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Experience of Awe: An Expansive Approach to Everyday Aesthetics

Thomas Leddy

Abstract

As opposed to Melchionne and Naukkarinen, I defend an expansive definition of everyday aesthetics, one that includes festivals, tourism, and many daily activities of artists and other professionals, along with most ordinary and common experiences. I argue for continuities between aesthetics of everyday life and the aesthetics of art and nature. Looking through a window, for example, may involve aspects of all three. Although I agree with Melchionne that everyday aesthetics is closely related to questions of subjective well-being, I take a more expansive approach to this, drawing from recent psychological studies of the experience of “awe” to stress the importance of such experiences in subjective well-being, thus tying the high points of everyday aesthetics more closely with the high points in the aesthetics of art and nature.

Key Words

awe, definition, everyday aesthetics, Melchionne, Naukkarinen, restrictivists, subjective well-being

1. Background of the debate over defining everyday aesthetics

When I titled my book on everyday aesthetics, “The Extraordinary in the Ordinary,” I intended to counter a prevailing tendency in this new and growing field to stress the ordinariness of the ordinary, limiting everyday aesthetics to this domain.^[1] I thought that this limitation failed to capture the dynamic interaction among everyday aesthetics, nature aesthetics, and art aesthetics. I wanted to stress the continuities between these, whereas others wanted to stress the discontinuities. Following John Dewey, I saw the aesthetic experiences connected with the arts as closely related to the aesthetic experiences of daily life.^[2] Art concentrates and intensifies the

aesthetic qualities we find in non-art aspects of our lives. Moreover, as Oscar Wilde observed, non-art phenomena often mimic art.^[3] Yet often the objects and activities of everyday life can transcend their ordinariness even without the mediation of art. Whether by the mediation of art or not, ordinary objects *can* be seen in a way that gives them heightened significance, making them, sometimes surprisingly, objects of awe or, at least, of fascination.

Often this happens through seeing the object as an artist would, but sometimes it happens spontaneously. Take human beauty. In every person's life, there are a few times when we glimpse a person of great beauty.^[4] This is by no means something that happens on a daily basis. Yet how shall it be classified? The experience fails to fall neatly into the traditional dichotomy of aesthetics of art versus aesthetics of nature. When someone finds a person to be a "great beauty," this is not a matter of nature appreciation any more than it is of art appreciation. Natural aesthetics has to do with natural environments; great human beauty does not or, at least, not directly. There are a number of other things that happen to us in non-art, non-nature contexts that are high points in aesthetic experience, for example, the way that a smell can evoke a world. These high points, I thought, should help to define the field of everyday aesthetics.^[5]

Inspired by Walter Benjamin but not following him, I called the above-mentioned quality of heightened significance "aura." I defined aesthetics generally, and aesthetic experience particularly, in terms of aura. I did not intend "heightened significance" to mean a greater sense of importance but something closer to "awesome" at its most intense, "fascinating" at a weaker level, and "interesting" at a still weaker level. Something has aura or heightened significance if it seems more alive, more real, more present, or more connected to other things. I argued that when an object, event, or experience has an aesthetic quality, for instance beauty, grace, or elegance, it is because it has aura.

However, I was not just interested in special aesthetic moments covered by such noble-sounding terms. I was also interested in the pervasiveness of aesthetic experience. To put it another way, I was not only interested in the way in which even the most ordinary thing can become extraordinary, but in low-level aesthetic experiences such as the pleasure we get in contemplating a neatened backyard. These experiences are as much a part of everyday aesthetics as the more intense, rarer sorts of experience, the ones that Dewey called “an experience.” In a later paper, I argued that these exist on a continuum in which the low-level experiences have aura as well, although it is less intense.^[6] My definition of everyday aesthetics was expansive in that it included the entire range of this continuum. For example, following Sheila Lintott, I would include the sublime experience of childbirth under everyday aesthetics, even though it is neither something that happens every day nor to every human.^[7] The importance of including sublime experiences in everyday aesthetics was highlighted in the last chapter of my book, in which I discussed everyday aesthetics and the sublime.^[8]

2. The search for a definition.

Some have argued that the field of everyday aesthetics is too open-ended, and that the solution to this is a definition. In *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Kevin Melchionne and Ossi Naukkarinen have each argued for a definition that is restrictive; in particular restricting everyday aesthetics to that which is ordinary, common and, almost strictly speaking, daily.^[9] As I have suggested above, my position continues to take the opposite tack, one that could be called “expansionist.” Is this just a matter of semantics, or arbitrary choice of category boundaries? I don’t think so. There are deep reasons for the disagreement and, in what follows, I will try to tease these out. My discussion will be directed here mainly to Melchionne.

