Review of Gregory Currie. *Arts and Minds.*

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The reader will find in Currie’s book intelligent discussions of many puzzles debated by philosophers of art: the identity of artworks; the nature of genre, of interpretation, of imagination and aesthetic reasons; the relation of pretence to metacognition in children and non-human animals; the implications of unreliable narrators; or of imaginative resistance. There is also an informative encyclopedia article on cognitivist film theory, and one essay that is mainstream film criticism (focused on *The Searchers*). And there are, passim, pleasurable disquisitions on a number of philosophical nugget-puzzles: the relation of the A-series and B-series conceptions of time to different sorts of fiction and imagination; the grue-bleen problem; the etiological theory of functions; and the debate between “theory” and “simulation” theories of our knowledge of others.

Currie’s writing is solidly within the analytic tradition. He gestures amiably in the direction of Ricoeur, but his irritation with Ricoeur’s verbose vacuity bursts at the seams in several places, concluding that what looked like an “exciting thesis” collapses under scrutiny into “near tautology” (p. 90). He’s no kinder to Proust, though granting that it’s a character, not Proust as philosopher, who holds the absurd view that memory occasionally dips into a timeless coexistence of all of life’s events. Currie rightly reminds us that if we are seriously looking for a theory of time, both literature, however poetic, and even experience itself, however compelling and “cognitively impenetrable,” must yield to science. True, of course, but perhaps a little priggish as a comment on Proust,
especially since the character’s view might be correct in Proust’s fiction. Why couldn’t a fictional world have a fictional metaphysics if it makes for good literature? Also, Currie’s claim that no philosophy could change our experience of time may be too pessimistic. I can’t see stars as distant in time, but, as Parfit and perhaps some mystics have argued, I can see time as either a succession of moments or, on the contrary, a global oneness.

The most interesting essays concern metarepresentation. This is a hot issue because of its connections with three important topics: the diagnosis and explanation of autism; the analysis of the notion of rationality, and the question of the proper characterization of animal intelligence. In the hundred years since C. Lloyd Morgan formulated his “canon” there has been a running dispute about the extent to which we should posit “higher” mental functions in explaining animal behavior. The notion of meta-representation, involving indispensable reference to a level of representation taking perceptual representation as its object, promises a certain measure of clarification of that controversial idea of “higher” functions. Currie looks at this question with particular emphasis on simulations, pretense, and deception. In the notorious “broken wing” behavior of the plover, for example, are we dealing with genuine pretense, directed at the manipulation of a mental state of the predator? Or is the behavior of the plover best explained in terms of a selectionist hypothesis in which the plover requires no representation of any state of the predator? Currie’s proposal is that simulation theory explains most pretending in children and animals, without recourse to meta-representation. Like perception itself, simulation involves a non-conceptual component and a capacity for “seeing-as” requiring no higher-level awareness.
The last two chapters in “Mind” contain, respectively, some very speculative considerations about the evolutionary stages that made art possible, and a brief discussion of the relevance of evolution to art theory. The first addresses Steven Mithen’s hypothesis that at a certain stage of evolution separate cognitive modules merged into a “fluid intelligence” (p. 231). Unlike Peter Carruthers, who has adduced both empirical and theoretical support for the view that language is the bridge between cognitive modules, Currie proposes no specific role for language. Instead he argues that a capacity for “pretend play” is the ingredient missing from Mithen’s explanation. The last chapter discusses some applications to aesthetics of a common form of thought experiment that consists in asking: “If O had been different with respect to K properties, would it have merited a different aesthetic response?” (p. 245) One might quibble that the weight placed on this question is excessive. A respondent’s assessment of the conditional ‘if p then q’ is likely to be very unreliable in grounding a prediction about that respondent’s actual judgment assessment of q made in the light of p. But Currie uses this thought experiment in the service of subtle and perceptive remarks about legitimate and illegitimate ways in which evolutionary facts in the antecedent could lead to modifications of aesthetic judgments in the consequent. That, in turn, illuminates the leaky boundary between explanations and justifications of aesthetic judgments.

The book’s lack of unified theme is also its charm. There will be something here for everyone.