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## On the Importance of Beauty and Taste

Panos Paris, *Cardiff University*

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### Abstract

We've all heard people say 'Beauty is only skin-deep', or 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder': our culture promulgates a conception of beauty as subjective, superficial, and independent of other values like moral goodness or knowledge and understanding. Yet our taste in beauty affects many aspects of our lives, sometimes playing a decisive—and often detrimental—role in areas as wide-ranging as our identity and self-esteem, our morally salient decisions, and our relationship to the environment. This presents us with a choice: we can either ignore the facts—leaving our conception of beauty unchanged and allowing our taste to influence much in our lives while either not acknowledging such influence, or perhaps seeking to reprimand it; or we can take the power of beauty seriously and seek to harmonise our taste with our values. I argue for the latter option, and propose a way of bringing beauty and taste in line with what matters to us using the notion of functional beauty. Adopting this strategy, I suggest, can have a powerful—and positive—impact on our self-esteem and wellbeing, our relationship to others, as well as our attitudes towards the environment.

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We've all heard people say 'Beauty is only skin-deep', or 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder': our culture promulgates a conception of beauty as subjective, superficial, and independent of other values like moral goodness or knowledge and understanding. At the same time, our taste in beauty affects many aspects of our lives, sometimes playing a decisive—often detrimental—role in areas as wide-ranging as our identity and self-esteem, our morally salient decisions, and our relationship to the environment. This presents us with a choice: we can either ignore the facts—leaving our conception of beauty unchanged and allowing our taste to influence much in our lives while either not acknowledging such influence, or perhaps seeking to reprimand it; or we can take the power of beauty and taste seriously and seek to harmonise it with our values. I argue for the latter option, proposing a way to bring beauty and taste in line with what matters to us. Doing so, I suggest, can have a powerful—and positive—impact on our self-esteem and wellbeing, our relationship to others, as well as our attitudes towards the environment.

I begin in section 1 by offering an overview of evidence showing that our taste in beauty currently influences us in ways that are rarely acknowledged, adversely affecting our wellbeing, how we relate to others, and to the natural world. In section 2, I argue that beauty's unsavoury effects are explained by certain peculiarities of our collective taste, which has left us with an unhelpful conception of beauty as wholly subjective, skin-deep, and independent of other values. In Section 3 I present a conception of functional beauty that is not wholly subjective, skin-deep, or independent of other values, and which comprises many different subspecies. In sections 4–6, I offer reasons to think that attuning our taste to functional beauty can positively contribute to our mental health and wellbeing, social justice, and our relationship to the environment. I conclude with some reflections on what it would take to thus attune

our taste,<sup>1</sup> which essentially would amount to taking beauty seriously in policy, legislation, and education.

## 1. The Power and Perils of Beauty and Taste

Whether we like it or not, many of our attitudes, decisions and behaviours—from the most mundane to the most consequential ones—are shaped by our taste for beauty and distaste for ugliness. Such influence extends to areas where we are currently facing considerable challenges, including mental health and wellbeing, social justice, and the environment. Let me briefly summarise some of the evidence.

First, presumably most of those reading this article will be aware that beauty standards are playing a key role in promoting negative body and self images, especially among young people, spearheading a mental health crisis. At the most basic level, feelings of guilt and shame are prevalent among those trying to live up to current beauty ideals and, inevitably, failing (Widdows, 2018, pp. 31–35). More alarmingly, we know that rates of eating disorders and body-image related disorders like body dysmorphia or bigorexia have been on the rise in the last decade (*ibid.*, pp. 60–62; Grogan, 2021). We also know that such disorders, as well as concerns over body image more broadly, are strongly correlated with mental health problems like anxiety and depression. Finally, the evidence suggests that such beauty-related mental health problems are correlated with social media use, and in particular platforms that are predominantly visual and that are formative of our beauty norms and tastes (MacCallum & Widdows, 2018; Fardouli et al., 2015).

A second set of evidence points to a plethora of social injustices explicable by appeal to beauty standards and tastes.<sup>2</sup> These begin from birth, with evidence indicating that infants perceived as physically attractive receive greater affection and attention compared to those perceived as unattractive (Langlois et al., 1995), and are judged to be more intelligent, likeable, and well behaved than unattractive ones (Stephen & Langlois, 1984). Later on in life, teachers' evaluations of pupils favour attractive over unattractive ones (Adams & Cohen, 1974), as do, further down the line, hiring decisions (Hosoda, Stone-Romero & Coats, 2003) and pay gaps in employment (Hammermesh, 2003). Juries give harsher sentences to those perceived as unattractive, while those perceived as attractive receive more lenient sentences (Darby & Jeffers 1988; McKelvie & Coley, 1993). Strangers' willingness to help others depends on those others' perceived attractiveness (Athanasidou & Greene, 1973), and even the willingness of doctors and nurses to conduct physical examinations on patients varies with whether they are perceived as fat (Fontaine et al., 1998). And this is excluding all the evidence that points to intersections between judgements of attractiveness and race, gender, or ability. The collective effect of such phenomena is known as 'lookism' (Minerva, 2017), designating a form of discrimination based on perceived physical attractiveness. This form of discrimination may be partly explicable by another well-documented and widespread phenomenon known as the 'halo effect'. This involves making wider evaluations about people on the basis of their appearance, such that those found beautiful are also found to have positive qualities, like being more intelligent, popular, etc., whilst those found ugly are found to possess the contrary, negative qualities (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