Melchionne’s restrictive definition is, in part, a response to the definition I offered in my

book. He observed that I treat everyday aesthetics as a “default third basket for what is not comfortably categorized as fine art or natural beauty.”^[10] This is not entirely true, since I also listed things generally included in everyday aesthetics. So part of my approach was ostensive. However, the definition I offered was negative. I said that everyday aesthetics covers that which is outside both art and nature aesthetics. I now think that the second, negative, aspect of my approach was too broad. First, it is not clear that *all non-art, non-nature* aesthetic phenomena should be included under everyday aesthetics. For example, what about the aesthetics of mathematics? Is that now a part of everyday aesthetics since it is not a part of the aesthetics of art or nature? Other domains that pose problems of this sort are the aesthetics of sports and the aesthetics of science. Second, a definition should really get at a thing’s essential nature or, at least, the core meaning of the concept. Negative definitions do not help with either. Third, as we shall see, the relationship between everyday aesthetics and both art and nature aesthetics is much too dynamic to be captured with a negative definition.

However, Melchionne’s problem is not that my definition is negative but that it is expansive. In particular, he is concerned that it would include things that are not daily or common. This is what is meant by favoring a restrictive definition of everyday aesthetics over an expansive one. In this article, I will defend an expansive definition. More accurately, I will defend an expansive approach to *understanding* everyday aesthetics, since I am not going to offer an actual definition. Although philosophical definition can be valuable, the process of creating a philosophical definition, insofar as it involves making strict distinctions, tends to hide continuities and dynamic interactions, the understanding of which is sometimes more important than setting up limitations.

Some might say that the disagreement could be easily resolved. All I need to do is cede the label “everyday aesthetics” to the restrictivists

and coin some other term, say “festival aesthetics,”^[11] to cover the non-everyday events I had included in everyday aesthetics, but which they exclude. Naukkarinen, agreeing for the most part with Melchionne, favors an everyday aesthetics that focuses on things that are familiar, easy, and obvious; and ordinary routines that can be performed “almost automatically.” He further writes that, “everyday objects, activities, and events, for me and for others, are those with which we spend lots of time, regularly and repeatedly. Most often this means objects and events related to our *work, home, and hobbies.*”^[12] Like Melchionne, he places parties outside of the everyday since they break the routines of life: “they are exceptions, occasions when we do other things than the normal.”^[13] In the chart that illustrated his article, “Party” appeared in the outer circle, whereas everyday aesthetics relate to what he called “My Everyday Now,” which is at the center.^[14]

The term “festival aesthetics” has a legitimate use insofar as it can be used to cover such things as parties, festivals, weddings, and holidays. However, “festival aesthetics,” plus the aesthetic of the common and ordinary, would not be sufficient to cover the wider domain I wanted to cover with the term “everyday aesthetics.” It would not, for example, include the above-mentioned aesthetics of pregnancy and childbirth. Nor would it include the delight I had this morning pointing out to my wife a series of lovely chalk drawings of animals, perhaps by a child, but possibly by an artist, that have appeared at one block intervals near our house. Since not clearly art, these drawings may fall within everyday aesthetics.

I toyed with the term “life aesthetics” for the broader domain I previously called “everyday aesthetics,” but rejected it since life also includes experiences of art and nature. “Popular aesthetics” is also problematic since it would have to cover popular art, which seems more part of art aesthetics than of everyday aesthetics. I continue to prefer “everyday aesthetics” as the name for the broader realm. “The aesthetics of the

common and ordinary” can cover what the restrictivists want to call “everyday aesthetics.”

As suggested, debates of this sort are more than a matter of “mere semantics” or efficient territory organization. They are aspects of, or perhaps even proxies for, larger debates. I suspect this is true for philosophical debate in general. The kinds of concepts philosophers argue over, such as “art,” “beauty,” and “good,” are not natural or mathematical kinds. They cannot be defined in the way “water” or “triangle” can. Nor can they be defined by simply referring to and generalizing over popular usage. What is involved in debates over their definition is competing visions of larger things. In this case, the debate over the definition of everyday aesthetics entails a debate over the nature of aesthetics itself, and also a debate, as we shall see, over the nature of the everyday. Moreover, such debates indirectly deal with more global issues, such as the nature of knowledge, man, and reality. That’s why they are so important to the debaters. For example, an argument about the nature of everyday aesthetics may also indirectly be about the nature of the good life.^[15] This is why one can usually describe this kind of debate in terms of competing ideologies or worldviews. Imagine one party gives a Marxist definition of everyday aesthetics and another a feminist definition. If there is a disagreement, then that is part of a larger disagreement between Marxists and feminists. Of course, teasing out what these larger issues might be in the long run can be difficult, and it is not clear that my deeper disagreements with the restrictivists are the same in each case. In the case of Naukkarinen, at least, the larger debate seems to be that of a Heideggerian (on his part) versus a Deweyan (on my part) world view.

