The Point of Everyday Aesthetics

Kevin Melcionne
kevin@kevinmelchionne.com

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Abstract
The point of everyday aesthetic activity is well-being.

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1. Introduction

Recent publications in everyday aesthetics have generated discussion about the definition and description of everyday aesthetic experience.[1] Long animated by off-beat observations about familiar yet rarely analyzed activities, the field of everyday aesthetics has recently moved in a more theoretical direction. Despite great progress in conceptualizing the everyday, attempts at sharper definitions and richer ontologies of the everyday aesthetic realm still leave the question of value unaddressed. Even if we develop a concept of everyday aesthetics that squares with our intuitions about the core of everyday aesthetic life, we are left with the question of its value.

It is conceivable that everyday aesthetic practices have no significant impact on our lives in spite of their pervasiveness. Perhaps everyday aesthetic practices are too ephemeral or superficial to have an impact. From this perspective, they are common but unimportant[2] while, by contrast, works in the fine arts merit our attention because they reflect skill and insight. They are also followed by critics and audiences, demonstrating a richness and complexity that can sustain those audiences. We observe lively debates, academic study, publications, and events centered around fine art. By contrast, most everyday aesthetic activities do not inspire critical reflection or art historical study. Rarely do they reflect great skill or insight. They are pursued in private and, when there is a public conversation, it is largely consumerist. Everyday aesthetic practices only merit the attention of critics, aestheticians, or laypeople when, as the line of argument goes, the practices have been transfigured or, in other words, redefined by being placed in a fine art context like a gallery or novel. There, everyday practices finally generate the kinds of attention appropriate to public culture.

When so much evident aesthetic value can be secured by a vigorous engagement with the fine arts, why should we, as individuals as much as aestheticians, take anything more than a casual interest in the aesthetics of everyday life? Why would one try to improve or change it? What does everyday aesthetic engagement offer that is substantially more valuable than engagement in the fine arts? In other words, what is the point of everyday aesthetic activity?

Before answering this question, I would like to clarify the definition of everyday aesthetics at work here. Everyday

aesthetics denotes "the aspects of our lives marked by widely shared, daily routines or patterns to which we tend to impart an aesthetic character."[3] Everyday aesthetic activities are ongoing, familiar practices with potential though not necessary aesthetic features. One may choose to impart or impute aesthetic quality to these practices but are not obliged to. For example, one has the opportunity to dress with flair but may simply throw on the closest pair of old trousers.

There are five main areas for everyday aesthetic practice: food, wardrobe, dwelling, conviviality, and going out (running errands or commuting). Importantly, not all activities construed as vernacular are everyday activities. Ongoing activities, like cleaning or cooking, are part of the everyday, unlike feasts or interior decoration, which occur seasonally, at most, or once every several years. Finally, everyday aesthetics emphasize activities rather than objects. It is the ongoing nature of the practice, not the genre of the object, say, folk or mass-produced, that makes for the everyday.

The view presented here is that the point of everyday aesthetics is subjective well-being (SWB). Now it is a truism that the promotion of well-being counts among the purposes of art. Some readers may find it harsh or bizarre to argue that, at least for non-artists, the fine arts are not especially suited to promoting SWB. But as we shall see, everyday aesthetic activities promote SWB more effectively than the fine arts because of their distinctive features. In what follows, I will offer a brief account of SWB derived from the literature of positive psychology. Then, I will examine everyday aesthetics in the light of this characterization.

2. The concept of subjective well-being

I will not run through the many debates that animate the field of positive psychology. The view I outline here is drawn from key researchers and will be sufficient for the purposes of situating the value of everyday aesthetics.[4]

Well-being arises when individuals 1) enjoy a steady flow of positive feelings; 2) have few negative ones; 3) are satisfied in their main pursuits, such as work and relationships; and 4) give their lives overall positive evaluations. The high incidence of positive emotion, low negative emotion, satisfaction in key domains, and positive overall assessments are four distinct factors in well-being. When individuals describe themselves positively in these four areas, they tend also to describe themselves as happy. Unhappy people are less likely to reply affirmatively in these areas.