A third set of evidence indicates that beauty informs our relationship to the environment and our decisions towards it.<sup>3</sup> These fall into three categories. Firstly, in the case of landscapes and habitats, we tend to single out areas of "outstanding natural beauty" on the basis of their picturesque or scenic qualities, and are concerned about their preservation, but neglect places like wetlands, indicating a "perceived need for protecting scenic wonders, but not ecological integrity, from cultivation and

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<sup>1</sup> My arguments here thus complement other proposals for redressing the harms due to contemporary beauty or other aesthetic norms in various domains (Saito, 2007; Eaton, 2016; Lintott & Irvin, 2016; Irvin, 2017; Minerva, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> This paragraph draws on issues and examples discussed by Irvin (2017).

<sup>3</sup> This paragraph draws on issues and examples discussed by Saito (2007).

development” (Saito 2007, p. 63). Secondly, in the case of living creatures, Stephen Jay Gould notes that ‘environmentalists continually face the political reality that support and funding can be won for soft, cuddly, and “attractive” animals, but not for slimy, grubby, and ugly creatures (of potentially greater evolutionary interest and practical significance) or for habitats’ (1993, p. 312). Relatedly, philosopher Marcia Muelder Eaton has noted the emotional reactions people have to the sentimental portrayal of deer perpetuated by Disney, dubbing it the ‘Bambi syndrome’. In the film’s heyday, this made it difficult to cull deer in the US, threatening the ecological equilibrium (2001, p. 182). Thirdly, in the case of the built environment, we often pit the beautiful against the ecologically desirable, whether that concerns our lived environment, where there is ‘still a strong resistance to green architecture not only because of the initial high cost but also due to the assumption that ecological value compromised the aesthetic value of such projects’ (Saito, 2007, p. 66); or projects beneficial to the environment outside towns and cities, like the ongoing resistance to wind farms, which are often seen as soiling the landscape. This, evidently, often comes with adverse environmental consequences.

The evidence above shows two things. First, that what we find beautiful or ugly can have powerful effects our attitudes, decisions, and behaviours in relation to ourselves, others, and the environment. Second, many of these effects are undesirable; they have negative impacts on our mental health, contribute to social injustice, and even adversely affect our relationship with the natural world.

## 2. Beauty, Taste, and Value

Confronted with such evidence, one might point out that it is, in a sense, unsurprising. Beauty is a powerful force, its experience characterised by rich feelings of pleasure and delight, so much so that beauty has been linked to love and happiness (Nehamas, 2007). No wonder it has a powerful motivational pull. But beauty is liable to lead us astray, and the evidence simply reflects this fact. We should thus do our best to resist beauty’s influence on our judgements, by being more suspicious of it and exercising greater vigilance. In this way, we will slowly be able to weed beauty’s influence out of the domains to which it does not belong.

But this, it seems to me, would be premature. The question we need to ask ourselves is whether the deleterious effects outlined above stem from the fact that when we find something beautiful, our experience of beauty spills over into domains that are properly not in the jurisdiction of aesthetics; or if these negative effects are instead a product of what we currently find beautiful.

It should be obvious that finding something beautiful is not in and of itself bound to bring about undesirable consequences. Indeed, in contrast to the evidence discussed earlier, there is a different set of evidence which suggests that appreciating beauty can contribute to, rather than detract from, wellbeing, and can positively contribute in domains that many would consider paradigmatically non-aesthetic. For instance, just as there is evidence that finding someone physically attractive may lead to certain unwarranted judgements or behaviours, there is evidence that finding someone morally good leads to finding them more beautiful.<sup>4</sup> This is important because it implies that experiences of beauty can also have a positive effect and lead us to embrace what is genuinely valuable. Experiences of beauty are credited as conducive to success in other domains too, including in mathematics and physics. Many great mathematicians (e.g., Hardy, 2004), and prominent physicists (e.g., Wilczek, 2016), claim to be drawn to their subject for its beauty, and to be guided by beauty in all of their most important discoveries and decisions. In such cases, beauty’s influence is conscious and, moreover, if we are to trust such expert testimonies, desirable and rewarding.

So it seems plausible that the negative effects in section one cannot be explained solely by the hypothesis that beauty sometimes overreaches, as when finding something beautiful affects many of our non-aesthetic attitudes, decisions, or behaviours. This is just as well, since the evidence above suggests that whether we like it or not, and whether or not our society chooses to ignore the link between experiences of beauty and other values, beauty, like an ivy, latches onto our most important

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<sup>4</sup> See my (2018a) for discussion of this evidence.

values and concerns. This is likely because the link between beauty and other values is deeply rooted in human psychology. This does not, of course, show that the link is desirable or worth preserving. But it does raise a question as to whether it can or should be severed. For the influence of our experiences of beauty on other domains in many of the cases mentioned in section one probably operates well below the level of consciousness. Otherwise, presumably, we would have already addressed these issues. Moreover, unlike certain kinds of unconscious bias, which are undesirable through and through, a love of the beautiful is plausibly both desirable and a much more fundamental and deeply entrenched part of our psychology (cf. Ravasio, 2022). Even if it were possible to eliminate beauty's influence altogether, it is not clear that this would be wise. For, as we've seen, experiences of beauty can also exercise valuable and desirable influence over our decisions and behaviour. If this is right, then trying to eliminate beauty's influence altogether, in the hopes that reason or something similar will replace it, seems like throwing out the baby with the bathwater. It is, after all, unlikely that there's anything else that can take beauty's place when it comes to its affective and motivational power, and the problem is not that beauty is powerful, but that its power can sometimes prove perilous.

