Evolution and Aesthetics

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I want to begin with four quotations, fairly typical of their type, and germane to our topic because they encapsulate what many artists and art lovers feel about art and music. These feelings are often inchoate, to be sure, and in the cold light of analytical day they may look extravagant and exaggerated. But they do capture something of the experience people often have of art and beauty, and for that reason alone must be given some phenomenological plausibility at least.

First quotation: 'It is reserved to art to salvage the kernel of religion, inasmuch as the mythical images which religion would wish to be believed as true are apprehended in art for their symbolic value, and through ideal representation of those symbols art reveals the concealed deep truth within them.'

Second quotation: '(In art) for a brief moment we really become the primal essence itself, and feel its unbounded lust for existence, and delight in existence. Now we see the struggles, the torment, the destruction of phenomena as necessary. For all our pity and terror we are happy to be alive, not as individuals but as *the* single living thing, merged with its creative delight…'

Something of what we experience in, say, *Tristan und Isolde* may be alluded to be these two extracts. In this context, we might also think of the experience of some of Titian's late paintings, *The Flaying of Marsyas*, (Archiepiscopal Palace, Kromeriz), for example, or of the exuberance of some of Rubens, his hunting scenes, say, or of the implacability of Homer and of Aeschylus, of the mystical vision in John Cowper Powys's *A Glastonbury Romance*, or of some of D. H. Lawrence, and of the serious vein underlying the silvery brilliance of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. And we could think of the evocation of the sublime in so many of Turner's canvasses. Mention of Turner might remind us that many people have analogous experiences in observing aspects of the natural world and feeling themselves a part of nature.

But leaving nature aside for the moment, our third quotation, taking up some of the theme of the first, says 'Good art, thought of as symbolic force, rather than statement provides a stirring image of a pure, transcendent value, a steadily visible enduring human

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good… in an unreligious age… the clearest expression of something grasped as separate and precious and beneficial.'

And finally, 'our highest dignity lies in the meaning given to us by works of art; it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified.'

Notice that Nietzsche (for it is, of course, Nietzsche's notorious claim on art's behalf in *The Birth of Tragedy*) does not say that the world is justified (or not) as an evolutionary process, or as chains of survival and reproduction, or as blind drive to procreate, or as random variation and selective retention. It is justified as an aesthetic phenomenon, and at least in *The Birth of Tragedy*, it actually is justified. Notice, too, in our third quotation Iris Murdoch—for it is she—speaks of an enduring human good, but also of a transcendent value. And analogous, non-naturalistic remarks could be made of quotation 1 (Wagner) and of quotation 2 (Nietzsche again).[1]

I am not going to discuss these quotations directly, beyond insisting that they do represent aspects of a vision of art and beauty, with a long history and still resonating—if beneath the surface—with many to-day. Nevertheless, examining what might be called the evolutionary account of art and beauty, as given by Darwin and his followers, may throw some indirect light on them, as I will suggest at the end of this paper. However, even at this stage, it will be obvious that the sentiments underlying my quotations will be in no little tension with what many take to be the message of orthodox Darwinism.

In so far as Darwinism is a doctrine of causal meaninglessness—indeed, in the hands of authors such as Jacques Monod and Richard Dawkins, perhaps *the* doctrine of causal meaninglessness—anyone in the least degree affected by any of the four quotations will have to treat a wholly Darwinian account of art and of our sense of the beautiful with extreme suspicion. At the very best, it will be radically incomplete. For, without any supplementation, Darwinism explains phenomena, to the extent that it does explain them, in terms of a blind, unconscious and unintelligent nature populated with creatures driven for no purpose to survive for a

[1] The first quotation is from Richard Wagner, 'Religion und Kunst' in his *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, 2nd edition, Leipzig, 1888, vol. x., p. 211; the second is from Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 1871, section 17; the third from Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun*, Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 76–7; and the fourth from Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, section 5.

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time, if they are lucky, to reproduce themselves, again given good fortune, and then to die; and all this for no other reason than the fact that they have these drives and enough physiological and behavioural adaptations to survive and reproduce, and with no result other than that with luck and the cunning of the randomly produced adaptiveness some of them do actually succeed in reproducing themselves, and in some cases producing offspring actually better fitted to their environments than their parents.

We should not be so impressed by the rhetoric of creationists or of their polar opposites, evolutionary atheologians like Monod and Dawkins into thinking that Darwinism is formally incompatible with religious belief or meaning. Nevertheless it cannot be denied that Darwinism has been a major weapon in the hands of those concerned to deny any meaning to our existence or that of the universe as a whole. It has been such a weapon precisely because, on its surface at least, Darwinism analyses life, including human life, in terms of five billion years of processes of random variation and selective retention. We, as every other living thing, are products of chance mutations in the genetic structure of earlier creatures, as are all our traits and dispositions, which, directly or indirectly, have been selected because of their contribution to survival and reproduction. According to Darwin, all living things strive to reproduce themselves at a geometrical ratio, and according to what he called the 'law of natural selection', according to which any variations in the 'least degree injurious' will be 'rigidly destroyed'.[2] This picture is not, as has just been noted, formally incompatible with meaning, religious or otherwise, but any such meaning will have to be added to it.

So, maybe there are aspects to our existence which do point beyond the blind drive to survive and reproduce. And maybe, if there is anything in our initial quotations, our intimations of beauty and other aesthetic properties are such aspects. In any case we do seem to spend an awful lot of time and effort in pursuing aesthetic ends. We beautify and decorate our environments, public and private, we create and appreciate works of art, and we seek and appreciate the aesthetic aspects of nature. And we do all these things in a way which seems to have little to with survival and reproduction, and which may at times interfere with survival and reproduction, as when artists starve in garrets or when opera fanatics spend their fortunes and ruin their marriages in pursuing

[2] Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, 1859, First para. of Chapter 4, Penguin Edition, Harmondsworth, 1882, p. 131.

