Aesthetic Disinterest

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A while back I bought a record, *Songs and Sounds of Orcinus Orca.*[1] It is a collection of the sounds made by whales, specifically "killer whales." There are twelve "cuts," each a recording of the whales during a particular activity or a particular "mood." The recording was made by a scientist, but the descriptions that he attaches to the sounds on his album range from scientific study to music. Now the question is, are the sounds on this album music? Are they simply scratchy, rubbery, whistling, popping noises? Are they fantastic *songs* made by creatures of nature? Are they *communication*? Are they like the sounds we hear when we listen to an opera in a language we do not understand?

Whatever the initial answer, it seems clear that the answer is in large measure dependent upon ***how we wish*** to be listening to the sounds, dependent upon our subjective focus in attending. If we are zoologists, we might be listening to these sounds in order to predict whale behavior as correlated with the sounds. If we are linguists, then we might be listening to find patterns. If we are appreciators of interesting music, we might be listening to the sounds purely for aesthetic enjoyment. Furthermore, besides listening with various foci dependent on particular vocations, we may also change our focus of attention in a single occasion of listening to the whales. Such would probably be the case if while the album were playing, I were to suggest to the listener that he might try to listen for ---------- (patterns, the similarity to a faulty synthesizer, the sublimity of the sounds of the largest creatures on earth, et cetera).

The importance of the question about how one is listening to these sounds lies, for this paper, in whether the experience of listening to these sounds is aesthetic in character or not. Moreover, is it the case that whether our experience of these sounds is aesthetic or not — whether in some broad sense they are music or not — is dependent in great measure, maybe completely so, on how the listener *chooses* to listen to the sounds? If the experience is aesthetic, it seems clear that it is not aesthetic because of something the *whales* are doing (except in the sense that it is to the ***whales*** that we are listening). It seems clear that if one is listening and having an aesthetic experience, it is because the listener is attending to the sounds in some manner *so as to render* the experience aesthetic. Since we are in the position to listen to the sounds in different ways, some of which seem patently unaesthetic and some (one?) which seem to afford us an aesthetic experience, then the question about whether the sounds are

constitutive of an aesthetic object seems to have something to do with what the subject is doing, something to do with what *attitude* the subject is taking toward the object or event.

Indeed, whether or not we believe that the aesthetic attitude is necessary for aesthetic appreciation or not (many attitude theorists do, but I am a bit skeptical), it seems a denial of common experience to suggest that there is simply no such thing as an aesthetic attitude. We do have the ability to view any object we please as aesthetic in one instance, or nonaesthetic in another. I can view the flower in the court as a botanical entity or as an aesthetic one. I can see the movements of honey bees and see communication or see dance. I can consider the Picasso as a great work of art or as a financial investment. All of these views, it seems, are completely in my control. I can turn my point of view "on or off," "aesthetic or not."

It is part of aesthetic attitude theorizing, or, more specifically, the subjective control of aesthetic experiencing, that I want to discuss here. The aesthetic attitude has figured centrally in aesthetics, from the enlightenment until the present, with the strongest tradition being that of *disinterest.* In this paper, I want to explore (I) the two most prominent definitions of the notion of "disinterest"— that of Kant and that of Jerome Stolnitz— to determine if definition or interpretation is trouble- free, and (II) whether the aesthetic attitude really is disinterested or not. In both cases, I believe the answer is no.

I

Let's start with the Kantian iterpretation.

Kant says that interest is what we call the liking we connect the presentation of an object's existence.... In order to play the judge in matters of taste, we must not be the least biased in favor of the thing's existence but must be wholly indifferent about it.[2]

Kant's central edict is that we must attend to the object without any care to its actual existence. It is the contemplative- image that we are to consider, how the object is represented in our imagination and umderstanding. Possession of an art object, then,is neither important nor encouraged.[3] Although this sort of position has a large history (Saftesbury, Hutcheson, Addison and Allison each used the idea of possession as their chief expression of interestedness), it is nonetheless rather counter intuitive.

