

3-4-2011

Psychical Distancing and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature

Laila Davis
Macalester College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/phil>

Recommended Citation

Davis, Laila (2011) "Psychical Distancing and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," *Macalester Journal of Philosophy*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 4.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/phil/vol10/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy Department at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Macalester Journal of Philosophy by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

Macalester Journal of Philosophy • Vol. 10, 2000

PSYCHICAL DISTANCING AND THE AESTHETIC APPRECIATION OF NATURE

LAILA DAVIS

Using Edward Bullough's theory (1957) as a rough guide, I have developed my own theory of the role of psychical distancing in aesthetic appreciation. In this paper, I will explain how the concept of "distancing" from practicality shows that the aesthetic appreciation of nature is the most intense aesthetic experience possible. I will defend distancing from George Dickie's criticisms, discuss the range and intensity of aesthetic experience, and illustrate the qualities of nature which make it ideal for aesthetic appreciation.

A New Theory of "Distancing"

What takes place when a viewer is contemplating an aesthetic object in a way that gives her an aesthetic experience?¹ The clearest way to answer this question is to look at the relationship between a viewer and an aesthetic object in two cases: when an aesthetic experience does take place, and when it does not. We know an aesthetic experience when we feel it, but what is it exactly that makes it different from an ordinary experience? In this paper I will focus on one of the necessary conditions for aesthetic experience: distance. Most scholars agree that aesthetic appreciation differs from normal appreciation because in the former we are appreciating the object *without considering its practical utility to ourselves*. In a sense, we are stepping away from ourselves and our human

needs and desires, and we are experiencing an object for its own sake. These human needs and desires are what I will refer to as “practicality.” In this way we can find the object “beautiful,” rather than “useful,” “comforting,” or “expensive.”

This process of stepping away is what Bullough calls “psychical distance.” Unfortunately, he uses the term “distance” ambiguously. For this reason, my theory of distance differs somewhat from his in order to make “distance” completely clear. Bullough uses “distance” ambiguously. For example, he writes:

This Distance appears to lie between our own self and its affections. . . . Usually, though not always, it amounts to the same thing to say that the Distance lies between our own self and such objects as are the sources or vehicles of such affections (Bullough, 94).

According to this definition, Bullough’s “distance” can be both between the viewer and her “affections” (human needs and desires) and between the viewer and the aesthetic object. This makes Bullough’s theory incredibly confusing, because he switches back and forth between the two definitions of “distance” without warning. My theory of distance is preferable because there is no such thing as the distance between the viewer and the aesthetic object. I define distance as being between the viewer and practicality, or between the aesthetic object and practicality. This is the same type of distance in both cases; it just occurs in two different places. As I will discuss below, the two occurrences of distancing are interdependent and inseparable.

There are two variables in the aesthetic experience: the viewer and the aesthetic object. The type and intensity of aesthetic experience which occurs depends on both of them. The aesthetic object must have some characteristics which are capable of creating an aesthetic experience in the viewer (rather than creating disgust or boredom, for example). These characteristics could, but need not necessarily, include: strong

imagery (in a poem), soft colors (in a painting), or harmony (in a musical piece). The setting or context in which the aesthetic experience takes place is also considered part of the aesthetic object variable. For example, if the aesthetic object is displayed in a museum rather than simply lying in the street, this is also a contribution of the aesthetic object to the aesthetic experience. The rest of the experience is determined by the viewer. A viewer will not necessarily see everything that is deemed "art" as beautiful, and many viewers may have different reactions to one aesthetic object. Some characteristics of the viewer conducive to aesthetic experience may be her age (she is old enough to understand the aesthetic object), her cultural background, and her current state of mind. Thus, both the aesthetic object and the viewer are understood as variables in the aesthetic experience. It is important to be clear on this point, because often the aesthetic object is overlooked in theories of distancing, and only the viewer's role is considered. This is a mistake, because it seems to suggest that we can analyze an aesthetic experience with complete disregard for the aesthetic object. This would be as if, upon hearing from a friend that she did not like the new painting at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, we were to try to figure out the reason for her dislike without asking about the subject or style of the painting. No philosopher would ignore the role of the aesthetic object in aesthetic theory, and I argue that the same goes for the theory of distancing.