3. Motive of the restrictivists

The restrictivists want to avoid expansion in the direction of that which is not daily or common. Melchionne insists, for example, that everyday aesthetics should exclude interior decoration, because engaging in

interior decoration, as opposed to house-cleaning and neatening, is not a daily activity. Now one way we could look at this would be to see interior decoration as a minor art, making it then fall under art aesthetics, as long as art is not identified with “fine art.” However, this solution would ignore the dynamic nature of the interaction between such literally everyday activities as neatening up a room and the more rare activities involved when one hires an interior decorator. Melchionne is aware of this interaction, but wants to keep the two distinct. Yet a lot of what goes into amateur collecting, rearranging, and decoration in one’s home is pretty close to interior design, although not professional. Moreover, it is continuous with the more daily activity of neatening up, which itself mainly serves to clarify the boundaries established in these earlier creative acts.

4. Melchionne’s definition

Melchionne defines everyday aesthetics in terms of four categories, which he uses as titles to sections of his paper. They are: “ongoing,” “common,” “activity,” and “typically but not necessarily aesthetic.” That is, to be part of everyday aesthetics something must be ongoing, common amongst most of humanity, and part of a practice, which itself may be non-aesthetic. (For Melchionne, practices are primary, objects secondary). We can see this as a definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, in which each condition is necessary and the conjunction sufficient. It is easy to see the first three as necessary conditions. It is harder to understand how the fourth can be, but we need not discuss that here.

The activity condition is central to Melchionne’s definition, since it characterizes *what* we are talking about as ongoing and common. In emphasizing activity, specifically the kind involved in a practice, Melchionne seeks to give primacy to practices over objects. However, in the process, he downplays experiences. Since there are many everyday experiences that are not clearly tied to practices (for example, the humor of seeing

a truck with sides made from a recycled front-yard fence, something I see on my daily walk), this restriction is problematic. Following Dewey, I give primacy to experiences over both practices and objects. Objects are best understood as aspects of, or elements in, experience. After all, we can only analyze practices and objects insofar as they are experienced.

Turn now to the “ongoing” condition. For Melchionne, “ongoing” means on a daily or almost daily basis. Yet why exclude certain non-daily events, for example, events that typically happen because it is the weekend rather than a workday? That workdays are usually more numerous than weekend days does not privilege them as coming under everyday aesthetics. Why, for example, should the Sunday drive be excluded? Now, inclusion of the Sunday drive may be easily conceded by restrictivists under the thought that it is an ongoing, although not daily, practice. Yet it is not the practice that is aesthetic, it is the experience. Moreover, something can be occasional but not ongoing and still be part of the everyday for the simple reason that unusual things happen, and we see, hear, and smell strange things every day.

And what about events that happen every day or, at least, frequently, but only in certain contexts and times of year? For example, I often contemplate the lights on my Christmas tree in late December or early January. I consider this experience to fall under everyday aesthetics. Yet, Melchionne insists that holidays, and hence holiday decoration and the practices and experiences involved in holiday decoration, lie outside everyday aesthetics; that holidays are seasonal events, not everyday ones. However, since every event occurs during a season, and many are marked by their seasonal character, to exclude the seasonal from the everyday would seem too rigid.

Similarly, restrictivists would exclude things we see when travelling as tourists. Yet isn't there an everyday life for the tourist? And if you are excluding the non-daily because it is

special, then what about things that happen on a daily basis that are equally special? What about, for instance, the nearly daily experience I have of seeing rabbits in my front yard when I go out to pick up the paper, something that happens because a neighbor keeps rabbits that constantly escape. It is somewhat magical to go out in the morning and come face to face with rabbits in the middle of an urban environment. I would include this experience within everyday aesthetics although it is neither daily, common, nor part of a practice.

The disagreement may be about what counts as general for a theory. Restrictivists may complain that I am focusing on oddball examples. Yet these are examples of things that give experiences of awe and fascination, or at least they are interesting. This kind of experience, as I have argued, is as fundamental to everyday aesthetics as it is to the aesthetics of nature and the aesthetics of art.

The question may be asked whether everyday aesthetics needs to be tied to practices. That is, can it also include events that are serendipitous? If everydayness is tied necessarily to practices, as Melchionne seems to want, then it would exclude, for example, noticing the amazing way trees look on a city street when taking a walk at sunset. This may happen every day, at least for those who like to walk at sunset, and yet noticing this is not part of any practice. There is a practice of walking, but that is something different. One can, of course, speak of the practice of looking aesthetically, but this is precisely the practice that would allow noticing things that are visually strange or strange to the other senses. So if that practice were allowed, then appealing to practices would be no help for the restrictivist position.

5. Problems with the commonality condition.

More significant are problems with the second condition, that of commonality. Bear in mind, and this is something that both Melchionne

and Naukkarinen are aware of, that what is typical on a daily basis for one person will be quite different from what is typical for someone else. The everyday life of a Trappist monk is going to be different from that of every other cultural type. One way to resolve this is to stress what humans share in common. Melchionne emphasizes that we all have to sleep, dress (or at least make ourselves physically presentable to others), prepare and eat food, and go out. The list is helpful, although it excludes many things I would consider parts of everyday aesthetics.

For example, almost all post-puberty people need to deal with sexual urges, and most adults need to work on a nearly daily basis.^[16] Our sexual and work lives should get as much of a hearing in everyday aesthetics as our sleeping and eating lives.^[17] Moreover, there is no need to limit everyday aesthetics to the small list of universal practices and exclude the vast range of narrower practices.

