

***The Spectator*, Aesthetic Experience and the Modern Idea of Happiness**

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Abstract Focusing on Joseph Addison and Richard Steele's *Spectator* papers, this essay links modern ideas of happiness to the emergence of aesthetic theory in early eighteenth-century Britain. It argues that Addison and his contemporaries understood aesthetics foremost as a means of enriching life through sharpening our sensory experience of the world, especially the world of nature. The «happiness» that attends this experience, as they describe it, is a heightened sense of feeling alive, of connecting to the providential order, and being part of a common universe of existing things.

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1 Introduction

Central to modern conceptions of happiness is the belief that life is richest and most worth living in moments of intense perceptual awareness. Perhaps no one has espoused this idea more eloquently than the Victorian essayist and art critic Walter Pater. The task of «speculative culture», he insists, is «to startle» the «human spirit» «into sharp and eager observation» (Pater 1974, p. 70). Indeed, Pater characterizes this as the key struggle of life itself. «A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life», he proposes, going on to ask:

How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?

It is as if in the very act of attention there is a concentration of life, a distillation. The world itself grows more vibrant. Pater writes lyrically of «gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch», famously positing that «to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life» (Pater 1974, pp. 60-61). Life radiates in such moments; it burns. A good life, according to this distinctly modern view, is one in which we are most perceptually alive.

The present essay traces this idea back to its origins, which coincide with the origins of modern aesthetics in early eighteenth-century Britain. This is perhaps not surprising. Etymologically, *aesthetics* comes from the Greek *aesthesis*, meaning sensation or sensory perception.¹ And from the beginning, aesthetics was identified with a particular form of ‘pleasure’ or ‘satisfaction’. But the connections between modern aesthetics and modern happiness are in fact much deeper than this, and are woven into the very way we talk about happiness. Whereas classical *eudaimonia* refers to the objective quality of a life as a whole, and is perhaps best decided by a third party, modern happiness is a first-person, typically present-tense feeling or affect – as Darrin McMahan explains, it is «something we can savor, relish, and feel» (McMahan 2006, p. 181).² These are perceptual terms, borrowed especially from the language of taste, which of course provides the foundational metaphor of aesthetic theory from Addison to Kant (on «taste», see Gigante 2005). We have grown so accustomed to thinking about happiness in this way that we may no longer recognize it as metaphorical, and indeed it may no longer be metaphorical. In moments of happiness, we really do feel happy; there are times when we really do seem to savor life. Aesthetic-perceptual tropes lurk even in historical accounts of how this idea came into being. In his compendious *Happiness: A History*, McMahan charts the slow emergence of modern happiness over the course of the seventeenth and the eighteenth century, characterizing it as a «great reorientation of the human gaze – from the joys of heaven to the happiness of earth» (McMahan 2006, p. 190). While McMahan is ostensibly describing the rise of a secular idea of temporal felicity, his language denotes a happiness that attends the way we «gaze» upon the «earth». This essay seeks to unpack that happiness.

I will focus on Joseph Addison and Richard Steele’s enormously successful *Spectator* papers. Of particular relevance to scholars of aesthetics is Addison’s celebrated «Pleasures of the Imagination» series, appearing in June and July 1712 as numbers 411-421 of *The Spectator*. Along with Shaftesbury’s *The Moralists, A Philosophical Rhapsody* and Francis Hutcheson’s *Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, the «Pleasures of the Imagination» series is widely regarded to be one of the founding texts of modern aesthetic theory (cfr. Costelloe 2013; Guyer 2008; Stolnitz 1961). For the purposes of this essay, I will be concerned less with Addison’s originality than with his exemplarity, analysing the «Imagination» papers – as well as his, and Richard Steele’s, related essays throughout *The Spectator* – to make larger claims about the period’s aesthetic philosophy. I will

1 Of course, the term ‘aesthetics’ did not enter modern languages until later in the century through the work of Alexander Baumgarten. For a concise overview, see Costelloe 2013, pp. 1-5.

2 For the third-person quality of *eudaimonia*, see Soni 2010 and Potkay 2010.

also draw on the work of a number of eighteenth-century nature poets, who can be seen as extending and disseminating this particular way of looking at nature. My central argument is that early aesthetic theory is less an academic study of the principles of art than it is a kind of art of living, one that pursues affective well-being through intensifying and enlivening our experiences of the world. In developing these ideas and practices, aesthetic writers pioneered modes of experience that continue to inform the way we think about happiness.