I believe that both the aesthetic object and the viewer are contributing to the aesthetic experience in an inverse relationship to each other. The more the aesthetic object contributes, the less the viewer needs to, and the more the viewer contributes, the less the aesthetic object does. An aesthetic experience occurs when both have contributed enough to add up to the "cost" of an aesthetic experience. It is as if I, as a customer, want to buy a bag of apples costing one dollar, but these apples are subsidized by the government. The amount of money that I (the viewer) need to dish out for the apples depends on the amount of the government subsidy (the

aesthetic object). Say the subsidy is 20 cents per bag; then I will have to pay 80 cents out of my pocket. But if the subsidy is 60 cents, then I only have to pay 40 cents to get my bag of apples. In an aesthetic experience, the relationship is analogous: the viewer's contribution to the experience (the customer) depends on the aesthetic object's contribution (the subsidy). The "distance" I will speak of from now on can be thought of as the amount of money either party contributes to the bag of apples.

As I mentioned above, it is a widely accepted theory that aesthetic experience occurs when the viewer is not thinking about an object's practical utility. Therefore, the manner in which both the aesthetic object and the viewer contribute to the aesthetic experience is through the distance of each from practicality. It is true that the viewer can actively "do" distancing from practicality, by changing his mindset. The aesthetic object, in contrast, has a distance from practicality which was instilled in it by the artist. But this does not mean that the aesthetic object is not contributing to the aesthetic experience by virtue of its distance from practicality. Thus, distance is both between the viewer and practicality, and between the aesthetic object and practicality. As I mentioned above, it is important not to confuse this with distance between the viewer and the aesthetic object, and I will not refer to such a distance in this paper. This distance always remains the same because when the efforts of both the viewer and the aesthetic object (through the artist) are taken into account, there is always the same amount of work to be done for an object to be perceived aesthetically rather than practically. (The bag of apples always costs one dollar; the interesting question is how much each party contributes to achieve this sum.) "As a rule, experiences constantly turn the same side towards us, namely, that which has the strongest practical force of appeal" (Bullough, 95). Thus, either the viewer or the aesthetic object needs to overcome this ever-present practicality so that the aesthetic experience can occur. When the viewer is distancing, she is disregarding practical thoughts or applications

concerning the aesthetic object. If the object is a film, for example, she is enjoying it without thinking about the quality of the acting, the size of the screen, or her illegally parked car outside. The aesthetic object can also be distanced from practicality and meet the viewer halfway, so to speak. A painting, for example, is quite difficult to mistake for a practical object. Its frame and two-dimensionality serve to distance it from practicality in the viewer's eyes. Though the viewer is the one perceiving the lack of practical thoughts about the aesthetic object, the aesthetic object is the one making the contribution, due to its inherent characteristics created by the artist. Thus, we can lay out the following general rule: *If the aesthetic object has a great inherent distance, such as a painting, little distancing is required of the viewer; if the aesthetic object has little inherent distance, little framing, such as a tree, more distancing is required of the viewer to perceive it as impractical.* Later in this paper I will argue that a more intense aesthetic experience can be had if the viewer does most of the distancing. First, however, I will defend the concept of distancing from the criticisms of George Dickie.

A Reply to Dickie's Criticisms of Distancing

As I have shown above, Bullough makes the term "distance" ambiguous by discussing both the distance between the viewer and the aesthetic object, and the distancing one needs to attain from practicality. I have clarified the term by eliminating the former type of distance and by using only distance from practicality to describe the aesthetic experience. Though I do not agree completely with Bullough, I find psychical distance an important aspect of the aesthetic experience. George Dickie misinterprets much of the psychical distance theory in order to argue that distancing does not occur. I will defend distancing from Dickie's criticisms because I believe it does indeed occur.

