Choosing Our Aesthetic Practices Wisely: Embodiment, Pleasure, and Justice

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During an exercise class a few months ago, I saw my thighs from an unusual angle while their flesh was drawn down by gravity in an unusual direction. I had not been in a position like this for years, and age- and menopause-related changes in fat distribution, musculature, and skin texture had transformed my thighs from a lightly rippled expanse of beach to a choppy dune. As the oldest person in the class by well over a decade, I knew my view was different from everyone else's and revealed features many of my classmates were probably trying to avoid: for my cultural context prizes the smooth, taut textures of youthful flesh on thin bodies. But I was engrossed. There was so much to see, so many unique contours, such a richness of texture and shadow. Layered over the ugliness I have been taught to assign to such a disruption of flesh was the direct experience of something fresh and fascinating.

As I age, the catalog of bodily features I can readily identify as defects, large and small, is continually expanding. There are chin whiskers, a knot of rough thickened skin over an ankle bone, perpetual furrowing between the eyebrows, a belly that pooches out over the top of waistbands. As my body changes, I experience ever more vividly the availability of two aesthetic aspects, corresponding to two practices of aesthetic appreciation I have the option of engaging in. On the one hand, I can view it through a practice defined by conventional beauty standards, from which it is falling ever further from compliance. On this option, I watch it descend into ugliness, perhaps slowed if I choose to engage in surgery or other interventions. I know women, caught in this option, who experience profound bodily self-loathing as they age.

On the other hand, I can explore what's here. Why, look at this! Those varicose veins have gotten more elaborate since the last time I looked carefully at them. Such an interesting cluster, with a juicy dark vein giving way to a tangle of pink and purple vessels so thin and delicate it's hard to believe they could be transporting something as viscous as blood. If I run my thumbnail over the veins, they vanish and gradually reappear. Who needs a tattoo when I get to wear this fascinating bit of evolving functional artwork?

So: I have open to me more than one way of approaching my body aesthetically. I can approach it through the lens of a conventional beauty practice, which reveals its ever-increasing deficiencies. Or I can approach it through the lens of a practice I call *aesthetic*

exploration: exploring what is before us with interest and curiosity, with the specific aim of seeking out aesthetic qualities that afford positive aesthetic experiences. (Irvin, 2017) Aesthetic exploration is like the approach we might take to a landscape with very different features than we've seen before: we roam around, looking for things and phenomena that are fascinating, intriguing, delightful, perplexing in a way that prompts further investigation. We are not surveyors taking a measure of the place but are instead here to have fun, to seek out aesthetic pleasures. This isn't to say it's an uncomplicated sort of fun. The practice may involve a fair measure of uncertainty and discomfort: what are we looking at? Ooh, that is … strange. We may feel taken aback, shocked, even at times disgusted: after all, we arrive at the experience with our full complement of natural and culturally trained aesthetic sensibilities, some of which involve disgust responses. We may also experience easy pleasures as some elements trigger our established responses to conventional beauty, prettiness, loveliness. We may decide to rest there for a while. But sooner or later we'll move on from that pretty vista and dive back into a close exploration of the gnarly, craggy bits, where the surprises are. The pleasures of this domain have a different tenor: they include prickles of curiosity, fascination with complexity, and wonder at the strange and unfamiliar.

To be clear, when I contrast the practice of celebrating bodily beauty from the practice of aesthetic exploration, I am using 'beauty' not as a generic term to indicate just any aesthetic value in which one might take pleasure, but to designate the facial and bodily qualities that a culture picks out for special valuing, those that lead to utterances like "She is beautiful" and to selection for roles in modeling and acting for which facial and bodily attractiveness are held to be of paramount importance. Beauty in this sense is a substantive aesthetic quality opposed to ugliness or unattractiveness. Empirical studies demonstrate the social reality of beauty and ugliness; people seen as ugly or unattractive are subject to penalties in many domains of life, while people seen as attractive enjoy a wide variety of benefits, as we will see below.

