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THE PERVASIVENESS OF THE AESTHETIC IN ORDINARY EXPERIENCE

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I argue that the experiences of everyday life are replete with aesthetic character, though this fact has been largely neglected within contemporary aesthetics. As against Dewey's account of aesthetic experience, I suggest that the fact that many everyday experiences are simple, lacking in unity or closure, and characterized by limited or fragmented awareness does not disqualify them from aesthetic consideration. Aesthetic attention to the domain of everyday experience may provide for lives of greater satisfaction and contribute to our ability to pursue moral aims.

Contemporary analytic aesthetics has tended to be heavily dominated by discussions of the aesthetic as it relates to art. Most of the (relatively few) exceptions address the aesthetic in relation to nature.¹ There are, of course, very good reasons to attend to art and nature: artworks and natural environments can give rise to magnificent aesthetic experiences. However, unless art and nature are construed quite broadly, they play a comparatively small role in many of our everyday lives. This is especially true of the fine art that is encountered in museums, theatres and symphony halls, which tends to dominate aesthetic discussions of art.

If aesthetic experience really were restricted to encounters with art and nature, it would be the case that those of us who live and work in urban and suburban environments that are not very thoroughly art-infused live lives rather lacking in aesthetic texture. But I submit that this is false: our everyday lives have an aesthetic character that is thoroughgoing and available at every moment, should

we choose to attend to it. The relative neglect of the domain of the everyday within the discipline of aesthetics is unfortunate, for this domain offers the prospect of significant satisfactions that are different in character from those available from experiences of art and nature, and that do not require travel to art galleries, nature preserves or other special sites.

In section I, I give several examples that will inform the succeeding discussion. In section II, I address the most general and well-developed existing account of the possibility of aesthetic experience in everyday life, namely that offered by Dewey in *Art as Experience*. I discuss Dewey's distinction between *mere* experience, which necessarily lacks aesthetic character, and *an* experience, which may be aesthetic in nature. I draw out the criteria for an experience that are implicit in Dewey's account, and discuss the ways in which my examples fail to satisfy these criteria. In section III, I discuss Dewey's criteria related to conscious awareness, and argue that the limitations on conscious awareness of everyday experiences do not rule out their having an aesthetic character. In section IV, I discuss Dewey's structural criteria, namely unity, closure and complexity. I consider two different ways in which unity and closure may be understood, and argue that only the weaker senses, which are satisfied by my examples, are relevant to whether or not an experience is aesthetic. In relation to complexity, I suggest that while it may often contribute to the *positive* aesthetic character of an experience, it is not a necessary condition for an experience's having an aesthetic character at all.

In sections V and VI, I defend the importance of the present inquiry, suggesting that aesthetic attention to everyday experience is likely not only to result in more satisfying lives but also to contribute to our ability to sustain projects undertaken in the pursuit of moral and other values.

I. Aesthetic Considerations in Everyday Life

What kind of role do aesthetic considerations play in everyday life? At the most concrete level, which will primarily concern me in this discussion, particular moments and local experiences have an aesthetic quality about them. Being in the room you are in right now, with its particular visual features and sounds; sitting the way that you're sitting, perhaps crookedly in an uncomfortable chair; feeling the air currents on your skin; all of these things impart a texture to your experience which, I will argue, should be regarded as aesthetic.

To illustrate the discussion, let me describe a few things I have discovered I sometimes do. I run my tongue back and forth on the insides of my closed teeth, feeling the smoothness of their central surfaces and the roughness of the separations between them. In the middle of typing a sentence, when I'm not sure what to say next, I turn to look out the window next to my desk, and I rest my right cheek on my cool knuckles while I watch the ducks that are swimming around in the small patch of lake that has already thawed near the shore.² While walking down my dirt road, I study the various colours of the dirt and the tire tracks that weave along it, and I contemplate how nice it would be to have a suit made out of a fabric with these gradations, with a subtle pattern that varies in texture and doesn't run too straight. I drink tea out of a large mug that is roughly egg-shaped, and I clasp it with both hands to warm my palms. When I am petting my cat, I crouch over his body so that I can smell his fur, which at different places smells like trapped sunshine or roasted nuts, a bit like almonds but not quite. I scratch my head with a mechanical pencil that allows me to part my hair and reach exactly the right spot on my scalp. I move my wedding ring back and forth over the knuckle that offers it slight resistance, and I jiggle it around in my right palm to enjoy its weight before sliding it back on.

