

Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Volume 12, 2020

Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



Published by



Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Founded in 2009 by Fabian Dorsch

Internet: <http://proceedings.eurosa.org>

Email: proceedings@eurosa.org

ISSN: 1664 – 5278

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The European Society for Aesthetics



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Design by Fernando Infante Del Rosal

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Moral Aspects' Aesthetic Relevance: on Dickie's Stolnitz, Stolnitz, and aesthetic attention

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ABSTRACT: Let us put aside for a while the question of whether there is such thing as an aesthetic attitude. Attitude theories are often criticized for assuming that adopting an aesthetic attitude, or exercising aesthetic attention, excludes consideration of the moral aspects of art. Indeed, George Dickie criticized Jerome Stolnitz for such an assumption. I claim that Dickie missed the target – Stolnitz's conception of disinterested attention does not commit him to excluding any attention to the moral aspects of art. First, I will succinctly point out Dickie's criticisms against Stolnitz's conception of the aesthetic attitude, namely with respect to the relation of morality to aesthetic value. I will then show that, according to Stolnitz, the limits of aesthetic relevance have primacy over the relation of morality to aesthetic value, and that the ultimate criterion of aesthetic relevance is experience's quality enrichment. If the consideration of a work's moral vision may enrich the quality of one's (aesthetic) experience of such work, then the consideration of that property is aesthetically relevant. Finally, I will mention a couple of recent versions of aesthetic attention which stress the inclusive nature of such kind of attention, therefore contributing to overcome Dickie's criticisms.

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This work is funded by national funds through the FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., under the Norma Transitória – DL 57/2016/CP1453/CT0090.

1. Introduction: Dickie's criticisms

The most influential critic of aesthetic attitude theories is George Dickie. In his widely read paper 'The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude' (Dickie, 1964) Dickie holds that the notion of aesthetic attitude has "little or no connection with the ordinary notion of an *attitude*" (Dickie, 1964, p. 56), that it has "no theoretical value for aesthetics" (ibid., p. 65), and that "the aesthetic attitude is a myth" (ibid., p. 56).

To argue against such statements is not my purpose here.² What concerns me is a secondary but influential thesis of Dickie's paper, namely his endorsing the view that, according to attitude theorists, adopting an aesthetic attitude, or exercising aesthetic attention, excludes taking account of the moral aspects of art. Although 'The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude' is known more for its main claim than for this thesis, the influence of the latter in the approach taken by many aestheticians as well as philosophers of art is also wide enough for it to be important that it be considered.

As the explicit target of Dickie's criticisms is Stolnitz's view, I will focus my comments on his notion of 'disinterested attention'. I will consider whether Dickie's reading is right; whether Stolnitz's notion of 'disinterested attention' commits him to excluding any attention to the moral aspects of art.³

2 Effective responses against Dickie's criticisms have come from Saxena, 1978; Zangwill, 1992; Fenner, 1996; Kemp, 1999 and, more recently, Nanay, 2016.

3 This is rather a paper on the history of contemporary aesthetics and philosophy of art than an exercise of aesthetics or philosophy of art. What is at stake is whether the highly influential criticism performed by Dickie, in particular the one addressed to the purported view endorsed by Stolnitz, is right.

According to Dickie, Stolnitz's conception of the aesthetic attitude has misled aesthetic theory with respect to "the relation of morality to aesthetic value" (Dickie, 1964, p. 61).⁴ Dickie appeals to David Pole's thesis according to which the moral vision which a work of art may embody is aesthetically significant (Pole, 1962).⁵ Dickie asserts that Stolnitz's "conception of the aesthetic attitude functions to hold the moral aspects and the *aesthetic* aspects of the work of art firmly apart", that it suggests "the moral aspects of a work of art cannot be an object of aesthetic attention because aesthetic attention is by definition disinterested and the moral aspects are somehow practical (interested)", and that it assumes an "incompatibility of aesthetic attention and the moral aspects of art" (Dickie, 1964, p. 63). In summary, according to Dickie, Stolnitz's view has misled aesthetic theory insofar as it assumes that adopting an aesthetic attitude excludes consideration of the moral aspects of art.

I claim that Dickie missed the target – at least he seems to have misunderstood Stolnitz in respect to what falls under 'disinterested attention'.

