

# The Aesthetic Urge

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Peter Berkowitz on *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* by Denis Dutton

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Denis Dutton. *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution*. Bloomsbury Press. 288 pages. \$25.00

In several divisions of the social sciences at our universities, particularly in sociology and anthropology, and throughout the humanities, at the forefront literature and the arts, there is scarcely a surer way for a scholar to demonstrate philistinism than to espouse the common-sense belief, at its core Socratic, that to understand human conduct in all its dazzling variety you must understand the universal features of human nature. To be sure, many economists and political scientists assume that human beings are rational, self-interested actors. And influential schools of psychology and linguistics hold that the mind is constituted by fixed structures that organize and direct perception, cognition, and language. But it remains a common opinion among significant swaths of social scientists and the dominant opinion in the humanities — including political theory and philosophy — that human nature is a discredited notion, the search for which reflects reactionary tendencies.

The disbelief in human nature stems from several sources. One is the disbelief in nature, or rather the critique of the premise underlying the natural sciences that the physical world is subject to universal laws. On the contrary, declare scholars across the humanities, the natural sciences reflect but one interpretation among many, a partial and distorting perspective, a paradigm that came into being at a discrete historical moment and will eventually be superseded, a socially constructed narrative that serves the interests of the prosperous and the powerful. If the claims of natural science to uncover universal laws of physical nature have been exposed as hollow and self-serving, how much more indefensible must be social scientists' and humanities professors' claims to have identified universal features of human nature?

Another source of scholars' disbelief in human nature is the conviction that human conduct and human understanding are ineluctably shaped by large, impersonal forces. According to this point of view, who and what we are — our appetites and aversions, our opinions and ideas, our virtues and vices, our sense of identity and our sense of difference — reflect the comprehensive and inescapable impact of economic relations, political institutions, religious faith, and the whole panoply of inherited cultural practices and beliefs into which we are born and through which we understand ourselves and others. This conviction is frequently bound up with an egalitarian commitment to a progressive political agenda. Only government, it is

maintained — as if egalitarian commitments and progressive political agendas were themselves a moral imperative and not culturally conditioned — is powerful enough to control and correct the sinister forces that ensnare and oppress individuals.

Although the two explanations of why human nature does not and cannot exist often operate in scholars' minds as if they were mutually supportive, in fact they are contradictory. If even our understanding of physical nature is no more than a one-sided interpretation of phenomena, then why should we have confidence in the proposition put forward by social scientists and humanities professors that grand systems of belief and entrenched institutional practices inflexibly dictate human knowledge and human conduct? And if grand systems of belief and entrenched institutional practices inflexibly dictate human knowledge and human conduct, why should we not suppose that the claim that the natural world, including human nature, is socially constructed is itself socially constructed and therefore not the truth about nature and human nature? Alas, few are the scholars in the social sciences and humanities troubled by the severe intellectual straits into which they are driven by their denial of the idea of a human nature.

Those scholars who are properly embarrassed tend to fall into one of two camps. Some look to the history of philosophy, particularly the classical political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. The challenge for them is to reconcile the classical view that the soul has an enduring structure and that human excellence consists in living in accordance with a fixed conception of the good life with the rejection of the idea that standards of human excellence exist naturally, a rejection on which modern natural science is based. The case of the hard-headed Thomas Hobbes, however, shows that the so-called teleological conception is not critical to the idea of a universal human nature. The great 17th-century thinker contemptuously dismissed classical political philosophy and teleology. Nevertheless, in the *Introduction to Leviathan*, he insisted on the Socratic foundations of political science, identifying self-knowledge and experience as the essential sources for the knowledge of the intellectual faculties and passions on which a rational account of politics must be based. Indeed, early modern philosophy generally recognized that any substantial and instructive understanding of society, morals, and politics must be rooted in and oriented by an account of human nature.

