

MORALIZING BEAUTY – SOME CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS

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Abstract: In this paper, I intend to criticize an argument, made by the philosopher Panos Paris, claiming that moral goodness is both a necessary and a sufficient condition of beauty. I will argue that Paris’s idea of functional beauty, on which his argument relies, does not work, as it misrepresents judgements of beauty, in fact reducing them to moral judgements. I will argue that judgements of beauty and moral judgements should be understood as distinct and independent of each other. That is, the morally good is not necessarily beautiful, and the beautiful is not necessarily morally good.

Keywords: functional beauty, Panos Paris, moral judgements, judgements of beauty

Introduction

Ethics and aesthetics denote two important realms of evaluation. While ethics develops, analyses, criticizes, and defends ideas about the morally good, about justice, rights and duties, how we ought to act and why, aesthetics deliberates about our judgements of beauty and taste, asking questions such as whether beauty exists in the object under consideration or in the eyes of the beholder, whether taste denotes historical and culturally specific concerns or universal standards, and so on. However, throughout the history of philosophy, there have been many attempts to connect these two realms of evaluation to each other, including examples such as Plato’s idea that the pursuit of beauty is a way of approaching “real goodness” (Plato 2000, 68; 212a), and Shaftesbury’s claim that “beauty and good are still the same” (Shaftesbury 1900, 138).

In this paper, I intend to criticize one such attempt, made by the philosopher Panos Paris. According to Paris and his version of the theory of functional beauty, a beautiful object should not only be well-formed for its purpose, but this purpose should also be morally good. Moreover, according to Paris, an object’s being morally good is both a necessary and a sufficient condition of its being beautiful. I will argue that Paris’s idea of functional beauty does not work, as it misunderstands and misrepresents judgements of beauty, reducing them to moral judgements.

I will maintain that judgements of beauty and moral judgements should be understood as distinct and independent of each other. That is, the morally good is not necessarily beautiful, and the beautiful is not necessarily morally good. The same holds, of course, for negative judgements – the morally bad is not necessarily ugly, nor is the ugly necessarily morally bad. It should be

emphasized here that I am not arguing that the beautiful *cannot* also be morally good and vice versa; I am only arguing that there is no *necessary* relationship between the beautiful and the morally good.

The main difference between moral judgements and judgements of beauty is that while moral judgements have at least some claim to universality and objectivity as they deal with goods, values, and norms pertaining to all human agents, judgements of beauty are fundamentally subjective and not conditioned by any set of norms necessarily valid for all persons. This means that while a human agent might be wrong about her moral rights and duties, there is no way she can be wrong about her judgements of beauty. We may disagree with another person's taste, but we cannot prove her to be wrong about what she claims to be beautiful or ugly; nor, of course, can she claim that we are wrong in our judgements of beauty.

The Necessary Subjectivity of Judgements of Beauty

The subjectivity and freedom of judgements of beauty mean that such judgements are not governed by criteria or conditions that we are rationally obliged to accept. That is, we are not guilty of any factual error or logical mistake if we deny that the *Mona Lisa* is a beautiful painting, although most people, including well-respected art historians and art critics, are likely to disagree with us. We might recognize as a fact of art history that the *Mona Lisa* is an important painting, a technical masterpiece due to Leonardo's use of *sfumato* (the use of shading to create the impression of contour instead of lining). However, this is not to say that the painting is beautiful, that is, that we find it pleasing to the eye.

This distinction between objective significance and subjective evaluation is recognized also by art critics who reject relativism about the merits of art works, like John Armstrong: "It benefits me little to believe (correctly) that the *Mona Lisa* is a masterpiece if, when standing before it, I can see nothing of interest or charm in it" (Armstrong 2001, 7). Armstrong also observes that "we cannot provide a rule for generating or judging beautiful objects. ... The only way of deciding whether something is beautiful is to perceive it yourself" (Armstrong 2001, 147).

Judgements of beauty are not assessments of historical significance or technical originality; judgements of beauty reflect our subjective appreciation of a person or an object – a subjective appreciation that can, of course, be shared by other people who are making *their* subjective judgements. Other people may, of course, also come to disagree with a particular judgement of beauty of ours, but they cannot claim that it is *wrong*; nor, of course, can we claim that our dissenting judgement is *right*. Judgements of beauty are simply not capable of being right or wrong in any meaningful sense of the word.