There has been an uptick in theorizing about aesthetic practices: niches of aesthetic activity within which distinctive values, norms, and approaches to aesthetic objects may emerge (e.g., Kubala 2021, Lopes 2018, Riggle 2024). While some aesthetic objects emerge out of a specific aesthetic practice and may be best approached through the lens of that practice, other objects, like natural landscapes and human bodies, emerge partly or wholly independently of aesthetic practices and may thus support more than one mode of aesthetic engagement. Thus we sometimes see disputes over the proper way to approach them: for instance, the disagreement between Allen Carlson (1979) and Noël Carroll (1983) over whether natural landscapes are best approached through a lens informed by scientific knowledge or may be appropriately appreciated through a practice privileging naïve awe and wonder.

If an aesthetic object may support multiple practices, how should we choose among them? Might there be reasons to relinquish one aesthetic practice—even if it yields exquisite and perhaps irreplaceable pleasures—and shift to another? Might there be

reasons to adopt an aesthetic practice even if we foresee that it will require effort and discomfort, and even if we are skeptical or uncertain about the aesthetic rewards it will offer and suspect it may overturn some of the aesthetic pleasures we currently enjoy?[1]

My answer is that aesthetic practices deserve critical scrutiny, and there are sometimes good reasons to actively cultivate alternatives to aesthetic practices that we already know yield profound rewards. This may be true even when our aesthetic experiences feel like things that are simply happening to us rather than the product of practices we are engaging in—as, perhaps, when we are struck by an experience of someone's bodily beauty. When we savor some aesthetic properties and abhor or withdraw from others, we are not just passively receiving an experience but also deepening a channel within our own minds—and ultimately within our communities, since the standards associated with established aesthetic practices are communally developed and maintained. What are the effects, both aesthetic and otherwise, of maintaining this channel, this pathway, rather than shifting to or blazing some other?

This question is worth asking because aesthetic practices fit into and inflect a life in ways that go far beyond particular experiences of aesthetic pleasure. Aesthetic experience is not simply a private, internal phenomenon we can or should keep veiled from the world. We are in constant aesthetic communication: our aesthetic responses to things are embodied, readable off our faces and postures. We teach each other what to seek out, what to embrace, what to despise, what to avoid.[2] And our aesthetic responses to other people's embodiment communicate to them whether their embodied presence is welcome and appreciated, tolerated with some difficulty, or outright unwanted.

This other-directed element was my original focus in advocating the practice of aesthetic exploration. Conventional practices of appreciating bodily beauty, which are also practices of negatively assessing ugliness, provide undue benefits to people seen as attractive while causing tremendous harm to those found unattractive: both the direct harm of experiencing others' disapproving gaze and a wide variety of social, political and economic penalties are systematically imposed on the ugly. (Irvin, 2017) Aesthetic judgment is not cordoned off from other forms of judgment: aesthetic value is an aspect of desirability and worth, so it is not surprising that beauty and ugliness are wrapped up in the allocation of all sorts of goods. Nonetheless, it is (I hope) easy to see that someone whose embodiment is judged ugly should not for that reason receive lower quality health care, less recognition for their professional achievements, or a harsher prison sentence. Nor should they receive less of our fundamental esteem. People deserve a full measure of respect regardless of where they fall on the spectrum of bodily beauty. Our recognition of

[1] Irene Martínez Marín (2024) offers a perceptive account of the discomfort and attitudinal clashes that may attend efforts to change one's practices and dispositions related to aesthetic appreciation.
[2] For example, Ryan Doran (2022, 104) cites research on the social transmission of disgust through facial expressions: we use expressions of disgust in response to particular objects to teach others to feel disgust, and this nonverbal pedagogy makes it possible to repurpose the disgust response toward objects that are socially defined as ugly or disgusting.

this should be all the more acute when we note that conventions of beauty have regularly been deployed to support violent regimes of white supremacy, patriarchy, cisheteronormativity, antifatness, and ableism.

