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Moral Beauty and Education

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Abstract

This article seeks to rekindle a version of the age-old view that aesthetic education can contribute to the development of virtue. It proceeds as follows. First, it introduces the moral beauty view, whereby the moral virtues are beautiful, and the moral vices ugly, character traits. Second, two ways in which moral beauty and ugliness can manifest themselves are considered: in people and in artworks. Third, it is argued that character education couched partly in aesthetic terms, and coupled with the cultivation of a sensitivity to moral beauty and ugliness, promise a solid and motivationally robust anchor for moral character development. It is suggested that introducing the notions of moral beauty and ugliness in our conceptual repertoire, coupled with the presence of moral beauty in our surroundings, can undergird more traditional pathways to virtue, whilst being congenial to the maintenance of virtue. Before closing, three objections against these suggestions are addressed, and some avenues for exploring the notion of moral beauty *vis-à-vis* moral motivation and education are proposed.

Keywords: moral virtue; moral education; beauty; aesthetic education; moral motivation

I. Introduction

In this paper, I consider how the notions of moral beauty and ugliness, in the form of what I call the ‘moral beauty view’, can play a key role in character or moral education, and how the presence of moral beauty can be a powerful source of moral inspiration and motivation for suitably brought up people. My central aim is to make fellow researchers, and especially those with an empirical and practical outlook, aware of the notion of moral beauty, to invite them to reflect on certain possibilities that come from thinking about it, and, more ambitiously, to inspire their curiosity concerning certain hypotheses about the importance of moral beauty and ugliness for moral motivation and education. In doing so, some of the discussion that follows is speculative, but the type of speculation I will engage in is, I hope, welcome, on two counts. On the one hand, it has an eminent intellectual precedent, both in being grounded in a long tradition, and in having been endorsed and advocated by great, but very different, thinkers, from Aristotle and Plotinus to Hume and Smith. On the other hand, my reflections here are not ethereal, but are, at least in principle, empirically testable, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

I will proceed as follows. First, I will introduce what I call the moral beauty view, which states that the moral virtues are beautiful, and the moral vices ugly, character traits. Second, I will consider two ways in which moral beauty and ugliness can manifest themselves in our surroundings, namely, in artworks—including painting, architecture, installations, memorials, music; and in people—including our acquaintances but presumably also those who maintain a public profile, including intellectuals, politicians, artists, and celebrities. Third, I will offer some thoughts on how character education couched partly in aesthetic terms, and the cultivation of a sensitivity to beauty and ugliness in moral characters and actions, wherever those may be found or manifested, promises a motivationally robust anchor for the cultivation of moral character. Before closing, I will address some preliminary worries one might raise against my suggestions, and propose some ways in which my hypotheses might be tested or put to practical use.

II. Introducing the Moral Beauty View

The notion of moral beauty and ugliness as I understand it here is traceable to the British philosophers of the Enlightenment, particularly the Third Earl of Shaftesbury (2001), Francis Hutcheson (2004),

and David Hume (1975). However, the view that beauty and morality are connected in important ways is arguably also part and parcel of the Greek virtue-ethical tradition, insofar as both Plato and Aristotle thought that virtue is *'kalon'*, a term used to refer to what is at once beautiful and good, and indeed Aristotle frequently suggests that the virtuous person's actions are *'kalon'* and performed for the sake of the *'kalon'* (2002, pp. 133, 142). In fact, I think that what I call the moral beauty view, or something very similar to it, is a staple of Aristotelian virtue ethics, but will not further pursue this claim, because doing so would raise interpretative issues that I cannot resolve here.¹ Such views can also be found in a variety of other philosophical and religious traditions, including early and medieval Christian ethics, for instance in Hugh of St Victor who wrote that '[w]e long to be perfectly carved and sculpted in the image of good men, and when excellent and sublime qualities ... shine forth in them like the beauty in exquisite statues, ... we strive to recreate these qualities in ourselves' (quoted in Jaeger, 2012, p. 137), as well as in Aquinas.²

Whatever it is that the foregoing philosophers and theologians thought, I suspect that Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith, could not have simply been speaking loosely, or been terminologically confused when they said things like the 'Author of Nature ... has made Virtue a lovely Form', such that there is 'a Beauty in Characters, in Manners' (Hutcheson, 2004, p. 9); or that taste arbitrates matters both moral and aesthetic, and that there is a 'moral beauty', which, he thought, 'closely resembles' natural beauty (Hume, 1975, p. 291); or again that 'benevolence bestows upon those actions which proceed from it, a beauty superior to all others, [while] the want of it, and much more the contrary inclination, communicates a peculiar deformity to whatever evidences such a disposition' (Smith, 2002, p. 297). It is partly to avoid questions about translation and interpretation that I develop my own view of moral beauty from this more modern tradition.³

