

# The Morality and Aesthetics of Personal Beauty

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## Abstract

This paper argues that people commonly make moral and aesthetic errors regarding personal beauty. One moral error involves treating people as if their superficial physical beauty is a key source of their value. This practice immorally objectifies people by treating them as aesthetic objects, such as paintings or sunsets, rather than persons. Physical personal beauty is overrated. And even to the extent to which it may be appropriate to appreciate personal beauty, people still commonly make an aesthetic error by treating people as if their aesthetic value derives primarily from how their faces and bodies look. We thereby overlook much of their aesthetic value, including their aesthetic agency – which involves the aesthetic choices that shape people’s appearance and conduct, as well as their inner selves and character. Moreover, tending to a person’s fuller aesthetic value may mitigate harmful consequences of lookism.

## 1. Introduction

Ted Chiang’s short story “Liking What You See: A Documentary” presents a thought experiment about personal beauty. Imagine there is a medical treatment called *calli*. Those who get *calli* see people’s faces without forming any judgment about beauty, ugliness, or any other aesthetic property. They make none of the snap judgments that are typically dependent on visual cues, such as a face’s symmetry or whether it has acne. At some schools, all students have *calli*. Those students focus on academics and social experiences, without feeling anxiety about what they or their peers look like.

Chiang’s story raises questions with moral and aesthetic import. Would you get *calli*, if it were possible? Would society be better or worse if everyone got *calli*? Is the story utopic or

dystopic? Between the two current authors, one finds the story utopic, and the other finds it dystopic. We agree, however, on related issues. First, a person's physical beauty—paradigmatically, how their face and body look—has *some* intrinsic value. Even those who find Chiang's story utopic should concede there is a cost to getting calli. Second, society systematically overemphasizes the physical beauty of persons. In evaluating and valuing personal beauty, people make moral and aesthetic errors.

This paper will explain both kinds of errors, with an eye toward what we morally and aesthetically owe to others. It is a moral error to treat people as if their superficial physical beauty is a key source of their value. This treatment immorally objectifies people. It is an aesthetic error to treat people as if their aesthetic value derives primarily from how their faces and bodies look. We thereby overlook much of their aesthetic value, including their aesthetic agency – which involves the aesthetic choices that shape people's appearance and conduct, as well as their inner selves and character. Moreover, tending to a person's fuller aesthetic value may mitigate harmful consequences of lookism.

## 2. Physical Beauty and Morality

We often treat people as if their physical beauty is a key source of their value. This practice immorally objectifies people. To objectify someone is to see or treat them as an object, where this involves treating them as lacking in agency, autonomy, and subjective experience (Nussbaum 1995). Here objectification involves treating people as objects to be aesthetically admired based primarily or largely on appearance. This treatment disrespects their agency, their personality, and their rationality—ways that people are fundamentally valuable, and that aesthetic objects, such as paintings or sunsets, are not.

A few clarifications are in store. First, in this section we are focused on what we call *shallow aesthetic appreciation*: the kind of appreciation that treats people as if their aesthetic value stems solely or largely from how their faces and bodies look. This includes judging someone as ugly based on their acne, or judging someone as beautiful based on certain symmetrical facial features. We will discuss in the next section more nuanced forms of aesthetic appreciation that pay attention to a person's agency by attending to how a person has styled their hair, applied make-up, tied their shoelaces, etc. This is a form of what we will call *deep aesthetic appreciation*.

Second, we are not claiming that it is *always* objectifying to evaluate someone as physically beautiful or ugly. Although we don't think that claim is as absurd as it might seem, it is not our position. We think more modestly that sometimes, but not always, this practice is objectifying. It might very well be objectifying to evaluate someone as physically beautiful or ugly during a job interview or during a conversation with one's doctor. In other contexts, however, such as when having a casual conversation with one's partner, it might not be objectifying to evaluate them as being physically beautiful or ugly, if this is perceived as just one aspect among many of who that person is.

