

SMPLECTY

Ecological Civilisation and the Will to Art



SAMUEL ALEXANDER

Essays on the Aesthetics of Existence

Homo Aestheticus, the Artful Species: An Evolutionary Perspective

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Published by the Simplicity Institute 2023
Working Paper Series: Essays on the Aesthetics of Existence
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Acknowledgements: Heartfelt thanks to Professor Brendan Gleeson for critically reviewing these essays. Countless improvements, both substantive and stylistic, were made in response to his feedback. Remaining errors and infelicities are my own. Thanks also to Agim Sulaj for generously giving permission to use his image on the cover, and to Andrew Doodson for his design of the cover.

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* This is a provisional Table of Contents. The essays are being published individually as they are completed, meaning that this project is a work-in-progress which may evolve.

‘What are humans *for*?’

– **Wendell Berry**

Homo Aestheticus, the Artful Species: An Evolutionary Perspective

Samuel Alexander

In previous essays I presented a view of the universe as being fundamentally aesthetic, a vision arising out of the metaphor of ‘cosmos-as-artist’ as opposed to the dominant paradigm of ‘cosmos-as-machine’. As an interpretative and explanatory tool, I posited an underlying creative force in the universe – a primordial Will to Art – that seeks to explore its creative and sensuous nature through the evolution of conscious life. From this perspective, matter is driven to self-awareness over billions of years, in order to produce and experience art and the beauty it can bring forth. Inspired by William Morris, I have defined art broadly and openly as the pleasurable and meaningful expression of creative labour, a theoretical move intended to blur the distinction between artist and artisan.

According to this poetic ontology, the ultimate *telos* of the universe is beauty, providing a latent purpose to the world and our human struggles within it. This guiding ideal should be understood not as mere cosmetic ornamentation, but as the pleasurable experience of art and nature, the meaningful interaction with self, other, and world, and the undertaking and contemplation of aesthetic activity. Our capacity to experience beauty shows that human beings have a place in this world, at least potentially, and our capacity to create beauty provides us with a noble, orientating purpose. The history of political society can be interpreted through this lens, as a dialectical process of evolution through which human beings struggle, often unconsciously and indirectly, toward the ideal of beauty.

Later in this collection of essays I will propose and defend a political economy of art, being a mode of societal organisation that would structure and support an ecological civilisation of artisan-artists. Such an aestheticised society would be composed of people living materially simple but sufficient lives in harmony with nature, seeking meaning and pleasure in life primarily through self-directed creative labour and aesthetic experience. In developing this orientating vision, my two guiding premises are, first, that material sufficiency is all that is *needed* for human beings to live rich, meaningful, and artful lives; and second, that material sufficiency is all that is *possible*, over the long term, on a finite planet in an age of environmental limits.

In what follows I will continue providing foundations for this vision of an ecological civilisation by exploring how human consciousness is presently the most sophisticated evolutionary outcome of the universe’s creative unfolding.¹ On that basis I will propose that our species is best described, not as *homo sapiens*, but as *homo aestheticus* – that is, artistic or aesthetic human.² It is easy enough to acknowledge that art could not have existed without the humans who produced it. Few consider the possibility, however, that humans could not have appeared without our arts.³

In that spirit, I will present a case for why every human being, on account of evolutionary inheritances, can (and should) be described and self-identify as being part of an ‘artful species’,⁴ as an aesthetic agent in an aesthetic universe. This account can be derived from our powerfully creative natures and innate aesthetic sensibilities, which are found universally among human societies and which have an origin in biological evolution. In fact, it will be seen that the development of our aesthetic practices and rituals throughout history, including the earliest forms of art, were what made us who we are, such that it is accurate to describe us as an art-created art creator – the aesthetic animal.⁵ This isn’t something one can simply declare, however. It calls for the presentation of a plausible evolutionary framework.

Furthermore, today it is self-evident that our species has evolved to such a state whereby we can now cooperate with physical evolution in order to shape or co-produce that evolutionary process through deliberative action; that is, through creative evolution.⁶ We can cooperate with physical evolution because we are at least partially in control of our own actions and can shape the societies and cultures of which we are a part. Our aesthetic capacities and potentials, therefore, are more powerful than ever. At the same time, we are living in a world where self-realisation through creative expression is being stifled if not extinguished by the seductive emptiness of consumerist cultures and today’s profit-centred politics of unsustainable growth. In short, our species seems to be suffering an aesthetic deficit, leaving us alienated from our creative natures. My overarching argument in this collection of essays is that this deficit must be resolved if we are to achieve political and ecological hopes for a more humane, sustainable, and artful social order. Not only that, I will present a theory of change based on the view that art and aesthetic activity are the best tools for producing this new society.

I want to make clear, again, that this narrative of the aesthetic universe is not being presented as the One and Only Right Way to understand evolution in general or humanity in particular. I acknowledge that both the universe and humanity are infinitely complex and, as such, are liable to an infinite number of interpretations. This acknowledgement, however, supports my aesthetic reading of existence, given that it implies that interpretation, an aesthetic practice, cannot be avoided in constructing a view of reality.⁷ It follows that my reading – evidenced and coherent through it may be – is only one of many plausible interpretations. Accordingly, rather than claiming a metaphysical grounding or presenting an evidential ‘proof’, I simply invite people to ‘think of things this way’ and see where the aesthetic metaphoric leads and what it might reveal. In doing so I present a Grand Narrative of the universe and humanity’s place in it, one that is self-consciously a narrative, but which is not, for that reason, untrue.⁸

Overview

After presenting a brief history of life on Earth by way of context, my examination will briefly restate the core elements of evolutionary theory, concerning natural and sexual selection. I then consider what role art and aesthetics may have played in evolutionary history and whether, or to what extent, art can be considered an adaptive strategy that helped our species survive and thrive. Ultimately, however, the question of whether art should be considered an adaptive strategy or ‘merely’ a cultural innovation is not as important as trying to get a sense of what type of creature we are. This understanding can be enriched by looking to our evolutionary history, irrespective of whether our aesthetic nature is a result of biological

inheritances or cultural traditions and practices. It's clear to me that our species is a product of biology *and* culture, and my evolutionary focus herein should not be interpreted otherwise. Anticipating issues discussed further in later essays, I will also consider whether the future of our species depends on our aesthetic and artistic natures, especially given the present context of intensifying environmental and social pressures. When looking to the past it becomes clear that the arts have helped our species survive, develop, and flourish in often hostile, uncertain, and changing environments. It seems plausible, then, that the wise use of the arts may also be required to assist us through the turbulent present and into unknown futures.⁹ Hence this is ultimately a forward-looking analysis, even if this essay resides predominantly in the past.

Over the course of this project, I will seek to show that the human capacity for art and our aesthetic sensibilities may prove to be necessary tools for adapting to, and managing, forthcoming crises – both at the individual and group levels. This will be especially so as biophysical limits begin to impact more deeply on the viability and stability of industrial civilisation (or any growth-orientated civilisation for that matter). Whether we adapt aesthetically or not will, in large part, determine whether we are 'fit to survive' in an increasingly resource and energy constrained and inhospitable ecological era. Just as the fastest deer are more fit to survive in an environment of speedy predators, humanity's aesthetic capacities and sensibilities might be central to our own survival in an age of environmental limits and planetary tipping points. After all, our aesthetic capacities and sensibilities are currently being dangerously repressed, distorted, and underutilised. This has resulted in what I have called an aesthetic deficit disorder – a lack of beauty, sensuality, meaning, and creativity in our lives. Put bluntly, the choice we face is: art or extinction. Fortunately, the choice is ours.

