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## A triumph of science or a paradigm blowing its own trumpet?

A book review: Dennis Dutton, *Instynkt sztuki. Piękno, zachwyty i ewolucja człowieka* [*The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution*], transl. by J. Luty, Copernicus Center Press, Kraków 2019

Dennis Dutton's book charmingly entitled *The Art Instinct* was published in Polish for the first time in 2019. However, market requirements led to its second publication (a reprint) in 2021. What is there in this philosophical book on art by a New Zealand philosopher of art that its first edition sold out within two years? I hope that my review will give at least a preliminary answer.

Dutton's work is rooted in one premise: in principle, our need for beauty (or beauty as a phenomenon) may be entirely explained with the paradigm of the theory of evolution. Dutton places his thesis in the context of certain controversies and discussions held by the supporters of the evolutionary paradigm. Regardless of his position in these discussions, due to his preliminary assumption, Dutton tries to prove two fundamental theses:

1. There is only one human nature<sup>1</sup>.
2. "No philosophy of art can succeed if it ignores either natural sources or its cultural character"<sup>2</sup>.

1 D. Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution*, New York 2009, chapter 2.

2 D. Dutton, *The Art Instinct*, p. 31.

It must be admitted that Dutton's aim is worthy of attention and respect. We also take our hat off to him for the abundance of examples that he discusses to prove his theses. Alas, the very fact that he interprets these examples within the evolutionary paradigm sows doubt in an attentive reader (one that is not seduced by Dutton's examples and his effortless narrative).

Let us start with the first thesis on human nature. Unfortunately, Dutton does not say anything particularly revealing. He merely states that since we are able to show linguistic universality and the so-called linguistic abilities of the human mind (in which he follows Steven Pinker)<sup>3</sup>, then we may transfer this argument to art. Consequently, with a plethora of examples from various parts of the world, we can declare that there is also universality in art. Interestingly, starting from this peculiar extrapolation of Pinker's theses, Dutton also extrapolates his own opinion regarding Pinker's findings and claims that their universal character is indisputable<sup>4</sup>. We can hardly agree with him since Pinker's thesis, a variant of the hypothesis on universal grammar, has met with strong counterarguments that have debunked his claims. To overlook them is an evident mistake<sup>5</sup>.

Even if Pinker was right, then dogmatically declaring that the issue — before and after extrapolation — is indisputable reveals problems that Dutton must have encountered. The rest of Dutton's book proves my point. We may even claim that beginning from Chapter 2, Dutton's standpoint is an example of what Karl Popper called, though in different circumstances, "metaphysical determinism"<sup>6</sup>. Even though in places there are a few cases of Dutton's dogmatism getting weaker, they do not impact the main arguments of the author.

3 D. Dutton, *The Art Instinct*, p. 29n.

4 D. Dutton, *The Art Instinct*, p. 29.

5 See a discussion between the proponents of the idea of universal grammar and its opponents: A. Nevins, D. Pesetsky, C. Rodrigues, *Pirahã Exceptionality: a Reassessment*, "Language" 85 (April 2007) no. 2, p. 355–404, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.o.0107>; D. Everett, *Pirahã Culture and Grammar: a Response to some Criticisms*, "Language" 85 (June 2009) no. 2, p. 405–442, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.o.0104>.

6 See K. Popper, *The Open Universe: An Argument for Indeterminism*, Routledge, 1988.

No matter what counterexample we might put forward, or what thesis from philosophical anthropology we might formulate, according to Dutton, every element of human nature boils down to the statement: “Well, this is the fruit of evolution”. Thus, he looks for the foundations of art not in art itself, but in the cognitive abilities of a human being. Consequently, he falls into the reductionist paradigm that is characteristic of the theory of evolution in its multiple variants. Nonetheless, we must do justice to Dutton and admit that he does consider the problem of “where” aesthetic qualities lie and he agrees that at least some answers point to the cognized object.