Now, there are, of course, philosophers who have claimed objectivity for their judgements of beauty. The Canadian philosopher Mary Mothersill, for instance, did not hesitate to label a person who did not share her judgements about the beauty of the landscape outside her window or the beauty of the face of her neighbour as "slightly defective – as if something blocked his perception or impaired his sensibility" (Mothersill 1991, 165).

Likewise, Roger Scruton has argued that "to see beauty as nothing more than a subjective preference or a source of transient pleasure, is to misunderstand the depth to which reason and

value penetrate our lives. It is to fail to see that, for a free being, there is right feeling, right experience and right enjoyment just as much as right action” (Scruton 2009, 197).

I find Mothersill’s and Scruton’s claims hyperbolic in the extreme. Some people detest Wagner’s *Parsifal*, others are deeply moved by it. Which ones are having the right feeling and the right kind of enjoyment here? What penetrating power of reason could decide this issue? Whose perceptive abilities are defective here? According to what criteria? What justification do these criteria have, except for being favoured by the person applying them? What kind of proof – empirical, logical, or otherwise – could be given for a judgement of beauty? Exaggerated claims about the non-subjective truth of judgements of beauty, and about the mental shortcomings of those who disagree with them, do not add anything to the understanding of aesthetic experiences; however, they do tell us something about the confident arrogance of some art critics.

Now, it is important in this context to note that holding that judgements of beauty are subjective and incapable of being objectively true is not equivalent to saying that these judgements are unimportant or that they can or could be dismissed as arbitrary and unfounded expressions of personal taste. On the contrary, judgements of beauty play a significant role in people’s quest for meaning and identity. By assessing objects, persons, behaviours, relations, situations, contexts, and so on in terms of beauty, we connect ourselves evaluatively to our environment and to reality in general, defining ourselves as persons with certain normative standards, that is, as persons having a *normative identity* (Bauhn 2017).

The important thing with judgements of beauty from the point of view of a person’s normative identity is that she can use such judgements to orient herself in the world, and to manifest a position of her own from which she can relate to other people, developing a more secure sense of who she is and who she wants to be in the process. In addition to contributing to the forging of a personal normative identity, judgements of beauty are relevant to the understanding of human well-being. Although judgements of beauty are subjective, they are also about things that matter to most people. People’s quality of life depends, among other things, on their being able to find beauty in the places where they live, work, go to school, and so on. Hence, to the extent that people have a right to well-being, that right should include a respect for their judgements of beauty (Bauhn 2009).

That judgements of beauty cannot be assigned a non-subjective validity has to do with a general fact about aesthetic concepts, namely, that they are not “condition-governed”. In the words of Frank Sibley:

There are no sufficient conditions, no non-aesthetic features such that the presence of some set or number of them will beyond question justify or warrant the application of an aesthetic term. ... [W]e cannot make *any* general statement of the form ‘If the vase is pale pink, somewhat curving, lightly mottled, and so forth, it will be delicate, cannot but be delicate.’ ... Things may be described to us in non-aesthetic terms as fully as we please but we are not thereby put in the position of having to admit (or being unable to deny) that they are delicate or graceful or garish or exquisitely balanced. (Sibley 1959, 426)

Sibley’s argument echoes a point made already by Immanuel Kant, namely, that the reason why we are free to reject judgements of beauty without committing any error of reasoning is that “[t]here can be no objective rule of taste by which what is beautiful may be defined by means of concepts” (Kant 2008, 62; Ak. V: 231). That is, we cannot derive universally valid conclusions

about what is beautiful from principles or general ideas that we necessarily must accept. Even if we were to rely on the judgements of “ideal observers” with a lot of experience of making aesthetic assessments, “it remains true that even fully educated and sophisticated tastes can differ” (Goldman 1993, 37).

