Which Beauty? What Taste?
Reflections on the Importance of the Philosophy of Beauty and Taste

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Abstract

In this paper I reflect on the importance of the traditional conceptual pair of beauty and taste. Despite recent proclamations within philosophy that beauty is making a comeback, the concept still provokes confusion. I trace such confusion in part to philosophers' increasingly thinking of beauty, in the so-called narrow, common-sense way, as an essentially shallow and thin concept. However, in stark contrast to most philosophers today, I observe that the notion of beauty in the narrow sense is the concept that allowed philosophers in the past—not unlike many laypersons today—to see beauty as linked to our most fundamental values, and so to speak of beauty of intellect, moral beauty, or the beauty of theorems, as well as artistic and natural beauty. And it is this understanding of beauty that was seen as a fundamental component of a flourishing life. Thus, to think of beauty as shallow and thin is thus not just undesirable, but evinces an impoverished outlook on both aesthetics and value more generally.

I begin by giving some background on beauty's alleged comeback in recent philosophy. I then proceed to note that in recent years this comeback has concentrated on aesthetic value rather than beauty, which is often dismissed as less important. I suggest that this is at least partly due to an association between, or a running together of, three distinctions: between narrow and a broad sense of beauty; between beauty as a thin and a thick concept; and between beauty that is easy, sensuous, and shallow on the one hand, and deep, profound, and meaningful, on the other. I argue that useful as these distinctions may be, they are unrelated to one another. Importantly, there is a distinct concept of beauty in the narrow sense that is both thick and not easy or shallow, that is inextricably tied to form, pleasure, and (non-aesthetic) value. However, whether or not an alleged instance of beauty, or indeed a person's or group's conceptions and experiences of beauty are easy and shallow or profound and meaningful, turns on another recently disparaged, yet central concept: taste. If we wish to better understand and promote the profound, meaningful, and enlightening varieties of beauty, then we should ensure that the conceptual pair of beauty and taste stand at the forefront of our philosophical enquiries.

Introduction

In this paper I reflect on the importance of the traditional conceptual pair of beauty and taste, with a particular sense or concept of beauty in mind, around which, I think, there is considerable confusion in recent philosophy despite proclamations to the effect that beauty is making a comeback. The concept I wish to focus on, or reorient debate towards, is one which, I think, was dominant from antiquity and well into the late eighteenth century. It is the concept that the ancient Greeks captured by the term 'kalon' and that eighteenth-century writers labelled 'beauty' without qualification, contrasting it with qualities like the sublime or tragic. This concept allowed philosophers to speak of the beauty of intellect, moral beauty, artistic and natural beauty, or the beauty of theorems.[1] It is also, I think, the ordinary sense of beauty used by non-philosophers, though our understanding or conception of that ordinary sense is rapidly, and perilously, narrowing.

I begin by giving some background on beauty's alleged comeback in recent philosophy. I then proceed to note that this comeback is often not really about beauty in the sense that interests me here, but about aesthetic value more broadly.[2] I discuss a number of distinctions that are frequently drawn, often implicitly, between a broad and a narrow sense of beauty, a thick and a thin concept of beauty, and beauty that is deep and meaningful or shallow and easy. These distinctions are often taken to map one onto another. However, seeing that they do not allows us to elude critiques of the notion of beauty and clear up some of the confusion that surrounds that notion. I argue that beauty is not itself deep or shallow, easy or difficult. Instead, it is taste that is good or bad, sophisticated or crude, etc. And yet beauty itself is a matter of pleasure in form as revelatory of deeper value. If I am right, then we should regard beauty and taste not only as central, but perhaps *the*, central concepts in aesthetics. Indeed, their neglect in much contemporary philosophy reflects not just an oversight of aestheticians, but an impoverished outlook on value among philosophers in general.

1. The Promised Restoration and the Distinction Between the Narrow and the Broad Sense of Beauty

Many have, over the last few decades, saluted a return to the central notion of aesthetics: beauty. Since the publication of Mothersill (1984) there have, it is true, appeared numerous articles and books whose titles contain the term 'beauty', and that purport to focus on that concept, including, to cite just some monographs: Scarry (1999), Danto (2003), Sartwell (2007), Nehamas (2007), Parsons and Carlson (2008), Scruton (2009), Lopes (2018) and Riggle (2023). Reading them, however, one would have thought that these are books on completely different concepts. Moreover, I suspect that many laypersons and even

[1] Though granted, 18th-century usage was sometimes ambiguous as was, at times, Greek usage, especially when the noun for beauty (*kallos*), rather than the adjective (*kalon*), was used (see Konstan 2015).
[2] Which, incidentally, may well be rather more polymorphous than most currently appear to think in the recent literature on such value.

philosophers from a few hundred years ago, would be puzzled by the notion of beauty found in many of the works that are credited with bringing beauty back.