However, here we come across yet another flaw of Dutton’s *magnum opus*. He shows ignorance when it comes to the rich tradition of philosophical reflection on art and beauty. We do not demand (on second thoughts, why not?) that an English-speaking scholar should know about the studies of prominent Polish aestheticians who discuss in detail the dispute between objectivism and subjectivism in aesthetics<sup>7</sup>. Nonetheless, it seems that a scholar who attempts to explain the foundations of philosophical aesthetics should know the concept of a layered construction of the work of art and its consequences, especially since it has been available in English for a long time<sup>8</sup>. Alas, the bibliography and most of the references and contexts of the main text show that Dutton adheres to the evolutionary paradigm and does not even try to discuss classical approaches. It seems to be a significant flaw in his argumentation. Also, in places he happens to be imprecise. Let us quote the first sentences of Chapter 9: “Immanuel Kant, a man with a capacious and hungry intellect, regarded himself as a modern, eighteenth-century cosmopolitan [...] Although he never left his hometown Königsberg”<sup>9</sup>. Well, it would be hard for Kant to give private

7 See for example S. Dziamski, *O subiektywizmie w wersji psychologicznej w polskiej myśli estetycznej XX wieku*, Poznań 1968.

8 See R. Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art*, transl. by G. G. Grabowicz, Evanston 1979; R. Ingarden, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, transl. by R. A. Crowley, K. R. Olson, Evanston 1979.

9 D. Dutton, *The Art Instinct*, p. 203.

lessons outside Königsberg if he had never left it. And yet, he did teach privately and earned his living in this way from 1748 to 1754<sup>10</sup>.

Leaving such nit-picking aside, we shall now return to the first problem: in what sense does Dutton speak of human nature? Above all, in the sense of biological nature and a common evolutionary past. If, from the perspective of philosophical anthropology, aesthetics, or the philosophy of art such considerations have any philosophical significance at all, they are partial and reduced to the adopted paradigm. What do we get as a response to the problem of common human nature? At most, arguments against racial segregation, but surely not a justification of the phenomenon of art.

Does the second thesis regarding both nature and culture save us from paradigmatic blindness? Unfortunately not, since Dutton falls for the *ignotum per ignotum* fallacy: in his book the phenomenon of culture is even more vague than the phenomenon of art. This, however, does not prevent him from reducing both to a peculiar superstructure for “nature”. Again, no matter what counterarguments and examples the critics of Dutton may use, to him the whole human world is the product of evolution.

In several places, however, Dutton puts forward arguments that transcend the evolutionary paradigm. While discussing issues related to forgery in art — a thread he knows much better — he remarks that while encountering a forgery we are moved by emotions that are hardly explicable by means of evolution<sup>11</sup>. Having made this accurate observation, Dutton “repeats his mantra” and tries to adapt the observation to his paradigm.

Admittedly, Dutton’s work contributes to the field by revealing something new or, simply, something valuable, even though that is only in relation to details and secondary matters. In more fundamental issues that he set before himself, it is not, unfortunately, a triumph of science but rather a work in line with the thesis of the reductionist paradigm. Bearing in mind Dutton’s venerable attitude to the principles of the theory of evolution, we

10 Cf. M. Kuehn, *Kant: a Biography*, Cambridge 2001, pp. 94–98. To make things worse, the Polish translation says Kant was a 19<sup>th</sup> century cosmopolitan.

11 D. Dutton, *The Art Instinct*, chapter 8.

may admit that it is a case of the paradigm blowing its own trumpet or, to use more academic language, a *petitio principii* fallacy.

Why is the book so popular? I do not mean my answer to be complete or final. However, I must admit that Dutton scientizes reality, a trend very fashionable among contemporary intellectuals. It is quite easy to see that this trend falls into a trap that postmodernism has set for science. Postmodernism abandoned “grand narratives” whose weak point for contemporary readers consisted in their complexity and profundity not being attainable to everyone. Consequently, “simple narratives” were proposed that pass off as “grand narratives.” I do not mean to say that science that deals with evolution is simple. Yet, it is Dutton’s solutions that are simple for he wants to resolve one of the most complicated philosophical issues with one basic argument: “it is due to evolution”. Unfortunately, such “simple narratives” attract many followers. For it is much easier to exclaim “evolution!” than to study the history of philosophy. Also, it is easier to read one light book by Dutton than hundreds of volumes on aesthetics and the philosophy of art. Is this the only reason for the book’s popularity? I guess one of many, but it is symptomatic enough to make one shudder at the thought of “simple narratives” gaining ground.

How then should the book be evaluated? Rather positively, for even though we have Dutton’s reductionism at the very center, the book does broaden our understanding. His viewpoint should be subjected to substantive and detailed revision. This, however, is a long theme for a whole book.