This does not mean that it is pointless to argue about the beauty of people, works of art, landscapes, cars, houses, or any other object. Arguing about beauty might help the discussants to discover new aspects of the object being assessed, aspects that they might have overlooked in the past. Moreover, it will help them clarify their aesthetic norms and values to themselves and to each other; in the process, they are likely to learn more about themselves and about what is important in their lives. What they cannot do, however, is to prove each other *wrong* in their judgements of beauty. Nor can they prove themselves to be *right* either. Judgements of beauty are not the kind of thing that we can be right or wrong about.

Beauty and Morality

Now, the proposition that the lack of objective foundation is what distinguishes judgements of beauty from moral judgements would be challenged by those who hold that “[t]here are no objective values”, neither of the aesthetic, nor of the moral kind, and that values simply “are not part of the fabric of the world” (Mackie 1977, 15). However, even if we were to agree that values are something that come into existence in the interaction between human agents and their world rather than something that exists independently of them, there would still be a distinction to be made between, on the one hand, (moral) values that are grounded in certain necessary conditions that apply generically to all human agents, and, on the other hand, (aesthetic) values that are grounded in the contingent preferences of individual human agents.

Moral values would then be ineluctable in a way that aesthetic values would not be, applying necessarily to all human agents regardless of their more specific and individual preferences, while aesthetic values would apply only contingently and only to those agents who happen to embrace them. For instance, it could be argued that moral rights “are necessarily rather than contingently connected with being human” since “the basis of rights must be sought in the conviction necessarily held by every human agent that he has rights to the necessary conditions of action by virtue of his having purposes and pursuing goods” (Gewirth 1978, 103). Nothing similar could be claimed for aesthetic values. All human agents must (logically) recognize the necessary value of those conditions of agency without which they could not be purposive agents in the first place, but there is no similar necessity that they all should accept the same standards of beauty.

Judgements of beauty, unlike moral judgements, cannot be justified by reference to values and norms that apply to all human agents; ultimately, they cannot refer to any other authority than the aesthetic preferences of the person making them. What about the authority of experts, such as art historians or art critics? Unfortunately, relying on someone else’s authority about a particular object being beautiful without having any kind of first-hand experience of the object in question cannot count as a *judgement*; it is rather a *report* of someone else’s judgement. And a report of a judgement is not itself a judgement. A statement that looks like a judgement of beauty, but which is in fact based on the authority of other people “is not an expression of the speaker’s judgment, for the speaker in this case has done no judging” (Sircello 1968, 7).

Against the claim that judgements of beauty should be conceptualized as independent of moral judgements, it has been argued that our aesthetic judgements can be *unjust* to the extent that they are based on “hierarchies of esteem”, implying that “activities and traditions which have a strong cultural association with socially inferior groups are authoritatively represented as disgusting, frivolous, or worthless” (Fraser 2024, 456). For instance, if jazz music is being dismissed as “noise” because it is associated with black people, or if quilting is being denigrated as “uninteresting” because it is thought of as something only women do, then these aesthetic judgements are expressive of hierarchies of race and gender that are inconsistent with egalitarian justice; hence, they are unjust.

However, here it is important that one does not confuse the aesthetic judgement itself with its background reasons. Yes, it is certainly possible that it is racism that makes a person dismiss jazz music, and it is equally possible that it is misogyny that makes another person dismiss quilting. Still, even if we have every reason to condemn racism and misogyny as morally wrong, it does not follow that we are morally obligated to hold that jazz music and quilting are beautiful art forms. We are morally obliged to treat all persons with equal respect, but we are under no moral obligation to be egalitarians in matters of taste. Hence, moral justice cannot oblige us to judge certain art forms or works of art to be beautiful just because they are associated with individuals or groups victimized by oppression and discrimination. To call a work of art beautiful not because of how it looks or sounds, but only because one wants to express solidarity with the marginalized artist who has made it, is not to deliver justice, but rather to corrupt the very meaning and purpose of aesthetic judgements. Indeed, judgements of beauty cannot function as just that – as judgements of beauty – if they are reduced to instruments of moral improvement.

