Making Art, Being Nature, and the Distributed Agency of Creaturely Creation

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“...it is only production through freedom, i.e., through an act of will that places reason at the basis of its action, that should be termed art. For, although we are pleased to call what bees produce (their regularly constituted cells) a work of art, we only do so on the strength of an analogy with art; that is to say, as soon as we call to mind that no rational deliberation forms the basis of their labour, we say at once that it is a product of their nature (of instinct), and it is only to their Creator that we ascribe it as art.”

- Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgment, 1790 (p.183, 1914 edition)

Why are Kant’s bees so artless even though their work is so beautiful? And it is beautiful: the comb is both geometrically precise and improvisational; it is an incubator filled with growing life and also a vessel brimming the concentrated sweetness of field and flower; it is one hive with many purposes orchestrated through loops of perception and response, negotiation and decision. As Adorno has pointed out, Kant was notable in the attention he gave to both nature and art in regards to aesthetics (91). Let’s make use of Kant’s particular example of the comb, with the shapes and the synergies that emerge throughout its structure, to briefly consider the categories of art, nature, and the creative agency of creatures once again.

Mistaken Intentions

The exclusion of non-human animals as agents of art has been so widely accepted as to seem obvious. Occasionally there is fanfare over a zoo elephant, a pet cat, or a dolphin who paints with the tools given to them by keepers. But the ambivalent brushstrokes by animals in enclosures, if anything, serves to only reassert the notion the art is the ken of humans – those who don’t merely “play” with paints, but represent with them. Giving animals the chance to fumble with classical tools for making art can enact a performance of gentle ridicule, a public demonstration reaffirming how simple, if charmingly inept, non-humans are in their creative capacities.

Far from technique, however, earnest art thinkers such as philosopher Denis Dutton claim to recognize the far deeper inadequacy to which Kant referred. As Dutton writes in his recent book, The Art Instinct, what animals create, “involves no planning or intellectual context,” whereas what human create, “are fundamentally different because they emerge in the context of human culture and self-consciousness (9).” The argument isn’t only that self-consciousness is the basis of creative motivation, but also the basis for any capacity to discern between the artful and the natural in themselves. “In a product of beautiful art we must become conscious that it is Art and not Nature,” Kant writes, “Nature is beautiful because it looks like Art; and Art can only be called beautiful if we are conscious of it as Art while yet it looks like Nature (187).” Interestingly, the often parodied notion that “anything is art if you call it art,” ends up as a key criterion for this view of the animal/art boundary: Animals lack art precisely because they lack the self-reflexiveness to consider their work as “their work” and call it such. By this logic, the comb of the honeybee as a creation falls short doubly, for it is neither distinct as an object nor possessed by authorship in ways typical of the artist-subject. Alas, there is no meaning in the melliferous.

By this it’s clear that the prevailing Kantian notion of creative agency is based most fundamentally on an assumption of individuation and separateness - of a will that is free and autonomous from Nature by the mere fact that will conceives of itself as free and autonomous. It makes sense that Kant could then also argue for a “characteristic social ‘spirit’ of humanity by which it is distinguished from the limitations of animal life” (254). After all, if non-human animals lack an individuated and intentional agency, how can they feel an interactive

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1 When animals in captivity given the opportunity, inducement, or training to use paint or fashion seemingly aesthetic arrangements, it is often assumed to be either a case of “programmed instinct,” or alternatively merely a “trick” that is not natural to animals in the wild. If the things made are arguably “tools,” then their functionality disqualifies them as art in the view of many writers on the topic. More on this point to follow.

2 And after all, how else would one, including an animal, enter into the fundamentals of art making if not through painting? The varied ironies and anthropocentrism are layered thickly on top of a canvas of assumptions.

3 Although Kant clearly sees humans as superior to animals, he gave much more consideration to shared abilities and affinities between them compared to most thinkers of his time, and indeed many since, especially for a Pre-Darwinian. In Critique of Judgment he writes:

"We then try at the same time to show that the ground of the artisan faculty of beasts, which we call instinct, specifically different as it is in fact from reason, has yet a similar relation to its effect (the buildings of the beaver as compared with those of men). - But then I cannot therefore conclude that because man uses reason for his building, the beaver must have the like... But... we can quite rightly conclude according to analogy, that beasts too act in accordance with representational (not as Descartes has it, that they are machines), and that despite their specific distinction they are yet (as living beings) of the same genus as man."
“social spirit” that is itself premised on the differentiation of individuals in the first place? Ironically, a whole hive of bees is limited because it isn’t social enough in the Kantian view, and instead is too much like one buzzing “superorganism.” The honeycomb as a creation isn’t the fruit of a socially negotiated and self-aware labor (i.e. art), but just another form that comes by way of nature as it happens. The artistic subjectivity, and thus agency, of the bee is thus undermined by both a lack of intersubjectivity among the members of the hive and the lack of objectivity with which they treat their own creations.4,5

How & Why? “Bee-Causes”

“The implicit denial of mental experiences to animals has become almost an act of faith, and it is supported primarily by arguments and assertions that true language is a unique and characteristic attribute of our species.”

