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Defending Everyday Aesthetics and the Concept of 'Pretty'

Thomas Leddy

Abstract

The paper defends everyday aesthetics against critiques inspired by Kant's distinction between the agreeable and the beautiful, such as that of Christopher Dowling. It does this by focusing on analysis of the concept of the pretty. Following Carolyn Korsmeyer and A. C. Bradley, I posit a continuum for the aesthetic, from the pretty to the beautiful and finally to the sublime. After giving a history of the concept of 'pretty,' I consider its largely gendered nature and the feminist issues this raises. I conclude by arguing that limiting aesthetics to art or to art plus nature ignores the continuity between everyday life and the arts first emphasized by John Dewey, and ignores the importance of aesthetic value in the parts of our lives not devoted to art.

Key Words

agreeable, everyday aesthetics, feminist aesthetics, prettiness, pretty

My wife, Karen, and I stand in front of our California bungalow looking at our garden. Karen says, "The garden looks really pretty today." I say, "Yes. What are those blue flowers?"

They look nice." She: "Those are irises. Yes they look nice." Were we talking about aesthetic qualities? I think so.

However, 'pretty' is seldom mentioned as an aesthetic quality, and 'nice' and 'looks nice' are hardly ever. Note that there was nothing purely personal or subjective about our attributions. Karen expected me to agree with her when she proclaimed the garden pretty. I expected her to agree with me when I said the irises were nice. We also probably hoped that at least some others would agree. Still, we would not be surprised if some disagreed, too. There is not only disagreement but also sometimes argument. That is, in cases like this, there *is* some disputing about taste. For example, if we heard that someone thought our garden was ugly, we would probably say to each other, "What's wrong with her?"

"[1]

1. Problems with Kant-based criticisms of everyday aesthetics

What I have said so far should sound both plausible and natural. But if so, this shows that Kant's distinction between the agreeable and the beautiful is not very useful. Kant

associates delight in the agreeable with interest in the existence of the object, the gratification we get from it and, in its most intense form, the enjoyment.^[2] He further states that, whereas the agreeable is that which gratifies, the beautiful is that which "simply pleases." The distinction between gratification and "simply pleases" is not very helpful, however. Our word 'gratify' means 'pleases' although it is often associated with showing gratitude or giving some award. Nor is it clear that we are any more interested in the existence of what we find agreeable than in what we find beautiful.

So what is the distinction? Kant thinks both humans and animals can experience the agreeable, but only humans can experience the beautiful. This is based on the notion that we humans are distinctly rational and animals are not. Yet as contemporary biology has shown, the distinction between humans and other animals is much more subtle and complex than that. Kant further thinks that instead of saying Canary wine is agreeable we should say it is agreeable to me, whereas we shouldn't say that something is beautiful to me. Yet when we say a wine is agreeable, we expect others to value it, as well. Moreover, we commonly say that something is "beautiful to me," and Kant provides no real reasons why we should stop doing this. Also, when we say that something is beautiful, we do not, in opposition to Kant, demand that everyone agree with us, although we might expect many to agree. We put both the agreeable and the beautiful on a pedestal, although the agreeable probably less so.

Kant says that the judgment of the agreeable is restricted to me. It is true that, if I say, "I like this, this is pleasing to me," then I am restricting the reference to myself. But this is not a judgment. By contrast, the sentence, "Violin music is agreeable," is a judgment and, when I make it, I am not restricting it to me. For Kant, when I say that a glass of wine is good, I wish to simply express a private feeling. Yet "Violin music is agreeable," refers to violin music, which is something others can hear and which others can judge to be agreeable or not. When I say, "Violin music is agreeable," I expect at least some people to agree, and if I say "This dog is beautiful," I will not be surprised if some disagree. If we want to make the claim seem more subjective, we add "to me," as in "Well, it looks pretty to me." The problem isn't that there is no distinction at all, but that the distinction is not clear-cut, and certainly not as black and white as Kant makes it out to be. Recent attacks on everyday aesthetics have assumed a distinction very similar to Kant's and, I argue, this is where they go wrong.

