

On The Rise of the Aesthetic Mind: Archaeology and Philosophy

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«The species-centred view of art reveals that the aesthetic is not something added to us ... but in large measure is the way we are, Homo aestheticus, stained through and through» (Dissanayake [1992]: xix).

To what extent, if indeed any, might our ability to engage in aesthetic experience be an eradicable part of the human mind? This question, daunting in its breadth, invites examination from several different perspectives. From a broadly anthropological point of view, it encourages us to reflect on our cognitive and socio-cultural evolution and the many ways in which our psychological development determines what it is to be human. From an archaeological angle, it urges us to consider various historical objects and sites as the expression of these forms of evolution and their importance in the continued transformation of the human mind. From a philosophical perspective, the question raises a host of issues about what distinguishes our ability for specifically aesthetic practice and experience, and which is manifest in the way we make and see things aesthetically¹. Perhaps most importantly, what does it really mean to say that some form of aesthetic impulse is constitutive of human nature? What are the marks of the aesthetic mind?

Of course even posing the question presupposes that it makes sense to posit a category of the aesthetic in the first place; a particular aspect of our psychology which

¹ Dissanayake (2014:3): Whilst aesthetics has traditionally «emphasized aesthetic *experience* more than making or physically participating in art – that is, “aesthetics” has often referred to a private, essentially passive “mental” experience. In a naturalistic view, aesthetic behavior is also concerned with aesthetic reception – experience or appreciation – but it includes and emphasizes making and participating».

somehow enables us to engage with our surroundings aesthetically. Certainly in the philosophical literature, there is little consensus surrounding the question of how we should conceive of the boundaries of the aesthetic. For some, the concept is closely connected to a framework in which beauty is the paradigmatic aesthetic quality². According to this model, the aesthetic sphere is constellated around the central function of mind which allows us, in Humean or Kantian terms, to make judgments of aesthetic taste. For others, it is crucial to look beyond traditional forms of beauty and broaden the scope of the aesthetic so as to include everyday experiences (such as the feeling of the sun's rays on one's skin or the sensation of wind blowing through one's hair)³. For others again, the aesthetic has the power to encompass religious and spiritual experiences, such as when we engage with the sublime or the super-natural. Here, the aesthetic is seen to reach into dimensions which extend far beyond traditional ideas of the formally beautiful or the sensuously pleasing⁴.

Many non-philosophers interested in aesthetics have nevertheless felt sufficiently comfortable with these fairly open boundaries to propose definitions of their own. Anthropologist Howard Morphy, for example, writes that «I define aesthetics as the effect of the physical properties of objects on the senses and the qualitative evaluation of those properties» (Morphy [1994]: 258). This is said to include cross-cultural effects as well as culturally specific perceptions of sensation⁵. In a somewhat similar vein, archaeologist Chris Gosden writes that «[t]he key link between people and the material world is that between aesthetics and emotions, both of which are felt in the body; both of which attach values to the world» (Gosden [2004]: 37). Aesthetics is, then, understood primarily in terms of the effects or sensations impressed upon us by qualities or properties which, in and of themselves, are not aesthetic. To put it slightly differently, on this line aesthetics is a way of perceiving or experiencing the world at least in part shaped by the group (or groups) we belong to. It is not something «out there» for us to discover and shape in accordance with our mind's aptitudes. Rather, «[t]he archaeology of aesthetics must simultaneously be an archaeology of perception» (Morphy [1994]: 258).

² See, for example, Mothersill (1984) and Kant (1790/2001).

³ See, for example, Irvin (2008); Saito (2007).

⁴ See, for example, Hepburn (2001).

⁵ To continue, Morphy writes that «[a]rchaeologically the task is to link qualities to context in order to build up a framework within which the role of qualities as *loci* of cultural value can be understood» (Morphy [1994]: 259).

Now, regardless of whether such definitions of the aesthetic are deemed entirely satisfactory or not, most interested parties would agree that we should not let the ambiguities surrounding the concept stop us in our investigative tracks. To use the words of Gosden again, «[w]hile I would accept that we need to be cautious in exactly how we use the term, the idea of aesthetics is too useful to throw out. I think the notion of aesthetics is vital in allowing us to understand the values that people attach to objects in different cultural contexts» (Gosden [2001]: 165). That is to say, «[a]esthetics need not emphasize concepts of beauty or refinement of taste, but rather the full range of evaluations any culture makes of its objects» (ivi: 167).