Recognizing that our aesthetic responses to others' bodies corrupt our treatment of them, we could try to cordon off the aesthetic realm from our behavior. As I have discussed elsewhere, this is not my approach, since I see this separation as both unrealistic and undesirable: having our bodily presence appreciated by others is part of enjoying the esteem of our community and full recognition of our humanity. (Irvin, 2017) This motivated my argument for aesthetic exploration as a kind of aesthetic practice with the explicit aim of taking delight in the wide variety of embodiments in the world, learning to experience more pleasures in response to more configurations of being. Aesthetic exploration can be practiced in relation to one's own body and the bodies of others, though the latter must be undertaken with great care to avoid creepiness.[3] One can practice first on one's own body and on publicly available representations or embodied performances to learn to find sources of aesthetic interest and pleasure in a wide variety of faces and bodies. Once this skill is secure and one can apply it with fluency and ease, one can use it to replace aesthetic responses to beauty or ugliness with responses of valuing the aesthetic affordances of any face or body, thereby reducing one's participation in processes that reward the beautiful and penalize the ugly.

But if adopting aesthetic exploration as a practice may promote a more just relation to others, what of its effects on my own experiences? Matteo Ravasio worries that aesthetic exploration, framed as an exclusive alternative to the practice of appreciating bodily beauty, requires that we give up too much: for beauty is inherently good, and if we shift to the practice of aesthetic exploration, "[a] valuable aspect of human life is sacrificed to a more just and equitable society." (Ravasio, 2023: 1003) We don't need to give up on beauty, Ravasio suggests, because we could instead adopt redistributive practices to "selectively [improve] the condition of the disadvantaged." (2023: 1007) One of the measures he considers is a direct intervention on the bodies of the ugly: we could, for instance, make it easier for them to comply with aesthetic norms by making plastic surgery widely available at low cost.[4]

It is intriguing to me that the specific pleasures of appreciating bodily beauty are thought to be so irreplaceably valuable that surgery, with its attendant risks (not least pain, infection, and other medical complications), is seriously floated as a solution.[5] Surgery to change one's bodily appearance can be a valuable strategy in some cases (for instance, as

[3] Creepiness in aesthetic exploration of others' bodies is a legitimate concern. I argue that unreflective assessments of bodily beauty, though they may feel automatic or natural, are in fact far creepier, associated as they are with unjust distribution of social rewards and penalties. Aesthetic exploration is a strategy for dislodging these assessments and their unjust effects and can be done respectfully. (Irvin, 2017: 18-9)
[4] Ravasio, 2023: 1001. Ravasio cites Francesca Minerva (2017) on this proposal, though notably Minerva offers a nuanced discussion tentatively endorsing cosmetic surgery for a narrow range of situations and acknowledging the drawbacks and limitations of the proposal.
[5] See related discussion by Xinkan Zhao (2023).

part of gender-affirming care), but what would it look like to take surgery seriously as a beauty redistribution technique? Thinking of my own body, a long list quickly accrues: certainly liposuction for these lumpy thighs and botox for that crinkly eyelid, and I could have some flesh removed from these knobby knees (or perhaps they need a smoothing implant?), and I'm not sure what they do for varicose veins but there is probably something. In five or ten years I'll no doubt require a next round of interventions. Disabled people whose unusually configured limbs are found ugly could have them amputated and replaced with ones that are more visually appealing: for, as a matter of justice, shouldn't disabled people have as much access to bodily beauty as everyone else? Lizzie Velásquez, whose body can't store fat and who as a teen discovered a YouTube video describing her as the "World's Ugliest Woman," could, perhaps, have her whole body packaged in a more appealing envelope. (Barness, 2014)

I believe Ravasio may be taking the pleasures he associates with the beauty practice more seriously than the harms it engenders, and he may be overly optimistic about the prospects of inscribing beauty on more bodies without inflicting further harm. This is perhaps because in his thinking, the perceiver who enjoys the pleasures of beauty is separated from the body that must be carved up to facilitate those pleasures.

