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Beyond the Call of Beauty: Everyday Aesthetic Demands Under Patriarchy

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ABSTRACT

This paper defends two claims. First, we will argue for the existence of aesthetic demands in the realm of everyday aesthetics, and that these demands are not reducible to moral demands. Second, we will argue that we must recognise the limits of these demands in order to combat a widespread form of gendered oppression. The concept of aesthetic supererogation offers a new structural framework to understand both the pernicious nature of this oppression and what may be done to mitigate it.

“You can’t leave the house looking like that.”

“You shouldn’t wear that tie with that shirt.”

“You’re too old for that hairstyle.”

“You can’t play that horrible music at my party.”

“You should take the laundry off the clothesline before your mother gets here.”

A recognisable feature of our lives is that we make aesthetic demands of each other. As the above examples show, we demand that people meet certain aesthetic standards and hold them accountable when they do not. These aesthetic demands are particularly prevalent in the realm of everyday aesthetics. We demand that people dress according to certain standards for certain jobs or social occasions. We demand that those we live with keep our homes in line with certain aesthetic standards (though as many couples and flatmates will recognise, these standards vary greatly).

Up to now the literature on aesthetic requirements has said surprisingly little about the realm of everyday aesthetics. Everyday aesthetic demands have also received relatively little attention in the growing literature on everyday aesthetics. This is less surprising, given it has only recently become a focus of sustained philosophical inquiry: the main focus of attention has been on defining the field of everyday aesthetics (Forsey 2014; Melchionne 2013; Rañiu 2013), on describing everyday

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aesthetic experiences or categories (Ngai 2012; Quacchia 2016; Semiczyszyn 2013), and on explaining the importance of the field (Irvin 2008; Leddy 2012; Rațiu 2013).

This paper will defend two claims. First, we will argue for the existence of aesthetic demands in the realm of everyday aesthetics and that these demands are not reducible to moral demands. Second, we will argue that recognising the limits of these demands helps us analyse and understand a prevalent form of gendered oppression. We will start in Section 1 by arguing in support of the existence of aesthetic obligations in the realm of everyday aesthetics. We will then, in Section 2, argue that these obligations are not reducible to moral obligations. In Section 3, we will argue that in addition to aesthetic obligations, there is also good reason to think that cases of aesthetic supererogation exist in the realm of everyday aesthetics. Finally, in Section Four, we will argue that accepting the existence of aesthetic supererogation has an important role to play in understanding and potentially combatting one form of gendered oppression.

Before we begin, it is worth briefly clarifying how we will use the term everyday aesthetics. Our use will follow Crispin Sartwell's (2005, 761) claim, "Everyday Aesthetics refers to the possibility of aesthetic experience of non-art objects and events." Included in everyday aesthetics then are our aesthetic experiences of non-art objects like tables, chairs, bicycles, clothes, and buildings; our aesthetic experiences of food and drink (Korsmeyer 1999; Brady 2005); our aesthetic experiences of the natural and built environment (Paetzold 2013; Saito 2005; von Bonsdorff 2005); and our aesthetic experiences of our own bodies and those of other people (Bhatt 2013; Irvin 2016; Shusterman 1999).

This definition is broader than others in the literature. For example, Tom Leddy (2012, 8–9) specifically rules out nature from his account which defines everyday aesthetics as concerning "objects that are not art or nature." Kevin Melchionne (2013), on the other hand, emphasizes the *everyday* in his definition in reference to "the aspects of our lives marked by widely shared, daily routines or patterns to which we tend to impart an aesthetic character." Our definition of everyday aesthetics is broader than both, as it includes nature and aesthetic experiences that may not be part of widely shared daily routines, such as preparations—of the body, of one's home—for a wedding (Cahill 2003). We adopt this broad definition of everyday aesthetics in order to show the wide range of cases in which these aesthetic demands occur.

1. AESTHETIC OBLIGATIONS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

At the start of this paper, we provided examples of demands we make of each other in the realm of everyday aesthetics. In this section, we argue that these demands are plausible cases of aesthetic obligation.