That moral judgements and judgements of beauty are conceptually independent of each other should not be considered controversial, given that “we seem to be able to say without contradiction that a poem is a good aesthetic object but will promote unhealthy political views, or that a play is a poor aesthetic object but will undoubtedly promote purity of heart” (Beardsley 1958, 560). Here we could also remind ourselves of the criticism that Friedrich Schiller once directed against those readers of poetry who take an overly instrumentalist view of art, treating “a serious and moving poem as if it were a sermon, and a simple and humorous poem like an intoxicating drink”; moreover, “if they were sufficiently tasteless”, these confused consumers of art might even “demand *edification* of a tragedy or an epic” (Schiller 2016, 83).

At this point, it is important to point out that my argument is not about beauty being the enemy of the morally good. The claim I am making here is that there is *no necessary connection* between pursuing what is morally good and pursuing what is beautiful; however, I am not claiming that these two pursuits cannot co-exist. Hence, I do not share Tolstoy’s complaint that there are “contradictions between beauty and goodness”; nor do I agree with his idea that the search for beauty necessarily involves a selfish indulgence in pleasure and that the works of “aesthetes of the type at one time represented by Oscar Wilde” celebrate “the denial of morality and the laudation of vice” (Tolstoy 1904, 181). Certainly, embracing an ideal of beauty is likely to involve a life very different from that of someone dedicated to Christian humility or asceticism, but it need not be an immoral one.

Functional Beauty

One way in which philosophers have tried to connect beauty with morality is by means of a theory of functional beauty, according to which moral goodness is treated as a function required by beauty. The idea of functional beauty also opens for the possibility of making judgements of beauty more objective, by providing beauty with an empirically ascertainable criterion – functionality.

Now, according to Glen Parsons and Allen Carlson, who initiated the contemporary discussion of functional beauty, “[t]he basic idea of Functional Beauty is that of a thing’s function being integral to its aesthetic character” or, more specifically, “the idea is that of a thing’s aesthetic qualities emerging from its function or something closely related to its function, such as its purpose, use, or end” (Parsons – Carlson 2008, 2). For an object or an organism to be beautiful, then, it should function well, given its purpose. For instance, a pig’s snout might look ugly to humans, but as it is well suited to the pig’s purpose of rooting through the ground to find food, it should be recognized as beautiful.

Here one could object that we are quite capable of recognizing the functionality of the pig’s snout without committing ourselves to any judgement at all, positive or negative, as to the beauty of the snout. The same kind of objection would apply to all attempts to make functionality a necessary condition of beauty.

Parsons and Carlson claim support for their view from the ancients, referring to Plato’s *Greater Hippias* (or, as it is also called, *Hippias Major*), in which Socrates is being referred to as saying that “whatever is useful we call beautiful”. However, a more recent and critical translation of that work suggests that the Greek word used here, *kalos*, should be rendered as “fine” rather than “beautiful”, as it is “a quite general term of commendation in Greek” and that hence “[n]oble’, ‘admirable’, and ‘fine’ are better translations, and of these ‘fine’ is best of all in virtue of its great range”; hence, “The *Hippias Major* is ... not a treatise in aesthetics, and beauty is not its subject” (Woodruff 1982, 110).

Now, although it remains unclear whether Socrates and Plato were adherents of the idea of functional beauty, we can be quite certain that David Hume embraced a view of beauty according to which it should be understood in terms of functionality and usefulness. According to Hume, we praise objects as beautiful because they give us pleasure, and they give us pleasure because they are fit for the purpose for which they were made or for which they are used by us or by some other person with whom we sympathetically identify:

[W]here any object has a tendency to produce pleasure in its possessor, it is always regarded as beautiful ... Thus the convenience of a house, the fertility of a field, the strength of a horse, the capacity, security, and swift-sailing of a vessel, form the principal beauty of these several objects. Here the object, which is denominated beautiful, pleases only by its tendency to produce a certain effect. That effect is the pleasure or advantage of some other person. (Hume 1978, 576).