Ravasio might protest that I have overextended the proposal: it is meant only for the most irredeemably ugly, not for the garden variety ugliness of aging bodies like mine. This should comfort us only if we are content with the othering of people whose bodies fall furthest out of line with beauty standards, such that if they want to be acceptable to society they had better accept extreme interventions to rectify the hideousness of their flesh. In addition, as Ravasio emphasizes, beauty is comparative: the point of the beauty practice is to pick out and admire the finest exemplars. Beauty standards and the practice in which they are embedded invite constant bodily self-surveillance and body management by those whose bodies are disproportionately subject to aesthetic regulation.[6] When turned on the body of the perceiver, the practice invites self-alienation, with the body framed as a perpetual disappointment and site for intervention. (Leboeuf, 2019) We see, accordingly, that demand for cosmetic surgery is not limited to the ugliest; even people who are attractive by societal standards seek it out to alleviate defects in their appearance.

Ravasio also entertains interventions in the perceiver's aesthetic psychology. We could develop technologies to "expand the number of people whom we find attractive," as discussed by Tena Thau (2020), or adopt practices designed to eradicate biases such as anti-fatness from our beauty judgments, as proposed by A.W. Eaton (2016).[7] But these

[6] Samantha Kwan discusses the fact that fat people in different demographic groups report different levels of body consciousness and felt need to engage in body management, which includes both "physical management" such as "manipulating one's body or available props … or changing one's actual behavior" and "psychological management" such as "a self-directed pep talk that reassures one of self-worth." (Kwan, 2010: 151)

[7] Ravasio, 2023: 1001. Though Ravasio references Thau (2020) in relation to the proposal of an "attraction-expanding technology," Thau's proposal appears quite different from Ravasio's. Thau draws on Ted

proposals have their limits: they leave in place the comparative element which is the source of the trouble. Cheryl Frazier argues "that we have reason to worry about approaches that encourage us to see certain bodies as likeable and attractive, given the reality that many fat people's bodies deviate so heavily from the kinds of bodies we are collectively willing to see as beautiful." (Frazier, 2022: 116) These ameliorative proposals risk "exclud[ing] those fat people whose bodies we find too deviant—often those who we deem unhealthy, who are larger, who diverge from gender expectations, or who are disabled." (Frazier, 2023: 292) A comparative approach that values more bodies while continuing to identify some bodies—both fat and non-fat—as ugly and unsightly does not go far enough in eliminating harm, and it leaves in place the imperatives of self-surveillance and bodily self-alienation in relation to beauty standards.

So: I believe Ravasio doesn't take seriously enough the harms associated with the beauty practice, and he overestimates the ability of interventions like surgery and expansion of beauty standards to alleviate these harms. But just as importantly, he underestimates the pleasures associated with alternative aesthetic practices. Aesthetic exploration is not a joyless asceticism. It is a playful, rambunctious practice, full of surprises, demanding perceptual, cognitive and affective engagement along with nimbleness, the ability to avoid getting stuck in displeasure or disgust—or, for that matter, in easy pleasures. Cultivating our ability to experience a wide variety of aesthetic pleasures in response to a wide array of bodily arrangements is its very point.

In addition to enhancing our ability to appreciate other people's embodiment in all its diverse forms, aesthetic exploration invites us to take aesthetic pleasure in our own bodies, regardless of where those bodies fall on the spectrum of beauty and ugliness. It expressly eschews the comparative dimension of beauty practices. My responses to bodies and their parts are, of course, conditioned by my past experiences, by the classificatory schemes available to me, and so forth. But at the same time, aesthetic exploration emphasizes attentiveness to what is here before me right now: the affordances of this very encounter with this very body.[8] It invites us to release comparisons and standards and immerse ourselves intimately within this moment of experience.

