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INTRODUCTION

Harry Drummond & Christopher Earley

If one were pressed to say what the core subject matter of aesthetics is, it would not seem inappropriate to say that it is beauty. It should thus be surprising that this central concept receives little focused attention in contemporary aesthetics. Instead, much research involving discussions of beauty tends towards, and favours, the concept of aesthetic value. Are we using the two interchangeably, or, does aesthetic value refer to something including, but beyond, beauty? If the latter, what exactly is beauty? Are there different senses in which we use the term?

We are thrilled to introduce this Special Issue of *Debates in Aesthetics*, which revives in lively, rigorous, and sometimes very personal, terms philosophical discussion of the concept of beauty. In the target article that gives this issue of *Debates in Aesthetics* its theme, Panos Paris sets out to put the discussion of beauty back on the agenda. As Paris finds, this concept is beset by conceptual confusion, in-part owing to insufficient attention to distinctions between, and proper use of, thick/thin, broad/narrow, and beauty as shallow and beauty as profound. Through

careful reconstruction, Paris puts forward a conception of beauty – thick, profound, and narrow – that cuts through this confusion and illuminates how beauty bears on ethical, epistemic, and prudential values. But Paris also reveals the crucial role that beauty plays in the good life, and how this brings the often maligned concept of taste back to the centre of philosophical aesthetics.

We are pleased to present Paris's article alongside responses from Catherine Wesselinoff, Pirachula Chulanon, and Filippo Focosi. Wesselinoff places Paris's work in the context of what they refer to as a broader 'beauty revival' within aesthetics, Chulanon explores the connections between Paris's argument and Kant's aesthetics, and Focosi investigates how Paris's argument can help us to understand the breadth of artistic beauty. In doing so, the respondents explore the tensions and possibilities within Paris's thesis. Through these pieces and Paris's replies to the respondents, the reader will quickly see just how philosophically rich this novel reframing of our conception of beauty is.

We are proud to publish this Special Issue of *Debates in Aesthetics*. We thank Panos Paris for accepting our invitation to write the target article for this issue and for taking the time to reply to respondents. We also thank our respondents for their thoughtful and creative engagements with Paris's work. Finally, we thank our referees, our proofreader Olivia Oddofin, and the British Society of Aesthetics for their continued support.

WHICH BEAUTY? WHAT TASTE? REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF BEAUTY AND TASTE

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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 viewing 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 ‘beauty’, in the narrow sense, allowed philosophers in the past—not unlike many laypersons today—to see beauty as linked to our most fundamental values, speaking 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 not just undesirable, but evinces an impoverished outlook on aesthetics and value more generally.

I begin by giving some background on beauty’s alleged comeback in recent philosophy. I then 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 a 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 thick, neither easy nor shallow, and inextricably tied to form, pleasure, and (non-aesthetic) value. However, whether 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—namely, taste. If we wish to better understand and promote the profound, meaningful, and enlightening varieties of beauty, 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. I have a particular sense or concept of beauty in mind, around which, I think, there is considerable confusion in recent philosophy, notwithstanding 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 18th century. It is the concept that the ancient Greeks captured by the term ‘kalon’ and that 18th-century writers labelled ‘beauty’ without qualification, contrasting it with qualities like the sublime or tragic. This concept allowed philosophers to speak of varieties of beauty, including the beauty of intellect, moral beauty, artistic and natural beauty, as well as 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 note that this comeback is often not about beauty in the sense that interests me here, but about aesthetic value more broadly.² I discuss a few 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 narrow sense of beauty and clear up some confusion about that

1 While 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), it is nonetheless clear, I think, that there was a fairly well-established notion of beauty among the intellectual consciousness, which had many of the features I identify in this essay.

2 Which, incidentally, may well be rather more polymorphous than most currently appear to think in the recent literature on such value.

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 as not only 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 Broad Senses 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. This includes, 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 philosophers from a few hundred years ago would be puzzled by the notion of beauty found in many of the works 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 philosophizing 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—not least by espousing a fairly personal outlook on beauty (inevitably, by his lights) himself—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 the 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:

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 to this day, usually⁴ employ 'beauty' to refer to that quality which makes the *Pavane* so delightful to the listener, many contemporary philosophers employing 'beauty' actually refer to the kinds of qualities that make *The Miraculous Mandarin* a musical triumph. If I'm right, this neatly explains my suspicion that neither philosophers up to a century ago nor laypersons would recognize the 'beauty' that many contemporary philosophers discuss.

A number of considerations seem to support my claim. In the first instance, the kinds of objects that most people describe as 'beautiful'

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.

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).

Another one is that the grounds on which people ascribe such qualities seem to differ. Doran, for instance, tells us that the beautiful, in the narrow sense⁵ is associated with qualities like the smooth, small, and delicate (2023). 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 (ibid.). Here, I prefer to leave the feeling elicited by the beautiful unspecified and talk of pleasure, which I believe underlies all 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 and 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 deal with a different notion, namely aesthetic value in general. Lopes (2018) serves as an explicit example. He associates the narrow sense of beauty with prac-

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 2023; forthcoming). I am not sure about this, but won’t discuss this issue here.

tices 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; or, more narrowly, 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.⁶ 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 marginalization 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 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.⁷ After all, he gives examples of mathematical beauty to show that beauty need not be restricted to the easy, sensuous, etc. But it is far from clear to me that this is Lopes’ intention. While one of Lopes’ chosen examples of beauty—the mathematical beauty of the proof of Euler’s identity theorem that 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 not. For instance, Titian’s *Flaying of Marsyas* is a harrowing, dark, and in some ways, ugly painting. ‘Beautiful’ is not a term I would use to describe this particular work (save for its composition), nor is it the one that Lopes should use, given his remarks that we “must work hard to overcome our

6 According to Widdows these norms are currently linked to firmness, smoothness, slimness, and youth, for women, and a broader, albeit related, set of criteria for men.

7 He certainly is doing this insofar as beauty in the broad sense ex hypothesi includes the narrow sense. But analyzing these different senses are, I take it, distinct projects.

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 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 intersect⁸), 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.⁹

So far, I hope to have made somewhat clear the distinction between the narrow and the broad senses 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 senses of beauty does not correspond to Lopes’ one between “easy, shallow, sensuous” and “okay” kinds of beauty (2018: 5). There are many examples of beauty in the narrow sense that are

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

9 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. In this, as in many other things, I find myself agreeing with Berys Gaut, who has previously suggested that aesthetic terms are too protean a category to characterize through a unified account other than one which sees them as terms evaluative of art qua art (2007: 34-35).

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, 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, and 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 by current beauty norms is purely shallow and sensuous, easy and escapist—certainly not in the consciousness of those who pursue it or in our culture's group consciousness.¹⁰ Again, Widdows' (2018) analysis is instructive here. 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, and profound on the other is too simplistic. And yet, as I hope section 1 makes clear, these distinctions are often run together.

10 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.

2. Narrow Beauty; But Thin or Thick?

To the above argument, it may be objected that I am 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 theorizing. 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’¹¹—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 is thereby taken to indicate a relational property. This is especially so if, as some have thought, the pleasure taken in the beautiful can be further elucidated (e.g., Nehamas 2007; Doran 2023), suggesting that the narrower notion may be thicker. Indeed, as we’ve already seen, if we go back far enough,

11 This qualification is meant to accommodate the view that there may be more than one concept of beauty (e.g., Doran 2023; 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 (2025)).

beauty was as thick as it gets, associated with qualities like order, proportion, and symmetry, or wellformedness for function. Recently, I have also argued that wellformedness is a necessary condition for beauty (2025), which clearly turns beauty into a thick concept. So, neither the distinction between the broad and the narrow senses of beauty nor the thick and thin senses of beauty offers good reason to disparage beauty as shallow, easy, or sensuous.

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 its content be 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 1969; 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 easily 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 cited do not.

3. Which Beauty?

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

purposes here.

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; 2024), this doctrine is mistaken. The concept of form is far broader and more encompassing than that doctrine allows, as I've argued in Paris (2025). Indeed, form may well delineate the aesthetic realm (Paris 2024).

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 that thing.

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, or more response-dependent or independent. It is not the purpose of this paper to arbitrate between these accounts, except to note that, to the extent that any account emphasizes either of these dimensions at the expense of the other, it is likely to leave something important out. Beauty is not only the term for an aesthetic property but also for an experience, occasioned by a relation between certain features of an object and certain features of a subject. So, any exclusively objective or subjective account will remain incomplete in one respect or another. It will either leave out what it is about the subject that makes such-and-such features the occasion of pleasure or avoid the question of what kinds of features occasion the specific kind of pleasure and why it is such-and-such qualities that enable a subject

to track beauty. Hence, I prefer hybrid theories, like that of functional beauty, which I will 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; 2023; 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 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).¹²

These three features of beauty in the narrow sense, which also serve to distinguish it from the broad sense, are nicely illustrated by functional beauty. In their book on functional beauty, Parsons and Carlson (2008) analyze 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 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 cannot. I have used similar counterexamples to

12 One reason why this view is so controversial is presumably due to the lack of theories of beauty that link it to goodness, truth, etc., whilst appealing to enough contemporary philosophers’ taste.

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 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 (2007) suggests the following, *inter alia*: beauty is an intimidatingly difficult concept to analyze, let alone define. But that cannot be all: philosophers normally enjoy difficult, even futile, theoretical pursuits. Another reason seems to be beauty's intimate link to pleasure. 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 and reinforced by certain features of our culture (both within philosophy and more widely) that have led to a shared taste in forms of beauty that arguably are, indeed, sensuous, shallow, and easy, and that often are promoted as means of distraction and escape from reality. Consider 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; 2024).

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 fide*, must we suppose either that it exhausts beauty or—assuming, as we should, that beauty is a matter of degrees, and 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. This 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 is no reason to think of beauty either as shallow, sensuous, and easy or as thin. Indeed, this is especially so if I'm right that beauty fits a schema comprising a network 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. Taste itself is a complex concept that denotes a sensibility or disposition to aptly identify and take pleasure in beautiful objects.

This should not surprise anyone who has thought seriously about beauty in the relevant sense. For, as Nehamas (2007) puts it,¹³ when we find an object beautiful, we feel 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

13 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.

