**Everyday aesthetics, happiness, and depression**

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**Abstract**

This chapter will introduce everyday aesthetics and conceptions of happiness, explore their interconnections, and indicate some ways they might relate to depression. I introduce the main claims and concerns of everyday aesthetics and illustrate these with examples from the Indian, Chinese, and Japanese philosophical traditions. I then consider two popular accounts of happiness – ‘hedonic’ and ‘life-satisfaction’ theories – and offer an alternative phenomenological account of happiness. Aesthetic appreciation and agency and happiness, it is argued, depend on a phenomenologically fundamental capacity to experience different kinds of significant possibility. It is the loss or disruption of that capacity which characterises experiences of depression.

**Keywords**

Aesthetic appreciation, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, depression, everyday aesthetics, happiness, psychiatry, Shinto

**Preliminaries.**

This chapter will introduce everyday aesthetics and conceptions of happiness, explore their interconnections, and indicate some ways they might relate to depression. Each topic is large and complex and can be connected to the others in a variety of ways, some obvious and others not. Some connections are well-served by the literature, such as the idea that certain kinds of aesthetic experience can contribute to our happiness, while others tend to be rather neglected. Moreover, each topic admits of cross-cultural variation. What is these days called ‘the aesthetics of the everyday’ is credited to East Asian traditions, especially those of Japan (Saito 2007, Yuedi and Carter 2014). Subsequent work has identified allied themes in the Western philosophical tradition, however, as well as from garden designers, cosmetologists, craftspeople, potters, gastronomes, and others professionally concerned with aesthetically significant aspects of life (Leddy 2012, Light and Smith 2005).

We find similar complexities in the term ‘depression’, which includes a variety of predicaments with different aetiologies, symptoms, prognoses, and treatment pathways. A discussion of these issues is offered in [chapter x of this volume]. Mental health conditions are also phenomenologically diverse, subject to competing theoretical descriptions, and in many cases acquire cultural and moral meanings. Since any general discussion of mental health would collapse into banality, I focus on the variety of predicaments which typically receive diagnoses of major depression. Using work in phenomenological psychopathology, I argue that experiences of depression involve changes in the ability to experience kinds of significant possibilities. The experiential world of the person diagnosed with depression is therefore structurally different: possibilities and kinds of significance we more ordinarily take-for-granted are no longer available – something communicated in the familiar rhetoric of the world seeming ‘strange’, ‘different’ in a way that is hard to describe, but often characterised as ‘dark’, ‘cold’, and in other ways diminished. This conception of depression has important implications for aesthetic experience and happiness, for each of these presuppose our ability to experience kinds of significant possibilities (the experience of something as beautiful, interesting, pleasing, satisfying, and so on). If so, then aesthetic experience and the attainment of happiness presupposes something necessarily lost in the experience of depression.

**Everyday aesthetics.**

‘Everyday aesthetics’ is a recent development in academic philosophical aesthetics, albeit well-established within east Asian cultural traditions and, perhaps, implicit in the everyday life of many people innocent of aesthetic theory. Most advocates of everyday aesthetics devote time to explaining its neglect within the history of Western philosophical aesthetics, at least since the emergence of ‘aesthetics’ as a distinct discipline in the eighteenth century. Gradually, the scope of aesthetics shrank to the fine arts, essentially making aesthetics the philosophy of art. Fortunately, expansions of aesthetic attention during the twentieth century led to a reconsideration of the occluded possibilities. A decisive expansion was environmental aesthetics, initially focused on natural environments but later including the built environment. Over time, environmental and everyday aesthetics became allied and often conjoined: much of our everyday aesthetic life includes appreciation of the natural environment, of weather, plants, animals, forests, and so on (on this alliance, see Saito 2007: ch.2 and Carlson 2020). Much of the contemporary interest owes to the work of Yuriko Saito, especially her book, *Everyday Aesthetics*, which identifies two main culprits for its neglect: *art-centred aesthetics* and *special experience-based aesthetics*, like those fixated on rare, spectacular experiences, especially of the sublime (Saito 2007: Part I).

**Art-centred aesthetics**.

Art-centred aesthetics is animated by the idea of art as ‘the quintessential model for an aesthetic object’, a stance either explicitly defended, as by Hegel, or implicitly adopted as a taken-for-granted focus (Saito 2007, 13). A turning point was John Dewey’s book *Art and Experience* of 1934, which celebrated aesthetic activities that enhanced ‘the processes of everyday life’, while challenging ‘the museum conception of art’, which fixated on art works, displayable in museums or galleries (Dewey 1934). Dewey challenged the ‘fallacy’ that ‘art and the aesthetic must *necessarily* be something separate from ordinary everyday modes of experience and activity’ (Leddy and Puolakka 2021, §2.2). Aestheticians should challenge a confinement of the aesthetic to art, and the attitude that art appreciation alone counts as ‘serious’ (Hepburn 2001).

Everyday aesthetics does not deny the significance of the arts. Many of its champions voice their own appreciation of many arts and, moreover, many take inspiration from the important east Asian concept of a Way (Chinese *dào*, Japanese *dō*). Ways include what in the West would be classed as crafts, the fine and martial arts, and kinds of aesthetic practice usually regarded as hobbies, such as cosmetics and the presentation of food. In the Chinese and Japanese philosophical traditions, Ways are embodied, aesthetically-charged, morally-infused practices, acting as forms of ‘bio-spiritual cultivation’ (Kirkland 2004, 33). It is attention to these Ways that helps challenge what Saito calls the ‘narrowing’ effects of art-centred aesthetics, uncritical adoption of which limits our sense of the ‘reach’ and the significance of the aesthetic (Saito 2007, 13-14ff). In practice, one could inherit and endorse narrow conceptions of the following:

1. *aesthetic activities*
2. *aesthetic objects*
3. *aesthetic qualities*
4. *aesthetic appreciation* – as, say, disinterested, spectatorial, episodic, something we do ‘at’ special performances under special conditions, while setting aside practical and other interests.

