

and experience of the arts worldwide?

Aesthetic experience, as well as the context of artistic creation, is a phenomenon both social and psychological. From the standpoint of inner experience, it can be addressed by evolutionary psychology: the idea that our thinking and values are conditioned by the 2.6 million years of natural and sexual selection in the Pleistocene.

This Darwinian theory has much to say about the abiding, cross-culturally ascertainable values human beings find in art. The fascination, for example, that people worldwide find in the exercise of artistic virtuosity, from Praxiteles to Hokusai to Renee Fleming, is not a social construct, but a Pleistocene adaptation (which outside of the arts shows itself in sporting interests everywhere). That calendar landscapes worldwide feature alternating copses of trees and open spaces, often hilly land, water, and paths or river banks that wind into an inviting distance is a Pleistocene landscape preference (which shows up in both art history and in the design of public parks everywhere). That soap operas and Greek tragedy all present themes of family breakdown ("She killed him because she loved him") is a reflection of ancient, innate content interests in story-telling.

Darwinian theory offers substantial answers to perennial aesthetic questions. It has much to say about the origins of art. It's unlikely that the arts came about at one time or for one purpose; they evolved from overlapping interests based in survival and mate selection in the 80,000 generations of the Pleistocene. How we scan visually, how we hear, our sense of rhythm, the pleasures of artistic expression and in joining with others as an audience, and, not least, how the arts excite us using a repertoire of universal human emotions: all of this and more will be illuminated and explained by a Darwinian aesthetics.

I've encountered stiff academic resistance to the notion that Darwinian theory might greatly improve the understanding of our aesthetic and imaginative lives. There's no reason to worry. The most complete, evolutionarily-based explanation of a great work of art, classic or recent, will address its form, its narrative content, its ideology, how it is taken in by the eye or mind, and indeed, how it can produce a deep, even life-transforming pleasure. But nothing in a valid aesthetic psychology will rob art of its appeal, any more than knowing how we evolved to enjoy fat and sweet makes a piece of cheesecake any less delicious. Nor will a Darwinian aesthetics reduce the complexity of art to simple formulae. It will only give us a better understanding of the greatest human achievements and their effects on us.

In the sense that it would show innumerable careers in the humanities over the last forty years to have been wasted on banal politics and execrable criticism, Darwinian aesthetics is a very dangerous idea indeed. For people who really care about understanding art, it would be a combination of fresh air and strong coffee.

KEVIN KELLY

Editor-At-Large, Wired; Author, New Rules for the New Economy



More anonymity is good

More anonymity is good: that's a dangerous idea.

Fancy algorithms and cool technology make true anonymity in mediated environments more possible today than ever before. At the same time this techno-combo makes true anonymity in physical life much harder. For every step that masks us, we move two steps toward totally transparent unmasking. We have caller ID, but also caller ID Block, and then caller ID-only filters. Coming up: biometric monitoring and little place to hide. A world where everything about a person can be found and archived is a world with no privacy, and therefore many technologists are eager to maintain the option of easy anonymity as a refuge for the private.

However in every system that I have seen where anonymity becomes common, the system fails. The recent taint in the honor of Wikipedia stems from the extreme ease which anonymous declarations can be put into a very visible public record. Communities infected with anonymity will either collapse, or shift the anonymous to pseudo-anonymous, as in eBay, where you have a traceable identity behind an invented nickname. Or voting, where you can authenticate an identity without tagging it to a vote.

Anonymity is like a rare earth metal. These elements are a necessary ingredient in keeping a cell alive, but the amount needed is a mere hard-to-measure trace. In larger doses these heavy metals are some of the most toxic substances known to a life. They kill. Anonymity is the same. As a trace element in vanishingly small doses, it's good for the system by enabling the occasional whistleblower, or persecuted fringe. But if anonymity is present in any significant quantity, it will poison the system.

There's a dangerous idea circulating that the option of anonymity should always be at hand, and that it is a noble antidote to technologies of control. This is like pumping up the levels of heavy metals in your body into to make it stronger.

Privacy can only be won by trust, and trust requires persistent identity, if only pseudo-anonymously. In the end, the more trust, the better. Like all toxins, anonymity should be kept as close to zero as possible.

ALISON GOPNIK

Psychologist, UC-Berkeley; Coauthor, The Scientist In the Crib



A cacophony of "controversy"

It may not be good to encourage scientists to articulate dangerous ideas.

Good scientists, almost by definition, tend towards the contrarian and ornery, and nothing gives them more pleasure than holding to an unconventional idea in the face of opposition. Indeed, orneriness and contrarianism are something of currency for science — nobody wants to have an idea that everyone else has too. Scientists are always constructing a straw man "establishment" opponent who they can then fearlessly demolish. If you combine that with defying the conventional wisdom of non-scientists you have a recipe for a very distinctive kind of scientific smugness and self-righteousness. We scientists see this contrarian habit grinning back at us in a particularly hideous and distorted form when global warming opponents or intelligent design advocates invoke the unpopularity of their ideas as evidence that they should be accepted, or at least discussed.

The problem is exacerbated for public intellectuals. For the media too, would far rather hear about contrarian or unpopular or morally dubious or "controversial" ideas than ones that are congruent with everyday morality and wisdom. No one writes a newspaper article about a study that shows that girls are just as good at some task as boys, or that children are influenced by their parents.

It is certainly true that there is no reason that scientifically valid results should have morally comforting consequences — but there is no reason why they shouldn't either. Unpopularity or shock is no more a sign of truth than popularity is. More to the point, when scientists do have ideas that are potentially morally dangerous they should approach those ideas with hesitancy and humility. And they should do so in full recognition of the great human tragedy that, as Isaiah Berlin pointed out, there can be genuinely conflicting goods and that humans are often in situations of conflict for which there is no simple or obvious answer.

Truth and morality may indeed in some cases be competing values, but that is a tragedy, not a cause for self-congratulation. Humility and empathy come less easily to most scientists, most certainly including me, than pride and