There are, I think, at least two reasons for this. One is, in some ways, unsurprising, albeit very important when philosophising about beauty. Beauty, as Nehamas (2007) points out, is personal. This means that how one philosophically substantiates their account of beauty will likely be shaped by their preferences, experiences, and values. This is why, as Nehamas also vividly illustrates—though he too espouses a fairly personal outlook on beauty (inevitably, by his own lights)—there have been such contrasting accounts of beauty, from Plato's erotic ascent from the beauty of bodies to that of the Form of beauty, to Schopenhauer's ascetic shield from worldly drives. I will return to this point later.

The other reason for major differences between recent works on beauty is, paradoxically, that few of these works are actually about beauty! Let me clarify this. Philosophers often distinguish between a broad and a narrow sense of beauty.[3] Here's one take on it:

> There is no contradiction in saying that Bartók's score for *The Miraculous Mandarin* is harsh, rebarbative, even ugly, and at the same time praising the work as one of the triumphs of early modern music. Its aesthetic virtues are of a different order from those of Fauré's *Pavane*, which aims only to be exquisitely beautiful, and succeeds.
>
> Another way of putting the point is to distinguish two concepts of beauty. In [what we're calling the broad] sense 'beauty' means aesthetic success, in another [i.e., the narrow sense] … only a certain *kind* of aesthetic success. (Scruton 2009: 15-16)

While most philosophers before the twentieth century, as well as laypersons, usually[4] employ 'beauty' to refer to that quality which makes the *Pavane* so delightful to the listener, many contemporary philosophers employing 'beauty' to refer to that quality, or sets of qualities, that make *The Miraculous Mandarin* a musical triumph. This would neatly explain my suspicion that neither philosophers up to a century ago nor laypersons would recognise the 'beauty' that many contemporary philosophers discuss.

A number of considerations seem to support this point. In the first instance, the kinds of objects that most people describe as beautiful or with reference to which they use the term 'beauty' include things like people's faces and bodies, as well as the practices and products that they use to adorn or otherwise 'beautify' these; people's characters, often those of their friends or loved ones; objects or phenomena in nature, such as certain landscapes, or sunsets and sunrises; certain moments and experiences, such as a holiday or a first kiss; and, though less frequently, artworks (cf. Brielmann & Pelli 2021).

[3] I've written a short 'blog post' on this for Uppsala University's 2020 *Beautiful Summer* series, which can be found here: https://aestheticperceptioncognition.se/ideas/beauty-broad-narrow/.
[4] I say usually because 'beauty' is sometimes used in ways besides those discussed in this essay, including some that may be called non-aesthetic.

Another one is that the grounds on which people ascribe such qualities seem to be different. Doran, for instance, tells us that the beautiful, in the narrow sense[5] is associated with qualities like the smooth, small, and delicate (2022b). Likewise, both Doran (ibid.) and others think that beauty is ordinarily ascribed to objects partly, but crucially, in virtue of their eliciting certain feelings or emotions in the subject, which have been variously identified as *eros* in Plato, love in Nehamas and Sartwell, and ecstasy in Doran. Here, I prefer to leave the feeling elicited by the beautiful unspecified, and talk of pleasure, which I believe underlies all of the foregoing suggestions.

These considerations are reflected in the philosophical tradition that was preoccupied with beauty. The ancients identified beauty with formal qualities like symmetry, as well as wellformedness for function, and, like Plato (1989; cf. Nehamas 2007), saw these as delightful to apprehend and awakening of desire. Hume (e.g., 1987) associated beauty very closely with pleasure and good form, as did Kant (2001), Schopenhauer (1958), and Santayana (1955), albeit in significantly different ways.