In attempting to explain why our work lives should be excluded, Melchionne says, “Few of us are pianists. Thus, the daily finger exercises of the pianist are not relevant to everyday aesthetic theory.”^[18] Yet the number or percentage of people engaged in an activity tells us nothing about whether that activity counts as part of everyday life. Piano exercises are an important part of the daily lives of pianists. Why exclude these activities from the everyday, at least relative to pianists?

It might be argued that piano exercises are part of the aesthetics of music and hence not a part of the aesthetics of everyday life. In response, let’s think about the everyday life of a typical artist. As I am more familiar with visual art, I’ll use the life of a painter in her studio as my example. Is the daily activity of the artist irrelevant to everyday aesthetics? Assume that there are no finished artworks in the studio. To assume this, at least a provisional definition of art is needed. An early version of George Dickie’s definition of art has the advantage, for our purpose, of being both well-known and brief: “A work of art in the classificatory sense is 1) an artifact

2) upon which some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld) has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation.”^[19] On his definition, there is no art in the room since the artist, as a representative of the artworld, has not designated anything there as a candidate for appreciation, that is, does not yet consider it ready for viewing.

Even if we assume this definition of art, there is a lot going on in the studio that has to do with aesthetics. Let’s assume that the artist is painting a still life based on an arrangement of fruit. In attending to these pieces of fruit, the artist attends to their aesthetic properties, possibly capturing or highlighting them as he or she represents them. These properties could also have been noticed in the kitchen prior to collecting the fruit for use in the studio. In short, the aesthetic qualities encountered by the artist in the studio belong to the aesthetics of everyday life.

Also, in the process of making a work of art, the artist is attending to the aesthetic properties of the paints used, especially as they interact with each other in the perceptual field both on the palette and on the paint surface. In addition, the artist may, at least, be subconsciously aware of the dynamics of the relationship between different parts of his or her body while painting, for example, the movements of the hands, the use of the eyes, and so forth. To exclude any of this from everyday aesthetics is a mistake.

This is not to confuse everyday aesthetics with art aesthetics. Art aesthetics, at least on Dickie’s account, only comes in *after* whatever the artist has created has attained the status of art. I am not sure this is right, since even when there are no designated art objects in the studio it still seems that there is *art* in the studio: the activity in the studio is art-making. So, alternatively, we might want to extend art aesthetics to include the creative process that leads to the art product. But this would just indicate an overlap between everyday aesthetics and art aesthetics in the world of the working artist. It is this kind of

overlap that is ignored by restrictivist definitions. Both art aesthetics and everyday aesthetics are harmed if each is treated as isolated from the other.

Melchionne himself captured some of the dynamic relationship between the aesthetics of art and the aesthetics of everyday life when he wrote that the Japanese tea ceremony “elevates the everyday to a ceremonial occasion,” and observed that “[a]fter participating in a ceremony, if I return to my daily food preparation with a deeper appreciation of the utensils, the heating and pouring of water, the aroma, then the tea ceremony has improved my everyday aesthetic life.”^[20] He also captured the ameliorative aspect of everyday aesthetics, for example, that paying attention to everyday aesthetics can improve our lives, to which I will return later. My point here is not that the Japanese tea ceremony is an example of everyday aesthetics, but that the close relationship between both art and ritual and everyday aesthetics is made particularly evident by this example.

More complicated is Melchionne’s window example. He writes, “a window with a view of a landscape has no everyday aesthetic value if the room is rarely occupied or the blind always drawn.”^[21] Well, of course, the view has *no* aesthetic value if it is never seen. Neither does the window—as-window have any aesthetic value if never used. But what about the cases in which the room is rarely occupied? Consider a mountain cabin, one with a window with a view, that is visited only once a year. On Melchionne’s view, the aesthetic value of this window with its attendant view is radically different from that of a window we look through every day. Looking through a window every day is a practice, whereas visiting one once a year falls, perhaps, under festival aesthetics. Again, on his view, the aesthetic value of the object and the experience is secondary to that of the practice. Nor am I clear how it is less a practice to look out a window once a year than every day.

I agree that, as Melchionne wrote, “if the light, the view, and the bench beside it contribute to the aesthetic character of some daily moment, then we may speak of the window in terms of everyday aesthetics.”^[22] But this is also the case if these things contribute to the aesthetic character of a once-a-year experience. When he stated, “It is the regular morning coffee, the acknowledgement of the evening sunset, or the mere raising of a blind after waking that imparts everyday aesthetic value to the window,”^[23] I again agree, but there are other, less regular, contributors as well. Everyday aesthetic value also comes from what is unique to the window, for example, its design, and to the experience, for example, what is seen through the window on *that* day. Moreover, each instance of these things, each particular event involving the regular morning coffee and also, perhaps, raising the blind after waking, can itself take on an aura of heightened significance, that is, can be aesthetic.

