## How to Explain Pleasure: Some Critical Remarks about Davies

Stephen Davies’ new book *The Artful Species* sets a new standard of sophistication for investigations of the evolutionary origins of art. Up until now, these investigations have had two main pivots. It has been debated, first, *whether* the “art instinct” is an evolved capacity and, if so, *how* it could have evolved. The “whether” turns on a further question. Is art a culturally specific concept? If so, it might better be treated by sociologists and economic historians than by biologists. The “how” is about details of evolutionary theory as applied to art. On this, we find technical discussions about “spandrels,” multi-level selection, sexual selection, heritability, and so on.

The other main pivot is about whether evolutionary theory is capable of illuminating so normative and so creative an enterprise as art. Scepticism on this point does not imply *denying* that the art instinct has evolutionary origins. Indeed, the most interesting sceptical positions *allow* that the art instinct is evolved, but insist that it is nonetheless not fruitful to study it as such. Nothing of aesthetic or philosophical interest will emerge from such a study, the sceptics say.

Davies’ approach to these questions is bold and highly nuanced. He dismisses, in a forceful and original way, the culture-specificity of the art concept, and argues that the universality of the art instinct demands an evolutionary account. And he claims that such an account *does* illuminate the philosophical foundations of art theory by helping us to understand cross-cultural aesthetic norms. He insists, however, that these foundational norms give us at best a weak and incomplete grasp both of the aesthetic response itself and of the appreciation and production of art. For to understand these (mostly) human characteristics, he suggests, we need to appreciate how they are transformed by being embedded in complex cultural and social practices and norms. While evolutionary theory gives us an appreciation of the scaffolding, it does not give us anything like a full appreciation of the significance of beauty or of art.

What kind of scaffolding? And how does the scaffolding permit cultural modification? Here’s an example that is particularly worthy of discussion because it exposes a weak point in the theory. Davies says that a “ripe, womanly figure” is a mark of good genes, and is thus attractive (107); this is the evolutionary baseline. On the other hand, “there is no clear borderline between physical attractiveness and social attractiveness,” for mate selection is “much more about personal identity” (113) and “wider considerations of social functioning” (115). Nevertheless, “when they beautify themselves in ways that are socially accepted, people often want to be thought of or recognized as sexually attractive” (116). Thus, Davies regards attraction to a specific type of mate is to be explained by evolutionary adaptation; this is the basis of a universal aesthetic preference. This attraction is modified by social context, and redeployed to broader social needs. He gives a similar account of landscape appreciation.

Now, it is extremely doubtful to me that this kind of account illuminates the aesthetic response. Let me explain. Let us first delineate two types of evaluative/motivational state. The *first* is an emotion, or drive, or appetite. This sort of state is action specific, and causally prior to action: hunger is specific to and causes eating; fear to flight; lust to sex; and so on. The *second* sort of motivational state I want to consider is *pleasure* and *pain*. These states are not action-specific—you can get pleasure from eating and from sex and also from reading. And they are effects rather than causes. As such, they are not motivational, but rather evaluative. Pleasure tells us to continue some activity that we have already embarked on; pain tells us to try and get out of a situation in which we find ourselves.

Of course, motivational and evaluative states are closely related. For one thing, the evaluation is recorded for later use: an activity that was found pleasurable in the past will be attractive in the future. But note that the motivation in these cases is not pleasure as such, but rather the anticipation of pleasure, based on the memory of pleasure. To put it another way: we do things *for the sake of* the pleasure they will bring; pleasure is a goal, a future state that we intend to achieve by doing a certain thing. Hunger, lust and other drives are different; they are present states that are directed toward the performance of a specific action, not toward a goal.

There is a special sub-category of pleasures that I shall call *telic pleasures*. Telic pleasure is an *effect* of getting something that is valuable such as food or sex. Here, the thing you take pleasure in—the food or the sex—may be evolutionarily valuable. But as noted before, pleasure is not a *cause* of getting this thing (as hunger or lust are); rather, it is an effect. Telic pleasures are associated with drives in a characteristic way. Let’s say you are sexually deprived. This is unpleasant and it motivates you to seek out a sexual encounter. The resulting encounter is often pleasurable, but not always. Either way, both lust and sexual pleasure at least temporarily shut down after release. Gustatory pleasure displays a similar profile. Hunger is unpleasant; eating to relieve hunger is sometimes pleasant, sometimes not. Either way, both hunger and gustatory pleasure shut down after you are sated.

