

THE CONCEPT OF DISINTERESTEDNESS IN
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH AESTHETICS

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ABSTRACT: There is a widely held view, due to the work of Jerome Stolnitz, that the concept of a distinctively aesthetic mode of perception, one defined by the characteristic of disinterestedness, originated with such writers as Shaftesbury, Addison, Hutcheson, Burke, and Archibald Alison. I argue through a detailed examination of the texts that this view is a complete misrepresentation. Those of the writers under discussion who employ the concept of disinterestedness (which not all of them do) do not give it the so-called “perceptual” meaning that Stolnitz does, and none of them use it to define a specifically “aesthetic” mode of perception, attention, pleasure, or anything else. The governing concept of their aesthetic thought was neither “disinterestedness” nor “the aesthetic” but (with the exception of Shaftesbury) “taste.” I conclude with an analysis of what the differences are, and why they matter.

1. “AESTHETIC DISINTERESTEDNESS” AND MODERN AESTHETICS

It would be commonplace to observe that it is only in the eighteenth century that the various matters now comprised under the name of aesthetics—say, beauty and related qualities, in art and in nature, and the experiences and activities of human beings in relation to these—are first brought together as a single field of philosophical concern. It would also be commonplace to observe that British philosophical writers such as the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, Joseph Addison, and Francis Hutcheson, played a major part in this development. The interesting question is: what part did they play?

According to one view, the major contribution of these writers to the development of aesthetics was to identify *disinterestedness* as the distinguishing mark of aesthetic experience. This view owes to the work of Jerome Stolnitz.¹ For Stolnitz, writing some forty years ago, the concept of disinterested perception was the core of the concept of the aesthetic attitude,

1. Jerome Stolnitz, “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20 (1961): 131–144. Stolnitz also devotes particular attention to Shaftesbury in “On the Significance of Lord Shaftesbury in Modern Aesthetic Theory,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 11 (1961): 97–113, and defends his position against objections from George Dickie in “‘The Aesthetic Attitude’ in the Rise of Modern Aesthetics,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 36 (1978): 409–422, and in “‘The Aesthetic Attitude’ in the Rise of Modern Aesthetics—Again,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 44 (1984): 205–208. In citations of the *Journal of Aesthetics*, I use the letters “a” and “b” after page numbers to refer to the two columns of each page.

and consequently central to the definition of aesthetics itself.² From his perspective, to show the origins of this concept in the work of eighteenth-century writers was at once to enhance the philosophical interest of those writers and to demonstrate the durability of the concept itself by lending it a venerable pedigree.³ Today, the theory of the aesthetic attitude has little role in philosophy other than as a dummy set up in aesthetics courses to be knocked down by the onslaughts of George Dickie.⁴ Yet Stolnitz's account of the origins of the central concept of that theory, the concept of disinterested perception, retains an influence that the theory itself has long lost.⁵ Philosophers and others writing about eighteenth-century aesthetic thought continue to attribute such a concept to Shaftesbury and his successors, and continue to cite Stolnitz's essay as authority for such an attribution.⁶

2. For Stolnitz's own philosophical views, see his *Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art Criticism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), esp. 32–42. This selection is reprinted in George Dickie, Richard Sclafani, and Ronald Roblin, eds., *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 334–341.

3. "One might indeed ask," Stolnitz says of the concept of disinterestedness, ". . . whether any other concept in modern aesthetics has achieved comparable longevity" ("The Aesthetic Attitude' in the Rise of Modern Aesthetics—Again," 205a).

4. See George Dickie, "The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (1964): 56–66, reprinted in Dickie, Sclafani, and Roblin, eds., *Aesthetics* (cited above, n. 2), 342–355.

5. Dickie criticized Stolnitz on historical counts as well: see his *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 53–69, and "Stolnitz's Attitude: Taste and Perception," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 44 (1984): 195–203. But even though Dickie's treatment of these matters is a welcome corrective to Stolnitz's, it is, as I shall be indicating in subsequent notes, unsatisfactory in several ways: it does not address Stolnitz's textual arguments in detail, it contains errors of its own, and it repeats some of Stolnitz's.

6. See, for example, Philip Ayres, "Introduction" to his edition of Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 2 vols., 1:xxvii; David Fenner, "Attitude: Aesthetic Attitude," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 1998), esp. 1:150b–151a; Arnold Berleant, "Beyond Disinterestedness," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 34 (1994): 242–254, and "The Historicity of Aesthetics," *ibid.*, 26 (1986): 101–111 and 195–203; Elizabeth A. Bohls, "Disinterestedness and the Denial of the Particular: Locke, Adam Smith and the Subject of Aesthetics," in Paul Mattick, Jr., ed., *Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics and the Reconstruction of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 16–51, esp. 16 and 26–27; Peter Kivy, "Recent Scholarship and the British Tradition: A Logic of Taste—The First Fifty Years," in Dickie, Sclafani, and Roblin, eds., *Aesthetics* (cited above, n. 2), 254–268, at 258; idem, *The Seventh Sense: A Study of Francis Hutcheson's Aesthetics and Its Influence in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York: Burt Franklin and Co., 1976), 120.

In claiming that Stolnitz's historical account continues to have influence, I do not deny that one could cite a great deal of recent work on early modern aesthetic thought that is free of its influence. My purpose in this essay is not to assess the current state of scholarship on that period, but merely to counteract a misconception of it whose influence is still to be observed, even if more commonly among those who are not close students of the period under discussion than among those who are. Still, one recent piece, Paul Guyer's richly informative essay "The Dialectic of Disinterestedness: I. Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics" (in

If Stolnitz's view of history were correct, then the aesthetic thought of Shaftesbury and the rest would be of note chiefly as the source of a now discredited (or at least discarded) idea. I shall argue, however, that his historical view is not correct at all. The writers Stolnitz discusses are indeed sources of modern aesthetic thought, but they are not sources of the concept that he purports to find in them, that of so-called "aesthetic disinterestedness." Some of them used the concept of disinterestedness—not Stolnitz's technical concept, but the ordinary one—in their various accounts of our enjoyment of beautiful things, but for none of them did it characterize a specifically aesthetic mode of perception, a specifically aesthetic mode of attention, or a specifically aesthetic mode of anything else. The nearest thing that any of these writers had to a concept of "the aesthetic" was the concept of taste, which differs from Stolnitz's concept of the aesthetic in several essential respects; notably in that it is not defined (though it is sometimes characterized) by the concept of disinterestedness. The decline of the theory of the aesthetic attitude therefore should not be allowed to take the eighteenth-century writers with it: they are worth recovering from Stolnitz's own recovery attempt. I shall return to these matters at the end of this essay.

The chief writers discussed by Stolnitz are, in chronological order, Shaftesbury, Addison, Hutcheson, and Archibald Alison.⁷ I shall discuss these writers, and Stolnitz's accounts of them, in that order, after which I shall draw some general historical conclusions. Before that, though, some preliminary clarifications must be made.

idem, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom: Essays on Aesthetics and Morality* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 48–93) merits specific comment. On the one hand, Guyer scrupulously avoids imposing any Kantian or post-Kantian conception of disinterestedness upon the writers he discusses. On the other hand, it is precisely such a conception that defines his subject. For example, his narrative takes account of the differing positions of eighteenth-century writers on the question whether knowledge plays a role in judgments of beauty, though no one before Kant would have taken such a question to have any direct bearing on the concept of disinterestedness. There is no outright distortion of history in this, but it does tend to obscure the fact that *no* concept in the thought of these writers played the role that the concept of disinterestedness came to play in subsequent aesthetic thought.

7. In order not to add unnecessary length to this essay, I have passed over Stolnitz's discussion of Edmund Burke ("On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness,'" 135–136).

A particularly lamentable way in which some writers have been influenced by Stolnitz's essay (though not one for which Stolnitz is to be blamed) is that they have taken the order in which Stolnitz happens to discuss his subjects—Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Alison, Addison—for a chronological one. Thus Fenner (cited above, n. 6) glibly asserts that Addison's account of taste (published in 1712) was a reaction to Hutcheson's (first published in 1725, six years after Addison's death). Similarly, Berleant claims that "as the notion of the aesthetic evolved among the British writers of this period, culminating in Addison [!], disinterestedness gradually emerged as its animating idea," and attributes this claim to Stolnitz ("Beyond Disinterestedness" (cited above, n. 6), 244 and n. 7). Addison's *Spectator* essays appeared just the year after Shaftesbury's *Characteristics*.

