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Should not “beauty and pleasure” be complemented with “cognition and communication”? : Reflections upon Denis Dutton’s art instinct: beauty, pleasure and human evolution

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**SHOULD NOT “BEAUTY AND PLEASURE” BE COMPLEMENTED
WITH “COGNITION AND COMMUNICATION”?
REFLECTIONS UPON DENIS DUTTON’S ART INSTINCT:
BEAUTY, PLEASURE AND HUMAN EVOLUTION**

- Joanna Klara Teske -

Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure and Human Evolution*,
Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009.

Denis Dutton’s study of art’s biological *raison d’être* is exceptional in the broad range of issues he perceives as relevant to the subject, the rich illustrative material and the book’s light tone. The book has justly received much attention world-wide (cf. Dutton’s book web site: <http://theartinstinct.com>). The purpose of this review is not so much to assess the contribution of the book to the current state of evolutionary aesthetics (the task has already been performed by numerous reviews collected on the web site, e.g. Joseph Carroll’s “*The Art Instinct*” in *Its Historical Moment: A Meta-Review* or Brian Boyd’s *Art and Selection*), as to consider the book from two particular angles. One is that of the humanities, whose scientific status Dutton’s application of the evolutionary perspective to art might help defend. It seems very promising that within the evolutionary framework (i.e. using arguments deriving from biology and anthropology) Dutton manages to discuss various specific aesthetic problems, even if the conclusions he reaches might sometimes be questioned. The other angle is that of the cognitive theory of art – the theory which treats art as, above all, a means of exploration. Dutton seems to belittle the cognitive function of art, and this might be why he fails to account for some more sophisticated aspects of art. If the two approaches – cognitive and evolutionary – were combined, they might perhaps explain the phenomenon of art more fully, and, in consequence, help more effectively art criticism reestablish its methodological status.

Dutton’s book, as I have said, is light in tone, but it is far from light in its significance: revealing the extent to which man’s cultural activity is based on biological nature, *Art Instinct* helps undermine the long-established division into the

natural sciences concerned with nature, and the humanities examining culture (art included),¹ which still seems to obtain within the human critical cognitive tradition. Forestalling any doubts as to how it should be interpreted, Dutton explains that the title phrase "art instinct" may sound paradoxical but is meant literally. That is to say, even art, which might appear most remote from the struggle for survival, at its birth was, and to some extent still is, part of it. Admittedly, Dutton's presentation of the role of art in natural and sexual selection is irresistible. Also he manages to show that this naturalistic approach may have vital implications for many highly specific aesthetic problems. In particular, Dutton's analysis of plagiarism which abuses our expectation of authentic and personal statements from the artist, essential for art, explains why plagiarism is considered not only a legal but also an aesthetic offence. Dutton's suggestion that there are natural limits to the flexibility of our aesthetic tastes helps understand why, contrary to the hopeful predictions of Anton Webern, postmen do not whistle atonal music (incidentally, Dutton, as far as I can see, does not provide any conclusive reasons why repetitiveness should be crucial in music but not elsewhere in art).² Most interesting is the author's discussion of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, another instance of controversial experimentation. The book applies the concept of self-domestication to man and his artistic activity, explains art's "wastefulness" with reference to Amotz and Avishag Zahavi's handicap principle, suggests that purposefulness has been reintroduced into the world on a large scale *via* sexual selection, and offers three arguments which help refute the theory of intentional fallacy. All these ideas may be bold but are well-argued, and seem to help understand the complex phenomenon of art. It seems as if evolutionary aesthetics, giving proper foundations and fresh arguments to scholarly research on art, might help this discipline both make further progress and re-establish its methodological status.

Such prospective benefits of the project of evolutionary aesthetics might, in the opinion of some scholars, be outweighed by the danger of the reductionist view of man that the project allegedly entails. It is worth noting in this context

¹ One might of course have for a while been aware of the gross simplification involved in this classification, as man could well be studied both ways (i.e. man's organism by biology, man's mind by psychology, to put it most crudely).

