction of aesthetic research, using the knowledge of physiology and psychology, put the study of emotion and aesthetic feeling in the primary position, so that the study of aesthetics showed a subjective color. In order to avoid subjectivism falling into the mire of individuality and relativism, they put forward the idea of disinterest and try to find some objective and universal standard for subjective aesthetic taste. They either put forward the "inner eye" which is different from the external perception, so that the production of aesthetic pleasure has the innate physiological basis and universal characteristics. Or the use of psychological concepts such as imagination and compassion, so that people's considerations of interest have a character beyond the individual. In terms of the nature of aesthetic activities, some scholars, such as Shaftsbury, Hutcheson and Bok, believe that aesthetic feeling does not contain utilitarian pleasure, while some scholars, such as Bok, believe that aesthetic feeling does contain utilitarian but goes beyond the consideration of personal interests.

4. Conflicts of Interest

This author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication this paper.

Acknowledgments

This paper was supported by Doctor's Fund of Taishan University, 2008.

References

- [1] The New Oxford Dictionary of English, Oxford University Press, 1998:952,530.

- [2] Peng Feng. Disinterested and Aesthetic Mind. Journal of Peking University (Philosophy and Social Sciences), 2013,(2):54.
- [3] Zhu Guangqian. History of Western Aesthetics [M]. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1979:216,216,212.
- [4]]Monroe C. Beardsley, Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1966:179181.
- [5] Zhu Guangqian. History of Western Aesthetics [M]. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1979:221, 222, 226.
- [6] Chen Hao. Beauty and Function -- An analysis of the concept of "Aesthetic Indifference" in the 18th century. Foreign Aesthetics [J],2017:169.
- [7] Zhu Guangqian. History of Western Aesthetics [M]. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1979:243,244,241.