Study of human nature also flourishes among proponents of evolutionary psychology, who occupy the second camp. Taking Charles Darwin's revolutionary writings in *The Origin of the Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) as their point of departure, these scholars contend that the capacities and desires that constitute human nature were decisively formed in the Pleistocene era — from about 1.8 million to about 10,000 years ago — by our distant ancestors' struggles in the savannas of eastern Africa for survival and their competition for mates. Those who look to the Western philosophical tradition to recover a defensible concept of human nature for the social sciences and humanities are likely to look askance at the prospect of salvaging something useful from an approach that regards human beings as a kind of complicated monkey descending from less complicated monkeys and ultimately

deriving from primeval mud and slime. These skeptics will presume that a Darwinian account of man must be hopelessly deterministic, deflationary, and reductionist, at odds with all that is sublime and noble in humanity.

Although reasonable to presume based on much that has been written by evolutionary theorists themselves, Denis Dutton shows in his delightful book on the evolutionary origins of the human instinct for art that the presumption is more than rebuttable. Professor of aesthetics and the philosophy of art at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, and founder and editor of the indispensable website, Arts & Letters Daily, Dutton brings to his task a gentle and incisive wit, abundant learning well-grounded in the social sciences and humanities, and an infectious enthusiasm for art and humanity of all sorts. To show that evolutionary theory can clarify that combination of passion, imagination, and intelligence that enables us to produce, enjoy, and benefit from art, he cheerfully wends his way through far-flung but interconnected controversies concerning landscape tastes; the universal features of human nature and the universality of art; to what extent art can be understood as a natural adaptation; the Darwinian sources of the human love of storytelling; the value of artistic capacities in obtaining a mate; classic disputes in aesthetic history such as whether Marcel Duchamp's 1917 display of a urinal counts as art; why there is music, or an art based on sound, but no art based on smell; and the meaning of masterpieces. His book more than meets its goal of enriching our appreciation of the animal origins of those powers that enable us to transcend our animal selves.

The extension of evolutionary theory beyond explanations of the developments of body and brain to include an account of the development of artistic creativity and aesthetic taste is, argues Dutton, perfectly reasonable:

The evolution of Homo sapiens in the past million years is not just a history of how we came to have acute color vision, a taste for sweets, and an upright gait. It is also a story of how we became a species obsessed with creating artistic experiences with which to amuse, shock, titillate, and enrapture our selves, from children's games to the quartets of Beethoven, from firelit caves to the continuous worldwide glow of television screens.

That story, though, can be told in many ways. A typical evolutionary theorist might begin with speculations based on recent findings by experimental psychologists about human perception. Other scholars might extrapolate from the astonishing but thin record of Paleolithic art to the present state of artistic practices and aesthetic tastes. Dutton, however, is too amply endowed with a Socratic sensibility to adopt an approach that will do little to intrigue and entice those not already convinced by evolutionary theory. While thoroughly conversant with the relevant experimental psychology and Paleolithic history, Dutton wisely, in the manner of Socratic inquiry, begins close to home by showing how non-technical, easily-graspable puzzles about the arts can be illuminated by a broadly evolutionary perspective.

Take, Dutton suggests, the persistent cross-cultural preference for paintings depicting lush landscapes. According to a much-discussed worldwide poll conducted in the early 1990s, people around the globe tend to dislike abstract paintings and to like depictions of landscapes with trees, rivers and streams or seas, open green areas, mountains, and blue sky. Sophisticated art critics scoffed at the poll, arguing the result was explained by the international marketing of calendars that featured landscapes typical of New York's Hudson River Valley. But the art critics lacked empirical evidence about both the worldwide distribution of calendars and the impact of calendar art on the formation of popular taste. Besides, it is more plausible to suppose that "the calendar industry has not conspired to influence taste, but rather caters to preexisting, precalenderical tastes."