² In a communicative theory of music this repetitiveness might perhaps be understood in analogy with John Searle's "Chinese-Room" thought experiment. Instrumental music as a means of communication (whether intellectual or emotional) is practically devoid of reference to external reality, devoid in fact of almost any semantic content (beyond the vague sense of sadness or joy, vitality or languor). If it conveys a message, it does so almost solely *via* its syntax, i.e. the internal structure of the composition. Naturally, for the message to be intelligible the element of repetition must be prominent: otherwise the structure will be imperceptible.

that, with his belief that the origin of human creative activity is closely related to the evolutionary processes of natural and sexual selection, Dutton refuses to reduce art to "cognitive foreplay in courtship," as he accepts all kinds of extensions to this original role and meaning of art. More than that, in the introduction to the book the author claims that Darwinian aesthetics in general need not imply any denial of man's non-animalistic character, and insists that the book recognizes art as a way in which man transcends his biological nature (p. 9). I find in the book no reason to distrust this declaration. Although it may seem that the very intention of identifying the biological background of art, of seeing art in terms of evolved adaptations runs counter to this non-reductionist declaration, Dutton repeatedly insists on human freedom, cf. the following observations: "Once we understand and know an impulse, we can choose to go along with it or we can resist it," (p. 161), "aesthetic tastes [...] ought to be open to endless rational reconsideration and judgment. [...] we need not be slave to our innate proclivities, our passions," (p. 162). Whatever freedom we have we owe it to our self-awareness (though recent experiments in neuroscience, suggesting as they do that the brain does not wait with its instructions for the aware self to reach its decision, might be somewhat disquieting). Dutton argues further that sexual selection, another large-scale mechanism (next to natural selection), which governs the lives of those organic creatures which have evolved sexual reproduction and can choose a mate, has been used by the human race to design itself. According to Dutton, sexual selection in the human race, where the choice of the mate is often conscious and rational, should be seen as "the reintroduction of intentional, intelligent design into the evolutionary process" (p. 165). Acknowledging human freedom in both the dimension of the individual and of the species, Dutton's theory excludes biological determinism. The objection of reductionism is, for all I can see, invalid.

It is elsewhere that I would locate the single major weakness of the book – in its neglectful treatment of art's cognitive and communicative functions. If Dutton fails to fully accomplish the task of demonstrating the instinctual character of art, it is, I think, precisely for this reason. When he comes to discuss the most relevant features of art – its formal complexity, serious content, the artist's commitment (i.e. serious intention combined with authentic personal experience), and art's distance (its indifference to the receiver, refusal to try and please him/her), and the consequent feeling of elation of the receiver who in contact with a work of art is liberated from his/her self – Dutton admits that the evolutionary explanation for these qualities is "murky [...] at best," (p. 236). According to him, the qualities in question characterize great art only, but one might well argue that at least two of them – formal complexity and the artist's commitment – are crucial to all

art worthy of the name. The evolutionary approach is, thus, apparently more successful with landscape preferences,³ fictional stories and body decorations, all of which need not be, strictly speaking, artistic in character. Adopting Dutton's distinction between art and great art, one might perhaps argue that to account for the latter some kind of cognitive (and communicative – the two are very closely related) theory of art is indispensable. In other words, perhaps the strictly biological explanation cannot account for what happens at this stage of the development of consciousness, where consciousness starts examining and designing itself; this may still be part of the process of evolution, but one which transcends the sexual-selection and natural-selection laws of nature.

This is not to say that Dutton totally ignores either the cognitive or communicative aspects of art. On more than one occasion, Dutton distinctly emphasizes this role of art: "intense interest in art as emotional expression derives from wanting to see through art into another human personality: it springs from a desire for knowledge of another person," (p. 235), art gives us "the feeling of recognition and communion with other human beings" (p. 243), a work of art can be called "another human mind incarnate" (p. 235). All the same he seems to assume the cognitive and communicative roles of art are of inferior significance. He decides, for example, to exclude communication from his list of features typical of art. He justifies the decision, stating that

Being made for an audience is also a refinement on artifactuality and substantially important in understanding art, but it is too thin to be a useful addition to the list,

