

Shared aesthetic starting points? Evolutionary aesthetics from a cultural-naturalistic perspective

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By now it has been established that our conception of art – which has definitely borne wonderful fruits – is, however, linked to a historically and geographically limited cultural context. The assumption that art «is putatively designed for disinterested contemplation, a source of pleasure divorced from the prospect of practical or utilitarian advantage, including social or religious benefits» (Carroll [2004]: 97) leaves out many aspects of human experience that, as claimed by Dennis Dutton, «people have little trouble identifying as artistic» (Dutton [2009]: 51). This circumstance has been geographically and culturally proved by numerous anthropological studies of other contexts, different from our own.

The thesis of the chronological limits of the current concept of art – seen briefly as a unified category, purposeless and therefore opposed to the old servile arts, autonomistic, which is to say not subject to heterogeneous criteria of judgement, and basically formalistic – has found solid arguments in the history of our «Western civilization». However, I wish to make it clear here that I will not go into a discussion of this category, which I will be using in a non-dogmatic and provisional way. Kristeller and Blumenberg are the two scholars who have most effectively outlined those processes related to the affirmation of Art with a capital A and understood as a singular noun, as well as of the concept of the artist as a creator. They have shown that it deals precisely with historical processes from which certain interpretations emerge, stemming from more inclusive and more continuist conceptions of artistic practices with respect to other human activities (cfr. Kristeller [1951], Kristeller [1952], Blumenberg [1957]).

But our contemporary world too testifies that this concept of art covers only a limited portion of artistic practices and human aesthetic experiences. And this is not merely shown by the enormous production of mass culture and the very broad market of

cultural and creative industries, which Noel Carroll has rightly presented as worthy of philosophical consideration (cfr. Carroll [1998]). The fact that the divine city of art, which Danto contrasts with the earthly city of the real world (cfr. Danto [1964]), is far from exhausting those human experiences that in one way or another we define as artistic is also demonstrated by those minor behaviours that characterize our lives from early childhood: listening to stories and storytelling, the tendency to dramatize or pretend by playing different roles and parts, the ability to look after the places in which we live and celebrate our daily rituals, to beautify our faces or to make our appearance more harmonious, and the disposition to accompany the various moments in our lives with melodies and with para- or proto-poetics texts – from lullabies to funeral dirges, from work songs to military marches, down to those homely musical atmospheres we like being welcomed with when returning home from work.

Surely one cannot give a definition of art that applies uniformly to all these cases: if even the much more limited attempt – from this point of view – to define art in the narrow sense just described has clearly failed, trying to say in what sense we can call artistic a series of human activities that differ in terms of their historical, cultural and geographical contexts seems completely impossible. And yet, the fact that the arts are historically shifting terms, whose outlines are constantly open and under development – they can be characterized as «fuzzy sets» (cfr. on that Vineis-Satolli [2009]: 8 ss.), a term introduced by a certain trend in current epistemology – does not prevent us from speaking of artistic practices. On the contrary, maybe it just shows that the plurality of ways in which we humans tend to «artify» our world concerns the very roots of our humanity. We do not necessarily have to conclude that either we can find a closed definition or else we have to give up the use of a certain word, at least on a scientific level. It is as though, because of the failures of philosophers – from Augustine to Heidegger – to define what time is, we were to treat our pervasive use of the term «time» and its ever-changing limits as unwarranted and purge it from our (philosophical) language.

Despite certain difficulties, then, can the whole cluster of disciplines that have raised the question of the evolutionary origins of the arts help us recover a sense or a larger set of inter-related senses of artistic practices and the aesthetic aspects of our experience? Can they offer us some tools to articulate a more inclusive and more continuist (with respect to other human practices) conception of artistic practices? And, above all, within which theoretical framework can we do this? Can we avoid slipping into dogmatic forms of reductionism, where the only alternative to the cultural relativism of allegedly

immeasurable artistic patterns seems to consist in the naturalization of the cultural into the biological and of the mental into the physical?