Third, our central moral concern is not with *evaluation* as such but instead with *valuing*, *over-valuing*, and *under-valuing*. In many contexts, even if it is not objectifying to merely evaluate someone's face as beautiful or ugly, it is still objectifying to fixate on and obsess over that person's attractiveness. It's one thing to recognize someone as having a pretty or ugly face. It's another thing entirely to ascribe too much or too little value to that person based on how superficially beautiful or ugly their face and body are. That's morally bad. And that's our central concern in this section.

A helpful comparison may be made with other ways we evaluate and value people. Consider an employer who evaluates one of their employees as productive. This mere evaluation by itself is not objectifying. If the employer, however, obsesses over this employee's productivity—and doesn't appreciate anything else about them—then *over-valuing* productivity and *under-valuing* other attributes amounts to objectification. They treat the person not as a person but as a machine to be judged solely in terms of output. Moreover, there is a difference between viewing the worker's productivity solely in terms of output and appreciating that output as the result of their agency. In the latter case, the employer appreciates the employee's work as a manifestation of their character and intentional effort, and the judgment may no longer be objectifying. This difference tracks the difference between shallow and deep aesthetic appreciation.<sup>1</sup>

Aesthetic objectification of the sort we have in mind is bad for consequentialist reasons. Overvaluing personal beauty has dire financial and social consequences associated with lookism (Maestriperi et al. 2017; Minerva 2017). Lookism is a form of discrimination against people on the basis of their lack of perceived physical attractiveness or beauty. Beautiful individuals are more frequently hired for jobs and receive higher pay (Doorley and Sierminska, 2015). They are judged to be more competent, and to have more positive personality traits. These judgments extend to children: teachers expect more from beautiful children, parents prefer to adopt beautiful children, and medical professionals and parents give better care to beautiful children (Kringelbach et al 2008). Our fixation on personal beauty is also salient on social media. We disproportionately engage with photos of beautiful people on Instagram. We make snap judgments about whether to swipe left or right on dating apps based on appearances.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for this journal for suggesting this example.

Aesthetic objectification is also bad for non-consequentialist reasons. It would be immoral to aesthetically objectify someone, even without further harmful consequences, and even if the person never knew. One underlying explanation for this is that, reasoning along Kantian lines, to do so disrespects a person's humanity, or to treat them as a mere means to an end. Perhaps, as Basu (2019) argues, herself endorsing and building on Strawson's (1962) position, we owe it to each other to treat others as agents because our self-understanding is dependent on others treating us in this same manner.

Basu's (2019) discussion of moral and epistemic reasons may also guide us in seeing a relationship between moral and aesthetic reasons. She argues that, sometimes, even if we have epistemic reasons (i.e. reasons aimed at truth) to make statistical inferences about individuals based on factors such as race and gender, we have moral reasons to refrain from making these inferences. In making such inferences we fail to treat people as individuals with agency. Basu (2019: 924) claims in these cases we observe people like a scientist would a planet: a mere object bound to statistical laws and generalizations. Analogously, even if we have aesthetic reasons to appreciate one's physical beauty, sometimes we have moral reasons to refrain from forming corresponding aesthetic judgments, or to at least focus less on their physical beauty. Whereas Basu warns against treating people like planets, we warn against treating people like sunsets: mere objects to be aesthetically appreciated based on appearances.

Some cases are relatively easy. A leader of an orchestra might have moral reason to conduct anonymous auditions, in order to avoid seeing musicians' faces and bodies. This process mitigates consequences of lookism, in addition to other forms of prejudice, such as racism, sexism, ageism, and ableism. Many cases are trickier. Consider again that parents are motivated to take better care of beautiful children. What should a parent do when they see one of their

children as cuter than another? Unlike the leader of the orchestra, who may choose to give cellists anonymous auditions, sighted parents cannot easily avoid noticing their children's faces. Such difficulties are pervasive. Our appreciation of personal beauty shapes whom we date, whom we befriend, and how we treat people at home or in the workplace. Clearly, a problematic bias is operating. It is unclear, however, how to act accordingly.

