THE MATTER OF DIFFERENCE
ART, EVOLUTION, COGNITION, THE SELF, AND MEANING

INTRODUCTION

Many commentators note that producing and appreciating art are among the activities unique to humans. How did this happen? In this paper, I will explore the ways in which art (in its various forms) has contributed to our evolution as a species, the formation of our unique cognitive abilities, and our experience of 'meaning' as human beings. I will begin by showing how art contributes to the evolution of human brain in creating a species distinct from other primates, I will then show how art plays a role in the evolution of cognitive faculties that distinguish us from each other, and finally I will discuss the cognitive capacities of the human mind to bring distinct patterns of thought (intuitive and reflective) together to create a unified self in the context of meaning-making, showing the significant role art might play for the enhancement of our lives.

FROM BIOLOGY TO CULTURE

Since Darwin's publication of *On the Origins of Species* in 18xx there has been a continual flow of discussion on how human beings have developed to our present state. Within this vast body of literature a few statements stand out as uncontroversial; the most important of which for this paper is the *uniqueness* of the human species. We have no peers in the known universe. In addition, we possess a conscious self-awareness in relation to the world around us: we think, solve complex problems, plan for our future, and engage in religious and aesthetic practices. While some other species may engage in some variation of these activities, none are as developed and complex as our own.

It is largely uncontested that humans share a common ancestor with modern apes and chimpanzees from about six million years ago.[1] Although the species that gave birth to us all has long been extinct, *Homo sapiens* continued a distinct developmental line from about 100,000 ago.[2] It is thought that other humanoid groups (such as *Neanderthals* and *Homo floresienses* – commonly called 'hobbits') may have overlapped with our own species, but they, and others like seemed to have vanished about 35,000 years ago.[3] We, along with our closest cousins (apes and chimpanzees, with whom we share 99.4% of our DNA sequences), are the sole hominid survivors from that common ancestry.[4]

While theories of how and why we survived are ubiquitous and varied, most evolutionary scientists at least agree that our survival was made possible by the development of our big brain. Compared with other species, the human brain is disproportionate to our size; with all the extra grey matter, full human development became possible only *after* birth, sometimes taking decades to reach its full potential. During evolved our brain became physically altered by the addition of processing components that provided us with new abilities – and which changed the way the older (reptilian) parts of our brain worked. It is this mysterious and magnificent blob of neruo-active matter that is responsible for everything in human civilization, from the ancient literature of Homer to the latest technologies in modern medicine.

With reference to our physical anatomy and chemistry, psychologist Jonathan St B.T. Evans points out that "the modern environment in which we [humans] now operate is so recent [the last 50,000 years] as to have played almost no role in the evolution of our species."[5]. Evans explains that our "environment exists because we designed and built it with our superior reflective

[1] Jonathan St. B.T. Evans, *Thinking Twice; Two Minds in One Brain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 2010, 30.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Jill Bolte Taylor, *My Stroke of Insight* (Bloomington IL: Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor) 2006, 15.
[5] Evans, 30

minds… Our adaption to a modern world of cars, airplanes, office towers, and computers was not a Darwinian process."[6] Our modern environment, created from ideas generated by our big brains has created a world to which we, as physical being, are ill-suited. It would seem that biological evolution has taken a backseat to *cultural* evolution – which, ironically, our biological processes are not equipped to handle!

So where does art fall in line with these processes? Is it biologically based, a cultural construction, or both?

To answer these questions, it will be helpful to look more closely at the biological process of evolution in relation to the mental processes of the brain itself. In *The Art Instinct*, Denis Dutton explains Darwin's theory of evolution as species developing slowly "by a process of *random mutation and selective retention*, known… as natural selection" (emphasis in the original). [7] Dutton describes *adaptation* – the 'gold standard' for evolutionary explanation – as "an inherited physiological, affective, or behavioral characteristic that reliably develops in an organism, increasing its chances of survival and reproduction."[8] Following "standard evolutionary theory," he writes, " anything produced by an adaptive process that is not an adaption must fall into one of two categories: a one-off random or accidental effect of gene combination… or… a causally related by-product [sometimes called 'spandrel'] of an adaptation or arrangement of adaptations."[9] In other words, the non-adaptive mutations, those that do not support survival and reproduction, die out in successive generations while others are retained as by-products. Although considered inconsequential to basic survival and reproduction, by-products can and often do become part of the human developmental processes in other ways.