Positive emotions help us see life as satisfying on the whole. In addition, having positive emotions today is likely to generate positive emotions in the future, compounding in an upward spiral.[5] Positive states of mind benefit other domains, like work and relationships. Positive feelings encourage creativity and exploration and help us deal better with difficulty. When met with positive interpretations, even events causing stress tend to increase subjective well-being. Negative states, on the other hand, like anxiety and depression, tend to narrow attention, decrease effectiveness, and lower SWB.[6]

Well-being exists in a dynamic equilibrium, that is, a range

that may vary over time but does not stay at the extremes for long. We may rise to euphoria or sink to depression because of the outcomes of our endeavors, but we typically adapt to changes in circumstances so that good and bad emotions eventually run their course. We tend to return to our preexisting hedonic range.[7] Positive emotions from time to time are not likely to increase SWB. To have an impact, positive emotions must be ongoing, generating further positive emotions, lifting us consistently to the higher end of our hedonic range.[8] As we tend to adapt to the causes of positive or negative affect, we must continually seek new sources of positive experience to remain at the higher end of our hedonic range.

3. Influencing subjective well-being

The term *hedonic treadmill*, which is sometimes used pejoratively, stands for the varied processes by which individuals seek to increase or maintain positive affect. [9] Hedonic regulation can involve, for instance, selecting the situations we put ourselves in, modifying them, determining the strength and nature of our attention, controlling responses, and determining our attitudes. Part of what is sometimes called "emotional intelligence" is the ability to regulate mood and spend more time at the higher end of our hedonic range. However, it is not easy to improve levels of well-being. Much of SWB depends on temperament, that is, our hard-wired psychobiological dispositions. We are all predisposed to certain cognitive patterns that either support or undermine a sense of well-being. Also, our circumstances, that is, our work, relationships, living arrangements, and finances matter. When they can be improved, well-being is likely to increase. However, circumstances are not easily improved. Life-altering improvements in circumstances, like a new home or job, may boost well-being in the short term but the effect typically fades.[10] Over the long-term, circumstances tend not to change very often. Thus, circumstances are not a good target for sustained improvements in well-being. What is left is activity, what we do on an everyday basis.[11]

Activities are the best way to engage the hedonic treadmill because:

a) They are ongoing and accessible.

b) We can change them. By changing the time, effort, focus, or environment for an activity, affective adaptation can be minimized. In this way, we can achieve the satisfaction on a regular basis while avoiding the routinization that tends to push us back down to the lower end of our hedonic range.

c) They are self-concordant. Activities allow us to pursue self-generated personal goals that are important to who we are and that we can personally endorse as good and valuable. The activity has to fit the traits and circumstances of the individual, squaring with larger goals, motivations, interests, talents, and values. Individuals who engage in activities that do not mesh with their circumstances or engage their traits are less likely to improve SWB, even if they are successful. Activities with these features are more likely to generate the upward spiral toward the higher part of our hedonic range.

When living in distressed circumstances whose improvement is unlikely, such as imprisonment or disability, individuals must rely heavily on activities in order to improve SWB. And where improved circumstances are to some extent possible, like post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, or poverty, the distressed benefit from the positive emotions generated from self-controlled and self-concordant activity. Although the activities themselves may not solve problems, they reduce anxiety and depression while increasing focus and efficacy. In turn, the improved mood achieved through activity may help individuals face the larger challenges in their lives.[12] In this way, self-concordant activities often play a valuable compensatory role in our inevitably difficult lives. For individuals who do not have the opportunity to pursue activities due, say, to overwork, improvement in subjective well-being is unlikely.

4. Well-being and everyday aesthetics, and the fine arts

With this exposition, we are in a better position to see why SWB is crucial to understanding the value of everyday aesthetics: Everyday aesthetic practices can promote well-being because they are typically ongoing activities marked by self-control and self-concordance. Now our everyday lives are filled with attempts at hedonic regulation. Indeed, any everyday activity has a chance to influence SWB merely by virtue of being an activity. Among the means of hedonic regulation, everyday aesthetic activities just happen to be the ones suited for aesthetically motivated people. Everyday aesthetic practices, like food preparation or wardrobe choices, are self-concordant and self-controlled. Individuals determine whether and in what way they will pursue them. Everyday aesthetic practices determine the degree and direction of the aesthetic attention and, in this way, facilitate the hedonic regulation crucial for well-being.

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. Fine art activities are intermittent for all but the makers and some attendant professionals. In contrast, everyday aesthetic activities are practiced by nearly all as a matter of everyday life. The ongoing yet flexible nature of everyday aesthetic practice is conducive to hedonic regulation.

We come full circle to the original objection to everyday aesthetics, namely that it lacks value relative to the fine arts. When well-being is brought to the foreground, everyday aesthetic practice turns out to be rich in possibilities while the fine arts seem challenged as a framework for human flourishing, except perhaps for the artists themselves. Although the fine arts present opportunities in the public sphere for cognitively and morally complex experiences, everyday aesthetics offers ongoing, self-controlled, and self-concordant activities that support well-being.

