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Scratching an Itch

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Abstract: I argue that there can be appropriate aesthetic experiences even of basic somatic experiences like itches and scratches. I show, in relation to accounts of aesthetic experience offered by Carroll and Stecker, that experiences of itches and scratches can be *aesthetic*; I show that itches can be *objects* of attention in the way that normative accounts of the aesthetic often require; and I show, in relation to accounts of the aesthetic appreciation of nature offered by Carlson and Carroll, that aesthetic experience of itches and scratches can be *appropriate*. I argue that attention to the domain of somatic experience is *worthwhile*, in that it offers the prospects of significant aesthetic satisfaction, and I suggest that even attention to unpleasant experiences like itches and pains may be aesthetically rewarding.

Scratching an Itch

In recent years, momentum has been gathering in defense of the appropriateness of aesthetic discourse in relation to a number of domains other than art and nature. Philosophers have argued that food, sports and sex can be viewed aesthetically.¹ It has been claimed that the "lower senses" of smell, taste and touch may play legitimate or even exclusive roles in some aesthetic judgments.² And there has been sustained criticism of the view that aesthetic judgments must be disinterested or must transport us out of the concerns of everyday life.³

Can this extension of the realm of the aesthetic be taken even further, so as to accommodate the idea that even the most mundane incidents of everyday life have an aesthetic character, or that there can be aesthetic experiences of such incidents? With attention to two especially hard cases, itches and scratches, I will argue that it is appropriate and worthwhile to think of even the simplest moments of everyday life in aesthetic terms. It is appropriate, because on the most plausible accounts of aesthetic experience there can be legitimate aesthetic experiences of itching and scratching; and it is worthwhile, because aesthetic attention to this domain offers the prospect of unique and significant satisfaction.

Most accounts of aesthetic experience have focused on the appreciation of some object or environment that is external to the appreciator and the appreciator's experience. While not disagreeing that aesthetic experience often is and should be of such external objects, I suggest that one's qualitative experience can itself be the object of legitimate aesthetic attention. This opens up a domain for inquiry that has been largely neglected within contemporary aesthetics.⁴

I. PHENOMENOLOGY

I begin with phenomenology, which will provide some of the data we need to reach philosophical conclusions. So, what is there to say, phenomenologically, about itches?⁵ First, they come in a great many varieties. There are tickling itches and prickling itches, creepy crawly itches and itches that have an ache to them, itches confined to a tiny location and itches that seem to cover more space. There are itches that keep recurring (especially on the sole of a foot shod in a high lace-up boot). There are itches that demand attention, and others that seem tolerable. There are itches that don't last long enough to bother scratching, and itches that stick around for many minutes. There are migratory itches that seem to elude one's efforts to scratch them; and, for about 20 percent of us, there are itches that pop up mysteriously on one area of the body after one has received a stimulus to a completely different part.⁶ There are itches that we suspect are due to bugs, and these demand more urgent attention. They are much more likely when one is outdoors, or has seen a bug recently, or has just read about an epidemic of urban bedbugs. And there are the itches that you will start to feel right now if you pay attention to what you are experiencing on a somatic level, which you are likely to do because you are reading this text.⁷ Luckily, there are itches that have a pleasant aspect, or at least there are in my experience.⁸ I hope that's the kind you are experiencing right now.

Don't be deceived by the crudeness of my descriptions, invoking terms like 'creepy crawly.' The fact that we (or, at least, I) lack good language for describing the character of a particular itch doesn't rule out its having a particular character, perhaps composed of several dimensions of experience. The fact that an itch is often experienced with greater intensity when it seems to be the result of a crawling bug indicates that at least some itches have a cognitive dimension, though we often think of itches as among the most primitive of physical sensations. The emergence of

itches also seems dependent on our attention to them: when we attend to one itch, this can cause other itches to become salient (or perhaps even to occur). After being apparently itch-free for hours, we may find ourselves assailed by itches springing up all over the body, and then, for some reason, our attention shifts away and we are once again free. Since attention is something that can, to some extent, be controlled, and since itches can be affected by the direction of attention, this raises the possibility that the experience of itches may itself be to some degree controllable, once again despite our intuition that they are brute physical/perceptual phenomena.⁹

Scratching, too, comes in varieties and has a number of different dimensions. There are calming, soothing scratches administered with the flat of a finger or the heel of the hand, rubbing the offending sensation away; and rough scratches that seem to dig the itch out, replacing it with a burning sensation. Scratching may generate a sensation that abates immediately, or one that persists for several seconds. We tend to think of scratching as an automatic response to an itch, and no doubt it often is. There is clear motivational pressure against allowing an itch to abide without intervening, perhaps because itches are sometimes caused by impingements on the body (such as the bite of a malarial mosquito) that it is in our evolutionary interest to eliminate – and so scratching is often our immediate and automatic response to an itching sensation. But the way we scratch, and whether we scratch at all, can be entirely calculated. Different itches demand different responses, and we are at some level well aware that the way the scratch feels and the way the itch is alleviated depend on the nature of the implement used, the amount of pressure applied, the duration of the scratch, the size of the region scratched. We can decide whether to attend to an itch and how to respond to it – perhaps we have all decided, on one occasion or another, that scratching some body part is not the thing to do, the severity of the itch notwithstanding.¹⁰ Elizabeth Gilbert recounts, in her memoir *Eat, Pray, Love*, an evening in India when her meditation was severely disrupted by mosquitoes. When she made the decision to stop reacting to them, her meditation practice deepened markedly (at the price of a goodly number of small red welts).¹¹ So it certainly is possible to inhibit the scratching response.