Deep history and the emergence of life

Let me begin at the beginning – literally. Physicists advise that the universe burst into existence approximately 13.8 billion years ago and that Earth formed around 4.5 billion years ago.¹⁰ From that point it is estimated that it took almost one billion years for the earliest forms of microbial life to emerge.¹¹ Within another billion years cyanobacteria had evolved, which were Earth's first photo-synthesizers, sustaining themselves using water and the sun's energy and releasing oxygen as a result. This 'Great Oxidation Event' set the stage for a remarkable transformation of Earth's atmosphere, as oxygen levels increased dramatically. Eventually, multicellular life developed, and around 600-800 million years ago the earliest forms of plant life, and then animal life, emerged. Over the next few hundred million years, the ecosystems of Earth continued to change and the conditions for more complex life forms developed. This point on the geological timescale is sometimes called the 'Cambrian explosion' (approximately 500 million years ago), when nearly all existing animal types, or phyla (mollusks, arthropods, annelids, etc), were established.

To cut a very long story short, animal life continued to evolve until there came a point, around six million years ago, when the earliest hominins emerged in Africa (ongoing technical debates over precise dates need not concern us – rough estimates are good enough). Hominins were descendants of the great apes – of which human beings are *all* descendants. These proto-humans initiated the transition to walking erect on two legs and developed larger brains,

amongst other physiological changes. These were evolutionary adaptations that assisted with surviving in competitive natural environments.

Over the next five million years or so a variety of hominin species lived, evolved, and died out. As environmental conditions changed and as some interbreeding amongst human species occurred, the genetic and cultural variety of these species continued to evolve. *Homo habilis* is thought to have emerged around 2.5 million years ago; *homo erectus* around 1.8 million years ago; and Neanderthals around 400,000 years ago. It is thought the Neanderthals went extinct around 30,000 years ago, being the last species of the *homo* genus to exist besides our own. Stone tools, such as handaxes, were being used at least 2.5 million years ago, giving birth to what is sometimes called *homo faber* ('tool-making human').

The oldest fossils of *homo sapiens* date back to around 300,000 years ago, and fossils from around 160-200,000 years ago look remarkably similar to our own. Although humans living today are in most regards anatomically indistinguishable from these early *homo sapiens*, it would be wrong to suggest that the processes of evolutionary biology have stopped.¹² These early humans *looked* like us, but it is not clear to what extent they *thought* like us, an inevitably speculative inquiry to which I will return. Throughout this long history, hominins typically lived in small hunter-gatherer tribes. It was only with the transition to agriculture around 10,000 years ago did humankind begin to settle in villages and develop more sedentary ways of life with increased socio-technical complexity.¹³

For present purposes this brief historical sketch suffices to lay the groundwork for an inquiry into the relationship between evolution and our artistic or aesthetic sensibilities. The next step in the analysis requires a brief statement of evolutionary theory, the nature of which is well known and, beyond the Creationists, is rarely disputed in any fundamental way (even as technical debates continue).

The theory of evolution

The theory of evolution by 'natural selection' is associated famously with Charles Darwin, who published *The Origin of Species* in 1859. It should be noted that the theory was also independently and concurrently conceived by Alfred Russel Wallace, who publicly presented a paper on the same subject with Darwin in 1858. In essence, this theory begins by acknowledging that environmental pressures placed on plants, insects, and animals lead to a 'struggle for existence'. Each individual in a species has slightly different characteristics (size, speed, other physical attributes, resilience, etc), and when an entire population cannot survive under specific environmental pressures – such as scarcity of food, an inhospitable climate, too many predators, and so forth – only the fittest survive. (The well-known phrase 'survival of the fittest' did not appear in *The Origin of Species* until the 5th edition, borrowed from Herbert Spencer, who coined the apt phrase after reading Darwin).

The result of these dynamics is that the surviving population will have a greater proportion of a particular set of heritable characteristics (e.g., longer necks in giraffes) that help the species adapt to a specific environment (e.g., insufficient food) and those with characteristics less useful in adaptation to the competitive environment (e.g., shorter necks) are more likely to die

off. A process that typically occurs over countless generations, species evolve as natural selection leads to usually small incremental adaptations that overtime can provide significant competitive advantage in the prevailing environmental conditions. In more recent times, dating from the work of Gregor Mendel, these adaptations are understood and explained with more precision via modern genetics. Darwin and Wallace knew *that* certain characteristics were heritable; Mendel, and those who advanced this work on genetic transmission, explained *how*.

The process above has come to be known as evolution by ‘natural selection’. However, Darwin later introduced a second evolutionary dynamic called ‘sexual selection’, originally outlined in his 1871 book, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*. Darwin had noticed that some evolutionary advantages emerged not because of their ability to help a species better negotiate a difficult physical environment, but rather to increase chances of attracting mates and thereby increasing the chances of passing on genes by other means.

This alternative evolutionary dynamic can be clarified by considering the most well-known example of sexual selection – and the one that helped Darwin to develop this sub-theory. The elaborate feathers of a peacock seem to have no competitive advantage in terms of mere survival in a hostile environment, and indeed, would seem to provide a sizeable disadvantage in terms of either fighting or fleeing. With respect to evolution by ‘natural selection’, the tail doesn’t make sense, and it was this incongruity that got Darwin rethinking aspects of his earlier theory. He came to realise that the tail of the peacock can be explained evolutionarily as a feature that is genetically passed on, not because it helped in the struggle for existence, but because it increases the chances of attracting female mates by distinguishing the male from competitors. That is, this physical feature evolves through ‘sexual selection’ rather than ‘natural selection’. Beyond the peacock, this sexual dynamic is seen throughout the animal kingdom (including in humans), where sexual selection clearly plays a role in genetic transmission as individuals select mates after visually assessing their attributes (e.g., perceived health, dominance, fertility, beauty, etc.) and making decisions accordingly.¹⁴

Consequently, natural selection and sexual selection evoke different notions of ‘fitness’ and therefore function differently, but concurrently, on evolutionary processes. Genes may have a higher chance of being passed on (and thereby shaping evolution) due to either explanation. Many theorists today, however, place sexual selection under the broader category of natural selection. Either way, for present purposes both processes need to be borne in mind as the discussion proceeds.

Today it can be hard to imagine quite how radical and unsettling the theory of evolution was to many people (even though, to be clear, many aspects of evolutionary theory predated the work of Darwin and Wallace). In nineteenth-century England, the dominant worldview was Christian, and the diversity of species was explained essentially in relation to the Book of Genesis. God created the world in six days, and even if interpreted metaphorically, the received view was that it was God who created the spectacular variety of species on Earth. Most notably, God created humankind in his own image, set apart from the other species. But the main point is that all species were thought to exist because of divine creation not biological evolution.

Evolutionary theory, however, was able to explain scientifically how the variety of species could have emerged *without* the need for positing a Creator. Human beings, although clearly the most sophisticated evolution of animal consciousness, were, in fact, just another animal, descended from the great apes. This nineteenth-century shift in thinking – from Genesis to evolution – was truly a Copernican revolution through which humankind's self-image shifted from 'creature of God' to 'talking ape'. In the absence of religious assumptions, of course, this ought not to imply any loss of dignity.

Art and aesthetics in evolution

With the basic theory outlined, I can begin assessing the evolutionary case for whether, or to what extent, it might be fair to describe the human being as an aesthetic animal – *homo aestheticus*. In particular, I want to enquire into whether art and aesthetics played any adaptive role shaping our biological attributes in evolutionary history, in the sense of providing competitive advantage in the struggle for existence.