Sara Protasi objects to aesthetic exploration as a practice on the grounds that it gives up on the "aspirational" element we prize in beauty practice: because it "does no work of weeding the non-beautiful from the beautiful[…,] it is epistemically and practically

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Chiang's short story "Liking What You See," in which Chiang "imagines a neurological device that renders users *unable to discern differences in physical attractiveness.* In Chiang's world, people can still feel sexual attraction, it is just a response to qualities deeper than looks." (Thau, 2020: 916; emphasis added) The effect of the technology is thus to "to reduce, or eliminate, the influence of physical appearance on one's romantic desires." (Thau, 2020: 916) Thau thus does not seem to be discussing a technology that makes its users experience more people as beautiful or physically attractive, but instead one that makes them *unable* to apprehend bodily beauty.

[8] By 'affordances,' I mean opportunities for aesthetic contemplation and appreciation generated by colors, forms, smells, textures, and tastes; movement, relations of elements, and functioning; and the observer's own affective and somatic experiences as an encounter unfolds.

inert." (Protasi, 2017: 95-96; emphasis in original) Relatedly, it "fails to be empowering": "we care about being beautiful because it sets us apart from others," but aesthetic exploration undermines the comparisons that allow for this setting apart. (Protasi, 2017: 96) Protasi is correct in diagnosing that aesthetic exploration abandons the bodily aspirations of beauty practices: aesthetic exploration directs me to appreciate my body's current affordances rather than to aspire for it to manifest a certain form or set of aesthetic qualities.[9] My aspirations are directed, instead, to the cultivation of my powers as an experiencer: to learn to notice new and different qualities, to shift perspectives, to tolerate discomfort, to seek pleasure, to be open to the possibility that the valence of my responses to particular features may change. Aesthetic exploration involves being finely attuned to visible and tactile qualities, movements, and relationships, and also sensitive to our own aesthetic responses of interest and fascination that might deepen into pleasures. Aesthetic exploration directs my aspirations away from wanting my body to look a certain way and toward the cultivation of rich experiential engagement with it as it is. Recognizing and enjoying the aesthetic affordances of my body is, in my view, plenty empowering; besting others in a comparison is not required.

For many people, adopting aesthetic exploration as a practice may yield novel and positive aesthetic experiences of both other bodies and their own body, helping to dislodge the attitude of disciplinary self-surveillance that beauty practices, especially in their aspirational mode, tend to evoke. But as Frazier discusses, the aspiration of cultivating positive aesthetic experiences of one's own body may not be a good fit for some who have continually received social signals that their body is ugly and unacceptable, in part because "it requires unlearning a lifetime of internalized shame and hate (often while still embedded in a society that continues to encourage those negative responses)." (2022: 147) Some people in this situation may prefer a practice *of body neutrality*, which "aims to bring people peace with their bodies by encouraging them to recognize what their bodies can do, to accept their body's limitations without shame, and to challenge harmful messages that one's worth is tied to their beauty." (2022: 145-146)

Another sort of aesthetic practice, varieties of which are discussed by Céline Leboeuf and Madeline Martin-Seaver, has to do with the aesthetic appreciation of felt bodily experiences rather than a focus on the body as a perceptual object accessible to an outside observer. Leboeuf proposes that "an unalienated relation to one's body would consist in the capacity to *enjoy* one's body," experiencing it not as a set of fragments to be brought into line or defects to be corrected but instead as a functioning whole that affords felt pleasures. (Leboeuf, 2019: 15) Her proposal, *sensualism*, involves "developing an inner

[9] Protasi, too, advocates a shift in our aspirations away from the cultivation of bodily appearance. She recommends that individuals focus on cultivating their moral character, which will make them more lovable; and perceivers should focus on cultivating a loving gaze according to which "the most beautiful people are the most lovable ones, independently of what they look like from the outside." (Protasi, 2017: 99) Protasi notes that this is an aesthetic proposal, for "[w]hen we love a person we come to appreciate features of their *body.*" (2017: 99; emphasis in original) While I am sympathetic to this proposal of having our responses to others' embodiment shaped by a prosocial attitude like love, my target is the direct aesthetic appreciation of the body itself, unmediated by an assessment of character.