Specifically, the view that I espouse—and that I take to be implicit in statements such as the foregoing, as well as others like them—holds that the moral virtues are beautiful and the moral vices ugly. More precisely, my view is that *if a trait is a moral virtue, then it is a beautiful character trait; and, conversely, if a trait is a moral vice, then it is an ugly character trait.*⁴ This is a conceptual claim, which states that beauty and ugliness are necessary conditions for moral virtue and moral vice, respectively. Of course, my main aim here is to suggest that while the claim is conceptual, it may have far-reaching implications for domains such as moral education and motivation. Now, as stated, the view implies a number of things. First, that the character traits in question are themselves beautiful and ugly, respectively. Second, that characters (and people) are beautiful and ugly, insofar as they possess or manifest such traits.⁵ Third, we speak of the beauty of someone's honesty, or of someone being disgusting for being dishonest, rotten for being untrustworthy, or wonderful for being kind. I think that the same applies to actions, but it is important to note that actions are intuitively beautiful or ugly insofar as they manifest the relevant traits, or at least the motivation or intentions that are (partly) constitutive of such traits. Fourth, that artefacts which manifest such traits, notably artworks, are also beautiful and ugly insofar as they do so. Although I will largely assume the claim that artworks can manifest character traits, I should say a few words by way of explanation. Works can manifest moral character traits in virtue of being artefacts in which choices of a manifested artist can be traced. The manifested artist is the artist as she or he manifests her or himself in the work; thus her or his qualities are *ipso facto* qualities of the work.⁶ Thus, it is not simply by representing characters that manifest certain attitudes that artworks and other artefacts can manifest character traits. After all, villains in many a Shakespeare tragedy are highly immoral but Shakespeare's tragedies hardly manifest moral vices; quite the contrary. Instead, it is in virtue of ethically-evaluable attitudes that works of art can manifest—for instance, cruelty in many works by the Marquis de Sade; forgiveness and pity for Anna Karenina by Tolstoy's eponymous novel—that they can be said to manifest moral character traits.

A word is perhaps also in order on how I understand the notion of beauty. It is well known that there is hardly consensus on what beauty is and that many philosophers in the analytic tradition had, at least until recently, given up on developing accounts of beauty. However, there is at least one claim about beauty that is not very controversial, namely that beauty is a response-dependent property, at least partly identifiable by the distinctive kind of pleasure it evokes in suitably competent appreciators, under specified conditions, which may themselves differ depending on the kind of object to be appreciated. This is common ground amongst thinkers as diverse as Alexander Nehamas (2007, pp. 71ff.), Roger Scruton (2009, p. 5), Mary Mothersill (1984, pp. 271-275), Dave Hickey (2012, pp. 2-3, 69-71), Crispin Sartwell (2006), and Berys Gaut (2007, pp. 118-119), to name a few recent contributors on the topic of beauty. Of course, this is not all there is to the notion of beauty. Additionally, for

instance, beauty is also plausibly thought to be connected to an object's form and involves pleasure in the contemplation of such form (while ugliness plausibly involves displeasure in deformity, as I have argued in my 2017). However, given the lack of consensus on what beauty is, philosophers who wish to establish whether something or other is beautiful often appeal to ordinary intuitions and experience, or engage in thought experiments. I will therefore follow suit below, though it is worth adding that, fortunately, it is not my aim to defend the moral beauty view here, not least because I have done so elsewhere, both by showing that moral beauty is compatible with formalist considerations about beauty (2018b), and by appealing to empirical evidence to support the view (2018a).⁷ Instead, as already indicated, my focus here will be narrower.

I have thus far given an outline of my view, along with some clarifications. But it is worth briefly pointing out some of the view's theoretical merits and implications of the moral beauty view, partly in order to suggest what makes it worth a philosopher's while, and partly to show how it forges a link between aesthetics and ethics in both theory and practice. First of all, the moral beauty view integrates aesthetics and ethics. For if, as it implies, central full-blown judgements of moral value are at least partly aesthetic, then there must be a deeper connection than mere mutual influence or dependence. Given the view, Gaut observes, *contra* certain extreme formalists, or the Romantics who sought to sever artistic or aesthetic from moral value, it turns out to be 'contradictory to hold that beauty matters in art, but that morality does not' (2007, p. 132). For, as McGinn notes, one upshot is that '[t]he true aesthete must be a moralist, since he cares about the beauty of his soul' (1997, p. 138). Likewise, this view serves as a wake-up call to the moralist counterparts of aestheticists, viz., those moralists who maintain that morality is entirely cut off from matters aesthetic, which concern the heart, and to be arbitrated and cultivated on rational soil alone. This cannot hold because, under the moral beauty view, if we are to fully fathom morality, we need to be sensitive to beauty too. Rationality is required, but unless affect concurs, matters remain unsettled.

In sum, the view I espouse suggests that unless moralists take aesthetics seriously and aestheticists take morality seriously, that is, unless both aesthetics and ethics are understood and pursued *in tandem*, our respective grasp of them will remain partial and compromised. This much is logically implied by the moral beauty view. Presumably, however, these considerations apply *mutatis mutandis* to aesthetics and ethics both as appreciative and as practical domains. Here, as already suggested, I will focus on the latter, and on some of the promises that the notion of moral beauty and ugliness holds for practice, specifically education, broadly construed. So, let me begin by suggesting two ways in which moral beauty (and ugliness) can be manifested in the public sphere, and then proceed to mention how I think that the notions of moral beauty and ugliness can, in fact, contribute to practice.

III. Examples of Moral Beauty and Ugliness

Moral beauty is a feature of people's gestures, characters, and so of people themselves. Indeed, one way for which we may argue for the moral beauty view is by appeal to ordinary experience. It is a common enough experience that we sometimes meet people whom we find far from attractive—indeed, we may find them ugly—and whom we come to find beautiful, on continued experience. Conversely, we may come, upon continued experience, to find someone ugly whom we previously found beautiful. More often than not, such experiential shifts are explained by appeal to the fact that we become acquainted with their characters, we find them kind, honest, or fair, and that it is these qualities that explain our finding them beautiful. There is empirical evidence that such changes in our aesthetic responses to one another occur frequently, and that, when we are conscious of them, we do, in fact, appeal to moral qualities in explaining our aesthetic appreciation (Paris 2018a).