While the existence of aesthetic obligations is far from universally accepted in the literature (Hampshire 1954), two persuasive arguments have been given in support of their existence. First, Howard Press argues that aesthetic obligations arise from principles, such as, "One ought to appreciate what is beautiful" (Press 1969, 525). This could take the form of a friend encouraging that you "really ought to go see Fabritius's *The Goldfinch* exhibit while it's touring Scotland." We can extend this

principle to a host of examples in everyday aesthetics: one ought to take the time to pay due sensitivity to what is beautiful in one's environment. Consider a visitor to a university campus learning their host had never seen its magnificent forest—renowned for its summertime blossoms and autumnal foliage. The visitor would be entitled to think that their host is blameworthy.

As well as having obligations to appreciate what is aesthetically valuable, it also seems plausible to think that we are required not to damage or destroy what is beautiful. In her discussion of everyday aesthetic demands, Yuriko Saito (2008, 214) notes that those who vandalise the environment are often subject to harsh criticism. To give our own example of such a case (Archer and Ware 2017), consider the following: In June 2014, a beauty spot on Scolty Hill near Banchory in Scotland was vandalized. The vandals were subject to intense criticism, with one local councillor saying: "It is a horrendous mess and people should be ashamed of themselves for spoiling our beautiful landscape in this selfish way" (*Deeside and Piper Herald* 2014). Those who have damaged this beautiful part of the world are blameworthy for the disregard they have shown to the aesthetic value of the landscape.

Another plausible example of an aesthetic obligation found in Saito's discussion of aesthetic demands concerns personal appearance. Satio (2008, 213) points to a case of Northwestern University's lacrosse team causing offence on a meeting to the White House by wearing flip-flops. This was seen to show a lack of respect. This is a clear example of an aesthetic demand that we make of each other. We demand that people dress in a way that shows respect, particularly on important occasions such as meeting the President or attending a wedding or a funeral. Those who fail to do so are subject to similar negative reactions as these athletes. We also make aesthetic demands of each other to keep our surroundings pleasant, particularly our homes. The flatmate who makes no effort to help tidy before the arrival of a guest can rightly be criticized. The flatmate who insists on playing awful music won't escape criticism either.

Marcia Eaton (2008) gives a second reason to accept the existence of aesthetic obligations. She argues that if there are aesthetic *dilemmas*, then there must be aesthetic obligations from which such dilemmas originate. Eaton discusses a classic "burning museum case" in which one has to make a choice between saving one of two paintings: both alike in their ability to enlighten, please, educate, and provoke wonder, but the second being more beautiful. Eaton notes that those working in art restoration often face these kinds of aesthetic dilemmas. She concludes that the "great pains" restorers take in recording exactly what alterations were made, and the "sense of real loss" experienced when restoration requires removal of the artist's work—such as when one painting lies atop a first—are indicative of a genuinely felt obligation (Eaton 2008, 4–5).

A clear example of this kind of dilemma in everyday aesthetics is found in cases of land development. Suppose that there is an economic and social need to build a railway connecting two cities. Investigation of the railway's possible routes yields two possibilities. The railway could either pass through a beautiful forest or along a majestic piece of coastland. This decision would not be taken lightly by the developers. Both areas of beauty make claims on us not to destroy them and whichever is lost

will be cause for regret. This challenge is indicative of a genuinely felt obligation. In these cases, to the extent that what demands consideration by the decision maker are the *aesthetic properties* of the object, it is this realm of properties that makes the dilemma an aesthetic one, rather than an economic or moral one. If moral dilemmas emerge out of a conflict of moral obligations, then the existence of genuine aesthetic dilemmas indicates a conflict between competing aesthetic obligations.

There is good reason, therefore, to think that aesthetic demands exist in the realm of everyday aesthetics. The principles ‘appreciate the beautiful’ and ‘do not damage or destroy what is beautiful’ both seem plausible obligation-generating principles that provide genuine cases of aesthetic obligations in everyday aesthetics. Moreover, it also seems plausible to think there exist aesthetic obligations to maintain certain aesthetic standards for our personal appearance and surroundings. Finally, we gave an example of an everyday aesthetic dilemma which also gives reason to think that aesthetic obligations exist.