³ Incidentally, it seems to me that Dutton's interpretation of the landscape experiment might be questioned. He argues that the human predilection for a certain kind of landscape, determined by a sense of security which the landscape might have promised in the Pleistocene Age, means that the human sense of art/beauty is determined by the origin of the human species. It seems, however, equally plausible to me to say that the two – the sense of beauty and the sense of security – might simply coincide, or that the need for security might actually dominate the desire for beauty (people might think they vote for beauty, whereas they vote for security when given the question: "What would you like to see a picture of?" For the question to ask for aesthetic preferences, it should perhaps be formulated differently: "What is the most beautiful picture you can think of?"). In other words, contrary to what one might think, man's choice of a favored picture (especially if it is to be selected on the basis of its subject-matter, rather than the technique of execution) need not be purely aesthetic: in particular, to the extent that it reflects a prehistoric assessment of safety, it is not aesthetic (it actually is then an instance of atavistic visual preferences); it is aesthetic to the extent that it appeals to our sense of beauty (or any other aesthetic quality). But I understand that in Dutton's view the aesthetic emotion (the sense of beauty) is part of the natural mechanism of reinforcing those reactions which might be conducive to survival (regardless of, so to speak, the objective qualities of objects or situations involved). Yet it is not obvious to me that Dutton's approach is superior to the interpretation I have suggested above: both seem legitimate to me.

as it applies to countless other kinds of human actuality outside the arts. Every social or communicative act is essentially connected to the idea of an audience" (p. 61).

This excuse seems unconvincing, as Dutton freely admits that none of the twelve features included in the list is unique to art. The same applies to the "open" and "probing" character of art Dutton mentions in the last chapter of the book, explaining that unlike in crafts, in arts the final effect is never fully preconceived (pp. 226-9). For no apparent reason also this concept of art being "open" and given to exploration is excluded from the cluster concept in chapter 3, though it is mentioned there in passing (p. 56).

In this context, it seems perhaps a bit surprising that in the name of art's communicative/cognitive potential Dutton rejects the concept of the implied author: "The importance of fiction depends in part on a sense of communicative transaction between reader and author – understood as a real, not an implied or postulated, author," (p. 124). The only "operative elements" in the process of interpretation are characters, the real author and the real reader. Dutton accepts the narrator and the implied author merely as some kind of hiding place for the author, and gently mocks the "literary theorist's seminar" for misconstruing the situation. He criticizes the concept of the implied author again later in the book, claiming that real books are written by real authors and that what the reader is most interested in is the message from the real author, and not some textual agent ("formal cause," p. 176). Dutton's dismissal of the implied author might be too rash, for in his book there is no attempt to consider arguments in favor of this narrative agent. In *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan mentions two: the possibility that the author might present in the book ideas quite alien to him/herself and the need to distinguish between the real author – possibly an author of many titles – and the implied author (the counterpart of the real author within the text) limited to the one particular title. Patrick O'Neill provides one more reason, introducing in his *Fictions of Discourse: Reading Narrative Theory* the concept of unreliable implied author, i.e. the implied implied author (who can only be identified with reference to the implied author). But one could think of other arguments, such as the "technical" argument: since every act of interpretation involves the risk of misinterpretation it is advisable to attribute the results to the implied rather than real author. Or the argument that the real author, having written the book and having revealed there some aspects of his/her personality, may change: his/her ideas, sensibility, frame of mind may change ("the implied author" is then a convenient name for the author's state of mind at the time of writing the book, in so far as it is therein expressed). Still more interesting is the argument based on the observation that many artists are taken aback by the final

result of their creative activity and perceive it as surpassing their skills and imagination, so that the implied author theoretically at least might sometimes have a better understanding of some aspects of life than the real one, a more sophisticated sense of technique, and the like.⁴ Naturally, the existence of the implied author does not diminish the importance of the real author, whose copyright is legally protected. The real communication takes place between the real author and real reader, but since it is done by means of a work of fiction, it is not direct and involves, among other things, the "mediation" of the implied author. Postulating this narrative agent seems to have no negative consequence for Dutton's understanding of the communicative function of art: indeed, it seems entirely harmless.

Likewise puzzling is Dutton's unwillingness to concede that literature which operates in the fictional/imaginative mode might be essentially involved in the quest for truth about reality. Dutton admits that truth matters in art, but only the truth about the author; otherwise, Dutton assumes, truth does not apply to fictional works as such ("In factual communication, truth matters. In fiction it does not, except normally to provide an accurate or deft backdrop for a story," p. 175). I think that this refusal to acknowledge messages concerning real life in fiction is a mistake: it suffices to assume that some analogy obtains between the fictional and the real world (most readers automatically make this assumption) to see that such knowledge about reality may well be conveyed *via* fiction. The messages we find may, but need not, be true, we appreciate them if they are (seem to be) true, and argue, in our minds if not in public, with those we perceive as false. This kind of truth about life is a far more important incentive to read than the truth we might obtain about the "fiction-maker." Indeed, regardless of what we want to find, we do find in fiction an interpretation of reality expressed *via* artistic form by the author. This interpretation reveals something about the author, though it is often far from obvious to what extent ideas expressed by characters, the narrator – even the total effect of the book controlled within the text by the implied author – may be ascribed to the artist. This interpretation reveals also something about the reader, and he or she might take advantage of this opportunity for self-