The problem I am explicitly posing from a philosophical point of view is whether the answers that we find in the complex field of evolutionary aesthetics allow us to approach the question of the (possible) human aesthetic starting points, with an eye to avoiding forms of reductionism – that is, ultimately, with a resolution of the psychic or of the mental into the physical – as well as foundationalism (where every effort is aimed at identifying the allegedly final and unique cause of phenomena, which is meant to be preserved from the possibility of being further questioned or discussed). In other words, is it possible to preserve a pluralistic perspective on the different issues and solutions glimpsed? What contributions can we find in this body of inquiries in order to better understand the roles that artifying behaviours and the aesthetic aspects of our experience have in the configuration of our humanity, within the framework of a cultural naturalism – to use John Dewey's formula – capable of taking into account both the natural roots of culture and the cultural complexity of human nature?¹ It is against this sort of background – a substantially pragmatist one – that I will try to compare some of the methods and categories that have emerged in the aforementioned debate.

As I set out to argue, I believe that these questions may find at least partially positive answers. Among the concepts, problems and methods of the non-linear and sometimes conflicting evolutionary debate it is possible to find some suggestions as to how we should envisage the tangle of artifying behaviours which human beings seem unable to give up, for one reason or another, from a philosophical perspective as well – the anthropology and sociology of art are already on more advanced positions from this point of view. I do not mean to deny that many of the so-called aesthetic evolutionary arguments tend towards forms of reductionism or involve philosophically problematic assumptions, but it seems more fruitful to draw upon some resources they provide, and which we could possibly make profitable philosophical use of.

¹In order to briefly summarize Dewey's cultural naturalism, one might mention his idea of a continuum between nature and culture; his assumption that culture, language and meanings emerge from our naturally social environment; his idea of human organisms as dynamically acting in nature and able to configure and change it from the inside, which is to say the notion of a retroaction of meaningful human activities upon the more naturalistic aspects of our world; and finally his marked anti-dualism. For an attempt to distinguish Dewey's naturalism from the present naturalizing trend in philosophy, see Margolis (2002). For naturalism as a shared trait in classical pragmatism, see Calcaterra (2011).

1. *The many ways of using the word «art»*

A first important point concerns the underlying trend in the debate – an implicit but clear trend – to regard the search for a strict definition of art – an essentialist, procedural, or functionalist one – as fruitless, on the grounds that despite being as historically and geographically anchored as any other inquiry, it seems to remain unaware of its roots and of the limitations they entail. In particular, what is philosophically central, as explicitly pointed out by Dennis Dutton, is the recovery of an average and unreflective pre-understanding of the arts: «a much more vague and broad pretheoretical understanding of what art is» (Dutton [2009]: 66). In fact, this acts as an unreflective assumption that also allows us to discriminate between culturally different artistic modes, and even to claim that «they do not have our concept of art». Dutton's insistence on the fact that artistic practices are prior than the formulation of aesthetic theories – with the splendid exception of contemporary art, on which Danto has based his generalizations² – has much in common with Dewey's claim on the derived or reflexive character of inquiry, which comes after practice and returns to it when established behavioural patterns fall into crisis and no longer function as usual³. It is also reminiscent of Peirce's thesis that «Thinking for a moment, it will be clear that a whole amount of facts are already assumed when a logical question arises for the first time» (Peirce [1932-1958]: 5.369). In other words, beliefs, assumptions and habits related to our practices – artistic ones in this case – play a structural role with respect to which any attempt to analytically define what art is here and now proves parasitic.

Of course these are in fact multiple and diverse ways, but their persistence and pervasiveness, rather than leading us to expunge and amend the word «art» because it is not univocal, should prompt us to ask whether it deals with deep anthropological attitudes, rooted in our being part of a natural and naturally social environment. To quote another notion that is very popular both in philosophical discussions and in our everyday lives, the word «game» is used in many different ways, and any attempt to define what all kinds of games have in common is doomed to fail. However, the fact that

² With regard to this point, both Carroll (2004) and Dutton (2009) have claimed that the various attempts to define art which have characterized the analytic debate on aesthetics ever since the 1950s, very often set out from very particular cases – such as Dadaist works or Pop art ones – which are conceived as paradigmatic forms of art, while they appear rather marginal and in any case atypical, if compared to other worldly artistic practices, considered both from a historical and a geographical point of view.

³ On the role of inquiry in connection to the immediate felt experience, see Dewey (1988) and Dewey (1991). Dewey (1951) is also particularly clear on this point.

men tend to play from early childhood to old age is a good enough reason not to get rid of the concept or attempt to artificially define its boundaries, but rather to acknowledge that it stands for a plurality of traits intrinsic to our being human.

In this respect, the arts are like other grand, vague, but real and persistent aspects of human life, such as religion, the family, friendship, society, or war. Despite disputed and borderline cases, they can be in many cases easily recognized across cultures and through history (Dutton [2009]: 63).