The main aim of this paper is to reflect further on the advantages and disadvantages of these loose conceptual boundaries. For while it is clear that holding an open view of the aesthetic has the advantage of allowing us to stretch far back into pre-historic practices, it is also possible that it restricts its explanatory power and range in our accounts of what constitutes that aesthetic mind in philosophical terms today. I will highlight some of the ways in which archaeological objects and sites can, at least in some respects, testify to the manifestation of the modern aesthetic mind. I will explore that idea that although art is not to be conceived as a spandrel or by-product, we might have to set certain standards for what rightly counts as aesthetic even though that might mean that we cannot accept the claim that art is, basically, an evolutionary adaptation without some further qualification. I would like to suggest that although the aesthetic representations we find in cave paintings do not indicate the emergence of some entirely new psychological ability, otherwise disconnected from our general cognitive development, there is some form of departure here which we must take note of. For, by tracing our capacity for aesthetic experience as far back into our history as possible, both in terms of our evolution as a species and also, perhaps, in terms of the development of our individual cognitive psychology, such as for example our neo-natal sense of rhythm⁶, we risk widening the concept of the aesthetic so much that it ceases to be useful. A particularly important task, then, and one which tends to be overlooked in interdisciplinary research, is to lead a discussion about whether the continued development of the *concept* of the aesthetic itself is to be considered as unproblematic or not. Until some progress is made in this area, and a better picture is drawn of the continuous move from what we might refer to as the «first aesthetic» to today's rather narrower notion, a

⁶ See, for example, Trevarthen (2010).

manifold of questions will continue to surround the suggestion that etiological or evolutionary accounts can shed light on issues in philosophical aesthetics.

One of the most prominent defenders of the view that art is first and foremost to be conceived as adaptation is Ellen Dissanayake. On her account, human beings are inherently aesthetic and artistic creatures. Art, or the process of «artifying» is, in other words, central to our evolutionary adaptation and art is «biologically predisposed adaptive behaviour» rather like acculturation, play, courtship and language. The fact that art occurs cross-culturally is said to strongly support the idea that our aesthetic predisposition and behavior comes about as the result of adaptation. As Dissanayake (2014: 45) writes:

In my hypothesis, artification has its own motivation and function(s). I regard it not as a by-product of other adaptations except insofar as, like many adaptations, it originated from elements in an earlier evolved adaptive behaviour mother-infant bonding... However, during the course of hominin evolution under selective pressures of individual anxiety about environmental uncertainty and the need for mechanisms of group bonding it arose from proto-artistic/aesthetic predispositions and developed its own adaptive trajectory.

In particular,

Artification, as I describe or «understand» it, is *an evolved behavioural predisposition in members of the genus Homo to intentionally make the ordinary extra-ordinary (i.e., to «make special»), by means of artistic/aesthetic operations (e.g., formalization, repetition, exaggeration, and elaboration), particularly in circumstances about which one (considers important).*

According to Dissanayake, then, our aesthetic faculty is thus a basic psychological component and, like any other aspect of our human nature, deeply rooted in the fact that adaptation is essential to survival.

At ground level, this idea seems powerful and far-reaching. It suggests a seamless continuum from basic survival strategies such as seeking shelter and warmth to advanced culturally-mediated practices of decoration and aesthetic elaboration. It brings together important strands of our psychology, biology and anthropology into one consistent, broadly Darwinian, approach to human nature.

However, generally speaking, the view that art is best understood as an adaptation or as having a distinct cognitive function in its own right, can be challenged on at least two counts. First, it can be held that the notion of art as adaptation is too vague and imprecise to carry any explanatory weight. What, after all, might *not* count as some form of adaptation? Surely everything which has developed to become part of human

behaviour is also in some significant sense the result of adaptation? To use the words of Johan De Smedt and Helen De Cruz (2012: 170), «[c]learly, it is not difficult to imagine adaptive functions for art, but that is exactly the problem of such adaptationist accounts – theorizing about them remains fairly unconstrained».

A second problem with the theory that art is adaptation comes from an important premise in neuro-scientific research and relates to the fact that if artistic behaviour is directly targeted by natural selection, we should expect its organisation in the brain to be modular. As Richard Lewontin (1978) and Kim Sterelny (2004) amongst others have argued, only cognitive capacities that are modularly organized can evolve without affecting the rest of the brain. In other words, unless cognition is in some important sense modular, it is incapable of developing away from its current structure and adapting to new circumstances. Now, the primary method by which to establish whether our cognitive abilities are modularly structured or not involves investigating whether the operation of such abilities do in fact involve the activation of the same neural circuits in similar conditions. Studies show, however, that experiences of art tend to activate different neural pathways. What this suggests, then, at least if we accept a modular theory of mind, is that artistic experience does not fit adaptive explanations of how mental states evolve. Artistic practice and behaviour, instead, rely on neural circuits that fulfil normal cognitive functions.