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their passion or when young girls devote all their time and energy to ballet training, all in apparent violation of Darwin's law of natural selection and without any indication of the types in question dying out. So even at the crudest level, does not aesthetic interest provide a counter-example to the theory of evolution?

Darwin was himself worried by the threat aesthetics posed for his theory for at least two reasons. In the first place, if aesthetic sensibility were confined to human beings, it would—against his theory—suggest a radical discontinuity between humans and other animals. Then, secondly, even in the animal kingdom there are aesthetic contrivances, such as the tails of peacocks and the plumage of humming birds. These contrivances seem to contribute nothing to survival and reproduction, but they are costly to produce, and in the case of peacocks' tails they may actually be injurious to their possessors in preventing or impeding flight.

In *The Descent of Man* Darwin tackled both these questions. His strategy was to show that both the appearance of beauty, as in the peacocks' tails, and the taste for it, as in the case of peahens' choices, go hand in hand as mutually supporting and demanding players in the struggle for existence. And, insofar as peahens and the like have an aesthetic sensibility, there is no discontinuity between us and the rest of the animal kingdom, even if our aesthetic tastes are more developed than those of most other animals.

What Darwin argued was that the elaborate displays found among animals and birds, particularly during mating, could be explained only on the assumption that birds and animals were capable of appreciating beauty. That is the only way in which we could explain why so much effort, metabolic and behavioural, went into producing these things, as beyond certain in-built preferences for regularity and symmetry, 'why certain bright colours should excite pleasure cannot be explained'.[3]

Darwin was concerned to demonstrate continuity between humans and other animals, so if he could show that there was in animals a genuine aesthetic sense, one large ostensible discontinuity would have been eliminated. The tails of male peacocks and the songs and plumage of many other birds are, in Darwin's own terms, elaborate, graceful, splendid, beautiful and highly ornamented. That the females of the species in question appreciate these things cannot be denied, says Darwin, and in just the same way that human females do, who deck themselves out with the same plumes

[3] Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 1871, quoted from the second edition, 1874, vol. I, p. 141.

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of the same birds. And in the animal kingdom, it is the most splendid and beautiful males who succeed in getting the most and best females—as, in the case of peahens selecting the peacocks with the most luxuriant tails, has more recently been confirmed systematically by experiment and observation.

But do the peahens who chose the peacocks with the best tails do so because they admire their beauty? That they might not be chosing on aesthetic grounds was actually the subject of an early dispute between Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace. Wallace was in general somewhat un-Darwinian in emphasizing differences between humans and other animals, a point to which we will return. But in the matter of female choice of mates, Wallace was more Darwinian than Darwin himself in denying that there was anything functionless or purely aesthetic in behaviour which played so significant a role in the development of a species.

Darwin himself argued that selection pressures alone, building on some initially inexplicable caprice or aesthetic preference could have been enough to explain the apparent admiration female birds had for the extravagance of their mates, and for the development within a species of males with ever more elaborate tails, songs and plumage. In the development of the species in question, females initially had preferences for males with the attributes in question. The resultant pairings produced off-spring with similar tastes and attributes. The most splendid of the new males are then, in their turn chosen by the ever more choosy females descended from the original choosers, and one more twist is given to the evolutionary spiral, which will go on developing until checked by some countervailing pressure.

The evolutionary potential of this sort of selection pressure and its trajectory moving far from its original starting point was well demonstrated by R. A. Fisher in 1930.[4] Fisher showed that once a preference gets embedded in a population, it will tend to move forward with ever increasing rapidity under its own momentum. It may even, as is the case with peacock's tails, produce unwieldy and, from the point of view of simple survival, potentially injurious adaptations. After all, peacocks with splendid tails are pretty poor flyers, and so more vulnerable to predators than they would be were their tails more modest. Does this example refute Darwin's principle about the the inevitable eradication of variations in the least degree injurious? Darwin thought not, because what the

[4] see R. A. Fisher, *The Genetical Theory of Natural Selection*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1930.

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luxuriantly tailed peacocks may have lost in terms of sheer survival, they more than made up for in reproductive advantage over their less well endowed competitors. Injury and advantage in evolutionary terms are many faceted, and cannot be read off from a creature's performance on just one dimension.

Darwin, supplemented by Fisher, provide a convincing enough account of how in a particular species, the development of what is for us aesthetically pleasing characteristics can occur as a result of female choice (and specifically as a result of what Darwin somewhat ungallantly refers to as the initially inexplicable operation of female caprice). But what he does not show is that either in the beginning of the evolutionary trajectory or at its end the females are choosing for aesthetic reasons. And it was on precisely this point that Wallace parted company with Darwin. Wallace insisted that in the human realm aesthetic response is part of our 'spiritual nature'—which we did not share with animals—whereas what looks to us like an aesthetic response in the animal realm is actually no such thing. For big tails, fine plumage and vibrant songs presuppose in their owners health, strength and vitality; ornamental display can also be a sign of territorial dominance, which also indicates general strength and superiority.