Thought experiments also point in the direction of the moral beauty view. A case in point is Nehamas' discussion of David Lynch's film *The Elephant Man*, which is a film about Joseph Merrick, a grossly deformed man in 19th century London who, in the beginning of the film, strikes us as not only very ugly, but positively shocking. However, as the film progresses, and we come to experience Merrick as a kind, loving, and honest, an individual with unbending faith despite all his misfortunes, we not only become used to his appearance, but his presence comes to be experienced with a pleasure recognisably like that which we take in contemplating other beautiful objects.⁸ The philosopher Stephen Davies recently invited us to engage in a thought experiment designed to make a similar, albeit converse, point:

Picture an outwardly beautiful woman who when she speaks, reveals that she is embittered, nasty, and vicious. Not only does she become less desirable, she comes to *look* less beautiful. Or, to get further away from appearances, a better way to make the point is to say that the interest

in her beauty, which unreflectively seemed to be confined to her physical attributes, is revealed by the negative response as having a wider scope all along. It carried assumptions about how she would perform as a person more broadly. When those assumptions are challenged by her behavior, she is revealed as less beautiful than was supposed. (2012, p. 112)

I think that the notions of moral beauty and ugliness, as articulated in the first section, offer the best explanation of the aforementioned phenomena, as well as intuitions in response to these thought experiments, but since I have argued for this claim in some detail elsewhere ([author] 2018), I will not elaborate on it here. I will only say that the foregoing considerations, if anything, make the moral beauty view highly plausible and therefore worth our while. They also suggest that people are often experienced as beautiful or ugly in virtue of their character traits or personalities.

Now, although moral beauty (and ugliness) is centrally a feature of people, and more abstractly, people's characters, like much beauty (and ugliness), I think that it can also be found in artworks, including works of music, buildings like churches and houses, or sculptures. This is because artworks too can manifest certain personality traits; these are appreciated through tracing the choices that have culminated in the end product. For instance, in the understated gesture of the 9/11 memorial, one can see respectfulness towards the individual and the community, a sense of togetherness and friendship in the face of disaster, and a firm conviction that this is what is taken out of the world in acts like the 9/11 terror attacks, and what we should reaffirm in response; this seems like the morally apt approach to the matter at stake, and it is where the beauty of the 9/11 memorial lies.

Indeed, artists have long exploited our experience of moral beauty, as evinced in the experiential shifts appealed to above, and to profound effects. When literary characters are presented as physically ugly but then revealed to be of great moral virtue, our experience faithfully presents them to us as beautiful in contemplation, as witness the effect of Plato's descriptions of Socrates, Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, or the Creature in *Frankenstein*. The converse likewise holds for physically beautiful people who prove to be morally vicious over the course of a narrative. Our disgust in characters such as Dorian Gray, Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, and Vronsky in *Anna Karenina*, clearly supports the claim that these characters come to be experienced as ugly in virtue of their vices.

Here are some more examples, drawn from my own experience.⁹ In Bach's *Erbarme dich, mein Gott*, sincere compassion and sympathy can be heard to pervade the aria as a whole, not just the lyrics, and in Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* one struggles to suppress an image of joyful and loving abandon wherein, our common humanity recognised, people are united through respect as in Kant's ideal of a kingdom of ends. Similarly, *Anna Karenina* is shot through with a sense of sympathy for Anna that Tolstoy (or Tolstoy as he appears in that novel) manifests on every page, and which is at least part of what makes this work so beautiful. There is a similar beauty in individual characters in many novels and plays. For instance, there is beauty in Antigone, manifest in her apt response to the choice put to her by Creon, when she recognises it as a genuine dilemma and confronts it at face value, in the context of a work which highlights the limits and limitations of the human condition. And there is great beauty, too, in Father Zosima's quiet humility in *The Brothers Karamazov*, as well as Sonya's sacrifice to support a poor and reckless family out of mercy and kindness, which Dostoevsky makes manifest through every sentence used to convey her personality in *Crime and Punishment*. It is, I think, highly plausible that the undeniable beauty of such works is inseparable from—in other words, cannot be explained without appealing to—the moral virtues that they evince. Strip any of these works of their moral qualities, and their beauty is sure to diminish—reverse these qualities, and the works will become ugly. Below, I will offer some more detailed examples of morally beautiful artworks, but for now I hope that these examples will suffice to illustrate what I have in mind in speaking of such moral beauty.

So what is the point of advancing such cases and pointing out the moral beauty in them, supposing, as aforementioned, that this is a genuine species of beauty and that these are plausible instances of it? I think that appreciation for moral beauty and ugliness can be built into a programme of character education and that, even outside of such a programme, if it is possible to cultivate a recognition of, or sensitivity to, moral beauty, it can, presumably, do at least some of the work on its own. This can be accomplished by ensuring that moral beauty features prominently in the public domain. In other words, my suggestion is that familiarity with the notion of moral beauty and ugliness, and its presence in one's conceptual framework, will enable one to see moral virtues and vices in aesthetic terms; and that this, provided that instances of moral beauty assume a prominent position in the public sphere, can both supplement and complement character education, while also contributing to the maintenance of virtue in society. This is basically a direct consequence of what seem to be plain

facts about beauty. Consider some near-platitudinous claims about beauty: beauty grounds attraction; the beautiful is the object of love; beauty prompts copies of itself; the beautiful is said to be valued for its own sake, not merely for the pleasure that it evokes. Conversely, we shun the ugly, avoid it, and would do much to rid it of ourselves and our surroundings. If beauty and ugliness have the qualities just mentioned, and if virtue is (experienced as) beautiful and vice (as) ugly, then, as our intellectual predecessors thought, it is plausible that beauty and ugliness may pave a solid route towards moral virtue, and one that also taps into the right affective dimensions.