Perhaps, then, as some have been tempted to conclude, art is best understood as a spandrel after all; as a fortuitous but arbitrary side-effect of some independent adaptive function? Arguments put forward along these lines include Stephen Mithen's claim, in his *The Prehistory of the Mind* (1996), that art emerged as the by-product of neural and physiological developments and resulting in enhanced cognitive abilities. In a similar vein, Steven Pinker (1997) states in *How The Mind Works* that art's main purpose is «to press our pleasure buttons». We value it for giving pleasure, but to think of art as playing a direct role in processes of natural selection is simply misguided – there is no evolutionary advantage implied by aesthetic ability alone. On this approach, the notion of adaptation is thus not without relevance in an aesthetic or artistic context, but only derivatively so.

Such matters are of course far from easily resolved, and certainly in the context of a short commentary such as this. But while the view of art as a spandrel does seem to raise serious objections to the adaptation account, it is hardly devoid of problems of its own. For example, as we have already mentioned in passing, it does not explain the universality of artistic practice in human culture. Furthermore, if the perceived function

of artistic practice consists of a simple and non-essential search for pleasure, how can we explain the great risks and expenditure of resources demonstrated by many cases of pre-historic art-making, such as the Venus of Willendorf or cave paintings? Here, rare materials have been manipulated during long and valuable hours in order to produce an object small enough to fit into the palm of our hand and which serves no obvious immediate purpose. Similarly, people have entered into dangerous caves devoid of all natural light in order to produce representations which can only be viewed by others with some considerable difficulty. It is, in other words, difficult to reconcile the remarkable costliness of producing art both in terms of time, effort and material with the idea that art is a «mere» side-effect.

A separate objection has been raised by Stephen Davies (2010), who argues very convincingly that establishing that art is a spandrel is, contrary to what one might assume, far from being the easier way out of this difficult conundrum. For the case supporting that view requires considerably more work or argumentation than it is usually given – if art is indeed to be a spandrel it is not enough to merely stipulate that it doesn't seem likely to be an adaptation. In addition, being a by-product with a seemingly unimportant role or behaviour does not necessarily rule out becoming an adaptation at a later stage of our evolutionary development. It is at least possible, then, to hold that even if «art behaviours came to us as spandrels, they would not remain so» (Davies [2010]: 338) since what may begin as a spandrel can acquire independent adaptive significance along the way.

Ultimately, the case for art as adaptation is deeply intertwined with the importance one is willing to accord to the potentially cognitive functions of aesthetic practice and appreciation, and the extent to which the pleasure which tends to accompany such practice and appreciation is considered a help or a hindrance in this respect⁷. That said, it belongs to the nature of adaptation that such processes are constantly evolving, continually developing into the next phase of natural progression. So, what does it really mean to say that our aesthetic abilities are an eradicable part of human nature? Which conception of the aesthetic are we relying on here?

⁷ «Like other evolved behaviors, art arises from brain activity whose biological purpose is to motivate and reward appropriate responses to one's environment – to things that are good (positive) or bad (negative) for us. A behavior of art can be conceptualized as an evolved capacity for performing various activities in response to specific emotional and cognitive experience – to be described later» (Dissanayake [2014]: 3).

In some respects, this worry parallels a point raised by Davies, namely that Dissanayake's notion of art – whether we think of it as «making special», «ratifying» or «ratification» – seems to be «so thinly characterized that it does not pertain to art as we understand it» (Davies [2005]: 296). Given adaptation, how can we know that our «first aesthetic», so to speak, has anything in common with the notion we use today? And how will it help to replace, as Dissanayake suggests, «“top down” or “mental” analyses of traditional aesthetics... by knowledge of “bottom up” experience» (Dissanayake [2014]: 3) if we don't have a clear answer to that question? If we concede that the aesthetic characterizes, at least at root, ways of perceiving or engaging with the world – ways which admittedly express themselves through behaviour and practice – why should mental states necessarily be a bad place to start our investigations? Investigating the probable origins of the aesthetic mind need not be mutually exclusive or even in conflict with traditional philosophical methods for explaining and analysing aesthetic experience as it is currently understood.