– Donald Griffin, The Question of Animal Awareness, 1981 (p.88)

Since Griffin’s seminal book, and certainly since Kant’s original Critique, there has been a wealth of biological research on the diversity of animals’ experiential capacities as well as a more nuanced approaches to the epistemological issues involved in animal phenomenology that can help us reinterpret the creativity of bees vis-à-vis the comb. Thanks to Karl von Frisch’s Nobel winning research we know that the wayfinding “waggle dance” of honeybees is a form of symbolic, context-dependent communication, with many - if not all - of the hallmarks of true language (Figure 1). What’s more, however, we also know that individual bees that receive information from hive mates (“followers”) actually display discernment and decisiveness in what to do and where to go. As Griffin describes, von Frisch’s research:

“shows that there is quite enough variability in the behavioral responses of bees and other communicating animals to leave room for the assumption of spontaneity. Many followers do things other than flying out to the place indicated by the dances; they often seem to ignore the dances altogether and turn to other activities” (89).

Figure 1: Two kinds of bee “dances” and the “followers” who jostle together as they receive information from the central dancer. A “waggle dance” (L) and a “rounds dance” (R), the latter of which is used to inform bees of a close-by food source. Karl von Frisch, from The Dance Language and Orientation of Bees (1965)

4 When animals in captivity are given the opportunity, inducement, or training to use paint or fashion seemingly aesthetic arrangements, it is often assumed a to be either a case of “programmed instinct,” or alternatively merely a “trick” that is not natural to animals in the wild. What’s more, if the things that the animals make are arguably “tools,” then their very functionality disqualifies them as art in the view of many who have written on the topic. More on this point to follow.

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Is such individualized, autonomous, and spontaneous behavior consistent with the action of a “free will”? We can return to this question and its implications for subjectivity as well as creative agency, but let’s regain our footing on the honeycomb and examine some further details in the matrix of making -

In the book, *Langstroth on the Hive and Honey Bee* (1883), the following figure (Figure 2) is used to illustrate an interesting fact about the hexagonal cells that make up a comb: They are actually of two different types - smaller ones to accommodate workers, and larger ones for rearing male “drones” (and either for storing honey or pollen as well). The text describes the situation: “As bees, in building from their cells, cannot pass immediately from one size to another, they display an admirable sagacity in making the transition from one set of irregular intermediate cells” (Langstroth 74). Two such transitional and intermediate cells are highlighted in red:

This particular architectural feature of the comb raises some very interesting questions about the creative agency of bees. Because the number of larger cells will differ with the biophysical circumstances of a hive at any given time, the particular configuration of the transitional “intermediate cells” is going to be variable and in flux. How does this unique structure come to be considering the inevitable vagaries of its actual form? And how do hundreds of bees collectively construct and continuously adapt such intermediate cells given that they are so anomalous compared to the overall geometry of the comb?

Over 100 years later after Langstroth’s book, biologist Stephen Pratt delved into the details of this “admirable sagacity” through a series of close and careful studies. To Pratt it was a, “question of how a coordinated building decision actually emerges from the separate choices of thousands of bees using only local information” (203). Note here that it is a “building decision” that somehow results from the “separate choices” of all the bees. Both individuality and rational agency are implicit in how contemporary social insect research has come to frame the question. At the same time, clearly this is not a kind of agency that is reliant on a notion of individual autonomy. Quite the contrary, the interesting question is now how the all the many single bees combine their various standpoints and local understandings into a collective decision and creation for which none can take special claim.
In constructing the comb and its intermediate cells, the bees respond to a dynamic network of haptic feedbacks: comb shape, cell size, cell number, coworker activity, and even the behavior of the young within the cells. In this way the bees inhabit both a sense of subjectivity and also act with an agency, but one very different in character from the singular and autonomous authorship with which human artistic creations are typically asserted. The subjectivity and the agency involved are inextricably individual and collective at the same time: the bee is a part of one whole (the hive) and also a whole self (a bee) in the creative life process of the colony. The phenomenon of intermediate cells and their construction, as one small example, highlight something far more complex than simple instinct is at work within such emergent processes.

