

# AESTHETIC APPRECIATION OF EXPRESSIVE QUALITIES IN ANIMALS

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Animals commonly feature in our aesthetic judgments – from our interactions with companion animals to the attention given to iconic species and ‘charismatic’ megafauna, yet it is surprising how neglected they are in recent philosophical aesthetics. Mammals, birds, insects and marine life are part of our everyday and not so everyday lives, in the flesh and featuring as subjects in the visual arts, literature and even music. Beyond this we find animals used for their aesthetic appeal in animal welfare campaigns, conservation and more generally in the media. It is not an understatement to say that the polar bear has come to symbolize the catastrophic effects of climate change, serving as an appealing ‘poster child’ for motivating global action around the problem.

In this essay, I try to make some headway towards understanding the grounds of aesthetic appreciation of animals. Although Glenn Parsons has made important progress on this topic, arguing that aesthetic value of animals is largely down to their ‘functional beauty’, I believe that his approach disregards expressive qualities as a significant source of aesthetic value. After raising a key problem in Parsons’ approach, I carve out a place for an expressive account and reply to some worries related to anthropocentrism. My discussion is confined to wild animals, given that is the context of Parsons’ paper, but also because companion and domesticated animals

raise a range of issues that deserve consideration in their own right, including their relationship to questions in everyday aesthetics.<sup>1</sup>

## II. ANIMALS AND FUNCTIONAL BEAUTY

Parsons explores possible grounds for appreciating animals aesthetically, such as vitality, strangeness and exoticism, symbolic value, and formal properties. Although offering insight into why humans value animals, he worries that none of these grounds address what he calls the ‘immortality objection’: “These forms of appreciation fail to provide a robust response to the charge that aesthetically appreciating animals involves relating to them in a shallow, and hence morally inappropriate manner.”<sup>2</sup> Parsons claims that this is so even in cases where such forms of appreciation “are explicitly intended to serve as grounds for the preservation of wild animals.”<sup>3</sup>

To meet this objection, Parsons argues that “we should reconceive the beauty of animals, focusing upon the aesthetic quality of ‘looking fit for function.’”<sup>4</sup> He distinguishes between weaker and stronger versions of the functional beauty thesis and favours the stronger one, which claims that there is an “internal relationship between function and beauty”, where beauty “emerges out” of the function of the object.<sup>5</sup> To illustrate this, he gives the example of a cheetah, where “it is not merely that the shape of the cheetah’s body is attractive, and also happens to be functional, by allowing it to reach great speeds. Rather, the shape of its body is attractive, in part, because it is functional.”<sup>6</sup>

Parsons’ strategy is consistent with two important positions in environmental aesthetics. First, he wants to provide an account of aesthetic appreciation of nature which takes nature on its own terms. This is a laudable aim, and one that many philosophers support.<sup>7</sup> Second, his approach is consistent with scientific cognitivism as the kind of theory which can provide such an account. Parsons has developed his own version of cognitivism after Allen Carlson, which explains why there is such an intimate connection between aesthetic value and knowledge in his position on

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Irvin’s (2008) analysis of petting her cat.

<sup>2</sup> Parsons (2007), p.161.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.165.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.163.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pp.163-4.

<sup>7</sup> Hepburn (1993), Saito (1998), Brady (2003) and Parsons (2008).

animals.<sup>8</sup> But the functional thesis, as applied to animals, suffers from a similar type of criticism that has been raised against scientific cognitivism applied to nature more generally. Noël Carroll has argued that scientific cognitivism, as closely tied to knowledge, leaves out some common appreciative responses, in particular ‘being moved by nature’, that is, aesthetic appreciation involving emotions.<sup>9</sup> I would argue that the same is true with respect to leaving out our responses to expressive qualities. Although Parsons does not discuss expressive qualities at length, as far as I can tell, appreciation of expressive qualities falls into forms of appreciation which do not satisfy the immortality objection.