So perhaps the negative effects in section one stem from our current collective taste in beauty, that is, from what we find beautiful, rather than beauty itself or the experience of beauty (cf. Higgins, 2000). But what might it be about our current taste in beauty that makes it liable to lead to such unpalatable consequences? It is difficult to give a full characterisation of our current taste in beauty, not least because there are bound to be individual variations. Be that as it may, our collective taste does appear to favour certain kinds of qualities over others (cf. Irvin, 2017; Eaton, 2016), and while it would be futile to try to offer an exhaustive list of such qualities across all domains, it is worth noting certain features. Our taste in human beauty, for instance, focuses exclusively on the face and body, and specifically, for women, on certain qualities like thinness, smoothness, firmness, and youthfulness (Widdows, 2018, pp. 21–26). For many of us, whether we find a person beautiful is independent of their character, and their character tells us nothing about whether they are beautiful. When it comes to the natural world, we seem to find beauty in picturesque landscapes, in neat, orderly scenes, and in medium to large mammals with bright colours and fairly smooth, regular features. Whether we find an animal beautiful has nothing to do with its design, nor does its design affect its beauty—just look at a worm: exquisitely designed to decompose organic matter, and essential to soil health, on which much of plant and animal life depends, but disgusting to look at. The common denominator here is that the qualities that we find beautiful in both human beings and animals are not just exclusively visual, but indeed, are whatever visually pleases us pre-reflectively, and independently of other considerations of value.

Our taste in beauty has been crystallised in what is plausibly our commonplace conception of beauty today. This sees beauty as fundamentally skin-deep—as strictly limited to, and predicable of, perceptible objects, and pertaining in virtue of objects' perceptual qualities; beauty is said to be a matter of how things look or sound, and independent of what they are, what they do, what they are for, or where they are placed (cf. Zangwill, 2001). Consequently, and crucially, on this conception, beauty is construed as superficial, in the sense that it is independent of other properties or values, like moral goodness or truth, and virtues like honesty, courage, justice, or wisdom. In addition to these features, beauty is also thought to be irreducibly subjective, in the sense that it is a matter of personal preferences. This immunises our taste in beauty from criticism.

All this may actually be unsurprising given the culture we inhabit. Since the advent of photography—to which the origins of our contemporary taste and concomitant conception of beauty are arguably traceable (Richards, 2017)—our cultural environment has been visual in ways unparalleled in human history, and is increasingly virtual in ways that we may not even be able to predict. Together with other technological advances in both the digital manipulation of images and their accessibility, our environment nourishes our appetite for beauty on an exclusively visual diet. And given that we are highly visual creatures, we happily indulge in that diet, whilst it, in turn, shapes our taste, radically narrowing the scope of what we commonly find beautiful, and even determines what we understand beauty to be.

Against this backdrop, it seems plausible that what explains the negative effects of our taste in beauty are two important features of our taste and concomitant conception of beauty. First, our taste in

beauty is misaligned with, or developed in isolation from, other interests and values. No wonder it can clash with them, and come out on top, given its power. Second, due to its exclusive focus on perceptual qualities, our collective taste in beauty is impervious to certain kinds of beauty that may lead to positive effects, like mathematical beauty or beauty in physics, which hold heuristic value, or the beauty someone can have in virtue of their character, which can lead to greater moral appreciation. This makes our taste and corresponding conception of beauty too narrow and excludes a great many experiences of beauty that we could be enjoying. Of course it's not possible for all of us to enjoy mathematical beauty, but its existence points to the possibility that many domains of everyday life offer untapped opportunities to enjoy beauty, which may be aligned to values we collectively endorse or should endorse.

Jointly the foregoing considerations provide both pragmatic and theoretical reasons to suspect that our current taste in beauty is deformed in at least two ways: it is too shallow and too narrow. Consequently, it is very limited and limiting, and is not serving our collective, or indeed, individual interests. This critique crucially depends, of course, on there being viable conceptions of beauty that do not share these flaws. It also requires us to reject the idea that beauty is purely in the eye of individual beholders, subjective and therefore immune to criticism. In the remainder of this article, I argue that there is a conception of beauty that is suitably broad and substantive, allowing us to anchor its influence onto what we care about, and helping us develop better and healthier relationships with ourselves, others, and the natural world.

### 3. Functional Beauty and Good Taste

There is, in the philosophical tradition, a well-established notion of what's recently been called functional beauty. This is a species of beauty that depends on wellformedness for function.<sup>5</sup> That notion was displaced by our increasingly narrow commonplace conception and was given a bad name through its association with form-follows-function principles in twentieth-century architecture and design (which, admittedly, were behind some rather ugly products). Yet this conception of beauty offers a valuable alternative to our commonplace conception.