II. ITCHES, SCRATCHES AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

It is appropriate, I will argue, to think of itches and scratches in aesthetic terms. But there are many claims that might be made under this rubric. First, it might be said that one can have aesthetic experiences of itches and scratches. Second, it might be said that itches and scratches are appropriate objects of aesthetic appreciation. Third, it might be said that itches and scratches have aesthetic properties. In this section I address the first claim, regarding aesthetic experience. In section III, I take up the question whether itches and scratches can properly be regarded as *objects* of experience in the way that normative accounts of aesthetic experience often require. In section IV, I show that itches and scratches can be the *appropriate* objects of aesthetic appreciation.¹² I argue that they contribute to the aesthetic character of the more complex experiences of which they are a part, and that they can be given appropriate aesthetic characterizations in the context of those experiences. It is thus the case that appropriate aesthetic judgments can be made about itches and scratches, whether or not we want to go so far as to claim that they actually possess aesthetic properties. In sections V and VI, I go on to discuss the aesthetic satisfaction that attention to this domain may afford.

To establish that there can be aesthetic experience of itches and scratches, it will help to highlight certain aspects of the phenomenology recounted above. With regard to itches, it is possible to discriminate among several varieties of them, each

with its own particular character. They vary along multiple dimensions, including intensity, duration, and specific qualitative feel (e.g., prickling v. tickling). The felt experience of them, in particular their intensity but perhaps also their qualitative feel, may be affected by one's beliefs about their sources. They can be the object of different levels of attention; they may be scarcely conscious or may completely monopolize one's awareness at a given moment. For at least some itches, one can, to some extent, alter one's experience of them by manipulating the direction of one's attention. Moreover, itches are a component of one's somatic experience as a whole; they help to punctuate and color that experience.

Are these elements of phenomenology sufficient to mark the experience of itches and scratches as at least potentially aesthetic? To answer this question, we must ask what an aesthetic experience is, and what is responsible for its counting as aesthetic. The history of the notion of aesthetic experience has recently been given a number of informative treatments.¹³ Rather than recounting that history here, I will focus on influential competing accounts proposed by Robert Stecker and Noël Carroll.¹⁴ Both were designed to be inclusive of aesthetic experiences of both art and nature and to avoid the pitfalls of some historical accounts, such as the implausible insistence that all aesthetic experiences share some particular phenomenal quality. Of course, those who begin from the assumption that accounts of aesthetic experience should be highly exclusive, ruling out from the start that there may be aesthetic experiences of a wide variety of objects, will reject the accounts I discuss here (and will wish to focus on the more normatively oriented accounts discussed in section IV).

According to Stecker's "minimal conception," aesthetic experience is "the experience of attending in a discriminating manner to forms, qualities or meaningful features of things, attending to these for their own sake or for the sake of this very experience."¹⁵ The minimal conception, as its name suggests, aims to identify the minimum conditions that mark an experience as aesthetic, so as to include everything that can reasonably be seen as falling into this category. Stecker is explicit in not requiring that the experience have a particular qualitative feel, or even that it be positive: there can, he notes, be both positive and negative aesthetic experiences.¹⁶ It is necessary, though, that the experience be accompanied by an evaluation: "one does not have such experiences," he says, "without ... valuing them in one way or another."¹⁷

It is apparent that on the minimal conception, experience of itches and scratches can count as aesthetic. Whether or not itches and scratches have "forms" or "meaningful features," they clearly have qualities that can be attended to in a discriminating manner, as our phenomenology demonstrates; and, since Stecker's account is disjunctive, forms and meaningful features are not required. Moreover, itches and scratches can be attended to for the sake of the experience itself. This is obviously true for scratches, which often produce positively evaluated sensations of relief or pleasure: there is nothing colloquially odd about saying that one enjoys a scratch for its own sake. Given Stecker's acknowledgement that there can be negative aesthetic experiences, it is also clearly true of itches that they can be attended to for their own sakes. Even if all itches are unpleasant (which I do not take to be obviously true), one can attend to an itch and evaluate it, negatively, for its own sake (as opposed to evaluating it negatively because it is a sign of, say, a skin lesion).