Now, I should point out that Parsons anticipates this type of objection: he says that he is only trying to articulate a form of appreciation that sidesteps the moral problem, rather than arguing that the functional thesis characterizes *all* forms of aesthetic appreciation of animals. But given Parsons has claimed that these other forms do not provide an adequate response to the problem, and the intimate connection between beauty and function he outlines, it’s not clear to me that he is not, in fact, excluding them on moral grounds. In other words, there is a strong indication, just as there is with scientific cognitivism, that aesthetic responses not tied to knowledge are shallow and may falsify nature.

I will not examine the functional thesis in more detail here, but rather I address what’s missing from Parsons’ approach. While beauty in the form of expressive qualities may, of course, be compatible with function, he does not adequately explore the range of other aesthetic qualities which contribute, justifiably, to animal beauty. In taking this line, Parsons privileges function/fitness above other grounds which may enrich aesthetic valuing. I believe that the main problem lies in putting too much weight on the immortality objection, which too swiftly leads to the view that other kinds of aesthetic valuing are problematic. Shallow responses will be a concern for any theory of aesthetic – indeed even artistic – appreciation. So, I suggest a different starting point which recognizes the importance of appreciating nature within the domain of the aesthetic, that is, where a wide range of qualities are significant in aesthetic appreciation, from the formal to the expressive, imaginative and, where contributing to aesthetic value or disvalue, the functional.

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<sup>8</sup> Parsons (2006) and Carlson (2000). Parsons and Carlson have also, together, linked a more developed, broader theory of functional beauty to ‘cognitively rich’ aesthetic appreciation of both artefacts and nature. See Parsons and Carlson (2008).

<sup>9</sup> Carroll (1993).

### III. EXPRESSIVE QUALITIES IN ANIMALS

Although there has been some discussion of emotional responses to nature, there has been less treatment of expressive qualities in environmental aesthetics, despite the fact that these qualities play a significant role in our aesthetic responses.<sup>10</sup> We easily speak of the ‘raging sea’ or a ‘peaceful scene’. Carroll writes: “We see the gnarled branches of barren trees and call them anguished because they call to mind the twisted appearance of human suffering.”<sup>11</sup> We judge a tiger to be mighty, a falcon’s flight exciting, the call of a loon melancholy or the song of an English robin joyous. In all of these cases we attribute expressive qualities to nature or use terms that relate to expressive qualities. Wildlife can be appealing through manifestations of inner autonomy, surprising us with a range of fascinating physiognomic and bodily expressions. With many mammals, though, aesthetic interest is connected to affinities with humans. Animals have eyes and facial expressions; they use familiar gestures and move in ways that we recognise.<sup>12</sup>

Imagine animals without their expressions, facial or otherwise – and try imagining humans in the same way. Aesthetic appreciation would then focus on other qualities, perhaps form, but that, I suggest, would give a much thinner account of the grounds of appreciation. Likewise, appreciating animals more narrowly in terms of their fitness or function may leave out the rich expressiveness we find in animals, whether in flight, in pursuit, attack, swimming, play or sleep. It could also be argued that many cases of appreciation involving function are less meaningful when not tied to expressive qualities. I do think Parsons recognises this, but the connection to function is not required for these qualities to be appropriate.

I would like to consider a couple of ways we might explain these kinds of qualities and then say something about how they fit into appropriate aesthetic responses. My aim is modest: to explore some possibilities and reflect on strengths and weaknesses. Some of my claims may extend to other natural things such as trees or people, but I will not make that argument here. I also limit my argument to expressive qualities in wild mammals and birds. In a longer paper, it would be interesting to look at a range of other creatures such as insects, fish, reptiles, and how having fewer affinities to humans affects aesthetic appreciation.

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<sup>10</sup> Carroll (1993, 2001), Budd (2002) and Brady (2003).

<sup>11</sup> Carroll (2001), p.176.