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[6] Ibid.
[7] Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct* (85.
[8] Ibid., 90,91.
[9] Ibid., 91.

Whether art falls within the category of evolutionary adaptation or adaptation by-product depends on who you ask. Some writers, such as V.S. Ramachandran, lean towards the more biological process of adaptation. In two chapters on aesthetics in *The Tell-Tale Brain*, Ramachandran presents a case for adaptive features of nine aspects of aesthetics (aspects of *his* choosing) in relation to the "neural architecture of the brain."[10] For each of his nine "laws" of aesthetics (grouping, peak shift, contrast, isolation, perceptual problem solving, abhorrence of coincidences, orderliness, symmetry and metaphor), Ramachandran makes the case for adaptation, showing in each instance the necessity of the alleged adaptation in relation to survival and reproduction.[11] While some of his claims are controversial and (admittedly) highly speculative, many of his ideas seem plausible. Take, for example, Ramachandran's so-called law of *contrast*. Contrast refers to colour and/or tonal variations in the visual field that permit us to distinguish one spatial area from another. The adaptation of contrast to our visual perception, argues Ramachandran, helped our primate ancestors with food and predator detection by drawing "attention to object boundaries."[12] Since a "high colour contrast is more attention getting," he argues, it would be easier for early primates to identify red fruit among green leaves "in dim twilight or across great distances."[13]

Merlin Donald takes a different perspective. In his essay "Art and Cognitive Evolution" he points out that art, although it may not be directly involved in issues of survival and reproduction, is "universal to all societies and unique to humans."[14] He writes:

> Inevitably, when a phenomenon is both universal and species-unique, the question of its evolutionary origins arises. Within the reach of evolutionary theory, human evolution is

[10] V.S. Ramachandran, *The Tell-Tale Brain* (200.
[11] Ibid., pp 193-244.
[12] Ibid., 220.
[13] Ibid., 119. I am reminded of animals (as foxes) which are more likely to be affected by visual perception of movement rather than by contrast.
[14] Donald Merlin, "Art and Cognitive Evolution," *The Artful Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 2006, 7.

> special, and unusually because it entails the co-evolution of *biological and cultural* forces. Art is central to that process… (emphasis mine).[15]

Donald suggests that art is best understood as "an inevitable by-product of mimesis – a primordial, and truly human, cognitive adaption that occurred very early in cognitive prehistory and became the signature feature of the human mind."[16] 'Mimetic' is the label Donald applies to the earliest phase of human culture and cognitive evolution, dating back at least one and one-half million years.[17] He suggests that

> [m]imesis had enormous cognitive consequences on the group level, resulting in a characteristically human form of communicative culture that later increased its influence with the emergence of language… [Mimesis] describes a cluster of capacities that were made possible by a single neuro-cognitive adaptation. …The four central mimetic abilities are mime, imitation, gesture, and the rehearsal of skill.[18]

These mimetic abilities permitted humans to refine such skills as gestural communication and tool making.

Denis Dutton takes yet another approach. His perspective on the evolution of art focuses mostly on *aesthetics as beauty*. Noting the role of art in sexual selection to attract a mate (as in peacock tails) and imitation of beauty (mimesis), Dutton appeals both to biology *and* culture in the complex discussion of the role of aesthetics in human development.[19] Championing what he calls a 'Darwinian aesthetics,' Dutton argues that the either/or language of adaptation and by-product is not applicable to art. He writes that his concepts

> are built on the idea that a vocabulary of adaptations versus by-products cannot make sense of the ancient origins and present reality of aesthetic and artistic experience. To be illuminated by evolution, the arts do not all need to be glorified as Darwinian adaptations similar to language, binocular vision, or the eye itself. Neither should the arts be dismissed

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[15] Donald , 7.
[16] Ibid., 14. Donald considers these communicative acts as the building blocks of ancient civilizations and cultures which, in turn, shaped the minds that created them.
[17] Ibid., 7.
[18] Ibid., 14, 15.
[19] Dutton rightly sets aside Contemporary Art (the discipline) in his study due to its short history (a few hundred years at best).