The issue of the window with its view leads me to think of a related issue in the aesthetics of nature. Just as we have seen that the relation between aesthetics of art and aesthetics of everyday life is best seen as dynamic, so too we find this in the relation between the aesthetics of nature and both the aesthetics of art and the aesthetics of everyday life. Recognition of this has profound implications for aesthetics in general. A window with a view of a landscape is, in itself, not nature, and yet looking out of the window to see a landscape is a matter of appreciating nature *and*, from a different angle, a matter of everyday aesthetics. It also relates to the aesthetics of art by way of the art of architecture. Someone might argue that appreciating nature through a window is not appreciating nature as nature but rather is appreciating it as though it were a painting.^[24] Yet such appreciation is acceptable as long as it is not considered the *only* way to appreciate nature. It might be thought that walking in nature is a more authentic or more appropriate way to appreciate nature than viewing it through a window. But this really depends on how often

and how carefully one does the viewing. Viewing through a window is one of the many ways we appreciate nature. The aesthetics of nature should be broad enough to handle this kind of appreciation.

But appreciation of nature is not the whole of this story. Awareness of the window, its glass, its frame, its structure, its solidity, its architectural placement, and so on, may also be an important feature of one's overall experience. Appreciating a landscape through a window, then, is an aspect of appreciation of the art of the architect as well as an aspect of nature appreciation.^[25] The experience of viewing both the window and the scene through the window is art-related *and* nature-related. It is also everyday aesthetics-related to the extent that both the art-related and nature-related aspects are contextualized within the everyday activity of "looking through a window." In short, the everyday, the natural, and the artistic are often intertwined in complex ways.

Moreover, limiting everyday aesthetics to practices that are daily or nearly daily fails to recognize that there are ideals of everyday aesthetics not met in a regular or ongoing way that are important in the definition of everyday aesthetics. Examples of such ideals include what Dewey referred to as "*an* experience," and experiences of awe that are also aesthetic.

6. Subjective well-being and awe

Melchionne has more recently argued that subjective well-being is the goal of everyday aesthetics.^[26] This could be seen as representing an ideal, but how is subjective well-being achieved? Melchionne thinks it best achieved through hedonic regulation. I applaud the idea that subjective well-being is enhanced by greater attention to everyday aesthetic phenomena. However, I am skeptical of exclusive emphasis placed on hedonic regulation. I have already mentioned the importance of the concept of awe. There is recent psychological evidence to support the idea that subjective well-being is

increased by moments of awe.^[27] As psychologists have observed, experiences of awe often come from experiences of great beauty or sublimity in art and nature. It seems then that there is something problematic about Melchionne's claim that, "Everyday aesthetic practices of our own design stand a much better chance of influencing well-being than the occasional encounter of high or popular art, such as attending museums or concerts from time to time."^[28] Practices of our own design are only one factor in life-enhancement.

Experiences of awe can come from nature, art, or everyday contexts.

I argue that we should treat everyday aesthetics, art aesthetics, and nature aesthetics on an equal footing when it comes to promoting well-being. First, our encounters with popular art, at least in industrialized countries like the United States, are hardly occasional and, in fact, take up a large part of most people's days. Second, although experiences of awe *are* occasional, they are hardly rare. Moreover, it is arguable that such experiences are a large part of what gives life meaning. Further, although such experiences are often induced by art and by nature, they are also often induced in non-art, non-nature contexts.

It might be replied that talk about awe is just another way to talk about the high end of the hedonic scale. But awe, and the closely related concept of fascination, do not simply mark the highest level of pleasure. Rather, like sublime experiences, they have other, sometimes negative or disturbing elements or aspects and although pleasurable in some sense, the pleasure is complex.

But is awe aesthetic? It can be, although it does not necessarily have to be. The dictionary defines it as "overwhelming wonder, admiration, respect, or dread."^[29] There doesn't seem to be a pleasure or delight component required here in the way that Burke required "delight" for the sublime to be aesthetic.^[30] However, wonder, admiration, and respect might each have its own

associated positive affect, and while I cannot personally imagine dread having a positive component, this may be because I am not religious. *Dictionary.com* suggests that the current sense of awe as involving “dread mixed with veneration” is because of its biblical use with reference to God.^[31]

Veneration can have a positive affect component, and any dread that a believer has towards God must be combined with some positive affect, for example, love. Otherwise, why worship Him? However, if awe were defined as simply a combination of fear and surprise, as some have done,^[32] then it could only be tangentially related to aesthetics, unless of course the surprise aspect also contains within it a delight aspect. Also, psychologists have observed that when people describe experiences of awe, those experiences are usually considered positive.

More like the work of some contemporary aestheticians, such as Denis Dutton, Stephen Davies, and Ellen Dissanayake on art, psychologists Piff and Keltner give an evolutionary account of the experience of awe.^[33] For them, awe motivates people to take part in community-building, such as “collective rituals, celebration, music and dance, religious gatherings and worship,”^[34] and may be adaptive for this reason. All of these community-building events have strong aesthetic components. So perhaps awe is one of the important aesthetic phenomena related to, although somewhat broader than, the sublime. Some might balk at this mixture of the aesthetic and the religious, although it is often also present in the sublime. But in tribal societies, from which all non-tribal peoples are descended, the arts, like music, dance, and ritual are not clearly distinguished. So the distinction may be relatively recent, and relatively unimportant, when discussing aesthetics broadly.