2. Stolnitz: experience's quality enrichment

To begin with, the excerpt chosen by Dickie does not support his

4 The relation of morality to aesthetic value is, in Dickie's view, one of three aspects of Stolnitz's conception of the aesthetic attitude which is incorrect. The other two are "the way in which he wishes to set the limits of aesthetic relevance" and "the relation of the critic to a work of art" (ibid., p. 61).

5 Not only does Dickie generally share Pole's view; he adds that "a work's moral vision is a *part* of the work" (Dickie, 1964, p. 64).

view that Stolnitz holds the moral and the aesthetic aspects of the work of art firmly apart. Here is the Stolnitz quotation in full:

any of us might reject a novel because it seems to conflict with our moral beliefs or our 'way of thinking.' (...) We have *not* read the book aesthetically, for we have interposed moral or other responses of our own which are alien to it. This disrupts the aesthetic attitude. We cannot then say that the novel is *aesthetically* bad, for we have not permitted ourselves to consider it aesthetically. To maintain the aesthetic attitude, we must follow the lead of the object and respond in concert with it. (Stolnitz, 1960, p. 36)

What is at stake in Stolnitz's description of the rejection of a novel on moral grounds is a conflict between (the moral aspects or the moral vision of) the novel and the moral beliefs *of the reader*. In the story told by Stolnitz, such a conflict has precluded the reader from accepting the novel and, what is more, from reading it aesthetically. Now, everyone would acknowledge that a conflict between one's moral beliefs and a novel's moral aspects or vision may be such to preclude one from even reading the novel.⁶ However, according to Stolnitz, it does not have to be the case.

It is not with respect to what a work may embody, to what is a part of the work – to use Dickie's words – that Stolnitz brings up the

⁶ Many have not permitted themselves to read – let alone to read it aesthetically – D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, or J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*.

problem of what is, and what is not, aesthetically relevant. He does so with respect to items that “are *not* embodied in the aesthetic object itself, but arise from the *percipient's* previous experience” (ibid., p. 53 [emphasis mine]). Those items are connected with the percipient’s past history, with what she has experienced in the past, with her memory. Among them are the beliefs, values, emotional predispositions, recollections, personal memories, thoughts, images, and the bits of knowledge which she brings to the experience of the work. Let me stress that they “are *not* present within the object itself” (ibid., p. 53 [emphasis mine]). Nevertheless, Stolnitz holds that they (too) may be relevant to its aesthetic appreciation.

They may be so if or when they reinforce attention to the object, they get absorbed into aesthetic perception and suffuse it with new significance, they fuse with the object and thereby give it added life, they illuminate it, rendering the percipient’s aesthetic perception more acute and subsequently enriching the quality of her experience and thus making it more intense and discriminating. These phrases are scattered across Stolnitz’s text (see ibid., pp. 55-60). However, there is a place where he both mentions the possibility and sets the conditions for considering the role of the above-mentioned items in aesthetic appreciation. Immediately after asserting that “we need not (...) condemn all ‘knowledge about’ as aesthetically irrelevant” Stolnitz states that such knowledge *is* aesthetically relevant “when it does not weaken or destroy aesthetic attention to the object, when it pertains to the meaning and expressiveness of the object, and when

it enhances the quality and significance of one's immediate aesthetic response to the object" (ibid., p. 58).

Now, if this is the case concerning that which is not embodied in the object, then there is no way Stolnitz could hold that a work's moral vision is not aesthetically relevant and, therefore, that it cannot be taken into account within the adoption of an aesthetic attitude or the exercise of aesthetic attention.

I shall note that Dickie keeps his discussion of the way Stolnitz approaches the relation of morality to aesthetic value, and the way in which he wishes to set the limits of aesthetic relevance, separate. However, there is a link between them: the way in which Stolnitz approaches the relation of morality to aesthetic value should be read in the light of the way in which he wishes to set the limits of aesthetic relevance – in short, the latter has primacy over the former. If, as Dickie holds, a work's moral vision is a part of that work, and if, as Stolnitz would never argue against, anything that is a part of a work may be relevant to the aesthetic appreciation of it, then, a work's moral vision is always at least potentially relevant to its aesthetic appreciation.