IV. Beauty and Moral Education

Character education, specifically moral character education, and indeed one with Aristotelian sympathies, such as that espoused by the working framework of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, and articulated in greater detail in Kristjánsson's work (e.g. 2015), recognises a number of ways in which character can be acquired: it can be taught, caught, and sought. Now, the acquisition of character through at least more or less traditional teaching will, I suspect, only or mostly contribute to the acquisition of what the Jubilee Centre and Kristjánsson call 'virtue literacy', i.e., a familiarity with, and ability to skilfully wield, virtue-theoretical terminology. Indeed, this is what interventions to date have been successful at achieving (ibid., p. 158).

In addition to being taught, character can also be caught and sought. These refer, respectively, to the acquisition of character through one's surroundings (for instance, a school's ethos, or the degree of emotional stability in one's family), and one's own initiative in seeking out one's own character improvement. But things like a school's ethos on its own seems a rather weak ground for acquiring virtue, unless it is either imposed on students (e.g., through uniforms, particular etiquette, etc.); or it becomes routine, and so habituated; or it is exemplary: students are attracted to it. While, unfortunately, despite its being well-known that family stability and the like are important for proper psychological development, these can neither be guaranteed, nor are they always sufficient for virtue. When it comes to seeking virtue, it is (barring psychological extremes of self-imposition, etc.) only one's conviction that virtue is worth the effort of acquiring it—which is just another way of speaking of one's attraction to virtue—that can lead to its pursuit.

So let us consider how the notions of moral beauty and ugliness may feature in different realms of virtue acquisition and cultivation. While the considerations below, although offered as independent of, and additional to, character building through teaching, do, I think, point to ways in which moral beauty can be built into educational programmes. To begin with, it is worth pointing out that mere virtue literacy, even coupled with a sense of duty, or even with components of *phronesis* comprising reasoning and skills that enable fine conceptual discriminations, are a far cry from the sort of ideal of Aristotelian virtue, mentioned earlier whereby the virtuous individual—starting from imitation of behaviour and internalisation of such behaviour, and perhaps principles—does the good because it is good—or for the sake of the '*kalon*', whilst (as the latter term suggests) taking pleasure in doing so.

Many past thinkers have been tempted by the thought that an education in beauty can contribute to moral development.¹⁰ Of course, many today would consider such views plain wishful thinking. But this may be because we, as a society and an intellectual *status quo*, have forgotten about moral beauty. Although things are probably not that simple, by ignoring the aesthetic component of moral virtues and vices, anything of substance in views like the aforementioned will be lost. Surely beauty in general hardly makes us better people, as the cases of tasteful Nazis, Wagner, etc., make clear. Still, beauty, and recognition thereof, is often said to prompt attraction, desire, love, emulation, and the like. If the connection between beauty and desire, attraction, love, a tendency to emulate the beautiful object, etc., are facts about normal human psychology (or even traits that we can inculcate in ourselves and others); if, moreover, we can highlight and educate people in discerning not only beauty in general, but moral beauty in particular; then perhaps a road to virtue, via beauty, opens up.

Consider firstly the question of moral motivation, which is more relevant to the notion of character being caught. There is a debate in philosophy over the question of whether or not moral judgements are as such motivating. The moral beauty view suggests that this question may be somewhat ill-posed, for fully possessing moral virtue entails sensitivity to beauty, beauty includes the beauty of virtues, and hence a fully-fledged first-person moral judgement is also aesthetic, and it is a conceptual and empirical platitude that beauty arouses conative states in its appreciators. So, first, leaving beauty out of these debates is a mistake, and, second, it is possible that it is neither goodness nor rightness understood as isolated properties that ground moral motivation, but beauty instead, i.e.,

their aesthetic component. If so, then at least part of the explanation for why moral virtue is desirable or attractive is straightforward: it is beautiful, hence pleasurable.

It is important to be clear here. The pleasure in question is taken in observing or contemplating moral virtue, not necessarily in performing morally virtuous deeds. For virtuous acts that demand great courage or even self-sacrifice need not (and are unlikely to) please the agent performing them. However, they do please those observing or contemplating them. Motivation through moral beauty, then, should be understood as grounded in pleasure and displeasure stemming from experiencing examples of moral virtue and vice and wanting to emulate the former, whilst avoiding the latter. We hear about virtuous people, we may meet some of them if we are fortunate, and we also have accounts of such persons as Jesus Christ, Socrates, and so on. The pleasure we take in them makes us want to be like them. Elaine Scarry suggests that '[b]eauty brings copies of itself into being' (1999, p. 3) because in finding something beautiful we are motivated to introduce more of it into the world. Conversely, Saito thinks that 'we often work, or believe we should work, toward improving the aesthetics of everyday environment and life. Negative aesthetic experiences are thus useful and necessary in detecting what is harmful to the quality of life and environment and provide an impetus for improvement' (2015). Thus, our desire to eliminate the ugly, coupled with a sensitivity to moral ugliness, may deter us from moral vice, even if we are not sufficiently motivated to pursue moral virtue. If philosophers since Plato are right in thinking that beauty is not only desirable but also awakens emotions that are motivating for those who can appreciate it, including love, or a desire to emulate the beautiful object, to understand it, and so on (see Nehamas, 2007), then the fact that morality is said to motivate its own pursuit should hardly perplex us. If those whose aesthetics are in order, *ceteris paribus*, desire the beautiful and shun the ugly, then through the notions of moral beauty and ugliness we may glean a psychologically plausible and theoretically parsimonious story about moral motivation. The point is not that moral motivation is either guaranteed or easily premised on moral beauty and ugliness. But that a general attraction to beauty, coupled with an ability to discern moral beauty and ugliness, may offer a pathway to virtue, albeit no doubt beset with obstacles. The first step in this direction, I suggest, is to rekindle, in people's conceptual (and consequently affective) repertoires, the connection between moral virtue and beauty, moral ugliness and vice. Once this is firmly established in people's minds, much, I expect, will follow.