The psychologists I refer to associate awe with shifting focus from narrow self-interest to community well-being.

Evolutionary aestheticians have often seen the arts, or the skills that go into art, as bringing communities together, thus giving these

communities an adaptive advantage. Awe, and whatever gives rise to awe, might be adaptive in this sense. All of this relates to the broader issue of the relation between aesthetics and ethics. If everyday awe is closely associated with ethics, then there is a stronger relation between the two than we may have thought.^[35] Piff and Keltner stated that in one experiment they found that participants who reported experiencing more awe in their lives, and who felt more regular wonder and beauty in the world around them, were kinder to strangers. Experiences of awe might make one feel more expansive and less driven to satisfy immediate personal needs.

Piff and Keltner also suggested that our culture is awe-deprived in that we spend more time working and less time outdoors and with others. Young people today are missing the camping trips and the starry heavens many older people experienced when young. Kant said, "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within."^[36] Piff and Keltner argued that in experiencing awe while looking at the starry heavens, we are more inclined to follow the moral law, or at least to help others.

Piff and Keltner observed a decline in attendance at arts events along with a decline in funding for arts programs in the schools, concluding that "awe deprivation has had a hand in a broad societal shift ...over the last 50 years," in that "people have become more individualistic, more self-focused, more materialistic and less connected to others."^[37] It is hard to measure this, and one would have to be careful in defining the key terms. The consequence, however, if true, is that aesthetics, including everyday aesthetics, may be more important for our cultural survival than many currently believe. Piff and Keltner concluded that, to reverse the trend, people should experience more everyday awe, actively seeking out "what gives them goose bumps, be it looking at trees, night skies, patterns of wind or water or the

quotidian nobility of others...."[38]

Promoting this would be an important goal for everyday aesthetics, but only under the expansive definition.

To stress the ordinary over the extraordinary and the common over the awe-inducing in everyday aesthetics is like judging art by its most mundane examples and not by its masterpieces. The equivalent to the masterpiece in everyday aesthetics is what Dewey referred to as "an experience," which is associated with what we have called awe.[39] Everyday aesthetics can have (should have!) a normative dimension in the sense of providing high points, things towards which it can aspire. It can aspire to increasing the pleasures and diminishing the pains in our lives not only quantitatively, as suggested by Melchionne's Bentham-like emphasis on hedonic regulation, but also by maximizing moments of awe. Moments of awe, however, are not activities or practices. This is true even though one can cultivate gaining these experiences, as in the Buddhist practice of mindfulness.

7. The "Garbage Moment"

The point of disagreement between Melchionne and me can be highlighted by looking at his discussion of taking out the garbage. He writes that this is "an everyday activity for nearly every one, but it is not typically an aesthetic activity. It would be bizarre to embellish it with ceremony." He admits it is possible to conceive of it aesthetically, but that "*what matters is not the logical possibility of a quality but, instead, its typicality.*"[40]

Agreed, taking out the trash is not typically considered an aesthetic activity or as something that can have a positive aesthetic quality. But should this exclude it from everyday aesthetics? One of my favorite comic strips, *Rose is Rose*, [41] frequently has one of the lead characters, the husband "Jimbo," experiencing what he calls his "garbage moment." When he takes out the garbage, he contemplates the stars, the universe, and life.

For him, taking out the garbage has a profound aesthetic character; perhaps it is sublime. Moreover, and because of this, there is a certain ceremonial quality to his taking out the garbage.

I agree with Melchionne that it would be bizarre to embellish taking out the garbage with an actual ceremony, for example, reading certain verses, lighting candles, or making it into something like the Japanese Tea Ceremony. However, it isn't bizarre to sometimes stop while taking out the garbage, look into the sky, and think about one's role in the universe. Nor is it just the thinking about the universe that provides the experience of awe. The awe of the "garbage moment" emerges from the experience as a whole.

Of course part of the experience is the irony that it involves something normally considered a lowly chore. After all, *Rose is Rose* is a comic strip, and it is somewhat funny that Jimbo has garbage moments. Still, humor does not exclude the aesthetic. Moreover, it is not clear that seeing taking out the garbage in an aesthetic way or in connection with an experience of awe is a bad thing.