Someone influenced by Kant might say that, although one person might like garlic and another might not, there is no disputing about this. On this view, your hatred of garlic is purely personal, idiosyncratic, and subjective. However, although we may not contest that you hate garlic, we may contest that you do so on good grounds. The issue isn't one of love and hate but one of whether or not garlic is good. A young person might say, "Garlic is disgusting. ... It is too strong," and someone older might reply, "Well, it is an acquired taste." Although we sometimes let the issue lie, we don't always. Everyday arguments, especially between

parents and children, often go like this: "Let's put some garlic in the salad dressing." "No, it's disgusting." "You're wrong about that...Try it. It gives the dressing a certain zing." The claim that garlic is good in salad dressings is not fully subjective. To think so is to be hypnotized by Kant into not recognizing what happens every day.

The problem of the agreeable vs. the beautiful is paralleled by the problem of distinguishing two kinds of pleasure, aesthetic and non-aesthetic. We intuitively feel that there are a lot of experiences and pleasures that are not aesthetic. But how do we know? We cannot tell simply from the object referred to, for it is arguable that anything can be experienced aesthetically when framed in the right way. Nor can we simply tell whether something is aesthetic by the words used in describing it: there are many terms that can be used either aesthetically or not. So what makes a pleasure, an experience, or a property aesthetic?

Bear in mind that the word 'aesthetic' is hardly a natural kind word like water. As with other philosophical terms 'aesthetic' is, to use W. B. Gallie's term, "essentially contested."^[3] Since the eighteenth century, different philosophers have given different definitions of 'aesthetic,' and each of these is in competition with the others. These definitions have been intended to satisfy competing overall pictures of diverse but overlapping sets of phenomena. The better theories have succeeded in satisfying a variety of needs, at least for some people for some time. However, new definitions are needed to satisfy new needs. I find inspiration in Robert Venturi's discussion of the definition of architecture.^[4] He claims that every architect works with a definition of architecture in mind, that every generation of architects has its own definitions, and that his firm has a current definition, which he then proceeds to explicate (i.e. architecture is shelter with symbols on it.) Moreover, his definition was powerful, contributing as it did to the founding of a major movement in architecture (postmodern architecture). This is how we should approach essentially contested concepts.

Definitions are needed, but no definition is final. The worse definitions have been forgotten. The strongest ones are still advocated by some, or serve as inspiration for newer definitions in the same mode. So, when philosophers like Christopher Dowling, a recent critic of everyday aesthetics, worry about "losing the core concept of the aesthetic," a natural reply is that there is *no* core concept, or at least that there is no absolute and unchanging core concept. ^[5] Rather, with respect to words like 'aesthetic,' we *choose* to see certain things as core and others not, and this choice works to some degree: it is true or not in the pragmatic sense of 'true.' Dowling, for example, chooses critical disagreement (in the form that we find in art criticism) as the core concept of aesthetics. He thinks that art fits that model well, but that very little in everyday life does.^[6] On this view, the aesthetic experiences of art are paradigmatic of aesthetic experience in general, and for an everyday experience to be aesthetic, it must be significantly art-like. But why should art be the center of aesthetics?

Certainly the most paradigmatic aesthetic term, 'beautiful,' can

be applied to a range of objects that goes well beyond art. We have beautiful friendships, football passes, springs, babies, outfits, and meals just as much as beautiful works of art. It is plausible that whenever we experience something as beautiful we have an aesthetic experience. There are many other aesthetic terms, such as 'pretty,' 'graceful,' and 'elegant,' all of which refer to aesthetic qualities. So it is also plausible that whenever we experience something as having an aesthetic quality, we are having an aesthetic experience, and that whenever we have such an experience *with pleasure* we are having an aesthetic pleasure. If an experience of something as beautiful, graceful, elegant, or pretty, is an aesthetic experience then aesthetic experience extends well beyond the domain of art and there are many things that have aesthetic properties that are not art.

It is not clear why critical disagreement is so central to Dowling's understanding of the aesthetic. Surely one can have an aesthetic experience without it. For example, one can walk into a museum and look at a painting and experience it aesthetically without paying any attention to the critical discussions that traditionally might have surrounded it. Perhaps he means that something is aesthetic if one *could* disagree critically about it. On this view, one could have critical disagreement about a Rembrandt but not about a scoop of chocolate ice cream. But why insist that everyday matters lack critical disagreement? Kevin Melchionne, in his otherwise critical response to Dowling, concedes that "our cooking, wardrobe choices, and décor are rarely the subject of argument and intersubjective engagement."^[7] Yet I wonder whether he hasn't conceded too much here. What about all those arguments I have with my wife about cooking, wardrobe choices, and décor (for example, whether or not a table we found at a second-hand store would look good in our living room)? Do they not count as critical disagreement?