Here is a related objection one might raise against our view.

1. We usually cannot help but aesthetically appreciate people's faces and bodies to the extent that we do.
2. If we usually cannot help but aesthetically appreciate people's faces and bodies to the extent that we do, then there is nothing immoral about the extent to which we aesthetically appreciate people's faces and bodies.
3. Therefore, there is nothing immoral about the extent to which we aesthetically appreciate people's faces and bodies.

The idea underlying (1) is that our aesthetic evaluation of faces and bodies is ingrained in our psychology, likely for reasons pertaining to evolutionary biology. Plausibly, for instance, we've evolved to be disgusted by acne and to associate it with unhealthiness. The idea underlying (2) is a version of the "ought implies can" principle: people can't be morally responsible for things they're unable to stop doing.

Our response is two-fold, and inspired by Zheng (2016). Zheng argues that racial fetishes are morally problematic, given how they affect members of fetishized groups. Members of such groups feel fungible, othered, and objectified. An objection to Zheng is that one's racial fetishes cannot be changed and thus are morally permissible. Zheng (2016: 415) argues in response that

- (a) we should not assume that racial fetishes are fixed and “handed to us on silver platters”, and
- (b) that we should interrogate how social structures shape the consequences of racial fetishes.

Along these lines, we challenge (1) above (for different arguments against this premise, see Eaton 2016 and Irvin 2017). We can change the extent to which we aesthetically appreciate faces and bodies. When we find ourselves excessively entranced by or repulsed by a person’s physical appearance, we can be self-aware and tone down that aesthetic response. We can get in the habit of shifting our focus to non-aesthetic features of that person--and even to other aesthetic features, the sort of which we discuss in the next section.<sup>2</sup> We don’t claim that such changes are easy, merely that they are possible.

The claim that we can alter our aesthetic practices is bolstered by recent arguments, themselves reliant on empirical evidence, that perceptual learning occurs in the realm of aesthetic appreciation (Burnston 2017, Ransom 2022). Perceptual learning is the alteration of our perceptual processing and perceptual experience through repeated exposure to or practice with a given class of stimuli. At least some of our aesthetic appreciation involves perceiving aesthetic properties. We can learn to perceive new or different aesthetic properties in response to exposure to, or training with, new categories of objects, and our aesthetic perception can be influenced by the social norms of a culture, including beauty norms (Lopes & Ransom 2023). The fact that our perception can change suggests that the sort of shift in appreciative practice we are proposing here is achievable.

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<sup>2</sup> Davies (2016: 134-135) makes a similar point. He thinks we can appreciate more than mere superficial aesthetic features of persons, often appealed to by evolutionary psychologists. Like Davies we think there’s much more to personal beauty than these features.

Moreover, we challenge (2) above by attending to the social level. Even holding fixed the extent to which we appreciate beautiful faces and bodies, we all should interrogate how society rewards beauty. Many harmful outcomes of lookism are socially contingent.<sup>3</sup>

To situate our moral stance on lookism, it is helpful to compare it to the view proffered by Andrew Mason (2021). Mason also argues lookism is problematic for consequentialist and non-consequentialist reasons. Building upon Deborah Hellman's (2008) work, Mason argues that everyday lookism is problematic because it is *demeaning*, even when abstracted away from racism, sexism, ableism, and other forms of oppression. We are sympathetic to this, but our approach differs in the following respect. On Mason's account, lookism, with the help of background aesthetic norms and contextual factors, *demeans* its victim by expressing that they are *morally deficient*. Our focus is broader than moral deficiency. We claim that to fixate on someone's superficial physical beauty or ugliness—and to under-value their other qualities—is to treat them as an aesthetic object. Granted, aesthetic objectification often involves treating someone as morally deficient. If someone treats you like a sunset—an object to be valued for surface-level appearances—they overlook your status as a moral agent. But they also fail to appreciate the plethora of *non-moral* qualities that make you a person—your aesthetic interests, your hobbies, your beliefs and ways of thinking about the world, the narrative of your life, and so forth. For this reason, we think that our broad appeal to *objectification* captures some of the general harms of lookism better than Mason's appeal to demeaningness.