Let's take the above quotes as Kant's chief expression of disinterest. There is good reason to do this, since these quotes are the most prominent and

forthright characterizations of disinterest in the *Critique of Judgment,* and are not taken back or altered significantly in the rest of this *Critique.* The counter-intuitiveness lies in the call to be completely unbiased towards the existence of the object itself. We are not to value the objects but only it's contemplative image. But surely are interested in having continued access to the object which gives rise to,or grounds in some tangible way, our aesthetic experience of its contemplative-image. Surely we would like to possess aesthetic objects(and have the object we do possess candidates for aesthetic appreciation in some degree).

Now, one might object that Kant is not discussing possessions of objects but is only discussing the correct frame of mind to judge objects aesthetically. This is true. However, we ought not to lose sights of two points: first, access to the physical object, in whatever way, is a prerequistie to consideration of object's merits. It seems artificial to suggest that we ought merely to disregard the physical nature of the object. Kant's call to this disregard is only made against his claim that the aesthetic judgment made might be better were the existence of the physical object ignored. This claim is the subject of the second paper.

Second, Kant says that aesthetic judgments are particular only. However, if we read this to mean that our judgments are particular vis-a-vis the instance of our viewing, then the force of Kant's claim is lost. Insofar as each instance-of-viewing is different, then it will be impossible for us to compare one viewing with another. I will not be able to question my companion about *this particular rose* since his viewing of *this particular rose* will be different from mine (his angle of view will be different, he may register the colors of the rose slightly from me, he may have something unpleasant on his mind, perhaps he has a toothache. All sorts of items will alter the experiential instance of his viewing from mine). *If* we read Kant to mean that the judgment is about this particular object or this particular event — that is, about something objective and stable (as objective and stable as anything else in Kant's phenomenal reality) — it will be necessary to make reference to the real existence of that object which grounds the judgments. That is, there must be something objective there for our judgments to be about if we are to make comparable judgments. To suggest that we judge without allusion to the physical object grounding our judgments is to tear down a crossed-bridge so that we can build one up ahead. It is artificial at best.

Kant's advice, taken strictly, puts us in the odd position of believing the image or thought-representation of the object to be more valuable than the object itself. Two odd scenarios follow: (1) if one day we are able to project into someone's brain the mental representation of an aesthetic object, or an art

object, then would that projection (which might be constituted by a series of neuron-simulators) be as valuable as the object itself? Perhaps we could do away with the Louvre in deference to having a bunch of machine like this one? (2) The second scenario goes like this: perhaps everyone on earth has a clear memory of Monet's *Water Lilies.* Is it the case then that the object itself, which is only instrumental in providing the mental image for us, is no longer valuable? Would we, if the National Gallery were to burn down, not mourn the loss, given that we all recall the object? This should follow if the object itself is not "the point," but the image is important for judging or experiencing.Now, Stolnitz's conception of 'disinterest'is, I believe, less problematic than Kant's. This may be because it is more straight-forward (at least for twentieth century analytics); it does not fit into a metaphysical system; and it doesnot directly relate to aesthetic judgement(as Kant's conception does). Stolnitz defines the aesthetic attitude as:

> disintersted and sympathetic attention to and contemplation of any object of awareness whatever, *for its sake alone....* Disinterested means that we do not look at the object out of concern for any ulterior purpose which it may serve. We are not trying to use or manipulate the object.4

The problem is this: is it possible to consider an object aesthitically *and* strictly "for its own sake alone" or as an end in itself? One might object to Stolnitz's accounts that paying aesthetic attention to an object for the purpose of having an aesthetic experience is paying attention with a particular purpose of mind. Stolnitz himself suggests that the aesthetic "response" of the pereceiver functions as a touchstone to whether "knowledge about" the object is relevant (whether, for instance, the object's moral point of view or certain critical-review information is relevant).[5] As the response or, to use my word, the experience, serves to determine what may be included in the aesthetic focus, it serves also as a goal adoption of the aesthetic attitude in the first place.