How does Darwin know that the females are not choosing their beautiful males because what we see as their beauty is symptomatic of other more utilitarian qualities? Could nature ever endow its creatures with properties and tastes which were not, in Wallace's terms, 'sensible'?[5] Evolution is a process powered by the drives individuals have to survive and reproduce and shaped by the environmental response to the means by which different creatures seek to satisfy those drives. Could evolution ever allow its creatures to waste time and effort on drives and properties which are literally useless? Wallace, more selectionist here than Darwin, thought not. Every trait of any significance had to endow its possessor with direct adaptive advantage in survival and reproduction. Caprice alone and aesthetic sense could play no significant role in a domain governed by the iron logic of natural selection, and certainly not to the extent envisaged by Darwin and Fisher.

How, then, might it be possible to decide between the view that aesthetic preference in animals is really aesthetic and the view that what looks to us to be aesthetic preference, on the part of peahens say, is really a preference for other qualities which go along with the

[5] On Wallace and aesthetics, see Helena Cronin, *The Ant and the Peacock*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 186–91.

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aesthetic, and which are not chosen via aesthetic appreciation? The problem is that there is no direct way of deciding. All we have is broad brush behaviour, which is susceptible of several interpretations. What we cannot do is ask a peahen why she makes the choices she does, or what precisely it is she admires in her mates. Nevertheless, if we compare what we see of peahens and other animals in this area with what seems to be crucial in human aesthetic judgments, that animals have a genuine aesthetic sense can come to seem highly doubtful.

We can usefully begin this enquiry by considering some of the things Kant says about aesthetic judgments.[6] In the first place, they are seen by Kant, correctly in my view, as both disinterested and universal, and right at the start we have a difference. For, whatever else the peahen is doing when she chooses the peacock with the best tail, she is judging neither disinterestedly nor universally.

In speaking of aesthetic appreciation as disinterested, what Kant means is that we are not interested in consuming or possessing the object we are reacting to. We are interested in its 'real existence' and contemplate it for its own sake, rather than as something which we could consume or sell or use. Of course, one might have both an aesthetic interest in something and some other interest. An art dealer might admire a painting for aesthetic reasons and for its monetary value to him; a landowner might appreciate his estate both for its beauty and for the lustre it added to his reputation. But in each case, it is possible, theoretically at least, to distinguish the aesthetic from the other interest.

The disinterestedness of the aesthetic judgment can be characterized in terms of the object in question being contemplated rather than used, and this goes even for cases where one admires something aesthetically for its fittedness to function. That is to say, we can speak of a beautiful car or aeroplane, and part of what we are admiring here may be the way the design refers to what it is intended to do, and, by its sleek lines or whatever, symbolizes that. But in saying that, say, the racing cars of the 1950s were beautiful in comparison to today's F1 monstrosities, we will be standing back from actually using the cars, even if the contemplation does eventually issue is use (though in this case, today's Ferrari would undoubtedly outperform its 1950s predecessor). Aesthetic enjoyment is, in Kant's terms, a 'reflective' rather than an 'organic' or 'appetitive' pleasure.

Matters may seem more complicated when we turn to sexual

[6] in Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, 1780, sections 1–60.

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beauty. In admiring a beautiful woman is the man disinterested? Or is he looking at her as a potential or even an actual lover? This is a question which takes us back to Plato. In *Phaedrus* (250ff) Plato had argued that our first perception of beauty comes when we fall in love with a beautiful youth. The lover shudders with awe and reverence, as at the sight of a god. He is seized by a strange sweating and by fever. Warmth enters the soul through the beauty coming in through the eyes. The soul grows wing and aches, as when a child is teething. When he is parted from the loved one, he is maddened, and will suffer any shame to get back in the presence of the beloved.

In his discussion of the power of sexual attraction, Plato undoubtedly touches on aspects of our emotive life which Kant would rather we forgot. In Plato's descriptions any reflective enjoyment is intermingled with the appetitive and the organic. In this Plato may be telling us something about the genesis of our aesthetic sense which Kant overlooks, and which points more in the direction of Darwinian accounts of beauty. For many people a strong and particular feeling for beauty and for the aesthetic does seem to accompany adolescence and sexual awakening. But not the only or necessarily the earliest intimation of the aesthetic. Even quite young children are often moved by the beauties of nature, in a purely contemplative way.

In any case, even if there are experiences of sexual beauty which are, in a sense, mixed, and which might point to some of our experience of beauty as being rooted in our physical nature, as Plato points out the madness and the would be consumption of the lover is only the first stage in the soul's ascent to the beautiful. When sanity returns, the lover will experience beauty in a calm way; his sense of the beautiful diffuses itself over all parts of material creation, where it is to be found, and not just the sexual. He turn from the 'slavish and illiberal' devotion to 'individual loveliness' to set sail on the 'open sea of beauty', before eventually finding rest in Beauty itself, something wholly abstract and non-material. (See *Symposium*, 210–2)

As we shall see, in terms of Kantian aesthetics abstract, non-material beauty is a step too far. But what Plato says about the second stage is suggestive, even in the case of the beauty of beautiful bodies. A calm, disinterested appreciation here is not out of the question. There can be a chaste, non-possessive appreciation of female beauty, either in the flesh or in the painted image. Despite the claims of John Berger, not every painted nude is an incitement to male possession or fantasy, even if many are. Titian's *Education*

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of Love (Borghese Gallery, Rome) is certainly a celebration of female flesh, but it is at the same time a reminder of the poignancy and uncertainty of love and of the pain of the experience (in the painting the achingly beautiful Venus is binding the love-inducing gaze of Cupid). In his later work Rubens continually and, in my view successfully, used female nudity, including exuberant depictions of his own wife's abundant and fleshy beauty, to evoke the blessings of peace and of fertility. Even Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (Uffizi Gallery, Florence) and Velasquez's *Rokeby Venus* (National Gallery, London), though certainly reminders of the most organic pleasures possible and of the processes of reproduction, are reflective reminders, which can and should be viewed aesthetically, that is disinterestedly, reflectively and without engaging desire.