First, it must be acknowledged that the human animal is not *uniquely aesthetic* amongst the community of life forms, if we use the term aesthetic broadly and inclusively. Above I gave the example (in relation to sexual selection) of how the extravagant plumage of the peacock's tail is used to 'signal fitness' and attract mates. It follows that the peahen must be impressed by the *visual spectacle* of the tail, which can fairly be described as an aesthetic response based on a particular aesthetic sensibility. Darwin argued that 'it is impossible to deny [the female bird] admires the beauty of her male partner.'¹⁵ We might want to qualify this as being proto-aesthetic, rather than aesthetic proper, especially given that there is probably no conscious aesthetic reflection or strategy at play but rather an instinctive response to stimuli. In any case, here we can at least acknowledge the emergence of aesthetic or proto-aesthetic practice and sensibility in the animal kingdom.

The same could be said of birdsong or the songs of whales. Not only can these be aesthetically beautiful, akin to music, but like the peacock's tail, they are aesthetic products often designed to attract mates or otherwise communicate through melodic rituals. Both the product (the beautiful tail or song) and the ability to be receptive to the spectacle (the aesthetic sensibility) are significant traits that provide competitive advantages. They are advantageous either because they help communicate or because they attract mates, or both. Thus, these aesthetic attributes and characteristics are more likely to be genetically passed on. Darwin and later theorists saw that the elaborate products of human artists resemble the displays of birds and peacocks, even speculating that the origins and functions of artmaking might be attributable to sexual selection.¹⁶ Both the ritual of showing off the peacock's tail and birdsong, however, are instinctive behaviours or genetically conditioned reflexes, presumably lacking in the creative reflection we would normally associate with the production of a work of art. Whether whales, having far greater intelligence than birds, deserve to have their songs understood differently, is an interesting question but one that presently need not be explored further.

Perhaps the closest thing akin to 'art' in the animal kingdom is the decorative practices of the bowerbird. Again, the male of the species will engage in a ritual designed to court females, gathering bright and pretty things, and arranging them in what seems to be a decorative

endeavour. This aesthetic practice is arguably more elaborate than what is undertaken by any other animal – except humans. Again, however, this arrangement of pretty things seems categorically distinct from, say, the thoughtful organisation of objects into a sculpture, or the curation of art pieces in a museum. Or rather, with due respect to the bowerbird, perhaps it is rather just a matter of degree, although at different ends of the spectrum. The depth of consciousness in the practices are presumably so different as to be only dubiously classify as the same thing – ‘art’ – a definitional conundrum to which we will have to return.

The same definitional haze arises with respect to so-called ‘animal art’, whereby a chimp or an elephant, for example, is provided with a paintbrush and canvas. Is the outcome art? Do we want to call this art? Even if the chimp produces a brush stroke or two that could loosely be described as having some aesthetic value, such experiments tend to show that if the canvas is not taken away, the animal will keep on painting until it is a complete mess, and thereafter show little or no interest in it.¹⁷ One cannot really say these animals are consciously giving ‘form’ to a creative product in any aesthetic sense. A chimp waving its hand with a brush over canvas is of such a rudimentary, unsophisticated creative act that it cannot be placed in the same category as a Rembrandt or Picasso. As noted, if the result does happen to show a semblance of ‘form’, it is usually a consequence of a human removing the canvas at a suitable time. So again, the presence of ‘art’ in the non-human animal kingdom arguably lacks plausibility, even if we should accept that proto-aesthetic sensibilities are certainly present.

Some may want to object here, and insist that these non-human examples are indeed art, and that my analysis is betraying anthropocentric biases. Perhaps. My hunch, however, is that there will be many more sympathisers than detractors in taking this modest theoretical stance. We can easily accept that the peahen has a basic aesthetic sensibility, the capacity to appreciate the beauty of the peacock’s tail, and that birds and whales create sounds that resemble the art of music. But I believe it is not unreasonable to proceed on the basis that these are very rudimentary *precursors* to art, but not art itself. At least, that will be my philosophical assumption, which I state to make sure my position is clear, even though someone might reasonably insist on an alternative reading.

The ‘origins of art’ in human history

Having provided examples of rudimentary or precursory examples of art and the aesthetic sensibility in the non-human animal kingdom, it should come as no surprise that those features exist in human evolution too. Moreover, it would be fair to say that they emerge in more developed or sophisticated forms. Just as the peahen developed an aesthetic sensibility in history, so too have evolutionary theorists and researchers argued that such a sensibility exists in early hominins, albeit in ways specific to our species.

For example, philosopher of art and evolutionary theorist Dennis Dutton argues that the near-universal judgement of beauty when humans contemplate a lush landscape with flowing water can be considered an ancestral aesthetic inheritance.¹⁸ Those humans drawn to such landscapes were more likely to find food and water, being an example of how aesthetic sensibility could provide an adaptive advantage and increase chances of survival and thus reproductive success. Below I will also consider examples of sexual selection, whereby, in ways

similar to the peahen and peacock, human beings have always engaged in aesthetic activity, presentation, and evaluation in mating rituals with evolutionary consequences. Archaeological evidence also indicates that ancestral hominins, as early as one million years ago or more,¹⁹ may have collected artefacts made of unusual materials or displaying unusual markings and carried these with them to their dwelling sites. This suggests that these collectors must have somehow been aesthetically attracted to these unusual or 'special' artefacts.²⁰ To borrow the words of art theorist Arthur Danto, these ancestral practices – as with some contemporary art practices – can be understood as an impulse to 'transfigure the commonplace'.²¹

Beyond mere aesthetic sensibility, however, what about the vexed archaeological question concerning the 'origins of art' itself? This framing risks getting us bogged down in the intractable debate over the definition or meaning of art, for it is certainly the case that answering the question of 'origins' here depends on what counts as 'art'. How, then, should we proceed?

The debate could be easily conceded to John Carey, who argues, with some persuasive force, that the most we can say, by way of definition, is that art is anything that someone has ever considered to be art, even if only one person has considered it to be so.²² This is the logical consequence of accepting that art is an 'essentially contested' term; a term which, as Morris Weitz argued, has no essence and so will forever be disputed without hope of analytical resolution.²³ Or, as Theodor Adorno wrote: 'It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist.'²⁴ This radical anti-essentialism, though theoretically compelling, doesn't much help us determine the origins of art, for if something is indefinable, one cannot be sure when the indefinable thing originated, since it cannot be easily or uncontroversially identified.

In response to these challenges, some theorists offer a 'cluster definition' of art, listing properties widely considered characteristic of art without suggesting that any single characteristic is necessary or sufficient. This approach avoids black and white conceptual statements (e.g., 'this and only this is art'), and it recognises that art objects or practices, at most, share what Wittgenstein called 'family resemblances'.²⁵ This position implies that examples of art can share overlapping features, without there being a common essence which *all* examples share. Below I list four prominent cluster definitions of art in an attempt to advance the discussion without falling into essentialism. These definitions, which themselves share family resemblances, proceed on the Wittgensteinian assumption that the concept of art is indeterminate.