> as by-products of a collision of human biology with culture. The arts intensify experience, enhance it, extend it in time, and make it coherent.[20]

Dutton sees artworks as "the most complex and diverse of human achievements."[21] He writes:

> The evolution of Homo sapiens in the past million years is not just a history of how we came to have acute colour vision, a taste for sweets, and an upright gait. It is also a story of how we became a species *obsessed* with creating artistic experiences with which to amuse, shock, titillate and enrapture ourselves, from children's games to the quartets of Beethoven, from firelit caves to the continuous worldwide glow of television screens (emphasis mine).[22]

Dutton postulates that our obsession with art is foundational to our creation and participation in culture. Appealing to human creativity, curiosity, originality, feeling, emotion, and interest in the meaning of things, Dutton impresses upon us the *value* of the arts for human experience. He writes:

> The open, probing character of the arts also means that, while they are suffused with emotion and value, they will never stand comfortably alongside other human value systems. Religion, ethics, and politics all require to some degree adherence to a conceptual stability that even the most conformist artists may wish to test. The arts never quite fit with the moral demands on which any functioning society depends.[23]

Thus, the arts are applauded their role in continual cultural growth. Various forms of art have served us well in securing our basic genetic needs (survival and reproduction) an our cultural development – through emphasis on design and refined motor control (as in mechanical arts, such as tool-making). But they have provided much more than this. Song, dance, visual art, and narrative, for example, have helped knit together family, tribe, and cultural units. Ideas shared through activities we now call art (examples include song from vocal utterance, dance from gesture, visual art from picture drawing, and narrative from oral traditions of story-telling) have

[20] Dutton, 102. Recall here that Dutton disagrees with Donald who considers language as emerging *from* art, thus making it a by-product as well.
[21] Ibid., 1.
[22] Ibid., 2,3.
[23] Ibid., 229.

helped universally to build strong cultural identities, adding corporate and individual value to human experience.

The Many and the One

So far, we have focused on human evolution from the perspective of biological function: our genes retain mutations that ensure their survival and reproduction and reject those that do not. In addition, the adaptations resulting from genetic mutation can lead to by-products that permit further evolution through the creation of culture. And we have seen that art – whether understood as a genetic adaptive mutation, an adaptation by-product, or both – has played a significant role in the evolution of culture. But, as Semir Zeki points out, "the brain is not a mere passive chronicler of external events and… perceiving is not… something the brain does passively."[24] Indeed, we, through our big brains, *make sense* of our world. And although we share 99.9% of our DNA sequences with each other as human beings, the remaining 1% seems to allow for maximum differentiation among members of our species. In addition to our biological differences, we have developed private lives as individual thinking and feeling beings.

Francis Steen writes that "the aesthetic impulse and experience" has played an essential role in the fundamental task of *constructing* ourselves as individuals distinct from each other.[25] He suggests that art can "tease us out of thought,"[26] permitting us to "detect and acquire information in the environment that is not present in the genes…for the purpose of wiring the brain."[27] Human beings, he argues, do not create aesthetic experience *ex nihilo*; aesthetics "appears to stem from an appreciation of the inferred but invisible underlying order that generates

[24] Semir Zeki, "The Neurology of Ambiguity," *The Artful Mind* (Oxford, Oxford University Press) 2006, 244.
[25] Francis Steen, "A Cognitive Account of Aesthetics," *The Artful Mind*, 58.
[26] Ibid., 59. Steen acknowledges borrowing this phrase from Keats.
[27] Ibid., 65.

the manifest phenomenon [such as beauty]."[28] He suggests that "we unconsciously make use of such complex natural orders in wiring the brain and calibrating our perceptual systems, that our self-construction relies on them, and that natural selection has constructed a motivational system that leads us to seek them out."[29] The system of motivation in question here can be understood as the appreciation or pleasure provided by aesthetic experiences which we "are designed to feel, inclined to seek out and enjoy as an end in themselves."[30]