2. *Behaviours versus objects*

A second notable aspect of the debate to which some voices on the evolutionary origins of the arts have made an important contribution concerns the reframing of the very subject of the enquiry. Many contemporary scholars arguing from an ethological perspective – one might say even Darwin himself in his writings – do not consider the arts primarily as objects or entities of a particular kind; rather they regard the arts as practices, behaviours, or human modes of interactions with the world (Dewey [1989]: 9)⁴. While this kind of approach is almost taken for granted by the scholars who adopt it – anthropologists and ethnologists such as Ellen Dissanayake, Dean Falk, and of course Irenhaus Eibl-Eibesfeldt – it appears to be philosophically central because it allows us to reformulate the problem of the so-called «*Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*», starting no longer from the particular entity which the work of art allegedly is, but from the sort of practice or human activity that is taking place. It deals with a practice that can obviously give rise to significant products, or can be supported by special kinds of things, but which does not necessarily lead to an object, liable to be separated from the action generating it and from the experience as part of which it is enjoyed.

On this point there is a clear analogy with the perspective of John Dewey's aesthetics, which starts simply by shifting the focus from the art product to art as an experience, in

⁴ It must be noted that this kind of behavioural approach does not represent the main trend in the debate on the evolutionary origins of art, which is often absorbed by the idea of an aesthetic or artistic mind, whose cognitive structures and functions should be clarified in order to explain why and how the arts began and flourished in human history. I believe that an ethological perspective, which includes interpretations of the mental and even neurological aspects of our experience, but is primarily focused on the dynamic interactions of organisms as a whole with their own environment, can be more fruitful for understanding the role that aesthetics and the arts play in human nature. As Terrence Deacon has acknowledged, «we tend to consistently underestimate the constructive power of extra-neuronal, supra-cognitive factors, and correspondingly overestimate what must be contributed by special features of human brains» (Deacon [2006]: 29).

order to recover a continuist conception of the arts. This happens at the expense of a more traditional philosophical starting point – the one represented by the question «what is a work of art?» – evidently favouring an autonomistic conception of the arts, because they are primarily conceived here as types of entities, liable to be removed from their context and to be understood as if they were independent from those rites, games and human activities they are part of.

But there is another important point connected to this approach, one which seems almost self-evident when expressed in Ellen Dissanayake's words, but which has largely been ignored by the modern philosophical tradition: «Ethology is the study of the behaviour of animals *in their natural environment*» (Dissanayake [1995]: 8, emphasis added). From this point of view, human conduct is not just the result of a subject's intentionality, but a form of interaction with the environment on which the organism depends for its very survival, understood at all levels of complexity and sophistication – as Dewey had already realized in his appropriation of Charles Darwin. The arts, from this perspective, are not dependent upon the *fiat* uttered by the alleged creative genius, who according to the late Romantic and theological tradition creates his products *ex nihilo* and in complete solitude (on this aspect cfr. Blumenberg [1957]); rather they have to do with our structural and non-optional relationships with the world.

On the other hand, we have to consider the very notion of organic life as an «energetic process during which organisms, bearers of this process, extract more potential energy from their environment than they must spend in the acquisition of this energy» – the basis of Eibl-Eibesfeldt's human ethology (Eibl-Eibesfeldt [1989]: 7; from now on quoted from the English translation). This idea of life takes as its premise the dependence of each organism on an environment, and thus shows itself to be very removed from traditional philosophical assumptions concerning the autonomy of consciousness and its creative abilities.

A third important point that has been brought up by many scholars in this debate, and in particular by those I have cited, is that the human natural habitat in which artistic practices take place is a naturally social habitat, that is an environment characterized by a high degree of social complexity – a much higher one than that of any other animal species, so that the degree of dependence of each organism from the group it belongs to is particularly acute and especially overloaded on an emotional level.

This type of assumption, therefore, limits to specific historical and geographical contexts the customary stereotype according to which art is above all a kind of subjective expression, thus calling for a major overhaul of the relationship between

individuality and sociality in artistic experiences.