Dickie makes three major mistakes in his interpretation of distance. First, he writes, "Distance here is understood as a

mental phenomenon which can be 'inserted' and which blocks the self's concern for consequences" (Dickie 1972, 128). This sentence is typical of Dickie's thinking as he continually ignores the element of distance provided by the aesthetic object and focuses only on the distancing done by the viewer. He tries to break distancing down to simple attention and inattention (Dickie 1973, 28). However, we cannot fully understand how and when aesthetic experiences take place unless we also consider the contribution of the aesthetic object to the process. For example, how would Dickie explain the experience of a man looking carefully at a famous sculpture in a museum for ten minutes, but not finding it aesthetically pleasing? The man *wants* to have an aesthetic experience, and he is being very attentive because he's been told that it is a beautiful sculpture, but for some reason it doesn't quite appeal to him aesthetically. Dickie's theory falls short here because the failure of aesthetic experience is obviously not due to inattention; it is due to qualities in the aesthetic object and aspects of the man that cause the failure of the aesthetic experience. Perhaps the sculpture is so similar to a practical object (such as a bench) that the man cannot sufficiently distance himself from his practical mindset to see it aesthetically. Or perhaps the sculpture is so distant from a practical, human object (such as a stack of bronze cubes draped in pink velvet) that the man can't make heads or tails of it. Here we see once again that both the aesthetic object and the viewer play a vital role in the aesthetic experience.

This neglect leads to a more serious problem in regard to psychical distancing theory. By ignoring the role of the aesthetic object, Dickie tries to bring aesthetic appreciation down to the idea that "institutional conventions. . . govern the behavior of spectators" (Dickie 1973, 23). Dickie ironically gives a vivid description of distancing on the part of the aesthetic object, labeling it as convention:

In fact there is no appropriate way for a spectator to behave practically in the usual theatre situation unless one counts applauding, keeping quiet and the like as practical activity. When one enters a theatre, one does not have to act to suspend practical activities or be got into a state of mind in which impulses to action are actively suppressed, because watching plays is just not a practical activity to begin with and any knowledgeable person who is in his right mind knows it (Dickie 1973, 22).

What Dickie has just described here is indeed a case when the viewer does not need to do much distancing to appreciate the theater as art. But why is this the case? I would argue that it is because the aesthetic object has done the distancing *for him*. Theater is inherently impractical, and though it might appear the way it does because of "convention," this, like setting and context, is still a contribution to distance. Yes, convention helps us to view things aesthetically by its distancing, but it does not explain why we can aesthetically appreciate nature, smells, conversations, or anything else which hasn't been formally deemed "art." In these cases, the viewer must distance himself further from practicality in order to meet the object with little inherent distance. I will show that my theory of distance covers all these cases *plus* convention, and is therefore a more valuable theory.

The final complaint I have against Dickie is that he limits the phenomenon of distance to the aesthetic experience alone. He writes, "I took Bullough to be maintaining that there are two kinds of consciousness: aesthetic consciousness (which has psychical distance as a component) and ordinary consciousness" (Dickie 1972, 127). Dickie is correct in believing that Bullough sets aesthetic consciousness apart from ordinary consciousness. Distancing, however, spans *both*. Distance can describe the relationship between an individual and her surroundings at all times and in all states of mind. When a person is at home washing dishes, she is most likely not having

an aesthetic experience. We can describe why in terms of distance. There is a certain amount of practicality to the phenomenon of dishwashing that needs to be overcome by either her or the phenomenon. Since the use of dishes, and washing them in particular, is one of the most practical experiences of humankind, the phenomenon provides very little inherent distance from practicality. Thus, in order to have an aesthetic experience while washing dishes, the person needs to distance herself greatly from seeing the experience as practical. This is why the theory of psychical distance is so useful: it shows the relationship between ordinary and aesthetic experiences, and even gives us guidelines on how to lead more aesthetic lives. Ordinary experiences are simply an occurrence of too little distance on the part of the viewer.