Such a supposition certainly fits well with evolutionary theory. According to the Savanna Hypothesis, we are drawn to lush landscapes featuring forests, water, mountains, and blue sky because they resemble the East African regions where much of human evolution took place. For our hunter-gatherer ancestors, it was rational to prefer such landscapes because they were "suitable for human habitation and flourishing." But to make the right choices, reason, then as now, often needed the assistance of passion. Accordingly, those of our ancestors who happened to be born with an emotionally positive response to regions that were most likely to furnish the essentials of life — regions of the sort, contrary to the parochial assumptions of several prominent Western art critics, common to both the Hudson River Valley and East African savanna — would have had an advantage in surviving and mating and thus passing on their genetic predilections to their offspring over those who were drawn, say, to deserts and barren mountainous regions. Over hundreds of thousands of years, a preference for lush landscapes would get built into our intellectual and psychological equipment.

Experience and observation, Dutton maintains, support the idea that art is universal and that its universality is grounded in universal features of human nature. Art is practiced and appreciated everywhere around the globe and in all civilizations throughout history. And everywhere around the globe and in all civilizations throughout history, the human mind displays common features and capabilities on which art depends. These include an intuitive understanding of space and time; an ability to see things from another's point of view; a feeling for probability; an ability to read facial expressions; a fascination with music; a sense of justice; and a capacity for language. As for the social and political side of our natures, much of it appears to grow out of the relationship between men and women, which also around the globe and in all civilizations throughout history has been a source of the most intense and intimate attachments and the most destructive jealousies and resentments.

The interaction between our physical and psychological nature and our social and political nature formed a being of fantastic complexity and interest:

As much as fighting wild animals or finding suitable environments, our ancient ancestors faced social forces and family conflicts that became a part of evolved life. Both of these force-fields acting in concert eventually produced the intensely social, robust, love-making, murderous, convivial, organizing, technology-using, show-off, squabbling, game-playing, friendly, status-seeking, upright-walking, lying, omnivorous, knowledge-seeking, arguing, clubby, language-using, conspicuously wasteful, versatile species of primate we became. And along the way in developing all of this, the arts were born.

The observable diversity of the arts reflects man's manifold nature.

And this diversity presupposes unity. We would not notice the amazing range of artifacts and performances within and across painting, sculpture, music, dance, fiction, theater, film, television, and more that exists across cultures unless we had a cross-culturally valid concept of art that enabled us to see works of all colors and textures, shapes and sizes, rhythms and melodies, plots and characters, and pieties and provocations as variations on a common undertaking.

To specify that concept, Dutton continues in a Socratic manner. Acknowledging the multitude of hard cases — outliers of all kinds and not least the “boundary-testing” drive of art over the last century — he seeks to locate “the uncontroversial center” of the concept and from there move outward “to the disputed remote territories.” One reason that Dutton is confident that an uncontroversial, or at least reasonable, center exists is that notwithstanding the cultural relativism that has engulfed anthropology and despite the decades of turgid prose scholars in the social sciences and humanities have devoted to debunking and deconstructing the very notion of cross-cultural validity, he has attentively read the relevant anthropological field work. Having himself conducted studies of carvers in the Sepik River region of northern New Guinea, he reports that the accumulated weight of scholarship “leaves no doubt that all cultures have some form of art in perfectly intelligible Western senses of the term.”

The core of a universally valid concept of art, according to Dutton, comprises a cluster of features. An object or activity counts as a work of art if it has the capacity to give immediate pleasure; displays skill and virtuosity; uses distinctive styles; expresses the artist's creativity; is connected to a language of appreciation and criticism; represents real and imaginary experience; is set off from everyday life by special framing and presentation; expresses the artist's unique identity; captures and evokes emotion; engages a variety of intellectual capacities; receives its significance in part from the place it occupies in a tradition; and, most importantly, emerges out of, and involves the audience in, an imaginative experience. To a considerable extent, Dutton emphasizes, this cluster of features tells us what we already know about art. At the same time, it advances our understanding. For example, it explains why avant-garde art, which engages our imagination and prods us to rethink our views about

art's scope, is art and why sporting events, where who actually wins and loses and not an imaginative experience is what matters, is not. It is also useful because so many scholars have lost sight of, indeed appear to be doing their best to obscure, what we already know.