Since the aesthetic attitude of "disinterested and sympathetic attention" can be easily differentiated conceptually from aesthetic experiencing, it is difficult to see how the aesthetic attitude could avoid being purposeful in the sense that its purpose is to foster aesthetic experiencing. The purposeless viewing cannot itself be the having of an aesthetic experience, since we are instructed to (consciously and voluntarily) view purposelessly. The only reason for us to adopt this attitude is to experience aesthetically, so there is a purpose behind the aesthetic attitude: having an aesthetic experience. An interpretation of 'disinterest' focusing on attention to the object "for its own sake alone," or as an end in itself, is problematic.

My conclusion finds further evidence in the consideration of a position such as Vincent Tomas'. Similar to Stolnitz, Tomas believes that the aesthetic point of view differs from all other points of view in that the aesthetic point of view is characterized by purposeless viewing. Indeed, for Tomas aesthetic viewing is viewing without "labeling" or "conceptualizing" the object in question at all. It follows from this that one could accidentally "fall into" aesthetic viewing. If I simply or merely apply no label or concept to an object, then, according to Tomas, I am viewing that object aesthetically. But I seem to viewing in this way on many occasions when I am not viewing aesthetically.For instance. if I am very tired, I may view an object without considering what it may be used for (et cetera), but fail to receive from that viewing any experience remotely aesthetic. This lends support to the view that pure purposeless viewing is a mistaken cashing out of aesthetic viewing. One has a purpose in viewing aesthetically, and that purpose is to experience aesthetically. The opposite, to "view it for its own sake alone" or "as an end in itself " is too close to viewing the object mindlessly.

II

Now to the second question: is the aesthetic attitude really disinterested? My argument for the aesthetic attitude not being disinterested begins at one step back: at the aesthetic experience. I want to suggest that the criterion against which we may test any aesthetic attitude formulation is wheather that attitude will, on the whole, or in the majority of cases, or always *promote* the most rich and rewarding aesthetic experiences. If a formulation fails to do this, then it is suspect. If one formulation does this better than another, then the former ought to be accepted over the latter.

I want to suggest that occasionally being *interested* can *contribute* to the aesthetic experience. Take the following example: say I am watching a horror film, and (incidentally) having an aesthetic experience. This particular film is based on the Biblical accounts of the "last days" of the world. Perhaps the film is the *Omen* or something like that. Now, I might be able to appreciate the film well while still maintaining an attitude of disinterest. I might even be able to appreciate the film more if I take moral even religious attitudes towards it. And, given that these ancillary attitudes do no harm to my aesthetic experience, they may be sanctioned even by the proponents of disinterest (Stolnitz agrees). But what if I take a personal interest in the film? What if I take the very personal and (it would seem) very intrested attitude that what I am viewing is *really* what will happen in the final days? Now, suppose that I am a devout Christian, and naive, perhaps, to the embellishment that the director or writer engages in. I may

well feel that I am looking at a "pre-record" of what will actually take place at the end of the time. I submit that I would be rather more terrified than I would be were I simply following the disinterest prescription. If the success of a horror film is based on how frightened it makes its viewers, and the greatest aesthetic experience regarding a horror film is to feel maximally frightened, then to be disinterested towards the film—disinterested *at all*— might be to arm the power of the film, and "settle' for a less robust aesthetic experience.

Here I do not treat the object as an "end in itself," but treat it as a means to something else: I treat it as an historical record(albeit of some point in the future). Now, some may argue that the attitude that I am experiencing or adopting is simply not aesthetic. But I find this enormously implausible. First, I would be bothered if the reason for saying that I am not in the aesthetic attitude is that I am not treating the objects as an end in itself; this would, without further reasons relating to the example above, be tantamount to making experience fit the theory, rather than the other (and correct) way around. Second, however we cash out the aesthetic experience, I can hold firm to my (phenomenal) belief that the experience I am having is an aesthetic one. If I believe that part of the aesthetic experience of watching the horror film is to get "good and scared," then my getting very frightened adds to my overall enjoyment of the film. My interest in the film as an historical vehicle might add to my fright, and as the fright is in this instance an important part of the aesthetic make-up of the film, that interest would enhance my aesthetic experience of that film.