Everyday aestheticians challenge (a) a narrow focus on these activities, objects, qualities, and modes of appreciation and (b) secondary or derogatory status given to a wider range of alternative aesthetic activities – cosmetics, perfumery, sports, cooking. Most also challenge the paradigmatic status assigned to the fine arts. In issuing these challenges, everyday aesthetics also resists the culturally and historically narrow scope of art-centred aesthetics. A common complaint is that ‘what has been regarded as mainstream aesthetics is based upon art and its experience turns out to be specific to, and circumscribed by, the practice primarily of the last two centuries in the West’ (Saito 2001, 12 – cf. Higgins 2017).

One important argument for an inclusion of the everyday into aesthetics concerns the fact that many everyday-aesthetic activities, objects, and qualities are ‘inescapable’ (Papanek 1995, 175). Food, home décor, signage, packaging, and self-presentation, to name but a few, are ubiquitous: they are available to (almost) everyone and depend on aesthetic abilities and sensibilities almost everyone has. If so, everyday aesthetics both reflects and embodies what Saito calls ‘aesthetic egalitarianism’ (Saito 1999; cf. Light and Smith 2005, chs. 8 to 11). Crispin Sartwell, too, endorses the attempt to liberate aesthetic experiences from ‘extraordinary moments and extraordinary places’, the ideal being ‘immersion in the world’ (Sartwell 1995, xi).

Everyday aesthetics therefore acts as a critique of the forms of ‘narrowing’ characteristic of the forms of art-centred aesthetics that dominated philosophical aesthetics. There is also the positive aspiration: to establish – or restore – a more expansive sense of our aesthetic experience and activity. In doing so, everyday aesthetics expands our sense of the *roles* that aesthetic concerns and activities play in everyday life. Food, for instance, can be a source of pleasure, a display of skills, a demonstration of love, a means of sustaining familial bonds, an exercise of religious discipline, and so on. Successfully fulfilling these aims often depends on the aesthetics of the preparation, presentation, and consumption of the food. Moreover, an aesthetics of the everyday can reveal connections between putatively distinct spheres of value, like ‘aesthetic’ and ‘moral’ (a distinction that is not integral to east Asian traditions in which an aesthetics of the everyday is dominant). A good example is ideal of *care* – for our bodies and those of others, the activities and objects of everyday life, and domestic, social, and natural environments. Saito argues that ‘the care relationship’ is related to ‘our moral life’ and ‘how we conduct ourselves in the world’ (Saito 2022, 132). Once caregiving actions, such as washing and tidying, are carefully appreciated, one sees how aesthetic-moral values are ‘deeply entrenched in the management of our daily life’ and integral to ‘the ethical and aesthetic mode of being in the world’ (Saito 2022, 2).

**Some examples of everyday aesthetics.**

Everyday aesthetics challenges various entrenched convictions of philosophical aesthetics. Importantly, though, its champions insist that its main claims about the scope of aesthetic experience and activity are quite consistent with the everyday experience and life of most people. An optimistic conviction of most everyday aestheticians is that most of us enjoy a far richer aesthetic life than is recognised by art-centred theories.

Consider, then, some of the typical examples of the richly textured aesthetic character of everyday life – a combination of *activities* and *objects*, including places and creatures:

* animals
* architecture
* clothing
* cosmetics
* doodling
* flower arranging
* food
* gardens
* home décor
* knitting
* listening to birdsong
* manners and etiquette
* packaging
* singing
* table setting
* the weather

This list includes many kinds of things: arts and crafts, environmental features, aspects of self-stylisation, interpersonal social performances – some universal, others culturally or historically specific – some are human practices, others natural phenomena, while others, like gardening, depend on intimate cooperation between the cultural and the natural (see Cooper 2006). Crucially, they are not confined to those ‘environments that we “visit” and … images that we behold’ (Saito 2007, 51).

Consider, now, some typical examples of the *aesthetic qualities* invoked in everyday aesthetics, both ‘positive’ and ‘negative’:

* apt
* correct
* cute
* dilapidated
* disgusting
* dowdy
* elegant
* gnarled
* grimy
* immaculate
* inviting
* mellow
* ornate
* ostentatious
* pristineness
* ramshackle
* spotless
* squalid

Such aesthetic qualities are complex; they are integral to our evaluative practices, and in some cases relate to wider concerns about hygiene, moral character, self-respect, even religious and political identity (cf. Leddy 1995, 2012; Saito 2007, chs. 4 and 5). The aesthetics of character, conduct, and self-presentation are good examples of the interfusion of the aesthetic and the moral (Sherman 2005). We can also include kinds of *sensation*. Materials, such as surfaces or textiles, could be harsh, rough, smooth, squidgy, ‘soft like satin’, or ‘icky’. Many combine visual and tactile qualities, sometimes aural qualities, too. Multimodal qualities, like squelchiness, might involve many different qualities (Irvin 2008, Leddy 1995). Such qualities are integral to our experiences of artefacts: a comfy chair, soft cotton jumper, the hum of a washing machine. We can also include less specific kinds of aesthetic description. If a person is praised as ‘well-put-together’, one is describing their bodily appearance, odour, comportment, and sartorial choices (cf. Novitz 1992).

**East Asian aesthetics of the everyday.**

East Asian traditions of China and Japan are ‘home’ to the most carefully-articulated, best-developed examples of everyday aesthetics. One can also find similar themes in Buddhism, which later became integral to the development of the Japanese Zen tradition.

Consider some examples:

1. *Indian Buddhism*.