Range and Intensity in Aesthetic Experience

The fact that too little distancing on the part of the viewer makes an experience ordinary suggests that we could also characterize a person with lack of distance from practicality as being too rational, therefore experiencing the world in the "ordinary" way of a human being. A person with too much distance might, in contrast, be too irrational, losing all sense of human individuality. Thus, an experience between the two (aesthetic experience) would allow us to be for a moment outside of ourselves without completely losing touch with reality. Aesthetic experiences can occur anywhere between the completely rational (practical) and the completely irrational. Where the viewer and the aesthetic object meet depends, as Bullough says, on both of them. The *intensity* of the experience, however, varies according to how far the viewer is distanced from practicality. The further the viewer is distanced from her sense of practicality, the more she steps out of her rational self. As a rule, the more she steps out of herself and her ordinary experiences, the more intense the aesthetic experience will be. The aesthetic objects which require the viewer to do the most distancing are the ones with the least inherent distance. Thus,

aesthetic objects with the least inherent distance can provide the most intense aesthetic experience.

One might ask, why not simply say that aesthetic objects with less inherent distance provide more aesthetic experience and ones with more inherent distance less? The answer can be found in the theory of psychological distance. It emphasizes that the aesthetic experience depends on both the viewer and the aesthetic object (Bullough, 100). We know from experience that what is determined aesthetically depends on the person interacting with it. An aesthetic object with less inherent distance may be capable of providing a very *intense* aesthetic experience; however, it requires a great amount of distancing of the viewer because it has no aesthetic context, and people tend to see things which have no explicit framing in practical terms. It will be more difficult to achieve the experience, and fewer people will achieve it. Sheila Dawson explains,

The artist distances phenomena so that their beauty is able to penetrate barriers which would probably have come between us and the undistanced objects. Few of us would find beauty in a butchered ox, but many find Rembrandt's painting "The Butchered Ox" beautiful (Dawson, 161).

An aesthetic object with more inherent distance is capable of providing only a less intense aesthetic experience because it does not give the viewer the opportunity to step very far outside of herself. However, since the viewer already has much of the work done for her, it is easier for her to have the aesthetic experience. If we simply talked about intensity in relation to the viewer's distancing from practicality, it would be easy to start ignoring the more impractical objects, which would disregard the only kind of aesthetic experience many people are capable of having, due to their inability to distance.

Nature

What kind of object should we look to for the smallest possible inherent distance, which will allow us to step most fully out of ourselves to achieve the most intense aesthetic experience? It is clear that this object should use as few crutches as possible to distance itself from being perceived as practical. The closer the object is to something people tend to see as practical, the more a person will have to distance and step out of herself to see it aesthetically. Let us again use the bag of apples metaphor. If the government offers only a 5-cent subsidy, the customer is forced to pay 95 cents out of her own pocket to get the bag of apples. The type of crutches an object should not use could include a physical frame, a setting in a museum, or a convention labeling it as "art." These all serve to distance the object from practicality, leaving less distancing to be done by the viewer, and therefore not allowing her as intense an experience. If we break down the elements of aesthetic experience even further, we find that the following are also distancing crutches for the object: the object's limiting itself to certain human senses, or to one moment in time, or its lack of change. In our everyday practical lives, objects assault all our senses, over a period of time, and they change over time. Any limitation of these three qualities in an object sets that object apart from our practical lives, and we no longer need to do as much distancing on our part to see the object aesthetically. For example, in this sense, a painting is one of the most limited types of art because it appeals only to the sense of sight, shows only one moment in time, and is static. Film would be an improvement because it can be experienced through both sight and sound and takes place over time. It has a limited capacity for change, however, because it is the same movie every time it is viewed. The crutches used by painting and film serve to distance the object from practicality, and therefore do not allow us to do as much distancing ourselves. Nature is the object that uses the least of these distancing crutches. When experiencing nature aesthetically, one can see clouds moving

past a tree, hear the leaves rustling, smell damp earth, and feel the sun and wind on one's face. All this is dynamic, changing with each passing second and stimulating all the senses. "If there is movement in the scene, the spectator may himself be in motion, and his motion may be an important element in his aesthetic experience" (Hepburn, 12). Nature does not have a physical frame, is not part of a convention, and is not located in a museum. All these qualities leave nature undistanced from practicality. The days are gone when a person looked at a forest and saw a log cabin, or looked at a deer and saw food for the winter, but humans still look to nature with their practical needs in mind. Today the forest is seen as a good site for a paper factory, and the deer's antlers maintain the hunter's pride. Due to nature's inherent practicality to humankind, it provides us with the best opportunity to distance ourselves from this practicality. We can step away from our rational desires and, in the midst of intense aesthetic experience, appreciate nature for its own sake.