2. WHAT IS "AESTHETIC DISINTERESTEDNESS"?

There are, so far as I am aware, three distinct senses in which the word "disinterested" is used outside of philosophy. (1) Frequently, indeed perhaps more often than not these days, it carries the sense of "uninterested." Such a use of the word, for all the disgust and distress that it causes to the verbally discriminating, is in fact the oldest.⁸ It was, however, recessive during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and, so far as I am aware, never appears in the writings of any of the authors under consideration here. (2) When applied to such substantives as "judgment," "inquiry," "evaluation," and the like, "disinterested" has the sense of "impartial," or, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* aptly glosses it, "unbiased by personal interest."⁹ (3) Applied to human actions, dispositions, and emotions, "disinterested" has the sense of "uninfluenced by self-interest," or, to quote some dictionaries, "free from self-seeking," "free from selfish motive," or "superior to regard of private advantage."¹⁰

It is evident that when Stolnitz speaks of "aesthetic disinterestedness," he does not use the word "disinterested" in any of these senses. At one point, he notes what he calls "the negative or privative meaning" of the word, namely "not motivated by self-concern":¹¹ this is evidently sense (3) above. He *contrasts* this with what he terms the "perceptual" significance of the word, which is the sense relevant to aesthetics.¹² Disinterestedness in this sense is a certain "mode of attention," a "mode of attention and concern," and a "way of organizing attention."¹³ Stolnitz appears to be describing it when he says that "aesthetic interest is in perception alone and . . . terminates upon the object itself," and that "the sole interest of the perceiver is in perceiving."¹⁴ He also identifies disinterestedness, at least as understood by Shaftesbury, with "the state of 'barely seeing and admiring,'" and with "perception of a thing 'for its own sake'."¹⁵ Finally, he says that, from Shaftesbury onward, the "salient

8. See *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed., 1989), "disinterested," 1.

9. *Oxford English Dictionary*, "disinterested," 2. In this gloss, the word "interest" must be understood in what Stolnitz terms the "axiological" sense ("On the Significance of Lord Shaftesbury," 105), that is, the sense of benefit, advantage, or, as the eighteenth-century writers would term it, private good. The *OED* does not distinguish between senses (2) and (3), nor does Stolnitz, but I believe that they are importantly distinct.

10. I take these phrases, respectively, from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (1985) and Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755).

11. "On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness,'" 132b.

12. "Origins," 133b.

13. "On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness,'" 131a, 133b, and 137a.

14. "On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness,'" 134b and 135b; cf. 138a and 137a, respectively.

15. "On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness,'" 133b and 138b. Similarly, in "On the Significance of Lord Shaftesbury": "Perception cannot be disinterested unless the spectator forsakes all self-concern and therefore trains attention upon the object for its own

antithesis” governing the use of the term “disinterested” is one between “object-centered” and “self-centered,” the former phrase being the one that indicates its meaning.¹⁶

From such formulas one may gather that aesthetic disinterestedness is a mode of attention and concern in which the perceiver’s interest is in perception alone and terminates upon the object. The question whether such phrases define a coherent and non-empty concept at all I reserve for treatment in another place. In the present essay, I shall merely argue that no such concept is to be found in eighteenth-century British aesthetic thought.

3. SHAFTESBURY

Stolnitz’s main claim about Shaftesbury is that he “is the first philosopher to call attention to disinterested perception.”¹⁷ He also claims that Shaftesbury is the first to use the word “disinterested” with “the distinctively aesthetic meaning which we attach to it today.”¹⁸ Stolnitz allows that, much of the time, Shaftesbury uses “disinterested” with what he (Stolnitz) calls a “‘practical’ significance,” in which “the reference of the term is still to actions and the motives to actions.”¹⁹ He claims, however, that Shaftesbury eventually comes to use the word with a specifically “perceptual” significance. His principal textual argument is contained in the following passage, into which I have inserted numbers for reference.

[1] When he [Shaftesbury] describes morality and religion as the “love” of their respective objects “for its own sake,” the term [“disinterested”] no longer has to do with choice and action but with a mode of attention and concern. . . . [2] When, furthermore, Shaftesbury goes on to describe the virtuous man as a spectator, devoted to “the very survey and contemplation” of beauty in manners and morals, the initial “practical” significance of “disinterested” is supplanted altogether by the perceptual. [3] The term now denotes the state of “barely seeing and admiring.” Given the etymology of the word “aesthetic,” it is, for the first time, appropriate to speak of “aesthetic disinterestedness.”²⁰

Claim 1 refers to a passage in which Shaftesbury, or rather his character Theocles, is contrasting a religious life devoted to “the disinterested love of God” with a “rational religion” that would give us no motive to serve God but

sake” (107).

16. “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” 138b.

17. “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” 132a. Similarly, in another place: “It is Shaftesbury who claims the distinction of being the first thinker to bring the phenomenon of disinterestedness to light and [analyze] it” (“On the Significance of Lord Shaftesbury,” 100; “analyze” substituted for “analyzing,” which I presume to be a slip).

18. The phrase occurs in “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” at 132a, though the claim is merely implied. Cf. 138b.

19. “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” 133b.

20. “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” 133b, textual citations omitted.

“compulsion,” so that our obedience should be “for interest merely.” Theocles says:

. . . 'Tis a very ill token of sincerity in religion, and in the Christian religion more especially, to reduce it to such a philosophy as will allow no room to that other principle of love [viz., disinterested love]; but treats all of that kind as enthusiasm for so much as aiming at what is called disinterestedness, or teaching the love of God or virtue for God or virtue's sake.²¹

The relevant part is simply the pairing of the phrases “aiming at . . . disinterestedness” and “teaching the love of God or virtue for God or virtue's sake.” Stolnitz's claim about this passage—that the term “disinterested” no longer has to do with choice and action but with a mode of attention and concern—seems to me to commit two errors.

First, Stolnitz implies that when Shaftesbury speaks of the love of God or virtue “for its own sake,” that is what he *means* by the word “disinterestedness.” Thus he claims, in another place, that “Shaftesbury used ‘disinterested’ to denote perception of a thing ‘for its own sake.’”²² But Shaftesbury does not equate disinterested love with the love of a thing for its own sake; he merely conjoins the two ideas (or rather, he conjoins “teaching” the one with “aiming at” the other). To be sure, to love something for its own sake is to love it disinterestedly, in the ordinary sense of that word; i.e., to love the thing without regard to any profit that it may bring one. But the identification does not run the other way: one may love something disinterestedly, yet for some extrinsic reason.²³ It should also be noted that, if indeed by ‘disinterested’ Shaftesbury meant “perception of a thing for its own sake,” he would be guilty of using words incoherently. For example: on my desk I see a clock. Do I see the clock “for its own sake,” or “for the sake of something else”? The question is patently senseless. Of course I may *look at* the clock for the sake of something or other (e.g., to find out the time), perhaps even for its own sake (if it is particularly nice-looking clock); but looking is not a species of perceiving. That aside, there is no basis for attributing this incoherent concept to Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury never uses the word “disinterested” to denote (= describe?) a kind of perception; nor

21. *The Moralists*, II.iii, in Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks* (cited above, n. 6), 2:45. All references to writings of Shaftesbury are to this collection. Here as elsewhere, Roman numerals appearing first in a citation refer to the author's divisions of his work, the following Arabic numerals to volume and page numbers. Orthography has, where necessary, been modernized throughout.

22. “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness’,” 138b.

23. Conceive, for example, of a man of peculiarly narrow religious views, who loves God for nothing but his destruction of the Sodomites. Such love could be quite disinterested, in that our man's love of God may be independent of any advantage that he thinks he derives from God's having destroyed the Sodomites. But this certainly would not be a case of the love of God for his own sake.

does he ever use it, or the phrase “for its own sake,” to modify “perception,” “perceive,” or any logically subordinate verb, such as “see” or “hear.”