One of the implications of the above is that the presence of moral beauty in the public sphere will increase the likelihood that a taste for it, and so for virtue, will be acquired by the public. Earlier I spoke about the moral beauty of people, specifically people who are well-known especially through features or accomplishments other than their virtuous behaviour or character. Such people include politicians, actors, musicians, dancers, and comedians, among others. And I think that when such people are virtuous, and hence morally beautiful, and where audiences are well-placed enough to recognise such moral beauty, the moral beauty of these public figures may play an important role in instilling virtue in the public. My point here is not just the fairly obvious one, given the foregoing, namely that it's good to have exemplars around, whose virtue is an example to us all. This is only one way virtues may be magnetic through the presence of moral beauty in the public domain. I also wish to suggest that people who are already admired—in some cases, for better or worse, nearly worshipped—including pop stars, actors, and so on, can substantially contribute to promoting virtue through their popularity. This is a more risky thought, but the idea is this: there is evidence that we copy people that we find to possess status (e.g. Henrich, 2016). Now, this imitative impulse is not too selective (from an evolutionary standpoint, this probably serves to ensure accuracy and that one does not miss the salient features through some blindspot or other); that is, we tend to copy others in more respects than the ones for which we admire them or look up to them; so, people will copy the clothes and shower gel used by their favourite football player and drive pop stars' cars (television commercials are sufficient proof of this); this tendency can be so pronounced as to lead to maladaptive behaviours: there is evidence that the suicides of certain celebrities prompt waves of suicides that are best explained by appeal to mimetic behaviours, as opposed to mental health problems and the like (ibid., pp. 49-50).

If features and behaviours as peripheral as hair colour or as extreme as suicide are imitated, then it would seem safe to predict that virtue, provided that it features prominently enough in a popular figure's profile, and is displayed consistently, will also be imitated; indeed, virtue is beautiful and a more central aspect of its possessor's personality, so that the motivation to imitate it should be greater than the motivation to imitate other (non-beautiful and peripheral) features of such people; this makes it more likely that virtue will be imitated.

Of course, in order for all of this to work, it is important that people actually possess the (true) belief that moral virtue is beautiful and vice ugly, and that they become at least somewhat sensitive to these qualities. I think that teaching that will introduce the relevant notions and guide our patterns of attention and/or considerable exposure to certain artworks and individuals with moral beauty, can help us acquire the relevant beliefs and aesthetic sensitivity. For instance, art seems in a position to afford us the (non-trivial) knowledge that moral traits are beautiful and immoral ones ugly. This is because art can grant us epistemic access to characters and their individual traits and thereby also their beauty and ugliness. Such access can be acquired in a number of ways: subjects in visual artworks can visually express emotions and attitudes; artworks can also display these through the choices of their manifested artists; as can characters in narratives through their dialogues, interior monologues, choices, behaviours, etc. By experiencing characters in artworks, such as Iago in *Othello* or Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*, as ugly and beautiful, respectively, we can come to believe that the moral virtues are beautiful and their contraries ugly.

Moreover, art shows us not only *that* morality is beautiful, immorality ugly, but also allows us to *experience* such beauty and ugliness first-hand, and to become more sensitive to it by pursuing ever more subtle and complex renditions thereof, which can vary both in their accessibility and their informativeness. Artworks differ in complexity, depth, subtlety, etc., not only in terms of their perceptible configurations, but also in terms of their moral-characterological explorations (see e.g. Carroll, 2002). Perhaps, then, artworks can sharpen our discriminative abilities and refine our taste for moral beauty. This, I think, should count as a morally-laden cognitive improvement, and one that resembles closely aspects of the virtue of *phronesis*. Allow me to expand on this last thought a little.

Dominic Lopes has identified one way whereby visual artworks in particular can cognitively improve us, by motivating the acquisition, and enabling the exercise, and subsequent refinement of, certain intellectual virtues, such as being a 'fine observer' (2006, p. 148). Fine observation, Lopes argues, is required for appreciating certain pictures, so that our interaction with them can motivate us to acquire and develop it. Moreover, pictures can foster and develop such skills as are constitutive of fine observation. These include 'delicacy of discrimination' (ibid.), viz., the ability to see better, become more attentive to detail, etc., which can be acquired by looking hard at pictures and becoming sensitive to various features; 'accuracy in seeing' (ibid., p. 149), which involves becoming more discerning and sensitive to the felt qualities of visual experiences; and 'adaptability of seeing' (ibid.), which refers to artworks' enabling us to 'see what is otherwise invisible' (ibid., p. 150), by granting us access to qualities that are unavailable to ordinary visual perception. These benefits are not simply experiential because, to the extent that such experiences can be brought under concepts, they can contribute to 'belief formation, knowledge gathering, and reasoning. Pictures have cognitive merit in so far as they bring about revisions to the way we conceptualize visual experience' (ibid.). No wonder then that insofar as they have such merits, artworks are praised for being true-to-life, insightful, revealing, profound, etc. (ibid., pp. 151-152).