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 accompanying analysis of taste.

Yet little work is done on taste today, and some are outright sceptical about its relevance in our subdiscipline.¹⁴ Criticizing 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, 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 18th century and before 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. [To be able to] explain its goodness to others, and ... talk about its strengths with balletomanes during intermissions" (1984, 187). But to prefer to "stay home and read

14 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).

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 (2022) 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.

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 judgment. 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 realizing 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 judgment of beauty if it fails to echo 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 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 this¹⁵ — largely a matter of taste. 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?¹⁶ As suggested above, and as I recently argued elsewhere (see Paris 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 well-being.

In light of this, I think that it is crucial that we focus on the basic conceptual pairing of beauty and taste and are clear on what concept of beauty we are focussing on. In failing to do so, we risk missing the 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 our 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

15 This is a controversial exegetical claim that I cannot defend here, but I rely for it partly on Hume's talk of moral taste and of his account of virtue and vice as forms of beauty. 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.

16 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.

appreciating complex coffee and 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 creatures 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 eulogize 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, 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. 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.

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 is 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 a specific conception of beauty, and its being treated as beauty in general, which is a symptom of our time. I have argued that this is a mistake and that the concept of beauty features centrally in people's lives and experiences. It has been at the

forefront of philosophizing 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 anti-oppressive discourse in aesthetics features beauty rather centrally (e.g., Taylor 2016; Wolf 1990; Protasi 2017).

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, whilst being 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 fertile philosophical ground, and that in not exploring it, we are risking an impoverished outlook not only in aesthetics, but in value theory altogether.¹⁷

It will be a shame if the conceptual pair of beauty and taste remains marginal in our subdiscipline. We are the gatekeepers of two of the most important concepts in value theory, whether others recognize this or not. We thus have a duty, in Du Bois's (1926) words, to seek "with

17 Many thanks to Christopher Earley and Harry Drummond for inviting me to write a piece on beauty, and for offering very helpful comments and suggestions on previous drafts.

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”.

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BEAUTY'S COMEBACK

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*In his article “Which Beauty? What Taste? Reflections on the Importance of the Philosophy of Beauty and Taste”, Panos Paris challenges proclamations that beauty is making a coherent “comeback”. Recent books whose titles contain the term “beauty”, Paris thinks, offer contrasting accounts of beauty—so much so that they appear to be written about completely different concepts. Paris rejects these broad conceptions of beauty in favour of a narrower conception of beauty, which he thinks is important to value in general. In the present article, I argue, contra Paris, that what I term the “Beauty Revival” is a coherent philosophical movement. I take as a paradigm example the similarities between the conceptions of beauty offered in three authoritative texts: *On Beauty and Being Just* (2000) by Elaine Scarry; *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (2007) by Alexander Nehamas, and *Beauty* (2009) by Roger Scruton. The broad sense of beauty around which these Revivalists cohere is, I argue, a comprehensive one that fulfils Paris’s desired link between beauty and value.*

Introduction

Beauty¹ held a central place in Classical, Medieval, Early Modern, Enlightenment and Romantic philosophy², but fell out of grace in the 20th century³. As Jerome Stolnitz has observed: “we have to recognise that ‘beauty’ has receded or even disappeared from contemporary aesthetic theory. For, like other once-influential ideas, it has simply faded away” (Stolnitz 1962, 185). However, over the last 30 years or so, critical theorists, artists, and philosophers have begun to comment on a thematic “return to beauty”. As Crispin Sartwell asserts: “there has been a revival of interest in beauty in both art and philosophy in recent years” (Sartwell 2022, 11). According to art historian Alexander Alberro, writing in 2004:

During the past decade, several texts by authors such as Arthur Danto, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Dave Hickey, Elaine Scarry, Peter Schjeldahl, and Wendy Steiner have sought to return our attention to the subject of beauty...The central questions raised by these authors, the questions they all in one way or another seem

1 Paris wants 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.” (Paris 2025, 9) I see no reason to be any less inclusive, and so consider beauty in a general way, rather than specifically in relation to art.

2 From Pythagorean fragments to Plato’s dialogues and Aristotle’s treatises, from St. Augustine’s *Confessions* to St Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*, throughout the Renaissance and into the English and German Enlightenment, experiences or perceptions of beauty are linked in various ways to the function and teleology of the human being. Beauty is variously described as a “manifestation of order” (Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1120a24) at which “the soul rejoices” (Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6 Chapter 2 102); the “cause of the good harmony and brightness of all things” (Pseudo-Dionysius *Divine Names* Chapter 4 234) that we recognise through “cultivating feeling in a rational and tempered way” (Aquinas I.73.1); a judgment that “can be resolved into the concept of perfection” (Kant, *Critique of Judgment* §15); and so on. This lengthy discussion about beauty in philosophy relies on beauty being regarded as a vital, incomparable, non-reducible feature of our experience.

3 For a full account of what happened to beauty in the 20th century, and why it became so unpopular, readers should refer to my recent monograph, *The Revival of Beauty: Aesthetics, Experience and Philosophy*, published by Routledge in 2023

to need to address, are: Whatever happened to beauty? Why and how has it been disparaged? Who denigrated it? And why do so many art critics and historians no longer consider the judgment of beauty to be a valid exercise? All of the authors named above present their work as an unapologetic attempt to revitalise the experience of the beautiful, to give credence once again to aesthetic judgments of beauty. 'Beauty,' Schjeldahl boldly announced in the late 1990s with an enormous sense of relief, 'Is Back'. (Alberro 2004, 37)

In his article "Which Beauty? What Taste? Reflections on the Importance of the Philosophy of Beauty and Taste", Panos Paris challenges the proclamations that beauty is making a coherent "comeback". Paris acknowledges the fact that "many have, over the last few decades, saluted a return to the central notion of aesthetics: beauty" (Paris 2025, 11). He also admits that there have "appeared numerous articles and books whose titles contain the word 'beauty' and that purport to focus on that concept," listing a small number of such monographs. "Reading them, however," he thinks, "one would have thought that these are books on completely different concepts" (11). The confusion this provokes shows that "we are still very much in the grips of a phobia of beauty" (15).

I do not think that Paris is really (or primarily) disputing that "beauty" is making or has made a comeback in a very general sense. Rather, he seems to be suggesting that beauty is making or has made the wrong *sort* of comeback: namely, a comeback which tends to be focused on a broad conception of beauty that might link it with, for instance, "aesthetic value". As Paris puts it, "contributions to the contemporary literature that allegedly are rekindling interest in beauty in fact deal with a different notion, namely aesthetic value in general" (15). Paris rejects this broad conception of beauty in favour of a narrower conception of beauty, which is his article's main job to set out and defend. In other

words, Paris takes the so-called “beauty comeback” as a prompt to critique the broad conceptions of “beauty” widely heralded by its participants.

In the present paper, I argue, *contra* Paris, that what I term the “Beauty Revival” is a coherent philosophical movement; contributors’ attitudes to beauty share a certain set of unifying features. Indeed, the broad sense of beauty around which the Beauty Revival coheres is a proper one that we do not need to give up. This sense of beauty fulfils Paris’s desired link between beauty and value or, at least, it already makes the link satisfactorily, obviating the need for his alternative version. I take as a paradigm example the similarities between three philosophical texts: *On Beauty and Being Just* (2000) by Elaine Scarry, *Only a Promise of Happiness* (2007) by Alexander Nehamas, and *Beauty* (2009) by Sir Roger Scruton. In my view, these texts share a common outlook: they all ground their conception of beauty on the conviction that there is an intimate bond between beauty and value—that our recognition of beautiful objects is closely related to our recognition of other (non-aesthetic) values. Thus, according at least to these three authoritative Revivalist philosophers, beauty is, indeed, as Paris puts it, “linked to our most fundamental values” (Paris 2025, 9).

The necessarily brief account of the Beauty Revival I offer in this paper proceeds as follows: In the first section, I give some background on what Paris refers to as the “Promised Restoration”, which I term the Beauty Revival. In the second section, I elucidate the common attitude to beauty and value, linking the three Beauty Revivalist texts mentioned above: *On Beauty and Being Just* by Elaine Scarry, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* by Alexander Nehamas, and *Beauty* by Roger Scruton. In the third section, I suggest that “Beauty Revivalism” has several different, broad, non-exhaustive characteristics. I conclude that Beauty Revivalism is, in fact, a coherent philosophical movement, disposing us to see beauty as a serious issue and an essential

aspect of our lives and experiences.

Beauty and Value

In my view, Beauty Revivalist philosophy—as represented by Elaine Scarry, Alexander Nehamas, and Roger Scruton—portrays beauty as a feature of our experience that causes us to apprehend other (non-aesthetic) values. Indeed, the Revivalists understand that beauty is linked—perhaps necessarily—to our apprehension of the highest human values. Each thinker links beauty to a different specific value: Scarry argues that beauty guides us towards the just; Nehamas claims that beauty is an object of love and manifests a promise of happiness; and Scruton suggests that beauty connects us to the sacred. Their conceptions all suggest that beauty is the apprehensive feature of some sort of value concept: justice, love, happiness, and the sacred, respectively. Thus, as the Revivalists explain, judgments of beauty are distinctive since they involve attempts to subsume beautiful objects under higher value concepts.

There is little space within the scope of this paper to provide a complete analysis of the accounts of beauty offered by Scarry, Nehamas, and Scruton. In brief, Scarry's analogy between beauty and justice is based on what she sees as their shared features: fairness and symmetry. Scarry argues that symmetry is an essential attribute of beauty, and social justice consists of a kind of symmetry of persons—in that all persons are to be treated as equal. Thus, in her view, the intrinsic qualities of beautiful objects directly inspire the search for social equality. Scarry also seeks to persuade us that this analogy between the recognition of beauty and the recognition of just social arrangements proceeds through the pleasure we find in “fairness”—in the equitable fitting together of disparate elements. For his part, Nehamas demonstrates numerous links between beauty and values such as love, knowledge, and happiness. In *Only a Promise of Happiness*, he claims that beauty is the object of love and argues that our love of beautiful objects com-

pels a desire for greater knowledge about them. The pursuit of this knowledge constitutes an experience of happiness. Scruton's defence of beauty is connected to his understanding of the sacred. Scruton does not say that beautiful objects are themselves sacred, but that "the experiences which focus on the sacred have their parallels in the sense of beauty" (Scruton 2009, 52). He thinks "the sense of beauty and reverence for the sacred are proximate states of mind, which feed into one another and grow from a common root" (57). He also claims that "the beautiful and the sacred are adjacent in our experience, and that our feelings for the one are constantly spilling over into the territory claimed by the other" (78).