In Hume, we also find the idea that moral virtues are beautiful because of their functionality or, more precisely, their utility. According to Hume, moral virtues are instrumental to the common good, and we tend to care about the common good simply because we have a capacity for sympathetic identification with others:

[J]ustice is a moral virtue, merely because it has that tendency to the good of mankind; and, indeed, is nothing but an artificial invention to that purpose. The same may be said of allegiance, of the laws of nations, of modesty, and of good-manners. All these are mere human contrivances for the interest of society. ... Now as the means to an end can only be agreeable, where the end is agreeable; and as the good of society, where our own interest is not concern'd, or that of our friends, pleases only by sympathy: It follows, that sympathy is the source of the esteem, which we pay to all the artificial virtues. (Hume 1978, 577)

In the twentieth century, Robin Collingwood analysed the concept of beauty in a way that suggests an idea of functional beauty, although he did not use that term. Collingwood allows the term “beautiful” to be applied to all kinds of sense experience – “a beautiful saddle of mutton or a beautiful claret” – but he also makes a particular reference to things the excellence of which “is that of well-devised and well-made means to an end: a beautiful watch or a beautiful theodolite” (Collingwood 1958, 39).

More recently, Jane Forsey has argued that the beauty of a designed object is a function both of how it looks and how it fulfils the purpose for which it was made: “We do not present design awards to things based solely on how they look, regardless of whether they work, but nor do we celebrate the purely functional while ignoring its form” (Forsey 2025, 38).

Functionality also plays an important role in mathematicians’ and scientists’ accounts of proofs and theories as beautiful. When the mathematician and physicist Henri Poincaré declared that the scientist “does not study nature because it is useful to do so” but rather “because he takes pleasure in it, and he takes pleasure in it because it is beautiful”, it might at first glance appear as he embraces a conventional aesthetic concept of beauty. However, Poincaré is quick to add that he does not refer to “that beauty which strikes the senses ... the beauty of qualities and appearances” (Poincaré 1914, 22). Instead, he is referring to “the intellectual beauty hidden behind sensible beauty ... this beauty which gives certainty and strength to the intelligence” (Poincaré 1914, 24). Poincaré’s idea of beauty has to do with functionality – the beautiful is identified with the scientifically practical and efficient. He emphasizes that “care for the beautiful leads us to the same selection as care for the useful”; moreover, he is convinced that “economy of thought, that economy of effort which ... is the constant tendency of science, is a source of beauty as well as a practical advantage” (Poincaré 1914, 23).

That scientific beauty involves efficiency in the sense of thought economy is also stressed by contemporary mathematicians. A beautiful proof possesses simplicity in the sense that “it doesn’t involve outside information” but can be decided based on information provided by the theorem under consideration itself; “once one sees the idea of the proof, one immediately sees why the conclusion of the theorem follows” (Raman – Öhman 2013, 199).

Likewise, according to Steven Weinberg, a famous physicist and Nobel laureate, a scientist’s use of the word “beautiful” refers to ideas and theories that are instrumentally efficient in solving whatever problem the scientist is trying to solve – once again, an allusion to the concept of functional beauty:

A physicist who says that a theory is beautiful does not mean quite the same thing that would be meant in saying that a particular painting or a piece of music or poetry is beautiful. It is not merely a personal expression of aesthetic pleasure; it is much closer to what a horse trainer means when he looks at a racehorse and says that it is a beautiful horse. ... [T]he

horse trainer's aesthetic sense is a means to an objective end – the end of selecting horses that win races. The physicist's sense of beauty is also supposed to serve a purpose – it is supposed to help the physicist select ideas that help us to explain nature. (Weinberg 1992, 133)

Hence, beauty in the scientists' sense is ultimately identified with efficient solutions to scientific problems – that is, in terms of functionality. In the words of Nick Zangwill:

There cannot be proofs, theories, or chess moves which are dysfunctional yet beautiful or elegant. So what we are appreciating in these cases is not dependent beauty or elegance but the mere technical achievement of finding a very effective means to an end. It is not genuine aesthetic appreciation. So aesthetic terms are metaphorically applied in these cases. (Zangwill 1998, 79)

As Zangwill points out, the concept of beauty as used by scientists is not really an aesthetic concept; scientists may use the term “beauty”, but what they mean is efficiency. This points to another problem with the theory of functional beauty, namely, that its very focus on functionality allows it to redefine the concept of beauty in a way that substitutes non-aesthetic for aesthetic content.