2 Aesthetics beyond Art

In recent decades, a wide range of philosophers and theorists – including Jacques Rancière, Arnold Berleant, Richard Shusterman, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Yuriko Saito, and Alexander Nehamas – have challenged the art-centred nature of contemporary aesthetic theory and its sequestering of aesthetic experience from the concerns and projects of everyday life. Although we may have lost sight of the fact, early aesthetic theory was not constrained in this way. This is the case even with the «Imagination» essays, the most technical and focused treatment of the subject to be found in *The Spectator*. In the inaugural number, *Spectator* 411, Addison introduces his topic and offers what is now recognized to be a paradigmatic account of aesthetic experience. I quote the passage in full:

A Man of Polite Imagination, is let into a great many Pleasures that the Vulgar are not capable of receiving. He can converse with a Picture, and find an agreeable Companion in a Statue. He meets with a secret Refreshment in a Description, and often feels a greater Satisfaction in the Prospect of Fields and Meadows, than another does in the Possession. It gives him, indeed, a kind of Property in every thing he sees, and makes the most rude uncultivated Parts of Nature administer to his Pleasures: So that he looks upon the World, as it were, in another Light, and discovers in it a Multitude of Charms, that conceal themselves from the generality of Mankind (Bond 1965, vol. 3, p. 538).

As this passage indicates, Addison understands aesthetics to encompass more than just the newly grouped fine arts (see Kivy 2012). In addition to pictures, statues and descriptions, aesthetics is also a matter of how one «looks upon the World», including such things as fields, meadows, and even the «rude uncultivated Parts of Nature». Like Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, Addison holds a broad and inclusive view of the aesthetic; as he proposes in an earlier essay, the «Whole Universe» is an arena of aesthetic experience, «a kind of Theatre filled with Objects that either raise in us Pleasure, Amusement or Admiration» (Bond 1965, vol. 3, p. 453).

In its earliest formulation, aesthetic theory attended to a special way of experiencing the world, one that included but was in no way limited to official artworks.

What defines the aesthetic, as Addison is describing it here, is not the status of the object, or even its perceptual properties, but the particular way the subject regards or contemplates that object. As Addison puts it, the aesthetic spectator «looks upon the World, as it were, in another Light». While this passage has become a *locus classicus* of modern aesthetic theory, it is worth noting that Addison's partner, Richard Steele, had formulated a very similar idea in a *Tatler* essay published almost three years earlier, proposing that a certain «Frame of Mind raises that sweet Enthusiasm which warms the Imagination at the Sight of every Work of Nature, and turns all around you into Picture and Landskip» (Bond 1987, vol. 2, pp. 59-60).³ For Steele, too, aesthetic experience depends, at least in part, on how we look at things, the particular 'Frame of Mind' we bring to bear on the world. Analytic philosophers refer to this perspective as the «aesthetic attitude», a concept closely identified with Jerome Stolnitz, who defends the extreme position that «no object is admitted to or excluded from the realm of the aesthetic because of its inherent nature», concluding that «[i]t is the attitude of the percipient that is decisive» (Stolnitz 1961, p. 142). Addison and Steele do indeed suggest that the aesthetic field is potentially unlimited, Steele claiming that this 'Frame of Mind' shapes one's vision all around you, and Addison that this special 'Light' colors every thing one sees. But this does not mean that the objects themselves are «indifferent», as Kant would later suggest (Kant 1987, p. 46).⁴ The kind of attentiveness Addison and Steele are describing does not supply value to valueless things – it 'discovers' value where it might otherwise remain hidden.

Closely bound up with the concept of the aesthetic attitude is the principle of disinterestedness. According to this line of thinking, what distinguishes aesthetic vision from other modes of looking is the fact that aesthetic vision is devoid of any practical or instrumental interest in the object, the spectator admiring it for its own sake alone. In eighteenth-century British aesthetic theory, this idea is often formulated in terms of property ownership. By seeing the world as «in another Light», Addison explains, the spectator may feel «a greater Satisfaction in the Prospect of Fields and Meadows, than another does in the Possession». A similar passage can be found in Shaftesbury's *The Moralists*, where, contemplating a «delicious» tract of country, Shaftesbury juxtaposes the «enjoyment of the

3 For more on eighteenth-century practices of viewing the world as if it were art, see Marshall 2005. As the present essay demonstrates, this is not the only way to experience the world aesthetically. For more on this distinction, see Norton 2015.