By contrast, many of the contributions to the contemporary literature that allegedly are rekindling interest in beauty in fact deal with a different notion, namely aesthetic value in general. Lopes (2018) serves as an explicit example of this. He associates the narrow sense of beauty with practices of "beautification". What precisely he means by this is not clear, but I take it that the term normally refers either broadly to the practice of giving things an appealing or 'pretty' appearance. More narrowly, it also refers to practices linked to what Widdows (2018) calls the 'beauty ideal', which essentially have the same goal of making one's appearance appealing but according to specific norms, which, according to Widdows, are currently linked to firmness, smoothness, slimness, and youth, for women, and a broader set of criteria for men. Drawing on others who have recently contributed to beauty discourse, Lopes points out that such a sense of beauty is "shallow, easy, sensuous" (6), and associated with escapism and fantasy. It is this narrow understanding of 'beauty', Lopes thinks, that led to the marginalisation of the philosophy of beauty. But, he reassures us, beautification "happens, but only sometimes, and it is inevitable only if there is no beauty in the broad sense" (6). Thus, Lopes proceeds to reassure us that his concern will be the "okay kind of beauty" (5), viz., "aesthetic value" (1) in general.

Perhaps I am overstating the case, for Lopes may perhaps still be discussing beauty in the narrow sense, in a way, but simply broadening its conception to encompass more than simply the sensuous, easy, and shallow.[6] After all, he gives examples of mathematical beauty to show that beauty needn't be restricted to the easy, sensuous, etc. But it is far from clear to me that this is Lopes' intention. For while one of Lopes' chosen examples of beauty—the mathematical beauty of the proof of Euler's identity theorem that

[5] In fact, I should say one of its narrow senses, since Doran thinks that there may be more than one sense at play under the so-called narrow sense (see 2022b; forthcoming). I am not sure about this, but won't discuss this issue here.

[6] He certainly is in the sense that beauty in the broad sense includes the narrow sense. But analysing these different things are, I take it, different projects.

mathematicians have reported as having formal features akin to those of beautiful poetry (c.f. Hardy 1992)—does plausibly fall under beauty in the narrow sense, other examples of his do. For instance, Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas* is a harrowing, dark, and in some ways ugly painting. 'Beautiful', then is not a term I would use to describe this particular work (save for its composition), nor is it the one that Lopes would, presumably, given that he remarks that we "must work hard to overcome our immediate reaction [based on its being "sickening to look at, utterly gut-wrenching"] ... The painting scarcely brings sensuous pleasure." (6) Except that he does: he says that it has a 'deeper beauty'. I find this deeply confusing, but terminology aside, Lopes, when speaking of beauty, clearly has in mind something else from what I suggested ordinary people and philosophers in the tradition have called 'beauty'. Lopes' concern is with aesthetic value in general, and while beauty in the narrow sense presumably falls under it (or at least they considerably intersect[7]), it most plausibly requires a different analysis. Which of these is primary, more fundamental, or more enlightening of aesthetic theory in general is, I think, something to be decided after we have satisfactory analyses of both.[8]

So far, I hope to have made somewhat clear the distinction between the narrow and the broad sense of beauty and to have shown that, contrary to appearances, we are still very much in the grips of a phobia of beauty in the narrow sense—henceforth the only sense in which I will use the term 'beauty' without qualification.

Now, the gentlest probing reveals that the distinction between the narrow and the broad sense of beauty does not correspond to Lopes' one between "easy, shallow, sensuous" and "okay" kinds of beauty (2018: 5). For there are many examples of beauty in the narrow sense that are not easy, shallow, or sensuous. The proof of Euler's identity is plausibly beautiful in the narrow sense, but hardly easy, shallow, or sensuous. The same can be inferred from looking at the philosophical tradition, and especially the weight accorded beauty and the various forms of beauty discussed by philosophers, many of whom deemed it at the centre of the good life. Plato's claim in the *Symposium* that human life is only worth living if it features contemplation of the beautiful (which, I note, is suspiciously close to his other famous claim, attributed to Socrates, that the "unexamined life is not worth living for human beings"), and such varieties as moral, mathematical, intellectual, natural, and artistic beauty that appear in writings by the likes of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith, hardly point to a quality that is shallow, easy, sensuous, albeit inherently linked to pleasure in apprehension. By contrast, the humour in *Jackass* and the bravado (if one can call it that) of a Tarantino film are shallow, easy, and sensuous—and whatever such works' aesthetic value, beautiful they are not. Indeed, in a sense, not even the beauty exemplified

[7] This qualification is intended to allow that perhaps beauty in the narrow sense is only partly an aesthetic notion, in the sense that Doran (2022a) claims that ugliness—plausibly the contrary of beauty—is only partly aesthetic.