The experiences and behaviours that I have described vary somewhat in complexity. Some of them involve conscious enjoyment; some involve simply

producing a sensation without reflecting on it (and, before I turned my observant eye upon myself, without even noticing it); some have a narrative element, however minimal (as when I watch the ducks); some involve considerations that are obviously aesthetic, as when I imagine a suit made from a fabric inspired by my dirt road. But it seems to me that we should consider all of these experiences to have an aesthetic character. Each of them involves my imparting a certain shape or texture to a small part of my life, over and above any other goal I might be aiming to fulfil. My behaviours are designed to alter the nature of my experience at a given moment, simply to make the experience itself more satisfying.

But are these aspects of my experiences sufficient to impart an aesthetic character to them? The possibility that there can be aesthetic experiences of things other than artworks, or that there can be aesthetic experiences that are not characterized by exaltation, has sometimes been excluded by definition.³ Rather than entering into a terminological debate over the reasonableness of using 'aesthetic' in such an exclusive way, which would take me too far from the topic that primarily concerns me here, I will engage a more sympathetic interlocutor who would nonetheless hold that the experiences I have described cannot be aesthetic. This will allow me to make more direct headway on the question whether, and on what grounds, a wide variety of everyday experiences should be seen as having an aesthetic character.

The most extensive and detailed account of the domain that concerns me here was put forward by Dewey in *Art as Experience*. Dewey argues that the aesthetic aspects of art and those of everyday life lie on a continuum. However, as we will see, Dewey offers a set of criteria for aesthetic experience that exclude most or all of the examples introduced above. Dewey does not argue for these criteria or give a clear account of why he favours them; his primary approach is to offer examples of experiences that satisfy the criteria and experiences that do not, in the

expectation that the reader will agree that the former are aesthetic while the latter cannot be. Dewey's discussion is of interest in part because it reflects a number of common and reasonable intuitions about the boundaries of the aesthetic. I will isolate the particular criteria that emerge from Dewey's account and identify the most plausible rationale for regarding each as a necessary condition for aesthetic experience. I will then argue that the criteria, as they ought to be understood, do not rule out everyday experiences like those I have described; and, indeed, that there are strong reasons to include such experiences within the realm of the aesthetic.⁴

II. Dewey and the Notion of an Experience

Dewey holds that the capacity for aesthetic experiences of art arises out of basic mechanisms, present even in animals, that are employed throughout everyday life. We are in a continual process, Dewey notes, of falling out of sync with our environments—whenever we are hungry, cold, tired, afraid, or in pain—and regaining our sense of union and harmony. We continually detect signs of dissatisfaction or discomfort within ourselves and attempt to alleviate that discomfort. When we achieve 'an adjustment of our whole being to the conditions of existence,' we experience 'a fulfillment that reaches to the depths of our being'.⁵ Aesthetic experience is an outgrowth of processes of perception, activity and emotion that allow for such fulfillment.

While defending the continuity of aesthetic and everyday experience, Dewey is also concerned to acknowledge the distinctness of the aesthetic, and to demarcate it from that out of which it emerges. In this spirit, he introduces the concepts of *mere experience* and *an experience*, suggesting that only when one has *an* experience can one's experience have a truly aesthetic quality.

What, then, makes for the distinction between mere experience and an experience? First, there are the related issues of *unity* and *closure*. Mere experience, Dewey notes, is continuous, often 'inchoate', and characterized by 'distraction and dispersion' (p. 35). In mere experience, 'we are not concerned with the connection of one incident with what went before and what comes after. ... Things happen, but they are neither definitely included nor decisively excluded; we drift' (p. 40). Because we are drifting, and failing to recognize the relationships among the various elements of what we encounter, in mere experience there is no unifying element, and no possibility of genuine closure. *An* experience, on the other hand, occurs 'when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment', when 'its close is a consummation and not a cessation' (p. 35). We can speak of fulfillment and consummation here because *an* experience 'ceases only when the energies active in it have done their proper work' (p. 41); they do not simply dissipate. An experience 'has a unity ... constituted by a single *quality* that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts' (p. 37). And this unity seems to be constituted in part by the fact that the consummation is 'anticipated throughout [the experience] and is recurrently savored with special intensity' (p. 55). An experience of a symphony or a Victorian novel is very likely to be characterized by unity and closure as Dewey describes them. It seems that the description might also apply to an intense sexual experience, or to the experience of running a race or climbing a mountain.

To be susceptible of having aesthetic qualities, then, one's experience must have clear boundaries and a certain kind of structure: there must be a degree of complexity (since there is a perception of relationships among the elements of the experience), an overarching unity (which may be supplied, at least in part, by the quality of the experiencer's attention), and a sense of culmination or building toward a satisfying close that is anticipated in advance.