Perhaps Dowling wishes to exclude this kind of conversation and only include discussions that occur within a community of connoisseurs. Yet is it wrong to use the word 'beautiful' if there is no community of connoisseurs, or for someone to use it outside that community? We certainly do not want to hold that only a good judge in Hume's sense can actually gain aesthetic pleasure from something. Children who have no expertise can still see something as beautiful in a way that is not purely subjective.

Maybe all Dowling is saying is that works of art are subject to critical reviews in newspapers and art journals and that we do not see similar reviews of everyday aesthetic phenomena. It is true that such phenomena are seldom reviewed in this way. Yet we do see reviews of designers and design trends. For example, Adolf Loos argued that ornament is crime and that therefore we should reject the work of the Vienna Secession designers.^[8] Moreover, individual products are reviewed in consumer guides and by customers on-line. Also, everyday aesthetic choices can be a source of great debate in *non-institutional* contexts, as witnessed in cross-generational disagreements over body-piercings.

One plausible theory about what distinguishes aesthetic from non-aesthetic pleasure is contextual meaning. On this view,

what makes scratching an itch aesthetic and not just a sensuous pleasure is having contextual meaning.^[9] An alternative approach is offered by Kant. His idea is that aesthetic pleasures come when judgment is disinterested and based on reflective contemplation.

Dowling invokes Kant with his notion of the essential quality of critical discourse. I do not think critical discourse is required, but perhaps contemplative judgment is, although whether the judgment needs to be explicit or conscious is another matter. Yet if judgment is simply a matter of applying a predicate, then saying that something (for example, a car or a dress) is pretty or nice is as much a judgment as saying that it is beautiful. So does the contemplation condition exclude this kind of judgment? Contemplation does attend many aesthetic experiences. However, if contemplation were required for judgments of beauty (or of prettiness, for that matter) then there could never be ones that came all at once. Yet this clearly happens, as when we suddenly perceive a stunning landscape or a pretty lane. Perhaps one can only say that judgments of beauty are more often (or much more often) the result of contemplation than judgments of prettiness. However, this does not make the latter non-aesthetic.

A final way to understand Dowling's criticism is to say that critical communication is communication in which there are norms. The complaint may be that whereas the aesthetics of art has norms, and the aesthetics of nature is quickly gaining norms (for example through the work of scientific cognitivists), the aesthetics of everyday life has none. Carlson and Parson's book *Functional Beauty* could be seen as one way to make the aesthetics of everyday life, or at least some parts of it, normative.^[10] Functional objects, they argue, cannot look beautiful or have other aesthetically positive qualities if they do not look fit for their function. Yuriko Saito also brings in a normative dimension when she argues that green lawns are unattractive because they are bad for the environment.^[11] Nor is the normative limited to these kinds of cases if we allow for norms that are not universal, ones that are perhaps accepted only by a narrow community and that may not be explicitly stated.

The question is whether there can be norms for judgments like "this is agreeable" or "this is pretty." One can have standards of prettiness just as one has standards of beauty. One can believe that certain things attempt to be pretty and fail. There can even be competing constituencies, one group believing a class of things is pretty (say a type of decorative garden) whereas others see it as horrible kitsch. This repeats debates that appear at the level of beauty, one group seeing the work of Bouguereau as beautiful, another as kitsch. And even when everyday aesthetics *appears* to lack norms, as when someone appreciates the play of shadows on a wall, this does not imply that they have none. Having norms in this case is simply a matter of being able to give plausible reasons for why one appreciates these things.

However, maybe neither contextual meaning, nor reflective contemplation, nor norms is necessary for an aesthetic experience. Perhaps all that is needed to distinguish aesthetic from non-aesthetic pleasure is some form of complexity,

richness, or depth. On this view, contextual meaning, reflective contemplation and application of norms are only ways of providing the requisite complexity. The pleasure of a warm bath by itself would not be aesthetic, but if, as Sheri Irvin suggests, the pleasure is richly evocative or seems to sum up all that is good in life, we could then say that it is.^[12] So the question with respect to 'pretty' and similar terms is whether the qualities they refer to are not complex or rich enough (in particular uses) to warrant being called aesthetic. I cannot go into this here, but have argued elsewhere that they must have an aura of heightened significance.^[13] On this view, 'pretty' and similar terms *can* be aesthetic qualities, although they are not always. Moreover, they are *often* used aesthetically. When they are, they refer to an experience that includes an aura of heightened significance but at a lower intensity than found in the beautiful, and a much lower level than found in the sublime.