Dutton acknowledges that the art instinct may not be a pure evolutionary adaptation — “an inherited physiological, affective, or behavioral characteristic that reliably develops in an organism increasing its chances of survival and reproduction.” But he respectfully disagrees with Stephen Jay Gould and Steven Pinker, two of the most eminent proponents of evolutionary psychology, both of whom have argued that art is a mere byproduct or accident of the evolutionary process. Rather, contends Dutton, our taste for art is very much bound up with “Pleistocene interests, preferences, and capacities.” The arts may not all “be glorified as Darwinian adaptations similar to language, binocular vision, or the eye itself.” But nor are they accidents. The arts contribute to survival and reproduction through the manner in which they “intensify experience, enhance it, extend it in time, and make it coherent.”

Consider the pervasiveness, and uses, of storytelling. “The love of fiction — a fiction instinct — is as universal as hierarchies, marriage, jokes, religion, sweet, fat, and the incest taboo.” And small wonder, argues Dutton, given “the adaptive power in human prehistory” of “the ability to imagine scenarios and states of affairs not present to direct consciousness.” Storytelling provides an attention-grabbing and mind-focusing way of crystallizing a community’s collective wisdom, identifying recurring patterns in human conduct, and passing on lessons about how to deal with persistent challenges. The capacity for “strategic, prudential, conditional thinking,” which storytelling facilitates, would have been as essential to hunter-gatherers in their ceaseless quest to provide food and shelter for themselves, their families, and groups as it is to their early 21st century descendants navigating the complexities of cosmopolitan liberal democracies. The universal capacity of small children to appreciate stories and to invent their own provides further evidence of a built-in feature of the human mind.

Natural selection or the struggle for survival, however, is not adequate to explain the full range of features associated with the art instinct, in particular the skill and sense of style that produces the opulence and extravagance characteristic of artistic objects and performances. Sexual selection, or the quest for the best mate, also plays a critical role. Like the peacock’s tail, which signals strength and fitness to peahens — according to experimental evidence the finer the tail the fitter the genes — so too artistic ability signals intelligence and a range of desirable qualities in a mate.

Evolutionary theory suggests that it is no accident that “the number-one topic for poetic and sung language worldwide and through history is love.” Indeed,

this is exactly what you would predict if poetry recited or sung had evolved in the context of courtship as a kind of cognitive foreplay. In the sense bequeathed to us by sexual selection’s effects on the evolution of speech, love is poetry’s natural subject.

In addition, if as evolutionary theory suggests one can demonstrate one's "genetic fitness to a mate by squandering resources that a less fit animal could not afford to waste" (or as Nietzsche remarks in the Preface to *Twilight of the Idols*, "Excess of strength alone is proof of strength"), one would expect as well that works of art would be, as they are, made of rare or expensive materials, time consuming to create and remote from any possible use; involve skills that are difficult to acquire; exist fleetingly; and depend on the exercise of great intelligence and energy.

This is not to say, Dutton stresses, that the arts are always at bottom only about survival and sex. Art's origins may lie in the primeval desires to obtain food and shelter and to pursue an attractive mate. Yet over hundreds of centuries the original capacities have enabled human beings to create civilizations worldwide in which art — from television soap operas to documentary filmmaking, from Mozart and Beethoven to bluegrass and hip hop, from Homer to John Updike, from Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel to Duchamp's Fountain, from the legends of the Upanishads to *Slumdog Millionaire* — entertains, inspires, and goads, and, in the most accomplished cases, serves as an indispensable vehicle for expressing our impressions and thoughts and longings, and for deepening our appreciation of the human condition by taking us into the minds of others.

Indeed, the greatest masterpieces produce a sense that "you are in the presence of a power that exceeds anything you can imagine for yourself, something greater than you ever can or will be." They create "imaginary worlds" that are "saturated with the most affecting emotions, the focus of rapt attention, offering intellectual challenges that give pleasure in being mastered." And, as they did originally for "the prehistoric women and men who first found beauty in the world," they provide for human beings today "a feeling of recognition and communion with other human beings."

Socratic to the end, Dutton's exploration of the evolutionary origins of the human art instinct never strays far from and culminates with the invitation implicit in art to philosophize, or account for the self-transcending animals that we are.

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