I think that this sort of account can be extended, *mutatis mutandis*, to the discernment and appreciation of *moral* beauty. When a work's subject matter is of a moral nature, and its exploration requires such skills as the aforementioned, because of the insightful and revelatory way whereby the subject matter is handled, the excellence of fine observation required and fostered by appreciation of that work plausibly also requires and fosters finer moral discrimination. To illustrate, consider Rembrandt's painting known as *The Jewish Bride*.¹¹ The couple represented is far from physically attractive; yet there is great beauty in them. To appreciate this beauty, we need to be sensitive to the work's subject matter, namely human love, and to the particular way in which it is handled by Rembrandt. Notice, for instance, how the man's hand, clearly caressing the woman's breast, could have made this picture vulgar, had minute features been but slightly altered. *The Jewish Bride* is, of course, anything but vulgar: the man's face assures both his bride and the viewer of his love. This manifests Rembrandt's signature skill, namely his power for capturing and communicating human emotion. The husband's expression is subtle, yet profoundly meaningful, plausibly conveying at once happiness, devotion, tenderness, understanding and acceptance of the troubles ahead, as well as the determination to face them; it leaves no doubts as to his motives and intentions. The wife is affirming the bond and accepting the proposed protection, care, and love, by gently caressing his hand with hers; and the viewer is compelled to recognise the value of, and admire, this union. Against this background, the positioning of the man's hand on the bride's breast can be seen to serve a dual purpose. It may remind us that what we have here is a love which has an ethical and spiritual dimension, yet does not shy away

from its physical manifestation, without suggesting that either can be reduced to the other: a profound rendition of a genuinely human affair. At the same time, the gesture may serve as a comment on how love as a virtuous bond can transcend its physical consummation, however much the latter is foregrounded. In this way, Rembrandt's visual treatment of the subject highlights the value of virtuous love, something further indicated by his handling of the light; the newlyweds appear radiant, their love paling the darker background, which, virtually in monochrome, looks almost unfinished. This painting, then, offers us insights into the nature of a moral emotion, while making us feel, through the features just indicated, its value.

Arguably, all of the skills that Lopes discusses are at once required and enhanced in appreciating Rembrandt's work and its moral dimension. Not only must we closely attend to details, but we must also become keenly aware of the experience that these ground, and observe more than is there to be seen in the picture, i.e., identify what it reveals and how it reveals it. Furthermore, the subject matter being morally salient, these considerations enhance not only our discernment of pictorial features but, since at least some of these play an ethical role in the picture, our moral discriminative abilities also. Moulded through our perusal of artworks such as Rembrandt's, moreover, such appreciative experiences inform, enrich, and refine our conceptual repertoire.

Other artworks can make us better appreciators of moral beauty and ugliness, by getting us to 'see' more quiet, subtle, or indeed difficult instances thereof. Towards the end of Haneke's film *Amour* (2012), for instance, Georges kills his wife Anne who has suffered two strokes in the film's early stages, by suffocating her with a pillow. The film, employing various cinematic techniques, enables the attentive, open-minded viewer, to see beyond the mere physical act, into Georges' motivation, which (arguably at least) is wholly grounded in concern for Anne, his life-long spouse, whom he dearly loves. Subtle visual cues, gestures, observations by characters, responses, and so on, pave the way for perceiving what is an inevitably violent scene, which would otherwise merely look brutal and ugly, as an act of loving concern. There is arguably beauty there, although it may take effort, open-mindedness, and patience to appreciate.

If these remarks are plausible, then, artworks such as *Amour* not only require and enhance the aforementioned observational skills, but can also serve as elaborate ethical thought experiments, by putting us in a position where we are invited to reflect on certain moral questions, upon careful attention to the particularities of characters and situations. For instance, while many traditional moral theories might prescribe absolutely against killing, *Amour* seems to put such prescriptions to the test against a concrete and richly textured example, in which the beauty of the motivation, manifesting loving concern for another, serves as a direct challenge to such absolutism. Thus, in addition to sharpening our cognitive and moral appreciative skills, moral cognitive gains from art can resemble those we reap from thought experiments in moral philosophy (cf. Gaut 2007, pp. 157-164).

V. Objections and Replies

Against my claims it may be objected, first, that beauty is only a matter of appearance, so the proposals here are not only false but potentially misleading.