Second, Stolnitz’s claim 1 rests on an opposition between “love” and “choice and action” that is quite alien to Shaftesbury’s thought. Stolnitz says that “on his [viz., Shaftesbury’s] account, the moral life is far less a matter of choosing and executing one’s decision, than of ‘liking’ or ‘loving’ the ‘view or contemplation’ of virtue.”²⁴ The words in quotation marks are taken from a passage in which Shaftesbury says that “of all views or contemplations this [viz., the contemplation of virtue] . . . is the most naturally and strongly affecting.” Shaftesbury substantiates this claim by giving several instances of actions that are “alike actuated by this passion.”²⁵ To love virtue, for Shaftesbury, is precisely to be “actuated” by it. In no way is “love” in this context restricted to “attention and concern,” or contrasted with “choice and action,” nor does Shaftesbury use the word “disinterested” with any such restriction. So far as “attention and concern” are implied in the passage, they are implied only by the word “love,” not by the word “disinterested.”

Claim 2—the claim that the “practical” significance of “disinterested” is supplanted by a “perceptual” one—is made with reference to a passage in which Shaftesbury is concerned with how best to “correct” the “taste or relish in the concerns of life” of “generous youth,” i.e., how to improve their moral taste.²⁶ The sentence containing the words quoted by Stolnitz reads:

Whoever has any impression of what we call gentility or politeness is already so acquainted with the decorum and grace of things that he will readily confess a pleasure and enjoyment in the very survey and contemplation of this kind.²⁷

In other words, anyone possessed of the rudiments of taste in conduct must be someone who finds pleasure in the mere “survey and contemplation” of “decorum and grace,” or beauty. The passage merely supplies the phrase “survey and contemplation” and has nothing to do with disinterestedness.

Claim 3—the claim that “disinterested” as used by Shaftesbury “now denotes the state of ‘barely seeing and admiring’”—refers to a passage in which an anonymous voice is rhapsodizing upon the “ardor and vehemence” shown by “admirers and pursuers of beauty.” The relevant sentence reads:

See as to other beauties, where there is no possession, no enjoyment or reward, but barely seeing and admiring; as in the virtuoso-passion, the love of painting and the designing arts of every kind so often observed.²⁸

24. “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” 133a.

25. *Miscellaneous Reflections*, II.i, 2:145.

26. *Miscellaneous Reflections*, III.ii, 2:214.

27. *Miscellaneous Reflections*, III.ii, 2:215.

28. *Miscellaneous Reflections*, III.ii, 2:217 n.

Here Shaftesbury contrasts “barely seeing and admiring” with “possession,” “enjoyment,” and “reward.” To love and pursue beautiful things apart from any desire to possess or “enjoy” them (Shaftesbury here uses the word in the sense of “have the use and benefit of,” not the sense of “derive pleasure from”), or any expectation of reward from them, merely in order to see and admire them, may be described as loving and pursuing them disinterestedly, that is, without any concern for one’s own advantage. To take this to mean that, for Shaftesbury, the word “disinterested” itself *denotes* “barely seeing and admiring,” is a *non sequitur*: the word does not even occur in the passage, or in the one previously cited.

Stolnitz has two other textual arguments, which may be treated more briefly. One refers to a passage in which Shaftesbury says that the “admiration, joy or love” that we find in mathematical knowledge “turns wholly upon what is exterior and foreign to ourselves,” and that it “relates not in the least to any private interest of the creature, nor has for its object any self-good or advantage of the private system.”²⁹ Stolnitz takes the passage to show that for Shaftesbury, mathematical objects may be “looked at disinterestedly.”³⁰ But the passage shows nothing of the sort. What Shaftesbury characterizes as “[related] not in the least to any private interest of the creature” is not our *contemplation* of mathematical objects, but the “pleasure and delight” we take in such contemplation.³¹ The implied contrast is with the case in which our delight in engaging with something owes to consideration of how it may benefit us. This is, once again, just the ordinary “practical” sense of “disinterested,” not any special “perceptual” or “aesthetic” sense.

The other textual argument refers to a dialogue in which one of Shaftesbury’s characters illustrates the very contrast just mentioned with two instances: first, a contrast between “being taken with the beauty of the ocean” and “[seeking] how to command it,” and second, a contrast between “being charmed . . . with the beauty of those trees under whose shade we rest” and “[longing] for nothing so much as to taste some delicious fruit of theirs.”³² In short, enjoying and being contented with the mere view of a beautiful thing is quite different from enjoying or being desirous of making use of it. The first sort of enjoyment, we could say (though Shaftesbury does not), is disinterested—once again, in a perfectly ordinary sense of the word. Stolnitz says that “disregard for possession or use is only an inference from or a specification of the broader proposition that the aesthetic spectator does not relate the object to any purposes that outrun the act of perception itself.”³³

29. *Inquiry*, II.II.i, 1:240.

30. “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” 133b.

31. This point is made by George Dickie in “Stolnitz’s Attitude” (cited above, n. 5), 201a.

32. *The Moralists*, III.ii, 2:102–103.

33. “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” 134a.

But there is no evidence that Shaftesbury subscribes to this “broader proposition.” When Shaftesbury speaks of disinterest, he means the disregard of private advantage, not the disregard of non-perceptual purposes. In sum, Stolnitz’s concept of “aesthetic disinterestedness” is nowhere to be found in the texts.

Stolnitz’s misattribution of this concept to Shaftesbury seems to take rise from the following facts. First, Shaftesbury does contrast the love, pursuit, and enjoyment of beauty—for the sake of simplicity, let us speak merely of “love,” as the most inclusive term of the three—with other loves on the score of its being “disinterested,” though only in the *ordinary* sense of not being influenced by self-interest. Second, one of the most important features of the love of beauty for Shaftesbury is the fact that its proper motive is nothing but “the excellence of the object.”³⁴ Third, these two features have a certain affinity, and sometimes appear together in the text. We could say that what explains the disinterested character of the love of beauty (or of goodness, or of God, when these are loved as befits them) for Shaftesbury is the fact that it is grounded in nothing but the excellence of its object. The phrase “for its [the object’s] own sake” provides a positive characterization to supplement the purely “privative” one (to borrow Stolnitz’s term) made by the word “disinterested.” It is partly because these two ideas are closely connected that Stolnitz conflates them. This will not, however, explain why he should go further and attribute to Shaftesbury a “perceptual” or “aesthetic” sense of the word “disinterested,” according to which “disinterested” means something like “interested solely in perception.” For that, it seems to me, one must look to Stolnitz’s own aesthetic theory, which is the model of what he claims to find in the authors he examines.³⁵ But the examination of that theory, as I said before, belongs in another place.

4. ADDISON

Stolnitz has large claims for the significance of Addison’s “Essays on the Pleasures of the Imagination,” published as nos. 411–421 of *The Spectator* (June 21–July 3, 1712). In his view, these essays “constitute the starting-point of modern aesthetics” by dint of their “taking ‘aesthetic perception’ to be foundational to aesthetic theory.”³⁶ In them, “the concept which organizes the field of inquiry and by reference to which . . . all of the other major concepts are defined, is now ‘the aesthetic’.”³⁷ The claim that someone not only possessed the concepts of “the aesthetic” and of “aesthetic perception,” but even made them foundational to aesthetic theory, decades before the word

34. *The Moralists*, II.iii, 2:46; cited by Stolnitz “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” at 132b.

35. See n. 2 above.

36. “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” 143a.

37. “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” 142a.

“aesthetic” had been introduced into any modern language, is rather venturesome. But Stolnitz is confident that Addison had the concept of aesthetic perception because he finds in Addison the supposedly equivalent concept of “disinterested perception.”

When Addison speaks of “imagination” or “taste,” the word, according to Stolnitz, “does not so much designate an entity as it announces a fact. The fact is the disinterested perception of beauty.”³⁸ At one point he says: “If, for ‘the pleasures of the imagination’ we read ‘the experience of disinterested perception,’ then it is fair to say that the aesthetic experience, in all but name, is Addison’s subject.”³⁹ Of course, given such license in how we read Addison’s phrase, we may find his subject to be anything we please. The question is: what justifies reading the phrase as Stolnitz does?