What concept of beauty does this relationship between beauty and other values expounded by the Revivalist thinkers imply? The Beauty Revivalist notion of beauty is a species of the sort of thinking that Kant calls "reflective judgment". "Judgment in general," Kant writes, "is the ability to think the particular as contained under the universal" (*Critique of Judgment*, Introduction, I) or the "faculty for subsumption of the particular under the universal" (*Critique of Judgment*, Introduction, II). To say that a concept is "universal" is to say that it is common to several objects. The question of how we are to "think the particular as contained under the universal" would thus appear to be the question of how we can think of a particular thing (say, Socrates) as having a feature that can at least in principle be shared with other objects (say, philosophers). Any individual task of subsumption, Kant suggests, may take one of two forms. First, a "determining judgment" involves the "subsumption" of a particular individual (Socrates) under a universal concept (the concept of being a philosopher). In this case, the universal is given, and it is the task of judgment to find a particular that can be subsumed under it. Second, in a "reflective judgment," a particular may be given "for which the universal is to be found" (*Critique of Judgment*, Introduction, II). In the first case, judgment is "determining" or "determinant"; in the second, it is "reflecting" or "reflective" (*Critique of Judgment*, Introduction, II).

ment, Introduction IV). Beauty-Revivalist formulations of the notion of beauty suggest, in loosely Kantian terms, that judgments of beauty assume the character of reflective judgment. What is special about judgements of beauty (as the Revivalists explain them) is that they involve attempts to subsume individual (beautiful) objects under higher value concepts (justice, happiness, or the sacred) in a reflective sense. The Revivalist suggests that in our experience of beauty, we are “reflecting”—attending somehow—to the possible concept that would unify such an experience. The Beauty Revivalists show us that a higher value concept, such as justice, happiness, wisdom, or sanctity, is discoverable through the reflective judgment initiated by the experience of beauty. The sense of beauty is the feeling we have in ourselves or the quality we attribute to an object, which gives us a sense that there are higher or more ultimate values.

The rubric “Beauty Revivalism”

In addition to examining the relationship between beauty and value, Beauty Revivalists also share a further set of unifying features. I have outlined these in detail in my recent monograph, *The Revival of Beauty: Aesthetics, Experience and Philosophy* (2023). In my view, the rubric “Beauty Revivalism” can be seen, in the first instance, to assume several different, broad, non-exhaustive characteristics:

1. Beauty Revivalist texts tend to open with some form of acknowledgement, from their authors, that beauty was an unpopular subject during the 20th century. The texts are written in response to “kalliphobic” or “anti-aesthetic” tendencies and have the goal of re-affirming beauty’s significance.
2. Beauty Revivalists adhere to the Acquaintance Principle. They maintain that being in the presence of a beautiful object is a necessary condition for the experience of beauty; that we cannot be argued into judgments about beautiful things; and that a feature is aesthetic because we cannot be aware of it unless we perceive the

object whose feature it is.

3. The notion of “aesthetic attention” is of great interest to Beauty Revivalist thinking. The Revivalists hold that experiences of beauty require sustained attention to an object. So, they are broadly in favour of revitalising aesthetic attitude theories, such as those of Edward Bullough and Jerome Stolnitz.

4. The Beauty Revivalists recognise beauty as an aesthetic category. They also acknowledge that the crux to understanding beauty is to compare our orientation to the object that we judge as beautiful to a range of alternative kinds of aesthetic judgements—or alternative types of sense perceptions. In this sense, they rejuvenate Kant’s distinctions between different forms of aesthetic judgement and assert the need for aesthetic criteria.

5. The Beauty Revivalists prefer hybrid theories of objectivity and subjectivity about beauty. They tend to incorporate insights from both subjectivist and objectivist accounts.

6. According to the Beauty Revivalists, perceptions and judgments of beauty are not merely sensory or cognitive processes—they also involve or inspire certain distinctive feelings or emotions. They think that one of the bases of our experience of beauty is an emotional response, seemingly linked necessarily to a pleasurable response.

7. It has been widely noted that “defining beauty is a notoriously difficult task” (Paris 2025, 18). All three of the Beauty Revivalists examined in this paper—Scarry, Nehamas, and Scruton—acknowledge that there is a non-discursive aspect to our experience of beauty. At the end of *Beauty*, Scruton says “the reader will have noticed that I have not said what beauty is ... I have avoided the many attempts to analyse beauty in terms of some property or properties exhibited by all beautiful things” (Scruton, 2009, 162).

Scarry notes that “at no point will there be any aspiration to speak in these pages of unattached Beauty, or of the attributes of unattached Beauty” (Scarry 2000, 3). Nehamas claims that what divides him from his critics is that “they are concerned with *what it is to be beautiful*, whereas I am interested in *what it is to find something beautiful*, in the phenomenology and not the ontology of beauty” (Nehamas, 2007, 205). The Revivalists thus share a tacit awareness that beauty is not reducible to a single or simple discursive formulation or definition: rather, it is an *experience*.

Although Beauty Revivalism has not been conceptualised this way in the past, it can now be addressed as a distinctive philosophical “movement” or school of thought. Beauty Revivalist adherents and their texts tend to share the above-mentioned common features: there are clear and demonstrable links between them. The texts I have chosen to discuss in this paper as representative of Beauty Revivalism by no means offer a complete representation of that movement. They function in this paper merely to represent the “tip of the iceberg,” and thus indicate possibilities for future research into Beauty Revivalism.

Conclusion

In his article “Which Beauty? What Taste? Reflections on the Importance of the Philosophy of Beauty and Taste”, Panos Paris critiques the “beauty comeback” on the basis that its participants offer broad conceptions of beauty which do not cohere with one another, and which are not “revelatory of deeper value” (Paris 2025, 11). I have argued, on the contrary, that Beauty Revivalism is a coherent, fully-fledged philosophical movement, which sees beauty, as Paris himself suggests that it ought to be seen, as “inextricably linked to so called non-aesthetic values” (20), such as justice, happiness, knowledge, and the sacred. Beauty Revival texts and authors can be clearly identified—not only do they assume definitive shared characteristics, but they cohere around the same broad sense of beauty as a purveyor of value. The conceptual

clarity about beauty which results from comparing these texts evinces an enriched, optimistic outlook on the present state of academic aesthetics.

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BEAUTY AND OTHER AESTHETIC CONCEPTS: A KANTIAN PROPOSAL

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Panos Paris suggests that beauty has a privileged place among aesthetic concepts and properties. In this paper, I argue that Kant's insights can help us further develop and defend this view. On the proposed Kantian view, a capacity to make judgments of beauty is presupposed by a capacity to make other kinds of aesthetic judgments.

In his perceptive defence of the concepts of beauty and taste, Panos Paris notes that recent debates about the relevance of beauty for philosophical aesthetics are plagued by a failure to distinguish between different senses of beauty—narrow vs. broad, thin vs. thick, shallow vs. deep. He then identifies a sense of beauty that is narrow, thick, and deep and thus equipped to escape the objection that beauty is either superfluous (if taken to simply mean aesthetic excellence) or “easy, shallow, sensuous” (if understood as a narrow notion). But Paris’s aim is not only to restore beauty as one among many aesthetic values; he also promises to show that beauty and taste are “*the* central concepts in aesthetics” (Paris, 2025; 11), that “beauty holds a special place among aesthetic concepts and properties” (27). At the end of the paper, however, the reader is left with a sense that this thesis, though attractive, hasn’t been given satisfactory articulation and defence.

I suggest that Kant’s account of beauty can help further substantiate and defend the claim that beauty is central to aesthetics, having some sort of primacy among aesthetic properties. While Kant does not provide an explicit account of other aesthetic properties beyond beauty and sublimity nor of aesthetic properties *simpliciter*, I argue that his views in the *Critique of Judgment* imply that beauty underlies all other aesthetic properties. More precisely, a *capacity* to discern and make judgments concerning beauty is presupposed by a capacity to discern and make judgments concerning other aesthetic values and qualities. Judgments of beauty are manifestations of the basic capacity for aesthetic sensitivity or discrimination. This capacity can be cultivated and expanded into a capacity to recognize other aesthetic values and qualities.

My primary purpose is not exegetical. It is to propose that basic tenets of Kant’s aesthetics can help us formulate a way (surely not the only “Kantian” way) of thinking about the centrality of beauty that is philosophically compelling. On the strength of its plausibility, I hope to

convince the reader that Kant's aesthetics has rich resources for thinking about other aesthetic properties beyond beauty or aesthetic judgment in the broadest sense. These resources have yet to be fully appreciated. Although I believe that my proposal is faithful to Kant's thinking (at least in spirit), there is no reason to consider faithfulness a necessary condition for fruitful engagement with a historical figure (several Kant-inspired classics can testify to this). In any case, the view sketched in this short paper will have to get a full textual and philosophical case in a more extensive future work.

1. The Form of Aesthetic Judgment

Aesthetic judgments span a wide range of judgments, which may be grouped into three broad classes: (i) purely evaluative judgments (whether something is aesthetically good or bad, superior or inferior to others); (ii) judgments that are both evaluative and descriptive (whether something is, e.g., graceful, lucid, trite); (iii) descriptive judgments that do not entail evaluation immediately or independently of context (whether something is, e.g., realistic, sombre, comical).¹ Aesthetic judgments need not involve a distinctively aesthetic term (consider 'I love that movie' or 'The symphony is too long'). What such judgments have in common is that they require an exercise of aesthetic sensitivity or discrimination. I use 'aesthetic values' and 'aesthetic qualities' to refer, respectively, to evaluative and descriptive properties affirmed in an aesthetic judgment.