What is striking about the reflectiveness which Kant sees in the aesthetic judgment is that there is no obvious analogue in the animal realm. We say that the peahen admires the peacock's tail only because she chooses the cock. The judgment, if such it is, is interested, organic, the manifestation of a very basic desire, which is indeed the only criterion for the existence of any judgment on the hen's part. She is only at the stage of Plato's maddened lover, if indeed she is even that far. We hear no stories of animals admiring some aesthetic feature of their environment reflectively and disinterestedly. And even if we are able to discern rhythm and melody in the song of a bird, it is far from clear that the birds do. Even less do they treat their songs aesthetically, using them as material to be developed musically, as, by contrast, the composer Messaien tried to do (with, in my opinion, rather mixed success).

If disinterested aesthetic judgments are not found in the animal kingdom, nor are universal ones. When the peacock with the most beautiful tail is chosen by a peahen, she is not implying that all observers, or even all peahens, should concur in finding it beautiful. Nor, when I declare a preference for dark over milk chocolate am I saying that every right-minded person should agree. But when I say that Beethoven's late quartets are great works of art, spiritually deep, full of exquisite lyricism, earthy humour and fascinating counterpoint, I am intending that what I say should command general assent. The fact that some of Beethoven's contemporaries failed to appreciate the late quartets means that I am committed to saying that they were in error over them, that for whatever reason (unfamiliarity or surface strangeness, perhaps) there was some failure in their appreciation. I am not simply saying that these contemporaries of Beethoven were unable to see that future generations of listeners would find the quartets deep, humorous, lyrical, and so on.

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In my view, the most natural way of explaining the Kantian universality of the aesthetic judgment, to which, it should be stressed, no equivalent can be found in the kingdom of non-linguistic animals, is to say that those who fail to agree with some generally acceptable aesthetic judgment are mis-perceiving something in the work in question. In my view, but not in Kant's. As is well-known, Kant emphasized the universality of the aesthetic judgment, while denying its objectivity. He thought that when I judge something beautiful or ugly or elegant, and so on, I am speaking not about real features of the object in question, objectively present in it. What I am indirectly, but really referring to, are feelings the object conjures up in me, in my breast. Aesthetic judgments are, in Kant's terms, subjective.

Part of the reason for this was that Kant thought that aesthetic judgments were singular. That is to say, an aesthetic judgment is one which is always, on the surface at least, about particular unique properties of the particular object it is (ostensibly) about. Many will agree with Kant here, up to a point. An aesthetic judgment by me about a work of art, say, requires experience by me of that specific object, and its unique combination of properties. A mere description will not suffice if I am interested in making a judgment about its aesthetic value. Nor will it be possible to sum up my grounds for my judgment in any general formula, which does not refer to specific features of the object in question. Thus, you can say that in a good painting a balance of form and detail is needed, but that general principle will not tell us why, let us say Veronese's *Marriage Feast at Cana* (Louvre, Paris) is an aesthetic triumph, while Frith's *Derby Day* (Tate Gallery, London), with much the same amount of form and detail, is hardly a painting at all. To make a judgment of that sort with any degree of confidence, you will have actually to look at the works in question and analyse the experience they conjure up.

But even if, as Kant rightly implies, aesthetic judgments cannot be usefully captured in terms of general formulae, it is simply prejudice to say—as Kant appears to do—that a non-formalisable judgment cannot be objective, or about real properties of objects. Judgments about the guilt or innocence of an accused person in court are also singular and non-formalisable, in much the same sort of way as aesthetic judgments, but they are certainly about something objective. Nor is their singularity and non-formalisability the main reason for Kant denying objectivity to aesthetic judgments. The deeper reason seems to be due to his realisation of what we might call the 'magnetism' of value. Beauty is something that

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attracts us, and ugliness repels, and so on with other aesthetic (and ethical) properties. But how can they do this if they are straightforward properties like squareness or redness, which have no necessary affective charge? If the recognition of beauty or of ugliness were due to something happening in us rather than to something outside us, that problem would be quickly solved. But, I think, far too quickly.

For it is not the case that every time I recognize something as beautiful I am then and thereby attracted to it, any more than I am always drawn to do the right thing and never the wrong thing. One could well—in one's youth, perhaps—admit the beauty of the painting of Raphael or the fineness of the poetry of Horace without being particularly attracted to either. The point is that while aesthetic and moral properties characteristically do engage us and are rooted in our genetically given constitution and our psychology, they can and do transcend their origins in such a way as to open a theoretical gap between recognition of a given property and actual responses in particular cases. No such normative gap—a gap which allows us to say that someone *ought* to like or admire some aesthetic feature of an object, even though they don't—exists in the animal case. They just respond or fail to respond. There would just be no sense in arguing that a peahen who failed to respond to the most luxuriant tail in her vicinity was making a mistake in judgment, as opposed to simply lacking a particular behavioural response.