In a similar way, Thich Nhat Hanh, following the tradition of Buddhism, encourages us to experience washing dishes through what he calls "mindfulness."^[42] "While washing the dishes one should only be washing the dishes, which means that while washing the dishes one should be completely aware of the fact that one is washing the dishes."^[43] This could be misinterpreted to mean that one should just concentrate on the truth of the proposition, "I am washing dishes." Rather, it means that one should be conscious of one's every action in washing dishes while washing dishes. Maybe one should be conscious of the dishes too, as they are part of the total experience, and of their aesthetic properties, although Hanh mentions nothing about this.^[44]

Similarly, in describing mindful drinking of

tea, Hanh writes, "Drink your tea slowly and reverently, as if it is the axis on which the whole earth revolves – slowly, evenly, without rushing toward the future. Live the actual moment. Only the actual moment is life." In my view, this way of drinking tea would allow one to concentrate on the aesthetic qualities of the tea, of the moment as experienced, and also of one's own actions.^[45] The aesthetic demand, like that of the Buddhist, is to notice the now...to live. As Hanh writes, "Drinking a cup of tea becomes a direct and wondrous experience in which the distinction between subject and object no longer exists."^[46] If that happens, the experience is not ordinary or common, and yet the ordinary is elevated and intensified.

Melchionne follows up his point about taking out garbage by stating that an everyday practice is not made aesthetic by some "counter-intuitive transfiguration or leap of creative re-invention," similar to what happened when Duchamp created *Fountain*. True, but nothing so counter-intuitive or avant-garde is needed to have a "garbage moment." Having a garbage moment is not a matter of turning something ordinary into a work of art.

Dewey urged us not only to notice the aesthetic properties of a great storm or a marvelous restaurant dinner but also the fire in a fireplace and the aesthetic satisfaction a mechanic takes in a job well done. In my book, I stressed the value of taking an aesthetic attitude towards such ordinary everyday things as shadows of trees on sidewalks. Sherri Irvin has similarly emphasized taking such an attitude towards, for example, observing her cat or even the way she sits and breathes.^[47] These latter things do not take us beyond the stream of daily life, but they do involve taking a different attitude towards that stream.^[48]

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, I have questioned Melchionne's and Naukkarinen's restriction of everyday aesthetics to "the aspects of our lives marked

by widely shared, daily routines or patterns to which we tend to impart an aesthetic character.”^[49] Although I admire that they have brought our attention to such things, I argue that things not so widely shared and not so daily, usual, or common may also fall under everyday aesthetics. An expansive definition of everyday aesthetics is needed because hedonic adjustment is not sufficient for subjective well-being; we also need moments of awe. This can be provided in part by aesthetic experiences of art and nature. However, if we take the path of Jimbo or Hanh, these moments of awe may also arise out of ordinary experiences of everyday life, given the right perspective or training. Let’s avoid everyday aesthetics as a mere third basket for things that are not art or nature. But also let’s not be too restrictive or too bound to the value of that which is easy and comfortable to recognize the value of the strange, the interesting, the fascinating, and the awesome in everyday life. Searching for this may make life, as Nietzsche would put it, worth living. If you define everyday aesthetics in a restrictive way you limit life itself.^[50]

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Endnotes

^[1] Thomas Leddy, *The Extraordinary in the*

Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 2012). One example of the position that stresses the ordinary is Arto Haapala, "On the Aesthetics the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness, and the Meaning of Place," in *Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, eds. Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 39–55. See also Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[2] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigree, 2005).

[3] Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," <http://virgil.org/dswo/courses/novel/wilde-lying.pdf>, accessed 6/9/15.

[4] See, for example, F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Winter Dreams," where one of his characters refers to another as "a great beauty." *Great Short Stories by Great American Writers*, ed. Thomas Fasano (United States: Coyote Canyon Press, 2011)

[5] Thomas Moore makes some interestingly parallel points from the perspective of a humanist psychologist. In his *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), he writes, "Ultimately, what most satisfies the soul is that which is captivating, spellbinding, and full of charms." (Moore, 189) His book, as the title shows, calls for a re-enchantment of everyday life, in which we find more of these satisfying things, through perceiving the world in a way that is more erotic, magical, enchanted, mythological, and ritualistic. Unlike those who would put ritual outside of everyday aesthetics, Moore wishes to bring it back in.

[6] Thomas Leddy, "Defending Everyday Aesthetics and The Concept of Pretty," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 10 (2012). <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=654>

[7] Sheila Lintott, "The Sublimity of Gestating and Giving Birth: Toward a Feminist Conception of the Sublime," in *Philosophical*

Inquiries Into Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Mothering: Maternal Subjects, eds. Sheila Lintott and Maureen Sander-Staudt (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 237–250.

[8] *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary*, *op. cit.*, Ch. 8: “Everyday Aesthetics and the Sublime.” See Paul Piff and Dacher Keltner, “Why do we experience awe?” *New York Times*, May 24, 2015, Sunday Review section. I want to thank Russell Quacchia for bringing this article to my attention. See also, Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt “Approaching Awe, a Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion. Cognition and Emotion” *Cognition and Emotion* 17 (2003), 297–314.

[9] Kevin Melchionne, “The Definition of Everyday Aesthetics,” *Contemporary Aesthetics*, vol. 11 (2013); Ossi Naukkarinen, “What is ‘Everyday’ in Everyday Aesthetics?” *Contemporary Aesthetics*, vol. 11 (2013).