For reasons I will not recount here, Carroll rejects Stecker's requirement that an aesthetic experience be valued for its own sake.¹⁸ If that part of Stecker's account is eliminated, though, the remaining conditions are too inclusive: they would suggest, implausibly, that every time a doctor examines an X-ray she is having an aesthetic experience, since she is "attending in a discriminating manner to [its]

forms, qualities or meaningful features." Carroll proposes a shift to a "content-oriented account," according to which an experience is aesthetic as long as it involves attention to the right sort of content. Aesthetic experience of an artwork, he suggests, is "attention with understanding to the work's formal and aesthetic properties and their interaction with each other and to the ways in which they engage our sensibilities and imagination."¹⁹ Elsewhere, he says, "An aesthetic experience is one that involves design appreciation and/or the detection of aesthetic and expressive properties and/or attention to the ways in which the formal, aesthetic and expressive properties of the artwork are contrived."²⁰ Carroll does not insist that his list of potential contents of aesthetic experience is exhaustive; however, he does claim that being an experience of such content is sufficient for being an aesthetic experience.

A difficulty in applying Carroll's view to everyday experiences is that his explicit focus is on artworks almost exclusively, and his chief aim is to account for aesthetic experiences of art; for instance, by 'form' he refers to "the ensemble of choices intended to realize the point or the purpose of the art work."²¹ However, Carroll clearly wishes to allow that there can be aesthetic experiences of things other than artworks. To see whether itches and scratches could fall into this category, we may consider some examples of his application of his view. He mentions, as examples of aesthetic experiences, "notic[ing] the droopiness of the weeping willow tree" and "observ[ing] the way in which colours draw our eyes into the background of the painting," and states that "it seems possible to have aesthetic experiences of the sensuous appearances of things, such as the pronounced angularity of a staircase."²² Carroll does not indicate whether he sees droopiness and angularity as formal or aesthetic properties. However, if experiential engagement with these aspects of sensuous appearance is sufficient for aesthetic experience, then there is no obvious reason to deny that one may have an aesthetic experience of the various sensuous aspects of an itch or a scratch, which are, as our phenomenology demonstrated, subject to qualitative characterization and comparative assessment just as droopiness and angularity are. Moreover, as noted above, it is possible to attend to the way in which itches and scratches interact with our processes of awareness; an itch may attract our attention, which in turn leads us to detect other itches that we might otherwise have been scarcely conscious of, or experience them with greater intensity. Noticing this is a somatic analogue of noticing how our visual attention is drawn into different aspects of a painting.

Without settling the debate between Carroll and Stecker, then, we can see that both of their accounts seem to allow for experiences of itches and scratches to be aesthetic experiences: such experiences can have as their content features that are analogous to those invoked by Carroll in expounding his view, and they can be experiences of discriminative attention valued for their own sakes, as Stecker requires.

III. ITCHES AND SCRATCHES AS OBJECTS OF EXPERIENCE

One who is committed to denying at all costs that there can be aesthetic experiences of itches and scratches might regard this consequence as a *reductio* of inclusive views like Carroll's and Stecker's. And even Carroll or Stecker might wish to rule out itches and scratches on the grounds that, as Carroll puts it, "all aesthetic experiences have objects."²³ The qualities that Carroll mentions, like angularity and droopiness, are qualities *of* particular entities, external to the experiencer, that are attended to aesthetically. Perhaps it is necessary that there be an entity, independent of the agent's experience, that anchors the qualities under discussion. If an itch is qualitative through and through, this might disqualify it from aesthetic attention.

A focus on physical objects or entities is common in accounts of aesthetic experience and appreciation. Such accounts often assume that the chief aesthetic role of qualitative experience is to inform us about the qualities of the objects that give rise to it. Sometimes, this focus on the object is used to rescue an account of the aesthetic from the charge that it allows for “mere” pleasures to count as aesthetic. Stecker observes, for instance, that on a liberal notion of aesthetic experience, “[t]he line [between the merely sensual and the aesthetic] is drawn by distinguishing between mere pleasant sensation and pleasure derived from discrimination of the sensuous or perceptible properties of the object of the experience.”²⁴

Contemporary normative accounts of aesthetic appreciation often carry an implicit or explicit requirement that some object independent of one’s experience be grasped. According to Jerrold Levinson, “to appreciate something aesthetically is to attend to its forms, qualities, and meanings for their own sakes, and to their interrelations, but also to attend to the way in which all such things emerge from the particular set of low-level perceptual features that define the object on a nonaesthetic plane.”²⁵ An example would be the way in which an appearance of three-dimensionality emerges from the configuration of colors on a two-dimensional surface. On Levinson’s view, it is *necessary* that the relationship between higher-level phenomena and the base-level properties of the object be attended to. If there is no object independent of experience that one is attending to, it might seem that only forms or qualities themselves, and not relations between these and base-level properties, are available, in which case one’s experience could not be counted as one of aesthetic appreciation.

Gary Iseminger’s view, while initially appearing more amenable to the domain of itches and scratches, in fact has similar implications. “[A]ppreciating something,” he says, “is a matter of valuing in itself the experience ... it affords.”²⁶ If appreciation is a matter of valuing experience in itself, then why can’t the qualitative experience of an itch be valued in itself, and thus appreciated? The potential problem lies in Iseminger’s epistemic account of experience, according to which one has an experience of a state of affairs only if that state of affairs actually obtains. One cannot aesthetically appreciate the qualities of an object that appears to one only in a hallucination, since one does not experience the object: the relevant state of affairs—namely, that there exist an object with those qualities—does not in fact obtain. Does one, in fact, experience something, in Iseminger’s sense, when one has an itch?