This worry disappears once we notice that the claim that beauty is only a matter of appearance is either false, or rests on a conflation between two senses of appearance. On the one hand, appearance may refer physical or perceptible appearance, in which case this objection would deny that characters etc. can be beautiful in the first place. The motivation for such a view is an assumption to the effect that beauty and ugliness are predicable only of perceptible objects. This assumption, however, is mistaken, as suggested by the widespread acceptance by experts of beauty in domains whose objects are clearly imperceptible (at least in the sense of perceptibility that pertains to the five senses), including chess moves, theorems in physics, proofs in mathematics, and so on. On the other hand, appearance may refer to superficial features of a thing, as opposed to its deeper structure or 'true nature'. Thus, a car may look good, but be very badly put together, or a flower can be beautiful even though it is made of plastic. But this proposal, again, is problematic, and stems in part from the same misguided assumption as the previous one. For consider the case of mathematical proofs, where the appearance/reality distinction breaks down: if someone writes a proof on paper, the writing may look terrible, but we would not say that the proof is ugly, but only that a written version of it is ugly. Likewise, in the previous cases we can say that insofar as the car or the flower are considered as objects to be looked at, or visible things, they may be beautiful, but may not be beautiful in terms of their structure *qua* car and flower, respectively. But there is another sense of appearance, where appearance simply refers to direct

experience. The claim, under this interpretation, is that beauty is something to be judged on the basis of direct experience. Whether or not this is true is debatable, but what is clear for our purposes is that this is no objection to the present proposal, for appearance in this sense includes thought and contemplation, when the object in question is abstract, as are character traits, thought, actions, etc. Hence, the first objection poses no threat to my proposal.

Second, this approach to moral education seems to locate moral motivation in precisely the wrong place, i.e., the beauty, rather than the intrinsic worth of, the good. It may thus appear to stem from a self-interested or vain desire for beauty.

Much here depends on what is meant by 'self-interested'. On the one hand, self-interestedness may refer to a general desire for self-improvement. In this sense, anyone who wants to become a morally better person is self-interested. But it would be absurd to call such a person self-interested in any sense that is incompatible with being properly morally motivated. The worry only threatens my proposal if self-interestedness is understood as a criticism for someone's lack of other-regarding concern, or if their motives for becoming moral are not themselves moral, i.e., their desire for moral improvement is only grounded in non-moral considerations. But the desire to become morally beautiful stems from an attraction to the moral beauty of others, their characters and responses, and a desire to emulate them out of admiration, love, etc. To the extent that such responses evoked by moral beauty are responsive to moral properties, this kind of motivation is not incompatible with virtue. So to think that motivation grounded in moral beauty is objectionably self-interested evinces a conceptual confusion between a sense of self-interest compatible with, and one incompatible with, morality. Someone who wants to become morally beautiful is no more (objectionably) self-interested than someone who wants to become a morally better person.

Of course, one may still resist my suggestions on the grounds that morally virtuous motivation cannot be grounded in beauty, for whereas virtuous motivation is intrinsic, i.e., requires that one is motivated by virtue itself or by others' needs, motivation grounded in moral beauty is not. We should by now be in a position to see that this objection rests on a misunderstanding. Beauty is a component of virtue. So, the intrinsic motivation proper to virtue seems to require a recognition of, and motivational basis in, its beauty, if virtue is to motivate as a whole. Even if it were possible to be motivated not by virtue itself but only by its beauty, this kind of motivation would hardly take one far; for someone discerning of moral beauty would quickly notice that being motivated to emulate the beauty of the morally virtuous cannot succeed if construed independently of moral considerations, for then one's motivation will not be appropriate, one will fail to be morally virtuous, and so will be devoid of moral beauty.

Finally, this whole project simply dresses up character education in an aesthetic language, while in fact contributing little, if anything, to available resources geared towards character education.

This objection fails to observe the dialectic in my paper. The problem is the conspicuous absence of any discussion of moral beauty and ugliness from debates in both philosophy and, more importantly, moral education and psychology. The aesthetic language in question makes salient the aesthetic component of something about which much is already known—though, if it does have an aesthetic component that is neglected, not fully known after all. So the suggestions here do not actually amount to a revisionism of already existing methods or practices, but propose additions to them. Beauty cannot replace learning a vocabulary of virtue terms, understanding relevant distinctions, knowing something about the history of ethics and different moral theories, or acquiring reasoning skills and experience. What it can do is inspire an attraction to and love of virtue, a motivation to acquire it, to increase our discriminatory capacities and sensitivity to it, and, partly thereby to activate and intensify pleasure in its pursuit. These are not the same thing under different description, though they are complementary. However, whether or not my speculations on ways in which the focus on beauty and ugliness can contribute to character education are, in fact, plausible, can only be judged in practice. Indeed, it is precisely as an invitation to colleagues in empirical and practical disciplines to consider and test the validity of its claims, that this article was conceived.

VI. Some Suggestions for Further Investigations

While I do not wish to venture beyond the scope of my expertise, as promised, before concluding, I should like to propose three lines of investigation that are open to researchers and educators who may wish to pursue agendas inspired by the foregoing reflections on the theory of moral beauty.

A first avenue would be exploratory. The notion of moral beauty is mentioned in work in positive psychology and is often understood as the object of the emotion of elevation, which is distinct from admiration, and which motivates those who experience it to help others (Algoe and Haidt 2009). I think that it would be worthwhile to further refine the notion of moral beauty, enquiring into how much work ‘beauty’ is doing in the positive-psychological notion, by comparing experiences of moral beauty and elevation, with those of different kinds of beauty. For if, for instance, that notion proves to be less aesthetically charged than the philosophical one that I have been discussing (something that is not unlikely), then it would need to be replaced by a novel construct and new instruments would have to be designed to measure it.

More directly, I think that it would be interesting to design an instrument (not unlike, for instance, Diessner et al. 2008) in order to see whether there are people who consciously find virtue beautiful and vice ugly, and examine their experiences qualitatively.