Dowling insists that an aesthetic claim is either trivial or universally valid. This is a false dichotomy. Nothing is trivial in every respect and in every light, and nothing is universal in every respect and in every light at least not in aesthetics. At the very least there is a continuum between the ultimately trivial and the ultimately universal. Most things are in-between. The worry here is that calling everyday experiences aesthetic trivializes grand aesthetic experience. There is no doubt that the experience of a Rembrandt can be much richer and more complex than that of a lovely front yard.

Nonetheless, it still makes sense to say that they are both aesthetic.

A final worry is that philosophers will take aesthetics less seriously if it includes the pretty and the nice. Do philosophers take morality less seriously when it deals with the question of stealing an apple from a neighbor's tree as well as with questions surrounding torture or murder? Isn't it, rather, a sign of seriousness that one deals with the minor as well as the major issues in a field? It is arguable that once the intimate connections between aesthetic and other pleasures is made clear, once aesthetics is no longer isolated in the realm of fine art or art plus nature, it will be taken more seriously by philosophers who had previously neglected it.

2. Pretty

I mention above that the pretty is seldom discussed in aesthetics. I want to stress the strangeness of that here. 'Pretty' appears in the indexes of no encyclopedias, companions, guidebooks, or textbooks of aesthetics I know of.^[14] There are no articles devoted to it and this is, as far as I know, the first to discuss it at length. This makes it in stark contrast to the beautiful and the sublime. Why is this?

The English word 'pretty' goes back to Old English for tricky or crafty. It later came to mean clever or artful. In Middle English it referred to a person who is excellent or admirable in appearance or manners. It is not until the mid-sixteenth century that it came to mean a thing that is fine, pleasing, nice, agreeable or proper. At this time it also came to refer to a person (especially a woman or child) that is attractive and pleasing in appearance, or beautiful in a delicate way.^[15]

This continues to be its main meaning, although it has other uses.

However, it is worthwhile to take the history of the concept back before the English word. It could be argued that Plato was opposed to the pretty as he spoke against cosmetics in the *Gorgias* and makes fun of Hippias' superficial notion of beauty in the *Greater Hippias* as well as Ion's in the *Ion*. [16] For Plato, cosmetics is a mere knack, the purpose of which is to produce gratification or pleasure. It is contrasted to gymnastics, which he considers a true art and productive of the good. Perhaps Plato was not entirely opposed to the pretty, since he commonly refers to pretty girls or boys without disapproval. Nonetheless, he certainly thought that the beautiful was far more important. In the *Symposium* he portrays Diotima putting forth a theory of beauty in which the lover of beauty goes up steps in a ladder of love. The first step, in which the lover enjoys the beauty of a boy, can be said to exist at the level of the pretty. In the final stage, apprehension of Beauty itself can be seen as taking a position similar to the level of the sublime in eighteenth century aesthetics, although it does not have the fearful properties associated with that concept. Plato's image of beauty as a continuum between the pretty and Beauty itself contains an important insight that was picked up again by A. C. Bradley and Carolyn Korsmeyer and will be adapted in this paper.

Moving to the Enlightenment era, we find that most philosophers only discussed prettiness in order to distinguish it from beauty, usually (in line with Plato) to the detriment of the former. In the seventeenth century, Dominique Bouhours said that "We sometimes call a thought beautiful which is in fact only pretty (*joli*), thus confusing beauty with that which we find pleasing." [17] This is similar to Kant's later distinction between the agreeable and the beautiful discussed above. Although eighteenth century British aestheticians seldom mention the pretty, Edmund Burke's treatment of beauty in terms of what is small, delicate, curved, and contained, reads very much like a discussion of the pretty. [18] As Santayana wrote, "By beautiful [Burke] means pretty and charming; agreeable as opposed to impressive." Santayana thought that by doing so, Burke only exaggerated the opposition between the beautiful and the sublime. [19] By making room for the pretty Santayana opened a path towards everyday aesthetics.