The principal text from which Stolnitz argues is the following paragraph:

A man of a polite imagination, is let into a great many pleasures, that the vulgar are not capable of receiving. He can converse with a picture, and find an agreeable companion in a statue. He meets with a secret refreshment in a description, and often feels a greater satisfaction in the prospect of fields and meadows, than another does in the possession. It gives him, indeed, a kind of property in everything he sees, and makes the most rude uncultivated parts of nature administer to his pleasures: so that he looks upon the world, as it were, in another light, and discovers in it a multitude of charms, that conceal themselves from the generality of mankind.⁴⁰

As Stolnitz remarks,⁴¹ the contrast between the “prospect of fields and meadows” and the “possession” of the same recalls Shaftesbury’s contrast between “being charmed . . . with the beauty of those trees under whose shade we rest” and “[longing] for nothing so much as to taste some delicious fruit of theirs.”⁴² If one is bent on construing the passage in terms of “disinterestedness,” one could say that the man of a polite imagination, according to Addison, enjoys nature disinterestedly (in the ordinary sense of the word), in that he finds satisfaction in the mere view of it, regardless of any possibility of possession or use. But does this justify imputing to Addison the concept of “disinterested perception”? Stolnitz describes Addison as “[pointing] to the experience of looking at ‘fields and meadows’ disinterestedly.”⁴³ But here as in Shaftesbury, if anything is said or implied to be “disinterested” it is our man’s *enjoyment* of nature, not his mere “looking,”

38. “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” 140a.

39. “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” 142a.

40. *The Spectator*, Donald F. Bond, ed., 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), no. 411, 3:538.

41. “‘The Aesthetic Attitude’ in the Rise of Modern Aesthetics,” 415b.

42. *The Moralists*, III.ii, 2:103.

43. “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” 140a.

and still less his “perception.” It is because he finds pleasure in merely looking that he can be said to enjoy nature disinterestedly; in no wise does Addison suggest that disinterestedness may be predicated of the looking itself.⁴⁴

Still, Addison says that the man of a polite imagination “looks upon the world, as it were, in another light.” If the pleasures of the imagination are what later in aesthetics would be called aesthetic pleasures (more on this supposition in a moment), does this not commit Addison to the view that there is a distinctively aesthetic way of looking at things, and hence an “aesthetic attitude”? Stolnitz thinks it does: he adduces the passage to show that, for Addison, “no object is admitted to or excluded from the realm of the aesthetic because of its inherent nature. It is the attitude of the percipient that is decisive”⁴⁵—a claim that he further supports by citing a passage in which Addison says that God “has given almost every thing about us the power of raising an agreeable idea in the imagination.”⁴⁶ But does that mean that for Addison, whether something is the object of a pleasure of the imagination depends on the attitude of the percipient?

A glance at the context of the quoted passage shows that the answer is “No.” In the preceding lines, Addison offers speculative explanations of why “the supreme author of our being has so formed the soul of man” as to “naturally delight in the apprehension of what is great and unlimited,” and of why he “has annexed a secret pleasure to the idea of any thing that is new or uncommon,” “has made every thing that is beautiful in our own species pleasant,” and “has made every thing that is beautiful in all other objects pleasant, or rather has made so many objects appear beautiful, that he might render the whole creation more gay and delightful.”⁴⁷ It is plainly implied here that *which* things give rise to the pleasures of the imagination depends

44. Even if one ignores Stolnitz’s illicit conflation of disinterested enjoyment with so-called “disinterested perception,” to read the passage as asserting only the *disinterestedness* of the man of polite imagination fails to give due weight to Addison’s description of him as having “a kind of property [cf. Shaftesbury’s “possession, enjoyment, or reward”] in everything he sees.” The phrase suggests that the man, far from relishing things without possessing them, rather has the advantage of possessing them in a purely imaginative way, just as he imaginatively “converses” with a picture, finds a “companion” in a statue, and takes “refreshment” from a description. Further, in the surrounding paragraphs Addison recommends the pleasures of the imagination for being “more obvious, and more easy to be acquired,” as well as “more conducive to health,” than the “pleasures of the understanding,” while they do not “suffer the mind to sink into that negligence and remissness, which are apt to accompany our more sensual delights” (3:538–539). Addison’s argument is precisely based on an appeal to our self-interest, not to our disinterest. For some instructive remarks on the habitual misreading of Addison’s essays by philosophers, see Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5–6.

45. “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” 142b.

46. *The Spectator*, no. 413, 3:546.

47. *The Spectator*, no. 413, 3:545–546.

on how God has made them and us. In particular it depends on his having made certain things great, uncommon, beautiful, and so forth, and his having made us susceptible of a pleasure in the perception of these qualities. The reason why we may derive the pleasures of the imagination from so many things is not, as in Stolnitz's theory, that the aesthetic attitude may be adopted toward "any object of awareness whatever,"⁴⁸ but rather that God has made so many beautiful (and novel, and great) things, and has given us the capacity to find pleasure in the view of them.⁴⁹ To impute to Addison even the rudiments of a theory of the "aesthetic attitude" is groundless.

What, then, are we to make of that "other light" in which, according to Addison, the man of a polite imagination looks upon the world? There is no need to invoke an "aesthetic attitude" theory to explain the phrase; its sense is given by the remainder of the sentence in which it occurs: looking on the world in another light consists simply in "[discovering] in it a multitude of charms, that conceal themselves from the generality of mankind."

Once we are rid of Stolnitz's misattribution to Addison of such concepts as "disinterested perception" and "aesthetic attitude," we are left with this sort of claim:

. . . Addison holds that things can be valuable aesthetically in different ways. He breaks away from the traditional view that "beauty" is the primary or even the sole value-category by taking sublimity and novelty to be equally important (no. 412). Thus "beauty," like "art," is subordinated to the position of a subclass of the aesthetic.⁵⁰

This much of what Stolnitz claims is correct: Addison treats sublimity—or rather, to use his own term, "greatness"—and novelty as qualities equal with beauty as causes of the pleasures of the imagination.⁵¹ Likewise, he treats "the works of nature and art" alongside each other as "qualified to entertain the imagination."⁵² Thus he groups together items that a latter-day philosopher might bring together under the concept of "the aesthetic."

But to count this as "subordinating" those items to the concept of the aesthetic, when there is no trace of the latter concept in Addison's writing, is fantastic. The generic concept in these essays is that of the pleasures of the

48. See Stolnitz in *Aesthetics* (cited above, n. 2), 336 and 341.

49. Dickie makes something like this point in *Art and the Aesthetic*, 64. However, he grants Stolnitz (erroneously, I would argue) the claim that "the main function of [Addison's] notion of the imagination . . . is that it furnishes a locus for working disinterestedness into his theory" (66).

50. "On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness,'" 142b.

51. See essay no. 412, especially the opening paragraphs (3:540).

52. The phrases are from the opening paragraph of no. 414, 3:548. Actually, what Addison asserts there is that the works of art are at some disadvantage in this comparison. More important, however, is the fact that he finds the two kinds of thing even to admit of a comparison of degree: one of them may have superiority, but neither has primacy *qua* thing qualified to entertain the imagination.

imagination. This concept has neither the content of Stolnitz's concept of "the aesthetic" (namely so-called "disinterested perception") nor even the same boundaries. For example, it does not include the beauties of music, which would surely count as an "aesthetic" concern on any common understanding of that term.⁵³ Addison opens the series of essays with the declaration: "Our sight is the most perfect and most delightful of all our senses," and eventually explains that by the pleasures of the imagination he means "only such pleasures as arise originally from sight."⁵⁴ This, and not "disinterestedness" or "the aesthetic," is the principle that determines his subject matter. If there is any higher concept defining his concerns, it is that of taste, which provides the topic for Addison's previous number of *The Spectator*.⁵⁵ I shall return to this point at the conclusion of this paper.