2. AESTHETIC DEMANDS ARE NOT REDUCIBLE TO MORAL DEMANDS

One objection that might be raised against our claims in the previous section is that what we have called aesthetic demands are really just moral demands with aesthetic content (MacCallum and Widdows 2016, 7–9; Widdows 2017). After all, it seems reasonable to think that we can legitimately morally demand of each other that we do not prevent others from having valuable experiences. Someone who vandalises an area of natural beauty would be violating this moral demand. Similarly, the demands of personal appearance could stem from the moral demand to behave respectfully towards others. Finally, the demand to keep our surroundings pleasant could stem from the moral principle not to harm others (even when that harm is fairly trivial, like the imposition of Nickleback on a group of partygoers). While all these demands have aesthetic content, it could be argued that this does not show that the demands are aesthetic ones. This objection has been raised against the claim that aesthetic obligations exist.¹ If all supposed cases of aesthetic obligation can plausibly be understood as moral obligations, then it seems like we can explain the normative force of the demands without making reference to aesthetic obligations. Given this, there seems little reason to think that there are any distinctly aesthetic obligations.

Three replies can be made to this objection. First, supporters of aesthetic obligations can accept that moral demands are present in all of the cases considered above. This does not rule out the possibility that there also exist distinctly aesthetic obligations in these cases. The demands in these cases may be overdetermined and stem from both moral obligations and aesthetic obligations.

By itself this response may not convince many. While there could be two distinct kinds of demand present in these cases, the more parsimonious explanation for the felt demand in these cases is that this can be fully explained by the presence of a moral obligation. In the absence of additional reasons to accept this response, there seems good reason to continue to take this objection seriously.

Moreover, this response faces another objection. It might be argued that any aesthetic demands in these examples cannot be disentangled from moral demands. Saito (2008, 238) suggests that when it comes to considering the kinds of examples we discussed in Section One, our aesthetic judgements both contribute and are responsive to our moral judgements. This means that it is not possible to fully separate our moral and aesthetic judgements in these cases. Accepting this claim would cast doubt on the claim that there are two distinct kinds of obligation present.

However, there is a good additional reason to think that a distinctly aesthetic obligation is at work here. Consider again the case of Scotly Hill's vandalism. This is a clear case of moral wrongdoing: the vandalism was damaging to the local environment and harmful to all those who enjoy the area's beautiful scenery. We may think that our negative reactions to this case could be fully explained by the violation of a moral obligation. On closer examination though, this explanation appears insufficient, as our moral disapproval does not exhaust our negative reactions to this case. While we feel moral outrage or resentment towards those who vandalize beauty spots in this way, we also feel a distinct kind of revulsion that is not present in other cases of moral wrongdoing. This revulsion is expressed in the reaction of a local Paths Association to the Scolty Hill vandalism when he says: "Those who cause such ugliness have very ugly minds" (*Deeside and Piper Herald* 2014). This is not just an expression of moral outrage but also of aesthetic outrage.² There is a distinct and severe aesthetic criticism being levelled here, that we will call aesthetic blame. The vandals are not just criticized for being immoral but for having *ugly minds*. While clearly a less serious offence, someone who wear flip-flops to the White House might also be criticized for showing a lack of aesthetic appreciation, as might the flatmate who inflicts untidiness on his cohabitants. This suggests a distinctly aesthetic form of disapproval levelled towards those who have violated their obligation to protect what is beautiful. This form of aesthetic disapproval gives a reason to think that a distinctively aesthetic wrong was committed. This means that even if we accept that many cases of aesthetic obligation will also be morally obligatory, there is still good reason to think that aesthetic obligations are not reducible to moral obligations. Moreover, even if we think our aesthetic and moral judgements are impossible to disentangle, we still have good reason to think that there are distinctly aesthetic obligations. The distinct negative response we have to such cases shows that these are not simply cases of moral obligation.

The final reply is that it does not seem plausible to think that moral obligations are present in all of the cases considered in Section One. The professor who never visits the forest near her office and so fails to conform to the principle 'appreciate what is beautiful' is failing in some way. However, it is not plausible to think of this as a moral failing. We would be unlikely to respond to the professor with resentment or question her moral character. We would, though, question her aesthetic sensibilities and lose faith in her commitment to beauty.

We have given three responses to the concern that the examples of everyday aesthetic obligations offered are really cases of moral obligations. First, the claim that moral obligations exist in these examples is compatible with there also existing aesthetic obligations. Second, there is a distinctly aesthetic form of censure operating here, in

addition to any moral censure. Finally, the claim that all of the examples given in Section One are morally obligatory does not look plausible when applied to the case of the professor's obligation to appreciate what is beautiful.

3. AESTHETIC SUPEREROGATION

We have argued that there exist aesthetic obligations in the realm of everyday aesthetics. We will now argue that in addition to aesthetic obligations there also exist cases of aesthetic supererogation in everyday aesthetics.³ Before we do this, however, we must first explain the concept of moral supererogation.