Mark Turner believes that "human beings evolved not an entirely different kind of mind [from other creatures], but instead the capacity for the strongest form of conceptual integration."[31] He sees this cognitive function (which he calls 'double-scope blending") as essential for making sense of the "chaos of perceptual data" to which we are subjected moment to moment. Double-scope blending refers to a process of "compressing" concepts into manageable elements (or images) called "inputs."[32] Inputs, created from materials already known to us, can be creatively arranged and rearranged (or "blended") to permit new perceptual experiences. For example, the visual input of 'cat' blended with the visual input 'window' leads to a new visual concept we might call 'cat in window.' Multiple inputs can be organized by the same conceptual framework ('cat and dog and bird in window') or a single input can be explored by several frameworks (cat in window in house in neighbourhood'), each producing a compressed blend from which emerges a dynamic structure, a "structure that cannot be found in any of the inputs" alone.[33] This process permits us to "understand and remember at human scale a range of complicated knowledge that

[28] Steen, 63.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid., 69.
[31] Mark Turner, "The Art of Compression," *The Artful Mind*, 93.
[32] Ibid., pp 94-96.
[33] Ibid., 100.

does not otherwise fit human-scale recognition."[34] The wide range of possibilities inherent in this process speaks to the diverse capacity for creativity in the human mind, making possible a garden in which an infinite bouquet of flowers can grow.

Faced with a constant flow of stimuli, the brain seeks to make sense of the world by constructing a unified identity, circumscribed in space, and able to change over time. David Freedberg's notion of boundedness may be helpful here. He writes:

> Being entails conservation; it has to be conserved in order to be; it can never be purely open. Pure openness is the enemy of being. If being were purely open, it would lose its life, terminating in nonbeing; and nonbeing can have no effect. The being of being consists of its own immanent closure and determinacy…[35]

In other words, we extract from the external environment certain data on which we can rely to maintain a sense of order. using these data to construct a 'self.' Ramachandran provides a checklist: a self requires *unity* (must always be the *same* self qualitatively), *continuity* (must maintain numerical selfhood over time), *embodiment* (must be circumscribed in space), *social-embedding* (must be part of a group of other 'selves'), *free will* (must be able to choose freely among options), and *self-awareness* (must perceive self as differentiated from other 'selves').[36]

Turner suggests that "typically, we are unaware we face this [ongoing] perceptual diversity." Comparing ourselves to art, he writes:

> When we look at the serene marble statue, it appears to us to be a single unit, without fragmentation, instability, or diversity despite the fact that the perceptual data we are compressing to achieve this comforting and useful recognition of an abiding, unvarying statue are themselves shifty and uncoordinated.[37]

Cultures form as groups of selves pull together to serve a common general interest (such as ensuring food supply), but the *qualia* of individual lives within the community remains

[34] Ibid.
[35] David Freeberg, "Composition and Emotion," *The Artful Mind*, 82.
[36] Ramachandran, pp 250-253. Ramachandran lists these seven qualities as "intuitive aspects" of a self.
[37] Turner, 94.

subjective and confidential. Socially dependant in many ways, human beings are *distinct individuals* who enjoy highly evolved *private* cognitive experiences. Equipped qualitatively with the same mental apparatus and processes, our brains nonetheless craft lives very different from one another, and aesthetics provides an important tools. Steen points out that "by proposing new perceptual orders, artists tap into both the core and the unused fringe capacities of the aesthetic response system to explore complex sensory orders that have no precedent in nature."[38] Turner goes a step further, suggesting that complex compression and blending processes of 'what is known' with what can be *imagined* – "forbidden fruit blending," as he calls it – makes us "extremely creative."[39] He writes:

> Constant attempt at blending provides a robust way of introducing a strong engine of variation into our conceptual systems. Almost all of those products of variation are *selected against* by governing principles or by pressures and affordances of our environment or by the absence of utility of any kind. But some of them, although they begin by blending structures that one might think have no business of being blended nonetheless provide quite powerful new conceptions (emphasis mine).[40]

Through the integration of creative blending, new conceptions slowly evolve, taking root by distributing cognitions that encourage the continual development of culture over time. Susan Greenfield agrees. She suggests that "minds develop as brains do, both as a species and as an individual starts to escape genetic programing in favor of personal, experience-based learning."[41]

Will the Real Regina Please Stand Up!