Indeed, if we reflect on our experiences, many of us will realise that we are actually quite familiar with functional beauty, even if the concept eludes us. Before testing this thought, let me briefly explain how I understand functional beauty. My account of functional beauty holds that (i) something's being well formed for its function, and (ii) pleasing most competent judges of that kind of thing insofar as it is experienced (in perception and/or contemplation) as thus well formed, together suffice for something's being beautiful (Paris, 2020).

Notice that this account comprises two conditions, of which one is objective, namely that a functionally beautiful object should be well formed for its function. This is something that, in most cases, will depend on comparison with other things with a similar function and so judging it correctly will require a considerable measure of experience. Assuming adequate experience, however, wellformedness is fairly straightforward to judge, even if open to debate. The only thing to note about this condition is that being well formed is not a matter merely of appearing a certain way, but of having a structure or form—which may be perceptible or intelligible—that is conducive to realising whatever the object's function is. This feature, then, introduces a measure of objectivity, the possibility of innumerable kinds of beauty, given the breadth of wellformedness, and a way of coupling beauty to other values.

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<sup>5</sup> The notion of functional beauty (unqualifiedly called 'beauty') arguably originated in antiquity and survived into modernity. It was reintroduced in contemporary philosophy, and labelled 'functional beauty', by Parsons and Carlson (2008). For a history of the concept, see (ibid., pp. 1–30). Note that my version of functional beauty (Paris, 2020), which I sketch in this paper, differs from that offered by Parsons and Carlson, which, in my view, inherits certain undesirable features of our commonplace conception of beauty, notably its link to strictly perceptual properties and independence from other, importantly moral, values. Saying that functional beauty is a species of beauty allows for the possibility of beauty that is not dependent on function and is predicably purely on the basis of perceptual or intelligible configurations.

This last point is perhaps clearer if we look at the second condition, which is a little trickier, since it specifies a partly subjective requirement, namely that the object's wellformedness please most competent judges. This raises an important and difficult question, which I have not yet addressed in my published work, and that adequately treating would take me beyond the remit of this paper. The problem becomes clear when we notice that there are arguably certain things that do not please competent judges despite being well formed for their functions. Examples of such objects might be things like rubbish bins, condoms, plain metallic bookcases, and, perhaps most perspicuously, torture instruments. These range from, plausibly, leaving most of us indifferent, to displeasing us proportionately with their wellformedness. But, one might wonder, if functional beauty is ultimately a matter of wellformedness for function, why would this be?

There are two things to say by way of explaining why certain things plausibly won't please even competent judges. First, wellformedness is a matter of degree, so with greater expertise and experience the threshold for pleasure becomes harder to meet. But that cannot be the whole story, for some objects may be ingeniously formed for their function, but pleasing to contemplate they are not. The thumbscrew, for instance, is a very well-formed torture instrument, ergonomically designed to deliver maximal anguish with great economy of size and materials.<sup>6</sup> If so, then we might expect a competent judge to take pleasure in the thumbscrew and to find it beautiful after all. This depends on whom we take to be a competent judge. I take it that being a competent judge is largely a matter of possessing the sorts of qualities identified by Hume (1987, p. 150). These include possessing relevant knowledge to understand and be able to experience how the different components of an object contribute to its function(s); having an appropriate degree of experience of dealing with objects of this kind so as to be able to assess the degree of their wellformedness for function in general and in comparison to other objects with a similar function; and being unprejudiced. But, importantly, a competent judge of beauty, especially when it comes to the beauty of human artefacts and practices (perhaps unlike abstract objects like mathematical proofs) must, I think, also be cognitively and affectively normal, including having a sound moral outlook and possessing a considerable degree of moral and emotional sensitivity (*ibid.*, pp. 152–153; cf. Paris, 2020, 521). This is because failure to possess such qualities is liable to lead to a misapprehension of certain objects and therefore also to a mistaken affective response to them. To wit, although the sadist may take great pleasure in the thumbscrew's design, this cannot be taken as criterial of the object's beauty since the sadist's judgement is marred by an abominable moral outlook.

Ultimately, then, the reason why certain well-formed objects might not please us, even if we can appreciate how well adapted their designs are to their ends, is that pleasure is contingent not only on wellformedness for function, but also on whether the functions of an object are themselves desirable. In Hume's words, when 'the end [is] totally indifferent to us, we ... feel the same indifference towards the means' (1975, p. 286; cf. Plato, 1983). And, in the case of torture instruments like thumbscrews, we may even be displeased since their function is inimical to our ends, viz., is undesirable. Under this construal, then, functional beauty is informed by certain norms and values from non-aesthetic domains, notably the moral realm. Thus, functional beauty is aligned with other values.

Note here that it is compatible with functional beauty that one may find a thumbscrew beautiful if one abstracts from its function and inspects it as a purely visual object. This is fine, provided that we note that the thumbscrew is not functionally beautiful and may even displease us when appreciated for what it truly is. This showcases another merit of appreciating functional beauty, which will become relevant in subsequent sections, namely that a taste for functional beauty can serve to put into perspective other, less cognitively-laden species of beauty, and can dampen their effects.