Clearly, so-called «bottom-up» approaches to aesthetics have the advantage of being able to produce interesting empirical results in connection with evolutionary adaptation and suggest possible ways in which our aesthetic predisposition fits into that broader picture. Behaviour and practice must, for obvious methodological reasons, have a significant place in such accounts. But without direct appeal to the specific set of mental states related to aesthetic experience and perception, it is difficult to see how aesthetic practice or behaviour can be seen to count as such – it still begs the question of when it becomes meaningful to actually refer to it as *aesthetic* practice or *aesthetic* behaviour. One of the main strengths of a strictly «bottom-up» approach which emphasizes the continuity of practice may well be that we get more and more powerful explanations of the cultural meaning of ritual practices in general. The price we pay is that we risk moving further and further away from the distinctive features of the very concept we are trying to understand⁸.

Where can we turn to in trying to bridge this gap? For reasons that are difficult to articulate comprehensively, the cave paintings at Chauvet, for example, help us grasp this peculiar combination of predisposition and adaptation with something closer to what we nowadays think of as artistic expression. For, regardless of whether the creation of these representations is directly linked to the birth of the modern linguistically

⁸ De Smedt & De Cruz (2012: 170): Dissanayake provides «an explanation not only for art but also for ritual and ritualized behaviour».

capable human being or not⁹, it still testifies to some kind of shift in human practice in which our original aesthetic impulse seems to have developed into something artistically more complex, or at least sufficiently composite for us to recognize our concept of art in it. Certainly, and as Gregory Currie (2009) has pointed out, «aesthetic sensibility may play its part in explaining the development of symbolic culture», and the aesthetic sensibility we see here is one to which we can relate our modern concept of the aesthetic and art. Perhaps, then, there is some sense in which what we see here is the rise of something rather like a «modern aesthetic mind» in virtue of reaching the kind of effects humankind has recently strived to achieve in artistic representation. The archaeology of aesthetics may well, then, be an archaeology of perception in so far as it reveals to us quite how close we feel to those with whom we share the fundamental features of our aesthetic mind. Though there is little hope of making a scientific claim to this effect, the sense of common humanity frequently attested to by those who come into contact with prehistoric cave-painting and sculpture is surely a significant factor. The claim here is not that these particular paintings in and of themselves mark an important departure but, rather, that they are one example of the manifestation of some form of aesthetic or artistic shift in the development of our species, and represent a point back towards which the concepts of the aesthetic embodied in modern-day art-making and philosophy can reach without being stretched beyond recognition. Regardless of the kinds of intention which lay behind the making of, say, the Venus of Willendorf, there remains the sense that it is an example of image-making which was and is, by dint of labour, materials and cultural practice, held dear.

Of the various philosophical approaches to aesthetics on the table today, adaptive evolutionary accounts of art seem, *prima facie* at least, to support so-called «everyday aesthetics», or theories centred on the twofold idea that (i) various aspects of our everyday life have strong aesthetic components and (ii) that these components, such as the ones manifest in for example the ways in which we decorate our homes or ourselves, need to be included into the fold of what we refer to as «aesthetic experience» and thus philosophical aesthetic theory. Of course, in many respects, this added support is to be welcomed for there is certainly no principled reason why aesthetics need be narrowly

⁹ This is not the point, extensively discussed amongst others by Gregory Currie and Nicholas Humphrey, about whether the emergence of cave art in Europe about 30,000 years ago should be conceived as evidence that human beings had now developed the ability for symbolisation and communication. For more on this issue, see Currie (2009) and Humphrey (1998).

conceived. That said, the most important problem facing everyday aesthetic accounts is, precisely, the openness about the applicability of the aesthetic upon which it relies. If feeling the wind in our hair, say, is a *bona fide* aesthetic experience, then which sensuous or perceptual experience is not? Surely there must be a meaningful boundary beyond which it no longer makes sense to characterize sensations and behaviours as aesthetic?

At the very least, then, this calls for a renewal of focus on what might be the central features of aesthetic experience. And regardless of whether one appeals to the judgment of beauty as a paradigmatic instance of an aesthetic mental state, or to some other kind of perceptual experience, the further our concept of the applicability of the predicate «aesthetic» reaches, the stronger needs to be our sense of what, in our psychological makeup, is anchoring this experience and shaping its character as aesthetic. The more «bottom-up» approaches to aesthetic become, in other words, the more a complementary «top-down» perspective becomes necessary.

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