Distinct from other primates, different from one another as human beings, we find ourselves engaged in yet one further evolutionary journey: the creation of a singular identity – a self – from the multiple options presented by the workings of our individual brain. Cognitively speaking, we

[38] Steen, 65.
[39] Turner, 109.
[40] Ibid., 112.
[41] Susan Greenfield, *The Private Life of the Brain* (New York: John Wiley and Sons) 2000, 22.

move from 'Who are we?' to 'Who am I?' Alone in our world of personal perceptions, Patrick McNamara suggests that we seek to construct a unified self by editing our biographical memories to "match the current self-model and its goals."[42] No small task – it's not like picking out pictures to create a family album of last summer's vacation, and choosing not to include that one of Uncle Ed lying drunk over two lawn chairs. While our *conscious* mind may make decisions like this, perhaps rationalized by poetic license, our brain, at an *unconscious* level, may accept or reject our rationalizations, or, even worse, raise our awareness of them, making us conscious of decisions we would rather not think of as having made purposefully!

So what is going on? How can we be a unified self when clearly there are conflicts in even our most trivial decision making processes? Jonathan St. B.T. Evans proposes a "two mind hypothesis" suggesting that our brain is home to two distinct but related operating systems: one he refers to as the "intuitive mind," the other the "reflective mind."[43] Not to be confused with instinct, which Evans defines as "innate, fixed, and universal behaviours,"[44] the intuitive mind functions unconsciously by means of a distinct neural pattern which connects the *older* (reptilian) *mind* – the limbic system – with direct response mechanisms, by-passing our conscious, more reflective, *new mind* (which relies on our pre-frontal cortex – the most recent evolutionary addition to our brains). Evans describes the new mind as "reflective, distinctive, human" whereas the old mind is: "parallel, fast, and automatic."[45]

The main advantages of our intuitive mind may seem obvious in light of our evolutionary background; they afford us the ability to make and act upon decisions quickly. And while this may prove useful in getting out of the way when a herd of elephants is headed in our direction, it

[42] Patrick McNamara, 255.
[43] Evans, 20. Evans proposed his "two mind hypothesis" and an alternative to the "chief executive model" (which he attributes to Descartes) in which the conscious mind is the driving force behind the majority of our actions.
[44] Ibid., 39.
[45] Ibid., 47.

does not always serve us as well in making decisions in contemporary culture. Sometimes the decisions we make quickly (intuitively) on the limited information obtained by our old mind have disastrous consequences, showing clearly in *retrospect* (reflection) that we could have benefitted from further thought on the matter.

The reflective mind works more slowly and deliberately. Evans writes:

> [T]he reflective mind is precisely what defines the uniqueness of our species and gives us every cognitive advantage that we hold over other animals. We have taken the ability to think about novel problems to a level completely without precedent in the rest of the animal kingdom.[46]

As might be expected, these two very different roommates occupying the same brain are sometimes in conflict – each vying for power in the decision-making process. This tension is aptly described by the apostle Paul: "I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing" (Romans 7:19). What is going on here? Evans argues that the two minds within our brain work from separate sets of rules, each constructed to provide a 'way of knowing' and a "way of deciding" distinct from the other.[47] Our two minds can and often do work in harmony, each offering its best to the service of the other in pursuit of a common goal. But when they conflict, it is due to influx of different sorts of information about a single problem from very different processing systems. Confused about the clash between our desires and actions (as suggested by the case of the apostle Paul), we feel as if we are being pulled in two different directions at once!