Gender issues concerning the pretty rose to importance in the eighteenth century. Kant, in his early *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* made a distinction between a woman who is pretty and one who is beautiful, the former providing only non-moral pleasantness. [20] Mary Wollstonecraft contrasted "a pretty woman, as an object of desire" with "a fine woman who inspires more sublime emotions by displaying intellectual beauty." [21] She wanted to direct men away from the "sensual homage paid to beauty...of features" which is associated with the pretty. Gender differences were also found in taste itself. Carolyn Korsmeyer has observed that the eighteenth century saw feminine taste as being for the pretty and charming, while masculine taste was for the profound and difficult. [22] This division of expected taste was extended to a division of the arts. Flower painting in the eighteenth century was

characterized as pretty and was associated with women.[23] Whether prettiness is politically suspect is a common contemporary theme as well, with second-wave feminists attacking it as masculinist and some self-described third-wave feminists giving it new value as an affirmation of femininity.[24]

The early twentieth century saw further developments of the concept of 'pretty' in the work of A. C. Bradley and Clive Bell. Bradley, writing in 1909, distinguished between two senses of the word 'beauty:' the one more general, in which Philosophy of Beauty and Aesthetics are equivalent, and the other more specific.[25] The more specific meaning allows us to say that something is pretty but not beautiful. He then places five "modes of beauty" side by side. These are, in sequence: sublime, grand, "beautiful" (in the more specific sense), graceful, and pretty. He notes that the first two seem allied, as do the last two, while beauty holds a neutral position, or inclines more to grace. Sublime and pretty, in this scheme, are "the most widely removed."

Bell was a leading denigrator of the pretty, both as subject matter and as an aesthetic quality within art. In his criticism of 'beautiful' as an aesthetic term, he describes the philistine as someone who believes that "[a] beautiful picture is a photograph of a pretty girl..."[26] He says of Frith's *Paddington Station* that, although the "picture contains several pretty passages of color, and is by no means badly painted," it is not a work of art because it is merely descriptive. Later in the historical section of his book *Art*, Bell criticized officials of the Byzantine Empire for choosing pretty patterns over significant design, thirteenth century Gothic buildings for being "stuck all over" with pretty things,[27] and eighteenth century artists for being happy to copy whatever is pretty.[28] He complained that by the mid-nineteenth century "art" had come to mean the imitation of objects, "preferably pretty or interesting ones." [29] He even criticized some art of his own time for juxtaposing pretty patches of color without considering formal relations.

In the mid-twentieth century Frank Sibley included pretty as one of his aesthetic concepts (along with beautiful, dainty and graceful), seeing it, along with lovely, as a term that people with only moderate aesthetic ability can use.[30] Such terms are different from ones which can be used only by those few who can make more subtle distinctions.[31] Francis Sparshott thought of the pretty as applicable to feminine things and pets, and saw it as part of a trio that also includes the sublime and the beautiful. [32] He gave a kitty and a thatched house as examples of things that are pretty. The pretty on his view is what does not demand serious attention, arouses stock responses, and is trivial.

3. The Continuum

I turn now to a recent approach to the pretty which, rather than simply being negative, situates it in a continuum with beauty.[33] In her article, "Terrible Beauties," which explicates the concept of difficult beauty, Carolyn Korsmeyer observed that "[i]n certain respects pretty and beautiful can be considered points on a continuum of aesthetically pleasing appearance," and that "considering what goes into assigning

an object (or a face or body) its place on this continuum illuminates something of the role of the difficult in the formation of beauty.”[34] Further, when discussing a passage from Matisse on his creative process, Korsmeyer captured something of the dynamic nature of this continuum, how something can exist at one level and yet be moved to another.

When Matisse deepened appreciation of his lines and shapes by making them less immediately pleasant, he illuminated a transition between what is merely pretty and what may perhaps be called beautiful, a transition that requires making appreciation more strenuous and less seductive.[35] So we can speak of the beautiful emerging out of the pretty by way of what she calls “intensification of experience.”[36] This can happen, for example, by taking on “implicit moral or existential weight.”[37] In short, the sweet, the pretty, and the charming move towards the beautiful, not only in art but in everyday life (as in appreciation of faces) as they become more difficult.