- Denis Dutton's proposes that art typically: (i) provides immediate experiential pleasure not utility; (ii) displays skill and virtuosity; (iii) exhibits style; (iv) has novelty and demonstrates creativity; (v) is subject to critical judgements and appreciation; (vi) involves representation; (vii) attracts special focus and is bracketed off from the everyday; (viii) expresses individuality; (ix) is emotionally saturated; (x) offers intellectual challenges; (xi) is associated with art traditions and institutions; (xii) evokes imaginative experience.²⁶
- Bery Gaut's cluster definition of art is: (i) possessing positive aesthetic properties; (ii) being expressive of emotion; (iii) being intellectually challenging; (iv) being formally complex and coherent; (v) having a capacity to convey complex meanings; (vi) exhibiting an individual point

of view; (vii) being an exercise of creative imagination; (viii) being an artifact or performance that is the product of high skill; (ix) belong to an established art form; (x) being the product of an intention to make a work of art.²⁷

- Elle Dissanayake makes a list of qualities and characteristics that pervade ideas about art, including: (i) *artifice* (something contrived, ‘artificial’ rather than natural); (ii) *beauty and pleasure* (admiration and enjoyment); (iii) the *sensual quality of things* (colour, shape, sound); (iv) the *immediate fullness of sense experience* (as contrasted with habituated, unregulated experience); (v) *order or harmony* (shaping, pattern-making, achieving unity or wholeness); (vi) *innovation* (exploration, originality, creativity, invention, seeing things a new way, surprise); (vii) *adornment* (decoration, display); (viii) *self-expression* (presenting one’s personal view of the world); (ix) *a special kind of communication* (conveying information in a special kind of language, symbolising); (x) *nonutilitarian* (made for its own sake, having no function); (xi) *serious and important concerns* (significance, meaning); (xii) *make-believe* (fantasy, play, wish-fulfilment, illusion, imagination); (xiii) *heightened existence* (exalted emotion, ecstasy, self-transcendence).²⁸
- Finally, Stephen Davies, who adopts a different and more concise approach, contends that something is art: (i) if it falls under an established, publicly recognised category of art or within an established art tradition; or (ii) if it is intended by its maker/presenter to be art and its maker/presenter does what is necessary and appropriate to realising that intention; or (iii) if it shows excellence of skill and achievement in realising significant aesthetic or artistic goals.²⁹

Without evaluating or trying to choose between them, I list these various attempts in order to provide non-essentialist ways of giving *some* content to the concept of art under discussion. But given they are all non-essentialist, the problem of how to identify art’s ‘origins’ remains, since non-essentialist cluster definitions are inherently fuzzy around the conceptual edges, and so early forms of art might (and do) remain difficult to identify.

There is another way to approach this definitional challenge, however, and that is to accept the blurry boundary between art and non-art by creating a concept that accommodates the *gradual emergence* of art practices along a spectrum. In that spirit, I’ll proceed with the cautious but coherent definitional work offered by evolutionary theorist Ellen Dissanayake, who introduced the term ‘artification’ to resolve the problem under consideration.³⁰ This concept can be preliminarily understood to refer to behaviours of ‘making things special’³¹, or of somehow making the ordinary extraordinary by means of artistic/aesthetic operations (e.g., formalisation, repetition, exaggeration, and elaboration).³² Artification can include features typically associated with art (beauty, imagination, creativity, skill, personal expression, sensory experience, and emotion). These are ‘ingredients that artifiers use as they make ordinary things... *extraordinary*.’³³ In this light, art can be seen as a subset of a broader notion of artification, and through this broader notion, it will be argued that we can come to a deeper understanding of an evolutionary understanding of both the making of, and the responses to, the arts.

The notion of artification proves to be very useful, then, especially in historical analysis, because it can side-step the thorny conceptual challenge of trying to determine whether something either is, or is not, art. Rather than having to make such a controversial theoretical judgement, which can be merely distracting, the notion of artification implies a gradual

movement along a creative spectrum, whereby the bowerbird can be said to be engaging in a basic form of ‘artification’, without the result being art, as such. In the same way, we might say that the shaping of early handaxes or spears in aesthetic yet non-utilitarian ways could be examples of artification without these artefacts being art. The second benefit of Dissanayake’s term is that it turns art (as a product) into artification or the verb to ‘artify’ (as a behaviour). This distinction will bear fruit as the discussion proceeds.

Consider the history of artification in human evolution. Dissanayake argues that the earliest proto-aesthetic behaviour in human beings emerged from ancestral mother-infant relations.³⁴ As hominin’s rose to walk on two legs, the female pelvis contracted, narrowing the birth canal, while at the same time the human brain was growing. Among other adaptations, this led to a reduction in the gestation period to accommodate these changes, meaning that babies with smaller neonate skulls were delivered in a more immature state compared to other primates.³⁵ This left the hominin newborns more reliant than ever, and for a longer time, on the mother for feeding.³⁶ Although it can sound crude to express it in evolutionary terms, a behavioural adaptation was needed to ensure the mother would voluntarily care for a helpless baby.

Dissanayake contends that a behavioural adaptation emerged from these physiological changes: the universally observable vocal and gestural interactions between mother and infant that are sometimes called ‘motherese’:

Although mother and baby are simply enjoying each other’s company, suffused with pleasure and love, these signals are, unknown to a mother, flooding her brain with the prosocial hormones that foster maternal behaviour in all mammals... [This] reinforces her brain’s neural circuits for affiliation and development, ensuring that she will be motivated to care for her demanding, helpless baby.³⁷

The consequence is that these interactions, which promote bonding between mother and baby, have evolutionary advantages, contributing to infant survival and maternal reproductive success by reinforcing pathways for caretaking and emotional attachment. What is more, Dissanayake notes that ‘[l]ocating the roots of human artifying in the earliest social interactions of infants with their caretakers reveals that the art impulse is far more deeply dyed and consequential to the evolution and psychology of humans than heretofore suspected by philosophers and scientists alike.’³⁸ The discovery of such aesthetic sensitivity at the beginning of life ‘suggests that emotional response to aesthetic manipulations has been critical to human survival.’³⁹ It is not surprising, she adds, ‘that these operations should become powerful sources of emotion.’⁴⁰ While Dissanayake does not argue that this was ‘artification’, she does describe this ritualised engagement as amongst the earliest, and perhaps *the* earliest, proto-aesthetic behaviour in our species.⁴¹

Dissanayake then proposes that there were various transitional evolutionary steps that led from the sing-song vocalisations of ‘motherese’, to more developed examples of artification and ritual, which led coherently over time to what we today call ‘the arts’. She provides the example of imaginative play in children. This typically requires the child to take a stance that is different from reality, creating ‘another dimension’ of experience. (I will consider the concept of ‘play’ in more detail in a later essay on Fredrich Schiller, but here its origins are evident). There also seems to be a ‘mark marking’ instinct in children to scribble and draw –

which emerges from what some researchers call an ‘inner imperative’.⁴² Pleasure seems to be derived from using our flexible and dexterous hands, and ‘meaning’ seems to emerge not merely from the outcome but from the process.

Dissanayake reports that the earliest known human-made marks – the making of ‘ordinary rock surfaces extraordinary’⁴³ – date from around 250kya (thousand years ago). Specifically, ‘ancestral hominins hammered cupules (cup-shaped indentations) on horizontal and vertical surfaces, often in rows or ranks, in tens, hundreds, or even thousands at one site.’⁴⁴ It is interesting to wonder: what were these people doing by making these indentations? They were often created on vertical surfaces, which suggests that they cannot have been to collect water. By not having any clear utilitarian purpose, they acquire a special mystique. The ‘time and physical effort required to make a deeply carved cupules call for an evolutionary explanation, since a biological organism does not regularly engage in such costly or labor-intensive behaviour without gaining some adaptive advantage.’⁴⁵ Other geometric or abstract (non-representational) markings have similarly deep history, with some being made by our remote ancestors in the Lower Palaeolithic era (ending about 180 kya).⁴⁶

It is possible and likely, however, that even before this time the earliest artifications were to the human body, self-adornments, altering hair or skin with paint, feathers, bones, or shells, or through permanent changes like tattooing. These body modifications do not leave archaeological evidence, meaning that dating these practices precisely is impossible. Nevertheless, perforated beads fashioned from shell or ivory date from around 200kya, which would have ‘artified’ those who wore them, making them special or extraordinary in some way.