[8] Though it may be worth mentioning here that I am sceptical that a satisfactory and adequately substantive account of 'aesthetic value' is forthcoming, as I think it too amorphous a notion to substantiate, especially in advance of offering a unifying account of the 'aesthetic'. Lopes, by the way, does not provide such a theory either. He distinguishes between two questions concerning aesthetic value, one which asks what makes such value *value*, and another which asks what makes it *aesthetic*, and chooses to focus on the former.

by current beauty norms is purely shallow and sensuous, easy and escapist—certainly not in the consciousness of those who pursue it as well as in our culture's group consciousness.[9] Again, Widdows' (2018) analysis is instructive here, as she explains how the beauty ideal has assumed the shape of an ethical ideal, which reveals much about those who strive to emulate it—indeed, it resides deep in their personal identities—and for whom its pursuit provides meaning, structure, and tangible payoffs. This, if anything, suggests that tying the distinction between beauty and aesthetic value to that between the easy, sensuous, and shallow on the one hand and the deep, meaningful, profound, on the other, is too simplistic. And yet, as I hope section 1 made clear, these are often run together.

2. Narrow Beauty, But Thin or Thick?

To the above argument it may be objected that I am myself slipping into a broader notion of beauty than the narrow one. After all, the narrow sense of beauty is really just about sensory pleasure and liking. In this respect, it is a rather thin concept. The notion of thin concepts, as opposed to thick ones comes from Williams (1985), who used it to distinguish between purely evaluative concepts, like 'good', which do not contain a descriptive dimension, and are in that respect 'thin', and concepts like 'courageous' that do possess such a dimension, and are thereby 'thick'. Beauty's thinness—allegedly consisting in the fact that, in calling something 'beautiful', all one is saying is that they like something—has been taken as evidence of its shallowness and insubstantiality, and as a reason to look to alternative notions in theorising—notably, Tolstoy (1996) and Bell (1927) both opted for 'art' on similar grounds, which also underlie Austin's ill-judged and ill-heeded call to "forget … about the beautiful, and get down instead to the dainty and the dumpy" (1956: 9).

However, it is not the case that beauty—or at least that all concepts or senses of 'beauty'[10]—is a thin concept. In the first place, it should be clear that between beauty and aesthetic value, there is an important sense in which aesthetic value is the thinner notion, insofar as it tells us nothing whatsoever about the object. Even if all that 'beauty' tells us is that the object of which it is predicated pleases, it still seems more informative than aesthetic value, if, as is plausible, it's thereby taken to indicate a relational property. This, especially if, as some have thought, this type of pleasure can be further specified (e.g., Nehamas 2007; Doran 2022b), suggests that the notion is thicker. Indeed, as we've already seen, if we go back far enough, beauty was as thick as it gets, associated with qualities like order, proportion, and symmetry, or wellformedness for function. So neither the distinction between the broad and the narrow sense of beauty or the thick and the thin senses of beauty offers good reason to disparage beauty as shallow, easy, or sensuous.

[9] Granted that here things too are more complicated than space allows me to acknowledge, and people's psychology is often deeply torn by their pursuit of such beauty. But in this respect, too, my discussion in this essay, as well as my recent discussion in (2022), should provide food for thought.

[10] This qualification is meant to accommodate the view that there may be more than one concept of beauty (e.g., Doran 2022b; forthcoming). I do not have the space here to discuss this, but my view is that beauty is one, though it comprises three species (see my [manuscript in preparation—please email me if you would like a copy, which should be available from March 2024]).

But if beauty is, in fact, a thick concept—it is, as we saw, not just aesthetic success, but aesthetic success of a specific sort—might it be its content that is the culprit? In other words, might it be part of beauty's nature that renders it sensuous, easy, shallow, an escape route from the world's harsh reality?

If we consult the work of past philosophers, as above, it hardly seems so: beauty is seen as a cornerstone of the good life (Plato 1989); a consoling mode of apprehending the true nature of the world (Schopenhauer 1956; Scruton 2009); an expression of our species being (Marx 2000); a route to moral goodness (Hume 1975); a pathway to truth and justice (Scarry 1999); the list could go on. Hardly what we expect from something shallow, sensuous, or easy. And lest it appear that I am again treading on ambiguities between beauty and aesthetic value, I should point out that of those cited, it is at least clear that Scarry and Scruton are discussing beauty, being aware of the difference between it and aesthetic value more broadly, even if, mistakenly in my view, one thinks that the others do not.

