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Faculty of Humanities

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION
THESES

BOTOND CSUKA

THE TELEOLOGY OF THE AESTHETIC IN THE BRITISH ENLIGHTENMENT



Doctoral School of Philosophy

Head of the Doctoral School: Dr. Tamás Ullmann DSc, professor

Aesthetics Doctoral Programme

Head of the Doctoral Programme: Dr. Béla Bacsó DSc, professor

Members of the Assessment Committee:

Chair: Dr. Béla Bacsó DSc, professor

Opponent: Dr. Bálint Gárdos PhD, senior lecturer

Opponent: Dr. György Fogarasi PhD, reader

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Member: Dr. Gábor Boros DSc, professor

Member: Dr. Zsolt Komáromy PhD, habil. senior lecturer

Supervisors: Dr. Sándor Radnóti CMHAS, professor emeritus

Dr. Endre Szécsényi PhD, professor

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INTRODUCTION

The dissertation is concerned with the emergence and unfolding of what we now call “aesthetics” in Britain during the first half of the eighteenth century. The aim of the study is, on the one hand, to determine the place of eighteenth-century British “aesthetic theories” within the extended disciplinary constellation of the period, and, on the other, to understand the functions or values these theories attributed to “the aesthetic”, to our sensitive-affective engagements with the surrounding world. In short, the study aims at exploring the ways the modern aesthetic sensibility and aesthetic experience grew out of and was embedded into the rich historical fabric of the British Enlightenment. It will position the aesthetic theories within the disciplinary context of “the science of human nature” and focus on the final cause arguments that permeate early modern aesthetics.

The teleological explanatory structures are often ignored in scholarship, even when crucial arguments run towards and converge into them. The histories of aesthetics were usually interested in reconstructing the rise of the autonomous conception of the aesthetic, and often remained blind towards the arguments that assigned a central function to the aesthetic in human flourishing. Teleology, however, seems to lie at the heart of the aesthetics of the British Enlightenment, an era obsessed not only with the understanding but also with the “improvement” of human life.

Reconstructing the relevant historical contexts, I believe, can explain the enduring presence of these final cause arguments. One might get a better historical understanding of the aesthetic theories of the British Enlightenment when s/he reads them within the contexts of the science of man and the peculiar providentialism of the eighteenth century. The aesthetics of the British Enlightenment was a multi-disciplinary bundle of theories, which was channelled into the new philosophical anthropology of the Enlightenment, “the science of human nature”. My major thesis is that it was designed to explore *the anatomy of sensibility*, which also entailed identifying its functions in our individual and social lives. This anthropocentric concern with the values and functions of the aesthetic was, however, almost always addressed in terms of final causes and in the language of providentialism.

Through dissecting the final cause arguments, it became visible that the first half of the eighteenth century was a period of transition in the understanding of the Providential Order: on the one hand, providentialism was still a relevant and meaningful framework,

while, on the other hand, there was a modern, anthropocentric shift in the understanding of the Providential Order (TAYLOR 2007). The emergence of the aesthetic, I argue, is bound up with this anthropocentric shift. The final cause arguments constitute the cornerstones of the early aesthetic theories because they reveal their true agenda, which is, paradoxically, an anthropocentric one: to explain and promote certain this-worldly functions and values of the bodily and mental faculties of sensibility – the “intention”, “use” or “design” of the human aesthetic apparatus. Throughout the teleological accounts of the aesthetic, the providential language of the final causes hides an anthropocentric and radically modern concern: determining the role and significance of sensibility from the point of view of the men and women of the emerging modern world.

