



On Schiller's Thought of Aesthetic Education

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Abstract

The great German poet, thinker, and distinguished aesthetic theorist Schiller pointed out in his most important aesthetic work "Letters on Aesthetic Education" that human nature can be transformed and elevated through aesthetic education. The transformation of eras and societies can be achieved through the means of artistic beauty, rather than violent revolutions. This article will analyze Schiller's thoughts on aesthetic education, thereby discovering the artistic value of beauty, understanding the role of aesthetic education, and subsequently drawing insights for contemporary social development.

Subject Areas

Higher Education

Keywords

Schiller, Aesthetic Education Thought

1. Introduction

Enlightenment At the end of the 18th century, the impoverished Schiller was fortunate to be rescued from his predicament with the support of the Danish Prince Augustenburg. In gratitude for the prince's generous help, Schiller shared his recent aesthetic thoughts with the prince in the form of letters, which are the surviving "Letters on Aesthetic Education". The core of Schiller's aesthetic thought is the concept of aesthetic education, and his ideas are mainly reflected in this book. Here, "beauty" refers to the art of beauty, and "education" refers to behavior and action, rather than traditional education in a specific sense.

2. Explanation of Schiller's Significant Aesthetic Education Thought

In order to gain a deeper understanding of Schiller's aesthetic education thoughts

and the study of aesthetics, the following will explain and elaborate on Schiller's important ideas on aesthetic education one by one.

2.1. Human Nature—The Starting Point of Schiller's Aesthetic Education Thought

Schiller is a philosopher who further contemplates the beauty of humanity based on Kant's aesthetics. He re-examines human nature from an aesthetic perspective. He believes that "a permanent and a constantly changing thing can be distinguished in a person", and that human nature is composed of two major elements, namely personality and state. [1] Personality is what he refers to as the "unchanging thing", which is a rational form derived from the rational level of humans. Naturally, the "constantly changing thing" refers to the state, which continuously generates various sensory contents with the passage of time and changes in the external environment, originating from the perceptual level of humans. Thus, a human being is a combination of perception and reason, a fusion of personality and state.

With the progression of the late Industrial Revolution, the constant changes in the objective world and the continuous development of human civilization have had a significant impact on humanity itself: firstly, the disconnection between individuals and society, and secondly, the internal fragmentation within each individual [2]. This influence has led to a split in human nature. The reasons for this can be traced back to the enhancement of human rationality, the development of various disciplines, and the intensification of social division of labor caused by the Industrial Revolution. These factors have accelerated the separation of sensibility and rationality, leading to a fragmentation of human nature, and thus, humans are no longer whole beings. Over time, this leads to a disconnection between the state and society, effort and reward, resulting in both society and individuals becoming fragmented.

2.2. Aesthetic Education—A Pathway to Perfecting Human Nature

So how can we repair humanity? Where is the way out? Schiller believes that modern people cannot reshape a complete human nature through the state, because it is the modern state that has led to the fragmentation of human nature. Any political revolution cannot achieve political freedom and will only cause further division of the human heart; similarly, it cannot be achieved through reason, as the duty of reason is to propose laws. The reshaping of human nature can only be realized through aesthetic activities, and "the play impulse" is a very important activity in aesthetics. Here, what Schiller calls "play" is not traditionally understood as play, but rather a state of freedom after humans have freed themselves from material desires and moral law enforcement. In a sense, "play" means "the birth of man" and "the return of human nature". So how can a person enter "play"? As mentioned earlier, humans are a fusion of sensibility and rationality. The former enables rational forms to gain sensory content, an effect that becomes

a sensory impulse; The latter makes external reality obey rational laws, known as a rational impulse. When humans develop harmoniously between sensory and rational impulses, they will enter play, and this possibility will be realized through a new impulse, namely the “play impulse.” It is a product of the combination of sensory and rational impulses, capable of leading humans to the essence of freedom. Schiller believes that with the “play impulse,” true aesthetic activities are born, thus giving rise to the art of beauty [3]. Therefore, in order to save humanity, people must take the path of aesthetic activities, play with beauty and art together, put themselves in an aesthetic state, allow people to better withstand the power of nature and moral governance in this state, thereby making people perfect individuals and realizing ideal human nature.