3. Which Beauty?

But perhaps this seems suspiciously like an appeal to authority. To avoid this charge, it may therefore be useful to have a specific account of beauty at hand. Here, of course, is where things tend to get tricky, for defining beauty is a notoriously difficult to task. Yet there are at least some considerations that we can lean on, and that lead to an account of beauty that I've defended elsewhere (Paris 2020) and which, I think, should do the trick for our purposes here.

Well, we have already come across a couple of suggestions in passing, both of which, I think, should be taken on board. First, there is a long-standing and surprisingly persistent intuition linking beauty with the concept of form. This is so not least because many of beauty's subspecies—the harmonious, the proportionately balanced, that which possesses unity among its complex parts or uniformity amidst variety—are all formal qualities. It may seem that this is to narrow beauty unnecessarily, but this is only because our contemporary accounts of form are linked to the modern doctrine of formalism which restricts the domain of the aesthetic to the distally perceptible. However, as I've argued elsewhere (Paris 2017; 2023), this doctrine is mistaken, and the concept of form is far broader and more encompassing than that doctrine allows. Indeed, form may well delineate the aesthetic realm (ibid.).

Second, beauty elicits pleasure. This is a platitude (Scruton 2009: 1). Ordinarily, and barring cases where the appreciator is suffering from some form of anhedonia, to experience something as beautiful is, *ceteris paribus* and *inter alia*, to take pleasure in experiencing the object.

Most accounts of beauty have focused more on one or another of these dimensions, hence most tend to be classifiable into either more object- or subject- focused accounts, or more response- dependent or independent. It is not the purpose of this paper to arbitrate between

these accounts, except to say that, to the extent that any account emphasises either of these dimensions, it is likely to leave something important out. For beauty is not only an aesthetic property, but also the name of an experience, occasioned by a relation between certain features of the object and certain features of a subject, so that both objective and subjective accounts will likely miss something out: namely, on the one hand, what it is about the subject that makes such-and-such features the occasion of pleasure, or, on the other, what kind of features occasion the specific kind of pleasure and why it is such-and-such qualities that enable a subject to track beauty. Hence my preference for hybrid theories, like that of functional beauty I outline shortly.

Third, beauty is inextricably linked to so-called non-aesthetic values, notably ethical, epistemic, and perhaps prudential value: hence our tradition has identified such varieties of beauty as moral beauty (e.g., Shaftesbury 2001; Hume 1975; Doran 2021; 2022; Gaut 2007; Paris 2017; 2018; 2020), the beauty of theorems or proofs (e.g., Hutcheson 2004) and the beauty of certain human qualities or relations, like friendliness, cheerfulness, etc. (e.g. Hume 1975). While remarkably well-established, this is currently probably the most controversial and difficult aspect of beauty, as well as a likely source of confusion about it. It is a source of confusion because philosophers are prone to assume that the fact that people speak of beauty when confronted with objects somehow evincing moral, epistemic, etc. value, they are using 'beauty' confusedly or metaphorically; or they are using beauty rather thinly, by way of expressing their approval. This is beginning to change, however, with research suggesting that mathematical beauty, for instance, can be at least partly traced to formal qualities and that similar considerations apply to moral beauty (Paris 2017; 2020).[11]

This threefold structure of beauty in the narrow sense, and how it distinguishes it from the broad sense, can be nicely illustrated through the example of functional beauty. In their book on functional beauty, Parsons and Carlson (2008) analyse functional beauty as basically an object's appearing well-formed for its function. However, they also, following a tradition that goes back to Plato (1983) suggest a distinction between their own version of functional beauty, which allows that things like torture instruments, weapons of mass destruction, etc. can be functionally beautiful, and another version, on which they can't. I have used similar counterexamples to argue for the latter version of functional beauty, tracing the difference between the two versions to pleasure: it is difficult to imagine taking pleasure in a torture instrument's wellformedness for function if we are, in fact, seriously contemplating the function and are morally sensitive individuals. On this account of functional beauty, something is functionally beautiful to the extent that it pleases most competent appreciators (where competence encompasses moral, epistemic, etc. dimensions) insofar as it is, in fact, well-formed for its function.