For the purposes of scientific study or general reference we can localize one or another aspect of the hive, and in doing so call attention to one aspect subjectivity or agency. But in practice the hive is a myriad of simultaneous bee-causes distributed among the changing comb, the flux of pollen, the developing young, the shifting workers, and the position of the sun (to name only a few). Vinciane Despret’s articulation of subjectivity and agency speaks to the intimate dynamics of honeybees: “there is no way to touch without being touched, there is no way to determine who touches whom. Touching enacts a de-subjectification. One may now be an agent without being a subject.” And crucially, this is possible through a reframed notion of the agential. As Despret rightly notes, “agency is not independence: the issue is not about seeking independent existences but about inquiring about the multiple ways one given creature depends on other beings. To be an agent requires dependency upon many other beings, being autonomous means being pluri-hetero-nomous.” (2013)

From the Animal to the Creaturely; from Autonomy to Ecology

“Art is prefigured in the very process of living. A bird builds its nest and a beaver its dam when internal organic pressures cooperate with external materials so that the former are fulfilled and the latter are transformed in a satisfying culmination. We may hesitate to apply the word “art,” since we doubt the presence of directive intent. But all deliberation, all conscious intent, grows out of things once performed organically through the interplay of natural energies. Were it not, art would be built on quaking sands, nay, on unstable air. The distinguishing contribution of man is consciousness of the relations found in nature.”


And so: the comb. Two hundred years of further study (and more yet to come) just might provide the empirical and conceptual grounds for arguing that honey bees do show a combination of intentionality, self-consciousness, and spontaneity in the construction of their combs that even a Kantian might find consistent with the creation of art, and not merely “nature.” For this reason I suggest that in the context of bees, beavers, bowerbirds, or beetles and their activity of building that the concept of “creatures” should be adopted over simply “animals.” 7 Etymologically “animal” (Latin: *anima*) refers to the animated, the moving, the breathing, without acknowledging their role in the making of the world as co-workers with all other creatures, as well as with the conditions of becoming that we typically call the “inanimate” (that temporary state of found in water, minerals, and gases that are all on endless move and in the process of cycling into creaturely existence). “Creature,” (Late Latin: *creatura*) on the other hand, recognizes not only animals, but also plant, fungi, and bacteria as “things created” (indeed, in collaboration with the rest of the world inhabits), and also as a thing that is actively creative in its very act of being.

But the most important point is neither that bees are subjects and agents, nor that their combs are forms of art. The more integrative understanding of the causalities and dynamics emergent in phenomenal forms explored here also proposes a revised and much blurrier conception of human subjectivity and agential creativity. The uniquely human form of creativity that Kant insisted upon based on the premise of our casual autonomy must confront the newer understanding of the co-activating webs and ecologies through which all things come to be. We need to consider that the “spontaneity” of our free and human will may not in fact be “our own,” but rather

7 This “creaturely” framing complements an approach like Agamben’s (2004) in his critique of Heidegger’s diminished views of non-human animal experience. Creatureliness also offsets the exceptionalism of humans as unique, so-called *Homo faber*. It is a framing that focuses on animals as something we make art “with” rather than making art “for” (Fuller 2008) or “about” (Broglio 2011). Though these are equally important aspects, they involve a discussion with a significantly different center of analysis.
the consequence of a psychological magic trick we play, one in which we covet events that emerge, and then after-the-fact fashion them into a narrative that makes us the center stage within the hum of the phenomenal world’s activities and uncertainties. To the extent that art may be another form of nature, we must also recognize (as Dewey did) that the human is just another aspect of the creaturely. Our distinguishing contribution is not so much a “consciousness of the relations found in nature,” but an insatiable insistence to communicate to each other those models of nature that we can’t help but construct.

Langstroth’s observant drawings and Pratt’s careful experiments are not merely representations of the comb, they are yet other manifestations of it that are as malleable, real, and replete as the waxy reticulations found in the center of the buzzing hive itself. In this way we begin to consider not only the boundary conditions of art and nature, but perhaps also the dichotomizing of reality and representation that the Kantian view so powerfully delineates as well. Reversing the logic of “cutting nature at its joints,” we might endeavor to find where those joints reconnect in ways that reconstitute the wholeness, flexibility, and continuity through which meaning is not only made but also grows, not only forms but also flows (like honey in a comb).

REFERENCES