The idea of a continuum (in this case a developmental one) can also be found in the work of the early environmentalist philosopher Aldo Leopold when he says, “[o]ur ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language.” [38]

Korsmeyer refers to prettiness as a less important value than beauty.[39] Here I disagree somewhat. In a way she is right, for the pretty is lower on the hierarchy of beauty, is the focus of less thought, and gives experiences that are less rich. However, it is also more pervasive, and plays a quantitatively larger role in our lives. It is rare to find something beautiful or to have an experience of beauty, but seeing things as pretty, cute, or nice is an everyday experience. This is also true for the aesthetic negatives: true ugliness is rare, but dull, unpleasant, and plain things are common. This pervasiveness makes for something that is immensely important.

4. Some preliminary issues

I am arguing that everyday aesthetics extends beyond the narrow domain Dowling wishes to limit it to, and I am using the importance of the pretty (as holding its own place in the continuum of aesthetics) to show this. However, I do not intend to praise or promote prettiness in the sense of getting people to care more about pretty things. I am not opposed to promoting more aesthetic experience in everyday life, but I suspect that people notice prettiness and pretty things as much as they need to. Nor would I like to promote appreciation of the pretty over appreciation of difficult beauties. People need no encouragement or training to appreciate things as pretty, but they need both to appreciate difficult beauties. However, with Robert Solomon, I think there is nothing wrong with enjoying the sweet sentiments, of which pleasure in the pretty is one, as long as no one is harmed.[40]

Nor do I believe promoting experiences of the pretty would entail promoting the arts. It is arguable that in order to do serious art, or maybe even art at all, one has to combat the seductions of the pretty. It is not for nothing that there have been so many attacks on the pretty. Prettiness is notoriously superficial. It often masks human suffering with an illusion of

pleasantness. Nietzsche sometimes treated the Apollonian artist as promoting this way of looking at the world.^[41] No wonder he referred to such artists as naïve. I agree that great art requires overcoming the seductiveness of superficial pleasures. The pretty can play a role in art, but only as part of a more complex structure of experience. Art cannot ignore the pretty any more than it can ignore the cute, the entertaining, or the pleasing. However, in attending to the pretty, it must dig beneath the surface. Art, moreover, has to combat the philistine who thinks that art only has to do with pretty things. The philistine reduces art to beauty, reduces beauty to the pretty, despises the pretty, and so rejects beauty and then art. The answer to the philistine is not to banish the pretty from aesthetics but to block the reductions.

To say a work of art is pretty is generally a put-down, at least in the fine arts. However, the concept does have a role in fine art, for example in referring to a pretty passage in paint or music, or when art references the pretty, as in some feminist and gay art. It is even quite commonly taken to be a positive aesthetic quality in the decorative arts. On *Antiques Roadshow* I have seen an expert refer to an eighteenth century French porcelain vase as “very prettily painted.” This was obviously considered to be a compliment.

5. Feminist objections

As we saw in the historical section, the pretty is a heavily gendered concept. It is not only more frequently applied to females; it is also more frequently applied to things in what is traditionally considered the female realm, for example to children, kitchenware, rooms and dresses. Of course it is also an evolving concept. Part of what is involved in its ongoing evolution is changing attitudes concerning women’s rights and, more generally, what it is to be a woman.

Some feminists may criticize the aesthetics of everyday life for discussing the concept of the pretty. Yet discussing a concept is not the same as promoting its current uses. Moreover, the aesthetics of everyday life has close affinities with feminist aesthetics. The aesthetics of everyday life has only recently emerged within the discipline of philosophical aesthetics, and this may be largely because it often deals with aspects of life associated with females.

The concept of the pretty *seems* innocuous. It is pleasant, after all, to experience a garden, house, or girl as pretty. And it doesn’t actually hurt anyone, except when you say that the garden, house, or girl is *merely* pretty. There are, however, situations in which being called pretty may be problematic. Two examples are (1) a heterosexual male may take offence to being called pretty, and (2) a woman might take offence if she is referred to as pretty in a professional context where reference to her looks would be inappropriate. Feminist critics are right to suggest that attributions of prettiness to women should be approached with caution, at least in such contexts.