The three elements of beauty in the narrow-yet-thick sense that I favour, are all present in my hybrid account of functional beauty: form plays a crucial role in the guise of

[11] One reason why this view is so controversial is presumably due to the lack of plausible theories of beauty that are capable of making good sense of the link between beauty and goodness, truth, etc.

wellformedness for function; pleasure (or the object's disposition to elicit it) in such wellformedness is necessary; and a link to value is implied by the relevant form of competence required, and the fact that what most likely differentiates between those who do and those who don't take pleasure in torture instruments' wellformedness for function is, in this case at least, a sensitivity to moral value. In this respect, I consider my account of functional beauty to be a good example of a species of beauty in the narrow-yet-thick sense. By contrast, if Parsons and Carlson's account is a *bona fide* account of an aesthetic property, then it is of beauty in the broad sense, viz., of function-related aesthetic value in general.

Based on these brief reflections, I cannot see anything about beauty as such that gives reason to abandon it in favour of the dainty and the dumpy, on the one hand, or aesthetic value, on the other. Why, then, is beauty still neglected and disparaged, despite a modest comeback? Lorand suggests the following, *inter alia*: beauty is an intimidatingly difficult concept to analyse, let alone define (2007). But that can't be all: philosophers normally enjoy difficult, even futile, theoretical pursuits. Another reason seems to me beauty's intimate link to pleasure. For this makes beauty an unattractively messy concept for philosophers, who are often wary of the contingency and imperfection of features calling for psychological analysis (cf., e.g., Lopes 2018; Carroll 2022). Another possibility, which I think likely, is that the focus on the distinctions discussed above has obscured the nature of beauty and led to a tendency to caricature it. This has, I suspect, been compacted by and reinforced by certain features of our culture (both within philosophy and in the wider sense) that have led to a shared taste in forms of beauty that arguably are, indeed, sensuous, shallow, easy, and that often are promoted as means of distraction and escape from reality, notably the insistence that beauty is a feature linked to the strictly distally perceptible, and that it is independent of interests, functions, purposes, etc. (cf. my 2022; 2023).

Even in our culture, however, where beauty may seem narrow, oculocentric, escapist, and superficial, we should be careful not to confuse a specific *conception*, a given *example*, *vision*, or *norm* of beauty, with beauty *tout court*. After all, in the first place, regardless of how aesthetically impoverished or infelicitous such a conception appears to us, it nonetheless is taken to provide meaning, inform choices, and structure the motivations of those enchanted by it (Widdows 2018), and it is important to understand why this is so. In the second place, just because this is largely what we might equate with beauty today, it does not mean that we are correct to do so—after all, presumably those, like Higgins (2000), who think that what we take to be beauty today is, in fact, kitsch, would beg to differ. Nor is it the case that if we grant that our culture's conception of beauty is *bona fine*, must we suppose either that it exhausts beauty or—assuming, as we should, that beauty is a matter of degrees possibly even of different qualitative orders—that it is of a high order.

These points bring me to the other importantly neglected concept, which has traditionally been paired with beauty, namely that of taste.

4. What Taste?

My view is that beauty is the central concept in aesthetics, and the one most relevant to that of the good life. Part of the reason why I think this is that beauty, for psychological reasons we have yet to fully grasp, aligns our affective or aesthetic life with what lies at the core of our being. To that extent it informs nearly all aspects of our evaluative outlook, which means that if we are to make substantial changes to that outlook, be it in philosophy or real life, then it is beauty—or, more correctly, taste—that we need to focus on. I think that we ignore this concept at our peril.

According to my arguments so far, there's no reason to think of beauty as either shallow, sensuous, and easy, or thin. Indeed, this is especially so if I'm right that beauty fits a tripartite schema—comprising a network of between form, pleasure, and (non-aesthetic) value. My account of functional beauty has further bolstered this suggestion by providing a concrete example of a species of beauty that is both narrow and thick, to the extent that it fits the said schema and contains a descriptive component, and is thus far from being sensuous, easy, etc. These considerations also go some way towards explaining why the concept of beauty has historically been linked to the notion of taste. For taste itself is a complex concept that denotes a sensibility or disposition to aptly identify and take pleasure in beautiful objects.

This should not come as a surprise to anyone who has thought seriously about beauty in the relevant sense. For, as Nehamas puts it,[12] when we find an object beautiful, we feel that it is deeply valuable, though we may know not how. It is natural, indeed, appropriate for what we find beautiful to elicit such an experience. This analysis reveals that Widdows' view whereby beauty has become an ethical ideal is not, in fact, so surprising after all: to call beauty an ethical ideal is precisely to say that it involves this experiential kind of intrinsic valuing that Widdows describes, but this, if I'm right, is just what it is to find something beautiful. What Widdows has revealed is that what has assumed this place in our day and age is a remarkably visual, virtual, and narrow ideal that is wreaking havoc on our self-esteem, bodily health, and even interpersonal relations (ibid.). But that this is so, as well as the ways to address its deleterious effects, is not a question to be settled by an analysis of beauty alone, but by an analysis of beauty and taste.