<sup>12</sup> Rolston (1987).

We might first ask if anything can be learned from expressive theories of art. One of the most pressing questions is just how emotion qualities (and other expressive terms not connected to emotional expression) can inhere in art forms, that is, how is it that music is *sad*? In the context of animals (or nature more generally), we ask: how is it that expressive qualities can be attributed to a natural, living thing that is not human or may not be sentient? For a start, ‘transmission type’ theories concerned with the communication of emotions from artist to audience can be set aside because appreciation of animals is not standardly a case of expression involving an artist and transmission of emotions through an artwork to an audience. Although domesticated animal breeds are clearly bred to meet both aesthetic and functional aims, and some animals have strong elements of ‘design’ through selective breeding, this approach is not relevant to wild animals.

A more promising line of thought appeals to similarity theories of expression in music, where expressive qualities are analyzed through resemblances between musical qualities and expressive qualities in humans. To hear music as having expressive qualities is to recognize in music a resemblance to human emotional behavior through speech, gestures and bodily movement.<sup>13</sup> A common claim is that expressive qualities are logically independent of acts of expression or mental states. The example often used is that a St Bernard’s face is sad-looking but the dog is not necessarily feeling sad. Bringing the theory into the context of animal appreciation, many expressive qualities will in fact relate to the inner states of animals. Nonetheless, I still want to maintain the distinction because there will be cases of expressive qualities where such a correspondence does not hold. A loon’s call may be described as melancholy without the bird actually being in that psychological state. With animals, we draw upon similarities between two natural forms of expression: a melancholy-sounding call and actual expressions of melancholy that we’re familiar with; we commonly use expressive qualities in humans as the reference point. There is recognition of expressive qualities linked to melancholy, and we can recognize the

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<sup>13</sup> DeBellis (2001).

same qualities in other natural forms.<sup>14</sup> In some cases, we make fairly customary associations or follow conventional ways of perceiving such qualities.

Also, we should not forget the relevance of context, which is significant for determining aesthetic qualities in environments. The loon's call, like the call of a curlew, is described as melancholy not only because it brings to mind ways melancholy people sound or behave, but also because of the places where it occurs. The loon and the curlew are not often encountered in flocks and are commonly found in habitats which themselves could be described as melancholy, e.g., remote lakes and moors. This is something we grasp from experience and attention to the environments which they inhabit.

Similarity theories are clearly helpful in cases when we can locate a resemblance between an expressive quality and some kind of behaviour or other point of likeness. This applies to a range of examples such as the robin's joyous song (resemblance to uplifting sounds, behaviour or music) or the majestic lion (with its ruffed mane, 'proud' expression, great roar). But what about cases where no resemblance seems to exist? There are of course real differences between humans and animals, and the nature of some resemblances will also be very hard to pin down. What if we're struck by something strange and wonderful that doesn't fit into our normal range of experience? In reply, we might say that new expressive qualities are just what underlie aesthetic experiences connected to wonder, fascination and the sublime. When we take aesthetic interest in something new, it will often be down to some highly expressive qualities not encountered before in some particular way. The sublime is commonly associated with expressive qualities, and eighteenth century writers used examples of various animals – from lions and tigers to mythical serpents and monsters. Here it is power and strength, for example, which overwhelm us in ways *beyond* comparison.

A more general solution is to give a causal account, where a resemblance relation doesn't have to feature in the experience *itself*. Instead, resemblance is understood as a causal property, where resemblances that exist – even small ones – cause, in the case of music, the listener to experience the music as expressive in that way. For

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<sup>14</sup> It may be that evolutionary theory tells us that some of these comparisons are made the other way around, that is, that our recognition of some expressions and our use of expressive terms originates from other sources, e.g., other species or natural phenomena (imagine a person 'storming around'). For some early discussion of this, see Darwin [1872] (1999). Howarth (1995) discusses similarities between human moods and nature's 'moods'.