Regarding most of my examples, it seems implausible to suggest that a special unifying quality is present, that there is some kind of culmination or that energies have run their proper course. If there is anything that gives these examples a sense of closure, it is that my attention turns away from the moment of experience and moves on to something else. But sometimes the attention is only partially present in such cases; and very often it simply drifts away, rather than being consciously redirected in recognition that a circumscribed moment of experience has come to a close. Clearly, this is mere cessation rather than consummation in Dewey's terms.

Another aspect of the distinction between mere experience and an experience involves the relationship between *doing* and *undergoing*. 'A man does something; he lifts, let us say, a stone. In consequence he undergoes, suffers, something: the weight, strain, texture of the surface of the thing lifted. The properties thus undergone determine further doing' (p. 44). Dewey goes on to say, 'An experience has pattern and structure, because it is not just doing and undergoing in alternation, but consists of them in relationship. ... The action and its consequence must be *joined in perception*. This relationship is what gives meaning; to grasp it is the objective of all intelligence' (p. 44; emphasis added). Further, he says, 'Experience is limited by all the causes which interfere with perception of the relations between undergoing and doing' (p. 44). In order to be having an experience, then, one must *perceive* the relationships between doing and undergoing.⁶ Clearly, the kind of perception involved is not merely sensory; it is a conscious, cognitive recognition of connections among elements. This sort of recognition seems to require that one's attention be rather fully directed toward what one is experiencing. Someone who is daydreaming or otherwise distracted while lifting the stone, then, cannot be having an experience (or, at least, not an experience of lifting the stone).

My examples satisfy some aspects of this requirement, but not others. In each of the examples, there clearly are relations, however simple, between doing and undergoing. I undergo an experience, such as feeling that my hands are cold, and take action in response, warming my hands by caressing the sides of my mug. I adjust what I am doing in response to sensations that indicate the mug is too hot to grasp for any extended period; and I put the mug down once my sensations suggest that my hands have been sufficiently warmed. This means that there is, at least, the reciprocal relationship that Dewey requires: insofar as I exert control over my sensory experience, undergoing and doing are intertwined, and often in quite a sophisticated way, calling on knowledge derived from past experience. I may make continual motor adjustments until I achieve a sensory state that I find to be suitable or fitting.

However, it is far from clear that this satisfies Dewey's further requirement that doing and undergoing be joined in perception: very often, the action of scratching my scalp or toying with my ring is one of which I am hardly conscious. In addition, as we have already noted, it seems that a certain quality of attention is required in order to give experience a sense of consummation or closure, and that this may be absent in some or most of my examples even when I am aware of what is happening: I do not have an expectation about the consummatory moment of watching the ducks that could lend the experience a unifying quality. Thus, it appears unlikely that what is happening in the examples is sufficient to create 'an experience' in Dewey's sense. Should we, then, accept his verdict that aesthetic character must be absent?

III. Conscious Experience, Attention and the Aesthetic

It must be admitted that the reciprocal sensing and adjusting to alter the quality of perceptual experience is often done automatically, even unconsciously. This is what

happens when I scratch an itch, absently run my tongue over my teeth, and so on. Indeed, for most of us who are not Zen masters, much of our experience is like this: we receive and respond to all sorts of sensory information, but without having much conscious awareness of this process. Dewey seems prepared to dismiss this sort of thing as non-aesthetic (or, as he would say, 'anesthetic') (p. 40). Indeed, it seems plausible to deny that experience can have an aesthetic character (or, perhaps, that it can be *experience* at all) if it is completely unconscious. If there were really nothing that it's like for me to swing my foot up and down while engrossed in a novel, how could the foot swinging make any aesthetic contribution to my experience? Given that we are minimally conscious, if at all, of so many aspects of what we experience in everyday life, can aesthetic considerations be pervasively relevant to daily experience?

There are three things to be said in response to this concern. First, even if it is sometimes true that sensing and adjusting is done automatically or unconsciously, it is not always the case. When, after a long bout of reading, I straighten my frame and enjoy a delicious sensation of stretching, this may be very consciously appreciated and adjusted so as to work out subtle areas of tension that have built up. The reciprocal relation of doing and undergoing is quite conscious: 'the action and its consequence' are 'joined in perception' (p. 44). And, of course, there is the possibility of bringing many things that are currently unconsciously undergone into consciousness, something that is advocated by many forms of meditative practice: it is possible for me to attend to the feeling of my fingers on the keyboard as I type, although I usually fail to do so. Attending to one's sensory experience is a form of mental discipline that can be learned, and can perhaps become as natural as ignoring that experience. Many aspects of our everyday experience, then, are already conscious in the way that Dewey requires; and others can be brought to consciousness.