Kant's aesthetic theory purports to be a *general* theory of aesthetic judgment. But it focuses exclusively on judgments of the form 'x is beautiful'.² Unsympathetic readers could take this to be a sign of impoverishment. Judgments of beauty are a tiny fraction of our rich ordinary aesthetic discourse (think of what we say to each other at the museum

1 This taxonomy is modified from Sibley (2001, pp. 33–34).

2 Apart from a much less extensive treatment of sublimity.

or after a play) and not obviously the most significant. Kant is not blind to this fact. In different places, he uses other aesthetic concepts without explicit theorization. For example: “A poem can be quite **pretty** and **elegant**, but **without spirit**. A story is **precise** and **orderly** [...]”. A ceremonial speech is **thorough** and [...] **flowery** [...]” (5:313, translation modified). He also does not fail to give a reason for privileging beauty: We “have to seek only the deduction of judgments of taste, i.e., of the judgments about the beauty of things in nature, and by this means accomplish the task for the whole of the aesthetic power of judgment in its entirety” (5:280).³ The suggestion is that the aesthetic power of judgment “in its entirety” has application beyond judgments of beauty, but establishing the validity of these judgments suffices for establishing the validity of all other aesthetic judgments (which is all the *Critique* needs to achieve).

There are two ways to defend Kant’s aesthetics against charges of impoverishment. One is to argue that, for Kant, ‘beauty’ refers to a *family* of aesthetic values. Here ‘beauty’ is construed in a *relatively* broad sense. It still does not simply mean aesthetic success; there is at least one type of aesthetic success—sublimity (which may itself be another family of aesthetic values)—that does not fall under it. I have little to say against this reading directly (though I offer some reasons for thinking that Kantian beauty is narrow in Section 3). I want to suggest another, more philosophically appealing way of reading Kant: beauty in the *narrow* sense is Kant’s concern, but beauty in the narrow sense has primacy over other aesthetic properties. In this sense, a capacity to make judgments that something is (or is not) beautiful is presupposed by a capacity to make aesthetic judgments of other kinds. Or, equivalently, possession of the concept of beauty is presupposed by possession

3 Citations from the *Critique of Pure Reason* are given by the pagination of the first (A) and the second (B) edition. Citations from Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* are given by the volume number and pagination of the Academy Edition. Translations are taken from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*.

of other aesthetic concepts.

To take other aesthetic properties to depend on beauty in this way is to view judgments of beauty as manifestations of a capacity that constitutes the *form* of aesthetic judgments in general. If this is correct, beauty occupies a parallel position to *a priori* forms of other representational capacities: space and time are the form of intuition, the categories are the form of empirical thinking about an object, and the moral law is the form of practical judgment. In claiming that space is the form of outer intuition, Kant is saying that a capacity to represent spaces is presupposed by a capacity to represent objects that occupy them. A capacity to represent causal relations is presupposed by a capacity to represent objective temporal successions. In the same vein, I suggest that a capacity to recognize beauty in an object is presupposed by a capacity to recognize other aesthetic qualities and values. In the third *Critique*, beauty is not characterized as the form of any representational capacity. But we find the claim that “beauty is the form of the purposiveness of an object, insofar as it is perceived in it without representation of an end” (5:236). As I argue below, this can be read as support for my view, for all aesthetic judgments rely on a capacity to apprehend an object in such a way as to perceive its purposiveness without a purpose.

Even if Kant understands ‘beauty’ in the narrow sense, it is not at all obvious that he has any interest in other types of aesthetic judgments. Let me briefly respond to this concern before I further elaborate on my view. Kant does not conceive of the *Critique of Judgment* primarily as a work of philosophical aesthetics. The three *Critiques* form a complete systematic study of the rational character of the human mind and its three basic capacities (e.g., 5:177). After investigating the faculty of cognition and the faculty of desire in the first two *Critiques*, the faculty of feeling pleasure and displeasure remains to be investigated. For Kant, the rationality of a given faculty or capacity has to do with its being governed by internal norms, which he calls ‘*a priori* principles’—*a priori*

because the source of these principles is internal to the faculty itself as autonomous or self-legislative.⁴ The third *Critique* is conceived as an investigation of the rational or “higher” part of the faculty of feeling—of the way human feelings are governed by internal normative principles, which manifests itself paradigmatically in our aesthetic responses to nature and works of art.⁵

The third *Critique* is at the same time an investigation of the power of judgment. Kant seems to think that the rationality of the human mind is explained by the rationality of its faculty of *cognition*, a point he expresses by saying that the three higher faculties of cognition (understanding, judgment, and reason) act as the higher faculties of the mind’s three basic faculties (5:198; 20:245-46). The faculty of feeling has the *power of judgment* as its higher part. Kant distinguishes the aesthetic from the teleological power of judgment. But he also says that the *aesthetic* power of judgment is fundamental to the power of judgment in its entirety, since “this alone contains a principle that the power of judgment lays at the basis of its reflection on nature entirely *a priori*”, a principle common to both aesthetic and teleological judgment (5:193).⁶ For this and related reasons, some interpreters have argued that the subject matter of Kant’s aesthetic theory is, in fact, the capacity for judgment *simpliciter*.⁷ This is not the place to evaluate this thesis. I only wish to note that if judgments of beauty are fundamental to the capacity for judgment *simpliciter*, it would *a fortiori* be fundamental to the capacity for *aesthetic* judgments, which span beyond judgments of beauty.

4 See Land (2021) and Schafer (2021).

5 See Cohen (2017).

6 Kant also says that “the principle of taste is the subjective principle of the power of judgment in general” (5:286).

7 E.g., Arendt (1989), Fleischhacker (1999), Ginsborg (2015), Makkai (2021).

2. The Significance of Taste

My proposal is that, in Kant's view, beauty in the narrow sense has primacy over other aesthetic properties in the following sense: a capacity to discern and make judgments concerning other aesthetic values and qualities presupposes a capacity to discern and make judgments concerning beauty. This view does not entail that all other aesthetic values are reducible to beauty or that they are just varieties of beauty. Nor does it entail that beauty is constitutive of all positive aesthetic values, such that to be graceful or delicate is necessarily to be beautiful. After all, there are aesthetic qualities that are not immediately evaluative. These, too, I believe, depend on the subject's capacity for recognizing beauty.

For Kant, judgment of beauty requires the exercise of a capacity, the aesthetic power of judgment, that calls for cultivation.⁸ He identifies this with 'taste' [*Geschmack*] in the ordinary (eighteenth-century) sense. Cultivation of taste is necessary in order to distinguish genuine from false beauty ('charm' [*Reiz*]). But I don't think this is all there is to Kant's claim. I disagree with those who hold that there is a single, objective, eternal standard of beauty and the faculty for detecting it (taste).⁹ On my view, taste admits of a determinate form or shape which is subject to normative standards determined partly *a priori*, partly by culture and history. One reason to think this is that Kant accords the role of a rule-giver to the artist (i.e., genius). Through their original creation, the artist gives a rule to art, which has normative force upon subsequent works. The work of genius serves "as a standard or a rule for judging" other works (5:308). Crucially, such a rule is "original" and "new" and not derived from previous rules or examples (5:317). This implies that Kant allows the standard of taste (for art) to vary depending on art-historical

8 5:225, 5:283. For discussion, see Matherne (2019).

9 E.g., Ameriks (2003).

situation.¹⁰

My suggestion is that part of what it is for taste to be given a determinate shape according to the current artistic practice is for it to be molded into capacities for discerning other aesthetic properties. For what differentiates one historical standard of artistic taste from another if not the set of aesthetic properties one finds (or ought to find) appealing or unappealing? To appreciate and judge the aesthetic merit of a work according to a given standard of taste, one must be in a position to discern the relevant aesthetic properties. Capacities to discern other aesthetic properties arise from the basic malleable or expandable capacity Kant calls 'taste'. They are particular empirical determinations or modulations of taste, which could be characterized as the basic capacity for aesthetic sensitivity. Our sensitivity for diverse aesthetic values and qualities does not consist in a bundle of unrelated capacities; these are systematically related insofar as they are determinations of one and the same basic determinable capacity.

What this basic capacity enables, for Kant, is awareness of the object's formal purposiveness or purposiveness without a purpose. This means that we apprehend the beautiful object as a distinctive kind of unity. This unity is not spatiotemporal but broadly functional (without determinate functions), analogous to organic unity. In judging an organism to be unity, we consider each of its parts as performing a specific function in reciprocal relation to one another and to the whole. Analogously, when we (seek to) judge an object to be beautiful, we consider its sensible properties in the light of their interrelation and in the context of the whole—how they interact, complement, and contrast with one another to generate experience of a unified whole.¹¹

10 Kant thinks that this marks a difference between natural beauty and artistic beauty. "The judging of [the beauty of nature] requires only taste". But "the possibility of [the beauty of art] (which must also be taken account of in the judging of such an object) requires genius" (5:311).

11 I'm indebted to Zuckert (2006) for the interpretation presented in this paragraph.

In this sense, our capacity to recognize an object's beauty involves the ability to engage in a distinctive mode or manner of apprehending it. Kant calls this 'mere reflection'. The object may fail to exhibit (a sufficient degree of) purposive unity and thus fail to be beautiful, but we still exercise a capacity to "reflect" upon it as long as we seek to evaluate the object in terms of its beauty. This is analogous (in some respects) to trying to solve a puzzle (say, Sudoku) which has no solution. We exercise a capacity to solve that type of puzzle as long as we continue to search for a solution.

The same 'merely reflective' mode of apprehension, I suggest, is involved the exercise of aesthetic capacities in general. As Frank Sibley observes, "the particular aesthetic character of something may be said to result from the *totality* of its relevant non-aesthetic characteristics".¹² Take a painting that we find balanced or a poem that we find moving. We can easily imagine that a slight change—adding a stroke here or darkening the color there, reordering this pair of words or changing that one—may result in a different totality that is no longer balanced or moving. It is balanced or moving "because everything about the work is exactly as it is". When we make a judgment concerning the aesthetic character of an object, we attend to the totality of its sensible properties. We engage, that is, in the same cognitive activity that we do when we evaluate an object in terms of beauty: relating its sensible properties to one another and considering how they hold together as a whole. This is what we do when we attend to an object as an *aesthetic* object.