5. HUTCHESON

The following passage from Hutcheson's *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* plays a large role in Stolnitz's account of that author's thought:

This superior power of perception [viz., the power of receiving impressions of beauty and harmony] is justly called a sense, because of its affinity to the other senses in this, that the pleasure is different from any knowledge of principles, proportions, causes, or of the usefulness of the object; we are struck at the first with the beauty: nor does the most accurate knowledge increase this pleasure of beauty, however it may superadd a distinct rational pleasure from prospects of advantage, or may bring along that peculiar kind of pleasure, which attends the increase of knowledge.⁵⁶

Stolnitz makes three claims on the basis of this passage, which I shall examine in turn.

The first claim is that Hutcheson's thesis "is only a development of Shaftesbury's insight that the aesthetic interest is in perception alone and that it terminates upon the object itself."⁵⁷ But Hutcheson says nothing about so-called "aesthetic interest," or anything that could plausibly be so described, any more than Shaftesbury does, and Stolnitz provides no reason

53. That is, unless, like Kant, one has complicated (and confused) epistemological reasons for maintaining that the pleasures of music are mere pleasures of sensation, and that they therefore do not properly belong to taste (*Critique of Judgment*, § 53).

54. *The Spectator*, no. 411, 3:535, 537. However, Addison includes pleasures "which proceed from ideas raised by words" (no. 416, 3:560), as in poetry, since such ideas are in his view "originally from sight" (see no. 411, 3:537).

55. Viz., no. 409; no. 410 is by Steele.

56. Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design*, Treatise I of *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, 4th ed. (London, 1738; hereafter *Inquiry*), I.xii, 11.

57. "On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness,'" 134b.

why the passage should be construed as evidence for the presence of such a concept. The only kind of perception that Hutcheson mentions in the passage is the perception of beauty, which is not a “perception” at all in the sense in which Stolnitz uses that word. “Perception” for Stolnitz means what Hutcheson would call the perception of an “external sense.” But Hutcheson is talking about perceptions of an “internal sense,” which are feelings of pleasure.⁵⁸ To be sure, Hutcheson holds that the perceptions in question commonly (though not in all cases) arise from perceptions of the external senses.⁵⁹ But nothing that he says implies that they arise from or depend on some kind of “interest in [external] perception.” The concept that Stolnitz purports to find in the text simply is not there.

The second claim is that “Hutcheson largely subsumes cognition under interestedness.”⁶⁰ Such a subsumption is a corollary of Stolnitz’s own conception of “aesthetic disinterestedness” as something that excludes an interest in cognition.⁶¹ Thus, in effect, Stolnitz takes the passage to show that Hutcheson shares this conception. But it shows nothing of the sort. In the passage, Hutcheson asserts that the pleasure by which we perceive beauty is distinct from and unaffected by any knowledge of the object or any pleasure derived from such knowledge. He *also* says that knowledge of this sort can give rise to a “rational pleasure from prospects of advantage.” The latter sort of pleasure may be described (though Hutcheson does not so describe it) as an “interested” pleasure. Thus Hutcheson distinguishes the pleasure of beauty from pleasures of knowledge, and reckons *some* pleasures that arise from knowledge to be “interested.” To take this as evidence that he “subsumes cognition under interestedness” is a logical mistake. It would be nearer the mark to say that Hutcheson subsumes interestedness under cognition. We shall return to this point.

Stolnitz’s third claim is that “Hutcheson employs ‘disinterestedness’ to describe the workings of the ‘internal sense’ of beauty . . . and thereby to

58. *Inquiry*, I.xii, 10–11. The point is complicated by Hutcheson’s curious assertion, at the beginning of I.x, that “it is of no consequence whether we call these ideas of beauty and harmony, perceptions of the external senses of seeing and hearing, or not” (8). The assertion is curious because the paragraphs that follow are devoted to arguing that these ideas owe to a power entirely distinct from the external senses. Hutcheson’s point seems to be that we could take the power of receiving such ideas to be part of our external senses if we did not care for “the convenience of distinguishing [these ideas] from other sensations of seeing and hearing, which men may have without perception of beauty and harmony,” viz., the “simple ideas” of external sense perception (*ibid.*).

59. He speaks of “ideas of beauty and harmony being excited upon our perception of some primary quality” (I.xvi, 14); but he also devotes a section of the *Inquiry* to “the beauty of theorems” (III), which presumably we do not perceive through the external senses. The perception of beauty is a pleasure which arises from the perception of uniformity in variety, and the latter may be perceived in objects of the intellect as well as objects of the external senses.

60. “The Aesthetic Attitude’ in the Rise of Modern Aesthetics,” 411b.

61. See Stolnitz in *Aesthetics* (cited above, n. 2), 336.

differentiate this faculty of the mind from others.”⁶² He supports his claim with two textual references, one to the passage of the *Inquiry* quoted above, the other to a passage in the *Essay on the Passions* in which Hutcheson says that “the sense and desire of beauty of several kinds is entirely abstracted from possession or property.”⁶³ One thing to be remarked is that, contrary to what is implied by Stolnitz’s use of quotation marks, Hutcheson does not use the word “disinterested” (or “disinterestedness”) in either passage.⁶⁴ Neither does he use any other motivational terms to describe the workings of mental powers. For him as for other British writers of the eighteenth century, it is human beings, and their acts and dispositions, that may be described as “interested” or “disinterested,” not the workings of their faculties.

Second, even if Hutcheson mentions disinterestedness under some description, that is not what he takes to “differentiate this faculty of the mind from others.” In the passage from the *Essay on the Passions*, the distinctness of the sense of beauty simply is not an issue: Hutcheson’s point there is that “the sense and desire of beauty” brings us pleasures without detriment, unless “this sense or desire of beauty be accompanied with the desire of possession or property,” in which case “every disappointment or change of fortune must make us miserable.”⁶⁵ In the *Inquiry*, the distinctness of the sense of beauty from other faculties is a matter of definition: Hutcheson defines that sense as “the power of perceiving these ideas [viz., the ideas of beauty and harmony].”⁶⁶ The burden of argument for Hutcheson falls rather on the thesis that these ideas are different in nature from other ideas;⁶⁷ and his main argument for that thesis has nothing to do with disinterestedness. It consists in a chain of observations such as these: some men can receive the simple ideas of external senses as well as others do, yet are deficient in their receptivity for ideas of beauty;⁶⁸ some brute animals have external senses at least as acute as ours, yet apparently no perception of beauty;⁶⁹ a being could be capable of perceiving “each color, line, and surface, as we do; yet without the power of comparing, or of discerning the similitudes or proportions,” or

62. “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” 137a.

63. *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions*, Treatise I of *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations on the Moral Sense*, 3rd ed. (London, 1742; facsimile reprint, Delmar, NY: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1969; hereafter *Essay*), IV.iv, 103. Stolnitz cites the first edition (1728), 101–102.

64. To be sure, the word “disinterested” does occur in the text surrounding the cited passage in the *Essay on the Passions*, but not in a way that supports Stolnitz’s case at all: Hutcheson mentions “disinterested malice” two pages earlier (IV.iii, 100) and “disinterested hatred” two pages later (IV.iv, 105).

65. *Essay*, IV.iv, 103.

66. *Inquiry*, I.x, 8.

67. “When two perceptions are entirely different from each other, or agree in nothing but the general idea of sensation, we call the powers of receiving those different perceptions, different senses” (*Inquiry*, I.ii, 2).

68. *Inquiry*, I.x, 8–9.

69. *Inquiry*, I.xi, 9.

could “discern these also, and yet have no pleasure or delight accompanying these perceptions.”⁷⁰ These observations are meant to show that ideas of beauty and harmony are distinct from the simple ideas of the external senses, and even from the perception of “similitudes or proportions.”