A second line of investigation could focus on testing hypotheses such as that thinking of virtue in aesthetic terms, and acknowledging an aesthetic dimension to virtue, attracts one more to virtuous people and behaviours; in short, thinking in this way is more motivating than seeing virtue or morality simply under the guise of the right or the good. One simple suggestion along this proposal would be to examine whether claiming to find virtue beautiful (see, e.g., Diessner et al. 2008), who investigated how many people experience moral beauty) predicts better scores on virtue questionnaires. Even better, their behaviour may be tracked and their motivations studied in longitudinal studies, which can use, for instance, experience-sampling methods.

Finally, a third proposed line of practice involves interventions. Educators could use stories, films, or songs that manifest virtues, as was done by the Jubilee Centre’s *Knightly Virtues* project, which used stories to develop children’s sensitivity to virtue concepts (Arthur et al. 2014), but discuss them in aesthetic terms, speaking of the beauty or the moral beauty of the courageous and honest, characters, kindling the thought that perhaps beauty is not just skin-deep, and instilling into pupils the idea that there is a beauty that is not physical, but is all the more attractive for that. This pedagogical intervention could then be followed by questionnaires or interviews that would seek to gauge its effects on dimensions like virtue literacy, motivation, and behaviour, even longitudinally.

While I the foregoing are the suggestions of a layperson, I do not think that they are any less interesting or promising for that; indeed, they certainly seem worth researchers’ while; for if they yield positive results, then the benefits to be gleaned should be obvious; while, if they do not, then at least we can lay to rest a theory that has preoccupied philosophers, theologians, educators, and artists since time immemorial—but which has largely been ignored in our own times—knowing that we have tried to use it but failed.

VII. Conclusion

I begun by introducing a view whereby the moral virtues are beautiful and the moral vices ugly, subsequently illustrating it with examples of beauty that I think stem from the moral qualities of both people and objects like artworks. I then proceeded to offer some proposals for how a rekindling of these notions in our conceptual repertoire, and a reflection on, and sensitivity to, moral beauty and ugliness, may contribute to the cultivation of virtue in different ways by inspiring emulation, firmly anchoring moral motivation, and even going some way towards offering a pathway to virtue independently of, as well as complementary to, formal practices of moral education. I ended by rebutting three objections to my proposal, to conclude that it has considerable merit, and should be taken seriously by those with a flair for empirical research, as well as those with a role in character education.¹²

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[Please note: three references have been removed for anonymity.]

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Notes

- ¹ For a sample of these debates, see the articles in *Classical Philology*, 104(4), October 2010, dedicated to “Beauty, Harmony, and the Good”.
- ² See, for instance, Eco (1986), for a useful discussion.
- ³ For a history of the moral beauty view, with a focus on its development in Germany, France, and Britain, in the Enlightenment, see Norton (1995).
- ⁴ This way of formulating the view is due to Gaut (2007, p. 120). It is worth mentioning that although my focus here is beauty, I think that other aesthetic properties, including the sublime, elegant, or funny, can also be attributed to character traits. Moreover, I think that non-moral character traits, including the intellectual or performance virtues, may also have aesthetic qualities. While I refrain from discussing these matters here would take me beyond the purview of this paper, I think that doing so would be a very worthwhile enterprise.
- ⁵ An obvious worry here is that there are some ugly people who are morally virtuous. But it is important here to clarify that I understand aesthetic evaluations in terms of beauty and ugliness to proceed in a *pro tanto* fashion. In other words, when we say that this or that thing is beautiful or ugly overall, our judgement comprises a number of more specific judgements, each of which may be qualified by an ‘*insofar as*’ clause, or by speaking of different respects in which something is beautiful or ugly. For instance, you may think that *Les demoiselles d’Avignon* is ugly insofar as its representational content goes, i.e., that the figures in it are ugly, but beautiful in terms of its composition. Or you may think that a novel by Charles Dickens is ugly in virtue of its sentimentality, but beautiful in terms of its story or language use. So in saying that *X* is ugly, we are not necessarily saying that *X* is ugly in every respect, but that it is ugly overall, i.e., all things considered. Thus, there is no problem in saying that someone who is ugly in respect of their physical appearance is also beautiful in respect of their character.
- ⁶ The qualifications and views in this paragraph are developed and defended in Gaut (2007). Similar points are made in McGinn (1997), but there are problems with his view that Gaut (2007) addresses. The most recent work on the moral beauty view is by myself (Paris 2018a, 2018b).
- ⁷ For other recent defences of the view that appeal to thought experiments and intuitions, see McGinn (1997) and Gaut (2007). While their views are slightly different, these differences do not bear on any of the issues discussed in this paper and so shall be set aside.
- ⁸ See Nehamas (2007, p. 59).
- ⁹ If the reader disagrees with these examples, I encourage her to delve into her own experience with artworks and consider whether or not there are any that support my case.
- ¹⁰ This is true of Shaftesbury (2001), and is implied in Hume (1975) and Hutcheson (2004), as well as being a staple of Schiller’s philosophy; see, for instance, Schiller (2016).
- ¹¹ While the subject of this painting is not known, and the title derives from an interpretation of the painting which is no longer thought to be valid, it seems fairly clear that it deals with human love. Since it is this that concerns me here, I shall refrain from getting bogged down in interpretative debates.
- ¹² I am grateful to Kristján Kristjánsson for feedback on an earlier version of this article and to Berys Gaut and Sarah Broadie for helpful comments on earlier versions of parts of this article. I am also grateful to three anonymous referees for the *JME* for very helpful comments that have improved this paper. A version of this article was presented at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues’ 2018 Annual Conference at Oriel College, Oxford; I would like to thank the audience there for helpful comments.