The Buddha praises ‘wholesome’ (*kusala*) actions, behaviours, and mental states, those which enhance one’s bodily, mental, and moral condition (see *Majjhima Nikaya* 46-47). Wholesomeness is achieved by following the disciplined ways of acting defined by the Eightfold Path and, for monks and nuns, the *Vinaya Pitaka*, the regulations for monastic life. Buddhist monastic practice aspires to transform one into a wholesome character, incorporating kinds of aesthetically pleasing appearance and comportment. Beauty for a monk, explains the Buddha, consists in their perfect habits, right conduct, and restraint (*Digha Nikāya* 26). Beautiful comportment manifests those virtues constitutive of wholesomeness and, ultimately, conductive to enlightenment. Its features include a ‘charisma’ or ‘energy’, ‘radiating outwards’, which the Buddha nicely compared to the scent of a flower or perfume (*Dhammapada* 55-56 – cf. McGhee 2000: 183). This extends to monastic appearance, clothing, interpersonal conduct, and micro-behaviours such as one they eat, talk, beg alms, chant, and meditate (Cooper 2017, Kidd 2017, Mrozick 2007). By manifesting this wholesome comportment, monks can ‘go forth beautifully’ and ‘attract the people’s hearts’ to the holy life (Samuels 2010: 78-79).

1. *Confucianism.*

Central to the moral teachings of Confucius is ‘ritual’ (*lǐ*), a rich concept encompassing not only formal and religious practices, but the whole range of everyday actions and behaviours. The scope of ritual includes ways of greeting guests, caring for the elderly, conversing with friends, and any personal and public comportment. Indeed, an enthusiastic discipline is advised not to walk, talk, or speak ‘unless it is in accordance with the rituals’ (*Analects* 12.1). Ritual conduct involves disciplined physical performance of morally virtuous actions – humble gestures, say, or respectful countenance, and these behaviours are conceived as ‘somaesthetic expressions of … moral dispositions’ (Mullis 2017: 144). Confucius, who acts as a model and theoretician of ritual, emphasises that ritual conduct is ‘beautiful’ and ‘harmonious’, comparable to dance and music (Fu and Wang 2016, Li 2010, ch.1). Like dance, consummate ritual conduct is a smooth and graceful means of conducting oneself in constant responsiveness to people, who are expected to reciprocate in turn (Gier 2001, Kim 2006). Like music, ritual conduct should be spontaneous and authentic, not mechanical repetition, and involves ‘training in a certain ethico-aesthetic character’ (Kim-Chong 1998, 70).

1. *Zen Buddhism*.

Japanese tradition features various ‘ways’ (*dō*), such as *chadō* (the Way of tea) and *jūdō* (the gentle Way). Ways are practices of self-cultivation; they cultivate and express virtuous dispositions and sensibilities, enhancing our physical and moral health and lending beauty to our actions. Ways include everyday practices usually performed in everyday environments – such as cooking or caring for a garden – and this reflects the Zen emphasis on *practice* as a means to enlightenment, rather than doctrine (cf. James 2004, 98). For D.T. Suzuki, what influenced Japanese tradition was ‘the atmosphere emanating from Zen’, not its doctrines, like ‘emptiness’ (Suzuki 1973: 362). Everyday activities – sweeping the floor, grinding rice, folding one’s sleeping mattress – can each express humility, naturalness, and spontaneity (Parkes and Loughnane 2018). Moreover, Zen appreciation of nature, too, focuses on simple, undramatic thing. Dōgen found that the grass swaying in the wind or the croaking of a frog can ‘expound the profound dharma (Dōgen 1995, 146). ‘Nothing special’, a Zen motto, emphasises the possibility of enlightenment in the most ordinary of experiences: ‘the moon and the flowers will guide you’, says the poet Ryōkan, not the grandiose achievements of ‘the fleeting world’ (Ryōkan 2001, 23).

1. *Shinto*.

Shinto, often called Japan’s indigenous religion, shares an appreciation of the moral and aesthetic significance of everyday experiences and practices (Carter 2008). ‘Religion’ may be misleading, prompting one influential scholar to characterise is as an ‘existential spirituality’ (Kasulis 2004, 44 and 69). Central to Shinto are *kami*, supernatural beings who inhabit objects, natural forces, and landscapes, and are worshipped at household and public shrines (*kamidana* and *jinja*, respectively). Shinto practices are aestheticized, like the *kagura* dances and everyday-aesthetic practices, especially those concerned with purity (*harae*). To make environments proper dwellings for *kami*, enormous moral and aesthetic attention is put on ‘order, cleanliness, brightness’ and ‘impeccability’ (Pilgrim 1993, 10). This is a rich aesthetic of simplicity and orderliness which easily lends itself to an aesthetics of the everyday: ‘the natural expresses itself through the simplicity of materials and artist. If simplicity is valued, the natural will be able to express itself most directly through the hands of the cook, the potter, or the chopstick maker’ (Kasulis 2004, 44).

**From aesthetics to happiness.**

Indian and Zen Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shinto are diverse traditions with substantial differences in their moral and aesthetic convictions. I offer them as examples of traditions in which kinds of aesthetics of the everyday are well-developed. Moreover, they illustrate how aesthetic experience and practice relate to the theme of happiness:

1. Human lives should be aesthetically rich, incorporating, appreciating and engaging, ioncorporating many different kinds of aesthetic objects, each experienced in terms of many different aesthetic qualities.
2. The domain of the aesthetic is continuous with the moral, spiritual, and existential domains; indeed, their interrelations are so deep that even a notional separation of them into distinct value-spheres is deeply distorting (‘wholesomeness’, ‘excellence’ for Confucius and Shinto ‘purity’ are all ‘ethical-aesthetic’ concepts – cf. Saito 2007, 205f).
3. Aesthetic experience and activity is integral to all aspects of human life, from modes of personal comportment to experience of natural places and creatures, to how we relate to and care for other people, to our performance of social roles and duties, and our participation in our cultural and spiritual communities.

For these general reasons, everyday aesthetics and happiness clearly relate to one another, although the details need spelling out. For Thomas Leddy, ‘happiness is a function, to a large extent, of [the] pervasiveness of distinctively aesthetic pleasure’ (Leddy 2014, 32). Similarly, for Arnold Berleant, appreciation of ‘the prosaic landscapes of home, work, local travel, and recreation is an important measure of the quality of our lives’ (Berleant 1997, 16).