Moving from ‘motherese’ and play, through ‘making marks’, to self-adornment, Dissanayake then considers the role of ceremonial or ritual practices in ancestral societies. These practices differentiate between ‘an ordinary or mundane order, realm, mood, or state of being and one that is unusual, extraordinary, or supernatural.’⁴⁷ Notably, rituals and ceremonies, apparently universal among human societies, bring together various ‘arts’ as we know them today, including self-adornment, dance, song, storytelling, decorated or embellished environments, or imbibing a ritual drink. The role or function of these and other artifications or arts are considered further below, but for now it can be noted that ritual and ceremony presumably arose along with, or *were*, religious or spiritual in nature. It is believed ritual and ceremony would have enhanced group bonding and/or provided some form of consolation, guidance, or assumed protection from the uncertainties or dangers of human existence. If art was able to induce altered states of consciousness, as we know to be true, perhaps religion was, in part, an attempt to give meaning to those altered states.

Another contender for the so-called ‘origin of art’ has been tentatively provided by philosopher and evolutionary theorist Gregory Currie.⁴⁸ Acknowledging that people who disagree about what counts as art will answer this question in different ways, he nevertheless makes a strong case for early handaxes as being amongst the earliest forms of art. Such handaxes date back to ‘around half a million years ago’ (a timespan he accepts is massively imprecise but still usefully suggestive).

Currie notes that most people find his answer unattractive, given that a handaxe is typically understood as a primitive technology, not an early artistic creation. Furthermore, the hominins making such tools so long ago presumably had limited social intelligence, no articulated language or symbolic imagination, and theorists might resist the thesis that art could arise in so 'thin' a cultural and cognitive setting. One assumption he makes, however, is that these early handaxes were examples of 'pure, unmeaningful beauty'.⁴⁹ From this he suggests that contemporary analyses of art in terms of 'meaning' can function to marginalise artefacts made simply to 'beautify' without deeper significance.

Currie cites historian J. Desmond Clark who notes that 'The symmetry and refinement of some of the earlier Acheulean handaxes, which surely go beyond utilitarian need, may reflect the first appearance of an aesthetic appreciation of form.'⁵⁰ Currie reviews a range of archaeological evidence and analyses that support this conclusion. These 'visually arresting'⁵¹ Acheulean handaxes are distinguished from earlier examples, dating from around 2.5 million years ago, which appear to be tools designed purely for utilitarian purposes, such as simple digging or cutting tasks. Here, again, the value in Dissanayake's notion of artification is apparent. We need not settle on a view about whether the Acheulean handaxes are 'art', as such, while still being able to confidently conclude that they signify some of the earliest examples of artification; that is, of making things special and taking aesthetic issues into consideration.⁵²

The most prominent contender for the 'origin of art' in human history is the exquisite, representational cave drawings and carved statues dating from the Upper Palaeolithic period, dating from around 30-40 kya.⁵³ There are the Chauvet and Lascaux caves in France, and comparable ones in Spain, Germany, and elsewhere.⁵⁴ When Pablo Picasso visited the Altamira cave in Spain and assessed the drawings therein, he reportedly confessed that 'we have learned nothing'⁵⁵ and that 'after Altamira, all is decadence.'⁵⁶ The implication here is that the images were unambiguously 'art', clearly anticipating the so-called 'high art' celebrated by classical and modernist sensibilities. Recently a discovery of cave art on the island of Sulawesi, in Indonesia, has scholars wondering if this site might now be the earliest known example of figurative art (dating from around 35 kya),⁵⁷ although the research and scholarly debate continue. Also in the Palaeolithic era there is evidence of carved statues and musical instruments, such as a vulture-bone flute, which is one of humanity's earliest known artefacts.⁵⁸ What did humans do when they first developed the mental and technological capacities to create complex items? It seems we made a musical instrument.

To present cave paintings as the origin story of art is arguably too reductive or narrow a view, for art need not be limited to painting or sculpting an object as opposed to singing, self-adornment, or dance. But, of course, a song or a dance does not physically endure and so archaeologists cannot discover these art forms, leading to their marginalisation in the story of origins. There is also a risk of ethnocentrism, with analysts consciously or unconsciously pointing to Europe as the birth of 'high culture'. How convenient and self-supporting! Whatever the case, these types of representational paintings are widely interpreted as the 'origin of art' and as signalling the birth of the 'modern mind', a higher level of consciousness in our species. Cave art could also represent an early form of human activity that connected

religious or spiritual exploration with aesthetic expression – two dimensions of life that ever since have been deeply intertwined.

Prehistorian John E Pfeiffer coined the phrase the ‘creative explosion’⁵⁹ to refer to this period in the Upper Palaeolithic era. During this period there did seem to be a new aesthetic shift into representational art practices and symbolic culture. Whether this should be described as a leap or a gradual development continues to be debated. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, this is contested theoretical and evidential space, which necessarily involves speculative assumptions about a ‘state of mind’ in early humankind and about which conclusions will forever remain uncertain and unclear.

My intention in reviewing this literature is not to draw firm or new conclusions. Rather, my goal is to provoke thought about the diverse ways in which, throughout our long species’ history, human practices of art and artification have evolved alongside our developing aesthetic sensibilities. More than that, however, art and aesthetics can be understood as being essential to humankind and the understanding of our species. By becoming more aware that our cultures and cultivated feelings are intimately and often fundamentally shaped by art practices and products, we can come to see ourselves as interdependent self-creators of personal and social realities. We create ourselves as we create our arts, such that without our arts, we would never have become who we are. This anticipates the question, central to this collection of essays: how might art shape who we might yet become?⁶⁰

Why was technological development so slow?

At this point I’d like to address a question that affords no straightforward answer but which may reward speculative consideration. Archaeologists confirm that, as the brains of hominins enlarged, tool-making humans (*homo faber*) emerged around 2.5 million years ago. And yet, what is perhaps most striking about the archaeological record thereafter is how slowly technology and toolmaking progressed. Can we say, then, that we owe our survival to our rational intelligence and technological prowess? Evolutionary theorist Robert Joyce argued against this view.⁶¹ He suggested that the most striking thing about human history from more than 500,000 to 10,000 years ago was the ‘slower-than-glacial advance’⁶² of technological progress. Where, he asked, during this time was the ‘rational’ or ‘tool-making’ animal? Indeed, if representational and symbolic cave art is understood as indicating the birth of the ‘modern mind’ – implying a capacity similar to our own – what was this developed consciousness occupied with? This question is especially interesting when we discover that anthropologists report that hunter-gatherer societies were the most leisure-rich that have ever existed, only needing to work two or three hours a day to meet basic material needs.⁶³

Joyce’s speculative but coherent answer was that the early advances in toolmaking were carried no further, or only extremely slowly, because, as such, they were satisfactory. His thesis was that the human interest in technology did not point toward the control of nature but toward the development of social relations and consciousness. These fundamental concerns were developed through the production of the arts, satisfied merely to ‘get by’ as technologists and scientists.⁶⁴ This suggests that, for ancestral humanity at least, technological advancement had very fast diminishing returns. After acquiring minimal equipment for survival – a few

simple tools and fire – humans seem to have invested less energy toward objective experimentation in the world and instead refined their means of subjective control and exploration. Perhaps the true problems of early humankind were less about threats from our own kind or other animals, but more about the dire necessity of developing supportive existential conditions and sensibilities to replace our lost animal environment.⁶⁵ This type of problem is arguably better resolved (back then as today) with the arts than the sciences.