Finally, when speaking about various forms of reductionism, it is also important to note the way in which ethology distances itself from the interpretation of behaviour in terms of stimulus-answer mechanisms⁵. Instead:

Human ethologists investigate complex behavioural sequences of individuals and interactions among people and groups of people. They thus work on higher integration levels than physiologists, who are concerned with the elemental life processes, such as stimulus perception, muscles contraction, and the conductions of nerve impulses. Although these processes are an important prerequisite to the understanding of behavioural events, one cannot deduce all the laws underlying any given social interaction from these elemental processes. Each higher level of integration has its own laws that cannot be derived from those of the levels below (Eibl-Eibesfeldt [1989]: 5).

A major breakthrough has been made in the debate, however, which concerns not just the term «behaviour», but also the adjective introduced by Ellen Dissanayake: what we are dealing with has come to be termed «artifying behaviours». In my opinion this category has at least two merits.

The first is that in this way a substantial role is attributed to those modes of deformation, stylization or alteration of both ordinary experiences and specifically artistic ones, which thus acquire a relevance that makes them perceivable as such. This move can be useful in moving away from the dichotomic conception of form and content, which is found both in formalistically oriented studies on the arts and in those having a more subject-oriented focus. This dichotomy can probably be traced back to Kant's thesis that pure judgements of taste are independent of any knowledge about the object which is being judged as beautiful, being merely based on the mutual arrangement of its traits in its representation and on the resultant harmonic arrangement of the soul's faculties in the judging subject. Formalism has therefore traditionally been connected to the autonomistic conception of the arts, but in order to recover a more continuist and inclusive comprehension of artistic phenomena we cannot simply dismiss the question of form in the arts. From this point of view, the so-called artifying hypothesis can help us better understand those formal aspects of our practices by regarding them as a structural means of making a certain event, relation or even object special for those who are sharing the same experience.

The second merit of the stress on artifying behaviours regards the possibility of

⁵ On this subject see Eibl-Eibesfeldt's critique to behaviourism in the first chapter of Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1967).

understanding the dialectic between ordinary and extraordinary – in the basic sense of «out of the ordinary» – which in modern times has led us to the contrast between (ethereal) works of art and what are regarded as mere things, as well as between the art world and reality. What are artified, or made special in Ellen Dissanayake's words, are the very behaviours, situations and interactions that characterize our ordinary everyday experiences: for example, communicative exchanges are made special by an overemphasis on the melodic and prosodic aspects of dyadic communication, through the accentuation of changes in movements and facial expressions. But as pointed out by Dissanayake herself, while on the one hand the notion of artifying behaviour strengthens the thesis that the roots of our artistic practices are situated in everyday life activities, on the other hand it brings out a certain distinction, by emphasizing those aspects that distinguish artistic gestures from the ordinary experience they stem from. So in the long run, the relationship between the ordinary world and the world of art can be interpreted in contrastive terms, possibly leading to the (false) autonomistic assumptions we are so familiar with.

3. *Reducing or complicating?*

It cannot be denied that at first glance the use of the simplified categories of adaptation, by-product, or noise seems like a reductionist approach, in which each phenomenon is to be pigeonholed according to the scholastic version of Darwin's natural selection developed by the so-called Modern Synthesis. It is in these terms that – at least *prima facie* – we may understand Gould's famous thesis according to which the arts, along with the whole of human culture, are the by-product of a single adaptive and more basic event, that is the enormous expansion of the human brain. What appear particularly reductionistic are Steven Pinker's metaphorical statements that the arts (and music in particular), with the exception of fiction, constitute a «strawberry cheesecake» or one of those «Sunday afternoon projects of dubious adaptive importance», compared to that neural computer derived from natural selection that is our mind (on this aspect cfr. Dutton [2009]: chapter 5).

But the debate about the evolutionary origins of the arts is actually far more multifaceted and not entirely reducible to the now popular philosophical attempts to naturalize the mind, epistemology or culture on physical grounds. First of all, for the simple reason that biology has to do with the complexity of living phenomena, which cannot easily be reduced to mere one-way relationships of efficient causality. Let us only consider here the well known fact that one of the areas which inspired Kant to formulate

his *Critique of Judgement* was, in addition to the still very large field of the arts, that of biology and the study of those natural phenomena falling beyond the laws of physics.