4 For a critique of the Kantian view, see Shusterman 1992, p. 52, and Leddy 2012, p. 28.

prospect» with the «property or possession of the land» (Shaftesbury 1999, p. 319). An even earlier – and more vigorous – expression of this idea can be found in the writings of the theologian and philosopher John Norris, who is perhaps best remembered for his early critique of John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and for his published correspondence with Mary Astell. One of the poems included in Norris’s *A Collection of Miscellanies*, archly titled «My Estate», reads:

Nay (what you’d think less likely to be true)
 I can enjoy what’s yours much more than you.
 Your meadow’s beauty I survey,
 Which you prize only for its hay
 [...]
 What to you care, does to me pleasure bring,
 You own the cage, I in it sit and sing (Norris 1717, p. 58).

Even more pointedly than Shaftesbury and Addison, Norris maintains that there is more «pleasure» to be found in admiring a «meadow’s beauty» than in owning the actual land. While we sometimes think of disinterestedness as a cool, almost indifferent detachment, this is not at all what we encounter in these passages. In developing what we have come to identify as the quintessentially modern aesthetic attitude, these thinkers expressly sought to articulate and promote a richer and more satisfying mode of being in the world.

To fully grasp these points, it is necessary to look beyond the «Imagination» papers to Addison and Steele’s discussions of aesthetics in the wider *Spectator*. Especially illuminating here are Addison’s «Chearfulness» essays, published on three consecutive Saturdays in May 1712 (the month preceding the «Imagination» papers). Although it may have fallen out of intellectual favour, cheerfulness was a vaunted character trait in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a key term in the moral lexicons of writers from Addison and Steele to Austen, Wordsworth, and Dickens. According to David Hume, it «naturally conciliates the good-will of mankind» and no quality «more readily communicates itself to all around» (Hume 1966, p. 86). Addison analyses cheerfulness from a variety of angles, «with regard to our selves, to those we Converse with, and to the great Author of our Being», examining it in both its «moral» and «natural» dimensions (Bond 1965, vol. 3, pp. 430 and 451). Cheerfulness is not happiness itself, as Addison depicts it, but a dispositional outlook or attitude conducive to happiness. He counsels his reader to cultivate this «Habit of the Mind», an undertaking especially urgent for his «Countrymen», who, he acknowledges, have a notorious penchant for «Melancholy»:

Every one ought to fence against the Temper of his Climate or Constitution, and frequently to indulge in himself those Considerations which may give him a Serenity of Mind, and enable him to bear up chearfully

against those little Evils and Misfortunes which are common to Humane Nature, and which by a right Improvement of them will produce a Satiety of Joy, and an uninterrupted Happiness (Bond 1965, vol. 3, pp. 453-454).

In this passage we find Addison unmistakably musing on the good life, its nature and its challenges, and he is doing so in a way that is largely consistent with classical ethics. One must cultivate the «Habits» necessary to withstand life's inevitable «Evils», thereby preserving the «Serenity of Mind» needed to keep working toward the venerable goal of «Happiness», or *eudaimonia*.⁵ What is striking about Addison's formulation is the crucial role aesthetics plays in the project.

After considering cheerfulness as a «Moral Habit» in *Spectator* 381, Addison devotes the next two essays in the series to demonstrating how aesthetic experience itself can promote cheerfulness. *Spectator* 387 posits that the world is «filled with innumerable Objects that are proper to raise and keep alive this happy Temper of Mind»; it goes on to survey a wide range of natural phenomena to illustrate the point, including «Lakes» and «Rivers», the «Musick» of the «Woods», the color «Green», the «Vicissitude of Day and Night», the «Change of Seasons», and even such «grotesque Parts of Nature» as «Rocks and Desarts» (Bond 1965, vol. 3, p. 452). *Spectator* 393 focuses on «Spring», the season when the earth's «Beauty and Delightfulness» are at their freshest and «the Mind of the Beholder» is especially apt to experience «those secret Overflowings of Gladness» upon «surveying the gay Scenes of Nature». The affective resources of nature appear to be endless. «The Creation is a perpetual Feast to the Mind» that can appreciate it, Addison maintains, «every thing he sees cheers and delights him» (Bond 1965, vol. 3, pp. 474-475).⁶

Particularly fascinating to Addison is the gratuitousness of all this beauty, or, more precisely, the lucky fit between our senses and the material world. For Addison, as for Hume later, beauty is not a «real» or objective quality in things themselves: it is a perception of the mind, not a property of objects. Technically speaking, things in themselves are colorless, drab and mute, something Addison reflects on both here in the «Cheerfulness» essays and in the «Imagination» papers. Drawing on Locke's distinction between the primary and secondary qualities of objects, Addison suggests that it is largely the latter that please us aesthetically, speculating that «if

5 Potkay 2010 makes a strong argument for the perseverance of *eudaimonism* in the eighteenth century; Norton 2012 argues that the subjective nature of modern happiness strained the *eudaimonistic* framework of traditional theories of the good life; see also Soni 2010, who sees a sharper break between modern happiness and classical *eudaimonia*.