appreciation of the body through physical practices" that are "pursued for the sake of enjoyment, and not for the sake of producing a certain appearance…: breathing exercises, yoga, sports, sex, and so on." (Leboeuf, 2019: 16)

Martin-Seaver argues for a practice of aesthetically appreciating felt bodily experiences on the grounds that "decentering the outward appearance of bodies and instead attending to the specificities of felt experience" allows us to resist oppressive forms of objectification, reaffirm our status as subjects, and reaffirm the value our bodies have for us regardless of how they appear to others. (Martin-Seaver, 2019: n.p.) This is particularly true of the felt bodily experiences we have while being objectified: when I aesthetically appreciate the felt sensations of my face warming, my pulse quickening, and my upper lip curling in an expression of contempt for someone who has catcalled me, I value these bodily experiences as expressions of my subjectivity, and this valuing helps me attend to their epistemic affordances as indicators of injustice. "Calling attention to something's sensuous qualities and fully attending to the specifics of sensuous experience, rather than screening them out, is a way of giving that experience value and weight." (Martin-Seaver, 2019: n.p.) Attending closely to my sensuous experience, then, gives me different opportunities to know and aesthetically value myself and my embodiment, independently of the standards associated with an outward gaze.

Leboeuf's and Martin-Seaver's compelling proposals seem compatible with both aesthetic exploration and body neutrality: one might cultivate aesthetic attention to felt bodily experience while also seeking out positive aesthetic experiences of one's bodily appearance as apprehended through the senses, or while seeking bodily acceptance without an aspiration to experience one's appearance positively. Insofar as all of these aesthetic practices are compatible with just responses to others' embodiment and some may fit better with an individual's needs and goals at a given time, a person can reasonably choose among them. Aesthetic practices are not one-size-fits-all: like other practices and projects, they must fit into the overall framework of our lives, and we may have good reasons to select one practice and modify or abandon another. Moreover, we may adopt different aesthetic practices directed toward different objects or contexts: a decision to give up on bodily beauty need not mean that we stop seeking out beauty in, say, architecture or music.

The possibility of combining aesthetic practices might lead us to ask: if we aim to establish more just relations with others' embodiment and a more satisfying relationship with our own, must we give up on bodily beauty entirely? Might I adopt a beauty practice in some contexts but shift to an alternate practice like aesthetic exploration in others? Perhaps I can bask in the appreciation of bodily beauty while reading fashion magazines or watching movies, but also adopt aesthetic exploration as an approach to experiencing my own body and the bodies of those I directly encounter, and cultivate aesthetic appreciation of my felt bodily experiences as Leboeuf and Martin-Seaver propose. Why not welcome an abundance of aesthetic practices, including the beauty practice in some contexts, and enjoy the pleasures they yield?

Some aesthetic practices are more cross-compatible than others: they involve cultivating perceptual, cognitive, and affective habits and skills that translate across domains or that interfere with alternative tendencies one might aim to cultivate.[10] Examining the unique affordances of the very body that is before me now seems highly compatible with cultivating the appreciation of felt bodily experiences in all their particularity. But these activities may tend to dislodge or loosen the grip of beauty practices: for they open us up to more ways of looking, to multisensory responses, to a focus on objects—this veiny wrist, this hot flash—that are not as readily assimilated within beauty practices or measured against beauty standards. Likewise, a focus on beauty—especially its comparative nature and its grounding in a set of standards applied to bodily features looked at in a particular way—may undermine our ability to fully apprehend and enjoy what's there. If we see something that we have no perceptual or conceptual vocabulary for, beauty practices may condition us to ignore it or reject it as ugly. These two kinds of aesthetic practices, then, may tend to compete rather than comfortably coincide.[11]

Moreover, participation in the practice of appreciating bodily beauty, even if we intend to limit it to certain bodies and contexts, keeps beauty standards salient in our minds as a lens to apply to bodies we encounter. We might consider the harmful effects of this lens sufficient reason to abandon it rather than maintain it in our aesthetic repertoire.