The term supererogation is roughly equivalent to the phrase "beyond the call of duty." Acts of supererogation are those that are morally good but not morally required. The contemporary discussion of supererogation in moral theory is generally accepted to have begun with J.O. Urmson's (1958) paper, "Saints and Heroes." Urmson argues that there exist acts that are morally good but not morally required. To support this claim he offers the following example:

We may imagine a squad of soldiers to be practicing the throwing of live hand grenades; a grenade slips from the hand of one of them and rolls on the ground near the squad; one of them sacrifices his life by throwing himself on the grenade and protecting his comrades with his own body. (1958, 63)

As Urmson notes, this seems like a clear case of morally admirable, praiseworthy behaviour. However, Urmson then gives two reasons to think that these acts are not morally required. First, it would not be appropriate to demand that the soldier dive on the grenade (Urmson 1958, 63). Given that moral obligations are generally thought to be acts that it is appropriate to demand that other people perform (Mill 2001, 49), this gives us good reason to think that the soldier's act was not morally required. Second, no one could legitimately reproach the soldier if he had failed to act as he did (1958, 64). This gives us good reason to think that the soldier's act was not morally required, at least if we accept the popular view that moral requirements are conceptually tied to blame.⁴

In the wake of Urmson's discussion, several philosophers have sought to provide a precise account of supererogation. While there is no complete agreement on how to understand supererogation, the following are generally thought to be plausible necessary and sufficient conditions for the concept:

An act is supererogatory if and only if:

1. It is morally optional (neither morally required nor morally forbidden).
2. It is morally better than the minimum that morality demands (e.g., Ferry [2013, 574]; Heyd [1982, 5]).

Recently, philosophers have begun to investigate whether cases of supererogation exist in normative domains other than morality, such as the epistemic domain (Herdberg 2014) and the domain of prudence (McElwee forthcoming). Elsewhere (Archer and Ware 2017), we have argued that it is also plausible to think that cases

of aesthetic supererogation exist. We provided the following account of aesthetic supererogation:

An act is aesthetically supererogatory if and only if:

1. It is aesthetically optional (neither required nor forbidden from the aesthetic point of view).
2. It is aesthetically better than the minimum that is required from the aesthetic point of view.

In order to defend the claim that cases of aesthetic supererogation exist in the realm of everyday aesthetics we must find cases that meet both of these conditions.

In fact all of the examples we looked at in Section One can be modified to be cases of aesthetic supererogation. Take the obligation to appreciate the beautiful. We claimed that someone who never made the five-minute trip to appreciate the beautiful forest was doing something wrong. However, someone who spends most of their weekends travelling to sights of natural beauty seems to surpass the limits of this obligation. Similarly, the obligation not to damage or destroy what is beautiful generated obligations not to engage in the destruction of beauty spots which can also be surpassed. Take for example the case of Michael Forbes who was offered significant sums of money to sell his house on the Menie Estate near Aberdeen to enable Donald J. Trump to build a golf course. Forbes decided not to sell his house in order to try and prevent Trump from building a golf course on this beautiful part of the Scottish coastline. In doing so, Forbes not only lost out on receiving an inflated price for his house, he also left himself open to a barrage of public criticism from Trump and his employees (Carrell 2008). This surpasses any reasonable aesthetic obligations that Forbes may have had in this case. Finally, the obligation to meet certain aesthetic standards for one's personal appearance and living areas can also be surpassed. While wearing flip-flops to meet the President may be aesthetically wrong, spending a significant amount of one's savings on a beautiful designer dress for this meeting would be supererogatory. Similarly, someone who devotes all his time to making his home as beautiful as possible also seems to surpass any aesthetic obligation he has to make his surroundings pleasant.

4. THE NEED FOR LIMITS ON EVERYDAY AESTHETIC DEMANDS

There is good reason then to think that there are aesthetic obligations in the realm of everyday aesthetics and that it is possible to go beyond these obligations to perform acts of aesthetic supererogation. We will now show the important role that the recognition of these categories could have in combatting gendered oppression. We will first point out an oppressive gender imbalance in everyday aesthetic demands. We will then argue that recognising the existence of aesthetic supererogation has an important role to play in combatting this challenge.