Now that we have a better grasp of the concept of functional beauty, we can perhaps begin to see its plausibility. Although our commonplace conception of beauty may prevent us from identifying experiences of functional beauty as genuine cases of beauty, once our attention is drawn to functional

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<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Anneli Jefferson for the thumbscrew example.

beauty, many of us will recognise it in our everyday lives, and cherish its experience as most rewarding.<sup>7</sup> For instance, those who work in professions that they consider ‘vocations’, from professional sports and architecture, to computer science and politics, probably recognise functional beauty when they encounter well-formed solutions to important problems in their fields, or when confronted with excellent specimens of work that contribute to certain purposes or ends that they see as desirable in that field. Some may even explicitly use aesthetic language, on occasion, as in talk of a beautiful political gesture, move in chess, goal in football, proof in mathematics, or computer software. Others, however, may hardly register such beauty, partly because they lack the requisite conceptual resources, having instead internalised something like the current commonplace conception of beauty described earlier. Still, the notion of functional beauty allows us to capture all these ways of being beautiful and illuminates a realm of beauty hitherto obscured by our current collective taste.

Besides being reflected in ordinary experience, then, the notion of functional beauty elegantly accommodates, and draws our attention to, certain examples of beauty that the taste perpetuated by our highly visual culture makes us insensitive to, including beauty that does not depend on sensory perception. In doing so, the notion of functional beauty appears to satisfy both requirements of a valuable conception of beauty that our commonplace conception violates: it offers a measure of objectivity; aligns with other values, or at least provides us with a way of developing taste that does so align; and offers the possibility of discovering and appreciating beauty in virtually every domain of ordinary experience and through different modalities. Hence, a taste for functional beauty promises to help redress some of the ills resulting from our current collective taste, which hypothesis I now turn to consider in relation to wellbeing, social justice, and the environment.

#### 4. Taste, Functional Beauty, and Wellbeing

The thought that beauty is linked to wellbeing is ancient. Plato went so far as to maintain that ‘in contemplating ... beauty, if anywhere, is human life worth living’ (1903). Research in positive psychology supports Plato’s insight, with evidence suggesting that being appreciative of beauty can be an important contributor to wellbeing. It is difficult to believe that Plato and the positive psychologists are talking about the same beauty that is behind the current mental health crisis. As we saw earlier, however, whether beauty’s influence is negative or positive depends on our taste. I suggested that developing a taste for functional beauty is a promising route towards countering the negative effects of current beauty standards. When it comes to enhancing wellbeing, I think that there are at least two ways in which functional beauty can help. First, a taste for functional beauty can help transform our conception of, and relationship to, human beauty itself. Second, it makes us sensitive to other forms of beauty that draw our attention away from narrow human beauty norms.

The first way in which a taste for functional beauty may contribute to wellbeing is by allowing us to appreciate human beauty differently in a number of ways, all of which transcend current norms of physical beauty such as thinness, firmness, smoothness and youth, for women, and muscularity, thinness, and the like, for men. Firstly, because of its focus on wellformedness for function, a taste for functional beauty does not rest content with the mere appearance of fitness, as exemplified by rock-hard abs or toned legs. Instead, its focus is both on appearance but also the underlying state of physical flourishing, aspects of which include health, vitality, etc. Because of this, such physical beauty is partly appreciable from the inside, in the mindful experience of a healthy, well-functioning body. And while it can also be appreciated from the outside, i.e., from a body’s physical appearance, such appreciation is not a matter of unreflective perception, but of regular acquaintance with, and observation of the various activities, poses, and tropes of bodies experienced in ordinary life rather than pictures. Because of its link to genuinely desirable ends, appreciation of this kind of functional beauty is more likely to enhance wellbeing than our commonplace conception. Additionally, it may, in turn, lead one to become more suspicious of images of Instagram-type bodies, which, more often than not, are not only digitally

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<sup>7</sup> Many might be reluctant to describe experiences of functional beauty as of beauty, or even as aesthetic. This is probably another case where our commonplace conception of beauty has influenced our language and conceptual categories. Still, insofar as we take pleasure in the wellformedness of things for their function, then we are, *ipso facto*, experiencing functional beauty.



manipulated but, when it comes to the bodies underneath the image, tend to be products of either unhealthy regimens or shortcuts to the appearance of fitness, including supplements and assorted potions, that may even compromise wellformedness.

This hypothesis receives some empirical support from a recent review of relevant literature by Alleva and Tylka, who conclude that ‘body functionality [is] a valuable construct with respect to positive body image and well-being, particularly when individuals appreciate what their bodies can do and conceptualise their body functionality holistically’ (2021, p. 149). The hypothesis also enjoy some indirect support from studies by evolutionary psychologist Viren Swami, which show that spending time in nature can be beneficial for mental health generally, but also specifically by improving negative body image. Part of the explanation Swami gives for this is that ‘being in nature ... shifts attention away from what the body looks like to what the body can do’ (2020, p. 5). In other words, as per our functional beauty hypothesis, essentially placing subjects in positions where the body’s wellformedness for its function can be appreciated. Another explanation Swami offers also links to functional beauty. He says that exposure to nature may promote a feeling of connectedness to nature which may in turn help ‘develop greater respect and appreciation for our bodies as part of a wider ecosystem requiring protection’ (ibid.: 6).

Secondly, functional beauty allows us to appreciate a kind of physical beauty that depends on the physical expression of a person’s character or personality through their body. This is because the effective expression of such inner states draws our attention to something that human bodies are particularly well designed to do, namely embodying and communicating certain psychological states and traits. To the extent that these, in turn, are desirable (in which case they themselves can be beautiful, as we will see presently), this amounts to a pleasing wellformedness for function that goes beyond current beauty norms. This phenomenon partly explains why we love spending time with our friends, and why it is hard to find them ugly even if they would be classified as such by commonplace standards (Nehamas, 2007; Protasi, 2017).