Ravasio suggests that "the burden of proof is on" those who advocate giving up on the beauty practice "to show that human beauty *isn't* inherently or intrinsically valuable." (2023: 1004; emphasis in original) But one need not deny this value to think it is an open question whether and how to participate in the beauty practice. Many properties and kinds of experience are inherently or intrinsically valuable. The finiteness of a human life means I can't pursue them all, and the fact that my aesthetic practices have profound, ethically inflected implications for my relationships with myself and others means that I have good reasons to reflect carefully and critically in choosing which practices to adopt and maintain, and which to modify or give up on.

We don't all have the same reasons to prefer one aesthetic practice to another. Some things speak to me more than others; some fit better with my style or personality, or with competencies I've previously cultivated. (cf. Martínez Marín, 2024; Lopes, 2018: 206) But I suggest that there are both moral and aesthetic reasons for preferring aesthetic exploration to the beauty practice: it is better from the standpoint of justice and

[10] Dominic McIver Lopes (2018) discusses the fact that, having cultivated the competencies and interests associated with one aesthetic practice, a person may then be well prepared to pursue related practices (206) as well as the fact that some aesthetic interests or competencies may interfere with others. (118)

[11] Of course, this is ultimately an empirical matter, not to be settled from the armchair; and some people may be more adept at switching between practices that involve competing values and aims. Some professions even require such switching: a hairstylist or makeup artist may need the ability to switch between beauty-related practices and practices designed to enhance other values, depending on the interests of the client or the parameters of the project they are working on. I am grateful to Cheryl Frazier and Jeremy Fried for this example.

individual well-being, and also rich in aesthetic rewards. It is, admittedly, somewhat unruly: it is open-ended and experimental, restless, characterized by seeking. It involves cultivating the attentional acuity to grasp the non-aesthetic qualities of things in all their richness, to notice things from different angles, at different scales, and through different sensory modalities, while suspending attachment to the valence of our experiences of those qualities. Something found to disturb or trouble might later be found to thrill, or to please, or perhaps to excite only a sense of homey familiarity. Something pleasing might come to seem less notable in light of subsequent discoveries. Aesthetic exploration celebrates a wide array of aesthetic qualities and affordances, with little sense that there is a right or wrong way to experience things. Pleasure is its guide, but it does not aim to calibrate its pleasures with anyone else's. For these reasons, it may not qualify fully as a practice for those like Lopes (2018) who see aesthetic practices as constituted by specific values and norms that practitioners are to follow in their aesthetic activity. And aesthetic exploration does not seem to exist as a robust, widespread, and well-established social practice in the way that the beauty practice does: I'm advancing a proposal, not offering an empirical description of some existing community's activity. But as Robbie Kubala (2021) observes, following Nicholas Wolterstorff (2015), an aesthetic practice has to start somewhere, and this point of origination may just be someone noticing something aesthetically rewarding and getting others involved in noticing and liking it, too. So: that's what I'm up to here.

On Nick Riggle's account,

> [t]wo or more people form an aesthetic community when their ways of engaging in the practice of aesthetic valuing are mutually supportive: their practices might overlap in significant ways, they might value similar things in similar ways, their valuing might cohere or be complementary, or their valuing might be rather different but nonetheless mutually enlivening. (2024: 127)

Aesthetic exploration is ripe for the formation of a community with practices of aesthetic valuing that are "rather different but mutually enlivening." We each have a unique profile of aesthetic interests and preferences, as well as a unique history of aesthetic experience of our own embodiment and of being subjected to aesthetic scrutiny by others. We may have different levels of interest in and tolerance for new ways of encountering bodily features that have been condemned as ugly. But there is room for many approaches here. For bodies, like natural environments, afford ugliness and disgust, but they are also—and sometimes by virtue of the very same qualities—fascinating, thrilling, and wondrous.[12]

[12] I'm grateful to Harry Drummond, Christopher Earley, Cheryl Frazier, Jeremy Fried, and Zachary Jurgensen, as well as to participants in the Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory Seminar at the University of St. Andrews, for helpful discussion and feedback.

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