STRUCTURE AND METHODOLOGY

Following an introductory chapter, the dissertation consists of four chapters. The first chapter reconstructs the main contexts of the study and proposes its main theses. The following three chapters – dedicated to the aesthetic theories of Joseph Addison, Edmund Burke, and Henry Home, Lord Kames – explore these issues in particular aesthetic theories. The chapters dedicated to particular anatomies of sensibility all have three main loci. (1) They start with positioning the author’s aesthetic theory within his own philosophy and/or the disciplinary network (or, in Addison’s case, the socio-cultural network) it was addressed to. My goal here is to take the original intentions of these works seriously and to understand these theories in the light of the broader contexts they were meant to be integrated into. (2) Each chapter then proceeds by exhaustively reconstructing certain arguments that concern the anatomy of sensibility, or, as I will refer to it, the aesthetic apparatus. These arguments characteristically conclude in the consideration of the final causes of the make-up of the sensitive-affective faculties, which try to explain *why* human nature is “designed” in such a way that we are able to engage with the world in a sensitive-affective manner and respond to it with pleasure. Since these arguments embed the aesthetic into various historical contexts by assigning to it different functions, the reconstruction of particular arguments will end with the reconstruction the historically relevant contexts these arguments open up.

It is a contextualist study if to be a contextualist means rejecting “the use of criteria of description and classification not available to the agent himself” (SKINNER 1969:29) and choosing “the parameters and guiding principles of the reconstruction [...] from a perspective

situated within the historical context of these past philosophies.” (LÆRKE 2013:21) But does that mean that using the concept of “the aesthetic” to refer to a new theoretical model that emerged in the first half of the eighteenth century, or using the term “aesthetics” to refer to an emerging discourse in this period are unwarrantable anachronisms which distort the internal perspective necessary for grasping “the true historical meaning” of these theories? After all, the literati of eighteenth-century London, Edinburgh or Aberdeen never used them, and never would have thought they were contributing to “aesthetics”. Still, in accordance with many contextualist historians (RORTY ET AL. 1984, VERMEIR 2013), I believe that the deploying anachronistic concepts and perspectives in historiography is not only inevitable in certain cases but also useful and legitimate. What is needed, nevertheless, is great caution and self-reflection when such anachronistic terms are applied, especially when it comes to such infamous plastic concepts such as “the aesthetic”.

To sum up, my purpose was to understand the early aesthetic theories of Addison, Burke, and Kames “on their own terms” by reconstructing the inner perspectives of the particular theories and the disciplinary configurations they were originally addressed to. However, my interest in rethinking the scope of the aesthetic and the place of aesthetics are admittedly motivated by present-day concerns with rethinking the aesthetic and its value in human life. But while present-day approaches must often argue against the prevailing “myths” of the predominant aesthetic models, these models were still in the making in the first half of the eighteenth century. It is exactly these formative periods when the classic models are not yet congealed, which are the most significant for the “creative redescriptions” of the history of philosophy. Revisiting the formative years of a model is crucial, since after one formulation becomes entrenched, and sinks “to the level of an unquestionable assumption”. (TAYLOR 1984:20–21) In the case of modern philosophical aesthetics, the predominant modern theoretical models of the aesthetic appeared and competed in the British Enlightenment.

THESES AND CONCLUSIONS

(1) The emergence of modern Western philosophical aesthetics was the emergence of a discourse that produced “the aesthetic” – new objects, qualities, and modes of experience accessible through the sensuous-affective faculties of the human body and mind. The aesthetic, as it is often argued, was born as a result of a subjective turn: a turn to the body, the nerves, the imagination, the inner senses, taste, memory, etc. It was a turn to the human

aesthetic apparatus, the faculties that allow us to engage in a pleasurable, sensitive-affective relation with the world around us. This also implies that the aesthetic was bound up with anthropological questions from the very beginning (CASSIRER 1951; MARQUARD, 1989; STÖCKMANN 2009).

(2) The emergence of the aesthetic cannot be separated from the rise of the new, affective notion of happiness, the re-evaluation of pleasure in human life (NORTON 2015). More generally, it was part of the early modern “affirmation of ordinary life”, the understanding of human flourishing in this-worldly, anthropocentric terms (TAYLOR 2001). Being bound up with these developments, the aesthetic in the British Enlightenment was never thought to transcend the ordinary but rather to enhance, complement or improve it.