In analysing aesthetic judgments as obliquely referring to the emotions which objects of aesthetic value stir up in us, Kant was, as in so much else, following Hume. For Hume, seeing an object as beautiful or ugly is a matter of 'gilding or staining it with the colours borrowed from internal sentiment'. Nevertheless, like Kant, Hume is also insistent on the universality of the aesthetic:

> the same Homer, who pleased at Athens and Rome two thousand years ago, is still admired at Paris and at London. All the changes of climate, government, religion, and language have not been able to obscure his glory. Authority or prejudice may be able to give a temporary vogue to a bad poet or orator; but his reputation will never be durable or general. When his compositions are examined by posterity or foreigners, the enchantment is dissipated and his faults appear in their true colours. On the contrary, a real genius, the longer his works endure, and the more wide they are spread, the more sincere is the admiration which they meet with.[7]

Hume, like Kant, wants to hold both that aesthetic judgments are potentially universal and that their source and ultimate reference is

[7] David Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', 1757, para 11.

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human taste; both, that there is such a thing as good taste, vindicated and manifested through universal assent and the test of time, and that this good taste is not objectively warranted by the objects themselves, but is a matter of those objects attracting our feelings or (in Hume's case) of their being gilded and stained by them. For Hume, as for Kant, the cross-cultural and trans-temporal critical-creative dialogue which elicits the cool, reflective and disinterested judgment that Homer is a poet of great stature, is ultimately a dialogue about what exists (or ought to exist) only in our minds. It is not about anything which is really or objectively there.

But why 'ought to exist' and how universal, if these judgments are not based on something which is actually there, and actually there apart from any feelings I or anyone else happen to have at any time? And what is the dialogue about, if it is not a dialogue about the *Iliad* itself? The attempt of Hume and Kant to subjectivise the aesthetic judgment is hard enough to accept in itself, but is particularly hard in the context of its supposed normativity and universality. It is time to suggest an approach to beauty which maintains its objectivity, but which does not deny its roots in human, and ultimately instinctual responses, nor its valuational—that is magnetizing—nature.

To find the Rokeby Venus beautiful is to make an objective judgment (and one which most people acquainted with the painting would agree with), but it is not to make a judgment which is factual in the scientific sense. It is a judgment which needs a specifically human sensibility to discern, and which will not be captured by the more universally intelligible concepts and theories of natural science. But to deny it objectivity on those grounds alone would simply be to indulge in a piece of philosophical dogmatism, according to which only the scientifically accessible is granted the title of real. So, on the view being advanced here, aesthetic judgments are indeed *our* judgments, that is judgments made possible only by our biological and cultural traditions, but they nonetheless reveal genuine properties of the objects in question.

When Hume and Kant and their followers deny this, they are in fact saying little more than that beauty is not a formalisable property, nor one which could feature in those types of scientific theory which deliberately prescind from properties which would be intelligible only to creatures with a very specific—in this case human—sensibility. To be sure, as already hinted at by the difficulty of finding rules for beauty, and by its extreme context dependence, there will be no set of physically determinable

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properties shared by and only by beautiful objects, such as sunsets, sunflowers, pictures of sunflowers and musical evocations of sunsets. But that a Mediterranean sunset, a field of sunflowers, Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* and Strauss's *Im Abendrot* are all beautiful is certainly something experienced by most of us as true, as demanded by the objects just mentioned, and as authoritative and compelling as anything in science. They are also judgments on which there is perhaps surprising convergence among different people and at different times, in the making of which people certainly believe themselves to be speaking about qualities of the things they are seeing or hearing, and not about feelings in their own breasts.

Indeed, that beauty is not just a projection or a matter of internal sentiment merely is strongly suggested by the experience most of us have had of learning that something is generally regarded as beautiful, of not initially appreciating it as such, and then, with further acquaintance, care and attention coming to find it beautiful (a phenomenon memorably described by Proust in a number of passages). In other words, what *is* beautiful actually directs, shapes and explains our experience of its being beautiful. It is not as if the feelings in us towards that thing existed prior to our assimilation of standards of true beauty, standards which we take to have an existence and a logic independent of empirically given feelings people have. In other words, whatever its origin may have been in ancestral sensibility, taste and instinct, in the human world as we know it, beauty is something objective and outside of us, commanding our attention and allegiance individually and collectively.

As far as the logic of beauty goes, it is perfectly possible that some aesthetic prophet could demonstrate to a whole people that there was something amiss about its taste—as, with some success and justification, Ruskin and Pugin did in nineteenth century England. And some might feel there is an even more pressing need for a Ruskin of the present day to reveal the aesthetic of the Disney empire as not so much popular as vulgar, garish and mawkish. (And maybe also we need some person with the authority of a Ruskin or a Carlyle to pull us all up over our connivance in rap and pop music and in the sheer lowness of popular television—though it is arguable that if there were such a person, these appalling phenomena would never have come to play so large a part in national and publicly funded life.) All this aside, though, when we read great criticism—Ruskin on Turner, say, or Nietzsche on Wagner, or Leavis on Eliot—what we have does not have the logical form of mere expression of emotion. These critics are pointing to features of the

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works they are discussing, and drawing judgments about those works, which we are urged to accept, based on the features they have pointed to. The criticisms demand us to respond to the works in a particular way, in a way we may not previously have realized, because of what they show us about the works; if we disagree—as in at least two of the cases we probably should—we will have to point to countervailing features which override the original judgment.

Note, incidentally, how discourse of this sort reinforces Kant's views on the universality of the aesthetic judgment, and also on its singularity: that, to stay with our examples, religiosity like Eliot's, but in hands other than his, or a neurasthenic sensibility like Wagner's, but without his colossal grasp of structure, might well have had the dire effects Leavis and Nietzsche purported to find in the works as a whole. While there are reason which support and must support aesthetic judgments, an aesthetic judgment will always depend on the precise and unique way a particular set of reasons bears on the specific case.