So far as toolmaking did develop, it was primarily in the direction of implements to paint, tattoo, model, play music, carve, and engrave. Moreover, the attention early humans directed toward materials – clay, pigments, gold, copper, and other metals – was largely ‘an artists’ interest.’⁶⁶ Joyce concluded that if we do not credit the arts as having a decisive role in human evolution, ‘the physical drift of that evolution makes no sense.’⁶⁷ The large brains of these early humans must have been engaged ‘in creating and receiving the arts’⁶⁸, which led to ‘cultural organisation and man’s freedom to begin making himself.’⁶⁹ Moreover, according to evolutionary scientist Ian Cross, ‘more or less the first thing we [humans] did when we developed the capacity and desire to produce diverse and technologically complex objects (probably between 40,000 and 30,000 years BP) was to produce musical instruments (bone pipes).’⁷⁰ This has led some writers to describe human beings not merely as an aesthetic animal, but a musical one.⁷¹

For these reasons Joyce believed that human survival and multiplication in history are owed more to the aesthetic utilisation of the enlarging brain than the rational application. Moreover, as a means of effecting emotional responses, Joyce suggested that ‘the arts of the Palaeolithic, the Neolithic, and the twentieth centuries are essentially the same.’⁷²

But what is art for? And what, if anything, is it good for?

There is a remaining conundrum in the history of art and artification which I have yet to consider in any detail, but will now give further attention. If carving cupules into rock, collecting shiny stones, or marking walls on a cave, etc, did not provide food or protect against predators, why did early humans engage in these behaviours? At first interpretation, the theory of evolution would suggest that these are wasteful, inefficient behaviours that would give people a competitive *disadvantage*. They seem to involve investing time and energy in non-utilitarian projects that could draw attention away from direct, survivalist tasks, such as securing food sources or defending against predators. One might assume that over time the instinct for art and artification might have faded out as other traits proved to be more effective in the struggle for existence.

And yet, paradoxically, the opposite seems to be the case. Such practices have evidently developed and expanded over time, to the extent that they are now considered universal traits in human societies. Dutton calls this our ‘art instinct’.⁷³ This counter-intuitively suggests that, from an evolutionary perspective, art and aesthetics are significant and consequential. It is worth delving further into why this might be so.

As discussed earlier, the earliest proto-aesthetic behaviour in humans emerged in mother-infant interaction. Specifically, such behaviour emerged from the sing-song and gestural

interactions of so-called ‘motherese’. This is a near-universal instinct and one that often reaches beyond the mother and emerges in many who interact with infants. It was seen that this ‘ritual’ can be coherently explained as providing an adaptive advantage, reinforcing pathways for caretaking and emotional attachment, thereby maximising chances of infant survival and reproductive success for the mother.

Some hypothesise that the origins of music emerge from this early proto-aesthetic behaviour.⁷⁴ Darwin himself speculated that, prior to the development of language, men may have begun producing melodic sounds and sequences as a mating ritual to attract females, akin to the signalling of a peacock’s tail.⁷⁵ In contrast to the process of natural selection, this would suggest that music may have its origins in sexual selection. Other analysts offer an alternative but not mutually exclusive argument that the act of singing or making tonal noises (even in advance of language) is an easier way to project the voice across distances. These melodic forms of communication could have been effective ways to warn tribespeople of dangers or more efficiently communicate one’s location. If so, these early forms of music making would have provided competitive advantages that assisted with survival and thus would have been traits that were more likely to be passed on. Perhaps, as suggested above, we are not merely an aesthetic animal, but specifically a musical animal⁷⁶ – a view supported by the fact that there are no known human societies that do not practise the art of music.⁷⁷

If music-making was the earliest form of vocal communication, then it is only a small step further to assume that language itself grew out of early musical interactions and behaviours.⁷⁸ This flips the conventionally assumed process back-to-front: language emerged out of song, rather than song emerging only after language. According to Ian Cross, music might have been ‘the most important thing we humans ever did.’⁷⁹ Moreover, if language sits alongside art as amongst the most distinctive features of the human species, this provides a further reason to see how, through art, the ‘modern mind’ evolved. From the musical animal emerges what scholar Jonathan Gottschall calls the ‘storytelling animal.’⁸⁰

Even the artification behaviours of play and mark-making amongst children can be seen as developing important mental skills like creativity and social bonding, as well as imagining ‘other worlds’ and ‘other dimensions’ beyond the present, immediate reality. All these behaviours can be understood as offering evolutionary advantages to individuals and the species, ‘justifying’ behaviour that might otherwise have been seen as ‘non-utilitarian’ and therefore problematic from an evolutionary perspective.

In the same vein, Currie believes that the ‘costly’ activity of beautifying early handaxes is explicable in terms of sexual selection.⁸¹ The fine motor skills, attention, memory, and dedication required by the proficient artisan likely would have provided a ‘fitness signal’ that would have been attractive to prospective mates. This would have increased the chances of the skillset being genetically transmitted through reproduction. Indeed, it might have been assumed that those skills were also generalisable, beyond axe making. This should not necessarily be seen as a deliberate strategy on behalf of the axe maker, or a conscious reflection on behalf of the mate. It is more akin to the instinctive behaviours and judgements of the peacock and peahen. Similarly, the aesthetic judgements of human bodily form are largely

instinctive and yet arguably have evolutionary explanations in terms of survival or reproductive fitness.⁸²

Furthermore, given that beautification of handaxes was costly but without clear utilitarian value, such extravagant practices could have been a further signal of strength, wealth, energy abundance, and ‘good genes’.⁸³ From this view it is the *making* or *artiflying* of the well-crafted axe, rather than the axe itself, that would have been the ‘fitness signal’. That said, in time such signals could have evolved into a *status symbol*, giving the possessor of the well-crafted axe an advantage in terms of sexual selection, irrespective of who made it.⁸⁴

As the brains of ancestral humans enlarged and our minds developed, we began transcending the purely ‘instinctive’ life of other animals and were increasingly able to remember the past and imagine the future. It is often acknowledged that sitting around a fire at night, where the visual world available during daylight is gone, could have provided the fertile context for critical mental developments like abstract thought, language development, reflection on and learning from the events of the day, and storytelling. These developments were a two-edged sword, however, providing new skills for managing the world but bringing with them existential challenges because of more sophisticated mental apparatus. Specifically, the more developed consciousness could have induced increased anxiety about the vital uncertainties of life, including food supply, predators, or other tribes. In time, the human animal would have become conscious of its own mortality and had to adjust to the reality of living in the face of inevitable death.

For present purposes, the problem of existential anxiety is relevant because it can be seen as a driver for ritualistic and ceremonial behaviour. Such behaviour can be understood as a coping mechanism that sought to control or mitigate the range of discomforting emotions. It is plausible that here we see the roots of religious thought and practice, arising from the developed emotional capacities to fear the unknown and be anxious about death. Religious or spiritual perspectives may also have been fostered by the developing imaginative capacity to envision different worlds and dimensions. Both historically and today, we see that religiosity is so often entwined with cultural practices of art and artification, ritual and ceremony.

In an uncertain and fearful world, where so much would have been unexplained, ancestral humans would have spontaneously come together to engage in multi-modal ritualised behaviours of dance, song, chanting, self-adornment, environmental elaboration, and, in time, storytelling. Being in a group in times of anxiety and fear is better than being alone, offering reassurances and satisfactions that would have reinforced the practices with positive neurochemical consequences. Dissanayake notes that ‘[a]lthough particular ritual actions and cultural messages vary from group to group, all are built on the same psychobiological scaffold.’⁸⁵ She explains:

Deep emotions (awe, wonder, fear, desire) and emotional bonding are produced less by esoteric knowledge than by engaging with others in stimulating shared activities. Rituals work because their artifications provide the excitement and drama that make their messages memorable and meaningful.⁸⁶

As well as helping to deal with existential anxiety, ritualistic and ceremonial behaviour can also be understood from an evolutionary perspective as an efficient means of encouraging group cohesion in collective tasks and promoting social bonding. This was especially important in hunter-gatherer social systems without alternative (centralised, state-based, or hierarchical) mechanisms for encouraging communal action. The human species, like most animals, has significant vulnerabilities. We would have discovered that acting as a group offered a range of advantages, such as coordinating hunts, encouraging necessary but mundane work, and promoting bonding and trust within the tribe. Interestingly, Dissanayake reports that ‘a number of archaeologists have noted an increase in indications of ritual (artification) at times of environmental stress, such as changing climate or competition with invaders over resources.’⁸⁷ For these reasons, ‘[s]ynchronized rituals may therefore have enabled some cultural groups to survive where others failed.’⁸⁸ This is not art for art’s sake, then, but art (or artification) for life’s sake.

