Response to Joseph Carroll

Stephen Davies

Professor Joseph Carroll dislikes the views I present in my book *The Artful Species*. He seems to think this entitles him to ridicule and caricature those views. I don't regard that style of approach as academically appropriate and won't respond in like tone. But I would like to correct some of the misrepresentations that Carroll presents.

Carroll describes me as willfully ignorant and as setting an unacceptably high standard of proof. He ignores passages such as the following: 'Of course we should avail ourselves of the latest scientific information on [the prehistory of our forebears] but this generally leaves answers to crucial questions under-determined. I am sympathetic to this difficulty. I don't mean to fault theories for being speculative in part, especially if they acknowledge the extent to which they go beyond the evidence. But where a range of very different proposals about the evolutionary significance of some behavior are in competition, with none clearly established as superior to all others, which is often the case where aesthetics and art are the topic, it will be more appropriate to reserve judgment than to opt for what we might like to be true' (43).

The fact is that, when it comes to claims about art's adaptive functions, there are many rival hypotheses. And despite Carroll's suggestion to the contrary, there is simply no consensus on many details of the lifestyles of our *Homo sapiens* and hominin forerunners. Anyone who reads the paleoarchaeological literature is most likely to come away impressed by how divided the experts are. Caution is not ignorance, willful or otherwise, and I cite in my book a great deal of the relevant academic literature.

Carroll maintains that, in my discussion of arts as adaptations I leave out "the most important and comprehensive theory, the idea that the arts create imaginative virtual words." Now, I don't think all the arts do this. Abstract forms of music, dance, and picturing, along with architecture, are not profitably described in such terms. Not all arts are narrative or depictive in character. Here, in brief, is what I say about those that are.
Our storytelling capacities are so extensive that they are likely to be adaptive. The same goes both for our ability to think imaginatively about the future and the past and for our capacity to understand the psychological life of others. These adaptations no doubt account for much of the appeal of the narrative arts. But so pervasive and important are these adaptive capacities, and so early is their appearance in individual development, it seems likely that the narrative arts enlist them rather than being responsible for them. So, I don’t neglect the idea that some of the arts create imaginative virtual worlds. My sin is rather that I don’t agree with Carroll that they must be adaptive on that score.

Carroll suggests I equivocate about whether the arts are adaptations or spandrels. In trying to prove this, he quotes a sentence fragment out of context – an academic misdemeanor for which I’d penalize my students. In fact, my view is clearly stated. I am not certain which view is better supported, but we need not settle that issue before being in a position to claim the arts as central to human nature.

It is explicit from the outset that my book asks about the explanatory power of biological accounts of aesthetic and art behaviors. When I say that some aesthetic behaviors have biological underpinnings it, should be plain that I mean that reference to these underpinnings achieves explanatory traction in some cases (and in others does not). But Carroll perversely interprets me as denying that a person needs a central nervous system in order to have any interests and responses, as if the issue were one about whether materialism or substance dualism were true. As the attitude Carroll expresses here makes clear, the game is about points scoring, no matter how cheap, rather than about fair-minded engagement with complex issues.