[10] Melchionne (2013), 1.

[11] I owe this term to a comment by Melchionne.

[12] Naukkarinen, 2.

[13] Naukkarinen, 3.

[14] Naukkarinen, 1.

[15] Several current researchers in everyday aesthetics have entered these larger realms. Melchionne, in “The Point of Everyday Aesthetics,” *Contemporary Aesthetics*, vol. 12 (2014), for example, holds that enhancement of subjective wellbeing is the point of everyday aesthetics. Similarly, I have stressed the importance of happiness in my “Everyday Aesthetics and Happiness,” *Aesthetics of Everyday Life: West and East*, ed. Liu Yuedi and Curtis Carter (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

[16] It should be noted that Naukkarinen, *op. cit.*, unlike Melchionne, includes our work lives under everyday aesthetics.

[17] See Arnold Berleant and Richard

Shusterman on ways in which sexual behavior can have an aesthetic dimension: Berleant, Arnold, "The Sensuous and the Sensual in Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 23, 2 (1964), 185–192.

Shusterman, Richard, "Asian Ars Erotica and the Question of Sexual Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 65 (2007), 55–68.

[18] Melchionne, 2013, 2b. Naukkarinen, *op. cit.*, seems more open to including this kind of activity under everyday aesthetics.

[19] George Dickie, *Aesthetics: An Introduction* (Indianapolis: Pegasus, Bobbs-Merrill 1971), p. 101.

[20] Melchionne, 2013, 2b.

[21] *Ibid.*, 2c

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] For example, Allen Carlson, "Appreciation and the Natural Environment," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 37, 3 (1979), 267–275.

[25] Yuriko Saito has mentioned to me two nice examples: Frank Lloyd Wright's windows without any frame in Taliesin (many of these windows have incorporated stained glass designs) and Katsura Detached Villa (also called Palace), Japan, which features a window frame in a decorative shape, adding a layer of aesthetic appreciation.

[26] Kevin Melchionne, *op. cit.*, 2014.

[27] See Piff and Keltner *op. cit.* "Why do we experience awe?" Psychology journalist Anna Mikulak notes that "in two studies, Van Cappellen and colleagues (2014) found that self-transcendent positive emotions, including awe, mediated the observed association between religiosity/spirituality and well-being." Anna Mikulak, "All about Awe: Science Explores how Life's Small Marvels Elevate Cognition and Emotion," *Observer*, 28,

4 (2015).

<http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/publications/observer/2015/april-15/all-about-awe.html>

[28] Melchionne, 2014, 4.

[29] "Awe" *Dictionary.com*, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/awe>, accessed 6/8/2015.

[30] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) Section IV, "Of Delight and Pleasure, as Opposed to Each Other," pp. 33–34.

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] As in R. Plutchik's wheel of emotions in "Contrasting and Categorization of Emotions," *Wikipedia* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Contrasting_and_categorization_of_emotions#Plutchik.27s_wheel_of_emotions, accessed 7/15/2015).

[33] Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), Stephen Davies, *The Artful Species* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.)

[34] Piff and Keltner, *op. cit.*

[35] Although it should be noted that in the eighteenth century, philosophers like Schiller thought that sensitivity to beauty made one more moral.

[36] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, tr. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (Project Gutenberg, Posting date 2013), Conclusion. <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5683>, accessed 8/28/2015.

[37] Piff and Keltner, *op. cit.*

[38] Whether goose bumps are either necessary or sufficient for experiences of awe is open to question, but will not be discussed here.

[39] For my take on Dewey on “an experience,” see *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary*, *op. cit.*, pp. 57–58.

[40] Melchionne, 2013, 2d.

[41] By Don Wimmer and Pat Brady, which I usually read in the *San Jose Mercury News*.

[42] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, tr. Mobi Ho (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[44] Yuriko Saito has observed to me that Zen practice similarly does not discriminate against such lowly activities as washing floors or cleaning oneself. The twelfth-century Japanese Zen priest Dōgen left writings regarding these practices in *Shōbōgenzō: The True Dharma-Eye Treasury*, Volume I (Taishō Volume 82, Number 2582), tr. Gudo Wafu Nishijima and Chodo Cross (Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai and Numata Center for Buddhist Translation, 2007), which can be found at https://www.bdkamerica.org/digital/dBET_T2582_Shobogenzo1_2009.pdf, accessed 7/16/15.

[45] Richard Shusterman similarly interprets Buddhism in this aesthetic way in his “Somaesthetic Awakening and the Art of Living Everyday Aesthetics in American Transcendentalism and Japanese Zen Practice,” in *Thinking Through the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 2012).


[46] Hanh, *op. cit.*, 42.

[47] Sherri Irvin, “The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic in Ordinary Experience,” *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 48,1 (2009), 29–44.

[48] Again, Thomas Moore, *op. cit.*, goes in the other direction, attempting to re-incorporate festival, magic, and mythology into everyday life.

[49] Melchionne, 2013, 3.

[50] I want to thank Kevin Melchionne, Ossi



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