An easy way out would be to observe that itches are caused by, and serve to inform us about, their physical causes, such as a mosquito’s arrival. To speak of the appreciation of itches, on this approach, is merely to speak loosely: what is in fact appreciated are not itches themselves, but air currents and bug bites and wayward hairs, or more proximal biochemical reactions in the skin. However, this would represent a capitulation, relative to my aim here: I mean to defend the claim that itches themselves, qua qualitative experiences, can be the objects of aesthetic experience and appreciation. But can experience of itches be genuinely aesthetic, given that it has no clear object? (Scratches do not pose the same problem, since they are physical phenomena distinct from the sensations they produce.) In art or nature appreciation, there is a structure independent of the experience, and that structure is what the experience is an experience of. Can such a distinction be drawn in the case of itches?

An affirmative answer is available when we can consider that experience can occur at two levels, one of which involves reflection on the other. While looking at one point in my visual field, I can shift my attention without moving my eyes: I can watch the owner of my favorite café operating the coffee roaster, or watch a mother

and her teenaged son playing the ancient Ms. Pac-Man machine. Perhaps, though this is more controversial, one can even become aware of sensations one was already having but just wasn't conscious of: on reading this sentence, for instance, you might become aware of the sensation of your feet touching the floor, or your tongue touching the roof of your mouth. These examples suggest that basic somatic experiences can be seen as constituting a structure which can be appreciated when attention is directed toward them. And just as we might strive to achieve more adequate appreciation of an artwork, in part through cultivating the ability of detecting and discriminating among its attributes, we may strive to achieve greater awareness of our basic somatic experiences.

Should it be thought, then, that there must be a distinction between appreciative experience and that which is appreciated, there are good prospects of securing such a distinction even in the case of basic somatic phenomena like itches. This distinction will allow for reflection on the way in which higher-level qualities of an itch (such as its being jarring) emerge from base-level properties (such as its being sharp and recurrent), as Levinson requires. It also allows for an epistemic conception of experience like Iseminger's, since there is a fact of the matter about one's somatic experience at a given moment: one can have an experience of one's qualitative somatic experience, as long as one is not mistaken about the nature of that experience.²⁷

IV. APPROPRIATE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE OF ITCHES AND SCRATCHES

I have argued that there can be aesthetic experiences of itches and scratches, even if it is thought that aesthetic experience requires an independent object or structure. However, some might wish for a stronger argument to the effect that it is not only possible but *appropriate* to take itches and scratches as the object of aesthetic experience. One way to approach this matter is, I take it, to ask whether it can be appropriate to offer an aesthetic characterization of itches and scratches: that is, whether it is appropriate to attribute aesthetic properties to them or describe them in aesthetic terms.²⁸

Can it be appropriate to describe basic somatic phenomena like itches in aesthetic terms; and if so, in what circumstances? An obvious thing about these phenomena is that, considered in themselves, they may be pleasant or unpleasant. But, of course, such basic pleasures are notoriously excluded from the domain of the aesthetic by some thinkers.²⁹ Though I doubt we should accept this move, I will grant it for the sake of the argument. So we will assume, provisionally, that the brute positive or negative evaluations that attend simple pleasures and displeasures are not sufficient for the application of aesthetic concepts to the phenomena.

Once we see the particular phenomena as embedded within a more complex structure of experience, however, the reluctance to apply aesthetic concepts should diminish. Though one might resist speaking of a color or simple auditory tone, perceived on its own, as aesthetic, it is clear that such simple elements contribute to the aesthetic character of the more complex structure of which they are a part. And, when we think of them as part of a complex structure, it becomes appropriate to speak of the elements themselves as having an aesthetic character: we can speak of the rightness or elegance or garishness of a particular color in the context of an image, for example.

Of course, the appropriateness of speaking this way depends on the idea that the more complex structure itself is ripe for the application of aesthetic concepts. The visual or auditory structures contained in paintings or musical works invite aesthetic consideration partly by virtue of the fact that they have been constructed intentionally, and with aesthetic ends in mind. But this cannot be a necessary

condition, as the case of nature appreciation shows: a structure that has not been intentionally constructed can support aesthetic consideration.

To see whether there can be appropriate aesthetic experiences of the structure of basic somatic phenomena, of which itches and scratches are a part, it will help to consider some normative accounts of the aesthetic experience of nature. These accounts aim to say what it is to have an *appropriate* aesthetic experience. If it can be shown that promising normative models of nature appreciation can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to somatic phenomena, this will bolster the case for their aesthetic character.