But why does it follow that a capacity to judge something to be balanced or moving presupposes a capacity to judge it to be beautiful? My view is that there is just one capacity that can be characterized in two ways: as a capacity for mere reflection *or* as a capacity for recognizing beauty. It is a capacity for apprehension whose *aim* is to discern the object's purposive unity. To exercise such a capacity is to relate the

¹² Sibley (2001, p. 35).

object's parts to one another in a distinctive way. But, in what way? In such a way as to make the object's purposive unity (if it has such) discernible or salient. This is the sense in which the capacity to recognize an object's formal purposiveness is akin to a perceptual capacity. As Kant puts it, taste is a "kind of" sense (5:293). But it is, strictly speaking, not a perceptual capacity. What it "detects" is irreducible to objective, non-aesthetic properties (though it depends on them). This type of unity cannot be characterized except by reference to one's *feeling* or affective response to individual objects. An object is experienced as beautiful when it elicits pleasure that signals the presence of this type of unity. To discern beauty *is* to feel "pleasure in mere reflection on the form of an object" (5:191); it is to judge "through feeling" (5:238). Taste is "the faculty for judging formal purposiveness [...] through the feeling of pleasure or displeasure" (5:194). The awareness of formal purposiveness is a kind of *felt* awareness.

My point is that although other aesthetic properties do not presuppose beauty or purposive unity (beauty is not a condition on possessing other aesthetic properties), to *discern* them requires the subject to engage in a mode of apprehension whose aim or end is to recognize such unity. One cannot see the grace of a Canova, hear the sweetness in a Chopin nocturne, or notice the gaudiness of a dress's colour unless one apprehends it *as if* to grasp its beauty (whether one judges it to be beautiful is beside the point). All aesthetic judgments share a common mode of apprehension. However, it cannot be characterized or defined except in terms of the affective response to an object it characteristically enables, namely, pleasure in the beautiful. All other aesthetic capacities thus presuppose a capacity to recognize beauty. This view may be seen as one way of fleshing out Paris's claim that beauty "tracks a distinctively human mode of valuing that is experiential—felt" (Paris 2025, 28).

3. Beyond Kantian Beauty

I have suggested how an account of the primacy of beauty could be developed on the basis of Kant's view in the *Critique of Judgment*. But is Kantian beauty *narrow*, *thick*, and *deep*? Does it correspond to the concept of beauty Paris advocates? My answer is yes.

Kant analyzes beauty in terms of formal features (disinterestedness, universality, etc.) that seem applicable to a wide range of aesthetic judgments. We might be tempted to take Kant to be concerned with aesthetic success in general, thus with beauty in the *broad* sense. But as I pointed out, Kantian beauty must *at least* be so narrow as to exclude sublimity, defined in terms of formlessness and "its resistance to the interest of the senses" (5:267).¹³ Kantian beauty is also distinguished from other species of aesthetic success by its association with form (cf. Paris, 2025, pp. 13-14, 19) and a qualitatively distinctive kind of pleasure.

Like Paris's preferred concept of beauty, Kantian beauty is thick. And, similarly, it acquires its thickness or descriptive dimension through its connection with (purposive) form. Kant's concept of form, however, is more flexible and capacious than the more familiar concept of form favoured by twentieth-century formalists like Roger Fry, Clive Bell, and Clement Greenberg. As Rachel Zuckert argues, by conceiving form in terms of unity or relation, rather than spatiotemporal properties, Kant can accommodate the unity of tangible form and representational content in a work of art. This is because purposive relations can obtain between aspects of content or between these and sensible properties.¹⁴ It is thus no surprise that, despite his alleged formalism, Kant holds that beauty (both artistic and natural) is "the expression of aesthetic ideas"

13 The capacity to experience the sublime might also allow for similar expansion or modulation. For instance, aesthetic values associated with tragedy, horror, and the grotesque could plausibly be aligned with the sublime. For an influential application of Kant's theory of the sublime to tragedy, see Schiller (1993).

14 Zuckert (2006, p. 163).

(5:320).¹⁵ An aesthetic idea, what great works of art and magnificent vistas present us with, is a sensible representation so rich in *content* that it outstrips our concepts—“a coherent whole of an unutterable fullness of thought” (5:329).

The unification of form and content leads us, finally, to the sense in which Kantian beauty is deep, profound, and meaningful. Aesthetic ideation through purposive forms allows beautiful objects to instantiate a distinctive mode of presentation of content—‘symbolization’ of abstract ideas that embody our deepest values. Following a venerable tradition, Paris locates the ‘depth’ of beauty in its affinity to non-aesthetic values, especially the good life, moral goodness, and justice. Kant, no doubt, belongs to this tradition when he claims, famously, that beauty is the symbol of morality (5:351). In experiencing beauty, we at the same time feel “a certain ennoblement and elevation” of the mind. This feeling is “analogical to the consciousness of a mental state produced by moral judgments” (5:354). Beauty thus presents us with a sensible analogue of the morally good, which, for Kant, is tied to freedom and the supersensible. Kant would agree with Paris that beauty “is a matter of pleasure in form as revelatory of deeper value” (Paris 2025, 11).

Kant has always been at the centre of the philosophical discussion of beauty. But I have argued that his thinking is also relevant for the current interest in the question of beauty’s place in aesthetics and its relationship to other aesthetic concepts and properties. If judgments of beauty are fundamental to other kinds of aesthetic judgments in the way I have suggested, it would follow that the philosophical analysis of judgments of beauty can reveal something essential about aesthetic judgments in general—that the analysis of beauty is the foundation of what Mary Mothersill called “the semantics of critical language”.¹⁶

15 For recent discussion, see Chignell (2007) and Matherne (2013).

16 Mothersill (1984).

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BROAD, NARROW AND THICK: TOWARDS A UNIFIED ACCOUNT OF ARTISTIC BEAUTY

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Although it has regained considerable prominence in the aesthetic debate over the past few decades, beauty remains a problematic concept in some respects because of its dual nature. On the one hand, in its traditional, narrow interpretation, it has been reduced to a very limited and thin set of features, like symmetry or prettiness. On the other hand, when broadly conceived, it tends to overlap with aesthetic value or merit. Such duality can be highly confusing, especially concerning artworks since there are apparently no connections between the two senses of beauty. Panos Paris has recently proposed to reorient the aesthetic debate towards narrow beauty, which he considers a thick, rather than thin, concept. In the present paper, I argue that the notion of thickness, in the formal-oriented version offered by Paris, can also be successfully applied to broad artistic beauty. This can help us restore unity in our aesthetic language and improve our understanding of the most recent developments in art history.

1. Artistic beauty and the charge of ambiguity

As Panos Paris suggests at the beginning of his paper, ‘beauty’ now finds itself in a somewhat paradoxical situation. On the one hand, it has undergone a sort of new renaissance since the last decades of the 20th century, thanks to the works of several philosophers and aestheticians (e.g., Mothersill, Nehamas, Zangwill, Danto, Scruton, Sartwell, and many others) who delved extensively into issues about many varieties of beauty (moral beauty, human beauty, abstract beauty, the beauty of nature and of artworks, everyday beauty). On the other hand, beauty has often been dismissed as an irrelevant and “essentially shallow” concept, mostly by those same authors who, with their articles and books, helped it make a strong “comeback” in recent philosophical debates (see Paris 2025, 10–11). This is particularly evident, in my view, in the sphere of artistic beauty, insofar as the idea that beauty gradually moved away from modern and contemporary art—especially visual arts and instrumental music—to reach other areas of human activity (such as fashion or urban design), became a *common loci* in both aesthetics and art history (see, e.g., Castro 2012).

At the core of this conundrum lies the fact that beauty—as several philosophers, from Beardsley to Paris himself, have claimed—is a “dual” and “ambiguous” concept since it can be conceived in both a broad and narrow sense. In a broad sense, ‘beautiful’ denotes “all that we see, hear or imagine with pleasure and approbation” (Tatarkiewicz 1980, 174). Thus, beauty *sensu largo* is a normative or “verdictive”—as Nick Zangwill (1995, 317) calls it—*notion*, which means “aesthetic success” (Scruton 2011, 13) and stands for the “aesthetic value” or “merit” that an object (most notably, an artwork) possesses in virtue of its various aesthetic qualities (see Beardsley 1981, 505–6). Contrariwise, intended as a narrow concept, ‘beauty’ means “only a certain kind of aesthetic success” (Scruton 2011, 13), that is, a specific and unique “regional quality” (Beardsley 1981, 505), which has been usually associated with such fea-

tures as ‘pleasantness’, ‘smoothness’, ‘delicacy’, ‘symmetry’, and the likes (see Paris 2025, 13). Along similar lines, when approaching the issue of musical beauty, Jerrold Levinson (2015, 58) distinguishes what he calls “narrowly” or “unequivocally beautiful music”—whose earmarks are traits such as “sweetness”, “harmoniousness”, “fluidity”, and “tenderness”—from “broadly beautiful music”, which is tantamount to “good or valuable music as a whole”.

This duality or ambiguity underlying the concept of beauty is quite problematic, at least within the artistic field. The grounds on which people ascribe the property of ‘beauty’ to a work may vary considerably, according to what kind of ‘beauty’ is involved (see Paris 2025, 13-14). The lack of some clear connection between the two concepts of beauty causes confusion, since an object or artwork may be judged as (broadly) beautiful, i.e., excellent or aesthetically valuable, without being (narrowly) beautiful, i.e., pleasant and proportionate. This is particularly true of modern and contemporary art (mainly visual arts and music, but also theatre, movies, poetry, and so on), where we are surrounded by works that are praised for being powerful, profound, sublime, dramatic, or even fragmented, restless and disturbing; that is, for qualities that are very different from, and in many cases incompatible with, those supporting judgments of beauty narrowly understood. Think of, e.g., the works of artists such as Picasso, Kirchner, Bacon, Freud, Basquiat, Kiefer, and Hirst, or of composers such as Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Varèse, Ligeti, Stockhausen, and Penderecki. Talking of beauty when describing their *oeuvres* may seem inappropriate unless we specify that we are using ‘beauty’ in its broad sense. Moreover, instances of ‘broadly-but-not-narrowly’ beautiful works can also be found in the history of classical art and music. For example, Levinson (2015, 61) speaks of the ugliness of Beethoven’s *Grosse Fugue*, and Paris (2025, 14-15) discusses the case of Titian’s *Flaying of Marsyas*, which he describes as “harrowing, dark, and in some ways ugly”.