To begin with, the very category of by-product is anything but simple, as noted by Stephen Davies in his article *Why Art is not a Spandrel*. Given that a spandrel is an architectural element devoid of any static purpose in the construction of a four-arched dome – as in San Marco's church in Venice –, it is much more problematic to argue that the arts are mere spandrels, for example, in the development of an abnormal brain, primarily because «evolution never begins afresh but instead builds on what already exists» (cfr. Davies [2010]: 336). Besides, it should firstly be ruled out that the arts are completely devoid of any adaptive significance. Perhaps it might be more useful to refer to the category of exaptation, derived from Gould himself: an evolutive phenomenon originally suited to a certain function but which later acquires a totally unexpected one, as noted by Mariagrazia Portera (cfr. Portera [2013]).

A deep dissatisfaction with the alternative between adaptation and by-product is shown by Dennis Dutton, who in his book *The Art Instinct* notes that there is no need to celebrate the arts by invoking the idea of adaptation and that they cannot simply be dismissed as a by-product of the collision between biology and culture. The point is that the tendency of the arts to «intensify experience, enhance it, extend it in time, and make it coherent» escapes the meshes of this conceptual dichotomy and rather requires the introduction of a category such as that of «evolutive extension» (cfr. Dutton (2009): 102 and 99).

In my opinion, what is at stake in this debate is the very concept of survival, so central in evolutionary theories. The strenuous persistence and extensive spread of aesthetic experiences and artistic practices should lead us to wonder about their meaning for human beings. From this point of view, the interpretation of the arts urges a reorientation of evolutionary theories, because even under the most unfavourable material conditions we display an anthropological tendency to enjoy our own interactions with the environment and to artify our behaviours which cannot be explained if we remain on the level of mere subsistence – as though it were possible to abstract a basic level of human life prior to all affective and symbolic connotations (on this point see the *Introduction* in Boas [1951]).

With regard to the concept of adaptation, Ellen Dissanayake has rightly stressed that:

The concept of adaptive function need not be inflexible, hierarchical or deterministic [...] Quite the contrary – the adaptationist idea is that behaviours are evolved predispositions that can be expressed in a variety of cultural and individual manifestation. (Dissanayake [2008]: 5)

But there is another more fundamental aspect I would like to mention: if we speak of attempts to trace the biological roots of the arts, we must ask what idea we have of these (alleged) roots, what kind of configuration they acquire, in order to understand what form of reduction of artistic phenomena we may be dealing with.

Some observations made by Dennis Dutton are significant when it comes to evaluating the role played by sexual selection. Dutton invites us to consider the complexity of human sexuality: against some oversimplified interpretations, he argues that sexuality – and so-called «reproductive success», on which so much has been said from Darwin onwards – cannot be reduced to mere procreation, since they are based on careful and refined discrimination on the part of women: for the chances of survival of their offspring are not exclusively related to the partner's health or physical power, but also to his propensity to «stick around, provide, and protect» (Dutton [2009]: 41).

Even Winfried Menninghaus' argument that the pursuit of beauty is linked to sexual selection opens up an interesting perspective on human sexuality – and this not just because, reviving the original dynamism of Darwin's thought, Menninghaus highlights its expensive and divergent aspects with respect to natural selection. Rather, the sort of human sexuality emerging from his book *The Promise of Beauty* is characterized as intrinsically carrying proto-evaluative aspects that serve as orientation criteria and as guidelines in the choice between different environmental possibilities: in a way, we might say that from this point of view biology itself poses a challenge to the usual dichotomy between facts and values which still stands at the basis of radically reductionist approaches (cfr. Menninghaus [2003]).

But it is especially in the works of Ellen Dissanayake and in those of Dean Falk that we find a complex interpretation of human life and of its implications, right from its biological foundations. Affective exposure and mutuality emerge here as structural traits at work from the earliest stages of life, which cannot be separated from the alleged level of mere physical survival⁶.

The basic idea, I think, is the one we can find in the classical pragmatism of Dewey and Mead by following a different route: not only are human bodies social, but the degree of complexity of human interdependence is perhaps qualitatively – and certainly quantitatively – new in the animal world; hence, it must be acknowledged that the human environment is as much natural as it is naturally social. To return to Dissanayake and Falk, the propensity to establish, maintain and strengthen ties, contacts and forms of

⁶ Several works by Dissanayake have been already mentioned. In addition, see Falk (2009).

proto-verbal communication is biologically founded on the marked immaturity characterizing human offspring at birth – on account of those physical limits consisting, on the one hand, in the narrowness of the female pelvis compared to human cranial capacity and, on the other, in the vulnerability of human infants when compared to other primates, as they are unable to cling on to the mother's body. But in order to survive even at a supposedly basic level, human babies need cares as much as food, human contact and special attention as much as oxygen. Whereas Dean Falk primarily emphasises the importance of all the phatic aspects of language and of the arts for human survival, Ellen Dissanayake identifies the tendency to artify exchange behaviours in babytalk – to stylize them, emphasizing certain aspects, making them salient and accentuating their trans-or multi-modal characters – as the very core of artistic practices, by means of which human weakness is transformed into something special that stands out from the coming and going of our ordinary experiences, and transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary, or finds the latter in the former.