On Allen Carlson's influential account, appreciating a natural environment appropriately requires grasping it as the kind of thing that it is. One reason for this is grounded in Kendall Walton's seminal argument that aesthetic features are category dependent: whether an artwork appears expressive or bland, he observes, will depend on the features of other artworks that belong to the category to which the work is appropriately assigned.³⁰ This is why Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* can be appropriately seen to be lively and energetic in relation to Mondrian's other works, though it would seem restrained and, perhaps, bland seen (inappropriately) in relation to Cubist works.

Carlson suggests that natural environments can be assigned to appropriate categories by bringing to bear scientific knowledge about their origins and relevant features.³¹ Seeing a whale as a mammal rather than a fish will allow us to recognize ways in which it is remarkable as compared to other mammals, most of which have evolved as terrestrial creatures. Appropriate aesthetic appreciation is cognitively informed: it attributes objects to categories to which they actually belong, and is thereby able to make appropriate aesthetic characterizations of them.

The structure constituted by basic somatic experiences seems perfectly apt for this type of appreciation. Somatic experiences are not a random jumble of phenomena, but the product of the mind's and body's functioning within a physical environment. It is possible to develop a sophisticated awareness not only of the phenomena themselves, but also of the way in which they are produced by and indicative of complex physical and psychological processes. Many anatomically informed varieties of yoga strive for precisely such awareness of the place of bodily sensations within the functioning of the whole psychophysical organism. I can see no reason to exclude these bodily phenomena from the realm of aesthetic appreciation described by Carlson.

Still, to insist that appropriate aesthetic appreciation of our somatic experiences *must* follow this model might well seem too exclusive. Richard Shusterman, who has eloquently advocated a discipline of "somaesthetics," speaks of "the beautiful experience of one's own body from within – the endorphin-enhanced glow of high-level cardiovascular functioning, the slow savoring awareness of improved, deeper breathing, the tingling thrill of feeling into new parts of one's spine."³² While Shusterman appeals to scientific concepts in this description, the core phenomenon seems available even to a subject who is not scientifically informed. The recognition that the breathing is improved and deeper, which contributes to one's "slow savoring awareness" of it, seems to be relative to one's past experience of breathing, rather than to a medical standard. Though comparison and categorization may be required, then, the relevant categories may be common-sense and local rather than scientific and general.³³ Itches and scratches have their own place in human experience that is hardly exhausted by an understanding of their physiological functions and roles; perhaps we can appreciate them aesthetically by acknowledging such things as how they call attention to our somatic experience and how they color that experience in certain ways.

Noël Carroll, while not disagreeing that Carlson has identified one model of appropriate appreciation of nature, has proposed an additional model: namely, that we may be *moved by nature*, which involves being open and attentive to the stimulus supplied by a natural environment and allowing an emotional response to develop in response to this stimulus. "For example, we may find ourselves standing under a thundering waterfall and be excited by its grandeur; or standing barefooted amidst a silent arbor, softly carpeted with layers of decaying leaves, a sense of repose and homeyness may be aroused in us."³⁴ These responses may well have a cognitive aspect, but the cognitive categories to which they appeal are not scientific ones.

It seems clear that one can be moved by one's somatic experiences, in the sense discussed by Carroll, without a sophisticated understanding of the process by which they were produced. As Shusterman describes, one can exult, aesthetically, in the sensations of one's own body. Thus, appropriate aesthetic appreciation of itches and scratches, and of the structure of somatic experience of which they are a part, is available on both Carlson's and Carroll's models.

V. SOMATIC EXPERIENCE AND AESTHETIC SATISFACTION

If the above analysis is correct, it is possible to have appropriate aesthetic experiences of basic somatic phenomena like itches and scratches. But is this conclusion really of interest?

An easy route to the conclusion that even the most mundane aspects of experience have an aesthetic character would have been to appeal to the fact that if the elements at one extreme of a spectrum are aesthetic, the elements at the other extreme, or toward the middle of the spectrum, are as well. If being colorful or dynamic is having an aesthetic character, so is being colorless or static. If being delicious or disgusting is having an aesthetic character, so is being bland.³⁵

But there is something less than satisfying about this approach. It's as if we were to say, "Let's all appreciate our somatic experience so we can be opened to a whole new world of the bland and banal." As Stecker puts it, "Those who care about such things as aesthetic experience or aesthetic properties do so because of the belief that they are providers of something of great value to human beings."³⁶ This is why I made my earlier promise to argue that it is not only appropriate but worthwhile to turn aesthetic attention to the domain of itches and scratches.

Happily, there is no reason to assume that the kinds of phenomena under discussion, experienced with attention, will in fact turn out to be bland or banal. An experience that one has every day, like drinking a cup of coffee, can become quietly exquisite and even strangely foreign when done with full attention to the feel of the cup in one's hands, the rim of the cup touching one's lower lip, and the sensation of the coffee in the mouth and going down the throat. Such commonplace moments of everyday experience are richly replete with qualities that we tend to neglect as we physically or psychologically multitask, giving our full attention to nothing. These qualities of somatic experience are available to everyone, cost nothing, and require no environmental degradation or natural resource depletion to produce. They are already here at every moment, and accessing them requires only attention. Moreover, if the testimony of Zen monks can be trusted, attention to sensory experience is a mental discipline that, once learned, does not interfere with one's activities but rather contributes to one's ability to perform them appropriately and even with virtuosity. So, while paying attention to one's sensations might at first distract one from, say, reading a book or carrying on a coherent conversation, eventually (we are told) it will be possible to accomplish such activities with full or even enhanced competence.