The first response focuses on the possibility of developing conscious awareness of one's sensory experience. A second response suggests that the development of such awareness may not be necessary for one's sensory experience to be aesthetically relevant. In psychological studies of unconscious cognition, such as the cocktail party effect, subjects listen to two streams of spoken language, one through each side of a pair of headphones, but are instructed to attend to only one. Though the subjects report having little or no awareness of what was said on the side they were not attending to, statistical evidence shows that they use the information presented on the ignored side to disambiguate words and phrases on the side they are actively listening to.⁷ This form of cognitive processing has clear aesthetic implications: if unconscious experience can affect our understanding of utterance meanings, it can contribute to the aesthetic character of what is consciously experienced (since, as the case of literature informs us, meaning can be highly aesthetically relevant).

Similar effects may be quite common in everyday life: information which we are not aware of processing contributes to the tenor of our experience, and even to the nature of our activity, in the reciprocal relationship of doing and undergoing. I see no reason to deny that this may be an aesthetic phenomenon, since it seems that something similar may be true in an experience of art: even when we are attending quite carefully, the complexity of the experience may be such that some elements will fail to be consciously noticed, but will still contribute to the overall aesthetic effect. In film, the fact that the camera is zooming in very slowly on the face of a character may contribute strongly to a sense of heightened tension or emotional intimacy, even for an engrossed viewer who fails utterly to register the change in framing. Indeed, conscious awareness of the manipulation may undermine the effect. The fact that something does not emerge into explicit consciousness does not rule out its relevance to the aesthetic character of

experience. As long as I am conscious of some aspects of my experience, then, the fact that I am unaware of other aspects does not rule out the possibility that the conscious experience has an aesthetic character to which the unconscious aspects contribute. Even the unconscious elements of experience, then, can be aesthetically relevant, though this might not lead us to conclude that they have an aesthetic character of their own.

I have suggested that unconscious elements of experience can be brought to consciousness, and that they may be aesthetically relevant even while they remain unconscious. But there is also the matter of those aspects of experience that remain in the twilight of consciousness: one is vaguely aware of them, but they are not vividly present within one's experience. This lack of vividness might be thought to disqualify the experience from having an aesthetic character. I submit, though, that there is no such disqualifying effect; indeed, the position of an aspect of experience on the spectrum between full attention and vague awareness may be a part of the experience's aesthetic character. The very fact of my vague awareness of a tantalizing smell in my environment may be part of the aesthetic texture of this moment; and that aesthetic texture would be quite different if I were fully and vividly aware of the smell. Just as artworks that are restrained in palette and form, or that contain vague and undefined elements, are not thereby precluded from having an aesthetic character—even, in some instances, a positive aesthetic character—neither the vividness of an experience as a whole, nor the vividness of particular elements of the experience, is necessary for an experience to have an aesthetic character.

I have argued that we should not conclude, from the fact that conscious awareness of everyday experiences is often limited, that these experiences are necessarily outside the domain of the aesthetic. In the following section, I consider Dewey's specific claims about the structure of an experience, and ask whether such

structural elements as complexity, unity and closure are genuinely required for experience to have an aesthetic character.

IV. Structure and the Aesthetic: Unity, Closure and Complexity

In Dewey's discussion of the distinction between mere experience and an experience, it is clear that unity and closure are required for the latter. Also implicit is an expectation that an experience will exhibit some degree of complexity: for instance, elements must be perceived in relation to one another. My examples, along with many other everyday experiences, may seem to be lacking in these qualities. What should we conclude from this?

Two distinct notions of closure, and relatedly, of unity, might be invoked in aesthetic contexts. The weak notion of closure is that of boundedness: an entity with clear limits separating it from other entities is, in this sense, closed. This sense of closure comes to mind when Dewey mentions, of mere experience, that its elements 'are neither definitely included nor decisively excluded' (p. 40). This sense of closure generates a related sense of unity: the ten provinces and three territories of Canada, despite their cultural, geographic and linguistic diversity, are united, in this weak sense, by virtue of the fact that they fall within a set of clearly defined boundaries that separate them from other geopolitical entities.

To be closed in the strong sense, an entity must satisfy an additional criterion: it must not only be bounded but also, as Dewey describes, exhibit development and culmination of the material within those boundaries. There is also a strong sense of unity: it is the sense in which elements not only must be bound together within clearly defined limits but also must exhibit qualitative similarities. It is clear that Dewey thinks closure and unity in the strong senses are required for something to count as an experience.