All doubts aside, by embracing this perspective I believe that it is possible to follow the path of cultural naturalism without running the risk of reductionism. For while the arts are biologically rooted, human biology appears to be already inclusive of cultural, social and symbolic components, in the broad sense of the term, which are part of material human subsistence and can be isolated only retrospectively, for heuristic or at any rate secondary purposes.

4. Foundationalism, coevolution and retroaction

Let us now examine the issue of foundationalism. It is clear that, particularly in the case of those authors according to whom the arts emerged as a result of the explosive growth of the human brain and of the abnormal expansion of its cognitive capacities, much of the debate on the evolutionary origins of the arts has a foundationalist structure, because it assumes that biological development constitutes precisely the mature and already complete basis on which cultural and artistic development in particular are grounded.

However, new elements have emerged in recent years that appear to support an idea which I personally encountered for the first time in a book by Clifford Geertz. In 1973 the anthropologist criticized the assumption that a sharp line of demarcation can be drawn between mental evolution and cultural accumulation, as though the latter had suddenly appeared on an already fully developed organic support. On the contrary Geertz suggested that the two processes of organic and cultural evolution developed together

through complex mutual interactions, with humans' ability to manipulate, for example, and human social contexts feeding neurological development (Geertz [1973], chapter 3).

It seems to me that Steven Mithen is now proceeding in a similar direction, because in an article he published together with Lawrence Parsons in 2008 he does not hesitate to criticize the traditional assumption shared by archaeological researchers, and which he previously upheld himself (Mithen [2008]). This is the idea that the brain is a biological constant from which every inquiry must begin, as if its evolutionary process had come to an end before cultural development could take place. However, in the light of some recent results in the field of neuroscience, Mithen now argues that the cultural contexts in which the human brain evolved affected its development both anatomically and functionally, thus influencing both the human species as a whole and individuals. In other words, the homo sapiens brain is not a pre-existing purely biological entity, prior to cultural development, but continued evolving because of the influences from social institutions, the world of artefacts, and so on.

This hypothesis is rather similar to the one already formulated by Terrence Deacon in 1997, in a book where he proposes the theory of a coevolution between language and the brain – a theory later expanded to include the artistic field as well. Deacon explicitly takes up Gould's category of exaptation, along with a Baldwinian perspective on human neurological evolution (Deacon [1997]: chapter 11). He argues that the peculiarity of the human brain lies neither in its size nor in completely new brain areas, but that it is connected to the deep reorganization which the human brain underwent through the development of the capacity for symbolic reference. In Deacon's view, this ability produced a discontinuity as compared to other forms of animal communication, which were already capable of gestural reference, but remained unable to access the level of symbolic reference, where common references are ensured by the systematic reference to other signs. The emerging capacity for symbolic reference affected neurological structures by leading them to develop a tremendous amount of new and very flexible connections, capable of producing a new mode of organization of the brain. In his essay *The Aesthetic Faculty*, Deacon argues that human aesthetic experience is connected to the enormous plasticity and maximum expansion of the possible connections between cognitive and emotional aspects of our exploration of the world. In this perspective, the arts appear to be an expression of the desire to master these generative possibilities, and a means to do so; as such, they allow us to glimpse the possibility of alternative behaviours, to explore other forms of affective interaction, and to acquire a major degree of awareness (Deacon [2006]).

Yet there is another (perhaps less striking) aspect of the foundationalist objection that can be ascribed to the debate on the evolutionary origins of the arts. It has to do with a certain hierarchy among the human capacities in question: primacy is assigned to either cognition (Pinker, Tooby and Cosmides) or language (Deacon), or even to the human tendency to artify (Dissanayake). Can we – and *should* we – really determine whether man became what he is only when he was able to produce and use tools, or articulate a verbal form of communication, or practice forms of art, ritualization and play? (cfr. Minelli [2013]).

