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Stephen Davies, Philosophy, University of Auckland

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Response to Richard Menary, Mohan Matthen, Alvo Noë, Tim Lewens, and Adrian Boutel

I want to thank Nicolas Bullot, who organised this symposium, and the contributors for their careful consideration of my work. Of course, I am delighted that philosophers of science, not only aestheticians, are prepared to engage with these debates.

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Richard Menary notes that humans are niche constructors. We engineer the environment, both cultural and physical, that we occupy. Not only can we buffer ourselves from the vicissitudes of the wider world in this manner, we are also a behaviourally flexible species, able to cope with change and variability. The knowledge, skills, tools, and practices that enable the propagation of this mode of existence are passed on to each new generation, as are techniques for the further enhancement of such knowledge and for refining and adjusting such skills and technologies. In other words, biology and culture interact and support each other.

Menary goes on to propose that art might be a peculiar form of niche construction that is inheritable by future generations. Though it is perhaps too recent to be an adaptation, art provides novel and rewarding ways for the application of traits that are adaptive. Yet more, via feedback it can alter those original dispositions and their physiological underpinnings. Our tool-making capacities would provide a foundation for carving and painting, perhaps. Our ability to reason about the future or, counterfactually, about the past, might lead us to develop an interest in fictional narratives. Our talent for learning via mimicry might lead us to take on and display

dramatic personae. The entrainment of motion that goes with coordinated forms of work could come to be expressed in dance and song. And so on. Moreover, these behaviours might in turn facilitate the transmission of the group's lore and values in a more memorable and convincing manner. The neural circuitry that is co-opted for these aesthetic purposes comes to be modified by them, and so the aesthetic niche is constructed.

There is much in this view that I like. Emphasising our behavioural and neural plasticity is surely to be preferred to reliance on the idea that we are largely governed by (behavioural-cum-neural) modules that were rigidly fixed in the past of our forebears. As is the proposal that there is mutual interaction and development between culture and biology, as against the idea that these are separate and do not affect each other. Meanwhile, the story about how art emerges from (and later transforms) other skills and routines is highly plausible.

In *The artful species* I treated aesthetics and art as separate topics, though this is not to deny an important place for aesthetic qualities in most artworks. In my terms, Menary's account is more about art than aesthetics. It is more about items or actions we skilfully create and entertain ourselves with than it is about why we might find beauty in the appearance of a flower or appreciate the awesomeness of a tall waterfall. Whether these latter reactions fall under his view might depend on the extent to which they are learned and culturally transmitted. Certainly, some aesthetic reactions are of this kind: consider the variety of clothing and adornments projected as beautiful in different societies and different times. But perhaps other aesthetic reactions depend heavily on our biology and on the demands that natural environments make on our survival.

When discussing evolution in *The artful species*, I acknowledged the option of developmental systems theory. This maintains that what is important is that the required developmental resources are made available to each new generation and allows that this might be achieved through cultural transmission in some cases rather than via genetic inheritance. Some such theory is implicit in the account of niche construction that Menary puts forward. But none of the theorists I discuss in the book commits to this view and it represents a departure from the classical form of

evolutionary selection that Menary refers to as the "modern synthesis." To avoid controversy, I focussed on the most widely accepted version of the modern synthesis unless the people I was discussing went beyond it; for instance, by supposing that selection operates on groups as well as on individuals and their genes. Had I pursued this direction, tempting as Menary makes it seem, I might have seemed to be guilty of what I criticise in others: speculation beyond the evidence. In fact, though, I think this line of speculation looks much more promising than many that are proposed, because it locates the emergence of art behaviours within a wider analytical framework that plausibly explains how culture has conspired with biology to turn us into the kind of species we are.

A notable absence in Menary's account is an explanation of why we find experiences of beauty and of skilfully produced art so pleasurable, which must be a key component in accounting for the cultural propagation and engineering of the relevant dispositions. This is a topic considered in some detail by Mohan Matthen, as I now discuss.

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According to Mohan Matthen, aesthetic pleasure is a response to the contemplation of an item. The pleasure does not anticipate consuming its target in any way; it goes with the observation of its object. We may admire functional objects, but we do not contemplate them because they are useful. We do so, rather, because the experience is pleasurable in itself. (In contrast to this view, it is suggested that I mistake the value of the object for the value of contemplating it.) What lies behind aesthetic pleasure? This could be caused by the exercise of our of pattern-recognition capacities, for instance.

As Matthen is aware, his account fits with a Kantian conception that sees the trademark of aesthetic experience as disinterested contemplation (involving the free play of the imagination and understanding).<sup>1</sup> Though the Kantian approach has had

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<sup>1</sup> Kant, Immanuel, *The critique of the power of judgment*, P. Guyer (ed.). P. Guyer & E. Matthews (trans.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000 [1790].

many adherents, I question it in *The artful species*, as have some other recent philosophers of art. But let us focus not on those criticisms but on the positive alternative I prefer.