One reason for requiring closure and unity, in aesthetic contexts, would be to

secure the potential objectivity of aesthetic judgments. If one is to make aesthetic judgments that have a claim to correctness and shareability, it seems that those judgments must be directed at a clearly delimited entity. It has also frequently been observed that which aesthetic qualities an entity will appear to have depends on the way in which that entity is framed; to change the boundaries around a natural scene, for instance, may change the aesthetic qualities that both the scene as a whole and particular items within it are seen to have. For the purposes of framing and securing the objectivity of aesthetic judgment, only closure and unity in the first, weaker senses are required. Even if the elements within some boundary are quite diverse, exhibiting no unifying quality and no development toward a moment of consummation, one can aesthetically evaluate the bounded entity as a whole: it might appear to be fragmented, discordant or chaotic.

When Dewey invokes closure and unity in the stronger senses, I believe he must be seen as doing something more than simply securing the preconditions for an aesthetic characterization of experience. For closure and unity in the stronger senses are, themselves, aesthetic qualities that an entity clearly subject to aesthetic assessment may have or lack. Some films build to a moment of consummation like that described by Dewey; others may resist any kind of resolution. One theatrical piece might be stylistically unified, with a single, clear plot into which all elements are obviously integrated; another might consist of a series of vignettes with little or no stylistic or thematic cohesiveness. Unity and closure, in the stronger senses, have often been thought necessary for an entity to warrant positive aesthetic evaluation, and they are qualities to which many artists aspire in their work. Thus, entities that exhibit these qualities are perhaps more likely to seem in candidacy for aesthetic consideration even by those suspicious of Dewey's project. However, this does nothing to show that being closed and unified in these senses is necessary for having an aesthetic character at all, or even for having a positive aesthetic

character. Many modern and contemporary artworks, such as the paintings of Agnes Martin and some of the compositions of John Cage, have nothing of narrativity or culmination; they are simply a parade of elements, whether regular or random, that end when they end. But this doesn't prevent us from discussing them in aesthetic terms: indeed, the fact that they resist narrativity and culmination is part of what imbues them with the particular aesthetic qualities they have, and on some views part of what makes them great works. Similarly, an experience may have a particular aesthetic character partly by virtue of the fact that it is not unified or closed in the stronger senses. Even if it were true that the absence of closure or unity made it less likely that an experience would receive a positive aesthetic evaluation, this does not show that these qualities are required for the experience to have an aesthetic character at all; to claim otherwise is to confuse a constitutive criterion with an evaluative criterion.

For these reasons, we should reject Dewey's claim that closure or unity in the stronger sense is necessary for an experience to have an aesthetic character. What about closure and unity in the weaker senses, which my examples might be thought to lack? A first response is to note that it may be possible to supply a minimal degree of closure (and the corresponding unity) in an ad hoc way, simply by virtue of the fact that a moment of experience stands out for the experiencer. The moments in my examples, however seemingly insignificant, stood out from the flow of my experience to such a degree that I felt inclined to isolate and describe them. I have, then, implicitly bounded them, and there is no obvious reason why further boundedness is required to secure any degree of closure that might reasonably be required to regard an experience as aesthetic.

Ultimately, though, we should reject closure and unity even in the weak senses as conditions for an experience to count as aesthetic. Closure and unity do have an important role to play in aesthetic contexts: they are necessary to secure

the objectivity and shareability of aesthetic judgments, whether about artworks or about everyday experiences. My aim here, though, is not to secure the objectivity of aesthetic judgments; it is to establish that the experience of everyday moments may have an aesthetic character. The fact that this character may be continually in flux does nothing to show that it is absent.

To see this point, consider the experience of a piece of music one has never heard before. It would be prudent to withhold aesthetic judgment about the piece, and even about particular elements of it, until one has heard it through; a particular passage might seem soothing and peaceful during an initial listen, but come to seem foreboding once its relation to subsequent passages is known. However, the piece and its particular passages are experienced as having an aesthetic character even as they unfold for the first time. One can, then, have an aesthetic experience even when that experience does not directly track the aesthetic features that the object of experience will eventually be judged to have. Neither a piece of music nor the experience of it begins to have a felt aesthetic quality only when it has ended.

For similar reasons, it is unclear that any fixed boundary around an experience is required for that experience to have an aesthetic character. Even if the frame is continually shifting, as new relationships and salencies attract the attention of the perceptual system, this means only that the aesthetic character of the experience will shift accordingly; not, again, that such character will be absent.