And yet little work is done on taste today, and there are some who are outright sceptical about its relevance in our subdiscipline.[13] Criticising Hume's account of taste, Carroll tells us that Hume is conflating liking and assessing when he identifies the eponymous standard with the joint verdict of true judges, viz., with what pleases true judges. For, he thinks,

[12] Nehamas sometimes seems to discuss the narrow sense of beauty, while at others he seems to focus on the broad sense. However, given his analysis of beauty as linked to love, let alone pleasure, and judging both by his examples of beauty, and of examples that he seems to think would not qualify as beauty, he ultimately seems concerned with the narrow sense.

[13] There are, as ever, notable exceptions, not all of which explicitly concern themselves with taste, but that in effect do so. For instance: Lopes (2008); Schellekens (2009); Kieran (2010); Eaton (2016).

what we find pleasing, what we like, and what we judge good aesthetically, are distinct. But this is precisely to revert to a sense of beauty as aesthetic value, something that can perhaps be calmly judged and remarked upon. This is a sense of beauty that philosophers of the eighteenth century and before it had little time for, perhaps because it did not matter in the ways that beauty matters.

Carroll would beg to differ. He writes that it is possible for a good critic (or true judge) to "know that ***Far From Denmark*** is good of its kind. … see the relation of its parts to its purpose, and … understand its relation to the intellectual and artistic climate of its time. [One who] can explain its goodness to others, and … can talk about its strengths with balletomanes during intermissions" (1984: 187). But to prefer to "stay home and read Stephen King" (ibid.). This is because, according to Carroll, "[t]here is no necessary connection between liking a work of art and judging it to be good" (ibid.). On similar grounds, Carroll recently called on philosophers to "forget taste", arguing not just that taste is no longer relevant, but that it should never have been thought relevant (2022).

Contra Carroll, it seems to me that, necessary or not, there *is* a connection between liking and assessing. Indeed, I think that the presence of such a connection between finding an artwork beautiful (if not generally aesthetically valuable) and taking pleasure in it and liking it indicates a healthy inner evaluative outlook. In other words, finding something beautiful and finding it good in certain respects may not be necessary, but it is good: it is a component of virtue.

Consider an analogy. Suppose that someone knows that infidelity is wrong, can explain to us all the reasons for it, but would rather commit it than not. Are we to say that this person is a good moral judge? Perhaps this depends on verbal disputes about what constitutes good moral judgement. But suppose we speak of taste, could we reasonably hold this person to have good moral taste? Or, to put it differently, would you put your trust, morally, in that person? Would you want to be that person's partner? I think not. By contrast, Carroll, appears to think that someone can be a tasteful person who may not find the good attractive, preferring, say, to indulge in poorer artworks despite realising that they are thus poorer. But why would one put one's trust in a critic who praises work **X** but enjoys work **Y** instead? Why should we trust their judgement of beauty if it fails to resonate with their inner life?

While a lack of necessary connections makes it easy for a philosopher to draw the distinctions and make the arguments that have become prevalent over the course of the last century, if the philosopher is someone engaged in the philosophy of value, the question concerns not whether **X** and **Y** are analytically connected, but whether a virtuous, tasteful, or otherwise competent person's psychology and evaluative outlook should aim at such a connection. It is a question of character, itself—if Aristotle and Hume are to be trusted on

this—largely a matter of taste.[14] Now, of course, it is eminently plausible that the ability to judge something good—or, for our purposes, beautiful—without liking may be closer to virtue than the corresponding inability; but the alignment between judging it to be beautiful and liking it is even closer.

5. Taste in Beauty and the Good Life

Why, though, should we care about cultivating good taste, let alone understanding beauty and taste better?[15] As suggested above and as I recently argued elsewhere (see my 2022), my account of functional beauty offers an important way of aligning non-aesthetic values with beauty. There, I also drew on research in psychology to show that a taste for such beauty, and its appreciation, appears to positively affect people's moral and environmental outlooks, whilst enhancing their wellbeing.