6 «Addison envisions an infinitely renewable dynamic of pleasure between a man and his world» (Lubey 2008, p. 415).

Matter had appeared to us endowed only with those real Qualities which it actually possesses, it would have made but a very joyless and uncomfortable Figure». That things appear the way they do is a function of our perceptual systems, which bolsters Addison's conviction that the world was in fact made for our aesthetic pleasure: «and why has Providence given [matter] a Power of producing in us such imaginary Qualities, as Tastes and Colours, Sounds and Smells, Heat and Cold, but that Man [...] might have his Mind cheered and delighted with agreeable Sensations?» (Bond 1965, vol. 3, p. 453). In a very material sense, there is no beauty without a spectator. And perception itself, as Addison understands it, is a ruse of providence to enrich the affective life of the perceiver.

Of course, we must meet the world halfway. If it is true that beauty promotes «Chearfulness», Addison insists just as strongly that the full appreciation of beauty requires «Chearfulness». This is, after all, the idea behind the claim that we need to view the world as «in another Light» if we are to discover its hidden «Charms». But the «Chearfulness» essays can help us flesh out our understanding of how this works. The aesthetic attitude, as Addison depicts it here, involves more than an attentiveness to the mere look of things, a focus on such formal properties as line, proportion and color. As the concept of «Chearfulness» makes clear, there is an affective component to the aesthetic attitude, a way of feeling toward the world, a kind of joyful openness toward it.⁷ The individual «possessed of this excellent Frame of Mind», Addison writes, «comes with a Relish to all those Goods which Nature has provided for him» and «tastes all the Pleasures of the Creation which are poured about him» (Bond 1965, vol. 3, p. 430).

From this point of view, the primary function of aesthetics is to enlarge our capacity to enjoy the world. With the right 'Frame of Mind' the individual can find profound satisfaction even in life's ordinary things and experiences, what Wordsworth will call the «simple produce of the common day» (in the Preface to *The Excursion*, l. 55; see Halmi 2014, p. 445). This is precisely where Addison and Steele look for it. According to Steele, «The Air, the Season, a Sun-shine Day, or a fair Prospect, are Instances of Happiness»; the spectator requires nothing «extraordinary to administer Delight» (Bond 1965, vol. 2, p. 309). Addison concludes his «Chearfulness» essays on a similar note, declaring that this «habitual Disposition of Mind consecrates every Field and Wood, turns an ordinary Walk into a morning or evening Sacrifice» and consolidates «those transient Gleams of Joy» into «an inviolable and perpetual State of Bliss and Happiness» (Bond 1965, vol. 3, p. 476). The aesthetic thus does not transcend the everyday so much as

7 Something like this can be found in *Tintern Abbey*, where Wordsworth speaks of «Our cheerful faith that all which we behold | Is full of blessings» (Schmidt 2006, p. 113).

it reveals its immanent value. As we have seen, this transfiguration of the commonplace (which scholars tend to identify with Wordsworth) was a key component of early aesthetic theory and perhaps its chief aspiration. From it derives our modern belief that we can enrich life by simply attending to the ordinary beauty around us.

3 Aesthetic Experience and the Ontology of Happiness

Addison and his contemporaries refer to the affects that accompany aesthetic experience by a variety of names, including «Pleasure», «Refreshment», «Entertainment», «Amusement», «Enjoyment», «Delight», «Chear», «Gladness», «Satisfaction», «Joy», «Bliss», and «Happiness». The wide range of terms signifies a correspondingly wide range of feelings, from light «Pleasure» or «Refreshment» to profound «Bliss» or «Happiness». They are not all synonymous or interchangeable and may differ from each other as much in quality as in intensity. I have no interest in reducing this multiplicity to a single theoretical model. But, at the risk of generalizing, I do want to reflect on the sense of good feeling – indeed, the sense of well-being – that accompanies more profound aesthetic experiences of nature. What follows is necessarily speculative; I offer it as an invitation to further inquiry.