Moralizing Beauty – The Theory of Panos Paris

In recent years, the philosopher Panos Paris has developed the idea of functional beauty to include moral qualities. According to Paris, an object is beautiful if it is “(1) well-formed for its function(s), and (2) pleases most competent judges in so far as it is experienced (in perception or contemplation) as (1)” (Paris 2020, 521). Now, Paris's idea about what it means for an object to be “well-formed for its function” includes that the function itself should be morally good. Moreover, the moral quality of an object matters more to its beauty than does its looks. Even objects that look plain or ugly are beautiful, to the extent that they serve a morally good function; on the other hand, if an object looks good but serves a morally bad function, then it is ugly, according to Paris.

Discussing the design of medical equipment, he argues that their health-preserving function makes them beautiful and that we should perceive them as such, regardless of their lack of properties directly pleasing to the eye:

Consider the defibrillator, another perfectly plain piece of contemporary Design; or consider blood pressure and oxygen monitors. I submit that, provided that we open-mindedly contemplate their literally life-saving Design sophistication, they should not strike us as aesthetically indifferent. On the contrary, it is plausibly their very visual plainness, which throws their functions into relief, that makes them beautiful. (Paris 2025, 49)

Likewise, the earthworm, despite being a “slimy, wriggly, brown-red tubelike animal ... a textbook argument for the existence of ugly nature”, should be appreciated as beautiful, given “how important its function is for a healthy natural world” (Paris 2022a, 246).

For the same reason – that the moral evaluation of an object's function should decide our judgement of its beauty – Paris arrives at the conclusion that objects such as instruments of torture – for instance, iron maidens and sacrificial knives – are ugly, precisely because they are well-formed for morally bad functions (Paris 2020, 526). Likewise, the design of objects intended to deny marginalized people egalitarian respect must therefore be ugly:

Suppose that we're walking around town and, passing under a bridge, you remark upon how nice those thorny concrete patterns are on the side of the pavement, nicely breaking up the uniformity of tarmac and concrete of the built-up city's tapestry, lending it a stellar quality. 'Beautiful Design', you say. But then I explain that their function is not to titillate walkers' visual interest, but to prevent the homeless from finding shelter from the elements and sleeping there, and that they're known as 'homeless spikes', and form part of a broader 'tradition' of 'defence architecture'. As far as 'functional style' and 'looking fit' go, 'defence architecture' does rather well: both visually intriguing and fit for its functions. Yet, precisely because of their good design, even though a moment ago you found them beautiful, you now find them ugly and are disgusted by them (at least, if we're walking together, I hope you do). (Paris 2025, 49–50)

Paris hence advocates a *moralized aesthetics*, according to which moral goodness is both a necessary and a sufficient condition of beauty. An object that is not morally good cannot be beautiful, and an object which is morally good is thereby also beautiful.

However, Paris's argument raises questions. First, it seems to involve a kind of unfounded reductionism – reducing aesthetic evaluation to an aspect of moral evaluation (plus functionality). But why should we have to accept this conclusion? There seems to be no good reason why we should not be able to hold both that a particular object has a beautiful design *and* that it serves a morally questionable purpose, or that it can both look ugly *and* serve a morally good and much-needed function.

History teaches us that the morally good and the beautiful are contingently rather than necessarily related to each other. Think of propaganda films presenting beautiful visions of unity, strength, health, and harmony to make the worldviews of a Hitler or a Stalin attractive to their audiences. Schiller noted once that while “[i]t cannot be denied that the charms of beauty can in good hands be employed to praiseworthy purpose, ... it is not contrary to its nature that, in bad hands, it has quite the opposite effect, making its power to captivate souls serve the ends of error and injustice” (Schiller 2016, 34). Propaganda has been described as “a devious weapon that once seduced the souls and the minds of men” (Taylor 2003, 5), and one aspect of its seductive power is its beauty. Elisabeth Schellekens, writing about a classical Nazi propaganda film, makes the following observations:

Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will* actively promotes Hitler's moral and political vision, and undoubtedly corrupted the minds of many young Germans during the second half of the 1930s by either instilling or strengthening a thoroughly flawed world-view. ... [T]he moral character of a work such as Riefenstahl's film can be persuasive precisely because it is so beautiful. ... The work's beauty is so contagious, one may argue, that the ideas and values that they represent seem equally beautiful and worthwhile. (Schellekens 2007, 78)