**Happiness.**

The term ‘happiness’ is versatile, studied by psychologists and philosophers, and the theme of an industry of popular ‘self-help’, therapeutic literature. In everyday language, the term is used to refer to pleasant feelings and emotions, bliss, good mood, high spirits, or the quality of one’s life, or at least large sections of it (cf. David, Boniwell, and Ayers 2014). It is related to religion and spirituality, social and cultural conditions, and interpersonal relationships, as well as to popular concepts, such as resilience, wellbeing, and flourishing. An academic discipline, ‘positive psychology’, explores the psychology of happiness and other positive states, with an eye to developing effective interventions.

There are two main accounts of happiness, each internally diverse, which are usually called *hedonic* accounts, that define happiness in terms of enjoyable feelings, like pleasure, and *life-satisfaction* accounts, which use richer, morally-charged concepts, like flourishing and wellbeing (cf. David, Boniwell, and Ayers 2014, sections II and III). However, each admits of considerable variety, depending on their biological, psychological, emotional, social and philosophical or religious commitments. Philosophically, most accounts endorse some sort of life-satisfaction account, such as Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, whose compass is ‘one’s life-as-a-whole’ (Annas 1993). Life-satisfaction accounts emphasise the many features a life ought to have to count as happy or flourishing: stable patterns of emotion, a diversity of interpersonal relationships, initiating and completing meaningful projects, and value-infused practices and habits. Of course, such account should also emphasise various facts of life—that, for instance, most lives will involve periods of sadness and happiness, or the fact that many events in life are too evaluatively complex to be described in such simple terms as ‘happy’ or ‘sad’. Happiness, flourishing, well-being and other positive concepts and ideals are intermingled, conceptually and existentially, with their negative counterparts (see Kagan 2014, Woodard forthcoming).

**The phenomenology of happiness.**

I offer a more general account of happiness, compatible with hedonist and life-satisfaction accounts, which emphasises the ways that forms of happiness depend on a more basic way of experiencing the world. In a famous passage, Ludwig Wittgenstein remarked, ‘the world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man’, the world of a happy man ‘must, so to speak, wax and wane’ (Wittgenstein 1974, § 6.43). Without pretending to know Wittgenstein’s meaning, I take his remark to refer to a phenomenology of happiness. When one is happy, one might enjoy specific experiences, activities, and relationships, but these will presuppose some background sense of the world, of its mood or character. Such world-experiences can be hard to describe, for they are the backdrops to the experiences which more usually occupy our concern.

To develop the idea, consider a recent account of the phenomenology of happiness, offered by the philosopher David E. Cooper (Cooper 2013). In happiness, one’s world – the world of everyday perception, understanding, and engagement – is experienced as being at once *expansive* and *energetic*. The world feels expansive – open, filled with possibilities, and a space of opportunities, receptive to aspiration and hope. Moreover, the world also seems charged with energy – a place of dynamic, change, and buoyancy, encouraging a sense that one’s projects will be energised, sustained, and helped to completion. Experienced in these ways, the world is experienced aesthetically, as beautiful, and many aestheticians testify to intimate connections between beauty, energy, and expansiveness. Elaine Scarry describes beauty as a ‘locus of aspiration’, one that ‘quickens’ and makes live ‘more vivid’ and ‘worth living’ (Scarry 2001, 24-25). A Greek tradition, including Plato and Plotinus, connected the Beautiful with the Good and understood experiences of beauty in terms of a love or longing for a goodness which human beings, with effort, could take up into their lives. Alexander Nehemas wrote a book on beauty, titled *Only a Promise of Happiness*, inspired by Stendhal’s aphorism. Beauty is ‘the promise of happiness’, since finding someone beautiful includes ‘a desire to continue interacting with them’, in increasingly rich ways, driven by ‘a sense that our life will be more worthwhile if [he or she] is part of it’ (Nehamas 2007, 53, 73, 75). Such claims are common in the philosophy of beauty, intimating deep connections between the beauty and the good life. Beauty and happiness disclose the world as a place of enticing and desirable possibilities—for aesthetic appreciation, interpersonal connection, and a satisfying life. In Cooper’s account, then, happiness fundamentally involves ways of experiencing and responding to the world:

The world of the happy person becomes more open, turning itself into an arena of possibilities for initiatives, projects, enjoyments and fresh commitments. To become open in this way, the world of the happy person must, so to speak, be a vista, something visible and surveyable: the possibilities that it enables, or indeed *is*, must be lit up like a clearing in a forest. Otherwise it cannot be experienced as the theatre of opportunities and initiatives that it needs to be in order to be open and expansive. It must be a world, too, that quickens, that gives out an impression of energy and animation: a place that is not fixed and static, but one where there is movement and vigour. (Cooper 2013, 39)

Happiness, then, does not consist of fleeting, brief, episodic experience of pleasure. It is a way of experiencing the world as an expansive, energised space of positive possibilities, the receptive arena for a person to create a meaningful, satisfying life. The world of the happy person is one that affords a secure, nourishing environment for the confident attainment of happiness. Put in these terms, a phenomenological account resonates with everyday discourse about happiness:

1. Appraisal of the quality of one’s life are inseparable from a background sense of the world. If the world feels harsh and hostile, a Schopenhauerian realm of suffering, it cannot be experienced as a theatre of happiness.
2. Happiness should have a sense of *ubiquity*. Brief moments of happiness cannot in practice suffice to make a life happy. One needs different forms and sources of happiness which pervade most or all of one’s experiences and activities. A world can be elaborately textured with many experiences of happiness, many of them modest, subtle, and idiosyncratic. As one historian puts it, the ‘idea of happiness … points us to an all-inclusive assessment of a person’s condition’ (White 2006, vii).
3. Happiness has a futural dimension: a person cannot be happy if all their happiness is behind them in past experiences and achievements, without any anticipation and prospect of more to come. Happiness projects towards into a sense that one’s life is progressing, that things are going well, and that projects will come to fruition. Here, the future is experienced as a beckoning space of enticing possibilities – perhaps a sense that the world guarantees us future happiness. For Freud, people ‘strive after happiness; they want to become *happy* and to remain so’ (Freud 2005, 25).