A second sort of example against a disinterested formulation of the aesthetic attitudes comes through a consideration of the power of interpretation and meaning. Many, especially those who place aesthetic value in the experience, tend to believe that the point behind offering critical interpretations and exploring the meaning(s) of artworks is to enhance the experience of viewers who will see, or have seen, or are seeing the works of art in question. Now, it might well be the case that a certain meaning of a work, which seeks to enhance the aesthetic experience of the individual, might also call for the explicit interest of the individual in the object. Take the following example: Suppose that I am a devout Christian (again), specifically an Anglican. Suppose too that I am in attendance at St. Paul's one sunday. I aesthetically appreciate the formal qualities of the Cathedral, the historical relations, the relations it bears to others of its kind(cathedrals, or cathedrals with domes, or buildings designed by Christopher Wren), and the significance, in Christendom, of the Cathedral. Now suppose that the music begins to play, I see the colorful procession, I smell the cold stone and the hard chairs; soon I feel the kinesthetic sense of standing, kneeling and

sitting in unison with the rest of the congregation, and then I taste the "elements." Now, so far in our description two things are going on: first, I am appreciating or experiencing everything from an aesthetic point of view, I am attending to the aesthetic features of everything that is going on around me and with me; second, I am using all of my senses, experiencing in as full a range as possible.

Now, suppose that instead of being a disinterested attender I become an *interested* participant; that is, I experience or take serious note of the *meaning* behind the ritual characteristic of the act of worship. I experience the "elements" as having the significance that the priest means them to have, et cetera. The question now is this: If my aesthetic experience then becomes greater in the face of the addition of my interest(my "purposeful" engagement in worship), who is to say that my interest does not indeed add to my aesthetic experience? Since disinterestedness is measured in efficacy against the fullness or greatness of the aesthetic experience, the result is that disinterestedness is *not* the appropriate attitude for having the best experience.

Now, one could object that what is happening is that I am experiencing two attitudes at once: one of aesthetic appreciation of the experience, the other of the interest in worship. The problem with this is that (1) I can stand fast in my belief that the attitude I am experiencing is singular, that this engagement *includes* my aesthetic appreciation of the experience (which is, I believe, the position of the Church on this), and (2) if when I become completely focused on the act of worship, my aesthetic experience of what is going on is then heightened, there is the "interested experience" and the "aesthetic experience".

Another example of where disinterest may be hazardous to aesthetic experiencing, and one which also involves meaning, is the view we take to such works as Duchamp's piece, *In Advance of a Broken Arm,* an object which was , before it became an art object, a snow shovel. Here, as in many instances of Dadaist, Modern or Post- Modern art, the meaning behind the phenomenal object seems rather important, to both the establishment of the objects as an art object and to its appreciation as such. In the case of Duchamp piece, it would seem that the function of the object — that it may be used for shoveling snow — plays an important role in the meaning behind the work. I do not mean to suggest that Duchamp is celebrating snow shoveling or anything of that short. However, without the recognition of the objects as a snow shovel, the meaning of *In Advance of a Broken Arm* as a presented art object would certainly not have the force or engender the interest that it does. Where I to consider the object with no regard for its "purpose" I would find little of interest about it:

it is starkly symmetrical, the red of the paddle and the green of the shaft complement one another, but that's about it.

So how, one might ask, do I deal with the plethora of examples that are offered which are designed to identify attitudes which are both interested ("instrumental" or "purposeful") and non- aesthetic? Very simply: sometimes an attitude characterized or inclusive of disinterest may lead to the best aesthetic experience to the object (or event) in question.And I am willing to go so far as to say that this may be the case in the majority of the instances. However, I contend that disinterest cannot be a *necessary* ingredient in the (or *a*) correct formulation of the aesthetic attitude. It may work some of the time, but it does not work all of the time.

Notes and References

1. Recorded by Dr. Paul Spong; produced by Ralph Harding; published by Total Recording of California, 1989.
2. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (Indianapolis : Hackett, 1987), first sentence of section two of Book One, 45.
3 By "Possession," I do not strictly mean "ownership." I have in mind a matter of "continued access."
4. Jerome Stolnitz, *Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art Criticism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 35 (emphasis mine)..
5. Stolnitz, *Aesthetics....*, 53.

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