Hence, it seems that either we are able to seek a connection between the two notions (i.e., broad and narrow) of beauty, or we have to choose which one of them has the primacy in a judgment of beauty of an artwork.

2. Panos Paris' notion of 'narrow-yet-thick' sense of beauty

Faced with the aforementioned dilemma that the duality of the concept of beauty brings, Paris prefers to follow the second path, granting aesthetic primacy to beauty narrowly understood. Indeed, he observes that this is the quality most philosophers (as well as art lovers or connoisseurs) before the twentieth century referred to when using the term 'beautiful' in their judgments. He reasons that the writings of many contemporary philosophers on beauty actually focus on the notions of aesthetic value, excellence, goodness, and the like because they are still "in the grips of a phobia of beauty in the narrow sense" (Paris 2025, 15). Thus, he suggests that, in order to render our aesthetic language unambiguous, it would be much better to avoid talking of 'beauty' when we are making a pure judgment of aesthetic value or merit.

Leaving aside linguistic issues, we should nonetheless ask why philosophers have recently turned their attention to a broad notion of beauty. This, according to Paris, has to do with the fact that beauty in the narrow (i.e., traditional) sense has been considered a "thin" concept. A concept is thin when it lacks a descriptive dimension. Beauty, as narrowly construed, has been often associated with "the easy, sensuous, and shallow" (*ibid.*, 14). As such, it would actually be a thin concept, insofar as it just states that an object has an appealing appearance. Moreover, it would have little relevance to the most important artistic trends that emerged during the last 150 years. However, if we look back at the philosophical tradition (from Plato to Santayana) that was preoccupied with beauty (in the narrow sense, i.e., as a peculiar artistic category), we find that it has been identified with formal 'substantial' qualities, like symmetry, proportion, and aptness. It is in virtue of such properties

that beauty *stricto sensu* possesses a descriptive content and is thereby “thick” instead of “thin” (*ibid.*). Paris goes even further by offering a detailed account of “narrow-but-thick” beauty (as he calls it), centred on formal qualities like harmony, balance, “uniformity amidst variety”, and “wellformedness for function”, which in turn elicit a pleasurable experience in the perceiver (*ibid.*, 18-23).

With a definition of beauty tied to a less rule-governed notion of form than it is in traditional theories about beauty, Paris manages both to strengthen the concept of narrow beauty and restore its relevance in art history and aesthetic judgments. Indeed, many artworks (and even non-artistic objects or events) are hardly easy, sensuous, or pretty, but they can nonetheless be aptly described as ‘beautiful’. Therefore, I think that his effort to “reorient the debate” on beauty issues is successful. Still, something more can be said about assessments of beauty, especially concerning modern and contemporary arts. In the next section, I will try to extend Paris’ formal-oriented notion of thickness and restate the relevance of broad beauty.

3. From ‘narrow-yet-thick’ to ‘broad-yet-thick’ artistic beauty

As we have just seen, Paris distinguishes between two sub-varieties of narrow beauty, i.e., a ‘thin’ and a ‘thick’ one. While the former has been taken as evidence of its “shallowness and insubstantiality” (*ibid.*, 17), the latter rests on solid formal grounds. It can, therefore, account for the beauty of a wider array of artworks. However, many artworks still fall outside the domain of narrow beauty—even in the revised and thicker version advocated by Paris—, especially in modern and contemporary visual art and music. To call them ‘beautiful’ remains a problematic task, if not an ambiguous linguistic act—at least until we find a link between the two principal varieties of (artistic) beauty, i.e., the broad and the narrow. Thus, it may be useful to seek some common traits that would allow us to use the same word in different contexts without causing confusion or misunderstanding. I think these common traits are to be

found in an extension of what Paris labels “thick narrow beauty”.

Firstly, it is important to stress that, even within the context of broad beauty, it is possible to envisage both a thin and thick sub-variety. Just as “thin narrow beauty” denotes, according to Paris, “shadow” qualities such as prettiness or graciousness, I suggest that we use the expression ‘thin broad beauty’ to cover the purely evaluative dimension of artistic beauty—that is, the overall aesthetic value of a work, independent of what is responsible for that value or aesthetic merit. But of course, some causal reasons must ground normative aesthetic judgments; we have to look closer among them to see if there are certain common features that form the descriptive dimension of beauty broadly understood. This is where a ‘broad-but-thick’ beauty—if there is any—lies.

According to Monroe Beardsley, however varied the aesthetic character of a work of art may be, its intrinsic merit or value depends on the capacity to produce a good aesthetic experience. Although no general rules govern such capacity, objects that possess a high degree of “unity, complexity, and intensity” are the best candidates to fulfil that purpose (Beardsley 1981, 530–34). Now, do such features resemble those at the core of narrow-thick-beauty? I think that we can answer affirmatively, but for clarity, it may be useful to follow a bottom-up approach. So, let’s start from the lower (i.e., narrower) level of beauty, and see if, in its thick-variant, it comprises features that can also be applied in judgments that assess the overall aesthetic value – that is, the beauty in its broad sense – of a work of art.

As we have seen, on Paris’ account, the two ‘objective’ properties of thick narrow beauty are ‘formal unity’ (which comprises features such as ‘balance’ and ‘uniformity amidst variety’) and ‘wellformedness for function’. (I intentionally leave aside the third element in his threefold structure of narrow beauty—i.e., the pleasurable experience—since it can be considered the subjective outcome of the jointed action of the two other elements). I propose to refer to them as, respectively,

‘harmony’ and ‘fittingness’. Now, my idea is that these same qualities also occur in the sphere of broad beauty, and therefore represent its descriptive content, i.e., its thick dimension—albeit with a higher level of intensity and complexity (to speak in Beardsleyian terms). To explain this, we must look at both properties more closely.

By ‘harmony’, we mean the formal unity among the perceivable parts of an item, as is stated in the classic theory of beauty (see Moore 1942, 45). Such formal harmony or unity, as argued, can be effectively matched with the notions of coherence and completeness. According to Beardsley, an (aesthetic) object is coherent when it is “highly organized”—so that every part or internal relation is at the right place and “it all fits together”—and “complete”, where “it has all that it needs”, meaning that no other part or relation outside the object is required to satisfy its underlying purpose (Beardsley 1981, 190–200). The features of coherence and completeness occur, at least to some degree, in most instances of traditional art, as well as in some modern and contemporary artistic practices (think of, e.g., Magical Realism, Metaphysical Art and Hyper-Realism in painting, or of Neo-Romanticism and Minimalism in music), which continued to pursue beauty in its narrow (but thick) sense. However, many avant-gardes of the twentieth-century century moved away from the principles of symmetry, harmony, and pleasantness, in favour of asymmetry, deconstruction, and discomfort. This trend seemingly continued into the most recent developments in art practices, such as postmodernism, which further challenged the idea of formal unity by emphasizing fragmentation, decentring, and eclecticism (see Shusterman 1992, 63).

Here, we should remember what two Greek philosophers, Heraclitus and Aristotle, convincingly argued: that formal unity can involve radical “oppositions and conflicting forces”, and that the harmony of a work of art is supremely beautiful only when—far from removing any sort of internal opposition—it embraces contingencies, dissonances, and

heterogeneity, and is enhanced by the tension they generate (Shusterman 1992, 64; see also Curi 2013). As Richard Shusterman (1992, 76) rightly remarks, even “fragmentation and incoherences” can have their own “stimulating aesthetic effect” and result in “more complex forms of coherence”—that is, as I read it, in ‘broadly’ beautiful artworks. In my view, this is what most avant-garde and post-modern artists sought by experimenting with novel compositional strategies and formal procedures, such as deconstruction, abstraction, seriality, hybridization, polystylism, and many others.

It would, nonetheless, be a mistake to treat the notion of formal harmony separately from the meaning of an artwork. Indeed, most artworks are appreciated in virtue of properties belonging to their (representational, narrative, or expressive) content as well. Now, several philosophers—from Kant to contemporary authors—have argued that there is an intimate relation between form and content in art. This has been described variously as interconnectedness, coalescence, fusion, or—in Paris’ own words—wellformedness for function (where the latter is of an expressive or semantic kind). The thesis of the inseparability of form and content is likewise endorsed by Roger Scruton, who refers to it as “fittingness”, which is, “in art as in life”, at the “heart of aesthetic success” (Scruton 2011, 106). He also maintains that it is in the artistic field that aesthetic fittingness reaches its highest degree. The artist always strives to express his ideas or feelings in the most intense and effective way by “fitting things to each other”, as is exemplified in the “supreme artistic achievements”, i.e., in “the highest form of beauty” (*ibid.*, 105-109). Thus, along with harmony, fittingness is responsible for the overall beauty of an artwork, whatever meaning it may communicate.

Nevertheless, according to some—most notably, Arthur Danto (2003, 86-102)—, when an artwork refers to such subjects as war, violence, suffering, and so on, it would be misleading to describe it as beautiful

instead of, say, dramatic, powerful, tragic, anguished, and the like. He claims this, in my opinion, since he relies on a narrow—and rather thin—concept of beauty, which, as far as visual arts are concerned, he associates with qualities such as “simple forms”, “smooth outlines”, elegance, and the like. However, on a broader perspective, if beauty, conceived as formal harmony, can embrace dissonances and heterogeneity, then it can likewise be “inflected” (to borrow a term from Danto himself) so that it becomes “internal”—i.e., ‘fitting’—to an artwork’s intended meaning, without overshadowing its possible painful or dramatic character. Thus, there is no reason to think that upsetting, despairing, or disorienting experiences, which gained special attention in modern and contemporary art, require ‘ugly’ means of expression. Instead, as George Santayana rightly claimed, “the more terrible the experience described, the more powerful must be the art which is to transform it” (Santayana 1986, § 57). Such a powerful artistic act, if I am right, takes shape in the abovementioned Titian’s painting (which is praised by Paris for its good composition), as well as in other ‘broad-but-thick’ beautiful artworks such as, e.g., Picasso’s *Guernica*, Bacon’s *Three Studies for a Crucifixion*, or the nine-movements suite titled *Blood on the Floor* by the English composer Mark-Anthony Turnage. While it would be misleading to place works of this kind beside, say, Botticelli’s paintings or Mozart’s piano concertos, it still makes sense to call them ‘beautiful’, to the extent that they display a high degree of unity among their internal elements (however varied) as well as between form and content (be it dramatic, painful, or otherwise). These two varieties of unity—which we called, respectively, harmony and fittingness, and which, as such, are at the core of narrow beauty—here are paired with formal complexity and semantic/expressive intensity, which bring us back to Beardsley’s three criteria of aesthetic value mentioned earlier.