Happiness, then, should not be confined to brief, episodic instances of pleasure or positive emotion. It involves a broader experience of the world as an expansive and energetic space of enticing possibilities which one can explore and actualise in different ways. Experiencing the world as a rich and unfolding space of positive possibilities provides the background for more specific forms and experiences of happiness, of the sort central to the hedonist and life-satisfaction accounts.

**Happiness and everyday aesthetics**.

How does this conception of happiness relate to everyday aesthetics? We should expect substantive connections, if, as Saito declares, one ‘part of the goal of everyday aesthetics is to illuminate the ordinarily neglected, but gem-like, aesthetic potentials hidden behind the trivial, mundane, and commonplace façade’ of everyday life (Saito 2007, 50). I discuss three connections: *enrichment* of experience, *aesthetisation* of negative aspects of life, and the enhancement of our *aesthetic agency*:

**Happiness and everyday aesthetics (1): Enrichment of experience.**

Cultivating appreciative sensitivity to the ‘gem-like’ aesthetic potential of our everyday life, sensations, environments, and activities could enrich our experiential and aesthetic world. If ‘aesthetic experience’ is confined to art or experiences of the sublime, then few, if any of us would regularly have *aesthetic* experiences; however, if a more expansive conception of the aesthetic is adopted, our prospects improve. Many lives, if not all, can be filled with a subtle pulse of beautiful, attractive, pleasing experiences, even if some of us do seem to live, intentionally or not, in an ‘aesthetic vacuum’ (Scruton 2011, 50). The attractions of everyday aesthetics include its encouraging conviction that there is far more aesthetic richness in our lives than we typically recognise and appreciate. If we fail to see this, then our lives possess a richness we do not perceive or appreicate, whether due to distraction, inattentiveness, distraction, or an internalisation of attitudes or theoretical convictions that narrow our aesthetic outlook and imagination (Cooper 2010, Danto 2014). In 1900, the Japanese novelist Natsume Sōseki, visiting England, was laughed at for inviting someone to a ‘snow-viewing’ (in Hume 1995: 40). Other enrichment strategies are available, including ‘aesthetic exploration’, appreciation of how aesthetic prejudices sustain social oppression, an edifying exercise of virtues, or kinds of aesthetic appreciation of animals (cf. Cooper 2010, Irvin 2017, Greaves 2019).

Aesthetic enhancement of experience can take many forms, partly shaped by material, cultural, and personal constraints. Our aesthetic opportunities depend, for instance, upon the materials, artefacts, natural spaces, environmental conditions, and humanised places immediately available (contrast central New York, the Argentinean *pampas*, and Svalbard). Japanese aesthetics, for instance, is shaped by its religious, cultural, and environmental history, lending that tradition a diversity concealed by the current fixation on *wabi-sabi*, the tea ceremony, and *shakuhachi* music. Zen influence on music, literature, and garden design have emphasised certain tastes and sensibilities – such as appreciation of indistinctness, transience, and impermanence (Cooper 2017, Suzuki 1973, Yanagi 1989). Other influences, however, may point in other directions. Motoori Norinaga rejected the Buddhist-infected taste for *wabi* and *sabi* – weathered stones, frayed scrolls, faded fabric, that ‘exemplify the conditions of decay, imperfection … insufficiency’ (Saito 2007, 187). Norinaga preferred a Shinto-inspired aesthetic, of immaculateness and purity, cleanliness and purity, celebrating, not ‘decay’, but ‘order, clarity’ and ‘brightness’ (Pilgrim 1993, 10, cf. de Bary 2010, 409-421). So, the specific objects and qualities that enter our enriched experience will depend on our wider aesthetic influences.

In speaking of ‘enrichment’, we should distinguish three claims. First, cultivating an everyday-aesthetic sensibility adds new kinds of appreciable aesthetic experience, ones not previously a feature of our experience. Second, that sensibility enhances the status of certain aesthetic experiences, ‘promoting’ them, as it were, to the status of the genuinely aesthetic. Third, an everyday-aesthetic sensibility can deepen our understanding of the depth or meaningfulness of our everyday-aesthetic experiences. Perhaps one starts to see aesthetic opportunities woven into one’s daily life, or to appreciate the seriousness of sorts of aesthetic practice one previously regarded as trivial. In these cases, there is enrichment.

**Happiness and everyday aesthetics (2): Aesthetisation of negative aspects of the world.**

Everyday experience includes negative aspects of the world: suffering, death, illness, the physical and mental decrepitude integral to ageing, devastated people and places, and wider processes of deterioration, which affects bodies and minds as much as artefacts, buildings, and environments. These include aesthetic features: the blemished, decayed, chipped, cracked, crumpled, eroded, faded, mouldering, ruined, which cultural geographers suggest is a cross-culturally stable dislike (Saito 2007, 174, n.53). However, there are exceptions, including the *Ruinenlust* – the appreciation of ruins, inspired by German Romanticism – and the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic in Japan, and other philosophical and cultural movements that aimed to aestheticise aspects of the world usually condemned. ‘Pleasure in ruins’ might not come naturally, but can be taught and if one develops appropriate conceptions of their significance (see Cooper 2012a, Dekkers 2000).