We have outlined a moral error regarding personal beauty. People overvalue the physical beauty of others and in doing so treat people as if they are aesthetic objects. This practice is

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<sup>3</sup> See Widdows (2022) for discussion of skepticism about individual duties, as opposed to collective action, about how to respond to oppressive beauty norms.



intrinsically morally problematic and leads to lookism which has harmful consequences. In the next section, we will describe an aesthetic error regarding personal beauty.

### 3. Personal Beauty Reimagined

Here we discuss shallow aesthetic appreciation as involving an aesthetic, as opposed to moral, error. Recall that shallow aesthetic appreciation involves treating people as if their aesthetic value stems solely or largely from how their faces and bodies look. This treatment overlooks deeper aesthetic value. People are aesthetic agents: they make aesthetic choices that shape their appearance and conduct, as well as their inner self and character. Proper aesthetic appreciation of people involves appreciating the products of their aesthetic agency.

Artworks offer an analogy. Some artworks are beautiful, and appreciating their beauty is part of the aesthetic value we derive from them. However, aesthetically appreciating most artworks requires going beyond beauty. It is now fairly uncontroversial that knowledge of the artist's intentions -- a sort of agency that the artist has exerted over the work -- can enhance our appreciation of artworks (e.g. Livingston 2005). When aesthetically evaluating people we should focus not only to how their faces and bodies look but on other aspects, including some that are at least in part the result of their aesthetic decisions (conscious or unconscious): their sense of style, their moral virtues, their personality, their sense of humor, their quirks and charms, and their life's narrative.

In general, we have *prima facie* aesthetic reasons to engage with something in a certain way when this will lead us to appreciate more of the object's aesthetic properties (cf. McGonigal

2018). These reasons give us a richer (veridical) aesthetic experience. What we may aesthetically owe each other is to engage in deep aesthetic appreciation.

To help situate our view, it is helpful to turn to a division recently proposed by Ravasio (2023). He argues that proposals to address lookism should be divided into two camps: redistributive and revisionary. He takes both camps to be committed to the claim that our current conception of human beauty is: (i) appearance based, in that we make judgments of beauty based on perceptible facial and bodily features of people; (ii) comparative, in that we can judge individuals to be more or less beautiful; and (iii) intrinsically valuable, in that human beauty is a final good, not reducible to instrumental value.

Redistributive strategies involve ‘redistributing’ beauty amongst the current population. This might occur by helping more people to become beautiful according to current beauty norms through subsidized plastic surgery, as suggested by Minerva (2017). Or, it might occur by broadening current beauty standards to make them more inclusive of diverse body types, as suggested by Eaton (2016).

Revisionary approaches, on the other hand, are those that advocate for a substantive alteration to the current conception of beauty. They seek to change one or more of the three features of our current conception of beauty listed above, and so are a form of conceptual engineering. Weak versions of this view are pluralist strategies insofar as they advocate for a new, revised conception of beauty that can co-exist alongside our current aesthetic practice, such as Leboeuf’s (2019) development of ‘sensualism’, which involves the aesthetic appreciation of our embodied sensations. Strong versions of revisionism advocate for a complete replacement of our current conception of beauty with an alternative appreciative practice. Ravasio lists Irvin (2017) and Protasi (2017) as potential examples of such a view.