Let me begin by returning to Addison's «Chearfulness» essay on the powers of «Spring». After claiming that no season compares with spring «for Beauty and Delightfulness», Addison attempts to explain the effects of this beauty:

In the opening of the Spring, when all Nature begins to recover her self, the same animal Pleasure which makes the Birds sing, and the whole brute Creation rejoice, rises very sensibly in the Heart of Man. I know none of the Poets who have observed so well as *Milton* those secret Overflowings of Gladness which diffuse themselves thro' the Mind of the Beholder upon surveying the gay Scenes of Nature (Bond 1965, vol. 3, p. 474).

According to Addison, «Man» here feels a form of «Pleasure» that is also felt by other animals. For the latter, this appears to occur spontaneously, with the «opening of the Spring, when all Nature begins to recover her self». For humans, by contrast, this enjoyment is mediated by aesthetics, triggered by the very act of «surveying» the natural world. Aesthetic contemplation, in other words, is what enables humans to feel the «same animal Pleasure» enjoyed by the rest of «Creation». This has important implications for the ways we think about both aesthetics and happiness.

That the good life is thought to have anything at all to do with «animal Pleasure» is historically significant. Indeed, it points to another important distinction between modern happiness and classical ideas of *eudaimonia*. Aristotle, for example, takes it for granted that the good life for humans must be distinctively human. The highest good, he maintains, cannot be mere «living» (which is «apparently shared with plants»), nor can it be a «life of sense-perception» (which is «apparently shared» with horses, oxen and «every animal»; Aristotle 1985, p. 16). It is on these grounds that Aristotle rejects «pleasure» as a candidate for *eudaimonia*, dismissing it as a «life for grazing animals» (Aristotle 1985, p. 7). Addison and his contemporaries not only have a more sanguine view of «pleasure» than Aristotle, they also have a more favorable view of animal enjoyment. This is especially evident in eighteenth-century nature poetry. The Scottish-born James Thomson, writing shortly after Addison, envisages «The whole mixed animal creation round / Alive and happy» (Sambrook 1984, p. 99), and the evangelical poet William Cowper, to cite a slightly later example, commends the «happiness» of animals, insisting that all creatures, even «the meanest things that are», have the right «to live and to enjoy that life» (Cowper 1785, p. 116). In contrast to Aristotle, who presupposes that animals are incapable of happiness, Thomson and Cowper see animal happiness not only as possible but in some ways as exemplary. Animals are able to find happiness in life itself: they are «alive and happy», they «live» and «enjoy that life». Even before Wordsworth, animal happiness exemplified the elemental joy of being alive, the felicity of sheer existence.⁸

Of course, it is not so easy for humans to hold onto this joy, a theme Addison and Steele return to again and again in their essays. In *Spectator* 93, Addison writes evocatively of how we «hurry» through life without really savoring it: we «travel through Time as through a Country filled with many wild and empty Wastes», he declares, wagering that «If we divide the Life of most Men into twenty Parts, we shall find that at least nineteen of them are meer Gaps and Chasms» (Bond 1965, vol. 1, p. 395). Steele picks up this theme in *Spectator* 100, published just over a week later. Employing language that anticipates Virginia Woolf's «cotton wool» of «non-being», Steele asserts that most of our lives are spent in «Instances of Inexistence» (Bond 1965, vol. 1, p. 421).⁹ An individual «advanced in Years» who looks back on life, Steele proposes, and «calls that only Life which was passed with Satisfaction and Enjoyment», «will find himself very young, if not in his Infancy» (Bond 1965, vol. 1, p. 419). Addison avows that even «Religion», if it is without «Chearfulness», deadens all the pleasures of

8 For more on the 'joy of being', see Potkay 2006, pp. 121-138.

9 Virginia Woolf says: «Every day includes much more non-being than being» (Schulkind 1985, p. 70).

existence: it «extinguishes all Joy and Gladness, darkens the Face of Nature, and destroys the Relish of Being it self» (Bond 1965, vol. 4, p. 253).