It is at this point that disinterestedness enters into the argument, though not in the way that Stolnitz suggests. Here is the crucial passage from Hutcheson:

And farther, the ideas of beauty and harmony, like other sensible ideas, are necessarily pleasant to us, as well as immediately so; neither can any revolution of our own, nor any prospect of advantage or disadvantage, vary the beauty or deformity of an object: for as in the external sensations, no view of interest will make an object grateful, nor view of detriment, distinct from immediate pain in the perception, make it disagreeable to the sense. . . .⁷¹

As in the passage quoted earlier, the principal point is not that the pleasure of beauty is “disinterested” but that it is “immediate,” i.e., that it is not affected by any “knowledge of principles, proportions, causes, or of the usefulness of the object,” and therefore that the power of receiving such a pleasure “is justly called a sense.” Hutcheson only mentions pleasures from “prospects of advantage” because these are the most obvious pleasures that may take rise from knowledge of the object. The mention of “external sensations” alludes to an earlier passage where he says:

Many of our sensitive perceptions are pleasant and many painful immediately, and that without any knowledge of the cause of this pleasure or pain, or how the objects excite it, or are the occasions of it; or without seeing to what farther advantage or detriment the use of such objects might tend⁷²

Stolnitz cites the last clause of this passage to show that Hutcheson “excludes from the aesthetic any concern for knowledge about the object.”⁷³ But the passage has nothing to do with “the aesthetic,” even if that word is given the innocuous sense of “what pertains to taste”: rather, it concerns pleasant and unpleasant “sensitive perceptions” generally. In the next paragraph Hutcheson illustrates the point with reference to agreeable and disagreeable “ideas” (in this instance, sense-impressions) raised by food and drink. The point is the same throughout: certain pleasures, *those of the senses as well as those of taste*, are unmediated by knowledge, and therefore must be ascribed to a sense.⁷⁴ Pleasures deriving from prospects of advantage are cited as the

70. *Inquiry*, I.xii, 10.

71. *Inquiry*, I.xiii, 11.

72. *Inquiry*, I.vi, 4.

73. “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” 134b.

74. As Guyer correctly observes (*op. cit.* at n. 6 above, 59–60).

contrasting case, not because they are “interested” and the others “disinterested,” but because they depend on knowledge while the others, in Hutcheson’s view, do not.

But Stolnitz takes disinterestedness to have a much greater role than this in Hutcheson’s thought. When he says that Hutcheson employs the concept of disinterestedness to differentiate the sense of beauty from other faculties, he means that Hutcheson uses the concept even to distinguish pleasures of taste from pleasures of sense. Thus, after attributing to Shaftesbury the view that “the pleasures of sense are always and necessarily ‘interested’,” and that “gratification taken in ‘the objects of sense’ . . . presupposes and cannot occur apart from ‘eager desires, wishes, and hopes’,” he says: “Hutcheson, similarly, holds that all of the pleasures of the ‘external senses’ arise from ‘desire’.”⁷⁵

Both claims are demonstrably false. What Shaftesbury, or his mouthpiece in the dialogue, says in the passage cited by Stolnitz is that “certain powerful forms in human kind,” presumably meaning sexually attractive forms, “*draw after ’em* a set of eager desires, wishes, and hopes.”⁷⁶ He says nothing to the effect that sensual gratifications “presuppose” desires. As for Hutcheson, what he says in the cited passage is that the pleasures of the external senses *give rise* to desires, not that they arise from them.⁷⁷ He says this, in fact, of *all* the varieties of pleasure that he lists, including the “pleasures of imagination,” among which he places the pleasure of beauty. Similarly, in one of the passages quoted earlier from the *Inquiry*, the property of being unaffected by “prospects of advantage” is not peculiar to “the ideas of beauty and harmony” but is something they share with “other sensible ideas.”⁷⁸ The idea that for Shaftesbury or Hutcheson the pleasures of taste are distinguished from the pleasures of sense by their “disinterestedness” is utterly without foundation.

In sum, although Hutcheson does contrast the pleasures of taste with pleasures deriving from self-interest, his purpose in doing so is merely to bring out the point that the former are independent of “any knowledge of the principles, proportions, causes, or of the usefulness of the object,” and therefore must be ascribed to a sense. He does not take this to be a point of contrast between pleasures of taste and sensory pleasures, but a point of similitude. There is in his writings no such concept as “aesthetic interest” or “disinterested perception.”⁷⁹

75. “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” 140b.

76. *The Moralists*, III.ii, 2:103, emphasis mine.

77. *Essay*, I.ii, 7.

78. *Inquiry*, I.xiii, 11.

79. Dickie correctly observes that “there is no trace of aesthetic perception in [Hutcheson’s] theory, because there is no trace of disinterested attention”; but for reasons that are not clear to me, he goes on to claim that “on Hutcheson’s theory of beauty there can be disinterested contemplation” (“Stolnitz’s Attitude,” 198a).

6. ALISON

Archibald Alison bears a special significance in Stolnitz's history because, according to Stolnitz, he "isolates and holds up for scrutiny what we would now call 'the aesthetic attitude.'" According to Stolnitz, Alison holds that the "faculties of aesthetic experience," which are "imagination and emotion," "can function aesthetically only when the spectator has disposed himself in a certain way," namely by "attending to an object with no interest other than that in perception itself."⁸⁰ Stolnitz claims that Alison gives "new significance to 'disinterestedness'" by elucidating the distinction "between 'object-centered' and 'self-centered,'" which was the "salient antithesis" governing the use of the term. "Attention can be object-centered [for Alison] only when there are no thoughts or feelings to divert attention to the proprietary self."⁸¹

I shall argue that, with one qualified exception, every one of these claims is false. Of all the writers discussed by Stolnitz, Alison comes closest to having the concept of an aesthetic attitude, in that he has a conception of a "state of mind . . . most favorable to the emotions of taste."⁸² But his conception of such a state of mind, I mean to show, is not merely distinct from Stolnitz's conception of the aesthetic attitude, but positively opposed to it on several essential points.

According to Alison, "the emotions of sublimity and beauty" are raised in the mind whenever an object awakens in the imagination "a train of thought . . . analogous to the character or expression of the original object."⁸³ For example, in "the scenery of spring," "the soft and gentle green with which the earth is spread, the feeble texture of the plants and flowers, the young of animals just entering into life, and the remains of winter yet lingering among the woods and hills,—all conspire to infuse into our minds somewhat of that fearful tenderness with which infancy is usually beheld."⁸⁴ Any state of mind that is "such . . . as to prevent this freedom of the imagination" leaves the emotions of taste "unperceived," while "whatever increases this exercise or employment of imagination, increases also the emotion of beauty or sublimity."⁸⁵ Alison sums up the matter in the following passage:

That state of mind, every man must have felt, is most favorable to the emotions of taste, in which the imagination is free and unembarrassed, or in which the attention is so little occupied by any private or particular object of thought, as to leave us open to all the impressions, which the objects that are before us can create. It is upon the vacant and the unemployed, accordingly,

80. "On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness'," 137a.

81. "On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness'," 138b.

82. Archibald Alison, *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1811; first edition 1790; hereafter *Essays*), I.I.ii, 1:10.

83. *Essays*, I.I.i, 1:3, 4–5.

84. *Essays*, I.I.ii, 1:16.

85. *Essays*, I.I.ii, 1:8; I.I.iii, 1:23.

that the objects of taste make the strongest impression.⁸⁶

There are, in Alison's view, states of mind favorable to the emotions of taste and states of mind unfavorable to those emotions. And so, when Stolnitz says that the faculties of imagination and emotion "can function aesthetically only when the spectator has disposed himself in a certain way": if we disregard the identification of emotion as a "faculty," which is no part of Alison's thought; if we substitute "give rise to the emotions of taste" for the anachronistic phrase "function aesthetically"; and if we disregard the account that Stolnitz goes on to give of this "way of disposing oneself" (of which more in a moment); then we have a true claim.⁸⁷ The more important question, however, is: do the favorable states of mind answer to Stolnitz's conception of the "aesthetic attitude"? In particular, are they characterized by "disinterested," in the sense of "object-centered," attention?