The shift to SWB as a value for our aesthetic lives has other implications. The emphasis on well-being may radically change how we think about art. For instance, when it comes to SWB, it is the quality of practice *as an activity* that matters rather than the quality of the artistic product. At times the

absorption of the maker in an activity will figure more prominently than the quality of the product he or she produces. From the perspective of SWB, there is no necessary relation between the quality of the activity and the quality of the product. Practices that challenge yet still permit mastery are more likely to generate well-being than practices that are too easy to engage us or are so difficult they lead only to frustration. However, these features pertain more to the quality of the engagement, not the product.

SWB also changes how we think of aesthetic competency. For SWB, we are aesthetically competent if we know what activities and experiences lift us to the higher end of our hedonic range and if we are capable of arranging our lives to secure this satisfaction. We are aesthetically incompetent if we continue to engage in activities that do not lift us higher in our hedonic range, even if the product of that effort is viewed as an excellent work of art. From the standpoint of SWB, aesthetic value is about more than the cogency of judgments of taste. What matters most is not that we get the judgments "right" but that we engage in activities that push us to the higher end of our hedonic range.

SWB theory tells us that, if one does not pursue art as an ongoing, self-controlled, self-concordant activity, it will not influence well-being. Excellence in art is not a factor. It is all fine and good that there are dissonant musical compositions, novels of abjection, and sprawling gallery installations of detritus. Such art often offers engaging intellectual and moral challenges for audiences through the negative emotions that it generates. The art may be appealing on many levels, but what makes art support well-being is the quality of our engagement with it. The intermittent *consumption* of intellectually challenging art probably will not influence well-being one way or the other. But quite likely, as an autonomous and self-concordant activity, the *creation* of such work will deeply and positively influence the well-being of its makers.

5. Conclusion: the politics of everyday aesthetics

The theory of everyday aesthetics stands at the intersection of philosophical aesthetics and cultural studies. Researchers in cultural studies tend to work in a more political framework, and some readers may jump to the conclusion that I am advocating a conception of art as therapy in place of an intellectually and politically challenging public culture. A still harsher complaint is that by focusing on happiness at the expense of social justice, I am somehow making everyday aesthetics complicit in maintaining the status quo of an unjust society.[13]

As harsh as it sounds, this kind of sparring is routine in cultural studies. Whenever empirical research suggests that modest, apolitical adjustments in our lives may improve them independently of broad social changes, we can be assured of a certain leftist academic objection that takes the empirical findings as an expression of complacency in the face of social injustice. Ironically, in these debates, decades of empirical, tested and retested research get labeled as "ideological" while the untested assumptions of the academic left are affirmed merely because of their political stripes.

From its outset in the groundbreaking work of Horkheimer and Adorno, cultural studies has been politically charged by its Marxist roots, its identification with the left and, by the 1980s, identity politics.[14] Analysis in cultural studies often aims to show that cultural practices are inflected by hegemonic structures of class, race, gender, and so forth. Individual agency, including aesthetic practices, must be construed within the context of the hegemonic structure.[15] Now any critique of hegemonic structures presupposes a conception of human flourishing, even if only an intuitive one, otherwise the critique itself would not be possible. However, the psychology of human flourishing baked into critique has gone unexamined. When first acknowledging mass culture, Horkheimer and Adorno did not have an empirically based theory of human flourishing and the standpoint for their critique was intuitive. This lack of scientific understanding of human well-being persisted into the 1990s. Today, however, we are lucky to be working in the wake of a huge wave of empirical research on human flourishing. Though not without differences at the margins, the findings of this field are robust and hard to ignore. They should be a prime tool for academics claiming to identify and promote cultural values. It is an unflattering comment on philosophical aesthetics and cultural studies that so many exciting developments in empirical psychology are simply ignored as if they had never happened.

Over the past thirty years, researchers on SWB have not discovered a significant role for higher income or standard of living in SWB. This was not for a lack of trying. Early studies of well-being tested unsuccessfully for objective conditions like income and standard of living only to discover that, after basic needs are met, greater income and higher standards of living do not significantly improve well-being.[16] Ultimately, the whole field of happiness studies emerged as an attempt to make sense of this surprising finding. Research shifted from external to internal factors or, in other words, how dispositions, inner resources, and coping tendencies support well-being.[17] Aestheticians and cultural theorists working today have the chance to make empirically-based claims about the real sources of well-being through culture. If it turns out that non-political factors can reliably improve the lives of members of politically marginal groups, it would be a real disservice to those people for academics of any political orientation to continue to pretend otherwise.