What might we discover by surveying our somatic experience with attention, treating it as an object of aesthetic appreciation? It is hard to say without actually cultivating the awareness that would make such appreciation possible. My own rather casual excursions within yoga, meditation and Zen practice have revealed that I can experience many plain old moments, such as in academic department meetings, as having a quiet beauty to them, when I attend to the complex of visual and auditory and somatic experiences that I'm having in those moments. It's hard to explain exactly how this happens. If you simply came and looked and listened at one of these department meetings, you wouldn't immediately be struck by anything beautiful happening there: my colleagues are not more attractive or better dressed or endowed with more resonant voices than yours, and our meeting room is pure 70s-era public university. Nonetheless, there is a texture of experience in those moments that it is possible to appreciate aesthetically, to gain a real satisfaction from. Moreover, this appreciation does not require that I ignore the content of the meeting. It might be seen as analogous to a movie soundtrack, which in the most successful case interacts with the plot and dialogue elements to produce a total aesthetic effect, and in other cases simply provides an aesthetic supplement to those elements.

These experiences are not experiences of exultation, they don't transport me to another realm, but neither are they boring or ho hum. In fact, a meeting becomes much less boring and ho hum at moments when I lend this sort of attention to my experience. And it seems to me that the ability to transform such moments into occasions for aesthetic satisfaction is a real gift, one that I don't employ often enough.³⁷ Aesthetic attention to the realm of basic, everyday experiences, then, offers the prospect of considerable reward.

VI. FOUR PERSPECTIVES ON UNPLEASANT EXPERIENCE

I have suggested that attention to the domain of somatic experience can be both appropriate and rewarding. But what about the fact that itches, along with many other elements of everyday experience, are typically unpleasant? Is attending to my somatic experience, when I have a bad blister on my foot and no choice but to keep walking, really going to yield satisfaction? If I am a victim of chronic pain or chronic itch caused by a medical condition, wouldn't I be better off distracting myself from my somatic experience than cultivating awareness of it?

To close, I will briefly outline four perspectives on the relationship between negative experiences and aesthetic satisfaction which may serve to defuse the worry that attention will yield satisfaction only in favorable circumstances. First, regarding some sensations characteristically regarded as pleasant or unpleasant, it may be possible for the valence to shift if we really attend to what those experiences are like. I have experienced valence shifts in both directions. I have discovered, of some foods I thought I liked, that I find them unpleasant to eat if I pay attention to what that experience is like. A shift from negative to positive, on the other hand, can occur when I know a pain to be an indicator of something positive, like increasing muscle flexibility: the association of the pain with the positive benefit is such that over time, the very quale I once regarded as unpleasant comes to be welcomed as pleasurable for its own sake (not just for the instrumental reasons that set the evaluative shift in motion). Thus, it may be possible to discover that an itch or a pain is actually not so unpleasant, or to have the level of unpleasantness diminish, when one attends to it as part of a larger complex of experience.

Some might maintain that it is analytic that pains (and, perhaps, itches) are unpleasant and cannot be enjoyed, such that anyone who claims to enjoy a pain cannot be in a genuine pain state. But this poses no real challenge for my account; all that is required is that one's experience can, through attention, become more

aesthetically satisfying. Perhaps one experiences the same qualia, but experiences them as more pleasurable; or perhaps one experiences a different set of qualia that are more pleasurable than the ones experienced previously. However we describe the case, if such shifts can occur then aesthetic attention to the domain offers prospects for increased satisfaction.

Second, the appreciation of particular moments of experience may be a matter of attentional selectivity: I disregard elements that offer no prospects for satisfaction, and choose instead to attend to others out of which a satisfying experience can be constructed. On such an approach, as an appreciator I am also creative: I am constructing the very object from which I will then derive aesthetic satisfaction, and perhaps I can use that to distract myself from unpleasant elements of my experience. Clearly, this is a strategy that we frequently employ, whether consciously or unconsciously.

A third possibility takes a quite different direction. Zen mindfulness practice advocates nonjudgmental awareness of everything in the realm of one's experience; using some things to distract one from other things, then, is off limits as a strategy for appreciation. The satisfaction that comes from appreciation of everyday moments by a Zen practitioner seems to be a function of the ability to detach oneself from preferences and evaluative judgments. It is said that when one achieves this ability, while also feeling the actual quality of experience as it arises rather than restricting one's perceptions to what one expects or believes to be possible, every moment presents itself as fresh and surprising. In this context, even pain can be enjoyed as one of the many facets of the freshness of experience. I have no personal experience of this; I am relying purely on the testimony of others.