Telic pleasures are not easy to understand. They seem redundant as motivators. Hunger motivates us to eat. What is the additional role for pleasure? Moreover, pleasure is an effect of consuming nourishment, not a cause—as such, it cannot motivate. What then is the function of telic pleasure? And why does it display a profile that is so different from hunger? Finally, why aren’t all drives associated with pleasure? Fear is an unpleasant emotion that motivates a specific action. Yet the action that follows is not accompanied by pleasure.

The key to understanding these phenomena is that pleasure helps us learn. Hunger motivates us to find and consume nourishment, but it does not tell us what things in our environment will provide us with nourishment. We have to learn this, and pleasure is that by which we do so. An animal chews on fruit; it gets pleasure. Now it knows that fruit of that type will provide it with nourishment. It chews on the bark of a tree; it gets displeasure. Now it knows that bark is not something it wants to eat. (It may nevertheless eat it if desperate for food.) As long as the initial reward (or punishment) adequately signals good (or bad) sources of nourishment, the animal will come to be an effective self-nourisher. Similarly, sexual pleasure teaches us what to do and with whom—lust is a much less differentiating drive. (Davies does mention learning—see p. 15, for example—but not in connection with the role of pleasure.)

Now, aesthetic pleasure is unlike both kinds of state just mentioned. Unlike telic pleasure it has nothing to do with getting something that satisfies a pre-existing need. The aesthetic response is pleasure (or its opposite) simply in contemplating its object: pleasure in being perceptually or intellectually engaged with it. Our pleasure in bird-song, for example, is encouragement to stop and listen to it; it has nothing to do with consumingbirds. *Aesthetic* delight in a human face similarly leads us simply to gaze at it; unlike lust, it has nothing to do with possessing its owner.

Davies disagrees with my assessment: “rather than being solely about restful, purposeless contemplation, aesthetic emotions guide how we navigate and engage with the world at large” (11). (Note his use of the term ‘emotions’: but even on his account, the aesthetic response is not action-specific in the way that emotions are.) This leads him to say: “The evolutionarily successful animals would be those that were motivated by these instinctual evaluations to make choices that led to the successful propagation of their genes” (10). But to me it seems obvious that the aesthetic response is not choice-directed in the way that emotions or drives are. Aesthetic pleasure is pleasure in the contemplation of an object: it motivates you to continue contemplating the object, but it does not anticipate consuming it in any way. Thus, Davies does not adequately explain how his “aesthetic emotions” differ from appetites such as lust. Nor does he take on board how aesthetic pleasure is different from the telic pleasures.

To my mind, the challenge for evolutionary theory is precisely to show how pleasure-in-contemplation can be fitness enhancing (or alternatively to show that it is *not*). Davies, in common with many other theorists, subsumes aesthetic pleasure to the evolutionary value of the beautiful thing. This is a mistake. Aesthetic appreciation has nothing to do with the value of possessing or consuming the object of admiration. This is why the sexual attractiveness of a “ripe, womanly figure” (his example) is not the same as aesthetic attractiveness. The two may be connected in some way I don’t pretend to understand. But it is wrong simply to subsume aesthetic pleasure to a telic pleasure. (This point is connected with Kant’s about disinterested pleasure.)

Possibly, Davies thinks that the argument above is refuted by the fact that we appreciate the beauty of functional objects, something he emphasizes repeatedly. But this is a red herring. To be sure, we do admire functional objects such as cars and houses and weapons. And we may even admire the beauty of *how* they are adapted to their function. But this is different from being attracted to them because they are useful. Aesthetic appreciation is pleasure in contemplation; this has to do with design and decoration. It might include appreciation of how form serves function. We can desire cars etc. simply because they are useful. Given that functional objects are sometimes beautiful and sometimes ugly, it should be obvious that this is different but compatible with aesthetic appreciation. But Davies often writes as though the aesthetic appreciation of useful objects can, or even must, be *based* *on* their functionality.