2.3. Pursuing Harmony between Individuals and Society—The Destination of Schiller’s Aesthetic Thought

In his youth, Schiller was deeply influenced by Enlightenment thought and expressed strong dissatisfaction with feudal despotism and a beautiful longing for freedom and equality in his early works. However, after the outbreak of the French Revolution and the series of problems it triggered, Schiller’s ideals of pursuing freedom, equality, and fraternity were destroyed. He no longer supported the means of transforming society through political revolution but turned to sacred art, hoping to achieve what violent revolution could not through aesthetic education. He believed that although there is an opposition between sensibility and rationality in human nature, there is also the ability to make these two opposing forces work together, which can produce a third character that is different from both sensibility and rationality, namely, the character of beauty. The innovation and progress of the times should start with the refinement of individual character, but unfortunately, the historical background in which Schiller lived could not ensure that everyone could possess this ability through reason and wisdom to achieve true refinement. Therefore, Schiller brought people into his “aesthetic state” and used aesthetic education as a path to use the art of beauty as a tool for the refinement of human character, allowing aesthetic taste to dominate everything, making his “aesthetic state” constantly expand. Here, there is no dictatorship, everyone will discover beauty, appreciate beauty, respect beauty, and be able to live in a free, equal, and refined social environment. In Schiller’s conception, it is possible to achieve a high degree of harmony between humans and society through the path of “beauty”, realize human freedom, and thus achieve the purpose of improving politics and transforming society.

3. The Limitation of Schiller’s Aesthetic Education Thought

No idea can be perfect, and it is clear that Schiller’s thoughts on aesthetic education also have certain limitations. Firstly, from a realistic and objective perspective, Schiller’s abandonment of the empirical approach leads him to overlook the complexity of the world and the diversity of events when analyzing problems. For

instance, after the outbreak of the French Revolution, Schiller believed that the revolution could not bring about true freedom but would instead plunge society into an even more extreme state [4]. Clearly, his viewpoint was biased. In the context where the lower classes were very lazy and the upper class was increasingly weak, Schiller's attempt to reform society and save the era through the art of beauty was rather unrealistic. Moreover, in the face of such significant events, he overlooked the complexity of the event itself, deviated from the objective developmental trajectory of the times, fell into the pitfalls of idealism, which prevented him from transcending the limitations of time and class. Therefore, his idea of saving the era through the art of beauty has been criticized by many as merely an unrealistic fantasy under the feudal private ownership system. Only after political and social revolutions are completed and power is firmly held by the people can aesthetic education truly flourish.

Secondly, his concept of "play" was originally intended to perfect human nature and grant individuals freedom through aesthetic education. However, precisely at this point, his propositions are ineffectual. The play impulse he referred to essentially pertains to the aesthetic impulse, which is fundamentally about freedom. Yet, under the social conditions of that time, it was challenging to realize the autonomy and freedom of play, making it an aesthetic activity imbued with utopian ideals. Furthermore, from Schiller's thoughts, we can discern that he seemed to believe that beautiful art was a panacea capable of curing any societal issues. As long as one could create beautiful art and implement aesthetic education, one would certainly cultivate noble character, thereby achieving complete individual freedom and making society more beautiful. However, art remains art; its essence is still a spiritual activity and cannot fully replace the struggle with weapons and substantial transformations. It should also be noted that as an advocate of aesthetics, Schiller overemphasized the positive role of beauty, leading to neglect of other important areas and avoiding discussions on the potential negative impacts of beauty and art.