The reason why I mention 'potential relevance' and not 'relevance simpliciter', by the way, has nothing to do with being uncertain as to whether Stolnitz accepts that a work's moral vision can be relevant to its aesthetic appreciation. It is just that he never asserts explicitly, in the way in which does Dickie, that a work's moral vision is a part of that work. All Stolnitz holds in the story he tells is

that the moral responses of a reader of a book, being moral responses *of her own*, are alien to it. Although it does not entail that a book's moral vision – not its potential reader's moral responses – is alien to it, it does not state explicitly that the moral vision is part of the book.⁷

There is nothing in Stolnitz's view that entails that the moral aspects of art cannot be taken into account within the aesthetic attitude. Attending to the moral vision of a work of art, to its interests, does not prevent the aesthetic appreciation of such work of art from taking place; one may consider those interests – even if they conflict with one's own – and still appreciate it aesthetically, attend to it disinterestedly. Indeed, there may be a conflict between the moral aspects or visions of a book and the moral beliefs of its reader; and yet, she may read that book aesthetically taking its moral aspects or visions into account. She may attend to the moral content of the book and yet without letting the conflict that may occur between such content and her moral beliefs preclude her from reading the book in a disinterested way.⁸

7 Surprisingly, I could find only one commentator who has noticed it, Sushil Kumar Saxena: “it is only this externalistic moral checking – this interposition of ‘moral (...) responses of our own *which are alien to it*’ – to which Stolnitz (in his words cited) objects” (Saxena, 1978, p. 87). As Saxena adds, after all Stolnitz “does not deny that a moral vision may be a part of a work's inner content” (ibid., p. 87). And if it may be a part of a work's inner content, it may in principle be considered.

8 David E. W. Fenner claims that “what Stolnitz advocates is inattention to anything that will *harm* the aesthetic appreciation of the object. If the moral point of view of the critical point of view helps to create a better experience, then these aspects ought to be included in the attention of the spectator” (Fenner, 1996, p. 104). What Fenner takes a better experience to be is one by the occasion of which the spectator takes more of a second-order, cognitively engaged pleasure, whereas “[b]ad experiences occur when one invests attention

If this is so, there is no need to say that the spectator may do something, namely, take a work's moral point of view into account, and *still* appreciate it aesthetically, that is, *despite* appreciating it aesthetically. One may appreciate a work of art aesthetically while taking its moral point of view into account, among anything else that may enrich the quality of her experience. That is, one has a better experience *because* one takes the work's moral point of view into account, among anything else that may help to create a better experience.

3. Other versions of aesthetic attention

If there is something Stolnitz might be accused of, it is that his way of conceiving the aesthetic attitude is too inclusive, rather than too exclusive. This is because, according to him, the very adoption of such an attitude not only admits but often requires a manifold of

into the object expecting a return of second-order pleasure, but when this pleasure is either not forthcoming or of a minimal degree" (ibid., p. 117). Indeed, within Fenner's proposal, this dual-character pleasure – or at least the expectation of such – plays a crucial role in aesthetic appreciation, although the pleasure is not taken in the object itself, but rather in the experience of attending to the object – and this is why he describes it as a 'metafeeling' or 'second-order occurrence' (ibid., p. 119). However, contra Fenner, it must be remarked that experience's quality enrichment does not amount to pleasure enhancement, that is, to a more pleasurable experience. Consideration of the moral aspects of art may render the experience richer and less pleasurable. Among the accounts focused on aesthetic attention, the one advanced by Bence Nanay presupposes such difference. Accordingly, Nanay has recently defined 'an aesthetically relevant property' – not 'an aesthetic property', I shall note – in the following terms: "if attending to a property of a particular makes me appreciate my experience of that particular more (or less), *and not as a result of making me appreciate the particular itself more (or less)*, it is an aesthetically relevant property" (Nanay, 2016, p. 73). Meanwhile, as Nanay adds, "it is not aesthetic appreciation that [is] used for defining aesthetically relevant properties, but the appreciation of one's experiences", and this is why the definition "is not circular" (ibid., p. 73).

items that are not embodied in the aesthetic object itself, that are not present within the object itself. This may include “repeated experience of the work, and even, sometimes, technical training in the art-form” (Stolnitz, 1960, p. 38), it demands that one is “persistent in returning to [the works] again and again” and enters a “process of familiarization [that] never ends” (ibid., p. 77).