appreciation of animals, there will be some causal property such that we experience an animal as having certain expressive qualities, e.g. thrilling or graceful. While this is a neat reply to the problem, and one that can be used to support similarity theories, it won't always give us what we want, which is an account of the nature of expressive qualities and how they're operating in aesthetic experience.<sup>15</sup>

However, in so far as similarity theories provide an explanation of many of our responses to expressive qualities, they provide a way to avoid the immorality objection at least in terms of connecting a quality found in one thing to a quality found in something else. The qualities mentioned do relate to non-aesthetic qualities; this kind of account converges with our interest in the aesthetic surface, and the appearance or look of things, pointing to how expressive qualities relate to perceptual qualities and making the reasonableness of such judgments easier to establish.

### *Expressive qualities and symbolic qualities*

Similarity theories do not explain all cases of expression because, also, some of our attributions are connected to associations, beliefs or cultural conventions operating in our appreciation. Symbolic qualities are often classified as a type of expressive quality because a specific form of expressiveness is drawn upon to symbolize some cultural characteristic. Holmes Rolston provides some interesting examples: "The British prefer the lion; the Russians the bear. States have chosen their animals; Colorado has selected the bighorn sheep – stately, powerful, nimble, free, loving the hills."<sup>16</sup> In the USA the bald eagle expresses "freedom, power, grace, lofty alertness."<sup>17</sup> But Parsons thinks that symbolic qualities in animals ground dubious and arbitrary forms of aesthetic appreciation, even in cases where symbolism has some moral benefit, e.g., the preservation of a species. He says:

Since eagles are no more free, one supposes, than are crows or sparrows, appreciating them as symbols of freedom has little, if anything, to do with eagles. Rather, it has to do with the particular constellation of associations prevalent in the human society at issue.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Matravers (2001).

<sup>16</sup> Rolston (1987), p.194.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Parsons (2007), p.161.

But this misses the point of why we take aesthetic interest in eagles. Bald eagles, like many other raptors, soar in open spaces, often reaching great heights on thermals. Besides being colourful and grand in size and shape relative to many other birds, their movement can reasonably be described as unconstrained and unconfined relative to the movements and habits of a crow, and especially a sparrow, which are more customarily seen in more everyday, less wild environments. Thus, the symbolic qualities we ascribe are connected to expressive qualities we admire.

It has been argued that for something to function symbolically, it has to be similar in structure to what it symbolises.<sup>19</sup> In this case, the eagle's symbolism is partly down to resemblance and partly down to cultural conventions and associations. There are obvious associations going on here between the quality of wildness and freedom as well as flight and freedom, so the connections made are not as arbitrary as Parsons makes them out to be. Some cases of symbolism based on expressive qualities may therefore be appropriate and reasonable because they are in fact connected to the character and lives of such animals.

We do make 'customary associations' that make sense and become part of legitimate knowledge rather than being arbitrary. Is this sort of symbolic representation a problem? I don't think so, if the symbolism bears some structural resemblance to the animal. So, in relation to a lion and its majesty, we might follow Holmes Rolston, who argues: "We elevate into symbolism something of the competence, the integrity, the character of the wild life."<sup>20</sup> This isn't to say, however, that every form of symbolism will meet the immorality objection, but I have shown that expressive qualities in the form of symbolic expression should not be, necessarily, problematic where connections exist to the lives of animals. There will be other forms of expressive qualities which require analysis in terms of irrelevance or inappropriateness, such as projective and metaphorical qualities, but I will have to leave them aside here.

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<sup>19</sup> Spackman (1998).

<sup>20</sup> Rolston (1987), p.194.



*Expressive qualities as literal expressions of feeling*

Now, an important difference between non-sentient nature and animals is that we can identify literal forms of emotional expression in animals because they have mental states while trees and rocks do not. So, this brings us to cases where expressive qualities are, in fact, the outward expression of mental states. Why care about such literal expressions, or include them as something of aesthetic interest? Most discussions of expression theory arise in the artistic context first rather than in the natural one, so literal expression is normally not of interest. Literal expression as we find it in humans or other animals simply doesn't get addressed as an aesthetic problem; presumably the view is that it is of interest to psychology or animal behavior but not to aesthetics.