Thirdly, the subjective initiative of humans and their comprehensive development have been overlooked. Marxism believes that humans change with the development and changes of society, and the changes in human morality are fundamentally influenced by social transformations. The evolution of human nature and the improvement of morality are mainly accomplished through practice. Only through transformative activities in nature and society can humans achieve freedom and perfect their humanity. Art, as an auxiliary educational tool, cannot solely rely on it to perfect one's character or elevate moral standards. In Schiller's aesthetic education philosophy, he regards aesthetic education as the only way to realize human freedom, overlooking the subjective initiative of humans and exaggerating the function of aesthetic education. This viewpoint is also not conducive to the comprehensive development of humans. Schiller only focused on human actions in art and beauty, neglecting human creativity in other fields. Only by achieving comprehensive development in morality, intelligence, physical

fitness, aesthetics, and labor can individuals gradually develop into complete beings, thereby liberating humans from unidirectional thinking, eliminating selfishness and greed in emotions, cultivating empathy, and ultimately achieving harmonious development between humans and society, and between humans and nature.

4. The Value of Schiller's Aesthetic Education Thought

4.1. The Unique Position of Aesthetic Education Has Been Established

Through reading, "Letters on Aesthetic Education" can be roughly divided into three parts: What is beauty? What is the significance and value of beauty? How to achieve beauty? Among these, the most influential is that Schiller formally proposed the concept of "aesthetic education" for the first time, hence, he was also revered as the "Father of Modern Aesthetic Education". In the second letter of "Letters on Aesthetic Education", Schiller pointed out: "In order to solve political problems in experience, we must go through the path of aesthetic education, because it is through beauty that people can truly achieve freedom." [5] This is the first formal proposal on the issue of "aesthetic education" in world history, which has epoch-making significance for promoting the development of aesthetics and the perfection of aesthetic education theory. "It can be said that from Schiller onwards, aesthetic education has truly established its unique position." [6]

4.2. The Development of Aesthetic Education Has Played a Pivotal Role in Bridging the Past and Paving the Way for the Future

Scholars have pointed out that the developmental history of Western aesthetics should be from Kant to Schiller, and then to Marx. In the first letter of "Letters on Education," Schiller also wrote: "Indeed, I am not willing to conceal from you that most of the views below are based on Kant's principles." [7] That is to say, Schiller's ideological foundation comes from Kantian aesthetics, but he also made breakthroughs and innovations in Kant's theory. Based on Kant's proposition that "beauty is a symbol of morality", he proposed the idea that "beauty is the freedom of human nature", and under the viewpoint that "aesthetic feelings arise from the free play of imagination", he introduced concepts such as the "urge to play". In addition, he inherited the ideas of aesthetic education from Plato, Aristotle, and others, not only strengthening the function of beauty but also closely linking aesthetics with humans, marking another major breakthrough in the history of aesthetics. On the other hand, Schiller's aesthetic thoughts left valuable intellectual resources for Marx, Hegel, and others. Marx once discussed the issue that comprehensive human development is a necessary condition for building communism, an issue influenced by Schiller's ideas on aesthetic education. It can be said that Schiller holds a pivotal position in the history of Western aesthetics; his thoughts on aesthetic education form a key part of Western aesthetics and serve as an important bridge.

4.3. Influencing the Development and Construction of China

Schiller's aesthetic education thought not only has a significant impact on the development of Chinese aesthetics, but also plays an irreplaceable role in the development of China's educational undertakings and modernization. As early as the beginning of the 20th century, Schiller's aesthetic education thought was introduced to China through Wang Guowei's introduction, and later Cai Yuanpei creatively proposed the proposition of "replacing religion with aesthetic education" under its influence, which had a wide-ranging impact. At the same time, the universal applicability and practicality contained in Schiller's aesthetic thought enabled Cai Yuanpei to apply it specifically to the development of China's education: during his tenure as the Minister of Education, he promoted aesthetic education along with intellectual, moral, and physical education; During his tenure as President of Peking University, he personally guided the practice of aesthetic education. In addition, when facing a series of phenomena brought about by China's modernization construction, such as human indifference, moral decline, and the expansion of materialism, Schiller had already criticized them in his theory and warned the world to redeem the soul with aesthetics and get out of the crisis. This is undoubtedly a valuable experience for our country's modernization construction and development.