Thirdly, a sensitivity to and taste for functional beauty opens us up to moral beauty and other forms of inner beauty. Moral beauty is a kind of beauty of character, specifically the beauty of character traits like honesty, fairness, and kindness, in short, the moral virtues (Gaut, 2007, pp. 114–132; Paris, 2017; 2018a; 2020; Doran 2021; 2022). To be morally beautiful is to have a good moral character and to have such character is to be beautiful in one way. Moral beauty is arguably a subset of functional beauty because virtues can be appreciated as well formed psychological—cognitive, affective, and behavioural—dispositions designed to realise certain functions or ends—namely, what we might call the humanly good, or human flourishing (Paris, 2020; cf. Paris, 2018a). Hence, a taste for functional beauty allows us to appreciate moral beauty. And while philosophers have been largely ignoring moral beauty, themselves prey to commonplace conceptions of beauty and taste, psychologists have argued, in line with my suggestions, that the appreciation of moral beauty leads to a ‘decrease in anxiety and depression and improved interpersonal functioning’ (Diessner 2019, p. 189; cf. Paris, 2021).

Jointly, the foregoing variants of functional beauty serve complicate the picture of human beauty significantly, revealing further dimensions of both physical and non-physical beauty, based on the genuine possession and manifestation of desirable qualities and ends like health, vitality, etc.; a conception of physical beauty inflected by (knowledge and understanding of) an individual’s inner traits; and a form of inner, intelligible beauty. Hence, a sensitivity to and taste for functional beauty opens one up to rich varieties of beauty, indicating that many more individuals should be appreciated, and appreciate themselves, for their beauty, and in many more ways. Crucially, the beauty it points to is both largely attainable, albeit to different degrees, and in line with efforts to better oneself in ways we should all think are important, and that we already know contribute to our wellbeing.

The second way in which a taste for functional beauty may enhance wellbeing, is by opening us up to a range of beauties that we can appreciate and that may be hard to notice under the current, commonplace conception of beauty. This is because functional beauty can be found in virtually anything that can be said to have a function, or be the product of design. So everyone, regardless of whether their interests are in the arts, running, playing video games, just hanging out, or other

purposeful objects or activities, will find something to appreciate for its functional beauty, provided they are also adequately sensitive to values. This will result in a decreased focus on our own bodies and those of others, and a greater focus on other aspects of our surroundings.

Moreover, since functional beauty is not strictly visual, its appreciation will, in turn, attune us to engaging with more cognitively-laden forms of beauty across many domains. From works of art, architecture, and nature, to sports moves, works of design, and thoughts and ideas, a taste for functional beauty opens up multiple levels of appreciation, whilst being guided by objective qualities and genuine values. This, in turn, can make our appreciation of beauty at once more meaningful and more valuable, again, promising enhanced wellbeing.

Still, one might worry that the kinds of functional beauty discussed above are not beauties that we can appreciate in just anyone or anything and certainly not beauties that are appreciable purely in virtue of looking at photographs of people. However, as also indicated above, one potential consequence of appreciating functional beauty is increased suspicion of merely visual forms of physical beauty. Relatedly, a taste for functional beauty and the various ways in which it can manifest itself may complement, and thereby plausibly result in decreased appreciation of, forms of beauty that are dependent on current beauty norms, or even purely perceptual beauty in general. This is something that should be familiar to many of us from artistic appreciation. Although we always retain a visual interest in the beauty of art, suitably educated and experienced appreciators of visual art will find most beautiful art that is not just visually pleasing, or indeed that may not be visually pleasing at all on the surface, but which possesses beauty in virtue of its subject matter, the skill and sensitivities of the artist that are expressed in the handling of it, and so on (cf. Nehamas, 2007; Paris, 2019). This is why it is plausible to claim that Rembrandt's late self-portraits—which tend to be visually rough but whose every brushstroke is permeated by a profound self-understanding hewn out of a hard-won humility—are more beautiful than portraits by Ingres or Bougureau, whose attractions are mainly visual.<sup>8</sup>

Once again, available evidence points to interactions between the effects of appreciating beauty in multiple domains and an increase in wellbeing (Martínez-Martí et al., 2016). Evidence supports this at least with respect to appreciating natural beauty, but there is also some evidence that supports that the trait of appreciating beauty more generally, including physical beauty (though presumably not physical human beauty construed under current norms), moral beauty, as well as other forms of inner beauty is associated with greater wellbeing. For instance, a recent set of studies found that simple interventions designed to draw the attention of subjects—by asking them to think of beautiful things and consider why they find them beautiful—to non-superficially beautiful things, like morally good behaviour or nature and the environment, have positive effects on wellbeing, by producing an increase in happiness and a decrease in depressive symptoms at least one month after the intervention (Proyer et al., 2016).<sup>9</sup>

## 5. Taste, Functional Beauty, and Social Justice

Although arguably beauty has always been a source of discrimination, current beauty norms, partly because of their narrow focus on physical appearance, and their even narrower focus on specific physical qualities, are a source of social injustice, making such discrimination more prevalent, whilst weighing disproportionately on those who are already oppressed, such as women (Widdows, 2018), people of colour (Taylor, 2016), or differently-abled individuals (Irvin, 2017).