To begin, let's consider Naomi Wolf's claim in *The Beauty Myth* (1990) that the norms of beauty have an oppressive impact on women's freedom. Wolf uses the term "the beauty myth" to refer to a dominant set of norms that proscribe how women should look. Wolf summarises this myth in the following:

The beauty myth tells a story: The quality called “beauty” objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual and evolutionary: Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful. Women’s beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless. (1990, 12)

Wolf claims the beauty myth is wrong on each of these points. There are, for example, no universally accepted standards of beauty and no legitimate evolutionary basis for the myth (1990, 12).⁵

How can such a mistaken myth be so prevalent? The answer according to Wolf is that it serves to protect the interests of male power and male-dominated institutions. The beauty myth entrenches male power by crippling women psychologically, by offering employers an excuse to fire women, and by constraining women into complying with their gender role. In Wolf’s words:

An economy that depends on slavery needs to promote images of slaves that ‘justify’ the institution of slavery. Western economies are absolutely dependent now on the continued underpayment of women. An ideology that makes women feel ‘worth less’ was urgently needed to counteract the way feminism had begun to make us feel worth more. (1990, 18)

Wolf’s point is that the beauty myth serves to make women feel as if they are failing to live up to the basic norms of society and so are undeserving of a proper share of society’s rewards.

Note that these problems are not exclusive to those pronounced female at birth. The aesthetic demands placed on cis women also exist, and are arguably amplified, for trans women. As Laurie Penny states:

If we locate contemporary patriarchal oppression within the mechanisms of global capitalism, the experience of trans women, who can find themselves pressured to spend large amounts of money in order to ‘pass’ as female, is a more urgent version of the experience of cis women under patriarchal capitalism. In Western societies, where shopping for clothes and makeup is a key coming-of-age ritual for cis women, all people wishing to express a female identity must grapple with the brutal dictates of the beauty, diet, advertising and fashion industries in order to ‘pass’ as female. (2010, 40)

Further examples of how beauty myths are not just about cis women include instances of trans women seeking sex reassignment surgery in the UK being turned away for wearing trousers to an appointment (Penny 2010, 43–44).

Wolf’s account of the beauty myth is important for our purposes because of the important role that the perception of a duty to conform to these norms has for

enabling the myth to survive. Though Wolf does not use the terms duty and obligation, she claims that a crucial part of the beauty myth is the idea that attaining these norms is “an imperative for women and not for men” (1990, 12). In other words, adhering to these norms is not seen as optional or trivial for women (Widdows 2017; *Girls’ Attitudes Survey* 2016, 5–6).

This claim is entirely plausible. We do not have to look far to find cases of women claiming that they have an obligation to conform to certain aesthetic standards. In a BBC Radio 4 (2009) interview, the actress Joan Rivers explained her decision to undergo numerous plastic surgery operations to protect her looks by saying, “I think I owe it to the people not to become a little dottery old lady.” Rivers’s claim that she *owes it* to people to act in this way suggests that she views this as her duty. A similar claim can be found in the following testimony of an anonymous correspondent in *Nutritional Concerns for Women* (Parham and White 1994, 366–67) on her decision to begin a weight-loss program: “I owe it to my husband and children to lose this fat so that I can be the healthy, attractive wife and mother they deserve. I have been bad in allowing myself to get this way and now I just have to suffer to lose it.”

In both examples, the women view the need to become more attractive as an obligation. They claim that becoming more attractive is something they *owe* to others. But are these experiences of moral obligations, aesthetic obligations, or both? Plausibly, at least part of this experience is that of an aesthetic requirement. The concern of these women of letting down family or public seems more reasonably understood as an aesthetic concern than a moral one. This becomes clear when we imagine what kind of negative reactions these women would deem themselves as worthy of if they failed to meet their obligation. It seems unlikely that they would deem themselves worthy of the form of blame and resentment that are legitimate responses to moral criticism. Rather, their concern would be that they will be liable to the distinctly aesthetic form of blame we discussed earlier.