Just to be clear, there *are* scientific accounts of the aesthetic response that target the value of perceiving or contemplating objects, as opposed to the value of the objects themselves (apart from perceiving them). For example, as Davies tells us,

Robin Allott . . maintains that the arts and mathematics constitute a pattern-perceiving or pattern-producing activity prompted by an impulse to explore the world, both outer and inner, and to understand it, resulting in our improved ability to act in it. (128)

Davies’ criticism of this proposal is perfunctory, based on the notion that pattern perception is automatic and hard-wired. This is not universally true: some is; some is not. Putting this aside, the virtue of Allott’s proposal is that it does *not* rely on the value of the thing perceived. Rather it is based on the value of contemplating the thing.

In the second half of the book, Davies attacks various theories of the evolutionary theory of art. His critique, filled out by rich cultural detail, is marked by distaste for reductive accounts, which discount cultural value. He also doubts that evolutionary accounts are methodologically sound; he writes, for example: “adaptationist theories of art involve no consideration of whether the traits in question are heritable” (129)—probably a justified criticism. What is missing from this discussion is a clear delineation of what needs to be explained.

Consider Ellen Dissanayake’s idea that art is “making special,” a notion that she amplifies by invoking “presymbolic” (i.e., content-independent) emotional resonance and perceptual salience. Whatever one might think about her approach, it clearly targets what she takes to be a central feature of art, namely the emotional valence of things like the following: the skill of the artist, the cost of the materials, the provenance of an original work of art, the subtlety and indirectness of artistic form. A crudely executed cell-phone photograph of the Las Meninas does not count as art; yet it has very similar pictorial content. The knock-off *portrays* the same scene; it has the same colours and formal composition. Where does it fall short? Dissanayake’s theory explains how: the photograph is not special and so it does not evoke the same kind of response.

Dissanayake is clear about her explanandum. We cannot say the same of Davies. His discussion assumes that we know what art is. An evolutionary theory has to explain *that*. He writes:

Dissanayake ditches the greater part of art’s artiness and intellectual value. And she becomes vulnerable to the charge she makes against other anthropologists and evolutionary psychologists: that they deal with . . . precursors or ingredients of art and the aesthetic rather than with the developed behaviour. (131-132)

To my mind, this misses the point. Dissanayake has a view about the evolutionary core of art. She assumes that she can explain artworks outside this core (e.g., “Fountain” by Marcel Duchamp) by historical processes of cultural emergence (including recent decadence and degeneration). Whatever you might think about her specific approach, her methodology is right. It is completely correct to observe that theories about the evolutionary emergence of music will fail to explain its current variety, which includes reggae, techno, and Arvo Pärt (133). But it is, nonetheless, dubious that evolutionary theories should aim for this kind of inclusiveness. In this matter, it is equally mistaken either to insist that evolutionary theories *do* explain the appeal of e.g. the twenty-first century novel (as some literary Darwinists seem to do), or to complain that evolutionary theories cannot explain such recent cultural products. Davies’ error lies on the second path.

Davies’ discussion of evolutionary aesthetics is remarkably learned. (The endnotes, references, and index take up more than a third of the book.) This makes the book occasionally quite difficult to read—you may be searching for a thesis, but what you get is more like a series of nested qualifications. And there are times when the mere existence of dissent is taken as reason for doubt. For example, Davies rounds off his discussion of Geoffrey Miller’s sexual selection theory this way:

Joseph Carroll, an English literature academic . . . goes so far as to describe Miller’s thesis as “provocative and ultimately frivolous.” (Philip) Ball calls [it] “facile.” The archaeologist Steven Mithen . . . describes Miller’s supporting arguments as “weak” and his evidence as “fragile.” (126; this is a complete paragraph.)

This would strike most philosophers as coming uncomfortably close to crowd-sourcing critical evaluation. There is a great deal of this sort of thing in the book.

Nonetheless, this is a very valuable discussion. The literature contains many famous evolutionary theses—Stephen Pinker, Ellen Dissanayake, Denis Dutton are prominent examples. By showing how each of them falls far short of the goal, Davies wants to show how the entire field of evolutionary aesthetics requires a reset. I think he is successful in this. The problem is that he does not tell us how to reboot.