What is crucial here is that the adoption of the aesthetic attitude “is not always easily come by” (ibid., p. 38) and that it “is not something which is over and done with it, once and for all” (ibid., p. 77). On the contrary, it often requires some contribution, some activity on the part of the percipient. The adoption of the aesthetic attitude is itself an activity – the percipient is an agent:

as a former teacher of mine used to say, aesthetic perception is frequently thought to be a ‘blank, cow-like stare.’ It is easy to fall into this mistake when we find aesthetic perception described as ‘just looking,’ without any activity or practical interest. From this it is inferred that we simply expose ourselves to the work of art and permit it to inundate us in waves of sound or color.

But this is surely a distortion of the facts of experience. (...) To be ‘sitting on the edge of the chair’ is anything but passive. (ibid., p. 37)

As for other conceptions of the aesthetic attitude criticized by Dickie, I readily admit that the thesis according to which the adoption of the aesthetic attitude is an activity that welcomes the consideration of a

manifold of items, which may be either present or not present within the object itself, embodied or not embodied in the aesthetic object itself, including its moral view, would never be shared by a theorist such as Edward Bullough. According to Bullough, distance “renders questions of origin, of influences, or of purposes almost as meaningless as those of marketable value, of pleasure, even of moral importance, since it lifts the work of Art out of the realm of practical systems and ends” (Bullough, 1912, p. 117). One could also hardly say that Vincent Tomas would accept Stolnitz’s view. Although he asserts that “contrary to what Ortega [y Gasset] wrote (...) it is false that ‘preoccupation with the human content of the work is in principle incompatible with aesthetic enjoyment proper’” (Tomas, 1959, p. 67), he rejects the claim that effort is involved in the adoption of the aesthetic attitude: “there seem to be people (poor souls!) for whom it involves effort, an ‘act of will,’ to adopt the aesthetic attitude” (ibid., p. 60).

Things change when one reaches Eliseo Vivas’s ‘intransitive attention’: not only does he mention “the activity, which is a necessary preparation to come into full possession of the poem”; he asserts that “the organic whole which is a poem of quality does not come forward on its own; the reader must make the effort to discover it” and that “to grasp the unity and the central effects of a poem the reader must work and work hard” (Vivas, 1959, p. 231). This hard work may include some ‘excursions’, but only ones that can be taken “as indispensable preparation for the reading of a poem”, that is, “as

indispensable as means to lead the reader as close as he can come to (...) intransitive or contextual experience with the poem”, are to be accepted as “of the right kind” (ibid., p. 230).⁹

To be sure, among the authors whose conceptions of the aesthetic attitude are criticized in Dickie’s paper, not only Stolnitz, but, to some extent, also Vivas, would reject the thesis according to which the moral aspects of art cannot be taken into account within the adoption of an aesthetic attitude.

What is more, the same might be said about recent versions of aesthetic attention, such as Fenner’s or Nanay’s.

It shall be remarked that in bringing these versions up, I do not mean, by no means, that they are equally inspired – or even that the latter is inspired – by Stolnitz’s view or by the theories of the aesthetic attitude. It would be uncontroversial to include Fenner among the attitude theorists, although he argues that adopting an aesthetic attitude is a sufficient but not a necessary condition for one to have an aesthetic experience.¹⁰ Nanay goes further and holds that aesthetic attention is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for

9 Also involved in Vivas’ version of the aesthetic attitude is a kind of ‘reflection’ that is addressed “to the grasping of the meanings and values that the artist informed” or, more generally, to grasping “the objective intention of the poem” (ibid., pp. 230-231).

10 In Fenner’s own words, “it is argued that while the aesthetic attitude is not necessary for the creation, sustaining, or flourishing of aesthetic experiences, it may well be *sufficient*, at least in some form. That is, while one need not be in an aesthetic attitude in order to experience aesthetically, it may well be that if she is in *an* or *the* aesthetic attitude, her experience will be aesthetic. It is at this point that my own attitude candidate is introduced” (Fenner, 1996, p. 3).

aesthetic experiences.¹¹ Nevertheless, he also claims that this kind of attention is required for paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience,¹² and that such cases have the status of paradigmatic because they “align nicely with the experiences some influential novelists, artists, and critics have tried to capture” (ibid., p. 33). If this is the case, it is advisable to bring Nanay’s account up as a recent version of aesthetic attention.¹³