Similar claims are made about the aesthetisation of ageing, a major theme of Japanese aesthetics, where it is connected to a sense of inevitable loss, impermanence, and evanescence. Frailty is integral to worldly existence. In Buddhist terms, human life is suffused with *dukkha* – ‘suffering’ or ‘dis-ease’, including inevitable separation from what is desired (youth, health, people and things we love) and inevitable subjection to what is not desired (senescence, illness, grief). Human life, indeed, is suffused with actual and inevitable loss (cf. Carel 20121). Saito calls these ‘existential conditions’, and argues, interestingly, the existential strategy of aestheticization as a way to cope with them. Aesthetic appreciation of aged things can involve different things: we may come to find things beautiful in new ways, inflect painful transience with a sense of pleasing preciousness, come to experience aged things as manifestations of humility and other virtues, and see aged things as indicators of deep truths about the world (Saito 2007, 184-204, which includes criticisms of such claims).

**Happiness and everyday aesthetics (3): Enhancement of our aesthetic agency.**

A virtue of an aesthetics of the everyday is that it can enhance our sense of the scope of aesthetic agency. By ‘aesthetic agency’, I refer to the variety of bodily, practical, creative, imaginative abilities that enable us to engage in practices that change the aesthetic character of aspects of the world. Aesthetic agency includes applying makeup, decorating a room, dancing, drawing, painting, playing musical instruments, and sculpting. Some of this is individual, some is shared, and some is collective. Aesthetic agency aims at different things. It can be aimed at creating *objects*, like paintings, or mean initiating or participating in *processes*, like a dance or singing in a choir. (cf. Nguyen 2020: ch.7). It can involve a range of specific tools and materials, such as paints and brushes, or simply our own bodily capacities. Aesthetic agency can involve changing the appearance of things (painting) or the composition of things (adding spices to a soup) or, perhaps, removing and destroying things (removing ugly wallpaper). In many cases, agency also includes acts of appraisal, such as connoisseurship and spectatorship, involving aesthetic commentary (‘The French horn came in too late!’, ‘What graceful movement!’) Saito describes kinds of everyday aesthetic agency:

[M]ost of us attend to our personal appearance almost daily: choosing what to wear and what sort of haircut to get, cleaning and ironing clothes, and deciding whether or not to dye our hair or try some kind of ‘aesthetic rejuvenation’ treatment or body decoration […] choosing the paint colour for the house, planting flowers in the yard, cleaning and tidying rooms … replacing shabby-looking drapes, and reupholstering a threadbare couch. (Saito 2007: 46–47)

Everyday aesthetics encourages an expansive sense of aesthetic agency, and this can enhance a person’s life. It can sustain a sense of activity, self-assertion, and abilities to creatively shape one’s body and environment, which could contribute to our happiness, at least in cases where one’s aesthetic efforts are met with approval. Praise, compliments, and nods of appreciation can be sources of pleasure, feelings of social connection, and a sense of belonging within a receptive community. Of course, exercising aesthetic agency can create problems, too, including the snobbish reactions of others and risking appearing or acting in ways liable to elicit negative reactions (Irvin 2017, Kieran 2010). For this reason, the connection of happiness to everyday aesthetic agency is complicated, contingent on many factors. In some cases of psychiatric illness, however, one might suffer a diminished ability to experience forms of happiness and aesthetic experience.

**Happiness, aesthetics, and depression.**

Depression, as a psychiatric category, covers a range of different kinds of predicament, which share a range of common phenomenological features. These include altered experiences of one’s body, other people, time, and the social world, as well as feelings of grief, hopelessness, despair, guilt, and diminutions of one’s sense of agency and the sense of belonging to a shared world. Describing the first-person experience of these predicaments is the task of phenomenological psychopathology, which applies the resources of existential phenomenology to psychiatric illnesses, including depression. In this section, I describe the influential account of the phenomenology of depression by Matthew Ratcliffe in his book *Experiences of Depression* and other papers (Ratcliffe 2015). I explore its mostly negative implications for my earlier accounts of everyday aesthetics and happiness.

**4A. Depression and aesthetic experience.**

Experiences of depression are often described in terms of the *world* seeming strange, altered, or different somehow, often in a sense that is hard to describe. Here is a typical example:

It was October, and one of the unforgettable features of this stage of my disorder was the way in which my own farmhouse, my beloved home for thirty years, took on for me at that point when my spirits regularly sank to their nadir an almost palpable quality of ominousness. The fading evening light […] had none of its familiar autumnal loveliness, but ensnared me with a suffocating gloom. I wondered how this friendly place, teeming with such memories […] could almost perceptibly seem so hostile and frightening. (Styron 1990, 45)

Some common descriptions invoke a range of visual and tactile metaphors: the world seems ‘cold’, ‘dark’, one feels ‘immersed’, ‘’trapped’, as if in an over-heated room, or a ‘closed, concentrated world, airless’, in ‘a kind of spiritual winter, frozen, sterile, unmoving’ (Ratcliffe 2015, 65). Such language testifies to a wide-ranging aesthetic impoverishment; the world now lacks colour, vitality, movement, energy, and is no longer experienced as an experiential environment describable in terms of comfort, openness, or space (see Ratcliffe 2015: 111f for indicative testimonies). A common feature of such accounts are reports of a stubborn sense of the inadequacy of language to properly convey the altered experience of the world. This may be a combination of (a) disruptions to a person’s descriptive abilities, (b) general limitations in our shared descriptive and linguistic resources, (c) the radically different experiential character of the world itself, especially the loss of a background sense of reality which our descriptive practices and resources more ordinarily presuppose:

You know that you have lost life itself. You’ve lost a habitable earth. You’ve lost the invitation to live that the universe extends to us at every moment. You’ve lost some- thing that people don’t even know is. That’s why it’s so hard to explain (quoted by Hornstein 2009: 213)

Such feelings are not easy to describe: our vocabulary—when it comes to talking about these things—is surprisingly limited. The exact quality of perception requires the resources of poetry to express. [...] I awoke into a different world. It was as though all had changed while I slept: that I awoke not into normal consciousness but into a nightmare (quoted by Rowe 1978: 268–9)