Even so, this worry need not extend to *all* attributions of prettiness, for example to streams or mountains. (It is hard to see how saying that a stream is pretty contributes to the oppression of women, for example.) To throw out the concept of ‘pretty’ because of feminist issues might be to lose some very valuable uses.

Still, it might be argued that these gender problems extend beyond application of the term to women, maybe not in the case of streams and mountains, but in how we see such things as pots and ties. There are certainly differences in the ways we speak. A man might be more hesitant to call a pot pretty, although he might accede to its being graceful or elegant. A woman might say a man's tie is pretty, but none of his male friends would. It might, then, be argued that we should suspect the very concept of the pretty because women are not only seen as its objects (in a way that makes men take them less seriously) but also are expected to find things pretty more often or in different circumstances than men. The thought here is that many uses of the concept are infected by those uses that directly take agency away from women.

However, as we analyze the pretty we should not just reflect on current usage but participate in forward-thinking changes. As pro-feminists, we want the future to be egalitarian. Such a future would be one in which the pretty is not as gender-weighted as it is today, at least not in such a way as to harm women. We want a future in which the concept is not used to make women less free. In short, the attachment between the pretty and the oppression of women might be historical and contingent: the word could evolve in a way that is consistent with egalitarianism without losing its ability to tie down the lower end of the aesthetics continuum.

6. A problem with the continuum hypothesis

It is admittedly difficult to place individual aesthetic terms on a continuum. For one thing, terms take on different meanings in different contexts. Aesthetic terms may be used for all sorts of purposes, and even 'pretty' *could* be used as a term of praise in a fine art context (as when an eccentric teacher uses it as his or her highest form of praise). Another problem with the continuum hypothesis is whether we can find a way to distinguish between the lowest level of the continuum and that which falls below that level. I have already suggested that some sort of richness, some aura of heightened significance is needed, and that this may be achieved through contemplation. However, contemplation may not be required since many of our experiences of something as pretty are immediate. I see some mountains lighted by the morning sun through an airplane window and say to my travel companion "look at those mountains, aren't they pretty." On my view an aura of heightened significance is both necessary and sufficient for something to be aesthetic. In any case, my motive in bringing in the continuum hypothesis was not to set up a stable and exact hierarchy of aesthetic terms but rather to deconstruct a strict dividing line between the purely subjective realm of the agreeable and the objective realm of critical discourse, a distinction that is often used by those who would attack everyday aesthetics from a Kantian angle.

7. Conclusion

'Pretty,' 'nice' and similar terms are often used to refer to aesthetic qualities. However, often, at least for 'pretty' in the fine arts, the quality is negative. We have to turn to everyday aesthetics (and perhaps to the popular arts) to find 'pretty' and 'nice' used in a generally positive way, for example in

referring to a pretty (or nice) house, dress, garden, girl, boy, thought, card, table-setting, plant, flower, walk, photograph, song, dance, town, baby, or voice.

Following Bradley, Korsmeyer, and ultimately Plato, I argued that pretty and nice are at the low end of a continuum that constitutes beauty in its most general sense. The continuum situates 'beauty' in the narrow sense of the term in the middle and 'sublime' at the high end. Kant's concept of the agreeable is not helpful here since he failed to recognize that as soon as we find something agreeable we have judged it, thus taking it out of the realm of merely sensuous pleasure. He confuses what is merely felt as agreeable or liked with what is *called* agreeable, likable, pleasant or pretty. These concepts are aesthetic every bit as much as beautiful and sublime. Kant's concept of 'the agreeable' covers whatever we like without making a judgment and without a contemplative or reflective dimension to that liking. So it is not to be dismissed. However, as soon as we *say* that something is agreeable or even likeable we are making a statement about something outside of ourselves, are making assumptions about what others will value, and are raising the experience to the level of beauty (in the general sense of that term), hence to aesthetics. The object then obtains a low-level aura of significance. So when we say that something is pretty, we are making a kind of aesthetic claim, and this frees everyday aesthetics from the kinds of objections raised by Dowling and others influenced by Kant.

Aesthetics is a vast sea, and the aesthetics of fine art is a little island in that sea. Limiting aesthetics to art or to art plus nature has various disadvantages. It ignores the continuity between everyday life and the arts first emphasized by John Dewey^[42] and more recently promoted by everyday aestheticians and aestheticians inspired by evolutionary theory. It ignores the importance of aesthetic value in the parts of our lives not devoted to art. It fails to recognize the dynamic relation between art and everyday life. Moreover, recognizing the importance of such qualities as "pretty" and "nice" in no way trivializes or diminishes the importance of such qualities as "beautiful" or "sublime" or such things as art and nature.