We take our view to be a version of strong revisionism, insofar as we propose that we should aesthetically appreciate people by engaging in deep aesthetic appreciation, where this involves both going both beyond the superficial physical beauty, and appreciating a person's beauty making features *as* products of their agency.<sup>4</sup> We thus count as going against condition (i) of Ravasio's conception of beauty. Against (i), we hold that appropriate beauty judgments are not merely appearance-based, as they involve aesthetic appreciation of a person's agency – what we call deep aesthetic appreciation.

In order to further articulate our revisionary view, it is helpful to contrast it to those of Irvin and Protasi. Our approach differs from, yet complements, these two views. Irvin (2017) suggests that we should aesthetically appreciate people by cultivating an attitude of aesthetic exploration, in order to fight negative effects of lookism. Irvin thinks we should approach bodies with the intent of actively seeking our aesthetic pleasure by discovering each body's distinctive aesthetic affordances. This is accomplished by closely attending to the form and behavior of components of bodies, such as the patterns of wrinkles and veins on hands, and how hands move. We should cultivate “a sense of adventure, a willingness to encounter and celebrate the unique and surprising, a willingness to tolerate and persist through moments of experience that are jarring” (Irvin 2017, p. 11). The version counts as strongly revisionary, Ravasio maintains, insofar as Irvin's proposed practice is meant to replace rather than supplement the current standard practice of beauty judgments.

Our account aligns with Irvin's in that we think that aesthetic appreciation of persons should focus less on beauty and ugliness, and expand to other aesthetic properties. Irvin's

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, if it turns out that most people already substantially engage in deep aesthetic appreciation, our view becomes less revisionary. We don't want to focus on the empirical question of to what extent people already engage in deep aesthetic appreciation. We're focused on the aesthetic claim that deep aesthetic appreciation is aesthetically good (independently of how often it does in fact occur).

account, however, leaves out appreciating the embodiment of others as a result of their agency. On her view, “[w]e can approach the body as though it were a new planet, or a familiar landscape made unfamiliar through the quality of our attention to it.” (2017, p. 12). Our approach instead emphasizes attending to aesthetic features that reflect agency and personhood.

Protasi (2017) argues that nearly everyone is beautiful insofar as they are capable of being loved. Looking at someone through a loving gaze unlocks aesthetic potential, regardless of their perceptible facial or bodily features. Ravasio (2023, p.1005) takes this view to be strongly revisionary insofar as it constitutes a significant departure from our current conception of beauty: it both requires us to reform our practice of judging beauty based on looks and eliminates the ability to make comparative judgments. The current conception of beauty is, on Protasi’s account, replaced with worthiness to be loved. We argue, instead, that viewing people as aesthetic agents reveals aesthetic properties. Moreover, we do not tie aesthetic appreciation of persons as closely to appreciation of their moral character.

Here are examples of deep aesthetic appreciation. Appreciating a woman’s aesthetic decision not to wear makeup involves realizing that perhaps she is asking us to put aside beauty and to notice other aesthetic properties of her face, to revise and enlarge our stereotypical judgments of female beauty, or perhaps to look past appearances altogether and focus on her non-perceptible aesthetic (or non-aesthetic) properties.

Aesthetically appreciating a punk’s purple mohawk involves appreciating the time and care that went into sculpting their hair -- it is a lengthy process that involves saturating hair with gelatin or another fixatif and then waiting for it to set while shaping it precisely. The aesthetic decision might involve a rejection of social aesthetic norms, and an invitation to appreciate other aesthetic properties of the hairstyle. The mohawk looks dangerous, with sharp points and clean

symmetry. If we get to know this person we might also aesthetically appreciate aspects of their character, such as their (let's say) rejection of the capitalist system or their lack of preoccupation with the judgments of others.

Another important aspect of the aesthetic appreciation of people is appreciating their innovation. This often requires background knowledge of current trends, and sometimes of the person. The fashion-forward sister of one of the authors once came to visit wearing sandals with socks. The initial shock became appreciation after she explained that it was a current runway trend, and she was having fun with it. If the runway trend was a commentary on the fashion faux pas, her outfit was a meta-commentary on the runway trend. Perhaps this sort of appreciation is similar to conceptual art - one can appreciate someone's aesthetic choice without finding the result itself aesthetically appealing.