I regard the aesthetic as actively seeking the beautiful and awesome and as shunning their opposites. To capture this I prefer talk of *directed attention* rather than *contemplation*, though that semantic difference might not bear much weight. Though Matthen stresses that aesthetic pleasure is a response to its objects and is not initially motivational, he allows, as I would too, that it teaches us how to find one kind of pleasure in the world. Anticipation of such future pleasure can then motivate us to seek out what we anticipate will be aesthetically appreciable.

A key difference between our views is that, whereas Matthen holds that our aesthetic pleasure is a response to our act of contemplation, I think it is a response to the beauty of its perceptual object. Sometimes this response can be cognitively complex and involve decision and judgments, but on other occasions we are simply struck by the item's beauty. An item's beauty can sometimes depend on aspects of its functionality and how this is realised, but the reaction is to the beauty rather than to the functionality as such. I compare the aesthetic response to emotion in this respect: it brings aspects of the world into prominence within our awareness. Contrary to what Matthen holds, finding something beautiful can prompt us to consume or use it. For instance, we often adorn ourselves with things we find naturally beautiful.

The aesthetic spotlight might light on things that are irrelevant to our evolutionary prospects, or that might even be maladaptive. But in some cases at least, we find beautiful, and thereby are drawn to, things that promote our survival and/or reproductive success. Under these conditions our aesthetic reactions are evolutionarily valuable. But for the lover of beauty, the value lies in the pleasure that attends the recognition of beauty, not in the evolutionary outcomes. And this remains true where the aesthete's preferences are explained by the fact that biological selection favoured the reproductive success of ancestors who found beauty in the same direction and not, instead, in what happened to be risky, dangerous, unattractive to others, etcetera.

On a different note, Matthen takes me to complain that evolutionary accounts of art's

origins might not explain the form the arts take now. He defends the methodological soundness of an approach that focuses on origins, here referring to the work of Ellen Dissanayake. That explanation can reveal a fundamental evolutionary function of art, even if it does not account for art's later history, which it should not be expected to do.

The point that I try to make in several places is precisely that we cannot expect to explain art's current status in terms of its original functions (see *The artful species*, pp. 62, 133-4). The challenge here is to the assumption common to many followers of evolutionary psychology, that we adapted to ancestral environments and have not changed since. If the aim of the enterprise is to maintain that art is adaptive now, more than the story about art's first emergence is needed. Indeed, it is possible that, as it has changed over time, art has become adaptive (or maladaptive) in new ways.

Meanwhile, my concern with Dissanayake's theory, of which I am an admirer, is not with its concentration on prehistory or with her suggestion that Modernist Fine Art can no longer serve the goals that made art evolutionarily valuable in the past. It is simply that, whereas she generally purports to be talking about art, it often seems to me that she has her sights on its predecessors. Her first book is titled *What is art for?*<sup>2</sup> The subtitles of her later books are more accurate: *Where art comes from and why* and *How the arts began*.<sup>3</sup> Now, I allow it is not easy to draw the line between art's immediate predecessors and first-art. We can expect a close continuity between them. But with her focus on play, ritual, mother-infant interactions, and the like, I think Dissanayake's views are not best represented as being about art as such. If those subtitles had been more to the front and centre, and if the relevant qualifications to her thesis were more often present, I would withdraw this objection altogether. As an account specifically of art's forerunners, I find her views convincing.

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<sup>2</sup> *What is art for?* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> *Homo aestheticus*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995 and *Art and intimacy*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000.

Kant comes up also in Alvo Noë's discussion. Like Kant, I distinguish between pleasurable perception generally and the appreciation of beauty. In Kant's explanation, the latter but not the former involves something like a judgment. Noë glosses this as meaning that there can be genuine agreement and disagreement over aesthetic matters.

Just as I appeal to a folk notion of art, without much analysis, I do the same for the aesthetic. In fact, I excised from the final version of *The artful species* a discussion of Kant and Hume on aesthetic judgment and objectivity. Kant maintains that we should expect universality in aesthetic judgments, despite the fact that, unlike ethical judgments, they are not rule-governed and so cannot be deductively demonstrated. According to Noë, if we follow Kant in regarding the aesthetic as distinctively evaluative, a biological explanation for the aesthetic response is unlikely to be forthcoming. My preference would be to characterise the aesthetic in terms of the kinds of properties it locates than in terms of the experience it generates or the cognitive capacities it engages. I think that some aesthetic reactions are personal, others are culturally relative, and yet others seem to be cross-culturally shared. Meanwhile, some are highly cognitive, such as seeing a chess move as beautiful, and others are unreflective and unbidden, as when we are suddenly struck by the beauty of the moonlight on the water. It is the widely shared, spontaneous aesthetic responses that seem to me to be the ones most likely to have an evolutionary grounding.