Such changes in the aesthetic character of the world are diverse. Aesthetic concepts are still deployed, albeit typically the negative ones – the world seems dark, cold, drained of light and life. The changes can take place slowly. The nature writer, Richard Mabey, noted a sudden a loss of pleasure in the beauty of birds, which had once meant so much to him, during? the early stages of a period of depression (Mabey 2005). The changes often become total. For the phenomenologist Karl Jaspers, ‘perception is unaltered in itself but there is some change which envelops everything with a subtle, pervasive and strangely uncertain light’ (Jaspers 1963: 98). Fiona Shaw spoke of her world becoming a ‘bleak shadowland’ (Shaw 1997: 25). William James, too, emphasises the change in world-experience—the world seems ‘remote, strange, sinister, uncanny. Its colour is gone’ (James 1906: 151, 243). Positive aesthetic experiences tend to recede, sometimes even to the point that the possibility of their returning seems gone, consistent with the loss of various kinds of hope: one loses a sense that ‘things are fluid, that they unfold and change, that new kinds of moment are eventually possible, that the future will arrive’ (Lott 1996: 246-247)

Such descriptions indicate that experiences of depression can involve both (a) the loss or diminishment of aesthetic experience and (b) wider-ranging changes that seem to invite description using a vocabulary of aesthetic impoverishment (‘dark’, for instance, is used visually, psychologically, and philosophically to describe nights, moods, or outlooks). The aesthetic diminishment can also take many different forms. In the case of beauty, one might be able to ascribe but not notice it, or notice it but not be moved by it, or be moved by it but not feel happy because of it, and so on (Scrutton 2018, 107).

These aesthetic changes also involve other typical aspects of experiences of depression. A loss of hope, for instance, is often described as involving a sense of one’s future seeming *dark* and *empty* (see Ratcliffe 2015, ch.4). Moreover, different aspects of depression can affect aesthetic experience in different ways. Scrutton notes that ‘a sense of alienation from the interpersonal and, by extension, the aesthetic world, as distinct from an inability to appreciate beauty *per se*, is characteristic of depression’ (Scrutton 2018: 105). One can lose one’s capacity for aesthetic appreciation, of beauty at least, while retaining a sense of being connected to the aesthetic world; by contrast, one can become alienated from the aesthetic world altogether.

**Depression and happiness.**

Experiences of depression also affect one’s experiences of, and capacity for, the variety of positive emotions and moods gathered under the term ‘happiness’, which can also include joy, elation, and delight. Such forms of happiness are often experienced as newly-absent from the world one now inhabits:

When I am not depressed my feelings/emotions are totally different, because I can think clearly. I can see a future for myself. I can feel happiness. I can see the joys in life. I can socialize. I can be loving and friendly. When I am depressed, I am unable to think clearly. I feel sorrow, anger, frustration, sadness, lonely, worthless, despair and mainly I feel like my life is not worth living and I would rather be dead! (quoted in Ratcliffe 2015, 113)

These altered experiences of happiness are often entangled with altered interpersonal experience; after all, we are often happy because of other people, whether because we happy *for* someone (a colleague is promoted) or happy *because* of someone (a friend spontaneously buys you a lovely gift) or happy *with* someone (a couple holding their first-born baby for the first time). Altered interpersonal experience will therefore involve disruptions to the kinds of experience of happiness a person can access or anticipate:

I become paranoid. People don’t like me, I’m a burden, they become patronizing because they know I can’t cope. When they care, it’s because they have to—and their happiness always seems to be in spite of me, never because of me, and I know I get in their way. Those I don’t see often feel like they’re from a different life and they’re moving quicker than me. They’re effort. They’re intense. (quoted in Ratcliffe 2015, 225)

In many cases, the loss of happiness takes a more profound form: loss of the possibility of happiness. Sometimes, we are not happy because there is, contingently, nothing and no one that might elicit it, even if one continues to anticipate happiness at some future point. In many experiences of depression, however, one ceases to anticipate happiness. Andrew Solomon writes in his memoir, *The Noonday Demon*, that ‘the first thing that goes is happiness. You cannot gain pleasure from anything [...] soon other emotions follow happiness into oblivion’ (Solomon 2001, 19). Ratcliffe explains this ‘oblivion’ as a loss of the *possibility* of happiness:

It is kinds of emotion that fall into ‘oblivion’ rather than their instances. It is not that the person stops feeling happy about *p, q,* and *r.* She gradually loses the sense that anything in the world could offer happiness; she ceases to experience its possibility. What Solomon describes is both an inability to anticipate feeling happy and an inability to actually feel happy. (Ratcliffe 2015, 55-56)

In his book, Ratcliffe argues that experiences of depression involve a more fundamental loss of access to kinds of significant possibility. Our experience ordinarily incorporates a diverse range of possibilities, ones implicit in our everyday experience and engagement with the world. These include perceptual possibilities, practical possibilities, and various interpersonal possibilities, all of them interrelated in dynamic, mutually-coherent ways, constituting our experiential world (Ratcliffe 2015, chs. 1 and 2). Such possibilities are experienced as significant in many different ways – as, for instance, boring, dangerous, exciting, interesting, irrelevant, relevant, strange, unusual, useful, useless. Such kinds of significance are shaped by our values, commitments, interests, goals, and habits (an inheritance from existentialist philosophy; see Cooper 2012b, §§ 2.3-2.4). Human life is an ongoing process whereby we experience and respond to these unfolding systems of possibility—actualising those salient to our life-projects and trying to resist those which would be destructive of them. ‘Our access to kinds of possibility’, explains Ratcliffe, ‘is itself integral to our experience’, without which one would not inhabit a habitable world (Ratcliffe 2015, 51).