Reflection on the way discussions about beauty actually proceed shows clearly that neurological and evolutionary accounts of the perception of beauty are necessarily incomplete (at best). To take an example of the former, P. W. Atkins has written of the near universal and favourable recognition of the golden section as being 'like the resonance of an electronic circuit to a distant transmitter, when a certain frequency can induce an enhanced power'. Particular circuits in the brain respond to the scanning of golden sections, the brain itself then responds in 'an enhanced manner' and our response is 'the one that normally correlates with perceived "beauty"'.[8] What is perceived as beauty, on this neurological account, is what meshes with our brain circuitry, which is itself a product of our DNA. As our DNA, and the behaviour it provokes, is itself part of our evolutionary history, an account like Atkins' will both fit into and fill out an evolutionary perspective.

The connexion is made explicitly by E. O. Wilson. In *Biophilia* he writes that aesthetic contrivances 'play upon the circuitry of the brain's limbic system in a way that ultimately promotes survival and reproduction'.[9] Wilson's idea is that aesthetic interest has been embedded in us because of the general usefulness of curiosity and the search for connexions and similarities. More specifically, because of our ancestral past, we are disposed to find beautiful

[8] P. W. Atkins, 'The Lion, the Rose and the Ultimate Oyster', *Modern Painters*, 2/4, Winter 1989, pp. 50–5.

[9] E. O. Wilson, *Biophilia*, Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 61.

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scenes and bodies which contribute in various ways to survival and reproduction. Thus it has recently been shown that, various allegedly superficial differences in taste aside (as between the large women of Renoir and Rubens, say, and the more gamine figures fashionable in the 1960s), men universally prefer women with figures with the same (low) waist-hip ratio, of about 0·70%, which is constant as between both Renoir's beauties and those of today.[10] Perception of this ratio in a woman is supposed to indicate to the males the woman's potential fertility and absence of actual pregnancy, which in turn is supposed to explain why men find women of this type beautiful. Men also prefer women with other characteristics, such as bright eyes and good complexions, which indicate youth (and hence ability to have healthy children). Wilson himself would explain the near-universal predilection for pictures for what are in effect Claude-type classical landscapes in terms of our ancestors having been disposed to favour landscapes which were conducive to survival on the savannah—that is to say, places where there was good vegetation, a source of water, such as a river or a lake, and also some higher ground to facilitate the perception of prey and predators.[11]

In fact this idea of the universality of what has been called by Denis Dutton a 'pervasive Pleistocene taste in landscape' has in a sense been confirmed by the researches of two emigré Russian artists, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, in 1993. Kómar and Melamid surveyed people around the world, and found that their taste in landscape was pretty constant, and much as Wilson had suggested, with the addition that there was a marked preference for some famous human figure in the picture. On this basis, and clearly ironically, they then concocted an impossible mélange of these elements, which they called *America's Most Wanted*, a Hudson River School scene, with George Washington standing beside a lake in which a hippo is disporting itself.[12]

I do not want to deny that at some level perception of aesthetic properties, and aesthetic interest more generally, is based in our physical constitution, our brain structure, and hence indirectly in our evolution. It is indeed this grounding in the physical which

[10] c.f. Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, Penguin, London, 1998, pp. 485–7.

[11] c.f. *Biophilia*, pp. 109–11.

[12] c.f. Denis Dutton, 'Art and Evolutionary Psychology' in Jerrold Levinson (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, Oxford University Press, 2002, in which there is a full discussion of Komar and Melamid, and of much else relevant to our present theme.

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leads me to reject the Platonic notion of a non-physical aesthetic. Our common biology also provides the start of an explanation as to why there are aesthetic universals, aesthetic preferences common to us all, to the extent that there are such things; though I do not believe that this is a purely physical matter. Aesthetic interest is connected to a wider sense of human flourishing and human potentiality, which though at some level is also common to us all, takes us beyond purely biological imperatives.

But what I do want to question is the view implicit in Atkins, at least, that the perception of beauty is an automatic response to a generalisable stimulus. The same golden section can be made out in many different objects: a prehistoric palace in Mexico, a temple in Greece, a sketch by Le Corbusier, numerous renaissance paintings, the Palazzo della Cancelleria in Rome, and, of course, in a Euclidean textbook. Even if the perceiver saw all of these things as balanced, this is not the same thing as harmonious, let alone as beautiful. It is only the right sort of balance which is harmonious or beautiful, or balance in a particular context. Even if modernist architects and their propogandists have forgotten it, Alberti's adage that the beauty of ornament must be added to the harmony of proportion remains true. But what is the right combination of proportion and ornament? And it would be simply absurd to say that the aesthetic interest in Raphael's *The Crucified Christ with the Virgin Mary, Saints and Angels* (National Gallery, London) is somehow explicable in terms of the geometry underlying the painting. Even if geometry is a necessary condition to an aesthetic like Raphael's it is not a sufficient condition. All the humanity and all the religion in the painting would be overlooked on an account framed in terms like those used by Atkins. (And it is surely significant in this context that Clement Greenberg who attempted a similarly reductive aesthetic was also the great spokesman for abstract painting, arguing heroically—or quixotically, as the case may be—that the history of painting should be seen as a history of a drive to the painterly purity of abstraction. But, for all the persuasive power of critics and others committed to abstraction, it is hard to see anyone finding the golden section on its own of even fleeting aesthetic interest.)