Another problem with Paris's theory of functional beauty is its circularity. According to Paris, a competent judge is one whose expertise comprises “a dimension of psychological and affective normality – including moral variants thereof” (Paris 2020, 521). Hence, a competent judge should also be a morally competent judge. But how do we decide that a judge is morally competent? For instance, wouldn't experienced connoisseurs of sadomasochistic pornography and performances be the most competent judges of these art forms, including their moral aspects, relating to prior consent of participants, safe words, and so on? Not so, according to Paris. According to him, “members of such appreciative communities are deviant and therefore fail to qualify as

competent judges, since a normal human psychology is a *sine qua non* of competent judges” (Paris 2020, 527).

This, however, is to win the argument by adjusting its premises to the desired conclusion. What Paris is doing here is to use words like “normal” and “deviant” in a way that favours his moral intuitions, thereby enabling himself to define competence in a way that fits these very intuitions, and so making it trivially true that a competent judge is one who shares Paris’s moral views on sadomasochistic works of art. Hence, the whole argument becomes circular: Sadomasochistic pornography is bad because it will be rejected by competent judges, and competent judges are those, and only those, who will reject sadomasochistic pornography.

Paris does not offer any specific moral principles to guide our judgements of beauty, but he points to the normative claims of contemporary social justice and climate activism, arguing that these claims have implications for how we should think about beauty and ugliness. Paris claims that we *should* judge certain objects, people, and projects as beautiful or ugly, out of concern for moral values such as justice, human rights, or environmental well-being. He holds that humanity “is one respect in which we are all beautiful in much the same way” and that this is what “lies behind calls by social justice groups to recognise various kinds of beauty, including most recently – in the context of the *Black Lives Matter* movement – black beauty, because to recognise the full humanity in someone is ... to recognise a kind of beauty” (Paris 2022a, 245).

Likewise, Paris holds that we should learn to appreciate “the functional beauty of seemingly ugly creatures” that are ecologically useful and to “counteract the preference for the cute and cuddly in efforts for preservation and protection”; moreover, we should beware of “the functional ugliness of nature’s suffering through global warming” and let this ugliness “motivate greater concern and spur more to action” (Paris 2022a, 247).

Moreover, Paris expresses the hope that, because of the strong connection between morality and beauty, it might be possible to teach people to be good by means of having them recognize the beauty of moral qualities: “if ... it is possible to educate people’s ability to notice not just beauty, but moral beauty in particular; then perhaps there is an available route to virtue via beauty” (Paris 2022b, 620).

Indeed, to Paris, the whole idea of functional beauty seems, at least to an important extent, to be justified in terms of its expected contributions to certain favoured moral and political ideals: “a taste for functional beauty may help alleviate some of the harms arising from our current taste in beauty, contributing to enhanced wellbeing, social justice, and a better relationship to the natural world” (Paris 2022a, 248). However, Paris’s view of aesthetics suffers from a moralism that corrupts the very meaning of judgements of beauty, as it suggests that our assessments of beauty and ugliness should be made in accordance with some supposedly desirable moral ends and not in accordance with what we see and hear. This is not to make a judgement, and it is certainly not to make a judgement of beauty. Instead, it is to renounce the right and freedom of independent and autonomous assessment for the sake of conforming to some alleged moral authority.

There is no moral *should* in aesthetic appreciation; we may well have a moral obligation to treat everyone with respect, but we are under no similar obligation to judge everyone to be beautiful. We are not even under a moral obligation to judge morally good persons and objects as beautiful. Certainly, there is a great temptation to think of good people as beautiful and bad people as ugly

– our moral judgements have an emotional content that easily spills over into judgements of beauty and ugliness. Sometimes this temptation is expressed as a claim about judgements of beauty being capable of expressing moral truths, as in the argument of the British philosopher Colin McGinn:

It can be literally *true* that a person has a beautiful soul, in virtue of the components and operations of that soul – the emotions felt, the thoughts had, the desires experienced. Similarly, it really is hideous to desire the suffering of the innocent, vile to exploit the weak, foul to betray a friend – each of these acts evokes revulsion and disgust in us. We do not respond with mere moral criticism or condemnation; our aesthetic faculties are recruited too. Such aesthetic judgements are as literally correct as comparable judgements about ordinary physical things. And they obviously have moral content. (McGinn 1997, 103–104)

However, in addition to the problem of knowing what is meant by a *soul* being beautiful, it remains unclear what McGinn has proven with his examples. As he himself recognizes, terms like “hideous”, “vile”, and “foul” are not pure aesthetic terms but “have moral content”. What we have here, then, is not a case of independent aesthetic judgements being true in virtue of corresponding to some moral truths, but rather a case of moral judgements masquerading as aesthetic judgements. What McGinn presents here is not a new revelation about how judgements of beauty rely on moral judgements, but rather a familiar truth about how we use aesthetic or quasi-aesthetic terminology to convey our moral judgements. We use such terminology to influence the subjectivity of our audience, trying to build an image in their mind that corresponds to our moral judgement. Just to say that a person has acted wrongly might not stir any reactions, but claiming that this person is hideous, vile, and foul has a better prospect of engaging the emotions of the people we are addressing.

Now, according to Paris’s idea of functional beauty, not only objects, but also features of human persons, such as virtues, can be described as beautiful, since “[v]irtues are plausibly human character traits (that is, complex psychological dispositions, comprising affective, cognitive, desiderative components, in conjunction with internalised principles, beliefs, etc.) that are (especially) well-formed to realise certain (humanly good) ends” (Paris 2020, 525). Hence, “the moral virtues are beautiful, and the moral vices ugly” (Paris 2019, 396).

To support his argument about the beauty of moral character traits, Paris refers to an example given by Alexander Nehamas about Joseph Merrick, the protagonist of David Lynch’s film *The Elephant Man* (in the film appearing under the name John Merrick). Merrick suffered from a yet unidentified illness, leaving his head unproportionally enlarged, his face severely disfigured, and his hands thickened into lumps of skin and bones, repelling people who met him with his appalling features. However, as Frederick Treves, Merrick’s doctor, found out, “Merrick’s grotesque face is not a sign of a psychological wasteland but belongs to an intelligent, kind, and sensitive man. And as Treves comes to like and respect him, Merrick’s face seems no longer grotesque to him and his appearance is no longer an issue” (Nehamas 2007, 59).

In Paris’s interpretation, this means that “his presence comes to be experienced with a pleasure recognisably like that which we take in contemplating other beautiful objects” (Paris 2019, 399). However, this is certainly to stretch Nehamas’s example too far. What the case of Joseph Merrick tells us is that a person’s kindness and other pleasing qualities can make us ignore her less attractive looks. We may no longer think of a kind person as ugly, but this does not mean that we begin to think of her as beautiful. We simply stop thinking of her ugliness as a defining or

significant feature of who she is. This is certainly an interesting psychological observation, but it does not support Paris's claim that moral goodness is a necessary as well as a sufficient condition of beauty.

Conclusion

Moral judgements and judgements of beauty are two important spheres of evaluation. While moral judgements can aspire to at least some level of universality and objectivity, dealing with goods, values, and norms pertaining to all human agents, judgements of beauty are subjective and not conditioned by any set of norms necessarily valid for all persons. The subjectivity of judgements of beauty has been questioned by adherents of the theory of functional beauty. According to this theory, an object's beauty is a matter of its being well-formed for its function; if it is well-formed for its function, it should be regarded as beautiful. Against this, one can object that it is possible both to recognize that an object (for instance, a pig's snout) is well-formed for its function, and still refuse to call it beautiful. In the version of functional beauty developed by Panos Paris, being well-formed includes moral goodness. Hence, an object's being morally good is both a necessary and a sufficient condition of its being beautiful. Against this claim, one can object that there are objects that are beautiful without being morally good (such as Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda films) and there are morally good objects (such as a dialysis machine) that are morally good without being beautiful. Hence, the theory of functional beauty cannot bridge the conceptual gap between moral judgements and judgements of beauty, and these two types of judgements remain independent of each other.

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