Hutcheson, Francis [addendum] Encyclopedia Article

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Although Francis Hutcheson's name is frequently associated with the third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), the truth is that once he rejects John Locke's (1632–1704) contention that beauty is a complex idea, his aesthetic theory is thoroughly Lockean. That beauty is a simple idea, for Hutcheson, is made clear when he postulates a sense of beauty as necessary to perceive it. And such a move is fully sanctioned by Locke himself when he writes that "I have here followed the common opinion of men's having but five senses, though, perhaps there may justly be counted more" (John Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, II, ii, 3).

Hutcheson's most succinct and influential statement of his basic position goes as follows: "[T]he word *beauty* is taken for *the idea raised in us*, and a *sense* of beauty for *our power of receiving this idea*" (*Inquiry concerning Beauty*, I, ix, p. 34).

The idea of beauty, which is a simple idea, is caused to be excited in the sense of beauty, however, by a complex idea, namely any collection of ideas that possesses what Hutcheson calls "uniformity amidst variety." The sense of beauty perceives ideas, and not the external world directly, because it is what Hutcheson calls a "reflex" or "subsequent" sense, requiring the five "external" senses to provide its objects.

Few today will find this Lockean account of beauty and its perception at all plausible. Nonetheless, it is no exaggeration that it defined and drove aesthetic speculation through the whole of the eighteenth century in Great Britain. And because it was philosophy at the cutting edge, the influence was good, even though it turned out the doctrine was not.

See Also

Aesthetics, History Of; Beauty; Locke, John; Shaftesbury, Third Earl of (Anthony Ashley Cooper).

Bibliography

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