In summary, art and artification can be understood as being adaptive for two main reasons: first, by alleviating existential anxieties and fears, and second, by instilling social emotions and bonding. It must also be acknowledged, more generally, that aesthetic practices tend to involve creative and imaginative behaviours that can induce awe, wonder, curiosity, or sheer pleasure which in various ways would have assisted in the relentless struggle for existence. Over countless millennia, as noted earlier, the aesthetic practices and sensibilities naturally evolved into what Dutton has called our ‘art instinct’⁸⁹. Similarly, Dissanayake describes this art instinct as a ‘behavioural predisposition to make the ordinary extraordinary,’⁹⁰ a ‘universal impulse to artify.’⁹¹ These conclusions are perfectly consistent with, and indeed provide evidential support for, my underlying thesis regarding the Will to Art.

All the same, one can leave open the question regarding to what extent art is a biological instinct compared to simply being, as some argue, a culturally, non-adaptive ‘spandrel’. In either case, we can see art and artification serving similar social and existential purposes and being constitutive of who we have become as an ‘artful species’.⁹² The closer one looks at contemporary society, the blurrier the boundaries between biology and culture become, as we realise our developed aesthetic capacities to shape and give form, not merely the world, but to ourselves. Nevertheless, the review and analysis above does present a strong case that our aesthetic natures have roots in biology, even if that nature is, now more than ever, being shaped and reshaped through culture.

Concluding remarks: The dual aspect nature of homo aestheticus

Throughout this collection of essays, I will use the notion of *homo aestheticus* to refer to a ‘thin’ theory of human nature which can be understood in two senses, one historical, the other of the future – a potentiality. In the historical view, as detailed in this essay, I have outlined a case that our biological inheritances, given to us through our evolutionary journey, have rendered us an artistic species, an aesthetic animal with aesthetic capacities and needs. I call this a ‘thin’ theory of human nature because what defines us as a species is our creative and aesthetic potentials and desires. This is only minimally substantive given that our nature is to create ourselves through our arts and aesthetic engagements. In other words, to argue that we

are an artful species is to present a theory that enables rather than significantly constrains who or what we are, given that our nature is *to create who and what we are*.

However, the motivation to write these essays arose from a realisation that, today, our creative natures are being stifled by consumerist cultures and capitalist economics. We have all these (biologically inherited) aesthetic capacities and needs, which existing society is not meeting and indeed is actively repressing. That is, humanity today suffers from a chronic aesthetic deficit disorder, which I contend is both a contributing cause of contemporary crises of capitalism and also points toward their potential resolution. If our aesthetic natures are being repressed with dire social and ecological implications, this suggests that we might need to turn to the aesthetic realm to resolve them, and with urgency. As Joyce asserted: ‘What we do with the arts, and what we consequently feel to be valuable, can be decisive in determining what we do with our means of production and our means of destruction.’⁹³

The stifling of our creative natures gives rise to a second aspect of the notion of *homo aestheticus*, being an unfilled potential toward which, I argue, we ought to be striving. Capitalism has distorted our natures, beating us into the shape of *homo economicus* – a selfish, obedient, and consumptive species. Our challenge is to transcend this distorted nature that has been imposed upon us and reclaim our true nature as *homo aestheticus*. One way to do this, I contend, is to shift our individual and collective energies and attention away from superfluous material and energetic consumption and toward aesthetic and spiritual exploration. In short, a shift from ‘having’ to ‘being’ is required in our collective modes of existence.⁹⁴ In this great and necessary transition toward SMPLCTY – an idealised social order of *homo aestheticus* – art promises to be both the means and the end. We can begin this journey with a ‘politics of the self’, one that French philosopher Michel Foucault called an ‘aesthetics of existence’. That is the subject of the next essay.

¹ To place humanity on the top of any hierarchy generally leads to the charge of anthropocentrism or speciesism, which is meant to imply an improper prioritising of human value over the value of other animals or lifeforms. For present purposes, all I am suggesting is that the imaginative and creative capacities of the smartest chimp, pale in comparison to the abilities of an ordinary human child and is of a different order entirely than what the artistic genius is capable of, think Mozart, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, or Picasso. I do not believe that acknowledging this implies being anthropocentric in any pejorative sense.

² My greatest influence here is Robert Joyce, *The Esthetic Animal: Man, the Art-Created Art Creator* (New York: Exposition Press, 1975). See also, Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes from and Why* (Seattle: Washington Press, 1995); Dennis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010); Stephen Davies, *The Artful Species* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Anjan Chatterjee, *The Aesthetic Brain: How We Evolved to Desire Beauty and Enjoy Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

³ See Joyce, *Esthetic Animal*, note 2, p. 5.

⁴ See Davies, *The Artful Species*, note 2.

⁵ See Joyce, *Esthetic Animal*, note 2.

⁶ I borrow the phrase, without the metaphysical baggage, from Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (New York: Dover, 1998).

⁷ I have outlined my aesthetic view of existence in more detail elsewhere. See Samuel Alexander, 'Introduction: The Aesthetic Dimension' in this collection of essays. The full set will be available here: <http://samuelalexander.info/s-m-p-l-c-t-y-ecological-civilisation-and-the-will-to-art/> (accessed 10 May 2023).

⁸ Stephen Davies argues, regarding evidential uncertainty or interpretive uncertainty, that 'where a range of very different proposals about the evolutionary significance of some behavior are in competition, with none clearly established as superior to all the others, which is often the case where aesthetics and art are the topic, it will be more appropriate to reserve judgment than to opt for what we might like to be true.' Davies' position is fair and reasonable, but it is not conclusive, determinative, or even neutral. One could just as easily argue that, in conditions of uncertainty, one might justifiably explore a particular line of interpretation and see what it reveals or conceals. This isn't so much about what we might *like* to be true, as exploring hypotheses that *might* be true, we just don't know it at the level of knock-down evidential proof. If, as Davies argues, we should 'reserve judgement', we are at risk of paralysing ourselves on matters that are potentially of extreme significance, and one might sooner risk being wrong on some subject (and reap the potential benefits of being right) than assume that avoiding being wrong is always the best strategy. See Davies, *Artful Species*, note 2, p. 43.

⁹ Joyce, *Esthetic Animal*, note 2, p. 6.

¹⁰ I tell the story of cosmological unfolding in more detail elsewhere. See Samuel Alexander, 'Creative Evolution and the Will to Art' in this collection. See link in note 7.

¹¹ It is worth remembering that Beethoven (or pick your favourite genius) is directly descended from these microbes.

¹² For example, changing diets over recent millennia have led to increases in average human height, smaller jaws, and increased tolerance to lactose. In short, our biological constitutions continue to evolve.

¹³ For a recent discussion of pre-agricultural civilisations, see David Graeber and David Wengrow, *Dawn of Everything: A New History of Everything* (London: Penguin, 2022).