From the perspective of our conscious reflective selves, this can be disconcerting. Surely, our analytical new mind argues, reflection is superior to intuition: it permits us to collect data, analyse it objectively, make an informed decision based on the relevant data, and devise a plan of action accordingly – aimed at achieving the outcome dictated by the process. Meanwhile, our old

[46] Evans, 48.
[47] Ibid., pp 53-106.

self (unconscious, more primitive and emotional) urges us toward a different course of action based on its perspective of past experience and feelings. In other words, what we have here is a conflict between the head and the heart! One method is not superior to the other, but each has evolved to handle different kinds of problems.

So can we really be a single individual? Because our brains are composed of billions of neurons, the possible combinations that contribute to the construction of a single human self are virtually endless.[48] And they are *not* stagnant. Greenfield writes of the mind as a "seething morass of cell circuitry that has been configured by personal experiences and is constantly being updated as we live out each moment."[49] Our experience, laden with emotion from the intuitive mind, provides raw material for reflection in the construction of the self. According to Greenfield, it is our *emotions* that provide the "building blocks of consciousness," by tying together our intuitive and reflective minds.[50] Evans agrees. He writes:

> There is a tendency to talk as though they [brains] were disembodied devices lying in vats, whereas they are actually integral parts of bodies capable of perception, action, and emotional response. By neglecting emotion, in particular, cognitive psychology leaves out an essential part of what it is to be a sentient being. …Emotions…play an important role in the feelings arising from the intuitive mind, which often compete with the essential cognitive process of the reflective mind… it is often *emotions and not thoughts* that ultimately control our actions (emphasis mine).[51]

Greenfield concurs. For her, an emotion is not an "occasional outburst" of behaviour, but rather, it forms the "core" of our mental states.[52] She observes that in contemporary neurological studies "emotion as a subjective sensation" has been replaced by an emphasis on "emotional

[48] Some estimates suggest the brain is capable of making trillions of unique synaptic connections!
[49] Greenfield, 13.
[50] Ibid., 21.
[51] Evans, 18.
[52] Greenfield, 21.

behaviour – an objective, observable event."[53] She argues that the "crux of emotion is not so much the response but the conscious, subjective feeling itself."[54] She goes so far as to suggest that *identifying* with the emotions generated by the more primitive part of our brain, results in a *loss* of self. She writes: "The more that we are feeling emotional, the less we are accessing our individual minds, the less we are being ourselves; ultimately we have let ourselves go!"[55] The self which is 'let go' in this instance is our "highly personalized set of values, history, and unique view of life."[56] On the other hand, total identification with our reflective self may leave us void of emotion, resulting in analytical human machines – as *Star Trek's* Mr. Spock! It would appear that reflection on intuitive actions could contribute to the "knowing" of intuitive processes and that intuition, when taken seriously, might provide depth of experience for the "knowing" produced by reflective consideration.

In the construction of a healthy human self, both extremes are to be avoided. Balance is the key; balance involves keeping in touch with our intuitive mind (accessed primarily through feeling) *and* our reflective mind (accessed mainly through thinking).[57] It could be that our idea of a singular identity or self is a bit off from the get-go; perhaps the self is better understood as dynamic – a continual balancing act through time!

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[53] Ibid., 20. Greenfield is responding to neurophysiologist Joseph Le Doux who argues that "each emotion has evolved separately according to our evolutionary needs" (Greenfield, 20). Le Doux focuses on the observable behavioural aspects of emotions as a kind of reflex action, paying little or no attention to the 'feeling' of emotion. Greenfield and Le Doux's disagreement is grounded in their very different interpretations of neurobiological systems.

[54] Ibid., 21.

[55] Greenfield, 13.

[56] Ibid., 21.

[57] I can't help but think of Carl Jung's personality typologies characterized by 'feeling' and 'thinking' functions which are applied to our internal data. Jung sees these as polarities, and suggests that individuals usually have a preference for one over the other (although capable of both).