To further situate our view, Marin-Seaver (2023) has recently provided a taxonomy of views that take a stance on the relationship between agency and beauty. Her description of beauty advocates, and beauty revisionists is especially relevant to our view.<sup>5</sup> Beauty advocates endorse beauty as a good, and maintain a connection between one's moral character and beauty: one's moral character can constitute or at least contribute to a person's beauty, such as with Protasi's (2017) view.<sup>6</sup> Thus we have agency with respect to cultivating beauty, insofar as we are able to cultivate our moral character.

While we side with beauty advocates in endorsing the claim that we can and do have some agency over whether or not we are beautiful, we think this extends well beyond moral character, and we do not take a stance here about how moral character may be the subject of aesthetic appreciation. Our aesthetic agency includes engaging in aesthetic projects such as

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<sup>5</sup> Here we put aside her category of beauty skeptics.

<sup>6</sup> See also Paris (2018).

cultivating a personal style or taste, and making this manifest in our appearance.<sup>7</sup> It includes decisions we make about how to approach life in ways that may fall outside the realm of morality, such as whether we decide to meet a personal challenge with humor or calm detachment. Moreover, we also think that deep aesthetic appreciation may target other properties that are outside the scope of the beautiful. We might aesthetically appreciate a person's quirkiness, creativity, innovation, or twisted sense of humor, without it being the case that these intrinsically valuable aesthetic properties contribute to their beauty (though this possibility is left open).

On our view, the issue of the scope of aesthetic agency remains open for debate. Can aesthetic agency include decisions about non-aesthetic aspects of our lives? One reason it might is that it may turn out that many decisions about non-aesthetic matters are based at least in part on aesthetics, such as which moral virtues we decide to cultivate, or what major to select in college (Nehamas 1985). How do our aesthetic identities and agency interact (see Walden 2023)? A comprehensive analysis of deep aesthetic appreciation of people also remains to be worked out. One issue is whether we appreciate only the end product of people's aesthetic agency, or whether we can also directly aesthetically appreciate people's decisions, in much the same way we might aesthetically appreciate the choice of method in a mathematical proof.

Beauty revisionism often involves embracing criticism of our current aesthetic practices surrounding beauty while calling for the expansion of our current concept of beauty to include different bodies and beauty norms, and emphasizing the relationship between personhood and aesthetic appreciation.<sup>8</sup> It is this relationship that builds in agency, insofar as personhood

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<sup>7</sup> We take our account to be compatible with Riggle's (2015) account of personal style.

<sup>8</sup> How exactly does Martin-Siever's category of 'beauty revisionists' relate to Ravasio's category of 'revisionary approaches'? Here we admit to not being entirely clear. However, Martin-Siever (2023, p. 9, fn.14) points out that

involves agency. As Martin-Seaver puts it, beauty revisionism allows that “[o]ur aesthetic appreciation is properly about the way a specific person manifests aesthetically” (2023, p. 7). We therefore suspect that our view falls into this category, while nevertheless distinguishing itself from others so categorized.

For example, our view complements another view of personal beauty that Martin-Seaver labels as beauty revisionist: Paul Taylor’s (2016: 104-131). Taylor argues that Thomas Jefferson’s objectification of black women enabled him to be sexually attracted to them without viewing them as genuinely beautiful. Jefferson failed to see Sally Hemmings as beautiful, because he failed to see her as a person. More generally, Taylor argues that recognizing one’s personhood enables a genuine appreciation of their beauty, as opposed to mere attractiveness. Similarly, we claim that seeing someone as a person with aesthetic agency enables deeper aesthetic appreciation, though we do not deny that there is a certain kind of beauty (akin to appreciating the formal properties of a painting) that is available to people through shallow aesthetic appreciation. While personhood and aesthetic agency are not equivalent, they’re related and not opposing concepts, and so we see our proposal as broadly complementary to Taylor’s.