It is against this backdrop that Addison and Steele recommend aesthetics, offering it as a kind of therapeutic. In the first of his «Imagination» papers, Addison argues that «Delightful Scenes [...] not only serve to clear and brighten the Imagination, but are able to disperse Grief and Melancholy, and to set the Animal Spirits in pleasing and agreeable Motions» (Bond 1965, vol. 3, p. 539). In the «Chearfulness» essays, he proposes that aesthetic contemplation stirs the «same animal Pleasure» that makes the «whole brute Creation rejoice» and stimulates our «Relish [for] all those Goods which Nature has provided». It may even restore the «Relish of Being it self». This is Steele's preferred way of thinking about aesthetic experience, which he casts in strikingly existential terms. In the same essay in which he diagnoses our chronic «Inexistence», Steele urges us to «Preserve a Disposition in our selves to receive a certain Delight in all we hear and see» (Bond 1965, vol. 1, p. 421). By becoming more responsive to our perceptual world, he suggests, we can intensify the feeling of living, enhancing the «Satisfactions of [our] Being» (Bond 1965, vol. 1, p. 420). With this «Disposition» to «receive a certain Delight in all we hear and see», we can live «in such a Manner, that there are no Moments lost» and the «heaviest of Loads (when it is a Load) that of Time, is never felt by us» (Bond 1965, vol. 1, p. 420). It is important to observe that Shaftesbury holds a similar view, claiming that without the experience of beauty, «the world would be but a dull circumstance, and life a sorry pastime. Scarce could we be said to live» (Klein 1999, p. 352). The earliest aesthetic theorists, like John Dewey more than two centuries later, explicitly argue that aesthetic experience makes us feel more «fully alive» (Dewey 2005, p. 17).

While in recent years literary scholars have become increasingly interested in questions of perceptual and affective experience, our understanding of this issue has not moved significantly beyond the ideas of Dewey and Pater.¹⁰ For further insight, we might look to current developments in aesthetic theory, particularly to those theorists who have begun to re-examine aesthetic experiences outside of art.¹¹ I am thinking especially of Gumbrecht, who equates 'aesthetic experience' with 'moments of intensity', framing the latter in terms of a kind of 'presence' in the world (cfr. Gumbrecht 2004). Yet even Gumbrecht's ontology leans too heavily toward the subject to do justice to the objective or cosmological dimensions of early aesthetic theory. By so radically downgrading the object of aesthet-

10 For an influential collection of this work on affect, see Gregg and Seigworth 2010.

11 For everyday aesthetics, see Saito 2007 and Leddy 2012; for the aesthetics of engagement, see Berleant 1991 and 1997; for an updated pragmatist aesthetics, see Shusterman 1992; and for related approaches, see Gumbrecht 2004, 2006.

ics, thinkers from Kant to Stolnitz have made it difficult for us to recover this aspect of eighteenth-century aesthetic experience. As we will see, for all his notable subjectivism, Addison ultimately understood aesthetics to be a way of connecting with the larger order of things.

The first point I would like to make in developing this idea is that the spectator's pleasure in beholding nature is in some complex way a condition of nature itself – not just other animals, but «all Nature», including inanimate beings. Throughout the «Chearfulness» essays, Addison speaks of the «gay Scenes of Nature», Nature's «Smiles», and the «Chearfulness in our Fields» (Bond 1965, vol. 3, pp. 474-475), a practice he associates with Milton and *Psalms*, and which would go on to form a key trope of subsequent nature poetry. Thomson, for example, surveys the «glad creation», and Cowper ponders «Scenes of accomplished bliss». The idea finds perhaps its definitive statement in Wordsworth's memorable line: «in all things / I saw one life, and felt that it was joy» (Maxwell 1986, p. 94). To dismiss this as pathetic fallacy is to underestimate the complexity of the ideas involved, much as Heather Keenleyside (2009) has argued of personification in *The Seasons*. Through a masterful reading of the poem, she explores how Thomson's canny use of the figure destabilizes the boundary not only between humans and animals but between persons and things. While the main thrust of her essay works to collapse the notional distance between the human and the nonhuman, Keenleyside also considers the matter in practical (or experiential) terms, attending to the ways humans and nonhumans move and are moved by each other. This is particularly useful for thinking about early aesthetic experience and its attendant affects.

Crucial to the aesthetic pleasure Addison describes, as we have seen, is that it is the 'same' pleasure animating the larger world of nature. Thomson makes this point even more directly, perhaps with Addison in mind, when he ruminates on the «infusive force of Spring on man», asking: «Can he forebear to join the general smile / Of Nature?» (Sambrook 1984, p. 26). Glossing this passage, Keenleyside notes that «Thomson imagines proper or social love not as an internal feeling but rather as an external force, which binds 'this complex stupendous Scheme of Things'» (Keenleyside 2009, p. 464). I would argue that this kind of affective logic is at work in Thomson's and Addison's understanding of nature aesthetics in general: to experience happiness in aesthetically contemplating nature is to «join» in the happiness of nature, to no longer stand apart. The feeling of connectedness is integral to the feeling itself, and a central part of its power and appeal.