Now, nothing in what one may call an attitude of expectant attention – Fenner’s version of the aesthetic attitude – precludes the moral aspects of art from being considered within the adoption of it. On the contrary, as Fenner himself states,

in viewing an artwork that was explicitly designed to convey some political message, one’s aesthetic appreciation of the object may be heightened by realizing the effectiveness of the piece in conveying its message. One’s appreciation of Picasso’s *Guernica* is enriched by realizing the powerful statement it makes about war and innocents. (Fenner, 1996, pp. 11-12)

11 Nanay notes that “attending in a certain way is not something we can always force ourselves to do” (Nanay, 2016, p. 32), that is, “we do not have full control over the way we exercise our attention” (ibid., p. 33).

12 In his own words, “some experiences that may be called aesthetic may not require aesthetic attention. All I claimed was that those paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience I zeroed in on (...) do)” (ibid., p. 28).

13 As Robert Hopkins writes, “[i]n emphasizing the role of attention in aesthetics, Nanay revitalizes a tradition that ran aground in the hail of criticism directed at the theory of the ‘aesthetic attitude’. Repositioning attention centre stage in aesthetics is welcome, offering a refreshing alternative to attempts to characterize the aesthetic by a more direct appeal to a special form of experience or a special class of properties” (Hopkins, 2017, p. 341).

As for Nanay, it must be remembered that, according to his philosophy of perception-based approach, any property, at least any property one can attend to, including properties that are not perceptually represented, can be aesthetically relevant. The *conditio sine qua non* is that it is connected to the object's observable formal properties, i.e., that it is made a semi-formal property.¹⁴ Inasmuch as *Guernica's* moral vision is connected with *Guernica's* observable formal properties, that is, as long as it is made a semi-formal property of Picasso's painting, it can count as an aesthetically relevant property. Therefore, it can be considered within the exercise of distributed attention, Nanay's special kind of aesthetic attention.

4. Conclusion

Although there are a number of reasons why interest in aesthetic attitude theories has waned in the past few decades, Dickie's criticisms have played a central role in this historical phenomenon. However, the historical significance of Dickie's criticisms does not lie solely in his view that there is no such a thing as an aesthetic attitude. Dickie also argued that, according to attitude theorists, adopting an aesthetic attitude excludes consideration of the moral

14 "Semi-formal properties are properties that depend constitutively on the artwork's formal properties" (Nanay, 2016, p. 113). Among them are the ones that "partly [depend] on our background information and partly on formal properties" (ibid., p. 107). As Nanay holds, "knowledge of non-observable facts about the artwork can indeed enrich attribution of some semi-formal properties to the artwork, thus, it can also enrich our aesthetic evaluation of it. But these non-observable facts are relevant to our aesthetic evaluation of the picture only inasmuch as they are connected to its observable formal properties" (ibid., p. 105).

aspects of art. This have contributed to take attitude theories as of no use when it comes to appreciate such significant and trendy topics as the relation of art to morality.¹⁵

Unfortunately, authors who have followed the tradition of aesthetic attention – including Fenner and Nanay – have not given any specific account on the topic.

I have shown that there is nothing in Stolnitz's conception of the aesthetic attitude that entails that the moral aspects of art cannot be taken into account within such an attitude. The adoption of the aesthetic attitude is an activity that welcomes the consideration of a manifold of items, which may be either present or not present within the object itself, embodied or not embodied in the artwork itself, including its moral view. According to Stolnitz, consideration of a work's moral vision may enrich the quality of one's aesthetic experience of such work.

Although showing this alone has been my purpose here, I have also given some hints on how a sophisticated account of aesthetic attention can include consideration of the moral aspects of art. Presumably, it would have to embrace some of the tenets of both Fenner's conception of expectant attention and Nanay's conception of distributed attention – namely Nanay's definition of an aesthetically relevant property.

15 Many have just moved to proposals such as Noël Carroll's moderate moralism (Carroll, 1996) or Berys Gaut's ethicism (Gaut, 1998).

But before moving to that it is important to stress an historical fact: according to Stolnitz, adopting an aesthetic attitude does not exclude taking into account of the moral aspects of art.

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