As I see it, both human and nonhuman animal cases of literal expressions are aesthetically relevant. In the case of humans, faces are especially interesting from an expressive point of view, which explains one source of the appeal of portraits.<sup>21</sup> Now, this claim can be made regardless of whether or not our attributions of particular expressions are accurate (I have more to say about this below). What kinds of aesthetic reactions might be connected to such qualities? Or, why should we think that such qualities are aesthetic? My brief answer to this question is that expressive qualities are central to experiences that we have no difficulty in describing as aesthetic, where pleasure or displeasure is taken in the look, feel, or meaning of something. New work in both everyday and environmental aesthetics has shown how aesthetic objects can be extended beyond the arts, and with that, the role of a whole range of expressive qualities in appreciation.

One worry about this type of appreciation, though, stems from the Pathetic Fallacy. Parsons cites Collingwood's claim that "the bright eyes of a mouse or the fragile vitality of a flower are things that touch us to the heart, but they touch us with the love that life feels for life, not with a judgment of their aesthetic excellence."<sup>22</sup> Parsons argues quite rightly that potential confusion between moral and aesthetic feeling does not entail aesthetic judgments are impossible. I want to build on this point to suggest that the 'bright eyes of a mouse' can be appreciated as expressive in relevant ways, rather than merely evoking a sympathetic response.

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<sup>21</sup> Brady (1998).

<sup>22</sup> Collingwood (1963), p.39-40, quoted in Parsons (2007), p.154.

We can and do make aesthetic judgments which distinguish between dull, insipid or tired eyes and, say, appreciating the poise and narrowed eyes of a wild cat about to pounce. We may well find the attentive appearance of those eyes interesting for their expression of vitality and expectant look. It is also true that bright eyes in many species are known to be an indication of good health, and this may lead us to react with sympathetic pleasure at the expression of life in the mouse. Although it may be difficult to separate moral from aesthetic feeling in experience, in these cases it would seem that such a judgment makes perfect sense on aesthetic grounds. That is, we can make distinctions between different forms of expression based on perceiving different non-aesthetic qualities. Likewise, we may judge that a single tree growing in the midst of a vast plain is ‘lonely’. Now we might feel a sort of misplaced sympathy for this tree – trees aren’t really lonely of course – but it is reasonable to aesthetically judge the scene in this way, given the combination of non-aesthetic qualities: an empty landscape with a single object that in some ways resembles a human figure standing alone. It is possible we would make the same judgment if the object was a round rock instead but the shape of the tree is very suggestive of human form.

#### **IV. THE IMMORALITY OBJECTION AND ANTHROPOMORPHISM**

The immorality objection demands a closer look in order to work through some worries about overly humanizing aesthetic appreciation. Parsons says that the question we must answer to meet the objection is “whether it is in fact possible for the aesthetic value of an animal to bear some significant relation to the nature of the animal itself.”<sup>23</sup> What’s at the heart of worries about aesthetic appreciation of animals is anthropomorphism, the concern being that we don’t appreciate animals for the distinctive creatures they are and instead humanise them in ways that are shallow, or worse, false. But we don’t need a functional thesis to address this; rather what’s required is (1) a robust account of anthropomorphism; and (2) aesthetic judgment that works between the overly trivial and overly serious.<sup>24</sup>

In the account I have given of some forms of expression in nature, human expression and behaviour are the main bases for making sense of expressive qualities. This is a red flag to a bull where anthropomorphism is concerned. However, some interesting recent accounts of anthropomorphism try to emphasize the importance of

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<sup>23</sup> Parsons (2007), p.161.