5. The Enlightenment of Schiller's Aesthetic Education Thought on Contemporary Society

5.1. Inspiration to Education Construction

Schiller believed that aesthetic education is education for all, regardless of wealth, status, or religious beliefs. His thoughts have certain guiding significance for the development and construction of educational undertakings on a macro level. Firstly, it is necessary to improve the aesthetic literacy of educators. The aesthetic literacy of teachers directly affects the aesthetic literacy of students, so teachers need to enhance their own aesthetic abilities and form an aesthetic consciousness. Secondly, they should cultivate the ability to express beauty and develop an attitude towards life that values beauty. Teachers are not only disseminators of knowledge but also disseminators of beauty. Only by being beautiful themselves can they guide students to discover, appreciate, and enjoy beauty. Gradually infuse professional aesthetic education knowledge into the teaching process, subtly affecting students' aesthetic tastes. Secondly, optimize the setting of aesthetic education courses. Schiller advocated using aesthetic means to promote human comprehensive development and thus achieve human freedom. This puts higher demands on aesthetic education courses. Aesthetic education courses must keep up with the times, be more professional, and have more diverse and lively content. While focusing on theoretical explanations, emphasis should also be placed on practical activities. By engaging students with interesting course content, we can stimulate their awareness and enthusiasm for aesthetic education, making the

“beauty” in aesthetic education better reflected. Thirdly, enrich practical activities in aesthetic education. Schiller believed that any pleasant acquisition of aesthetic concepts and consciousness cannot be separated from practice. The characteristic of aesthetic education is its practicality. Schools can regularly organize festival activities, art exhibitions, etc., based on students’ individual characteristics, allowing students to truly feel the truth, goodness, and beauty brought by art through aesthetic education activities. In addition, the teaching field can be extended to social life, allowing students to consciously discover and create beauty in practice.

5.2. Art is the “Soft Power” of National Development

In Schiller’s advocacy, we can truly feel his emphasis on art. In fact, in today’s social environment, we can indeed use art to save humanity. The power of art and its educational role are now no less than an ideological revolution. Since modern times in China, movements such as the May Fourth Movement and the New Culture Movement have raised the banners of patriotism, democracy, and science. Under the influence of these ideological waves, the Chinese people have elevated culture and art to a higher status. Today, for contemporary China, we still need to continue to pay attention to art and culture. It has always been a reaction to economic politics, and it will also react back to them. The value of art is mainly reflected in a noble and beautiful culture, which is also our indispensable “soft power” in international competition [8]. Therefore, we should insist more on the prosperity and development of socialist cultural undertakings with Chinese characteristics, exert the power of art, let every citizen participate in it, and emphasize the educational role of art, and now we do not need to spark another ideological revolution under the catalysis of art, but integrate the beauty of art into national construction and citizens’ humanity.

6. Sum up

More than two hundred years after Schiller’s death, when we look back at his contributions, we find that Schiller’s ideas on aesthetic education are not only of the past but also belong to the future. Despite the inevitable limitations of his thoughts, his high regard for spiritual and cultural construction in the process of modernity and his unremitting pursuit of human aesthetic existence has become a great spiritual force inspiring mankind to move forward. Nowadays, we should follow Schiller’s direction of aesthetic education, combine it with the characteristics of the times, innovate and keep up with the times, educate people with beauty, perfect human nature, achieve the two centennial goals, and then transition to a higher stage of socialism, and even create favorable conditions for realizing the beautiful ideal of a communist society. This is precisely the ultimate goal and task of aesthetic education.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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