Once we have accepted that these are experiences of aesthetic obligation, a new perspective on the oppressive power of the beauty myth opens up. An important part of the beauty myth is its insistence that women face more demanding aesthetic obligations than men. One case demonstrating the force of such obligations as particularly salient to women concerns a pair of television cohosts on the popular Australian *Today* breakfast show. Responding to the daily criticism and sartorial commentary host Lisa Wilkinson received from viewers regarding her on-air style, host Karl Stefanovik tried an experiment: he wore the same blue suit on the show for over a year. No one noticed, no one cared, no one wrote in (Adewunmi 2014). The comparative point here is that while men may feel certain aesthetic obligations, they are not held to them, and do not feel them as keenly as women do. Thinking about the case in this way allows us to see the mechanics of the oppression of the beauty myth more clearly. There are legitimate aesthetic demands that we can make of each other and we rightly feel a need to ensure we live up to them. The beauty myth subverts these legitimate feelings of aesthetic obligation into a repressive tool. By holding women to more demanding standards of aesthetic obligation, the beauty myth makes women feel unattractive, worthless, and despondent.

We might think that the problem is that women are being held to the wrong aesthetic ideal: one which involves expensive hairstyling, well-kept nails, regular body waxing, shaving, bleaching, threading, and plucking, cosmetic enhancements, soft and dewy skin, a tidy and fit physique, and an appropriate range of well-fitting, seasonable clothes, shoes, and accessories. This might lead us to criticize women who choose to present themselves in this way for propagating the mistaken aesthetic ideals of the beauty myth. Bordo (1993) and Jeffreys (2005), for example, argue for the harmfulness of such ideals as stemming from the harmfulness of the practices often required to attain them.⁶ Murnen and Seabrook (2012, 440) indicate that we might also critique beauty ideals themselves as “functionally and symbolically disempowering to women.” Penny identifies a clear case of one problematic ideal: “It is not enough for women such as Victoria Beckham and Angelina Jolie to be preternaturally thin; they must be seen to be suffering to be thin, to be starving themselves” (2010, 33). Comparatively, where the content of the aesthetic ideals to which women are held can be unhealthy or arbitrary, male ideals feature predominately positive qualities of, e.g., physical strength (Jeffreys 2005, 95, 128). Relatedly, as historian Elspeth Brown (2012, 55) points out regarding aesthetic ideals in contemporary fashion modelling, due to the industry’s early association with prostitution, fashion houses have explicitly promoted an

Anglo-Saxon beauty ideal whose cultivated, middle-class status clearly signalled through gesture, presence, family history, and of course public relations [...] a sanitized sexuality central to the commodification of the female form under capitalism. (2012, 55)

Where the content of an aesthetic ideal is itself unhealthy or classist, such ideals are *prima facie* problematic. One way of reacting to this situation would be to engage in a rejection of all of the aesthetic ideals endorsed by the beauty myth. However, as Wolf argues in the following discussion, this is the wrong approach:

The real issue has nothing to do with whether women wear makeup or don’t, gain weight or lose it, have surgery or shun it, dress up or dress down, make our clothing and faces and bodies into works of art or ignore adornment altogether. *The real problem is our lack of choice.* (1990, 272)

The reason for this is that not all of the ideals endorsed by the beauty myth are obviously problematic, some of these ideals may be wrong and yet others may genuinely pick out aesthetic goods. Psychologist Nancy Etcoff (2000, 8) contends, “Beauty is a basic pleasure. Try to imagine that you have become immune to beauty. Chances are, you would consider yourself unwell—sunk in a physical, spiritual or emotional malaise.” Can it be an aesthetic good to take pleasure in matching your manicure to your bathing suit? Sure. As Neumann argues,

Women’s and men’s urge for beauty in all its variants—in the fine arts, architecture, and in everyday life with home decoration and dress—appears to be

an important part of what makes life meaningful. [...] Acknowledging that beauty matters as a major source of creativity and life expressions may be a way out of the double bind that exhorts us to invest heavily in our appearance and to be ridiculed for it at the same time.⁷

Aiming to maintain an immaculate home as a beauty ideal can also be a genuine aesthetic good.

If some of these ideals are genuine aesthetic goods, then why is it problematic to encourage people to live up to them? The concept of aesthetic supererogation provides the answer to this question. The right response to the beauty myth is not to reject all beauty ideals, nor to deny beauty a prominent place in a meaningful life. Some of the ideals of the beauty myth should be rejected altogether. For others though, the problem is not with the ideal but with the demand that all women should live up to the ideal. The problem we identify, then, lies in treating cases of aesthetic supererogation as aesthetically required. It is when this distinction remains unacknowledged that an individual can feel they have a lack of choice.