4. Concluding Remarks

The way Paris faces the problem of the ambiguity of 'beauty' is insightful and promising. I think he is right in defending a thick notion of narrow beauty, which accounts well for most artworks of the past and a significant body of modern and contemporary works. However, there is no need to give up the notion of 'broad beauty' in favour of its correlate, i.e., aesthetic value. Instead, I explored the intersection between the two senses of beauty and suggested that they are both—with respect to their thick, i.e. descriptive, dimension—grounded on the formal properties of harmony and fittingness. If that is so, we can continue talking of beauty even in front of those artistic trends that experimented with fragmentation and dealt with dramatic issues. Of course, some works of art will still fall outside the domain of beauty, albeit broadly understood. I am thinking of the category of Conceptual Art, extending from Duchamp's ready-mades to Cattelan's installations. However, I hold that this is not at all problematic, insofar as works of this sort have little or nothing to do with formal and aesthetic matters, and sometimes clearly reject any kind of beauty (be it narrow or broad). Whether they nonetheless achieve some remarkable artistic—instead of aesthetic—value (in virtue of, e.g., strictly historical-contextual features such as originality or subversiveness) may eventually be the subject of further inquiries.

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HOPE IN BEAUTY – RESPONSES TO MY COMMENTATORS

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I. Preliminary Remarks

I am deeply grateful to Harry Drummond and Christopher Earley who, as editors of *DiA*, invited me to write my target article, as well as to Pirachula Chulanon, Filippo Focosi, and Catherine Wesselinoff, who took interest in it and invested their time and energy in carefully reflecting upon and writing insightful responses to it. I have learned much from them and could, in principle, simply concede their points, not least because I was pleased to find in them more sympathy for my views than I've come to expect from fellow philosophers. And yet, in the spirit of philosophical respect and with a view to fruitful exchange, I will, of course, offer some thoughts in response to each of the commentaries. I will conclude with some rather eccentric, though I hope not unwelcome, reflections, which set my investment in beauty and taste, and my concern over what I see as its considerable neglect by philosophers and decline in the world at large, against a more personal context. Though less philosophical, such contextualization is, I find, particularly illuminating when it comes to reflecting on one's philosophical practice, especially when that practice is focused on value theory.

II. Chulanon on a Kantian Account of the Primacy of Narrow Beauty in Aesthetics

Pirachula Chulanon made me think twice (thrice even) about my long-held scepticism concerning Kant's views on beauty. Chulanon's illuminating discussion of Kant's account of the judgement of beauty and its centrality to aesthetic judgement in general is one of the best things I've read on Kant in recent memory, and I'm glad that Chulanon thinks that Kant and I can agree on many things, including on the link between beauty and deep values. Chulanon, however, is also concerned that my paper does not make good the claim that beauty has some kind of centrality in aesthetics. Now, in my view, beauty is tied to our most central fundamental values, and, in the species that I call functional beauty, this can be seen at work. In my mind, other aesthetic properties or values are secondary to beauty, much in the way that instrumental values are secondary to intrinsic ones. In recent work (2020; 2022; 2023; 2025a; 2025b), I have slowly been working my way through more substantive accounts that will, I hope, ultimately help me propose a full-blown theory encapsulating the relevant ideas (in my 2025b, I have also begun working out something like Kant's notion of purposiveness without purpose). I therefore accept that I have work to do to complete the project, and I'm grateful to Chulanon for showing me that the latter has much more in common with Kant than I've been willing to admit.

So, I concede to Chulanon that my defence of the centrality of beauty is not fully-fledged in my article, but I want to clarify that, in a nutshell, it rests mainly on my linking beauty to moral and epistemic values and virtues. In fact, I think that beauty may lie behind such values and virtues themselves. This has always been my most fundamental disagreement with Kant, who is, if I understand him aright, keen to keep those realms of value distinct. Hence his talk of beauty as symbolizing, and as bearing analogies with, morality, which contrasts, for instance, with others writing around his time, like Hume, Hutcheson, or Smith,

who straightforwardly spoke of morality as a kind of beauty. This closer relationship between beauty and other values is part of why beauty is central, not just for aesthetics, but value theory more generally: more than being a prerequisite of aesthetic judgement, it is, in my view, a prerequisite to humanly valuing intrinsically. But a defence of this, granted, lies some way away.

Nonetheless, it's worth clarifying that my claim is analogous to Chulanon's, and that Chulanon's account of Kant may perhaps help me spell it out better. For Chulanon thinks that (a capacity to appreciate) beauty lies behind and is presupposed by (our capacity to appreciate other) aesthetic values. In a similar fashion, I think that (our capacity to appreciate) beauty is a precondition of (our capacity to appreciate) values such as the moral virtues and qualities like wisdom. Proper appreciation of these latter values engages our taste, for such appreciation is, itself, an instance of appreciation of beauty. Failure to appreciate beauty in the presence of such qualities (even in the contemplation of them) reflects evaluative impoverishment.

In closing, I would like to reiterate that Chulanon's piece offers a fascinating view of how a Kantian account of beauty may provide the resources that allow us to appreciate the centrality of beauty, and I hope that he will develop this proposal further in future work, for I certainly am eager to hear more. It is precisely this sort of analysis that I feel is most needed in today's landscape of philosophical aesthetics, and from which I fear that many contemporary philosophers focusing on beauty and aesthetic value are moving away.

III. Focosi on the Significance of Broad Beauty

Filippo Focosi, while in agreement with my account of narrow, thick beauty, argues that there is also a place for a broad sense of beauty involving fittingness, which is itself a kind of unity, a quality plausibly linked to beauty, which allows for works that aren't harmonious, balanced, etc., but disunified, deconstructed, hybridized, etc. to count

as beautiful. For instance, he thinks that while it's clear that Mozart's piano concerti are beautiful in a narrow sense, we should still maintain 'beauty' as a concept relevant to works like Bacon's *Three Studies for a Crucifixion*.

However, I am yet to be convinced that using the same term to speak of Bacon's *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* or Hirst's *A Thousand Years* and Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* or Beuys' 7000 *Eichen* is helpful. For one, it deepens the divide between philosophical and lay usage. For another, it runs the risk of causing confusion in philosophy itself. As much as philosophers pretend to strive for clarity and precision, if I'm right in my diagnosis about discussions of beauty in the last few decades, for some reason they clearly fail to live up to that aim in that area of aesthetic discourse. But using beauty indiscriminately also seems to misdescribe and even do a form of injustice to some works. For while they may be unified in many ways, this does not seem sufficient for beauty, not least because there are many artworks that do possess a compelling unity between form and content—the Marquis de Sade's novels, Goya's *Disasters of War* series of etchings, Berg's *Wozzeck*, and others—but whose unity is precisely one that dwells on ugliness, depravity, and disorder. Calling such works beautiful would, I think, be ill-advised.

I do think, however, that Focosi may have something else in mind, something which he may be conflating with beauty in the broad sense. What I take this to be is a higher-level, intellectual, ethical, or otherwise 'inner' kind of beauty, which is of the narrow-and-thick variety, but can stem largely from coherence, thematic unity, or expressive subject matter that comes from certain works that include much that is disharmonious, incoherent, or unpleasant. This might include, for example, the *Grosse Fugue* (which I, incidentally, do find achingly beautiful), but, I would suggest, exclude, say, much of the work of Stockhausen; likewise, it might include, say, Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinema*, but exclude Michael Haneke's *Funny Games*. The latter examples may well

be aesthetically valuable, and their aesthetic value may be partly down to some form of coherence, but what they elicit is worlds apart from satisfaction or pleasure—they do not call for liking or loving; they call for shock and disgust. But to see this, it is necessary, I think, as Chulanon points out, to have the capacity to see beauty in the narrow-yet-thick sense.

This also brings me to at least part of the reason why Focosi and I ultimately disagree. For he “intentionally leave[s] aside the third element in [my] threefold structure of narrow beauty – i.e., the pleasurable experience – since it can be considered as the subjective outcome of the jointed action of the two other elements” (Focosi, 2025: 68). By contrast, I, in fact, see it as among the conditions for something’s counting as beautiful and do not think it is always the effect of wellformedness for function or other forms of wellformedness, unless we inappropriately and forcefully try and separate form from subject matter (which, I take it, Focosi would agree that we should not do). Indeed, this has been my main disagreement with Parsons and Carlson’s (2008) account of functional beauty.¹ On their account, functional beauty is a matter of looking fit for function, whereas on mine it is *being* fit for function *and pleasing* insofar as it is fit for function. The reason is precisely what Focosi calls ‘the inseparability of form and content’: if something’s well-formed for a function that elicits displeasure in me, then its wellformedness is all the more unpleasant on that account. Torture instruments, genocidal tactics, and self-absorbed themes are all examples of this; all arguably often fit for their respective functions, but are, in my mind, repulsive.