Meaning

As has been made clear by now, the human brain is a multi-faceted, biologically-powered, consciousness-building organ. We feel and think – and can, for the most part, *express* our feelings and thoughts. Also, we are aware that others have feelings and thoughts different from our own and that we can interact with *their* expressions. And, in addition, we are *aware* that our own feelings and thoughts are continually changing and developing over time through a combination of the intuitive and reflective cognitive processes in our brain (which, by analogy, we can apply to others as well). So, on a personal scale, what makes a single human life worthwhile? In other words, what gives meaning to our lives? In this final section, I will explore ways in which art and aesthetics provide opportunities for enhancing the quality of life by providing access to the experience of deeper meaning.

As we in the Western world have become more "civilized" we have, in recent centuries, tended to value our reflective mind over the intuitive. As it turns out, this one-sided emphasis has not served us well. For example, we have used our superior thinking functions to create a social environment saturated by consumerism: needs are created in the minds of consumers and products created to meet those so-called needs. As a culture we have become preoccupied with competitive consumption, aptly expressed by the slogan 'whoever dies with the most toys (things) wins.' It would not be wrong, in my view, to say that we are failing miserably in our evolutionary task as the dominant species. Consciousness has provided us with a unique tool by which we can alter our world for the better of all. However, we have often abused this power, constructing unhealthy environments that have damaged not only our environment, but contributed to the damage of non-western cultures – and all other species, for that matter. It would seem that *meaning*, for those in the grip of capitalist consumerism, can be equated with competition and accumulation.

For others, meaning in life is found through religion. Gordon Graham writes in *The Re-enchantment of the World*:

> There can be more to life than 'amusing ourselves to death,' and not just the work required for earning the means to do so. Generally speaking, the arts provide something more. In addition to the merely entertaining, painting, music, literature, and the built environment stock the world with beauty, interest, the clever, and the captivating.[58]

While this sounds promising for the role of art in adding meaning to our lives, Graham doesn't actually think this is the case. Ultimately, he believes that *only* religion can provide meaning and depth in one's life. Naturally, I disagree. As Susan Wolf points out, "A meaningful life is not the same as a happy life or a morally good life."[59] What Graham fails to notice is that each of the artistic phenomena he lists can lead to a potentially *meaningful experience* –an *aesthetic* experience – experience which is not necessarily based on happiness or morality or even religion.

So how might aesthetic experience provide meaning for our lives? To begin, French phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne divides aesthetic experience into two distinct but overlapping categories: that of the artist and that of the spectator; both types of experience, he suggests, are poised to add meaning to the lives of those who engage them. [60] For example, an artist's experience of *creating* is focused on the process of 'making' something – something which has no utilitarian value, such as the decoration on a vase, a painting on a living room wall, or an abstract sculpture on a busy city street. Whether or not appreciated by viewers, such artworks have much value for the artist, the most of important of which is engagement in the creative process itself. The process of making art involves a back and forth rhythm between our intuitive and reflective selves – much like a dance (with no one 'leading'), creating much needed balance for our minds.

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[58] Gordon Graham, *The Re-enchantment of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 2007, 186.
[59] Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 2010, 76.
[60] Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press) 1973, xlv.

With reference to interviews of highly creative people, conducted during a study on creativity, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes:

> [The people interviewed] mentioned repeatedly their constant shifting from action to reflection, from passion to objectivity. In each case, this alteration allowed them to keep learning, to keep adjusting to new situations. Their creativity unfolded organically from idea to action, then through the evaluation of the outcomes of action back to ideas – a cycle that repeated itself again and again. None of them [seemed to be] motivated by money and fame. Instead they are driven by a feeling of responsibility for the common good, a feeling that sometimes borders on traditional religious values but more often seems to depend on a spiritual sense of the order and beauty of natural phenomena that transcends any particular creed.[61]

Patrick McNamara explains that Csikszentmihalyi, through his study, presents "a way of living [called] 'vital engagement'" or *flow*.[62] Rollo May attributed this way of living to *revelation,* "representing the highest degree of emotional health."[63] The artist lives in a world of continual novelty, with an almost childlike sense of wonder and curiosity.