Helpfully, Noë not only criticises my views but also indicates ways to mitigate those criticisms. He thinks that I claim that art is a cultural technology that exhibits the biological fitness of those who make and use it. If it works, this argument proves too much, because it can be generalised to all cultural technologies, including writing. But rather than faulting the argument on this score, he suggests that it demonstrates the limits to what biology can help us to understand. It can account for art as one technology among many others, but it cannot measure the extent to which the power and significance of art goes beyond this.

I am grateful for the suggestion, but I had not intended that my argument about how form becomes norm, and thereby becomes fitness-relevant, to be so generalizable. I emphasized not only the universality of art behaviours but also their high cost and

individual differentiation. The relevant skills and knowledge are difficult to master. And individuals differ in their art specialties, of which there are potentially a great many. So, the evaluation of individuals' art-relevant competencies can provide highly nuanced assessments of comparative fitness. By comparison, the mastery of writing and reading is much more uniform and thereby uninformative.

According to Noë, this position entails that I must be an adaptationist about art. If it was the pressure of sexual selection that explained the virtuosic cultivation of art capacities in our species, I guess that would be right. But I am not sure if this was the ultimate driver. From our perspective, art behaviours are largely self-motivating because we experience them as intrinsically rewarding. That is consistent with, but does not require, the story about sexual selection.

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Tim Lewens and Adrian Boutel are concerned by the way I sometimes tend to imply that human nature is solely biological, and not also cultural, in its construction, though I do acknowledge the importance of gene-culture coevolution. If I created that impression I was careless. And they are concerned that the distinction I make between evolved behaviours and cultural technologies is not sustainable in light of recent work on the importance of learned imitation in the transmission of knowledge. In my terms, imitation is a technology propagated by culture, yet it is more or less universal, it appears early in development, and it is also developmentally robust, which I identify as characteristics of biological adaptations.

These are fair points. I'll take them in reverse order.

We might say that, in the end, everything depends on biology and on the evolutionary forces that shape it. So, everything is/was either an adaptation or a by-product. (Similarly, more or less everything is an exaptation by being based on some prior adaptation or by-product.) This view makes for a very simple taxonomy and guarantees that there must be a connection between aesthetics, art, and evolution. Partly to avoid this cheap conclusion, it seemed to me that we should probably reserve the notion of a by-product for behaviours that are fairly closely derived from an



adaptation. Where there is, instead, a distanced and indirect connection to very broad adaptations, like intelligence and imagination, it would be more useful to talk of cultural technologies. And indeed, Aniruddh D. Patel employed some such notion in arguing that music is best thought of as a transformational technology rather than as either an adaptation or by-product.<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, the distinction is one of degree only, and we could always argue about what "distanced" and "indirect" amount to. But I avoided such niceties, because I was not finally convinced by Patel's arguments and because I thought that the technology view, as applied to art, distances it rather too far from what I assume to be biologically based capacities. As Menary has quoted, I say that I would bet the adaptations that gave rise to art behaviours are "intelligence, imagination, humor, sociality, emotionality, inventiveness, curiosity." I continue: "Though art is mediated by culture, it gives direct and immediate expression to these traits and dispositions, so I would identify it as a by-product rather than as a technology" (*The artful species*, p. 185). "Direct and immediate" is doing the work here.

As regards human nature, I accept that it is as much cultural as biological. When I refer to our biologically evolved human nature, I do not mean to exclude culture but rather to exclude cultural technologies, like the more or less universal reliance on smart phones. I suggest that these evolved aspects of human nature typically emerge more or less spontaneously and universally under the conditions of normal development. So, what would I say about imitation? I doubt that it counts as a cultural technology as I use that notion. The effectiveness of this mode of learning depends on distinctive dispositions not found in other animals. The teacher slows and exaggerates the actions being taught. The learner knows not to interpret those actions literally. She aims at repeating and learning them, though she is aware they are means to the desired goal. In other words, she does not directly target the desired goal using trial and error, but aims to achieve it through the mastery of a particular technique.

Of course, more modest accounts of human nature are plausible. It might be characterised in terms of species-typical repertoires that are neither universal nor

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<sup>4</sup> *Music, language, and the brain*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

exclusive to humans. Or it might be conceived as a set of highly sensitive dispositions various different subsets of which can be triggered under the variety of environments to which our species is exposed. I favoured the stronger view mainly because I was convinced that aesthetic reactions are universal and art-behavioural competence in the production and consumption of art are similarly widespread. Given the broad view of art that I adopt, almost everyone is an expert on at least one form of art. Consider how much most teenagers know about the TV shows, music, movies, videogame genres, and clothes fashions that interest them!

Stephen Davies,  
University of Auckland.