In addition to the structural requirements related to unity and closure, Dewey's account yields an implicit requirement related to complexity, as he requires that relationships between doing and undergoing be joined in perception. Another worry, then, concerns the fact that the examples I have offered seem too simple for aesthetic considerations to be relevant. I am petting the cat, I lower my face to his fur and enjoy the smell, period. End of story. Even if we do not seek narrative culmination, or closure, we might be inclined to demand that an experience be more

complex than this for aesthetic concepts to apply to it. Many discussions of the aesthetic relevance of smell or taste have focused on the fact that it is possible to adopt an attitude of connoisseurship or sophistication with respect to them: to learn to draw fine olfactory or gustatory distinctions, to incorporate elements of smell or taste in complex structures, and so forth.⁸ In my encounter with the cat, little of this is happening. I do not go on to position the cat's smell in a careful taxonomy of scents encountered in my daily experience, or (thankfully, one might say) to create a fashionable new scent, *Eau de chat*, in which I capture a selection of the scents the cat emits and place them in some relation to one another.

But surely the actual placement of elements within a complex structure is not necessary for the elements to be considered aesthetically. A monochrome painting has aesthetic impact even though it is about as simple as a painting can be, and this is not *only* because of the way in which it shocks by eschewing the project of showing patent relations of colours and forms that preoccupied its historical predecessors. Simplicity and complexity lie on an aesthetically relevant spectrum of properties; simplicity can itself be an aesthetic quality, and can contribute to the aesthetic merit of an artwork. The fact that an experience is simple, then, cannot disqualify it from having an aesthetic character.

Moreover, the appearance of simplicity may be a figment of the way I have described the examples. When I lower my face into my cat's fur, my experience has subtle tactile, olfactory, auditory, visual and emotional components. If I am alive to all these elements of the experience, what I grasp may in fact be quite complex. In consequence, we should reject the suggestion that experiences of the sort I have described fail a complexity test that must be passed if something is to count as an object of aesthetic attention.

V. The Importance of Aesthetic Attention to the Everyday

I have argued at some length that certain little things, which we often hardly notice and may be inclined to dismiss as trivial, are worthy of the application of aesthetic concepts. What is the point of this? Why is it important to recognize the pervasive presence of aesthetic considerations in everyday life? There are a number of answers to this. Some of them are evident in the writings of Richard Shusterman. The first has to do, quite simply, with self-knowledge.⁹ Insofar as we think that self-knowledge is worth striving for, philosophically and personally, we should attend to the minor moments of experience that supply much of the texture of our lives. And we should acknowledge that most of life is, in fact, made up of minor moments.

Additional reasons for exploring this domain are both hedonic and moral. We deserve better than to have our ordinary pleasures, the ones which animate our day-to-day existence, dismissed as insignificant, and our ability to appreciate them accordingly diminished. As Shusterman suggests in relationship to popular art forms, in dismissing them '[w]e are made to disdain the things which give us pleasure and to feel ashamed of the pleasure they give', which amounts to an unwarranted 'ascetic renunciation'.¹⁰ The same applies to everyday life: insofar as we are led to ignore it or regard it as unworthy of attention, we deprive ourselves of a source of gratification. If we attend to the aesthetic aspects of everyday experience, our lives can come to seem more satisfying to us, even more profound. And, of course, through attention we may learn to build upon and enhance the aesthetic character of experience.

There are also moral reasons for attending to the aesthetic aspects of daily experience. At first glance, this might seem a bit mysterious: Michael Slote has suggested that 'our ordinary thinking about morality assigns no positive value to the well-being or happiness of the moral agent of the sort it clearly assigns to the well-being or happiness of *everyone other than the agent*'.¹¹ Why, then, should my

attention to the aesthetic aspects of my own experience have any moral relevance? Is this not simply a matter of my pursuing the good for myself?

The aesthetic aspects of everyday life take on obvious moral relevance insofar as they affect my tendency to do or pursue what is morally good. I see at least two ways in which this is likely to happen. First of all, it seems plausible to suggest, based on the patterns of competition and consumption that are everywhere evident in industrialized societies, that many people are fundamentally dissatisfied with their lives, and are perpetually seeking after some outside stimulus, often a consumer product, to complete them.¹² But the acquisition of this product does not solve the problem; it provides, at best, a short-lived and partial pleasure, and then raises the bar even higher for future stimuli.¹³ This continually escalating pursuit of material things has a number of pernicious effects. Notably, it leads to exhaustion of natural resources and harm to the environment, as we shelve or throw away goods that are still in working order and seek after ever bigger and shinier and faster symbols of status. It also leads to the hoarding of resources: since we always feel that we need more and better to be satisfied, we never feel that we have more than we need; thus we never arrive at a level at which we feel confident that we can afford to give something away to help meet the basic needs of others.