Now, of course, taste is of the essence here, and I do not doubt that some may find beautiful things that I find revolting. In some cases, it may even be possible for them to explain why they feel differently from me, and, in getting to see the work from their perspective, to affect my

1 The other disagreement being that they think functional beauty is a matter of looking fit, whereas I think it’s a matter of being fit, so long as that fitness can somehow be grasped experientially.

experience of the work, though it may take time for such an experiential shift to take effect. But there are limits, and the examples above seem fairly plausible ones. To return to the sticking point, however, remember that, whereas Focosi thinks that harmony and fittingness result in pleasure, I think that this is not the case and that there are occasions where they may even result in displeasure, especially in the case of artworks. Hopefully, my examples above help to support my position. In addition to them, however, I also think that in some cases, like in many of the works of Goya, Bacon, Picasso, Schoenberg, Ana Mendieta, Morbid Angel, Harmony Korine, Gaspar Noé, and many others, this is an intended effect. Their works do not aim at beauty in any straightforward sense of that term, and yet they do possess unity and coherence, and, obviously, they do aim at, and (in some cases) achieve, some kind of aesthetic success. Their works may serve as warnings, wake-up calls, insights into certain worldviews that we might not wish to enter, but they are not the stuff of pleasurable, eudaimonic contemplation.

IV. Wesselinoff on Beauty Revivalism

Both from Catherine Wesselinoff's book (2024) and from similar publications like Wendy Steiner's (2002), it's clear that beauty lost its virtual monopoly over aesthetics and art theory and practice at the turn of the 20th century, but it has recently been regaining some of its authority and urgency. In my target article, I claim that there is confusion over the concept of beauty and that many who have discussed beauty in recent works do not, in fact, refer to beauty *per se*, but to aesthetic value. This, I suggested, is both wrong-headed and misleading, as it derails us from the study of the fundamental aesthetic concept, a concept that may also lie at the very heart of our evaluative selves and experiences.

Wesselinoff argues that, *pace* my overall argument, a recent revival of interest in beauty is, in fact, well underway. It takes the form of a fairly well-defined intellectual movement, and its representatives include the likes of Nehamas, Scruton, and Scarry, among others. However, it

seems to me, Wesselinoff here reveals much more agreement between us than she seems to realize. The philosophers she mentions are ones that I accept, in my own paper, as beauty revivalists (to use her helpful term). And yet, I fear that her criticisms very much reaffirm my concern over a mistrust of the narrow sense of beauty and of a confusion about the distinction between that narrow sense and the broader sense. This is because Wesselinoff seems intent upon maintaining that these theorists' accounts are of beauty in the broad sense, and that such a broad sense has all the merits that I reserve in my article for the narrow sense.

Now, I do not think it would be particularly fruitful to debate this final point because, as I suggest above, I think that where Wesselinoff and I disagree is on whether, on the relevant accounts, beauty is understood in the narrow or broad sense. While Wesselinoff thinks it is the broad sense, I think it is the narrow. I don't quite understand why Wesselinoff thinks that it's the broad sense. For among the beauty revivalists she discusses, Scruton, at least in his introduction to the concept (2009), is explicit in locating his interest in the narrow sense, while the others mentioned imply as much through the kinds of things they say about beauty—things that Wesselinoff nicely summarises (Wesselinoff, 2025b: 41-43), and which, with some qualifications, I'm also happy to concede play the kinds of roles I assign to narrow beauty. Again, then, I think that there is no genuine disagreement here. Indeed, I rejoice in the fact that both Wesselinoff and I appear to agree that there is a distinctive kind of quality—beauty—that is linked to other values, and which is distinct from that sense of beauty that has been the focus of works by the likes of Lopes (2018), Riggall (2023), and Mothersill (1984). This also explains my remark, and hopefully also addresses Wesselinoff's concern with said remark, that philosophers writing on 'beauty' seem to be talking about very different things indeed: for Scruton, Nehamas, and Scarry do not seem to be discussing the same notion as, say, Mothersill and Lopes.

Perhaps, however, Wesselinoff is concerned that my defence of the narrow sense of beauty is of an ultra-narrow, or shallow, sense. Though I explicitly caution against such a reading, arguing that this is a matter of our conception of narrow beauty and of our taste, rather than a matter concerning the concept of narrow beauty, I suspect that my remarks in response to Focosi above, and the fact that I can accommodate such difficult works as the *Grosse Fuge*, the *Histoire(s) du cinema*, or *Oedipus Rex* under my conception of beauty, should assuage any concerns that my conception is overly narrow or superficial.

Furthermore, I mostly take no issue with Wesselinoff's characterization of beauty revivalist philosophy. On the contrary, there is a sense in which I now see myself as a beauty revivalist too, though with the important proviso that the beauty I have in mind is the narrow-yet-thick concept I illustrate in my article as well as in some of my other work. There is one exception, however. I am not persuaded by the seventh characteristic in her account, which, in a nutshell, is that for beauty revivalists, beauty is an "*experience*" because it resists definition (42). I do not, of course, doubt that beauty does elicit certain experiences. In fact, I say so myself, and underline the importance of this. But if it were only an experience, then, *contra* Wesselinoff, it is not clear why having that experience requires that we perceive the object that elicits it. Or why, for instance, as she points out, symmetry is necessary for at least some accounts of beauty. Nor does it follow from the fact (if it is one) that beauty cannot be defined that it is therefore not a property, let alone that it is an experience. Indeed, if, as she says, the right account of beauty is a hybrid one—as my account is—then it presumably partly involves references to the object, and so, presumably, again, to some feature(s) of it, however intractable or ineffable those might be.

A final note. At the end of her piece, Wesselinoff remarks that the theorists she discusses give us reason to adopt an "enriched, optimistic outlook on the present state of academic aesthetics" (44). Alas, it was

Roger Scruton who said to me in 2012 or thereabouts that he thought aesthetics probably does not have much of a future. It was after he had given a lecture in which none of his students seemed to have been aware of Bach's *Erbarme dich mein Gott*. Back then, I did not make much of his remark. However, I've since been increasingly concerned that he was right in worrying over the decline of interest in beauty and the deformation of both lay and expert taste; one need only look at the examples of beauty from recent writings of those focusing on the broad sense to despair. So, although I wish I could share Wesselinoff's optimism about the present state of academic aesthetics, I cannot. At least within so-called analytic aesthetics, the philosophers she discusses are the exception and currently remain in the periphery. I do hope, though, that their example might someday prove the rule.

V. Autobiographic Coda

In lieu of a conclusion, I'll reframe some of my concerns in a way that privileges biography and personal experience over philosophical reflection and debate. As a child, I never cared about beauty, so-called high-art, or anything remotely related to these. And, although I had the luck of attending (or pretending to attend) a well-respected school, anyone familiar with my lifestyle would be far more likely to predict I'd end up in some kind of dodgy line of work, if not in prison or dead. Certainly, the prospect of becoming a philosopher of beauty was nowhere near the horizon. Then, after one of my circle's acquaintances shot another one dead over drug money, I decided that I needed to take things more seriously to escape the paths that looked most likely for me. I decided to start reading the suggestions in my literature classes. I still remember reading Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* when I was 16—these were, after all, the first books I had read in my life. I spent the rest of that year avoiding school as I had done before, but this time it was to read Dostoyevsky. I then read other things our teachers recommended: C.P. Cavafy,

Andreas Karkavitsas, Stratis Myrivilis, Albert Camus, Henrik Ibsen. It was life-changing: these same works led me to explore other forms of art too. I listened to Bach and Mozart and eventually considered going to university to study things like these. But I was clueless about most things and needed to find something that would allow me to start from scratch, whilst also enabling me to spend my time with this newfound love. I decided on Philosophy (there was no expectation of any background) and Film (since I loved films too, though I'd never yet seen anything like what I saw as a Film student—watching Godard for the first time was my next epiphany).

In other words, the way I see it, turning my attention to beauty changed my life. Although someone whose childhood was the polar opposite of mine, J.S. Mill famously also found consolation in, and attributed his recovery from the mental breakdown he suffered aged 20 to, reading beautiful literature. It has long been thought that art, especially beautiful art in the sense of beauty that concerns me, has this kind of soul-nourishing, transformative power. Sure, many artforms and styles can be very influential in people's lives. I myself credit metal music as the second most important catalyst in my autobiographic U-turn.² And I find much in metal that is shared with the greats that I discovered at school and in my life after school. But the truly beautiful (not to say that there's no beautiful metal) is something else.

My interest in beauty stems from such life experiences and can be put in terms of certain questions: is there anything about the works of George Eliot, Dostoyevsky, Nina Simone, Shakespeare, Akram Khan, Beethoven, Jean-Luc Godard, and Amalia Rodrigues, that makes them more likely, or more suitable, to be the arbiters of such transformations or epiphanies that is missing in, on the one hand, the work of Ed Sheeran, Jack Vetriano, Lady Gaga, or Quentin Tarantino; but also,

² This may be unsurprising given metal's reputation of accommodating 'misfits' (Eileanor 2020).

on the other hand, in works that are aesthetically valuable but not beautiful, like (some of the) works of Francis Bacon, Ana Mendieta, and Julia Ducournau?³ And, whatever the answer to this first question, I also wonder: does exposure to these different kinds of worlds of art lead to (or is it more likely to lead to) a life better lived, or a more virtuous character, *ceteris paribus*, and this on principled or constitutive grounds? My current work on beauty stems from a deep-seated feeling—I am happy to call it a prejudice if that will appease some colleagues, as long as they realise that my prejudice was hard-won—that the answer to these questions is affirmative, a feeling that I have had ever since my initial discovery of artistic beauty. This feeling may only reflect a kind of hope in beauty, akin to W.E.B. Du Bois's (1926), which I cited in my original article—but is not this precisely the same kind of hope that nourishes the feeling that true happiness is to be found in virtue? And does not this, ultimately, mean that the philosophy of beauty and virtue is, at the same time, a philosophy of hope?

Whatever the correct answers, my work is also a plea: in a world where beauty is eclipsing, where public taste is degenerating, and where the powers that be are rapidly defunding the kinds of artworks and artforms that changed my life in the name of democracy or freedom, I hope that others in similar positions to mine will continue to have the opportunity to listen to truly beautiful music, to watch truly beautiful films, to attend truly beautiful operas, to dance truly beautiful dances, etc., etc...

3 A similar question preoccupies me concerning nature, for I have always been drawn to wild, untouched nature, and cannot but feel that there's something there that our taste for the urban, or for traditional gardens, stifles. But I have not dealt with nature here because I think that a discussion of nature requires a different approach. Some of my thoughts on this issue are in (forthcoming).

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