What goes for the golden section also goes for waist-hip ratios of 0·70% and for Claudian landscapes. These features would provide at most a substratum of what is required for true beauty and for real aesthetic interest. In fact it is doubtful that they do even that. For many people, including possibly for the painter himself, Rubens' most touching depiction of female beauty is the painting called *The*

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Little Fur (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), in which Hélène Fourment is precisely not painted as an ideal subject for evolutionarily determined male admiration, but rather as a real woman, beautiful and beloved, to be sure, but also with the imperfections of reality, and, as far as one can see, with a waist-hip ratio which is certainly not 0.70%. In other words, to reduce beauty, even female beauty to some standard format is just crass, as it simply ignores the full human context in which the beauty of a person is actually recognized.

This point becomes even clearer when we turn to landscape. Whatever Wilson and those polled in public opinion surveys might say about their preferred scenes, it is noteworthy that Ruskin found Claude's approach to the subject insipid. Although Claude had a 'fine feeling for beauty of form' and 'considerable tenderness of perception', the overall effect is of a kind of 'feminine charm' and of an artist 'incapable of enjoying or painting anything energetic or terrible.'[13] Ruskin had a point. To maintain aesthetic interest, an artist has to do more than give us a formulaic chocolate-box landscape. But once the task of the landscape painter is seen as, at least in part, showing us things we might not otherwise have noticed or appreciated, it becomes far from clear that he or she has to stick with scenes our savannah roaming ancestors might have found conducive to their survival. And in fact they don't, even on chocolate boxes. Since Turner and Ruskin, at least, mountains and stormy seas have featured hugely in landscape taste, and since Sidney Nolan and Fred Williams deserts too, all terrains one imagines early man would have done his level best to avoid, and which evolution should therefore have given us a predisposition to find ugly. Post romanticism we do not, of course, have any such predisposition or not in all cases, though we do in some, those too dreary and desolate, perhaps. But how dreary is too dreary? Couldn't a Turner or a Graham Sutherland even change our earlier assumptions about that? We are back with the Kantian insistence on the non-generalisable nature of aesthetic judgments, just as we are when we enquire as to just what degree of roughness might prevent our Claudian sylvan glade (complete with picturesque rocks) from being insipid.

Aesthetic judgments focus on the precise detail of a given work or object, and they are also normative. They are about how this particular thing ought to be, with its full human resonance. They are judgments which are elucidated by giving reasons and how they

[13] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. v, part ix, ch. 5, 1860, as in the Cook and Wedderburn edition, London, 1903–12, Vol. vii, p. 319.

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apply in the particular case, and how the particular thing relates to other aspects of our lives and the human world generally. In this sort of discussion, appeals to brain circuitry or to evolutionary history will be strikingly irrelevant. They may tell us something about the origins of some of our preferences in an entirely general way, but they will tell us nothing about how or why this bit of ornament in a building enhances or destroys its overall harmony, or why *The Little Fur* is so humanly resonant, or why D. H. Lawrence's novels are so much fuller and more convincing than his essays, even when both seem, on the surface, to be conveying the same general messages.

To put this point another way, our experiences of beauty and other aesthetic properties (including negative ones) are not like certain nerves or neurones being stimulated. They are not just a matter of the senses or the brain being appeased. They are not like hunger or thirst or our drives to reproduce being assuaged or aroused. Aesthetic experience always involves reflection and judgment. At the very lowest level it always involves a perception of the beautiful object as an object of such and such a sort, and beautiful in such and such respects. As a result of this intentionality of the aesthetic judgment, critics of a judgment of ours can then point to features of the object we have missed or comparisons we should have made or connexions we should have drawn. We might then be led to revise or refine or reject our original judgment, and so to modify the experience.

There is nothing analogous in sensory stimulation, whether this is pleasurable or painful. Even though selective attention can modify an experience of pure pleasure or pure pain, what is at issue in these cases is an experience unmediated by thought or judgment, and not responsive to reasoning in the way judgments, including aesthetic judgments are. We can have aesthetic or quasi-aesthetic judgments closely tied to or based on sensations, as in the case of wine-tasting perhaps, but even here, in the element of judgment involved, the experience takes on rational and cognitive dimensions transcending the purely sensory. In a positive aesthetic experience, the pleasure in question is not just experienced; it is perceived as having a value, and if Kant is right, as having a universal value, and also as being bound in with all sorts of other attitudes and values we have or ought to have. Art may be for art's sake, but it is never just for art's sake. It is because of the valuational dimension of the aesthetic that aesthetic judgments are open to criticism and refinement, and, for the subject of an aesthetic experience, life is improved cognitively, emotionally and even morally.

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The neural circuitry and evolutionary accounts of the experience of beauty overlook the intentionality of aesthetic experience and the role that reason-giving and justification play in refining our sense of the beautiful. They are thus unable to account for the way that far more than the formal properties of things contributes to our sense of what is beautiful and why, in our aesthetic endeavours the clichés of chocolate box and pin-up will not do. Related criticisms can be made of the recent attempts by writers like Steven Pinker and Geoffrey Miller to account for artistic endeavour in terms of the status and sexual advantage successful artists and owners of art secure as a result of their work and possessions.

Some artists certainly do succeed in this way. Due to the acclaim their work brings them, and seeing artistic motivation in terms of sexual success or status more generally would certainly bring it within the general orbit of evolutionary explanation, where what is done is done for advantage in survival and or reproduction. To this fairly crude notion Miller adds a refinement in his book *The Mating Mind*.[14] What attracts potential mates to successful artists is their skill in performance, the rarity of great performance, and its consequent expense and difficulty. So, on this view, art is explained in terms of sexual selection, artistic virtuosity being valued by potential mates both for its rarity and as a symbol of other skills in the performer. Again, at one level, this theory is not entirely baseless; one has to think only of the careers of the likes of Paganini and Liszt, Picasso and Augustus John.