The first thing to be said in reply to this question is that the word "disinterested" simply does not occur in Alison's text, at least not in any passage cited by Stolnitz; so he cannot be said to give a new significance to the *word*. To say that he gives a new significance to the *concept*, if that is what Stolnitz means, one must first show that the concept is present. Stolnitz tries to show this by citing the following passage:

The husbandman who goes out to observe the state of his grounds, the man of business who walks forth to ruminate about his affairs, or the philosopher, to reason or reflect, whatever their natural sensibilities may be, are at such times insensible to every beauty that the scenery may exhibit; nor do they begin to feel them, until they withdraw their attention from the particular objects of their thought, and abandon themselves to the emotions which such scenes may happen to inspire.⁸⁸

Stolnitz says that the husbandman and the businessman "are obviously 'interested'," while the philosopher is not; but the philosopher's "reflection," he claims, is still "anti-aesthetic."⁸⁹ By the first remark, Stolnitz seems to mean that, for Alison, the reason why the husbandman and the businessman are insensible of the beauties of the scenery is that their attention to it is governed by interests other than that in perception itself. The second remark is more puzzling, but given Stolnitz's explanation of "disinterested" as "object-centered," it seems most probable that what makes the philosopher's

86. *Essays*, I.I.ii, 1:10–11.

87. George Dickie objects that Alison says only that a certain state of mind is *favorable* to the emotions of taste, not that any state of mind is *required* for them ("Stolnitz's Attitude," 203a). This is true of the main passage under consideration, but in one already cited, Alison states categorically that "if the mind is in such a state as to prevent this freedom of imagination, the emotion, whether of sublimity or beauty, is unperceived" (*Essays*, I.I.ii, 8).

88. *Essays*, I.II.ii, 1:95.

89. "On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness,'" 137b.

reflection “anti-aesthetic” in his view is its failure of “disinterestedness” in the specified sense.

But it is plain that what we have here, at least in the cases of the businessman who “walks forth to ruminate about his affairs” and the philosopher who steps out “to reason or reflect,” are, as George Dickie observes, not instances of “interested” attention at all but simply instances of *inattention* to the natural scene.⁹⁰ The husbandman seems to be a different case, in that he is said to go out “to observe the state of his grounds.” One might be tempted to say, in Stolnitz’s terms, that he is attentive to the scene in a “self-centered” and therefore “interested” way.⁹¹ But this is conspicuously not *Alison’s* explanation of the case. Rather, Alison’s explanation of all three cases is the same: the men do not “feel” the beauties of the scene because they are preoccupied with “the particular objects of their thought.” The “particular object” of the husbandman’s thought is evidently the state of his grounds, i.e., whether they are flourishing or not. Because of his concern with this object, he cannot “abandon [himself] to the emotions which such scenes may happen to inspire.” Whether his attention is “interested” or “disinterested,” or “self-centered” or “object-centered,” has nothing to do with the matter.

Stolnitz’s most plausible textual argument is based on the following passage:

When a man of any taste, for instance, first settles in a romantic country, he is willing to flatter himself that he can never be satiated with its beauties, and that in their contemplation he shall continue to receive the same exquisite delight. The aspect in which he now sees them, is solely that in which they are calculated to produce emotion. The streams are known to him only by their gentleness or their majesty, the woods by their solemnity, the rocks by their awfulness or terror. In a very short time, however, he is forced to consider them in very different lights. They are useful to him for some purposes, either of occupation or amusement. They serve as distinctions of different properties, or of different divisions of the country. They become boundaries or landmarks, by which his knowledge of the neighborhood is ascertained. It is with these qualities that he hears them usually spoken of by all who surround them. It is in this light that he must often speak and think of them himself. It is with these qualities accordingly, that he comes at last insensibly to consider them, in the common hours of his life.⁹²

As Stolnitz points out, it is clear that, in this vignette, the cessation of the man’s emotional response to his surroundings is not due to inattention to them;⁹³ rather, it is due to his seeing them in what Alison calls a different

90. Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic*, 68–69.

91. Stolnitz makes this point against Dickie in “‘The Aesthetic Attitude’ in the Rise of Modern Aesthetics,” at 418a.

92. *Essays*, I.II.ii, 1:102–103.

93. Or to divided attention, as Dickie claims (“Stolnitz’s Attitude,” 202b–203a).

“light” or “aspect,” specifically an aspect in which they are (among other things) “useful to him for purposes.” Thus, according to Stolnitz, “Alison explicitly excludes attention . . . constrained by ulterior purposes,” and so “[distinguishes] the mode of attention requisite to [the emotions of taste] from other modes of attention or, specifically, disinterested from interested attention.”⁹⁴

Nonetheless, whatever affinity may obtain between the “before” and “after” of Alison’s little story, on the one hand, and Stolnitz’s “disinterested” and “interested” attention on the other, it does not reach anywhere near equivalence. To begin with, Alison speaks, not of two different “modes of attention,” but of two different “lights” or “aspects” in which objects may be seen. Stolnitz takes these to be equivalent distinctions; it will become apparent in a moment why they are not. To stick, then, to Alison’s distinction: The first aspect is one in which things wear what Alison calls a “character” or “expression”—in this story, gentleness, majesty, solemnity, awfulness, and so on—and in which the onlooker allows his imagination to range through all the trains of thought raised by these characters. To regard things in this aspect is to be in “the state of mind most favorable to the emotions of taste.” The second aspect is one in which things wear no character or expression but merely have various kinds of practical significance. To regard things in this aspect is to regard them in a fashion that might be described, by a modification of Stolnitz’s phrase, as “constrained by concern for purposes.”

But Stolnitz speaks of “attention constrained by *ulterior* purpose.” The word “ulterior” plays an essential role in Stolnitz’s conception of “aesthetic disinterestedness”: the implied meaning is “ulterior to the purpose of perceiving the object.” A concern with practical purposes, in Stolnitz’s conception, makes impossible the kind of perception where “the sole interest of the perceiver is in perceiving.”⁹⁵ But the freedom of imagination that allows Alison’s man to respond to his surroundings with the emotions of taste has absolutely nothing to do with his purposes, or with his being “interested in perceiving,” whatever that may mean. Even if some states of mind *unfavorable* to the emotions of taste are characterized by concern with practical purposes, and so are describable as “interested,” the state of mind favorable to those emotions does not at all conform to Stolnitz’s concept of “disinterested attention.”

In fact, the very idea that Alison’s “state of mind most favorable to the emotions of taste” is a kind of attentiveness to the object, is very wide of the mark. Stolnitz describes this state of mind as one in which “the object is, precisely, attended to. . . . The governing attitude is vigilance and control, attention to the object which scrupulously shuts out whatever might diminish

94. “‘The Aesthetic Attitude’ in the Rise of Modern Aesthetics,” 418b.

95. “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” 135b.

or subvert it.”⁹⁶ That this conception is utterly alien to Alison is evident from the following passages:

When any object, either of sublimity or of beauty, is presented to the mind, I believe every man is conscious of a train of thought being immediately awakened in his imagination, analogous to the character or expression of the original object. *The simple perception of the object, we frequently find, is insufficient to excite these emotions*, unless it is accompanied with this operation of mind, unless, according to common expression, our imagination is seized, and our fancy busied in the pursuit of all those trains of thought, which are allied to this character or expression.⁹⁷

There are many, whom the prospect of such appearances in nature, excites to no exercise of fancy whatever; who, by their original constitution, *are more disposed to the employment of attention, than of imagination*, and who, in the objects that are presented to them, *are more apt to observe their individual and distinguishing qualities, than those by which they are related to other objects of their knowledge*. . . . It is, I believe, consistent with general experience, that men of this description *are little sensible to the emotions of sublimity or beauty*. . . .⁹⁸

The contrast with the view that Stolnitz attributes to Alison could hardly be starker. Stolnitz says that, for Alison, attention must be entirely focused upon the object: Alison says that those who favor attention over imagination, and who observe the distinctive qualities of an object rather than relating it to other objects, cannot feel the emotions of taste. Stolnitz says that the “governing idea” in Alison is that of “attending to an object with no interest other than that in perceiving itself”.⁹⁹ Alison says that “the simple perception of the object” is insufficient to excite the emotions of taste; we must allow our imagination to pursue “all those trains of thought . . . allied to [its] character or expression.”