⁴ Pat Barker's novel *Regeneration* provides a nice illustration of the problem. The novel tells the story of the First World War. In one scene Wilfred Owen, who admires Siegfried Sassoon's poetry, is honored with the opportunity of talking to the poet in person. Finding the man slightly "arrogant" and "intimidating," Owen comes up with the following consolation: "It didn't matter what this Sassoon thought about him, since the real Sassoon was in the poems." In his conclusion this fictional Owen is mistaken: the real Sassoon is not intra-textual. However, this experience of disappointment with the real author attributed to Owen in the novel shows that the distinction between the real author and his/her intra-textual representative might be useful (it corresponds to the reader's experience).

-examination. This interpretation is also about the world (if only by revealing how the world might be reflected in the imagination of another human being). *Number9dream* by David Mitchell, for instance, shows (as conveniently suggested by the epigraph taken from Don DeLillo: "It is so much easier to bury reality than it is to dispose of dreams") that people manage their lives by and large in their minds and only occasionally forsake the dreamland to confront reality; it also suggests that as a result of the general feebleness of contact with "objective" reality, serious confrontation may be extremely painful. This is my interpretation of Mitchell's interpretation of the world expressed in the novel. I go through the book to experience the alternative viewpoint, then compare it to the world as I know it. I am interested in Mitchell's story because it reveals a fragment of his personality (true, but a moment before taking the book in my hands I hardly knew he existed and could not care less what kind of personality he has). The book also gives me a chance to compare his view/experience of life with mine (i.e. it reveals to me something about my personality), and, finally, represents the real world⁵ and serves as a source of information about it. This representation is neither necessarily true, nor given that status, but then elsewhere – in life and in science – we make do with hypotheses. To demand only true and confirmed theses from fiction seems unfair.

The space devoted in Dutton's book to the problems of truth in fiction, and of communication between the reader and the author indicates clearly that Dutton appreciates the cognitive and communicative importance of art, even if he belittles it elsewhere in the book. I would like to suggest that a proper recognition of art's cognitive function might help account for many specific features Dutton sees as essential in art: "novelty and creativity," "criticism," "representation," "expressive individuality," "emotional saturation" and "intellectual challenge." It might also help explain the importance of two other features which, according to Dutton, characterize great art, i.e. "complexity" and "the artist's commitment." It also appears that the adaptive value of self-knowledge, sense of communion with others and better insight into their minds, which can all in some degree be achieved *via* art, is non-questionable. Finally, the decision to include the cognitive/communicate aspect of art might help distinguish between art and commercial entertainment, for the latter does not explore reality, content to copy schematic solutions in order to sell well.⁶

⁵ This representation need not consist in close imitation but may involve all kinds of distortion.

⁶ Dutton's decision to include popular entertainment in the category of art seems to me highly controversial. He undertakes to analyze contemporary and primitive art in their social environment to search for those aspects of art which appear universal in human nature. On this basis he promises

An interesting variant of the cognitive theory of art has been offered by Karl R. Popper in connection with his theory of the third world. In fact, in many respects Dutton's ideas come close to Popper's view of art, obviously but not exclusively with reference to the evolutionary framework. The two approaches to art share also the belief that one of art's functions might be cognitive: according to Dutton, art helps us penetrate the minds of other people; Popper's idea of the interaction between the artist and the work of art, taking place during the process of artistic creation and essential for art, might help extend the area of exploration to the artist's own mind. Finally, both approaches recognize the role of criticism in art, though Dutton perceives it in analogy with sports (both arts and sports, taken as fitness-indicators, need some means of control to exclude cases of foul play)⁷ rather than with science, as Popper does.

It seems to me that the two theories (Dutton's and Popper's; or, speaking in more general terms, the naturalistic and the cognitive theories of art) might actually be combined. There is no reason why Dutton should object to the idea that a work of art is a kind of experiment, by means of which man can explore his psychic constitution (there is at least one passage in the book where Dutton comes close to this idea:

Art, therefore, is at least in this respect an adaptation for individuals because it helps them to know their own – i.e. characteristically human – emotions, and therefore helps them to navigate life in control of their emotions rather than being controlled by them (pp. 122-3).