In light of this, I think that it is crucial that we focus on the basic conceptual pairing of beauty and taste, and that we are clear what concept of beauty it is that we are focussing on, because in failing to do so, we risk missing forest for the trees. For it is beauty that is fundamental to living a good and happy life, that allows us to develop fully and appreciate ours and others' humanity, and that is behind some of the most profound and enduring experiences, relationships, and life-defining decisions.

Think about it: can there be a happy, flourishing life devoid of appreciating Picasso's *Guernica* and Bela Tarr's *Satantango*? Or without appreciating complex coffee or haute cuisine? In other words, can one live a good life devoid of appreciating non-narrow-yet-thick varieties of beauty in the broad sense? Of course there can! By contrast, it strikes me as far less plausible that a life without appreciating any beauty in the narrow-yet-thick sense—which consists at least partly in taking pleasure—in oneself (including one's body and thoughts, the fineness of the products of one's labour), in nature, or the kindness, camaraderie, and indeed the looks, gestures, and expressions of friends or partners, or in art, is one worth living for beings like ourselves. This, again, suggests that beauty holds a special place among aesthetic concepts and properties.

It is telling, in this regard, that when people eulogise over a lost loved one, it is the word 'beautiful' that they reach for and it is through beauty that they seek to pay their final dues—Nick Cave's *Ghosteen* is a remarkable example of this phenomenon, clearly being a musical eulogy for Cave's dead son. Such consolation and praise need not be shallow or empty—but of course it can be; again, such questions are questions of taste. In this sense beauty is the aesthetic lifeblood—without it, other aesthetic values themselves grow dim.

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[14] This may be a controversial claim that I cannot defend here, but I take it that this is the point of Hume's talk of moral taste and of his account of virtue and vice as forms of beauty. And it is also how I read Aristotle's view of the importance of pleasure in virtue as well as his claim that the right action or response in a situation is a matter to be settled by *aesthesis*.

[15] This, Levinson (2002) thinks, is the real problem with taste-based accounts like Hume's. My answer is very different from, but not necessarily inconsistent with, his.

I've already suggested partly why I think this is: among concepts in philosophical aesthetics, beauty is the one most entwined with value in general.

6. Concluding Remarks

I have suggested that, notwithstanding claims to the contrary, beauty remains somewhat taboo in contemporary aesthetics. I suggested that part of the reason may be that beauty in the narrow sense is taken to be either thin or sensuous, shallow, and easy, or both, which in turn may stem from the prevalence of and confusion between a specific conception of beauty that is a symptom of our time, with beauty in general. I have sought to argue that this is a mistake and that the concept of beauty features centrally in people's lives and experiences, and has been at the forefront of philosophising about beauty at least since Pythagoras. When it comes to conceptions or instances of beauty, however, there are distinctions in value. And it does seem right that the shallow and easy varieties of beauty are not to be preferred. But this point concerns taste, another concept that, I have suggested, we have been neglecting.

Notwithstanding quietism about beauty in aesthetics, it is a testament to the power of that quality that many of the great scientists of our time like Carlo Rovelli, Frank Wilczek, and Richard Dawkins; many of the great moralists of our time, like Peter Singer and Martha C. Nussbaum, and many of the great artists of our time, like Peter Doig, Michael Nyman, and the late Jean-Luc Godard, still pursue this kind of beauty, celebrate it through their works, and seek to spread its influence. It is also similarly revealing that much of the anti-oppressive discourse in aesthetics features beauty rather centrally (e.g., Taylor 2016; Wolf 1990; Protasi 2017).

It will be a shame, and a mark of impoverishment in aesthetics, if the conceptual pair of beauty and taste remains marginal in our subdiscipline. We are the gatekeepers of two of the most central concepts in value theory, whether others recognise this or not. We thus have a duty, to quote Du Bois, to seek "with Beauty and for Beauty to set the world right. That somehow, somewhere eternal and perfect Beauty sits above Truth and Right I can conceive, but here and now and in the world in which I work they are for me unseparated and inseparable" (1926).

The reason that I think this sense of beauty is important, then, is that it tracks a distinctively human mode of valuing that is experiential—felt—and provides a basis of some of our most fundamental values, as well as a rich source of human wellbeing. We need a lot more work to understand beauty, and this work is unlikely to be done by philosophers working in isolation from other disciplines. But I hope it's clear that this is philosophical ground that is fertile, and that in not exploring it, we are risking an impoverished outlook not only in aesthetics, but in value theory altogether.[16]

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