<sup>24</sup> Hepburn (1993).

similarities rather than differences between humans and other mammalian species. This kind of argument stresses the affinities we feel for other mammals, and criticizes scientific accounts which so often argue that we cannot have knowledge of other minds and are in danger of making mistaken and distorting attributions of mental states. Mary Midgley, for instance, argues that in so far as we think our attributions of various feelings to humans are apt and at least in the right ballpark, we should have a fair degree of confidence when it comes to mammals. And, importantly, why should we be so concerned about mistaken readings of animals and not of humans? We do make mistakes in the human context, and will also make mistakes with animals, but she denies that the gap between the two forms of experiencing feelings in others are so vastly different.<sup>25</sup>

Her position enables us to see how we might formulate something like an ideal appreciator, where aesthetic judgments strike a balance between appreciating expressive qualities that are not anthropomorphic in the problematic sense. Midgley's chief criterion for ensuring appropriate judgments is close, careful attention, especially in cases of animals with whom we are less familiar. That this also holds for humans supports the robust account. People with less experience of children will have less honed skills in reading behavior in them. This sort of account of anthropomorphism – where attributing human qualities to animals is actually more one of being carefully aware of similarities and being watchful of projection and misattributions – might usefully ground aesthetic appreciation of expressive qualities such that the immorality objection becomes much less of a worry. Midgley says – not at all lightly – that novelists as well as ethnologists can successfully grasp animal feeling.

There are worse and better forms of anthropomorphism to be sure. Some symbolic qualities and their anthropomorphic expressions have real consequences for animals, and these kinds of cases will not meet the immorality objection. For example, some symbolic qualities may in some way be close to the animal's behaviour but impute mental qualities that are not really there – in ways that are bad for the animal, e.g., the 'wily' fox that is persecuted, or the fat Friesian cow browsing among the daisies on the butter tub which bears little resemblance to the lives of real butter producing cows.

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<sup>25</sup> Midgley (1995), p.332 and Rollins (2003).

Also, while we seek affinities between humans and animals for what we think are good reasons, sometimes this leads to awful consequences. James Serpell cites the problem of anthropomorphic selection: “selection in favour of physical and behavioural traits that facilitate the attribution of human mental states to non-humans.”<sup>26</sup> One of the sadder cases is the English bulldog, which has appealing aesthetic qualities of strength, power and stubbornness, becoming a symbol for the power of Britain in the face of its enemies in WWII. Karsh’s photograph of Winston Churchill draws on these qualities, using them to symbolically express his leadership. But the breed suffers from a disabling characteristic (difficulty breathing) which is a direct result of breeding to preserve particular anthropomorphic traits.<sup>27</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION

These cases, while posing challenges, should not ultimately deter us from valuing expressive qualities that are relevant and appropriate. We can understand a variety of aesthetic responses as appropriate by identifying types which distort or overly-humanise through problematic forms of anthropomorphism. While the aesthetic value of animals will be grounded in a range of qualities, including ‘looking fit for function’, other qualities do not necessarily undermine respect for animals. Engaging with expressive qualities can deepen appreciation and open up new avenues which are not shallow, but instead support respectful aesthetic valuing. Aesthetic experience is rich and varied, and I think we’re better off recognising that richness and working with it to strike a balance between aesthetic freedom and aesthetic constraint.

This kind of balance broadens the foundation of aesthetic valuing and it is also, I believe, relevant in our artistic interactions with animals. That is, while fitness and function no doubt motivate artistic representations of animals – consider the horse paintings of George Stubbs – expressive and symbolic qualities also come to the fore – here Gericault’s paintings of horses serve as a useful contrast. So: we can also learn something from art about how to locate a reasonable and proper place for expressive qualities. Our aesthetic-expressive interactions with animals can support a form of valuing wild nature that considers remarkable affinities and meeting points between human and non-human natures and cultures.

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<sup>26</sup> Serpell (2003), p.92.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.93.

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