However, in either simplistic or sophisticated versions, the sexual selection view explains at most one side of artistic activity. It explains at some level why the artists might want to be artists, and why some of them might drive themselves beyond the norm. It does not explain why women mob them, if mob them they do, and why the rest of us shower them with wealth and adulation. Leaving aside the obvious point that in mature artistic traditions virtuosity in itself is not the only or indeed the most admired quality in an artist, the sexual selection account fails to explain why it is precisely artistic virtuosity which is so admired, as opposed to virtuosity in, say, arithmetic or coal mining or sheep-shearing. Nor, at a more profound level, does it explain what the artist himself finds worthwhile in his performance, and leads him on to master it in the way he does. Picasso was promiscuous and highly sexed, and artistic success undoubtedly enabled him to satisfy himself in these ways

[14] Pinker, in *How the Mind Works*, pp. 522–4, Miller in *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature*, Doubleday, New York, 2000.

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beyond most men's wildest dreams, but this was a by-product of his artistic genius. He had first to succeed artistically, and to do this he had to understand and feel what art was about, and having grasped this, he had both to be able to innovate artistically, and to want to innovate artistically. He, like his admirers, had to be gripped by a sense that art was worth doing for itself and on its own terms—for it is because he and they have this sense that he is admired for his supreme ability at that. He is not admired because of the wealth and riches he gets through art; unlike a business man who is admired because of the riches his work brings, an artist is admired for his work, and logically admiration for his riches come afterwards. The sexual selection accounts of artistic activity are, in other words, externalist accounts, touching on some of the dynamics of artistic communities and esteem, but they tell us nothing about the meaning or justification of judgments of beauty, about their internal logic or value.

An evolutionary theorist like Miller could grant some of this. He could admit that to see a given behavioural trait as having had a certain function in its evolutionary history is not equivalent to its having that function now. On this view, in prehistory virtuosic artistic performances, by their rarity and skill, demonstrated rarity and skill in their possessors, who were thereby, like peacocks with luxuriant tails, preferred by potential mates; and because of this the taste for art and ability in it got into our genes. But then, this taste having got into our genes, so to speak, we can now value art and artists for other reasons than those to do with mate acquisition. But this concession is not enough. It is not just true (though it is) that artistic motivation nowadays floats free of its evolutionary origins, with a logic and system of values of its own, unconnected to whatever might have been true in the remote past. Even this modified evolutionary account fails to explain why it was *artistic* virtuosity which was admired in the first place. In sum, if there is anything to the 'performance' account of our aesthetic taste and sensibility, the direction of explanation must be exactly the opposite to that postulated by Pinker and Miller. That is, it is because artistic performance is admired for aesthetic reasons, that outstanding performers become attractive to potential mates and gain high status, rather than the other way round.

So, what then is aesthetic experience based in? It involves, at various levels, a delight in appearance, to be sure, a harmony for a time between us and how things appear. But does it take us any further than that? Does it, as our opening quotations suggested, suggest any deeper transcendence of the immediate? Does it

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intimate to us that we are 'at home' in the universe, as religion at one time preached, and as, in different ways, science and morality might contest (science by telling us that the world is really very different from how it seems, morality—at least on some accounts—by imposing on us duties which we either cannot fulfil or which have to be fulfilled at supreme personal cost)?

This is not the place to attempt an answer to these questions, or even any adequate analysis of their meaning. But our reflections on evolution prompt the following dilemma. Either, as our opening quotations implied, art and aesthetic experience really do point to some transcendence of the material world; in which case, evolution cannot give us a full account of human life and experience. Or, alternatively, art is a purely human creation and aesthetic experience has no transcendent dimension. In which case, something like an evolutionary explanation of these phenomena would in all likelihood be called for, even if we are at the moment far from any such account. At any event, any sense of transcendence aesthetic phenomena evoke would itself be illusory.

Maybe this sense of transcendence—which certainly does attach to many works of art of the past—has in some obscure way helped the species to survive and reproduce. It would be much the same way as, according to Michael Ruse, the (for him) equally illusory belief in an objective moral reality may in the past have helped human communities and individuals to flourish evolutionarily.[15] In both cases, the picture would be of survival devices tricking us into feelings of transcendence and illusions of objectivity for their own devious ends. But then, if this is true and it is generally realized to be true, we will look back on those forms of art which do intimate transcendence of some sort as belonging to a certain primitive and backward stage of humanity, as do the religious traditions out of which so many of them grew. In such circumstances, and in the absence of any transcendent ambition or dimension, art itself is likely to degenerate, as Ruskin predicted as early as 1846, into what he called mere aesthesis, 'mere amusement, ministers to morbid sensibilities, ticklers and fanners of the soul's sleep'—much like what you can see in to-day's most admired galleries of contemporary art, in fact.[16] Perhaps, too, surveying the cultural scene of the West to-day, both high and low, we might recall Darwin's own strictures about the 'babarous races of men', with

[15] c.f. Michael Ruse, in 'Evolution and Religion', paper presented at The Royal Institute of Philosophy's schools' conference, Warwick, 1995.

[16] Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. ii, part iii, ch. 1, 1846, as in Cook and Wedderburn, vol. iv, p. 36.

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their 'hideous ornaments and equally hideous music'.[17] Post Darwin, and perhaps in part because of Darwin, the aesthetic wheel would seem to have turned full circle.

[17] Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, vol. 1, p. 142.

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