7. CONCLUSIONS

It is perhaps no very rare thing for a historical account to be published whose inaccuracies can be demonstrated largely from the very textual evidence that the author cites to support it. It is rare, though, that such an account enjoys lasting influence. That this has happened with Stolnitz’s account of the putative origins of the concept of aesthetic disinterestedness cannot be explained merely by attributing cunning to the author or gullibility and ignorance to his readers. Rather, one must suppose that there has been a co-

96. “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” 138a.

97. *Essays*, I.I.i, 1:4–5, emphasis added.

98. *Essays*, I.I.ii, 1:20, emphasis added.

99. “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” 137a.

operation of intellectual vices between author and audience. There are two such vices that I find to be of particular importance in this case. I shall conclude by, first, offering an account of them, in the hope of promoting their extirpation, and then offering an account of what we miss through falling into them.

The first vice is an irresponsible way with the word “disinterested” and its relatives. This irresponsibility takes several forms. One consists in using the word with a sense that is neither its ordinary one nor any well-specified technical sense, but which rather waltzes about indeterminately. If Stolnitz’s use of the word is self-consciously technical (though not, for that, well-defined), numerous instances could be cited of aestheticians whose use of it is governed neither by common usage nor by precise technical definition. Another form of the vice consists in using the word “disinterested” without care as to whether it makes an intelligible modification to the substantive with which it is combined. We may thank this habit for the pleonasm “disinterested contemplation,” and the obscurantism “disinterested perception.” Finally, there is the habit of using the noun “disinterestedness” without any clear thought of an act, disposition, or motive to bear the characteristic so described.¹⁰⁰

The other vice consists in the incautious use of concepts alien to the writers under consideration in order to represent their thought. The most baneful instance of this in the present matter is the use of the word “aesthetic” as a load-bearing philosophical term. Stolnitz’s account is an exemplar of how the reliance on anachronous terms can prejudice historical inquiry, and can lead the inquirer (and his readers) to think that he has discovered evidence of doctrines and concepts that simply are not there. To be sure, the mere use of the adjective “aesthetic” or the noun “aesthetics” to talk about the thought of writers who did not use such words need not be ruinous, if proper caution is taken not to confuse our terms or concepts with theirs. But such caution is too rarely taken, and the damage done by this practice to the understanding of historical texts that we *now* classify as belonging to “aesthetics” is incalculable.

In the first section of this paper I remarked that the nearest thing that Shaftesbury, Addison, Hutcheson, or Alison have to a concept of “the aesthetic” is the concept of taste. Now is the time to say something about how these two concepts compare, and why the differences matter. I begin with their common elements, which I find to be two. First, both concepts include within their concern the beautiful and the merits of works of art (or at least some merits of such works), though each concept does so for different reasons (to be explained in a moment). Second (though this does not hold for *Shaftesbury’s* use of the concept of taste), both concepts presuppose, in one way or another, that the nature of these values—beauty or artistic or aesthetic

100. I elaborate these charges in another paper, “Modern Aesthetics and the Jargon of Disinterestedness” (forthcoming).

merit—is to be explained in terms of something in or about *us*, be it how the bearers of these values affect us, how we perceive them, how we judge them, or what “attitude” we take toward them, depending on the theory. This is true at least of Stolnitz’s concept of the aesthetic; if the concept is not commonly so understood among philosophers today, then the writers under consideration are so much the further from having anything like it.

On the other hand, the two concepts differ in at least two essential respects. One—and the point merits emphasis—is that the concept of taste, as understood by the writers under study here, and in contrast to the concept of the aesthetic (that is, once again, Stolnitz’s concept), *does not contain the concept of disinterestedness as a defining element*. To be sure, Shaftesbury and Hutcheson both hold that the pleasure of taste is independent of any prospect of advantage arising from the object, and so in that respect a disinterested pleasure. But neither for them nor for any of the others is disinterestedness essential to defining what taste is. Disinterestedness was not a defining feature of taste for any philosopher before Kant. Needless to say, the British writers’ concept of taste does not contain such concepts as “disinterested attention,” “disinterested contemplation,” or “disinterested perception” either; neither, for that matter, does Kant’s.¹⁰¹ But then, these are by no means universally accepted as belonging to the concept of the aesthetic either.

The second essential difference is that the concept of taste as understood by our writers contains as defining elements two concepts entirely extraneous to Stolnitz’s “aesthetic disinterestedness,” namely the concept of the beautiful and the concept of pleasure. Eighteenth-century thinkers commonly defined taste (those of them who had a definition of it, which would exclude Shaftesbury)¹⁰² as the faculty of perceiving what is beautiful with pleasure. Thus Addison defines “a fine taste in writing” as “that faculty of the soul, which discerns the beauties of an author with pleasure, and the imperfections with dislike”;¹⁰³ Hutcheson defines “a fine taste” as a certain “greater capacity of receiving such pleasant ideas” as he enumerates under the heading of “ideas of beauty and harmony”;¹⁰⁴ Alison defines taste as “that faculty of the human mind, by which we perceive and enjoy whatever is

101. The disinterestedness that figures in Kant is disinterested *pleasure*, not disinterested “perception” or “contemplation.” On this point see Nick Zangwill, “Unkantian Notions of Disinterest,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 32 (1992):149–152.

102. This is because for Shaftesbury, in contrast to subsequent thinkers, the concept of taste does not play an explanatory role. Rather, Shaftesbury conceives of it as a sensitivity to qualities “really and truly here” (*Inquiry*, II.iii, 1:252; the quoted phrase comes from a discussion of our “reflected sense” of moral qualities, but Shaftesbury applies the term “taste” as readily to that as to the sense of beauty: see Shaftesbury, *Soliloquy, Or Advice to an Author*, III.iii, 1:216–219). For a discussion of this point see Kivy, *The Seventh Sense*, 14–21.

103. *The Spectator*, no. 409, 3:528.

104. *Inquiry*, I.x, 8.

beautiful or sublime in the works of nature or art.”¹⁰⁵

Such a collection of definitions could be augmented with ones from other eighteenth-century British writers. Taken all in all, they reveal two presumptions. One, implicit in the very metaphor of the word “taste” as used here,¹⁰⁶ is that we can perceive beauty with sense-like immediacy, apart from articulate knowledge or reasoning. The other—evident not so much from the definitions themselves as from the philosophical accounts that were built upon them—is that such immediate perception of beauty, when it occurs under the proper conditions or in the right fashion, is *authoritative*. The pleasure of taste was conceived by these writers (again with the exception of Shaftesbury) neither as a means *faute de mieux* for detecting the presence of beauty, nor as an emotional accompaniment to a properly intellectual recognition of it, but as the principal or even the sole mode of discerning it. For those writers given to pursuing these matters theoretically (which would exclude Addison), taste was not so much a faculty posited to describe or explain how we discern the beautiful, as a faculty in terms of which beauty is to be described or explained. Once beauty is conceived in this way, it requires only some psychological invention to account for the sublime, the picturesque, the novel, the ridiculous, and so forth, on the same lines.

It is because of this, and not because of the discovery of any concept of “the aesthetic” or of “disinterested perception,” that eighteenth-century British writers on taste could extend their concerns as they did. Whether their way of thinking of these matters is a good one or not is, I take it, a live question.¹⁰⁷ The important point is, in the first place, that it is the nature of beauty that provides them with a matter to think about, and in the second place, that it is the concept of taste that provides them with a way of thinking about it. To push these matters to the margins and treat these writers as originators of the concept of “aesthetic disinterestedness” is not only to find in them what is not there, but also to miss most of what is.¹⁰⁸

105. *Essays*, Introduction, 1:xi.

106. Of course, it is questionable whether this use of the word “taste” is a live metaphor for us today, but in the early eighteenth century, when such a use of the word was comparatively new, matters were different. Hence the explanation of “this metaphor” offered by Addison at the beginning of *Spectator* no. 409 (3:527).

107. Examples of recent aesthetics in the tradition of the theory of taste are David Wiggins’s neo-Humean theory and Roger Scruton’s neo-Kantian one. See Wiggins, “A Sensible Subjectivism?”, in *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), and Scruton, *Art and Imagination: A Study in the Philosophy of Mind* (London: Methuen, 1974).

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