At first glance it may be difficult to see how developing a taste for functional beauty could contribute to social justice. One might even worry that functional beauty risks promoting ableism. But this would be too quick. It is generally plausible that beauty, health, and physical excellence are linked and that this

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<sup>8</sup> Actually, Bougureau's are more readily described as kitsch, but one may still recognise a visual seductiveness, or at least an attempt at such, which would also explain his contemporary popularity.

<sup>9</sup> While such studies do not mention functional beauty, they couch their questionnaires and discussions in explicitly aesthetic terms, while talk of appreciating, for instance, 'non-moral excellence', strongly point to features inherent and experiences grounded in the appreciation of functional beauty.

link has been forged deep within our evolutionary history, thus having a powerful hold over us. Functional beauty simply develops this aspect of our taste in line with genuine health and physical fitness, rather than its mere appearance. But it does not mean that ableism follows from this picture. There are two reasons for this. First, functional beauty allows us to appreciate disabled bodies too, and does so more than current beauty norms which are based on a specific blueprint. This is because most disabled bodies are able to function and are wonderfully adaptive to the challenges posed or options afforded by their particular disability (cf. Alleva & Tylka, 2021, p. 150). Importantly, they are often able to express their possessor's personality and to be used for communicative purposes. All of these are appreciable through a taste for functional beauty. Second, as mentioned in the previous section, functional beauty opens up a range of ways of being humanly beautiful that go beyond possessing health and being physically fit. It thus offers a much more comprehensive conception of human beauty that depends on one's full humanity rather than one's mere body.

This last remark points to a form of beauty that can plausibly be appreciated through the lens of functional beauty but that is often missed. This is the possibility of beauty in humanity itself, as it is expressed and can be appreciated in virtually every human being who is not a moral monster. Humanity is not a particular trait or excellence, but is, essentially, a fact about every one of us that comprises a physiology and psychology that hold a potentiality for good (though also for evil) and that we can recognise and appreciate in most of those around us. This is important to bear in mind because it can, to some extent, be recalled when meeting strangers, and dampen biases that someone falling short of other, particularly current commonplace physical beauty standards, may trigger. It is also important because it is one respect in which we are all beautiful in much the same way (cf. Protasi, 2017; Wolf, 1990). And it is this, I think, that 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, if I'm right, to recognise a kind of beauty (cf. Okoro, 2019).

Besides the foregoing, I think that the elements of functional beauty making it conducive to wellbeing can also, *mutatis mutandis*, contribute to combatting social injustices perpetuated by current beauty norms and taste. Recognition of various forms of human beauty, including inner beauty, which depends on ends like the humanly good, partly consisting, as it does, in different individuals' wellformedness to realise such ends, brings beauty in line with other values and places all human beings on an equal, or at least unbiased, footing.

Here too, the evidence concurs, pointing to correlations between generally appreciating beauty and scoring more highly on morally-relevant personality measures, like pro-sociality, agreeableness, and reduced neuroticism (Martínez-Martí et al., 2016). Moreover, albeit limited, relevant evidence suggests that a sensitivity to moral beauty in particular is linked to a number of morally desirable behaviours and attitudes, which, include 'increased cooperative behavior', 'reduction in prejudice against race or sexual orientation', 'increased belief in life as meaningful and in the benevolence of others', 'increase [in] positive affect and prosociality (affiliation and compassionate goals) and decrease [in] self-image goals' (Diessner, 2019, p. 189).

## **6. Taste, Functional Beauty, and the Environment**

Finally, we turn to functional beauty's enhancement of our relationship to the natural world. What applies to human beauty will, to some extent, also apply to the beauty of the natural world. Being able to see more kinds of beauty and beauty in more kinds of natural objects will, presumably, reduce our tendencies to favour certain species or habitats over others irrespective of their ecological value, whilst putting a brake on the dominance and pervasiveness of a single dominant standard (or set thereof) (cf. Saito 2007, pp. 69-96).

But arguably a taste for functional beauty in nature can also spur an ecological agenda. Consider some of the issues mentioned earlier. We have seen that beauty can be a powerful motivator due to its emotional hold over us, so that it leads to certain undesirable results, for instance, calls for the preservation and protection of certain species to the detriment of others, but also to decisions to do or

not to do certain things, such as not going ahead with a windfarm because it is thought that it would ruin the landscape and constitute an ‘eyesore’ (Guardian 2022).<sup>10</sup>

A recognition and appreciation of functional beauty could help alleviate some of these undesirable effects of beauty judgements based on narrow, visual norms.<sup>11</sup> Consider an example mentioned earlier, that of the earthworm. A slimy, wriggly, brown-red tubelike animal, it seems like a textbook argument for the existence of ugly nature. And yet, once we consider how well designed it is for its function, and how important its function is for a healthy natural world, then we might just begin to see it differently. All of its features that seem to make it visually ugly are evidence of how effectively this creature can discharge its functions, which in turn contribute to good soil structure and fertility, important for the life and health of a great variety of other plants and animals. Seeing it thus, one’s experience may undergo a radical transformation, allowing them to appreciate a kind of beauty, previously unavailable to them.