We close this section with a quick note about lookism. What methods can mitigate its effects is an empirical question. There is, however, reason to think that deep aesthetic appreciation can help. Such appreciation shifts our focus from one’s physical appearance to the agency that crafts this appearance.

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her taxonomy emphasizes agency in a way that Ravasio’s does not. Moreover, she puts Eaton’s (2016) view in this category, whereas Ravasio instead labels it a redistributive approach.

#### 4. Further objections and replies

Ravasio has argued that strong revisionary strategies fall prey to two objections. Insofar as our proposal falls into this camp, then, one might object, it is equally vulnerable to these objections. Ravasio's first objection against revisionary proposals is that they are too severe a response to lookism: better results would be achieved by simply implementing a redistributive approach. This is because the redistributive approach results in selective improvement of those negatively affected by lookism without a disadvantage to those not so affected. In contrast, the revisionary strategy results in a general loss of value for all. By replacing the current conception of beauty with an alternative, such strategies "level the playing field by depriving everybody of a valuable dimension" (Ravasio, 2023, p. 1006). This is, people are deprived of the aesthetic value they would get from our current appreciative practice.

Our view can meet this objection: it does not entail a general loss of value but instead a gain. We have argued that we make an *aesthetic* mistake when we engage in shallow aesthetic appreciation, not just a moral mistake. That is, in such cases we systematically overvalue appearances and fail to appreciate them as the product of a person's agency. Engaging in deep aesthetic appreciation will thus result in a net gain in aesthetic value. It is the correcting of an error in aesthetic judgment, or appreciative practice.

To return to the analogy to artworks: it would be an aesthetic mistake to appreciate an artwork solely in terms of its formal properties. Though such a process is not without value because it would allow us to appreciate some of the work's aesthetic properties, it nevertheless misses a large swathe of aesthetic properties of the artwork, including ways that the artwork is beautiful that don't rely merely on its formal properties. It is an impoverished aesthetic practice. The appreciator errs by disregarding the historical context and the real or implied intentions of



the artist. So too, we maintain, is it an aesthetic mistake to engage solely in shallow appreciation of persons, rather than deep aesthetic appreciation.<sup>9</sup>

Here one might object that our response is not persuasive if we adopt aesthetic hedonism, the orthodox view—held by Mothersill (1989), Stecker (2006), and many others—on which an object’s aesthetic value amounts to its power to give pleasure to its perceivers.<sup>10</sup> It’s very pleasurable to fixate on people’s physical beauty. So, the objection goes, if people were to focus less on people’s physical beauty, they’d make an aesthetic mistake by neglecting a ton of aesthetic value. We thus have aesthetic reasons to fixate on superficial personal beauty to our heart’s delight. Or so the objection says.

We have two responses to this objection. First, following Shelley (2011), Lopes (2018), and a growing number of detractors, we reject aesthetic hedonism. In particular, we follow Shelley (2011) in thinking that it’s often aesthetically bad to *overvalue* artworks, even if doing so affords one great pleasure. While we acknowledge there’s room in a thriving aesthetic life for personal preferences and even for guilty pleasures, it would be aesthetically undesirable for you to listen constantly to a local business’s banal commercial jingle and to think it compares to Stevie Wonder’s *Songs in the Key of Life*—no matter how pleasant the experience. Likewise, it’s aesthetically bad to overvalue and obsess over superficial physical beauty, even if that brings pleasure.

Second, our view is not as unfriendly to aesthetic hedonism as it might seem. Even for the hedonist, focusing less on superficial physical beauty and engaging in deep aesthetic appreciation of persons can open up new aesthetic pleasures. Let us return to the analogy of a

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<sup>9</sup> Though we maintain that it is an aesthetic mistake, we take no stance here on what sorts of aesthetic obligations might arise as a result, or how any aesthetic obligations might interact with other kinds of obligations. See Robbie Kubala (2020) for discussion of aesthetic obligations.

