

## **How did the arts originate? The group demarcation and the scientific account**

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*Abstract.* Why did human beings first begin making art? In this paper, I present two accounts of its origins, one of which connects the arts to the desire for group demarcation and another to scientific impulses.

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*Wicked is the summer breeze*

*That experiments upon the trees—*

Why did man first begin making art? By “man,” I do not wish to exclude women. By “art,” I wish to cover more than just visual art and include poetry, music, and more. Why did human beings first begin making art? Some will say that this question lies outside the province of philosophy. It cannot be addressed merely by reflecting. It requires evidence from history. Furthermore, we lack this evidence. Others will say that actually you cannot be a proper philosopher without an account of the origins of the arts. Yet others will say that in earlier cultures people did not think of the arts as we do today. They did not separate out painting, music, and poetry from religion, as we often do (Allan 2019: 10). One cannot address the question without understanding the concepts which people long ago worked with. Anyway, I shall present two speculations. I should also say, as part of my preliminary remarks, that I am not using art to cover specifically “high art” – art that is prestigious or merits prestige – rather to cover all artistic creation.

We can call the first speculation “the group demarcation account.” Consider a few schoolchildren who decide to form a gang. They develop ways of demarcating who is a gang member and who is not. They begin walking in a peculiar way, for example, and talking in a peculiar way. They no longer address each other by the names given at birth, rather by names only known to members. They claim certain spaces to be their own. One day they agree to all espouse the view that the moon is larger than the sun, despite a certain amount of evidence to the contrary. This gets them in a lot of trouble with the authorities, whom they suspect to be sun-worshippers. They excommunicate members who refuse to tow the party line in the face of pressure from the authorities.

All this is nothing unusual, I presume. Presumably, throughout history there have been groups who adopt practices to demarcate members from non-members. According to the first account, the arts were introduced for this purpose. People decorated themselves in certain ways as part of demarcating their group. They sang songs in a certain style. Often they developed artistic styles that are hard to imitate, for this was all the better given the end of demarcating members from non-members. Sometimes the art forms were even difficult to enjoy. For example, one had to listen to the songs many times before one was able to extract any pleasure from them. A process of initiation was required.

The group demarcation account has surely occurred to others before. Is it within the essays of Victor Mota? We can call the second account “the scientific account.” A child, or even an adult, may be fascinated by certain physical cause and effect relationships. A magnet attracts an iron filing. Over and over again, the child puts the magnet within the vicinity of the iron filing to observe this, until eventually they move on to other interests. Similarly, the mind can be subject to predictable effects. One says, “Boo,” while a person is concentrating on something and

scares that person. At a more advanced level, one tells frightening stories. It may be impossible to capture in a formula how to do that, but the artist is much like the child with the magnet. They repeatedly make works which have an effect that they anticipate beforehand. Then they observe that effect. It is as if they were confirming a hypothesis. Such artworks may aim at suspense, fear, laughter, or other effects.

I suppose that artworks that arise from scientific impulses are more likely to have wider appeal. The artist regards the human mind as a system which, given certain inputs, will be subject to certain effects. There is less incentive to make the artwork only accessible to some. But it is still possible to produce an artwork of more limited appeal in a scientific spirit. One thinks, “There is an effect one can only produce in a few minds, and it can be produced by means of an artwork such as this...”

The two accounts can be combined. Amongst group A, artworks arose for tribal reasons – I mean group demarcation reasons, if “tribal” is a poor choice of word – whereas the scientific account captures why artworks have arisen amongst group B. Also a person may begin creating artworks for the reason captured by the scientific account, but others may imitate their artworks because this provides a convenient way to demarcate a group. But probably there are better accounts than both of these!

## **Reference**

Allan, D. 2019 (second version). Analytic Aesthetics and the Dilemma of Timelessness. Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/ALLAAA-10>