Peter Singer's prescription is that we abandon the quest for satisfactions derived from material goods and apply our energy to helping others instead.¹⁴ This, he says, is much more likely to eventuate in a true, enduring satisfaction that seems worthwhile even upon reflection. But it seems that something may be needed as a precursor here, at least for many people. Dewey and Joseph Kupfer, among others, have suggested that the aesthetic is a necessary component of a rewarding and satisfying life; neglecting it may be counterproductive, simply reproducing the dissatisfaction that gives rise to the misguided escalation of consumption and acquisitiveness.¹⁵ Perhaps what is needed is attention to the aesthetic elements

already present in daily experience, to the rich and varied—and, if we attend carefully, complex and multisensory—satisfactions to be had in moments that do not involve Humvees or iPods or designer jeans. If we can learn to discover and appreciate the aesthetic character of experiences that are already available to us, perhaps we will be less inclined to think that we must acquire new goods that make different experiences available. Perhaps we can discover that we already have enough, or even more than we need, to be satisfied; and this might make room for giving something—time, energy, or money—away.

VI. Harnessing the Aesthetic in Service of the Moral

One way in which the aesthetic character of everyday life has moral significance, then, is that attending to this aesthetic character may reduce our tendency to cause harm in attempts to satisfy our needs. There is also a more straightforward way in which aesthetic considerations may be relevant to ethical performance, and it is to this that I turn in the present section.

Morality is often thought of as a matter of sacrifice. To satisfy negative duties that enjoin us against harming others is a matter of giving up opportunities to do as we please. Becoming a moral vegetarian, in recognition of the fact that animals are often caused great suffering in industrial meat production, involves renouncing foods that may have given one great pleasure, as well as a convenient source of nutrition. To satisfy positive duties that require us to help others involves giving up time, money or other resources we might have used to secure our own benefit. The hours one spends doing volunteer work are hours that cannot be spent reading novels in the hammock or taking bubble baths, and the money one sends to Oxfam is money that cannot be spent on new rims for the sports car or left to accrue interest in the retirement account.

It is evident, I think, that this element of sacrifice plays a significant role in inhibiting moral activity. As a moral vegetarian myself, I have had many conversations with people who say that they are aware of the relevant facts and recognize the moral force of the arguments in favour of vegetarianism, but simply can't bring themselves to comply. Vegetarianism is construed as a simple case of sacrifice, of adopting a certain kind of asceticism which may seem both aesthetically distasteful and motivationally unsustainable.

Attention to the aesthetic character of everyday experience may substantially alleviate this problem. If we become more fully and explicitly conscious of how aesthetic considerations structure our choices, we are in a position to find ways to satisfy our aesthetic preferences while realizing our moral values more fully. Rather than viewing vegetarianism as a matter of giving things up, we can view it as a matter of finding different ways to indulge the tastes that were once satisfied by meat consumption. Rather than viewing volunteerism as a matter of giving up time one would have spent on pleasurable pursuits, we can view it as a matter of contributing in a way that satisfies our desires regarding the texture of our lives, whether this be through learning carpentry on a Habitat for Humanity project or cooking for the local homeless shelter. The ultimate moral viability of such an approach depends, of course, on the assumption that there are a variety of options for satisfying our moral duties, such that we can blamelessly select the one that is most suitable to our particular complex of preferences and tendencies. But even on a scheme that suggests there is often only one morally *optimal* alternative, it may still be possible to effect moral improvement by pursuing a sub-optimal alternative that satisfies one's aesthetic preferences. This is surely better than refraining from any attempt at moral improvement, as might otherwise happen.

The motivational effect under discussion is not, of course, exclusive to moral projects. Aesthetic considerations can be harnessed in support of any kind of

project, moral or non-moral: taking care of one's health, becoming more knowledgeable about world history, improving one's parenting skills, and so forth. It is often possible to satisfy a variety of interests, aesthetic and otherwise, through a particular pattern of action. Because attending to our aesthetic preferences gives our lives a more satisfying texture, we are more likely to persist in any project that is undertaken with this dimension of experience in mind. Inquiry into the aesthetic character of everyday experience, then, holds the promise both of greater satisfaction and of more effective moral agency.