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Endnotes

[1] I discuss "nice" in *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview

Press, 2012).

[2] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* tr. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952) #3, pp. 44-45.

[3] W. B. Gallie, "Art as an Essentially Contested Concept," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplement* 56 (1955-56), 169-198.

[4] Robert Venturi, "Architecture as Decorated Shelter," in *Aesthetics: A Reader in Philosophy of the Arts*, ed. David Goldblatt and Lee B. Brown (Prentice Hall, 2011), pp. 130-131.

[5] Christopher Dowling, "The Aesthetics of Daily Life," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 50, 1 (2010), 225-242.

[6] He concedes that, when a door looks like it fits right, we are having an aesthetic experience, p. 230.

[7] Kevin Melchionne, "Aesthetic Experience in Everyday Life: A Reply to Dowling," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 51, 4 (2011), 437-442, ref. on 439.

[8] Adolf Loos, "Ornament and Crime," in Goldblatt and Brown, pp. 123-129.

[9] For a discussion of this, see Sherri Irvin, "The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic in Ordinary Experience," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 48, 1 (2008), 29-44, and "Scratching an Itch," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 66, 1 (2008), 25-35.

[10] Allen Carlson and Glenn Parsons, *Functional Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[11] Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[12] *Op. cit.*

[13] *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary. Op. cit.*

[14] However, I have an article in the forthcoming second edition of *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* on this topic. In the article I go into the history of the concepts of 'pretty' and 'prettiness' in more detail.

[15] *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.*

[16] Kenneth Dorter, "The Ion: Plato's Characterization of Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 32, 1 (1973), 65-78, ref. on 76.

[17] Dominique Bouhours, quoted in Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *The History of Aesthetics* Vol. III (Continuum with Polish Scientific Publishers, 2005), p. 393.

[18] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[19] Carolyn Korsmeyer also observed that for Burke, beauty is "diminished and retreats back to something close to

pretty." "Terrible Beauties," *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* ed. Matthew Kieren (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing: 2006), pp. 51-63, ref. on p. 57.

[20] Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, tr. John T. Goldthwait (University of California Press, 2004), p. 87.

[21] Mary Wolstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Women: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 49.

[22] Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 47.

[23] Rozika Parker and Griselda Pollock, "Crafty Women and the Hierarchy of the Arts" in Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Aesthetics: The Big Questions* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998), p. 45.

[24] Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, "Feminism in the Classroom: Teaching Towards The Third Wave," in *Feminism in Popular Culture* eds. Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley (New York: Berg Publishers, 2006), p. 64. Of course, the very concept of "third-wave feminists" is contested.

[25] A. C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965).

[26] Clive Bell, *Art* [1913] (Createspace, 2011).

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 55.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 64.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 66.

[30] Frank Sibley, "Aesthetic Concepts," *Philosophical Review*, 68, 4 (1959), 421-450.

[31] Frank Sibley, "Objectivity in Aesthetics," in *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 82.

[32] Francis Sparshott, *The Structure of Aesthetics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), pp. 72-75.

[33] Earlier I referred to a continuum between the ultimately trivial and the ultimately universal. This continuum is different in that nothing within it considered ultimately trivial or ultimately universal. This is, rather, a continuum between low-level aesthetic qualities such as "pretty" and high-level ones such as "sublime" with "beauty" falling someplace in between.

[34] Korsmeyer, "Terrible Beauties," *op. cit.* She draws on Bernard Bosanquet, *Three Lectures on Aesthetic* (London: Macmillan, 1915).

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 55.

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 60.

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 55-6.

[38] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There (Outdoor Essays & Reflections)* (Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 96. Thanks to Yuriko Saito for this reference. I would also like to take this occasion to thank Prof. Saito for her many other helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

[39] Korsmeyer, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

[40] Robert C. Solomon, "On Kitsch and Sentimentality," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 49, 1 (1991), 1-14.

[41] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy in Basic Writings of Nietzsche* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 2000).

[42] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Minton, Balch and Co., 1934).