Kevin Melchionne
kevin@kevinmelchionne.com

Kevin Melchionne paints and writes aesthetics. More information about his work can be found at www.kevinmelchionne.com and independent.academia.edu/KevinMelchionne.

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Endnotes

[1] Kevin Melchionne, “The Definition of Everyday Aesthetics,” and Ossi Naukkarinen, “What is 'Everyday' in Everyday

Aesthetics?" both appear in *Contemporary Aesthetics*,11 (2013), www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/journal.php. Thomas Leddy, "Defending Everyday Aesthetics and the Concept of 'Pretty,'" *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 10 (2012), and, Wood Roberdeau, "Affirming Difference: Everyday Aesthetic Experience after Phenomenology" in Volume 9 of the same journal. The best comprehensive account remains Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press), 2008.

[2] Christopher Dowling, "The Aesthetics of Daily Life," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 50:3 (2010), 225-242.

[3] Melchionne, "Definition of Everyday Aesthetics."

[4] For instance, the widely read synthetic account of Martin Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*, (New York: Free Press, 2011). For additional overviews of the research, see Ed Diener, Eunkook M. Suh, Richard E. Lucas, and Heidi L. Smith, "Subjective Well Being: Three Decades of Progress," *Psychological Bulletin*, 125:2 (1999), 276-302; and Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "On Happiness and Human Potentials: A Review of Research on Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being," *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52 (2001), 141-66.

[5] Barbara L. Fredrickson and Thomas Joiner, "Positive Emotions Trigger Upward Spirals Toward Emotional Well-Being," *Psychological Science*, 13:2 (March 2002), 172-75.

[6] There is an enormous body of literature here. For instance, Michael A. Cohn, Barbara L. Fredrickson, Stephanie L. Brown, Joseph A. Mikels, and Anne M. Conway, "Happiness unpacked: positive emotions increase life satisfaction by building resilience," *Emotion*, 9:3 (June 2009), 361-8.

[7] Bruce Headey and A. Wearing, "Personality, Life Events, and Subjective Wellbeing: Toward a Dynamic Equilibrium Model?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57 (1989), 731–9.

[8] Fredrickson and Joiner, "Positive Emotions Trigger Upward Spirals Toward Emotional Well-Being."

[9]James J. Gross, "The Emerging Field of Emotion Regulation: An Integrative Review," *Review of General Psychology*, 2:5 (1998), 271-299.

[10] Diener et al., "Subjective Well Being: Three Decades of Progress," p. 279; and Michael Argyle, "Causes and Correlates of Happiness," In Daniel Kahneman, Ed Diener, & N. Schwarz (Eds.), *Well-being: The foundations of hedonic psychology* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), pp. 353-373.

[11] Kennon M. Sheldon & Sonia Lyubomirsky, "Achieving Sustainable Gains in Happiness: Change for Actions, Not your Circumstances," *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 7 (2006), 55-86.

[12] Fredrickson and Joiner, "Positive Emotions Trigger Upward Spirals toward Emotional Well-Being," and Christopher G. Davis, Susan Nolen-Hoeksema and Judith Larson, "Making

Sense of Loss and Benefiting from the Experience: Two Construals of Meaning," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75:2 (Aug 1998), 561-574.

[13] Special thanks to the anonymous peer reviewer for making this claim.

[14] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1949), John Cumming, trans., (New York: Continuum, 1972). For the early history of cultural studies, see Patrick Brantlinger, *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983) and *Crusoe's Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America*, (New York: Routledge, 1990).

[15] For the crucial shift to the concept of hegemony in cultural studies in the 1970s and 80s, see Tony Bennett, "Foreword," *Popular Culture and Social Relations* eds. T. Bennett, C. Mercer, and J. Woolacott (London: Open University Press, 1986), p. xiv. In the context of French post-structuralism, Michel de Certeau's influential distinction between strategies and tactics in *L'invention du quotidien, vol 1. arts de faire* (1980) (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), pp. 43-68.

[16] For instance, the influential article by Paul T. Costa, Robert R. McCrae, and Alan B. Zonderman, "Environmental and Dispositional Influences on Well-being: Longitudinal Follow-up of an American National Sample," *British Journal of Psychology*, 78 (1987), 299-306.

[17] For defense of subjective over objective measures of happiness, see Myers, D. G., & Diener, E. "Who is happy?" *Psychological Science*, 6 (1995), 10-19.