Conclusion

In this paper I have explained my theory of "psychical distance" and clarified it through defense from Dickie's criticisms. I have shown that the distance theory can describe our relations with all objects and determine when these relations are aesthetic experiences. Though aesthetic experiences can take place at varying levels of distance from the viewer, depending on the aesthetic object, I have argued that the most intense experiences occur when the aesthetic object provides less inherent distance, thus requiring the viewer to further remove herself from practicality and her rational self. Finally, I have shown that nature has less distance than most other aesthetic objects and therefore provides the most intense aesthetic experience.

Knowing now what we do about the inherent distance of aesthetic objects, we can make one final observation about the art world. Bullough noticed that, "over-distanced Art is

specially designed for a class of appreciation which has difficulty to rise spontaneously to any degree of Distance" (Bullough, 101). This class of appreciation has occurred during times which "were epochs of a strong practical common sense too much concerned with the rough-and-tumble of life to have any sense of its aesthetic charms" (Bullough, 109). I believe that this trend can be noted in art today. It seems people are today trying to create art-forms that deviate further and further from the essential human experience. This kind of "abstractness" was not necessary a hundred years ago. Our aesthetic objects could be the vital sign that our lifestyle today has fallen into such concern with practical matters that we are no longer as capable of distancing as our ancestors were. I would suggest education as a possible solution to this problem. The skill of distancing can be taught. By teaching people how to distance, we can show them nature as an aesthetic object, and we can provide them with lives of greater aesthetic experience.

Bibliography

- Berleant, Arnold, "Cultivating an Urban Aesthetic," *Diogenes* 136 (Winter 1986), 1-18.
- Brady, Emily, "Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (Spring 1998), 139-47.
- Bullough, Edward, "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle," in *Aesthetics: Lectures and Essays*. London: Bowes & Bowes, 1957.
- Casebier, Allan, "The Concept of Aesthetic Distance," *The Personalist* 52 (Winter 1971), 70-91.
- Crawford, Donald W., "Comparing Natural and Artistic Beauty," in *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, edited by Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

- Dawson, Sheila, " 'Distancing' as an Aesthetic Principle," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 39 (August 1961), 155-74.
- Dickie, George, "Bullough and Casebier: Disappearing in the Distance," *The Personalist* 53 (Spring 1972), 127-31.
- , "Psychical Distance: In a Fog at Sea," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 13 (Winter 1973), 17-29.
- Hepburn, R. W., "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty," in *"Wonder" and Other Essays: Eight Studies in Aesthetics and Neighbouring Fields*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984.
- Kovach, Francis J., "Aesthetic Disinterestedness in Premodern Thought." *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 5 (Spring 1974), 59-65.
- McDermott, John J., "Why Bother: Is Life Worth Living? Experience as Pedagogical," in *Philosophy and the Reconstruction of Culture: Pragmatic Essays after Dewey*, edited by John J. Stuhr. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Birth of Tragedy*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1967.
- , *The Gay Science*. New York: Random House, 1974.
- Pandit, Sneha, "Nature of the Aesthetic Experience According to the Traditional Indian Approach." *Indian Philosophy Quarterly* 4 (April 1977), 319-26.
- Saxena, Sushil Kumar, "The Aesthetic Attitude." *Philosophy East and West* 28 (January 1978), 81-90.
- Shepard, Paul, *Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu, "Desert and Ice: Ambivalent Aesthetics," in Kemal and Gaskell, *op. cit.*, 1993.
- , *Passing Strange and Wonderful: Aesthetics, Nature, and Culture*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 1993.
- Wynn, Mark, "Beauty, Providence, and the Biophilia Hypothesis," *Heythrop Journal* 38 (July 1997), 283-99.

Notes

1. For my purposes, I will use the term "aesthetic object" to describe anything that is capable of giving us aesthetic pleasure, including natural objects. I will use the term "viewer" to describe the human individual experiencing the aesthetic object, even though the experience may be taking place through a sense other than sight.