There are (at least) three reasons why this lack of choice is so problematic. First, as Wolf makes clear, this removal of choice harms women by making them feel guilty and worthless for failing to live up to the beauty myth's demands. Guilt is often tied to a sense of obligation. Self-discrepancy theory, developed by psychologist [Edward Higgins \(1987\)](#), provides a way to understand this connection. According to this theory:

Individuals hold self-perceptions in three domains: the 'actual' self (the attributes we believe we have); the 'ideal' self (the attributes we aspire to have); and the 'ought' self (the attributes we believe we should have). When discrepancies arise between these perceptions, it can lead to negative emotions and cognitions. Specifically, discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal self can result in dejection-related emotions such as disappointment and sadness, whereas discrepancy between the actual self and the ought self can result in agitation-related emotions such as anxiety and guilt. These types of discomfort lead people to engage in behaviours designed to resolve the discrepancies. ([MacCallum and Widdows 2016](#), 6)

While a given goal may be a genuine aesthetic good—such as a beautiful home— one's experience will differ given whether she takes the goal as aspirational or normative. However, no one should feel guilty for not having an immaculate home: that is an overly demanding obligation, yet the experience of guilt in precisely this everyday area—detailed, for example, in a series of interviews conducted by [Penny \(2010, 49–51\)](#)—indicates that such ideals *are* often experienced as obligations.⁸

A second problem is that this lack of choice closes off the possibility of a whole-hearted dedication to other activities. Someone who dedicates herself to living up to standards of aesthetic perfection will be unlikely to have the time to dedicate herself to pursuing other valuable ways of life, such as one dedicated to pursuing epistemic or moral goods ([Cahill 2003](#), 52). Becoming a great scientist, historian, or

philosopher requires a level of dedication that may (unfortunately) be incompatible with aesthetic perfection. This lack of choice also hinders other forms of aesthetic excellence. Those pursuing perfection in their appearance will also be unlikely to become great composers, game designers, or novelists.

What this tells us then is that there is a need to place limits on the aesthetic demands that are made, in order to protect the freedom of women (or indeed of anyone) to pursue projects and commitments that clash with the pursuit of aesthetic perfection. The concept of aesthetic supererogation has a crucial role to play in persuading people of their freedom not to feel obligated to meet the standards of aesthetic perfection. Those who accept the need to meet some aesthetic norms and who believe that the pursuit of aesthetic perfection can be valuable, may be persuaded that the aesthetic norms they must meet are ones approaching perfection. An important way of responding to this deceptive slight of hand on the part of proponents of the beauty myth is to acknowledge that in aesthetics, as in morality, not all acts of value are required.

5. CONCLUSION

We have defended two claims in this paper. First we argued that it is plausible to think that cases of aesthetic obligation exist in the realm of everyday aesthetics, and that these are not reducible to moral demands. Then we argued that it is plausible that cases of aesthetic supererogation also exist in this domain. From these claims, we can now identify how accepting the existence of aesthetic supererogation has an important role to play in understanding and potentially combatting an important form of gendered oppression.

Our arguments in this paper are important for at least three reasons. First, we have contributed to the growing literature on aesthetic obligation by arguing that both aesthetic obligation and aesthetic supererogation exist in the realm of everyday aesthetics. Second, we have extended the current discussion of aesthetic obligations to examine the limits of aesthetic demands. Most importantly though we have sought to show how an understanding of aesthetic obligation and aesthetic supererogation can enhance our understanding of oppressive aesthetic demands. This enhanced understanding could potentially provide useful resources for combating this oppression.⁹

NOTES

1. See Archer and Ware (2017, 110–12), where we respond to this objection.
2. Arnold Berleant (1997, 67) discusses a similar idea of “aesthetic offence.”
3. We have previously defended the existence of acts of aesthetic supererogation in Archer and Ware (2017).
4. Supporters of this view include Darwall (2006) and Skorupski (1999, 29).
5. The fact that there are no universally accepted standards of beauty does not rule out the possibility of aesthetic realism.
6. A catalogue of distressingly harmful beauty practices can be found on the blog of the Leverhulme- and AHRC-funded Beauty Demands Project at the University of Birmingham.
7. Neumann 2017, 393. As Plato boldly asserts in *Symposium*, 211d: “It is only in beholding beauty that human life is worth living.”
8. See also Hefner et al. (2014) on social obligations generating guilt with regard to food choice.

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