¹⁴ Sexual selection and competition manifests culturally today, especially in so-called consumer societies, where people (especially men) consume conspicuously to signal wealth as a strategy of status competition. In human societies, however, the nature of such status competition can change depending on cultural assumptions. For example, one can imagine a culture whereby driving a sports car and wearing expensive jewellery were consumption practices considered distasteful and unattractive to the opposite sex. This would not mean sexual selection was not at play, only that the relevant 'signals' had changed.

¹⁵ Quoted in Davies, *Artful Species*, p. 12.

¹⁶ See Ellen Dissanayake, 'Why Did Our Ancestors Artify' in Ekkehart Malotki and Ellen Dissanayake, *Early Rock Art of the American West: The Geometric Enigma* (Washington: Washington University Press), p. 200.

¹⁷ See Dutton, *Art Instinct*, note 2, p. 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, Ch 1.

¹⁹ Ellen Dissanayake, 'The Concept of Artification' in Malotki and Dissanayake, *Early Rock Art*, note 16, p. 30.

²⁰ Ellen Dissanayake, 'Roots and Route of the Artification Hypothesis' (2017) *AVANT* 8(1): pp. 26-7. See also, Dissanayake, 'Artification', note 19, p. 30.

²¹ Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

²² See, e.g., John Carey, *What Good Are the Arts?* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 29.

²³ Morris Weitz, 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (1956) 15(1): pp. 27-35.

²⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 1.

²⁵ See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963).

²⁶ Dutton, *Art Instinct*, note 2, p. 25.

²⁷ Berys Gaut, "'Art" as a Cluster Concept' in Noel Carroll (ed), *Theories of Art Today* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), pp. 25-44.

²⁸ Ellen Dissanayake, 'Artification', note 19, pp. 23-4.

²⁹ Davies, *Artful Species*, note 2, pp. 28-9.

³⁰ Dissanayake, 'Artification', note 19, pp. 23-45; Dissanayake, 'Roots', note 20.

³¹ Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus*, note 2, Ch. 3.

³² Dissanayake, 'Roots', note 20, p. 26.

³³ See Dissanayake, 'Why Did Our Ancestors Artify', note 16, p. 197.

³⁴ Dissanayake, 'Roots', note 20.

³⁵ The human child would need to be born at around 18 months to conform with other primates. See Dissanayake, 'Why Did Our Ancestors Artify', note 16, p. 202.

³⁶ *Ibid*.

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- ³⁷ Dissanayake, 'Roots', note 20, p. 19.
- ³⁸ Ibid. p. 26.
- ³⁹ Ibid, p. 27.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Dissanayake, 'Why Did Our Ancestors Artify', note 16, p. 202.
- ⁴² Quoted in Dissanayake, 'Roots', note 20, p. 21.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid. See also, Malotki and Dissanayake, *Early Rock Art*, note p. 11 and Ch. 3.
- ⁴⁵ Malotki and Dissanayake, *Early Rock Art*, note 16, p. 73. They note that creating one cupule could take six hours over two days requiring ten hammerstones of hard quartzite. Some sites had hundreds or even thousands of cupules.
- ⁴⁶ Malotki and Dissanayake, *Early Rock Art*, note 16, p. 8.
- ⁴⁷ Dissanayake, 'Roots', note 20, p. 22.
- ⁴⁸ Gregory Currie, 'The Master of the Masek Beds: Handaxes, Art, and the Minds of Early Humans' in Elisabeth Schellekens and Peter Goldie (eds.) *The Aesthetic Mind: Philosophy and Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 9-31.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid, pp. 9-10.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 10.
- ⁵¹ Ibid, p. 15.
- ⁵² For decades it was thought that Neanderthals were assumed to lack ritual and art, but recent discoveries have challenged that view. See Malotki and Dissanayake, *Early Rock Art*, note 16, p. 31. Whether the practices discussed can be called art, they can be classified as artification or 'making special'.
- ⁵³ Note that some argue that there is evidence for symbolic drawing on caves as far back 78kya, in Blombos cave, Southern Cape, where pieces of ochre have been found with markings that are claimed to be symbolic. This claim, however, is disputed. See Davies, *Artful Species*, note 2, p. 3; see also Currie, 'The Master of the Masek Beds' note 47, pp. 18-19. On ochre, see also, Malotki and Dissanayake, *Early Rock Art*, note 16, p. 31.
- ⁵⁴ See Malotki and Dissanayake, *Early Rock Art*, note 16, p. 11.
- ⁵⁵ Currie, 'The Master of the Masek Beds', note 48, p. 17.
- ⁵⁶ Davies, *Artful Species*, note 2, p. 3.
- ⁵⁷ Jo Marchant, 'A Journey to the Oldest Cave Paintings in the World' *Smithsonian* (January 2016). Available here: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/journey-oldest-cave-paintings-world-180957685/> (accessed 10 January 2023).
- ⁵⁸ See Davies, *Artful Species*, note 2, p. 5.
- ⁵⁹ John Pfeiffer, *The Creative Explosion: An Inquiry into the Origins of Art and Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).
- ⁶⁰ Joyce, *Esthetic Animal*, note 2, p. 4.
- ⁶¹ Ibid, pp. 18-20.
- ⁶² Ibid, p. 18.
- ⁶³ See, e.g., Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (London: Routledge, 2017).
- ⁶⁴ Joyce, *Esthetic Animal*, note 2, p. 18.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 20.
- ⁶⁶ Joyce, *Esthetic Animal*, note 2, p. 27.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 21.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 22.
- ⁷⁰ Ian Cross, 'Is Music the Most Important Thing We Ever Did? Music, Development, and Evolution' in Suk Won Yi (ed) *Music, Mind, and Science* (Seoul: Seoul University Press, 1999) pp. 10-39.
- ⁷¹ Michael Spitzer, *The Musical Human: A History of Life on Earth* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).
- ⁷² Joyce, *Esthetic Animal*, note 2, p. 24.
- ⁷³ See Dutton, *The Art Instinct*, note 2.
- ⁷⁴ For a review of possibilities regarding the origins of music, see Anton Killin, 'The Origins of Music: Evidence, Theory, and Prospects' (2018) *Music & Science* 1: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059204317751971>
- ⁷⁵ See Nicholas Bannan, 'Darwin, Music, and Evolution: New Insights from Family Correspondence on *The Descent of Man*' (2016) *Musicae Scientiae* 21(1): pp. 3-25.
- ⁷⁶ Spitzer, *The Musical Human*, note 71.
- ⁷⁷ John Blacking, *Music, Culture, Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁷⁸ See, for example, Brian Levman, 'The Genesis of Music and Language' *Ethnomusicology* (1992) 62(2): pp. 147-170.

⁷⁹ Cross, 'Is Music the Most Important Thing', note 70.

⁸⁰ Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁸¹ Currie, 'The Master of the Masek Beds', note 48.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ As Marek Hohn and Steven Mithen suggest: 'Just as a peacock's tail may reliability indicate its "success", so might the manufacture of a fine symmetrical handaxe have been a reliable indicator of a hominins' ability to secure food, find shelter, escape from predation and compete successfully within the social group. Such hominids would have been attractive mates...' Quoted in Currie, 'The Master of the Masek Beds', note 48, p. 21.

⁸⁴ Currie, 'The Master of the Masek Beds', note 48, p. 28-9

⁸⁵ See Dissanayake, 'Why Did Our Ancestors Artify', note 16, p. 219.

⁸⁶ Dissanayake, 'Roots', note 20, p. 24.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

⁸⁹ Dutton, *Art Instinct*, note 2.

⁹⁰ Dissanayake, 'Roots', note 20, p. 23.

⁹¹ Dissanayake, 'Artification', note 19, p. 45.

⁹² Davies, *Artful Species*, note 2.

⁹³ Joyce, note 2, p. 3.

⁹⁴ On 'being' over 'having', see Erich Fromm, *To Have or to Be?* (New York: Continuum, 2007).