<sup>10</sup> See Van der Berg (2020) for discussion of the debate over aesthetic hedonism.

painting. By moving beyond the striking formal features of Picasso's *Guernica*, and thinking more about its historical context, Picasso's intentions to provide anti-war commentary, and about how it compares to other paintings at the time—one may derive more aesthetic pleasure, not less.

Ravasio's second objection against revisionary proposals is that they rest on a dubious implicit moral principle, that "values or practices are always blameworthy, and in need of reform, if they result in unmerited inequalities" (2023, p. 1008). Moreover, if revisionists endorse this principle, then they are implicitly committed to eliminating other valuable practices that result in unmerited inequalities, and this would again make people worse off by depriving them of these valuable practices. In the aesthetic domain, we evaluate people on the basis of their bodily adornments (clothing or hair style, tattoos, etc.) or aesthetic taste, and perhaps discriminate against those with bad taste or questionable style as a result. This inequality may be unmerited if taste and style are largely determined by situational factors beyond a person's control.

Our reply is as follows. First, our position is that shallow aesthetic appreciation is morally wrong in part because it objectifies the person who is the object of such appreciation. Such objectification is morally wrong even if it does not result in the well-documented harmful consequences of lookism. It thus does not rest on the implicit principle stated by Ravasio. One way to see this is to recognize that it would be morally bad to objectify everyone as aesthetic objects even if everyone were equally beautiful or ugly. Objectifying everyone equally is still bad.

Second, our aesthetic argument against shallow aesthetic appreciation does not depend on this principle either. The claim is rather that people are making an aesthetic error because their appreciative practice is impoverished: they are depriving themselves of rich sources of aesthetic

value. One principle we endorse in favor of deep aesthetic appreciation is relatively uncontroversial: we have prima facie aesthetic reasons to engage with something in a certain way when this will lead us to appreciate more of the object's (veridical) aesthetic properties.

Third, we do not think that endorsing our view entails that we would need to discontinue the practice of evaluating people's clothing, haircuts, tattoos, and sense of aesthetic taste. Rather, we are calling for a revision of this practice, to shift it towards deep aesthetic appreciation. As we detailed in the previous section, deep aesthetic appreciation is not about simply appreciating the physical or non-physical features of a person. Rather it involves (amongst other things) appreciating those features as the product of their agency.

To be clear, this is not a magic bullet against negative aesthetic judgments. Deep aesthetic appreciation is still fundamentally comparative. As Ransom (2019) puts it, we might negatively judge people as being posers or sheep for either misrepresenting their aesthetic tastes or simply 'following the herd' in their aesthetic choices rather than asserting their aesthetic agency. For example, we might negatively judge that a person's choice of clothing is solely the result of responding to marketing trends rather than dressing in a way that expresses their authentic sense of personal style. Or we might evaluate someone who decides to like a band, or dress a certain way, solely in order to fit into a certain group as being a poser. Both situations, she argues, reveal how central our aesthetic taste is to our sense of identity. We take such cases to support the claim that there is an important connection between agency and aesthetic evaluation: *all else equal*, we aesthetically evaluate people's aesthetic choices more favorably the more agentive they are. The sheep acts without much agency. The poser acts with agency, but in order to aesthetically deceive people about her sense of taste and so obscures accurate evaluations.

Finally, while revising our current appreciative practice in favor of deep aesthetic appreciation doesn't eliminate negative aesthetic judgements per se (or bias and snobbery, for that matter), we do believe that it will help mitigate the harmful effects of lookism. By widening and deepening the scope of aesthetic appreciation, this aspect of our aesthetic lives will be much richer and multi-dimensional as a result.<sup>11</sup>

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