**Loss and impoverishment.**

Experiences of depression, on this account, involve loss of access to kinds of significant practical and interpersonal possibility. Things no longer ‘light up’ as enticing, so our practices and activities seem meaningless; social roles and commitments cease being significant and intelligible; other people are no longer experienced in terms of possible meaningful interaction, communion, or connection. As kinds of possibilities are drained from one’s world, there is a sense of diminishment, absence, and loss. In a very severe case, however, the awareness of there having been a loss is, itself, lost (see Ratcliffe 2015, 110ff). In some cases, a person’s experiential world undergoes a change involving the temporary restoration of a sense of possibility. ‘Renee’, the titular patient of *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl*, offers a vivid account:

[W]hen we were outside I realized that my perception of things had completely changed. Instead of infinite space, unreal, where everything was cut off, naked and isolated, I saw Reality, marvellous Reality, for the first time. The people whom we encountered were no longer automatons, phantoms, revolving around, gesticulating without meaning; they were men and women with their own individual characteristics, their own individuality. It was the same with things. They were useful things, having sense, capable of giving pleasure. Here was an automobile to take me to the hospital, cushions I could rest on. […] for the first time I dared to handle the chairs, to change the arrangement of the furniture. What an unknown joy, to have an influence on things; to do with them what I liked and especially to have the pleasure of wanting the change (Sechehaye 1970, 105-106)

In Ratcliffe’s terms, ‘Renee’ (a pseudonym) experiences temporary restoration of her ability to experience kinds of significant practical and interpersonal possibilities. ‘Things’ became *useful objects*, artefacts like chairs and automobiles. Other people were ‘men and women’, individuals offering possibilities for meaningful interaction. Moreover, this restoration was aesthetically charged and one of happiness—one of ‘joy’ ‘pleasure’, and ‘marvellous’.

If the experience of depression involves a diminished ability to experience kinds of significant possibility, how does this relate to everyday aesthetics and happiness? To start with, everyday aesthetics presupposes our ability to experience the world, or aspects of it, in a rich variety of aesthetically-charged ways. If aesthetic possibilities are unavailable, then there can be no everyday aesthetic experience—or, perhaps, there can be only negative aesthetic possibilities. Everyday aesthetic appreciation and agency presupposes that one can experience a range of experiential and practical possibilities. One spots things, admires them, picks them up, handles them, and finds things beautiful, neat, and satisfying. If these forms of appreciation and agency are unavailable, there can be no aesthetic enrichment.

A second connection concerns the bodily phenomenology of depression as it can relate to everyday aesthetic experience and happiness. Recall that everyday aesthetics, in many cases, involves the appreciation and aestheticization of one’s own body – its motion, textures, sounds, smells, and appearance. Think of the Confucian rituals, which strive for spontaneity, harmony, and propriety in one’s posture, gait, tone of voice, and facial appearance. However, this positive self-experience is undermined by typical kinds of changes to bodily phenomenology in depression. Depression testimonies consistently mention fatigue, pain, sluggishness, tiredness, an intense sense of difficulty with even relatively small tasks. Others mention extremely negative experience of one’s body as fat, useless, or ugly (cf. Ratcliffe 2015, 76-77). In such cases, the everyday aesthetic aspiration to aestheticize the appearance and comportment of one’s body will seem to be either practically or phenomenologically difficult, if not impossible. Moreover, it may be impossible for someone to experience their bodily comportment in positive ways, as their bodily phenomenology becomes dominated by estrangement (see Fuchs 2013).

A third connection concerns the diminution of the interpersonal world which is integral to experiences of depression. Scrutton notes that that aesthetic experiences are often interpersonal, too: we admire things together, show things to one another, share our opinions and so on (“Ooh, that’s pretty!”, “That cravat goes lovely with that shirt!”). This includes many everyday-aesthetic experiences and practices (think of food, style, and cosmetics and the experience of public places, parks, homes, and workplaces). Any diminishment of our interpersonal world, then, can entail diminishment of our aesthetic possibilities. Diminishment, though, does not exhaust the effects of depression on the phenomenology of aesthetic experience, as Scrutton notes:

Experiences of beauty in depression … often induce feelings of loneliness, sadness, fear and so on, because they draw attention to the depressed person’s alienation from the interpersonal world. Consequently, people with depression may appreciate beauty in the sense of perceiving and being moved by it, but feel sadness, numbness, or fear rather than joy or wonder because of it. (Scrutton 2018: 107-108)

The possibility of happiness, too, presupposes our ability to experience other people and feel various kinds of connection to, or belonging in, a shared social world. However, the interpersonal possibilities and sense of belonging this requires are eroded in depression, hence the talk of the social world as ‘shadowland’, populated by ‘automatons’, pervaded by an inchoate sense of threat, distrust, and hostility (see Ratcliffe 2015, ch.8). If one’s world is bereft of enticing interpersonal possibilities, then the kinds of connections and relationships with others that could sustain kinds of happiness become impossible and even inconceivable. Moreover, many kinds of happiness and pleasure depend on the initiation, continuation, or completion of our projects—going on a long hike, painting a portrait, studying for a degree. If those projects cease to be intelligible or meaningful, then one is locked out of the happiness they could have afforded.

**Conclusion.**

In many cases, experiences of depression will involve the loss or diminishment of the experiential possibilities presupposed by everyday aesthetics and conceptions of happiness. If depression involves a loss of access to kinds of significant possibility, this includes the possibilities for aesthetic appreciation and agency, interpersonal connection and social intercourse, and for an expansive sense of one’s life as a space of enticing possibilities which, if realised, would offer contentment and pleasure. It is unclear what therapeutical implications follow this this account (cf. Ratcliffe 2015, ch.10 and Scrutton 2018). However, three things should be clear. First, aesthetic experience and agency are much richer than theories focused on art and special experiences indicate; revealing this fact is a main virtue of the aesthetics of the everyday. Second, happiness involves not only aesthetic activities and enjoyments, but also a certain way of experiencing the world. Third, aesthetic experience and happiness depend on our capacity to experience various kinds of possibility – a capacity arguably diminished, or even lost, in experiences of depression. This suggests that that loss of positive aesthetic and existential possibilities is integral to most if not all experiences of depression.

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