For early aesthetic theorists and contemporary nature poets, there could be a decidedly numinous or sacred quality to such experience.¹² As noted

12 According to a number of critics and philosophers, this is one of the key forms of transcendence to survive the so-called disenchantment of the world. «In a secular society art, like natural beauty, remains a last refuge for religious and noumenal truth and it retains something

earlier, Addison attributes the very possibility of aesthetic enjoyment to providence, for organizing our senses in such a way that we take pleasure in perceiving the natural world. He also puts forward a kind of aesthetic version of the argument from design, claiming that «Faith and Devotion naturally grow in the Mind of every reasonable Man, who sees the Impressions of Divine Power and Wisdom in every Object on which he casts his Eye» (Bond 1965, vol. 4, p. 144). Addison develops his ideas about the divinity within nature more fully in his «Essays upon Infinity» (*Spectators* 565, 571, 580, 590), writing in *Spectator* 565 that the «Maker» is in fact «Omnipresent» in «his Works»: «His Being passes through, actuates, and supports the whole Frame of Nature» (Bond 1965, vol. 4, p. 531). Shaftesbury apostrophizes the «Sole animating and inspiring power» of Nature on similar grounds: «Thy influence is universal, and in all things thou art inmost» (Klein 1999, p. 307). This picture of a spirit-infused world would become a staple of the period's nature poetry. Thomson (sounding again like Addison) writes of the «boundless spirit» that «pervades, / Adjusts, sustains, and agitates the whole» (Sambrook 1984, p. 26). Cowper maintains «that there lives and works / A soul in all things, and that soul is God» (1785, p. 107); and Wordsworth, in the same passage of *The Prelude* quoted above, explains how «with bliss ineffable / I felt the sentiment of Being spread / O'er all that moves and all that seemeth still» (Maxwell 1986, p. 94). Such ideas were widespread in the period, appealing to deists, Latitudinarians, and evangelicals, deriving from an eclectic body of intellectual sources, such as Stoic and Platonist cosmologies, the *Psalms*, Spinoza, Henry More, and even Isaac Newton.¹³

What is interesting about Addison's take on this is the way the individual again appears to hover on the margins of the universal system. Consider this passage from *Spectator* 571, one of the «Infinity» essays, which I quote at some length:

Every particle of Matter is actuated by this Almighty Being which passes through it. The Heavens and the Earth, the Stars and Planets, move and gravitate by Vertue of this great Principle within them. All the dead Parts of Nature are invigorated by the Presence of their Creator, and made capable of exerting their respective Qualities. The several Instincts, in the brute Creation, do likewise operate and work towards the several Ends which are agreeable to them, by this Divine Energy. Man, who does not co-operate with this holy Spirit, and is

of this power even for the secularly and atheistically minded and not merely for those who remain religiously inclined» (Diffey 1996, p. 57).

13 Addison writes: «But the noblest and most exalted way of considering this infinite Space is that of *Sir Isaac Newton*, who calls it the *Sensorium* of the Godhead» (Bond 1965, vol. 4, p. 532).

unattentive to his Presence, receives none of those Advantages from it, which are perfective of his Nature, and necessary to his Well-being (Bond 1965, vol. 4, p. 548).

This «Divine Energy» is present everywhere in the «Creation», animating all the actions and forces of the universe, from the circling of planets to the commands of instinct; even the «dead Parts of Nature» are sustained and «invigorated» by this «great Principle». And yet, as with the «animal Pleasure» of spring – and perhaps with «Being» itself – what is inexorable in the rest of nature is not so certain with us. Of all creatures, «Man» alone is capable of standing outside the general system of providence, receiving «none of those Advantages» that are «perfective of his Nature, and necessary to his Well-being».

Seen from this perspective, aesthetic experience serves to draw us back into the cosmic order, allowing us to «co-operate» with the will of providence. Indeed, early aesthetic theorists held it to be one of the primary ways we fulfill our part of the divine plan. Henry Grove neatly captures this idea in the final *Spectator* paper, number 635, which can be read as a summation of the series as a whole: «the End for which [God] designed his reasonable Offspring is the Contemplation of his Works, the Enjoyment of himself, and in both to be happy» (Bond 1965, vol. 5, p. 170). Grove contends that humans were made to enjoy the world's beauty, not only in the sense that our «Faculties» are providentially fitted to the world, but also in the sense that this defines our very purpose or «End». Reprising Addison's famous metaphor, Grove submits that God fashioned this «immense Theatre» for our «Entertainment», speculating further that «he is well pleased in the Satisfaction» we derive from it (Bond 1965, vol. 5, pp. 170-171). Here we see the teleological underpinnings to the period's belief that aesthetics can profoundly enrich life. Not only does aesthetic experience make us feel more alive and more connected to what is outside of us: it may be our very reason for being. As Grove puts it – and Addison and Shaftesbury would certainly agree – we are «designed» to find our happiness in contemplating God's works. It is what we have been put here to do.