(3) Closely related to the affirmation of ordinary life, the other relevant context of the emergence of the aesthetic in the British Enlightenment is the formation of a new model of human nature, which conceived man as a creature of sensibility. This new anthropological model emerged as part of the wider intellectual rearrangement in Europe that took place roughly in the first half of the eighteenth century: “the rise of sensibility.” As a result of the joint enterprise of vitalistic medico-physiological models, empirical analyses of consciousness, moral sentimentalism, rhetoric and criticism, and popular sentimental novels, sensibility came to be seen as the groundwork of human nature and the link that connects us to the physical world (GAUKROGER 2010).

(4) Accordingly, the aesthetic theories of the British Enlightenment did not aim at constructing full-fledged theories of beauty or art. Instead, they used our engagement with beauty or art to reveal the universal laws of the aesthetic apparatus. Applying the experimental method, the bodily and mental powers responsible for sensibility were observed in (re)action while responding to the stimuli of the beautiful or the sublime. This means, on the one hand, that aesthetic experiences, occasioned by art or nature, functioned primarily as experiments in the aesthetic theories of the British Enlightenment. On the other hand, it also shows that the aesthetic emerged in the eighteenth-century process of “the naturalisation of the human” (GAUKROGER 2016).

(5) Given that its ultimate goal was to understand the workings of the aesthetic apparatus, the aesthetic theory of the British Enlightenment, to paraphrase Hume’s famous formulation, emerged as the anatomy of sensibility. Anatomizing human sensibility meant (a) identifying the particular human powers (the human aesthetic apparatus) that were thought to be responsible for our aesthetic perceptions, (b) revealing the universal laws of their natural (and

optimal) operation, and (c) examining their interrelations with other faculties of body and mind. (d) Finally, the functioning of human sensibility within the order of things also had to be revealed.

(6) As the anatomy of sensibility, aesthetics was channelled into “the science of man”, the multidisciplinary anthropological enterprise of the British Enlightenment to, on the one hand, anatomize human nature, and to, on the other, improve human life. The aesthetic theories of eighteenth-century Britain were designed to contribute to both projects – enriching our knowledge of human sensibility, while also functioning as instruments of improvement.

(7) The investigations concerning the functions of aesthetic sensibility in human life did not only want to explain these but were also interested in promoting their value and the need for the cultivation of sensibility. These theories were, after all, explanatory and normative at the same time. Behind this pursuit lies the assumption that aesthetic experiences have transformative power, which was of special importance for the project of “improvement” in the Enlightenment, a coherent European intellectual movement of modernisation (ROBERTSON 2005). The aesthetic – like the anatomy of sensibility promoting it – was seen as an instrument of improvement, which resulted in the peculiar interlocking of the anthropological with the therapeutic.

(8) The aim to understand the functioning of the aesthetic in the order of things meant mostly to understand (and promote) the functions or values of the aesthetic in human flourishing. For describing these functions, the aesthetic theories of the British Enlightenment utilized a theological language, the language of final causes, constructing teleological arguments in order to answer the anthropocentric concern with the value of aesthetic experience in the preservation and improvement of human life.

(9) The agenda of the teleological accounts was in accord with the anthropocentric shifts in eighteenth-century providentialism, which presented the Providential Order as an economy of “mutual benefits” designed for the preservation and improvement of human life (TAYLOR 2007). Similarly, the final causes assigned to the aesthetic by the teleological accounts all served the betterment of human life. Instead of presenting arguments from design, these teleological accounts embedded the aesthetic into crucial aspects of human life, arguing for its valuable role in bodily and mental well-being, moral and pious culture, and social cohesion. The aesthetic, as a fine yet important particle in the Providential Order, was presented through these arguments as an instrumental experience and susceptibility that benefits the preservation and improvement of human life.

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