A fourth possibility, and perhaps the most obvious and straightforward, is that once we become more fully aware of the nature of our experience, we are in a position both to understand more fully what we find satisfying and to make changes that will promote more satisfying future experiences. This, of course, is where scratching plays a special role: scratching is quite explicitly undertaken to give a certain shape to one's somatic experience. One scratches to mask or eradicate an unpleasant sensation, or to generate a pleasant one. Scratching is thus both responsive and active: it involves apprehending some aspect of one's sensory experience, formulating (even if not fully consciously) an intention to alter that experience, and perceptually tracking it as it evolves through one's activity until a satisfactory state has been achieved. If I am a sensitive appreciator of my experience, it seems, I will also be a sensitive constructor of the elements of my future experiences. Perhaps, then, there can be not only an aesthetics but an artistry of everyday experience. But since I feel far from competent in matters of such artistry, I will not attempt further discussion of it here.

VII. CONCLUSION

I have argued that itches and scratches can be the objects of appropriate aesthetic experiences. My most stalwart opponent might still resist the conclusion that a single itching sensation, considered in isolation from any context, has an aesthetic character, though careful attention to the phenomenology should lead us to question this resistance. In any case, when a basic somatic experience such as an itch takes its place in a larger structure of experience that we may attend to and appreciate, it clearly is appropriate to see it as having an aesthetic character. I have suggested that such larger structures of experience are appropriate candidates for such appreciation on two quite distinct models, and that appreciation of them can yield satisfactions that are clearly worth having.

Many further questions remain to be addressed. Can aesthetic judgments about somatic experiences have any claim to objectivity, given the privacy of these

experiences?³⁸ Does aesthetic experience of bodily sensations differ in some systematic way from aesthetic experience of artworks or natural environments? Should more attention be paid to the constructive and creative aspects of aesthetic experience, which bridge the gap between experiencer and artist? Does aesthetic attention to somatic experience threaten to produce an undesirable hyperaestheticization of everyday life? I hope that my inquiry here will prompt others to reflect on these questions, both for their own sakes and for the sake of the light they may shed on the notion of the aesthetic.³⁹

NOTES

¹ On food, see Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Cornell University Press, 1999) and Elizabeth Telfer, *Food for Thought: Philosophy and Food* (London: Routledge, 1996). On sports, see Wolfgang Welsch, "Sport Viewed Aesthetically, and Even as Art?" in *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 135-155; and Joseph H. Kupfer, *Experience as Art: Aesthetics in Everyday Life* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983). Kupfer also discusses sex from an aesthetic perspective.

² On smell and taste, see Emily Brady, "Sniffing and Savoring: The Aesthetics of Smells and Tastes," in *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, ed. Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 177-193. On touch as an aesthetic sense in the appreciation of art, see Dominic M. McIver Lopes, "Art Media and the Sense Modalities: Tactile Pictures," *Philosophical Quarterly* 47 (1997): 425-440; and "Vision, Touch, and the Value of Pictures," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 42 (2002): 191-201. In "Proprioception as an Aesthetic Sense" (*Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64 (2006): 231-242), Barbara Montero suggests that proprioception plays an aesthetic role in the spectator's experience of dance.

³ The view that aesthetic judgments must be disinterested is generally traced to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*; the view that art releases us from everyday concerns was expressed by Schopenhauer in *The World as Will and Representation* and taken up by Clive Bell in *Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1914), among others.

⁴ A notable exception is Richard Shusterman, "Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57 (1999): 299-313.

⁵ By 'itch,' I refer to a sensation and not to its physical cause. Scratching, then, belongs to a different category: it is an action one may undertake, and a cause of sensation. For this reason, itches and scratches will sometimes figure in my analysis in different ways.

⁶ This phenomenon, known as 'referred itch,' is discussed in J. M. S. Pearce, "Referred Itch (*Mitempfindung*)," *European Neurology* 55 (2006): 233-234; and C. P. Richter, "Mysterious Form of Referred Sensation in Man," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 74 (1977): 4702-4705. Richter also describes some effects of attention on referred itch experiences.

⁷ Sorry about that. Just think of all the itches I had to endure while I was writing.

⁸ It might be claimed that this is a conceptual impossibility, and that any itch-like sensation that is experienced as pleasant must be a tickle instead. The relation between itches and positive evaluation is discussed in section VI.

⁹ Some itches, especially those caused by infection and other disease processes, may be less susceptible to the effects of shifting attention. Perhaps even in these cases, however, there is a habituation effect that can lead to a less intense experience of an itch, just as one can habituate to visual or auditory stimuli.

¹⁰ Perhaps not *everyone* has made such a decision, but I suspect that the vast majority of people who routinely stand in front of large groups of college students have.

¹¹ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love* (New York: Viking, 2006).

¹² Those who believe, with Roger Scruton (*Art and Imagination* [London: Methuen, 1974]), that appreciation must be appropriate to count as aesthetic may wish to await the arguments of section IV before concluding that itches and scratches are even potential objects of aesthetic appreciation.