Semir Zeki writes that an artist is happy that "situations or views... are open to more than one, and sometimes to several, interpretations."[64] He continues:

> The artist rather than creating ambiguity… uses, sometimes to exquisite effect, this potential of the brain. Equally, the viewer uses the same potential in providing different interpretations.[65]

And it is to the viewer we now turn. On spectatorship, American artist Joan Mitchell has made the comment that "other people don't have to see what [she sees in her] work."[66] Not only do responses to artwork *not* need to correlate with the intentions of the artist, neither do they need to be the same as other spectators. Indeed, given the individuality of our brains, it would be

[61] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity* (New York: Harper) 1997, 316.
[62] McNamara, 94.
[63] Rollo May, *The Courage to Create* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company) 1994, 40, 69.
[64] Semir Zeki, "The Neurology of Ambiguity" in *The Artful Mind*, 244.
[65] Ibid., 244.
[66] Terry Barrett, *Why is That Art?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 2008, 75.

surprising if they did! But the spectator does share with the artist an interest in novelty. Michael Polanyi writes:

> First the artist produces from his own diffuse existence a shape circumscribed in a brief space… a shape wholly incommensurable with the substance of its origins. Then we respond to this shape by surrendering from our own diffuse memories of moving events a gift of purely resonant feelings. The total experience is of a wholly novel entity, an imaginative integration of incompatibles on all sides.[67]

Terry Barnett explains further, suggesting art requires

> "that viewers be active while engaging with works of art. They cannot merely sit back and be bathed in aesthetic delight in the presence of a work. Artwork demands the audience's interpretive engagement. Viewers are inquiring partners of the artist in creative and expressive activities. Without responsive viewers, paint on a canvas, however wonderfully put there by whatever brilliant artist, is mere pigment on cloth."[68]

Barrett holds that artworks are "uniquely valuable." He insists "they open experiences to us we would otherwise miss; they present ways of knowing the world to which other means of knowing do not have access. Artworks are more than mere providers of aesthetic pleasure, they can change us…"[69]

So how is this accomplished? Patrick McNamara provides a plausible explanation from a neurologist's perspective. He describes a "decentering" process that causes a sort of mental breakdown (deliberate or otherwise) of our central sense of self. This leads us to consider new and innovative possibilities which may lead to new insights for the ongoing construction of the self. Once assent has been made to a new course of action, our memory is consulted "to find a more integral version of the Self that can encompass deeper, more optimal solutions to internal and external conflicts and problems." Finally, our "old Self is then bound to and integrated into the

[67] Michael Polanyi, *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 1975, 88.
[68] Barrett, 101.
[69] Ibid.

new identity," and, if everything works out, "that new identity is larger and more complex than other older Self, and thus it is more unified."[70]

The experience of aesthetics, as either creator or active spectator, can contribute to the decentering process in McNamara's schema. But, as Susan Greenfield notes, our established connections of neurons make decentering a difficult process. She writes, "We see the world in terms of what we have seen already."[71] In reference to observation of the natural world, she suggests that preconceived notions make it hard "to unpick [what we see] into mere colours and shapes again,"[72] to "unscramble the visual world,"[73] as it were. "For most of us," she writes, "our carefully nurtured, preconceived notions intervene,"[74] thus the decentering process is thwarted.

As infants, we start our lives as creative creatures, embarking on the construction of a unique and personal self.[75] But, as Greenfield points out, as we mature into adulthood, "we stunt our imaginations," exchanging creativity for conformity, imagination for efficiency. Art and aesthetics offer at least one way to regain some of these abilities. By igniting our intuitive cognitive mind, by getting in touch with our primal mind, we can participate in the novelty that shakes us from our conscious slumber, making everything new again. As we clear out the routine reflections that stifle our intuitive minds, we open the door between them, inviting the creative dance to begin. Borrowing words from William Blake, we will "see the world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower… hold infinity in the palm of our hand, and eternity in an hour."[76] We would be hard-pressed to find something more meaningful than that!

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[70] McNamara, 47.
[71] Greenfield, 65.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid., 101.
[74] Ibid., 65.
[75] Whether by way of nature, nurture, or nature and nurture is not relevant here.
[76] William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence," *William Blake; The Complete Poems* (New York: Penguin) 1977, 506.