Similarly, there is no reason why he should find the idea that the creative process involves a sequence of interactions between the artist and the work of art inconvenient (incidentally, at the end of the book Dutton speaks of the artist's ini-

to construct a "naturalistic, cross-cultural definition of the concept of art" (p. 4). What he actually provides (in chapters 3 and 10) is a list of features typically associated with art ("a cluster concept"), none of which is supposed to be unique to art. This absence of a "proper" definition of art is intentional. Dutton believes that art is a highly complex and heterogeneous phenomenon; that it is determined by human nature in quite contingent and unsystematic ways. This decision and the exclusion from the list of the communicative function or probing character of art result in a concept of art so broad that it encompasses the contemporary entertainment industry. I think that art (even its popular variety) is by most people perceived as distinct from mass entertainment (TV quizzes, soap operas, fun fairs, or computer games). Both can give pleasure and both engage the imagination, but there their affinity comes to an end. There are other things which give pleasure and engage the imagination, such as mathematics or philosophy, but they too should not be mistaken for art.

⁷ Criticism in Dutton's view, though not itself part of art, is an essential phenomenon which accompanies most artistic activity, so that Dutton includes it among the twelve features which taken together define art (pp. 54-5).

tial ignorance as to the final effect of the creative process, p. 229). Finally, Dutton, who appreciates the importance of criticism, but situates it beyond art, would not expose his theory to any danger by accepting criticism as internal to art (as a kind of counterpart of criticism which is essential to Popper's program of critical rationalism in science).⁸ And vice versa: Popper's interpretation of art (taken as an example of a cognitive theory of art) seems very fragmentary and one-sided when contrasted with Dutton's; it fails to account for the phenomenon of body decorations, the wastefulness of art, the element of beauty, or art's connection with human sexuality, to mention only some examples. So the combination might prove beneficial for both theories. Indeed, some kind of combination of the evolutionary approach with the cognitive approach in art studies seems most natural and forthcoming.

My final comment is uttered in defense of Hermann Hesse. This is a minor issue, hardly connected with the book's line of argument, but Dutton's choice of Hesse's "pretentious mysticism" as an example of literature which "can offer kitsch by way of undemanding analysis of life's problems through trite insights into the secrets of the universe," (p. 242) seems to me unjust.⁹ Having read Hesse's *Mein Glaube: Eine Dokumentation*, I must say that I have much respect for somebody who is not content with the faith bequeathed to him by his parents, who undertakes the effort of searching for God in other traditions, who can admit in the end that none of them is ultimately superior, though some (the authoritative ones) might be less attractive to himself, and who suggests that the meaning of life consists in taking care of other people. Even if the final message is simple and might appeal to the reader (Dutton's definition of kitsch in literature), the insight has been painfully earned and is expressed with an earnest effort to achieve authenticity (rather than to please) – surely this is not kitsch.¹⁰

With all my reservations, I think that Dutton's book is a fascinating study of art, revealing the potential of evolutionary aesthetics (both in terms of the insight

⁸ Of the three ideas I have here attributed to Popper (1) work of art may be treated as an experiment by means of which the mind examines itself, 2) the creative process involves interactions between the artist's mind and the work s/he creates, 3) criticism is part of art), only the second is presented explicitly in his works, but the first and the third may be accepted, I think, as legitimate extensions of his ideas. For an attempt at reconstructing Popper's theory of aesthetics see my essay "Filozofia nauki i sztuki z perspektywy metodologii Karla Poppera," in *Studia Philosophica Wratislaviensia* 4.3 (2009): 27-52.

⁹ It is worth noting that this interpretation of kitsch involves a reference to art's cognitive role (cf. also „Kitsch shows you nothing genuinely new [...]" , p. 241).

¹⁰ Dutton might have some other work of Hesse in mind, but he expresses his opinion in a general way, without reference to any titles, and *Mein Glaube* seems representative of Hesse's religious writings.

into the phenomenon of art and support for the status of the humanities that it provides) and demonstrating that its explanatory value need not imply any excessively reductionist interpretation of man and/or his/her creative activity. The book is also a great source of inspiration. This – the ability to fascinate the reader with the subject-matter and provoke him/her to further reflections, beyond the author's guidance – seems to me the most that any book can do. For this experience I am truly grateful to the author.