¹³ See, for instance, Noël Carroll, "Aesthetic Experience Revisited," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 42 (2002): pp. 145-168, and "Four Concepts of Aesthetic Experience," in *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 41-62; Jerrold Levinson, *The Pleasures of Aesthetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,

1996); Richard Shusterman, "The End of Aesthetic Experience," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55 (1997): 29-41; Robert Stecker, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), ch. 3.

¹⁴ The view of aesthetic experience proposed by John Dewey in *Art as Experience* (New York: Putnam, 1934) might appear to be especially hospitable to the project I undertake here, but as it differs quite significantly in its focus and aims from conceptions more recently developed within analytic aesthetics I leave consideration of it to another occasion. Even on Dewey's conception, it is not clear that itching and scratching will count as aesthetic, since Dewey reserves aesthetic terminology for experiences satisfying technical criteria such as unity, culmination and closure.

¹⁵ Robert Stecker, "Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Value," *Philosophy Compass* 1 (2006): 1-10, at p. 4. Cf. a very similar formulation in *Aesthetics*, pp. 46-47, which includes mention of "a payoff intrinsic to this very experience."

¹⁶ Stecker, *Aesthetics*, ch. 3.

¹⁷ Stecker, "Aesthetic Experience," p. 9.

¹⁸ See especially Carroll, "Aesthetic Experience Revisited."

¹⁹ Carroll, "Aesthetic Experience Revisited," p. 167. Stecker objects that Carroll's conditions do not guarantee that one is genuinely having an *experience* of the work rather than simply thinking about it. See Stecker, "Aesthetic Experience," pp. 6-7. It is not my aim here to adjudicate the debate between Carroll and Stecker.

²⁰ Carroll, "Art and the Domain of the Aesthetic," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 40 (2000): 191-208, at p. 207. To avoid circularity, Carroll proposes an account of aesthetic properties that is independent of his account of aesthetic experience.

²¹ Carroll, "Aesthetic Experience Revisited," p. 165.

²² Carroll, "Aesthetic Experience Revisited," pp. 163, 164 and 168, respectively.

²³ Carroll, "Aesthetic Experience Revisited," p. 163.

²⁴ Stecker, *Aesthetics*, p. 43. He refers to views like that espoused in J. O. Urmson, "What Makes a Situation Aesthetic?" in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts: Contemporary Readings in Aesthetics*, ed. Joseph Margolis (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), pp. 11-26.

²⁵ Levinson, *Pleasures*, p. 6. Emphasis in original.

²⁶ Gary Iseminger, *The Aesthetic Function of Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 39.

²⁷ I do not mean to suggest that such an account will satisfy every aim one might have in introducing an epistemic component of aesthetic experience: if one wishes to secure the publicity or corrigibility of aesthetic judgments, the fact that one's qualitative experiences are private may thwart these aims. While this issue certainly merits further consideration, I must leave it aside for the present.

²⁸ I mean by these formulations to remain neutral as regards the dispute between realists and anti-realists about aesthetic properties.

²⁹ Some trace such a view to Kant, although Budd maintains that on Kant's view the merely agreeable should be considered a subcategory, albeit minor, of the aesthetic. See Malcolm Budd, "Kant on Natural Beauty," in *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 25-47. Among contemporary accounts, Iseminger (*Aesthetic Function*, pp. 40-41) observes that something may be enjoyed without being found valuable or being recognized for what it is; such an experience, on his view, would not be properly termed aesthetic.

³⁰ Kendall Walton, "Categories of Art," *Philosophical Review* 79 (1970): 334-367.

³¹ Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2000), esp. pp. 54-71.

³² Shusterman, "Somaesthetics," p. 299.

³³ Carlson himself makes some concession to such points. He allows that common-sense knowledge may help to frame natural objects in a way that allows for appropriate appreciation (*Aesthetics and the Environment*, p. 50). He also acknowledges that appreciating an object or environment may sometimes be a matter of recognizing the various purposes to which it has been put, including symbolic and mythological uses (p. 135).

³⁴ Noël Carroll, "On Being Moved by Nature: Between Religion and Natural History," in *Arguing About Art: Contemporary Philosophical Debates*, 2nd ed., ed. Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 167-186, at p. 168.

³⁵ Compare J. O. Urmson's observation in his classic paper "What Makes a Situation Aesthetic?" (p. 14): "[I]t is tempting ... to concentrate unduly up on the most sublime and intense of our experiences; but I am convinced that it is important to ensure that our account of the aesthetic should be as applicable to toleration as to our most significant experiences...."

³⁶ Stecker, "Aesthetic Experience," pp. 1-2.

³⁷ In describing this capacity as a gift, I do not intend to imply that it is innate. While some people probably have a special innate endowment for such aesthetic experiences, others (like me) can acquire some measure of this capacity through learning.

³⁸ For discussion of similar matters in relation to proprioception, see Montero, "Proprioception."

³⁹ For helpful comments and discussion, I am grateful to Tom Adajian, Stephen Davies, Tom Leddy, Sheila Lintott, Elijah Millgram, Martin Montminy and an anonymous reviewer for this Journal.