It is not a coincidence that beauty and ugliness are commonly appreciated by naturalists. David Attenborough, for instance, in the television programme *A Life on Our Planet* (2020), contrasts the seeming visual beauty of a bleached coral reef resulting from global warming, with its ugly reality, when he notes that the ‘when you first see it you think that perhaps it is beautiful, and suddenly you realise it’s tragic, because what you’re looking at is skeletons, skeletons of dead creatures. ... the reef turns from wonderland to wasteland’. By contrast, as in the earthworm example given above, seemingly visually ugly creatures can be aesthetically appreciated once we understand how they are designed to discharge their function. Richard Dawkins concurs, when he remarks of bats that ‘[t]heir faces are often distorted into gargoyle shapes that appear hideous to us until we see them for what they are, exquisitely fashioned instruments for beaming ultrasound in desired directions’ (2006, p. 24; Parsons & Carlson, 2008, pp. 123–124). Appreciating the functional beauty of seemingly ugly creatures, then, may counteract the preference for the cute and cuddly in efforts for preservation and protection, while greater sensitivity to the functional ugliness of nature’s suffering through global warming may motivate greater concern and spur more to action.

As for the wind turbines and farms, similar considerations apply. Assuming that they are one of, if not our best bets for clean energy and for protecting the natural world,<sup>12</sup> we may begin to see them as well formed artefacts that do not mar the landscape but are welcomed by it, insofar as their function is, ultimately, the protection of natural landscapes, ecosystems, and the environment more generally, through counteracting our reliance on non-renewable energy and fossil fuels. Seen thus, they are efficient and intelligent designs for producing clean energy and ultimately—though no longer seen in terms of functional beauty—a symbol of a commitment and effort to prevent environmental disasters.

## 7. Concluding Thoughts: Taking Beauty and Taste Seriously

I have been arguing that while our current taste in, and conception of beauty leads to certain undesirable consequences, due to its narrowness, shallowness, and its being decoupled from other values, 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

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<sup>10</sup> Debates over the aesthetics of wind farms and wind turbines have been going on for over a decade now (e.g., Guardian, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> I don’t in fact think that all of our current aesthetic norms concerning the beauty of nature are narrowly visual. However, many are and these are unhelpfully placed at centre stage by our culture, with its general visual focus, which tends to single out striking animals or landscapes, rather than more subtly beautiful ones.

<sup>12</sup> This assumption is important. If it’s mistaken, then perhaps these structures are eyesores, after all (cf. Paris, 2018b). But it’s important to be clear about the level at which we disagree. If participants in relevant debates who think that wind turbines are eyesores agree that they are well formed for generating clean energy and prolonging the life of the planet, then they fail to appreciate their functional beauty. This can be either because they fail to appreciate their wellformedness, or because they do not genuinely take ecological interests to heart.

world. This is because it encourages the appreciation of beauty on multiple levels and across sensory modalities, whilst aligning it with other values.

Given that this article has advanced a hypothesis, informed by available evidence, but largely theoretical, it is essential that more research looks into the relationship between taste in beauty and our attitudes and behaviours in other domains. More specifically, we need more research on the relationship between appreciating functional beauty and its various subspecies, including moral beauty, environmental beauty, etc., and attitudes, behaviours, and decisions in domains like those discussed here, where we currently face challenges.

Now, suppose that my hypothesis does hold up to further scrutiny. What can we do to ensure that we live in a society with a healthy, positive outlook on beauty? First of all, we should acknowledge the existence of functional beauty, and of the possibility of distinctions in the quality of different tastes and conceptions of beauty. Second, we should encourage the development of a taste for functional beauty. To achieve anything like a widespread appreciation of functional beauty, we need to develop a social and cultural environment that encourages and supports the development of a taste in such beauty, partly by embodying it. This minimally requires that the notions of beauty and taste inform public policy, legislation, and education.

Relevant public policy that acknowledges the importance of functional beauty may include planning permission requirements for buildings, which specify that they need to be designed with a view to genuinely embodying respect the environment, the inhabitants of the relevant spaces, and the communities affected.

Relevant legislation can continue to aim to minimise the influence of social media and the use of manipulated photos across media, which shape the taste of both children and adults, and it can place greater restrictions on the so-called beauty industry, which, in many ways, acts to legitimise and propagate our current taste in beauty, while, as technology advances, making it increasingly inhuman and inaccessible.

Finally, when it comes to education, greater attention should be paid to beauty, and relevant principles instilled, through frank discussions of beauty in arts and humanities subjects like literature and art as well as sex education and other relevant subjects. These should aim to introduce students to the varieties of beauty in art and human beings, from moral beauty, to the beauty of language, personality-inflected faces and bodies, and so on. But also through incorporating aesthetic terminology and ideas in subjects that superficially seem non-aesthetic, like mathematics, science, or even PE, thereby introducing students to ideas like mathematical beauty, or the beauty of bodily functionality.

Whatever the precise programme for developing a collective taste for functional beauty and its subspecies, it is of the essence that beauty and taste feature regularly and explicitly in our thinking in the areas of wellbeing, social justice, and the environment, as well as other domains, and that their nature and role is further debated and elaborated.<sup>13</sup> This will only happen once we acknowledge the power and importance of beauty and taste and begin taking them seriously.

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