4 Conclusion

As scholars, we have paid too little attention to the role aesthetics may have played in the Enlightenment's legitimization of earthly happiness, the «great reorientation of the human gaze» described by McMahon (2006). Aesthetic theorists like Addison were on the leading edge of the new cultural understanding of happiness. At a moment when religious traditionalists continued to oppose the growing focus on temporal felicity, and even

its supporters fretted over the links between subjective well-being and the objective good or virtue,¹⁴ Addison's aesthetic writings show a remarkable lack of defensiveness on this score: not only do they take it for granted that humans are supposed to be happy, they clearly identify that happiness with affective pleasure or enjoyment, with feeling good. Roger Scruton observes that the «experience of natural beauty [...] contains a reassurance that this world is a right and fitting place to be – a home in which our human powers and prospects find confirmation» (Scruton 2011, p. 55). I submit that something like this took place on a cultural level: the fascination with natural beauty that defines the rise of aesthetics was inextricably bound up with the period's developing conviction that this is a «right and fitting place to be», that happiness need not wait until the next world. To recognize the earth's beauty is to recognize it as our proper «home».¹⁵

Of course, there are also important ways in which aesthetic ideas of the good life have long stood in tension with mainstream conceptions of happiness. I am thinking in particular of the view of happiness as a kind of pursuit, an unending cycle of desire-possession-desire that psychologists refer to as the «hedonic treadmill» (see Bok 2010, pp. 145-147). The disinterestedness of aesthetic experience seeks to suspend or interrupt that dialectic; it is a way of enjoying the meadow without owning the land.¹⁶ This is not a happiness of wanting and acquiring, but of experiencing and being, of what Jean-Jacques Rousseau describes as «the simple feeling of existence» (Rousseau 2004, p. 88).¹⁷ A recurring theme in early aesthetic theory, as we have seen, is that we already have what we need to be happy – the trick is to appreciate it.

Addison and Steele ultimately understand aesthetics to be a means of enriching life through sharpening our sensory experience of the world. The happiness that attends this experience, as they describe it, is a heightened sense of aliveness, of connecting to the cosmic order, and of being part of a common universe of existing things. What we find here, as with Rousseau later in the century, is an affective affirmation of being itself. After the art-centered and anesthetic tendencies of so much twentieth-century aesthetics, this kind of thinking has in fact made a resurgence

14 For more on the period's anxieties about the moral implications of subjective happiness, see Norton 2012, 2014.

15 For changing aesthetic appreciations of nature, see Nicolson 1959.

16 «Aesthetic joy is, as joy always is, desire at rest» (Potkay 2007, p. 140).

17 Jacques Rancière summarizes this «happiness» as follows: «to enjoy the quality of sensible experience that one reaches when one stops calculating, wanting and waiting». While Rancière calls Rousseau «the first theoretician of this disinterested sensible state» (Rancière 2013, pp. 45-47), Addison and his contemporaries precede him by half a century.

in contemporary aesthetic theory.¹⁸ Gumbrecht, for example, proposes that aesthetic experience «may help us recuperate the spatial and bodily dimension of our existence», and perhaps give us back «a feeling of our being-in-the-world» (2004, p. 116). Elaine Scarry maintains that beauty «quickens» and «adrenalizes»: «It makes life more vivid, animated, living, worth living» (Scarry 1999, pp. 24-25). And Arnold Berleant contends that the value of the aesthetic should be measured «by perceptual immediacy and intensity in enhancing the intimate bond of person and place» (Berleant 1997, p. 36). Theorists are beginning to reflect again on the enhancive powers of aesthetic experience, its capacity to enliven being and contribute to a full and happy life. Although *The Spectator* is rarely acknowledged as a precedent, they are carrying on the original project of modern aesthetic theory.

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18 Of course, present day theories shed the language of divine presence and providence. Elaine Scarry, however, suggests that this does not fundamentally change the experience itself: «What happens when there is no immortal realm behind the beautiful person or thing is just what happens when there is an immortal realm behind the beautiful person or thing: the perceiver is led to a more capacious regard for the world» (Scarry 1999, pp. 47-48).

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