VII. Conclusion

I have argued that everyday experiences have an aesthetic character that is worthy of philosophical inquiry, despite the fact that these experiences may be simple, may lack unity or closure, and may contain elements of which we are less than fully conscious. Attending to this domain may enhance our self-knowledge, increase the availability of certain kinds of aesthetic satisfaction, and, in particular, provide motivational support for projects undertaken in pursuit of moral and other values. If we harness aesthetic considerations in the service of the moral, rather than simply ignoring the role of the aesthetic in motivating action or seeing morally charged situations in terms of bald conflict between what we want and what we should do, it seems very likely that this will enhance our willingness and ability to fulfil our moral duties and pursue moral goals. And surely we want to celebrate and embrace both aesthetic and moral value: it would be most unfortunate if we had to choose between goodness and aesthetic satisfaction, with no possibility of obtaining both.

With this discussion, I hope to have convinced you that this is not the situation that confronts us: the everyday moments of our lives are deeply and essentially aesthetic, and they can afford aesthetic satisfactions that promote moral activity. The bulk of analytic aesthetics would tend to send us to the art gallery or

the wilderness in pursuit of aesthetic satisfaction. While such trips are undoubtedly worthwhile, the aesthetic richness of one's life need not depend on them.¹⁶

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¹ During the calendar years 2001 to 2006, for instance, of approximately 270 articles published in the two major English-language print journals of aesthetics, the *British Journal of Aesthetics* and the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 95% focused on art, 3% focused on nature, and 5 articles, or under 2%, focused on anything else. I include in the 'art' category those articles that discuss such general concepts as aesthetic value and aesthetic experience, when their primary examples are of artworks. Discussions of the role of the aesthetic in everyday life are not entirely unheard of: in a recent article in this Journal ('In Search of the Aesthetic', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 47 [2007], pp. 232-250), for instance, Roger Scruton discusses at length the example of a carpenter choosing how to fit a door, and also mentions such activities as 'lay[ing] the table for guests', 'dress[ing] for a party or a dance', and 'arrang[ing] the objects on your desk' (p. 240). Scruton notes, however, that quotidian aesthetics is 'a much-neglected topic' (p. 240).

² The attentive reader may have guessed, correctly, that this passage was written before I relocated to Oklahoma (from Canada).

³ See, for example, Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1913).

⁴ My principal aim is not to contribute to the exegesis of Dewey's text, but to use Dewey's discussion to shed light on the general question whether everyday experiences should be regarded as aesthetic. My treatment will be limited to those aspects of Dewey's account that are of greatest interest for this purpose.

⁵ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee, 1934), p. 17.

⁶ As is apparent from this description, Dewey holds that aesthetic experience of art involves active response to the artwork, not merely passive reception.

⁷ D. G. MacKay, 'Aspects of the Theory of Comprehension, Memory and Attention', *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, vol. 25 (1973), pp. 22-40.

⁸ See, for instance, Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. P., 1999), and Emily Brady, 'Sniffing and Savoring: The Aesthetics of Smells and Tastes', in Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith (eds.), *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2005), pp. 177-193.

⁹ Richard Shusterman, 'Somaesthetics and the Body/Media Issue', *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. P., 2000), pp. 137-153, at p. 139.

¹⁰ Richard Shusterman, 'Form and Funk', *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), pp. 169-200, at p. 170.

¹¹ Michael Slote, 'Some Advantages of Virtue Ethics', in Owen Flanagan and Amélie O. Rorty (eds.), *Identity, Character and Morality: Essays in Moral Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), p. 441. Emphasis in original.

¹² Peter Singer's *How Are We to Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest* (Amherst, NJ: Prometheus Books, 1995) is animated by a compelling discussion of this problem.

¹³ In *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (New York: Penguin, 2005), the economist Richard Layard presents a diverse array of evidence for this claim.

¹⁴ Singer, *How Are We to Live?*

¹⁵ Dewey speaks of 'esthetic perceptions that are necessary ingredients of happiness' (*Art as Experience*, p. 10), while Joseph Kupfer notes, 'There is a felt but largely unarticulated aesthetic deprivation which underlies more and more of our daily dissatisfaction' (*Experience as Art: Aesthetics in Everyday Life* [Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1983], p. 2).

¹⁶ I am grateful to Jim Hamilton, Tom Leddy, Martin Montminy and Glenn Parsons for comments on earlier versions of the manuscript. I benefited greatly from discussion of this paper at the 2006 meeting of the Pacific Division of the American Society for Aesthetics, and in particular from questions posed by Alex Neill. I would also like to express my gratitude, which I know is widely shared, to Peter Lamarque for his outstanding service to the profession during his years as Editor of this Journal.