The new suggestion from Dean Falk's writings (and partly also those of Terrence Deacon, in spite of the differences between their conceptions of human language) is that linguistic and artistic practices have had a common, intertwined development and have been supporting and influencing each other. Personally, I favour this hypothesis because, on the one hand, it seems to me difficult to argue that human artistic practices have no significant implications and, on the other, I find a conception of language focusing exclusively on its referential functions a purely abstract idea. What seems particularly promising to me is Falk's notion that the phatic aspects of communication may have contributed – and may still be contributing – to making both syntactic discrimination and semantic function (or even symbolic function in Deacon's sense) more effective.

In any case, both these authors' conclusions, as well as the work of Ellen Dissanayake, emphasise the profound importance of communication, which seems to rest more on a human deficit than on any positive foundation, namely on the structural exposure of human beings since birth to a natural and naturally social environment, on which they depend for their survival, at all levels.

It is within a framework of this kind that Dewey introduces the word «aesthetic» with a different meaning from «artistic», in order to point at those aspects of our experience whereby, due to our structural dependency from an environment, we perceive situations, things and other people as either primarily friendly or fearsome, favourable or detrimental with respect not only to our survival but also our well-being.

To return now to the proto-verbal exchanges between mother and child, which Dissanayake and Falk regard as genuine aesthetic *incunabola*, it might be helpful to take up George Mead's concept of «conversation of gestures». A gesture in this context is not so much the motor or verbal sign of a referential meaning, in parallel with the idea that language basically consists in a combination of terms having meanings essentially understood as objects of reference or as logical entities (Mead [1934]); rather, a gesture is primarily conceived by Mead as the beginning of a social act, as an invitation to answer –

not necessarily verbally, but more generally in terms of behaviour – on the part of the interlocutor, who is consequentially driven to produce an appropriate reaction. The significant gesture and language in particular, much more easily and effectively ensure mutual interaction, to the extent that they make it possible for the speaker to adopt the same attitude towards himself as towards his interlocutor, who is led to play his own part. From this point of view, the human mutuality described by Dissanayake would concern the roots not only of artifying behaviours, but also of symbolic and linguistic ones.

5. *Pluralism?*

In this brief survey of some theoretical questions in the debate on the evolutionary origins of the arts that could fruitfully be explored from a cultural-naturalistic perspective, a few words should be said about pluralism, which seems to be the most anti-dogmatic outcome of the ongoing research in the field.

On the one hand, there appear to be a variety of different ways of artifying our experiences – so that the famous unitary system of the arts dating back to the eighteenth century reveals itself to be quite illusory (cfr. Kristeller [1951], [1952]). On the other hand, these are undeniably persistent and widespread practices – for example we continue to sing at funerals, even if contemporary funeral melodies are perhaps more likely to be those of pop music, as opposed to requiem masses or folk dirges. Why not assume, as Ellen Dissanayake does, that the anthropological tendency to stylize, to make our behaviours and situations special, takes a variety of forms? But at a more basic level, why not envisage this kind of inclination as being interwoven with a tendency towards the production of symbolic meanings both in the direction indicated by Deacon and in the different one outlined by Mead? And why not acknowledge the role of the act of fictionalizing, whose primarily anthropological rather than literary roots have been already underlined by Wolfgang Iser⁷?

As previously noted, it is necessary to avoid the philosophical tendency to establish phylogenetic and ontogenetic hierarchies, as if in each case only one propensity could be invoked to explain the difference between human beings and other animals.

Last but not least, we have to recognize that multiple causes may be at work, so that for example the pleasure of listening to and telling stories is central for us both because

⁷ Some interesting reflections on the role of fiction and especially the act of fictionalizing, understood as a human behaviour, can be found in Iser (1990) and Iser (1997/98). Among the many voices in the recent debate on the evolutionary origins of fiction, see Carroll (2004) and Boyd (2009).

it works as a virtual exploration of our emotional possibilities, as Deacon suggests, and because it help to configure our own identity in the various roles we play in our lives – and into which we are forced by a nature freed from constrictive instincts, but at the same time exposed to uncertainty in the choice between different answers, as argued by Iser.

To conclude with a reference to cultural naturalism, these kinds of interpretations on the origins of our artifying behaviours make it quite clear that in the case of human beings causes and reasons are not defined by sharp boundaries and that what seems to come later often feeds back on what appears to come before. characters and accents, in a territory, then as now, at the border between philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and biology.

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